

BEST OF ARMENIA

Character:

Unique cultural tour to Armenia, historical sites, perfect landscapes, lush forests of northern Armenia and rocky landscapes of the south, biblical Mount Ararat, small villages, local food and wine. The perfect mix of ancient history and living culture ... with some fun times thrown in too!

Duration:

10 days / 10 nights

Accommodation:

Tourist hotels

Meals:

10 breakfasts, 1 lunch

Mode of travel:

Comfortable, air-conditioned vehicles

Some days involve short walks (1-2 hours round trip); for those who do not want to walk local jeeps can be rented at a reasonable cost

Tour support:

AdvenTour tour leader /driver, local guides

Included:

Accommodation for 10 nights

Meals as specified in the itinerary

AdvenTour tour leader/driver, local guides

All activities as per itinerary with all entry fees

All transfers in comfortable, air-conditioned vehicles

Welcome to Armenia information kit

Excluded:

Optional activities

Itinerary

Day 1

Treasures of Yerevan

In the morning meet other group participants and tour leader, brief pre-tour orientation meeting. The day starts with a visit to History Museum housed by Yerevan City Hall. Providing an excellent introduction to the history of the city, the museum is an ideal place to start your exploration of Yerevan, new and old. A walking tour of Yerevan exploring various layers of its history – medieval shrines hidden behind imposing Soviet-style façades, narrow streets of the old center with sunlight playing on its pink walls, Closed Market and Blue Mosque on Mashtots Avenue, Republic Square, Cascade and Mother Armenia, Opera House and Northern Avenue. A cultural showcase not to be missed is Matenadaran, one of the world's oldest repositories of ancient manuscripts, visit to Genocide Memorial, a solemn reminder of the first genocide of the 20th c. We continue our exploration with a visit to the Vatican city of Armenia, Holy Echmiadzin. Experience a fascinating journey through time, descend to the ruins of the pagan sanctuary beneath the altar and pay tribute to the Treasury of Mother Cathedral with striking collection of relics of Christianity. On to Zvartnots, a temple consecrated in the presence of Emperor Constantine of Byzantium, it stands out as one of the most prominent creations of medieval architecture.

Overnight: Hotel in Yerevan

Meal plan: Breakfast

Day 2

Classical Armenia

Breakfast at hotel. Drive east to the magnificent Temple of the Sun at Garni, the only surviving sample of Hellenistic architecture in the Caucasus and the legendary Monastery of Spear at Geghard. Explore the mosaic ancient baths and ruins of the royal palace, immerse yourself in the atmosphere of this mythical place and examine remarkable cross stones carved into sheer rock. On to Lake Sevan, one of the highest freshwater lakes in the world - the tranquil majesty of its ever-changing waters, stunning mountains silhouetted against the blue sky, all this inspired its name The Pearl of Armenia. Enjoy the scenery, take a 20-minute walk to the top of Akhtamar Trail for the best photographic views of the Lake, explore romantic Sevanavank Monastery. If we are lucky with the weather, we will take a boat trip to Seagull Island (groups of 6 persons and more). Back to Yerevan. In the evening we offer you to enjoy the cultural life of Yerevan with an exquisite performance at National Opera or a concert at Classical Music Chamber offering you the best of what is available at the time of your stay (optional).

Overnight: Hotel in Yerevan

Meal plan: Breakfast

Day 3

Amberd Fortress

Early start today with a trip to the highest peak of Transcaucasia, Mount Aragats (4,090m), an extinct volcano. The first stop of our trip is Saghmosavank (Monastery of Psalms) perched on the edge of picturesque Kasakh gorge. Acclimatizing gradually as we ascend the beautiful countryside, we reach Amberd Fortress on the southern slope of Aragats. Breathtaking views of the fortress and citadel, snow covered peaks of Aragats, sun scorched grasslands dressed in wildflowers combine to provide an unforgettable experience this morning. If we come here during summer months we can visit high-mountain camps of friendly Yezidi tribes who tend their sheep under the towering peaks of Aragats. We will discover the traditional way of life of these people of the mountains, visiting their tents, trying fresh cheese and yogurt. Continue to our comfortable hotel in Byurakan - clear mountain air, powerful panoramas, fresh dishes and star observations at 1,460 m above sea level!

Overnight: Hotel in Byurakan

Meal plan: Breakfast

Day 4

Lori, Northern Armenia

We start to explore some of the less traveled routes of Lori, the largest of Armenia's 11 provinces. Start our day with a drive to Kurtan with a small 5th century basilica church, the start of a dramatically beautiful gorge, one of the deepest and longest in Armenia. On to 7th century Hnevank, a splendid monastery decorated with fine stone carvings. Drive to Stepanavan, a charming town

nestled in the mountains. Visit to the ruins of feudal Armenia's main fortresses, Lori Berd situated on a naturally fortified plateau between two river gorges. Explore the site and take in the beauty of dramatic mountain scenery. Inside the fortress is a bathhouse, with remains of a complex plumbing system. Continue on foot to a vaulted medieval bridge at the bottom of the gorge crossing Urut River, leading to several cross carvings in the rock face. Here we have a great view over the so-called Communist Caves once serving a secret meeting place for "red" revolutionaries. Optional dinner at one of many roadside restaurants before heading to your hotel in Stepanavan.

Overnight: Hotel in Stepanavan

Meal plan: Breakfast

Day 5

Northern Armenia cont'd

After breakfast we are off to beautiful Kobayr monastery situated on the edge of a narrow ravine. Superb frescoes and a unique atmosphere make Kobayr a jewel in the crown of Northern Armenia. We continue our trip to sleepy Alaverdi, once an industrial town and rise to our next destinations - Haghpat and Sanahin. Severe and majestic design and marvelous bas-reliefs justly rank these sites among the celebrated UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Marvel at the intricate reliefs showing biblical scenes and characters, before wandering the atmospheric graveyards. Many tombs are carved with khachkars – Armenian cross stones, perhaps looking remarkably Celtic to some of you. Continue to Dilijan, a town nestled in a deep wooded gorge. Check in at hotel, rest. In the evening take a stroll in the old town where strangers are greeted with smiling curiosity.

Overnight: Hotel in Dilijan

Meal plan: Breakfast

Day 6

Dilijan National Park

Day six starts slowly, with time for leisurely breakfast before a visit to newly-opened Old Dilijan Complex on historic Shamambertan street. Here we experience the town as it was in the 19th century and observe the weaving of carpets by local women at Carpet Showroom. Continue your journey through Dilijan National Park, a protected area renowned for its serene lakes, picturesque hill trails and peaceful villages, visit to Haghartsin or Goshavank, fairy-tale monasteries set amidst flower-filled meadows. Away from the main road and following a high mountain pass less traveled, we drive to Lake Sevan. Our passing encounters with friendly locals in small villages en route may leave us with some of our strongest memories and best photos of rural Armenia. Continue to your chalet-style hotel right on the beach, check-in, rest.

Overnight: Hotel at Lake Sevan

Meal plan: Breakfast

Day 7

Lake Sevan and Silk Road Adventures

Our first stop today is Stone Garden at Noraduz with unique collection of exquisite khachkars, cross-stones. Proceed to a heart-pumping southward trip through the rugged Selim Pass. Climbing steep paths and enjoying the views of Lake Sevan below, we reach the amazingly intact Selim Caravanserai, an important trading post on the Great Silk Road where little has changed since the fourteenth century. Our next stop will be at Shatin observation point to see Bezoar Goats on the opposite side of the gorge (seasonal). The afternoon offers a real off-the-beaten-path experience as we walk to discover Fortress of King Smbat, one of the best-preserved medieval citadels in Armenia, Zorats Cathedral and the Church of St. Catherine with romantic stories attached to its history.

Overnight: Hotel in Yeghegnadzor

Meal plan: Breakfast

Day 8

Tatev Monastery and Southern Armenia

A day dedicated to exploration of Southern Armenia combining the magic of Armenia's finest mediaeval architecture with stunning landscapes. The first visit is to Karahunj, Armenia's Stonehenge, an ancient observatory that has caused sensation in astronomical circles. Our next visit is Tatev Monastery, an architectural masterpiece dating from the 10th century. Drive through a narrow ravine so deep that the sun hardly reaches the bottom, later ascend to a high-mountain plateau with striking views of jagged mountains and gorges. On the way back soar above the gorges in the world's longest aerial tramway, a must-see attraction opened in 2010. The whole journey to

Tatev takes 4 hours and is a totally absorbing and unique experience. Transfer to Goris crossing and off to Khndzoresk cave town. Walk down the gorge to explore the mysterious caverns cut in the face of the rocks by people seeking refuge from persecution in the natural protection of high cliffs. Drive to Goris, a quaint town surrounded by mountains. Take a stroll in the narrow tree-lined streets and charming old town. Dinner is at your leisure, before you sink into a good night's rest at your hotel.

Overnight: *Hotel in Goris*

Meal plan: *Breakfast*

Those taking **Karabagh** and **North-Western Iran** extension start their tour next morning after breakfast (see Karabagh and North-Western Iran extensions below).

Day 9

Wine and Cheese Route

After a hearty breakfast consisting of so many fresh and home-made products we leave Goris. Driving back to Yerevan we have the last chance to experience the untamed beauty of Southern Armenia - surreal red rocks providing an eerie echo, honey-coloured villages sandwiched between them. We are in the agricultural heart of Armenia and do not miss the chance to sample some of the fantastic produce: private wine touring in *maran* (cellars) of a small winery in Aghavnadzor followed by a lunch in the farmhouse. On to Noravank, the masterpiece of medieval architect Momik situated above an awesome gorge. The next stop of our trip is Khor Virap, the site of royal prison where St. Gregory the Illuminator was held for thirteen years before converting Armenia into the first Christian nation in 301. Guided by the remote majesty of biblical mount Ararat, we explore the site, its underground chambers, elegant chapels and are captivated by the ascetic atmosphere of the site. Back to Yerevan.

Overnight: *Hotel in Yerevan*

Meal plan: *Breakfast, lunch*

Day 10

Farewell to Yerevan

Free day on your own for a last chance to enjoy Yerevan. Visit Vernisage, the huge arts & crafts market, the best place in Caucasus to buy souvenirs. Open only on weekends it is a lot of fun to wonder in. Explore the treasures of the cultural life of Yerevan, ramble in the oldest part of the city or just relax in shady parks or busy outdoor cafes, enjoying the young and lively atmosphere of this ancient city, the contemporary of Babylon and Rome.

Overnight: *Hotel in Yerevan*

Meal plan: *Breakfast*

KARABAGH EXTENSION (year round)

Travel by 4WD cars into the most unusual region of historic Armenia, Karabagh. Remote and little known, the region is quickly forging its future whilst retaining and preserving a rich cultural heritage. We will pass serene lakes, forested valleys dotted by historical villages, we will explore evocative medieval strongholds and above all, we will meet proudly independent people of Karabagh – we aim to have a taste of it all in this short, active break!

Day 1

Lake Vanand and Ancient Basilica

In the morning the real adventure begins as we branch off the regular roads and travel down dramatic mountain roads to beautiful Vanand Lake, rest and time for leisurely walks, perhaps we can try fishing and prepare our own lunch – fresh fish barbeque. Continue to Kachatagh for a visit to Tsitsernavank, the best preserved ancient basilica in Armenia. This evocative church was believed to contain relics of St. George the Dragon-Slayer. Bathe in the geothermal pools nearby, take a walk in the village, meet and chat with the friendly locals.

Overnight: Hotel in Tsitsernavank

Meal plan: Breakfast

Day 2

Traditional Crafts

After breakfast drive to picturesque Mets Tagher village, time to explore Kazh folk museum: tour a blacksmith's shop where you can see demonstration of traditional crafts - watch a piece of metal being transformed, feel the heat, hear the pounding and experience the magic. See the making of mulberry vodka typical for Karabagh up close, there is of course vodka tasting at the end with traditional snacks. Continue to traditional Togh village that has hardly changed for centuries and visit the ruins of the palace of Melik (Duke of Artsakh). Here the history truly comes to life as you walk amidst the ruins evoking military and economic might, Halivor medieval bridge and Abunc Gyol, thermal pools at Ishkhanaget river are our next stops. Continue to New Life Water Park and hotel, rest and overnight.

Overnight: Hote New Life

Meal plan: Breakfast

Day 3

Ancient Tigranakert

After breakfast drive to Shushi, Karabagh's cultural jewel. City walls encircle the medieval center and provide a fantastic panorama of flower-filled Hunot Gorge below, time spent walking in the streets of Shushi. Along our route lies Mayraberdt Fortress, the primary bulwark against invasions from the eastern steppe. Continue to the ruins of Royal city of Tigranakert, founded by Tigran the Great in the 1st century BC. Explore what was once a citadel, a fire temple and an elaborately decorated royal palace. Time to visit field archaeological museum and have a walk at the site, on-site explanations offered by museum experts. Then following scenic off road paths we make for Gandzasar, a historic monastery atop a green hill above Vank village. Guided visit of the walled abbey that shared in the turbulent history of Armenia. Overnight at hotel near Gandzasar.

Overnight: Hotel in Gandzasar

Meal plan: Breakfast

Day 4

Dadivank Route

After breakfast we head to the north of Karabagh and here, hidden in deep forested valleys we reach Dadivank, the most magical place in all of Karabakh. The monastery was named after St. Dadi, a disciple of Apostle Thaddeus whose tomb was discovered by archeologists in 2007. The western facade of Dadivank's Cathedral bears one of the most extensive Armenian lapidary (inscribed-in-stone) texts. Time free to explore the site. We then drive past Jermajur thermal springs, stopping to take a dip in the natural sauna and continue off road by Sotk - Vardenis highland route towards Lake Sevan, continue to Yerevan.

Overnight: Hotel in Yerevan

Meal plan: Breakfast

Continue your Armenia Tour with the program of Day 10 above.

Included:

Accommodation for 4 nights

Meals as specified in the itinerary

AdvenTour tour leader/driver, local guides

All activities as per itinerary with all entry fees

All transfers in comfortable, air-conditioned 4WD vehicles

NORTH-WESTERN IRAN EXTENSION (year round)

The ancient lands of Iran are steeped with history and culture. A unique aspect of this culture is Armenian Monastic Ensembles of Iran in the north-west of the country. St Thaddeus, St Stepanos and the Chapel of Dzordzor are examples of outstanding universal value of Armenian architectural tradition and testimony to important interchanges with other regional cultures, in particular the Byzantine, Orthodox and Persian. Tabriz home to unrivaled masterpieces of architecture such as the Blue Mosque and Kondovan, Iran's Cappadocia are exciting landmarks not to be missed.

Day 1

Jolfa and St. Stepanos

From Goris we drive south to Armenia-Iran border via Kapan-Meghri highway, the highest in Armenia. We reach Meghri famous for amazing lush fruits and vegetables. The figs are great, while the pomegranates, if in season, are not to be missed. Reach the border, change the vehicle and meet your Iranian guide. Continue to Jolfa on the Arax River, at one time a major Armenian settlement until Shah Abbas I drove Armenian families to New Jolfa in Isfahan. Visit Church of St. Stepanos, a UNESCO World Heritage site dating back to the 14th century. This remarkable well preserved monastery is famous for its exterior reliefs and carved stones on the outer walls.

Overnight: Hotel in Jolfa

Meal plan: breakfast

Day 2

St. Thaddeus and Dzordzor

After breakfast we continue to Tabriz via Maku, en route we visit the small Urartian citadel of Sangar and Maku Palace. Off to Saint Thaddeus church, a masterpiece of Armenian architecture, the oldest and original part of the church around the altar dates back from the 10th century and is believed to be built by Apostle Thaddaeus who is buried here. This is a major pilgrimage site for Armenians of Iran who camp once a year for three days to attend special services on the anniversary of the death of Saint Thaddaeus. We continue to the Chapel of Dzordzor. Arrival Tabriz, the fourth largest city and formerly the capital of Iran.

Overnight: Hotel in Tabriz

Meal plan: breakfast

Day 3

Tabriz

From Tabriz we make an excursion to Kandovan village famous for its unique architecture, where cave-houses are carved off from huge rocks. The legend goes that the first people to settle here were Mongol warriors who found the caves by chance and used them as their temporary camouflage and accommodation. However, among archaeologists, it is considered to be of Pre-Islamic Period. Back to Tabriz and proceed to city tour including the major highlights: Blue Mosque, one of the masterpieces of Iranian tile work built by Jahan Shah in 1465; Arg-e Tabriz, part of the medieval citadel dating back to the 14th century. A landmark not to be missed is Tabriz Bazaar, once the largest and most beautiful bazaar in the Middle East. The bazaar is known for rugs, silverware and silk; proceed to the spice Bazaar to see and sample some of the amazing diversity on offer.

Overnight: Hotel in Tabriz

Meal plan: breakfast

Day 4

Back to Armenia

Back to Armenia-Iran border. Arrive in Armenia around noon time, continue to Goris.

Overnight: Hotel in Goris

Meal plan: breakfast

Continue your Armenia Tour with the program of Day 9 and Day 10 above.

Included:

Accommodation for 4 nights in tourist hotels

Meals as per itinerary

Services of local guide fluent in English

All activities as per program with all entrance fees

All transfers in comfortable, air-conditioned vehicles

Visa processing

Tour Notes

1. Special notes

The information in these Special Notes covers the average range of conditions likely to be found on this trip. In remote destinations unexpected conditions can prevail at any time, and all adventurous holidays can therefore be subject to unexpected changes; in order to enjoy them you should be prepared to be flexible where necessary.

2. Travel health and insurance

No vaccination is required for traveling in the Caucasus. The region's climate is very pleasant, with no health risks. Water is very clean and safe. However, travelers usually prefer bottled spring and mineral water, which can be found in shops and supermarkets.

There are registered pharmacies in all cities and towns with all basic medications. Travelers with special needs are advised to take a supply of those medications that they are likely to require. Medical facilities are numerous with many qualified doctors practicing in all specialties. Doctors and hospitals often expect cash payment for their services. Travelers are advised to consult their medical insurance company prior to traveling to confirm whether their policy applies overseas and covers emergency expenses such as medical evacuation. When selecting a travel insurance policy we require that it cover medical expenses including emergency repatriation and personal liability. We also strongly recommend that the policy cover loss of luggage and personal effects.

3. Physical preparation and tour grade

There will be no extreme fitness requirements and rough traveling. Some of the natural and historical sites we visit will require fair amount of walking with options for more keen travelers and nature explorers. A normal level of fitness will be expected and will certainly help enhance the opportunities to enjoy the trip.

4. Money

You will need to allow enough money for meals as well as optional activities. An average meal in a restaurant should cost between EUR 8-10. Tipping is customized and not compulsory. You should be aware that Caucasus is still a cash-only economy and credit cards are not accepted in the majority of shops and restaurants. There are several ATM machines in major cities where you can obtain cash.

5. Communication during the tour

If you need to be contacted while traveling we recommend that you set up an email address that can be accessed on the road. Email cafes are common and are the preferred way for our leaders and travelers to stay in touch.

If someone wishes to contact you in an emergency while you are on an AdvenTour trip we recommend that they contact our operator by phone + 374 10 48 22 71 or E-mail: adventour@netsys.am.

6. Accommodation

We choose hotels/guesthouses that combine comfort and great service with unique ambiance and appreciation of the natural beauty of a region. The emphasis is on location and practicality.

Our tours are based on 3 star properties. In capital cities and other places where higher-class accommodation is available you can upgrade if you wish. Your tour leader will help arrange this and the extra cost will be paid by you. In areas where hotels are not available, particularly in small towns in the regions, the group will stay at a local guesthouse (often with shared facilities). Some campsites we stay in are equipped with showers, toilets, electricity and a common eating area. Where no campsites are available we go wild camping (no facilities). These are limited to once or twice a tour and are in areas where you can enjoy the scenery. All other nights will be in campsites/hotels as described above.

Single Supplement

Should you want more privacy during your trip, you can upgrade by the requesting your own room, often at a little extra cost.

Pre / Post-Tour Accommodation

If you require additional accommodation either before or after the trip, we can book this for you. Please contact AdvenTour for current prices.

7. Transport and private transfers

The mode of transport we use is chosen to suit the environmental aspects and local infrastructure. During tours we use comfortable, air-conditioned cars, minibuses and buses as well as some local transport that is well-maintained and supplied with a first-aid kit. In fact, we often use more than one type of transport per trip. And just in case you are wondering – we also travel by foot.

Airport transfers are not included in the cost of the trip. Please, let us know at the time of booking if you would like us to arrange a private transfer for you.

8. Staff and support

While on AdvenTour trips, you will be accompanied by a tour leader/driver. The tour leader is in charge of general organization of your trip making sure that you have a most enjoyable time. He/she has broad general knowledge of the places visited, including historical, cultural, religious and social aspects. The tour leader is able to provide suggestions on what to do and see and can recommend great local eating venues. Local guides are an important part of AdvenTour team, they are trained by us and support our groups in sites and locations where their special knowledge of the trails, particular activities or communities will add to the enjoyment of the tour.

9. Meals

The tour cost includes bed and breakfast in the hotels and guesthouses. Meals, when included, will feature local cuisine. For other meals, you are left to choose what and where to eat, though your tour leader will be on hand to suggest venues and arrange where necessary. This can be one of the great joys of this trip as the food in Armenia is superb. Vegetarians should have no problems on this tour.

10. Laundry

Facilities are offered by most hotels for a charge.

11. Visas

Citizens of EU, USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and a number of other countries can obtain Armenian visa upon arrival at the airport or land border. All other nationals are advised to consult Armenian Embassy in their country of residence. Georgian visa is not required for EU, USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand citizens. All other national are advised to consult the Georgian Embassy in their country of residence. Turkish visa is obtained upon arrival at the airport or land border. Iranian visa support is provided by AdvenTour through local partners in Iran. Visa regulations can and do change without notice. Please check the current regulations in good time to obtain a visa if one is required.

12. Travel luggage

Because of limited luggage space on transfer vehicles, we limit each passenger to ONE main suitcase or frameless backpack (the size not more than 75cm x 45cm x 25cm, the weight no more than 20 kg) and one day bag. The daypack is practical for keeping general items (e.g. camera, books, wallets etc.) at hand when your main pack is out of reach. Please note many hotels in the regions do not have porters and you will need to carry your own luggage.

Travel tip 1: On some tours, if you wish, it is possible to leave surplus clothes and other personal equipment in hotels where you will return after your circular trip. Please bring a small bag to pack excess items in and leave the bag at the hotel. Mark your luggage with your name and arrival date. Please ask your tour leader to advise where this may be possible / advisable.

Travel tip 2: You might be tempted to buy a few souvenirs here and there, so leave a little room for those extra purchases!

13. Safety

We always recommend the use of a neck wallet or money belt while traveling, for the safe keeping of your passport, air tickets, cash and other valuable items. All the hotels we use have safety deposit boxes, which can be used to store your valuables.

14. Responsible tourism

Tourism can be a real help to local communities providing income, positive cultural exchanges and the financial incentive to protect the natural environment. Our trips are designed to use family-based guesthouses in the regions, buy local food, hire local guides, drivers and rent trucks to ensure that as much money as possible is retained within the local economies.

15. Feedback

After your travel, we would like to hear from you. Within two weeks after your departure we will send you a feedback form to complete.

Information in this document has been compiled with care and is provided in good faith. However it is subject to change and does not form part of the contract between the client and AdvenTour.