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

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 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 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/Ahurian 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 marz Արագածոտնի մարզ

By Rick Ney
Maps by Rafael Torossian
Edited by Bella Karapetian

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Note about pronunciation: we transcribe words into English using local dialect, and substitute "i" for "y" as in Sarigugh instead of Sariguygh. "p." stands for poghotts (street), "pts." for poghotsner (streets), "pta." For poghota (avenue).

Highlights

- Visit Ashtarak Gorge and the three sister churches of Karmravor, Tsiranavor and Spilkakavor (p. 10)
- Follow the mountain monastery trail to Tegher (pp. 18), Mounin (p. 20), Hovhanavank (pp. 21) and Saghamosavank (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 Yeghipatruish (p. 34), the Bronze Age fortress at Tsaghkahovit (p. 38) & fire altar at Gegharot (p. 40)
- Hike the nature trails over the Pambak and Tsaghkahuni Mountains into the forests of Kotak and Lori (pp. 36, 37, 39, 40)
- Climb to the top of Kosh Castle, an intact 13th c fort and the amazing Kosh Great Khakhkar (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 khakhkar, 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)

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...
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, arming through a number of villages, to wind its way through some of Armenia’s rarest flowers and birds.

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, and 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 slopes. Other remarkable varieties include the Blackthorn (Prunus spinosa), cultivated Greek Walnut (Junglans regia L.), Mahaleb Cherry (Cerasus mahaleb L. Mill), Pear (Pyrus takhtadzianii Fed.), Wild Apple (Malus schelkovnikovii, O. brachystachys, O. haystanum, Cerasus orientalis Uglitzk).

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

Wild relatives of crop plants: Fruit trees include the Blackthorn (Prunus spinosa), as well as cultivated Greek Walnut (Junglans 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, C. Gmel), Blackberries (Rubus armeniacus Focke),
Cereal grains include Wild barley (Hordeum spontaneum C. Koch etc)
Fodder include Bur Clover (Medicago papillosa Boiss etc) and Armenian pit (Onobrychus hajastana Grosh 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** species include Long-legged Buzzard, Rough-legged Buzzard, Red Kite, Greater Spotted Eagle, Short-toed Snake-Eagle, Stepe Eagle, Northern Harrier, Pallid Harrier, Montagu's Harrier, Shikra, Lanner Falcon, Peregrine Falcon, Yellow Wagtail, Common Stonechat, Common Sandpiper, Common Scoter, Common Buzzard, Oriental Bunting, Black-headed Bunting, Black-billed Magpie, European Jackdaw, Rock, Common Raven, Honey Buzzard, Black Kite, Lesser Spotted Eagle, and Boreal Owl

**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 White-throat, Black-headed Bunting, Snow Bunting, Eurasian Linnet, Eurasian Tree Sparrow, and Isabelline Shrike


**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, Raddie's Accentor, Ring Ouzel, Mountain Chiffchaff, Corn Bunting, Oriental Bunting, Black-headed Bunting, Crimson-winged Finch, White-Winged Snowfinch

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

For a complete list of birds by species and habitat see TourArmenia Birding pages (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 Bearly marked paths, for 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 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 bath. Best to soak 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.

For a complete list of thermal and mineral springs see TourArmenia Springs pages (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.

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from "vot", meaning leg or foot, so the
mountains and castles at Mughni, Hovhanavanak, Saghmosavank, Amberd, Tegher and Dzorap, the burial place of Armenia’s Arshakuni kings. Visit the tomb-church for Mesrop Mashots at Oshakan and the quaint village of Voskevaz with its Bronze Age Vip Cup (Drin Stone). Visit the mount of Biurakan with its space observatory and the Optical-Radio Telescope at Orgov. Visit the medieval monasteries and princely castles at Kosh, Aruch, Shamirum 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 Tsaghkasgar, Zovasar and Garnemovit. 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: Astvatsatsnik monastery (5th-7th cc), the “underwater church” at old Zovuni with its nearby S. Vartan mausoleum (5th c) and Tukh 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 recluses but friendly Zoroastrian Yazidis 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 you go, with warm to hot days and cool nights.

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 Neolithic 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 Aragavar. 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 Aragats (possibly from “vot”, 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) Reservoir Sites, Yeghipatrush, T’tujur, Rya-Taza, Tsaghkahovit (1-2 days). Mt. Aragats, Kari Lich (1-4 days).

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, Hovhanavanak, Saghmosavank, Amberd, Tegher and Dzorap, the burial place of Armenia’s Arshakuni kings. Visit the tomb-church for Mesrop Mashots at Oshakan and the quaint village of Voskevaz with its Bronze Age Vip Cup (Drin Stone). Visit the mount of Biurakan with its space observatory and the Optical-Radio Telescope at Orgov. Visit the medieval monasteries and princely castles at Kosh, Aruch, Shamirum 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 Tsaghkasgar, Zovasar and Garnemovit. 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: Astvatsatsnik monastery (5th-7th cc), the “underwater church” at old Zovuni with its nearby S. Vartan mausoleum (5th c) and Tukh Manuk shrine (BCE), khachkars and stelae (5th-7th cc); then visit the working prehistoric archeological excavations at Tsaghkahovit.

Hitting the Highlights
Ashtarak, Oshakan, Royal Mountain trail (Mughni, Saghmosavank, Hovhanavanak, 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).

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 Vishaqs (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.

Prehistoric excavations in Aragatsotn region include Stone Age sites at Tsaghkahovit, Kuchak, Hnaberd, Ashtarak, Voskehat, Agarak, Oshakan, Shamiram and Mt. Arteni; and Copper/Bronze Age settlements at Tsaghkahovit, Hnaberd, Ashtarak, Oshakan, Voskevaz, Agarak, Kosh, Shamiram, Aruch, Avan, Aragatsi-berd, Kakavaztor, 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 (Araratan) 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 (Arshaghtunili) and Yerevan (Erebuni, Teishebaini) to be considered a relative backwater and summer home to the area’s governors. Enough remains have been discovered through, 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.

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 “Armeni,” 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 especially their prized Nesaean horses, the descendants of which can still be found in Aragatsotn. Armenian
Yervanduni or Orontid 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 Giumlias, 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), Arazmad (Zeus), Vahtang (Hephaestus), Kuneh (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, Aragar, Tegher and Aghtamir (Vskevaz).

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 Kamsarakar 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.

“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.

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 Khusrow 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 Mazzdaism believers (Zoroastrianism – fire worshipers), a belief that found some resonance with Armenians before the Christian era (Armenian 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 Shapuha 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 Parthey (387-426), traveled to the major centers of learning in Asia Minor before another monument for independence, though rarely visited now, is north of Oshakan, in the village of Aghtsk (Dzorap). As war booty, Shapuh took had taken the remains of the Arshacid (Arshakuni) kings, “robbing” the Armenians of their ancestral powers. The Sasanids, 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.

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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 Narsavar.

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. Aghstsk, Ush, Arashavan, Jrambar, T’tujur, Mirak, Derek, Aragar, Kosh, Shamiram, Verin Sasunik, Avan, Aruch, Irind, Zakari Berd, Talin, Dashtadem, Mastara, Zarnj, Zovasar, Garnahovt.

THE BAGRATUNIS

Worn down by continued Armenian rebellions, in 681 the Arabs appointed Asht Bagratuni (the Carnivorous) Prince over Armenia and in 885 Kiev 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 Bagratuni, 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 Bagratuni, 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 rivalries. 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).
scale assault in 1064, capturing Ani, and destroying the Byzantine army at Manazert. 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 coves—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), Dashadzem, Parpi, Ashtarak, and the S. Grigor Lasavorich 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 **Bagraturi sites in Aragatsotn** are at Biurakan, Arimand, Kosh, Aruch, Dashadzem, Zarjna, Hovhanavank, Yeghiastrash 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. Forgiving alliances with the new rulers (who were fighting themselves with Kurdish and Iranian emirs), the region became one of 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 Gumi or north via Aparan, Vanadzor and Sadakhol. 

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 took 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, Mughn, Ambed, 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 gorge 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, Ashtarak and Aragatsotn, 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 Nestorians at the time of the invasions and 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,

Unable to evict Kurdish and Iranian Emirs from Dvin, the official capital of Armenia, The Bagraturi 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 Marmionian stronghold at Aruch fell to the Bagraturi. 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 Bagraturi 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 Byzantine province, and the onslaught of Seljuk Turks led by Alp-Asran, the first waves of Turkomens 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 Bagraturi 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
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 land 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, now became 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 and his men swept into the country. In 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, burning crops and pastures on their way. A severe famine ensued and cannibalism was reported, as well as the selling of human flesh at the market.

The rulers left in Timur’s wake a decimated people. 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 cultivated farming communities through the region, leaving a power that had invaded and settled into Anotlia long before him, the Ottomans. Timur died in Samarkand in 1405.

The Seljuk Turks who governed Persia, who had expelled the Mongols 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 event of Persia. The Ottomans, who had conquered 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 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 at his focus on Baghdad and Mesopotamia. Gradual encroachment wrested the remainder of Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan into Ottoman titular control by 1585.

Turk-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 Herckel 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 1821 completed the remainder of Eastern Armenia to the Czar’s lands.

As WWI began, Armenian patriots joined the Czarist forces, a number from Ashar in and especially Ararat, 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 a long war in the desert by Turkish and Kurdish soldiers and peasants determined to wipe the Armenian race from the face of the earth.
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 wash 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 Armenia in 1919 and Aparan and the Turkish Army was forced out of Eastern Armenia, allowing the country to form a Republic.

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 Turkish forces were unable to stop the communist forces and Armenia was declared a republic. The Treaty of Baku was signed the following year.

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 Aragatsotn in 1994. Aragatsotn'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 Yezidis (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 Aragatsotn, especially in Aparan region. Descendants of the Kurds who entered Armenia with the Seljiks, Mongols and Kurdish ones of the 10th-14th cc (including the great Jalai-al-Din in the 11th c), current Yezidis 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.

As the population boomed in the post-war years, construction of new housing became paramount. In this Aragatsotn’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 design detached from a Moscow perspective. Shoddy construction and skimming off supplies were in no small part the reason so many buildings were damaged during the 1988 earthquake and 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. The new Caravan route is designed to provide a flexible and affordable way to travel. With a stay in Ashtarak before going to Yerevan, the Caravan route provides a convenient and comfortable way to explore the region.

Remittances are perhaps still the largest item 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 grow 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 significant. There are several routes, 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 landscape. 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, as 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.

By Air

There are no air connections to Aragatsotn region. It may be possible to have a private 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, Armariv and a few kilometers of Kotak 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 through the northern slopes of 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 Armariv, or the Aparan-Echmiadzin route (A329) climbs the eastern face of Aragats by the monasteries at Mughni (2 km), Hovhanavank (6 km) and Saghmosavan (14 km) before ascending into the high alpine plains with Yezdi villages at Haratan/Shevanah (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 Ashtarak (59 km), (A329 continues south to Smbat 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 the town of Giumri. From Aragats it is 11 km to Tilk, 17 km to 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), Noramderd (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 Dzoraghi/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 &

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 Tilk, 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-Tbilis is 1470 AMD, sitting compartment is 3600 AMD, and a place in a 4-bed compartment is 5600 AMD.
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 khorovots stands and cafes along the Giumri and Aparan highways (Aragar-Kosh), at Ashtarak, Aparan, Talin and Mastara, Osvekevaz 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 khorovots 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.

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 alternately 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.

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 spring the entire mountain is lined with 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.

Pictoresque locales include Ashtarak Canyon, Ohanavan, Saghmosavan, Amberd, Tegher, Kari Lich, the road to Kari Lich, the top of Mt. Aragats, the Amberd, Arshakan, 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, Garnavot, Karmrashen and Mastara.

Prehistoric / Urartian excavations, tombs, vishapstones, khachkars & ruins in Aragatsotn Region include Tsaghkahovit and Gegharot (Aparan plain), Oshakan, Osvekevaz, Agarar, Tegher, Shamiram, Kakavberd, Mt. Arteni, Tsaghkasar, Ushi.

Medieval fortresses, monasteries, churches, Khachkars & ruins will be found at Ashtarak, Oshakan, Osvekevaz, Mugnhi, Karbi, Ohanavan, Saghmosavan, Ushi, Artashavan, Jrambar, Yeghispatr, T'Tujur, Aparan, Mirak, Rya-Taza, Derek, Parpi, Aghtsk, Biurakan, Tegher, Amberd, Kari Lich, Shamiram, Verin Sasanik, Avan, Aruch, Bais, Irind, Talin, Dashtadem, Karmrashen, Mastara, Zovasar, Garnavot, and Zarnja.

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; Mt. 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. Damligladu (2781m), the Tukhmanuk Pass into Upper Kotalik (2781m) and Mt. Davakar (2861m). North of Aparan are Mts. Mensar
For details talk to Armenian Aviation Club, 24 Vardanants p, Yerevan, email: aac@unesco-club.am
You can also contact Dan Retz with questions about Armenian flights at dan_retz@yahoo.com, or visit www.ucalculus.org/armenian.html.

Adventure Tour Operators
Ayrudy Riding Club, (tel. 032 34 628 cell. 091 42 45 33), 3 Mt. Ardeni st, Aparan, Ashtarak, email: stallion@ayrudy.am, URL: www.ayrudy.am/, offers riding lessons and trial rides in and around Ashtarak. Riding lessons from $10 per hour to trial rides from $15 per person.

Cavling
Aragatsoo has many 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 the Armenia Caving pages (www.tacentral.com/nature/natural_story.asp?stor y_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) Kari lich 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 many 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 Ashtarak basin. Two important gliding spots:
Aragats (7/0 – 500m vertical) This flying site is in the foothills of Mt. Aragats, the highest mountain in Armenia to the Northwest of Yerevan.
Vardablur (7/0 – 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.

For details talk to Armenian Aviation Club, 24 Vardanants p, Yerevan, email: aac@unesco-club.am
You can also contact Dan Retz with questions about Armenian flights at dan_retz@yahoo.com, or visit www.ucalculus.org/armenian.html.
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, URL: www.masstours.com, specialize in archeological tours and participation in archeological digs supervised by working archeologists include the Urartian fortress Erebeni (Arin Berd) forerunner of present day Yerevan, the Bronze Age temple-city of Agarak, Bronze -Iron Age tomb field of Aghavnavtun, Paleolithic caves in the Kasakh River Canyon near the village of Apnagugu, 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) for more information about sacred geometry.
ASHTARAK  (DO 40.30167 x 44.35917)

ASHTARAK MAP (p. 20)

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.

Sights

ASHTARAK - UCSEVUNU (“Tower” elev. 1139m, pop. 34963) Literally at the foot of Aragats, built on the rim of the Kasakh River and at the crossroads to Giurmi 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 hardest 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 clime in the river gorge on hot summer days.

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 Kodaik and Shirak. The town was subservient to the bishopric of 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 town’s position was perfect for watching the Ararat Valley and monitoring access points to the mountain. 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.

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/avant garde 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 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.

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. Marianeh”, 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
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, spilling 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 then 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 –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 13th 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.

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.
The other wings of the cross form are rectangular inside and out. 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. 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 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 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 as Christian all along. For more information visit TourArmenia's web site on khachkars (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 please 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 Katch the cool, wet air coming from the canyon and the tidy feel of the area is a welcome respite from the more modern areas of the town. The porches are decorated with crested wooden arches and balustrades, giving a more romantic feel to the otherwise pedestrian architecture of the modern town.

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 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.

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.

In 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 colonnette 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, converted to a church in the early Christian era by S. Lasuchovich, 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 Astghik)’ 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 Karmravor parking lot and continue driving downhill into the river gorge. 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.

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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 production 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.
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

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.

Darabavor caves

Inside the gorge are the locally famous used for refuge in the medieval times.

Nature Trails

Westwards, you can hike along the canyon to Oshakan (7 km) and Amberd/Aigeshat (11 km).

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 Tiblisi, 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 Tiblisi (Tbilisi), founded by tsaristikos Nerses Ashtaraketsi after the Lazarus Institute in Moscow. Working as a photographer and teacher in Russia, and influenced by the Armenian writer Khachatour Abovian (esp. his Verk Hayastani or "Wounds of Armenia"), Proshian published his first novel "Sos & Varitter" in 1860, which gained immediate success, Mikhail 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 playwriting 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 Tiblisi, many donated by 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. Khajoian, Zarzand 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, and art works, most 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.

The canyon has some unique wildflowers (Linaria armeniaca, Acantholimon bracteatum, Liliun akana, Tulipa julia, Corydalis augustifolius, Ornithogalum mountanus, O. qussonei, Campanula choziatorskyi, Bellevalia longistila, Muscari neglecta, Lotus goebelia, Astragalus strictifolius, Serratula serratuloides, Tumanthea aucheri, Malus neglecta, Prunus divaricata, Sorbus graeca, S. persica, S. aucuparia, Crataegus orientalis, Corydalis marrubifolia) and fauna (squirrel, wild bore, lynx, nutria, fox and rarely bear).

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).
## 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**

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

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

- **THEATRE, MUSIC**
  - 8. Cultural Palace

- **NEW SHOP, 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**

### PRACTICALITIES

**Area Code:** 232

**Long Distance:** 0232 + 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 (0223) 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 Aftokaiyan 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 Agataneghgos 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 around the time of 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 Aftokaiyan bus (station by) the main square on Yerevanian p. (near 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 (Ambard (27 km) & Kari Lich/Mt. Aragats (34 km); Dzorap/Aghst (8 km) & Tegher (13 km); Mughn (2 km), Ohanavan (7 km), Saghamosavan (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.

**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, fare 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); Mughn (2 km), Ohanavan (7 km), Saghamosavan (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.

Ayrudy Riding Club, 3 Mushgeh Bagraturi Street, Ashtarak (tel. (032) 3-46-28 cell 091 42-45-70), email: stallion@ayrudy.am, URL: www.ayrudy.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 Mashots 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 telegrams. 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. Armenian, (on page 13).

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.

Ashtarki Dzor Restaurant/Motel, Ashtarki Gorge (tel. 36778) is a bit over the top in its tastes, but the local "Novi Armeni" and a lot of western Armenians think it’s wonderful. The place bills itself as an “entertainment center” replete with event/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 expatriats. 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 small European style cottages 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 is inconvenient for Yerevan but a good jumping off point for Ashtarak and Aragatsotn, esp. if you have a car and prefer 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 kiosk 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.

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

Springs: Oshakan, Voskevaz, 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 Voskevaz road intersection in central OSHAKAN (DD 40.5970 x 44.31493)

OSHAKAN - OCUHULU (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 manuscriptoriums, 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). 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 “Mhrian” 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.

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.tacentral.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.tacentral.com/manuscripts_miniatures/m_manuscripts_index.html].

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 of the more well-heeled faithful through the ages. One to look for is for the priest named Ter Arake 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 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 church 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 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 Armentele 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, Armentele, 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 village is also known as the site for an important Bronze Age fortress (3rd-1st m BCE) known as Akhtamar ("salt Timir," 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.

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 "Badalal 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 Badalal 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.

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.

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.

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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 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) 🐐🐫

OSKEVAZ - ՈՍԿԵՎԱԶ (before Ghizitamur or "Red Timur" elev. 1034m, pop. 5381) was named in the 15th century after Timur the Lame, who sparing 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.

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 "Badalal 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 Badalal Zham (DD 40.25827 x 44.28973, elev. 1012m).

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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 - ՈՍՔԵՀԱՏ till 1949 Patinj, pop. 830) 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
The village was settled on the site of an Agarak fortress complex, built in the 4th c to protect the approaches to Dzorap where the Arshakuni (Arshakid) royal mausoleum lay. The site, which begins at this point and stretches N 2 km to the Tegher/Amberd fortress, another 2.5 km to the 4th c Arshakuni mausoleum church and canyon wall caves that once protected the villagers at Dzorap, 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 Voskehat 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 44.2847222)

AGARAK - USHCHU (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 temple site (DD 40.30148 x 44.27838, elev. 1714m), with substantial chamber tombs of coarse boulders surrounded by stone rings and covered with a mound. The site is one of the largest and best preserved in the region, with openings and marked off areas.

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.

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.

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).
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 Karahunj, in Siunik. Another find, on the rock shelf at Sev Ghul (Black Tower) in Gumri 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 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.

Travel Guide®

DZORAP/AGHTSK - ՀԱՐՍԱԽՈՒՄ / ԱՐՍԱԽ (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.

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 same 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.

Excavators say 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 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).

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 Asharak 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).

According to legend and the 5th c historian Pavtos Biusand, the troops of the Sassanid king Shapuh 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".
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 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 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 mausoleum is a small rectangular vaulted hall (2.6m x 3.7m and 2.5m high), stretching from 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 remains of the other kings were carried off to Persia, in a bid to dispirit the Armenians and place a hex on their fortunes. The Sparapet Vasak Mamikonian (ca. mid 4th c), after defeating the Persians in battle, retook the bones and carried them back to Armenia to the newly built mausoleum church at Aghstik, where they were buried (according to one legend pagan separated from Christian; according to another the bones were mixed together, so the builders could not separate them between Christian and pagan and had to bury them together, incorporating pagan symbols with Christian in the decor) in the lower chamber, thus restoring the power of the kingdom. Obviously this didn’t do the trick, since Vasak was betrayed in a later battle by a rival nakharar Merujan Ardzruni (367-368), which led to the defection of Vasak’s brother Vahan along with many other nakharars to the Pother side.

### The ARSHAKUNI DYNASTY OF KINGS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>King Name</th>
<th>Reign Duration</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vahan Mamikonian</td>
<td>367-368</td>
<td>Governor of Aghstik, buried the bones of the Arshakuni kings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arshak II (son of Vahan)</td>
<td>c 350-368</td>
<td>Buried the bones of the Arshakuni kings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tigranes VII (son)</td>
<td>c 350-368</td>
<td>Buried the bones of the Arshakuni kings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merujan Ardzruni</td>
<td>369-370</td>
<td>Governor of Aghstik, buried the bones of the Arshakuni kings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pap (son of Archak II)</td>
<td>370-374</td>
<td>Buried the bones of the Arshakuni kings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zik (regent)</td>
<td>387-390</td>
<td>Buried the bones of the Arshakuni kings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khosrov III (from Arshakuni family)</td>
<td>387-392</td>
<td>Buried the bones of the Arshakuni kings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artavazd VI</td>
<td>252-283</td>
<td>Buried the bones of the Arshakuni kings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arshak III (son of Zarmandukht)</td>
<td>384-389</td>
<td>Buried the bones of the Arshakuni kings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merujan Ardzruni</td>
<td>369-370</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khosrov III (second time)</td>
<td>384-415</td>
<td>Buried the bones of the Arshakuni kings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shahpur (heir of Perse)</td>
<td>415-421</td>
<td>Buried the bones of the Arshakuni kings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provisional government of Narses Djidjrakatsi</td>
<td>421</td>
<td>Buried the bones of the Arshakuni kings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local independent governments</td>
<td>421-423</td>
<td>Buried the bones of the Arshakuni kings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artash (Artaxes IV)</td>
<td>423-438</td>
<td>Buried the bones of the Arshakuni kings</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The arms 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).
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 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 Asharak 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 and 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 - Stb’rbd’r (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 Kathun (a.k.a. “Mama Kathun”), wife of Prince Vacheh Vachutian, who had purchased the district of Aragatsotn 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, Hovanavank 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.

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 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.

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’gheratun" folk restaurant and museum. The D’gheratun plans to renovate the entire old village into a folk art center and lodge, making this one the more interesting spots in the region, well worth the stop.
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 nay 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.

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.

An inscription on one of the columns credits Vardapet Alghbaiirk 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 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 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.

Old Tegher village is as 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’gheratun & Hatsatun, 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.

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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 walking 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 Sianik 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 village yard, which has running water; Springs in the village yard and area.

Backtrack down to the Giumri Highway, turn left (W) and take the highway to and above Ashrar for about 5.9 km to the Parpi cloverleaf exit (left or N) and take that for about 4.7km to PARPI center (DD 44.32941 x 44.30722)

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 walking 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 Sianik marz. If you are into astronomy, stop by the office to see if anyone is free, it is a treat not to be missed.

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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 yard and area.

Backtrack down to the Giumri Highway, turn left (W) and take the highway to and above Ashrar for about 5.9 km to the Parpi cloverleaf exit (left or N) and take that for about 4.7km to PARPI center (DD 44.32941 x 44.30722)

Pride 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 walking 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 Sianik 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 yard and area.

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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 "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.

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 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.

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 Parpi, continue N on the mountain road for about 100 m to (Bazmaghbiur DD 40.33467 x 44.31023)

SIDE TRIP: (Bazmaghbiur - Puqduqgmyyn till 1949 Taki, 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 Bazmaghbiur, continue NE on the mountain road for about 600 m to (Ghazaravan DD 40.34778 x 44.34167)

SIDE TRIP: (Ghazaravan - քաջարավան 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, follow the Shahvard River gorge up the face of Aragats (about 7 km to a fork, take the left fork for another 8 km till it peter's 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 - Մուղնի (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.

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 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 belfry in front of 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, 4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** in the village.

From Mush, 40.33389 x 44.37778

### OHANAVAN

Ohavan 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-Sharamir 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)

### OHANAVANK - ՕՀԱՆԱՎԱՆՔ

(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.

**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 Karbi center continue N on the main village road for about 1.7 km to (Karbi) center (DD 40.33889 x 44.37778)
- From Mush, 40.33389 x 44.37778

**SIDE TRIP:** (Karbi - Քարբի) 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. Kirakii 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 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.

**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

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Aragatsotn Marz : 35 of 94 - TourArmenia © 2007 Rick Ney ALL RIGHTS RESERVED - www.TACentral.com
Armenian architecture and has been nominated — along with Saghmosavank and Tegher—as a World Heritage Site. The monastery is located in 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 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.

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 these columns decorated with framed circular designs. The dome is covered with an umbrella tent roof.

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 Bagratunis 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 was particularly 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 influence 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 monastery has numerous inscriptions on its walls, detailing parts of its history. One, high on the N wall of the “tapanatun” (sepulchre, mausoleum, literally “graveloven 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 Ivan, 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...”

The central window on the eastern façade is framed with twin moldings. Probably influenced from the same idea at Kobehr 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 12th 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. Manueilian. 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.

Camping is possible in the river gorge or near the bank, 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) (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), a team of archaeologists studying sites from paragliders and airborne cameras. The village was 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 Prieure 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 Ohanavan 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 Ohanavan, which she believes has a special energy for healing in Armenia.
The small (5.8m x 8m) standing church is the original 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.

Butting up against it, now a pile of rubble with trace foundations, was the large 12th-13th cc 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.

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 cc 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 cc, 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 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.

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 cc 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 cc shrine. The founding of the monastery is supposedly connected to a certain Sarpapet 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 cc, 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.

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 cc.

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
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.

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 - Մեծ Աստվածածին եկեղեցի (1235) 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 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 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 km and out of Saghmosavank to the village and monastery of SAGHMOSAVANK (DD 40.40246 x 44.378815)

**SAGHMOSAVAN - Սաղմոսավան** (elev. 1610, pop. 194) is the name for the tiny village next to the more famous 13th c Saghmosavank - Սաղմոսավան 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 Zaralians. Prince Vacheh Vachatian is tied 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.
A remarkable structure, the L-shaped book depository, or library (1235), 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 for storing precious plate especially in light of the eastern apse.

Though both monasteries were seminaries and research centers, Saghmosavank 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 honeycomb style reminiscent of patterns popular in Seljuk, Persian and Arab states, which Armenians were exposed to by trade and invasion.

A remarkable 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.

The L-shape dictated a number of unique solutions for supporting the roof while maintaining a falling 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 apertures 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.

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 above the altar conch depict 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 decor, the red and black stones painted with white, yellow and red paint to emphasize the carvings.

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 decor, the red and black stones painted with white, yellow and red paint to emphasize the 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.

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 “picked 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.

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
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 country from this vantage point nor the sense of what they used to be. . . .

The trip to base camp is a 30-minute climb from and queens. The road ends at Kari Lich, Armenia's second highest湖 (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 country from this vantage point nor the sense of what they used to be. . . .

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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.

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The Markarian survey – the First Biurakan Survey (A) covers 17,000 sq. deg. of the Northern sky, 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.

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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 known as the Markarian galaxies.

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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 Karahunj.

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.

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...
as mass loss and worked on interstellar matter, radio galaxies and active galactic nuclei. Hambartssumian 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.

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.

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).

The west entrance has a portal with twin half-colonnets (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, lighting 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/) 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 bhavik@bao.sci.am) has lodging for conference attendees and walk-ins when rooms are available. The lodging is pension 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 comfortalodge 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 44.2666667.

**SIDE TRIP:** Antarut till 1949 Inaklu, founded 2nd half of the 19th c, elev. 152A, 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 bed 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 winds 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 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 - UUPÔİM** (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 era, 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 cleared 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 Ashtot "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 Pahlavuni ruled the Bagratuni 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, Saghmosavan and Hovhanavan), 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 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 overwhelming 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 decor except edging around the portal and windows, and the patchwork of crosses carved into the facade.

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.

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** - **ՎԱՐԴԻԱՆ ("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.

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A Vanishing Landscape... 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 new 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.

**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.

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.

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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 Antarut, 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 44.16666).

KARI LICH - ՔԱՐԻ ԼԻՉ (“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
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’redat 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 3100 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, Chalcopyrite, Gypsum, Pyrrhotite, and Quartz.

**Ecology.**

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.

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**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), Woodpeigeon, 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 Wheatear, Cetti’s Warbler and Black-headed Bunting. More wooded areas are home to Mountain Chiffchaff, Golden Oriole and Syrian Woodpecker.

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**Travel Guide® 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 then 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: [climbingabout.com](http://climbingabout.com)

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Photograph courtesy of © Tigran Nazaryan

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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: near Kari Lich, alpine meadow 3200m alt. Doronicum oblongifolium, Taraxacum stevenii, Primula algida, Campanula tridentata, Gentiana pontica, Oxypolis 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, 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.
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.

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 skirt 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

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.

(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.

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.

Photograph courtesy of © Tigran Nazaryan

(Experienced Guide) From North Summit
your guide will know the best route for the season and your experience
level.

Photograph courtesy of © Tigran Nazaryan

A third path, 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.

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

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gorgeous views of Shirak and Lori on the way up.
(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
Moslem and Christian faiths found refuge in the 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 being the eternal butt of the Armenian version of the “hillbilly” joke (or red neck, or Okie, or . . . you got 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.”)

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. 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.

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At the highway (see late medieval bridge. There is, with 19th c village church in village home (rustic, 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair).

Alternate route to Mt. Ara Lehr: The village faces Mt. Ara Lehr ("Arayi-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 Apnaghiugh, take the northern road to the highway (about 500m) then turn right (N) and continue for about 150m then turn left (W) and continue for 1.5 km to (Aral) center (DD 40.4622 x 44.3736) + AIBUBEN PARK - ԱԻԲՈՒԲԵՆ ՈՒԹՅ (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 Ambered: 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 Ambered 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 (Apnaghiugh DD 40.43944 x 44.39611) which parallels the highway before crossing the river to the village in about 400m and a 10 km. 

Side Trip: (Apnaghiugh – Upluwagn 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 pre-19th c village church, with homemade offerings and some evidence of matagh (sacrifice) near the church yard.

Alternate route to Mt. Ara Lehr: The village faces Mt. Ara Lehr ("Arayi-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.

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 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.

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)** (40.47674 x 44.39447) **(late)**. 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) **(late)**.

**ASTVASTNKAL - UU4+U0W+UL** (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 **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 f 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 frame 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
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 (Yerinjatap, DD 40.453056 x 44.464167)

SIDE TRIP: (Yerinjatap – Թղթահար, till 1949 Ghrebulagh, elev. 1897, pop. 318) sits above a river that feeds the Kasakh, at the bottom of the Tsakhkunats 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.

Yerinjatap 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 Yerinjatap, 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)

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 image and asked him to come to Nineveh. 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 below the surface of the ground. She then had his body buried in a deep grave, covering it with earth. She then set herself over the grave, and in a moment, the mountain rose up like a flap of a corpse to its former contour. Semiramis is said to have placed the statue in 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, colchicum bifolium, Purdmania scilloides, Scilla armenia, S. siberica, Tulipa julia, Iris caucasia, Muscari caucasicum, Bellevallia pycnanta, Orchidogalum schelkovnikovi, O. brachystachys, O. hyastanum, Fritillaria caucasia, Nectarosordum tripedale, Osp of gagea, Myosotis alpestre, Amenone caucasia, Orchis corniphora, Gladiolus tenus.

Mountain Steppe flora include Gladiolus atroviridaceus, Nigella oxypteta, Actynolema

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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.

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.

Side Trip: (J’rambar - Spuwüpin 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 Yeghipatrus 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 pensionat and goes towards the pine forests. The road leads to a series of sites on Aparan Jrambar (Aparan Reservoir).
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 relicts 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). 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 marty of the struggle against the Sassanid Empire. Mamikonian fell in battle near Avarair in 451 leading the troops of Prince Tachat Gntuni, 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.

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 Gntuni. 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 YEGRHAPATRUSH center (40.53326 x 44.47467). *YEGRHAPATRUSH - ԵՐԳԻՊԱՏՐՈՏՍ* (before Taniru, 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 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 corner 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 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 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 Saghmosavank 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 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.

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 pantaloon), 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 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.

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.
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 Dzoraglugh, 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, 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.

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 (variably 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), Mkritch Nashghash 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 town and ends at the shoreline about 2.6 km from center. The Lake at this point has striking scenery 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.*

MAP LEGEND

- Aparan WW II Monument
- Teghienats Church
- Kasakh Church
- Post Office
- Tigran Petrossian Monument
- Motel / Restaurant

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 - ԱԲԱՐԱՆ  (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 Kasak 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 Kasak 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.
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.

Bearing

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 Petrosian 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.

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.

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 Tirdat 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.

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, Yeghipatru, 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.

Take the time to visit the remarkable little Tegheniats Church nearby. To get there, backtrack 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.

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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**


**Shopping**

The Shuka is in the center, off the main square. M'terks and kiosks are around town. A Univermag is in the center, now privatized.

**Apostakes** 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 S 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’khagh N turnoff (at 2.8 km) to (T‘tujur) (DD 40.57472 x 44.45472).**

**SIDE TRIP:** (T‘tujur - Ուրէժի) “Sour Water,” till 1950 Imliu (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 inlet of the upper Tsaghkuniats range, which have forested slopes worth investigating. Due south is a dirt path that lead to Yeghiephurash in about 2.2 km and topping the T‘tujur Pass (2093.3m). The village has a S. Harutjun 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 Yeghiephurash. 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’khagh, take the right fork North for about 6.2 km up hill 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). The village is a quasi-pagan deity combining traits of gods from the Near East, and is built on top of a pre-Chrisitan shrine. Alternate Route to Hankavan: The village is the jumping off point for 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 - Լուսագիւղ 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-Chrisitan 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, so please ask before you leave, lest you return unhappy.
Camping is possible in the area and on the mountain track; Overnight in village home (4000 AMD for B&B is fair); Springs are in the village.

Mt. Aragats NE climb: Nigavan is a good jumping off point for climbing the NE face of Aragats to the North Peak. There is a dirt track that ascends the NE slope from the western edge of the village, it winds its way up to a couple of summer camps for the area shearers. A footpath from the camps is on a mountain stream. The tracks peter out here, but you can continue on foot path another 1 km to a higher camp, and from there, following the stream for about 3.5 km you are at the bottom ridges of the North Peak (3525m). From here on it is a major climb to summit these ridges and reach the northern peak, and for this last part you need some good mountain gear (see page 1).

Camping is possible on the mountain slope, at the summer camps and near the village (ask first); Overnight in village home (4000 AMD for B&B is fair); Springs are in the village.

† Backtrack to Aparan center and turn right (N) on the Vanadzor road and continue for about 2.5 km out of town to a left diagonal road (NW), take that for about 3 km to (Nigavan) center (DD 40.62167 x 44.29917, elev. 2117m)

SIDE TRIP: (Nigavan - Üşçül) Dam salon from 1947 Karabedrak, till 1967 Hovit; pop. 1574) sits above the Kasakh River valley, on the western side, the brooding northeaster face of Aragats to the west. By Nigavan you are officially in the shepherding territory, countless herds of cattle, sheep and goats are herded up the mountainside in the summer months to enjoy the vast expanse of wind swept grass and wild flowers. The concentration of Yezdi villagers increases from here though Nigavan's population is made up mostly of descendants of Armenians from Erzerum, Mush and Kars who immigrated here in the spring of 1828. Nigavan exists thanks to sheep and cattle farming, the natives selling their wares in Yerevan once a week. Nigavan is known for its dairy products and especially its matsun (village yoghurt); if you come here, be sure to buy some, and ask if they have any homemade lavash. Dip the lavash into the matsun for a heavenly treat. Among the purveyors of dairy products are Areznaz and Albert Movsisian, 77 years old. They peddle their wares in Yerevan with significant cost; buy direct and help them out. Also seek out Frunzik Hovhannisian, reputed to be the village historian. The village is simple, nothing fancy at all, but the villagers are warm and inviting.

There is a 19th c church in the village, and nearby a cyclopean fort on the SW slopes, part of the Tsaghkahovit Survey of Paleolithic to Iron Age settlements, forts and burial sites.

† Backtrack to the highway and turn left (N) continuing about 2.3 km to the next intersection taking the right fork (NE) for about 1 km to the Kasakh River and (Mirak, DD 40.64500 x 44.32417)

SIDE TRIP: (Mirak - Üşçul) formerly Mirak elevation 2043m, pop. 1458 sits over the right back of the Kasakh River. The hamlet has the ruins of a 5th c church and a unique cyclopean fortress, perched on the east bank of the Kasakh, below the nearby hillside, something rarely done in the Bronze Age (fortresses almost uniformly took the high ground), suggesting it may have been linked to a "mother fort" above or was a watch along the river to detect hostile forces on approach. The site is at the point where the Aparan Valley meets the Tsaghkahovit Plain, a meeting point between the regions of Shirak, Lori-Tavush and Ararat. The Bronze Age Site is below the village and consists of remains of stone fortification walls that are plain to see, some standing over 1m tall. The walls are made of cyclopean blocks over half a meter thick, carefully placed together with no infill. The all end and begin at odd places on the site making it hard to detect the exact dimensions or shape. Still it appears the compound was large; surveys for Project ARAGATS (which surveyed the site in 1998) saying it was over 200m in diameter. They place the site in the late Bronze Age.

Mt. Davakar Hike. From center continue on the poor village road NE about 4 km and you reach Melikiguli (formerly Melik-Kendi), which is at the base of Mt. Shoghakat (2639.6m) and Mt. Davakar (2861m), a pleasant full day's climb in spring or cool weather. From the village NE edge, take the N path that skirts Shoghakat on its west side and leads in about 3 km to the village of Ortachia (formerly Kuruboghaz), the SE edge of which has a mountain track that climbs between the two mountains to the top of Davakar in about 4.4 km on the longer S route, about 3.5 km on the shorter route that departs from the E edge.

Camping is possible in the area and river canyon (ask first); Overnight in village home (3000-5000 AMD for B&B is fair); Springs are in the village and on the riverbed.

† Backtrack to the highway, turn right (N) and continue for about 4.5 km to RIA TAZA (DD 40.65806 x 44.30611)
The Yezidis

The “Yezidi” or “Yazidi” (Kurdish: Êzîdî or Êzîlê) belong to the smallest of the three branches of Yazidism, 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. Yezidi 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 is in common with pre-Islamic Iranian, Indian and Near Eastern beliefs. In fact, only the initiated actually know the full theology, even among the Yezidis 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 each other. Christianity and Islam. For more information see resources.

### RIA TAZA - ԻՐԱԹԱՑ (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.

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 been 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 animitic 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

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 (Alagiaz) center (DD 40.33306 x 43.65806)

**SIDE TRIP:** (Alagiaz - Ùwùqùq till 1938 Mets Jamshiu 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 Berivan, 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 Alagiaz 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 TSAGHKHOVIT PLAIN and some important excavations.

**THE TSAGHKHOVIT PLAIN - ՏՍԱԳԽՀՕՎԻՏ ՊԼԱԻՆ** The Tsaghkahovit plain is a triangle of relatively flat (rolling) 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. It therefore 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.

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 had 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 A/AGATS), is ongoing, focusing on Tsaghkahovit, Gegehart.
and Aragatsi-berd, which are seen to be well organized and in communication with each other, yet 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 Alagiaz (past Sangiar village), and at about 500m from central Sangiar the road forks; take the left (S) fork for about 2 km to central TSAGHKOVIT** (DD 40.63611 x 44.22306)

**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 Aagarak, 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: Berdistsot, Geghgart, Ashtot Yerkat, Aragatsi-berd, Mirak, Tsaghkahovit, Sahakaberd, and Hnaberd, focusing in succeeding years on the Tsaghkahovit Fortress and in 2006 on the discoveries found at the Bronze Age altar at Geghgarot.

Excavations continue in the summer months. For more details on the project and how to attend, visit their web site at: acsacouchicago.edu/~atsmith/Pages/aragats.html

**TSAGHKOVIT - ՍՈՑԽԽՈՎԻՏ** (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 (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.

Excavations of these sites continue, but project researches 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 southeastheast 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.

**SIDE TRIP:** (Hnaberd - Հնաբերդ) elev. 2137m, pop. 1128) lies mostly on the left (west) bank of a branch of the Geghaztor 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 Hnaberd 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.
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 Dzunkerd River. The area is mostly farming and animal husbandry, peopled by Yazidis.

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 low paraglides and aerial 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 (3000-4000 AMD for B&B & is fair); **Springs** are in the village.

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Camping is possible on a right (E) turn into **GEGHAROT** (DD 40.70583 X 44.21944) (till 1945 Keshiskend) elev. 2121m, pop. 529) the small hamlet of mostly Yazidis eking out an existence growing vegetables, raising herds and producing some excellent dairy products (cheese and matsuq). The village setting is idyllic in the spring time, snow bound in the winters.

**Tsrarist 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** are in the village.

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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
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 cromtech (stone chamber) cemetery running up to the fortifications. This site has not yet been excavated.

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 citadel 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.

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.

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 (15 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: Lernavan route follows the river for about 300m to a barn 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 Naranav 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 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 5 intersections in about 1.2 km (N to the Imirkhan summer camp and ruins and Tamaradash 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 Dzukend Summer camp. In another 400m you are the entry to Tsaghasar Ruins, 500m N, and another 800m to the Ghvamali 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 Sasunashen) - (Avan) - (Shamiram) - ARUCH - (Nor Amanos) - (Agarak) - (Kakavdzor) - (Baisliz) - (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 (Babyylon, 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 Sasanashen.

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 green, and will come again as next year’s snows melt. The area is often ignored by those here, beginning around 500,000 BCE, inhabiting the (then) smoldering mountain slopes and densely 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 (Babyylon, 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 Sasanashen.

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**Eat:** Talin cafes, Agarak/Udjan cafes, roadside stands.

**Springs:** Udjan, Aragatsotn, Kosh, Avan, Aruch, Nerkin Bazmaberd, Kakavdzor, 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 - UQURUŞ (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 - Ցուցված) 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 Geghetsik (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 (ogh-ee), village home brew). The village has a statue of General Andranik 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
steep hills; about 1.2 km NW the cave complex of Phit (or "fish village") is 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, facing farmland irrigated by the 7th c BCE Shamiran 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 sleepers: 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 homes (rustic, 3000-4000 AMD for BB&B is fair); Springs are in the village.

Backtrack to the Giumri highway, turn R (W) and continue for about 3.4 km to Koshchakar prominently set off the road on the right (N).

KOSH KHACHKAR - ԿՈՇ ԽԱՉՔԱՐ

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 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 cross later 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, Seljiks, Kurdish Emins and Mongols, this symbol is resurrected and prelabeled into contemporary current. I like to think it was a deliberate assault, a kind of rude hand gesture at 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, D4 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-Shamiran 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 along the main Kosh castle road one can camouflage 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 Paleolitic 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 Helenistic period (2nd BCE-3rd CE), as Kish fortress shows (details follow).

Directly uphill from center in the village cemetery (take the road running by the canal then cross the 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 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.

The castle is an oblong structure with rounded corners (take its W and E ends), and a southern gate.

The red tufa building is based 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 abutments of the once large and bustling Koshavank Monastery, an important monastery and seminary for the region in the late Mambikonian / 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 Cliffsides 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 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.
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).

Return downhill to the path to the ravine and take it (by vehicle or on foot) to St. 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 eh 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 apsidioles (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.

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.

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, beadings, 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.

SIDETRIP:

(Verin Sasunik – Վերին Սասուն, 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.

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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. Stephanos 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). 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:** (Avan – Iğulu) elev. 1648m, pop. 533 lies at the SE edge of a major delta or 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 numerous keshaps and khachers 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 a stepped stylobated with the old 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**. There are a number of alpine trails off 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, turns left (NW) and then right and reaches the Castle in about 1.2 km of steep incline. A local guide can show you the way.

**SIDE TRIP:** (Shamiram - Guřšupud) 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 streams 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 Petroglyths 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 to central (Aruch, DD 40.28929 x 44.08095).**

**Aruch** (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 for the Mamikonian Family (Grigor Mamikonian, 561-682), 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 Vachesh 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) VASKA Mamikonian. The office of Sparapet became hereditary under Vaska, 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 Saharanri as Sparapet in the late 4th c, which led to an insurrection that reinstated the Mamikonians and brought Emmanuel 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, Emmanuel had the queen’s infant son Artashes III (Arshak III) married to his daughter, cementing their families and fortunes. It was Emmanuel’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 prince Sahakanush was the daughter of Saint Sahak the Great (“Isaac the Great,” Katolikos of Armenia and sponsor of the Khor Virap Monastery’s 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 contact 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 religion again and joined the rebellion which culminated in the Battle Vardenantz ("Vartan") at Avarair ("ah-va-RYE-er") Field in Vaspurakan (SW of Nakichevan, 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 and by 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.

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 then 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 music of sacred hymns echoing in the deep chamber. Even without its dome, the prayers, chants and hymns were so alike and yet unlike the Gregorian chants in the west, and for the music of sacred hymns...
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 Hellenistic fresco traditions (unconstrained and supple figures, harmony of lines and planes, ornamental motifs).

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.

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.

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 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.

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.

Ringing 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 older 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 Holy 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 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, Gimnri 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 a village home (rustic, 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** 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) (DD 40.22422 x 44.13333)

**SIDE TRIP:** (Nor Amanos - Անգամս) 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 a former Frankish village (Kakavard). 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 a 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 Aruch and continue north for about 1.8 km, past the Shamiram intersection and reaching the Gimnri 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 Gimnri Highway is a northbound road turning off to the left. Take that road for about 3 km to central (Aragak) (DD 40.30778 x 44.28472) (DD 40.30778 x 44.28472)

**SIDE TRIP:** (Aragak - Աղաթ) on the Talish River, a tiny hamlet of shepherds in high alpine country with nearly barren ridgetop 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 begin 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 support. 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 colonnettes. The W side has a portal with three arched panels 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 Talish door aperture is covered with wooden beams, but the vauling and arches that supported the drum are still intact. The overall

**Hiking.** There are some really good, challenging hikes from Kakavdzor, 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. Kakavzar (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 Kakavdzor a bad dirt track continues northwards through the mountainous terrain for about 1.4 km to (Baisez) (DD 40.360833 x 44.055277) (DD 40.360833 x 44.055277)

**SIDE TRIP:** (Baisiz - Բաևս) formerly Bashiss, elev. 1664m, pop. 1513 is on the right bank (E) of the Talish River, a tiny hamlet of shepherds in high alpine country with nearly barren ridgetop 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 begin 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 support. 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 colonnettes. The W side has a portal with three arched panels 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 Talish door aperture is covered with wooden beams, but the vauling 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, 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 3 km to (Verin Sasunashen) (DD 40.36667 x 43.98333)

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 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 - հյուղ) 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.

Backtrack to the Giumri Highway, turn R (W) and continue for about 1 km to central (Katnahbiur, DD 40.37722 x 43.98383)

SIDE TRIP: (Katnahbiur - կանաբ) formerly Mehraban, elev. 1915m, pop. 1480) straddles the Giumri Highway, with a roadside 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 gorg. Most tantalizing are the remains of a small 4th c church 1km S of the village is the cemetery with fragments of another church (5th-6th 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 village is the cemetery with Hellenistic graves.

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.

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 arcs 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 cornices decorated with fretwork and pomegranate fruit and leaves, and window archivolts (sub arches) with geometric patterns and half-colonnettes set into walls, all 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 colonnettes. 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.

SIDE TRIP: (Shgharsik - Աշնան) formerly Mehraban, elev. 2070m, pop. 1568) is a small village on an spur of Mt. Aragats, just above the Armavir 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 village is the cemetery with Hellenistic graves.

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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.

SIDE TRIP: (Ashnak - Աշնան) formerly Eshniak, elev. 1377m, pop. 1494) is on the lower hills of Mt. Aragats, just above the Armavir 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 village is the cemetery with Hellenistic graves.

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 Katnahbiur, a village road crosses a stream and turns sharply right (N) for 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 gorg. Most tantalizing are the remains of a small 4th c church in the village is the cemetery with fragments of pre-Christian stelae carved with simple crosses and capitals carved with zodiac symbols or warrior figures. On the NW end of the village is a bonfire for the children to light on New Years Eve. 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 village is the cemetery with Hellenistic graves.
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 Vagharschapet (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.

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.

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.

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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 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 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'wil" 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 drum echoes the same designs. Traces of color on the exterior cornices and crowns of the windows indicate that they were at on 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.

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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

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
ASHIR, 12 Khanjian p.

Shopping
The Shuka is in the center, off the main square
Mtsks 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 mtsks and in the summer at a park café.

END OF TRIP
TRIP 6: WESTERN ARAGATSOTN

TALIN – Western Loop and/or Northern Route

Western Loop: DASHTADEN – (Areg) – (Arteni) – (Arags) – (Getap/Tlik/Bagravan) – (Suser) – (Tsakanakser) – (Zarnja) – (Talin)

Northern route: (Talin) – (Akunk) – (Karmrashen) – (Mastara) – (Dzoragliugh) – (Tsagkhazar) – (Tsosvar) – (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 Artamir, western Aragatsotn is a land apart, not quite as lush as the marshlands that coat the edges of the lower land, but neither as flat as the sun. The region is marked by its receding hills and scattered lava cones plus its unrelenting beauty; violet 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 and west. 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.

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This trip is divided into two directions; north and west. While most tourists follow the northern route as far as the Giumri side which 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 Dzoragliugh, Tsagkhazar, Tsosvar, Garnahovit, also Mastara, and Dashtadem.

Continue S about 3.5 km to central DASHTADEN (DD 41.33958 x 43.85727)

DASHTADEN DNOU’OBU – (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 Hkotkemberian 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 pasturage.

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 periods 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 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 Shahn’shah, the last of a long line of Kurdish Shaddadid emirs who ruled sections of Armenia and intermarried into its clans.

“The prayer must not have worked since the Shaddadids lost their capital at Gandzak in 1075 and Shahn’shah is never heard from again.

The Shaddadids
The first appearance 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 than on for the next two centuries. Entrepreneurs and brigands in equal measure, under his heir Ali 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 Seljuks. In fact the bickering Byzantines and Bagratunis did as much to end Armenian sovereignty as any Shaddadil, Seljuk or Mongol warior.

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’ monothestism 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.

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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.

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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 documents 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 43.858896, elev. 1302m).

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 (Areg) center (40.38917 x 43.81417)

SIDE TRIP: (Areg - Upnubltil 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, mtersks, 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, mtersks, 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)
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 Ani peninsula (15.2 km) and Akun (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 600-800m 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 – Unubd till 1946 Ghlijaatagh, 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); Sprinngs 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 – Suser) elev. 1592m, pop. 1146) sits in a rocky valley just SE of Hamashler (1692.6m) and NW of Mt. Debetep (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); Sprinngs in the village.

From Tsamakasar center, take the east village road that skirts the tall hill for about 2 km to (Zarnja) (DD 40.46697 x 42.78333).

SIDE TRIP: (Zarnja – Zovasar, 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 lovely, its carved design in the lace tatting style showing a geometric cross and animal and floral imagery interwoven in and around. The drum is octagonal, its facaces flanked by columns carved with diagonal lines and ribbed arches, both made from basalt. The roof of the entrance 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). Along the way you can also reach Maralik (18 km) and the Maralik church (14 km) before entering 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 2102m 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 UUSUSU' (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, suggesting that period for its construction. 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 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.

Hidden amongst some houses S of the church is the small S. N’shan chapel, a delightful little hall chapel/ 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. 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 like 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, Nakichevan Khachkars that were destroyed in
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 Giurmi 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, (DO 40.4661 x 43.89972).

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, DO 40.4661 x 43.89972). 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 starting 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 comines, window edging and entrance portals. The twin half-colonnettes sharing a single capital like that on the W façade became common by the second part of the 7th c

There are other church remains in the gorge E of the village (about 500m up river).
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 and 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 TWRI, 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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