

An aerial photograph of a rural landscape. In the foreground, a dirt road winds through a field of dry, brownish vegetation. To the right, a small cluster of buildings, including a red-roofed structure and a stone tower, is visible on a slight rise. The middle ground shows a vast, flat expanse of land with patches of green and brown, likely agricultural fields. In the far distance, a range of blue mountains stretches across the horizon under a bright blue sky with scattered white clouds.

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Armenian monastery Khor Virap.

It was late November, and my friend and I sat on a bench at the Khor Virap Monastery in Armenia, gazing at the silhouette of Mount Ararat. Long a symbol of Armenia's cultural identity, the mountain now stands in quiet exile across the closed Turkish Armenian border. The scene carried a strange irony—this was the end of our two-week journey through the Caucasus, yet we found ourselves looking back, quite literally, at where it all began.

Our trip had started in Ankara, Turkey, with the goal of reaching Armenia overland. What could have been a straight-forward crossing turned into a necessary detour through Georgia, thanks to the ever-present realities of geo-

politics. The closed border between Armenia and Turkey made any direct route impossible.

Ten days before our visit to Khor Virap, 140 kilometres to the north, we stood among the ruins of Ani, the ancient capital of Bagratid Armenia, now located in Turkey's Kars province. Overlooking the ravine separating Turkey from Armenia, we were once again confronted by a closed border. Like the Turkish Armenian border at Khor Virap, the site was quiet, with little sign of military presence beyond a fence and a lone guard post on the Armenian side.

While it's not uncommon for borders to shift or for cultural heritage to be stranded beyond

Even the ruins that survived faced neglect, vandalism, or deliberate efforts to erase their Armenian identity.



View on the Turkish city of Kars.

modern boundaries, Armenia's case is particularly poignant. Once a sprawling empire stretching from the Caucasus to the Medi-terranean, Armenia's territories were gradually divided and absorbed by competing powers, including the Ottoman, Russian, and Persian Empires. Despite these changes, Armenian communities remained vibrant and integral to society, particularly within the Ottoman Empire, where they made significant cultural, economic, and political contributions.

This role came to a devastating end in 1915 with the onset of the Armenian Genocide. Over 1.5 million Armenians were systematically killed, and countless others were forced into exile, forming the modern Armenian diaspora.

Cities historically populated by Armenians—such as Kars, Van, and Erzincan—were emptied of their Armenian inhabitants and subsequently Turkified, erasing centuries of cultural and demographic history. Thousands of Armenian churches, monasteries, and monuments were destroyed, their stones repurposed or left to decay, and the cultural landscape of the region was

irrevocably altered. Even the ruins that survived faced neglect, vandalism, or deliberate efforts to erase their Armenian identity. Decades later, the genocide remains a point of contention, with its recognition still

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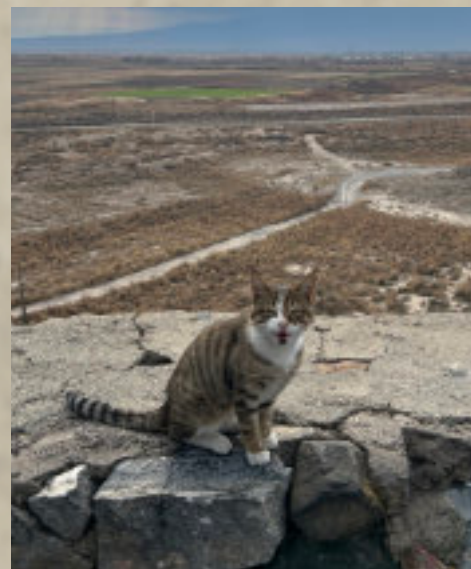
controversial in many parts of the world, particularly in Turkey. This denialism is chillingly encapsulated in Adolf Hitler's infamous remark a week before Nazi Germany's invasion of Poland: "Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?"

The closed border between Armenia and Turkey is not merely a geopolitical reality but a symbolic rift in history and identity. Following Armenia's independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, hopes of easing border restrictions were quickly dashed. In 1993, Turkey sealed its border and severed diplomatic ties in response to Armenia's support for

Nagorno-Karabakh during the First Nagorno-Karabakh War. Since then, the land border has remained closed, with sporadic and largely symbolic attempts at normalization.

In 2021, special envoys were appointed to reignite dialogue. Progress seemed promising in 2022, with limited agreements to resume flights between Istanbul and Yerevan. A rare moment of cooperation came in February 2023, when Armenian trucks carrying humanitarian aid crossed the closed


border to assist Turkish earthquake victims. Yet this goodwill was short-lived. By late 2023, domestic political pressures and Turkey's unwavering alliance with Azerbaijan stalled further efforts at reconciliation.



Armenian-Turkish border Khor Birap.

And what of the heritage sites stranded beyond these closed borders? The answer is layered and complex. Take the ruins of Ani, for instance—a city once hailed as the "City of 1,001 Churches" and a vibrant center of Armenian civilization. After decades of neglect, during which the ruins were left to deteriorate in a restricted military zone, preservation efforts have finally begun. However, these efforts often come with little acknowledgment of Ani's Armenian heritage, instead framing it as part of a broader, non-specific "Anatolian" legacy.

The Cathedral of Kars, built in the 10th century during the Bagratid Armenian Kingdom, was left abandoned for decades, intermittently used as a petrol depot, and was eventually repurposed into a mosque with the blessing of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Mount Ararat, visible across Yerevan on a cloudless day, stands physically out of reach, save for those who are willing to go via Georgia and obtain the necessary permits to climb the mountain from the Turkish side.

Overall, it represents a particularly poignant symbol of the Armenian experience—a land and history claimed, reshaped, and often rendered inaccessible by the forces of geo-politics and historical erasure. These cultural heritage sites being more than physical structures but repositories of memory, identity, and resilience. In terms of what the future holds for these sites, the outlook is as complex as the histories they represent. The future of Armenia's stranded heritage hinges on several factors, including regional geopolitics, international advocacy, and the evolving narratives around identity and historical justice, many of which lie beyond Armenia's direct control. 

Ruins of Ani in Eastern Turkey (left) and the Armenian-Turkish Border (right).

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