

KARS

city guide



KARS CITY GUIDE

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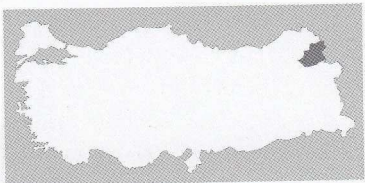
This book is the product of a joint effort. A considerable number of books have been written about Kars over its history, but not many in the relatively modern format of the guide book. In recent years, Kars has become one of the main attractions of Eastern Anatolia with its history, geography, daily life, and also through new archeological discoveries and artistic and cultural projects that tie its past to its present.

Kars has always been of interest to travelers but has recently become a destination visited by an increasing number of tourists every year.

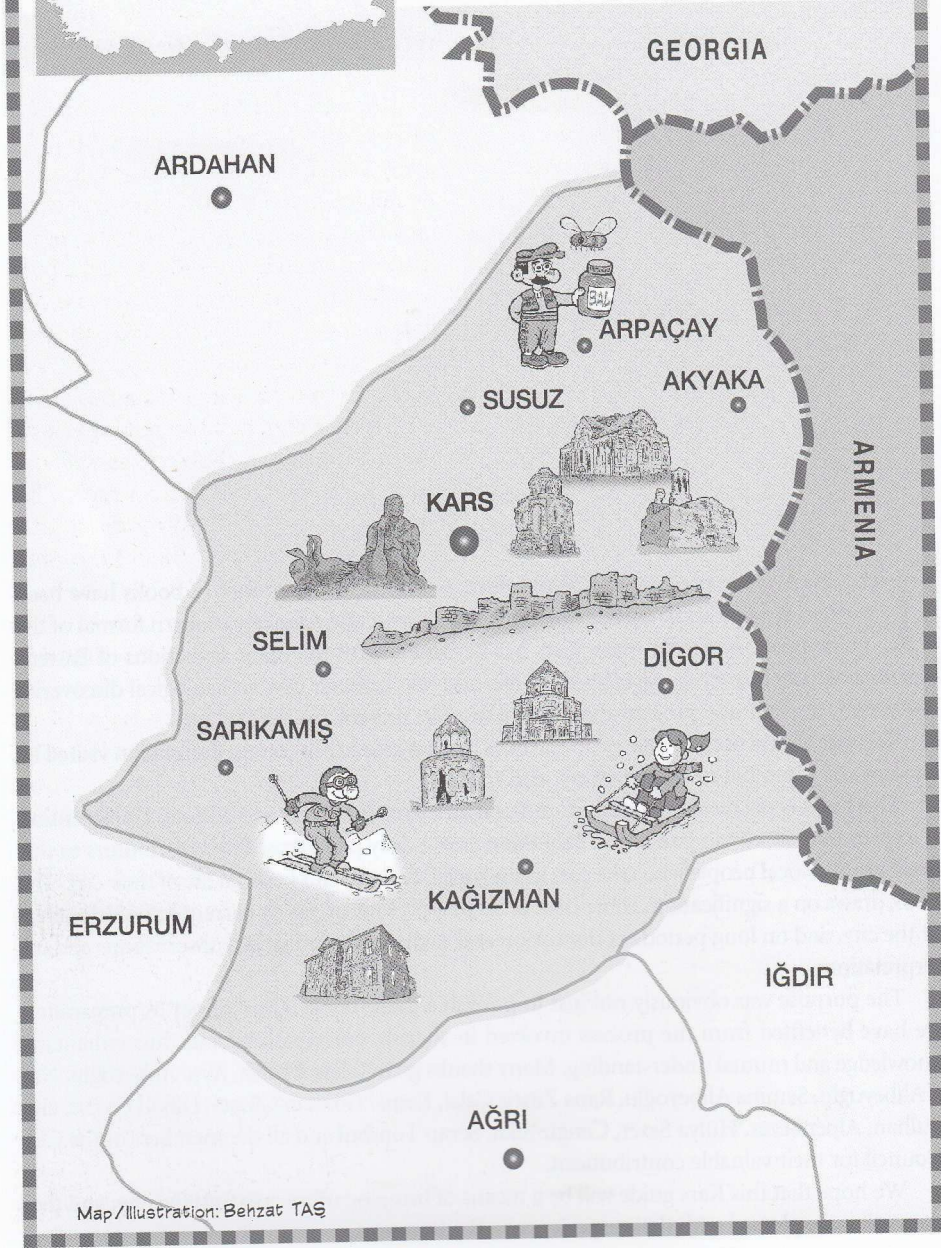
This book is the result of a project undertaken by many writers and editors. The intention is to promote the city to guests and help them create daily programs. The contributors to this book are also local people who take part in the social, cultural and political life of their city. The book draws on a significant number of sources that provide access to current knowledge about the city, and on long periods of discussion and exchange of individual observations and interpretations.

The purpose was obviously not just to publish a guide book. Throughout its preparation we have benefited from the process involved in sharing our creativity and thus enhancing knowledge and mutual understanding. Many thanks go to Okay Akarca, Ayşe Alibeyoğlu, Naif Alibeyoğlu, Semiha Alibeyoğlu, Rana Zincir Celal, Kemal Gökhan Gürses, Dilşad Oygur, Gül Pulhan, Alper Sezer, Hülya Sezer, Cengiz Şıklı, Serap Tombul and all the members of the City Council for their valuable contributions.

We hope that this Kars guide will be a means of bringing more guests to the city, and that they will leave pleased with their experience in the Kars area.



KARS MAP



Map/Illustration: Behzat TAŞ

Kars is a broad plateau with rivers including the Aras, Arpaçay and Kars flowing from west to east. It is situated in the Caspian Sea basin.

The region's volcanic structure led to the formation of high plateaus (yaylas) and lowlands (ova). The Kars Lowland or plain constitutes 19 percent of the province, and at 2,500 square kilometers is the largest in eastern Anatolia. Plateaus in total cover 51 percent of the province. Kars province makes up about 1.3 percent of the surface area of Turkey.

CLIMATE

Kars has a characteristic harsh continental climate with six or seven months of winter and frost for approximately 160 days of the year. The record high temperature recorded in the city is 34.8 C, and the lowest is -39.6 C.

FLORA

Meadows and grasslands are the dominant flora in Kars. There are also pine forests in the towns of Sarıkamış and Ardahan Posof, and oak trees in the town of Kağızman. As the linking point between Anatolia, Cauca-

sus and Central Asia, Kars contains species typical to all these geographies, making for a rich biological variety. Flora typical to steppes or deserts can be observed in the lowland of Iğdır and along Kağızman. In the mountains above 3,000 metres there are species typical to Alaska or Siberia.

During the Ice Age, when temperatures fell dramatically at places close to the poles, many animal and plant species migrated to Anatolia to survive. In between ice ages, some of these species returned home, others settled in Anatolia and still others did both.

The combination of plateaus and mountain grasslands in Kars makes the province suitable for stockbreeding, and it is also rich in mineral waters. At a time when the importance of healthy drinking water is emphasized all over the world as well as in Turkey, the unpolluted Kars region has thousands of springs and relatively clean streams, rivers and lakes. Çıldır Lake, Aktaş Lake, Aygır Lake, Çalı Lake and Kuyucuk Lake also host a variety of bird life. The Scots pine (*Pinus Sylvestris*) forests of Kars are unique in Turkey.

Around 1,250 species of seeded plants breed naturally in the region, including 100 endemic species which do not exist elsewhere in the world, including the "Kars Bur-



A view from Çıldır Lake. Photograph: Ertuğrul Erdem

çağrı" (*Lathyrus Karsianus*) that breed in the Allahuekber Mountains. Others include *Festuca Karsiana*, *Allium Karsianum*, *Caucalis Karsianum* and *Nonea Karsensis*.

The snow starts to melt in mid-April, and with the coming of spring *Crocus* and *Cochicum* begin to flourish, followed by buttercups, primroses and orange corn poppies by the side of the water.

The villagers of Kars pick *koşkoz* (*Eart-nhut pea/Lathyrus tuberosus*) while ploughing their fields in spring and peel them to eat. Fresh coriander (*Coriandrum sativum*) is sold in the markets and used to flavour local dishes. Blue Globe Thistle (*Echinops Pungens*) is eaten uncooked. Hogweed (*Heracleum Trachyloma*) stalks are peeled and then eaten either raw or pickled. Crazy poppy (hashish), stinging nettle, *yemlik*, *evelek* (*lepitora procerca*), *kuşyemi* (canary grass/*phalaris canariensis*), *aş otu* (a kind of red corn poppy/*papaver rhoeas*) are other plants that enrich Kars cuisine.

The healing side of plants has been known in Kars since ancient times. People known as healers used to apply this knowledge, learned from their grandparents, to cure physical and psychological illnesses. With the progress of modern medicine and the drug industry, this knowledge of plants and their therapeutic effects, gained over

years of experience, has been largely forgotten. Today, plants like yellow flower (*nego*), fresh radish, vine leaves, flaxseed or onions are still used, although infrequently, to treat small ailments.

The lack of industry in Kars has been considered a failing of the city. However, it is thanks to this underdevelopment that the soil and water in Kars remain unpolluted, and much of the province is suitable for organic agriculture.

LAKES

The main lakes of Kars are *Çıldır*, *Karzak*, *Aygır* and *Çenklice*, and others include *Erhan*, *Turna*, *Çenekci* and *Kuyucuk* lakes. The only artificial lake in the region is the one created by the *Arpaçay Dam*, one of three major dams in Kars. The others are the *Çıldır* and *Bayburt* dams; the first two produce energy, while *Bayburt* is used for irrigation only.

ÇILDİR LAKE

Located in the boundaries of *Ardahan* and *Kars*, *Çıldır* is a fresh-water tectonic lake 1960 meters above sea level. At 115 square kilometers it is the country's largest after *Lake Van*. The lake is up to 22 meters deep and hosts many wild birds and trout fish.

ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

Many national and international projects are seeking to safeguard the environment of northeast Anatolia. At the heart of these projects are the principles of sustainable development and 'preserve and use'.

Many of the region's ecological systems are not sufficiently protected. For example, the grasslands around *Erzurum*, *Kars* and *Ardahan* have become infertile due to early and excessive pasturage, leading to an increase in erosion. Damage to forest ecosystems has spread and wildlife is gradually disappearing. It is crucial that parts of the region be granted protected status, and that the *Sankamış*, *Allahuekber* and *Ağrı* mountains are declared as National Park areas.

Runoff from the lake joins with the Cala and Kars streams.

AYGIR LAKE

The deepest part of this four square kilometre fresh water lake situated along the Kars-Göle road is 30 meters. It lies to the west of the town of Susuz and is fed by melting snow and springs at its depths.

Aygır in Turkish means stallion and it bears that name because apparently when the air is released underneath, due to the melting of the snow in the early spring; it makes a sound similar to that of a neighing horse.

DENİZ (ÇENGILLI- ÜLKER) LAKE

Located on the slopes of Aladağ Mountain facing the town of Kağızman, this fresh-water lake is fed by water sources at its depths and hosts many fish.

TURNA LAKE

This two square kilometre lake is located in a volcanic area northeast of Köték village in

the town of Kağızman, its grassy shores cutting through the surrounding hills. Though deep, the lake contains no fish.

KUYUCUK LAKE

Again no fish, though the lake, situated on the road to Akyaka, is host to wild birds that have helped it win protected status, including wild geese, ducks, cormorants and storks. The lake swells to around 10,000 square meters in spring.

LAVAŞ LAKE

A small lake situated on the southwest of Çıldır Lake. Its waters are directed to the Çıldır Lake via a channel built by the State Water Authority.

POPULATION

Kars has experienced major population shifts throughout its history, due to occupations, wars and destructions, as well as its location on the route between Anatolia and the Caucasus.

The first census was carried out under the Ottomans in 1831: it found that the city had 19,741 male inhabitants. According to the 1876 census, 25,230 men lived in Kars, of which four-fifths were Muslim. Including women, children and others that weren't counted, it is estimated that the population was over 100,000 at the time. The census of 1877/1878 shows the population of Kars as 120,000.

In the 19th century, the expansionist policies of the Russians after their capture of the city resulted in major migration. The Tsarist regime transported some of the population of the Crimea and Caucasus to the Kars region, while others were moved inside Anatolia.

According to the census carried out in



Photograph: Ertuğrul Eridem

FISHING AT ÇILDIR LAKE: Fishing is done throughout the year and is an important means of earning a living for locals. The lake is covered with a thick layer of ice throughout winter, leading to an interesting fishing technique: Fisherman dig through a meter of ice to reach the water, and insert nets through the hole. Another hole is made 20 meters away and the other end of the net is pulled out from there. This quite labourous fishing technique is only seen in this region.

1897, after 20 years of Russian sovereignty, the population of Kars was 292,478, of whom 162,723 were men. The main reason for this huge increase in population in 20 years was Russian colonization. The ethnic structure of the city and its environs confirms this. Non-Muslims such as Armenians, Greeks, Yezidis, Assyrians and Syrians, Germans (Nemis) and Estonians like Molokans, Doukhobors and Khakhols were located in and around Kars during this period.

With the end of Russian occupation in 1918, many ethnic and religious groups left Kars, which like other parts of Turkey faced a serious loss of population due to migration for economic, social and political reasons.

The population of Kars province increased consistently between 1927 and 1975. After 1985, when the census recorded a population of 722,431, the population shifted to a downward trend. In 1992 Ardahan and Iğdir, two of the major towns of Kars province, were made into provinces in their own right, causing the population of

Kars province to fall to 325,016 in the census of 2000.

The patterns recorded since the 1980s shows that Kars loses its population to other cities while still attracting migrants from villages. The statistics confirm this trend: in 1975, 93 percent of the population of Kars was born there, while by 2000 this had fallen to 86 percent. The average number of people per household fell to 6 in 2000 from 7.5 in 1955. About 44 percent of the province's inhabitants live in towns or cities, and the population density is 32 people per square kilometre.

While it may be less diverse in ethnic terms than in the era of Russian occupation, Kars still contains Kurds, Azerbaijanis, Turkmens, Yerlis and Terekemes (Karapapak) – all of Turkic origins. If wars and occupations were the driving force behind population change in the pre-Republic period, in the past eight decades it has mostly been due to employment opportunities and the region's detachment from central government. The population index of the city is quite below the average in the country.

WHEN TO GO?

Kars has something for all seasons, from its uniquely large, crystallized snowflakes in winter to its abundance of nature in summer and rich cultural heritage all year round. In winter the days are short and the streets empty as dusk falls; life continues at home. The last snows don't leave the streets until March.

For those who would prefer to see daily life in Kars under milder weather conditions, to visit the sights in the city and its environs more thoroughly and observe its natural habitat in more detail, the best time to visit is between June and September. From mid-June the region's flowers are at their best.

ECONOMY

AGRICULTURE

The Kars economy has depended on agriculture and stockbreeding since early times. Agriculture was concentrated on grain, pulse and fruit production in the pre-Russian period. During the Russian occupation, the introduction of modern techniques led to a doubling in the area of cultivable land, as well as efficiency gains, making agriculture the driving force of the provincial economy. Small-scale cigarette and sunflower oil factories were also established.

At the beginning of the Republican Period, Kars agriculture was set back by the de-