

# Northeastern Anatolia



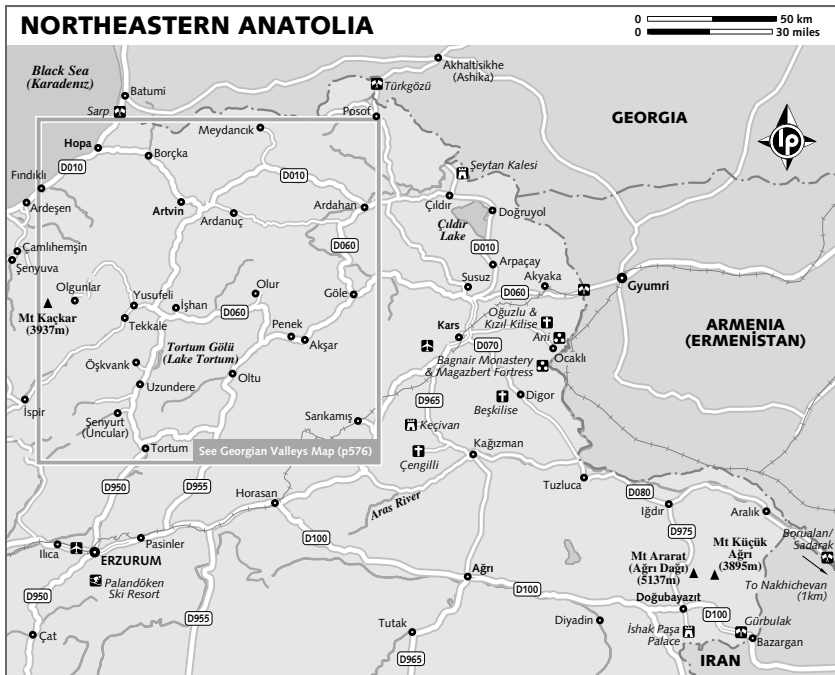
Two words: *saklı cennet* (secret paradise). These pretty much sum up northeastern Anatolia. Almost a void on the tourist radar due to its remoteness, this far-flung outpost is a red flag to those hungry for the unknown, and one of nature's most perfect playgrounds. You can pant up Turkey's highest summit (Mt Ararat) or ramble through the delightful Kaçkar Mountains in summer; swoosh down superb ski runs in Palandöken or Sarıkamış in winter; or whip down the rapids through spectacular canyons on the foaming Çoruh, one of the world's top 10 white-water runs. For such a tiny territory (by Turkish standards), the palette of landscapes is astonishing: precipitous gorges, unending steppes, refreshing *yaylalar* (highland pastures) and pine tree-clad mountains.

Travelling in northeastern Anatolia is like falling into a time warp. You'll find a bonanza of palaces, castles, mosques and churches dotted around the steppe, with not another traveller in sight. While the astonishing İshak Paşa Sarayı and the ruins of Ani are the stand-out highlights, for those with their own wheels there's nothing quite like the thrill of shifting gears on scenic byways and backways and stumbling across fairytale Georgian or Armenian monuments in splendid isolation, all testifying to Turkey's once flourishing ancient civilisations. Need to catch some urban vibes? Erzurum, with its portfolio of Seljuk buildings, and Kars, renowned for its Russian architecture (not to mention its delicious honey and cheese), will deliver. Best of all, the people are among the country's most hospitable. Shhh, that's just between you and us.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Cut the fresh powdery snow at the **Palandöken** (p575) or **Sarıkamış** ski resorts (p592) or test your mettle on a white-water run through the **Çoruh Gorge** (p578)
- Lose yourself in the former glories of **Ani** (p587), once a thriving Armenian capital
- Leap off the map into the **Karagöl Sahara National Park** (p583) and wander around its quaint villages and gorgeous alpine forests
- Measure how far your jaw drops in front of **İshak Paşa Palace** (p593) in Doğubayazıt or **Çifte Minareli Medre** (p571) in Erzurum
- Soak up the fabulous location and spectacular architecture of **Beşiklise** (p592), **Magazbert Fortress** (p591) and **Şeytan Kalesi** (p590)
- Let time pass you by in the oh-so-serene hamlets of **Barhal** (p580) and **Olgunlar** (p580)
- Hit the summit of the iconic **Mt Ararat** (p595), Turkey's highest mountain





## ERZURUM

☎ 0442 / pop 402,000 / elevation 1853m

Who said Erzurum was a cold and conservative city? Strolling down Cumhuriyet Caddesi, the main artery, on a sunny day and sampling a *tatlı* (dessert) in one of its hip pastry shops, you'll find Erzurum appealing and relaxed. Truth is, it is a contradictory place; it's Islamic to its core and with deep roots in tradition, but adapted to Western consumerism. Here you can shop till you drop and quaff an incendiary rakı (aniseed brandy) – all while the *müezzins* call the faithful to prayer. A gregarious student population adds a liberal buzz to the air.

Erzurum promotes itself as the architectural capital of eastern Anatolia. Its impressive array of Seljuk monuments makes this tag well deserved and you'll oohhh and ahhh over the wonderful *medreses* (seminaries) and mosques that line the main drag. Then sweat it up to the citadel, where you can check out the entire city before you, with the steppe forming a heavenly backdrop.

Still too tame for you? Come in winter and enjoy the nearby high-octane 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 attend the 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.

## Information

Most banks have branches with ATMs on or around Cumhuriyet Caddesi. There are also a few moneychangers, including **Cihan Döviz** (☎ 234 9488; Çaykara Caddesi; ☎ 8am-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-5pm Sat & Sun). There are internet cafés everywhere. The **tourist office** (☎ 235 0925; Cemal Gürsel Caddesi; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri) has some brochures and, if you're lucky, a city map. The **Iranian consulate** (☎ 316 2285; fax 316 1182; Atatürk Bulvarı; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 2.30-4.30pm Mon-Thu & Sat) is about 2km south of the centre, towards Palandöken ski resort (also see boxed text, p680).

## Sights & Activities

The single most definitive image of Erzurum is the magnificent **Çifte Minareli Medrese** (Twin Minaret Seminary; Cumhuriyet Caddesi), east of the centre of town. It dates from the 1200s when Erzurum was a wealthy Seljuk city before it suffered attack and devastation by the Mongols in 1242. The facade 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 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*.

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 to south and six running east to 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 TL3; ☎ 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 Medrese is the classical **Lala Mustafa Paşa Camii** (1562).

If you haven't run out of stamina, you can climb to the **kale** (citadel; admission TL3; ☎ 8am-5pm), perched on the hilltop to the north of the Çifte Minareli, and savour the views over the city and the steppe. It was erected by the emperor Theodosius around the 5th century.

Archaeology buffs will make a beeline for the **Erzurum Museum** (Erzurum Müzesi; Yenişehir Caddesi; admission TL3; ☎ 8am-5pm Tue-Sun), several long blocks southwest of the Yakutiye Seminary. It houses finds from nearby digs.

## Sleeping

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

## BUDGET

**Otel Çınar** (☎ 213 2055; Ayazpaşa Caddesi; s without bathroom TL13, s/d TL20/30) If the Yeni Çınar Oteli is full, the adjoining Çınar is a tolerable runner-up. Some travellers might have a heart attack when they see the diminutive singles,

## ERZURUM

	A	B	C	D
<b>INFORMATION</b>				
Cihan Döviz.....	1 B4	Otel Polat.....	14 C3	<b>ENTERTAINMENT</b>
Tourist Office.....	2 B4	Yeni Çınar Oteli.....	15 C3	Daşhane..... (see 17)
		Yeni Örnek.....	16 C3	
<b>1 SIGHTS &amp; ACTIVITIES</b>		<b>EATING</b>		<b>SHOPPING</b>
Caferiye Camii.....	3 C4	Erzurum Evleri.....	17 C4	Rüstem Paşa Çarşısı.....
Çifte Minareli Medrese.....	4 D4	Gel-Gör Çağ Kebabi.....	18 C3	
Erzurum Museum.....	5 B5	Güzel yurt Restorant.....	19 C4	<b>TRANSPORT</b>
Kale (Citadel).....	6 D3	Kılıcoğlu.....	20 C4	Avis.....
Lala Mustafa Paşa Camii.....	7 C4	Közz..... (see 13)	21 C4	Durmazpınar Turizm.....
Turkish-Islamic Arts & Ethnography Museum.....	8 C4	Küçükbey Konağı.....	(see 15)	Esadağ Ticket Office..... (see 11)
Üç Kümbetler (Three Tombs).....	9 D4	Lokanta..... (see 15)	22 C4	Gölbazı Semt Garajı.....
Ulu Cami.....	10 D4	Salon Asya.....	22 C4	Sude - National Car Rental.....
Yakutiye Medrese..... (see 8)		Vatan Lokantası.....	23 C3	Turkish Airlines.....
		<b>DRINKING</b>		
<b>2 SLEEPING</b>		Çay Bahçesi.....	24 C4	
Esadağ Otel.....	11 C4			
Grand Hotel Hitit.....	(see 16)			
Hotel Dilaver.....	12 C3			
Otel Çınar..... (see 15)				
Otel Dede.....	13 C4			

but apart from that the Çınar will do the trick for unfussy backpackers, with rooms daubed a gaudy shade of green, and well-scrubbed bathrooms. No breakfast is served.

**Yeni Çınar Oteli** (☎ 213 6690; Ayazpaşa Caddesi; s/d TL25/35) This place may not look like much, but has a lot of virtues for true budget-seekers. It's clean, safe, quiet and within walk-

ing distance of everything you might need. Avoid the rooms at the rear, which have obstructed views. Breakfast is not included. Hungry? There's a *lokanta* (eatery serving ready-made food) next door. It's in the market, a short bag-haul from İstasyon Caddesi. The only flaw is the deserted, dimly lit street at night.

**Yeni Ornek** (☎ 233 0053; Kazım Karabekir Caddesi; s/d TL30/40) Style? Er, no. Despite a canary-yellow facade, the Yeni Ornek is as no-frills as it gets but the rooms are well kept and the staff pleasing, making it a reliable lower-midrange option. After a long day's turf pounding, sink into the comfy leather armchairs in the lobby while marvelling at the ancient switchboard.

**Otel Dede** (☎ 233 1191; Cumhuriyet Caddesi; s/d TL30/50) If you want to be right on the main drag and not pay through the nose, this is the place. Room design is in a generic hotel style, with tiled floors, a pinkish colour scheme, unfortunate frumpy bedding and less-than-perky mattresses. Bathrooms could do with a touch up. Közz (see right) is just behind the reception.

**Otel Polat** (☎ 235 0363; fax 234 4598; Kazım Karabekir Caddesi; s/d TL35/60) Don't judge a book by its cover. The greyish facade is off-putting, but it's much more appealing inside, with prim bathrooms and fresh rooms, as well as a bright rooftop breakfast room boasting smashing views of the city. Some rooms are darker than others, so ask to see a few before committing.

## 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 (p575), 5km southwest of Erzurum.

**Grand Hotel Hitit** (☎ 233 5001; fax 233 2350; Kazım Karabekir Caddesi; s/d TL40/70) A good lair in this price bracket, with rooms that seemingly get plenty of TLC. Convenient location and good views from the rooftop breakfast room.

**our pick Esadaş Otel** (☎ 233 5425; www.erzurume.sadas.com.tr, in Turkish; Cumhuriyet Caddesi; s/d TL45/80) Pros: right on the main thoroughfare, close to everything, including our beloved Kılıçoğlu. Cons: right on the main thoroughfare, dangerously close to Kılıçoğlu, and a bit noisy (traffic ceases around 11pm). Very well maintained and efficiently run. Terrific breakfast, with five varieties of local cheese, sausages and yoghurt. Bargain down the prices a bit if it's slack.

**Hotel Dilaver** (☎ 235 0068; www.dilaverhotel.com.tr; Aşağı Mumcu Caddesi; s/d TL60/90; 📶) A bit overpriced, but first let's talk location. It's within spitting distance of the main sights but in a tranquil street. Then there are the rooms. Here the mattresses are springy, the carpets

have no stains and the tiles in the bathrooms are unchipped. From the rooftop breakfast room, check out the entire city spread out below you.

## Eating & Drinking

You'll find plenty of eateries sprinkled around Cumhuriyet Caddesi.

**Çay Bahçesi** (Cumhuriyet Caddesi) This lovely leaf-dappled tea garden, just off the Turkish-Islamic Arts & Ethnography Museum, is a godsend if you need a cool place to rest your weary feet.

**Közz** (☎ 235 1516; Cumhuriyet Caddesi; mains TL2) We'd say three things about this fast-food joint on the main street; it's enormously popular, the staff is efficient and the *tavuk* (chicken) sandwiches will keep you coming back for more.

**Kılıçoğlu** (☎ 235 3233; Cumhuriyet Caddesi; snacks & pastries from TL2) With 27 kinds of baklava and 23 ice-cream flavours, this slick pastry shop is the place to head in case of hypoglycaemia. The playful picture-book format menu will help you navigate between the treats on offer. How could you resist such poetic names as *fıstıklı kıvrım*, *beyaz saray*, *prenses* or *dilber dudağı*? Snacks are also available.

**Salon Asya** (☎ 234 9222; Cumhuriyet Caddesi; mains TL4-8) Buzzing and packed, come here for satisfying kebabs and heaving ready-made meals in rosy surrounds. The food is fresh and hygienically prepared.

**Küçükbey Konağı** (☎ 214 0381; Cumhuriyet Caddesi, Erzurum Dügün Salonu Karşısı; mains TL4-8) Ah, oh-so-mellow Küçükbey. Set in a rambling old mansion-turned-café, this welcoming oasis is popular with students of both sexes, here to enjoy the atmosphere, gossip, flirt and puff a nargileh (traditional water pipe for smoking). Food-wise, it features textbook meat dishes, *mantı* (Turkish-style ravioli) and snacks, but it's the atmosphere that most come to ingest. It's tucked away in a side street off the main drag.

**Vatan Lokantası** (☎ 234 8191; İstasyon Caddesi; mains TL5-8) This snappy joint cranks out above-average kebabs and döner, along with not-too-greasy *sulu yemekler* (ready-made meals), but no pide (Turkish-style pizza).

**Gel-Gör Çağ Kebabı** (☎ 213 3253; İstasyon Caddesi; mains TL5-8) This charismatic Erzurum eatery specialises in *çağ kebabı* (mutton grilled on a horizontal spit) served with small plates of salad, onions and yoghurt. It's a concept that's

## SERVICES FROM ERZURUM'S OTOGAR

Destination	Fare (TL)	Duration (hr)	Distance (km)	Frequency (per day)
Ankara	50	13	925	about 10
Diyarbakır	30	8	485	5
Doğubayazıt	20	4½	285	5
İstanbul	60	19	1275	7
Kars	15	3	205	frequent
Kayseri	40	10	628	several
Trabzon	20	6	325	several
Van	25	6½	410	about 3

been a cult since 1975, so dedicated carnivores can't go wrong here.

**our pick** **Güzelyurt Restaurant** (☎ 234 5001; Cumhuriyet Caddesi; mains TL5-13) This iconic restaurant, in business since 1928, is so adorable because it feels so anachronistic, with shrouded windows, old-fashioned charm and thick carpets. It's also a great place to spill money on a great meal. The mezes are a headliner, with about 20 different specialities (from inoffensive eggplant to, ahem, brains), but the menu also features a smattering of mains, including 'Bof Straganof' (no typo), all handled with apt deftness and served by old-school, bow-tied waiters. It's licensed – yeah!

**our pick** **Erzurum Evleri** (☎ 212 8372; Cumhuriyet Caddesi, Yüzbaşı Sokak; mains TL7-12) Yes, two 'our pick' restaurants in this city. Push the door of the Erzurum Evleri and you'll immediately see why. It feels like half the paraphernalia from six centuries of the Ottoman Empire has ended up here, with an onslaught of kilims (pileless woven rugs), pictures, weapons, farming tools and other collectibles from floor to ceiling. Surrender to the languor of the private alcoves with cushions and low tables and treat yourself to a soup, a *börek* (filled pastry) or a *tandır kebab* (stew). The nearby Daşhane (☎ 213 7080), which has the same management, features live music on Friday and Saturday evenings. If only it was licensed!

## 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*.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

**Durmazpınar Turizm** (☎ 233 3690; Cumhuriyet Caddesi; ☎ 8am-8pm) An agent for Sun Express and Onur Air. Sun Express has two weekly flights to Antalya and Bursa (from TL119), three weekly flights to İstanbul (from TL119) and four weekly flights to İzmir (from TL119). Onur Air has one daily flight to İstanbul (from TL112, two hours). Also sells tickets on behalf of Turkish Airlines.

**Turkish Airlines** (☎ 213 6717; www.thy.com; Cumhuriyet Caddesi; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-2pm Sat) One to two daily flights to İstanbul (from TL112, 1¼ hours) and a daily flight to Ankara (from TL59, 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 on p680), 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 (above).

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 (TL15, three hours, 129km); minibuses to Artvin (TL20, four hours, 215km), Hopa and Rize leave at 7.30am, 11.30am, 2pm, 4.30pm and 6pm.

### TRAIN

The train station is about 1km north of Cumhuriyet Caddesi. The *Doğu Ekspresi* leaves daily at noon for İstanbul via Sivas, Kayseri



and Ankara (TL40); for Kars, it departs at 5.20pm (TL10). The *Erzurum Ekspresi* leaves for Ankara, via Sivas and Kayseri, daily at 1.30pm (TL35, 24 hours); for Kars, it departs at 11am (TL10, 4½ hours).

## Getting Around

A taxi to/from the airport, about 15km from town, costs around TL30.

Minibuses and city buses pass the otogar and will take you into town for TL1; a taxi costs about TL7.

Car rental is available through **Avis** (☎ 233 8088; www.avis.com.tr; Terminal Caddesi, Mavi Site 1 Blok 5; ☹ 8am-7pm) and **Sude – National Car Rental** (☎ 234 3025; fax 234 3024; Milletbahçe Caddesi; ☹ 8am-7pm), off Çaykara Caddesi.

## AROUND ERZURUM

### Palandöken Ski Resort

☎ 0442

Did you know this? A mere 5km south of Erzurum, Palandöken is regarded as the best ski resort in the country, with 10 ski lifts, including one telecabin, 28km of ski runs on three levels (seven beginner runs, six intermediate and two advanced) and an excellent après-ski scene. 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 TL35 per day).

### SLEEPING & EATING

With the exception of the Dedeman, the following 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 30% in low season).

**Palan Otel** (☎ 317 0707; www.palanotel.com; s/d with half-board TL170/240; ☹ ☹ ☹) Reliable. That's code for 'utilitarian and unexciting'. This pretty much sums up the Palan, where the rooms are reliably clean, the service is reliably well disposed and amenities reliably comprehensive.

**Polat Renaissance** (☎ 232 0010; www.polatrenaisance.com; s/d with half-board TL220/300; ☹ ☹ ☹) Gloating over its five-star rating, the pyramid-shaped Polat is a very impressive option, gigantic in scale, with the feel of a mini-city, but rates zero on the charm meter.

**Dedeman** (☎ 316 2414; www.dedeman.com; s/d with half-board TL250/400; ☹) This Dedeman is older

than the Ski Lodge but it's right at the foot of the ski runs, at 2450m.

**ourpick Ski Lodge Dedeman** (☎ 317 0500; www.dedeman.com; s/d with half-board TL350/450; ☹ ☹) A pleasing alternative to the pomp of the larger ventures in Palandöken, the smaller but more stylish Ski Lodge Dedeman boasts appealing rooms that are tastefully decked out with king-size beds and chocolate-brown and white furnishings, as well as a few historic Erzurum sketches hung on the walls. Don't scream at the posted rates – they're negotiable.

Another massive hotel, the Astrila Kayak Otel, was under construction at the time of writing.

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

From central Erzurum, a taxi will set you back about TL15.

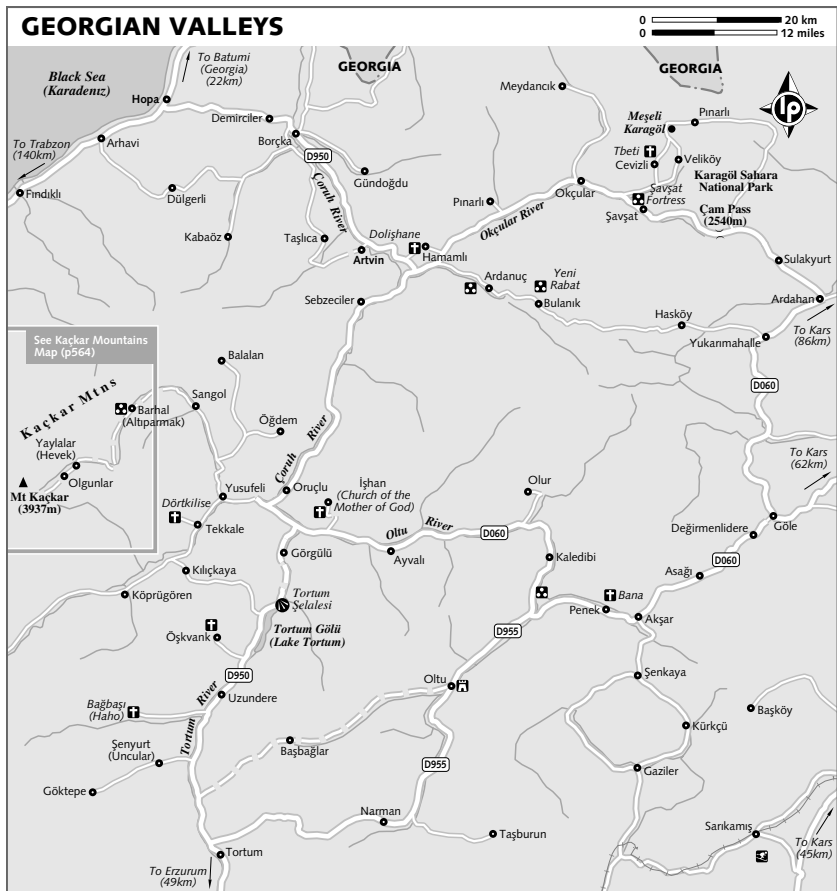
## GEORGIAN VALLEYS

Don't miss the mountainous country north of Erzurum towards Artvin because, in addition to being spectacular, it's also one of northeastern Anatolia's most culturally peculiar areas. 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 mountain scenery is awesome, 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.

For a vivid account of this little corner of Turkey, look no further than Tony Anderson's *Bread and Ashes: A Walk Through the Mountains of Georgia*, which includes a chapter about the Georgian Valleys.

### HISTORY

The Persians and Byzantines squabbled over this region from the 4th century AD. 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 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 the valleys are a delight to explore, but public transport to and from most of them consists of one 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. It's best to hire a car in Erzurum or a taxi in Yusufeli (about TL250 for a day).

The following itinerary starts from Yusufeli.

### İşhan

From Yusufeli, drive to the petrol station along the Artvin–Erzurum road (9km) and go another 8km until you reach the junction with the D060. Take the road on the left marked for Olur and Ardahan. You'll reach İşhan after 6km. Turn left at a junction marked by a sign reading 'İşhan Kilisesi'. The upper 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 TL2) 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 (right). 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 elegant carved colonnades.

### Tortum Gölü & Tortum Şelalesi

Back at the junction with the D060, take Hwy 950 in the Erzurum direction (south). You'll reach the impressive **Tortum Şelalesi** (Tortum Waterfalls) after about 16km, signposted 700m off the main road. Continuing south, Hwy 950 skirts the western shore of **Tortum Gölü** (Lake Tortum), which was formed by a landslide about three centuries ago. You can break your journey at the **İskele Alabalık Tesisleri**

(☎ 0442-792 2022; fish dishes TL6), about 4km south of the waterfalls, and enjoy well-prepared fish dishes right by the lake. The setting is awesome and boats are available for rent (TL5).

### Öşkvan

Continuing 8km south 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. Keep an eye out for 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.

### Bağbaşı (Haho)

About 15km 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 its 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.

### Oltu

Continue south along Hwy 950 until you reach the turn-off to Narman. Drive past

Narman. When the road meets the D955, turn left (north). 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.

### Bana & Penek

Continuing a further 18km north along the D955 brings you to the junction with the D060. Turn left and drive for about 4km and 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.

Backtrack to the junction with Highway 955. From the junction, turn left onto the D060 towards Kars. A further 14.2km 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. The awesome Armenian **church of Bana** soon comes into view, standing on a hill with the mountains forming a fantastic backdrop – an unforgettable vision. Its most distinctive architectural feature is its rotunda shape. You can approach the church by following a dirt road that branches off to the left about 600m after leaving the village (don't brave it in wet weather with an ordinary car).

### YUSUFELI

☎ 0466 / pop 6400 / elevation 560m

Be sure to squeeze Yusufeli into your itinerary because work on the foundations of a nearby dam is scheduled to be carried out in the forthcoming years and the whole valley will vanish underwater. Nobody knows exactly when it's going to happen, which makes matters even more painful. People will be relocated higher in the mountains, and Turkish officials have guaranteed that no church will be submerged. The good news is that before this happens there's a lot to do here if you're an adrenaline junkie. The swift Barhal Çayı (Barhal River) rushes nois-

ily through Yusufeli on its way to the nearby Çoruh River, and the town is a popular base for white-water rafting and trekking groups from Europe, Israel, Turkey and America.

Yusufeli is also a good base for culture vultures. The churches at nearby Barhal and Dörtkilise are definitely worth the trip. Yusufeli is also a kicking-off point for the Georgian Valleys (p575).

### Orientation & Information

A short stroll reveals everything Yusufeli has to offer: Halit Paşa Caddesi and İnönü Caddesi, joining to form the main street; the banks with ATMs; a couple of internet cafés; the post office behind the school in the eastern part of town; and the **tourist office** (☎ 811 4008; İnönü Caddesi; ☹ 8am–6pm Mon–Sat), near the otogar. In principle, it's staffed by English-speaking students.

### Activities

#### WHITE-WATER RAFTING

The Çoruh River is one of the world's best rafting rivers, with superb rapids and brilliant playholes around Yusufeli and Barhal. The river offers a wide range of rafting options for all skill levels, from II to V depending on the stretches and the levels of water. Beginners will tackle more forgiving sections on the nearby Barhal River. Bobbing down the river you can also enjoy a taste of traditional eastern Anatolian village life and admire the tall craggy gorges. Rafting is best in May, June and July; early August the volume of water is usually insufficient.

Various local operators run day trips out of Yusufeli for about TL50 per person (minimum four people) for about 3½ hours of rafting; ask at Hotel Barhal, Otel Barcelona, Greenpiece Camping or at the tourist office. Be sure to choose an outfitter with bilingual guides. Other companies run longer trips with three nights' camping and four days' rafting culminating at Yusufeli Gorge. Prices start at around €1200 for one week, including food and camping.

**Water by Nature** (☎ in the UK 0148-872 293; www.waterbynature.com), based in the UK, comes recommended. This company uses Cemil's Pension in Tekkale as a base. Another reputable outfit is **Alternatif Outdoor** (☎ 0252-417 2720; www.alternatifraft.com), which operates out of Marmaris.

## TREKKING

From Yusufeli, a few guides can lead you on customised treks up into the Kaçkar Mountains; see p563. The tourist office, Otel Barcelona or Greenpiece Camping can help with organising such trips. Pension owners in Barhal (p580) and Olgunlar (p580) 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.

## YUSUFELI

**Greenpiece Camping** (☎ 811 3620; www.raftingyusufeli.com, in Turkish; camping per person TL8, tree house TL30, s/d TL20/40; 📍) Greenpiece boasts an excellent setting and has various types of accommodation. For budget travellers, the ultra-basic tree houses hiding in the leaves of an orchard can do the trick, or you can pitch your tent in the grassy grounds. The three rooms by the river are the best ones; the other rooms, in a building in the orchard, feel more cramped. There's a pleasant restaurant by the riverside (dinner is about TL12) and, yes, it's licensed. Add another TL7 for breakfast. Rafting and trekking trips can be organised here. 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 TL20/30) Scraping funds together for your sojourn in Yusufeli? Consider staying at this well-run cheapie conveniently located by the suspension bridge. The dark carpets are permanently stained from who knows what but the bathrooms get all the proper scrubbing. Some rooms open onto the river, and there's an on-site restaurant with a terrace overlooking the gushing river. The owners can organise various trips in the area, including trekking and rafting. Breakfast is extra.

**our pick** **Otel Barcelona** (☎ 811 2627; www.hotelbarcelona.com.tr; Arikli Mahallesi; s/d TL80/120; 📍) The pièce de résistance of accommodation options, this upmarket resort-style abode, under Turkish-Spanish (well, Catalan) management, flaunts excellent amenities, bright rooms with scrupulously clean bathrooms, pleasing colourful tones and an attached quality restaurant. Post-rafting you can bask lizard-like by

the big pool – utter bliss. The owners are very well clued up and can organise various trips in the area, including 4WD tours, as well as hiking and rafting trips. Oh, and staff speak good English. Warmly recommended.

## BETWEEN YUSUFELI & BARHAL

The following ventures are on the road to Barhal, right by the Barhal River, and easily accessible by minibus from Yusufeli (TL4).

**Hotel River** (☎ 824 4345; Bostancı; s/d with half-board TL60/95; 📍) This family-run pension is about 12km from Yusufeli. Rooms are neat and cosy, with pine cladding, TV, well-sprung mattresses and private bathrooms, though prices are somewhat inflated. Meals are served on a breezy terrace, and the gushing river provides a soothing soundtrack. Rafting and trekking trips can be organised.

**İhtiyaroğlu** (☎ 824 4086; www.apartagara.com; Sarıgöl Yolu; camping per person TL8, s/d with half-board TL40/80) Almost a carbon copy of the Hotel River, with three chalet-like buildings overlooking the river. You can also pitch your tent in a grassy area. It's 1.5km further on from its competitor.

## Eating

Most places to stay have attached restaurants, but there are a few independent restaurants worthy of note.

**Çoruh Pide ve Lahmacun Salonu** (☎ 811 2870; Ersis Caddesi; mains TL4-7) You wouldn't guess it from the humble surrounds, but this place does excellent Turkish and Arabic pizzas, served freshly baked from the oven.

**Hacıoğlu Çağ Döner** (☎ 811 3009; İnönü Caddesi; mains TL5-8) Close to the tourist office. Energy-boosting servings of meat (including çağ döner) and fish dishes, as well as *sulu yemekler*. Avoid the latter – too much gravy – and go for the fresh trout, best enjoyed on the terrace overlooking the river.

**Arzet Lokantasi** (☎ 811 2181; İnönü Caddesi; mains TL5-8) Arzet keeps things plain and simple: ordinary decor, neon lighting, brisk service and a good range of kebaps and other standard fare.

## Getting There & Away

From Yusufeli there are at least three buses in the morning for Erzurum (TL15, three hours), a 9am service to Trabzon (TL35) and several minibuses to Artvin (TL13). For Kars, you'll have to take a taxi out to the petrol

station (TL20) along the Artvin–Erzurum road and catch the bus from there, at about 1pm (TL15).

## AROUND YUSUFELİ

### Barhal (Altıparmak)

☎ 0466 / pop 1000 / elevation 1300m

In Barhal (officially called Altıparmak), about 27km northwest of Yusufeli, *'Hayat çok güzel'* ('It's a nice life'). Imagine a *köy* (village) nestled in a verdant valley, a rippling stream running through its heart, a lovely mountainscape and a handful of cosy pensions. It can't get more bucolic than that – you feel you've stumbled onto the set of *Little House on the Prairie*. Once you've had your fill of playing the roles of the Ingalls, look for the well-preserved, 10th-century **Georgian church** that stands besides Karahan Pension. You can also take the walk up to the small ruined **chapel** in a meadow ridge above the town – it's worth the 45 minutes' 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 Karahan Pension.

Pension owners also arrange two- to four-day treks across the mountains to Çamlıhemşin with horses to carry your baggage. One horse, costing TL60, can porter for two trekkers. Add another TL80 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. No glitz or pomp, just friendly ambience and cosy rooms equipped with pine cladding. And the soothing soundtrack of the river.

**Barhal Pansiyon** (☎ 0535-264 6765; www.barhalpansiyon.com, in Turkish; half-board per person TL35-50) The first place you'll pass on the road into town. The seven rooms (with shared bathroom) in the main house are hanky-sized yet well tended, with pine cladding. For more privacy, it's worth shelling out for the newer rooms with private facilities (but no views to speak of) in a separate building. The copious dinner includes six *çesit* (dishes).

**Marsis Village House** (☎ 826 2002; www.marsisotel.com; half-board per person TL35) A few steps further up, just back from the river. It feels like a cosy doll's house, with 16 rooms, an agreeable terrace and amiable staff. Three rooms come

with private bathrooms. If you're travelling solo, aim for rooms 106 and 107, which feature river views. The wholesome dinners come in for warm praise.

**Karahan Pension** (☎ 826 2071; half-board per person TL40) This pension is as cosy as a bird's nest and boasts an adorable setting on a hillside on the outskirts of the village. The main house is full of nooks and crannies and harbours 17 smallish rooms. Tip: angle for a room with a bathroom and a view over the valley. Food here is a definite plus; owner Mehmet Karahan does wonders with simple ingredients. And Barhal's Georgian church is almost on your doorstep. Amen.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

A couple of minibuses make the run from Yusufeli (TL10, two hours), usually at 2pm and 4pm or 5pm. If you have your own vehicle, note that only the first 18km (until Sarıgöl) are surfaced. From Sarıgöl to Barhal (9km), only 6km of road are surfaced. 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 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, **Altunay Pension** (☎ 832 2001; www.kackar3937.com; half-board per person TL45, bungalow TL100), 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 features spotless rooms with bathrooms. 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.

## RAFTING & TREKKING IN THE KAÇKARS

A rafting and trekking guide based in Yusufeli, Cumhuriyet Bayrak can't gush enough superlatives about his playground.

'Here in Yusufeli we're lucky enough to have both rafting and hiking possibilities. People come from all over Europe and Israel to enjoy them. The rafting season begins in June. For beginners, it's best to come in July or August, because the level of water is lower and the rapids less challenging.

'We begin with a practice session and a briefing on a calm section of the river, usually on the Barhal River, before tackling more thrilling sections. There's always a guide on the boat, who gives the instructions to the team, and a minibus follows along the road and picks us up at the end of the ride.

'What makes rafting so special here is that the scenery is awesome, with gorges and castles, so you have history and adventure all in one trip! I also guide tourists in the Kaçkar Mountains, which is gaining in popularity among the trekking community. Here again, the scenery is terrific; in just a few days, you can enjoy alpine lakes, awesome summits, a plethora of wild flowers and, if you're lucky, you might come across ibex and bears. It's very photogenic, and it offers more diversity than, say, Mt Ararat.'

So will Yusufeli remain a rafting mecca once the dam is completed? 'If not, we'll find other places on the river'. Cumhuriyet Bayrak is a lesson in optimism!

The village of **Olgunlar** is about 3km further up in the mountains. Here you'll find the **Denizgözü Pansion** (☎ 832 2105; half-board per person TL45), with salubrious rooms and private bathrooms, overlooking the river, and the 15-room **Kaçkar Pansion** (☎ 832 2047; www.kackar.net; half-board per person TL45), 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** (p563) over the Kaçkar Mountains. 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 (TL20 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, on a hillside (there's no sign). 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. 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.

The term 'cheap and cheerful' could have been written for **Cemil's Pansion** (☎ 811 2908, 0536-988 5829; cemil\_pansion@hotmail.com; Tekkale; half-board per person TL35). So could 'you get what you pay for'. This budget stalwart has lots of nooks and crannies as well as a convivial terrace right beside the river and a tank full of trout. Aim for a room in the new building, which won't cost you any more and is much, much friendlier on the eyes. Note that bathrooms are shared. Evening meals are available by arrangement. 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 three services per day (TL2). A taxi costs about TL20. From Tekkale you can hike to Dörtkilise (6km), 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 partly surfaced but pretty

## GEORGIA, ANYONE?

Wanna make your friends jealous? Consider a nice little foray into neighbouring Georgia. It's all the more tempting now that visas (p680) are no longer necessary for most Western nations (but it's still wise to check beforehand). From Kars, you can take a minibus to Posof (TL15), then ask the driver to continue to the border, a further 16km ride (TL20). 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. The next morning, you could forge west to Batumi, get an eyeful of the Black Sea and take a minibus to the Turkish border at Sarpi. A more direct option consists of taking a minibus to Ardahan (TL10 from Kars), where you can hop on the daily bus proceeding from İstanbul and heading to Tbilisi, which leaves from Ardahan at around 10am (TL35). It stops in front of the office of the **Özlem Ardahan** (☎ 0478-211 3568) bus company, on the main drag, and also uses the Posof border crossing.

Despite a military confrontation with Russia in 2008, Georgia is a safe place to visit. For Ossetia and Abkhazia, check out the situation while in Georgia.

rough from Tekkale and shouldn't be braved if it's wet.

## ARTVİN

☎ 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, but it's the best launching pad for exploring the mystifying *yaylalar*. And if you plan a visit in summer, try to make it coincide with the **Kafkasör Kültür ve Sanat Festivali** (Caucasus Culture & Arts Festival; ☎ 212 3711), which takes place over the last weekend of June in the Kafkasör Yaylası, a pasture 7km southwest of Artvin, with *boğa güreşleri* (bloodless bull-wrestling matches) as the main attraction.

Up the main drag is a roundabout overlooked by the **tourist office** (☎ 212 3071; artvin@ttmail.com; 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 *valiliği* (provincial government building). Many hotels double as brothels, but you should do fine if you stick to the **Otel Kaçkar** (☎ 212 9009; Hamam Sokak; s/d TL25/40), tucked away in a quiet lane off the main drag, or the more upmarket **Karahan Otel** (☎ 212 1800; fax 212 2420; İnönü Caddesi; s/d TL55/80; ☎), which is a good deal if you can ignore the grotty entrance on the main

drag (the second entrance at the back is much more appealing).

For cheap fare, stroll along İnönü Caddesi and size up the small eateries and pastry shops.

The otogar lies further down the valley, about 500m from the town centre, off a hair-pin bend. There's one morning bus a day to Kars (TL25, five hours, 270km) and regular buses to Trabzon (TL20, 4½ hours, 255km). For Erzurum there are several daily buses and minibuses (TL25, five 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 (TL15, 1½ hours, 70km), about two minibuses to Ardahan (TL20, 2½ hours, 115km), and at least six minibuses to Yusufeli (TL13, 2¼ hours, 75km). There are also regular services to Ardanuç (TL8, one hour, 30km) and to Şavşat (TL12, 1½ hours, 60km).

## KARS

☎ 0474 / pop 78,500 / elevation 1768m

What a quirky city. 'Where am I?', is probably what you'll find yourself wondering on arrival. With its stately, pastel-coloured stone buildings dating from the Russian occupation and its well-organised grid plan, Kars looks like a slice of Russia teleported to northeastern Anatolia. And the mix of influences – Azeri, Turkmen, Kurdish, Turkish and Russian – adds to the feeling of surprise.

It won't be love at first sight (especially on a rainy day), but Kars is high on personal-



ity and atmosphere. No wonder it provided the setting for Orhan Pamuk's prize-winning novel *Kar (Snow)*.

Kars is usually regarded as a base for excursions to Ani (p587) and other hidden treasures in the surrounding steppe, but it would be a shame not to take time exploring its excellent sights and soaking up the eclectic vibe. And don't leave Kars without sampling the delicious local *bal* (honey) and *peynir* (cheese).

The border with nearby Armenia was still closed at the time of writing, but when it's reopened, it should foster a thriving business be-

tween the two countries – not to mention an exhilarating overland route to the Caucasus.

## 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. Many of the sturdier stone

### A MAGICAL TRIP IN THE BACKCOUNTRY

In summer, the area that extends to the northeast of Artvin is simply stunning. There's a tapestry of bucolic ambience, with lakes, rivers, mountains and forests straight out of a Brothers Grimm fairy tale, *yaylalar* (high-altitude pastures), traditional wooden houses and villages...with the added appeal of a distinctly Caucasian flavour, courtesy of the proximity of Georgia. Amid this setting reminiscent of *Heidi*, stand the ruins of several churches and castles as well as off-the-beaten track towns that are definitely worth a look. From west to east:

**Church of Dolişhane** About 17km east of Artvin, on the road to Kars and Ardanuç, a signposted turn-off ('Dolişhane Kilisesi 3km') leads to this beautiful 10th-century church, blessed with a few reliefs.

**Georgian Monastery and Church of Porta** This 10th-century church is accessed by a path off the Artvin–Şavşat road (look for the brown metal sign), about 10km before the turn-off to Meydançık.

**Meydançık** The quintessential *yaylalar* settlement, near the Georgian border, is accessed by a good tarred road that branches off the Artvin–Şavşat road.

**Ardanuç** Coming from Artvin, you'll first drive past the Ferhatlı castle (look up on your right, it's perched on a rocky outcrop) and, another 8.5km further east, the Gevernik castle, before entering Ardanuç set in a dramatic canyon guarded by an impregnable fortress.

**Church of Yeni Rabat** About 17km past Ardanuç, near the village of Bulanık, this church is a bit hard to reach because the road is in bad shape a few kilometres past Ardanuç, but was being widened and upgraded when we visited.

**Şavşat** This old Georgian town is worth a peek for its fairy-tale castle standing sentinel on the western outskirts of town.

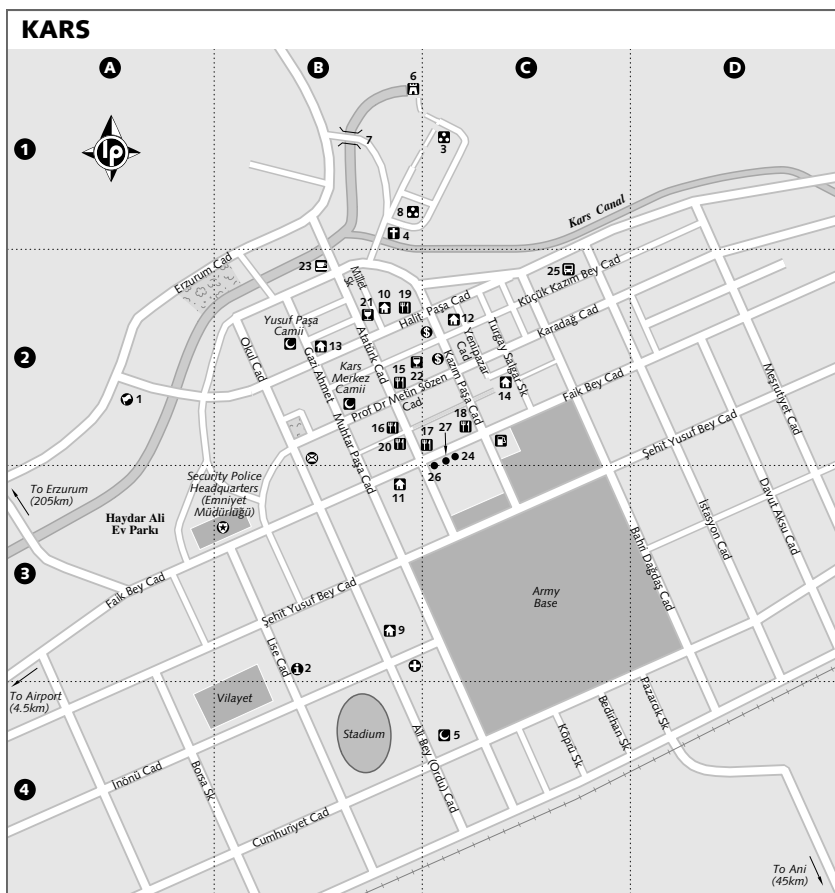
**Church of Tbeti** Easily accessed from the Artvin–Şavşat road, on the way to Karagöl Sahara National Park, this 10th-century church is in ruins but in a beautiful setting. Look for the elaborately carved windows.

**Karagöl Sahara National Park** A national park blessed with spectacular mountain scenery and a lovely lake called Meşeli Karagöl.

**Ardahan** From Şavşat, a wonderfully scenic road leaves the lush, wooded valleys behind and snakes steeply around numerous twists and turns to the Çam Pass (2540m) before reaching Ardahan, the typical steppe town, with a citadel and an old bridge.

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

Should you fall under the spell of this lovely area (no doubt you will!), you can bunk down at the **Laşet Tesisleri** (☎ 0535-734 6711; Şavşat Ardahan Karayolu; s/d TL35/50), an adorable little hotel nestled in lush vegetation on the Şavşat–Ardahan road, about 8km east of Şavşat. There's also the **Karagöl Pansiyon** (☎ 0466-531 2137; Meşeli Karagöl; r per person TL40), just by the shore of the Meşeli Lake. It's open from mid-June to August only.



buildings along the main streets date back to the Russian occupation.

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

### Orientation & Information

Most banks (and ATMs), internet cafés, hotels and restaurants are in or close to Atatürk Caddesi, the main drag. Although the otogar 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.

Limited tourist information is available at the **tourist office** (☎ 212 6817; Lise Caddesi; ☎ 8am–

noon & 1–5pm Mon–Fri), west of the centre. To organise transport to Ani, a good bet is to contact **Celil Ersoğlu** (☎ 212 6543, 0532-226 3966; celilani@hotmail.com), who acts as a private guide and speaks good English. He'll probably meet you at your hotel's reception.

The **Azerbaijani consulate** (☎ 223 6475, 223 1361; fax 223 8741; Erzurum Caddesi; ☎ 9.30am–12.30pm Mon–Fri) is northwest of the centre (also see boxed text, p680).

### Sights & Activities

The prominent **Kars Castle** (Kars Kalesi; admission free; ☎ 8am–5pm), north of the river in the older part of the city, is worth the knee-jarring climb, if only for the smashing views over the town and the steppe in fine weather. Records show

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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** (Kümbet 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 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.

Kars' beguiling résumé also features clusters of Russian belle époque mansions and other buildings sprinkled around the city centre, including the **Fethiye Camii**, a converted 19th-century Russian Orthodox church. It's easy to take a self-guided walking tour with the booklet *Kars*, available from most hotels.

The **Kars Museum** (Kars Müzesi; Cumhuriyet Caddesi; admission TL3; ☎ 8am–5pm Tue–Sun), on 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.

## Sleeping

**Kent Otel** (☎ 223 1929; Hapan Mevkii; s/d TL15/30) Rooms are what you'd expect: the beds are kind of lumpy, decor is plain, the facilities are a little outdated and the shared bathrooms have seen their fair share of bodies and odours. But it's well taken care of and secure, and the great central location and economical rates keep it popular with travellers who have one eye on the bank balance. Breakfast is not included but the affable owner will point you to a *kahvaltı salonu* (breakfast restaurant) nearby.

**Güngören Hotel** (☎ 212 5630; fax 223 4821; Millet Sokak; s/d TL30/50) If you're seeking a billet in Kars with attentive staff, good-sized rooms with modern furniture and a handy location, this fine pile is your answer. The most colourful rooms are on the 1st and 2nd floors. Perks include a satisfying breakfast, a restaurant and a men-only hamam (TL15). It's popular with savings-minded European groups, and it's also a good choice for solo women travellers. One grumble: there's no lift.

**Hotel Temel** (☎ 223 1376; fax 223 1323; Yenipazar Caddesi; s/d TL30/45) Value for money, the Güngören's main competitor offers neat rooms with immaculate sheets and a soothing blue and yellow colour scheme. Unlike

the Güngören, there's a lift. The management here gets mixed reviews.

**Hotel Karabağ** (☎ 212 9304; www.hotel-karabag.com; Faik Bey Caddesi; s/d TL85/130; 🚻) After a much-needed refurbishment, the Karabağ now suffers from excessive self-esteem and charges exorbitant rates for rooms that can't quite shake that just-a-motel feeling. Its trump card is its ace location, right on the main drag, and its wide array of facilities, including a restaurant. Bargaining wouldn't hurt.

**ourpick Kar's Otel** (☎ 212 1616; www.karsotel.com; Halit Paşa Caddesi; s/d TL190/260; 🚻 📺) Seeking a luxurious cocoon in Kars with homely qualities, efficient hosts and a big dollop of atmosphere? Look no further than this savvy boutique hotel, housed in an old Russian mansion. A cool exercise in interior loveliness, it breathes an air of repose, though some might find the white colour scheme a bit too clinical. It has just eight rooms, so you can expect personalised service. Added bonuses include free wi-fi, flat screen TVs and the Ani Restaurant (right). Well worth the splurge.

A new hotel, the Grand Ani Hotel (Ali Bey Caddesi), was under construction when we visited and should play in the same league as the Karabağ.

## Eating

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.

**Kılıçoğlu** (☎ 212 6039; Faik Bey Caddesi; pastries & snacks from TL2) *Dondurma*- (ice cream) and *baklava*-holics rave about this slick venture smack dab in the centre, which presents its treats almost as beautifully as a jewellery store. We surrendered to a couple of *vezir parmağı*, filled with Antep pistachios, and to an excellent *kazandibi* (caramelised rice pudding).

**Antep Lahmacun Salonu** (☎ 223 0741; Atatürk Caddesi; mains TL2-4) Pide and *lahmacun* (Arabic pizza) aficionados head straight to this humble joint to gobble a flavoursome local-style pizza at paupers' prices.

**ourpick Ocakbaşı Restoran** (☎ 212 0056; Atatürk Caddesi; mains TL5-8) This well-established restaurant is at the pinnacle of Kars' eating scene. One mouthful of its *ali nazık* (eggplant puree with yoghurt and meat) or its Antepim pide (sesame bread stuffed with meat, cheese, pars-

ley, nuts and eggs), its two signature dishes, and you'll understand why. The pictorial menu, with fairly accurate English translations, is of great help. It has two adjoining rooms, including a mock troglodytic one (wow!), but it's not licensed (boo!).

**Antep Sofrası** (☎ 212 9093; Atatürk Caddesi; mains TL5-8) The pastel-coloured walls of this relative newcomer are only part of its appeal. It's usually the tasty kebabs, pide and other feel-good food that keep the cash register ringing.

**Kristal Döner ve Yemek Salonu** (☎ 212 5100; Halit Paşa Caddesi; mains TL4-9) Come here for the ultra fresh *sulu yemekler*. There are about 10 various dishes on offer, and the menu changes daily according to seasonal produce and whim. Save room for the exquisite *sütlaç* (rice pudding).

**Fasıl Ocakbaşı** (☎ 212 1714; Faik Bey Caddesi; mains TL6-10) Joy of joys, the Fasıl is licensed. It's housed on the 1st floor in an unsightly building, at a major intersection, but you don't have to look at that while you tuck into meze, grills and ready-made meals. There's live music at weekends.

**Kar's Otel – Ani Restaurant** (☎ 212 1616; Halit Paşa Caddesi; mains TL6-15) Kars' most luxurious hotel also harbours its most civilised restaurant. With its all-white decor, contemporary furnishings and mood lighting, the rarefied dining is ideal for romantic meals. Food-wise, it brings a much-needed diversity to a kebab-jaded palate, with sirloin steaks, veal cutlets and even a few veggie options.

## Drinking

**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.

**Barış Cafe Pub** (☎ 212 8281; Atatürk Caddesi) 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 gossip, puff a nargile, dance and listen to live bands (three times a week). If hunger beckons, snacks are available. The disco in the basement is something to behold – headscarved women tear it up on the dance floor!

**Bira Bahane** (☎ 212 5389; Küçük Kazım Bey Caddesi) Amazing how first impressions can be deceptive. Seen from the outside, you wouldn't guess that this recent venture boasts a rather atmospheric setting (think sturdy furniture

## SERVICES FROM KARS' OTOGAR

Destination	Fare (TL)	Duration (hr)	Distance (km) (per day)	Frequency
Ankara	50	16	1100	a few
Ardahan	10	1	80	frequent minibuses
Artvin	25	6	270	1 in the morning
Erzurum	15	3	205	frequent minibuses
Iğdır	15	3	132	several
Posof	15	2	142	2 in the morning
Trabzon	40	9-10	525	1 direct, or change at Erzurum or Artvin
Van	30	6	370	1 in the morning

and fake brick walls) and a well-stocked bar. Homesick? A cold Foster's (yeah, mate) will keep your spirits high. On the ground floor, you can sample excellent grills served on huge *mangals* (barbecues). Good mezes too.

## Getting There & Around

### AIR

A *servis* (TL3) runs from the agencies to the airport, 6km from town.

**Turkish Airlines – Sun Express** (☎ 212 4747; Faik Bey Caddesi; ☎ 8am–8pm) One daily flight to/from Ankara (from TL114, 1¼ hours) and to/from Istanbul (from TL114, two hours). Also an agent for Sun Express.

**Sun Express** (www.sunexpress.com.tr) Has two weekly flights to Izmir (from TL144).

### 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** (cnr Faik Bey & Atatürk Caddesi), a few doors away from Doğu Kars, has a daily bus to Van. The table (above) lists some useful daily services.

Minibuses to local towns (including Iğdır, Erzurum, Sarıkamış, 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 minibus to Iğdır, then another to Doğubayazıt. For Georgia (see p582), take a minibus to Posof or take the first minibus to Ardahan at 8am to hop on the bus to Tbilisi at around 10am. Should the border with Armenia eventually reopen to travellers, you'll need to get a minibus 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 more information on the dangers of hitching see p689.

For details of transport to Ani, see p590.

### CAR

Steer clear of the car-selling companies in the centre – they claim they can rent cars but we're told that they don't provide proper insurance.

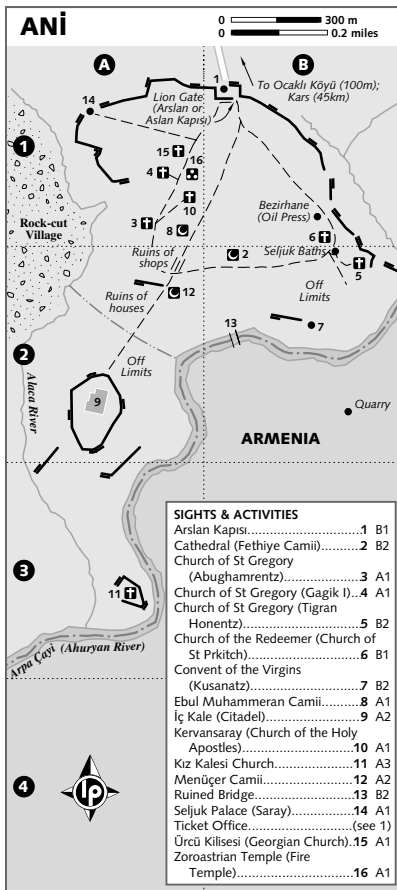
### TRAIN

The *Doğu Ekspresi* leaves for İstanbul (TL40), via Erzurum, Kayseri and Ankara, at 7.10am daily. The *Erzurum Ekspresi* (TL35) leaves for Ankara, via Erzurum and Kayseri, at 9am daily. It's worth considering these trains for the relatively short hop to Erzurum (TL10, about four hours).

## 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 wind-swept 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 Rd entrepot. 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 it's hassle-free and no permit is required.

## 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

Not all the site is open to visitors; some parts are still off-limits. Allow at least 2½ hours at the site, and preferably three or four.

There are no facilities at the site.

## Sights

Enter the **ruins of Ani** (admission TL5; ☞ 8.30am-5pm) through the sturdy **Arslan Kapısı** (also called **Aslan Kapısı**), a gate that was 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

Just past the remains of an **oil press**, the Church of the Redeemer (Church of St Prkitch) 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 facade *relay* the history. The facade also sports a superb *khatchkar* (cross stone) designed on an elaborate rectangular background, about 3m above ground.

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, as well as a small sundial.

### CONVENT OF THE VIRGINS (KUSANATZ)

Dramatically perched on the edge of the Arpa Çayı gorge, the Convent of the Virgins is off-limits but is clearly visible from the Menüçer Camii (right). Its distinctive, serrated-domed chapel is enclosed by a defensive wall. Scant ruins of a **bridge** across the river lie to the west in an area that is also 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 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, inscriptions 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. Further north the ruins of a toppled minaret, which is supposed to have belonged to the **Ebul Muhammeran Camii**, have been exposed.

### 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.

The minaret sports an inscription in Arabic, which is *bismillah* ('in the name of Allah'). 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 Convent of the Virgins, the ruined bridge and the cathedral from the main gallery.

Nearby is a recently excavated area, which contains remains of **houses**, with ovens, a granary and bathrooms.

### 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 (ABUGHAM-RENTZ)

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 of 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.

From the church you can savour the view of a rock-cut village beyond the river escarpment, on the Armenian side.

### KERVANSARAY (CHURCH OF THE HOLY APOSTLES)

The Church of the Holy Apostles (Arak Elots Kilisesi) 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 and a *khatchkar* carved on a rectangular background.

### 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 (ÜRCÜ KILISESİ)

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 (SARAY)

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-restored so that it looks quite out of place.

### 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 p584), for about TL30 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 TL100 return plus waiting time; the drive takes around 50 minutes. You can also hire a taxi (from TL70). 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 **Seytan 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.

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

### SOUTH OF KARS

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.

## HIDDEN GEMS – ARMENIAN CHURCHES AROUND ANI

So you loved Ani and want more? No problem, there are other impressive Armenian churches and castles in the vicinity. These sites usually boast awesome settings (the steppe, my friend, the steppe), and part of the pleasure lies in getting to them. To reach these sites, you'll have to rely on your own wheels or hire a taxi for the day (it shouldn't cost more than TL150). Although the area is still under military control, tourists won't be hassled. There are no tourist facilities, so stock up on food and water.

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, a further 2km brings you to Hamzagerek. In Hamzagerek, ignore the turn-off marked for Akyaka and bear left when at a little fork just past the turn-off to Akyaka. As you come out of the village, you'll be overwhelmed by the eerie sight of the church standing on a small mound, in the distance. It's the sole towering element in an otherwise flat, treeless grassland. If you're lucky, you'll see Mt Ararat in the distance. Go 4km further and you'll be close to Yağkesen, with the church clearly visible on your right. 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. To approach the church, you'll have to enter the village; follow the road for another 1.5km and turn right at a junction (you can't miss the church as it's a landmark). Backtrack at the junction and bear right. About 3km from the junction, you'll cross Bayraktar (no sign). Around 3km from Bayraktar, you'll skirt Ayakgedik (no sign). It's another 1.5km to Başgedikler.

### Bagnair Monastery

Back on the main road linking Kars with Ani, drive east until the village of Esenkent comes into view. About 600m from the sign marked 'Esenkent's Hoşgeldiniz', take the gravel road on the right. Drive 4.5km until you reach a first junction; continue straight ahead for about 1.5km and you'll arrive at a second intersection. Bear right at a sign marked 'Kozluca' and after 1.5km uphill 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 to another right-angle intersection. Bear left for 1.3km and you'll reach Üçözlük 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 escort you to this vantage point 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.

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.

Still not enough for you? Make a beeline for **Beskilise** (Five Churches), which must rank as one of Turkey's most dramatically situated religious buildings. This Armenian church is about 35km south of Kars, off the road to Digor and Iğdır, in the Digor River gorge. Access is hard to find; coming from Kars, it's about 4km before Digor and 600m before a dirt track leading to a white-pumice quarry, on the right. From the main road, you'll have to walk across pastures to find the entrance of the gorge, then follow the valley upstream staying on a vague path on the hillside, midway between the valley floor and cliff-top above. After about 30 minutes, the church appears like a mirage, perched on a ledge overlooking the valley floor. There were initially five churches (hence the name) here. The one you see, dating from the 11th century, is the only survivor. Despite some names scratched into the walls, it's still in good shape, with an intact dome and elaborate Armenian inscriptions.

These sights are difficult to reach without your own transport. Your best bet is to rent a car in Erzurum, or to hire a taxi and a cooperative driver for a day in Kars. Celil Ersoğlu (see p584) in Kars can also drive you to these sights.

## SARIKAMIŞ

Innsbruck? St-Moritz? No, Sarıkamış. Snow bunnies, take note: the town and ski resort of Sarıkamış, 55km southwest of Kars, has deep, dry powder combined with terrain that pleases both skier and snowboarder. There's also interesting cross-country options. How does it compare with Palandöken (p575)? We're told that the vibe is more down-to-earth and family-oriented, and the area much less windy. We also found the slopes more scenic, with vast expanses of Scotch pines that make for a magnificent background. The ski season generally lasts from December to April, but Sarıkamış can also be enjoyed in summer, with a good network of hiking trails.

The infrastructure is surprisingly state-of-the-art, with two computerised *telesiej* (chair

lifts) and nine ski runs (three beginner runs, three intermediate and three advanced), at an altitude ranging from 2200m to 2634m. Rental equipment is available at the hotels (about TL25 per day).

The ski resort proper is 3km away from the town centre. The welcoming **Çamkar Hotel** (☎ 0474-413 6565; www.camkar.com; s/d with full board winter TL190/250, summer TL55/110; 🍷 🍷) and the massive **Toprak Hotel** (☎ 0474-413 411; www.sarika mistoprakhotels.com; s/d with full board in winter TL290/390, in summer TL150/190; 🍷 🍷) are just at the foot of the ski runs and offer excellent amenities, including a kids' club, sauna, bar, disco, shops and licensed restaurants. Prices include ski passes. A third establishment, the Ce-Mar, was under construction when we visited.

Regular minibuses ply the route between Kars and Sarıkamış (TL5, 45 minutes). From Sarıkamış, take a taxi to the resort (TL7).

## KARS TO DOĞUBAYAZIT

To reach Doğubayazıt and Mt Ararat, head south from Kars via Digor, Tuzluca and Iğdır, 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.

You can break your journey in **Iğdır**, which has a good choice of accommodation, though most establishments double as brothels. Try the Grand Derya, on the main drag, not far from the minibus stop for Kars.

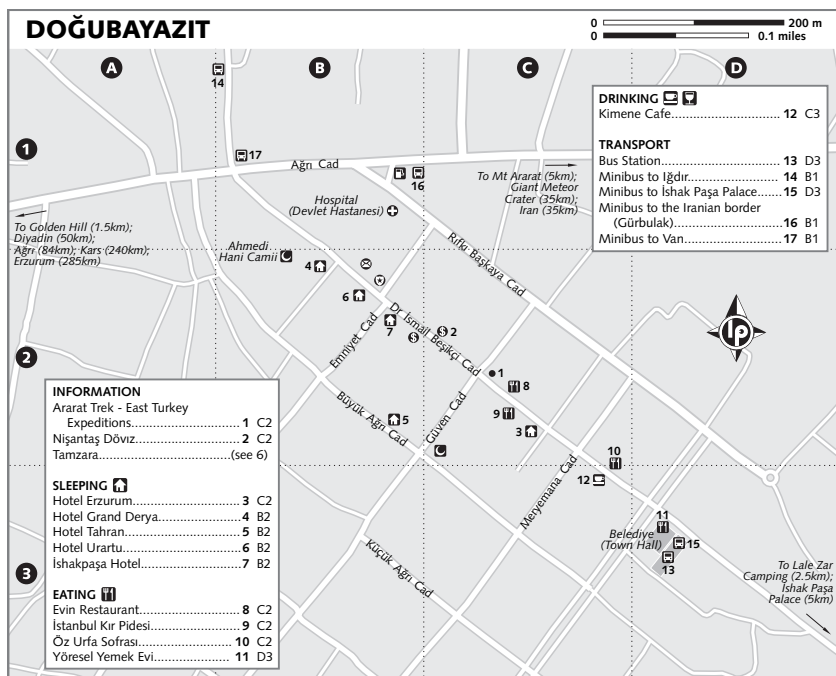
From Iğdır it's possible to take a bus east to the Azerbaijani enclave of **Nakhichevan** (TL15, 2½ hours, at least five daily buses), provided you have already obtained a visa (there's an Azerbaijani consulate in Kars). The bus leaves from near Otel Aşar, on the main drag. This enclave is cut off from 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 (TL15, three hours, about seven daily services) also leave from near Otel Aşar; cross the street and head to İmpaş store. The last minibus departs at 5pm. If you come from Kars and want to go to Doğubayazıt, the minibus stop is a few minutes' walk from Otel Aşar, near a mosque (ask for directions).

## DOĞUBAYAZIT

☎ 0472 / pop 36,000 / elevation 1950m

Gosh, what an awesome backdrop. On one side, the talismanic **Mt Ararat** (Ağrı Dağı,



5137m), Turkey's highest mountain, hovers majestically over the horizon. On the other side, İshak Paşa Palace, a breathtakingly beautiful fortress-palace-mosque complex deploys itself 6km southeast of town. Not too bad for such a charmless frontier town high on testosterone (read: lots of soldiers, policemen, moustached men and the occasional touts, but, alas, very few women on the streets). A lack in charm doesn't however mean a lack in character; this is a quintessentially Kurdish town that prides itself on its strong Kurdish heritage, which it celebrates each year during the **Kültür Sanat ve Turizm Festival** (Culture and Arts Festival), over the last weekend of June. This is a great occasion to immerse yourself in Kurdish culture, with singing, dancing and theatre.

Doğubayazıt is also the main kicking-off point for the overland trail through Iran (the border is a mere 35km away).

## Orientation & Information

Doğubayazıt is small and easily negotiated on foot. For tourist information, various travel agencies, including **Ararat Trek – Eastern Turkey**

**Expeditions** (☎ 0535-616 0267; www.ararattek.com; Dr İsmail Beşikçi Caddesi; ☎ 8am-8pm), run by knowledgeable Zafer Onay, and **Tamzara** (☎ 0544-555 3582; Emniyet Caddesi; ☎ 8am-8pm), in Hotel Urartu, will be able to help with your queries. Staff speak English.

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

There are several outlets on the main drag where you can check your emails.

## Sights

### İSHAK PAŞA PALACE & ESKİ BEYAZIT

One of eastern Turkey's star attractions, the stalwart and (over)restored **İshak Paşa Palace** (İshak Paşa Sarayı; admission TL2; ☎ 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 stalactite 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. 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. It also contains a kitchen and a colonnaded dining hall.

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. The selamlık also has a library and a lovely mosque, which has kept much of its original relief decoration (note the life tree) and ceiling frescoes.

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).

For that perfect picture, head to the tea-house on the hill above the palace.

Minibuses (TL1) 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 TL20 for a return trip,

waiting time included. Walking back down is pleasant, although women in particular might feel rather isolated.

## Sleeping BUDGET

A word of warning: there are two camping grounds-cum-pension, near İshak Paşa Palace but they are not recommended for women travellers.

**Lale Zar Camping** (☎ 0544-269 1960; [lalezarcamping@hotmail.com](mailto:lalezarcamping@hotmail.com); İshakpaşa Yolu Üzeri; camp site per person incl tent TL8) Yes, it looks like a bit of a schlep from downtown Doğubayazıt (on the road to İshak Paşa Palace). But bear with us. This camping ground, run by two friends, Bertil and Mecit (one Dutch, one Kurd), is set in a well-tended property dotted with a few grassy patches (but no shade to speak of), and the outskirts-of-town location does mean a multitude of stars in the night sky and quiet, quiet nights. There's an on-site food store and restaurant. The ablution block is in good nick. Prices include tent rental.

**Hotel Erzurum** (☎ 312 5080; Dr İsmail Beşikçi Caddesi; s/d without bathroom TL110/20) The Erzurum is an old warhorse of the Doğubayazıt backpacker scene, and it shows. But at these prices you didn't expect the red carpet, right? Expect cell-like, threadbare rooms and saggy mattresses. It's conveniently located and the shared bathrooms won't have you squirming. No breakfast is served.

**Hotel Tahran** (☎ 312 0195; [www.hoteltehran.com](http://www.hoteltehran.com); Büyük Ağız Caddesi 124; s/d TL20/36; ☑) The Tahran's recipe for success has served it well over the years: keep your prices low, your standards high and employ attentive (in a good way) staff. Although on the small side, the rooms come equipped with crisp sheets and the views of the Ararat might provide some diversion. Same verdict for the private bathrooms: tiny but salubrious, with hygienic red floor tiles. The rooftop terrace, with an internet terminal (free access), is a good place to relive your Ararat expedition over a beer. Going to Iran? Bilal, the affable manager, is well clued up on the subject. A safe bet for solo women travellers, too. Breakfast is extra.

**İshakpaşa Hotel** (☎ 312 7036; fax 312 7644; Emniyet Caddesi; s/d TL25/45) Most rooms have been equipped with new mattresses and the old carpets have been dumped (we saw them piled on the pavement), which is a good sign. Some bathrooms are in better shape than others,



though, so ask to see a few rooms before settling in.

**Hotel Urartu** (☎ 312 7295; fax 312 2450; Dr İsmail Beşikçi Caddesi; s/d TL30/60) Reliable and central, the Urartu is not a bad place to start your Ararat adventure but it has one problem: it's fully booked by *öğretmen* (teachers) and other civil servants during the school year. From mid-June to September, though, it welcomes travellers. No breakfast is served.

### MIDRANGE

**Hotel Grand Derya** (☎ 312 7531; fax 312 7833; Dr İsmail Beşikçi Caddesi; s/d TL50/90) An ideal retreat after a few days' clambering in knee breeches and hiking boots. This excellent venue has benefited from an overhaul and now offers comfortable rooms with all mod cons. Top tip: for Ararat views, request a room ending with 01 or 12 and avoid the ones ending in 02 (they look onto the facade of the building next door). Bring earplugs or the call to prayer at 5am emanating from the nearby mosque will be etched forever on your mind.

**Golden Hill** (☎ 312 8717; fax 312 5865; Çevreyolu Üzeri; s/d TL70/90; ☑) This recent venture on the road to Ağrı, about 2km from the centre, doesn't have a whit of soul or character but it boasts sparkling rooms decorated with a liberal use of cream and chocolate-brown. Some rooms have Ararat views. Other features include a sauna, hamam, bar and restaurant. It's popular with tour groups. Surprisingly, there's no air-con.

### Eating & Drinking

**İstanbul Kır Pidesi** (☎ 312 8352; Dr İsmail Beşikçi Caddesi; pide TL1) No typo – this modest eatery serves up the best value pide this side of the Ararat. Choose between the cheese, potato or meat pide (and that's about it).

**our pick** **Yöresel Yemek Evi** (☎ 312 4026; Dr İsmail Beşikçi Caddesi; mains TL3-5) Hooray! Some feminine touches in this male-dominated city! This establishment is run by an association of Kurdish women whose husbands are imprisoned. They prepare lip-smacking *yöresel* (traditional) meals at bargain-base-ment prices. Servers speak minimal English but do their best to explain the contents of their stainless steel trays to the clueless bulging-eye. If you want to give your tastebuds something new to sing about, try the *keşke* (good-bye figure!). The döner kebab is also worth every bite.

### Kimene Cafe

(Dr İsmail Beşikçi Caddesi; snacks TL3-5) The closest thing the town has to a 'smart' café, with a chilled-out vibe. The Turkish coffee is jaw-clenchingly strong, and snacks are available. Though it's not licensed, it may serve beer to foreigners (but that's between you and us). There's live music in the evening.

Other options:

**Öz Urfa Sofrası** (☎ 312 2673; Dr İsmail Beşikçi Caddesi; mains TL5-8) The all-wood, barnlike surrounds boast a kind of ramshackle charm. Pide, grills and ready-made meals.

**Evin Restaurant** (☎ 312 6073; Dr İsmail Beşikçi Caddesi; mains TL5-8) This modest number was recommended to us by trekking guides who fill their belly here after completing a Mt Ararat expedition. It serves all the usual suspects.

### Getting There & Away

Minibuses (TL4) 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, p680.

There are no buses to Van, only minibuses that leave at *approximately* 7.30am, 9am, noon and 2pm daily (TL10, three hours, 185km). Getting to Kars, you'll have to catch a minibus to Iğdır (TL5, 45 minutes, 51km, every hour) and change there. From Iğdır to Kars should cost TL15.

Go to the main otogar for services to other long-distance destinations; often you'll have to travel via Erzurum (TL20, four hours, 285km).

### 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 TL50 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) at the Iranian border and a village at the base of Mt Ararat. Full-day tours cover the same sites plus a visit to the Diyadin Hot Springs, 51km west of Doğubayazıt.

### MT ARARAT (AĞRI DAĞI)

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, including Ararat Trek – Eastern Turkey Expeditions and Tamzara (p593) in Doğubayazıt.

Several guides, hotel staff and touts 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. Follow the official procedure, even if you have to endure the slow-turning wheels of bureaucracy.

And now, the costs. Whatever agency you use, expect to cough up at least TL700 per person for the trek (three days, including guides, camping and food) from Doğubayazıt (a bit less if you're a group). Most reputable agencies recommend four-day treks in order to facilitate acclimatisation before tackling the summit.

Despite the extortionate fare, climbing Ararat is a fantastic experience. Expect stupendous views and stunning landscapes. The best months for climbing are July, August and September. 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, but it's seldom used. The first camp site is at 3200m, and the 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 hoo-ha, but you still need permission from the local *jandarma* – it's best to go with a local agent. Expect to pay around TL300 per person.

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