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Armenia

Contributors: Paulo Rui Anciaes

Edited by: Linda L. Lowry

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The promotion of tourism is increasingly regarded as an economic policy priority in Armenia, given the country's scarcity of economic resources. The tourism potential of the country lies in its ancient history and culture. The Armenian Diaspora has been vital in the development of the tourism industry, investing in infrastructure and acting as the industry's main market. Despite the growth in the number of visitors, the potential of the sector is limited by an image problem, political issues, lack of accessibility, and resource shortages.

Armenia is a landlocked country in the South Caucasus region. More than one third of its 3 million inhabitants live in Yerevan, the capital city. An estimated 5 to 10 million ethnic Armenians live abroad. The country has few natural resources and went through a severe process of economic restructuring following its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, the transition to a capitalist economy, a military conflict with Azerbaijan during the 1990s, and the effects of an earthquake in 1988. The development of tourism is a priority for economic policy.

The major attraction of the country is its cultural heritage. Armenia was the first country to adopt Christianity as the official state religion, in 311, and has some of the oldest surviving churches in the world. Three religious sites have been declared UNESCO World Heritage sites: (1) the cathedral of Echmiatsin and the ruins of the Zvartnots church, located near Yerevan; (2) the monastery of Geghard, carved out of a mountain, and the surrounding area (including the pagan temple of Garni), also within reach of Yerevan; and (3) the monasteries of Haghpat and Sanahin, located in the northern part of the country.

Other attractions include the more than 10,000 khachkars (ancient carved stone crosses) dotted around the country. Lake Sevan, one of the highest freshwater lakes in the world, has great tourism potential, including beach resorts and monuments such as Hayravank Monastery. In Yerevan, the Matenadaran houses one of the world's richest collections of medieval manuscripts. On the outskirts of the city, the Erebuni Fortress site is the ruins of the ancient kingdom of Urartu.

According to data from the Armenian National Statistics Service and the World Tourism Organization, the number of visitors to Armenia has been increasing at an annual rate of 11% since 2008. In 2014, the country received almost 1.2 million visitors. However, Armenia's share of markets such as Western Europe has been decreasing, compared with neighboring countries such as Georgia. In addition, data from the World Travel & Tourism Council show that the contribution of travel and tourism to the gross domestic product is still relatively modest (7.7%).

The Armenian Diaspora has played a crucial role in the development of tourism, being responsible for a large part of the investment in the sector. Ethnic Armenians living abroad also account for the majority of arrivals and are active in promoting the country abroad. For example, the Birthright Armenia organization provides incentives for younger people in the Diaspora to visit Armenia.

The main origins of the visitors are Russia, Georgia, Iran, the United States, and France. Armenia is in a particularly good position to attract visitors from Russia, as a large proportion of the population has good Russian language skills. Tourism from neighboring Turkey and Azerbaijan is restricted by the lack of diplomatic ties between Armenia and these countries.

Armenia also suffers from an image problem, as it is sometimes perceived as a country affected by political and military conflicts. This perception is fueled by the permanent tension

along the border with Azerbaijan and the occasionally violent internal conflicts (e.g., in 1999 and 2008). The perception that traveling to countries in the ex-Soviet Union is a bureaucratic process is also a limiting factor. As of 2014, visa requirements had been lifted for citizens of most European countries but not for citizens of countries representing important tourism markets, including the United States, Australia, China, and Japan.

Accessibility remains one of the major issues in the development of tourism, as the borders with Turkey and Azerbaijan are closed. The Zvartnots International Airport in Yerevan has benefited from improvements over the years but receives direct flights from only a small number of countries. These flights tend to be expensive. Many roads are in poor condition, and the few existing rail services are slow and unreliable. Plans for the extension of the subway system in Yerevan have not succeeded. Shared vans remain the main means of inter- and intracity public transportation.

The quality of other infrastructure is still lagging; many facilities have been inherited from Soviet times and are in a poor state of repair. However, substantial investments have been made since independence, including the regeneration of places such as the Tsaghkadzor Ski Resort, the restoration of historical sites, and the construction of new hotels.

Shortages in the availability of other resources are also a cause of concern. The supply of water is a major issue, because of the dry climate. Lake Sevan has been shrinking since the 1950s, although the water levels have risen since 2002 due to a World Bank program. The shortage of energy has also forced the country to reopen a nuclear power station. Armenia is also suffering from a lack of qualified human resources because of the emigration of a large proportion of the population.

The government has implemented policies to develop tourism, often with the support of other countries or international organizations. For example, the National Competitiveness Foundation of Armenia has collaborated with the U.S. Agency for International Development to produce a strategy for the development of tourism. Wider regional and urban policies may also have a positive impact on tourism but often have external effects. For example, the regeneration of some neighborhoods in Yerevan met with protest from local residents who were evicted from their homes.

Paulo Rui Anciaes

See also [Accessibility Issues in Travel and Tourism](#); [Cultural Tourism](#); [Heritage Tourism](#); [International Relations and Tourism](#); [Transportation and Infrastructure Issues in the Developing World](#)

Further Readings

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Websites

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Union of Incoming Tour Operators of Armenia website: touroperator.am/

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