

Best Places in Armenia

Armenia is an ancient country situated at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, between the Black Sea and Caspian Sea. This small country is known for its 3,500-year-old history, rich culture and amazing mountainous landscapes. Each year, an increasing number of people visit Armenia to explore this interesting land, immerse themselves in centuries-old customs and traditions, learn about its colourful history and admire the spectacular scenery. The locals are warm and hospitable and do their best to make visitors feel welcome in their beloved motherland.

1. Yerevan

By far the largest city in Armenia, the capital Yerevan is a great place to start for anyone wishing to explore Armenia. The city is home to the grand Republic Square, while climbing the Cascade to see the city's monument to Soviet victory in the Second World War is a must. Yerevan is also home to Blue Mosque, which is the only mosque in the whole of the country, as well as Levon's Amazing Underground World, which is one of Europe's most unusual attractions.

2. Shikahogh State Reserve

The second largest forest reserve in Armenia, Shikahogh State Reserve is so unspoiled that large parts of it remains unexplored to this day. The forest is believed to be home to animals including leopards, bears, wild goats and vipers and it is also thought that Shikahogh State Reserve has about 1,100 species of plants, although its fauna has not yet been fully explored. The reserve was threatened by a planned highway in 2005, but environments successfully lobbied for the forest's future to be protected. The reserve also has a number of very beautiful waterfalls to enjoy.

3. Lake Sevan

Sevan (66 kms north-east of Yerevan) is one of the most popular towns in Armenia because of the stunning Lake Sevan. The lake is especially popular in the summer amongst both locals and tourists. At 1,900m, Lake Sevan is also considered to be one of the highest lakes in the world and sometimes it seems as if the azure waters are about to touch the sky. Its beauty has earned the lake the nickname ‘the pearl of Armenian nature’. Sevan is also known for its fish “ishxan” (Armenian trout), so once in Sevan don’t miss the opportunity to order delicious fish dishes at one of the local cafés or restaurants.

4. Dilijan national park

Armenia has four national parks and Dilijan national park may be the most beautiful of the lovely quartet. The park, which was only established in 2002, is famous for its medicinal mineral water springs, as well as its natural monuments. Many of Armenia’s more important cultural locations can be found within the grounds of the park, such as Haghartsin Monastery, Goshavank Monastery and Jukhtak Vank, as well as Matosavank Monastery and the Akhnabat church. The Aghestev and Getik river basins are also both within the boundaries of Dilijan national park.

5. Mount Aragats

Mount Aragats is one of Armenia’s most stunning natural sights, with the dormant volcano located in the north of the country. It is Armenia’s highest peak and there is a lot of rock art to be enjoyed around its base, with paintings of animals and human-like figures dating back hundreds of years. Snow covers the peak almost all year-round but Mount Aragats can be climbed, with July, August and September the best times of the year to attempt the hike. The southernmost of the four peaks is the easiest to climb, while the northern peak, at around 4,000 metres, is the most challenging.

6. Lake Arpi

While Lake Sevan can be extremely crowded during the peak tourist season, Lake Arpi has a much more relaxed feel. Used for irrigation and hydropower production, Lake Arpi is also the source of the Akhurian River. In 2009 a new park was established around the lake to protect the natural environment, with around 100 species of birds known to live in the area. Lake Arpi also hosts rich flora and fauna and is a Ramsar Convention protected site. Lake Arpi has one the largest colonies of Armenian Gull and its recreation activities include camping and walking tours.

7. Noravank

Monasteries are one of Armenia's defining characteristics and the example at Noravank is one of the most beautiful in the whole country. Sheer brick-red cliffs shield the monastery, which was built in the 13th century. Noravank is famous for its Astvatsatsin (Holy Mother of God) church, while the story goes that the monastery was saved by God himself when Armenia was conquered by the Mongols hundreds of years ago. If you only choose to go to one monastery during a trip to Armenia, Noravank would be an extremely good selection – thousands of people visit every year.

8. Gyumri

The second largest city in Armenia, Gyumri is well worth a visit for anyone heading to the country for the first time. Perhaps the best place from which to enjoy the sights of Gyumri is from the Black Fortress on the hill that overlooks the city, while the massive Mother Armenia statue can also be found nearby. Many of the most important cultural institutions of Armenia are in Gyumri, such as the Dzitoghtsyan Museum of Social Life and National Architecture of Gyumri, as well as the Aslamazyan Sisters House-Museum and the Sergey Merkurov House-Museum. The Kumayri Historic District is Gyumri's oldest area, with a thousand ancient buildings found here.

9. Vanadzor

Armenia's third major city is Vanadzor, which is located in the north of the country. Vanadzor is an ideal base from which to explore the beautiful Lori region, which is certainly one of the best places to visit in Armenia. The Vanadzor Botanical Garden is one of the finest tourist attractions in the city, while visitors should also consider checking out the Vanadzor fine art museum. The many mineral springs of the Lori region mean there are a wide range of terrific spas to enjoy in and around Vanadzor. Although Vanadzor is primarily an industrial city, it also houses many theatres, such as the Bohem Chamber Theatre of Vanadzor and the Vanadzor Puppet Theatre.

10. Amberd Fortress

Dating back to the seventh century, Amberd Fortress is one of the most stunning places to visit in Armenia. Formerly among the Armenian Kingdom's primary military-defensive points, the fortress can be reached in about an hour from the capital city Yerevan. However, snowfall can make the fortress inaccessible during the winter months, with the weather usually improving by late May. The view from the top of the fortress is truly breathtaking, while the building itself is also stunning. Amberd Fortress is a short trip from the village of Byurakan, home of the Byurakan Observatory.

11. Tsaghkadzor

Armenia's mountainous scenery makes it ideal for winter sports and the country's best ski resort can be found at Tsaghkadzor in the heart of the country. Ski lifts are paid for by the ride and are among the most affordable in Europe. Tsaghkadzor boasts some of the finest hotels in the country, while the resort also has one of the nation's biggest entertainment centers in the form of the Senator Royale casino complex. Tsaghkadzor

also has the Kecharis Monastery, which is one of Armenia's most important religious complexes, dating back to the start of the 11th century.

12. Upper Azat Valley

The Upper Azat Valley is one of Armenia's World Heritage Sites, partly due to the incredible Geghard Monastery for which the region is most famous. The main chapel was built 800 years ago but the history of the monastery goes all the way back to the fourth century, when it was founded by Gregory the Illuminator. According to legend, the Geghard Monastery once housed one of the spears that was used to crucify Jesus Christ, brought to Armenia by Apostle Thaddeus, and as such it is one of Armenia's most important religious sites. The Upper Azat Valley is also home to the St Astvatsatsin (Holy Mother of God) chapel, which is partially carved out of the rock.

13. Karahunj Observatory

Often referred to internationally as Armenia's version of Britain's Stonehenge, Karahunj is one of the most fascinating places to visit during a break in Armenia. Located close to the city of Sisian in the Syunik province, Karahunj is made up of well over 200 massive stone tombs, while the main area sees 40 stones standing in a circular formation, supposedly built in honour of the Armenian main God, Ari, named after the Sun. A small museum in Sisian is dedicated to findings that have been made at Karahunj, which is claimed to be the oldest observatory of its kind in the world.

14. Khor Virap

Views of Mount Ararat can be enjoyed from all over Armenia, but perhaps the best scenery of the mountain can be found from the Khor Virap monastery, which is definitely also worth visiting in its own right. This location is one of the most important

historic sites in Armenia's history as it was where Gregory the Illuminator was imprisoned for 14 years before he cured King Trdat III of his disease. The King then converted to Christianity, paving the way for Armenia's religious future. As such, Khor Virap is a popular spot for Armenian weddings today, while the underground chamber in which Gregory the Illuminator was held can be visited during a trip to Khor Virap, which is among Armenia's most visited pilgrimage sites as a result.

15. Dvin

Our final selection for the best places to visit in Armenia is Dvin, one of the country's oldest cities – in fact, it was the capital of Armenia in medieval times. A sixth century BC fortress was also once situated in Dvin, according to Unesco, while incredible artefacts are regularly found in this part of Armenia. More modern sights can also be enjoyed in the city, such as the St. Harutyun Church in Dvin, which was built in 2000. Dvin once housed the Cathedral of St. Grigor, but all that remains of the building today is the stone foundations that have been uncovered by archeologists.

16. Echmiadzin

The city of Echmiadzin is located about 20 km from Yerevan (30-minutes by car). A tour of Armenia wouldn't be complete without a visit to Echmiadzin. Armenia is the first country in the world that adopted Christianity as a state religion (in 301 AD) and the Echmiadzin Cathedral was built to commemorate this. Built on the site of an ancient pagan temple, Echmiadzin is the religious centre of all Armenians.

17. Tatev Monastery

It takes four hours (253 km) to get to the monastery of Tatev from Yerevan by car but it's really worth the effort! A visit to Tatev is one of the most popular things to do in Armenia for visitors. The monastery is a majestic medieval (9th century AD) structure located on the edge of a deep gorge and surrounded by amazing mountainous landscapes. In order to get to the monastery, you

can take the cable-car (listed in the Guinness Book of Records as being the longest in the world). You will glide over the deep gorge for about 20 minutes and enjoy the fantastic scenery.

18. Jermuk

Jermuk is one of the most popular spa towns in Armenia because of its healing mineral waters and mild climate. The town has more than 40 thermal springs! In Jermuk, you can visit the Gallery of Water for free tastings of the healing mineral waters. And don't forget to visit the most popular attraction – Jermuk Waterfall, which is the second largest waterfall in Armenia. The water tumbles down from the height of about 70m.

19. Karahunj

In the Syunik region located about 200km from Yerevan, you'll find one of the oldest and most popular megalithic sites of Armenia called Karahunj or Zorats Karer. It is located on a plateau at an altitude of 1,770m and consists of more than 200 stones each of which has holes 5cm in diameter. This construction remains a mystery for scientists who have different versions concerning its origins and use – the most popular version states that the construction dates back to the 6th century BC and served as an observatory for star-watching.

20. The symphony of stones

In the Kotayk region of Armenia, there is a beautiful canyon called Garni that's famous for its unique basalt columns. As a result of geological processes, the stunning natural symmetrical columns were formed and these days, they're aptly called 'the symphony of stones'. Indeed, if you look at the canyon from afar, many of the cliffs resemble a giant organ!

21. Selim Pass

On the way from Sevan to Yerevan, you can stop to enjoy the view of one of the most beautiful natural sights of Armenia: the Selim Pass. This pass was once the part of the famous Silk Road that linked Europe with the Far East. The ancient caravanserai (a resting place for merchants on the Silk Road) still stands till this day. The view of the verdant valley below is simply breathtaking.

22. The cave city of Khndzoresk

In the same region of Syunik, there is another attraction that's popular among tourists: the old village of Khndzoresk. This is a unique settlement where time seems to stand still. The old part of the village is composed of huge caves where people lived until the 1950's. A new bridge connects the two parts of the village and the views from the bridge are quite literally breathtaking.