

Persian leopard research in Armenia

Largely undiscovered by tourism, Armenia is a land of rich heritage and culture, proud and hospitable people and breathtaking scenery. Armenia is also home to an incredible diversity of wildlife, including brown bear, grey wolf, lynx, wild boar and porcupine, set against a backdrop of pristine forests and stunning mountainous landscapes. This year the scientists and conservationists from Armenia are welcoming PTES supporters to visit their country and to spend time with them in their research to save one of Armenia's most charismatic large carnivores, the Persian Leopard.



Day-by-Day Itinerary

Day 1 The Adventure Begins

Arrive at London Heathrow Airport for your flight to Yerevan. On arrival, you will be welcomed by Alexandre Malkhasyan, a freelance researcher and wildlife expert, and his English and Armenian speaking wife, Naira Malkhasyan, who will take you to the Congress hotel in Yerevan (<http://www.congresshotelyerevan.com>).

Day 2 Journey to Eghegnadzor

After breakfast you will travel by mini bus to the town of Eghegnadzor, south of Yerevan.

During the journey you will stop at Noravank monastery, founded by Bishop Hovhannes, an abbot of Vahanavank who moved to the area in 1205.

You will also take this opportunity to visit a village in the Egheghis river canyon. Bezoar goats, a main prey species of the Persian Leopard, have been reintroduced here and members of the reserve team will help you look for them.

This evening the group will stay in a family home in Eghegnadzor town.

Day 3 Journey to Meghry

This morning you will travel to the very south of Armenia, to Meghry, where Alik and his team have carried out most of their research. During the journey you will have the chance to look at the spectacular mountainous scenery, which changes from dry and sparse to green and lush the further south you travel.

En route you will stop at Zorats-Qar, a megalithic observatory. It comprises of 204 rough-hewn stones, arranged in an elaborate layout and dating from some time prior to 2000 BC. Large lizards, up to 40cm in length, sometimes clamber over the stones. This species is called Caucasian agama and they range from Turkey to Pakistan.

You will spend tonight and the next 3 nights, in Meghry

Day 4 Boghkhhar reserve

Today you will explore the Boghkhhar reserve, looking for signs of the wildlife here, such as brown bears and porcupines.

You will be transported to the reserve in 4 wheel drive vehicles and then be able to explore more on foot.

Day 5 Leopard path

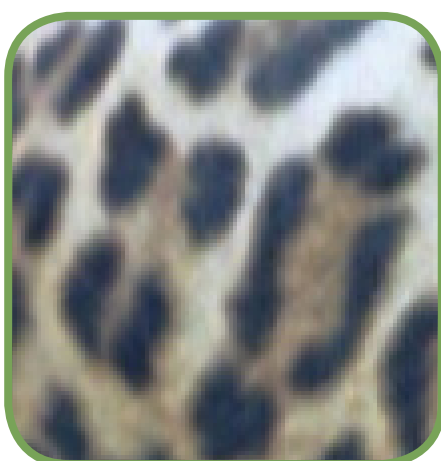
Today you will follow a leopard path through the Meghry range. As you walk you will be able to look for signs of the leopards, such as their scats, scrapes and footprints. You may also be able to spot bezoar goats, the leopards main prey species.

Day 6 Njuvady

After breakfast you will travel to Njuvady, the location for much of the current leopard research and conservation projects and also the main habitat of the leopard in the region.

Day 7 and 8 Shikahokh reserve

This morning you will say your goodbyes



to Meghry and travel to Shikahokh village, in the Shikahokh reserve. Over the next couple of days you will explore the reserve, taking in the spectacular scenery and looking for signs of leopards as well as visiting an ancient church and bridge.

During your time here you will stay in a family house in Shikahokh village.

Day 9 Journey back to Yerevan

Today you will travel back to Yerevan. En route you will visit Khor Virap, a monastery with the impressive back drop of Mount Ararat.

Khor Virap is famous above all else as the place where King Trdat III imprisoned St Gregory the Illuminator for 13 years in the late 3rd and early 4th century and it is still possible to visit the subterranean cell where he was imprisoned.

Once you have arrived at Yerevan, there will be a chance to rest in the Congress hotel or to explore this historic city. Believed to be as old as Babylon, the city of Yerevan grew up around the original fortress town of Erubuni, whose prosperity grew as a result of its location on the cross roads of a number of major trade routes.

Day 10 Lake Sevan

This morning you will travel to Lake Sevan. At 1,900m above sea level, Lake Sevan is one of the world's highest lakes. Its clear turquoise waters have earned it the name of 'the Emerald of Armenia'. As you walk around the mountain lake you may spot wetland birds, such as the endemic Armenian gull.

In the afternoon you will visit Garni temple, Armenia's only Greco-Roman-style building. You will enjoy a guided tour of the site and hear about its long and important history.

You will also visit the Geghard monastery, a UNESCO World Heritage site. Built into the side of a mountain in a deep, heavily wooded valley Geghard is a fantastic example of medieval Armenian architecture. Begun in 4th century AD it consists of the 'Mother of God' Cathedral and two chapels carved deep into the rock.

This evening you will have a farewell dinner in a local restaurant.

Day 11 Farewell

This morning your guides will take you back to the airport for your return flight home.

Please note this itinerary is a GUIDE ONLY. Due to circumstances beyond our control, as well as to maximise opportunities for seeing animals, the following itinerary may be subject to change. No sightings of species described are guaranteed as they are wild animals and we cannot restrict their natural movements, nor indeed would we wish to.

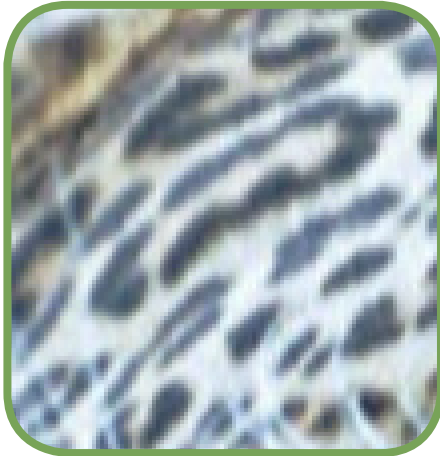
Participants must be reasonably fit as the tours will involve extended walking in the mountains and river valleys.

The country: Armenia

Armenia is home to around 3.7 million people, of which around one third live in the capital, Yerevan. It is a country packed with remarkable attractions, from mineral springs and mountain lakes to ancient cities and stunning architecture. It is only now that Armenia is no longer part of the Soviet Union that the rest of the world is beginning to appreciate its unspoilt beauty. Lively cafes and restaurants are numerous along many city streets, and the Armenians are welcoming visitors with open arms.

Geography

Smaller than Belgium, Armenia sits on an isthmus of land between the Black and Caspian seas. It is a landlocked



Leopards

Legal Status: Leopards living in the southern half of Africa are listed as Threatened under the U.S. Endangered Species Act. All leopard populations in Africa as well as the Middle East and Asia are listed as Endangered.

Description: Leopards are usually spotted, medium-sized members of the Pantherinae, the subfamily which includes all "roaring" cats: lions, tigers, jaguars and leopards, as well as clouded leopards, snow leopards and marbled cats. Leopard markings consist of solid spots, or clusters of spots called rosettes. In certain parts of their range, particularly southern Asia, black leopards also occur, although at close range, markings can still be seen. Overall leopards, in the case of males, average 150 lb (68 kg). Leopards from populations from Turkey, Iran, Armenia and Afghanistan are by far the largest, with males routinely reaching 200 lb. Although up to 27 subspecies are still recognized by some specialists, others have pared this number down to as few as eight; taxonomic research is still ongoing.

Range: The leopard is the most widespread member of the Family Felidae. Even today leopards can be found from throughout most countries of Africa south of the Sahara, across the Middle East to Southeast Asia as well as northward to the Russian Far East. Overall, leopards are most common in east, central and southern Africa and rarer elsewhere.

country, bordered by Georgia, Turkey, Azerbaijan and Iran. Armenia contains an endless chain of mountains, valleys and sweeping plateaux, interspersed with virgin forests, mountain lakes and waterfalls. About 90% of this mountainous country lies at elevations of over 1000m above sea level, and the ever changing terrain means you can travel from semi desert foothills to alpine meadows within a few miles.

History

Widely acknowledged as one of the 'cradles of civilization', Armenia was the first country in the world to adopt Christianity in 301 AD. Travelling through Armenia, you are constantly reminded of this in the architectural masterpieces and the embroidery of crosses (khachkars) carved into the mountainside. Another revolutionary turning point came with the invention of the Armenian alphabet in 405 AD by the scholar and philosopher Mesrob Mashtots, which initiated a golden age of Armenian literature and science.

History has thrown more than a few bad hands Armenia's way. Its location at the intersection of important trade routes and its rich natural resources ensured it came under the sway of various empires, including Roman, Byzantine, Arab, Persian and Ottoman. In 1920,

Armenia became part of the USSR, only to become an independent country again in 1991 with the break up of the Soviet Union.

With independence came an escalated struggle with neighbouring Azerbaijan over a piece of land called Nagorno-Karabakh, which is located within Azerbaijan, but populated by people of Armenian heritage. The natural gas that had been coming from Azerbaijan was cut off and fuel shortages got so bad that within a year more than 1.5 million trees were chopped down for fuel. The beautiful city parks in Yerevan lost most of their wooden park benches, leaving only the curved ironwork sides standing as a sad reminder of a terrible year. A cease-fire was signed in 1994 between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

In 1988, the country was hit by a massive earthquake which devastated the Spitak and Gyumri area in northwestern Armenia. Despite these difficulties, nothing has prevented Armenians from doing what they do best; celebrating their culture and enjoying their laid back lifestyle.

Food

Armenian cuisine is a wonderful fusion of flavours, and many dishes are spiced with a tantalizing combination of red pepper, basil, thyme, coriander and tarragon. A meal often starts with a wide selection

of hors d'oeuvres, including peppers and vine leaves stuffed with rice and meat, pickled and fresh vegetables, salty white sheep's cheese with fresh green herbs, and various kinds of cured meat (basturma). A lot of Armenian cooking focuses on barbecued meats, especially lamb, which is served as kebabs (shashlik) with flat bread (lavash), and also in a soup (bozbash) or stew.

Armenia has a rich selection of fruits and vegetables, and the dried apricots in

particular are famous for their life giving qualities. A variety of pastries and cheese cakes are available from street vendors. The production of wines suffered during the soviet anti-alcohol drive of the 1980's, but the business is now back on its feet. The best wines can be tested and purchased on the way from Khosrov Reserve to Southern Armenia. Armenian brandies in particular are excellent and locals are very happy to inform you that Winston Churchill would always insist on Armenian in preference to French brandy.

Essential traveller's information

DATES Friday 12th September - Monday 22nd September

GROUP SIZE 7 plus a PTES representative

ACCOMMODATION In Yerevan - hotel with ensuite rooms. All other accommodation will be in family houses. It will be often necessary to share a room and there will not be ensuite facilities.

FOOD Traditional Armenian fare, see above for more details. Vegetarians can be catered for with advance notice.

FITNESS You will get the most enjoyment out of the trip if you are able to walk for reasonably long distances at an unhurried pace.

CLIMATE Armenia has a continental, mountain climate. Our visit in September should coincide with perfect walking weather, with fresh days, little rain and a stunning backdrop of autumnal colours. Daytime temperatures will rise to between 25–30°C and at night, fall to 10°C.

TOUR COST £900 per person based on two sharing. Price includes accommodation, all meals, ground transportation and excursions, services of local guides. Not included are flights, travel insurance, drinks and spirits, souvenirs etc.

SINGLE ROOM SUPPLEMENT £90. Please note, we will try to find single travellers who would prefer to share a room someone to share with.

FLIGHT COST £500 including taxes. Prices are not guaranteed until all deposits have been paid and are correct at time of printing (February 2008).

TRAVEL INSURANCE Travel insurance is compulsory. You must have adequate travel and medical/rescue insurance to cover the whole of your journey. Please see our optional travel insurance offer for details.

PASSPORT, VISAS & VACCINATIONS Please ensure that you have a full 10 year passport, which is valid for at least six months after your return date. British Citizens require a Visa to enter Armenia.

You are advised to make sure your Polio, Tetanus-Diphtheria, and Hepatitis A are in date.

RESERVATION & INFORMATION To reserve your place please fill in the enclosed booking form and return with the necessary deposits to PTES. If you have any questions, please call 020 7498 4533 or e-mail enquiries@ptes.org

Research and conservation in Armenia

In Armenia, the Persian Leopard is listed as 'endangered' in the national Red Data Book and in the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. As an important flagship species for its habitat, Persian leopard research plays a crucial role in conserving Armenia's wildlife. Intensive research and conservation efforts were launched in 2000 to better understand the ecology of this rare and charismatic species and to promote their preservation. The efforts focus on the following issues:

- To carry out research and population monitoring programmes in order to obtain more information about the natural history of these vanishing cats in Armenia.
- To implement concrete conservation actions, such as limitation of human access to leopard habitats by the construction of road blocks.
- To raise public awareness in the local communities about the value of the leopard for nature and for people.

In December 2002, PTES funded Igor Khorosyan and Alik Malkhasyan in an exciting new project to determine the leopard population size and distribution in Armenia. They have succeeded to verify two new methods to determine leopard presence and distribution: scat counts and use of special lures. For more information about the teams work please visit <http://www.persianleopard.com>.