Persistence, a study vehicle and driver with will take to you to some of the most including the popular resort at Tsaghkadzor, packed in the winter months with avid snow skiers and their wannabes and almost as full in the summer with the newly rich who move like herbs into the forested villas, resorts and hotels. Closer to Yerevan is the still thriving mineral spa at Arzni, once the private domain of the Soviet elite, but now open to all who want to wile away their time with mineral baths and massages. The road to Arzakan is filled with summer “camps”, full-service lodgings that include meals and a few mineral baths of their own. The road to Hankavan is another favorite of the Soviet vacationer, and the location of many summer camps for Armenia’s children, as well as a few well-heeled pensionats at surprisingly affordable prices.


Maps by Rafael Torossian

By Rick Ney
Maps by Rafael Torossian

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INTRODUCTION

For most first-time visitors Kotaik (also spelled “Kotayk”) is simply a blur on the highway on the way to the beaches of Lake Sevan or the ski slopes at Tsaghkadzor. This is a pity, since the marz offers an amazing variety of monuments and natural splendors, and if they lie mostly on the edges of the district, well then they are all the more worth the effort.

Kotaik is a glory of history and nature, tracing Armenia’s development from Stone Age settlements in the Hrazdan River Gorge, which snakes north and south through the region like a craggy spine, to 15,000-5000 BCE petroglyphs etched on the rocks of the Geghama Lehr (Mountain Range), to the settlements of the Armenian Arshakuni Dynasty, at the cliff top 2nd c Greco-Roman temple at Garni and its entrance to the great Khosrov Nature Preserve, to the dozens of Medieval sites throughout the marz, including the great monasteries at Bjni, Buzhakan, Tsaghkadzor, Kaputan and the stunning complex at Geghard, itself carved from solid rock and built to house the true spear that pierced Christ’s flesh.

Throughout the marz are undulating mountain meadows teeming with spring wildflowers and forests lining the western crests of the Tegheniats Range, towering above the mineral spas, summer resorts and camps at Arzakan, Hankavan and Arzni, while the Geghama Range harbors both 15,000 BCE petroglyphs and several of Armenia’s rare natural lakes, fed by melting snows.

Not one to show its charms lightly, Kotaik makes you work for your pleasures, whether they are on top of the Geghama Lehr or hiking through the forests on its western border. Since most visit Armenia in the heat of summer, the sun blasted landscape can be intimidating, like those in Armavir and Ararat marzes, but a little persistence, a study vehicle and driver with calories will take to you to some of the most spectacular and awe inspiring places in the country.

Kotaik has more accessible pleasures as well, including the popular resort at Tsaghkadzor, packed in the winter months with avid snow skiers and their wannabes and almost as full in the summer with the newly rich who move like herbs into the forested villas, resorts and hotels. Closer to Yerevan is the still thriving mineral spa at Arzni, once the private domain of the Soviet elite, but now open to all who want to wile away their time with mineral baths and massages. The road to Arzakan is filled with summer “camps”, full-service lodgings that include meals and a few mineral baths of their own. North of Tsaghkadzor is the road to Hankavan, another favorite of the Soviet vacationer, and the location of many summer camps for Armenia’s children, as well as a few well-heeled pensionats at surprisingly affordable prices.

Just 15 minutes from Yerevan is the thriving community of Abovian and the nearby village of Akun, favored by gastronomic insiders wanting to dine on fresh fish bred in one of the dozens of small ponds that permeate the area. Fed by one of the largest aquifers in Western Asia, the millions of liters of water erupting from the surrounding marshland quenches half of the capital’s thirst, while the other half gushes from the towering cliffs of Garni Gorge, also in Kotaik, its elaborate river system host to rare species of plants and fauna, as well as picnickers and swimmers seeking some respite from Yerevan’s stifling heat.

NATURE

Kotaik’s environment is as varied as its geography, with several three main geographic zones and several sub-zones. The southernmost area, close to Yerevan, is a part of the Sub-Arax, or Ararat folded mountain region. This area is lush in the few weeks of the year when rain is plentiful, but is otherwise parched without irrigation. The upper district, beginning with the Tsaghkuniats mountains (a spur of the Pambak Mountain Range) near Tsaghkadzor and extending north to Lori and Tavush marz, is a part of the Lesser Caucasus Mountain Range, with folded mountain ridges marking its terrain. The mountains still show traces of the huge forests that once adorned their hills, now reduced to a few hundred hectares near the resort areas that draw their worthiness from the tree-induced micro-climate. Greatly reduced

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from illegal logging and soil erosion, the area's forests are in danger, and reforestation is considered a viable way to bring them back to their medieval glory.

The vast majority of the district lies within the Central Volcanic Highlands with folded mountain ridges marking the east and west borders. The ridges were formed during the Miocene era, a time of violent volcanic eruptions. This district is a part of Armenia's youngest (give or take a few million years) regions, its rich alluvial soil springing to life with each snow melt and sparse rainfall. The upper elevations along the Tatarskhuantsa and Gheghama Mountain Ranges are alpine meadows and upper alpine terrain with scatterings of high mountain forests. The forests spill downhill into meadowland, scrub and a distinctive microclimate inside the Hrazdan River Gorge.

Minerals. The region is rich with stone and mineral ores, especially at Megradzor, one of Armenia's working gold mines, and its largest operation. At Megradzor alone, minerals found include Alkanna, Buckhornite, Calaverite, Gelaena, Gold, Nagyagite, Pyrite, Quartz, Tellurobismuthite and Tetradymite. Much of the marl is a part of Armenia's Volcanic Highlands and as such contains large deposits of volcanic rock (tuf, pumice, perlite) as well as basalt, gypseum, pumice, andesite, limestone, marble, granite.

Flora. Kotak’s flowers are breathtaking if you are lucky enough to catch them in season. Unfortunately, the typical tourists comes at High Season in July and August, which is murder on wild flowers int eh district. The best time to flower is from mid-April in the lower elevations through mid June in the upper regions, as the wildflowers face themselves in bands uphill. The showstoppers are the thriving poppies in the spring and the goldenrod, straw flowers are but a few of the delights that await you.

Flowers in Kotak (Geghama Lehrs) include Merendera trigyna, M. raddeana, colocasia bifolium, Purdminoria scilloides, Scilla armenia, S.iberica, Tulipa julia, Iris caucasia, Muscaria caucasia, Belamcanda chinensis, Orthogamaschekhovnikovii, O. brachystachys, O. hyastanum, Fritillaria casca, Nectoredorum tripdidae, Osp of paja, Myosots alpestre, Amenone caucasia, Orchis coryphela, Gladiolus tenuis.

Lower Elevation sagebrush steppe flora includes Gladiolus atroviolaceus, Nigella oxyptalata, Actynolema macrolema, Gundelia tournefort, Verbascum saccatum, Lallemanita iberica, Scabiosa argentea, Scorzoneraphypos, Muscari beglecta, Stichys inflata, Astragalus distygophypos, A. kochianus, Achillea tenufolia, Helichrysum rubicundum, Silena sparguillifolia.

River Gorge flora include Alkanna orientalis, Cerasus incana, Prus, salicifolia, Cerasus mahaleb, Amygdalus ferzlinia, Spiralacentra, Saffrjuga cymabalaiae.

Mountain Steppe flora includes Gladiolus atroviolaceus, Nigella oxyptalata, Actynolema macrolema, Gundelia tournefort, Verbascum saccatum, Lallemanita iberica, Roemeria retracta, Scorzoneraphypos, Muscari beglecta, Stichys inflata, Astragalus distygophypos, A. kochianus, Achillea tenufolia, Helichrysum rubicundum, Silena sparguillifolia.

Wild relatives of crop plants include Cereal grains (Secale vavilovii Grossh, Hordeum elatius Bieb., Fruits (Pisum subalpine, Mountain Meadow species include Gladiolus atroviolaceus, Nigella oxyptalata, Actynolema macrolema, Gundelia tournefort, Verbascum saccatum, Lallemanita iberica, Roemeria retracta, Scorzoneraphypos, Muscari beglecta, Stichys inflata, Astragalus distygophypos, A. kochianus, Achillea tenufolia, Helichrysum rubicundum, Silena sparguillifolia.


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


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

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

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

For a complete list of all birds by species and habitat see TourArmenia Birding pages (www.tacentral.com/nature/birding.asp).
Soaking Etiquette. Springs can be located by the roadways which are reserved for drinking, or clearly marked paths, or in out of the way locations. Many springs are considered community property, with villagers and visitors making stops to soak or collect water in bottles. If it’s a drinking spring, then it’s not for soaking, no matter how appealing. A spring for soaking is fairly obvious: it empties into a pool, is fairly secluded, and is not stocked with fish (and fishermen) being bred for market. Often there will be others already taking in some of the effervescent waters. Men feel quite at home stripping down to their underpants to soak or collect water in bottles, no where in sight. Nudity is not allowed. Bring a swimsuit if you are more modest. Women visitors can feel free to soak, out of sight, and if there are any local men around, be prepared for a lot of attention, which can make the experience unpleasant.

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

Eco Challenges. Kotaik is threatened by a number of environmental problems and may be the best measure of just how bad the country’s environment will be if steps are not taken to reverse the trends. Lush and green for a few weeks, and then parched. Snow in the winter is a rarity, and rest of the year, a result of desertification brought on by large scale illegal logging in nearby Lori and Tavush. Believe it or not, Kotaik was once verdant with thick stands of forests cascading down the mountains into the valley. Kotaik’s standard of living was at least one of the factors for the thriving metal industry in the Bronze and Iron Ages, but real loss began with the Mongol invasions, as invading tribes burnt the forests or cut them down to create pasturage. Still, enough trees survived to prevent whole-scale desertification until one of the worst losses occurred in the 17th c, when Shah Abbas I forced the local population into exile and executed a scorched earth policy, burning anything that might support the pursuing Ottoman army. The reason these forest slaughters are on the mountain slopes to the West, where the Soviets built resort areas and pensions. Even these few forests are at risk as illegal logging continues, spurred on by corrupt officials exporting wood to Georgia, Iran, Russia and (surprisingly) France and Germany, who forbid illegal logging in their own countries.

The Hrazdian river valley, for centuries a conduit for trade has become another kind of conduit, funneling smog generated by Yerevan’s economic boom to Lake Sevan. If it were not for the fact most cars have been converted to run on natural gas the situation would be much worse, though on a hot summer day it is hard to imagine anything worse with a white cloud of smog hanging around you as you drive towards Sevan.

Bad for locals but good for the environment is the large scale emigration from the industrial towns of Charentsavan and Hrazdian to Yerevan or abroad. Forced away to hunt for work, the drop in population has opened the door on environmental resources, though it may only be temporary, as those who have “struck it rich” in Russia or the West return home to open new business and workshops, some of which grow into unregulated factories spewing out toxins into the air.

The success of the construction industry is causing further damage to forests, with one of the worst being the gigantic cement plant at Hrazdan is responsible for up to 50% of the air pollutants in the marz, and operates without any pollutant controls. On days the plant “cooks” to make cement, it spews a thick cloud of white smoke that envelops the region, especially the summer resorts in the areas of Tzaghkadzor and Hankavank. Tzaghkadzor, already overpopulated, is particularly damaged, its trees noticeably sickened by the smog. I have no clue why anyone would pay such high prices to subject themselves to smog, especially that generated by lime.

Water can seem abundant in the marz, if your measuring sticks are the Karasounakn (Forty sources) aquifers by Akunk and those at Garni, Arzakan, and the Hrazdan River and the snow caps on the nearby mountain ranges, but otherwise the area is threatened by a great loss of water. The massive springs around Akunk (near Arzakan) feed the ever-growing thirsts in Yerevan and slowly drain the underground aquifers that formed during the Paleocene Era. Diminishing water supplies have cut the amount of precipitation that can support the area, and country experiences, and lately the snowfalls have not been enough to make up the difference.

DO: Visit the 1st c BCE temple at Garni with its surrounding 4th c BCE fortress, and the incredible monastery at Geghard, carved from solid rock and nestled within a steep gorge. Visit Tzaghkadzor, Armenia’s ski area and Olympic training center. Travel the highway to Hankavank, staying at one of a dozen summer camps and pensions, on route to the Greek Village. Climb the hill to the Chalcedonian Tzehrakuni monastery by Meghrodzor. Visit Bjini, with its 9th-10th c monastery and nearby Pahlavuni Fortress excavation which recovered a royal church and palace in 2006. Visit the handsome village of Yeghvard, with its cottage homes and the impressive 1301 Astvatsatsin Church, one of a handful with the copper chapel still intact, its drum decorated with Arabic inscriptions. Nearby, visit the 7th-13th cc Teghenians Vank monastery by Buzhakan, its substantial ruins richly decorated with floral and animal imagery.

On the outskirts of Yerevan, at Zovuni, visit the Karmir Berd (Red Fort) remains perched over the deep Hrazdian Gorge, itself the location of Stone Age quarries and settlements. See “Levon’s Divine Underground” at Arinj, its subterranean rooms carved entirely by hand and set 20 m below the surface. Visit the still thriving city of Abovian, Armenia’s research center, the area that the few kings of Armenia ruled, and go to the Karasounakn (Forty sources) by Akunk to dine on fresh caught fish bred in water pouring from a complex of Armenia’s largest fresh water springs. See the temple at Kaputakan, with stunning views of the surrounding mountains. Visit the Black Castle at Sevaberd.

Natural Armenia: Cross the Garni Gorge and hike the mountain trails in the Khosrov Preserve to the 12th-13th c Havuts Tar Monastery, its convent walls covered with lacy carvings. Explore the Garni River from the Azat reservoir to the Geghama Lehr, hiking below the ancient temple at Garni and the monastery at Geghard and then up the Chef Selav River to the petroglyphs at Mt. Nalsar and Azhdahak. Likewise, travel up the Garni Gorge, past Sevaberd and through summer camps used by Yezidi shepherds, to camp beside another of the nearby petroglyphs between the mountain ‘breasts’ of Ms. Seghasar (Zeiinari Aresh) and Geghaghun. Soak in a mineral spring at Pank, Bjini or on the Tzaghkuniants mountains.

WHEN: For bird watchers the best months to visit the marz are in spring (March-May) and fall (October), when the migratory flight patterns course through the district. Flower lovers will want to visit in Spring (April-May) before the summer heat sets in and dries up the terrain. Summer can be unbearable in the Hrazdian valley and the lower plateau, which includes the towns of Abovian, Charentsavans and Hrazdian. It can also be hot and dry in Sevan and Akunk, where fish ponds and marshes abound, though surprisingly cool in the evenings, as the night breezes fan over the water. A few areas escape the worst heat, most noticeably the western border, hemmed in by the Tsaghkuniants Range with its resorts at Tsaghkadia, Hankavank, Arzakan and Buzhakan, and the eastern boundary, on top of the Geghama Lehr, which are warm by day, but frigid at night. In winter, it seems every teen snow bunny heads to Tsaghkadia, which has the only bonafide downhill ski slopes in the country and a number of renovated and new lodgings.

HOW LONG? Garni & Geghard are usually done in half a day by group tours, allowing the rest of the day to scare up something else. To make a real exploration of it, add in a trip into the Garni Gorge and across to Havuts Tar (45 min hike) for a full day exploration, with meal at the traditional Sergei Tun in old Garni. Tsaghkadzor deserves at least one day with its wonderfully renovated Kecharis monastery, Olympic Village and Class C ski slopes, but if you can, overnight at the village or one of the newer digs in town and watch the pretty people walk by. Western Kotaik can be done in one day drive by, taking in Yeghvard, Buzhakan and Bjini. Eastern Kotaik, with stops at Kaputau, Hatsi, Sevaberd and Alakan, is a half to one day outing, while adding in the alpine Alnakich with the nearby petroglyphs requires a serious 1 day or more manageable 2 day outing.

Kotaik is often tied to its neighbors for its history, to the fates of the royal domains of Aragatzotn and the colonies of Lake Sevan. It has a distinct history all its own while sharing the fates of its nearby districts. Kotaik’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 Hrazdan plateau in the Miocene and Paleocene eras. The river is a treasure trove of Stone Age (Paleolithic) open air workshops and settlements from early times, including ca. 500,000 year old hominid fossils discovered in the gorge. Considering that 2 million year old hominid fossils were uncovered just 150 km north in Georgia, it is likely the same can be found in the river gorge, it being a major conduit of trade and civilization from the earliest of times.

Now covered with snow in the winter, Kotaik’s mountains were once warm and humid year-round, heated by the smoldering volcanoes that are now dormant and make up the marz’s terrain. The warmth made settlement possible at an early period, allowing for higher elevations. The tribes that domesticated wild grains, fodder, grape, and herded wild animals left their mark on the top of the mountains in hundreds of carefully carved petroglyphs, the earliest dating to the Paleolithic era (15,000-12,000 BCE) and testifying to the region’s preferred location. Until the late Neolithic Era, which left little more than stone tools and obsidian shavings in the valley floor, the mountain tops flowered with rock carvings, detailing the natives’ lives, religious beliefs and exploration of the cosmos. There are even some petroglyphs that seem to describe the division of time, one called Armenia’s first calendar (ca. 5000 BCE).

A conduit of trade, the marz was also a conduit of armed forces using Kotaik to colonize and defend the outlying areas to the North and to invade and conquer the rich Ararat Valley below. The region was favored by the Nairi and Urartu before blossoming under the Arshakuni Kings who prized the forests around Tsaghkadzor and built defensive castles along the Hrazdan River and at Garni. The kings and their nakharar rivals the Mamikonians, Arsuruns, Rshutsins and Kamsarakens each in their turn added to Bronze Age fortresses at Bjni, Garni, Sevaberd and elsewhere, adding to the culture and development of the region. The Bagratunis and their kinsmen the Pahlavunis left it in possession during the second Golden Age, and it was later used as defense against north, becoming the domains of the great Zakarian brothers and their subject lords the Vachutians and Kaghbakians (Proshians) during the great period of ensuing turbulent times of Seljuk, Mongol, Ottoman and Persian invasions ended thousands of years of Armenian autonomy, but left behind magnificent castle walls & monasteries as testament of its heritage.

Prehistoric Age

Evolving for millions of years, even 5,000 years ago the mountains of Kotaik were still smoldering volcanoes. Having spent their energy in carving the Hrazdan plateau, a massma of alluvial deposits of soil, minerals and precious metals, their occasional fiery display of fireballs and lava marking the mountains as sacred lands, home to the sun gods.

During the late quaternary (Pleistocene) and the Holocene periods (roughly 500,000-12,000 years ago) the volcanoes began to cool, though they still radiated enough heat to create a moist climate so that the slopes of the mountains were covered with alpine grass and trees, with abundant wildlife and game animals inhabiting the lands. Dozens of lakes and ponds appeared on the mountain tops, fed by melting snows and rainfall, The remaining lakes home to a number of migrating water fowl.

Stone Age sites were built near hot springs and along the great Hrazdan River (later called Ildaruni by the Urartians and Zanga by marauding Turkic tribes), excavations showing a remarkably developed culture with sophisticated tools and an understanding of food cultivation and animal breeding. There is also evidence that inhabitants were aware of the medicinal properties of mineral water, constructing baths and drinking fountains at several sites, most notably Arzni, with Paleolithic (Acheulian – 300,000-100,000 BCE) stone tool workshops in the river gorge. The most remarkable testament to early life in the district are on the face of the Geghama Leh, where hundreds of petroglyphs and pictograms dating back to the Paleolithic (15,000-12,000 BCE), Mesolithic (12,000-7000 BCE), Neolithic (7000-5000 BCE) and the Chalcolithic/Copper-Bronze Age (5000-2000 BCE) cover fields of stone.

Despite the harsh terrain, the plateau was one of the first marz to make the transition from food gathering to food production in the Neolithic era, some 7,000 years ago. Evidence of agriculture and animal breeding appeared there shortly after the earliest known Mesopotamian sites.

Stone Age sites in Kotaik include the petroglyphs by Balaiovit (Yerevan), Mt. Seghansar and Gegghmanawan, Nalsar & Azhdahak, open air workshops at Arzni, Mt. Hatis, Jraber & Nurnus and the 8th-9th century Nasuhkert I-II) and Bronze Age burial sites at Aragel.

Copper and Bronze Ages

By the Copper Age the settlements inhabiting Kotaik were exploiting the marz’s rich veins of stone and metal (obsidian, gold, copper and tin) and by the 4th m. BCE, the ores from this marz were sent to regional powers and contributed to the development of the Nairi, a loose federation of tribes that controlled the Armenian Highlands through the early Bronze Age. These settlements, built mostly during the 5th-1st millennium BCE, protected a thriving agricultural community as well, the cultivation of grapes, apricots, barley and wheat forming a basis for commerce with Mesopotamia. The development of wine-making in Egypt is also traced to its commerce with the tribes in the region in the early Bronze Age.

The region grew in importance in the Bronze Age, as the gold mines at Meghradzor were first exploited in a systematic way. Another site was the 4th m. BCE village of Elar; in mythology established on the death of Ara Geghetsik (Ara the Beautiful) while fighting the armies of the Babylonian Queen Shamiram. A sorceress, Shamiram (Ara’s wife) tried to revive the lifeless body of Ara and in a jealous fit when scorned, fought him on the battlefield. Dressed as a common soldier, Ara was killed in fighting and it is said that when the sorceress met her fate, as the god of love, he cried out, “El Ara,” thus naming the village. She is also reported to have begged the gods to help, crying, “Ar zni,” thus naming the region. Coincidentally, the village of Arzni, not 5 km away from Elar/Abovian was the site of a copper age settlement as well.

Copper-Bronze Age sites in Kotaik include fortresses at Garni, Zovuni, Dovri, Yeghvard, Kaghsh, Bjni and a massive fortress at Sevaberd, and excavations at Zovuni, Aragel, Karashamb, Astghaberd, Dovri and the Geghama Leh.

Urartian, Persian, Greek & Roman Periods

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

Urartu was one of the most powerful empires of its day, a developed culture that had extensive
Armenian marzpanate, a fully autonomous district

The Byzantine Empire grew rapidly in the 6th c, starting its march eastwards with the 521 edict of Justinian to reorganize the Byzantine Armenian lands, which had been separated from their eastern parts in 387. In 591, when Khosrov IV sought to regain his throne by appealing to the Byzantines, he offered parts of Persian Armenia in moving the border between Byzantine and Persian Armenia to Kotaik:

Kosrov II (439-457) decreed that Armenians were to convert to Zoroastrianism, the age old religion of Persia and later, the Seleukids. The ensuing Achaemenid period (331–189 BCE) invigorated the region as Greek deities, architecture and art took hold. With the passing of the Yervanduni dynasty in 188 BCE and the ascension of Artash (Arshac) royal inhabitants in the Roman-Parthian period, as the kingdom became a buffer zone between the great Empires and faced total annihilation on several occasions.

After the fall of Urartu to the Medes around 585 BCE, Kotaik was absorbed by Scythian tribes and spent much of the Persian Satrapy period under their control. Influences from the neighboring empire were still felt, Kotaik absorbing Zoroastrian beliefs and deities, especially the worship of Ahurat. By the 4th c BCE the region was absorbed into the Greek kingdom ruled by the Orosirian Vurvanduni dynasty, its economy based on agriculture and horse breeding, Kotaik’s meadows supplying the prized Armenian Nesaean horses to the Persians and later, the Seleukids. The ensuing Achaemenid period (331–189 BCE) invigorated the region which became a linchpin between the northern regions of Tavush and Gegharkunik and the great Ararat valley.

Artsakh (Arshac) royal inhabitants in the Roman-Parthian period, as the kingdom became a buffer zone between the great Empires and faced total annihilation on several occasions.

**Greek & Roman-Parthian era sites are at Garni (temple), Arinj (settlement), Voghchaberd (cave complex), Dovor and Hatsi (Ashtgaberd fortress).**

**EARLY CHRISTIAN – MIDDLE AGES**

By the time of the conversion, the Parthians in Persia had been replaced by the Sassanians, who were hostile to the Armenian Arshakuni kings (themselves Parthians) and their on-again, off-again supporters the Romans. Preferring the Romans over the Sassanids, the Arshakuni King T’rdat IV (The Great), also chose Christianity over the Sassanid Madaizam which the King of Kings in Persia insisted the Armenians adopt.

Artsakh (Arshac) royal inhabitants in the Roman-Parthian period, as the kingdom became a buffer zone between the great Empires and faced total annihilation on several occasions.

Kotai did not convert easily. Only a few Christian khans were won over the centuries and the original Arshakuni Christians were relocated to Klan, at Voghchaberd and on top of Mt. Arai, not surprising since the district was used as a bastion of paganism during the holy wars that occurred after T’rdat’s conversion. The earliest surviving Christian structures are from the 6th c, 200 years after S. Grigor preached the new faith. The district’s fate as one of the main routes of invasion became characterized by shifting location from the main action in the Ararat valley. Its capital, Khosrov IV, who offered parts of Persian Armenia in moving the border between Byzantine and Persian Armenia to Kotaik:

**He [Khosrov] gave him [Maurice] all of Arvastan to Nisibis and the Armenian lands which were under his power: the Tanuterakan tun all the way to the Hurazdan [Hrazdan] River with the district of Kote [Kotai] up to the village of Garni . . .** (Sceboes, iii, p.27)

Kotaik was in the hands of the Byzantines, its lands used much as before, with the exception that the Bagratuni and Kamsarakar nakharar families began to lay claim to parts of the region, and the marz finally began to enter the Christian era properly, with a spurt of church construction including the predecessors to the great monasteries at Bjini, Yeghvard and buzahan.

Khosrov II managed to reconquer the lands he ceded to Byzantium in 611, but the religious differences between the Byzantines and Armenians over the decision of the council of Chalcedon in 451 (about the nature of Christ) and Byzantines demands that Armenia accept Chalcedony had grave repercussions when the Armenians faced the Arab invasion of the 640s. In 648-69 the Armenians made a final break with the Byzantines, refusing Chalcedony and making peace with the Persians, who initially promised not to interfere with their internal matters and to grant freedom of religion.

Arab rule was relatively benign at first and the building spurt of the 6th century accelerated in the 7th, with many of the great basilicas of the period traced to the early Arab period, including the great churches at Yeghvard, Zaravan, Oughndzor, Voghchaberd, Tegheniats, Ptni and Karashamb.

In 693, the Umayyad Caliph appointed his brother governor of Armenia and in 698 the Byzantines attempted to retake the country, supported by the Armenian Ishkhan Smbat Bagratuni and nakharars. The Arabs were merciless in their subjugation, destroying monasteries and cities and...
Kotaik, Yerevan, Dvin & Gegharkunik (along with also by massive amounts of wealth that were via Bjini, Teghenik, Arzni and Ptgni en route to the Ararat Valley and Dvin. It came to an abrupt end by two forces; the renewed energies of the Byzantines to conquer Ani and Dvin and the 11th c invasions by the Seljuk Turks. The Seljuk attacks began as raids by nomadic Seljuks looking to plunder a rich land. The conquest of Iran and were setting their sights on Armenia and Byzantium. They took Ani in 1065 and in a battle destined to change the Near East for ever afterwards, defeated the Byzantine army and Manzikert in 1071. The Byzantines spent the next 400 years defending an ever dwindling empire, while the Armenia lost their last dynasty of kings, and all chance at autonomy until the 20th c. was a patchwork of Kurdish and Seljuk fiefdoms, Kotaik became increasingly important in this with Kurdish and Iranian emirs), the region became a major conduit for trade on the Silk and Spice trails, which coursed through the region en route to Dvin and Persia.

The Second Golden Age

For Kotaik, the golden age established under the reign of the Bagratunis improved decisively. Reaching its apogee during the early Christian period and existed on the fringes of the great centers in the Ararat Valley and western Armenia. It but took advantage of this second period, establishing monasteries, academies and churches throughout the district, promoting study and learning along with spiritual devotion. Perhaps the most famous to be created in the district at this time is Grigor Magistros Pahlavuni (990-1058), a linguist, scholar and diplomat and founder of Kecharis Monastery.

Grigor was a lay member of the Pahlavuni family, the son of the Prince Vassak and quickly gained fame as a scholar and diplomat in the Byzantine court. After the fall of Ani, when he became governor-general of Edessa, the emperor Constantine IX Monomachus making him a Duke. Magistros is most famous for his scholarly work; he studied theological and secular texts in Syriac as well as Greek, teaching many Ecclesiasts of the period. Magistros assembled the most complete collection of Armenian texts up to his period. The historical and philosophical texts include the works of Anania Shirakatsi (610-685) and translations of Greek philosophers like Timaeus and Phaedo.

The Sejkuls

The Second Golden Age was fueled and advanced by massive amounts of wealth that were accumulated in Armenia, fed by the trade routes between The East and West, Russia and the Caliphate that crossed through Armenia, one route passing through Kotaik, another along the Azat River, via Bjini, Teghenik, Arzni and Ptgni en route to the Ararat Valley and Dvin. It came to an abrupt end by two forces; the renewed energies of the Byzantines to conquer Ani and Dvin and the 11th c invasions by the Seljuk Turks.

The Seljuk attacks began as raids by nomadic Seljukks looking to plunder a rich land. The chronicles mention one such raid of Bjini in 1042, defeated by King Bagrat II Bagratuni and Grigor (Magistros) Pahlavuni. By the time the Byzantines had taken Ani in 1045, the Seljukks had completed conquest of Iran and were setting their sights on Armenia and Byzantium. They took Ani in 1065 and in a battle destined to change the Near East for ever afterwards, defeated the Byzantine army and Manzikert in 1071. The Byzantines spent the next 400 years defending an ever dwindling empire, while Armenia lost their last dynasty of kings, and all chance at autonomy until the 20th c.

At the beginning of the 12th century, the Seljuk Turks defeated the Byzantine army at Manzikert and different Seljuk and Kurdish warlords. Kotaik was a patchwork of Kurdish and Seljuk fiefdoms, with Armenian strongholds clinging to their fortresses. Some of the most influential were the Metsatuns, the great monasteries. The walls of churches throughout the marz hold numerous cross stones and inscriptions in honor of the rich metsatun lords. The fortresses that dot the landscape in Kotaik became increasingly important in this period as ruling families retreated to their remote castles and fortresses. Forging alliances with the new rulers (who were fighting themselves with Kurdish and Iranian emirs), the region became a major conduit for trade on the Silk and Spice trails, which coursed through the region en route to Dvin and Persia.

The Zakarians

The transformations of Kotaik as a major military power at the end of the 12th c the political situation for Armenians improved decisively. Reaching its apogee during the reign of Queen Tamar (1184-1213) and led by the Armenian brothers Ivaneh and Zakareh Zakarian, the Armenian-Georgian armies smashed Seljuk control of the northern regions, including Bjini and Kotaik in 1201. The land under the control of Zakareh Zakarian and his son Shahshnsh was in the northwest of the reconquered territory (including Lori, Ani & Aragatsotn) while that of his brother Ivanish and his son Avak were to the east and included Bjini, Kotaik, Yerevan, Dvin & Gegharkunik (along with Vagharshapat, Aragatsotn, Vagharshapat, Blagoveshchensk, Boghoy, and their capital Bjini received tremendous wealth from trade. Metsatuns (literally “great houses”), the newly rich who made their wealth from trade and lending, held their assets in cash, and consequently used it to secure their status by donating money to build or purchasing outright churches and additions to the great monasteries. The walls of churches throughout the marz hold numerous cross stones and inscriptions in honor of the rich metsatun merchants who donated funds to the church, hoping to secure a safe passage to heaven in return. The great khachkar art form developed in

Kotaik experienced a new flowering of culture, unlike anything it had seen before. The Bagratan era may have been a second golden age, but the period of enlightenment was extraordinary. Kotaik was extraordinary. The monastery at Georgh, built to house the True Spear and carved from solid rock, was expanded to include the large Ararat Monastery and the Proshian (Kaghbasian) mausoleum, built for Prosh Kaghbasian (1223-1284), heir to the family that founded Bjini, Dvin and Vayots Dzor for Ivanish Zakarian. Ivanish himself established the Chalcledonian (Georgian Orthodox) monastery of Tzetheruk in 1196-99 at Meghadzor, marked by its extravagant design opposed to the severe simplicity favored by Armenian Apostolic churches built for his brother Zakareh.

Another vassal lord to Ivanish was Vacheh Vachutian, who received lands in return for military service, including parts of Kotaik and the monasteries of Makaravank in Tavush, Amberd Fortress, Hovhannavank, Sagmosavank and Tegher in Aragatsotn.

Other works include the octagonal church at Garni, the monastery of Tezharuik in 1196-99 at Meghadzor, marked by its extravagant design opposed to the severe simplicity favored by Armenian Apostolic churches built for his brother Zakareh.

The surge in development was fueled also by the exploding international caravan trade coursing through the country. On the main Yerevan route from Gegharkunik and Lori, Kotaik and its capital Bjini received tremendous wealth from trade. Metsatuns (literally “great houses”), the newly rich who made their wealth from trade and lending, held their assets in cash, and consequently used it to secure their status by donating money to build or purchasing outright churches and additions to the great monasteries. The walls of churches throughout the marz hold numerous cross stones and inscriptions in honor of the rich metsatun merchants who donated funds to the church, hoping to secure a safe passage to heaven in return. The great khachkar art form developed in

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The Mongols. The glories were short lived as Khaqan turned to Islam and the Mongol nomads were no longer able to support the local population. Famine and disease became commonplace in the 14th century, along with the constant in-fighting by rival Mongol chieftains, ravaging the countryside and weakening the country for another invasion, its last from Central Asia, and worst. Among the new inhabitants in the marz were the Yezidis (Zoroastrian-influenced descendants of Mongol/Kurdish invaders from the 11th-14th cc), whose presence in Kotaik is traced to this period, and who continue to live in the marz, annually taking their sheep herds to alpine pasturage in the summers. Timur. Unable to put up any defense, the remaining Armenians could but just watch as the lame Timur (Tamarlaine or “Tamar the lame”) led three successive waves of attack in 1386-1387, 1394-1396 and 1399-1393. The attacks were brutal, enslaving local peasants and Azats alike, pillaging towns and villages and burning croplands and pastures as they passed. His invasions prevented crop planting, and a severe famine ensued. Cannibalism was reported in some areas. 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, including Khaqan. Those that remained lived in remote caves as a form of resistance, eking out their existence as best they could. Cave complexes from this period are at Voghchaberd and in the Hrazdan and Azat River Gorges. Timur died in Samarkand in 1405, ending his reign of terror but leaving a power vacuum in Armenia.

8th-11th c sites are at Yegvard, Tegheniats Vank (Buzhakan), Ptgni (Dzagavank), Arzakan (Nehguys S. Astvatsatsin Vank), Vardanavan (Vardanavank), Solak (Mairavank Astvatsatsin), Tegheniats Vank and Garni. Fortresses are at Sevaberd, Zoravan, Mt. Hatis, Solak and Garni.

12th-14th c sites include the octagonal church at Garni, the exquisite Havats Tar convent by Ghazan Khan, Kecharis, Vank at Tsaghkadzor, the glorious Kaptavank Church at Kapatun (1349), the expansion of monasteries at Tegheniats Vank and Tegheniats Vank (Ptgni), Neghuti S. Astvatsatsin Vank (Arzakan), Makravank (Hrazdan) and Bjini. Cave sites are at Voghchaberd, Garni and Arzni.

OTTOMANS & PERSIANS

The Seljuks that survived Timur’s invasion ruled in Persia, facing a new threat in the Ottomans, who took Constantinople in 1453 and began to expand their empire eastwards. The Ottomans under Mehmet I defeated the Seljuks in Anatolia, only to square off with a new power, the Safavids in Persia, who under Ismail Shah expelled the remains of Seljuks in Armenia and took possession of the country. Mehmet’s successors defeated Ismail Shah and conquered the majority of Armenia in 1514-1516. The Ottomans consolidated their gains under Suleiman II, and gradual encroachment wretched the titular remainder of Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan into Ottoman control by 1585. The Safavid Persians under Shah Abbas I managed to wrest Eastern Armenia from the Ottomans during the long and brutal Ottoman-Persian war of 1596-1622, using the battlefield at Alboxet. At first overwhelmed by superior Ottoman forces, Abbas turned the tide of the war by using a slash and burn tactic, destroying Armenia’s land and forcing Armenians to emigrate to Persia, where they settled near Isfahan at New Jhulfa. Mostly abandoned to Mongol pastureage, the lands of Kotaik were further harmad during the campaign as farms and forests were burned during the retreat. Some say it is this campaign that irreversibly destroyed much of the forests of Kotaik, relegating the remainders to the fringes of the western border. After eighteen years of war Armenia was finally divided between Persia and Ottoman Turkey with Eastern Armenia (including Kotaik) awarded to the Safavids. Shah Abbas’ successors were not as enlightened as he and began repressive measures against the Armenian population, by now a minority in their own country. Pogroms against Christians became so harsh that a number of Armenians married into Muslim families and converted to escape the harsh treatment of their Christian cousins. So many made the switch that some say Armenian DNA can be found in perhaps 40% of the Persian and Turkish populations.

By the late 17th c the Russian Empire had expanded to the gates of the Caucasus, its artisans recruited by Peter the Great to help build his new capital at St. Petersburg. At the request of Armenian and Georgian emissaries Peter the Great sent expeditions into the Caucasus in 1700 and 1722, at first retreating from Persian forces but not before bolstering local resistance by Armenian Meliks in Karabak (Artsakh) and Northern Armenia. Led by David Bek, they acceded to Persian authority in name only.

The Turk-Persian war resumed mid century, each side taking and retaking parts of Eastern Armenia, including areas of Kotaik, which became a refuge for locals hiding in the mountain caves at Voghchaberd, Garni canyon and in the Hrazdan gorge by Argel, Karashamb, and Solak.

At the end of the century, the eunuch Agha Mohammed Khan seized the Safavid throne in 1794 and struck out at the Armenians, laying waste again to the countryside. This time the Russians were ready, the Imperial army sweeping south in 1797, pushing the Persians across the Araxes River and into Georgia, and the northern districts for the Czar. In 1813 and 1826 the Persians ceded lands to the Russians, establishing Russian control over Eastern Armenia.

19th CENTURY

Kotaik’s rebirth did not occur in the 19th c, unlike the rest of Russia, which experienced steady growth and industrialization during the Czarist period. Relegated to farming, herding and mining, the district was a provincial backwater, favored of hunters and those seeking fortunes in exploiting raw materials, but little else. It did recoup its population after the Turko-Russian war of 1828, which established the border further west in Ottoman Turkey and caused a significant shift of populations; Muslims moving west and south into Turkey and Persia, Christians moving east and north into Armenia.

The 1828 migration recovered land laid fallow since the invasions of the Mongols and Timur, returning grazing rights to former landowners and promoting steady growth and industrialization during the Czarist period. Relegated to farming, herding and mining, the district was a provincial backwater, favored of hunters and those seeking fortunes in exploiting raw materials, but little else.

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An epidemic of fatherless homes breakup of the family. Most head of households (fathers) are gone in search of work. This little households in Armenia no longer have a permanent father or mother. While most living abroad continue to send remittances back home, a growing number gradually forget their families in Armenia, their remittances gradually ending with some starting new families in their new homes, that continues to this day. While official each village where their father is. Most will tell you they are in Russia, a few in Europe or the USA.

As WWI began, Armenian patriots joined the Czarist forces and Russian incursions into Turkey were quick and decisive, causing the virtual collapse of the eastern Ottoman Empire and liberalising the Ottoman hold in Moscow, some to Yerevan, while those who can, emigrate to Europe and the US. The money sent back is used to fuel a limited merchant economy, though the empty shops and kiosks at Charentsavan and Hrazdan show a collapse of even that small economy, the countless empty apartments pointing to a mass exodus of the population. Few believe the great factories will ever restart.

Kotaik's current economy is based on agriculture, stone quarries, seasonal tourism and remittances from family members working abroad. Remittances are the largest influx of money into the marz. While Charentsavan and Hrazdan have witnessed a severe decline in living and housing standards, Abovian continues to thrive, benefiting from its close location to Yerevan, a mere 15 minute ride away. Another thriving community is Tsaghkadzor, the site of the Soviet Olympic training center and Armenia's only ski resort. The town is a regular haunt of the well-heeled from Yerevan and the Diaspora willing to toss money at its shockingly expensive lodges and pensions.

The largest concern in the district is Kotayk Brewery, a successful company that supports local initiatives. Owned by Hagik Arakelian ("Dog, Gago"), Armenia’s wealthiest businessmen (second only to Serj Sargsyan, the Minister of Defense), the income from the brewery and his other interests are used to help the poor in some well-publicized hand outs and to rejuvenate local villages and arrest the brain drain in the marz. In Abovian, funds are allocated to pay construction and transportation costs to attend universities in Yerevan, an effort that has paid off with a distinctly higher standard of living in the city, one of the few that has not witnessed a whole scale loss of population. Tzarakian is also setting his sights on the presidency, opening 400 offices through Tavush and Kotaik, having taken the oil rich city of Baku and Azerbaijan. During the battle, the Turks moved in to take lands it had lost in WWI, including Mt. Ararat. On December 2, 1920 Armenia signed the treaty of Alexandropol with Turkey and on the same day it was annexed to the Soviet Union.

THE SOVIET PERIOD

Soviet Kotaik experienced tremendous growth, especially after World War II, developing from a backwater district that exported raw materials to an industrial center churning out finished goods and supplying the country’s electrical needs through a series of hydroelectric plants built on the Hrazdan River. Tapping into the hydropower of the region was key to building the new Soviet Armenia and the network of hydroelectric plants, with the little hydro dams on the Hrazdan gorge in the 1930s.

Raw materials were still important, with the gold mine at Meghradzor becoming more important as the Soviets bartered with western countries and the Yerevan-Hrazdan-Jjevan rail line was improved, allowing export of raw goods and import of materials for processing at new industrial complexes built at Hrazdan and the new Soviet cities of Charentsavan (est. 1948 to house hydroelectric plant workers, then light industry), and Abovian (1963) built at the site of the 4th millennium BCE village of Elar. Abovian was also a research center, its standard of living above most towns outside Yerevan.

Goods produced in the marz included food products, cement, metal casting, glass, furniture and a little advertised but crucial industry in diamond production. Charentsavan became the most important industrial center in the country. Both the population and industrialization increased 6-fold in the Soviet period.

Kotaik entered a period of decline along with all the Soviet Union beginning in the Brezhnev era, as the reality of the previous 70 years of promises. By the time of independence, the marz was already experiencing a severe decline in industrial output while the damage to the environment resulting from unchecked pollution was hard to hide, the forests regularly coated with white soot from the dozens of smokestacks in the marz.

2ND REPUBLIC

Kotaik's importance grew during the 1988-1994 conflict with Azerbaijan over Nagorno Karabakh (Aartsakh) once the Azeri cut delivery of gas to the country. The hydroelectric plants that had fueled 30% of the country's electric needs now were needed to generate all of it, the nuclear plant at Metsamor shuttered in 1988. Unfortunately the malaise that hit the Soviet Union had damaged the power plants, which were neither maintained nor upgraded. The power blocks that worked were subject to frequent breakdowns, and when they worked they worked beyond their capacity, causing blackouts throughout the country. The industrial economy collapsed as well, as raw goods were unable to get to factories due to the Georgian blockade of Abkhasia, the only viable rail line to Russia once the Chechen fighting began. Once thriving cities ceased overnight; their citizens without work or income. A mass exodus began, one that continues to this day. While official signs show a population of 272,000 in 2004, they are notoriously unreliable with the actual population perhaps 50% of that number.

KOTAIK NOW

The missing 50% seems to be gone for good. Mostly head of households and young adults have made the exodus, many to benefit from the growing tourism and stay at its resorts and pensionats. But by 2000 their numbers were dwindling too, losing most of their head of households, who left impoverished villages to work abroad.

An epidemic of fatherless homes breakup of the family. Most head of households (fathers) are gone in search of work. This little households in Armenia no longer have a permanent father or mother. While most living abroad continue to send remittances back home, a growing number gradually forget their families in Armenia, their remittances gradually ending with some starting new families in their new homes, abandoning their families back home. As you travel the marz you can witness this dramatic change simply by asking the children you meet at each village where their father is. Most will tell you they are in Russia, a few in Europe or the USA.

Despite the serious challenges facing the marz, it is experiencing a resurgence of sorts, fed by the booming Yerevan economy that buys its food products and stays at its resorts and pensionats. The loss of population can be seen as a ‘correction’ to the 20th century boom, painful to those who are living through it but required to prepare the marz for the 21st century.

IN AND OUT

By Rail. The elektrichka travels daily between the Yerevan Arabkir rail station (above Cascade) and Lake Sevan, stopping at Charentsavan & Hrazdan en route. It is a cheap way to see the countryside, if you don’t mind the slow pace. It takes about 1 hr 15 min to Charentsavan and 1 hr 30 min to Hrazdan, and about 3 hours to reach the Lake Sevan depot. 500-1000 AMD.

By Air There are no air connections to Kotaik region. It may be possible to rent helicopter transport, if you have the bucks and want to flaunt it (Contact Azaryan or Mountain Rescue Team (P. 10) to inquire.

By Road The main road through Kotayk is the Yerevan-Sevan highway. Another main road enters the marz from Aragatsotn (Ashtarak) and connects to the Sevan Highway. Other roads are

Rural communities had weathered the changes of the 1990s well for a while, living off their local products and animal husbandry. But by 2000 their numbers were dwindling too, losing most of their head of households, who left impoverished villages to work abroad.

An epidemic of fatherless homes. The most dramatic change in Kotaik, and in Armenia, is the breakup of the family. Most head of households (fathers) are gone in search of work. This little reported change is a landmine of social change, the first time in memory that a majority of households in Armenia no longer have a permanent father or mother. While most living abroad continue to send remittances back home, a growing number gradually forget their families in Armenia, their remittances gradually ending with some starting new families in their new homes, abandoning their families back home. As you travel the marz you can witness this dramatic change simply by asking the children you meet at each village where their father is. Most will tell you they are in Russia, a few in Europe or the USA.

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in the north (Hankavan) and South (Garni/Geghard & Sevaberd), none of which have an outlet.

From Yerevan, the main road in and out of the marz is the Yerevan-Sevan highway (M4/M24) that travels north by Abovian, Charentsavan, Hrazdan and Tzaghkadorz en route to Geshgrunkh and Lake Sevan. From Yerevan it is 16 km to Abovian, 34 km to Charentsavan, 33 km to Hrazdan, 42 km to Tzaghkadorz and 67 km to Sevan City. Parallel to the highway on its east is the Abovian-Hrazdan road (H1) which passes villages en route.

The north Hankavan road (H28) from the Tzaghkadorz turnoff passes forests, pensions, Meghradzor and summer camps en route to the Greek village of Hankavan (36 km). At Meghradzor it joins the roughsod (H27) and crosses the Arjandots Mountains to meet Margahovit in Lori (29 km).

To the west of the Sevan Highway is the Hrazdan River road (H5), a scenic route that follows the river gorge and connects Yerevan with Zovuni (4 km), Arzni (22 km), Karashamb (30.5 km), Arzakan (35.5 km), Bjni (40.5 km) and Hankavan (53 km).

The Yeghvard Road (H4) connects Yerevan to Yeghvard (19 km), Aragliugh (Ara Lehr) (29 km) and Buzhakan (36 km).

There is a east-west road (H6) connecting Ashtarak in Aragatsotn with Yeghvard (12 km) and Arzni (22 km) connecting to the Hrazdan River Road.

To the east there are a series of mountain roads radiating out from Abovian, one leading east to Kotal (6 km), Akunk (7.5 km), Zar (12.5 km), Sevaberd (18 km), then on to a twisting path to Aknalich (29 km) and the petroglyphs on the Geghami Leh (27 km). Another leads southeast from Abovian to Aramis (5.5 km), Kamaris (8 km) and Gehgheh (12 km). A third leads north from Abovian to Kota (6 km), Kaputan (12 km), Hatis (17 km) then around Mt. Hatis to Zar (10 km).

To the Southeast is the Garni-Geghard Road (H3), which runs along the northern edge of Aragats Marz and the Khosrov Preserve, leading from Yerevan to Jrvesh (4 km), Voghchaberd (10 km), Garni (22 km) and Geghard (33 km). At Garni there is a jumping off point into the Khosrov Preserve to hike the trail to Havats Tar Monastery or drive (with permission) to Aghjots Vank and Kakabacberd.

Public Transport includes intercity buses and minibuses (Maskhuri Taxis) that travel from village to village and city to city.

Buses from Yerevan travel daily to Abovian, Charentsavan, Hrazdan and Garni (150-300 AMD), with stops at villages along the way. There are also taxi connections from Hrazdan to Tzaghkadorz (1000 AMD) and Garni to Geghard (1500 AMD).

Minivans also stop at Abovian, Charentsavan, Hrazdan and Garni (250-400 AMD), with taxi connection from Hrazdan to Tzaghkadorz (1000 AMD) and Garni to Geghard (1500 AMD). Minivans connect towns to villages, including Abovian to Akunk, Sevaberd, Arzni, Yeghvard, Buzhakan, Bjni, Meghradzor and Hankavan. Minivans run mornings and evenings, ask around for times.

Cars with drivers and taxis can be hired in Yeghvard, Abovian, Charentsavan, Hrazdan, Tzaghkadorz and at many villages, like Akunk, Arzni, Biureghavan and Garni/Geghard, most welcome day trips, even on short notice. Figure 100-150 AMD per kilometer plus something extra for stops or negotiates a day rate of around 200-400, for up to four passengers. If you stop for food, feed the driver as well. Ditto if you decide to overnight and his home isn’t nearby.

OVERNIGHT/EAT

Lodging. Kota has a variety of overnights, from three star wonders to pensionats, summer camps, motels and flop houses ("Bosetuns") that rent by the hour. The amount and variety is surprising for such a small district, with most located in scenic areas. Tzaghkadorz has the most on offer with the Olympic Center and hotels (including a recently opened 3 star hotel), resorts, pensionats (6000-40,000+ AMD), spas (7000-30,000 AMD) and cabins (5000-25,000 AMD) throughout the town. The area is popular year round, packed to the gills during ski and summer seasons. Hankavan Valley has a number of summer pensionats, several in states of renovation (6000-30,000 AMD), summer camps that accept walk-in visitors (3000-5000 AMD) and the Hataly Spa, a Soviet-era behemoth that is cheap and comfortable despite its age (6000-15,000 AMD). Arzakan Valley has pensionats (6000-15,000 AMD) lining the road that arcs up into the Tegheniats Mountain Range, popular in the by vacationers watching the spectacular fall foliage. The Sevan Highway has a few motels (5000+ AMD) lining the road, convenient and khorovatz stands. These are mostly used for tete-a-tetes but come in handy if nothing else is available. Abovian has a couple of motels and one really elaborate hotel with fountains and cafe in front (5000-15,000 AMD). Hrazdan has one terrible Soviet hotel, not worth the visit, Charentsavan hotel is closed. Around Akunk there are several fish restaurants with motel rooms (6000-15,000 AMD) Arzakan has one working spa (6000-15,000 AMD) and a motel-restaurant at the top of the gorge.

Home stays, which can be rustic but full of local hospitality can be found at villages and towns throughout the marz. Expect to pay 3000-5000 AMD for basic room in most towns, closer to 10,000 AMD per person in Tzaghkadorz. Village homes will usually not have indoor toilet facilities. Abovian, Charentsavan, Hrazdan and Tzaghkadorz are all worth checking for a home stay. Be sure to offer to pay up front. Many homes will politely refuse money at first, but four attempts seem to be the magic number before they accept. Check out a home stays at Garni, they don’t advertise, but they have the prettiest location and friendly hosts.

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. 3000-4000 AMD for bed and breakfast is reasonable.

Camping is exceptional along the Hrazdan River gorge, on the eastern mountain forested area (Tsaghkadorz, Arzakan, Ara Lehr, and Hankavan Valley) as well as to the east at Aknalich and Mt. Hatis. It can be chilly at night in the upper elevations. Sites are mostly in wild areas or river canyons. Before setting up camp, be sure you are not trespassing 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 in Kotal is as varied as lodging. Tsaghkadorz has the most to offer, with restaurants, cafes and khorovatz stands throughout the town. Tsaghkadorz is also the most expensive venue, as are the fish restaurants around Akunk, though Akunk has the better food and atmosphere. Abovian has a couple of restaurants and several cafes, as well as khorovatz stands. Hrazdan has a restaurant on the lake, cafes and khorovatz stands. Charentsavan has just a few kiosks. Yeghvard has home cooking and kiosks. There are restaurants mostly and khorovatz stands on the Hankavan and Arzakan Roads, as well as on the road to Garni. There are restaurants and cafes at Azni, in and above the gorge.

Water Reliable bottled water is generally not available outside of towns, though the ubiquitous Coca-Cola knockoffs are everywhere. Kota has roadside springs that locals love to visit to fill up their bottles with. They are considered safe by locals, and we have never had a problem with one, but you need to use your own judgment and don’t drink out of a cup that’s not yours.

DESTINATIONS
Kota has a lot more to offer than skiing at Tsaghkadorz and church hopping at Bjni.

Pictoresque locales include the Hrazdan River Gorge (especially by Zovuni, Arzni, Nurums, Karashamb and Bjni), Mt. Arni Lehr and Buzhakan, the Arzakan Valley, Tsaghkadorz, Hankavan Valley (Plunik, Meghradzor and Hankavan), Voghchaberd, Garni, Garni Gorge (Azat River), Geghard, Arikhal, Vsoskejer River, Geghama Lehr.

Prehistoric sites include the petroglyphs by Bahalovit (Yerevan), between Mts. Seghanasar and Gegghamaghan and Mts. Nalsar & Azhdahak, open air workshops at Arzni, Mt. Hatis, Jabrer & Nurums, the Mustierian-Mesolithic cave sites (Usakert I-II) and Bronze Age burial sites at Aragel.

Copper-Bronze Age sites include fortresses at Garni (Zovuni, Dovri), Voghchaberd, Kaghshi, Bjni and a massive fortress at Sevaberd, and excavations at Zovuni, Aragel, Karashamb, Astghaberd, Dovri and the Geghama Lehr.

Urartian sites in Kotaik include sites at Dovri, Tehgenik, Aramis, Zar, Sevaberd, Hatis and Garni.

Greek & Roman-Parthian era sites are at Garni (temple), Arinj (settlement), Voghchaberd (cave complex), Dovri and Hatis (Astghaberd fortress).

Early Christian and Middle Age sites are at Zoravan, Yeghvard, Buzhakan, Teganenits, Ptni,
Karashamb, Karenis, Teghenis, Nurmus, Aramous, Bjni, Voghchaberd, & Garni.

Medieval sites (8th-11th c) sites are at Yeghvard, Teghenis Vank (Buzhakan), Ptgni (Dzorashen), Yeghvard (Khor Virap), Aragatsotn (Hrazdan) S. Astvatsatsin Vank), Vardenavank (Vardenavank), Solak (Mairavan Astvatsatsin), Teghenis Vank and Garni. Fortresses are at Sevaberd, Zoravan, Mt. Hatis, Solak and Garni.

Medieval sites (12th-14th c) sites include the octagonal church at Garni, the exquisitely carved Gavants Tar, 2 km southeast by a volcanic cone with great views of Garni and the Voskejur River. The site of Garni Gorge is at the foot of Garni Gorge, which is the site of the ancient Temple of Vahram, built in the 3rd century AD. The site of Garni Gorge is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

NATURE TOURING

Natural areas include the wind-swept alpine vales of the Gegaehla Lehr, including the crystal blue lake at Aknalich and the nearby petroglyphs on the stone of Mt. Seghanasar and Geghmaghan, as well as Mts. Nalsar & Azhdahak further south; the petroglyphs at Mts. Seghanasar & Geghmaghan. The petroglyphs at Mts. Seghanasar & Geghmaghan.

Mountains include Mount Arai (2576 m) north of Yeghvard, which is a favorite spot for hikers and climbers. Mount Arai (2576 m) is a volcanic cone with great views of Garni and the Voskejur River. The site of Garni Gorge is at the foot of Garni Gorge, which is the site of the ancient Temple of Vahram, built in the 3rd century AD. The site of Garni Gorge is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Caving. Kotaik has dozens of caves, with concentrations on the Hrazdan and Azat (Garni), River Canyons. Unique cave sites are on the Hrazdan River at Arzni, Aragatsotn (Medieval cave complexes) with natural caves all along the gorge. Garni Gorge has natural caves below Garni and along the gorge in both directions. There is a Stone Age-Medieval cave complex at Voghchaberd. A large cave complex is at the Poghos Petros Shrine between Akun and Zark at the base of Mt. Hatis. For more details on caves see TourArmenia.

Birding. Spring (March-April) and Autumn (September-October) are the best times to observe migrating birds, which will congregate at the marshlands and fish ponds around Akun, as well as on the Hrazdan and Azat Rivers. More regular visitors (Geghessh and Arat Gorges) and other places to bird watch mountain steppe birds.

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

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first aid facilities and the services of their professional rescue group (EU certification).

The Armenian Mountain rescue teams "Spitak" stationed in Yerevan and Stepavan, can organize hiking, rock climbing and mountain expeditions. Guides are experienced rescuers-rock climbers, and they can also arrange horse riding along picturesque routes, by a horse cave and "Ancient Armenian horse games". They hire expert guides from in and out of the country and provide full tour services. Worth looking into, very well organized.

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

Archeological Tours
MassTour, 8 Komitas, Yerevan, (tel./fax. +374 10 27 78 32), 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 Aghavnavtun, Paleolithic caves in the Kasakh River Canyon near the village of Apnagiugh, guided visits to the petroglyphs in the Geghama mountain range. They also run basic tour packages with expert guides. Excavation packages begin from $750/week for full service land-expeditions.

Sacred Geometry. Archeological expeditions are scientific by definition and not for the casual tourist, though a stop by an active dig is informative and fascinating when they are uncovering fresh finds. The information can also useful in understanding the religious beliefs of ancestral Armenians and how they applied these in worship, building temples and burying their dead. 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! At sites such as the temple of Mythra at Gami, these rules are rigidly applied and can easily seen, if you know what to look for. See our Sacred Geometry chapter (www.tacentral.com/architecture.asp?story_no=21) for more information about sacred geometry.
EXPLORING THE REGION

Most of these trips can be done in a single day by car, depending on how many sites you visit and how long you spend at each stop. Sites in UPPER CASE are considered major sites definitely worth stopping at while those marked in parenthesis ( ) are called side trips, meaning they are worth a visit if you have the time but may be too far off the main route or too many to include all of them in a single trip.

Likewise you may be able to combine some day trips if you stick to just the MAIN SITES (UPPER CASE), especially Trips 1 & 2 which can be done in half days. The trip up the Geghama Lehr or into Garni Gorge or the Khosrov Preserve should be treated as routes that extend their Trip into full day affairs.

Decent to good overnight are available at Tsaghkadzor, Abovian, Arzni, Arzakan and Hankavan Valleys and Akunk, basic or minimal service overnight at the Sevan Highway (Charentsavan, Hrazdan), home stays at Garni and villages.


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.

Trip 1 has two of the most important historic sites in Armenia, the Bronze Age fortress and Hellenistic Temple to Mythra at Garni and the spectacular stone-carved monastery at Geghard (also called Airavank). Arguably they are as popular as Echmiadzin, and just as easy to visit, with taxis, minivans and tour buses plying the Garni road throughout the day.

Not known to most visitors is that the same curving road that arcs through the Voghchaberd Mountains and traces the Azat River canyon is one of the oldest roads in mankind, following a path of civilization from the Stone Age to the present day. First used by Mesolithic-Paleolithic tribes who inhabited caves on the Azat canyon and at Voghchaberd, the area became a prized possession of warring factions, Bronze Age tribes harnessing stone from the nearby mountains to build cyclopean fortress walls at Garni.

Garni gained importance under the Urartians and Arshakuni kings who expanded the site into a royal retreat, defensive position and place of worship. Bordering the Khosrov forest, hunting grounds for the Artashesian and Arshakuni kings, the river marked the border between Armenia and Sassandri, Georgian and Mongol invaders in the medieval period, Garni facing off with the captured city of Dvin for control of the kingdom.

The canyon protected religious enclaves as well, one of the most stunning next to the village of Havuts Tar, Garni, Azat River Gorge.

The Azat River continues to divide the country, now between Kotak and the Khosrov Preserve, the last large nature reserve in the south Caucasus and home to endangered species of mountain goats, wild cats and Caucasian leopards. Garni is one of the entries into the preserve, with its prehistoric and medieval ruins at Havuts Tar, Aghjots Vank, Babiert and Geghi Castle. You can hike to Havuts Tar from Garni in about 30 minutes of uphill climb, well worth the foot aches and sore muscles for the stunning views and exquisitely carved led stone work in the convent. The other sites require off road vehicles and permission to venture.

But the canyon is worth a serious visit, for its river bottom forests, the ice cold waters of the Azat River with pools of water to soak in, the extraordinary “symphony canyon” walls of perfectly cut diamond shaped granite, basalt, slate and andesite stone and towering tree canopies over picnic and camping spots. A unique eco-system, Garni gorge provides excellent hiking in either direction, ending at the Azat Reservoir on the south or Geghard Monastery and the gates to Lake Sevan on top of the Geghama Lehr to the north.

Note: If you want to focus on Garni, Geghard and Garni’s virosos, you may want to drive through to Geghard and work your way back, allowing for extra time and change of plans.

Stay: Overnight in Yerevan or home/B&B stay in Garni, village home (rustic). Camping along the route, river canyon or near villages.

Eat: Garni restaurant, roadside stands.

Springs: Voghchaberd, Garni, Azat River Gorge.

From Yerevan Center, take Abovian Street and connect with the Sevan Highway (sign-posted) and continue about 3.7 km to the Massis (Nor Nork) exit onto Gai p. Take Gai p. through Nor Nork/Massis about 1.8 km to a T-intersection and a left turn into the Garni Road. Continue for about 2.5 km to a right turn into (Yevre), DD 40.1856 x 44.5869

SIDE TRIP: (Yevre) - (Yevre) – (Dzoraghiur) also Yevre, also Drjvezh, "waterfall", pop. 5333) lies just outside Yerevan proper and at the NE foot of Mt. Khachisar (1623.6 m). The village is known mostly for its dachas, first built during Soviet times for the government big-wigs and their come-alongs, still hot property for the well-heeled or those lucky enough to have inherited or bought before the real estate boom. The dachas lie about 3.7 km east of the village on the Garni road.

The village itself has the ruins of an old cemetery, probably founded on a prehistoric tomb field but now strewn mostly with 5th c medieval-19th c stones. About 1 km SE of the village on a ridge road are ruins and a stone quarry. Ahas, no sign of a waterfall.

Not very good Camping is possible near the village on the mountainside, though the night view of Yerevan is nice; Overnight in village home or dacha possible (rustic, 3000-5000 AMD for B&B is fair); Springs in the village.

Backtrack to the Yevre dachas and take a right onto Garni Road and continue to the 15 km marker and the CHARENTS ARCH (DD 40.2050 x 44.6431)

Charents Arch - ԳԱՐԵՏՍ ԱՐԿ ( elev. 1774m is known for its spectacular view of Mt. Ararat framed by the valley between Mts. Khachasar (right, 1623.6 m) and Kuzei (left, 1489.5 m), with the ruins of the medieval village of Shorbulagh nestled in the rolling farmland and meadows below. The best time to view the stunning scenery is in the early morning, when the mists roll off the fields and low lying clouds ring the crown of Ararat in winter and early spring.

The arch is named for one of Armenia’s best loved poets, Yeghishe Charents (1897-1937), a revolutionary artist during the turbulent years of the Genocide, WW I and the formation of the Soviet Union. Charents was born Yeghishe Soghomonian in Iran and received his schooling in Yerevan Marz: 12 of 56 - TourArmenia © 2006 Rick Neyer ALL RIGHTS RESERVED - www.TACentral.com
Kars (1904-1912), then a part of the Armenian Provinces of the Russian Empire. In 1914 Charents joined Armenian Volunteer brigades on the Caucasus front and fought with Russian Imperial troops as they routed the Turks and liberated western Armenia, as far as Van and Erzurum. During this campaign Charents witnessed first hand the ravages of the Armenian Genocide, which strongly affected his poetry, as did his support of the Russian revolution, joining the Red Army in 1918 and fighting against resurgent Turkish troops that were invading the Armenian republic.

After the collapse of the Turkish campaign and the founding of the Armenian Republic, Charents moved to Yerevan in 1919, working as a teacher. When the Red Army invaded the foundering republic later that year and the new Soviet Republic was proclaimed in 1920, Charents was a fervent supporter of the new Communist order, believing it was the only path to peace and prosperity for what was admittedly a decimated, feudal society.

Charents was enamored of the Futurists, writers, artists and playwrights who tried to reinvent their art forms, reacting against the old as they boldly experimented in their work. Seeing Communism as the ultimate liberation, these influential artists and intelligentsia tried to take the revolution one step further, completely altering the way their words, music and performances were seen, creating—as they saw it—the new society that Lenin preached during the 1920s. Charents was particularly influenced by the views of Vladimir Mayakovski, considered the master of Soviet poetry and who worked as a propagandist, agitator, poet, writer and commentator. Charents emulated Mayakovski’s critical views, casting his eyes on the feudal vestiges in Armenia, then against the new society itself. For more about the Futurists and Mayakovski visit (mayakovsky.com/)

This put him at odds with an increasingly totalitarian government, and, to save his own life, Charents was forced to renounce Futurism in 1924, and his mentor in Russia. The disillusionment and what he had come to see as being a feeling of betrayal and guilt at his failure hurt him. For those he had held in such high regard, profoundly affected his work, and he never quite recovered from this blow.

Especially after Mayakovski killed himself in 1930, Charents’ view grew darker, in his work and in his life, his bitterness and sense of betrayal apparent in his last work which devoted itself to nation over internationalism, the individual over the collective, completely at odds with the world views of the Soviet powers, and Stalin. Charents was killed in 1937, one of the millions murdered during the Great Purge. He was rehabilitated in 1954 after Stalin’s death, and became widely read by the local population. His home-museum in Yerevan houses his works and the story of his life.

Charents published six volumes of poetry plus a novel: LYRICAL POEMS, DANTEAN LEGEND (1916), THE FRENZIED MOBS (1918), POEMS (1923), LAND OF NAYIRI (1923) EPIC DAYBREAK (1930), BOOK FOR THE ROAD (1932). Charents also wrote many unpublished poems.

The Arch. This monument to his views of nationhood and freedom is an appropriately late-Soviet outlook on his life. Despite its obvious nationalist overtones, the form of the monument, its material (granite), its size, its shape—arches, the frame it makes the azure sky, verdant valleys and Mt. Ararat in the distance is more than a stunning postcard moment, it represents Charents’ world views as they had matured by the time of his death; the view is of an unobtainable part of the nation he loved so much and to a notion of freedom and individual – he died for. It shows a part of the country he fought for and which now lies under foreign rule; but it is also of the home he hoped to build, of an independent Armenia.

Continue for about 1 km to VOGHCABERD, DD 40.16872 x 44.64746)

SIDE TRIP: (Vogchaberd - Aghupzla - also Voghjaberd or Voghjabert, elev. 1769m, pop. 3500) is an ancient settlement, with cave dwellings at the top of the village going back to the Paleolithic Era. The cliff dwellings continued to be hot property during later invasions, protecting the local populace from the ravages of the invading armies while providing defenses for Armenian fighters.

The Cliff dwellings are the most obvious sites in the village set about 50 m above the village. To get there, take the asphalt road into the village to where it ends just below the cliffs. You need ropes or really long arms to get into the caves, but the ground below is scattered with stone flakes, leftovers of Stone Age tool making, plus a few pottery shards from later eras.

About 100m before the cliffs, a dirt path takes off above a farm house on the right through some briars for about 50 m to the village Tukh Manukh, a very old shrine with pagan origins (look for the bronze Age vishap or phallus fragment inside). The current 4th-5th c walls are covered with a little tin and a whole lot of sky, while the inside is decorated with a menagerie of religious pictures, icons, totems and candles, a celebration of local devotion. Look for the Arabic stone lying among the khachkar fragments; it is carved on the back side of a vishap stone, previously carved with Christian symbols.

An enigmatic find in the village’s apple orchards are the remains of a 4th c church, part of the original village and, if the dating is correct, one of the oldest church of its type. It’s a bit of a winding journey there, but the view of Ararat and the orchards is stunning, especially in the early morning dew. To get there, take the main highway E about 200 m past the asphalt turn to the cliffs, and turn right (at the store/kiosk) into a rocky path that goes down into the valley. Go for another 200 m or so to where a fence on the right protects the orchard. Turn right and then right again, following the grassy, rocky path, into the orchard. More fences mark off the orchards, but a sort of alley will divide two. Climb over or open the make-shift gates and walk about 150 m to a small opening and the church ruins.

The church is a small basilica with a protruding apse, and is small indeed. Perhaps able to remain appear to be a combination of pagan and Christian symbols. The size, shape and markings make this a good example of how early Christians “baptized” pagan shrines; erecting crosses over them and obliterator the pagan iconography with Christian symbols.

The apples in the orchards are excellent, but note they are the villager's livelihood. If you pick some, try to track down the owner and pay
them something. You can also leave some

Continue SW on the valley dirt road and in about 4 km you will reach the *ruins of medieval Shorbulagh*, its modern incarnation 2 km further W. There is an interesting cemetery and fragments of the old village scattered about.

There are other *megalithic stones* scattered around the village, including worship stone fragments and chamber tomb stones. To the east, near the base of Mt. Vohchaberd (2092.9 m), grow three of the four known types of *wild wheat*. These were domesticated in the Paleolithic era, allowing hunter-gatherer ancestral Armenians to develop settlements and the basis of the Ararat civilization.

Camping is possible near the village in the valley below (apple orchards are nice and grassy, but be sure to get permission, they are also carefully watched) or near the village; **Overnight** in village home possible (rustic, 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** in the village.

From central Voghchaberd, continue E on the winding highway for about 1.6 km to central *(Geghahr* DD 40.1564 x 44.6511)  

**SIDE TRIP:** *(Geghahr* - *Geghral* - till 1935 Araftchik, elev. 1666m, pop. 851) was resettled by survivors of the genocide from Van, Kars and their surrounding area in 1918-1924. Another ancient settlement on the Garni-Yerevan road, there are ruins of the old village at the end of the first road to the L once you enter the village. A bustling community in the Persian Satrapy and early Armenian period (5th-3rd c BCE), sarcophagi made from red stone were uncovered in Soviet times, along with funeral items. They are kept in Yerevan, but there are a few locals that remember the dig and can point you in the general SW direction. To explore on your own, and for a trip to the middle of nowhere, take the R turn before the village onto a dirt road into the valley and Mt. Kuzets (about 3.7 km).

Camping is possible near the village in the valley below (be sure to get permission if private land); **Overnight** in village home possible (rustic, 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** in the village.

- From Geghahr continue E then S on the highway for about 2.5 km to S turn off to *(Hatsavan* DD 40.1378 x 44.6522)

**SIDE TRIP:** *(Hatsavan* - *Haçavank* 1512m, literally “Place of a food” or “Place of bread”, pop. 600) guarded the pass to Garni and as such was fortified from an early time. Other then the occasionally found pottery shard or tool fragments plowed up by farmers, there are remains of fortifications that housed the king’s guard, including **two half-round towers** from the Hellenistic period (1st-3rd cc CE) survive, located about 200 m before the entrance to the village, on a low ridge on the south side of the highway.

- Continue E/SE on the highway for about 4 km to the Garni Valley and a full 7 km to **GARNI** *(DD 40.11749 x 44.72826)  

**GARNI** - *Gn* (until 1936 Bash-Garni, elev. 1302m, pop. 8400) is an old settlement; a sign at the entrance to the village tells us its full 4170 years of inhabitation. The site is one of the most visited in Armenia, rivaling nearby Geghard Monastery and Echmiadzin for bragging rights. It is a remarkable place, made famous for the Cyclopean stone walls that surround the royal summer residence and 1st c CE temple to Mythra.

**CITY MAP**

**History**

Settlement at the site goes back to the Stone Age and Paleolithic and Mesolithic artifacts have been uncovered at the site. Still found in villagers' gardens are Copper, Bronze and Iron Age pottery, tools and jewelry. Through by the Neolithic era the area around the temple was firmly settled, the cyclopean fortress walls are dated from the Bronze Age, when the importance of the site became evident. Situated on top of perfect natural defenses on two sides with impenetrable cliffs plunging 300 meters to the Goghi and Azat rivers below, and on the third with massive fortress walls, Garni was both a fortress and sacred place. The immediate surroundings of the fortress grew along with the royal residence, encompassing much of the current village.

Throughout its more than 4100 year history, the site was an important linchpin in the defenses and rule of the country. According to a cuneiform record found on the territory of Garni, the fortress was conquered by the Urartian king Argishti I in the first half of the 8th c BCE. It was fortified several times in the ensuing centuries, becoming a summer residence for Armenia's kings, their troops and retreat stationed in the village and surrounding area (Hatsavan, Geghahr & Voghchaberd, plus across the gorge in the current Koshrov Preserve).

The temple and nearby palace are dated from the 4th century BCE to the 2nd century CE. It was during this time that the introduction of the Hellenistic ideals was introduced to Armenia in the wake of Alexander the Great’s armies. The period may be called “Armenian Hellenism” since Armenians combined Greek ideals with their own beliefs, and there is record of Armenian gods and legends making their way to Greece, where they were borrowed and renamed. Some are the names and shapes of the constellations in the zodiac (Vahagan is the constellation Orion, Torgh Angheg the constellation Aries, Haik the constellation Hercules); others are legends (the legends of Hercules are actually based on earlier legends of the Armenian king Haik); still others being the gods themselves: the Greek Zeus for the Armenian god Aramazd, Aphrodite for the Armenian goddess Astghik, the Greek Hephaestus for the Vahagan, Artemis for the goddess Anahit. 

**T’rdat I:** From its earliest incarnation a temple of some kind was at Garni, each dedicated to a god of its time: the sun, fire, in the Urartian period to Khaldi, Teisheba or Arabuni and finally, to the Zoroastrian deity Mehr/Mihr or Mythra. There had been a royal residence at the site for most of its history, though the earliest buildings are yet to be uncovered.

During the 3rd-2nd cc. BCE, Garni was the summer residence for Armenian kings of the Yervanduni, Artashashes and Arshakuni dynasties and was one of their most powerful strongholds against foreign invasion, reaching its height of glory during the Artashashian and Arshakuni periods (188 BCE - 428 CE).

The Artashaches and Arshakunis did much to shape the Armenian nation, expanding its territories to its greatest size and fending off encroachments from Persian (Parthian) and Roman armies. They brought prosperity and rule to the country, allowing it to evolve into a regional power...
Period the Romans were in a protracted battle with the Parthians for control of the Near East, using Armenia as their battleground. In the 1st c the country was ruled by the Arshakuni king, T'rdat (36-57 CE), and then by his brother Khosrov (57-83). The new king last 3 years before he was deposed by the Parthian candidate T'rdat (53-60, 62-66-75 CE), the younger brother of the Parthian king of kings Vagharshak (Vologeses), who like the Arshakuni kings before him, had Parthian blood. In retaliation, Rome invaded Armenia in 57 CE, ravaging the capital at Aratashat in the year 58 and was about to annex Armenia outright when they were surrounded and defeated by T'rdat's armies at Kharput in 62 CE. In a stunning reversal (Or not, considering how often people changed sides in those days), T'rdat sued for peace with Nero and lay down his diadem before an effigy of Nero, agreeing to go to Rome to get it back from the man who had killed him. He also needed—and may have already been offered—Rome's money to rebuild his capital at Aratashat.

The trip to Rome took nine months and was reported by historians as a great Cecil B. DeMille affair: following Zoroastrian practices, the Armenian king traveled by land to avoid polluting the sea, having been given a helmet of gold instead of a veil, his train had a cavalry of 3000 retainers, Magian priests, a contingent of Roman legionaries, there were bespangled horses, treasure laden pack animals, the king was not without his retinue of women, including those who were holding the infant son of his meeting with Nero at Naples. His arrival was a success—not least because it started with a scandal when the recalcitrant Parthian refused to disarm himself in the presence of Nero and ended with gladiator games in his honor and a coronation of the new emperor at the forum in Rome decked out with banners and gold. T'rdat kneeling before Nero and saying:

"Master... I have come to thee, my god, to worship thee as I do Myruthas (Mythra). The destiny thou spinnest for me shall be mine, for thou art my Fortune and my Fate, (Dio, LXII; vol. VIII)

Nero was greatly pleased, placing the diadem on T'rdat's head and entertaining him at the theatre of Pompey, which had been covered with gold and shaded by purple cloth stretched over head. There was a banquet and every honored guest was treated like royalty. T'rdat returned in triumph with Roman legions and two million sestertii (gold). Roman craftsmen and artists were rushed to the royal capital at Aratashat. T'rdat raised the city and renamed it Neronia in honor of his big brother in Rome.

At the same time T'rdat commissioned the Temple to Myruthas at Garni, sometime around 66 CE. It was repaired, along with the fortress and palace gardens after T'rdat fleded off barbarian raids from the north in and around 72 CE. He built a palace for his sister-queen Khosrovudikhat and had a Greek inscription installed on the site around the same time, referring to him as "the sun" and "supreme ruler of Greater Armenia." Some dispute this sequence of events, claiming the medieval chronicler Movses Khorenatsi's relating of the events places the temple and palace to T'rdat II almost 200 years later. However, most archeologists and historians say that by its style and construction, the temple and out buildings are better placed in the 1st c.

The temple remained intact for a further 1700 years, surviving the mass destruction of pagan temples throughout Armenia during S. Gregory's pagan war. Legend says it was preserved at the request of King T'rdat II's sister, perhaps because it was believed to be one of the first sites where Christianity was preached.

Garni fortress continued as a summer residence for Armenian royalty to the end of the Arshakuni dynasty ca. 428, the a time when garrison and nakharar families. The church erected a large basilica near the site in the 4th c and another immediately adjacent to the temple itself, first in the 7th c, then as an open apse (circular) church in the 9th c. Other churches were erected over pagan temples in the village in the same periods, then again in their present forms in the 11th and 12th c.

The Arabs destroyed most of the fortress in the 7th c, converting the fortress for a short time into a mosque, carving the walls at the entry with Arabic script.

Its glory as a summer residence was renewed in the Bagratuni and Zakarian periods (9th-13th cc), as the 11th c Astvatsatsin and 12th c "Little" or "water" monuments incorporated into the temple. There were also lively communities across the river in the Khosrov Preserve, royal hunting grounds founded by T'rdat's 3rd century descendent Khosrov the Great. The Zakarian (also Proshian) period saw the rise of great monasteries and convents in Armenia, and by Garni one of the most amazing was Hovuts Tar, just across the river and uphill. The Turkish-Safavid-Iranian noblemen. The village survived, villagers scrambling into the gorge or up nearby mountains to hid during raids and war, returning to rebuild their huts and plant the rich soil on the Garni valley in time of peace.

For 1700 years the temple stood intact, surviving only to earthquakes in 1679. In 1848-49 it remained destroyed for almost 300 years until the Russian orientalist Nikolai Marr and his colleague Yaakov Smirnov rediscovered the ruins. During the great earthquakes in the 1930s Prof. Nikolai Buniyatov made a faithful reconstruction of the temple, and the temple was rebuilt ca. 1966-1976.

The modern village still supports itself by farming, though new influx of cash comes from tourists making the one hour pilgrimage to the temple site and a new breed of investors, wealthy Armenians buying village houses for summer homes.

The cyclopean stone wall construction technique perfected during Roman times, leading to the thinking that the walls were actually built in the Roman period. In fact this technique was common for millennia before the Roman period in Armenia and the stones were first laid in the 3rd millennium BCE by ancestral Armenians who developed the region into one of the greatest metallurgical and trading powers in Asia Minor. In the 7th c. Arab invaders destroyed most of the structure, but they were rebuilt in the 10th c. the gate showing medieval carving details.

A rectangular precursor in the NE fortress wall, dated the 3rd-4th centuries was used as a service building, housing the king's garrison or servants. The building has a similar composition as the royal palace nearby, next to the temple, with pylons dividing the main room and pilasters on the outer walls supporting the barrel vaulting.

Past the Souvenir Shop and at the end of the long walkway is the Garni Temple. The temple on the southern tip of the fortress is the only remaining intact model of Hellenistic architecture in Armenia. It is a reconstruction of the original, which was destroyed along with the defensive walls in a powerful earthquake in 1679 CE. Reconstruction began in 1949, and is considered an almost perfect reconstruction of the original.

The temple was dedicated to Myruthas (also, Mythra, in Armenian/Persian "Mehr / Mihr"), a deity popular in the near East. It was found its way to Greece and Rome, becoming the patron goddess of the Roman Empire in its last period before Christianity. The name "Mythra" is synonymous with the Greek word "Helios", which means the sun or sun god, and is a variant of earlier Vedic...
"Helios! T'rdat the Great, King of Armenia, when the ruler built the agarak (castle) for the queen and this inaccessible fortress in the eleventh year of his reign, Meneus with the Ter's permission, being a ligit of the great sarparket (general), by way of gratitude (purchased) in the presence of witness Mathues..."

This inscription suggests that Khorenatsi confused T’rdat III with T’rdat I, who reigned in the 1st century CE. Other contemporary accounts by the Roman historians Dionissios Cassius and Tacitus mention the journey to Rome by T’rdat I, where he ceremonially received his crown from the hands of the Emperor Nero in 65 CE. Not honored by the Armenian king with lavish gifts as compensation for the destruction of the Armenian capital Artashat by Corbulonus and the devastating campaign against the Armenians in 59-60 CE. The restoration of Artashat and the walls of the fortress of Garni, and the construction of the temple to Mythra in Garni are attributed to T’rdat I, the Greek inscription referring to events in the 11th year of his reign, the year 76 CE. This version is supported by the temple’s architecture, the choice of Mythras whose popularity is traced to Nero’s reign and the building technique used for its construction.

A common feature of sacred structures from oldest times into the Christian era is to orient the structures to the East. In this Armenians shared Zoroastrian entities with Persia and worshipped fire as an ultimate gift from the gods, an entity in itself. Like their Persian brethren they oriented their temples with the altar in the west, where it could receive the first rays of the rising sun, that is, the powers of the sun god. This orientation became important to early Christians who converted temples to churches. One way to differentiate the new religion from the older was to reverse the orientation of the temple, placing it to the east, where they believed the Son of God would rise at the end of time. 

Uniquely, T’rdat’s temple is not oriented east-west but rather on a Northwest-Southeast axis, following the contour of the promontory on which it sits but defying the Zoroastrian principles of orienting temples east and west. It is thought by some to have been given this orientation because of the shape of the temple on which it was built and Urartian temples were oriented both North-South and East-West. A North-South orientation can be found at Erebuni in the temples to Khaldi and Adana, but the temple of Sushi, considered the oldest in Armenia, is dedicated to T’rdat’s deity. There are rare examples of Roman temples built on a North-South axis, one of which could be the model for the temple art Garni, but there is no active debate on this point and unlike modern builders who squeeze buildings where best they fit, the builders of sacred structures in the 1st c took their jobs seriously, orienting temples to benefit the gods who were believed to live therein. Jury still out, take your best guess.

The Temple. The temple is a Greco-Roman peripteros (peripteros, enclosed chamber) of the Ionic style on a podium originally 3 meters in height. On the Northern side of the temple a broad (8 meters) stairway with nine steps leads to the inner sanctum. The sanctuary is bordered by two bas-relief images of kneeling male figures. At the entrance to the sanctuary, among the inscriptions and bas relief figures, there are Arabic inscriptions commemorating the capture of the fortress and converting it into a mosque.

The cellae (sanctuary) is surrounded by a colonnade of 24 columns (6 in front, 8 on the sides), with finely molded capitals (two sided) carved with floral motifs. The frieze work features leaves turned around lion masks that appear to be molded, though they were carved from solid stone.

The same feature is shown in the ceiling, and the richly ornamented carvings and cornice over the cellae entrance. The hipped roof is intricately ornamented, atypical of the style predominant in the Western Roman Empire. The decorative work is often indecipherable from the architectural units, one of the reasons the temple is considered one of the best examples of the Greco-Roman style, akin to temples at Nima, the Minerva Medica in Rome, the temple of Apollo in Sagalas, Mythras in Cremna and the Asklepios in Pergamum.

This sculptural motif is found from later monuments of East Roman provinces, such a Nîha in Syria (the first century A.D.). In front of a raised stone naos (inner sanctum) there is a shallow pronao (outer sanctum) with antae (slightly projecting plaster strips which terminate the winged walls of the naos) and an entrance-way framed with a flatband (flat molding). The naos held the idol with rituals performed in the pronao.

Note the smooth columns. While their bases resemble those of Attic temples, the Ionic capitals are decorated with molded rather then hewn volutes, ova and leaf ornamentation. Each capital is different in its design—uncommon in Greek or Roman architecture but a characteristic feature of Armenian public structures. The corner capitals are more elaborate than those on the sides, with the volutes (scrollwork) jutting out at right angles from the temple.

The entablature (the band of stone above the columns that supports the roof, made up of the architrave—the support stone itself—and the frieze—the decorative part) is unique from Hellenistic temples in that the frieze and architrave overhang the capitals, something seen in later buildings in 2nd c Syria and Rome (4th c). The carvings combine acanthus fronds with flowers, rosettes, grapes, pomegranate and other flora unique to Armenia and the region.

The cornice is decorated with evenly placed lion busts, their mouths open. The lion motifs—along with oxen—were common Urartian design, seen on murals, shields and seals of state. The lion heads were exposed to its older version in Armenia and Persia, and brought its fire image back to the Roman Empire, where it evolved yet again. There are two views on the temple’s date. Movses Khorenatsi (5th c CE), credited as the writing the first history of Armenia, writes that the temple was built by T’rdat II (287-330 CE). In his history he writes that when T’rdat completed building the fortress he set up a villa (meaning a temple) with its columns ornamented with remarkable high-relief moldings for his sister Khorsovidukht, leaving in memory of himself a Greek inscription. Lost for centuries, the inscription carved on basalt was discovered in the Garni Village graveyard in 1946. The inscription reads in part, ""
Ancient Armenians built their lives around the laws of nature, carefully studying the seasonal ebb and flows that governed their lives. Predicting the spring thaw and summer’s rain was more than a show of magic, it was crucial to the survival of the culture. Considering how dependent they were on the elements, it is not such a great leap of faith to equate natural cause and effect with supernatural force, nor to apply that belief to daily life. In religion, control of the elements became synonymous with control of the gods, not only bringing them closer to earth to bless their lives with abundant crops or long lives, but also to literally control them, so their wrath did not strike against the people with flood, drought or pestilence.

Almost literally, geometry meant contact with the gods. And it was considered a way of imitating the structure where the sun (probably the first god) and the moon (probably the second god) governed the natural order—earliest man believed if he could "map" the universe, he would be able to predict the whims of gods, who sent punishing droughts, floods and pestilence on the land around him.

Geometry was also a fundamental tool for making things by hand. Without it, you simply can’t. You may not be aware of it, but when you shape any object, you are following the laws of geometry, which is based on an even older skill—that of measures, or counting. In the ancient world, this knowledge was considered magic, and as magic, it was kept in the realm of religion, in the realm of priests, a carefully guarded secret which was passed on only the elect. Capturing the image of the structure of the universe, geometry was both a symbolic system for understanding how it worked as well as a recreation of the universe itself, on earth.

During Sacred Geometry, numbers are combined with shapes to create a harmonious whole. The idea was to reunite humanity with the cosmos (the sphere), the circle, the Equilateral triangle, the square, the pentagram, the hexagon & the golden section). These can be generated by the means of two tools used by mathematicians and builders, the straight edge and the compass. Their construction does not require measurement.

However, their measurements are important in Sacred Geometry, since they combine with Numerology and sacred numbers to represent something holy. Sacred numbers are numbers with have special symbolic meanings. Their importance is rooted in mystical belief—if you used these numbers in measuring, or follow them on certain dates and in combinations, you were appeasing the gods, and affirming yourself as a member of their metaphysical family.

In short, the number was believed both a symbol and actual incarnation of its meaning. So the number one which meant whole and indivisible in sacred numerology came to stand for and was believed to be the undivided universe itself (in mathematics and in the actual world). If one stood for unity, two was believed to represent the first division, opposites. Three is still in our consciences the three deities of all great religions while for Christians the Holy Trinity of God the Father, Son and Holy Ghost. It was considered the holiest number. Four represented the division of time (the four seasons), the four directions, the four rivers of paradise—it was unity divided into equal parts. The number Five is made of unequal parts (2 and 3) so was considered a harbinger of misfortune. It also represented man (one who stands on his own), the five fingers of the hand, the pentagram. Six is made of 3+3 or 1+2+3. And so was considered perfect. God created the world in six days, Christ was crucified on the sixth day, and he perished in the sixth hour. Seven was associated with celestial beings and spiritual forces; there are seven days in a week, there were seven known planets in the ancient world; 7 evil spirits. The Augustinian God was the God of seven: he rested on the seventh day and Christian life is ordered by seven; seven capital sins, seven virtues and seven sacraments. Eight is the first number after seven, and was considered the symbol of life; Christ resurrected on the eighth day, the eight sided octagon is the favored form for the baptismal font. If three was considered a holy number, then nine was the holiest doubled, consisting of 3 x 3. It was literally believed to mark the place of God. Ten is the round and perfect number that forms the basis of the decimal system and was the universal number for the Pythagoreans. To Augustinian it was the perfect number (3 + 7) and to the Hebrews and Christians it meant completion. The Ten Commandments are divided into two sets of laws; the first 3 are to the love of God, the last 7 to the love of their neighbor.

Finally, the number twelve, which formed the basis of the Sumerian and Babylonian numerical system; there are twelve signs of the zodiac, twelve tabernacles of Jehovah, the sanctuaries of Marduk, Christian churches and Islamic mosques. Throughout history, commonly described are a few basic geometrical forms from which all the universe was composed: the cube (the square, the octagon is the favored form for the baptismal font. If three was considered a holy number, then nine was the holiest doubled, consisting of 3 x 3. It was literally believed to mark the place of God. Ten is the round and perfect number that forms the basis of the decimal system and was the universal number for the Pythagoreans. To Augustinian it was the perfect number (3 + 7) and to the Hebrews and Christians it meant completion. The Ten Commandments are divided into two sets of laws; the first 3 are to the love of God, the last 7 to the love of their neighbor.

Another way of using numerology is to add the digits within a number to its final equation. So the number 123 is made up of 1+2+3 = 6. The “real” meaning was believed to be the end result of adding their digits ( 24 = 2+4 = 6, or perfection, etc.)

Look again at Garni temple, this time using the principles of Sacred Geometry: The angles and measures used in designing the temple can be seen as both aesthetically beautiful, and as a reaffirmation of the universal laws that governed man’s destiny. Angles, number of columns, dimensions—these were all created with a careful eye to appeasing the gods and protecting the human from their wrath.

In fact, the structure itself is a representation of the cosmos, with a raised platform (the heavens) at the top of 9 Steps leading to the main entrance (three times three, or three times the holy triad). The temple has a column to inter column ratio of 1 to 3 (1 being the primary number of the universe and 3 representing the Greco-Roman triad Jupiter, Juno and Minerva).
Five is a misfortune number in some cultures, but with the Greeks and early Armenians, it was also the sign of the pentagram, the sign of making things (the five fingers). Note that inside the sanctuary, five is always the length of horizontal lines, while eight is always the length of vertical lines. Cosmically this could be interpreted to mean that the resurrection and new life which came from above and below (some gods lived in the underworld), met the horizontal human world, unable to enter the realm of the gods without their help.

There are 24 columns representing the clouds or caves, inhabited as early as the Paleolithic Era, and more recently during the myriad invasions by Seljuk Turks, Arabs, Mongols, Turks and Persians. It is a 100 m drop to the river floor and a whole other world from the Hellenistic site above (see "The Other Side of Garni", p. 22).

Opposite the river is the Khosrov Mountain Range and one of the entries into the Khosrov Preserve (see Near Garni, p. 23). At the top of the ridge just in front is the Queen Katranideh Shrine, built over a Tukh Manuk (pagan shrine converted to Christian purposes). Follow the mountain line over to your left and on a clear day you can detect the outline of Havuts Tar, a gorgeously decorated convent that was patronized by the Zakarians and Proshians during the 12th-13th cc. It's a 45 minute hike from Garni, well worth the climb (Havuts Tar is described in Near Garni, p. 22). Further to the left and still across the canyon are the upper ridges of the Khosrov Mountains, leading to the Geghama Lehr and Lake Sevan. Note the "flatiron" plateau, at the confluence of the Goghti and Azat Rivers. The plateau is a favorite of mine, emerald green in springtime and burnt umber during the summer. The Goghti River meanders about 11 km to the base of Mt. Yerakatar (2589.6 m), and beyond Mt. Dimatslehir (3107 m) and Nalsar (3177 m), the location of some of Armenia's petroglyphs.

Over to the right, the river leads to the Azat Reservoir (Azat Lich or Jrambar), a 6 kilometer hike through the river forests and an idyllic spot for camping or soaking in the natural hot mineral springs on its shoreline.

Next to the Temple are the foundations of an 897 CE church, which was built over the grave of the Catholicos Mashtots. Partially excavated in 1907 and 1909-1911, the site was covered over, and rediscovered when excavations resumed in 1949. The church was a variant of the central dome church built along a cross axis. The interior of the cruciform walls form four semi circular apses, with annexes between having entrances in the arms of the cross. The central square lay beneath the dome. The church itself was entered on the Northern and Western sides. The entire structure rested on a plain inscribed into a 24 sided triangle meeting where the idol stood, most probably on her face. The numbers 8 and 5 are

And so it continues throughout the entire temple. Count lines and distances, add them, and you will always end with a sacred number. This is perhaps superstition or coincidence to us, and some argue you can come up with any sacred number if you add numbers together, but to the builders of the temple, that was the point, and they did it deliberately. It was the perfect embodiment of their communion with the universe. It should be remembered also, that this continuous system of sacred geometry was only used in sacred buildings. Secular buildings might imitate the system in some ways, but they never equaled the staggering formulas and calculations to be found in sacred buildings.

See our chapter on Sacred Geometry and Numerology (www.tacentral.com/architecture.asp?story_no=2) for more.

The temple overlooks the steep Garni or Azat River Gorge, at the tip of a triangular promontory. Directly below the temple mount and along the basalt cliffs are a number of caves, inhabited as early as the Paleolithic Era (see "The Other Side of Garni", p. 22).

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During excavations of the palace an 8th c. BCE Urartian cuneiform inscription attributed to King Argishti I was discovered. The cuneiform relates the conquest of the Garni area and the enslavement of its inhabitants.

The main mosaic (2.91 x 3.14 m) depicts a water scene with the sea goddess Thetis and other mythological figures set against a light green background. The inscriptions on the mosaic are Greek but the facial types are oriental, depicting fish, Nereids and the Ichthyocentauri. The Nereids are the fifty daughters of Nereus and Doris who dwell in the Mediterranean Sea. These beautiful women were always friendly and helpful towards sailors fighting perilous storms. They are believed to be able to prophesy. They belong to the retinue of Poseidon. They were named Bythos (Sea-Depths) and Aphiros (Sea-Foam), half-brothers of Kentauros Kheiron, and like him probably regarded as wise teachers.

One of the intact inscriptions in Koine Greek (the popular form of Greek that emerged in post-classical antiquity ca. 300 BCE –300 CE) reads:

ΜΗΔΕΝ ΛΑΒΟΝΤΕΣ ΗΡΙΑΣΑΜΕΘΑ ΚΑΝΕΝΑ ΝΕΚΡΟ ΩΤΕ ΟΘΑΛΑΣΣΑ ΩΤΕ Ο ΩΚΕΑΝΟΣ (We receive no dead from the sea neither from the ocean)

Which is also translated to mean "Work and gain nothing."

OTHER GARNI SITES

The village has a number of worthwhile sites, including three medieval churches, the village itself and the incredible Garni Gorge.

Churches

Just down the street from the temple is the important 4th-5th c Garni Basilica (DD 40.11826 x 44.73340). To get there, backtrack to the main village road, turn right and stop at the post office (just past the school, on the R). Opposite the post office is an alley that leads to the church (past the delightful Sergei Tun folk restaurant) in about 50 m. The basilica is a large building for its time, a single nave structure with an arcade (portico) on its S side. By its layout it appears to have been built over a Pagan temple to an unknown deity. The church had a deep semi-circular apse with a vault that was strengthened by three archbands resting on pilasters. This church is reminiscent of that at K’asakh. Both of these churches had ornamental moldings in the east façade. It was a type of molding characteristic of the 5th and 6th centuries.

The Bath House is located in the northern part of the complex at an angle to the residential block and is encased in a modern shed. Built of irregular blocks set in lime, the 3rd c building consisted of five rooms, four of which had apses.

A dressing room at the eastern end is followed by a cold water bath, a warm bath (tepidarium), a hot or steam bath (caldarium) and a cooling (frigidarium) room. The builders used a water reservoir and a heating system popular in Rome, known as hypocaust. Hot air from the furnace circulated through an underground passage lined with baked bricks under the floors, which were lined with baked bricks covered with polished stucco and mosaics. The floors were laid on brick supports that also captured heat from the furnace and transferred it upwards into the heated rooms.

The Ichthyocentauri (or Ikthhyokentauroi) were a pair of centaurine sea-gods with the upper bodies of men, the lower fore-parts of horses, ending in the serpentine tails of fish. Their brows were adorned with a pair of lobster-claw horns. The Sea-Centaurs probably developed from the divine Fish of Syrian mythology which carried Ashitarte ashore following her watery-birth and were set amongst the stars as the Constellation Pisces.
just not inside with the ‘favorites of God.’ The 4th-
5th c portico, with an apse on its E end, seems to have
provided this purpose, putting the ‘sinner’s on display while allowing them to make their peace
with the new Christian order.

The ruins of the church include substantial parts of
the walls, the main apse, bases for the portico and
large mounds of stone fragments, many decorated
with carvings from the 4th-13th cc. Tombstones
line the church and portico floors, some carved
with depictions of the soul underneath.

Further East, past the village square and next to
the bakery is the 7th-12th c Astvatsatsin (DD
40.11721 x 44.73550). To get there, backtrack to
the street ends at a T-intersection. Turn R (S) and
take the next L (E), and continue forward for about
400 m on the curving road to Astvatsatyn.

Though ascribed to the 12th c and with a 17th c
bell tower, the triple nave basilica was established
in the 7th c, probably built in stone to replace a
wooden structure that stood over the site of a
pagan shrine. The church has been recently
renovated, revealing the marble stone construction
and evidence of its earlier versions. The church was
built of multi-colored tufa stone (red and black),
with three barrel vaults above the naves to support
the tufa roof. The vaulting is made from
stone fragments and brickwork set with lime and
framed by the weight-bearing arches made of
finely hewn tufa stone set upon pediments of black
dark. The arches for the main vaulting are
detailing and slightly protruding stones at the point
they begin to curve inward.

The small cruciform church, built in the 11th c at
the site of a pagan shrine. A red stone on your
right as you enter the church yard is beautifully
carved with a bird perched on a floral stem and a
rosette under its tail, the symbol of eternity and a
distinctive pagan icon locals swear proves the
pagan origin of the site.

Regardless, the church is beautifully designed,
combining black and white stone with elaborately
carved red tufa inlays over the windows, doors and
in the drum and dome. The combination of red,
black and white stone is remarkable, for both is intricate detail and lavish attention paid to such a
small building. The church would barely house a
dozen people, marking it as a shrine made for
contemplative prayer more than a building
designed for the masses.

The apron for the apse is as elaborately carved as
the flourishes on the outside walls. To the E of the
church are a small shrine and a set of khachkars,
from the 11th-13th cc.

A late medieval bridge lays in the gorge. Take
the right at the bottom of the gorge road, it will be
on the left. The bridge once connected the
Khosrov Preserve and the monasteries of Havuts
Tar and Aghjots Vank with Garni. It was also the
only crossing from Persian Armenia to Turkish held
Armenia in the 16th-17th cc.

There are also shrines in the village, a Tukh
Manuk in the NE and the frescoed S. Sargis NW on
a hilltop. Directions are easier to ask for than try
to describe here. The Queen Katranideh is S of the
fortress on the hilltop.

Other
The village has a numerous khachkars scattered about the place, some in villager backyards. Ask around as you walk about.

The village itself is a gem, one of the pretiest in Armenia. Popular

Of architectural significance is the 10th-12th c bridge spanning the Azat River?

Garni has a World War II Monument, located at the entrance to the village on its W edge, where the road to the village forks from the Geghard highway.

There is a tonir in the village, located on the street leading to the temple complex at #17. The house is private so respect them if they don’t want to show it.

PRACTICALITIES

Area Code: 222
All local numbers begin with a 7 (7-xx-xx)
Long Distance: 0222 + local number
From abroad: +(374) 222 + local number
Mobile Phones: 091 Armentel, 093 Viva Cell
International callers: Armentel +(374) 91 + number, Viva Cell +(374) 93 + local number
Unless otherwise noted, local numbers require the (0222) prefix if calling long distance, or +(374) 222 prefix if calling from abroad.

IN AND OUT

By Bus, Minivan
The bus is a reliable means of travel, if vehicles are older and worn around the edges, and they tend to pack ’em in, especially on first and last runs. Minivans hit all the villages and are the cheapest way to go, if they tend to run only twice a day, in each direction.

Buses from Yerevan run every 50 minutes between 8.45 and 21.30, stopping at J’reveh, Voghchaberd, Hatsavan and Garni. In Yerevan they leave from 1A/5 Gayi p. (near Khivossi off of Khandjian/Agetangeghos ps.) 250 AMD.

Minivans (Marshrutnii taxis) also leave from the near Kino Rossiya (14/3 Gayi p.) every 50 minutes or when full, 8.45-21.30. Also 250 AMD.

By Taxi
Taxis are more expensive, but the most convenient way to travel (you decide when you go, and you stop where you want). Taxis from Yerevan to Garni are around 3000 AMD for up to 4 people. For excursions, figure an additional 100 AMD per kilometer, plus more for waiting. You can also order a taxi by phone. The going rate is around 3000 AMD. Most Yerevan taxi services provide this service, but we use Voyage tel: (010) 54-54-05, 54-54-06 and have had good experiences.

From Garni, taxis in Abovian are around town or at the Aftokaiyaran (bus station) by the main square. 3000 AMD.

By Car
Garni is on the H3 road to Geghard, 22 km from Yerevan. Petrol stations and rest stops/kebab stands are on the highway near Garni and at Voghchaberd and Hatsavan.

ARRIVAL

On foot is easy in the village center, the temple compound is about 500 m from the nearest highway intersection and 1 from the square. You can get just about anywhere in the village within 15-20 minutes on foot. It is a bit more of hike to the gorge, still only 1 km from the square. From there it is a 6 km hike downstream to the Azat Reservoir (W) or 4 km upstream to Goght and another 3.5 km to Geghard vank.

Taxis Abovian has taxi service, ask if you can’t find one. 500 AMD anywhere in center.

Regional Taxis are a good way to explore the near region, and the only way to get from Garni to Geghard if you don’t have wheels. To Geghard it is 2000-3000 AMD for up to four people, you might be able to negotiate a cheaper rate in off season or if it is a private vehicle. Four wheel vehicles for explorations, Khosrov Preserve can be found in village as well, ask at Samvel Ohanian’s B&B (tel: -) or Sergei’s Tun restaurant.

COMMUNICATION, ETC.
Fire – 101
Police – 102
Ambulance service – 103
Gas emergency service – 104
Trunk Line – 107
Telephone directory information – 109
Paging service – 189

Phone, telegraphs
Garni is covered by both Armentel and Vivacell mobile phone services. International calls can be made at the Central Post Office, on the main street. See HayPost (HayPost site for list (www.haypost.am/EN/abt_offices.html)). The post office has trunk line phone service, sells phone cards (30 minutes 3000 AMD) and can deliver telegrams.

Shopping, Film, etc.
There are mterks and kiosks on the Yerevan-Geghard road. Film and batteries are at Mterks. Batteries are suspect, bring your own.

OVERNIGHT

B&B, GUEST HOUSES
The B&B idea is brand new in Garni and as a result amenities are not at the same level as elsewhere. Expect to pay the same as if you stay in a village home (3000-5000 AMD).

Sergei’s Tun restaurant, just down the aisle opposite the post office off the main street, is planning to add cabins to their delightful folk restaurant/garden in the next year and may have room for overnights. If not, ask them to suggest a local village home. 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair.

Samvel’s B&B (two doors up from the Post Office, is being developed by a local villager and his family. They have a single room with a balcony overlooking the main street with a back view to the gorge. The amenities are a bit rustic but great food and friendly hosts. Samvel can act as a guide to the village and gorge, and has connections for getting pass into the Khosrov Preserve. 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair.

Village homes are a definite possibility though the tourist trade makes bargaining a little harder. For the higher price they should be able to offer a private bath, without, pay less or go back to Yerevan. Most are rustic; 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair.

HANGESTAN GOTTI
Just as you come into Garni Valley (about 2.3 km from Hatsavan) there is a road veering S leading to a HANGESTAN GOTI (Rest Area/Camp). 3000-5000 AMD for day pass or overnight camping. Keep on the road to the entry to the gorge, where a series of Hangestan Gotti lay on the river bed.

CAMPING
Camping is possible in the gorge, reached by footpath behind the car park to the temple, or down the gorge road at the E end of the village (ask for “Garni Dзор”;)

FOOD AND DRINK
There are a couple of khorovats stands at Hangeustan Goti and in the river gorge. Food can also be bought at Mterks (food shops) and kiosks in town.

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

Sergei’s Tun, down the alley across from the post office, is a folk–style outdoor restaurant serving an amazing menu of authentic village food served by waiters dressed in folk costumes. They are hot with the bus tourist trade, but don’t let that stop you from partaking of their extraordinary fare. Whatever is prepared for the day is what is served and it will do more than tide you over to the next meal, it may well tied you over for the next day or two! Full meals average 3000-3500 AMD. $$

The Ishkhan Dzuk Restaurant, Garni Gorge, is located on the river below the village. Take the east road past S. Astvatsatsin down into the gorge and then take a L at the river. Serves excellent river-bred trout to diners in river-side cabanas. Fish and trimmings cost 3000-3500 AMD per person for large parties, slightly higher for small groups. Worth every dram. $$-$ $$

Hangeustan Goti off the highway from Hatsavan and in the River Gorge offer

[MAP]
Spring are at the temple site, in the village and along the river. Yerevan’s drinking water gushes from the Cliff sides of the gorge below the village.

CONTINUE TRIP 1

NEAR GARNI

GARNI GORGE - KHOSROV PRESERVE - HAVUTS TAR - BAIBERD - METS GILANLAR - AGHJOTS VANK

Though these trips are marked as major stops, they take a half day or more to visit and are not for the casual tourist. But if you have the time and don’t mind hiking uphill they are well worth the effort, exploring parts of Armenia few tourists ever see. They include Garni Gorge, the wilderness area that runs along the Azat and Goghti Rivers and makes for a fine drive through, picnic or hiking, the western part of the Khosrov Preserve with its abandoned settlements and the rarely visited Havuts Tar convent and Aghjots Vank.

To get to the other side of Garni, continue E about 500 m past Mashtots Hairapet Church on the same road until it descends into the gorge. The road is badly maintained but passable for most vehicles and gets steeper as the walls of the Goghti River Canyon begin to rise. The nature preserve begins at the canyon proper, and officially cars are not allowed beyond.

At the bottom of the descent the road ends in a T-intersection; R (W) leads to the forest, picnic areas and a Hanganst Goti (3.5-4 km) and eventually to the Azat Reservoir (about 6 km), while L (E) leads in about 1.5 km past the Fish restaurant to the bridge over the river and then heads back on the other side for another 800 m to the Khosrov Preserve Gate and the hiking trial to Havuts Tar.

First, the R (W) turn to the gorge and reservoir:

**GARNI GORGE (ԳԱՐՆԻ ԳՈՐԾԻ) -

The Other Side of Garni. Garni Gorge is one of Armenia’s natural wonders and a favorite of locals for lazy summer days. The waters gushing from the basalt and granite cliff walls are ice cold and crystal clear and feed a unique ecosystem (as well as quenching much of Yerevan’s thirst.**

**Note:** The nature preserve is home to wild animals, but they are as reluctant to meet you as you are to them. All wild creatures have keen sense of smell and hearing, and it is highly unlikely you will run across any. Between May 1 and early June and between September 1 and 20 snakes are most active and may be spotted sunning on warm rocks. All except one are harmless. The giurza is rare but extremely poisonous. The Garni Canyon is close enough to inhabited areas there is scant chance of coming across one, but you can detect it by its sand colored to dark gray coloring and hexagonal shaped markings. If you do happen to spot any snake, simply stop. The snakes avoid contact with humans at all costs. The giurza warns before it strikes by coiling and raising its head. Even at a few inches distance, if you stop moving, the snake is likely to retreat. If you are bitten by a snake, tourniquet the limb about 20 cm from the bite and seek help immediately. Keep your eyes open and look around you and you should be OK.

Symphony Canyon. The Goghti and Azat Rivers meet at Garni, more than 300 feet below the temple site, creating an impenetrable natural fortress above, and a remarkably diverse eco system below. While dry summer winds whip the mountain plain above the canyon rim, below the river forest is always moist and cool: towering trees form a canopy above the foot paths along the river, and wild boar, deer, leopards and bears call the nature preserve home.

Symphony canyon was named for its rock formations, a series of perfectly cut diamond shaped granite, basalt, slag and andesite. Inside the canyon are the remains of a 16th c. bridge, its finely engineered arches at one time leading to a narrow road that surmounted the Geghama mountain range, ending at Lake Sevan.

A few hundred meters west, past a series of caverns yawning in the side of the canyon walls, the Goghti River joins with the Azat, and to the right is one of the most beautiful sights in Armenia: About 600 meters away and 300 feet above is the Temple of Garni. In the morning it is yellow gold. In the evening it dips red with the setting sun. Inside the canyon, the upper rim and sky are soon blocked from view: tangled vines wrap themselves around century’s old trees that shade the hot sun from the fetid ground. In spring swarms of blue, yellow, gold and violet butterflies nest along the sun-dappled river bed, as many as a thousand might be resting on the banks or the side of a tree.

The canyon is also a habitat for birds and other fauna. Among them is the loti, which we spotted on our hike. Looking every bit like a lime green snake, loti actually has gills for breathing and projections where a million years ago or so it had legs. Harmless, the loti is endangered and listed

The Fragility of a Summer’s Day Out

The road into the Azat River canyon has spectacular views of the Garni gorge, with cold water for soaking, pleasant hikes under the towering canopy of trees, picnic areas and summer camps. It is also a narrow road, carved from the canyon sag and graded annually. The dirt road is one way for most of the 200 m drop, with passing zones wide enough for two vehicles half way down.

We were navigating our way up on the west side of Garni, watching at a distance a line of cars following an old bus coming down. The passing zone was just ahead, a relief since I did not want us to have to navigate the steep incline to the canyon floor in reverse. I lazily looked down at the river floor as it grew smaller, the children playing in a river pool at a hangeast go (literally ‘rest area’, though it translates as a camp ground for paying weekend picnickers), their splashing and shrieks of delight receding as we rose, when out of the corner of my eye I saw a puff of dust on the road ahead and while the shrieks of delight below were drowned out by screams of terror ahead. I thought, “that sounds like a carnival ride, but where is it?”

I think it was Rafi who first said, “My God! They went over the edge!” but I cannot be sure. Both lines of cars stopped, we scrambled out to follow the line of cars and a crowd of onlookers, children crying, parents rushing to grab their kids, others running around crying for help, everything slowed down to a crawl, nothing in real time. People below started to open the car, a large van pulled up, ready to take the wounded (or the bodies, we never found out) away.

A car passed us on the way down, a white Volga. The driver smiled, oblivious to what had happened. I realized, that while Volga, that smiling man, he was the one that forced the car off the road, two cars passing each other on a single car path, one going to the left and skydiving to the river, the other hugging the cliff side and getting by, oblivious to what he had done.

No one talked. It took 30 minutes to reach the top. Beyond the obvious (don’t try to pass on a one-lane road) the fragility of life overwhelmed me. A car of people out for a Sunday picnic were now wounded or dead, another carload continued to their rendezvous, unknowing of what they had done. How the grace of God would bless this I did not know.
The Young Man and the Sea

It was a long summer day. The clear blue waters of the lake lap softly against the rocks, stippled by jumping Tznkor, Sazan, Koghak, Carp and the rare Kamerra Khast thrusting into the afternoon light. On the far side of the lake there was a large mound encrusted with mineral salts and traces of a natural spring while further up the scrub hill sat a caravan tent and a flock of sheep. A sleek bird perched above the middle of the lake was a small house on piers. After a few echoing calls across the lake, one of the men on the far side waved and slowly made his way to the lake’s edge. Soon a motorboat appeared with two men inside.

The men were Robert and Armen. Armen's taut body, sinewy arms and grizzled face made him look much older than his 25 years. Deep set eyes and a sun weathered face shone as he smiled and welcomed us on board for a tour of the lake, ‘his home’. A few minutes later the boat landed on the other side, and we settled into a carved stone pool of water fed by mineral springs. The water was cold and rich, a natural salve for weary legs that just hiked 6 kilometers from Garni. Armen smiled and then called to a circling hawk, perfectly imitating a mating call. The hawk swirled in its flight and began to descend, swerving away just as it spotted the human source of the cry, furiously flapping its wings and shrieking in anger.

The beauty and natural area of this is hard to imagine when it is so close to Yerevan. Calling the city ‘a place for machines’, Armen seemed to thrive on the solitude of the lake. People are people, he shrugged as he looked off to a jumping fish about to be entangled in one of the nets he set in the lake. “On the lake, everything is understood. I know my place.” Robert nodded in assent. Neither spoke except when asked, only then after a deep silence, carefully considering the question.

Armen used to swim in the lake when he was a boy, and as soon as he completed his time in Karabakh, he and Robert decided they didn’t want to go back to the city, they remembered the pristine world on the shores of the lake and decided to make it a home. Tending sheep on the far side of the lake, they also fish for a living, living in the tent or in the house set in the center of the lake.

Neither man had much to say about their time in Karabakh, it was “our duty and it was necessary,” as Armen put it, and they would do it again when they had to. But a weariness in their faces showed as they spoke about the youth as soldiers, a weariness of age too soon. I told him about the story “The Old Man and the Sea”, and he quickly dubbed himself a “Young Man of the Sea,” saying he had always loved the lake, diving and swimming in it when as a boy, that he and Robert got through the long winters in Karabakh by reminiscing about the lazy afternoons swimming and fishing by the lake, promising each other they would set up a fishing business at their boyhood lake. He proudly gestured at their private kingdom as he said, “we got our dream.”

Neither man shunned companionship, they seemed to thrive on it and they welcomed visitors, repeatedly asking us to return with more guests—they had fish ready to fry, could build a campfire on the lake shore, and there is plenty of room on the pier for people to sleep. The offer was good for anyone who found their way to their little sea kingdom, “just call across the waters when you reach the reservoir’s edge. We’ll hear you.” True hosts, they almost grow angry when we offered to help them out with the fuel for their motorboat.

As we boarded the boat to return to the nature preserve and the temple of Garni, the sun set on the crystalline waters that formed diamonds of light on the canyons walls and underneath the pier, the sound of a gull hugging in the air, and I thought that if this life was not perfect, it was the most nearly perfect these men could have made at that time; in the solitude of nature, in an island on piers in the center of a beautiful lake, by a campfire on a mountainside with each his own thoughts and the star studded night for companionship, free from the restraints of the other side, we see ourselves.
The preserve is still important and quite large, consisting of 29,196 hectares, 9000 of which have trees, mostly scrub and cedar. The national park protects more than 1800 species of plants, 156 of which are considered rare, endangered or on the verge of extinction, listed in the Red Book. Fauna include rare insects, amphibians, snakes, the Armenian mouflon (Ovis orientalis gmelinii), Caucasian Bearded Goat (Capra aegagrus) and the Caucasian or Persian Spotted Leopard.

The Caucasian Bearded Goat (also called the Bezoar or Persian Ibex, or the wild goat by scientists who believe it is the ancestor of the domestic goat) is an endangered species that has almost been hunted to extinction in Armenia.

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The bearded goat is listed in the Red Book and in the IUCN list of Endangered Species.

The Caucasian or Persian leopard is said to be the largest of all subspecies of leopards. It can grow to up to 1.5 to 2.7 feet tall and weigh as much as 155 lbs. Before 1990, when Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Russia, and Turkmenistan were the Soviet republics, the scientific names of the leopard used in these countries were P. p. tulliana and P.p. ciscaucasia, whereas the name P.p. saxicolor had been traditionally used by the western specialists for the cats in Iran and, partially, Afghanistan.

Most Leopards are light tan or fawn with black spots, but their coats are very variable. The spots tend to be smaller on the head, larger and have pale centers on the body.

The name Leopard is a combination of leo (Latin for lion) and pard ("panther"), the animal believed to be a hybrid of lions and panthers. Interestingly, the panther is simply a darker version of the spotted leopard, they are very much related.

In Armenia, the Persian leopards live in the juniper sparse forests and, to a lesser extent, in arid and mountain grasslands, subalpine and alpine meadows. Their haunts are extremely rough terrain; rock outcroppings and cliff sides. The leopard uses the same trails during regular movements, enabling researchers to find and study the reclusive animals. Unfortunately this also enables poachers to hunt the animals (see side column). The leopard in Armenia is threatened by disturbance, poaching and wild fire, but perhaps mostly by the wholesale slaughter of their main food, the mouflon and bearded goat, both almost poached out of existence in their main hunting grounds.

Permission to enter the preserve is required, officially from the ministry of Nature Protection in Yerevan (35 Moskovian, good luck) or from the director, Samvel Shaboyan (still difficult: tel: +234 21-352). As many people who are blocked seem to gain entry by using alternate routes or "tipping" gatekeepers. Sadly, it seems the ones who should be stopped are allowed in to poach while those interested in promoting their preservation are kept away. Other entries into the park are in Ararat marz, and over the Geghama lehr from Lake Sevan.

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

To Havuts Tar. From Garni, take the Garni Gorge road into the canyon, and at the T-intersection at the river, take a L (E) and continue on the pitted road about 1 km (and past the excellent fish restaurant) to the Yerevan Water works and the bridge across the river. Take th bridge, turn R (E) and continue uphill to the entrance to the Khosrov Preserve. You are not allowed into the park without a permit, but park
The path to the convent is narrow and surprisingly difficult for such a slight incline. There are few shady spots on the way, in hot weather take a hat and water. A spring is about 2/3rds of the way up.

Just past this khachkar the ruins of the village begin, a myriad of stone foundations of homes, shops and shrines for the once thriving community that supported the convent’s work and farmed its lands. The ruins cover the hillsides all around the complex. About 500 m past the 12th c khachkar is the gate to the walled Havuts Tar complex.

**Background**

Havuts Tar is one of Armenia’s most beautiful ruins, its stones dripping with delicate lacework as elaborate as any monastery in Armenia. A Pagan temple lay on the site during the glory days of Roman rule, replaced with successive Christian structures. The current gate to the site is embedded into the walls of the convent’s first Christian period. Its importance as a convent is traced to the 11th c, when Prince Grigor Pahlavuni (990-1058), heir to the prince of Bjini and nephew of the Bagratuni sparapet Vahram Pahlavuni, founded the church of Amenaprkich on the western outcrop of the complex. Grigor is better known in Armenian history as Grigor Magistros, a title he took once after Byzantium annexed the Kingdom of Ani and Grigor went on to serve as the Governor-general of the province of Edessa. The Byzantine Emperor Constantine IX Monomachus bestowed upon him the title of Duke. An erudite layman, Grigor’s letters are a mine of information on theology, literature, mythology, politics and other matters of his time. They are written in an arcane style by a man with philhellenic tendencies. His chief poetical work is a long metrical narrative of the principal events recorded in the Bible. This work, we are told, was written in three days at the request of a Mohammedan noble, who, after reading it, became converted to Christianity.

The convent thrived under Grigor Migistros’s patronage, becoming a leading center of learning and the arts. Along with housing members of the royalty who dedicated their lives (or were banished for infidelities) to prayer and contemplation at the convent, Havuts tar held important relics, including the 9th c masterpiece The Savior of All of Havuts Tar, now at the Echmiadzin Treasury.

The “Kusanats anapat” (convent) continued to find favor with succeeding nakharars, including the Chalcedonian Ivanheh Zakarian who funded its great spurt of growth in the early 13th c, introducing the intricate lace-like design covering the walls of the convent, then by the Kaghbakians (Proshians), well known for their work at Geghard, but equally responsible for the crowning work at Havuts Tar and the nearby Aghjots vank.

The convent was destroyed and rebuilt during Seljuk, Mongol and the Timurid invasions, succumbing to the 1679 earthquake which did the greatest damage. It was finally rebuilt in the 18th c for the Katolikos Astvatsatur, saving the western Amenaprkich Church and the main basilica in the compound. This lasted barely to the 20th century, when the struggling convent was deserted and left to ruin by the Soviet Armenian government.

The current gate to the site is embedded into the compound walls. The foundations of the original walls remain are traced to the 9th c when the convent was established, though there is some thought walls from the Bronze Age may also have existed at the site. Originally made from finely hewn basalt and tufa, the walls were mostly destroyed during the Timurid invasions of the 15th-16th cc and completely destroyed during the 1679 earthquake, which also ruined the entire complex. When it was rebuilt in the 18th c, workers used rubble left over from the earthquake, including khachkar fragments and pieces of decorated stones from the original buildings.

The path has stunning vistas of Garni temple, the village and the area. As you get closer to the convent, you will pass some khachkar fragments, intricately carved pieces of once grand monuments. About 2/3rds of the way there look for a couple of khachkars on a hill on the left, plus the base of what was once a great khachkar. Closer to the convent is a bend in the path and a stunning 12th c khachkar.

![The Savior of All of Havuts Tar, 9th century.](image)

The Complex

The complex is large, taking up several hectares inside the walled compound, with the remains of the surrounding village and two churches from the 7th-10 c on a western hilltop, the site of the original pagan temple and the convent’s first Christian structures.

The path to the walled Havuts Tar complex. This lasted barely to the 20th century, when the struggling convent was deserted and left to ruin by the Soviet Armenian government.
made from gray basalt clamped over rubble stone with lime. The décor is more severe than its neighbor to the north, attesting to its earlier "iconoclastic" origins.

Just to the E and N of the basilica (moving around the compound in a counterclockwise direction), there are a number of fallen stones, heavily decorated with elaborate carvings. These are the remains of a public building, perhaps the chancellery. Some think this was a gavit, though it is rare to have one placed to the east of a church. Fallen stones in this section are very elaborate, including some massive capitals for large squat support columns. The northern wall of the 9th c church have a number of carvings, including some beautiful intertwining crosses and examples of the 12th c experimentation with the tree of life symbol, a precursor to the 13th c masterpieces that added the sun symbol.

Continue west through the rubble of the chancellery and you reach the ruins of the magnificent 13th c gavit, which resembles a public square with columns. The gavit was quite large with a substantial gabled roof, supported by interconnecting cross-arches and barrel vaulting. The girth of the columns indicates the size and weight of the roof, as well as marking out the inner space for the gavit. Columns were placed in the center of a gavit, supporting arches that intersected above at the very center and then continued to the outer walls. Imagine a distance equal to that of the columns to the very center of the room, then mark it to the outside and you can imagine how large this gavit was, which housed a religious academy, a scriptorium, vestal embroidery, as well as community center and overflow prayer hall.

To your right is a large building with three vaulted halls. The 9th-13th c building was rebuilt in the 18th c and used to house members of the convent. The farthest west is believed to have been the kitchen/dining hall for the dwindling community. Khachkar fragments were incorporated into the walls during reconstruction.

The scattered capitals, columns and stones on the ground outside the church, as elaborate and beautiful as they are, are but a taste of the magnificence that awaits you inside. The 13th c renovation of the church included replacing gray basalt stone with decorative red and black tufa, adding extravagantly carved stone casements and frames throughout the building. The effect is breath-taking, and unlike any other church we have seen in Armenia. Many churches of the 13th century added florid details on their walls, but none so completely, or luxuriantly as Havuts tar. The comparison to lace embroidery is not an exaggeration, niches, columns and frames are covered with intricate lace patterns of never-ending lines, unbreakable cords and flora and geometric details.

Walk to the south exterior of the church, and you have to wedge between two very large, intricate carved stones, weighing a half a ton or more. Note the back of the one with a large carved handle. This was a door for the gavit or church, one of a handful surviving to this day and truly impressive entry to what must have been an extraordinary building.

Amenaprkich is a classic cruciform central dome type with antechambers in the four corners. The southern wall is elaborately carved as the northern, with crosses, icons and royal markings on the façade.

The south of both churches, abutting the fortress walls is a large underground chamber, seen from its western side. The top appears to be a grassy mound and it had an upper chamber that was destroyed before the 18th c renovation. The chamber was used for storage in the original convent, then as a dormitory and dining area in later times.

About 100 m to the west, on a rough path marking the main street of the medieval village is the 10th c Amenaprkich with a 7th c basilica next door. Amenaprkich was built in 1013 for the young Grigor Pahlavuni a.k.a. Grigor Magistros, well before he became his nom de plume and during the last heyday of the Bagratuni period.
BAIBERD, METS GILANLAR, AGHJOTS VANK: Permission to enter the Preserve is required to explore Baibert, Mets Gilanlar and Aghjots Vank. Contact Samuel Shabayon (tel: +234 21-352).

To Baibert: Start from the gate into the preserve and follow the dirt road (Jeep or Vilis/UAZ) upstream along the Azat River about 4.5 km to the Mill Creek (Ujgh-Iunul) bridge, with a locked gate on the other side (key is in the house on the hill to your left and back a little). Before the bridge take the left rough path for about 200 m to Baibert.

The village is deserted with mostly foundation ruins to commemorate its once thriving community of Armenians, Kurds, and Azeris who inhabited the village at successive times. The last community of Armenians were deported in the 17th c to Persia by the Safavid Shah Abbas I as part of a scorched-Earth retreat in the face of Ottoman advances during the Turko-Persian wars of 1602-1620. Also surviving are the remains of a single nave basilica, built over a pagan temple in the 4th-5th centuries. The village houses a few of the Preserve workers and their families, who may be willing to point you to some of the area’s more interesting sites, including graveyards and the remains from the pre-Christian era.

Camping is possible in the preservation area (permission required); Overnight in Garni (rustic, 3000-5000 AMD for B&B is fair); Sprins along river beds.

Getting to Mets Gilanlar: From Baibert take a northern mountain track (Jeep or Vilis/UAZ) uphil for about 2.3 km of treacherous, cliff-hugging terrain to the remains of Mets Gilanlar.

Mets Gilanlar’s few huts are all that remain of a village that thrived on sheep herding and simple farming. Like the residents of Baibert, inhabitants were force-marched to Persia in the 17th c, and later Kurdish and Azeri residents left in the 20th century. The area is now a prime breeding ground for several of Armenia’s Endangered species, including the Persian Leopard, Armenian Mouflon, and the Armenian/Ibex. The terrain is rough and sparsely vegetated, and while there are some excellent hikes to the North and East, it can get bloody hot in the summertime and sun screen, bottled water and a good hat is required. A good guide is strongly advised, both to get to the good spots for bird and animal watching, and as part of your permission to enter the preserve. A local guide can be found in Garni (Call Samuel Ohanian at tel: ———— and through one of the Adventure Tour Operators listed at the beginning of this chapter.

Camping is possible in the area (be sure you have permit to stay in the preserve); Overnight in Garni (rustic, 3000-5000 AMD for B&B is fair); Springs along river beds.

Getting to Aghjots vank is a circuitous route. Take the NW path out of Mets Gilanlar (take the left before the village), cross the river and pass the old mill then continue for about 1.5 km to the ruins of Yelijah Village (“Yeh-lee-ja” - ուղիձու, where a path strikes out to the east on top of a ridge and in about 1 km ends at the stunning location for the equally beautiful Aghjots Vank.

You can equally strike out on foot across the valley to the vank from Mets Gilanlar 20-30 minutes), or in half a day of strenuous hiking over mountains from Goght.

Aghjots vank is perched on a mountain ridge overlooking the Gilanlar River. Local lore traces its founding to Grigor Lusavorich (Gregory the Illuminator) in the 4th c on the site of the martydom of St. Stepanos (a companion of Hripsimeh), which places the site in the Pagan era. Grigor spending his time knocking down or converting Pagan temples. The site was part of a Bronze and Iron Age culture in the area, developed into a walled compound by the 2nd millennium BCE. You can find the remains of Bronze Age fortresses and Vishaps in the surrounding mountains.

If the Christian church was established in the 4th century, it was probably a wooden structure, rebuilt in later centuries before becoming an important vank that was greatly expanded in the 13th c, giving it its current layout. Sacked in 1603 during Shah Abbas’ deportation of Armenians, the vank was partially restored in the 18th c along with Havuts tar, only to be sacked again in the same century and permanently ruined during Azeri/Armenian fighting in 1905-06. The vank was quite large, as big as nearby Havuts Tar and possibly bigger. The outer walls once rung around the entire complex but all that remain are on the western and northern edges. The remaining walls contain the ruins of outer buildings, sunken chambers and still to be excavated residential quarters.

S. Stepanos, a central dome type, dates to the 11th c, about the same time as Amenaprkich at Havuts Tar. The dome has collapsed, but the bulk of the church remains, showing its classic cruciform type with antechambers at the four corners. The tall central hall was buttressed by strong corners of basalt stone, which in turn supported the drum arches. The church was made of red and black tufa, now discolored by wear but...
in their heyday a colorful addition to the hill top. Monasteries are edged with smooth ribbing, as are the windows. Inside, the simple lines of the structure are enhanced by ribbing while the apron has geometric patterning and places where a series of painted icons once stood.

The 13th c gavit was added in 1207 for the vank's benefactors, Atabeg Ivaneh Zakarian and Prince Grigor Khaghbakian. Unlike the gavit at Havuts Tar, the gavit at Aghjots Vank has enough remaining walls to give some sense of its large size. And height. The walls tower above the central plan, matching the church walls but increasing the volume of the entire structure exponentially. The roof was supported by interconnecting arches, supported by central columns and columns placed along the outer walls.

All around the site are the remains of service buildings and the terracing used for farming. Much of the gavit's walls and many of the khachkar tombstones have tumbled down into the gorge, worth the effort for the physically doxoterus.

**Camping** is possible in the area (be sure you have permit to stay in the preserve); **Overnight** in Garni (rustic, 3000-5000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** in the area, riverbed.

**CONTINUE TRIP 1**

- **Backtrack to Garni and the Yerevan-Geghard highway at禽 WW II monument (western edge of the village), turn R (E) and continue E for about 4.8 km to the turnoff to (Goght - DD 40.1394 x 44.7794)**

**SIDE TRIP**: (Goght - Gnpj; elev. 1594, pop. 850) was called Goghot in 13th c. manuscripts. The small village rests above the Goghti River and was an adjacent to Garni village for much of its history. The village has the ruins of a 5th-c baslica church, built over pagan shrine, destroyed during the 15th c Timurid and 17th c Persian invasions, rebuilt in the 18th c using stone and khachkar fragments from its earlier periods. A pretty church in a nice location. The gorge is worth investigating if you have the time, with cold spring water popular with village kids in the summer. From Goght it is about 3.5 km to Geghard Monastery.

**Alternate Route to Havuts Tar**: From Goght it is a 1 hour climb to Havuts Tar across the Goghti River. To get there, go past the ruined basilica, then left on a potted asphalt road to its end. From there you pass through a farmyard (ask) down into the gorge, across a small wooden bridge and up to the other side to the SW, following a path that climbs the mountainside to the left (S) of a rocky spine. The path follows the contour of the mountainside, passing a grouping of khachkars and khachkar base, then the spring and the convent itself.

**Camping** is possible in the river gorge or nearby; **Overnight** in village home (rustic, 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** in the village.

From Goght, take the Geghard Highway and continue E for about 1.5 km to the Geghard Village turnoff (L), instead continue forward as signposted for another 3.5 km and past the statue of a lion holding a spear to GEGHARD VANK (DD 40.13763 x 44.81539)

**GEGHARD VANK - ԳԵՂԽԱՐ ՎԱՆՔ** (also Airavank - Աիրավանք - elev. 1302m, pop. 20) is located at the end of the Yerevan highway (H3), about 33 km from Yerevan center. The monastery is set into a deep canyon with waterfalls and towering cliffs around. The narrow entrance to the site helped hide the vank, protecting it from total destruction during Mongol, Timurid and Persian incursions; though it had to be rebuilt several times in its history. The World heritage site is truly impressive; this is one place in Armenia worth the visit. Devotion was lavished on the monastery, achieving amazing results, including carving two churches and royal mausoleum out of solid rock. It was also a community of erudite monks who spent their lives in one of dozens of caves in and around the complex, also hewn from solid stone.

Geghard means "the Lance", or the true spear that pierced Christ's side when he lay on the cross, and the monastery is one of only four places in the world claiming to have inherited the True Spear.

The area around the monastery is beautiful, with trees clanging to craggly rock cliffs and mountain tops, and the Goghti River running along the southern side, green with waterfalls. The remains around the monastery lead upstream to Mt. Yerakatar (2589.6 m), Vishap lich and in a one day hike, Lake Sevan.

**Background**

The exact date for the founding of the monastery is unknown, but pre-Christians considered springs in the area sacred, particularly one inside the cave that is now housed by the monastery. Continuing to worship the water spirits at the time of the conversion of Armenia, Grigor Lusavorich is believed to have established an ascetic monastery at the site in the 4th c. which became known as "Ayrivank" or "Monastery of the Cave”. Monks depictions of this date as a part of the first period, their ascetic lifestyle confirmed by the small caves on the cliffs, reached only by ladder or rope.

The ascetic tradition was strong in Asia Minor, reaching a status ranking with, and in cases rivaling the political powers of the day, especially in Syria and Greece, both of which had profound influence on the Armenian Church. Ayrivank worked, and lived, in small crevices that were open to the elements, becoming famous for their suffering and believed by some to have reached a type of divine connection. The monastery is mentioned in early chronicles as an important place of worship, and seat of power.

Unfortunately nothing of original Ayrivank remains, save a few fragment stones of the original walls. Fourth, 8th and 10th century chronicles write that the old monastery had, along with the ascetic monk quarters—churches, shrines, well-heeled residential quarters and extensive support buildings.

Ayrivank suffered the same fate as much of Armenia during the Armenian nakharar revolt of 923, when the Arab vice-regent in Armenia Nasr plundered the site, burning the vank to the ground. The vank was re-inhabited (ascetic monks need little to recoup their losses, though countless manuscripts were lost) and the vank was encircled with fortifications, much of which survive.

Though inscriptions are found from the 1160s, the current monastery is considered a product of the 13th c. when the Georgian branch of the Bagratuni family (the ‘Orbellians’) defeated Seljuk invaders and, by the Armenian generals Ivanek and Zakareh Zakarian, retook large portions of the Armenian kingdom, including Kothaik and Geghard. The Zakarians rivaled each other for power and cultural status, and ruled over a period of cultural flowering in Armenia, called the “Silver Age” for the number and beauty of churches, monasteries and universities it fostered. Khachkar art reached its zenith in this period, developing a complexity and beauty unrivaled in religious art. And while Zakareh sought to maintain the ascetic principle in churches built under his patronage, Ivanek showed a clear preference for Chalcedonian ideals, including iconography and elaborate decoration on religious monuments. And Ivanek showed great interest in Geghard, ironically replacing the ascetic institution with gorgeous buildings covered with elaborate carvings. In this, Ivanek lent the vank a joie de vivre it had heretofore shunned, at least officially.

The oldest surviving buildings at the site, the small Grigor Lusavorich church, gavit and the first cave church are traced to Atabeg Ivaneh’s patronage. Ivaneh showed a clear preference for Chalcedonian ideals, including iconography and elaborate decoration on religious monuments. And Ivanek showed great interest in Geghard, replacing the ascetic institution with gorgeous buildings covered with elaborate carvings.

The oldest surviving buildings at the site, the small Grigor Lusavorich church, gavit and the first cave church are traced to Atabeg Ivanek’s patronage. In the mid 13th century the monastery was purchased by a vassal of the Zakarians and progenitor of the Proshian Dynasty, Prosh.
was enshrined in an icon in 1244 and sold by Baldwin II to Louis IX of France, who had it enshrined with the Crown of Thorns in the Sainte Chapelle in Paris. The tip was lost during the French Revolution.

The rest of the lance was seen by various pilgrims, in Jerusalem, in Constantinople and in both Constantinople and Paris. Somehow ending at Constantinople, it fell into the hands of the Turks, and in 1492, under circumstances minutely described in Pastor’s History of the Popes, the Sultan Bajazet sent it to Innocent VIII to encourage the pope to keep his brother Zizim (Cem) prisoner. At this time great doubts as to its authenticity were felt at Rome because of the presence of other rival lances in Paris, Nuremberg (the Vienna lance) and Armenia. In the mid 1700s Benedict XIV states that he obtained from Paris an exact drawing of the point of the lance, and that in comparing it with the larger relic in St. Peter’s he

Kaghbakan (1233-1284) whose wife ordered the construction of the church as aAct of thanksgiving for a safe journey to Jerusalem. He was enthroned at the Patriarchal court of Cilicia in 1243 and consecrated the archbishop in the church of its name in 1244. He returned to Armenia in 1246 and in 1247 consecrated the church of the Holy Sepulchre in Nisibis. In 1250, Kaghbakan returned to Armenia and consecrated the church of Echmiadzin in 1254. He returned to Constantinople in 1258 and died in 1284. His relics were kept in the church of Echmiadzin. The church was also known as the church of St. Kaghbakan, who is his name. The church was also known as the church of St. John the Baptist, who is his name. The church was also known as the church of St. Andrew, who is his name. The church was also known as the church of St. John the Baptist, who is his name. The church was also known as the church of St. John the Baptist, who is his name. 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was satisfied that the two had originally formed one bishop. This bishop remained in Rome, but it is venerated as the true lance, before and after Vienna received its spear, Otto made his gift to the Poles, the cross was discovered at Antioch, landed Which begs the question, “didn’t they know it was a fraud?”

The answer is probably as frustrating as the question, buried in the medieval mindset, which could believe each copy of a relic they worshipped surely multiply relics, each one true and original, no matter how many there were. In science they might call this cloning, but in the Middle Ages, it was God’s gift to the monasteries.

The monastery consists of the walled compound, the Complex

Two churches, gavit and zhamatun, the Proshian buildings to the 19th-20th c renovations.

Chapel of Gregory the Enlightener built ca. 1177, and is about 100 meters from the monastery gate, high above the road. The chapel was partially carved from the cave that it replaced, a spring once emitted from the cave. The basilica has a horseshoe-shaped apse and several adjoining passages and small antechambers on varying levels, all hewn from solid rock. The steps at the end of the tier, next to the large gavit, leads to an upper chambers and zhamatun, while a crevice in the cliffs between the gavit and steps goes into an inner chamber. The 13th c gavit and 12th c katoghike are the large roofed buildings on the left (north) of the courtyard.

There are two other gates to the courtyard, on the south side, which leads down a few steps to a collection of khachkars and hiking trails into the nearby forest, and on the east, which leads to the mataghatun (sacificial house), as well as the bridge over the river into the forest and rock cliff.

At Geghard, Khachkars line the sides of the canyon wall, from the very simple to several extremely complex. A particularly beautiful one is next to the main entrance to the cathedral, but others showing a wide range of periods and styles are on the Eastern side of the monastery square, facing the staircase to monk cells and chapels.

The 1215 Katoghike (cathedral) and its adjoining gavit (narthex) were built adjacent to the inside churches. The katoghike has a central plan, a cruciform with the cross assuming the shape of a rectangle. The eastern wing of the cross ends with a semi-circular altar apse. The dome rests on the
The southern façade of the cathedral has a large portal with exquisite carvings, showing the flair of the Zakarian princes. The tympanum is elaborately carved with stylized trees and vines dripping with pomegranates and bunches of grapes, both symbols of long life and prosperity. The intertwining trunks frame four arched sections, the fruit of the vines and trees filling in the space. The whole is framed by an arch covered with star patterns, flanked by two doves, symbolizing peace, while the lion and ox icons above the main frame of geometric patterning “protect” the entire ensemble, while advertising the Prince’s power.

The central square, supported by arches ascending from pilasters and half columns on the four corners of the central hall. The pointed arches and triangular pendentives support the drum and cupola, trimmed with stone ribbing. The four corners of the church have small barrel-vaulted two-storey chapels with steps protruding from the wall. The apron for the horseshoe-shaped apse is decorated with running arches and images of saints.

The architect Galdzak (also Galdzag) for Prosh Kaghbakian and his heirs, along with the spring-cave church on the other side of the gavit. This is based on an inscription in the other church and the resemblance of the two carved churches. However, this confuses the history of the founding of the current monastery which traces it to the Zakarians (as well as the obeisance the Kaghbakians / Zakarians). This history ascribes construction to the Zakarians who ordered the rock church Astvatsatsin in 1215, which had a passageway and a smaller zhamatun where the current one is.

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The eight-sided drum is decorated with arches and bas relief figures of birds, animal heads, human masks, rosettes and jars.

The interior is decorated with ribbing on the corners, arches and windows. The internal walls have many inscriptions recording donations. The walls once had frescoes, traces of which can barely be detected. But overall, the building is not as sumptuously decorated as other churches sponsored by Ivanhe Zakarian, reflecting for some the more ascetic community for which it was built, but to others demonstrating Ivanhe’s sense of proportion, since the building was but a backdrop for the eye-popping treasures that were housed inside. It is too easy to look at these buildings simply as pieces of stone and forget that—like the castles used by royals—they were heavily decorated in applied art: gold, silver and bronze candelabras, worship items and plate were displayed in rooms covered with drapes of damask and silk, while tapestries hung form the walls and thick carpets lay a the floors. Do not be deceived; what you see now is but a poor man’s view of the 13th c religious world.

Connecting the kathgik to the West is a large gavit, built between 1215 and 1225 and connecting on its north side with the rock cliffs. The north wall is considered sacred, a place of worship from the Bronze Age when water gushed from its side. A bank of candles continues to commemorate the spot, though now in honor of a Christian God.

The building is central in plan, much like other gavits of the period, with four heavy, squat columns supporting intersecting arches that in turn divide the space into nine squares while they support the gabled roof. The center apertures is topped with a tent-roof open dome, the ceiling stones shaped like stalactites, popular in the 13th c in Armenia and Asia Minor. The floors alternate geometric patterns with tombs for the nobility, rich patrons and favored members of the monastic community, mostly the prior.

The exterior of the gavit includes a number of memorial crosses and inscriptions and its western portal is elaborately decorated with a peaked arch and floral geometric patterns in a vaguely eastern style while retaining a western (Armenian) essence, and is one the best examples of the melding of cultures in Armenian art, perfected in this period.

The passage nearest the cathedral, at the NE of the gavit (right as you face the north wall), leads to the lower zhamatun (gavit), Proshian Sepulchre and the Astvatsatsin mausoleum church.

Sepulchre and zhamatun. The first chamber you reach is a small zhamatun (gavit) with elaborate high relief carvings on its walls and niches for holding the remains of noble families. The current zhamatun was constructed for Prosh Kaghbakian, a vassal of the Zakarian princes, who purchased the monastery and had the chamber enlarged in 1283 from a smaller antechamber to the Astvatsatsin church, which lies adjacent to the zhamatun.

There is a claim that both this zhamatun and the adjoining church were built in the late 13th c by the architect Galdzak (also Galdzag) for Prosh Kaghbakian and his heirs, along with the spring-cave church on the other side of the gavit. This is based on an inscription in the other church and the resemblance of the two carved churches. However, this confuses the history of the founding of the current monastery which traces it to the Zakarians (as well as the obeisance the Kaghbakians / Proshians would have had to their overlords the Zakarians). This history ascribes construction to the Zakarians who ordered the rock church Astvatsatsin in 1215, which had a passageway and a smaller zhamatun where the current one is.

The Zakarians inherited the monastery along with the lands of Siunik, Artsakh and Katoak from the Georgian Orbelian Kings in the early 13th c, and in turn granted (sold) Geghard and the surrounding lands to their vassal, Prince Kaghbakian. It is his nephew, Prosh, who ordered the enlargement of the monastery, including the installation of a family sepulchre at the north end of this zhamatun in the mid to late 13th c. Hence the large Proshian Crest on the top of the northern wall; two lions with dragon tails tethered by an iron ring held by a third lion’s teeth, over an eagle clutching a lamb. The eagle clutching the lamb was part of the Crest for the Bagraturi family, whose representatives in the 13th c were the Orbelians in Georgia, themselves represented in Armenia by the Zakarians. Accordingly, the zhamatun and the adjoining church were both enlarged and embellished for the Proshians, very possibly under the direction of the architect Galdzak, who labored for 40 years to complete the entire ensemble.

The sepulchre is dated to 1283, sometime after the first wave of Mongol attacks, when the Proshians made peace with their new Central Asian overlords and were allowed to reign under Mongol suzerainty. The design maintains an Armenian essence, with Asian influence only appearing in the framing patterns for the wall crosses and sun dials on the eastern walls. It is more readily seen on the outer walls of the cathedral and gavit, a more public display of allegiance.

The square room has deep niches and arched vaults on the east and north ends, the north reserved for the Proshian family. The sarcophagi are missing, but must have been an elaborate affair of others of this period give any indication; carved with floral and geometric patterns and rung by arcature, religious symbols, perhaps pictures of saints or the fallen on the sides, the top surprisingly simple, etched to indicate the human
Both the Zakarians and Proshians come from a tradition new in Armenian History: the self-made prince, who created his position on the force (in the cases of the Zakarians) or wealth (the Proshians) he was able to amass in his lifetime. But they borrowed their ‘royal lineage’ from their noble Arshakuni forebears, intermarrying and adopting their insignia as suitable to their purposes. What is remarkable is how closely they followed the dictates of the 2000 year old nakharar tradition.

To make it the court of an Armenian king, you had to be listed in one of two official registries or official invincibles, the Gahnamak and Zoranamak, ranking your family based on honor, virtue and esteem. The difference between Gahnamak and Zoranamak were in the criteria determining the esteem your family was held in. Being born in high places did not necessarily insure your survival in the lists, as countless noble families who lost their standing during the Arab, Seljuk and Mongol invasions learned too well.

Zoranamak was based on the military strength of relative houses, namely how many cavalry, infantry and support staff you had, how trusted you were to defend borders, the number of troops you lent the king, and the like. A Gahnamak listed noble as a result. The Proshians, vassals to the Zakarians, had “good zoranamak” too, only as much, though you might not know it looking at the impressive carvings on their sepulchre walls.

So, the Zakarian generals who made their name by liberating the country by force, not only had good karma, they had “good zoranamak” too, gaining economic and political power (Gahnamak listed nobles as a result. The Proshians, vassals to the Zakarians, had “good zoranamak” too, only as much, though you might not know it looking at the impressive carvings on their sepulchre walls.

soul rather than the human body, or left plain, the sides speaking for the interred humanity.

Other high relief designs depict a large cross with geometric patterning, sun symbols and numerous crosses on the walls and columns. One niche (also called a chapel) to the right of the entry to the gavit has a mystical figure sketched with crowned human heads and the body of an eagle or hawk, the crypt for noble relatives to or vassals of the Proshians. Flanking the entry to the church is a plattband frame with two figures in the upper corners, their arms poised as if to emphasis a point, halos behind their bearded faces. This scene has been suggested for this figures being the apostles Bartholomew and Thaddeus, perhaps more likely since the monastery housed the True Spear Thaddeus is said to have brought to Armenia. Others say they are members of the Proshian family, but the halos would make their sainthood a bit premature.

In the corner there is a stone fireplace, some say for heating but, being the only of its kind, more likely for preparing matagh (sacrifice). And in this the fire pit might also be a holode of Pagan times, as are the zhamatun and Astvatsatsin, both of which are oriented not due East as all Christian monuments were, but to the NE, like the temple at Garni. This would mean that both structures were Pagan in origin, carved to the current form in the 13th century. Entirely possible.

Astvatsatsin church is next door, its history confusing. It was built by the Zakarian prince Ivaneh Zakarian and the Proshians, who added their coat of arms to the site and probably enlarged and decorated the church form eh original when they carved out of rock at the site in 1283. The Zakarian family received the monastery in the early 13th c and it is believed to have been constructed between 1215-1225 CE. Later touches are thought to be more beneficial to the church.

The church was constructed in the mid 13th century, sometime in the 1240’s, and was similarly hand carved into a domed cruciform type with annexes in the corners with additional chambers off the NW wall. An inscription at the base of the tent dome recounts the church was built by the architect Galdzak.

The dome is supported by two sets of arches over the central hall, and is decorated with elaborate stalactite stonework which also decorates column capitals and the conch of the altar apse. The arches are supported by half columns at the corners, typical of churches of the time. The southeastern wall is decorated with arched niches, each conch designed differently from the others.

Petrov and Poghos has been suggested for these figures being the apostles Bartholomew and Thaddeus, perhaps more likely since the monastery housed the True Spear Thaddeus is said to have brought to Armenia. Others say they are members of the Proshian family, but the halos would make their sainthood a bit premature.

Cracks in the walls are a result of earthquakes, interrupting the perfect lines in its design but otherwise leaving the structure intact. This is due in part to the engineering of the church and the incredible way legend says it was built; carved by hand from the top down. This may very well be an urban legend, but it was carved from solid rock, and the idea of the architect choosing the most difficult way to build the church, hauling rock out of the top aperture, just seems to fit the medieval Armenian mindset. The difficulty would not have stopped the builders; they lived in a world of difficulty and constructing a church this way could well have been seen as an act of faith, penance or even bravado, perfect for the medieval mind.

Go back to the Gavit and take the NW passage (left as you face the north wall of the gavit) to the northwest cave church Avazan. This part of the engineering of the church and the incredible way legend says it was built; carved by hand from the top down. This may very well be an urban legend, but it was carved from solid rock, and the idea of the architect choosing the most difficult way to build the church, hauling rock out of the top aperture, just seems to fit the medieval Armenian mindset. The difficulty would not have stopped the builders; they lived in a world of difficulty and constructing a church this way could well have been seen as an act of faith, penance or even bravado, perfect for the medieval mind.

So back to confusion in the back benefactions, the Proshian Prince Papak and his wife Ruzukan. An inscription shows it to have been completed in 1288.

The passageway leading to the gavit has a number of high-relief crosses carved in the solid stone, a pattern repeated throughout the monastery.

The gavit is a central plan space, its ceiling supported by four columns, entirely carved from Merik and Grigor, the rest have disappeared, pilfered or deliberately destroyed during invasion.

The room’s acoustics are amazing, perfect for religious chant. If you are lucky someone will be chanting while you are there. A hole in the back right (E) corner gives a view of the Proshian sepulchre downstairs. Get someone to chant nothing like it.

Several are at the top of a stone stairway to the east of the katoghike and show how primitive the religious chant. If you are lucky someone will be chanting while you are there. A hole in the back right (E) corner gives a view of the Proshian sepulchre downstairs. Get someone to chant nothing like it.

Go back outside and around to the west of the gavit. A stairway W of the gavit leads up to the upper gavit and mausoleum, carved for the Proshian Prince Papak and his wife Ruzukan. An inscription shows it to have been completed in 1288.

The gavit is a central plan space, its ceiling supported by four columns, entirely carved from solid rock. The columns are larger than other gavits, no doubt due to their being carved by hand, but they maintain the integrity of dividing the room into nine equal squares, with a spherical dome at the aperture.

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The gavit also serves as a mausoleum, which may have been its primary function. Of the bodies that were known to have been interred here, the only ones left are the tombs of the Proshian princes Merik and Grigor, the rest have disappeared, pilfered or deliberately destroyed during invasion.

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like the cave churches or set into the walls. They include storage, sleeping quarters, workshops and the current refectory. Others are small rock cut chapels with apses and altars, twin and triple chapel structures, some with ornamented entryways. If open, feel free to explore.

A number of khachkars are cut on rock surfaces and on the walls of the buildings. The large number of khachkars speaks to the importance of the monastery, they were expensive to carve and benefactors would carefully choose where they placed their memorials, looking for the most auspicious place to leave their “calling card” of faith.

Those at Geghard show a high level of art, richly ornamented with geometrical or floral motives. The composition of some khachkars’ decoration is quite unique.

**Outside the monastery.** Outside the monastery walls on the East side is an arched passageway leading to the canyon. A small river runs by the monastery, with a small bridge allowing you to walk into the nearby forest. Some of the bushes surrounding the outer walls are covered with strips of cloth tied to the branches. These are called “Wish Trees” but maybe they should be called “Burning bushes”, since they look like the burning bush in the biblical story, multi-colored and moving like flames in the breeze. Throughout the canyon there is evidence of inhabitation by monks, in the forest, or in other caves carved out of the canyon wall.

Across the river and on top of an E cliff you can spot some small flags. This is a promontory that the young and/or fit like to mount and wave to us lesser mortals below. It’s not a difficult climb and the view is beautiful, especially early in the morning.

*Camping* is possible in the area by the river but you might get shooed away if you try to stay too close to the monastery. Ask. **Overnight** in a village home at Geghard (rustic, 3000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** at the vank.

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TRIP 2: YEGHVARD - BUZHAKAN

YERAYEN - ZOVUNI - YEGHVARD (Nor Yerayen) - MT. ARAI LEHR - ZORAVAN (Pokravan / Dovri) - ARAUGIUGH - (Saralandar)
- BUZHAKAN / TEGHENIATS VANK - (Karashan - Arzakan pensionat)

TRIP 2: YEGHVARD - BUZHAKAN

FROM YEREVAN TAKE THE DAVITASHEN BRIDGE AND TAKE THE FIRST R OFF RAMP (NE) TOWARDS ZOVUNI AND KANAKERAN. FOLLOW THE NE ROAD THAT TRACE THE HRAZDAN RIVER FOR ABOUT 3 KM TO THE KANAKERAN TURNOFF (R) AND ZOVUNI (DD 40.21960 x 44.28473)

ZOVUNI - ԶՈՒՅՆԻ (est. 1965, elev. 1138m, pop. 640) is named for both the current village just outside Yerevan and for its first, submergence to the waters of the Hrazdan Reservoir in Aragatsotn marz. The Aragatsotn village lay on the Kasagh River at the crossroads of Stone Age, Bronze Age and early Armenian trade routes, and was later over run by Mongol, Shaddadid and Yazidi tribes, who formed the majority of the population by the 16th c. The village was emptied in 1965 to make way for the rising waters fo the Aparan Reservoir, which buried homes, graveyards and a valuable 5th c church. Residents from the current village near Yerevan still consider their old village their own and make annual treks to the old site, beekeeping, herading cattle and catching the waters recede in the hot summer sun, slowly revealing their lost home.

The land around was once part of a primordial land and rocky area that gives way to pine forests at Buzhakan, a twisting rocky road leading to the haunting ruins of Tegheniats Vank, an incredible achievement of architecture in the 10th-13th centuries and rival to the great monasteries of its day. One of the most beautiful momementaries in Armenia, the carvings on the vank’s stones are unique in Armenia, for their obviously pre-Christian roots and the masterful way they were carved. Like Havuts Tar in Trip 1, this is one of the few places that just isn’t to be missed, though it often is. The forests above Buzhakan provide superlative hiking and camping, plus a nearby pensionat.

The trip can be done in a half day, and you may want to combine it with parts of the Hrazdan Canyon (covered in Trip 3), continuing on to Ashtarak and Aragatsotn marz (see Aragatsotn chapter), or overnighting at one of the pensionats/camps in the Arzakan Valley (Trip 3). But if you take the time to explore Mt. Hatis and Tegheniats (picnic), it will take a full day.

Stay: Overnight in Biurakan.
Eats: Biurakan, Kari Lich.

- From Yerevan take the Davitashen Bridge and take the first R off ramp (NE) towards Zovuni and Kanakeran. Follow the NE road that trace the Hrazdan River for about 3 km to the Kanakeran turnoff (R) and Zovuni (DD 40.21919 x 44.5846).
- YEGHVARD - ԵՐԳՎԱՐԴ (est. 1011m, pop. 2500) is surrounded by farms and orchards, however, it lies between Ashtarak and the Hrazdan canyon on the Biureghavan highway (H6). It is an old village, first settled in the Stone Age and developed into a regional center in the Bronze Age. The land around was once part of a primordial forest that was long ago clear-cut to make way for agriculture, and the area prides itself on the vegetable sand fruit that grow here. The village is becoming a magnet for people wanting to escape Yerevan’s chaotic growth, as well as invest in some well-made homes. The potted, cobbled roads pass some genuine 19th c jewels, village homes with wooden balustrades, lacy curtains and tree-shaded yards. The village is rather wealthy, so don’t expect too much in the way of cheap overnight deals (they may even refuse to help), but if you do hit it off with a local and are invited for coffee, take them up on it. The hospitality, warmth and humor is delightful. The village is south of Mt. Arai Lehr, which has some excellent day hiking.

Dead center is the 10th-14th century jewel, S. Astvatsatsin, a two-story structure with an upper chapel under the tall dome. Said to have been built in 1001 or 1312, the church was most likely built over a pre-Christian temple, its small footprint closely imitating pagan shrines of the Hellenistic period. The lower floor is now a few steps below ground, but in its day it was level to the surface, a small central dome cruciform type
The chapel is cruciform with a shallow cupola supporting the flor of the bell tower, much as the lower church, with the decoration on the inner walls are more elaborate, its architectural lines more dynamic.

The building's façades are extremely elaborate, showing some of the best examples of Medieval carving in the country. Bold, high relief depictions of the cross and religious figures are incorporated into distinctly Asian geometric patterning, imported by Mongolian invaders in the 13th-14th centuries. The result, though, is distinctly Armenian, using elements of Central Asian motifs while maintaining the integrity of the Armenian overall design. You can tell this is influenced by outer sources, but still, the essence of the design, as with the building, is distinctly Armenian. On the western façade, the main entrance to the lower church is more plain (suggesting a 10th c building) but the upper chapel walls are covered with a horseshoe-shaped apse. The shallow cupola serves as a concave arch for the upper floor. The blackened walls are due to centuries of burning candles, and obscure some of the fine details on the walls: geometric patterns, marble dais front and red and black tufa mosaics forming a large rising sun on the back of the upper apse.

The double arch window opening onto the upper chapel is elaborately carved, including a commemorative inscription atop the central column.

More outstanding designs are found on the southern façade, including stepped upper framework with intricate weaving and pomegranates and a powerful depiction of the ancient Mamikonian-Bagratuni family crest, a lion clutching the prone body of a lamb. This crest was incorporated into the Zakarian and Proshian family seals as well.

The northern façade has equally elaborate designs, its family crest a butting ibex, symbol of an unknown benefactor. The incorporation of four distinct family crests showed a high level of cooperation between the normally warring Armenian nakharars, who by the 14th century were in the throes of extinction. A last gasp of Armenian culture before the devastating Timurid invasions, Astvatsatsin required a pooling of resources to realize its splendor, no matter how protected it may have been. Until Mughni, Astvatsatsin was the only large-scale construction of its kind in the eastern kingdom, certainly as elaborate.

The eastern façade has a simpler design motif from the others, with an elaborate sun symbol with an eight-pointed star center set over the carving of a bull fighting a horse or ibex. This is the family crest for one of the church's benefactors, possibly an extension of the Kaghbakian / Proshian family.

The bell tower with tent roof tops the entire structure, giving it its unusual height. The roof is supported by twelve thick columns with large protruding capitals and high-relief arches on the lintel. The bell tower serves as the drum for the dome and its exterior is elaborately decorated with rich carvings of crosses and high-relief ribbing on the arches and arch columns. Above the arches are interweaving geometric lines, creating a chain link effect, embodying the best of both the near Eastern/Mongol motif and Armenian geometric patterns. One detail, though, is not Armenian at all and aptly demonstrates who was calling the shots at the time: Look above the arches, just below the tent roof; ringing the cornice of the

The western plaza in front of the church was once a 13th c gavit, with a few column fragments to show what was there. The layout of the gavit seems much the same as others of the period, a very large square plan with intersecting arches that supported the gabled roof and central aperture, which was domed. Entry to upper chapel is blocked; the narrow steps that once led fro the ground to the chapel are missing, perhaps removed during the construction of the gavit, though the caretaker insists they were removed much later. Other churches with upper chapels that added gavits removed the outer stairs and found another way to ascend to the upper floor. Astvatsatsin had a back way up, which has been sealed as well. The upper floor is made from finely hewn tufa stone clasped onto thick walls, with windows on the north and south sides, divide by columns on the north and

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At the time of its construction, Yeghvard and the marz was under duress with a dwindling Armenian population. The slopes of Mt. Aragats and Arai Lehr were emptied in the 13th-14th c by Mongol and Turkic tribes who converted the area’s farmland to summer yaylas (pasturage). Astvatsatsin was built during this period of upheaval, under the reign of the Mongol Ghazan Khan (1295-1304) and his successors Khuda Banda (1304-1316) and Abu Sa‘id (1316-1333), who had converted to Islam, when Christianity quickly passed from a favored religion to a tolerated religion, beginning the persecution of the 14th century. Ghazan Khan mitigated the persecution in his later years, suggesting that the church may indeed have been built in 1301, during his reign, his successors actively suppressing the Christian religion. Placing Islamic tiles on the façade of the upper floor would have been deemed a smart move, showing the Mongol lords obeisance and even, as at Tegher Vank in Aragatsotn where niches are topped with Mongol pointed arches, misleading them to the actual purpose of the church (yes, this really happened). The ceramic tiles at Yeghvard’s church would then have served as a way to “blend in” with the Mongol population, or even, as some suggest, to announce its conversion to a mosque, no matter how temporary. The tall, slender tower would have reminded Moslems of the minarets of their mosques. Still, it seems likely to me at least that it was more an idea of survival by imitation, without actually converting. You decide.

The central apse was pentahedral in design and fit within the walls of the church, as opposed to later protruding apses. A wall inscription is dated 660 CE, and it is believed that the church was renovated/rebuilt in the 6th-7th centuries, perhaps under Movses Yeghvard’ets’ patronage. The renovation replaced the wooden roof with red tiles, requiring the installation of three new columns able to take the weight of the new roof. The newer columns are easy to detect from the smaller, older ones. A number if inscriptions can be found on stones at the site, once set on the walls for wealthy parishioners seeking favor with the church (or the after life).

Another 5th-6th c basilica is not as large (9.1 x 23.5 m) but fits the foot print of a pagan temple it probably replaced. The church is just N of the triple nave church, about 30 m up the road (#6). You have to pass through a villager’s yard, so knock first and be nice.

Only the lower walls survive, but they show the general layout and portals on the west and south façade. The surviving walls show abutments and anchors for arches that supported a vaulted ceiling of stone. The hall ends with a horseshoe-shaped apse on the eastern end.

Nearby are the remains of a couple of khachkars and traces of a Tukh Manuk shrine that stood at the site. The area is overgrown with trees and grass, but still locals make matagh at the site, the worn path and burnt offerings showing the way, and they swear supernatural happenings occur all the time.

**Drum** is a row of Islamic ceramic tiles, alternating between rectangular, square and round tiles of rich Central Asian motifs. The most prominent are the round blue tiles inscribed with Arabic (Koranic) letters. Given the date for the current structure (1301-1321), during the Mongol period in Armenia, the tiles either mark the church’s protected status under a Mongolian overlord or—as some suggest—its use as a mosque.

The narrow outer naves end with side apses facing the hall perpendicularly, absolutely unique in Armenian churches and never again duplicated. This further suggests the site may have been incorporating features of an earlier temple. Again, not proved.

**South Route to Mt. Arai Lehr:** At the north end of the village there are a couple of trails that lead to the South face of Mt. Ara Lehr I about ~ km, passing Tsaghevank (S. Kuis Varvara, Sister Barbara) shrine and monolithic natural monuments on the way. The trail crosses the Arzni-Shamiram canal, and heading N/NW to the south peak.
The southern approach leaves from the Karbi road in the NW of the village, arriving at the S/SE crest in about 15-20 km depending on the upper path you choose (see below for detailed directions).

Camping in the area and on the mountain sides; Overnight in the village possible (3000-5000 for B&B is fair); Springs in the village.

**M.T. ARAI LEHR - URUUSH LBN**

(DD 41.2842544007816 x 44.456520080566406) For Satellite image of Arai Lehr, go to www.maps.google.com and enter 41.2842544007816, 44.456520080566406 in the search box. Great image.

The volcanic cone Mt. Arai Lehr (pronounced “ar-EYE lehr” elev. 2575.9 m) looms over the countryside, in clear view of Mt. Aragats and the Geghama Lehr. The mountain, named for the mythical Armenian hero Ara Gheghetsik (Ara the Beautiful or Handsome) slain by the Queen Semiraminis (Shamiram in Armenian) is so named because of the shape of its crest from the west; the mountain ridge resembles the prone face of a man, some saying it is the body of Ara, banished to the mountain by the dark arts of the Babylonian queen. The mountain had a less exotic connotation with its Turkish name, Garniyangh (“Wounded Stomach”).

The view from the top of Arai Lehr is incredible with the Geghama Lehr and the Kotalik plateau to the east, the Tsaghkuniants range and Aparan Jrambar to the north, an uninterrupted view of Mts. Ararat & Aragats, Ashtrak and the Kasakh River gorge to the west, and the Ararat Valley and Yerevan to the south.

The mountain is a unique combination of geological strata, with andesite-basalt rock formations on its Eastern slope and fields of “stone hail,” rounded volcanic stones formed of lava that hardens while falling to the ground or formed while rolling down the hardened slopes. Other slopes (south, east) have tall rock monoliths with natural caves and rich, fertile volcanic loam that nurtures an incredible variety of flora, a number of species which are unique to Arai Lehr.

The northern slopes are forested; thought illegal logging is slowly stripping the mountain of this vital resource that prevents land erosion and desertification. The forests consist of hardwood species (oak, maple) with birch and seven species of ash along with others. In addition the forests have a number of wild fruit trees and berries. About 50 species of shrubbery grow on the slopes. Western slopes show the effects of clear-cut logging; emerald green during a few weeks of Spring, the slopes quickly dry in May, turning a harsh shade of brown for most of the year.

Ecology: For such a small territory Arai Lehr contains a surprising complexity of topography, taking in almost all of Armenia’s total: semi desert, mountain steppe, hardwood forests and meadows with small sections of tall herbaceous, rocky and mountain scrub.

Arai Lehr officially has 650 species of vascular plants, an amazing concentration of twenty percent of Armenia’s total. Twenty species on the mountain are endemic to the Armenian Plateau, nine of which are exclusive to the republic. Of the total over thirty are considered rare and threatened, fifteen of which are listed in the Red Book of Endangered Species in Armenia. Many species are incredibly beautiful, including mountain Crocus, Iris and Oriental Poppies, and are at their most abundant in the early-mid spring (mid April-Ma y). Others found on the slopes include Pushkinia scilloides, Merendera trigyna and Scilla armena, Fritillaria caucasica, snowflower (Merendera trigyna) and the rare Aquilegia olympica. Most of the rare and endangered species can be propagated, though an experienced guide is absolutely necessary to determine which can be naturalized and which must be left alone.

Additional information on Arai Lehr’s eco-system is in the Mt. Arai Lehr section of the Aragatsotn chapter. See adventure tour operators for expert flora guides.

**Kotalik hiking trails** There are several trails up Mt. Arai Lehr from all sides. Some of the most popular begin in Kotalik, form the south and east. The trails are not difficult for the basically fit person, though persons not used to hiking should prepare ahead for potentially tiring walks. Good hiking shoes, a hat, sun screen and wind breaker are de rigeur on even summer days, as well as plenty of water.

**Nor Yerznka Trail**

The trail begins just NWW of the village and across the Arzni-Shamiram canal, where a dirt path forks off to the R about 250 m from the canal. The path (navigable by off road vehicles most of the way up) crosses grassy meadows and farmlands for about 9 km before meeting up with the path from Yeghvard Village. From there it begins the climb in earnest (another 9 km), passing natural outcrops, mountain streams and ridges plus the Kuis Varvara (Sister Barbara) shrine, also known as Tsaghkevank (“Flower Monastery”), inside a cave with a spring. The water from the spring is reputed to have curative powers, especially relating to eyesight. There is a significant level of zinc in the water, known to assist in eye sight, along with joint and muscle cramps. Drink up! The moss-covered shrine reputedly contains the tomb of the saint along with an altar and (in season) candle sellers, belying its original pagan use, and probably hiding the resting place of pre-Christian bones to boot. The Spring once had a Vishap (phallus), sadly gone. Zinc water content.

**Yeghvard Trail** More popular as the Nor Yerznka trail, but shorter by a few km, the Yeghvard trail leaves the north end of the village and strikes across the northern fields to the mountain. It is joined with the Nor Yerznka trail in about 4.5 km from the village, and then climbs in a circular path over the mountain’s ridges and natural monuments of rock towers, along with the Kuis Varvara (Tsaghkevank) shrine (another 9 km).

**Saralandj Trails**

The eastern approach is one of the shorter paths, but also pastoral, passing through rising hills and forested slopes en route to the top. The trails are also among the shortest to the top. For the flat footed, there is a mountain road (Vilis/UAZ/jeep) that departs the village from its N/W edge and skirts the mountain on its way to Yerznjakap and the Aparan reservoir, so – km distant. About 3.3 km from Saralandj there is a path on the left that climbs the eastern slopes, ending in 3.6 km at the crater. A couple of hiking trails veer off from the cemetery at the western edge of the village and join together just below the main peak, skirting it to the N then west to end at the top, for a total of about 4.5 km if you take the Saralandj trail from the cemetery, 5 km if you take the southern route.

Western approaches: Approaches to the mountain in Aragatsotn begin from Apagniugh (see Aragatsotn chapter for details).

More information view Anna Asatryan's web site on her research into Arai Lehr at http://www.anna-asatryan.chat.ru/arailer.htm. An incredible researcher, Anna is seeking support to publish her findings on the mountain’s amazing diversity. Worth the visit.

**Camping** is possible on the mountain slopes and in the top crater which gets cold at night even in the summer time; overnight at Yeghvard or Nor Yerznka (rustic, 3000-5000 AMD for B&B is fair); Springs in the villages and on mountain streams (ask guide).

Backtrack to Nor Yerznka, then L (E) on the Yeghvard Highway (H6) to the far (NE) side of Yeghvard, taking the left fork towards Buzhakan and continue for about 4.5 km to the turnoff to Zoravan. Yeghvard Hwy (H6) - 5 km from village.

**Zoravan** DD 40.3569444 x 44.5230556
About 50 m downhill is the large, imposing Zoravar cathedral. The ruins of the church are substantial enough to show its once impressive size, and attempts to reconstruct the building in the 1970’s cultural revival, when nationalist styles predominated, were only partially successful. Zoravar was permitted to be rebuilt by the Soviet government to advertise their “tolerance”. Zoravar is a circular structure, or, more correctly, a central plan type (meaning an octagonal hall, the inner hall surrounded by eight apses), an innovation of the 7th century. The eastern (altar) apse is larger than the rest, with protruding pentagonal walls on the exterior. The large polygonal drum of the dome was supported by thick lower walls, pendentives (triangular sections) and support columns between the apses, placed on high bases. The drum is circular inside and dodecagonal (twelve sided) outside. It is assumed to have had a polygonal roof of stone slabs. The outside walls of the church hall are separated with wide triangular niches, marking the division between the eight apses. The decoration on the walls is fluid, with geometric and animal motifs and high relief friezes, somewhat reminiscent of the contemporary Zvartnots Cathedral, though nothing as elaborate.

When you visit see if you can find Vart Hakobian, a friendly farmer who tends his field near the church ruins. Hailing from Akhalalak, an Armenian enclave in SW Georgia, Vart will while away the time with stories of villagers and local lore about the area. Good company on a hot day, and a lot of humor.

The jewel of the village lies to the W, the 7th c Zoravar complex, set on a low hill about 2 km distant from the village. You can spot the dark walls of the circular structure, and the older funeral shrine above it, from the highway. To get there take the dirt tracks (all vehicles) that strike off to the L of the highway just above the railroad tracks. The path seems to wind away from the church (take the left fork at about 800 m), but in about 1.2 km fro the highway it intersects with another path (turn L) that leads directly SW to the complex. The church is a little downhill from the crest of the hill, where a small funerary chapel and cemetery lie (park here).

According to the 13th c historian Vartan Bardjerberdtsi (Vartan of Bardjer berd), the church was consecrated by Grigor Mamikonian (661-685). The church was built in the same period as the great central apse cathedral Zvartnots near Echmiadzin (built 643-652), which spawned a number of imitations throughout the kingdom, including the eight-sided Irind cathedral and later eight-apsed Amenaprkich at Ani and Varzan (destroyed) and a six-apsed church at Ani.

Zoravar, like all polygonal churches, resembles a fortress tower, and this stylistic choice is probably no coincidence; the church was built at the height of the Arab invasions, the first wave of invaders that ended the Armenian kingdom’s autonomy in the Christian era. Under assault from foreign (and apostatizing) legions, the Armenians need for strong defense would have carried over into other areas of their lives, including religion. Circular buildings were easier to defend. They withstood assaults better than the mammoth basilicas of the 5th-6th centuries. It may be just a flight of fancy, but the idea of constructing force and strength in even the worship places fits the mindset of a people under attack.

Is it just a coincidence that the church was named Zoravar (meaning “leading troops into battle,” “soldierly” or “forceful”), not unlike the opening sound of Zvartnots (alternately meaning church of “Angelic beings” and “Vigilant forces” or, as angels are also described in the bible, “Forces of God”)? You decide.

There is a long inscription carved on the exterior, now illegible, and a number of marks made by stonemasons on the inside.

The caves lie in the cliffs under the church, to the W. Most are collapsed but a few have small openings. Local lore has it Timur stopped at the site during his ravages of the country, rounding up villagers into caves found on the cliffs just below the church and setting them afire.

Surprisingly little commented on are the mass of stones to the S of the complex, an early stone circle of the Copper-Bronze Age. Some debate ensues on the authenticity of these stones, which, if they did naturally drop down from Aral Lehr or bubbled up in a lava flow, were perfectly designed in concentric spheres of rough stone.

Camping is possible in the area, but save it for Aral Lehr of Buzhakan; Overnight in village (rustic, 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair);
Springs in the village.

Backtrack to and cross over the highway onto a dirt path (opposite an old stone-cutting plant) on the other side, which is about 1 km to (Dovri DD 40.34 x 44.54)

The small funerary chapel, dedicated for an unknown family is a single-nave structure with thick tufa walls and a vaulted ceiling, topped with a pitched stone-gable roof. Nearby is the grave yard with scattered tombstones and khachkar fragments to stand for what was once there. Among the fallen stones look for 4th-10th c khachkars, including one beautiful prone
The village Tukh Manukh is on the ridge of a hill overlooking a brook. To get there, backtrack to the 5th c church, and then take the left fork, a rutted alley. Passing a right alley, take the next left, the next right, the next left uphill to the site (ask for “Tukh Manuk”, DD 40.408 x 44.5444, elev. 1658m). Pagan in origin, the outline of the old temple is clearly seen in the reconstructed walls. Built with basalt and tufa stone and topped with a tin roof, the building has a south portico on the western end with a small doorway into the hall. The inside is remarkable, with rough wooden pillars supporting the wooden ceiling and roughly dividing the hall into three naves, though you would scarcely think of the wide open hall as triple nave. White washed walls cover earlier frescos, though some attempt has been made to recreate some of the wall paintings, on either side of the apse.

Medieval and 19th century renovations mostly obscure the original Tukh Manuk shrine, but a visit to the small annex to the right of the apse confirms its early purpose; three finely hewn sarcophagi (Hellenistic?) on the eastern wall of the candle-soot covered room, their tops dotted with candle wax and small “wishing” stones. Like the wishing ledges at Geghard and the wishing stones are a product of pre-Christian rites, whether placing pebbles on sacred stones (graves) or playing a kind of game of chance, getting one to stick to a sacred stone (Tsoghamak) or tossing it on a ledge (Geghard).

The shrine is a little jewel of local lore and worship, its walls adorned with simple acts of faith and primitive depictions of the crucifixion and Madonna and Child. Unfortunately, locals are also doing battle with righteous churchgoers from outside the community over the displays on the church walls. (see inset).

In a less deadly method than warning iconoclasts of the 7th-9th centuries who murdered ‘heathen’ icon-carrying believers, the battle between church officials in Echmiadzin determined to clean Armenian churches of unapproved iconography and villagers wanting to express their faith by displaying whatever bits of religious items they can afford, is very real. There is anger seething beneath local compliance and a “plastic Jesus” guerilla cleaning for God.
campaign has begun to replace items torn from walls almost as soon as they are removed.

Its end may be foretold but before it ends in antiseptic churches everywhere, take the chance to explore the naïve but genuine acts of faith showered on village churches and shrines. I for one hope the victors never completely succeed; the simple, pure acts of belief are the most compelling, reminding me of Christ’s words of seeing the world through the eyes of a child (Matthew 18:3).

**Camping** in the forests of Arai Lehr or above Buzhakan; **Overnight** in village (rustic, 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** in the village and on the mountain.

- Backtrack to Aragigd and turn L (N) on the Buzhakan road and continue for about 5.5 k, passing the military checkpoint, to central BUZHAKAN (DD 40.4552778 x 44.5205556)

BUZHAKAN  -  ԲՈՒԺԱԽԱՆ (once called Babakishi, elev. 1856 m, pop. 1660) sits in a crevice of the Tegheniats Mountain Range, a spur of the Pambak Mountains. Though illegal logging has felled much of the timber, the area still boast forests that once thrived in this part of Armenia, thick stands of which protect Tegheniats Vank, the reason for visiting this village.

The village itself is large, but unkempt, locals scraping by on remittances from abroad and simple farming. While most villages in Armenia have lost 30-40% of their men folk (gone to work abroad), villages like Buzhakan have lost 50% or more of its pre-1991 population. Those that remain look to have a pretty tough time of it, so patronize the small shops as you pass through.

The village also inherited health problems from Soviet times, including rampant thyroid disease, or goiter. Easily prevented by the intake of iodine which has been added to drinking water and salt in the industrialized world as a matter of course, locals do not have the resources for such a simple cure. Non-iodized salt is sold in the village from Iran and Ukraine, compounding a problem that should have been fixed decades ago and which is also widespread in Lori, Shirak and Siunik.

There are some pretty houses in the village, but the reason to come here lies in the forests to the north of the village. And despite its current woes, Buzhakan is famed for herbs that grow in the forests, villagers once prized for their knowledge of herbal healing. Few in Armenia still remember the science and one to look up here if you have the time is Varduhi Manukian, whose knowledge was assed down from her grandmother and mother. True to form, she treats villagers free of charge. An avid collector of herbs, if you can coax the septuagenarian into taking you with her in the forests, it will be one of the most rewarding times you will have spent in Armenia.

**Camping** is possible by the vank, or in the forests (watch for illegal loggers) or around the village (ask); **Overnight** in village (rustic, 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** in the village and along the river leading to the vank.

**Alternate Route to Hrazdan Canyon/ Trip 3**: Backtrack to Aragigd and take the E road to Karashamb, then take the Hrazdan Canyon road and trip 3 (N to Bjini, S to Yerevan)

**END OF TRIP 2**
TRIP 3: HRAZDAN RIVER, LEFT BANK


This trip features

Stay: Camping at Kari Lich and in the cone.
Eat: Concession stand at Kari Lich.
Springs: Dozens of springs and pure water streams on the mountainside.

From the N edge of the church yard (village center), take the Amberd/Aragats road N for about 2.4 km to Antarut (DD 40.35 x 44.2666667)

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

The village has some early (5th-9th c) 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 fo

Camping is possible in either river gorge, or above the village on the rim, but ask first; Overnight in village (rustic, 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); Springs in the village and on the riverbed.

From Yerevan, take the Biurakan road N (first right after the Voskevaz T-intersection) road for about 3.8 km (take the left at 1.5, right takes you to the Ashtarak highway) as it climbs and switchbacks to the BIURAKAN Observatory entrance (right, E), then another 1.2 km to the 3rd right turn to BIURAKAN center (DD 40.33660 x 44.28473)

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

Camping is possible in either river gorge, or above the village on the rim, but ask first; Overnight in village (rustic, 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); Springs in the village and on the riverbed.

END OF TRIP 3
Unless otherwise noted, local numbers require the (0232) prefix if calling long distance, or +374 232 prefix if calling from abroad.

**Taxis** Abovian has plenty of taxis, in the center, and at the Abovian

**Regional Taxis** Taxis are a good way to explore the near region, and very reasonable if you are two or more and split costs, which are per vehicle. Negotia

**Taxi Services** Look for taxi service ads at the center and area cafes, re

**TRAVEL AGENCIES**

For nature or adventure tours, see Adventure Tour Operators (on page 10).

**COMMUNICATION, ETC.**

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

For a medical emergency, dial 103. If possible go to Yerevan for medical service or ask at your lodging for recommendation. Central Hospital, 61 Narekatsi p. tel. 3-1949. Polyclinic, tel. 3-3335.

**Dentist** Ashtarak has no dental clinic, there are a few in town or at the main square on Yerevanian p. They are better equipped to serve visitors.

**OVERNIGHT**

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

**HOTEL / MOTEL**

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

**BOARDING/APARTMENT**

This is a distinct possibility in Ashtarak, though 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 Abovian
Pine Tree House (Yerevan Tel: (010) 52-16-25) has been

Sevan Highway
Udjan Motels: About 10 km outside of town, in Udjan, facing farmland

Food and Drink
Restaurants, cafes and bistros are throughout the city, as are khovoratz joints in town and on the highway to Giumri. Food can also be bought at Mterks (food shops) and kiosks around town.

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

Restaurant Ashtaraki Dzor, Kasakh Gorge 1 (tel. 34880) is a palatial restaurant/motel/entertainment center, 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.
The main streets are:

From Yerevan,

Abovian is not a small hike, form end to end it can take 30 minutes or more to walk. The center is mostly shops and apartments, while the better hotels and restaurants are far enough apart to warrant a taxi.

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

SIGHTS

The town's main site

S. Marineh

Museums

The Name, 4 Proshian p., tel. (33254) is

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

PRACTICALITIES

Area Code: 232

Long Distance: 0232 + local number

From abroad: +(374) 232 + local number

Mobile Phones: 091 Armenteil, 093 Viva Cell

International callers: Armenteil +(374) 91 + number, Viva Cell +(374) 93 + local number

Unless otherwise noted, local numbers require the (0232) prefix if calling long distance, or +(374) 232 prefix if calling from abroad.

IN AND OUT

By Bus, Minivan

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

Buses stop at Abovian on routes from Yerevan, Gumri and Vanadzor-Aparan. Several Yerevan-Abovian buses run daily between the Yerevan bus and minivan stop at 4 Paronian, west of the end of Mashtots just before "khvorovats street" a.k.a. Proshian. They begin and end from the Abovian Aftokaiyaran at the main square on Yerevanian p. Bus #111 is the Yerevan-Abovian bus, bus #502 is the Yerevan-Abovian-Voskevaz bus. 250 AMD.

Minivans (Marshrutni taxis) leave from the Abovian Bus Station on Yerevanian p. by the main square in Abovian. Minivans do not have a set schedule, they leave when they are full and generally run once or twice a day out to the tending villages, so ask. Minivans connect Abovian with the Yerevan bus and minivan stop at 4 Paronian, west of the end of Mashtots and before "khvorovats street" a.k.a. Proshian. They begin and end from the Abovian Aftokaiyaran at the main square on Yerevanian p. Aftokaiyaran on routes from Yerevan, Gumri and Vanadzor-Aparan. Several Yerevan-Abovian buses run daily between the Yerevan bus and minivan stop at 4 Paronian, west of the end of Mashtots just before "khvorovats street" a.k.a. Proshian. They begin and end from the Abovian Aftokaiyaran at the main square on Yerevanian p. Bus #111 is the Yerevan-Abovian bus, bus #502 is the Yerevan-Abovian-Voskevaz bus. 250 AMD.

By Car

Abovian is at the crossroads of the Gumri-Yerevan, Aparan/Vanadzor-Echmiadzin and the Abovian highways. There are also side roads to Biurakan/Amberd/Karli Lich, Oshakan and Aparan. Most Yerevan taxi services provide this service, but we use Voyage tel: (010) 54-54-05, 54-54-06 and have had good experiences.

From Abovian, taxis in Abovian are all around town or at the Aftokaiyaran (bus station) by the main square on Yerevanian p (near the university square). Most Yerevan Dzor Restaurant/Motel. Late in the day you may have to bargain a bit or add something for return, but normally this is not a problem. Taxis to Yerevan are around 3000 AMD (2700 AMD at 100 AMD per km), to Talin around 4000 AMD, to Aparan around 2500 AMD. See taxi list for call taxi below.

By Taxi

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

Yerevan-Abovian Taxis

Just about any taxi will take you to Abovian at around 100 AMD per kilometer (double cost to cover driver's return) and dedicated cars to Abovian are located at Kino Hairenik (Kino Rossyia) at the corner of Abovian

Regional Taxis

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

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

**Internet**

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

**Bank, Exchange**

Money wires and credit card advances can be done at banks, ATM and exchange at bank.

ArmSavingsBank, 18 Hanrapetutian (3-5376)

ACBA, 1 Yerevanian p.

ASHB, Proshian p.

Armeconombank, Main Square

Unibank, Grigorian p.

Converse Bank, 23 Ogostosi

**Shopping**

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

**Film, etc.**

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

**Pharmacy**

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

**Hospital, Polyclinic**

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

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Polyclinic, tel. 3-3335.

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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 Abovian**

Avan

Pine Tree House (Yerevan Tel: (010) 52-16-25) has been

Sevan Highway

Udjan Motels. About 10 km outside of town, in Udjan, facing farmland

**FOOD AND DRINK**

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

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Khorovats Stands proliferate on the highway arching around Ashtarak. They offer good value at 1000-1500 AMD per shish or 500 AMD for kebab.
TRIP 4: HANKAVAN VALLEY

TSAGHKADZOR - (Jrarat) - (Marmarik) -
MEGRADZOR - (Dzorak) - (Pliunik) -
ARTAVAZD - (Hankavan Valley Pensionats between Artavaz and Hankavan) - HANKAVAN - HANKAVAN FORESTS

Trip 4 takes you into

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

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

Springs: Apnagiugh, Aragats, Hartavan, Jrambar, Yeghipatrush, Ttujur, Aparan, Mirak, Rya Taza, Tsaghkahovit, Gegharot, Sipan...

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

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

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

Springs are in the village and along the river.

HANKAVAN - (till 1935 Bash Aparan, elev. 1898m, pop. 2566) [MAP] town, listed by the 2nd c. geographer Ptolemy as Kasakh, descends from a long line of settlements from each period of human activity on the plateau.

From a Bronze Age beginning, the town developed as Kasakh throughout the Medieval period, serving as a seat of power for the Vachutian Family in the 13th c. It was devastated by Mongol, Seljuk and Kurdish attacks, depopulated in the 15th c after Timur rode through and only resettled after the Russo-Turkish War of 1826-1828 awarded the region to the Russian Empire.

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

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

Springs are in the village and along the river.

SIDE TRIP: (Apnagiugh - Uchluugq) before Akina-Geok, elev. 1807m, pop. (1949) is in a high valley, nested between woodlands within a narrow triangle of canyons at the confluence of two riveremptying into the Kasakh River. Both canyons make good hiking and camping, the SW crossed by a late medieval bridge. There is also a pretty 19th c village church, with homemade offerings and some evidence of matagh (sacrifice) near the church yard.

Alternate route to Mt. Arairlehr: The village faces Mt. Arairlehr (2575.9 m) 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 500 m to the base of a waterfall and a small stream opposite. Follow /climb the small stream up the SE canyon wails to the base of the mountain, where a dirt track begins up the mountain. From there it is a 4.2 km hike to the crest of the mountain.

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

Springs are in the village and along the river.

From central Kuchak, go N on the Aparan Highway for about 8 km to the Kasakh River bridge in HRAZDAN (40.59300 x 44.35616)

END OF TRIP 4
TRIP 5 : SEVAN HWY, HRZDAN CANYON, RIGHT BANK

YEREVAN - ARINJ - PTGHNI - [ABOVIAN] - ARZNI - (Blureghavan) - (Nurnus) - (Gjrbler) - CHARENTSAVAN - (Vartanavank) - (Solak) - (Lernanist) - (Sevan Pass)

This trip visits ------------------

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

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


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

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

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

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

SIDE TRIP: (Apagniugh - Uñhluwqmy before Akin-Geok, elev. 180.7m, pop. 1949) is in a high valley, nestled between woodlands within a narrow triangle of canyons at the confluence of two rivers emptying into the Kasakh River. Both canyons make good hiking and camping, the SW crossed by a late medieval bridge. There is also a pretty 19th c village church, with homemade offerings and some evidence of matagh (sacrifice) near the church yard.

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

SIGHTS

The town's main site

S. Marineh

Museums

The Name, 4 Proshian p, (tel. 33254) is

Theater, 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 shows. 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.

RACTICALITIES

Area Code: 232

From abroad: +(374) 232 + local number

Mobile Phones: 091 Armentel, 093 Viva Cell

International callers: Armente1 +(374) 91 + number, Viva Cell +(374) 93 + local number

Unless otherwise noted, local numbers require the (0232) prefix if calling long distance, or +(374) 232 prefix if calling from abroad.

IN AND OUT

By Bus, Minivan

The bus is a reliable means of travel, if vehicles are older and worn around the edges, and they tend to pack

Buses stop at Abovian on routes from Yerevan, Giumri and Vanadzor-Aparan. Several Yerevan-Abovian buses run d

Minivans (Marshrutni taxie) leave from the Yerevan Bus Station on Yerevanian p, by the main square

By Taxi Taxis are more expensive, but the most convenient way to travel (you decide when you go, and you

Yerevan-Abovian Taxis

From Yerevan, just about any taxi will take you to Abovian at around 100 AMD per kilometer (double cost to cover driver's return) and dedicated cars to Abovian are located at Kino Hairenik (Kino Rossiyia) at the corner of Agatangeghos and Movses Khorenatsi Pts. Cars normally charge 3000 AMD for up to four passengers, though be prepared to bargain and for the taxi driver who wants to wait a full carload to make the extra fare. You can also order a taxi by phone. The going rate is around 3000 AMD. Most Yerevan taxi services provide this service, but we use Voyage tel: (010) 54-54-05, 54-54-06 and have had good experiences.

From Abovian, taxis in Abovian are all around town or at the Aftokaiyeran (bus station) by the main square on Yerevan.

By Car: Abovian is at the crossroads of the Giumri-Yerevan, Petrol stations and rest stops/kebab stands proliferate on the highway near Abovian and in nearby Agarak, Ujan and Kosh.

AROUND

On foot is a bit of a hike from the river to the top of the canyon, but the left bank is easy enough to navigate on foot, y

Taxis: Abovian has plenty of taxis, in the center, and at the Abovi.

Regional Taxis: Taxis are a good way to explore the near region, and very reasonable if you are two or more and split costs, which are per vehicle. Negotia

Taxi Services: Look for taxi service ads at the center and area cafes.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

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

For nature or adventure tours, see Adventure Tour Operators (on page 10).

COMMUNICATION, ETC.

Fire - 101
The village of Ashtarak is covered by both Armetel 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 Mashotos p. and 2 Gitavan p. See HayPost (HyePost) site for list (www.haypost.am/EN/about_offices.html). The post office has trunk line phone service, sells phone cards (30 minutes 3000 AMD) and can deliver telegraphs.

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

**Internet**

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

**Bank, Exchange**

Money wires and credit card advances can be done at banks, ATM and exchange at bank; ArmonBank, 18 Hahapetapun (3-5376) ACBA, 1 Yerevanian pl; ASHB, Proshian pl; Armeconombank, Main Square Unionbank, Grigorian pl; Converse Bank, 23 Ogostoski

**Shopping**

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

**Film, etc.**

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

**Pharmacy**

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

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**Hospital, Polyclinic**

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

Central Hospital, 61 Narekatsi pl. tel. 3-1949.

Polyclinic, tel. 3-3335.

**Dentist**

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

**OVERNIGHT**

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

**HOTEL / MOTEL**

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

**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 Abovian

Avan

Pine Tree House (Yerevan Tel: (010) 52-16-25) has been

Sevan Highway

Udjan Motels. About 10 km outside of town, in Udjan, facing farmland

**FOOD AND DRINK**

Restaurants Cafes and bistros are throughout the city, as are khorovatz joints in town and on the highway to Gumri. Food can also be bought at mterks (food shops) and kiosks around town.

$ = 2000 AMD or less for meal w/o drinks

$$ = 2000-3500 AMD

$$ = 3500 AMD or more

Restaurant Ashtarak Dzor, Kasahk Gorge 1 (tel. 34880) is a palatial restaurant/motel/entertainment center th but a little pricey at $10-20+ per person for a meal. $$

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

From Ashtarak center, take the northern highway towards Aparan/Vanadzor for 10.8 km following the western face of Mt. Araairlehr past Mughni, Karbi, Ohanavan, Ushi, Arshavan/Saghmosavank to the L turn off to the Amberd Road and the AIBUBEN PARK (DD 40.41241 x 44.38369) is possible in the ravines and near the village (ask first); **OVERNIGHT** in village home (rustic, 4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** are in the village and along the river.

END OF TRIP 5

**AIBUBEN PARK - ԱԻԲՈՒԲԵՆ ՊԱՐՔ - OLBEN PARK**

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

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

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

SIDE TRIP: (Apnagiugh – ԱՊՈՆԱՋԻՈՒԹ before Akina-Geok, elev. 1807m, pop. 1949) is in a high valley, nestled between woodlands within a narrow triangle of canyons at the confluence of two rivers emptying into the Kasak River. Both canyons make good hiking and camping, the SW crossed by a **late medieval bridge**. There is also a pretty **19th c village church**, with homemade offerings and some evidence of matagh (sacrifice) near the church yard.
Abovian © TravelArmenia


Background. Background here

Mineral Springs. Abovian is close to Arzni, which is a ...

Weather. Abovian

Weather Bearings The town is

The main streets are

From Yerevan,

Abovian is a not a small hike, form end to end it

can take 30 minutes or more to walk. The center

is mostly shops and apartments, while the better

hotels and restaurants are far enough apart to

warrant a taxi.

Taxis are available throughout the town, in the center

and near cafes/restaurants. 100 AMD (5

km is standard but confirm price before starting on

your trip.

SIGHTS

The town’s main site

S. Marineh

Museums

The Name, 4 Proshian p, (tel. 33254) is

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

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PRACTICALITIES

Area Code: 232

Long Distance: 0232 + local number From abroad: +(374) 232 + local number Mobile Phones: 091 Armetel, 093 Viva Cell International callers: Armetel +(374) 91 + number, Viva Cell +(374) 93 + local number

Unless otherwise noted, local numbers require the

(0232) prefix if calling long distance, or +(374) 232 prefix if calling from abroad.

IN AND OUT

By Bus, Minivan

The bus is a reliable means of travel, if vehicles

are older and worn around the edges, and they

tend to pack ‘em in. Still, they work and they are

cheap. Minivans are more convenient, dropping

you off pretty much where you want. Though they
do not follow a set schedule (they often wait or a

full van before departing, especially to villages are

Yerevan), drivers and passengers can tell you

about when to expect the next one.

Buses stop at Abovian on routes from Yerevan,

Giumri and Vanadzor-Aparan. Several Yerevan-

Abovian buses run daily between the Yerevan bus

and minivan stop at 4 Paronian, west of the end

of Mashtots just before ‘khorovats street’ a.k.a. Proshian begins and from the Abovian Aftokaiyeran at the main square on Yerevanian p. Bus #111 is the Abovian-Yerevan bus, bus #502 is the Yerevan-Abovian-Voskevaz bus. 250 AMD.

Minivans (Marshrutni taxis) leave from the

Abovian Bus Station on Yerevanian p. by the main

square in Abovian. Minivans do not have a set

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

By Taxi

Taxis are more expensive, but the most

convenient way to travel (you decide when you go,

and you can stop along the way). If you split the

cost between 2 or more travelers, it can be pretty

cheap. Yerevan-Abovian Taxis

From Yerevan, just about any taxi will take you to

Abovian at around 100 AMD per kilometer (double

cost to cover driver’s return) and dedicated
cars to Abovian are located at Kino

Hairenik (Kino Rossia) at the corner of

Agatangeghos and Movses Khoreznets Pts. Cars

can normally charge 3000 AMD for up to four

passengers, though be prepared to bargain and for

the taxi driver who wants to wait for a full carload

to make the extra fare. You can also order a taxi

by phone. The going rate is around 3000 AMD.

Most Yerevan taxi services provide this service,

but we use Voyage tel: (010) 54-54-05, 54-54-06 and

have had good experiences.

From Abovian, taxis in Abovian are all around

town or at the Aftokaiyeran (bus station) by the

Abovian Dzor Restaurant/Motel. Late in the day you may have

to bargain a bit or add something for return, but

generally this is not a problem. Taxis to Yerevan

are around 3000 AMD (2700 AMD at 100 AMD per km), to Talin around 4000 AMD, to Aparan around 2500 AMD. See taxi list for call taxi on page 44.

By Car

Abovian is at the crossroads of the

Giumri-Yerevan-Aparan/Voskevaz. Highways serving Abovian are the

A327/M1 which runs between Yerevan and Giumri

and at the Abovian Dzor Restaurant/Motel. The

nearby Agarak, Ujan and Kosh.

ARDOWN

On foot is a bit of a hike from the river to the top

of the canyon, but the left bank is easy enough to

navigate on foot, you can cross the center within

15 minutes, ditto down to the gorge. See Bearings

on page 44 for a layout of the town.

Taxis Abovian has plenty of taxis, in the center,

and at the Abovian Dzor Restaurant/Motel. The

service is good, the drivers knowledgeable (few

speak English), and willing to show off the city. The rate is 100 AMD per km. One taxi service is

(tel. 33400, 3540).

Regional Taxis are a good way to explore the

near region, and very reasonable if you are

two or more and split costs, which are per vehicle.

Negotiate before starting on your journey, figure

100 AMD/km as fair, add 250 AMD per hour for

more. Taxi drivers can take you from the center to all

distances from Abovian center: Oshakan (4 km) & Voskevaz (6 km); Agarak (6 km), Kosh (17 km) and Aruch (23 km); Biurakan (11 km), Amberd (27 km) & Kari Lich/Mt. Aragats (34 km);
Additional phone services are in town. They advertise in front of their shops, sometimes with internet.

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

**Bank, Exchange**
Money wires and credit card advances can be done at banks, ATM and exchange at bank.

*ArmSavingsBank, 18 Hanrapetutian (3-5376)
ACBA, 1 Yerevanian p.
ASHB, Proshian p.
Armeconombank, Main Square
Unibank, Grigorian p.
Converse Bank, 23 Ogostosi*

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

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

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

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

*Central Hospital, 61 Narekatsi p. tel. 3-1949.
Polyclinic, tel. 3-3335*

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

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

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

**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 Abovian**
Avan
Pine Tree House (Yerevan Tel: (010) 52-16-25) has been

**Sevan Highway**
Udjan Motels. About 10 km outside of town, in Udjan, facing farmland

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

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

Restaurant Ashtarak Dzor, Kasakh Gorge 1 (tel. 34880) is a palatial restaurant/motel/entertainment center th 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.
TRIP 6: SOUTHEAST, GEGHAMA LEHR

This trip visits ------------------

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

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

Springs: Udjan, Kotaik, Kosh, Avan, Aruch, Nerkin Bazmaberd, Kakvadzor, Verin Bazmaberd Ashnak, Irind, Katnaghbiur, Yeghnik.

SIDE TRIP: (Apnagiugh – Upluwnug before Akina-Geok, elev. 1807m, pop. 1949) is in a high valley, nestled between woodlands within a narrow triangle of canyons at the confluence of two rivers emptying into the Kasakh River. Both canyons make good hiking and camping, the SW crossed by a late medieval bridge. There is also a pretty 19th c village church, with homemade offerings and some evidence of matagh (sacrifice) near the church yard.

Alternate route to Mt. Arair Leh: The village faces Mt. Arair Leh (2575.9 m) 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 500 m to the base of a waterfall and a small stream opposite. Follow /climb the small stream up the SE canyon walls to the base of the mountain, where a dirt track begins up the mountain. From there it is a 4.2 km hike to the crest of the mountain.

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

END OF TRIP 6
RESOURCES ▲

READINGS


"Compositions of Domed Structures in Georgia and Armenia" (R. Agababian, Yerevan 1950)

"The History of Armenian Architecture" (V. Arutunian, Yerevan 1985)

"Armenian Architectural Monuments" (V Arutunian and S Safarian, Moscow, 1951)

"Architettura Armena del quarto al diciannovesimo secolo," P. Cuneo (Rome, 1988)

"Armenian Civil Architecture (Dwelling Houses and Public Buildings)," O. Khakhfkhchian (Moscow, 1971)

"Domed Cross Compositions in Armenia and the Byzantine Empire in the 5th to 7th Centuries," S. Mnatsakanian (Yerevan, 1989)


"Old Armenian Architecture," N. Tokarsky, (Yerevan, 1946)

"Armenian Architecture in the 4th to 14th Centuries," N. Tokarsky (Yerevan, 1961)

"Armenian Architecture," A. Zarian (Yerevan, 1996)


"Armenia, A Journey Through History," Arra Avakian (The Electric Press, Fresno)

"The Heritage of Armenian Literature, Vol. 1 From the Oral tradition to the Golden Age," Agop Hacikyan, editor (Wayne State University Press, Detroit)

"Byzantium The Early Centuries," John Julius Norwich (Knopf, New York)


"Histoire de l’Arménie," by Pardejian

"Zoroastrianism in Armenia", by James Russell

"Armenian Khachkars" (Editions Erebeni, 1978)

"Armenian Medieval Churches," Swiss Institute for Technology, Department of Architecture (ETH, Zurich, 1996)

"Architecture of the Soviet Armenia,"

"Architecture of the Soviet Armenia,"

"Russian Arkitektura Sovjetskoy Armenii 20th Century," (Sovietakan Grogh, Yerevan, 1980)

"Armenian Architecture," A. Zarian (Yerevan, 1996)


"A Very Brief History of Armenia," Christopher J. Walker, Printinfo, Yerevan 2003

"Forests and Their Significance for Mountainous Armenia, V. Gabrielyan, A. Nalbandyan, N. Darbinyan, Yerevan, 2001


"Wetlands in Armenia – their values and threats and their contribution to sustainable development and poverty alleviation," PDF FILE

"First National Report to The Convention on Biological Diversity incorporating A Country Study on the Biodiversity of Armenia" PDF FILE

ONLINE

Regional

Endangered Species www.iucnredlist.org/search/details.php/3786/ all

www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shaddadids

Wings Over Armenia www.archaeology.am/index.html

Proshadians www.armenianhistory.info/index.htm

History, Culture, Background

The Armenian Nobility en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Armenian_nobility

www.armenian.ch


Armenian History www.armenianhistory.info/index.htm

Exhaustive Armenian History penelope.ucchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Gazetteer/Places/Asia/Armenia/_Texts/KURARM/home.html

Eastern Asia Minor and the Caucasus in Ancient Mythologies rdnelson.com/mythint.htm

Armenian Highland www.armenianhighland.com/

Ecology

Armenian Nature Conservation Public Society nature.iap.tirax.org/

Biodiversity of Armenia www.nature-ic.am/biodiv/index%20eng.html

Masis.am Mounatins www.masis.am/mounats/?lang=eng

Masis.am Flora www.masis.am/ PGRCAC www.cac-biodiversity.org/arm/index.htm

Eco Agrotourism in South Caucas (excellent maps) ecotourism.com/

Eco Team Development users.freenet.net/%7Eecoteam/

Weather Forecasts www.tacentral.com/weather.asp

Climate Change Info Center-Armenia www.nature.am/Index.htm

ERMC www.grida.no/enrin/htmls/armenia/soe_armenia/english/ermc.htm

National Academy of Sciences of Armenia www.sci.am/

Protected Areas of Armenia www.grida.no/enrin/biodiv/biodiv/national/armenia/general/dvthr.htm

www.armenia/Pages/ETHZ/

Birds of Armenia Project www.cac-biodiversity.org/arm/index.htm

National Academy of Sciences of Armenia www.sci.am/

Proshadians www.armenianhighland.com/

Armenian Highland www.armenianhighland.com/

Armenian History www.armenianhistory.info/index.htm


Architecture armenianstudies.csufresno.edu/ www.thais.it/architettura/default.htm

www.armenian.ch/armenia/Pages/ETHZ/

Information, Guides
Nazarian and Christine Karapetian for their insightful comments, advice, trips into the wilderness and challenging ideas; to Gagik Gurjian from the Ministry for Historical Preservation, who has been showing me the intricacies of Armenia’s cultural monuments and their influences since 1992, leading me to some of the mot amazing places and events I have been, as well as to the large vat of killer Voskevaz wine in his garden; to Stepan Ter-Margaryan & the folks at the Institutes of History and Archeology branches of the National Academy for their help on pointing me to original sources and exhaustive original information on destinations; to Sam Stepanian for his eternal support; to Arminco, Grisha Saghian and Vahan Yerkanian for their support, the creation of the first edition on CD, link ups and links to culture and more and to R and L. TMB.

Rafael Torossian (research, maps, and graphics) has been collaborating with Rick on TourArmenia since 1996, focusing on maps and graphics while providing some much needed reality checks and commentary along the way. In his other real life, Rafael designs flash sequences, ads, graphics and web sites for TWR1, designing for a wide variety of sites and content management projects.

In a previous life Rafi was the Assistant to the Minister for Sports, serving 6 ministers, before meeting Rick when they worked together on several humanitarian aid projects funded by USAID and 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, learning computer skills and creating the first multi-denomination accounting system for USAID projects in the Caucasus.

In an earlier life Rafi was an athlete, competing in Light Athletics (Track) where he set the All Armenia record for the 60 meter dash, a record that still stands. He was a Sports Teacher and an Honored Coach of the Republic of Armenia. He lives in Yerevan, is a proud Yerevantsi, one of the few who did not leave in 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, where she learned patience and good humor working with American professors (God give us patience and a dose of Pantalgin). She then worked at the World Food Program in Armenia for 11 years as an administrator and Program Officer. At the same time she collaborated with Rick on articles and the first TourArmenia CD-ROM. In her previous life Bella worked with International architects at ArmStateDesign Institute as an information program assistant and translator, as well as learning the form and function of design in life, a gift she carries with her to this day. History and architecture is her true love 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!

Thanks to: (Region): Ashot Levonian for his information on hiking and caving tours in Tavush, to Boris Gasparian for detailed info and critique of the prehistoric material; (General): to Tigran Nazarian and Christine Karapetian for their insightful comments, advice, trips into the wilderness and challenging ideas; to Gagik Gurjian from the Ministry for Historical Preservation, who has been showing me the intricacies of Armenia’s cultural monuments and their influences since 1992, leading me to some of the mot amazing places and events I have been, as well as to the large vat of killer Voskevaz wine in his garden; to Stepan Ter-Margaryan & the folks at the Institutes of History and Archeology branches of the National Academy for their help on pointing me to original sources and exhaustive original information on destinations; to Sam Stepanian for his eternal support; to Arminco, Grisha Saghian and Vahan Yerkanian for their support, the creation of the first edition on CD, link ups and links to culture and more and to R and L. TMB.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS
Rick Ney (author) started his life in Armenia in 1992, working in education, humanitarian aid and development projects that morphed into IT development and writing about Armenia; a relationship of 14 years which has taken him to it seems every nook of his adopted country. Rick is passionate about Armenia’s deep history and amazing ecology, and can be found roaming the countryside in search of new places to introduce to the world. Rick is equally passionate about making the country accessible for independent travelers, whom he believes will be the basis of Armenia’s development and entry into the democratic world. Rick divides his time between Armenia and caring for a parent in Texas, both of which he considers the richest experiences of his life.

Rick wrote the first full guide to Armenia in the post Soviet era and the first multi-media guide on CD-ROM, TourArmenia. Other writings include articles about Armenia’s prehistoric observatories at Metsamor and Karahunj, Armenia’s Nature and hiking trails and commentary on his experiences in the country. Still others are travel articles for several publications. Rick and his small team at TourArmenia continue to add information about the country to their web site at www.TACentral.com and www.TourArmenia.info.