

# War Torn Nagorny Karabakh Transforms into Tourist Hot Spot

If you can look past the ghost towns full of mine fields and the occasional sniper fire, then the war ravaged Azerbaijani region of Nagorny Karabakh is actually a pretty decent holiday getaway. At least for the adventurous visitors.

Although it has a reputation for violence, foreign tourists have flocked to stateless, Armenian controlled area like never before. The reason why anyone would seek out a place like this to vacation is beyond all comprehension. But the experiences they share leave no doubt as to why they return.



Among those who dared to brave such a place is 23 year old French pharmacist, Jordan Nahoum. He states that he was aware of Nagorny Karabakh's bloody reputation when he first came. And yet amongst the crowds of fellow tourists from Turin to Taiwan, he found something totally unexpected.

As he moved along the hawkers in the town of Stepanakert selling travel souvenirs, he says, "I feel safe here. There are so many people from different countries, and everyone is so friendly and warm that I do not feel I am in any danger."

Armenian-backed separatists seized the area from Azerbaijan in a bloody battle that cost the lives of some 30,000 people. Among the relatively peaceful calm of the locals, it can be easy to forget that the area remains stuck on the verge of war, with both sides heavily rearming themselves. A 1994 ceasefire was signed between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which ended most of the major aggression. However, several attempts to get the two sides to make a peace deal have continued to end in failure.



Despite this fragile peace, local authorities have poured in massive amounts of funds towards the tourism industry. A move they say that has really paid off in recent years, with visitor numbers growing

by 40 percent annually.

Sergey Shahverdyan, head of the department of tourism for the separatist authorities notes that if they can continue to maintain such visitor growth, within the next five years tourism will have become the most fruitful project in their budget.

On the other side of the fence, Azerbaijan remains against the tourist industry of the region, which it says is illegally occupied threatening anyone who visits the place with being blacklisted. A move to open a new airport by Armenian authorities, which would open up Stepanakert to an even larger part of the world has been met with threats of war.



But for those who dare to brave the potential dangers, there is a land rich in history. All over ancient ruins can be found, including medieval monasteries and 18th century mosques. And the rugged nature of the landscape only adds on to the appeal for tourists.

Sergey says that the only problem they have is keeping adventure seekers away from the battle lines. "It can be easy to forget," he says "that in this peaceful area we are still locked in conflict."

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