



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate

The Republic of Armenia covers 11,483 square miles (29,743 square kilometers) in the Caucasus region of southwestern Asia. It is slightly smaller than Maryland. Much of Armenia lies on a mountainous plateau, a landscape that makes large portions of territory uninhabitable. Armenia's rocky terrain is evident in the society's use of native stones in megalithic structures, ornamented stone crosses, cathedrals, and palaces throughout the country. Frequent earthquakes are a reminder of Armenia's volcanic past and position on a major fault line.

One-third of Armenia is pastureland, while one-tenth is forested. The most fertile region, the Ararat Valley, is located southwest of the capital city of Yerevan. Hundreds of rapid-flowing mountain rivers join with some one hundred small, picturesque lakes, beautifying Armenia. Lake Sevan, one of the world's largest mountain lakes, covers 540 square miles (1,400 square kilometers) at 6,500 feet (1,981 meters) above sea level. Sevan is home to unique species of fish, birds, and other wildlife. Some species, such as the *ishkhan* (prince) trout, are endangered because of pollution and other factors. Armenia's continental climate features cold, snowy winters and dry, hot summers.

History

Legends about Armenia's origins center on a hero leading his people. Whether the hero be the archer Hayk or the valiant Aram or another, most Armenians, though few scholars, accept the legends as part of Armenia's history. Written

accounts of peoples living in the region date to as early as the 14th century BC. By the ninth century BC, local tribes united to become Urartu. In 782 BC, a famous Urartian king, Argishti, built Erebuni as his capital. Yerevan is built on the same site as Erebuni, the ruins of which are still visible. A distinct Armenian civilization developed in the sixth century BC after Urartu fell.

In the following centuries, a series of invaders (Assyrians, Romans, Parthians, and others) overran Armenia because of its strategic position. Despite this, Armenians successfully maintained their national identity. During the native reign of Tigran the Great (95–55 BC), Armenia became an empire able to subdue the Parthians and contest Rome's power in the region. Armenia's borders extended from the Caspian Sea to the Mediterranean.

By AD 100, Armenia had lost its independence, and parts or all of the country fell under Persian, Byzantine, and Arab rule at different times. Despite moments of regional independence, a sovereign Armenian kingdom was not fully restored until the ninth century, when it was liberated from Arab rule. This ushered in a period of prosperity and growth. The capital, Ani, was larger than most European cities.

Seljuk Turks spreading south in the 11th century pushed Armenians closer to the Mediterranean, where in 1080 they founded the Kingdom of Cilicia, or Lesser Armenia. Cilicia fell in 1375 to Egypt. Armenia was later divided between the Ottoman Turks and Persians. Persia ruled eastern Armenia until 1828, when Russia annexed it. Ottoman rulers in western Armenia began a series of massacres in the late 1800s, culminating in a 1915 genocide in which the Ottomans deported Armenians to the deserts of Syria, Mesopotamia,

and Arabia. Some 1.5 million people died. Survivors scattered all over the world or found refuge in eastern Armenia.

Eastern Armenia declared independence from Russia in 1918, but a 1920 invasion of the Red Army established Armenia as a Soviet Socialist Republic. Emboldened by greater openness in the Soviet Union, in 1988 Armenia and Nagorno-Karabagh (an Armenian-populated autonomous region under Azerbaijani jurisdiction) demanded that Nagorno-Karabagh be administratively integrated into Armenia. This grew into a major movement that eventually developed a broader agenda, including the idea of Armenian independence, which was declared in 1991.

The Nagorno-Karabagh issue degenerated into open confrontation and then full-scale war. Nagorno-Karabagh Armenians declared their own independence in 1992. Armenian troops helped them create a buffer zone and an access corridor to Armenia. These and other battlefield victories led to a cease-fire in 1994. No permanent political solution has been found as yet, but the cease-fire has held, and Nagorno-Karabagh operates with de facto independence. Armenian-Turkish relations remain cold because of the 1915 genocide dispute. Though the two governments met in 2009 to draw up a “roadmap” to reestablishing ties, subsequent events have caused the Armenian parliament to suspend normalizing relations with Turkey.

THE PEOPLE

Population

Armenia's population of 2.97 million is barely growing at an annual rate of 0.01 percent. More Armenians (around eight million) live outside of Armenia than inside. Since 1993, more than half a million people have left Armenia in search of jobs. Diaspora Armenians remain very involved in Armenian politics and society. Ethnic Armenians comprise 98 percent of Armenia's population. Minority groups include Kurds (1.3 percent), Russians (0.5), Yezidis, Assyrians, and Greeks. Most people (64 percent) live in urban areas. Approximately one-third live in Yerevan, and more continue to move to the capital each year in search of better economic opportunities.

Language

Hayeren (Armenian) is the official language. Russian is also widely used. Minorities speak their native tongue in addition to either Russian or Armenian. English is becoming increasingly popular. Armenian is a subgroup within the Indo-European language family. The unique Armenian alphabet, consisting of 39 characters, was created in AD 405 by a monk, Mesrop Mashtots. One of the earliest works in the new alphabet was a Bible translation. During the centuries, the dialect used in that translation became standard (*Grabar*) or classical Armenian. Today's primary dialects—Western (called *Grabar*) and Eastern (called *Ashxarhabar*)—stem from historical divisions in the country and differ mostly in spelling and pronunciation. Eastern Armenian is used more inside the country, and Western Armenian is spoken among the diaspora.

Though not the official language, Russian plays an important role in the linguistic and cultural life of Armenians. Many urban adults attended Russian-language schools and continue to actively speak, read, and write Russian in their daily lives. Informal correspondence, street and shop signs, and much of the television and radio programming are in Russian. Russian anecdotes and humor are often used in casual conversation. The mixing of Armenian and Russian is common, and many people enjoy Russian television, radio, film, and music.

Religion

Armenia embraced Christianity in AD 301 as the state religion. This was largely due to the efforts of St. Gregory the Illuminator, who built the Mother Church, Holy Echmiadsin, in 303. Armenians all over the world look to the Holy Echmiadsin near Yerevan as the center of the Armenian Apostolic Church. Through many centuries, the Church acted as protector of national culture and values. Although society is mostly secular, the Church retains its role as the national faith. About 95 percent of the population belongs to the Armenian Apostolic Church, headed by a *Catholicos*, or supreme patriarch. While the church plays an important role in life events like weddings and funerals, only a small percentage of the population attends church services weekly, though it is common for people to visit churches to light candles. Other faiths present include Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestant.

General Attitudes

Armenians view themselves as a strong-willed, patient, and persevering people with a strong sense of entrepreneurship, adaptability, and pragmatism. They consider themselves to be lovers of freedom and fairness. Armenians take great pride in their ancient history and epic tales of heroic struggles against oppression or adversity. Despite centuries of domination, war, and even genocide, Armenians have maintained their culture, language, and traditions, as well as a somewhat sarcastic sense of humor. Because Armenians lacked sovereignty for so long before independence in 1991, they tend to be very political, constantly questioning and frequently distrusting government authority.

Armenians value education, and they believe it is the responsibility of parents to provide their children with the best schooling possible. The family plays the most influential role in defining values, morals, and principles. The family may also act as an intermediary between the individual and the state. The extended family ensures that religious and cultural values are passed from generation to generation. These values come both from the West and the East, creating a unique mix of cosmopolitanism and conservatism.

Personal Appearance

Armenians pay great attention to their clothing and hairstyles, and many families spend a substantial portion of their income on clothing. European trends are generally followed. Women prefer high-heeled shoes. Younger women wear T-shirts, pants, or short skirts. Older women prefer dresses and skirts with conservative tops and jackets. Men wear conservative

suits. In the past, shorts were worn in public only when participating in an athletic activity. However, younger men now wear shorts often. Parents dress their children well, even if they cannot afford equally nice clothing for themselves.

Traditional costumes are worn only during special cultural and ceremonial events or by the elderly in remote villages. Rural women wear dresses with thick wool socks and slippers, unless they are working in the fields, in which case they wear rubber shoes. Rural men essentially dress as urban men do, except when working in the fields.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings

When greeting, Armenians say *Barev* (literally, “Let good be with you”) as a casual “Hello.” The plural form (*Barevdez*) signifies more respect and formality when appropriate. Men shake hands when they greet and even kiss some acquaintances on the cheek. Women hug and kiss each other. After an initial greeting, people often say *Vonts es?* (How are you?). More formally, the same phrase would be *Inchpes ek?* Strangers do not greet in urban areas, but rural people will greet passing strangers. Before parting, friends might say *Sytesootiun* or *Araijem* (both mean “See you later”). *Hajoghootiun* (Good luck) is also popular. Longer separations require a more formal exchange: *Barov mnas* (Stay with peace) and *Barov gnas* (Go with peace). Armenians address their friends and acquaintances by first name. As a sign of affection between close friends, Armenians add the suffix *-jan* (literally, “dearest”) to a person's first name. If the addressee is an official or an older person, the titles *paron* (or *tiar*) for men, *tikin* for married women, and *oriort* for single women are used with the last name.

The Russian patronymic is still a common means of communicating respect among older Armenians and in formal circumstances (including schools, universities, and offices). The patronymic is based on a person's father's first name, modified with a male or female suffix. One follows the addressee's first name with the patronymic, leaving out the surname.

Gestures

Armenians often use their eyes, hands, shoulders, and heads to express themselves more clearly. During conversation, eye contact is expected. Hand gestures are used among friends, such as expressing approval with “thumbs up” or shaking the shoulders to show indifference. However, in formal settings, such body movements are considered impolite. Chewing gum in public is impolite, as is putting feet up on furniture. Men and sometimes women stand when an older person enters a room. People remove their hats when entering a building. It is considered improper for women to smoke in public, though men may smoke nearly anywhere.

Visiting

Armenians are sociable and gregarious. They try to treat guests graciously and generously. A common saying is “Any guest is on the top of my head.” Guests are served dessert or

fruit with coffee or tea. Those arriving near mealtime are invited to share the meal. Guests often bring flowers or sweets. Flowers are given only to the hostess and only in odd numbers (except for funerals when they are given in even numbers). Unannounced visits are common and accepted, especially between neighbors and relatives.

Eating

The day's first meal, *nakhajash*, consists of coffee or tea and a pastry. Children are served bread, butter, cheese, boiled eggs, honey or jam, and warm milk. On winter weekends, *khash* (cow's feet cooked all night) is served at sunrise with friends and relatives gathered around a table filled with *lavash* (flat Armenian bread), pickles, greens, and vegetables.

Lunch (*jash*) is eaten at midday. Dinner (*entrik*) is after 6 p.m. and is the main meal. Armenians eat in the continental style, with the fork in the left hand and the knife in the right. Conversation is animated. Hands and wrists are to be on the table, but elbows must not rest on the table.

When guests are present, a *seghanapet* or *tamada* (toastmaster) will propose toasts to anything from the hostess to peace to national values. Traditionally, a woman prepares the meals and joins the group only after serving everyone else. She will later insist that guests take second or third helpings. Declining such offers in rural areas can offend the hosts.

LIFESTYLE

Family

The father is the head of the family and works for its financial support. The mother is in charge of the household and the children's education. Urban men and women have equal access to higher education and often both have professional careers. Urban families tend to have two or three children, while rural families are slightly larger. Children are expected to help around the house. Rural children may help on the farm.

Newlywed couples often move in with the groom's parents, who later care for the grandchildren and are cared for and supported by their children. First-born sons are appreciated because they represent future security and family continuity. If there are two sons, the younger one stays with the parents, while the older moves his family into a new home.

Housing

In cities, people usually live in Soviet-era apartment buildings built from pink tufa stone. A typical apartment is quite small, with two or three rooms. Nuclear families live together, sometimes—particularly in the case of the youngest son—with an elderly parent. A strong stigma is associated with putting parents in nursing homes, so the practice is rare.

In rural areas, dwellings are more spacious. They are built around a central courtyard, where animals wander. Often, there is no indoor plumbing, and water is pumped from a central location in the backyard. A backyard contains a picnic area, a garden, livestock pens, and sometimes an outhouse.

Dating and Marriage

In urban areas, dating begins around age 18 and usually leads to marriage. Couples go to cafés, restaurants, and concerts, or they enjoy walks in the park. In rural areas, where parents traditionally arrange marriages, dating may occur after the engagement. Most people marry in their twenties or late teens. People in rural areas usually marry younger than those in urban areas.

The groom's parents officially request the girl's hand in marriage. If the girl's parents consent, then a *khoskap* (tying of promise) is held, where the groom presents a ring as a promise to marry. At a later engagement ceremony in the girl's home, relatives and friends celebrate and the groom gives his future in-laws jewelry, large plates of fruits and desserts, flowers, and Armenian brandy. Traditional weddings take place in a church but civil marriages are quite common. Relatives from both sides celebrate at the groom's home on the wedding's first day, and a wider circle of friends continues festivities with folk music and dancing on the second day. After the wedding, the bride moves into the groom's home; the newlyweds break plates with their feet before entering.

Life Cycle

Armenian children are sometimes named after their grandparents. In the bigger cities, it is more common for parents to name them after historical or literary characters. Armenia is probably the only country in the world where the names Hamlet and Ophelia are very popular. Nearly everyone is baptized into the Armenian Apostolic Church. The ritual usually involves total immersion of the child into a small tub. A carryover from Armenia's pagan roots sees many Armenians pour corn and other harvest grains over a child's head, symbolizing a bountiful life and wholesome living.

After a person dies, relatives visit the grave on the seventh and fortieth days after the death and also on the Day of Holy Cross, a holiday when people visit the graves of loved ones. On the one-year anniversary, a memorial ceremony is held at the grave.

Diet

The Armenian diet includes a variety of different tastes from Eastern cuisine. Staple foods include greens (parsley, spinach, tarragon, etc.), fish, beef, cabbage, and *lavash*—lightly browned thin bread, rolled out in large circles and baked in a *tonir* (a special oven dug in the ground). Common dishes in Armenia include *harisa* (wheat and chicken cooked in large pots for several days), *kyabab* and *khavorovats* (marinated meat placed on sticks and cooked on coals), and *dolma* (stuffed grape or cabbage leaves with meat, cracked wheat, greens, and spices). Many people enjoy *basturma* (salted beef with a spicy coating), *sujukh* (minced beef with greens and spices), and *kuftal* (pounded, boiled meat).

From early spring to late fall, Armenia produces an abundance of fruit: grapes (table and wine varieties), peaches, apples, pears, cherries, mulberries, figs, walnuts, strawberries, and many others. Apricots native to Armenia are considered among the best in the world. The pomegranate is favored as a symbol of life, maternity, prosperity, or love. Armenians

preserve fruits, vegetables, pickles, fruit drinks, and cured meats for winter consumption. Armenians drink all types of coffee, but a thick brew served in small cups is most customary. Tea and brandy are also popular.

Recreation

Reading literature is a favorite pastime in Armenia, as are reading the newspaper and discussing politics. Soccer is the most popular sport. Young Armenians also like tennis, swimming, wrestling, basketball, and table tennis. All urban apartment buildings have courtyards, where children often play games. Chess and backgammon are especially popular in Armenia, which has private chess schools where children can learn the game. Many of the world's leading chess players have Armenian roots.

On warm days, people enjoy being outdoors with friends, going to Lake Sevan, or picnicking and making *khavorovats*. Urban residents have summer cottages in the countryside. Vacations were more common and diverse in Soviet times, while today's financial realities limit people to short vacations at Lake Sevan. Winter leisure time is spent indoors watching television, reading, knitting (done by women), and so on.

The Arts

Armenian written literature dates back to the fifth century AD. In the 16th century, *ashugh* (bards) wrote important folk songs and ballads. Sayat-Nova's love songs are still popular. Dancing is an important form of Armenian artistic expression. Some folk dances, such as the carpet-weaving dance, are based on the moves of everyday processes. Accompanied by traditional folk music, circle dances are performed on festive occasions. The *duduk* (oboe carved from apricot wood) is a national instrument. Folk arts include rug weaving and metalwork. Carving *khatchkars* (decorative stone monuments) is an ancient Armenian art form that continues today.

Most city dwellers regularly attend opera, symphony, or theater performances. Current themes for theatrical works include politics, national values, and humor. Yerevan has a flourishing open-air art market and many museums and galleries.

Holidays

Armenia's public holidays include New Year's Day (1 Jan.), when gifts are exchanged among family and friends; Christmas (6 Jan.); Victory and Peace Day (9 May), celebrating the end of World War II; First Republic Day (28 May), marking the 1918 to 1920 independence; Constitution Day (5 July); and Independence Day (21 Sept.), celebrating the 1991 independence. Other important days, though not holidays, include the Day of Maternity and Beauty (7 Apr.); Genocide Victims Commemoration Day (24 Apr.), when people visit Yerevan's memorial to the victims of the 1915 genocide; and Earthquake Victims Commemoration Day (7 Dec.). For Easter, people color eggs and eat fish (avoiding meat), special greens, cakes, and rice with raisins.

are adding to the 15 or so state institutions. Students are admitted by entrance exam or the ability to pay tuition.

SOCIETY

Government

Armenia is led by a president (currently Serzh Sargsyan) as head of state. The president appoints a prime minister (currently Tigran Sargsyan) as head of government. A number of parties are represented in the 131-seat National Assembly; its members are elected. The voting age is 18. Any permanent resident can become a citizen, regardless of ethnic origin.

Economy

During Soviet times, industry accounted for one-third of Armenia's economic production. After 1991, while moving from a planned to a market economy, the industrial emphasis shifted from heavy items like machinery to goods and foods that could be consumed locally. The government strongly encourages development of small and medium private businesses, and it has successfully privatized most state enterprises—private enterprise now accounts for the vast majority of economic output. The services sector provides the most growth, but growth is also occurring in telecommunications, agriculture, chemicals, and energy generation. Armenia exports gold jewelry and semiprecious stones. Exports and the construction industry were hurt by the 2008 global financial crisis. The crisis also caused a decrease in remittances sent to relatives from Armenians living abroad; such remittances traditionally comprise roughly 20 percent of Armenia's GDP. Despite liberal trade laws, Armenia's development is hindered by political crisis and the unresolved disputes with Turkey and Azerbaijan. Most wealth is concentrated in a few hands. The currency is the *dram* (AMD).

Transportation and Communications

Urban residents have access to numerous trolley buses, trams, buses, and taxis. Minibuses provide comfortable and affordable transportation along fixed routes. Yerevan has a subway. The nation's rail system primarily serves commercial cargo; most people travel long distances by bus. Rural villagers still make use of horses and donkeys at times. Many people own cars. Generally, the wealthy drive European models and most others drive Russian models that predate independence. Cellular phones are quickly outpacing landlines, which are difficult to obtain. Internet access is widespread in cities but rare in rural areas. Despite government restrictions on the freedom of the media, a number of newspapers and television and radio stations operate.

Education

Armenians have a great respect for learning. Children begin school at age 8 and graduate at 18. Major ethnic minorities have their own schools. Public primary and secondary schools are free. About two dozen private colleges prepare students for university. An increasing number of private universities

Health

Armenia's healthcare system is being transformed into a market-oriented, fee-for-service system. New private clinics and hospitals are being established, though public ones are still open. Most people choose where to seek medical attention based on the reputation of the doctors, and not based on whether the clinic is public or private. The disabled, veterans, and children from vulnerable groups still receive free care in the new system.

AT A GLANCE

Contact Information

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POPULATION & AREA

Population	2,966,802 (rank=138)
Area, sq. mi.	11,483 (rank=140)
Area, sq. km.	29,743

DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	76 of 182 countries
Gender inequality rank	66 of 155 countries
Real GDP per capita	\$5,500
Adult literacy rate	100% (male); 99% (female)
Infant mortality rate	20 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	69 (male); 77 (female)

*UN Development Programme, Human Development Report 2010 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

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