



Sacred Armenia

Early Christian Monasteries & modern-day Yerevan

5–13 September 2025 (ML 774)

9 days

Lecturer: Ian Colvin

Monasteries and other sacred buildings from as early as the seventh century.

Outstanding mountainous landscape.

Time to get to know Yerevan, with its squares, cafés and street-life.

Comfortable hotels and surprisingly good food.

Combine this tour with *Georgia Uncovered*, 15–25 September 2025 (ML 785).

Of all the lands straddling east and west, the nation of Armenia is perhaps least like a gateway and most like a frontier. 'Unique' is a lazy and unenlightening epithet with which to characterise distant lands, but Armenia, both ancient and modern, Asian and European, melting-pot and defiantly individual, is fully deserving of the description. Its long and tenacious history is one of tragedy and renewal. The heralding of a 'New Armenia', following a peaceful uprising led by Nikol Pashinyan against corruption and single-party rule, signals the latest upward curve.

At its apogee in the first century BC, Armenia stretched from the Mediterranean to the Caspian, and almost to the Black Sea. For the next three centuries, however, it would suffer conquest and reconquest as the Romans and the Parthians traded blows in the southern Caucasus, with intermittent periods of self-rule keeping the flame of independence alive.

It was in large part to keep themselves distinct from the two vast surrounding empires that the Armenians adopted the new religion of Christianity in AD 301, developing a new alphabet a hundred years after that. These two markers of identity survived domination by Byzantines, Arabs, Mongols, Turks and Russians, as did many spectacular religious buildings, which were built to withstand not just invasions but earthquakes too.

Armenia's sacred architecture was a greater influence on medieval Europe than is commonly assumed, after its round towers and cross-plans were noted by returning crusaders. Thick-walled, built from local tuff or basalt, and housing a particularly severe strain of eastern Christianity, there is a resplendent austerity about these churches which is only heightened by their frequently spectacular natural surroundings.



Yerevan, mid-18th-century engraving

Many of the finest, including the rock-hewn Geghard and the UNESCO world heritage site of Echmiadzin, are easily visited from the capital, Yerevan. And while calling Yerevan the most sensitively-remodelled of all former Soviet cities may sound like damnation with the faintest praise imaginable, today it is attractive and confident, its proliferation of cafés, galleries and public spaces making it a truly pleasant place to spend time. In the north of the country are two more UNESCO-listed monasteries, at Sanahin and Haghpat; both tell the story of Armenian religion and cultural endurance.

Meanwhile Yerevanis live, work and socialise in the literal and metaphorical shadow of Ararat, still Armenia's most emotive symbol despite now being on Turkish land.

A few hundred yards from the border, the monastery of Khor Virap, which proudly boasts the dungeon where St Gregory the Illuminator was incarcerated, defiantly advertises the indomitable Armenian Christian tradition.

Itinerary

Day 1. Fly at c. 11.30am from London Heathrow to Yerevan via Paris (Air France), arriving c. 1.20am the following day. Transfer to the hotel in the heart of the city. First of three nights in Yerevan.

Day 2: Yerevan. A leisurely start this morning. The day begins with a visit to the comprehensive and fascinating State Museum of Armenian History. At the National Art

Gallery see collections from Armenia, Russia and Western Europe.

Day 3: Echmiadzin, Yerevan. In the morning, visit the Matenadaran, a repository of 17,000 illuminated manuscripts. The Museum of the Armenian Genocide is all the more powerful for its simplicity. After lunch, drive to Echmiadzin, the seat of the Armenian Apostolic Church, also a UNESCO world heritage site. The vast ruined cathedral at neighbouring Zvartnots tells of the extraordinary ambition of early architects.

Day 4: Amberd, Dzoraget. The ruins of Amberd Fortress, dramatically located on the southern slopes of Mount Ararat, date back to the 12th century, although it has been a stronghold since the seventh. In the afternoon, drive to Dzoraget. First of two nights here.

Day 5: Akhtala, Alaverdi. The 13th-century frescoes in Akhtala are strongly influenced by Byzantium. The monasteries at Haghpat and Sanahin, both UNESCO-listed sites, are both fine examples of Armenian sacred architecture.

Day 6: Vanadzor, Dilijan, Lake Sevan. Visit a stone-carver who continues the tradition of cutting khachkars (cross-stones), characteristic of Medieval Christian Armenian art. Drive to Lake Sevan, and the peerlessly situated Sevanavank monastery that overlooks it. First of three nights in Yerevan.

Day 7: Khor Virap, Noravank, Yerevan. Visit the Khor Virap monastery in the foothills

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of Mount Ararat, where St Gregory the Illuminator was imprisoned. Hidden from view in a remote valley, Noravank, the masterwork of the architect and sculptor Momik, is perhaps the most beautiful of Armenia's 13th-century monasteries.

Day 8: Geghard, Garni. Much of the monastery at Geghard is carved out of the cliffside. The Hellenic temple at Garni is the last remaining pre-Christian building in Armenia.

Day 9. The morning flight from Yerevan, via Paris, arrives London Heathrow at c. 4.30pm.

For those combining the tour with *Georgia Uncovered*, fly at c. 9.30am from Yerevan to Tbilisi (Georgian Airlines), arriving c. 10.00am. Transfer to the hotel for the first of two nights before the tour begins.

Lecturer

Ian Colvin. Historian and Byzantinist specialising in Late Antiquity and the South Caucasus, with interests in the wider history of the region. Trained at Oxford, he is now a researcher at the University of Cambridge. He has directed an ongoing archaeological expedition to ancient Archaeopolis in the South Caucasus since 2001, and leads a number of tours in the region.

Practicalities

Included: travel by private air-conditioned coach throughout; breakfasts, 5 lunches and 7 dinners with wine, water and coffee; all admission to museums, churches and sites; all tips for restaurant staff, drivers and guides; all state and airport taxes; the services of the lecturer and a local guide.

Accommodation. **Armenia Marriott Hotel, Yerevan** (marriott.com): a 4-star hotel in a central location. **The Avan Dzoraget** (avan-dzoraget.tufenkianheritage.com): a small and stylish hotel in a wonderful riverside location, equivalent to a 4-star. *Single rooms are doubles for sole use throughout.*

How strenuous? You will be on your feet for long periods. Many of the sites are reached by steep, uneven steps often without handrails. There are 220 steps to a monastery. The tour would not be suitable for anyone who has difficulties with everyday walking and stairclimbing. There are 4 coach journeys of over 2 hours (average distance by coach per day: 72 miles).

Group size: between 10 and 22 participants.

Combining the tour with *Georgia Uncovered*.

Included, in addition to the tours: flight (standard class) with Georgian Airways from Yerevan to Tbilisi on 13 September 2025; airport transfer; accommodation for two nights in Tbilisi from 13–15 September 2025; breakfasts; all state and airport taxes.