Aragatsotn is a favorite haunt of the urban “Yerevantsi”, who escape the summer heat at one of the many dachas and pensionats (summer lodges) that inhabit the southern edge of the mountain. Anchored by the ancient city of Ashtarak, a city with the most complete survey of sacred architecture in the country, the area is a combination of rustic villages, sophisticated living and nouveau riche excess, set in a stunning landscape. Camping, hiking, horse-back trails are an added treat.

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

The Northern area (“Aparan”) is usually lumped as one but is really two distinct regions; Mt. Aragats itself, a looming mass of snow and wildflowers with some moderate-to-difficult mountain climbing, and the upper plateau around Aparan, home to the bulk of Armenia’s nomadic Zoroastrian Yezidis (also called Yesidis or Yezeedis), who begin their annual trek up the mountain slopes to graze their flocks each spring and summer. This area is a source of clean air, cool climes and some incredible prehistoric sites that are traced to a time when the volcanoes were still active and warmed the upper elevations. One exceptional site is near Tsaghkahovit.

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

The area The result is a startling land of contrasts: to the west (old Talin province) the land is upper plateau dotted with small mountains and an almost lunar landscape. The semi-desert steppe land is actually teeming with wildlife that roams the deep ravines and mountain ridges that striate the sparse land. This area is actually the landscape. Camping, hiking, horse-back trails are an added treat.

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

Aparan locals (“Aparants”) also happen to be the butt of the Armenian version of the Polish joke, every country needing their country bumpkin. If ever a region should not be judged by its first appearance, it is Aragatsotn. In the harshest summer months, the rolling hills on the south and west will seem parched brown, but deep in a nearby river gorge or a few km up the face of Aragats will bring a lush land of grass, flowers and a refreshing cool breeze.

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

The fortunes of the region are parallel to the fortunes of the nakharars, Armenia’s aristocratic families that broke and made in a continual dance of treaty and attack, treaty and attack. Somehow through all their self-inflicted turmoil they managed to create an apex of beauty under the Bagratuni, Zakarian, Proshian and Vachutian families in the 10-13th cc, producing the outstanding “sister vanks” of Hovhanavank, Saghmosavank and Tegher, plus the stunning mountain monasteries at Aruch, Ashtarak and Talin. Aragatsotn is also the final resting place for Mesrop Mashtots, credited with inventing the current Armenian alphabet and introducing a wave of learning and native literature in Armenia.

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

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

The higher you ascend the face of the mountain, the more quickly Yerevan’s brown air evaporates, the more lush the environment becomes, and the more luxuriant the flora. Near the top of the mountain (but 40 minutes drive from Yerevan), spring flowers will coat the wet ground, vying with snowlines for attention. In Yerevan it may be a time of violent volcanic eruptions, the region is actually Armenia’s youngest (give or take a few million years), its rich alluvial soil and southern exposure on Mt. Aragats giving rise to a remarkably diverse flora and the agricultural revolution that built proto-Armenia. The western sub-region (historic Talin region) is really the upper semidesert of the Ararat Dashtavir (Ararat Valley), to which it owes most of its historic development. The rest belongs to Mt. Aragats, which rises above the entire region. Aragats makes up nearly 18% of the entire Armenian landmass. Mt. Ararat may be the crown of historic Armenia and still its symbol, but Aragats is its master, creator of just about everything that matters in the Armenian natural world.

The four crests that top Mt. Aragats 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 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, Aragats River, flows from the top of Aragats to the Kasakh River near Ashtarak, ambling through a number of topographies and climate zones, home to some of Armenia’s rarest flowers and birds.

Flora in Aragats (Geghama Lehr) include Merendera trigyna, M. raddeana, Colchicum bifolium, Puschkinia scilloides, Scilla armena, S. siberica, Tulipa julia, Iris caucasia, Muscari caucasicum, Bellevalia pycnantha, Ornithogalum schelkovnikovii, O. brachystachys, O. haystanum, Pritillaria caucasia, Nectoroscorodum tridentata, sp. of Gagea, Myosotis alpestre, Amenone caucasia, Orchis coriophora, Gladiolus tenuis.

Lower Elevation sagebrush steppe flora include Gladiolus atrovirens, Nigella oxyptetala, Actynolema macroleoma, Gundelia tournefortii, Verbascum saccatum, Laliemamita ibercia, Roemenera refracta, Scabiosa argentea, Scorzonera papposa, Muscari neglecta, Stachs y inflata, Astragalus distyphousy, A. kochians, Achilles tenuifolia, Helichrysum rubicundum, Silene splendifolia.

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

Mountain Steppe flora include Gladiolus atrovirens, Nigella oxyptetala, Actynolema macroleoma, Gundelia tournefortii, Verbascum saccatum, Laliemamita ibercia, Roemenera refracta, Scabiosa argentea, Scorzonera papposa, Muscari neglecta, Stachs y inflata, Astragalus distyphousy, A. kochians, Achilles tenuifolia, Helichrysum rubicundum, Silene splendifolia.

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 CC Gmel), Blackberries (Rubus armeniacus Focke.).

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

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

For detailed information and list of species see TourArmenia Flora pages
Mountain Forest Area species include European Roller, Black Kite, Lesser Spotted Eagle and Boreal Owl

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

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

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

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 all public roads and in your own garden. For a complete list of all the drinking 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 backed Shrike, Dunnock, Black Redstart, White-winged Redstart, Western Rock-Nuthatch, Eastern Rock-Nuthatch, Wallcreeper, Eurasian Linnet, Red-billed Chough, Yellow-billed Chough

Mountain Slope species include Red-footed Falcon, Merlin, Eurasian Hobby, Rufous-tailed Rock-Thrush, Blue Rock-Thrush, Sombre Tit, Rock Bunting, Grey-necked Buntings, Crinemon-winged Finch, Red-fronted Serin, Trumpeter Finch, Mongolian Finch, Eurasian Linnet, Red-billed Chough, Yellow-billed Chough


Mountain Forest Area species include European Roller, Black Kite, Lesser Spotted Eagle and Boreal Owl

FAUNA

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

BIRDS

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

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

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

the tomb-church for Mesrop Mashtots at Oshakan and the quaint village of Voskevar with its Bronze age Vishap (Dragon Stone). Visit the village of Biurakan with its space observatory and the Optical-Radio Telescope at Orgov. Visit the medieval monasteries and princely castles at Kosh, Aruch, Shamiram and the enormous castle at Dashtadem, one of the largest standing castles in Armenia. See the Bronze Age excavations throughout the region, including the newly discovered 5000 BCE temple complex at Agarak, the largest pre-Christian religious site in Armenia, equal in size to those in Egypt and Sumeria. See the Stone Age sites at Mt. Arteni and the 7th c churches at Talin; stop by the glorious 7th c round church at Mastara and the archeological digs and medieval churches at Tsaghkasgar, Zovasar and Garnevohit. 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: Astvatsnakal monastery (9th-7th cc), the "underwater church" at old Zovuni with its nearby S. Vartan mausoleum (5th c) and Tukh Manuk shrine (BCE), khachkars and steles (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 recluse but friendly Zoroastrian Yezdis inhabit several villages thereby, as well as shepherding their flocks onto the mountain pastures from May-September. River valleys around Ashtarak, Talin and Aruch can be hot and humid, while the land above is arid. On the mountains the weather becomes cooler the higher up you go, with warm to hot days and cool nights.

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

Hitting the Highlights
Ashtarak, Oshakan, Royal Mountain trail (Mughni, Saghososavank, Hovhanavanav, Amberd, Dzorap, Tegher), Biurakan (1-2 days). Western Aragatsotn: Kosh, Aruch, Talin, Mastara, Border line (1-2 days). Aparan, Reservoir Sites, Yeghipatrush, T’Tujur, Rya-Taza, Tsaghkahovit (1-2 days). Mt. Aragats, Kari Lich (1-4 days).

HISTORY
Aragatsotn’s history begins with the first people to inhabit the Armenian plateau, believed to have lived on the (then) warm and humid volcanic mountains that gave shape to the Ararat Valley in the Anceolihiti and Paleolithic eras. The western part of the region, known through history as Talin Region, is the upper end of the Ararat Valley, Armenia’s Fertile Crescent. The Eastern and Northern parts, now snowbound in winter, were once a warm, moist area with lush growth and large populations of wildlife (rhinoceros, elephants and tigers being just three prehistoric residents) and home of tribes who left their mark on the rich soil with some of Armenia’s first domesticated grains and fruit, and on her stones with stone pictures of their conquests and beliefs. Settlements expanded during the late Neolithic Era (5000-4000 BCE) and grew in sophistication, creating some of the largest prehistoric religious complexes in the old world, including a massive site that stretches for 2 km along the Amberd river at Agarak. Later, the region was favored by the kings of the Nairi, Urartu and early Armenians, and in medieval times, its history was tied to the rivalries of two of Armenia’s most powerful nakharar (princely) families, the Mambikonians 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. It is first mentioned as Votn Aragatso, possibly from the root “vot”, meaning leg or foot, so, ‘the Leg or Foot of Aragats’. The word ‘Aragats’ itself made from the root ‘Ara’, one of Armenia’s founding mythological figures. The mountain was revered as the Greeks treated Olympia; as the seat of the gods, the bilowing clouds and storms that issued from the cauldron of its peaks signs of favor or displeasure. Aragats is also mentioned by medieval chroniclers, woven into the fabric of the start of all the peoples of the Caucasus. As eloquent as any is Juansher’s Concise History of the Georgians (trans. Robert Bedrosian):

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

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

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

Ancient Aragatsotn encompassed Armariv region and Vaghsarapat (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.

Aragatsotn Marz : 8 of 94 - TourArmenia © 2008 Rick Ney ALL RIGHTS RESERVED - www.TACentral.com
As recently as 9,000 years ago the mountains of Armenia were still smoldering lava pits, having spent their energy in carving the valley of Ararat while leaving behind some of the richest alluvial soil in the Near East.

It’s hard to imagine now, but most of the land was covered by forests of trees and mountain grass. Hot springs still gush from underground volcanic fissures, many of which once had Vishaps (Dragon Stones) erected at their sources. Some of these stones made their way to Christian sites where they were “baptized” (re-carved) into Steles 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, Kakavadorz, 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 shortly after the earliest known Mesopotamian sites.

Vishap, thought by some to be an Armenian version of the Gilgamesh hero.

Prehistoric excavations in Aragatsotn region include Stone Age sites at Tsaghkahovit, Kuchak, Hnaberd, Ashtarak, Voskehat, Agarak, Oshakan, Shamiram and Mt. Arteni; and Copper/Bronze Age settlements at Tsaghkahovit, Hnaberd, Ashtarak, Oshakan, Voskezav, Agarak, Kosh, Shamiram, Aruch, Avan, Aragats-berg, Kakavadzor, Talin, Tsaghkasar and Garnahovit.

COPPER AND BRONZE AGES

By the Copper Age the tribes inhabiting Aragatsotn were mastering trade, taking advantage of the region’s rich volcanic stones, such as obsidian, and metals, such as copper, tin, arsenic and iron to master the making of tools, metallurgy and pottery. The discovery of the process for making bronze and especially iron in Armenia put the country into the international spotlight, and in the crosshairs of its neighbors.

Internal rivalries between tribes as well as invasions by more powerful nations to the south in Mesopotamia set in motion the construction of massive battlegrounds and strategically placed settlements in the country. Aragatsotn seems to have been a favorite haunt of the Prehistoric well-heeled, as dozens of Copper/Bronze Age sites built in a broad Arc around the base of Mt. Aragats show.

The settlements were unified by their dependence on metal-making and trade, and by their shared design: cyclopean defensive wall ringing a central citadel and administrative/manufacturing districts. These settlements, built mostly during the 6th-1st millennium BCE, protected a thriving agricultural community as well, the cultivation of grapes, apricots, barley and wheat forming a basis for commerce with Mesopotamia. The development of wine-making in Egypt, is also traced to its commerce with the tribes in the region as early as the 4th millennium BCE.

The first constructions at Amberd Fortress are traced to this period, built on the massive promontory overlooking the Ararat Valley. Rich findings in the region include bronze, copper and gold jewelry, tools and weapons, and an extraordinary set of bronze religious totems uncovered near Agarak, a figure on a horse or Urartu’s splendor: copper and bronze jewelry, utensils, plates and shields, plus the important Iron Armenia fed to the budding empire.

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URARTIAN, PERSIAN & ROMAN PERIOD

One of the Northeast frontiers of the Nairi confederation (ca. 2000 – 1000 BCE) mentioned by the Assyrians in their early chronicles, Aragatsotn marz became a part of the Yeturni state during the creation of the Urartian (Araratian) empire (9th c BCE).

Ashtarak, the capital of Aragatsotn is believed to date back to the time of the state of Urartu, deriving its name from the Urartian god Ishhtar. 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 (Arushinili) and Yerevan (Erebuni, Teishebaini) to be considered a relative backwater and summer home to the area’s governors. Enough remains have been discovered though, at Agarak, Ashtarak and elsewhere to show some of Urartu’s splendor: copper and bronze jewelry, utensils, plates and shields, plus the important Iron Armenia fed to the budding empire.

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

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

After the fall of Urartu to the Medes in ca. 585 BCE, the Persian Achaemenid dynasty under Cyrus I absorbed the eastern part of the Urartian empire into its thirteenth satrapy, the “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 Acheamenids, supplying troops to their campaigns (one of which was the march on Athens), and supplying especially their prized Nasaen horses, the descendants of which can still be found in Aragatsotn. Armenian Yervanduni or Orvonti 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 Gunnias; current Glumi. Later Parthian rulers intermarried with Armenian nakharar households to form a unified ruling class, the Yervanduni, then Arartsheir and Arshak or Arshakuni dynasties (Greater Haik), which withstood 500 years of Roman invasions 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), Vahagn (Hephaestus), Nuneh (Athena) and Astghiksh (Aphrodite), all destroyed during the early Christian era. Aragatsotn’s frontier saw repeated invasions 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 Hellenistic & Roman ruins are at Tsaghkasar, Areg, Agarak, Tegher and Aghtamir (Voskevaz).

EARLY CHRISTIAN – MIDDLE AGES

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

The 4th and 5th centuries were vital centuries for Armenia’s freedom, and the region served as a protector of that independence. Historically, the period was cataclysmic, as pagan believers were forced into the new religion, a process that took several hundred years, and the complete transformation of world power in the Near East.

The end of the Parthian dynasty in 226 was nearly as catastrophic for Armenia as the death of their king Khosrow and his family in 261. The Parthians were interrelated to the Armenian kings by marriage, their blood lines a binding force in their relations, despite their rivalry. The new Sassanid empire, which decimated the Persian Parthians, were fundamentalist Mazdaism believers (a radical form of Zoroastrianism), a belief that found some resonance with Armenians before the Christian era. Armenians were promoters of the Cult of Mithra (also “Mythra”), and thought to have introduced the cult to Rome, but their conversion for his family (The Bagratuni or Bagratid Dynasty). Aragatsotn became a part of the Bagratuni landholdings, forfeited by the Mamikonians after their defeat during the 774-775 revolt. The Arabs gave the lands to the Bagratunis, who had not joined the rebellion, creating a vast northern kingdom relatively free from Arab and Byzantine interference. The Bagratunis 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.

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

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

In 640 Arabs swarmed from the south, destroyed the Sassanids in Persia and began conquering Armenia and much of Asia Minor. Byzantium refused to help Armenia defend itself from Arab attack, partly in response to Armenia refusing Byzantium demands to adopt the findings of the Chalcedonian Council (the council declared Jesus was both divine and human in form, while Armenians believed in the older orthodoxy, that Christ was in one form only, human and divine together).

Rival kingdoms of equally great power and wealth rose in Vaspurakan and Siunik, the latter creating an autonomous kingdom that lasted well past the Bagratuni era. Another rival kingdom, only a few kilometers distant from Ani, was the Kars Kingdom, once the capital of the Bagratunis, and governed by members of the Bagratuni family. The period, though reflected by the great wealth of major centers of learning in Asia Minor before during the first Arab absorption of the country showed 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 kingdoms such as the Mamanikons. 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, Dzorap, Ushi, Arashavan, Jermuk, Mingar, Derek, Agarak, Kosh, Shamirn, Verin Sasunik, Avan, Aruch, Irind, Zakari Berd, Talin, Daishadam, Mastara, Zarnj, Zovasar, Garnahovit.

THE BAGRATUNIS

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The Armenian alphabet is credited to Mesrop Mashtots, who, under the patronage of King Vramshapur and the Katolikos Sahak Parthev (387-428), traveled to

"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.
destroying the Byzantine army at Manazkert in 1071, ended all pretense of a unified Armenia and Armenian autonomy.

In 1072 the Seljuk-Turk army moved against Armenia, conquering Tigranakert, Ani and other cities, bringing all of Armenia under Seljuk rule. The Seljuk army remained in Armenia for two years until the second Seljuk campaign in 1072.

In 1071, the Byzantine army was defeated at Manzikert by the Seljuk Turks, and the Byzantine Empire lost control of Armenia.

The glories were short lived as Aragatsotn fell to the Mongols in 1225, ended all pretense of a unified Armenia and Armenian autonomy.

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

Unable to evoke Kurdish and Iranian Emirs from Dvin, the official capital of Armenia, The Bagratunis moved instead to Ani, and built their great city there, initiating a remarkable period of development, where Armenian culture achieved new levels of artistry. Resumption of international trade brought prosperity and the revival of artistic and literary pursuits. Hundreds of monasteries and churches, as well as thousands of exquisitely carved stone crosses (Khachkars) are traced to this period.

The churches assumed their conical domed cruciform shapes, with elaborate carved images on the facades and frescoes in the interior sanctuaries. In Aragatsotn Oshakan continued to be an important religious center, but Ashtarak began to assume greater importance as a center for trade and local governance, especially as the Mamikonian stronghold at Aruch fell to the Bagratunis. The marz was an important conduit for trade into the northern regions, the most important route traveling from Dvin in Ararat Valley to Ani and Lori Berd via Ashtarak and Oshakan. It is in this period that Ashtarak (“tower”) developed, surpassing Oshakan as administrative center and trade city.

The Bagratuni power is often said to have fallen to a combination of attacks by the Byzantine Empire (led by Basil II, the “Macedonian Emperor” of Armenia by bond) determined to absorb Armenia into its Eastern provinces and the onslaught of Seljuk Turks led by Alp-Arslan, the first waves of Turks, led by Turkmens and Turkmen into Anatolia. But in fact the kingdom was divided and weakened before these two forces set about their campaigns, weakened by internal fighting between younger members of the Bagratuni family and infighting with rival kingdoms at Siunik and Kars.

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Changes occurred in the late 13th century as the Ghazan Khan converted to Islam and Christianity passed from the status of a favored religion to a tolerated one. So too, the Mongol Nomadic way of life led to a severe destruction of the land and population. The Mongols had expropriated vast tracts of lands for grazing, taking the upper lands of Aragatsotn for their herds (“Yallas”), while taking the Ararat Valley and lower Aragatsotn for winter pasturage.

The land, once irrigated for farming, quickly became a semi-desert, no longer able to support the land 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 (Tamariane or “Tamar the Lame”) led three successive attacks in 1386-1387, 1394-1396 and 1399-1403. The invincibility of the Mongol was mowed by local peasants and Azats alike, pillaging towns and villages in Aragatsotn and burning croplands and pastures on their way. A severe famine ensured and cannibalism was reported as well as the selling of human flesh at the market.

Timur appointed his half-mad brother governor of Armenia, who soon provoked a series of pogroms against the local population, delighting in torture and gruesome execution. Encountering resistance by King Gorgi II of Georgia, Timur led his final, and worst attack against Northern Armenia and Georgia in 1399, enslaving over 70,000 people and depopulating many districts in Northern Armenia. People in Aragatsotn lived in remote caves as a matter of course, eking out their existence as best they could.

Timur’s armies smashed carefully cultivated kingdoms throughout Anatolia, including a power that had invaded and settled into Anatolia long before him, the Ottomans. Timur died in Samarkand in 1405.

The Ottomans. The rulers left in Timur’s wake were a fragmented group of petty fiefdoms and districts that were then descended from each of the last 200 years of invasions. Prime among these were the Seljuk Turks who governed Persia, who had managed to evict Timur’s hordes from their lands after his death. When Ottoman Turks took over Constantinople in 1453, Mehmet II 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, the Armenian border. Facing the Turkmen who ruled Persia, the Ottoman Shah Mehmet II fought his bloodiest battle yet at Terjan on the Euphrates, managing to defeat the Turkmen but barely.

The Turkmen were finally expelled from Armenia and Persia by the nascent Safavid ruler Ismail Shah. Mehmet’s successors began a second expansion in the 16th century, defeating Ismail Shah and conquering the majority of Armenia in 1514-1516. The Ottomans consolidated their gains under Suleiman II, who also spared Persia and the vestiges of Armenia remaining from final defeat as he focused on Baghdad and Mesopotamia. Gradual encroachment wrested the remainder of Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan into Ottoman titular control by 1587.

Meanwhile Turko-Persian fighting resumed with Armenia as the battle ground, Persians and Ottomans taking and retaking Yerevan, Ararat and Karabakh. 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 Erekle 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 the Ararat to Russia and a counter attack to a Persian rebellion in 1826 wrested the remainder of Eastern Armenia to the Czar’s lands.

19th CENTURY

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

The old caravan routes from centuries before served Aragatsotn well, as trade routes to Giurmi (Kumanli) and Kars were reopened and new routes to Vanadzor and Tbilisi were built to the Pambak and Spitak passes. Ashratkar became a regional capital, though Talin and Aparan never again regained the status they enjoyed in the Medieval period.

Growth exploded with the construction of the Yerevan-Tbilisi railway in 1899-1910, which passed through Aragatsotn on the old Caravan route, and industrial development that included the development of rock quarries in Lower Aragatsotn and near Talin and Ashratkar.

The marz was still primarily an agricultural community, shepherds herding sheep and cattle on the mountainsides and farmers tilling irrigated soil in the lower regions. The region experienced a rebirth in education, as the monastic tradition of learning was revived with local schools, thought limited to the well-to-do or exceptionally gifted, began an important transformation in thinking of the local people.

No more immune to the winds of socialism that was sweeping Europe in the 19th c, Ashratkar and Aragatsotn bred its own secret cells of partisans (often recent graduates of universities and academies in Tiflis (Tbilisi), Moscow and St. Petersburg) determined to build a new Socialist Republic.

FIRST REPUBLIC

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

When the Czar abdicated in 1917, the Russian army, now controlled by Lenin, retreated to fight the White Army in Russia, leaving the vast Armenian lands vulnerable and weakened. In the winter of 1918 Armenia joined Georgia and Azerbaijan to form the Transcaucasian Federation and declare independence from Russia. The effort lasted barely 3 months, its demise hastened by the Georgian exodus to curry favor with Germany and Azeri resistance to its Christian counterparts who they felt blocked their final connection with Turkey.

In the same year the Turkish Army, still fighting on its western front, launched attacks against the Armenians, determined to demolish the country and create a Pan-Turkic Empire from the Black Sea to China. The new Communist government in Russia worsened the situation by making a secret treaty with Mustafa Kamal, leader of the New Turk government, allowing Turkey to invade the Caucasus.

Aragatsotn became a focus of the fighting, its western edge used as both battleground and passage to the Ararat Valley, stopping only when defeated at Sardarapat (Vahib-Pasha, the defeated Turkish commander, termed the Armenian soldiers as "the best fighters in the world"). The Armenians held defenses at Karakilisa and Aparan, and the Turkish Army was forced to evacuate the country.

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

Wheat sent from the USA prevented famine and the country reorganized itself in remarkable time, so much so it was able to declare for annexation Western Armenia in 1919. Still the country’s fate was dire; the Turks armed local Kurdish and Turkish villagers, setting them against the new Republic, and the Allies, far from rewarding Armenia for its sacrifices by reuniting the Armenians of Anatolia, betrayed the country in the Treaty of Sevres.

The British particularly acted against Armenia's interests, forcing the other powers to opt for a weak treaty, which called for the Turks to free all Armenian prisoners of war and political prisoners, and evacuate the Transcaucasus but providing no way to enforce the act, allowing Turkey to keep its arms.

President Woodrow Wilson was the only one to argue for freeing historic Armenia and protecting its frontiers. In fact the Allied powers did not recognize the Armenian Republic until January of 1920, a few months before the Red Army attack, and they provided no support to the country’s defense. Wilson was granted the right to determine Armenia’s borders, and drew the lines to include Van, Erzerum and Bitlis, vastly expanding the territories west of Aragatsotn. Turkey was forced to recognize Armenia’s existence, but before the new borders could be enacted, the Turks began an offensive against Greeks trying to take back historic Greek lands in Thrace, and Armenians who were trying to take back their historic lands.

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

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

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

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

After the war a new boom began, with the expansion of agriculture and industry throughout the marz. Another development occurred in 1946, when the Soviet Astrophysicist Victor Hambartsumian established the Biurakan Observatory on Mt. Aragats. The Observatory, which has the second largest optical telescope in the scientific world, expanding research, defense development and computer technology (“informatics”) to the forefront of the Soviet Union. The observatory is still operating and considered a vital research center for astrophysics worldwide. Another observatory, the first optical-radio observatory in the world, was built a few kilometers above Biurakan.

As the population boomed in the post-war years, construction of new housing became paramount. In this 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).
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 in instead of spices from the orient. One of the great pleasures of visiting a village is to stumble upon a wedding or family event and watch the reunions of these “new caravan workers,” with the families and friends they have left behind.

ARAGATSOTN NOW
Aragatsotn’s economy is based on agriculture, stone quarries, seasonal tourism and remittances from family members working abroad. Remittances are perhaps still the largest influx of money into the marz, with that money funding small enterprises and a steadily improving standard of life. The Dacha trade is more vibrant, as the new rich build elaborate and unwieldy homes that no longer even serve 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 Arashak have greenhouses that are the source of the flowers you pay dearly for on Sayat Nova boulevard.

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

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

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

One of the few blessings of the economic and Azeri over Karabakh flared up, as well as the ratio 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

IN AND OUT
By Rail The gnatsk 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 05:00 the next day). Show up early to flag down the train. Basic Seating Class is 1470 AMD, sitting compartment is 3600 AMD, and a place in a 4-bed compartment is 5600 AMD.

By Air There are no air connections to Aragatsotn region. It may be possible to rent helicopter transport, if you have the bucks: contact Avarayr or Mountain Rescue Team (p. 16) to inquire.

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

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

The road to Lori and Armavir, or the Aparan-Echmiadzin route (A329) climbs the eastern face of Aragats by the monasteries at Mughni (2 km), Hovhanavan (6 km) and Saghmosavan (14 km) to inquire.

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 clapsed with Armenian tufa, the buildings could not hide the ill-conceived and cramped quarters, and the materials did not weather well in the Armenian climates, their designs dictated from a Moscow perspective. Shoddy construction and skimming off supplies were in no small part the reason so many buildings were damaged during the 1988 earthquake, damaging a few buildings in Aragatsotn.

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

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km) before ascending into the high alpine plateaus with views of Mt. Aragats to the north, as well as Talish, Kachavarz, Ashtarak (20/23 km) and Kukas (24 km) then Apanar (40 km) and another Yezi village at Ria Taza (52 km) and the archeological excavations at Tsaghkahovit (59 km) and Garnahovit (59 km) before crossing the Pambak Pass (62 km) to Spitak (69 km) Vanadzor (86 km). To the south it is 17 km to Echmiadzin.

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

There are a series of mountain roads radiating out from Ashtarak, leading north to Mt. Aragats and south to the valley floor. The main Aragats route travels west from Ashtarak to Aparan (6 km) where it branches north to Biurakan (12 km), Norambar (18 km), passes the turn off to Amberd (25 km, Amberd is 4 km from the turn off) and the base of Mt. Aragats at Kari Lich (17 km). Another branches off just past Agarak (7.5 km) to Dzoraguiagh/Aghtsk (9 km), the monastery at Tegher (15 km) and a side road to Orvg (15 km), where the optical-radio observatory sits.

Public Transport includes intercity buses and minibuses (Marshrutni Taxis) that travel from villages to towns, and with Yezdi villages at Hartavan/Shenavan (20 km) and Baisz, Irind, Talin, Dashtadem, Karmrashen, Mastara, Zovasar, Garnahovit, and Zarnja.

For those traveling to Armenia, you can travel by plane from Yerevan to Giumri, on a steady schedule, there is a tourist office in the international airport. Travelers can arrange at an agency in Yerevan.

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

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

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

Eating out/water in the region can be found at roadside khorovats stands and cafes along the Giumri and Aparan highways (Aragak-Kosh), at Ashtarak, Aparan, Aruch and Mastara and Oshakan. Ashtarak has full blown restaurants catering to the Yerevan crowd, plus bistros and cafes of its own. Talin and Aparan have cafes and khorovats stands. Bottled water is generally not available outside of towns, though the ubiquitous Coca-Cola knockoffs are everywhere. Aragatsotn has roadside springs that locals love to 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.

ARAGATSOHN

Aragatsotn has a lot more to offer than climbing Mt. Aragats or manning the battlements of Amberd and looking at Mashtots’ grave. Three important aspects of the region are within a steady drive of each other, and the nature is extraordinary; in the spring the entire mountain is literally covered with poppies and mountain flowers, and throughout the year the deep river gorges are micro-environments harboring some of Armenia’s most rare species of animals and flora.

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

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

Medieval fortresses, monasteries, churches, Khakhkars & ruins will be found at Ashtarak, Oshakan, Voskevaz, Mughi, Karbi, Ohanavan, Shirakavank, Jermuk, Yeghaptahrus, T’Tujur, Aparan, Mirak, Rya-Taza, Derek, Parpi, Aghsht, Biurakan, Tegher, Amberd, Kosh, Shamiram, Verin Sasunsk, Avan, Aruch, Baisz, Irind, Talin, Dashtadem, Karmrashen, Mastara, Zovasar, Garnahovit, and Zarnja.

NATURE TOURING

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

Hiking and trekking is spectacular throughout Aragatsotn, especially on the mountain itself. The most accessible is the south face, starting from Kari Lich, which is a 3 hour hike to the summit on a steady slope. More difficult climbs are to the other three summits, two requiring rock climbing (North and East). Another hike is up the Kasakh River canyon, starting at Ashtarak and continuing down to Ria-Taza, for a steady drive of each other, and the nature is extraordinary; in the spring the entire mountain is covered with poppies and mountain flowers, and throughout the year the deep river gorges are micro-environments harboring some of Armenia’s most rare species of animals and flora.

The Amberd River canyon passes Biurakan and Aghtstev (with cave dwellings below the 4th c Arshakunia mausoleum church) and can be traced up to the Amberd fortress itself if you take the right fork by Orgov which is the Arkashen River. The left fork is the Tegher River which leads to Tegher monastery. Above Kakavador and Baisz are dozens of mountain streams and the Talish River that climbs for about 20 km to the south slope of Mt. Kakavasar. Talin region has river canyons leading uphill from Irind, Yeghnik and Karmrashen, as well as low lying rivulets and rocky landscapes around Dashadtem, Mt. Arteni and the Akhurian River (border with Turkey, patrolled). From Mastara, with its spectacular 6th century round church, you can hike past a remarkable collection of Stone Age, Bronze and Iron Age and Medieval fortresses, settlements, churches and excavation sites (upper Mastara, Zovasar, Tsaghkasar and Garnahovit).
Mountain treks There are more mountains than just Aragats, even if it is the big brother.

Northeast Aragatsotn: Mountains on the Aparan Plain include Arai Lehr (2576m) east of Artashavan, which is a favorite spot for Armenian mountain climbers to commemorate April 24; Mt. Tegher (2851m) and Artstistler (2687m) east of Aparan Reservoir, which pass on to Kotaik marz and the forests of Tzaghkadzor; and the upper region Mt. Damilkgiaduk (2781m), the Tuksmanak Pass into Upper Kotaik (2781m) and Mt. Davakar (2861m). North of Aparan are Mt. Mensar (2474m), Sharailler (2474m) and Ghalchatepe (2346m), while west of the town are the twin peaks of Mt. Nigasar (3181m) and Chingi (3424m).

Central Aragatsotn: North of Kosh and west of the Amberd and Tegher Rivers are Mt. Tirikart (2859m), Agravakar (3025m), Karakar (3138m) and Kakavasar (3303m), while to the south are Karmratar (1286m) and Dashnakar (1064m).

West Aragatsotn: Talin Region has Mt. Mets Arteni (2047m) with its Bronze Age excavations, Mt. Zaranja (1758m) and above Musta Marts, Tzaghkadzor (2219m) and Garnasar (2395m), also with Bronze Age sites.

For most hikes or climbs, an experienced mountain guide is required, for safe travel and to navigate the local areas and populations. They also know which areas are off-limits (some sections are restricted military areas, and not marked) as well as the secret cuppy holes and gorges with rare delights. See Adventure Tour Operators (on page 16) for experienced guides.

Caving Aragatsotn has hundred of caves, with concentrations of caves on the Khazar, Amberd, Tegher and Arkashen River Canyons. Unique cave sites are on the Gegharet River west of Aragats village (5. Lusavorich Cave shrines); at Aghst (medieval cave complexes) and Dashtadem (7th-18th c cave complexes). For more details on caves see TourArmenia Caving pages (www.tacentral.com/nature/natural_story.asp?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) Kasakh and lower Amberd River canyons, (March-April) Talin and the west district, (April-May) Aparan Plain, Ashtarak and Kosh elev. up to Tegher and Amberd, (April-August) Kari Lich and the top of Mt. Aragats. See Flora (on page 6)

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 points are ideal gliding spots:

- **Aragats** (T/O – 500m vertical) This flying site is in the foothills of Mt. Aragats, the highest mountain in Armenia to the Northwest of Yerevan. **Vardablur** (T/O – 200m vertical) Near the town of Ashtarak, to the North of Yerevan, the village of Vardablur provides a nice flying site. The mountain is surrounded by huge agricultural fields, allowing flight in any wind direction and endless landing zones. An ancient pagan cemetery nearby is a worthwhile diversion from the trip home.

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

For details talk to Armenian Aviation Club, 24 Khorenatsi p, Yerevan, email: aac@unesco-clubs.am

You can also contact Dan Retz with questions about Armenian flights at dan_retz@yahoo.com, or visit www.vcucaucus.org/armenian.html.

### Adventure Tour Operators
- **Aryrudzy Riding Club**, (tel. 032 34 628 cell. 091 42 58 41, 3 Murad Melkonyan Street, Ashtarak, email: stallion@aryrudzy.am, URL: www.aryrudzy.am, offers riding lessons and trial rides in and around Ashtarak. Riding lessons from $10 an hour to trial rides from $15 per person.

Haik Melkonian, tel. 091-71-73-82, email: ajdahah@yahoo.com, organizes hiking/camping/tripping trips in Armenia with his team of professionals. The group specializes in Mt. Aragats and the Gegharmat, especially Mt. Ahdahak, with its unique eco-system, Crater Lake and petroglyph-covered stones. They also service nature trips throughout the republic. Melkonian also organizes eco-tours as part of its mission to preserve and enlarge ecologically vital areas of the country. Eco-tours are expert-led hiking, climbing, and camping tours, including hiking and camping along picturesque routes, bird watching, horse and camel rides, and first aid facilities and the services of their professional rescue group (EU certification).

- **The Eco-Center** (tel. 010 27 87 28 / 27 40 12), 2 H Hakobian St. apt. 22, 375033 Yerevan, Armenia; email: info@hikeandgo.com, organizes nature tours, climbs and camping, as well as birding, flower watching and other nature tours. Contact Zhanza.

Hike & Go, (tel. France (+33 6) 88 34 04 11, local cell 20 41 38), email: info@hikeandgo.com, an adventure travel group operating out of Armenia and France (English spoken) is an interesting group that features tours of Armenia

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combining traditional touring with hiking into Armenia’s wilderness and off-the-beaten-path monuments, some of which can only be reached by hiking. See web site (www.hikeandgo.com/)

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

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

Flower Tours
Professor Nora Gabriellian is Armenia’s preeminent expert on flowers in Armenia, personally discovering several new species of endemic flowers, the latest in 2006. She is the author of the upcoming Field Guide to Armenian Flowers, the culmination of 50+ years work in the field. This seventy-something still out-hikes the fittest members of her tours and combines expert data with humor, enthusiasm and great good will. She is not easy to book (she continues to do her research and is not for the casual tourist), but if you can arrange for her to take you on a 1 to 8 day flower tour, you will never see Armenia the same way again. She doesn’t have a travel agency but contact her through her daughter Mariam (also widely respected for her botanic work) at m.agababian@hotmail.com, 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 Erebuni (Arin Berd) forerunner of present day Yerevan, the Bronze Age temple-city of Agarak, Bronze -Iron Age tomb field of Aghavatun, Paleolithic caves in the Kasakh River Canyon near the village of Apnaghiu, 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**

**(Dd 40.30167 x 44.35917, elev. 1139m)**

**ASHTARAK MAP** (p. 23)

Ashtarak - ՈՇԻՐԱԿ ("Tower, pop. 34963")

Literally at the foot of Aragats, built on the rims of the Kasakh River and at the crossroads to Giumri and Vanadzor, the modern town is but the latest incarnation of a string of settlements from each era of human development in Armenia. The town is worth a visit for several reasons, not least of which is its impressive collection of Medieval churches, representing each period of architectural achievement in Armenia, from its earliest experimentation to the last gasp of splendor just before the Timur Mongol invasions. The river gorge is a natural jewel, seldom explored on its own right except by the hardiest of trekkers, but worth the effort for the unique flora, rock formations and fauna that inhabit the micro-climate. Some trendy digs have settled into the gorge as well, taking advantage of Ashtarak’s close proximity to Yerevan and the cool 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 Kotaik and Shirak. The town was subservient to the bishopric Oshakan for much of the Roman and early Christian era, serving as a military outpost. Beginning in the 9th c, as Armenia recovered from the Arab conquests and developed under the patronage of the Bagratunis, the trade routes that had passed through became increasingly important and that from Dvin and Persia passed north via the town. The caravans, and their wealth, helped to build an important regional center, quickly overshadowing the bishopric at Oshakan a few kilometers south. Passed from Seljuk to Kurd to Mongol, then to Persian and Russian hands, the town survived into the 19th century, even thriving as a trade and administrative center.

During the Soviet period the town’s population swelled, as industry and agriculture expanded. No longer needed to guard the mountain passes for Armenia’s kings, the town nonetheless became the gateway to scientific endeavours at the Biurakan Observatory and the Orgov Radio-Optical telescope, secret research centers in the Soviet Union. Like all of Armenia’s regional towns, Ashtarak fell on harsh times with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the local economy, but has fared better than the rest for its close proximity to Yerevan, and its position as a way station for the hundreds of Yerevantsi en route to their summer dacha. Still the town has a tired post-industrial look about it on the edges and a distinctive village character throughout. The canyon, the amazing churches on top and inside it, and the bacchanalia at a riverside restaurant are the sties to see.

Favorite sons include the 20th c writer/avant-garde guardist Gevorg Emin, the 19th century romantic poet Simbat Shahaziaz, 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.

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.

**Sights**

The town’s main attraction is its collection of Medieval Churches, encompassing 1000 years of religious construction beginning from 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.

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

The main streets are Proshian and Grigorian, running roughly parallel to each other in the center, then forming a triangle with the old Yerevan road on the S side of town.

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

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

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

The church is often overlooked by visitors, but it is an architectural jewel 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 polygonal drum and tent roof) and the remarkable 19th c gavit, looking very much the thing for a Catholic church hall (which may explain its neglect). The drum and especially the dome are intricately built with carvings and crenulated stone pieces. Armenian "gothic archways," popular during this time, can be seen in the sides of the tented dome, giving it a lightness and movement not found in other domes. The facades themselves are adorned with narrow windows framed with geometric borders and a cross-form, the outer wings carved in elaborate patterns. The drum supports the 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. Aside from the elegant red-tiled roof, the church is notable for its small size and intricate decor. It is considered one of a number of "free crosses" that were erected throughout the country, as much shrines as churches; as much markers of faith as places of worship. It is possible, very possible, that it was built on the top of a pagan shrine to a pre-Christian deity, Astghik, Vahagn or Mythra. Measuring only 5.969 meters by 7.467 meters.

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. Kristopar at Dashadzem.

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.

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

Now since each of the three churches is more than 100 years older then the previous, the tale would make the prince a very penitent man.
Although centuries old, Karmravor is well preserved.

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

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

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

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 of their lives, heroic efforts, or simple pleas for mercy in the next life. The khachkars include one by the last great Khachkar sculptor Kiram Kazmogh (1551-1610) with a 1602 sample of intricate mastership. 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 figures (8th c) and the Kiam Khachkar, a red khachkar with extremely elaborate side panels and tree of life.

Old Asharak 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 tri-storied balconies overlooking the alleys and river catch the cool wet air rising from the canyon floor and the tidy feel of the area is a welcome respite from the more modern areas of the town. The porches are decorated with crenelated wooden arches and balustrades, giving a more romantic feel to the otherwise pedestrian architecture of the modern town.

Tsiranavor (“of apricot” or “apricot color”, 5th c, refurbished in 6th-7th cc) lays a little west of Karmravor, overlooking the canyon, and is the oldest extant church in Ashtarak. To get there from the entry to Old Town, continue on the alley towards the Perj Proshian Home Museum (see page 22) and Statue, which lie at the end of an alley (ask if you get lost). From here you walk to the site. Behind you as you face the museum is a quaint little alley that leads to a R alley which passes in front of the Tsiranavor Church (DD 40.29805 x 44.36522, elev. 1149m).

The current walls are dated to the 5th c with traces of an earlier building. There are no inscriptions but it is thought the refurbishment dates to the period of Nerses of Ashtarak (540-557). The church is located near Spitakavor church, opposite Karmravor on a canyon rim. The building is a triple-aisle basilica, once of several in Armenia. The main aisle ends in a horseshoe-shaped apse flanked by two chambers slightly below the altar stage. The curved central apse and the symmetrical apsidoles on either side are all included within the church’s rectangular exterior walls, which gave it an expressive nature and elevated the interior under a gable roof. The 5th c structure had a wooden roof that was replaced with a stone one resting on three piers of T-shaped piers which was characteristic of 5th c Armenian architecture. The pilasters are missing from the present-day pylons. The spans between the pylons are as wide as the middle nave, which divide the nave by flying arches and pilasters into four square parts (as in the Kasakh basilica). The architecture is more developed here than in other basilicas of the period; two symmetrical apsidoles flank the altar apse. The roof was pitched over the side aisles with a second pitch roof covering the main hall.

What remains are the exterior walls, halls, apse and the side chambers, but none of the decoration that once adorned the church. There is no doubt that the walls once had frescoes and were ornately decorated designs, but the Armenians, surrounded by pagan religions and under pressure to convert to any one of them, took a more decisive, even combative stance, literally conquering the gods of old by placing the cross over and inside them, in effect baptizing them and claiming them as Christian all along. 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 dog that the walls once had frescoes and were ornately decorated designs, but the Armenians, surrounded by pagan religions and under pressure to convert to any one of them, took a more decisive, even combative stance, literally conquering the gods of old by placing the cross over and inside them, in effect baptizing them and claiming them as Christian all along.
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).

The Kasakh River Canyon lies 100 meters below the rim and is worth a visit on its own. Harboring a distinct ecosystem 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. The old bridge is closed for thru traffic, but there is ample parking and a large green park awaits you.

Despite its name, Spitakavor is not at all white but rather made from red tufa, its white coating long since eroded by time and wear. The church is recorded as coming from both the 4th c, which would make it the oldest structure in Ashtarak and the 14th c, making it the youngest. The church is a single hall-type, used in both periods, but debate over the dating calls attention to the foundations, which some say were actually pre-Christian in origin, converted to a church in the early Christian era by S. Lusavorich, abandoned, then rebuilt in the last period before Armenia’s loss of 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 ("Sarks" 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 rim 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. The old bridge is closed for thru traffic, but there is ample parking and a large green park awaits you.

On the way down you will pass the 18th-19th cc Ashtarak baths, a "honey-dome" construction protecting once active thermal Mineral springs that erupted from the canyon walls here and supported a thriving trade in baths, many a Victorian spending their afternoons leisurely soaking in the steaming hot and icy cold baths. The baths are closed now, but there is talk of reopening them as part of a rejuvenation effort for the canyons. As long as they don’t go the way of the nearby canyon casinos they may retain their original charm.

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

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

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

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

The mill has some excellent overlooks of the river and canyon walls.

High above you from this site, on the opposite cliff, is the small but impressive S. Sarkis (19th c), often mistaken for Karmravor by first-time visitors. It sits opposite the canyon from Karmravor and is built on older foundations, possibly pre-Christian in origin. The church is also small, shrine-like, and built in the same style as Karmravor, without the additional detail and experimentation used in the older church. The hall is barely cruciform, more of a square with minor indentations to form the cross wings that slip out from the central hall by a few centimeters. It is topped with a central dome, the drum of which is round and prostrates above the squat church, focusing attention on it rather than the entire structure. The elongated dome and tent roofing gives the appearance of the whole being a shaft or lance. The exterior walls are finely hewn from red tufa, unadorned and clearly showing the engineering feat of the central dome type. S. Sarkis is a favorite of locals, who still use the small church for sacrifices of chickens and doves as they plead for intercession. Nearby in a rough stone wall sits a modern "khachkar" carved with elaborate depictions of animals and beings from Stone Age pictograms found in the area. The scene depicted combines Paleolithic, Neolithic, Chalcolithic figures with biblical allegories in a fascinating retelling of the origin myth.
Cross over the bridge (foot traffic only) and take a L on the dirt road that follows the riverbed and after a few hundred meters (under the modern bridge) you will suddenly find yourself in a large Hangestian Goti (Rest Area) next to a steep and raging Water Fall a welcome respite on a hot day, the water hole nearby often occupied by local children who delight in showing off their swimming prowess to visitors.

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

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

Descended of a princely family that once governed Garni, born Yovhannes Ter-Arakelian, Proshian (1837-1907) was an educator, photographer, novelist, translator, ethnographer and an avid supporter of Armenian Theatre. Part of the “New Golden Age” of Armenian literature and philosophy, Proshian was of the generation that built the progressive Armenian ideal and took the first steps to changing the culture from a Feudal to a modern one. A native Ashtaraketsi, Proshian spent his adult life in Tbilisi, one of the two centers for Armenian culture (the other being Constantinople). First educated in nearby Mughni, the poverty-stricken Proshian later attended the prestigious Nersessian Academy in Tiflis (Tbilisi), founded by Katoghikos Nerses Ashtaraketsi after the Lazarus Institute in Moscow. Working as a photographer and teacher in Russia, and influenced by the Armenian writer 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 in the 19th c as Abovian’s work, and the French calling it the “Armenian Romeo and Juliet”. Struggling against the “Russification” of the Armenian character in the great 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 Tiflis, 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.

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

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

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

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

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

Taxi services are a convenient way to travel (you decide when you go, and you can stop along the way). You can order a taxi by phone. The going rate is around 3000 AMD for a city ride. Most Yerevan taxi services provide this service, but we use Kalina (tel 010-555-333). Note even the best taxis can go bad overnight, so ask around when you arrive for the best taxi service.

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 Agategnoshes and Movses Khorenatsi Pts. Cars normally charge 3000 AMD for up to four passengers, though they are 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 or split the price between 2 or more travelers; it can be pretty cheap. 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.

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 wait for a full van before departing), drivers and passengers can tell you when to expect the next one.

Aparan (250 AMD), Vanadzor (300 AMD), Biurakan (100 AMD), Aght/Agarar (100 AMD), Aruch (100 AMD), Tallin (150 AMD), Mashtara (250 AMD) and Giumri (350 AMD).

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TRAVEL AGENCIES

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

Ayrudzy Riding Club, 3 Mushgeh Bagratuni Street, Ashitarak (tel. (032) 3-46-28 cell 091 42-45-70), email: stallion@ayrudyz.am. URL: www.ayrudyz.am offers riding lessons and trial rides in and around Ashitarak. Riding lessons from $10 an hour to trial rides from $15 per person.

For nature or adventure tours, see Adventure Tour Operators (on page 16).

COMMUNICATION, ETC.

Fire – 111
Police – 102
Ambulance service – 103
Rescue Hot Line - 118
Gas emergency service – 104
Trunk Line – 107
Telephone directory information – 109

Phone, telegraphs
Ashitarak is covered by both Armentel and Vivacell (Proshian p.). Mobile phone services. International calls can be made at the Central Post Office, 1 Sisakian p. Two others are at 4 Mashtots p. and 2 Gitavan p. See HayPost site for list (http://www.haypost.am/) The post office has trunk line phone service, sells phone cards 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 Ashitarak, expect dial up and slow. Venues and prices fluctuate, ask at your overnight. E-net on Proshian has decent service and a fun crowd.

Bank, Exchange
Money wires and credit card advances can be done at banks, ATM and exchange at bank.
Armi Savings Bank, 18 Hanrapetutsian (3-5376)
ACBA, 1 Yerevanian p.
ASHB, Proshian p.
Armenconombank, Main Square
Unibank, Grigorian p.
Converse Bank, 23 Ogostosi

OVERNIGHT

Lodging runs the gamut of venues. Most visitors stay in Yerevan and make a day trip to Ashitarak, 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 w/ hot water at 2000/4000/5000/6000 AMD. Cheap enough to overlook the faults.

Ashtarak Dzor Restaurant/Motel, Ashtarak Gorge (tel. 0232-36778) is a bit over the top in its tastes, but the local "Novi Armenii" and a lot of western Armenians think it's wonderful. The place bills itself as an "entertainment center" replete with eves-dropping wedding and banquet halls filled with celebrities 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 10,000/20,000 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 Ashitarak
Biurakan
Pine Tree House (Yerevan Tel: (010) 52-16-25) has been around for several years, run by the irresistible Mary Panian, one of the first to offer quality travel and lodging to expatriates. The B&B is small and clean, still a favorite with expats wanting a break from Yerevan. The B&B is close to the Biurakan Observatory and a good jumping off point for nature hikes into the nearby Amberd River gorge, and exploring the Aragats highlands, including Amberd and Kari Lich. For the flat footed, it is also a great spot for comfortable lodging while exploring the same spots by car. Mary can point out some of the more beguiling and remote points of interest, as well as other local services, like horse-back trail riding on offer nearby. SGL at $25, includes breakfast.

Dzorap/Aghst Village
Dzorap/Aghst Village Dacha, (Tel: 091-45-60-53) located about 10 km from Ashitarak 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 has key 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.

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

Yerevan
ICRC Hospital Guest Houses, end of Yerevan on the Gimri 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 or go by regional transport. Located on the Yerevan-Ashtarak highway about 12 km from Ashtarak are several small European style cottages at the Red Cross Hospital compound that are clean and comfortable. Studio/DBL at $20/$30, short term rentals by the month start at $150.

FOOD AND DRINK

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

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

Bistro, Grigorian at Old Yerevan p. Basic food, basic prices. ¥
Restaurant Ashtaraki Dzor, Kasakh Gorge 1 (tel. 34880) is a palatial restaurant/motel/entertainment center that caters to the well-heeled and tourist trade wanting a bit exotica during their stay. The restaurant includes a motel with pretty reasonable rates (see Ashtarak Overnight on page 25). 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.
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.

**TRIP 1: AROUND ASHTARAK**


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

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

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

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

**Springs:** Oshakan, Voskezav, Parpi, 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 Voskezav road intersection in central OSHAKAN (DD 40.9870 x 44.31493, elev. 1051m)**

**Oshakan – OGUHLU** (pop. 3956) has a storied history, with Stone Age, Bronze Age and Hellenistic remains. An ancient capital of the region, Oshakan was also an important religious center, final resting place for Mesrop Mashtots; creator of the Armenian Alphabet in the early 5th century.

**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 Syriac for religious rites, which had to be translated to congregations by Syrian priests, who were usurping the positions of Armenian priests.

There are those who argue that an original Armenian script (sometimes called the “Mihrian” or “Mithrian” script), which dated from the 4th millennium BCE, was still in existence, but only in remote areas that still practiced the pagan religion, Grigor Lusavorich and King T’rdat, in their fervor to convert the country to Christianity 100 years earlier, having eradicated all traces of this language elsewhere.
Complicating things was the deteriorating situation with the Persian Sassanids, who threatened to annihilate the Armenian culture along with its rulers. For several centuries Armenia’s kings had shared language, culture and religion with Parthian kinsmen. Things changed in the 3rd c when the Sassanids overthrew the Parthian clan. Devout Zoroastrians, the Sassanids expected their subjects to convert to the pagan faith and renounce Arshakuni (Parthian) sovereignty.

Having divided the Armenian kingdom in 387 with the Sassanids, Byzantium struck at the culture as well. Armenian subjects were forbidden to speak Syrian; instead Greek was to be substituted in liturgy and the area gradually Hellenized; the Byzantines hoping to pressure the Armenians to recant their monotheism and convert completely to the Greek Orthodox Church, which professed the Chalcedonian Creed.

In the same light, the Sassanids forbade the use of Greek, and insisted that Armenians recognize their Mazdaist deities as equal to the Holy Trinity. Threatened with cultural annihilation by Sassanian “barbarians” on one side and by Byzantines on the other, the Armenians chose to assert their own identity through a new alphabet.

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 scoured 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 and however it happened, it was a tremendous achievement that—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 [www.tacentral.com/language/index.asp](http://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_m_index.html).

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

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

The church was built in the 5th c (442-443), three years after Mashtots death, its benefactor Vahan Amatuni. It was rebuilt many times, the last in 1875 for the Katoghikos George IV. The current structure is a mixture of styles, looking more like a Victorian gym than the shrine for one of Armenia’s
him. Give it. Well worth the tips which are also his main means of income.

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

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

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

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

The Tukh Manuk (Black Youth) is an extremely popular but officially frowned upon pagan cult to a proto-Indo-European deity cognate with Krishna: an otherworldly beautiful young man inhabiting the boundary between settlement and wilderness (Prof. James Russell).

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

On top of the hill, below the Armentel Cellular tower, is one of the great archeological finds in Armenia, the Bronze Age Didikond Citadel (DD 40.26205 x 44.31990, elev. 1120m).

The foundations for the citadel are massive, the cyclopean white stones outlining huge rooms with central column supports for the gigantic roofs. The site was only found when the local phone monopoly, Armentel, began digging pits for the cell phone tower and uncovered the huge site. Archeologists were called in and excavations uncovered five palaces on the N slope alone, as well as large shaft tomb field. The small church at the site is the 5th c S. Grigor.
The village is also known as the site for an important Bronze Age fortress 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 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 Shakhrard River where it meets the Kasakh River sits the 5th c “Badal 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 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 Shakpard River and enter VOSKEVAZ (DD 40.27400 x 44.30236, elev. 1034m).

VOSKEVAZ - Նուբւլղուշ (before Ghzltamur or “Red Timur”, pop. 5381) was named in the 15th century after Timur the Lame, who spared the villagers while rampaging through the area. Now a mixed community, the villagers had their roots in Khoi, Iran. The village is a farming community and known for its grapes and a particularly potent fruity white wine made from their nectar. This is home-brew and not to be mistaken for the Voskevaz wine labeled in the shop. You can only get this in the village and by making nice with a local. It’s worth it.

The village has a partially ruined S. Hovhannes Church (DD 40.27343 x 44.29824, elev. 1053m), under reconstruction. The masons say the church will take about 3 years to complete, when the door 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.

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From Voskevaz center, take the W road out of the village through orchards and farmlands for about 1 km to (Voskehat, DD 40.2758 x 44.2746, elev. 1018m).

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

SW of the church on the rim is a 5000 BCE Vishap stone / phallus stone, seen at a distance from the church (look for the electric tower). Reach the stone by taking the dirt track S of the church and follow it around to gorge rim to the Stone. The fertility stone is said by some to have been erected in Soviet times, but others contradict the story, saying it was always here, or at least marks a spot where one stood in antiquity. Whenever it was erected, the protruding stone looks to be a natural part of the landscape. If it is a modern placement, the men who put it there had a remarkable sense of accuracy; (or a lurid sense of humor; stand in front of the stone facing the canyon, where the two rivers meet to see what I mean).
The village was settled on the site of an Iron Age or Urartian settlement, as the cyclopean stone wall of an old building on the entry road to the village suggests. This wall, made from Iron Age stones, was actually part of the Agarak fortress complex, built in the 4th c. to protect the approaches to Dzorap where the Arshakuni (Arshakid) royal mausoleum lay.

The cliffs look like wave surges in the ocean. Archeologists believe these "waves" are actually the remnants of huge sculptures carved in the soft stone millennia ago, and that you can still detect the sign of the ram (Aries) in the carving. If proven true, this would be the largest scultpure of its kind in the Caucasus from the early Bronze Age, a monumental accomplishment 5000 years ago.

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

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

The Pagan temple, changing the orientation from the pre-Christian western focus (the setting sun) to the direction of the rising sun (the resurrection).

The cliffs are accessible from the Giumri highway (backtrack to the Giumri highway and turn R (W) and cross over Amberd River and the western village limits (sign posted). Turn immediately L (S) on the dirt path just over the river and at the village sign; the rising slope and cliffs of the Agarak Temple Site are on the L (DD 40.29576 x 44.27838, elev. 1714m). The cliffs look like wave surges in the ocean.

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the suggestion that it may have been human sacrifice (well documented for this period in Armenia) seems to make many queasy and unwilling to accept its premise. Another option, which is both plausible and probable to a growing number of people, is that the site was both a major production and religious site, combining sacrifice, the making of wine (a sacred drink that produced 'visions') and, as Metsamor's large metal production suggests—either a metal production center or user of liquid metals in performing rituals. We know that in this time (5000-4000 BCE) there were still active volcanoes in the area, their molten lava flowing down the slopes of nearby mountains in red rivers of liquid heat. One can imagine these people using this molten substance—or just as likely liquid metal from Metsamor—to fill the dozens of small reservoirs. Several tiny holes at Metsamor—one evening fill these reservoirs with a combustible liquid so they overflow and flow down the small channels, setting 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).

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 Giunri show the same series of holes and carvings, suggesting the peoples of this time were unified in their concepts and probably well related.

Excavators are currently working on the northern plateau of the site, patiently uncovering the site layer by layer, the work done in the warmer months, allowing visitors to view the work in progress. In the northeast edge of the plateau a street was discovered lined on both sides with houses with round floor plans and square external corners, indicating a town with regular street plan in the early Bronze Age. An enormous quantity of ceramic fragments, terra cotta statues, round and horseshoe-shaped portable hearths, and hearth stands were also uncovered, placing that layer in the middle period of the Shengavit or Kuro-Araxes culture, roughly 2900-2700 BCE.

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The series of vats on the south end of the first rocky slope seems to confirm the idea that it was a grape production site, though why major wine making would be done inside a religious temple is hot debate—is that this may as well have been a sacrificial stone, the small holes and depressions holding blood that spilled from one to the other through the flow lines to form an elaborate pattern on the face of the rock. Blood sacrifice is still performed in Armenia, so this is plausible, though the suggestion that it may have been human sacrifice (well documented for this period in Armenia) seems to make many queasy and unwilling to accept its premise.

Another option, which is both plausible and probable to a growing number of people, is that the site was both a major production and religious site, combining sacrifice, the making of wine (a sacred drink that produced 'visions') and, as Metsamor's large metal production suggests—either a metal production center or user of liquid metals in performing rituals. We know that in this time (5000-4000 BCE) there were still active volcanoes in the area, their molten lava flowing down the slopes of nearby mountains in red rivers of liquid heat. One can imagine these people using this molten substance—or just as likely liquid metal from Metsamor—to fill the dozens of small holes, their overflow passing through the curving flow lines, forming an elaborate design on the rock. What an interesting experiment it would be to one evening filling these reservoirs with a combustible liquid so they overflow and flow down the small channels, setting 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 Ashtarak Road intersection, turn left and go past the Burakan 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, elev. 1251m) 

DZORAP/AGHTSK - ձորապ / Աղթսկ
(officially Aghstsk, before Akis or Hakhs, pop. 3497)
meanders up the foothills of Mt. Aragats while
According to legend and the 5th c historian Pavstos, the Sassanids' 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 which was an enormous and incredibly strong and ingeniously built structure.

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 Sparapat 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 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 retaining 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 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, failing to invasions and earthquakes long past the time of the Arshakuni. A later historian, Movses Khorenatsi, wrote that a decision was finally made to inter them in the saint's vault at Vagharshapat (Echmiadzin).

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

The mausoleum is a small rectangular vaulted hall (2.6m x 3.7m and 2.5m high), stretching from east to west with a segmented-shaped apse at its eastern end. The vault was partially dug into the hill, its southern and eastern ends rest on a five-stepped stylobate. The roof is flat, no evidence has been found to determine the shape of the second floor.

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

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

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

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 Aghstik, 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.
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

### The ARSHAKUNI DYNASTY OF KINGS

- Tiridates I (second time) 54-56
- Tiridates I of Armenia 56-58/59
- Roman occupation 58-59
- Tigranes V of Caçapoce 59-62 (Roman protectorate)
- T'rdat (Tiridates) I of Armenia 62-72 (Parthian protectorate 62-63; Roman protectorate 63-72)
- Axaideres (son of Pacoros II of Parthia) 72-7 (Roman protectorate)
- Parthamasiris (Axaideres brother) 7-114 (Parthian protectorate)
- Roman province 114 – 118
- Vologeses I (Parthian Arsacid) 118-119 (Roman protectorate)
- Aurelios Pacoros 119/44
- Sohemo c 140/144-161
- Pakoros 161-163
- Sohemo (second time) 163-7
- Sanatrit 179
- Valsaraces or Vologeses II (son) 197
- Khosrov I of Armenia (son) 197-238
- To Persia 238-252
- Artavazd VI 252-253 (Parthian protectorate)
- T'rdat (Tiridates) III (son of Khosrov) 253-281 (Roman protectorate)
- Khosrov II the Small 281-283
- Tigranes VII (son) 283-300
- Arshah II (son) c 350-368

### OVERNIGHT

#### Tegher

Tegher. The monastery complex consists of the 1213 S. Astvatsatsin, a 1221 gavit with two domes, towers, and a 19th c village as well as a new "D'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.

### Taxi Service

- 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, elev. 1700m).

### Aragatsotn Marz : 34 of 94 - TourArmenia © 2008 Rick Ney ALL RIGHTS RESERVED - www.TACentral.com
The church of St. Astvatsatsin (1213) is made of dark gray basalt. The church is an enclosed cruciform type with four chambers in the corners, used as chapels and depositories. The large hall has a central dome and ends in a semicircular apse. The dome is supported by the corner columns of the square, and has a tall round drum. The décor is simple, without much design save the cornice moldings and the accentuation of the arches in the main area. The cupola of the dome is reach by a transition of layers from it base, accentuating the height of the space, the volume seeming to expand beyond its actual dimensions.

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

The 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.

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

The 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.

The medieval-19th c graveyard has the ruins of a few mausoleums and some interesting khachkars, a couple of which lean against wall ruins. They are deeply cut geometric drawings of the cross and tree of life with fancy edging in the frames, but miss the sun symbol favored in other khachkars of the period.

Old Tegher village is 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.
vault and arches were pointed, a rarity of churches in the early medieval period. It was renovated again in the 10th c, as the builders added a second set of walls, turning the church into a fortress.

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

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

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, weavings and other folk craft demonstrations, as well as incredibly tasty food using old recipes.

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

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

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

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

Prides of place are the huge Radio-Optical Telescopes scattered around the village and set into crevices of the mountainside. The telescopes combine features of both traditional optical telescopes and the (then) new 20th c techniques of exploring space using Radio waves with large antennas. The most famous radio-optical telescope (ROT) is the first built on the site, the “Heruni Mirror Radio telescope” (ROT-54/2.6), the Large Antenna of which with a diameter 54m still has the best parameters among all Large Antennas in World. The antennas are truly gigantic, impossible to image without waling by one and peering down in the huge concave antenna. Spearheaded during the Soviet period, they continue to work, supplying vital research to astronomers around the globe. The institute is headed by Paris Heruni, the president of the Radio Physics Research Institute and the Academy of Sciences. Heruni is better known in Armenia for his efforts to promote the discovery by astrophysicist Elma Parsamian of 5th-3rd cc BCE astronomical observatories in Armavir and Siunik marz. If you are into astronomy, stop by the office to see if anyone is free, it is a treat not to be missed.

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

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

Parpi S. Tsrinavor

Parpi S. Tarmanchats

Parpi - Tsirnavor (also known as Parbi, elev. 1160m, pop. 894) is on the right bank of the Shakhvart River, and was another of a series of Iron Age forts that guarded the approaches to Amberd Castle. The N side of the village has the remains of the 5th c Tsrinavor (“Apricot”) church, a unique example of the protruding apse hall style, once considered rare in Armenian architecture and an experiment in the development of the cross form from the single aisle basilica.

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

Portions of the walls use stones from the cyclopean walls of the nearby Bronze Age fortress and Medieval settlement on the hill just to the E, also where you will find the remains of the small but elegant Tarmanchats (“Holy Translator”) Church. Built in the 7th c, the church was completely rebuilt in the 10th-11th cc, adding a southern entrance portal. It is a tetracconch (four conchs, or semicircular apses with a central dome), the protruding apses decorated with stone carvings and khachkars embedded in the walls. Half columns were used in the interior corners of the apses to support the dome arches. The adjoining corners of the rectangular arms were also reinforced by half-columns on the outside. Destroyed and rebuilt several times, masons used khachkars and surviving carvings in the walls. There is also the tradition of donating memorial stones that were embedded in the walls as well, so it is hard to differentiate between those intentionally placed by wealthy donors and those used from the surrounding cemetery. The carvings take pride of place here, some of the most elaborate and whimsical we have seen in Armenia. Grape bunches and pomegranates are carved on the capitals of the half-columns that frame the entryway, deliberately built low so you have to bow to enter the church, and an
The cemetery contains a number of tombstones dating back to the 4th c with the red Khachkar near the church showing a distinct Tree of Life image under the cross. The site is especially beautiful in the spring, when the grass is green and wildflowers cover the hillside, some sprouting from the walls of the church.

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

Camping is possible in the river gorge or nearby; Overnight in village home; Springs in the village.

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

The village is a farming community known for one thing; the 14th c S. Gevorg Monastery (set in the center of the village of the main road from Ashtarak, open 10-5), for all its holy intentions looking out of place like a orange and black striped corn silo rather than the important 15th c revivalist 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.

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.

Thus, 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.
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 interfaced 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 consists of 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 and black tufa blocks, appearing as a chess board in some views, as a detail for arcatures or pediments in another. The large windows in the façade are framed with a protruding orange tufa molding that continues around the windows up into a cross, at the sides into circular design, and below into interweaving "ribbons". The most beautiful section is the Southern door with its archway carved with elaborate quatrefoil and alternating strips of geometric designs. The western doorway is a real treat, a taste of the Armenian Baroque, its archway (tympanum) includes a beautiful central cross with adjoining bas-relief floral vase designs and some of the original orange coloring for the archway. It is a gorgeous entry, capped by an impressive bell tower and gallery. The gallery, a three arched affair topped by a twelve-column belfry, was built at the same time as the church, rare in Armenian churches, which usually slapped a belfry on to the western face to 'bring it up to code', so to speak. As deep as the first nave in the main hall, the substantial gallery gives the church a monumental affect from front, though it looks ill-placed and squashed from the side.

The monastery is filled with pilgrims on the Feast Days for S. Grigor Lusavorich.

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.

**SIDE TRIP:** (Karbi - Քարբի) From Mughni center continue N on the village road for about 1.7 km to (Karbi) center (DD 40.33389 x 44.37778) 4000 AMD for B&B is fair); Overnight in village home (rustic, 4000 AMD for B&B is fair); Springs in the village.

Still, the call of new money is strong and the village has suffered some loss of manpower, an exodus few think will reverse in the future. The villagers are extremely friendly and proud of their village and their history as a Persian administrative center (17th-18th cc), and consider the looming domes of Ohanavan to the north actually their own, the villagers of Ohanavan simply caretakers of the great monastery until Karbi's town limits are expanded to include the more famous building.

Camping is possible in the river gorge or nearby; Overnight in village home (rustic, 4000 AMD for B&B is fair); Springs in the village.
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 century and whose plan is identical to pagan temples of the period. The church was rebuilt in 553. The region was controlled by the Mamikonian family, who patronized the churches in the area, including S. Karapet. Losing power in the 9th century, the Mamikonians were replaced by the Bagratunis and their kin the Pahlavunis who became patrons of the church, but did little to expand its importance. The monastery began to achieve prominence in the 12th century, important enough to have a fortified wall added to protect against Seljuk and Kurdish warlords attacking the region, and especially in the early 13th century as the power of the Bagratuni family waned, replaced by their relatives the Georgian branch known as the Orbeli Kings.

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

The architecture of these monasteries, along with others in Lori-Berd and Siunik are among the most sophisticated and beautiful in Armenia, and their collapse by repeated Mongol, Kurdish and Ottoman attacks in the 13th, 14th and 15th centuries that much more painful. The Mongol attacks were especially destructive, causing a mass exodus from the area and the desertion of the monastery. Slowly decaying, the monastery experienced a renewed period of growth in the 18th century under Persian rule and especially after the Russo-Turkish war in 1828, when settlers from the Ottoman ruled town of Mush repopulated the village and began to reclaim the church. Soviet times were not kind to the monastery; it was deserted again and fell into disrepair, the dome collapsing in 1919 for a second time, this time pulling down much of the southern end of the hall. Attempts to renovate the monastery began in the 1970s, stopped the Armenian economy collapsed at the end of the Soviet Union, and resumed in the 1990s with the dome reconstructed in 1999 and the church is almost completely rebuilt. The church still maintains an important presence in the history of Armenian architecture and has been nominated – along with Saghmosavank and Tegher—as a World Heritage Site.

The Complex

Hovhanavank monastery

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

The 5th century church flanks the main Hovhanavank church, built in 1216-1221 and funded by Vacheh Vachutian, who also had built the monastery at Saghmosavank. The church is of the same type as Saghmosavank, a cross-winged domed structure with two-story annexes in the corners of the building. The western annexes retain their original staircases. The cupola space predominates in the interiors of both churches, also reflected in the exterior shapes of these structures. The decoration of S. Karapet is more refined, the front apron of the semi-circular apse composed of patterned stones—five-pointed stars, pentagons and diamonds—framed with half-round molding. This kind of design was typical for 13th century Armenian churches (Harich, D'segh, and Stepanosavank).

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

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

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

The central window on the eastern façade is framed with twin moldings. Probably influenced from the same idea at 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 advancemen in the depiction of human forms in Armenian religious art.

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

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

The western façade is impressive, with its tympanum inscription appearing like an ornamental design, the carvings of diamond shapes on the framing and the stalactite carvings on the twin windows. The original windows are thought to have been cross-form, like the twin apse windows at the church of S Grigor in Tatev.

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

Other

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

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

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George Ivanovich Gurdjieff (January 13, 1872 - October 29, 1949), was a Greek-Armenian mystic and "teacher of dancing". His teaching is about becoming more aware of oneself in daily life. Gurdjieff was born in Alexandropol (Gyumri), but grew up in Kars. Gurdjieff studied medicine and the Eastern Orthodox priesthood in school, but left the academic world in search of the ultimate answers. From 1884 to 1912, he pursued his quest throughout the Middle East, India, Tibet, and Central Asia. Gurdjieff describes these expeditions and his encounters with religious schools and monasteries in his autobiography, Meetings With...
Remarkable Men. While in Moscow in 1912, he met author, lecturer, mathematician, and his famous disciple, P.D. Ouspensky. Ouspensky helped to spread Gurdjieff's thoughts and ideas throughout the United States. To avoid harsh times after the Bolshevik Revolution, and after traveling through Georgia, Constantinople, and Germany, Gurdjieff and his followers fled to France in 1922. In France, he established the Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man at the Priure at Avon. Gurdjieff established the Institute because he believed his ideas needed to be re-discovered 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.

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

From Hovhanavan 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)

USHI - Ուշի (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 archeologists studying sites from paragliders and airborne cameras. The village was the administrative center for the Persian mahal of Sayyidi-Aksakli, covering the western slopes of Aragats and inhabited by pastoral communities of Turkish-Kurdish tribes. The village has several sites, a 10th c church, remains from a Bronze Age settlement and fortress, and the important Medieval S. Sarkis Vank.

As you reach the village, take the right fork, a paved road through the village to the other side (W). You will pass a small 10th c church, mostly in ruins. On the W edge of the village an access road continues another 500 m or so to the Western Hill and ruins of the 5th-18th cc S. Sarkis Vank, plus a 7th c shrine.

The founding of the monastery is supposedly connected to a certain Roman general 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 beheaded for preaching Christianity. He was buried in the village of Namian, Mazandaran Province.

In the first decade of the 5th c, Armenians led by Mesrop Mashtots had his remains taken from Persia and interred on the hill you are standing, and built a small memorial church in his honor.

The structure, simply and quickly made, soon conquests, when, in a 10th-11th cc the church was restored on the foundations of the original. During the 12th-13th cc the Zakarians and Vachutians ruled the area and new wealth poured into their coffers, allowing them to build a new domed church adjoining the southern walls of the old church. According to inscriptions on the doorway, a gavit was added in 1246 adjoining the south wall of the new church, which is also known as the large church or Astvatsatsin. Sometime in the 14th c a belfry was added to the western side of Astvatsatsin. By this time the complex had become so large and developed it was converted into a monastery. The monastery was damaged by Mongol invasions, the worst of which was the Timur invasion of the 15th c, and largely neglected, though fortifications were built during Persian Rule in 1654, which shored up its image somewhat.

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

The Complex

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

The small (5.8m x 8m) standing church is the original 9th-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.
circular and square towers in the corners. It lasted barely 20 years, damaged by the 1679 earthquake that ruined much of the service buildings in the monastery.

Just North of the vank (about 200 m) on the top of the hill are the remains of a major Iron Age fort, hard to detect when on foot, but a lookout with a 12th-13th c. wall, two narrow halls each with a vaulted upper chamber, and a central room with a vaulted roof. A semicircular apse and hall was quite wide, flanked by two very narrow halls each with a sealed chamber used as a depository or treasury.

The hall is divided into three areas by two sets of columns at the end of the apse curved wall and thick walls with archway above on the western end, dividing the west area from the main and apse creating a narthex with two end chapels on the N and S. The portal had a tympanum with a religious scene carved on it, and the windows and cornices were adorned with moldings and geometric ornamentation.

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

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

Adjoining the N end of the chapel and running to the W was a long building with four rooms (the two on the right were above the chapel walls) used as service or guest chambers. All along the North, West and South walls were monk quarters, a vaulted guest-chamber, dining and utility buildings. If restored they will make up the most extensive set of monastery buildings in Armenia, though judging from all the rubble around you this will be one big puzzle.

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

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

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

MAP LEGEND
1. S. Sion Church (1215)
2. Gavit (13th c)
3. Book deposition (1255)
4. S. Astvatsatsin Church (1235)

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

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

Backtrack to the main village road, turn left (S) and continue for about 500 m to a T intersection, turn left (E) and go about 1.1 km and out of Arashavan to the village and monastery of SAGHMOSSAVANK (DD 40.40246 x 44.37981, elev. 1610) +O

SAGHMOSSAVANK - Ուռնամունք 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 Hovhanavan in 1215, though judging from all the rubble around you this will be one big puzzle.

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 1968, ongoing restoration has shored up the walls while the monastery waits funding for a complete renovation. If restored they will make up the most extensive set of monastery buildings in Armenia.

Vachutians, who had purchased the region from the Zakarians. Prince Vacheh Vachutian is tied to both vanks, but his wife, Mama Khatun, is more closely connected to Saghmosavank, and considered its sponsor.

The monastery is dated to 1215, though whether that is the founding of the vank or the completion of the main church is uncertain. Damaged during a string of invasions in the 12th-13th cc, the monastery was deserted after the Timur invasion (14th c), rebounding only after Persia took the region from Turkey in the 17th c. It was also severely damaged by the earthquakes of 1679 and 1827 and was renovated several times including a major renovation in 1890. Further damaged in 1968, ongoing restoration has shored up the walls while the monastery waits funding for a complete renovation. If restored they will make up the most extensive set of monastery buildings in Armenia.
I Kurd (son of Vacheh) and my wife Khorishah built this library and established this chapel in the name of our daughter. The depository is unique for a number of reasons, not least of which is its complex design and the execution of the support arches for the roofing and dome. The building had an apse in its eastern end and the SE corner has two-story annexes, completely unique for this type of building. The depository connects with the gavit and Astvatsatsin, and is thought to have been used not only for storing manuscripts but also precious plate especially in light of the eastern apse.

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

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

The L-shape dictated a number of unique solutions for supporting the roof while maintaining a felling 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 apertures with itself topped with an octahedral rotunda and tent roof. The transition to the apertures is done by a series 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, and tent roof.

The exterior of the building is accentuated by wall niches on either side of the façade windows, which are obscured on the western end by the gavit. The building is of the same type as Hovhanavank, though its décor is less ebullient than the family monastery to the south, belying its function as a seminary and religious study center. Still, there are fine carvings on the edifice, with geometric and ornamental designs on the cornices and framing the windows and portals. Of exceptional note is the tympanum on the western entrance to the church, a stylized depiction of Christ and his disciples over a row of eight pointed stars carved like filigree.
which is further decorated with an inscription in large letters above the small arches.

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

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

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
TRIP 2: ASHTARAK TO ARAGATS

ASHTARAK -

(A) AGARAK – DZORAP – TEGHER – (Orgov)

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

UPPER CASE destinations are worth a long visit, (side trips) are worth the stop if you have the time. Note that [Agarak, Dzorap, Tegher and Orgov] are also on Trip 1, and can be skipped or visited as part of either day trip. This trip takes you up the face of Mt. Aragats, Armenia’s tallest mountain. At 4095m, it is a foreboding mass of volcanic rock and fertile hills, topped by four peaks surrounding the sunken cone. If Mt. Ararat is Armenia’s soul, Aragats is her body a landmass that can be seen from all but two of Armenia’s marz. The mountain is surprisingly accessible, its south peak a three-hour moderate hike up a constant incline. The other three peaks are more rugged, they require better preparation (and stamina) and a guide, but the south peak is attainable for even the active couch potatoes among us. Standing on its craggy top is standing on the top of Armenia. Nothing matches the views of the country from this vantage point nor the sense of triumph; you are in the house of the ancient gods.

The trip to base camp is a 30-minute climb from Ashtarak by car, past Biurakan with its Medieval monasteries and space age astronomical observatory and Amberd castle, summer home to Armenia’s kings and queens. The road ends at Kari Lich, Armenia’s second highest lake (the highest is inside the volcanic crater), an ice-blue (or ice black, depending on when you visit) mirror reflecting the dome of the sky.

Note. This trip can be combined with some sites from Trip 1 for a full day of sightseeing 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 3200m above sea level, and lungs and ticker may not be what they used to be. . . .

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

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


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

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


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

(A) AGARAK - ԱՐԱՐԱԹ (elev. 1063m, pop. 2497) for details see Trip 1 Agarack description.

B. AGARAK TO KARI LICH (MT. ARAGATS)

From Agarak center, take the Biurakan road N (first left after the Voskevaz T-intersection) road for about 3.8 km (take the left at 1.5, right takes you to the Ashtarak highway) as it climbs and switchbacks to BIURAKAN (OD 40.33660 x 44.28473, elev. 1438m).

BIURAKAN - ԲԻՐԱԿԱՆ (elev. 3034) is on the right (E) bank of the Amberd River. The village is prosperous, as much for its flower beds as for its setting in the lush volcanic hills. From here, the road winds up Aragats, Armenia’s highest mountain, with views of the entire region.

The First Biurakan Survey

The Markarian survey—the First Biurakan Survey (FBS)—remains the largest spectral survey in the Northern sky, covering 17,000 sq. deg. of the Northern sky and part of the Southern sky at high galactic latitudes. The survey was carried out between 1965 and 1980 by Markarian and his colleagues V. A. Lipovetski and J. A. Stepanian using the observatory’s 102/132/213 cm (40/52/84”) Schmidt telescope with a 1.5 deg. prism. Each FBS plate contains low-dispersion spectra of some 15,000-20,000 objects, and there are some 20,000,000 objects in the whole survey, so that one can make a preliminary understanding of their nature. It is possible to select objects by their colour, broad emission or absorption lines, SED, discover and classify them.
were constructed. In 1960 a new Schmidt telescope with 40-inch (102 cm) correcting plate and 52-inch (132 cm) mirror was installed in Biurakan. In 1965, B. E. Markarian began a survey with a goal of revealing UV-excess galaxies. It lasted 15 years and became one of the most famous surveys in astronomical history, discovering 1500 galaxies with UV excess now names the Markarian galaxies.

Biurakan Observatory

Entrance to the observatory is about 1.2 km south of Biurakan village center. The observatory is a working research center with an extremely dedicated (and busy) staff or researchers. Visitors are welcome, but access may be limited depending on research activities. Scientists from around the globe visit the observatory to conduct research and treasure their access to the telescopes.

The observatory’s achievements are significant; researchers have discovered a number of flare stars, Supernovae, Herbig-Haro objects, and cometary nebulae, the 1500 "Markarian" galaxies with UV excess, and the site of two major conferences on SETI (Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence).

History

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

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

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

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.

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

Hambartsumian (1908-1996) was born in Georgia and worked at the Pulkovo Observatory in his early years. He also taught at the University of Leningrad and wrote the first Russian textbook on theoretical astrophysics. Most of his research was devoted to invariance principles applied to the theory of radiative transfer, inverse problems of astrophysics, and the empirical approach to the problems of the origin and evolution of stars and galaxies. Hambartsumian was the first to propose that T Tauri stars (lightweight stars in an intermediate stage between proto-stars and low mass stars like our sun) are very young (only 10 million years old) and that their close stellar associations are expanding. He demonstrated the ongoing evolutionary processes in galaxies, such as mass loss and worked on interstellar matter, radio galaxies and active galactic nuclei. Hambartsumian was a president of the International Astronomical Union and the organizer...
of two major conferences on SETI at the Biurakan Observatory (1964 and 1972).

OTHER SITES

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

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

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

Catch this in the evening sun if you can, the amber glow of the red tuff is remarkable.

ARTAVAZIK VANK AND KHACHKAR

From S. Hovhannes return to the asphalt road (R fork from the fountain square), turn R (E) and continue out of the village to the canyon (the road peters out to a rocky path). The vank is apparent as you leave the village and descend into the wide gorge, a red structure with a huge khachkar opposite the river (DD 40.33560 x 44.28473, elev. 1438nm).

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

In the 13th c a belfry was erected on the roof over the western entrance, a slender rotunda with delicate fretwork. It too succumbed to the elements, lightning from an electric storm a few years back striking the dome and shattering the back end. There is still enough remaining to appreciate the detail.

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

PRACTICALS

The observatory (mob. tel. (091) 455421 Director, URL: www.bao.am) 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 thayk@bao.sci.am) has lodging for conference attendees and walk-ins when rooms are available. The lodging is pansionat style, with running hot and cold water. Large groups can utilize the dining facilities, but otherwise no food on campus. DBLS at 15,000 AMD. They also have TRP and other rooms, price per additional person quoted on request.

B&B

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

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

From the N edge of the church yard (village center), take the Amberd/Aragats road N for about
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 complex includes fortification, the Christian eras, when the current castle was built, Antarut 2.4 km to (Image 18x36 to 42x135)

Amberd and Arkhashen River gorges, two steep ravines that were impenetrable for thousands of years. The complex includes fortification, the outer walls being rebuilt and a new path into the complex built over a rocky hillock with a series of stone steps and path leading to the Amberd gorge rim and the main gate.

The 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 an older side road up towards Orgov. The second starts at the NW edge of the village (200m from its NW edge), across the left river, and wends its way uphill and through woodlands 5 km to Amberd Castle.

History
In Neolithic times the area seems to have been permanently settled, the smouldering volcanic cone of Aragats providing a warm, moist environment for agricultural development. As the volcano went dormant and Bronze Age civilizations cleared 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 packed up their winter quarters and moved en masse 30 km up hill to Amberd.

Other than prehistoric structures legends place the medieval founding of Amberd with King Ashot “Yerkat” (Iron) Bagratuni in the 10th c, along with other fortresses along the borders of his kingdom, though there was already a summer residence at Amberd at the time of the Arab invasion in the 7th c. A letter by the statesman Grigor Magistros Pahlavuni, who was also the archimandrite of Ani around the year 1050, places the current fortress and the surrounding district in the hands of the powerful Pahlavuni family in the late 10th c. The Pahlavunis railed the Bagratuni in Ani and supplied a single line of Kabılıks from 1065 – 1203 (with the occasional anti-patriarchal and

The Complex
The complex was ideally situated to protect its keepers, set high above the confluence of the Amberd and Arkhashen River gorges, two steep ravines that were impenetrable for thousands of years. The complex includes fortification, the castle, bath and church, as well as outer defensive positions and a covered walkway to the river below. The site is under substantial renovation, 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.

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 Vachulian in 1215 (patron of the much expanded monasteries at Tegher, Saghmosavank and Hovhanavanvank), 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 and 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.

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

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

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

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

Between Amberd and Mt. Arağats 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, elev. 3200)**

**KARI LICH - ՔԱՐԻ ԼԻՉ** (“Stone Lake”) lies below Mt. Arağats’ South peak, and is the starting point for most mountaineers attempting the climb Armenia’s tallest mountain. The entry to the lake’s area has spectacular views of Araarat 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.

Next to the south shoreline is the **Physics Institute – Cosmic Ray Institute and Arağats 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 Arağats research station and gathers data as part of an early warning system against extreme solar energetic particle (SEP) events which pose danger to the satellite electronics and space station crews.**
Overnight. *The Physics Institute* next to the lake is happy to put up visitors for $15 a night, $30 with food. Warm bed, toilets and running water.

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

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

» END OF TRIP 2
TRIP 3: MT. ARAGATS

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

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


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 44.166666).

KARI LICH - クール LHS ("Stone Lake" elev. 3200), for details see Kari Lich at end of trip 2.

MT. ARAGATS - ウラグリュ Lbr (DD 40.5333 x 44.20000, elev. 4090m)

Aragatsotn is dominated by Mt. Aragats, 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 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.

Photograph courtesy of Tigran Nazaryan ©
the snow melts or fails. There are also several reservoirs capturing the melting snows, the largest of which, to the NW, is Lake Mantsash.

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 station," 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 sacrificed doneo-eers are staked in the mountain side, next to or within Christian shrines.

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

Formation

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

Minerals

Anhydrite, Chalcedony Agate, Chalcopyrite, Gypsum, Pyrrhottie, 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 green 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.

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

Safety Tips

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

For more information: Clicking.com

Tour Guide: 

Climbing.com

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eared Wheatear (Su), Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush (Su), Blue Rock Thrush, Ring Ouzel (Su), Cetti's Warbler, Common Whitethroat (Su), Red-billed Chough, Northern Raven, Rock Sparrow, Snow Finch, Twite, Crimson-winged Finch, Common Rosefinch (Su), Rock Bunting, Ortolan Bunting (Su), Black-headed Bunting (Su).

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

Mt. Aragats Flora: Amberd fortress and canyon, 2100-2200m alt. Nectaroscordum tripedale, Inula maria, e Papaver orientale,

Astragalus hyalolepis, Medicago dzhavakhetica, Trifolium bordilovskyi, Ornithogalum najastanicum, Dianthus cretaceus, Solanathus stamineus

Mt. Aragats Flora: near Kari Lich, alpine meadow 3200m alt. Doronicum oblongilobium, Taraxacum stevenii, Primula algida, Campanula tridentata, Gentiana pontica, Oxytropis albania, Androsace raddeana, Pedicularis crassinodis, 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 16.

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.

The climbs Camping inside the crater for a few days is definitely worthwhile, since it has spectacular rock formations and provides incredible star-gazing opportunities at night.

From Kari Lich, each of the four peaks with their saddlebacks (North, South, East and West) can be climbed, camping at base, or inside the crater. Allow one day for each climb, returning to base or camping inside the crater. You are strongly advised to spend 1-2 days before the climb at Kari Lich or higher to acclimate yourself to the thin air and high altitude. Altitude sickness is rare on Aragats. But can occur. Our climbs begin with the South peak, which is the most popular and easiest to climb of the four, then continues around the rim to the East, spending the night at base camp next to Kari Lich or inside the crater.

SOUTH PEAK (3879m) is the easiest to climb of all four peaks. The hike will be easy for physically fit, but for the rest of us it is a moderately arduous climb, hardest the closer you get to the top, when the high altitude and the constant 30° incline conspire to stop the most

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

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

A third path is to descend first S from the south summit to the SE saddle (part of one of the routes up) and cross on the East peak, or skirting below it over to the north peak. On the rim there is a trail 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. 55)

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From Aparan district/Aragats v. and Gegharot River take the approach to the East Peak stopping at the Jrvesh falls (details on p. 55)
(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

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End of map with labels and coordinates.
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. Yezidis 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 the idea) and Armenians all over have a repertoire of jokes poking fun at their naiveté (example: “An Aparantsi’s wife told her friend, “oh I love these cell phones, every time I call my husband he is always at the office.”)

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 to show the presence of royalty. Like Lori and Tavush, the area was faced mass deportation of native Armenians in the wake of Seljuk, Mongol and Kurdish Emir attacks, the conquerors taking the meadows for alpine pasturage for their herds of animals (taken from the local Armenians as war booty). A subgroup of Kurdish nomads, the Yezidis, 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. Yezidis 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.

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TRIP 4: APARAN REGION

ASHTARAK – (Apnagiugh) – (Araliy) - (T’rednetu) – (Aragats – jump area East face) - (Hartavan) - (Aparan Lake) - (Old Zovuni) - (YEGHAPATRUSH) - (Kasakh) - (Kuchak) - (APARAN – T’Tujur) - (Dzoraglukh) – (Lusaglukh) – (Nigavan) – (Mirak) - (RIA TAZA – (Alagiaz) - TSAGHKHOVIT PLAIN - TSAGHKHOVIT - (Hnabare - (Norashen) - (Vardabur) - (Derek) - (Sipan) – (Jamashlu – Aragatsi Berd) – GEGERHROT – (Asht Yerkat) – (Lernarap – Berdidosh)

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

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

Eat: Aparan cafes & bistro, roadside stands, village homes.


From Ashtarak center, take the northern highway towards Aparan/Vanadzor for 10.8 km following the western face of Mt. Arai Lehr past Mughni, Karbi, Ohanavan, Ushi, Arzavahan/Saghmosavank, then turn off to the Amberd Road and the AIBUBEN PARK (DD 40.41241 x 44.38369)
crossed by a late medieval bridge. There is also a pretty 19th c. village church, with homemade offerings and some evidence of matagh (sacrifice) near the church yard.

Alternate route to Mt. Arai Lehr: The village faces Mt. Arai Lehr ("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.

From Apnagiugh center, take the northern road to the highway (about 500m) then turn right (N) and continue for about 500m, then turn left (W) and continue about 1.5 km to (Arai) center (DD 40.4622 x 44.3736) (²Ú¶Æ)

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

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

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.

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

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

Alternate route to Shenavan and Hartavan: take the NE village road that parallels the power lines for about 1.9 km of bumpy dirt road to the Hartavan-Aragats intersection at Shenavan. From there it is 1.8 km 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** center (40.47674 x 44.39447, elev. 1375m)

**SIDE TRIP:** **Hartavan - հարթավան** (before Ghara-Kilsis, pop. 1790) lies on the right bank (E) of the Gegharot River with a delta of streams to its north. The view from this tall site is stunning, taking in the Aragats plain and the E face. The village has a **19th c church** and more, interestingly, the remains of a **13th c shrine**, attributed to Kurd Vachutian, the son of Vacheh Vachutian who purchased Aparan and Ashtarak regions from the Zakarians in the early 13th c. The shrine sits on a hill in the village.

By tradition, the monastery was established on the spot where a piece of the True Cross was buried, the relic still believed by some to be under the arches.

The Katoghike for the memory of our souls. We have

**ASTVASTNKAL - Աստվածաստան** is placed on a hillside overlooking the Kasakh River, an ancient travel route for caravans 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 yet.

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 church.

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

The **Katoghike** was completely rebuilt in the 13th c on top of the previous 5th c church. The church is a central domed cruciform building with chambers in the four corners. The dome is supported by the inner points of the cross wings, with sweeping arches holding up the large drum and shallow cupola. The drum is faceted on its sides crowned originally by an umbrella roof but now by a metal tent roof that is falling apart. The inside is ornately decorated with protruding cornices and ornamental motifs of flora and geometric patterns. The semicircular apse had an elaborate apron frieze and some evidence of painting on the design elements can still be seen.

The exterior is simply done with details in the window framing, cornice work and around the dome of the building. 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 underneath 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
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.

Small 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 Sagmosavank. 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.

Climbing the mountain: North Approach

The mountain is named for a legendary Armenian king, Ara Geghetsik ("Ara the Handsome"), who is believed to have died at the hands of the Babylonian Queen Semiramis ("Shamiram" in Armenian), who hurled him into the pit of the volcano, his spirit rising to its top to form the shape of his face it has today.

The mountain is a volcanic cone that blew itself off sometime in the Paleolithic Era, cooling to its present shape by the Early Bronze Age, around the same time as Aragats and other volcanoes in the country. The sunken cone is open on several sides, allowing melted snows to form the mountain streams that feed the Kasakh and Hrazdan Rivers. On its northern side the mountain has traces of the native forests that once covered its slopes, the northern shadows protecting the trees from the hot southern sun, which is brutal in the summer (bring your sun screen, hat and water).

Camping is possible on the river bed; Overnight in village home at Yer'njatap 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 (Yer'njatap, DD 40.4530556 x 44.4641667)

SIDE TRIP: (Yer'njatap – Երենջատափ, till 1949 Gharbulagh, elev. 1897, pop. 318) sits above a river that feeds the Kasakh, at the bottom of the Tsakhkuniats Range. In the spring the entire valley floor and mountains are an emerald green, passing into reddish brown by mid summer, with strings of green on the riverbeds. There are several ruins near the village, one just S under the power lines, another about 1.2 km from the village edge on the SW mountain road and a third, the ruins of an old church, about 2.8 km from the village edge on the same road, on the right side of the road, overlooking the Kasakh river gorge.

Yer'njatap is a jumping off point for climbing Mt. Arai Lehr from the North with several roads and dirt tracks leading to the base of the summit or all the way up. See next site for details.

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

There are several routes to Arai Lehr from Yer'njatap, detailed below. All are 4-8 km from the base of the mountain or a 3-4 km walk to the summit of MT. ARAILEHR (40.45306 x 44.46147, elev. 2605m). MT. ARAI LEHR - ԱՐԱԻ ԼԵՐ ("Ar-aiy-ee-LEHR", slurred by locals to "Ara-Lehr") is actually located in Kotik Marz, but it has northern approaches from Aragatsotn.

Detailed description of the mountain, its ecology and Kotaik approaches is in the Kotaik chapter.

Several northern approaches climb the mountain, from easy to moderately difficult. It is even possible with a Vilis/UAZ or Jeep to drive up the mountain, but why would you? OK, you might, but try to walk a little to take in the nature.

A SW mountain road runs parallel to the Kasakh River for about 4.6 km to where a path leads up the Western face of the mountain for about 4.2 km to the summit.

Two dirt tracks exit the south edge of the village; one next to the SW mountain road ("Left"); the other just S of the village ruins ("Right"). Both intersect about 3 km from the crest of the mountain, the right track continuing forward to the top of the mountain and the left skirting the NE base of the mountain before turning sharply right (SW) and climbing the NE cleft of the mountain.
Another mountain road intersects the Norashen road 1 km north of central Yer’njatap on the NE end of the village and a right turn (SE) takes you to a right fork (S) in about 700m onto a mountain track that passes the NE edge of the mountain and after about 4.4 km leads to a path that climbs the NE ridge of the mountain (on its S side) to the crater in about 3.5 km.

Two other mountain paths start from Saralandy in Kotaik marz, some 5 km distant and take an westerly route to the East peak, skirting around its base to join the NE crevice pathway.

Southern and Eastern approaches begin from Yeghvard and Pokravan in Kotaik marz.

See Kotaik Marz chapter for S & E approaches.

Camping is possible on the summit and on the nearby riverbeds; Overnight in village home at Yer’njatap 4.5 km to the N (rustic, 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); Springs are in the village and on the mountainside.

**APARAN RESERVOIR - ԱՊԱՐԱՆ ԱՐՁԱՆ**

Lake Aparan takes up what was a deep valley for the Kasakh River, and stretches 7 km from top to bottom and over 2 km at its widest point. The lake supplies water to the Ararat valley and is an idyllic spot for camping, picnics and hiking, as well as swimming in the cold waters. The rise and fall of the waters are seasonal, in some years the melting snows raise the level to above the top rim, while in August and September the waters drop to reveal most of the northern reservoir floor, which is emerald green from the rich alluvial sediments deposited by the lake’s waters.

From the dam (just after the bridge on the east shore) there is a dirt path that goes to the R (S) and leads in about 1.3 km to the sparse but evocative Norashen ruins. Turn left (N) after the 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.

**OLD ZOVUNI MONUMENTS - ՕԶԶՈՒՆԻ ՓՈՑԻՑՎԱԾԵՐ**

Not far from the camping/picnic areas, seen from afar as you travel north and standing above the lake shoreline are several important sites, among which are relics from historic Zovuni, submerged under the reservoir’s waters when it was filled in Soviet times and its inhabitants moved to a new suburb of Yerevan of the same name. Locals still return seasonally to shepherd flocks and collect berries and herbs in the fertile lake bed and nearby hills. They delight in taking visitors on a tour of the remains of their old village, regaling with stories of a time and place long past. Zovuni was the historic center of the valley and home of the 5th c Poghos Petros church, a Tukh Manuk and a S. Vartan mausoleum and church. The latter two were dismantled and rebuilt, block by block, on higher land on the eastern shoreline.

First is the Tukh Manuk Shrine, S. Vartan Mausoleum, Khakhkars and Zovuni cemetery sitting on a low hill overlooking the reservoir and the forested tops of the Tsakhkuniats Range to the east.

**SIDE TRIP: (J’rambar - Anuapup 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 Yeghpatrash and then down. We prefer the first, but either will work.**

**Southern Route:** Continue across the dam (the guards at the gate should let you in if you tell them you are seeking Poghos Petros) and take the dirt road that goes slightly uphill of the abandoned pansionat and goes towards the pine forests. The road leads to a series of sites on Aparan Reservoir (DD 40.4863 x 44.438, elv. 1825m). Photograph courtesy of © Tigran Nazaryan
In front of and behind the shrine there are several memorial stones and khachkars on the site, including a black base with the fragment of a once tall stele, possibly an open cross stone, but carved with geometric patterns that suggest a less Christian purpose.

Scattered around the church are some early khachkars, including a 4th c Greek cross stone, carved on a menhir stone, another early Christian khachkar (7th c?) fragment with a deeply incised tree of life, and a black stele, with two deep niches with eroded patterns within. This last looks to be an earlier Vishap stone.

Also nearby is the ruined 5th c S. Vartan mausoleum, called the Zorovar Vartan Mamikonian mausoleum for the commander of Armenian forces at the 5th c battle of Avarair (also spelled "Avarayr", pronounced "ah-var-EYE-er") and martyr of the struggle against the Sassanid Empire. Mamikonian fell in battle near Avarair in 451 leading the troops of Prince 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.

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.

Underneath the lake’s waters are the ruins of the old settlement of Zovuni, its stones taken by nearby villagers spared the exodus forced on the citizens of Zovuni, who left en masse in the 1980s when the reservoir was completed and began to flood. Nothing remains except memories and few traces marking a once bustling village.

Overnight At the dam worker housing is only about half used, so if you meet the right person you should be able to spend the night in one of the vacant apartments or dormitories, if you can take their ragged state. Better to camp out on the shoreline, where Camping is possible along the lakeshore; Springs are on the river bed in the reservoir.

From the Old Zovuni site, continue N on the dirt path as it heads towards and meets up in about 1.8 km with a right fork leading NE in about 1.5 km into YEGHIPATRUSH center (40.53326 x 44.47467, elev. 2008m)

YEGHIPATRUSH - ԵՐՈՈՓԱՏՐՍՈՒՄ (before Tanirlu, 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 5. Astvatsatsin church. The church’s size and the large 13th c gavit show how important this monastery was for the area, the “new” gavit used as a seminary and religious academy.

Part of the Kasakh valley holdings of the Vachutian family, this entire area, mostly under water, was a refuge of last resort from the already encroaching Mongol hordes. The church was built over an earlier church that in its turn must have been built over a pagan temple; the lake is ringed with Stone, Bronze and Iron Age settlements, fortresses and burial grounds and standing stones in the nearby cemetery are clearly Bronze Age or earlier in origin.

The church is a central domed cruciform type with chambers in the four corners. From outside the cross form is easily detected, with separate roofs for each wing of the cross plan and lower gabled roofs over the chambers, the walls of which are flush with the wings. Deeply incised niches rest on either side of the church windows and portal, the niches touching the chamber walls. A simple round dome surmounts the central square, with four silt windows framed with light décor. A stone tent dome rests on top of the drum. The church, ruined by invasions, was shored up several times and renovated in the 20th c using modern and old stones.

The 13th c gavit, added just before the worst of the Mongol invasions, is unique. It had a two-story watch tower on its north side, the corners of which touched the NW church corner. The tower has large windows in the second story, and was topped with a belfry at a later date. The exterior of the gavit is decorated as simply as the church, with khachkars embedded into the walls as memorials for supplicants.

The interior is more ornamental, though not as lavishly as Astvatsnak 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, no two can be alike, though more than 40,000 were carved in the medieval period. Other khachkars lie on the ground, including a gray basalt khach from the early medieval period (7th
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 depressions and burning their clothes at the site. He swears they are all cured, miraculously, and that locals know the stone is thousands of years (‘tens of thousands of years’) old.

The deliberate carving of a multitude of crosses over the face of the stone and converting one part into a mini shrine, suggests a serious effort to wash away the original use of this stone, and its veneration as something powerful, a link to a religious past. This is an amazing artifact.

Gravestones in the cemetery include some large stones carved with likeness of the interred and symbols of their life or hoped-for after life. One in particular appears to show a man holding the handle of a 12-spoked wheel, with an eight-fanned orb over his left shoulder. Others are rudimentary figures showing the barest outline of the person (their sex determined by a dress or pantaloons), their heads replaced with a round orb, representing a halo or aura. Another is fenced in with wrought iron, uphill from the sacred stone.

Another lies on the ground just W of the khachkar shrine, towards the edge of the cemetery. It is unremarkable save an insignia under the writing, a shield with cross and pointed tops. Locals say this is the grave of a rich villager in the medieval period who only wore shoes with soles made of gold.

Hiking. There are a couple of good hikes from the village, both leading to the Tsakhkuniats Mountains and Kotaik on the other side.

A North path leaves from the NE edge of the village (just above the Kuchak road) and climbs the range to the T’tujur Pass (2093.3m, 2.2 km), continuing through the mountain clefts 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 Yeghipatruh 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), pensionats above Arzakan (12 km) and north towards Megradzor (17 km). These are sometimes difficult to navigate paths, easy to lose your way. To hike beyond the first 3 km you need an experienced guide (See Adventure guides on page 16).

OVERNIGHT B&B

Diana Hovhannisian, in the house directly across from the church, has a large village home and garden with great views of the valley with room for 7-8 visitors at 3000-4000 AMD per night. Her home is an artist’s
retreat and paintings lie scattered around the house.

**Camping** is possible on the lake side and in the mountains; **Overnight** in village homes (rustic, 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** are in the village and on the mountainside.

From Yeghipatrus church, take the W road out of the village towards Kuchak for about 4.8 km to (Kasakh, DD 40.53774 x 44.41257, elev. 1851m)

**SIDE TRIP:** (Kasakh - Եղիպատրուշ) is a hamlet, now dormant and without houses, but with a single-nave basilica on top of a tall hill L of the road to Kuchak (look to the lake as you cross the north bridge then up the hills, take the dirt path just before a small pass leading to a cemetery and beyond the church and park below it on the E side, DD 40.53446 x 44.40697, elev. 1884m), said to be 19th c but looking made from much older stones and construction details.

From its base on the like bed, there is a small covered picnic table and next to it a Tukh Manuk shrine, very small but with interesting religious items gathered by locals.

Go back to the Kuchak road, turn L and continue around the hill on your L for about 700m to a L dirt path (farm sign on R side of road) that leads to the base of the hill and another, more important Tukh Manuk (Black Youth) Shrine on top of the hill, borrowing Christian and pagan elements in its form and use. Note the snake carvings on the rocks on the hill as you climb the steps, and the way the surrounding area is divided with rock lines, some of which are modern fences made from clearing farmland but which much are the remains of a large Bronze Age settlement at the site. The Black Youth was a pre-Christian deity, borrowing devices from pagan beliefs from the Near East. It continues to be venerated throughout the country in remote shrines like this (invariably built on top of pre-Christian animistic or deity pagan shrines), though locals swear they are praying to the Christian God or His Son. Immediately around the shrine the ground is littered with obsidian flakes, signs of settlement from the Stone or Bronze Age.

The village was built on the ruins of previous settlements in 1829-1830 at the conclusion of the Russo-Persian war, by Armenians who had lived in Mush. It is named for Nahapet Kuchak, a 16th c poet and bard credited with raising the romantic poem to new heights, equal to the best of the great Persian poems of the period. Armenians 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 confr. It developed in the following centuries with the poems of, Yovhannes Yerzenkatsi, Constantine Yerzenkatsi and Arakel Baghishetsi (14th c), Mkrich Naghash and Yovhannes Teikurantsi (15th c) before reaching what many consider its perfect form in the writings of Grigor Ahtamartsi 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.

The Lake (Aparan) is a 2.6 km long headwater lake on the SE edge of the village and ends at the shoreline about 2.6 km from center. The Lake at this point has striking shoreline with dramatic rocks and cliff falls (a few of the rocks have carved holes reminiscent of those at Agarak), sandstone erosions and deep water. Fishermen use the shore here to catch crawfish ("rok") and lake trout. It is a good

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 church has nothing to do with Nahapet.

There is a 19th c village church in the center of town, replete with home-made offerings and obvious devotion. A matagh stone is near the church, with evidence of sacrificial offerings.

**Camping**. The Lake Road leaves the SE edge of the village and ends at the shoreline about 2.6 km from center.
A camping spot, close enough to the village to walk for provisions at village kiosks. If you want privacy, go further down the shore from the road, better is across the shoreline at Zovuni, which you can see from this side of the lake.

**Kuchak Petroglyphs.** South of Kuchak, on stones along the shoreline are about 60 carved pictograms, mainly geometric symbols that may be Iron Age linear script (2nd-1st millennium BCE). 50 are underwater 8 months of the year, emerging from July-October. The carvings were discovered in 1967 (Suren Petrossian).

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

From central Kuchak, go N on the Aparan highway for about 8 km to the Kasakh river bridge in **APARAN** (40.59300 x 44.35616, elev. 1898m)

**APARAN** - (till 1935 Bash Aparan, pop. 2566) is first mentioned by the 2nd c geographer Ptolemy as Kasakh. The town descends from a long line of settlements from each period of human activity on the plateau. From a Bronze Age beginning, the town developed as Kasakh throughout the Medieval period, serving as a seat of power for the Vachutian Family in the 13th c.

It was devastated by Mongol, Seljuk and Kurdish attacks, depopulated in the 15th c after Timur rode through and only resettled after the Russo-Turkish War of 1826-1828 awarded the region to the Russian Empire. The town became famous in 1918 as the site of a pivotal battle that reversed the tide of Turkish invasion and led the way to Armenia's liberty and the forming of the First Republic. It was also a hotbed for revolutionary activism, with several Bolshevik minions hailing from the town. They are no longer celebrated as they once were on May Day, but their memory survives, as do those of the courageous men and women who fought in the Great Patriotic War, Aparantsis known for their tenacious fighting abilities and sacrifice.

The town is made of Kurdish and Armenian locals, known as Aparantsis, the butt of many a 'local yokel' joke. Reputed to be dim witted, Aparantsis are quite warm and friendly, and if their native speech is slower, it is quick-witted and inviting. Aparan is also notoriously known as the birthplace of a number of corrupt government officials and police officers, the locals providing the greatest number of policemen to the Yerevan force.

If this is an unseemly side to their history, they have much to be proud of, and the town is now dotted with a number of monuments to celebrate their native sons' achievements.

The city is built on both sides of the Kasakh River, and is on top of a Bronze Age site, the Aparani Berd archaeological site. Remains are located behind the Genocide/Aparan Battle Memorial on the N side of town, above the Kasakh gorge. The excavation uncovered a substantial 3rd-1st millennium BCE settlement based on trade and agriculture. The site has housing foundations, tomb fields and caves in the river canyon. There is also evidence of a large cyclopean fortress which guarded the passage between Lori and Ararat.

**Bearings** The town is served by the North-South Aparan Highway (A329/M3), its center just N of the Kasakh River Bridge. The main square, named after Chess Champion Tigran Petrosian, has government buildings and shops around the memorial. The churches are just north, the Genocide/Battle of Aparan Memorial is N on the highway about 500m from the square.

From Aparan it is 40 km to Ashtarak, 29 km to Spitak, 50 km to Vanadzor and 62 km to Yerevan.

**SITES**

**Central Square / Tigran Petrossian Square** The central Square, also known as the Square of Letters for its monuments to literary and cultural figures, is located in the center of town, just north of the Kasakh River Bridge. The square has an imposing monument to Tigran Petrosian, a native son who became the 9th World Chess Champion. The monument is imposing and retro-modern, looking much like the Armen Tigranian statue in Yerevan's Ring Park.

Authorities plan on erecting monuments to more of Armenia's famous, dressing the otherwise drab Soviet feel of the place. Sounds nice, though the real cost of the project is usually much lower than the official bid, the mayor and his infamous sons taking a cut off the top.
Aparan Monument
Just N of town, on a hill to the left (W) of the highway is a large Gate protecting the entrance to a large grove of pine and birch trees and above them the imposing Aparan Monument, dedicated to (depending on who you talk to) either 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). Considering how these monuments were pushed through Soviet Armenian bureaucracy, it may well represent all four.

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"

Becoming Minister for Defense of the fledgling Armenian Republic in 1918, D’ro became a popular hero after victories over Turkish forces in 1918 in various campaigns against Turkey, Azerbaijan and Georgia. In 1920, after the incorporation of the Republic of Armenia into the Soviet Union, D’ro – a member of the ruling Dashnaks—was forced to leave the country and immigrate to Iran and later to Germany.

Controversially, D’ro is linked with the Germans during World War II, believing he could revive an independent Armenia as part of a German strategy to destabilize the Soviet Union by "liberating" its republics.

There is much debate of what D’ro did during the war, he led a contingent of Armenian troops, and some have accused him of committing atrocities, others that he focused exclusively on liberating Armenia and avoided fighting Soviet Troops and saved countless Armenian POW’s in the process.

Arrested after the war, D’ro was released, immigrated to Lebanon and then to the US for medical treatment, where he died. His actions during World War II are a volatile subject in polite conversation. Suffice to say, he is a saint in Armenia for his actions during the genocide and protecting the first republic, which arguably saved the country from certain destruction by Ottoman Turks. He is especially revered in Aparan, and you are advised to be careful what you say.

Churches
North of the roundabout on side streets are two churches, including the 4th-7th cc Kasakh Basilica (S. Khach or Holy Cross), an important example of early Armenian Christian architecture. It has recently been restored and is now a working church. The church is reached by continuing north after the roundabout and taking the first large street to the R, the church is on the L about 100m from the hwy.

The triple nave basilica is the best specimen of the Oriental-style Armenian basilica. It is a rectangular building standing on a stepped stylobate, suggesting a conversion and enlargement of an earlier pagan temple.

The interior of the hall had a width to length ratio of 1 to 2. The hall is divided by three pairs of T-shaped pylons into a nave and two aisles (the nave is 2.5 times wider than the aisles). The pylons are matched in the long walls by pilasters that support the flying arches of the side vaults.

The arches have been reconstructed; an original surviving arch of the central nave and the flying arches of the side aisles are distinctly horseshoe-shaped. The vaults for the nave and aisles share the same roof. A gallery and room connecting to the church are later additions.

The addition of the north chapel done before the last quarter of the 4th c following the decrees of the Katolikos Sahak Partev who tried to harmonize church structures and rites as he fought against the precepts of the Greek and Syrian churches, who were usurping Armenian rites. A Greek inscription was found in 1908, dedicated to King T’rdat of the Arshakuni Dynasty (353-425 ).
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.

Minivans depart from the bus station by the square for villages throughout the region (Kuchak, 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.

**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.

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**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 and can deliver telegrams.

**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.

**OVERNIGHT**

There is a restaurant/motel (Rent by hour or night) and Restaurant on the right as you enter the town. 5000 AMD for 5 or 24 hours (whichever you require). Other venues in town entirely possible in apartments and homes. Ask around, they are everywhere. 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair. Camping up the hills NE of town by Lusagiugh (3 km).

**Shukas in town, ask at your overnight for recommendation.**

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. Mterks and kiosks are around town. A Univermag is in the center, now privatized.

**Car repair, tires, petrol**

in town and the highway.

**Medical**

The medical center is poorly equipped, folks usually go to Ashtarak or Yerevan. The center has a polyclinic and hospital (tel 4067).

**Apoketas in town, ask at your overnight for recommendation.**

**Aparan**

From Aparan, about 100m S of the Kasakh River Bridge take the E/SE road out of town and through Mulki (1.2 km), to a fork in the road just N of Vardenis (3.8 km from Aparan), turn left (E)
and continue another 5 km, over the Kasakh River
and past the Ch’knagh N turnoff (at 2.8 km) to
(T’tjur) (DD 40.57472 x 44.45472)

Alternate Route to Hankavan: (map next page)
There is a dirt track that surmounts the
Tsaghkuniats Range and descends to Hankavan
Natural Park 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,
takes the right fork North for about 6.2 km up
the mountain as it climbs to the top ridge of the
Tsaghkuniats Range. From there on there is 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’tjur
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
traveler’s reference guide_ is required to safely
navigate you (on page 16).

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 (Lusaglugh) center (DD 40.61444 x 44.39083, elev. 2141m)

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)

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.

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 breath-
taking views (and heart stopping cliff edges and
gorges) and is not for the faint of heart. About
half way along it passes through a mountain
camp once used by the Pioneers. Season rains
may cause rock slides, be sure to ask before you
leave, lest you return unhappy.

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.

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.

**SIDETRIP:** (T’tjur - Թթուր) "Sour Water,"
till 1950 T’mtlu elev. 1943m, pop. 1617) is set
on the western end of the confluence of three
mountain streams that feed the Kasakh River. It
is just north of an inturn of the upper
Tsaghkuniats range, which have forested slopes
worth investigating. Due south is a dirt path
that lead to Yeghipatrun in about 2.2 km and
topping the T’tjur Pass (2093.3m). The village
has a S. Harutiun church and a Karmir Vank
("Red Monastery") said to have been built in the
17th c, located to the south just above the
riverbed near the path to Yeghipatrun.

**SIDETRIP:** (Dzoraglukh - Դժուրագլուխ) til
1946 Gulablub elev. 2089m, pop. 1825) is in
a NW fold of Mt. Arkaster (2687m) that includes
the smaller (2426.1m) mount it lays at the foot of.
On its east end are the ruins of the 10th-
13th c S. Hovhannes church.

**Hikes.** The village is a good jumping off point
for hiking the nearby mountains, with three
possible trails that lead to the top of the
Tsaghkuniats Range. The north trail departs from
the NW of the village and in about 2 km
meets with a N/S path that climbs towards the
T’tjur/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’tjur
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 16).

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.

**SIDETRIP:** (Lusaglugh - Լուսաղկ) formerly
Gharanlegh, pop. 1540) 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 interesting 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 hill near N of the village (about 1 km
on the N path that twists E then N up the
northern hills). The Tukh Manuk (Black Youth) is
a quasi-pagan deity combining traits of gods
from the Near East, and is built on top of a pre-
Christian shrine.

The concentration of Yezdi villagers increases from here through 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. The village 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

**SIDE TRIP:** Dzoraglukh - Դժուրագլուխ
that lies at the foot of. On its east end are the
ruins of the 10th-13th c church.

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half way along it passes through a mountain
camp once used by the Pioneers. Season rains
may cause rock slides, be sure to ask before you
leave, lest you return unhappy.

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mountain track; Overnight in village home
(4000 AMD for B&B is fair);
Springs are in the village.

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.

**SIDETRIP:** (Nigavan - Նիգավան) til 1947
Damagerez, till 1957 Novit, pop. 1574) sits above the Kasakh River valley, on the western
side, the brooding northeaster face of Aragats
top its back. By Nigavan you are officially in shepherding territory, countless herds of cattle,
sheep and goats are herded up the mountainside in the summer months to enjoy the vast
expanses of wind swept grass and wild flowers.

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has a S. Harutiun church and a Karmir Vank
("Red Monastery") said to have been built in the
17th c, located to the south just above the
riverbed near the path to Yeghipatrun.
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.

**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 NEW slope from the western edge of the village, it winds its way up to a couple of summer camps for the area shepherds in about 7.5-8 km. The camps are 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 (3526m). From here on it is a major climb to surmount these ridges and reach the northern peak, and for this last part you need an experienced guide and 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.

**SIDE TRIP: (Mirak - Újhpöp formerly Miriak) sit on 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 walls 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; surveyors from 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 Meilikgh in (formerly Meilik-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, elev. 2070m)** (formerly Ghondaksaz, pop. 858) sits on the west bank of the Kasakh River, which has become more of a 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 several 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 have 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 anistic tombstones in the shape of horses, some of which may be over Mongol warrior remains, and the other, a 4th or 5th c church or chapel, built over a small pagan shrine that was venerated by the Yezidis after their arrival. It fell into disrepair during the Timur expedition, and now sits mostly in ruins, though you will still offerings on the premises, local villagers not wishing to anger the spirits of those who came before.

Camping is possible on the NE hillsides or by the river (ask first); Overnight in village home (4000 AMD for B&B is fair); Springs are in the village.

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 not be so fascinating between digs, since they are captured by the Urartians, the tendency was to tear down or completely revamp the previous structure, especially Early Iron Age fortresses, leaving precious little behind to show us how the ancestors lived.

By a stroke of good luck, the Tsaghkahovit Plain, heretofore thought to be the most advanced Bronze Age civilizations in the area. Its relative obscurity and the protection by surrounding mountains were key to its recent discovery. So much of the earliest sites are lost to us by their very success; when captured by the Urartians, the tendency was to tear down or completely revamp the previous structure, especially Early Iron Age fortresses, leaving precious little behind to show us how the ancestors lived.

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Project ArAGATs

Project ArAGATs (Archaeology And Geography of Ancient Transcaucasian States) is a joint Armenian-American archaeological research project led by Dr. Adam T. Smith of the University of Chicago Department of Anthropology and Dr. Ruben S. Badalyan of the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography, Yerevan, Armenia. The project surveyed and excavated sites throughout the Aragats region, including key finding on the Tsaghkahovit Plain, near Agarak, and in the Aparan Valley, with an eye to document and record known Late Bronze and Early Iron Age fortress sites in the Tsaghkahovit plain and to examine several sites that had been reported to the Institute of Archaeology but never described.

The Project first focused on 8 sites in the Tsaghkahovit Plain; Berdistsot, Geghard, Astot 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 Geghard.

Excavations continue in the summer months. For more details on the project and how to attend, visit their web site at:

accspuchicago.edu/~atsmith/Pages/Aragats.html

Three Ancient Settlements

are near the citadel, South, Southeast and East of the hill, all within 200m of the citadel. Living rooms uncovered in the south and southeast settlements did not show signs of burning, suggesting they were not a part of the episode that destroyed the citadel –or had not yet been built. Ceramic fragments in the disturbed areas were from Late Bronze to Early Iron Ages, while those in the living areas were from later periods.

About 400m E of the citadel hill is the Cemetery, at its N end a cromlech (remains of a stone chamber) that proved to be two burial chambers, one on top of the other. The oval-shaped site (9m x 9.6m) is covered by stone fill and surrounded by large basalt stones. Both chambers were lined with stones and topped with large basalt blocks, their cists (stone burial boxes) oriented in opposite directions (one NW to SE, the other NE-SW) like points on a compass. Ceramics found in the chambers are in line with those found in the fortress, suggesting they are of the same time and development.

Excavations of these sites continue, but project researchers believe that the evidence suggests the following timeline for the site: a settlement was built on the lower reaches of the SW slope in the Early Bronze Age; the fortress, terraces and East Cemetery were added in the Late Bronze Age and the south and southeaster settlements were built in the Late Urartian/Achaemenid period (7th-5th cc BCE).

Camping is possible near the village (ask first); Overnight in village home (3000-5000 AMD for B&B is fair); Springs are in the village.

From Tsaghkahovit center take the N road to the Artik Road (about 1.5 km), turn left (W) and continue about 7.8 km through Amre Taza (at 1.8 km) and past the Geghazor/Berkarat turnoffs (at 4.5 km) to a T intersection; turn left (S) and proceed another 2 km to (Hnaberd center, DD 40.6367 x 44.141, elev. 2117m) "[Image]"

Hnaberd

Hnaberd - (Hnaberd - Tsaghkahovit, pop. 1128) lies mostly on the left (west) bank of a branch of the Geghazor 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.

Backtrack to the Artik Road, turn left (W) and continue for about 4.8 km, past Geghazor (at 2 km) to (Norashen, DD 41.18806 x 44.32722, elev. 2004m) "[Image]"

SIDE TRIP: (Hnaberd - Tsaghkahovit, pop. 1128) 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 hilltops 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 stone work 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.
Khalidi appeared (on the campaign) with his weapons(?), he defeated the land of Kulia ("Qulia"), which prostrated itself before Argishti. Khalidi preceded (king Argishti).

Argishti says: I destroyed the city of Duruba of the land of Qulia

Camping is possible near the village (ask first); Overnight in village home, also at Mets & Pank Manitst and Arevshat villages (4000 AMD for B&B is fair); Springs in the village.

- Backtrack to Alagiaz and the Spitak/Lori Highway in Alagiaz, turn left (N) and in about 100m take the left road for about 3.5 km to (Vardablur) center (DD 40.69611 x 44.2300, elev. 2059m)

SIDE TRIP: (Vardablur - Հայրապատ, till 1950 Jang), pop. 1185) sits on the SE foot of the dormant cone of Mt. Vardablur (2376m) straddling the Dzukend River. The area is mostly farming and animal husbandry, populated by Yezidis.

Paragliding Jump Point. Vardablur is one of the paragliding jump points for the Armenian Aviation Club (see Paragliding). With a 200m vertical take off, the site is surrounded by large fields allowing flight in any wind direction landing zone. You need to pre-arrange for a paraglide, but at roughly $10 a flight day (gear rental extra), it can be a great way to see the area. There are also now paragliding archeological surveys (see Wings Over Armenia in resources on page 93).

Camping is possible on the mountain slope and near the village (ask first); Overnight in village home (3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); Springs are in the village.

- Backtrack to Alagiaz and at the Spitak/Lori highway turn left (N), cross the bridge and continue for about 600m. The highway forks into two roads, take the right (NE) route for about 3.5 km to (Sipan) center and the Tsarist Road to Spitak (DD 40.72167 x 44.26972, elev. 2121m)

SIDE TRIP: (Sipan - Սիփան, till 1978 Pamb Kurd or Pambak, pop. 529) the mountains rise on both sides of the narrow Sipan valley, the small hamlet of mostly Yezidis sitting on the right fork of the highway. Some YezidisSkin has small hamlets, mostly Yezidis. The main road forks into two roads, take the right (NE) route for about 3.5 km to (Sipan) center and the Tsarist Road to Spitak (DD 40.72167 x 44.26972, elev. 2121m)

SCENIC: Sipan is a wonderful place to see the more nomadic life, feeding the more developed populations down the mountain side, these late Bronze Age fortresses show a period of centralized political power, but little is known. Excavators believe that the late Bronze Age citadels at these sites demonstrate a new way of life for the inhabitants of the plain; in contrast to the Middle Bronze Age, from which fewer settlements are found & inhabitants led a more nomadic life, feeding the more developed populations down the mountain side, these late Bronze Age fortresses show a period of centralized power and economy, built on developed religion, culture, and trade.

Excavations of this site and the one at Tsaghkahovit are beginning to illuminate the status of the area in the Late Bronze Age and Achaemenid (5th c BCE Persian) period, of which little is known. Excavators believe that the Late Bronze Age citadels at these sites demonstrate a new way of life for the inhabitants of the plain; in contrast to the Middle Bronze Age, from which fewer settlements are found & inhabitants led a more nomadic life, feeding the more developed populations down the mountain side, these late Bronze Age fortresses show a period of centralized power and economy, built on developed religion, culture, and trade.

The citadel covers an area of about 3.5 ha, and is eroded, with bedrock sticking up in places. Fortification walls were mostly buried, the excavation team uncovering about 25m so far, enough to show a refined construction process unknown in other sites in this region. The fortifications had a gateway on the NW side and several buttresses, a feature seen at pre-Urartu sites by Sevan.

The site revealed a number of ceramic fragments; many from the Early Bronze Age and a number of decorated pieces. Excavations of the Kura-Araxes civilization, a highly centralized people from Early Bronze Age who populated the Kura and Araxes River basins.

Scenic: Sign village on the deteriorating road as you cross a river gorge bridge. The mountains rise on both sides of the narrow Sipan valley, the small hamlet of mostly Yezidis sitting on the right fork of the highway. Some Yezidis Skin has small hamlets, mostly Yezidis. The main road forks into two roads, take the right (NE) route for about 3.5 km to (Sipan) center and the Tsarist Road to Spitak (2378m). Subject to mudslides and lack of interest to repair this original connection between Lori and Aragatsotn, you can wind your way in about 14 km through spectacular scenery, hair raising turns and sheer cliffs to Spitak (via Lernantsk).

Camping is possible on the mountain slopes and near the village (ask first); Overnight in village home (4000 AMD for B&B is fair); Springs in the village.

- Backtrack to the fork in the highway and turn right (NW) onto the new road to Spitak and continue for about 800m to (Jamsulu, DD 40.69056 x 44.27361)

SIDE TRIP: (Jamsulu - Ջամշոււ, elev. 2059m, pop. 1325) is on the right bank (N) of the Kasakh River, to the south of the highway. The village is the site of Aragatsi-Berd, one of the sites being investigated by archeologists with Project ARAGATS (side column) on an outcrop to the north of the village (at 40.69576 x 44.28523, elev. 2087m). Several sections of the stone fortifications are clearly visible from the surface along with a large concentration of ceramic debris from the Early to Mid Bronze and Iron Ages. The site resembles in many ways those at Gehaghor, a little further NW from here, with signs of both Early and Late Bronze occupation, followed by use of the site during the mid Iron and Achaemenid eras.

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

- Continue NW on the highway for about 4.6 km to a right (E) turn into GEGHAROT (DD 40.70583 x 44.21944, elev. 2081m)

GEGHAROT - Ջեղարոտ - (till 1945 Keshishkend, pop. 1185) lies on the NE edge of the Tsaghkahovit Plain and is the focus of recent excavations, one of which, in 2003, uncovered a major find, an intact religious center with a fire altar. The site was first identified in 1964 by researchers who recorded scattered Early Bronze Age surface materials, a cyclopean fortress, and a cemetery, the cemetery becoming the focus of excavations, uncovering eight burial sites between 1956-1960.

The current excavations (by Project ARAGATS, side column), are focusing on the citadel itself, which sits on a spur of Mt. Tsiklar (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).
The Early Bronze Age items were found mainly on the northern and eastern slopes. Other ceramics are traced to the late Iron Age and Urartian period with still others to the little known Achaemenid period that followed the collapse of the Urartian kingdom.

In 2003 the team uncovered a circular altar complex within the citadel area. The floor surrounding the altar was strewn with ceramics, all of which date to the first and second horizons of the Late Bronze Age. Preliminary research suggests that this altar complex is the earliest one of its kind in the region and unique in its association with metallurgy. The area around the altar yielded a crucible, a mold used to make jewelry, and bronze objects, including a pin and bracelet.

About 1.6 km N of the village is the heretofore unrecorded Ashot Yerkat fortress (Tsilkar Fortress), built around an eroded rocky elliptical citadel set upon an upper peak of Mt. Tsilkar (at 40.72245 x 44.22834, elev. 2407m). The small fortress (0.15 ha) provides clear views across the entire Tsaghkahovit Plain as well as the north of the Aparan basin. It is nearly impregnable on the north side, the slopes are virtually impossible to climb while its southern side (with parts in good shape) held the entry gate. On the south slope is a cromlech (stone chamber) cemetery running up to the fortifications. This site has not yet been excavated.

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

Continue N on the highway for about 3 km past Tsilkar to the Pambak Pass where continuing on the main highway (N) will take you into Lori Marz and Spitak (16 km) and Vanadzor (35 km). A left turn at the pass (diagonal to the NW) in about 3.5 km uphill will take you to (Lernapar, DD 40.74861 x 44.16056, elev. 2198m)

SIDE TRIP: (Lernapar - Lênûswup “Mountain Dance,” bill 1978 as Haikakan (Armenian) Pamb, 1978. pop. 1544) is on the northern edge of the Tsaghkahovit Plain and at the foot of Mt. Mensar (2419m). The village, other than being the northernmost village in Aragatsotn and the starting point for several excellent hiking trails into Lori, is also the site for Berdidosh, a Bronze Age Fortress and Citadel. The fortress is on a high rocky outcrop overlooking the entire northern plain (at 40.73835 x 44.18318, elev. 2209m). The fortifications, mostly in ruins, encircle the outcrop and form its citadel, the walls built of medium size stones without infill. The site includes the fragmentary ruins of a stone wall which appears to have encircled the upper reaches of the outcrop. The survey of the site was on the surface only, showing a few shards with no conclusive dating. It is assumed the fortress was Late Bronze, Early Iron Age as well as Urartian and Achaemenid. The site awaits a fuller excavation.

Hiking. The village is a good point to start several hikes, from an easy 1-3 hour jaunt to more difficult climbs over the Pambak range into Lori. There are also several nomad and summer camps in the area, to the west of the village. Unless you want to climb Mt. Mensar to the north, hikes all begin from the western edge of the village at the end of its southern road. From there a mountain track goes W for about 800m to the Gegharot River.

The Lernavan route follows the river for about 300m to a 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 Jrrat Route, instead of going north along the river continues on the mountain track for about 1.6 km to an intersection with a mountain path that angles back to the NE for about 1.4 km to the Azatani summer camp. Continue on another 600m and you will reach an intersection with a N/S path; N on this path will lead to the Yeghenlar Summer camp in about 1.2 km. Continue west on the original track, in about 1 km, passing 5 intersections in about 1.2 km (N to the Imirkhan summer camp and ruins and Tamardash camp and ruins on the mountain slopes at 500m and 1.5 km respectively) and 2.2 km and a N intersection at 2.8 km. This last intersection leads in about 3.5 km to the Duzkend Summer camp. In another 400m you are the entry to Tsaghkasar Ruins, 500m N, and another 800m to the Ghamvali ruins, both Iron Age-Medieval settlements. There is a foot path from the entry point that continues another 4.5 km to Jrrat. 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) - (Kakavadzor) - (Balsiz) - (Karakan Fortess) - (Nerkin Sasunashen) - (Asnak) - (Irind) - (Katnaghbiur) - (Shgharshik) - (Yeghnik) --

This trip visits the western region of Aragatsotn, starkly different from the other regions. The area at the foot of the mountain may be on the same elevation as those in the west, but they are more akin to those found in Shirak and Armavir, two regions to which they once belonged. The route passes through the mountain steppe land and desert marshes of the upper Ararat plain, its rocky land emerald green in the springtime, fading to shades of reddish brown in the summer, save the numerous dots of dark green oasis’ along its rocky profile. In the upper elevations the snow melt feeds a constant undulating cross section of green grass and red, yellow and blue wild flowers. The swathe of land that makes up the road from Ashtarak to Talin straddles the terrain of green upper meadows with flocks of sheep and herds of cattle fattening on the seas of grass and the semi-desert craggy landscape that fades from spring to summer like the waves of heat that rise off the rocks.

This contrast shaped the peoples who first settled here, beginning around 500,000 BCE, inhabiting the (then) smoldering mountain slopes and thickly forested riverbeds on the bottom of the high plain. As forests were felled and the mountain’s cone cooled, the upper freeze increased to its current 5 months of the year, sending settlers southwards, on the lower plains. The road you travel on this trip takes you along one of the oldest trade routes in the world, from the Kura-Araxes river basins, and their connection with the civilizations of the south (Babylon, Sumeria) to the Shirak Plains, which link to the Black Sea and Anatolia. Not surprisingly the fortresses, citadels and settlements of the Bronze Age show a link with these distant lands, trading beliefs and ideas along with goods. The route became a vital conduit of trade in later Urartian and Achaemenid eras and was a key route to controlling the area in the Roman era. In the early Christian period the route became a conduit for the conversion of the kingdom by the followers of the Gregory the Illuminator and T’rdat III. By the 4th c, the region had become a protectorate of the Mamikonians, a rich and powerful family ruled the area until the 8th c. They established a seat of power at Kosh and sponsored the construction boom of the 5th-7th cc in the marz, sponsoring ever more elaborate monasteries and churches throughout the marz: the great monasteries at Aruch, Talin and Kosh were matched by experiments in new architecture at small out of the way places like Irind, Yeghnik, Nerkin Bazmaberd & Nerkin Sanashen.

This trip is only 46 km long, but it passes an entire swathe 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.

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.

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.

Stay: Hotel in Talin (of the most basic kind), restaurants/motels between Udjan and Kosh, village homes (basic), camping by Kosh reservoir, Kakavdazor.

EAT: Talin cafes, Agarak/Udjan cafes, roadside stands.

Sights: Udjan, Aragatsotn, Kosh, Avan, Aruch, Nerkin Bazmaberd, Kakavdazor, Verin Bazmaberd, Ashnak, Irind, Katnaghbiur, Yeghnik.

From the W exit to Ashtarak on the Giurmi 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, elev. 1069m)

SIDE TRIP: (Udjan) - 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 Ghettsik, 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, “ogh-EE,” village home brew). The village
has a statue of General Andranik, hero and leader of the 1915 Armenian Genocide and 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 “P'ko giugh” ("P'ko village") next to a shepherd camp, and about 1.5 km NE “Baramam,” a cyclopean fortress with church ruins. There are also caves in the area.

OVERNIGHT

Restaurants/motels proliferate on the Giumri highway in Udjan, facing farmland irrigated by the 7th c BCE Shamiram canal and one of the more beautiful views of Mt. Ararat. The spots also pose as khorovats cafes, tasty meals if you pick the meat yourself. You can’t miss them; they lay right off the highway and their neon/Christmas light displays are unmistakable at night. At present count there are four of these sleepovers, more or less the same in facilities (4-5 basic doubles, running water, hot water), and purpose (“5000 drams, 5 hours” or the same for 24 hours). There is one standout:

UDJAN RESTAURANT HOTEL, Udjan, tel. 093-8252090 093-189640, is the best of the offerings, and a good bet for overnight it too; the basic rooms are clean, with a/c and 24 hour hot water, with the best part being its location—in front of a huge apricot orchard, immaculately maintained with dining tables under the bowers. In spring this is glorious. The complex has individual cottages and a small pool, DBL/CC at 6000/15,000 AMD. One of the best deals in the country.

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.

- Backtrack to the Giumri highway, turn R (W) for about 3.4 km to a Khachkar prominently set off the road on the right

KOŠKH KHAÇHKAR - ԿՈՒԿՀԻԽԱԽԿԱՐ

The large khachkar is dated 1195, and was erected to commemorate the deliverance of Aragatsotn from Seljuk Turks in a decisive battle that turned them away, setting the stage for a brief revival of Armenian culture under the Mongol invasions 40 years later. The battle against the Seljuks was waged under the leadership of the Zakarian brothers, Zakareh and Ivaneh, brilliant Armenian generals under the patronage of the Georgian Orbeli Kings who managed to regain the northern Armenian Kingdom. The khaçkhar 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 taffeta, with an abstract depiction of the tree of life all but obscured by the riotous geometric patterns. The cross is set over an ornate sun symbol, also typical of the latter period symbolizing the Christ, the victorious one, conquering over the pagan sun god. Its highlight at this late period is puzzling. Wouldn’t it have been more likely to use such a forceful depiction in the earlier days, during the Pagan Wars of the 4th c? For some reason, in the throes of defense against the Byzantines, Seljuks, Kurdish Emirs and Mongols, this symbol is resurrected and propelled into contemporary current. I like to think it was a deliberate assault, a kind of rude hand gesture at the enemy, the crucifying 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 KOŠH (DD 40.30722 x 44.16000, elev. 1275m)

KOŠH - ԿՈՒԹԱՀ

(formerly Khash, pop. 1452) is set in a fold of the mountain foothills, just south of the Arzni-Shamiram Canal at the place where the mountain slopes begin to rise dramatically and steeply to the cone’s base. There are a number of small farms on the south and north ends of the village and, more notoriously, the Kosh Penal Institution in the village, which has imprisoned Jehovah's Witnesses for refusing to serve in the army (and some say for being a rival religion). You can see the church on a low hill in the center of the village, and right high above it, the Kosh castle, camouflaged by its brown surroundings in summer and autumn but sticking out like a sore thumb in the snowly spring grass. Koshavanak is located in a ravine in the western hills outside of the village.

Historically the area was a strategic point on the main route through south Aragatsotn, from the Paleolithic era as archaeologists 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 Koshavanak monastery (details below).

Fortress settlements were developed in the early Bronze Age, expanding in the Iron Age and Hellenistic period (2nd BCE 3rd c.), as Kosh fortress shows (details follow).

Directly uphill from center in the village cemetery (take the road running by the canal then cross a bridge into the cemetery) you will find the ruins of a S. Grigor Church (said to be 13th c, but its structure and design are pure 4th c hall form), surrounded by a large cemetery. The hall church still has its walls, with khaçkars embedded into the medium sized dress blocks as well as boasting a sundial. The collapsed roof was gabled, some of the original stone roofing survives.

The surrounding medieval cemetery (9th-10th cc) has some impressive khaçkars, including a 7th c black open span cross with the wings still intact, a beautiful 13th c red khachkar done in a lace tatting style with deeply incised and riotously geometric patterns that almost obscure its design and the semicircular top to an unknown khaçkars shrine with stunning ornamental designs.

Kosh Castle. Straight up the steep hill from the cemetery and S. Grigor (a new winding road on the E end was built for renovation work but is usable by Jeeps and Vilis/UAZ only; otherwise walk the 100m or so uphill), on a large rocky promontory looming on top of the village is the 13th c Kosh castle, the last of a series of forts in the surrounding complex of "Kosh Castle."

The castle is an oblong structure with rounded edges on its W and E ends, and a southern gate. The red tufa building is built on a foundation of cyclopean blocks of black tufa, probably borrowed from earlier structures, but dressed for the 13th c building. The building was much higher than it is now, with towers that looked out over the Ararat Valley and the southern Shirak and Aparan basins. The south gate is enclosed with a narrow vaulted hall, easier to defend against unwanted intruders. Its exterior archway is simply done, as are the outside walls.

SE of Kosh castle on a nearby hill are Iron Age towers.

Nearby are the substantial remains of the once large and bustling Koshavanak Monastery, an important monastery and seminary for the region in the Marmikian / Bagratuni and Zakarian eras. To get there from the village cemetery, go 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, more notoriously, a long rocky promontory looming on top of the village is the 13th c Kosh castle, the last of a series of forts built on the spot, excavations having uncovered hundreds of km away, providing days of advance facilities (4-5 basic doubles, running water, hot water), and purpose (“5000 drams, 5 hours” or the same for 24 hours). There is one standout:

Kosh Castle. Straight up the steep hill from the cemetery and S. Grigor (a new winding road on the E end was built for renovation work but is usable by Jeeps and Vilis/UAZ only; otherwise walk the 100m or so uphill), on a large rocky promontory looming on top of the village is the 13th c Kosh castle, the last of a series of forts built on the spot, excavations having uncovered hundreds of km away, providing days of advance facilities (4-5 basic doubles, running water, hot water), and purpose (“5000 drams, 5 hours” or the same for 24 hours). There is one standout:

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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.

Shrine on its L built into a rocky promontory, impossibly placed in a spine of rock with no apparent access, obviously for those serious about getting their spiritual nourishment with its difficult climb to reach.

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 gqgon 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 traveler's reference guide symbol that is in this carving represented by a shrine on its L built into a rocky promontory, impossibly placed in a spine of rock with no apparent access, obviously for those serious about getting their spiritual nourishment with its difficult climb to reach.

Return downhill to the path to the ravine and take it (by vehicle or on foot) to S. Stepanos church (7th c), built in a gorge against a cliff allowing one entrance, on the S. The central dome church has two chambers adjoining the apse, with an opening to the northern apsidal. The chambers were used as treasuries and depositories,

that function moving to ch 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 apsiodes (secondary apses) and uniquely finished, with the southern apsidal covered by a barrel vault and the northern with a groin vault, decorated with small conches 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

Fragments of the frescoes remain to show how richly ornamented the sanctuary was; on the apse wall there is a fragment of “Christ enthroned” and, level to the window, a depiction of the twelve apostles, six on either side, receiving from the central Christ figure a scroll of scripture. This last is considered unusual, for painting of this kind normally show the Christ dispensing wine and bread (the blood of Christ, the body of Christ), but at S. Stepanos, he distributes the word of God. This may mark the monastery as a special seminary, educating and consecrating priests, the “new apostles” charged with preaching the good word.

The exterior is also richly decorated, the southern entrance decorated with a portal topped with a pointed arch spanning the doorway, bridging two sets of colonettes. The door frame, window frames and the cornice are covered with miniature arches, beading, and circular designs. The building is roofed with gables and the missing dome was set upon a polygonal drum, topped with an umbrella roof.

The nearby hermit caves dot the landscape, the most dramatic a series of small hand-hewn cells with circular entries lining the face of a large promontory. The effect of the dark holes ringing the side of the ionized basalt rock is almost lunar. It is hard to fathom the dedication of monks spending their lives in one of these small cramped cells, stifling hot under the summer sun and frigid in winter. The monastery cemetery has some interesting khachkars and khachkar fragments, including an early 7th c primitive made from brown basalt and carved with a simple but evocative style, and a beautiful red 10th-11th cc khachkar, with sun symbols at the head and base wings of the cross and the tree of life looking like sheaths of wheat.

West of the village, on top of a hill is the 13th c Great Kosh Khachkar, kept company by the wind and roaming cows. The cross is truly huge, its base taller than a grown person. The red tufa khachkar is set upon a three-step pedestal of black and red tufa and encased in a frame of reinforcing tufa blocks, also red and carved like a picture frame, with multi-layered edging. This is a true masterpiece of khachkar art, the lace tatting style of deeply incising the stone creates an unbelievably complex pattern of geometric designs, wrapping around the cross on its top and sides, then continuing in a second upper row of even more intricate design that is again topped with an upward curving cornice supporting a crown of even more elaborate interlacing lines and etches, a 13th c version of the gqgon 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 traveler's reference guide symbol that is in this carving represented by a shrine on its L built into a rocky promontory, impossibly placed in a spine of rock with no apparent access, obviously for those serious about

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SIDE TRIP: (Avan – Uzul, pop. 533) lies at the SE edge of a major delta of mountain streams that arcs off the upper branch of the Ampur (Amberd) River. Many of them seasonal, the streams nevertheless provide a vital source of irrigation and drinking water, and there are a number of mountain springs in the area. Inside the village are the remains of the 5th c Astvatsatsin Basilica, a single-nave hall church popular throughout Armenian history. The church was built on a stepped stylobate and has the east apse integrated within the rectangular walls. Owing to its location near pre-Christian fortresses and signs of settlement from earlier periods, the church is likely to have been erected over an earlier mountain shrine to an unknown pagan deity.

Due S of the village at the end of a dirt track, on a large promontory with superb views of the entire Ararat Valley are the remains of an Iron Age Cyclopean Fortress built on top of a Bronze Age fort and Neolithic open air workshops. Another, the Avan fortress at 1880m has only had cursory inspection and is hard to detect.

Hiking There are a number of alpine trails off of Avan, including a NE trail that leads eventually to Amberd. Taking a track out of the E edge of the village, follow the trail for about 9 km as it passes through the delta and then along the main tributary and its gorge as it reaches a sharp left (NW) turn barely 300m from Amberd. A ridge and the impassable Amberd Gorge separates you, though, but hiking about 1 km SE from the point you reach another track that heads NW, crosses the Amberd and reaches the Castle in about 1.2 km of steep incline. A local guide can show you the way.

Not very good Camping is possible near the village (ask first); Overnight in village home (rustic, 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); Springs are in the village and in the delta.

SIDE TRIP: (Shamiram – Cuilijnud) (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. The cemetery has the grave for Youssef Bek, a famous Yezidi fighter against the Turks in 1918, hero of the Sardarabad battle.

In the winter the fields are good places to hunt for Neolithic, Bronze Age and Iron Age finds worked up by tractor plows. Near the SW edge of the village, two mountain stream gorges meet. The point is the site of a vast area of settlement in the Bronze Age to Medieval period, their foundations appearing as impressions in the field or sticking out of the ground.

There are also the remains of a huge fortress also dated to the Bronze Age, though the location, by two mountain rivers, suggests the site was used from a very early period.

All around you are parts of a substantial burial ground, with remaining traces of cromlechs and ancient burial sites, some quite rich with their findings. The cromlechs are a prime spot to find Petroglyphs and Pictograms from the Bronze and Iron Ages, about 10 of which can be seen on the carved surfaces with circular objects (The sun? A god? Time?) matched with stylized human and animal figures, symbolizing the person’s life, or a zodiacal positioning of the stars.

Not very good Camping is possible near the village (ask first); Overnight in village home (rustic, 4000 AMD for B&B is fair); Springs are in the village.

Backtrack to the Aruch intersection N of the village, turn left (W) and follow for about 2.7 km into central ARUCH (DD 40.28929 x 44.08695, elev. 1226m) (until 1970 Talish, pop. 5964) is a little visited but amazing place, the little village and the surrounding area embracing a jaw-dropping array of artifacts and buildings from the Bronze Age through the late medieval periods, including a pagan church, a 7th c cathedral, a castle, settlements, Bronze Age tombs, menhirs, khachkars, Greek sarcophagi, stelae, wineries, caves and other artifacts.

There is a 19th c church in the village, with early khachkars and khachkar fragments used in its construction but the village is best known as the historic seat in Aragatsotn for the Mamikonian Family (Grigor Mamikonian, 661-682), which dominated Armenian politics from the 4th-8th cc. The Mamikonians are part and parcel of the history and folklore of Armenia, their leaders seeming to have been either reckless adventurers with little regard for the well being of their subjects or brilliant tacticians who saved the essence of the
Armenian culture, if losing battles of record. As with all of Armenian history, it depends on who you talk to.

The Mamikonians The family claimed descent from Chinese emperors of the Han dynasty, indicating that both trade and power brokering had a long history in the family tree. The first Mamikonian on record was Vacheh Mamikonian (r. 330-339), the family bursting on the scene in the chronicles beginning in 355, when the family was headed by the new Sparapet (Commander-in-chief) Vasak Mamikonian. The office of Sparapet became hereditary under Vasak, handed from one Mamikonian to the next with few exceptions. This became the source of their real power in Armenia.

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 just flown in from Beirut to escape the Israeli bombing). But their heartfelt prayers, their chants and beautiful singing reverberated off the towering walls of the cathedral, giving me one of those moments of revelation I so often get on my trips: this was a building not only to look at, its frescoes to teach the masses the stories of the Bible and the path to God; this was a building for sound; for the emotional pleading of open weeping and prayers of supplication, for the dissonant sounds of Armenian church chants, so alike and yet unlike the Gregorian chants in the west, and for the music of sacred hymns echoing in the deep chamber. Even without its dome, the prayers, chants and hymns were overwhelming, putting each stone into its place as if for the first time. This was a building to hear as well as see.

Vartan Mamikonian By 393 the family was headed by Hamazas, whose wife the princess Sahakunush was the daughter of Saint Sahak the Great ("Isaak the Great," Katolikos of Armenia and sponsor of Mesrop Mash’tos’ quest to rediscover the lost Armenian script, which led to the new alphabet in 405 ) and a descendant of the Artashises. The Armenian family 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 Yazdagird II was reengaging earlier compacts with Armenian warrors 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, 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 Vardanantz (“Vartan”) at Avarair (“ah-va-RYE-er”) Field in Vaspurakan (SW of Nakhichevan, between Lakes Van and Urmiya).

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. Yazdagirt 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.

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By 750, the Mamikonians had lost Taik, Khelat and Mush to the Bagratunis, their leader Aratavazd in the 770 giving his daughter to Smbat VII Bagratuni, ruler of Armenia, whose son, Smbat Masaker (literally “the meat-eater” or “carnivore” but meaning “the voracious”), became the forefather of the Bagratuni line of Kings. This was a wise choice.

A not-so-wise choice was to lead a rebellion against the Arabs in 774-775, while your new son-in-law had just made compact with the caliphate. The war against the Arabs marked the end of the Mamikonian rule, replaced by the Bagratunis who took possession of the lands they were forced to abdicate. There is evidence one Mamikonian continued to rule Sason ca. 800 and that they continued to reign in Bagravand for another 50 years, the last of their line, Gregory, regaining the province in 860, only to lose it again to the Bagratunis shortly thereafter.
porticoes each topped with an arch and a later tent stone roof, the outlines for which can be seen above the portals. Evidently Grigor was also enamored of other buildings of the time; Aruch’s Cathedral boasts a number of decorative elements from Zvartnots, including window ornaments and cornice shapes.

The interior still has traces of the original frescoes, including one on the apse of Christ holding a scroll of Gospel text in his left hand, painted against a deep blue background on the apse conch with a frieze of acanthus vines and baskets of fruit below, and further down figures of apostles. This fresco combines the compositions of “The Lord Offering the Law” with “The Ascension,” and bears more than a passing resemblance to Hellenist fresco traditions (unconstrained and ornamental motifs).

The church is considered the most outstanding example of the domed hall type of churches. It is also the largest of its type (34.6 x 16.9m inside). The church can be dated exactly due to the masons’ inscription and in a number of references by contemporary chroniclers; it was built between 661-666 for Prince Gagik Mamikonian as the mother church for his seat of power at Aruch, its sides having a 2:1 ratio, a precise measurement for domed halls in the 6th and 7th cc (in the mid Middle Ages churches had been refined to a ration of between 1:1.6 to 1:1.3).

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The original column bases stand exactly as they did in the 7th cc, 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 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 a depression for the royal derriere. Some think that the building was originally religious, converted to secular use by the Mamikonian family.

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 archevite ceiling with columns.

The dome was placed at the exact center of the large hall, supported by the cube and arcs. Fragments of the drum cornerstone the half-colonettes found next to the cathedral show it was polygonal and decorated with an arcature that wrapped around its sides. Pendentives (triangular sections of vaulting between the rim of a dome and each adjacent part of the arches that support it) were used for the transition to the drum, which was round inside.

The hall which was spacious and well-lit for its time, the side wall windows paired with upper windows on its north and south wings. The eastern apse is flanked by two rectangular chapels on either side, the chapels each having an apse as well as a cross vault. The central apse has three windows on its back wall, two of which are found in the deep triangular niches cut into the eastern façade. The three entrances are decorated with ornaments.

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.

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 cc, 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 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 (2.3x1.0m) is made of tufa, carved with parallel piping design, its surface carved with a depression for the royal derriere.

The original column bases stand exactly as they did in the 7th cc, 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.
time or another to serve the needs of the palace and cathedral.

The surrounding early Christian and Medieval cemeteries have some excellent examples of khachkars and grave stones, including a stepped stylobate double grave and grave stones from the 5th c forward. Lying on the ground, too fragile to be moved, is an ancient 4th or 5th c stone cross, 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 membirs and vishap (dragon) stones from the Bronze and Iron Ages, others newly minted in their times, both sporting figures of saints and crosses on their sides, the more elaborate telling gospel stories in picture form (handy for the bulk of the population, which was illiterate) and evocative depictions of crosses.

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 the stones. 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 intended windows of a stone cut vat for fermenting grapes, set within a settlement from the same period and some odd looking objects made from stacked stone blocks.

They look like they have been deliberately made in much later times, but locals swear they are part of the early period. Scattered through the village are a number of interesting 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 and end of a 9th-10th cc khachkar with only the upper end remaining, the design over the top of the looking like rams horns; and an early (4th c) primitive cross carved into a large stone, with three carved cups on the surface of the stone, resembling the cups found on Bronze Age platforms allied with early astral observatories. Was this an early Christian attempt to "baptize" a pagan site?

Both inside and out of the village, especially in the space shared with Shamiram Village just 1.2 km to the SE are additional medieval cemeteries and a substantial prehistoric burial site, with Bronze Age tombs, some with menhirs (stone pillars). There are also Caves in the area, along the canyon walls of the nearby river.

OVERNIGHT / FOOD & DRINK

Narek Restaurant/Hotel, Giumri Hwy, about 2 km W of Shamiram turnoff, is a new venue with several rooms connected to their restaurant (Armenian menu, $5-$15) for 10,000-15,000 AMD. Like all Restaurants/Hotels, their main clientele are those seeking a late night drink or sleeping over hangovers. Rooms however, are clean and staff is friendly.

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

SIDE TRIP: (Nor Amanos – Agarak) (DD 40.22422 x 44.37877) 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.

About 300m to the right (E) of the Aruch intersection on the Giumri Highway is a northbound road turning off to the left. Take that road for about 3 km to central (Agarak) (DD 40.30778 x 44.28472) .

SIDE TRIP: (Agarak - Ugupunu) once Talishi Agarak, elev. 1063m, pop. 1497) sits on the lower slopes of Aragats, which appears to the NE. The village was once inhabited by members of the Talish tribe (hence the old name “Talishi Agarak”) but the current settlers came from Van in 1920. The village has the ruins of a 5th-6th cc church and an Urartian site N of the village on the hills.

Not very good Camping is possible near the village (ask first); Overnight in village home (rustic, 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); Springs are in the village.

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.
The deteriorating road another 4 km to Kakavadzor (DD 40.3436 x 44.01194)

**SIDE TRIP:** (Kakavadzor – Քարավադցում formerly Yashil, elev. 1478m, pop. 1513) sits on the SE end of a delta of Mountains streams flowing from the upper highlands of Aragats, its hilly terrain quickly turning to steep inclines and promontories to its N and E. SE of the village, across a river bed, are the ruins of the Late Bronze Age / Iron age Kakavaberdi complex (2nd-1st millennia BCE) that includes a carved map on a slab of tufa from the late Bronze/Iron Age. A map shows what seem to be irrigation lines, as well as settlements.

**Hiking.** There are some really good, challenging hikes from Kakavadzor, following the delta N and NE towards the Aragats cone, with numerous springs and different levels of inclines and terrain. One great 1-2 day trek is to follow the Talish River from the NE edge of the village and follow it into its canyons and upper mountain terrain to Mt. Kakavasar (3303.2), about 14 km distant. A local, experienced guide will help you navigate the best paths. 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 and area.

- On the N end of Kakavadzor a bad dirt track continues northwards through the mountainous terrain for about 1.4 km to (Baisez) (DD 40.360833 x 44.0552778)

**SIDE TRIP:** (Baisez – Բայթջղա formerly Bashois, elev. 1564m, pop. 1513) is on the right bank (E) of the Talish River, a tiny hamlet of shepherds in high alpine country with nearby cliffs and rugged grasslands to the north. The village has a **c chapel** built over earlier foundations (5th-7th cc). SW of the village is the 7th c church fragments of another church and continue about 1.8 km to (Nerkin Sasunashen) (DD 40.36194 x 43.98278)

**SIDE TRIP:** (Nerkin Sasunashen – Ներկին Սասունաշեն formerly Gharagonmaz, elev. 1759m, pop. 1491) sits on the left bank of a mountain village, with cyclopean ruins, and above the village, two small reservoirs ideal for camping in cooler weather. The dirt track continues N about 3 km to Mets Irind (2050.9m) and Irind Village.

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

- Backtrack to the Giumri Highway, turn L (W) and continue for about 3.5 km to the Nerkin Sasunik/Ashnak intersection, turn right (NE) and continue about 1.8 km to (Nerkin Sasunashen)

**SIDE TRIP:** (Ashnak - Աշնակ formerly Eshnak, 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 trupe, which perform throughout the year in 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 site of a medieval cemetery with fragments of another church (4th-5th cc) and the outlines of a cyclopean fort in the farmland. Take the left (S) fork of a dirt track from the SW end of the village will take you in about 4 km to just S of the site of a medieval fort (9th-10th cc) and an Arshakuni period grave site, with Hellenistic graves.

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

- Backtrack to the Giumri Highway, turn L (W) and continue for about 3.4 km past Davashen to where the road rises to an intersection at the Irind road. Turn R (N) on the good asphalt road (courtesy of the Prime Minister, who was born here) and continue another 3 km to central (Irind, DD 40.34309 x 43.97594)

**SIDE TRIP:** (Irind -Իրինդ elev. 1884m, pop. 1480) is 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.
The Kamsarakans were an Armenian branch of the Karen-Pahlav, one of the seven great houses of Armenia. Their 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 Arabs in 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 leadership of the kingdom and a site of religious patronage by the Kamsarakans.

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: (Katnaghibur – 溻lʊphʊŋ ʊmʊ) formerly Mehraban, elev. 1915m, pop. 1980) straddles the Giumri Highway, with a roadside stand in season for a quick bite or drink. The village has a ruined 5th c church in its center, about 100m off the highway.

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

On the W edge of Katnaghibur, a village road crosses a stream and turns sharply right (N) for about 3.8 km to central (Shgharshik, DD 40.41667 x 43.96667)

SIDE TRIP: (Sh’gharshik – Թղարշիք Շղառաշիք) till 1935 Shamikh Hajji, elev. 2070m, pop. 1568) is a small village of shepherds and dairy producers on windswept mountainous terrain. The shepherds make excellent guides if you want to explore the alpine terrain in the N. The village has a small Iron Age Kloroghlu fortress with Bronze Age remains in the territory and a small cave by the cemetery to the NE, converted into a shrine.

The interior was done in a way to emphasize its volume, the cornices with long coronas decorated with fretwork and pomegranate fruit and leaves, and window archivolt (sub arches) with geometric patterns and half-colonnets set into wall niches, all combine to give the illusion of a much bigger building than it really was. The exterior of multi color finely hewn tufa façade echoes the interior arches, with bas relief arcature over colonettes. Missing are traces of the more of the original décor that decked out the interior, including any frescoes, so we can only imagine what treasures were used to adorn the building, but it remains, by itself and destroyed by earthquakes, a still magnificent example of the Mastara type of church. Nearby are remains of an Iron Age fortress, with traces of Bronze Age constructions.

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

Take the W mountain road from Shgharshik for about 2 km to (Yeghnik, DD 40.40000 x 43.95000) for about 3 km to the Giumri Highway, turn right (W) and continue about 4 km to the entry road to Talin. Turn L and go central TALIN (DD 40.38850 x 43.87292, elev. 1614m)

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 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 Yaghchishapat (Echmadzin) 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 region. Under Arshakir II, the family joined the rebellion against the Sassanids in 451 and again in 482-484 under Arshakir’s son Nerses. Kamsarakans are mentioned as generals for Justinian I, as imperial exarch of Italy and prince of Armenia for the emperor in the late 7th c, serving as curopalate (an honorific title in the Byzantine court for second after the emperor). One even raised a revolt against the emperor in 808. In Armenia, the Kamsarakans took part in the revolt against the Arabs 771-72 and, after its failure, their house was abolished and they were forced to sell their possessions in Armenia. The family then branched into the Pahlavunis, which assumed the religious mantle of the country in the 9th-10th cc.
cathedral yard and cemetery and then to R and L
to the main entrance.

The exact date for the founding church is not known, its masons left no inscription and its earliest mention, though dated 783, was for the
creation of waterworks by a priest named
Ukhtootiu and his brother Tot’l, presumably done
after the church itself was built. The fact its
architecture is more refined and advanced than
early 7th c structures places it sometime between
mid 7th century and the date of the waterworks,
mostly like during the reign of the Kamsarakan
Prince Nerses (the builder), who commissioned
the small S. Astvatsatsin nearby.

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.

The triple-nave church seems to be a synthesis of
two earlier forms of buildings; the cruciform and
the older Armenian basilica-type churches with
cupola. Some think its design is taken from S.
Grigor at Dvin (ca. early 7th c), and their plans are
remarkably alike. The wings of this apsidal cross
form are almost identical in size, their interior
semicircular apses matched by polygonal exterior
walls. As opposed to cross-domed churches
before, the dome is no longer placed over the
center of the hall, but over the center of the
building and extending the western wing to
creating a monumental piece of architecture.

Pendentives (capital shelves) make the transition
to the polygonal drum, its twelve sides typical for
drums of the second half of the 7th c (one for each
apostle). There are five entries on the north,
south and west sides.

The interior is quite large and one the best lit in
Armenia, its walls boasting 28 windows with
additional light pouring in from the round ports
and 12 windows in the drum. The walls were
richly decorated, covered with friezes and
frescoes, historically important since they prove
that frescoes were common on the interiors of
Armenian churches in the late 6th-7th cc
Remaining frescoes include "Christ's entry into
Jerusalem" on the south side, the figure of Christ
on a donkey clearly visible in 1918 but now the
only parts of the scene visible are portraits of six
apostles. Talin also has the only remaining
Armenian example of a fresco showing Christ in a
medallion with busts of the apostles, which
surround the apse arch. The Apse itself once
contained a Theophanic vision (a divine
manifestation, a vision of reality in which
everything seen takes on symbolic meanings.
Interestingly the Islamic tradition uses the term
"ta‘vil" which means the same thing and describes
inscriptions on funerary towers such as that at Nor
Amanos), like at Mren, Lmbatavank and
Goshavank. In addition, there are portraits of
saints standing in pairs between the windows of
the Apse and standing saints such as at Aruch (on
page 78) and Mren, both 7th century churches.

The exterior is even more elaborate; its windows
have 14 types of ornaments in their geometric
frames while decorative arches are covered with
floral motifs. The décor is reminiscent of that at
Zvartnots, also commissioned by Prince Nerses,
which led some to suggest its date may be the
same. The western façade has a four column
portico, its wall divide by a pair of niches with a
half-colonettes set inside each niche. Colonettes
and arches continue around the sides of the
polygonal apses.

The drum echoes the same designs. Traces of
color on the exterior cornices and crowns of the
windows indicate that they were at 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 Complex  SE of the main church
is the small, elegant S. Astvatsatsin, built in the
7th c for Prince Nerses. An undated inscription
attributes the construction to the first part of the
7th c reign of Prince Nerses (the builder)
Kamsarakan, who gave it its informal name the
"church of the Kamsarakan."

The small church is a triconcha (triple-apse)
central plan church, the semicircular apses each
with a rectangular exterior. The west wing is square and longer than the other three. Note the niche on the W end of the northern wing oriented to the east, typical for 7th c churches. The cruciform shape of the church is evident from the outside, the tall walls roofed with red clay tiles. The polygonal drum has narrow windows set near to the roofline for the wings, and the dome is in the Byzantine Style, slightly curved and topped with red tiles. The décor of the cornices under the roofs are alternating rows of squares, done in red tufa. Though simple, the church is quite elegant, with window and portal décor restricted to slight arches that break up the flat surface of the facades.

**Complex.** The complex includes a cemetery and foundations for a 5th c single-nave basilica, a 7th c palace building, and many pedestals, one of which sites on the east end of Astvatsatsin, topped by an early Christian Stele. Stelae were carved with saintly figures and depictions of scenes from the bible and come from the pre-Christian tradition of erecting Vishaps and fertility poles (phalli) near sacred spots. Most here were carved after pagan times but a couple of obviously phallic stones have been "resurrected" with a Christian theme. The collection is one of the best in Armenia and well worth spending some time looking over.

**Other.** Due north on a hilltop are the remains of fortifications for a Bronze/Iron Age fortress, an early settlement and a tomb field, and in the nearby gorge (by the Giumri Highway), you can see fragments of the original medieval dam. There are also some caves close by, used from earliest times. Look for obsidian flakes and pottery shards. As you drive W on the road to Areq (backtrack to the main town street and turn right), you will pass a khachkar shrine, with a popular and important 9th-10th cc circle cross.

**PRACTICALITIES**

**Area code is 2490**

**Long Distance inside Armenia:** +0 2490 + number

**International:** +3741 2490 + number

**IN AND OUT**

Three Talin Buses leave Yerevan daily (afternoon) from the Main Station on Admiral Isahakov in Yerevan and arrives at the bus station by the main square in Talin. 500 AMD.

Likewise Giumri Buses travel via Talin and can drop you off en route if you pre-arrange with the driver, though they will want to drop you off on the highway, at the entrance to town (about 1 km to center). Buses for Yerevan depart from the main bus station on Admiral Isahakov p. 700 AMD

Minivans for Giumri pass through Talin and will drop you off if you prearrange with the driver. Minivans leave from Yerevan every 20 minutes or so, from Intersection of Agatangeghos & Khorenatsi Streets in Yerevan and can stop at the Talin Bus Station. 1200 AMD.

**AROUND**

Taxis are in town center, 100 AMD per km plus 200 to start. You can use taxis to explore the region as well, same price. Locals will also volunteer to do same for negotiated price. Figure $20-25 for a day's trip in the region as fair (up to 4 passengers).

Minivans depart from the bus station by the square for villages throughout the region. They leave when they are full and generally travel early morning, returning late afternoons. Check when you arrive to get an idea of the schedule, which is very changeable.

**COMMUNICATION, ETC**

**Fire – 101**

**Police – 102**

**Ambulance service – 103**

**Rescue Hot Line – 118**

**Gas emergency service – 104**

**Trunk Line – 107**

**Telephone directory information – 109**

**Post, Phone, telegraphs**

The Central Post Office is at 7 Spandarian. The post office has trunk line phone service, sells phone cards and can deliver telegrams.

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

**In and Out**

**Banks**

ArmSavingsBank, 24 Terian tel. 2318

ASHIB, 12 Khanjian p.

**Shopping**

The Shuka is in the center, off the main square. Markets and kiosks are around town.

**Car repair, tires, petrol** in town and the highway.

**Medical**

The medical center is poorly equipped, folks usually go to Yerevan (68 km). Polyclinic, 1Leninakanian p. tel. 22-66.

**Apotekas** in town, ask at your overnight for recommendation.

**OVERNIGHT / FOOD & DRINK**

The Soviet style hotel is closed, but **apartments** in town entirely possible in apartments and homes. Ask around, they are everywhere. 3000-5000 AMD for B&B is fair. **Camping** in the area is ok in spring and autumn, bloody hot in the summer.

**Food and Drink** is barely available, mostly through mterks and in the summer at a park café.

END OF TRIP 5
TRIP 6: WESTERN ARAGATSOTN

Western Loop: DASHTADEM - AREG / MT. ARTENI – (Arteni) – (Arages) – (Getap/Tlik/Bagravan) – (Suser) – (Tsamakaswar) – (Zarnja) – (Talin)

Northern route: (Talin) – (Akunk) – (Karmrashen) – MASTARA – (Dzoragurgh) – (Tsaghkasar) – (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 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.

This strategy 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 its most impressive.

For some, this will merely be a “pile of rocks,” something you tolerate as you drive through en route to Giumri, pulling down your shades hiking up into the air. For others, with discerning eyes and a gift for imagining consequences, this is a crusty jewel box ready to be opened.

This trip is divided into two directions; north and west. While most tourists follow the northern route as far as the Giumri Highway takes them into Shirak, both loops can be done in one day, allowing time to continue on to Giumri. If you are on the hunt for “top ten” sites only, you may want to bypass the western loop and stop at Dashtadem, Mastara and then into Shirak for sites by Artik and Harich. Otherwise, give yourself the time to explore these little jewels in the western basin and in obscure points on Aragats.

If you don’t mind the outside toilet and possibly sharing a room; Ashtarak or Giumri (46 km each) or Yerevan (68 km).

зион historic Armavir, western Aragatsotn is a land apart, not quite as lush as the marshlands that coat the edges of the lower land, but neither as desperate in the sun. The region is marked by its receding hills and scattered lava cones plus its unriveting beauty; velvet green in the wet season and a haunting moonscape in the dry. 7000 years ago the region was completely different, covered with grass, shrubs and trees, all of it clear-cut to build the great empires of Anatolia and Urartu. Now it is a rocky landscape, lichen-covered and brooding, with pockets of fecundity by the river beds and springs, of which there are still many. It is here someone told me “you can feel biblical,” wandering in the ever increasing landscape, contemplating your mortality and the promise of a better world.

A little further S, look over to the western hills and the nearby Mt. Kabaghler (1618.2m), the area is scattered with Stone Age obsidian workshops with countless flakes of obsidian stone to mark its presence.

From central Talin, take the Hoktemberian road S about 1 km to the ruins of a (medieval caravanserai and Stone Age workshop) on the L side of the road (DD 40.36575 x 43.86247, elev. 1555m).

SIDE TRIP: at about 1 km from the electric station in Talin on a small rise on the R (E) side of the road are the ruins of a huge medieval caravanserai, with traces of the support arches that held up the elaborate vaulting. The caravanserai served Talin, set away from the town as a security measure to keep the randy camel drivers at bay. The ruins are still impressive, showing a building able in its day to house large numbers of caravan drivers and their pack animals.

The village has 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 period of history. The size is truly impressive, the outer walls encompassing part of the village proper within their circular layout with ramparts on the corners.

The fortress dates from several periods, its existing outer walls are 19th c from the last Kajar (also "Qajar") khans of Yerevan, forced to leave in 1828 when the Russian Imperial Army took possession of East Armenia from the Persians. The fortress is much older though, built on Bronze and Iron Age foundations easily detected in the main fortress walls and expanded during Urartian, Arshakuni and Bagratuni periods, the latter with surviving 10th c remains inside the walls.

Over the arched gate are several large seal tiles set into the wall surface, with emblems of lions on the framed surface.

The 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 I 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.

The Fortress

The arched gateway leads past the outer defenses, the walls dated to the 19th c, their round towers slapped onto earlier 10th-12th cc walls, themselves built upon traces of cyclopean fortifications. The thick walls are made from medium to small rough tufa stones laid with lime in an almost haphazard way, though taken as a while the edifice is almost huge.

Inside the walls you can detect the foundations for the citadel, sleeping and eating quarters and other service buildings. The water works were impressive, underground cisterns were fed by running water piped in from the outside.

Go around the castle to its S side to enter the building. On the S wall of the castle keep look for an Arabic inscription written with Kufic letters. It is attributed to Shah’n’shah, the last of a long line of Kurdish Shaddadid emirs who ruled sections of Armenia and intermarried into its clans.

"May Allah exalt him, in the blessed month of Safar in the year 570 (September 1174) the lord of this strong fortress, the Prince, the great Spasalar, the Pillar of the Faith, the Glorifier of Islam, Sultan son of Mahmud son of Shavur."

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

The Shaddadids first appear in the chronicles in 951, under the leadership of Muhammad bin Shaddadid (951-971) who established the clan at Dvin and gave it its name. They had been invited to protect Dvin by its citizens who feared worse from other roaming clans and had to be evicted when they showed no signs of leaving. They left, and returned, running the city more off than on for the next two centuries. Entrepreneurs and brigands in equal measure, under his heir Ali I bin Muhammad Lashkari (971-978), 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) they intermarried with the Bagratuni royal house, which had its own entrepreneurial (brigand) ideas about running things. The Shaddadids married and bickered with the in-laws at Ani while the region was being tossed back and forth between Byzantine and Bagratuni warlords and a new power entered from Central Asia, the Seljuk Turks. In fact the bickering Byzantines and Bagratunis did as much to end Armenian sovereignty as any Shaddadd, Seljuk or Mongol warrior.

The Byzantines for their part coveted the Armenian kingdom for its rich lands and even richer veins of metal and semiprecious ores and sought by any means to conquer the country, including betrayal. Using the pretext of apostasy by their fellow Christians for refusing to renounce the Armenian ‘heretical’ monotheist religion, in 1044 the Byzantine emperor Constantine IX sent his troops against the Armenian king Gagik II and asked the Shaddadids to join the fight against their Armenian kinsmen. The Shaddadids agreed, provided they were allowed to keep the territories they conquered en route to Ani. Constantine agreed and the Shaddadids joined the Seljuks against the Bagratunis, participating in the sack of the city that was then annexed by the Byzantines. The Byzantines (acting oh so Byzantinism) demanded all of the Shaddadid conquered lands, and when they refused, organized a militia of surviving Ani defenders and other mercenaries to march against the infidels. The infidels fled to Dvin, garrisoned its walls and flooded its land by damming the Garni River, turning farmland into marshes. They ambushed and routed the Byzantine army which was caught in the quagmire, defeating them and selling many of its men into slavery. Two years later the Byzantines returned and ravaged the Shaddadid lands, forcing them to accept Byzantine suzerainty. The warfare weakened the Armenian forces and then the Seljuks arrived on the scene in 1053, to which the Shaddadids pledged allegiance in 1055, where they slaughtered citizens attempting to escape the besieged city. Attempting to placate the Seljuks, they joined them again for the defeat of the city in 1067, and offered the Seljuk Sultan Alp-Arslan the keys to their capital at Gandzak. He apparently liked the idea, taking the keys and the city as his own in 1075. The dynasty became fractured, taking what pockets of lands and castles they were allowed by and left a memento of his stay behind.

The castle is truly impressive, becoming more so as an ongoing local-government initiative authentically reconstructs the walls and floors. Using the original stone and techniques learned from the medieval period, the Dept of Historical Preservation is funding a massive project to completely rebuild the structure to its original four tower structure, respecting the original stone while giving visitors an idea how it once stood. Though built for Shaddadid emirs, the architects and
builders of the time were Armenian, and their engineering prowess shows with deliberately separate tower walls adjoining each other, allowing seismic tremors to pass through while limiting damage and in the design of the towers themselves, built to deflect gunfire and cannon shot into sidelong, less lethal directions.

Below there is a large central room, used for storage and dining, with narrow stairways leading to the top ramparts. From the top of the central room, there were two more floors, which the preservation engineers plan to recreate as the project progresses. The whole thing is planned to be completed in an additional three years, completing the castle, rebuilding the outer ramparts and removing village homes from the fortress area (causing a bit of a controversy locally) to recreate the area as it once was, perhaps with an ethnographic site with historical demonstrations and performances.

**Outside the Village**

Continue S on the Hoktemberian road and off of either side of the road from about 1.8 km for the next 3 km, you will find evidence a gigantic Bronze Age settlement that was used through the Middle Ages, including the fragmentary remains of houses, temples, cemeteries and tomb fields, khachkars and caves.

**S. KRISTOPORI VANK - ՍԵՐԱՐԵՑ ՔՐԻՍՏՈՓՈՐՈՒԹՅԱՆ ՎԱԿՆ (DD 40.32297 x 43.85896, elev. 1302m)**

S. Kristopori (S. Kristofor Vank) can be seen from the Dashtadem Castle walls, on the horizon to the south. 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.

Nearby is a sloping square tower, mistakenly called a bell tower in the Soviet era information plate. The 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 ancient, resembling symbols from the Urartian hieroglyphic script used in the Iron Age. This may mark its origins, the design fitting no later period.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

- **Camping** on the mountains and near the village; **Overnight** in village home (rustic, 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** in the village.
- **Continue S** from another 4.5 km as the potted road winds past hills and summer camps and through grape fields and orchards to **Arteni, DD 40.29833 x 43.75417**

**SIDETRIP**: (Arteni - Արտենի) 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.

This is a good place to stock up on some bottles before continuing on your journey. Arteni has a couple of cafes, mterks, kiosks and roadside stands to stock up on vittles.

Arteni is a stop on the Giumri-Yerevan train, which passes through every other day on the opposite direction. Check at the station (NE of town for times and prices.)
**Food** at roadside stands, cafes, mterks, kiosks; **Camping** is possible nearby (ask first); **Overnight** in home (rustic, 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Water** in town.

« Continue S for another 9.5 km to (Argats) train station (DD 40.21833 x 44.23278)

**SIDE TRIP:** (Argats - Ünüşüq) founded 1924, elev. 906m, pop. 1129) sits on the Akhurian River basin just NW of orchards and SW of the “badlands” that arc up into southern Shirak. The town is another planned Soviet community, with some interesting examples of early communist design in the town center. The town has a few kiosks, mterks and a café or two, as well as roadside khorovats stands.

SW of town where the Talin Canal connects with the Akhurian River in a gorge there is the 7th c octagonal church, a fine example of a unique design (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.

Argats is also a stop on the Giumri-Yerevan railroad, the trains passing through every other road 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 Tilk (11.6 km) before entering sebuah town of Zarnja and the entrances to Anipemza (15.2 km) and Ayni (18.2 km) and then at about 16.6 km the SW entrance to Bagravan, which veers off to the right at a bridge.

Take that road that skirts the south of the village and in about 600-80m there will be a right (S) turn onto a village road that in about 4 km takes you back into Aragatsotn and Nor Areg; Continue through Nor Artik and eastwards for about 2 km to (Suser) (DD 40.46694 x 43.73333)

**SIDE TRIP:** (Suser – Ünüşüq till 1946 Ghijatagh, elev. 1592m, pop. 1146) sits in the midst of several dormant lava cones, in a rugged land that is surprisingly verdant in the wet season. The village has a pretty cemetery with khachkars and E of the village, a shrine.

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

« Continue E on the village road and about 2.8 km from the edge of Suser is (Tsamakasar) (DD 40.46639 x 43.75511)

**SIDE TRIP:** (Tsamakasar – Bulbuluwnun elev. 1592m, pop. 1146) sits in a rocky valley just SE of Hamashler (1692.6m) and NW of Mt. Debetepe (1763.8m). Just outside the village are Bronze Age burial grounds, on the low grounds and on the tall hill to the NE (1706m).

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

From Tsamakasar center, take the east village road that skirts the tall hill for about 2 km to (Zarnja) (DD 40.46667 x 43.78333)

**SIDE TRIP:** (Zarnja – Ünüşüq, 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 is showing a geometric cross and animal and flora imagery interwoven in and around.

The drusk is octagonal, its facets flanked by columns carved with diagonal lines and ribbed arches, both made from basalt. The roof of the dome is an excellent example of the early umbrella style, with multi-colored stone work on its surface.

**Alternate Route to Maralik/Giumri:** From Zarnja, continue NE on the potted road to reach Maralik (14 km) by way of Dzitankov and Karaberd. At Maralik you can join the highway to Giumri (24 km).

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

**Backtrack to Tsamakasar and take the Areg/Talin road S for about 15 km by way of Hatashen and Areg to (Talin) to join the Northern route.

**NORTHERN ROUTE:**

From Talin center take the main street NE, cross over the Giumri/Yerevan Highway and continue on the Karmrashen road for about 2 km to a village road on the left (N), take that for about 3.4 km to (Akun) center (DD 40.41667 x 43.9),

**SIDE TRIP:** (Akun – Ünüşüq till 1946 Ghijatagh, elev. 1788m, pop. 1617) 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 is showing a geometric cross and animal and flora imagery interwoven in and around.

The village was settled in 1829 by émigrés from Khoi (Khoi) and Mush in Kajar (Qajar) Persia at the end of the Russo-Persian War which gave Eastern Armenia to the Russian Tzar. On the hills above the village are the remains of the original settlers, Bronze Age warriors and families who settled there and built a cyclopean fortress.

**Hiking:** There are a few good trails near Akun, two of which lead to small reservoirs that provide camping opportunities. The first trek follows the mountain stream from the NE edge of the village for about 1.9 km to a fork and some springs. Follow the right fork E for another 2.4 km to the Vosketas Reservoir and dam.

**The second trek** follows the northern mountain track as it climbs through terrains towards Zovasar reservoir (in about 4.8 km, where on the opposite side of the lake are the remains of the village of Shenik with the rebuilt 5th c Armenian churches. The reservoir is larger than a Vosketas, and is a good jump off point for scaling nearby Mts. Tsaghkasar (2219.4m) and Garnasar (2295.4m).

The third trek departs about 300m W of the village and follows the mountain track that skirts Mt. Mushghudag and ends in about 3 km at the Mastara entrance.

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

**Backtrack to the Karmrashen road, turn left (N) and continue about 5.5 km to (Karmrashen) center (DD 40.43611 x 43.94528).

**SIDE TRIP:** (Karmrashen – Ünüşüq till 1946 Ghijatagh, elev. 1788m, pop. 1617) 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 is showing a geometric cross and animal and flora imagery interwoven in and around.

The village is in the lower highlands of Aragats, on a gentle roll of an otherwise mountainous landscape that is surprisingly verdant in the wet season. The village has a pretty cemetery with khachkars and E of the village, a shrine.

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

**Backtrack to the Karmrashen road, turn right (NW) and continue on the highway for about 8 km to (Mastara) (DD 44.4972 x 43.87, elev. 1723m)

**Mastara Uusuq** (before, Nerkin or Lower Talin, 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 ancient worship, as early steles and Vishap stones show. There is a substantial fortress to the NE of the village.

As you enter the village look for the dome of the 6th (5th?) - 7th cc S. Hovhannes church, 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 Theodors Guni who attended the council of Dvin in 645, which suggests its construction in the mid to late 7th c.

Two more inscriptions on the Western wall allude to a Grigor Vanakan as the architect, though they probably refer not to its construction but to its restoration (the inscriptions use the word “shinel” which in medieval manuscripts translates as both “to build” and “to restore”), which suggest an earlier date. Considering the founding of the church is traced to S. Grigor Lusavorich when he buried the relics of John the Baptist under the church and you have a combination of 4th, 6th, and 7th century buildings. It may well be that the earlier 4th c church was redone in the 6th and 7th cc, though traces of the 4th cc structure have not been found (neither has a serious excavation been undertaken).

The Tukh Manuk claim comes from the position of the central stone inside the chapel, a hallmark of all Tukh Manuks. The Tukh Manuk comes to us from Pagan times, and is tied to regional deities and the cult of drinking blood. It may very well be tied to the wine drinking Bacchus god, which came to Greece from India via the Armenian Highland (and wine being a very potent substitute for blood in many religions). The inside the chapel is more of a shrine, with various icon paintings of the Virgin Mary and saints flanked by holy clothes and khachkar with evidence of the original block of stone on the top and bottom.

The interior of the church is large and roomy, accentuated by light streaming into the space from the wide apse windows on the west and south sides, but mostly from those in the drum, all eight sides of which have a window, capturing light from any angle. Those on the cardinal points are wider than the diagonal sides. The interior is accentuated by plaster which covered the walls and still exists on the upper parts. There are no signs of wall paintings but some thought is that it must certainly have had some, since it was built in the period prior to the iconoclastic period. The curve of the dome is decorated with a symbolic sun design, the rays ending with round plaques. Three stage fan vaults provide the transition from the cube to the dome. Inside the church you can also see where the church was restored. Look at the apsiodes, their crossbars have older reliefs that were reused and tacked onto the structure.

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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 Djuqa, Nakichevan Khachkars that were destroyed in 2006 by Azeris breaking them up for rubble. There are also the remains of a chapel in the cemetery grounds.

On a hill SE of the village is one of Armenia’s greatest khachkars, the 13th c Mastara Great Khachkar, an incredible work of art set upon a rock outcrop. The tail slender stone is an amazing work of art, with intricate "lace" tatting and elaborate intertwining lines and geometric patterns cover the entire surface, the lines carved in a way it is impossible to detect where they end or begin, they seem to form an unending string of stone. The thin, thin stone itself is achingly fragile on its wind swept spot, surrounded by stones that appear to be traces of an old fortification.

Other khachkars are scattered throughout the village, stroll through to spot them as the pop up in some of the most unlikely of spots.

On top of a distant hill NE of town is the 10th-11th cc S. Stepanos shrine, a hall church sitting on a low crest, with the walls of a fortress around. The village, by a green-roofed building, there is a small monument to Soghomon Tehlarian; a national hero who is celebrated for his assassination of the main architect of the Armenian Genocide, Talaat Pasha, in Germany. During the trial, his defense so moved the jury he was acquitted of all charges.

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

Take the NE village road out of Mastara for about 2.4 km through the river gorge to (Dzoragluagh, DD 40.46667 x 43.9)

SIDE TRIP: (Dzoragush – Ձնագաթք 1940 N. Pirtkan, elev. 1903, pop. 178) sits on the right (S) bank of the river as its valley narrows to a pincer formation of the mountain slopes. Nearby are traces of a Bronze Age settlement and a tomb field, the field marked by a large squat menhir or primitive stele sticking up from some large rocks seemingly lying in a haphazard fashion. They are in fact the remains of the excavation that uncovered metal and stone jewelry and totems placed by the body as well as jars of good deemed necessary for the journey into the afterlife.

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

There is a path that charges uphill from Dzoragluagh to Tsaghaskar, which is less than 1 km to the N, high on the towering hill, but it is nasty traveling and impossible for anything less than a solid jeep and nerves of steel. The village is more easily reached by taking the Giumri Highway N in the distance.

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

From Zovasar continue NE on the same road another 2 km (Garnahovit, DD 40.48333 x 43.95)

SIDE TRIP: (Garnahovit – Գառնահովիտ 1946 Adiyan, elev. 1903m, pop. 178) In the middle of the village is the remarkable 7th c S. Gevorg church, one of the best preserved tetraconch churches (four protruding apses joined to a central space at right angles), and has the same composition as S. Hripsimeh in Echmiadzin. Unlike Hripsimeh, S. Gevorg uses three-quarter niches shifted southwards and northwards off the diagonal axis of the central hall, forcing attention from the hall to its upper corners, where four fan vaults create the support arches for the substantial drum, itself pierced with windows on each of its polygonal walls; double windows on the four cardinal walls and single on the diagonals. The niches lead to four corner chambers, which were used as prayer rooms, treasury and depositories.

Also unique to this church were the dimensions of the cross wings, which are narrower at the top than the width of the support walls for the drum, forcing a change of perspective when looking at the vaulted cross form above. This startling perspective was utterly unusual for its time, an experiment in breaking the expected planes and layout of churches into more dynamic structures. The outside walls have niches which typical for the time, though the smaller ones under the gables were a new touch, as were the shape of the dome corners as triangular recesses from the main structure. Wall decoration is typical of the 6th-7th cc, with arch contours, window edging and entrance portals. The twin half-colonettes sharing a single capital like that on the W façade became common by the second part of the 7th c. The church yard has the remains of some substantial medieval buildings.

There are other church remains in the gorge E of the village (about 500m up river).
Nearby (E and SE) are **Bronze Age remains** (DD 40.496277 x 43.96469).

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

Backtrack to the Giumri Highway and head N (R). In a few kilometers you reach the top of a pass and over to the R is a large stone monument on top of a hill. You can reach this by circling around to the back and taking a path to the monument (DD 40.45465 x 43.84870).

**SIDE TRIP:** The monument is built in memory to a family on the lower end, with a unique stack of large stones on the top platform and great views of the valley and Turkish border.

**END OF TRIP 6**
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RESOURCES ▲
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 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).

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 TWIRL, 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 Pantaigin). 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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