

Northeastern Anatolia



If you yearn to explore, push Turkey's back door. Not only is the least-visited corner of the country a secretive world (even for the Turks), it's also a gold mine for wannabe adventurers. You can plan a thorough itinerary, with highlights that cover the most accessible sights, or you can take a more DIY approach, stumbling around in remote villages or wandering in the *yayalar* (highland pastures) without another traveller in sight. Whatever your perspective, the warmth you'll experience is another incentive to discover the region. And there's a distinctly Caucasian flavour, courtesy of the proximity of Armenia and Georgia, which adds to the appeal.

For James Bond action-seekers, there are outdoor adventures galore to gorge on in a variety of mind-boggling playgrounds. Rafting enthusiasts swear that the frothing rapids of the Çoruh are the most thrilling in the world, while snow bunnies will be in seventh heaven at Palandöken ski resort. If hiking is more to your liking, consider scaling Mt Ararat, Turkey's highest summit, or tackling the Kaçkar Mountains.

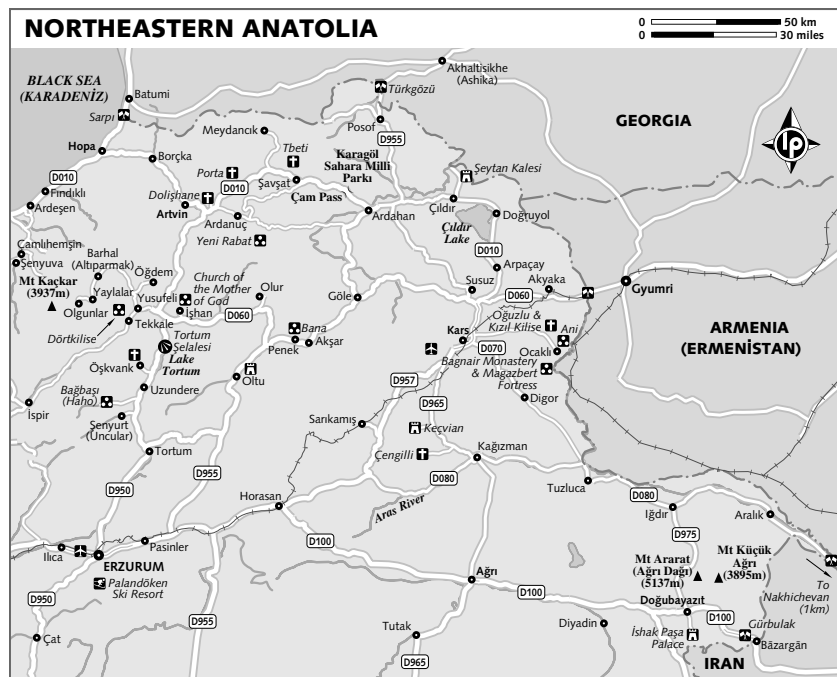
And culture? The region musters up enough surprises to enthrall even the most jaded history buffs. It's like a vast open-air museum, with a gobsmacking portfolio of palaces, castles, mosques and churches dotted around the steppe. The astonishing İshak Paşa Sarayı and the ruins of Ani are must-sees for anyone with an interest in Turkey's ancient flourishing civilisations. There are also hidden treasures that await you, including a bonanza of Georgian churches near Yusufeli and Armenian monuments near Kars, all set against the extraordinary gorges or steppes.

Go on. Break the mould and delve a little deeper into Anatolia.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Piece together eastern Turkey's mysterious past through ancient churches and castles, such as **Şeytan Kalesi** (p585) or **Öşkvank cathedral** (p570)
- Psyche yourself up and join the adrenaline junkies on a white-water run through the **Çoruh Gorge** (p572)
- Dose up on amazement at the ruins of **Ani** (p581), an ancient Armenian capital
- Impress your peers and rip up some powder at the **Palandöken ski resort** (p569)
- Wake to clear skies and astounding views, and search for words atop **Mt Ararat** (p589), Turkey's highest mountain
- Thank the heavens for the sight of **İshak Paşa Palace** (p586) in Doğubayazıt, the castle of every child's imagination
- Cross Turkey's most isolated border at Posof, sup a full-bodied wine in **Georgia** (p585) and re-enter Turkey the next day





ERZURUM

☎ 0442 / pop 362,000 / elevation 1853m
 Forget any preconceived notion you have of a cold, austere and overwhelmingly conservative city. Sure, the climate is off-putting much of the year and the city feels much less liberal than its Mediterranean counterparts, but Erzurum is rapidly metamorphosing into a vibrant metropolis and the sizeable student population brings a refreshing touch of modernity. The 'peoplescape' of Erzurum is absorbing in its contrasts. Patriotic, conservative men and women wearing voluminous black drapes or at least headscarves mix with young couples and stalwart soldiers.

Ditch your bags on arrival and leg it straight to Cumhuriyet Caddesi, the main artery, which showcases some of the best Seljuk architecture in the country. Then sweat it up to the citadel, where you can get your bearings over the urban sprawl, with the steppe forming a heavenly backdrop.

The short summer (June to September) is obviously the best time to visit Erzurum, but it's also an excellent base in winter for skiing enthusiasts, who come from all over Turkey

and abroad to enjoy the nearby Palandöken ski resort.

History

Being in a strategic position at the confluence of roads to Constantinople, Russia and Persia, Erzurum was conquered and lost by armies of Armenians, Persians, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Saltuk Turks, Seljuk Turks, Mongols and Russians. As for the Ottomans, it was Selim the Grim who conquered the city in 1515. It was captured by Russian troops in 1882 and again in 1916.

In July 1919 Atatürk came to Erzurum to hold the famous congress that provided the rallying cry for the Turkish independence struggle. The Erzurum Congress is most famous for determining the boundaries of what became known as the territories of the National Pact, the lands that became part of the Turkish Republic.

Orientation

Cumhuriyet Caddesi, which becomes Cemal Gürsel Caddesi along its western reaches, is Erzurum's most sizzling eat-drink-shop-

bank street. These streets are divided by the Havuzbaşı traffic roundabout. Most of the city's blockbuster sights and hotels are in this vicinity.

The train station is about 1km north of Cumhuriyet Caddesi. You will need transport to get to the otogar (bus station), 3km west of the centre, and the airport. The minibus

garage, the Gölbaşı Semt Garajı, is northeast of the town centre.

Information

Erzurum has many internet cafés on Erzincan Kapı Caddesi, which runs parallel to Cumhuriyet Caddesi. Most banks have branches with ATMs on or around Cumhuriyet Caddesi.

ERZURUM
 Some Minor Roads Not Depicted
 0 300 m / 0.2 miles

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Kar@slan Internet Cafe (Erzincan Kapı Caddesi; per hr €0.60; ☎ 8am-midnight)

Tourist office (☎ 235 0925; Cemal Gürsel Caddesi; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri) Has some brochures and, if you're lucky, a city map.

Sights & Activities

East of the centre of town is the magnificent **Çifte Minareli Medrese** (Twin Minaret Seminary; Cumhuriyet Caddesi), the single most definitive image of Erzurum. It dates from the 1200s when Erzurum was a wealthy Seljuk city before it suffered attack and devastation by the Mongols in 1242. The façade is an example of the way the Seljuks liked to try out variation even while aiming for symmetry: the panels on either side of the entrance are identical in size and position but different in motif. The panel to the right bears the Seljuk eagle; to the left the motif is unfinished.

The towering limestone entrance is a mix of originality and austerity. The twin brick minarets are decorated with eye-catching small blue tiles. Don't look for the tops of the minarets – they are gone, having succumbed to the vagaries of Erzurum's violent history even before the Ottomans claimed the town.

The main courtyard has four large niches and a double colonnade on the eastern and western sides. At the far end of the courtyard is the grand, 12-sided, domed hall that served as the Hatuniye Türbesi, or Tomb of Huand Hatun, the founder of the *medrese* (Islamic theological seminary).

Equally attention-seeking is the **Ulu Cami** (Great Mosque; Cumhuriyet Caddesi), next to the Çifte Minareli. Unlike the elaborately decorated Çifte Minareli, the Ulu Cami, built in 1179 by the Saltuk Turkish Emir of Erzurum, is restrained but elegant, with seven aisles running north-south and six running east-west, resulting in a forest of columns. You enter from the north along the central aisle. Above the third east-west aisle a striking stalactite dome opens to the heavens. At the southern end of the central aisle are a curious wooden dome and a pair of bull's-eye windows.

A short hop from the Ulu Cami, you'll notice the small Ottoman **Caferiye Camii** (Caferiye Mosque; Cumhuriyet Caddesi), constructed in 1645.

Walk south between the Çifte Minareli and the Ulu Cami until you come to a T-junction. Turn left then immediately right and walk a short block up the hill to the **Üç Kümbetler**

(Three Tombs) in a fenced enclosure to the right. Note the near-conical roofs and the elaborately decorated side panels.

Back on Cumhuriyet Caddesi proceed further west until you reach the **Yakutiye Medrese** (Yakutiye Seminary; Cumhuriyet Caddesi), a Mongol theological seminary dating from 1310. The Mongol governors borrowed the basics of Seljuk architecture and developed their own variations, as is evident in the entrance to the *medrese*. Of the two original minarets, only the base of one and the lower part of the other have survived; the one sporting superb mosaic tile work wouldn't be out of place in Central Asia. The *medrese* now serves as Erzurum's **Turkish-Islamic Arts & Ethnography Museum** (Türk-Islam Eserleri ve Etnoğrafya Müzesi; admission €1.25; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm Tue & Thu-Sun). Inside, the striking central dome is lined with faceted stalactite work that catches light from the central opening to make a delightful pattern. It's surrounded by leafy gardens – the perfect place for a tea break.

Right next to the Yakutiye Medresesi is the classical **Lala Mustafa Paşa Camii** (1562).

If you haven't run out of stamina, you can climb to the **kale** (citadel; admission €1.25; ☎ 8am-5pm), perched on the hilltop to the north of the Çifte Minareli. It was erected by the Emperor Theodosius around the 5th century. Savour the views over the city and the steppe.

Archaeology buffs will make a beeline for the **Erzurum Museum** (Erzurum Müzesi; admission €1.25; ☎ 8am-5pm Tue-Sun), several long blocks south-west of the Yakutiye Seminary. It houses finds from nearby digs.

In the mood for a scrub? The men-only **Erzurum Hamamı ve Saunası** (Adnan Menderes Caddesi; complete wash €4; ☎ 5am-midnight) has a good reputation. Women should head for the **Kırk Çeşme Hamamı** (Ayazpaşa Caddesi; complete wash €4; ☎ women 8am-6pm, men 5am-midnight), behind the mosque.

Sleeping

Despite a relative dearth of tourists, the accommodation scene in Erzurum is surprisingly varied.

BUDGET

Yeni Çınar Oteli (☎ 213 6690; Ayazpaşa Caddesi; s/d €12/16) A title-holder in this bracket for price, room size and cleanliness, it has no-frills but well-kept rooms. It's in the market, a short bag-haul from İstasyon Caddesi. The only flaw is the deserted, dimly lit street at night.

Breakfast is not included. Hungry? There's a *lokanta* next door.

Otel Çınar (☎ 213 5249; Ayazpaşa Caddesi; s/d €12/15) If the Yeni Çınar is full, the adjoining Çınar is an OK runner-up, with greenish, smartish rooms and well-scrubbed bathrooms. No breakfast is served.

Otel Dede (☎ 233 1191; Cumhuriyet Caddesi; s €9-14, d €17-20) The pros of staying here include cheap prices and a brilliant location, smack bang in the centre. The cons include a meagre breakfast (€2 extra), unadorned rooms and a migraine-inducing pinkish colour pattern. True budget-seekers will opt for the passable rooms on the 4th floor, with shared toilets and sinks (but no shower).

Yeni Ornek (☎ 233 0053; Kazım Karabekir Caddesi; s/d €14/20) The Yeni Ornek is a good choice away from the hustle and bustle of the exact centre, but within walking distance of all you need. It has appealing pastel-green rooms and well-kept tiled bathrooms. Note the ancient switchboard in the lobby.

Otel Polat (☎ 235 0363; fax 234 4598; Kazım Karabekir Caddesi; s/d €17/28) One of the best deals in town, without question, though these prices only just scrape into the budget category. Don't be fooled by the greyish exterior. Inside, it's much more appealing, with cosy rooms, good amenities and prim bathrooms, as well as a bright rooftop breakfast room boasting uninterrupted views of the city – splendid on a sunny day!

MIDRANGE

Erzurum also has a couple of comfortable midrange options, but top-end ventures are as scarce as hen's teeth in the centre. If you want full-on luxury you'll need to stay at the Palandöken Ski Resort (p569), 5km southwest of Erzurum.

Esadaş Oteli (☎ 233 5425; www.erzurumesadas.com.tr in Turkish; Cumhuriyet Caddesi; s/d €23/39; ☎) The best you can say about this nominally three-star middling place is that it's very central, efficiently run, well maintained and serviceable. Oh, and wi-fi is available.

Kral Oteli (☎ 234 6400; fax 234 6474; Erzincan Kapı Caddesi; s/d €25/39) Just off Cumhuriyet Caddesi, the Kral is a brave attempt at traditional-meets-modern décor. The façade is a bit off-putting but the rooms make up in visuals what they lack in size. Each floor has a theme – choose from the 'Republic', Seljuk', or 'Palandöken'. It's also handy if you want to be close to the

sights, restaurants and internet cafés in the centre.

Hotel Dilaver (☎ 235 0068; www.dilaverhotel.com.tr; Aşağı Mumcu Caddesi; s/d €25/42; ☎) Sure, there are plenty of cheaper places to stay in Erzurum, but the staff here are professional, the location's ace and the beds are comfortable. Be sure not to skip breakfast in the rooftop breakfast room, which affords smashing views over the city.

Eating & Drinking

Rumbling tummies won't go hungry in Erzurum. You'll find plenty of eateries sprinkled around Cumhuriyet Caddesi.

Simit Konağı (Cumhuriyet Caddesi; simits €0.60; ☎ 8am-11pm) This humming venue adjoining Kılıçoğlu churns out *simits* (O-shaped bread rings sprinkled with sesame seeds) that are so yummy we guarantee you'll be back for more.

Gel-Gör Çağ Kebabı (☎ 213 3253; İstasyon Caddesi; mains €2-4; ☎ 10am-11pm) You know those restaurants with menus a mile long, where it takes forever to make up your mind? Well, you won't have that torment at this charismatic Erzurum eatery, for it specialises in *çağ kebab* (mutton grilled on a horizontal spit) served with small plates of salad, onions and yogurt. It's a concept that's been a cult since 1975, so dedicated carnivores can't go wrong here.

Salon Asya (☎ 234 9222; Cumhuriyet Caddesi; mains €2-4; ☎ 10am-10pm) With its doesn't-get-more-central location, bright dining room and good repertoire of classic dishes, this long-running eatery is one of the essential culinary stops you should make while in town.

Küçükbey Konağı (☎ 214 0381; Cumhuriyet Caddesi, Erzurum Dügün Salonu Karşısı; mains €2-5; ☎ 8am-10pm) If you need a break from the hurly-burly of Cumhuriyet Caddesi, lug your bags to this welcoming refuge, tucked away in a converted house full of nooks and crannies. The food – consisting mostly of *mantı* (Turkish-style ravioli) and other simple dishes – is OK, but not the main reason to come. The Turkish coffee kicks like a mule.

Vatan Lokantası (☎ 234 8191; İstasyon Caddesi; mains €3-5; ☎ 8am-10pm) Don't expect culinary revelations in this snappy joint, just the usual suspects honestly prepared and served by attentive waiters. Grab a *tavuk şiş* and satisfy the inner self.

Güzelyurt Restoranı (☎ 234 5001; Cumhuriyet Caddesi; mains €4-7; ☎ noon-11pm) After feeding your

AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Erzurum Evleri (☎ 213 8372; Cumhuriyet Caddesi, Yüzbaşı Sokak; mains €3-5; 🕒 8am-11pm) This one-of-a-kind Erzurum institution scores a perfect 10 on our 'charm-meter', not for offering particularly gourmet food but for its mind-blowing décor and mellow atmosphere. It feels like half the paraphernalia from six centuries of the Ottoman Empire has ended up here, with an onslaught of kilims, pictures, weapons and other collectibles from floor to ceiling. For the complete *paşa* feel, surrender to the languor of the private alcoves with cushions and low tables and treat yourself to a soup, a cup of tea or a nargileh. A tad too folksy for some tastes, but after so many characterless interiors we found this dash of Ottoman-esque exoticism refreshingly authentic. It's connected to the nearby **Daşhane** (☎ 213 7080; 🕒 8am-11pm), which features live music on Friday and Saturday evenings.

mind with the artistic beauty of the Çifte Minareli, retrace your steps on Cumhuriyet Caddesi and feed your belly in this Erzurum dining shrine. Don't be put off by the shrouded windows that give it a look of a Soviet-style Mafia bolthole. Inside it's much more inviting, with soft lighting and black-clad waiters. 'Tavuk Şinitzel', 'Bof Stroganof' and 'Rulo Bif' (no typo) feature on the menu, as well as a host of appetising meze. Feeling provocative? Dare to quaff an incendiary *duble* (glass of rakı) while gazing at the mosque across the street – pure perversity in this God-fearing city.

Gizem Cafe & Patisserie (☎ 235 2200; Cumhuriyet Caddesi; 🕒 7am-11pm) This snazzy pastry shop with polished surrounds is something of a treasure-trove for carb-lovers, with lots of ravishing cakes, baklavas and ice creams. The upstairs salon is a good place to make eye contact (and eye contact *only*) with Turkish students of both sexes, here to enjoy the atmosphere, gossip and giggle. And if you travel with a laptop (and we're guessing you do), you'll be pleased to know that it has free wi-fi access.

Kılıçoğlu (☎ 235 3233; Cumhuriyet Caddesi; 🕒 7am-11pm) This übertrendy pastry shop wows you with its sleek setting and a wide array of tantalising pastries, which have such poetic names as *fistikli kıvrım*, *beyaz saray*, *prences* or *dilber dudağı* (look at the playful picture-book format menu). With 27 kinds of baklava and 23 ice-cream flavours, this is a Shangri-la for a sweet tooth. Snacks are also available. It's so popular it's spawned a second place over the road.

Çay Bahçesi (Cumhuriyet Caddesi; 🕒 7am-10pm) Need some hush and a cool place to rest your sightseeing-abused feet? Nothing beats this delightful, leaf-dappled tea garden, just off the Turkish Islamic Arts & Ethnography

Museum. Nurse a (soft) drink and you'll feel happy with life.

Shopping

Erzurum is known for the manufacture of jewellery and other items from *oltutaşı*, the local black amber.

Rüstem Paşa Çarşısı (Adnan Menderes Caddesi) Built between 1540 and 1550 by Süleyman the Magnificent's grand vizier, this two-storey covered *han* (Ottoman tavern), north of Cumhuriyet Caddesi, now serves as a centre for the manufacture and sale of items made from *oltutaşı*. If you've found the souvenir of your dreams, we'll be happy to hear about it!

Getting There & Away**AIR**

All airlines provide *servises* to shuttle passengers to the airport (€3).

Kuzkay Turizm (☎ 234 2447; www.sunexpress.com.tr; Cumhuriyet Caddesi; 🕒 8am-8pm) Represents Sun Express. Two weekly flights to Izmir (from €44, two hours).

Onur Air (☎ 235 0280; www.onurair.com.tr; Cumhuriyet Caddesi; 🕒 8am-6.30pm) One daily flight to İstanbul (from €49, two hours).

Turkish Airlines (☎ 213 6717; www.thy.com; Cumhuriyet Caddesi; 🕒 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-2pm Sat) One daily flight to İstanbul (from €44, 1¼ hours) and a daily flight to Ankara (from €44, 90 minutes).

BUS

The otogar (bus station), 2km from the centre along the airport road, handles most of Erzurum's intercity traffic.

If you're heading to Ankara or İstanbul, Esadaş buses have the best reputation. For Iran (if you already have your visa; see the boxed text, p674), take a bus to Doğubayazıt from where you can catch a minibus to the Iranian frontier.

Details of some daily services from Erzurum's otogar are listed in the table below.

The Gölbaşı Semt Garajı, about 1km north-east of Adnan Menderes Caddesi through the back streets, handles minibuses to towns to the north and east of Erzurum, including Artvin, Hopa, Rize and Yusufeli. Minibuses to Yusufeli leave at 9am, 1.30pm and 4pm daily (€9, three hours, 129km); minibuses to Artvin (€10, four hours, 215km), Hopa and Rize leave at 7.30am, 11.30am, 2pm, 4.30pm and 6pm. The Gölbaşı Semt Garajı can be difficult to find unless you take a taxi (about €3).

SERVICES FROM ERZURUM'S OTOGAR

Destination Fare Duration Distance Frequency (per day)

Ankara	€23	13hr	925km	about 10
Diyarbakır	€14	8hr	485km	5
Doğubayazıt	€9	4½hr	285km	5
İstanbul	€31	19hr	1275km	7
Kars	€9	3hr	205km	frequent
Kayseri	€20	10hr	628km	several
Trabzon	€10	6hr	325km	several
Van	€12	6½hr	410km	about 3

TRAIN

The *Doğu Ekspresi* leaves daily at noon for İstanbul via Sivas, Kayseri and Ankara (€20); for Kars, it departs at 5.20pm (€5). The *Erzurum Ekspresi* leaves for Ankara, via Sivas and Kayseri, daily at 1.30pm (€17; 24 hours); for Kars, it departs at 11.09am (€5; 4½ hours).

Getting Around

A taxi to/from the airport, about 15km from town, costs around €17. A taxi trip within the city costs €2 to €4.

Minibus and city buses pass the otogar and will take you into town for €0.40; a taxi costs about €4.

Car rental is available through **Avis** (☎ 233 8088; www.avis.com.tr; Terminal Caddesi, Mavi Site 1 Blok 5; 🕒 8am-7pm) and **Decar** (☎ 234 6160; www.decar.com; Milletbahçe Caddesi; 🕒 8am-7pm), off Çaykara Caddesi.

AROUND ERZURUM Palandöken Ski Resort

☎ 0442

Did you know? A mere 5km south of Erzurum, Palandöken is regarded as the best ski area in the country, with 10 ski lifts, including one telecabın, and 28km of ski runs on three

levels (seven beginner runs, six intermediate and two advanced). At weekends from December to April, be prepared to jostle with other snow-lovers for a spot on the slopes and a place in the ski-lift queues. Rental equipment is available at the hotels (about €20 to €25 per day).

SLEEPING

With the exception of the Dedeman, the places to stay are open all year. All hotels have their own restaurants, bars and discos. The prices quoted here are high-season winter rates (expect discounts of up to 20% off season).

Palan Oteli (☎ 317 0707; www.palanotel.com; s/d €50/75; 📞 📺 📺) What the Palan lacks in style it makes up for in service and amenities, which include a sauna and gym.

Ski Lodge Dedeman (☎ 317 0500; www.dedeman.com; s/d €55/85; 📞 📺) Our favourite, by far. Opened in 2006, this stylish abode has somewhat managed to retain a low-key charm and a congenial atmosphere. It's shiny-clean, light-filled and well organised. And did we mention the well-sprung mattresses, which are so bouncy you could use them as trampolines?

Dedeman (☎ 316 2414; www.dedeman.com; s/d €84/109; 📞) This second Dedeman is older than the Ski Lodge but it's right at the foot of the ski runs, at 2450m.

Polat Renaissance (☎ 232 0010; www.polatrenaisance.com; s/d €84/109; 📞 📺 📺) Gloating over its shiny five stars, the massive, pyramid-shaped Renaissance is reminiscent of George Orwell's Ministry of Truth, but it has all the bells and whistles you could dream of.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

In theory, there are minibuses from south of central Erzurum to Palandöken during the ski season. Otherwise, you can take a taxi (€8).

GEORGIAN VALLEYS

The mountainous country north of Erzurum towards Artvin is the perfect combination of nature and culture. It was once part of the medieval kingdom of Georgia, and has numerous churches and castles to show for it. The trouble you take to see this region will be amply rewarded. The good news is that you don't need to be an architecture buff to marvel at these buildings. The mountain scenery is spectacular, and the churches, which mix characteristics of Armenian, Seljuk and

Persian styles, are eye-catching and seldom visited. If you happen to be passing in mid-June, the orchards of cherries and apricots should be in bloom – a special treat. If the rains hold off, late September and early October can also be fine times to visit, as the trees will have autumnal colouring.

History

The Persians and Byzantines squabbled over this region from the 4th century. Then it was conquered by the Arabs in the 7th century, recovered by the Byzantines, lost again and so on. It was part of the medieval Georgian kingdom in the 10th century, governed by the Armenian Bagratids from the same lineage as the Armenian Bagratids ruling over the Kars region. A mixture of isolation brought about by the rugged terrain, piety and the support of Byzantium all fostered a flourishing culture that produced the churches you see today.

However, it was the ambitious King Bagrat III who looked outside the sheltered valleys and unified Georgia's warring kingdoms in 1008. Bagrat III shifted the focus of the newly formed kingdom by moving the capital from Tbilisi, nominally under the control of the Arabs, to Kutaisi, and by gradually disengaging from the southwest valleys that had been under the sway of the Byzantines since 1001.

The southwest provinces had been coexisting relatively harmoniously between the Byzantines and Georgians, but the arrival of the Seljuk Turks in 1064 dashed hopes of real stability. King David IV ('The Builder'; 1089–1125) defeated the Seljuks in 1122, and took up where King Bagrat III had left off by reunifying Georgia with Tbilisi and the southwest provinces. So began the 'Golden Age' for Georgian culture, which reached its peak during the rule of Queen Tamar (1184–1213).

Alas, stability was relatively short-lived. With the arrival of the Mongol conqueror Tamerlane in 1386, the kingdom was dealt its most savage blow by the Ottoman capture of Constantinople in 1453 and the ending of the protection the Georgians had enjoyed under quasi-Byzantine rule. The kingdom went into decline, the Ottomans annexed the Georgian Valleys and, later, imperial Russia took care of the rest.

Today many locals have Georgian heritage, but most converted to Islam or left after the troubles in the early 20th century.

Getting There & Away

The small mountain villages in these valleys are a delight to explore, but public transport to and from most of them consists of a single minibus that heads between Erzurum and Artvin early in the morning, returning in the afternoon. Buses run between Erzurum and Yusufeli, though these allow little opportunity for exploration. Hiring a car in Erzurum or Artvin, although relatively expensive, is the best way to get around and needn't be too costly if you assemble a group. From Yusufeli, you could also hire a taxi, but be prepared to cough up at least €100.

Bağbaşı (Haho)

About 16km south of the turn-off to Öşkvan is another turn-off on the right (west), over a humpbacked bridge, to the village called Haho by the Georgians. It's signposted 'Taş Camii, Meryemana Kilisesi'. Go 7km up the partly paved road through orchards and fields to the village. The **monastery complex** is about 800m further up the road. It dates from the late 10th century and is in good condition. Don't miss the conical-topped dome, with its multicoloured tiles, or the fine reliefs, including a stone eagle grasping a doe in his claws. The use of alternating light and dark stones adds to the elegance of the building.

The church is used as a mosque, so some restoration work has taken place here.

Öşkvan & Around

Continuing north on Hwy 950, you'll reach the turn-off to Öşkvan, which is 7km off the highway. Keep on the main road winding up the valley to the village, where you can't miss the impressive **cathedral**, built in the late 10th century. It's the grandest of the Georgian cathedrals in this region with a three-aisled basilica (as in the earlier churches of Dörtkilise or Barhal) topped off by a dome. Marvel at the blind arcades and the reliefs of the archangels.

The central nave has two walled-off aisles on either side. The southwest aisle, like the triple-arched narthex, is still in relatively good shape – notice the intricate carvings on the capitals, with elaborate geometric designs, typical of Georgian church decoration. There are other fine relief carvings, both on the massive capitals that supported the equally majestic dome (it has fallen in) and on the exterior walls. Look for the fine relief of the

three wise men and Mary and Joseph, to the right (northeast) of the main entrance.

Much of the roof has fallen in, but there are still well-preserved fragments of frescoes; look in the half-dome on the inside of the main porched portal.

Highway 950 skirts the western shore of **Tortum Gölü** (Lake Tortum), which was formed by a landslide about three centuries ago. Feeling peckish? Stop at the **İskele Alabalık Tesisleri** (☎ 792 2471; fish dishes €4), where you can tuck into well-prepared fish dishes. The décor is nothing flash, but the setting is awesome.

A little further up the road are the impressive **Tortum Şelalesi** (Tortum Waterfalls), about 35km from Yusufeli and signposted 700m off the main road.

İşhan

When Hwy 950 meets the D060, take the road on the right marked for Olur and Kars. Go 7km to the road on the left for İşhan, marked by a sign reading 'İşhan Kilisesi'. The mountain village is spectacularly situated, 6km up a steep, paved road carved out of the mountainside.

Located past the modern white mosque, the wonderful **Church of the Mother of God** (admission €1.50) was built in the 8th century and enlarged in the 11th. There are traces of blue frescoes in the near-conical dome (vanishing fast – 25 years ago whole walls were covered in them), and a superb arcade of horseshoe-shaped arches in the apse, all with different capitals. The four pillars are impressive, as in Öşkvan (see opposite). Unfortunately, a huge dividing wall was built in the nave – half of this church functioned as a mosque until the replacement mosque was built in 1984. The most detailed of the many fine reliefs – above the portal of the small chapel next door – ascribes the founding of the church to King Bagrat III. Also worth admiring are the inscriptions above the bricked-up portal of the main building and an elaborate fretwork around the windows. The drum also sports some fine blind arcades and elegantly carved colonnades.

Bana & Penek

Continuing along the D060 in the Kars direction, after the village of Kalidibi you'll see a **castle** on a mound. It's an eerie sight, in keeping with the surreal landscape, where craggy gorges alternate with reddish bluffs. About 400m further on you'll see a second crumbling

castle on the left, built on a rocky outcrop and overlooking a river lined with poplars.

From the junction with Highway 955, driving a further 14.5km on the D060 towards Kars will lead you past a bridge crossing the Penek Çayı (it's signposted). About 100m past the bridge, take the side track on the left. It goes uphill for 2km to the village of **Penek**. Continue through the village and turn left about 700m further on. The awesome Armenian **church of Bana** comes into view, standing on a mound with the mountains forming a fantastic backdrop – an unforgettable vision. Its most distinctive architectural feature is its rotunda shape. Beware: in wet weather you could get trapped if the road is muddy.

Oltu

Along the D955, the peaceful town of Oltu is huddled beneath a startling **kalesi** (citadel), painstakingly restored in 2002. Little is known about its history, but it is supposed to have been built by Urartus in 1000 BC. The castle was probably used by Genoese colonies and was of some importance during the Roman and Byzantine periods, before being occupied by the Seljuks and then by the Ottomans in the 16th century.

YUSUFELİ

☎ 0466 / pop 6400 / elevation 560m

Yusufeli's fate is sealed: the foundations of a nearby dam are scheduled to be carried out in the forthcoming years. The whole valley will vanish underwater, and people will be relocated higher in the mountains. Turkish officials have guaranteed that no church will be submerged. Before this happens you should enjoy Yusufeli while you can. And there's a lot to do here if you're an adrenaline junkie. The swift Barhal Çayı rushes noisily through Yusufeli on its way to the nearby Çoruh River, and the town is a popular base for white-water rafting and trekking groups.

But it's not all about nature and outdoor activities: Yusufeli is also a good base for culture vultures. The churches at Barhal and Dörtkilise are definitely worth the trip. There are limited minibus services to these villages, but if you have cash to spare you can hire a taxi to take you to them.

Orientation & Information

A short stroll reveals everything Yusufeli has to offer: Halit Paşa Caddesi and İnönü

WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD FOR YOUNG YUSUFELIANS?

Fatih Şahin is a well-known trekking guide in Yusufeli and an opponent of the construction of a dam that will flood part of the Çoruh valley in a few years: 'Not only will we lose our land and our houses, but we will lose also lose our past, our memories, our traditions. This is the land of our ancestors, they are buried here, and all will vanish under water. That's not acceptable. And any tourism development is now blighted. Activities are doomed to disappear. When the dam is completed, there will no longer be any rafting trips, and certainly less trekking routes. The roads to the churches will be flooded. Young people in the valley feel desperate and are forced to move because they know they have no future here. The government assures us that we will be relocated in this area, but we still don't know where. The bureaucrats in Ankara put pressure on those who are against the dam.'

Caddesi, joining to form the main street; the banks with ATMs; the post office behind the school in the eastern part of town; and the few small hotels and restaurants. A **tourist office** (☎ 811 4008; İnönü Caddesi; ☎ 8am-6pm), near the otogar, was opened in 2006. In principle, it's staffed by English-speaking students. The **Yakamoz Café** (Enver Paşa Caddesi; per hr €0.60; ☎ 9am-11pm), in the small alley opposite Hotel Barhal, has internet facilities.

Activities

WHITE-WATER RAFTING

The Çoruh River is one of the world's best rafting rivers. Die-hard fans love tackling Yusufeli Gorge's very own 'King Kong' rapids, but most of us are exhilarated enough by the other frothing challenges in this class 4 to 5 rafting river. Bobbing down the river you can also enjoy a taste of traditional eastern-Anatolian village life and the tall craggy gorges. It would be interesting to hear about your experience. Rafting is best in May and early June; by the end of July the volume of water is insufficient.

Various local operators run day trips out of Yusufeli for about €25 per person (minimum four people) for 3½ hours of rafting; ask at Hotel Barhal, Otel Barcelona or at Greenpiece Camping. One English-speaking guide who comes recommended is **Necmettin Coşkun** (☎ 0505 541 2522; coruhrafting@hotmail.com). Other companies run longer trips with three nights' camping and four days' rafting culminating at Yusufeli Gorge. Prices start at around €1000 for one week, including food and camping. Travellers have recommended **Water by Nature** (☎ in the UK 0148-872 293; www.waterbynature.com), based in the UK. When we visited, this company used Cemil's Pension in Tekkale as a base. **Alternatif Outdoor** (☎ 0252-417 2720; www

.alternatifraft.com) is a Turkish group operating out of Marmaris.

TREKKING

From Yusufeli, guides **Özkan Şahin** (☎ 811 2187, 0532 505 8975; www.way2kacgar.com) and **Fatih Şahin** (☎ 811 2150, 0532-622 9489; www.bukla.com) can lead you on customised treks up into the Kaçkar Mountains; see p558. Both speak good English. Pension owners in Barhal (opposite) and Olgunlar (p574) also arrange treks.

Sleeping

Unfortunately, Yusufeli doesn't have a lot of good accommodation, and it's no wonder – the dam project has blighted tourism development. The cheapies in the centre are best avoided – they look like they might collapse in a cloud of dust before your eyes.

Greenpiece Camping (☎ 811 3620; camping per person €3, tree house per person €6-9, s/d €9/14; 📍) Greenpiece boasts an excellent setting and has various types of accommodation. For shoestringers, the ultra-basic tree houses hiding in the leaves of an orchard can do the trick (one more abutment block wouldn't harm, though), or you can pitch your tent in the grassy grounds; for more comfort, upgrade to one of the three rooms with bathrooms. There's a pleasant restaurant by the riverside (dinner is about €5) and, yes, it's licensed. Rafting trips can be organised. Cross the bouncing suspension footbridge beside Hotel Barhal & Restaurant, and follow the signs to find this place about 700m from the bridge.

Hotel Barhal & Restaurant (☎ 811 3151; Enver Paşa Caddesi; s/d €9/18) Ideally located by the suspension bridge, the Barhal is the most obvious port of call if you don't want to deplete your accommodation budget. The rooms are not going to win a beauty contest but are fresh

and luminous, and bathrooms are functional; some rooms overlook the river. The on-site restaurant serves up decent dishes and overlooks the river – if the terrace was any nearer the water you'd have to swim to dinner. The owners can organise various trips in the area, including trekking and rafting. Breakfast is extra.

Hotel River (☎ 824 4345; Bostancı; riverotel@yahoo.com.tr; s/d with half board €25/40) A friendly welcome from a charming family awaits at this new-ish pension, judiciously positioned right by the Barhal River. Although it's about 12km from Yusufeli on the road to Barhal, it's easily accessible by minibus from Yusufeli (€3). Rooms are sparklingly clean and cosy, with pine cladding, TV, well-sprung mattresses, colourful linen and private bathrooms. Meals are served on a breezy terrace, and the gushing river provides a soothing soundtrack. Rafting and trekking trips can be organised. Warmly recommended.

Otel Barcelona (☎ 811 2627; www.hotelbarcelonanet.com; Arikli Mahallesi; s/d €55/70; 📍 📺 📶 🚰) Almost incongruous in this backpacker territory, this upmarket resort-style abode, under Turkish-Spanish management, flaunts excellent amenities (including free wi-fi and a pool), roomy rooms with scrupulously clean bathrooms, pleasing colourful tones and an attached quality restaurant. The icing on the cake here is that you can take a dip in the big pool. Various trips can be organised in the area, including 4WD tours, as well as hiking and rafting trips.

Eating

Gourmet food in Yusufeli? Dream on! Remember what you're here for: nature and adventure, darlings. Check out also the hotel restaurants (see earlier).

Çoruh Pide ve Lahmacun Salonu (☎ 811 2870; Erisis Caddesi; mains €2-3; ☎ 10am-8pm) It's all in the name. This is arguably the best place in town for Turkish and Arabic pizzas, served fresh from the oven, with plenty of pizzazz.

Hacıoğlu Cağ Döner (☎ 811 3009; İnönü Caddesi; mains €2-3; ☎ 8am-10pm) Close to the tourist office. If you want to branch out from the standard kebabs, the *alabalık* (trout) deserves a try. The terrace by the river is an added bonus.

Azret Lokantasi (☎ 811 2181; İnönü Caddesi; mains €2-4) If your stomach is in knots, this eatery plates up face-filling kebabs and other standards at paupers' prices.

Aile Çay Bahçesi (İnönü Caddesi; ☎ dawn-dusk) On the main square, it's the most agreeable place in town to relax over a cuppa in the shade and watch the world go by.

Getting There & Away

From Yusufeli there are at least two buses in the morning for Erzurum (€9, three hours), a 9am service to Trabzon (€13) and several minibuses to Artvin (€7). For Kars, you'll have to take a taxi out to the petrol station along the Artvin-Erzurum road and catch the bus from there, at about 1pm (€8).

AROUND YUSUFELI

Barhal (Altıparmak)

☎ 0466 / pop 1000 / elevation 1300m

Heaven! Picture this: a village nestled in a verdant valley, a rippling stream running through its heart and a lovely mountainscape. It's bucolic to boot. About 28km northwest of Yusufeli, you could be forgiven for thinking you've landed in Switzerland. Well, Switzerland without the crowds, that is. Once this initial euphoria subsides and you've had your fill of the wonderful scenery, you'll want some cultural sustenance. Barhal (officially called Altıparmak) preserves a 10th-century **Georgian church**. Take the walk up to the small ruined **chapel** in a meadowed ridge above the town – it's worth the half-hour pant for the bird's-eye views over the town and the jagged, snow-capped peaks beyond. The (unsigned) walk starts over a plank footbridge near Mehmet Karahan's pension.

Pension owners also arrange two- to four-day treks across the mountains to Çamlıhemşin with horses to carry your baggage. One horse, costing €30, can porter for two trekkers. Add another €40 per day for a guide (flat fee). Other costs are negotiable.

SLEEPING

Once you arrive in Barhal you won't want to leave, especially since the handful of pensions here are far more inviting than those in Yusufeli.

Barhal Pansiyon (☎ 826 2031; www.barhalpansiyon.com; half board per person €16) The first place you'll pass on the road into town. It's congenial, and the 12 rooms (with shared bathroom) are well tended. Enjoy the scenery and the hush from the terrace.

Marsis Village House (☎ 826 2002; www.marsisotel.com; half board per person €20) A few steps further

up, just back from the river. It feels like a cosy doll house, with 16 comfy rooms, an agreeable terrace and amiable staff. Three rooms come with private bathrooms. We plumped for rooms 301, 106 and 107, poky yet intimate and cosy, with pine cladding, parquet flooring and river views thrown in for free. The wholesome dinners come in for warm praise.

Karahan Pension (☎ 826 2071; www.karahanpension.com in Turkish; half board per person €17) Run by affable Mehmet Karahan, this idiosyncratic pension on a hill beside the church has everything in spades. No glitz or pomp, just friendly ambience and neat rooms that have been recently refurbished. Angle for a room with private bathroom and a view over the valley. To make matters even more agreeable, food here is a definite plus: feast on fresh village honey and artery-clogging cream with bread at breakfast time. Here, 'Hayat çok güzel' – you'll certainly agree.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

A couple of minibuses make the run from Yusufeli (€4, two hours), usually at 2pm and 4pm or 5pm. If you have your own vehicle, note that only the first 18km are sealed. If it's dry, the winding, narrow road can be braved in an ordinary car, but it's wise to seek local advice before setting off.

Yaylalar (Hevek) & Olgunlar

☎ 0466 / pop 500

It's a darn tiring ride to get to **Yaylalar**, about 22km further from Barhal, but peace and seclusion have a price. Believe us, this is an ideal retreat to rejuvenate mind and body, with a glorious setting, jagged peaks, babbling brooks, traditional farmhouses and the purest air we've ever breathed in Turkey – not to mention the superb hikes that await you. Recharge the batteries, feast on organic food, explore the surrounding *yaylalar* (highland pastures) and you'll be happy with life. A hint: don't forget your Turkish phrasebook as nobody speaks a single word of English.

Yaylalar boasts an excellent place to stay, **Çamyuva Pension** (☎ 832 2001; www.kackar3937.com; half board per person in old/new room €15/23, bungalow €55), with a variety of sleeping options. You can bunk down either in the plain rooms with shared bathrooms in the first building or, if you seek more privacy and comfort, in one of the four adjoining cabins, which are called, with some exaggeration, bungalows (up to

four persons). A second building resembling a big Swiss chalet was opened in 2006 and features 13 spotless rooms with private bathrooms. The food is fresh, varied and plentiful, with no fewer than 15 *çeşit* (dishes) at breakfast. Your friendly hosts, İsmail and Naim, also run a food shop and a bakery. İsmail is the minibus driver to Yusufeli and can drive you to Olgunlar.

The village of **Olgunlar** is about 3km further up in the mountains. Here you'll find the **Denizgözü Pension** (☎ 832 2105; half board per person €20), with salubrious rooms and private bathrooms, overlooking the river, and the 15-room **Kaçkar Pension** (☎ 832 2047; www.kackar.net; half board per person €25), another haven of peace complete with pine cladding and similar in standard to the Denizgözü.

Both these villages can be used as bases for **hikes** over the Kaçkar Mountains (p558). From Olgunlar, it takes about two to three days to reach Ayder, through the Çaymakçur Pass (approximately 3100m). The pension owners will be happy to help you organise a trek. They can provide mules, horses, a guide and camping equipment.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Minibuses to Barhal usually travel a further 22km to the end of the line at Yaylalar (€9 from Yusufeli). There are no services for Olgunlar, about 3km from Yaylalar.

Tekkale & Dörtkilise

☎ 0466 / pop 2000

Peaceful Tekkale lies 7km southwest of Yusufeli. It's an ideal jumping-off point for exploring Dörtkilise (Four Churches), another ruined 10th-century Georgian church and monastery lying about 6km further upstream. The building is domeless, with a gabled roof and very few frescoes. It's similar to, but older and larger than, the one at Barhal, and takes less time and effort to visit. It's a perfect picturesque ruin, with weeds and vines springing from mossy stones.

On the way to Tekkale you'll pass the ruins of a **castle** almost hanging above the road.

Cemil's Pension (☎ 811 2908, 0536-988 5829; Tekkale; camp site/r with half board per person €3/17) is a cheerful, chalet-like pension, with lots of nooks and crannies as well as a convivial terrace right beside the river and a tank full of trout. You can choose between a bed in a room (aim for a room in the new building) or sleeping on

the terrace. Evening meals are also available. Cemil Albayrak, the chirpy owner, can arrange treks into the surrounding countryside, as well as rafting trips. He may also play *saz* (guitar) for his guests in the evening.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

To get to Tekkale take a minibus from the south side of the bridge (along Mustafa Kemal Paşa Caddesi) in Yusufeli towards Kılıçkaya or Köprügören; there are about five services per day (€0.50). A taxi costs about €10. From Tekkale you have to hike 6km to Dörtkilise, bearing in mind that there is no sign for the church, which is high up amid the vegetation on the left-hand side of the road. If you have a car, the road is pretty rough from Tekkale onwards and shouldn't be braved if it's wet.

ARTVIN

☎ 0466 / pop 21,000 / elevation 600m

Artvin's main claim to fame is its spectacular mountain setting – it's precariously perched on a steep hill above the road linking Hopa (on the Black Sea coast) and Kars.

Sadly, in the last few years this has turned into a spectacularly scarred setting, thanks to kilometres of dam and road works. Apart from a couple of ancient houses, the city itself does not have much to captivate you. Despite these minor shortcomings, it's the best launching pad for exploring the mystifying *yaylalar* (high pastures). And if you plan a visit in summer, try to make it coincide with the Kafkasör Kültür ve Sanat Festivali – a definite must-see.

Orientation & Information

Artvin is perched on a valley side, high above a bend in the Çoruh River. It's little more than one steep street (İnönü Caddesi) and is easily negotiated on foot, except for the trip to and from the otogar, which lies further down the valley, about 500m from the town centre, off a hairpin bend.

For internet access head to **Özle Internet Cafe** (İnönü Caddesi; per hr €0.60; ☎ 8am-midnight), next door to Karahan Otel. In the same street you'll find the PTT and banks with ATMs. At its western end is a roundabout overlooked by the **tourist office** (☎ 212 3071; İnönü Caddesi; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri), where you can pick up a couple of brochures and a useful map of the area. Most hotels are within a block of the *valilik* (provincial government building).

Festivals & Events

Over the last weekend of June, the Kafkasör Yaylası, a pasture 7km southwest of Artvin, becomes the scene of the annual **Kafkasör Kültür ve Sanat Festivali** (Caucasus Culture & Arts Festival; ☎ 0232-464 0529), with *boğa güreşleri* (bloodless bull-wrestling matches) as the main attraction. It's attended by people from all over the Caucasus.

Sleeping

Many hotels double as brothels, but you should do fine if you stick to the following options.

Otel Uğrak (☎ 212 6505; PTT Arkaşı, Hamam Sokak; s/d with shared bathroom €9/12) Tucked away in a quiet lane off the main drag, this cheapie is rather ho-hum, but it is central and serviceable, the shared bathrooms are OK and some rooms at the rear boast terrific views. Overall, it's a good deal if you're not too choosy. Breakfast is not included.

Otel Kaçkar (☎ 212 9009; Hamam Sokak; s/d €17/28) The bedroom furniture is a little creaky and the carpets seriously battered, but the bathrooms are good and the bedspreads colourful, and the occasional whiff of hospital-strength disinfectant is testament to the place's spotlessness.

Turistik Otel Genya (☎ 212 3131; Cumhuriyet Meydanı; s/d €17/28; ☎) Taking a brave step away from the trademark greyish façade scheme, this recent outfit, daubed a camp shade of yellow, has spotless new facilities, including air-con, parquet flooring, luminous rooms, salubrious bathrooms and a rooftop terrace. It's just behind the mosque.

Ağasın Otel (☎ 212 3333; fax 212 8528; İnönü Caddesi; s/d €20/28; ☎ ☎) This modern number is a good alternative to the Karahan, with neat rooms and sparkling bathrooms. Some doubles at the back are blessed with superb views over the valley. Sure, you might find yourself running into the occasional prostitute at the lounge-bar behind the reception, but it's pretty harmless, though lone women travellers are better advised to stay somewhere else.

Karahan Otel (☎ 212 1800; fax 212 2420; İnönü Caddesi; s/d €25/31, with air-con €31/37; ☎ ☎) The Karahan is as sexy as a multistorey car park from the outside – and the grotty entrance doesn't help – but the lift will whisk you up to fancier surroundings. Refurbished, sun-filled and spacious rooms, bathrooms as clean as a whistle and competent staff conspire to make it a recommended option. Breakfasts are served in

a vast room (complete with pine-clad walls), that resembles a sauna.

Eating & Drinking

For cheap fare, stroll along İnönü Caddesi and size up the assorted small *kebabçısı* (kebab joints) and *pideci*s (pizza places).

Arses Cafe Bar (☎ 212 3484; Hürriyet Caddesi; snacks €1-3; ☎ 10am-midnight) Sometimes you want the simple things in life: a dangerously cheap beer, inexpensive nibbles, a decent dollop of authentic charm and a few smiles from the waiters. This place has all that, plus live bands most evenings. It's unsurprisingly popular with students. Interesting name, though.

Köşk Pastanesi (☎ 212 1621; İnönü Caddesi, Tekel Sokak; ☎ 7am-9pm) A popular bolthole on the main drag. If you need to re-energise, skip the unexceptional baklavas and stick to inoffensive snacks or sample an ice cream.

Sedir Pastanesi (☎ 212 5960; İnönü Caddesi; ☎ 7am-10pm) This pastry shop has an invigorating *şahlep* (a hot drink made from crushed tapioca root extract, which has aphrodisiac qualities – no, really?) as well as stodgy cakes. It's just opposite the Köşk.

Nazar Restoran (☎ 212 1709; İnönü Caddesi; mains €2-5; ☎ 8am-10pm) At the foot of the main street

where it turns to descend the valley, the licensed Nazar won't win any culinary awards, but if you nab a window-side seat you'll enjoy fabulous views of the valley (and the dam construction works, incidentally).

Efkar Restaurant (☎ 212 1134; İnönü Caddesi; mains €2-5; 8am-10pm) In the same building as the Nazar, upstairs. The interior is dull and cramped but from the little balcony you'll be graced with a 'million-dollar view' (as they say).

Getting There & Around

There's one morning bus a day to Kars (€14, five hours, 270km), four to Samsun (€14, eight hours, 577km) and regular buses to Trabzon (€9, 4½ hours, 255km). For Erzurum there are several daily buses and minibuses (€12, four hours, 215km). Some buses coming from Erzurum or Ardahan and heading on to Hopa don't go into the otogar but drop you at the roadside at the bottom of the hill.

There are also frequent minibuses to Hopa (€7, 1½ hours, 70km), about two minibuses to Ardahan (€9, 2½ hours, 115km) and Törtüm (€9, 2½ hours, 91km), and at least six minibuses to Yusufeli (€6, 2¼ hours, 75km). There are also regular services to Ardanuç

(€4, one hour, 30km) and to Şavşat (€6, 1½ hours, 60km).

Artvin Ekspres (İnönü Caddesi), west of the *valilik*, runs a *servis* to the otogar. 'Köprü' minibuses (€0.50) also shuttle passengers between the *valilik* and the otogar. Alternatively, a taxi up will cost you about €3.

KARS

☎ 0474 / pop 76,000 / elevation 1768m

This is the city that provided the setting for Orhan Pamuk's prize-winning novel *Kar* (*Snow*). Kars always elicits strong reactions – negative or positive, depending on your perspective. Some travellers loathe it ('muddy', 'lethargic', 'stark', 'sad'); others scratch below the surface and realise that Kars is high on personality and atmosphere. All right, it's a bit nibbled around the edges, but when the sun shines, the stately, pastel-coloured stone buildings look almost chirpy, giving the town the look of a Little Russia in Turkey. And the mix of influences – Azeri, Turkmen, Kurdish, Turkish and Russian – adds to the appeal.

The main reason for coming to Kars is usually to visit Ani (p581), but don't forget to enjoy the delicious local *bal* (honey) and *peynir* (cheese); these will certainly keep your spirits high. When the border with Armenia reopens, which is bound to happen one of these days, business with nearby Gyumri will thrive.

History

Dominated by a stark medieval fortress, Kars was once an Armenian stronghold, capital of the Armenian Bagratid kingdom (before Ani) and later a pawn in the imperial land-grabbing tussle played out by Turkey and Russia during the 19th century. The Russians captured Kars in 1878, installed a garrison, and held it until 1920 and the Turkish War of Independence when the republican forces retook it. One of the town's large mosques was obviously built as a Russian Orthodox church, and many of the sturdier stone buildings along the main streets date back to the Russian occupation.

The locals are said to be descended from the Karsaks, a Turkic tribe that came from the Caucasus in the 2nd century BC and gave their name to the town.

Orientation

The Russians obviously had great plans for Kars, which they laid out on a spacious grid

plan. Most banks (and ATMs), hotels and restaurants are in or close to Atatürk Caddesi, the main drag. Although the otogar (bus station) is 2km southeast of the centre, off the Artvin–Ardahan road, almost everything else (except the train station and the museum) is within walking distance. Dolmuşes run from the minibus terminal just east of the town centre.

Information

Limited tourist information is available at the **tourist office** (☎ 212 6817; Lise Caddesi; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri), west of the centre. It can help you organise a taxi to Ani, but maybe a better bet is to contact **Celil Ersoğlu** (☎ 212 6543, 0532 226 3966; celilani@hotmail.com), who acts as a private guide and speaks very good English. He'll probably meet you at your hotel's reception.

Internet access is widely available. The brightest outlet is **Comis** (Atatürk Caddesi; per hr €0.60; ☎ 8am-11pm), which has flat screens and snacks.

Numerous banks with ATMs can be found in the centre. The **Azerbaijani consulate** (☎ 0474-223 6475, 223 1361; fax 223 8741; Erzurum Caddesi; ☎ 9.30am-12.30pm Mon-Fri) is northwest of the centre (also see the boxed text, p674).

Sights & Activities

Don't even consider missing the prominent **Kars Castle** (Kars Kalesi; admission free; ☎ 8am-5pm), north of the river in the older part of the city. It's worth the knee-jarring climb, if only for the smashing views over the town and the steppe in fine weather. Records show that Saltuk Turks built a fortress here in 1153. It was torn down by the Mongol conqueror, Tamerlane, in 1386 and rebuilt for the Ottoman sultan Murat III by his grand vizier Lala Mustafa Paşa in 1579. The entire complex was rebuilt yet again in 1855. The castle was the scene of bitter fighting during and after WWI. When the Russian armies withdrew in 1920, control of Kars was left in the hands of the Armenian forces, until the republican armies took the *kalesi*.

On the way to the castle, along the riverbanks huddle assorted crumbling reminders of Kars' ancient past, including the **Church of the Apostles** (Kumbet Camii). Built between 932 and 937 for the Bagratid King Abas, it was repaired extensively and turned into a mosque in 1579 when the Ottomans rebuilt much of the city; the Russians added the porches in

GETTING LOST IN THE YAYLALAR

In summer, the area that extends to the northeast of Artvin is simply magical. The *yaylalar* (summer pastures) represent the heart and soul of traditional rural eastern Anatolia. There's a tapestry of bucolic ambience, with lakes, rivers, mountains, lush valleys, forests, pastures, traditional wooden houses, villages, grazing cattle and sheep... The landscape is completely unspoiled, and there's virtually no traffic. Amid this pastoral setting stand several ruined churches and castles that are definitely worth a look.

This territory lends itself perfectly to a DIY approach, preferably with your own wheels because public transport is unreliable. Put away your guidebook and follow your nose. All you need is a map (the *Artvin Kent Planı & İl Haritası*, which is available at the tourist office in Artvin, and any good touring map of the country should suffice) and a picnic. Of course, some words in Turkish for directions always help.

From Artvin, you could follow the D010 eastwards – the road to Kars – then head to the 10th-century **Church of Dolışhane**. The 9th-century **Georgian Monastery and Church of Porta**, near Pnarlı, is also worth a peek. If you continue east along the Çoruh, don't miss the turn-off that leads up to **Meydancık**, the quintessential *yaylalar* settlement, near the Georgian border. From there, you could make your way to the old Georgian town of **Şavşat**, on the main road, and take a small detour to the 10th-century **Church of Tbeti**, in ruins but in a beautiful setting. Further east, the **Karagöl Sahara National Park**, a national park blessed with spectacular mountain scenery, beckons. Continuing east, you cross over the **Çam Pass** (2540m), leaving the lush, wooded valleys behind, to reach **Ardahan**.

From Artvin, you could also take a southern route to **Ardanuç**, which boasts the remains of a fortress, and reach the **Church of Yeni Rabat**, near the village of Bulank.

All we can say is *iyi yolculuklar* (have a nice trip)!

the 19th century. The 12 relief carvings on the drum are of the apostles. Near the church you'll see the ruins of the **Ulu Cami** and the **Beylerbeyi Sarayı** (Beylerbeyi Palace) nestling beneath the castle.

One of the more attractive – and intact – structures in the area is the 15th-century **Taş Köprü** (Stone Bridge), ruined by an earthquake and rebuilt in 1725.

The **Kars Museum** (Kars Müzesi; Cumhuriyet Caddesi; admission €1.25; ☎ 8am–5pm Tue–Sun), inconveniently located in the eastern fringes of the town, has exhibits from the Old Bronze Age, the Urartian, Roman and Greek periods, and the Seljuk and Ottoman times. Photographs show excavations at Ani and the ruins of some of the Armenian churches in Kars province.

The cleanest *hamam* (bathhouse) in Kars is the modern **Kızılai Hamam** (Faik Bey Caddesi; ☎ women noon–5pm Mon–Fri, men 5am–noon & 5pm–midnight), which charges around €6 for the works.

Sleeping

Kent Otél (☎ 223 1929; Hapan Mevkii; s/d €9/15) Look at the rates! Fear not, it's well maintained, central and secure. Sure, the shared bathrooms could do with a more serious deodorising session, but the colourful rooms are more than acceptable for unfussy backpackers. Breakfast is not included.

Güngören Hotel (☎ 212 5630; fax 223 4821; Millet Sokak; s/d €15/24; 📺) Splashes of colour and modern furniture bring the bright, good-sized

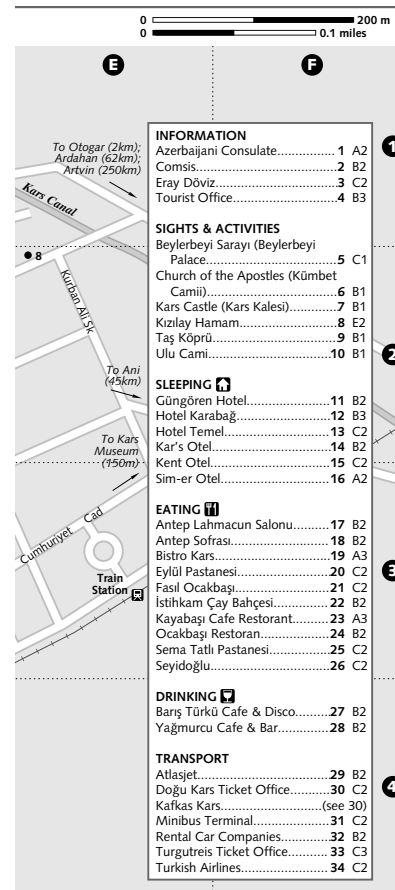
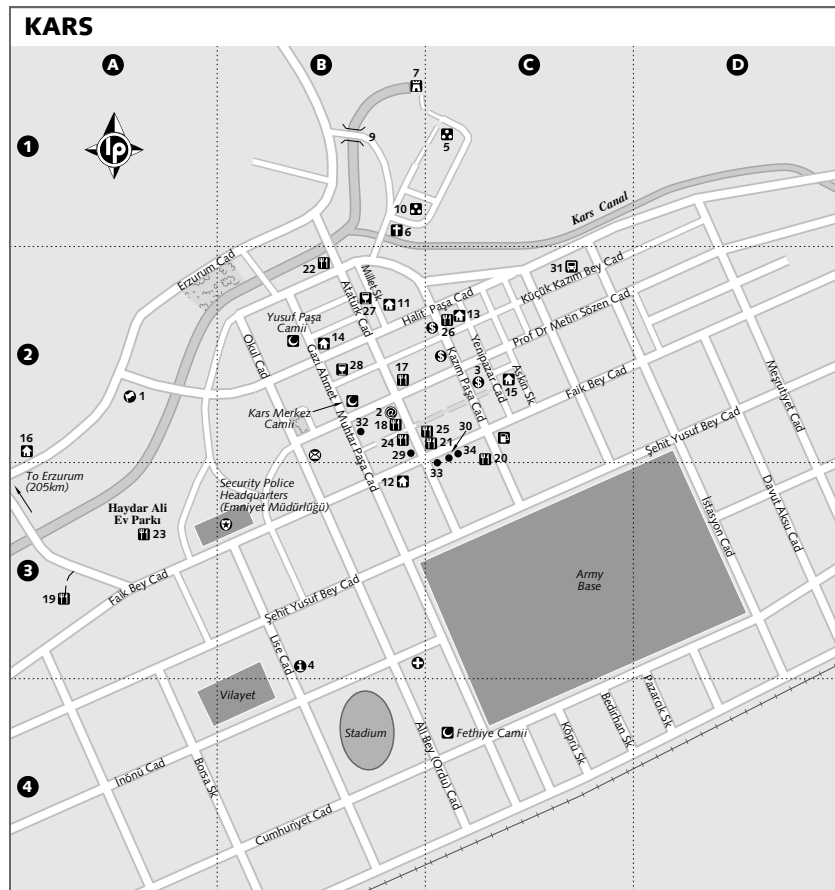
rooms to life. Other perks include an airy *kahvaltı salonu* (breakfast room), a good restaurant, a men-only *hamam* (€6) and more than the odd smile. It's also a good choice for women travellers.

Hotel Temel (☎ 223 1376; fax 223 1323; Yenipazar Caddesi; s/d €14/25) From the outside the Temel looks like just another crummy motel, but inside it's one of the best bargains in town – on a par with the Güngören. The rooms are neat, the bathrooms sparkle and the blue-and-yellow colour scheme brings cheer to the institutional setting. Management can be a bit grumpy, though.

Hotel Karabağ (☎ 212 3480; www.hotel-karabag.com; Faik Bey Caddesi; s/d €33/50; 📺) There's an impersonal feel to this three-star venture, but it's

AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Kar's Otél (☎ 212 1616; www.karsotel.com; Halit Paşa Caddesi; s/d €90/130; 📺 📺) Beg, borrow and/or steal to stay at this splendid conversion of an old Russian mansion that has just eight rooms. Some might find the white colour scheme a bit hospital-like, but we love the refined yet informal environment, and the cocoon ambience. Added bonuses include free wi-fi, TVs with flat screens, a pleasant courtyard, elegant furnishings and the Ani Restaurant (mains €2 to €8; open 11am to 10pm), easily the slickest eatery in northeastern Anatolia. This is well worth the budgetary blowout, especially if you can bargain the prices down when it's quiet.



ideally positioned right in the heart of things and the rooms are comfortable enough. Like the Sim-er following, it's popular with tour groups. The noise of the street seeps right into the street-facing rooms – light sleepers should ask for a back room. You could probably slash the price by 20% if it's quiet.

Sim-er Otél (☎ 212 7241; fax 212 0168; Eski Erzurum Yolu; s/d €34/59; 📺 📺) This modern monolith is functional and professionally run, and has many facilities, including a sauna, but it doesn't even register a blip on the traditional charm radar. It's across the river, a tad out of the action, and is popular with tour groups. Posted rates are ridiculously expensive – haggle for a substantial discount if it's slack.

Eating & Drinking

Kars is noted for its excellent honey. It's on sale in several shops along Kazım Paşa Caddesi, which also sell the local *kaşar peyniri* (a mild yellow cheese), *kuruyemiş* (dried fruits) and other sweet treats – the perfect ingredients for a picnic in the steppe!

Antep Lahmacun Salonu (☎ 223 0741; Atatürk Caddesi; mains €1–2; ☎ 11am–9pm) Pide and *lahmacun* (Arabic pizza) aficionados head straight to this humble joint to gobble a flavoursome local-style pizza at paupers' prices any time of the day.

Seyidoğlu (☎ 223 7668; Kazım Paşa Caddesi; mains €1–3; ☎ 7am–11pm) This is the place all heads turn towards when it comes to sampling a heavenly baklava or a sticky *dondurma* (ice cream) in civilised surroundings. You can

also chow down on inexpensive snacks. Ah, luscious Seyidođlu.

Ocakbaşı Restoran (☎ 212 0056; Atatürk Caddesi; mains €2-4; ☎ 11am-10pm) One of Kars' best choices, the Ocakbaşı has two adjoining rooms, including a mock troglodytic one in the Ocakbaşı 2, and does a brisk trade any time of the day. It continues to win plaudits for its excellent *ali nazık* (eggplant puree with yogurt and meat).

Fasıl Ocakbaşı (☎ 212 1714; Faik Bey Caddesi; mains €3-5; ☎ noon-10pm) This place is housed in an unsightly concrete building, at a major intersection. Never mind, the interior is much more elegant, with parquet floors, dark wood furniture, earthy tones and large windows. The menu covers enough territory to please most palates, but results can be patchy.

Antep Sofrası (☎ 212 9093; Atatürk Caddesi; mains €3-5; ☎ 11am-11pm) The pastel-coloured walls of this relative newcomer are only part of its appeal. It's usually the tasty kebaps, pide and other feel-good food that keep the cash register ringing.

Kayabaşı Cafe Restoran (☎ 223 2065; Mesut Yılmaz Parkı; mains €3-5; ☎ 10am-11pm) After a turn around the nearby park, nab a table on the terrace and warm yourself with a kebab, a pide or *balık* (fish) in this well-positioned eatery, about 500m west of the centre. Forget the cold beer in hand – it's not licensed.

Bistro Kars (☎ 212 8050; Resul Yıldız Caddesi; mains €3-8; ☎ 10am-11pm) It didn't take long for the Bistro Kars, opened in 2005, to capture the hearts and tummies of well-heeled locals and visitors alike. The list of meze gallops through *patlıcan* (aubergine), yogurt, pepper, salads and other goodies that are too hard to pronounce – all irresistibly fresh. You can also dig into well-executed meat and fish dishes and wash it all down with a glass of wine or a beer (hallelujah!). The dining room is an enchanting mix of elegance and rustic charm, but on a hot summer's day the breezy terrace is a sure winner.

Sema Tatlı Pastanesi (☎ 212 2323; Atatürk Caddesi; ☎ 8am-10pm) With a remarkable rack of cakes, pastries and puddings from which to choose, plus a mellow atmosphere and a historic setting, this is the ideal spot for capping a meal off.

Eylül Pastanesi (☎ 223 4254; Kazım Paşa Caddesi; ☎ 7am-10pm) If you've got the munchies, this colourful pastry shop has a wide range of treats, best enjoyed at the small tables out the

front. It's also a good place to start the morning with a hearty *kahvaltı* (€2).

İstihkam Çay Bahçesi (Atatürk Caddesi; ☎ 8am-9pm) This leafy spot by the canal is the perfect salve after trudging up to the castle. Sip a glass of tea in the shade.

Entertainment

Who said that Kars was an austere city? Sure, it ain't Dakar, but you'll find a handful of venues for whooping, sweating and jiggling.

Barış Türkü Cafe & Disco (☎ 212 8281; Atatürk Caddesi; ☎ 10am-midnight) The Barış was the flavour of the month when we visited, and it's easy to see why. Housed in a historic mansion, this atmosphere-laden café-bar-disco-restaurant has a happening buzz and is a magnet for students of both sexes who come here to flirt, gossip, puff a nargileh, dance and listen to live bands (three times a week). If hunger beckons after swigging more than a few glasses of Efes in the basement, you can order an excellent *yayla kebab* (kebab with yogurt) to restore balance to the brain (€3 to €5).

Yağmurcu Cafe & Bar (☎ 212 6199; Küçük Kazım Bey Caddesi; ☎ 6-11pm) Another handsome disco-bar popular with trendy young things, here to sample a glass of beer (€2) during semester time. With an interesting combination of wood and stone patterns, the décor here is imaginative.

Getting There & Around

AIR

A *servis* (€2) runs from the agencies to the airport, 6km from town.

Atlasjet (☎ 444 3387; Atatürk Caddesi; ☎ 8am-8pm) One daily flight to/from Istanbul (from €55, two hours).

Turkish Airlines (☎ 212 4747; Faik Bey Caddesi; ☎ 8am-8pm) One daily flight to/from Ankara (from €50, 1¼ hours) and to/from Istanbul (from €45).

BUS

Kars' otogar, for long-distance services, is 2km southeast of the centre, although *servises* ferry people to/from the town centre. The major local bus companies, **Doğu Kars** (Faik Bey Caddesi) and **Kafkas Kars** (Faik Bey Caddesi), have a ticket office in the centre. **Turgutreis** (nr Faik Bey & Atatürk Caddesi), a few doors away from Doğu Kars, has a daily bus to Van. The table, opposite, lists some useful daily services.

Minibuses to local towns (including Iğdır, Erzurum, Ardahan and Posof) leave from the **minibus terminal** (Küçük Kazım Bey Caddesi). If you're

heading for Doğubayazıt be warned that there are no direct services. The usual way to get there is to take a minibüs to Iğdır, then another to Doğubayazıt. For Georgia (see p675), take a minibüs to Posof. Should the border with Armenia eventually reopen to travellers, you'll need to get a minibüs to Akyaka. For Yusufeli, take a bus to Artvin and ask to be dropped at the nearest junction (about 10km to Yusufeli) along the Artvin-Erzurum road, from where you'll have to hitch a ride to Yusufeli.

For details of transport to Ani, see p585.

SERVICES FROM KARS' OTOGAR

Destination	Fare	Duration	Distance	Frequency (per day)
Ankara	€20	16hr	1100km	a few
Ardahan	€5	1hr	80km	frequent minibuses
Artvin	€14	6hr	270km	2
Erzurum	€9	3hr	205km	frequent minibuses
Iğdır	€6	3hr	132km	several
Posof	€7	2hr	142km	a few minibuses
Trabzon	€20	9-10hr	525km	2 direct, or change at Erzurum or Artvin
Van	€17	6hr	370km	1 in the morning

CAR

You'll find several car-rental companies on Gazı Ahmet Muhtar Paşa Caddesi.

TRAIN

The *Doğu Ekspresi* leaves for İstanbul (€20), via Erzurum, Kayseri and Ankara, at 7.10am daily. The *Erzurum Ekspresi* (€17) leaves for Ankara, via Erzurum and Kayseri, at 9am daily. It's worth considering these trains for the relatively short hop to Erzurum (€5, about four hours).

EAST OF KARS

Ani

The ruins of Ani, 45km east of Kars, are an absolute must-see, even if you're not an architecture buff. Set amid spectacular scenery, the site exudes an eerie ambience that is unique and unforgettable.

Once the stately Armenian capital, Ani is now little more than ruins dotting a windswept plateau overlooking the Turkish-Armenian

border. Come here to ponder what went before: the thriving kingdom; the solemn ceremony of the Armenian liturgy; and the travellers, merchants and nobles bustling about their business in this Silk Road entrepôt. There's a mystique here that transcends its abandonment and leaves you with a mix of wonderment and melancholy at Ani's fate.

Given the proximity of the border, the area is still under military control, but things are much more relaxed than they were – a permit is no longer required, and photography is permitted.

HISTORY

On an important east-west trade route and well served by its natural defences, Ani was selected by the Bagratid king Ashot III (r 952-77) as the site of his new capital in 961, when he moved here from Kars. His successors Smbat II (r 977-89) and Gagik I (r 990-1020) presided over Ani's continued prosperity, but after Gagik, internecine feuds and Byzantine encroachment weakened the Armenian state.

The Byzantines took over the city in 1045, then in 1064 came the Great Seljuks from Persia, then the Kingdom of Georgia and, for a time, local Kurdish emirs. The struggle for the city went on until the Mongols arrived in 1239 and cleared everybody else out. The nomadic Mongols had no use for city life, so they cared little when the great earthquake of 1319 toppled much of Ani. The depredations of Tamerlane soon afterwards were the last blow: trade routes shifted, Ani lost what revenues it had managed to retain and the city died. The earthquake-damaged hulks of its great buildings have been slowly crumbling away ever since.

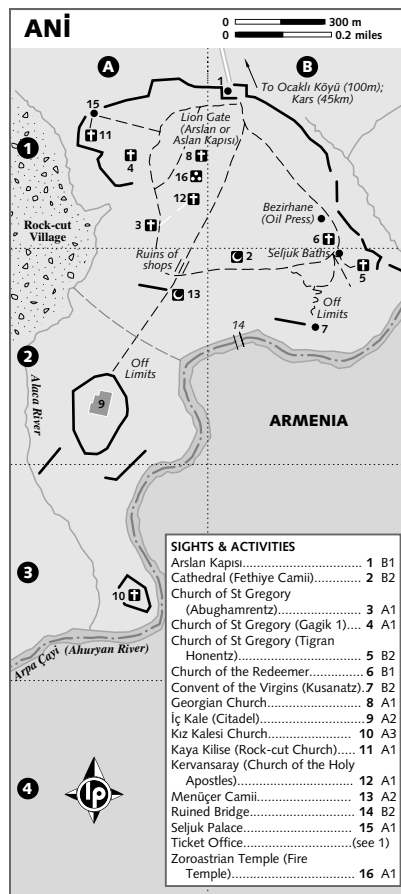
INFORMATION

You no longer need permission to visit Ani, and you can buy your ticket at Ani itself. Not all the site is open to visitors, though: some parts are still off-limits. Allow at least 2½ hours at the site, and preferably three or four.

At the time of writing there were no facilities at the site.

THE RUINS

Enter the ruins of **Ani** (admission €3; ☎ 8.30am-5pm) through the sturdy **Arslan Kapısı** (or Aslan Kapısı), a gate supposedly named after Alp



Arslan, the Seljuk sultan who conquered Ani in 1064, but probably also suggested by the *aslan* (lion) in relief on the inner wall.

Your first view of Ani is stunning: wrecks of great stone buildings adrift on a sea of undulating grass, landmarks in a ghost city that was once home to nearly 100,000 people, rivalling Constantinople in power and glory.

Follow the path to the left and tour the churches in clockwise order.

Church of the Redeemer

The Church of the Redeemer soon comes into view. It's a startling vision – only half of the ruined structure remains, the other half having been destroyed by lightning in 1957. This church dates from 1034–36 and

was supposedly built to house a portion of the True Cross brought here from Constantinople; Armenian inscriptions on the façade relay the history.

The architecture is typical of the circular-planned, multi-apsed Armenian churches built in this era. The round porthole window above the ornamental portal is one of the few windows the church could withstand.

Church of St Gregory (Tigran Honentz)

Beyond the Church of the Redeemer, down by the walls separating Ani from the gorge of the Arpa Çayı and easy to miss, is the Church of St Gregory the Illuminator (in Turkish, Resimli Kilise – Church with Pictures). Named after the apostle to the Armenians, it was built by a pious nobleman named Tigran Honentz in 1215, and although exposure and vandalism have done great damage to the interior, it is still in better condition than most other buildings here. Look for the long Armenian inscription carved on the exterior walls, as well as the colourful and lively frescoes depicting scenes from the Bible and Armenian church history. It also features well-preserved relief work, with floral, avian and sinuous geometric designs.

Convent of the Virgins (Kusanatz)

Return to the plateau and follow the paths down into the Arpa Çayı gorge to visit the Convent of the Virgins, with its distinctive, serrated-domed chapel enclosed by a defensive wall, dramatically perched on the edge of the gorge. This monument might be off-limits; check at the ticket booth. Scant ruins of a **bridge** across the river lie to the west in an area that is definitely off-limits.

Cathedral

Up on the plateau again, the cathedral, renamed the Fethiye Camii (Victory Mosque) by the Seljuk conquerors, is the largest and most impressive of the buildings. Ani cathedral was begun by King Smbat II in 987 and finished under Gagik I in 1010.

Ani was once the seat of the Armenian Orthodox Patriarchate; the three doorways served as separate entrances for the patriarch, the king and the people. As the grandest religious edifice in the city, it was transformed into a mosque whenever Muslims held Ani, but reverted to a church when the Christians took it back again. Unfortunately, the

HIDDEN GEMS – ARMENIAN CHURCHES AROUND ANI

Ani may be the highlight, but there are other impressive Armenian churches and castles in the vicinity that are also worth investigating. These sites usually boast awesome settings, and part of the pleasure lies in getting to them. There are no tourist facilities, so stock up on food and water. There's no public transport to these sites, so you'll have to rely on your own wheels or hire a taxi for the day (it shouldn't cost more than €80). Although the area is still under military control, tourists won't be hassled.

The four monuments described below are relatively easily accessible. No permit was necessary at the time of writing, but it's wise to double-check. A word of warning: village sheepdogs can be seriously nasty; it's best to be accompanied by locals when arriving in a village. If it's wet, the gravel roads may be impassable without 4WD.

Oğuzlu Church

From Kars, take the road to Ani. In Subatan, about 27km from Kars, take the asphalted road marked for Başgedikler, 11km to the northeast. There's a right-angle intersection at the entrance to the village; bear left onto the gravel road for 3km and you'll arrive in Oğuzlu. The monumental 10th-century church rises up from the steppe and dominates the surrounding houses. Unfortunately, it's in a bad state of preservation. An earthquake in 1936 caused the dome and other structures to collapse.

Kızıl Kilise (Karmir Vank)

From Oğuzlu, drive back to the junction in Başgedikler. Turn left and cross the village. As you come out of the village, the asphalt road ends and becomes a gravel road. About 1.6km from the junction, you'll skirt Ayakgedik; a further 3km brings you to Bayraktar. From Bayraktar, it's another 3.7km to Yağkesen where the church stands, visible from some distance. It's an eerie vision, with the building rising up on a small mound, the sole towering element in an otherwise flat, treeless grassland. It's the best-preserved structure in the area. Outstanding features include a conical roof, V-shaped niches on the exterior and slender windows, an inscription in Armenian above the portal and some handsome carvings.

Bagnair Monastery

Back on the main road linking Kars with Ani, drive west until the village of Esenkent comes into view. About 200m before the Esenkent signpost, take the gravel road on the right. Drive 4.5km until you reach a first junction; continue straight ahead for about 1.8km and you'll arrive at a second intersection. Bear right and after 1.5km you'll enter the Kurdish village of Kozluca, where you can admire two Armenian monuments. The larger church, thought to have been constructed in the 11th century, is badly damaged, whereas the minor one, 200m across a small ravine easily negotiated on foot, is still in good shape, with a nice, 12-sided dome-drum adorned with blind arcades. Both are used as cattle pens.

Magazbert Fortress

From Bagnair Monastery, return to the junction, 1.5km downhill. Turn right (south) and carry on a further 3km until another right-angle intersection. Bear left for 1.3km and you'll reach Üçözü village. Continue through the village and stop at the *jandarma* (police) barracks. From here you can see a Turkish flag flying about 1km to the south on a mound. Try to persuade the *jandarma* to let you walk as far as this vantage point (it's wise to be accompanied by a local) and you'll be rewarded by an achingly beautiful view over this pearl of an Armeno-Byzantine fortress standing atop a rock spur and overlooking a bend in the river. It's said to date from the early 11th century and was captured by the Ottomans in 1579. Unfortunately, at the time of writing you were not allowed to walk down into the valley and approach this superb fortress. Even from a distance, you can easily see a row of three semicircular bastions.

spacious dome, once supported by four massive columns, fell down centuries ago.

Seen from a distance, the building looks quite featureless, but a closer inspection reveals eye-catching decorative elements, including several porthole windows, slender windows surrounded by elegant fretwork, several triangular niches, an inscription in Armenian near the main entrance and a blind arcade with slim columns running around the structure.

Walking towards the Menüçer Camii to the west, you'll go past an **excavated area**, supposed to be a former street lined with shops.

Menüçer Camii

The rectangular building with the tall octagonal, truncated minaret, the Menüçer Camii is said to have been the first mosque built by the Seljuk Turks in Anatolia (1072). Six vaults remain, each of them different, as was the Seljuk style, but several others have fallen into ruin. This odd but interesting blend of Armenian and Seljuk design probably resulted from the Seljuks employing Armenian architects, engineers and stonemasons. The alternating red-and-black stonework is a distinctive feature. Look also for the polychrome stone inlays that adorn the ceilings. The structure next to the mosque may have been a Seljuk *medrese* or palace.

Climbing up the minaret is forbidden – the spiral staircase is steep and narrow, and there's no parapet at the top. It's much safer to enjoy the view over the canyon, the ruined bridge and the cathedral from the main gallery.

İç Kale

Across the rolling grass, southwest of the mosque, rises the monumental İç Kale (the Keep), which holds within its extensive ruins half a ruined church. Beyond İç Kale on a pinnacle of rock in a bend of the Arpa Çayı is the small church called the **Kız Kalesi** (Maiden's Castle). You'll have to look from a distance – both these sites are out of bounds.

Church of St Gregory (Abughamrentz)

On the western side of the city, this rotunda-shaped church topped by a conical roof dates from the late 900s. It was built for the wealthy Pahlavuni family by the same architect as the Church of the Redeemer. On the 12-sided exterior you'll see a series of deep niches topped by scallop-shell carvings. Then look up to see the windows of the drum, framed by a double set of blind arcades.

Kervansaray (Church of the Holy Apostles)

The Church of the Holy Apostles dates from 1031, but after their conquest of the city in 1064 the Seljuks added a gateway with a fine dome and used the building as a caravanserai, hence its name.

Seen from a distance you could think it's in ruins, but in fact it's fairly well preserved. Taking a closer look, you'll notice decorative carvings, porthole windows, diagonally intersecting arches in the nave, and ceilings dynamically decorated with geometric patterns made of polychromatic stone inlays, as well as various Armenian inscriptions.

Church of St Gregory (Gagik I)

Northwest from the Kervansaray, the gigantic Church of St Gregory was begun in 998 to plans by the same architect as Ani's cathedral. Its ambitious dome collapsed shortly after being finished, and the rest of the building is now also badly ruined. You can still see the outer walls and a jumble of columns.

Zoroastrian Temple (Fire Temple)

North of the Church of the Holy Apostles are the remains of a Zoroastrian temple, thought to have been built between the early 1st century and the first half of the 4th century AD – therefore the oldest structure in Ani. It might have been converted into a Christian chapel afterwards. The only remains consist of four circular columns, not exceeding 1.5m in height – it's not easy to spot them in the undulating steppe. They lie between the Church of the Holy Apostles and the Georgian Church – proceed about 100m due north from the Church of the Holy Apostles and you should come across the temple.

Georgian Church

You can't miss the only surviving wall of the Georgian Church, north of the Zoroastrian temple, which was probably erected in the 11th century. It used to be a large building, but most of the south wall collapsed around 1840. Of the three arcades left, two sport bas-reliefs, one representing the Annunciation, the other the Visitation.

Seljuk Palace

To the northwest of the Church of St Gregory (Gagik I) is a Seljuk palace built into the city's defensive walls and painstakingly over-

GEORGIA, ANYONE?

What about a nice little foray into neighbouring Georgia? It's now pretty straightforward to enter this country as visas are no longer necessary for most Western nations. Fewer things will get your heart pumping faster than crossing the border at Posof, Turkey's smallest and most isolated border crossing. Take a minibus from Kars (€7), then ask the driver to continue to the border, a further 16km ride (€12). Cross the border (no hassles), then take a taxi to Akhaltsikhe, the nearest substantial town. From there, there are buses to Borjomi, where you can find accommodation and, most importantly, some good Georgian wines to sluce – perfect for a night out. The next morning, provided you've recovered from the hangover, you could forge west to Batumi, get an eyeful of the Black Sea and take a minibus to the Turkish border at Sarpi. This is an exhilarating two-day trip, with a guaranteed culture shock (read: women wearing miniskirts and no headscarves) and ever-changing scenery.

This is a suggested route, but there's ample scope for further exploration. For instance, we'd love to hear about the ride from Akhaltsikhe to Batumi, or from any reader who's made this trip by bike/motorbike/horse.

restored so that it looks quite out of place. Nearby is the partly crumbled, rock-cut **Kaya Kilise**.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Transport to Ani has always been a problem. Most people opt for the taxi minibuses to the site organised by Kars tourist office or Celil Ersoğlu (see p577), for about €12 per person, provided there's a minimum of six persons. If there are no other tourists around, you'll have to pay the full fare of €39 return plus waiting time; the drive takes around 50 minutes. Make sure that your driver understands that you want a minimum of 2½ hours and preferably three hours at the site.

NORTH OF KARS

Very few tourists even suspect **Çıldır Gölü's** existence. Far less talismanic than Lake Van, this loch-like expanse of water about 60km north of Kars is worth the detour nonetheless, if only for the complete peace and quiet. It's also an important breeding ground for various species of birds, best observed at **Akçekale Island**. **Doğruyol**, the only significant town on the eastern shore, has an eye-catching hilltop church.

From the town of **Çıldır**, on the northern shore, continue 3.5km until you reach the village of Yıldırımtepe. From there, a path snakes into a gorge and leads up to **Şeytan Kalesi** (Devil's Castle). Standing sentinel on a rocky bluff over a bend of the river, it boasts a sensational setting that will make even the most panorama-weary traveller dewy-eyed. Come and see for yourself!

You'll need your own transport to reach these places.

SOUTH OF KARS

This is what we scribbled on our notepad when we visited the area: 'Çengilli: fantastic'. While you're in Kars, you should definitely take a trip to the Kurdish village of **Çengilli**. It is home to a superb 13th-century **Georgian monastery**, which jabs the skyline. It's similar in many respects to the Armenian churches near Ani, but the views over the Aras mountains are unforgettable. Çengilli is about 20km off the D965-04 (the road that connects Kars with Kağızman). The road that leads up from the D965-04 to Çengilli is not tarred, and some sections are very steep – don't brave it in wet weather.

From Çengilli, backtrack to the main road and drive to the north (towards Kars), until you see a turn-off on the left for Ortaköy. This secondary road leads to the village of **Keçivan**, which boasts superb ruins of a castle, precariously perched on a ridge – another dazzling sight.

These sights are difficult to reach without your own transport. Your best bet is to rent a car in Kars or in Erzurum, or to hire a taxi and a cooperative driver for a day. You can also contact Celil Ersoğlu in Kars (see p577).

KARS TO DOĞUBAYAZIT

To reach Doğubayazıt and Mt Ararat, head south from Kars via Digor, Tuzluca and İğdır, a distance of 240km. From Tuzluca the road follows the Armenian frontier. The army

patrols the area to prevent border violations and smuggling, and if you're on the road at night expect a couple of checkpoints.

If you want to break your journey, **Iğdır** has the best choice of accommodation.

From Iğdır it's possible to take a bus east to the Azerbaijani enclave of **Nakhichevan** (€6, 2½ hours, at least five daily buses), provided you have already obtained a visa (there's an Azerbaijani consulate in Kars). The bus leaves from near Otel Aşar, on the main drag. This enclave is cut off from the rest of Azerbaijan by Armenia, and you'll have to take one of the few daily flights to get to Baku.

Minibuses for Kars (€6, three hours) also leave from near Otel Aşar; cross the street and head to İmpaş store.

DOĞUBAYAZIT

☎ 0472 / pop 36,000 / elevation 1950m

Lucky Doğubayazıt (doh-oo-bay-yah-zuht) – this dusty frontier town crawling with soldiers has few charms of its own but is blessed with a fabulous backdrop. **Mt Ararat** (Ağrı Dağı, 5137m), a Kilimanjaro-esque snow-capped summit and, incidentally, Turkey's highest mountain, hovers majestically over the horizon. Doğubayazıt's appeal lays also in its proximity to İshak Paşa Palace (İshak Paşa Sarayı), a breathtakingly beautiful fortress-palace-mosque complex 6km southeast of town. And yes, it's a quintessentially Kurdish town that prides itself on its strong Kurdish heritage.

Doğubayazıt is also the main kicking-off point for the overland trail through Iran (the border is a mere 35km away). You'll find traders from neighbouring countries in the streets.

Orientation & Information

Doğubayazıt is small and easily negotiated on foot. For tourist information, various travel agencies, including **East Turkey Expeditions** (☎ 536-702 8060; www.eastturkey.com; Dr İsmail Beşikçi Caddesi; ☎ 8am-8pm) and **Tamzara** (☎ 544 555 3582; www.tamzaratur.com; Emniyet Caddesi; ☎ 8am-8pm), in Hotel Urartu, will be able to help with your queries. Staff usually speak English. They can also help with getting a visa to Iran (allow a week; see also the boxed text, p674).

Most banks have ATMs. There are also several moneychangers, including **Nişantaş Döviz** (Dr İsmail Beşikçi Caddesi; ☎ 7am-7pm Mon-Sat, 7am-noon Sun), which keeps longer hours and happily changes cash, including Iranian rials.

The best place to check your emails is the bright **Elit Cafe** (Dr İsmail Beşikçi Caddesi; per hr €0.60; ☎ 9am-11pm).

Sights

İSHAK PAŞA PALACE

One of eastern Turkey's star attractions, the stalwart and restored **İshak Paşa Palace** (İshak Paşa Sarayı; admission €3; ☎ 8.30am-5.30pm Tue-Sun Apr-Oct, 8.30am-5pm Nov-Mar), 6km uphill southeast of town, is the epitome of the *Thousand and One Nights* castle. Part of its magic derives from its setting – it's perched on a small plateau abutting stark cliffs and overlooking a plain, framed by Mt Ararat.

The palace was begun in 1685 by Çolak Abdi Paşa and completed in 1784 by his son, a Kurdish chieftain named İshak (Isaac). The architecture is a superb amalgam of Seljuk, Ottoman, Georgian, Persian and Armenian styles.

The palace's elaborate main entrance leads into the **first courtyard**, which would have been opened to merchants and guests. Note the ornate fountain just inside the door, here to refresh weary visitors.

Only family and special guests would have been allowed into the **second courtyard**. Here you can see the entrance to the **Haremlik**, Selamlık, guards' lodgings and granaries to the south, and the tomb in the northwest corner. The tomb is richly decorated with a mix of Seljuk carvings (note the faceted staccato work) and Persian relief styles, evident in the floral decorations. Steps lead down to the sarcophagi.

From the second court you can pass through the marvellously decorated portal of the **Haremlik** into the living quarters of the palace. You'll notice channels in the floors of the rooms, once part of the unheard-of luxuries of central heating, sewerage and running-water systems built throughout the palace. The harem's highlight is undoubtedly the beautiful dining room, a melange of styles with walls topped by Seljuk triangular stonework, Armenian floral-relief decoration and ornate column capitals betraying Georgian influence.

You'll have to return to the second courtyard to enter the **Selamlık** from the northern side. Entry is via the stately hall where guests would have been greeted before being entertained in the ceremonial hall-courtyard to the right.

Across the valley from the palace are the ruined foundations of **Eski Beyazıt** (Old Beyazıt), which was probably founded in Urartian times c 800 BC. Modern Doğubayazıt is a relative newcomer, the villagers having moved from the hills to the plain only in 1937. You can also spot a well-worn mosque, a tomb and the ruins of a fortress, which may date from Urartian times (13th to 7th centuries BC).

Getting There & Away

Minibuses (€0.70) rattle between the otogar and the palace, but there's no fixed schedule – they leave when they are full; otherwise a taxi driver will want about €12 for a return trip, waiting time included. Walking back down is pleasant, although women in particular might feel rather isolated.

Festivals & Events

Over the last weekend of June, the city hosts the **Kültür Sanat ve Turizm Festivali** (Culture and Arts Festival), a great occasion to immerse yourself in Kurdish culture, with singing, dancing and theatre. It usually takes place in the stadium. Kurdish big names, such as sing-

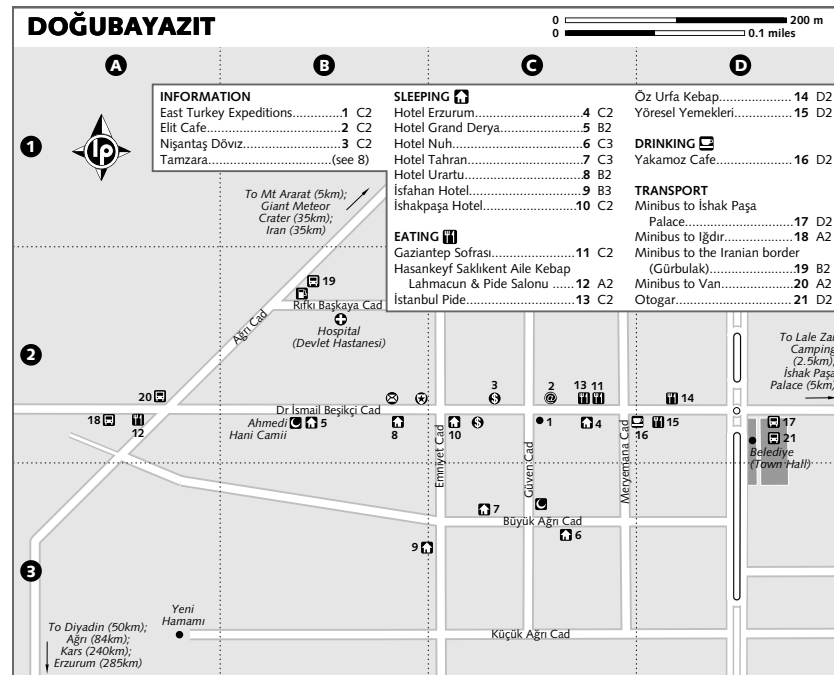
ers Ferhat Tunç or Aynur Doğan, sometimes hold concerts during the festival.

Sleeping

BUDGET

Lale Zar Camping (☎ 544 269 1960; site €3) This recent camp site is run by two male friends, Bertil and Mecit – one Dutch, one Kurd. The well-tended property and abundant greenery (but no shade to speak of) make it a peaceful place to pitch your tent. There are only nine camp sites, which ensures intimacy. If hunger beckons, there's an on-site food store and restaurant. It's a fair old walk from the centre (on the road to İshak Paşa Palace), but the outskirts-of-town location does mean a multitude of stars in the night sky and quiet, quiet nights. Note that the camping grounds near İshak Paşa Palace are not recommended for women travellers.

Hotel Erzurum (☎ 312 5080; Dr İsmail Beşikçi Caddesi; s/d with shared bathroom €4/6) This cheapie won't hit any style award, but look at the rates! Rooms are shoebox-sized but presentable, and the shared bathrooms won't have you squirming. The young owner, Metin, can help you



organise a trek to Mt Ararat. No breakfast is served.

Hotel Tahran (☎ 312 0195; www.hotelhtahran.com; Büyük Ağrı Caddesi 124; s/d €9/14; 📺) Many cash-conscious travellers, including solo female travellers, park their grungy backpack in this peaceful outfit, and we can understand why. Although on the small side, the rooms are cheerful enough and come equipped with back-friendly beds and crisp sheets, and the private bathrooms have hygienic red floor tiles. The rooftop terrace is another drawback. And if you intend to journey to Iran, Celal, the affable manager, is well clued up on the subject. Breakfast is extra (€1.50).

Ishakpaşa Hotel (☎ 312 7036; fax 312 7644; Emniyet Caddesi; s/d €9/14) Ignore the tatty carpets at the entrance – most rooms have benefited from a fresh paint job and will fit the bill for penny-pinchers, with salubrious bathrooms, TVs, balconies and well-sprung mattresses.

MIDRANGE

İsfahan Hotel (☎ 312 4363; Emniyet Caddesi; s/d €14/23; 📺) A popular option with tour groups. Fairly mundane, it nonetheless offers sizeable rooms and comfortable beds.

Hotel Grand Derya (☎ 312 7531; fax 312 7833; Dr İsmail Beşikçi Caddesi; s/d €18/30; 📺) This venerable pile seems to have a brilliant location, until you realise you'll be roused at 5am by the call to prayer emanating from the nearby mosque. But we're guessing you've got used to that by now, and the level of comfort and professional service make up for it.

Hotel Urartu (☎ 312 7295; fax 312 2450; Dr İsmail Beşikçi Caddesi; s/d €17/31; 📺) Oh dear, the Urartu was fully booked by female *öğretmen* (teachers) when we dropped by – a rare sight in this part of Turkey! At least this means it's a commendable option for women travellers. It has unexciting yet serviceable rooms, good amenities and attentive staff (in a good way).

Hotel Nuh (☎ 312 7232; www.hotelnuh.8m.com; Büyük Ağrı Caddesi; s/d €42/66; 📺) The Nuh thinks it plays in the top league and charges megalomaniac prices for neat but unimpressive rooms. Hone your bargaining skills and negotiate a substantial discount (read: 30%), and it's good value. The winner here is the rooftop restaurant affording superb vistas of Ararat.

Eating & Drinking

Hasankeyf Saklıkent Aile Kebap Lahmacun & Pide Salonu (☎ 312 8802; Yol Altı Sokak; mains €3-6; 🕒 11am-

11pm) Serious travelling or hiking requires serious nourishment, and this buzzing eatery east of the main drag gets the thumbs up for its invigorating fare – the *Saklıkent kebab*, with a bit of everything, will assuage all hunger pangs. The décor is a bit kitsch (a mock cavern and walls adorned with cheesy frescoes), but after so many neon-lit establishments you may find it almost stylish.

Yöresel Yemekleri (☎ 312 4026; Dr İsmail Beşikçi Caddesi; mains €2-5; 🕒 noon-8pm) Yes, it's possible: no moustachioed men; only women do the service here – coool. But they wear headscarves – boo. This establishment is run by an association of Kurdish women whose husbands are imprisoned. They prepare savoury *yöresel* (traditional) meals at bargain-basement prices. Everything is pretty good, but if you want a recommendation, go for the *abdiğör köfte* (giant meatballs served with rice). The only criticism is that the décor is a bit bland. More feminine touches, please.

İstanbul Pide (☎ 312 2324; Dr İsmail Beşikçi Caddesi; pide €0.50; 🕒 8am-10pm) Widely considered to serve the best pide and *börek* (flaky pastry) in town.

Gaziantep Sofrası (☎ 312 0195; Dr İsmail Beşikçi Caddesi; mains €2-5; 🕒 8am-11pm) Facing the Erzurum Hotel, it has colourful surrounds and a congenial rooftop terrace complete with cushions.

Öz Urfa Kebap (☎ 312 2673; Dr İsmail Beşikçi Caddesi; mains €3-5; 🕒 11am-10pm) With its all-wood décor, this cheery little joint resembles a Swiss chalet. The food is varied and savoury, and *ayran* (yogurt drink) is doled out with a ladle. The small shaded terrace is a plus.

Yakamoz Cafe (Dr İsmail Beşikçi Caddesi; 🕒 8am-11pm) The closest thing the town has to a groovy café (by eastern Anatolia standards). A good place to relax over a cup of tea.

Getting There & Away

Minibuses (€2) to the Iranian border (Gürbulak) leave from near the junction of Ağrı and Rıfki Başkaya Caddesi, just past the *petrol ofisi* (petrol station), approximately every hour. The last one departs around 5pm. See also the boxed text, p674.

There are no buses to Van, only minibuses that leave at *approximately* 7.30am, 9am, noon and 2pm daily (€6, 2½ hours, 185km). Getting to Kars, you'll have to catch a minibus to Iğdır (every hour, €2, 45 minutes, 51km) and change there. From Iğdır to Kars should cost €6.

Go to the main otogar (bus station) for services to other long-distance destinations; often you'll have to travel via Erzurum (€9, four hours, 285km). There are two daily buses to Ankara (€23, 17 hours, 1210km).

AROUND DOĞUBAYAZIT

The travel agencies and most hotels in Doğubayazıt can help you organise a daily excursion to sights around the town. Half-day tours (about €20 per person) take in İshak Paşa Palace, 'Noah's Ark' (an elongated oval shape in stone that is supposed to be Noah's boat), the over-rated 'Meteor Crater' (most probably a geological aberration) and a village at the base of Mt Ararat. Full-day tours (€20 to €45, depending on the number of people) cover the same sites plus a visit to the Diyadin Hot Springs, 51km west of Doğubayazıt.

Mt Ararat (Ağrı Dağı)

A highlight of any trip to eastern Turkey, the twin peaks of Mt Ararat have figured in legends since time began, most notably as the supposed resting place of Noah's Ark. The left-hand peak, called Büyük Ağrı (Great Ararat), is 5137m high, while Küçük Ağrı (Little Ararat) rises to about 3895m.

CLIMBING MT ARARAT

For many years permission to climb Ararat was routinely refused because of security concerns, but this fantastic summit is now back on the trekking map, albeit with restrictions. A permit and a guide are mandatory. At the time of research you needed to apply at least 45 days in advance, your application had to be endorsed by a Turkish travel agency and you had to include a passport photocopy and a letter requesting permission and stating the dates you wish to climb.

You can apply through any reputable agency in Turkey.

Several guides and hotel staff in Doğubayazıt claim they can get the permit in a couple of days. Don't believe them. There's probably some bribery involved or, even worse, a scam, whereby they take your passport and let you think they'd obtained the permit but in reality would be taking you up Ararat unofficially. It's much safer to follow the official procedure, even if you have to endure the excruciatingly slow-turning wheels of bureaucracy. Hopefully things should become more relaxed in future.

The bad news is the price. Whatever agency you use, expect to cough up at least €350 per person for the trek (three days, including guides, camping and food) from Doğubayazıt (a bit less if you're a group).

Despite the extortionate fare, climbing Ararat is a fantastic experience. You'll be rewarded with stupendous views and stunning landscapes. The best months for climbing are July, August and September, but you must come well prepared. You'll need to be comfortable with snow-climbing techniques using crampons past 4800m even in the height of summer.

The usual route is the southern one, starting from Eliköyü, an abandoned village in the foothills, at about 2500m. There's another route starting from the village of Çevirme. The first camp site is at 3200m, and a second one at 4200m.

You can also do daily treks around the mountain. Provided you stay under 2500m you won't have to go through so much official hoohah, but you still need permission from the local *jandarma* – it's best to go with a local agent. Expect to pay around €150 per person.

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