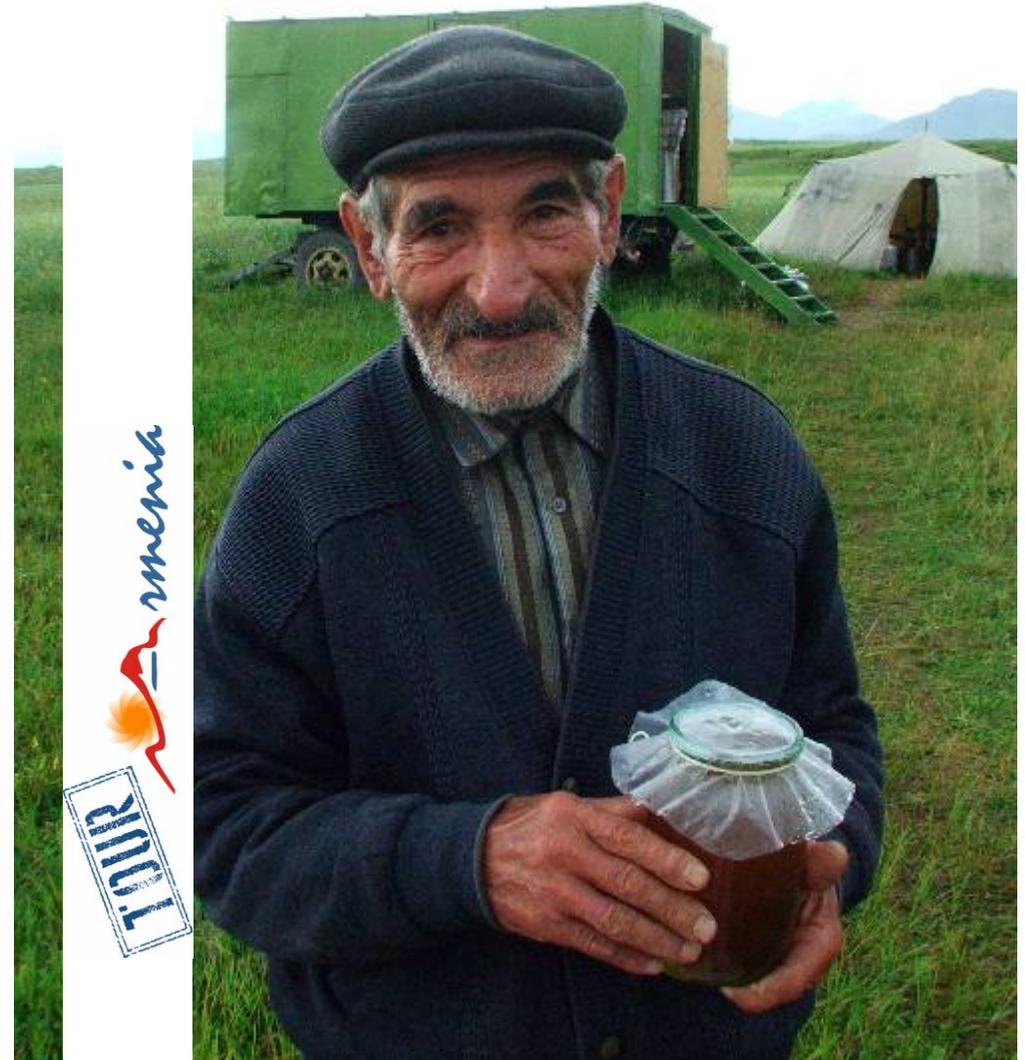


NOTES:

# ARAGATSOTN



# ARAGATSOTN *marz* Արագցոտն մարզ

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*Note about pronunciation: we transcribe words into English using local dialect, and substitute “j” for “y” as in Sarigluigh instead of Sarigyugh. “p.” stands for poghots (street), ‘pts.’ for poghotsner (streets), ‘pta.’ For poghota (avenue).*

*Note: GPS coordinates are in decimal degrees (DD) Latitude x Longitude. Elevation (elev.) is in meters. Population counts (pop.) are estimates for 7 km radius from place and due to ongoing migrations the numbers are not exact.*

## INTRODUCTION

Aragatsotn (also spelled “Aragadzotn”) is named after the massive mountain (4095m / 13,435 ft.) that hovers over the northern reaches of Armenia. The name itself means “ ‘at the foot of’ or ‘the legs of’ Aragats”, a fitting title if ever there was one for this rugged land that wraps around the collapsed volcano. A district carved for convenience, the marz actually consists of three distinct geographical areas that made up previous administrative centers: Aparan, Ashtarak and Talin.

**The mountain** Mt. Aragats (Turkish and in some maps “Alagiaz”), formed during the Miocene era, once reached 10,000m above sea level before a massive eruption 500,000 years ago (one of a string of eruptions in during the Pliocene and quaternary ages) caused the near perfect cone to collapse, leaving behind four peaks to serve as sentinels over the collapsed dome. The resulting lava flow spread outwards hundreds of km so that the mountain is 18% of the total land mass of the country, and can be viewed from every marz except two.

**The area** The result is a startling land of contrasts: to the west (old Talin province) the land is upper plateau dotted with small mountains and an almost lunar landscape. The now semi-desert steppe land is actually teeming with wildlife, hanging out in the deep ravines and mountain ripples that striate the sparse land. This area is actually the northern end of the great Ararat Valley, once covered with forests and tall grass, now barren scrub. Don't be deceived; the soil is still fertile and springs to life when irrigated by the melting mountain snows, infrequent rainfall and numerous springs that nourish each village.

In the southeast, the land alternates between rolling steppe lands and deep gashes in the soil—river gorges that have supported wildlife and

## Highlights

- **Visit Ashtarak Gorge and the three sister churches of Karmavor, Tsiranavor and Spitakavor** (p. 10)
- **Follow the mountain monastery trail to Tegher** (pp. 18), **Mughni** (p 20), **Hovhanavank** (pp. 21) and **Saghmosavank** (pp. 23)
- **See Amberd Castle, summer home for Armenia's rulers** (p 25)
- **Hike up the south peak of Mt. Aragats for a view from the top of Armenia.** (p. 25)
- **See the megalithic temple complex at Agarak** (p. 17)
- **Visit the Kurdish Culture Center at Alagiaz & the Yezidi village of Ria Taza** (p. 38)
- **Buy some village fresh cheese and Matsun at Nigavan** (p. 37)
- **View the ancient observatory at Yeghipatrush** (p. 34), **the Bronze Age fortress at Tsaghkahovit** (p. 38) & **fire altar at Gegharot** (p. 40)
- **Hike the nature trails over the Pambak and Tsaghkuniats Mountains into the forests of Kotaik and Lori** (pp. 36, 36, 37, 37, 40)
- **Climb to the top of Kosh Castle, an intact 13th c fort and the amazing Kosh Great Khachkar** (p. 41)
- **See the Mamikonian seat of power in Aragatsotn, at Aruch** (p. 42)
- **Stop by Talin to see one of the “perfect” examples of early medieval construction, the cathedral** (p. 43)
- **Visit Mastara, with its gorgeous 6th c open cross form church and 13th c master khachkar, visit with village elders, climb the nearby shepherd hills** (p. 50)
- **Visit Arteni winery and buy a bottle or two for a picnic on the road** (p.49)

civilization from before the Stone Age. The earliest skeletal remains found are 1.7 million years old with African ancestry and the area is in the midst of Armenia's Cradle of Civilization, the Ararat/Akhurian River valleys. The area supported a series of settlements, burial mounds and ancient sites that grew to become vital sources of bronze and iron for the empires of the Near East. Like Talin, the land is rocky and dry in the summer, its soil surprisingly rich when irrigated. Unlike Talin the Southeast has deeper soils and is more heavily farmed. The mountain slopes receive more rainfall than on the plateau and has thick stands of mountain grass and wildflowers throughout the summer season.



Aragatsotn is a favorite haunt of the urban “Yerevantsi”, who escape the summer heat at one of the many dachas and pansionats (summer lodges) that inhabit the southern edge of the mountain. Camping, hiking, horse-back trails are an added treat.

Aragatsotn is the location of Biurakan Observatory and the second largest optical telescope in Eurasia. The observatory is home to some of the most brilliant astronomers in the world, one of which discovered the ancient observatories at Metsamor and Karahundj.

The Northern area (“Aparan”) is usually lumped as one but is really two distinct regions; Aragats itself, a looming mass of snow and wildflowers with some middle-to-tough mountain climbing, and the upper plateau around Aparan, home to the bulk of Armenia's once nomadic Zoroastrian Yezidis (also called Yesdis or Yezedis), who begin their annual trek up the mountain slopes to graze their flocks each spring and summer. This area is a source of

clean air, cool climates and some incredible prehistoric sites that are traced to a time when the volcanoes were still active and warmed the upper elevations. One exceptional site is near Tsaghkahovit.

Now the cold winters and meters-high snow give way to stunning “greenscapes” and blankets of wildflowers in the summer. The mountain experiences eight months of flowering, beginning in the river valleys near Ashtarak and ascending the mountain in ever rising bands of color before retreating in August towards the base. The area also produces some of the best dairy products in the country.



Aparan locals (“Aparantsis”) also happen to be the butt of the Armenian version of the Polish joke, every country needing their country bumpkin.

If ever a region should not be judged by its first appearance, it is Aragatsotn. In the harshest summer months, the rolling hills on the south and west will seem parched brown, but deep in a nearby river gorge or a few km up the face of Aragats will bring a lush land of grass, flowers and a refreshing cool breeze.

The region has been a favorite haunt for the well-heeled for quite a long time—Citadels and castles beginning from the Copper and Bronze Age dot the landscape, including the once impregnable summer fortress of Armenia’s kings, the fortress at Amberd.

The fortunes of the region are parallel to the fortunes of the *nakharars*, Armenia’s aristocratic families that broke and made in a continual dance of treaty and attack, treaty and attack. Somehow through all their self-inflicted turmoil they

managed to create an apex of beauty under the Bagratuni, Zakarian, Proshian and Vachutian families in the 10-13th cc, producing the outstanding “sister vanks” of Hovhanavank, Saghmosavank and Tegher, plus the stunning mountain monasteries at Aruch, Ashtarak and Talin. Aragatsotn is also the final resting place for Mesrop Mashtots, credited with inventing the current Armenian alphabet and introducing a wave of learning and native literature in Armenia.

Mountain climates, stunning vistas, great climbing and hiking, some of the best preserved historic sites in the country and the friendliness and hospitality of locals make Aragatsotn a must-see destination. Leave the dusty streets of Yerevan behind for a quick (20 minute) trip uphill to some clean air and friendly folk.

### NATURE ▲

Aragatsotn’s environment is as varied as its geography. Formed during the Miocene era, a time of violent volcanic eruptions, the region is actually Armenia’s youngest (give or take a few million years), its rich alluvial soil and southern exposure on Mt. Aragats giving rise to a remarkably diverse flora and the agricultural revolution that built proto-Armenia. The western sub-region (historic Talin region) is really the upper semi-desert of the Ararat Dashtavir (Ararat Valley), to which it owes most of its historic development. The rest belongs to Mt. Aragats, which rises above the entire region. Aragats makes up nearly 18% of the entire Armenian landmass. Mt. Ararat may be the crown of historic Armenia and still its symbol, but Aragats is its master, creator of just about everything that matters in the Armenian natural world.



Photograph courtesy Tigran Nazaryan

The four crests that top the mountain are but reminders of its once soaring heights before a massive eruption leveled the 10,000m. cone to its current 4095m. The collapsed dome is called Armenia’s weather maker, a cauldron of forces that generate huge summer storms that flow down its slopes into the valleys. The snows of winter melt into the rivers of summer, diverted by irrigation canals as old as the mythical Queen Shamiram (Semiramis), one of which is thought to be over 5000 years old. Another waterway, Amberd River, flows from the top of Aragats to the Kasakh River near Ashtarak, ambling through a number of topographies and climate zones, home to some of Armenia’s rarest flowers and birds.



Photograph courtesy of Tigran Nazaryan ©

In summer’s broiling heat, the western regions can seem just a series of brown hills rolling into nothingness, punctuated by an occasional oasis of trees surrounding villages. But on closer look, the villages, and their oasis’, are part of a complex mountain waterway, protected by deep gorges that protect a thriving wildlife. Within these gorges (some of which drop 500m) you will find a stunning variety of flowers and birds, as you pass from semi-desert plateaus into semi-tropical wildernesses.

The higher you ascend the face of the mountain, the more quickly Yerevan’s brown air evaporates, the more lush the environment becomes, and the more luxuriant the flora. Near the top of the mountain (but 40 minutes drive from Yerevan), spring flowers will coat the wet ground, vying with snowlines for attention. In Yerevan it may be a stifling 35c while on Aragats it freezes at night. From the top you may be forgiven for thinking you can brush your hands across the face of the heavens, touching the face of God. The views of three-fourths of Armenia lie below you: Shirak, Lori, Tavush, Ararat Valley and Lake Sevan.

### MINERALS

Aragats is a dormant volcano, and as such contains large concentrations of volcanic rock (tufa, pumice, and perlite) as well as basalt, gypsum, pumice, andesite, limestone, marble, granite. Minerals include quartz, agate, obsidian, silver and copper.

### FLORA

The flowers are breathtaking if you are lucky enough to catch them in season. Among the brightest flowers are the native poppies, straw flowers and wild irises that cover the upper meadows and hillsides from Spring to summer.

**Flora in Aragats (Geghama Lehr) include** *Merendera trigyna*, *M. raddeana*, *Colchicum bifolium*, *Puschkinia scilloides*, *Scilla armena*, *S. siberica*, *Tulipa julia*, *Iris caucasica*, *Muscari caucasicum*, *Bellevalia pycnantha*, *Ornithogalum schelkownikovii*, *O. brachystachys*, *O. haystanum*, *Fritillaria caucasica*, *Nectaroscordum tripedale*, *sp. of Gagea*, *Myosotis alpestre*, *Amenone caucasica*, *Orchis coriophora*, *Gladiolus tenuis*.

**Lower Elevation sagebrush steppe flora include** *Gladiolus atroviolaceus*, *Nigella oxypetala*, *Actynolema macrolema*, *Gundelia tournefortii*, *Verbascum saccatum*, *Lallemanita iberica*, *Roemeria refracta*, *Scabiosa argentea*, *Scorzonera papposa*, *Muscari neglecta*, *Stachys inflata*, *Astragalus distyphus*, *A. kochianus*, *Achillea tenuifolia*, *Helichrysum rubicundum*, *Silene spergulifolia*.

**River Gorge flora include** *Alkanna orientalis*, *Cerasus incana*, *Pyrus, salicifolia*, *Cerasus mahaleb*, *Amygdalus fenzliana*, *Spiraea crenata*, *Saxifraga cymbalaria*.

**Mountain Steppe flora include** *Gladiolus atroviolaceus*, *Nigella oxypetala*, *Actynolema macrolema*, *Gundelia tournefortii*, *Verbascum saccatum*, *Lallemanita iberica*, *Roemeria refracta*, *Scabiosa argentea*, *Scorzonera papposa*, *Muscari neglecta*, *Stachys inflata*, *Astragalus distyphus*, *A. kochianus*, *Achillea tenuifolia*, *Helichrysum rubicundum*, *Silene spergulifolia*.

**Wild relatives of crop plants: Fruit trees include** the Blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*), as well as cultivated Greek Walnut (*Juglans regia* L.), Mahaleb Cherry (*Cerasus mahaleb* L. Mill), Pear (*Pyrus takhtadzianii* Fed.), Wild Apple (*Malus orientalis* Uglitzk).

**Wild Berries** include the cultivated *Grape* (*Vitis sylvestris* CC Gmel), *Blackberries* (*Rubus armeniacus* Focke.).

**Cereal grains** include *Wild Barley* (*Hordeum spontaneum* C. Koch etc)

**Fodder** include *Burclover* (*Medicago papillosa* Boiss etc) and *Armenian pit* (*Onobrychus hajastana* Grossh etc)

For detailed information and list of species see [TourArmenia Flora pages](#)



#### FAUNA

*Mountain leopard* (very rare), *Caucasian wildcat*, *Caucasian ram* and *mountain goat* (very rare), *mole*, *lynx*, *porcupine*, *squirrel* and *marten*.

#### BIRDS

Aragatsotn has a surprising array of birds for its location and terrain. More birds will be found in the Ararat Valley, but the treat of surprising a mountain eagle, hawk or a woodland thrush awaits those who take the hiking trails into the mountain river gorges. Not all of these species are guaranteed to be found in Aragatsotn, but they favor the region's geographic areas outlined below.

**Mountain Steppe wetlands** species include *Common Crane*, *Black Stork*, *Corn Crake*, *Common Buzzard*, *White-tailed Eagle*

**Scrub** species include *Bohemian Waxwing*, *Red-backed Shrike*, *Dunnock*, *Rufous-tailed Scrub-Robin*, *Common Stonechat*, *Lesser Whitethroat*, *Black-headed Bunting*, *Snow Bunting*, *Eurasian Linnet*, *Eurasian Tree Sparrow*, and *Isabelline Shrike*

**Semi-desert to Mountain Steppe** species include *Lesser Kestrel*, *Common Kestrel*, *Saker Falcon*, *Chukar*, *Pin-tailed Sandgrouse*, *Black-bellied Sandgrouse*, *Little Bustard*, *Great Bustard*, *Houbara Bustard*, *Collared Pratincole*, *Black-winged Pratincole*, *Stone-Curlew*, *Eurasian Dotterel*, *Caspian Plover*, *European Bee-eater*, *Blue-cheeked Bee-eater*, *European Roller*, *Bimaculated Lark*, *Calandra Lark*, *Lesser Short-toed Lark*, *Greater Short-toed Lark*, *Crested Lark*, *Horned Lark*, *Tawny Pipit*, *Red-backed Shrike*, *Woodchat Shrike*, *Lesser Grey Shrike*, *Northern Shrike*, *Rufous-tailed Scrub-Robin*, *Bluethroat*, *White-throated Robin*, *Northern Wheatear*, *Isabelline Wheatear*, *Rufous-tailed Wheatear*, *Finsch's Wheatear*, *Black-eared Wheatear*, *Pied Wheatear*, *Desert Wheatear*, *Ring Ouzel*, *Olivaceous Warbler*, *Upcher's Warbler*, *Orphean Warbler*, *Menetries's Warbler*, *Yellowhammer*, *Corn Bunting*, *Ortolan Bunting*, *Black-headed Bunting*, *Black-billed Magpie*, *Eurasian Jackdaw*, *Rook*, *Common Raven*

**Mountain Steppe** species include *Long-legged Buzzard*, *Rough-legged Buzzard*, *Red Kite*, *Greater Spotted Eagle*, *Short-toed Snake-Eagle*, *Steppe Eagle*, *Northern Harrier*, *Pallid Harrier*, *Montagu's Harrier*, *Shikra*, *Lanner Falcon*, *Peregrine Falcon*, *Yellow Wagtail*, *Common Stonechat*, *Corn Bunting*, *Ortolan Bunting*, *Black-headed Bunting*, *Pine Bunting*, *Snow Bunting*, *Common Rosefinch*, *Crimson-winged Finch*, *Red-fronted Serin*, *Twite*, *Trumpeter Finch*, *Mongolian Finch*, *Eurasian Linnet*, *Red-billed Chough*, *Yellow-billed Chough*

**Rocky Cliffs, River Gorge** species include *Rock Dove*, *Eurasian Eagle-Owl*, *Common Swift*, *Alpine Swift*, *Eurasian Crag-Martin*, *Northern House-Martin*, *Red-rumped Swallow*, *Dunnock*, *Black Redstart*, *White-winged Redstart*, *Western Rock-Nuthatch*, *Eastern Rock-Nuthatch*, *Wallcreeper*, *Eurasian Linnet*, *Red-billed Chough*, *Yellow-billed Chough*

**Mountain Slope** species include *Red-footed Falcon*, *Merlin*, *Eurasian Hobby*, *Rufous-tailed Rock-Thrush*, *Blue Rock-Thrush*, *Sombre Tit*, *Rock Bunting*, *Grey-necked Bunting*, *Crimson-winged Finch*, *Red-fronted Serin*, *Trumpeter Finch*, *Mongolian Finch*, *Eurasian Linnet*, *White-winged Snowfinch*, *Eurasian Tree Sparrow*, *Spanish Sparrow*, *Pale Rock-Finch*, *Rock Sparrow*, *White-winged Snowfinch*, *Rose-coloured Starling*

**Woodlands, Thickets, Farmland, Orchard** species include *Levant Sparrowhawk*, *Eurasian Sparrowhawk*, *Northern Goshawk*, *Black*

*Francolin*, *Pheasant*, *Eurasian Woodcock*, *Common Wood-Pigeon*, *European Turtle-Dove*, *Common Cuckoo*, *Eurasian Scops-Owl*, *Tawny Owl*, *Barn Swallow*, *Wood Lark*, *Red-throated Pipit*, *Firecrest*, *Common Goldcrest*, *Icterine Warbler*, *Willow Warbler*, *Eurasian Chiffchaff*, *Greenish Warbler*, *Greater Whitethroat*, *Winter Wren*, *Dark-throated Thrush*, *Fieldfare*, *Redwing*, *Song Thrush*, *Mistle Thrush*, *Eurasian Blackbird*, *Crested Tit*, *Corn Bunting*, *Pine Bunting*, *Red-fronted Serin*, *Twite*, *Eurasian Siskin*, *Chaffinch*, *Brambling*, *European Greenfinch*, *European Goldfinch*, *Eurasian Bullfinch*, *Hawfinch*, *Eurasian Tree Sparrow*, *Rose-coloured Starling*, *Common Starling*, *Black-billed Magpie*, *Eurasian Jay*, *Rook*

**Mountain Forest Area** species include *European Honey-Buzzard*, *Black Kite*, *Lesser Spotted Eagle* and *Boreal Owl*

**Sub alpine, Mountain Meadow** species include *Caucasian Grouse*, *Grey Partridge*, *Common Quail*, *Eurasian Skylark*, *Tree Pipit*, *Meadow Pipit*, *Water Pipit*, *Whinchat*, *Radde's Accentor*, *Ring Ouzel*, *Mountain Chiffchaff*, *Corn Bunting*, *Ortolan Bunting*, *Black-headed Bunting*, *Crimson-winged Finch*, *White-Winged Snowfinch*

**Alpine** species include *Caspian Snowcock*, *Alpine Accentor*, *Red-billed Chough* and *Yellow-billed Chough*

For a complete list of birds by species and habitat see [TourArmenia Birding pages](#) ([www.tacentral.com/nature/birding.asp](http://www.tacentral.com/nature/birding.asp))

#### THERMAL AND MINERAL SPRINGS

In Aragatsotn, calcium cold water springs are located by Kari Lich and Aparan, with dozens of fresh water, sodium and natural hydro carbonate springs located throughout the mountain area.

**Soaking Etiquette** Springs can be located by the roadside, which are reserved for drinking, on clearly marked paths, or in out of the way locations. Many springs are considered community property, with villagers and visitors making stops to soak or collect water in bottles. If it's a drinking spring, then it's not for soaking, no matter how appealing. A spring for soaking is fairly obvious: it empties into a pool, is fairly secluded, and is not stocked with fish (and fishermen) being bred for market. Often there will be others already taking in some of the effervescent waters. Men feel quite at home stripping down to their underpants to soak provided women are no where in sight. Nudity is not allowed. Bring a swimsuit if you are

more modest. Women visitors can feel free to soak, but wear a swimsuit, and if there are any local men around, be prepared for a lot of attention, which can make the experience unpleasant.

Carbonated sulfur water is surprisingly strong, and one should never soak more than 5-10 minutes at a time, especially if it is hot. This goes for 'professional soakers' and neophytes alike. The revitalizing affect will be most immediately felt on your pulse, so monitor it as you soak. The skin tingles, and if you are allergic to sulfur, you can get a rash. Calcium carbonated water (the stuff they put in sodas to make it fizz), tingles as well, and can raise your pulse if you stay too long in the water. Best to "dunk and drip", that is, spend just a few minutes in, then twice as long out, especially if you haven't tried natural spas before.

For a complete list of thermal and mineral springs see [TourArmenia Springs pages](#) ([www.tacentral.com/nature/natural\\_story.asp?story\\_no=4](http://www.tacentral.com/nature/natural_story.asp?story_no=4)).

**Challenges** Aragatsotn is threatened by its successes, its closeness to and retreat from the pollution and grime of. The city's notorious summer smog, trapped by its location in a bowl formed by the Ararat, Aragats and Gegharkunik mountain ranges, long threatened the Ararat valley with its noxious fumes during the Soviet period. For a few short years in the early 90's, when few could afford petrol and the streets were mostly empty, the air cleared, showing locals how beautiful the valley is. Now, with rising economic output and unchecked factory and car, the growing number of European and Japanese vehicles dwarfed by the smoke-belching Soviet cars that ply the roadways. The smog is bad enough that where once the top of Aragats was pristine white at its snow crest, it is common now to discover tinged snow, much like that on the Santa Monica mountains hemming in Los Angeles. Another challenge is the lack of forests that once covered the territory. Felled during the Bronze Age, they have not recovered, and those few that remain are constantly threatened by villagers seeking cooking wood and government cronies always on the look out for another free export.



**DO:** ▲

Visit Ashtarak and its river gorge monasteries that succinctly capture the history of Armenian religious architecture. Travel the Royal Mountain trail of monasteries and castles at Mughni, Hovhanavank, Saghmosavank, Amberd, Tegher and Dzorap, the burial place of Armenia's Arshakuni kings. Visit the tomb-church for Mesrop Mashtots at Oshakan and the quaint village of Voskevaz with its Bronze age Vishap (Dragon Stone). Visit the village of Biurakan with its space observatory and the Optical-Radio Telescope at Orgov. Visit the medieval monasteries and princely castles at Kosh, Aruch, Shamiram and the enormous castle at Dashtadem, one of the largest standing castles in Armenia. See the Bronze Age excavations throughout the region, including the newly discovered 5000 BCE temple complex at Agarak, the largest pre-Christian religious site in Armenia, equal in size to those in Egypt and Sumeria. See the Stone Age sites at Mt. Arteni and the 7th c churches at Talin; stop by the glorious 7th c round church at Mastara and the archeological digs and medieval churches at Tsaghkassar, Zovasar and Garnehovit. Walk the face of Aragats, starting and camping at Kari Lich. Stop at Aparan on the eastern side of Aragats, en route to Lori marz, and visit the monastic sites along the Aparan reservoir: Astvatsnkal monastery (5th-7th cc), the "underwater church" at old Zovuni with its nearby S. Vartan mausoleum (5th c) and Tuxh Manuk shrine (BCE), khachkars and stelae (5th-7th cc); then visit the working prehistoric archeological excavations at Tsaghkahovit.

**WHEN?** ▲

The lower elevations of Aragatsotn are best seen in the spring and fall, when the spring rains, melting snows and mild weather cause a riot of red, yellow

and green that coats the land from April-May, and the mild autumn weather celebrates the abundant harvest in October. The upper elevations are snow bound from September – March, and very cold until May. In the summer, the rich upper plateau around Aparan is a welcome respite from Ararat Valley and Yerevan heat, and the reclusive but friendly Zoroastrian Yezdis inhabit several villages thereby, as well as shepherding their flocks onto the mountain pastures from May-September. River valleys around Ashtarak, Talin and Aruch can be hot and humid, while the land above is arid. On the mountains the weather becomes cooler the higher up you go, with warm to hot days and cool nights.



**HOW LONG?**

Ashtarak and the nearby mountain monasteries and Amberd are an easy half-day trip from Yerevan. Add in Oshakan and Biurakan for a full day trip. You can explore the region from Yerevan, but you may find a stay at a local B&B, motel, restaurant/motel or pansionat both more convenient and interesting. The Ashtarak-Giumri highway passes numerous Prehistoric, Bronze Age, Urartian and Medieval sites at Ashtarak, Oshakan, Agarak, Shamiram, Avan, Kakavadzor, Aruch, Talin and Tsaghkassar towards the West, and the Aparan – Vanadzor highway (Tsaghkahovit) Northeast. The South peak of Mt. Aragats is a day trip from Yerevan, an overnight at Kari Lich (camping), or a series of hikes up the four peaks, camping in the collapsed dome.

**Hitting the Highlights** Ashtarak, Oshakan, Royal Mountain trail (Mughni, Saghmosavank, Hovhanavank, Amberd, Dzorap, Tegher), Biurakan (1-2 days). Western Aragatsotn: Kosh, Aruch, Talin, Mastara, Border line (1-2 days). Aparan,

Reservoir Sites, Yeghipatrush, T'tujur, Rya-Taza, Tsaghkahovit (1-2 days). Mt. Aragats, Kari Lich (1-4 days).



**HISTORY** ▲

Aragatsotn's history begins with the first people to inhabit the Armenian plateau, believed to have lived on the (then) warm and humid volcanic mountains that gave shape to the Ararat Valley in the Aneolithic and Paleolithic eras. The western part of the region, known through history as Talin Region, is the upper end of the Ararat Valley, Armenia's Fertile Crescent. The Eastern and Northern parts, now snowbound in winter, were once a warm, moist area with lush growth and large populations of wildlife (rhinoceros, elephants and tigers being just three prehistoric residents) and home of tribes who left their mark on the rich soil with some of Armenia's first domesticated grains and fruit, and on her stones with stone pictures of their conquests and beliefs. Settlements expanded during the late Neolithic Era (5000-4000 BCE) and grew in sophistication, creating some of the largest prehistoric religious complexes in the old world, including a massive site that stretches for 2 km along the Amberd river at Agarak. Later, the region was favored by the kings of the Nairi, Urartu and early Armenians, and in medieval times, its history was tied to the rivalries of two of Armenia's most powerful nakharar (princely) families, the Mamikonians and the Bagratunis.

Aragatsotn's origins are as steeped in legend as in fact. In mythology the region is one of God's favored regions, first inhabited by the descendants of Noah who landed on the mountains of Ararat after the Great Flood. Even its name is steeped in myth, first mentioned as *Votn Aragatso* (possibly

from "vo", meaning leg or foot, so *the Leg or Foot of Aragats*, Aragats itself made from the root Ara, one of Armenia's founding fathers, though which Ara I am unsure). It was considered like Olympia, the seat of the gods, the billowing clouds and storms that issued from the cauldron of its peak signs of favor or displeasure. Aragats is also mentioned by medieval chroniclers, woven into the fabric of the start of all the peoples of the Caucasus. As eloquent as any is *Juansher's Concise History of the Georgians* (trans. Robert Bedrosian):

*"Let us recall the fact that the Armenians, Georgians, Aghbanians, Movkans, Herans, Leks, Kovkases and Egers had one father named T'orgom, son of T'iras, son of Gamer, son of Japheth (Yabet'), son of Noah [g7]. He was a brave, gigantic man. At the time of the destruction of the Tower [of Babel] and the division of tongues and the dispersion of mankind throughout the world, [T'orgom] came and settled between the Masis and Aragats mountains."*

The mountain, and the land around it is a part of the fabric of Armenia's myths, from the great Haik, progenitor of the Armenian race, through his offspring Armenak;

*Haik's son Armenak, who went northeast of the land of Haik (Van), settled in "a valley surrounded by huge mountains with rivers flowing from the west, the waters gushed forth from under rocks at the foot of the mountain, and joined together into rivers. The high mountains were snow-covered in the sun." Armenak settled in the valley and developed its northern end. He gave the tallest mountain, "which was youngest among the others", the name Aragats, and the city at its base Aragatsotn (the foot of Aragats). Armenak had a son named Aramais, who built a city called Armavir on the banks of a river he named Yeraskh (a Persian corruption of Arax). Aramais' son Amassia settled in Armavir and had three sons; Paroir, Gegham and Kholagh. The latter two had cities at the foot of Ararat named after them. Amassia also gave the name "Masis" to Mt. Ararat. ([TourArmenia...mythology](http://www.tourarmenia.com/mythology) ([www.tacentral.com/mythology.asp](http://www.tacentral.com/mythology.asp)))*

Ancient Aragatsotn encompassed Armavir region and Vagharshapat (Echmiadzin) and included ancient Armavir, Ashtarak and Oshakan. Amassia is now a district in Shirak region which was also part of the ancient Aragatsotn district.

### PREHISTORIC AGE ▲

To understand the great development from the Paleolithic era forward in this mountain region, we need only look to the climates of the Stone Age. As recently as 9,000 years ago the mountains of Armenia were still smoldering lava pits, having spent their energy in carving the valley of Ararat while leaving behind some of the richest alluvial soil in the Near East. It's hard to imagine now, but most of the land was covered by forests of trees and mountain grass. Hot springs still gush from underground volcanic fissures, many of which once had Vishaps (Dragon Stones) erected at their sources. Some of these stones made their way to Christian sites where they were "baptized" (re-carved) into Stelae with Biblical imagery.



Stone Age sites were built near hot springs and river valleys on the region's western and northeast plateaus, with the area around Aparan leaving behind a wealth of settlements. Pictograms from various periods can be found along the road from Amberd to the peak of Mt. Aragats and near Voskehat, Agarak, Kakavadzor, Shamiram in the south and Kuchak in Aparan region. Earlier excavations uncovered stone tools and the skeletal remains of human beings and animals, such as the hippopotamus, elephant, rhinoceros, tiger, horse, camel, and ox dating to the Pleistocene age, more than 500,000 years ago. Despite the harsh terrain, the Highlands were one of the earliest regions to make the transition from food gathering

to food production in the Neolithic era, some 10,000 years ago. Evidence of agriculture and animal breeding appeared there shortly after the earliest known Mesopotamian sites.



### COPPER AND BRONZE AGES ▲

By the Copper Age the tribes inhabiting Aragatsotn were mastering trade, taking advantage of the region's rich volcanic stones, such as obsidian, and metals, such as copper, tin, arsenic and iron to master the making of tools, metallurgy and pottery. The discovery of the process for making bronze and especially iron in Armenia put the country into the international spotlight, and in the crosshairs of its neighbors. Internal rivalries between tribes as well as invasions by more powerful nations to the south in Mesopotamia set in motion the construction of massive battlements and strategically placed settlements in the country. Aragatsotn seems to have been a favorite haunt of the Prehistoric well-heeled, as dozens of Copper/Bronze Age sites built in a broad Arc around the base of Mt. Aragats show. The settlements are unified by their dependence on metal-making and trade, and by their shared design: cyclopean defensive wall ringing a central citadel and administrative/manufacturing area, the paeans forced outside to fend for themselves. These settlements, built mostly during the 5th-1st millennium BCE, protected a thriving agricultural community as well, the cultivation of grapes, apricots, barley and wheat forming a basis for commerce with Mesopotamia. The development of wine-making in Egypt, is also traced to its commerce with the tribes in the region as early as the 4th millennium BCE.

The first constructions at Amberd Fortress are traced to this period, built on the massive promontory overlooking the Ararat Valley. Rich findings in the region include bronze, copper and

gold jewelry, tools and weapons, and an extraordinary set of bronze religious totems uncovered near Agarak, a figure on a horse or Vishap, thought by some to be an Armenian version of the Gilgamesh hero.

**Prehistoric excavations** in Aragatsotn region include Stone Age sites at Tsaghkahovit, Kuchak, Hnaber, Ashtarak, Voskehat, Agarak, Oshakan, Shamiram and Mt. Arteni; and Copper/Bronze Age settlements at Tsaghkahovit, Hnaber, Ashtarak, Oshakan, Voskevaz, Agarak, Kosh, Shamiram, Aruch, Avan, Aragatsi-berd, Kakavadzor, Talin, Tsaghkasar and Garnahovit.



### URARTIAN, PERSIAN & ROMAN PERIOD ▲

One of the Northeast frontiers of the Nairi confederation (ca. 2000 – 1000 BCE) mentioned by the Assyrians in their early chronicles, Aragatsotn marz became a part of the *Yeturni* state during the creation of the Urartian (Araratian) empire (9th c BCE). Ashtarak, the capital of Aragatsotn is believed to date back to the time of the state of Urartu, deriving its name from the Urartian god Ishtar. Urartu was one of the most powerful empires of its day, a remarkably developed culture that had extensive contacts with the major empires of the Ancient world stretching between the Mediterranean and India. At constant war with its neighbors, Urartu was mostly fixed in battle against the greatest power of the day, Assyria, conquered and conquering its southern neighbor in turn. Aragatsotn was on the outer edge of the empire, not as far as the middle lands in Tavush, used as buffer zones from invading Cimmerians and Scythians, but far enough from the main action at Armavir (Argishtinili) and Yerevan (Erebuni, Teishebaini) to be considered a relative backwater and summer home to the area's governors. Enough remains have been discovered

though, at Agarak, Ashtarak and elsewhere to show some of Urartu's splendor: copper and bronze jewelry, utensils, plates and shields, plus the important Iron Armenia fed to the budding empire.



Exhausted by constant warfare, Urartu's collapse under attack by northern Cimmerians and Scythians (progenitors of the Tajiks that invaded during the medieval period) prefaced Assyria's by a few decades. Aragatsotn was an outpost of the empire, prized for its iron, obsidian and agricultural production, as well as a refuge from invasions in the south.

**Urartian sites** in Aragatsotn include sites at Ashtarak, Amberd, Talin, Kosh, Tsaghkahovit and Tsaghkasar, and Oshakan.

After the fall of Urartu to the Medes in ca. 585 BCE, the Persian Achaemenid dynasty under Cyrus I absorbed the eastern part of the Urartian empire into its thirteenth satrapy, the "Armenoi," appointing the now dominant Armenians as Satraps (regional governors) and *sparapets* (military commanders).

The introduction of Median, Persian and Armenian Zoroastrian deities are traced to this period, especially the Armenian fascination and worship of Anahit. Armenia had become autonomous, giving liege and tariff to the Achaemenids, supplying troops to their campaigns (one of which was the march on Athens), and supplying especially their prized *Nesaeen* horses, the descendants of which can still be found in Aragatsotn. Armenian

Yervanduni or Orvontid dynasties ruling the country beginning in the Achaemenid period (331 – 189 BCE), using Amberd in Aragatsotn as a summer residence.

The region became part of the Armenian Satrapy on the collapse of the Achaemenid dynasty with the invasion of Alexander the Great, though it remained highly autonomous during the Seleucid period, and some think Aragatsotn was mentioned in the Anabasis, the epic journey by Xenophon and the “ten thousand” who marched through Armenia en route to the Black Sea in 401 BCE, part of the territory around *Gumnias*, current Giumri. Later Parthian rulers intermarried with Armenian nakharar households to form a unified ruling class, the *Yervanduni*, then *Artashesid* and *Arshak or Arshakuni* dynasties (Greater Haik), which withstood 500 years of Roman incursions into Armenia, through which Hellenistic culture became a hallmark of the elite.

Greek temples and deities once dotted the landscape of Aragatsotn, with emphasis on mountain shrines venerating the now Hellenized Anahit (Artemis), Aramazd (Zeus), Vahagn (Hephaestus), Nuneh (Athena) and Astghikh (Aphrodite), all destroyed during the early Christian era. Aragatsotn's frontier saw repeated incursions by rival Parthians and Romans, the Armenians playing one off the other in the struggle for the country leading up to the Sassanid and Christian era.

Traces of *Persian & Roman ruins* are at Tsaghkasar, Areg, Agarak, Tegher and Aghtamir (Voskevaz).

#### EARLY CHRISTIAN – MIDDLE AGES ▲

If the northern regions resisted Christianity, and in truth the “baptism” of the nation to the new faith was anything but quick, judging by the number of 4th-5th cc churches and monasteries, and its favored status by the ruling Mamikonian and Kamsarakan families, who erected their family seats at Aruch and Talin, Aragatsotn was an early convert to the new faith and a northern stronghold of political power. For 500 years, from 300-800 CE, Aragatsotn's capital was Oshakan, just south of modern Ashtarak, and the region served as a counterweight to the larger, more urbane Arshacid (Arshakuni) capitals at Vagharshapat (Echmiadzin) and Dvin.



The 4th and 5th centuries were vital centuries for Armenia's freedom, and the region served as a protector of that independence. Historically, the period was cataclysmic, as pagan believers were forced into the new religion, a process that took several hundred years, and the complete transformation of world power in the Near East. The end of the Parthian dynasty in 226 was nearly as catastrophic for Armenia as the death of their king Khosrov and his family in 261. The Parthians were interrelated to the Armenian kings by marriage and birth, their blood lines a binding force in their relations, despite their rivalry. The new Sassanid empire, which decimated the Persian Parthians, were fundamentalist Mazdaism believers (Zoroastrianism – fire worshipers), a belief that found some resonance with Armenians before the Christian era (Armenians were promoters of the Cult of Mithra (also “Mythra”), thought to have introduced the cult to Rome), but which set them at firm odds after the conversion of the kings household and the beginning of the Christian era. The rebellion of the nakharars against the ruling house in 340, the invasion of Armenia by the Sassanid King Shapuh II (353-372) and the intervention of Rome led to the 387 division of Armenia between Sassanid Persia and Rome. The Sassanids, having taken 4/5ths of Armenia now demanded Armenia's Parthian rulers give obeisance to their more extreme religion and to abandon their new Christian faith.

The Armenian alphabet was one of the key components of preserving Armenian identity in the face of Sassanid incursions and those that followed. Shrouded in myth, the rediscovery of the Armenian alphabet is credited to Mesrop Mashtots, who, under the patronage of King Vramshapur and the Katolikos Sahak Parthev (387-428), traveled to major centers of learning in Asia Minor before

“receiving a vision where Christ struck the alphabet on stone”. Mashtots is buried in Oshakan, his tomb immediately becoming a shrine and rallying point for Armenia's independence struggle.



Another monument for independence, though rarely visited now, is north of Oshakan, in the village of Aghstk (Dzorap). As war booty, Shapuh took had taken the remains of the Arshacid (Arshakuni) kings, “robbing” the Armenians of their ancestral powers. The Sparapet Vasak Mamikonian, later defeating Shapuh's army, regained the bones of the Arshakuni dynasty and had them interred in a monument high on Mt. Aragats. The monument (and presumably the bones of the Arshakuni ancestors) remains in Aghstk, north of Oshakan.

In 484 Armenia emerged from war against the Persians (Achaemenids), which had lasted three decades. The Persians had suffered a crushing defeat by the Huns, and had to come to terms with the Armenians. Freedom of religious worship was restored with the Treaty of Nvarsag.

In 640 Arabs swarmed from the south, destroyed the Sassanids in Persia and began conquering Armenia and much of Asia Minor. Byzantium refused to help Armenia defend itself from Arab attack, partly in response to Armenia refusing Byzantium demands to adopt the findings of the Chalcedonian Council (the council declared Jesus was both divine and human in form, while Armenians believed in the older orthodoxy, that Christ was in one form only, human and divine together). Initial Arab rule was benign and tolerant, the Armenian nakharars autonomous as long as they gave titular obeisance to the Caliphate. The number of churches completed in

the 7th century, during the first Arab absorption of the country shows the level of tolerance by the new overlords to their Christian subjects. Later rule by the more fundamentalist Abbasid Arabs was harsh, and their reaction to the destructive invasion of Armenia by the Byzantine Emperor Julian and Armenian revolts against the new caliphate in the 8th c was ruthless, ending the power of many nakharar houses, including the Mamikonians. Lost too was the Armenian “Golden Age” of culture. Churches and monasteries were destroyed, clergy were killed and the arts virtually stopped for one hundred years.

**Early Christian and Middle Age sites** are at Ashtarak, Oshakan, Voskevaz, and Parpi. Aghstk, Ushi, Artashavan, Jrambar, T'tujur, Mirak, Derek, Agarak, Kosh, Shamiram, Verin Sasunik, Avan, Aruch, Irind, Zakari Berd, Talin, Dashtadem, Mastara, Zarnja, Zovasar, Garnahovit.

#### THE BAGRATUNIS ▲

Worn down by continued Armenian rebellions, in 861 the Arabs appointed Ashot Bagratuni (the Carnivorous) Prince over Armenia and in 885 King of Armenia, beginning a long period of eminence for his family (The Bagratuni or Bagratid Dynasty). Aragatsotn became a part of the Bagratuni landholdings, forfeited by the Mamikonians after their defeat during the 774-775 revolt. The Arabs gave the lands to the Bagratunis, who had not joined the rebellion, creating a vast northern kingdom relatively free from Arab and Byzantine interference. The Bagratuni dynasty lasted until the end of the 11th c, when Seljuk and Byzantine attacks captured and then destroyed the Bagratuni capital at Ani as well as Vagharshapat and Dvin.

Rival kingdoms of equally great power and wealth rose in Vaspurakan and Siunik, the latter creating an autonomous kingdom that lasted well past the Bagratuni era. Another rival kingdom, only a few kilometers distant from Ani, was the Kars Kingdom, once the capital of the Bagratunis, and governed by members of the Bagratuni family. The period, though reflected by the great wealth of Ani and the titular Armenian capital Dvin, in Ararat Valley, were already fragmented and plagued by petty rivals. Junior members of the Bagratuni family included the rulers of the Tashir-Dzoraget Kingdom in Lori and the newly formed Orbeli (Orbelian) Kings in Georgia (Albania).



Unable to evict Kurdish and Iranian Emirs from Dvin, the official capital of Armenia, The Bagratunis moved instead to Ani, and built their great city there, initiating a remarkable period of development, where Armenian culture achieved new levels of artistry. Resumption of international trade brought prosperity and the revival of artistic and literary pursuits. Hundreds of monasteries and churches, as well as thousands of exquisitely carved stone crosses (Khachkars) are traced to this period. The churches assumed their conical domed cruciform shapes, with elaborate carved images on the facades and frescoes in the inner sanctums. In Aragatsotn Oshakan continued to be an important religious center, but Ashtarak began to assume greater importance as a center for trade and local governance, especially as the Mamikonian stronghold at Aruch fell to the Bagratunis. The marz was an important conduit for trade into the northern regions, the most important route traveling from Dvin in Ararat Valley to Ani and Lori Berd via Ashtarak and Oshakan. It is in this period that Ashtarak ("tower") developed, surpassing Oshakan as administrative center and trade city.

The Bagratuni power is often said to have fallen to a combination of attacks by the Byzantine Empire (led by Basil II, the "Macedonian Emperor" of Armenian blood) determined to absorb Armenia into its Eastern provinces and the onslaught of Seljuk Turks led by Alp-Arslan, the first waves of Turkomen into Anatolia. But in fact the kingdom was divided and weakened before these two forces set about their campaigns, weakened by internal fighting between younger members of the Bagratuni family and infighting with rival kingdoms at Siunik and Vaspurakan. In the end, the advancing wave of Seljuk Turks, who had begun incursions into Armenia in 1040 and made a full

scale assault in 1064, capturing Ani, and destroying the Byzantine army at Manazkert in 1071, ended all pretense of a unified Armenia and Armenian autonomy. In 1072 the Seljuks sold Ani to the Kurdish Shaddadids, along with Shirak and sections of Aragatsotn. From now on Armenia's history would be islands of petty fiefdoms and principalities in a sea of Seljuk, Kurdish and Iranian ruled provinces. With one exception, that of the next period, Armenia was now divided and thousands fled to Cilicia, the first wave of Armenian Diaspora.

**Medieval Cave settlements.** It is at this period that Aragatsotn's caves—inhabited from the beginning of human settlement—were once again used by victims of the Seljuk invasion. Caves dot the canyon walls of all the rivers of the region, and some fascinating remains can be found in the canyons at Dzorap (Aghtsk), Dashtadem, Parpi, Ashtarak, and the S. Grigor Lusavorich Cave-shrine on Aragats. The caves are remote and not easy to get to, and require a knowledgeable guide, often be found in the nearby village.

Other **Bagratuni sites in Aragatsotn** are at Biurakan, Amberd, Kosh, Aruch, Dashtadem, Zarnja, Hovhanavank, Yeghipatrush and Ria-Taza.

**LATE MEDIEVAL / PERSIAN PERIOD ◄**

At the beginning of the 12th century, Historic Armenia was divided between Byzantium and different Seljuk and Kurdish warlords who ruled from the cities of Ani, Akhlat, Kars and Erzurum. Aragatsotn was a patchwork of Kurdish and Seljuk fiefdoms, with Armenian strongholds clinging to their holdings though now subservient to their new Muslim lords.

The fortresses that dot the landscape in Aragatsotn became increasingly important in this period as ruling families retreated to their remote estates during the worst attacks. Forging alliances with the new rulers (who were fighting themselves with Kurdish and Iranian emirs), the region became one the most important, and wealthiest in Armenia, a major conduit for trade on the Silk and Spice trails, which coursed through the region en route to Dvin and Ani. In fact the routes once traveled by caravans laden with spice, silk, carpets, gold, precious gems and fruits are the same now used by trucks ferrying goods from Iran to Georgia, running via Ashtarak and Giumri or north via Aparan, Vanadzor and Sadakhlo.



With the transformation of Georgia into a major military power at the end of the 11th and beginning of the 12th century, the political situation for Armenians improved decisively. And in twenty years of fighting, under the leadership of the Zakarian sons Ivaneh and Zakareh, the Georgian army retook a significant part of Northern Armenia from Seljuk domination including Aragatsotn: Aparan, Talin, Aruch, Ashtarak, Ohanavan, Saghmosavan, Tegher were freed and reinvigorated with new trade on routes into Georgia. Much of the sacred architecture that survives in Aragatsotn can be traced to this period, when churches and monasteries built in the 7th and 10th centuries were now expanded with elaborately designed structures, where religious and scientific research continued as if nothing had happened to interrupt their progress. The region experienced a new flowering of culture with the construction of monasteries at Talin, Aruch, Aparan, Tegher, Saghmosavan, Ohanavan, Ushi, Mughni, Amberd, as well as numerous churches and shrines built throughout the region, in canyons, on the crests of hills, even on top of Mt. Aragats.

Architectural masterpieces in Aragatsotn include the magnificent monasteries and World Heritage Site candidates at Ohanavan, Saghmosavan and its sister vank at Tegher, all built by rival members of the same princely family. These achieved an artistic expression much like the great monasteries at Sanahin and Haghpat in Lori and Siunik's jewel at Tatev, surpassing, some say the great cathedrals at Ani, Kars, Vagharshapat (Echmiadzin) and Dvin. Their location, perched on river gorges high on Mt. Aragats is a gorgeous reminder of the beauty and sophistication of the Medieval Armenian mind, especially in Spring time,

as mountain poppies and wild flowers blanket the area.

The glories were short lived as Aragatsotn fell to invasion by Jalai-al-Adin in 1225, whose armies of Turkmen and Kipchuk mercenaries savagely pillaged the countryside, burning orchards and crops and initiating a period of famine in Armenia, so weakening the country that when the Mongol Hordes invaded in 1236, there was no organized resistance. The Mongols took the fortresses at Talin, Aruch, Amberd and Ashtarak, along with the rest of the region. Armenian lords made peace with the Mongols, who showed better mercy than Jalai-al-Adin, but the 1254 Mongol census of Armenia had severe consequences for the country, as the noble families, heavily taxed, went into rebellion in 1259-1261, which was brutally suppressed and led to stronger measures to control Armenia's princes, which included requiring each to make a 3 year journey to the Mongol capital in Kara Korum in Mongolia, and their adroit exploitation of antagonisms between the branches of the Armenian royal families, favoring some (and not others), dividing lands and treasury among feuding lords and otherwise promoting persons to positions coveted by their nearest and dearest.



Despite Mongol pressure, Armenia was not at all decimated, and trade and religious life continued as before, even expanded under early Mongol patronage. Many of the Mongol generals and their wives were sympathetic to the Armenian church, restoring the Katolikos to his seat in Albania and facilitating the church's construction of monasteries and academies in the country, including Armenia's first university at Gladzor in 1280. The Mongols employed Armenian merchants in their court, and merchants and religious figures were found both in court and at all points on the caravan routes which became enormous conduits of wealth under Mongol protection, generating unimaginable wealth for the new "middle class" of traders and sellers,

who erected expensive monuments and churches to advertise their good fortune.

Changes occurred in the late 13th century as the Ghazan Khan converted to Islam and Christianity passed from the status of a favored religion to a tolerated one. So too, the Mongol Nomadic way of life led to a severe destruction of the land and population. The Mongols had expropriated vast tracts of lands for grazing, taking the upper lands of Aragatsotn for their herds ("Yailas"), while taking the Ararat Valley and lower Aragatsotn for winter pasturage. The land, once irrigated for farming, quickly became a semi-desert, no longer able to support the local population as farmers were enslaved while those who remained were unable to plow their land as their livestock was taken by Mongol overlords. Famine and disease became common occurrences in the 14th century as was the constant in-fighting by rival Mongol chieftains, each vying for control of the quickly disintegrating empire, ravaged the countryside, decimating the population and weakening the country for another invasion, its worst and last from Central Asia.

**Timur.** Unable to put up any defense, the remaining Armenians could but just watch as Timur (Tamurlane or "Tamur the Lame") led three successive attacks in 1386-1387, 1394-1396 and 1399-1403. The invaders were brutal, enslaving local peasants and Azats alike, pillaging towns and villages in Aragatsotn and burning croplands and pastures on their way. A severe famine ensued and cannibalism was reported, as well as the selling of human flesh at the market.

Timur appointed his half-mad brother governor of Armenia, who promptly began a series of pogroms against the local population, delighting in torture and gruesome execution. Encountering resistance by King Giorgi II of Georgia, Timur led his final, and worst attack against Northern Armenia and Georgia in 1399, enslaving over 70,000 people and depopulating many districts in Northern Armenia. People in Aragatsotn lived in remote caves as a matter of course, eking out their existence as best they could. Timur's armies smashed carefully crafted kingdoms throughout Anatolia, including a power that had invaded and settled into Anatolia long before him, the Ottomans. Timur died in Samarkand in 1405.

**The Ottomans** The rulers left in Timur's wake were a fragmented group of petty fiefdoms and districts governed by Turkmen descended from each of the last 200 years of invasions. Prime

among these were the Seljuk Turks who governed Persia, who had managed to evict Timur's hordes from their lands after his death. When Ottoman Turks took the city of Constantinople in 1453, they gradually began to expand their territory east and south, incorporating Seljuk estates into the Ottoman Empire. Having long entrenched themselves into Anatolia and Eastern Europe and no facing the Turkmen threat in the East, at the Armenian border. Facing the Turkmen who ruled Persia, the Ottoman Shah Mehmet II fought his bloodiest battle yet at Terjan on the Euphrates, managing to defeat the Turkmen but barely. The Turkmen were finally expelled from Armenia and Persia by the nascent Safavid ruler Ismail Shah. Mehmet's successors began a second expansion in the 16th century, defeating Ismail Shah and conquering the majority of Armenia in 1514-1516. The Ottomans consolidated their gains under Suleiman II, who also spared Persia and the vestiges of Armenia remaining from final defeat as he focused on Baghdad and Mesopotamia. Gradual encroachment wrested the remainder of Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan into Ottoman titular control by 1585.

#### PERSIAN ARMENIA

The shape of modern Armenia began in the late 17th century, as the Safavid Persians under Shah Abas I managed to wrest Eastern Armenia from the Ottomans during the long and brutal Ottoman-Persian war of 1602-1620, which used Armenia as the battlefield. Aragatsotn was further decimated in this campaign; Ashtarak, Talin and Aparan were emptied of their people, and trade virtually stopped until the end of the war. At first overwhelmed by superior Ottoman forces, Abas turned the tide of the war by using a slash and burn tactic, destroying Armenia's land and forcing Armenians to emigrate to Persia, where they settled near Isfahan at New Jhulfa. Without supplies and food, the ottomans, were unable to press their advantage and after 18 years of fighting, the division of Armenia into West and East became final in 1620, as the majority of the country was kept in Ottoman hands while Georgia, Azerbaijan and East Armenia, including Aragatsotn, was given to Persia.

Shah Abbas showed real compassion for his Armenian subjects, declaring religious liberty in the Empire and attending Armenian services on several occasions. He assigned the governorship of his new province to Armenian leaders, called "Meliks," who enjoyed a good degree of independence. Abas policies of tolerance towards Christians in his empire was not followed by his

successors, who began policies more in line with the repression of earlier Mongols of the 13th century. In the late 17th c Armenians sent emissaries to Europe and Russia to ask for help. In response, Czar Peter the Great sent expeditions to the region in 1700 and 1722, beginning the Russian Imperial era in the Caucasus. The Russians retreated from their first expedition, but Armenian Meliks, under David Bek, asserted independence in Karabakh and Northern Armenia, acceding to Persian authority in name only.



Meanwhile Turko-Persian fighting resumed with Armenia as the battle ground, Persians and Ottomans taking and retaking Yerevan, Ararat and Kars. The Persians reinstated religious freedom in 1736, and fought ferocious battles with the Ottomans in 1743, which devastated much of the land. Aragatsotn became a refuge for locals hiding again in mountains and caves. Finally, in the mid 1700's Armenians made an appeal to the Georgian King Herekleh II to establish a Transcaucasian kingdom, while Empress Yekaterina (Catherine the Great) began the Russo-Persian war in 1768, a failed venture thwarted by the Persians, themselves facing Civil war. By the end of the century, the eunuch Agha Mohammed Khan seized the throne in 1794 and two years later laid waste to the aspiring Armenian kingdom at Karabakh and savagely attacked the Ararat valley and Aragatsotn.

The Russians, under Czar Pavel, finally acted. The Russian army swept southward in 1797 and pushed the Persian forces back across the Arax River, and annexed a large area of territory for the empire of the Czars. The treaty of Gulistan in 1813 ceded Persian lands east and north of Yerevan to

Russia and a counter attack to a Persian rebellion in 1826 wrested the remainder of Eastern Armenia to the Czar's lands.

#### 19th CENTURY ▲

Aragatsotn's rebirth, like that of all Eastern Armenia, was quick and tremendous under Imperial Russia. Long attached to the Persian Yerevan Melik, the region developed at a tremendous pace, achieving regional status in the mid 19th century.

The old caravan routes from centuries before served Aragatsotn well, as trade routes to Giumri (Kumaiyri) and Kars were reopened and new routes to Vanadzor and Tbilisi were built to the Pambak and Spitak passes. Ashtarak became a regional capital, though Talin and Aparan never again regained the status they enjoyed in the Medieval period. Growth exploded with the construction of the Yerevan-Tbilisi railway in 1899-1910, which passed through Aragatsotn on the old Caravan route, and industrial development that included the development of rock quarries in Lower Aragatsotn and near Talin and Ashtarak. The marz was still primarily an agricultural community, shepherds herding sheep and cattle on the mountainsides and farmers again tilling irrigated soil in the lower regions. The region experienced a rebirth in education, as the monastic tradition of learning was revived with local schools, thought limited to the well-to-do or exceptionally gifted, began an important transformation in thinking of the local people. No more immune to the winds of socialism that was sweeping Europe in the 19th c, Ashtarak and Aragatsotn bred its own secret cells of partisans (often recent graduates of universities and academies in Tiflis (Tbilisi), Moscow and St. Petersburg) determined to build a new Socialist Republic.

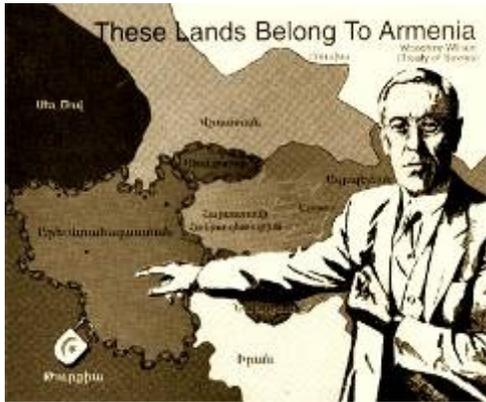
#### FIRST REPUBLIC ▲

As WWI began, Armenian patriots joined the Czarist forces, a number from Ashtarak and especially Aparan, which has a long history of sending its men into the military. Russian incursions into Turkey were quick and decisive, causing the virtual collapse of the eastern empire and freedom in Western Armenia for the first time in 500 years. This did little to alleviate the genocide of up to 2 million Armenians, who had been force-marched into the desert by Turkish and Kurdish soldiers and peasants determined to wipe the Armenian race from the face of the earth.

When the Czar abdicated in 1917, the Russian army, now controlled by Lenin, retreated to fight

the White Army in Russia, leaving the vast Armenian lands vulnerable and weakened. In the winter of 1918 Armenia joined Georgia and Azerbaijan to form the Transcaucasian Federation and declare independence from Russia. The effort lasted barely 3 months, its demise hastened by the Georgian exodus to curry favor with Germany and Azeri resistance to its Christian counterparts who they felt blocked their final connection with Turkey.

In the same year the Turkish Army, still fighting on its western front, launched attacks against the Armenians, determined to demolish the country and create a Pan-Turkic Empire from the Black Sea to China. The new Communist government in Russia worsened the situation by making a secret treaty with Mustafa Kamal, leader of the New Turk government, allowing Turkey to invade the Caucasus. Araratotsn became a focus of the fighting, its western edge used as both battleground and passage to the Ararat Valley, stopping only when defeated at Sardarapat (Vahib-Pasha, the defeated Turkish commander, termed the Armenian soldiers as "the best fighters in the world"). The Armenians held defenses at Karaklis and Aparan and the Turkish Army was forced out of Eastern Armenia, allowing the country to form a Republic.



The First Republic was established May 28, 1918, a period of great turmoil. Owing to the genocide, the population of the country swelled from 300,000 to over one million and the country's infrastructure was shattered. That year up to 20,000 people starved to death or died of typhus or the plague. Wheat sent from the USA prevented famine and the country reorganized

itself in remarkable time, so much so it was able to declare for annexation Western Armenia in 1919. Still the country's fate was dire; the Turks armed local Kurdish and Turkish villagers, setting them against the new Republic, and the Allies, far from rewarding Armenia for its sacrifices by reuniting the Armenians of Anatolia, betrayed the country in the Treaty of Sevres. The British particularly acted against Armenia's interests, forcing the other powers to opt for a weak treaty, which called for the Turks to free all Armenian prisoners of war and political prisoners, and evacuate the Transcaucasus but providing no way to enforce the act, allowing Turkey to keep its arms. President Woodrow Wilson was the only one to argue for freeing historic Armenia and protecting its frontiers. In fact the Allied powers did not recognize the Armenian Republic until January of 1920, a few months before the Red Army attack, and they provided no support to the country's defense. Wilson was granted the right to determine Armenia's borders, and drew the lines to include Van, Erzerum and Bitlis, vastly expanding the territories west of Araratotsn. Turkey was forced to recognize Armenia's existence, but before the new borders could be enacted, the Turks began an offensive against Greeks trying to take back historic Greek lands in Thrace, and Armenians who were trying to take back their historic lands.

Ironically, the end of Democratic aspiration in the Caucasus came from Azerbaijan, in Baku, as the Communists took control of the oil rich city and the Red Army use the country to invade Armenia in April 1920. The war was quick and decisive, the Turks took back the lands given to Armenia, including Igdir (Mt. Ararat) while the Red Army took the rest. On December 2, 1920 Armenia signed the treaty of Alexandropol with Turkey and on the same day it was annexed to the Soviet Union.

**THE SOVIET PERIOD ▲**

The marz was carved from the greater Ararat District and encompassed Armavir (Hoktemberian), Vagharshapat (Echmiadzin), Talin, Ashtarak and Aparan districts. In the mid 20th century the region was divided into three districts: Ashtarak, Talin and Aparan, which were merged into Araratotsn in 1994.

Araratotsn's development during the Soviet period was extraordinary, as agriculture and industrialization were both developed to high degree. First collectivized, farmers were eventually allowed to till their own plots in addition

to the collectivized farms that were by and large unsuccessful in this part of Armenia. The Yezdis (Zoroastrian-influenced descendants of the Mongol/Kurdish invaders from the 11th-14th cc) experienced a boom as well, becoming the most prominent minority in the marz, inhabiting the upper regions of Araratotsn, especially in Aparan region. Descendants of the Kurds who entered Armenia with the Seljuks, Mongols and Kurdish emirs of the 10th-14th cc (including the great Jalai-al-Din in the 11th c), current Yezdis are sometimes called Christian Kurds, though their beliefs are influenced as much by the followers of Zoroaster, from whence their ancestors came.

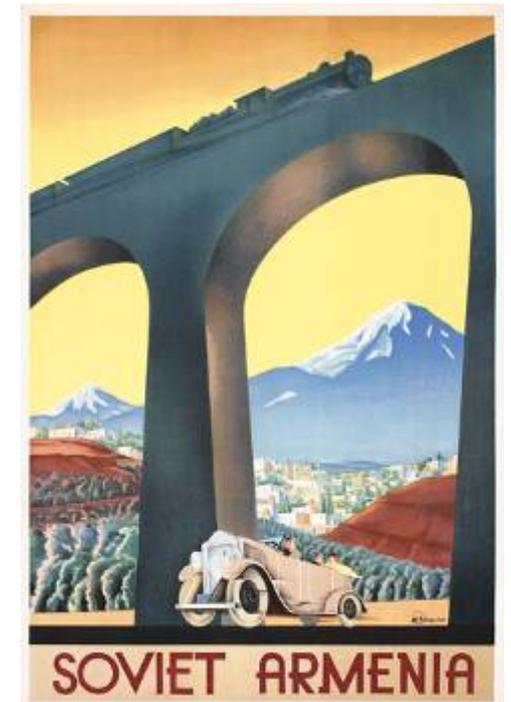


The great development of the region was industrial: Ashtarak and Talin, both on the rail line to Moscow, were heavily industrialized, receiving raw materials (textiles, metal ore, lumber) that were transformed into finished goods, shipped throughout the Soviet Union. Among these were carpets, cloth, iron goods and steel beams for construction, as well as light industrial goods and products. Both the population and industrialization increased 6-fold within 20 years of joining the Soviet Union.

The Great Patriotic War (World War II to us foreigners) was devastating to the local population; up to 50% of the able-bodied population was recruited to fight and 30% died in the war. Factories were converted to war manufacturing munitions and (secretly) airplane parts.

After the war a new boom began, with the expansion of agriculture and industry throughout

the marz. Another development occurred in 1946, when the Soviet Astrophysicist Victor Hambartsumian established the Biurakan Observatory on Mt. Aragats. The Observatory, which has the second largest optical telescope in Eurasia, immediately raised Armenia's stature in the scientific world, expanding research, defense development and computer technology ("informatics") to the forefront of the Soviet Union. The observatory is still operating and considered a vital research center for astrophysics worldwide. Another observatory, the first optical-radio observatory in the world, was built a few kilometers above Biurakan.



As the population boomed in the post-war years, construction of new housing became paramount. In this Araratotsn's stone quarries mined a majority of tufa stone used in Yerevan. Other construction materials mined in the marz included cement, used to build the tens of thousands of apartment buildings that blight the Armenian landscape (if you've seen one Soviet apartment block, you've seen them all, from Siberia to the desert tropics, they are all the same). While the

area around Ashtarak experienced a “Dacha Boom” in the 1970-1980’s, as the connected and well-heeled poured their income into elaborate weekend retreats, the rest of the region had to live with hideous apartment blocks blighting the landscape. Even clasped with Armenian tufa, the buildings could not hide the ill-conceived and cramped quarters, and the materials did not weather well in the Armenian climates, their designs dictated from a Moscow perspective. Shoddy construction and skimming off supplies were in no small part the response so many buildings were damaged during the 1988 earthquake, damaging a few buildings in Aragatsotn.

The marz also experienced a slump, part of the Brezhnev malaise that hit the rest of the Soviet Union in the late 70’s and 80’s. A well worn joke as never-before seen inflation began to hit the country was “the government pretends to pay us, and we pretend to work.”

## 2ND REPUBLIC ▲

Aragatsotn had little damage from the earthquake of 1988, but could not help but be affected by the drain on the economy when the conflict with Azerbaijan over Karabakh flared up, as well as the collapse of the Soviet economy in 1991 and the ensuing collapse of the ruble. When Azerbaijan stopped supplying gas to the country and attacked Armenians in Azerbaijan and Karabakh, Aragatsotn suffered along with the country, in some ways more as its infrastructure and economy was mostly dependent on imported raw material (cut off during the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict that stopped rail service from Russia) and export markets that no longer existed.

Aragatsotn has experienced an exodus of its working force, though not to the scale of other regions. Workers are better able to commute to Yerevan, which is just 20 km from the capital city. Still, perhaps 25% of the population has gone to Russia and the west and send remittances to their families left behind. In a modern way, they have introduced a new Caravan route, one that trades workers from Armenia instead of spices from the orient. One of the great pleasures of visiting a village is to stumble upon a wedding or family event and watch the reunions of these “new caravan workers,” with the families and friends they have left behind.

## ARAGATSOTN NOW ▲

Aragatsotn’s economy is based on agriculture, stone quarries, seasonal tourism and remittances

from family members working abroad. Remittances are perhaps still the largest influx of money into the marz, with that money funding small enterprises and a steadily improving standard of life. The Dacha trade is more vibrant, as the new rich build elaborate and unwieldy palaces that should no longer even be called a weekend hut. But their contribution to the local economy is minimal, the roadside stands on the outskirts of Yerevan derive more income from weekend vacationers than the local markets in Aragatsotn. Farming is a large market, as is the booming flower market. Most villages around Ashtarak have greenhouses that are the source of the flowers you pay dearly for on Sayat Nova boulevard.

Still, everything is relative in Armenia, and though it is impossible to know the real economic well-being of locals (Armenians are notorious for hiding their real economic situation, until you are invited for a wedding, when all the stops are pulled out and you get some idea of how much money must be stuffed under those mattresses), town-dwellers are significantly less off than those in Yerevan, while farmers are among the most secure.

Eco-Travel economic opportunities for Aragatsotn are first and foremost Mt. Aragats, which is considered one of the better moderate climbs in Europe, and among the most accessible. Mountain expeditions vary from the leisurely one day hike to the south peak, a 3 hour easy-moderate climb, to the rugged north peak, that requires an all day climb on difficult rock cliffs.

Except for seasonal pasturage in the upper elevations and small plots of land that must be heavily irrigated, the district is a deeply challenged environment. For a few weeks of spring the slopes are emerald green, yellow and red, then the summer heat bakes off the spring growth and creates a rock-strewn desolate land. Villages are built around mountain streams and springs, sufficient for their needs but not for the explosive growth of new dachas that are beginning to crowd the mountain slopes. In some areas you will be forgiven for thinking you are in some urban exurb as you pass house after house stacked on the mountainside.

One of the few blessings of the economic and transportation collapse of early 90’s was that farmers, unable to obtain chemical fertilizers from Russia, were forced to adopt organic farming measures, which ended up producing some of the healthiest, tastiest fruits and vegetables

imaginable. With recovery the chemical fertilizers are back, and the health of the soil, and products are in decline. Particularly annoying is one California Armenian’s bright idea to introduce the tasteless pulp we call tomatoes in the supermarket in the USA, which almost destroyed the local tomato market in the early 2000’s. Locals rallied, refusing to buy the inferior quality of the crap from California, and local varieties are making a comeback, but you still have to look for real local varieties.

Close to Yerevan, locals are not as forthcoming or friendly as they are in other, more remote marz, still their idea of being reserved will strike most westerners as their closest friends, as the even the simple act of trying to speak a little Armenian, or a smiling will win smiles in return, invitations for tea, food, local gossip and invitation to stay.



## IN AND OUT ▲

**By Rail** The *g’natsk* travels between Yerevan and Tbilisi, going in each direction every other day (to Tbilisi on even days and to Yerevan on odd days of the month). The train passes along the far western border with local stops at Tlik, Aragats and Arteni. It is a cheap way to see the countryside, if you don’t mind the slow pace. On even number days of the month it goes toward Tbilisi (leaving Yerevan 19.00 and stopping in Aragats 1-3 hours later), then towards Yerevan on odd numbered days (leaving Tbilisi 16.15 and arriving in Yerevan 06.00 the next day). Show up early to flag down the train. Basic Seating Class for Yerevan-Tbilisi is 1470 AMD, sitting compartment is 3600 AMD, and a place in a 4-bed compartment is 5600 AMD.

**By Air** There are no air connections to Aragatsotn region. It may be possible to rent helicopter transport, if you have the bucks: contact [Avarayr or Mountain Rescue Team](#) (p. 13) to inquire.

**By Road** There are three main roads through Aragatsotn, with intersecting mountain roads and paths that link the marz to Shirak, Lori, Armavir and a few kilometers of Kotaik en route to Yerevan.

From Ashtarak, the main road in and out of the marz is the **Giumri-Yerevan route** (M1/A327) that travels west then north skirting Mt. Aragats and the mountain plains towards Shirak and it is 6 km to Agarak, 18 km to Kosh, 24 km to Aruch, 46 km to Talin, 54 km to Mastara and 92 km to Giumri; and 22 km to Yerevan center in the south.

The road to Lori and Armavir, or the **Aparan-Echmiadzin route** (A329) climbs the eastern face of Aragats by the monasteries at Mughni (2 km), Hovhanavan (6 km) and Saghmosavan (14 km) before ascending into the high alpine plains with Yezdi villages at Hartavan/Shenavan (20/21 km) and Kukas (24 km) then Aparan (40 km) and another Yezdi village at Ria Taza (52 km) and the archeological excavations at Tsaghkahovit (59 km) and Gegharot (59 km) before crossing the Pambak Pass (62 km) to Spitak (69 km) Vanadzor (86 km). To the south it is 17 km to Echmiadzin.

On the far west is the **Akhurian Route** (A326/H17), which parallels the rail line from Yerevan to Giumri and follows the border with Turkey for about 30 km, passing through Aragats and Tlik on the way to Giumri. From Aragats it is 11 km to Tlik, 17 km Ani Pemza, 24 km to Kharkov (Ani) and 59 km to Giumri.

There are a series of mountain roads radiating out from Ashtarak, leading north to Mt. Aragats and south to the valley floor. The main Aragats route travels west from Ashtarak to Agarak (6 km) where it branches north to Biurakan (12 km), Noramberd (18 km), passes the turn off to Amberd (26 km, Amberd is 4 km from the turn off) and the base of Mt. Aragats at Kari Lich (39 km). Another branches off just past Agarak (7.5 km) to Dzoragiugh/Aghtsk (9 km), the monastery at Tegher (15 km) and a side road to Orgov (15 km), where the optical-radio observatory sits.

**Public Transport** includes intercity buses and minivans (Marshrutni Taxis) that travel from village to village and village to town. Buses to Yerevan travel daily from Ashtarak, Talin &

Aparan, with stops along the way. Fares are 150-250 AMD. Village minibuses run mornings and evenings, ask for the times. Minivans travel the same routes, plus connect towns with villages. Cars with drivers can be hired in Yerevan, Ashtarak, Aparan and Talin, taxis or local drivers. Taxis can be found in Ashtarak with a few in Talin and Aparan and most welcome day trips, even on short notice. Figure 100 AMD per kilometer plus something extra for stops or negotiate a day rate of around \$20-40, depending on how many of you there are. If you stop for food, treat the driver as well. Ditto if you decide to overnight and his home isn't nearby.

### OVERNIGHT/EAT ▲

**Lodging** *Ashtarak* has a Soviet style hotel, a couple of small "restaurants/motels" (read 'by the hour') on the outskirts, and a rather posh and expensive restaurant/motel favored by the New Armenians. Nearby on the slopes of Mt. Aragats are a few pansionats (6000-10,000 AMD for bed/room and board), a recently redone overnight at the Biurakan Observatory and a few B&Bs (5000-20,000 AMD). The Giumri highway has several restaurants/motels and road side cafes at Udjan and Aruch, renting by the hour or night (when asked the rate at one of the Udjan lodgings, the cheery grandmotherly matron chirped, "5000 drams, 5 zham! (5000 drams, 5 hours)!" When asked the rate for tourists overnight, she quickly responded, "Eli 5000 drams (Also 5000 drams)!" The one-time shame of having a girl on the side seems to have quickly subsided in the New Armenian landscape. The motels (5000-10,000 AMD) are not the neatest but are welcome respites if you need a place to crash and don't mind the revelry next door.

Unique to Aragatsotn are its many *dachas*, most of which are privately held but some of which are available for overnights (\$10-100). These are best arranged at an agency in Yerevan.

Other than this the pickings are slim, save *home stays*, which can be rustic but heart-warming experiences at villages and towns throughout the marz. Expect to pay (5000-10,000 AMD) for room/apartment/home in remoter locales. Talin, Aparan, Mastara, Biurakan, Voskevaz and Oshakan are all worth checking for a home stay. Be sure to offer to pay up front. Many homes will politely refuse at first, but four tries seems to be the magic number before they accept.

*Villagers* will put up anyone in need; the amenities will be sparse, but the hospitality will be warm and inviting. You will have to insist to pay in many cases, villagers especially taking offense at the idea of selling their hospitality. 3000-5000 AMD for bed and breakfast is reasonable.

*Camping* is exceptional at Kari Lich on Mt. Aragats, and available throughout the marz, mostly in wild areas or river canyons. Before setting camp, be sure you are not intruding on private property, especially if you are close to a village or farm. Ask and you will almost certainly be given permission—and probably food, drink and an evening of stories into the bargain. Details for lodging are listed in individual Day Trips.

**Eating out/water** in the region can be found at roadside khorovats stands and cafes along the Giumri and Aparan highways (Agarak-Kosh), at Ashtarak, Aparan, Talin and Mastara, Voskevaz and Oshakan. *Ashtarak* has full blown restaurants catering to the Yerevan crowd, plus bistros and cafes of its own. Talin and Aparan have cafes and khorovats stands. Bottled water is generally not available outside of towns, though the ubiquitous Coca-Cola knockoffs are everywhere. Aragatsotn has roadside springs that locals love to visit to fill up their bottles with. They are considered safe by locals, and we have never had a problem with one, but you need to use your own judgment and don't drink out of a cup that's not yours.



### DESTINATIONS ▲

Aragatsotn has a lot more to offer than climbing Mt. Aragats or manning the battlements of Amberd and looking at Mashtots' grave. Three important and enchanting mountain monasteries are within easy drive of each other, and the nature is

extraordinary; in the spring the entire mountain is literally covered with poppies and mountain flowers, and throughout the year the deep river gorges are micro-environments harboring some of Armenia's most rare species of animals and flora.

**Picturesque locales** include Ashtarak Canyon, Ohanavan, Saghmosavan, Amberd, Tegher, Kari Lich, the road to Kari Lich, the top of Mt. Aragats, the Amberd, Arkashen, Tegher and Kasakh river canyons, the mountain track from Ashtarak to Orgov, Aparan Reservoir, the Aparan plain and sites at Rya-Taza, Tsaghkahovit and the Pambak Pass, Garnahovit, Karmrashen and Mastara.

**Prehistoric / Urartian excavations, tombs, vishap stones and settlements** in Aragatsotn Region include Tsaghkahovit and Gegharot (Aparan plain), Oshakan, Voskevaz, Agarak, Tegher, Shamiram, Kakavaberd, Mt. Arteni, Tsaghkasar, Ushi.

**Medieval fortresses, monasteries, churches, Khachkars & ruins** will be found at Ashtarak, Oshakan, Voskevaz, Mughni, Karbi, Ohanavan, Saghmosavan, Ushi, Artashavan, Jrambar, Yeghipatrush, T'tujur, Aparan, Mirak, Rya-Taza, Derek, Parpi, Aghstk, Biurakan, Tegher, Amberd, Kosh, Shamiram, Verin Sasunik, Avan, Aruch, Baisz, Irind, Talin, Dashtadem, Karmrashen, Mastara, Zovasar, Garnahovit, and Zarnja.

### NATURE TOURING

**Natural areas** include upper Mt. Aragats and its four crests, with unique and fragile alpine ecosystems both inside the crater (with its aquamarine ice lake) and on the hill slopes leading up, the Khazar, Amberd and Tegher River Canyons which pass through several geographic zones each with its own distinct flora and fauna, the Aparan Plain, a high mountain plateau with wind-swept vistas alternating between emerald green in the summer and blinding white snow in the winter, and the rugged semi-desert areas in the west of the marz. This is one of the most exotic in the district, and seldom traveled (no doubt because of its harsh rocky slopes and desolate views in the summers), though a gem of a hike for the adventurous, as the region is striated with rivulets and low river canyons.

**Hiking and trekking** is spectacular throughout Aragatsotn, especially on the *mountain* itself. The most accessible is the south face, starting from Kari Lich, which is a 3 hour hike to the summit on a steady slope. More difficult climbs are to the

other three summits, two requiring rock climbing (North and East). Another hike is up the *Kasakh River canyon*, starting at Ashtarak and continuing north to Mughni, Ohanavan and Saghmosavan, then (for the really fit), continuing about 15 km to Artashavan, Jrambar to Aparan Reservoir for camping. The *Amberd River canyon* passes Biurakan and Aghstev (with cave dwellings below the 4th c Arshakuni mausoleum church) and can be traced up to the Amberd fortress itself if you take the right fork by Orgov which is the Arkashen River. The left fork is the Tegher River which leads to Tegher monastery. Above Kakavadzor and Baisz are dozens of mountain streams and the Talish River that climbs for about 20 km to the south slope of Mt. Kakavasar. Talin region has river canyons leading uphill from Irind, Yeghnik and Karmrashen, as well as low lying rivulets and rocky landscapes around Dashtadem, Mt. Arteni and the Akhurian River (border with Turkey, patrolled). From Mastara, with its spectacular 6th century round church, you can hike past a remarkable collection of Stone Age, Bronze and Iron Age and Medieval fortresses, settlements, churches and excavation sites (upper Mastara, Zovasar, Tsaghkasar and Garnahovit).



**Mountain treks** There are more mountains than just Aragats, even if it is the big brother.

*Northeast Aragatsotn: Mountains on the Aparan Plain* include Arai Lehr (2576m) east of Artashavan, which is a favorite spot for Armenian's mountain climbers to commemorate April 24; Mts. Teghenis (2851m) and Artsitsler (2687m) east of Aparan Reservoir, which pass on to Kotaik marz and the forests of Tzaghkadzor; and the upper region Mt. Damilkgiaduk (2781m), the Tukhmanuk Pass into Upper Kotaik (2781m) and Mt. Davakar (2861m). North of Aparan are Mts. Mensar

(2474m), Sharailer (2474m) and Ghalachatepe (2344m), while west of the town are the twin peaks of Mts. Nigasar (3315m) and Chingil (3424m).

*Central Aragatsotn: North of Kosh and west of the Amberd and Tegher Rivers* are Mts. Tirikatar (2859m), Agravakar (3025m), Karakakar (3138m) and Kakavasar (3303m), while to the south are Karmratar (1286m) and Dashtakar (1064m).

*West Aragatsotn: Talin Region* has Mt. Mets Arteni (2047m) with its Bronze Age excavations, Mt. Zarnja (1758m) and above Mastara Mts. Tsaghkadsar (2219m) and Garnasar (2295m), also with Bronze Age sites.

For most hikes or climbs, an experienced mountain guide is required, for safe travel and to navigate the local areas and populations. They also know which areas are off-limits (some sections are restricted military areas, and not marked) as well as the secret cubby holes and gorges with rare delights. See [Adventure Tour Operators](#) (on page 13) for experienced guides.

**Caving** Aragatsotn has hundred of caves, with concentrations of caves on the Khazar, Amberd, Tegher and Arkashen River Canyons. Unique cave sites are on the Gegharot River west of Aragats village (S. Lusavorich Cave shrine); at Aghst (medieval cave complexes) and Dashtadem (7th-18th c cave complexes). For more details on caves see [TourArmenia Caving pages](#) ([www.tacentral.com/nature/natural\\_story.asp?story\\_no=3](http://www.tacentral.com/nature/natural_story.asp?story_no=3))

**Flower Watching** Mountain flowers begin their blooming season as early as February in the river canyons, with peak blooms from the end of March-May along a band of territory around Ashtarak to Tegher, then continuing throughout the summer in progressively higher elevations. Even in July and August, arctic spring flowers will be in bloom around Kari lich and up towards the summit of Mt. Aragats. Aparan plain received peak blooms April-June. Talin and the west district have early blooming with flowers mostly spent by mid May. Best places to look are (February – April) Kasakh and lower Amberd River canyons, (March-April) Talin and the west district, (April-May) Aparan Plain, Ashtarak and Kosh elev. up to Tegher and Amberd, (April-August) Kari Lich and the top of Mt. Aragats. See [Flora](#) (on page 3)

**Birding** Spring (April-May) and Autumn (September-October) are the best times to

observe migrating birds on lower elevations, while summer is good for River Canyon species. There are few birds on the upper elevation, save the mountain eagles, osprey and hawks. Best places are in the *Kasakh, Amberd, Tegher River Canyons* (Rocky Cliffs, River Gorges, and Mountain Forest Areas), the *Mountain Slopes around Amberd, Tegher, Biurakan, Irind, Yeghnik and Garnahovit* (Mountain Slope, Sub alpine, Mountain Meadow) and around *Talin and Dashtadem* (Scrub, Semi-desert to Mountain Steppe, Mountain Steppe). See [Birds](#) (on page 4) and [Resources](#) (on page 90).



**Paragliding** Paragliding is an excellent way to take in the wonders of the region for the adventurous. The slopes have good opportunities, and paragliders have been known to glide from the summit to Aragats to the Ashtarak basin. Two points are ideal gliding spots:

*Aragats* (T/O – 500m vertical) This flying site is in the foothills of Mt. Aragats, the highest mountain in Armenia to the Northwest of Yerevan.

*Vardablur* (T/O – 200m vertical) Near the town of Aparan, to the North of Yerevan, the village of Vardablur provides a nice flying site. The mountain is surrounded by huge agricultural fields, allowing flight in any wind direction and endless landing zones. An ancient pagan cemetery nearby is a worthwhile diversion from the trip home.

If you don't bring your own gear, it is expensive. A wing, harness and helmet can cost \$ 2,500. In addition, a month of training costs 4,000 drams (9 dollars), but students pay half that. And one flight day costs 2,500 AMD including all expenses such as food and transport. The Armenian Aviation Club, which provides paragliding opportunities, can arrange gear rental and flight days.

For details talk to *Armenian Aviation Club*, 24 Khorenatsi p, Yerevan, email: [aac@unesco-clubs.am](mailto:aac@unesco-clubs.am)

You can also contact Dan Retz with questions about Armenian flights at [dan\\_retz@yahoo.com](mailto:dan_retz@yahoo.com), or visit [www.xcaucasus.org/armenian.html](http://www.xcaucasus.org/armenian.html).

#### Adventure Tour Operators ▲

*Ayrudzy Riding Club*, (tel. 032 34 628 cell. 091 42 45 70), 3 Mushegh Bagratuni Street, Ashtarak, email: [stallion@ayrudzy.am](mailto:stallion@ayrudzy.am), URL: [www.ayrudzy.am](http://www.ayrudzy.am), offers riding lessons and trial rides in and around Ashtarak. Riding lessons from \$10 an hour to trial rides from \$15 per person.

*Haik Melkonian*, tel. 091-71-73-82, email: [aidahag@yahoo.com](mailto:aidahag@yahoo.com), organizes hiking/climbing/camping trips in Armenia with his team of professionals. The group specializes in Mt. Aragats and the Geghama Lehr, especially Mt. Ajdahak, with its unique eco-system, Crater Lake and petroglyph-covered stones. They also service nature trips throughout the republic. Melkonyan is also a professional photographer, whose photos grace the pages of Erivan magazine.

*Ashot Levonian* (tel. 010 57 03 28, mob. 091 49 58 34), e-mail: [levash77@mail.ru](mailto:levash77@mail.ru) is an expert hiking/climbing/camping guide; his team arranges hiking, mountain climbing, caving, geology tours, churches and fortresses. They will arrange hotels in Yerevan, airport pickup, transport, sight-seeing, etc. Group support includes guide, translator, cook, rescue doctor and driver. Standard tour is a two-week hiking trip averaging 5-10 km walking a day: Yerevan - Mt. Aragats - Alaverdi - Ijevan - Dilijan - Sevan - Martuni - Yeghegnadzor - Kapan - Meghri - Jermuk - Yerevan.

One of the most experience mountain climbers in Armenia is *Andrei Chesnokov*, (tel. 010 57 67 57), 10 Vardanants p, Apt. #49, Yerevan, Armenia 375010, email: [ruzan@aua.am](mailto:ruzan@aua.am), who has climbed most of the mountains in Armenia and is a recommend, reliable guide.

*Avarayr Adventure Tours*, (tel. 010 56 36 81, 52 40 42, Fax: 010 56 36 81), 1 Pavstos Biusand p, Yerevan, E-mail: [avarayr@arminco.com](mailto:avarayr@arminco.com), URL: [www.avarayr.am/](http://www.avarayr.am/) has been arranging cultural and adventure tours to Armenia for more than 12 years, one of the first to provide fully equipped hiking, climbing and adventure tours. Tours include expert guides, cooks and support staff for all tours. Tours run the gamut from hiking and climbing in the wilderness to cultural visits for the more comfort-minded. Their best seem to be

tours that combine both aspects. A good, solid company.

*Armenian Mountain Rescue Teams "Spitak"* (tel: 010 35 00 06), 50 Halabian p, Yerevan, email: [spitak@yerphi.am](mailto:spitak@yerphi.am), [moon.yerphi.am/~spitak/adventure.htm](mailto:moon.yerphi.am/~spitak/adventure.htm), stationed in both Yerevan and Stepanavan, can organize hiking, rock climbing and mountain expeditions. Guides are experienced rescuers-rock climbers, and they can also arrange horse riding along picturesque routes, by a horse cave and "Ancient Armenian horse games."

*Armenian Green Cross Ecological NGO* ("AGCE"), 14-10 Batumi, Vanadzor (tel. 0 322 24066, fax. 58449, mob. 093 32 32 84) is a local NGO that provides eco-tours as part of its mission to preserve and enlarge ecologically vital areas of the country. Eco-tours are expert-led hiking, climbing and camping tours, including hiking and climbing equipment, tents, sleeping-bags, emergency and first aid facilities and the services of their professional rescue group (EU certification).

*The Eco-Tour Center* (tel. 010 27 87 28 / 27 40 12), 2 H Hakobian St. apt. 22, 375033 Yerevan, Armenia, email: [zhanna@netsys.am](mailto:zhanna@netsys.am), [www.ecotourismarmenia.com](http://www.ecotourismarmenia.com), arranges nature tours, climbs and camping, as well as birding, flower watching and other nature tours. Contact Zhanna.

*Hike & Go*, (tel. France (+33 6) 88 34 04 11, local cell: 091 20 41 38), email: [info@hikeandgo.com](mailto:info@hikeandgo.com) an adventure travel group operating out of Armenia and France (English spoken) is an interesting group that features tours of Armenia combining traditional touring with hiking into Armenia's wilderness and off-the-beaten-path monuments, some of which can only be reached by hiking. See [web site \(www.hikeandgo.com/\)](http://www.hikeandgo.com/)

*AdvenTour Travel* (tel. 010 53 96 09, cell: 091 42 67 45), Email: [adventour@netsys.am](mailto:adventour@netsys.am), URL: [www.armeniaexplorer.com](http://www.armeniaexplorer.com), 39 Pushkin p, Yerevan, Armenia, 375002, arranges adventure, birding, botanical and historic tours.

*Oxalis Tours*, (tel. UK (+44 20) 78 70 80 37, USA (+1 201) 984 1420; Fax: (+44 20) 76 81 31 31) 68 Landseer Road, London N19 4JP UK, URL: [www.oxalis-adventures.com/armenia/index.php](http://www.oxalis-adventures.com/armenia/index.php) provides trekking, climbing and botanical tours to Armenia, specializing in combining off-the-beaten paths with primary sites. They hire expert guides from in and out of the country and provide full tour services. Worth looking into, well organized.

#### Flower Tours

Professor Nora Gabriellian is Armenia's preeminent expert on flowers in Armenia, personally discovering several new species of endemic flowers, the latest in 2006. She is the author of the upcoming Field Guide to Armenian Flowers, the culmination of 50+ years work in the field. This seventy-something still out-hikes the fittest members of her tours and combines expert data with humor, enthusiasm and great good will. She is not easy to book (she continues to do her research and is not for the casual tourist), but if you can arrange for her to take you on a 1 to 8 day flower tour, you will never see Armenia the same way again. She doesn't have a travel agency but contact her through Rafi at (tel: 010 53-24-55) who can check her schedule and make arrangements.

#### **Archeological Tours ▲**

*MassTour* (tel./fax. 010 27 78 32), 8 Komitas, Yerevan, e-mail: [info@masstours.com](mailto:info@masstours.com), URL: [www.masstours.com](http://www.masstours.com), specialize in archeological tours and participation in archeological digs supervised by working archeologists include the Urartian fortress Erebuni (Arin Berd) forerunner of present day Yerevan, the Bronze Age temple-city of Agarak, Bronze -Iron Age tomb field of Aghavnatun, Paleolithic caves in the Kasakh River Canyon near the village of Apnagiugh, guided visits to the petroglyphs in the Geghama mountain range. They also run basic tour packages with expert guides. Excavation packages begin from \$750/week for full service land-expeditions.

**Sacred Geometry** Archeological expeditions are scientific by definition and not for the casual tourist, though a stop by an active dig is informative and fascinating when they are uncovering fresh materials. The information is also useful to understand the belief concepts used by ancestral Armenians in building cities, temples and burying their dead. Much of what is found follow a strict set of rules and concepts about the gods, humans and the after life. This evolved into something called Sacred Geometry, which dictated the ways things were built, even to the angles, measurements and number of steps in a building! See our [Sacred Geometry chapter \(www.tacentral.com/architecture.asp?story\\_no=2\)](http://www.tacentral.com/architecture.asp?story_no=2) for more information about sacred geometry.



**ASHTARAK** ▲

(DD 40.30167 x 44.35917)

**ASHTARAK MAP** (p. 20)

☒ **ASHTARAK - ԱՇՏԱՐԱԿ** (“Tower” elev.

1139m, pop. 34963) Literally at the foot of Aragats, built on the rims of the Kasakh River and at the crossroads to Giumri and Vanadzor, the modern town is but the latest incarnation of a string of settlements from each era of human development in Armenia. The town is worth a visit for several reasons, not least of which is its impressive collection of Medieval churches, representing each period of architectural achievement in Armenia, from its earliest experimentation to the last gasp of splendor just before the Timur Mongol invasions. The river gorge is a natural jewel, seldom explored on its own right except by the hardiest of trekkers, but worth the effort for the unique flora, rock formations and fauna that inhabit the micro-climate. Some trendy digs have settled into the gorge as well, taking advantage of Ashtarak's close proximity to Yerevan and the cool climate in the river gorge on hot summer days.



The restaurants/motels are amazing excesses of taste and propriety, and favorite haunts of the well heeled and powerful. Fear not, they also cater to tourists and visitors, and are worth a visit if only to be able to say “I was there.” Restaurants/motels are some of the more affordable digs in the country, and a few are even the genuine item, though most exist for trysts by wealthy businessmen and their girl friends.



**Background** First mentioned in medieval chronicles in the 9th c, Ashtarak is much older as cave dwellings and river bed sites from the Paleolithic era show. Fortresses of some kind have been on the site from the Bronze Age when the first cyclopean walls were hauled to the site. The name, which means “tower” is apt, as the town's position was perfect for watching the Ararat Valley and monitoring access points to the mountain, Amberd and the passages to Kotaik and Shirak. The town was subservient to the bishopric Oshakan for much of the Roman and early Christian era, serving as a military outpost. Beginning in the 9th c, as Armenia recovered from the Arab conquests and developed under the patronage of the Bagratunis, the trade routes that had passed through became increasingly important and that from Dvin and Persia passed north via the town. The caravans, and their wealth, helped to build an important regional center, quickly overshadowing the bishopric at Oshakan a few kilometers south. Passed from Seljuk to Kurd to Mongol, then to Persian and Russian hands, the town survived into the 19th century, even thriving as a trade and administrative center.

During the Soviet period the town's population swelled, as industry and agriculture expanded. No longer needed to guard the mountain passes for Armenia's kings, the town nonetheless became the gateway to scientific endeavours at the Biurakan Observatory and the Orgov Radio-Optical telescope, secret research centers in the Soviet Union. Like all of Armenia's regional towns, Ashtarak fell on harsh times with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the local economy, but has fared better than the rest for its close proximity to Yerevan, and its position as a way station for the hundreds of Yerevantsi en route to their summer dacha. Still the town has a tired post-industrial

look about it on the edges and a distinctive village character throughout. The canyon, the amazing churches on top and inside it, and the bacchanalia at a riverside restaurant are the sties to see.

Favorite sons include the 20th c writer/avante guardist Gevorg Emin, the 19th century romantic poet Smbat Shahaziz, the Katolikos Nerses Ashtaraketsi [Nerses V (of Ashtarak) 1843-1857] and the 19th c writer Perj Proshian, who has a house museum in town.

**Mineral Springs.** Ashtarak has mineral and fresh water springs on the Kasakh River and in town, free for the soaking or drinking.

**Weather.** Ashtarak has much the same weather as upper Yerevan, with hot dry summers, cold snowy winters, wet springs and idyllic autumns. At 3740m, the town is still affected by the broiling Ararat heat waves in the summer, though nights are cooler. A few kilometers uphill and weather changes dramatically towards the cooler.



**Bearings** The town is built on both side of the Kasakh River, with most of the sites you will want to see on the left bank (west). This is where Ashtarak's collection of Medieval churches is located: Spitakavor (4-5th cc), Tsiranavor (5-6th cc), Karmravor (7th c) and S. Marineh (1281). It is also where you will find the interesting house museum of the 19th c novelist Perj Proshian. The right bank also has a late medieval bath, Urartian irrigation channel and fort remains, a Medieval mill and pretty 19th c houses. The 1661 bridge is located in the gorge while a modern church built on medieval foundations is located on the top of the right bank.

The main streets are Proshian and Grigorian, running roughly parallel to each other in the

center, then forming a triangle with the old Yerevan road on the S side of town.

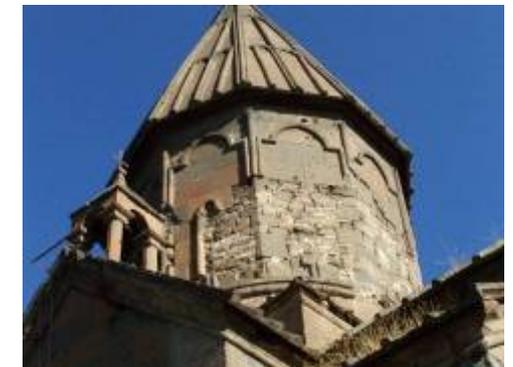
From Yerevan, take the left fork just before the large new bridge and follow it into town. There is one bridge that crosses the Kasakh to the left bank, about 1.2 km in town. Make an immediate right and follow that another 1 km to the town square, where a right turn leads to the canyon rim and the bulk of the medieval churches. There is also an access road to the canyon floor.

Ashtarak is a good hiking town, not as easy to walk as other cities if you are out of shape or just too tired to hike up and down the canyon. A taxi (100 AMD/km) or car makes easy transfers, with foot trekking de rigueur once inside the canyon. Otherwise, the town itself is small enough to troll across in 20- 30 minutes.

**Taxis** are available throughout the town, in the center and near cafes/restaurants. 100 AMD per km is standard but confirm price before starting on your trip.

**SIGHTS**

The town's main site is its collection of Medieval Churches, encompassing 1000 years of religious construction beginning from the conversion of the country in the 4th c. Some of the churches are in ruins, but they still retain their innate splendor and illustrate the breadth of experimentation and innovation that are hallmarks of medieval Armenian building.



**S. Marineh** (also “S. Mariane”, 1281) The largest church in Ashtarak is the later S. Marineh, which is much grander than the others and located further inland from Karmravor in the NE end of

town. To get there, take the E exit into town from the Yerevan highway and go into town, crossing the bridge and turning R into town center. Follow that street (Proshian) through the central square and uphill to a signposted intersection, showing a R turn to Karmravor. Continue up and take the first L instead, then the first L after that and in a block you will see the large unique gavit and church of **S. Marineh** (DD 40.30098 x 44.36049, elev. 1153m).

Alternately, you can take the road into town from Mughni (N of the Giumri highway as it bypasses Ashtarak) which turns into Proshian and shows a L turn (signposted) to Karmravor –take the R instead, then L to the church.



The church is often overlooked after Karmravor, an architectural jewel in Ashtarak (and in Armenia for the period), but well worth the visit, and I must confess this is my favorite church in town; for its unique design (the tall structure is topped with a soaring, fragile polyhedral drum and tent roof) and the remarkable 19th c gavit, looking very much the thing for a Catholic church hall (which may explain its neglect). The drum and especially the dome are intricately built with carvings and crenulated stone pieces. Armenian “gothic archways,” popular during this time, can be seen in the sides of the tented dome, giving it a lightness and movement not found in other domes. The facades themselves are adorned with narrow windows framed with geometric borders and a cross-form, the outer wings carved in elaborate patterns. The drum supports the tent roof with archways of its own and eight windows, one for each facet. The southern entrance is noted for not being centrally placed on its façade, but rather to the north end of that wall. It seems that another structure adjacent to the entry was once there, a

gavit (narthex) no longer present. Inside, the church hall is divided between the main cruciform with the apse on the east end (typical for Armenian churches) and a cool, crisp design. The southern roof is topped by an 1838 bell tower, built from basalt and no longer in use.



This is a neighborhood church, very much alive (and lively, what with all the local gossip). It has a well kept garden and large trees to shade visitors from the harsh summer sun. The view of Ararat from the S would be stunning were the electric lines not in the way. A nearby parsonage (20th c) built with tufa stone boasts intricately carved wooden porches.

**The three sisters** The Three Sisters are the nickname given to three churches in Ashtarak; Karmravor, Tsiranavor and Spitakavor, each representing a different period of Armenian history and together covering the greatest achievements of sacred architecture in the country. As with most of Armenian sites there are legends tied to their creation. According to one there were three sisters, equally beautiful, and each in love with the same prince. In one version they each wore a different color dress; white, brown and red. In other versions they had different color hair; auburn, red and blonde. Spurned by the prince (in one version), the two eldest (auburn and red hair) threw themselves from the top of the canyon wall to their deaths, followed by the youngest (blonde) who found their bodies broken on the rocks below. In another version, the elder sisters (apricot and red dresses) decided to commit suicide so the youngest could have the prince. Again the youngest (white dress) threw herself after her sisters, spoiling the planned nuptials. The Prince, stricken by remorse in all versions, had the three churches erected in honor of each of the sisters,

one apricot-brown (auburn, Tsiranavor), one red (Karmravor) and one white (blonde, Spitakavor) and went off into the sunset/oblivion to count his sins for encouraging such rude behavior.

Now this doesn't have much to do with reality, since each of the three churches is more than 100 years older than the previous, making the prince a very old man by the time the last was built.

**Karmravor** The most famous of the “three sisters” is Karmravor, a tiny jewel sitting in the midst of an early Christian/Medieval Cemetery. To get there, backtrack to the signposted road to the church (in English) and follow that for about 100m to a parking lot below the small **Karmravor church** (DD 40.29960 x 44.36483, elev. 1157m).

Alternately, you can take the road into town from Mughni (N of the Giumri highway as it bypasses Ashtarak) which turns into Proshian and shows a L turn (signposted) to Karmravor.



It has also been suggested it could have been erected as early as the 6th c, since other features in its construction suggest an earlier Byzantine influence, especially the shape of the red-tile dome. The tiles are remarkable, for having survived mostly intact and for their intricate details. Most are original, laid with lime mortar. Repairs in the 1980s showed just how exact the measurements are; no two tiles are of the same size or exact shape, though together they appear to be the same. Some of the only original tiles that once adorned the roofs of most of Armenia's churches and monasteries, Karmravor's are in remarkable condition.



Karmravor, which means “of red,” or “red color” is dated to the 7th c for its architectural details (carved cornices and window edges), and is considered the best structure of its type. The church is the first (and smallest) of three structures of its type built in Talin and Ashtarak regions in the 6th-7th cc, the others being the newly reconstructed S. Sion in Oshakan and S. Kristopor at Dashtadem.

An undated inscription beginning on the south wall and extending to the North does not give clues to the church's date, but affirms that two priests, Grigori and Manas, were responsible for its construction.



Aside from the elegant red-tiled roof, the church is notable for its small size and intricate decor. It is considered one of a number of “free crosses” that were erected throughout the country, as much shrines as churches; as much markers of faith as places of worship. It is possible, very possible, that it was built on the top of a pagan shrine to a

pre-Christian deity, Astghik, Vahagn or Myhra. Measuring only 5.969 meters by 7.467 meters. Although centuries old, Karmravor is well preserved.

The small building stands on a stepped base, suggesting it may have been placed over a pre-Christian platform (three-stepped platforms were *de rigueur* for Pagan temples/shrines in the period, Garni being an exception with 9 steps (or 3 x 3). The church is cruciform, with the central dome supported by the corners of a square, the corners protruding up on the exterior. The six-faceted barrel rises from this, the cupola crowned with a faceted onion-head dome, much like the Byzantine churches it emulates. The 6th-7th cc was a time of extensive communication between the Armenian kingdom and the Byzantine (Greek) empire, when tastes followed the long caravan routes along with the trade. The small Karmravor is remarkable for combining distinctive Armenian free-cross design and barrel vaulting with a shallow faceted Byzantine dome.



Entrance to the church is from the west, facing the east altar. Inside, the arms of the cross form the small hall, the horseshoe shaped walls of the apse built within the rectangular east exterior wall. The

other wings of the cross form are rectangular inside and out. Above the central hall are four squinches (corner protrusions) that support the drum of the cupola, which is eight-sided with eight small squinches transitioning the drum and cupola itself. Karmravor has one more special feature: the columns on the interior corners stand in pairs facing each other, instead of diagonally. The church is decorated by combining geometric designs (intertwining lines, semicircles and variations of the cross) with intertwining vines and leaf motifs, especially on the eaves of the dome. Other 6th-7th cc churches like Karmravor are St. Marineh of Artik, Lmbatavank, St. Astvatsatsin of Talin, and Vosketar. There is something beguiling about this elegant little building, a true masterpiece of simplicity and taste.

Outside the church and a little downhill is a 12th c **Khachkar**, finely carved with a clear image of the sun disk and a tree of life, so important in Armenian Christian symbolism. You can easily detect the elaborately carved disc under the cross, and on either side of the lower part of the cross, stylized 'branches' of the tree of life. Both hail from pre-Christian days, when Armenians worshipped the sun god Aramazd (related to the supreme Persian god Ahura Mazda) and the tree of life, a symbol of immortality from at least the days of the Sumerians (6000-3500 BCE). Both figure prominently in Christian use of the light, salvation, the tree of life, the tree of knowledge and the Garden of Eden. Christians in Greece and Rome converted these symbols to their own use using scripture or as a backdrop to purely Christian designs, but the Armenians, surrounded by pagan religions and under pressure to convert to any one of them, took a more decisive, even combative stance, literally conquering the gods of old by placing the cross over and inside them, in effect baptizing them and claiming them as Christian all along. For more information visit [TourArmenia's web site on khachkars \(www.tacentral.com/khachkars/\)](http://www.tacentral.com/khachkars/).

The khachkar is a part of the **Old Cemetery** that lies East and North of Karmravor with several khachkars and numerous multi-colored medieval grave stones, many sadly missing their intricate carvings, but a few still boasting the images of the deceased and allegorical depictions representing their lives, heroic efforts, or simple pleas for mercy in the next life. The **khachkars** include one by the last great Khachkar sculptor Kiram Kazmogh (1551-1610) with a 1602 sample of intricate mastery. Others to look for include a set of three khachkars of red tufa sitting side by side

(the "Three Brothers" 13 c), the Great Ashtarak Khachkar with the cross surmounting a bottom panel of three discs (14th c) and the Kiram Khachkar, a red khachkar with extremely elaborate side panels and tree of life.

**Old Ashtarak** From Karmravor start to head back towards town center and take the first L street (alley) into **Old Town**, a delightful surprise of 18th and 19th c houses and narrow, well kept alleys with a canal small canal running through the streets. The older homes, with their long multi-storied balconies overlooking the alleys and river catch the cool wet air rising from the canyon floor and the tidy feel of the area is a welcome respite from the more modern areas of the town. The porches are decorated with crenellated wooden arches and balustrades, giving a more romantic feel to the otherwise pedestrian architecture of the modern town.



**Tsiranavor** ("of apricot" or "apricot color", 5th c, refurbished in 6th-7th cc) lays a little west of Karmravor, overlooking the canyon, and is the oldest extant church in Ashtarak. To get there from the entry to Old Town, continue on the alley towards the **Perj Proshian Home Museum** (see page 19) and Statue, which lie at the end of an alley (ask if you get lost). From here you walk to the site. Behind you as you face the museum is a quaint little alley that leads to a R alley which passes in front of the **Tsiranavor Church** (DD 40.29885 x 44.36522, elev. 1149m).

The current walls are dated to the 5th c with traces of an earlier building. There are no inscriptions but it is thought the refurbishment dates to the period of Nerses of Ashtarak (540-557). The church is located near Spitakavor church, opposite Karmravor on a canyon rim. The building is a

triple-aisle basilica, once of several in Armenia. The main aisle ends in a horseshoe-shaped apse flanked by two chambers slightly below the altar stage. The curved central apse and the symmetrical apsidioles on either side are all included within the church's rectangular exterior walls, which gave it an expressive nature and elevated the interior under a gable roof. The 5th c structure had a wooden roof that was replaced with a stone one resting on three piers of T-shaped piers which was characteristic of 5th c Armenian architecture. The pilasters are missing from the present-day pylons. The spans between the pylons are as wide as the middle nave, which divide the nave by flying arches and pilasters into four square parts (as in the Kasakh basilica). The architecture is more developed here than in other basilicas of the period; two symmetrical apsidioles flank the altar apse. The roof was pitched over the side aisles with a second pitch roof covering the main hall.

What remains are the exterior walls, halls, apse and the side chambers, but none of the decoration that once adorned the church. There is no doubt that the walls once had frescoes and were ornately covered with carvings, memorial stones and khachkars.



Later attempts to preserve the building included reinforcing the north and west walls in the 17th c and rebuilding the south wall. However, earthquakes and neglect damaged the building, so that it was mostly in ruins by 1815. Around 1880 it was decided to transform the church into a fortress (Berd), its roofing stones used in part to create a fortress wall on the perimeter, doubling the North and West wall and rebuilding most of the southern wall, adding embrasures to its upper part and ruining much of the original composition. The

surrounding district became known as "Berdatagh" (Fort district) as a result, a name that still stands. The pediment with a serrated cornice in the eastern façade and a double window with a colonette in the center of the western wall have been retained. Restoration began in the mid 20th c, when the walls, piers, arches, vault fragments and khachkars were uncovered. Near the west end, there are traces of the beginnings of the central vault.

**Spitakavor** ("of white" or "white color", 4th-13th/14th cc), lies near Tsiranavor and also perched over the canyon precipice. To get there, take the alley on the R (S) side of Tsiranavor (with a modern white stone house on its R) to the end and turn R again to the next alley, following it to its end, where on the L the small, ruined **Spitakavor Church** lies (DD 40.29925 x 44.36761, elev. 1152m).



Despite its name, Spitakavor is not at all white but rather made from red tufa, its white coating long since eroded by time and wear. The church is recorded as coming from both the 4th c, which would make it the oldest structure in Ashtarak, and the 14th c, making it the youngest. The church is a single hall-type, used in both periods, but debate over the dating calls attention to the foundations, which some say were actually pre-Christian in origin, converted to a church in the early Christian era by S. Lusavorich, abandoned, then rebuilt in the last period before Armenia's lost its autonomy. The current structure is from the 13th or 14th cc, but an earlier Christian structure is said to have been built on the site in the early 4th c, its pre-Christian foundations dating back to the 2nd c BCE. This early structure may be the white building alluded to in the legend of the three sisters, their deaths an allegory for the capitulation

of the pagan gods (red, apricot and white; Vahagn/Anahit, Nuneh and Astghikh?) faith to the new Christian religion, with the Prince ("Sarkis" in some versions) actually the Armenian people, or Armenian leaders who saw the truth and repented. Sounds as good as any explanation.

The current structure is single nave or hall type, popular in the early Christian period, when pagan temples were converted into Christian churches. Later experimentation introduced the central dome, cruciform and circular hall styles. A small building, Spitakavor I was modified to the cruciform type, with a small dome that adorned its hall. The foundations are Pagan a stepped stylobate built at the gorge rim hundreds of years earlier. The stone is finely hewn, but with little décor.

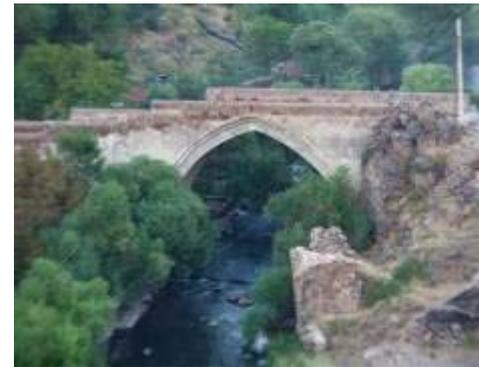
**The Kasakh River Canyon** lies 100 meters below the town ledge and is worth a visit on its own. Harboring a distinct eco-system from that above, the dry landscape on top quickly left behind as you descend into the bottom forest. The area is popular by locals for its picnic area, and a waterfall and swimming hole awaits those patient enough to explore the river. To get there, backtrack to the Karmavor parking lot and continue driving downhill into the river gorge. The old bridge is closed for thru traffic, but there is ample parking and a large green park awaits you.



On the way down you will pass the 18th-19th cc **Ashtarak baths**, a "honey-dome" construction protecting once active thermal Mineral springs that erupted from the canyon walls here and supported a thriving trade in baths, many a Victorian spending their afternoons leisurely soaking in the steaming hot and icy cold baths. The baths are closed now, but there is talk of reopening them as

art of a rejuvenation effort for the canyons. As long as they don't go the way of the nearby canyon casinos they may retain their original charm.

At the riverbed is the **Medieval Bridge** (1661, DD 40.29868 x 44.36806, elev. 1111m). This black and white striated stone structure once supported all traffic between the Ararat valley and North Armenia, and is noted for its triple arch construction, the only bridge in Armenia to be built in such a way. The triple arches forded the riverbed at its strongest points, avoiding flash floods that washed away many of its precursors.



The bridge is also located at a strategic defensive point, as a look above you will confirm. The tallest, most inaccessible cliffs surround you, and the stone remains of the 7th c **Urartian Fort** that sits above you guarded the narrow passageway uphill. The walls surrounded a massive structure that guarded this passage and the hinterlands of Aragats into the Roman/early Christian era, finally falling to Seljuk, Mongol and Ottoman incursions.

Below the fortress and following the hill is an unimpressive but still important site, the **7th c BCE Urartu canal**, which has been ferrying mountain spring water to Ashtarak's farmlands for over 2600 years. The canal, considered an engineering feat of the Urartians, is possibly much older, some calling it part of the "Shamiram Canal" a canal that fed waters to the lands around Van and built by the legendary Shamiram, or "Semiramis" (the current Shamiram canal is actually on the other side of the Kasakh, flowing towards Yeghvard). Probably there were earlier canals on the site, domesticated wheat and other farming predating the Urartians by 1000 years or more, but the current structure was refined and

built during the early Urartu period, and works to this day.

Immediately next to the bridge in a long squat stone building is the **Ashtarak Mill** (DD 40.29863 x 44.36843, elev. 1108m) a medieval structure that was renovated and for a short time was the center piece of an outdoor ethnographic "village, grinding grain into flour by costumed guides. The demonstration site is closed, but the remaining buildings still lend a romantic air to the picnic grounds, especially the small streams that run through the grassy area. The mill has some of the original machinery used in the processing, and a collection of pots, tools and farming implements used by Armenian farmers up to the Soviet period. The mill has some excellent overlooks of the river and canton walls.



High above you from this site, on the opposite cliff, is the small but impressive **S. Sarkis** (19th c), often mistaken for Karmavor by fist-time visitors. It sits opposite the canyon from Karmavor and is built on older foundations, possibly pre-Christian in origin. The church is also small, shrine-like, and built in the same style as Karmavor, without the additional detail and experimentation used in the older church. The hall is barely cruciform, more of a square with minor indentations to form the cross wings that slip out from the central hall by a few centimeters. It is topped with a central dome, the drum of which is round and protrudes above the squat church, focusing attention on it rather than the entire structure. The elongated dome and tent roofing gives the appearance of the whole being a shaft or lance. The exterior walls are finely hewn from red tufa, unadorned and clearly showing the engineering feat of the central dome type. S. Sarkis is a favorite of locals, who still use the small church for sacrifices of chickens and doves as they

plead for intercession. Nearby in a rough stone wall sits a modern “khachkar” carved with elaborate depictions of animals and beings from Stone Age pictograms found in the area. The scene depicted combines Paleolithic, Neolithic, Chalcolithic figures with biblical allegories in a fascinating retelling of the origin myth.



Cross over the bridge (foot traffic only) and take a L on the dirt road that follows the riverbed and after a few hundred meters (under the modern bridge) you will suddenly find yourself in a large Hangestian Goti (Rest Area) next to a steep and raging **Water Fall** a welcome respite on a hot day, the water hole nearby often occupied by local children who delight in showing off their swimming prowess to visitors.

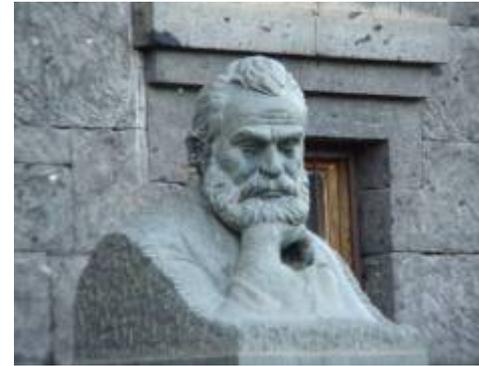
**Ashtarak's new center** is not as interesting as other Armenian towns, much of its deep history and early architecture erased over millennia of destruction and rebuilding (a few survive behind the modern streets). Still the town has a certain charm for its friendly people and simple shops, some of which still carry old Soviet products and paraphernalia.

#### Museums

The **Perj Proshian House-Museum**, 4 Proshian p. (tel. 33254) is the birthplace and home for the 19th c writer known for his penetrating depictions of Armenians struggling to preserve their identity in the face of Russian Imperialism and mass industrialization. Especially known for his characters drawn from peasant life, Proshian's writings are important ethnographic studies as well as compelling dramas. The museum was founded in 1937 on his 100th birthday, though the museum was not opened until 1948.



Descended of a princely family that once governed Garni, born Yovhannes Ter-Arakelian, Proshian (1837-1907) was an educator, photographer, novelist, translator, ethnographer and an avid supporter of Armenian Theatre. Part of the “New Golden Age” of Armenian literature and philosophy, Proshian was of the generation that built the progressive Armenian ideal and took the first steps to changing the culture from a Feudal to a modern one. A native Ashtaraketsi, Proshian spent his adult life in Tbilisi, one of the two centers for Armenian culture (the other being Constantinople). First educated in nearby Mughni, the poverty-stricken Proshian later attended the prestigious Nersessian Academy in Tiflis (Tbilisi), founded by Katoghikos Nerses Ashtaraketsi after the Lazarus Institute in Moscow. Working as a photographer and teacher in Russia, and influenced by the Armenian writer Khachatur Abovian (esp. his Verk Hayastani or “Wounds of Armenia”), Proshian published his first novel “Sos & Vartiter” in 1860, which gained immediate success, Mikhael Nalbandian saying it was as great as Abovian's work, and the French calling it the “Armenian Romeo and Juliet”. Struggling against the “Russification” of the Armenian character in the 19th c, Proshian joined the New Armenian movement to preserve Armenian history and protect Armenian values through literature. His contemporaries were the authors Raphael Patkanian, Raffi and Ghazaros Aghaiyan, and the playwright Gabriel Sundukian, the latter having a profound effect on Proshian's playwrighting efforts. His “Hatsi Khuntir (A Matter of Bread)” was one of the longest running plays at the Sundukian Theatre.



The museum is located in the center of town in a two-story building with large balcony overlooking the front courtyard. The collection of 1500 items includes first editions of his work and items from his childhood and time in Tiflis, many donated his size children. There is also a family tree tracing the Proshian family to the 15th c and photographs and memorabilia of Proshian and his colleagues, the who's who of the 19th c Armenian Literary world.

**Grigor Ghapantzian House-Museum** Located in #5 secondary school, the museum, a branch of the E. Charents Literature and Art Museum, was founded in 1987 on the 100th birthday of this prominent linguist, its collection consisting of 230 items, including manuscripts, photographs, books and paintings (H. Khojioan, Zazand Darian, etc) related to his life and work.

**Acad. Norair Sisakian House-Museum**, 7 Ghapantzian p. (tel. 33229) was founded in 1986 in honor of one of the founders of the study of cosmic biology. For visitors to Biurakan Observatory, this is a nice side visit, with about 350 items in the collection of the academician's personal belongings, photographs, manuscripts, books and documents, the majority of which were donated by Sisakian's wife Varvara Petrovskaya. The museum opened in 1998 after resettlement of refugee families that used to live on its premises.

#### Theatre, Concerts

The Ashtarak Culture Palace, located in the center of town, still hosts the occasional performance of musicians, folk dancers and plays, most done by local artists. There are also occasional art showings. The “season” is usually in the fall and spring; check at the center to see if something is showing, it can be well worth the 100 AMD to see local talent and their proud parents.

#### Springs

There are numerous fresh water springs in the canyon and near S. Marineh. Mineral Springs still feed the old bath house, though it is closed (a local may show you in if you are lucky and no one is looking).

#### Excavations

There are a couple of excavation sites worth seeing, the Darabavor Bronze Age/Medieval settlement and the Darabavor Caves, both located just outside of town on the left bank of the Kasakh river, just past the new bridge as you travel around Ashtarak towards Giumri. The settlement was inhabited mostly in the middle Bronze Age. Inside the gorge are the locally famous **Darabavor caves** used for refuge in the medieval times.

#### Nature Trails

The river canyon offers good hiking. Follow it northwards for an easy-moderate hike to Mughni (3 km), Karpi (4.5 km), Ohanavan (6 km) and Saghmosavan (11 km). Following the river westwards, you can hike along the canyon to Oshakan (7 km) and Amberd/Aigeshat (11 km).



The canyon has some unique **wildflowers** (*Linaria armeniaca*, *Acantholimon bracteatum*, *Illium akana*, *Tulipa julia*, *Corydalis augustifolius*, *Ornithogalum mountainum*, *O. gussonei*, *Campanula choziatorskyi*, *Bellevalia longystila*, *Muscari neglecta*, *Lotus goebelia*, *Astragalus strictifolius*, *Serratula serratuloides*, *Tomanthea aucheri*, *Malus orientalis*, *Prunus divaricata*, *Sorbus graeca*, *S. persica*, *S. aucuparia*, *Crataegus orientalis*, *C. laciniata*) and **fauna** (squirrel, wild bore, lynx, nutria, fox and rarely bear).



## ASHTARAK MAP KEY

 **HOTEL**  
24. Ashtarak Hotel

 **FOOD & DRINK**  
23. Sisakian Lyova  
25. Bistro/Café

 **BUS -MARSHRUTNI TAXI**  
20. Taxi Service  
29. Aftokaiyan

 **MUSEUM, ART GALLERY**  
9. Perj Proshian Home-Museum

 **MONUMENT, SITE**  
2. 18th c Baths

 **CHURCH**  
1. S. Gevorg  
3. S. Marineh  
6. Karmravor  
10. Tsiranavor  
11. Spitakavor  
16. S. Sarkis

 **THEATRE, MUSIC**  
8. Cultural Palace

 **SHOPS, YARMARKA, SOUVENIRS**  
5. Yarmaka (Market)  
18. Souvenirs

 **STADIUM**  
30. Stadium

 **INTERNET, PHONE, POST**  
17. Post Office  
27. VivaCell  
28. E-Net Internet

 **GOVT. OFFICE**  
12. Marzpeteran  
15. Ashtarak Mayor's Office

 **BANK, ATM**  
7. ARMECONOM Bank  
13. Unibank  
14. ArmsSavingsBank  
22. ASHB

 **APOTEKA**

 **CLINIC, HOSPITAL**  
4. Dentist  
26. Clinica

 **SERVICE, PHOTO**  
19. Air Tickets  
20. Taxi Service  
21. Konika Photos

 **PARK**

 **PUBLIC TOILET**

## PRACTICALITIES

Area Code: 232  
Long Distance: 0232 + local number  
From abroad: + (374) 232 + local number  
Mobile Phones: 091 Armentel, 093/094 Viva Cell  
International callers: Armentel + (374) 91 + number, Viva Cell + (374) 93 or 94 + local number  
Unless otherwise noted, local numbers require the (0232) prefix if calling long distance, or + (374) 232 prefix if calling from abroad.

## IN AND OUT

**By Bus, Minivan**  
The bus is a reliable means of travel, if vehicles are older and worn around the edges, and they tend to pack 'em in. Still, they work and they are cheap. Minivans are more convenient, dropping you off pretty much where you want. Though they do not follow a set schedule (they often wait for a full van before departing), drivers and passengers can tell you about when to expect the next one.

**Buses** stop at Ashtarak on routes from Yerevan, Giumri and Vanadzor-Aparan. Several *Yerevan-Ashtarak* buses run daily between the Yerevan bus and minivan stop at *4 Paronian (W of the end of Mashtots just before 'khorovats street' a.k.a. Paronian p.)* and the Ashtarak Aftokaiyeran at the main square on Yerevanian p. Bus #111 is the Yerevan-Ashtarak bus, Bus #502 is the Yerevan-Ashtarak-Voskevaz bus. 250 AMD.

**Minivans** (Marshrutni taxis) leave from the Ashtarak Bus Station on Yerevanian p. by the main square in Ashtarak. Minivans do not have a set

schedule, they leave when they are full and generally run once or twice a day to outlying villages, so ask. Minivans connect Ashtarak with the Yerevan bus and minivan stop at *4 Paronian, west of the end of Mashtots and before 'khorovats street' a.k.a. Proshian* (250 AMD), *Aparan* (250 AMD), *Vanadzor* (300 AMD), *Biurakan* (100 AMD), *Aghst/Agarak* (100 AMD), *Aruch* (100 AMD), *Talin* (150 AMD), *Mastara* (250 AMD) and *Giumri* (350 AMD).

**By Taxi** Taxis are more expensive, but the most convenient way to travel (you decide when you go, and you can stop along the way). If you split the price between 2 or more travelers, it can be pretty cheap.

### Yerevan-Ashtarak Taxis

**From Yerevan**, just about any taxi will take you to Ashtarak at around 100 AMD per kilometer (double cost to cover driver's return) and dedicated cars to Ashtarak are located at *Kino Hairenik (Kino Rossiya)* at the corner of Agatangeghos and Movses Khorenatsi Pts. Cars normally charge 3000 AMD for up to four passengers, though be prepared to bargain and for the taxi driver who wants to wait for a full carload to make the extra fare. You can also order a taxi by phone. The going rate is around 3000 AMD. Most Yerevan taxi services provide this service, but we use Kalina (tel 010-555-333). Note even the best can go bad overnight, ask around when you arrive for best taxi service.

**From Ashtarak**, taxis in Ashtarak are all around town or at the *Aftokaiyeran* (bus station) by the main square on Yerevanian p (near the university building) as well as at the Ashtarak Dzor restaurant/motel. Late in the day you may have to bargain a bit or add something for return, but normally this is not a problem. Taxis to Yerevan are around 3000 AMD (2700 AMD at 100 AMD per km), to Talin around 4000 AMD, to Aparan around 2500 AMD. [See taxi list for call taxi](#) below.

**By Car** Ashtarak is at the crossroads of the Giumri-Yerevan, Aparan/Vanadzor-Echmiadzin and the Abovian highways. There are also side roads to Biurakan/Amberd/Kari Lich, Oshakan and Voskevaz. **Highways** serving Ashtarak are the A327/M1 which runs between Yerevan and Giumri via Talin (Yerevan: 20 km, Talin: 46 km, Maralik: 68 km, Giumri: 92 km), the M3 which serves Echmiadzin (17 km) and Aparan (40 km) en route to Spitak (57 km) where it connects to the M7/A330 to Vanadzor (80 km). Another is the H6

1 km SE of town which goes to Yeghvard (22 km) and Abovian (43 km) from which you can connect with the M24 to Yerevan (20 km), Hrazdan (33 km), Tsaghkadzor (43 km) and Sevan (59 km). The side road at the SW end of town branches off from the main road to the Giumri highway and passes to Oshakan (4 km) where a NW road goes to Voskevaz (another 2 km). It takes about 25 minutes to Yerevan, 1.5 hours to Giumri, and 30 minutes to Aparan, 1.5 hours to Vanadzor.

Petrol stations and rest stops/kebab stands proliferate on the highway near Ashtarak and in nearby Agarak, Ujan and Kosh.

## AROUND

**On foot** is a bit of a hike from the river to the top of the canyon, but the left bank is easy enough to navigate on foot, you can cross the center within 15 minutes, ditto down to the gorge. [See Bearings](#) (on page 15) for a layout of the town.

**Taxis** Ashtarak has plenty of taxis, in the center, and at the Ashtarak Dzor Restaurant/Motel. The service is good, the drivers knowledgeable (few speak English), and willing to show off the city. The rate is 100 AMD per km. One taxi service is (tel. 33400, 3540).

**Near Region Taxis** Taxis are a good way to explore the near region, and very reasonable if you are two or more and split costs, which are per vehicle. Negotiate before starting on your journey, figure 100 AMD/km as fair, add 500 AMD per hour for waiting. Taxis can take you from the center to (all distances from Ashtarak center): Oshakan (4 km) & Voskevaz (6 km); Agarak (6 km), Kosh (17 km) and Aruch (23 km); Biurakan (11 km), Amberd (27 km) & Kari Lich/Mt. Aragats (34 km); Dzorap/Aghst (8 km) & Tegher (13 km); Mughni (2 km), Ohanavan (7 km), Saghmosavan (14 km) and Aparan (40 km). A full day's trip into region and back should cost around \$20. Note you buy the driver's meal if you stay out all day and overnight if he can't go home at night from where you settle in.

### Taxi Services

Look for taxi service ads at the center and area cafes, restaurants and lodging venues. They change by the season, sometimes by the week. Also inquire at your lodging. Most offer the service or will find someone for you. You can also call most any taxi service in Yerevan. We called Kalina (tel 010-555-333). Note even the best can go bad

overnight, ask around when you arrive for best taxi service.

## TRAVEL AGENCIES

*Air Tickets* are on sale at a small office on Proshian near the square, which can also arrange local transport.

*Ayrudzy Riding Club*, 3 Mushegh Bagratuni Street, Ashtarak (tel. (032) 3-46-28 cell 091 42-45-70), email: [stallion@ayrudzy.am](mailto:stallion@ayrudzy.am), URL: [www.ayrudzy.am](http://www.ayrudzy.am) offers riding lessons and trial rides in and around Ashtarak. Riding lessons from \$10 an hour to trial rides from \$15 per person.

For nature or adventure tours, see [Adventure Tour Operators](#) (on page 13).

## COMMUNICATION, ETC.

Fire – 101  
Police – 102  
Ambulance service – 103  
Rescue Hot Line - 118  
Gas emergency service – 104  
Trunk Line – 107  
Telephone directory information – 109

## Phone, telegraphs

Ashtarak is covered by both Armentel and Vivacell (Proshian p.). Mobile phone services. International calls can be made at the *Central Post Office*, 1 Sisakian p. Two others are at 4 Mashtots p. and 2 Gitavan p. See [HayPost \(HyePost\) site for list \(www.haypost.am/EN/abt\\_offices.html\)](#). The post office has trunk line phone service, sells phone cards (30 minutes 3000 AMD) and can deliver telegraphs.

Additional phone services are in town. They advertise in front of their shops, sometimes with internet.

## Internet

There are a couple of internet spots in central Ashtarak, expect dial up and slow. Venues and prices fluctuate, ask at your overnight. *E-net* on Proshian has decent service and a fun crowd.

## Bank, Exchange

Money wires and credit card advances can be done at banks, ATM and exchange at bank.  
*ArmSavingsBank*, 18 Hanrapetutian (3-5376)  
*ACBA*, 1 Yerevanian p.  
*ASHB*, Proshian p.  
*Armeconombank*, Main Square  
*Unibank*, Grigorian p.

*Converse Bank*, 23 Ogotosti

## Shopping

There are *mterks* and kiosks throughout town, congregated on Proshian and Grigorian pts. There is a souvenir shop on Proshian near the square. Check out the local *Shuka* off the square; prices can be cheaper than Yerevan, the food fresher in the summer.

## Film, etc

There is a *Konika* shop on Proshian, and film can be found in town. Batteries are suspect, bring your own.

## Pharmacy

*Apotekas* (Armenian: deghatuner) can be found in the center of town. One is opposite S. Marianeh church.

## Hospital, Polyclinic

For a medical emergency, dial 103. If possible go to Yerevan for medical service or ask at your lodging for recommendation.

*Central Hospital*, 61 Narekatsi p. tel. 3-1949.

*Polyclinic*, tel. 3-3335.

## Dentist

Ashtarak has no dental clinic, there are a few in town but it is better to go to Yerevan for dental work; they are better equipped to serve visitors.



## OVERNIGHT

*Lodging runs the gamut of venues. Most visitors stay in Yerevan and make a day trip to Ashtarak, but still there are a few choices worth considering.*

## HOTEL / MOTEL

*Hotel Ashtarak*, Proshian p. (tel. 32045) is a basic, Soviet style hotel with running water and rooms with SGL/DBL w/hot water/LUX/LUX w/hot water at 2000/4000/5000/6000 AMD. Cheap enough to overlook the faults.

*Ashtaraki Dzor Restaurant/Motel*, Ashtaraki Gorge (tel. 36778) is a bit over the top in its tastes, but the local “Novi Armenii” and a lot of western Armenians think it’s wonderful. The place bills itself as an “entertainment center” replete with eye-boggling wedding and banquet halls filled with celebrators that keep the place busy throughout the year. The restaurant has live music. The motel is clean and room amenities include hot and cold water, bathroom, toilet, Satellite TV set, refrigerator (in some rooms), air conditioning, heating, general buffet, telephone in the lobby, parking, sauna (extra), restaurant. Surprisingly affordable with SGL/DBL at 20,000/25,000 AMD.

## BOARDING/APARTMENT

This is a distinct possibility in Ashtarak, though done informally, there are no organized rentals. Ask around when you arrive. 3000-5000 AMD per person with breakfast is quite fair.

## CAMPING

*Free Camping at the River* is possible, though you may want to move a bit away from town as the area is also a favorite trysting spot for local teens.

## Near Ashtarak

### Biurakan

*Pine Tree House* (Yerevan Tel: (010) 52-16-25) has been around for several years, run by the irrepressible Mary Panian, one of the first to offer quality travel and lodging to expatriates. The B&B is small and clean, still a favorite with expats wanting a break from Yerevan. The B&B is close to the Biurakan Observatory and a good jumping off point for nature hikes into the nearby Amberd River gorge, and exploring the Aragats highlands, including Amberd and Kari Lich. For the flat footed, it is also a great spot for comfortable lodging while exploring the same spots by car. Mary can point out some of the more beguiling and remote points of interest, as well as other local services, like horse-back trail riding on offer nearby. SGL at \$25, includes breakfast.

### Dzorap/Aghst Village

*Dzorap/Aghst Village Dacha*, (Tel: 091-45-60-53) located about 10 km from Ashtarak and 150

meters uphill from the 4th c mausoleum church of the Arshakuni kings, is a private dacha that can be rented out (self-catering) for weekends or weekly stays with advance notice of a week or more. The dacha is built on several floors on top of a rise in the hill overlooking the Amberd canyon and has several stone patios that look out over the river, towards Biurakan, and Ararat. There is a small pool in front (normally empty, give them a week to fill it), large kitchen and dining area with balconies, two DBL rooms and fold out sofa in the great room, one and a half baths. Large, a little frayed, funky with breath-taking views. Next door farmer neighbors look out for the space and can provide light catering. \$250 a week for up to 4 people; \$150 a weekend. Catering \$25 a day for 4.

## Giumri Highway

*Udjan restaurants/motels*. About 10 km outside of town, in Udjan, facing farmland irrigated by the 7th c BCE Shamiram canal and one of the more beautiful views of Mt. Ararat are several restaurants/motels and khorovats cafes. You can’t miss them, the neon/Christmas light display are unmistakable. restaurants/motels have 4-5 rooms each, pretty basic, but oh so cheap at 5000 AMD per night per person (or 5 hours, depending on your purpose). The food is good but pick out the meat yourself to get the tastiest morsels.

## Yerevan

*ICRC Hospital Guest Houses*, end of Yerevan on the Giumri Highway (M1) (Tel: (010) 34-23-49; 35-32-97), e-mail: [archotel@freenet.am](mailto:archotel@freenet.am) is inconvenient for Yerevan but a good jumping off point for Ashtarak and Aragatsotn, esp. if you have a car or go by regional transport. Located on the Yerevan-Ashtarak highway about 12 km from Ashtarak are several small European style cottages at the Red Cross Hospital compound that are clean and comfortable. Studio/DBL at \$20/\$30, short term rentals by the month start at \$150.

## FOOD AND DRINK

Restaurants, Cafes and Bistros are throughout the city, as are khorovats joints in town and on the highway to Giumri. Food can also be bought at *Mterks* (food shops) and kiosks around town.

\$ = 2000 AMD or less for meal w/o drinks  
\$\$ = 2000-3500 AMD  
\$\$\$ = 3500 AMD or more

*Bistro*, Grigorian at Old Yerevan p. Basic food, basic prices. \$

*Restaurant Ashtaraki Dzor, Kasakh Gorge 1* (tel. 34880) is a palatial restaurant/motel/entertainment center that caters to the well-heeled and tourist trade wanting a bit exotica during their stay. The restaurant includes a motel with pretty reasonable rates (see [Ashtarak Overnight](#) on page 22). Live music and weddings round out the experience on weekends and can add to the local charm. The food is indifferent by Armenian standards (which means quite good by western standards but not incredible) but a little pricey at \$10-20+ per person for a meal. \$\$\$

*Khorovats Stands* proliferate on the highway arching around Ashtarak. They offer good value at 1000-1500 AMD per shish or 500 AMD for kebab.

#### **Outside**

*Agarak/Kosh Khorovats*, Giumri highway, 6-10 km W of Ashtarak center, right side of road. We first discovered this little jewel with two rival cafes and motels in 1997 while traveling to Giumri in the middle of winter and still like its simplicity and attention to the basics: good meat and good basic food. With more trade in the latter years you probably want to pick out the meat yourself (go for the marbled fat, it has better taste, if "heart-attack city") khorovats shish with trimmings at 1500 AMD, a filling meal can be had for around 2500 AMD.



## EXPLORING THE REGION ▲

Most of these can be done in a single day by car, depending on how many sites you visit and how long you take at each one. Sites in UPPER CASE

are considered major stops and sites marked in parenthesis ( ) are side trips or too far from the main route to include in a single day trip, and may have to be skipped if you want to finish in the

same day.

Day Trips 1 and 2 can be combined for a very long single day trip if you are on the rush—ignore all side trips if you do this. Mt. Aragats climbs require two or more days to take in all the peaks.

Decent to good overnights are available at Ashtarak and Biurakan, basic or minimal service overnights are at Talin, Aparan and villages.

- 🏕 camping possible
- 🏠 overnight
- 🍷 food and drink
- ♨ thermal, mineral spring

### TRIP 1: AROUND ASHTARAK ▲

**ASHTARAK – OSHAKAN – VOSKEVAZ – (Voskehat) – AGARAK – DZORAP/AGHSTK – TEGHER – (Orgov) – [Ashtarak] – PARPI – (Bazmaghiur) – (Ghazaravan) – [Ashtarak] – MUGHNI – (Karbi) – OHANAVANK – USHI – (Artashavan) – SAGHMOSAVAN**

UPPER CASE destinations are worth a longer visit, (side trips) are worth the stop if you have the time. You can visit all sites on this trip in one day, depending on how long you stay at each stop. Note that **Agarak, Dzorap, Tegher and Orgov are also on Trip 2 and can be visited on either trip.**

The area around Ashtarak was once a part of a much larger Aragatsotn, encompassing both the mountain slopes and the upper part of Ararat Valley, including Vagharshapat (Echmiadzin) and Armavir. As such it was patronized by kings and nakharars, Urartians and the kingdoms of the Bronze Age. It is astounding just how much there is to see in this small area; within 20 km of Ashtarak in any direction you will find Bronze Age fortresses and cities, Urartu strongholds, the resting place of the inventor of the Armenian alphabet and some of Armenia's most beguiling mountain monasteries, three of which are candidates for World Heritage Sites. The distances are small, but the trip includes beautiful mountain slopes, river canyons and the upper Ararat Valley floor.

- 🏠 overnight
- 🍷 food and drink
- ♨ thermal, mineral spring

**Stay:** Overnight in Ashtarak, village home (rustic). Camping along the route, river canyon or near villages.

**Eat:** Ashtarak restaurants and cafes, roadside stands, Oshakan, Ushi, Hovhanavan, and Saghmosavan.

**Springs:** Oshakan, Voskevez, Parbi, Mughni, Hovhanavan, Saghmosavan.

📍 From Ashtarak Center, take Grigorian p. SW to the Old Giumri road intersection, cross over and continue for about 7.5 km to the Voskevez road intersection in central **OSHAKAN** (DD 40.9870 x 44.31493) 🏠 🍷 ♨

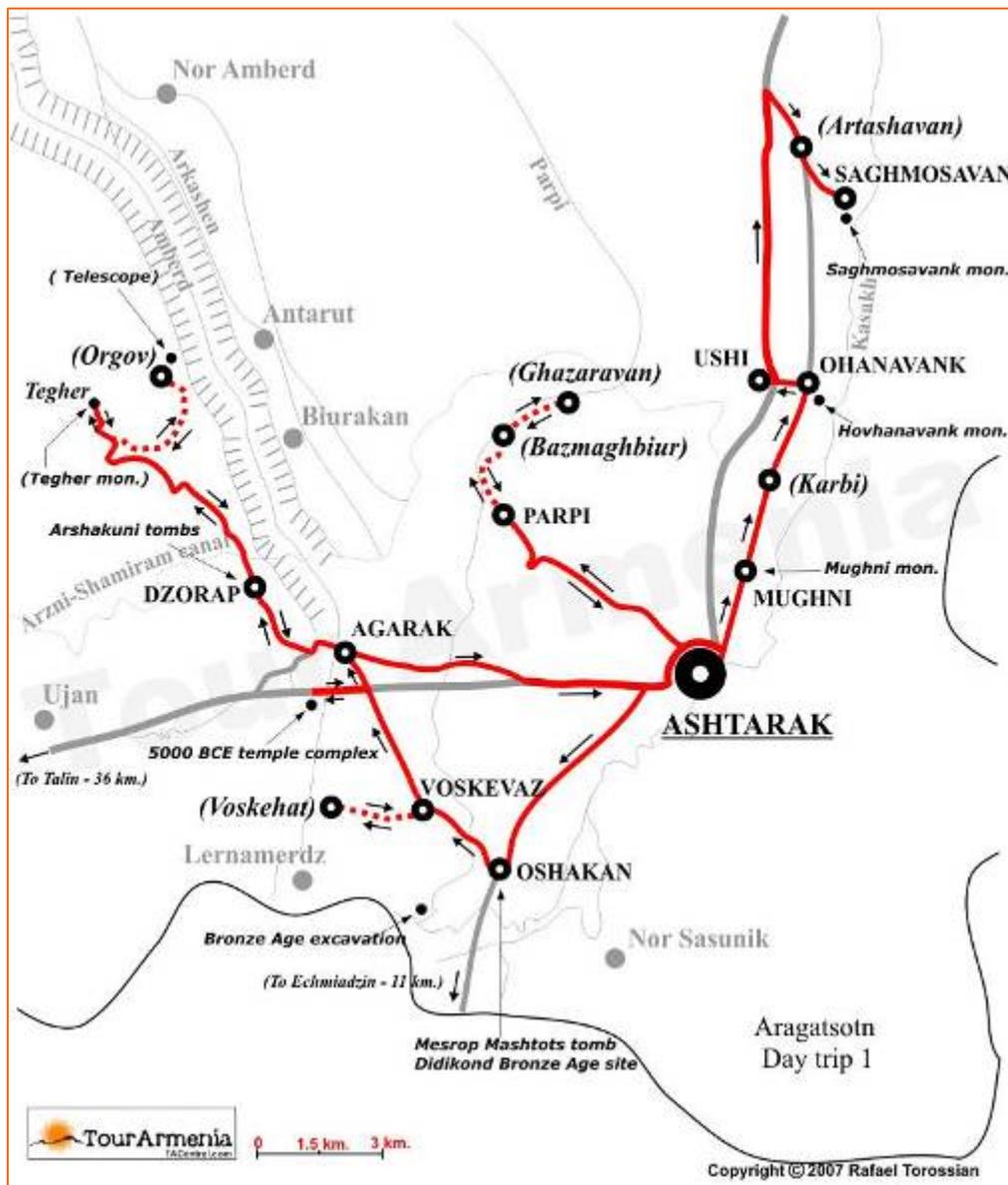
🏠 **OSHAKAN - ՕՇԱԿԱՆ** ▲ (elev. 1051m, pop. 3956) is one of Armenia's most important religious sites, final resting place for Mesrop Mashtots, considered the inventor of the Armenian Alphabet in the early 5th c. Before Mashtots introduced the alphabet in 405-407 CE, Armenians used Syrian translations of the gospels, interpreted by special docents during services. After its introduction, Armenian writers entered what is called the Golden Age of Literature, a period of around 250 years where an astounding number of manuscripts were made; translations of Greek, Latin and Syrian texts, as well as original philosophies, scientific treatises, medical and legal texts and religious studies. Throughout its history, over 100,000 manuscripts were made, about 25,000 of which are preserved in museums and manuscriptories, the majority at the Matenadaran in Yerevan.

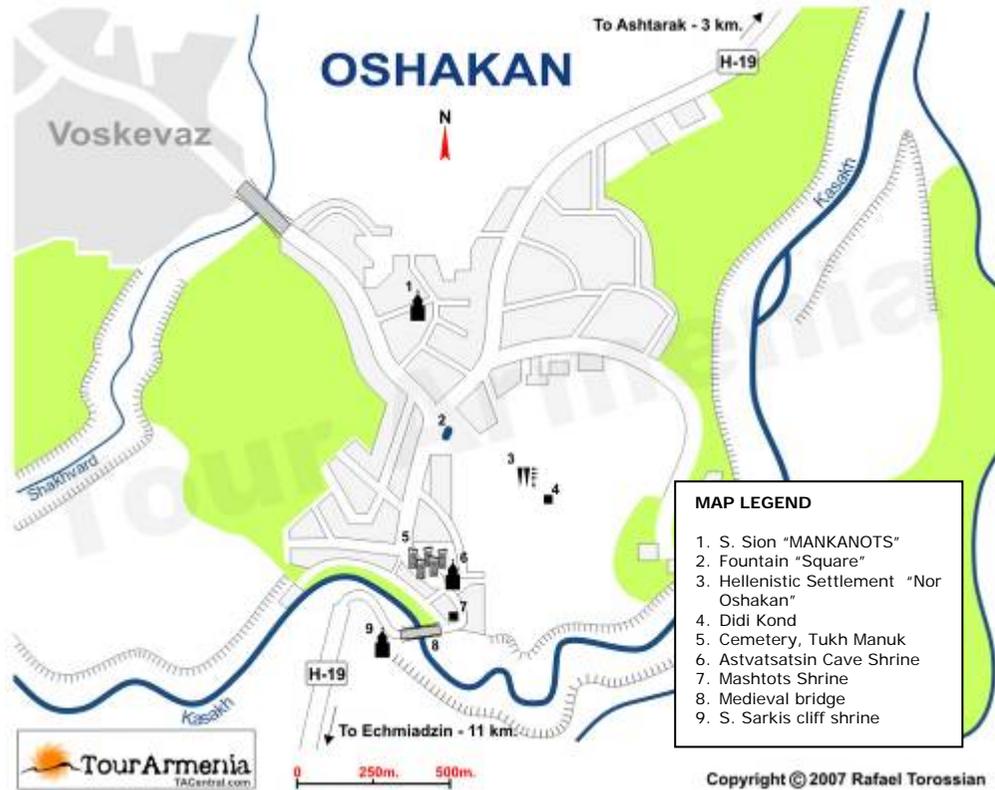
### History

Oshakan dates back to the Stone Age. Bronze Age and Urartian settlements have been uncovered in the area. The village was a regional diocese of Aragatsotn district, which at that time included Vagharshapat (Echmiadzin) and Armavir. It became an important pilgrimage destination after Mashtots died and a visit to his grave was believed a site of miraculous cures.

### Mesrop Mashtots and the Armenian Alphabet.

Mesrop Mashtots (362-440), came onto the scene at a time when Armenia was facing certain destruction, if not by invasion then by the loss of its native tongue and culture. Long swept into the dust bin of the lower classes, the Armenian language was seldom used in official circles, which preferred Greek and Parthian, or Greek and Syrian for religious rites, which had to be translated to congregations by Syrian priests, who were usurping the positions of Armenian priests. There are those who argue that an original Armenian script (sometimes called the "Mihrian" or "Mithrian" script), which dated from the 4th millennium BCE, was still in existence, but only in remote areas that





still practiced the pagan religion, Grigor Lusavorich and King T'rdat, in their fervor to convert the country to Christianity 100 years earlier, having eradicated all traces of this language elsewhere.

Complicating things was the deteriorating situation with a new Persian dynasty, the Sassanids, who threatened to erase the Armenian culture along with its rulers in the 4th-5th cc. For several centuries Armenia's kings had shared language, culture and religion with their kinsmen, the Parthians. Things changed in the 3rd c when the Sassanids overthrew the Persian clan. Devout Zoroastrians, the Sassanids expected their subjects (and quasi-subject nations, of which Armenia was one) to convert to the pagan faith and renounce Arshakuni sovereignty.

The Byzantines used this opportunity to pressure the Armenians recant their monotheism and convert completely to the Greek Orthodox Church,

which professed the Chalcedonian Creed. Threatened with invasion by Sassanid "barbarians" on one side and by Byzantines on the other, the Armenians had to assert their independence or face annihilation.

Mashtots, born and educated in Taron, was a member of the royal garrison in Vagharshapat in 389, then a scribe and counselor for King Vramshapuh and the Katoghikos Sahak Parthev (387-428), when he was asked to find or create an Armenian script to preserve the kingdom's identity. There is much debate on whether Mashtots "created" the alphabet he is credited with, a dispute that continues to this day.

The official line is that after traveling the Near East to repositories of learning, Mashtots had a vision in which God struck the alphabet with a golden hammer on stone, and all that Mashtots had then

to do was to write it down and present the divine script to the court.

A diverging view (which has gained credence of late) agrees that Mashtots and his disciples soured the Near East in search of something, but that something was the original Armenian script, which was believed to have existed as the language of the Pagan faith, destroyed along with the temples and shrines obliterated by Grigor Lusavorich and his followers in the early 4th c.



This version makes sense of the historical record: Why else would the king and katolikos send Mashtots in search of the script unless there was something to be found? Mashtot's biographer, Koriun, never used the word "creator" in reference to Mashtots, but rather called him a translator sent to find "something". As the crisis with the Sassanids and the Byzantine Empire deepened, Mashtots—who was personal translator to the king—was dispatched to uncover the older version of Armenian which Gregory's campaign against paganism had destroyed.

Among the first places Mashtots was sent was Goghtn (Nakhichevan), a hot bed of Paganism that still resisted the charms of the Christian church, which was thought to still have the old script. Failing there, he and his disciples traveled Syria and Anatolia, ending up at Samusat (Samsat) in present Turkey where he made his discovery (the old script) or had the vision where "the right hand of Jesus struck the alphabet on stone".

Modifying the script, Mashtots and his followers presented the new script to the court. All this happened sometime between 401-406, the Armenian Church recognizing a "creation" in 405.



Whenever or however it happened, it was a tremendous achievement, and—along with the conversion 100 years earlier—transformed the country, insuring its cultural survival and beginning the Golden Age of Armenian literature. The script has survived intact for 1600 years with only the addition of three letters in the 10th-12th cc (see [the alphabet \(www.tacental.com/language/index.asp\)](http://www.tacental.com/language/index.asp)). There are those who say it so successfully captures Indo-European sounds that most of literature can be translated into Armenian without losing the original pronunciation.

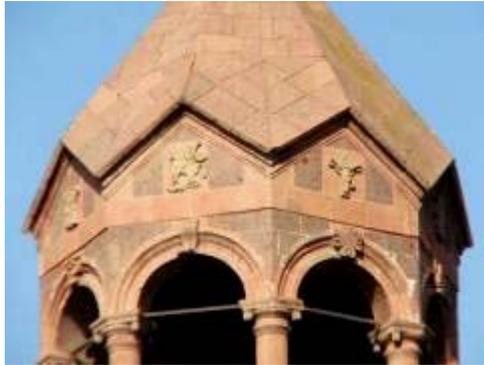
Though Armenia's feudal society dictated that peasants would remain illiterate for centuries, the state and church began to use the Armenian language and the new script initiated an immediate and centuries-long period of writing and education, called [The Golden Age in Armenia \(www.tacental.com/manuscripts\\_miniatures/m\\_m\\_index.html\)](http://www.tacental.com/manuscripts_miniatures/m_m_index.html).

**Mesrop Mashtots Shrine** (DD 40.29870 x 44.31493, elev. 1051m) is on the main road between Ashtarak and Echmiadzin. To get there, continue S on the main road from the square for about 1 km to the front of the church.

The church is surrounded by gardens, including one with Aibu Ben khachkars, each carved for a different Armenian letter of the alphabet.

The church was built in the 5th c (442-443), three years after Mashtots death, its benefactor Vahan Amatuni. It was rebuilt many times, the last in 1875 for the Katoghikos George IV. The current structure is a mixture of styles, looking more like a Victorian gym than the shrine for one of Armenia's most important historical figures. The East side is

unique for having a bell tower and for its round shape.



Inside, the church is more elaborate, with wall paintings done in 1960 by H. Minassian. The original 5th c tomb is under the altar, a vaulted chamber with a niche on the east wall. There was once a window on the western wall, now covered with stone, suggesting the tomb was once half-exposed, as at the 5th c Arshakuni mausoleum Dzorap. Pilgrims still flood the site, their genuine faith mixed with gawking tourists. Whatever the story of his work on the alphabet, Mashtots was an enlightened person with tremendous skill. Light a candle for intellect and perseverance, and for a time when education saved a people.

In the adjoining **cemetery** you will find the gravestones for bishops, priests and some the more well-heeled faithful through the ages. One to look for is for the priest named Ter Arakel Danilian, died 1827; this is the grandfather of Perj Proshian, a 19th c writer whose home-museum is in Ashtarak.

**Local Guide.** The village also has a number of sites worth seeing, including hermit cave shrines and a Bronze Age Citadel. You can see them all in about an hour, and having a local guide is helpful. One such guide we found at the Mashtots Church was the delightful **Artur**, a mentally challenged young man who works at the church doing odd jobs. He proved to be one of our best guides in Armenia. Because of his limited capacity he repeatedly asked where we wanted to go, but he knew exactly where to lead us and acted the part quite well. He makes no bones about asking for a money for his services, something he no doubt learned in his former life before he church hired

him. Give it. Well worth the tips which are also his main means of income.

In the river canyon are the cave **shrines** for **S. Hovhannes** and **S. Sarkis** as well as the still working **1706 Oshakan Bridge**. To get there, continue S from the Mesrop Mashtots Church into the gorge. Cross the bridge and begin to climb up the other side.

On your L is a small grotto with candles and icons, the **S. Hovhannes Shrine**. Continue uphill and just as it hairpins to the L, stop the car and look for a long wooden ladder propped up against the canyon walls (about 20 m from the road into the canyon). This is **S. Sarkis**, a hermit cave *cum* shrine revered by locals.

Backtrack to S. Mashtots and continue N, taking the first R (looks like an alley) to the back of the village and the bottom of Didikond Hill. To the L are the village cemetery and the Tukh Manuk. Turn R and continue to the end of the houses where the rocky road peters out. Get out and walk behind into the gorge, veering L as you go along. The cliff side **Astvatsatsin cave shrine** (DD 40.25771 x 44.31816, elev. 1050m) is in an opening on the path.

Turn around and go up to the cemetery on the same village road. The **Tukh Manuk shrine** (DD 40.28147 x 44.31617, elev. 1077m) sits on a small hill in the oldest part of the cemetery, a checkerboard pattern of red and black tuff stones.

The Tukh Manuk (Black Youth) is an extremely popular but officially frowned upon pagan cult to an adolescent blood-drinking god-head somewhere between Mythra (the fire god of Zoroastrianism) and Jesus Christ. The shrines are found throughout the country, in almost every village, many still used by locals performing matagh (sacrifice) of birds or small animals in supplication. They often sit next to a tree or bush covered with strips of cloth, the Armenian "Tree of Life" from pre-Christian lore.

Supplicants will pray while walking seven times around the shrine before performing matagh, hoping for an answer to their prayers, or in thanks for a prayer answered. The Black Youth is linked to a proto-Indo-European deity cognate with Krishna: an otherworldly beautiful young man inhabiting the boundary between settlement and wilderness (Prof. James Russell).



**S. Tadevos (Thaddeus) the Apostle** (DD 40.25940 x 44.31238, elev. 1037m) is in the village, a partially sunken 4th c structure built over pagan foundations. The form of the structure, as well as the telltale holy stone inside the building mark for a pre-Christian shrine before it was converted to its current use.

The village wraps around the massive **Didikond Hill** which has not one but two pre-Christian excavations, a Hellenistic settlement on the N side and the Late Bronze Age citadel on the top of the hill. To get there, from the square (fountain), take the main road to Ashtarak N, then take the R fork that skirts around the N of the hill. The gas pipe forms a bridge over a dirt path that leads up hill (Jeeps can make it all the way, our Lada pretty far up). As you ascend, to the R you can see the traces of **Nor Oshakan**, the Hellenistic settlement that was uncovered in Soviet times.



On top of the hill, below the Armentel Cellular tower, is one of the great archeological finds in

Armenia, the **Bronze Age Didikond Citadel** (DD 40.26205 x 44.31990, elev. 1120m).

The foundations for the citadel are massive, the cyclopean white stones outlining huge rooms with central column supports for the gigantic roofs. The site was only found when the local phone monopoly, Armentel, began digging pits for the cell phone tower and uncovered the huge site. Archeologists were called in and excavations uncovered five palaces on the N slope alone, as well as large shaft tomb field. The small church at the site is the **5th c S. Grigor**.



The recently renovated **S. Sion / Mankanots** (DD 40.27316 x 44.31225, elev. 1028m) is in the NW side of Oshakan, in a district of the same name. To get there, from the fountain square go N on the Voskevaz road to the 2nd village road on the R, take that to the 2nd L road to the edge of the village and the small 7th c **S. Sion (Zion) Church** with an adjoining 6th-7th cc stone pillar on a plinth.

The church is said to be one of three built from the same model, the other two being the more famous Karmravor in Ashtarak and S. Kristopor in Dashtadem. S. Sion is a *tetrakonch* (a building composed of four conchs, a conch being a semicircular niche surmounted by a half-dome) resting on a stepped stylobate. It is built of finely cut local tufa and inside, the corners of the semicircular apses are rounded, the transition to the dome on an octagonal drum is made with fan vaults. The only entrance (W) has a portal with twin half-columns. It is a fine reconstruction, only lacking the ceramic tile roof it once boasted.



The pillar is said to mark the grave of the Byzantine emperor Mauricius (539-602) or his mother, said by the Armenian chronicles to have come from the village. If so, he wasn't much of a native son, embroiling Armenia in fighting with Persia throughout his reign. Shortly after his accession, in 590 he intervened in a Persian war of succession, helping the young Khosrov II to regain his throne. In return, Armenia and eastern Mesopotamia returned to the Byzantine Empire. Ultimately, Mauricius was crippled by constant warfare and the gradual decline of the great empire forged by his predecessor Justinian I. Beset by continual wars and threat of bankruptcy, Mauricius was eventually dethroned by Phocas, and after being forced to watch his three sons executed, was beheaded himself. Mauricius is the traditional author of the military treatise *Strategikon* which is praised in military circles as the first and only sophisticated combined arms theory until World War II (though lately even that tidbit of fame is being stripped away historians now saying *Strategikon* was actually written by his brother).

**Camping** is possible in the area, on the riverbed or nearby—ask: **Overnight** in village home (rustic, 3000-5000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** are on the river and in the village.

➡ From **Oshakan**, take the NW **Voskevaz** road out of the village and about 50 m from the edge of Oshakan you will cross the Shakhvard River and enter **VOSKEVAZ** (DD 40.27400 x 44.30236) 🏠 🌿

🚩 **VOSKEVAZ - ՈՍԿԵՎԱԶ** 🏔️ (before Ghzltamur or "Red Timur" elev. 1034m, pop. 5381) was named in the 15th century after Timur

the Lame, who spared the villagers while rampaging through the area. Now a mixed community, the villagers had their roots in Khoi, Iran. The village is a farming community and known for its grapes and a particularly potent fruity white wine made from their nectar. This is home-brew and not to be mistaken for the Voskevaz wine labeled in the shop. You can only get this in the village and by making nice with a local. It's worth it.



The village has a partially ruined **S. Hovhannes Church** (DD 40.27343 x 44.29824, elev. 1053m), under reconstruction. The masons say the church will take about 3 years to complete, when the dome will top out at 23 meters. The church building is a large hall type with a protruding apse, by its size and foundation style built over the ruins of a pre-Christian temple. The protruding apse is a unique feature for Hall churches, only a handful exist. It was an experiment in the early 5th c that led to more experimentation in the ensuing centuries.



About 2 km S of the village just before the rim of the Shakhvard River where it meets the Kasakh River sits the 5th c "**Badali Zham**" (Badal's Church). To get there go S through the Old Village (a wonderful series of old stone buildings, walls and wooden balustrades) to a dirt track that runs into and along the southern farm fields. Just before the village dump, take a left path that crosses towards the river canyon and another dirt track that runs N/S. Turn L (N) for about 200 m to **Badalai Zham** (DD 40.25827 x 44.28973, elev. 1012m).

Its hall (6.7 x 9.45m) ends in an apse that is horseshoe-shaped inside with pentagonal exterior. The building rests on a stepped stylobates, suggesting pre-Christian origins. The walls are relatively thin (0.9m) keeping them in harmony with the original wooden roof. But by the 6th c stone pylons were added to the north and south walls for a flying arch to support new stone vaulted roofing. The ornamental designs on the pylons are a feature of Armenian buildings in the 4th-6th cc.



SW of the church on the rim is a 5000 BCE **Vishap stone / phallus stone**, seen at a distance from the church (look for the electric tower). Reach the stone by taking the dirt track S of the church and follow it around to gorge rim to the Stone. The fertility stone is said by some to have been erected in Soviet times, but others contradict the story, saying it was always here, or at least marks a spot where one stood in antiquity. Whenever it was erected, the protruding stone looks to be a natural part of the landscape. If it is a modern placement, the men who put it there had a remarkable sense of accuracy (or a lurid sense of humor; stand in front of the stone facing the canyon, where the two rivers meet to see what I mean).

The village is also known as the site for an important **Bronze Age fortress** (3rd-1st m BCE) known as Akhtamar ("salt Timur," possibly "the Salt of Timur"), about 100 m S of the Vishap Stone (DD 40.2569 x 44.28015, elev. 1015m). You can see it on the low hills from the stone, a series of walls and large stones lining the upland. The cyclopean walls enclose Bronze Age, Iron Age and medieval settlements, all of which were uncovered in a major set of excavations in the 20th c.



The entire field to the W of the main walls shows the outlines of houses, buildings and streets in this once large settlement. Artifacts from the Bronze and Iron Age are considered —along with the discoveries at Agarak and Tsaghkahovit—some of the most important finds of their period are in the State History Museum collection in Yerevan. Also close by is a medieval stone and mortar fort.

**Camping** is possible in the area, on the riverbed or nearby—ask: **Overnight** in village home (rustic, 3000-5000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** are on the river and in the village.

➡ From **Voskevaz** center, take the W road out of the village through orchards and farmlands for about 1 km to (**Voskehat**) 🏠 🌿 🏔️

**SIDE TRIP:** (**Voskehat - Nulythuan** till 1949 *Patrinj*, pop. 850) overlooks the Amberd River Gorge and has the ruins of an **Iron Age fortress** that once guarded the entry to Amberd Fortress and the remains of a **14th c Church**. Otherwise a farming village with few pretensions, other than its recent fame as the Southern end of the massive 5000 BCE Agarak

Religious complex, which stretches N 2 km to the Giumri Hwy.

The River gorge is fairly accessible here and a good jumping off point for those wanting to **hike the Amberd** up Mt. Aragats. From Voskehat it is 2.4 km to Agarak, another 2.5 km to the 4th c Arshakuni mausoleum church and canyon wall caves that once protected the villagers at Dzorap, and another 2 km to the Tegher/Amberd fork (take the right fork to Amberd or the left about 2.5 km to Tegher Monastery), and another 7.5 km to Amberd fortress. Note these are the bottom of the canyons at these spots, allow time and effort to climb to the top to see the site.

**Camping** is possible in the river gorge or nearby; **Overnight** in village home (rustic, 3000-5000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** in the village.

➡ Backtrack to Voskevaz center, then take the N road for about 2.5 km to the Giumri Highway, cross over and continue for about 800 m to **AGARAK** center (DD 40.3077778 x 44.28472222)

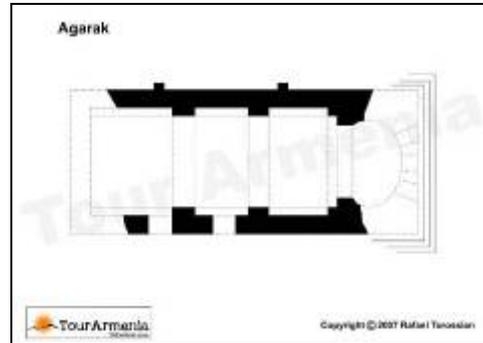


📍 **AGARAK - ԱԳԱՐԱԿ** ▲ (elev. 1063m, pop. 2497) is on the right bank of the Amberd River and at the foot of the main path to Mt. Aragats. The village was inhabited from prehistoric times, as excavation in the area attest, but its modern incarnation is dated to 1919 with settlers from Van and Tbilisi.

**As you come in:** At the turnoff from the Giumri highway, on the left is a **monument to the heroes of the battle for Van** a tall stature in a stylized eagle's wing. The monument, built in the 1980's while Armenia was still in the Soviet Union, is already part of local lore; locals saying the funds for it were donated by a rich Diaspora Armenian, who ordered not one, but two wings, which would look like a rising bird (phoenix or eagle) over the edge of the hills. As things developed the funds allocated for the statue were "eaten" by Soviet authorities, leaving only enough for one wing. Bon-apetit.

The monument is built on the site of the **Bronze Age graveyard of Verin Navehr**, with substantial chamber tombs of coarse boulders surrounded by stone rings and covered with a mound. You can visit the site and see the remains of the dig, with openings and marked off areas.

**Center:** The village was settled on the site of an Iron Age or Urartian settlement, as the cyclopean stone wall of an old building on the entry road to the village suggests. This wall, made from Iron Age stones, was actually part of the **Agarak fortress complex**, built in the 4th c to protect the approaches to Dzorap where the Arshakuni (Arshakid) royal mausoleum lay.



The building was converted in the same century into a **S. Hovhannes Church** by adding an apse. The single aisle hall church was part of the defenses, its southern and eastern walls also serving as fortifications with their formidable towers. Another feature was the narthex; it was built simultaneously with the church at the building's western end and fully integrated with it.



The narthex is a rectangular vaulted building as wide as the church, extending from east to west. An ornament representing a Greek cross inside a circle, typical of the 4th-6th cc, has survived intact on the northern wall. S. Hovhannes is one of

Armenia's oldest churches, converted from a Pagan temple, changing the orientation from the pre-Christian western focus (the setting sun) to the direction of the rising sun (the resurrection).



Not far from the main church is a **S. Gevorg shrine** (DD 40.30148 x 44.27838, elev. 1714m), on a small road in the village (ask), a small brown tuff building rebuilt in 1999, the foundations of a Pagan-4th c **Tukh Manuk (Black Youth deity) shrine** (on same path as S Gevorg but inside someone's garden—ask), the **ruins of a Persian Era mosque** (in same area as S. Hovhannes—ask) and a **medieval cemetery** set within the modern village graveyard (center).



**Southwest of town:** S of Agarak across the Giumri highway (backtrack to the Giumri highway and turn R (W) and go to Agarak village limits sign and turn L (S) on the dirt path; the rising slope and cliffs of the **Agarak Temple Site** are just there (DD 40.29576 x 44.27838, elev. 1714m).

The site, which begins at this point and stretches towards the village of Voskehat is one of Armenia's most important excavations, an ongoing dig begun in 2001 that continues to amaze participants with its findings.

The excavation, undertaken by members of the Archaeology and Ethnography Institute of the National Academy of Sciences of Armenia (NASA), is on a volcanic plateau that has been excavated before and erroneously dated to the Iron Age. The current, more extensive excavation is uncovering an astonishing territory and complexity that is equal in size to the greatest temple sites of the prehistoric world.



The first section, closest to the highway, and focus of the original dig, is a triangular area on a rising hill with wind-carved cliffs on the west bank of the Amberd River. This is the area most readily found by first-timers, lying directly along the Giumri highway. As you climb the mount, the size of the area become evident; from this mount and continuing over the landscape W of the river is a temple site covering 200 hectares, 118 of which have been declared a historical and cultural preserve by the Government of Armenia.

**Bronze Age Temple Site.** The upper layers have long been exposed to the open and venerated as a holy spot by locals. The complex is huge, stretching south from the Giumri highway to Voskehat village. From the distance it is hard to see how sophisticated the site is, it simply appears as a natural formation of large cliffs of tufa stone, passageways, rock hills, plateaus and freestanding blocks of stone extending down the river for a couple of kilometers. But the surfaces of the stones show evidence of stone work, as well as the sides of the cliffs and plateaus; niches in the cliffs

and stairways leading the platforms, as well as other unidentified structures. All of this transforms the natural landscape into a gigantic cult monument including an unbroken series of round, horseshoe-shaped structures linked by channels and trapezoidal "sacrificial altars". The cult center and courtyards are believed created in the early Bronze Age. The trapezoid is important; it matches that found on the astronomical observatory at Metsamor, which pointed towards the star Sirius in the dawn sky at the Spring equinox.



Excavators say the temple size is unmatched in Armenia, and puts it on par with those found in prehistoric China, Egypt and the ancient Sumerians. The carvings include some resembling the mid Bronze Age Metsamor Script found in the 5000 BCE excavation about 20 km south, along with a series of holes and carved lines on the face of the rocks. The script and other ritualistic symbols, as well as traces of an ancient observatory and planetary or star map, suggest inhabitants practiced the same study of the night sky as the priests and astronomers at Metsamor and those at Karahundj, in Siunik. Another find, on the rock shelf at Sev Ghul (Black Tower) in Giumri show the same series of holes and carvings, suggesting the peoples of this time were unified in their concepts and probably well related.

Other remains included fragments of buildings and fortifications, from the Copper Bronze Age through the Medieval period, with Hellenistic walls predominant.

Excavators are currently working on the northern plateau of the site, patiently uncovering the site layer by layer, the work done in the warmer months, allowing visitors to view the work in

progress. In the northeast edge of the plateau a street was discovered lined on both sides with houses with round floor plans and square external corners, indicating a town with regular street plan in the early Bronze Age. An enormous quantity of ceramic fragments, terra cotta statues, round and horseshoe-shaped portable hearths, and hearth stands were also uncovered, placing that layer in the middle period of the Shengavit or Kuro-Araxes culture, roughly 2900-2700 BCE.



**Wine, Blood or Metal?** Other discoveries include a cemetery from the period with pictograms of what may be gods and other fantastic creatures inscribed in stone, plus what some say was an extensive winery operation, with large vats in the rock interconnected by carved 'flow lines' allowing overflow liquid to pass from one vat to another.



The series of vats on the south end of the first rocky slope seems to confirm the idea that it was a grape production site, though why major wine making would be done inside a religious temple

area is not clear and the dozens of other holes on the rock do not fit this idea at all; there are too many too small with too many elaborately carved connecting flow lines between them to practically produce any amount of wine. Another suggestion—in hot debate—is that this may as well have been a sacrificial stone, the small holes and depressions holding blood that spilled from one to the other through the flow lines to form an elaborate pattern on the face of the rock. Blood sacrifice is still performed in Armenia, so this is plausible, though the suggestion that it may have been human sacrifice (well documented for this period in Armenia) seems to make many queasy and unwilling to accept its premise.

Another option, which is both plausible and probable to a growing number of people, is that the site was both a major production and religious site, combining sacrifice, the making of wine (a sacred drink that produced 'visions') and, as Metsamor's large metal production suggests—either a metal production center or user of liquid metals in performing rituals. We know that in this time (5000-4000 BCE) there were still active volcanoes in the area, their molten lava flowing down the slopes of nearby mountains in red rivers of liquid heat. One can imagine these people using this molten substance—or just as likely liquid metal from Metsamor—to fill the dozens of small holes, their overflow passing through the curving flow lines, forming an elaborate design on the rock. What an interesting experiment it would be to one evening fill these reservoirs with a combustible liquid so they overflow and flow down the small channels, set it alight and watch the burning liquid trickle from the top of the rock down, seeing what patterns emerge. If as I suspect, it is cosmic related, the design would be a map of the night sky as it once was, thousands of years ago.

For more information, [visit the Agarak excavation site \(www.archaeoexpeditions.com/Armenia.htm\)](http://www.archaeoexpeditions.com/Armenia.htm).

**Camping** is possible by the river or near the excavation; **Overnight** in village home (rustic, 3000-5000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** in the village.

➡ *Backtrack to Agarak center, which takes you to the Old Ashtarak Road intersection, turn left and go past the Biurakan road (100 m or so) and forward for another 500 m or so to where the road makes a U-bend S and crosses a bridge. Immediately after it starts to climb and another road intersects it just before it starts to come out*

*of its bend, take that road and climb up the hill for about 400 m to the village limits and another 1.6 km uphill to where the road turns sharply right (E) and then left (N) and passes the **DZORAP School** (DD 40.31568 x 44.25506) *

✚ **DZORAP/AGHSTK** - ձորաք / Աղսթ  (officially Aghstk, before Akis or Hakhs, elev. 1251m, pop. 3497) climbs the foothills of Mt. Aragats while hugging the rim of the Amberd River. The village of Dzorap is technically the lower end of the climb, with a small space of land between it and the village newly renamed Aghstk, but the folks in Yerevan apparently forgot to tell the villagers, who call it Dzorap to this day, and trying the new name only wins stares and shoulder shrugs. Use Dzorap ("Dzor" means gorge).

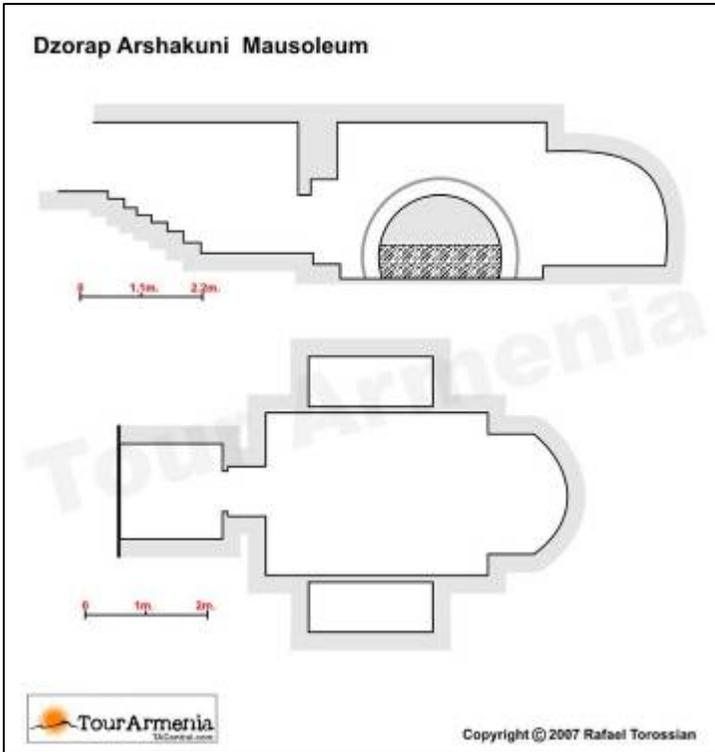
The village is pretty in its own way and the river gorge is breathtaking, more than 200 m deep at this point, with its caves with medieval stone doors. Halfway through the village is the 4th c Arshakuni Mausoleum Church, built to house the remains of Arshakuni Kings stretching back to the 2nd c BCE.

The **Arshakuni Mausoleum** is about 400 m N of the village school, on the same road. It is on the right, a low set of tufa building remains with fragments of the edifices that once stood there.



According to legend and the 5th c historian Pavstos Buisand, the troops of the Sassanid king Shapur II destroyed the Arshakuni ancestral burial place at Ani-Kamah and

*"captured the Arshakuni Kings' remains, failing only to open the burial vault of King Sanatruk*



which was an enormous and incredibly strong and ingeniously built structure."

The bones seem to have stayed in Armenia, the Persians probably figuring it didn't much matter where they were when they had Armenian nakharars in their hip pockets. The mausoleum continued to be used to inter Armenia's kings until the 5th c then the line of kings ended. The mausoleum survived for some time, falling to invasions and earthquakes long past the time of the Arshakunis. A later historian, Movses Khorenatsi, wrote that a decision was finally made to inter them in the saint's vault at Vagharshapat (Echmiadzin)."

Go into the **sunken chamber**, which shows little evidence of bones or remains, but has some interesting iconography on the walls. Originally a half-buried mausoleum with church above, it was possibly built over a temple to a powerful deity or war god (the Armenia church

over resourceful in combining pagan myths with actual events).



The mausoleum is a small rectangular vaulted hall (2.6m x 3.7m and 2.5m high), stretching from

**The ARSHAKUNI DYNASTY OF KINGS**

- *Tiridates I (second time) 54-56 CE*
- *Tiridates I of Armenia 56-58/59*
- *Roman occupation 58-59*
- *Tigranes V of Capadoce 59-62 (Roman protectorate)*
- *T'rdat (Tiridates) I of Armenia 62-72 (Parthian protectorate 62-63; Roman protectorate 63-72)*
- *Axidares (son of Pacorus II of Parthia) 72-? (Roman protectorate)*
- *Parthamasiris (Axidares brother) ?-114 (Parthian protectorate)*
- *Roman province 114 – 118*
- *Vologeses I (Parthian Arsacid) 118-? (Roman protectorate)*
- *Aurelios Pocosos ?-140/44*
- *Sohemo c 140/144-161*
- *Pakoros 161-163*
- *Sohemo (second time) 163-?*
- *Sanatrik ?-197*
- *Valarsaces or Vologeses II (son) 197*
- *Khosrov I of Armenia (son) 197-238*
- *To Persia 238-252*
- *Artavazd VI 252-283 (Parthian protectorate)*
- *T'rdat (Tiridates) III (son of Khosrov) 283-330 (Roman protectorate)*
- *Khosrov II the Small 330-339*
- *Tigranes VII (son) 339-c350*
- *Arshak II (son) c 350-368*

- *Persian occupation 368-370*
- *Cylax (Zig), governor 368-369*
- *Artaban (Karen), governor 368-369*
- *Vahan Mamikonian, governor 369-370*
- *Merujan Ardzruni, governor 369-370*
- *Pap (son of Archak II) 370-374*
- *Varazdat (grand-son of Tigranes VII) 374-378*
- *Queen Zarmandukht (widow of Pap) 378-379*
- *Provisional govt. Enmanuel Mamikonian 378-379*
- *To Persia 379*
- *Persian marzpan, Queen Zarmandukht and Enmanuel Mamikonian 379-c 380*
- *Zarmandukht and Enmanuel Mamikonian c 380-384*
- *Arshak III (son of Zarmandukht) 384-389 (m. Vardandukht, daughter of Enmanuel Mamikonian)*
- *Vagharshak 384-386 (m. daughter of Sahak Bagratuni)*
- *Khosrov III (from Arshakuni family) 387-392*
- *Zik (regent) 387-390*
- *Vram Shepuh 392-414 (bro. of Khosrov III) 392-414*
- *Khosrov III (second time) 414-415*
- *Shahpur (heir of Perse) 415-421*
- *Provisional government of Narses Djidjrakatsi 421*
- *Local independent governments 421-423*
- *Artash (Artaxes) IV (son of Vram Shepuh) 423-*

east to west with a segmented-shaped apse at its eastern end. The vault was partially dug into the hill, its southern and eastern ends rest on a five-stepped stylobate. The roof is flat, no evidence has been found to determine the shape of the second floor.

The interior of the mausoleum is a cross plan, with arcosoliums (arched recesses used as a burial-place) and horseshoe-shaped arches on the north and south walls, where the sarcophagi of the Arshakuni kings were placed. The W entrance had a stair encased in a dromos (passage to a tomb).

The stone walls between the arcosoliums have **bas-reliefs** associated with Pagan icons combined with Christian motifs. On the left (N) is a design of the biblical story of Daniel in the Lion's Den and a motif of rams, evoking the predicament Armenia was in the time, caught between the jaws of the Sassanids and Romans. On the other side (S) is a picture of fantastic mythical heroes or gods, with astrological imagery of birds, a bull calf amid a grape vine, a cross in a circle with two birds perched on top and a hunter with two dogs striking a wild boar. Guess which side is Pagan. Surprise! They both are in origin; the north had simply been

subsumed into Christian Art by the time of the mausoleum.

Stele bases lie right next to the church, at its southern end for as yet unknown structure, possibly a shrine or chapel.

Just N of the mausoleum in the same complex are the remains of a **4th c basilica**, discovered during excavations in 1973. It is attached on the southern side to the mausoleum. It has an almost square hall, something unusual for basilicas, which is divided into three aisles by two pairs of rectangular pillars. The 5th c abutments were changed to T-shape (the north-eastern pylon took a cross shape). The apse is distinctly horseshoe-shaped in plan and has a rectangular chapel on the south.

Of the remaining fragments scattered on the ground in the complex are some beautifully carved **wall stones and pieces of khachkars**, some stones showing designs incorporating a dragon design (vishap) with deep geometric patterns. One stone in particular to look for is placed within one of the wall columns, the stone, a **menhir** (standing stone connected with ancient astronomy) from pre-Christian time stands between two layers of the column. The stone has some etching on it, possibly of Christian symbols, but unclear. It is easy to imagine 4th c builders incorporating pagan stones within the Christian structures, they were barely removed from the pagan faith and many still adhered to it, secretly or in open. By burying pagan cult stones within the façade of the Christian church, they were capturing the essence (good luck, fortune, power) of the old religion within the new, as King Shapuh did by capturing the bones of the Armenian Kings.

The combination of three structures (church, burial vault and stele) was typical of Armenia's early Christian memorial architecture.

About 100 m N of the basilica, a path to the right descends into **the gorge and a series of caves**, some with massive cantilever stone doors from the medieval period. Get a local guide to show you the caves, one of which has a false floor with a giant pit below to hide occupants when someone breached the doorway. Others have pits for storing food, and by the looks of it, the caves are still used by locals for romantic trysts.

**OVERNIGHT**

*Dzorap/Aghst Village Dacha*, (Tel: 091-45-60-53) located about 10 km from Ashtarak and 150 meters uphill from the 4th c mausoleum church of the Arshakuni kings, is a private dacha that can be rented out (self-catering) for weekends or weekly stays with advance notice of a week or more. The dacha is built on several floors on top of a rise in the hill overlooking the Amberd canyon and has several stone patios that look out over the river, towards Biurakan, and Ararat. There is a small pool in front (normally empty, give them a week to fill it), large kitchen and dining area with balconies, two DBL rooms and fold out sofa in the great room, one and a half baths. Large, a little frayed, funky with breath-taking views. Next door farmer neighbors look out for the space and can provide light catering. \$250 a week for up to 4 people; \$150 a weekend. Catering \$25 a day for 4.



*Taxi Service* is (093-92-20-03) and 3000 AMD to Yerevan, **Camping** is possible in the river gorge or nearby; **Overnight** in village home (rustic, 3000-5000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** in the village.

➡ *Continue uphill on the Dzorap road (take the left fork when given the choice) for about 5 km on a climbing, winding road past the turnoff to Orgov (at about 2.9 km) that gradually deteriorates as it reaches **TEGHER** monastery (DD 40.34474 x 44.23975)* 📍 🏰 🌿

🏰 **TEGHER** - ՏԵԴԵՐ ▲ (before Dighir elev. 1700m, pop. 15 or 50 when the shepherds come up for summer) is at the end of a mountain road, surrounded by fields of grass and flocks of sheep and cattle. The old village, built in the 19th c and abandoned in 1962, is a fine example of traditional Armenian architecture and lies next to the large monastery which, for all its dark and brooding

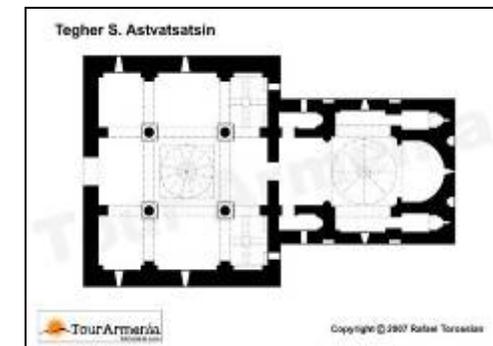
looks, appears like a fairytale castle as you twist and wind your way uphill to its alpine location.

**The monastery** is dated to the early 13th century, built for Princess Khatun (a.k.a. "Mama Khatun"), wife of Prince Vacheh Vachutian, who had purchased the district of Aragatsoth from the Zakarian brothers and spend the first decades of the century erecting fantastic monasteries on the mountainside. Tegher is the sister vank to two contemporary monasteries built on the other side of the Amberd River at Ohanavan and Saghmosavank. Built in the same period (1200-1220) and designed by the 13th c architect Vardapet Aighbairik, these three monasteries form a triptych of the best of Armenian design and experimentation in the period.

Flushed with new ideas about design and engineering and flushed with cash from the riches of the reopened Silk and Spice Trails, the period is sometimes called the Silver Age. Unable to rival the literary brilliance of the 5th c Golden Age, it was in fact Armenia's Golden Age of Church construction, when oriental, European, Byzantine and Roman ideas and décor melded into an exciting style that somehow became distinctly Armenian. Just as early Armenian ideas about the arch and the central dome influenced the great gothic cathedrals of Europe and construction in Asia; a few hundred years later Asian and European ideas about décor and towering structures found their way back to Armenia. Tegher, Hovhanavank and Saghmosavank are three great examples that show some of this influence. The monastery is still a place of pilgrimage for four nearby villages, especially on the grape blessing holiday in August.



**Tegher.** The monastery complex consists of the 1213 S. Astvatsatsin, a 1221 gavit with two domes towers, and a 19th c village as well as a new "D'gheraton" folk restaurant and museum. The D'gheraton plans to renovate the entire old village into a folk art center and lodge, making this one of the more interesting spots in the region, well worth the stop.



The **church of St. Astvatsatsin** (1213) is made of dark gray basalt. The church is an enclosed cruciform type with four chambers in the corners, used as chapels and depositories. The large hall has a central dome and ends in a semicircular apse. The dome is supported by the corner columns of the square, and has a tall round drum. The décor is simple, without much design save the cornice moldings and the accentuation of the arches in the main area. The cupola of the dome is reach by a transition of layers from it base, accentuating the height of the space, the volume seeming to expand beyond its actual dimensions.

As you enter the church, look on both side walls immediately after the door; the inside walls boast niches, surmounted by a pointed arch, reminiscent of central Asian design predominant among the Muslim overlords at the time.



The church was built at the time of Mongol invasions, and survived intact, a feat not often repeated in the country. The story goes that when they were building the church, Mama Khatun had the architects install these pointed arches so that invading Mongols would recognize them and consider the church one of their own. Interesting to note that the arch has two protruding arches on the below the top point, forming a trilogy of design features. The trilogy is one of the most constant symbols of the Christian faith, in this case allowing Mama Khatun to placate the Mongols while she confirmed the Christian purpose of the design.



The outside of the church, a rectangular building with two wall niches and windows on the north, east and south, is also simply done, with little attention to detail or the ebullient décor of its sister vanks at Hovhanavank and Saghmosavank. The round tower drum is topped with a tent roof. The roof over the church is gabled, in a cruciform design with the four corners of the central square supporting the drum for the dome.

The **gavit**, finished in 1221, is particularly impressive, a central plan with four thick squat columns and intersecting arches supporting the center square that transitions into the concave dome with open hole. There is little décor, the shapes of the columns, archways and dome pieces giving substance to the structure, and has a grace unmatched in more elaborate gavits elsewhere.

This was a seminary for deacons and acolytes, a place of serious study, and obviously the bishop must have felt Tegher's students did not need the distracting details and swirling baroque designs found at Tegher's sister vanks Saghmosavank and Hovhanavank (never mind those were schools as well). But the gavit is unique in one aspect, its two chapels with domed bell towers, unlike any other gavit in Armenia, though the campaniles set on the roof are reminiscent of the triumphal arch at Horomos monastery near Ani. The towers are tall, with a second floor, where students lived. Access was by ladder near the gavit entrance, perhaps another way of keeping check in students; pull their means of escape at night.



An **inscription** on one of the columns credits Vardapet Aighbairik with designing the gavit and church. Among the **graves on the floor**, some of which are beautifully carved with the simplest of lines, is the grave for Mama Khatun herself, the church's donor (also linked with monasteries at Dadivank in Karabakh) and her husband Prince Vacheh Vachutian. The pictures on the stones, when there is one, lacks any attempt at faithful representation of the person lying below. The images could be any person, male or female, that almost look like figures from Neolithic pictograms.



The lack of personal features is in line with the church teachings of the time; the belief that to achieve grace, to be ready to enter the kingdom of heaven, one must subsume one's identity into a kind of nothingness, or at least to anonymity. The figures also suggest something else, not at all proven but one may be true. They seem to be what they are; ghosts. The lines of the shapes of their figures are like the lines of the aura (halo) that Christianity often illustrates as a halo when representing a saint. Presumably all those buried here were considered holy and as such filled with grace, which the halo represented.

Outside, the western wall has a dozen or so khachkars carved into the façade, mostly towards the top of the wall, memorials of wealthy donors who supported the monastery and so were given a stone "calling card" for heaven in return.



The **medieval-19th c graveyard** has the ruins of a few mausoleums and some interesting **khachkars**, a couple of which lean against wall

ruins. They are deeply cut geometric drawings of the cross and tree of life with fancy edging in the frames, but miss the sun symbol favored in other khachkars of the period.

**Old Tegher village** is a series of ruins on the hill to your L as you approach the church from the parking lot. The village was once quite large and the foundations for the houses and buildings remain to show just how big it was. The small church at the S end of the village is a **Tukh Manuk/ 5th c Astvatsatsin**. The area is slated for some renovation, the villagers from Dzorap, led by the amazing and irrepressible Mamvel Soghomonian, are about to start rebuilding the small houses into folk lodges for tourists. Their plan is to eventually rebuild the entire village into a "Folk Village," for visitors, combining folk craft demonstrations with restaurants, tourist lodging, stables and horse back riding and organized treks into the river gorge and up Mt. Aragats.



#### FOOD AND DRINK

Currently run by Mamvel and his partners is the surprising and well done *D'gheratur & Hatsatur*, next to Tegher Church (tel. (091) 456053, 488150). Once a folk museum, the site has been authentically rebuilt as it once was in the 18th-19th cc, with authentic lavash tonirs, butter churns, grist mills, weaving and other folk craft demonstrations, as well as incredibly tasty food using old recipes.



They cater to a lot of groups but always welcome walk ins and as they grow (especially the Old Village site) will increase their offerings. There are two remarkable things about this site; the first that Mamvel and his team have rebuilt the site with no outside funding; Secondly, they are completely respecting the original architecture and materials used 200 years ago. While there are modern conveniences for the more comfort prone of us, the structures use original materials whenever possible. A beautiful example of what can be achieved in Armenia with local initiative.

**Camping** is possible in the church yard, which has running water); **Springs** in the church yard and area.

↪ Backtrack about 2.1 km to the fork in the road and turn left (E) continuing for about 2.2 km to (Orgov DD 40.3333 x 44.2500) 🏠 🚰 🌿

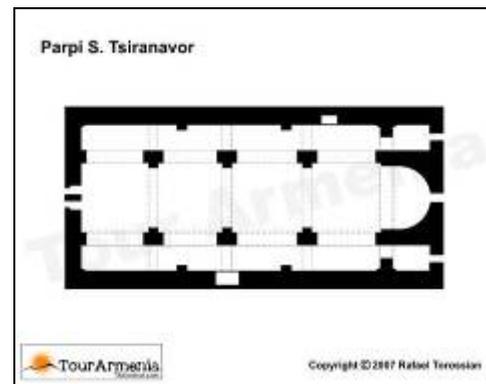
**SIDE TRIP:** (Orgov - Օրգով elev. 1388, pop. 300) is a small alpine village on the left bank of the Amberd River with the remains of a **Bronze age fort** on its western edge, used to defend the upper approaches to Amberd Castle during Urartian, Roman and medieval times. Next to the fortress remains is an underground passage that leads to a spring.

Prides of place are the huge **Radio-Optical Telescopes** scattered around the village and set into crevices of the mountainside. The telescopes combine features of both traditional optical telescopes and the (then) new 20th c techniques of exploring space using Radio waves with large antennas. The most famous radio-optical telescope (ROT) is the first built on the site, the "Heruni Mirror Radio telescope" (ROT-

54/2.6), the Large Antenna of which with a diameter 54m still has the best parameters among all Large Antennas in World. The antennas are truly gigantic, impossible to image without waling by one and peering down in the huge concave antenna. Spearheaded during the Soviet period, they continue to work, supplying vital research to astronomers around the globe. The institute is headed by Paris Heruni, the president of the Radio Physics Research Institute and the Academy of Sciences. Heruni is better known in Armenia for his efforts to promote the discovery by astrophysicist Elma Parsamian of 5th-3rd cc BCE astronomical observatories in Armavir and Siunik marz. If you are into astronomy, stop by the office to see if anyone is free, it is a treat not to be missed.

**Camping** is possible in the river gorge or nearby; **Overnight** in village home (rustic, 3000-5000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** in the village.

↪ Backtrack down the mountain to the Giumri Highway, turn left (W) and take the highway to and above Ashtarak for about 5.9 km to the Parpi cloverleaf exit (left or N) and take that for about 4.7km to **PARPI** center (DD 40.32941 x 44.30722) 🏠 🚰 🌿



📍 **PARPI** - ՓԱՐՊԻ 📍 (also known as **Parbi**, elev. 1160m, pop. 894) is on the right bank of the Shakhvard River, and was another of a series of Iron Age forts that guarded the approaches to Amberd Castle. The N side of the village has the remains of the **5th c Tsiranavor** ("Apricot") church, a unique example of the protruding apse hall style, once considered rare in Armenian

architecture and an experiment in the development of the cross form from the single aisle basilica.

The church is most certainly built over a previous temple and shows traces of Greek Cornice style with early Christian symbols carved on the window and door lintels. The apsidal archway has survived, giving some sense of the original height of this otherwise small space with the hall space (4.14 x 8.75m interior) ending in the protruding apse with pentagonal walls on the outside. The church is built from finely hewn basalt blocks of stone. Entries are on the W and S walls, the doorways capped with U-shaped stone crossbars. All walls, except the north wall have wide windows, another unique feature of Armenian churches in this period. The upper portion of the W façade has double windows typical of Armenian architecture in the 4th-5th cc. Also typical of the period, Greek crosses in circles surrounded with stylized palm trees are carved in the capitals on the apsidal arch. The capital abacus bears a geometric ornamental pattern (a rectangle divided into eight triangles) typical of in Armenian churches in the 5th c. The church was renovated in the 7th c, its wooden roof replaced with stone vaulting, and wall piers with flying arches added to the hall. The vault and arches were pointed, a rarity of churches in the early medieval period. It was renovated again in the 10th c, as the builders added a second set of walls, turning the church into a fortress.



Portions of the walls use stones from the cyclopean walls of the nearby **Bronze Age fortress** and Medieval settlement on the hill just to the E, also where you will find the remains of the small but elegant **Tarkmanchats ("Holy Translator") Church**. Built in the 7th c, the church was completely rebuilt in the 10th-11th cc, adding a southern entrance portal. It is a tetraconch (four conchs, or semicircular apses with a central dome), the protruding apses decorated with stone carvings and khachkars embedded in the walls. Half columns were used in the interior corners of the apses to support the dome arches. The adjoining corners of the rectangular arms were also reinforced by half-columns on the outside. Destroyed and rebuilt several times, masons used khachkars and surviving carvings in the walls. There is also the tradition of donating memorial stones that were embedded in the walls as well, so it is hard to differentiate between those intentionally placed by wealthy donors and those used from the surrounding cemetery. The carvings take pride of place here, some of the most elaborate and whimsical we have seen in Armenia. Grape bunches and pomegranates are carved on the capitals of the half-columns that frame the entryway, deliberately built low so you have to bow to enter the church, and an extraordinary 'trinity' of circular designs based on the sun symbol is carved over the main lintel.

The cemetery contains a number of **tombstones** dating back to the 4th c with the **red Khachkar** nearest the church showing a distinct Tree of Life image under the cross, the weave of the cross pattern interlaced with the surrounding geometric pattern. The site is especially beautiful in the spring, when the grass is green and wildflowers cover the hillside, some sprouting from the walls of the church.

Nearby are the **S. Grigor** Church with khachkar fragments and the adjoining **medieval cemetery** with graves and domed sarcophagi scattered on the rolling hill. There are also some exquisite khachkars from the 9th-12th cc, unfortunately damaged or in pieces. Still, beautiful to see in their natural environment. Also nearby is the **S. Gevorg church**, a cruciform dome type with a beautiful 10th c khachkar, and a **cave** with a rolling stone door, used by locals to hide from invaders from the earliest of times, with the rolling door from the time of the Seljuks.

**Camping** is possible in the river gorge or nearby; **Overnight** in village home (rustic, 3000-5000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** in the village.

➡ From Parpi, continue N on the mountain road for about 100 m to (**Bazmaghiur** DD 40.33467 x 44.31023) 🏠 🏞️ 🌿

**SIDE TRIP:** (**Bazmaghiur - Բազմաղբյուր** till 1949 *Takia*, elev. 1160m, pop. 894) has some **early graves** and on the opposite canyon rim from Parpi, the remains of a **Bronze Age/Iron Age Fort** of the same name.

**Camping** is possible in the river gorge or nearby; **Overnight** in village home (rustic, 4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** in the village.

➡ From Bazmaghiur, continue NE on the mountain road for about 600 m to (**Ghazaravan** DD 40.34778 x 44.34167) 🏠 🏞️ 🌿

**SIDE TRIP:** (**Ghazaravan - Ղազարավան** before Nazervan, elev. 1346m, pop. 505) has some **Bronze Age fortresses and settlements** nearby, otherwise the end of the road and jumping off point for Aragats treks to the nearby Shamiram Canal and the quickly rising hills to nearby Mt. Karagush (1581.1m, 2 km N as the bird flies, 4 as trekkers climb) or follow the Shahvard River gorge up the face of Aragats (about 7 km to a fork, take the left fork for another 8 km until it peters out at 2600m).

**Camping** is possible in the river gorge or nearby; **Overnight** in village home (rustic, 4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** in the village.

➡ Backtrack to the Giumri Highway (cloverleaf intersection) and take the L (E) road for about 500 m to the Mughni/Aparan exit, take the Mughni exit (N) for about 800 m into to **MUGHNI** (DD 40.31778 x 44.37278) 🏠 🏞️ 🌿

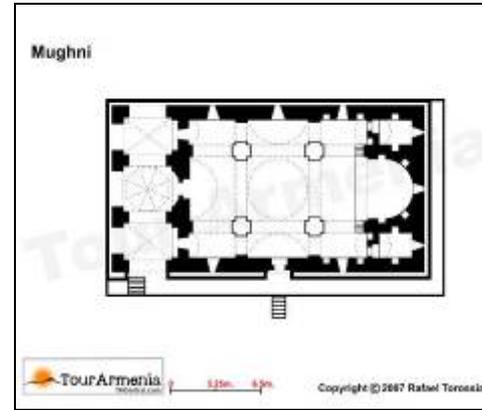
🏠 **MUGHNI - ՄՈՂՆԻ** 🏞️ (elev. 1314m, pop. 450) is actually a part of Ashtarak now, but in its day was a separate village in its own rite, and after Seljuk, Mongol, Kurdish and Ottoman invasions, it was finally given to the Persians in the 1620 division of Armenia between the two Middle Eastern Empires, allocated to the new theme or "mahal" of Aparan. The Russians captured the village in 1828 and placed it into the Aragatsotn District.



The village is a farming community known for one thing; the 14th c **S. Gevorg Monastery** (set in the center of the village of the main road from Ashtarak, open 10-5), for all its holy intentions looking out of place like a orange and black striped corn silo rather than the important 15th c revivalist building it is. Look more closely and you will be rewarded with revelations, as the church has exquisite details and carvings to complement its important role as a transitional church between medieval and modern times and a lonely receptacle of Christian faith during the long period of decline in Armenia.



First built in the 15th c, the church and the area experienced an upturn in fortunes as the Persian Empire promoted trade and prosperity in the Armenian Province. Close to Ashtarak, the village experienced a rising wealth from trade, allowing the Armenian Vardapet Yovhannes to commission a major renovation of the church in 1661.



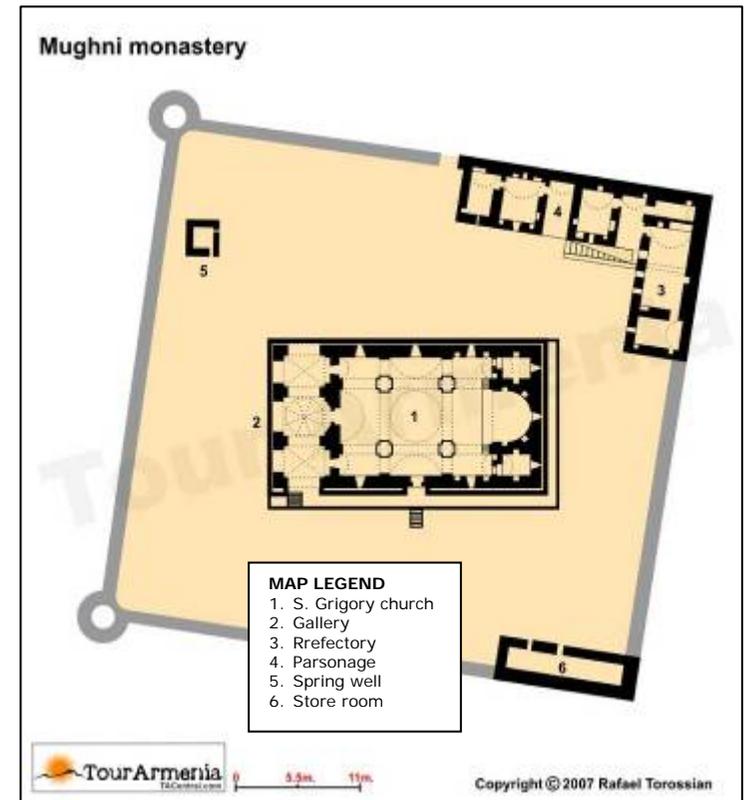
The church was built along the new lines for Armenian architecture, requiring a smaller, compact use of space, with a single church, bell tower over the western entrance (which was added to several older structure to "modernize them"), and residential quarters lining a fortress wall that enclosed the entire complex.

This, protected against outside incursions, still fresh in the minds of locals who had witnessed 600 years of invasions, and small enough to maintain on a still diminished income, the new churches stood testament to the Armenian faith while showing fiscal restraint. Other renovations of this type are the Tatev Mets Anapat, Khor Virap and Shatinvank complexes.

S. Gevorg Monastery has its residential quarters in the NE corner of the monastery walls, its first floor a storeroom for the monastery, the second for residential quarters.

The Church took 8 years to complete and was supervised by the architect Sahak Khizanetsi and then his protégé Murat. The building is a central dome triple-aisle basilica, with an elongated central space divided into three naves by four central piers and archways. The central aisle is more than twice the width of the side aisles and crowned with the drum of the dome. The large apse is flanked by two enclosed chambers in the corners of the eastern wall, each a small chapel with its own altar space.

The large church is considered the best sample from this period, and representative of its style, though there are features unique to this structure; the wide central nave, the unique placement of the central dome over the main hall and not connected to the apse arching, and the retreat from the cruciform shape of the building to a rectangular one with clear-cut shapes. The interior is well



preserved, including fragments of murals dating back to the 17th c, probably done by Nagash Hovnatan, the artist that painted the murals at Echmiadzin cathedral. The richness of the designs and even their presence shows how important this church was to the Armenian hierarchy at the time, its rich adornment in stark contrast to the waning churches in the larger, richer but less favored Ashtarak just 6 km south.



The church exterior has a mosaic design with rings of orange andesite interlaced with basalt and tufa stone. The round drum of the central dome is topped with an "umbrella tent" roof, called so because of its appearance: the roof is a series of 16 inverted Vs ringing the large drum. The drum overpowers the rest of the central hall, for its size and the orange and black rings of stone, looking vaguely Arabic in their effect. The history of the church includes its use by both Christian and Muslim worshippers, and the design might be a result, there is nothing like it in any other Armenian church.



The drum has a series of windows and over each one is a bas-relief of an evangelist. The upper façade is decorated with alternating orange andesite and black tufa blocks, appearing as a chess board in some views, as a detail for arcatures or pediments in another. The large windows in the façade are framed with a protruding orange tufa molding that continues around the windows up into a cross, at the sides into circular design, and below into interweaving "ribbons".

The most beautiful section is the Southern door with its archway carved with elaborate quatrefoil and alternating strips of geometric designs. The western doorway is a real treat, a taste of the Armenian Baroque, its archway (tympanum) includes a beautiful central cross with adjoining bas-relief floral vase designs and some of the original orange coloring for the archway. It is a gorgeous entry, capped by an impressive bell tower and gallery. The gallery, a three arched affair topped by a twelve-column belfry, was built at the same time as the church, rare in Armenian churches, which usually slapped a belfry on to the western face to 'bring it up to code', so to speak. As deep as the first nave in the main hall, the substantial gallery gives the church a monumental affect from front, though it looks ill-placed and squashed from the side.

**Camping** is possible in the river gorge or nearby; **Overnight** in village home (rustic, 3000-5000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** in the village.

➡ From Mughni center continue N on the village road for about 1.7 km to **(Karbi) center** (DD 40.33389 x 44.37778) 

**SIDE TRIP:** **(Karbi - Կարբի** elev. 1270m, pop. 1550) is nestled against the village of Ohanavan with its monastery domes rising above the village roofs. Karbi itself is home to several churches, including the 11th-13th cc S. Kiraki or **S. Gevorg, Tsiranavor and Tukh Manuk** (Black Youth quasi-pagan shrine) as well as the **"Zargarents Zham"**.

No stranger to village rivalry, the best preserved church is the 15th c **S. Astvatsatsin basilica** with bell tower built between 1691-1693. S. Astvatsatsin is a hall-style basilica more reminiscent of 4th and 5th cc hall churches than 17th c edifices. The large hall is made from basalt, decorated with slabs of orange tufa, its

substantial belfry and front gallery sporting the same checkerboard effect as at Mughni, only its design looks more appropriate and less overbearing.



It appears the same architects may have overseen this church, though it may have been just a copy. The same stone work is evident in both villages. There is a tiny 6 columned drum with tent roof on the roof at the point where the central hall meets the apse. Narrow upper windows emit little light into the voluminous interior which is sparsely decorated except for the altar décor, typical for villages like this; lace, copies of the virgin and Christ and a always replenished supply of flowers for the altar. The nave floor has tomb stones that are much older than the 17th c, some appearing to be 13th c or earlier. The carvings of the deceased underneath are sparse and yet florid. There is a nice basalt khachkar embedded in the exterior wall.

The village has prospered in the last decade, its farmlands rich and fertile, its produce in demand in Yerevan and for export. In fact, Karbi is the home for **Tamara Fruit** (in Karbi 032-31-977, Fax: 032-31-976), which produces local fruits into frozen packages and preserves. You can't beat the local prices (75¢ to \$1.50) and the product is locally produced.

Still, the call of new money is strong and the village has suffered some loss of manpower, an exodus few think will reverse in the future. The villagers are extremely friendly and proud of their village and their history as a Persian administrative center (17th-18th cc), and consider the looming domes of Ohanavan to the north actually their own, the villagers of

Ohanavan simply caretakers of the great monastery until Karbi's town limits are expanded to include the more famous building.

**Camping** is possible in the river gorge or nearby; **Overnight** in village home (rustic, 4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** in the village.

➡ From Karbi center continue N on the main village road for about 800 m into **OHANAVAN** and to the Arzni-Shamiram Canal where there is a bridge, just after take the first R (E) and follow it about 400 m to **OHANAVANK** (DD 40.38011 x 44.38118) 

**OHANAVAN - Օհանավան** (elev. 1286m, pop. 1200) is perched on the rim of the Kasakh River canyon overlooking verdant fields on the other side. It was once one of the most esteemed settlements in Armenia, a thriving medieval community that was swept away by Kurdish and Mongol invasions in the 14th c, deserted until it was reborn in 1828 with Armenian immigrants from Mush. The village is home to the magnificent **Hovhanavank (Հովհանավանք)**, which, paired with its sister monasteries at Saghmosavank and Tegher, were rivals for prominence reaching their zenith in the early 13th c under the patronage of the powerful and rich Zakarian family.



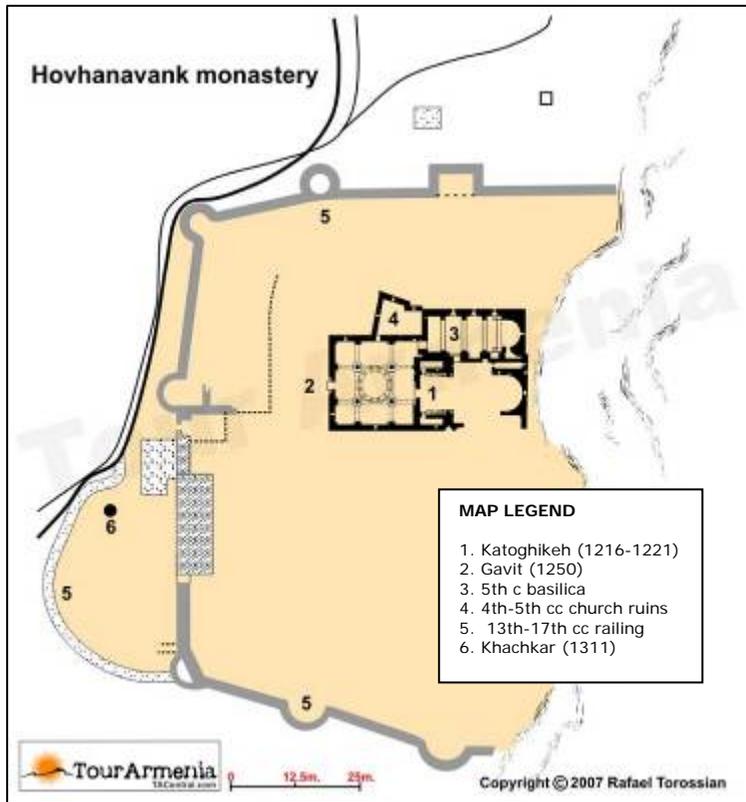
**History**

The village has been inhabited for as long as people have settled the Armenian highland, with evidence of settlement dating to the Iron Age (tools, bones, artifacts). It was a center of some kind for pre-Christian worship, as the original structure, S. Karapet, was built first in the 4th c and whose plan is identical to pagan temples of

the period. The church was rebuilt in 553. The region was controlled by the Mamikonian family, who patronized the churches in the area, including S. Karapet. Losing power in the 9th c, the Mamikonians were replaced by the Bagratunis and their kin the Pahlavunis' who became patrons of the church, but did little to expand its importance. The monastery began to achieve prominence in the 12th c, important enough to have a fortified wall added to protect against Seljuk and Kurdish warlords attacking the region, and especially in the early 13th c as the power of the Bagratuni family waned, replaced by their relatives the Georgian branch known as the Orbeli Kings.

The monastery became an important part of the Aragatsotn district given to the Zakarian brothers for their service to the Orbeli Kings. Hovhanavank's history is paralleled to that of Saghmosavank, 5 km to the north, and both were built to their present structures by the Vachutians, a rich and powerful landed gentry that managed to purchase the lands around them (as well as Amberd and other properties) from the Zakarians soon in the first decade of the 13th c. During a short period of twenty years Hovhanavank, along with its sister vanks at Saghmosavank and Tegher, experienced rapid growth, the small church of Karapet growing to a large monastery and support community. The Zakarians maintained an interest in the monastery, the 17th century Archdeacon Zakaria compiling a history of the monastery in 1686, the most detailed documentation of any monastery in Armenia.

The architecture of these monasteries, along with others in Lori-Berd and Siunik are among the most sophisticated and beautiful in Armenia, and their



collapse by repeated Mongol, Kurdish and Ottoman attacks in the 13th, 14th and 15th cc that much more painful. The Mongol attacks were especially destructive, causing a mass exodus from the area and the desertion of the monastery. Slowly decaying, the monastery experienced a renewed period of growth in the 17th century under Persian rule and especially after the Russo-Turkish war in 1828, when settlers from the Ottoman ruled town of Mush repopulated the village and began to reclaim the church. Soviet times were not kind to the monastery; it was deserted again and fell into disrepair, the dome collapsing in 1919 for a second time, this time pulling down much of the southern end of the hall. Attempts to renovate the monastery began in the 1970s, stopped the Armenian economy collapsed at the end of the Soviet Union, and resumed in the 1990s with the dome reconstructed in 1999 and the church is almost completely rebuilt. The church still maintains an important presence in the history of

Armenian architecture and has been nominated — along with Saghmosavank and Tegher—as a World Heritage Site.

### The Complex

The walled complex sits on a rim overlooking the Kasakh River canyon, on the eastern edge of Ohanavan village. The Monastery's earliest structure is the 6th c incarnation of the 4th c S. Karapet ("the Forerunner", i.e. "John the Baptist") church, said to be built on the foundations of a pagan temple to an unknown deity. The single aisle basilica certainly seems to sit on the footprint of an earlier temple—or was built to the same dimensions—its size and layout are nearly identical to pagan temples of the era. The small basilica had a wooden gallery on the south side and was rebuilt in 553 replacing the wood roof with a stone one, its present vault roof with three flying arches. The church was made of finely hewn tufa and basalt stone, weathered over time. The arrangement of the wall arches, resting on piers embedded into the walls makes the interior seem longer than it actually is. Foundation fragments of another early church lie next to the 5th c basilica, little is known of this second ancient church.



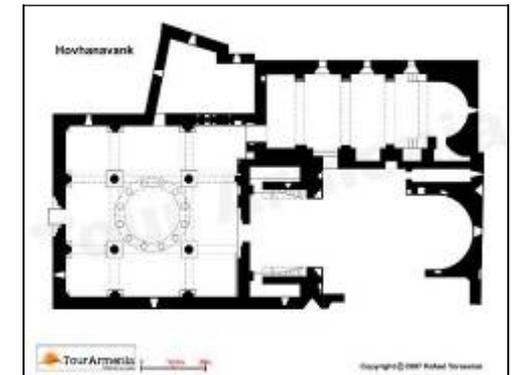
The 5th c church flanks the main Hovhanavank church, built in 1216-1221 and funded by Vacheh Vachutian, who also had built the monastery at Saghmosavank. The church is of the same type as Saghmosavank, a cross-winged domed structure with two-story annexes in the corners of the building. The western annexes retain their original staircases. The cupola space predominates in the interiors of both churches, also reflected in the exterior shapes of these structures. The decoration of S. Karapet is more refined, the front apron of the semi-circular apse composed of patterned stones — five-pointed stars, pentagons

and diamonds — framed with half-round molding. This kind of design was typical for 13th c Armenian churches (Harich, D'segh, and Stepanosavank).

The monastery has numerous inscriptions on its walls, detailing parts of its history. One, high on the N wall of the "tapanatun" (sepulchre, mausoleum, literally "gravestone house") reads:

*"By the grace of our beneficent God, during the reign of Queen Tamara daughter of the great Giorgi, in the year 642 (1200 CE), of the race of Torgom, we the brothers Zakaria and Ivaneh, sons of Sarkis the great, son of Avak Zakaria, when the light of God's grace rose and entered Armenia and fortified us in the battle against the enemies of Christ's cross and destroyed their power and crushed their violence and the country of Ararat was delivered from the heavy yoke of their aggression, we wished to make offering and gave the tribute of grace to the Holy Forerunner of Hovhanavank..."*

Exterior decoration was concentrated on the dome and the three facades (east, south and west). The 12 sided drum of the dome is of considerable height and decorated with an arcature set on a series twin half-columns, the walls between interspersed by narrow windows and molding designs with framed circular designs. The dome is covered with an umbrella tent roof.



The central window on the eastern façade is framed with twin moldings. Probably influenced from the same idea at Koberh and Akhtala. The moldings on the two diagonal squares with inset circles just beneath the East window and above it, form a small circle, a square and then a cross. The western façade is similar in design, but it is obscured by the gavit. The western doorway is

decorated with columns arranged in a perspective, the door framed by eight-pointed stars set into the wall, the entire frame covered with floral ornamentation much like that in the interior of the church.



The tympanum over the doorway is perhaps the most interesting aspect of the decoration, a surprisingly realistic bas-relief of the "wise and unwise maidens", the central figure of Christ

enthroned, his hands raised and his face turned to the left, his right hand blessing the "wise maidens" (those who kept their legs closed, one presumes) and with his left reproaching the "unwise". Still iconic, the realism of the garments and its rich detailing is a remarkable advancement in the depiction of human forms in Armenian religious art.

The **gavit** (narthex) was built for Prince Kurd, the son of Vacheh Vachutian, in 1250, and is of the type typical for the period, a largely square, four columned room with a central open rotunda and dome. The abutments for the arches are more uniform than at Saghmosavank, while the section roofs are more varied. The eastern section is a series of stalactites, the south-eastern corner is made of intersecting lines, and the southern section is a flat stone ceiling while the western section is crowned at the entrance by a dome-like roof. The central section is topped with a twelve-column rotunda and belfry, the largest in diameter (6.5m) in its time.

The belfry was added later, probably in 1274 during renovations to the building. The original opening was topped by a steep tent roof resting on intersecting arches, similar to tent roofs of 13th c gavits in Arzakan, Makaravank and Khoranashat. Look at the rotunda; the small arches connecting the alternating round and octagonal columns are trimmed at the top with pointed cornices that point to an umbrella shape. Like the main dome. Its present conical shape probably goes back to 1651 when church underwent repairs.



The western façade is impressive, with its tympanum inscription appearing like an ornamental design, the carvings of diamond shapes on the framing and the stalactite carvings

on the twin windows. The original windows are thought to have been cross-form, like the twin apse windows at the church of S Grigor in Tatev.

The monastery **cemetery** is a number of medieval tombstones, some in the shape of richly ornamented khachkars. Of special note at Hovhanavank is a 1311 red Khachkar framed by intricately carved column base with arching.

#### Other

The village center also has a **Commemorative Monument to the Fallen**, a monumental sculpture for the victims of the genocide by the architect M. Manuelian. The inscription on the monument reads, "In the memory of the 1915 Genocide and the Martyrs of 1988," a reference to the murders of 300 Armenians in Sumgait, a suburb of Baku, Azerbaijan.

On a rim of the gorge opposite from Hovhanavank in the N end of the village is the internationally renowned **Gurdjieff center**, an alternative "wholistic healing" center that incorporates methods developed by the psychologist and thinker George Gurdjieff. The center, a large building with its orchard, swimming pool and rest areas, is easy to spot, it is the only developed spot in the village. The center is run by Gurdjieff's grand-daughter, Margaret Gurdjieff, president of Gurdjieff International and a member of the Russian Natural Sciences Academy.



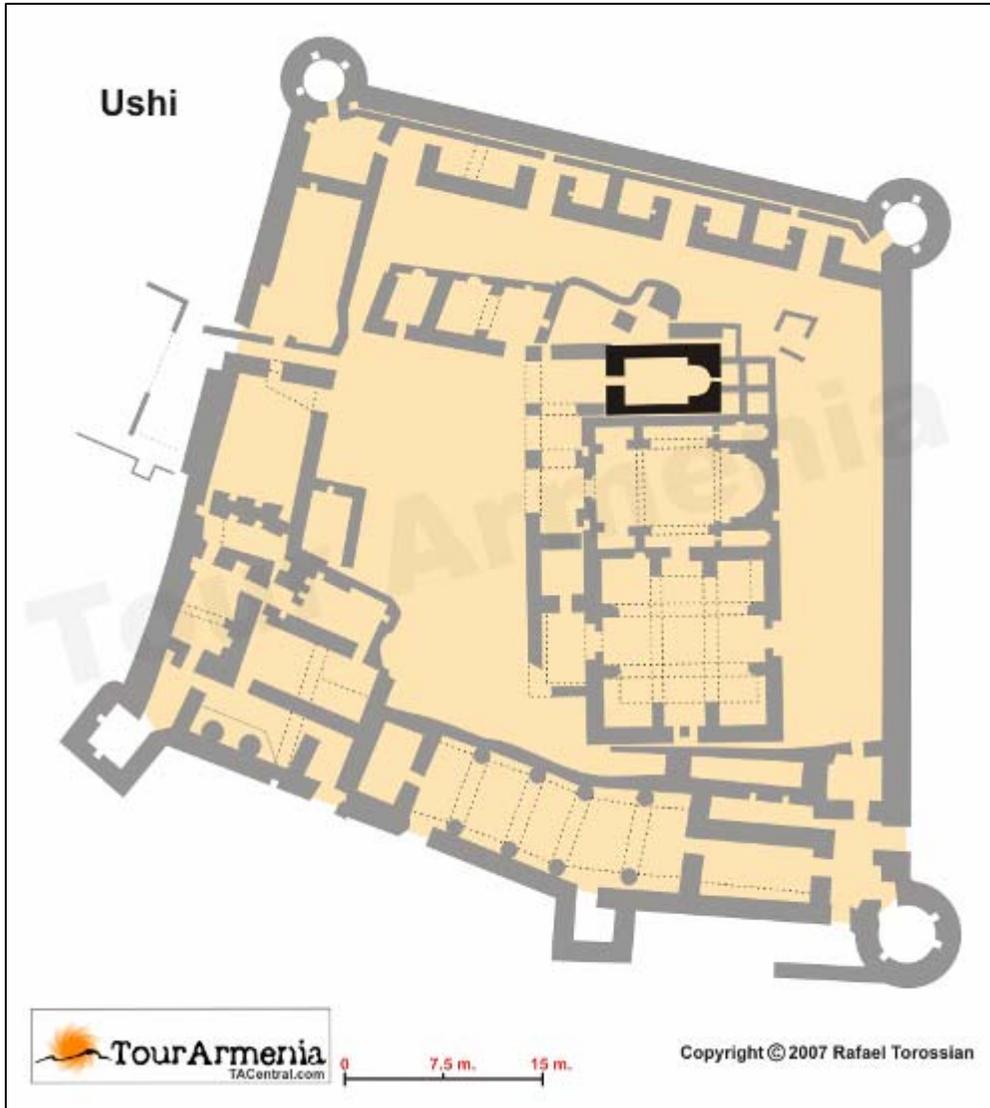
George Ivanovich Gurdjieff (January 13, 1872? - October 29, 1949), was a Greek-Armenian mystic and 'teacher of dancing'. His teaching is about becoming more aware of oneself in daily life. Gurdjieff was born in Alexandropol (Gyumri), but grew up in Kars. Gurdjieff studied medicine and the Eastern Orthodox priesthood in school, but left

the academic world in search of the ultimate answers. From 1884 to 1912, he pursued his quest throughout the Middle East, India, Tibet, and Central Asia. Gurdjieff describes these expeditions and his encounters with religious schools and monasteries in his autobiography, *Meetings With Remarkable Men*. While in Moscow in 1912, he met author, lecturer, mathematician, and his famous disciple, P.D. Ouspensky. Ouspensky helped to spread Gurdjieff's thoughts and ideas throughout the United States. To avoid harsh times after the Bolshevik Revolution, and after traveling through Georgia, Constantinople, and Germany, Gurdjieff and his followers fled to France in 1922. In France, he established the *Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man* at the Priore at Avon. Gurdjieff established the Institute because he believed his ideas needed to be rediscovered by his students. He felt they could accomplish this discovery with unexpected and sometimes strenuous activities similar to the style of Marpa, the thirteenth-century Tibetan teacher of Milarepa. Gurdjieff centers were established in Western Europe and the Americas, the center at Ohanavank the first in the post Soviet Union. Once an advisor to Stalin, Gurdjieff was forced into exile by the Communists and his family sent to Samarkand. Margaret Gurdjieff studied her grandfather's manuscripts in secret, and opened the center in Ohanavank, which she believes has a special energy for healing in Armenia.

**Camping** is possible in the river gorge or near the vank, but ask first; **Overnight** in village home (rustic, 3000-5000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** in the village.

➡ From Hovhanavank church backtrack to the main village road (about 400 m west), turn right (N) and go about 800 m to an intersection with left (W) and right (E) turns. Continue past that another 75m or so and take the left (W) road about 2400 m to the Aparan Highway. Cross the highway and continue another 200 m to **USHI** (DD 40.35361 x 44.36861) 📍 🗺

📍 **USHI – Ուշի** 📍 (elev. 1379m, pop. 1550) is the latest incarnation of a series of settlements, fortresses and burial sites in the area from the Bronze and Iron Ages, as well as others like the abandoned **Buravet Village**, east of the gorge, most of which have only recently been recovered by [Wings Over Armenia \(www.archaeology.am/index.html\)](http://www.archaeology.am/index.html), a team of archeologists studying sites from paragliders and airborne cameras. The village was the



administrative center for the Persian mahal of Sayyidli-Aksakhli, covering the western slopes of Aragats and inhabited by pastoral communities of Turkish-Kurdish tribes. The village has several sites, a 10th c church, remains from a Bronze Age settlement and fortress, and the important Medieval S. Sarkis Vank.

As you reach the village, take the right fork, a paved road through the village to the other side (W). You will pass a small **10th c church**, mostly in ruins. On the W edge of the village an access road continues another 500 m or so to the Western

Hill and ruins of the 5th-18th cc **S. Sarkis Vank**, plus a 7th c shrine.

The founding of the monastery is supposedly connected to a certain Sparapet Sarkis "Zorovar" (warrior), Prince of Cappadocia (361-363), who, banished by Emperor Julian found haven at the court of the Armenian King Arshak. Sarkis then served in army of the Persian King Shapuh who had him soon beheaded for preaching Christianity. He was buried in the village of Namian, Mazandaran Province. In the first decade of the 5th c, Armenians led by Mesrop Mashtots had his remains taken from Persia and interred on the hill you are standing, and built a small memorial church in his honor. The structure, simply and quickly made, soon collapsed, and the struggles of Armenians against the Persian Sassanids and Byzantines prevented them from being rebuilt until after the Arab conquests, when, in a 10th-11th cc the church was restored on the foundations of the original.

During the 12th-13th cc the Zakarians and Vachutians ruled the area and new wealth poured into their coffers, allowing them to build a new domed church adjoining the southern walls of the old church. According to inscriptions on the doorway, a gavit was added in 1246 adjoining the south wall of the new church, which is also known as the large church or Astvatsatsin. Sometime in the 14th c a belfry was added to the western side of Astvatsatsin. By this time the complex had become so large and developed it was converted into a monastery. The monastery was damaged by Mongol invasions, the worst of which was the Timur invasion of the 15th c, and largely neglected, though fortifications were built during Persian Rule in 1654, which shored up its image somewhat.

Soon after, the 1679 earthquake severely damaged the monastery, and it was unable to restore itself to its former glory. Finally, in 1827, Ushi and the surrounding area was struck by a severe earthquake that completely ruined the monastery, toppling the belfry, most of the living accommodations and badly damaging S. Sarkis church. Restoration efforts are underway to preserve the smaller church with plans to eventually restore the entire complex.

#### The Complex

Despite its state, the huge walled compound (45m x 54m) is impressive, if you have to use your imagination to recreate some of the battlements and buildings.

The small (5.8m x 8m) standing church is the original **5th-12th cc S. Sarkis chapel**, built over his grave. The chapel is a single-nave hall church and had a vaulted ceiling and gable roof. The structure was built from polished basalt. It is badly damaged though it has been cleared somewhat in preparation of eventual restoration. The footprint of the church suggests it may have been erected over a Pagan temple, Mashtots and his cohorts wanting to both venerate their sainted Zorovar and strike a blow against local nonbelievers, which were in abundance in the 4th c.

Butting up against it, now a pile of rubble with trace foundations, was the large **12th-13th c S. Astvatsatsin (Holy Virgin) Church**, a central dome triple apse basilica with a rectangular exterior. The semicircular apse and hall was quite wide, flanked by two very narrow halls each with a sealed chamber used as a depository or treasury. The hall is divided into three areas by two sets of columns at the end of the apse curved wall and thick walls with archway above on the western end, dividing the west area from the main and apse creating a narthex with two end chapels on the N and S. The portal had a tympanum with a religious scene carved on it, and the windows and cornices were adorned with moldings and geometric ornamentation.

The **1246 gavit** seems to have been typical for its time, a square centric plan with four sets of half columns supporting intersecting arches that end in wall piers, also made to look like columns. The central space was topped by an open dome of some kind, and the entry was from the W, with a portal into the main church on the N end of the gavit. There are two windows, E and S. The decor was also typical of the time, elaborate carvings of geometric patterns and floral motifs on the cornices, bands and around the windows and portals. Some fragments can be seen in the ruins.

A **gallery** with arcature set on columns and ends wrapped the W end of the chapel and church, ending in the walled base for the 14th c **belfry** which had a polyhedral rotunda with tent roofing. The belfry survived until the 1827 earthquake, when it was toppled.

Adjoining the N end of the chapel and running to the W was a **long building** with four rooms (the two on the right were above the chapel walls) used as service or guest chambers. All along the North, West and South walls were **monk quarters**, a

**vaulted guest-chamber, dining and utility buildings.** If restored they will make up the most extensive set of monastery buildings in Armenia, though judging from all the rubble around you this will be one big puzzle.

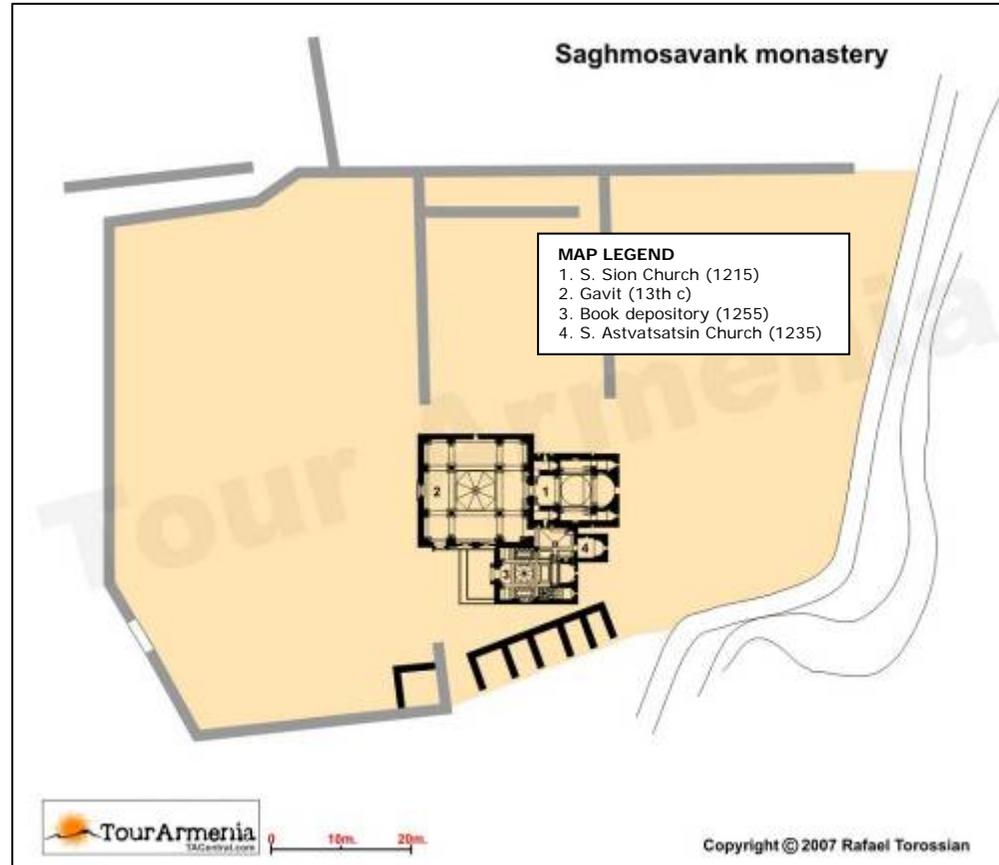
The complex is surrounded by the remains of a **fortification wall** built in 1654 with 2-story circular and square towers in the corners. It lasted barely 20 years, damaged by the 1679 earthquake that ruined much of the service buildings in the monastery.

Just North of the vank (about 200 m) on the top of the hill are the remains of a major **Bronze and Iron Age fort**, hard to detect when on foot, but easy from the air. The fort easily dwarfs the monastery in size, perhaps three times as big, with battlements and corner towers, and some traces of Menhirs and tomb mounds.

**Overnight** in village home (rustic, 4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** in the village.

➡ Backtrack to the fork in the road and take a N path to the Aparan highway and turn left (W), after about 300 m the highway curves N, continue for about 4.7 km to the N entrance of (Artashavan) (DD 40.39361 x 44.38139) 

**SIDE TRIP: (Artashavan - Արտաշավան** elev. 1632m, pop. 2107) is a small farming village best known for being next to the more famous 13th c Saghmosavank, but which has a superb little **7th c Astvatsatsin church** in its NE corner. To get there, from the Aparan highway follow the road into the village for about 700 m or the third right turn, take that for about 200 m to the church. Astvatsatsin is an open cruciform type with protruding wings and central dome, in the style of Karmravor in Ashtarak, the dome set upon an octahedral drum. The entire structure is made from multicolor tufa, and has the restrained decor of the period, with small flourishes of molding in the cornices and over the windows. A medieval cemetery wraps around the church on three sides (N, W, and S) and has two fine khachkar specimens, one being an extraordinary **early Christian khachkar** made from a menhir (standing stone, much like those at Karahundj). Normally traced to the 8th c, a few very early samples (4th-6th cc) can be found in remote areas of Armenia, this being one. The stone, and the church location,



suggest both were built over a pre-Christian worship area.

**Camping** is possible in the river gorge or near the vank, but ask first; **Overnight** in village home (rustic, 4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** in the village.

➡ Backtrack to the main village road, turn left (S) and continue for about 500 m to a T intersection, turn left (E) and go about 1.1 km and out of Artashavan to the village and monastery of **SAGHMOSAVANK** (DD 40.40246 x 44.37881S) 

✂ **SAGHMOSAVAN - ՍԱԴՄՈՍԱՎԱՆ** (elev. 1610, pop. 194) is the name for the tiny village

next to the more famous 13th c **Saghmosavank - Սաղմոսավանք** monastery, both perched on the rim of the dramatic and steep Kasakh River Canyon.

Saghmosavank ("Monastery of Psalms") was built in the same period as its sister vank Hovhanavank 5 km to the south, for the same family, the Vachutians, who had purchased the region from the Zakarians. Prince Vacheh Vachutian is tied to both vanks, but his wife, Mama Khatun, is more closely connected to Saghmosavank, and considered its sponsor.

The monastery is dated to 1215, though whether that is the founding of the vank or the completion of the main church is uncertain. Damaged during a string of invasions in the 12th-13th cc, the

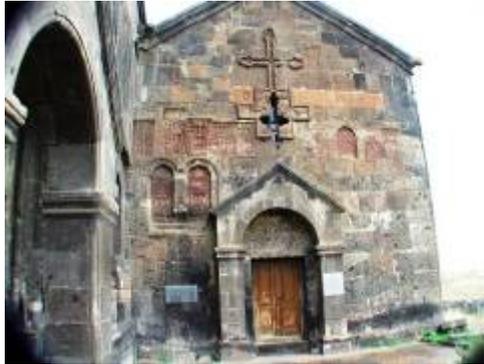
monastery was deserted after the Timur invasion (14th c), rebounding only after Persia took the region from Turkey in the 17th c. It was also severely damaged by the earthquakes of 1679 and 1827 and was renovated several times including a major renovation in 1890. Further damaged in 1988, ongoing restoration has shored up the walls while the monastery waits funding for a complete rejuvenation. The monastery is still a magnificent example of its type, and some say the more beautiful of the two sister vanks, the building set into the landscape more complimentary than at Hovhanavank. You decide.

The main church, **S. Sion (Zion)** is a cross-winged, central domed structure with two-story annexes in the corners. The exterior is rectangular, though the roof lines show the wings of the cross. The semicircular apse opens into the central space, frames with four piers of columns supporting archways that in turn support the cupola and dome. The dome overpowers the rest of the building, adding light and substance to the whole space by its mere presence. The western area is separated by arches and indentation in the walls but still opens into the central domed area. The western area has staircases to the upper parts of the NW and SW annexes, used for study, writing and worship. The interior is simpler than at Hovhanavank, but no less refined or beautiful, in Saghmosavank you get a sense of harmony and balance in the structure itself, without the trappings of too much décor.



The exterior of the building is accentuated by wall niches on either side of the façade windows, which are obscured on the western end by the gavit. The building is of the same type as Hovhanavank, though its décor is less ebullient than the family monastery to the south, belying its function as a

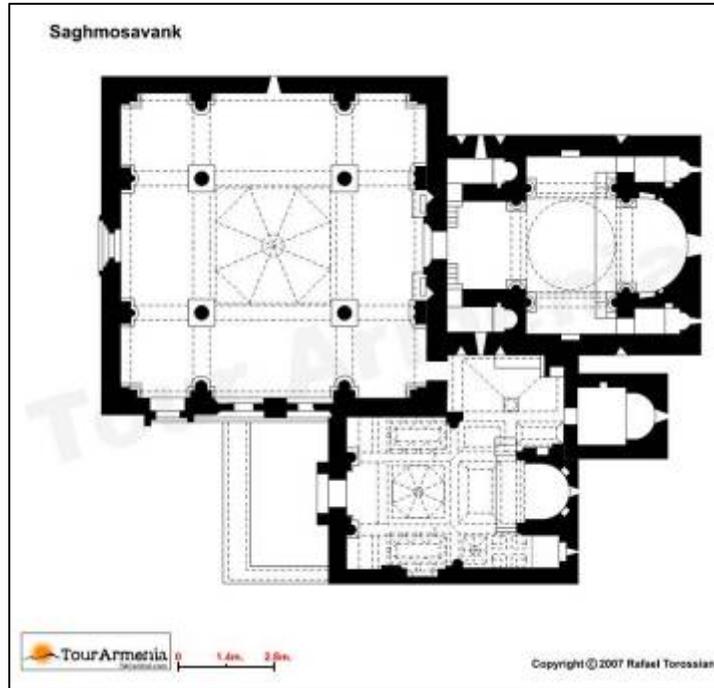
seminary and religious study center. Still, there are fine carvings on the edifice, with geometric and ornamental designs on the cornices and framing the windows and portals. Of exceptional note is the tympanum on the western entrance to the church, a stylized depiction of Christ and his disciples over a row of eight pointed stars carved like filigree.



A second, much smaller church is the 1235 **S. Astvatsatsin**, built to the S of the main church and now incorporated into the NE end of the book depository. The small space is more of a chapel, with barely room for a few people to stand before the semicircular apse. The vaulted hall is square, about the same depth as the altar space.



Though both monasteries were seminaries and research centers, Sagmosavank is better known for its academy and library, served by two remarkable structures in the monastery. The first is the large **church gavit**, built in the second quarter of the 13th c and added to the west of the



main church by Vacheh's son, Prince Kurd. The gavit is a large space with four central columns supporting intersection archways ending into support piers in the walls.

The spaces marked off by the central columns have flat vaulted ceilings, but the central area is crowned by a square recess that graduates into a beautiful open dome topped by a small six-column rotunda and tent roof.

The interior of the dome is decorated with twelve facets that are each framed with molding and quatrefoils resting over semi-quatrefoils. The squared opening moves to the circular dome with a series of uneven triangular facets, also framed with moldings. The effect is powerful giving the illusion of a sunburst in the center of a ring of crosses. Outside the gavit is simpler, made from finely hewn tufa. The western entry has two arches, a rounded tympanum arch just above the doorway and a taller pointed arch above it. The tympanum is a monochrome mosaic of stars set on filigree geometrics, while the upper arch is in a honeycomb style reminiscent of patterns popular



The L-shape dictated a number of unique solutions for supporting the roof while maintaining a feeling of a centralized space; half columns and wall

abutments are set at different heights, the archways placed to give the illusion of symmetry with an otherwise asymmetrical arrangement of the rooms and light aperture. The central section is crowned with an octahedral vaulted aperture which is itself topped with an octahedral rotunda and tent roof. The transition to the aperture is done by a series of cantilevers decorated with trefoils which themselves form conchs and small vaults. The rotunda has eight columns with arches and trefoils making the transition to the round dome, which is further decorated with an inscription in large letters above the small arches.

A remarkable structure, the L-shaped **book depository, or library** (1255), was also built for Vacheh's son, Prince Kurd, as an inscription on the walls of the building attests:

*"I Kurd (son of Vacheh) and my wife Khorishah built this library and established this chapel in the name of our daughter."*

The depository is unique for a number of reasons, not least of which is its complex design and the execution of the support arches for the roofing and dome. The building had an apse in its eastern end and the SE corner has two-story annexes, completely unique for this type of

building. The depository connects with the gavit and Astvatsatsin, and is thought to have been used not only for storing manuscripts but also precious plate especially in light of the eastern apse.

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The side walls are decorated with a geometric pattern made from different star shapes, triangles and octagons. The wall above the altar conch depicts the rays of a rising orb and on the arch next to it an angel and a coat of arms with a winged eagle clutching a lamb in its talons. More interesting is the use of color in the décor, the red and black stones painted with white, yellow and red paint to emphasize the carvings.

The exterior is unique as well, the building as tall as the church and gavit, the facades unadorned and topped with gables. The western façade has two crosses formed by molding, the lower framing the western window. Around the window are bas-reliefs of a lion, doves and rosettes. The walls have numerous crosses carved into the stone blocks, memorials of offerings by pious donors. The column rotunda has thick capitals and an eight sided upper wall for the round fillets (face carvings).



Around the vank are foundations of service buildings and monk Quarters, as well as a **medieval cemetery** with tombstones and a number of tombstones and **khachkars**, some of

which are among Armenia's best samples. Two side-by-side khachkars next to the buildings are set on pedestals and intricately carved, the left one framed with a pointed arch on two side columns.



**Camping** is possible on the rim of or in the river gorge, or near the vank, but ask first; **Overnight** in village home (rustic, 4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** in the village and on the riverbed.

➡ END OF TRIP 1



The intricate detailing of this dark stone is amazing, the artist distilled the shapes of the typical khachkar (cross on sun, the tree of life) into a series of finely worked filigree designs that merge together into an entire pattern. Two others are set on tomb chambers or small shrines, with a more robust depiction of the cross, tree and sun. Near the rim of the canyon are a series of khachkars well worth seeing, including a tall red one with "picketed lace" framing and a tall black one with an oval framing of the cross in intricate patterns.

Also in the compound is a black **Matagh Stone**, used by locals for sacrificing small animals as supplication.

The monastery was surrounded by **defensive walls** made of cyclopean stone blocks taken from a nearby Iron Age fortress. Remains are near the entrance.

Along the canyon walls below the monastery are a series of **Caves**, used to hide in during the invasions, most famously during the Timur attacks.

The canyon is excellent jumping off point for hiking in either direction; 5 km North to the confluence of the Kasakh (right fork) and the Gegharot (left fork) Rivers and 12 km to Aparan Reservoir, or 11 km South to Ashtarak.

**TRIP 2: ASHTARAK TO ARAGATS ▲**  
**ASHTARAK –**

**(A) [AGARAK – DZORAP – TEGHER – (Orgov)]**

**(B) AGARAK - BIURAKAN – (Antarut) - AMBERD - KARI LICH**

UPPER CASE destinations are worth a long visit, (*side trips*) are worth the stop if you have the time. Note that **[Agarak, Dzorap, Tegher and Orgov] are also on Trip 1**, and can be skipped or visited as part of either day trip.

This trip takes you up the face of Mt. Aragats, Armenia's tallest mountain. At 4095m, it is a foreboding mass of volcanic rock and fertile hills, topped by four peaks surrounding the sunken cone. If Mt. Ararat is Armenia's soul, Aragats is her body a landmass that can be seen from all but two of Armenia's marz. The mountain is surprisingly accessible, its south peak a three-hour moderate hike up a constant incline. The other three peaks are more rugged, they require better preparation (and stamina) and a guide, but the south peak is attainable for even the active couch potatoes among us. Standing on its craggy top is standing on the top of Armenia. Nothing matches the views of the

country from this vantage point nor the sense of triumph; you are in the house of the ancient gods. The trip to base camp is a 30-minute climb from Ashtarak by car, past Biurakan with its Medieval monasteries and space age astral-observatory and Amberd castle, summer home to Armenia's kings and queens. The road ends at Kari Lich, Armenia's second highest lake (the highest is inside the volcanic crater), an ice-blue (or ice black, depending on when you visit) mirror reflecting the dome of the sky.

**Note.** This trip can be combined with some sites from Trip 1 for a full day of sight-seeing without the climb to the South Peak of the mountain. If

you are going to attempt the climb, give yourself at least one day at Kari Lich to acclimate yourself. It may be a moderate climb, but you are 3200 m above sea level, and lungs and ticker may not be what they used to be. . . .



**Stay:** Overnight in Biurakan, Nor Amberd, Kari Lich.

**Eat:** Biurakan, Nor Amberd, Amberd, Kari Lich.

**Springs:** Biurakan, Kari Lich, Amberd.

NOTE: **"A"** adds four sites from Trip 1, close enough to the route to add for a full day excursion without climbing Mt. Aragats.

☞ From Ashtarak Center, take the main road W/SW about 1.5 km to the Giumri road intersection. Turn right (N) and follow the road as it merges into the Giumri Highway and take the second intersection right (about 5.4 km from the Karmravor intersection), follow that road for about 700 m to **AGARAK** center (DD 40.30778 x 44.28472)

☒ **AGARAK - ԱԳԱՐԱԿ** (elev. 1063m, pop. 2497) for details see [Trip 1 Agarak description.](#)]

**A. ALTERNATE ROUTE: AGARAK TO TEGHER (ORGOV)**

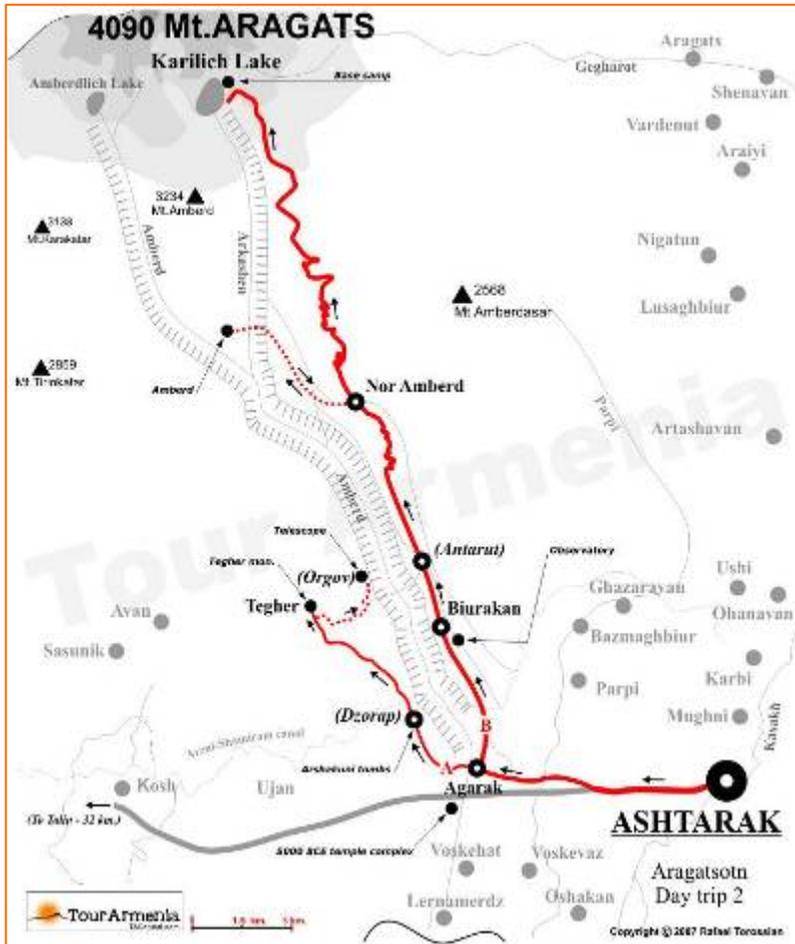
☒ **DZORAP / AGHSTK - ձՈՐԱՓ / ԱՂՏԶ** (before Akis or Hakhs, elev. 1194m, pop. 3497) for details see [Trip 1 Dzorap description.](#)]

☒ **TEGHER - ՏԵԴԻՐ** (also Dighir elev. 1487m, pop. 15 or 50 when the shepherds come up for summer) for details see [Trip 1 Tegher description.](#)]

*[SIDE TRIP: (Orgov - Օրգով) elev. 1388, pop. 300) for details see [Trip 1 Orgov description.](#)]*

**B. AGARAK TO KARI LICH (MT. ARAGATS)**

☞ From Agarak center, take the Biurakan road N (first right after the Voskevaz T-intersection) road for about 3.8 km (take the left at 1.5, right takes you to the Ashtarak highway) as it climbs and switchbacks to the **BIURAKAN** Observatory entrance (right, E), and above **BIURAKAN** center (DD 40.33660 x 44.28473)



**The First Biurakan Survey**

The Markarian survey –the First Biurakan Survey (FBS)— remains the largest spectral survey in the Northern sky and part of the Southern sky at high galactic latitudes.

The survey was carried out between 1965 and 1980 by Markarian and his colleagues V. A. Lipovetski and J. A. Stepanian using the observatory's 102/132/213 cm (40"/52"/84") Schmidt telescope with a 1.5 deg. prism.

Each FBS plate contains low-dispersion spectra of some 15,000-20,000 objects, and there are some 20,000,000 objects in the whole survey, so that one can make a preliminary understanding of their nature. It is possible to select objects by their colour, broad emission or absorption lines, SED; discover, classify and investigate them.

**My winter teas at Biurakan**

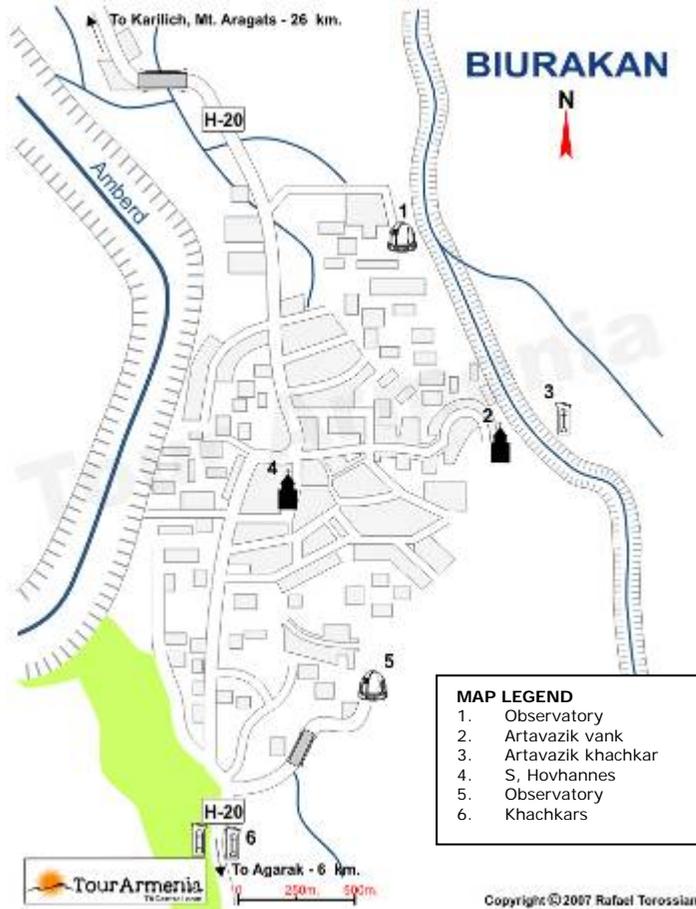
In 1995, as I was beginning to write stories about Armenia that morphed in the first TourArmenia guide, I was lucky enough to wend my way up Aragats one cold winter day to meet some extraordinary folks roughing it in throes of the energy blockade which cut power to the mountain community 23 hours a day.

Everyone I met was genuinely impressed with this American guy (and not CIA too!) who came hauling up to their winter quarters, actually interested in their work! The observatory was as still as the cold crystalline air, their struggle as harsh. "Winter is the best time to see the stars," I was told, somewhat ruefully. "If that switch (to turn on the telescope) worked when I flipped it, I could show you."

And there was one, Edvard Khachikian, a particularly resourceful man, who not only explained the intricacies of Active Galaxies and Diffuse Nebula, as well as the results of his study of the Markarian Survey (replete with stacks of slides and mugs of steaming tea brewed on his wooden stove, the slides viewed by holding them in front of candles, the tea with dollops of home made rose hip compote), but more to the heart that winter, how best to split a log and start a smokeless fire.

I spent several afternoons at Biurakan, standing in the shadow of greatness, knowing in another time I would never have had the chance.

Their humanity is what I remember most, and their humor. You haven't lived until you've heard the one about the traveling galaxy and the Diffuse Nebulae's wife. . .



founded the Biurakan Observatory and had built the second largest telescope in Europe. Immediately the sleepy town found its dot on the worldwide map as Soviet and European astronomers sought to gain access to the telescopes.

**Biurakan Observatory**

Entrance to the observatory is about 1.2 km south of Biurakan village center. The **Biurakan Astrophysical Observatory** or Biurakan Observatory is an astronomical observatory owned and operated by Armenian Academy of Sciences. This is a scientific research center with some pretty amazing research going on. Visitors are welcome, though access may be limited depending on research activities. Scientists from around the globe visit the observatory to conduct research and gain access to the telescopes.

The observatory has discovered many flare stars, Supernovae, Herbig-Haro objects, and cometary nebulae, the 1500 "Markarian" galaxies

with UV0excess, and the site of two major conferences on SETI (Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence).

**History**

Established in 1946 by Hambartsumian, the first telescopes were built between 1951-1955, and included the 5-inch double astrograph, 8/12-inch Schmidt telescope, 10-inch telescope-spectrograph, nebular spectrograph, 16-inch Cassegrain telescope and 21/21-inch (53cm) Schmidt telescope. The installation of the 2.6m Cassegrain reflector enhanced the investigation of the observatory into flare stars.

In 1950 the observatory began construction of radio-telescopes, competing against the Orgov observatory across the Amberd Ravine. Two symphas antennas for observations in 4.2m wavelength and two symphas for 1.5m wavelength were constructed. In 1960 a new Schmidt telescope with 40-inch (102 cm) correcting plate and 52-inch (132 cm) mirror was installed in Biurakan. In 1965, B. E. Markarian began a survey with a goal of revealing UV-excess galaxies. It lasted 15 years and became one of the most famous surveys in astronomical history, discovering 1500 galaxies with UV excess now names the **Markarian galaxies**.



In 1964 and 1971 conferences on extraterrestrial civilizations were held. The meeting of 1971 was the first international symposium on the problem of *Extraterrestrial Civilizations and Communication with Them*. Biurakan's efforts with SETI continue with ongoing research and scanning of the sky. Well recognized for its research and symposia, Biurakan fell on very hard times after the fall of the Soviet Union (see inset: *My Winter teas at Biurakan*). Scientists did not abandon ship but forged new collaboration with colleagues from outside the country: France, Germany, Italy, UK, Spain, Russia, USA, Mexico, Japan, China, India, and other countries. In 1994 the 2.6m telescope was put back into operation with modern equipment donated by the French, who continue to support the observatory with short term research work. In 1998 the observatory hosted an International Astronomy Union symposium on *Activity in Galaxies and Related Phenomena*, dedicated to Hambartsumian's 90th birthday. More than 100 astronomers from 24 countries, attended, beginning the observatory's rebirth. The observatory is headed by Elma Parsamian, astrophysicist and "archeological-astronomer" who uncovered the mysteries of the Bronze Age observatories at Metsamor and Karahundj.

Biurakan Observatory's main telescope is its 2.6m Cassegrain reflector. The observatory also has a 1 and .5 meter Schmidt reflector and other smaller telescopes in use.

**Museum**

**Victor Hambartsumian House-Museum**, Biurakan Observatory, was founded in 1997. The current exposition includes personal belongings of the astrophysicist and his private library of 2500 volumes.



**Victor Hambartsumian**

*Science does not tolerate those who try to combine commitment to it with our attractions.*  
--Victor Hambartsumian

Hambartsumian (1908-1996) was born in Georgia and worked at the Pulkovo Observatory in his early years. He also taught at the University of Leningrad and wrote the first Russian textbook on theoretical astrophysics. Most of his research was devoted to invariance principles applied to the theory of radiative transfer, inverse problems of astrophysics, and the empirical approach to the problems of the origin and evolution of stars and galaxies. Hambartsumian was the first to propose that *T Tauri* stars (lightweight stars in an intermediate stage between proto-stars and low mass stars like our sun) are very young (only 10 million years old) and that their close stellar associations are expanding. He demonstrated the ongoing evolutionary processes in galaxies, such

**BIURAKAN - ԲՅՈՒՐԱԿԱՆ** (also known as **Biurakan**, elev. 1438m, pop. 3034) is on the right (E) bank of the Amberd River, its outskirts perched over the River gorge. The village is prosperous, as much for its greenhouses growing the flowers you pay a fortune for on Sayat Nova p. in Yerevan as for its farm fresh produce and dairy products.

A sleepy stop on the approaches to Amberd Castle and Mt. Aragats, save its position in the Battle of Biurakan at the beginning of the 10th c when Armenians revolted against remaining Arab sovereignty, not much happened in the village until the 20th century when in 1946 the Soviet Armenian astrophysicist Victor Hambartsumian,

as mass loss and worked on interstellar matter, radio galaxies and active galactic nuclei. Hambartsumian was a president of the International Astronomical Union and the organizer of two major conferences on SETI at the Biurakan Observatory (1964 and 1972).

#### OTHER SITES

On both sides of the road as you enter the village from the Giumri highway are some interesting **khachkars and gravestones**, from the 8th c forward. The khachkars are in a kind of park (at least at one time), about 200m before the observatory gate.

A little bit from the fountain square in the center of town (above the observatory, where a R fork branches off the main road; a fountain is on a small stone platform between the roads on the N side) is the 5th c **S. Hovhannes basilica**. To get there, take the R fork from the fountain square, then the first R alley and follow the rocky path around to the church, set on top of a rise in the hill (DD 40.34517 x 44.26490, elev. 2176m).



**S. Hovhannes** is a remarkable building, a basilica with two completely different facades on the S side. The E has a series of arched columns on the façade (with bells placed in front), reinforcing its Romanesque roots. The W side is more in keeping with early Armenian architecture of the time (though it is unique with the main arch over the S entry), suggesting the building was built over several periods, capturing the latest design modes as it grew, and that the eastern side may be even older than its official 5th c date. Romanesque design is found primarily in the oldest structures in Armenia (4th-5th cc). The interior is starkly gothic, with towering walls and limited window

light, though the whole thing feels airy and light, despite its obviously heavy construction. A striking building with a pretty flower garden in the ground and couple of nice khachkars in the yard. Catch this in the evening sun if you can, the amber glow of the red tuff is remarkable.

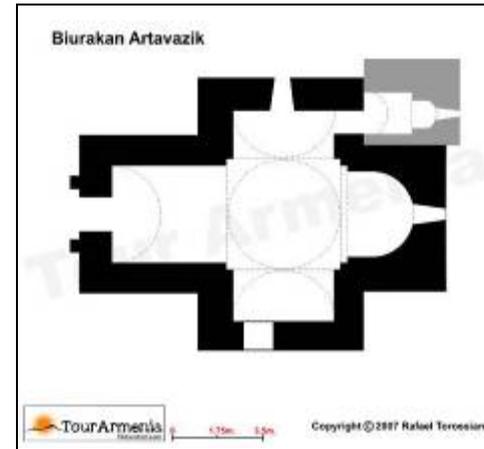


**Artavazik Vank and Khachkar** From S. Hovhannes return to the asphalt road (R fork from the fountain square), turn R (E) and continue out of the village to the canyon (the road peters out to a rocky path). The vank is apparent as you leave the village and descend into the wide gorge, a red structure with a huge khachkar opposite the river (DD 40.33660 x 44.28473, elev. 1438m).



**Artavazik Vank** (7th c) has a relatively complex composition with its apsiadoles (secondary apses) added to the northern side of the altar apse after its main construction. The small domed cross church, built of black and red tufa was partially destroyed by flood in 1840. The remains are a fine sample of 4th-7th cc church construction,

combining roughhewn (walls) with finely cut blocks of local stone (windows, doorways and arches). The apsiadoles were built in the 7th c, immediately following the main construction, seen by mason markings on the walls of the apsiadoles and main hall.



The west entrance has a portal with twin half-colonettes (small columns, often set in clusters). The transition to the dome (now ruined) was made with fan vaults, an ingenious device that distributed the massive weight of the dome efficiently while making the support look thin and fragile. In some cases it did not work, as the collapsed domes through out the country show.



In the 13th c a belfry was erected on the roof over the western entrance, a slender rotunda with delicate fretwork. It too succumbed to the

elements, lightning from an electric storm a few years back striking the dome and shattering the back end. There is still enough remaining to appreciate the detail.

The 13th c khachkar, erected at the same time as the western belfry, is a huge stone, positioned directly in front of the Eastern apse of the church, across the river. The size is truly huge, 4/5th the height of the church walls. In the setting size the stone glows through the ruined walls, a striking image.

#### PRACTICALS

The observatory (mob. tel. (091) 455421 Director, URL: [www.bao.am/](http://www.bao.am/)) does offer public visits and lodging at its hotel (check ahead, full if there is a conference. See overnight below).

#### OVERNIGHT

##### Hotel.

**Biurakan Observatory** (contact Haik at [hhayk@bao.sci.am](mailto:hhayk@bao.sci.am)) has lodging for conference attendees and walk-ins when rooms are available. The lodging is pansionat style, with running hot and cold water. Large groups can utilize the dining facilities, but otherwise no food on campus. DBLS at 15,000 AMD. They also have TRP and other rooms, price per additional person quoted on request.

##### B&B

**Pine Tree House** (Yerevan Tel: (010) 52-16-25) has been around for several years, run by the irrepressible Mary Panian, one of the first to offer quality travel and lodging to expatriates. The B&B is small and clean, still a favorite with expats wanting a break from Yerevan. The B&B is close to the Biurakan Observatory and a good jumping off point for nature hikes into the nearby Amberd River gorge, and exploring the Aragats highlands, including Amberd and Kari Lich. For the flat footed, it is also a great spot for comfortable lodging while exploring the same spots by car. Mary can point out some of the more beguiling and remote points of interest, as well as other local services, like horse-back trail riding on offer nearby. SGL at \$25, includes breakfast.

**Camping** is possible in either river gorge, or above the village on the rim, but ask first; **Overnight** in village home (rustic, 3000-5000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** in the village and on the riverbed.

➡ From the N edge of the church yard (village center), take the Amberd/Aragats road N for about 2.4 km to (Antarut DD 40.35 x 44.266667) 🏰 🌊

**SIDE TRIP:** (Antarut till 1949 Inaklu, founded 2nd half of the 19th c, elev. 1524, pop. 200) sits between two highland forks of the Amberd River and at the confluence of another to the south that flows into the Amberd (W) and Biurakan (E) Rivers. The hamlet is on a fertile incline, the waters of its multiple rivers support a farming as well as grazing community.

The village has some **early (5th-9th cc) khachkars**. There are also a couple of dirt tracks that make good hiking trails following the Amberd River. The first turns off the main road just before the main part of the village (as it starts to bend to the NE), and goes over grasslands to the E for about 500m to the Amberd ravine, then down the canyon in about 300m of steep incline to the canyon floor, then on to the other side and up towards Orgov. The second starts at the NW edge of the village (200m from its NW edge), across the left river, and wends its way uphill and through woodlands 5 km to Amberd Castle.

**Camping** is possible in either river gorge, or above the village on the rim, but ask first:

**Overnight**

There are a couple of pansionats by Antarut, on the road from Biurakan towards Amberd. **Nor Amberd Holiday Hotel** is a pansionat opening summers for 6000 AMD per person, including meals. Another is **Aragats Hangestian Tun**, comparable prices. Both are old and a little run down, expect basic facilities for the price. **Overnight in village home** (rustic, 3000-5000 AMD for B&B is fair)

**Springs** in the village and on the riverbed.

➡ From Antarut center, continue N on the Amberd/Aragats road N for about 3 km to the Nor Amberd Sanitorium and in another 2.8 km at a fork in the bend the posted turn off for Amberd. Follow that for another 5 km as it winds across the hills, down into the Arkashen River and up again to **AMBERD** (DD 40.39083 x 44.22574) 🏰 🌊

🌟 **AMBERD - ԱՄԲԵՐԴ** (elev. 2187m) is one of Armenia's most popular sites, a relatively intact stronghold that housed Armenia's rulers from the

Neolithic to modern eras. A stone Age settlement on the spot evolved into the current Bronze Age & Urartian fortress that protected Armenia's rulers, most famously during the Roman and early Christian eras, when the current castle was built, expanded and rebuilt over successive periods. A medieval church was added to the complex, which is set on a promontory overlooking the confluence of the Amberd and Arkashen Rivers.



**History**

In Neolithic times the area seems to have been permanently settled, the smoldering volcanic cone of Aragats providing a warm, moist environment for agricultural development. As the volcano went dormant and Bronze Age civilizations clear-cut the forests that had covered much of the mountainside, the area became snow-bound 5 months of the year, making it useful only in the warm months, an alpine retreat for Armenia's rulers wanting to escape the broiling summers down below. It must have been something like the summer retreats of Raj India, as the entire court and legions of scribes, servants and courtiers picked up their winter quarters and moved en masse 30 km up hill to Amberd.

Other than prehistoric structures legends place the medieval founding of Amberd with King Ashot "Yerkat" (Iron) Bagratuni in the 10th c, along with other fortresses along the borders of his kingdom, though there was already a summer residence at Amberd at the time of the Arab invasion in the 7th c. A letter by the statesman Grigor Magistros Pahlavuni, who was also the archimandrite of Ani around the year 1050, places the current fortress and the surrounding district in the hands of the powerful Pahlavuni family in the late 10th c. The Pahlavunis rivaled the Bagratunis in Ani and supplied a single line of Katolikos from 1065 –

1203 (with the occasional anti-patriarch and coadjutor) and the site was their seat of power around the time the church was built, for Prince Vahram Pahlavuni, in 1026 (inscription on inside lintel of N doorway) and the castle was enlarged during the same period.



The times of the Pahlavunis were tumultuous, they losing Amberd to successive waves of Seljuks, Byzantines and Seljuks again before being retaken in 1196 by Ivaneh and Zakareh Zakarian, Armenian generals for the Orbeli king of Georgia. It was purchased by Vacheh Vachutian in 1215 (patron of the much expanded monasteries at Tegher, Saghmosavank and Hovhanavank), the fortress becoming a key defense for a few years until it was captured and destroyed by the Mongols in 1236. The castle was never rebuilt, with the exception of modern alterations to make it accessible to tourists.



**The Complex**

The complex was ideally situated to protect its keepers, set high above the confluence of the Amberd and Arkashen River gorges, two steep ravines that were impenetrable for thousands of years. The complex includes fortification, the castle, bath and church, as well as outer defensive positions and a covered walkway to the river below. The site is under substantial renovation, the outer walls being rebuilt and a new path into the complex built over a rocky hillock with a series of stone steps and path leading to the Amberd gorge rim and the main gate.

**The walls and gate.** The gates that controlled access to the site were built at the same time as the medieval fortifications; their remains are at the end of the fortified walls that once led from the castle's SW corner to the Amberd River canyon. Near the rim a small building, with an arched entrance was added later. Another fortification with towers ran from the castle to the Amberd gorge on the Arkashen River side, its semi-circular towers used to hurl projectiles on attackers below. The gates on this wall, as well as the later walls leading to the Amberd, were built with fairly small stones set with lime. Larger, more finely cut stones were used in the corners and detailing.



**The castle** was burned during a Mongol raid, and left untouched until an excavation in 1936 established its plan. The three-story building (third being the substantial attic) is made from rough hewn blocks of tufa stone, its tower walls inclined to make it easier to fire on attackers below. The inside of the castle was sumptuous; with a magnificent entry hall and staircase, and each floor with five rooms, built in a line. The main hall below opened onto three central rooms while the upper floor housed reception halls and private apartments. Fragments uncovered during

the excavation showed a rich design: rooms were decorated with elegant carvings, oil-lamps and incense holders while they were decorated with silks, brocades and bronze, gold and silver ornaments. This was no primitive campground.

**Water Supply.** Medieval keeps such as Amberd placed crucial importance on maintaining constant water flow, and if possible, secret or internal supply so that if attacking armies destroyed the primary viaduct – in this case terra cotta pipelines laid to upper sources of spring water— the inhabitants could not be forced out dying of thirst. Amberd had such a passageway, a secret covered pathway located in a cleft in the rocks within the Arkhashen River fortifications, descending in heart-stopping steep steps to the river.

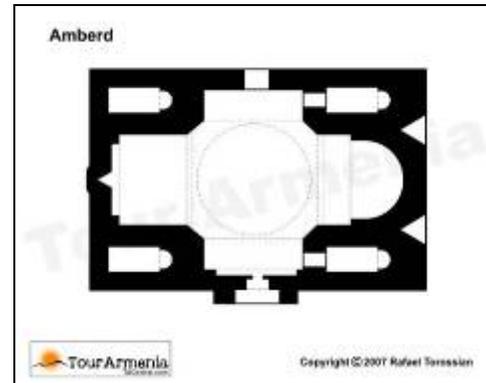
The **baths** were constructed outside the palace in the 13th century and included clay hypocaust heating and luxurious bathing rooms. Little survives but the foundations and your imagination.



**The church** was built in 1026 for Prince Vahram Pahlavuni, one of Armenia's "savior generals". The domed structure sits between the castle and the edge of the promontory, next to the Arkhashen River wall. The single nave domed hall with four small chambers in the corners is an awkward looking building from the outside, its massive drum and umbrella style dome overwhelms the lower building.

The dome is supported on its cube by corner columns and sweeping arches, with the exterior round drum divided into 10 facets by pairs of thin columns supporting peaked arches in multiple layers of cornice work and the gabled umbrella roof. Its exterior is simple, even severe, with minimal décor except edging around the portal and

windows, and the patchwork of crosses carved into the façade.



A beautiful **early khachkar** (5th c? 8th c?) lies against the church walls, its simple thick cross and rudimentary edging suggesting its creation centuries before the medieval church.



The tips of each cross wing end in circles rather than the three points typical for Armenian crosses. The cross rests over a distinct but sparse tree of life, suggested by four pairs of recessed loops, their number (8) being a mystical figure to Pagans. The church was completely renovated in 1974, replacing much of its original grandeur with what appears to be a utilitarian space, surprising for a royal house of prayer. The now too simple interior would have been sumptuously decked out with rich brocades of silk and spun gold, thick curtains (note the holes in the corner walls to place the poles) and thick carpets, as well as plate gold and silver for the altar. Despite their ascetic reputation,

Armenian churches could be as sumptuous as their Byzantine cousins.



Between Amberd and Mt. Aragats there are around 20 **rock-carvings and Vishaps** dated to the Neolithic and Bronze Ages. They are in outcropping of rocks along the way, ask a local guide to show you.

**Camping** is possible in either river gorge, or above on the rim at the site; **Springs** on the riverbed.

↪ **Backtrack to the Biurakan highway and turn left (N), continuing uphill through some dramatic switchbacks and beautiful views of the high mountain plains and alpine country for about 14.3 km to KARI LICH (DD 40.50 x 44.166666)** 📍

📍 **KARI LICH - ԿԱՐԻ ԼԻՃ** 🏔️ ("Stone Lake" elev. 3200) lies below Aragats' Southern peak, the starting point mountaineers attempting the climb up Armenia's tallest mountain. The entry to the lake's area has spectacular views of Ararat Valley, which quickly recede as you descend slightly to the lake shore. The lake itself has a circumference of 1150m and is either ice-blue or pitch black, depending on the weather. Those with the nerve (or the testosterone, the macho, the moxie, or simply cannot leave a dare unmet) take a dip in the icy waters, which sucks the breath out of your lungs within seconds of dipping your toes in.

The shoreline alternates between rocky outcrops and pebble sand. On the east side is a quickly rising hill that climbers use to pitch tents and establish base camps for hiking up the mountain top.



Photograph courtesy of © Tigran Nazaryan

**Base Camp.** The hike up the Southern peak is easy enough that those in reasonably good condition can make the climb in 3 hours or so. The other peaks are more difficult, and require better preparation and a guide. If you plan on climbing the mountain, you are strongly advised to spend at least one night at Kari Lich to acclimate yourself to the altitude. You are after all at 3200m (10,498 ft) and are attempting to climb to 4090m (13,415 ft). More about climbing the four peaks are [detailed in Trip 3](#) (on page 48).

#### **Aragats Space Weather Observatory**

*Radiation and Geomagnetic storms, which are elements of Space Weather, are part of major obstacles to Space Operations. Reliable forecasting of the arrival of these dangerous elements is of vital importance for orbiting flights and some surface industries. In addition to the fleet of space-born instruments, worldwide networks of particle detectors spread along different latitudes and longitudes, provide valuable information on the intensity and anisotropy of the variable cosmic ray fluxes.*

[-Space weather Observatory](#)

Next to the south shoreline is the **Physics Institute – Cosmic Ray Institute** and **Aragats Space Environmental Center** ("ASEC," "CRD") which provides real-time monitoring of different species of secondary cosmic rays. This is one of two monitoring stations, the other is at Nor Amberd, which you passed on the way to Amberd. A Solar Neutron Telescope (SNT), is in operation at the Aragats research station and gathers data as part of an early warning system against *extreme solar energetic particle* (SEP) events which pose danger to the satellite electronics and space station crews.

**Overnight.** *The Physics Institute* next to the lake is happy to put up visitors for \$15 a night, \$30 with food. Warm bed, toilets and running water.

**Food & Drink.** To the right (E/NE) as you enter there are concessions (summers) with a grill and canned drinks.

**Camping in the area.** **Overnight** at the *Physics Institute-Space Weather Observatory*. **Springs** on the hillside, plus the multiple mountain streams and rivulets that flow down the mountainside are clean.

➡ END OF TRIP 2



**TRIP 3: MT. ARAGATS ▲**

**KARI LICH - SOUTH SUMMIT - EAST SUMMIT - NORTH SUMMIT - WEST SUMMIT**

This trip features the four peaks of Mt. Aragats, the highest point in Armenia (elev. 4090m/13,415 ft) with absolute elevation ranges from 450-4,090m (1,476-13,419 ft) above sea level. It includes tips for hikers and information about each of the peaks, from the relatively easy climb of the southern peak (about 3 hours for the average fit person) to the more challenging peaks that require several days of acclimation and climb from inside the collapsed cone of the now dormant volcano. No matter what your physical aptitude is, you should not miss at least driving to Kari Lich at the base of the cone and gazing on one of Armenia's most magical spots, worshipped for millennia as the home of the gods and source of all power in the kingdom. Spend a couple of hours here and

you will feel like you can touch the top of the sky, and you will be amazed at the way the mountain changes, the deep inner cauldron churning up clouds, rain and snow in the same summer's day.



**Stay:** Camping at Kari Lich and in the cone.

**Eat:** Concession stand at Kari Lich.

**Springs:** Dozens of springs and pure water streams on the mountainside.

➤ The trip begins at Kari Lich (end of Trip 2). From Agarak center, take the Biurakan road N (first right after the Voskevaz T-intersection) road for about 5 km to Biurakan, then another 2.4 to Antarat, another 5 km to the Amberd turnoff and a final 14.3 km to the end of the road at **KARI LICH** and **MT. ARAGATS** (DD 40.50 x 44.166666)

✂ **KARI LICH - ԿԱՐԻ ԼԻՃ** ("Stone Lake" elev. 3200), for details see [Kari Lich at end of trip 2](#).

✂ **MT. ARAGATS ▲**

(DD 40.5333 x 44.20000)

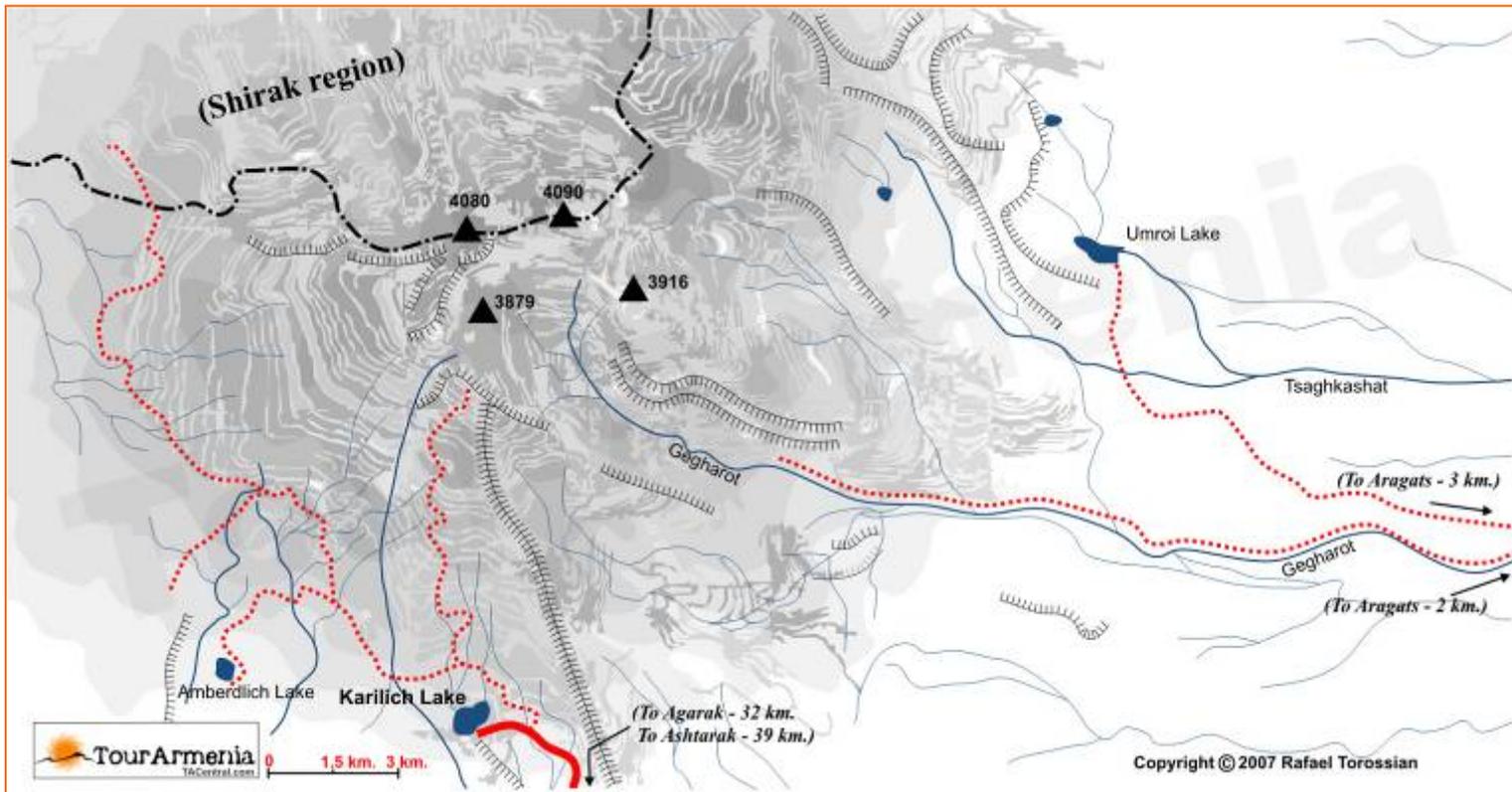
Aragatsotn is dominated by Mt. Aragats (elev. 4090m), a dormant strato-volcano and the tallest mountain in the country. About 40 km from Yerevan, Aragats is a category 1B mountain (tourist category 3, some easy roped climbing) makes Mt. Aragats accessible to most mountain climbers and naturalists wanting to explore its four peaks.

The mountain is massive, covering more than 820 sq km of land in its central elevation, and 18% of the total landmass of the republic. There are four summits: North (the highest, 4090m), West (4080m), South (3879m) and East (3916m) forming the jagged edge of the volcanic crater, once a massive cone (10,000+/- m) which blew itself open about 500,000 years ago, just as the first settlers began to inhabit the area. Pictograms

found on the mountainside allude to this catastrophic event, which ended an era of warm moist climate and began the continental weather patterns Armenia has today.

The crater spilled lava mostly to the east and NW, which have undulating landscapes; between the S and E crests the wall is broken, the lava filling in the Aparan plateau. Today the Gegharot River flows down to the village of Aragats, past an ancient pagan cave site that was converted into a S. Lusavorich shrine. The Karakatal mountain range, a sharp peak of rock formation, stretches to the south of the mountain (you passed it to get here, on your right). It is matched with another to the N. Between each peak there are saddlebacks of stone with rocky pathways and crevices, each with its own stunning view of the landscape and challenges for the mountaineer.

From the top of the mountain you can see most of the Lesser and Great Caucasus Range, even as far as Mt. Elbrus, Europe's tallest mountain at 5642m. Elbrus lies N on the Georgian/Russian border, about 500 km away. Ararat Valley stretches to the south and SW for about 100 km, and there are excellent views of the upper elevations of Mt. Ararat and the Republic of Turkey to the west and southwest. To the east and southeast is the Aparan plateau and Lake Sevan, the Geghama lehr that separates the lake from the Ararat Valley nearest, the Sevan Mountains and Karabakh further to the east. North is Lori and Tavush and in the NW you can see the city of Giumri, 70 km distant.



Photograph courtesy of © Tigran Nazaryan

Snowbound for most of the year, save a few weeks from mid July through August, the mountain has numerous small lakes, among them Kari Lich, situated at the base of the S summit, Lake

Lessing, and inside the crater a “secret pool” of glacial blue water that expands and disappears as the snow melts or falls. There are also several reservoirs capturing the melting snows, the largest of which, to the NW, is Lake Mantash.

The mountain top has several “hidden” pagan and early Christian shrines, hardly surprising given it was considered a cauldron of the gods, its brooding cone generating storms and fair weather several times a day. Now called “Armenia’s weather maker”, the mountain was worshipped by eons of pagans who only tentatively traded their belief in the all powerful gods of Vahagn, Astghik and Aramazd for the Christian trinity in the 4th c. To this day pagan symbols and sacrifices abound on the mountain side, next to or within Christian shrines.

One legend that descends from the Pagan period, esp. if the legend of the all-burning light of the Zoroastrian religion is applied, is about S. Grigor Lusavorich, who converted the country with King T’rdat III in the 4th c. In it, Grigor climbed to the top of Aragats to pray, an all-burning lamp hanging from the sky lighting his way down in the evening. Probably predating even the Zoroastrians, legends of night lights on mountains, (especially volcanic mountains) are easy enough to trace. The legend continues that the light still burns, seen only by those who are consecrated (i.e. the true believers).

**Formation**

The original volcanic cone is from the Pliocene-to-Pleistocene age. Satellite cones and fissures on the sides of the volcano were the source of large lava flows that descended to the lower layers, assumed to be from the Holocene age though later Potassium-Argon dating indicated mid- to late-Pleistocene ages. The youngest flows (at the bottom) have not been definitively dated, but are conjectured to be from the end of the late-Pleistocene to 3000 BCE. A 13-km-long, WSW-ENE-trending line of craters and pyroclastic (fluidized masses of rock fragments and gases) formations cut across the northern rim and is the source of young lava flows and lahars (similar to pyroclastic flows but contain more water); the latter characteristic of Holocene summit eruptions.

**Minerals.** Anhydrite, Chalcedony Agate, Chalcopryrite, Gypsum, Pyrrhotite, and Quartz.

**Ecology.**

*My first assault on Mt. Aragats (there is no other way to put it, it was a long, arduous assault) was up the “easy” southern peak. I went with friends and we met a group of alpine enthusiasts of all ages, the youngest 4 years old, the oldest in his 70’s. The night before we camped out in the cold July air (a relief from the stifling heat of Yerevan below) and sat around a campfire telling Armenian stories and singing folk songs.*

*The next morning, we began the climb. I quickly learned that no matter how many miles I had slogged in the hot Texas sun to prepare for this climb, I was no match for the Armenian mountain goats around me. I had trained at a relatively low altitude of 1800 ft, while I was starting here at over 10,000 ft. I knew I was a goner when the 4 year old danced by me on the continual 30° incline and waved to me from the top of the mountain, 2 hours into the climb. A few choice thoughts came and vanished from my mind as I weakly waved back, grabbing the air for support.*

*I nearly gave up several times, the last 50 ft from the peak. I only made it because of Tico and Christine, who kept me going with promises of the great view and the fact I would have “done it”.*

*To add insult to injury, they of course enjoyed several cigarettes en route while I huffed and puff my smoke-free lungs out trying to catch up.*

*I did make it, but not before the 4-year old’s naptime and passing her on the way down while I was still going up. As I caught the last breath I thought I would ever make, I sat on the edge of the south rim and stared into a limitless crater of brown rock and aquamarine blue water coursing through the sunken cone floor.*

*I was on the top of Armenia, and I had made it. And I felt elated for having done both.*

*It’s not a climb for anyone who heaves while taking the front stairs of their home, but for those wanting to see what the top of the world is like, and who can find helpful mountaineers like Tico and Christine (just hang around Kari Lich, they come by every day and are happy to help), you’ve got to try it.*

*Just stay away from the 4-year olds, they can wreak havoc with your ego.*

Even in the heat of summer mini glaciers can be found on the mountain side at multiple elevations. Most are on the north end of smaller peaks and hills, the shadows, but several exist year round. In the summer, immediately next to glacial ice are grass and beautiful yellow, white and sky blue alpine flowers, which pop up overnight and can

repeat flower throughout the summer season. One of the mountain’s delights is straddling both, one foot in ice and snow, the other on lime green grass with thousands of white star flowers. The mountain also has a few standing forests (between Biurakan and Nor Amberd) and numerous alpine meadows. In the spring, the meadows are blanketed with wildflowers, the most common of which is the vivid red Armenian poppy.



Photograph courtesy of © Tigran Nazaryan

**Birding.** Aragats is an excellent area to spot alpine and upper highland species. The slopes east of Kari Lich away from the main road and lower hills can also be productive.

For the most diverse and interesting bird watching and flora/fauna field trips, two base camps are optimal: just below the rim at Kara Lich (alpine and sub-glacier), and 2/3rds up the Mountain, at Amberd. Amberd lies at the dividing line between mountain forest and alpine vegetation zones. Amberd sits over two massive river canyons, each providing excellent hiking, field trips, caving and bird watching potentials (including one of the largest colonies of Caucasian bats in the world). Amberd is at alt. 3000m so a good place to acclimate to the upper elevations.

**Bird Sightings:** *Horned Lark, Rufus-tailed Rock Thrush, Alpine Accentor, Wallcreeper and Snow Finch* occur in the more upland areas along with high-altitude specialties of the area such as *Caspian Snowcock and Crimson-winged Finch*. More widespread upland birds include *both rock thrushes, Northern Wheatear and Ring Ouzel. Western Rock Nuthatch and Red-billed Chough* are common. *Raptors* are impressive and include *Eastern Imperial and Lesser Spotted Eagles and Long-legged Buzzard* in summer and *Pallid Harrier*

and *Steppe Eagle* in autumn. The lower slopes and scrub around Lake Kari hold more of the area’s specialties such as *Radde’s Accentor* and the skulking and elusive *White-throated Robin*. *Lesser Grey Shrike* also occurs as well as *Black-eared Wheatear, Cetti’s Warbler and Black-headed Bunting*. More wooded areas are home to *Mountain Chiffchaff, Golden Oriole and Syrian Woodpecker*.

**All Birds** include *Short-toed Eagle (PM), Pallid Harrier (PM), Levant Sparrowhawk (Su), Long-legged Buzzard, Common Buzzard, Lesser Spotted Eagle (Su), Steppe Eagle (PM), Eastern Imperial Eagle (Su), Golden Eagle, Booted Eagle (Su), Common Kestrel, Lanner Falcon (rare), Northern Hobby (Su), Caspian Snowcock, Chukar Partridge, Common Quail (Su), Woodpigeon, Turtle Dove (Su), Common Cuckoo (Su), Little Owl, Common Swift (Su), Alpine Swift (Su), Hoopoe (Su), Great Spotted Woodpecker, Syrian Woodpecker, Bimaculated Lark (Su), Wood Lark (Su), Eurasian Skylark, Horned Lark, Sand Martin (Su), House Martin (Su), Tree Pipit (Su), Water Pipit (Su), Black-headed Wagtail (Su), Grey Wagtail, Common Dipper, Radde’s Accentor, Alpine Accentor, Dunnock, Bluethroat, White-throated Robin (Su), Black Redstart, Common Redstart (Su), Isabelline*

**Safety Tips**

- **Wear sturdy hiking shoes (sneakers not an option)**
- **Bring plenty of water, lip balm and a hat**
- **You are close to the sun’s UV rays; wear sunscreen and sunglasses**
- **Bundle up in layers**
- **Use a hiking stick or cane**
- **Climb with an experienced leader.**
- **Rope up for all glacier travel.**
- **Have at least 2 experienced people per 3 person rope team**
- **Climbing with less than 3 people in a party is not recommended and is hazardous.**
- **Be aware of current weather and route conditions.**
- **Use good judgment and know your limits.**

For more information:  
[climbing.about.com/  
 Gear List](http://climbing.about.com/Gear List)

*Wheatear (Su), Northern Wheatear (Su), Black-eared Wheatear (Su), Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush (Su), Blue Rock Thrush, Ring Ouzel (Su), Cetti's Warbler, Common Whitethroat (Su), Mountain Chiffchaff (Su), Western Rock Nuthatch, Wallcreeper, Golden Oriole (Su), Lesser Grey Shrike (Su), Red-billed Chough, Northern Raven, Rock Sparrow, Snow Finch, Twite, Crimson-winged Finch, Common Rosefinch (Su), Rock Bunting, Ortolan Bunting (Su), Black-headed Bunting (Su).*

**Flowers** Aragats has some good flower opportunities, including mid summer (July-early August) flowering of alpine species on the slopes leading to the cone, and spring-summer viewing on the lower elevation around Amberd, which is the diving line between alpine and upper forest strata.

**Mt. Aragats Flora: Amberd fortress and canyon, 2100-2200m alt.** *Nectaroscordum*

*tripedale, Inula maria, e Papaver orientale, Astragalus hyalolepis, Medicago dzhavakhetica, Trifolium bordzilovskyi, Ornithogalum najastanicum, Dianthus cretaceus, Solenanthus stamineus*

**Mt. Aragats Flora: near Kari Lich, alpine meadow 3200m alt.** *Doronicum oblongifolium, Taraxacum stevenii, Primula algida, Campanula tridentata, Gentiana pontica, Oxytropis albana, Androsace raddeana, Pedicularis crassirostris, Erodium armenum, Daphne kurdica, Delphinium freynii, Hedysarum caucasicum*

**Paragliding.** The *Armenian Aviation Club*, 24 Khorenatsi p, Yerevan, E-mail: [aac@unesco-clubs.am](mailto:aac@unesco-clubs.am), which offers paragliding throughout Armenia, has charted a specific site for Aragats. The *Aragats - T/O – 500m vertical* flying site is in the foothills of Mt. Aragats, the highest mountain in Armenia to the NW of Yerevan. The winds can

be high but the site has good thermal potential and provides great views of Mt. Aragats. Hiking to a small rocky T/O takes about 2-3 hours. For more information talk to the folks at the club.

**CLIMBING ARAGATS:**

**When.** July 15-August 15 are the optimum times, and begin your climb early (dawn or earlier) though there are no guarantees nature won't decide to give you a few snow showers anyway. The cone is a weather maker; clouds begin to rise in the morning with storms common in the afternoons. Showers don't last long, but inside the crater there is a perpetual ice cover in places, so be aware that at night it will drop to below freezing. Outside the crater it drops to between 0-3° C (32-37° F) at night, and is rarely warmer than 7-10° C (45-50 F) in the daytime.

**Outfitting.** Sufficient clothes for winter-like

weather, sturdy boots, plenty of water and energy food like trail mix are required for these climbs. A professional guide for all by the South summit is also required to safely climb the mountain.

**Guides.** If you attempt any peak other than the south peak *you need an experienced guide.* They ensure safety and know the ins and outs of the mountain better than any book or map. See [Adventure Tour Operators](#) on page 13.

**Background.** The crater of Mt. Aragats is a sub-polar zone, 750 meters below the rim of the mountain. In warm summers, as ice melts it forms shallow ponds. The tallest peak is 4090m and the crater floor is 3250m.

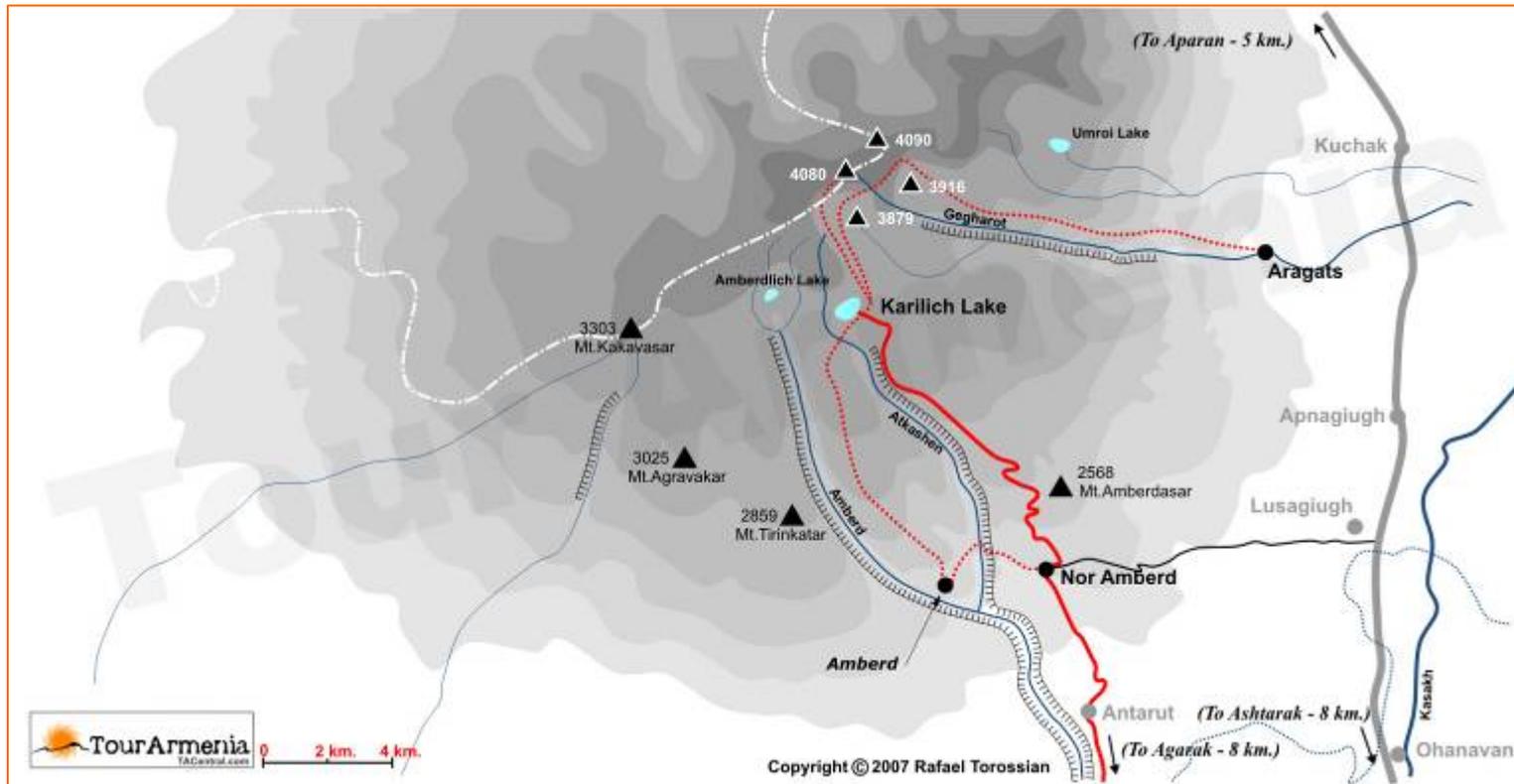


Photograph courtesy of © Tigran Nazaryan

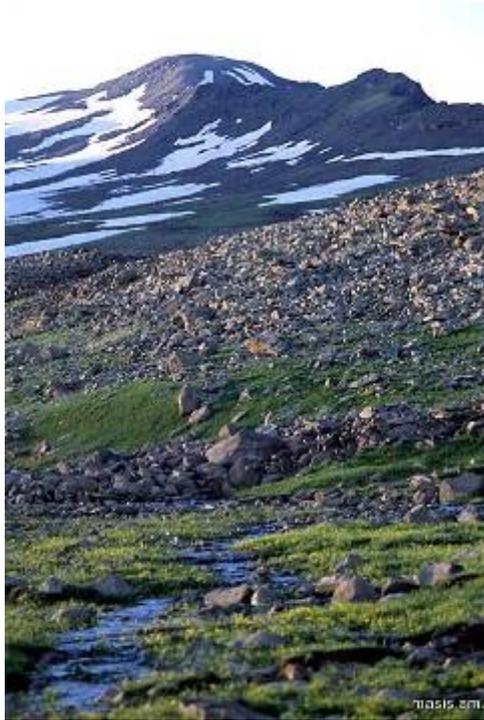
**The climbs.** Camping inside the crater for a few days is definitely worthwhile, since it has spectacular rock formations and provides incredible star-gazing opportunities at night. From Kari Lich, each of the four peaks with their saddlebacks (North, South, East and West) can be climbed, camping at base, or inside the crater. Allow one day for each climb, returning to base or camping inside the crater. You are strongly advised to spend 1-2 days before the climb at Kari Lich or higher to acclimate yourself to the thin air and high altitude. Altitude sickness is rare on Aragats. But can occur.

Our climbs begin with the South peak, which is the most popular and easiest to climb of the four, then continues around the rim to the East, spending the night at base camp next to Kari Lich or inside the crater.

**☒ SOUTH PEAK** ▲ (3879m) is the easiest to climb of all four peaks. The hike will be easy for physically fit, but for the rest of us it is a moderately arduous climb, hardest the closer you



get to the top, when the high altitude and the constant 30° incline conspire to stop the most determined "weekend hiker". Slogging through the thin air and perspiring climb is well worth it, as the entire landscape of Armenia and Eastern Turkey spread out before you. On the top of the rocky peak there is a metal cross and a number of make-shift altars and shrines, some with matagh (sacrificial) offerings.



Photograph courtesy of © Tigran Nazaryan

➡ Easiest route is to begin hiking upwards from the lake in a zigzag formation, in a northwesterly direction. Eventually (1-2 hours, depending on your lung and leg power), you should meet up with a dirt track (the track begins NE of the concession stand at the lake) and begin to switchback the mountain to the top. The last slog is 30m of real incline, climbing past an abandoned service building and through a crevice up to the summit.

➡ Another way up (for the really fit and macho) is to locate the rock ridge to the east of the lake, climb it and then follow the ridge up. You have to

cross onto a bisecting ridge that forms one of the saddlebacks.

➡ A third way, preferred by the climbers I went up with, is to begin the climb on the north shore of the lake, over to a ridge overlooking Amberd Lich, then follow the mountain side upwards in a NE pattern until it meets up with the dirt track. This adds an extra hour to the hike, but has some gorgeous views of Shirak and Lori on the way up.



Photograph courtesy of © Tigran Nazaryan

✂ **NORTH PEAK** ▲ (4090m) is Aragats' highest, and one of the most rugged peaks *requiring an experienced guide* to safely mount. The summit has both a marker at its highest point and numerous makeshift shrines or memorials, of successful climbs as well as pagan and Christian purpose. The climb up the peak is much more difficult than the south summit, if for nothing else than the typical climb is to surmount the South Peak first, then descend into the crater and across to the North edge. Longer treks requiring considerably more stamina course across the West peak saddleback then across the steady including saddle to the North peak. Note the real peak is marked with metal tripods; there is a "false summit" that appears to be the top, but is not.

It takes 4-5 hours to reach from Kari Lich, or about 3 hours from the crater floor.

➡ The most obvious path from the South summit is to follow the SW saddleback towards the crater, sliding down its gravelly side and skirting the west peak across glacial ice to the North peak. However it is easier to walk to the NE side of the main summit and clamber up its loose rock slopes to the eastern saddle that leads to the North peak.

➡ A more challenging climb, that also takes in more mountain terrain and requires more stamina, is to descend from the south summit to the SW saddleback, and skirting the W peak, descend into the crater then skirt along the western peak to the W end of the north summit, following a cleft in the NW summit to the secondary height and then dip down and up again to the main peak.

➡ A third path is to descend first S from the south summit to the SE saddle (part of one of the routes up) and cross on the East peak, or skirting below it over to the north peak. On the rim there is a trail the leads to the peak.

➡ From Aparan district/Aragats v. and Gegharot River take the approach to the East Peak stopping at the Jrvesh falls ([details](#) on p. 52)



Photograph courtesy of © Tigran Nazaryan

✂ **WEST PEAK** ▲ (4080m) is Aragats second tallest peak and its most difficult climb, *requiring an experienced guide*, ropes and gear to mount. It is a solid piece of jagged red rock, windswept and forlorn, but with gorgeous views of the crater, the other peaks and Shirak marz. Below it is Lake Mantash, which one of the ways up the peak.

➡ (*Experienced Guide*) From the South summit, descend to the SW saddleback and across to the W summit. There are ridges leading to the top, your guide will know the best one for you.

➡ (*Experienced Guide*) From the crater you have two options, SW saddle or a steep climb to the NW end, then up to the peak. Your guide will know the best route for the season and your experience level.

➡ (*Experienced Guide*) There is a longer (1-2 day) route that begins in Shirak marz, from the N

edge of Lake Mantash, returning to the lake, or descending into the crater for an overnight. The trek climbs the longest route to the west peak, but has some of the most dramatic landscapes, from alpine to rocky terrain. This side of the mountain receives less of the pollution of Yerevan, so the skies are bluer; the colors more vivid till you reach the summit. This route leaves just N of Mantash, tracing the Armenia Canal to the Geghadzor River, following the latter to the western peak. Your guide will have the best route for the season and your level of experience.

✂ **EAST PEAK** ▲ (3916m) can be almost as difficult as the western peak, or as easy as the North Peak, depending on your trek. *An experienced guide is recommended for this peak.* Connected by a saddle to the North peak, it is separated by a wide crevice from the SE saddle, from which lava poured eastward during the Holocene Era, creating the rich alluvial souls of the Aparan plateau. It also created the widest gap in the crater rim, the source of the rushing waters of the Gegharot River that flows to the Aparan plateau.



Photograph courtesy of © Tigran Nazaryan

➡ (*Experienced Guide*) From the South summit you can backtrack on the S ridge to the SE saddleback, descending into the crater on the E end and across the waters of the Gegharot and its delta, then up the S ridge of the East Peak. Or descend into the crater following the N/NE slopes, then cross the crater to the peak. Your guide will advise the best route.

➡ (*Experienced Guide*) From North Summit follow the NE saddleback down and then up to the East Peak, either on the ridge path or up the face of the mountain peak, depending on the challenge you want.

➡ (Experienced Guide) From crater cross to the east of the crater, over glacial snowcaps to the Gegharot delta and up the E edge of the peak. There is a path that climbs up the ridge to the summit, and continues westward to the North peak.

➡ (Experienced Guide) Aparan / Gegharot River. This trek is longer (1-2 days) and is a great beginning or ending point to climbing multiple peaks, spending the night in the crater or at J'rvesh Falls on the Gegharot River. The trek

starts on the Aparan plateau, east of Aragats village. The village is about 14 km from the crater, following the Gegharot River, but a mountain track follows the river to the base of the J'rvesh Falls, which are about 4 km from the headwaters of the River inside the crater.

The ascent passes through alpine fields and flocks of sheep and cattle shepherded by Yezdi Villagers who spend their summers in the upper elevations, and wild stands of grass, flowers and scrub. It also passes, about 500m past a fork in the

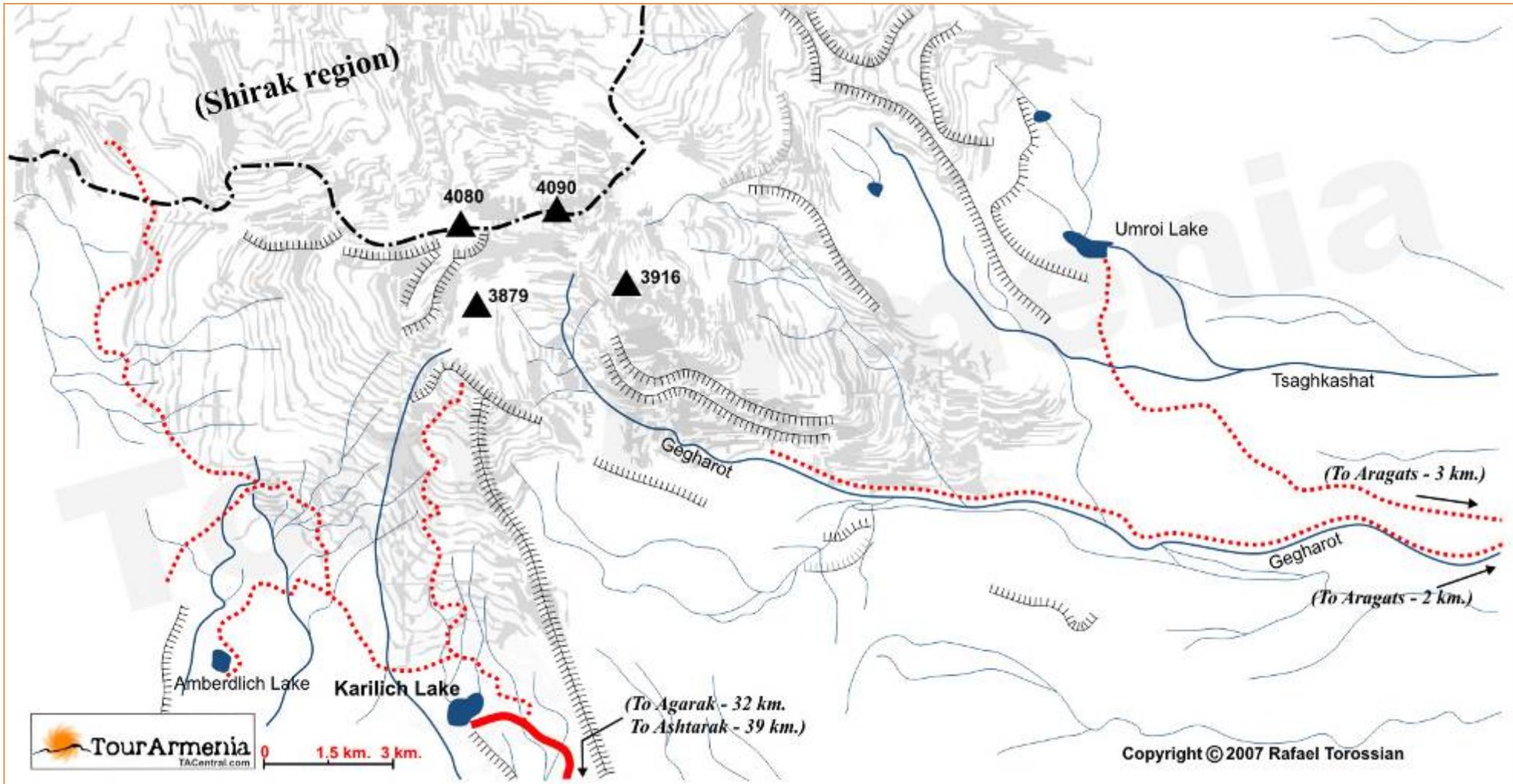
Gegharot River the highest altitude waterfall on Aragats (J'rvesh). At 2500m, it is a good acclimation stop, and lies in a different vegetation zone from the others. Nearby is an old **S. Grigor Lusavorich cave-shrine**, converted from an older pagan site. From here, the ascent to the crater and the East Peak is half a day, returning to the falls, or camping in the crater for more climbs in the next day.

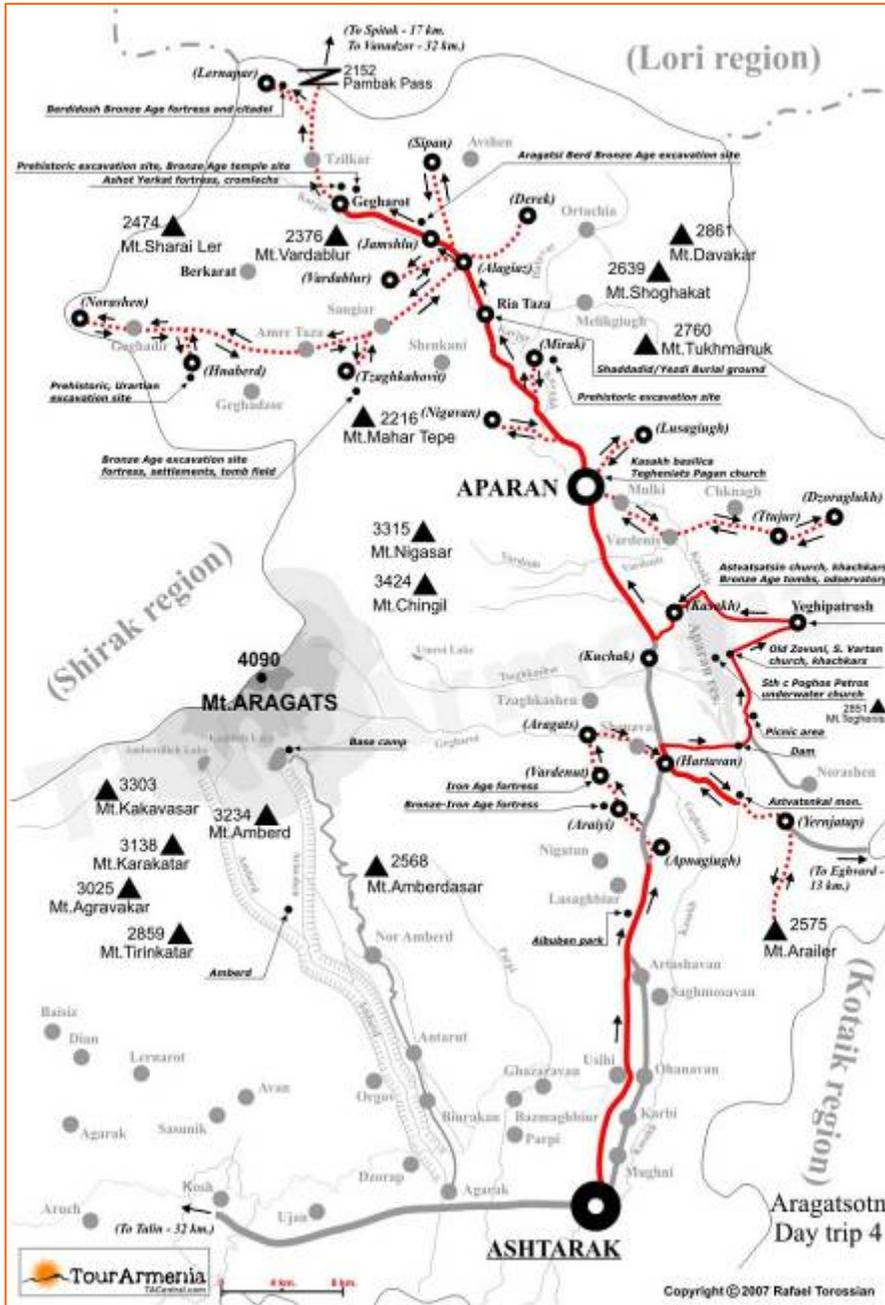
Going the other way, it is a half-day descent from the East Peak/crater to J'rvesh, stopping to rest

and enjoy the falls and set up camp. It is another half-day descent from J'rvesh to a pickup spot west of Aragats Village.

**Camping** at Kari Lich and volcanic crater (bring warm tent and sleeping bag; **Overnight** at Physics Institute (\$10/15, \$20/30 with food); **Springs** around Kari Lich and in crater.

➡ END OF TRIP 3





**TRIP 4: APARAN REGION ▲**

**ASHTARAK** – (*Apnagiugh*) – (*Araiyl*) – (*Vardenut*)– (*Aragats – jump area East face*) – (*Hartavan*)– **ASTVATSKAL**– (*Yer’njatap / ARAILEHR*) – (*J’rambar*) – **APARAN LAKE** – (*Old Zovuni*) – **YEGHIPATRUSH** – (*Kasakh*) – (*Kuchak*) – **APARAN**– (*T’tujur*) – (*Dzoraglukh*) – (*Lusagiugh*) – (*Nigavan*) – (*Mirak*) – **RIA TAZA** – (*Alagiaz*) – **TSAGHKAHOVIT PLAIN**– **TSAGHKAHOVIT** – (*Hnaberd*) – (*Norashen*) – (*Vardablur*) – (*Derek*) – (*Sipan*) – (*Jamashlu – Aragatsi Berd*) – **GEGHAROT** – (*Ashot Yerkat*) – (*Lernapar – Berdidosh*)

Trip 4 takes you into the Aparan Plateau, also known as the eastern Aragats highlands. The land quickly rises from Ashtarak to a high meadowland/sub alpine terrain of undulating hills and mountain cones, hemmed in on the west by the massive Northern rim of Aragats and to the west by the Tsakhkuniats Range dividing the marz from Kotaiik. To the east is the brooding “face of Ara”, Mt. Arai Lehr (pronounced “Ar-EYE Lehr”), reputedly the resting place of, Armenia’s warrior king, Ara the beautiful, slain by the machinations of the Babylonian Queen Shamiram (Semiramis) who magically transformed the top of the mountain into his sarcophagus, the outline of the body easily seen on its top ridge. The mountain is good days hike, easy for the fit, a moderate trudge for the rest of us. In the spring time it is covered by wildflowers, and the small lake on its crest is cool year round.

This is one of the most ancient settled areas in Armenia, benefiting from the warmer climates generated from the still moldering volcanoes in the area into the 3rd millennium BCE. Aparan has some exceptional excavations that have only recently seen the light of day, among them the vast Stone and Bronze Age sites at Marik and the Tsaghkahovit Plain, the latter an ongoing dig that is uncovering traces of settlement more than 7000 years old. From the time of the Romans the area was known as the Aparan (“Abaran”) kingdom, Province or dukedom. The kingdom was short-lived but left dozens of fortresses and monasteries to show the presence of royalty. Like Lori and Tavush, the area was faced mass deportation of native Armenians in the wake of Seljuk, Mongol and Kurdish Emir attacks, the conquerors taking the meadows for alpine pasturage for their herds of animals (taken from the local Armenians as war booty). A subgroup of Kurdish nomads, the Yezdis, who resisted converting entirely to the

Moslem and Christian faiths found refuge in the upper regions of Aparan, and continue to lead pastoral lives to this day. Their nomadic existence reduced to herding their flocks up the mountain in summer, returning to the plateau floor for winter’s snow, burying their dead under fantastic saddle stones carved to look like the horses they raised and worshipped when their ancestors ruled the land. Yezdis are now a minority in the area, native Armenians have retaken the bulk of the land they once forfeited, and there is a wary co-existence between the groups.

Modern Aparan is known for both its high altitude grasslands and idyllic locales and for the military prowess of its native sons and daughters, some of whom were the toughest fighters of the Great Patriotic War and who form the backbone of the police force (which may not be such a good thing right now). The town of Aparan, built over the ruins of estates built by princes and emirs that ruled before, is reputed to breed a legion of fierceness equal only by its slow mental capacity; “Aparantsis” are doomed it seems to be the eternal butt of the Armenian version of the “hillbilly” joke (or red neck, or Okie, or . . . you got the idea) and Armenians all over have a repertoire of jokes poking fun at their naiveté (example: “An Aparantsi’s wife told her friend, “oh I love these cell phones, every time I call my husband he is always at the office.”) The region produces a larger proportion of the police force second only to Goris, with the same complicated reputation. Aparantsis are by nature shy in public and friendly, and if you find yourself stranded in town, they can prove to be your most ingratiating hosts.



**Stay:** Overnight in Aparan hotel and village homes (both are rustic). Camping throughout the area, on river beds, by Lake Aparan, in woodlands, near villages (ask first).

**Eat:** Aparan cafes & bistros, roadside stands, village homes.

**Springs:** Apnagiugh, Aragats, Hartavan, Jrambar, Yeghipatrush, T’tujur, Aparan, Mirak, Rya Taza, Tsaghkahovit, Gegharot, Sipan.

➡ From Ashtarak center, take the northern highway towards Aparan/Vanadzor for 10.8 km following the western face of Mt. Arai Lehr past Mughni, Karbi, Ohanavan, Ushi, Artashavan/Saghmosavank to the L turn off to the Amberd Road and the **AIBUBEN PARK** (DD 40.41241 x 44.38369)



✂ **AIBUBEN PARK - ԱՅԲՈՒԲԵՆԻ ԱՅՓԻ** (Alphabet Park) is a startling experience; halfway up a hill and to your left (W) suddenly appear a series of stone carvings, each one of the letters of the Armenian alphabet, with a statue of their accepted inventor, Mesrop Mashtots, seated above. This collection of jumbo size blocks never fails to get double takes and sudden stops as locals and tourists alike jump out of their vehicles to wander through the bizarre collection of stones and take pictures. Go on, stop and take a picture too: your inner child is dying to get out and play a while.

Alternate Route to Amberd: Continue on the L road in front of the park and in about 1 km, on the R you will see an **abandoned church** (DD 40.41146 x 44.36932, elev. 1793m), judging by the stones in its walls from the medieval period, rebuilt in the 19th c.

Continue W on the same asphalt road (in good shape) and it leads to the Amberd road in about 9.8 km, of wilderness, passing forests and meadows teeming with wildflowers in the spring months.

➡ Continue N on the Aparan Hwy about 5 km to the first exit to (**Apnagiugh** DD 40.43944 x 44.39611) which parallels the highway before crossing the river to the village in about 400m



SIDE TRIP: (**Apnagiugh – Ափնագյուղ** before Akina-Geok, elev. 1807m, pop. 1949) is in a high valley, nestled between woodlands within a narrow triangle of canyons at the confluence of two rivers emptying into the Kasakh River. Both canyons make good hiking and camping, the SW

crossed by a **late medieval bridge**. There is also a pretty **19th c village church**, with homemade offerings and some evidence of matagh (sacrifice) near the church yard.

Alternate route to Mt. Arai Lehr: The village faces Mt. Arai Lehr ("Arai-ee-LEHR" 2575.9m) to the SE, reached by following the river on the E edge of the village for about 1.5 km to the Kasakh River then following that NE for about 500m to the base of a waterfall and a small stream opposite. Follow /climb the small stream up the SE canyon walls to the base of the mountain, where a dirt track begins up the mountain. From there it is a 4.2 km hike to the crest of the mountain.

**Camping** is possible in the ravines and near the village (ask first); **Overnight** in village home (rustic, 4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** are in the village and along the river.

➡ From Apnagiugh center, take the northern road to the highway (about 500m) then turn right (N) and continue for about 500m, then turn left (W) and continue another 1.5 km to (**Arai**) center (DD 40.4622 x 44.3736)



SIDE TRIP: (**Arai – Արայի** before, Bazarjik, elev. 1824m, pop. 1942) lies between two small mountain rivers, which branch off into several more on the village's western edge. It is a jumping off point for hikers wanting to trek the SE slopes of Aragats, there is a dirt track that ascends the mountain from the SW of the village for about 8 km to a summer encampment and Yezdi grazing area, 12 km distance from the crater.

The village has the remains of a **caravanserai built in 1213** for the Zakarian brothers and rebuilt in the 19th c. The caravanserai is some distance from the village, a common practice in medieval times, to segregate caravans and their "tempting ways" from the local citizenry. Settled in the Stone Age, the village is near some **Bronze and Iron Age cyclopean forts**, located on the upper ridges to the SW and NW of the village, the latter close to Vardenut.

**Camping** is possible near the village (ask first); **Overnight** in village home (rustic, 4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** are in the village.

➡ From Arai center, take the NW potted mountain road for about 1.5 km to (**Vardenut**) center (DD 40.47444 x 44.36194)



SIDE TRIP: (**Vardenut – Վարդենուտ** before, Shirakala, elev. 1891m, pop. 1942) lies on a rolling hillside within a delta of mountain streams branching off of the Gegharot River that quickly become rivers again as they reassemble into the Gegharot below the main highway, some 4.5 km to the SE. Several high altitude **marshlands** lie to the NW and NE of the village, making good **birding** in the spring and autumn migrations.

Prehistoric settlements include the remains of a large **Iron Age fortress** in the center of the village, possibly demolished by Uartians in their campaign to conquer the area. Having faced the humiliation of being forced into exile by the last waves of Mongol armies and Kurdish Emirs in the 14th-16th cc, the village lay desolate for 300 years, rebuilt on top of the ancient fortress only after the Treaty of Turkmanchai in 1828 (February 21, 1828 to be precise), which ended the Russo-Turkish War and awarded Nakhichevan and the Yerevan District (including Aparan) to the Russian Empire. The village has a **small shrine**, possibly built on top of a pre-Christian shrine to a mountain god. A rough stone leans against a wall, with traces of 18 rudimentary crosses carved on the concave surface.



Alternate route to Shenavan and Hartavan: take the NE village road that parallels the power lines for about 1.9 km of bumpy dirt road to the Hartavan-Aragats intersection at Shenavan. From there it is 1.8 km E to Hartavan (1.3 to the Aparan highway) and 2 km to Aragats.

**Camping** is possible near the village (ask first); **Overnight** in village home (rustic, 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** are in the village.

➡ From Vardenut center continue north on the potted road for about 2.2 km to Hartavan-Aragats intersection on the E edge of the village, turn left (W) and go another 200m to (**Aragats**) center (DD 40.4911111 x 44.3491667)



SIDE TRIP: (**Aragats - Արագած**, till 1948 Ghazanfar, elev. 1939m, pop. 1942) lies at the intersection of the Aragats-Hartavan highway and the Vardenut-Kuchak road. It was built on a flat plain of fertile alluvial soil and continues to be a prosperous farming community. There are a number of neatly built contemporary tufa-block homes with gardens in the village. On the upper elevations NW of town there are a number of **summer encampments** for Yezdi and Armenian shepherd tending their herds, you may even spot some horses running free on the hillsides. There are marshlands NE of the village and a delta of mountain streams in an arc NE to SE towards the Aparan highway.

The village is also a **jumping up point for climbing the eastern face of Mt. Aragats**, is only 1 km N of Vardenut on the potted mountain road and 1.8 km from the center intersection that leads west for about 1.5 km to the edge of the village and the westward passage to Mt. Aragats. From the edge of town it is a 10 km hike to the J'rvesh high altitude water fall (good base camp) and another **4 km to the crater** (see East Peak on page 51).

Alternate route to Kuchak: At the highway intersection on the E edge of the village, take

the N route for about 1.4 km of potted road to the outskirts of Tsaghkashen; continue on the road for another 2.9 km to the Aparan highway intersection at Kuchak.

**Camping** is possible near the village (ask first) and along the Gegharot River; **Overnight** in village home (rustic, 4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** are in the village and on the river.

➡ From Aragats center, take the E road out of town about 2 km to Shenavan, continue another 3.2 km to the Aparan highway and a full 3.8 km and across the Gegharot River gorge to (**Hartavan**) center (40.47674 x 44.39447) 🏰 🏠 🌊



**SIDE TRIP: Hartavan - Հարթավան** (before Ghara-Killisa, elev. 1375m, pop. 1790) lies on the right bank (E) of the Gegharot River with a delta of streams to its north. The view from this tall site is stunning, taking in the Aragats plain and the E face. The village has a **19th c church** and more, interestingly, the remains of a **13th c shrine**, attributed to Kurd Vachutian, the son of Vacheh Vachutian who purchased Aparan and Ashtarak regions from the Zakarians in the early 13th c. The shrine sites on a hill in the village. To get there, take the entrance into the village from the Aparan Hwy, a sharp uphill climb. You can see the shrine high on the L as you come uphill. At the first intersection, there is a sharp L turn that continues back and uphill, take that to the last house and walk the last 20m to the shrine, behind the house and garden. The shrine is in partial ruins, with only the remains of an arch and support wall marking its existence; that and some beautiful early to mid medieval khachkars indicating religious presence here for

some time before the Vachutians arrived to buy up the place. But the view! Oh the view is breathtaking in the early morning.

**Camping** is possible near the village (ask first) and along the Gegharot River; **Overnight** in village home (rustic, 4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** are in the village and on the river.

➡ From Hartavan center, take the E village road (pot marked) about 4 km as it dramatically descends into the Kasakh Gorge, winding around to the other side before dropping to the river floor and crossing a bridge that leads to a L fork that rises to **ASTVASTNKAL** monastery (40.46322 x 44.44371) 🏰 🏠 🌊

🏰 **ASTVATS NKAL - ԱՍՏՎԱՏՆԿԱԼ** ▲ (elev. 1807m) was built over a pagan worship site on a hillside overlooking the Kasakh River, a route for persons wanting to pass between Ashtarak and Lori beyond the reach of the authorities at the forts set around Amberd. As it is placed it may have been built over an earlier church, in turn that over a pagan shrine, but no evidence has been found to support this as of yet.



The monastery, with support walls and battlements added in later years, was greatly expanded in the 13th c for Prince Kurd, Vacheh's son and heir, and apparently a swaggering sort, having inscribed on the S church wall:

*"By the grace and mercy of God, I Kurd, Prince of Princes, son of the great Vacheh, and my wife Khorishah, daughter of Marz pan, built the Holy Katoghike for the memory of our souls. We have decorated it with every kind of precious ornament and offered the garden bought by us*

*in Parpi, virgin land in Oshakan, a garden in Karbi, a villager (?), and three hostels, in the year 693/AD 1244."*



#### The complex

The complex includes a Katoghike (Cathedral), gavit, nearby graveyard, the 4th c Astvatsatsin and foundation of support structures (refectory, dormitory, kitchen, etc).



The **Katoghike** was completely rebuilt in the 13th c on top of the previous 5th c church. The church is a central domed cruciform building with chambers in the four corners. The dome is supported by the inner points of the cross wings, with sweeping arches holding up the large drum and shallow cupola. The drum is faceted on its sides crowned originally by an umbrella roof but now by a metal tent roof that is falling apart. The inside was ornately decorated with protruding cornices and ornamental motifs of flora and geometric patterns. The semicircular apse had an elaborate apron frieze and some evidence of

painting on the design elements can still be seen. The exterior is simply done with details in the window framing, cornice work and around the drum of the dome. Two niches flank the portal or window on each wall, the four antechambers are separately roofed from the main vaulting of the cross wings of the building.

Adjoining the S of the main church is the small **4th c Astvatsatsin**, a hall church type rebuilt to support a dome, but still looking very much like the Pagan structure it was built over. Note the stepped platform and the uniform design.



Modern renovation efforts were stopped just before the fall of the Soviet Union, and their skeletal remains can still be found in the new support walls for the **13th c gavit**, itself an extremely elaborate building abutting the W façade of the Katoghike. The building had a central plan typical of gavits from the period, though quite large in its own way, with four large squat columns supporting the central arches that supported the multi-tiered vaulting and center aperture. The **central columns** are each different, alternating from round fat cylinders with simple capitals to hexagonal columns with sharp thick capitals elaborately carved with geometric cross shapes on their substantial planes.

The underlying sides of the **arches** were also elaborately carved with geometric patterns of crosses as were the windows framing and the portals. This was highly refined artwork, the last of its kind in Armenia for 400 years. Exceptional examples of their type are the **wall abutments** which supported the outer ends of the archways. Abutments protruded from the wall, those on the church side had large half-size khachkars engraved on the bottoms with thick "roping" carved on the

upper end of the column, matching the capitals of the column itself.



The **khachkars** are masterpieces of stone lacework that delicately picked out a cross form on an otherwise massive chunk of stone supporting the inner arches. Other abutments incorporate the cross design into the capitals with smaller crosses below the main wings and geometric grape bunches (fruit of the vine, blood of the lamb) above. In this they combine pagan and Christian motifs.



Smaller khachkar memorials are placed into the walls and a full size khachkar rests on the church side. The cross capitals for wall abutments and some of the khachkar work has been painted in red, a popular design feature of the period, which was Armenia's "rococo" era. The same use of paint can be found at Hovhanavank and Saghmosavank. The walls of the gavit are a series of arched closed walls with conch vaulting over each section of the square plan. Outside, the

windows and portal were framed with thick framing using a slight perspective in the patterns. The portal was framed with a series of geometric patterned design, topped with a religious frieze that has sadly been lost.

Other **khachkars** are in the church yard and nearby grave field, many in pieces but a few preserved, retaining their former glory despite their age and exposure to the elements. One in particular is made from brown tufa and has a deeply incised cross, its tips strongly, almost defiantly showing their triple tips, sitting over a lively tree of life scene, the upper bits looking like rushing water falls rather than the branches of the tree.

**Camping** is possible on the river bed; **Overnight** in village home at Yerinjatap 2 km away (rustic, 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** are in the village and on the river.

➔ From Astvatsnkal, continue E on the main road about 2 km as it ascends the canyon walls and climbs to the **(Yer'njatap, DD 40.4530556 x 44.4641667)** 🏠 🏠 🏠

**SIDE TRIP:** (Yer'njatap – Երևյաթապ, till 1949 Ghrbulagh, elev. 1897, pop. 318) sits above a river that feeds the Kasakh, at the bottom of the Tsakhkuniats Range. In the spring the entire valley floor and mountains are an emerald green, passing into reddish brown by mid summer, with strings of green on the riverbeds. There are several ruins near the village, one just S under the power lines, another about 1.2 km from the village edge on the SW mountain road and a third, the ruins of an old church, about 2.8 km from the village edge on the same road, on the right side of the road, overlooking the Kasakh river gorge.

Yer'njatap is a **jumping off point for climbing Mt. Arai Lehr** from the North with several roads and dirt tracks leading to the base of the summit or all the way up. See next site for details.

**Camping** is possible near the village (ask first) and along the river; **Overnight** in village home (rustic, 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** are in the village and on the river.

➔ There are several routes to Arai Lehr from Yer'njatap, detailed below. All are 4-8 km from the base of the mountain or a 3-4 km walk to the

summit of **MT. ARAILEHR** (40.45306 x 44.46417)



✚ **MT. ARAI LEHR - ԱՐԱՅԻ ԼԵՌ** 📍 ("Ar-aiy-ee-LEHR", slurred by locals to "Ara-Lehr", elev. 2605m) is named for a legendary Armenian king, Ara Geghetsik ("Ara the Handsome"), who is believed to have died at the hands of the Babylonian Queen Semiramis ("Shamiram" in Armenian), who hurled him into the pit of the volcano, his spirit rising to its top to form the shape of his face it has today.

The mountain is a volcanic cone that blew itself off sometime in the Paleolithic Era, cooling to its present shape by the Early Bronze Age, around the same time as Aragats and other volcanoes in the country. The sunken cone is open on several sides, allowing melted snows to form the mountain streams that feed the Kasakh and Hrazdan Rivers. On its northern side the mountain has traces of the native forests that once covered its slopes, the northern shadows protecting the trees from the hot southern sun, which is brutal in the summer (bring your sun screen, hat and water).



Photograph courtesy of © Tigran Nazaryan

**The Peaks**

There are 6 peaks around the sunken cone of the dormant volcano, with its own views and challenges to reach from the central crater (none are very hard if you are physically fit):

- Central 2605m
- East 2577m
- South-east 2572m
- Ktuts (west) 2511m
- North-west 2481m
- North-east 2478 m

**The Legend of Ara and Shamiram and the creation of Arai Lehr**

At this time there lived Semiramis (Shamiram in Armenian), the queen of Nineveh and a sorceress of the dark arts. Her husband was Ninus, who came to loathe her for her infidelity, and left his country. Semiramis, who had heard about the fame of the handsome Armenian king Ara ("Ara Geghetsik"), lusted after his image and asked him to come to Nineveh and marry her. Ara refused, so she marched her armies towards Armenia.

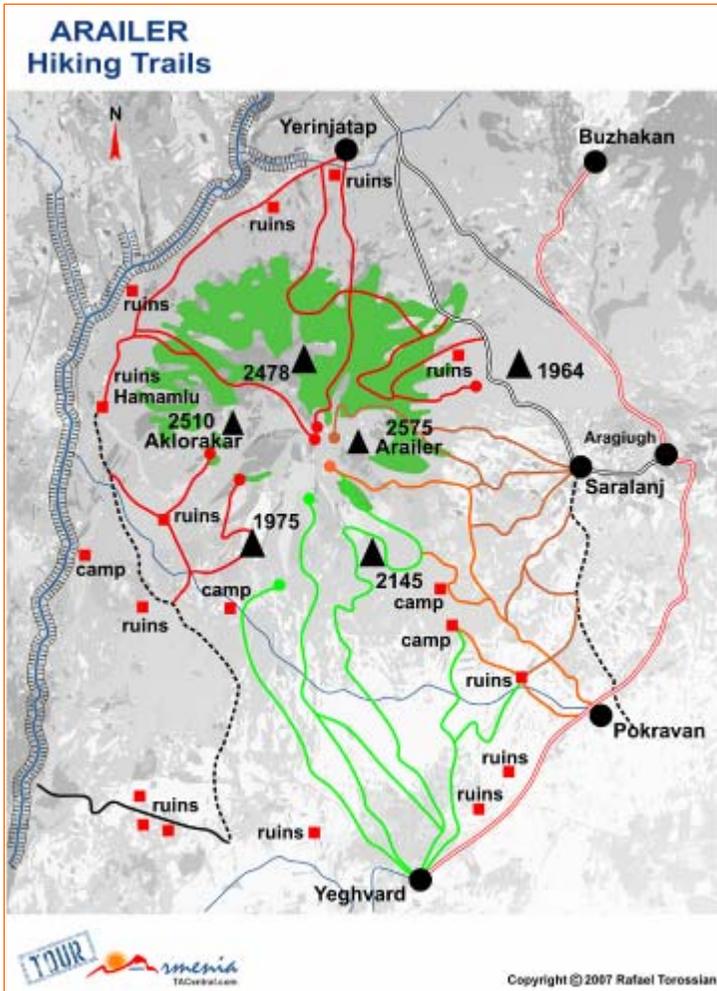
The battle began when Semiramis arrived in the region called Ararat, at the foot of the mountain that bears Ara's name. She wanted him caught alive, but he was vanquished, his body found on the battlefield among other slain soldiers. In order to calm the Armenians, who wanted to avenge his death, Semiramis said, "I have prayed to the gods to lick his wounds and heal him. Ara will revive."

Semiramis believed she could revive him. But when his corpse decayed she became crazed and had her servants bury it in a deep grave. Dressing one of her men as the fallen king, she came before the Armenians and said it was him. She had a statue erected in his name and gave sacrifices to the gods for saving his life. The Armenians believed her and spared her death at their hands. Semiramis then left Armenia for Van and Nineveh.

Another version of the story explains the creation of the mountain that bears Ara's name (Arai Lehr, literally "Ara's mountain"). This version has Ara being cast upon the mountain by Shamiram after he spurns her advances. Shamiram, skilled in black magic, conjured the forces of the night to throw him into the void, and when he landed, his body sank onto the top of the mount, giving it its present contour. Yet another tale says that when Ara died, and Semiramis had him buried at the foot of the mountain, his spirit rose, forming the top of the mountain into his sleeping likeness. The top of the mountain does resemble the contour of a man's face.

**Flowers** on Arai Lehr include (in season) *Merendera trigyna*, *M. raddeana*, *colchiam bifolium*, *Purdminia scilloides*, *Scilla armenia*, *S. siberica*, *Tulipa julia*, *Iris caucasia*, *Muscari caucasicum*, *Bellevalia pycnantha*, *Ornithogalum schelkovnikovii*, *O. brachystachys*, *O. hyastanum*, *Fritillaria caucasia*, *Nectarosordum tripedale*, *Osp of gagea*, *Myosotis alpestre*, *Amenone caucasia*, *Orchis coriophora*, *Gladiolus tenuis*.

**Mountain Steppe flora** include *Gladiolus atroviolaceus*, *Nigella oxypetala*, *Actynolema*



fronted Serin, Trumpeter Finch, Mongolian Finch, Eurasian Linnet, White-winged Snowfinch, Eurasian Tree Sparrow, Spanish Sparrow, Pale Rock-Finch, Rock Sparrow, White-winged Snowfinch, Rose-coloured Starling

**Climbing the mountain: North Approach**

Several northern approaches climb the mountain, from easy to moderately difficult. It is even possible with a Vilis/UAZ or Jeep to drive up the mountain, but why would you? OK, you might, but try to walk a little to take in the nature.

➤ A SW mountain road runs parallel to the Kasakh River for about 4.6 km to where a path leads up the Western face of the mountain for about 4.2 km to the summit.

➤ Two dirt tracks exit the south edge of the village; one next to the SW mountain road ("Left"); the other just S of the village ruins ("Right"). Both intersect about 3 km from the crest of the mountain, the right track continuing forward to the top of the mountain and the left skirting the NE base of the mountain before turning sharply right (SW) and climbing the NE cleft of the mountain.

➤ Another mountain road intersects the Norashen road 1 km north of central Yer'njatap on the NE end of the village and a right turn (SE) takes you to a right fork (S) in about 700m onto a mountain track that passes the NE edge of the mountain and after about 4.4 km leads to a path that climbs the NE ridge of the mountain (on its S side) to the crater in about 3.5 km

➤ Two other mountain paths start from Saralandj in Kotaik marz, some 5 km distant and take an westerly route to the East peak, skirting around its base to join the NE crevice pathway.

➤ Southern and Eastern approaches begin from Yeghvard and Pokravan in Kotaik marz.

See Kotaik Marz chapter for S & E approaches.

**Camping** is possible on the summit and on the nearby riverbeds; **Overnight** in village home at Yerinjatap 4.5 km to the N (rustic, 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** are in the village and on the mountainside.



Photograph courtesy of © Tigran Nazaryan

➤ **Backtrack to Yer'njatap, Hartavan and the Aparan Highway, turn R (N) and continue for about 1.7 km to a T-intersection (large empty tufa building on the R) and an unmarked tree-lined road that goes right (E) for about 3 km to the dam of Aparan Reservoir and (J'rambar, DD 40.48194 x 44.43306)**

**SIDE TRIP:** (J'rambar - Ջրամբար elev. 1839m, pop. 129) lies just under Aparan Lake (Reservoir), its hamlet built below the dam to house workers for the dam and lake.

➤ **NOTE** that there are two ways to the East shore of Aparan. The first, below, begins from the dam and goes north along the eastern shoreline. Another option is to follow the Aparan highway to Kuchak and cross along the northern shore to Yeghipatrush and then down. We prefer the first, but either will work.

**Southern Route:** Continue across the dam (the guards at the gate should let you in if you tell them you are seeking Poghos Petros) and take the dirt road that goes slightly uphill of the abandoned pansionat and goes towards the pine forests. The road leads to a series of sites on **Aparan Jrambar (Aparan Reservoir)**



**APARAN RESERVOIR SITES**

Lake Aparan takes up what was a deep valley for the Kasakh River, and stretches 7 km from top to bottom and over 2 km at its widest point. The lake supplies water to the Ararat valley and is an idyllic spot for camping, picnics and hiking, as well as swimming in the cold waters. The rise and fall of the waters are seasonal, in some years the melting snows raise the level to above the top rim, while in August and September the waters drop to reveal most of the northern reservoir floor, which is emerald green from the rich alluvial sediments deposited by the lake's waters.

From the dam (just after the bridge on the east shore) there is a dirt path that goes to the R (S) and leads in about 1.3 km to the sparse but evocative **Norashen ruins**. Turn left (N) after the

macrolema, Gundelia tournefort, Verbascum saccatum, Lallemanita iberica, Roemeria retracta, Scabiosa argentea, Scorrionera paposa, Muscari beglecta, Stchys inflata, Astragalus distyophysus, A. kochianus, Achillea tenuifolia, Helichrysum rubicundum, Silena spergulifolia.

**Birding** on Arai Lehr is better in migration periods, but there are some species you can see year round, including *Red-footed Falcon*, *Merlin*, *Eurasian Hobby*, *Rufous-tailed Rock-Thrush*, *Blue Rock-Thrush*, *Sombre Tit*, *Rock Bunting*, *Grey-necked Bunting*, *Crimson-winged Finch*, *Red-*

bridge and continue about 500m to the equally sparse **Kushi ruins**, en route to the picnic areas described below.

**Picnic /Camping Spots.** Continue N on the dirt path from the reservoir dam and in about 2 km a R turn into the forest (gated) leads to a grove of pine trees, a spring and a **picnic area**. The area is deserted most of the year, save the odd shepherd or local collecting masur (rose hips) or wild berries. Another **picnic and camping area** is on the L as you continue N, in another 1-2 km, also in a grove of pine trees. Popular with locals, the site is unfortunately littered with trash (Armenia's chronic problem being the abhorrence of picking after itself), but still a pleasant spot to pitch a tent or stop for a meal (but do pick up after yourself). The camping opportunities continue N along the shoreline to Old Zovuni, and beyond if you like camping out in the open.



**Zovuni monuments.** Not far from the camping/picnic areas, seen from afar as you travel north and standing above the lake shoreline are several important sites, among which are relics from historic Zovuni, submerged under the reservoir's waters when it was filled in Soviet times and its inhabitants moved to a new suburb of Yerevan of the same name. Locals still return seasonally to shepherd flocks and collect berries and herbs in the fertile lake bed and nearby hills. They delight in taking visitors on a tour of the remains of their old village, regaling with stories of a time and place long past. Zovuni was the historic center of the valley and home of the 5th c Poghos Petros church, a Tukh Manuk and a S. Vartan mausoleum and church. The latter two were dismantled and rebuilt, block by block, on higher land on the eastern shoreline.

First is the **Tukh Manuk Shrine, S. Vartan Mausoleum, Khachkars and Zovuni cemetery** sitting on a low hill overlooking the reservoir and the forested tops of the Tsakhkuniats Range to the east (DD 40.50876 x 44.44835, elev. 1894m).



**The Tukh Manuk Shrine** is very old, made from large tufa blocks and roofed with metal corrugated steel. The shrine is dedicated to the Black Youth deity, a combination of images from Near East sources which may have evolved into the Mythra deity worshipped in Armenia and later Rome. The south entry opens to a dark hall space, oriented to the east now, but originally having its pre-Christian altar in the west. Note the telltale ancient stone positioned inside the shrine, a hallmark of pagan origins in Tukh Manuks.



In front of and behind the shrine there are several **memorial stones and khachkars** on the site, including a black base with the fragment of a once tall stele, possibly an open cross stone, but carved

with geometric patterns that suggest a less Christian purpose.



Also nearby is the ruined 5th c **S. Vartan mausoleum**, called the Zorovar Vartan Mamikonian mausoleum for the commander of Armenian forces at the 5th c battle of Avarair (also spelled "Avarayr", pronounced "ah-var-EYE-er") and martyr of the struggle against the Sassanid Empire. Mamikonian fell in battle near Avarair in 451 leading the troops of Prince Tachat Gtuni, who it is said brought his body here and ordered the construction of the sepulchre church. The mausoleum/church has a half-buried sepulchre adjoining the church on the south. Built on a stepped platform, the foundations outline Hellenistic temples with its footprint and form the basis of a single-nave basilica.



Scattered around the church are some early khachkars, including a **4th c Greek cross stone**, carved on a menhir stone, another **early Christian khachkar** (7th c?) fragment with a

deeply incised tree of life, and a **black stele**, with two deep niches with eroded patterns within. This last looks to be an earlier Vishap stone.



Depending on when you visit the site, the important 5th-6th cc **Poghos Petros basilica**, a single nave basilica will be submerged under the lake's waters or standing on dry, green ground. It is about 100m below the Tukh Manuk and cemetery (DD 40.50089 x 44.43547, elev. 1843m). The large church was built as a triple nave basilica, converted into a domed hall in the first quarter of the 6th c for Prince Gtuni. It is the oldest example of this church type in Armenia, with protruding northern and southern portal "wings" and a semicircular apse built within the thick rectangular walls, the northern wall in ruins. There is also a western entry to the church with semi columns on either side with a simple rectangular frame. The roof, now gone, was originally wooden, later replaced with a stone gable roof, the later dome supported by heavy pylons adjoining the southern and northern walls.



The rows of pylon masonry are chamfered and bear the mason's mark while the NE pylon still has an inscription for Prince Gntuni, whose family held Zovuni in their possession during the 5th-6th cc. The deep recessed apse has a vaulted ceiling and is dressed with white stones, its edges decorated with classical columns protruding from the walls. The sides of the walls have protruding square columns that supported the roof, breaking the even plains of the walls. There are signs of frescoes on the walls, but impossible to see their designs, mostly washed away from the rising and falling waters.



Underneath the lake's waters are the ruins of the **old settlement of Zovuni**, its stones taken by nearby villagers spared the exodus forced on the citizens of Zovuni, who left en masse in the 1980s when the reservoir was completed and began to flood. Nothing remains except memories and few traces marking a once bustling village.



**Overnight** *At the dam worker housing is only about half used, so if you meet the right person you should be able to spend the night in one of the vacant apartments or dormitories, if you can take their ragged state. Better to camp out on the shoreline, where **Camping** is possible along the lakeshore; **Springs** are on the river bed in the reservoir.*

➡ *From the Old Zovuni site, continue N on the dirt path as it heads towards and meets up in about 1.8 km with a right fork leading NE in about 1.5 km into **YEGHIPATRUSH** center (40.53326 x 44.47467) 🏠 🚶 🗺*



🏠 **YEGHIPATRUSH - ԵՂԻՊԱՏՐՈՒՇ** 📍 (before Tanirlu, elev. 2008m, pop. 1412) is inhabited by descendants of the original Mush émigrés who resettled the village after the genocide. It was christened Mravian in Soviet times, after Askanaz Mravian, a Bolshevik revolutionary and the first Soviet Armenian Cultural Commissar. He was murdered by the Soviet Secret Police in 1929. The village is an idyllic spot, close to the lake and below the Tsakhkuniats Range, in a cleft in the mountains.

At the upper end of the village (follow the road you enter on through the village to a R alley that goes directly to the churchyard—you can spot the dome and follow it as you drive) is the impressive **10th c S. Astvatsatsin church**. The church's size and the large **13th c gavit** show how important this monastery was for the area, the "new" gavit used as a seminary and religious academy. Part of the Kasakh valley holdings of the Vachutian family, this entire area, mostly under water, was a refuge of last resort from the already encroaching Mongol hordes. The church was built over an earlier

church that in its turn must have been built over a pagan temple; the lake is ringed with Stone, Bronze and Iron Age settlements, fortresses and burial grounds and standing stones in the nearby cemetery are clearly Bronze Age or earlier in origin.



The church is a central domed cruciform type with chambers in the four corners. From outside the cross form is easily detected, with separate roofs for each wing of the cross plan and lower gabled roofs over the chambers, the walls of which are flush with the wings. Deeply incised niches rest on either side of the church windows and portal, the niches touching the chamber walls. A simple round dome surmounts the central square, with four slit windows framed with light décor. A stone tent dome rests on top of the drum. The church, ruined by invasions, was shored up several times and renovated in the 20th c using modern and old stones.



The **13th c gavit**, added just before the worst of the Mongol invasions, is unique. It had a two-story watch tower on its north side, the coroners of which touched the NW church corner. The tower has large windows in the second story, and was topped with a belfry at a later date. The exterior of the gavit is decorated as simply as the church, with khachkars embedded into the walls as memorials for supplicants.



The interior is more ornamental, though not as lavishly as Astvatsnkal a few km south. The four central columns were all round, with the same shape capitals and bases, each carved with a different design. The two in front are modern reconstructions. The central square plan had vaulted roofing, supported by intersecting arches resting on each of the four columns and wall abutments opposite. The wall abutment bases are basic rectangular protrusion with simple adornment. A steep stone stairway leads to the tower on the NE side. Probably the most elaborate

décor are the portals, to the church inside the gavit, and into the gavit.



The church portal is badly eroded, gouged by invading tribes and worn down by the elements. It may have had a fresco arrangement, like those found at Saghmsovank or Hovhanavank; it would not have uncommon for the same artists to work on multiple projects sponsored by the same family. The portal to the gavit is very elaborate, a beehive arch with conchs in layers ending in a "bishop's hat" above the center of the doorway. It is framed in an undeniably "Asian" look, the flat stones forming a peaked arch and the rectangular frame carved in a delicate lacework that resembles the framing used in Persian, Turkish and Indian edifices off the time.

About 100 m away is a **burial ground**, the stones and khachkars from the medieval period. The ruins of the wall are the western fragment of the semicircular apse of a **5th c single nave basilica**. The squared columns on the corner of the apse were the support columns for arches that supported a dome over the front hall.

The cemetery has a **13th c khachkar shrine**, shored up with cement. The two tall red khachkars were donated by a very wealthy supplicant, framed in gray basalt and set upon a large base carved with an elaborate mosaic of white and red stone "inlay", the design alternating red 8 pointed stars and white crosses. The magnificent khachkars are highly detailed, with lace-work geometric designs and deeply incised patterns for the crosses, tree of life, sun symbol and grape bunches.



Even though they look alike in their design and carving, very subtle difference emerge to show their differences; the sun symbols have different centers, the grape bunches have different interior carvings, the crosses end in slightly different points. In this they respect the dictum for all khachkars, no two can be alike, though more than 40,000 were carved in the medieval period. **Other khachkars** lie on the ground, including a **gray basalt khach** from the early medieval period (7th c?) with a snake symbol above the cross and a dominant tree of life picture.



One to look for is a remarkable **khach shrine carved on the face of a large white boulder**, erasing older pictogram figures. Look carefully, the top of the stone shows depressions identical to those found on the ancient astronomical observatory at Metsamor and the [Agarak sanctuary](#). The stone itself has several carved stairway, worn now by erosion, and missing a few steps from a section that has fallen away. The same stone at Metsamor had five steps, one for

each of the known planets in the Bronze Age. Village elder Smbat, who happened upon us while we were visiting the site, told us that locals use the stone to cure sick children, washing them in the water that stands in the rock's holes and burning their clothes at the site. He swears they are all cured, miraculously, and that locals know the stone is thousands of years ('tens of thousands of years') old.



The deliberate carving of a multitude of crosses over the face of the stone and converting one part into a mini shrine, suggests a serious effort to wash away the original use of this stone, and its veneration as something powerful, a link to a religious past. This is an amazing artifact.



**Gravestones** in the cemetery include some large stones carved with likeness of the interred and symbols of their life or hoped-for after life. One in particular appears to show a man holding the handle of a 12-spoked wheel, and eight-fanned orb over his left shoulder. Others are rudimentary

figures showing the barest outline of the person (their sex determined by a dress or pantaloons), their heads replaced with a round orb, representing a halo or aura. Two graves of interest are worth looking for: the first is fenced in with wrought iron, uphill from the sacred stone.



It is known as the "hodja" or rich man's grave, for a villager who was notoriously tight with his money. The story goes he had villagers build his grand house and barn, but when the workers asked for payment, he refused, saying they had eaten and slept on his property while working and that was payment enough. They kept asking and he kept refusing. Finally, the workers went to the church, took up handfuls of dirt and asked God to "please turn his house into this dirt." After a time, the hodja lost his house, his farm and all his money.



The second lies on the ground just W of the khachkar shrine, towards the edge of the cemetery. It is unremarkable save an insignia

under the writing, a shield with cross and pointed tops. Locals say this is the grave of a rich villager in the medieval period who only wore shoes with soles made of gold.



**Hiking.** There are a couple of good hikes from the village, both leading to the Tsakhkuniats Mountains and Kotaik on the other side.

A **North path** leaves from the NE edge of the village (just above the Kuchak road) and climbs the range to the T'tujur Pass (2093.3m, 2.2 km), continuing through the mountain cleft with forests

on either side before crossing a river just S of T'tujur village (just over 4 km). From T'tujur it is 2 km to Dzoraglukh, from which it is 3 km to the top of the Tsakhkuniats range and Kotaik.

The **East path** leaves Yeghipatrush on its eastern edge following the river delta uphill about 3 km to the top of the range. Multiple paths "spider" the mountain range, leading in roundabout ways to Buzhakan (12.5 km), pansionats above Arzakan (12 km) and north towards Megradzor (17 km). These are sometimes difficult to navigate paths, easy to lose your way. To hike beyond the first 3 km [you need an experienced guide](#) (See Adventure guides on page 13).

**OVERNIGHT B&B**

*Diana Hovhannisian, in the house directly across from the church, has a large village home and garden with great views of the valley with room for 7-8 visitors at 3000-4000 AMD per night. Her home is an artist's retreat and paintings lie scattered around the house.*

**Camping** is possible on the lake side and in the mountains; **Overnight** in village homes (rustic, 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** are in the village and on the mountainside.

➡ From Yeghipatrush church, take the W road out of the village towards Kuchak for about 4.8 km to (**Kasakh**, DD 40.53774 x 44.41257, elev. 1851m)

**SIDE TRIP:** (**Kasakh - Բաւախի**) is a hamlet, now dormant and without houses, but with a **single-nave basilica** on top of a tall hill L of the road to Kuchak (look to the lake as you cross the north bridge then up the hills, take the dirt path just before a small pass leading to a cemetery and beyond the church and park below it on the E side, DD 40.53446 x 44.40697, elev. 1884m), said to be 19th c but looking made from much older stones and construction details.

From its base on the like bed, there is a small covered picnic table and next to it a **Tukh Manuk shrine**, very small but with interesting religious items gathered by locals.



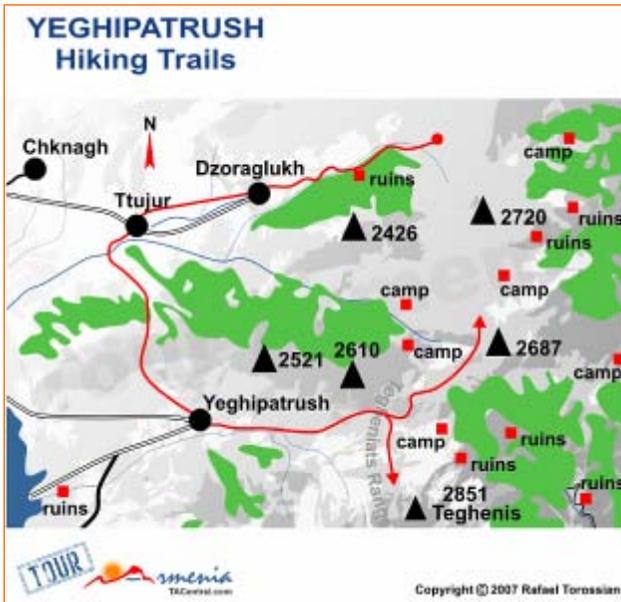
➡ Continue S on the road for about 1 km where it meets up with the Yerevan-Aparan hwy and then S about 700m to central (**Kuchak**) (DD 40.52528 x 44.39167) 🏠 🚶 🏞

**SIDE TRIP:** (**Kuchak - Բնչալի** also spelled "Quchak" elev. 1867, pop. 1659) lies just west of the main body of Aparan Reservoir (Aparani Jrambar), the western terminus of the old road between Kuchak and Yeghipatrush on the opposite shore. Between them, underneath the waters that now supply Yerevan, is old Zovuni, an ancient settlement from the Bronze Age that became one of the important monastery centers for Aparan Kingdom before being submerged in the 1980s.

Go back to the Kuchak road, turn L and continue around the hill on your L for about 700m to a L dirt path (farm sign on R side of road) that leads to the base of the hill and another, more important **Tukh Manuk (Black Youth) Shrine** on top of the hill, borrowing Christian and pagan elements in its form and use. Note the snake carvings on the rocks on the hill as you climb the steps, and the way the surrounding area is divided with rock lines, some of which are modern fences made from clearing farmland but which much are the remains of a large Bronze Age settlement at the site. The Black Youth was a pre-Christian deity, borrowing devices from pagan beliefs from the Near East. It continues to be venerated throughout the country in remote shrines like this (invariably built on top of pre-Christian animistic or deity pagan shrines), though locals swear they are praying to the Christian God or his Son. Immediately around the shrine the ground is littered with **obsidian flakes**, signs of settlement from the Stone or Bronze Age



The village was built on the ruins of previous settlements in 1829-1830 at the conclusion of the Russo-Persian war, by Armenians who had lived in Mush. It is named for Nahapet Kuchak,



a 16th c poet and bard credited with raising the reinvention of the romantic poem to new heights, equal to the best of the great Persian poems of the period. Armenian Love poetry – heretofore frowned on by the church, which focused literature on religious themes and the “moral virtues” of its defenders—began its evolution in the 13th c with the secular themes of poems by Frick, borrowing fragments from pre-Christian poems that had been suppressed during the conversion of the contr.

It developed in the following centuries with the poems of, Yovhannes Yerzenkatsi, Constantine Yerzenkatsi and Arakel Baghishetsi (14th c), Mkrtych Naghash and Yovhannes Telkurantsi (15th c) before reaching what many consider its perfect form in the writings of Grigor Akhtamartsi and Kuchak in the 16th c. In an otherwise declining period of culture, the work of 16th-17th c bards, catering to the Persian Shah and their underlings governing the Armenian province, succeeded in preserving bits of Armenia’s pre-Christian heritage along with its history and cultural values. Perhaps more importantly, favored of the ruling house, bards formed a bridge with the past, engendering a love of literature and ideas that would explode on the scene in the 19th c, creating the modern Armenian literature.



Nahapet (“kin head”, “head”) came from Van and is credited with creating the genre of **Hairens**, poems which consist of four verses of 15 syllables each. An expanded “Haiku” he may or may not have invented the form, more likely he took it (or a form like it) and made it his own. His poetry captures the essence of the times, it is a lively celebration of life lived to the fullest, in pain, in joy, in romantic conquest. The church

must have been horrified. Other than its name (and the odd student reading his work), the village has nothing to do with Nahapet.

There is a **19th c village church** in the center of town, replete with home-made offerings and obvious devotion. A matagh stone is near the church, with evidence of sacrificial offerings.

**Camping.** The Lake Road leaves the SE edge of the village and ends at the shoreline about 2.6 km from center. **The Lake** at this point has striking shoreline with dramatic rocks and cliff falls (a few of the rocks have carved holes reminiscent of those at Agarak), sandstone erosions and deep water. Fishermen use the shore here to catch crawfish (“rok”) and lake trout. It is a good camping spot, close enough to the village to walk for provisions at village kiosks. If you want privacy, go further down the shore from the road, better is across the shoreline at Zovuni, which you can see from this side of the lake.

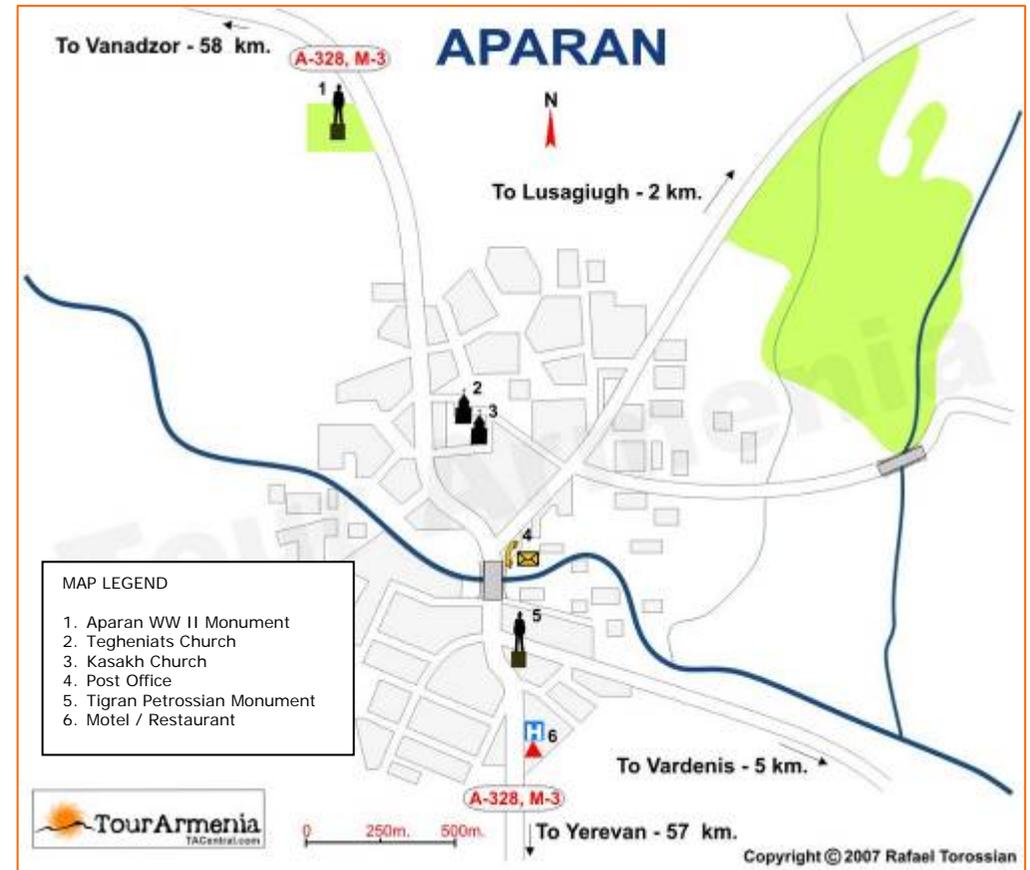
**Kuchak Petroglyphs.** South of Kuchak, on stones along the shoreline are about 60 carved pictograms, mainly geometric symbols that may be Iron Age linear script (2nd-1st millennium BCE). 50 are underwater 8 months of the year, emerging from July-October. The carvings were discovered in 1967 (Suren Petrossian).

**Overnight** in village home (4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** are in the village.

➔ From central Kuchak, go N on the Aparan highway for about 8 km to the Kasakh river bridge in **APARAN** (40.59300 x 44.35616) 🏠 🚶 🌊

📍 **APARAN - ԱՊԱՐԱՆ** 🏔️ (till 1935 Bash Aparan, elev. 1898m, pop. 2566) town, listed by the 2nd c geographer Ptolemy as Kasakh, descends from a long line of settlements from each period of human activity on the plateau. From a Bronze Age beginning, the town developed as Kasakh throughout the Medieval period, serving as a seat of power for the Vachutian Family in the 13th c. It was devastated by Mongol, Seljuk and Kurdish attacks, depopulated in the 15th c after Timur rode through and only resettled after the Russo-Turkish War of 1826-1828 awarded the region to the Russian Empire.

The town became famous in 1918 as the site of a pivotal battle that reversed the tide of Turkish invasion and led the way to Armenia’s liberty and the forming of the First Republic. It was also a



hotbed for revolutionary activism, with several Bolshevik minions hailing from the town. They are no longer celebrated as they once were on May Day, but their memory survives, as do those of the courageous men and women who fought in the Great Patriotic War, Aparantsis known for their tenacious fighting abilities and sacrifice.

The town is made of Kurdish and Armenian locals, known as Aparantsis, the butt of many a ‘local yokel’ joke. Reputed to be dim witted, Aparantsis are quite warm and friendly, and if their native speech is slower, it is quick-witted and inviting. Aparan is also notoriously known as the birthplace of a number of corrupt government officials and police officers, the locals providing the greatest number of policemen to the Yerevan force. If this is an unseemly side to their history, they have

much to be proud of, and the town is now dotted with a number of monuments to celebrate their native sons’ achievements.

The city is built on both sides of the Kasakh River, and is on top of a **Bronze Age site**, the Aparani Berd archeological site. Remains are located behind the Genocide/Aparan Battle Memorial on the N side of town, above the Kasakh gorge. The excavation uncovered a substantial 3rd-1st millennium BCE settlement based on trade and agriculture. The site has housing foundations, tomb fields and caves in the river canyon. There is also evidence of a large cyclopean fortress which guarded the passage between Lori and Ararat.



#### Bearings

The town is served by the North-South Aparan Highway (A329/M3), its center just N of the Kasakh River bridge. The main square, named after Chess Champion Tigran Petrosian, has government buildings and shops around the memorial. The churches are just north, the Genocide/Battle of Aparan Memorial is N on the highway about 500m from the square.

From Aparan it is 40 km to Ashtarak, 29 km to Spitak, 50 km to Vanadzor and 62 km to Yerevan.

#### SITES

##### Central Square / Tigran Petrossian Square

The central Square, also known as the Square of Letters for its monuments to literary and cultural figures, is located in the center of town, just north of the Kasakh River Bridge. The square has an imposing **monument to Tigran Petrosian**, a native son who became the 9th World Chess Champion. The monument is imposing and retro-modern, looking much like the Armen Tigranian statue in Yerevan's Ring Park.

Authorities plan on erecting monuments to more of Armenia's famous, dressing the otherwise drab Soviet feel of the place. Sounds nice, though the real cost of the project is usually much lower than the official bid, the mayor and his infamous sons taking a cut off the top.



##### Aparan Monument

Just N of town, on a hill to the left (W) of the highway is a large Gate protecting the entrance to a large grove of pine and birch trees and above them the imposing **Aparan Monument**, dedicated to –depending on who you talk to–to the 1918 Battle of Aparan, which routed the Turkish Troops and led to the formation of the First Republic; or to the victims of the Genocide of 1915; or to the victims and soldiers of World War I; or to the Great Patriotic War (World War II).

The memorial was originally intended to be to the Victims of the Genocide, but since Soviet authorities never officially recognized the genocide, monuments intended to memorialize the event had to slip it on the sly, abstracting it as part of other events.

The Aparan monument is rally a complex of memorials commemorating the genocide as World War I, along with memorializing the Battle of 1918 and World War II. The memorial is also unique for having no official dedication, being proposed and built by the local town folk.

The monument is a very large black tufa freestanding structure looking something like the ruins of a fortress with three niches, each resembling a church apse. Each niche contains a unique modern khachkar and inscription. The genocide inscription reads:

*"1915 To the Victims of the Genocide and 1918 To the Heroes of the Aparan Battle"*

In 2000, the remains of the Armenians Freedom Fighter General Drastamat Kanaiyan, (more widely known as D'ro, 1 May 1883 - 8 March 1956), were transferred to the monument from the USA. D'ro was an Armenian freedom fighter, general and Minister of Defense in the first republic.

He was born in the village of Karmir in modern Armenia, near Lake Sevan and served in the Russian army before and during in World War I, fighting Turkish and Azeri Troops and saving countless Armenian lives during the Genocide.



Becoming Minister for Defense of the fledgling Armenian Republic in 1918, D'ro became a popular hero after victories over Turkish forces in 1918 in various campaigns against Turkey, Azerbaijan and Georgia. In 1920, after the incorporation of the Republic of Armenia into the Soviet Union, D'ro – a member of the ruling Dashnaks—was forced to leave the country and immigrate to Iran and later to Germany.

Controversially, D'ro is linked with the Germans during World War II, believing he could revive an independent Armenia as part of the German strategy to destabilize the Soviet Union by "liberating" its republics.

There is much debate of what D'ro did during the war, he led a contingent of Armenian troops, and some have accused him of committing atrocities, others that he focused exclusively on liberating Armenia and avoided fighting Soviet Troops and saved countless Armenian POW's in the process.

Arrested after the war, D'ro was released, immigrated to Lebanon and then to the US for medical treatment, where he died. His actions during World War II are a volatile subject in polite conversation. Suffice to say, he is a saint in Armenia for his actions during the genocide and protecting the first republic, which arguably saved the country from certain destruction by Ottoman Turks. He is especially revered in Aparan, and you are advised to be careful what you say.



##### Churches

North of the roundabout on side streets are two churches, including the 4th-7th cc **Kasakh Basilica** (S. Khach or Holy Cross), an important example of early Armenian Christian architecture. It has recently been restored and is now a working church. The church is reached by continuing north after the roundabout and taking the first large street to the R, the church is on the L about 100m from the hwy.

The triple nave basilica is the best specimen of the Oriental-style Armenian basilica. It is a rectangular building standing on a stepped stylobate, suggesting a conversion and enlargement of an earlier pagan temple.



The interior of the hall had a width to length ratio of 1 to 2. The hall is divided by three pairs of T-shaped pylons into a nave and two aisles (the nave is 2.5 times wider than the aisles). The pylons are matched in the long walls by pilasters that support the flying arches of the side vaults.

The arches have been reconstructed; an original surviving arch of the central nave and the flying arches of the side aisles are distinctly horseshoe-shaped. The vaults for the nave and aisles share the same roof. A gallery and room connecting to the church are later additions.

The addition of the north chapel done before the last quarter of the 4th c following the decrees of the Katolikos Sahak Partev who tried to harmonize church structures and rites as he fought against the precepts of the Greek and Syrian churches, who were usurping Armenian rites. A Greek inscription was found in 1908, dedicated to King

T'rdat of the Arshakuni Dynasty (353-425 CE). The architectural decoration of the church is archaic; the trim of its windows somewhere between the window frame and edge, the archivolt (bands or moldings surrounded by an arched opening) descends to mid window where it is joined by the horizontal elements of the frame. This ornamental design was perfected in the 5th c, indicating this was an early attempt right after the conversion of the country.



The basilica's short walls were topped by pediments, its doors framed by porticoes with pediments supported by two pairs of columns linked by a horseshoe arch. Cornices are serrated. These combine to show how strong Hellenistic traditions were in Armenia in the early 4th c.

The church was abandoned at the beginning of the Soviet Union, its priests and those of the neighboring churches were exiled to Siberia, most dying. Renovation began in the 1990's and was completed in 2005.



Take the time to visit the remarkable little **Tegheniats Church** nearby. To get there, back track to the highway, go north to the next R and look for wall on your right, as it turns, take the alley that follows it to a narrow breach, where you can enter a large yard with ruins and khachkars and to the S, on a low hill overlooking some waterworks, the very old and unique 4th c Church (chapel). The church is a hall type that is a perfect example of the building conversions done in the first part of the Christian era, when priests simply converted Pagan temples into churches, making cursory changes to the façade to "convert" its purpose to the new religion.



This church is unique in that it survives mostly intact (most temples were torn down to make way for newer and larger churches) and still retains its original layout and stonework, including the Pagan sun symbols that adorn its simple façade. Note the hollow circles flanking the small cross stones that were clearly imbedded to replace their pagan forebears. In a park like setting, with grass

overgrowing the stepping stones, this little church is a gem in an otherwise faintly barren locale.

**PRACTICALITIES**

Area code is 2520

**IN AND OUT**

Two *Vanadzor Buses* travel via Aparan and can drop you off en route if you pre-arrange with the driver. One leaves from the Northern Bus Station at 1 Sevan Highway, the other from the Main Station on Admiral Isakov in Yerevan and arrives at the bus station by the main square in Aparan. Buses for Yerevan depart from the bus station and end up at the Northern or Main Bus Station. 500-700 AMD.

Minivans for Vanadzor pass through Aparan and will drop you off if you prearrange with the driver. Minivans leave from Yerevan every 20 minutes or so, from Intersection of Agatangeghos & Khorenatsi Streets in Yerevan and can stop at the Aparan Bus Station. 1000 AMD.

**AROUND**

*Taxis* are everywhere in town center, 100 AMD per km plus 200. You can use taxis to explore the region as well, same price.

*Minivans* depart from the bus station by the square for villages throughout the region (Kuchak, Yeghipatrush, Aragats, Nigevan, Tsaghkahovit, Hnaberd, Alagiaz, etc). They leave when they are full and generally travel early morning, returning late afternoons. Check when you arrive to get an idea of the schedule, which is very changeable.

**COMMUNICATION, ETC**

- Fire – 101
- Police – 102
- Ambulance service – 103
- Rescue Hot Line - 118
- Gas emergency service – 104
- Trunk Line – 107
- Telephone directory information – 109

**Post, Phone, telegraphs**

The Central Post Office is on the main Square, 53 Baghramian p. It has trunk line phone service, sells phone cards (30 minutes 3000 AMD) and can deliver telegraphs.

Additional phone services are in town. They advertise in front of their shops, sometimes with internet.

Aparan School # 1 welcomes visitors, and is connected to the Internet. You have to talk your way in but if they like you, you can probably check your email here if nothing else is in town.

**Banks**  
ArmSavingsBank, 32 Shahumian, tel. 5247 ASHB, 28 Baghramian p.

**Shopping**  
The Shuka is in the center, off the main square. Mterks and kiosks are around town. A Univermag is in the center, now privatized.

**Car repair, tires, petrol** in town and the highway.

**Medical** The medical center is poorly equipped, folks usually go to Ashtarak or Yerevan. The center has a polyclinic and hospital (tel 4067).

**Apotekas** in town, ask at your overnight for recommendation.

#### OVERNIGHT

There is a *restaurant/motel* (Rent by hour or night) and Restaurant on the right as you enter the town. 5000 AMD for 5 or 24 hours (whichever you require). Other venues in town entirely possible in apartments and homes. Ask around, they are everywhere. 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair. Camping up the hills NE of town by Lusagiugh (3 km).

#### FOOD AND DRINK

The restaurant/motel S of town has a restaurant with Armenian food at around 2500-3000 AMD for a meal without drinks. There is a café on the left north of the Arevtri S'rah on the square. Other spots include cafes, bistros and khorovats joints in town and by the highway.



➡ From Aparan, about 100m S of the Kasakh River Bridge take the E/SE road out of town and through Mulki (1.2 km), to a fork in the road just N of Vardenis (3.8 km from Aparan), turn left (E)

and continue another 5 km, over the Kasakh River and past the Ch'knagh N turnoff (at 2.8 km) to (T'tujur) (DD 40.57472 x 44.45472) 🏠 🚶 🌿

**SIDE TRIP:** (T'tujur - Թթուջուր "Sour Water," till 1950 Imrlu elev. 1943m, pop. 1617) is set on the western end of the confluence of three mountain streams that feed the Kasakh River. It is just north of an inturn of the upper Tsaghkuniats range, which have forested slopes worth investigating. Due south is a dirt path that lead to Yeghipatrush in about 2.2 km and topping the T'tujur Pass (2093.3m). The village has a **S. Harutiun church** and a **Karmir Vank** ("Red Monastery") said to have been built in the 17th c, located to the south just above the riverbed near the path to Yeghipatrush.

**Alternate Route to Hankavan:** (map next page) There is a dirt track that surmounts the Tsaghkuniats Range and descends to Hankavan Nature Area in Kotaik. With a keep and some luck you can explore this wilderness area, a beautiful, uninhabited section of the country. The road begins from the N end of the village, there is a left path that goes to Ch'knagh, take the right fork North for about 6.2 km uphill as it meets an "improved" rutted road that begins to switchback and pass under the crest of the hill (2523.8m). All around you on your way up are several **Stone Age open air sites**, hard to discover unless you get out and start coursing the field. Look for flakes and pieces of rock that were obviously worked. The site was a "workshop" for Paleolithic tools and weapons, part of the civilization that first settled this region. From the crest the road continues over the mountain range for another 7.2 km, winding above the Marmarchai River and past several old ruins before descending into the Greek village of Hankavan. In Hankavan, ask for Nicholai and his wife; if they are still there they are fine hosts and will supply food and a rustic sort of B&B (3000-5000 AMD) plus stories of the old days, speaking a little archaic Greek, the language of Plato and Socrates.

**Camping** is possible in the area and forests (ask first); **Overnight** in village home (4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** are in the village.

➡ From T'tujur center cross the river on its south side and take the E road about 2.2 km to (Dzoraglukh) (DD 40.58028 x 44.48528) 🏠 🚶 🌿



**SIDE TRIP:** (Dzoraglukh - Զորագլուխ till 1946 Giulablu elev. 2089m, pop. 1826) is in a NW fold of Mt. Arkastler (2687m) that includes the smaller (2426.1m) mount it lays at the foot of. On its east end are the ruins of the 10th-13th cc **S. Hovhannes** church.

**Hikes.** The village is a good jumping off point for hiking the nearby mountains, with three possible trails that lead to the top of the Tsaghkuniats Range. The **north trail** departs from the NW of the village and in about 2 km meets with a N/S path that climbs towards the T'tujur/Hankavan road. The **Eastern Trail** departs from the E edge of the village with two paths leading to the top of the nearby mountain, one turning N at about 1 km through a mountain pass, containing 2.5 km where it meets a network of trails that roam the mountain range back into Aragatsotn or E into Kotaik; the other skirts the north face of the mountain before turning south on the top ridge of the Tsaghkuniats Range (about 3 km from the village). A **southern route** leaves from the S end of the village, just east of the T'tujur road, and skirts the S edge of the nearby

mountain as it climbs to the top ridge of the Tsaghkuniats Range. From there on there is a **spider web of trails**, and [an experienced guide is required to safely navigate you](#) (on page 13)

**Camping** is possible in the area and forests (ask first); **Overnight** in village home (4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** are in the village.

➡ Backtrack to Aparan and immediately north of the Kasakh River bridge take the NE road out of town for about 3 km to (Lusagiugh) center (DD 40.61444 x 44.39083, elev. 2141m) 🏠 🚶 🌿

**SIDE TRIP:** (Lusagiugh - Լուսագլուխ formerly Gharanlegh, pop. 1504) is also in a fold in the nearby low mountains with access to the upper Tsaghkuniats Range and Kotaik. The village has a working **1887 church**. More important architecturally are the ruins of a **4th c church**, about 700m up from the E edge of the village on the mountain track and a 7th c **Tukh Manuk chapel**, on a hilltop N of the village (about 1 km on the N path that twists E then N up the northern hills). The Tukh Manuk (Black Youth) is a quasi-pagan deity combining traits of gods from the Near East, and is built on top of a pre-Christian shrine.

**Alternate Route to Hankavan:** The village is the jumping off point for an alternate route to Hankavan, which is in worse shape (so more fun to the testosterone driven) and may be faster to hike than drive up. The track leaves from the E edge of the village (like you are going to the 4th c church), and continues to switchback and wind around Mt. Davakar (2781.6m) for about 12 km to Hankavan. This road passes over breathtaking views (and heart stopping cliff edges and gorges) and is not for the faint of heart. About half way along it passes through a mountain camp once used by the Pioneers. Season rains may cause rock slides, be sure to ask before you leave, lest you return unhappy.



### The Yezidis

The "Yezidi" or "Yazidi" (Kurdish: Êzîdîti or Êzîdî) belong to the smallest of the three branches of Yazdanism, the other two, Alevism and Yarsanism, differing from the Yezidis by recognizing Islamic taqiyya (dissimulation). The three branches are divided geographically and rarely communicate with each other. Yezidis face a lot of discrimination, especially in Moslem countries and so rarely admit their religion, but one rough figure states fully a third of the population of Kurdistan are Yezidis, their culture is closely tied to Kurdish and they mostly speak Kurmanji (Northern Kurdish).

Their religion is a highly secretive and symbolic one; Sufi influence and imagery is a part of it but much of their mythology has more in common with pre-Islamic Iranian, Indian and Near Eastern beliefs. In fact, only the initiated actually know the full theology, even among the Yezidi themselves. Their religion is so secretive that not even those who describe the religion can be sure they actually have it right. The common consensus though is that the Yezidi believe in One God who created the world that is now in the hands of Seven Holy Beings, or the Heptad, often referred to as the Angels or 'heft sirr' (the Seven Mysteries). Above all the angels is 'Malak Ta'us' (Tawûsê Melek in Kurdish), represented as a Peacock Angel, erroneously equated by some Muslims and Christians with Satan or the Devil, who mistake its synonym 'Shaitan,' or Devil in the Koran, for its true meaning. Actually the word Ta'us is derived from the Greek, referring to Zeus and Theos, also to God, making Malak Ta'us God's Angel, which is how the Yezidi view it.

Their views on creation, the point of sin and the nature of evil and good are different from both Christianity and Islam. For more information [see resources](#).



However, they have little in common other than ancestral blood. Their religion, which is secretive, shares a great deal from the Zoroastrian religion that originated around the Caspian Sea, and borrows tenets from both early Christian and Moslem beliefs. The real starting point of their religion may never be known, but it shares something of the origins of Persian, Turkish, Armenian, Georgian and aboriginal Azeri pagan religions; worshipping fire, the sun and an Originator of all things. Beginning in 2005 Yezidi-Armenian students became the first of their worldwide community to receive schoolbooks in their own language.

Right off the highway on the right side of the road are two interesting monuments, one the **Yezidi Cemetery**, dating back to the 13th c, with animistic tombstones in the shape of horses, some of which may be over Mongol warrior remains, and the other, a **4th or 5th c church or chapel**, built over a small pagan shrine that was venerated by the Yezidis after their arrival. It fell into disrepair

during the Timur expedition, and now sits mostly in ruins, though you will still offerings on the premises, local villagers not wishing to anger the spirits of those who came before.

**Camping** is possible on the NE hillsides or by the river (ask first); **Overnight** in village home (4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** are in the village.

➔ Continue N on the highway for about 2.6 km to (**Alagiadz**) center (DD 40.33306 x 43.65806) 



**SIDE TRIP:** (**Alagiadz - Ալազազ** till 1938 Mets Jamshtu elev. 1259m, pop. 1235) sits at the crossroads of three roads, two leading north into Lori Marz and one to the heart of the Tsaghkahovit Plain and Shirak. The village is inhabited, like Ria Taza, by Yezidis, and has a **Kurdish Cultural center** in the center, run by a woman named Beritan, who also runs a small clinic out of the same building for the surrounding villages. The village also runs a cheese factory, well worth visiting.

**Camping** is possible near the village (ask first); **Overnight** in village home (3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** are in the village.

➔ From Alagiadz there are two westward roads leading outside the village. Take the southern Artik road which is about 200m S of the Kasakh River bridge. Take that road W into the southern edge of the **TSAGHKAHOVIT PLAIN** and some important excavations. 

✳ **THE TSAGHKAHOVIT PLAIN - ՇԱԿԿԱՅՈՎԻՏ ԳՆՐԹԱՎԱՅԻ** The Tsaghkahovit plain is a triangle of relatively flat (rolling hills) land between the

Pambak Range and Mt. Aragats. From its beginnings it was a relatively contained territory, rich with alluvial soil from the lava flows of the volcanic mountains around it, and had in the early periods of Human habitation, a moist, warm climate that fostered a tremendous growth of settlements and social interaction, as recent excavations are showing. In fact, in the Bronze Age, it was as developed as the Ararat and Araxes-Kur basins, heretofore thought to be the most advanced Bronze Age civilizations in the area. Its relative obscurity and the protection by surrounding mountains were key to its recent discovery. So much of the earliest sites are lost to us by their very success: when captured by the Urartians, the tendency was to tear down or completely revamp the previous structure, especially Early Iron Age fortresses, leaving precious little behind to show us how the ancestors lived. By a stroke of good luck, the Tsaghkahovit Plain, though a part of Urartu's hinterland, somehow survived much of this pillage and destruction, giving us a remarkable look into the deepest history of Armenia, untouched by succeeding generations. We don't know what the people who lived here called themselves, but in the Iron Age the Urartians called the people the Uliia ("oo-LEE-ah").

It was also a crossroads between the ancient people of the Lower Caucasus. The road you are riding on now parallels an ancient path that skirted the Mt. Aragats along the southern edge of the plain connecting the Shirak plain to the west with the Aparan Basin to the East, and, following the Kasakh River to the south, the Ararat Valley. To the North, a rough path over the Pambak Pass led into Lori.

The plain is also the site of a series of fascinating recent excavations, which, along with the ongoing digs at Hovk in Tavush and the massive temple complex in Agarak, are considered some of the most important finds in the Near East, demonstrating a level of sophistication and development never before though possible in this part of the world, let alone so high up in air. Archeology is being rewritten in this small area, as new understandings about ancient geography and climate is undoing old precepts about where civilizations could have begun.

The Tsaghkahovit excavations, begun in 1998 under the direction of a joint Armenian-American Project for the Archaeology and Geography of Ancient Transcaucasian States (Project ArAGATS), is ongoing, focusing on Tsaghkahovit, Gegharot

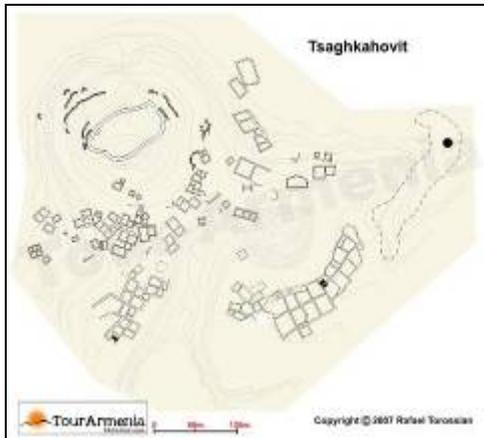
✳ **RIA TAZA - ՌԻԱ ԹԱԶԱ**  (formerly Ghondaksaz, elev. 2070m, pop. 858) sits on the west bank of the Kasakh River, which has become more of stream now, closer to its source in the north of the marz. This small village on the upper plateau, officially part of the Tsaghkahovit Plain, is inhabited by Yezidis, descendants of Kurdish nomads who immigrated to western Asia in the wake of Turkish and Mongol invasions from the 11th-15th cc. Some say they are descended from Shaddadid warriors who settled in the area. The Yezidis in Armenia are sometimes called "Christian Kurds," to differentiate them from their Moslem brethren in present-day northern Iran, Iraq and eastern Turkey.

and Aragatsi-berd, which are seen to be well organized and in communication with each other, all three having substantial populations in the Early and Late Bronze and Urartian/Achaemenid periods.

**Note on visiting sites:** the sites on the plain are worth visiting if there is an excavation going on (generally late spring and early summer), but may not be so fascinating between digs, since they are covered up. In season try and catch an excavation dig—you might just arrive in time for an important find. Do behave yourself, though, this is serious stuff.

Off season, the sites are in windswept grasslands and can be a nice picnic spot, it's just a few km, and you have a chance to say at least, "I was there".

➡ Continue on the Artik Road about 6.5 km from Alagiav (past Sangiar village), and at about 500m from central Sangiar the road forks; take the left (S) fork for about 2 km to central **TSAGHKAHOVIT** (DD 40.63611 x 44.22306) 🏰



📍 **TSAGHKAHOVIT - ՇԱԳԿԱՎՈՎԻՏ** 📍 (till 1946 Haji Khalil, elev. 2224m, pop. 1409) lies on the left (north) bank of the Tsaghkahovit River, the village rising graceful up the rolling foothills of Aragats. The village has a modern **Grigor Lusavorich Church**, but the pride of place goes to the large ongoing excavation nearby at the **Tsaghkahovit Fortress** about 500m S on Mt. Mahara Tepe (2216.6m). An Urartian fortress

**Project ArAGATS**

*Project ArAGATS (Archaeology And Geography of Ancient Transcaucasian States) is a joint Armenian-American archeological research project led by Dr. Adam T. Smith of the University of Chicago Department of Anthropology and Dr. Ruben S. Badalyan of the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography, Yerevan, Armenia. The project surveyed and excavated sites throughout the Aragats region, including key finding on the Tsaghkahovit Plain, near Agarak, and in the Aparan Valley, with an eye to document and record known Late Bronze and Early Iron Age fortress sites in the Tsaghkahovit plain and to examine several sites that had been reported to the Institute of Archaeology but never described.*

*The Project first focused on 8 sites in the Tsaghkahovit Plain; Berdidosh, Gegharot, Ashot Yerkat, Aragatsi-berd, Mirak, Tsaghkahovit, Sahakaber, and Hnaber, focusing in succeeding years on the Tsaghkahovit Fortress and in 2006 on the discoveries found at the Bronze Age altar at Gegharot.*

*Excavations continue in the summer months. For more details on the project and how to attend, visit their web site at:*

[accspcuchicago.edu/~atsmith/Pages/Aragats.html](http://accspcuchicago.edu/~atsmith/Pages/Aragats.html)

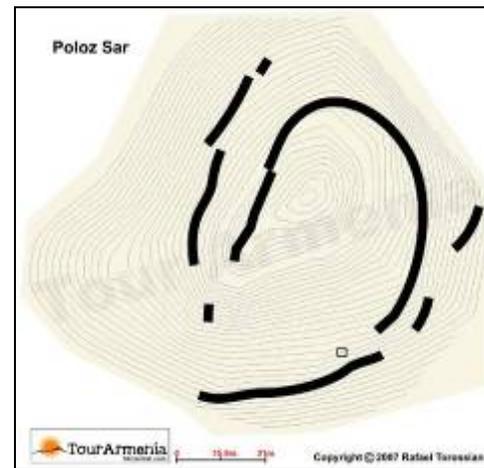


(Kalachi Castle) is about 500m E of the village on Mt. Kalachi Tepe (2182.9m).

**Tsaghkahovit excavations** on the southern Mt. Mahara Tepe are the focus of archeologists and have helped them establish a chronology of development between Late and Early Bronze Age fortress, settlement and cemeteries. The hillsides are extensively terraced, showing a much greater

attention to development than expected in the Bronze Age.

Excavation of the **hilltop citadel** showed that the walls were constructed from medium sized stones that were barely shaped, with smaller rocks wedged into the crevices. The rough nature of the walls is at odds with more refined stonework in lower sites using cyclopean stones. Immediately below the sedimentary layers excavators found ash and charred earth, evidence of burning that destroyed the occupation layer but sealed the yellow clay and flagstone floor below. Trench findings included grinding stones, hearth pits, drill holes, polished knucklebones, a small ceramic tripod and numerous vessel fragments and jars. Ceramics from the citadel trenches were from the Late Bronze/Early Iron Age and Middle Iron Age. Below the ash layer late Iron Age wares no longer appear, leaving Late Bronze and Early Iron Age artifacts. Other items found were from the Classical and medieval periods, showing occupation well into the Christian era. Another trench, the "Robber's" trench on the western side of the citadel yielded numerous pieces of a large storage jar, as well as a number of burnt beam fragments resting on the clay floor. Radiocarbon dating of the beam fragments suggest the citadel was burned sometime between the late 14th and early 12th c BCE.



**Three Settlements** are near the citadel, South, Southeast and East of the hill, all within 200m of the citadel. Living rooms uncovered in the south and southeast settlements did not show signs of

burning, suggesting they were not a part of the episode that destroyed the citadel—or had not yet been built. Ceramic fragments in the disturbed areas were from Late Bronze to Early Iron Ages, while those in the living areas were from later periods.

About 400m E of the citadel hill is the **Cemetery**, at its N end a cromlech (remains of a stone chamber) that proved to be two burial chambers, one on top of the other. The oval-shaped site (9m x 9.6m) is covered by stone fill and surrounded by large basalt stones. Both chambers were lined with stones and topped with large basalt blocks, their cists (stone burial boxes) oriented in opposite directions (one NW to SE, the other NE-SW) like points on a compass. Ceramics found in the chambers are in line with those found in the fortress, suggesting they are of the same time and development.

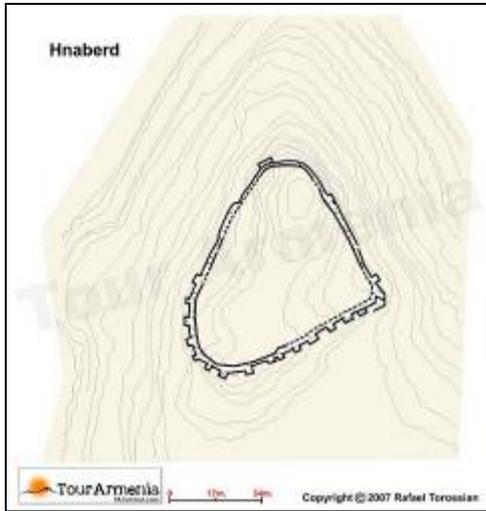
Excavations of these sites continue, but project researchers believe that the evidence suggests the following timeline for the site: a settlement was built on the lower reaches of the SW slope in the Early Bronze Age; the fortress, terraces and East Cemetery were added in the Late Bronze Age and the south and southeaster settlements were built in the Late Urartian/Achaemenid period (7th-5th cc BCE).

**Camping** is possible near the village (ask first); **Overnight** in village home (3000-5000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** are in the village.

➡ From Tsaghkahovit center take the N road to the Artik Road (about 1.5 km), turn left (W) and continue about 7.8 km through Amre Taza (at 1.8 km) and past the Geghadzor/Berkarat turnoffs (at 4.5 km) to a T intersection; turn left (S) and proceed another 2 km to (**Hnaber**) center (DD 40.64278 x 44.14444) 🏰

**SIDE TRIP:** (**Hnaber** - Հնաբերդ elev. 2137m, pop. 1128) lies mostly on the left (west) bank of a branch of the Geghadzor River, with another mountain stream to its west. There is a **5th c church and shrine** in the village, and a dirt track departing from the S edge of the village takes you in about 1 km to the **Hnaber Citadel**, an Urartian fortress built over the ruins of previous forts.

**Camping** is possible near the village (ask first); **Overnight** in village home (4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** are in the village.



➡ Backtrack to the Artik Road, turn left (W) and continue for about 4.8 km, past Geghadir (at 2 km) to (Norashen, DD 41.18806 x 44.32722) 🏠 🌳

**SIDE TRIP:** (Norashen - Նորաշեն formerly Ghurudara elev. 2004m, pop. 1792) is the last village before entering Shirak Region. From here you are just 2.6 km from the Mantash River as it divided Mets and Pokr Mantash villages and continuing SE about 8 km from Artik. Turning R (N) at the river, you immediately enter Arevshat and are just 2.8 km from Spandarian where, on a rock face of the Shirak Pass, an Urartu cuneiform inscription reads:

Khaldi appeared (on the campaign) with his weapons(?), he defeated the land of Kulia ("Kulia"), which prostrated itself before Argishti. Khaldi preceded (king Argishti). Argishti says: I destroyed the city of Duruba of the land of Qulia

**Camping** is possible near the village (ask first); **Overnight** in village home, also at Mets & Pokr Mantash and Arevshat villages (4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** in the village.

➡ Backtrack to Alagiadz and the Spitak/Lori Highway in Alagiadz, turn left (N) and in about 100m take the left (W) road for about 3.5 km to

(Vardablur) center (DD 40.69611 x 44.23000) 🏠 🌳

**SIDE TRIP:** (Vardablur - Վարդաբլուր till 1950 Jangi elev. 2059m, pop. 1185) sits on the SE foot of the dormant cone of Mt. Vardablur (2376m) straddling the Duzkend River. The area is mostly farming and animal husbandry, peopled by Yezidis.

**Paragliding Jump Point.** Vardablur is one of the paragliding jump points for the Armenian Aviation Club (see [Paragliding](#)). With a 200m vertical take off, the site is surrounded by large fields allowing flight in any wind direction landing zone. You need to pre-arrange for a paraglide, but at roughly \$10 a flight day (gear rental extra), it can be a great way to see the area. There are also now paragliding archeological surveys (see [Wings Over Armenia in resources](#) on page 90).

**Camping** is possible on the mountain slope and near the village (ask first); **Overnight** in village home (4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** are in the village.

➡ Backtrack to Alagiadz and the Spitak/Lori highway, turn left (N) and about 50m after you cross the Kasakh River Bridge there is a right (E) turn on a village road, take that for about 3 km to (Derek) (DD 40.70333 x 44.32611) 🏠 🌳

**SIDE TRIP:** (Derek - Դերեկ till 1978 Jarjaris elev. 2059m, pop. 1185) sits in a fold of the lower Pambak Mountain Range, which divides Aragatsotn from Lori. The village has the ruins of a 5th c church, about 50m on the left (N) as you enter the village. Overlooking a mountain stream, the church also served an old cemetery, a few stones remain.

**Hiking.** The village sits at the SE base of a dormant cone (2339m) with woodlands on its NE side. A full day hike (2 if you camp along the way) departs the N end of the village and climbs up the Pambak Range snaking its way through several passes before meeting the Karakhova River, from which it descends to the Lernajur River and Lernapat Village, the Pambak River about 8 km from Vanadzor. This entire hike is about 19 km and could use a local guide to avoid wrong turns in the mountain passes. A knowledgeable villager will do well.

**Camping** is possible on the mountain slope and near the village (ask first); **Overnight** in village home (3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** are in the village.

➡ Backtrack to Alagiadz and at the Spitak/Lori highway turn left (N), cross the bridge and continue for about 600m where the highway forks into two roads, take the right (NE) route for about 3.5 km to (Sipan) center and the **Tsarist Road to Spitak** (DD 40.72167 x 44.26972) 🏠 🌳

**SIDE TRIP:** (Sipan - Սիփան till 1978 Pambak Kurd or Pambak) elev. 2121m, pop. 529) the mountains rise on both sides of the narrow Sipan valley, the small hamlet of mostly Yezedis eking out an existence growing vegetables, raising herds and producing some excellent dairy products (cheese and matsun). The village setting is idyllic in the spring time, snow bound in the winters.

**Tsarist Road to Spitak:** About 3 km north of the village on the deteriorating road as you cross a river gorge bridge, the mountains pinch inwards on the old tsarist road, forming the Spitak Pass (2378m). Subject to mudslides and lack of interest to repair this original connection between Lori and Aragatsotn, you can wind your way in about 14 km through spectacular scenery, hair raising turns and sheer cliffs to Spitak (via Lernantsk).

**Camping** is possible on the mountain slopes and near the village (ask first); **Overnight** in village home (4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** in the village.

➡ Backtrack to the fork in the highway and turn right (NW) onto the new road to Spitak and continue for about 800m to (Jamshlu, DD 40.69056 x 44.27361) 🏠 🌳

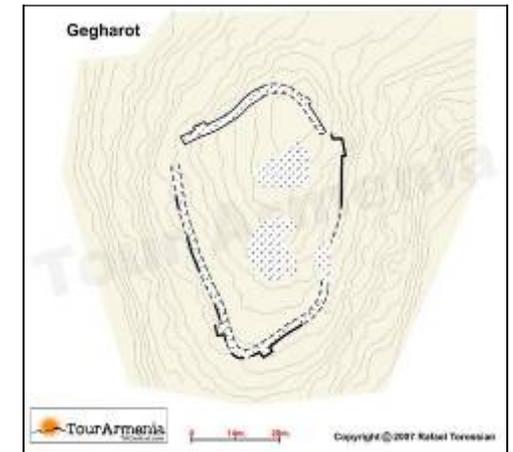
**SIDE TRIP:** (Jamshlu - Ջամշլու elev. 2069m, pop. 1262) is on the right bank (N) of the Kasakh River, to the south of the highway. The village is the site of **Aragatsi-Berd**, one of the sites being investigated by archeologists with [Project ArAGATS](#) (side column) on an outcrop to the north of the village (at 40.69576 x 44.28523, elev. 2087m). Several sections of the stone fortifications are clearly visible from the surface along with a large concentration of ceramic debris from the Early to Mid Bronze and Iron Ages. The site resembles in many ways those at Gegharot, next a little further NW from

here, with signs of both Early and Late Bronze occupation, followed by use of the site during the mid Iron and Achaemenid eras.

**Camping** is possible near the village (ask first); **Overnight** in village home (4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** are in the village.

➡ Continue NW on the highway for about 4.6 km to a right (E) turn into **GEGHAROT** (DD 40.70583 x 44.21944) 🏠 🌳

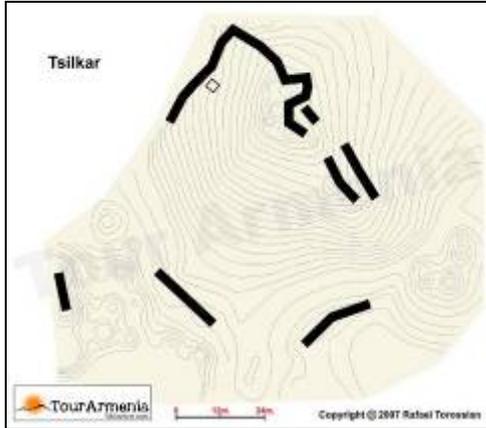
🏠 **GEGHAROT - ԳԵՂԱՐՈՏ** (till 1945 Keshiskend elev. 2081m, pop. 1185) lies on the NE edge of the Tsaghkahovit Plain and is the focus of recent excavations, one of which, in 2003, uncovered a major find, an intact religious center with a fire altar. The site was first identified in 1964 by researchers who recorded scatters of Early Bronze Age surface materials, a cyclopean fortress, and a cemetery, the cemetery becoming the focus of excavations, uncovering eight burial sites between 1956-1960.



The current excavations (by [Project ArAGATS](#), side column), are focusing on the **citadel** itself, which sits on a spur of Mt. Tsilkar (2557.6m) on the eastern edge of the village (about 500m E of the NE edge of the village, or 700m NE from the river).

Excavations of this site and the one at Tsaghkahovit are beginning to illuminate the status of the area in the Late Bronze Age and Achaemenid (5th c BCE Persian) period, of which little is known. Excavators believe that the Late Bronze Age citadels at these sites demonstrate a

new way of life for the inhabitants of the plain; in contrast to the Middle Bronze Age, from which fewer settlements are found & inhabitants led a more nomadic life, feeding the more developed populations down the mountain side, these late Bronze Age fortresses show a period of centralized power and economy, built on developed religion cult, metal making and trade.



The **citadel** covers an area of about 3.5 ha, and is eroded, with bedrock sticking up in places. **Fortification walls** were mostly buried, the excavation team uncovering about 25m so far, enough to show a refined construction process unknown in other sites in this region. The fortifications had a gateway on the NW side and several buttresses, a feature seen at pre-Urartu sites by Sevan.

The site revealed a number of ceramic fragments; many from the Early Bronze Age and a number of decorated pieces traced to the Kura-Araxes civilization, a highly centralized people from Early Bronze Age who populated the Kura and Araxes River basins.

The Early Bronze Age items were found mainly on the northern and eastern slopes. Other ceramics are traced to the late Iron Age and Urartian period with still others to the little known Achaemenid period that followed the collapse of the Urartian kingdom.

In 2003 the team uncovered a **circular altar complex** within the citadel area. The floor

surrounding the altar was strewn with ceramics, all of which date to the first and second horizons of the Late Bronze Age. Preliminary research suggests that this altar complex is the earliest one of its kind in the region and unique in its association with metallurgy. The area around the altar yielded a crucible, a mold used to make jewelry, and bronze objects, including a pin and bracelet.

About 1.6 km N of the village is the heretofore unrecorded **Ashot Yerkat fortress (Tsilkar Fortress)**, built around an eroded rocky elliptical citadel set upon an upper peak of Mt. Tsilkar (at 40.72425 x 44.22934, elev. 2407m). The small fortress (0.15 ha) provides clear views across the entire Tsaghkahovit Plain as well as the north of the Aparan basin. It is nearly impregnable on the north side, the slopes are virtually impossible to climb while its southern side (with parts in good shape) held the entry gate. On the south slope is a cromlech (stone chamber) cemetery running up to the fortifications. This site has not yet been excavated.

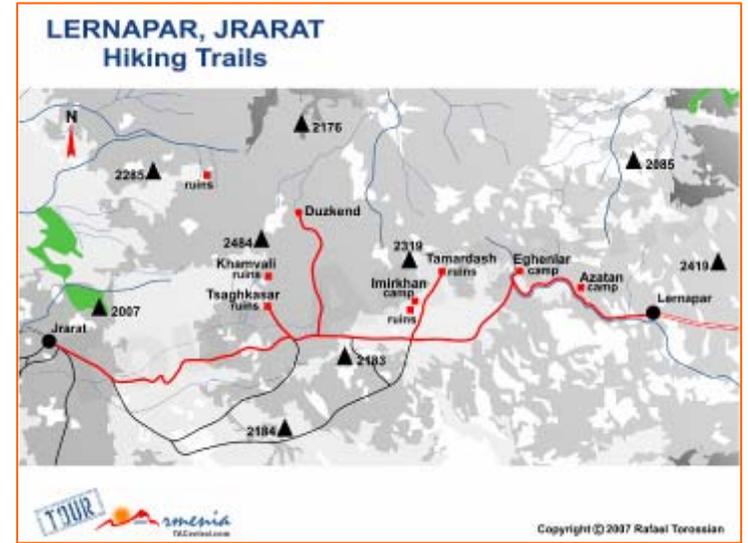
**Camping** is possible near the village (ask first); **Overnight** in village home (4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** are in the village.

➔ Continue N on the highway for about 3 km past Tsilkar to the **Pambak Pass** where continuing on the main highway (N) will take you into Lori Marz and Spitak (16 km) and Vanadzor (35 km). A **left turn** at the pass (diagonal to the NW) in about 3.5 km uphill will take you to (**Lernapar**, DD 40.74861 x 44.16056) 🏠 🚰 🏞️

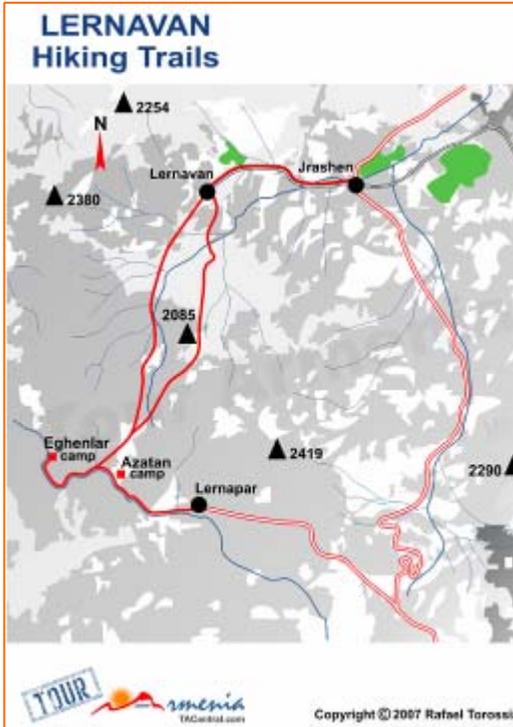
**SIDE TRIP:** (**Lernapar - Լեռնապար** "Mountain Dance," till 1978 as Haikakan (Armenian) Pamb, elev. 2198m, pop. 1544) is on the northern edge of the Tsaghkahovit Plain and at the foot of Mt. Mensar (2419m). The village, other than being the northernmost village in Aragatsotn and the starting point for several excellent hiking trails into Lori, is also the site for **Berdidosh**, a Bronze Age Fortress and Citadel. The fortress is on a high rocky outcrop overlooking the entire northern plain (at 40.73835 x 44.18318, elev. 2209m). The fortifications, mostly in ruins, encircle the outcrop and form its citadel, the walls built of medium size stones without infill. The site includes the fragmentary ruins of a stone wall which appears to have encircled the upper reaches of the outcrop. The survey of the site was on the surface only, showing a few shards with no conclusive dating. It is assumed

the fortress was Late Bronze, Early Iron Age as well as Urartian and Achaemenid. The site awaits a fuller excavation.

**Hiking.** The village is a good point to start several hikes, from an easy 1-3 hour jaunt to more difficult climbs over the Pambak range into Lori. There are also several **nomad and summer camps** in the area, to the west of the village. Unless you want to climb Mt. Mensar to the north, hikes all begin from the western edge of the village at the end of its southern road. From there a mountain track goes W for about



800m to the Gegharot River.



The **Lernavan route** follows the river for about 300m to a bar and at 600m the Azatani Summer camp. Continue to follow the river another 1.3 km as it winds under a mount and you reach the Yeghenlar Summer Camp. There is a mountain path that goes N from the first camps and in about 4.5 km climbs into Lori and ends at Lernavan, or, following the river and bypassing Lernavan, in 6.5 km it ends at Jrashen.

The **Jrarat Route**, instead of going north along the river continues on the mountain track for about 1.6 km to an intersection with a mountain path that angles back to the NE for about 1.4 km to the Azatani summer camp. Continue on another 600m and you will reach an intersection with a N/S path; N on this path will lead to the Yeghenlar Summer camp in about 1.2 km. Continue west on the original track, in about 1 km, passing S intersections in about 1.2 km (N to the Imir Khan summer camp and ruins and Tamardash camp and ruins on the mountain slopes at 500m and 1.5 km respectively) and 2.2 km and a N intersection at 2.8 km. This last intersection leads in about 3.5 km to the Duzkend Summer camp. In another 400m you are the entry to Tsaghkasar Ruins, 500m N, and another 800m to the Ghamvali ruins, both Iron Age-Medieval settlements. There is

*a foot path from the entry point that continues another 4.5 km to Jrarat. Or you can continue on the mountain track (by Jeep I hope) as it goes for about 6 km (S and then W) to the same point.*

**Camping** is possible near the village (ask first);  
**Overnight** in village home (4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** are in the village.

➡ END OF TRIP 4



**TRIP 5: ASHTARAK TO TALIN**

**ASHTARAK** – [Agarak] - (Udjan) – (Aragatsotn) - **KOSH** – (Verin Sasunik) – (Avan) – (Shamiram) - **ARUCH** - (Nor Amanos) – (Agarak) – (Kakavadzor) – (Baisiz) - (Karakala Fortress) - (Nerkin Sasunashen) – (Verin Sasunashen) - (Ashnak) – (Irind) – (Katnaghbiur) - (Shgharshik) – (Yeghnik) -- **TALIN**

This trip visits the western region of Aragatsotn, starkly different from the other regions. The area at the foot of the mountain may be on the same elevation as those in the west, but they are more akin to those found in Shirak and Armavir, two regions to which they once belonged. The route passes through the mountain steppe land and desert marshes of the upper Ararat plain, its rocky land emerald green in the springtime, fading to shades of reddish brown in the summer, save the numerous dots of dark green oasis' along its rocky profile. In the upper elevations the snow melt feeds a constant undulating cross section of green grass and red, yellow and blue wild flowers. The swathe of land that makes up the road from Ashtarak to Talin straddles the terrain of green upper meadows with flocks of sheep and herds of

cattle fattening on the seas of grass and the semi-desert craggy landscape that fades from spring to summer like the waves of heat that rise off the rocks.

This contrast shaped the peoples who first settled here, beginning around 500,000 BCE, inhabiting the (then) smoldering mountain slopes and thickly forested riverbeds on the bottom of the high plain. As forests were felled and the mountain's cone cooled, the upper freeze increased to its current 5 months of the year, sending settlers southwards, on the lower plains. The road you travel on this trip takes you along one of the oldest trade routes in the world, from the Kura-Araxes river basins, and their connection with the civilizations of the south (Babylon, Sumeria) to the Shirak Plains, which link to the Black Sea and Anatolia. Not surprisingly the fortresses, citadels and settlements of the Bronze Age show a link with these distant lands, trading beliefs and ideas along with goods. The route became a vital conduit of trade in later Urartian and Achaemenid eras and was a key route to controlling the area in the Roman era. In the early Christian period the route became a conduit for the conversion of the kingdom by the followers of the Gregory the Illuminator and T'rdat III. By the 4th c, the region

had become a protectorate of the Mamikonians, a rich and powerful family ruled the area until the 8th c. They established a seat of power at Kosh and sponsored the construction boom of the 5th-7th cc in the marz, sponsoring ever more elaborate monasteries and churches throughout the marz: the great monasteries at Aruch, Talin and Kosh were matched by experiments in new architecture at small out of the way places like Irind, Yeghnik, Nerkin Bazmaberd & Nerkin Sanashen.

This trip is only 46 km long, but it passes an entire swath of Armenian history; from the earliest Stone Age efforts to settle a volcanic landscape through Bronze Age megalithic fortresses and temple complexes and medieval architectural triumphs.

The road is also a dividing line, on the right as you head to Talin (N), the villages base their livelihood on shepherding their flocks and herds up the mountain slopes in ever higher bands as the summer progresses. On the left (S) the land is irrigated and heavily farmed. The entire land was once green and abundant, you will be forgiven for wondering where it all went as you drive through on a summer's day. The brown that is now once was green, and will come again as next year's snows melt. The area is often ignored by those

**Eat:** Talin cafes, Agarak/Udjan cafes, roadside stands.

**Springs:** Udjan, Aragatsotn, Kosh, Avan, Aruch, Nerkin Bazmaberd, Kakavadzor, Verin Bazmaberd, Ashnak, Irind, Katnaghbiur, Yeghnik.

**Note:** The first part of the trip [marked like this] is covered in Trip 2, and can be added to or bypassed on this trip as you wish.

➡ [OPTIONAL SITE FROM TRIP 4]: From Ashtarak Center take the West (Giumri) Highway for about 6 km to:

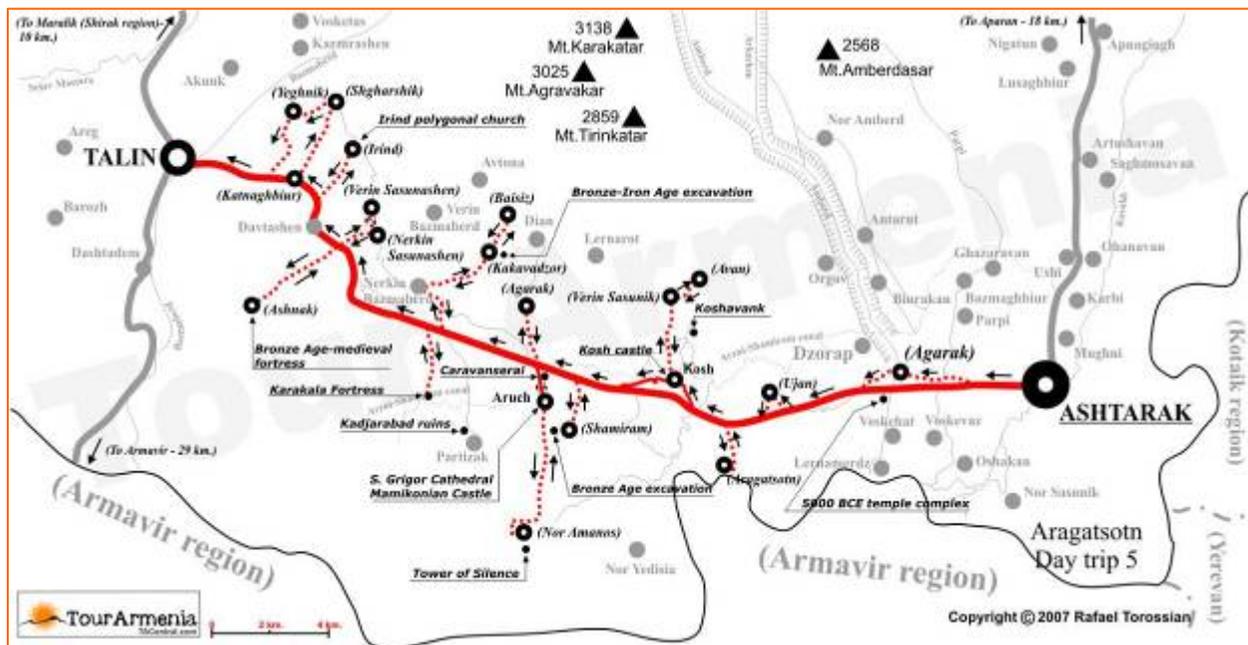
📍 **AGARAK - ԱԳԱՐԱԿ** (elev. 1063m, pop. 2497) for details see [Trip 1 Agarak description.](#)

➡ From the W exit to Ashtarak on the Giumri highway [or from the S exit to Agarak on the same highway] continue W for about 10.5 km [about 5.8 km from Agarak] to the first Udjan turn (the second is in another 1 km), a right (N) turnoff that leads in about 1.2 km to **(Udjan)** center (DD 40.30222 x 44.20556) 🏠 🍷 🏕️

**SIDE TRIP: (Udjan - Ուլլուլ** elev. 2069m, pop. 1262) is set just off the highway behind an orchard and farmland. The rather large village combines vegetable farming with animal husbandry, taking flocks of sheep and herds of cattle up the sloping hills behind you. About 800m north of the village is the **Arzni-Shamiram Canal**, built during the Urartian period and greatly enhanced by the Soviets to irrigate the entire lower Aragats basin. The canal is linked to the legend of Queen Shamiram (Semiramis) of Nineveh, Babylon who legend has it led her forces against the eponymous Armenian King Ara Geghetsk (Ara the Handsome), in a battle at the foot of Mt. Arai Lehr. Since Ara is a progeny of the mythic god-king Haik, it is doubtful the queen ever set foot in Armenia, let alone transformed Ara into a mountain using her black magic. Still the legend is deeply etched in local lore and skeptical comments are soon dispelled with a wave of the hands and some good, strong Oghi (**Օղի**, "ogh-EE," village home brew). The village has a **statue of General Andranik**, hero and leader of Armenian resistance to Turkish invasion and Azeri aggression from 1917-1920. He was forced to emigrate when the Bolsheviks came to power and died on Paris, still hoping for a new Armenian republic. There are two sites on the

wanting to explore Natural Armenia, and that is a shame. True in the dog days of summer you may feel you are hiking through the Gobi Desert, but in even in the summer the evenings are blessedly cool and in the spring and autumn this region is teeming with wildlife, and has some excellent hiking up the SW face of Mt. Aragats. From many points it is a half-day hike up to the summit's base, where cold alpine air awaits you, even in July.

🏠 🍷 🏕️  
**Stay:** Hotel in Talin (of the most basic kind), restaurants/motels between Udjan and Kosh, village homes (basic), camping by Kosh reservoir, Kakavadzor.



steep hills; about 1.2 km NW the **cave complex of "Pkoï giugh"** ("Pkoï village") next to a shepherd camp, and about 1.5 km NE "**Bairamali**," a **cyclopean fortress with church ruins**. There are also caves in the area.

**OVERNIGHT**

**Restaurants/motels** proliferate on the Giumri highway in Udjan, facing farmland irrigated by the 7th c BCE Shamiram canal and one of the more beautiful views of Mt. Ararat. The spots also pose as khorovats cafes, tasty meals if you pick the meat yourself. You can't miss them; they lay right off the highway and their neon/Christmas light displays are unmistakable at night. At present count there are four of these sleepovers: **Udjan, Shirak, Masis and Mush**, each identical in facilities (4-5 basic doubles, running water, hot water), rooms (basic, not all that clean) and purpose ("5000 drams, 5 hours" or the same per person for 24 hours).

**Camping** is possible near the village (ask first); **Overnight** in village home (rustic, 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Sprints** are in the village.

➡ Backtrack to the Giumri highway, turn R (W) and continue for about 3.4 km to a **khachkar** prominently set off the road on the right (N)

✂ **KOSH KHACHKAR - ԿՈՇ ԽԱՇԿԱՐ** The large **khachkar** is dated 1195 CE, and was erected to commemorate the delivery of Aragatsotn from Seljuk Turks in a decisive battle that turned them away, setting the stage for a brief revival of Armenian culture until the Mongol invasions 40 years later. The battle against the Seljuks was waged under the leadership of the Zakarian brothers, Zakareh and Ivaneh, brilliant Armenian generals under the patronage of the Georgian Orbeli Kings who managed to regain the northern Armenian Kingdom within the span of a decade. The khachkar is carved from golden tufa in an elaborate ornamental style typical for the age (I've heard it called "Armenian rococo"), featuring deeply incised carving that resembles lace tatting, with an abstract depiction of the tree of life all but obscured by the riotous geometric patterns. The cross is set over an ornate sun symbol, also typical of the latter periods, symbolizing the Christian conquest over the pagan sun god. Its highlight at this late period is puzzling. Wouldn't it have been more likely to use such a forceful depiction in the earlier days, during the Pagan Wars of the 4th c? For some reason, in the throes of defense against the Byzantines, Seljuks, Kurdish Emirs and

Mongols, this symbol is resurrected and propelled into contemporary current. I like to think it was a deliberate assault, a kind of rude hand gesture to the enemy, the crusading cross on top of the sun becoming a visual way of saying, "not in my yard, buddy. Our god conquers yours, just as our cross stands over the sun, and all of you godless sun-worshipping heathens trying to apostatize the nation."

➡ In another km or so after the khachkar there is a R fork off the highway that leads in about 1.5 km to (**Kosh**, DD 40.30722 x 44.16000) 🏰 🏛️ 🏠

✂ **KOSH - ԿՈՇ** 🏰 (formerly Kvash, elev. 1275m, pop. 1452) is set in a fold of the mountain foothills, just south of the Arzni-Shamiram Canal at the place where the mountain slopes begin to rise dramatically and steeply to the cone's base. There are a number of small farms on the south and north ends of the village and, more notoriously, the Kosh Penal Institution in the village, which has imprisoned Jehovah's Witnesses for refusing to serve in the army (and some say for being a rival religion). You can see the **church** on a low hill in the cemetery set in the back of the village, and high above it, the **Kosh castle**, camouflaged by its brown surroundings in summer and autumn but sticking out like a black tulip in the snow or spring grass. **Koshavank** is located in a ravine in the western hills outside of the village.

Historically the area was a strategic point on the main route through south Aragatsotn, from the Paleolithic era as archeologists have found at scattered outdoor workshops and settlements. **Hermit caves** are just N of the village (follow the power line for about 500m), the cave is on your right (E). They have been used by humans from that early period and esp. in the medieval era as locals hid from Mongol and Turkish raids, and formed a part of the Koshavank monastery (details below). Fortress settlements were developed in the early Bronze Age, expanding in the Iron Age and Hellenistic period ( 2nd C BCE- 3rd c CE), as Kish fortress shows (details follow).

Directly uphill from center in the village cemetery (take the road running by the canal then cross a bridge into the cemetery) you will find the ruins of a **S. Grigor Church** (said to be 13th c, but its structure and design are pure 4th c hall form), surrounded by a large cemetery. The hall church still has its walls, with khachkars embedded into the medium sized dress blocks as well as boasting

a sundial. The collapsed roof was gabled, some of the original stone roofing survives.

The surrounding **medieval cemetery** (5th-19th cc) has some impressive khachkars, including a 7th c **black open span cross** with the wings still intact, a beautiful 13th c **red khachkar** done in a lace tatting style with deeply incised and riotously geometric patterns that almost obscure its design and the **semicircular top** to an unknown khachkar shrine with stunning ornamental designs.

**Kosh Castle**. Straight up the steep hill from the cemetery and S. Grigor (a new winding road on the E end was built for renovation work but is usable by Jeeps and Vilis/UAZ only; otherwise walk the 100m or so uphill), on a large rocky promontory looming on top of the village is the **13th c Kosh castle**, the last of a series of forts built on the spot, excavations having uncovered Hellenistic pottery at the site. The castle was built either for the Zakarian Brothers, who had just liberated the area from the Seljuks and Kurdish Emirs, or the Vachutians, who purchased the region from the Zakarians in the early 13th c. It is easy to see why it was built; the entire region can be seen from this spot, including a clear view to nearby fortresses such as Ashtarak, Talin, and by signal, Amberd. Signals could be sent within a matter of minutes from this point to spots hundreds of km away, providing days of advance warning to the farthest edges of the country.



The castle is an oblong structure with rounded edges on its W and E ends, and a southern gate. The red tufa building is built on a foundation of cyclopean blocks of black tufa, probably borrowed from earlier structures, but dressed for the 13th c building. The building was much higher than it is now, with towers that looked out over the Ararat

Valley and the southern Shirak and Aparan basins. The south gate is enclosed with a narrow vaulted hall, easier to defend against unwanted intruders. Its exterior archway is simply done, as are the outside walls.

SE of Kosh castle on a nearby hill are **Iron Age towers**. Nearby are the substantial remains of the once large and bustling **Koshavank Monastery**, an important monastery and seminary for the region in the late Mamikonian / Bagratuni and Zakarian / Vachutian eras. To get there from the village cemetery, go back to the canal road and take it to the main village road, turn N and follow it out of the village as it climbs the highlands. In about 1.7 km from the canal road turnoff you will see some barns to the NW and a cement post on the R where a deep path forks off and plunges into the canyon hills, somehow crossing over a rocky stream and climbing uphill onto a mountain meadow. Continue on and you will begin to round a bend where a path to the ravine and Cliffside S. Stepanos church forks off to the R and may seem impassable at first, but plow on if your vehicle can make it, otherwise walk the 100m or so to the church. A left path leads to the top of the hill and center of the old complex, now in ruins with enigmatic traces of shrines, old churches, intact stone staircases and khachkars. Gorgeous in the spring.

**Koshavank** was built between the 7th-14th cc and includes the 7th S. Stepanos church, built in the mountain gorge, hermit caves in the cliffs (which probably hail back to early Pagan caves) and the ruins of the 12th-13th cc Koshavank monastery on top of the hill.



Take the top path first to investigate the remains of what was once a substantial monastery, taking in the entire hilltop as well as the ravine to the E. From here you can readily imagine what wealth bought in these times (the 10th-13th cc were its heyday). Remains include a vaulted hall (dining area with shrine) built into the side of the hill, its jutting arched walls resembling a medieval Quonset hut, also foundations of a book depository, gavit, shrines, refectory and service buildings (kitchen, dormitories, storage rooms).



Carefully make your way to the River to the E and for the sure footed (this is risky as hell, easy to slip and fall into the ravine), peer over the edge to see the tops of both S. Stepanos and a gabled shrine on its L built into a rocky promontory, impossibly placed in a spire of rock with no apparent access, obviously for those serious about getting their spiritual nourishment with its difficult climb to reach.



Return downhill to the path to the ravine and take it (by vehicle or on foot) to **S. Stepanos church** (7th c), built in a gorge against a cliff allowing one entrance, on the S. The central dome church has two chambers adjoining the apse, with an opening to the northern apsidal. The chambers were used as treasuries and depositories,

that function moving to the monastery as it grew. The church was built of finely hewn tufa stones. The geometric patterns and lettering on the stone were made by the original masons in the 7th c. The building's *central cross form* is typical for the period, with fan vaults and arches making the transition from the central square to the dome. The cross wings were used as *apsiadales* (secondary apses) and uniquely finished, with the southern apsidal covered by a barrel vault and the northern with a groin vault, decorated with small conchs and decorated with eight-pointed stone mosaic. What immediately strikes you as you enter is how wealthy this monastery must have been; its walls are detailed with ornamental carvings and the walls with frescoes, clearly marking it before the iconoclast period.



Fragments of the frescoes remain to show how richly ornamented the sanctuary was; on the apse wall there is a fragment of "Christ enthroned" and, level to the window, a depiction of the twelve apostles, six on either side, receiving from the central Christ figure a scroll of scripture. This last is considered unusual, for painting of this kind normally show the Christ dispensing wine and bread (the blood of Christ, the body of Christ), but at S. Stepanos, he distributes the word of God. This may mark the monastery as a special

seminary, educating and consecrating priests, the "new apostles" charged with preaching the good word.

The exterior is also richly decorated, the southern entrance decorated with a portal topped with a pointed arch spanning the doorway, bridging two sets of colonettes. The door frame, window frames and the cornice are covered with miniature arches, beading, and circular designs. The building is roofed with gables and the missing dome was set upon a polygonal drum, topped with an umbrella roof.

The nearby **hermit caves** dot the landscape, the most dramatic a series of small hand-hewn cells with circular entries lining the face of a large promontory. The effect of the dark holes ringing the side of the ionized basalt rock is almost lunar. It is hard to fathom the dedication of monks spending their lives in one of these small cramped cells, stifling hot under the summer sun and frigid in winter. The **monastery cemetery** has some interesting **khachkars** and **khachkar fragments**, including an early 7th c primitive made from brown basalt and carved with a simple but evocative style, and a beautiful red 10th-11th cc *khachkar*, with sun symbols at the head and base wings of the cross and the tree of life looking like sheaths of wheat.

West of the village, on top of a hill is the **13th c Great Kosh Khachkar**, kept company by the wind and roaming cows. The cross is truly huge, its base taller than a grown person. The red tufa khachkar is set upon a three-step pedestal of black and red tufa and encased in a frame of reinforcing tufa blocks, also red and carved like a picture frame, with multi-layered edging. This is a true masterpiece of khachkar art, the lace tatting style of deeply incising the stone creates an unbelievably complex pattern of geometric designs, wrapping around the cross on its top and sides, then continuing in a second upper row of even more intricate design that is again topped with an upward curving cornice supporting a crown of even more elaborate interlacing lines and etches, a 13th c version of the gorgon knot, without beginning or end. The cross is almost buried within, yet still retains its undeniable form, with a geometric tree of life and grape bunches in the bottom the upper corners resting over the sun symbol that is in this carving represented by a smaller cross set within the rounded form. If you see nothing else in Kosh, see this cross, it is one of the most impressive (and impressively done) I have seen in Armenia.

Also to the west of the village is the seasonally full Kosh reservoir, 3.7 km from the Avan road turnoff on the main village road going back to the Giumri Highway, where a right (N) turn on a dirt track leads in about 200m to the reservoir dam.

#### OVERNIGHT – FOOD & DRINK

##### Restaurant/Motel

About 1 km from Kosh towards Giumri, on the L is a *restaurant/motel* with the same amenities (basic, hot water) and prices (5000 AMD) as at Udjan.

*Camping* is possible by the reservoir or near the monastery, best in springtime (ask first); **Overnight** in village home (rustic, 3000-5000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** are in the village.

➡ From the Avan Road turnoff at the S end of the village, turn right (N) and follow it about 4.3 km as it winds up the mountain slope (and past the Koshavank track) to where the road forks at (Verin Sasunik) 🏠🏠

**SIDE TRIP: (Verin Sasunik – Վերին Սասունիկ** formerly Gharajilar elev. 1597m , pop. 25 ) sits on the top of a steeply rising slope, its houses reclaimed by original tenants who were forced out in 1960 and managed to get back in during 1989 at the height of the Karabakh movement and the tumultuous end of the Soviet Union. Ruins of the original village lie scattered about, not all reclaimed by the return of the villagers, and some emptied again during the 1990s.



Just at the fork, on the right (E) are the remains of a medieval cemetery and ruins, and, set into them the once proud **S. Grigor Sasunik Church** (7th c), of which only the Northern end with apsidal remaining. It was of the same type as [S. Stepanos in Kosh](#) (on page 74) at the bottom of the slope and is figured to have the same plan.

**Camping** is possible in the area, best in springtime (ask first); **Overnight** in village home (rustic, 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair).

➡ From Verin Sasunik, take the right fork (E) for about 1.5 km to (**Avan**) (DD 40.33333 x 44.16944) 🏠 🌲 🌿

**SIDE TRIP:** (**Avan – Ավան** elev. 1648m, pop. 533) lies at the SE edge of a major delta of mountain streams that arcs off the upper branch of the Ampur (Amberd) River. Many of them seasonal, the streams nevertheless provide a vital source of irrigation and drinking water, and there are a number of mountain springs in the area. Inside the village are the remains of the 5th c **Astvatsatsin Basilica**, a single-nave hall church popular throughout Armenian history. The church was built on a stepped stylobate and has the east apse integrated within the rectangular walls. Owing to its location near pre-Christian fortresses and signs of settlement from earlier periods, the church is likely to have been erected over an earlier mountain shrine to an unknown pagan deity.

Due S of the village at the end of a dirt track, on a large promontory with superb views of the entire Ararat Valley are the remains of an **Iron Age Cyclopean Fortress** built on top of a Bronze Age fort and Neolithic open air workshops. Another, the **Avan fortress** at 1880m (DD 40.33336 x 44.16664) has only had cursory inspection and is hard to detect.

**Hiking.** [HIKING MAP] There are a number of alpine trails off of Avan, including a NE trail that leads eventually to Amberd. Taking a track out of the E edge of the village, follow the trail for about 9 km as it passes through the delta and then along the main tributary and its gorge as it reaches a sharp left (NW) turn barely 300m from Amberd. A ridge and the impassable Amberd Gorge separates you, though, but hiking about 1 km SE from the point you reach another track that heads NW, crosses the Amberd and reaches the Castle in about 1.2 km of steep incline. A local guide can show you the way.

Not very good **Camping** is possible near the village (ask first); **Overnight** in village home (rustic, 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** are in the village and in the delta.

➡ Backtrack to Kosh, then take the W village road to the Giumri Highway past the Great Kosh Khachkar and Reservoir (about 2.6 km). At the highway turn right (W) and continue for about 700m to the Aruch road turnoff, turn left (SW) and follow that road for about 1.4 km to the Shamiram intersection, where you turn left (S) and follow for about 1.6 km to the E turn to central (**Shamiram**, DD 40.28333 x 44.10000) 🏠 🌲 🌿

**SIDE TRIP:** (**Shamiram - Շամիրամ** (elev. 9151, pop. 9151) sits on a relatively flat plain of good soil with irrigation access, permitting a modest amount of field crops to be raised. In the winter the fields are good places to hunt for Neolithic, Bronze Age and Iron Age finds worked up by tractor plows. Near the SW edge of the village, two mountain stream gorges meet. The point is the site of a vast area of **settlement** in the Bronze Age to Medieval period, their foundations appearing as impressions in the field or sticking out of the ground.

There are also the remains of a **huge fortress** also dated to the Bronze Age, though the location, by two mountain rivers, suggests the site was used from a very early period.

All around you are parts of a substantial burial ground, with remaining traces of **cromlechs and ancient burial sites**, some quite rich with their findings. The cromlechs are a prime spot to find **Petroglyphs and Pictograms** from the Bronze and Iron Ages, about 10 of which can be seen on the carved surfaces with circular objects (The sun? A god? Time?) matched with stylized human and animal figures, symbolizing the person's life, or a zodiacal positioning of the stars.

Not very good **Camping** is possible near the village (ask first); **Overnight** in village home (rustic, 4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** are in the village.

➡ Backtrack to the Aruch intersection N of the village, turn left (W) and follow for about 2.7 km into central **ARUCH** (DD 40.28929 x 44.08095) 🏠 🌲 🌿



✚ **ARUCH ԱՐՈՒՃ** ▲ (until 1970 Talish, elev. 1226m, pop. 5964) is a little visited but amazing place, the little village and the surrounding area embracing a jaw-dropping array of artifacts and buildings from the Bronze Age through the late medieval periods, including a pagan church, a 7th c cathedral, a castle, settlements, Bronze Age tombs, menhirs, khachkars, Greek sarcophagi, stelae, wineries, caves and other artifacts.

There is a **19th c church** in the village, with early khachkars and khachkar fragments used in its construction but the village is best known as the historic seat in Aragatsotn for the Mamikonian Family (Grigor Mamikonian, 661-682), which dominated Armenian politics from the 4th-8th cc. The Mamikonians are part and parcel of the history and folklore of Armenia, their leaders seeming to have been either reckless adventurers with little regard for the well being of their subjects or formidable adversaries who saved the essence of the Armenian culture, if losing battles of record. As with all of Armenian history, it depends on who you talk to.

**The Mamikonians.** The family claimed descent from Chinese emperors of the Han dynasty, indicating that both trade and power brokering had a long history in the family tree. The first Mamikonian on record was Vacheh Mamikonian (r. 330-339), the family bursting on the scene in the chronicles beginning in 355, when the family was headed by the new Sparapet (Commander-in-chief) Vasak Mamikonian. The office of Sparapet became hereditary under Vasak, handed from one Mamikonian to the next with few exceptions. This became the source of their real power in Armenia.



Armenian princes (nakharars) were famous for their intrigues and rivalries, and that between the Mamikonians and other noble houses was no less volatile. Jockeying for position with their rivals, the Mamikonians defeated and were defeated in turn, a famous betrayal by the Artsrunis in a battle with Persia in the mid 4th c and the appointment of a Saharuni as Sparapet in the late 4th c, which led to an insurrection that reinstated the Mamikonians and brought Enmanuel Mamikonian, one of the family's most brilliant strategists, to power as reinstated Sparapet and, on the death of the King Varazdat and his Queen Zarmandukht, Regent over the kingdom. Ever the Feudal chess player, Enmanuel had the queen's infant son Artashes III (Arshak III) married to his daughter, cementing their families and fortunes. It was Enmanuel's death in 385 that began the great Persian war in 386-387 which led to the first division of the kingdom between the Sassanids and the Romans.

**Vartan Mamikonian.** By 393 the family was headed by Hamazasp, whose wife the princess Sahakanush was the daughter of Saint Sahak the Great ("Isaac the Great," Katolikos of Armenia and sponsor of Mesrop Mashtots' quest to rediscover the lost Armenian script, which led to the new alphabet in 405 CE) and a descendant of the Arshakunis. Their son Vartan Mamikonian is considered one of the greatest military leaders of Armenia, despite the fact he died in a losing battle.

**The Battle of Avarair.** The battle was precipitated by the apostasy of ruling Armenian nakharars who had been summoned to the Sassanid Persian capital at Ctesiphon and given the choice to either renounce the Christian faith and become Mazdaists (Zoroastrians) like their Persian overlords, or be put to death. In doing so

the Sassanid King Yazdagert II was reneging earlier compacts with Armenian leaders to accept Persian suzerainty as long as Armenians were allowed to practice the Christian faith. Most, like Vartan, converted to the Sassanid religion and remained in captivity until allowed to return to Armenia in 450. Under suspicion for their act in Persia, the news of which began a mass revolt in the country, Vartan and his fellow nakharars immediately found the old rebellion again and joined the rebellion which culminated in the Battle Vardanantz ("Vartan" ) at Avarair ("ah-va-RYE-er") Field in Vaspurakan (SW of Nakhichevan, between Lakes Van and Urmia). The Persian army with its elephant cavalry greatly outnumbered the Armenians, who were themselves recorded at 66,000 and whose requests for aid were rebuffed by Constantine, who was battling elephants of his own, sent by Attila the Hun.



The Persians quickly won, killing Vartan Mamikonian and eight generals while the rest of the number Armenian leaders found their Sassanid religion anew and ran to the Persian side. Though winners, the Persians were unable to contain the rebellion which turned into a guerilla campaign. Yazdagert finally granted amnesty to the Armenians allowing them to continue their religion and build new churches. So the battle, though lost, is seen as a strategic victory for Armenia, ultimately ending in their freedom of religion and the preservation of their culture for centuries to come. The battle of Avarair is often called by Armenians History's first battle for freedom of conscience.

**Byzantine Emperors?** During Persian subjugation, the Mamikonians allied themselves to Rome, sending many of their sons to serve in the Byzantine army, where they rose to the highest

levels, some believe they even propagated a line of Byzantine Emperors (Leo the Armenian and Basil I). The Regent Theodora and her brothers Bardas and Petronas the Patrician were of Mamikonian heritage and the Mamikonians are considered a classical link with modern European nobility.

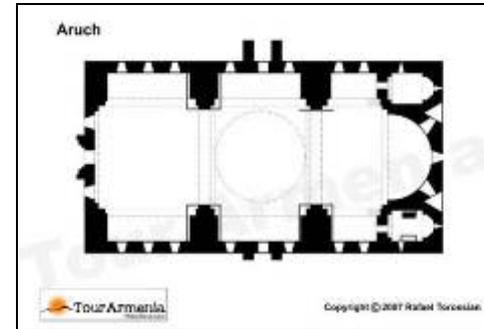


**Bagratuni Mamikonians.** Regaining stature in Armenia with the stagnation of the Sassanid Empire and the assertion of Armenian autonomy, the Mamikonians, beginning with landholdings in Taik (west of Shirak), added the regions of Sasun and Bagravand as their fortunes increased, Bagravand encompassing much of Aragatsotn at its greatest extent. At Kosh (historic Kvash), they built a large fortress that became their regional seat of power as they fought with the rising Bagratunis in Shirak for eminence. By 750 CE, the Mamikonians had lost Taik, Khelat and Mush to the Bagratunis, their leader Artavazd in the 770 giving his daughter to Smbat VII Bagratuni, ruler of Armenia, whose son, Smbat Msaker (literally "the meat-eater" or "carnivore" but meaning "the voracious"), became the forefather of the Bagratuni line of Kings. This was a wise choice. A not-so-wise choice was to lead a rebellion against the Arabs in 774-775, while your new son-in-law had just made compact with the caliphate. The war against the Arabs marked the end of the Mamikonian rule, replaced by the Bagratunis who took possession of the lands they were forced to abdicate. There is evidence one Mamikonian continued to rule Sasun ca. 800 and that they continued to reign in Bagravand for another 50 years, the last of their line, Gregory, regaining the province in 860, only to lose it again to the Bagratunis shortly thereafter.

**SITES**

Most easily found is the imposing **S. Grigor Katoghike**, which has lost its original dome but is still in remarkably good shape. To get there, take the main road in from the village and it leads to the front of the complex inside the village.

The church is considered the most outstanding example of the domed hall type of churches. It is also the largest of its type (34.6 x 16.9m inside). The church can be dated exactly due to the masons' inscription and in a number of references by contemporary chroniclers; it was built between 661-666 for Prince Gagik Mamikonian as the mother church for his seat of power at Aruch, its sides having a 2:1 ratio, a precise measurement for domed halls in the 6th and 7th cc (in the mid Middle Ages churches had been refined to a ration of between 1:1.6 to 1:1.3).



The now collapsed **dome** was placed at the exact center of the large hall, supported by the cube and arches. Fragments of the drum cornerstone the half-colonettes found next to the cathedral show it was polygonal and decorated with an arcature that wrapped around its sides. Pendentives (triangular sections of vaulting between the rim of a dome and each adjacent part of the arches that support it) were used for the transition to the drum, which was round inside.

The **hall** which was spacious and well-lit for its time, the side wall windows paired with upper windows on the north and south wings. The eastern **apse** is flanked by two rectangular chapels on either side, the chapels each having an apse as well as a cross vault. The central apse has three windows on its back wall, two of which are found in the deep triangular niches cut into the eastern façade. The three **entrances** are decorated with porticoes each topped with an arch and a later tent

**A Church to Hear**

*When we arrived, the first thing I remember was the huge size of the structure, one of the largest I have seen in Armenia, with a grandeur and monumentality not unlike the Gothic cathedrals in Europe, only Aruch was 400 years older than its European cousins.*

*The next was the singing; beautiful, haunting silver sounds from a group of Diaspora Armenians from somewhere in the Mid East (we couldn't tell if they were Persian or Lebanese, the latter possible since several hundred had jus flown in from Beirut to escape the Israel bombing). But their heartfelt prayers, their chants and beautiful singing reverberated off the towering walls of the cathedral, giving me one of those moments of revelation I so often get on my trips: this was a building not only to look at, its frescoes to teach the masses the stories of the Bible and the path to God; this was a building for sound; for the emotional pleading of open weeping and prayers of supplication, for the dissonant sounds of Armenian church chants, so alike and yet unlike the Gregorian chants in the west, and for the music of sacred hymns echoing in the deep chamber. Even without its dome, the prayers, chants and hymns were overwhelming, putting each stone into its place as if for the first time. This was a building to hear as well as see.*



stone roof, the outlines for which can be seen above the portals. Evidently Grigor was also enamored of other buildings of the time; Aruch's Cathedral boasts a number of decorative elements from Zvartnots, including window ornaments and cornice shapes.

The interior still has traces of the original **frescoes**, including one on the apse of Christ holding a scroll of Gospel text in his left hand, painted against a deep blue background on the apse conch with a frieze of acanthus vines and baskets of fruit below, and further down figures of apostles. This fresco combines the compositions of "The Lord Offering the Law" with "The Ascension," and bears more than a passing resemblance to Hellenist fresco traditions (unconstrained and supple figures, harmony of lines and planes, ornamental motifs).



Behind the Katoghike are the excavated ruins of the **Grigor Mamikonian castle** (661-685) in the center of the village, its foundations and pieces of the once lavish walls surviving to remind us of what compact with the enemy can bring; the benefactor, Grigor Mamikonian, was one of the few nakharars to thrive during the Arab conquest, his purchased "neutrality" in the Arab wars with his brethren a key to his success, the cathedral and the continuation of his family name.

The castle was strongly influenced by the palaces at Dvin, historians believing that Grigor, wanting to emulate the seat of power in Dvin (or to rival them), ordered the architect to reproduce it at Aruch. The complex consists of two palace buildings, a chapel and a memorial column. The **main palace building** lies to the S of the cathedral. It is built around a central hall divided into three naves by three pairs of massive stone columns. In this it was identical in layout to the palace at Dvin, as wide but shorter. Rooms were added on the N and S end of the main hall in a single line, the entire layout set within a square plan. An open gallery on the northern side that

continued on the western façade had an architrave ceiling with columns.



The original column bases stand exactly as they did in the 7th c, with two surviving **capitals**, one of which is a replica of capitals at the Dvin palace in both size and the subject of the design; two palm leaves rolled into a circle, separated by extended palm leaves set on either side of a cross. The abacus (stone slab or shelf that sits on top of the capital) for this capital is decorated with undulating grape leaves and fruit. The other capital is smaller and is similar to the first, only decorated with six-pointed stars on the abacus.



The **throne**, which has survived the ravages of time and is the only surviving sample of its type in Armenia, is set in the middle of the central aisle, on the eastern end, echoing the placement of the altar in the eastern apse of churches, unmistakably placing the two together in the mind's eye of the observant Armenian, who lives his life in symbols of power and faith. The throne (2.3x1.6m) is

made of tufa, carved with parallel piping design, its surface carved with a depression for the royal *derriere*.

The **reception hall** (18.7x10.7m) is set on the east of the palace, a 3-aisle basilica with two pairs of cross pylons supporting the vaulted roof. There were no other rooms in the building, which was set upon a two-stepped stylobate and built from finely hewn tufa blocks, some of which are 3.5m long, possibly from an older cyclopean wall. The basilica had three entrances, west north and east. The building was first thought to have been built in the 7th c, but recent research indicates that it was already rebuilt by that time, replacing its eastern wall by building it around a third set of pylons that projected into the hall like pilasters (half-columns set into walls). The original hall was thus shortened by at least one span of pylons. Some think that the building was originally religious, converted to secular use by the Mamikonian family.



In the middle ages the basilica was converted into a **fortress** with towers added on the E and NW corners and the addition of a vaulted tank to store water, which ran along stone troughs.

Next to the palace and cathedral are the remains of a single-nave **4th c basilica**, built over a pre-Christian temple, reversing the direction of the altars from the west (pagan) to the east (Christian) end. There are also foundation and traces of multiple **early buildings**, all used at one time or another to serve the needs of the palace and cathedral.

The surrounding **early Christian and Medieval cemeteries** have some excellent examples of **khachkars and gravestones**, including a stepped

stylobate double grave and gravestones from the 5th c forward. Lying on the ground, too fragile to be moved, is an ancient 4th or 5th c cross stone, with primitive etching of the cross frame and tree of life all that remain. There are also some **Early Christian stelae** in the area, made from tall, slender blocks of stone, some evidently carved from menhirs and vishap (dragon) stones from the Bronze and Iron Ages, others newly minted in their times, both sporting figures of saints and crosses on their sides, the more elaborate telling gospel stories in picture form (handy for the bulk of the population, which was illiterate) and evocative depictions of crosses.

Ringling the complex was a large **fortress**, first built in the 4th c and used until the 16th c when the Persians finally assumed control of eastern Armenia. A few wall sections remain, nestled within some interesting **19th c stone houses**, themselves using stone taken from the original fortifications. Look for the foundation of the **circular tower** in the area.



#### Other

Behind the school there is a large 6th-13th cc **Amrots**, many of its walls intact from the medieval period. Be sure to look for the **Hellenistic Stone Sarcophagi**, hidden among grass or at the edges of the old cemeteries. The stone coffins are rarely found in Armenian excavations, even more rarely as well preserved as this. Note that a solid block of stone is hallowed out to receive the body of the deceased, the space for the shoulders and head carved separately. Also look for the **medieval winery** with a stone cut vat for fermenting grapes, set within a settlement from the same period and some odd looking objects made from stacked stone blocks.

They look like they have been deliberately made in much later times, but locals swear they are part of the early period. Scattered through the village are a number of interesting **Free Standing Khachkars**, including a tall 9th c red tufa example, its cross sublimated to the tree of life and surrounding frame; a short 10th c khachkar with ornamental cross design; the top end of a 9th-10th cc khachkar with only the upper end remaining, the design over the top of the cross looking like rams horns; and an early (4th c?) primitive cross carved into a large stone, with three carved cups on the surface of the stone, resembling the cups found on Bronze Age platforms allied with early astral observatories. Was this an early Christian attempt to "baptize" a pagan site?

Both inside and out of the village, especially in the space shared with Shamiram Village just 1.2 km to the SE are additional medieval cemeteries and a substantial **prehistoric burial site**, with **Bronze Age tombs**, some with **menhirs** (stone pillars).

There are also **Caves** in the area, along the canyon walls of the nearby river.

#### OVERNIGHT / FOOD & DRINK

*Narek Restaurant/Hotel*, Giumri Hwy, about 2 km W of Shamiram turnoff, is a new venue with several rooms connected to their restaurant (Armenian menu, \$\$-\$\$\$\$) for 10,000-15,000 AMD. Like all Restaurants/Hotels, their main clientele are those seeking a late night tryst or sleeping over hangovers. Rooms however, are clean and staff is friendly.

**Camping** is possible near the village (ask first); **Overnight** in village home (rustic, 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** are in the village.

➡ Continue S on the paved road for about 4.5 km to where the road turns right (W) about 1.0 km from (**Nor Amanos**) (DD 40.22422 x 44.13333)



**SIDE TRIP:** (**Nor Amanos – Նոր Ամանոս** until 1984 Sovkhoz #2, elev. 1067m, pop. 427) was developed as a collective farm and is 1.9 km from this point, where the small Nor Amanos reservoir is plus, left (E) of the road, the remains (mostly stones) of a **medieval cemetery**, perhaps of the Talish tribe. The Talish are now Shiite Muslim and appeared in Armenia in the late medieval period, along with Kurdish Emirs

and Persian Shahs. They are a part of the Indo European Family of languages, close to Persian, and could be one of the original indigenous Persian people. Some believe they were one of the first four tribes of the Kizilbash who spoke Turkic, Kurdish and possibly Luri.

The cemetery also has the lower rows and a stone door of a **Muslim funerary tower (Tower of Silence)**. The stone tower is faceted, and had Islamic inscriptions on its sides. The Muslim tomb tower, just as the Christian church, has its predecessors in a pagan past, and for tomb towers, two possible origins have been put forth, both possible. One is that the stone tower, with its free standing structure and domed roof, comes from the tradition of the Royal tent, another freestanding "domed" structure. The other, and possibly more plausible, is from Zoroastrian funerary towers which were widespread throughout Asia, open stone structures or polygonal towers where the remains of the deceased were placed, exposed to the elements. These "Towers of Silence" became especially popular in India and Central Asia, though their origin is traced to the Caspian Sea. The towers became Christian converts along with the pagan temples in Armenia, though they retained the essential pre-Islamic symbols; the tower or ziggurat reaching towards the heavens, the dome, or imitation of the heavens, and their walls covered with sacred symbols, to hasten the journey to the next world.

Not very good **Camping** is possible near the village (ask first); **Overnight** in village home (rustic, 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** in the village.

➡ Backtrack to Aruch and continue north for about 1.8 km, past the Shamiram intersection and reaching the Giumri highway. Next to the turnoff are the remains of the (**Aruch Caravanserai**)

**SIDE TRIP:** The reconstructed (**Aruch Caravanserai**) was built in the 10th c and used/rebuilt for the next two centuries. This Medieval form of a Holiday Inn was located on the main route through the marz, but a bit removed from the nearby town. It was not unusual for caravanserais to be set away from urban areas, the better to protect locals from brigands and to preserve your daughter's maidenhood.

The caravanserai has been newly rebuilt again, this time with enough new stone to show the outline and function of the building without replacing the original stone. Worth the stop to poke around. There are larger in the country but this is the most easily reached.



➡ About 300m to the right (E) of the Aruch intersection on the Giumri Highway is a northbound road turning off to the left. Take that road for about 3 km to central (**Agarak**) (DD 40.30778 x 44.28472) 

**SIDE TRIP:** (**Agarak - Ագարակ** once Talishi Agarak, elev. 1063m, pop. 1497) sits on the lower slopes of Aragats, which appears to the NE. The village was once inhabited by members of the Talish tribe (hence the old name "Talishi Agarak") but the current settlers came from Van in 1920. The village has the ruins of a **5th-6th cc church** and an Urartian site N of the village on the hills.

Not very good **Camping** is possible near the village (ask first); **Overnight** in village home (rustic, 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** in the village.

➡ Backtrack to the Giumri highway, turn right (W) and continue about 4.8 km to an intersection, turn right (N) and continue about 1.5 km until you reach a T intersection, turn left (W) for another 1.4 km to central Nerkin Bazmaber, where you take a right (E) on the main street out of town and follow the deteriorating road another 4 km to (**Kakavadzor**) (DD 40.34361 x 44.01194) 

**SIDE TRIP:** (**Kakavadzor – Կարավաձոր** formerly Yashil, elev. 1478m, pop. 1513) sits on the SE end of a delta of Mountains streams flowing from the upper highlands of Aragats, its hilly terrain quickly turning to steep inclines and promontories to its N and E. SE of the village, across a river bed, are the ruins of the Late Bronze Age / Iron age **Kakavaber complex** (2nd-1st millennium BCE) that includes a **carved map** on a slab of tufa from the late Bronze/Iron Age. The map shows what seem to be irrigation lines, as well as settlements.

**Hiking.** There are some really good, challenging hikes from Kakavadzor, following the delta N and NE towards the Aragats cone, with numerous springs and different levels of inclines and terrain. One great 1-2 day trek is to follow the Talish River from the NE edge of the village and follow it into its canyons and upper mountain terrain to Mt. Kakavasar (3303.2), about 14 km distant. A local, experienced guide will help you navigate the best route. Note the upper elevations are cold at night.

**Camping** is possible near the village (ask first); **Overnight** in village home (rustic, 4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** in the village.

➡ On the N end of Kakavadzor a bad dirt track continues northwards through the mountainous terrain for about 1.4 km to (**Baisez**) (DD 40.3608333 x 44.0552778) 

**SIDE TRIP:** (**Baisiz – Բայսիզ** formerly Bashsis, elev. 1664m, pop. 1513) is on the right bank (E) of the Talish River, a tiny hamlet of shepherds in high alpine country with nearby cliffs and rugged grasslands to the north. The village has a wonderful (and surprising) **12- 13th cc church**, a central domed cruciform with the dome missing. Reconstruction began in the 1970s ended before the dome could be rebuilt, leaving behind reinforcing rebar frames sticking up into the air like craggy fingers grasping for some substance. The church is still a jewel, its red tufa exterior made from finely hewn stone blocks, finished with side niches and bas relief arcature supported by colonettes. The W side has a portal with three arches on the wall, echoed on the east end with an apse window instead of a portal. The gabled roof has missing sections, but overall the church is in good shape. Inside the dome aperture is covered with wooden beams, but the vaulting and arches that supported the drum are still intact. The overall

structure is simple and refined, giving little hint to the décor that once adorned the church. Nearby are fortress remnants and a cave complex in the cliffs and upper canyons.

**Camping** is possible near the village (ask first); **Overnight** in village home (rustic, 4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** in the village and in the area.

➡ Backtrack to Nerkin Bazmaberd, where going forward (W) instead of turning left (S) to the Giumri Highway leads to a bad dirt track (jeeps only and watch for mudslides) and Verin Sasunashen. But for the rest of us mere mortals in Ladas, take the left and at the Giumri road on the S of **Nerkin Bazmaberd**, take a left again and go SE for about 1.6 km to the Giumri Highway, turn R (W) and continue about 1 km to an intersection just before a river, take the left (S) and go about 3.3 km to (**Karakala Fortress**)

**SIDE TRIP:** (**Karakala Fortress – Կարակալա բերդ**) The Iron Age to Medieval fort was one of dozens watches for the region, a link in a chain of forts that could relay messages to the furthest reaches of the kingdom within a few hours.

➡ Backtrack to the Giumri Highway, turn left (W) and continue for about 3.5km to the Nerkin Sasunik/Ashnak intersection, turn right (NE) and continue about 1.8 km to (**Nerkin Sasunashen**) (DD 40.36194 x 43.98278) 🏠 🏠 🏠

**SIDE TRIP:** (**Nerkin Sasunashen – Ներքին Սասունաշեն** formerly Gharagonmaz, elev. 1759m, pop. 1491) sits above several river gorges with a good overlook of the western plains. There is a small reservoir on the E end about 600m distant from the village limits that is a good camping spot in spring and autumn, but which evaporates in hot weather. The village was obviously inhabited from the earliest of human activity in the area; with Stone Age open air sites followed by Bronze Age and Iron Age fortifications and religious sites. On the village's SW end on a hilltop are the remains of a small **7th c church** with adjacent **Iron Age fortifications** and **caves** in the gorge. Most tantalizing are the remains of a small **4th c church site** in the village center, with fragments of pre-Christian stelae carved with simple crosses and capitals carved with zodiac symbols or warrior figures. On the NW of the village, a bad road leads to a **marker** memorializing the crash of a US plane in 1958,

shot down by Soviet MIG fighters for violating Soviet airspace.

**Camping** is possible near the village (ask first); **Overnight** in village home (rustic, 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** in the village and area.

➡ Continue north on the deteriorating village road across the gorge about 1 km to (**Verin Sasunashen**) (DD 40.36667 x 43.98333) 🏠 🏠 🏠

**SIDE TRIP:** (**Verin Sasunashen – Վերին Սասունաշեն** formerly Gharagonmaz, elev. 1759m, pop. 1491) sits on the left bank of a mountain river, with **cyclopean ruins**, and above the village, two small **reservoirs** ideal for camping in cooler weather. The dirt track continues N about 3 km to Mets Irind (2050.9m) and Irind Village.

**Camping** is possible near the village (ask first); **Overnight** in village home (rustic, 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** in the village and area.

➡ Backtrack and cross the Giumri Highway and continue for about 4 km to (**Ashnak**, DD 40.3275 x 43.9166667) 🏠 🏠 🏠

**SIDE TRIP:** (**Ashnak -Աշնակ** formerly Eshniak, elev. 1377m, pop. 1494) is on the lower hills of Mt. Aragats, just above the Arnavir basin. The village was once a large settlement, recorded in the 5th c as an important trade and administrative center. Its current inhabitants are descended from 1830 refugees from Sasun. The village is known for its folk dance trope, which performs from time to time at village celebrations and folk festivals in the country. Just off the small square are the ruins of a **10th c chapel** built over earlier foundations (5th-7th cc). SW of the village is the **cemetery** with fragments of another **church** (4th-5th cc) and the outlines of a **cyclopean fort** in the farmland. Taking the left (S) fork of a dirt track from the SW end of the village will take you in about 4 km to just S of the site of a **medieval fort** (9th-10th cc) and an **Arshakuni period grave site**, with **Hellenistic graves**.

**Camping** is possible near the village (ask first); **Overnight** in village home (rustic, 4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** in the village and area.

➡ Backtrack to the Giumri Highway, turn L (W) and continue for about 3.4 km past Davitashen to where the road rises to an intersection at the Irind road. Turn R (N) on the good asphalt road (courtesy of the Prime Minister, who was born here) and continue another 3 km to central (**Irind**, DD 40.34309 x 43.97594) 🏠 🏠 🏠

**SIDE TRIP:** (**Irind -Իրինդ** elev. 1884m, pop. 1480) is set just NW of Mets Irind (2050.9m) at the gateway to high alpine country. There are number of springs in the area, one of which feeds the village stream and powers a water mill 500m upstream.



Off the main road are the remains of what must have been a fantastic **Irind polygonal church** in the same style as the Gagikashen Cathedral in Ani and the Zorovar Church in Yeghvard. Like these two, Irind's building is polygonal, with eighteen sides and eight spacious triangular niches recessed into the walls between the apses. The church had a rectangular entrance in the western side, plus two chapels at the sides of the altar apse. The upper story was done "wedding cake" style with twelve sides forming the drum that was crowned with a truncated pyramid roof, its inside cylindrical. The inside had semicircular apses with three-quarter columns supporting high arches spanning the apse space, which supported the drum. Each apse had its own window with smaller windows on the rounded interior walls of the drum.

The interior was done in a way to emphasize its volume, the cornices with long coronas decorated with fretwork and pomegranate fruit and leaves, and window archivolts (sub arches)

with geometric patterns and half-colonnettes set into wall niches, all combine to give the illusion of a much bigger building than it really was. The exterior of multi color finely hewn tufa façade echoes the interior arches, with bas relief arcature over colonettes. Missing are traces of the more of the original décor that decked out the interior, including any frescoes, so we can only imagine what treasures were used to adorn the building, but it remains, by itself and destroyed by earthquakes, a still magnificent example of the Mastara type of church. Nearby are remains of an Iron Age **fortress**, with traces of Bronze Age constructions.

**Camping** is possible near the village (ask first); **Overnight** in village home (rustic, 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** in the village and area.

➡ Backtrack to the Giumri Highway, turn R (W) and continue for about 1 km to central (**Katnaghbiur**, DD 40.37722 x 43.93833) 🏠 🏠 🏠

**SIDE TRIP:** (**Katnaghbiur – Կաթնաղբյուր** formerly Mehraban, elev. 1915m, pop. 1480) straddles the Giumri Highway, with a roadside stand in season for a quick bite or drink. The village has a ruined **5th c church** in its center, about 100m off the highway.

**Camping** is possible near the village (ask first); **Overnight** in village home (rustic, 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** in the village and area.

➡ On the W edge of Katnaghbiur, a village road crosses a stream and turns sharply right (N) for about 3.8 km to central (**Shgharshik**, DD 40.41667 x 43.96667) 🏠 🏠 🏠

**SIDE TRIP:** (**Sh'gharshik – Շղարշիկ** till 1935 Shenikh Haji, elev. 2070m, pop. 1568) is a small village of shepherds and dairy producers on windswept mountainous terrain. The shepherds make excellent guides if you want to explore the alpine terrain in the N. The village has a small Iron Age **Kioroghlu fortress** with Bronze Age remains in the territory and a small **cave** by the **cemetery** to the NE, converted into a shrine.

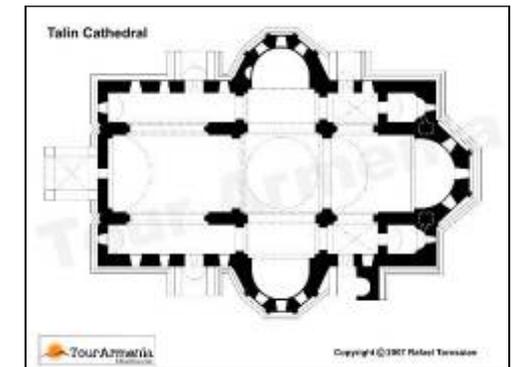
**Camping** is possible near the village (ask first); **Overnight** in village home (rustic, 3000-4000



The Kamsarakans were an Armenian branch of the Karen-Pahlav, one of the seven great houses of Armenia and Persia claiming Arshakuni (Arshakid) blood. Their seat of power was in the Ararat (Airarat) Region, at Vagharshapat (Echmiadzin) with fortresses at Bagavand, Shirak and Ani. The name is believed to have come from Prince Kamsar, who died in 325. Enjoying prestige as cousins of the ruling Arshakunis, on their downfall in 428 and the division of the country between Byzantium and Persia, the Kamsarakans took advantage of their position to take control of the northern regions of the kingdom. Under Arshakir II, the family joined the rebellion against the Sassanids in 451 and again in 482-484 under Arshakir's son Nerses. Kamsarakans are mentioned as generals for Justinian I, as imperial exarch of Italy and prince of Armenia for the emperor in the late 7th c, serving as *curopalate* (an honorific title in the Byzantine court for 'second after the emperor'). One even raised a revolt against the emperor in 808. In Armenia, the Kamsarakans took part in the revolt against the Arabs 771-72 and, after its failure, their house was abolished and they were forced to sell their possessions in Armenia. The family then branched into the Pahlavunis, which assumed the religious mantle of the country in the 9th-10th cc.

cathedral yard and cemetery and then to R and L to the main entrance.

The exact date for the founding church is not known, its masons left no inscription and its earliest mention, though dated 783, was for the creation of waterworks by a priest named Ukhtoiur and his brother Tot'l, presumably done after the church itself was built. The fact its architecture is more refined and advanced than early 7th c structures places it sometime between mid 7th century and the date of the waterworks, mostly like during the reign of the Kamsarakan Prince Nerses (the builder), who commissioned the small S. Astvatsatsin nearby.



**SITES**

As you drive into Talin, in its center, on your R is the **19th c Church** with **modern khachkars**. The church is nicely done with a bell tower and worth a stop if you arrive during Sunday services.



**Talin Cathedral.** To get there, continue to the town square, and turn R on the road just before the Culture Center, follow that about 800m to

The building is one of the most imposing churches in Armenia, built from multi-hued tufa. The red and gray blocks completely alter its appearance depending on the weather. In the sun it appears to glow with reddish tones, but in cloudy or wet weather the gray stones seep through.



AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** in the village and area.

➡ Take the W mountain road from Shgharshik for about 2 km to (Yeghnik, DD 40.40000 x 43.950000) 🏠 🗺️ 🌳

SIDE TRIP: (Yeghnik –եղնիկ till 1946 Dadalu, elev. 1827m, pop. 1488) is another hamlet of shepherds and friendly villagers, with a working 1866 **S. N'shan church**. A mountain track beginning from the cemetery in the W of the village leads in about 1.3 km to the ruins of **Michnadzor**, on the other side of a river gorge.

**Camping** is possible near the village (ask first); **Overnight** in village home (rustic, 4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** in the village and area.

➡ Either backtrack to Sh'gharshik and the Giumri highway or take the S village road from Yeghnik for about 3 km to the Giumri Highway, turn right (W) and continue about 4 km to the entry road to

Talin. Turn L and go central **TALIN** (DD 40.38850 x 43.87292) 🗺️ 🏠 🗺️ 🌳

🗺️ **TALIN ԹԱԼԻՆ** 📍 (elev. 1614m, pop. 1488) Talin sits at the gateway to western Ararat, overlooking the upper Ararat Basin, or north old Armavir. It is situated just below a ring of hills and craggy rocks at the W edge of a delta of mountain streams, a few with gorges in and near the town. Mentioned as early as the 1st c CE and in chronicles from the medieval period (Stepanos Taronatsi, Mkhitar Airivantsi, Vardan Vardapetis), the town has been inhabited from the earliest of times, with traces of Neolithic open air workshops, Bronze Age and Iron Age settlements and fortresses vying for attention from the elaborate and extensive medieval sites. Those that survived and are easy to find date from the height of Talin's place as a regional capital for the kingdom and a site of religious patronage by the Kamsarakan Family, rivals to the Mamikonians who ruled nearby.

The triple-nave church seems to be a synthesis of two earlier forms of buildings; the cruciform and the older Armenian basilica-type churches with cupola. Some think its design is taken from S. Grigor at Dvin (ca. early 7th c), and their plans are remarkably alike. The wings of this apsidal cross form are almost identical in size, their interior semicircular apses matched by polygonal exterior walls. As opposed to cross-domed churches before, the dome is no longer placed over the center of the hall, but over the center of the building and extending the western wing to creating a monumental piece of architecture.

Pendentives (capital shelves) make the transition to the polygonal drum, its twelve sides typical for drums of the second half of the 7th c (one for each apostle). There are five entries on the north, south and west sides.

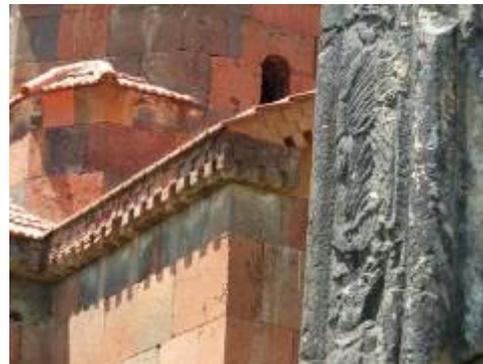


The **interior** is quite large and one the best lit in Armenia, its walls boasting 28 windows with additional light pouring in from the round ports and 12 windows in the drum. The walls were richly decorated, covered with friezes and **frescoes**, historically important since they prove that frescoes were common on the interiors of Armenian churches in the late 6th-7th cc. Remaining frescoes include "Christ's entry into Jerusalem" on the south side, the figure of Christ on a donkey clearly visible in 1918 but now the only parts of the scene visible are portraits of six apostles. Talin also has the only remaining Armenian example of a fresco showing Christ in a medallion with busts of the apostles, which surround the apse arch. The Apse itself once contained a *Theophanic vision* (a divine manifestation, a vision of reality in which everything seen takes on symbolic meanings. Interestingly the Islamic tradition uses the term

"ta'vil" which means the same thing and describes inscriptions on funerary towers such as that at Nor Amanos), like at Mren, Lmbatavank and Goshavank. In addition, there are *portraits of saints* standing in pairs between the windows of the Apse and standing *saints* such as at [Aruch](#) (on page 75) and Mren (A-2176), both 7th century churches.



The exterior is even more elaborate; its windows have 14 types of ornaments in their geometric frames while decorative arches are covered with floral motifs. The décor is reminiscent of that at Zvartnots, also commissioned by Prince Nerses, which led some to suggest its date may be the same. The western façade has a four column portico, its wall divide by a pair of niches with a half-colonettes set inside each niche. Colonettes and arches continue around the sides of the polygonal apses.



The drum echoes the same designs. Traces of color on the exterior cornices and crowns of the

windows indicate that they were at one time painted.

The church was severely damaged through the centuries, beginning with Seljuk and Mongol invasions. An earthquake destroyed the cupola and part of the drum in 1840, another damaged more of the church in 1931. Some restoration has been done, but the dome and some of the walls still need rebuilding.



**S. Astvatsatsin.** SE of the main church is the small, elegant **S. Astvatsatsin**, built in the 7th c for Prince Nerses. An undated inscription attributes the construction to the first part of the 7th c reign of Prince Nerses (the builder) Kamsarakan, who gave it its informal name the "church of the Kamsarakan."



The small church is a triconcha (triple-apse) central plan church, the semicircular apses each

with a rectangular exterior. The west wing is square and longer than the other three. Note the niche on the W end of the northern wing oriented to the east, typical for 7th c churches. The cruciform shape of the church is evident from the outside, the tall walls roofed with red clay tiles. The polygonal drum has narrow windows set near to the roofline for the wings, and the dome is in the Byzantine Style, slightly curved and topped with red tiles. The décor of the cornices under the roofs are alternating rows of squares, done in red tufa. Though simple, the church is quite elegant, with window and portal décor restricted to slight arches that break up the flat surface of the facades.



**Complex.** The complex includes a **cemetery** and foundations for a **5th c single-nave basilica**, a 7th c palace building, and many pedestals, one of which sites on the east end of Astvatsatsin, topped by an **early Christian Stele**. Stelae were carved with saintly figures and depictions of scenes from the bible and come from the pre-Christian tradition of erecting Vishaps and fertility poles (phalli) near sacred spots. Most here were carved after pagan times but a couple of obviously phallic stones have been "resurrected" with a Christian theme. The collection is one of the best in Armenia and well worth spending some time looking over.

**Other.** Due north on a hilltop are the remains of fortifications for a **Bronze/iron Age fortress**, an early **settlement** and a tomb field, and in the nearby gorge (by the Giumri Highway), you can see fragments of the original medieval dam. There are also some **caves** close by, used from earliest times. Look for obsidian flakes and pottery shards. As you drive W on the road to Areg (backtrack to the main town street and turn right),

you will pass a **khachkar shrine**, with a popular and important 9th-10th cc **circle cross**.

### PRACTICALITIES

Area code is 2490

Long Distance inside Armenia: +0 2490 + number

International: +3741 2490 + number

### IN AND OUT

Three *Talin Buses* leave Yerevan daily (afternoon) from the Main Station on Admiral Isahakov in Yerevan and arrives at the bus station by the main square in Talin. 500 AMD.

Likewise *Giumri Buses* travel via Talin and can drop you off en route if you pre-arrange with the driver, though they will want to drop you off on the highway, at the entrance to town (about 1 km to center). Buses for Yerevan depart from the main bus station on Admiral Isahakov p. 700 AMD

Minivans for Giumri pass through Talin and will drop you off if you prearrange with the driver. Minivans leave from Yerevan every 20minutes or so, from Intersection of Agatangeghos & Khorenatsi Streets in Yerevan and can stop at the Talin Bus Station. 1200 AMD.

### AROUND

*Taxis* are in town center, 100 AMD per km plus 200 to start. You can use taxis to explore the region as well, same price. Locals will also volunteer to do same for negotiated price. Figure \$20-25 for a day's trip in the region as fair (up to 4 passengers).

*Minivans* depart from the bus station by the square for villages throughout the region. They leave when they are full and generally travel early morning, returning late afternoons. Check when you arrive to get an idea of the schedule, which is very changeable.

### COMMUNICATION, ETC

Fire – 101

Police – 102

Ambulance service – 103

Rescue Hot Line - 118

Gas emergency service – 104

Trunk Line – 107

Telephone directory information – 109

### Post, Phone, telegraphs

The Central Post Office is at 7 Spandarian. The post office has trunk line phone service, sells phone cards (30 minutes 3000 AMD) and can deliver telegraphs.

Additional phone services are in town. They advertise in front of their shops, sometimes with internet.

### Banks

*ArmSavingsBank*, 24 Terian tel. 2318

*ASHIB*, 12 Khanjian p.

### Shopping

*The Shuka is in the center, off the main square*

*Mterks and kiosks are around town.*

**Car repair, tires, petrol** in town and the highway.

**Medical** The medical center is poorly equipped, folks usually go to Yerevan (68 km). Polyclinic, 1Leninakanian p. tel. 22-66.

**Apotekas** in town, ask at your overnight for recommendation.

### OVERNIGHT / FOOD & DRINK

The Soviet style hotel is closed, but **apartments** in town entirely possible in apartments and homes. Ask around, they are everywhere. 3000-5000 AMD for B&B is fair. **Camping** in the area is ok in spring and autumn, bloody hot in the summer.

**Food and Drink** is barely available, mostly through mterks and in the summer at a park café.

☛ **END OF TRIP 5**



**TRIP 6: WESTERN ARAGATSOTN ▲**

**TALIN** – Western Loop and/or Northern Route

Western Loop: **DASHTADEM** - (Areg) – (Arteni) – (Aragats) – (Getap/Tiik/Bagravan) – (Suser) - (Tsamakasar) – (Zarnja) – (Talin)

Northern route: (Talin) - (Akunk) – (Karmrashen) - **MASTARA** - (Dzoragiugh) – (Tsaghkasar) – (Tsovasar) – (Garnahovit) - (Shirak/Giumri)

This is a vast, abundant land; in the spring full of life's promise, in the summer its promises hidden under rock and unrelenting sunshine. A part of historic Armavir, western Aragatsotn is a land apart, not quite as lush as the marshlands that coat the edges of the lower land, but neither as desperate in the sun. The region is marked by its receding hills and scattered lava cones plus its unrelenting beauty; velvet green in the wet season and a haunting moonscape in the dry. 7000 years ago the region was completely different, covered with grass, shrubs and trees, all of it clear-cut to

build the great empires of Anatolia and Urartu. Now it is a rocky landscape, lichen-covered and brooding, with pockets of fecundity by the river beds and springs, of which there are still many. It is here someone told me "you can feel biblical," wandering in the ever increasing landscape, contemplating your mortality and the promise of a better world.

The region has memories of its own, tracing the human epoch in this special place. They include – like the rest of Aragatsotn—open air sites from 10,000 years ago plus others that trace the evolution of agriculture and settlement, the discovery of time and stars, and the need for defenses, from then into the modern age. But unlike the rest they are specific in their understandings as they are in their construction and material, larger, more impressive and less restricted in their idea of their place in the world. Fewer and farther between, this being a flatter, so less defended land, they are nonetheless among Armenia's most evocative. For some, this will merely be a "pile of rocks," something you tolerate as you drive through en route to Giumri, pulling

down your shades hiking up the air. For others, with discerning eyes and a gift for imagining consequences, this is a crusty jewel box ready to be opened.

**This trip is divided into two directions;** north and west. While most tourists follow the northern route as far as the Giumri Highway takes them into Shirak, both loops can be done in one day, allowing time to continue on to Giumri. If you are on the hunt for "top ten" sites only, you may want to bypass the western loop and stop at Dashtadem, Mastara and then into Shirak for sites

by Artik and Harich. Otherwise, give yourself the time to explore these little jewels in the western basin and in obscure points on Aragats.



**Stay:** Overnight in Talin, village home if you don't mind the outside toilet and possibly sharing a room; Ashtarak or Giumri (46 km each) or Yerevan (68 km).

**Eat:** Talin, roadside stands on highway by Mastara.

**Springs:** Villages have an open spring or water source, natural springs on the mountain slopes by Dzoragiugh, Tsaghkasar, Tsovasar, Garnahovit, also Mastara, and Dashtadem.



➤ From central Talin, take the Hoktemberian road S about 1 km to the ruins of a **(medieval caravanserai and Stone Age workshop)** on the L side of the road (DD 40.36575 x 43.86247, elev. 1555m).

**SIDE TRIP:** at about 1 km from the electric station in Talin on a small rise on the R (E) side of the road are the ruins of a huge **medieval caravanserai**, with traces of the support arches that held up the elaborate vaulting. The caravanserai served Talin, set away from the town as a security measure to keep the randy camel drivers at bay. The ruins are still impressive, showing a building able in its day to house large numbers of caravan drivers and their pack animals.

A little further S, look over to the western hills and the nearby Mt. Kabaghter (1618.2m), the area is scattered with **Stone Age obsidian workshops** with countless flakes of obsidian stone to mark its presence.

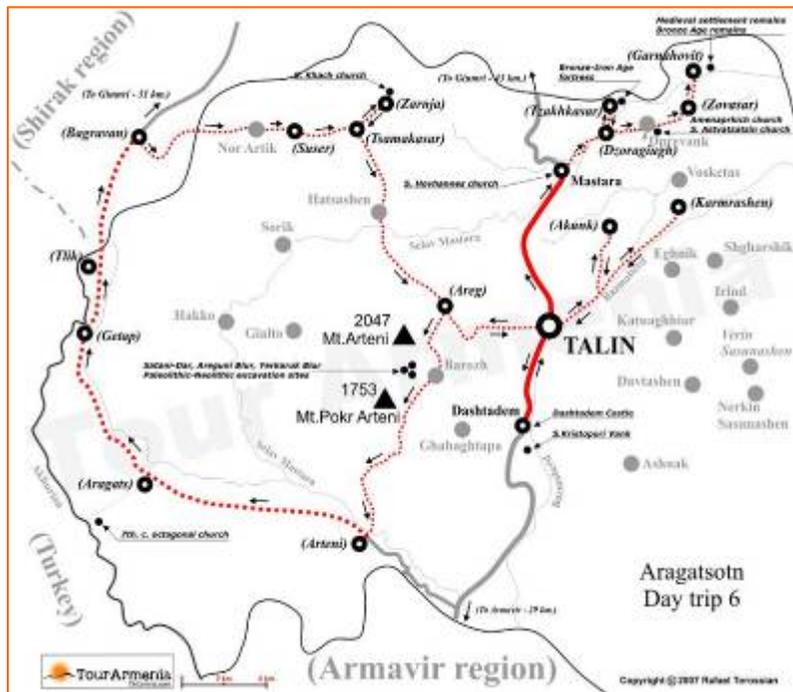
➤ Continue S about 3.5 km to central **DASHTADEM** (DD 41.33958 x 43.85727) 🏰 🗺️

✳️ **DASHTADEM ՂԱՇԱԴԵՄ ▲** (before, Nerkin or Lower Talin, elev. 1458m, pop. 1612) sits on the top of a rolling hill with fine views of the surrounding area, down to Hoktemberian and the Ararat Valley and up towards Mt. Aragats. The site is important for holding the grand **Dashtadem Castle**, one of the largest intact fortresses in Armenia; certainly its most impressive.



This strategic point was important to a number of people, beginning from the original Paleolithic settlers who used the area's obsidian fields and cliffs to create tools and weapons. Later periods saw the development of a massive Bronze Era settlement (one of the largest in the country) during a time when the land was still verdant, blessed with an abundant source of water and mild weather. Had to imagine now, but the entire area was once covered with trees and bushes, all lost in the medieval period during Mongol rampages and whole scale burning of the fields for pasture.

Its most famous period began much later, in the 10th c, as the Bagratunis began their great period of control over the northern kingdom and established the fortress and nearby church. It was also a period of chaos, as Arab suzerainty gave way to incursions by tribes from Central Asia, including Kurdish Emirs known as the Shaddadids. The Shaddadids ruled the land and built part of the fortress at Dashtadem, leaving a legacy of the 11th century tides of war.



**Dashtadem Castle.** The huge fortress is in the middle of the village, just off the main street.

**Complex.**

The fortress consists of the outer walls, inner walls and the castle itself, built over successive period of history. The size is truly impressive, the outer walls encompassing part of the village proper within their circular layout with ramparts on the corners.

The fortress dates from several periods, its existing outer walls are 19th c from the last Kajar (also "Qajar") khans of Yerevan, forced to leave in 1828 when the Russian Imperial Army took possession of East Armenia from the Persians. The fortress is much older though, built on Bronze and Iron Age foundations easily detected in the main fortress walls and expanded during Urartian, Arshakuni and Bagratuni periods, the latter with surviving 10th c remains inside the walls.

Over the **arched gate** are several large seal tiles set into the wall surface, with emblems of lions on the framed surface.



**The Fortress**

The arched gateway leads past the **outer defenses**, the walls dated to the 19th c, their round towers slapped onto earlier 10th-12th cc walls, themselves built upon traces of cyclopean fortifications. The thick walls are made from medium to small rough tufa stones laid with lime in an almost haphazard way, though taken as a while the edifice is almost huge.

Inside the walls you can detect the foundations for the **citadel, sleeping and eating quarters** and other **service** buildings. The water works were

impressive, underground **cisterns** were fed by running water piped in from the outside.



**The Castle**

The impressive castle towers above the entire complex. Foundation for medieval buildings lie scattered among the construction materials for the ongoing renovation.

Just N of the castle is the small **10th c S. Sarkis**, a single-nave domed hall with a semicircular apse, enclosed within a rectangle. The ruins do not show much of the original décor, it is missing its roof, dome and sections of the S, W and N walls. But the finely hewn red tufa interior walls on the apse show a highly refined design, which may have had some wall painting, though the iconoclastic period had already begun.



Go around the castle to its S side to enter the building. On the S wall of the castle keep look for an Arabic inscription written with Kufic letters. It is attributed to Shah'n'shah, the last of a long line

of Kurdish Shaddadid emirs who ruled sections of Armenia and intermarried into its clans.:

*"May Allah exalt him, in the blessed month of Safar in the year 570 (September 1174) the lord of this strong fortress, the Prince, the great Spasalar, the Pillar of the Faith, the Glorifier of Islam, Sultan son of Mahmud son of Shavur."*

The prayer must not have worked since the Shaddadids lost their capital at Gandzak in 1075 and Shah'n'shah is never heard from again.

**The Shaddadids** first appear in the chronicles in 951, under the leadership of Muhammad bin Shaddadid (951-971 CE) who established the clan at Dvin and gave it its name. They had been invited to protect Dvin by its citizens who feared worse from other roaming clans and had to be evicted when they showed no signs of leaving. They left, and returned, running the city more off than on for the next two centuries. Entrepreneurs and brigands in equal measure, under his heir Ali I bin Muhammad Lashkari (971-978 CE), the Shaddadids were invited on the same pretext to take Gandzak (Ganja, just east of Tavush) from the Salarids in 971, and took possession of the Arran region. This time they stayed put, and throughout their long reign (951 to 1174 or 1199 CE) they intermarried with the Bagratuni royal house, which had its own entrepreneurial (brigand) ideas about running things. The Shaddadids married and bickered with the in-laws at Ani while the region was being tossed back and forth between Byzantine and Bagratuni warlords and a new power entered from Central Asia, the Seljuk Turks. In fact the bickering Byzantines and Bagratunis did as much to end Armenian sovereignty as any Shaddadid, Seljuk or Mongol warrior.

The Byzantines for their part coveted the Armenian kingdom for its rich lands and even richer veins of metal and semiprecious ores and sought by any means to conquer the country, including betrayal. Using the pretext of apostasy by their fellow Christians for refusing to renounce the Armenian 'heretical' monotheist religion, in 1044 the Byzantine emperor Constantine IX sent his troops against the Armenian king Gagik II and asked the Shaddadids to join the fight against their Armenian kinsmen. The Shaddadids agreed, provided they were allowed to keep the territories they conquered en route to Ani. Constantine agreed and the Shaddadids joined the melee against the Bagratunis, participating in the sack of the city that was then annexed by the Byzantines. The

Byzantines (acting oh so Byzantine) demanded all of the Shaddadid conquered lands, and when they refused, organized a militia of surviving Ani defenders and other mercenaries to march against the infidels. The infidels fled to Dvin, garrisoned its walls and flooded its land by damming the Garni River, turning farmland into marshes. They ambushed and routed the Byzantine army which was caught in the quagmire, defeating them and selling many of its men into slavery. Two years later the Byzantines returned and ravaged the Shaddadid lands, forcing them to accept Byzantine suzerainty. The warfare weakened the Armenian forces and then the Seljuks arrived on the scene in 1053, to which the Shaddadids pledged allegiance and were allowed to take part in an attack on Ani in 1055, where they slaughtered citizens attempting to escape the besieged city. Attempting to placate the Seljuks, they joined them again for the defeat of the city in 1067, and offered the Seljuk Sultan Alp-Arslan the keys to their capital at Gandzar. He apparently liked the idea, taking the keys and the city as his own in 1075. The dynasty became fractured, taking what pockets of lands and castles they were allowed by the Seljuks and scraping their subsistence as mercenaries for the Sultan who based his power in Gandzar. The last recorded Shaddadid was the Sultan ibn Mahmud ibn Shavur, known by contemporary sources as Shah'n'shah (1164-1174 CE), who inhabited the fortress at Dashtadem and left a memento of his stay behind.



The **castle** is truly impressive, becoming more so as an ongoing local-government initiative authentically reconstructs the walls and floors. Using the original stone and techniques learned from the medieval period, the Dept of Historical Preservation is funding a massive project to completely rebuild the structure to its original four

tower structure, respecting the original stone while giving visitors an idea how it once stood. Though built for Shaddadid emirs, the architects and builders of the time were Armenian, and their engineering prowess shows with deliberately separate tower walls adjoining each other, allowing seismic tremors to pass through while limiting damage and in the design of the towers themselves, built to deflect gunfire and cannon shot into sidelong, less lethal directions.



Below there is a large central room, used for storage and dining, with narrow stairways leading to the top ramparts. From the top of the central room, there were two more floors, which the preservation engineers plan to recreate as the project progresses. The whole thing is planned to be completed in an additional three years, completing the castle, rebuilding the outer ramparts and removing village homes from the fortress area (causing a bit of a controversy locally) to recreate the area as it once was, perhaps with an ethnographic site with historical demonstrations and performances.

#### Outside the Village

Continue S on the Hoktemberian road and off of either side of the road from about 1.8 km for the next 3 km, you will find evidence a gigantic Bronze Age settlement that was used through the Middle Ages, including the fragmentary remains of **houses, temples, cemeteries** and **tomb fields, khachkars** and **caves**.

**S. Kristopori Vank** (S. Kristofor Vank) can be seen from the castle walls, along the horizon to the S. To get there continue past the tomb field to where an old khachkar marks the L (E) path that leads to the 7th c S. Kristopori Vank (DD 40.32297 x 43.85896, elev. 1302m).



The vank is one of three of its type in Aragatsotn, built for the leaders of each of the major princely regions; Talin (S. Kristopor), Ashtarak (Karmravor) and Oshakan (S. Sion). Built at the same time, they are based on the same model, each crowned by a ceramic roof. S. Kristopor now boasts a stone gabled roof, and is the largest of the three. The reconstructed domed cruciform church is made of multicolor tufa stone with an eight-sided polygonal drum and tent roofing over the dome. Remember Karmravor and imagine how the dome once was, with red ceramic tiles and a "Byzantine" arched design. The drum has windows on the four cardinal sides, and tall windows are also on the E and W walls, the western window set above the entry which has an arched portal. The church is surrounded by a cemetery with graves from the medieval and later periods.



Nearby is a **sloping square tower walls** once used by the vank, erroneously called a bell tower on the Soviet era metal information plate,

normally dead accurate in their descriptions. He tower stones are unique for both their shape (this kind of tower is not found elsewhere) and for the strange markings on their sides. Neither Armenian alphabet letters nor arithmetical symbols (possibly used during rebuilding the tower, marking each stone in sequence), the markings are obviously ancient, certain symbols from the Urartian hieroglyphic script used in the Iron Age. This may mark its origins, the design fitting no later period.

**Camping** is possible near the village and by nearby streams (ask first); **Overnight** in village home (rustic, 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** in the village.

➔ Backtrack to Talin and take the western road out of town for about 5.8 km to the **(Areg)** center (40.38917 x 43.81417) 🏠 🗺️ 🌊

**SIDE TRIP:** (**Areg - Uptq** till 1935 Pirmalak, elev. 1564m, pop. 1488) sits on the eastern edge of smooth bottomland that looks SW to Mets Arteni (2047m) and Pokr Arteni (1753.9m) with Mt. Ararat in the distance. A mountain track from Areg leads to the top of Mets Arteni with its gigantic **Iron Age and Medieval fortress**.

The Southern road to Arteni leads SE to a nook between Mets and Pokr Arteni, and the first of the three important Paleolithic and Neolithic (100,000 – 12,000 BCE) sites of **Satani-Dar, Areguni Blur** and **Yerkaruk Blur**.

The first, at about 2.5 km from Areg and another 500m up the river bed (N) is the **Satani-dar**, which encompasses approximately 6-8 sq. km and consists mostly of obsidian pieces; surface artifacts found on the site include some well made hand axes similar to Acheulian hand axes of Europe (Europe's oldest hand axes) and miniature versions of the first. The second, **Areguni Blur** is 1.8 km down the road, where a left (E) dirt track goes right by it in about 800m, on the right (S). Backtrack to Arteni road and continue left (S) another 700m to **Yerkaruk Blur**, about 50m off the road to the left (E).

**Camping** is possible near the village (ask first); **Overnight** in village home (rustic, 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** in the village.

➔ Continue S from another 4.5 km as the potted road winds past hills and summer camps and

through grape fields and orchards to (**Arteni, DD 40.29833 x 43.75417**) 🏠 🗺️ 🌊

**SIDE TRIP:** (**Arteni - Uputbuh** till 1950 Boghutlu, elev. 1206m, pop. 1608) was built as a planned farming community in Soviet days, and its streets, if drably Soviet in style, are definitely planned, radiating off a central square. The small town also sits in the midst of orchards and grape fields, the grapes pressed at its winery to produce some of Armenia's best known table wine. Good place to stock up on some bottles before continuing on your journey. Arteni has a couple of cafes, mterks, kiosks and roadside stands to stock up on vittles.



Arteni is a stop on the **Giumri-Yerevan train**, which passes through every other day on the opposite direction. Check at the station (NE of town for times and prices.)

**Food** at roadside stands, cafes, mterks, kiosks; **Camping** is possible nearby (ask first); **Overnight** in home (rustic, 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Water** in town.

➔ Continue S for another 9.5 km to (**Aragats**) train station (DD 40.21833 x 44.23278) 🏠 🗺️ 🌊

**SIDE TRIP:** (**Aragats - Uruquob** founded 1924, elev. 906m, pop. 1129) sits on the Akhurian River basin just NW of orchards and SW of the "badlands" that arc up into southern Shirak. The town is another planned Soviet community, with some interesting examples of early communist design in the town center. The town has a few kiosks, mterks and a café or two, as well as roadside khorovats stands.

SW of town where the Talin Canal connects with the Akhurian River in a gorge there is a **7th c octagonal church**, a fine example of a unique design form. You need permission to get that close to the border, the mayor's office is a good place to look for someone who can get you past the Russian guard posts.

Aragats is also a stop on the **Giumri-Yerevan railroad**, the trains passing through every other day in opposite directions. Check at the station of times and prices, which are variable.

Alternate Route to Giumri: If you continue NW on the Highway from the rail station you will eventually reach Giumri (63 km).

**Food** at roadside stands, cafes, mterks, kiosks; **Camping** is possible nearby (ask first); **Overnight** in home (rustic, 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Water** in town.

➡ From Aragats rail station take the Giumri Highway NW to reach the border villages of **Getap** (8.2 km), **Getap Railway Station** (9.6 km) and **Tlik** (11.6 km) before entering southern Shirak and the entrances to Anipemza (15.2 km) and Ani (18.2 km) and then at about 16.6 km the SW entrance to Bagravan, which veers off to the right at a bridge. Take that road that skirts the south of the village and in about 600-80m there will be a right (S) turn onto a village road that in about 4 km takes you back into Aragatsotn and Nor Artik. Continue through Nor Artik and eastwards for about 2 km to (**Suser**, DD 40.46694 x 43.73333) 🏠 🚶 🌿

SIDE TRIP: (**Suser – Unuṭṭṛ** till 1946 Ghlijatagh, elev. 1592m, pop. 1146) sits in the midst of several dormant lava cones, in a rugged land that is surprisingly verdant in the wet season. The village has a pretty cemetery with khachkars and E of the village, a shrine.

**Camping** is possible near the village (ask first); **Overnight** in village home (rustic, 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** in the village.

➡ Continue E on the village road and about 2.8 km from the edge of Suser is (**Tsamakasar**) (DD 40.46639 x 43.75611) 🏠 🚶 🌿

SIDE TRIP: (**Tsamakasar – Զամակասար** elev. 1592m, pop. 1146) sits in a rocky valley just SE of Hamashler (1692.6m) and NW of Mt.

Debetepe (1673.8m). Just outside the village are Bronze Age burial grounds, on the low grounds and on the tall hill to the NE (1700m).

**Camping** is possible near the village (ask first); **Overnight** in village home (rustic, 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** in the village.

➡ From Tsamakasar center, take the east village road that skirts the tall hill for about 2 km to (**Zarnja**) (DD 40.46667 x 43.78333) 🏠 🚶 🌿

SIDE TRIP: (**Zarnja – Զարնյա**, elev. 1653m, pop. 1146) is wedged between several hills and sits at the foot of Mt. Zarnja (1758.6m). About 400m NE of the town square is an imposing, fortress-like 7th c **S. Khach church**, an interesting domed cross form building with four protruding apses, each apse rounded on the inside with polygonal exterior walls. The interior has been stripped of its plaster and frescoes (it was rebuilt in the 10th c), but the exposed stone clearly shows the clean architectural lines and the seamless transition from the tall apse arches and the drum of the dome. Outside the finely hewn tufa blocks (mostly red, with some darker colors intermittently placed) are “dressed up” with elaborate details like the strong window framing and top arches. The stone above the western entry is particularly fancy, its carved design in the lace tating style showing a geometric cross and animal and flora imagery interwoven in and around. The drum is octagonal, its facets flanked by columns carved with diagonal lines and ribbed arches, both made from basalt. The roof of the dome is an excellent example of the early umbrella style, with multi-colored stone work on its surface.

Alternate Route to Maralik/Giumri: From Zarnja, continue NE on the potted road to reach Maralik (14 km) by way of Dzitanokov and Karaberd. At Maralik you can join the highway to Giumri (24 km).

**Camping** is possible near the village (ask first); **Overnight** in village home (rustic, 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** in the village.

➡ Backtrack to Tsamakasar and take the Areg/Talin road S for about 15 km by way of Hatsashen and Areg to (**Talin**) to join the Northern route.

NORTHERN ROUTE:

➡ From Talin center take the main street NE, cross over the Giumri/Yerevan Highway and continue on the Karmrashen road for about 2 km to a village road on the left (N), take that for about 3.4 km to (**Akunk**) center (DD 40.41667 x 43.9) 🏠 🚶 🌿

SIDE TRIP: (**Akunk – Ակունք** till 1946 Giuzlu, elev. 1788m, pop. 1617) sits at the end of a spring fed spur of the Vosketas River and SE of Mt. Mushghudag (1997.1m). The village is in the lower highlands of Aragats, on a gentle roll of an otherwise. The village was settled in 1829 by émigrés from Khoi (Khoi) and Mush in Kajar (Qajar) Persia at the end of the Russo-Persian War which gave Eastern Armenia to the Russian Tsar. On the hills above the village are the remains of the original settlers, Bronze Age warriors and families who settled there and built a **cyclopean fortress**.

**Hiking.** There are a few good trails near Akunk, two of which lead to small reservoirs that provide camping opportunities. **The first trek** follows the mountain stream from the NE edge of the village for about 1.9 km to a fork and some springs. Follow the right fork E for another 2.4 km to the **Vosketas Reservoir and dam**. **The second trek** follows the northern mountain track as it climbs rough terrain towards **Zovasar reservoir** (in about 4.8 km), where on the opposite side of the lake are the remains of the village of Shenik with the rebuilt 5th c Amenaprkich and 7th c S. Astvatsatsin churches. The reservoir is larger than a Vosketas, and is a good jump off point for scaling nearby Mts. Tsaghkasar (2219.4m) and Garnasar (2295.4m). **The third trek** departs about 300m W of the village and follows the mountain track that skirts Mt. Mushghudag and ends in about 3 km at the Mastara entrance.

**Camping** is possible near the village (ask first); **Overnight** in village home (rustic, 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** in the village.

➡ Backtrack to the Karmrashen road, turn left (N) and continue about 5.5 km to (**Karmrashen**) center (DD 40.43611 x 43.94528) 🏠 🚶 🌿

SIDE TRIP: (**Karmrashen – Կարմրաշեն** till 1946 Krmzlu, elev. 2012m, pop. 1560) sits in the midst of a delta of high altitude streams, with verdant pastures of land on the hilly rises to the N and NE. The village, by its older name, has more than its share of Kurdish Yezidi

shepherds who make the annual trek uphill to tend their flocks on the high alpine meadows only to return in the winter for “warmer” pastures at a mere 2012m above sea level. Inside village are an **1865 S. Astvatsatsin church**, a “Ch’knavor” shrine cut from solid rock and khachkars from several periods. About 800m S/SE of the village, across a high ravine, are the remains of a Bronze/Iron Age cyclopean fortress.

About 1 km N of the village, at Vosketas, is a reservoir with good (if chilly) camping.

**Camping** is possible near the village (ask first); **Overnight** in village home (rustic, 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** in the village.

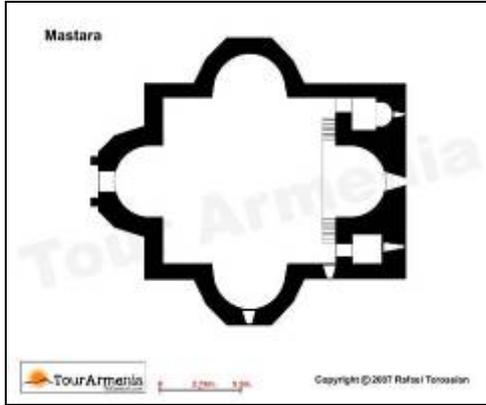
➡ Backtrack to the Giumri/Yerevan Highway at Talin, turn right (NW) and continue on the highway for about 8 km to **MASTARA** (DD 40.44972 x 43.87) 🏠 🚶 🌿

✚ **MASTARA ՄԱՍՏԱՐԱ** 🏠 (before, Nerkin or Lower Talin, elev. 1723m, pop. 1279) is situated at the NE end of a wide broad plain of verdant alluvial soil. The village has been a place of settlement from the earliest of times, as well as a place of worship, as early stelae and Vishap stones as well as a substantial fortress on the NE of the village show.



The name—at least in popular legend—is believed to have come from the founding of the main church (and hence the village) by S. Grigor Lusavorich, who is believed to have brought relics of John the Baptist from Caesarea in Anatolia to Armenia. A fragment is supposed to have been laid under the altar at the Mastara church (S.

Hovhannes, or Saint John the Baptist), creating its popular name, a combination of two Armenian words; "mas" (a piece) and "tara" (I buried). However, the name can also be broken into "mas" (a piece) and t-ar-a (of or belonging to god) which better fits both its ancient origins and its Indo-European language roots. Either way it makes for a colorful history for a very old place.



As you enter the village look for the dome of the 6th-7th cc **S. Hovhannes church**, set about 500m from the highway at the end of a tangle of streets. The church building was a new development in sacred architecture, a domed central cross with four predominant apses coming together to form the support base for the tall drum and dome. It was such a trailblazer the form came to be known as the Mastara type, unique to Armenian churches, its plan not found anywhere else. The age of the church is in dispute, again clouded by popular legend.

A badly preserved Greek inscription on the S wall may mention a certain Peroz, who some say is the Sassanid King that ruled in the 5th c (r. 459-484), suggesting that period for its construction. However a reading of the builders' inscription alludes to the Bishop Theodoros Gnuni who attended the council of Dvin in 645, which suggests its construction in the mid to late 7th c.

Two more inscriptions on the Western wall allude to a *Grigoris Vanakan* as the builder, believed to refer not to its construction but to its restoration (the inscriptions use the word "shinel" which in medieval manuscripts translates as both "to build" and "to restore"), which suggest an earlier construction. And throw into the pot for good

measure the founding of the church by S. Grigor Lusavorich when he buried the relics of John the Baptist under the church (which would make it a 4th c construction) and you have a 4th, 6th or 7th c church. It may well be that the earlier 4th c church was redone in the 6th and 7th cc, though traces of the 4th c structure have not been found (neither has a serious excavation been undertaken).



The church was converted into a fortress in the Middle Ages (like those at Ashtarak, Parbi and Ashnak), its walls running in a semicircle around the apses. Traces of the northern western sections are what remain of fortifications that lasted until the 19th c. In the Soviet period the church was shuttered in 1935 during a Stalinist purge and converted to stables, reopening as a church only in 1993.

As you approach the church, look for the way the monumental octagonal **dome** (11.2m diameter) has been shaped; its corners are beveled to create triangular niches that reduces the mass and creates a lighter (for its period) block of stone. Suggesting an earlier date of construction, the exterior **walls** are more in line with 5th c churches, simply done with almost no decoration. Only the **window frames** are decorated, with geometric and floral patterns predating the same style common in the 7th c, which may confirm they were added during restoration. Though the original walls are devoid of décor, the **7th c restoration** poured on the detailing with arch cornice, window frames and entrance portals with arches resting on twin colonettes. The restoration also included the fancy inscriptions, those on the E and W facades framed with arches and colonettes.



The **interior** of the church is large and roomy, accentuated by light streaming into the space from the wide apse windows on the west and south sides, but mostly from those in the drum, all eight sides of which have a window, capturing light from any angle. Those on the cardinal points are wider than the diagonal sides. The interior is accentuated by plaster which covered the walls and still exists on the supper parts. There are no signs of wall paintings but some thought is that it must certainly have had some, since it was built in the period prior to the iconoclastic period. The curve of the dome is decorated with a symbolic sun design, the rays ending with round plaques. Three stage fan vaults provide the transition from the cube to the dome. Inside the church you can also see where the church was restored. Look at the apsidioles, their **crossbars** have older reliefs that were reused and tacked onto the structure. The two **annexes** that flank the altar apse were built at the same time as the original church, the northern annex ending in a horseshoe shaped apse. Church grounds have an interesting newer **khachkar** with evidence of the original block of stone on the top and bottom.

Hidden amongst some houses S of the church is the small **S. N'shan chapel**, a delightful little hall church / Tukh Manuk set in a small grove of trees. The chapel, built entirely of red tufa has a tiny upper window on its west wall that is its sole source of light, and some rudimentary design flourishes, like the arch over the small door. There is a beautiful old khachkar set into the wall next to the entrance. The chapel could have been built anytime after the 4th c, and appears was placed over a much older worship site, judging by its position, layout and the use of some very old stones from the pre-Christian era (not the carvings on a corner stone on the walls).



The Tukh Manuk claim comes from the position of the central stone inside the chapel, a hallmark of all Tukh Manuks. The Tukh Manuk comes to us from Pagan times, and is tied to regional deities and the cult of drinking blood. It may very well be tied to the wine drinking Bacchus god, which came to Greece from India via the Armenian Highland (and wine being a very potent substitute for blood in many religions). The inside the chapel is more of a shrine, with various icon paintings of the Virgin Mary and saints flanked by holy cloths and the entire surface of the walls coated with black candle soot.



The village **cemetery** has graves going back to the early medieval period (and pre-Christian tombs?) with a collection of stunning khachkars and gravestones and monuments from the earliest period to the modern era. The khachkars include some intricately carved pieces from the 10th, 12th and 17th cc, the latter resembling the Djuga, Nakhichevan Khachkars that were destroyed in

2006 by Azeris breaking them up for rubble. There are also the remains of a chapel in the cemetery grounds.

On a hill SE of the village is one of Armenia's greatest khachkars, the 13th c **Mastara Great Khachkar**, an incredible work of art set upon a rock outcrop. The tall slender stone is an amazing work of art, with intricate "lace tatting" and elaborate interweaving lines and geometric patterns cover the entire surface, the lines carved in a way it is impossible to detect where they end or begin, they seem to form an unending string of stone. The thin, thin stone itself is achingly fragile on its wind swept spot, surrounded by stones that appear to be traces of an old fortification.

Other **khachkars** are scattered throughout the village, stroll through to spot them as the pop up in some of the most unlikely of spots.

On top of a distant hill NE of town is the 10th-11th cc **S. Stepanos shrine**, a hall church sitting on a low crest, with the walls of a fortress around.

East of the village, by a green-roofed building, there is a small **monument to Soghomon Tehlerian**; a national hero who is celebrated for his assassination of the main architect of the Armenian Genocide, Talaat Pasha, in Germany. During the trial, his defense so moved the jury he was acquitted of all charges.

**Camping** is possible near the village (ask first); **Overnight** in village home (rustic, 3000-5000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** in the village.

➡ Take the NE village road out of Mastara for about 2.4 km through the river gorge to (**Dzoragiugh**, DD 40.46667 x 43.9)   

**SIDE TRIP:** (**Dzoragiugh – Ձորագյուղ** till 1940 N. Pirtikan, elev. 1903, pop. 178) sits on the right (S) bank of the river as its valley narrows to a pincer formation of the mountain slopes. Nearby are traces of a Bronze Age settlement and a tomb field, the field marked by a large squat menhir or primitive stele sticking up from some large rocks seemingly lying in a haphazard fashion. They are in fact the remains of the excavation that uncovered metal and stone jewelry and totems placed by the body as well as jars of good deemed necessary for the journey into the afterlife.

**Camping** is possible near the village (ask first); **Overnight** in village home (rustic, 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** in the village.

➡ There is a path that charges uphill from Dzoragiugh to Tsaghkasar, which is less than 1 km to the N, high on the towering hill, but it is nasty traveling and impossible for anything less than a solid jeep and nerves of steel. The village is more easily reached by taking the Giumri Highway N from Mastara about 8 km to a village road 800m S of the Landjik turn off which angles back to the right (SE), and follow that for about 4.2 km to (**Tsaghkasar**, DD 40.46611 x 43.89972)   

**SIDE TRIP:** (**Tsaghkasar – Տաղկասար** elev. 1903m, pop. 178) sits on the N bank of the Garnahovit River, on top of a hill that overlooks Dzoragiugh. To the east are Mt. Tsaghkasar (2219.4m) and the river courses upstream towards Garnahovit (about a 5.5 km trek) passing several mountain springs and alpine meadows. The village has a small **Tadevos Arekelots** (Thaddeus the Apostle) shrine, and the ruins of a **cyclopean fort** nearby.

**Camping** is possible near the village (ask first); **Overnight** in village home (rustic, 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** in the village.

➡ From Dzoragiugh continue E on the bad village road for about 1.9 km to the **Zovasar Reservoir** and the impressive ruins of **Shenik**, and in another 2 km (**Tsaghkasar**, DD 40.46611 x 43.89972)   

**SIDE TRIP:** **Zovasar reservoir** sits on the right (S) side of the road, where on the opposite side of the lake are the remains of the former village of **Deprevank - Դըքրեվանք (Shenik – Շենիկ)** an ancient settlement whose medieval presence was wiped out in the modern age with eerie reminders of its presence marked off with rough stones and a few surviving structures, including the remains of the **5th c S. Amenaprkich** single nave church with surviving walls, semi-circular apse and one tall rounded arch to show what the support structure was like. Another is the **7th c S. Astvatsatsin** church, another single nave hall church that was rebuilt at the beginning of the 20th c.

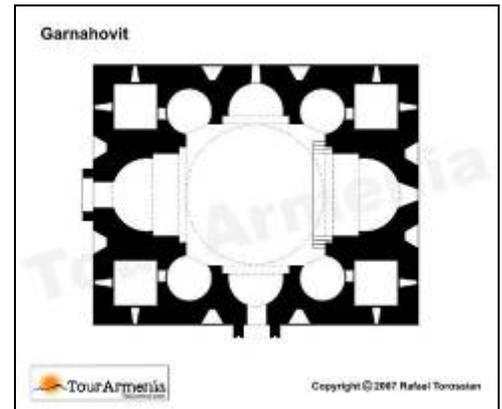
2 km up the road is the village of (**Zovasar - Չովասար** till 1978 Aghakichik, elev. 1903, pop. 87) which sits on a wind swept upper

plateau, the sketchy outlines of rock foundations and menhirs stretching towards the conical Mts. **Tsaghkasar** (2219.4m) and **Garnasar** (2295.4m) in the distance.

**Camping** is possible near the village (ask first); **Overnight** in village home (rustic, 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** in the village.

➡ From Zovasar continue NE on the same road another 2 km (**Garnahovit**, DD 40.48333 x 43.95)   

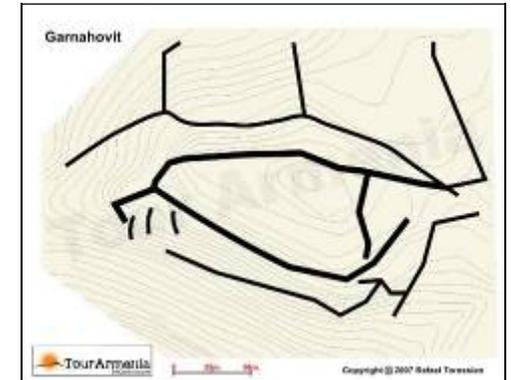
**SIDE TRIP:** (**Garnahovit – Գարնահովիտ** till 1946 Adiaman, elev. 1903m, pop. 178) In the middle of the village is the remarkable 7th c **S. Gevorg church**, one of the best preserved tetraconch churches (four protruding apses joined to a central space at right angles), and has the same composition as S. Hripsimeh in Echmiadzin. Unlike Hripsimeh, S. Gevorg uses three-quarter niches shifted southwards and northwards off the diagonal axis of the central hall, forcing attention from the hall to its upper corners, where four fan vaults create the support arches for the substantial drum, itself pierced with windows on each of its polygonal walls; double windows on the four cardinal walls and single on the diagonals. The niches lead to four corner chambers, which were used as prayer rooms, treasury and depositories.



Also unique to this church were the dimensions of the cross wings, which are narrower at the top than the width of the support walls for the drum, forcing a change of perspective when looking at the vaulted cross form above. This startling

perspective was utterly unusual for its time, an experiment in breaking the expected planes and layout of churches into more dynamic structures. The outside walls have niches which typical for the time, though the smaller ones under the gables were a new touch, as were the shape of the dome corners as triangular recesses from the main structure. Wall decoration is typical of the 6th-7th cc, with arch cornices, window edging and entrance portals. The twin half-colonettes sharing a single capital like that on the W façade became common by the second part of the 7th c. The church yard has the remains of some substantial **medieval buildings**.

There are other **church remains** in the gorge E of the village (about 500m up river).



Nearby (E and SE) are **Bronze Age remains** (DD 40.496277 x 43.96469).

**Camping** is possible near the village (ask first); **Overnight** in village home (rustic, 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** in the village.

➡ Backtrack to the Giumri Highway and head N (R). In a few kilometers you reach the top of a pass and over to the R is a large stone monument on top of a hill. You can reach this by circling around to the back and taking a path to the monument (DD 40.45465 x 43.84870).



*SIDE TRIP: The monument is built in memory to a family on the lower end, with a unique stack of large stones on the top platform and great views of the valley and Turkish border.*

➡ END OF TRIP 6



## RESOURCES ▲

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHORS ▲

**Rick Ney** (author) first came to Armenia in 1992 to work at the American University of Armenia. In

1993 he began his work in humanitarian aid and development for USAID-funded projects at the Armenian Assembly of America and Fund for Democracy and Development, the latter as Caucasus Region Director. This morphed into writing about Armenia for various publications, which became the first English language complete guide to Armenia in 1996 (online) and 1998 (CD-ROM). It has since become an online resource, visited by more than 24 million unique visitors ([www.TACentral.com](http://www.TACentral.com) and [www.TourArmenia.info](http://www.TourArmenia.info)). Rick is passionate about Armenia's deep history, amazing ecology, and making the country accessible for independent travelers, whom he believes will be the basis of Armenia's entry into the open world. In 2000 he began dividing his time between Armenia and caring for a parent in Texas, both of which he considers the richest experiences of his life.

**Rafael Torossian** (research, maps, and graphics) has been collaborating with Rick on TourArmenia since 1996, providing some much needed reality checks and commentary along the way. In his other life Rafael designs flash sequences, ads, graphics and web sites for [TWRJ](http://TWRJ), for a variety of sites and content management projects. In a previous life Rafi was a field and track athlete, setting the All Armenia record (still unbroken) for the 60 meter dash, then as Assistant to the Minister for Sports, serving (surviving) 6 ministers, before meeting Rick, when they worked together on several humanitarian aid projects managed by the Armenian Assembly of America and Fund for Democracy and Development. In a world where engineers are taxi drivers, Rafi became the finance manager for these projects, creating the first multi-denomination accounting system for USAID projects in the Caucasus, tracking currency that inflated at one time 150% per day. Rafi is an Honored Coach of the Republic of Armenia and lives in Yerevan, a proud Yerevantsi who did not leave during the dark years of 1991-1995.

**Bella Karapetian** (Editing, Translations, Russian Edition) first met Rick in 1993 when she came to the American University and worked in his office as Faculty services Manager and Special Events Coordinator. There she had the chance to use her

remarkable patience and good humor with wide-eyed professors wanting to know where the nearest shopping mall was (God give us patience and a good dose of Pantalgin). She then worked at the World Food Program in Armenia as administrator and Program Officer. In her previous life Bella worked with International architects at ArmStateDesign Institute as an information program assistant and translator. She is currently Executive Director of the NGO Historic Armenian Houses. History and architecture are her true loves and she has traveled to China, Thailand, Malaysia, Italy, Germany, and Lebanon and throughout the former Soviet Union. Bella tops this off by maintaining her membership in the World Esperanto Association. *Saluton!*

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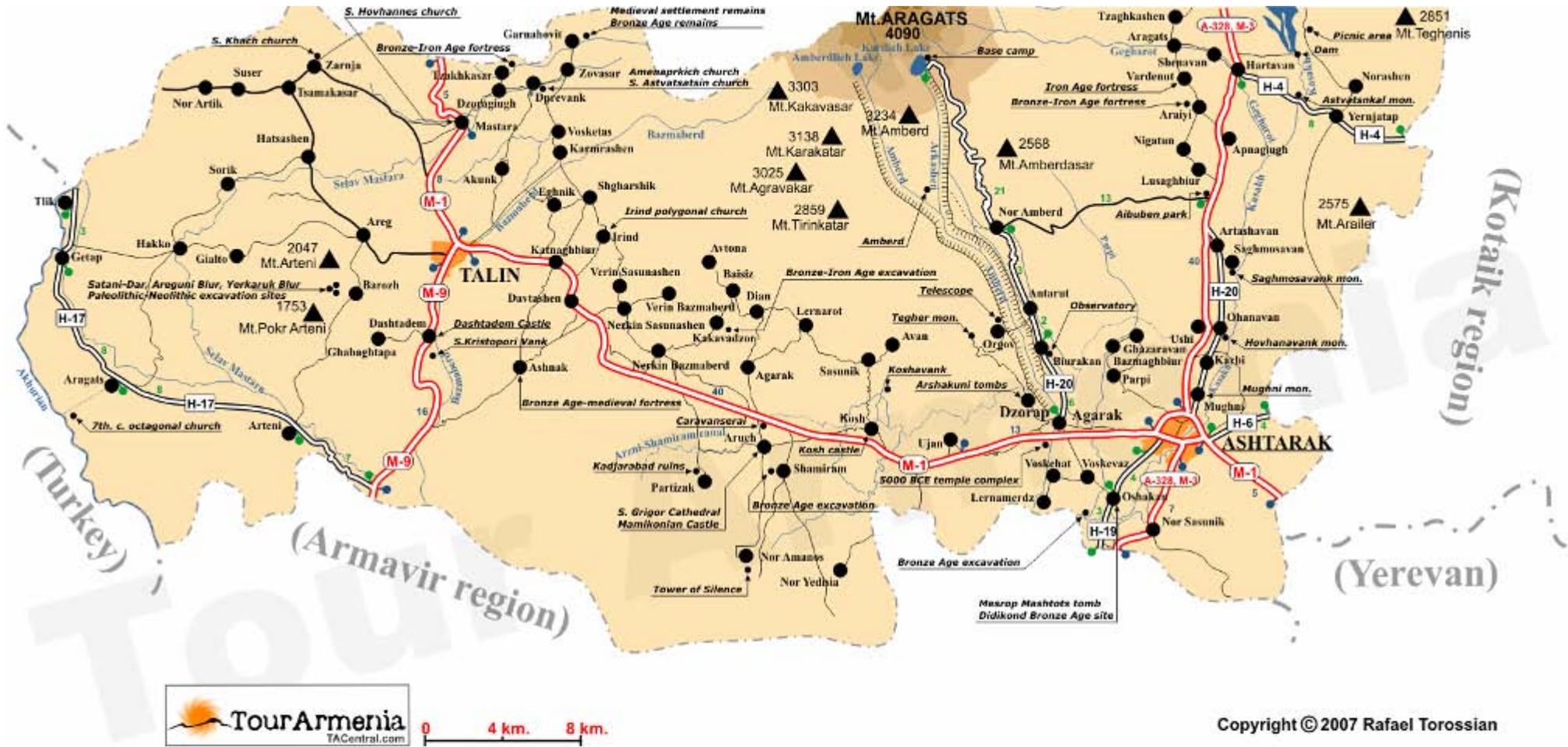
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# Aragatsotn region

## A





# Aragatsotn region B

