

Southeastern Anatolia



No carpet shops. No bus parties. No tacky resorts. Southeastern Anatolia is another world. Past Gaziantep or Malatya, the gateways to the southeast, opportunities for off-the-beaten-track exploration abound. You'll instantly feel a 'last frontier' ambience and an overpowering sense of exoticism and adventure.

Here's the menu: jagged peaks, scorched plains, extinct volcanoes, vast lakes and historical cities. If one place had to be singled out, it would be pretty Mardin, perched on a hillside dominating Mesopotamia, midway between the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers. The holy city of Şanlıurfa, which is redolent of the Middle East, is making a challenge for that title. Other must-sees are Van, the most sophisticated city in eastern Turkey; Diyarbakır, with its mighty basalt walls; and Hasankeyf, blessed with a delightful setting. Nemrut Dağı (Mt Nemrut), topped with colossal ancient statues, never fails to impress.

This huge territory is also considered 'other' partially as it's the bastion of Kurdish identity and culture. Apart from some Arabic pockets, most towns and villages are predominantly Kurdish. Sure, there's an edgy roughness to the region, but this is part of the appeal. Relax. Gone is the rather sullen, oppressed atmosphere that prevailed several years ago, and very few areas are still off-limits. More often than not you'll be considered as a *misafir* (guest), not an outsider. The southeast has many treasures and few tourists. Dare to open Pandora's Box – it will win your heart, we swear. Come and experience it for yourself.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Lap up gooey pistachio baklavas at **İmam Çağdaş** (p596) in Gaziantep
- Witness the high emotions of pilgrims in **Şanlıurfa** (Urfa; p600), a holy city where prophets Job and Abraham left their imprints
- Feast on fresh trout at **Halfeti** (p600), then take a boat trip to **Rumkale** (p600), a magical place with poignant ruins overlooking the Euphrates
- Delight in the charming atmosphere of **Mardin** (p626) and drink in the views over Mesopotamia
- Hear yourself scream 'Cennet!' (paradise) in **Savur** (p630), the region's best-kept secret
- Text your friends that you're up on the 'thrones of the gods' – **Nemrut Dağı** (Mt Nemrut; p610) – a glass of wine in hand
- Cross sparsely populated mountain landscapes from Van to reach **Bahçesaray** (p643)



KAHRAMANMARAŞ (MARAŞ)

☎ 0344 / pop 543,900

Mmmm... ice cream! If you're heading to this neck of the woods from Cappadocia or the Mediterranean coast, a stop in Kahramanmaraş is mandatory for all ice-cream lovers. It produces an insanely good *dövme dondurma* (beaten ice cream), which is justly revered throughout Turkey. Its unique elasticity comes from *salep*, a flour made from wild orchid roots. It is made with so much jaw-sticking binder that it can withstand the city's intense summer heat and be displayed hanging on a hook like meat. If you find that it's not reason enough to stop here, there are a handful of cultural treasures that will keep you busy for at least a day, with not a tourist in sight. For a first taste (literally!) of southeastern Anatolia, Kahramanmaraş is ideal.

Sights

The **Ulu Cami** (Atatürk Bulvarı), built in Syrian style in 1502, has a tall and unusual minaret, which has survived the depredations of earthquakes and invaders relatively intact. The hilltop **kale** (fortress) is also worth investigating, if only for the smashing views of the city.

Then head back from here towards Kıbrıs Meydanı. In the streets to your left you'll find Kahramanmaraş' lively **bazaar**. Poke around this ancient labyrinth and you'll encounter men making saddles, beating vast copper vats and manufacturing buckets out of old tyres. Some readers have recommended the sections where Ottoman-style leather shoes are made and wood is carved. Just try to find them!

The passable **Kahramanmaraş Museum** (Azerbaycan Bulvarı; admission €1.25; ☎ 8am-noon & 1.30-5pm Tue-Sun) is 300m uphill from the otogar. Exhibits include a dozen fine Hittite stela covered in lively reliefs.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Belli (☎ 223 4900; fax 214 8282; Trabzon Caddesi; s/d €25/38; 🚿) Ideally located just to the southeast of Kıbrıs Meydanı, the Belli has been refurbished and features spruce rooms and prim bathrooms. Brilliant value.

Yaşar Pastanesi (☎ 225 0808; Trabzon Caddesi; ☎ 8am-10pm) We start salivating just thinking of Yaşar's truly indulgent *dondurma* (ice cream); you don't want to know what happens when we recall the platter of Turkish sweets. The décor is another draw: while the entrance

is super-slick, there's a cosy lounge decorated with various knick-knacks at the back. It's a skip and a jump from Hotel Belli.

Getting There & Away

From the otogar there are hourly minibuses to Gaziantep (€3, two hours, 80km), while five daily buses ply the stunning route to Kayseri (€9, 5½ hours, 291km).

GAZİANTEP (ANTEP)

☎ 0342 / pop 1,100,000

Believe us: if one day there's a Barcelona-like *movida* (a hedonistic and cultural revolution) in eastern Turkey, it will happen in Gaziantep. A fast-paced and forward-looking city, Antep vibrantly accommodates its traditional Mesopotamian culture with the buzz of thriving industry. One of the most desirable places to live in eastern Anatolia, Antep's beguiling résumé includes clusters of old stone houses sprinkled around the city centre, an imposing fortress, a row of vibrant bazaars, a burgeoning café culture, the biggest city park in eastern Turkey, active pedestrianised streets and taste-bud-tingling cuisine. The old and the new combine to form an attractive, civilised and welcoming confection.

And if all you want is to please your palate, Antep could prove to be your Shangri-la: it is reckoned to harbour more than 180 pastry shops and to produce the best *fıstıklı* (pistachio) baklavas you can gobble down in Turkey, if not in the world.

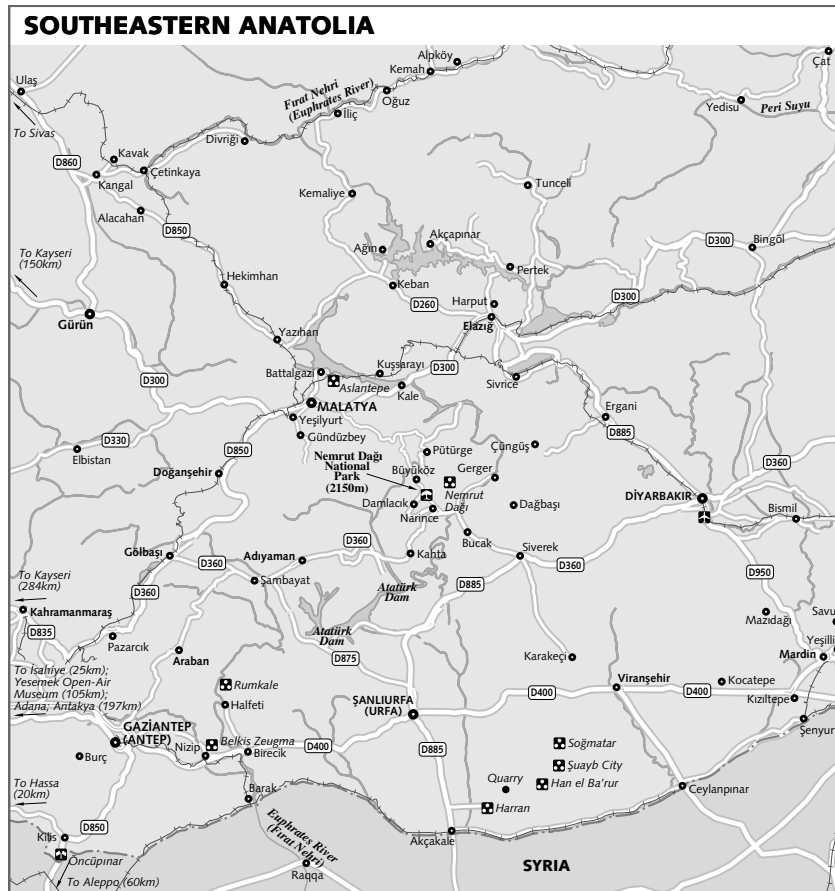
If you start your eastern Turkey trip in Gaziantep, be sure to make the most of its epicurean potential. Further east it's much more limited.

History

Before the Arabs conquered the town in AD 638, the Persians, Alexander the Great, the Romans and the Byzantines all left their imprints on the region. Proceeding from the east, the Seljuk Turks strolled into the picture around 1070.

Aintab (the former name of Gaziantep) remained a city of Seljuk culture, ruled by petty Turkish lords until the coming of the Ottomans under Selim the Grim in 1516.

During the Ottoman period, Aintab had a sizable Christian population, especially Armenians. You'll see Armenian churches, community buildings and mansions scattered throughout the city's historical core.



In 1920, as the victorious allies sought to carve up the Ottoman territories, Aintab was besieged by French forces intent on adding Turkish lands to their holdings in Syria and Lebanon. Aintab's fierce nationalist defenders surrendered on 8 February 1921. The epithet *Gazi* (War Hero) was added to Antep in 1973 to pay homage to the tenacious defence of the defenders.

Orientation

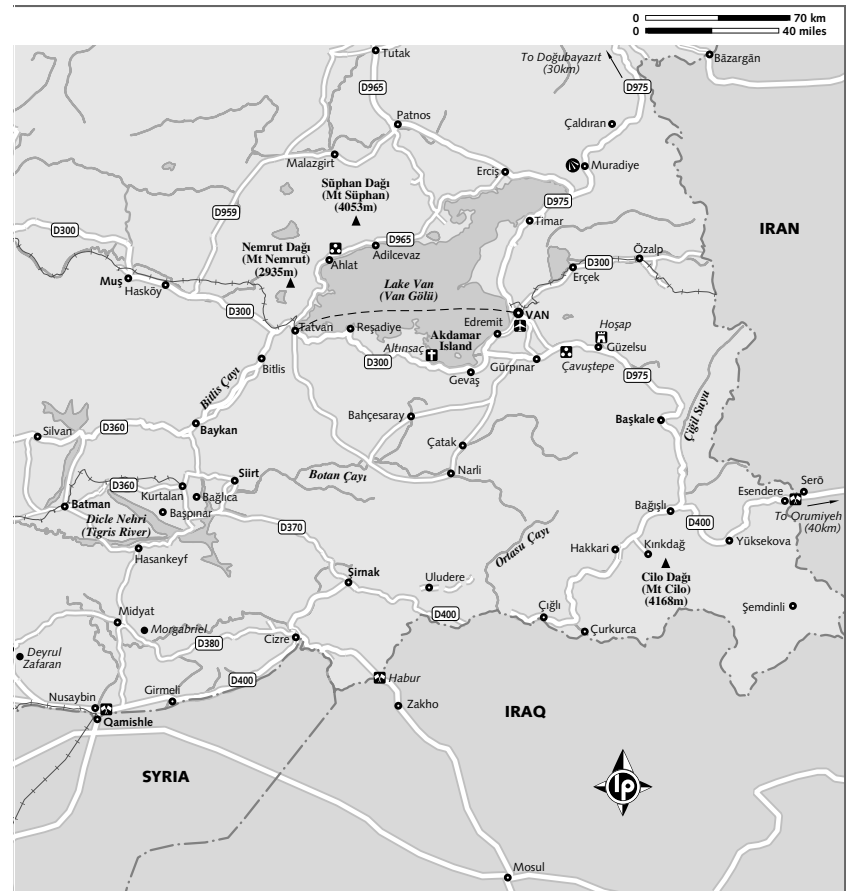
The centre of this fast-growing city is the intersection of Atatürk Bulvarı/Suburcu Caddesi and Hürriyet/İstasyon Caddesi, marked by a large equestrian statue of Atatürk and still called *hükümet konağı* (government house) square.

Most essentials are within walking distance of the main intersection, including hotels, banks with ATMs, bureaux de change, restaurants and sights; the train station is 800m north. The otogar is about 6km from the town centre.

Information

The post office, most banks with ATMs and exchange offices are on or around the main square.

Arsan (☎ 220 6464; www.arsan.com.tr; Nolu Sokak; 🕒 8am-7pm) This reputable travel agency sells tickets for domestic and international companies and can arrange various tours (from €30 per person), including Halfeti, Belkis-Zeugma and Yesemek. Ayşe, the helpful manager, speaks good English.



Nil Cybernet Cafe (Atatürk Bulvarı; per hr €0.60; 🕒 8am-11pm)

Olimpia Internet (Kayacı Sokak; per hr €0.60; 🕒 8am-11pm) Across the street from Hotel Uğurlu.

Tourist office (☎ 230 5969; 100 Yıl Atatürk Kültür Parkı içi; 🕒 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri) In a pinkish building standing in the city park, it has well-informed staff, who speak English and German. Brochures and maps available.

Sights

KALE DISTRICT

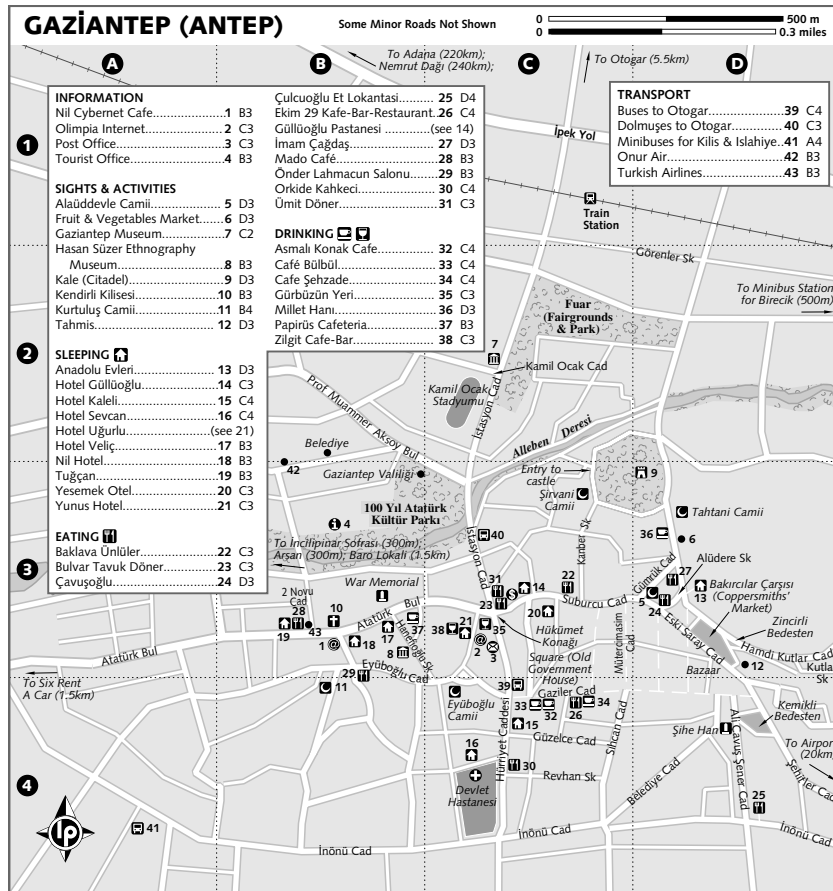
Get your bearings over the urban sprawl you're going to embrace by climbing up the unmissable **kale** (citadel; admission free; 🕒 8.30am-4.30pm Tue-Sun). The citadel is thought to have been constructed by the Romans. It was restored by Emperor Justinian in the 6th cen-

tury AD, and rebuilt extensively by the Seljuks in the 12th and 13th centuries.

At the foot of the citadel is an interesting quarter with a fruit and vegetable market, workshops where you can watch men beating copper into coffee pots and shiny bowls, old stone houses and little mosques. You can walk back into town through a partially covered **bazaar** area, looking out for saddle makers and other artisans at work. Coffee break? Try to find **Tahmis** (Buğdaypazarı Sokak), possibly the most atmospheric *kahvehane* (coffeehouse) in Gaziantep. Tell us what you think!

GAZİANTEP MUSEUM

The place to see some of the most magnificent mosaics in the world, the **Gaziantep Museum**



(☎ 324 8809; İstasyon Caddesi; admission €1.25; 🕒 8.30am–noon & 1–5pm Tue–Sun) has been spruced up, expanded and rearranged. Even if the idea of an archeology museum usually sends you to sleep, this place will amaze you with its collection of the many mosaics unearthed at the rich Roman site of Belkis-Zeugma, just before the new Birecik Dam flooded some of the site forever. It's impossible not to fall in love with the *Gipsy Girl*, from the 2nd century AD, reportedly the museum's highlight – we agree. Make also a beeline for the famous *Scene of Achilles being sent to the Trojan War*.

HASAN SÜZER ETHNOGRAPHY MUSEUM

Occupying a restored two-century-old Gaziantep stone house tucked away in a side

street off Atatürk Caddesi, the **Hasan Süzer Ethnography Museum** (admission €1.25; Hanıfioğlu Sokak; 🕒 8.30am–5.30pm Tue–Sun) is well worth a visit. A central *hayat* (courtyard) patterned with light and dark stone provides light and access to the rooms. Those on the ground floor were for service; those on the 1st floor made up the *selamlık*, quarters for male family members and their visitors; and those on the 2nd floor made up the *haremlık*, for female family members and their visitors.

100 YIL ATATÜRK KÜLTÜR PARKI

In search of a respite where you can flake out? Spitting distance from Gaziantep's traffic-snarled main thoroughfares, the **100 Yıl Atatürk Kültür Parkı** (admission free) is a lovely space in the

middle of the city and provides a green haven for nature lovers, families and courting 20-somethings.

KENDİRLİ KİLİSESİ

Wedged between modern buildings smack in the centre, this **church** (Atatürk Bulvarı) is a startling vision. It was constructed by French priests with the help of Napoleon III in 1860. Seen from a distance, the building looks quite featureless, but a closer inspection reveals a number of eye-catching decorative elements, including black-and-white medallions.

MOSQUES

Of Gaziantep's many mosques, the most impressive is the **Kurtuluş Camii**, built on a small hill off the main drag. Initially constructed as a cathedral in 1892, it features alternating black-and-white stone banding. Another mosque worth admiring is the **Alaüddevle Camii**, near the Copper Smith's market.

Sleeping

Gaziantep is rolling in accommodation, much of it on or near Suburcu, Hürriyet and Atatürk Caddesi. Most places to stay are business-oriented.

BUDGET

Yunus Hotel (☎ 221 1722; fax 221 1796; Kayacı Sokak; s/d €18/29; 🕒 📶) Vying with the Güllüoğlu for the accolade of Gaziantep's best budget hotel, the Yunus is kept in good nick, featuring a fine selection of tidy rooms with salubrious bathrooms and a working lift for easy access. Just one grumble: the breakfast room has no windows. It's in a tranquil side street, but close to the action.

Hotel Uğurlu (☎ 220 9690; fax 220 9627; Kayacı Sokak; s/d €18/29; 🕒 📶) Almost a carbon copy of the Yunus next door (same architect?), this is another boon if you don't want to stretch your wallet, with a fine selection of hanky-sized but cheerful rooms with all creature comforts.

Hotel Güllüoğlu (☎ 232 4636; fax 220 8689; Suburcu Caddesi; s/d €20/31; 🕒 📶) The Güllüoğlu has been smartened up and is now heralded as one of the best venues in this price bracket. Right in the heart of the action, it offers super clean rooms with double-glazing, the bathrooms are probably the cleanest-smelling this side of the Euphrates and the rooftop breakfast room proffers unabashed views over the citadel. And if you need to sate a sweet tooth, the

eponymous pastry shop is just on the ground floor – lucky you!

Hotel Veliç (☎ 221 2212; www.velicotel.com; Atatürk Bulvarı; s/d €20/31; 🕒 📶) This concrete lump on the main drag is certainly not a paean to design but at least it's serviceable, well maintained and tidy. Some rooms are more spacious than others, so check out a few before committing. Top marks go to the bright top-floor breakfast area, with smashing views over the city.

MIDRANGE

Hotel Kaleli (☎ 230 9690; fax 230 1597; Hürriyet Caddesi; s/d €28/39; 🕒 📶) Well, the furnishings here are a bit jaded but the bathrooms are kept in fine fettle, so we're not complaining.

Nil Hotel (☎ 220 9452; www.nilhotel.com in Turkish; Atatürk Bulvarı; s/d €25/40; 🕒 📶) After a complete make-over, this hulking tower on the main drag flaunts its rejuvenated look with pride. Rooms are snug and well appointed, and it's high on facilities, with satellite TV, air-con, wi-fi, lift and modern furnishings.

Hotel Sevcan (☎ 220 6686; fax 220 8237; Eyiyoğlu Mahallesi; s/d €28/42; 🕒 📶) With its marshmallowesque façade, baby-pink walls as well as bordello-red curtains and bedspreads, one wonders whether a lost designer once wandered into the Sevcan. Mind you, it's a pleasant change from the typical brown Turkish hotel rooms you'll be getting used to by now. Solid amenities complete this rosy picture.

Yesemek Oteli (☎ 220 8888; İsmail Sokak; s/d €30/42; 🕒 📶) Bang in the thick of things, the well-respected Yesemek rightly prides itself on its high level of service and amenities. Its well-equipped, comfortable rooms deliver good value for money if you can bargain a bit on the posted rates. Some rooms have balconies.

TOP END

Anadolu Evleri (☎ 220 9525; www.anadoluevleri.com; Köroğlu Sokak; s/d €60/80, 1-person/2-person ste €80/100; 🕒 📶) Enter here at your own risk: you may never feel like leaving! This bijou boutique hotel, a stone's throw from the bustling bazaar, is set in a splendid, old stone Gaziantep house built around a lovely courtyard. The 10 rooms exude bucketloads of charm, with beamed or painted ceilings, mosaic floors, secret passageways, and antique furniture and artefacts. The three gleaming suites, offering a fine sense of individuality, are designed to spoil you rotten. At the end of the day, treat yourself to a tippie (wine or rakı) and a platter

of cheese in the cosy wine lounge and you'll be in seventh heaven. To top it off, your host, Tim Schindel, speaks excellent English and is a mine of local knowledge.

Tuğçan (☎ 220 4323; fax 220 3242; Atatürk Bulvarı; s/d €68/84; 📍 📞 📺 📷) After having fallen for the Anadolu Evleri, it's hard to praise the Tuğçan, which pales in comparison, with its massive proportions and lack of charm. That said, this behemoth scores high on amenities, with conference rooms, a brace of bars and restaurants, a swimming pool and a reception area resembling a concourse.

Eating

Gaziantep is a nirvana for food-lovers, with a good selection of eateries and pastry shops to suit all palates and budgets. Along Suburcu Caddesi and Atatürk Bulvarı, banks and mobile-phone shops jostle with a number of shops crammed with a mind-reeling choice of Turkish sweets. Some recommended treasure troves are listed here, but it's by no means exhaustive – do your own research and let's share our views on the squishiest baklavas in the city!

Bulvar Tavuk Döner (Istasyon Caddesi; mains €1-2; 🕒 11am-10pm) This central hole-in-the-wall would be a mere blip on busy İstasyon Caddesi, were it not for its well-executed chicken sandwiches and melt-in-your-mouth *gözleme* (savoury pancakes). If the weather permits, grab one and walk down the street to the 100 Yıl Kültür Parkı.

Çulcuoğlu Et Lokantasi (☎ 231 0241; Kalender Sokak; mains €2-4; 🕒 11.30am-10pm Mon-Sat) If there were a döner or kebab Oscar, this Gaziantep institution would be a serious contender. It has been whipping up supertasty meat dishes since 1975 to a loyal stream of customers. Business is brisk here, and it's more lively than intimate. It's a bit difficult to find, tucked away down a narrow side street off İnönü Caddesi (about 20m from a little mosque) but worth searching for.

İmam Çağdaş (☎ 231 2678; Kale Cıvırı Uzun Çarşı; mains €2-5; 🕒 8.30am-9.30pm) We don't mean to spoil it by raving too much. However, baklava purists swear this is the best place in Turkey to sample pistachio baklava – we agree that there's good reason to claim this. It also churns out scrumptious kebabs. The secret? Fresh, carefully chosen ingredients and the inimitable 'Çağdaş touch' (see the boxed text, opposite). Expect queues and occasional groups of tourists (the

word is out). A typical Gaziantep experience at the worst, an orgasm for the palate at the best. Since 2006 the restaurant moved into a new, bigger building across the street. Less authentic? Let us know.

Çavuşoğlu (☎ 231 3069; Eski Saray Caddesi; mains €2-5; 🕒 11am-9pm Mon-Sat) This sprightly outfit rustles up dishes that will fill your tummy without emptying your wallet. The menu roves from the usual kebabs to faultlessly cooked pide. A toothsome baklava will finish you off sweetly. Yum.

Ümit Döner (☎ 231 1790; İstasyon Caddesi; mains €3-5; 🕒 11am-10pm) If you're pining for a yummy *İskender* kebab, Ümit's signature dish, this is the place to go. Portions are copious, the meat is perfectly slivered and the salads are fresh. Sandwiches and rice are also available.

Ekim 29 Kafe-Bar-Restaurant (☎ 230 2766; www.ekim29.com in Turkish; Gaziler Caddesi; mains €3-5; 🕒 9am till late) Set in a converted old house, this mellow place feels light years away from the grinding pace of Gaziler Caddesi and time-warps you back to the past century, with dark wood furniture, cushions and wooden beams. Foodwise, it focuses on simple meals, such as salads, chicken dishes, appetisers and grills. There's live music every evening. Yes, it's licensed!

Mado Café (☎ 221 1500; Atatürk Bulvarı; mains €3-5; 🕒 8am-11pm) It's difficult for even the staunchest dieter to pass by the tantalising display of treats offered by this hip pastry shop and ice-cream parlour. You can also nosh on snacks and sip explosively fruity cocktails. It occupies a classy building with parquet floors and high ceilings, west of the main square.

İncilipinar Sofrası (☎ 231 9816; 100 Yıl Atatürk Kültür Parkı İçi; mains €3-6; 🕒 10am-10pm) Hmm, will it be *çoban salata* (salad), *altı ezmeli* (a stew with tomato sauce served in a clay pot) or *ali nazik* (aubergine puree with yogurt and ground meat)? Set on the edge of a leafy park, this widely acclaimed venue serves savoury fare in seductively cosy rooms complete with cushions, low tables and old artefacts. It's also a good place to puff a nargileh (water pipe). Alas, it's not licensed – there's a mosque nearby.

Baro Lokali (☎ 339 4140; 100 Yıl Atatürk Kültür Parkı; mains €3-6; 🕒 10am-9pm Mon-Sat) It may be off the beaten track, at the western end of the 100 Yıl Kültür Parkı, but you will no doubt be glad you made the pilgrimage. The leaf-dappled outdoor terrace is perfect for escaping sticky

THE ÇAĞDAŞ' (MAGICAL) TOUCH

Oh dear, for any sweet tooth, discussing the qualities of a perfectly crafted baklava with Burhan Çağdaş himself amounts to talking about soccer with Zinedine Zidane in person. Every day more than two tons of the divine stuff is sent throughout the country – even to the presidency!

Burhan Çağdaş is the owner of the eponymous İmam Çağdaş pastry shop and restaurant in Gaziantep, which vies for the title of most iconic eatery in southeastern Anatolia, if not in Turkey. Since 1887 five generations of Çağdaş have been tormenting carb-lovers. In 120 years İmam Çağdaş, the founder, and his descendants have refined the art of making baklava – layered filo pastries with honey and nuts. The pistachio baklava has reached cult status. Any secret, Mr Çağdaş?

'I carefully choose the freshest ingredients imaginable. Everything is organic. I know the best oil and pistachio producers in the Gaziantep area. The nature of the soil here gives a special aroma to pistachio. All my cooks use techniques from days of yore and we use wood for cooking, not electricity. The ovens are built with special stones. And we don't go into mass production. Quality is paramount.'

How can one judge whether a baklava is fresh?

'It's simple: when it's in your mouth, it should make like a *kshhhh* sound.'

He's right. We'll never forget the typical *kshhhh* that characterises a fresh baklava when we gobbled these damn little things. If you want to whet your palate before your trip, check out www.imamcagdas.com – you'll understand why we are hooked forever. So will you be!

Gaziantep on a hot summer day. The kitchen produces fireworks of flavours, from choice meat dishes to lip-smacking mezés. Rejoice! You can order beer, raki or wine with your meal, and there's live music most evenings in summer. We'll be back.

Other temptations in the centre include:

Baklava Ünlüleri (☎ 232 2043; Suburcu Caddesi; 🕒 8am-8pm) Another treasure-trove for cake and sweet lovers with – you guessed it – excellent *fıstıklı* (pistachio) baklavas.

Güllüoğlu Pastanesi (☎ 231 2282; Suburcu Caddesi; 🕒 8am-8.30pm) A perennial fave, with the usual winning trypich: squidgy pistachio baklava (we can't have enough of these little treats!), flavoursome ice creams and good tea.

Önder Lahmacun Salonu (☎ 231 6455; Eyuboğlu Caddesi; 🕒 8am-9pm) A short bag-haul from Kurtulus Cami. The pide and *lahmacun* (Turkish-style pizza) are healthily prepared right in front of you. Pizza never tasted this good.

Orkide Kahkaci (☎ 231 2277; Hüriyet Caddesi; 🕒 8am-9pm) The tantalising scent of freshly baked cakes and biscuits wafting from the door will perk up even the most jaded proboscis.

Drinking

Cafe Şehzade (☎ 231 0350; Gaziler Caddesi; snacks €1-2; 🕒 8.30am-8pm) The décor alone is worth a gander: the atmospheric Şehzade is housed in an 800-year-old converted *hamam* (bathroom).

The food, mostly snacks, is so-so, but it's a good place to meet students and sip a cup of tea. Drop by in late afternoon, when there's live music.

Gürbüzün Yeri (Hüriyet Caddesi; juices from €0.70; 🕒 8.30am-11pm) Ultrafresh fruit juices are the deal in this buzzing hole-in-the-wall, so put some bounce in your step with a glass of *atom* (an explosive mixture of milk, honey, banana, hazelnuts and pistachio) or *şalgam*, a bitter but refreshing drink made from root vegetables, garlic and hot peppers. *Lezzetli* (delicious)!

Asmalı Konak Cafe (☎ 231 4105; Gaziler Caddesi; 🕒 8am-8pm) A soothing venue set in a converted house, on a lively pedestrianised street. Nab a table on the balcony and watch the world stroll by with a glass of ayran in hand.

Café Bülbül (☎ 221 2616; Gaziler Caddesi; h8am-8pm) Another peaceful refuge. It lures in students in search of a pleasant spot to flirt and relax over a soft drink.

Zilgit Cafe-Bar (☎ 230 0490; Kayacak Sokak; 🕒 9am-11pm) This cosy place full of nooks, crannies, carpets and cushions features live music every evening. Soft drinks and alcohol are available. It's near the Yunus Hotel.

Millet Hanı (Uzun Çarşı; snacks €1-3; 🕒 8am-10pm) A pleasant venue. Where else could you sip a cup of tea or sup a soup in a five-century-old converted caravanserai? The whole experience

THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Papirüs Cafeteria (☎ 220 3279; Noter Sokak) By far our favourite. Housed in a historic mansion off Atatürk Caddesi, this treasure-trove is perfect for unwinding after a bout of sightseeing. It has bags of character, and features a leafy courtyard and several rooms with ancient frescoes and old furniture. It's a good place to make eye contact with students of both sexes.

is a bit marred by the gaudy beach umbrellas in the courtyard.

Getting There & Away**AIR**

Gaziantep's Oğuzeli airport is 20km from the centre. An airport bus departs from outside each airline office 1½ hours before flights (€3).

Cyprus Turkish Airlines (www.kthy.net) Two weekly flights to Ercan (Northern Cyprus), from €50.

Onur Air (☎ 221 0304; www.onurair.com.tr; Kazaz İş Merkezi; ☎ 7am-7pm) Two daily flights to/from İstanbul (from €50; 1¼ hours).

Pegasus (www.flypgs.com) Daily flights to/from İstanbul (from €45) and to/from Izmir (from €45).

Sun Express (www.sunexpress.com.tr) Three weekly flights to/from Izmir (from €45, 1¼ hours).

Turkish Airlines (☎ 230 1563; www.thy.com; Atatürk Bulvarı; ☎ 8.30-5.30pm Mon-Fri & 8.30am-1pm Sat) Two to three daily flights to/from İstanbul (from €50, 1¼ hours).

These airline companies don't have offices in Gaziantep but any travel agency, including Arsan (see p592), can issue tickets in behalf of these companies

BUS

The otogar is 6km from the town centre, although if you arrive by minibus it'll usually weave through the town centre before heading out there. Frequent city buses (€0.60) rattle between the otogar and the town centre. To get to the otogar, catch the bus in Hürriyet Caddesi, north of Gaziler Caddesi, or a dolmuş about 400m further north in İstasyon Caddesi. A taxi costs about €6.

There's no direct bus to Syria; you'll have to go to Kilis first, then take a taxi to the border or to Aleppo. Minibuses to Kilis (€3, 65km) leave every 15 minutes from a separate

minibus terminal on İnönü Caddesi. This terminal also handles minibuses to İslahiye (€3, 95km). Minibuses to Birecik (€3, 46km) have their own terminal on İpek Yolu, east of the centre.

Details of some daily services are listed in the table, below.

SERVICES FROM GAZİANTEP'S OTOGAR

| Destination | Fare | Duration | Distance | Frequency (per day) |
|---------------|------|----------|----------|----------------------------|
| Adana | €7 | 4hr | 220km | frequent buses |
| Adıyaman | €5 | 3hr | 162km | frequent minibuses |
| Ankara | €20 | 10hr | 705km | frequent buses |
| Antakya | €7 | 4hr | 200km | frequent minibuses |
| Diyarbakır | €12 | 5hr | 330km | frequent buses |
| İstanbul | €21 | 15hr | 1136km | several buses |
| Kahramanmaraş | €4 | 1½hr | 80km | frequent buses & minibuses |
| Mardin | €12 | 6hr | 330km | several buses |
| Şanlıurfa | €5 | 2½hr | 145km | frequent buses |
| Van | €18 | 12hr | 740km | several buses |

CAR

You may need a car to see some of the surrounding sights, especially Yesemek Open-Air Museum (opposite). Try Arsan (p592) or **Sixt Rent A Car** (☎ 336 7718; Ordu Caddesi), 1.5km west of town.

TRAIN

The comfortable *Toros Ekspresi* leaves for İstanbul via Adana and Konya at 2.30pm on Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday (€20, 27 hours). To get to Aleppo and Damascus by train, you'll need to go to İslahiye to catch the twice-weekly train to Syria (about five hours from İslahiye, €5)

AROUND GAZİANTEP Kilis

☎ 0348 / pop 70,700

Go there now! The word is not out – yet. Easily accessible from Gaziantep, Kilis beckons

the savvy with its convivial atmosphere and bristles with splendiferous historical buildings scattered around the city centre: mausoleums, caravanserais, *hamams*, mosques, fountains, *konaks* (old houses)... Most ancient buildings are in the process of being restored, including the Adliye, the Mevlevi Hane, the Tekye Camii, the Paşa Hamamı, the Cuneine Camii, the Çalılık Camii and the Kadı Camii... Mosey around the narrow streets off the main drag and you'll find them, among a number of others.

Take a minibus from Gaziantep and allow a day in this surprising city to do it justice. Should you want to stay overnight here, the **Hotel Arca** (☎ 814 08343; Zekerya Korkmaz Bulvarı; s/d €31/45; ☎ ☎ ☎) is the best shut-eye option, with bathrooms so clean you could eat off the floor. If hunger beckons, there's a pastry shop and an ice-cream parlour on the ground floor.

There are frequent minibus services to Gaziantep (€3, 65km, one hour). Minibuses to İslahiye depart every hour (€3, 82km, 1½ hours). For Aleppo in Syria, take a taxi to Öncüpınar at the border (€6, 7km). From the Syrian side of the border, you can pick up a taxi on to Aleppo.

Yesemek Open-Air Museum

One of the star attractions in the Gaziantep area, the **Yesemek Open-Air Museum** (Yesemek Açık Hava Müzesi; admission €1.25; ☎ dawn-dusk) is a vast hillside studded with some 300 Hittite stones and statues. Even if you're not a fan of the Hittites, you will find a visit rewarding, if only for the picturesque setting.

The unique use of the site is intriguing. From around 1375 BC this hillside was a Hittite quarry and sculpture workshop. For over 600 years it churned out basalt blocks, weighing anywhere from 1.5 to eight tonnes, carved into lions, sphinxes and other designs. Today, the pieces are left in various states of completion, abandoned at the end of the Hittite era.

Yesemek is a long 113km haul from Gaziantep. Getting there by public transport is not really convenient. First, you'll need to catch one of the half-hourly minibuses from Gaziantep to İslahiye (€3, 1½ hours), in time for the 1.30pm (no Sunday service) minibus to the site, which is 25km southeast of İslahiye. You'll need to pay for the minibus to bring you back to İslahiye (around €15 to €20) the

same day, since they usually stay overnight in the village.

It's easier to hire a car or a taxi in Gaziantep (about €60). You could do a scenic loop, taking in Kilis, Yesemek and İslahiye. From Kilis, follow the D410 to Hassa/Antakya, then bear right onto the gravel road marked for Yesemek.

Belkis-Zeugma

The city of Belkis-Zeugma was once an important city. Founded by one of Alexander the Great's generals around 300 BC, it had its golden age with the Romans, and later became a major trading station along the Silk Road. Unfortunately, it has lost much of its appeal since most of the site disappeared beneath the waters of the Birecik Dam. Despite numerous excavations, all that is left of its former grandeur is a pile of rubble and a couple of dilapidated pillars. Nor are there any explanatory signs. Most interesting mosaics and finds have been transferred to Gaziantep Museum, where some are on display.

The site is about 50km from Gaziantep and 7km off the main road to Şanlıurfa (it's signposted), but there's no minibus service. If you don't have your own vehicle, you may think it's too much effort getting there for too little reward.

Birecik

About 46km east of Gaziantep, right by the Euphrates River (Fırat Nehri), Birecik is one of the few nesting places in the world of the eastern bald ibis (*Geronticus eremita*), a bird species that, sadly, hovers on the brink of extinction.

The birds are tagged, released into the wild, and supposed to be here only during the breeding season (February to July), but you can usually see at least a few of the homebodies year-round.

If you've got your own vehicle, getting to the breeding station is reasonably simple. Follow the riverbank north for about 1km looking out on the right for the brown-and-yellow sign marked **Birecik Kelaynak Üretim İstasyonu** (Birecik Ibis Breeding Station; ☎ 7am-7pm).

If feathered creatures are not your thing, you can visit the ruins of the **fortress** that is perched on the hill.

If you get stuck in Birecik, head to the **Mirkelem Otel & Restaurant** (☎ 0414-661 0500; s/d €17/28; ☎ ☎ ☎), on the highway just west

of the Euphrates, where the coaches stop. This motel-like establishment is not exactly a honeymoon destination but at least it's clean, serviceable and well organised.

The best place for a good meal is **Kıyı Restaurant** (☎ 661 0117; Karşıkaşa; mains €3-7; 🕒 8am-9pm), right by the Euphrates, about 500m from Mirkelam Otel (it's signposted). Picture this: an open-air terrace overlooking the river, great views of the fortress, lots of shade and patently fresh fish. Wash it all down with a glass of beer – this is all the therapy you need after a half-day's sightseeing.

Any of the buses travelling between Şanlıurfa and Gaziantep can drop you at Birecik, so you can easily make a stop-off visit on your way through without having to stay overnight (provided you're ready to leave by early afternoon). At Birecik ask to be let off at the *kale* (fortress), by the river. Then you'll have to walk 1.3km to the breeding station or hire a taxi.

The small otogar is near the vegetable market, by the river, at the foot of the fortress. There are frequent minibuses to Şanlıurfa (€3, 1½ hours) and Gaziantep (€3, one hour). For Halfeti (€2, 45km), there are regular minibuses on weekdays, but very few services at weekends. A taxi ride to Halfeti costs about €26.

Halfeti & Rumkale

Need a break in a secluded place? Then Halfeti is for you. This peaceful village lies about 40km north of Birecik, right on the bank of the Euphrates. It's the perfect spot to unwind before tackling the busy cities of Şanlıurfa to the east or Gaziantep to the west. The setting couldn't be more appealing, with attractive houses that trip down the side of the hillside above the river. Sadly, with the construction of the Birecik Dam, half of the city was inundated, including several archaeological sites, and part of the population had to be resettled.

There are a couple of places to soak up the atmosphere. For a cup of tea or a fresh fish from the lake, the leafy **Siyah Gül Restaurant** (☎ 0414-751 5235; mains €3-5), overlooking the lake, is a sound option and alcohol is served. The licensed **Duba Restaurant** (☎ 0414-751 5704; mains €2-6), further down, at the end of the village (just follow the road that goes along the lake), is even better, with a shady pontoon on the water. Should you decide to stay overnight,

the welcoming **Şelaleli Konak** (☎ 0414-751 5500; d per person €10) fits the bill, but there are only three rooms (one with private bathroom). Breakfast is extra (€2).

From Halfeti, boat trips to nearby **Rumkale** can easily be organised (about €30 for the whole boat) – a definite must-do. This ruined fortress sits atop a rocky bluff overlooking the river and is accessible by a short but steep path. It features a mosque, a church, a monastery, a well and other remains, all in a relatively good state of preservation. And, man-oh-man, the views are just lovely.

Halfeti is relatively easily accessible by public transport on weekdays. Hourly minibuses ply the route between Birecik and Halfeti (€2).

ŞANLIURFA (URFA)

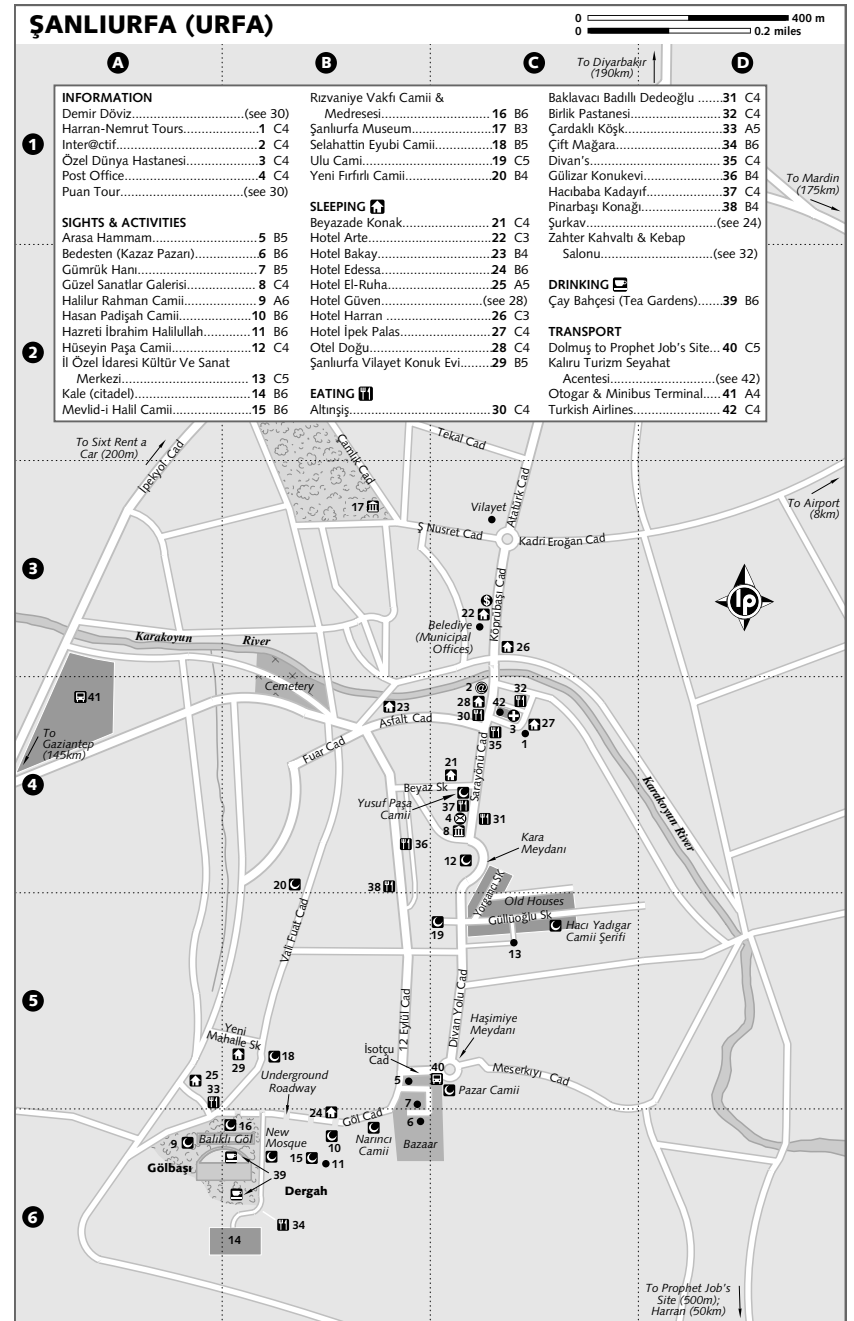
☎ 0414 / pop 463,800 / elevation 518m

Mystical and pious Şanlıurfa (the Prophets' City; also known as Urfa) casts a spell on anyone who visits this great pilgrimage town, one of the greatest religious and historical sites in Turkey – it's light years away from nearby Gaziantep in this respect. It also has a distinctly Middle Eastern flavour, courtesy of its proximity to Syria. Women cloaked in black chadors elbow their way through the odorous crush of the bazaar streets; moustached gents in *şalvar* (traditional baggy Arabic pants) swill tea and click-clack backgammon pieces in a shady courtyard; pilgrims feed sacred carp in the shadows of a medieval fortress... If you're after touches of exoticism, you'll be amply rewarded here. Urfa also has its share of the mundane – out on the highway the traffic is noisy and unruly, and the suburbs are disfigured by the ubiquitous concrete eyesores. Regardless of this, it's a must-see for any visitor to the southeast.

History

The Hittites imposed their rule over the area around 1370 BC. After a period of Assyrian rule, Alexander the Great hit Urfa. He and his Macedonian mates named the town Edessa, after a former capital of Macedonia, and it remained the capital of a Seleucid province until 132 BC, when the local Aramaean population set up an independent kingdom and renamed the town Orhai. Orhai finally succumbed to the Romans, as did everywhere hereabouts.

Edessa pursued its contrary history by speedily adopting Christianity (c 200



before it became the official religion of the conquerors.

Astride the fault line between the Persian and Roman Empires, Edessa was batted back and forth from one to the other. In 533 the two empires signed a Treaty of Endless Peace – that lasted seven years. The Romans and Persians kept at it until the Arabs swept in and cleared them all out in 637. Edessa enjoyed three centuries of peace under the Arabs, after which everything went to blazes again.

Turks, Arabs, Armenians and Byzantines battled for the city from 944 until 1098, when the First Crusade under Count Baldwin of Boulogne arrived to set up the Latin County of Edessa. This odd European feudal state lasted until 1144 when it was conquered by a Seljuk Turkish emir.

The Seljuk Turkish emir was succeeded by Saladin, then by the Mamluks. The Ottomans, under Selim the Grim, conquered most of this region in the early 16th century, but Edessa did not become Urfa until 1637 when the Ottomans finally took over.

As for its modern sobriquet, Urfa became Şanlıurfa (Glorious Urfa) in 1984. Since 1973, when Heroic Antep (Gaziantep) was given its special name, the citizens of Urfa had been chafing under a relative loss of dignity. Now that their city is 'Glorious', the inhabitants can look the citizens of 'Heroic' Antep straight in the eye.

Orientation

Except for inside the bazaar, it's fairly easy to find your way around Urfa. You'll see the citadel to the right as you enter the town along the highway from Gaziantep. The otogar is about 1km from the centre. If you take a taxi to the centre, ask for the *belediye* (town hall) in order to reach most hotels; or for the Balıklı Göl, or Gölbaşı, for the mosques, pools and bazaar. The Balıklı Göl is 1.5km from the otogar.

Along different stretches the city's main thoroughfare is called Atatürk, Köprübaşı, Sarayönü and Divan Yolu Caddesi.

Information

The post office and most banks with ATMs are on or around Sarayönü Caddesi.

Demir Döviz (Sarayönü Caddesi; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri & 8am-1pm Sat) Private exchange office. Keeps longer hours than the banks.

Harran-Nemrut Tours (☎ 215 1575, 0542-761 3065; Köprübaşı; ozcan_aslan_teacher@hotmail.com; ☎ 9am-

6pm) Just behind the Özel Dünya Hastanesi. In the absence of an efficient tourist office, this is the most reliable source of information, a small travel agency efficiently run by Özcan Aslan, a local teacher. He speaks very good English and is a mine of local information. He also runs tours to nearby sites.

Inter@ctif (Sarayönü Caddesi; per hr €0.60; ☎ 9am-11pm) Across the street downstairs, almost opposite the Özel Dünya Hastanesi.

Özel Dünya Hastanesi (☎ 216 2772; Köprübaşı) A well-equipped private hospital.

Puan Tour (☎ 216 0295; Sarayönü Caddesi; ☎ 8am-7pm Mon-Sat) An agent for Atlasjet and Fly Air.

Sights

CITADEL

A defining city landmark, the **kale** (admission €1.25; ☎ 8am-8pm) on Damlacık hill, from which Abraham was supposedly tossed, is an absolute must-see. Depending upon where you go for your information, it was built either during Hellenistic times or by the Byzantines or during the Crusades or by the Turks. In any case, it's vast, looks magnificent when floodlit and can be reached via a flight of stairs or a tunnel cut through the rock. On the top, the most interesting things are the pair of columns that local legend has dubbed the Throne of Nemrut after the supposed founder of Urfa, the biblical King Nimrod. But really, you come up here for the spectacular views over Urfa.

GÖLBAŞI

Legend had it that Abraham (İbrahim), who is a great Islamic prophet, was in old Urfa destroying pagan gods one day when Nimrod, the local Assyrian king, took offence at this rash behaviour. Nimrod had Abraham immolated on a funeral pyre, but God turned the fire into water and the burning coals into fish. Abraham himself was hurled into the air from the hill where the fortress stands, but landed safely in a bed of roses.

The picturesque Gölbaşı area of Urfa is a symbolic recreation of this story. Two rectangular pools of water (Balıklı Göl and Ayn-i Zeliha) are filled with supposedly sacred carp, while the area west of the Hasan Pađışah Camii is a gorgeous rose garden. Local legend has it that anyone catching the carp will go blind. Consequently, these appear to be the most pampered, portly fish in Turkey.

On the northern side of Balıklı Göl is the elegant **Rızvaniye Vakfı Camii & Medresesi**, with a much-photographed arcaded wall, while

at the western end is the **Halilur Rahman Camii**. This 13th-century building, replacing an earlier Byzantine church, houses the site where Abraham fell to the ground. The two pools are fed by a spring at the base of Damlacık hill, on which the castle is built.

DERGAH

Immediately to the southeast of the pools and the park is the Dergah complex of mosques and parks surrounding the colonnaded **courtyard of the Hazreti İbrahim Halilullah** (Prophet Abraham's Birth Cave), built and rebuilt over the centuries as an active place of pilgrimage. Its western side is marked by the **Mevlid-i Halil Camii**, a large Ottoman-style mosque. At its southern side you'll see the entrance to the **Hazreti İbrahim Halilullah** (Prophet Abraham's Birth Cave; admission €0.40) in which legend has it that the Prophet Abraham was born. He lived here in hiding for his first seven years – King Nimrod, responding to a prophecy he'd received in a dream, feared that a newly born would eventually steal his crown, so he had all babies killed. This is still a place of pilgrimage and prayer, with separate entrances for men and women.

To the north, on Göl Caddesi, is the **Hasan Pađışah Camii** (1460), but it's of little interest inside. All of these buildings are open to visitors but, as they are important places of worship, you should be modestly dressed.

MOSQUES

Urfa's Syrian-style **Ulu Cami** (Divan Yolu Caddesi) dates from the period 1170–75. Its 13 *eyvans* (vaulted halls) open onto a spacious forecourt with a tall tower topped by a clock with Ottoman numerals.

At Kara Meydanı, the square midway between the *belediye* and Dergah, is the **Hüseyin Paşa Camii**, a late-Ottoman work built in 1849.

On Vali Fuat Caddesi, which leads up from behind Gölbaşı to the Cevahir Konuk Evi, is the enormous, beautifully restored **Selahattin Eyubi Camii**. It was once St John's church, as you can see by the altar, and is adorned with carvings. Follow Vali Fuat Caddesi north and you'll notice the **Yeni Fırırlı Camii**, another finely restored building, once the Armenian Church of the Twelve Apostles.

ŞANLIURFA MUSEUM

Up the hill to the west of the *vilayet* (provincial government headquarters) building, off

Atatürk Caddesi, the **Şanlıurfa Museum** (Şanlıurfa Müzesi; admission €1.25; ☎ 8am-5pm Tue-Sun) captivates visitors with a journey into Eastern Turkey's archaeological evolution.

The gardens contain various sculptures, and on the porch as you enter are several mosaics, the most interesting showing assorted wild animals. Inside, noteworthy artefacts include Neolithic implements, Assyrian, Babylonian and Hittite relief stones and other objects from Byzantine, Seljuk and Ottoman times.

BAZAAR

After visiting the museum, ponder on your new-found knowledge with a wander through Urfa's **bazaar** (☎ daylight Mon-Sat). Spreading itself east of the Narıncı Camii, it is a jumble of streets, some covered, some open, selling everything from sheepskins and pigeons to jeans and handmade shoes. It was largely built by Süleyman the Magnificent in the mid-16th century. The best idea is just to dive in and inevitably get lost. Women should be on guard for lustful hands.

One of the most interesting areas is the **bedesten** (*kazaz pazarı*), an ancient caravanserai where silk goods were sold. Today you'll still find silk scarves sold here, as well as gaudy modern carpets and the lovely blue and red scarves worn by local women. Right by the *bedesten* is the **Gümrük Hanı** (customs depot), with a delightful courtyard that is always full of tea- or coffee-swilling moustached gents playing backgammon. A very authentic ambience.

Buried in the lanes of the bazaar are several ancient and very cheap **hamams**, including **Arasa Hamamı**.

OLD HOUSES

Delve into Urfa's back streets and you'll find examples of the city's distinctive limestone houses with protruding bays supported on stone corbels. Although many of these houses are falling into decay (and some are far too large for modern families), a few have been restored, most notably the house of Hacı Hafızlar, near the PTT, which has been turned into an art gallery, the **Güzel Sanatlar Galerisi** (☎ 8am-5.30pm Mon-Fri, noon-4pm Sat). The art here is usually pretty ordinary but the courtyards and fine carved stonework are a joy to behold and the cusodians don't mind you wandering through.

You can also pop into the **Şurkav** (Balıklı Göl Mevkii), a local government building near the entrance to Hotel Edessa, where the courtyard is draped with greenery.

In the market area, try to find the **İl Özel İdaresi Kültür Ve Sanat Merkezi**, another splendid house restored in 2002. It was once a church.

PROPHET JOB'S SITE

Although it's not the highlight of a trip, Prophet Job's Site is worth the bus ride for its historic significance. It's about 1km south-east of the Gölbaşı district. Legend holds that Eyyüp (Job) was a prosperous and devout man, thus despised by İblis (Satan). İblis took away Job's health, wealth and family, to force him into a crisis of faith. Instead, Job retreated to the **cave** (Eyyüp Peygamber Makamı) you see here, where he waited patiently in devotion to God. After seven years, God restored his possessions and health, the latter by means of a freshwater spring that Job unleashed by thumping the ground with his heel. Pilgrims come here to wish for the patience of Job and to restore their health with the spring water collected from a well.

Entrance is free but a small donation is expected. The nearby mosque features exquisitely tiled archways.

Regular 'Eyyüp Pey' minibuses departing from outside the Urfa bazaar will drop you right by the gate to the compound.

Sleeping BUDGET

With few foreign tourists passing through, most Urfa hotels cater for pilgrims and businessmen. Unmarried couples can be made to feel unwelcome and solo female travellers even more so. The Hotel Bakay is often recommended as a comfortable place for solo women; unmarried couples should feel welcome at Hotel İpek Palas. Ignore the touts for the pensions who may accost you at the bus station or in the centre – we've had some bad reports about these pensions, especially from women.

Ötel Doğu (☎ 215 1228; Sarayönü Caddesi; s/d €9/12) The Doğu is not exactly decked out for honeymooners but the spare rooms are acceptable and the private bathrooms passed the school-marm's cleanliness inspection. It's also well positioned for access to cafés and restaurants. Be prepared for a sweaty night in summer for there's no air-con.

Hotel Bakay (☎ 215 8975; fax 215 1156; Asfalt Yol Caddesi; s/d €14/22; ☎ ☎) One of the best ventures if you're watching the pennies. This jolly good hotel wins no prize for character but sports well-equipped (if smallish) rooms with salubrious bathrooms, some with TV and balcony. Some are brighter than others, so ask to see a few. It's popular with Turkish families – a good sign for female travellers. For your information: 'If you like to have a make-up call please press 9' – this was written on the telephone. Free wi-fi.

Hotel İpek Palas (☎ 215 1546; Köprübaşı Dünya Hastanesi Arkası; s/d €17/25; ☎ ☎) Heave a sigh of relief: there's air-con in this good-value, well-maintained hotel with compact rooms. The fake-painted brick walls in the corridors are a tad cheesy, but who cares? It's tucked away in a side street behind the private *hastane* (hospital).

MIDRANGE

Hotel Güven (☎ 215 1700; www.hotelguven.com; Sarayönü Caddesi; s/d €17/28; ☎ ☎) All's shipshape at the welcoming Güven, although it's not exactly a home away from home. The rooms are reassuringly Air-Wicked and the bathrooms have been smartened up.

Beyzade Konak (☎ 216 3535; www.beyzadekonak.com in Turkish; Sarayönü Caddesi, Beyaz Sokak; s/d €18/30; ☎ ☎) Another utterly charming 19th-century stone building featuring a soothing courtyard and several comfy Ottoman-style lounges. The Beyzade bills itself as *Urfadaki Eviniz* (your home in Urfa), and rightly so. Bring earplugs, though – the *sıra geceleri* (live music evenings) can be noisy.

Hotel Arte (☎ 314 7060; www.otel-arte.com.tr; Köprübaşı Cad; s/d €28/39; ☎ ☎) An excellent addition to Urfa's sleeping scene. If you've had your fill of cheesy fixtures and mismatched furniture, the Arte is the perfect salve, with smart rooms, exceedingly clean bathrooms, large double-glazed windows overlooking the main drag, parquet flooring, wi-fi access and contemporary trappings. A winning formula.

Cevahir Konuk Evi (☎ 215 4678; www.cevahirkonukevi.com; Yeni Mahalle 5k; s/d €28/50; ☎ ☎) Formerly the Şanlıurfac Vilayet Konuk Evi, this nearly-but-not-quite boutique hotel is set in a delightful 19th-century stone building in a peaceful area. It's a smart place to rest your head – staff wear Ottoman costumes, and the central courtyard with fountain offers

a delightful café-restaurant – but it's disappointing to find the bedrooms furnished in more or less standard Turkish hotel style.

TOP END

Hotel Edessa (☎ 215 9911; fax 215 5030; Balıklı Göl Mevkii; s/d €34/50; ☎ ☎) Don't expect a whole lotta lovin' when you're checking in or out – just an ace position overlooking the Gölbaşı and well-organised, if a bit anonymous, rooms with all mod cons. Angle for a room with a view of the Gölbaşı. It's a popular option with tour groups.

Hotel Harran (☎ 313 2860; fax 313 4918; Köprübaşı Cad; s/d €37/56; ☎ ☎ ☎) If fancy décor is out of the question but hygiene and wide-ranging facilities are high on your list, then the Harran could be worth it. This tower-block hotel features rosy rooms with spick-and-span bathrooms. Added bonuses include an on-site restaurant, a *hamam* (men only) and a swimming-pool.

Hotel El-Ruha (☎ 215 4411; www.hotelelruha.com in Turkish; Balıklı Göl; s/d €63/84, ste €125; ☎ ☎) Much too massive to be awarded the status of boutique hotel, the five-star El-Ruha is the swankiest hotel in town nonetheless, with shiny-clean rooms and a host of top-notch facilities, including a sauna, a *hamam* and a fitness centre. Alcohol is forbidden on the premises.

Eating & Drinking

It pays to be a bit careful what you eat in Urfa because the heat makes food poisoning more likely. Make sure whatever you choose is hot and freshly cooked. Alcohol is usually not served. Urfa's culinary specialties include: Urfa kebab (skewered chunks of lamb served with tomatoes, sliced onions and hot peppers); *çiğ köfte* (minced uncooked mutton); and *içli köfte* (deep-fried mutton-filled meatballs covered with bulgur).

Baklavacı Badıllı Dedeoğlu (☎ 215 3737; Sarayönü Caddesi; ☎ 8am-9pm; pastries €0.50-1) If there's heaven in this holy city, it just might be Dedeoğlu. Cognoscenti swear it concocts the most flavoursome baklavas in Urfa.

Birlik Pastanesi (☎ 313 1823; Köprübaşı Caddesi; ☎ 8am-10pm; pastries €0.50-1) Come here to re-energise over a bountiful selection of cakes and other goodies.

Hacıbaba Kadayıf (Sarayönü Caddesi; ☎ 8am-9pm; pastries €0.50-1) Near the Yusuf Paşa Camii, this is where you can sample *peynirli kadayıf* (cheese-filled shredded wheat doused in honey).

Zahter Kahvaltı & Kebap Salonu (Köprübaşı Caddesi; mains €2-3) This cute place is a delicious respite from the usual Turkish breakfast. Here you'll enjoy gooey honey and cream on flat bread, washed down with a large glass of çay (tea) or *ayran* (yogurt drink) – all for around €2.

Divan's (☎ 215 8552; Sarayönü Caddesi; mains €2-3; ☎ 8am-10pm) Off the main drag, this restaurant-café-fast-food joint is a judiciously laid-out complex, where you can nosh on burgers, pizzas, ready-made meals and kebaps. With its fountain and breezy outdoor seating, it's a great place to loll after a day's sightseeing. For an energy bolt, slug down a freshly squeezed orange juice.

Çift Mağara (☎ 215 9757; Çift Kubbe Altı Balıklıgöl; mains €2-5; ☎ 10am-10pm) The dining room is directly carved into the rocky bluff that overlooks the Gölbaşı, but the lovely terrace for dining alfresco beats the cavernous interior (views!). It's famed for its delicious *içli köfte* and, with prices starting at €2, they are a filling option if you're suffering from wallet stress. If only it served alcohol, life would be perfect.

Pınarbaşı Konağı (☎ 215 3919; 12 Eylül Caddesi; mains €2-5; ☎ 8am-10pm) Almost a carbon copy of Gülizar Konukevi, this eatery has bags of character. It occupies a wonderful old Urfa house where you dine on floor cushions in a series of rooms set around a courtyard. There's live music in the evening.

Altınış (☎ 215 4646; Sarayönü Caddesi; mains €3-5; ☎ 11am-10pm) Business is brisk here as the lunchtime punters pile in for their daily fill-up. You'll find all the usual suspects. Judging by the *sarma beyti* (a kind of kebab), the servings are voluminous, so bring an empty tum.

Gülizar Konukevi (☎ 215 0505; www.gulizarkonukevi.com; Karameydanı Camii Yanı; mains €4-5; ☎ 8am-10pm) Good food and traditional surrounds. Use your chance to try its speciality, *şillik*, a type of walnut pancake. The cosy setting is an added bonus.

Çardaklı Köşk (☎ 217 1080; www.cardaklikosk.com in Turkish; Vali Fuat Caddesi, Tünel Çıkışı; mains €4-6; ☎ 9am-11pm) This also occupies an old house but one that has been so restored it feels almost new. Here too there are several rooms varying in shape and size arranged around the courtyard. But the real wow is the view over Gölbaşı. We wish the food and service were equally impressive.

Cevahir Konuk Evi (☎ 215 9377; www.cevahirkonukevi.com; Yeni Mahalle Sokak; mains €4-8; ☎ 8am-10pm)

URFA'S WILD NIGHTS *Jean-Bernard Carillet*

Nightlife in Urfa? In the City of Prophets, this may sound a contradiction in terms but, to my great surprise, I found the evenings in Urfa the hottest in eastern Anatolia, with high-octane dancing almost every night. What makes the city tick is the *sıra geceleri* ('traditional nights') that are held in upscale restaurants. Picture *şark odası* (lounges) where guests sit, eat, sing and dance. After the meal, a live band plays old favourites that keep revellers rocking and dancing to their hearts' content. I found myself lured into one of the lounges – 'Gel, gel' (come, come)! I couldn't decline the invitation to join the dance. Folksy evenings never looked so fun. That evening I thanked my lucky stars that nobody took a picture of my body contortions to the sounds of Kurdish flute on the 'dance floor'... If you want your moment of glory too, the best venues to check out are Beyzade Konak, Gülizar Konukevi, Pınarbaşı Konağı and Cevahir Konuk Evi. Send us the pictures!

Another popular option with Turkish tourists, the Cevahir uses a winning combination: a lovely setting (think: a well-tended garden and an old mansion with several comfy lounges), live music in the evening and tasty dishes. If you think it's time to give your palate some much-needed diversity, opt for the *karişık peynir tabağı* (platter of cheese). A true pleasure.

If all you want is to relax over a cup of tea in leafy surrounds, head for the various *çay bahçesis* in the Gölbaşı park – a great experience any time of the day.

Getting There & Away**AIR**

Turkish Airlines (☎ 215 3344; www.thy.com; Kalıru Turizm Seyahat Acentesi, Sarayönü Caddesi; 🕒 8.30am-6.30pm) has five weekly flights to/from Ankara (from €65, 1½ hours). A bus service leaves from outside the office for the airport, 1½ hours before the departure (€2).

Atlasjet (www.atlasjet.com) operates four weekly flights to/from İstanbul (from €44, two hours). **Fly Air** (www.flyair.com.tr) has three weekly flights to/from İstanbul (from €43).

BUS

The otogar, on the main highway serving the southeast, receives plenty of traffic, but most buses are passing through, so you must take whatever seats are available. Buses to the otogar can be caught on Atatürk Bulvarı (€0.40). Taxis usually ask €4 for the short hop between the otogar and the main drag. Details of some daily services are listed in the table, right.

Minibuses to Akçakale, Harran, Birecik, Kahta and Adiyaman (€4, two hours) leave from the minibus terminal beside the

otogar. If you're travelling to Syria, you'll need to catch a minibus to Akçakale (€2, one hour), then catch a taxi over the border to Raqqqa.

SERVICES FROM ŞANLIURFA'S OTOGAR

Destination Fare Duration Distance Frequency (per day)

| | | | | |
|------------|-----|------|--------|-----------|
| Adana | €10 | 6hr | 365km | frequency |
| Ankara | €22 | 13hr | 850km | 5-6 |
| Diyarbakır | €6 | 3hr | 190km | frequency |
| Erzurum | €17 | 12hr | 665km | 1 |
| Gaziantep | €5 | 2½hr | 145km | frequency |
| İstanbul | €28 | 20hr | 1290km | a few |
| Malatya | €8 | 7hr | 395km | 1 |
| Mardin | €6 | 3hr | 175km | a few |
| Van | €18 | 9hr | 585km | 2 |

CAR

For car hire try **Kalıru Turizm Seyahat Acentesi** (☎ 215 3344; fax 216 3245; Sarayönü Caddesi, Köprübaşı; 🕒 8.30am-6.30pm), the Turkish Airlines agency, or **Sixt Rent A Car** (☎ 315 0440; fax 315 0307; 🕒 8am-7pm).

HARRAN

☎ 0414 / pop 6900

Don't skip Harran. It seems certain that this settlement is one of the oldest continuously inhabited spots on Earth. The Book of Genesis mentions Harran and its most famous resident, Abraham, who stayed here for a few years back in 1900 BC. Its ruined walls and Ulu Cami, crumbling fortress and beehive houses are powerful, evocative sights and give the city a feeling of deep antiquity. Traditionally, locals lived by farming and smuggling, but the coming of the Atatürk Dam looks set to change that as cotton fields sprout over

what was once desert. Many seemingly poor villagers are actually quite comfortably off, with huge TVs and ghetto-blasters in their houses.

On arrival in Harran you are officially expected to buy a ticket (€1.25), but there may not be anyone in the booth to collect the money. If anyone in the castle tries to charge you, insist on being given the official ticket.

You will probably need to hire a local guide to tour the sites, but also to ward off the flocks of children demanding coins, sweets, cigarettes, ballpoint pens and 'presents'. The guides will want around €5 for their services.

History

Besides being the place of Abraham's sojourn, Harran is famous as a centre of worship of Sin, god of the moon. Worship of the sun, moon and planets was popular in Harran, and at neighbouring Soğmatar, from about 800 BC until AD 830, although Harran's temple to the moon god was destroyed by the Byzantine emperor Theodosius in AD 382. Battles between Arabs and Byzantines occupied the townsfolk until the coming of the Crusaders. The fortress, which some say was built on the ruins of the moon god's temple, was restored when the Crusaders approached. The Crusaders won and maintained it for a while before they too moved on.

Sights**BEEHIVE HOUSES**

Harran is famous for its beehive houses, the design of which may date back to the 3rd century BC, although the present examples were mostly constructed within the last 200 years. It's thought that the design evolved partly in response to the lack of wood for making roofs and partly because the ruins provided a ready source of reusable bricks. Although the Harran houses are unique in Turkey, similar buildings can be found in northern Syria.

The **Harran Kültür Evi**, within walking distance of the castle, is set up to allow visitors to see inside one of the houses and then to sip cold drinks in the walled courtyard afterwards. The **Harran Evi** is similar. You can also stay at these places.

KALE

On the far (east) side of the hill, the crumbling *kale* stands right by some beehive houses. Although a castle probably already existed

on the site from Hittite times, what you see now dates mainly from after 1059 when the Fatimids took over and restored it. Originally, there were four multiangular corner towers, but only two remain. Once there were also 150 rooms here, but many of these have caved in or are slowly filling up with silt. Make sure you see the **Eastern Gate** with carvings of chained dogs, here to protect the city.

WALLS & MOSQUE

The crumbling stone **city walls** were once 4km long and studded with 187 towers and four gates; of these only the overly restored **Aleppo Gate**, near the new part of town, remains.

Of the ruins inside the village other than the *kale*, the **Ulu Cami**, built in the 8th century by Marwan II, last of the Umayyad caliphs, is most prominent. You'll recognise it by its tall, square and very un-Turkish minaret. It's said to be the oldest mosque in Anatolia. Near here stood the first Islamic university, and on the hillside above it you'll see the low-level ruins of ancient Harran dating back some 5000 years.

Sleeping

Most people visit from Urfa on a day trip.

Harran Evi (☎ 441 2020; beds with half board €15) and **Harran Kültür Evi** (☎ 441 2477; beds with half board €15) Some people have slept in a beehive dormitory or under the stars on raised *tahtlar* (sleeping thrones) to catch the breeze, but it's ultra-basic and particularly uncomfortable when it's scorching hot.

Bazda Motel (☎ 441 2001; fax 441 2145; s/d/ste €18/35/40; 📍) On the road as you come into town, this is a reliable option. It has been designed to mimic the beehive houses – a brave but somewhat misdirected attempt. The airy rooms have spotless bathrooms and air-con, but are overpriced.

Getting There & Away

Getting to Harran is straightforward and you don't really need to take a tour. Minibuses (€2, one hour) leave from Urfa's otogar approximately every hour and will drop you at the new part of Harran near the *belediye* and PTT – it's a 10-minute walk to the old part.

If you're driving to Harran, leave Urfa by the Akçakale road at the southeastern end of town and go 40km to a turn-off to the left (east). From there, it's another 10km to Harran.

AROUND HARRAN

Although the sites beyond Harran are missable if you're pushed for time, it would be a shame not to see the astonishing transformation wrought on the local scenery by the GAP project (see the boxed text, below) – field upon field of cotton and barley where once there was just desert.

To get around the sites without your own transport is virtually impossible unless you have limitless time. Even with your own car the roads are rough and poorly signed, and it is easy to go astray on the dusty tracks, so the tours offered by Harran-Nemrut Tours (p602) are certainly worth considering. For €25 per person for four or more people you visit Harran, Han el Ba'rur, Şuayb City and Soğmatar, with a chance to take tea with villagers. Expect a simple taxi service. You may need to take a picnic lunch, or you might have a village lunch-stop. It's useful to have a pocketful of change for the tips you'll be expected to give.

Han el Ba'rur

About 10km east of Harran you can visit a deep quarry. Locals will tell you the stones quarried here were used to build the walls of Harran. A further 20km east are the remains of the Seljuk **Han el Ba'rur**, a caravanserai built in 1128 to service the local trade caravans. Although some restoration work has been done here, there are not enough visitors to justify any services (or tickets for that matter). The stones in the **Bazda Caves** nearby are also supposed to have been used for the construction of Harran.

Şuayb City

Another 12km northeast of the caravanserai are the extensive remains of Şuayb City, where hefty stone walls and lintels survive above a network of subterranean rooms. One of these contains a mosque on the site of the supposed home of the prophet Jethro. Once again, don't expect to find any services, but it's a good idea to bring a torch (flashlight) and to wear sturdy shoes.

Soğmatar

About 18km north of Şuayb, the isolated village of Soğmatar is a very atmospheric, eerie place, surrounded by a barren landscape with bare rocks and ledges. On one of the ledges there was once an open-air temple, where sacrifices were made to the sun and moon gods, whose effigies can be seen carved into the side. This open-air altar was the central, main temple. On the top of the rock are assorted ancient Assyrian inscriptions. Like Harran, Soğmatar was a centre for the cult worship of Sin, the moon god, from about AD 150 to 200.

Standing on the summit of the structure, you can see remains of other temples on the surrounding hills. There were supposedly seven in all.

Once again there are no services at Soğmatar, although villagers will no doubt be happy to point out the sites.

KAHTA

☎ 0416 / pop 60,700

Dusty Kahta isn't the most atmospheric place to spend your holiday, but it's well set up for

visits to Nemrut Dağı, with plenty of tours on offer and a decent selection of hotels. If you'd prefer somewhere more inspiring head straight to Karadut (p613).

A good time to visit would be 25 June when the three-day **International Kahta Kommagene Festival** starts, with music, folk dancing and all sorts of fun and games. All the hotels will be filled with tour groups, so it's wise to book ahead at this time.

You can check your emails at the **Medy@ Bilgisayar Internet Cafe** (Mustafa Kemal Caddesi; per hr €1; ☎ 9am-11pm).

Sleeping

Pension Kommagene (☎ 725 9726; fax 725 5548; Mustafa Kemal Caddesi; camp sites per person €3, s/d with shared bathroom €6/9, s/d €12/17; 🚻) While the no-fuss rooms don't set hearts aflutter, this guesthouse is the most commendable option if the bottom line counts. The more expensive air-con rooms with private bathrooms are markedly better. Self-caterers can use the kitchen, and campers can pitch their tent in the partially shady garden. Add €3 for breakfast and €6 for dinner. It's noted for being a bit pushy with its tours to Nemrut.

Hotel Nemrut (☎ 725 6881; fax 725 6880; Mustafa Kemal Caddesi; s/d €23/39; 📺) This high-rise lump with a glass-panelled façade is popular with tour groups, which is not a bad sign. Spruce rooms with iffy toilets and well-sprung mattresses are the order of the day here. A few more smiles at the reception would sweeten the deal.

Zeus Hotel (☎ 725 5694; www.zeushotel.com.tr; Mustafa Kemal Caddesi; camp sites per person €6, s/d €25/45; 📺 🚻 🍷) All the perks of a three-star, including a licensed bar and a restaurant. The rooms may not be glamorous, but they're spotless, largish and pleasantly appointed. Fancy a dip? There's a well-tended pool to cool off in when it's sweltering. Campers can pitch their tent on the parking lot and have their own ablution block.

Eating

With your own wheels you may prefer to drive along Baraj Yolu, the continuation of Mustafa Kemal Caddesi, to the vast lake formed by the Atatürk Barajı, where there is a handful of licensed restaurants (a taxi would charge about €4 to get there).

Urfalim Lahmacun Salonu (☎ 725 6305; Mustafa Kemal Caddesi; mains €2-3; ☎ 8am-9pm) The lure?

Pizzas fresh from the oven. Get stuffed for minimal coinage at this enticing eatery, about 250m west from the main junction.

Papatya Restaurant (☎ 726 2989; Mustafa Kemal Caddesi; mains €2-3; ☎ 8am-10pm) Don't expect culinary sophistication in this snappy joint next to Hotel Nemrut, just the usual suspects honestly prepared and served by efficient waiters. There's no menu – just point at what you want.

Kahta Sofrası (☎ 726 2055; Mustafa Kemal Caddesi; mains €2-4; ☎ 8am-10pm) Off the main intersection, this is the most obvious place to line the stomach without breaking the bank. Order a tasty kebab or a well-prepared pide, and you'll leave with a smile on your face.

Akropalitan (☎ 725 5132; Baraj Yolu; mains €3-6; ☎ 9am-10pm) The perfect place to give your palate some needed diversity. Skip the kebabs and hoe into a faultless grilled *alabalık* (trout), served in a *kiremit* (clay pot) and accompanied by a wonderful loaf of metre-long bread. Sample the whole thing in the leafy garden, from where you can enjoy wonderful views over the lake.

Neşetin Yeri (☎ 725 7675; Baraj Yolu; mains €3-6; ☎ 9am-10pm) Soothingly positioned right by the lakeside, the Neşetin is similar in standard to the Akropalitan. The emphasis is also on fresh fish from the lake. Here you can dine overlooking the lake with a background symphony of frogs; come just before sunset. Very atmospheric.

Getting There & Away

Kahta's small otogar is in the town centre with the minibus and taxi stands right beside it. There are regular buses to Adana (€12, six hours, 532km), Adiyaman (€1, 30 minutes, 32km), Ankara (€20, 12 hours, 807km), İstanbul (€29, 20 hours, 1352km), Kayseri (€15, seven hours, 487km), Malatya (€6, 3½ hours, 225km) and Şanlıurfa (€4, 2½ hours, 106km).

A dolmuş leaves Kahta at about 2pm daily (except Sunday) for Karadut (€2), returning from Karadut at 7am the next day.

The road east to Diyarbakır was flooded by the lake formed behind the Atatürk Barajı, and buses from Kahta now travel to Diyarbakır north of the lake (€9, five hours, 174km). A more interesting way is via one of the six daily minibuses to Siverek, which are timed to meet the ferries across the lake. In Siverek you may have to wait half an hour or so for

GAP – THE SOUTHEASTERN ANATOLIA PROJECT

The character of the landscape in southeastern Anatolia is changing as the Southeastern Anatolia Project (Güneydoğu Anadolu Projesi), better known as GAP or Güneydoğu, comes on line, bringing irrigation waters to large arid regions and generating enormous amounts of hydroelectricity for industry. Parched valleys have become fish-filled lakes, and dusty villages are becoming booming market towns and factory cities.

The scale of the project is awe-inspiring, affecting eight provinces and two huge rivers (the Tigris and the Euphrates). In 2006, 17 dams (out of a planned total of 22) had been completed.

Such a huge, hope-generating project can also generate sizable problems, especially ecological ones. The change from dry agriculture to wet has already caused an explosion of disease. The incidence of malaria has increased tenfold, and it is feared that diarrhoea and dysentery, already on the rise, will follow suit.

The project has also generated political problems, as Syria and Iraq, the countries downriver for whom the waters of the Tigris and Euphrates are also vital, complain bitterly that Turkey is using or keeping a larger share of the water than it should. Innumerable archaeological sites have also disappeared under dam water, or are slated to do so.

a connection to Diyarbakır, but the bazaar is enough fun to fill in the time.

NEMRUT DAĞI NATIONAL PARK

Nemrut Dağı Milli Parkı (Mt Nemrut National Park) is probably the star attraction of eastern Turkey, and rightly so. The enigmatic statues sitting atop the summit have become a symbol of Turkey. The stunning scenery and historical sights and the undeniable sense of mystique and folly that emanates from the site make a visit here essential.

The spellbinding peak of **Nemrut Dağı** (*nehm-root dah-uh*) rises to a height of 2150m in the Anti-Taurus Range between the provincial capital of Malatya to the north and Kahta in Adiyaman province to the south. This is not to be confused with the less visited Nemrut Dağı (2935m) near Lake Van (see p635).

Nobody knew anything about Nemrut Dağı until 1881, when a German engineer, employed by the Ottomans to assess transport routes, was astounded to come across the statues covering this remote mountaintop. Archaeological work didn't begin until 1953, when the American School of Oriental Research undertook the project.

The summit was created when a megalomaniac pre-Roman local king cut two ledges in the rock, filled them with colossal statues of himself and the gods (his relatives – or so he thought), then ordered an artificial mountain peak of crushed rock 50m high to be piled between them. The king's tomb and those of three female relatives may well lie beneath those tonnes of rock. Nobody knows for sure.

Earthquakes have toppled the heads from most of the statues, and now many of the colossal bodies sit silently in rows with the 2m-high heads watching from the ground. Plans exist to replace the heads on the bodies but so far not much has happened.

Although it's relatively easy to get to the summit with your own vehicle, most people take tours, organised in either Kahta or Malatya or, increasingly, from Şanlıurfa or Cappadocia (see the boxed text, p614).

Plan to visit Nemrut between late May and mid-October, preferably in July or August; the road to the summit becomes impassable with snow at other times. Remember that at any time of year, even in high summer, it will be chilly and windy on top of the mountain. This is especially true at sunrise, the coldest time

of the day. Take warm clothing on your trek to the top, no matter when you go.

There are various accommodation options actually on the mountain, and it's well worth taking advantage of them since the stunning views and peaceful setting make up for any lack of mod cons. Be sure to check that adequate blankets are provided.

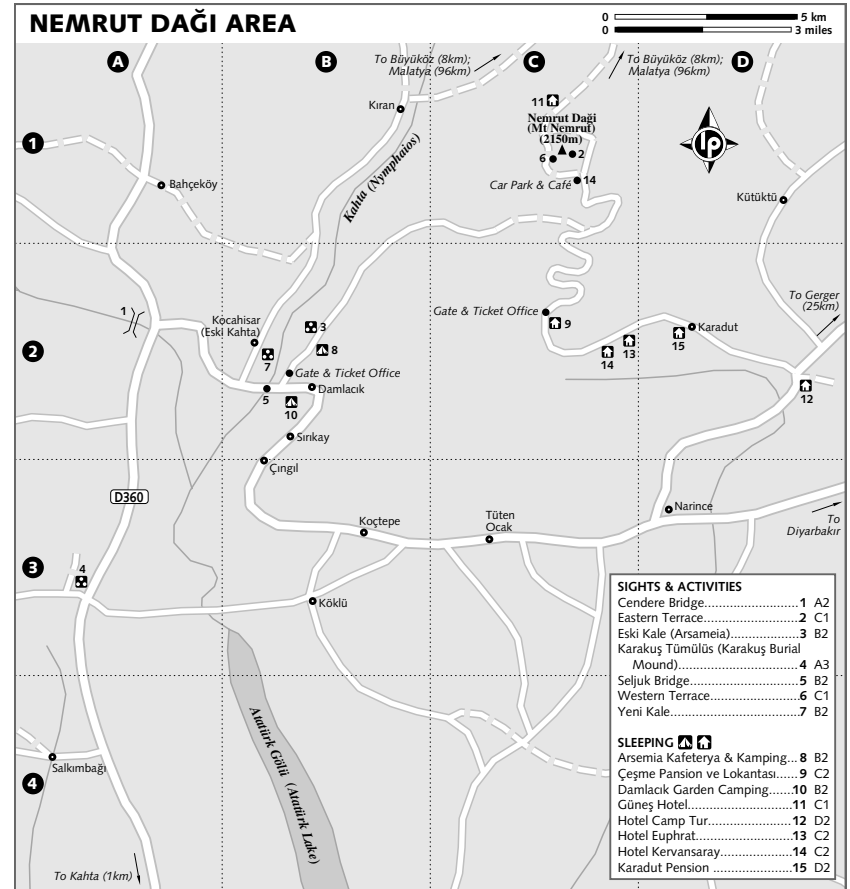
History

From 250 BC onwards, this region straddled the border between the Seleucid Empire (which followed the empire of Alexander the Great in Anatolia) and the Parthian Empire to the east, also occupying a part of Alexander's lands. A small but strategic area, rich, fertile and covered in forests, it had a history of independent thinking ever since the time of King Samos (c 163 BC).

Under the Seleucid Empire, the governor of Commagene declared his kingdom's independence. In 80 BC, with the Seleucids in disarray and Roman power spreading into Anatolia, a Roman ally named Mithridates I Callinicus proclaimed himself king and set up his capital at Arsameia, near the modern village of Eski Kahta. Mithridates prided himself on his royal ancestry, tracing his forebears back to Seleucus I Nicator, founder of the Seleucid Empire to the west, and to Darius the Great, king of ancient Persia to the east. Thus he saw himself as heir to both glorious traditions.

Mithridates died in 64 BC and was succeeded by his son Antiochus I Epiphanes (r 64–38 BC), who consolidated his kingdom's security by immediately signing a nonaggression treaty with Rome, turning his kingdom into a Roman buffer against attack from the Parthians. His good relations with both sides allowed him to grow rich and revel in delusions of grandeur, seeing himself as equal to the great god-kings of the past. It was Antiochus who ordered the building of the fabulous temples and funerary mound on top of Nemrut.

In the third decade of his reign, Antiochus sided with the Parthians in a squabble with Rome, and in 38 BC the Romans deposed him. From then on, Commagene was alternately ruled directly from Rome or by puppet kings until AD 72, when Emperor Vespasian incorporated it into Roman Asia. The great days of Commagene were thus limited to the 26-year reign of Antiochus.



Orientation

There are three ways of approaching the summit. From the southern side, you will pass through Karadut, a village some 12km from the top, before embarking upon the bone-jolting last few kilometres to the car park. From the southwestern side, you will travel via a secondary road that goes past Eski Kale (Arsameia) and climbs steeply for about 10km until it merges with the Karadut road, some 6km before the car park at the summit. From the northern side, you can start from Malatya – it's a long 98km haul, but it's a very scenic drive and the road is asphalted until the Güneş Hotel, near the summit. If you don't want to backtrack, it's possible to do a loop (see p615).

It costs €3 to enter Mt Nemrut National Park. Coming from the southwest, the entrance gate is just after the turn-off to Eski Kale (Arsameia); from the south, the gate is just past Çeşme Pension; from the north, the gate is at the Güneş Hotel.

At the car park just below the summit are a café and toilets. To reach the ruins themselves, you'll have to walk for about 600m.

Sights & Activities

KARAKUŞ TÜMÜLÜS

Highway D360, marked for Nemrut Dağı Milli Parkı (9km), starts in Kahta next to the Pension Kommagene. The first site you'll see in the park is **Karakuş Tümülüs**, via a road to the left, 200m off the highway. Like the Nemrut

mound, the Karakuş burial mound, built in 36 BC, is artificial. A handful of columns ring the mound – there were more but the limestone blocks were used by the Romans to build the Cendere bridge. An eagle tops a column at the car park, a lion tops another around the mound, and a third has an inscribed slab explaining that the burial mound holds female relatives of King Mithridates II.

From Karakuş the summit of Nemrut is clearly, if distantly, visible; it's the highest point on the horizon to the northeast. Return to the highway and turn left.

CENDERE BRIDGE

Some 10km from the Karakuş Tümüülüş, the road crosses a modern bridge over the Cendere river. On the left-hand side, you'll see a magnificent humpback Roman bridge built in the 2nd century AD. The surviving Latin stellas state that the bridge was built in honour of Emperor Septimius Severus and his wife and sons (long after Commagene had become part of Roman Asia). Of the four original Corinthian columns (two at either end), three are still standing.

YENİ KALE

About 5km from the bridge you can take a 1km detour off the main road to the village of **Eski Kahta**, also known as Kocahisar, which is overlooked by castle ruins. Although there was once a palace here, built at the same time as the Commagene capital of Arsameia on the other side of the ravine, what you see today is the ruins of a 13th-century Mamluk castle, **Yeni Kale** (New Fortress). There are some Arabic inscriptions above the main and only gateway. You can climb up to look at the castle, but make sure you're wearing appropriate shoes, and watch your step.

At the base of the path up to the castle is the **Kocahisar Halı Kursu** (Kocahisar Carpet Course), a rudimentary workshop where local women learn carpet-weaving techniques to keep the tradition alive. They don't sell the carpets here but don't usually mind if you poke your head in to have a look.

After Yeni Kale you'll cross the Kahta (Nymphaios) River, where you can see the old road that crossed the river at a graceful **Seljuk Bridge**.

ESKİ KALE (ARSAEMEIA)

About 1.5km further along the main road, a road to the left takes you 2km to Eski Kale,

the ancient Commagene capital of Arsameia, founded by Mithridates I Callinicus in around 80 BC, and added to by his son Antiochus I. Just after the turn-off, you stop at the **park entrance**, where you'll be asked to pay for both the Arsameia site and access to the summit (€3).

At Eski Kale, walk up the path from the car park. Just off to the left you'll come to a large **stele** depicting Mithras (or Apollo), the sun god, wearing a cap with sunrays radiating from it. Further along are two more **stellae**. Only the bases have survived, but they were thought to depict Mithridates I Callinicus, with Antiochus I, the taller stele, holding a sceptre. Behind them is a cave entrance leading down to an underground room. These cave-temple structures were thought to have been built for Mithras-worshipping rites.

Continue on the path uphill to the striking and virtually undamaged stone relief that portrays Mithridates I shaking hands with the god Heracles. Next to it is another cave-temple that descends 158m through the rock. Don't attempt to go down the steps as they are said to be perilous. The long Greek inscription above the cave describes the founding of Arsameia; the water trough beside it may have been used for religious ablutions.

Above the relief on the level top of the hill are what are left of the foundations of Mithridates' capital city, and a spectacular view – the perfect spot for a picnic.

ARSAEMEIA TO THE SUMMIT

From Arsameia you can take the 16km partly surfaced short cut to the summit or backtrack to the main road, which is a longer route but less steep and fully surfaced. The short cut leaves from beside the entrance to Arsameia and slogs up the mountain for about 8km to join the main route about 6km before the summit car park. It's passable only during daytime and in dry weather, and it has precipitous hairpin bends, so drive slowly and very carefully. The last 2km before the junction are unpaved and can be very muddy if it's wet.

Most tours combine the two routes, thus making a loop. Sunrise tours take the longer route (via Narince and Karadut) on the way up and take the short cut to descend back to Kahta. Sunset tours take the short cut on the way up and the longer route to get back to Kahta.

If you take the longer route from Arsameia, return to the main road and turn left. About 3km further is the sleepy village of **Damlack**. Then you'll pass through various little stone-housed settlements until you reach the larger **Narince**, where a turn-off to the left is marked for Nemrut. North of Karadut, the last half-hour's travel (12km) to the summit is along a steep, bumpy road mostly paved with basalt blocks. The last 3km are particularly horrendous – you'll have to drive in first gear.

Hiking

Travellers staying in Karadut may wish to walk the 12km to the summit. It's a clearly marked road with a steady gradient.

THE SUMMIT

By the time you arrive at the car park and café you're well above the tree line. The **Nemrut Dağı park entrance** (€3; ☞ dawn-dusk) is 200m up from the Çeşme pension and 2.5km before the junction with the short cut to Arsameia.

Beyond the building, hike 600m (about 20 minutes) over the broken rock of the stone pyramid to the **western terrace**. Antiochus I Epiphanes ordered the construction of a combined tomb and temple here. The site was to be approached by a ceremonial road and was to incorporate what Antiochus termed 'the thrones of the gods', which would be based 'on a foundation that will never be demolished'. Antiochus planned this construction to prove his faith in the gods, and in so doing assumed that upon his death his spirit would join that of Zeus-Ahura Mazda in heaven.

As you approach, the first thing you see is the western temple with the conical funerary mound of fist-sized stones behind it. At the western temple, Antiochus and his fellow gods sit in state, although their bodies have partly tumbled down, along with their heads.

From the western terrace it's five minutes' walk to the **eastern terrace**. Here the bodies are largely intact except for the fallen heads, which seem more badly weathered than the western heads. On the backs of the eastern statues are inscriptions in Greek.

Both terraces have similar plans, with the syncretistic gods, the 'ancestors' of Antiochus, seated. From left to right they are Apollo, the sun god (Mithra to the Persians; Helios or Hermes to the Greeks); Fortuna, or Tyche; in the centre Zeus-Ahura Mazda; then King Antiochus; and on the far right Heracles,

also known as Ares or Artagnes. The seated figures are several metres high, their heads alone about 2m tall.

Low walls at the sides of each temple once held carved reliefs showing processions of ancient Persian and Greek royalty, Antiochus' 'predecessors'. Statues of eagles represent Zeus.

Sleeping & Eating

There are several places to stay along the roads to the summit. The pretty village of Karadut has a few small eateries.

Damlack Garden Camping (☎ 0416-741 2027; camp sites per person €3; ☞) At Damlack, about 2.5km from the junction for the entrance gate, this camp site has very basic facilities but the owners are hospitable and the lovely grassed camping areas are a distinct bonus. In summer you'll probably be offered apricots and prunes from the nearby orchard. Meals are available on request (€4).

Arsameia Kafeterya & Kamping (☎ 0505-320 0882; camp sites per person €3) In Eski Kale, about 1km past the entrance gate, this congenial place is an ideal base for unfussy backpackers. Pitch your tent on a small ridge and soak up the views over the valleys. The catch? There's no shade. On a balmy summer's night you can also drag a mattress out on the rooftop and sleep beneath the star-studded skies. Orhan occasionally plays the Kurdish flute for guests. Meals are available (about €4).

Karadut Pension (☎ 0416-737 2169; www.karadutpansiyon.net; camp sites per person €3, d per person €12; ☞) This pension-cum-hostel in Karadut has six pea-sized but neat rooms, cleanish shared bathrooms, a kitchen you can use and three-course meals for €4. It's a bit cramped but perfectly acceptable if you can forgo privacy. Campers can pitch their tent in the pleasant garden at the back, with good views over the mountains and a well-kept ablution block. Two rooms boast air-con.

Çeşme Pension ve Lokantası (☎ 0416-737 2032; camp sites per person €3, s with half board €12) The best you can say about this pension is that it has yawn-inspiring but acceptable rooms with private bathrooms and boasts a lovely setting, only 6km from the summit. There's also a camping ground with a well-scrubbed ablution block.

Hotel Camp Tur (☎ 0416-737 2061; camp sites €6, s/d with half board €14/28) This family-run outfit is 15km from the summit, on the right, just

ORGANISED TOURS TO NEMRUT DAĞI (MT NEMRUT)

The main tour centres are Kahta and Malatya, but there are also tours from Karadut, Şanlıurfa and Cappadocia.

From Karadut

Several pensions in Karadut offer return trips to the summit, with one hour at the top for about €28 (Karadut Pension) or €34 to €39 (Hotels Euphrat or Kervansaray).

From Kahta

Kahta has always had a reputation as a rip-off town so you need to be wary of what's on offer. Always check exactly what you will be seeing in addition to the heads themselves, and how long you'll be away. The hotels and guesthouses in Kahta run most of the tours.

The majority of tours are timed to capture a dramatic sunrise or sunset. If you opt for the 'sunrise side', you'll leave Kahta at about 2am via Narince and Karadut, arriving at Nemrut Dağı for sunrise. After an hour or so, you'll go down again following the upgraded direct road to Arsameia. Then you'll stop at Eski Kahta, Yeni Kale, Cendere Bridge and Karakuş Tümüülüs. Expect to be back in Kahta at about 10am. If you sign up for the 'sunset tour', you'll do the same loop but in the reverse direction – in other words, you'll leave at 1.30pm and start with the sights around Arsameia, then go up to the summit, before descending via Karadut and Narince. You'll be back in Kahta at 9.30pm.

A third option is the 'small tour', which lasts about three hours. It zips you from Kahta to the summit and back again, allowing about an hour for sightseeing. It's a bit less expensive (a taxi would charge about €35), but it's much less interesting. If you have enough time you really should do the long tour to get the most out of your visit.

Although Kahta hotels and guesthouses advertise these services as 'tours', you'll quickly catch on that they're only taxi services when your driver proffers comments like 'that's an old bridge'. If you want an English-speaking guide who actually knows what they're talking about, go with **Mehmet Akbaba** (☎ 0416-726 1310, 0535 295 4445; akbabamehmet@hotmail.com) or **Nemrut Tours** (☎ 0416-725 6881; Mustafa Kemal Caddesi), based in Hotel Nemrut. Expect to pay around €100 per group for the longer tours with these guides.

From Malatya

Malatya offers an alternative way to approach Nemrut Dağı. However, visiting Nemrut from this northern side means you miss out on the other fascinating sights on the southern flanks (reached

by the turn-off to Nemrut out of Narince. Here you'll find a nondescript building with six recent, modern rooms with private bathrooms, bare camping facilities, a petrol pump, which may or may not be working, and tours to the summit.

Hotel Kervansaray (☎ 0416-737 2190; fax 737 2085; camping per person €4, s/d €23/32, half board €26/44; 📞 📺) Same brick walls, same setting and same family, the low-slung Kervansaray is a carbon copy of the Euphrat. What sets it apart, though, is the smaller number of rooms (14), which ensures greater intimacy. It has neat rooms with impeccable bathrooms, a restaurant with a kitschy rustic interior, a swimming pool and a pleasant camping ground. The owners can drive you to the summit (€34 per minibus).

Güneş Hotel (half board per person €23) About 2.5km from the eastern terrace, in the valley below, this place is of use mostly to those coming up from Malatya. The setting is superb, the hush enjoyable and the rooms comfortable, but the meals are disappointing.

Hotel Euphrat (☎ 0416-737 2175; fax 737 2179; s/d with half board €32/44; 📞 📺) With 52 rooms, the low-rise Euphrat has the largest room capacity in the area and is popular with tour groups in peak season. The main selling points are the terrace with stupendous views over the valley, and the swimming pool. However, we found the rooms a tad more impersonal than at the Kervansaray. It's just 8km from the summit – the owners can drive you up there (€39 per minibus).

via Kahta). You can get the best of both worlds by traversing the top by foot and hitching a ride to Kahta; if you're travelling by car you'll have to take the long route via Adıyaman.

The Malatya tourist office organises hassle-free minibus tours to Nemrut Dağı from early May to the end of September, or to mid-October if the weather is still warm. Tours leave at noon from near the tourist information booth in the tea garden behind the *vilayet*.

The three-hour ride through dramatic scenery to the summit is asphalted all the way up. After enjoying the sunset from the summit for two hours, you descend to the Güneş Hotel (opposite). Here you have dinner and stay the night before taking the minibus back up to the summit for sunrise. After breakfast at the Güneş you return to Malatya at around 10am.

The per person cost of €30 (minimum three people) includes transport, dinner, bed and breakfast, and you pay for admission to the national park and the site. In theory, there are tours every day, but if you turn up alone you have to be prepared to pay substantially more. If you prefer to descend via Kahta, hike across the summit to the car park and café building (30 minutes), and ask around for a minibus with an empty seat; or hitch a ride with someone going down to Kahta.

From Şanlıurfa

Two-day tours (€60, minimum four) or sunrise/sunset tours (€40, minimum four) to Nemrut are also available from Harran-Nemrut Tours (p602) in Şanlıurfa. These tours usually take you to the Atatürk Dam along the way. They're relatively good value, but don't expect more than a driver. At the time of research no other operators were offering these tours from Urfa.

From Cappadocia

Many companies in Cappadocia offer minibus tours to Nemrut from mid-April to mid-November, despite the distance of over 500km each way. Two-day tours cost about €120 and involve many hours of breakneck driving. If you have enough time, it's better to opt for a three-day tour (costing about €140), which allows the journey to be broken into more manageable chunks.

Most three-day tours take in the Karatay Han near Kayseri, and ice cream in Kahramanmaraş, before arriving in Kahta. On the second day you visit Nemrut Dağı for sunrise and then take in the sights at Arsameia, Cendere and Karakuş, and Atatürk Dam. Afterwards, you continue to Harran, before stopping for the night in Şanlıurfa. On the last day you drive back via Birecik, Gaziantep and Adana, returning to Göreme over the Taurus Mountains via Niğde.

In Göreme, three-day tours are run by Neşe Tour (see p502) with twice-weekly departures. Other companies in Göreme offer similar packages, but it's worth checking exactly where you'll be stopping.

Getting There & Away

CAR

To ascend the southern slopes of Nemrut from Kahta, you can do one of the following: drive along the old road via Koçtepe and Narince; take the shorter route via Damlacık and Arsameia, then the 15km short cut; or take a longer but more scenic route that includes Karakuş, Cendere, Eski Kahta and Arsameia. Make sure you have fuel for at least 250km of normal driving. Though the trip to the summit and back is at most 160km, you have to drive some of that in low gear, which uses more fuel. Be prepared for the rough, steep last 3km before the summit.

You can also approach the summit from Malatya (98km one way) and drive up to the

Güneş Hotel – the road is surfaced and it's a very scenic drive. From there, a rough road leads to the eastern terrace, a further 2.5km – it's OK with a normal car in dry weather. If you don't want to drive all the way back to Malatya, you can backtrack 10km to the village of Büyükköz from the Güneş Hotel. In Büyükköz, villagers will show you the road to Eski Kahta, a further 21km. The first 8km are unsurfaced. This road is passable with a normal vehicle in dry weather, but seek local advice at the Güneş Hotel before setting off.

TAXI & MINIBUS

From Kahta, taxi drivers charge about €35 to run you up to the summit and back, but don't expect anything in the way of guidance.

Sevinç (☎ 321 5188; Atatürk Caddesi; pastries €0.50-1; ☎ 7am-10pm) This pastry shop features a sleek, modern interior and a batch of mouthwatering desserts, including baklava and *kadayıf* (shredded wheat and nuts in honey). There's a welcoming *aile salonu* (family dining room) upstairs.

Mado (☎ 323 2346; Kanal Boyu; ice creams €0.50-1.25; ☎ 9am-11pm) Is this the sexiest place in the city? Whatever your verdict, it's the best outfit to enjoy a delicious ice cream or a pastry in sleek surrounds.

Serhent Simit Sarayı (İnönü Caddesi; simit €0.60; ☎ 7am-10pm) Hmm, those damn little calorie-busting *simit*s (O-shaped bread rings sprinkled with sesame seeds) eye-catchingly displayed continue to torment us! The *peynirli* (*simit* with cheese) is a killer. More, please.

Nostalji (☎ 323 42 08; Müçelli Caddesi; snacks €1-3; ☎ 8am-11pm) No matter how hectic the day, as soon as you step inside this squeaky-boarded, old Malatya mansion complete with memorabilia, stress evaporates as fast as light drizzle on asphalt in summer. Soak up the cool karma in the light-filled main lounge while listening to the mellow music and sipping a cup of Turkish coffee. Simple dishes are also available. It's also a good place to meet students of both sexes.

Vilayet Çay Bahçesi – VIP Cafe (Vilayet Tea Garden; İnönü Caddesi; snacks €1-4; ☎ 7am-11pm) We're suckers for the relaxing atmosphere that prevails in this unexpected oasis of calm, just off the busiest junction in the city. Nab a table at VIP Cafe and chow down on burgers or *gözleme*, or linger over a cuppa – an instant elixir after a hectic bout of sightseeing. No doubt you'll be approached by friendly Kemal, who runs the information booth nearby.

Mangal Vadisi (☎ 326 22 00; Kışla Caddesi; mains €2-5; ☎ 11am-10pm) With its big *mangals* (barbecues) on the ground floor, the restaurant will give dedicated meat eaters reason to smile. Unsurprisingly, the emphasis is on grilled meat (chicken, lamb, liver and more). The neon-lit dining room upstairs is less attractive. It's in a little street off Atatürk Caddesi.

Hacıbey Lahmacun (☎ 324 9798; Kışla Caddesi; mains €3-4; ☎ 11am-10pm) Our favourite refuelling stop for a hearty pide or a *lahmacun*, washed down with a refreshing *ayran*. The menu is translated into English, and there are photos of each kind of pide. The wood-panelled façade of the building looks like a Swiss chalet – very exotic for Malatya.

Şelale Kernek Restaurant (☎ 323 9313; Kernek Meydanı; mains €3-5; ☎ 10am-10pm) The main drawcard of the Kernek is its open-air rooftop overlooking verdant gardens, perfect in summer. Otherwise the dining room doesn't contain one whit of soul or character. The menu focuses on pide and grills.

Kaşık Restaurant (☎ 323 6292; Kanal Boyu; mains €3-5; ☎ 8am-11pm) Priding itself on its savoury *kiremit* (meat cooked in a clay pot), the Kaşık also serves comforting grills and pide. Some pictures of the dishes feature prominently above the entrance, so you can't really go wrong. For a splurge, try their *Kaşık special*, which has a bit of everything. Bonuses include the outside terrace and late opening hours.

Semerkant (☎ 325 6031; Kanal Boyu; mains €3-5) If you want a quiet drink, a nargileh or a snack alfresco, you could do worse than occupy a seat on the terrace of this tentatively hip bar-restaurant. The fake stone walls are amusing too.

Shopping

You won't leave Malatya without filling your bags with apricots, the city's delight. There's a handful of dried-fruit shops specialising in apricot baskets, jams and pickles on Atatürk Caddesi. **Armağan** (☎ 325 7005; Atatürk Caddesi; ☎ 8am-9pm) has the best selection. More dried-fruit shops can be found in the bazaar (see p617).

Getting There & Away

AIR

All companies operate an airport bus (€3).

Atlasjet (☎ 324 1313; www.atlasjet.com; Müçelli Caddesi; ☎ 8.30am-8pm) One daily flight to/from İstanbul (from €44, 1½ hours).

Onur Air (☎ 326 5050; www.onurair.com.tr; İnönü Caddesi; ☎ 8am-8pm) One daily flight to/from İstanbul (from €48).

Turkish Airlines (☎ 324 8001; www.thy.com; Kanal Boyu; ☎ 8.30am-5.30pm Mon-Fri, 8.30-1.30pm Sat) Two daily flights to/from İstanbul (from €44), and a daily flight to/from Ankara (from €44, one hour).

BUS

Malatya's enormous otogar, MAŞTİ, is 4km out on the western outskirts. Most bus companies operate *servises* (shuttle minibuses) there from the town centre. If not, minibuses from the otogar travel along Turgut Özal Bulvarı/Buhara Bulvarı (aka Çevre Yol). However, they aren't allowed into the town centre. Ask to be

let off at the corner of Turan Temelli Caddesi and Buhara Caddesi and walk from there. City buses to the otogar leave from near the *vilayet*. A taxi to the otogar costs about €7.

Some daily bus services to major destinations are listed in the table, below.

SERVICES FROM MALATYA'S OTOGAR

Destination Fare Duration Distance Frequency (per day)

| | | | | |
|------------|-----|------|--------|----------|
| Adana | €12 | 8hr | 425km | a few |
| Adıyaman | €7 | 2½hr | 144km | frequent |
| Ankara | €20 | 11hr | 685km | frequent |
| Diyarbakır | €8 | 4hr | 260km | a few |
| Elazığ | €4 | 1¾hr | 101km | hourly |
| Gaziantep | €8 | 4hr | 250km | a few |
| İstanbul | €25 | 18hr | 1130km | a few |
| Kayseri | €12 | 4hr | 354km | several |
| Sivas | €9 | 5hr | 235km | several |

CAR

Car-hire agencies are clustered just west of the Tekel Factory on İnönü Caddesi. **Meydan Rent a Car** (☎ 325 6060; www.meydanoto.com.tr in Turkish; İnönü Caddesi, Sıtmapınarı Ziraat Bankası Bitişijği; ☎ 8am-7pm) is a reliable outlet.

TRAIN

Right in the middle of Turkey, Malatya is a major railway hub and is well connected by train to the east of the country (Elazığ, Tatvan, Diyarbakır), the west (İstanbul, Ankara, Sivas, Kayseri) and the south (Adana). A train via here can be a good alternative to tiring bus trips.

The *Vangölü Ekspresi* leaves for İstanbul via Sivas, Kayseri and Ankara at 6.10pm on Tuesday and Thursday (€12); for Elazığ and Tatvan (€6), it leaves at 1.35am on Wednesday and Sunday.

The *Güney Ekspresi* leaves for İstanbul via Sivas, Kayseri and Ankara at 6.10pm on Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Sunday (€12); for Elazığ and Diyarbakır (€6), it departs at 1.35am on Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday and Sunday.

The *4 Eylül Ekspresi* leaves daily for Ankara via Sivas and Kayseri at 2.55pm (€12).

The *Firat Ekspresi* leaves daily for Adana at 10.20am (€8); for Elazığ, it departs at 5.40pm (€3).

Malatya's train station can be reached by dolmuş (€0.40) or by 'İstasyon' city buses from near the *vilayet*.

AROUND MALATYA Aslantepe

The scant finds of this archaeological site, located about 6km from Malatya, are not exactly gripping, but if you have an interest in Anatolian archaeology you'll enjoy **Aslantepe** (☎ 8am-5pm) and its pretty village setting.

When the Phrygians invaded the Hittite kingdom at Boğazkale, around 1200 BC, many Hittites fled southeast over the Taurus Mountains to resettle and build walled cities. The city of Milidia, now known as Aslantepe, was one of these neo-Hittite city-states (for more information about the Hittites, see the boxed text, p463).

On-off excavations since the 1930s have so far uncovered seven layers of remains.

To get to Aslantepe from Malatya, catch a bus marked 'Orduzu' (€0.40, 15 minutes) from the southern side of Buhara Bulvarı near the junction with Akpınar Caddesi. Buy an extra ticket for the return trip, and tell the driver where you want to get off; the site is a pleasant 500m stroll from the bus stop.

Old Malatya (Battalgazi)

You don't need to be an archaeology buff to be captivated by the remains of old Malatya, the walled city settled alongside Aslantepe, about 11km north of Malatya at Battalgazi.

As you come into the village you'll see the ruins of the old **city walls** with their 95 towers, built during Roman times and completed in the 6th century. They've lost all their facing stone to other building projects, and apricot orchards now fill what were once city blocks. The village of Battalgazi has grown up in and around the ruins.

The bus from Malatya terminates in the main square. Just off here, beside the mosque boasting the smooth-topped minaret, is the **Silahtar Mustafa Paşa Hanı**, an Ottoman caravanserai dating from the 17th century. Although restored, it's virtually abandoned.

When you've finished at the caravanserai, turn right and follow Osman Ateş Caddesi for about 600m until you see the broken brick minaret of the finely restored 13th-century **Ulu Cami** on the left. This is what you've really come to see. This stunning, if fast-fading, Seljuk building dates from the reign of Alaettin Keykubad I. Note the remaining Seljuk tiles lining the dome over the *mimber* (pulpit) and worked into Arabic inscriptions on the *eyvan* and *medrese* (seminary) walls. Also

BACKROADS: UPPER EUPHRATES

If you really want to get off the beaten track, you could venture into a territory that is still overlooked by travel books (including this one!): the upper valley of the Euphrates, from Elazığ to Erzincan. From Elazığ you could head north to Petek, then follow the shores of the Keban Barajı. There are no primary roads, only secondary roads that serve intriguing towns and villages – it's a wonderful scenic drive. For adventurous types with plenty of time and their own wheels, this region offers an insight into a fascinating world that few Westerners have seen. There aren't many facilities but if you think travel is more about meeting people and discovering new places than swanning around in top-notch accommodation, you might find your nirvana here. Allow three days to cover this suggested route.

worthy of interest is the **Ak Minare Camii** (White Minaret Mosque), about 50m from the Ulu Cami. This also dates from the 13th century.

Close by is the 13th-century **Halfeti Minaret**, made completely of bricks, and the **Nezir Gazi Tomb**.

Buses to Battalgazi (€0.40, 15 minutes) leave every 15 minutes or so from the same bus stop as those for Aslantepe.

Yeşilyurt & Gündüzbey

It's a true pleasure to enjoy the refreshingly peaceful atmosphere of Yeşilyurt and Gündüzbey, respectively 9km and 11km from Malatya. Old houses, lots of greenery, pleasing tea gardens, picnic areas... So cool! Take a minibus from Milli Egemenlik Caddesi in Malatya (€0.40, 20 minutes) and enjoy the hush.

ELAZIĞ

☎ 0424 / pop 305,000 / elevation 1200m

If you're passing through the vibrant city of Elazığ, you must see the Urartian treasures in the **Archaeology & Ethnography Museum** (Arkeoloji ve Etnografya Müzesi; admission €1.25; ☎ 9am–5pm Tue–Sat) on the campus of the Euphrates University, in the western outskirts of the city. You may also want to visit **Harput**, about 6km from Elazığ, which was an important staging post on the Silk Road to and from China and India. The main attraction there is the huge but badly ruined **castle** astride a rocky outcrop – an eerie vision. The Urartians built the first castle on this site way back in the 8th or 9th century BC, but what you see today are the remains of the castle built by Turks in the 11th century AD. Other assorted historic buildings are scattered about, including the **Ulu Cami**, sporting a crooked minaret, and several mausoleums. Harput is a popular place for picnicking families at weekends.

Frequent minibuses (€0.40) run to Harput from a small terminal in the centre of Elazığ.

Sleeping

There's a thicket of hotels 200m or so east of Cumhuriyet Meydanı along Hürriyet Caddesi.

Turistik Otel (☎ 218 1772; Hürriyet Caddesi; s/d €12/17)

It won't feature in the pages of the *Condé Nast Traveller* (read: ageing plumbing in the bathrooms and worn curtains), but the prices are competitive, the rooms presentable and the location hard to beat. Enough for a night's kip. You'll have to forgo breakfast.

Hotel Varan (☎ 233 8824; Hürriyet Caddesi; s/d €14/23; 🚽) Renovations were in progress when we popped in (you could still smell the paint), which bodes well. It's spitting distance from the Turistik. Luminous rooms with back-friendly beds and pathogen-free bathrooms. No breakfast is served.

Marathon Hotel (☎ 238 8686; www.themarathonhotel.com.tr; Bosna Hersek Bulvarı; s/d €28/40; 📺 📺 📺) Bump it up a notch in this four-star establishment. A saunter from the main square, it sports 60 cosy rooms with fluffy carpet, five swish suites, two bars, a *hamam*, a sauna, a fitness centre and a panoramic restaurant. And for those aching legs, there is a *masaj salonu* (massage room).

Eating

You'll find scores of cheap eateries and pastry shops along Hürriyet Caddesi and in the side streets.

Hacıoğulları Lahmacun (☎ 212 1996; Hürriyet Caddesi; mains €1–3; ☎ 10am–10pm) *Lahmacun*, *lahmacun*, *lahmacun*. Or pide. This hole-in-the-wall on the main drag concocts scrumptious Turkish and Arabic pizzas, cooked before your eyes and served on a wooden plate.

Kilis Kebap Salonu (☎ 236 7572; İşbankası Yanı; mains €2–4; ☎ 10am–8pm) An easygoing eatery where you can fill your belly without spending a fortune. It's been in business since 1952, so it knows its stuff.

Getting There & Away

Six Turkish Airlines flights a week connect Elazığ with Ankara (from €45, 1¼ hours).

Elazığ's spacious otogar is 3km east of the centre. There are fairly frequent services to and from Diyarbakır (€5, two hours, 151km), Erzurum (€14, seven hours, 324km), Malatya (€4, 1¼ hours, 101km) and Tatvan (€10, six hours, 329km).

Like Malatya, Elazığ is well connected by train to the east of the country (Tatvan, Diyarbakır), the west (İstanbul, Ankara, Sivas, Kayseri, Malatya) and the south (Adana).

DIYARBAKIR

☎ 0412 / pop 665,400 / elevation 660m

Let's get right to the point – Diyarbakır is best known as the town that, since the 1980s, has been the centre of the Kurdish resistance movement. This speaks volumes. Nowhere else in eastern Turkey will you hear people priding themselves so much on being Kurdish. Diyarbakır remains the stronghold of Kurdish identity and tenacity. Fortunately, the situation has improved considerably; walking down the streets of this animated city on a sunny day, you wouldn't think it was the centre stage of pitched battles between the rebels of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and the Turkish army. Sure, it's not entirely stabilised, but this doesn't mean you should give Diyarbakır a miss.

With its narrow alleyways, its countless historical buildings, its Arab-style mosques and its uniquely unforgettable ambience, the old walled city will make you feel like you're floating through another time and space. Some travellers think it's a bit rough around the edges; others regard it as a veiled, self-contained city that doesn't easily bare its soul. Whatever your perspective, Diyarbakır is undisputedly filled with character, soul and energy. Be sure to squeeze it into your Anatolian trip.

History

Mesopotamia, the land between the Tigris and Euphrates Valleys, saw the dawn of the world's first great empires. So it's no surprise that

Diyarbakır's history begins with the Hurrian kingdom of Mitanni c 1500 BC and proceeds through domination by the civilisations of Urartu (900 BC), Assyria (1356–612 BC), Persia (600–330 BC) and Alexander the Great and his successors, the Seleucids.

The Romans took over in AD 115, but because of its strategic position the city changed hands numerous times until it was conquered by the Arabs in 639. The Arab tribe of Beni Bakr that settled here named their new home Diyar Bakr, which means the Realm of Bakr.

For the next few centuries the city was occupied by various tribes, until 1497 when the Safavid dynasty founded by Shah İsmail took over Iran, putting an end to more than a century of Turkoman rule in this area. The Ottomans came and conquered in 1515, but even then, Diyarbakır was not to know lasting peace. Because it stood right in the way of invading armies originating from Anatolia, Persia and Syria, it suffered many more tribulations.

Banned until a few years ago, the Nevruz festival takes place on 21 March and is a great occasion to immerse yourself in Kurdish culture. For more details, see p658.

Orientation

Old Diyarbakır is encircled by walls pierced by several main gates. Within the walls the city is a maze of narrow, twisting, mostly unmarked alleys. Most services useful to travellers are in Old Diyarbakır, on or around Gazi Caddesi, including the PTT, internet cafés and banks with ATMs.

KURDISH WAY WITH WORDS

Southeastern Anatolia is predominantly Kurdish territory. Most Kurds speak Turkish, but in remote places you'll hear Kurmanci and Zazaki, the two Kurdish dialects spoken in Turkey. Surprisingly, those who speak Kurmanci won't understand those who speak Zazaki. Kurdish languages don't share any linguistic features with Turkish, but are related to Persian and other Indo-European languages. Instead of the ubiquitous *teşekkür ederim* ('thanks' in Turkish), you'll hear the much more straightforward *spas* in Kurmanci and instead of *merhaba* (hello), you'll hear *rojbas*.

The train station is about 1.5km from the centre, at the western end of İstasyon Caddesi. The otogar is 3.5km northwest of the centre.

New Diyarbakır sprawls to the northwest of the old city, but you'll have no reason to go there.

Information

Most banks have branches with ATMs on İnönü Caddesi.

Nazlı Saray Döviz (Gazi Caddesi; ☎ 8am-7pm Mon-Sat) Private exchange office that keeps longer hours than banks.

Şafak Internet Cafe (per hr €0.60; ☎ 8am-11pm) Off Kibris Caddesi.

Teknoloji Bilgin (Ali Emiri Caddesi; per hr €0.60; ☎ 8am-10pm) Internet café. Just outside the city walls, a few doors from the Selim Amca'nın Sofra Salonu.

Tourist office (☎ 228 1706; Kapısı; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri) Housed in a tower in the wall. Has some brochures and can only help with simple queries.

Sights

CITY WALLS & GATES

Diyarbakır's single most conspicuous feature is its great circuit of basalt walls, probably dating from Roman times, although the present walls date from early Byzantine times (AD 330-500). At almost 6km in length these walls are said to be second in extent only to the Great Wall of China. They make a striking sight whether you're walking along the top or the bottom.

Numerous bastions and towers stand sentinel over the massive black walls. There were four main gates originally: **Harput Kapısı** (north), **Mardin Kapısı** (south), **Yenikapı** (east) and **Urfa Kapısı** (west).

Fortunately, the most easily accessible stretch of walls is also the most interesting in terms of inscriptions and decoration. Start near the Mardin Kapısı close to the Deliller Han, a stone caravanserai now home to the Otel Büyük Kervansaray. Be sure not to miss **Nur Burcu** (Tower Nur), the **Yedi Kardeş Burcu** (Tower of Seven Brothers), with two Seljuk lion bas-reliefs, which you can see only from outside the walls, and the **Malikşah Burcu** (Tower of Malik Şah, also called Ulu Badan), which has some bas-reliefs too.

You can also ascend the walls of the **İç Kale** (fortress or keep) to enjoy the fine views of the Tigris, flanked by a patchwork of market gardens, as it meanders 2km to 3km south to flow under the 11th-century **On Gözlu Köprüsü** (Ten-Eyed Bridge).

At various spots inside the base of the walls you can see brightly painted, open-air **Sufi sarcophagi**, notable for their turbans, their size a symbol of spiritual authority. There's a cluster a few hundred metres northeast of the Urfa Kapısı.

Unfortunately, you must be careful when walking on and along the walls as there have been reports of attempted robberies. Try to go in a group.

MOSQUES

Of Diyarbakır's many mosques, the most impressive is the **Ulu Cami**, built in 1091 by Malik Şah, an early Seljuk sultan. Incorporating elements from an earlier Byzantine church on the site, it was extensively restored in 1155 after a fire. It's rectangular in plan – Arab style, rather than Ottoman. The entrance portal, adorned with two medallions figuring a lion and a bull, leads to a huge courtyard. This is the most elegant section of the building, with two-storey arcades, two cone-shaped **şadırvans** (ritual ablution fountains), elaborate pillars, and friezes figuring fruits and vegetables – a real feast for the eyes.

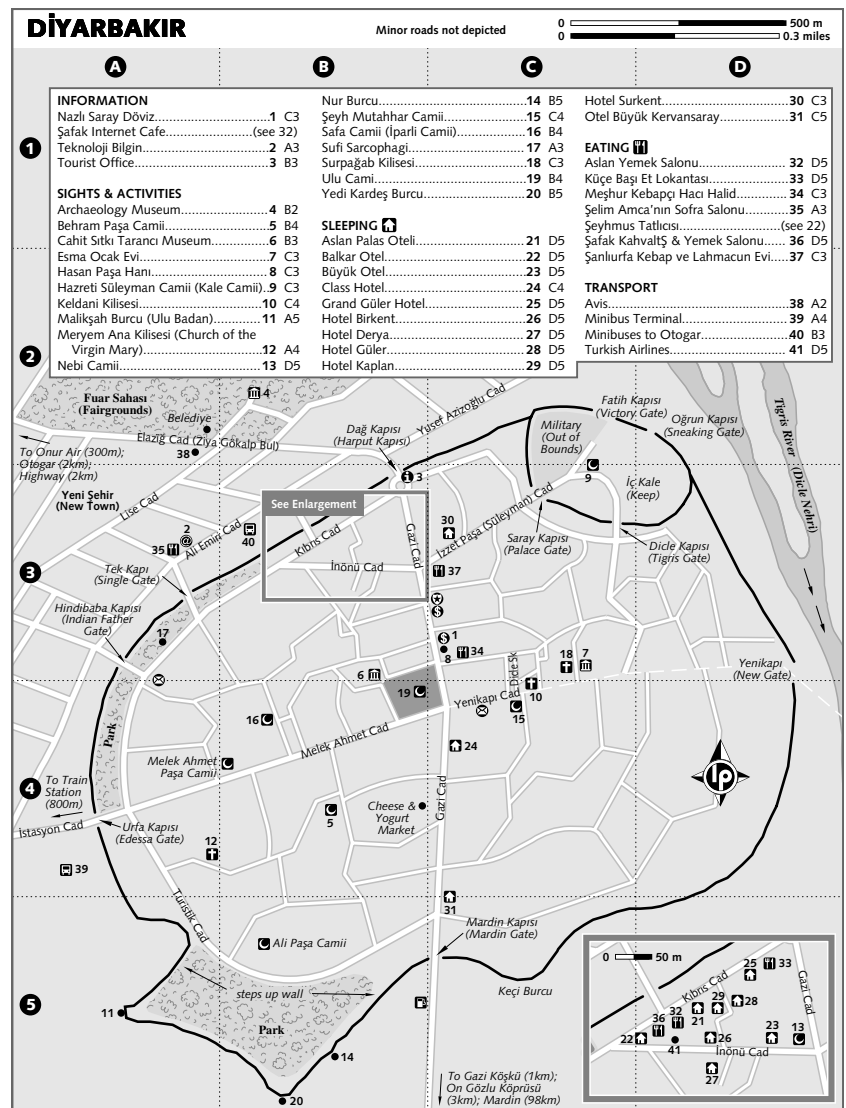
Across Gazi Caddesi is the **Hasan Paşa Hanı**, a 16th-century caravanserai occupied by jewel and antiques vendors. It was extensively restored in 2006.

Alternating black-and-white stone banding is a characteristic of Diyarbakır's mosques, many of which date from the time of the Akkoyunlu dynasty. One of these is the **Nebi Camii** (1530) at the main intersection of Gazi and İzzet Paşa/İnönü Caddesi, which has a detached minaret sporting a stunning combination of black-and-white stone.

The **Behram Paşa Camii** (1572), in a residential area deep in the maze of narrow streets, is Diyarbakır's largest mosque. More Persian in style, the **Safa Camii** (1532) has a highly decorated minaret with blue tiles incorporated in its design.

The **Şeyh Mutahtar Camii** (1512) is also famous for its minaret, but its engineering is even more interesting – the tower stands on four slender pillars about 2m high, earning it the name **Dört Ayaklı Minare** (Four-Legged Minaret).

The 12th-century **Hazreti Süleyman Camii**, beside the İç Kale, is particularly revered because it houses the tombs of heroes of past Islamic wars. Local people flock here on Thursdays to pay their respects.



Note that most of these mosques have more than one name; the alternative names are shown on the map key. When visiting these mosques, you should try to time your visit for 20 to 25 minutes after the call to prayer (when the prayers should be finished), as most of them will be locked outside prayer times.

ARCHAEOLOGY MUSEUM

Diyarbakır's **Archaeology Museum** (Arkeoloji Müzesi; off Elazığ Caddesi; admission €1.25; ☎ 8am-5pm Tue-Sun) is near the Fuar Sahası (Fairground), behind the towering Dedeman Hotel.

It has a well-presented collection including finds from the Neolithic site of Çayönü (7500-6500 BC), 65km north of Diyarbakır.

There's also a decent Urartian collection and relics from the Karakoyunlu and Akkoyunlu, powerful tribal dynasties who ruled much of eastern Anatolia and Iran between 1378 and 1502. Labels in English are a great help.

GAZİ KÖŞKÜ

About 1km south of the Mardin Kapısı, the **Gazi Köşkü** (admission €0.60) is a fine example of the sort of Diyarbakır house to which its wealthier citizens would retire in high summer. The house dates from the time of the 15th-century Akkoyunlu Turkoman dynasty and stands in a well-tended park, very popular with picnicking families at weekends. It's open whenever the caretaker can be found, and you should leave him a tip for showing you round.

To get there, it's a pleasant, if rather isolated, downhill walk. Taxis charge a rip-off €12 including waiting time. From this side of the city you get fine, unimpeded views of Diyarbakır's dramatic walls.

DIYARBAKIR HOUSE MUSEUMS

Old Diyarbakır houses were made of black basalt and decorated with stone stencilling. They were divided into summer and winter quarters, and the centre of the summer part was always the *eyvan*, a vaulted room opening onto the courtyard with a fountain in the centre. In summer, the family moved high wooden platforms called *tahtlar* (thrones) into the courtyard for sleeping, making it possible to catch any breeze.

The best way to see inside one of these old houses is to visit one of the museums inside the city walls. For example, the poet Cahit Sıtkı Tarancı (1910–56) was born in a two-storey black basalt house built in 1820, in a side street about 50m north of the Ulu Cami. It now houses the **Cahit Sıtkı Tarancı Museum** (Ziya Gökalp Sokak; admission free; ☎ 8am–5pm Tue–Sun), which contains some of the poet's personal effects and furnishings.

The beautiful grey-and-white-striped **Esmâ Ocak Evi**, not far from the Dört Ayaklı Minare, was built in 1899 by an Armenian and restored in 1996 by a female writer, Esmâ Ocak. You'll need to bang hard on the door to alert the caretaker, who will show you the gracefully furnished living rooms. Admission is by donation, but you'll be encouraged to give at least €1 per person. While you're there ask the caretaker to show you the Armenian Surpağab Kilisesi (right) opposite.

CHURCHES

The population of Diyarbakır once included many Christians, mainly Armenians and Chaldeans, but most of them were pushed out or perished during the troubles in the early 20th century or, more recently, with the Hezibollah. Only their churches linger as reminders.

The **Keldani Kilisesi** (Chaldean Church), off Yenikapı Caddesi, is a plain, brightly lit church, still used by 30 Christian families of the Syrian rite (in communion with the Roman Catholic church). The chaplain from the Meryem Ana Kilisesi holds a service here on the second Sunday of the month. It's fairly easy to find on your own. Walk past the detached minaret of the Nebi Camii, take the first left (Dicle Sokak) then the first right (Şeftali Sokak). The caretaker usually sits outside the Nebi Camii.

The Armenian **Surpağab Kilisesi**, also just off Yenikapı Caddesi, has long been grass-infested since the roof caved in, but the elderly custodian will show you the atmospheric chapel next door, eerily untouched since the worshippers left decades ago. It's well worth visiting.

The wonderful **Meryem Ana Kilisesi** (Church of the Virgin Mary) is still used by Orthodox Syrian Christians; they are Jacobites, or Monophysites, who refused to accept the doctrine laid down at the Council of Chalcedon in 451. This said that Jesus had two natures, being simultaneously fully divine and fully human – the Monophysites insisted he had only one divine nature. The church is beautifully maintained, although only about seven families still attend services. You will have to hammer on the door as the custodian lives two courtyards away and may not hear you.

Other churches have found new uses: one near the Dört Ayaklı Camii as a PTT, another inside the İç Kale as a prison.

Sleeping

Most accommodation options are conveniently located on Kibris Caddesi and the nearby İnönü Caddesi, where there's a range of hotels in all price brackets interspersed with restaurants. In summer it's scorching hot here, something to bear in mind when choosing a room. The best accommodation choices for lone female guests are the Hotel Birkent, the Otel Balkar and the top-end options.

BUDGET

Aslan Palas Oteli (☎ 228 9224; Kibris Caddesi; s/d with shared bathroom €9/14, s/d €12/20; ☎) This long-standing fave is a good haunt for frugal (male) travellers, with a mixed bag of rooms – ask to see a few before you make a decision to stay here, as some are more luminous than others. Air-con in all the rooms. The catch? There's no double-glazing, and prices don't include breakfast.

Hotel Surkent (☎ 228 1014; İzzet Paşa Caddesi; s/d €14/20; ☎) The new kid on the block, the Surkent was just getting a lick of flamingo-pink paint and other final renovations when we visited – a good omen. The Smartie-like façade, with an odd mix of aluminium plates and tangerine frames, is amusingly quirky.

Hotel Güler (☎ /fax 224 0294; Yoğurtçu Sokak; s/d €15/20; ☎) Tucked in an alleyway off Kibris Caddesi, this two-star outfit is a perfect place to rest your head after a long day's sight-seeing, with well-looked-after rooms, well-sprung mattresses and prim, if pint-sized, bathrooms.

Hotel Kaplan (☎ 229 3300; fax 224 0187; Kibris Caddesi, Yoğurtçu Sokak; s/d €15/23; ☎) A short stagger from the Güler, the Kaplan is a pleasant surprise, with spacious and comfortable yet impersonal rooms. Try to snaffle one of the brighter top-floor rooms.

Hotel Birkent (☎ 228 7131; fax 228 7145; İnönü Caddesi; s/d €16/25; ☎) If you bet the Birkent has air-con, stout bedding and spruce rooms, you'll hit the trifecta! Yes, this is one of the most dependable options in town, with consistently good reviews from travellers. Other pluses include a lift, double-glazing and an ace location.

MIDRANGE

Balkar Otel (☎ 228 1233; fax 224 6936; Kibris Caddesi 38; s/d €19/25; ☎) This typical middling three-star boasts colourful, well-appointed rooms with TV and minibar. Bathroom-wise, don't even think of gesticulating in the diminutive cubicles in the single rooms. Added bonuses include a lift, a hearty breakfast and a rooftop terrace that proffers stunning views over the walls.

Grand Güler Hotel (☎ 229 2221; fax 224 4509; Kibris Caddesi; s/d €21/31; ☎) 'Grand' is a very optimistic description but it sports well-furnished rooms and neat bathrooms. The front rooms have double-glazing so it shouldn't be too noisy.

Büyük Otel (☎ 228 1295; fax 221 2444; İnönü Caddesi; s/d €24/34; ☎) The Balkar's most serious competitor, this reliable player stands its ground with spick-and-span rooms, excellent amenities and bathrooms that you won't dread using. A good choice for women travellers.

Hotel Derya (☎ 224 2555; fax 221 9735; İnönü Caddesi; s/d €25/34; ☎) Another option worth considering, with an elegant blue mosaic façade, a rooftop restaurant and good facilities. The petite among us will find the rooms intimate, while others may argue for the term 'claustrophobic'.

TOP END

Otel Büyük Kervansaray (☎ /fax 228 9606; Gazi Caddesi; s/d/ste €50/80/100; ☎) This historic place comes recommended if you need to pamper yourself after a tiring trip. Housed in the 16th-century Deliller Han, a converted caravanserai, it has charm in spades. This is not the height of luxury, but it scores high on amenities, with a restaurant, a bar, a *hamam* and a nifty pool in which to cool off. The standard rooms are itty-bitty, but how much time are you going to spend in your room when the inner courtyard is so agreeable?

Class Hotel (☎ 229 5000; www.diyarbakirclasshotel.com in Turkish; Gazi Caddesi; s/d €90/115; ☎) An angular building right in the heart of the old town, this five-star bigwig won't appeal to fans of minimalism, but it has all the bells and whistles your platinum card will allow for, including a pool, a sauna, a nightclub and a conference room – not to mention the fitness centre to keep off those extra kilos added by a baklava overdose. Or you could linger over a cuppa in the delightful Çizmecci Pavilion, built in 1317 and converted into a cosy lounge.

Eating & Drinking

A stroll along Kibris Caddesi reveals plenty of informal places to eat. They're nothing fancy, but they offer authentic fare at very moderate prices.

Selim Amca'nın Sofra Salonu (☎ 224 4447; Ali Emiri Caddesi; mains €4–7, set menu €9; ☎ noon–9.30pm) This rather upscale eatery outside the city walls is famous for one thing and one thing only: *kaburga dolması* (lamb or chicken stuffed with rice and almonds). Round it off with a devilish *İrmik helvası* (a gooey dessert) and wash it all down with a soft drink. (Alcohol? Dream on!) Well worth the splurge.

Information

All major banks with ATMs are on Cumhuriyet Caddesi. The **Oscar Internet Cafe** (Cumhuriyet Caddesi; per hr €0.60; ☎ 9am-11pm) is across the street from **Akbank** (Cumhuriyet Caddesi). In new Mardin, try **Can Internet Cafe** (Yenişehir; per hr €0.60; ☎ 9am-11pm), near Otel Bilen.

Sights

Mardin's most obvious attraction is the rambling **bazaar** that parallels Cumhuriyet Caddesi one block down the hill. Here donkeys are still the main form of transport, and are decked out in all the finery you sometimes see on sale in carpet shops. Look out also for saddle repairers who seem to be able to restore even the shabbiest examples.

Strolling through the bazaar, keep your eyes open for the secluded **Ulu Cami**, a 12th-century Iraqi Seljuk structure, which suffered badly during the Kurdish rebellion of 1832. Inside it's fairly plain, but the delicate reliefs adorning the minaret make a visit worthwhile.

Mardin Museum (Mardin Müzesi; Cumhuriyet Caddesi; €1.25; ☎ 8am-5pm), prominently positioned on the main drag, is worth visiting for the late-19th-century building alone. This superbly restored mansion sports carved pillars and elegant arcades on the upper floor. Inside, it has a small but well-displayed collection including everything from a finely detailed 7th-century BC Assyrian vase to finds from Gırnavaz, a Bronze Age site 4km north of Nusaybin. Afterwards, head east along Cumhuriyet Caddesi, keeping your eye out for a fabulous example of Mardin's domestic architecture on your left – the three-arched façade of an ornately carved **house**.

Continue east, looking for steps on the left (north) that lead to the **Sultan İsa Medresesi** (☎ daylight hr), dating from 1385 and the town's prime architectural attraction. The highlight is the imposing recessed doorway, but make sure you wander through the pretty courtyards, lovingly tended by the caretaker, and onto the roof to enjoy the cityscape.

Further east is what surely must be Turkey's most gorgeous **post office**, housed in a 17th-century caravanserai with carvings such as frills around the windows and teardrops in stone dripping down the walls – shame they added the clunky staircase! Across the street you can't miss the elegant, slender minaret of the 14th-century **Şehidiye Camii**. It's superbly carved, with colonnades all around, and three

small bulbs superimposed at the summit. The base of the minaret sports a series of pillars.

Also worth visiting is the 14th-century **Latifîye Camii**, behind the Akbank, where a shady courtyard has a *şadırvan* in the middle. The 15th-century **Forty Martyrs Church** (Kırkklar Kilisesi; Sağlık Sokak) is to the west, with the martyrs depicted above the doorway of the church as you enter. If it's closed, bang hard on the door to alert the caretaker. Services are held here each Sunday. In the vicinity of the Artuklu Kervansarayı, the eye-catching **Hatuniye** and nearby **Melik Mahmut Camii** have been recently restored.

Another striking sight, the **Kasımiye Medresesi**, 800m south of Yeni Yol, was built in 1469. Two domes stand over the tombs of Kasım Paşa and his sister, but the highlights are the sublime courtyard walled with arched colonnades and the magnificent, carved doorway. Upstairs, you can see the students' quarters, before ascending the stairs to the rooftop for another great Mardin panorama.

Sleeping

If you're on a budget, grit your teeth: cheap hotels are annoyingly thin on the ground in Mardin.

Otel Bilen (☎ 213 0315; www.bilemhotel.com; s/d €25/45; ☎ ☎) In the new part of Mardin (Yenişehir), 2km northwest of Cumhuriyet Meydanı, this mundane three-star hotel won't bowl you over with charm, but it has spacious rooms with TV and well-scrubbed, tiled bathrooms. It's a bit overpriced, but there's room for negotiation if it's quiet. To get to the town centre from here, cross the road and flag down any dolmuş.

Erdoba Konakları (☎ 212 7677; fax 212 8821; www.erdoba.com.tr; Cumhuriyet Caddesi; s/d €48/72; ☎) Pomp it up in this stylish 'boutique hotel' – the first of its kind in Mardin – right in the heart of the old town. It comprises two historic mansions finely restored, with graciously decorated rooms and several terraces offering unimpeded views over the Mesopotamia plain. The catch? Only five rooms come with a view. It also houses a vaulted restaurant.

Artuklu Kervansarayı (☎ 213 7353; www.artuklu.com.tr; Turkish; Cumhuriyet Caddesi; s/d €45/73; ☎ ☎ ☎) This new kid in town wows you with a wide range of amenities but rates zero on the view scale. The décor is all borders and valances, and the rooms are above average, with dark furniture, parquet flooring and brick walls.

A SUCCESS STORY

Ebru Baydemir is what you would call a 'local character'. Aged 30, she is the dynamic owner of Cercis Murat Konağı in Mardin (see below) and the head of the Mardin tourism association. A rare example of a female entrepreneur in eastern Anatolia, she has managed, against all odds, to foster a new mindset among many Mardin women and has somewhat paved the way for the changing roles of women in a predominantly male-oriented society. 'When I opened my restaurant in 2001, I wanted to offer jobs to women but this was difficult because of the prevailing women-should-stay-at-home mentality. I started with a few female cooks who knew tried-and-true recipes, but I was obliged to set up partition walls so that they could not be visible in the kitchen. Little by little, I gained the confidence of their husbands. At present 15 female employees work here and they don't have to conceal themselves any longer. In Mardin it's now accepted that women can work outside.' Any other achievement, Mrs Ebru? 'Cercis is the first licensed restaurant in southeastern Anatolia' – something for which travellers will be eternally grateful.

Best of all, cooking courses are available for tourists. The cooks are ready to impart some of their secrets – a wonderfully authentic experience. Check out www.cercismurat.com for more details.

Büyük Mardin Hotel (☎ 213 10 47; fax 213 1447; Yeni Yol Caddesi; s/d €67/84; ☎ ☎ ☎) This massive structure is not a triumph of harmony and proportion but features all mod-cons, including a sauna and *hamam*, and the views over old Mardin and the Mesopotamia plain are just sensational. It caters predominantly to groups and is often booked solid, so reservations are advised.

Eating & Drinking

İmzeil Et Lokantası (☎ 212 1062; Cumhuriyet Meydanı; mains €2-4; ☎ 10am-7pm) A hanky-sized, bright little spot where you can get a protein fix without depleting your travel budget.

Turistik Et Lokantası (☎ 212 1647; Cumhuriyet Meydanı; mains €3-6; ☎ 9am-10pm) Judging by the awkward greeting ('Hallo!'), 'Touristy Et Lokantası' would sound more appropriate. The food is predictable and the décor nothing flash, but it stays open late. It's right next door to the İmzeil.

Cercis Murat Konağı (☎ 213 6841; Cumhuriyet Caddesi; mains €4-7; ☎ 11am-11pm) Send your tastebuds on a tailspin at this innovative restaurant serving authentic village food with a creative twist (not a kebab in sight). Sink your teeth into a *közlenmiş peynir* (grilled cheese) or the *ayvalı kavurma* (lamb meat with quince), and you'll quickly discover the reason for its cult status (see boxed text, above). All dishes are prepared by women from Mardin, with recipes from the days of yore. There's a TV screen where you can watch them working their magic in the kitchen. The Cercis occupies a traditional Syrian Christian home with two

finely decorated rooms and a terrace affording simply stunning views. A respectable wine list and exemplary service complete the perfect equation. *Afiyet olsun* (enjoy your meal)!

Lido (Cumhuriyet Caddesi; pastries €0.40-1 ☎ 8am-8pm) Near the Artuklu, this small pastry shop has its fair share of sinful pleasures. There's a pleasant terrace.

İldo Pastaneleri (☎ 213 7288; Hükümet Konağı Arkası; pastries €0.50-1 ☎ 8am-11pm) A lighthouse for sybarites, with a wide array of pastries and ice creams served in sleek surrounds. The *fıstıklı dondurma* (pistachio ice cream) is worthy of an Oscar.

Vitamin (Cumhuriyet Caddesi; ☎ 8am-7pm) This unassuming place is the size of a postage stamp but is a victory for humanity when it comes to freshly squeezed fruit juices (from €0.50).

Çay bahçesi (Cumhuriyet Caddesi) The best tea garden in town is across the road from the PTT. It's the perfect place to soak up the atmosphere and be hypnotised by the terrific views over the old city and the scorching plains.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Mardin airport is 20km south of Mardin. There's no airport shuttle, but any minibus to Kızıltepe can drop you at the entrance (€0.70).

Fly Air (☎ 444 4359; www.flyair.com.tr; Yenişehir; ☎ 8.30am-7pm Mon-Sat) Has three weekly flights to/from Istanbul (from €43, two hours).

Onur Air (☎ 212 4141; www.onurair.com.tr; Cumhuriyet Meydanı; ☎ 8am-8pm) Has six weekly flights to/from Istanbul (from €48).

Turkish Airlines (Bilem Turizm ve Seyahat Acentası; ☎ 213 3773; www.thy.com; Karayolları Karşısı Yenişehir; 🕒 8am–6pm) Near the Bilen Hotel. Has three weekly flights to/from Ankara (from €44).

BUS

Most buses leave from outside the bus company ticket offices east of the centre. From around 4pm services start to dry up so it's best to make an early start. Minibuses depart every hour or so for Diyarbakır (€4, 1½ hours), and for Midyat (€3, 1¼ hours) and Nusaybin (the Syrian border; €2). There are also four to five daily minibuses to Savur (€2, 45 minutes). Several daily buses connect Mardin with Urfa (€6, three hours) but, heading west, they're often already full when they arrive in Mardin; you'd be well advised to book a ticket as soon as you arrive. Other useful services for travellers include to Cizre (€4, three hours), the major hub for northern Iraq (see the boxed text, opposite); to Şirnak (€8, 3½ hours); and to Batman (€4).

AROUND MARDİN

Deyrul Zafaran

The magnificent **monastery of Mar Hanania (Deyrul Zafaran)** (🕒 9–11.30am & 1–3.30pm) stands about 6km along a good but narrow road in the rocky hills east of Mardin. The monastery was once the seat of the Syrian Orthodox patriarchate and, although this has now moved to Damascus, the site continues to act as a local boarding school.

In AD 495 the first monastery was built on a site previously dedicated to the worship of the sun. Destroyed by the Persians in 607, it was rebuilt, only to be looted by Tamerlane six centuries later.

Shortly after you enter the walled enclosure via a portal bearing a Syriac (a dialect of Aramaic) inscription, one of the school kids will volunteer their services as a guide.

First they'll show you the **original sanctuary**, an eerie underground chamber with a ceiling of huge, closely fitted stones held up as if by magic, without the aid of mortar. This room was allegedly used by sun worshippers, who viewed their god rising through a window at the eastern end. A niche on the southern wall is said to have been for sacrifices.

The guide then leads you through a pair of 300-year-old doors to the **tombs** of the patriarchs and metropolitans who have served here.

In the chapel, the **patriarch's throne** on the left of the altar bears the names of all the patriarchs who have served the monastery since it was refounded in 792. To the right of the altar is the **throne of the metropolitan**. The present **stone altar** replaces a wooden one that burnt down about half a century ago. The walls are adorned with wonderful paintings and wall hangings. Services in Aramaic are held here.

In the next rooms you'll see **litters** used to transport the church dignitaries, and a **baptismal font**. In a small side room is a 300-year-old **wooden throne**. The floor **mosaic** is about 1500 years old.

A flight of stairs leads to very simple guest rooms for travellers and those coming for worship. The patriarch's small, simple bedroom and parlour are also up here.

There's no public transport here so you must take a taxi or walk. Hopeful drivers wait outside the bus company offices in Mardin and will ask €14 to run you there and back and to wait while you look round.

Savur

Ah, Savur. Come here on a clear day, and you'll fall in love with this diamond of a town – at least we did. About an hour's minibus ride from Mardin, Savur is clearly special. If you're looking for some hush and seclusion, this is

the perfect place to decompress. The atmosphere is charmingly lethargic and the setting is enchanting, with honey-coloured old houses that are huddled beneath a citadel, lots of greenery and a gushing river running in the valley. Another pull is the warm welcome you'll receive.

The time to visit is now, before this haven of serenity is let out of the bag and becomes the new Mardin, a place on everyone's itinerary.

Should you decide to stay overnight, there's the wonderful Hacı Abdullah Bey Konagü (see boxed text, opposite), which is reason enough to come here. If you want to eat out, the **Perili Bahçe – Alabalık Tesisi** (☎ 0482-571 2832; Gazi Mahallesi; mains €3–4; 🕒 8am–9pm), off the Mardin road, is a killer, with a large open-air area overlooking the gushing river and shade in abundance. As the cook puts it, '*herşey natural*' (everything is natural here) – we agree. Relish fresh trout, salads, potatoes or *içli köfte* and sluice it all down with a glass of *killit* (local wine) or rakı. So cool!

Reaching Savur by public transport is a doddle. From Mardin there are regular minibus services (€2, one hour).

MİDYAT

☎ 0482 / pop 61,600

About 65km east of Mardin lies sprawling Midyat, with a drab new section, Estel, linked by 3km of potholed Hükümet Caddesi to the inviting old town. Midyat has lots of potential but is not as touristic as Mardin, mostly

because it lacks Mardin's hillside setting. It's definitely worth a visit nonetheless.

The centrepiece of the old part of town is merely a traffic roundabout. Close by, **honey-coloured houses** are tucked away behind a row of jewellery shops. Here, the alleyways are lined with houses whose demure doorways open onto huge courtyards surrounded by intricately carved walls, windows and recesses. Watch out for the many curved *firm* (ovens) in the streets shared by neighbouring families.

Like that of Mardin, Midyat's Christian population suffered in the early 20th century and during the last few decades, and much of the community has emigrated. There are nine Syrian Orthodox **churches** still in use in the town, though only four regularly hold services. Although you can see the steeples, it's hard to find the churches in the maze of streets so the best option is to accept one of the local guides, who are likely to be hot on your heels.

There are a couple of hotels and the modern **Saray Lokantası** (☎ 462 3436; Mardin Caddesi; mains €2–3; 🕒 10am–10pm) with good-value meals, in new Midyat where the Mardin minibuses first stop. Close by, the **Hotel Demirdağ** (☎ 462 2000; fax 462 1482; Mardin Caddesi; s/d €15/23; 🕒) is the best option in town and has colourful, decent-value rooms.

Rattly minibuses regularly ply the bumpy route from outside the Saray Lokantası to old Midyat to save you the charmless walk. Most services leave from old Midyat, some 100m north of the roundabout along the road to

THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Hacı Abdullah Bey Konagü (☎ 0482-571 2127, 0533 239 7807; r per person with shared bathroom & half board €34) Step through the door into this cocoon-like *konak* (mansion) perched on the hilltop and you may never feel like leaving again. Staying at this peach of a place is arguably the best hotel experience you'll have in southeastern Anatolia. The seven rooms are impeccable, and the common areas are attractively decked out, with judiciously positioned artefacts. It's full of nooks and crannies, and no two rooms are identical. Homemade meals come in for warm praise and can be served on the rooftop terrace, with lovely views over Savur. Throw in the warm welcome of the Öztürk family, and you have a winner. Simply *cennet* (paradise).

WELCOME TO IRAQ Tony Wheeler

At the Habur border post, we'd spent over an hour wandering from office to office in the pouring rain. At one of them my taxi driver reluctantly slipped a banknote into the pages of my passport before handing it over the counter. It seemed to work; the passport came back within minutes with a stamp inside. I was finally out of Turkey. We drove over the bridge and stopped in a car park just beyond the sign announcing: 'Welcome to Iraq'.

Crazy? Suicidal? No. Most of Iraq may be a death zone, but the northern region, which local Kurds hope to establish as an autonomous state of Kurdistan, has been fairly safe and it's easy to enter via the Habur border crossing, south of Cizre and Silopi. Just don't mention the name 'Kurdistan' to Turks; on the Turkish side of the border 'Iraq' is the diplomatically safe place to talk about.

In Iraq, I took a taxi on to Zakho and then to Dohuk where I spent the night. From there I explored north to the mountain town of Amadiya and then continued east to Arbil (aka Erbil or Hawler), which huddles around a magnificent hilltop citadel. Although I travelled on to Sulaymaniyah, the other major city in the region, I didn't head further south to Iraq's ancient centres such as Nineveh, Nimrud or Ur.

Well, I'm not completely mad.

Batman. Minibuses from here leave at least hourly for Hasankeyf and Batman (€3, 1½ hours, 82km) and Mardin (€3, 1¼ hours). Minibuses for Cizre leave from just south of the roundabout on the Cizre road.

Minibuses from Mardin will pass through the new town, then drop you off at the roundabout in the old town. You could easily base yourself in Midyat and make a day trip to Mardin or Hasankeyf.

AROUND MİDYAT

Morgabriel

About 18km east of Midyat, **Morgabriel (Deyrul Umur) Monastery** (☎ 9-11.30am & 1-4.30pm) rises like a mirage from its desert-like surroundings. Though much restored, the monastery dates back to AD 397. St Gabriel, the namesake of the monastery, is buried here – the sand beside his tomb is said to cure illness. You'll see various frescoes and the immense ancient dome built by Theodora, wife of Byzantine emperor Justinian, and a more recent bell tower.

Morgabriel is home to the archbishop of Tür Abdin (Mountain of the Servants of God), the surrounding plateau. These days he presides over a much diminished flock of around 80 people, the majority students. Fortunately, life for the residents seems to be looking up after the recent troubles, and there should be no problem about visiting.

You could ask here about visiting some of the other churches in the region, such as the **Meryem Ana Kilisesi** at Anıttepe (Hah).

To get to the monastery from Midyat take a minibus (€2) heading along the Cizre road and ask to be dropped at the signposted road junction, from where it's a 2.5km walk uphill to the gate. Start early in the morning as minibuses become increasingly difficult to find as the day wears on. If you don't feel like walking

you can charter one of the minibuses for about €20 return, including waiting time.

Hasankeyf

☎ 0488 / pop 5500

Hasankeyf, a gorgeous honey-coloured village clinging to the rocks of a gorge above the Tigris River, is a sort of Cappadocia in miniature where some people still live a troglodyte lifestyle. It's a definite must-see.

SIGHTS

Arriving in Hasankeyf from Batman, you'll see on the right-hand side of the road the conical **Zeynel Bey Türbesi**, isolated in a field near the river. This turquoise-tiled tomb was built in the mid-15th century for Zeynel, son of the Akkoyunlu governor, and it's a rare survivor from this period.

A modern bridge now spans the Tigris, but as you cross you'll see, to the right, the broken arches and pylons of the **Eski Köprüsü** (Old Bridge), their size giving some idea of the importance of Hasankeyf in the period immediately before the arrival of the Ottomans.

Across the bridge a sign to the right points to the **Kale** (Fortress) and **Mağaralar** (Caves). As you walk along the road you'll see the **El-Rizk Cami** (1409), sporting a beautiful, slender minaret similar to those in Mardin and topped with a stork's nest. Just past the mosque, the road forks. The right fork leads down to the banks of the river with a great wall of rock soaring up on the left. The left fork cuts through a rocky defile, the rockfaces pitted with caves. Take the slippery stone steps leading up on the right to the castle.

You quickly come to the finely decorated main gate to the castle. This strategic site has been occupied since Byzantine times, but most of the relics you see today were built during the reign of the 14th-century Ayyubids.

HASANKEYF UNDER THREAT

Hasankeyf is a gem of a place, but has the cloud of a giant engineering project hanging over it. Despite its beauty and history, the town is slated to vanish beneath the waters of the İlisu Dam, part of the GAP project – see the boxed text, p608. The proposed dam will flood a region from Batman to Midyat, drowning this historic site and several other archaeological treasures, and displacing over 37 villages. In 2002, several foreign investors pulled out amid the controversy provoked by the dam, but it seems that the works won't be delayed indefinitely, and the construction works should start sooner or later, in spite of mounting local resistance. The mayor of Hasankeyf tries to gain international support to protect the sites and would like to take legal action, but the battle is virtually almost lost. So a visit to Hasankeyf is a must. Now!

Beyond the gate are caves, which youthful guides will describe as shops and houses. At the top of the rock you face the ruins of the 14th-century **Küçük Saray** (Small Palace), with pots built into the ceiling and walls for sound insulation and superb views over the river.

You will then be led past a small **mosque**, which was obviously once a Byzantine church, to the **Büyük Saray** (Big Palace), with a creepy gaol underneath, right by a tower teetering on the edge of the cliff. It was probably built as a watchtower. The 14th-century **Ulu Cami** was built on the site of a church.

SLEEPING & EATING

There's only one shut-eye option in Hasankeyf. If it's full, you can base yourself in Batman, about 35km to the north. Batman is a charming modern town.

Hasankeyf Motel (☎ 381 2005; Dicle Sokak; s/d €9/17) By the Tigris bridge, this no-nonsense motel offers unadorned rooms with shared bathrooms. Some rooms overlook the river. No towels are provided, and no breakfast is served. There are only seven rooms, so it's wise to book ahead.

Few things could be more pleasurable than lunching where a series of **çardaks** (leafy-roofed shelters) have been set up along the riverbank. Tables stand in the river, so while you tuck into your fish you can soak your lower limbs in the icy clear water of the Tigris. A normal meal of grilled meat with salad and a cold drink is unlikely to come to more than €4. Try the following options.

Yolgeçen Hanı (☎ 381 2287; Dicle Kıyısı; mains €2-5; ☎ 8am-10pm) One of the most atmospheric restaurants, with a series of rock-hewn dining rooms overlooking the river. Sit on lumpy cushions, hoe into a kebab or a grilled fish, knock it all down with a glass of rakı (yes, it's licensed!) and you should depart happy and buzzing.

Hasankeyf Fırını Et Lokantası (☎ 381 2270; mains €1-3; ☎ 8am-10pm) Near the Hasankeyf Motel, this unpretentious yet welcoming joint dishes up fresh pide.

Has Bahçe (☎ 381 2609; Dicle Sokak; mains €2-4; ☎ 8am-10pm) Along the river (but no views to speak of), this eatery occupies a shady garden and serves up fresh fish, chicken and lamb.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Frequent minibuses run from Batman to Midyat, transiting Hasankeyf (€2, 40 minutes,

37km). There's also a daily service to Van (€12, 310km).

ŞİRNAK

Şirnak boasts a stunning location, with jagged mountains as a backdrop. There's not much to do, but it's a convenient staging post if you plan to explore the deep southeast. From there, you can take the long but highly scenic haul to Hakkari in the one daily minibus (€9, 181km, five to six hours depending on waits at checkpoints). The landscape is sublime, with a mix of canyons, passes, gorges and mountains; at times the road skirts the border with neighbouring Iraq.

Although the accommodation scene is nothing to write home about, you can stay overnight there. The best we can say about the **Hotel Meneşçe** (☎ 0486-216 1902; Uludere Caddesi; s/d €20/30) is that it's an acceptable choice despite its greyish exterior, peeling walls and battered carpets. At least it has clean sheets and good views at the back. If it's full, try the nearby **Otel Murat** (☎ 0486-216 2857; Uludere Caddesi; r with/without bathroom €17/8), which features hanky-sized rooms and mattresses that sink like hammocks, but at this price we're not complaining. The gloomy **Hotel Ilkar** (☎ 0486-216 6464; Uludere Caddesi; s/d €14/25), frequented by prostitutes, is best avoided.

If you want to fill your grumbling belly at wallet-friendly prices, head to the busy **Diyarbakır Faysal Ustanin Evi** (Cumhuriyet Caddesi; mains €2-3; ☎ 8am-10pm), opposite the Ilkar, which tosses up generous plates of meat and mezes. It features a cosy Turkish corner at the back. There's even a pleasant **Aile Çay Bahçesi** (Aile Tea Garden; Cumhuriyet Caddesi; ☎ dawn-dusk) right in the centre. It's great for relaxing over a cuppa while soaking up the lovely views over the mountains.

From Şirnak onward to the west, there are at least two daily minibuses to Siirt (€5, two hours, 96km) and two bus services to Diyarbakır (€9, five hours, 340km). You can stay overnight in Siirt, but the city is quite dull; **Otel Erdef** (☎ 0484-223 1081; Cumhuriyet Caddesi; s/d €25/42) is serviceable but pricey for what you get.

BİTLİS

☎ 0434 / pop 220,400

Bitlis has lopsided charm. While the city centre is an obvious nomination for the muddiest-pavements-in-the-Van-area award,

overall it's a beguiling city with a smorgasbord of monuments that testify to rich ancient origins. The contrast with neighbouring Tatvan is striking. While modern Tatvan boasts an orderly street plan, Bitlis is a somewhat chaotic old town squeezed into the narrow valley of a stream. Women travellers, come prepared: Bitlis feels overwhelmingly male.

A castle dominates the town, and two ancient bridges span the stream. Make a beeline for the **Ulu Camii**, which was built in 1126, while the **Şerefiye Camii** dates from the 16th century. Other must-sees include the splendid **İhlasiye Medrese** (Quranic school), the most significant building in Bitlis, and the **Gökmeydan Camii**, which has a detached minaret.

The main problem in Bitlis is the lack of facilities, which means you'll have to base yourself in Tatvan. Regular minibuses travel from Tatvan to Bitlis (€2, 30 minutes).

TATVAN

☎ 0434 / pop 54,000

While Tatvan doesn't set the heart aflutter, it's ideally positioned if you plan a trip to spectacular Nemrut Dağı (Mt Nemrut; opposite) – not to be confused with the higher-profile, iconic and volcanic (inactive) Nemrut Dağı south of Malatya, Ahlat (opposite) and Bitlis (p633). Several kilometres long and just a few blocks wide, it is not much to look at, but its setting on the shores of Lake Van (backed by bare mountains streaked with snow) is magnificent. It is also the western port for Lake Van steamers.

Information

Everything you'll need (hotels, restaurants, banks, the PTT and the bus company offices) huddles together in the town centre.

Sleeping & Eating

Tatvan has a handful of hotels that are well used to housing tourists.

Öz Gaziantep Baklavacısı (☎ 827 7077; Cumhuriyet Caddesi; pastries €0.50-1; ☹ 8am-8pm) Adjoining the Şelale, this is the perfect place to finish your meal off with a triangle of flaky baklava.

Hotel Üstün (☎ 827 9014; Hal Caddesi; s/d €7/14) The family-run Üstün shows signs of wear and tear (read: poo-brown carpets, drab-looking façade, mattresses as comfortable as Thanksgiving's mashed potatoes), but it's tidy and secure, the sheets are immaculate, and there's a functional shower in each room (but the

toilets are shared). It's down the side street running by the PTT.

Hotel Dilek (☎ 827 1516; Yeni Çarşı; s/d €14/23) The Dilek stands its ground with spruce, colourful (if a tad compact) rooms with tiled bathrooms and a smart rooftop breakfast room. Pity about the meagre breakfast, though. It's in a street running parallel to the main drag.

Tatvan Kardelen (☎ 825 9500; Belediye Yanı; s/d €25/45) This is usually where tour groups bunk down when in town, which is enough to recommend this sharp-edged concrete lump next to the *belediye*. It features spacious and fastidiously clean rooms. If only the migraine-inducing corridors were smartened up!

Şelale Izgara Salonu (☎ 827 9767; Cumhuriyet Caddesi; mains €2-3; ☹ 11am-10pm) This very well-regarded restaurant evinces a vague sense of style, with yellowish walls adorned with a couple of knick-knacks. It serves kebabs and ready-made meals that will have you walking out belly-first.

Kaşı Beyaz Ocakbaşı (☎ 827 6996; PTT Yanı; mains €3-5; ☹ 10am-10pm) Bona-fide carnivores should head straight to this buzzing eatery, not far from the Hotel Dilek. Meat is grilled to perfection on a big *ocak* (grill) on the ground floor. If you've had your fill of meat dishes, pide is also available.

Şimşek Lokantası (☎ 827 1513; Cumhuriyet Caddesi; mains €3-5; ☹ 10am-10pm) The wood-panelled interior is inviting and the food doesn't disappoint. Don't expect newfangled concoctions – just the standard kebabs.

Getting There & Away

If you're heading to Van, you can take the ferry that crosses the lake twice a day (€3 per person, about four hours). It doesn't have a fixed schedule, though. Buses to Van run round the southern shore of the lake (€6, 2½ hours, 156km).

Minibuses to Ahlat (€2, 30 minutes) and Adilcevaz (€3.50, one hour) leave every hour or so from PTT Caddesi, beside Türk Telekom and the PTT. The minibus stand for Bitlis (€2, 30 minutes) is a bit further up the street.

LAKE VAN (VAN GÖLÜ)

☎ 0432

Lake Van (Van Gölü) is eastern Anatolia's *pièce de résistance*. After the rigours of central Anatolia, this vast expanse of water surrounded by snowcapped mountains sounds deceptively like a holy grail for those in search of beaches

and watersport activities, but it's not. Lake Van has great potential for activities, but nothing has been really developed yet and infrastructure is lacking. Water sports? Lakeside resorts? Dream on! But at least this means it's scenic and virtually untouched. A circumnavigation around its shores reveals plenty of surprises.

By far the most conspicuous feature on the map of southeastern Turkey, this 3750-sq-km lake was formed when a volcano (Nemrut Dağı – not to be confused with the one with the statues) north of Tatvan blocked its natural outflow.

North Shore

If anything the journey around the north shore of Lake Van from Tatvan to Van, with first Nemrut Dağı (Mt Nemrut) and then Süphan Dağı (Mt Süphan) looming beside the road, is more beautiful than going around the south shore.

The big bus companies take the shortest route around the south of the lake from Tatvan to Van. If you want to travel around the north shore you'll probably have to break your journey. Regular minibuses run from beside Türk Telekom and the PTT in Tatvan to Ahlat (€2, 30 minutes) and Adilcevaz (€3). From Adilcevaz, there are five direct buses to Van (€6, 2½ hours), but the last one departs at 2.30pm – make sure you start out early in the day.

NEMRUT DAĞI (MT NEMRUT)

This Nemrut Dağı (2935m) rising to the north of Tatvan is an inactive volcano with five crater lakes on its summit – not to be confused with the more famous Nemrut Dağı (Mt Nemrut, topped with the giant heads) near Kahta.

A trip up this Nemrut Dağı is also an unforgettable experience, not least for the fine views back over Lake Van. On the summit the scenery is almost completely unspoilt. In spring and early summer the lower slopes of the mountain are a sea of sweet-smelling wild flowers. Midweek, the only company you're likely to have is the shepherds with their flocks (and dogs) and the hoopoes, nuthatches, skylarks and other birds. A tip: follow the dirt road that leads down to the lake and find your own picnic area. Memorable!

You can visit Nemrut only from around mid-May to the end of October. At other times the summit is under metres of snow.

Several ski lifts were being set up on the outside slopes when we visited. Nemrut Dağı could well become another ski resort in eastern Anatolia in the near future. Stay tuned.

It's not easy to get to Nemrut, as there are no regular services from Tatvan. In high season, you could try to hitch a ride. Your best bet is to ask the staff at your hotel in Tatvan for advice or hire a taxi. Expect to pay about €40 return.

With your own transport, leave Tatvan by the road around the lake and then turn left towards Bitlis; about 300m further, turn right following a sign saying 'Nemrut 13km'. The road is rough but passable in an ordinary car except in wet weather. From the summit you can follow the dirt road that winds down into the crater to the lake shore – another 6km.

AHLAT

A further 42km along the lake shore is the small town of Ahlat, famous for its splendid Seljuk Turkish tombs and graveyard. Don't overlook this largely underrated site, and allow at least one hour to visit the sights.

Founded during the reign of Caliph Omar (AD 581–644), Ahlat became a Seljuk stronghold in the 1060s. When the Seljuk sultan Alp Arslan rode out to meet the Byzantine emperor Romanus Diogenes in battle on the field of Manzikert, Ahlat was his base.

Later, Ahlat had an extraordinarily eventful history even for Anatolia, with emir (tribal leader) defeating prince and king driving out emir; hence, perhaps, the fame of its cemeteries.

Just west of Ahlat you'll see the overgrown polygonal 13th-century tomb, **Usta Şağirt Kümbeti** (Ulu Kümbeti), 300m off the highway and set in the midst of a field near some houses and a new mosque. It's the largest Seljuk tomb in the area.

A bit further along the highway on the left is a little museum, and behind it a vast unique **Seljuk cemetery** (Selçuk Mezarlığı), with stele-like headstones of lichen-covered grey or red volcanic tuff with intricate web patterns and bands of Kufic lettering. It's thought that Ahlat stonemasons were employed on other great stoneworking projects, such as the decoration of the great mosque at Divriği, near Sivas.

Over the centuries earthquakes, wind and water have set the stones at all angles, so they stand out like broken teeth – a striking sight

with spectacular Nemrut Dağı as a backdrop. Most stones have a crow as sentinel, and tortoises cruise the ruins.

On the northeastern side of the graveyard is the beautiful and unusual **Bayındır Kümbeti ve Camii** (Bayındır Tomb & Mosque, 1477), with a colonnaded porch and its own *mihrab* (niche indicating the direction of Mecca).

The small **museum** (admission €1.25; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm) has a reasonable collection including Urartian bronze belts and needles as well as some Byzantine glass-bead necklaces.

Other sites in Ahlat, worth exploring if you have the time, include the **Çifte Kümbet** (Twin Tombs), about 2km from the museum towards the town centre, and the **Ahlat Sahil Kalesi** (Ahlat Lakeside Fortress), south of the Çifte Kümbet, built during the reign of Süleyman the Magnificent. The poplars here are knotted with crows' nests.

It's easy enough to make a half-day trip to Ahlat from Tatvan. Dolmuşes leave for Ahlat (€2, 30 minutes) from beside Türk Telekom and the PTT. Make sure you ask to be let off at the museum on the western outskirts of Ahlat, or you'll have to leg it back from the town centre.

ADİLCEVAZ

About 25km east of Ahlat is the town of Adilcevaz, once a Urartian town but now dominated by a great Seljuk Turkish fortress, the **Kef Kalesi**, and the even greater bulk of **Süphan Dağı** (Mt Süphan, 4434m). It's worth pausing here if you're travelling by car.

Snowmelt from the year-round snowfields on Mt Süphan flows down to Adilcevaz, making its surroundings lush and fertile. As you enter the town along the shore, the highway passes the nice little **Ulu Camii**, built in the 13th century and still used for daily prayer. Now that life in the southeast is slowly returning to normal, it is once again possible to climb Mt Süphan in summer.

If you get stuck, there are a couple of places to stay in Adilcevaz, including **Otel Park** (☎ 311 4150; s/d €23/39) on the waterfront, not far from the otogar. It's a grim building, but the rooms are more colourful and well kept.

South Shore

Travelling south around the lake between Tatvan and Van, the scenery is beautiful, but there's little reason to stop except at a point 5km west of Gevaş, where the 10th-century

Church of the Holy Cross at Akdamar is a glorious must.

EDREMIT

About 15km west of Van you'll pass through Edremit, a small lakeside settlement with the feel of a seaside resort: all lilos, beach balls and ice cream.

GEVAŞ

Like Ahlat on the north shore, Gevaş has a cemetery full of tombstones dating from the 14th to 17th centuries. Notable is the polygonal **Halime Hatun Türbesi**, built in 1358 for a female member of the Karakoyunlu dynasty.

AKDAMAR

One of the marvels of Armenian architecture is **Akdamar Kilisesi** (Church of the Holy Cross). It's perched on an island 3km out in the lake, and motorboats ferry sightseers back and forth. Sadly, restoration works were under way when we visited, and the scenery was a bit marred by scaffolding.

In AD 921 Gagik Artzruni, King of Vaspurkan, built a palace, church and monastery on the island. Little remains of the palace and monastery, but the church walls are in superb condition and the wonderful relief carvings are among the masterworks of Armenian art. If you're familiar with biblical stories, you'll immediately recognise Adam and Eve, Jonah and the Whale (with the head of a dog), David and Goliath, Abraham about to sacrifice Isaac, Daniel in the Lions' Den, Samson etc. There are some frescoes inside the church.

Akdamar island is also an ideal spot for a picnic.

North of Akdamar another even more isolated and forgotten 11th-century Armenian church stands on the island of **Çarpanak**, popular with bird-watchers.

ALTINSAÇ KILISESİ

Not surprisingly, the well-publicised, easily accessible Akdamar Kilisesi has overshadowed the southern shore's other highlights, and Altınsaç Kilisesi is no exception. Another relatively well-preserved Armenian church, it's perched on a mound overlooking the lake. This is a pearl of a site; if you have your own wheels, be sure to squeeze it into your itinerary. The word is not out, and you'll have the whole place to yourself.

From Akdamar, drive about 11km towards Tatvan until you reach a junction. Turn right onto the road marked for Altınsaç. After 3km the asphalt road ends and becomes a gravel road. The road skirts the shore of the lake for another 14km, until you reach the village of Altınsaç. On a clear day this a wonderfully scenic drive, with breathtaking views over the shimmering waters of the lake and the undulating hills of the steppe. From the village it's another 2km to the church, which is visible from some distance – an awesome vision.

SLEEPING & EATING

Although there are several basic camping grounds at Edremit, the best bet is the **Akdamar Camping ve Restaurant** (☎ 216 1505; camp sites per person €1; mains €2-5; ☎ Apr-Sep) immediately opposite the ferry departure point for Akdamar island. The camping ground here is elevated, with fine views of the lake. The restaurant has a terrace with lake views and an indoor area in case of bad weather; the fish is fresh. Another speciality is the *kürt tavası* (meat, tomato and pepper cooked in a clay pot).

Just east of Edremit, along the main road, you'll find a couple of midrange hotels by the water, including the charmless but well-equipped **Merit Şahmaran** (☎ 214 3479; fax 612 2420; s/d €43/60; 📶), 12km from Van.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Minibuses run the 44km from near Beş Yol in Van to Akdamar harbour for €1 during high season. At other times, there's an hourly minibus to Gevaş (€1). If you want to be dropped at the boat dock 5km further on, negotiate the price with the driver (about €6). Alternatively, catch a minibus heading to Tatvan and ask to be let off at Akdamar harbour. Make sure you're out on the highway flagging a bus back to Van by 4pm, as soon afterwards the traffic dries up and buses may be full.

Boats to the island run as and when traffic warrants it (minimum 10 people). Provided others are there to share the cost, a return ticket for the 20-minute voyage and admission to the island costs €3. Getting to Çarpanak is harder. The boatmen are likely to want €160 before they'll consider the 2½-hour voyage.

VAN

☎ 0432 / pop 391,000 / elevation 1727m

In the mood for some sophistication? Well, you have come to the right place. It usually

comes as a surprise to many travellers to discover that Van is by far the most engaging and liberal urban centre in eastern Anatolia. It feels different from other metropolises in the east, not least because of its sizeable student population. Don't expect too much, though: it's certainly not hedonistic (you're not in Marmaris, baby), but there's a fluid, lively energy to the city and a true *joie de vivre*, as testified by the daily *passeggiatta* (promenade). As happens in Italy, the whole town promenades up and down Cumhuriyet Caddesi to window-shop, catch up with friends, see what's new, and generally take things easy. If you want to see young couples walking hand in hand on the main drag or flirting in the pastry shops, this is your chance. The place offers a refreshing change, particularly if you have travelled from rigorous Şanlıurfa or Hakkari.

Beautifully positioned near the eponymous lake, Van doesn't make the most of its enticing location, with few activities on offer. Forget the lake, and focus on the striking monuments, including Van Kalesi (Van Castle or the Rock of Van), which is a true pleasure.

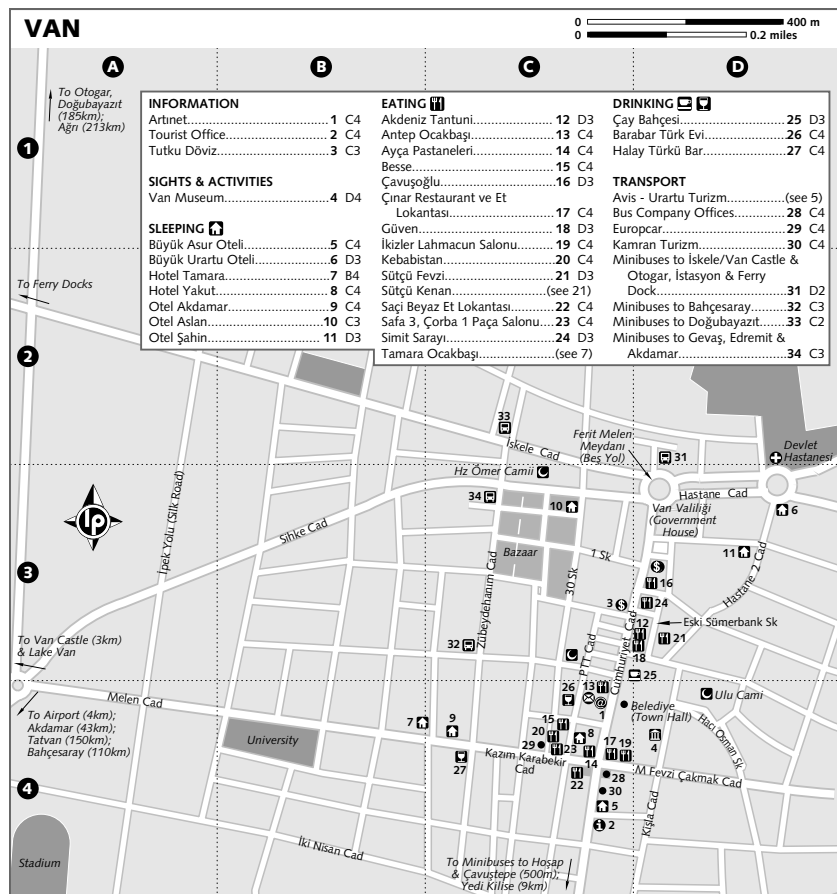
Van is also an ideal base to journey around the lake or explore the ancient Urartian city at Çavuştepe, the craggy mountain fortress of Hoşap and the remote village of Bahçesaray.

History

The kingdom of Urartu, the biblical Ararat, flourished from the 13th to the 7th centuries BC. Its capital was on the outskirts of present-day Van. The Urartians borrowed much of their culture, including cuneiform writing, from the neighbouring Assyrians with whom they were more or less permanently at war. The powerful Assyrians never subdued the Urartians, but when several waves of Cimmerians, Scythians and Medes swept into Urartu and joined in the battle, the kingdom met its downfall.

Later the region was resettled by a people whom the Persians called Armenians. By the 6th century BC it was governed by Persian and Median satraps.

In the 8th century AD, Arab armies flooded through from the south, forcing the Armenian prince to take refuge on Akdamar island. Unable to fend off the Arabs, he agreed to pay tribute to the caliph. When the Arabs retreated, the Byzantines and Persians took their place, and overlordship of Armenia seasawed



between them as one or the other gained military advantage.

After defeating the Byzantines in 1071 at Manzikert, north of Lake Van, the Seljuk Turks marched on, with a flood of Turkoman nomads in tow, to found the sultanate of Rum, based in Konya. The domination of eastern Anatolia by Turkish emirs followed and continued until the coming of the Ottomans in 1468.

During WWI, Armenian guerrilla bands intent on founding an independent Armenian state collaborated with the Russians to defeat the Ottoman armies in Turkey's east. From then on the Armenians, formerly loyal subjects of the sultan, were viewed by the Turks as traitors. Bitter fighting between Turkish and Kurdish forces

on the one side and Armenian and Russian forces on the other brought devastation to the entire region and to Van. For more about this contentious period, see the boxed text, p40.

The Ottomans destroyed the old city of Van (near Van Kalesi) before the Russians occupied it in 1915. Ottoman forces counter-attacked but were unable to drive the invaders out, and Van remained under Russian occupation until the armistice of 1917. After the founding of the Turkish Republic, a new planned city of Van was built 4km east of the old site.

Orientation

Everything you'll need (hotels, restaurants, banks, internet cafés, the PTT and the bus

company offices) lie on or around Cumhuriyet Caddesi, the main commercial street.

The city's otogar is on the northwestern outskirts, and most bus companies operate services there from the town centre. The main train station is northwest of the centre near the otogar, with another station, İskele İstasyonu, several kilometres to the northwest on the lake shore.

Tours to nearby areas can be organised by Büyük Asur Oteli (see p640).

Information

Banks with ATMs are easily found on Cumhuriyet Caddesi, as are internet cafés.

Artnet (Cumhuriyet Caddesi; per hr €0.60; ☎ 8am-11pm) A modern outlet with flat screens. It's across the street from the *belediye*.

Tourist office (☎ 216 2530; Cumhuriyet Caddesi; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 1-5.30pm Mon-Fri) Hands out some brochures on the Van area.

Tutku Döviz (☎ 214 1847; Cumhuriyet Caddesi; ☎ 8am-6.30pm Mon-Sat) Exchange office.

Sights

VAN CASTLE (VAN KALESİ)

Nothing is quite so impressive in Van as the **Van Castle** (Van Kalesi, Rock of Van; admission €1.25, car parking €1; ☎ 9am-dusk), which dominates the view of the city. About 3km west of the city centre, it's a wonderful place to come for a picnic.

Just past the spot where the minibus drops you, on the northern side of the rock, is a modern mosque and the **tomb** of Abdurrahman Gazi, a Muslim holy man. It's frequently visited by pilgrims including infertile women who are thought to be helped by coming here. Further on, at the northwestern corner, you'll reach the ticket office, then the car park, where there are toilets and a tea garden.

A stairway from the car park leads up the rock. Once you've reached the summit, the old city reveals itself like Pandora's box. Over towards the southern face of the rock you'll see an iron gateway blocking off a lengthy **cuneiform inscription**. This recounts the high points of King Argishti I's reign (786-764 BC). There are also several rock-cut **funeral chambers**, including King Argishti's.

Continue up to the top of the rock, where you can see the fortifications, including the **Sardur Burcu** (Sardur Tower, 840-830 BC) with several cuneiform inscriptions in Assyrian praising the Urartian King Sardur I.

If you look down to the south of the rock, you'll see a flat space broken up by the grass-covered foundations of numerous buildings. This was the site of Tushpa, an Urartian city that flourished almost 3000 years ago, although the foundations you see are those of the **old city** of Van, destroyed during the upheavals of WWI. Time is well spent walking around the base of the rock afterwards and inspecting these ruins, preferably taking someone to guide you for safety and avoid potential hassles from kids. Of the Seljuk **Ulu Cami** only a broken brick minaret remains, but the **Hüsrev Paşa Külliyesi**, dating back to 1567, has been restored and you may be able to get inside to see the fine brick dome and fragmentary murals. If not, you can still inspect the delicate *kümbet* (tomb) attached. The nearby **Kaya Çelebi Camii** (1662) has a similarly striped minaret but is still in use and likely to be locked except at prayer times.

To get to Van Kalesi take a 'Kale' minibus from Beş Yol (Ferit Melen Meydanı; €0.40), which will drop you at the eastern edge of the rock. Go right around the base of Van Kalesi to the entrance at the northwestern end. Women should avoid visiting on their own - they may find themselves hassled as they walk to the entrance.

VAN MUSEUM

The small **Van Museum** (Van Müzesi; Kişla Caddesi; admission €1.30; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm Tue-Sun) boasts an outstanding collection of Urartian exhibits. The Urartian gold jewellery is the highlight, but the bronze belts, helmets, horse armour and terracotta figures are also well worth seeing.

The ethnographic exhibits upstairs include local Kurdish and Turkoman kilims and a carpeted sitting area, such as is found in village houses. The Genocide Section is a piece of one-sided propaganda displaying the contents of graves left from the massacres of Turks and Kurds by Armenians at Çavuşoğlu and Zeve.

The museum has a good bookshop with plenty of foreign-language titles about the region.

Sleeping

Van has a decent range of accommodation, though inspiration can be hard to find (please someone - open a boutique hotel!) and it's a wee bit more expensive than elsewhere in eastern Turkey. Most hotels are on or around

the main drag, making comparisons relatively easy.

BUDGET

Otel Aslan (☎ 216 2469; Özel İdare İş Merkezi Karşısı; s/d 66-9/9-12) A key player on the Van budget accommodation scene, this hotel-cum-hostel features shoebox-sized colourful rooms with double-glazed windows. And the floor of the rooms is tiled – no brownish, whiffy carpet! Cheaper rooms share toilets and showers, which can be a drag but, in this location for this price, you won't hear anyone complaining. No breakfast is served.

Büyük Asur Oteli (☎ 216 8792; fax 216 9461; Cumhuriyet Caddesi, Turizm Sokak; s/d €20/34; (P)) This hotel may not be the cheapest option in town, but it's without doubt the most reliable for travellers. Ignore the Soviet-style façade – rooms are freshly painted and come complete with fresh linen, back-friendly beds, TV and prim bathroom. It's also noteworthy for its prime location and its cosy lobby with floor cushions you can sink into with a post-sightseeing beer at hand. The manager, Remzi Bozbay, speaks very good English and is a mine of local information. The hotel can also organise tours to Doğubayazıt, Akdamar Island, Hoşap Castle and other local attractions.

If you have no luck scoring a room at the Aslan or at the Büyük, check out the aging but central **Hotel Yakut** (☎ 214 2832; fax 216 6351; PTT Caddesi; s/d €17/23; (P)) or the unexciting but acceptable **Otel Şahin** (☎ 216 3062; fax 216 3064; İrfan Baştuğ Caddesi; s/d €14/25; (P)).

MIDRANGE

Otel Akdamar (☎ 214 9923; fax 212 0868; Kazım Karabekir Caddesi; s/d €29/38; (P)) Midrange hotels are thin on the ground, so the Akdamar is destined to do well. Although it has a certain 'could be anywhere' sensibility in its décor and standards, it's well organised and its very central location is a gem, with all the restaurants and pastry shops within easy reach. Amenities are solid, and the bathrooms are clean-smelling. It caters mainly to business travellers. Wi-fi is available.

Büyük Urartu Oteli (☎ 212 0660; www.buyukurartu.otel.com; Hastane 2 Caddesi; s/d €37/50; (P)) A reassuring choice with no surprises (good or bad) up its sleeves. The monolithic Urartu's primary clientele are business travellers and tour groups, and while all rooms meet modern standards, the hulking great façade is not

too pretty. Still, you don't have to look at that from the inside, and the full array of amenities, including a sauna, rooftop restaurant and a pool, offers ample compensation.

Hotel Tamara (☎ 214 3295; Yüzbaşıoğlu Sokak; s/d €37/62; (P)) The newest kid on the block, the ambitious Tamara features smart rooms with all mod cons, and there's not a speck of dirt to be found. It has two restaurants, a bar, a *hamam* and wi-fi access. It caters mainly to businesspeople. Cumhuriyet Caddesi is a wiggle away.

Eating

Simit Sarayı (Cumhuriyet Caddesi; simits €0.60; ☎ 8am-8pm) *Simit, simit, simit*, get us our *simit* fix! If you can't find this bustling *simit* shop on the main drag you've either lost your eyesight or your sense of smell.

Safa 3, Çorba 1 Paça Salonu (☎ 215 8121; Kazım Karabekir Caddesi; soups €1; ☎ 24hr) If Saçi Beyaz is too trendy for your taste, walk down Kazım Karabekir Caddesi to this quirky little restaurant, which serves soups and other goodies round the clock. If you want to impress your peers (and locals), check out the supposedly palate-pleasing *kelle* (mutton's head) – good luck! The lentil soup, though a bit spicy for the uninitiated, takes you into more traditional culinary territory.

Ayça Pastaneleri (☎ 216 0081; Kazım Karabekir Caddesi; snacks €1-2; ☎ 8am-11pm) With its see-and-be-seen glass front on the 1st floor, mellow atmosphere, virginal white walls and sleek furnishings, this place screams trendy. Fortunately, there's substance behind the trappings, with toothsome baklavas and well-prepared snacks. The 1st floor is popular with flirting students. So cute.

İkizler Lahmacun Salonu (☎ 214 9568; M Fevzi Çakmak Caddesi; mains €1-3; ☎ 11am-11pm) Make a beeline for this little den off the main drag. It has been serving up pide and *lahmacun* to ravenous locals since 1962, so it really knows what it's doing when it comes to the national dish.

Akdeniz Tantuni (☎ 216 9010; Cumhuriyet Caddesi; mains €2; ☎ 11am-10pm) A good spot for a quick bite, this bustling eatery on the main drag features surprisingly pleasant surrounds. Enjoy your chicken sandwich while sitting around low wooden tables.

Kebabistan (☎ 214 2273; Sinemalar Sokak; mains €2-4; ☎ 10am-10pm) Another bastion of well-executed Turkish fare, Kebabistan is well regarded for

its expertly cooked kebaps. Portions are generous and service swift. Its second branch, across the street, specialises in pide.

Tamara Ocakbaşı (☎ 214 3295; Yüzbaşıoğlu Sokak; mains €2-6; ☎ 10am-11pm) Impressive! In the Hotel Tamara, this eatery wows you with its 40 *ocak* – each table has its own grill. The décor is more over-the-top than *recherché*, but it makes for a welcome change from the usually mundane dining rooms that characterise many eateries in Anatolia. High-quality meat and fish dishes feature prominently, so prepare to ease out your belt a notch.

Antep Ocakbaşı (☎ 215 9101; Cumhuriyet Caddesi; mains €3-5; ☎ 8am-10pm) This eatery is up some stairs in an unremarkable block. The stomach-groaning menu features all the usual suspects, including mezes, pide, grills and kebaps. The crowd ranges from chattering families to giggling students and crusty old men, giving the place a nice buzz.

Saçı Beyaz Et Lokantası (☎ 214 4016; Kazım Karabekir Caddesi; mains €3-6; ☎ 11am-10pm) Besse's main competitor, this shiny place adds a touch of glitz to Van's restaurant scene (which isn't, of course, saying too much). The food is well presented and of high quality, with service to match, although you can't help but feel you're paying more for the sleek setting than for the food. There's a separate entry for the eponymous pastry shop (on the ground floor), blessed with an agreeable terrace where you can unwind over a cup of tea or a delectable *dondurma*.

Çınar Restaurant ve Et Lokantası (☎ 214 6606; Cumhuriyet Caddesi; mains €3-6; ☎ 11am-10pm) It's more or less the same story as for Kebabistan in this long-standing favourite. The eclectic menu focuses on pide, kebaps, grills and stews. The chef recommends the *kaburga dolması*.

Besse (☎ 215 0050; Sanat Sokak; mains €4-7; ☎ 11am-9.30pm) If you're in search of a bit of sophistication, Besse fits the bill perfectly.

It is done out in soothing yellow tones and features parquet flooring and dim lights. The kitchen turns out superior cooking, with an emphasis on grills, salads and stews – try the excellent *ali nazik*, Besse's signature dish. It's deep in the heart of a vibrant area on the 1st floor of a bland building. If only alcohol was available!

Other temptations in the centre include: **Çavuşoğlu** (☎ 214 2669; Cumhuriyet Caddesi; ☎ 8am-10pm) Keep up your strength with a Turkish coffee and a delectable pastry.

Güven (☎ 214 0300; Cumhuriyet Caddesi; ☎ 8am-11pm) Another treasure trove for the sweet tooth, on the main thoroughfare.

Drinking & Entertainment

Van might be a fairly liberal city with an important student population, but if it's Ibiza-style you're after, you're barking up the wrong tree. However, there's a couple of lively hang-outs that can be recommended.

Barabar Türk Evi (☎ 214 9866; Sanat Sokak) The closest thing Van has to a pub, the Barabar is a definite rare breed in eastern Turkey. It may be lodged on the 1st floor of an unprepossessing building, but there is a fever-pitch energy with its mainly student crowd of both sexes gulping pints of frothy draught beer (about €3). Yes, BEER! It gets frantic here at weekends, with a live band knocking out Kurdish tunes – tear it up on the dance floor if you dare.

Çay Bahçesi (Cumhuriyet Caddesi; ☎ 8am-8pm) Van's undoubted social hub, this tea garden boasts lots of shade and greenery and is an attractive place to imbibe the atmosphere of central Van. It's deservedly packed with an eclectic crowd any time of the day. Nab a seat under the trees and linger over a cup of tea.

Halay Türkü Bar (☎ 214 8233; Kazım Karabekir Caddesi) Almost a carbon copy of the Barabar. Although it's trying hard and is a great place,

THE YUMMIEST BREAKFASTS IN EASTERN TURKEY

Van is famed for its tasty *kahvaltı* (breakfast). Skip the usually bland breakfast that is served in your hotel and head straight to Eski Sümerbank Sokak, also called 'Kahvaltı Sokak' (Breakfast St), a pedestrianised side street running parallel to Cumhuriyet Caddesi. Here you'll find a row of eateries specialising in complete Turkish breakfasts. Drool over *otlu peynir* (cheese mixed with a tangy herb, Van's speciality), *beyaz peynir* (a mild yellow cheese), honey from the highlands (mmm!), olives, *kayma* (clotted cream), butter, tomatoes, cucumbers and *yumurta* (eggs). The **Sütcü Fevzi** (☎ 216 6618; Eski Sümerbank Sokak; ☎ 7am-noon) and the **Sütcü Kenan** (☎ 216 8499; Eski Sümerbank Sokak; ☎ 7am-noon) have a few tables set up outside. A typical Van experience.

the Halay hasn't yet acquired the cool reputation of the Barabar.

Both are resoundingly popular among students of both sexes and make for a great experience. Enjoy!

Getting There & Away

AIR

A bus service leaves from outside the office of Kamran Turizm for the airport, 1½ hours before the departure (€2).

Atlasjet (www.atlasjet.com) Operates a daily flight to/from İstanbul (from €44, two hours).

Kamran Turizm (☎ 216 7031; Cumhuriyet Caddesi; ☹ 8am-8pm) An agent for Atlasjet, Pegasus, Sun Express and Turkish Airlines.

Pegasus Airlines (www.flypgs.com) Has a daily flight to/from Ankara (from €44, 1¼ hours) and İstanbul (from €60).

Sun Express (www.sunexpress.com.tr) Has a twice weekly flight to/from İzmir (€55, two hours).

Turkish Airlines (www.thy.com) Has a daily flight to/from İstanbul (from €44) and Ankara (from €44).

BOAT

A ferry crosses Lake Van between Tatvan and Van on a twice-daily basis. There's no fixed schedule. The trip costs €3 per passenger (€6 per car) and takes about four hours. 'İskele' dolmuşes ply İskele Caddesi to the harbour (€0.40).

BUS

Many bus companies have ticket offices at the intersection of Cumhuriyet and Kazım Karabekir Caddesi. They customarily provide services to shuttle passengers to and from the otogar.

Minibuses to Doğubayazıt leave from a small bus stand on İskele Caddesi, a few blocks west of Beş Yol. Minibuses to Bahçesaray (€6, three hours) leave from near a tea house called Bahçesaray Çay Evi, southeast of the bazaar. Minibuses to Hoşap and Çavuştepe (€3, 30 to 45 minutes) leave from Cumhuriyet Caddesi. Minibuses to Gevaş and Akdamar (€1, about 45 minutes) depart from a small bus stand in a side street off Zübeydehanım Caddesi, near the Otel Aslan.

To get to Iran, take a direct bus to Orumiye (in Iran) or a bus to Yüksekova (€6, three hours), then get on a shared taxi to Orumiye (€6).

Details of some services are listed in the table, right.

SERVICES FROM VAN'S OTOGAR

| Destination | Fare | Duration | Distance | Frequency (per day) |
|----------------------------|------|----------|----------|--------------------------------------|
| Ağrı | €8 | 3hr | 213km | frequent buses |
| Ankara | €30 | 22hr | 1250km | frequent buses |
| Diyarbakır | €13 | 7hr | 410km | frequent buses |
| Doğubayazıt (via Çaldıran) | €6 | 2½hr | 185km | several morning minibuses |
| Erciş | €3 | 1¼hr | 95km | several buses |
| Erzurum | €13 | 6hr | 410km | several buses |
| Hakkari | €6 | 4hr | 205km | a few buses |
| Malatya | €15 | 9-10hr | 500km | frequent buses |
| Orumiye (Iran) | €12 | 6hr | 311km | at least one bus |
| Şanlıurfa | €18 | 9hr | 585km | a few buses |
| Tatvan | €6 | 2½hr | 156km | frequent buses |
| Trabzon | €14 | 12hr | 733km | a few direct buses, most via Erzurum |

CAR

Consider renting a car to journey around Lake Van. Try **Europcar** (☎ 215 8990; Kazım Karabekir Caddesi) or **Avis – Urartu Turizm** (☎ 214 2020; Cumhuriyet Caddesi) next door to the Büyük Urartu Otel.

TRAIN

The twice-weekly *Vangözü Ekspresi* from İstanbul and Ankara terminates at Tatvan; from Tatvan, the ferry will bring you to the dock at Van. The weekly *Trans Asya Ekspresi* connects İstanbul to Tehran and stops at Van. It leaves for Tehran (€17) at 6.49pm on Friday; for İstanbul (€30), it leaves at 4.53pm.

You can get to the station İstasyon by dolmuş from near Beş Yol (€0.40).

Getting Around

For minibuses to Van Kalesi and the ferry dock (*iskele*), go to the minibus terminal near Beş Yol at the northern end of Cumhuriyet Caddesi.

AROUND VAN Yedi Kilise

The poignant, crumbling Yedi Kilise (Seven Churches) is about 9km southeast of Van, in

a typical Kurdish village. It used to be a large monastery. The arched portal sports elaborate stone-carvings, and you can also see various Armenian inscriptions above it. Inside, there are some well-preserved frescoes. There's no admission fee but a small donation is expected. If you want to buy souvenirs, women selling knitted gloves and socks usually wait near the building and will be happy to show their handicrafts. After visiting the church, you can mosey around the muddy streets of the village.

There's no reliable public transport to Yedi Kilise. The most practical way to get there is by taxi (about €13 including waiting time), or you could walk back to Van and enjoy the scenery.

Bahçesaray

Wow! Be prepared to run out of superlatives. From Van, the 110km ride to reach this town in the middle of nowhere, set high in the mountains, is exhilarating and makes for a perfect complement to a journey around Lake Van. Bahçesaray's main claim to fame is its isolation: because of the snow it's cut off from the outside world at least six months of the year. 'Half the year we belong to God,' say the locals. From Van, the highly scenic road crosses the steppe before gradually ascending until the Karabel Geçiti, at 2985m – dizzying. On your way look for *zoma* (encampments), with Kurdish shepherds, their flocks and their damn dogs (beware!). The scenery is captivating on a clear day – the air is pure and the surrounding mountains make a perfect backdrop. In late spring, the view of the wild expanses of the highlands ablaze with vivid hues is unforgettable.

Bahçesaray has plenty to keep you busy for a day or two. Why not visit the nearby monuments, including a couple of Armenian churches and an ancient bridge? Or play chess with the locals, who are reputedly the best players in eastern Anatolia? But if all you need is to re-energise, be sure to enjoy the delicious local *bal* (honey). Count on €13 per kilogram.

One of the highlights of this trip is that you'll have to spend the night in a private home, as there's no official accommodation. It shouldn't be a problem, as locals are excessively hospitable and you'll doubtless be warmly received as a *misafir* (guest).

In summer, you could reach Bahçesaray with a normal vehicle, but you should know

that the road is tarred only until Yukarı Narlıca and deteriorates markedly near the pass – a 4WD or a high-clearance vehicle would be more appropriate. If it's wet, this part of the road is impassable with a normal vehicle. There's a *jandarma* (police) check-point at Yukarı Narlıca.

One or two minibuses leave daily except Sunday from a small minibus stand in Van (ask for Bahçesaray Çay Evi, off Zübeydehanım Caddesi). The bumpy ride takes about three hours and costs €6.

Hoşap & Çavuştepe

A day excursion southeast of Van along the road to Başkale and Hakkari takes you to the Urartian site at Çavuştepe (25km from Van) and the spectacular Kurdish castle at Hoşap (Güzelsu; 33km further along). Both sites amply reward the effort of visiting them.

Hoşap Castle (admission €1.25) perches photographically on top of a rocky outcrop alongside Güzelsu, a hicksville truck-stop village. Cross the bridge and follow the signs around the far side of the hill to reach the castle entrance.

Built in 1643 by a local Kurdish chieftain, Mahmudi Süleyman, the castle has a very impressive entrance gateway in a round tower. The guardian will quickly spot you and rush to sell you a ticket. You then enter the fortress via a passage cut through the rock. Many of its hundreds of rooms are still clearly visible, and the view is stunning.

The narrow hill on the left side of the highway at Çavuştepe was once crowned by the fortress-palace **Sarduri-Hinili** (admission €1.25), home of the kings of Urartu and built between 764 and 735 BC by King Sardur II, son of Argishti. These are the best-preserved foundations of any Urartian palace.

From the car park, the **upper fortress** is up to the left, and the vast **lower fortress** to the right. At the upper fortress there is little to see except a platform, possibly used for religious rites, and the ruins of a temple to Haldi, but from here you can see the layout of the lower fortress.

Climb the rocky hill to the lower fortress temple ruins, marked by a gate of black basalt blocks polished to a high gloss; a few blocks on the left side are inscribed in cuneiform. As you walk around, notice other illustrations of Urartian engineering ingenuity: the cisterns under the pathways, the storage vessels and, at the far end where the palace once stood,

VISITING TURKEY'S DEEP SOUTHEAST

The southeastern corner of Turkey carries a fearsome reputation among travellers and among Turks from Western Anatolia (who usually know nothing about the area). All right, it was at the epicentre of the Kurdish rebellion during the 1980s and '90s and for a long time was off-limits to travellers. Although the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK/Kongra-Gel) called off its cease-fire in June 2004, the situation has greatly improved and the whole area is under heavy military control. There are checkpoints, but no hassle to speak of – just have your passport ready at hand and don't deviate from the main road.

It might be a bit intimidating for first-timers, especially women travellers, but you shouldn't believe all the scare stories. Keep in mind that it's the nature of news that you hear more about killing than about living. While a few pockets of the region remain problematic, the vast majority is as warm and welcoming to visitors as anywhere in Turkey. Wild and largely ignored yes, but never dull. At the time of research, we were able to travel without problem (and using public transport) from Mardin to Şirnak (221km), and from Şirnak to Hakkari (181km), and then from Hakkari to Van (203km). From Mardin to Şirnak, there was only one checkpoint, and from Şirnak to Hakkari only three.

Everybody we spoke to in the deep southeast assured us that travelling to the area was perfectly safe. The only thing you need is to be a bit more vigilant and seek local advice before setting off. Anyway, the military will simply not allow you to get too close to trouble – if any. Whatever the situation, you'll probably be the only travellers for miles around.

Check the situation out. If it looks OK, jump right in. You won't regret it, we swear.

the royal Urartian loo, said to be the oldest such squat toilet ever excavated. Down on the plains to the south you'll see canals also created by the Urartians.

To get to the Hoşap and Çavuştepe sites, catch a minibus (on Cumhuriyet Caddesi in Van) heading to Başkale and say you want to get out at Hoşap (€3). After seeing the castle, flag down a bus back to Çavuştepe, 500m off the highway, and then catch a third bus back to Van. It's pretty easy to do this trip on your own as frequent minibuses and buses ply the route.

HAKKARI

☎ 0438 / pop 236,000 / elevation 1720m

Tell friends in İstanbul that you intend to go to Hakkari, and the reaction is quite likely to be one of condescending incredulity, at best ('You're going *where?*'), or of warning ('There are some problems out there!'). True, Hakkari is ragged around the edges, as befits a city that was at the epicentre of the Kurdish rebellion during the 1980s and '90s and that is tucked away in Turkey's far southeastern corner, at 1700m, far from any other major urban centre.

But oh, how things have changed. Hakkari is rising from the ashes, and travellers are trickling in, lured by the sensational setting – the city is ringed by the jagged Cilo Dağı moun-

tains – and the great potential for exploration. The Cilo is again accessible, and it won't take long before trekking trips are organised here. You could also take a minibus and explore at your leisure the picturesque nearby town of **Çukurca** and rejuvenate your mind and body in the high pastures of **Kırkdag**. Be a pioneer!

Dangers & Annoyances

Women travellers should expect to be the main focus of attention. The area is overwhelmingly male-oriented, and female travellers can be made to feel unwelcome. It's wise to dress modestly. The best place for women travellers is Hotel Şenler.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Ümit (☎ 0438-211 2469; Altay Caddesi; s/d €14/17) We prefer Hotel Şenler, but this is a bearable plan B – if you can get past the sombre reception area, that is. It's in the centre.

Hotel Şenler (☎ 0438-211 5512; Bulvar Caddesi; s/d €25/45) Hakkari's best-value and most reassuring hotel, by far. Staff are professional and eager to help (ask for Turan Şimşek), bathrooms are kept in top nick and you won't be tripping over your backpack in the generous-sized rooms. It's also very central. Does it get any better?

Hacıbaba Kebap Salonu (☎ 211 3003; Cumhuriyet Caddesi; mains €2-4; 🕒 8am-10pm) The Hacıbaba

is heralded as one of the best restaurants in town. After having vacuumed up a satisfying *tavuk şiş* (roast chicken kebab) served with salad and fresh bread, we won't argue. The big grill at the back is impressive. It's just off the main square.

Getting There & Away

From Van to Hakkari, there are regular bus services (€6, four hours). There are also several daily minibuses to Yüksekova (€3, 78km), from where you can cross the border at Esendere–Seró and journey on to Iran. Daily minibuses also ply the route to Çukurca (€3) and Kırkdag (€1.50). Westwards you can

take the long but highly scenic haul to Şirnak in the one daily minibus (€9, five to six hours depending on waits at checkpoints).

NORTH OF VAN

If you're bound for Doğubayazıt from Van, you have a choice of routes. Some buses still take the long way round via Erciş, Patnos and Ağrı, but the minibuses all travel via Muradiye, Çaldıran and Ortadirek, a considerably shorter 185km run and one worth taking for the magnificent pastoral scenery along the way, especially if you can pause at the spectacular **Muradiye Waterfalls**. Keep your passport handy for any army checkpoints.

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