

TORONTO (CANADA) STAR



# Ancient land offers feast of history and natural beauty

**Vibrant culture survived decades of Soviet dominance**

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Yerevan, Armenia—The axles scream at every bump in the road and we are tossed about inside our minibus like lottery balls.

Appropriately enough, this crumbling Armenian back road, like an archeological ruin, paves the way for a unique journey back in time.

Part of the road network, battered by the great earthquake of 1989, remains in disrepair.

A couple of hours along, our stomachs feel the same. We have been told to bring food and water since rural Armenia offers little for tender Western stomachs.

But we are here to sample a different menu: a feast of ancient history and natural splendours.

"This is a special place. Its beauty never ceases to amaze me," says Armenian-American **Matthew Karanian**, a professional photographer and writer (and attorney and university professor) who co-wrote *Armenia & Karabagh, The Stone Garden Guide*, an illustrated 306-page guidebook about his beloved homeland.

Set amid the mountains of the Caucasus Region, Armenia is surrounded by exotic, sometimes turbulent neighbours, including Iran, Turkey, Georgia and Azerbaijan, and packs 7,000 years of history into a country that's a little more than half the size of Nova Scotia.

Imagine a breathtaking blend of rivers, valleys, plains and sand canyons



reflecting 1,001 colours.

One of several countries whose doors have recently opened to tourists, Armenia unveils a paradox of an intense religious culture and dazzling urban nightlife that will impress even the most jaded traveller.

"When I was transferred to Yerevan, I did not know what to think and what to expect. Now I'm having a great time here. The Armenian culture and people are fascinating," says Frenchman Alex Nurock, director of management at the Marriott Armenia Hotel in Yerevan.

Despite centuries of conflict and oppression, Armenians remain a steadfastly religious people, proud of being the oldest Christian nation on Earth.

Monasteries, some of them thousands of years old, remain active, inhabited and true to their purpose. Very much a living history, these medieval structures operate much as they did 1,700 years ago, despite being Armenia's No. 1 tourist attraction.

During my visit, the head of the Armenian Church, Catholicos Karekin II, said that the role of all church leaders is "to establish goodness in the heart of the people, so that, through love, they will find their salvation."

"Christianity is like the colour of our skin," our guide added. "It is inseparable for the life of every Armenian."

For centuries, Armenia's political and social evolution has been guided by faith.

The Armenian Apostolic Church resembles Catholicism (although married men can become priests), and as with many Western nations of centuries past, the church represents a kind of a parallel government.

The fraternal and historical links between Armenia and the West – particularly France and the United States – breathe a natural warmth into the relationship between Armenians and their guests.

Roughly eight million people of Armenian descent are scattered throughout the world (double Armenia's population), notably French singer Charles Aznavour, American tennis legend Andre Agassi and American singer and actress Cher. Armenia languished as a republic of the former Soviet Union before regaining its independence in 1991.

Today, the architecture, cars and fashions stir memories of this period and Russian endures as the nation's most common second language after Armenian.

Still, the painted-over greyness of the land is brightened by a grand elegance that will not be denied.

Yerevan, the capital, resembles a modern Russian city. A small town of 14,000 in 1900, it is now home to 1.2 million people. At its heart, Republic Square is an immense public space and cultural centre bordered by shops, hotels, museums and art galleries.

This was Lenin Square during the Soviet period, and the requisite Lenin statue stood watch over the masses before eventually being toppled – and beheaded – after independence.

This decapitated symbol of Soviet repression lies broken and discarded in a back courtyard of the National History Museum, for all to see.

The Canadian consulate has a prestigious address – on Republic Square, in an office once occupied by the KGB.

"The Canadian embassy is in Moscow but we provide consular services," says Artashes Emin, the honorary Canadian Consul.

"Once I was in an arts and crafts market, and I found a Canadian passport on the ground. Then I returned to the consulate and the Canadian who lost the passport arrived just moments after me, to get a replacement passport. It was incredible. I really felt useful that day."

Yerevan's Genocide Monument pays homage to the estimated two million victims of the 1915 Armenian genocide.

A circular, underground museum recalls the event in stories and photos while a 45-metre granite stela points to the sky to signal rebirth. A 12-sided structure leans inward to mourn the 12 Armenian provinces annexed by Turkey. More a pilgrimage site than a tourist stop, the park is both profoundly moving and deeply disturbing.

The greatest surprise is the restaurants and the lively nightlife that begins as soon as the plates are emptied.

A full meal of Armenian specialties, accompanied with wine, costs about \$12, delivering wonderful memories at remarkably affordable prices. At night, joyful revellers move through the main streets in waves. Food and drinks are served on terraces with an authentic Mediterranean flavour.

"Armenia is a destination that will open the eyes of a curious traveller seeking something beyond the well-worn pathways of tourism," says Karanian.

***Benoit Legault*** is a Montreal-based writer. His trip to Armenia was subsidized by the Armenia Marriott Hotel and by Lufthansa Airlines.