

ARMENIA

PREFACE

Armenia is home to one of the world's oldest and most durable civilizations. Three thousand years of history tell a powerful tale of conquest, foreign domination and resurgence. Throughout it all, the country's people have sustained a clear sense of national, ethnic, and religious identity.

Part of the Soviet Union from 1921-1991, a newly independent Armenia is working hard to fulfill the promise of democracy and a market economy. The transition has been difficult. In addition to the natural hardships faced by all command economies undergoing reform, Armenia faces blockades and sanctions resulting from a bitter conflict with Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh region.

Following independence Armenia was virtually without electric power for two years. Its well-developed economy—one of the richest in the Soviet Union—was simply crushed. Recovery has been slow. Now, however, the worst is over. The dram, the national currency, is stable. Petroleum and gas imports are flowing steadily. Moreover, the power sector has been reorganized to dramatically improve efficiency. As a result, consumers have steady, reliable electrical service.

With traditional resilience, the country is slowly climbing out of an abyss, even though Armenia's borders with Azerbaijan and Turkey are closed. Although the traditional manufacturing base is shattered, small and medium-sized businesses are opening all over the capital, and, to a lesser extent, in the regions. A wide variety of consumer goods are available in local markets, kiosks and stores. The metro is running; car traffic is rolling all day long. Much, however, is contingent on a peaceful political resolution to the volatile Nagorno-Karabakh situation.

AREA, GEOGRAPHY, AND CLIMATE

Armenia is located in the South Caucasus, at the intersection of Europe and Asia. It covers a total land area of 29,800 square kilometers, which is slightly larger than the state of Maryland. Armenia is a landlocked country bordered by Azerbaijan, Georgia, Iran and Turkey.

The climate is highland continental. It is dry, with an average of 550mm (21.6 inches) of annual rainfall. In the Ararat Valley, where Yerevan is located, there is far less rain, with an average of 200mm to 250mm (7.9 to 10 inches).

Seasonal extremes are pronounced in the Ararat Valley. Temperatures can approach the record summer high of 42°C (107.6°F) or plunge towards the record winter low of -30°C (-22°F). Mean temperatures are more temperate, however. July readings give an average high range of from 25°C (77°F) to 30°C (86°F). The January low range averages from -5°C (23°F) to -7°C (19°F). Autumns are long and golden; Armenia enjoys around 2700 hours of sunshine each year.

The country rests on a high mountainous plateau cut by fast flowing rivers. The over-grazed hills boast little true forest, but many of the steeper slopes are dressed with small shrubs and second growth. Good soil is plentiful in the Arax River Basin, and sheltered valleys across the country host pastures and prolific fruit orchards. The scenery along the highways is often dramatic, with high mountains shadowing green pastures ribboned with clear, cold streams.

Twenty-percent of Armenia's land is given over to pasture and 17% to agriculture. Three thousand and fifty square kilometers is under irrigation.

At 4,096 meters (13,438 feet), Mount Aragats is the highest point in the country. The altitude of Yerevan is 1,000 meters (3,281 feet) above sea level, which is not usually a factor for health reasons.

The interesting geology consists mostly of young igneous and volcanic rocks including obsidian. Armenia is honeycombed with geologic faults and remains seismically active. The effects of a severe earthquake centered in Spitak in 1988 are still evident.

POPULATION

According to the 2001 census (the census is being conducted every 10 years), Armenia's population was roughly 3 million people with ethnic Armenians making up more than 98% of the total. Yezidis, ethnic Russians and ethnic Greeks make up less than 2% of the overall population. While more than 90% of Armenians are nominally affiliated with the Armenian Apostolic Church, there are comparatively small, but growing, communities of other faiths. The government does not provide official figures for religious adherents, but congregants offer the following estimates: Catholic, both Roman and Mekhitarist (Armenian Uniate) (approximately 180,000); Yezidi, an ethnically Kurdish cultural group whose religion includes elements derived from Zoroastrianism, Islam, and animism (approximately 40,000 nominal adherents); unspecified "charismatic" Christian (approximately 22,700); Jehovah's Witnesses (approximately 8,500); Armenian Evangelical Church (approximately 5,000); Baptist (approximately 2,000); the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) (2,000); Greek Orthodox (approximately 1,200); Seventh-day Adventist (950); Pentecostal (approximately 700); Jewish (500 to 1,000), and Baha'i (over 200).

Armenians have their own highly distinctive alphabet and language. Ninety-six percent of the people in the country speak Armenian, while 40% of the population speak Russian as well. Armenia is totally literate; 99% of the population can read and write.

Most adults in Yerevan can communicate in Russian. English is increasing in popularity, but is rarely spoken with any fluency outside of educated circles. Cyrillic script can still be seen on many street and building signs.

Caucasian hospitality is legendary and stems from ancient tradition. Social gatherings center around sumptuous presentations of course after course of elaborately prepared, well-seasoned (but not spicy-hot) food. The host or hostess will often put morsels on a guest's plate whenever

it is empty or fill his or her glass when it gets low. After a helping or two it is acceptable to refuse politely or, more simply, just leave a little uneaten food.

Armenia is by tradition a male-dominated society. Women moving about alone should be careful about making eye contact or giving friendly smiles to men. Indeed, women traveling or eating by themselves are sometimes harassed without cause, mainly by groups of men in cars who have been drinking. Violence against foreign women in such situations is very rare, but it has occurred.

Ethnocentrism born of the country's cohesive homogeneity and long isolation occasionally causes problems for visitors. Light-haired or fair-skinned people may receive unwanted attention, as may people of African descent. Occasional acts of aggression are by no means restricted to Americans, and it should be emphasized that virtually all of this behavior comes from children or unruly teens.

Such belligerence appears to be the rare exception. As a rule Armenians both young and old are cheerful, friendly and polite, more curious than anything else. Americans are well regarded, in general. On the whole, Armenia is considered very safe and people posted here move about freely in both town and country, by day and by night.

PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS

Armenia ("Hayastan" in Armenian) is a republic. On November 27, 2005, the current constitution was adopted through a national referendum.

Armenia consists of ten provinces plus the capital: Aragatsotn, Ararat, Armavir, Gegharkunik, Lori, Kotayk, Shirak, Syunik, Tavush, and Vayots Dzor, plus the capital city of Yerevan.

The head of state is the President.

The head of government is the Prime Minister, who is appointed and dismissed by the President. The President also appoints and dismisses the members of the government, as proposed by the Prime Minister.

Parliamentary elections were held in 2007, presidential elections were held in 2008. Serge Sargsyan is the President of Armenia. Pro-government parties retained a majority of seats in the parliament. The next parliamentary elections will be in 2012, the next presidential elections in 2013.

The unicameral legislative branch is known as the National Assembly. There are 131 MPs; 90 are elected by proportional (party) list, and 41 from majoritarian (single mandate) districts.

Currently the ruling coalition is composed of the Republican Party, the Country of Law Party (Orinats Yerkir), and the Prosperous Armenia Party.

There is a wide array of opposition parties, some of which have coalesced into Armenian National Congress.

The new constitution establishes new guidelines for the country's judicial system, much of which is not yet fully in place. A new Criminal Code was passed and took effect in 2003, replacing Soviet-era laws.

Many international organizations are represented in Armenia. The United Nations is very active, as are the EU and the International Financial Institutions. In addition, there are scores of non-governmental organizations. These serve a variety of needs, ranging from humanitarian aid to democratic as well as economic development.

A cease-fire has held in Nagorno-Karabakh, a predominantly Armenian region within Azerbaijan, since 1994. The unresolved confrontation, which has resulted in closed borders with Azerbaijan and Turkey, hinders Armenia's full economic development. Even with this encumbrance, however, Armenia has been able to achieve double-digit growth rates for several years running.

Lastly, no discussion of public institutions would be complete without mentioning the vast Armenian Diaspora, both in the U.S. and Europe. It has become a bridge to the outside world for many Armenians and influences the direction of the country with resources and ideas.

ARTS, SCIENCE, AND EDUCATION

Yerevan is the country's intellectual, as well as its administrative, center. Yerevan State University, the State Medical Institute and the State Engineering University are located in the capital — providing the foundation of the country's higher education system.

The American University of Armenia has graduate programs in Business and Law, among others. The institution owes its existence to the combined efforts of the Government of Armenia, The Armenian General Benevolent Union, USAID, and the Boalt Hall School of Law at the University of California at Berkeley.

The extension programs and the library at AUA form a new focal point for English-language intellectual life in the city. Many of the country's most successful young entrepreneurs are graduates of this institution.

As might be expected from so literate a society, Yerevan is a city of culture. The Matenadaran Library contains a priceless collection of ancient manuscripts, chiefly Armenian, but also Persian, Arab, Roman, and Greek.

The city's National Art Gallery has more than 16,000 works that date back to the middle ages. It houses paintings by many European masters. The Modern Art Museum, The Children's Picture Gallery, and the Saryan Museum are only a few of the other noteworthy collections of fine art on display in Yerevan. Moreover, many private galleries are in operation, with many more opening each year. They feature rotating exhibitions and sales.

The world-class Armenian Philharmonic Orchestra performs at the beautifully refurbished city Opera House, where you can also attend a full season of opera. In addition, there are several chamber ensembles highly regarded for their musicianship, including the National Chamber Orchestra of Armenia and the Serenade Orchestra. Classical music can also be heard at one of

several smaller venues, including the State Music Conservatory and the Chamber Orchestra Hall.

The open music fest held in August and September at the cinema Moscow open air theater brings in ensembles from home and abroad to perform in a delightful setting.

Jazz is popular, especially in the summer when live performances are a regular occurrence at one of the city's many outdoor cafes.

Also, there are many drama theaters in Yerevan hosting plays in Armenian, Russian, and, occasionally, English.

Yerevan's Vernissage (arts and crafts market), close to Republic Square, bustles with hundreds of vendors selling a variety of crafts on Saturdays and Sundays and a few weekdays (though the selection is much reduced). The market offers woodcarving, antiques, fine lace, and the hand-knotted wool carpets and kilims that are a Caucasus specialty. Obsidian, which is found locally, is crafted into an amazing assortment of jewelry and ornamental objects. Armenian goldsmithery enjoys a long and distinguished tradition, populating one corner of the market with a selection of gold items. Soviet relics and souvenirs of recent Russian manufacture — nesting dolls, watches, enamel boxes, etc.— are also available at the Vernissage.

Across from the Opera House, a popular art market fills another city park on the weekends.

Armenia's long history as a crossroads of the ancient world has resulted in a landscape with innumerable fascinating archeological sites to explore. Medieval, Iron Age, Bronze Age and even Stone Age sites are all within a few hours drive from the city. All but the most spectacular remain virtually undiscovered, allowing you to view churches and fortresses in their original settings.

In Soviet times Armenia boasted very high numbers of scientists and technical specialists — a staggering amount in proportion to its population. Many of the USSR's most important facilities and institutes were located here. Much of the basic research has stopped, however, due to the country's impoverished condition.

COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY

Armenia's economy collapsed with the fall of the Soviet Union and the closure of its borders with Turkey and Azerbaijan following the dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh. After recent years of strong recovery, the Armenian economy now exceeds its size in 1990. The Armenian Government has made great progress in moving Armenia from a centralized state with a planned economy to a democratic society with a free market economic system. Armenia no longer suffers the chronic shortages it experienced in the early nineties.

Parliament has continued implementing an ambitious program of reforms aimed at restructuring the banking and financial services sector, liberalizing trade, attracting foreign investment through improved tax and customs regimes, establishing a Western accounting system, and meeting the obligations of its recent accession to the WTO. Armenia has improved land transportation routes to its neighboring trade partners, Georgia and Iran, although borders

with Turkey and Azerbaijan remain closed due to the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute. There are several weekly flights between Yerevan and Istanbul, however, despite the closed land border.

Largely due to the help of international development assistance and foreign direct investment by Diaspora Armenians, the economy has grown dramatically since 1990, with exceptionally strong growth rates either at or above 10% since 2001. This progress and fiscal stability has, in turn, earned Armenia continued support from international institutions. The IMF, the World Bank, the EBRD, as well as other financial institutions and foreign countries have extended considerable grants and loans to Armenia. International aid has sought to reduce the budget deficit, keep the local currency stable, stimulate private businesses, develop the energy, agricultural, food processing, land and air transport and social sectors, as well as continue reconstruction in the area damaged by the 1988 earthquake.

The U.S., the EU and the United Nations are the main providers of assistance to Armenia. The U.S. Millennium Challenge Corporation is poised to spend an additional \$235 million in Armenia over the next several years, in addition to exceptionally robust traditional assistance.

The long-term resolution of the country's economic problems will depend on settling the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and establishing diplomatic and trade relations with Turkey and Azerbaijan. A settlement would increase the country's industrial output and allow Armenia to fully utilize its highly educated human resources by expanding regional trade links with Azerbaijan, Turkey and the Middle East.

In the years since independence, services (telecommunications) and agriculture have consistently been Armenia's largest economic sectors. Other sectors, however, have driven Armenia's robust growth. Output in the construction sector — largely due to foreign aid and investment — accounts for the lion's share of domestic growth. Export-oriented diamond cutting and polishing stands out as one of Armenia's major earners of foreign currency. There is also a significant and growing high-tech sector.

Despite Armenia's robust growth, income disparities remain wide. This is partly attributable to the government's poor record in tax revenue collection, which has prevented it from raising levels of social expenditure. Wage rates vary widely between public and private sectors. Although real wages continue to rise, many households continue to rely on domestic agricultural production and private transfers from relatives working abroad to meet their consumption needs.

The poverty level remains high, although it is declining: the number of households living below the nationally defined poverty line fell below 40% in 2004 (the latest year for which statistics are available). The government's Poverty Reduction Strategy projects a gradual reduction in the poverty level to below 20% of households by 2015.

Although the economic recovery has led to an increase in employment in those sectors that have benefited from foreign investment, overall employment has stagnated over the past several years. Using International Labour Organization methodology (as opposed to official statistics) the unemployment rate is 31.6%. A major development challenge for Armenia's future is to ensure that a greater share of Armenians enjoy the benefits of growth.

TRANSPORTATION

Automobiles

A car is very desirable, though not absolutely a necessity in Yerevan.

In general, taxis are affordable (about \$2 a ride), and a clean and well-run metro line operates in the city center.

Yerevan's streets, though improving, are often rough going off the main avenues. A car that can handle potholes (i.e. with clearance and a good suspension) makes driving less harrowing. The national highways outside of Yerevan are mostly in good condition. Main routes are usually well surfaced enough to allow for moderate cruising speeds with occasional bad spots. Secondary routes are sometimes quite degraded. Ongoing construction, slowing traffic in the short term, is positive evidence of the Diaspora-funded march toward better infrastructure.

The road culture can be aggressive and undisciplined. Drivers must remain alert for any possible eventuality at all times. Constant jaywalking and poor lighting at night add to the danger in cities and villages. Yerevan's roads are a place for skilled, confident drivers with quick reflexes.

Local Transportation

Public surface transportation in Yerevan is crowded and the equipment is old. There are buses, trolley buses and even a funicular. Taxis are available and reasonably priced. Two dollars is the average fare for a ride within the downtown area. Many taxis are not metered so passengers must negotiate; expect to pay a slight premium if you can't negotiate in Armenian or Russian. Tips are appreciated, but are not expected.

There are "Marshrutki" (mini bus) taxis as well. They run specified routes at varied rates ranging from 50 to 200 drams (15 to 65 cents). Operation and maintenance of these vehicles can be questionable.

A limited metro line operates in Yerevan that is generally clean, timely and uncrowded. The price of a token is 50 drams (15 cents).

There are inter-city buses and very few trains.

Regional Transportation

There are no regular commercial flights between cities in Armenia. Passenger train service is sub-standard. For example, the train to Tbilisi takes 14-16 hours, runs an erratic schedule, and is uncomfortable. (The same ride by car takes from five to six hours.) Most internal long-distance travel is accomplished by car or bus.

Strained relations with Turkey over Nagorno-Karabakh have closed that nearby land border. Because of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, direct travel to Azerbaijan is impossible from Armenia.

The Armenian leg of the highway to Tbilisi is in good condition, and has been improved by the recent opening of a two-kilometer tunnel. The drive from Yerevan to Tbilisi takes 5-6 hours, depending on weather conditions.

Surface routes to southern Armenia are open most of the year. The regional roads are passable for most of the year, but in the dead of winter some routes close from time to time due to heavy snow in high mountain passes.

Travel to nearby and neighboring countries is generally accomplished by air. The schedule is variable; most flights are weekly, while others leave three to five days a week. There are daily flights to Moscow and Tbilisi. Six main carriers currently serve Yerevan: Armavia — The Armenian National Carrier, Aeroflot International Airlines, Air France, Czech Airlines, BMI (British Midland Airway Limited) - code shared flight with British Airways, but operated by BMI and Austrian Airlines. Other smaller carriers offering regional flights operate from Yerevan as well.

Though the list seems to change on a weekly basis, there are currently flights to and from Yerevan to the following cities: Vienna, Moscow, London, Paris, Prague, Amsterdam, Athens, Istanbul, Dubai, Aleppo, Beirut, Tehran, Kiev, St. Petersburg, Tbilisi and a dozen other CIS cities.

Arrival and departure times on the most traveled routes are routinely scheduled for the most inconvenient hours (between midnight and 6am). BMI flights to London, Air France flights to Paris, and daily flights to Moscow are exceptions.

COMMUNICATIONS

Yerevan continues to struggle with infrastructure problems. The effects of these are most pronounced in the IT sector, and affect daily life through sometimes substandard telephone lines and slow dial up Internet access. Improvements are promised.

Telephones and Telecommunications

There is cellular service in Yerevan.

Internet

There are several dial-up Internet providers with varying, but affordable, rates. One of the better known is Arminco. Internet cafes are beginning to proliferate, but do not boast the most comfortable atmosphere.

Improved service and access to the World Wide Web are possible with leased lines or a radio modem. These services can run into hundreds of dollars a month. Also, there is high-speed Internet access at the Hotel Marriott Armenia I Business Center. There are many cafes and restaurants equipped with WiFi. Predictably, the Internet scene is changing all the time.

Radio and TV

There are several FM radio stations in Yerevan that play a variety of music. American popular music is ubiquitous, but you also get an interesting mix of Armenian traditional and contemporary, Iranian, Turkish, and Russian music.

Regular TV consists of local Russian and Armenian programming over VHF broadcast bands totaling 5-7 channels and CNN International in English (though often with poor reception). A local cable AATV company, Super System, provides digital cable TV service with around 65

channels, 30 of these channels are in English, including CNN, BBC, MTV, Discovery Channel, Cartoon Network and several others. The installation of the digital decoder costs around \$400, plus a monthly fee of about \$35 for the full package.

In addition, there are many broadcast satellites whose footprints cover Yerevan.

Newspapers, Magazines, and Journals

There is a local weekly publication that provides some Armenian news in English "*Noyan Tapan Highlights*". Western periodicals in English may be reviewed at English-language American University of Armenia Library.

HEALTH AND MEDICINE

Medical Facilities

Hospitals in Yerevan include Nairi Hospital, St. Astvatsamayr Medical Center, Children's Hospital and Nork-Marash Cardiac Hospital. All approach Western standards for cleanliness, technology and care.

Yerevan has several dental clinics that meet international professional standards. There are a number of dental practices that can provide routine cleaning, complete simple procedures, crown work, root canals and other major dental work, as well as respond to emergencies. Several of these clinics offer a full range of orthodontic services.

Community Health

Yerevan is a relatively clean city with functioning sanitation services. That being said, litter is a problem. Incomplete construction sites and poorly maintained infrastructure can present a hazard in the form of missing manhole covers, incomplete sidewalks, rusted metal and the like. The majority of stores and restaurants are clean and well maintained.

The city water supply is usually adequate and clean, but it is not treated to U.S. standards. Water from the tap should be briskly boiled for three-five minutes before drinking. Bottled water is inexpensive and ubiquitous; bottles range in size from 0.5 to 5 liters.

Yerevan is home to a species of white scorpion that presents no serious health risk, but is often a topic of conversation in the summer. The scorpion's sting is the equivalent of that of a bee or wasp — except in the rare instance of an allergic reaction. Scorpions have been found in some houses, usually in basements and closets, but they are primarily outdoor pests. Check your boots and shoes before slipping them on, especially when camping.

Snakes are a more serious outdoor danger. There are four species of poisonous snake in Armenia. The most poisonous are *Vipera Lebetina* (locally known as *Gurza*), *Vipera Kaznakovi*, *Vipera Raddei*, and *Vipera Ursinii* (English equivalents unknown). Fifty percent of all bites occur in children 12 years old or younger during the summer months of July and August. Take extra precaution when hiking and camping, both popular activities for the Foreign Service community here. Wear high boots and heavy long pants when hiking and keep a sharp eye out. Children

should be discouraged from playing in thick grass in high summer — even in some less developed parts of the city.

If a bite occurs, call the health unit as we and most large hospitals have antivenin.

Alcoholic beverages are generally considered true to their labeling; however, throughout the CIS, adulteration of bootleg alcohol with poisonous wood alcohol is known to occur. Armenia is famous for its cognac; buy it, and all alcohol, from reputable sources.

Preventive Measures

There is a very serious microbial condition known as Brucellosis that can be contracted from some hoofed animals. One vector is from unpasteurized milk from goats or cows. Homemade Armenian cheese from village producers is the main culprit. This rustic salty cheese should be purchased from quality stores and markets, not from street vendors. Cheese made by the larger producers is generally considered safe, as is imported cheese. Be cautious about unfamiliar cheeses. Yogurt and sour cream from commercial producers is considered safe. Again, be careful of village produce.

Giardia, a water-born intestinal parasite, is present and its source is usually from well water or streams. Again, tap water should be boiled for three-five minutes before consumption.

New arrivals should be aware that strenuous exercise at Yerevan's elevation could take one by surprise. Serious runners should take it easy at first and 'test the waters.' There is a concern of shortness of breath, fainting or vertigo.

Armenia is notoriously dry. Stay well hydrated in winter by drinking plenty of water or juice to help avoid upper respiratory complaints. These are common in Armenia. Hats and sun block are a necessity for any prolonged activity outside in the summer. It is also important to drink lots of juice or water in hot, dry conditions. Tea, coffee or soft drinks that contain caffeine are no substitute for good water as caffeine acts as a diuretic.

Recommended immunizations for Yerevan include Typhoid, Diphtheria-Tetanus, Hepatitis A and Hepatitis B. People who expect to be out in the country or whose activities could put them in the way of a dog bite might want to consider a preventive rabies series, although the disease is not reported.

Availability of familiar brands of American over-the-counter and prescription pharmaceuticals are improving in Yerevan. Most OTC medications are available. Substitutions are available too, but you have to know what you are looking for. To be on the safe side, we encourage you bring a full supply of prescription medicines, favorite over-the-counter medications, and health supplies you frequently use.

Armenia is in an earthquake zone. Without being overly dramatic, and with the full understanding that the possibility of an earthquake at any given place and time is statistically remote, it would nonetheless be prudent to review some materials on how to prepare for, and how to behave during, a seismic event. FEMA maintains literature on this subject. Basic precautions include keeping several days supply of drinking water on hand at all times and remaining indoors if there is a quake; the greatest hazard comes from falling building glass or roofing materials, rather than from complete building collapse.

YEREVAN

Yerevan, the capital of Armenia, is in the west-central part of the country in the Ararat Valley, a plateau about 3,000 feet above sea level. The fertile valley, settled since pre-history, is surrounded by snowcapped mountains, and dominated by the famous Mt. Ararat (16,000 feet). (Check out the live webcam of Mt. Ararat at www.arminco.com/livewebcam.html.) With the exception of the low-lying center city, Yerevan is a town of hills and winding streets. Pockets of old-fashioned charm give way to Soviet-era apartment blocks, with the rural countryside only minutes in any direction. The Republic Square and Opera House offer the finest examples of the tuff stone facades that color most of Yerevan.

The city is the cultural as well as the administrative center of the nation. With just over a million people it is home to roughly a third of the country's population. Armenia's strong economic growth over the past few years is most evident in Yerevan. New boutiques, fancy coffee houses and art galleries have spread all over the city. Shiny BMWs, SUVs, and black-windowed Mercedes weave among the boxy Ladas and industrious marshrutki.

SECURITY

Armenia is an exceptionally tolerant country, and Americans or members of any racial or religious group are not specific targets of violent crime. Although recent political unrest degenerated into violence, neither police nor protesters specifically attacked foreigners. Overall Armenia is safer than most American cities, but because violent crime can happen anywhere, Americans are advised to take the usual precautions: keep a low profile, avoid walking alone at night in poorly lit, unknown areas, etc.

Most crime against Americans in Armenia involves petty theft, for example pick pocketing or vehicle break-ins to steal objects left visible on the passenger seat. American passports are particularly valuable and thus potential targets. Again, the prudent American should take the same precautions she would elsewhere in the world: maintain a low profile, leave valuables such as wallets, purses, jewelry, passports or large sums of money in a hotel or residence whenever possible, and carry necessary cash and identification in a front pocket. Do not leave valuables or personal items of any kind visible on the passenger seat of a car where they may tempt passerby. Armenia is primarily a cash economy, credit cards and ATMs are accepted only at major institutions such as reputable hotels. The incidence of crime in Yerevan, including violent crime, is relatively low in comparison to major metropolitan areas of the United States.

Western visitors may appear as rich targets and are susceptible to thefts from unlocked premises and pickpockets or purse-snatchers. Common sense and good judgment should be exercised in activities by keeping a low profile, and being alert to any signs of surveillance. One should maintain continual awareness of one's surroundings, especially when times and places are predictable, e.g. arriving/departing hotels, parked cars, or scheduled appointments. In general, most individuals report feeling a sense of safety living here, and complete a full tour without being the victim of even petty crime.

Day-in and day-out traffic poses the most danger to people in Armenia. The importance of following the fundamentals of driver and pedestrian safety has never been more important. All drivers are encouraged to wear seat belts, drive defensively at all times, and avoid confrontations with other drivers. As in the United States, vehicles in Armenia are left-hand drive and traffic moves on the right side of the road. The most significant difference between Armenian and American traffic laws is that left turns are illegal at many traffic lights. Instead, a driver must drive straight through the light, proceed up the street until she may make a U-turn, and then turn right once she reaches the traffic light from the opposite direction.

Minibuses, known locally as marshrutki, are poorly maintained and frequently involved in accidents. Be wary of drunk drivers, especially at night, during weekends and on the main highway between Yerevan and the resort areas of Tsaghkadzor and Sevan. Pedestrians are cautioned that vehicles often drive on sidewalks and against traffic. Besides a few well maintained vital arteries, Armenia's roads are often riddled with potholes and poorly lit. In rural areas paved roads can unexpectedly degenerate into narrow, gravel tracks. Avoid rural roads at night. These factors especially warrant attention in light of the country's long, icy winters and mountainous terrain.

Travelers should avoid the old highway between the towns of Ijevan and Noyemberyan in the Tavush region. This portion of the road is declared off-limits because it lies too close to the cease fire line between Armenian and Azerbaijani forces, a line which has seen numerous cease fire violations over the years.

The majority of the population in Armenia still walks or takes public transportation. Most intersections have crosswalks and pedestrian lights, but many do not work properly. Stay aware of your surroundings because most vehicles won't necessarily give you the right of way. Buses and marshrutki stop just about anywhere and everywhere they please, so make sure you take a good look around before stepping out into the street.

Yerevan has a large population of stray dogs. Please use extreme caution when coming into contact with one. They may look friendly but many are hungry, territorial and skittish from being mistreated.

Among the other threats faced in Armenia are earthquakes. Armenia is located in a very seismically active region. It is important to note that Armenia was ravaged by a large earthquake in 1988. Another major safety concern is Metsamor, an aging Russian-built nuclear power-plant that was re-opened in 1995. (Note: Metsamor was shut down in 1989 due, in large part, to the 1988 earthquake.) Metsamor is 18 miles from Yerevan, and in the years since its reopening, has undergone substantial IAEA-funded safety upgrades.

There are no known specific terrorist threats against U.S. facilities or interests in Armenia.

HOUSING

Yerevan is comprised of apartments and houses often with small gardens in the front and/or back of the house.

Utilities and Equipment

Electricity is 220v-50hz. There are frequent, sometimes extremely powerful, spikes. Bring surge protectors and uninterruptible power supplies (UPS's) for computers and any other expensive or delicate electrical equipment. European-style round-prong sockets are used in all housing. Adapter plugs for appliances with power-switching properties are needed and available locally, or should be brought with you. Non-power switching electrical appliances with 110v-60hz input require a transformer. Some appliances like electric clocks cannot be adapted in this way.

Not all houses have grounded outlets, so extra care should always be exercised around appliances. Hand-held equipment (hair dryers, shaver) requires extra caution.

FOOD

For most of the year an amazing cornucopia of delicious, very inexpensive raw fruits and vegetables overflow the stalls at the open-air markets. Many of the best fruits and vegetables (the delicious cherries, buckets of raspberries, blackberries, strawberries, sweet peaches, apricots and melons) are only available in season. Winter sees a marked reduction in the selection available. That being said, the basics can be found year round, though for higher prices. Tomatoes, cucumbers, green bell peppers, apples, oranges, grapefruit, bananas, onions, potatoes, carrots, beets, garlic, basil, cilantro, and even salad greens are always available. The architecturally notable covered market in the city center boasts the most consistent supply, and features a variety of imported products, but fruit and vegetable stands can be found in most neighborhoods.

Fresh pork, lamb, beef, chicken and a limited variety of excellent quality fresh fish are available year round. Fresh farm eggs are available everywhere. UHT-boxed milk in 0.5%, 2% and 3.5% fat content, as well as full-fat powdered milk can be purchased at a number of Western oriented grocery stores. UHT boxed cream is also available. High-quality butter, yogurt, and a limited variety of very good cheeses are widely sold. (Most recognizable cheeses, such as parmesan, mozzarella, and brie are consistently available).

A variety of Western soft drinks, candy, cigarettes, ice-cream bars, beer, wine and liquor are available. Some imported foreign food items are available, such as soy sauce, coconut milk and tabasco sauce, but for much higher prices than you would find in the U.S. Baby food is available, but the selection is not as wide as in the U.S.

Dried fruits like raisins, apricots and figs, as well as many kinds of salami and cured meat, can be found in abundance. A limited selection of international coffees can be purchased whole bean or ground from several new high-end specialty stores and cafes. Also available are pasta, flour, rice, dried beans, baking soda, sugar, and other basic cooking supplies. More specialized ingredients should be included in HHE or consumables shipments.

Yerevan is home to hundreds of restaurants, more and more with an international focus. There are Italian, Thai, Mexican, French, Indian, Chinese, Bulgarian, Belgian, Irish, Georgian, Middle Eastern, classic American, and other exotic cuisines to complement the profusion of dining establishments offering tasty Armenian specialties.

Fried chicken, donuts and pizza are readily available and rival any back home.

Armenian food is excellent. It is a straight-forward cuisine that relies on the country's excellent produce and demands the freshest ingredients. Lavash (flat bread), white cheese, and marinated grilled meat provide the non-vegetable foundation of a typical meal. Local wine, beer, vodka, or Armenia's internationally renowned cognac are served alongside a wide variety of fruit juices. (Apricot and sour cherry juices are particular favorites.) Fresh fruit, baklava, and other baked goods finish off the meal, washed down with strong coffee or fragrant tea.

CLOTHING

The supply of ready-made clothes available is limited and often not to American taste.

The sun can be quite strong, especially in the mountains, so hats, sun block, and good sunglasses are needed. Bring some effective winter gear, including good snow boots. It does not stay cold very long, but temperatures can get very low. Long underwear will be appreciated on some days. Keep in mind that many local buildings are not heated.

Washable fabrics should be chosen where possible, although there is dry-cleaning service available. Sturdy walking shoes are a must; walking is a good way to get around in Yerevan.

Note: Shorts are not worn by men and very rarely by women.

SUPPLIES AND SERVICES

What you bring by way of supplies is mainly a matter of preference, not absolute necessity. Most household goods are available here, from cleaning supplies to paper goods, but they seldom bear a familiar brand name and often the quality is not up to U.S. standards. Prices can also be quite high for some things (especially imported goods), such as sponges, welcome mats, high-quality mops, etc. Many familiar brands are hard to find.

Basic Services

The following services are available and adequate (sometimes excellent, and almost always very affordable): haircutting and coloring, shoe repair, taxis, tailoring, dressmaking, dry cleaning, auto repair, lock smith, picture framing, etc. In short, most average needs can be met.

Religious Activities

Of the numerous churches in Yerevan, most are Armenian Apostolic. That being said, there are also many other local congregations including Baptist, Catholic, Seventh-day Adventist, Mormon, as well as those served by a Synagogue or Mosque.

Yerevan Protestant Gathering Fellowship, the English Service of the Evangelical Church of Armenia, was established at the initiative of the Armenian Missionary Association of America (AMAA) over six years ago. English language services are on Sundays.

There is also a small Jewish Synagogue; the Services are on Saturdays and high holidays and are conducted in Hebrew.

The Catholic Churches in Yerevan have Masses or Divine Liturgies on Sundays. First Communion, Baptisms, and Confessions can be arranged. At the church in Avan, the Divine Liturgy is in Armenian with the readings and sermon also given in English. There are booklets with the Armenian, transliterated Armenian, and English language so that you can follow along. The Sisters of Charity (Mother Teresa's order) have an English language mass each Sunday at 3 p.m.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day-Saints (Mormons) has numerous branches in Yerevan and around the country. While there are no services in English, many non-Armenians worship in the Arabkir, Center, or Ajapnyak (near Vahakni) branches and sometimes hold Family Home Evenings and other activities in English.

The Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate has services in Russian on Saturdays and Sundays. There are vigils on feast day evenings and liturgies on feast day mornings.

EDUCATION

Dependent Education

There are several options available for pre-school instruction. The International Center for the Young has programs for 3 to 4 year olds, and the classes are taught by English-speaking Armenian staff. The International Co-op School has a program in English for ages 2.5 to 5 and the French Lycee has a program in French for children ages 3 to 5.

The QSI International School of Yerevan (QSIY) is an independent, coeducational day school, which offers a rigorous educational program to children of all nationalities ages 3 to 13. Children of ages 14 through 17 are enrolled at QSIY, but take very challenging core courses through correspondence from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. QSIY was founded in 1995. The school year is comprised of 3 trimesters, extending from August 26 to December 17, January 11 to March 24, and April 4 to June 17.

The school is governed by the Board of Directors of Quality Schools International, the membership of which is formed as set forth in the Bylaws of Quality Schools International. An Advisory Board, composed of 6 to 10 members who reside in Armenia and are appointed by the President of Quality Schools International and the director of the QSI International School of Yerevan, assists the school in its operation.

The school offers an outcomes-based educational program with a curriculum similar to that of U.S. public and private schools. Instruction, leading to individual mastery, takes advantage of small class sizes and the diverse educational backgrounds of the students. Instruction is in English. The elementary grades are accredited by the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools.

In the 2009-2010 school year, there are nineteen full-time faculty members. Of these, eleven are American and the rest are Armenian. In addition, the school has part-time teachers for physical education, Russian, French, Armenian, art, and music. Girl Scouts, sports, dance, chess, Armenian language and other activities are offered as part of the extra-curricular program.

At the beginning of the 2009-2010 school year, the student enrollment was 71. Of the total, 36 were U.S. citizens and all others were third country nationals.

The school is located on the first and second floor of the Caritas Manufacturing Company, a furniture factory. There are, at present, 11 large, and other small, bright classrooms. The library, computer lab, offices, a multipurpose room, and 5 toilet areas complete the facility. In addition, a large playground, soccer pitch, volleyball court and an outside stage are available for outdoor activities. A wall surrounds the school, and there are 24-hour security personnel on duty.

In the 2007-2008 school year, the school's income derives from regular day school tuition. Annual tuition rates are as follows: Pre-school (3-4 years olds): \$4,000; Kindergarten (5 years olds): \$15,900; and ages 6-17: \$19,000. The one-time registration fee as well as an annual capital fund fee are included in these prices. These quoted fees are to be paid in U.S. dollars.

Email: yerevan@gsi.org

Home Page: <http://www.gsi.org/>

RECREATION AND SOCIAL LIFE

Sports

A number of sporting activities are available in Yerevan, featuring soccer and tennis, but also basketball, softball, horse back riding, swimming, go-carts, etc.

Fishing is an attractive prospect in Armenia, a country with more than 100 mountain lakes, and countless clear, fast rivers. Lake Sevan is only about 70 kilometers from Yerevan. It is one of the world's largest mountain lakes, is a popular summer tourist spot, and the reputed home of vast numbers of brown trout.

The Tsakhkadzor ski resort, less than an hour from Yerevan, is a popular destination in both summer and winter. Beautifully situated, it boasts two brand new ski lifts that opened in December 2004. The skiing and snowboarding can be quite good, especially after a good snow, but the area has limited grooming equipment, so ice and uneven surfaces can offer a challenge. They also have sleds and snowmobiles available for rent. Cross-country skiing and snowshoeing can be accomplished almost anywhere in the countryside you choose.

In the spring, summer and fall, there are several peaks to climb, and unlimited hiking trails. If you are up for a serious climb, Mt. Aragats offers the highest peak in Armenia, amazing views, and a strenuous 12 hours of trekking.

For those who like to run and socialize or socialize and run, the venerable Hash House Harriers have an active chapter in Yerevan.

Outdoor swimming pools are available for a daily or monthly fee at several hotels and there is golf and swimming at the Vahakni Country Club.

Touring and Outdoor Activities

Yerevan is an excellent base for exploring Armenia's many ancient churches, monasteries, and natural wonders.

Some of the oldest Christian monuments in the world can be found here. The architecture is fascinating and the settings dramatic; the mountainous Armenian landscape is unforgettable. Many people like to hike, climb and camp, especially since the countryside is safe for overnight camping.

There is much to see in Armenia: the intricately carved stone crosses, called "khachkars"; the soaring walls of the once impregnable fortress of Amberd; Roman mosaics at the pagan temple of Garni; the huge chambers hewn out of solid rock at the cave monastery of Geghard; dozens of other churches and ruins that hide in the country's rough, wild landscape.

The Cathedral at Etchmiadzin, built in 480, is the spiritual center of the Armenian Apostolic Church. Located about thirty minutes from Yerevan by car, Etchmiadzin Cathedral is especially memorable when visited for Sunday services. The church, its grounds, and museum contain a fine collection of ancient religious artifacts.

NOTES FOR TRAVELERS

Seven main carriers currently serve Yerevan:

Armavia, Aeroflot International Airlines, Czech Airlines, BMI (British Midland Airway Limited) - code shared flight with British Airways, but operated by BMI; Austrian Airlines and Air France.

Flights through Western Europe are encouraged. The problematic transit through Moscow, i.e., the confusing and sometimes costly transfer between two airports and regular difficulties in attaining the necessary Russian visa, handicap Aeroflot. Armavia is simply unreliable.

Other small carriers offering regional flights operate from Yerevan as well.

Though the list seems to change on a weekly basis, there are direct flights to and from Yerevan to the following cities: Vienna, Moscow, London, Paris, Prague, Amsterdam, Athens, Istanbul, Dubai, Aleppo, Beirut, Tehran, Kiev, St. Petersburg, and a dozen other CIS cities.

Flight time examples:

From the East Coast: 6 hours to London and 5 hours to Yerevan.

From Yerevan: 3.5 hours to Vienna, 3.5 hours to Moscow, 3 hours to Istanbul.

CURRENCY, BANKING, AND WEIGHTS AND MEASURES

The dram is the official currency. It is internally convertible. Currently, one U.S. dollar equals approximately 375 dram.

Armenia is a cash-based economy. Banks are not generally used.

American Express Travelers Checks are accepted at the largest of the hotels, but there are added fees.

There are many money exchanges throughout Yerevan that operate seven days a week. By law all transactions must be in Armenian drams.

The metric system of weights and measures is used here: fabric is bought by the meter, potatoes by the kilogram, gasoline by the liter, and distances are measured in kilometers.

RECOMMENDED READING

These titles and Internet sites are provided as a general indication of the material published on this country. The Department of State does not endorse the following unofficial publications or World Wide Web sites.

Books

Lonely Planet Georgia, Armenia & Azerbaijan, 3rd Ed. (2008)

Arlen, Michael J. *Passage to Ararat*. 1975.

Baliozian, Ara. *The Armenians: Their History and Culture*. 1980.

Darlymple, William. *From the Holy Mountain*. 1999.

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Der Hovanesian, Diana and Margossian, Marzbed. *Anthology of Armenian Poetry*. 1978.

Der Nersessian, Sirarpic. *The Armenians*. 1970.

Kaplan, Robert D. *Eastward to Tartary*. 2000.

Kudian, Mischa. *Lamentations of Narek*. 1977.

Lang, David Marshall. *The Armenians: A People in Exile*. 1988.

Mirak, Robert. *Torn between Two Lands*. 1983.

Panossian, Rasmik. *The Armenians: From Kings and Priests to Merchants and Commissars*. 2006.

Suny, Ronald Grigor. *Looking Toward Ararat: Armenia in Modern History*. 1993.

Walker, Christopher. *Armenia, Survival of a Nation*. 1980.

Werfel, Franz. *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*. 1934.

World Wide Web Sites

U.S. Embassy Yerevan

<http://www.usa.am>

Armenia Information

<http://www.armeniainfo.am/>

Armeniapedia: The Online Armenia Encyclopedia

<http://www.armeniapedia.org>

Armenian Research Center

<http://www.umd.umich.edu:80/dept/armenian/>

National Academy of Sciences of Armenia

<http://www.sci.am>

American University of Armenia

<http://www.aua.am>

Yerevan Physics Institute (Yerphi)

<http://www.yerphi.am>

Yerevan State University (YSU)

<http://www.yesu.am>