

Discover Armenia's Charm.

By Richard Plunket, Lonely Planet The Toronto Sun
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For an unfair first impression of a country, try arriving at an unrenovated Soviet airport in the middle of the night. Armenia's Zvartnots airport looked like a space station from the outside and a disused factory on the inside. Mercifully, this ancient country revealed its authentic -- and attractive -- nature very quickly.

Along the stately boulevards of the capital Yerevan, cafes were still doing business at 3 a.m., and the hosts at my B&B (a modern apartment decked out with traditional Armenian carpets) were waiting up to embrace me, literally, and feed me until I dropped. The next few days were a never-ending feast of fruit, cured ham, lavash (flat bread), salads, brandy, wine and rich Armenian soorich (coffee).

Mountainous Armenia is a compelling mix of European elegance, Middle Eastern exuberance, ex-Soviet mundanity and modern economic miracle.

The first country to convert to Christianity, it has countless legacies from 1,700 years of faith -- from ancient churches and monasteries to the uniquely Armenian khatchkars, literally "crucifix stones," upright blocks of basalt deftly carved with crosses and interweaving patterns.

Though 20th-century wars almost destroyed the country, the new century is seeing a gratifying upsurge in fortunes. Though it still has a long way to go, Armenia has one of the fastest-growing economies in the world.

Smart new hotels and guesthouses are sweeping away the gloomy old Soviet hotels. The 3 million or so Armenians are rediscovering their traditional enjoyment of life -- they share a passion for culture, food and family not unlike Greeks and Italians, though their landlocked country is tucked between Turkey, Georgia and Iran.

Almost every corner of Armenia can be reached in a day's drive from Yerevan.

The highlight for Diasporan Armenians is the Vatican of Armenia, Holy Echmiadzin. The 1,700-year-old Mayr Tachar (Mother Church) is an exotic mix of Persian-style murals, monks in black cowls and richly gilded holy relics.

Armenia's holiest treasure, the lance that pierced Christ's side, lies in the treasure room at the rear of the cathedral. The casing around the spearhead is a riot of finely wrought silver, but the relic itself is a brutal, crude shard of iron -- exactly what a provincial Roman soldier might have wielded 2,000 years ago.

Echmiadzin is only 30 minutes from Yerevan through the vineyard-studded

Araks Valley. North from Yerevan lies the vast blue mirror of Lake Sevan. The richly forested northern province of Lori has two gorgeous World Heritage-listed monasteries. Heading south you skirt the awesome Mount Ararat and pass ranges and valleys on the way to the spectacular fortress of Tatev. Many tour companies run day trips and overnight stays to the provinces.

Back in Yerevan the cafes stay open late into the night on warm summer evenings; the Opera House offers high culture at bargain prices; and the national museum on Republic Square has a magnificent art collection, regarded as the third best in the former U.S.S.R. The Museum of the Armenian Genocide at Tsitsernakaberd just outside the city centre commemorates the victims of the Ottoman and Turkish massacres of 1915-1923. A solemn procession is held every year on April 24 to honour the fallen.

Best of all, there are the Armenians themselves. The language is something of a challenge (it has a unique 38-letter alphabet), but many people, especially the young, speak English. Armenians are an expressive, cultured, hospitable people who love barbecues, boxing and homemade liqueurs as much as the latest opera production.

Visit someone's house, and within minutes a table of food and drinks is set. As one host said, it is his duty to keep everyone's glasses full, but the next step is up to the guest.

And I'm happy to report that an overseas Armenian businessman is totally renovating and modernizing that dismal airport.

GETTING THERE

Air Canada flies via Europe to Yerevan's Zvartnots airport.

WHERE TO STAY

Parev Inn (parev.am) is a lodge-style B&B run by a delightful Canadian-Armenian couple. Doubles with kitchenettes for about \$60.

Avan Villa Yerevan (tufenkianheritage.com) is a luxury boutique hotel fitted out in traditional Armenian style. Doubles from about \$140.

WHERE TO EAT

The classic Armenian meal is khorovats (barbecue), with salads, pickles and flat bread. The dining culture is distinctly relaxed -- people settle in for hours of eating, drinking and talking. Our Village, in Yerevan, is a charming traditional restaurant with meals for about \$6-\$10 and live folk music.

Sayat Nova in Yerevan is a multi-level restaurant complex with a nightclub in the basement and a terrace cafe upstairs with hookah pipes.

GRAPHIC: photo by Bill Wassman, Lonely Planet Images Villagers enjoy a festive meal in rural Armenia, where the dining culture is distinctly relaxed.
