

# Faith Tourism in Armenia: Monasteries of Haghpat and Sanahin

Christianity played a crucial role in the development of Armenian art and architecture. The “classic” style developed in the 5th–7th centuries, but its further evolution came to an abrupt halt with the Arab occupation that began at the end of the 7th century. Armenia became independent again at the end of the 9th century and Armenian art was revived when the kingdom was consolidated and national identity re-established.



In this period two Byzantine monasteries were built – the monasteries of Haghpat and Sanahin. They were important centers of learning, housing some 500 monks, and bear eloquent testimony to the highest achievement of Armenian architecture. Today they are visited by hundreds of tourists and pilgrims eager to see and explore the two monasteries inscribed on the UNESCO’s World Heritage List.

“People are often surprised by the majestic and severe architecture of the monasteries. They are truly impressive,” said Vrezh, a tour guide of AdvenTour, that organizes tours around Armenia and Georgia.

Both monasteries are exceptional examples of the 'domed hall' ecclesiastical architecture that developed in Armenia from the 10th to the 13th centuries, which blended elements of both Byzantine church architecture and the traditional vernacular building style of this region.

“We were fortunate that in Haghpat, the priest gave us an expert and well-informed tour,” said John from UK who joined the AdvenTour’s tour Best of Armenia last year. “It was a unique opportunity. We wish we had had more knowledge of the history of these places,” he added.



The construction of the main church of the large fortified monastic complex of Haghpat, dedicated to the

Holy Cross, began in 966–67 and was completed in 991. The central dome rests on the four massive pillars in the side walls. The external walls are almost entirely covered by triangular niches. The apse contains a fresco of Christ Pantocrator.

The building is complete and in its original form, apart from some 11th- and 12th-century restorations, includes a large gavit through which access is gained to the church. The plan of the gavit, built in the second decade of the 13th century, differs markedly in style from the main church. A large narthex-type building used for meetings, teaching and funerary rituals is based on vernacular architecture in wood, with the roof supported on four pillars in the centre of the structure.

The Sanahin Monastery consists of a large group of buildings on the plateau above the Debet gorge. It is skillfully integrated into the impressive mountain landscape. The buildings are laid out on two rectangular axes, with their facades facing west.

The main church, built in the 10th century, is the Cathedral of the Redeemer. The emphasis of the cross-shaped interior is on the central nucleus and the harmony between the square base and the circular dome. The central dome in this case is surrounded by four two-storey sacristies or chapels. To the west there is a four-columned gavit built in 1181. Its plan is that of a cross inscribed in a square. Lighting is by means of an aperture in the centre of the dome. This is the earliest known example of this type of structure, which owes its origins to Armenian peasant dwellings consisting of square rooms with four free-standing pillars supporting the roof and a central hole to allow smoke to be dispersed.



The Church of the Mother of God (Astvatatzin), located to the north of the cathedral and connected with it by means of an open-ended vaulted passage, is the oldest building in the complex, built in 934 by monks fleeing from Byzantium. The large library (scriptorium), built in 1063, is square in plan and vaulted, with ten niches of varying sizes in which codices and books were stored. At the south-eastern corner of the library is to be found the small church dedicated to St Gregory the Illuminator. The 11th-century Academy of Gregory Magistros is located between the two main churches. The deep niches along the walls and the abundance of light give this building an exceptional spatial quality. The cemetery, located to the south-east of the main buildings, contains the late 12th-century mausoleum of the Zakarian princes.

AdvenTour is the pioneer of experiential travel in Armenia and the Caucasus. They create original travel experiences that provide real-life interaction with the colorful region and its people. Whether it's a classical sightseeing or a more active exploration, the travelers get up close and personal with places they are exploring.

Date: 2011-03-28

Article link:

<http://www.tourism-review.com/travel-tourism-magazine-faith-tourism-armenian-monasteries-of-haghpat-and-sanahin-article1483>