

The monastery of Khor Virap with Ararat in the distance. The closed Turkish-Armenian border runs a few hundred metres beyond the monastery

After the flood

Journey among snowy mountains and ancient monasteries in the little-visited country of Armenia, to hear stories of Noah's Ark and those troubled souls who have searched for it in vain

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A drover on a country road in Lori Province, northern Armenia. LEFT The monastery of Noravank dates from the 12th century, and is said to have once housed a piece of the True Cross

‘When it is visible, Ararat is hypnotic in its vastness. It is a key to understanding this ancient country’

AFTER 150 DAYS AFLOAT ON the water, Noah, his family and all the animals heard a loud crunch as the Ark hit dry land. They had arrived on a little island – which, as the waters receded, turned out not to be an island at all, but the tip of an immense mountain. The mountain was called Ararat, and it towered high over a rocky landscape.

After some months the world was dry again, and Noah’s family and animals descended (many seizing the opportunity to trot off to warmer and/or more exotic parts). But legend tells that Noah’s great-grandson, Hayk, stayed put in this stony land, and founded Armenia. It would become the first Christian nation on Earth.

After 4,500 years, the biblical deluge has turned to a light drizzle as my plane lands in Yerevan, the Armenian capital, but the importance of Ararat has not been forgotten.

At the border control, a guard pauses from playing solitaire on his phone to ink my passport with an Ararat-shaped stamp. Travelling into Yerevan among Soviet-era tower blocks, the taxi passes the stadium of FC Ararat (the Man United of Armenia), and the Ararat Cognac factory. Among the wide boulevards of the city centre are the Ararat Restaurant and the Ararat Hotel – where, according to TripAdvisor, some rooms smell

of cigarettes (possibly Ararat brand cigarettes). In the cafés around the Opera House, you can use Ararat-adorned banknotes from the ATM outside AraratBank to buy Ararat Beer and Ararat Wine, excessive consumption of which may mean you’re admitted to Ararat Medical Centre. And close by is the clock tower of Government House, which bears the national crest: Ararat etched in stone.

A range of modest-sized peaks surrounds Yerevan, and on cloudy days you might spend some hours working out which one is Ararat. But this is a mistake: seeing the real mountain entails tilting your head a little higher and squinting at the sky until a patch of brilliant whiteness appears – not clouds, but a glimpse of an immense snow-capped summit, wildly out of proportion to everything else in view. On days when it is visible, Ararat is hypnotic in its vastness: taller than any peak in the Alps and most other things this side of the Himalayas.

Ararat stalks visitors to Yerevan: lingering among the laundry lines, playing peek-a-boo behind shopping malls. For millions of Armenians, it is the first thing they see when they open their curtains in the morning, and the last before they go to bed. It is a key to understanding this ancient country.

From Yerevan, I head eastwards beneath the lower slopes of Ararat and up into a

wind-scoured plateau. The road winds among craggy escarpments and extinct volcanoes. On one mountain pass stands a 14th-century caravanserai where merchants would have rested on journeys between Samarkand and Istanbul. Military towers from Soviet times – windows smashed and satellite dishes broken – still rise like lighthouses over meadows of swaying grass.

Though an independent country since 1991, Armenia has always been a frontier territory: a small nation squished between the superpowers of Persia, Russia and Turkey. Armenia stands on the boundary of Christian and Muslim worlds, the border of the former USSR and the West, and the junction of three tectonic plates too.

Nothing has stood firm through seismic tremors and tides of invaders like the monasteries of the Armenian Apostolic Church – counting among the most ancient Christian structures on Earth.

‘Armenians build beautiful churches because we are beautiful people,’ insists Father Sahak Martirosyan. He is the priest of one of the most exquisite monasteries, Noravank, set in a canyon an hour’s drive from Yerevan. ‘Our architects used stones as their words: they were expressing their innermost feelings with their designs.’

Father Sahak shows me round the monastery, peeking into churches



Father Sahak Martirosyan standing inside the church of Surp Karapet at Noravank monastery

‘Ararat means rebirth, for this is where mankind took its first steps on Earth after the flood’

blackened by years of burning incense, where vines reach through the windows. Pulling back the sleeve of his robe, he taps at his iPhone to show me his pictures of Noravank through the seasons: winter days of deep snowfall when no visitors came; summer evenings walking the forests nearby. He comes to a picture of Ararat taken from a viewpoint not far away, the mountain rising above a bank of cloud, giving the impression it had detached itself from Earth and were hovering weightless in the sky.

‘Ararat is the symbol of Armenia,’ says Father Sahak. ‘It means rebirth, for this is where mankind took its first steps on Earth after the flood.’ I ask him if he believes the Ark is still hidden on Ararat, but he smiles and does not answer. In its mother cathedral at Echmiadzin, the Armenian Apostolic Church keeps what is said to be a fragment of Noah’s Ark, found on the mountain by a 4th-century saint, propped on a Plexiglass stand next to a claimed piece of the True Cross. Countless others have set out for the mountain looking for the Ark without success: maverick priests, NASA astronauts, TV crews. Most recently came the case of Donald MacKenzie, a part-time builder from the Outer Hebrides obsessed with finding the Ark. Telling no-one where he was going, he climbed Ararat carrying little more than a tent, a Bible and a small telescope. Donald disappeared, last seen in September 2010 high on the mountain, straying from the main path soon before a storm blew in.

Father Sahak studies the picture of Ararat until the screen dims, and he pockets his phone with a melancholy sigh. It is a sound you hear in Armenia whenever the name of Ararat is spoken. Sometimes the sigh takes the form of a faintly audible tut. Sometimes it is a long, sorrowful gust of breath.

It is the sigh that tells you the symbol of Armenia is not in Armenia at all. It is a few miles over a closed border, in Turkey.

The closest most Armenians come to Ararat is Khor Virap: another monastery, set among the watchtowers marking the Armenian-Turkish border. It stands on a rocky bluff from which you can hear the call to prayer drifting across no-man’s land when the wind blows east.

Scored into the coarse volcanic rock of the monastery are the names of countless pilgrims who have visited here – including some carved by weak hands precisely one century ago. These particular pilgrims were also refugees, escaping from what many believe was the first genocide of the 20th

century. Historians estimate that up to 1.2 million Armenians were killed by Ottoman armies during the turmoil of the First World War. Millennia-old Armenian communities in the lands west of Ararat – in present day Turkey – were wiped out by death marches, mass burnings and by forcibly capsizing boats out at sea. When plotting the extermination of ethnic Poles, Hitler was reputed to have said, ‘Who speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?’

The question of the genocide is part of everyday Armenian life, mostly because it is still unresolved. The Ottoman Empire’s successor state, Turkey, refuses to apologise for the killings, saying that the deaths were a result of war and not systematic ethnic cleansing. It is for this reason that Turkey and Armenia remain hostile neighbours, and that the border remains closed. It is also for this reason that thousands of pilgrims come to Khor Virap every year to peer over the impassable frontier as if it were a coastal cliff – and to look up the mountain, which is a symbol of everything that has been lost.

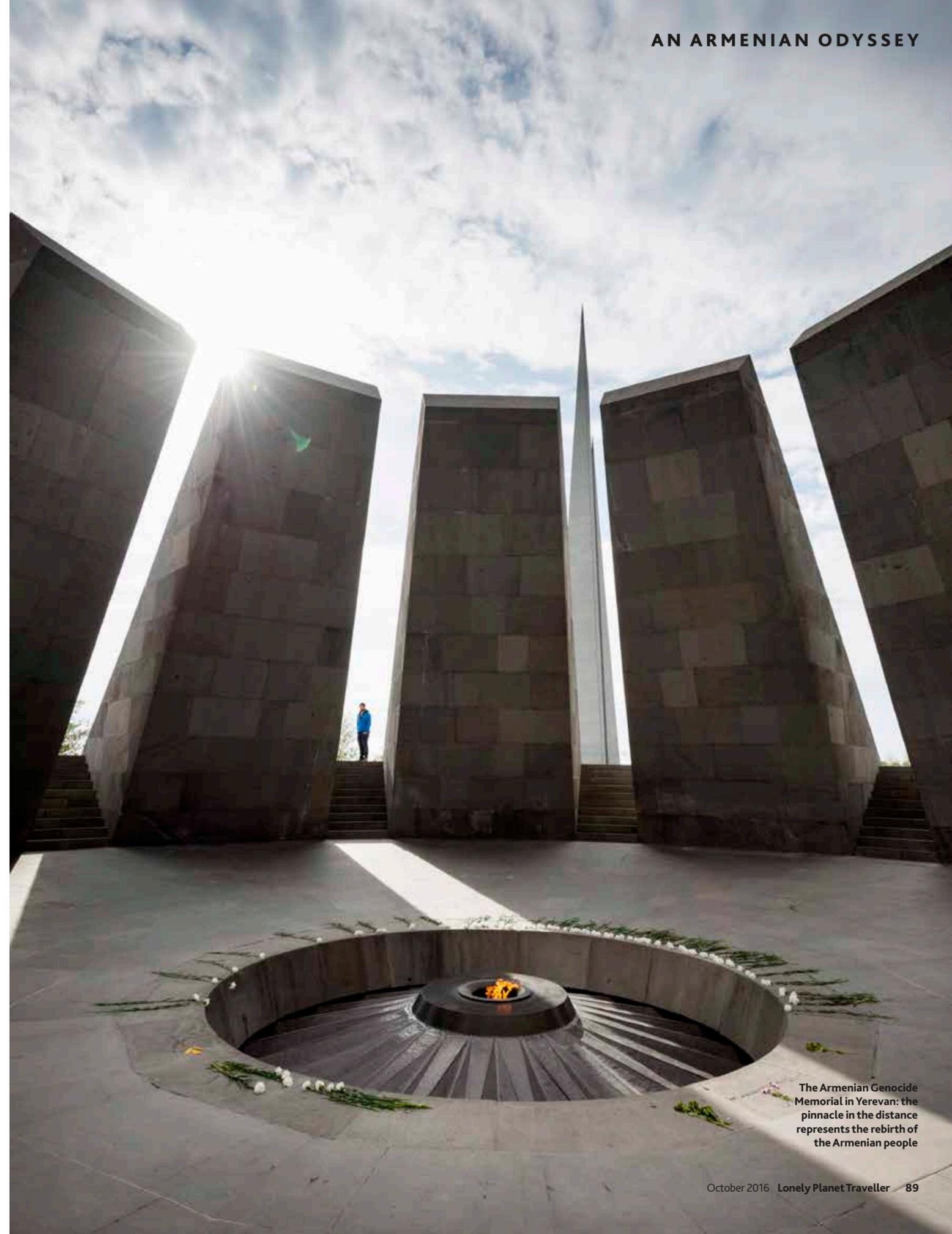
THERE IS NO COASTLINE in Armenia, nor is there easy access to the sea: as well as a closed border with Turkey to the west, the boundary with neighbouring Azerbaijan is also shut following a war in the 1990s. It means that almost 90% of its land frontiers are blocked: despite being a landlocked country, some say Armenia is as isolated as a Pacific island.

The place locals head for when any claustrophobia sets in is Lake Sevan, known to some as the ‘Armenian Ocean’ – one of the highest freshwater lakes in the world. Seen on a clear day, it is a picture of serenity: snowy ranges mirrored in the still waters of the lake, their crisp reflections sliced in two by little fishing boats out on their morning rounds. Along the shore are resorts from Soviet times, when comrades from Estonia or Siberia came on holiday here. They swam out from pebbly beaches and composed poems to the motherland, watching cloud formations blow over from the Caspian Sea.

And, in a meadow beside the northern shore, is the strangest sight in all Armenia: a mighty, sea-going boat, timbers weathered and bruised by Atlantic waves. Look closer, and you might spot its owner: a man with a silver-grey beard and steely-blue eyes, who built this boat himself with no experience, and who keeps it in a field of cows, 300 miles from the nearest sea. But this isn’t



Echmiadzin Cathedral claims to display a piece of Noah’s Ark. ABOVE Symbolic doves are kept at Khor Virap monastery. BELOW Looking over the rooftops of Yerevan



The Armenian Genocide Memorial in Yerevan: the pinnacle in the distance represents the rebirth of the Armenian people



Captain Karen Balayan sitting in the galley of the *Cilicia*. LEFT *Cilicia* in a field next to Sevan. The AYAS Nautical Research Club also builds smaller historical vessels



'It is rather strange being the captain of a sea-going ship in a landlocked country'

a sign of an impending deluge. It is one of the great triumphs of 21st-century Armenia.

'Like me, Noah was an amateur boat builder,' says Captain Karen Balayan, sitting in the galley of his ship. 'But Noah's boat was a box designed only to float: mine was built to go somewhere!'

An electrical engineer who built model yachts as a youngster, Captain Karen is the president of the AYAS Nautical Research Club: a group of friends who, in 1985, resolved to build a full-sized medieval sailing ship from scratch. The boat was to be called *Cilicia* and would follow a 14th-century Armenian design, from a time when Armenians had their own Mediterranean coastline. Karen studied documents in the British Library, soon finding himself bribing foresters with vodka to get the right kind of timbers. He and his crew slept aboard the half-built boat during the collapse of the Soviet Union (to make sure no-one chopped it up for firewood), and in 2002 launched her on water for the first time at Lake Sevan.

'It is rather strange being the captain of a sea-going ship in a landlocked country,' says Karen. 'Perhaps the sea has stayed in my genetics since the days when Armenians were seafarers. Building the boat and taking it onto the ocean was my dream. If you follow your path without deviating, you will achieve your dreams.'

Sailing on Lake Sevan was a warm-up act for a far greater odyssey. Standing in the galley, Karen retraces his 2004 route on a faded map torn from an Austrian Airlines in-flight magazine. It started with *Cilicia* being wheeled over the mountains to Georgia's Black Sea coast (to the confusion of traffic police). There followed two years of adventures with a crew of a dozen. They sailed among cargo ships in the Bosphorus and gondolas in the Venetian lagoon, under the battlements of Malta and beneath the rock of Gibraltar, steering among the dolphin pods of Biscay and beneath the raised arms of Tower Bridge. Finally, they returned from the Baltic to the Black Sea by Russian rivers and canals, becoming the first ever vessel to circumnavigate Europe – all in a medieval boat registered in a landlocked nation. Karen climbs up on deck to show me the oak rudders – snapped in two during one stormy night on the Black Sea, meaning the crew had to steer using saucepans and buckets to stop their ship capsizing.

'We were frightened. After a point instinct takes over, the fear disappears and all you feel is the will to stay alive, to sail on.'

This Armenian impulse to travel is nothing new. Armenians have settled in distant corners of the world in a way only comparable with Jews. There is a local joke that Armenians have most likely settled on

undiscovered planets. It was an Armenian photographer in London who took the defiant image of Churchill that appears on the new £5 note; an Armenian architect in Istanbul who designed the dome on the Aya Sofya that represents the vault of heaven itself. And it's also true the most Googled person in the world is an American woman of Armenian descent: Kim Kardashian. In diaspora communities around the world – California to Calcutta, Buenos Aires to Beirut – Armenian families hang pictures of Ararat on their walls, to remind them of a homeland they might never have visited.

Karen shows me his favourite place on the boat: the captain's perch beside the stern. From here, the cows are hidden beneath the gunwales of the *Cilicia*, and Lake Sevan seems to rise straight from the prow. The distant leagues of the lake vanish into the morning mist, and for the briefest moment there is a sense that Karen might be afloat on endless waters, sailing high above the Earth on the boat that he built.

It is only a very brief moment, for it is soon time to go back below deck. It has started to rain again.



OLIVER SMITH is senior features writer for *Lonely Planet Traveller* magazine. It was his first trip to Armenia.



A view south from the Selim Pass in southern Armenia