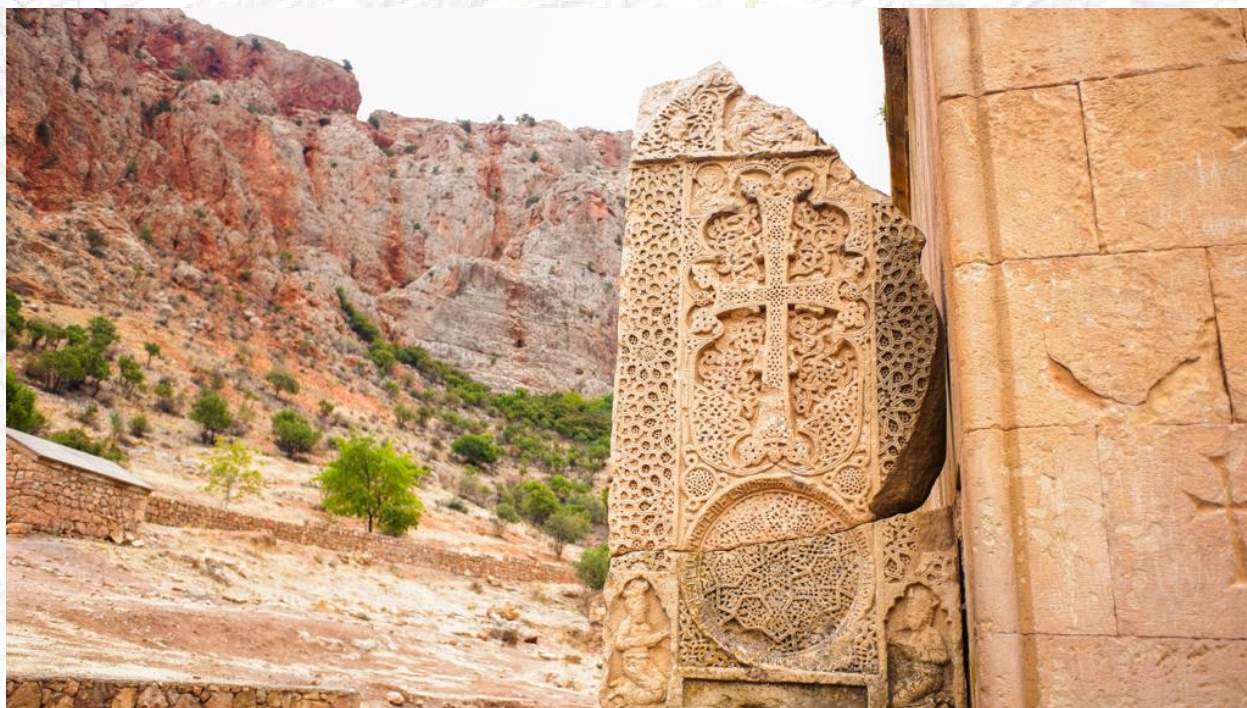


Armenia expedition report 2023



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Summary

We travelled to Armenia for three weeks in September 2023 to hike a continuous 180 km section of the newly established Transcaucasian Trail (TCT) in the Vayots Dzor province. We planned 9 days of full hiking (excluding rest days), but decided to leave the trail after 7 days due to the outbreak of military conflict with Azerbaijan. After assessing the situation, we planned an alternative 2-day hike in the Tavush province in the north of the country. We hiked a total of 116 km over these 9 days, and also visited a number of culturally important monasteries, archaeological sites and wineries.

About the expedition

About the region

The Caucasus is a mountainous region between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea, spanning six different countries – Russia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Turkey and Iran. It is home to the Greater and Lesser Caucasus Mountains, two of the world’s great mountain ranges and some of the highest peaks in Europe.

Remnants of the Persian, Ottoman and Russian Empires are abundant throughout the Caucasus, due to a long history of invasion and occupation by successive imperial powers, as well as the region’s position as a major junction on the Silk Road trading routes. The region has a rich and diverse cultural heritage, boasting the earliest recorded evidence of wine-making, more than 8,000 years ago and more than 40 indigenous languages.

The Greater and Lesser Caucasus Mountains form two distinct geological corridors. The range of landscapes in this region include high-altitude grasslands, snow capped crags, coniferous and deciduous forests on the mid-altitude slopes, and shrubby plateaus and swamp forests at lower elevations. Of the 6,500 plant species found in the Caucasus, approximately 25 percent are endemic. There is also a large diversity of fauna, including wolves, brown bears, Caucasian leopards, jackals, lynx, hyenas, gazelles, and the iconic Bezoar goat.

Despite this, the region remains relatively little-visited. Access to wilderness areas is difficult due to a lack of reliable, recent and detailed data. Until recently, the best available topographic maps were Soviet-made military maps dating back to before the Cold War, unavailable to the public and decades out of date. Public domain aerial imagery is inconsistent and often at too low a resolution to be useful to the hiker. Open-source mapping varies enormously in accuracy and completeness, often having been created by untrained hobbyists from second-hand sources.

However, in 2015 the Transcaucasian Trail (TCT) project began with the aim of developing a world-class, long-distance trail network across the Caucasus region, linking roughly two dozen existing and proposed national parks in the region. By its completion, the trail will stretch roughly 3,000 km. Currently over 400 km have been completed in Georgia and Armenia.

About the TCT

The TCT is a long-distance hiking trail that follows the Greater and Lesser Caucasus Mountains, connecting diverse communities and ecosystems. Parts of the trail have been known for centuries but no formal trail had been designed or maintained until the TCT project was formed in 2015 in order to improve access to the region's diverse cultural and natural heritage and encourage its preservation. The goals of the TCT are to provide a world-class experience for hikers and other trail users, while increasing economic opportunities for local communities. Through improving access to historic sites and protected areas in the region and raising their profile, the TCT aims to ensure that the natural and cultural heritage of the region can be enjoyed by future generations. The TCT also aims to promote international understanding and cooperation between the different countries and cultures along the trail by connecting communities and bringing people together to work on trail building. The trail building volunteer groups often contain people from Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan who may not otherwise have opportunities to meet and work side-by-side.

Expedition aims

Technical Objectives:

The primary aim of the expedition was to give team members experience through-hiking a recently created trail, providing experience in safely navigating in semi-remote areas. A secondary aim was to record bird sightings along the route, submitting occurrences to ebird. Currently there are no ebird submissions at all along the route, and in general the Vayots Dzor province is poorly sampled. Our sightings will therefore be valuable data, and will be fully available to the general public. Our key technical objectives were:

- Plan a detailed route for a medium altitude trek, tailored to the skill level of all team members.
- Improve trekking ability, through training beforehand and during the expedition.
- Build experience navigating on less well established routes.
- Improve bird ID skills for all members.

Personal Objectives:

The TCT is run by experienced trekkers with a passion for making nature and unique cultures accessible. As a group, our personal aims were to experience the remote culture of Vayots Dzor and promote the TCT to a wider audience. Our key personal aims were:

- Experience planning an expedition in a non-English speaking country in a rural setting.
- Experience new plant and animal species in their natural environment.
- Promote birding in Armenia, through publicising rare sightings we hope to make over the duration of the trip.
- Experience the culture of Caucasus, which will be a fully new experience to all members. Learn to speak some Armenian.
- Promote the TCT Imperial, and a wider audience, to encourage future expeditions along the TCT

Expedition team

Robert Barber - Expedition Lead / Scientific Lead

Age at time of expedition: 29

Academic Background:

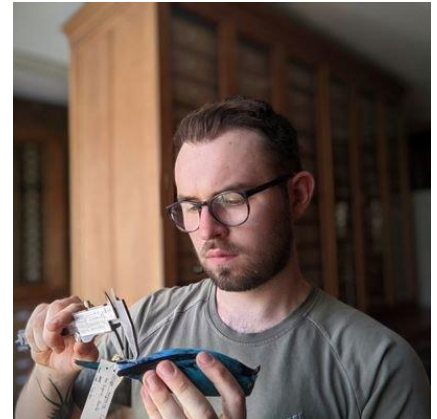
- MSci Zoology, The University of Nottingham
- Currently: 4th Year PhD Student, Quantitative Methods in Ecology and Evolution CDT, Imperial College Department of Life Sciences

Hiking Experience:

- 2 months of fieldwork in the East Usambara mountains of Tanzania, involving hiking each day to sites to record samples from isolated mountain streams.
- Multiple hiking trips across the UK.
- Hiking in Polish Tatra Mountains (2,499m).
- Wild camping experience: Dartmoor (3 Days); Brecon Beacons (2 Days); Lake District (3 Days)

Other Experience:

- Competent rock climber, taking part in many outdoor trips across the UK.
- Competent horse rider, skier and mountain biker.
- Competent bird identification skills.



Hannah O'Sullivan - Technical Lead

Age at time of expedition: 28

Academic Background:

- BSc Zoology: University of Exeter
- MRes Computational Methods in Ecology and Evolution: Imperial College London
- Currently: 4th Year PhD Student, Quantitative Methods in Ecology and Evolution CDT, Imperial College Department of Life Sciences and Kew Gardens

Hiking Experience:

- Peruvian/Ecuadorian Andes: Various hikes
 - Vinicunca (5,200m)
 - Laguna Humantay (4,200m)
 - Pasochoa Volcano (4,220m)



- GR221: Serra de Tramuntana Mountains
 - Port d'Antrax to Pollença (140km)
 - Total ascent: 6,140m
 - Total descent: 6,150m
- Bavarian Alps: Various hikes
 - Watzmannhaus (1928m)
 - Gotzenalm (1685m)

Other Experience:

- Collection enhancement expedition (Equatorial Guinea)
 - Entomological expedition funded by the Natural History Museum, London
 - Focus on collecting lepidoptera, orthoptera and odonata
 - 1 field season of 4 weeks
- Senior herpetologist (Guyana)
 - 5 field seasons of two months each
 - Hammock camping throughout
 - Planning biodiversity surveys in tropical rainforest
 - Leading night treks to survey reptiles and amphibians
 - Surveying reptiles and amphibians
- Tropical field assistant (Peru)
 - 3 months surveying birds, mammals, reptiles and amphibians
- Internship - Queen Saovabha Memorial Institute (Thailand)
 - Venomous snake handling programme

Anna Gee - Responsible for Safety and Risk

Age at time of expedition: 25

Academic Background:

- BA Biological Sciences, University of Oxford
- Currently: 2nd Year PhD Student, SSCP DTP, Imperial College
Department of Life Sciences

Hiking Experience:

- Team navigator for Ten Tors expedition, Dartmoor (2 days, fully self-sufficient)
- Abbots Way, Dartmoor (37km in a day)
- Laguna 69, Cordillera Blanca (4600m)
- 10 day guided hike in Higher Atlas mountains, Morocco
- Bagged 7 Munros on both solo and group hikes

Other Experience:

- 6 months fieldwork in remote high-altitude regions of Peru
- 10 months fieldwork in remote tropical forests in Mexico
- Regular wild camping on Dartmoor



Expedition diary

Day 1: Arrival in Yerevan

Day 2: Yerevan and shopping for supplies

We visited the Yerevan HQ of HIKEArmenia, an organisation that creates trails, supports hikers and aims to raise awareness of Armenia as a hiking destination. They provided incredibly helpful, up-to-date and granular information about the trail and were able to sell us gas, maps and to organise for us to purchase bear spray. We would highly recommend that anyone interested in hiking in Armenia contact this organisation.

Day 3: Travel to Martuni

We caught a *marshrukta*, a local minibus, from Yerevan to the town of Martuni. Martuni is just 25 km from the start point of our hike, so we were able to get an early start for our first day of hiking. Once we were out of Yerevan we met very few people who spoke any English, and began to rely heavily on the few Armenian words we had learnt, gestures and Google translate. Translations to and from Armenian were usually quite poor, so we often used Russian instead, as almost everyone in Armenia spoke some Russian.

Day 4: Selim Caravanserei to Hors

17 km, 305 m ascent, 609 m descent

We began our hike at the historic Selim Caravanserei site in thick fog. The early 14th century Caravanserei has been a rest stop for Silk road travellers for almost 700 years and seemed an appropriate place to begin our journey. Winding our way up a grassy plateau into the mountains, we saw Golden eagles through the drizzle. Cold and damp, we were very relieved to finally spot our isolated first resting place - the Hors Conservation Area guesthouse - nestled in a valley.



Day 5: Hors to Shativank monastery

17 km, 556 m ascent, 922 m descent

We were treated to an incredible breakfast by the ranger who manages the guesthouse and his wife. Cheeses, honeys, fresh and preserved fruits were all sourced directly from their beautiful garden and served with piles of fresh lavash. Completely stuffed, we headed down into Hors valley. Upon reaching the river, we started spotting the distinctive scat and prints of brown bears. We cautiously continued along the trail, the prints and scat becoming more frequent and fresher, until we reached some very fresh prints that were still clearly visible under the flowing water of the river. Deciding that we'd rather not come face to face with a brown bear, we made our way back up to the highway and followed it into the nearby village of Shatin, where we once again picked up the trail.



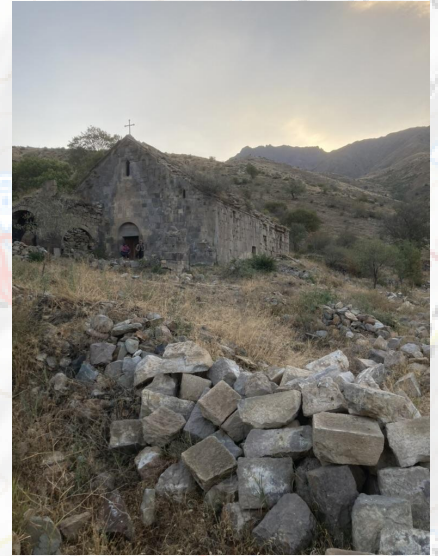
It was a very steep climb out of the village toward the abandoned monastery of Shativank, where we planned to make camp. Ancient olive and walnut trees lined the valley, and whenever we emerged from their shade we had expansive views over the Caucasian steppe. Upon arrival at the monastery we discovered a large Armenian family grilling meat and were instantly invited to join them - a very welcome meal that somewhat undermined our planned bear precautions. After they had left we set up camp inside the abandoned monastery and carefully packed up all our food, trash and toiletries into a drybag, which we hid 100 metres from the camp. Luckily there was no evidence of anything having disturbed it during the night, and even the leftover meat from the BBQ remained, suggesting we hadn't been visited by any bears.



Day 6: Shativank monastery to Crossway Camping

19.6 km, 502 m ascent, 1082 m descent

We got started early in anticipation of the stretch of route that had been described as the “Death march” by the TCT route setters, the gruelling 45 degree angle did reward us with even more incredible views. We were also running low on drinking water, so were relieved to find a spring near the summit where we collected and purified water. The route then followed a contour around the mountain through bone dry fields of grasses and wildflowers towards the 14th century Spitakavor Monastery. Covered in carvings and sculptures and with views down the valley, this peaceful monastery was an ideal spot to cook a quick lunch and refill our water bladders from another spring. Descending into the valley we met the first (and only) other hiker we saw on the whole route and swapped stories and tips for the trail.



Day 7: Rest day

We used our rest day to restock on food in the town of Yeghegnadzor and tend to our blisters.



Day 8: Areni-1 cave to Noravank monastery

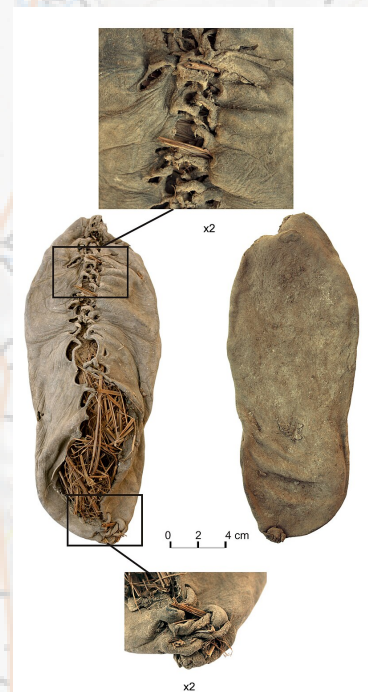
7 km, 510 m ascent, 68 m descent



We began the day with a visit to the Areni-1 cave, one of the most important archaeological sites in the country. Discoveries in this cave include the oldest known piece of leather footwear in the world (dated to 3,500 BC). The shoe is currently in the History Museum of Armenia, and we made sure to visit it when we returned to Yerevan. The cave also contains the world's first known winery, estimated to date to between 4100 - 4000 BC, and the oldest known humanoid brain!



We then hiked from the cave up the gorge to Noravank, a 13th-century monastic complex surrounded by red cliffs. We ate well at the monastery's small restaurant, enjoyed their homemade wine and slept in the attached guesthouse.



Day 9: Noravank monastery to Gnishik

13 km, 762 m ascent, 304 m descent



The day began with a steep climb out of the valley, until the entire Noravank complex looked small down below us. This area is part of the Arpa Protected Landscape, the Gnisheek Prime Butterfly Area and the Noravank Important Bird Area and the wildlife was suitably impressive. We enjoyed spectacular views of bearded vultures, found a wolf print and spotted a metre-long Armenian steppe viper! We also finally spotted the iconic Bezoar goats as we entered the isolated valley towards Gnishik. The trail was very overgrown in places, so we moved slowly, tapping the dried grass ahead of us to check for snakes. As dusk fell, we passed along a lush green riverside - beautiful but also excellent habitat for bears and the highly venomous Blunt-nosed viper. We were pretty relieved to make it to Gnishik and our beds in the visitor centre.



Day 10: Gnishik to Horadis

11.6 km, 511 m ascent, 389 m descent

Leaving Gnishik, the landscape became much more agricultural than any of the previous days. As we were hiking in late summer/autumn, this mostly meant piles of hay that had just been harvested, though we also saw herds of cattle and sheep. Reaching the shoulder between two peaks meant we were treated to expansive views both over the valley we had just hiked and the valley we were about to enter. Despite the entire landscape being stretched out in front of us, the trail itself became very difficult to follow, and had clearly seen little use. After a few false starts, we were able to rejoin the route and followed a contour around the hillside before descending once more towards the ruined village of Horadis. Horadis was home to a stunning ruined monastery, a freshwater spring and a few cattle herders, who invited us in for strong Armenian coffee and let us camp near their hut.



This was also the day that Azerbaijan launched a military offensive against the autonomous Nagorno-Karabakh region (known in Armenia as the Artsakh Republic, which is how we will refer to it). Our local SIM cards had signal for parts of the hike, so we were able to follow the news as it unfolded. We had previously discussed a plan for such a situation and were aware that we may need to leave the trail.



Day 11: Horadis to Martiros. End of planned hike due to military conflict.

16.6 km, 404 m ascent, 419 m descent

The landscape changed once again (it seemed like each day we were walking through a completely different landscape) to become more arid and desert-like. It was a particularly hot day, so the lack of trees or any other form of shade was keenly felt. We spotted long-legged buzzards soaring above us with snakes dangling from their talons. The only other person we saw along the trail was a sheep herder with his flock, who, with typical Armenian generosity, waved us over to offer us bread.



Seeking shelter from the midday sun; Burnt grasslands close to Martiros village.

We were also closely following the situation in Artsakh and made the decision to cut our hike short. While the conflict in Artsakh only lasted one day, military activity in the Vayots Dzor region was increasing due to the potential of an Azerbaijani invasion and we decided the risk was too high. We were also aware that the southern provinces of Syunik and Vayots Dzor would likely become the centre of a refugee crisis as thousands of ethnic Armenians were displaced, and it would be inappropriate for us to continue regardless of safety concerns. We therefore finished our planned hike at the village of Martiros, and returned to Crossway Camping to take stock of the situation and make a plan.

Days 12 - 13: Making new plans and travelling to Dilijan

We decided to travel to the Dilijan National Park in the Tavush province in the north of the country to continue hiking. The area around Dilijan has much more foreign tourism than the Vayots Dzor region, better infrastructure and is further from the Azerbaijani border and less militarised. We chose a section of the TCT that could be completed as a stand-alone two-day hike and were kindly driven up to Dilijan by the son of the owner of Crossway Camping.

Day 14: Kachardzan to Gosh lake

5.8 km, 541 m ascent, 137 m descent

We began the hike at the village of Kachardzan. Passing through the village we were called over by a couple in their garden, who insisted on gifting us their homegrown cucumbers and grapes. From there we began a long ascent to Gosh lake through a lush green forest (a world away from the arid steppe of Vayots Dzor). We peaked at the ruined church of Spitak Yeghysi, and watched as a herd of wild horses thundered past us and into the rest of the ruined village below. We spent the night camping next to Gosh lake.

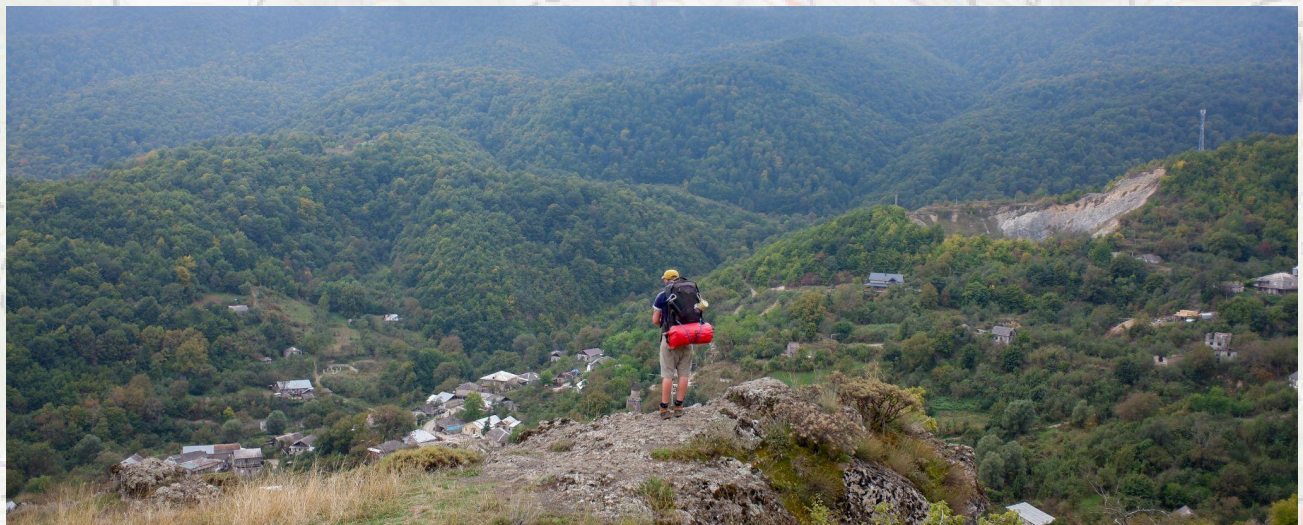


Day 15: Gosh lake to Parz lake

8.5 km, 373 m ascent, 457 m descent

A thick fog hung over the lake in the morning as we made porridge and coffee and set off through the woods towards Parz lake. The trail here was very well marked and we hardly needed to do any navigation. We soon came out at Gosh village, site of the large and well preserved Goshovank monastic complex. One of the most impressive things at this site was one of the most intricate *kachkars* (cross stones) in existence. While we had seen many *kachkars* along our route, both in monasteries and in small groups along the trail, this 1291 example stood out for its delicate complexity, and is actually known as “The Needlecarved”.

We climbed steeply out of Gosh and continued across the fields towards Parz lake. The woodlands around Parz were home to the highest fungal diversity we saw all trip, including stinkhorns and amethyst deceivers (*Laccaria amethystina*). We ended our 2-day hike at Parz lake and returned to Dilijan for the night.



Day 16: Travel to Yerevan

Days 17 - 19: Yerevan

During our final days in Yerevan we were able to explore the city more and finally visit the Armenian History Museum, Armenian Genocide Museum and Memorial, and Garni temple. The Genocide Museum is a difficult but very worthwhile experience, detailing the horrors of the 1915 Armenian Genocide, the historical context and the consequences of the continued lack of acknowledgement from many countries. The site at Garni is a fascinating reminder of the extent of the Roman Empire, including a Roman bath house and temple to the sun god Mihr.



From top: Republic Square, Yerevan, Wreaths at the Armenian Genocide Memorial; Garni temple; Armenian carpets at the Vernissage market.

The Artsakh conflict

As we were in Armenia during the Nagorno-Karabakh/Artsakh conflict of September 2023, we feel it would be an omission not to talk about the impact these events had on the country and the people we met. The region is within the internationally-recognised borders of Azerbaijan, but is of huge cultural and historical importance to Armenians and, prior to the conflict, was

inhabited by ethnic Armenians and operated as an independent state. Many people we met spoke about their Artsakh heritage, and about family still living in the region. The Armenian History Museum and Matenadaran dedicate large parts of their exhibits to the religious and historical significance of Artsakh. Many culturally important Armenian rugs, demonstrating unique patterns and creative techniques, hail from Artsakh.



Riot police in Republic Square; Food donations in Yerevan; Graffiti in support of Artsakh.

As of the 2nd October, more than 100,500 people, from an initial population of about 120,000, had left the Artsakh region and become refugees in Armenia. The UN reported that as few as 50 to 1,000 ethnic Armenians are left in the region, and Azerbaijan faces accusations of ethnic cleansing. During this time, Azerbaijan continued to blockade the contested region, preventing all access for independent observers. Whilst in Yerevan, we met many families who were planning to host Artsakh refugees, however most were still making the difficult journey from Goris to Yerevan, often using barely functional vehicles after shelling in Stepanakert. Once again, we were impressed by the incredible hospitality that Armenians extended to those in need.

The separatist government of the Artsakh Republic has agreed to dissolve on January 1st 2024. In the days following the conflict there were protests in Yerevan claiming that the Armenian government had not done enough to protect Artsakh. Most people we spoke to did not believe that the conflict had come to an end, and expected further aggression from Azerbaijan. Particularly in regard to the Syunik corridor, an Armenian region which separates two internationally recognised territories of Azerbaijan. While the Artsakh conflict appears to be over, it's unsurprising to hear such sentiments from people who have experienced repeated military conflict over the past few decades, and in the context of increasing tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan.



Top to bottom: Student protesters on North Avenue, Yerevan; Medical doctors protesting the growing humanitarian crisis in the Artsakh region.

Bird sightings

Throughout our expedition in Armenia, we were consistently impressed by the diversity of Avian fauna. Moreover, by travelling in September, we were also able to observe many birds that use the Caucasus mountains as a migratory highway towards Africa to overwinter. Given the altitude and isolation during our route, most of the surrounding land experienced little human alteration, and provided the ideal habitat for large wide ranging birds that are absent from a typical European outdoor setting. For instance, on our first day alone, we saw multiple Golden Eagles, Kestrels, Buzzards, and Hoopoes, as well as a wealth of smaller song birds. However, the highlight from our first day was the rarely seen Eurasian Scops-Owl, which was perching outside our mountain guesthouse as the sun set.

Another highlight from the trip was seeing multiple Bearded Vultures flying low near Noravank Monastery, often between crags at a height similar to our own. On the same day, we also saw a Long-legged Buzzard carrying a snake between its talons - a welcome sight after seeing a venomous Armenia steppe viper up close only hours before. In that same valley, we saw Chukar quails that littered the hills, often alongside iconic Bezoar goats.

As we moved North to Dilijan, the environment became increasingly wooded, and closely resembled mountainous Europe in many aspects. As such, birds became more familiar, although still stunning in many instances. Personal highlights from this region included seeing a Purple Heron fishing and Syrian Woodpeckers foraging in the trees above.

As we stated in our initial proposal, we recorded as many sightings as we could to eBird, a citizen science database of bird occurrences. While our list was by no means extensive, we put special effort into recording sightings from areas inaccessible to most birdwatching tourists, such as high altitude sections of the trail. Given the low number of recordings in the area, we hope our sightings will provide useful information on the environmental conditions these birds are often located, but rarely observed.



Bearded Vulture (*Gypaetus barbatus*), Chukar (*Alectoris chukar*), Purple Heron (*Ardea purpurea*)

Other wildlife sightings



Left to right: Brown bear prints near Norovank, possible wolf prints, Armenian steppe viper

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to the Imperial College Exploration board, the RCSA Trust and the Lord Mayor's 800th Anniversary Awards Trust for providing funding, without which none of this would have been possible. We'd also like to express our sincere gratitude to Lorraine Craig and Phil Powers for their invaluable support and advice during the planning stages. We would also like to thank HIKEArmenia and the TCT team for their support and recommendations in the country.



Appendix 1: Costs

Flights: £490 per person

Accommodation: £329 per person

Gear: £310 per person

Local transport: £40 per person

Food: £63 per person

Total: £1,232 per person

Appendix 2: Kit

Personal kit:

- Sleeping bag
- Roll mat
- Hiking poles
- Walking boots
- Water bladder
- Bear spray (purchased from Camp.AM in Yerevan)
- Head torch
- Power bank

Team kit:

- First aid kit
- Tent
- Biox water purification drops
- JetBoil
- Shovel
- Gas canisters (purchased from HIKEArmenia in Yerevan)
- Pots, pans and cooking utensils
- Solar charger
- Binoculars

Appendix 3: Bird Species list

Crows, Jays and Magpies:

- Eurasian jay, *Garrulus glandarius*
- Eurasian magpie, *Pica pica*
- Yellow-billed chough, *Pyrrhocorax graculus*
- Rook, *Corvus frugilegus*
- Hooded crow, *Corvus cornix*
- Common raven *Corvus corax*

Dippers:

- White-throated dipper, *Cinclus cinclus*

Pheasants, Grouse, etc:

- Chukar, *Alectoris chukar*
- Black-bellied sandgrouse, *Pterocles orientalis*

Pigeons and Doves:

- Rock pigeon, *Columba livia*
- Laughing dove, *Spilopelia senegalensi*

Nightjars:

- Eurasian nightjar, *Caprimulgus europaeus*

Swifts:

- Alpine swift, *Apus melba*

Hérons, Egrets and Bitterns:

- Purple heron, *Ardea purpurea*

Hawks, Eagles and Kites:

- Bearded vulture, *Gypaetus barbatus*
- Short-toed snake-eagle, *Circaetus gallicus*
- Booted eagle, *Hieraaetus pennatus*
- Golden eagle, *Aquila chrysaetos*
- White-tailed eagle, *Haliaeetus albicilla*
- Common buzzard, *Buteo buteo*
- Long-legged buzzard, *Buteo rufinus*
- Levant sparrowhawk, *Accipiter brevipes*

Owls:

- Eurasian scops owl, *Otus scops*

Hoopoes:

- Eurasian hoopoe, *Upupa epops*

Bee-eaters:

- European bee-eater, *Merops apiaster*
- Blue-cheeked bee-eater, *Merops persicus*

Woodpeckers:

- Eurasian green woodpecker, *Picus viridis*
- Syrian woodpecker, *Dendrocopos syriacus*

Falcons and caracaras:

- Eurasian hobby, *Falco subbuteo*

Nuthatches:

- Eastern nuthatch, *Sitta tephronota*

Starlings:

- European starling, *Sturnus vulgaris*