



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate

Area (sq. mi.): 11,484

Area (sq. km.): 29,743

The Republic of Armenia is located in the Caucasus region of southwestern Asia. It is slightly smaller than Belgium or the U.S. state of Maryland. Much of Armenia lies on a mountainous plateau, a landscape that makes large portions of territory uninhabitable. One-third of Armenia is pastureland, while one-tenth is forested. The most fertile region, the Ararat Valley, is located southwest of the capital city of Yerevan. Hundreds of rapid-flowing mountain rivers join with some one hundred small, picturesque lakes.

Lake Sevan, one of the world's largest mountain lakes, covers 363 square miles (940 square kilometers) at 6,234 feet (1,900 meters) above sea level. Sevan is home to unique species of fish, birds, and other wildlife. Some species, such as the *ishkhan* (or Sevan) trout, are endangered because of pollution and other factors.

Armenia's continental climate features cold, snowy winters with temperatures ranging between 14 and 23°F (-10 and -5°C) and dry, hot summers with temperatures fluctuating between 72 and 97°F (22 and 36°C). Frequent earthquakes are a reminder of Armenia's volcanic past and position on a major fault line.

History

Kingdoms

Legends about Armenia's origins center on a hero leading his people. Whether the hero be the archer Hayk or the valiant Aram or another, most Armenians, though few scholars, accept the legends as part of Armenia's history. By the ninth century BC, Armenian tribes had united to form the Urartu Kingdom (or the kingdom of Ararat, related to the biblical Mount of Ararat, which is regarded as the symbol of Armenia). In 782 BC, a famous Urartian king, Argishti I, built the military fortress of Erebuni at the site of current-day Yerevan. The ruins of Erebuni are still visible. The Orontid Dynasty replaced the kingdom of Urartu in the sixth century BC.

Foreign Invaders

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

By AD 100, Armenia had lost its independence, and parts of it fell under Persian, Byzantine, and Arab rule at different times. In 387, the Armenian Arshakuni Kingdom (AD 66–428) was divided between the Romans and the Persians. In 451, the Armenians, led by the Armenian army's commander-in-chief, Vardan Mamikonian, engaged in the Battle of Avarayr against the Persians, who had tried to compel them to renounce Christianity and convert to Zoroastrianism. The Armenian resistance continued until the Persian king was forced in 484 to declare the freedom of

Christian religion in Armenia. Despite moments of regional independence, a sovereign Armenian kingdom was not fully restored until the ninth century, when it was liberated from Arab rule. This ushered in a period of prosperity and growth.

Ottoman Rule and the Armenian Genocide

At the beginning of the 11th century, the nomadic tribes of the Seljuk Turks, who had settled in central Asia, expanded their control and occupied large areas of land. As a result of the invasion of the Seljuk Turks, part of the Armenian population left the fertile plain areas and retreated to mountain strongholds, which left Armenia's defensive capabilities weakened against the invaders. The rest of the population migrated west, closer to the Mediterranean, where in 1080 they founded a principality in Cilicia, or Lesser Armenia. Cilicia became a kingdom in 1198 and fell in 1375 to Egypt. Armenia was later divided between the Ottoman Turks and Persians. Persia ruled eastern Armenia until 1828, when Russia annexed it. In the late 1800s, Ottoman rulers in western Armenia began a series of massacres and deportations to the deserts of Syria, Mesopotamia, and Arabia, culminating in the deaths of 1.5 million Armenians. Survivors scattered all over the world or found refuge in eastern Armenia. Despite efforts by the two governments to rebuild ties, Armenian-Turkish relations remain strained by political and historical issues, including the Armenian Genocide.

Independence and the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict

Eastern Armenia declared independence from Russia in 1918, but a 1920 invasion of the Red Army established Armenia as a Soviet Socialist Republic. Emboldened by greater openness in the Soviet Union, in 1988 Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh (an Armenian-populated region assigned to Soviet Azerbaijan in 1921 by Joseph Stalin) demanded that Nagorno-Karabakh be administratively integrated into Armenia. This grew into a major movement that eventually developed a broader agenda, including Armenian independence, which was declared in 1991.

The Nagorno-Karabakh issue degenerated into open confrontation and then full-scale war between Armenians and Azerbaijanis. Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians declared their own independence in 1991. Armenian troops helped them create a buffer zone and an access corridor to Armenia. These and other battlefield victories led to a cease-fire in 1994. In 2010, the Armenian parliament suspended the ratification process of the protocols to support Azerbaijan and indicated that ratification depended on a peace deal in Nagorno-Karabakh, a matter not mentioned in the protocols. No permanent political solution for the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has been found as yet, and the region operates with de facto independence.

Recent Events and Trends

- **Presidential elections:** In February 2013, President Serzh Sargsyan was reelected to a second five-year term in office. Sargsyan is tasked with maintaining the country's stability and moving peace talks forward.
- **Challenges for the Armenian Church:** In October 2013, leaders of the Armenian Apostolic Church gathered to discuss major issues challenging the church and its membership, like widespread secularization in the post-Soviet republic and

administrative divisions. About 95 percent of Armenians are members of the Armenian Apostolic Church, but many of them are secular.

THE PEOPLE

Population

Population: 2,974,184

Population Growth Rate: 0.14%

Urban Population: 64%

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

Language

Hayeren (Armenian) is the official language. Russian is also widely used. Minorities speak their native tongue in addition to either Russian or Armenian. English is becoming increasingly popular. Armenian is an independent branch of the Indo-European language family. The unique Armenian alphabet, consisting of 38 characters, was created in AD 405 by a monk, Mesrop Mashtots, with assistance of King Vramshapuh and the *catholicos* (the supreme spiritual leader of the Armenian Church), Sahak Partev. One of the earliest works in the new alphabet was a Bible translation. In the following centuries, the dialect used in that translation became standard (*Grabar*), or classical, Armenian, which is still used in church services. Today's primary dialects—Western (called *Grabar*) and Eastern (called *Ashxarhabar*)—stem from historical divisions in the country and differ mostly in spelling and pronunciation. Eastern Armenian is used more inside the country, and Western Armenian is spoken among the diaspora.

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

Religion

Armenia embraced Christianity as the state religion in AD 301. This was largely due to the efforts of St. Gregory the Illuminator, who built the Mother Church, Holy Etchmiadzin, in 303. Armenians all over the world look to the Holy Etchmiadzin, near Yerevan, as the center of the Armenian Apostolic Church. The apostles Bartholomew and Thaddeus

are considered the founders of the Armenian Apostolic Church. About 95 percent of the population belongs to the Armenian Apostolic Church, headed by a *catholicos*, or supreme patriarch. Through many centuries, the Church acted as protector of national culture and values. Society today is mostly secular; only a small percentage of the population attends church services weekly, though it is common for people to visit churches to light candles. Nevertheless, the Church retains its role as the national faith and plays an important role in life events like weddings and funerals. Other faiths present include Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestant.

General Attitudes

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

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

Personal Appearance

Armenians pay great attention to their clothing and hairstyles, and many families spend a substantial portion of their income on clothing. European trends are generally followed. Women prefer high-heeled shoes. Younger women wear T-shirts, pants, or short skirts. Older women prefer dresses and skirts with conservative tops and jackets. Older men wear conservative suits. In the past, shorts were worn in public only when participating in an athletic activity. However, younger men now wear shorts often. Parents dress their children well, even if they cannot afford equally nice clothing for themselves.

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

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings

When greeting, Armenians say *Barev* (Be well) as a casual “Hello.” The plural form (*Barev dzez*) signifies more respect and formality when appropriate. Men shake hands when they greet and even kiss some acquaintances on the cheek. Men and women greet each other with a handshake. Women wait for the man to present his hand and initiate the handshake. Women hug and kiss each other.

After an initial greeting, people often say *Vonts es?* (How are you?). More formally, the same phrase would be *Inchpes ek?* Strangers do not greet in urban areas, but rural people will greet passing strangers. Before parting, friends might say *Ts’tesutyun* or *Araijem* (both mean “See you later”). *Hajoghootyun* (Good luck) is also popular. Longer separations require a more formal exchange: *Barov mnas* (Stay with peace) and *Barov gnas* (Go with peace). Armenians address their friends and acquaintances by first name. As a sign of affection between close friends, Armenians add the suffix *-jan* (literally, “dearest”) to a person’s first name. If the addressee is an official or an older person, the titles *paron* (or *tiar*) for men, *tikin* for married women, and *oriord* for single women are used with the last name.

The Russian patronymic is still a common means of communicating respect among older Armenians and in formal circumstances (including schools, universities, and offices). The patronymic is based on a person’s father’s first name, modified with the suffixes of *-ovich* (*-evich*) for males and *-ovna* (*-evna*) for females. For example, a man might be called *Ara Setrakovich* and a woman *Anush Ashotovna*.

Gestures

Armenians are emotional people and often use their eyes, hands, shoulders, and heads to express themselves more clearly. During conversation, eye contact is expected. Hand gestures such as expressing approval with “thumbs up” or shaking the shoulders to show indifference are used among friends. Men and women express dissatisfaction by raising their forefinger over their heads. However, in formal settings, such body movements are considered impolite. Chewing gum in public is impolite, as is putting feet up on furniture. Men and sometimes women stand when an older person enters a room. People remove their hats when entering a building. It is considered improper for women to smoke in public, though men may smoke nearly anywhere. Out of respect, teenagers generally choose to not smoke in front of their elders.

Visiting

Armenians are sociable and gregarious. They try to treat guests graciously and generously. Guests are served dessert or fruit with coffee or tea. Those arriving near mealtime are invited to share the meal. Guests often bring flowers, a homemade dessert, a box of chocolate, or a specialty drink. Flowers are given only to the hostess and only in odd numbers (except for funerals, when they are given in even numbers). Unannounced visits are common and accepted, especially between neighbors and relatives.

Guests are received in the living room and served appetizers of mixed nuts and salty cookies. Guests are invited to serve themselves. Women often stay in the kitchen and

prepare additional courses while male hosts offer alcoholic beverages like whiskey, vodka, or Armenian cognac. During visits, men usually discuss international politics, business news, and sports. Women sit separately and inquire about each other's children, cooking, and news from relatives. While guests are over, teenagers are expected to take care of the younger children in a separate room.

Eating

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

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

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

LIFESTYLE

Family

Structure

The majority of Armenians hold to the traditional values, morals, and principles taught to them by elder family members. Most urban families have four members: a father, mother, and two children. Rural families are larger, with three or four children. During Soviet times, families were much larger because families were less concerned about the stability of the economy. Recent socioeconomic conditions in Armenia make providing a good life for three or more children very difficult. Children are raised mainly by their mother, but also by their grandmother and aunts. Parents are typically very involved in the lives of their children; the extended family also develops close ties with relatives. Aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, and in-laws visit their families regularly and help take care of the children. The extended family ensures that religious and cultural values are passed from generation to generation. In both rural and urban areas, live-in grandparents usually take care of the children while the parents are at work. The youngest child is usually treated with more care, and the oldest child serves as an example to the younger siblings.

Parents and Children

Parents work hard to provide the best life for their children, and the child's development is considered a priority. In Armenian culture, respect for one's parents is cultivated from childhood. Throughout childhood, children demonstrate their respect for parents and family by listening to the parents' advice. Out of respect, teenagers choose to not smoke in front

of their elders.

While growing up, children are expected to take responsibility for their schoolwork and to help around the house. From the age of six, children begin to run errands to the store, clean their rooms, and help vacuum and dust. Girls often help their mothers with cleaning and cooking, while boys help their fathers in fixing the car or repairing the home. Rural children may help plant and water the garden or work on the farm.

In adulthood, children are expected to care for aging parents any way they can. Newlywed couples often move in with the groom's parents, who later care for the grandchildren and are cared for and supported by their children. Firstborn sons are valued because they represent future security and family continuity. If there are two sons, the younger one stays with the parents, while the elder moves his family into a new home. Adult daughters are expected to visit and care for their aging parents. Placing parents into nursing homes is taboo. Almost all unmarried adult children live with their parents until they marry or can financially support themselves.

Gender Roles

The father is generally the head of the house and considers it his duty to provide financial support for the family. The mother is responsible for the household and the children's education. Urban men and women have equal access to higher education and often both have professional careers. In urban areas, both the father and mother may work. Most rural women do not work outside the home, except in their gardens.

In recent years, women have become more financially independent and are sometimes the only providers for their families. Women can hold positions as doctors, teachers, secretaries, shopkeepers, and administrators. Very few women occupy leadership positions in government or business. The state allows women, by law, equal opportunity to pursue education, participate in political processes, and access health care. However, women are not protected in cases of domestic violence; the state views this as a private matter rather than a crime.

Housing

Urban

The urban residential landscape is a mix of old Soviet-era apartment complexes and two-storey private homes. Most apartment buildings have a similar exterior, stone or cement, with a balcony for each apartment. The number of total rooms per apartment ranges between one and four. Urban private homes are larger and more distinct in appearance. Most homes have a rough pink-orange tufa (a type of limestone) exterior and are sometimes decorated with tiles. Residents of private homes usually build high fences and keep small gardens on the side of the house. The social status of residents can often be determined by the size of a home and the aesthetic details on the exterior. The interior includes a few small bedrooms, a bathroom, and a large dining room. During Soviet times, homes were cluttered with furniture and carpeted walls and floors. Now most Armenians try to keep the interiors of their homes simple and modern. Most urban and rural homes do not have air-conditioning systems.

Rural

In rural areas, homes are built using the same pink-orange tufa stone as private urban homes. Some exteriors are covered in red, yellow, and white tiles, and parts of the home are painted yellow or white. A typical home is two storeys and much larger than apartments and houses in the city, with three bedrooms, and a bathroom and dining room on each floor. Balconies overlook the street or the garden. Homes usually have a central courtyard, where animals wander. Some homes have large properties with a sizable garden, a swimming pool, and a second kitchen for barbecuing. Many rural homes have the same modern amenities of indoor heating and electric appliances as urban homes. However, indoor plumbing is less common, and water is often pumped from a central well in the backyard. Backyards contain a picnic area, livestock pens, and sometimes an outhouse.

Home Life

Most homes in Armenia are designed with large entertainment/dining rooms. When guests come to visit, they are often received in the dining room. The men of the home usually claim a room as their study, while women take over the kitchen as their personal space. Parents share one bedroom and divide the other rooms between the children, with boys and girls in separate rooms.

Home Ownership

Home ownership is achieved by over 90 percent of the population. In Yerevan, the government cares for many urban yards by planting trees and flowers and setting up benches. Most Armenians live in the same house their whole lives without moving. Home ownership is usually passed down from generation to generation. However, many young couples are buying their own new homes. Most of the population cannot afford to own multiple homes, but some wealthy individuals own several.

Dating and Marriage

Dating and Courtship

In urban areas, most Armenian couples begin dating around age 18. Most couples meet at work, school, and family celebrations and through social media sites. Usually, it is the young man who initiates a romantic relationship by asking family and friends about the young woman's personality, interests, and current relationship status. Group activities are planned with the intent of getting to know the young woman better in a comfortable setting. When the young man has developed enough confidence, he will show more personal interest in the young woman and set up subsequent single dates. Couples go to cafés, restaurants, and concerts, or they enjoy walks in the park. During courtship, couples exchange presents and visit each other's families and friends.

In rural areas, couples are introduced by their parents or relatives. Parents want their sons to date and marry young women with high morals. A meeting is arranged for the young man to see the young woman without her knowledge, and if he likes her, courtship follows. Rural couples go out to cafés, walk in parks, and sometimes travel to Yerevan for dates. Because having several previous boyfriends is not good for a girl's reputation, the family makes sure relationships lead to marriage.

Engagement

Engagements begin with the groom's parents' official request for the girl's hand in marriage. If the girl's parents consent, then the *khoskap* (tying of promise) ritual is held, where the groom presents a ring as a promise to marry. The *nshandrek*, or a later, secondary engagement ceremony, is the formal meeting of both sides' relatives in the bride's home. The ceremony usually takes place around a decorated dinner table, where relatives and friends celebrate and propose toasts to the bride and groom.

During the ceremony, the groom and his mother present jewelry to his bride and future in-laws. The exchange of gifts represents the families' acceptance of the match. Often, a priest from the Armenian Apostolic Church will attend the engagement dinner, bless the rings, and pray for the happiness of the couple. The engagement dinner lasts a few hours, and the engagement itself can last several months in urban areas. In rural areas, the engagement period is much shorter because the couples usually have known each other for a longer period of time.

Marriage in Society

Rural couples usually marry in their early twenties, while urban couples marry in their mid-twenties. Most Armenians expect to marry. If they are unable to meet someone on their own, families or friends often try to find a match through their connections. Since the majority of Armenians belong to the Armenian Apostolic Church, traditional marriages, held in churches, are common. Both civil and religious ceremonies are performed, but they are usually held on different dates.

Weddings

Weddings are elaborate, tradition-filled events. Families prepare for traditional weddings months before they happen. Although some ancient wedding practices have been discontinued, many rituals are still preserved and some modern elements have been added. On the day of the wedding, the groom's relatives sing and dance with *sini* (large baskets) filled with presents, candies, cognac, and the bride's wedding clothes outside of the bride's house. After some time, the bride's relatives go out to trade parcels and traditional Armenian pastries called *gata* with the groom's relatives.

The bride prepares for the wedding ceremony at her house with the help of her female relatives. Sometimes children sneak into the dressing room and steal one of the bride's shoes and later return the shoe in exchange for money from a member of the groom's family. The bride and the groom leave the bride's home together under the sounds of cheers and traditional Armenian folk music and travel in a procession of decorated cars to the church.

In church weddings, the bride and groom approach the altar together, accompanied by their godparents, who serve as lifelong advisors and friends to the couple. After the service, the couple is congratulated by guests and the bride places her hands on her unmarried friends' heads and wishes them the same luck and happiness by saying, "I pass it to you." Outside of the church, the newly married couple releases doves symbolizing love, peace, and happiness. A honking car then transports the bride and the groom to the groom's home for the traditional "*lavash* (flat bread) and honey" ceremony. To show that life should be healthy, wealthy, and sweet, the

groom's mother receives the couple by laying large flat pieces of *lavash* on their shoulders and feeding them honey.

Receptions are usually held in a restaurant, and all arrangements are made by a *tamada* (toastmaster) or a hired party planner. Wedding guests enjoy offering the bride and groom traditional toasts (*kenats*) such as "May you grow old on one pillow," eating traditional foods like *dolma* (stuffed grape leaves), and dancing all night long. Relatives from both sides celebrate at the groom's home on the wedding's first day, and a wider circle of friends continues festivities with folk music and dancing on the second day. After the wedding, the bride moves into the groom's home; the newlyweds break plates with their feet before entering. The ritual symbolizes the breaking up of Satan's power, which allows the couple to enjoy their life together as husband and wife.

Divorce

Traditional society does not approve of divorce, and many within the Church try to find ways to unify the family. Harsh social stigmas are attached to women who are divorced. It is much easier for a man to remarry than a woman because divorced women are often perceived as immoral and sexually permissive.

Life Cycle

Birth

The birth of a child is a special event for Armenian families. Women are typically surrounded by their husband and relatives throughout the pregnancy. Many believe that the cravings of a pregnant woman should be satisfied immediately because the developing child should never go without. Most men hope to have sons to carry on the family line. Throughout the first 40 days after birth, parents protect newborns from the "evil eye" and only allow visitors from the immediate family. After the 40 days, relatives, neighbors, and friends visit the child and congratulate the parents by saying *Achkalusanq*, or "Light to the eyes." At birth, children receive gifts of jewelry (holy crosses, gold medallions, etc.). Traditionally, Armenian children are named after their father's parents or grandparents. Some parents also name their children after historical, political, or literary figures.

Nearly everyone is baptized into the Armenian Apostolic Church. Babies are blessed during the *orhnutyan karg* (blessing), a ritual that usually involves total immersion of the child in a small tub. Some Armenians pour corn and other harvest grains over a child's head, a pagan ritual that symbolizes a bountiful life and wholesomeness. Working women are given paid maternity leave from four months before the birth to almost three years afterward. Women may choose to return to work when they are ready.

Milestones

Birthdays celebrating the first and 16th years of life are important celebrations. The first birthday marks the beginning of life, and the 16th birthday is seen as the first step toward adulthood. Parents often invite friends and family to a party held in honor of the child. Young boys receive cars, trucks, and construction blocks as presents. Girls are given dolls and are later taught to sew or knit dresses for the doll. On the 16th birthday, teenagers receive their passports. Legally, a youth reaches adulthood upon the 18th birthday, whereas socially

adulthood is achieved after gaining financial independence or marrying and having children. For many young men, maturation occurs during a two-year mandatory military service, between the ages of 18 and 20.

Death

For many faithful Christians, it is important to receive absolution before death. After a person dies, the body is kept in bed for three days, and relatives, neighbors, and friends say good-bye to the deceased and offer condolences to the family. Priests administer prayers for the soul of the dead during the procession from the house to the cemetery. The coffin remains open until it is time for the final burial, at which time women are excused and do not return until the completion of the burial. Relatives say their final good-byes at the gravesite and return home to drink and commemorate the life of the deceased. Relatives visit the grave in a ceremony known as *mer'elots' hishatak* (remembrance of the dead) on the seventh and fortieth days after the death. Relatives also visit and burn incense five times a year, on the days after each of the Armenian Apostolic Church's great feast days. The mourning period can last for a week or years. Women often dress in black, and men refrain from shaving while they are mourning. On the one-year anniversary, a memorial ceremony is held at the grave. Most Armenians do not practice cremation. In regards to inheritance, men and women are treated equally.

Diet

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

From early spring to late fall, Armenia produces an abundance of fruit: grapes (table and wine varieties), peaches, apples, pears, cherries, mulberries, figs, walnuts, strawberries, and many others. Apricots are native to Armenia. The pomegranate is favored as a symbol of life, maternity, prosperity, and love. Armenians preserve fruits, vegetables, pickles, fruit drinks, and cured meats for winter consumption. Armenians drink all types of coffee, but a thick brew served in small cups is most customary. Tea and brandy are also popular.

Recreation

Sports

Soccer is the most popular sport, and most youth own their own soccer balls. Young Armenians also like tennis, swimming, wrestling, basketball, and table tennis. Young boys and girls often play sports together at school or playgrounds. All urban apartment buildings have courtyards, where children may play soccer, volleyball, and basketball.

Urban areas also have well-maintained recreational centers, swimming pools, and sports clubs available for those who are members or make monthly payments.

Leisure

Chess and backgammon (*nardi*) are especially popular in Armenia, and almost every family has a chess and backgammon board. Chess is included in the country's school curriculum, and that allows children to learn the game at an early age. Many of the world's leading chess players have Armenian roots. Older men gather in parks to play chess, backgammon, and checkers. The wealthy enjoy bowling and playing billiards. On warm days, many people enjoy being outdoors with friends, going to Lake Sevan, or picnicking and making *khovrats* (marinated meat placed on sticks and cooked on coals).

Urban areas offer a variety of entertainment venues, such as cinemas, theaters, restaurants, and cafés with live music. The capital, Yerevan, hosts many world famous singers and artists. People travel from rural areas to the cities when they can afford to make the trip. When rural residents are unable to travel to large cities for entertainment, many stay home, visit with neighbors, and go on long walks.

Both rural and urban families encourage their children to play instruments like the piano or violin. Many people learn to play instruments so they can entertain friends and family at parties. Many families own badminton sets and enjoy playing with friends and neighbors in the yard. Most men enjoy watching boxing matches on television. Winter leisure time is spent indoors watching television, reading, and knitting (done by women). Reading and discussing politics are favorite pastimes in Armenia.

Vacations

Vacations were more common and diverse in Soviet times, but today's financial realities limit most working people to short day trips to Lake Sevan. Lake Sevan is one of the most popular and affordable vacation destinations in Armenia. Many travel to Lake Sevan to lounge on public beaches, sail on catamarans, and camp out. Many urban residents have summer cottages in the countryside. The towns of Dilijan and Jermuk are known for their healing hot springs, and many people enjoy drinking the thermal water and receiving treatment from the springs for various ailments. Some people go to the ski resort Tsakhkadzor in the winter, but it is also a common destination for summer nature trips. The neighboring country of Georgia and the cities of the Black Sea are other popular and affordable vacation choices for Armenian travelers.

The Arts

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

palaces are made with native stones from the country's rocky terrain. Carving *khatchkars* (decorative stone monuments) is an ancient Armenian art form that continues today. Many Armenians are talented artisans and turn their hobbies of painting, ceramics, and creating traditional crafts into a business. The works of Armenian artisans include dolls, jewelry, carved wood, embroidery, and carpets.

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

Holidays

Armenia's public holidays include New Year's Day (1 Jan.); Armenian Christmas (6 Jan.); National Army Day (28 Jan.); International Women's Day (8 March); Genocide Victims Commemoration Day (24 Apr.), when people visit Yerevan's memorial to the victims of the 1915 genocide; Victory and Peace Day (9 May), celebrating the end of World War II and the liberation of the town of Shushi in 1992 during the Nagorno-Karabakh war; First Republic Day (28 May), marking the 1918 to 1920 independence; Constitution Day (5 July); Independence Day (21 Sept.), the date when a referendum was held in 1991 on the country's independence; and the Day of Remembrance of Victims of the 1988 Earthquake (7 Dec.), when families visit the graves of relatives and take flowers to the monument to the earthquake victims. Religious holidays include the feast of St. Sargis (celebrated 63 days before Easter), Purification Day (14 Feb.), Easter (4 April), Palm Sunday (5 April), and *Vardavar* (Transfiguration), which is 14 weeks after Easter.

New Year's

New Year's (*Amanor*) is a time for people to visit family and friends, eat seasonal foods, and exchange gifts. Preparations for New Year's begin a month before the holiday, and celebrations continue for an entire week. New Year's is often the busiest time for women, as they must clean, decorate the house, and prepare large amounts of food for guests. Homes are open to everyone, and visitors are welcome any time; decorated tables are topped with specialty foods and sweets, and drinks are prepared for guests. Traditionally, people fasted during New Year's and only put out grains and vegetables for eating. Today, families treat themselves to *dolma* (stuffed grape leaves), ham, *basturma* (cured and seasoned meat), pastries, dried fruits, nuts, cognac, and juice. Children especially love celebrating New Year's, as they wait impatiently for Santa Claus (*Dzmir Papik*) to bring presents, attend special holiday shows at schools or town squares, and meet to take pictures with Santa.

Armenian Christmas

Because Armenia was the first state in the world to adopt Christianity as the official state religion, many Armenians celebrate Christmas (*Surb Tsnund*) with a special solemnity. Christians attend church and participate in the Divine Liturgy (a church service) conducted by the chief bishop of the Armenian Apostolic Church. On Christmas Eve, families bring lit candles from the church into their homes to purify the homes from the power of darkness. A typical Christmas

dinner for families includes fish and rice, served with raisins, dried fruits, and Armenian red wine. On the day after Christmas (*merelots*, or “remembrance of the dead”), Armenian churches hold a special Mass in honor of the deceased, and families visit the graves of relatives. *Mer'elots' hishatak* are celebrated after every main holiday, and many are deemed non-working days.

Easter

Easter (*Zatik*) is celebrated on a national level. Not only do families attend church, but church services are broadcast on state television. Everyone greets each other by saying, “Christ has arisen,” to which the response is “Blessed is the resurrection of Christ.” Several weeks before Easter, families place sprouting grains on trays, cover the trays with a thin sheet of cotton, and place them in sunlight. The grains are watered every day, and by the time Easter day arrives, the cluster of sprouts has grown to about 4 inches (10 centimeters) in length. People color eggs and eat fish (avoiding meat), special greens, cakes, and rice with raisins. Many families color eggs in red, symbolizing the blood of Christ, and place them around the sprouting grain plants. Children enjoy egg tapping games, in which the whole egg represents new life, or creation, and the broken egg symbolizes the open grave of Christ.

Feasts and Festivals

Armenians love to celebrate the ancient traditions and legends associated with various seasonal feasts and festivals. The feast of St. Sargis is held to celebrate the martyrdom of St. Sargis and the 14 soldiers who died defending Christianity in the fourth century. St. Sargis is beloved by the youth, and a special ceremony is held after the Divine Liturgy to bless young people. Young girls are told that if they place a plate of wheat flour outside their windows at night and in the morning see a horseshoe track, their wishes will come true. On the eve of St. Sargis's feast, young boys and girls eat salty pies before bed in hopes of catching a glimpse of their future spouse coming to offer water to them in the middle of the night.

For the religious Purification (*Trndez*) holiday, Armenians attend church and bring home lit candles, which are used to start large fires in the yards. People gather in a circle around the fire singing, until the flames turn to small embers. After the fire burns down, people, starting with married couples, jump over the fire. This rite is believed to drive away dark powers and cold winters.

The Transfiguration (*Vardavar*) water feast is one of the most ancient and joyful summer holidays. The origins of the Transfiguration are pagan; however, after the adoption of Christianity in Armenia, the holiday transformed into a celebration of Christ's transfiguration. From early morning to late at night, children play and splash water on each other, passing cars, and unknowing passersby. During this midsummer holiday, many people find being doused with water refreshing and believe the water to contain healing properties.

SOCIETY

Government

Head of State: Pres. Serzh Sargsyan

Head of Government: PM Tigran Sargsyan

Capital: Yerevan

Structure

Armenia is a republic led by a president, who serves as head of state. The president of Armenia cannot be elected for more than two consecutive terms. The president appoints a prime minister as head of government, subject to a no-confidence vote by the parliament. The constitution does not put any limitation on how many terms the prime minister serves. The 131-seat National Assembly is the country's legislature. Ninety National Assembly members are directly elected through a proportional representation system (women occupy every sixth position on a party's candidate list) and forty-one members by direct vote; members serve five-year terms. Armenia's judiciary is subject to executive pressure and influence and is believed to be corrupt.

Political Landscape

The current political landscape lacks diversity and competitiveness. President Serzh Sargsyan's political party, the Republican Party of Armenia, is currently the ruling party in parliament, and the Prosperous Armenia party is second strongest. The Armenian National Congress, an opposition coalition composed of 13 opposition parties, has a small presence in parliament. Small political parties are often unsupported and are unable to compete in elections. Recently, tension over the ruling party's administrative pressure and voting fraud has resulted in the opposition bloc's boycott of elections. The opposition believes the ruling party shows a lack of interest in domestic policy. Peace talks with neighboring Turkey and Azerbaijan are a critical issue, and many Armenians believe that by supporting the current president and his party, the issue may move forward.

Government and the People

The government is involved in many aspects of Armenian life. While freedom of religion and the rights to own property and to obtain an education are generally respected, freedom of speech and assembly are usually limited. The government provides its people with paved roads, schools, health care, and jobs. Corruption is one of the major problems facing the development of the country and it exists on many levels of public life. The government has adopted new laws, placing priority on improving legislation and infrastructure in order to combat money laundering, increase levels of transparency in the public sector, and enhance accountability of all branches of government.

Though international observers consider elections to be free and fair, many Armenians believe elections are marred by irregularities and claim that voting fraud, bribery, and the use of public administrative resources help the ruling parties' candidates win elections. Politics are closely followed by the Armenian diaspora, though most are not citizens and do not vote. The voting age is 18.

Economy

GDP (PPP) in billions: \$18.95

GDP (PPP) per capita: \$5,600

During Soviet times, industry accounted for one-third of Armenia's economic production. After moving from a planned to a market economy in 1991, the industrial emphasis shifted from heavy items like machinery to goods that could be consumed locally. The government strongly encourages development of small and medium private businesses, and it has successfully privatized most state enterprises—private enterprise now accounts for the vast majority of economic output. The services sector provides the most growth, but growth is also occurring in telecommunications, agriculture, chemicals, and energy generation. Armenia exports gold jewelry and semiprecious stones.

Exports and the construction industry were hurt by the 2008 global financial crisis but recovered and experienced some growth between 2010 and 2011. International aid, foreign investment, and remittances sent from Armenians working abroad help sustain economic growth. Most wealth is concentrated in a few hands, as about 35 percent of the population lives below the poverty line. Armenia's unresolved disputes with Turkey and Azerbaijan are detrimental to the country's development and growth. More economic reforms are needed to improve the economy's growth and opportunity. The currency is the *dram* (AMD)

Transportation and Communications

Internet Users (per 100 people): 32

Cellular Phone Subscriptions (per 100 people): 104

Paved Roads: 100%

Urban residents have access to numerous trolley buses, minibuses, trams, and taxis. Minibuses provide comfortable and affordable transportation along fixed routes. Yerevan has a subway. The nation's rail system primarily serves commercial cargo; most people travel long distances by bus. Rural villagers still make use of horses and donkeys at times. Many people own cars. Generally, the wealthy drive European models and most others drive Russian models that predate independence. Bicycles are growing in popularity. In 2012, Armenia opened the country's first bicycle path in Yerevan.

Cellular phones are quickly outpacing landlines, which are difficult to obtain. Internet access is continuing to increase but remains limited in small and rural towns. Television is the country's main media source. Despite laws against government restrictions on the freedom of the media, a number of newspapers, television, and radio outlets are informally controlled by the state.

Education

Adult Literacy: 99.6%

Mean Years of Schooling: 10.8

Structure

Education is compulsory from age 6 to 15, but attendance is not enforced. Children attend preschool from age 2 to 5 and primary school from age 6 to 11. Between the ages of 11 and 16, children attend middle school and work to achieve the Certificate of Basic Education. After the completion of basic education, students have the option of continuing their

education for three more years at a high school or of attending vocational school. Armenia has several educational institutions for children with mental and physical disabilities.

Access

Education is highly valued by Armenians and many parents work hard to provide for their children's education. Primary school enrollment and literacy rates are generally high. Most schools are public and free, though some public schools charge fees for uniforms and additional learning materials. An educational gap exists between students from wealthy families and students from poorer families because poor students are not able to afford private tutoring. In rural areas, school budgets are limited; many rural schools lack modern facilities and an updated curriculum. Some rural families struggle to pay school fees and often keep children home from school to work on the farm. Private education is available for students who have high enough test scores or who can afford to pay tuition.

School Life

Every school varies on which subjects are emphasized in the classroom. Common school subjects include mathematics, history of the Armenian Church, languages (Armenian, Russian, and English), and chess. Students spend at least two hours a night doing homework and preparing for the next day's class. Tests are the main form of student evaluation. Despite society's disapproval, cheating is common.

Depending on the teacher, classrooms may be either relaxed or strict learning environments. Most teachers use visual aids and textbooks to supplement class lectures, discussions, and analyses. Parents are involved in their children's education and try to teach responsibility, diligence, and studiousness. If students are struggling in school, parents can pay teachers for additional tutoring sessions.

Higher Education

Students who score high on the exit exam (*miasnakan*) for secondary education can qualify for free tuition at a university of their choice. Armenians have many options for higher education and can choose to enroll in different colleges within a university, vocational training, music conservatories, religious seminaries, and private and public universities. The cost of higher education varies from school to school. Many rural students are unable to afford higher education. At present, there are more private higher-education institutions operating in Armenia than public ones. The top universities include Yerevan State University, Yerevan State Medical University, State Engineering University of Armenia, and the American University of Armenia.

Health

In the communist era, Armenia enjoyed one of the best healthcare systems of all the Soviet republics, delivering comprehensive care on a centralized basis. Now, Armenia's healthcare system is being transformed into a market-oriented, fee-for-service system. New private clinics and hospitals are being established, though public ones are still open. Most people choose where to seek medical attention based on the reputation of the doctors and not based on whether the clinic is public or private. The disabled, veterans, and children from vulnerable groups still receive

free care in the new system. Access to quality health care is limited in rural areas. Common health problems among the population include heart disease, cancer, and type 2 diabetes. The rate of tobacco consumption is rising among men and women.

AT A GLANCE

Contact Information

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Country and Development Data

Capital	Yerevan
Population	2,974,184 (rank=139)
Area (sq. mi.)	11,484 (rank=141)
Area (sq. km.)	29,743
Human Development Index	87 of 187 countries
Gender Inequality Index	59 of 148 countries
GDP (PPP) per capita	\$5,600
Adult Literacy	100% (male); 99% (female)
Infant Mortality	17.59 per 1,000 births
Life Expectancy	71 (male); 77 (female)
Currency	Dram