

Armenia 2026

Last year Penny and I were lucky to get the last 2 places on the AAC seniors ski touring trip to Norway. Having had a great trip, we were very excited to learn this year the group would be going to Armenia with the same excellent guide, Jim Blyth. A 9-day adventure combining 6 days touring with some sight-seeing. Naturally we signed up.

As our travel day February 28th drew near, we became increasingly anxious about Armenia's proximity to Iran, especially as Trump's rhetoric grew more aggressive. Travel day arrived and we boarded an early morning flight from Manchester to Yerevan via Brussels, relieved that nothing appeared to have happened—only to discover upon arrival in Brussels that the US and Israel had initiated hostilities. Despite many flight cancellations to the Middle East, ours to Yerevan was unaffected and once we arrived in Armenia, we felt very safe, even though at times we were only a few miles from both the Iranian and Azerbaijani borders.

We met our local ski guide Hovhannes at the airport. He was charming and a font of knowledge about all aspects of Armenia. We were booked into a comfortable modern city centre hotel with a wonderful buffet breakfast. Despite the 4-hour time difference and the very early start there was no rest for the AAC seniors. We immediately went out to a local Jazz Club founded by Levon Malhasian, a legendary Armenian Jazz pianist now in his 80's and were rewarded by hearing Malhasian himself play a short set after midnight. Well worth waiting up for!

The following morning, we embarked on a walking tour of Yerevan led by a local guide. We discovered that Yerevan has served as Armenia's capital since 1918, but its origins as a city date back much further. Much of the city was rebuilt during the Soviet period, following an ambitious 1924 plan designed by the renowned Russian-Armenian architect Tamanyan. This plan, featuring wide boulevards, classical public buildings made from tuff (the regional volcanic stone), monuments, and green areas, still forms the core layout of modern Yerevan.

We took a minibus trip out to Etchmiadzn, the religious capital. Armenia became a Christian country in the 3rd century, and Christianity is an important thread to its history and cultural life. Much of Armenia's history can be summarised as being occupied and fought over by various much larger neighbouring empires, Roman, Persian, Tsarist Russian, Ottoman and Soviet. Etchmiadzn is home to the Church's leader, The Catholicos and the Mother See cathedral. As it was Sunday there was a church service on. Churches in Armenia typically don't have seats and it is normal to drift in and out while the priests conduct services that last 2 to 2.5 hours.

The last stop on our tour was the Armenian Genocide Memorial and Museum situated on a hill above the city. In 1915 when Armenia was occupied by the Ottoman Empire a

genocide orchestrated by the Ottoman Turks killed 1.5 million Armenian people, men, women and children. A genocide that Turkey denies happened. As photography and to a more limited extent film was in use by then there is a wealth of documentary evidence providing an extremely harrowing and powerful account of both the genocide itself and events leading up to it. The Genocide Memorial was erected in 1967 to honour the victims of the Genocide and symbolize the rebirth of the Armenian people.

More culture that evening with a very fine performance of Madam Butterfly at the Opera House.

And now to the skiing! On Monday we left Yerevan in the minibus and headed north, our destination, a hotel in Arthur's Resort which seemed to be a Soviet era summer tourist spot. En route we stopped at Mt Ara (2614m) where we skinned up 900 metres mainly in sun, but it was overcast, windy and cold when we got to the top. So, no hanging about after the transition! Straight off into very difficult crusty snow before finding a long lovely middle section of powder (not the lightest but wonderful). Further descent brought us back to difficult crusty conditions before getting back to the bus.

The next day we skinned from the hotel up to a ridge on Mt Teghenis in sunshine to be rewarded by powder snow on the descent. We had a sandwich where the good skiing finished and skinned up again. We only did about 500m vertical that day, so quite gentle but after the long journey and a 4-hour time difference that was probably a wise decision. The group seemed to respond well and the ski tracks left in the snow looked better than the day before.



Another day, another hotel. This time in the town of Aragats. We left our luggage there and headed off to ski. The weather had changed with some snow and poor visibility. It did not look promising for touring and so we visited the local ski resort of Myler. A newly developed resort with two lifts and aspirational plans for many more. Facilities and

hotels are being built at the base. We made best use of the poor visibility day skiing on the piste.

The weather had changed again the following day. A real blue-sky day. So, we headed a short distance to Mt Tuhkmanuk (2800m) in the minibus across the high snow-covered plain with white volcanic peaks thrusting up all around. The group of well-travelled skiers and mountaineers was seriously impressed by the landscape. We parked in a small village and set off past a gold mine to skin up 800m to the summit. It was glorious and it was clear from the ascent that the descent was going to be an epic powder descent. That is exactly what it was! A classic day's skiing that will be rarely bettered.



On Friday we headed South – a day of culture and travel taking in three of Armenia's most famous monasteries. We began with Gegherd Monastery, partly carved out of rock, partly stone-built in an impressive gorge setting. Additionally, the buildings are surrounded by khachkars, a uniquely Armenian form of stone block, richly decorated with crosses and intricate carvings, recalling Celtic crosses. Then on to Khor Virap Monastery perched on a dramatic hilltop site. It is very close to and overlooks the fortified and closed border with Turkey. Not far over the border one sees Mt Ararat (5137m) and its companion Little Ararat (which is a Mt Fuji lookalike). Mt Ararat is an important cultural symbol for Armenia and the fact it is so clearly visible, especially from the capital Yerevan, but in a foreign country after 20th century border changes, is a source of deep frustration to many Armenians.

The third and perhaps most impressive monastery we saw that day was the Thirteenth Century Noravank Monastery. Its setting is spectacular in a rocky gorge which towers above the series of churches there. Several have been rebuilt after earthquake damage. Their small shapes are unusual and are in places decorated with complex carvings. It is

a burial place for old aristocratic families. A few of the graves are of warriors with gravestones showing a reclining lion with its cheek resting on its paw.

As we travelled south, we drove along the heavily fortified border with the Azerbaijani enclave of Nakhichevan. Worryingly, Iran had fired Shaheed drones hitting a school and the airport of Nakhichevan a couple of days before. However, we arrived at Hermon, our destination for the next 2 nights without incident, and settled into our comfortable hotel owned by the local entrepreneurial bishop.

It snowed heavily overnight and we went to bed thinking skiing the next day would be unlikely, but when morning came, we managed to get out in the bus and ski the NE slope of Mt Srkghonq from the village of Goghtanjik. Visibility was not good, but we had a fun session in new snow.

The next day we drove back to Yerevan. This involved going over a pass near Mt. Grate Sevgar. It was unclear if it was open or not. As it turned out they were just managing to keep it clear by dint of several snowploughs working near the top. Shortly after crossing that we parked and had our last ski, skinning up the lower slopes of Grate Sevgar. The ascent was just 400m, but it was a long distance with quite a lot of flat terrain in places. On the way down we had a short pitch of perfect powder.

We continued the drive back passing Lake Servan, the world's second largest high-altitude lake. We stopped for a fish lunch by the lake shore. We made another stop at Horatus for visiting a particularly large collection of Khachkar stones. Then back to our original hotel in Yerevan. Most of the group left early the next morning. Penny and I spent two more very rewarding days looking around Yerevan before leaving. It was a fantastic trip with amazing skiing possibilities. We enjoyed some great ski conditions as well as learning something of this fascinating country.

Tim Owen – April 2026