



EasternTurkeyTours

A Pilgrimage to Lake Van



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Ferry from Aghtamar (Akdamar) Island

This is a four day (five nights) tour of Armenian churches and monasteries south and east of Lake Van. From Varakavank (The Seven Churches) to St. John's church on Gduts (Carpanak) island and taking in Garmir Vank and, St. Thomas' church near the village of Kanzak (Altinsac), before finishing with Arter (Kusadisi) and, of course, the beautiful Sourp Khach (Church of the Holy Cross) on Aghtamar Island. As a Catholicosate until 1916, Sourp Khach embodies a central place in Armenian religious history. One of only a few Catholicosates, the Community at Aghtamar and Sourp Khach had the authority to create new bishops, elect church leaders and bless the holy oil essential to important rites and sacraments such as marriage, baptism, funerals and the consecration of bishops. The backdrop for this unique tour is the incomparable Lake itself.



You will need to arrive the day before your tour to allow you to get used to the environment and meet fellow pilgrims. You will also attend a special orientation meeting and a welcome dinner at your hotel. Depending on your arrival time there will be a tour to the citadel of Van and the ruins of old Van. Van is the base for the tour.

Day 1

Varakavank (Seven Churches), situated on the southern slope of Erek Dağı (Mt. Varak) was one of the wealthiest and most famous monastic sites of the ancient Kingdom of Vaspuragan and the seat of the Archbishopric of Van. The monastic institution was attributed to King Senekerim-Hovhannes (1003-1022) but there were most certainly religious buildings on the site prior to this period. On the Sunday nearest September 28 (always two weeks after the Exaltation) the Armenian Church celebrates the Feast of the Holy Cross of Varak (Varaka Khach) commemorating the 3rd century placement of an authentic relic of the true cross in Armenian soil at Varakavank. This is a feast of the true cross is unique to the Armenian Church. Although destroyed in the fighting of 1915 and afterwards, substantial ruins remain of this important site, including frescos and khachkars. From Varakavank we return to Van to take the boat to Lim (Adir) Island.

Adir (Lim) island with 17th century church ruins and Armenian cemetery with beautiful khachkars: Picnic lunch on the island. The Church on Lim, St George's, was built in 1305 with additions made in 1621 and again in 1766.



Varakavank before 1915



Adir (Lim) island

Day 2

Today we visit Carpanak Island (Gduts) from the city of Van by boat. Housing a monastery and the 12th century church of St. John the island commands spectacular views of the lake, Mt. Suphan (Sipan) and Van Castle. There are also ruins of a hermitage and monk's cells. There was also a well known scriptorium at the monastery during the 15th century and Gduts continued to function as a hermitage until 1915. Picnic lunch on the island with the opportunity for a swim in the lake.



St. John's Church, Gduts Island



Day 3

This day requires a degree of fitness as it involves a walk of about one hour on a moderate incline.

We will visit the churches of Garmir Vank (Gorundu) and St. Thomas' near the village of Kansak (Altinsac) both overlooking Lake Van. Picnic lunch.

Day 4

Today we will visit the islands of Arter and Aghtamar. The Monastery commemorates the vision of St. Gregory of Nareg in which, whilst in prayer at his monastery at Nareg, overlooking the lake, he saw the Virgin Mary with the Christ Child seated in the clouds above the island. On hearing a voice telling him to approach the vision, the saint rose and ran across the water to reach the island.

The Monastery originally had two churches; one, the Church of the Mother of God, survives and is clearly visible from the lake shore.

From Arter we will continue to Aghtamar and the sublime Church of the Holy Cross (Sourp Khach), the undoubted highlight of any visit to Lake Van.

Sourp Khach, the Church of the Holy Cross, was built as a part of a palace and religious complex between 915 and 921 King Gagik Ardzruni. Although it is one of the best known examples of Armenian architecture, it is also unique in that there is no comparable example in terms of the reliefs and decorative features that adorn the exterior of the building.



Garmir Vank



St. Thomas' at Kansak



Akdamar (Aghtamar) and the Church of the Holy Cross



Arterivank, the Monastery of the Mother of God of Arter



The Bible Story of Jonah and the Whale

Day 4 (Continued)

The grace and simplicity of the original structure is superb although it has been somewhat marred by later additions. A chapel was added in 1293 at the south eastern side of the church and dedicated to St. Stepanos and a further chapel was added at the north eastern side by the Catholicos Zakarias I (1296- 1336) while the section in front of this chapel serves as an entrance. Catholicos Tovmas (Thomas) built an addition at the front of the church producing a lower "split level" floor plan. At the end of the 18th century a belfry was added over the southern entrance which partly obstructs view of some reliefs. In spite of these later accretions, the church retains its air of grace and timeless simplicity. The reliefs on the exterior of the church, while naive in style, demonstrate great artistry and skill in both their conception and execution.

One of only a few Catholicosates (until 1916) Sourp Khach held the authority to consecrate bishops, elect church leaders and bless the holy oil (miuron) that was essential for religious rites such as baptism, marriage, funerals and the anointing of bishops.

Day 5

After breakfast at the hotel, depart from Van for your onward journey home.



David and Goliath



Lazarus being raised from the dead by Christ- from the interior of the church

Tour Summary: Pilgrimage to Van

5 Nights. 4 Days. Half Board accommodation (4*) and inclusive of transport by road and boat, all lunches on tour, museum/ site entries and guide.

Cost per person: E600 with reductions available based on group size

(There needs to be at least 7 people booked on this tour for it to proceed in this format due to the costs of chartering boats on Lake Van. We are happy to cater for small private groups but this would involve a surcharge)

This tour can be taken on its own or can be attached to any of our other regional tours. We are also happy to organise specialist interest or religious tours of Istanbul, European City of Culture for 2010, either at the beginning or end of your Pilgrimage tour of Lake Van

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