

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
Hanrapetutyun (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

ARMENIA INDEX

- 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, *khovrats* (barbecued food) AMD1700

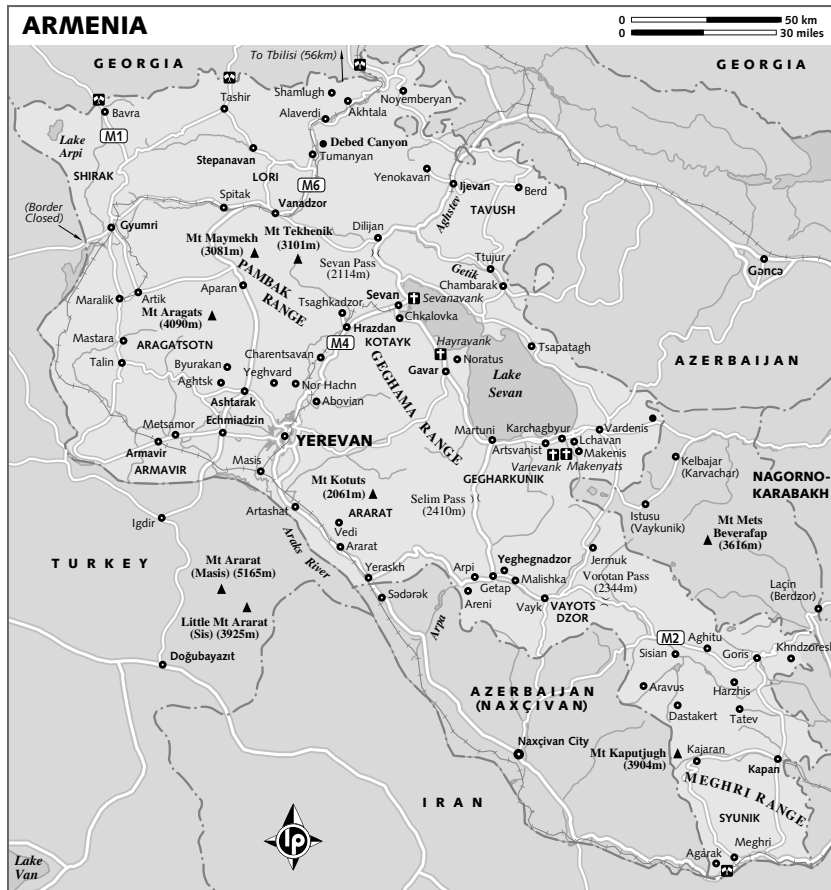
May) has more flowers but autumn (late September to early November) has long, warm days and more stable weather. It's also the time of harvest festivals and delicious fresh produce – Yerevan averages 27°C in both seasons. Summer (June to August) in Yerevan can be 40°C for days at a time, while conditions 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



that make the Montagues and the Capulets seem like bosom buddies.

On the one side stands Turkey and the long-simmering genocide argument. The issue flares up every so often, as it did in 2006 when French law made it a crime to deny the genocide, and again in 2007 when the US House Committee on Foreign Affairs approved a bill to condemn the genocide. More often than not it is the diaspora that pushes this agenda. As the actual events slide into history, modern Armenians still pay the price as diplomatic relations are frozen and the border closed.

Still, free marketeers have found ways around the blockade and manage to import Turkish goods via Georgia.

Recent comments by Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan that the two sides jointly investigate history hold promise of a thaw. Some Armenians also wonder if a message of good-neighbourly love was cryptically hidden in Eurovision song contest voting. At the 2007 contest Turkey was the only country to give Armenian singer Hayko a maximum score of 12 (who were those judges anyway?).

There is less promise for rapprochement on Armenia's eastern border, where the relationship with Azerbaijan is downright poisonous. Official fighting between the two countries ended in 1994 but the matter still feels closer to war than peace. The status quo – with Armenia officially occupying 16% of

Azerbaijan and negotiations at a standstill – is likely to last for some time.

Closer to home, hot topics routinely surround the booming local economy. With GDP growth rates at around 13% it is growing faster than most markets in Europe – much of the credit has been given to former president Robert Kocharian. The pace of reform shows on the streets of Yerevan, where expensive clothing and cars are everywhere and competition is rife to flash the hottest new designs. Fashion addicts have likewise dispersed themselves into rural areas, where it's not uncommon to see women in stiletto heels and men with pointy-toed leather shoes traipsing through dusty mountain villages.

Economic improvement paved the way for a 60% rise in pensions in 2008, but with per capita income at around US\$5700 Armenia still has a long way to go to catch up with Europe. The idea of joining the EU has been thrown around with much interest but given the level of poverty that still exists (around 30%), the high levels of corruption and the shaky democracy, no one is holding their breath.

Other hot topics include Armenia's push to increase its population, by natural means or otherwise. In 2007 parliament passed a dual-nationality bill in hopes of luring diaspora Armenians and foreigners married to Armenians. The Western money that would flood in with the repatriates could be another boost to the economy – Armenia already rakes in around US\$5 billion in remittances.

Parliamentary elections in 2007, won by the conservative Republican Party, indicates popular support for the pro-Russian hierarchy and paved the way for Prime Minister Serge Sargsyan to win the presidential election in February 2008. Sargsyan, a former defence minister and war hero in Karabakh, is of the same mould as Kocharian and is likely to build on his predecessor's reforms.

HISTORY In the Beginning...

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

mention Armenians in the 6th century BC as a tribe living in the area of Lake Van.

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

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

Christianity & the Written Word

The local religious scene in Armenian villages attracted Christian missionaries as early as AD 40, including the apostles Bartholomew and Thaddeus. According to lore, King Trdat III declared Christianity the state religion in AD 301. His moment of epiphany came after being cured of madness by St Gregory the Illuminator, who had spent 12 years imprisoned in a snake-infested pit, now located under Khor Virap Monastery (p176). A version preferred by historians suggests that Trdat was striving to create national unity while fending off Zoroastrian Persia and pagan Rome. Whatever the cause, the church has been a pillar of Armenian identity ever since.

Another pillar of nationhood arrived in 405 with Mesrop Mashtots' revolutionary Armenian alphabet. His original 36 letters were also designed as a number system. Armenian traders found the script indispensable in business. Meanwhile, medieval scholars translated scientific and medical texts from Greek and Latin.

Kingdoms & Conquerors

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

ARARAT: ARMENIA'S HEART OF STONE *Arpi Armenakian Shively*

Many diasporan Armenians are surprised by the strength of their emotions on seeing Mt Ararat for the first time. 'We grew up seeing only pictures in school textbooks,' says Moses Elmadjian, who was born in Cyprus, 'so when I finally saw the real mountain in my 80s, I was moved to tears.'

Armenians tell many affectionate legends about Mt Ararat. Azadour Guzelian, a retired Armenian-language newspaper editor based in London, has a favourite: 'The night after the Flood waters subsided, Noah went out drinking with his sons, and lost his trousers. According to legend they are still out there, buried under centuries of snow.' Perhaps the first vineyard, reputed to have sprung up here after the Flood, yielded particularly potent grapes.

The mountain's soaring heights and plunging abysses have generated myths and cult worship for thousands of years, and the mystique continues today. In paintings and photographs, on backgammon boards and tea trays wherever Armenian families call home, Ararat's twin peaks are rooted in the national psyche. Canadian-Armenian film-maker Atom Egoyan's 2002 movie, *Ararat*, commemorates the genocide. Armenian-American rock band System of a Down wrote a track, 'Holy Mountain', on the same theme. The mountain has featured in several literary novels, poems, screenplays and even computer battle games: Kurt Vonnegut's novel *Bluebeard* refers to the mountain, and British novelist Julian Barnes weaves plot lines around it in *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters*. Mt Ararat may be the sacred, icy Mt Ararat of PC-based game *Diablo II* and is the site of an epic battle in a video game called *Keio Flying Squadron*.

The words of early-20th-century poet Yeghishe Charents, inscribed on the triumphal arch at one end of Republic Sq, frame a view of Ararat with appropriate sentiment: 'You may look the world over and never find such a mountain...'

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

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

The Armenian Question

The Russian victory over the Persian Empire, around 1828, brought the territory of the modern-day Armenian republic under Christian rule, and Armenians began immigrating to the region. The tsarist authorities tried to break the Armenian Church's independence, but conditions were still preferable to those in Ottoman Turkey, where many Armenians still lived. When the latter

pushed for more rights, Sultan Abdulhamid II responded in 1896 by massacring between 80,000 and 300,000 Armenians.

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

The first independent Armenian republic emerged in 1918, after the November 1917 Russian Revolution saw the departure of Russian troops from the battlefield with Ottoman Turkey. It immediately faced a wave of starving refugees, the 1918 influenza epidemic, and wars with surrounding Turkish,

Azeri and Georgian forces. It fought off the invading Turks in 1918, and left the final demarcation of the frontier to Woodrow Wilson, the US president. Meanwhile, the Turks regrouped under Mustafa Kemal (later Kemal Ataturk) and overran parts of the Caucasus. Wilson's map eventually arrived without troops or any international support, while Ataturk offered Lenin peace in exchange for half of the new Armenian republic. Beset by many other enemies, Lenin agreed.

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

Independence

The debate over the Armenian-majority region of Nagorno-Karabakh inside Azerbaijan brought a new wave of leaders to the fore under Gorbachev's *glasnost* reforms. Armenians voted for independence on 21 September 1991, and Levon Ter-Petrosian, a 40-year-old scholar and leader of the Karabakh Committee, became president. The war with Azerbaijan over Karabakh exploded just as the economy went into freefall. See the Nagorno-Karabakh chapter (p300) for more information on the conflict.

After the war, rumours of coups and assassination attempts prompted Ter-Petrosian to reverse civil rights and throw Dashnak leaders and fighters from the Karabakh War into jail, where some spent three years as political prisoners. Ter-Petrosian was re-elected for another five-year term in 1996 but resigned in 1998, isolated and unpopular.

He was replaced by Robert Kocharian in March 1998, a war hero from southern Karabakh. Kocharian entered the war with one tank and amassed 13 more by the time of the ceasefire. Kocharian quickly moved

to woo back the diaspora, especially the influential Dashnak faction.

By the end of the 1990s the new class of wealthy import barons stood out in shocking contrast to the country's poverty. Anger over this disparity was at least partly responsible for the terrible 1999 massacre in the national assembly, when gunmen, screaming that the barons were drinking the blood of the nation, murdered eight members of parliament and wounded six others. The event sparked a wave of emigration and endless recriminations, but the 1700th anniversary of the founding of the Armenian Church in 2001 marked something of a turning point in the country's fortunes. Memories of the suffering and upheaval since independence linger on, but the rapid economic revival through the 2000s has raised spirits.

PEOPLE**The National Psyche**

Visitors are struck by how European Yerevan feels – with cafés, swish clothes, chamber orchestras and churches – but out in the countryside the social attitudes are quite Middle Eastern. The alphabet and language support a deep Christian piety and an intense love of learning and intellectual achievement. Russian poet Osip Mandelstam (1891–1938) said the Armenian language has boots of stone that won't wear out. There is also a sadness to Armenia that underpins the enjoyment of sunshine, music and brandy. Peace with Azerbaijan over Karabakh seems as distant as ever, and the Turkish land border looks no closer to being opened. People feel this suits a small number of import barons to the exclusion of anyone else. Armenians are famously relaxed and unbothered by upheaval; when asked why Armenia hasn't had a postindependence revolution a la Ukraine or Georgia, the answer is all too obvious – after an hour of riveting talk everyone would end up back at their favourite café.

Daily Life

In the clubs and mansions of Nork in Yerevan, the elite text each on cell phones, hang out at the latest new cafés and shop on fashionable Abovyan Poghots. Money comes in from everywhere to keep the country alive – sons in Moscow, daughters in Greece, cousins in Glendale, Toronto and Sydney. Although the national income has climbed back to where it

was in the Soviet era, the distribution of wealth is now wildly uneven. Out in the grim factory towns around Lake Sevan, life is a lottery. Jobs are nonexistent, and a whole generation has emigrated to work overseas. The least affected seem to be people from the country, who can usually feed themselves from the land parcelled out to them soon after independence.

Armenian work culture is happily relaxed. People might stay out until midnight, arrive at work the next day at 10am or 10.30am, pop out for an hour or two to pay the bills, and leave work around 6pm. This relaxed attitude to time stretches to appointments – an hour late is no big deal – and to restaurants, where waiters let you linger over coffee or drinks for hours before you ask for the bill.

Population

Accurate population figures are a matter of some debate in Armenia. In 2005 the population was estimated at 3,215,800 people. There were 3.8 million in 1979; another census was held in 1989 but the figures were disrupted by the 1988 earthquake. With the departure of the Azeris and the arrival of Armenians from Azerbaijan pushing the total as high as four million in the early 1990s, it means one million have left since independence, or a quarter of the total. There has been a large exodus from rural areas isolated by the new frontiers, such as Syunik and the Shamshadin region, to Yerevan and abroad.

About one third of the population lives in Yerevan, and more than half in the Ararat Plains within a 60km radius of the capital. Armenians make up 93% of the population, Russians 2%, and Yezidi Kurds, Assyrians and Greeks make up the rest. There is a small

diasporan Armenian community in Yerevan, sometimes called repatriates, different from earlier diasporan generations who arrived after WWII.

Multiculturalism

Over the last 200 years the territory of modern-day Armenia has shifted from encompassing a Muslim majority to an almost monoethnically Armenian population. Indeed, the official motto of modern Armenia is 'One Nation, One Culture'.

In 1828 Armenians made up perhaps 30% of the population, outnumbered by Azeris, Turks and Kurds. Waves of immigration after the Russian conquest pushed this up to about 70% by 1918, when the first republic was declared. More immigrants arrived after WWII, but as recently as 1988 there were Azeri-majority regions on the eastern shore of Lake Sevan and in the corner of Shirak marz (region) around Lake Arpi, plus scattered villages across the country. The mutual ethnic cleansing by Armenia and Azerbaijan between 1988 and 1994 removed pretty much all of the 300,000-odd Muslims, and many place names changed from Turkic to Armenian. Other minorities, including Russians and other Soviet nationalities, also departed.

Today non-Armenians make up less than 5% of the total. There are Assyrian Christians in and around Yerevan, members of an Oriental Orthodox Church like the Armenian Church. The half-Assyrian village of Arzni is just north of Yerevan.

The 80,000 or so Yezidi Kurds have their own distinct culture and religious beliefs, following an ancient Gnostic faith, a living link to Zoroastrianism. A company of Yezidi

A YEN FOR YAN (OR IAN)

The vast majority of Armenian surnames end in '-ian' or '-yan'. The former is usually western Armenian, the latter eastern, though it's not a set rule. The suffix means 'from' or 'of', either from a town (Marashlian from Marash; Vanetsian from Van), from a parent (Davidian, son of David), from an occupation (Najarian, son of a carpenter; Boyajian, from the Turkish word 'boyaj' for someone who dyes fabrics), or from status or personal traits (Melikyan, son of a king; Sinanian, from a Turkish term for a well-endowed gent). Names with the prefix 'Ter' mean a married priest (Ter Hayr) was an ancestor, eg ex-president Levon Ter-Petrosian. Western Armenian names may spell it 'Der', as in Der-Bedrossian. There are also families with the suffix '-runi', such as Siruni and Artrruni. These families were once aristocrats.

In this chapter we've commonly translated the last three letters of a surname as 'yan', except if that person was western Armenian or if that is the way their name most commonly appears, eg Robert Kocharian and Martiros Sarian.

KIRK KERKORIAN

There's a local joke that if Azerbaijan has oil, Armenia has Kirk Kerkorian (b 1917). The American billionaire casino magnate has channelled upwards of US\$180 million through his Lincy Foundation. One of Kerkorian's earlier coups was as boss of MGM studios in the 1970s, when he green-lighted *Midnight Express*, a chilling tale of brutal Turkish justice and prisons written by Oliver Stone. The depiction of Turkey mixed insult (the mostly Greek and Armenian actors spoke an invented gibberish) with a classic story of survival, which is why it still resonates with audiences and Turkey's international image today. Since 2000 the Lincy Foundation has funded the completion of the Sevan–Dilijan tunnel, repaired major roads in Yerevan and across the country, and built apartments to finally house people made homeless by the 1988 earthquake in and around Gyumri, and has also run social programs and business lending schemes. Kerkorian has helped before – during the 1990s when the Turkish-Azeri blockade cut energy supplies, Kerkorian matched diaspora donations dollar for dollar. His money and his faith in Armenia have given diasporan-Armenian relations a huge boost, and single-handedly improved Armenia's economy. In 2005 President Robert Kocharian awarded Kerkorian with the nation's highest honour, the Medal of Fatherland.

cavalry fought alongside the Armenians at the battle of Sardarapat in 1918. In the last 100 years most of their villages have been emptied across Turkey and Iraq. Some Kurds, in the Ararat Valley especially, are Christian and becoming assimilated – Kurdish women wearing traditional floral headscarves and bright layers of skirts aren't such a common sight these days. Yerevan is home to the world's oldest Kurdish newspaper, *Rza Taza*. Yezidi herders on the Aragats highlands around Aparan and Talin still graze sheep and goats on the high summer meadows, but these traditions are under threat as the old rangelands are sold up and fenced off.

The Molokans (Milk Drinkers) are a sect of Russian Old Believers split from the Russian Orthodox Church in the 16th century, a bit like Russian Protestants. They're well regarded for their honesty, piety and excellent farm produce. They number about 5000, down from 50,000 20 years ago – many left for Russia and Canada.

Armenian Diaspora

The majority of Armenians live outside historic Armenia, a process that goes back centuries to colonies across Asia and Europe but is mostly due to the 1915–23 genocide.

There are about eight million Armenians living abroad but only 3,205,000 in Armenia and Karabakh. Tbilisi (Tiflis to Armenians) was a 19th-century Armenian cultural capital, and there are somewhere around 300,000 Armenians in Georgia, including a majority in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region ('Javakhk' in Armenian) north of Gyumri. There are

big communities in the USA, Russia (especially Moscow), France and other areas of Europe, Lebanon and Syria, plus others in Canada, Australia and South America. Well-known diasporans in these countries include Cher, Andre Agassi, Charles Aznavour and Gary Kasparov.

There is also an old community in Iran, particularly in Esfahan and Tehran. Remarkably, there is still an Armenian community in Turkey. About 60,000 Armenians live in Istanbul. Vakifli, the last Armenian village in Turkey, stands amid orchards on the slopes of Musa Dagh about 40km from Antakya, not far from the Syrian border. The Hemşin are a Muslim mountain people on the Turkish Black Sea coast who speak a distinct Armenian dialect.

Outside Armenia, Russia and Iran, most Armenians speak western Armenian, which differs from eastern Armenian in grammar, slang and the pronunciation of about eight letters out of 38.

RELIGION

Around 90% of the population align themselves with the Armenian Apostolic Church, with smaller numbers of Armenian Catholics, Russian, Greek and Assyrian Orthodox Churches and the neo-Gnostic Yezidis. The Muslim population is minute.

The differences between the Armenian Apostolic Church and the Catholic and Orthodox faiths are subtle but ancient. The first differences arose in AD 451, when the Armenians were too busy fighting the Persians to attend the worldwide church's Council of

OLD TIME RELIGION *Arpi Armenakian Shively*

'Armenians are a people who love to cry,' says Ani Pakradouni of Beirut and Yerevan. 'We celebrate five major memorial days a year in church, as well as the death day of each of our loved ones.' The major holidays are Christmas (Epiphany, January 6), Easter in March or April, the Transfiguration of Christ Day on 19 July, the Feast of the Assumption on 16 August, and Holy Cross (Khatchverats) Day on 14 September.

There has been a revival of churchgoing since Armenia regained independence. 'Not only elderly worshippers either,' says Moses Taslakian. 'In fact, I'd say 80% are under 40 years old.' Although sleek newcomers like St Gregory the Illuminator Church in Yerevan are popular, the older churches, many of which have been around for 700 years or more, are particularly loved. 'As comforting as old slippers,' says Londoner Vartan Armen, after his first visit to Armenia.

Most venerable of all is Holy Echmiadzin, founded in AD 301 by Gregory the Illuminator after a dream in which Jesus selected the site. 'You can feel the weight of centuries of devotion around you,' says Ani Pakradouni.

'The sung Mass at Echmiadzin is the most moving experience,' says Movses Tchapanian. 'The Armenian words, icons and candles and even the smell of incense wrap me in an atmosphere of reverence. I truly feel close to God when I stand near the altar.'

Vartan Armen says non-Orthodox worshippers might find the congregation's comings and goings rather distracting. 'At Echmiadzin, everyone stands. There seems to be no rule about when you arrive or leave. People were still squeezing past us halfway through Mass, walking around, lighting candles, talking to friends. Actually, I think there's something charming about it, like being in God's living room.'

Chalcedon. The Armenians disagreed with the authorities in Constantinople over the nature of Christ. The Armenian Church sees the divine and human nature of Jesus Christ combined in one body (Monophysite), while the Greek Orthodox sees each nature as separate. An Arab caliph proclaimed the Armenian Church to be the most senior of the Oriental Orthodox Monophysite Churches in the 7th century, including the Ethiopian, Assyrian and Egyptian Coptic Churches, which explains the Armenian presence in both Egypt and Ethiopia. The presence of the Oriental Orthodox Church in India led to Armenian communities in cities across that country, especially in Madras (Chennai). While the Armenian Church followed neither Peter nor Helena (Rome nor Constantinople), it sometimes steered closer to Rome in the 12th to 18th centuries.

The Mekhitarist fathers, Armenian Jesuits, started the first Armenian printing press on the isle of San Lazzaro in the Venice lagoon in the 17th century. Armenian Catholics make up about 5% of the total Armenian population, and are relatively well represented in Gyumri and Yerevan.

Nearly all Armenians celebrate Christmas on the Epiphany (the baptism of Jesus) on 6 January. Until the 4th century other Christians

did as well, until the church in Rome moved the date to 25 December to absorb a popular pagan bacchanal on that date.

The exception is the Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem, which follows the original Julian calendar and celebrates Christmas on 19 January.

The church was assimilated into Communist rule by Stalin in the 1930s, and Catholicos Khoren I died in the Gulags in 1938. During WWII the pressure relented a little, and in the Brezhnev years the church began regaining its ancient independence. During the Cold War the diaspora church fractured between the anti-Communist Catholicosate of Sis, based in Antelias, Lebanon, and the Catholicosate of Echmiadzin in Soviet Armenia. The division has been partly reconciled since independence.

ARTS Literature

Oral folk tales told during long winter nights in villages, such as the *Daredevils of Sassoun* (an epic tale that would give *Lord of the Rings* a run for its money), were the earliest form of Armenian literature. Mesrop Mashtots' creation of the alphabet in AD 405, for the purpose of writing religious texts, set in place the foundation of written stories. The first

words written in the Armenian alphabet were allegedly 'recognise wisdom and advice, heed the words of a genius'.

Classics include St Grigor Narekatsi's *Book of Lamentations* (also just called the *Narek*), a book of simple, practical ways of prayer written when Narekatsi (951–1003) was ill. Mkhitar Gosh (1130–1213) wrote the *Book of Trials* (a code of law) at Goshavank near Dilijan, the first collection of Armenian civil laws.

Medieval Armenian scientists wrote works such as *Useless for the Ignorant*, a work on medicine. The rise of modern Armenian literature began in the 19th century. Khachatur Abovyan's *Wound of Armenia* novelised the shocks, patriotism and hopes of the nation, with a prescient eye to the events to come early in the next century.

The Armenian-American writer William Saroyan (1908–1981) crafted lively short stories on immigrants and Armenians in California.

When Saroyan visited Soviet Armenia he always put an American flag in front of him at public occasions, saying it was a tribute to the country that gave him a life. *The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze & Other Stories*, published in 1934, is probably his best-known collection. Contemporary American-Armenian historians and writers include Richard Hovhannissian and Peter Balakian.

Hardly any translations of Armenian classics are on sale in Yerevan, so try ordering through www.amazon.com, or through specialists such as the bookstore of the New York-based Armenian General Benevolent Fund (www.agbu.org).

RABIZ PARTY

Rabiz is a contraction of the Russian words '*rabochy sskusstvo*' (workers culture). It's entertainment and it's also a lifestyle – the guys in the silk shirts and gold chains driving too fast while smoking and talking on their mobile phones. If you ask a hip student, they'll say that Armenian popular culture is divided between loud, showy, raucous *rabiz* culture on one hand and everything of good taste on the other. *Rabiz* also covers a lot of highly inventive slang. *Rabiz* music is marshrutka-driver (public minivan transport driver) music, a mix of brainless pop and over-the-top tragic ballads (girl has cancer, boy says he'll kill himself before she dies) that strike a sentimental Middle Eastern chord in Armenian hearts. They want music that will make them cry, as well as impassioned love songs and arms-aloft dancing music. This kind of music booms from taxis in Greek, Russian, Turkish and Arabic. The Armenian variety comes from Los Angeles, Beirut and Moscow as well as Yerevan, where it plays in neighbourhood bars, clubs and *khoravats* (barbecued food) joints late into the night.

Cinema

The ArmFilm studios on the Ashtarak road out of Yerevan once thrived with productions but are now mostly moribund. Sergei Paradjanov (Parajanian) was born in Tbilisi and adopted the Russian -ov suffix to his name. Frequently out of favour with the culture moguls, he still managed to unleash camp-visionary theatrical films including *Colour of Pomegranates*, *Sayat-Nova*, *Ashough Gharib* and *Souram Fortress* in the 1960s and 1970s. The reward for his genius was four years' hard labour in a Soviet prison camp. Two more films followed his release from prison but his final masterpiece, *The Confession*, was left unfinished with his own death. While the films may not have seen success in the USSR, he won fans internationally including Fellini and Bertolucci.

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

Music

Armenian religious music's mythically complex harmonies are partly lost, though there are many fine, melancholy choirs of the Armenian liturgy. The great composers

of the 19th and 20th centuries include Komitas, whose works for choir and orchestra put Armenian music on an international stage, and Armen Tigranyan for his opera *Anush*. Aram Khachaturian is best known for his *Sabre Dance* and the ballet *Spartacus*. Sayat-Nova, oft considered the greatest singer-songwriter in the Caucasus, began his career in the court of Erekle II of Georgia but was exiled for his forbidden love of the king's daughter. The country is still a centre for classical music, with a ballet theatre, an opera company, orchestras for chamber music and symphonies, and an active world of composers and performers.

Folk music is alive and well in town troupes and late-night clubs and *khoravats* palaces. Spend a night at a popular venue like Ashtarak's Ashtarak Dzor (p174) complex and marvel at the range of talent. The *duduk*, a double-reed instrument made from

apricot wood, will become the soundtrack to your journey in Armenia. Its inescapable trill features in traditional music and many modern pop tunes blaring from the speakers of taxi cabs.

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

Current artists of note include Lilit Pipoyan, a Joni Mitchell-esque singer and songwriter, and Vahan Artsruni, a composer with folk-guitar pickings who also rocks out in Yerevan's small live-rock scene. Arto Tunçboyacıyan's Armenian Navy Band mixes jazz and folk music on the albums *Bzdik Zinvor* (Little Soldier) and *New Apricot*.

There are plenty of emerging young singers, including Hasmik Karapetyan, Armenia's ver-

ARTHUR GRIGORIAN

Singer Arthur Grigorian has enjoyed a long and illustrious career and is now considered to be the 'godfather of Armenian pop music'. His albums include *The Best of the Best and Yesterday, Today and...* Arthur is also a peace advocate and vocal supporter of Nagorno-Karabakh, the native land of his father.

What makes a good musician?

A musician should not lie. They must be honest with themselves, God and their fans. They must be willing to bare their souls.

How do you characterise Armenian music?

Armenian pop incorporates much traditional music. It uses traditional instruments like the *duduk*, *zurna*, *shiva* and *bulula* and blends classic rhythms and beats that are familiar to all Armenians.

Why does it borrow so much from the traditional?

Armenia is a small country between much larger neighbours. There has always been the threat that we would lose our culture to Russian, Turkish or Iranian invaders. So our defence has been to clutch what remains Armenian to ward off external influences. Even when we adopted pop music from the West it was important to make it uniquely Armenian. Armenians in Turkey and Iran have mixed their music with Turkish and Iranian sounds, which is something we must try to avoid.

Which artists have influenced you?

Among the Western pop artists, I'd say my guru is Stevie Wonder. He is my musical inspiration. In Armenia I appreciate the music of Komitas.

What do you do when you're not making sweet Armenian music?

I love to fly helicopters and airplanes. In my next life I want to be a professional pilot. My friend is a pilot and I occasionally join him in the cockpit. One time he let me fly the entire route from Yerevan to Belfast – the passengers were Armenia's national soccer team!

What is most important for Armenia?

A peaceful solution in Karabakh. Karabakhis are the bravest, smartest people in the world and they deserve a peaceful and prosperous future. There are many external forces that have played a role in Karabakh but it's time for the Karabakhis to determine their own fate. I pray for peace not only in Karabakh but also in Armenia and Azerbaijan.

KOMITAS & SOGHOMIAN TEHLIRIAN

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

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

sion of Celine Dion, and Hayko, the Armenian entry to the 2007 Eurovision song contest (he finished eighth).

The diasporan music scene is highly varied – from the Los Angeles metal masters System of a Down, to Cher (Cheryl Sarkissian) and her groundbreaking gowns, to the timeless croonings of Charles Aznavour ('mmm... come closer... eets nice to be like zeets'). A concert featuring all three would really be something else.

Architecture

Reconstructions at Erebuni (p156) and the Metsamor Museum (p173) give an impression of the cities of classical Armenia – sprawling palaces with Persian, Hellenic and local influences. Surp Hripsime (AD 618) in Echmiadzin (p173) is a classic of early Christian church architecture, when the halls of basilicas transformed into domed square or cross-shaped churches.

St Gregory the Illuminator built churches on top of pagan temples across historic Armenia. His successors had a flair for placing churches and monasteries above cliffs and on sunlit shelves of land. Saghmosavank (p174) perches on the edge of Kasagh Gorge, pinning down the land and saving it from collapsing into the abyss. Tatev (p216) stands in a similar position on the Vorotan Canyon. Even

through the years of the Mongol invasions, stunning monasteries were built at Gandzasar (p306), Goshavank (p192), Haghpat (p201) and Haghartsin (p192).

Armenian architecture has also influenced that of Europe. Crusaders, who had built only square towers, adopted the Armenian method of building round towers on churches and castles. The cross-shaped layout of churches found everywhere is also attributed to Armenian church builders.

Only a few frescoes have survived from the medieval period, with images of varying faintness at Lmbat and other churches near Talin (p175), and at Kobayr (p199) in Lori and the Surp Poghos-Petros Church at Tatev (p216).

Yerevan was rebuked as a hovel of mud houses by visiting Russian tsarist officers at the end of the 19th century, but some fine stone buildings with high walls and arched windows can be found in many old villages and towns such as Meghri, Ashtarak, Malishka and Goris. The tsarist old quarter of Kumayri in Gyumri is the most complete 19th-century urban area in Armenia.

Yerevan is an almost entirely Soviet city with some startling edifices, such as Mother Armenia (p155) and the Cascade (p152). What one writer termed 'random monumentality' describes the impact of Soviet art in Armenia. Silver astronauts, brooding 5m-high eagles,

and the superheroic muscles of designated national heroes in bronze leap from granite pedestals all over the country.

Visual Arts

There are enough art galleries, artists' studios and house museums to fill several weeks in Yerevan. Miniaturisation and microsculpture is a peculiarly Armenian pursuit, with a number of impressive artists, including Eduard Ter-Ghazaryan of Sisian, whose pieces require a microscope to be appreciated; you can see examples of his work at Sisavan Church (p212).

Martiros Sarian is one of Armenia's most famous painters, and a museum in Yerevan preserves his studio (p153). Suitably enough, a Sarian sculpture in a Yerevan park is the focus of Yerevan's art market, where painters gather to offer a critique of each other's work and sell their paintings (p165). Most of the paintings have religious iconography or capture familiar Armenian landscapes. Yervand Kochar has his own gallery filled with portraits nearby on Moscovyan Poghots (p153).

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

The illustrated manuscripts preserved in Yerevan's Matenadaran (p152) and the libraries of Echmiadzin are testament to centuries of monastic endeavour.

The brilliant dyes gleam today from the pages of thousands of manuscripts, prepared with rare dyes and preparations that were state secrets in classical and medieval Armenia. Some highly skilled calligraphers create copies of classic images like the Annunciation, which can be bought in Yerevan (p165).

Theatre & Dance

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

The Hellenic kings of Armenia patronised theatre in the 3rd century BC, and Greek dramas played to King Tigran the Great. There are about a dozen active theatre houses in Yerevan specialising in musical comedy, contemporary plays and drama revivals.

The musical comedies and shows for kids are easy to follow and very professionally done (for booking details see p163).

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

ENVIRONMENT

The Land

Armenia's land is filled with mountain ranges and plateaus with valleys and plains in between, folded and creased into a stunning array of regional environments. Perched on the north-eastern edge of the Anatolian Plateau, the country has several peaks above 3000m.

Indeed, only 10% of Armenia lies below 1000m. The country's highest peak, Mt Aragats, is 4090m, though the highest mountain of historic Armenia is Noah's mountain, 5165m Mt Ararat (Masis), in present-day Turkey.

National Parks

About 12% of Armenia is protected by natural and historic reserves, though much of this is Lake Sevan National Park.

In Soviet times the reserves were closed except to scientists. Nowadays all are open, and it's a good idea to leave a tip of around AMD300 per person with the custodian – they don't earn much. The Khosrov Nature Reserve (p176) in the hills beyond Geghard is terrific for hikes, with volcanic 'organ-pipe' cliffs, *khatchkars* (carved stone crosses) and isolated churches. The Dilijan Nature Reserve protects hornbeam and oak forest, while the woods and canyons of Shikahogh Nature Reserve (p219), south of Kapan, are rarely visited by tourists. The state also protects a number of archaeological sites, including Erebuni (p156), Dvin and Metsamor (p173) around Yerevan, and some rare habitats, such as scrubland near Jrarat south of Echmiadzin, preserving Vordan Karmir beetles, once used to prepare dyes.

Environmental Issues

Parts of the Armenian environment took a terrible beating from Soviet industry. There are stories of driving through the haze around Vanadzor's giant chemical plant when it was in full swing and noticing that your nylon shirt was rotting away. The Metsamor nuclear power station, 30km west of Yerevan, generates 40% of Armenia's

energy but does not meet internationally accepted safety standards and will be decommissioned by 2016 at the latest. Plans are being laid to build a new 1000-megawatt plant with Russian aid.

Poverty and the lack of alternative fuels have put pressure on forests. Larger-scale logging of questionable sustainability has occurred in the Lori and Tavush *marz*. The economic recovery might also bring hazards – one mining works apparently restarted with its old exhaust scrubbers already stripped out and sold off.

The air quality in Yerevan suffers from so many vehicles rumbling along past their retirement date and from low-quality fuel. Still, the quality of bird life in Armenia proves that the country has an abundance of healthy wilderness – perhaps as much as 70% of the land surface – from the oak and hornbeam forests of Dilijan and rocky highlands of the Geghama range to the ice fields on Mt Aragats.

Another good-news story is the rising water level of Lake Sevan – conservation efforts have caused the lake level to rise by 2m since 2002.

Environmental awareness is scant. Pipes pour raw sewage into rivers and it's common to see people dumping their garbage into the nearest stream. There is a long way to go to change attitudes but some environmental education programs have begun. The twice-yearly **Sun Child Festival** (www.sunchild.am) gets kids excited about going green.

FOOD & DRINK

Armenian cuisine is a national treasure, a delicate mix of lightly spiced meats, fresh salads, lots of chewy light lavash bread and home-made specialities dating back centuries. It combines elements of the cuisines of all its historic neighbours – Arabic, Russian, Greek and Persian – but remains distinctive. Scientists believe that the first wheat was grown on the southern flanks of historic Armenia, south of Lake Van, while the Romans dubbed the apricot *prunus armeniaca*, or Armenian prune.

A lot of Armenian produce is practically organic by default, and you might notice a difference between industrial-scale Western supermarket chicken and happily free-range Armenian chicken. There is an amusing blog about the joys of Armenian food at <http://armenianfood.blogspot.com>.

Staples & Specialities

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

Broadly speaking, western Armenian cuisine is more similar to Lebanese and Turkish cooking, while eastern Armenian has more Russian and Georgian influences. Besides *khoravats*, staples include dolmas (rice wrapped in vine leaves), soups, vegetable stews and lavash fresh from the oven. Armenians aren't afraid to throw in garlic and salt by the handful to boost the flavour. Hors d'oeuvres include cold salads, salty cheeses and dips such as *jajik* (yogurt with cucumbers and fennel). *Tan about* is yogurt soup sprinkled with parsley and fennel, much admired for its curative qualities. Pastries appear everywhere, such as Georgian *khachapuri* (cheese pies) and *bourek* (flaky pastry with salty cheese and spinach). Cured meats include *sujukh* or *yegh-chik* (dark, cured spicy sausage) and *basturma* (finely cured ham). Desserts include honey-drenched baklava and sweetly crunchy *kedayif* (dessert pastry) though thick chocolate cakes and tortes are popular in the region too.

Drinks

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

The two main lagers are Kilikia and Kotayk, widely available and quite refreshing on a hot summer afternoon. Kilikia is a typical middle-European lager, very good when fresh. Its main rival, Kotayk, is sold everywhere and is a little more reliable, if bland, while Erebuni has more flavour and is made by the same company. Russian Baltika beer is also sometimes available; Baltika 3 and Baltika 7 are the most common lagers. *Kvas* is a home brew sometimes sold at markets, a lightly alcoholic drink made from rye bread, something like a natural cola or sweet soda.

FRUIT FANATICS *Arpi Armenakian Shively*

In a nation too often associated with shortages, fruit is enjoyed in abundance in Armenia and woven into the culture. Seventy-eight-year-old Lucine Sherbetjian, originally from western Armenia, croons an undulating folk song from the 1930s with a catchy chorus: 'Oh, Yerevan, with your praiseworthy grapes and the perfume of your peaches.'

'For New Year and our Christmas,' says Houri Taslakian, who lives in Yerevan, 'even the poorest families cover the dining table with dishes of dried fruits and preserves. They are kept full for 15 days so that hospitality never runs out.'

Chocolate and mass-produced sweets are expensive and scarce, so fruit is the basis for several treats. What's top of the chew charts? 'Give me *tetoo lavash*,' says Aline Taslakian from Florida, who summers in Yerevan. 'Paper-thin layers of sour plum puree, they're addictive!' The taste for sweetened fruits extends to liquids: 'In my cousin's house, they serve homemade cherry liqueur to wash down lunch,' says Alice Ekrek, 'and even the kids drink it!'

Grapes and rosy *narinj* peaches are especially prized here, but one fruit reigns supreme. Thanks to plentiful sunshine and an absence of chemicals and pesticides, the flavour of Armenian apricots is regarded as incomparable. Houri Taslakian says Yerevan's annual Golden Apricot Film Festival also pays homage to its finest fruit: 'A basket of apricots is blessed at the opening ceremony.'

Apricots and other fruits also feature in folk medicine. In her book *Armenian Food: Fact, Fiction and Folklore* Irina Petrosian notes several orchard standbys: 'Apricots are regarded as a cure for everything from constipation to heartache. Pomegranate juice is prescribed for diarrhoea and pomegranate rind if you're feeling queasy.'

In Armenia, fruit is an everyday miracle.

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

Most red wines are made from the Areni grape, well suited to the hot summers and harsh winters. The one-dollar-a-bottle stuff is what you'd expect, but some of the wines for AMD1500 to AMD5000 are excellent. Frosts and late springs make the Armenian vintage as shaky as the Champagne region. Some reputable Areni makers are Vayots Dzor, Vedi Alco, Getap and Noravank, and new wineries are springing up. White wines are produced from vineyards in Tavush, Lori and Karabakh, and are generally sweet or with extra tannins from the skins.

Where to Eat & Drink

Yerevan's restaurant scene is booming and the quality of the international cuisine continues to improve. Prices are moderate if you are coming from Europe, but pricey if coming from Georgia or Iran. An appetizer, main

course and glass of wine in Yerevan will cost AMD4000 to AMD6000 (US\$12 to \$18), or half that price if you eat somewhere simpler.

Outside Yerevan, the choices can often be limited to *khoravats*, kebabs and sometimes *lahmajo* or *lahmajoon* (spiced-up little minced-lamb pizzas).

Vegans & Vegetarians

There are hundreds of fine meat-free dishes in the Armenian cookbook, but at restaurants the options might only be salad, grilled vegetables, bread and cheese (sorry, vegan comrades). Nuts are sold everywhere – sunflower seeds are a very Middle Eastern obsession. Tomatoes, rice, aubergines, courgettes and a profusion of herbs and spices have created a wealth of vegetarian dishes. Western Armenian cuisine has hummus, tabouleh and other dishes associated with Lebanese cuisine, and there are lots of home-made *ratatouilles* made from beans, carrots and onions with olive oil. *Kartofel* (pilaf rice) is a buttery mix of dried raisins, apricots and other spices. B&B hosts will do vegetarian meals.

Habits & Customs

Breakfast isn't a big meal here, but for all other mealtimes, Armenians love to sit, drink and eat for hours. Menus are becoming more common,

but the custom is to discuss options and prices with the waiter if there's no menu, and often even if there is. Some say it's rude to eat with your left hand, others say that's a Muslim custom and not Armenian.

The drinking culture is highly developed, but it needn't be crippling. As one host said, it's my duty to keep your glass full, it's up to you how you drink it. Women drink wine or brandy rather than vodka. Drunkenness is unacceptable, especially for women. If you want to propose a toast it's polite to ask the permission of the *tamada* (main toastmaker). There's a custom in clinking glasses of holding your glass lower than the next person's, as a sign of deference. This can develop into a game until the glasses are at table level. If you empty a bottle into someone's glass, it obliges them to buy the next bottle – it's polite to put the last drops into your own glass.

Eat Your Words

Armenians often call common foods by Russian, Turkic and even Hindi words.

MENU DECODER

about – soup
basturma – cured beef or ham
biber – capsicum, pepper
bourek – flaky stuffed pastry
dolma – rice and meat parcels in vine leaves
hats – bread
hav – chicken
hummus – ground chickpea paste with oil
gov – beef
ishkhan – Sevan trout
kebab – ground meat cooked on a skewer
kedayif – crunchy dessert pastry
khamaju – a meat pie similar to *khachapuri*
khash – winter stew of animal parts
khaghogh – grapes
khashlama – lamb stew cooked in beer or wine

SOME HANDY ADVICE

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

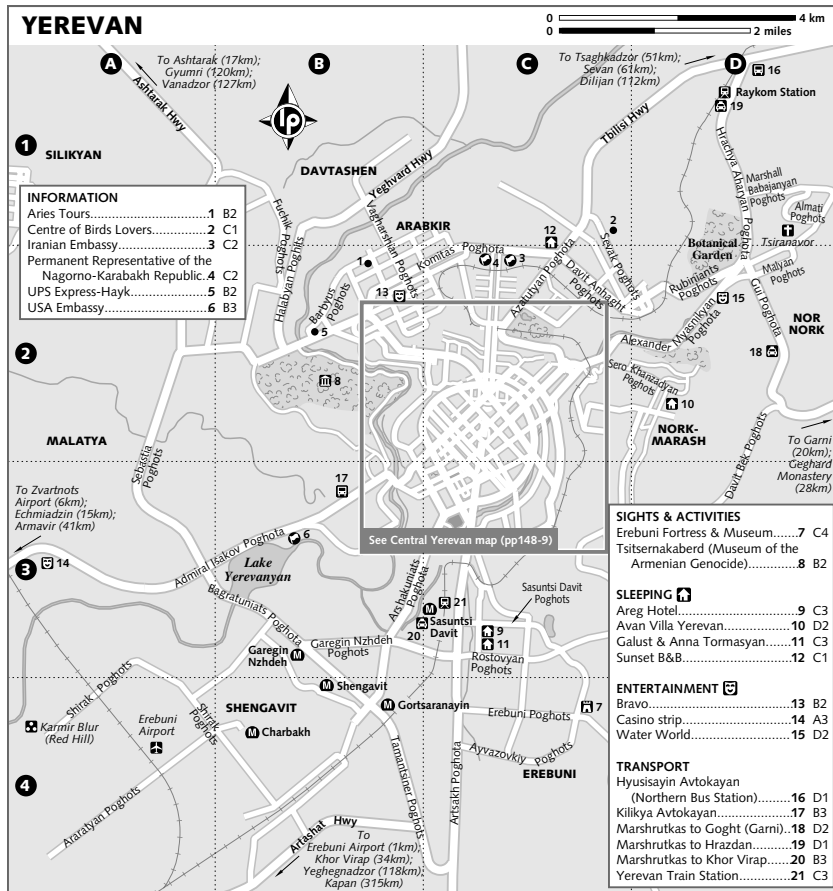
Another piece of advice: do not give money to beggars on the streets of Yerevan. There is an organisation called Orran which supports the homeless and it has done an effective job of taking care of the destitute. Beggars only seem to come out on the street in the tourist season. If you want to give something, it's best to donate directly to **Orran** (☎ 1-53 51 67; www.orrان.am).

khoravats – barbecue, usually pork, lamb or beef, also vegetables and fish, does not include kebab
khoz – pork
kyufta – meatballs mixed with onion and egg
lahmajo (lahmajoon) – minced-lamb minipizza
lavash – thin flat bread
matsoon – yogurt
oghee – fruit vodka
paneer – cheese
patlijan – aubergine
pomidor – tomato (also *loleek*)
shakar – sugar
sigra – river trout
suchush – plum and walnut sweet
sujukh – cured sausage
tabouleh – diced green salad with semolina
tan – yogurt
tsiran – apricot
vochkhar – lamb

YEREVAN ԵՐԵՎԱՆ

👤 1 / pop 1.1 million

While it's the undeniable cultural, economic and political heart of the nation, Yerevan can at times feel like a city on permanent holiday. All summer long Yerevanites saunter up and down the main boulevards, preening in high fashion and fast cars while occasionally popping into a parkside café to schmooze over a drink or two. It's the most laid-back capital in the Caucasus and it's easy to slide into a torpor for a day or two. The city has some lovely 19th-century Russian edifices in its central core plus rings of parkland and handsome brick squares. Outer areas maintain an air of Soviet sprawl but these are limited by steep hills and gorges. Yerevan's museums and monuments could keep you busy for a few days but the best thing about the place is the people. Expressive black eyebrows, proud noses and classical Greek and Persian profiles appear everywhere, in a street culture



somewhere between Marseilles, village Armenia and old Beirut. Yerevan is a relaxed and safe place where people live at one pace while the traffic goes at another. The cultural life is intense for a city of its size, including dozens of theatres, concert halls, galleries and live music clubs.

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

HISTORY

Yerevan's history dates back to 782 BC, when the Erebuni fortress was built by King Arghishti I of Urartu at the place where the Hrazdan

River widened onto the fertile Ararat Plains. It was a regional capital of Muslim khanates and Persian governors until the Russian annexation in 1828.

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

ORIENTATION

Yerevan sits in a valley edged on three sides by hills, with the little Hrazdan River cutting a serpentine gorge west of the city centre. Central streets in the city are laid

out on a grid with several ring roads, intersected by the redeveloped Huyusayin Poghota (Northern Ave). In the centre is Hanrapetutyán Hraparak (Republic Sq), while the Opera House a few blocks north is another focal point. Mesrop Mashtots Poghota (avenue) is one of the city's busiest thoroughfares.

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

The main train station is above Sasuntsi Davit metro station. Yerevan's metro has four stations in the city centre with the last stop at Berekamutyun.

INFORMATION

Bookshops

There are quite a few bookshops selling Armenian and Russian publications and stockists of other languages are rare.

Arbridge Bookstore Café (Map pp148-9; ☎ 52 12 39; 20 Abovyan Poghots; ☎ 8.30am-midnight) Has a small but well-chosen range of titles and a book exchange; see p161 for details.

Macmillan Bookstore (Map pp148-9; ☎ 53 79 82; 9 Gharám Parpetsy Poghots) Has a few English-language novels but mostly sells learning materials, including dictionaries.

Noyan Tapan (Map pp148-9; ☎ 56 81 84; Hanrapetutyán Hraparak) Has a few English novels plus maps and books on Armenia.

Cultural Centres

American Corner (Map pp148-9; ☎ 56 13 83; yer-evan@americancorners.am; 2 Amiryan Poghots; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat) Has a library, internet access and a series of films and lectures.

YEREVAN IN ONE DAY

Start off with breakfast at a café on Abovyan Poghots with some freshly ground *soorch* (coffee). Take a look around the grand buildings of Hanrapetutyán Hraparak (Republic Sq), and have a browse in the National Gallery. Head up Abovyan and take a look at the Katoghike church. The square around the Opera House has plenty of cafés for lunch dining. The Matenadaran is a fine building with a small but beautiful collection of manuscripts on display, or go up to the Cascade for a grand view over the city, surrounded by flower beds. Then head out to a restaurant for a long dinner of Armenian *khovavats* with salads, desserts and cognac. Check out a club or people-watch from any one of dozens of late-night cafés, around the Opera House and the Ring Park in particular.

WI-FI IN YEREVAN

Free wi-fi is available at the departure lounge in Zvartnots airport. You can use wi-fi in the lobby of the Golden Tulip hotel (p159), but you will have to buy something. Pay wi-fi is available at the Tourist Information Centre (p151), the Club (p161), Triumph (p162) and Zodiac (p162). Some of the upscale hotels have a pay wi-fi service for their guests. The Envoy Hostel (p158) charges a reasonable AMD500 per hour.

Emergency

Emergency services ☎ 103

European Medical Centre ambulance ☎ 54 00 03

Fire ☎ 101

Police ☎ 102

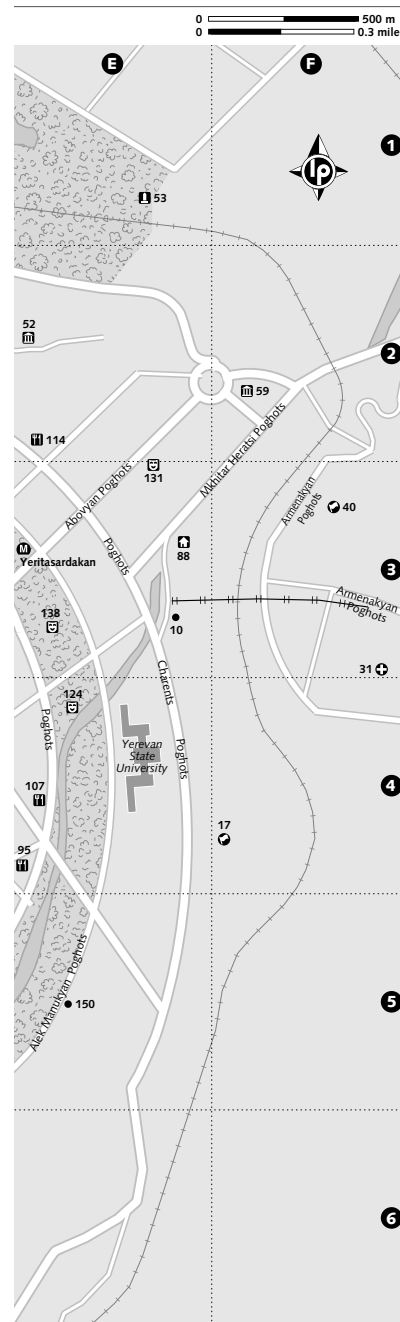
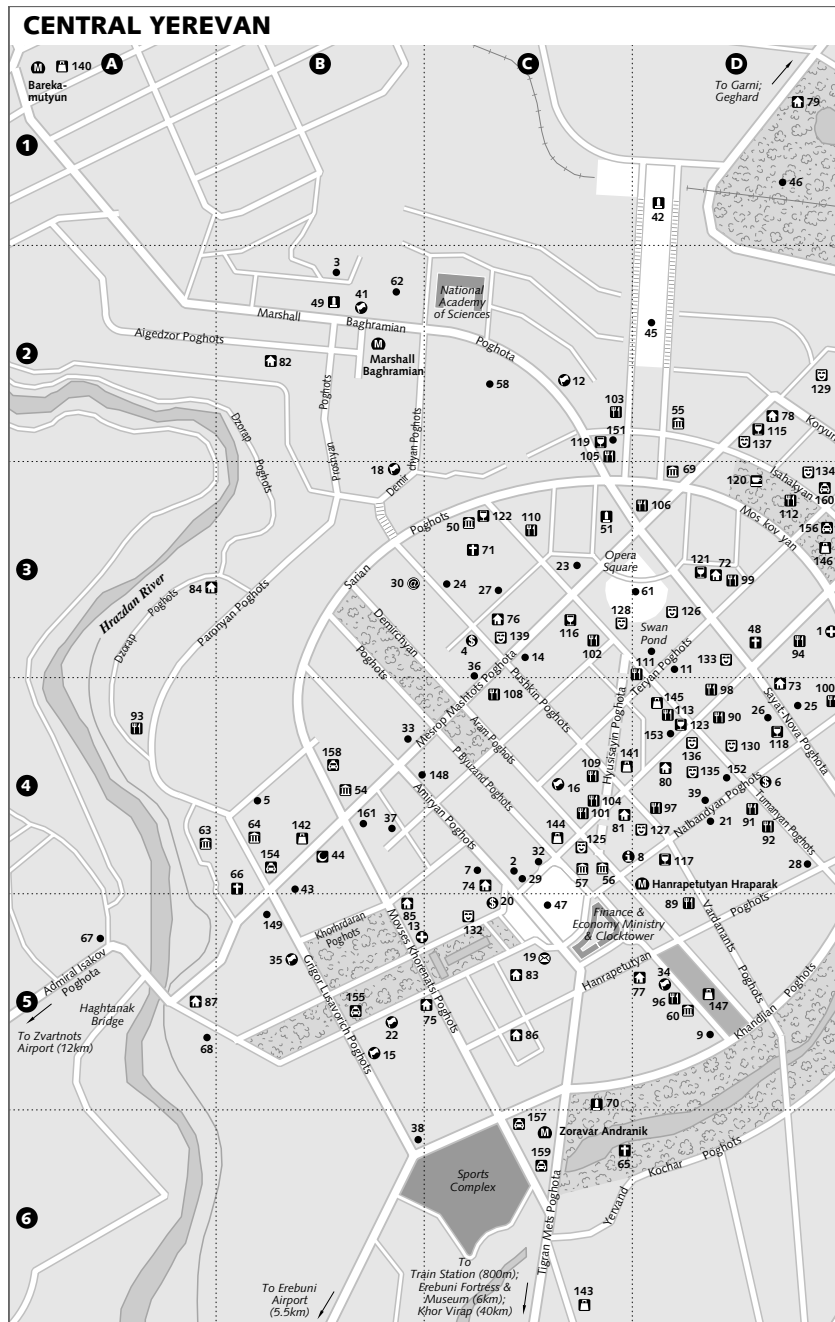
Internet Access

There are internet clubs on virtually every city block, varying from cramped basements to places with 20 terminals or more. Many are open very late and cost around AMD300 per hour. Some can be unbearably smoky.

You also need to pay for the megabytes used, so costs rack up every time you click a new page or upload/download something. **Nexus** (☎ 53 33 88; 49 Pushkin Poghots; ☎ 24 hr) near the Envoy Hostel and **Kino Moskva** (Internet Club; Map pp148-9 ☎ 52 12 70; 18 Abovyan Poghots; ☎ 9am-10pm) at the Moscow Cinema are both decent options.

Internet Resources

Tour Armenia (www.tacentral.com) and *Armenia Now* magazine (www.armenianow.com) have regular updates of clubs, pubs and restaurants in Yerevan. The website www.armeniadiaspora.com also has some handy information.



Laundry

There are only a handful of laundromats around town, but all hotels and most B&Bs and homestays can arrange clean laundry. The following places are all full-service and charge by the kilo.

Lavanda (Map pp148-9; ☎ 53 40 31; 56a Pushkin Poghots) Convenient if you are staying at the Envoy hostel.

Selena Service (Map pp148-9; ☎ 53 65 08; 4 Zakyun Poghots) Charges about AMD1500 for a shirt or AMD1000 for trousers or dry-cleaning.

Shahab (Map pp148-9; ☎ 54 31 96; 2 Grigor Lusavorich Poghots).

Media

The main English-language weekly newspaper, *Noyan Tapan*, is available from Noyan Tapan (p147) and Artbridge Bookstore Café (p161) and sometimes from hotels and souvenir shops. Artbridge also has international magazines and newspapers, and these are sometimes available in the lobbies of upscale hotels such as Hotel Avia Trans. The NPAK gallery (p154) puts out the handy *Yerevan Guide* booklet with good listings, tips and reviews; it's also available at hotels and tourist-oriented shops around town.

Medical Services

Yerevan has the best medical facilities in the country, but they're still inadequate by international standards.

4th Yerevan City Polyclinic (Map pp148-9; ☎ 58 03 95; 13 Moskovyan Poghots)

European Medical Centre (Map pp148-9; ☎ 54 00 03; 3/1 Vazgen Sargsyan Poghots)

Nork-Marash Hospital (Map pp148-9; ☎ 65 09 71; 13 Armenakyan Poghots, Nork-Marash)

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

Money

There are moneychangers everywhere in Yerevan and cash machines dispensing drams are becoming quite common. Euros, dollars and roubles can be changed nearly everywhere; the pound and Georgian lari are less commonly traded. **HSBC** (☎ 56 32 39; hsb@arminfo.com; 9 Vazgen Sargsyan Poghots) is the leading international bank and has several branches with cash machines around the city. If you

INFORMATION		National Folk Art Museum of Armenia.....	59 F2	Cactus.....	116 C3
4th Yerevan City Polyclinic.....	1 D3	NPAK.....	60 D5	Cheers.....	117 D4
American Corner.....	2 C4	Opera House.....	61 D3	Lounge Bar Bunker.....	118 D4
American University of Armenia.....	3 B2	Presidential Palace.....	62 B2	Pioneer Club.....	119 C2
Anelik Bank ATM.....	4 C3	Sergei Paradjanov Museum.....	63 A4	Poplovok Jazz Café.....	120 D3
Aquarius Travel.....	5 B4	State Museum of Armenian History.....	(see 57)	Pub Ché.....	121 D3
Arexim Bank ATM.....	6 D4	State Museum of Wood-Carving.....	64 B4	Shamrock.....	122 C3
Armavia.....	7 C4	Surp Grigor Lusavorich Cathedral.....	65 C6	Texas.....	123 D4
Armenia Information.....	8 C4	Surp Sargis.....	66 B4	ENTERTAINMENT 📺	
Avarayr.....	9 D5	Yerevan Brandy Company.....	67 A5	Aqua.....	124 E4
Ayas Nautical Research Club.....	10 E3	Yerevan Wine Plant.....	68 A5	Aram Khachaturian Concert Hall.....	(see 61)
Birds of Armenia Project.....	(see 3)	Yervand Kochar Museum.....	69 D3	Arno Babadjanian Concert Hall.....	125 C4
BMI.....	(see 26)	Zoravar Andranik statue.....	70 C5	Astral.....	126 D3
Canadian Embassy.....	(see 74)	Zoravar Church.....	71 C3	Avante Garde Music.....	127 D4
Caravan Tours.....	11 D3	SLEEPING 🛏		Café Atlantic.....	128 C3
Chinese Embassy.....	12 C2	Anahit Avedisyan.....	(see 72)	Chamber Theatre.....	129 D2
European Medical Centre.....	13 B5	Anahit Stepanyan.....	72 D3	Club One.....	130 D4
FedEx/Transimpex.....	14 C3	Ani Plaza Hotel.....	73 D4	Garage Club.....	131 E3
French Embassy.....	15 B5	Armenia Marriott Hotel.....	74 C4	Hakob Paronyan State Musical Comedy Theatre.....	132 C5
Georgian Embassy.....	16 C4	Congress Hotel.....	75 C5	Hovhannes Tumanyan Theatre of Marionettes.....	133 D3
German Embassy.....	17 F4	Envoy Hostel.....	76 C3	Hrachia Ghaplanyan Drama Theatre.....	134 D3
Greek Embassy.....	18 B3	Europe Hotel.....	77 D5	Kami.....	135 D4
Haypost Main Office.....	19 C5	Foreign Students Hostel.....	78 D2	Kino Moskva.....	136 D4
HSBC.....	20 C5	Gayane Simonyan.....	(see 72)	Kino Nairi.....	137 D2
Hyr Service.....	21 D4	Golden Palace.....	79 D1	Komitas Chamber Music Hall.....	138 E3
Iran Information & Communication Centre.....	(see 44)	Golden Tulip - Hotel Yerevan.....	80 D4	Malkhas Jazz Club.....	139 C3
Italian Embassy.....	22 B5	Hotel Avia Trans.....	81 C4	Melines.....	(see 104)
Kiosk for Opera Tickets.....	23 C3	Hotel Bass.....	82 B2	National Academic Opera & Ballet Theatre.....	(see 61)
Lavanda.....	24 C3	Hotel Erebuni.....	83 C5	Opera.....	(see 61)
Lazaryn Dpratoon.....	25 D4	Hotel Hrazdan.....	84 A3	Relax.....	(see 114)
Levon Travel.....	26 D4	Hotel Shirak.....	85 B5	SHOPPING 🛍	
Macmillan Bookstore.....	27 C3	Hy Business Hotel.....	86 C5	Hayastan Market.....	140 A1
Menua Tours.....	(see 150)	Metropol Hotel.....	87 A5	Salt Sack.....	141 C4
Ministry of Culture.....	28 D4	Parev Inn.....	88 E3	Shuka No 1.....	142 B4
Ministry of Foreign Affairs.....	29 C4	EATING 🍴		Shuka No 2.....	143 C6
Nexus.....	30 B3	Ankyun.....	89 D5	Treasures of Armenia.....	144 C4
Nork-Marash Hospital.....	31 F3	Artbridge Bookstore Café.....	90 D4	Tufenkian Carpets.....	145 D4
Noyan Tapan.....	32 C4	Beijing.....	91 D4	Underground stores.....	146 D3
OVIR.....	33 B4	Bukhara.....	92 D4	Vernissage art market.....	(see 51)
Polish Embassy.....	34 D5	Caesar's Palace.....	93 A4	Vernissage market.....	147 D5
Russian Embassy.....	35 B5	Café Central.....	94 D3	TRANSPORT	
Sati Tours.....	36 C3	Caucasus Tavern.....	95 E4	Aeroflot Russian Airlines.....	148 B4
Selena Service.....	37 B4	City Diner.....	96 D5	Air Arabia.....	149 B5
Shahab.....	38 B6	Dolmama's.....	97 D4	Air France.....	(see 150)
Tatev Travel.....	39 D4	Gusto.....	98 D4	Austrian Airlines.....	150 E5
Turkmenistan Embassy.....	40 F3	Karma.....	99 D3	Caspian Air.....	(see 39)
UK Embassy.....	41 B2	Lagonid Bistro-Café.....	100 D4	Caucasus Airlines.....	(see 26)
SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES		Marco Polo.....	(see 74)	CSA Czech Airlines.....	151 C2
50th Anniversary of Soviet Armenia Monument.....	42 D1	Meeting Point Café.....	101 C4	EET.....	152 D4
Arena Bowling Centre.....	43 B4	Old Erivan.....	102 C3	Europcar.....	(see 80)
Artists' Union.....	(see 80)	Our Village.....	(see 72)	Hertz.....	153 D4
Blue Mosque.....	44 B4	Phoenicia Restaurant.....	103 C2	Lufthansa.....	(see 74)
Cascade.....	45 D2	Restaurant Français.....	104 C4	Marshrutkas to Agarak & Ashtarak.....	154 B4
Haghtanak Park.....	46 D1	Samurai.....	105 C2	Marshrutkas to Alaverdi.....	155 B5
Hanrapetutyun Hraparak.....	47 C5	Santa Fe.....	106 D3	Marshrutkas to Alaverdi, Gyumri & Vanadzor.....	157 C6
Katoghike.....	48 D3	Sayat Nova.....	107 E4	Marshrutkas to Echmiadzin.....	158 B4
Marshall Baghramian statue.....	49 B2	Shah Pizza.....	108 C4	Marshrutkas to Goris, Kapan, Sisian, Vayk & Yeghegnadzor.....	159 C6
Martiros Sarian Museum.....	50 C3	Square One.....	109 C4	Marshrutkas to Sevan.....	160 D3
Martiros Sarian statue.....	51 C3	The Club.....	110 C3	Syrian Arab Airlines.....	161 B4
Matenadaran.....	52 E2	The Color of Pomegranates.....	(see 152)		
Military Museum.....	(see 53)	Time Out.....	111 D3		
Mother Armenia (Mayr Hayastan).....	53 E1	Triumph.....	112 D3		
Museum of Modern Art.....	54 B4	Tumanyan Shwarma.....	113 D4		
Museum of Russian Art.....	55 D2	Zodiac.....	114 E2		
Museum of the Middle East.....	56 C4	DRINKING 🍷 🍺			
National Art Gallery.....	57 C4	Buddha Lounge.....	115 D2		
National Assembly (Azgayin Zogov).....	58 C2				

had to organise a money transfer, this would be an easy place to do it. Travellers cheques are mostly spurned or met with bewildered looks – avoid relying on them if possible or try a bank like HSBC. Handy ATMs that accept Visa and MasterCard include **Anelik Bank** (Map pp148-9; 41 Pushkin Poghots) and **Arexim Bank** (Map pp148-9; 20 Tumanyan Poghots).

Post

The public mail service in Yerevan is slow but fairly reliable. The **Haypost Main Office** (Map pp148-9; Hanrapetutyun Hraparak; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Sat) is centrally located. A letter or postcard sent abroad might take one or two weeks, but it gets there. Several local and international companies compete for the parcel business: **FedEx/Transimpex** (Map pp148-9; ☎ 54 42 77; triplex@arminco.com; 40 Mesrop Mashtots Poghots) **UPS Express-Hayk** (Map p146; ☎ 27 30 90; omae@arminco.com; 1 Kievyan Poghots)

Telephone

Telephone services in Yerevan are reasonable and you usually get through on the first or second attempt. ArmenTel has lost its monopoly so prices will continue to drop on international calls. Internet cafés offer cheap VoIP international calls. Many internet cafes also have **Skype** (www.skype.com) software on their machines.

Tourist Information

Armenia Information (Map pp148-9; ☎ 54 23 03, 54 23 06; www.armeniainfo.am; 3 Nalbandyan Poghots; ☎ 9am-7pm) The best tourist office in the region, with lots of books and brochures, and young staff who are happy to help with virtually anything from nightlife to transport. It keeps lists of homestays and B&Bs in Yerevan and in the provinces. It's just off Hanrapetutyun Hraparak near the metro station of the same name.

Travel Agencies

There are lots of useful travel agencies offering everything from one-day minivan tours to private car tours, from a day to a week anywhere in the country. Some specialise in travel to Iran, Georgia and even Turkey. A selection of recommended agencies:

AdvenTour (Map pp148-9; ☎ 53 96 09; www.armeniaexplorer.com) Specializes in adventure trips – hiking and mountain biking – plus speciality interests such as photography, bird-watching and archaeology. Call first

as the location is hidden outside the centre but staff will meet you in town.

Ajdahag Mountain Hiking Club (www.ajdahag.narod.ru) Arranges one-day treks up the southern peak of Mt Aragats and Mt Ara, a two-day climb up to Aragats' highest peak, plus hikes in the Geghama Mountains to the petroglyphs on Mt Azhdahak and other peaks.

Aquarius Travel (Map pp148-9; ☎ 53 67 67; www.aquarius.am; 11 Leo Poghots) Arranges Yerevan apartments and homestays, and does tours by car and driver in Yerevan and beyond. Services have received mixed reviews from travellers.

Aries Tours (Map p146; ☎ 22 01 38; www.bedandbreakfast.am; 43 Kyulpenkyan Poghots, Arabkir) Has an excellent B&B network in parts of the country where the local hotels aren't so great, and arranges transport and excursions.

Avarayr (Map pp148-9; ☎ 52 40 42; www.avarayr.am; 1 Pavstos Byuzand Poghots) Avarayr is an adventure-tour company offering treks from three to 12 days (the latter covering much of the country), camping trips for groups, and some unusual cultural and archaeological tours.

Caravan Tours (Map pp148-9; ☎ 56 52 39; www.caravanarmenia.com; 42/1 Teryan Poghots) Arranges apartments, homestays and tours; garners good reports for prompt individual service.

Hyr Service (Map pp148-9; ☎ 56 04 95; www.hyr.service.com; 50 Nalbandyan Poghots) Rents apartments and does trips around the country including many day tours from Yerevan.

Levon Travel (Map pp148-9; ☎ 52 52 10; www.levon.travel.com; 10 Sayat-Nova Poghota) Good for outbound travel and booking airline tickets.

Menua Tours (Map pp148-9; ☎ 51 20 51; www.menuatours.com; 9 Alek Manukyan Poghots) Does daily tours to sites around the country and is a reliable organiser of apartments, car rental, cell-phone rental and other services.

Sati Tours (Map pp148-9; ☎ 53 10 22; www.satiglobal.com; 21 Mesrop Mashtots Poghota) Highly rated agency with daily excursions to major sites around the country from Yerevan for AMD4600 to AMD12,000 per person, plus accommodation, two- and three-day all-inclusive regional tours, and car and driver hire.

Tatev Travel (Map pp148-9; ☎ 52 44 01; www.tatev.com; 19 Nalbandyan Poghots) Specialises in travel to Iran, including arranging visas. It has daily coaches from Kilikya Avtokayan to Tabriz, Iran, for AMD17,000 one way, and is the local agent for the Iranian Caspian Airlines, which flies Yerevan–Teheran three times a week. Also sells airline tickets and arranges local tours and apartments.

SIGHTS

Yerevan is not 'touristy', and it takes a little exploring to get to know what at first seems like a city of subtle variations on Soviet apartment

design – the best stuff is hidden indoors, while churches are hidden in courtyards and cul-de-sacs. The oldest surviving part of the inner city is the Kond neighbourhood, between Sarian and Proshyan Poghots, close to the gorge of the Hrazdan. Central Yerevan is small enough to enable you to walk to all the major sites.

We've broken down the sights into two main areas, the northern half of downtown, including Opera Sq and the Cascade, and sights in the southern half of downtown, south of Republic Square.

Opera Square, the Cascade & Moscovyan Poghots

This section includes sights in the northern half of downtown. This leafy area is known for its fashion boutiques, upscale restaurants and outdoor cafés, which seem to cover every patch of available parkland. It also has its share of small museums clustered between the Opera House and the Cascade.

CASCADE

A vast flight of stone steps and flower beds, the **Cascade** (Kaskad; Map pp148–9) leads up to a monument commemorating the 50th anniversary of Soviet Armenia. It completes one end of Tumanyan's north–south axis through the city, in line with Tigran Mets Poghota and the Hyusisayin Poghota (Northern Ave) project. There are five recessed fountains along the Cascade, some with sculpted panels and postmodern *khatchkars*.

The top section of the Cascade was left unfinished when independence arrived, until 2001 when diasporan philanthropist and art collector Gerald L Cafesjian took over the project. Since then the vast concrete structure has been cleaned, the escalators through its core repaired and hundreds of flower beds planted.

Take the escalators up through the belly of the building, which looks like a skyscraper resting on its side, and walk onto the 'roof' to take in the panorama surrounded by flowers. At the top is a rather bleak plaza with the **50th Anniversary of Soviet Armenia Monument** at its centre (though the views are great). The new **Cafesjian Museum** is being integrated into the Cascade to house a vast collection of art and glassware. Cafesjian is spending \$30 million to complete the structure and add galleries – final plans include a new arts centre at the top of the Cascade. It's all set to open in the summer of 2009. Fernando Botero's

cheerfully fat sculpture *Cat* stands at the base of the Cascade, the first element of Cafesjian's collection put into place. Botero's *Roman Warrior* has a 'rigid' pose at the top.

OPERA HOUSE

The landmark of the northern part of the city, the **Opera House** (Map pp148–9; Opera House; ☎ 52 79 92; 54 Tumanyan Poghots) is surrounded by parks, cafés, nightclubs and shops. The building has two main halls: the Aram Khachaturian Concert Hall (p164) and the National Academic Opera and Ballet Theatre (p164), thoroughly upgraded in 2003.

Tastes have broadened a bit since Soviet Armenia, and the music scene here goes beyond opera and symphonies to Russian pop, MTV and a night club in the bowels of the Opera House itself. For the same price as a ticket to see *Giselle* (AMD2000 to AMD3000) at the Opera House you can dance to the latest Euro-pop at the Opera Disco, not generally the case elsewhere.

MATENADARAN

Armenia's ancient manuscripts library, the **Matenadaran** (Map pp148–9; ☎ 58 32 92; www.matenadaran.am/en; 53 Mesrop Mashtots Poghota; admission AMD500, guide AMD2000; ☎ 10am–4pm Tue–Sat), stands like a cathedral at the top of Yerevan's grandest avenue. It preserves more than 17,000 Armenian manuscripts and 100,000 medieval and modern documents. The first Matenadaran for Armenian texts was built by St Mesrop Mashtots at Vagarshapat (Echmiadzin) in the 5th century.

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

At the base of the building there is a statue of Mashtots teaching his alphabet to a disciple, while six other statues of great scholars and writers stand by the door. The outdoor gallery has carved rock tombs and *khatchkars* brought here from ancient sites around Armenia. Inside, the collection includes Greek and Roman scientific and philosophical works, Iranian and Arabic manuscripts, and the 15th century Homilies of Mush, so

heavy that it was ripped in half and carried by two women after the 1915 genocide. The book was not put together until years afterwards – one saviour had emigrated to America. The illuminated works on display show swirls of red and gold combining classical borders with luxuriant flowers and gardens.

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

MARTIROSI SARIAN MUSEUM

This museum preserves the studio and some of the works of 20th-century painter Martiros Sarian. Some say the pick of his works adorn galleries in Moscow and Paris. Start your visit to the **museum** (Map pp148–9; ☎ 58 17 62; 3 Sarian Poghots; admission AMD600; ☎ 10.30am–4.30pm Fri–Tue, 10am–3pm Wed) upstairs with his sombre early works, then watch the colours erupt as he falls in love with Persia and Egypt. His art seems to mature by fusing those colours into a vision of an Oriental Armenia, landscapes of stark mountains, green villages and plunging gorges. Sarian's large studio remains as it was when the artist died in the 1950s.

OTHER SIGHTS

National Folk Art Museum of Armenia (Map pp148–9; ☎ 56 93 83; 64 Abovyan Poghots; admission AMD500; ☎ 11am–4pm Tue–Sun) Has a large display of Armenia's finest crafts, which reveal the exotic influence of the East in Armenian culture. There's also a nice lace exhibit and some interesting woodcarving.

Museum of Russian Art (Map pp148–9; ☎ 56 03 31; 38 Isahakyan Poghots, admission AMD500; ☎ 11am–4pm Tue–Sun) A collection of 200 works by 19th- and 20th-century Russian artists, donated by Professor Aram Abrahamian, who had a taste for cheerfully picturesque landscapes. Enter on Tamanyan Poghots.

Yervand Kochar Museum (Map pp148–9; ☎ 52 93 26; 39/12 Mesrop Mashtots Poghota; admission AMD300; ☎ 11am–5pm Tue–Sun) Features the sculpture and Cubist-style three-dimensional paintings of the brilliant draughtsman and artist.

Churches in the area include the **Zoravar Church** (Map pp148–9; 1694), one of the nicest little secrets in the city, tucked away off Gharam Parpetsi Poghots. The tiny **Katoghike** (Map pp148–9; 13th century) is at the corner of Sayat-Nova Poghota and Abovyan

Poghots. The Soviets were demolishing a later church here in 1936, which exposed the fine inscriptions on the chapel. Amazingly enough for that era, a public outcry let the chapel survive. Fragments from the dismantled church lie around it.

Republic Square, Southern Mashtots & Khandjian Poghots

Sights in this section are grouped in the southern part of downtown. The area around Republic Sq includes government ministries, as well as some of the better hotels and embassies. This section also includes the largely commercial southern part of Mesrop Mashtots Poghota, Haghtanak Bridge and the parkland along Khandjian Poghots.

HANRAPETUTYAN HRAPARAK (REPUBLIC SQUARE)

The former Lenin Sq is surrounded by the city's finest ensemble of buildings, particularly the Armenia Marriott Hotel and the National Art Gallery and State Museum of Armenian History, where Stalinist scale meets Armenian architecture in a huge yellow-and-cream building facing some massive fountains. The statue of Lenin now lies on its back in the museum's courtyard, while the head is apparently stored in the basement. The centre of the square (more of an oval) is now a flat stretch of polished marble. New lights and repaired fountains make Hanrapetutyanyan Hraparak (Map pp148–9) a focal point on warm afternoons and nights.

STATE MUSEUM OF ARMENIAN HISTORY

This museum spans from Stone Age cave dwellers in the Hrazdan Gorge to the astronomy and metallurgy of 3000 BC Metsamor, the Urartu Empire and the gathering of the Hayk tribes into a nation in the 6th century BC. After that centuries fly past at the **State Museum of Armenian History** (National Museum; Map pp148–9; ☎ 58 38 61; Hanrapetutyanyan Hraparak; admission AMD800, guide AMD5000; ☎ 11am–6pm Tue–Sun) through Hellenic Armenia, the arrival of Christianity and long wars against Persia, the Arab conquest and subsequent flowering at Ani, and then the long centuries under Muslim Turkish and Persian rule. There are medieval *khatchkars*, costumes, jewellery, coins, and models of buried settlements and lost churches.

NATIONAL ART GALLERY

Holding the third biggest collection of European masters in the former USSR, many of the works in the **National Art Gallery** (Map pp148-9; ☎ 58 08 12; Hanrapetutyun Hraparak; admission AMD800, guide AMD3500; ☎ 11am-5.30pm Tue-Sun) were appropriated in Europe during WWII. This national treasure includes works by Donatello, Tintoretto, Fragonard, Courbet, Theodore Rousseau, Rodin, Rubens and Jan Van Dyck. There are also many works by Russian painters, and Armenian painters, sculptors and graphic artists including Martiros Sarian, Yervand Kochar and Sedrak Arakelyan. Note that the floors are a little wonky – floor seven is marked floor eight in the elevator, and so forth. If you can talk your way into visiting the roof there are opportunities here for sweeping city views.

YEREVAN BRANDY COMPANY

'The fairyland of the world-famous Armenian brandy', **Yerevan Brandy Company** (Map pp148-9; ☎ 54 00 00; www.ybc.am; Admiral Isakov Poghota; tour & tastings AMD2500; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Fri, tours by appointment) runs fun tours with generous tastings from its iconic premises by the Hrazdan River. Other Armenian brandy companies such as Great Valley are neophytes compared to the Yerevan Brandy Company, now part of the French Pernot-Ricard group. The company has cellars of barrels dating back to the 19th century, including one which won't be opened until a Karabakh peace deal appears. Tours take 75 minutes, including tastings, and end at the souvenir shop. It's a pleasant walk across the Haghtanak Bridge or a short taxi ride (AMD500) from the city centre.

BLUE MOSQUE

Of the eight or so working mosques in Yerevan in 1900, the **Blue Mosque** (Map pp148-9; ☎ 42 84 98; 12 Mesrop Mashtots Poghota; ☎ 10am-6pm) is the only one remaining. The **Iran Information & Communication Centre** next door has the key. It's appropriate to wear trousers and a long-sleeved shirt – no bare legs or shoulders. The Soviets turned the mosque into the Yerevan City Museum until it was restored and somewhat 'modernised' by an Iranian religious-government foundation in the 1990s. It lives on as a sign of Armenia's necessarily good relations with Iran.

The mosque was built in 1765 by the Persian Governor Hussein Ali Khan as a

place for Friday sermons and features a *me-drese* (religious college) built around a garden courtyard, a 24m-high minaret and a brightly tiled turquoise dome.

A seven-hectare fortress was also built during the governor's reign but was destroyed in the 1880s. Today it's the site of the **Yerevan Wine Plant**, just on the city side of the Haghtanak Bridge across from the Metropal Hotel. As you drive from the airport over the Hrazdan River into the city, look at the walls on the left above the river, which are said to be the original walls of this fortress.

SERGEI PARADJANOV MUSEUM

This engaging, eccentric **house museum** (Map pp148-9; ☎ 53 84 73; www.parajanov.com/museum.html; 15/16 Dzoragyugh Poghots; admission AMD700, guide AMD3500; ☎ 10.30am-5pm) of an avant-garde film director and artist (see p139) stands by the Hrazdan Gorge near Surp Sargis. Paradjanov was born in 1924 in Tbilisi but retired to Yerevan after serving prison terms on charges of immorality in the 1970s and 1980s. While some of his international admirers campaigned for his release (with mixed results), his health was affected and he died in 1990. This fine house showcases his colourful, amusing collages and framed found-object sculptures, as well as sketches and designs for his films. There's real wit and flair to his work, and it's well worth visiting even if avant-garde 20th-century film isn't normally your thing. There are postcards and videos of his major films for sale.

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

Near the corner of Sarian Poghots is the main exhibition centre for contemporary Armenian artists, the **Museum of Modern Art** (Map pp148-9; ☎ 53 53 59; 7 Mesrop Mashtots Poghota; admission AMD800; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun). It also has an impressive collection of works from the 1970s onwards. The museum is on a narrow lane just off Mashtots. The **Artists' Union** (Map pp148-9; 16 Abovyan Poghots), next to the Golden Tulip – Hotel Yerevan, is another major exhibition space.

NPAK

The Norarar Pordzarakan Arvesti Kentovon (Armenian Centre for Contemporary Experimental Art) is a large, well-appointed **gallery and art complex** (Map pp148-9; ☎ 56 82 25; www.accea.info; 1/3 Pavstos Byuzand Poghots;

admission free; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Sat) facing the big Vernissage market. Yervand Kochar's 1959 figure *Melancholy* pines at the entrance. Most of the artists in residence are in their 20s, and avant-garde concerts and performances are held in a huge auditorium. Viewed with healthy suspicion by the more conservative arts audience, the next Armenian cultural revolution might start here.

SURP GRIGOR LUSAVORICH CATHEDRAL

Modern Yerevan's first real cathedral (Map pp148-9) was built to celebrate 1700 years of Christianity in Armenia and was consecrated in 2001. This hulking building stands on a small hill where Khandjian Poghots meets Tigran Mets Poghota. It's a bit brutalist in execution, possibly because it hasn't been around for 1000 years and collected age, atmosphere and *khatchkars*. Stairs leading up from Tigran Mets Poghota point straight at the carbuncle of the Kino Rossiya building across the street. There's a statue of Zoravar Andranik at the bottom of the stairs. General Andranik Ozanian led the army that defeated the Turks at Sardarapat in May 1918.

OTHER SIGHTS

The **Museum of the Middle East** (Map pp148-9; ☎ 58 16 51; 1 Aram Poghots; admission AMD300; ☎ 11am-4pm Tue-Sat) houses a small but diverse collection of artefacts from Zoroastrian Persia and early regional civilisations from Luristan and Elam. It's at the back of the National Art Gallery, and affords a peek at Lenin's headless statue in a courtyard.

The **State Museum of Wood-Carving** (Map pp148-9; ☎ 53 24 61; 4-2 Paronyan Poghots; admission AMD300; ☎ noon-6pm Tue-Sun) is actually an interesting collection of some meticulous pieces, both modern and medieval.

Near the Museum of Wood-Carving, look out for the **Surp Sargis Church** (Map pp148-9; 1853), on Israeliyan Poghots off Mashtots, overlooking the Hrazdan. The Sunday liturgy and choir are particularly good.

Outside the Centre

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

MOTHER ARMENIA

Symbolism abounds in the huge statue of **Mother Armenia** (Mayr Hayastan; Map

pp148-9). She looms over the city in line with Mesrop Mashtots Poghota, on a classic Soviet plaza complete with tanks and jets set on pedestals at the eastern end of Haghtanak (Victory) Park. The 23m-high Mother Armenia glares out across the city towards the Turkish border with a massive sword held defensively in front of her. She replaced a Stalin statue in 1967. Two soldiers died when his statue was wrenched off unannounced one night, leading to grim muttering about Stalin still killing from beyond the grave.

Inside the 50m pedestal is a **Military Museum** (Map pp148-9; ☎ 25 14 00; admission free; ☎ 10am-5.30pm Tue-Fri, to 3pm Sat & Sun). The interior is based on Surp Hripsime at Echmiadzin, a brave acknowledgment of religion by the architect during Stalin's lifetime. Originally fitted out with displays from WWII (300,000 Armenians died, half of those sent to fight), today most of the space is devoted to the Karabakh War – a Dashnak's paradise which includes a tableau of female soldiers in the Karabakh conflict. All explanations are in Armenian but the dioramas are easily grasped. **Haghtanak Park** (Map pp148-9), next to Mother Armenia, is a mostly overgrown patch of woods. Watch out for children (and sometimes adults) speeding around in miniature cars. There's a quaint amusement park in the park with a Ferris wheel, cafés and outdoor billiards tables.

TSITSERNAKABERD (ARMENIAN GENOCIDE MEMORIAL & MUSEUM)

Commemorating the agony of the 1915–22 genocide of Armenians during the death throes of the Ottoman Empire, the **Museum of the Armenian Genocide** (Map p146; ☎ 39 14 12; Tsitsernakaberd Hill; admission free; ☎ 11am-4pm Tue-Sun) and memorial create a moving experience. The museum lies underground in a grey stone hall. Large photographs (many, but not all, with English explanations) tell the story of the genocide simply and baldly. There's no effort to demonise the Ottoman authorities; the facts are allowed to speak for themselves. It starts with the massacres of 1896 and 1909 and the lack of an international response, and then moves on to the murder of Armenian labour conscripts in the Ottoman army in late 1914 and early 1915. The arrest and subsequent murder of community leaders and intellectuals on 24 April 1915 marks the beginning of that nightmare summer. All over Anatolia

men were arrested, marched out of their towns and murdered at the nearest lonely spot; then came the forced deportations of the remaining women and children and forced marches into the Syrian desert.

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

Nearby there is a *khatchkar* in remembrance of the 1988 Sumqayıt massacre in Azerbaijan, and the graves of early victims of the Karabakh War.

There is a row of trees planted by foreign leaders who recognise the genocide, despite the Turkish government's determination to punish any foreign power that does so. The Turkish denial works on many levels – it never happened, the documents are fake, it wasn't deliberate, the deportations were for their own safety, not that many people died, Turkish people suffered too, it was the fault of the Dashnaks. Considered in full it falls over with inconsistencies, but that doesn't seem to make a difference.

A broad pathway flanked by a 100m-long wall engraved with the names of massacred communities leads to the **memorial**, consisting of a 40m-high spire next to a circle of 12 basalt slabs leaning over to guard an eternal flame. The 12 tilted slabs represent the lost provinces of western Armenia, while the spire has a fine split dividing it into larger and smaller needles, the smaller one representing western Armenia. Some surmise other layers of meanings – the 12 slabs huddle like refugees around a fire on a deportation march, and the spires might be a highly stylised monument to Mt Ararat and its smaller peak, or blades of newborn grass. Set on Tsitsernakaberd Hill (Fortress of Swallows) across the Hrazdan Gorge from central Yerevan, the memorial was built in 1967 after unprecedented demonstrations on 24 April 1965, the 50th anniversary of the genocide. In a rare acknowledgement of public discontent, the Soviets deposed the local Communist Party boss in response and gave permission for the memorial to be built.

A taxi (AMD600 from the city centre) is the easiest way to reach Tsitsernakaberd. If you feel up to it you can walk to and from

town over the Haghtanak Bridge and past the Hrazdan Stadium.

EREBUNI FORTRESS & MUSEUM

Excavations began at the **Erebuni Fortress** (Map p146) site in 1959 after a farmer found a stone tablet with writing on it in the dirt. Follow Tigran Mets Poghota south past the train station and turn left onto Erebuni Poghots; the site and museum are at the end of the road.

Archaeologists found a large cuneiform slab with the inscriptions of Argishti I, king of Urartu, setting the date the fortress was built at 782 BC. It reads, in part, 'Argishti, the son of Menua, has built this magnificent fortress as a house for Khaldi, the Lord, to the glory of the Biayni countries and to the horror of enemies', which says a bit about the nature of Armenian pride.

The view from the fortress takes in the city and Karmir Blur (Red Hill), where excavations have revealed similar ancient finds. Frescoes in the reconstructed palace wall are replicas. There are huge storerooms for wheat, along with gigantic pitchers for wine and oil, and *tonir* (oven pits). There's also a place for animal sacrifices, and workshops (still buried) for making tools, including arrows for fighting and hunting.

The **Erebuni Museum** (Map p146; ☎ 45 82 07; 38 Erebuni Poghots; admission AMD1000, guide AMD3500; ☎ 11am-5pm Tue-Sat), at the bottom of the hill, has other cuneiform tablets and jewellery excavated from the site in a striking 1960s Soviet building with huge apricot-coloured *tufa* (volcanic stone) friezes.

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

WALKING TOUR

This tour can be walked in two stages. Starting at **Marshall Baghramian metro station (1)**, it's a downhill stroll through the heart of the government and embassy district. Walk uphill a bit to the statue of **Marshall Baghramian (2)** below the steps up to the **American University of Armenia (3)**. The marshall was born in Karabakh and led some of the great tank battles of WWII. Next to the statue is the **British Embassy (4; p221)**, a good attempt at blending traditional styles with ambassadorial presence. Next along is the **Presidential Palace (5)**, and the **National Assembly (6; Azgayin Zogov)** on a high grassy rise on the right. Opposite stands the **National Academy of**

Sciences (7). Continue on down Baghramian past the Syrian and Chinese embassies. After the Constitutional Court take the first left onto Isahakyan Poghots and another onto the top end of Tamanyan Poghots. A belt of parkland leads to the foot of the **Cascade (8; p152)**, a grand project of steps and gardens leading up to the **50th Anniversary of Soviet Armenia Monument (9)**. Returning downhill,

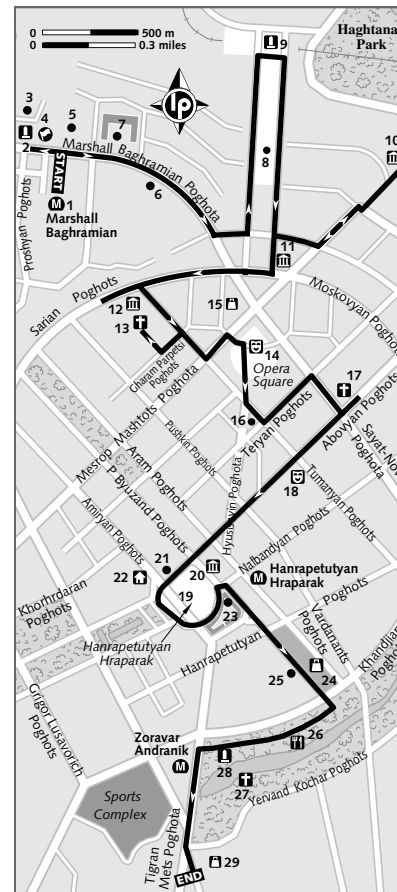
WALK FACTS

Start Marshall Baghramian metro station

Finish Shuka No 2

Distance 3.6km

Duration 2½ hours



take the first left onto Isahakyan and another left onto Mesrop Mashtots Poghota and climb two blocks to the **Matenadaran (10; p152)**, the repository of Armenia's written and illuminated heritage.

Head back to the base of the Cascade. There are several galleries and museums in the vicinity, including the **Yervand Kochar Museum (11; p153)**. Cross Marshall Baghramian and head along the curve of Sarian Poghots to the **Martiros Sarian Museum (12; p153)** and its captivating Eastern landscapes. In the courtyards just behind the museum, but accessible only via Gharam Parpetsi Poghots or Pushkin Poghots, is the lovely orange tuff of the **Zoravar (13; p153)** parish church. It's a short walk along Tumanyan to the **Opera House square (14; p152)**. The area of park around the Martiros Sarian statue across Mashtots from the Opera House holds the painters' branch of the **Vernissage Markets (15; p165)** on weekends. The Opera House grounds are ringed by some of the city's smartest cafés, clubs and 24-hour bars: a nice place for a rest and a light meal.

Begin stage two at the **Northern Avenue project (16)**, a new development of multistorey buildings starting at Tumanyan Poghots. Head along stylish Sayat-Nova Poghota and turn left on Abovyan. Here stands the gorgeous 12th-century **Katoghike (17; p153)**, a chapel so tiny the congregation stands in the yard. Recent work on the church has expanded it and added lay buildings. Down Abovyan Poghots in the other direction are souvenir shops and the **Kino Moskva complex (18; p165)**. The lower part of the street has some sturdy 19th-century buildings in volcanic hues of orange and black. Abovyan debouches into **Hanrapetutyun Hraparak (19; Republic Sq)**, where the Lenin statue once stood. It now lies headless in a courtyard of the **National Art Gallery (20; p154)**.

Ringed the broad hippodrome-shaped space are the **Ministry of Foreign Affairs (21)**, the **Armenia Marriott Hotel (22; p159)**, the central post and telephone office and the **Finance and Economy Ministry (23)** with its clock tower. On weekends you can head up Nalbandyan one block on the far side of the National Gallery and take the first right into the main **Vernissage Market (24; p165)**.

The **NPAK gallery (25; p154)** is next to the Vernissage. After crossing busy Khandjian Poghots continue to the right through the Ring Park with lots of fancy **cafés (26; p163)**

to the city's newest landmark, the **Surp Grigor Lusavorich Cathedral** (27; p155). The equestrian statue of **Zoravar Andranik** (28) springs from a pedestal in front of the cathedral. Continuing down Tigran Mets through a bustling hub of shops and marshrutka stands, you can veer onto an extension of Movses Khorenatsi Poghots to **Shuka No 2** (29), one of the city's biggest food markets.

COURSES

Lavaryn Dpratov (☎ 54 29 09, 52 37 78; www.ltd.am; 21a Sayat Nova Poghots) is an Armenian language school for all levels. It's in a building set back from Sayat Nova.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Fireworks seem to celebrate a national holiday or commemorate some event or other every fortnight or so. The independence days sometimes see concerts on Hanrapetutyun Hraparak or in the parkland around the Opera House. The major summer event is the **Kenats Festival**, in late September, with concerts, folk dancing and other events. The **Golden Apricot International Film Festival** (www.gaiff.am) is held in July. The HyeFest, in early October, sees the arrival of international theatre groups for a variety of performances.

SLEEPING

Besides the listings below, travel agencies can organise a homestay for around AMD5000 per night or an apartment rental starting from around AMD10,000 per night. You can also check www.armeniainfo.am, which has listings for B&Bs. Prices for midrange and luxury hotels include government taxes. Yerevan is the most expensive city in the region: dorm beds cost AMD5000 to 7000, a budget double is AMD25,000 to 35,000 and a midrange double will set you back AMD35,000 to 55,000. Top-end doubles start at around AMD60,000. See the Armenia Directory (p220) for information on renting an apartment in Yerevan.

Opera Square, the Cascade & Moscovyan Poghots

BUDGET

Envoy Hostel (Map pp148-9; ☎ 53 03 69; www.envoyhostel.am; 54 Pushkin Poghots; dm/s/d inc breakfast AMD7000/18,000/36,000; ☎ ☑ ☒ ☓) The only bona fide youth hostel in the region, Envoy offers spotless rooms, an English-speaking staff,

non-smoking throughout and a good travellers vibe. It has a perfect location in the city centre, reasonable rates and free city tours each morning. It does get a little loud and crowded when families or big groups turn up and some rooms are boxy and windowless. The breakfast is minimal (bread, tea, jam and cheese) but it has a kitchen for self-caterers. The door is actually on Parpetsi Poghots.

Foreign Students Hostel (Map pp148-9; ☎ 56 00 03; ysugh@xter.net; 52 Mesrop Mashtots Poghota; s/d AMD15,000/23,500) Simple and small rooms are on offer at this university hostel, usually occupied by exchange students and the odd Peace Corps volunteer. There is no reception desk, just go and talk to the administrator in room 106.

Parev Inn (Map pp148-9; ☎ 55 99 85; www.parev.am; 71 11th Aigestan Poghots; s/d incl breakfast AMD22,000/26,000; ☎ ☑) A pleasant guesthouse just up from Mkhitar Heratsi Poghots (near the Nork cable car), run by a Canadian-Armenian couple. Prices are about 25% lower from 1 November to 15 May. The rooms are large and comfortable (if a little bland), with a kitchenette and modern bathrooms. Some rooms are nicer than others so look at a few before settling down. The access road is a little hard to spot – take a sharp right before the CPS petrol station.

Anahit Stepanyan (Map pp148-9; ☎ 52 75 89, 091502 071; 5 Sayat-Nova Poghota Apt 25; per person AMD5000) Among the available guesthouses in Yerevan, this place seems to get the highest praise among backpackers. It consists of two large dorm rooms and a loft. The guest rooms are a little dishevelled and do get crowded but the common area (a living room) is clean and modern. Anahit speaks English.

Gayane Simonyan (Map pp148-9; ☎ 52 75 88, 091737 361; per person AMD5000) There are several homestays in this apartment block; this one is on the floor below Anahit at apartment 22. Gayane's is not as modern or clean as Anahit's, but you'll get a little more privacy. The staircase for Anahit and Gayane is located next to Our Village restaurant.

Anahit Avedisyan (Map pp148-9; ☎ 58 16 17; per person AMD5000) In the same building but one door-entrance east, Anahit lives in apartment 6. She runs a clean, well-maintained flat with two guest rooms, but be prepared for some serious motherly reprimand at the slightest infraction of house rules. The people who run these places all know each other and if one is full you'll be directed to another flat with an available bed.

MIDRANGE

Ani Plaza Hotel (Map pp148-9; ☎ 58 95 00; www.anihotel.com; 19 Sayat-Nova Poghota; s/d AMD41,000/51,000, deluxe s/d AMD63,000/70,000; ☎ ☑) This landmark in the heart of town has been updated to be an upper-midrange hotel. Cheaper rooms have not seen renovation on the same scale as the deluxe rooms, but all are modern and comfortable. Rates include breakfast. At the time of research a fitness centre and an indoor pool were being built.

Republic Square, Southern Mashtots & Khandjian Poghots

MIDRANGE

HY Business Hotel (Map pp148-9; ☎ 56 75 67; www.hybusiness.com; 8 Hanrapetutyun Poghots; r AMD25,000, ste AMD45,000-65,000; ☎ ☑) Not a typical hotel, this place is designed for extended stays or families – rooms are large and come with kitchenettes. Internet is AMD2000 per day, breakfast is also AMD2000 per day. It's associated with the American University in Armenia.

Hotel Shirak (Map pp148-9; ☎ 52 99 15; www.shirakhotel.com; 13a Movses Khorenatsi Poghots; s/d AMD25,000/35,000; ☎ ☑) A show of Soviet chic glazes the rooms and the lobby of this antiquated hotel. Still, it has a fine downtown location, sunny balconies overlooking a park and a friendly staff. The lack of renovation has at least kept the prices low (and its worth asking for a discount as the price may come down further).

Hotel Erebuni (Map pp148-9; ☎ 58 05 05; www.erebunihotel.am; 26/1 Nalbandyan Poghots; s/d AMD26,000/32,000, prices 50% lower Nov-Mar; ☎ ☑) The Erebuni has seen some refurbishment but it remains a bland post-Soviet experience – you are mainly paying for the central location.

Congress Hotel (Map pp148-9; ☎ 58 00 95; www.congresshotelyerevan.com; 1 Italia Poghots; s/d AMD38,400/52,440; ☎ ☑) Next to a pleasant park and overlooking leafy Italia St, the Congress is notable for its quiet serenity in the city centre. The 128 rooms are clean and modern, although the singles are a little poky. The hotel is best known for its big outdoor swimming pool, accessible by nonguests for a hefty AMD11,000.

Europe Hotel (Map pp148-9; ☎ 54 60 60; www.europehotel.am; 32-38 Hanrapetutyun Poghots; s/d AMD44,000/50,000, ste AMD64,000-80,000; ☎ ☑) This quiet hotel in the centre of town has a flair for bright colours in its décor, and a groovy bar and café on the ground floor. The rooms

are a little small but perfectly comfortable. Continental breakfast included.

TOP END

Hotel Avia Trans (Map pp148-9; ☎ 56 72 26; www.aviatrans.am; 4 Abovyan Poghots; s/d/tr/deluxe incl breakfast AMD40,000/50,000/70,000/80,000; ☎ ☑) The anonymous looking exterior belies an otherwise pleasant lobby and friendly reception in this central hotel. Wi-fi is available, and the management claims to be building a fitness centre and swimming pool.

Metropol Hotel (Map pp148-9; ☎ 54 37 01; www.metropol.am; 2/2 Mesrop Mashtots Poghota; s/d AMD45,000/55,000, ste AMD65,000; ☎ ☑) With its heavy drapery, maroon colours, renaissance sculptures and gold trim, the Metropol has established itself as the most ostentatious hotel in the city. Facilities include a sauna, a swimming pool and a miniature exercise area. Breakfast is included.

Golden Tulip – Hotel Yerevan (Map pp148-9; ☎ 58 94 00; www.goldentuliphotelyerevan.com; 14 Abovyan Poghots; s/d AMD54,000/64,000, ste from AMD83,000; ☎ ☑) A five-star hotel (by local standards), the Golden Tulip has touches of classical European décor and modern touches like flatpanel TVs and free wi-fi. The piano bar in the lobby is a fine place for a drink, the Rossini Italian restaurant is one of the best in town, and yet its most valued amenity is the fabulous rooftop swimming pool.

Armenia Marriott Hotel (Map pp148-9; ☎ 59 90 00; www.marriott.com; Hanrapetutyun Hraparak; r from AMD60,000; ☎ ☑) With its posh address on Republic Sq, the Marriott stands out as the place to be seen in Yerevan. The hotel includes a ritzy buffet breakfast, a 24-hour gym (one of the best in town), two restaurants (Italian and Middle Eastern) and the popular Meeting Point café at the front. Rooms in the back are quiet and have views of Mt Ararat.

Outside the Centre

BUDGET

Galust & Anna Tormasyan (Map p146; ☎ 45 23 10; 97 Burnazyun Poghots; per person AMD5000; ☎) A couple of blocks from Yerevan train station (and Sasuntsi Davit metro), this two-storey village-style house has four bedrooms. Breakfast costs AMD1000 extra. Rooms with bathrooms are more expensive. Anna Tormasyan speaks basic English and runs a friendly homestay. Guests can use the kitchen and washing machine. The place is about 80m down Burnazyun

Poghots from the corner with Sasuntsi Davit Poghots (walk over the canal bridge and turn right at the corner with the apartment block). It's on the first corner on the left, with a metal grille gate for the garage.

Sunset B&B (Map p146; ☎ 23 15 16; http://sunsetarm.com; 65 Komitas Poghot, Apt 61; s/d AMD14,000/19,000; 📺) Sergey and Nune Lalayan are your hosts at this apartment B&B near Haghtanak Park, north of the centre. There are two bedrooms, a kitchen, a living room and internet access. The owners don't live here so you need to call ahead so they can show you the place.

Areg Hotel (Map p146; ☎ 45 62 13; www.areg.am; 80 Burnazyan Poghots; s/d AMD14,700/21,700; 📺) Run by a friendly family, Areg has large, plain rooms with clean bathrooms and satellite TV. It also has a bar and can arrange transport to local sights.

MIDRANGE

Hotel Hrazdan (Map pp148-9; ☎ 53 53 32; www.hotelhrazdan.am; 72 Dzorap Poghots; s/d/ste AMD25,000/40,000/50,000; 📺) A multistorey tower overlooking the Hrazdan Gorge, formerly only for Soviet bigwigs but now privately run and renovated. New rooms are a little plain but light and airy and with nice views.

Hotel Bass (Map pp148-9; ☎ 22 26 38; www.bass.am; 3/1 Aigedzor Poghots; s/d AMD32,000/36,000, ste AMD48,000-56,000; 📺) A friendly boutique hotel in an interesting neighbourhood close to Marshall Baghramian metro station. Large and homey rooms are decked out with TVs, DVD players and free wi-fi for laptop carriers. Sauna and indoor pool are among the amenities. Ask for big discounts in the off-season.

TOP END

Avan Villa Yerevan (Map p146; ☎ 54 27 07; www.tufen.kianheritage.com; 16 13th Poghots, Nork; r from AMD45,000; 📺) High up in the Nork neighbourhood east of the centre, this is the prime candidate for Armenia's best boutique hotel. Individually designed rooms and furnishings, plus fine food and wine in a handsome stone building overlooking Yerevan.

Golden Palace (Map pp148-9; ☎ 21 99 99; www.goldenpalacehotel.am; Azatutuyun Poghots; r AMD70,000, ste AMD106,000; 📺) A strikingly modern hotel, the 66-room Golden Palace is a glass and steel structure on the edge of Haghtanak Park. Rooms have nice touches like terry-cloth robes and the suites are equipped with a Jacuzzi and

kitchenette. The presidential suite costs a cool AMD800,000 a night – Jacques Chirac stayed here during his 2006 visit.

EATING

Yerevan's dining scene continues to improve with dozens of international offerings, including Japanese, Russian, Georgian, Italian, Lebanese and Greek restaurants. Traditional fare is also thriving; there are plenty of places for carnivores to taste the best lamb, pork and beef *khoravats* Armenia can offer. Street snacks like kebabs wrapped in lavash and pastries and pies are sold from stalls and bakeries in every neighbourhood.

Opera Square, the Cascade & Moscovyan Poghots

RESTAURANTS

Gusto (Map pp148-9; ☎ 58 11 21; 11 Abovyan Poghots; meals AMD2000-3500; 📺 8.30am-midnight) Lively, new place for reliable pastas, pizzas and calzones. The scene is a nice mix of singles, families and couples and there is pleasant street-side seating.

Samurai (Map pp148-9; ☎ 58 56 70; 2 Marshall Baghramian Poghot; meals AMD2000-6000, 📺 11am-11pm) Atmospheric Japanese restaurant with open seating or recessed tables in small alcoves. Sushi starts from AMD1000 for two pieces all the way up to AMD15,000 for an assorted platter. Chahan (fried rice), ramen, tempura and teriyaki dishes are also available.

Lagonid Bistro-Cafe (Map pp148-9; ☎ 58 49 93; 37 Nalbandyan Poghots; meals AMD2000) A good-value restaurant serving terrific Syrian-Armenian cuisine, including tabouleh (AMD600), hummus (AMD600), and grills and kebabs for around AMD1300. The décor is fairly simple but the food is fresh and tasty.

Karma (Map pp148-9; ☎ 58 92 15; 65 Teryan Poghots; meals AMD2200-3500; 📺 noon-11pm) North Indian restaurant offering excellent tandoori chicken and vegetarian dishes in beautifully decorated surrounds. It also offers cuisine from elsewhere in Asia, including Chinese, Japanese and Thai dishes.

Our Village (Map pp148-9; ☎ 54 87 00; 5 Sayat-Nova Poghot; meals AMD2300-3000; 📺 11am-11pm) A rather fun 'ethnic' Armenian tourist restaurant with excellent home-style cooking and rousing live music, plus sturdy pine tables and a long drinks list. Expect to pay for every thing that appears on your table, including the bread.

Old Erivan (Map pp148-9; ☎ 58 88 55; 2 Tumanyan Poghots; meals AMD2500; 📺 noon-midnight) Part spectacle, part restaurant, this place serves Armenian cuisine amid boisterous minstrels belting out folk music. The atmosphere is cavelike, with lots of antiques and crafts, although the winged centurions are a little over-the-top.

Color of Pomegranates (Map pp148-9; ☎ 58 52 04; 15 Tumanyan Poghots; meals AMD2600-3500; 📺 noon-11pm) Small, charismatic restaurant decorated with arty relics from Vernissage market. The menu is a mix of European, Armenian and Georgian, with dishes such as *khashiyama* (boiled lamb) and beef chops with prunes.

Beijing (Map pp148-9; ☎ 52 78 22; 9 Tumanyan Poghots; dishes AMD2800-4500; 📺 noon-11.30pm) Finding good Chinese food in the Caucasus is no mean feat, but Beijing pulls it off. It has a smart interior, friendly service and about 300 different dishes.

Bukhara (Map pp148-9; ☎ 52 13 31; 9 Tumanyan Poghots; meals AMD3000-5000; 📺 11am-midnight) Yerevan's cosmopolitanism continues to expand with this rare Uzbek restaurant. You can enjoy authentic Central Asian *manti* (dumplings – better than the Armenian variety), plus *samsa* (baked meat pastry), *laghman* (noodle dish) and *plov* (a rice dish with meat and fruit) amid traditionally Uzbek décor.

Club (Map pp148-9; ☎ 53 13 61; 40 Tumanyan Poghots; meals AMD3000-5000; 📺 noon-1am) One of the

classiest places in Yerevan, the Club fuses Western Armenian and French cuisine into a fresh and tasty dining experience. It includes a main dining hall, a second drinks-only room with cushions and low tables, and a hidden café in the back where you can enjoy one of the best pizzas in town. Live music is occasionally on offer and there is a separate section for books and handicrafts. Wi-fi is available.

Phoenicia Restaurant (Map pp148-9; ☎ 56 18 94; 3 Tamanyan Poghots; meals AMD6000-10,000; 📺 noon-1am) A fine upscale restaurant with a refined wine list and an interesting Italian, French and Middle Eastern menu. Expertly prepared steak, shrimp and chicken dishes, plus a few vegetarian options. Beware of unrequested drinks, wine 'top-ups' and other carefully orchestrated rip-off tactics that can send your bill through the roof. The entrance is on Isahakyan Poghots

CAFÉS

ArtBridge Bookstore Café (Map pp148-9; ☎ 52 12 39; 20 Abovyan Poghots; sandwiches AMD1200-2000, coffee AMD300-600; 📺 8.30am-midnight) This is a comfy, arty café behind a bookstore that sells concert and drama tickets. The food is reasonably priced, the décor is very European and there are even nonsmoking tables. Foodwise, you can't go wrong with the excellent French toast, but the sandwiches and pastas we tried were mediocre for the price.

KHORAVATS: MEAT ON THE GRILL

When dusk descends on Yerevan the smoke begins to rise on Paronyan Poghots (aka 'Barbecue St'). The street is more like a highway and all along its 2km length you'll spot khoravats restaurants in every shape and form, including simple courtyard eateries run by families and large, sophisticated places, especially on Paronyan Poghots, where huge terraces step down into the Hrazdan Gorge.

The cheaper ones, similar to the old days when these house restaurants were rare examples of tolerated private enterprise, are on the upper stretch near in the direction of Marshall Baghramian Poghot. Some have private dining rooms, other have live music and a gregarious atmosphere. If one doesn't suit your mood, just move to the next.

A dinner of tasty grilled pork, lamb and beef wrapped in lavash with salad and onions costs AMD1600 to AMD2000 at the smaller places. Kebab is around AMD600. Many do grilled chicken (AMD1500) as well. Some have home specialities – it helps to go with someone who can recommend a favourite.

Clustered around the corner of Paronyan Poghots and Dzorap ('gorge bank') Poghots are several of the modern variety. Caesar's Palace (Map pp148-9) and Urartu (Map pp148-9) are two of the best and cost a little more (around AMD2300 to AMD5000 per person, not including too many drinks) – if you like a restaurant with a view, it's hard to beat Urartu's perch over the gorge.

Triumph (Map pp148-9; ☎ 56 09 99; 27 Isahakyan Poghots; meals 2000-3000; ☎ 10am-4am) Triumph is a popular place for local youths to preen and promenade. It has a standard range of food and drinks, plus a nice location tucked into a park. Wi-fi is available for a pricey AMD2500 per hour.

Café Central (Map pp148-9; ☎ 58 39 90; 30 Abovyan Poghots; meals AMD2500-3500; ☎ 10am-midnight) With its wood panels, high ceilings, mirrors and art deco air this café feels like a throwback to 1920s. The menu features an extensive range of coffees and cakes plus salads and light meals.

Santa Fe (Map pp148-9; ☎ 56 00 93; Tamanyan Park; meals AMD2500-3500; ☎ 9.30am-2am) Very popular place for families as it has an attached playground and kid-friendly menu (fancy a Harry Potter Pasta or Shrek Pizza?), but is sophisticated enough for adults. Very clean toilets are a bonus.

Zodiac (Map pp148-9; ☎ 51 43 10; 105/1 Teryan Poghots; drinks AMD900-1500; ☎ 9am-midnight Mon-Sat, 11am-11pm Sun) Unlike others in this list (which are more like restaurants), Zodiac is a traditional café doling out teas, coffees and pastries. Wi-fi is available for around AMD1000 per hour.

QUICK EATS

Tumanyan Shwarma (Map pp148-9; ☎ 52 07 81; 19 Tumanyan Poghots; shwarma AMD650; ☎ 10am-midnight) One of the most popular shwarma joints in town. The *khoravats* section (AMD1800) is next door.

Time Out (Map pp148-9; ☎ 50 14 83; 1 Hyusisayin Poghot; meals AMD1000-1500; ☎ 10am-midnight) Cafeteria-style place that makes ordering easy: just pick what you want and pay at the counter. Specializes in salads, fruit bowls, juices and light meals.

Republic Square, Southern Mashtots & Khandjian Poghots

RESTAURANTS

City Diner (Map pp148-9; ☎ 54 24 40; 1/3 Byuzand Poghots; dishes AMD1300-2800; ☎ 11am-11pm) Did someone raid a Route 66 souvenir gift shop? This place is wall-to-wall with street signs and license plates in a reaching attempt to create a 1950s American diner. The menu of Philly cheese steaks, bacon burgers and cheese fries is geared towards homesick Americans in dire need of cholesterol. The English-speaking waitstaff provides friendly service.

Shah Pizza (Map pp148-9; ☎ 53 16 73; 34 Meshrop Mashtots Poghots; meals AMD1500-3000; ☎ 10am-midnight) Middle Eastern hookah joint that feels more like Damascus than Armenia. Most of the clientele are Arab businessmen, travellers and expats. It serves, salads, kebabs and of course pizza, as well as flavoured *nargile* (hookah).

Caucasus Tavern (Map pp148-9; ☎ 56 11 77; 82 Hanrapetutyanyan Poghots; meals AMD1500-3000; ☎ 24 hr) This is one of the more successful 'tourist' restaurants in town. Waiters in Georgian garb dish up cheap drinks such as mulberry *oghee* shots for AMD300, feasts of *khachapuri* pies and main barbecue platters to the sound of live folk music. It claims to be open all night but may close in the wee hours.

Ankyun (Map pp148-9; ☎ 51 33 38; 4 Vardandats Poghots; meals AMD2000-3500; ☎ noon-11pm) With possibly the best Italian food in the city, this place serves great pastas and starters. Try the carpaccio in olive oil or for vegetarians the tomato and mozzarella platter. The steaks are arguably the best in town. The atmosphere is quiet and candlelit, unusual for an Armenian restaurant.

Square One (Map pp148-9; ☎ 56 61 69; 1/3 Abovyan Poghots; meals AMD2500-3500; ☎ 9.30am-2.30am) Turn up at lunchtime any day of the week and you're likely to find this place packed with NGO staffers, diplomats, expat businessmen and local entrepreneurs. The laid-back, congenial atmosphere and English-speaking wait staff are attractive, as is the nonsmoking lounge upstairs. The American-orientated menu features sandwiches, pizzas, pastas, salads, burgers and tasty breakfasts (served all day). There is another branch at the airport.

Restaurant Français (Map pp148-9; ☎ 54 46 44; 30 Arami Poghots; meals AMD3000-4500; ☎ 10am-11am) French bistro aficionados should make their way to this cosy eatery for some fine beef and chicken dishes and tasty appetizers. The menu is written on the chalkboard, and black-and-white scenes of Paris set the mood just right. The building is slated for demolition, so check local listings for the new address.

Dolmama's (Map pp148-9; ☎ 56 89 31; 10 Pushkin Poghots; meals AMD7000-10,000; ☎ 11am-midnight) A small, upmarket restaurant in a homey atmosphere where you'll get personal attention, a lengthy wine list and some interesting local specialities. Try the mountain lamb stew or chicken in wine and walnut sauce, made with the freshest produce available.

CAFÉS

Marco Polo (Map pp148-9; ☎ 54 53 50; 1/3 Abovyan Poghots; pizzas AMD1500; ☎ 9am-11pm) A popular meeting place, this big, modern café and bar playing cool sounds is at the lower end of Abovyan. It has an extensive list of café snacks (salads, sandwiches, cakes), quite tasty pizzas, and main courses such as grilled lamb with salad for AMD3000. The coffee is good, and you can sit inside on a cold or rainy day.

Sayat Nova (Map pp148-9; ☎ 58 00 33; cnr Sayat-Nova Poghot & Khandjian Poghots; meals AMD2500; ☎ 10am-2am) A colourful, busy institution combining a bar, a rooftop café, a restaurant and a nightclub. The ground-floor Amazon Restaurant has a tropical Mayan theme straight from Vegas, plus steaks, pizzas and sandwiches. The café helped introduce *nargile* pipes to Yerevan.

DRINKING

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

Opera Square, the Cascade & Moscovyan Poghots

Poplovok Jazz Café (Map pp148-9; ☎ 52 23 03; Isahakyan Poghots, btwn Teryan Poghots & Mesrop Mashtots Poghot) A café complex centred on a large pond. Poplovok is the one by the side of the pond, with live jazz most nights. Former president Kocharian is a jazz fan and sometimes drops by. Musicians like Chick Corea have played here.

Cactus (Map pp148-9; ☎ 53 93 93; 42 Mesrop Mashtots Poghot; cocktails AMD2000; ☎ noon-midnight) An ersatz Mexican restaurant (the basics are there but it lacks the spices; meals AMD3000), best enjoyed for the excellent frozen margaritas.

Pioneer Club (Map pp148-9; ☎ 58 18 19; 2 Marshall Baghranian Poghot; ☎ 8pm-3am) Part of the active 'exotic' cabaret scene, with a strip club

downstairs but a porn-free bar upstairs, with reasonably priced drinks.

Shamrock (Map pp148-9; ☎ 091788 197; cnr Tumanyan & Sarian Poghots; ☎ 10am-midnight) Passable Irish pub that attracts locals and the Peace Corps crowd. Sundays tend to be a good gathering night.

Texas (Map pp148-9; ☎ 54 56 03; 19 Tumanyan Poghots; ☎ 5pm-3am) Sawdust on the floor, wagon wheels, a bull's head, John Wayne posters and the odd wolf pelt set the scene for the Western-style saloon. Yeee-ha.

Lounge Bar Bunker (Map pp148-9; ☎ 56 25 04; 12 Sayat Nova Poghots; ☎ 6pm-3am) Manhattan-style basement club with a chrome and steel entrance. On weekends a DJ mixes rap and techno, turning the place into a miniclub.

Buddha Lounge (Map pp148-9; ☎ 56 55 00; 50 Mesrop Mashtots Poghots; ☎ 5pm-3am) Eclectic Asian-themed place in the basement of a building on upper Mashtots. The 22-year-old owner was inspired after visiting the Paris original. Good place to down an exotic drink as you pub crawl across the city.

Pub Ché (Map pp148-9; ☎ 54 76 66; 4 Bayron; ☎ noon-midnight) The Che Guevara brand name has moved on to Yerevan with this swanky bar. The AMD2700 cocktails are a little pricey, but it's still a fun place to soak in the atmosphere of guns, cigars and Che paraphernalia.

Republic Square, Southern Mashtots & Khandjian Poghots

Cheers (Map pp148-9; ☎ 58 0416; 46 Nalbandyan Poghots; ☎ 7pm-late) A cheerful, youthful pub popular with tourists, diasporan Armenians and locals. There are good tunes and bright staff with a lethal array of drinks.

ENTERTAINMENT

Theatre, Ballet & Classical Music

Billboards by the Opera House and on Abovyan Poghots advertise upcoming events;

OUTDOOR CAFÉS: LIVIN' THE GOOD LIFE

Café hopping has become something of a citywide obsession. Before, after and sometimes during work locals crowd into the city's outdoor cafes, and there is no shortage. Take your pick from shady spots with umbrellas and café lattes to dimly lit mafia dens serving cakes and cognac. You hardly need this guide to tell you where to go; you'll spot them as you tour the city – just pick one that suits your style. Good places to look include the Cascade area and anywhere around the Opera House. Students tend to gather around the Ring Park near Surp Grigor Lusavorich Cathedral. Most expats prefer the Meeting Point Café in front of the Marriott Hotel (p159). Also look for places on the newly opened Northern Avenue.

the Armenia Information office (p151) and the Artbridge Bookstore Café (p161) can help with tickets and information. Tickets are a steal at just AMD1000 to AMD2000 for most events. The Opera House has a concert hall and a theatre for opera and ballet. Most theatres close during July and August.

Aram Khachaturian Concert Hall (Map pp148-9; Opera House; ☎ 56 06 45; 46 Mesrop Mashtots Poghota)

Arno Babadjanian Concert Hall (Map pp148-9; ☎ 58 28 71; 2 Abovyan Poghots)

Chamber Theatre (Map pp148-9; ☎ 56 63 78; 58 Mesrop Mashtots Poghota)

Hakob Paronyan State Musical Comedy Theatre (Map pp148-9; ☎ 58 01 01; 7 Vazgen Sargsyan Poghots)

Hovhannes Tumanyan Theatre of Marionettes (Map pp148-9; ☎ 56 32 44; 4 Sayat-Nova Poghots)

Hrachia Ghaplanyan Drama Theatre (Map pp148-9; ☎ 52 47 23; 28 Isahakyan Poghots)

Komitas Chamber Music Hall (Map pp148-9; ☎ 52 67 18; Isahakyan Poghots) Near Abovyan Poghots.

National Academic Opera and Ballet Theatre (Map pp148-9; Opera House; ☎ 52 79 92; 54 Tumanyan Poghots)

Discos

The local club scene is well developed, with everything from Manhattan miniclubs to European-style techno caverns. Don't call these places nightclubs, which generally refer to strip clubs.

Aqua (Map pp148-9; Alek Manukyan Poghots; admission AMD1500; ☎ until late Tue-Sun) Sits over the little Getar River in the park in front of the Yerevan State University. This is one of several café-nightspots in this area, lively on weekends.

Astral (Map pp148-9; admission AMD3000; ☎ until late Wed-Sun) Astral is to Yerevan what the Hacienda was to Manchester: ground zero for the dance-music scene. This club is located in a huge underground space next to the Opera House.

Bravo (Map p146; ☎ 27 06 10; 13 Hrachia Kochar Poghots, Arabkir; meals from AMD3000; ☎ until late Tue-Sun) This cheerfully weird complex of theme bar-restaurants with dance floors and live music attracts an older crowd as much for its Japanese and European food as the tropical- and jazz-themed rooms.

Café Atlantic (Map pp148-9; Pushkin Poghots; ☎ 24 hr) This café-bar by the Opera House has pulsing music and a nightclub. It can be a little disconcerting to see children hanging around here until the wee hours.

Club One (Map pp148-9; ☎ 54 64 24; 26a Tumanyan Poghots; admission AMD3000; ☎ until late Wed-Sun) Fairly exclusive club (there is not even a sign) on Tumanyan. Small but clean inside with thumping house music. It tends to absorb a real late-night crowd when other discos are closing so head here around 3am if you are still awake.

Garage Club (Map pp148-9; 54/3 Abovyan Poghots; ☎ until late) Stylish club that blares electronic dance music and hosts 'theme parties'. Can be a bit tight on space.

Kami (Map pp148-9; 18 Abovyan Poghots; ☎ until late) Small lounge and part-time disco with Mondrian art theme and dancing on Friday and Saturday. The rest of the week it hosts live music acts. It's back behind the Syrian sweet shop.

Opera (Map pp148-9; admission AMD2000; ☎ until late Wed-Sun) Disco attracting a slightly older crowd. It's easy to find, right under the Opera House, accessed from the north side.

Relax (Map pp148-9; 105 Teryan, Citadel Business Centre; admission AMD2000; ☎ 10pm-late Wed-Sun) Very popular with the young and wealthy crowd, with quite a few expats and Armenian diasporans thrown into the mix. It has an enormous bar, brings in top-notch DJs and serves decent food as well.

Live Music

Avante Garde Music (Map pp148-9; www.ara.am; 3a Pushkin Poghots; admission AMD2000; ☎ 10pm-late Tue-Sun) Inside a slightly nasty old Russian block, this club hosts jam sessions, jazz and rock bands. Check the schedule on the website. Cover prices vary according to who is performing.

Malkhas Jazz Club (Map pp148-9; ☎ 53 17 78; 52 Pushkin Poghots; cover AMD2000; ☎ 11am-3am) Laid-back club with two levels; a bar upstairs and a lounge in the basement where the bands perform. It also serves excellent food, including steaks, pork chops and pasta, plus a full range of drinks. Owner Levon Malkhasian is considered the father of Armenian jazz – he has a huge library of jazz books and CDs and often closes the club in the daytime so young musicians can rehearse.

Gay & Lesbian Venues

Gay life is fairly low key but moving ahead since the government repealed laws introduced (and enforced) by Stalin – check www.gayarmenia.com. The most popular hangout

is **Melines** (Map pp148-9; ☎ 54 46 44; 30 Arami Poghots; ☎ 10pm-3am) a cellar bar located below the French restaurant. The building is slated for demolition but will hopefully relocate. Art Bridge bookstore is another meeting place.

Cinemas

Kino Moskva (Map pp148-9; ☎ 52 12 10; 18 Abovyan Poghots) American blockbusters dubbed into Russian, anyone? Tickets are cheap and there is a bar, an internet club and a nightclub. Nice Soviet-classical balcony.

Kino Nairi (Map pp148-9; ☎ 54 28 29; 50 Mesrop Mashtots Poghota) Sometimes shows movies in English one night a week, and has two slightly alternative late-night bars, the 5th Element (movie theme) and Underground, with cabaret on weekends. Expats enjoy the VIP level that can be rented out for private screenings.

Sport

The local football league has a regular winter season; the national team and top clubs haven't had much luck in European competitions. Basketball is popular among kids, while *nardi* (backgammon) is the elders' game of choice, along with chess.

There are two modern sport and leisure facilities in Yerevan. **WaterWorld** (Map p146; ☎ 63 89 98; 40 Myasnikiyan Poghota; admission AMD5000; ☎ noon-8.30pm, nightclub until late Fri & Sat) is a AMD1000 taxi ride towards Sevan. The entry fee covers a range of pools and water rides, plus a beach towel. There are cafés and bars at the complex; it's quite a scene on a hot summer's day with all the kids, jewellery and luxuriant Armenian male body hair. It's open-air and closed in winter, except for penguins perhaps. **Arena Bowling Centre** (Map pp148-9; ☎ 53 61 01; 8 Mesrop Mashtots Poghots; ☎ 9am-9pm Mon-Fri), Yerevan's best bowling hall, is modern and costs, per lane, AMD6000 during the day or AMD12,000 per hour after 6pm.

Casinos

Looking like a Lego version of the Las Vegas Strip, Yerevan's low-rise casino strip (Map p146) stretches from the city limits out towards the airport. It makes for a somewhat surreal entry into Armenia as the neon signs flash past. Despite the novelty of it all, these places rank fairly low on the local entertainment scene and the empty sidewalks are testament to this. It's hardly worth the cab fare to get out here.

SHOPPING

Vernissage market (Map pp148-9; Pavstos Byuzand Poghots) The main weekend flea market caters to locals shopping for car parts and plumbing fixtures as well as tourists rummaging through piles of antiques and old communist medals. It's also a good place to pick up a chess set and intricately carved jewellery boxes among other locally produced handicrafts.

Vernissage art market (Map pp148-9; Mesrop Mashtots Poghota & Sayat-Nova Poghota) Around the Martiros Sarian statue across from Opera Sq, this market deals primarily with paintings; you can turn up some real gems here at negotiable prices. Purchases are made from both dealers and the artists themselves.

Salt Sack (Map pp148-9; ☎ 56 89 31; 3/1 Abovyan Poghots) Better-than-average souvenir and handicrafts shop with some maps and books for sale, and a range of jewellery, pottery, items like woven salt sacks, carpets, dolls and T-shirts.

Made in Armenia Direct (Map pp148-9; ☎ 59 92 93; Hanrapetutyun Hraparak, Marriott Hotel) One of the best selections of crafts and handmade jewellery and religious iconography.

Treasures of Armenia (Map pp148-9; ☎ 52 76 92; 1/1 Abovyan Poghots) Craft gallery run by local designer Nina Hovnanian. Besides unique jewellery, crafts, cushions and clothing there is a tea room where you can break your shopping spree. It's also a fun place just to look at the mind-boggling price tags and wonder, will anyone will buy that US\$400 scarf?

Other popular purchases include cognac and carpets. There are lots of cognac stores on the main streets (Mesrop Mashtots Poghota, Sayat-Nova Poghota and Abovyan Poghots).

Tufenkian Carpets (Map pp148-9; ☎ 52 09 11; 2/1 Tumanyan Poghots) is owned by James Tufenkian who made his name in Tibetan carpets and is now working to revive the Armenian carpet-making tradition, which was collectivised and sucked dry during the Soviet era. There are others sold at the main Vernissage market; see p221 for information on customs procedures. Carpets range from US\$50 for something basic to US\$15,000 for a first-rate hand-woven carpet. Many shops can arrange to ship your carpet home.

Bootleg CDs, games and software are sold everywhere for a pittance. Hayastan market (Map pp148-9), above Barekamutyun metro station, is the closest thing to a department store, but it still has a bootleg feel to it.

Some others are tucked into underground stores (Map pp148–9) at the Yeritasardakan metro station.

There are two big *shukas* (food markets; Map pp148–9) at 3 Mesrop Mashtots Poghota and at 35 Movses Khorenatsi Poghots, just off Tigran Mets.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

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

Air

Zvartnots Airport (✈ flight information 187), 11km from Yerevan, is Armenia's major airport. The main terminal looks like a Soviet scale model of the space station in *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*; hi-tech in conception but low-tech in construction materials. A new US\$100 million terminal was opened in 2006 with much fanfare.

The new arrivals hall has a money exchange and booths for ArmenTel and VivaCell if you want to buy a SIM card for your phone. The check-in counters are still in the old terminal, but the departure lounge (with a café and free wi-fi) is in the new terminal. See p319 for details on airlines that serve Zvartnots.

The airport tax when flying out of Zvartnots is AMD10,000, payable when you check in.

Airline Offices

Aeroflot Russian Airlines (Map pp148-9; ☎ 53 21 31; www.aeroflot.ru; 12 Amiryany Poghots)

Air Arabia (Map pp148-9; ☎ 53 45 33; www.airarabia.com; 14 Mesrop Mashtots Poghots)

Air France (Map pp148-9; ☎ 51 22 77; www.airfrance.am; 9 Alek Manukyan Poghots)

Armavia (Map pp148-9; ☎ 56 48 17; www.u8.am; 3 Amiryany Poghots)

Austrian Airlines (Map pp148-9; ☎ 51 22 01; www.aua.com; 9 Alek Manukyan Poghots)

BMI (Map pp148-9; ☎ 52 13 83; www.flybmi.com; 10 Sayat-Nova Poghota)

Caspian Air (Map pp148-9; ☎ 52 44 01; info@tatev.com; c/o Tatev Travel, 19 Nalbandyan Poghots)

CSA Czech Airlines (Map pp148-9; ☎ 52 21 62; www.csa.cz; c/o Visa Concord Travel, 2 Marshall Baghratian Poghota) Near corner with Isahakyan.

Lufthansa (Map pp148-9; ☎ 59 99 22; www.lufthansa.com; Marriott Hotel, Republic Sq)

Syrian Arab Airlines (Map pp148-9; ☎ 53 85 89; c/o Astron Travel, 3 Movses Khorenatsi Poghots)

Bus

Buses are generally cheap and slow old Soviet models, and while they may be half the price of a marshrutka they're often twice as slow as well. Buses mostly serve on village and suburban routes. The main bus station is the **Kilikya Avtokayan** (Map p146; ☎ 54 07 56; 6 Admiral Isakov Poghota), past the Yerevan Brandy Company on the Echmiadzin road, which has international bus services and buses to Gyumri and the towns of the Ararat Plain. The **Huyisayin Avtokayan** (Map p146; northern bus station; ☎ 62 1670; Tbilisian Mayrughi) is on the Tbilisi Hwy, 4km from centre, and serves Sevan and Dilijan.

Buses from the Kilikya Avtokayan to as far as Moscow (AMD21,600, about 72 hours, 4am Wednesday and Sunday) and Istanbul (AMD26,300, 41 hours, 1pm Wednesday and Saturday) can take days and are for extreme travellers only. Buses to Batumi (AMD10,000, 14 to 20 hours, 7am Monday and Friday), Tbilisi (AMD3700, about nine hours, 8am and 10am daily) and Tabriz (AMD17,000, 27 hours, 10am daily; book in advance through Tatev Travel, p151) also depart from Kilikya Avtokayan.

Car & Motorcycle

Several agencies rent out cars in Yerevan, including big names like Europcar and Hertz. A three-day rental ranges between AMD56,000 and 176,000 depending on the make and model of your car; you can get anything from a Lada to a Japanese 4WD. It's also possible to hire a driver with the car.

EET (Map pp148-9; ☎ 54 42 05; 15 Tumanyan Poghots)

Hertz (Map pp148-9; ☎ 58 48 18; 7 Abovyan Poghots)

Europcar (Map pp148-9; ☎ 22 94 95; 8 Kievyan Poghots) Also has a desk at Golden Tulip hotel.

Marshrutka

Yerevan is the hub of the national network, and marshrutkas (minivans) leave from spots around the city, from a kerb to a mini-bus station to one of the main bus stations. For transport all over Armenia they're fast,

reasonably efficient and not much more expensive than the buses. The following list is obviously subject to change but it should assist. Ask 'Vor tegh marshrutk gnoom eh?' (What is your destination?). Drivers and helpers will often guide foreigners to the right van or put you in the front seat.

Try to arrive about 30 minutes before departure to make sure you get a seat. Marshrutkas almost always leave on time and may even depart a few minutes early.

NATIONAL

Agarak (near Ashtarak) (Grigor Lusavorich Poghots, AMD300, 40 minutes, 9.55am, 11.55am, 1.55pm, 4pm and 5.55pm).

Alaverdi (corner Agatangeghos and Movses Khorenatsi Poghots in front of Rossiya Mall, AMD1700, three hours, 9am, 2pm, 3pm and 4pm).

Armavir (Hoktemberyan) (Kilikya Avtokayan, AMD400, 45 minutes to one hour, every 15 minutes, 7.30am to 9.30pm).

Ashtarak (Grigor Lusavorich Poghots, AMD250, 40 minutes, one or two per hour between 8.40am and 6.40pm).

Dilijan (Huyisayin Avtokayan, AMD1500, two hours, hourly between 10am and 6pm, plus Jjevan services).

Echmiadzin (Sarian Poghots near corner of Mesrop Mashtots, AMD250, 20 to 30 minutes, every 10 minutes between 8am and 10pm).

Goris (Kilikya Avtokayan (AMD2500, 8.50am, 3pm and 5pm); corner Agatangeghos and Movses Khorenatsi Poghots in front of Rossiya Mall (AMD2500, hourly between 7.30am and 3pm).

Gyumri (corner Agatangeghos and Movses Khorenatsi Poghots in front of Rossiya Mall, AMD1200, two hours, every 20 minutes between 7.30am and 8pm).

Goght (for Garni) (GAI Poghots near Mercedes Benz showroom, AMD250, 25 minutes, every 50 minutes between 10am and 9.30pm).

Hrazdan (for Tsaghkadzor) (Raykom Station, AMD400, 40 minutes to one hour, every 30 minutes between 9am and 6pm).

Ijevan (Huyisayin Avtokayan, AMD1700, 2½ hours, hourly between 10am and 6pm).

Jermuk (Kilikya Avtokayan, AMD1800, two hours, 10am and 3pm).

Kapan (corner Agatangeghos and Movses Khorenatsi Poghots in front of Rossiya Mall, AMD3500, six to eight hours, hourly between 7am and noon).

Khor Virap (Sasuntsi Davit Metro, Sevan Poghots, AMD400, 40 minutes, 11am and 3.30pm).

Meghri (Kilikya Avtokayan, AMD5500, nine to 11 hours, 7am).

Sevan (28 Isahakyan Poghots in front of Drama Theatre, AMD500, 40 minutes, hourly between 9am and 7pm).

Sisian (Kilikya Avtokayan (AMD2000, four hours, 8.30am, 10.30am, 12.30pm and 2.30pm); corner Agatangeghos and Movses Khorenatsi Poghots in front of Rossiya Mall (AMD2000, four hours, 9am).

Stepanakert (Kilikya Avtokayan, AMD1500, three hours, 9am, 11am, 2.30pm, 4pm and 5pm).

Vanadzor (corner Agatangeghos and Movses Khorenatsi Poghots in front of Rossiya Mall, AMD1200, two hours, every 20 minutes between 7.30am and 8pm).

Vayk (corner Agatangeghos and Movses Khorenatsi Poghots in front of Rossiya Mall, AMD1000, two hours, hourly between 8am and 7pm).

Yeghegnadzor (corner Agatangeghos and Movses Khorenatsi Poghots in front of Rossiya Mall, AMD1000, two hours, hourly between 8am and 7pm).

INTERNATIONAL

Batumi (Kilikya Avtokayan, AMD12,500, 10 to 15 hours, 7am Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday).

Stepanakert (Kilikya Avtokayan, AMD5000, seven to eight hours, five or so per day between 7am and 2pm).

Tbilisi (Kilikya Avtokayan, AMD6500, six hours, 9am and 11am).

Train

The imposing **Yerevan train station** (Map p146; ☎ information 184; Sasuntsi Davit Hraparak) is off Tigran Mets Poghota south of the city centre, with the Sasuntsi Davit metro station underneath. The booking office is on the ground floor to the right. Information boards are in Armenian and Russian, but some of the staff speak English. The main route loops west and north through Gyumri (3½ hours), on through Vanadzor (8½ hours) and Ayrum near the border (11 hours) and on to Tbilisi (16 hours). There are a couple of local trains to Yeraskh (near the Naçxivan border) and to Hrazdan.

Trains leave for Tbilisi on even days at 7pm, arriving theoretically at 9.40am, though a couple of hours late is normal. There are also trains every day to Gyumri at 8am and 4.50pm; an open-seating (bench) ticket costs AMD480. There are separate classes for the train to Tbilisi; open seating costs AMD3700, *kupe* (standard) compartments cost AMD5500, while SV (deluxe) compartments cost AMD12,000. Bedding costs AMD1000 in *kupe* compartments but comes free with SV class. The toilets aren't great and the carriages aren't new, but it's a very pretty ride. Book compartments a day ahead, and take food and drinks with you.

GETTING AROUND To/From Zvartnots Airport

Minibuses and buses from Zvartnots (Place of Angels) Airport leave from the car park 300m from the main terminal. Yerevan minibuses 107 and 108 (AMD150, every 20 minutes, 8am to 6pm) run between the airport and Berekamutyun Hraparak (which has the Berekamutyun metro station). Bus 201 goes to the airport down Mesrop Mashtots from the Opera House (AMD150, every 30 minutes, 7.30am to 5.30pm). Alas for public transport users, many flights come and go at night.

The price of a taxi to and from the airport turns on whether you arrange it in advance or chance it with the cowboys outside arrivals. A taxi might cost AMD5000 from the airport, but going from town to the airport you'll probably pay just AMD2000. If you arrive on the last flight you'll have more bargaining power as drivers will be eager to get home. The trip takes about 15 to 20 minutes to central Yerevan.

Public Transport

Yerevan has tonnes of public transport. There are no special passes and you pay as you go – but it's cheap, and it takes you right into the bustle of urban life.

The cheapest are the city minibuses (marshrutkas), renowned here and across the developing world as the worst drivers on the streets. There are hundreds of routes, shown by a number in the front window. They do stop at bus stops, but you can flag one down anywhere on the street. You pay AMD100 when you leave. Ask to stop by saying 'kangnek'. Women travellers should try to sit near the front and next to a female passenger if possible.

There are also buses following numbered routes and trolleybuses running on electricity from overhead cables. Bus and marshrutka tickets cost AMD100 to AMD200.

Bus 32, which goes from Kilikia bus station up Mashtots, past the Opera House and to the northern bus station every 20 minutes or so, is useful.

Best of all there's the clean, safe and efficient **Yerevan metro** (AMD50; ☎ 6.30am-11pm; trains every 5-10 min), which runs roughly north-south through these underground stations – Berekamutyun, Marshall Baghramian, Yeritasardakan, Hanrapetutyan Hraparak,

YEREVAN MARSHRUTKAS

- 11** – Erebuni Museum, Tigran Mets Poghata, Hanrapetutyan Hraparak, Haghtanak Bridge
- 13** – Kilikia Avtokayan, Haghtanak Bridge, Mesrop Mashtots Poghata, Marshall Baghramian Poghata, Berekamutyun metro
- 18** – Yerevan train station, Hanrapetutyan Hraparak, Nalbandyan Poghats, Marshall Baghramian Poghata, Ajapniak
- 43** – Nor Zeytun, Azatutyan Poghats, Haghtanak Park, Yeritasardakan metro, Surp Grigor Lusavorich Cathedral, Gortsaranayin metro
- 51** – Mesrop Mashtots Poghata, Abovyan Poghats, GAI Mercedes showroom
- 81** – Avan, Nalbandyan Poghats, Tigran Mets Poghata, Erebuni
- 101** – Hyusisayin Avtokayan (northern bus station), Tbilisi Hwy, Komitas Poghata
- 107** – Zvartnots Airport, Echmiadzin-Yerevan Hwy, Sebastia Poghats, Kievyan Poghats, Berekamutyun metro

Zoravar Andranik near Surp Grigor Lusavorich Cathedral and Sasuntsi Davit station at the Yerevan train station. The line continues west and south on ground level to stations in the industrial suburbs.

Taxi

Taxis are cheap and plentiful, from well-loved Ladas to late-model Benzes. There are two types – street taxis and telephone or call taxis. Neither type carries meters, so you should set the price before starting off. You'll see numbers for call taxis stencilled on buildings everywhere. Tourist publications such as *Yerevan Guide* carry listings for many companies. A ride within the city centre in a street taxi costs AMD500 anywhere for the first 5km and then an extra AMD100 for every kilometre thereafter.

AROUND YEREVAN

Because Armenia has so much history centred on its capital, it's easy to see many sites on half-day excursions from Yerevan. This section covers the *marz* of Ararat, Kotayk, Armavir and Aragatsotn. You can easily hire a taxi to see many of these places, but it often works out to be cheaper and less hassle to take a day tour with a company like

Hyr Service or Sati (p151). Sample prices include Garni/Geghard for AMD5000 or Khor Virap/Noravank for AMD8000.

GARNI TEMPLE ԳԱՐՆԻ

This comprehensively rebuilt **Hellenic temple** (adult/student AMD1000/250), was dedicated to Helios, the Roman god of the sun. It was built by Armenia's King Trdat I in the 1st century. It became a summer house for Armenian royalty after the Christian conversion.

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

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

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

In the ruins of the church next to the temple is a **vishap** (carved dragon stone). This is a marker to show the location of water. Some marks on the middle of the stone are in fact writing from King Argishti from the

8th century BC, which reads 'Argishti, son of Menua, took people and cattle from Garni to Erebuni [the original site of Yerevan] to create a new community'.

From the temple it's possible to reach Havuts Tar Monastery; see below.

In the village of Garni, **Tavern Restaurant & Hotel** (☎ 091357 581; ☎ 11am-10pm) serves *khoravats*. Upstairs, it has clean and comfortable rooms for AM10,000 per night. See also p170 for information on getting to and from Garni.

GEGHARD MONASTERY ԳԵԴՂԱՐԴ

Named after the holy lance that pierced Christ's side at the crucifixion, Geghard Monastery stands in a steep scenic canyon 9km beyond Garni. The spear itself was once kept here but is now housed in the holy treasury at Echmiadzin (p171).

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

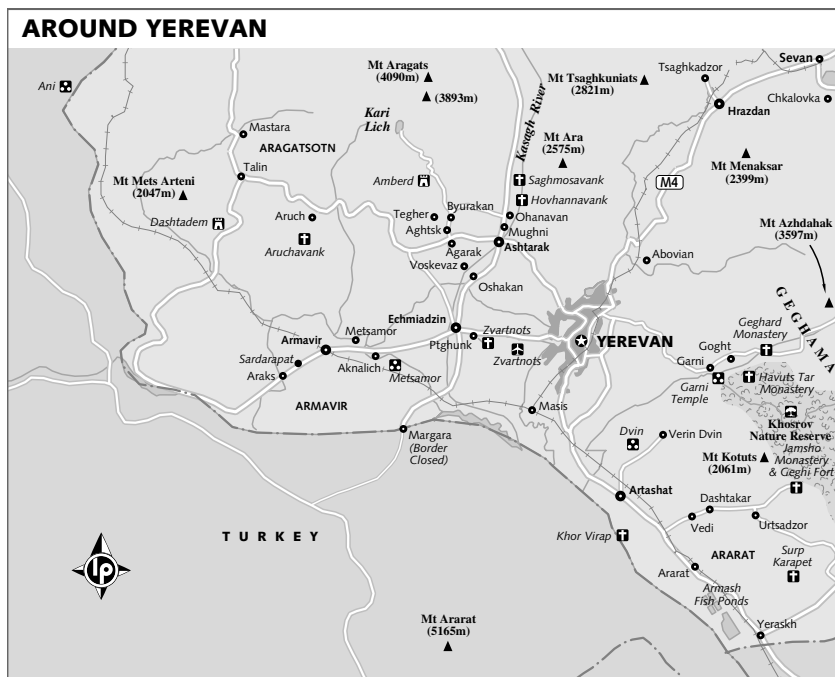
As you approach the monastery, look to the left up the hill for caves that house monastic cells built by monks. Trees here are often dotted with strips of cloth, as are trees on the other side of the monastery near the river. It is said a person can say a prayer or make a wish and tie a strip of cloth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

GARNI TO HAVUTS TAR

Havuts Tar (Chicken Roost) Monastery is a rewarding two-hour hike from the river below Garni. The trailhead is just left of the entrance to Garni Temple. Follow it down to the gorge (continuing down at intersections). Turn left at the bottom of the gorge and after 30 to 40 minutes cross the old stone bridge over the Azat River and pick up the trail on the opposite bank. The trail forks left and leads to a ranger station marking the northern entrance to the Khosrov Nature Reserve. From the guardhouse go left along the narrow trail near the crest for 3km. The kindly old ranger who lives in the shack can point you in the correct direction. The monastery eventually comes into view, with a large *khatchkar* marking the route.

The monastery comprises two parts, an eastern and a western side, constructed between the 11th and 13th centuries. An earthquake in 1679 destroyed much of the complex, but there is still much to explore, including underground chambers and an interesting church with a red and black chequered façade.

Travellers report spectacular hiking from Garni all the way to Lake Sevan. The 50km hike takes four or five days and in summer you'll meet plenty of Yezidi and Armenian shepherds tending their flocks on the slopes of Gora Karaganchal. You'll need to be self sufficient with food, tents, sleeping bags and reliable maps.



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

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

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

Outside, steps on the left lead up the hill to a 10m passage into another **church** that has been carved out of the raw rock. The

proportions in this room are nothing short of extraordinary, considering it was carved from the rock around it. The acoustics of the chamber are also quite amazing. In the far corner is an opening looking down on the church below.

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

Getting There & Away

Marshrutkas to Garni (AMD250, 25 minutes, every 50 minutes from 10am to 9.30pm) depart from GAI Poghots (behind the Mercedes Benz showroom). You can get to the showroom by taking marshrutka 58 or 66 from Berekamutyun metro station or marshrutka 51 from Mesrop Mashtots Poghota'. In Garni the bus leaves you on the main road, a short walk to Garni Temple. The main road continues for 10km to Geghard, but public buses don't go that far. Bus 284 continues to Goght but then it's another 4.5km to Geghard (from where



you could walk or hitch a ride the rest of the way). Alternatively, a taxi from Garni to Geghard and back with a one-hour wait is AMD3000.

ZVARTNOTS CATHEDRAL ԶՎԱՐԹՆՈՅ

Built from 641 to 661, the ruins of the **church** (admission AMD1000; ☎ 10am-5pm) of Surp Grigor Lusavorich (St Gregory the Illuminator) at Zvartnots are different to every other set of ruins in Armenia. Catholicos Nerses II the Builder (building might have been his profession before joining the clergy) sponsored construction of the cathedral. Reputedly one of the most beautiful churches in the world, it housed relics of St Gregory, the first Catholicos of the Armenian Church.

A model of the partially reconstructed church in the Museum of Armenian History (p153) in Yerevan shows it to have been a round creation with a hood-shaped dome 45m high. An earthquake in 930 caused the building to collapse. An arc of finely carved pillars and a massive stone floor are what remains, along with a profusion of decorated stone

fragments. Architecture historians argue over whether the reconstruction in the Armenian History Museum is really true to the church's original design. Either way, the pillars evoke a feeling for a Greek- and Roman-influenced Levantine Christianity similar to many early-Syrian church ruins.

A pool in the centre of the building was used to baptise adults. Around the cathedral are the ruins of the palace of the Catholicos and the wine press and stone tanks of a massive medieval winery. Zvartnots lies in rich farmlands and orchard just south of the Echmiadzin-Yerevan highway, next to the delightfully named village of Ptghunk, 17km from Yerevan and 4km from the centre of Echmiadzin. It's easy to catch public transport either way along the highway.

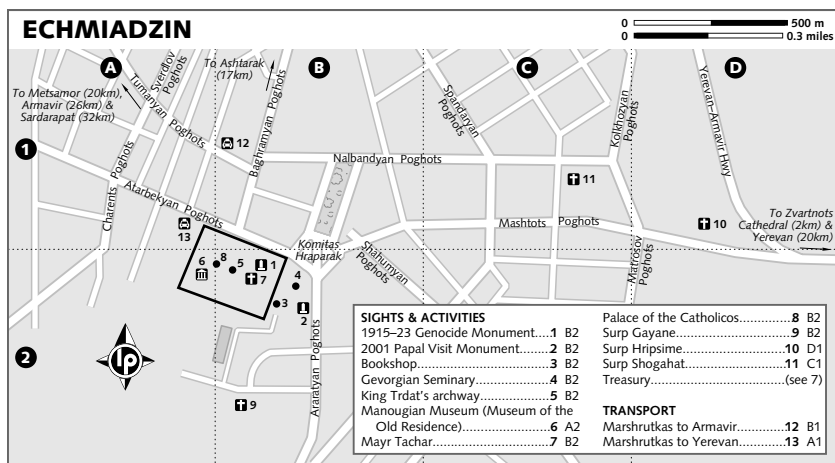
ECHMIADZIN ԵՃՄԻԱԾԻՆ

☎ 0231 / pop 52,000

Holy Echmiadzin is the Vatican of the Armenian Apostolic Church, the place where Surp Grigor Lusavorich (St Gregory the Illuminator) saw a beam of light fall to the earth in a divine vision, and where he built the first Mayr Tachar (Mother Church of Armenia). For Armenian Christians, Echmiadzin (Descent of the Only Begotten Son of God) has unparalleled importance. Echmiadzin (sometimes spelt Ejmiatsin or Etchmiadzin) was the capital of Armenia from 180 to 340, when Christianity was first adopted by the Armenian nation. The seat of the Catholicos (patriarch of all Armenians) wandered across western Armenia for centuries before returning to the Mayr Tachar in 1441, with substantial rebuilding in the 15th century. The cathedral has sprouted more bell towers over the last 400 years, but the core is much as St Gregory's vision guided him. The Palace of the Catholicos in front of the Mayr Tachar is the home of the present Catholicos, Garegin II, enthroned in November 1999. He is the supreme prelate of the 1700-year-old Armenian Apostolic faith.

Holy See of Echmiadzin ՍՈՒՐԲ ԵՃՄԻԱԾԻՆ

The main cathedral, **Mayr Tachar**, stands in a quadrangle of hedges and lawn surrounded by 19th-century buildings. By the main entrance at the southern end the large grey **2001 Papal Visit Monument**, built for Pope John Paul II's visit and mass in 2001, stands next to the **Gevorgian Seminary**. The 19th-century **seminary**



was closed in 1921 when Echmiadzin was swamped by refugees from the genocide, and it was forbidden to reopen under Soviet rule. The main gate leads past the **bookshop** between buildings holding monastic cells to the central compound. Bearded clergymen in hooded black robes glide along the garden paths around the Mayr Tachar.

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

At the rear of the church, through a door on the right of the altar, is the **treasury** (☎ 10am–5pm Tue–Sat, 1.30–5pm Sun). It houses 1700 years of treasure collected by the church, including the Holy Lance (Surp Geghard), the weapon used by a Roman soldier to pierce the side of Christ on his way to Calvary. It's a suitably brutish spearhead set into an ornate gold and silver casing. It was brought to Echmiadzin from Geghard Monastery. There is also an image of the Crucifixion, which, according to tradition, was carved by St John. The treasury has relics of the apostles Thaddeus, Peter and Andrew, some in hand or arm-shaped reliquaries, and fragments of the Holy Cross and Noah's Ark.

A door from the treasury leads under the main body of the church to a pagan shrine with a fire altar, seemingly left in situ in case this whole Christianity thing turned out to

be a fad and the old faiths reasserted themselves. The shrine can be visited with a prior appointment through a travel agency, or with a bit of luck by asking one of the clerics in the treasury.

The gardens of Mayr Tachar have a **1915–23 Genocide Monument** and many fine *khatchkars* assembled from around the country. The **archway** leading to the Palace of the Catholicos was built by King Trdat III in the 4th century. The **Manougian Museum (Museum of the Old Residence)** stands next to the palace. It's off-limits to casual visitors but if you have some clout with the Armenian Church it can be visited. Travel agencies in Yerevan can arrange visits to the church's private museum. There are some particularly fine *khatchkars* across the garden from the museum's entrance (some are also near the Papal Visit Monument, see p171), including examples from the recently destroyed cemetery in Julfa's old town in Naxçıvan.

Other Churches

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

The 17th-century **Surp Shoghahat** rather pales beside the splendour of its neighbours

in Echmiadzin, but it's a sturdy stone structure with simple, elegant lines. It was rebuilt on the foundations of a chapel to one of the companions of Hripsime and Gayane.

Surp Hripsime was originally built in 618, replacing an earlier chapel on the site where Hripsime is said to have been killed after she refused to marry King Trdat III, choosing instead to remain true to her faith – she was a pagan who had earlier fled marriage from the Roman emperor Diocletian.

Getting There & Away

Marshrutkas for Yerevan (AMD200, 20 to 30 minutes, 21km, every 10 minutes) leave from Atarbekyan Poghots, two blocks up from the main traffic circle. Transport further west towards Armavir (AMD250, hourly between 11am and 4pm) leaves from Tumanyan Poghots. The minivans leave from Sarian Poghots in Yerevan near the corner with Mesrop Mashtots Poghota.

METSAMOR MUSEUM

ՄԵՇՍԱՄՈՐ ԹԱՆԳԱՐԱՆ

Besides an internationally renowned nuclear power plant, Metsamor also has intriguing remains of sophisticated early cultures. The **Metsamor Museum** (☎ 09374 15 67; admission AMD1000; ☎ 11am–5pm Tue–Sun), 6km from Metsamor town, displays evidence of thousands of years of civilisation from an early Iron Age settlement excavated nearby. From Echmiadzin take the main road to Armavir, then turn left and travel for 3km to the village of Taronik, then take a right in the village and another left about 500m on. The collection includes gold jewellery from 600 BC and earlier, and an ancient astrological stone.

Outside the museum entrance is a row of **phallus stones**, some measuring 3m high, most brought here from other excavation sites. Dating from pre-Christian times, the stones are fertility symbols created to ask for God's help not only with human fertility, but also for good crops and animal health. Other exhibits require more explanation and an English-speaking guide. Behind the museum, giant stones around the outside of the excavation are part of an ancient **Cyclopean fortress**, yet to be completely excavated.

On the second hill, before descending to the **covered excavation site**, ask someone from the museum to point out the lichen-mottled **astrological stone**, with markings

that were part of an early astronomical observatory with similarities to Zorats Karer near Sisian.

SARDARAPAT ՍԱՐԴԱՐԱՊԱՏ

About 10km past the small city of Armavir (Hoktemberyan) in the orchards and farms of the Ararat Plain stands the venerated war memorial site of **Sardarapat**. It was here in May 1918 that the forces of the first Armenian republic under Zoravar (General) Andranik turned back the Turkish invaders and saved the country from a likely annihilation. Built in 1968 with statues of giant bulls, a 35m stone belltower shrine to the fallen, five eagle statues built of tuff and a memorial wall, the site puts an Armenian twist on Soviet war memorials. Nationalist Armenians treat a visit here as a kind of pilgrimage. The nearby **museum** (admission AMD500, guide AMD700; ☎ 11am–5pm Tue–Sun) has relics from the battle itself in the first hall, as well as exhibits of items from the Neolithic Age up to the Middle Ages. Upstairs there is a treasure trove of carpets, jewellery, ceramics and handicrafts, the sum of which represents the country's best ethnography collection – a celebration of Armenian culture, survival and life.

Getting There & Away

Sardarapat is about 10km southwest of Armavir, signposted near the village of Araks. If time is short it makes sense to combine a visit with one to Echmiadzin or Metsamor. Marshrutkas leave from Yerevan's Kilikya Avtokayan for Armavir (AMD300, 45 minutes to an hour, every 15 minutes, 7.30am to 9.30pm). A taxi from Armavir with two hours at Sardarapat should cost about AMD2000 with bargaining.

ASHTARAK ԱՇՏԱՐԱԿ

☎ 0232 / pop 27,000

Ashtarak is a mid-sized regional town on the Kasagh Gorge, 22km northwest of Yerevan and somewhat higher at 1100m. Ashtarak is an interesting old town with lots of 19th-century buildings. There's a 16th-century stone bridge below the new bridge, and four churches around town, including the little 7th-century Karmravor church with intricate carvings and a cemetery with *khatchkars* a short way north, and the 6th-century Tsiranavor church on the edge of the gorge. Ashtarak has some very rural neighbourhoods as well, full of fruit

trees and stacks of hay in late summer. While there is no great need to come to the town itself, it does make a decent transit point for the Kasagh Gorge churches (see below) if you are travelling by local transport.

Kasagh Gorge Churches

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

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

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

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

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

Sleeping & Eating

Ashtarak Dzor (☎ 3 67 78; Kasagh Gorge, Ashtarak; per person incl breakfast AMD10,000; 🍴) This midrange

hotel, built on terraces down the walls of Ashtarak Gorge, is best known for its dining and entertainment. *Khoravats* dinners cost AMD3000, and there's a big dance floor and some pretty good local talent singing and playing. The hotel rooms are modern with satellite TV, though the service is a bit rusty. A fun choice for a weekend out of Yerevan with friends. It's about 4km north of the town centre

Getting There & Away

Ashtarak is on a major road, so public transport is easy. In Yerevan, Ashtarak marshrutkas leave from Grigor Lusavorich Poghots, (AMD250, 40 minutes, every hour from 7.30am to 6.30pm). There are also marshrutkas from here to villages such as Voskevaz and Agarak that go via Ashtarak. A bus travels to Ohanavan around 3pm or whenever it's full. Marshrutkas return to Yerevan from Ashtarak's main *shuka*.

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

BYURAKAN & AROUND

ԲՅՈՒՐԱԿԱՆ

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

The fortress of **Amberd** was constructed on a ridge above the confluence of the little gorges of the Amberd and Arkashen streams. The high stone walls and rounded towers are a rough but effective defence, rebuilt many times but mostly dating from the 11th century. It's easy to see why the site was chosen – at 2300m above sea level, it commands a position above the farms and trade routes of the Ararat Plain. According to local lore, the thick walls of the fortress were never breached – not even by those pesky Mongols. A church stands downhill from the fortress with the ruins of fortified houses and a substantial public bathhouse. A small kiosk here sells drinks and snacks.

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

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

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

Sleeping

Byurakan Observatory Hotel (☎ 093508 681; per person AMD5000) This is an old Soviet establishment on the grounds of the observatory. The hotel itself is a lovely pink tuff building with basic but satisfactory rooms. For an extra AMD1000 you'll get a tour of the observatory at night.

Getting There & Away

There are three buses per day from Yerevan to Byurakan, departing at 10.30am, 12.45pm and 5.30pm from the bus stand on Grigor Lusavorich Poghota in Yerevan (AMD300). If you don't catch one of these there are also a few buses to Agarak, 6km south of Byurakan on the Ashtarak–Gyumri highway. From Agarak you could walk, hitch or hire a taxi. There are very few, if any, taxis in Byurakan itself so if you need a cab to go to Aragats or Amberd its better to take one from Ashtarak. The three buses return to Yerevan at noon, 4pm and 6.30pm.

MT ARAGATS ԱՐԱԳԱՍԾ ԼԵՐ

Snow covers the top of the highest mountain in modern Armenia almost year-round, so climbing is best in July, August or September. Beware – even in August, clouds can gather in the crater by about 10am, so it's good to start walking as early as possible. It's not unusual for hikers to start on mountain ascents at 5am.

The southernmost of its four peaks (3893m) is easy enough for inexperienced climbers, but the northern peak (4090m) demands greater abilities.

The road from Byurakan winds 27km up to the Cosmic Ray Institute observatory and the waters of Kari Lich. If you have your own sleeping bag, the scientists may be able to find a place for you to sleep (for around AMD2000). Hot water and clean bathrooms are available. Alternatively, there are camping places for those suitably equipped with a tent.

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

Several tour companies can arrange walks up Mt Aragats, including the Ajdahag Mountain Hiking Club (p151) and Avarayr (p151). A two-day trip including guide, transport and camping equipment costs around AMD45,000 per person. **Serzh Hovsepian** (☎ 35 00 46; serzh_hovsepian@yahoo.com) is also a recommended guide for climbing the mountain's peaks. Serzh is a member of the Spitak mountain-rescue team.

Getting There & Away

There is no public transport to Kari Lich. Hitchhikers usually take a bus to Byurakan and then try to thumb a lift, which is more likely on weekends. A better idea is to get a group together to climb the mountain and share the costs of a cab from Yerevan, Ashtarak or Byurakan. From Byurakan a cab should cost AMD4500 (one way) after some haggling.

TALIN & AROUND ԹԱԼԻՆ

☎ 2490 / pop 7,600

Talin lies in one of the stonier, more rugged corners of the country, 75km northwest of Yerevan. Many of the surrounding villages were settled by refugees from Van and Kars in historic western Armenia, now part of Turkey, and local folk-dancing troupes preserve

western Armenian songs and dances. There are also some Yezidi Kurd villages in the vicinity.

Those with an abiding love of Armenian church architecture might want to visit Aruch's 7th-century **Aruchavank Monastery**, midway between Ashtarak and Talin, and the similar 7th-century **Surp Astvatsatsin Church** on the outskirts of Talin itself.

About 5km south of Talin is the interesting 10th-century double fortress of **Dashtadem**, which still shelters flocks of sheep inside its sturdy walls after dark. Follow the highway onto Gyumri to **Mastara** and its very different fortlike church from the 5th century, with rare vestiges of frescoes.

KHOR VIRAP MONASTERY

Խոր Վրափ Մոնաստիր

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

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

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

The ground-level buildings at Khor Virap have been repeatedly rebuilt since at least the 6th century, and the main Surp Astvatsatsin Church dates from the 17th century. Khor Virap is an important pilgrimage site and people often visit for a baptism or after a wedding to perform a *matagh* (sacrifice, often of sheep or chicken), which keeps the

priests busy on weekends. It's a shivery experience to climb 60m down into the well. The well is lighted, but you need to wear sturdy shoes to scale the metal ladder. Just outside the monastery walls are some excavations on the site of Artashat, Trdat's capital, founded in the 2nd century BC.

The Armash Fish Ponds, 25km downstream from Khor Virap near the border town of Yeraskh, are home to a great variety of migrating birds in spring and autumn as well as local species.

The ruins of the ancient capital of Dvin are on the edge of the plains near Verin Dvin, about 13km from Artashat.

Getting There & Away

There are two marshrutkas a day to Khor Virap from Yerevan (AMD350, 11am and 3.30pm), and three buses per day (9am, 2pm and 5pm), all from the Sasuntsi Davit metro station. Z

The main highway is 4km away, with lots of public transport to and from Ararat and towns further south. A return-trip by car from Yerevan costs about AMD7000 through a taxi service.

KHOSROV NATURE RESERVE

Խոսրովի Արգելիչ

Khosrov Nature Reserve protects several chunks of rugged hills and wooded slopes in the upper valleys of the Azat, Votankunk and Khosrov Rivers.

The reserve is broken up into four distinct sections – the most popular section is the gorge below Garni and Geghard, which can be explored on foot.

You need a 4WD to reach the other parts of the reserve. The park's main office is in Vedi, 49km from Yerevan. From here 4WD roads climb up past Dashtakar to a bridge across to Urtsadzor, and then up to **Surp Karapet**. It's an isolated spot with a 13th-century church topped by a classic ribbed umbrella cone, more easily reached via the southern highway, at the turn-off about 4km after the hamlet of Tigranashen. The road up to the reserve reaches a pretty camping spot on the Vedi river, then it's a trek on foot into the rugged light forest to the **Jamsho Monastery** and **Geghi Fort**. Companies such as Avarayr (p151) arrange treks and nature tours in the reserve.

NORTHERN ARMENIA

Northern Armenia comprises the *marz* of Shirak, Lori and Tavush – this also includes the rugged bare highlands of Gegarkunik around gorgeous Lake Sevan. The regional landscapes vary from Shirak's open plains to Lori's pine forests and Tavush's lush hornbeam and oak woods around Dilijan. We have listed the sites in the order most visited from Yerevan – most travellers head up to Lake Sevan and then on to Dilijan with a side trip to Ijevan. Travellers usually overnight in Vanadzor before going to Georgia via the Debed Canyon. Stepanavan and Gyumri are also worthy side trips.

LAKE SEVAN ՄԵՎԱՆԱ ԼԻՃ

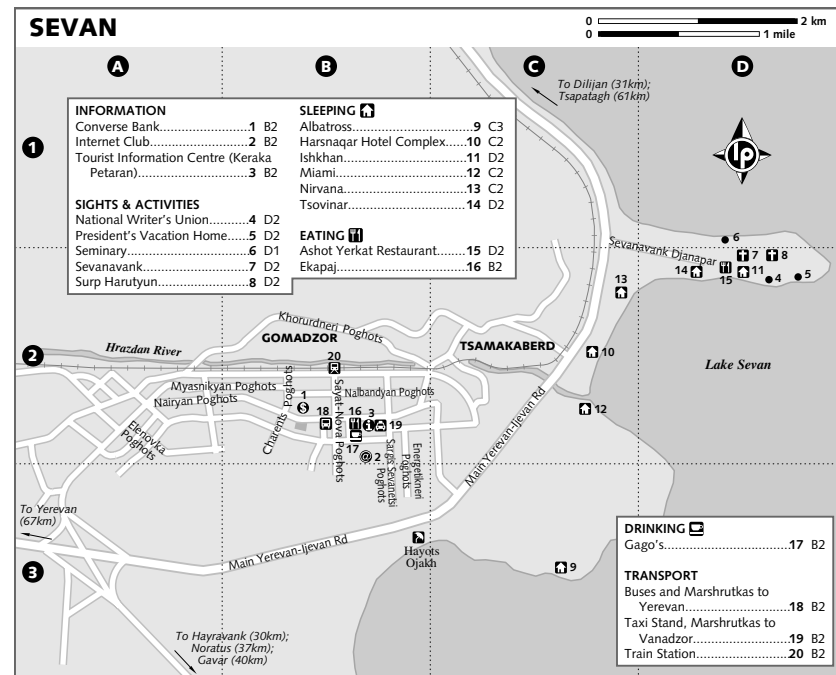
Perched at 1900m above sea level, the great blue eye of Sevana Lich (Lake Sevan) covers 940 sq km, and is 80km by 30km at its widest. The lake is perfect for escaping Yerevan's summer heat. Its colours and shades change with the weather and by its own mysterious processes, from a dazzling azure to dark

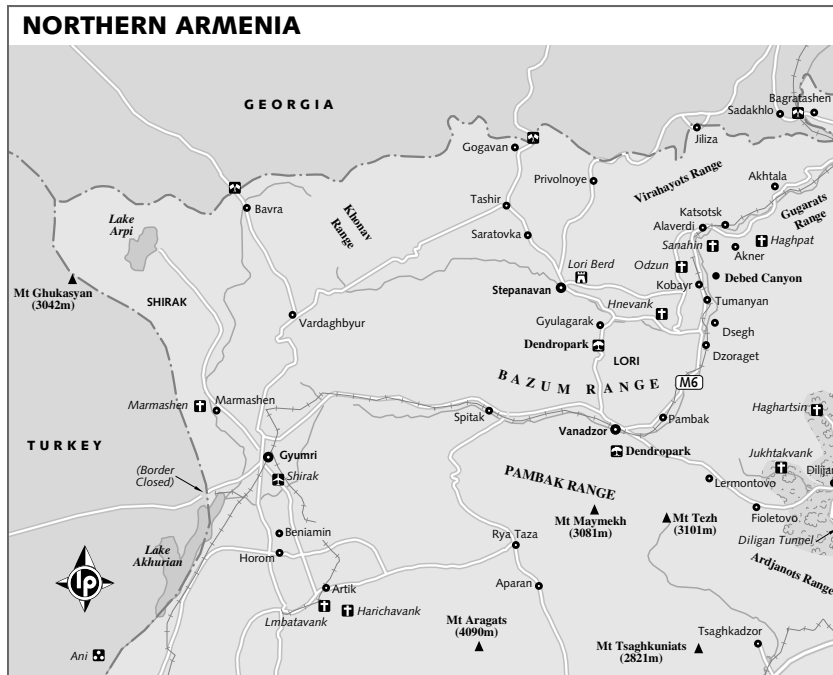
blue and a thousand shades in between. The freshwater lake supports a healthy fish population, including the *ishkhan* (prince trout), named for a row of spots like a crown on its head.

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

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

Tourism is picking up around the lake, but except for a hectic 10 weeks in summer it's





usually quiet. The stark volcanic highlands and plains around the lake endure a long winter, and except for a string of achievements in medieval church building around the lake's edge, the hinterlands of Gegarkunik *marz* are not often visited.

SEVAN ՍԵՎԱՆ

☎ 0261 / pop 20,000

The bustling little town of Sevan is 6km from Sevan Monastery, a short way inland from the lake's western shores. Founded in 1842 as the Russian village of Elenovka, there are few signs of the past besides some Russian provincial houses at the western end of town. Sevan's main street, Nairian Poghots, has a Haypost office, cafés, a *shuka*, money-changers and taxis to Sevan Monastery and lakeshore hotels.

The main beach strip is along the sandy south side of the Sevanavank peninsula, crowned by the much-photographed churches on the hill at the end. This beach is suddenly transformed into the Armenian Riviera in the brief hot summers, with bars, beach volleyball, water-skiing and paddleboats.

There are other, quieter beaches closer to Sevan town across the highway near the Hayots Ojakh motel-restaurant. There are fees in summer to use the beaches near Sevan, from AMD2000 to AMD3000 per person depending on the beach.

Information

The **Tourist Information Centre** (☎ 2 02 20; www.sevaninfo.am; 164 Nairyan Poghots; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Sat), located in the Keraka Petaran (city Municipality building), can supply you with a map of the area and ideas on activities or accommodation. **Internet Club** (☎ 2 74 83; 1 Kriboidov Poghots; ☎ 10am-9pm) is a couple of blocks south of the City Municipality. **Converse Bank** (☎ 254 52; Nairyan Poghots; ☎ 9.30am-6.30pm) has an ATM that accepts Visa, while moneychangers feature up and down the main drag.

Sevanavank ՍԵՎԱՆԱՎԱՆԻ

Sevan Monastery (Sevanavank) is up a long flight of steps on the peninsula's turtle-backed hill and has commanding views of the lake. In summer and autumn a thick carpet of cloud pushes over the Areguniats



mountains to the north and evaporates at the lake's edge.

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

Continue up the hill past the foundations of the **Surp Harutyun Church** to the highest point of the peninsula, with panoramic views. On the far side of the hill are two buildings: one belongs to the **National Writers' Union** (closed to the public), the other is the **president's vacation home**, protected by a high fence. The building on the north side of the peninsula is a new **seminary** for the Armenian Apostolic Church. The students sometimes play football in the

car park near the stairs. There are a couple of souvenir stalls and the Ashot Yerkat restaurant (see p180) too. There's no public transport out here, so arrange for a taxi to wait for you (about AMD2000 with 30 minutes' waiting time from Sevan town).

Sleeping & Eating

Sevan's beach resorts start to fill up – and raise their prices – around late May. Prices may jump by 40% in the high season. The season slows down again in early September. In spring and autumn they remain open with reduced rates and in winter most are shut entirely.

Camping is possible for a fee and there are lots of little *domiks* (housing units made from cargo containers), ministry lodges and guesthouses around the lake that you might unearth if you ask around. Sevan is also close enough to Yerevan for a day trip.

Ishkan (☎ 093359 053; Sevan peninsula; domiks AMD10,000-15,000) Cheap and popular with backpackers, Ishkan is located conveniently near the parking lot by Sevanavank. It may feel like an Oklahoma trailer park but it should suffice for budget travellers.

Tsovinar (☎ 1-53 05 99, 091601 821; Sevan peninsula; domiks AMD15,000-25,000) A friendly little two-storey lodge about halfway along Sevanavank's main beach. The rooms are small but they have hot water.

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

Miami (☎ 093570 404; Yerevan Hwy; d AMD20,000, cottages AMD30,000-40,000, villa AMD50,000-70,000) A serene resort with cabins and a main hotel sent around a grassy courtyard with an above-ground splash pool. The scene can get lively with music and dancing.

Albatross (☎ 091485 245; Yerevan Hwy; cottages AMD15,000) About 2.5km southwest of Sevan town, Albatross occupies a quiet stretch of beach with a few colourful *domiks*. Paddleboats and jet skis are available.

Harsnaqar Hotel Complex (☎ 2 00 92; www.harsnaqar.hotel.am; fax 2 00 65; Yerevan Hwy; s/d AMD30,000/40,000; ☎) This is the large Holiday Inn-style hotel where the highway meets the lake. It has a waterpark, tennis courts, lawns and a private stretch of beach. It also has an excellent restaurant, with a terrace overlooking the lake.

Ashot Yerkat Restaurant (☎ 2 500 00; meals AMD2000-3000; ☎ 10am-9pm) You can feast on kebabs, grilled *ishkhan* trout, salads and lavash on the terrace of this restaurant out on the Sevan peninsula. Try the house speciality, 'eat and shut up' – a concoction of sautéed meat and potatoes.

Ekapaj (☎ 2 11 44; Nairyan Poghots; meals AMD1000-2500; ☎ 10am-9pm) A popular and convenient bistro in the middle of town. The usual stuff – kebabs and *khovavats* – is available, plus breakfasts of blintzes and fried eggs.

Gago's (Sayat-Nova Poghots; ☎ 11am-midnight) On the street behind Ekapaj is this friendly café where you can have cold drinks and snacks.

Getting There & Away

By car Yerevan is only 30 to 40 minutes away by freeway. Transport (AMD600, 40 minutes, every hour 9am to 5pm) to Yerevan leaves from the corner of Nairyan Poghots and Sayat-Nova Poghots in the centre of Sevan town.

There's a marshrutka to Vanadzor from the corner of Nairyan and Shinararneri Poghots at 10am (AMD1000) that can drop you in Dilijan. This corner is also a taxi stand. A taxi to Yerevan (67km) costs about AMD7000, to Dilijan AMD3500, to Tsaghkadzor AMD2000, and to Sevanavank with 30 minutes' waiting time about AMD2000. A taxi to one of the hotels around the peninsula costs AMD1000. A four- or five-hour tour of Sevanavank, Hayravank and the *khatchkars* of Noratus should cost around AMD7000.

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

AROUND LAKE SEVAN

About 30km south of Sevan is the charmingly typical *tufa* **Hayravank Monastery** – 1100 years old, sturdy as the day it was built, and with *khatchkars* in the cemetery attesting to centuries of Armenian life. The promontory it stands on has a fine view of Lake Sevan. Further south is Noratus (sometimes spelt Noraduz), an old village and a fine place to wander around. There's a tall chapel of **Surp Grigor Lusavorich** at one end of town and an ancient *khatchkar*-studded cemetery on the eastern side of the village. Noratus is a good area to find a **beach** on the sunny side of the lake.

The provincial capital of Gegharkunik *marz* is **Gavar** (Kamo), population 30,000, on the cold slopes of the Geghama Mountains west

of Lake Sevan. It's a quietly poor town, similar to **Martuni** at the lake's southern end, with a few cafés, a Soviet-era hotel and a feeling that it is just struggling to survive. A newly repaired road heads south through a tunnel under the **Selim Pass** (2410m) from Martuni to Yeghegnadzor in Vayots Dzor. About 20km east of Martuni is the handsome little **Vanevank Church** (903), in a gorge south of the town of Artsvanist. Turn off at Karchagbyur and head up the valley through Lchavan to the centre of Makenis village to find the 10th- to 13th-century churches of **Makenyats Vank**, close to a gorge.

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

On the far side of the lake at Tsapatagh is the **Avan Marak Tsapatagh** (☎ 1-54 31 22; www.tufenkianheritage.com; s/d/ste AMD32,700/39,200/65,400; ☎ ☎), a stylish lakeside hotel with a swimming pool – an escape from the bustle of Yerevan. The hotel has sailboats and windsurfers for hire in summer, and the splendid Zanazan restaurant (meals around AMD3500 to AMD6000). By road the shortest route to Yerevan is along Sevan's north shore (140km, two hours).

North of Tsapatagh, Shorja is a poor, desolate village but a logical base for exploring the picturesque Artanish peninsula. It's possible to camp at the lakeshore.

Public transport around the lake is sporadic – there are regular marshrutkas and buses from the Hyusisayin Avtokayan (Tbilisian highway) on the northern limits of Yerevan to the main towns (Gavar, Martuni and Vardenis) for around AMD1000. The best way to discover the lakeshore miles of quiet, clean beaches is with your own transport and perhaps camping gear.

In summer, the train from Sevan continues to Shorja on the other side of the lake (AMD430, one hour). There are no toilets on the train. From Shorja you can come back by road to the Dilijan highway (AMD500) and pick up northbound transport, or go all the way back to Yerevan (AMD1000). There is a daily marshrutka from Sevan to Shorja (AMD1000) around 1pm.

(Continued on page 189)

(Continued from page 180)

TSAGHKADZOR ՇԱԳԿԱԶՈՐ

☎ 0223 / pop 1800

Back when Armenia was part of the USSR Soviet athletes used to come to this tiny village to train for the winter Olympics and other sport competitions. The ski centre is still here and if you happen to be in Armenia in winter Tsaghkadzor (Gorge of Flowers) makes an excellent weekend getaway. The little resort, 57km north of Yerevan, is a virtual ghost town in summer, which is great if you are looking for cut rates on hotels or some crowd-free nature spots.

The main road reaches a central square and veers left up to the House of Writers, or right and around to the active Kecharis Monastery. The road straight on from the monastery leads to the cable-car station, while another branches to the left up to the Sport Base. The 6km cable car up Mt Tsaghkuniats runs daily even in summer.

The skiing facilities at the ski resort are basic and a far cry from the Alps but good fun for a day on the slopes.

A single cable-car ride costs AMD1000, and you can hire basic ski equipment, much of it vintage gear from the cable-car station. Better equipment is available from the Hotel Kecharis.

The forests around the base of the mountain provide some nice walks, and in summer there's horse riding from the Tsaghkadzor Sport Base. Horse riding can be organized directly through **Seran Mirzoya** (☎ 093340 058), reached through the Hotel Kecharis.

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

Sleeping & Eating

Many local homes offer homestays for AMD5000 to AMD8000 per person per night. Asking around once you arrive might be leaving it a bit late; see if someone can pass on a recommendation and make contact in advance. There are a couple of cafés open in summer along the main street.

Arminay Akopyan B&B (☎ 5 20 40; 35 Kecharetsu Poghots; per person AMD5000) Clean and friendly guesthouse with hot showers. No English spoken.

Saya Hotel (☎ 5 24 35; Grigor Magistros; r AMD15,000)

Increased tourism has seen the recent construction of several hotels on Tsaghkadzor's main square. Saya's clean, quiet rooms offer the best value among them. If it doesn't suit, head across the square to Jupiter or Bagart hotels.

House of Writers (☎ 1-28 10 81; www.writershotel.am; s/d AMD12,000/13,000, apt AMD40,000-50,000; ☎) This one-time Soviet-ministry hotel has seen significant renovations – the new apartments come with colourful modern furniture and even a fish tank! Unrenovated rooms are at least well-maintained. Follow the main road into town and look for the sign on the left.

Viardo (☎ 5 26 20, 093333 597; 6-person cottages AMD20,000-35,000, 3 meals per day extra AMD4000) A complex with 25 cottages separated by trees. The set-up of each cottage is the same, the difference being that the more expensive ones have been newly renovated. Prices drop 30% outside the summer holidays and ski season. There's a café and a bar here as well. It's on the road to the cable-car station, straight on past the Kecharis Monastery.

Kecharis (☎ 5 20 91; www.kecharishotel.am; Orbeli Poghots; r incl breakfast AMD20,000-30,000; ☎) A slick, new operation in the centre of town with well-maintained facilities, modern rooms and lots of colourful art adorning the walls. Facilities include a business centre, a sauna and a branch of the popular Jazzve Café. The English-speaking staff can also give tips on local activities or set up horse-riding trips. Prices increase by 30% during the ski season.

Coffee Break (☎ 093-515 234; ☎ 8am-2am) Despite its name, this place features grilled meats and kebabs more than coffee. The wood tables and a stone patio are a fine attempt to blend into the mountain scenery, but the blaring stereo is somewhat less attractive.

Getting There & Away

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

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

DILIJAN ԴԻԼԻՋԱՆ

☎ 02680 / pop 17,000

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

During Soviet times this was the peaceful retreat for cinematographers, composers, artists and writers to come and be creative; today it's a centre for tourism with a number of fine B&Bs and some renovated old Soviet guesthouses.

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

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

Information & Orientation

The **Dilijan Tourist Office** (Sharambeyan Poghots; ☎ 10.30am-5pm Tue-Sun) is open for business in the tourist enclave on Sharambeyan Poghots, a short walk uphill from the bus turnaround. It can provide lists of local homestays, B&Bs, craftspeople and artists.

Myasnikyan Poghots wriggles up from the main roundabout past the little *shuka* and the Dilijan historic centre to the town centre and out to Shahumyan Poghots to the older residential quarters. There's a **Haypost-Armentel** (58 Myasnikyan Poghots) in the town centre. About 200m past the Post Office is the **Internet Café** (☎ 093855 236; per hr AMD400; ☎ 10am-8pm). There are moneychangers on Myasnikyan as well as the **Ardshinvest Bank** (60 Myasnikyan Poghots), next to the Haypost office.

Sights

The **Dilijan Historic Centre** (Sharambeyan Poghots) is a little cobbled street next to Myasnikyan

Poghots. This collection of stone and wooden traditional buildings includes shops, a hotel, eateries, souvenir stalls and workshops for local craftspeople. The complex was thoroughly renovated in 2007.

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

The ruins of **Jukhtakvank Monastery** are near the Dilijan mineral water plant, 3.2km east along the Vanadzor road and about 3.5km up to the right.

The Surp Grigor Church, built around the 11th century, is missing its dome. The forest setting is a nice place for a picnic. Further on towards Vanadzor the scenery is gorgeous, passing the Russian **Molokan villages** of Fioletovo and Lermontovo.

Sleeping

There are lots of hotels and sanatoriums in and around town, many being snapped up and renovated now that a tunnel cuts travel time to Yerevan to around 90 minutes. The Hotel Lernayin Hayastan was being rebuilt at the time of writing. Some beautifully located resorts, such as the House of Composers, where Khachaturian, Shostakovich and Prokofiev stayed, are still run by government ministries. A local B&B scene is also developing.

Tateh Guesthouse (☎ 25 33, 093890 885; 41 Komisareri Poghots; per person AMD5000) This large home is run by a young couple. It's not as welcoming as some other places but is central and low-priced. From the main road (just past the internet café), walk down the steps and look for the metal fence with the green trim.

Getap Motel & Restaurant (☎ 56 14, 093460 060; 4.5km along Ijevan Hwy; d/cottages AMD10,000/40,000) Getap means 'riverbank' in Armenian, which sums up the out-of-town location of this motel. There are a couple of spiffy new cottages with enough room for four people, and some rooms in the main building with a basic shared bathroom. The restaurant has little open-sided cabins by the water and serves *khoravats* (including grilled fish) for AMD1500 per person. A taxi to and from Dilijan costs about AMD1000.

Nina B&B (☎ 23 30, 091767 734; 18 Myasnikyan Poghots; per person AMD6000) Most backpackers end up at this friendly B&B consisting of three guestrooms. Nina and husband Albert are

great cooks and occasionally prepare *khoravats* for guests. It's a very welcoming place and one of the best B&Bs in the country. At the *shuka* turn right and up the short hill (it's well signposted).

Magnit B&B (☎ 093224 725; 86 Kalinin Poghots; per person AMD7000) Huge home with 10 guest rooms, all clean, modern and carefully decorated. It's about 1km from the roundabout on the road to Vanadzor. Breakfast is a pricey AMD2500.

Tamara Davtyan (☎ 56 71, 094573 645, 093573 645; 12 Myasnikyan Poghots; per person AMD10,000) Next door to Dili Villa, this place has set ambitious prices for mediocre accommodation; fortunately, it is open to negotiation. Although it's not a modern home, the family is friendly.

Daravand Guesthouse (☎ 78 57, 094420 965; info@daravand.com; 46 Abovyan Poghots; s/d without bathroom 9000/14,000, with bathroom AMD10,000/18,000) This character-filled place has well-appointed rooms, a cosy common room and an outdoor deck with gorgeous views. Prices include breakfast, and the food is excellent. Owner Razmik is a diaspora Armenian with an Iranian upbringing and a German education. He can organise day trips to places of interest. The guesthouse is on the road toward Jukhtakvank, 360m off the main Dilijan-Vanadzor road. Look for the red garage and the stairs leading up to the house.

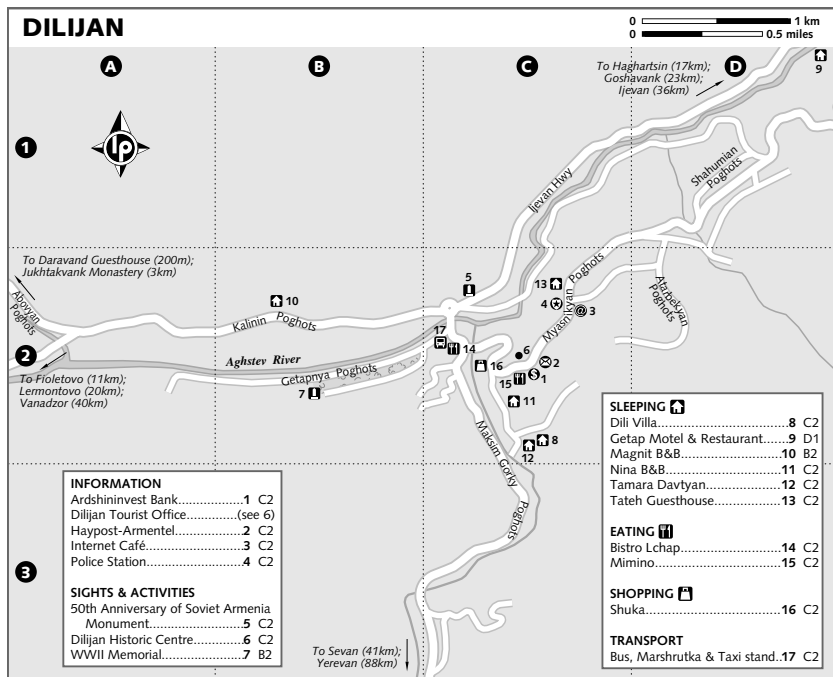
Dili Villa (☎ 70 59; www.dilitours.de; 12a Myasnikyan Poghots; per person incl breakfast AMD13,000) A handsome modern house run by the director of the local art school and his wife (French and English are spoken). There are five rooms and a modern bathroom. Excellent home cooked meals are available, plus lots of fruit and Armenian wines. Owner Ghazar will even paint your portrait upon request! Package tours of the area can be arranged. The guesthouse is 500m past Nina B&B.

Eating

There are a couple of friendly local cafés and restaurants but nothing in the fine-dining bracket.

One of the most popular places around is Getap, the hotel-restaurant on the highway towards Ijevan (see opposite).

Mimino (☎ 41 41; 37 Myasnikyan Poghots; meals AMD1800; ☎ 10am-11pm) A restaurant set slightly off the street near the historical preserve, with Georgian treats such as *khingalee* dumplings and *khachapuri* pies, plus salads.



Bistro Lchap (☎ 33 80; shwarma AMD800; 🕒 9am–9pm) Conveniently placed near the bus stop, near the roundabout, this shwarma joint serves to fill up travellers on the move.

Getting There & Around

Buses and marshrutkas to Yerevan leave from the main roundabout by the river. Buses (AMD1000, three hours) leave hourly between 9am and 3pm – some of these are services starting further north from Ijevan or Noyemberyan. Services to Ijevan (AMD500, 45 minutes) run hourly between 9am and noon. Services to Vanadzor (AMD500, 40 minutes) run at 10am, 11am, 2pm and 3pm.

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

HAGHARTSIN ՀԱՂԱՐՏԻՆ

The handsome **Haghartsin Monastery** (Haghartsin means ‘Dance of the Eagles’) was built in the 12th century by two brothers, princes of the Bagratuni kingdom. It’s hidden away in a lovely forest valley by some massive nut trees. The monastery has three churches, the first for Gregory the Illuminator, the second for the Virgin Mary, named Surp Astvatsatsin (Holy Mother of God) and, the last, a chapel to St Stepanos. An image of the Virgin and Child by the door has distinct Mongolian features – added to convince the next wave of Mongol invaders not to destroy the church. The brothers’ family seal can be seen on the back of this church. There are some stunning *khatchkars*, a sundial on the wall of the St Gregory Church, and a refectory (1248) with amazing arching interlocked stone beams. Mass is held in the Surp Astvatsatsin at 11am on Sunday. The monastery is 4km off the main Dilijan–Ijevan road. You can get a lift to the turn-off and easily walk the rest of the way (or possibly hitch there, especially on a weekend when there is more traffic).

From Haghartsin, it’s possible to walk on trails over mountain to Dilijan, a 10km hike that requires a little more than three hours. The path is not marked, but with a compass it’s fairly easy to find the route. From the monastery, continue on the gravel road down to the river and then up the other bank toward

the ridge. A path continues to the right along the tree line with Dilijan eventually coming into view. Note that this route passes precariously close to a military base where shooting exercises are occasionally conducted, so only consider this after consulting with the tourist office in Dilijan.

GOSHAVANK ԳՈՇԱՎԱՆԿ

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

Considered one of the principal cultural centres of Armenia in its time, historians believe Goshavank was abandoned at the end of the 14th century. Goshavank then appears to have been reoccupied in the 17th to 19th centuries and restored from 1957 to 1963. The local custodian, Zarik, is a delightful guide and loves to demonstrate the acoustics in the main church with an old prayer. She may also show you a museum filled with artefacts collected from the area.

Zarik’s son **Armen Grigoryan** (☎ 094949 001) organises guided hikes to Gosh Lich (Gosh lake; 2.5km away), caves and forgotten forts in the mountain forests. A trek to the little-known remains of Ak Kilise (Turkish for ‘White Church’) takes about six hours.

Another walk leads 6km to Parz Lich along a marked trail. However, most hikers usually take a taxi to Parz Lich and start the walk there, as it’s easier to get transport out from Gosh. There are usually some people at Parz Lich who can show you the trailhead.

Sleeping

Besides the following B&Bs other families in the village have rooms available; ask Zarik and Armen Grigoryan at the monastery for advice. The town also has a small **hotel** (per person AMD10,000), on the main road, 300m before the church. There is usually no-one there, but a caretaker lives in a small home next door.

Osepien B&B (☎ 093942 491; per person AMD7000) This friendly B&B with three rooms is run by

Osepien Artur, the director of the monastery complex. Osepien can spin some yarns about the history of the area.

Gosh’s Home (per person AMD7000) A quiet guesthouse in the middle of the village (ask around for directions). Manager Suren Grigorian can help with local logistics and can guide you on local hikes including the one to Parz Lich.

Getting There & Away

Goshavank is 5km off the main Dilijan–Ijevan highway. You can ride on a local bus or marshrutka to the turn-off and walk or hitch the rest of the way. One bus (AMD200) serves the monastery; on Tuesday and Friday it goes to Dilijan at 9am and returns from Dilijan at 1pm. On Monday and Wednesday it goes to Ijevan at 9am and returns at noon. A taxi from Dilijan or Ijevan (both 23km away) is the easiest option (about AMD6000 one way).

IJEVAN ԻՋԵՎԱՆ

☎ 0263 / pop 21,000

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

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

Orientation & Information

There are banks on Melibekyan Poghots, the end of which has a distinctive fountain and a couple of cafés. The ACBA Bank next to the fountain has an ATM that accepts Visa.

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

The **Ijevan Tourist Information Centre** (☎ 3 32 58; 5a Melikbekyan Poghots; 🕒 10am–7pm Mon–Sat) in the cultural centre–theatre can help you find a guesthouse and may offer some travel suggestions if you can communicate in Russian or Armenian (no English is spoken here). It can provide a town map and a list of B&Bs, most of which are hard to find or no longer function. A couple of doors down from the Tourist Information Centre is an **Internet Club** (☎ 3 19 01; per hr AMD500; 🕒 10am–11pm). **Rouben Simonyan** (☎ 3 24 32) is a local historian who speaks Armenian and Russian and can arrange guides for road trips and hikes to unusual sites in the region.

Sights

The **Ijevan Wine Factory** (☎ 3 42 33; 9 Yerevanyan Poghots; 🕒 9am–6pm Tue & Fri) presses much of the local vintage into dry white and sparkling wines under the Haghartsin, Gayane and Makaravank labels. It offers free tours and tastings with advance notice, and has cellar-door sales. The winery also puts on lunches overlooking the river. It’s about 1.5km from the town centre towards Dilijan, just past the little **Ijevan Local Lore Museum** (☎ 3 42 59; 5 Yerevanyan Poghots; admission free, donations appreciated; 🕒 9am–5pm Tue–Sun), with a couple of rooms of ethnographical displays. A short way up the left bank of the Aghstev river from Melikbekyan is a **sculpture park**.

Sleeping

The B&B scene is more than a little dysfunctional. About 10 properties are listed in a brochure at the tourist office; however, none seem to have signs or visible addresses. The B&Bs listed below aren’t too hard to locate. The bizarrely named **Hotel Dog** (☎ 3 14 16) next to the sculpture park was being renovated at the time of research and should become the best hotel in town.

Gyulnara Meliksetyan (☎ 3 15 54, 093191 211; 2 Nalbandyan Poghots; per person AMD5000) This B&B is in a big house about 1km north of the centre, with six bedrooms, satellite TV and modern plumbing. Home-cooked dinners cost about AMD1500. To get there, travel north along the main highway from the *shuka* for around 800m, turn left uphill and then take the first right on a dirt track. There are no signs at all, so it’s best to take a taxi the first time or call first.

Vardan Vardanyan B&B (☎ 3 36 95; 25 Proshchyan Poghots; per person AMD5000) This spacious home is

run by the same man who owns the Vardanak Café; he'll probably approach you about accommodation if you eat there. The B&B is on the hill behind the café.

Geghetsik Edilyan Guesthouse (☎ 3 21 95; dm AMD5000, r from AMD10,000) This simple country lodge, off Dilijan road 5km from Ijevan, is run by the gregarious Geghetsik, who speaks Armenian and Russian. It was built as a teachers' college on a hill with views over the Spitak Reservoir. Coming from Ijevan you pass the Spitak Reservoir. Before reaching the railway bridge look for a tunnel under the railway, head uphill 150m and the hotel is on the left. A taxi from Ijevan should cost AMD1000; ask for 'Geghetsiki pansionat'.

Hotel Mosh (☎ 3 56 11, 091452 463; www.hotel-mosh.am; 3 Yerevan Poghots; r with/without bath AMD7000/5000) This eight-room hotel doesn't have much atmosphere, but it's conveniently located on the main road, just past the *shuka*. Hot showers and satellite TV available.

Eating

Vardanak Café (☎ 3 36 95; ☺ 11am-10pm) Among the three cafés in the centre of town along the main highway, this one, next to the bus station, is the only one that serves hot food. The owner also has a B&B nearby and is keen to assist travellers.

Elit (☎ 091111 300; ☺ 10am-10pm) This swanky restaurant on the highway serves up *khoravats* in a big banquet hall. It's opposite the winery. It also has guestrooms for AMD10,000.

Getting There & Away

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

There are marshrutkas to Yerevan (AMD1500, three hours, every hour from 10am to 6pm) that stop in Dilijan 36km down the road. One bus (AMD1000) for Yerevan departs at 9.30am. Dilijan is also served by a bus (AMD300, 9.30am) and a marshrutka (AMD500, 2pm). There is one daily marshrutka to Vanadzor (AMD700, 9.30am). At the time of writing there was no public transport to Georgia, but you could get something to Noyemberyan and change there.

If you are headed that way it's still worth asking about a share taxi to the border or a resumption of bus services.

YENOKAVAN ԵՆՈՔԱՎԱՆ

The rugged mountains around Ijevan hide old roads, forts and churches in their many folds. A fantastic hike to the west of Ijevan can be found along the road leading to the town of **Yenokavan**, which sits by the Sarnajur River. On the southern edge of Yenokavan is a small church perched on a rock overlooking a gorge. Inside the gorge is the 13th-century **Surp Astvatsatsin Church**.

Up the valley from Yenokavan is an interesting new tourist venture run by **Apaga Tour** (☎ 091290 939, 091495 834; www.apaga.info; tigran@artak.net). There are horse stables here, and guided trail rides can be made for AMD3500 per hour or AMD20,000 per day (including meals). Guided hikes are also available if you prefer walking. Apaga also offers accommodation in newly built small cottages for AMD20,000 with three meals; the price also includes a one-hour horse ride.

Down in the river gorge, a separate tourist venture has been set up by a couple of young brothers from Ijevan – **Vahagn and Tatul Tanayan** (☎ 3 14 65, 091365 437). Their camp near the Khachagbyur river is in a beautiful spot they have dubbed 'Peace to the World'. Bring a swimsuit as there are some wonderful bathing pools and cascades nearby. You can stay and eat at the camp for around AMD10,000 (less if you bring your own tent and food). The Tanayans can also show you some caves in the area, some 30m deep. The most interesting is Anapat Cave, which contains unique pre-Christian carvings of faces and human forms.

NORTH OF IJEVAN

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

Just past the turn-off to Noyemberyan there's a road 4km to Achajur village and onwards another 6.5km to the 11th-century **Makaravank** monastery. The beautiful church is set deep in a forest, giving it a very peaceful atmosphere. There are some fine carvings on the exterior and interior of the structures, including ornate altar daises carved with

eight-pointed stars, floral motifs, fish, birds and geometrical forms. There is no public transport here, but you may be able to get a lift with locals visiting the site.

Heading on towards Noyemberyan, turn up the valley at Kirants for the epic ride to the **Kirants** monastery – Niva or Villis Jeep only. It's a muddy 14km road hemmed in by forest. After about 10km you can walk up the north bank of the valley about 50m to 100m to find a **medieval stone road** parallel to the new track. The 13th-century Kirants monastery is quite unique, built of brick and decorated with coloured tiles by a Greek-influenced branch of the Armenian Church. The forest setting is very lush, but watch out for ticks in summer.

Other churches in the vicinity include the **Arakelots** monastery, the little **Moro-Dzoro** monastery and **Deghdznuti Vank**, with a rough-hewn chapel from as early as the 4th century, next to a 13th-century church. A guided tour with Rouben Simonyan from Ijevan (p193) or perhaps with someone from Kirants or Acharkut village would be a real advantage.

SHAMSHADIN

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

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

Berd (population 8000) itself is nothing special but does have a restaurant and a couple of hotels. The **Berd Hotel** (☎ 093930 777; per person AMD5000-10,000) was being renovated at the time of research. Contact Mr Vardgez on the number above. A cheaper place down the road is the **Hotel Raipotreb** (☎ 026721 426; per person AMD2000), which also has a decent restaurant.

The main reason to come to Berd is to hike here along the old road from Ijevan. The 35km

road twists and winds through the mountains and past some attractive old villages. The hike takes about 12 hours in total, best spread over two or three days. There are no hotels, but you can ask in the villages for a homestay. Just make yourself known as a tourist as locals are wary of strangers in these parts (you may be mistaken as a wayward Azeri spy or soldier). It's best to have a taxi driver take you the first 5km or so out of Ijevan to get you on the right track. Just make sure they are taking you on the old road that heads east of town rather than the new road going north.

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

Khoranashat monastery used to be Shamshadin's most visited historic attraction, but these days it's off-limits as it's only a few hundred metres from the border. The villagers of nearby Chinari don't recommend going there – Azeri soldiers nearby are prone to taking pot shots at visitors.

The road from Lake Sevan to the regional centre of Berd is one of the wildest and most beautiful in the country. From Chambarak (Krasnosyelsk) it turns north past the village of Ttujur over the 2286m Getik pass and winds over the summer pastures and through forests along the ridges and flanks of Mt Mrkhuz (2993m).

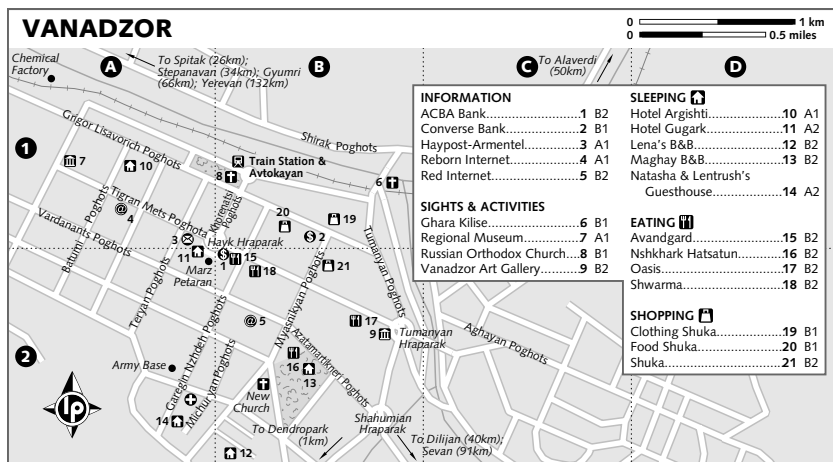
VANADZOR ՎԱՆԱԶՈՐ

☎ 0322 / pop 170,000

Lining the banks of the Pambak River, Vanadzor, formerly Kirovakan, is a post-industrial Soviet city and administrative centre for the Lori region. The main street, Tigran Mets Poghota, bustles with shops, cafés and the swishest clothes outside Yerevan. The young folk attending the teachers' college add a bit of nightlife to the city. The huge chemical works at the eastern end of town are mostly moribund, but some factories are reopening and some new industries are starting to appear. The city is a useful base for visiting the classic churches of Debed Canyon, with good transport links to other cities.

Orientation

Tigran Mets Poghota has lots of moneychangers' signs as well as a cash machine at the **ACBA Bank** (22 Tigran Mets). The **Converse Bank** (54 Grigor Lusavorich) has an ATM that accepts Visa



and MasterCard. There are also internet clubs and internet telephone offices along Tigran Mets, including the **Reborn Internet** (Tigran Mets; per hr AMD300; ☎ 10am-10pm), near the corner with Batumi, and a post office. Another online option is the **Red Internet** (81 Vardanats Poghots; per hr AMD300; ☎ 9am-10pm). The train station and the *avtokayan* (bus station) are together at the bottom of Khorenatsi Poghots.

Sights

There's not a whole lot to see, but there are parks and some interesting neighbourhoods to explore. A **regional museum** (☎ 4 17 51; admission AMD500; ☎ 11am-6pm Mon-Sat) at the western end of Tigran Mets is housed in an unattractive-looking building, diagonally opposite the cinema. At the other end of town the **Vanadzor Art Gallery** (Tumanyan Hraparak; admission AMD200; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun) shows off local talent across widely divergent styles of painting and sculpture.

Vanadzor's *shuka* on Myasnikyan Poghots is one of Armenia's busiest regional markets. The old village neighbourhoods of **Dimats** and **Bazum** are east of the town centre, over the Tandzut River. The centre of town has the usual Soviet look, but south along Myasnikyan Poghots there are some elegant stone villas and country houses. There's a little **Russian Orthodox Church**, in the park by the train station, and the Armenian Apostolic church called the **Ghara Kilise** (Black Church), built from suitably black stone and surrounded by an elaborate cemetery. The Armenian church

stands near the lower bridge on Tumanyan Poghots. There's an interesting walk up Abovyan Poghots along the little valley of the Vanadzor River, past boating ponds, tall trees and shuttered sanatoriums to an overgrown **Dendropark** (Forest Reserve).

Sleeping

Hotel Gugark (☎ 4 15 19; Hayk Hraparak; r per person AMD3000-8000) This pre-war Soviet building on Hayk Hraparak has a few scruffy rooms and some renovated ones. It's not the nicest place around, but it's cheap and central, making this a good base for budget travellers.

Natasha & Lentrush's Guesthouse (☎ 4 63 43, 094914 100; 24 Michuryan Poghots; per person AMD7000) A B&B with four rooms in an elegant two-storey villa with a garden. The couple's daughter, Kristine, speaks English. To get there, head up Garegin Nzhdeh Poghots, turn left at the army base and then take the first right after the hospital; No 24 is halfway up the street on the right, distinguished by a large grapevine and a little metal balcony.

Maghay B&B (☎ 4 52 59, 091794 029; marined61@rambler.ru; 21 Azatamartikneri Poghots; per person AMD7000) Very welcoming B&B with three rooms and a communal bathroom. The family often eats with the guests, which creates a homey atmosphere. To find it, take the lane that goes left of the Nshkhark Hatsatun restaurant; it's at the end of the lane.

Lena's B&B (☎ 2 53 11, 094854 403; 26 Orbeli Poghots; per person AMD7500) Owners Lucine and her mother, Lena, offer a comfortable stay in

this pleasant home with three rooms. Lucine speaks English and is switched on to the needs of tourists; she can help organise a trip to the Debed Canyon.

Hotel Argishti (☎ 4 25 56; 1 Batumi Poghots; s/d AMD20,000/25,000) Three blocks from Hayk Hraparak on a quiet street you'll find this decent midrange hotel with high ceilings and a gated rose garden. The furnishings are new and comfortable, and there are some family rooms (for four people) for AMD35,000. It also has a restaurant, a bar and a billiards room.

Eating

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

Nshkhark Hatsatun (☎ 4 10 11; 25 Azatamartikneri Poghots; meals AMD1500-2500; ☎ 11am-10pm) Pizza, cold beer and ice cream are a few of the specialities here, although it can do a good old-fashioned *khoravats* as well. It's a grey stone building with a green and yellow sign in Armenian, standing back from the street, with a park on one side.

Oasis (☎ 4 06 46; 48 Tigran Mets Poghota; meals AMD2000; ☎ 10.30am-11pm) One of the most popular places in town, Oasis has an extensive menu with most items pictured so you know what you are in for. Many European dishes and some Caucasian regional fare.

Avandgard (☎ 4 07 47; 22 Tigran Mets Poghota; meals AMD1800-2500; ☎ 10.30am-11pm) Armenian, Georgian and Russian dishes figure prominently at this progressive restaurant with a flashy interior. It serves a nice trout in wine sauce for AMD2200.

Getting There & Around

Vanadzor's *avtokayan* and train station (☎ 2 10 09) are at the bottom of Khorenatsi Poghots. Marshrutkas to Yerevan (AMD1200, two hours, every 20 minutes from 7.30am to 8pm) take a 132km route via Spitak and Aparan to Yerevan. There's also transport to Dilijan (marshrutka or bus AMD500, up to one hour, 10am and 1pm) continuing to Ijevan (AMD1000), Stepanavan (AMD400, 45 minutes, 8.30am, 10am, 1pm, 2.30pm and 4.30pm), Gyumri (AMD800, 9am, 10am, 11am, 1pm and 2pm) and Alaverdi (AMD500, up to one hour, 8am, 10am, 1.30pm, 3pm and 4.30pm). A bus to Tbilisi (AMD3500) departs around 8am.

Trains heading to either Yerevan or Tbilisi will come and go in the middle of the night, making them of little use to travellers. A marshrutka to Tbilisi (AMD3500) leaves at 8.30am.

The churches of the Debed Canyon and Lori Berd can be visited on a day trip by taxi for around AMD6000 to AMD8000 for seven or eight hours, or about AMD5000 to Lori Berd, or you can negotiate with drivers based at the *avtokayan*.

STEPANAVAN & AROUND

ՍՏԵՊԱՆԱՎԱՆ

☎ 0256 / pop 14,000

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

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

Information

The best information centre outside Yerevan is located here in quiet Stepanavan. Several of the staff at the **Stepanavan Information Centre** (Language and Computer Centre; ☎ 2 21 58; www.stepanavan.info.am; 11 Million Poghots) speak English and are happy to answer questions or perhaps arrange a tour for you. They have maps and can organise accommodation at the info centre or elsewhere in town. Check the website for a free downloadable walking tour of the town. **Internet** (per hr AMD400) is available here.

There are banks and shops exchanging money around the main square and the *shuka*. Taxis, buses and marshrutkas leave from the main square.

Sights

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

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

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

From the Dendropark, the road continues east for 8km to the village of Kurtan. At the gas station in Kurtan veer right, cross the bridge and travel another 7km to **Hnevank** monastery. The monastery stands inside the gorge on the southern side of the canyon, near the confluence of the Gargar and Dzoragets Rivers. It was founded in the 7th century but dates mostly from the 12th century. The monastery was being restored at the time of research and there were plans to build a

restaurant on site. From here the road continues to the Vanadzor–Alaverdi highway.

The **Lori Plains** stretch north of Stepanavan to the Georgian border, with a few mixed Armenian–Russian villages such as Saratovka and Privolnoye. The main road passes through the town of Tashir to the minor border post at Gogavan. On the Georgian side a decayed 77km road leads to Tbilisi. Another road (best tackled in summer) climbs to the west over the lonely mountains and meadows of the Khonav range to Shirak *marz* and Gyumri.

Sleeping & Eating

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

Anahit Pensionat (☎ 2 25 78; r AMD4000, cottages AMD10,000; 🏠) This Soviet sanatorium is in the forest on the ridge behind town. The cottages have been remodelled and there's a swimming pool (AMD600), a sauna (AMD5000) and some sports facilities. The restaurant here is probably the best in town, and worth visiting even if you're not staying at the hotel.

Information Centre Guesthouse (☎ 221 58; stepanavaninfo@gmail.com; 11 Million Poghots; s/d AMD8000/10,000; 🏠) A convenient, low-priced option, the Information Centre has one en suite room with satellite TV and a laundry machine. The entrance is private so you don't need to go through the info centre each time you enter.

Ruzan Marikyan (☎ 221 96, 093166 845; info@bedandbreakfast.am; 6/6 Left Bank quarter; per person AMD10,000) B&B offering a couple of comfortable bedrooms. The Marikyans are an educated couple (a doctor and an engineer) and although no English is spoken they are very helpful and sincere.

MM Hotel (☎ 2 40 50; 9 Nzdheh Poghots; r AMD15,000, deluxe AMD20,000) New hotel near the Information Centre; rooms come with TV and fridge. Pine floors give the rooms a nice aroma.

Next door to MM Hotel is the similar **Hotel Lori** (☎ 223 23) with almost identical prices.

Getting There & Away

Marshrutkas for Yerevan (AMD1500, three hours) leave from the main square at 8am, 10am, 11am, 1pm, 2pm and 3pm. There are four buses a day to Vanadzor (AMD400) at

8.30am, 10.30am, noon and 4pm. A daily bus goes to Tbilisi (AMD3000, 12.30pm). A taxi anywhere in town from the main square costs AMD400.

DEBED CANYON ԴԵԲԵԴԻ ՀՈՐ

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

Sleeping

Hotel Anush (☎ 0322-408 08; Vanadzor–Alaverdi Rd; cottage AMD10,000) This stone-clad motel and restaurant is about 12km from Vanadzor, near Pambak village. There are 12 modern rooms with satellite TV and clean bathrooms. The restaurant is a nice place to break for lunch or dinner, and costs about AMD2500 per person.

Avan Dzoraget Hotel (☎ 01-54 31 22; www.tufenkianheritage.com; per person AMD25,000; 🏠) A 34-room luxury hotel run by the arty Tufenkian group, near the confluence of the Debed and Dzoraget Rivers, midway between Vanadzor and Alaverdi. Opened in spring 2004, it's by far the best hotel in the region, with a spa, a swimming pool and a restaurant, plus a bar in a Soviet bomb shelter.

Getting There & Away

Buses and marshrutkas travel from Vanadzor to Alaverdi at 8am, 10am, 1.30pm, 3pm and 4.30pm. But once you get to Alaverdi you'll still need transport to visit all the monasteries. Sanahin is fairly easy to reach on your own (using the cable car) and there are regular marshrutkas to Haghat. But connections to Akhtala and Odzun are rarer, and most independent travellers miss Kobayr because it's poorly signposted. To see the sights quickly and economically it makes more

sense to hire a taxi from Vanadzor. Expect to pay around AMD8000 for the day. If your budget is tight or you prefer to explore the valley at a relaxed pace, hitching and bussing is still an option.

Kobayr ԶՈՐԱՅՐ

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

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

Kobayr is a perfect picturesque ruin, with trees and vines springing from finely carved mossy stones. The main building has lost its roof but has some elegant, partially restored frescoes, and the bell tower is largely intact. At the time of writing locals had begun the process of restoring the monastery – given their painstakingly slow work they are likely to still be there by the time you read this.

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

Alaverdi ԱԼԱՎԵՐԴԻ

☎ 0253 / pop 10,000

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

ARTUR MELKUMIAN

Artur Melkumian, 39, is a construction worker currently helping to rebuild Kobayr Convent. Renovation began in 2006 and is expected to continue until 2011. We asked him about the status of the project.

Is the church being preserved for the sake of history or as an active place of worship?

We are restoring the church so that it can be an active place of worship for the local people. Of course we will also try to build it to the original specifications.

What are the challenges of rebuilding?

We are trying to use traditional methods so we don't use cement. The main challenge has been to understand how the structures were originally built. Scientists and historians have come here to study the original buildings but we still don't understand all the techniques. It's important that we use the same types of plasters and materials to maintain the original look. Also, we're not using modern equipment or cranes so it's really labour intensive to move the materials and stone blocks.

What does the project mean for the community?

We don't have a church in Kobayr so a lot of people are supporting this work. They want to rebuild the community and connect with their traditions.

What does it mean for you personally?

When we were kids we used to come up here and play in the ruins and explore the caves nearby. That was during the Soviet period when no one took care of this place – I saw it graffitied and ruined. We didn't think much of it then because we were just kids. But I understand the importance of it now and it makes me proud to rebuild something I saw neglected for so long. Personally I am not so religious, but after working on this project I have come to appreciate the historical significance of this place. We learn new things about this building every day. We turn over stones and see ancient writing, we dig and find more structures. People in Kobayr live day-by-day and don't think much about history, but this project has taught us a lot about our past.

Tamara's bridge, about 1km down from the bus stand, was built by Queen Tamar of Georgia.

This humpbacked stone bridge was used by road traffic until 25 years ago. There are four kitten-faced lions carved on the stone railing. Legend tells that when a 'real' man finally walks across, the lions will come to life.

SLEEPING & EATING

Formal accommodation is lacking in Alaverdi, but it's possible to stay in local homes in Alaverdi, Sanahin, Odzun and Haghpat if you ask around and have luck on your side. The Flora Restaurant may have some contacts. If you're invited but not asked to pay, discreetly leave AMD5000 behind when you leave.

Flora Restaurant (☎ 2 24 74, 091210 624; Alaverdi; meals AMD2500; ☎ 10am-10pm) To get here, cross Tamara's bridge, climb the stairs on the far side and turn right for a short walk along a road. There are private dining rooms for one to 10 people, clean bathrooms and freshly prepared *khoravats*, kebabs, salads and sometimes *dolma*.

There are two cafés open in warm weather near Tamara's bridge, good for an ice cream, light snacks and a drink, and stores with pastries around the bus stand.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The bus and marshrutka stand is a parking bay off the main road – taxis wait here and further up the hill. A bus ticket and information window is located in the back of the lot, next to the Xerox and fax shop. Marshrutkas and buses are available to Stepanavan (AMD700, two hours, 10am, 3.30pm), Vanadzor (AMD500, up to one hour, 8am, 9am, 11.30pm, 1pm) and Yerevan (AMD1700, three hours, 8am, 9am, 12.30pm and 2pm).

There's a bus to the Georgian border (AMD250) at 6pm, or try to jump on a passing marshrutka. The train station is 2km down the valley by the copper mine at Katsotsk. A daily train to Vanadzor leaves at 6pm (AMD200, two hours). A taxi to Haghpat and Akhtala or to Odzun and Kobayr should cost between AMD4000 and AMD5000, or about AMD8000 to all of them.

Odzun ՕՉՈՆ

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

Odzun Guesthouse (☎ 094543 673; per person AMD10,000) is 2.5km past Odzun village at the foot of a forested slope. The building is a two-storey 1960s-style motel, with 13 standard rooms and two deluxe rooms with balconies, space and hot water. The place is surrounded by orchard trees and lawns with views over Odzun.

Travellers recommend the more homely and slightly cheaper **Nersisyan Alvard B&B** (☎ 0253-2 50 03; per person AMD8000) located near the upper school.

Buses come here from Alaverdi at 10am, 11am, 2pm and 5pm. A taxi to and from Alaverdi should cost about AMD2000. Odzun is on the road to Stepanavan and a couple of times a day, around 10.15am and 3.45pm, an Alaverdi to Stepanavan bus passes through here.

Sanahin Monastery ՄԱՆԻՆԱՅԻՆ

Moss-covered Sanahin is a fascinatingly detailed church and monastery complex, packed with ancient graves, darkened chapels and medieval gallery schools (study halls where pupils sat on benches on either side of a corridor). The inner sanctum of the Surp Astvatsatsin (Holy Mother of God) Church, located in the middle of several buildings, is the oldest structure here, dating back to 928, while its adjoining *gavit* or entrance hall is one of the later buildings, built in 1211. A library was created at Sanahin in 1062, and a medical school flourished in the 12th century. Sanahin means 'older than that one', referring to its younger cousin at Haghpat.

From the cable-car station, walk up to the main square of Sadahart and take a left;

after 900m you reach a T-junction in Sanahin village (separate from Sadahart). Sanahin Monastery is uphill, or follow the sign downhill to the **Mikoyan Museum** (admission AMD200; ☎ 10am-1pm & 2-6pm), a shrine to the Mikoyan brothers Anastas and Artyom. Anastas Mikoyan survived 60 years in the Politburo, outlasting even Stalin, and so deserves a museum. Artyom was the designer of the USSR's first jet fighter in WWII, the MiG. There's an early MiG jet outside the museum (no climbing allowed!). The charming administrator is unstoppable once she starts explaining every photo, medal and uniform on display – a tip of AMD100 or so is a nice gesture after a tour.

SLEEPING

Sadahart is home to the totally decrepit **Hotel Debed** (main square). The hotel was closed at the time of research but some local people have been known to hang around the lobby in order to redirect tourists to their nearby homestays, charging around AMD5000. They may also offer to arrange a taxi for you to see the local sights, but be warned that this service could prove quite expensive. Be sure to research the timetables of onward bus services in advance; although your hosts might claim to know this information, it could be incorrect. Despite their shortcomings these homestays can be a decent place to spend the night.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

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

Haghpat Monastery ՀԱՂՊԱՏ

This pearl of a monastery perched on the lip of the Debed Canyon has Unesco World Heritage status, along with Sanahin. This place has atmosphere and architectural splendour in abundance and the views around the canyon alone are worth the trip. Founded around 976 by Queen Khosrvanuch, who built Surp Nishan at the centre of the walled complex, it

really took off in the 12th century with a magnificent bell tower, library and refectory. An inscription on the *gavit* of Surp Nishan reads in part 'You who enter through its door and prostrate yourself before the Cross, in your prayers remember us and our royal ancestors, who rest at the door of the holy cathedral, in Jesus Christ'. Further around past a cute Surp Astvatsatsin chapel is the freestanding *gavit* built by Abbot Hamazasp in 1257, which has glorious acoustics. Uphill is the bell tower, and off by the wall a stone refectory. *Khatchkars* and study halls surround the central church.

Flora Simonyan B&B (☎ 09479 24 12, 09196 88 16; per person incl breakfast AMD6000) is a basic place with a few rooms, a hot shower and meals. It's next to the parking lot at Haghpat, part of a small snack bar.

Marshrutkas from Alaverdi run at 10am, noon, 1.30pm, 2.30pm, 4.30pm and 5.30pm, costing AMD200. A taxi from Alaverdi to Haghpat and back will cost AMD2000. Alternatively, walk to Sanahin Monastery if you are headed there anyway. It's 7km via Akner village.

Akhtala Monastery ԱԽԹԱԼԱ

Situated at the edge of Akhtala, this 13th-century complex is recommended for its fine decorative carvings and frescoes. A thick wall surrounds it. Historians aren't sure if the church was dedicated to St Gregory (Surp Grigor) or the Apostles (Arakelots). The doors of the church are usually locked and one of the villagers keeps the key; it's just a matter of asking around for it to see the beautiful frescoes in the nave area. If you can't get a key it's still possible to peek through a hole in the locked church doors. Surrounding the church are a couple of well-preserved chapels and the ever-present graveyard with some new stones. Akhtala is about 18km northeast (downstream) of Alaverdi. A taxi trip combined with a visit to Haghpat will cost about AMD4000. Without your own car you can hitch to the signposted turn-off, then walk the final 3km up to the church (skirting around the edge of the copper-mine pond), which takes less than one hour.

GYUMRI ԳՅՈՒՄՐԻ

☎ 0312 / pop 120,000

A city of stately Russian architecture, cobbled streets and a bustling market, Gyumri is one of the most attractive towns in the country,

and also one of the most tragic. The 1988 Spitak earthquake levelled large sections of the city and drove most of the survivors away. You can still see devastated buildings around town, as well as historic structures under careful reconstruction.

Twenty years after the quake, life is only beginning to normalise, although locals still seem to talk about it as though it occurred last week. Jobs have returned, permanent housing has replaced most of the cargo container homes and the population has increased two-fold.

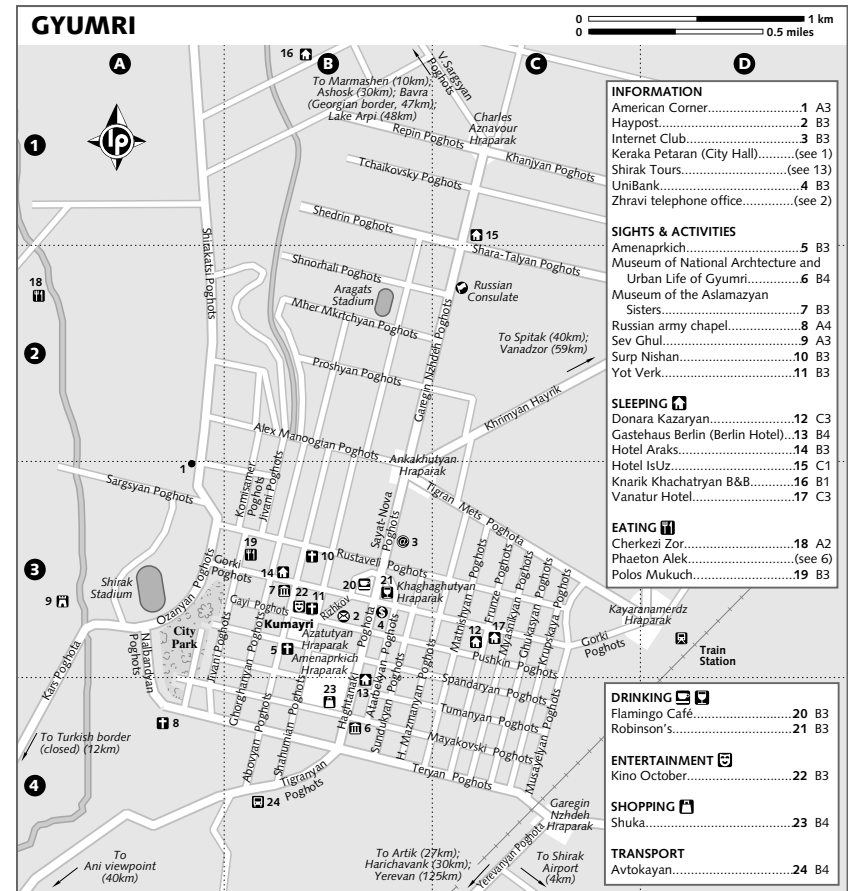
The townsfolk of Gyumri have a distinctive accent with hints of western Armenian, and a famously ridiculous sense of humour in tandem with conservative social mores. Other Armenians like to tease Gyumritis about local delicacies such as *kalla* (cow's head) and the particularly rich stew of *khach* made here in the cold seasons. The winters last longer here than in Yerevan, until April or May.

Few travellers come this way, most people choosing to travel between Yerevan and Tbilisi via Sevan and Dilijan. But if you are on a loop tour of northern Armenia then Gyumri becomes a necessary stop and jumping-off point for several sites including Marmashen and Harichavank. Visitors will be treated to some good-value accommodation, decent restaurants and the remnants of 19th-century Russian colonialism.

History

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

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



The Spitak earthquake on 11 December 1988 put paid to much of Gyumri's historic splendour, as well as the myriad factories established here by the Soviets. Besides levelling large parts of the city and surrounding villages, it killed 50,000 people and made many more homeless. The botched recovery effort would haunt the city for years as successive winters passed without heating or electricity. The early 2000s saw rapid redevelopment and rehousing of the earthquake victims.

Orientation & Information

In downtown Gyumri the centre of the shopping district lies between Haghtanaki Poghota, Azatutyun Hraparak (Freedom Sq) and Khaghaghutyun Hraparak (Peace Sq).

The Haypost office and the Zhravi private telephone office are on little Rizhkov Poghots between the two squares.

Shirak Tours (☎ 3 76 59; www.berlinhotel-gyumri.am; 25 Haghtanaki Poghota) is a useful local tour company run from the Gastehaus Berlin by Alex Ter-Minasyan. He arranges day trips by car to Marmashen for about AMD10,000 and to Harichavank for AMD20,000.

There are several internet cafés and banks along Sayat-Nova and Garegin Nzhdeh Poghots, including the **Internet Club** (☎ 3 27 35; 7 Sayat-Nova Poghots; ☎ 10am-10pm). UniBank has an ATM at Khaghaghutyun Hraparak. You can also use the internet at **American Corner** (☎ 2 21 53; 68 Shirakatsi Poghots; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri), located next to the City Hall.

Sights & Activities

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

A couple of blocks north of Yot Verk is the more modest **Surp Nishan** Church, built in 1870 and restored in 2003. The old buildings along Gorki Poghots and by the city park are worth wandering around – some buildings are shells; others have been restored to their prime. On Teryan Poghots there is a 19th-century pyramid-shaped **Russian army chapel** with a peaked silver roof. Continuing over the hill for 500m or so brings you to the **Sev Ghul** or 'black sentry' fort. From here you can see the **Mother Armenia statue** on an adjacent hill, towards the Turkish border.

The **Museum of National Architecture and Urban Life of Gyumri** (☎ 2 36 00; 47 Haghtanaki Poghots; admission AMD1000; ☹ 10am–5pm Tue–Sun) is a substantial building set back from the corner with Teryan Poghots. The 1872 mansion of the Dzitoghtsyan includes fine furniture and authentic décor, plus an art gallery and displays on local history. An attached gallery of sculptures by Sergei Merkulov contains more Lenins and Stalins than you can shake a sickle at. The **Museum of the Aslamazyan Sisters** (☎ 3 01 82; 232 Abovyan Poghots; admission AMD500; ☹ 10am–5pm Mon–Fri) on what was once Kumayri's finest promenade is another house museum with a display of traditional furnishings and more contemporary artworks.

About 30km north of Gyumri, the village of Ashotsk offers a range of activities in both summer and winter, including kayaking, biking and cross-country skiing. **Artur Mikayelyan** (☎ 093352 111, 0235-21758; mika-ski@mail.ru) organises these activities and offers accommodation in his simple home. A weekend of food and lodging costs around AMD15,000. Marshrutkas from Gyumri run to Ashotsk hourly during

the day. It's a great way to experience rural Armenia and stay active too.

Sleeping

Donara Kazaryan B&B (☎ 2 42 63; 142 Frunze Poghots; per person AMD6000) Donara runs a homestay from her fine family house, with two chintzy bedrooms and a shared bathroom. Daughter Vartuhi speaks English.

Knarik Khachatryan B&B (☎ 3 48 64, 091453 266; skyngo@list.ru; 31 K Demirtchyan Poghots; per person AMD9000) Large home with four bedrooms and comfortable furnishings. Host Knarik can organize fishing trips in the area. Take Shirkatsi Poghots north, then turn right on Demirtchyan; the B&B is 600m down on the left.

Vanatur Hotel (☎ 3 07 14; 70a Gorki Poghots; r AMD20,000, deluxe AMD30,000) The newest place in town offers comfortable rooms with TV. Deluxe rooms have a Jacuzzi in the bathroom. Prices include breakfast. The restaurant also serves lunch and dinner with a Georgian-inspired menu.

Hotel IsUz (☎ 3 33 99; www.isuz.am; 1/5 Garegin Nzhdeh Poghots; s/d/ste incl breakfast AMD20,000/24,000/30,000; ☹ ☹) This 12-room hotel offers comfortable rooms with minibars, excellent bathrooms and neat decorations including murals. The front desk can arrange transport.

Hotel Araks (☎ 3 58 15; www.arakshotel.am; 31 Gorki Poghots; s/d AMD25,000/30,000; ☹ ☹) High ceilings, frilly drapes and a huge staircase lends an old-world feel to this hotel. Recent renovation makes it one of the best in town. Amenities include a sauna and an indoor pool.

Gastehaus Berlin (Berlin Hotel) (☎ 2 31 48; www.berlinhotel-gyumri.am; 25 Haghtanaki Poghots; s/d incl breakfast AMD27,000/32,000; ☹ ☹) This hotel was built as an accommodation wing for a German hospital on the same premises. It seems odd to have doctors and patients always outside, but the hotel itself is welcoming and colourfully decorated. The spacious rooms have comfy beds, satellite TV and minibar. The hotel is home to Shirak Tours, which can help with logistics in the area.

Eating

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

Polos Mukuch (☎ 3 45 11; 75 Jivani Poghots; meals AMD2500; ☹ 9am–10pm) The latest restaurant to occupy a historic building near the Hotel Araks, Polos Mukuch is popular with family groups and sometimes has entertainment – the menu is in Armenian and has a long list of drinks.

Phaeton Alek (☎ 3 29 88; 47 Haghtanaki Poghota; meals AMD2500–3500; ☹ 10am–7pm) In the cellars of the architecture museum, this spot often hosts groups for an 'ethnic' experience, with old artefacts on the walls and sometimes entertainment as well. Solo diners may not feel so welcome, but the food is hearty and good value.

Chekezi Vor (Fish Farm; ☎ 3 05 59; meals AMD3000–5000; Bulvarayin Poghots; ☹ 10am–10pm) You'll be guaranteed fresh fish at the appropriately named Fish Farm. Pick what type of fish you want and the chef literally plucks your dinner out of the pool and sets it on the BBQ. It's on the western side of town and a little hard to find. From the stadium, cross the opposite bank and walk north up the canyon for 1.3km. Alternatively, go by taxi.

Drinking & Entertainment

The Flamingo Café and Robinson's occupy the little park in the middle of Khaghaghutyun Hraparak. Both serve drinks and *khoravats* until the last customer staggers away, with a soundtrack of pumping Russian drinking tunes. Of the two, Robinson's is the more interesting, having a jungle setting with tree houses and the like.

Evenings tend to be quiet in Gyumri; you can fill in the time with a film at the **Kino October** (admission AMD700) located on Azatutyun Hraparak.

Getting There & Around

Buses and marshrutkas, including those to Yerevan (AMD1200, two hours, every 20 minutes 7am to 7pm), leave from the *avtokayan* on Tigranyan Poghots. Transport to Vanadzor (AMD800, one hour) leaves almost hourly between 9am and 4.30pm. Marshrutkas travel daily to Tbilisi (AMD5000, 3½ hours, 10.30am).

Vanadzor is on the train line between Yerevan and Tbilisi; there is a train every day in one direction (even days to Tbilisi and odd days back to Yerevan). A seat to Tbilisi is AMD2770 and a cabin berth costs AMD4000; to Yerevan it's AMD480. Train travel is two

to three times slower than road travel; it takes 3½ hours to reach Yerevan and between 10 and 12 hours to reach Tbilisi. Call the station (☎ 2 10 02) to confirm schedules.

There are lots of taxis in Gyumri and cheap marshrutkas all over town. A taxi ride from the *avtokayan* to Garegin Nzhdeh Poghots should cost around AMD500; an urban marshrutka costs AMD100.

Shirak Airport, which is 5km southeast of town, is served by Siberian Airlines (Moscow, Novosibirsk), Ural Airlines (Ekaterinburg), Aeroflot-Don (Sochi, Rostov) and Armavia (Moscow). There are plenty of ticket agencies in town. Flights to Moscow cost around \$125 to \$140, including the AMD10,000 departure tax, about \$25 cheaper on average than from Yerevan. A taxi to the airport is around AMD1500.

MARMASHEN ՄԱՐՄԱՇԵՆ

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

The biggest church, Surp Stepanos, was built between 988 and 1029, with a 13th-century *gavit*. An Italian team led restoration work in the 1960s, so intricately carved old church stones have been incorporated into newer building blocks. Beautiful carved tombs and *khatchkars* dot the land around the churches, and it's a peaceful, rural environment typical of Shirak, with grassy horizons. The caretaker is here 8am to 8pm daily, and he can recite some of the inscriptions on the sides of the churches by heart. A return taxi to Gyumri is about AMD3000. Make sure the driver understands that you want to see the monastery and not the nearby village of the same name. There are hourly buses from Gyumri's *avtokayan* to Varambert (AMD120) between 9am and 7pm (look for the bus to Kaps).

HARICHAVANK ՀԱՐԻՉԱՎԱՆԿ

Harichavank monastery is in the sturdy old town of Harich, about 4km from the town of Artik. This complex was the summer residence of the Catholicos of Echmiadzin for a period after 1850 and is surrounded by

19th-century buildings. Harichavank is one of those monasteries where a 7th- or 8th-century chapel has been dramatically expanded with 13th-century *gavits* and domes. There is some beautiful geometric stonework over the main door church and around the dome of the *gavit*.

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

A direct bus departs Gyumri's *avtokayan* for Harichavank (AMD350, 50 minutes) at 11.30am. If you can't catch it there are marshrutkas and buses to Artik (AMD200, 30 minutes, hourly), from where you can wait around for another marshrutka to Harich or take a taxi from Artik (AMD1800 return). If you have your own vehicle, the monastery is about 15km off the main Yerevan–Gyumri road.

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

ANI VIEWPOINT ԱՆԻ

The southern tip of Shirak *marz* includes the restricted border zone around the viewing point for **Ani**, across the Akhuryan on the Turkish side of the border. You need to pass a Russian-run checkpoint to reach the achingly beautiful view over Ani, the 10th-century capital of Armenia. The ruined city occupies a promontory above the river, an undulating sea of green sprinkled with the bare stones of old churches. The city was captured by the Seljuk Turks in 1064, and abandoned after the Mongol invasions. Its position on the old front line of the Cold War between NATO and the USSR has preserved its isolation. People of Armenian descent can often schmooze their way past, but foreigners usually need to arrange a visit through a travel agency. It's no particular hassle to visit with permission. It's utterly haunting at sunset in late summer or autumn, when the Kurdish herders return to the rough little village outside the city walls. There's a quarry on the Armenian side for the nouveau riche who want buildings

made of Ani tuff. Some of the villagers in the vicinity are descended from genocide survivors, so every year on 24 April there's a tradition of lighting bonfires along the border as a reminder to Turkey. If you only get to see Ani from afar, it's possible to take a virtual tour at www.virtu.alani.org.

SPITAK ՍՊԻՏԱԿ

This town is infamously known for being close to the epicentre of the 1988 earthquake. The town was wiped out and 4000 of its residents perished in the 7.2 quake. Housing has since been rebuilt, mainly with donations from overseas. Each housing block bears the distinctive touch of the country that provided the rebuilding costs.

A walk through Spitak cemetery shows the tombstones of those who perished; some of the stones mark whole family graves. The nearby church made of sheet metal was erected shortly after the earthquake as a place to pray for the dead.

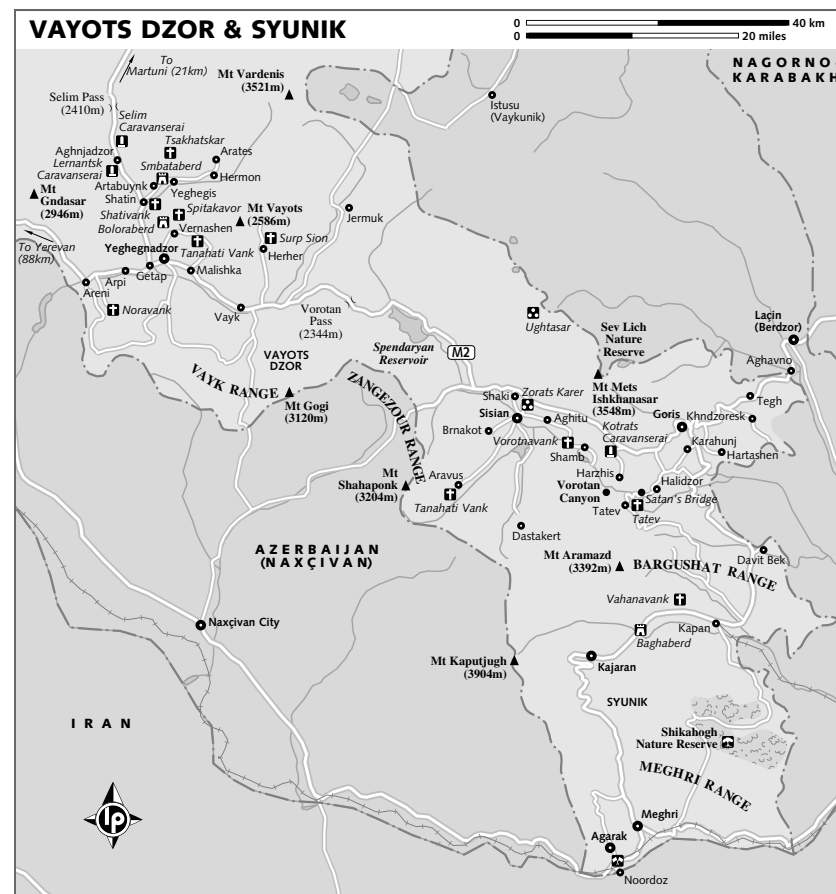
A neglected monument to the dead stands on a hill near the town. It's a haunting and forlorn spot that seems not to have been visited in some time, as if the residents of Spitak wish not to be reminded of their grim past.

Spitak is just off the main road between Gyumri and Vanadzor and served by frequent marshrutkas.

VAYOTS DZOR & SYUNIK

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

In the south, Syunik is full of ancient churches and monasteries, rustic villages making home-made fruit vodkas, forests, high pastures and stunning evidence of much older human cultures in the rocks of Zorats Karer and Ughtasar near Sisian. The 19th-century town of Goris is a great base to



visit Tatev or Karabakh or as a break before the long haul to Iran.

ARENI ԱՐԵՆԻ

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

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

is also a local wine-making centre. **Hotel Noy** (☎ 0872 55 45; Arpi; r AMD7000-18,000; 🚗), on the main highway, is a motel-style complex with clean rooms, a bar, a buffet and a swimming pool. The Tufenkian group (www.tufenkianheritage.com) is building a luxury hotel and restaurant at Areni, expected to open in 2008. There are frequent buses and marshrutkas along the main highway.

NORAVANK ՆՈՐԱՎԱՆԿ

This church complex, by the 13th-century architect Momik, is a masterpiece both for its architecture and its dramatic setting. Noravank (New Monastery) was founded by Bishop Hovhannes in 1105, and was last restored in the 1990s. Climb the narrow stone

A SPELUNKER'S DELIGHT

The area around Areni and Arpi is riddled with hundreds of caves, some of which contain a kilometre or more of chambers.

There are some accessible caves in the canyon that leads up to Noravank, including the Trchunneri Karayr (Bird Cave), close to the turn-off and Magili Karandzav, about 1km further into the canyon. Magili is one of the deepest caves in the area and significant as the home of a large colony of fruit bats; Neolithic-era stone tools have also been found here. Unfortunately, vandals have ruined most of the stalactites.

Excellent examples of stalactites and stalagmites can be found at other caves in the area, including the Arjeri, Mozrovi and Jerovank caverns. These caves are not for the inexperienced, so it's best to visit on a guided tour (the caves are also locked to casual visitors). Contact **Amtour** (☎ 10744 266; www.amtour.am) in Yerevan, which organises group tours. When exploring any cave bring a strong flashlight and carry extra batteries. Wear old clothes as you will inevitably get very dirty.

If you take the tour and plan to visit southern Armenia anyway, have the driver leave you in Yeghegnadzor and go from there.

stairs outside **Surp Astvatsatsin** (1339) to get a closer look at its dome. Astvatsatsin is also known as Burtelashen, after its patron, Burtel Orbelian, who is buried here with his family. Historians say the church is reminiscent of towerlike burial structures created in the early years of Christianity. There's a wonderful carving of Christ flanked by Peter and Paul above the door.

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

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

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

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

YEGHEGNADZOR & AROUND

ԵՂԵԳՆԱԶՈՐ
☎ 0281 / pop 8200

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

The town has moneychangers, a **UniBank** (☎ 52 13 43) with an ATM (accepting Visa cards) and the **Arpa Net Internet Café** (☎ 2 21 23; per hr AMD300; ☎ 9am-9pm) just downhill from the *avtokayan*.

Sights

The **Vyats Dzor Regional Museum** (4 Shahumian; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-5pm Sat) in the centre of town describes local history but is frequently closed. A better option is to visit the **Museum of Gladzor University** (☎ 2 37 05; admission

AMD1000; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Sun) in the village of Vernashen, 4km uphill from Yeghegnadzor. The museum has displays on monasteries across the country, plus old manuscripts and descriptions of Armenia's various schools and universities. The museum is housed inside a 17th-century church called St Hagop.

The museum marks the end of the village and just past it is a T-junction. The road to the left leads to **Spitakavor** monastery, about 9km along a winding dirt track for vehicles or 5km along a more direct walking path. The road is rough so hiking is a good idea; just bring plenty of bottled water. To find the trail, walk through the village and carry on straight up the western bank of the gorge past a small dam on the river (ignore the vehicle road, which switches back). The 20th-century Armenian fighter Garegin Nzhdeh was buried at Spitakavor in 1983. He fought in the Balkan Wars and, in WWI, went into exile and lobbied the Nazis to restore Armenian territory, before being handed over at the end of the war by the Allies and dying in a Soviet prison. The **Boloraberd fortress** crowns a rocky crest across from the monastery.

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

Another 3.5km along the road leads to the **Monastery of Arkaz**. It is well known for holding a piece of the True Cross under a stone marker in the back of the church. The church sees many visitors during the last two Sundays of October, when locals arrive in droves to sacrifice animals after the harvest.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Gladzor (☎ 2 51 65; main square; per person AMD3000) Just off the main square is this ageing and under-funded Soviet-era hotel with no sign. It has cold bucket baths when water is available and cramped rooms with lumpy beds. It's a bland experience, but there is nothing cheaper if you're on a tight budget.

Gohar's Guest House (☎ 2 33 24; 44 Spandaryan Poghots; s/d incl breakfast AMD8000/15,000) A comfortable homestay with Gohar Gevorgyan, whose house is just past the football field.

It's a good idea to arrange to be picked up. Meals can be prepared on request.

Antione B&B (☎ 093594 544, 093852 542; per person AMD11,000) Antione is a Canadian-Armenian who runs a lovely B&B about 2km uphill from the town centre. It's a modern home with comfortable rooms and a small library of English-language books. Breakfast is available (as it should be at this price). It would be difficult to find the place on your own so call ahead for a pick up.

If you have your own transport there are several riverside restaurants along the main highway that set a good Armenian table for around AMD2000 per person, including kebabs, *khoravats* (including venison, fish and, more controversially, bear-meat *khoravats*), salads and drinks. Open 8am until late outside winter. A popular place for vehicles to stop is **Karitak** (☎ 2 48 06), about 5km west of town on the road to Yeghegnadzor. Edem Café, on the road to Noravank, is another excellent choice; it has live music from 9pm on weekends.

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

Getting There & Away

Marshrutkas and buses to nearby villages leave from the *avtokayan* in the centre of town, opposite the Hotel Gladzor. A daily bus to Jermuk (AMD700, 40 minutes) leaves at 2pm. There are marshrutkas to Vayk (AMD200, 20 minutes) twice hourly between 9am and 5pm. Marshrutkas to Yerevan (AMD1200, 90 minutes to two hours, hourly 8am to 6pm) usually leave from the junction with the main highway. Space permitting, you can also flag one down here to go to Goris. As yet there is no public transport to Martuni on the shore of Lake Sevan, but hitching is not too much of a struggle. Taxis can be hired near the *avtokayan* for AMD100 per kilometre. Noravank is about 20km west, while Jermuk is 53km east.

YEGHEGIS & AROUND ԵՂԵԳԻՍ

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

To reach the area, turn north off the Yerevan–Goris highway at Getap and after 12km turn right (east) towards Shatin village. The first sight of interest is **Shatvank**,

a fortified monastery with a church (rebuilt in 1665), a waterworks, a grain-storage silo and two-storey monk and guest quarters. To get there by 4WD Jeep turn right at the end of Shatin towards the river. About 150m past the bridge turn right, then after 500m go left to a cemetery and continue on this track for 7km.

To get there by foot, take the steeper but shorter path from the gorge. To reach the trailhead, take the left fork above the bridge; after 100m take the trail to the right and walk for 45 minutes.

About 2km up from Shatin village, a road branches up the valley to the west towards Artabyunk. About 1km past the village a track goes steeply down to the right towards the stream, which can be crossed by a 4WD vehicle.

From the river it's 6km to the 10th-century **Tsakhatskar monastery**, a crumbling agglomeration of churches and old *khatchkars*. From the stream, continue up the main track, the monastery eventually comes into view on the left.

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

Yeghegis village is reached by taking the right fork after Shatin (ie away from Artabyunk). The village looks as though it's been inhabited forever; it has a couple of churches, including the very unusual **Surp Zorats**, where worshippers gathered before an outdoor altar.

It's believed this courtyard was created so that horses and soldiers could be blessed before going off to battle.

Across the river from the village, a metal footbridge leads to an 800-year-old Jewish cemetery – Hebrew letters are clearly visible on some of the grave markers.

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

There is no public transport out here, so the best way to visit is either to hike or hire a taxi (preferably a 4WD).

SELIM CARAVANSERAI

ՍՈՒԼԵՄԱՅԻ
ՔԱՐՆՎԱՆՍԵՐԱԻ

Built in 1332, this is the best-preserved caravanserai in Armenia. According to the inscription by the door, this travellers inn for traders and their caravans of pack animals was built by Prince Chesar Orbelian. It was built for the days when the great Silk Road passed from Iran through Goris, the highlands, Yeghegnadzor and Selim Pass on its way to Europe. The inscription also honours the Mongol despot Abu Said II Khan as 'the ruler of the world'. Built on basalt blocks, the building has a central hall for animals divided by two vaulted side aisles with stone mangers.

To reach the caravanserai, head north from the Yerevan–Goris highway at Getap. The site is 30km from the turn-off. It's worth stopping here if you are travelling onwards to Martuni, but it probably doesn't warrant a trip in its own right.

VAYK & AROUND ՎԱՅՔ

☎ 0282 / pop 5400

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

The **Vayk Hotel** in the middle of town is a 19th-century building that was being renovated at the time of research.

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

JERMUK ՋԵՐՄՈՒԿ

☎ 0287 / pop 7000

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

The spa business gets most of its customers in the July and August holidays, and largely hibernates outside this season. Some of its sanatoriums have immersion pools and treatment areas. The spa attendants take their job seriously – in the old days people would sign up

for 18-day courses with medically supervised immersions in Jermuk's waters.

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

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

At the time of research a small ski resort was being built on a hill close to the town. It's not the Alps but should satisfy beginning and intermediate skiers for a half day.

Orientation & Information

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

Sleeping

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

Hotel Life (☎ 2 12 56; Shaumian Poghots; per person AMD5000) On the main street near the shops, this place has four comfortable rooms, each with a divided living room and bedroom, plus en suite facilities. Amenities include TV, VCR (with Hollywood movies dubbed in Russian) and hot showers. This is a real bargain in the low season.

Anush Guest House (☎ 2 24 41; Vardanyan Poghots; s/d with half board AMD5000/10,000, deluxe s/d AMD10,000/15000) Partially restored, the old Anush hotel has some excellent deluxe rooms big enough for you and a dozen friends. The standard rooms with separate bath have not been refurbished and are not worth the price. Owner Ashot Margaryan can also arrange

dinners, visits to sanatoriums and transport around the area.

Turis Hotel (☎ 2 30 99; Getapnya Poghots; per person incl 3 meals AMD11,000) On a quiet road in the east part of town, the Turis has pleasant and modern rooms in a stately old building. It's 700m east of the main bridge.

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

Eating

Gandevank Restaurant (☎ 2 16 90; meals AMD2500; ☎ 10am–midnight) Of the many *khoravats* places we tried around Armenia this one seems to stand out for its succulent grilled meats. The fresh-fruit dessert also deserves a special mention. Coming across the main bridge, turn right (away from the centre); it's about 400m straight ahead in a wood-fronted building.

Besides this place there are a couple of cafés in the centre.

Getting There & Away

Jermuk is 177km from Yerevan, about two hours by the main highway, and then 26km off the main highway on a spur road. In the low season there is one marshrutka to Yerevan each day (AMD2000, 2½ hours) at 7.30am. At 8am there is a bus to Yeghegnadzor (AMD700, one hour) and at 4pm a bus goes to Vayk (AMD500, 30 minutes). More buses and marshrutkas operate in July and August.

SISIAN ՍԻՍԻԱՆ

☎ 02830 / pop 18,000

Sisian sits on a high plateau where it snows as late as March or April, and the autumn ends early here too. Long miles of cropland are mown from the Spendaryan Reservoir to Goris after its short growing season, and in September the villages stack up with piles of hay, some taller than their houses. Sisian is a fairly quiet country town with a core of early-20th-century buildings. This land below the mountains of Syunik has been inhabited since forever, back to the ages of Neolithic observatories and animal petroglyphs. Some examples have been gathered in the town's *karadaran*

(stone museum) park. The site of Sisian itself was inhabited as long ago as 2000 BC.

Sisian is located centrally in the southern end of Armenia and works as a base while heading to or from Yerevan. There's plenty to see and do in and around Sisian, and other regional sites are accessible from here.

Orientation & Information

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

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

An internet club is opposite the Hotel Dina. Just past the Dina, the next street left leads to the Basen Hotel. You can change money at stores and kiosks near the main bridge.

Ashot Avagyan (☎ 091584 485; ukhtasar@mail15.com) is an artist who arranges Jeep trips up the mountains to Ughtasar. Ashot organizes a local arts festival on 11 August that attracts artists and musicians from around the country.

Sights

Originally built in the 6th century, **Sisavan Church** was restored as recently as the 20th century. It combines an elegant square-cross floor with some striking sculptures of royal and ecclesiastical patrons inside and out. Inside there's a display of microsculptures by local artist Eduard Ter-Ghazaryan.

Seen through a microscope, one features 17 images of the cross on a human hair coated with metal.

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

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

Facing the park is the **Museum of History** (☎ 33 31; admission AMD500; ☎ 10am–5pm Tue–Sat), with some carpets and ethnographical displays beside maps and historical information, mostly labelled in Armenian with some English. It also has some interesting photos taken after an earthquake levelled the town in 1931.

Sleeping & Eating

Aminhanyan Shavash B&B (☎ 41 42; 9 Tigran Mets Poghots; per person AMD5000) A large house on the outskirts of town managed by English-speaking Gayane. Laundry is available and breakfast is an extra AMD2000. It's 2km from the bus stop on the eastern side of town and difficult to find on your own. A taxi here will cost AMD400.

Hotel Dina (☎ 33 33; 35 Sisakan Poghots; www.dinahotel.am; r with/without bath per person AMD8000/3000, deluxe AMD10,000) A handsome 1930s building with basic shared rooms and nicer double rooms with en suite bathrooms. The receptionist usually won't offer the cheaper rooms unless you ask. Given the low price, quality rooms and central location, this is easily the best deal in town. Breakfast costs AMD2000. The managers speak some English and can help with arranging tours and transport onwards.

Hotel Lalaner (☎ 66 00; www.lalahotel.am; 29 Sisakan Poghots; s/d/deluxe AMD10,000/20,000/25,000) Overlooking the town square, this clean and comfortable hotel has 10 rooms and a restaurant. Deluxe rooms have a Jacuzzi in the bathroom. The hotel also organizes trips to local sights plus activities such as fishing, hiking and camping.

Zorats Qarer B&B (☎ 36 11; info@bedanbreakfast.am; 40 3rd Poghots; per person AMD10,000; ☎) A modern stone-clad villa at the end of a track about 100m west of Sisavan Church (a 10-minute walk from the centre of town). The four bedrooms are smallish and cosy, with extra bunks for kids. Views of Sisian are spectacular from this spot. It's overpriced compared to the Dina, but the owners are open to negotiation.

Jira Hars (☎ 53 86; Israelyan Poghots; ☎ 10am–10pm) Nestled by the river just next to the bridge, this local *khoravats* joint serves up grilled meat, soups and salads. You can sit inside or in cabanas next to the river. Otherwise, most of the hotels have restaurants, including a good one at the Basen.

Getting There & Away

There are four marshrutkas to Yerevan (AMD2000, four hours, 8am, 9am, noon and 2.30pm) and one to Goris (AMD700, 45 minutes, 8.30am) each day, where the bridge meets Israelyan Poghots (along the north bank). Taxis wait at this junction too. There's also a bus stop at the turn-off from the Yerevan–Goris road into town, where people often wait for rides.

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

AROUND SISIAN

Two hundred and four upright basalt stones up to 3m high set along sweeping lines and loops, some punctured with sight holes aligned with stars, make up the ancient site of **Zorats Karer**. The site, situated on a rise above the river plains ringed by mountains, is dotted with tombs dated to 3000 BC. Scientist Elma Parsamian argues that the site's elaborate astronomical functions can be shown at the solstices and equinoxes. Lines of stones define an egg-shaped area with a burial tumulus in the centre, with a north arm stretching 170m and a southern alley 160m long. About 70 stones are pierced with finger-sized holes. Along with the 5000-year-old observatory at Metsamor west of Yerevan, it suggests the builders had a deep knowledge of astronomy, including the zodiac and the lunar phases, combined perhaps with worship for stars such as Sirius. Zorats Karer is 3.5km north of Sisian, signposted on the left about 700m before the main highway. The stones are in the fields about 400m from the turn-off.

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

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

built by Queen Shahandukht and her son Sevada. A couple of kilometres down the valley on the other side of the river the road passes Vorotan to the **Shamb hot springs**, where you can warm your toes (you might not want to put much more of your body in the water as it's a little polluted).

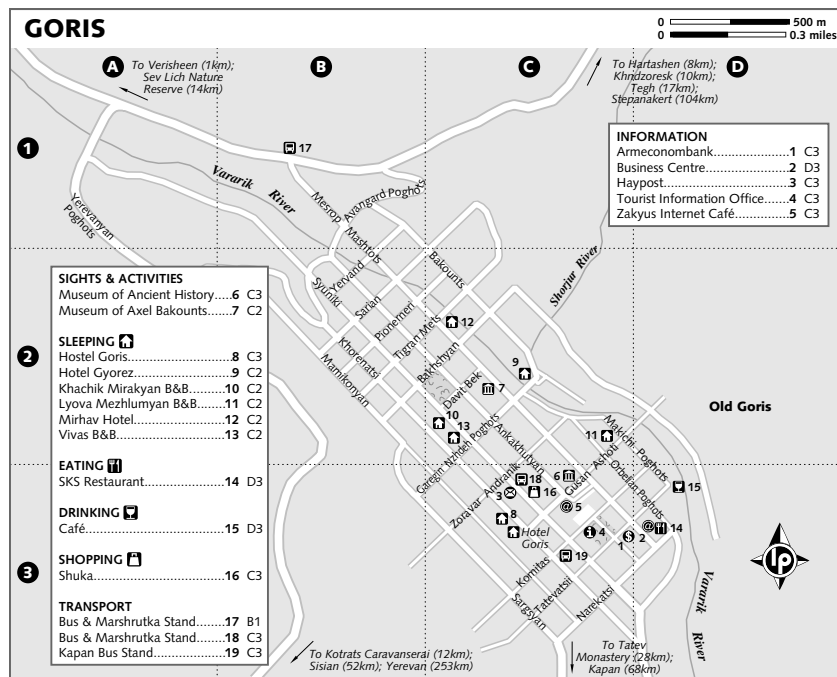
The petroglyphs of **Ughtasar** (Pilgrimage Mountain) in the mountains north of Sisian are even older than Zorats Karer. They lie at an altitude of 3300m around a lake on Mt Tsg huk, accessible between June and September, and even then only if it's not a cold summer. Carvings of leaping, dancing animals and hunters adorn rocks and boulders everywhere around the small lake. It's a haunting place surrounded by isolated peaks, and you can only wonder why ancient people would trek to such an inhospitable place to leave their mark on stone. The tracks are steep, rocky and hopeless without a Jeep (Villis) and a guide. Ashot Avagyan (see opposite) helped build the tracks to Ughtasar during the Karabakh War, and can arrange drivers and Villis hire for AMD20,000 per vehicle for a trip of eight to 10 hours – the ascent takes at least three hours.

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

GORIS ԳՐԻՏ

☎ 0284 / pop 25,000

The endlessly winding roads that leap through the gorges over the mountains of Syunik come to a major junction at Goris, making this an inevitable stop between Yerevan, Stepanakert and the Iranian border. But it's hardly a place to pass through – Goris is a destination in itself. Boasting fine stone houses with arched windows and balconies on tree-lined avenues, it's a great place for strolling and chatting with locals. The pace of life is slow: there is little commercial or industrial activity, or even tourist kitsch, so it really feels like you've stepped back in time. Goris is known for its variety of homemade fruit *oghee* including the deliciously potent mulberry and Cornelian cherry (*hone*) *oghee* – explore the



shuka on Syuniki Poghots or ask at a B&B to find some.

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

There is a fine selection of hotels and B&Bs in town, plus a couple of museums and a busy little *shuka*. It makes a good place to break a long journey between Yerevan and Karabakh – plan on spending a few days to soak it all in.

Orientation & Information

Goris was laid out to a plan by a German architect in the 19th century. The **Tourist Information Office** (☎ 093550 655; 4 Ankakhutyun Poghots; ☎ 10am–5pm Mon–Fri) has a well-informed English-speaking staff and is located just south of the park in the centre of town.

The banks, the **Haypost office** (19 Syuniki Poghots) restaurants and shops are within a few blocks of the main square. The **Zakyus Internet café** (☎ 3 00 27; Gushan Ashoti; per hr AMD250; ☎ 10am–

midnight) just west of the taxi stand is clean and has a good connection. Or try **Business Centre** (☎ 2 30 10; 9 Mesrop Mashtots; per hr AMD250). The **Armeconombank** (☎ 2 42 09; 4 Mesrop Mashtots) has an ATM that accepts MasterCard.

Sights

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

The **Museum of Axel Bakounts** (☎ 2 29 66; 41 Mesrop Mashtots Poghots; admission AMD200; ☎ 10am–5pm Tue–Sun) is a typical Goris villa with stone walls and a veranda looking onto a courtyard. The museum was the home of writer Axel Bakounts (or Bakunts), who died in Stalin’s 1937 purges. It features his personal effects and furnishings from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The friendly director of the museum, Mikaelyan Kajik, may invite you

into his office to sample some of the local mulberry vodka.

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

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

Sleeping

Hostel Goris (☎ 2 18 86, 093-287 902; jirmar28@freenet.am; 55 Khorenatsi Poghots; per person AMD7000) This hostel is run by the affable Jirayr Martirosyan, an accomplished artist. There are two rooms, one with three beds and one with a double bed that is suitable for couples. Rooms have TV and are pleasantly decorated. There is running hot water, good coffee and a filling breakfast. The hostel is well signed and right next to the utterly squalid Hotel Goris, which now acts primarily as a shelter for refugees from Karabakh.

Lyova Mezhlumyan B&B (☎ 2 22 98; 7 Makichi Poghots; per person incl breakfast AMD7000; ☎) A fine stone house close to the Vararik River. It is 200m east of the main square. There’s no sign, but the exterior has curved walls reaching in to a recessed door. The large home includes six bedrooms, a large living room and nice bathrooms. Food is fresh and home-grown – the family keeps bees and chickens and grows vegetables. Mrs Mezhlumyan’s daughter Nairi speaks English.

Vivas B&B (☎ 2 48 12, 094233 262; www.vivas.am; 65 Syuniki Poghots; dm/d AMD6500/12,000) Another fine B&B, this has both dorm and private rooms. The owners can organise hiking trips in the region.

Hotel Gyorez (☎ 3 00 12; Garegin Nzhdeh Poghots; s/d AMD7000/14,000; ☎) Clean, functional and somewhat bland hotel that opened in 2007. It’s excellent value for solo travellers who want a private room.

Khachik Mirakyan B&B (☎ 2 10 98; 13 Davit Bek Poghots; mirakyanbb@rambler.ru; s/d AMD9500/14,000; ☎) Situated near the park where Davit Bek meets Syuniki Poghots, Khachik Mirakyan B&B is welcoming and comfortable. There are five bedrooms with private bathrooms, and a great balcony for resting up.

Mirhav Hotel (☎ 2 46 12; 100 Mashtots Poghots; s/d/tr AMD14,000/19,000/24,000; ☎) This tastefully designed boutique hotel is probably the best place to stay in southern Armenia. The brick floors, antiques hanging from the walls, wood furnishings and stone façade all blend with Goris’ historic character. While providing a rustic atmosphere it maintains modern bathrooms, cable TV and internet. It’s run by an Iranian-Armenian named Shahen Zeytourchian, a retired surgeon who speaks five languages including English.

Eating & Drinking

The best place to eat in Goris is the restaurant at the Mirhav Hotel, which serves a variety of items including rice pilaf and pork chops. It also offers Armenian omelettes, which resemble heated pasta sauce with bread, not unlike *shakshouka* (an Israeli dish). Self-caterers may want to poke around the *shuka*.

SKS restaurant (☎ 2 41 00; Narekatsi Poghots; meals AMD2000; ☎ 10.30am–midnight) If you don’t mind loud music this place is fine for dinner, offering the usual array of *khoravats*, kebabs and salads. The clean bathroom is a bonus.

Café (☎ 2 32 78; Tatevatsii Poghots; meals AMD1500–3000; ☎ 9am–1pm) The uninspiring name doesn’t quite capture the beauty of this lush

PUNCH DRUNK

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

garden-cum-café that overlooks Old Goris. It's a popular place for drinks but snacks are also served, including shurma and boiled crayfish.

Getting There & Away

There are three main stands for onward transport. The old *avtokayan* is on the highway into town (where the highway continues to Yerevan in one direction and Stepanakert in the other direction). From here shared taxis travel to Yerevan for AMD3000. There are marshrutkas to Yerevan (AMD2500, 7.30am, 9am, 10am, noon and 5pm). Transport to Stepanakert (AMD3000) originates in Yerevan – four or five marshrutkas pass here each day; the 12.50pm seems to be a pretty regular service. A taxi to Stepanakert, 104km away, will cost AMD10,000.

Marshrutkas to Kapan (AMD1300, two hours, 9am, noon and 3pm) depart from the corner of Komitas and Syuniki.

Buses for nearby villages, including Tatev (AMD500, 3pm) leave from the *shuka* on Syuniki. A taxi to Kapan costs AMD10,000. A day trip to Tatev costs AMD8000.

AROUND GORIS

There are several historic villages around Goris, many with ancient artificial caves still used as stables. **Khndzoresk**, 10km east of Goris, perches above the ruins of Old Khndzoresk, which was dug into a grassy gorge of soft volcanic sandstone. Whole walls of rock are dotted with caves; you could spend several hours exploring the area.

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

Interestingly, there's a village in the gorge below Goris called Karahunj, which means 'stone henge' in Armenian. The substantial remnants of the 12th-century **Kotrats Caravanserai** (built by the Orbelian princes) lie 2km south of the main highway near Harzhis. The **Sev Lich Nature Reserve**, 14km northeast of town on the shoulder of Mt Mets Ishkhanasar, protects a lake (Sev Lich means 'Black Lake') at 2666m. The track up requires a Jeep and a guide.

TATEV ՏԱԹԵՎ

☎ 0824 / pop 300

Built on a fairy-tale natural fortress of rock on the edge of the Vorotan Canyon, Tatev is as jaw-dropping as any of the World Heritage-listed churches in Lori. The views down the gorge reach to the peaks of Karabakh. The road to Tatev turns south of the main highway and reaches the northern edge of the gorge at Halidzor. Near the start of the descent is a gorgeous little cone-roofed stone shelter, at the end of a ridge; it's well worth stopping to look.

At the bottom of the canyon are mineral springs and Satan's Bridge. Legend tells that villagers fleeing to Tatev were blocked by the raging river. Before the invaders attacked, a bridge was magically created by a huge falling rock and the people were saved. The site includes two natural spring pools, so bring a swimsuit. Just past the second pool is a steep slope that leads down to the river. A rope and ladder are on hand to help you down, but it's very dicey and potentially dangerous as you are putting your life in the hands of the rope. A caretaker may be on hand to help you down – if he is not then just forget it. If you do make it safely down the ladder, move to your right to find two limestone caves with rushing water and gorgeous pools. Local authorities are planning to build a staircase down to the caves but until then consider this a very dangerous little trip.

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

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

Just uphill from the monastery is a café and an **Information Centre** (☎ 0824-9 71 41, 093845 632; sarmen@km.ru; ☎ 9am–9pm), run by the English-speaking Sarmen Arshakyan. This is the place to ask about hikes in the area or B&Bs where you can spend the night. More information can be found at www.tat.ev.org.

The scenery around Tatev is gorgeous and there is plenty of scope for short hikes. One trail leads to **Svarants** (population 100), a hamlet 30 minutes' walk away on the other side of the valley. Another trail heads north to the top of **Petroskhatch mountain**, 4km away from Tatev (the round-trip hike takes under three hours).

Sleeping

There are at least four B&Bs in tiny Tatev, each charging around AMD3000 to AMD5000. They are not signed, but the hamlet is small so just ask around or contact the Information Centre.

Gago B&B (☎ 0824-9 74 48) Has several rooms in a house with a large garden; it's near the school.

Jon & Lena B&B (☎ 0824-9 73 92; zarinev@yahoo.com) In a large house located behind the school. The owner speaks some English.

Getting There & Away

Each day a bus leaves Goris for Tatev (AMD500, 3pm). The bus returns to Goris the next morning at 9am. The other way up here from Goris is by taxi (one way/return AMD5000/8000). There is also a bus from Tatev to Kapan (AMD750) on Tuesday and Sunday at 3pm, and Thursday at 8.30am. The same bus leaves Kapan for Tatev on Tuesday (8am), Thursday (3pm) and Saturday (3pm), from outside the Lernogratz Hotel.

GORIS TO KAPAN

The 68km stomach-churning road from Goris to Kapan dives in and out of the Vorotan Canyon before climbing around the forests and pastures of the Bargushat Range; a total of 49 hairpin turns. Some maps don't show that the road wriggles through occupied Azerbaijan in several places. The removal minefields continues on this border, and there have been injuries and deaths among civilians at villages like Davit Bek as recently as 2007.

The most interesting sight along this route is **Bgheno-Noravank monastery**, which was lost to the world until 1920 when Axel Bakounts

stumbled upon it in the forest. The main church dates to 1062 and contains intricately carved biblical reliefs. It's a great camping spot or a logical break for cycle tourists. The turn-off from the highway has a sign directing you towards Bardzravan, a nearby village. After 3.1km, turn off the road to the right and the church is visible after 150m.

Further down the highway, there is a military base (Karmerkar) and a turn-off for the 3km access road to the village of **Davit Bek**. The village is another pleasant stopover and sports a couple of old churches and a pristine river with cascades and swimming holes. From the village there is a pleasant 40-minute walk to a pagan temple. A marshrutka travels from Davit Bek to Kapan (AMD400) each morning at 8.30am, returning at 3pm.

KAPAN ԿԱՊԱՆ

☎ 0285 / pop 45,700

Kapan is Armenia's version of Pittsburgh or Kalgoolie, a town built for the mining industry that surrounds it. The Russians first started mining here in earnest in the 1850s and the city boomed during the Soviet period, when most of the town's infrastructure was developed. Locals say there's so much unrefined metal beneath the ground that magnetic compasses won't work in some parts of town.

Below the looming peak of Mt Khustup (3210m), Kapan's industrial outskirts and concrete apartment blocks have a harsh appearance, but the town centre, where two rushing rivers meet, has leafy parks and squares. The reopening of the copper-molybdenum mine has kick-started the local economy after a decade of jobless isolation. Australians make up the bulk of the foreign experts, many of whom can be found clutching bottles of beer in the evening at the Hotel Darist. While the local economy moves forward, tourist facilities remain basic, with only a couple of hotels and restaurants and an absence of B&Bs.

Kapan's main church is near the Hotel Lernagordz, and is noted locally for its good acoustics and the priest's fine singing. A **city historical museum** (22 Shahumian; admission free) is worth wandering into if you are killing time in Kapan and need to catch up on your Syunik regional history. Among the thousands of artefacts are 19th-century swords, carpets and kilims.

Karajan lies 33km up the highway from Kapan. The road climbs even further across

the Tashtun Pass before descending to the Iranian border on the Araks River. Another road heads south from Kapan into the mountainous wilds of the Shikahogh Nature Reserve. This road is being improved and by 2008 should become the primary highway to Meghri.

Orientation & Information

The town centre is a triangle joined by two rivers, with a Davit Bek statue in rippling bronze across the main highway from the confluence. Facing the buildings between the rivers, the Hotel Darist is up the right fork and the Hotel Lernagordz is up on the left. The hulking Marz Petaran (provincial government building), the Haypost building and the Palace of Culture face each other off in the middle of the triangle. There's an **internet café** (per hr AMD300; ☎ 9am-11pm) in the Hotel Lernagordz, and a couple of other, slower places with internet connections among the shops close by. There are banks and shops with cash exchange around the Marz Petaran and around the main *shuka*, across the river from the Hotel Darist. ATMs accepting Visa only can be found at both hotels.

More information is available online at www.kapan.am.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Lernagordz (☎ 6 20 86; Davit Bek Hraparak; dm AMD3000, s AMD5000-6500, d 8000-12,000; 📺) Renovated rooms offer a large TV, a balcony and a hot water shower. Avoid the cheap rooms on the 7th floor, which are filthy and have no water. It ain't the Ritz but it's fine for a night or two, especially for budget travellers.

Hotel Darist (☎ 6 28 62, 6 26 62; 1a Aram Manukyan Poghots; s/d/ste AMD12,000/16,000/25,000) A clean, well-run establishment with renovated rooms and bathrooms – the hotel of choice for Kapan's crew of expat miners. The administrator's office is on the 4th floor. It also has a restaurant on the 1st floor, which serves tasty *khoravats*, salad and bread for AMD2000, and serves drinks until late. The reception is on the 4th floor.

Caravan (☎ 5 49 00, 093304 866; Kajaran hwy; per person AMD12,000) This restaurant and guesthouse is in a pretty valley 8km towards Kajaran. The four rooms are all rather dire for the price, complete with overflowing toilets and lumpy furnishings. The enormous dead spider at the bottom of the dirty pool completed

the picture. On the other hand, the restaurant is fine and one of the best places in the area for a meal. A taxi from Kapan will cost AMD1500; the staff can call a taxi to take you back to town.

The Hotel Darist has the best restaurant in town. Another option is the **Khach Meruk Café** (☎ 9am-midnight), which serves salads and pizzas. It's a pleasant place to hang out if you don't mind loud accordion music. The Caravan Restaurant (see above) is also recommended.

Getting There & Away

There are marshrutkas to Yerevan (AMD5000, six/eight hours in summer/winter, 7am, 8am and noon) from in front of the Hotel Lernagordz. There are three marshrutkas to Goris (AMD1300, 90 minutes to two hours, 9am, noon and 3pm). For Meghri (AMD1000) there is a 2pm bus departing from a stop at the Davit Bek statue. A taxi to Meghri will cost AMD10,000.

AROUND KAPAN

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

The remains of 9th-century **Vahanavank**, about 7km from Kapan just off the Karajan road, are fairly modest but the epic views across southern Syunik repay the effort of a visit. The monastery was once the religious centre for Syunik's kings. An attempt to restore the monastery in 1978 was later abandoned and what remains is a roofless structure of red limestone.

The ruins of **Baghaberd fortress**, the capital of Syunik until it was sacked by Seljuk Turks in 1170, stands north of the confluence of the Geghri and Voghji Rivers, halfway between Kajaran and Kapan. Once it was the largest historic defence construction in Armenia, but now only its towers and some walls remain. It's a steep scramble up to the fortress walls.

The struggling mining town of Kajaran (population 8000) lies beneath Syunik's highest mountain, 3904m Mt Kaputjugh, 33km west of Kapan. The local hostelry is the **Hotel Ganzasar** (☎ 0285-3 32 04; 2 Lernagordzneri Poghots; per

person AMD5000), scraping by on a shoestring with hot water for a couple of hours in luxe rooms. The hotel is on the main square. Between 8am and 9.40pm there are eight marshrutkas (AMD300) between here and Kapan.

The road to the **Shikahogh Nature Reserve**, 45km south of Kapan, climbs up a valley, over a ridge and into the valley of the Tsav River, where at the hamlet of Nerkin Hand there's an ancient grove of massive plane trees. The oak and hornbeam forests either side of the Tsav comprise the nature reserve, though you'll need a Niva or Villis to explore the 100 sq km of gorges and forests.

MEGHRI ՄԵՂՐԻ

☎ 0286 / pop 4500

Strategic Meghri, Armenia's toehold on Iran, is worth exploring for its fine stone houses. The town sits deep in the rocky, lushly irrigated gorge of the Meghri River surrounded by sawtooth peaks. The postindependence borders left Meghri deeply isolated, and the local economy struggles by on remittances, farming and a bit of business from the highway to Iran. The border crossing is at the Araks bridge near Agarak (population 3500), 8km from Meghri, open all day.

The Meghri fortress above the town dates mostly from the 18th century. The brick domes of Surp Hovannas at the Meghri town monastery date from the 17th century. In the centre of the main part of town is the fine St Astvatsatsin Church with a distinctive octagonal dome, built in the 17th century with later frescoes. There's also the Surp Sargis Church across the river in Pokr Tagh, the smaller side of town, with two rows of columns and some delicately restored frescoes.

There are a few Russian soldiers based at Agarak with Armenian troops and officials. Most travellers come this way to cross the border but a few intrepid souls just come for a glimpse of Iran – you can see the ancient village of Noordoos (also spelt Noghdoos or Norduz) across the river, including the minarets of the local mosque. Iranian farmers and shepherds can be seen busily working on the opposite bank. Be very careful about taking pictures in the area – on our visit a Russian border guard checked our camera for sensitive photos.

It's a slow border-crossing (it may close for lunch) but there's no particular hassle. The Armenian side has a bank where you can

change money and a few stalls selling cold drinks. There may be one or two taxis, or you could hitch a ride to Meghri.

Sleeping & Eating

There are a handful of B&Bs in Agarak and Meghri, which can be booked through Aries Tours (p151). At the time of research the Hotel Meghri was being refurbished – it's just 50m downhill from the square.

Haer B&B (☎ 4 30 54, 093545 414; info@bedandbreakfast.am; 14 Karakert Poghots; per person AMD5000) Marieta Azatyan runs this B&B with two rooms with double beds in classic provincial style – satin duvet covers, carpets and wood-veneer furniture. The B&B is located 900m from the town square. Walk past the Haypost (VivaCell is another landmark) and follow the road as it curves along the hillside; turn right just after the abandoned stone and brick army fort – it's 50m uphill on the right. The family may invite you for a meal but you may have to pay for it later; ask about food prices to avoid confusion.

Mila Hotel (☎ 4 31 80, 094356267; r per person AMD8000, deluxe 20,000) Three kilometres north of Meghri on the road to Kapan, this small hotel has three basic rooms with shared bath and a better 'deluxe' room with en suite facilities. It's a little overpriced but has a peaceful location and meals are available.

The B&Bs will prepare dinners and lunches with prior notice for about AMD1500. There are no restaurants as such in Agarak or Meghri, but there are a few basic roadside cafés offering *khoravats* for AMD2000.

Getting There & Away

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

Hitchhiking from Meghri to Kapan is difficult – suspicions run high in this border area and drivers are less prone to pick up strangers. If you're stuck, take a cab to Kajaran and hop on a marshrutka.

On the other side of the border buses are rare or nonexistent, but a taxi to Jolfa (Julfa, Culfá) should cost US\$5 to US\$8 (40 minutes)

with bargaining. A shop just outside Iranian immigration exchanges currencies. See p323 for information on buses to Iran, which leave from Yerevan.

ARMENIA DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATION

Yerevan has a full range of places to stay, from AMD7000-a-night budget options and midrange hotels (AMD25,000 to AMD50,000 for a double room), to good three- and four-star hotels. The new Armenia Marriott Hotel (p159) is the first international-standard hotel in the city. There are a couple of excellent boutique hotels in Yerevan. For upmarket hotels we've included government taxes in the prices.

Across Armenia there is a burgeoning range of budget pensions for around AMD5000 to AMD8000 per person per day. Renting and sharing an apartment is a recommended way to keep costs down (see below).

Outside Yerevan there is a handful of impressive new hotels and some comfortable homestays and B&Bs. Resort areas such as Dilijan, Tsaghkadzor, Jermuk and Lake Sevan have a range of Soviet-era hotels and sanatoriums either recently privatised or owned by government ministries. The websites listed on p222 will inevitably list new places.

Rentals

Renting an apartment is a common practice among visitors to Yerevan. Prices peak

between June and October. At the time of writing, AMD10,000 a day got you a single-bedroom apartment with sporadic water supplies a marshrutka ride away from town. Upwards of AMD20,000 a day rented a two- or three-bedroom apartment with a more convenient location. Up to AMD30,000 a day earned a three- or four-bedroom renovated apartment or house. Besides the travel agencies, which frequently arrange apartments (p151), there are some specialists for standard and luxury apartments: www.hyurservice.com, www.visitarm.com and www.realacern.com.

ACTIVITIES

Armenia is quickly building a reputation among bird-watchers – 346 species have been recorded here, including one-third of Europe's threatened species, and 240 species breed here. The Birds of Armenia Project at the **American University of Armenia** (Map pp148-9; ☎ 27 45 32; www.muhlenberg.edu/depts/biology/boa/book.htm; 40 Marshall Baghramian Poghota, Yerevan) has maps and books on the country's profusion of avian plumage. A *Field Guide to Birds of Armenia* and *Handbook of the Birds of Armenia* are both by Martin S Adamian and D Klem. There's also the **Centre of Bird Lovers** (Map p146; ☎ 24 70 59; adamians@freenet.am; Paruyr Sevak Poghots, Nor Zeytun, Yerevan), which engages in conservation efforts and works with ornithological guides.

Mountain climbing on Mt Aragats is possible in summer, and there are challenging hikes along the Garni Gorge and through the Khosrov Nature Reserve close to Yerevan. Country hikes are made easier by the profusion of piped springs. *Adventure*

Armenia: Hiking and Rock Climbing by Carine Bachmann and Jeffrey Tufenkian will serve you well. It details 22 hiking routes and several rock-climbing spots.

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

BOOKS

A glossy little guide with some terrific photos is *Edge of Time: Travelling in Armenia & Karabakh*, which reveals a shining love for the country. *Rediscovering Armenia* by Brady Kiesling and Raffi Kojian details every village and nearly every monument in the country. You can buy it in Yerevan and it's also online (free!) with maps at www.armeniapedia.org. Pictorial books include Jacob Majarian's *Armenia – Pictorial Treasury of an Ancient Land*. Majarian also creates excellent calendars; see www.majart.com.au.

Peter Balakian's justly praised *Black Dog of Fate* deals with suburban Armenian life in the USA and with the silences and agonies of his family's experiences during the genocide. *Visions of Ararat* by Christopher Walker is a collection of writings on Armenia by visitors over the centuries.

The Crossing Place by Philip Marsden is as haunting as travel literature gets, an evocation of the Armenian spirit from the forced marches into Syria through to the old communities of the Middle East and Eastern Europe to a frontier village in the middle of the Karabakh War. Marsden's *The Spirit Wrestlers* explores the Russian dissenter communities in the region, including the Molokans.

Finding translations of writers such as Raffi and Abovyan is best done through specialist bookstores such as the **Sardarabad Bookstore** (www.sardarabad.com) in Los Angeles and the **Armenian General Benevolent Fund bookstore** (www.agbu.org) in New York.

BUSINESS HOURS

Most churches are open 9am to 6pm daily, though in winter you might have to wait a while for the key to appear. Government offices

and international organisations usually work 9am to 5pm weekdays. Fairs and markets open daily. Museums and galleries often close Monday. Shops are usually open 9am to 7pm, or 10am to 10pm. Bank opening hours vary but are usually 9.30am to 5.30pm Monday to Friday and 10.30am to 1.30pm Saturday.

CUSTOMS REGULATIONS

The usual restrictions apply (one carton of cigs, 2L of booze, no guns) and there's no currency declaration to keep. If you plan to take something out of the country considered to be of cultural, historical or national value (eg a rug, a samovar or similar) a certificate is required from the **Ministry of Culture** (Map pp148-9; ☎ 1-52 93 49; 5 Tumanyan Poghots, Yerevan). You'll find it's much easier if the shop you bought the item from arranges the permit for you, or if you can speak Armenian. Otherwise the bureaucracy can be quite baffling.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

The following are all in Yerevan:

- Canada** (Map pp148-9; ☎ 56 79 03; aemin@freenet.am; Marriot Hotel, 1 Amiryan Poghots)
- France** (Map pp148-9; ☎ 56 11 03; www.ambafrance-am.org; 8 Grigor Lusavorich Poghots)
- Georgia** (Map pp148-9; ☎ 56 43 57, 58 55 11; geomb@netsys.am; 42 Aram Poghots)
- Germany** (Map pp148-9; ☎ 52 32 79; germemb@arminco.com; 29 Charents Poghots)
- Greece** (Map pp148-9; ☎ 53 00 51; grembarm@arminco.com; 6 Demichyan Poghots)
- Iran** (Map p146; ☎ 23 49 00; emiranar@arminco.com; 1 Budaghyan Poghots, Arabkir Park)
- Italy** (Map pp148-9; ☎ 54 23 35; www.ambjevervan.esteri.it; 5 Italia Poghots)
- Nagorno-Karabakh** (Map p146; ☎ 24 99 28, 52 64 28; www.nkr.am; 17a Zaryan Poghots)
- Poland** (Map pp148-9; ☎ 54 24 93; polemb@arminco.com; 44/1 Hanrapetutyanyan Poghots)
- Russia** (Map pp148-9; ☎ 56 74 27; 13a Grigor Lusavorich Poghots)
- Turkmenistan** (Map pp148-9; ☎ 65 09 03; serdar@arminco.com; Norki Avginer, House 288/5)
- UK** (Map pp148-9; ☎ 26 43 01; www.britissembassy.gov.uk; 34 Marshall Baghramian Poghota)
- USA** (Map p146; ☎ 46 47 00; <http://yerevan.usembassy.gov>; 1 American Poghota)

Armenia does not have embassies in Australia, Ireland, New Zealand or the Netherlands. Irish travellers should contact the Armenian embassy in the UK. Dutch visitors should contact the Armenian embassy in

THE AYAS NAUTICAL RESEARCH CLUB

One of the best stories about postindependence Armenia concerns a medieval sailing ship in a landlocked country. The Ayas project began back in 1985 when the club's founders became interested in the times of the Cilician Kings, from the 10th to 14th centuries, when Armenian naval vessels and traders plied the eastern Mediterranean from the ports of Ayas and Korykos. Club members discovered old plans of Armenian ships in the British Library. Armenia hasn't had a sea coast since 1375, but they set out to build a sailing ship the old way. After independence, the fuel shortages made the timbers of the Ayas a target for people on the verge of freezing. Club members lived and slept in the boat for several years to protect it. The vessel survived to sail on Lake Sevan in 2002 and in 2004 sailed on the Black Sea all the way to Portsmouth, England. In 2006 the ship continued its journey to St Petersburg, Russia, and along a series of rivers all the way back to the Black Sea where the trip began. The **Ayas Nautical Research Club** (Map pp148-9; ☎ 57 85 10; 1 Charents Poghota, Yerevan) has a substantial library of books on maritime Armenia and its fleets.

Brussels. Australian and New Zealand inquiries should also be addressed to the Armenian embassy in the UK. A full list of Armenian embassies and consulates can be found at www.armeniaforeignministry.com.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

December to April

Armenia has a full range of festivals, strongly Christian but intimately tied to the seasons, the land and folk traditions. The year ends (and kicks off) with **Navasard** (New Year's). The pre-Christian New Year was on the first day of the month of Navasard (August). The Church fathers moved the date to 31 December, but the name carried over. Households bake cookies and the New Year bread, which contains a coin. Whoever finds it has good fortune coming. **Surp Dzenount** (Christmas) is held on 6 January, the Epiphany (baptism) of Jesus. Hymns and psalms ring out from churches, and water and myrrh are blessed – it's sometimes called water-blessing day. **Trndez** (Purification) occurs 40 days after Christmas (16 February). Bonfires are lit and people leap over them for protection from the evil eye, illness and poisons. Trndez also signals the coming of spring.

Easter Season

Surp Sargis Don (St Sargis Day) falls nine weeks before Easter, between 18 January and 23 February. The handsome warrior saint may appear in the dreams of girls this night, wearing gold armour, to decide their fate – the man she dreams of who gives her water will be her husband. The 40 days of Lent before Easter is a fasting period with holidays such as Shrove-Tide, a good time for public celebrations. **Tsarzardar** (Palm Sunday), one week before Easter, is a proper spring celebration. Trees are brought into churches and hung with fruit. **Zatik** (Easter) falls between mid-March and mid-April, depending on the Church calendar. Households that planted lentil seeds 40 days earlier at the start of Lent lay red-painted eggs on the bed of green shoots on Easter Sunday.

May to November

Hambartsum (Ascension Day) is in May, 40 days after Easter. In the old days young women had the freedom to sing in the fields and socialise on this day. It's also a festival of fate. At midnight, space and time pauses and nature speaks to itself. Witnesses to such a moment will have their dreams fulfilled.

The big summer holiday is the **Vardavar** (Transfiguration), which falls between mid-June and mid-July, when kids and teenagers throw water on everyone they can, and no one takes offence (much). It's hilarious, but not a day for noncolourfast clothing. In pagan times this was the festival of the love goddess Astgik, when her love was spread by sprinkling petals and rose water on the ground. **Astvatsatsin** (Holiday of the Mother of God) in mid-August is when priests bless the grape and fruit harvests. **Khatchverats** (Holy Cross), falling on the Sunday closest to 14 September, is a day for commemorating the dead.

HOLIDAYS

Annual public holidays in Armenia:

New Year's Day 1 January

Christmas Day 6 January

International Women's Day 8 March

Good Friday varies, from mid-March to late April

Motherhood and Beauty Day 7 April

Genocide Memorial Day 24 April

Victory Day 9 May

Republic Day 28 May

Constitution Day 5 July

Independence Day 21 September

Earthquake Memorial Day 7 December

INTERNET RESOURCES

Armenia Diaspora (www.armeniadiaspora.com) Run by the Armenian Foreign Ministry, with news and a very good travel section.

Armenia Guide (www.armeniaguide.com) A strong links website, with connections to the sites listed here and many more.

Armenia Now (www.armenianow.com) A lively, weekly Yerevan-based web magazine with interesting features on life and current events.

Armeniapedia (www.armeniapedia.org) The best resource on everything you ever wanted to know about Armenia.

Blogrel (www.blogrel.com) Ongoing blog that keeps a finger on the pulse of modern Armenia.

PanArmenian.net (www.panarmenian.net) Online community site carrying comprehensive news bulletins on Armenia, Karabakh and regional issues.

Tour Armenia (www.tacentral.com) Another terrific local-culture and tourist-information site.

MAPS

The maps made by Yerevan-based company Collage are the best available, with a full-colour foldout map *Armenia & Mountainous Karabakh*, the nifty, brochure-sized, 26-page

Roads of Armenia and the brilliant *Yerevan Atlas*, with new and old street names, street numbers and lots besides. They cost AMD3000 to AMD6000 from souvenir shops and bookstores in Yerevan. Excellent free maps are available from the Armenia Information office in Yerevan.

MEDIA

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

Hye-FM (91.1 FM) plays a good mix of popular music on international play lists and some local music as well.

The only TV channel with an independent editorial policy, A1, is constantly at odds with government and oft-dragged through the courts. CNN is broadcast over public TV in Yerevan. Big hotels carry satellite TV.

MONEY

A strong dram means that Armenia is no longer the bargain it once was, but prices are still moderate by European standards. A seat on a minibus to the furthest corner of the country costs AMD5000. A taxi across Yerevan costs AMD500. *Lahmajo* (*lahmajoon*) cost AMD100, while a hearty meal of *khoravats* with salad, bread and drinks at a country restaurant might cost around AMD1800 per person. Budget accommodation is rarely less than AMD5000. In Yerevan, it's hard to find a private hotel room for less than AMD18,000.

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

Exchanging Money

The best cash currencies are US dollars, euros and Russian roubles, roughly in that order. Georgian lari can also be changed in Yerevan and border towns. Other currencies are hard to change except at a handful of major banks in Yerevan. There are moneychanging signs waving flags and rates at customers everywhere in Yerevan and around *shukas* in all major towns. Virtually any shop can change money legally, and many food stores and

small goods vendors do. Scams seem to be rare, and transactions straightforward.

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

Visit www.arca.am/atmsearch.php-en to access a clickable search of every ATM in the country.

Tippling & Bargaining

The usual tipping rule at cafés and restaurants is 10%. Taxi drivers won't complain if you set the price when getting in and stick to it when getting out. Shops have set prices, but *shukas* (markets) and outdoor fruit and vegetable stands are more negotiable. Foreigners might be charged a little extra but might also be laden with extra goods.

POST

National postal service Haypost has offices in every major town. A letter might take anything from two weeks to six weeks to reach North America or Australia, but the service is fairly reliable. If you're sending out something of value you might feel safer with UPS, FedEx or a local courier company in Yerevan (p151).

TELEPHONE

The country code is ☎ 374, while Yerevan's area code is ☎ 1.

It's possible to make calls from central call centres. Give the attendant the phone number, and you'll be directed to a phone booth with a vintage telephone. There's usually a clear line after a couple of attempts.

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

For calls within Armenia, call ☎ 0 + city code + local number; for mobile numbers dial the ☎ 09 prefix first (most people will give you this along with their mobile number),

then the number. For international calls, dial ☎ 00 first.

Mobile Phones

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

TOURIST INFORMATION

The main tourist office is the Armenia Information centre (p151). It has a ton of information, and it's well organised and helpful. Tourist information offices are also located in Dilijan (p190), Goris (p214), Ijevan (p193), Sevan (p178) and Stepanavan (p197).

VISAS

Armenian visas are available at all entry points – 21-day tourist visas cost \$30, and three-day transit visas cost \$20. The officials might not speak much English, but it's just a matter of filling out a form and paying. A 21-day e-visa from www.armeniaforeignministry.com costs \$60 and takes two days to be emailed to you. Print out a copy and have it on hand on arrival and departure. E-visas are only for arrivals at Zvartnots Airport. If you want a longer visa, apply directly to an Armenian embassy. Processing time is usually three to five days and the fee is about \$60. You can get up to 120 days, but make sure you ask for this specifically if you want the maximum number of days.

Border Crossings

Armenia's international border posts are as follows:

Agarak Land border with Iran.

Bavra Land border with Georgia.

Gyumri (Shirak Airport) CIS airport.

Guguti-Tashir Land border with Georgia.

Sadakhlo-Bagratashen Land border with Georgia.

Yerevan (Zvartnots Airport) International airport.

Visa Extensions

You can get a visa extension at the Passport and Visa Department of **OVIR** (Map pp148-9; ☎ 53 43 91; 13a Mesrop Mashtots Poghota, room 211; ☎ 2-6pm Mon-Fri). At room 211 you fill in a form and provide

a photocopy of the picture page in your passport and return the next day to confirm authorisation of the extension. Once you have confirmation you pay AMD500 for every day you want to extend.

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

It's possible to avoid the three trips to OVIR by simply overstaying your visa and then paying US\$3 per day when you leave. OVIR at Zvartnots is not much of a hassle, and land border guards are similarly happy to accept your money.

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

Visas for Onward Travel

GEORGIA

The **Georgian Embassy** (Map pp148-9; ☎ 1-58 55 11; geoemb@netsys.am; 42 Aram Poghots) provides visas for 60 GEL (US\$35). However, these days many Western nationals can enter visa-free and those that need a visa can get one at the border (see p127). Note that visas may not be available at the border for train travellers. The safest bet is to get a visa at the Georgian embassy in Yerevan.

IRAN

The **Iranian Embassy** (Map p146; ☎ 23 49 00; emiranar@arminco.com; 1 Budaghyan Poghots, Arabkir Park) provides visas only after you have received approval from the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and for this you'll need to go through a travel agent. The whole process can last two weeks or more. Contact Tatev Travel (p151).

WORK

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

© Lonely Planet Publications. To make it easier for you to use, access to this chapter is not digitally restricted. In return, we think it's fair to ask you to use it for personal, non-commercial purposes only. In other words, please don't upload this chapter to a peer-to-peer site, mass email it to everyone you know, or resell it. See the terms and conditions on our site for a longer way of saying the above - 'Do the right thing with our content.'