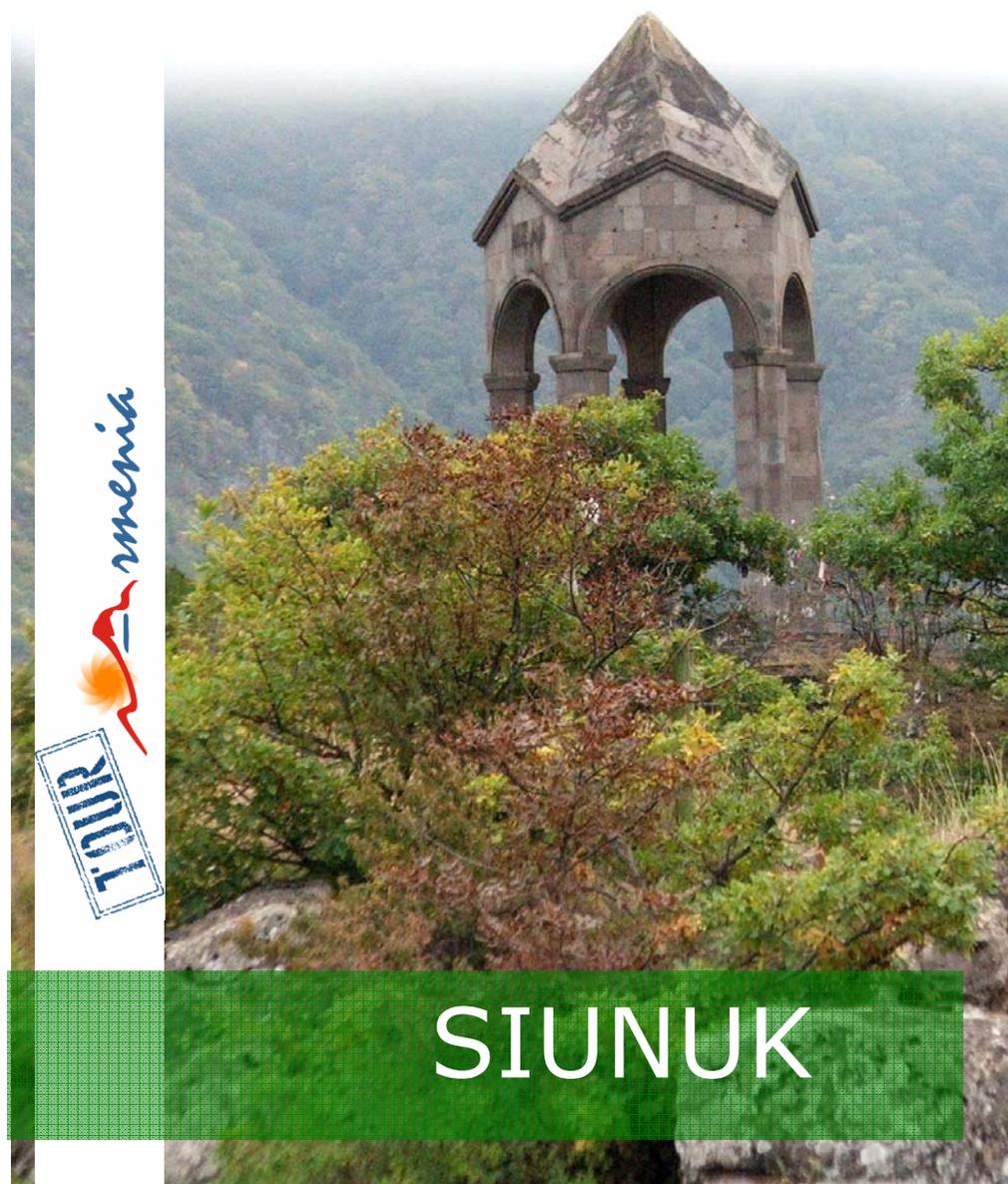


NOTES:



TUR

armenia

SIUNUK

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INTRODUCTION

Area: 4506 sq. km
Population: 80,000
Administrative Center: Kapan
Distance from Yerevan: 320 km
Marzpetaran: (285) 62 010
Largest City: Kapan

Kapan:

Hospital, Tel: (285) 62 183
Police, Tel:(285) 63 949
Haypost, Tel: (285) 63 786

Goris:

Hospital, Tel:]284) 22 152
Haypost, Tel: (284) 23 150

Sissian:

Hospital, Tel: (2830) 35 01
Haypost, Tel:(2830) 43 85

Megri:

Haypost, Tel.: (2860) 32 52

BACKGROUND

ADVENTURE TOUR GUIDES

Guides

Andrey Chesnokov, 10 Vardanants p, Apt. #49 tel. 010-576757, email: ruzan@aua.am, is one of the highest regarded mountaineers in Armenia, having led numerous trips up mountains throughout eh country and the Caucasus. He is equally, friendly and professionally focused, insuring safe climbs.

Spitak Rescue Team, 50 Halabian p, tel. 010-350006, 350186, email: spitak@mail.verphi.am, is a highly trusted group of mountaineering individuals who provide hiking, climbing, rappelling and other adventure tours in Armenia. They are mountain rescue providers, so are very safe, with emergency transport and equipment if needed.

INKAR LLC, tel. 010-744226, 093-744226, email: info@amtour.am, URL: www.amtour.am, a geological company that has begun offering speleological tours with its mountain trekking tours.

EXPLORING THE REGION ▲

TRIP 1: TO SISSIAN ▲

➡ From --- to (DD)    

SIDE TRIP: **Vorotan Pass**, (pop.)

➡ From --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: **Goraik**, (pop.)

➡ From --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: **Mets Karakhach** (pop.)

➡ From --- to **SPANDARIAN RESERVOIR** (DD 39.67405 x 45.81127, elev. 2105m)   

[MAP]

✚ **SPANDARIAN RESERVOIR** - ՍՊԱՆԴԱՐԻԱՆԻ ջրմբ. (Սպանդարյան ջրմբ.) ▲ begins on the eastern end of Goraik and stretches for 7 km to the west end of Sarnakunk. The reservoir was built to both irrigate wheat fields on the high plateau and to harness the hydroelectric potential of the Vorotan River. It now is part of a massive tunnel project to feed Lake Sevan. The 17 km tunnel funnels water from Spandarian Reservoir to the Arpa River tunnel, a 27 km tunnel that feeds Lake Sevan.

Authorities moved the inhabitants of two villages to fill the reservoir. Goraik was moved west, its cemetery relocated on a hill overlooking the both shores (seen from the highway, a tall monument notes the old village), but the citizens of the old Molokan village of Borizovka was not moved. Its citizens were resettled in nearby Tsghuk or Yerevan.

The lake is beautiful, a placid mirror of blue in the emerald green alpine region. Bitterly cold and snowbound for 9 months of the year, the lake is a welcome respite of cool during the short summer, the region remote and inviting for outdoors enthusiast who love the high plains. Hiking trails lead to neighboring mountains (a day hike will take you to the petroglyph fields at Mt. Davagioz

or Ughtasar, and hikes south and west explore the Siunik/Vayots Dzor border).

The reservoir is named for a Soviet proto-hero, Suren Spandarian (1882-1916). Spandarian, a native of Artsakh, was a student at Moscow University when he joined the Bolshevik movement and began his revolutionary work in 1901, attempting to organize Moscow factory workers. He fought in the 1905 revolution, in Moscow and then the Caucasus. He became a member of the Baku committee in 1907, then moved to Tbilisi in 1910.

Escaping near arrest, in 1911-1912 he attended the All Russia Bolshevik convention in Prague, where he was elected as a member of the Central Committee Russian bureau. He returned to Russia, where he was arrested in 1912 and sent to Siberia, where he continued his revolutionary work, attempting to organize the prisoners. He died in 1916, on the eve of the Bolshevik Revolution.

Camping in the area (alpine country: cold at nights): **overnight** in nearby village (rustic; 3000 AMD for B&B is fair); **springs** in villages.

➡ From --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: **Mets Karakhach** (pop.)

➡ From --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: **Tsghuk** (pop.)

➡ From --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: **Sarnakunk** (pop.)

It is located above pastures of Sarnakunk village in Sissian region, on the surface of Ughtasar and Djermajur rocks, which are 3000-3300m above sea level. The deepness of each rock picture is 1-6mm. The rock pictures are irreplaceable history sources. Old people living in our highlands left rich materials to be studied about their life, worships, traditions and occupations. The first group of rock pictures belong to the B.C. 5-4 millenniums and the second group belongs to the B.C. 3-2 millenniums.

➡ From --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: **Spandarian** (pop.)

➡ From --- to **ANGEGHAKOT** (DD 39.56876 x 45.94062, elev. 1845m)    

✚ **ANGEGHAKOT** - ԱՆԳԵՂԱԿՈՒՐ (Անգեղակոթ) ▲ (pop. 1000) is one of the oldest settlements in Siunik, with large Paleolithic and Neolithic settlements found in the village and nearby. It is located on the north shore of the Angeghakot Reservoir, and is about 15 km from Sissian using the (M2) highway.

[MAP]

The village has Bronze Age Dolman graves, standing stones with eyeholes used in an ancient observatory/worship cromlech, 5 churches (3 standing), medieval cemeteries with khachkars and pagan stones, and a nearby pilgrimage church of S. Vartan.

Background Ongoing excavations have uncovered a major 6th millennium BCE settlement with a large number of artifacts. The settlement has strong similarities to the Mesopotamian Neolithic culture, and gives clues to ancestral Armenian early development in eastern Armenia.

An important Pagan worship site, the village had at least one observatory like that at Karahundj near Sissian; the standing stones with their carefully carved eye-holes are all around the village; in church walls, cemeteries, and in villager backyards.

The village churches were first erected in the 4th-5th cc, incorporating pre-Christian buildings in their construction. Though there is no record of a monastery, the village was an important pilgrimage site, with 7 churches, shrines and the pilgrimage sight of S. Vartan listed in medieval chronicles. Angeghakot's religious structures are generally older, and smaller, than those further south.

This did not signify a loss of the village's importance, however; some of the more important figures in Siunik history came from Angeghakot, including the famous 17th c Melik, Israel Ori, who

convened a secret meeting of eleven Meliks to petition Peter the Great to intervene on Armenia's behalf. The young man spent most of his life in the courts of the Czar, Leopold the Great, and Pope Clement XI seeking support for the country. Finally obtaining their support, he infiltrated the court of the Persian Shah on reconnaissance, planning an invasion with Armenian and Georgian leaders.

On return to Russia in 1711, Ori suddenly died, ending plans for an early liberation of the country.

The village was attached to Zangezur in the 18th-19th cc reorganization of the region, and was a spotlight in the 1918-1919 struggle to maintain autonomy against Turkish aggression and Stalin's plans to sever Zangezur from Armenia and award it to Turkey.

Failing that, Stalin then determined the district should go to Turkish Azerbaijan, and Angeghakot was in the vanguard of resistance led by Garegin Nzhdeh in 1920-1921, ended in Moscow recognizing Zangezur as a part of the Soviet Republic of Armenia.

The village exists mostly on remittances from its younger generation which lives and works abroad.

The village has **Neolithic dolmens** and **Bronze Age/Iron Age tumuli**. In the area in front of the post office and the school yard (DD 39.56894 x 45.94091, elev. 1845m), there are a number of old stones, Bronze Age tumuli that cover a large part of the village center. The stones are impossible to miss; rough cut, rounded, many with rudimentary crosses carved on them in the 4th century to convert them; but with the unmistakable signs of their observatory purpose: carefully carved eye-holes that once pointed to phenomenon in the night sky.

A Paleolithic deposit at 1800m was uncovered by French-Armenian archeologists in 2005, which continues to show a highly developed culture in annual digs. The findings point to large groups of hunter-gathers from the Paleolithic era that infiltrated the area. The settlement had a substantial lithic (chipped stone tool) industry which principally used obsidian that was elaborately carved into a number of tools. The style and type are identical to Mousterian (Neanderthal bifacial tools found t Zagros-Taurus mountain settlements of the same period. The

stone tools are highly refined, with numerous points or teeth, and include micro-edges and flared facets.

The village has three standing churches, out of 7 recorded in history.

S. Stepanos Nakhav'ka (DD 39.56687 x 45.93924, elev. 1840m) is located at the SW end of the main street, about 300 meters from the square. It is set against the rock hill just below the street (there is a path that downhill and to the church). The evocative single nave church has pre-Christian origins, its location abutting the cliff walls, where a sacred spring once ran, behind the apse. The façade is made with rough stones, with several old stones embedded within, their cross symbols similar to those of the early Christian period. Rebuilt in the 17th c, the walls also bear stones from the medieval period; look up at the roofline as you enter the church—one of the stones that form the overhand was cut from a khachkar.

Inside, the hall shows signs of being reconfigured to accommodate an eastern apse. The apron for the altars bears a large white-washed stone covered with rudimentary crosses that appears to be prehistoric and which villagers say is the most sacred stone in the church.

The yard has a number of gravestones and khachkars, including a superb black stone against the west wall. There are fragments of a gallery or gavit that once stood here; look for the column capitals with crosses carved on top.

S. Astvatsatsin (DD 39.5680 x 45.93663, elev. 1840m) is located across the gorge from S. Stepanos, and can be seen from the smaller church. It is reached by backtracking to the square and taking a western street that leads up to the church.

As you begin the final approach, you will pass a number of old stones (look for the gravestone with a periscope hole; this was once a cromlech keystone), khachkars and, surprisingly, a wealth of potter fragments. Locals say this is the oldest part of the village, and the pottery they regularly find dates to the Hellenistic and Iron Ages.

The large triple nave church was first erected in the 5th c and has been renovated several times, most recently in the past few years. It is a working church, and locked during the week. Ask

a neighbor and they will call the person with the key.

The church is made of rough stone, with embedded khachkars and old burial stones. The roof is slated, but as was customary with basilica churches, also covered with earth and a crop of grass and wildflowers. It has one central opening in the roof, which is topped by a pillared rotunda and tent roof.

The interior is impressive, with thick walls and a polished floor. The side naves are separated from the central aisle with two rows of wide arches. The walls were originally plastered and painted, but only fragments remain.

Outside the church there are a number of "loaf" shaped gravestones and khachkars.

The **old church/Tukh Manuk** (DD 39.56812 x 45.93941, elev. 1810m) is not far and within sight of Astvatsatsin, reached by a back path of the village. As you backtrack from Astvatsatsin toward the center, at the first bend in the dirt road, take the narrow path N of the dirt road, which runs between villager yard and vegetable paths, then turn sharply right to hug a low cliff and end at a villager's house, where the remains are.

The small shrine is made of foundations stones and a few khachkars that are clearly a sacred site for villagers. There are khachkars inside the low rock walls, and one light colored stone with a very old carving transformed into a cross. Another bears marks of its eyehole.

Back in the center, taking a right that will lead to S. Hazarap'rkich, stop and take note of the huge **Bronze Age stones** (DD 39.56910 x 45.94140, elev. 1838m) that have been carved with crosses, especially one with two eye holes that is the base of one of the exceptional **khachkars**. There are also some curious **rounded stones** that seem embedded in the ground. These low stones also appear in the N cemetery (see below).

In this same yard there is a **dolman grave** that has been converted into a Tukh Manuk.

S. Hazarap'rkich ("Savior of Thousands") (DD 39.56776 x 45.94335, elev. 1778m) is located on the other side of the village, under a rock cliff and butts up against the stone cutting factory. The church is roofless, and completely taken over by

nature. The western entry retains its cyclopean door jamb and some of the arching remains.

The **old cemetery** (DD 39.57329 x 45.93814, elev. 1860m) is in the N end of the village is fascinating; an entire hill covered with Bronze Age, Iron Age, early Christian and Medieval grave stones. The site includes an impressive multi-stepped grave monument to an unknown Siunik prince, rung with graves of his retainers and officers. The monument is topped by a large black khachkar and bears both pagan and Christian sun disks on the sides of the base.

Nearby is a remarkable monument that is made from a vishap stone, a khachkar and an observatory stone with eyehole that has been shaped into a rudimentary capital. The sides of the capital stone bear carvings of three pagan disks found on petroglyphs throughout Armenia.

Made of Bronze Age monument stones, this is reshaped into a medieval monument for an extremely important person, who now is unknown.

A large number of ground stones have eye holes; so many that it is believed the cemetery was first a cromlech, the stones with eye holes positioned to navigate the night sky. It then became a cemetery, the standing stones converted to medieval gravestones, and developed over time into the site you use now.

The variety of stones and their carving is amazing; stones have elaborate hunt scenes, pagan symbols and drawings that are worked into medieval scenes; khachkars are extraordinarily diverse in their styles; the older using the faces of vishaps and standing stones with eye holes, later carved in elaborate designs with some startling motifs.

Among the unique stones are a number of flat stones with round head and foot ends. The stones are carved with a combination of ancient Armenian **swirling disks** and **Star of David**. They are unique to Vayots Dzor and Siunik; not seen elsewhere, and they are believed to be the graves for members of a local Jewish community that served the local nakharars; they congregate in front of the multi-step royal monument.

Both Vayots Dzor and Siunik had Jewish communities in the medieval period, where they appear to have been well regarded and treated with tolerance (there is even record of them being

permitted to own land—unheard of in medieval Europe and Byzantium). A large Jewish cemetery has been uncovered at Yeghegis, the Orbelian capital in the 13th c.

A half buried **Tukh Manuk** is nearby, covered with rusting tin roof.

Near Angeghakot

On the road to Shaghat/Geghvardot, about 1 km from Angeghakot, is the **S. Vartan pilgrimage site** (DD 39.57365 x 45.92861, elev. 1774m). The stone building is set against a boulder cliff, and includes a cave sanctuary, walled yard, and the small church.

The cave has a pool of water fed by an underground spring, which once nourished a stream and a grove of trees the Armenian army used to rest after their defeat at the Battle of Avarair in 451.

The sacred spring has been revered for its purported curative properties since before the Christian period, and was probably a pilgrimage stop before it became attached to the Avarair heroes. After their legendary visit, miracles attributed to Avarair's martyr Vartan Mamikonian led to his canonization and the site became a famous place of pilgrimage.

The tumbled building you see now is a pale reflection of the great walled compound that once greeted pilgrims. The church is dated 1298, during the height of Orbelian rule, when churches and monasteries throughout their lands were renovated or founded. Fallen stones in the area included several impressive column bases and capitals, and fragments of the old church and gavit that once stood at the site.

The current building is a late medieval reconstruction, using pieces of the old church and rubble stone. The small inner hall combined rough stonework with sections of the rock cliff. This is still a very important pilgrimage spot; candles, prayer beads, religious prints and embroidered cloth decorate the altar.

The low cave is at the bottom of the cliff, just inside the walled church yard. Crawl in to explore the space, which includes a large pond of clean spring water.

Camping near the village or on the reservoir;
overnight in village home (rustic; 3000 AMD for B&B is fair); **springs** in the village.

➔ **From** --- to **SISSIAN** (DD 39.52174 x 46.02371, elev. 1660m))

➔ **From** --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: **Geghvardot** (pop.)

➔ **From** --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: **Shaghat** (pop.)

➔ **From** --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: **Mutsk** (pop.)

➔ **From** --- to **SHAKI** (DD 39.56453 x 45.99844, elev. 1705m)    

☒ **SHAKI - ՇԱԿԻ (Շաքի)** ▲ (pop. 750) is set in a cleft of hills on the left bank of the Shaki River, which feeds the Vorotan River. It is 3 km west of Sissian using the Shaki road.

The village is very old; Bronze and Iron Age remains lie just E of the village school, in a web of streams that feed the Shaki River; and on the right bank where the old cemetery and Shaki Vank once stood.

Shaki Falls are one of the most beautiful waterfalls in the country—then they are working. The water that feeds the picturesque 18 m falls is siphoned off for irrigation and so only a fraction of the original waters flow over the huge boulders. When fully on (a local at the canal works on the ay to the falls offers to “turn on the falls” for a fee), they are stunning and swimming holes at their base are a favorite of locals and hot tourists. Even when “off” they are worth seeing, to imagine their full glory, and to take a dip on a hot summer day.

On top of the hill by the **old cemetery** are the scant remains of **Shaki Vank**. Nearby are the remains of a **shrine** named for Shaki, one of 93 maidens saved from flood by a miracle.

Camping in the area; **overnight** in Sissian or village home (rustic; 3000 AMD for B&B is fair); **springs** in the village.

SISSIAN ▲

(DD 39.52174 x 46.02371, elev. 1660m)

✳ **SISSIAN - ՍԻՍԻԱՆ (Սիսիան)** (also spelled "Sisian" and "Sisyan", till 1935 Gharakilisa, then Sisavan, after 1940 Sissian, pop. 8000) is located in the Vorotan River valley as it widens between a windswept upland to the N and several deep river valleys and the towering Zangezur mountain range to the SW. Sissian is 197 km from Yerevan and 164 km from Meghri. It is 6 km S of the (M2) highway, taking the Shaki Village road.

[MAP]

The town has a wonderful, small ethnographic museum, worth a visit to understand the current of history in upper Siunik (and in most places in Armenia, to be truthful), an art museum, the 7th century Sisavank, a small town atmosphere with some very comfortable lodgings.

The air is clean, and the town sits under a bowl of stars on clear nights; one of the most perfect places in Armenia to star gaze, reason enough for the ancients to erect an observatory nearby. In the summer Sissian is wonderfully cool weather. Sissian Region is at an altitude of between 1600-2400 meters; winters can be brutal, though the mountains are blanketed with snow and have excellent trails for cross-country skiers. The average temperature is 17.5°C in summer and -5°C in winter.

Sissian is a great way station for exploring the region. It is close to the Petroglyph fields on Mts. Mets Karakhach and Ughtasar, the Bronze Age Observatory of Karahundj (Zorats Kar), Tatev Monastery, Vorotnavank, the Vorotan/Shamb hot springs and the cold Shaki Falls, and four river canyons each worth taking a day to explore in themselves. Goris is 32 km away, making it possible to visit in a day trip as well (though Goris has its own charms and recently added lodgings worth looking into).

BACKGROUND

Sissian prides itself on being the oldest continually inhabited settlement in Armenia (Yerevan's, Giumri's and other town's claims aside), a self-proclaimed honorific based on 1960s-1990s excavations in the region that have uncovered a rich, complex series of settlements going back to the Paleolithic era. The nearby petroglyph fields

on Mts. Mets Karakhach and Ughtasar are dated as far back as the Chalcolithic era (ca. 12,000-7000 BCE). Closer to the town, Karahundj (also called Zorats kar by locals), is a ca. 4200 BCE astronomical observatory with a mid-to-late Bronze Age grave field.

Other excavations are of settlements and fortresses from the Kur-Araxes, Urartian and Hellenistic periods, with artifacts including a gold pot from the 18th c BCE, clay totems from the same period and golden staff ornaments and Roman medallions from the 1st c BCE (Nike, Eagle and Artimis).

Early chroniclers placed Sissian into the historic Tsghuk province of Mets Haik (formed ca. 4th c BCE), at least one calling the town Siunik; another Sisavan. The region was the largest of twelve districts/fiefdoms in Siunik Kingdom, Siunik itself being third largest of the 12 "kingdoms" of Mets Haik (kingdoms, dukedoms, provinces and districts are interchangeable terms used to describe the areas of Met Haik, by both ancient and modern historians and locals. The nakharars stated this confusion, electing kings who were notoriously beholden to their princes, and calling themselves kings and Prince of Princes at will).

Tsghuk (Sissian) was the largest of Siunik's districts, about the same size as it is now (stretching from the gates of Zangezur to Goris; from the Siunik range to the Zangezur mountains), and included the lands of Tatev and Hardjis, now in Goris district. Tsghuk became the administrative center of the kingdom, with the present day Sissian as its capital.

The capital had moved to Kapan by the early medieval period, and Moz (Mozn), Yeghegis and Yeghegnadzor rivaled the city for domination during the heyday of Vayots Dzor (10th-14th cc). Still, the town was important, its spiritual center at the 7th c Sisavank or S. Hovhannes.

Like Vayots Dzor Tsghuk/Sissian prospered under the "Pax Mongoliana" of the 13th-14th cc, as the Orbelian princes became vassals to the Khan. Due to its more remote location, the district continued its prosperity during the 1335-1344 internecine wars of succession and the chaos that followed in other part of the country. This is the period of Tatev's cultural flowering and importance.

Timurid raids ended this last golden age in Armenia, and the region joined the struggle against Turkic and Persian dominance during the 15th-18th cc.

Sissian was sacked more than once, and its old name Gharakilisa (Black or Burnt Church) is traced to this period. The population was deported to Persia in the 1604 migration of the country. Tatar nomads settled the area, turning cultivated lands into pasturage for the flocks and herds.

Resettlement began during a period of enlightenment under Persian rule in the mid 17th c, though the city joined the fight against late the Persians in the late 17th and 18th cc.

Encouraging Russian intervention, the city became a part of the lands granted to the Tsar in the 1813 Treaty of Gulistan. A part of the Elizabetpolskaya Gubernaya, Gharakilisa/Sissian prospered as émigrés from Persia and Turkey settled in the town in 1813-1830. However, the town of Sissian remained a village, with only 70 Armenians and 40 Tartars listed in the census at the end of the 19th c.

It had also become a part of the Zangezur lands, made from a truncated version of the Siunik kingdom, which included Nakhichevan and Karabakh. Russian efforts to control the independent populace results in Nakhichevan and Karabakh being separated from the district.

Gharakilisa/Sissian was a part of Zangezur, and joined the struggle against Turkish efforts to take the region and build a land bridge between Turkey and Central Asia, sheltering the partisan troops of Garegin Nzhdeh during their military campaigns that stopped the Turks, and forced the Bolsheviks to recognize the district as part of the Armenian republic.

Sissian was the source of violent resistance to Stalin's 1930-1933 collectivization efforts, resulting in a large number of locals being killed., Subdued, its name was changed in 1935 to Sisavan, finally to Sissian in 1940. In 1959, the town had grown to 3883 people, mostly Armenians. By 1970 its census was 7428.

Along with agricultural products, Soviet Sissian became a center for light manufacturing: knitwear, medical instruments, reinforced concrete and condensers. All of it stopped at the end of the Soviet Union in 1991, with limited agricultural

production revived in the late 1990s, including exports of dairy and canned fruit.

The town, and region, faced a new migration in the late 1990s, as hundreds of thousands of able bodied workers left for Russia and the west in search of work. The town now lives off of remittances sent from abroad, and limited tourism.

During the consolidation of the country into marz in 1996, Sissian became a sub region of Siunik, along with Goris, Kapan and Meghri historic regions.

NAVIGATING THE TOWN

Sissian has one of the easiest centers in Armenia to navigate. There are two entrances into Sissian from the (M2) highway; the western, main approach is taking the exit for Shaki, then following it to the river and town, where it becomes Sisakan p. A second, shorter entry is about 4.4 km past the Shaki turn. There is a large sign for a gas station (and a small one for Sissian and Zorats Kar) at the turn. This road passes the Karahundj Standing Stones en route to a north entrance to the town.

As you enter, the road turns sharply left, giving you two choices to reach the center: the first is to take the steep Ter-Ghazarian p that angles to the right at the end of the curve, following it to another steep rocky street that passes the large church and ends at an asphalt street (Sisakan p) that runs parallel to the river, leading to the center.

The second is to continue on the entry street (Gai p) after it curves left, taking the second right to Basen Hotel or the third right to the center.

The town center is divided by the Vorotan River, joined by a wide bridge that forms the main N/S street (Nzhdeh p).

At the S side of the bridge you will find a small square with the shuka, mterks, a VivaCell in the old cinema house, and apartment blocks. The street fronting the square is Israelian p. From here, you will leave for the southwestern and southern villages and historic sights.

At the N end of the bridge, the street closest to the river parallels a second main street, Sisakan p, which has the post office, a walkway entry to Basen Hotel, Dina Hotel and several shops just

before the main square that faces the new Lalaner Hotel and the Mayor's office.

SIGHTS

One of the simple pleasures of the town is experienced every warm weather night; a **promenade** of neighbors and friends on the old stretch of Sisakan p. The town provides no street lighting in the old center, so each evening is a starlit walk of teens, adults with babes and young children, and pensioners walking the 5 block stretch from one end of the promenade to the other, turning around and walking the other way. It has a slightly carnival atmosphere about it, as neighbors catch up on local gossip and young men and women eye each other furtively. This simple pleasure is enchanting when the moon is out, or under a star-studded sky.

S. Hovhannes (S. Grigor, Sisavan, Siuni Vank), is located off of Grigor Lusavorich (Mikoyan) p. in the NW end of town. It dominates the skyline, and easy to spot from the bridge.

To **imposing structure** is a wide-domed cruciform type, built in the 6th c over a Pagan temple. It is considered one of the best preserved Armenian churches, maintaining its original layout with minor alterations. It is additionally exceptional for its domed cruciform type—one of the first 6th century churches to reach what is now the "typical" Armenian church style. Placing the wide dome over a square formed by the corners of the cross wings and their supporting arches, the church established a form that has continued for 1500 years.



It also features an early use of niche buttressing, which distributed the weight of the dome to the corners of the outside walls, where the building was strongest. The niches are topped by scallop arching, each one in a different design.



The church name is both Grigor Lusavorich and S. Hovhannes, which may denote an early version in the 4th-5th cc, or an additional worship building that no longer exists.

An inscription on the church walls states it was built between 670 and 689 for Prince Kohazat Siuniats and Bishop Yosef. The inscription actually refers to a later addition to the church, perhaps repairs to the dome, where the inscription was made.



The church anchored old Siunik town, fronting a large beautiful square that was surrounded by mansions and houses for the Siunik princes. The

square now has a few flower beds but a number of gravestones for important religious leaders, aristocrats and prominent members of the community.

Siuni Vank was an important manuscript and educational center in medieval times, contributing to the vast library at Tatev that was destroyed by Seljuks in 1170. During the Mongol period, Sissian continued to produce manuscripts, including a 1296 specimen in the Matenadaran, and the church has several old books behind glass.

The **interior** of the church is laid out with four annexes in the corners of the square, carving a cruciform between them. This is a working church, and busy on holidays and Sundays. Candles illuminate portraits of Grigor Lusavorich and other saints on the walls. Look for the strand of hair carved with microscopic crosses—a magnifying glass shows the amazing work.

MUSEUMS

Adonts Sisian History Museum, 1 Adonts p, tel. 3331, open 10-4, 500 AMD, founded in 1990 and named for the Armenian historian Nikoghayos Adonts, born in Sissian.

This is one of the better small museums in Armenia, beginning with its **open front yard**; a museum in itself covering the history of the region from the Chalcolithic period. The large collection includes stones carved with petroglyphs, featuring a large number of rams (considered the first constellation of the zodiac, and traced to the Armenian highlands). If you look carefully you will also spy snakes, a horse, Bezoar goat, scorpion and a swirling sun symbol in the half-dozen boulders brought down from Mt Ughtasar.



Others include Bronze Age standing stones and phalluses; Hellenistic capitals, cornices and a stone sarcophagi; Bronze Age ram stones carved with crosses and Arabic totemic inscriptions; larges labs of stones used to cover a Bronze Age tomb; and medieval carvings and khachkars.

The lone standing stone, with an eye-hole, is encircled with small stones on the ground. There a numerous examples of the "solar calendar" in the region; in fields, near cemeteries and at excavation sites. They were used to both sight solar or night phenomenon and to count off time, each small stone representing a period of time. There is yet to be a serious study of this phenomenon, just as no one has yet undertaken a serious study of the other ancient observatories in the country.

Just by itself, this outdoor collection outpaces other museums in the country, and the examples of petroglyphs on the large boulders is an amazing achievement, but needs protection—these are 5000-17,000 year old carvings!



The **inside** of the museum is small, with three main rooms divided into galleries of artifacts and photos. Most of the displays are about Sissian region, with focus sections on the Karabakh War and the 1915-1921 struggles for Zangezur's independence. Photos and captions are in multiple languages, including English. In the regional section, a picture of a stone on the wall of Brnakot Church shows an armless man in front of a pendulum. This is a tombstone for a man who created the first known pendulum clock in Armenia, his arms cut off by terrified villagers who thought he was practicing witchcraft. The original is still in the church walls, and featured in [Day Trip 2](#) (p. 10)

The main gallery is the central room, which features the Bronze and Iron Ages. Of exceptional value are excavated vases from 3000-2000 BCE, according to the staff, though archeological work of the last decade has added centuries to the accepted Soviet timeline.

Especially look for the small dark vase with a ram's head and four circles. The ram symbolizes the zodiac sign Aries, the first constellation of the old new year. The circles are thought to show ancestral Armenian understanding of the seasons, one circle for each season.



You will also find this same symbol of four circles (divide by a cross) in Armenian salt cellars, which also go back to the Bronze Age for their origin. In this, the circles may represent both time and the four elements (earth, water, fire, air).

The vase is further decorated with a band around its neck and the sharp arches around the belly. The constant band of arrow shapes around the neck represented the cosmos, while the arch shapes are the mountains of Sissian.

Other pots have wavy lines that denote water, which was a cosmic symbol for the afterlife.

Still others bear small stars (crosses) and other cosmic symbols divided by mountains, illustrating the heavens, earth and underground, which was sometimes seen as a mirror of the heavens. These pots are sacred, found in graves and were probably used to store nourishment for the afterlife.

The same room has a small collection of bronze jewelry, and bronze and obsidian arrowheads.

The third room is dedicated to late medieval and folk exhibitions, with some beautiful carpets, rugs and furniture on display. The Sissian carpet design is especially interesting, based on church shapes.

The walls of the central room have an exhibition of local avant-garde artists Ashot Avagyan, who holds an annual "video-art-action" every August 11 at the nearby Neolithic sites of [Karahunji](#) (p. 10), [Ughtasar](#) (p. 13) and [Portakar](#) (p. 19).

Sissian Branch of the National Gallery of Art, 23 Sisakan p, tel. 2814, open mon-sat 10-7 (break 2-4), 500 AMD, has a small collection of art work from the Yerevan gallery, featuring works by regional and national artists. You can see the same in Yerevan, but not with this much attention, or with such helpful guides. The gallery holds occasional exhibitions.

Monuments, Cemeteries



Monument to the Sovietization of Zangezur is a fine multi-media statue to a horrific period of local history. The Sovietization of the region required massive deaths and the starvation of local farmers when they were forced into collectives. The violent uprising that followed was brutally suppressed by the authorities. The monument features four panels of heroic scenes of a bountiful Armenia (the woman with food spread out before her) and Red Army and local Armenian communist partisans marching to battle. The tall "column" above these bronze panels is topped by a statue of Mother Armenia.

Uphill from the monument and S. Hovhannes is a **Karabakh Martyrs Cemetery** and a **WWII monument**.

OTHER

Sissian Art School has students working in weaving, ceramics and woodworking. Stop by if they are in session, and you may find an item they are willing to part with (for a consideration, of course!). Ask for directions.

Bronze Age tomb field is on the east end of town, on the large plateau above the last street.

There are strewn rocks to mark the spot, and a good view of the town.

Volcanic caves line the walls of the cliffs on the west end of the town (towards Shaki). They were inhabited from the Stone Age. Fairly picked over by archeologists and locals, there is still a number of obsidian and stone flakes, as well as pottery shards.

NEARBY

The petroglyphs at Mt. Ughtasar are a half-to-full day trip, reached by jeep or Vlis. Local guides (ask at your lodging) will do a day trip for around 30,000 AMD. Be sure it includes lunch and the fellow actually knows something about the pictograms (a lot of locals say they do, but when it gets down to it, they know very little). If not, bargain for a cheaper rate for the ride only. 15,000 AMD for ride is fair, but extremely hard to find. See our entry on [Ughtasar](#) for details (p. 13)

PRACTICALITIES

INFORMATION CENTER

For further information about Sissian contact the **TOURISM AND BUSINESS CENTRE OF THE MUNICIPALITY OF SISSIAN**, tel. 3330, Cell: (091) 201731, email: infcent@yahoo.com.

IN AND OUT AND AROUND

Minivan, Bus Daily buses/minivans connect Sissian (Main Bus Stop at the square on Israelian p) with Yerevan (Central Bus Station on Admiral Isahaakov; also at the corner of Agatangeghos and Khorenatsi—behind Kino Rossiya; metro: Zoravar Andranik), 2000 AMD.

Regional Minivans (Marshrutni taxis) are caught at three bus stops. Those caught at the central Israelian Bus stop connect Sissian with Goris (500 AMD), Aghitu (150 AMD), Noravan (150 AMD) and Vorotan (200 AMD), and Vaik (150 AMD).

Those caught at the Bus Stop on Sisakan p, one block west of the central stop connect to Shaken (100 AMD), Angeghakot (150 AMD) and Goraik (200 AMD).

Those caught from the Vorotan Bus Stop on the south side of the river connect Sissian with Tolors (150 AMD), Akhlatian (150 AMD), Ashotavan (200 AMD) and Brnakot (150 AMD). Times and venues variable, ask the day before you go.

Taxi Taxis are more expensive, but the most convenient way to travel (you decide when to go, and where). From Yerevan, taxis depart from behind “Kino Rossiya” at the corner of Agatangeghos and Movses Khorenatsi. Taxis charge around 18,000 AMD for up to 4 people. Call taxis are cheaper, charging by the km. There are a number of taxi services in town—all provide this service.

In town taxis proliferate in the center. Typical fare is 500 AMD anywhere in center, or 100 AMD per km plus extra to wait. Taxis are useful in traveling the area, but negotiate; they know the routes very well and that tourists can pay more. Offer them 100 AMD per km plus an extra 1000 AMD to wait 30-45 minutes. Local call taxis are everywhere, their numbers advertised on the street.

Car Sissian is 6 km S of (M2), which connects Sissian with Goris (32 km), Kapan (93 km), Kadjaran (119 km) and Meghri (164 km) to the south. The (M2) connects Sissian with Jermuk (85 km), Vaik (68 km), Yeghegnadzor (84 km), Areni (98 km), Ararat (160 km), Artashat (176 km), and Yerevan (206 km).

Petrol and gas stations are on the highway and the connecting roads into town.

COMMUNICATION, ETC.

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

Phone, telegraphs

Area code is 283 0
Long Distance: 0283 0 + local number
From abroad: + (374) 283 0 + local number
Mobile Phones: 091 Armentel, 093/094 Viva Cell

The town is covered by both Armentel (Sisakan p) and VivaCell mobile phone services. International calls can be made at the *Central Post Office*, Sisakan p. [See HayPost \(HyePost\) site for list \(www.haypost.am\)](http://www.haypost.am). The post office has trunk line phone service, sells phone cards and can send telegraphs.

Internet

Arminco (office in Kapan: 1/61 Aram Manukian p, tel. 285-62381, 285-67923, email: balasanyan@arminco.com, provides dial up and soon to come Wi-Fi service. Sissian School #2 has an Internet Computer center, open to the public on Saturdays.

Bank, Exchange

Money wires and credit card advances can be done at banks; ATMs and exchange at banks; exchange points in town will change money at competitive rates.

VTB, 4 Adonts p, tel. 2952
Ardshininvestbank, 21 Sisakan p, tel. 2795

Shopping

There are *mterks* and kiosks throughout town, congregated on Israelian, Khanjian at both ends of the bridge. The Shuka is at the S end of the bridge.

Film, etc.

Film and batteries can be found at *mterks*. Batteries are unreliable for digital cameras, bring your own.

Pharmacy

Apotekas (Armenian: *deghatuner*) can be found in the center of town, one is on Israelian (N), the other on Vorotan (S).

Hospital, Polyclinic

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

Hospital, 1 Spandarian p. tel. 3790
Polyclinic, 14 Charents p, tel. 3502

OVERNIGHT

Overnights can be had at local hotels, B&Bs and at home stays or apartments. For the latter, ask around when arriving, and expect to pay 3000-5000 AMD for the privilege.

HOTEL DINA, 35 Sisakan p, tel. 3333, has clean well maintained rooms in its pleasant stone-clad building. The building dates to the 1930s, but everything inside has been upgraded. The staff will prepare meals for you if you ask ahead, and they provide breakfasts (1000 AMD). Hot water,

friendly atmosphere, clean linen and rooms. An excellent deal with DBL/LUX at 8000/10000 AMD.

HOTEL LALANER, 42 Sisakan on the Mayoral Square, tel. 6600, 4500, 093-598871, email: info@lalahotel.am URL: www.lalahotel.am, is a newly renovated hotel on the old square, with a restaurant and bar on the first floor. Clean, modern rooms with slightly poofy designs have hot showers, clean linen and satellite TV. The Jacuzzi room is a hoot, and has to be seen to be believed. A few rooms are moderately priced otherwise expensive with DBL from 10,000-20,000 and Lux from 20,000-35,000 AMD. One DBL can sleep 4 on 2 DBL beds.

HOTEL BASEN, 1/5 Alex Manukian p, tel. 5264, is a big disappointment, with run down rooms and ill-kept amenities. Carpets are musty, the rooms are not clean and they are hugely overpriced with SGL/DBL at 16,000 AMD. The restaurant serves basic food—but you need to bargain before you place your order—they do not provide a menu and jack the prices on unsuspecting visitors.

SHARVARSH AMIRKHANIAN B&B, 9 Tigran Mets p, tel. 4142.. 8000 AMD.

SVETIK GEVORGIAN B&B, 4a Paruir Sevak p, tel. 5222. 8000 AMD.

OFELIA BALIAN B&B, 22 N Stepanian p, tel. 5874, 2621. 8000 AMD.

ZORATS KARER B&B, House 30, Street #3, located above the church, tel. 3611, is run by Gevorg and Seda, and is popular with independent tourists. They provide clean rooms, a decent breakfast and will help you plan your day trips. 8000 AMD per person.

FOOD & DRINK

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

ANI, 42 Sisakan p, tel. 2732, is located in Hotel Lalaner, serves good food in their bar-restaurant, and also cater to weekend celebrations. \$\$-\$\$\$

HOLSTEN, Yerevan-Sissian Highway, tel. 6447, serves good wholesome food at moderate prices. \$\$

HOTSATUN, Yerevan-Goris Highway, tel. 4333, serves very decent fare in their new surroundings. Armenian cuisine, fish or *khorovats*. \$\$

HOTEL BASEN, 1/5 Alex Manukian p, tel. 5264, serves basic food at inflated prices. They have two dining halls, the folk decorated one is reserved for buses. Be sure to agree on price before you order—they jack them up if you don't. \$\$-\$\$\$

JRAHARS, by the bridge off of Israelian, serves decent fare in their large restaurant. Sandwiches to *khorovats*. \$-\$\$

KRUNK, Yerevan-Goris Highway, tel. 4975, serves Armenian cuisine in basic surroundings. \$-\$\$\$

SUR & SUM, 9 Nzhdeh p, tel. 4140, is located off the south end of the main bridge. Basic food and basic prices. \$-\$\$

There are food shops in town as well.

TRIP 2: AROUND SISSIAN ▲

[North](#)
[Southwest / South](#)
[East](#)

Sissian North
[Karahundj - Ughtasar](#)

➡ **From** --- to **KARAHUNDJ** (DD 39.55060 x 46.02898, elev. 1778m) 

✚ **KARAHUNDJ / ZORATS KAR - ԶՐԱՄՆՈՒՆԳ / ՉՈՐԱՏ ԶԱՐ** (Զարահունջ / Չորաց քար) ▲ (also "Carahunge" or "Carahoung", also "Zorats kar" or "Zoratstar") is located 3 km N of Sissian, a collection of standing stones huddled like soldiers on a wind blown hill. Small signs point to the left (west) turn onto a dirt path that winds its way in about 1 km to the site.

[PLAN]

A metal shed serves as unofficial information center, souvenir stand and coffee supplier to tourists. T-shirts, prints and some artwork are on sale, featuring the stones and nearby petroglyphs.

The 204 stones have been ascribed with mystical, fertility and cosmic powers, but rarely have ancient monuments caused such a sensation in scientific circles. The site, arranged in an egg shape with two jutting wings, is considered by many to be an ancient astronomical observatory, while it also includes over a hundred Bronze Age tumulus graves, with one rich grave in the center of the observatory.

The stones, many with eyeholes carefully carved at their top ends, challenge the very dating of early astronomy and the answer to the question, "Who were the first astronomers?" If proven true, a current controversial dating of the stones (5000 BCE) mean they predate England's Stonehenge; they predate the Babylonian's claim to being the first astronomers; and they confirm what some people already believe: that Armenia is the birthplace of the zodiac, and perhaps the beginning of navigation and the concept of time.

This is a pretty amazing claim for a group of rough-cut stones that have been almost ignored for centuries. Archeologists are unsure of these claims, focusing on the Bronze Age artifacts found

at the gravesites, but, led by two of Armenia's pre-eminent astrophysicists and astronomical historians, the standing stones, and especially their eye holes that point to phenomenon in the night sky, are revolutionizing the way we understand the development of ancient astronomy.

Background It will come as no surprise after reading a bit Armenia's history just how important astronomy is to the national character. The symbol of the Sun, signs of the zodiac, and ancient calendars were currency in the region thousands of years before the rest of the world was just waking up, astronomically speaking. Egypt and China were still untamed wilderness areas when the first cosmic symbols began appearing on the side of the Geghama Mountain Range sometime between 15,000-12,000 BCE.

More than 25 years of study has been focused on the stones at Sissian, beginning in the 1980's when archeologists first uncovered megalithic tombs at the site. Before then, the site wasn't more than a curiosity, though in the 19th century it was endowed with fertility powers—pictures taken in the 1890's show women lying prone across stones in an effort to "cure barrenness".

The superstitions surrounding sites like that at Sissian made the archeological discoveries in the 1980's all the more profound. But it also opened a controversy around the reason for the stones, and just how old they are. Archeologists excavating the site said the age of the site—including the stones—was anywhere from 1st to mid 3rd millennium BCE, but the reason (or actual date) for the stones was never fully explained.

Professor Elma Parsamian, astrophysicist and director of the Biurakan observatory conducted the first systematic study of the site, after her sensational discovery of the Bronze Age observatory at Metsamor (Armavir marz), which is dated to 2800-2500 BCE.

Parsamian and her assistant Alexander Barseghian conducted the first astronomical study of Karahundj in 1983. Archeologists thought the stones were simply placed around the Bronze Age graves as monuments or ritual stones. Parsamian and Barseghian were immediately struck by the overall design and the number of stones at the sight. To Parsamian—who had just received recognition for her ground-breaking explanation of the purpose and date for the observatory at

Metsamor—the reason for the stones at Sissian were never adequately explained by excavators, and dating is still to be determined.

Some suggested the stones were ornamental and that the holes car 2-5 ton rocks into place. The problem with this was that the holes are cut at the thinnest, weakest part of the 2 to 5 ton rocks, and would break as soon as pressure was applied. Archeologists had no other explanation.

Instead, what Parsamian was able to conclude was that the stones were a particular kind of telescopic instrument. She noted that stones on the Western side of the complex had "antsker" (eye-holes), and that they all pointed to the horizon.

While archeologists were unable to conclude their purpose as they focused on artifacts found under the ground, Parsamian's experience as an astronomer made her look instinctively to the stars above. The eye holes look at specific points in the night sky in different directions.

While excavators spent their days at the site, Parsamian and her assistants worked in the night and at dawn. What they found was astonishing. Using the holes to sight with you can watch lunar phases and the sunrise at the solstice.

Coming on the heels of her remarkable discovery at Metsamor, the stones at Sissian confirmed her original hypothesis—ancestral Armenians were indeed navigators, they had an intimate understanding of the stars, how to plot latitude and longitude, even how to divide time.

Not surprisingly, archeologists at the site—who thought they had the discovery to themselves—scoffed at Parsamian's theories, and to this day the older of them refuse to admit the stones might have any astronomical purpose, despite the mounting evidence to the contrary.

The lines are drawn so clearly that it even affects the type of tour visitors receive when visiting the site. Pro-old and pro-new theorists battle it out daily at the stones.

An Ancient Observatory

Parsamian felt she was able to confirm the purpose of the stones, but she was unable to complete her investigations due to lack of funds. Nevertheless, her work was enough to fuel a deep interest in the complex.

From her findings it became increasingly accepted that the site was used to watch the night sky and solar positions, and it seemed the stones were from a different period than the burial ground. Some archeologists agreed, but lacking carbon dating or other methods of determining the age of the stones, they were unable to agree on a specific date, and so the site was ascribed to the 3rd millennium BCE (old style still call it an Iron Age site, without much to back up their dating).

Parsamian first published her findings in 1984, and shared her discovery with others, one of whom was Paris Heruni, the director of the Radio Physics Measurement Institute and the designer of the first optical radio telescope in the world, located just above Biurakan on Aragats Mountain.

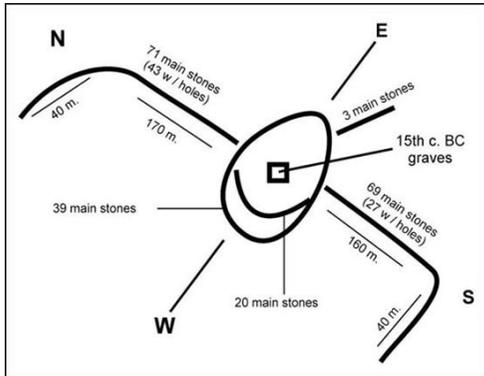
Heruni was fascinated with Parsamian's findings. Believing that her pioneering work at Metsamor and Sissian not only shattered previous conceptions about when ancestral Armenians developed their culture, but that it also pointed to a source of civilization itself on the Armenian Plateau, Heruni began to study her work carefully, as well as that by Gerald Hawkins regarding Europe's henges.

Using Parsamian's original findings, Heruni has organized successive expeditions to the site beginning in 1994, each during an equinox or solstice. The made a systematic study of the stones, mapping and numbering each stone. Using chronometers, telescopes, cameras and aerial surveillance Heruni and his team soon verified Parsamian's findings: the stones were indeed an astronomical instrument, and it is still accurate.

[MAP]

The complex Inside the complex there are 204 main stones. All of them are made of basalt. Each is between a half a meter to 3 meters tall, their bases are up to one and a half meters wide, and they weigh up to ten tons each. Of these main stones, 76 have apertures ("antsk"), 63 are in stable condition, 16 declining, and 90 lying on their sides. 45 are damaged, especially the apertures.

Heruni thinks the damages were caused by invading Arabic, Seljuk, Mongol and Timurid armies and early Christians trying to destroy the pagan worship site.



A bird's-eye view of the site is impressive. The complex is centered around 39 stones in the configuration of an egg, with its main axis stretching 43 meters East to West, and 37 meters from North to South. Dissecting this central form is an arc of twenty stones that bends to the West, forming an inner elliptical shape, a "Khorda".

One excavated grave lies inside the khorda, which led archeologists to originally think the observatory stones were placed there about the same time.

Three alleys of stones take off from central egg, looking like arms reaching to the North, South and Southeast. The alleys are two to ten meters wide, with additional stones lying in their path. These "arms" are important, since the stones with apertures in them lie only on the alleys.



The North and South arms bend at the end to the West. The North alley is 172 meters long, turning

west for another 40 meters. It holds 71 main stones, 43 with apertures. The South alley stretches 160 meters, turning west for 40 meters. It holds 69 main stones, 27 with apertures. The one going southeast stretches 20 meters, with three main stones inside the alley.

Though the stones are rough and lichen covered, the eye holes are polished and finely cut, and positioned to exact points on the horizon.

The eye-holes measure 7 to ten centimeters diameter at the surface, then funnel down to 5 centimeters in diameter before opening up again on the other side. When Heruni's team measured the azimuths through the eye holes, they found that they were still very accurate.

Wafer thin obsidian glass uncovered at the site led some to suggest that an optical insert may have been placed inside the holes for magnification or to reflect images.

How accurate?

Heruni sketched out a schematic of England's Stonehenge, pointing to two inner circles inside the mammoth stones most people think as the monument itself. "Those huge 'doors' that everyone thinks is Stonehenge are nothing without these smaller stones in the middle," Heruni said as he pointed to a circle of lower stones on his drawing. "These are the sight stones for the complex. You stood behind them, then you placed a pole in one of these holes in the ground between them and the door ways. That's the only way you could spot something in the sky. There are many of these stones and holes, so (Stephen) Hawkins thinks astronomers rotated around the circle to keep up with the moving sun and moon."

The stones at Sissian are completely different. "Of all the henges discovered anywhere outside of Armenia, none have apertures. None. And the apertures are so cleanly cut, they pinpoint very small spots in the sky. At Stonehenge your field of vision is much larger; the doorways are about 70 centimeters wide. But at Sissian, they are only 5 centimeters diameter. You can pinpoint a spot within a spot. It is extremely accurate. Even more so when you think they might have made cornices from clay or wood and placed them inside the apertures. It would have made the telescopes amazingly accurate for that time. Even for today."

An Astronomical Instrument

Heruni is sure the site is as Parsamian stated; an astronomical instrument. And he is also sure the site was used to plot sunrises, moon phases, and even more incredible, the first calendar.

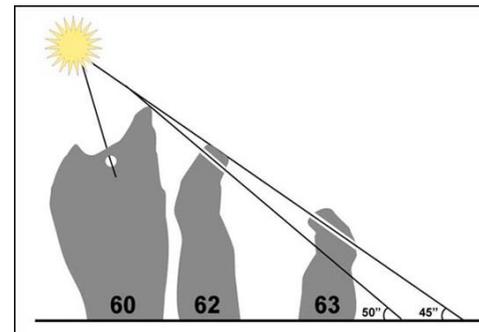
This is not so far-fetched. To plot the sky, you have to have an idea of time. These stones—many of which look to the azimuths, were used at specific times of the year to chart solar and lunar phases. Those with eye-holes point exactly to the point where they occur at exact times of the year.

Unlike star positions, the sun and moon continue to cross azimuths in the same position in the night sky. So key stones emerged as reliable predictors of their phases.

A Complex and Elegant Instrument

Just as interesting are the stones without eye holes; they were a part of the same instrument. Eye holes were not enough without other points to fix the angle of the sight. So there are stones to look through, and others close by that were used to line up the stone, to establish the angle of sight.

There is one stone, which can be called the **keystone** to the whole complex; it has an eye-hole and bowl carved into a lower level. A rain shower that filled the bowl convinced researchers the stone was actually a leveling stone. When the bowl is full and balanced, sighting through the eye hole levels other stones, which in turn can be used to level the rest. It is an ingenious yet simple way of correcting stones, using a sophisticated understanding of physics and geometry, long before the sciences were practiced elsewhere.



An elegant instrument To see how the entire site worked look at three stones that form a "single and beautiful instrument" as Heruni describes them. The stones (**#60, 62, 63**) include one (# 60) called the cock, or rooster, because of its shape. One tip is higher than the other, and was a sighting point for #62, which has an eye-hole that looks right over its tip. Then there is #63, which has an eye-hole that also looks at the tip of the rooster, but at a different angle. That is the leveling stone for the first two.

The latitude at Sissian is 40°, which means the position of the sun at mid day on the summer solstice is 50°.

The angle of the eye-hole in stone #62 is angled at 50°, just over the tip of the rooster stone (#60).

And the angle of the eye-hole in stone #63 (the leveling stone) is 40°, that is, the same angle as the latitude at Sissian.

These three stones were **used to watch the summer solstice** and are so accurate they successfully competed with the expensive telescopes Heruni's team brought to their expeditions.

Other stones mark the sun at its zenith at the equinox (March 21, or the start of spring, the beginning of the New Year in the Old Armenian Calendar). Like Parsamian's observatory at Metsamor, the stones at Karahundj were crucial to marking the start of the year.



Others point to constellations and stars, and the site even has a sort of "university"; stones **#160**

and #161. # 160 looks onto a low western hill, and is positioned for an adult to look through it. Right next to it, stone # 161 looks at the same point, but is much lower. Researchers think these two were used to instruct the next generation of astronomers.

Just How Old Is It?

Classical historians place the beginning of astronomy, the calendar, and the zodiac to the Babylonians, who built huge towers (Ziggurats) to use to navigate the night sky, around 2400 BCE.

Parsamian challenged that notion with her study at Metsamor, showing that ancestral Armenians were star-gazing and charting the sky 400 years earlier. When she studied the site at Karahundj, she was unable to find anything to use to calculate a dating of the site, like she had in Metsamor using a stellar calendar, so it was left undated until Heruni began his work.



As Heruni and his team catalogued the stones, they found one that was different from the rest. Heruni believes it is the key stone Parsamian was looking for.

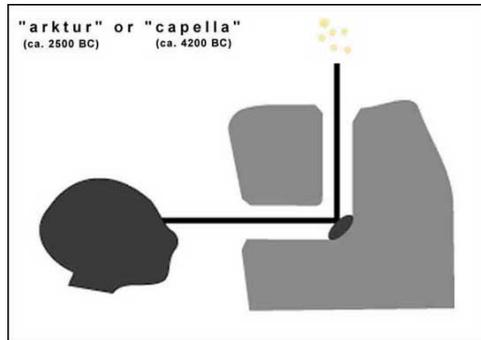
While all the other eye holes point to the horizon, this one had an aperture that bent in the center and pointed directly up. By inserting something polished in the corner bend, one could look through the hole to a zenith point straight above.

It had to be something seen with the naked eye, and discounting the sun and moon, which do not cross the zenith point above this stone at this latitude, Heruni began calculations assuming that whatever it was above was a single star or group of stars seen without magnification.



Using the same method Parsamian had published in her study on Metsamor, Heruni took the latitude of the site, five of the brightest stars in the North sky, and compared them with a stellar calendar showing the stars ascendant in Sissian region during different periods of time.

The calendar pointed to two stars at the zenith above the periscope stone, at different times; Arktur and Capella.



Arktur was ascendant at 2500 BCE, which is the time the old Armenian calendar was devised (2492 BCE), attributed to Haik, the eponymous founder of Armenia who established his kingdom in Armenia after defeating the Babylonian king Bel (Nemruth).

Long considered a mythical figure, recent study points to a real person. Discovery of a Babylonian border stone that describes Nemruth's death at the hands of a northern king, and a clay tablet letter to Haik point to a historical person whose story was

mixed with foundation myths to create the legend we have now.

To celebrate his victory, Haik is said to have changed the names of the months of the calendar to those of his children. And that is what leads Heruni to date the site 1700 years earlier, when the star Capella was at the zenith point above the periscope stone. The calendar in the Haik story is not the original calendar, it is a calendar change.

Unlike other calendars, the Armenian calendar is a solar calendar. While the Egyptian calendar is also based on 12 months and 30 days, the Armenian calendar includes 7 days in a week, and each day of the month has its name. Armenians included an intermediate 5 day period to mark the new year, creating a 365 day calendar that had to be adjusted every four year.

To Heruni, the changing of the old to the "main style" calendar in 2492 BCE, is a second key to the dating of the site at Sissian. There was already a calendar when it was changed, at the time Arktur was ascendant above Armenia.

Here is where science becomes an art: Heruni theorizes that the amount of time required developing the first calendar points to the earlier star dating, 4200 BCE. Not only to understand the concept of time and divide it into an accurate model of prediction, but to understand latitude and longitude, and develop navigation.

If true, it indeed shatters most histories on the beginning of astronomy. It also coincides with the earliest zodiac designs in Armenia, which appeared at the beginning of the 5th millennium BCE.

What's in a Name?

For as long as anyone could remember, the site was called "Ghoshun Dash", a Turkish name meaning "Army Stone", probably because the complex looks like an army of soldiers when seen from a distance. Parsamian translated the name into Armenian, "Zorats Kar", but she couldn't help but notice that a nearby village and locality was called "Karahundj".

"The word 'Karahundj' is a complex word, made up of 'Kara' (from stone) and 'hundj', which could be translated literally into stone-henge (Armenian and English are both Indo-European languages with many of the same word roots).

However, the words "hunj" and "henge" have no known root meaning, and no modern equivalent. So it is conjecture to say that Karahundj is literally Stonehenge.

One explanation for "hundj" is that it is a corrupted form of "punj", which means bouquet (a bouquet of stones). Stephen Hawkins in his study of England's Stonehenge supposed that 'hundj' might be an old version of the word 'hung' or 'hang', which would make Stonehenge 'hanging stones.'

Another says it is a variant of the Armenian word for voice ('h'nchuin'), and the name Karahundj means "Voice Stones" or "singing stones". Heruni notes that at the March equinox, hundreds of people visit England's Stonehenge to listen to the stones, as the winds whistle through them.

Coincidence? Most people know England's Stonehenge, but there are others in England and Europe (Scotland, Ireland, Iceland and Brittany), and they share the same name meanings, suggesting more than coincidence in their founding.

One in the Hebrides is called 'Kalinish' which first part 'Kali' is close to the Armenian word for stone 'Kara'. And 'nish' is a precursor of the Armenian 'n'shan' which translates into 'sign'. A town near another henge in England is named "Karnak", but in old English it was "Karnish," which is also close to Armenian for 'Stone Sign' ('kar-n'shan').

Just as interestingly, the name of a village near Goris that gives the site its name is Karahundj, a name that is as old as history. The village has several Bronze Age sites, and a sacred stone with petroglyphs that are believed to go back to 5000 BCE, incorporating cosmic symbols and signs of the zodiac.

All of this points to a shared history, and a shared point of origin. To Heruni and a growing body of experts, the stones at Sisian are Armenia's Stonehenge.

Camping in the area (no shade and cold at night); **overnight** in Sissian hotel; **springs** in Sissian.

➡ From Karahundj, continue N to the Goris Highway (M2), cross over to a village road that continues N for about 1.5 km to the village of Ishkhanasar (Kizilzhuk), from where you head N/NW on Jeep tracks that appear and disappear (you need a guide) for about 14 km of bone-jarring travel (figure 1.5 hours and plenty of fuel) before entering a 3000m altitude valley between Mt. Ughtasar's crests, with glacier lakes and the **UGHTASAR PETROGLYPH FIELD** (DD 39.68666 x 46.05416, elev. 3300m) 🏔️ 🗺️

🗺️ **UGHTASAR PETROGLYPH FIELD - ՈՒՂՏԱՍԱՐԻ ԺԱՅՐԱԲԱՏՈՒԿԵՐՆԵՐԻ ԴԱՇՏ** (Ուղտասարի ժայրաբատուկերների դաշտ) 📍 is located about 17.5 km NW of Sissian and reached by Jeep only in good weather (the mountain is snowbound between October-June). The best time to visit is between mid July and the end of August.

MAP



The mountain is so named for its double peaks resembling camel humps ("Ught" is Armenian for camel), and is the location of an important archeological site encompassing approximately 2000 petroglyphs dating back to the Paleolithic era.

Not just one In actuality, this field shows but one piece of Armenia's petroglyph heritage, and even it is divided between two major sights in historic Siunik; here and Jermajur ("warm water") or Itsitsu, near Kelbajar in the protected corridor of Karabakh. There are also numerous smaller sights that can be found throughout the marz, with

others in the valleys and mountains of lower Siunik, and beyond.

In truth, Armenia's petroglyphs sites—like the number of ancient stone observatories—probably number in the hundreds. They are found all along the Geghama and Siunik Mountain ranges, near Yeghegnadzor and Vaik, and throughout the Ararat valley up into Shirak—anywhere a Neolithic-Bronze Age fortress, settlement or grave field is found, you will most likely find petroglyphs.

What makes Ughtasar and the fields on the Geghama Lehr so interesting are their large collections (8000+), and their locations—all are around 3000-3300 meters in altitude, near a glacial lake, and were developed in much warmer times.

The Ughtasar site is beautiful; with a small glacier lake nestled in a rim of the extinct volcano that blew itself out in the Pleistocene period. The lake can have ice floes year-round and patches of snow in the area never completely melt. Scattered around the lake are boulders, many of which bear the carvings of ancestral Armenians.



The more important boulders, thought to be sites of worship or generational commemoration, bear multiple carvings. The number and development of the artwork suggest this field was used for thousands of years before the changing climate pushed worship to lower elevations.

More than anything else the rise and fall of this worship site is related to climatic changes of the times and its effects on a growing population; a lesson to us moderns about preserving ecology: At its inception, in the Paleolithic period (ca. 12,000 BCE), the mountains of Siunik were still smoldering volcanoes on their way to extinction, with geysers of hot water spewing into the air and a generally warm, moist climate that nurtured

paleontological plants that only come to us in fossil form.



Later generations (Neolithic and Bronze Age) continued to record their prowess and celestial beliefs on the stones, constructing shrines, lodges, a cyclopean fortress and a number of Neolithic and Bronze Age Dolmens, suggesting a more permanent presence at the site.



At some time in the mid to late Bronze Age, the climate of the Near East changed. This is largely due to the clearing of forests to burn in forging metal, or shipped to Mesopotamian and Anatolian cities that had already depleted their natural reserves. The change in climate brought much colder weather to Central Asia and the lower Caucasus, and began the desertification that has by now gripped the Middle East. Loss of foraging lands and droughts began a series of great migrations that shaped the next 5000 years of western history.

The field at Ughtasar was mostly abandoned in the Iron Age, shepherds finding less pasturage at this altitude. Those that knew about it, visited the site and some left carvings attributed to this late time, but it had long since stopped being an important place of worship or gathering.

How old are they?

The dating of the petroglyphs is a subject of much debate, with newer scientists discovering data that pushes the date back to the Paleolithic Era (ca. 12,000 BCE), and their older compatriots—products of the Soviet era—resisting what seems them to be a challenge to their old research. To listen to these two generations debate is a glimpse of just how subjective history is, and how political the fields of research are. Land mines for you and me, but a treasure trove of dissertation material for them.

The archeological dating is subjective; an educated guess based on the excavation of pottery and tools found at the site, and is not multi-dimensional or multi-discipline. Sticking to pottery and bones, it leaves out studies by climate, botany and astronomical histories that shed important light on the timing of prehistory. A small but growing body of opinion places the first carvings around 12,000-7000 BCE, with later generations in the Late Neolithic-early Bronze Age (7000-5000 BCE) and after (5000-4000 BCE). Without definitive dating methods that have yet to be invented, this may be as close as we can get to the actual dating.

The Petroglyphs The petroglyphs at Ughtasar are images carved onto black and grey volcanic stone, using stone tools. The subject choices resemble those found in other countries (120 and counting): human-like (anthropomorphic), animal and bird (zoomorphic) images are common, as are circles, spirals, dots, lines, and other geometric and abstract forms. They have great cognitive value and tell us myths of origins, stories of past societies, traditions, emotions, beliefs, defeats and victories of our ancestors.



Almost all aspects of human life are reflected in Rock-Art. Most images depict men in scenes of hunting and fighting, cultivating land, competing and dancing. Different animals, especially goats, deer and panthers, as well as the mythological creatures - "vishaps" (dragon-like steles) are pictured. Some rock-images reflect the adoration of maternity, the ancestors, heroes, spirits, fertility and time. Geographic elements are also featured: rivers, lakes, springs etc., followed by astronomical bodies and phenomena: the Sun, the Moon, stars, stellar constellations and starry sky, bolides, comet, and lightning. There are many images of carriages and various structures, maps, water-grids, starry sky, as well as carved compasses, solar and lunar calendars.



The carvings in Siunik were first studied in the 1920s by an early Soviet researcher, A. Kolontar,

who did not do a systematic study and published no findings. It was not until 1960s that Soviet archeologists began systematic field research, which is ongoing as funding allows. Their findings were sensation when first reported, and have led to a growing number of online publications of the major petroglyphs fields in Armenia.

Spanning dozens of kilometers of territory, the carvings ("itsagir" or "goat-letters" in popular lore), can be found on the slopes of Ughtasar, the mountains near Tsghuk (Mets Karakhach), the Vardenis Range, and at the sources of the Yeghegis (Mt. Vardenis), Arpa (Mt. Khachatsar) and Vorotan Rivers (Mt. Davagioz). Common among them is their altitude (3000-3300m), and their iconography.



The petroglyphs at Ughtasar are in the main considered memorials by current archeologists; commemorating the life and prowess of the dead. They are rich with flora and fauna imagery—all the major animals that inhabited the marz are included in the designs.



Carvings include depictions of animals (wild and domesticated aurochs (urus, wild ancestors of cattle), goats, mutton, gazelles, deer, horses, boars, wolves, dogs, jackals, leopards, bears and

tigers); hunters with lassoes, traps, bows and arrows, pikes, spears and shields; Carts and sleds pulled by oxen (aurochs). Cattle breeding and sheep and goat herding predominate. Interestingly, birds do not figure prominently in the Ughtasar carvings.



There are numerous cosmic symbols, including Aries and rudimentary calendars carved like wheels, or dividing time by using a cross and four circles for the seasons.



Among the more complex carvings are some of the earliest depictions of dance in the ancient world; scenes of ceremonial dance with two or more figures. Other show figures performing before others, perhaps relating a famous fight or hunt, or depicting the figures as communal leaders.



Other scenes are social in nature, depicting moments revolving around the central figure's place in society, or performing ritual acts.

Camping in the area (alpine area; cold); overnight in Sissian or Ishkhanasar village home (rustic; 3000 AMD for B&B is fair); springs in the village.

Sissian Southwest /South ▲

☞ From --- to (DD) 🏰 🗺️ 📷 🌊

🏰 **BRNAKOT - ԱՐԵՆԻ (Արենի) ▲** (pop.)

Brnakot is situated 7 km far from Sissian. It was one of the famous Melik (local governors) centers of the Siunik. The village is famous both by its monuments, church and its famous representatives/villagers. It is the birthplace of the prominent Armenian historic Nikoghayos Adonts. Four heroes of the Great Patriotic War, many scientists, artists and state activists are from the village as well. Megalith monument titled "Hovvi Qar/Shepherd's Stone- is nearby to the village.

☞ From --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: **Ashotavan** (pop.)

☞ From --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: **Salvard** (pop.)

☞ From --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: **Hatsavan** (pop.)

☞ From --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: **Tasik** (pop.)

☞ From --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: **Arevis** (pop.)

Tanahat Vank It is an Armenian architectural monument of 5-6th centuries. It was a prominent monastic complex of Siunik. It is located in the north from Arevis village, in the mountainous plain. Ghevond Alishan assumed that in place of Tanahat during the pagan period there was the heathen temple of Anahit goddess. The chief church is called St. Stepanos. It is a basilica structure and has a stage. The church had a hall room. Portico capitals are furnished with flowers. Next to the monastery there is a cemetery with cross stones and grave stones. On one of the mentioned the Armenian letters are hardly noticed.

In 1975 in Tanahat ruins Urartu cuneiforms have been found out, which are on both sides of basalt stone. Tanahat currently is in half ruined states

☞ From --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: **Tolors Reservoir** (pop.)

☞ From --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: **Akhlatian** (pop.)

☞ From --- to (DD)

🏰 **BNUNIS - ԱՐԵՆԻ (Արենի) ▲** (pop.)

☞ From --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: **Torunik** (pop.)

☞ From --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: **Dastakert** (pop.)

Sissian East ▲

➡ **From** --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: **Uits** (pop.)

It is situated on the eastern borders of Sissian, in front of the Siunik fortress, on the right-hand high area of the Vorotan's gorge nearby to the village Uyts. This amazing monument has not almost been studied and its partial studies and geometrical calculations have brought to the initial conclusions that from Uyts to the Aghitu village area (about 2 km) a great ancient city had existed, which had permanently survived from the third millennium to the middle of the first millennium. Many Cyclopean structures: dolmens, cromlechs and walls like Zorats Qarar have been preserved. This monument exceeds by its sizes not only the suchlike monuments of the Armenia dated at that time, but also the regional ones. The local population calls it Sangyar-Qaraberd.

➡ From Uits backtrack to the Vorotan road (Sissian), turn R (E) and continue for about 5 km to **AGHITU** (DD 39.51690 x 46.08164, elev. 1615m)   

✳ **AGHITU / AGHUDI - ԱՂԻՏՈՒ / ԱՂՈՒԴԻ (Աղիտու / Աղուդի)** ▲ (before Aghudi, pop. 500) is located 7 km E of Sissian on the cleft of a mountain. The small village is made of Armenian descendants of 19th century émigrés who resettled the village, after it have been usurped by Turcoman settlers, who left their old **burial mosque** and a large number of Muslim **graves** on the western hill at the entry to the village. The village includes a unique 7th c grave monument, the remains of a fortress and the Bronze Age tomb filed.

Background Its origins are in the Paleolithic era, when the first settlement was established in valley, using the area caves for shelter. Later Bronze and Iron Age settlements and worship sites were built in the village, and their remains appear in the village's Christian monuments. The Hellenistic settlement was large enough to host details of Roman soldiers in their 1st c BCE invasion of the region.

Medieval chronicles list Aghitu as the first influential settlement in Siunik, both spiritually and

militarily. It has a large monastery (now gone) and a strong fortress.

The name Aghitu is thought to have come from the word "agh" or estate, and that the village was an estate for regional governors.

Aghitu Monument Its most famous sight is in the village center, by the side of the road; a striking three-story arched monument in the center of a now ruined church complex and ancient cemetery.

The 6th-7th century monument is built over a mausoleum for as yet unknown person whose visage that once adorned the eastern face is defaced, as are any inscriptions that might lead to finding out who the person is this great monument commemorates.

Built in three layers, the structure copies the form of honorary monuments throughout the Near East, with a heavy base that housed an inner chamber or mausoleum graves and taller, open second story, built with pillars that create arch work which in turn supports a third level with smaller columns and arch windows.

The second level has one central octahedral pillar flanked by two semi columns attached to the outer framing. The central column is topped by a sun disk and divides the second story into two arched windows. On its eastern façade, the now defaced figure of a crowned person is immediately above the capital of the central column.

The top level has three smaller arched windows with two freestanding columns supporting the arches. The three columns are thought to represent the Holy Trinity (or the Roman trinity of Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva in the Roman era grave monuments that predate and influenced the early Christian monuments like this).

Like the monument at Odzun, also 6th-7th cc, Aghitu's grave monument bears a great likeness to its antecedents in Rome/Syria and Greece. The early church placed great importance on these grave monuments, encouraging their construction at the places of old worship sites, and their elaborate iconography. This suggests the monuments were more than just grave memorials. They were used to transform otherwise pagan symbols into Christian totems, not at all uncommon for the times.

So few survived the ravages of time and invasions, making the monument at Aghitu, like that at Odzun and important slice of history; of a time when spiritual monuments kept one foot in the past as they transformed themselves into something new. They are emulated in the 12th-14th cc with the large number of two story grave monuments erected throughout the country, some with chapels on the upper floor, others with towering pillars like this, or khachkars.

The monument is elaborately carved, decorated with great flourish, using snakes, vines, flower blooms, pomegranates, heart shapes and incredibly detailed lace work on the capitals and surfaces. It was once painted; the remains of the red pigment that highlighted the carving is still easy to see.

The style of the lower columns especially is so monumental and detailed, it resembles the elaborate carving of columns and walls at Zvartnots Cathedral in Armavir marz; one reason its dating drifts to the 7th century—some believe the carving had to have been done by the same masters that carved the decorations at Zvartnots. The style, though, is Roman/Syrian/early Christian, which speaks to the earlier period. No one knows for sure.

The inscriptions that do survive are all from a later time, and include Arabic writing on one wall. One inscription refers to the fallen heroes of the Battle of Avarair and may point to persons buried inside the mausoleum.

The monument was once part of a large complex of buildings and other monuments, pieces of which lie scattered about the yard. This included a large 10th-11th century church.

Who is buried here? There are several schools of thought about who this monument commemorates. According to legend the monument honors two martyred brothers; some saying they were Christian martyrs, others pre-Christian holy men.

Excavations at the site have uncovered a number of early medieval tombs. The inscription to the heroes of Avarair would suggest at least some of these may be these heroes, or that the monument itself may have been erected to Vardanants, though no historical record refers to this, which seems unlikely.

Others say the inhabitants are the settlements first rulers, basing their argument on the village name (Aghitu; "agh"; estate) and that the monument was built to house family remains.

Yet another is based on the basalt sculptures and artifacts found at the site during excavations, now housed in the museum in Sissian. This says the monument is a direct descendant of Roman soldier monuments, which housed the collective bones of its fallen soldiers. It is hinted at that in fact this monument may have been erected to replace a Roman monument that sat on the spot from the 1st c BCE, when Roman legions were based in the area.

The monument appeared on the 1993 1000 dram note, and is the inspiration for the bell tower at Sardarapat.

Berdatagh Castle ruins are on a hill S of the village. There is also a **Bronze Age Tomb field** in the area.

Camping near the village and down in the gorge; **overnight** in village home (rustic; 3000 AMD for B&B us fair); **springs** in the village.

➡ From Aghitu continue SE on the Vorotan road for about 3.3 km to the turnoff for (**Vaghatin**, DD)   

SIDE TRIP: **Vaghatin** (pop. 350) is situated on top of the gorge, and has splendid views of the valley.

Camping near the village and down in the gorge; **overnight** in village home (rustic; 3000 AMD for B&B us fair); **springs** in the village.

➡ From the Vaghatin turnoff continue on the Shamb road for about 1.6 km down hill and around the cliffs into the Vorotan canyon and the R tun to **VOROTNAVANK** (DD 39.49631 x 46.12133, elev. 1471m)  

✳ **VOROTNAVANK - ՎՈՐՈՏՆԱՎԱՆԲ (Վորոտնավանք)** ▲ was built on a promontory looking out over the Vorotan Canyon, 14 km east of Sissian. The monastery has two large churches, a gavit, classrooms, refectory and monk cells, and impressive walls running along two sides of the

large courtyard, in excellent condition with impressive views of the river valley.

[PLAN]

The monastic complex was an important religious and cultural center in Siunik in the 10th-15th cc, covering the history of the kingdom between the Bagratuni and Orbelian periods.

While ancient worship temples were at the site, and an early church was erected sometime the 4th-5th centuries, when a shrine to (and in legend, by) Grigor Lusavorich was built at the site of a Pagan temple, historians do not mention the monastery until the year 1000, when the older church, S. Stepanos was built for Queen Shahandukht (wife to the Siunik Prince Smbat I, mother of his son, Prince Vasak I and grandmother of Katramide, wife to King Ashot Yerkat).

In 1006 her son, Sevada, commissioned S. Karapet ("the forerunner", i.e. John the Baptist) to the SW of the older church.

An inscription at the dedication of the monastery reads, "In the year 1000 Shahandukht by order of king Smbat built a church [dedicated to] St. Nakhav'ka Stepanos, then in 1006 Sevada, the brother of king Vasak built here a church after St. Karapet and its chapel".

Shahandukht also arranged the construction of art workshops, residences and service buildings, surrounding the complex with a thick wall. A tall stone pillar topped by a khachkar was erected in central courtyard, signifying the monastery's importance as a place reserved to invest priests and monks and to inaugurate provincial rulers.

Later magnates had the now missing gavit and other buildings in the complex.

The monastery was ruined by Seljuks in 1104 and not rebuilt until the reign of the Orbelians, when it entered its golden age; 14th c inscriptions on the walls are attributed to local rulers and the famous theologian, philosopher and later founder of Tatev's 14th c University, Hovhannes Vorotnetsi (1315-1398), lived and worked here, conducting his scientific experiments, writing theological and philosophical tracts, and teaching a burgeoning population of students. When he opened the university at Tatev, he maintained close ties with the academy here.

The monastery was completely ruined during Timurid invasions, and then abandoned in the 16th c during the forced migration of Armenians to Persia. Its 17th century revival was not successful; by the 19th c it was barely functioning and in poor condition. The 1931 earthquake completely ruined the complex, toppling the dome and walls.

Modern renovation began in the 1980s and awaits funding for completion. The **complex** includes S. Stepanos, S. Karapet, the gavit, workshops, storehouses, academy and a caravanserai.

S. Stepanos Nakhav'ka (St. Stephen the Precursor) is the oldest extant church in the complex, dedicated in 1000 for Queen Shahandukht and Prince Smbat Siuniats. It was repaired in the 13th c by Prince Tarsaiyich Orbelian. It is located behind the arcade to the SW of the larger S. Karapet.

The single nave basilica has a semicircular apse with annexes in all corners save the SW. The apse has a northern entry to the NE annex (a chapel) which also connects to the NW chamber. An opening in the southern wall leads to the SW chapel. The hall is completely without carvings or signs of decoration, a result of its repeated desecrations during 13th-15th cc. invasions.

There is another room to the west of the main hall, with a large circular opening in its floor. Locals say this was the opening to the underground tunnel that connected Vorotnavank with Vorotnaberd 2 km east. It may just as well be a well, or a fireplace for the room, which was used as a lecture hall in the monastery.

Notice the graves embedded in the floor; one bears an eye hole from its Bronze Age use as standing stone in an ancient observatory or cromlech. The stone is plain, without inscription. There is a wonderful black khachkar in the NE corner of the room and some evocatively carved grave stones nearby.

The **gallery** that runs along the southern wall is paved with gravestones of important clergy and wealthy donors, and has a row of beautifully carved khachkars on its E end.

The larger domed cruciform **S. Karapet** was dedicated in 1006, commissioned by Shahandukht's son, Sevada. It was renovated in 1315 for Prince Burtegh (Burtel) and Pughta Orbelian, and again in 1438 for Sarkis Angeghakotsi. The rectangular exterior houses a cruciform shape on the inside with annexes in the four corners. The western apse is flat walled, while the other three are semicircular.

The interior walls were decorated with wall paintings, believed to be of the same school of painters as Tatev. It too was repeatedly sacked, and the original decorative apron and other carvings are missing. As important as it was, investing clergy and governors into their offices, this would have been richly endowed with frescoes, portrait carvings, khachkars, silk damask tapestries and gold plate. Hard to imagine now but *de rigueur* for a monastery of the times intent on showing its importance.

The large dome rests on pendentives supported by the four corners of the central hall, carved to resemble thin columns. Because of its destruction in the 1931 earthquake, the drum and dome decoration did not survive and it is unclear if they were painted along with the walls.

The western **arcade** is from a later period, and wraps the southern wall of S. Stepanos as well. It is paved with gravestones of important personages, and has some interesting khachkars.

The base of the **stèle** (pillar) has been partially reconstructed on the S side of S. Karapet. This pillar designated the monastery as permitted to invest religious offices and political appointments.

The eastern façade of S. Karapet is niched, part of the buttressing system and to delineate the interior space. The niche has scalloped arches with cue-ball shaped heads at the base of the scalloping.

The stelae (pillar), dome and walls were destroyed in the 1931 earthquake and are in varying states of reconstruction. Other buildings that were in the complex and are mainly represented by their foundations or in varying states of reconstruction, include a **third church**, a **large hall** west of S. Stepanos, **administrative buildings**, a **guest house** (caravanserai) and the **gavit** west of S. Karapet.

Camping near the vank and down in the gorge; springs in the village.

➡ From Vorotnavank, continue SE on the Shamb road, and in about 1 km the main road crosses the river but a north road leads to the left. Take that L road for about 1.5 km to VOROTAN (DD 39.48742 x 46.14006, elev. 1433m) 🏠



✚ **VOROTAN - ՎՈՐՈՏԱՆ (Վորոտան)** ▲ (pop. 150) is a tiny hamlet on a wooded slope opposite Vorotnaberd (Davit Bek Castle), Vorotan springs, a medieval bridge and close to Vorotnavank. The village still dreams of a day when the authorities will complete the half-finished ruins of a spa and revive the community. Until then they scrape by on remittances from family members in Russia, or off of the once abundant nature that surrounds them. The young dream of the day they can leave and earn a living in Yerevan or Moscow.

[MAP]

No one dreams of picking up the pieces themselves and making a go of it by catering to the tourists who come to soak a bit in the hot springs below. A pity, since a B&B, café and mterek seem in tall order.

Springs The hot springs erupt at several spots on the valley floor between Vorotan and the tall bluff opposite which forms the back of Vorotnaberd. Behind the aging hulks of cement that were meant to become a small spa in Soviet days, but has since been abandoned, a small cement pool is filled with the hot waters of one spring.

The area is beautiful, with forest-laden hills, green sprouting everywhere, and wild flowers that laden the slopes with colors in the spring and bloom intermittently throughout the summer.

The area around the pool is also unbelievably littered, driving most westerners off as soon as they arrive. Locals seem not to notice or care as they rip off plastic wrappers and toss them at their feet, smiling at others all the while. This is one of the worst legacies of the country, and especially pronounced at a natural monument like this. Feel free to frown and browbeat offenders. Cleaner springs, albeit not as hot, are in the riverbed

feeding the Shamb reservoir, about 3 km away (see [Shamb hot springs](#), p. 18).

If you can bring yourself to overlook the trash to take a dip in the pool, do, the spring water is naturally pure and quite warm. Its mineral content is such that it soothes aches and pains, and is reputedly a cure for arthritic problems.

Melik Tangi Bridge About 100 meters S of the pool, following the dirt road that crosses a stream feeding the river, there is a beautiful single span stone bridge, built in 1855 for Melik Tangi. It can be seen from the pool.

The single-span arch bridge spans a rushing current and lies between two boulder cliffs, the one under the fortress with some pretty impressive rock formations. Stones for the bridge were taken from the ruins of a nearby 9th-10th cc church and cemetery.

The bridge is navigable; the narrow road on the other side hugs the cliff before opening out onto a meadow and connects with Shamb highway in about 500 meters. This side of the hill is the easiest way to reach Vorotnaberd, or Davit Bek Castle.

Vorotnaberd/ David Bek Castle

You actually pass it on your way to Vorotan village, but it is obscured on the N end by trees and the hilltop. The castle is set on top of the bluff (1461m) that towers above the hot springs and Melik Tangi Bridge, opposite the river from Vorotan village.

Bits of the outer walls can be seen from these points but there is no easy path up from here (though quite a good climb for rock-climbing enthusiasts). The opposite side of the hill, which faces the Shamb road, is both easier to use and shows more of the large fortress.

Crossing over the Melik Tangi bridge and continuing around the hill will take you to the other side of the hill; as well as backtracking to the Shamb road and continuing S about 1 km. Paths to the top begin from the road, just off of a hairpin curve.

Vorotnaberd is one of the more famous castles in Siunik's history, and very old, by some accounts dating to the Artashesian dynasty (ca. 189 BCE); by others it is a still mostly intact fortress from its

Iron Age days of glory when it guarded the entry to the valley from northern tribes.

The castle is mentioned in the "*History of Vartan and of the wars of the Armenians [written] at the request of David the Mamikonian*", by the 5th century historian Yeghishe. In it he lists Vorotnaberd as one of the castles taken from the Sassanids by Vardan Mamikonian in 450. Vartan and his cohorts used the castle as a stronghold while plotting a complete revolt against the Sassanid king Yazdgerd II, resulting in the Battle of Avarair (451), Vartan's martyrdom and Armenia's eventual autonomy under the terms of the Treaty of Nvarsak in 484.

The 13th c historian and bishop of Siunik Stepanos Orbelian called Vorotan one of Siunik's most important castles, belonging to a certain Senekerim, prince of Siunik, from 1075-1094. Protecting the border of Siunik and holding out for 50 years, the castle was finally captured by Seljuk Turks in 1104, then recaptured by Ivaneh Zakarian in 1219, who gave it to his vassal, Liparit Orbelian.

Liparit is the founder of the Armenian branch of the Orbelian dynasty, which ruled from their capital in Yeghegis (Vayots Dzor) and sponsored dozens of monasteries and universities in the 13th-14th centuries, including Noravank, Gladzor and nearby Vorotnavank and Tatev.

The Orbelians thrived during the Mongol period, and the castle was an important stronghold for their holdings. They moved south following the collapse of the Mongol dynasty, and Vorotnaberd became the Orbelian seat of power.

Somehow surviving the arrival of Timur Lenk and his Turkmen hordes in the 1380s, the Orbelians were then caught in the collapse of Timur's empire into warring factions when Smbat, the last strong family head, chose the wrong side and on the capture of his stronghold of Vorotnaberd in 1407/1410 by Kara Yussuf ("Joseph of Stone"), decamped for Georgia where he died.

The castle went from Turcoman to Safavid hands in the 16th c, where it was controlled by Meliks, petty rulers ostensibly under Persian control, until 1724, when Davit Bek and his partisan forces took it from Melik Baghu. It reverted to Persian hands after his death, but was badly damaged during the late 18th c campaigns against Siunik and Artsakh by the armies of Agha Mohammed Khan, before

returning to Armenian hands, this time under the Russian Tsar in the early 19th c. It never fully recovered, and was abandoned.

The castle is protected on three sides by the sheer cliffs overlooking the Vorotan River, and had thick walls running the fourth and longest length, with round towers and battlements. There was one entry to the castle, on the western side.

Walls remains are largely from the oldest period, and the complex includes the preserved remains of the citadel and Orbelian graves. Other stones lie scattered about the large site, as do pottery shards and sections from all periods of its use.

In medieval times Vorotnaberd was linked to nearby Vorotnaberd (2 km) via a secret tunnel that ran along the Vorotan River. It was used many times during sieges, linking the two fortresses and supplying the troops within.

Camping in the area, near the hot springs or village, and in the fortress; **overnight** in village home (rustic; 3000 AMD for B&B is fair); **hot springs** at the pool, cold water in the village.

➡ **From** --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: Shamb Hot Springs (pop.)

➡ **From** --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: Shamb (pop.)

Shamb Daisy n Sisian region, in a narrow canyon of Vorotan river Shamb reservoir with "Zangezur Daisy" was established, from where water reaches to turbines of Tatev HES through a tunnel with 18 km length. "Daisy" is a unique hydro technical structure in a form of the same flower, which is aimed for gravity removal of waters of Shamb artificial lake.

➡ **From** --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: Ltsen (pop.)

This Chapel-church was constructed in 1347, some kilometers south-east from Ltsen village, on the right edge of the forest of the road taking to Tatev. It is apparent that it has been an old sanctuary related to the worship of tree. Further for the

same purpose that chapel was constructed around the two embraced fur trees that were acknowledged saint. One wall is directly constructed on the root seen on the ground. The chapel-church was called Anapat, since it was separated, where further the pilgrim Christians used to come to pray.

Archeological Dig (see bookmarks)

➡ **From** --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: Darbas (pop.)

NOTE: Next three are worth the stop, but are often skipped for lack of drive time. Too bad, they are great village overnights with friendly people (except Lor) and beautiful camping/home stay opportunities.

➡ **From** --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: Getatagh (pop.)

➡ **From** --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: Lor (pop.)

Lor is a famous ancient settlement. First time it had been mentioned in 839. Here the Cross-statute-monument titled White or Loriki Khach built in 1271 is situated erected by governor Vorotshah in memory of his parents. Lor was a famous mediaeval educational and manuscript center. There are a number of manuscripts in the Matenadaran taken from or authorized by Lor. The school built in 1905 is still operable. In 1915-1916 the famous Armenian writer Axel Bakunts was a teacher in Lor and his story "Xonarh Axchikw/Humble Girl" had been written at that period. Lor is the birthplace of the famous Armenian poet Hamo Sahyan leaving an indelible mark on his insight and literal heritage.

➡ **From** --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: Shenatagh (pop.)

TRIP 3: TATEV ▲

➡ **From** opposite the 2nd south (main) Norashen turnout there is a dirt road (supposedly by a stone house) that leads uphill to (**Portakar DD**)

SIDE TRIP: **Portakar** is located on a hill north of the Yerevan-Goris Highway. The smooth ceremonial rock with a nipple of stone in its center dates to the Bronze Age. The name comes from its association with the human navel, though the rock could just as easily be a representation of a woman's breast. Folklore traces the monument with magical properties, mainly for barren women who would visit the rock and prostrate themselves over it in the attempt to become fertile.

Portakar Celebration Site of annual artistic rites performed by the artist, patriot of the Karabakh war, "Jungian cultural archetype genetic memory" and enfant terrible of the local art scene, Ashot Avagyan (email: ukhtasar@mail15.com, URL: <http://www.naregatsi.org/Ashot/>). A teacher of art in the Sissian Art School, Ashot is notoriously famous in local and young Diaspora circles for his annual video-art-actions every August 11, which is Navasard, the first day of the new year in old Pagan Armenian calendars. The actions are at and by the Ughtasar petroglyph fields, at Karahunj Stone Circle and at Portakar.

If you fancy joining this spiritual-art-happening, you can try contacting Globe Travel, which has arranged the trip in the past, with transportation from Yerevan: Globe Travel: #14 Sayat Nova p, tel. 010-547777, 547111, email: anna@globetravel.am or info@goarmenia.com.

➡ **From** --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: **Kotrats Standing stone & Caravanserai** (pop.)

➡ **From** --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: **Hardjis** (pop.)

➡ **From** Hardjis, backtrack to the (M2) highway, turn L (E) and go about 4.3 km to another R

(S) following the potted road about 7.5 km to an intersection, where a L takes you in about 1.6 km to Khot and a R turn leads in about 1.5 km to central **SHINUHAIR** (DD 39.43051 x 46.31910, elev. 1464m) 🏠 🗺️ 🌿

✳️ **SHINUHAIR - ՇԻՆՈՒԴԱՅՐ (Շինուհայր) ▲** (pop. 350) is set just below the rim of the canyon and above the old village, which is a 500 meter hike down on the valley floor. The old village is, like Khot and Halidzor, well preserved with streets, houses, shops and churches from its 5th c inception, with traces of the Bronze and Iron Age settlement it replaced.

The old village includes the S. Stepanos basilica church, a triple nave 17th c reconstruction of a much older church. The walls and roof sprout flowers in the summer, and the altar is dressed with village offerings; religious prints, candles and plastic statues.

The SE road from the village boasts a fine tall 16th c khachkar that is carved on the face of an old cromlech stone.

The valley floor also boasts a natural pool of water, fed by the river and a number of springs, and excellent camping territory.

Camping in the gorge; overnight in village home (rustic; 3000 AMD for B&B is fair); **springs** in the village and in the gorge.

➡ **From** --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: **Khot** (pop.)

➡ **From** --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: **Halidzor** (pop. 250) is a tiny village that sits above the ruins of its medieval self, with the remains of the foundations of its once prosperous streets, homes and churches.

The village was donated to Tatev Monastery in the early 10th c, one of the instigating acts of the royals which led to a peasant rebellion that took 15 years to subdue.

The lower village has an early Christian church that was most recently renovated in the earl 17th c when Armenians resettled the village.

About 1 km E is Vanasar, a worship site with khachkars and ancient stones, given to the 14th c architect Siranes by Prince Tarsaiyich Orbelian in payment for his work on the renovation of Amaghu Noravank after it was destroyed by the 1340 earthquake.

The valley floor is cool and tree-shaded, with natural pools and good camping spots.

About 1.5 km S of the village on the Tatev road you pass through a Bronze Age tomb field that has been converted to a picnic area. The old stones includes some from the medieval period, and a large engraving is in the area, with an inscription dating to 1898.

Camping in the gorge; overnight in village home (rustic; 3000 AMD for B&B is fair); **springs** in the village and in the gorge.

➡ **From** Halidzor take the SE road for about 1 km to a picnic area and the remains of an Iron Age tomb field, and in another -km to the top of **TATEV GORGE/ G'MBET** (DD 39.38991 x 46.27721, elev. 1352m) 🏠 🗺️ 🌿

✳️ **TATEV GORGE / G'MBET - ՏԱԹԵՎԻ ԶՈՐ / ԳՄԲԵՏ (Տաթևի ջոր / Գմբետ) ▲** begins about 3 km SW of Halidzor, where a bend in the road opens up on the wide canyon, and a left path leads in about 100 meters to a small monument poised at the top of a sheer drop, locally called the "G'mbet".

[MAP]

Built in Soviet times, the small rotunda replaces an old shrine that was once at the site, dedicated to the legendary tale of a girl who threw herself off these cliffs rather than submit to marriage to an Arab ruler. The stone structure has spectacular 270° views of the Vorotan and Tatev canyons.

From the g'mbet you can see to the East the Kapan highway that snakes its way uphill, an older highway that goes in the same direction, the border with Karabakh, and to the West, above a 200 m waterfall, Tatev vank. Well worth the short hike.

➡ **From** the g'mbet, continue on the Tatev road as it snakes its way downhill for about to the

valley floor and the **SATANIC BRIDGE** / (DD 39.39477 x 46.25800, elev. 1042m) 🏠 🗺️ 🌿

✳️ **DEVIL'S BRIDGE / HARANTS ANAPAT - ՍԱՏԱՆԻ ԿԱՄՈՐԻՉ / ՀԱՐԱՆՑ ԱՆԱԳԱՏ (Սատանի կամուրջ / Հասնց Անապատ) ▲** is located at the deepest section of the Vorotan Canyon; cliff edges are 700-800 meters above the riverbed. The canyons is also so narrow that on many days sunlight never reaches the bottom, or for just minutes a day.

10th c church Before reaching the bottom, the road curves past half-finished pensionats and the ruins of a **domed cruciform church** (DD 39.39328 x 46.26050, elev. 1073m), dated to the 10th c. The dome and end walls are missing, which serves the purpose to open up the structural lines and show just how strong this was. The longitudinal walls and central square supports are intact, and the decorated stonework, alternating white and dark stone slabs, survive, as does the floor paving and some of the inner frescoes.

Devil's Bridge At its most narrow and deepest part Devil's Bridge is situated, in a bed of mineral springs and warm water pools.

Devil's Bridge is actually a gigantic boulder that wedged into its current position after falling off the nearby cliff during an earthquake. The rock obscures the river at one point, which appears to disappear into the rocks and not surface for another 50 meters. The natural bridge is 30 meters long and 50-60 meters wide, and for much of the region's history it was the bridge used to cross the river to get to Tatev.

The huge stone also fell where a number of warm and cool springs erupt from the cliff walls, many seeming to "bleed" from the striated stone, coloring it with its mineral water. This occurs all up and down the 700-800 meter surface of the cliffs, creating myriad permutations of color and texture, along with thousand year old stalactites that hang from the boulder like larvae sacs or as wingless birds. Others are formed in countless clefts and recesses in the rock.

A short hike down the "bridge" leads to a warm water spring that feeds a manmade pool, which then runs off into a natural pool of cool water. Below that the water feeds the river, with natural

pools and remote areas for hiking, fishing and camping. Both pools are popular with locals in the summer, who fill the pools early and leave late. A nearby picnic area is also popular, and not well maintained.

A grill operates at the entry to the bridge with khorovats and kebab.

Tatevi hermitage (Harants Anapat)

Taking a path on the opposite end of the parking area, near the 1970s picnic pavilion, the river forms a natural pool, and a path on the other side of the river leads in about 30 minutes to the 12th century Harants Anapat Monastery, or Tatevi Anapat (Hermitage), where the Tatev and Vorotan gorges meet. The large walled compound is in remarkably good condition for having been abandoned and left to the elements a century ago.

The complex is walled, with arched entry to the inner yard that includes the main triple nave basilica, monk cells, university buildings and service buildings. The monastery was abandoned at the same time as Tatev, during the Timurid raids, and rebuilt in 1613, serving as a school and nunnery until it was closed in the late 19th c. The complex sustained some damage in the 1931 earthquake, but most of it survived to this day, if its stone walls and roof are mostly covered with plants and flowers.

In its heyday, Harants Anapat was a famous center of learning and culture, with a manuscriptorium that copied medieval script.

➡ From Devil's Bridge, continue uphill on the Tatev road for about – km to the village, where a L (S) turn at its entrance leads in about 200 m past a café and information center to the parking area for **TATEV VANK** (DD 39.37999 x 46.25017, elev. 1522m)    

✚ **TATEV VANK - ՏԱԹԵՎ ՎԱՆԷ (Տաթև Վանք)**  (pop. 250) is located in the village of the same name, on top of a crest overlooking the Vorotan and Tatev gorges.

PLAN

The monastery is one of Armenia's most important monuments, and a candidate for World Heritage

Status. Its history, magnificent buildings and splendid nature combine to make this one of the must-see sights in Armenia. Tatev is what most visitors call a "real monastery", meaning the first one they visit that actually looks like an old medieval monastery with fortress walls, a huge church and dozens of monk cells, halls, rooms and secret passages.

Background According to legend Tatev was named for St. Eustathius, one of 70 disciples who accompanied the Apostle Thaddeus into Armenia, and that it was built on the remains of a pagan temple. Bronze and Iron Age settlements were at the site, and a number of old burial stones have been worked into monastery structures.

Archival materials indicate the site had a small church that was frequented by pilgrims in the 5th century. From then to the 9th century the chronicles are silent, resuming their records with a property transaction from Philip prince of Siunik to David, Bishop of Siunik at the time the Bishopric was moved to the site, and began to amass relics and spiritual importance.

In 844, following the destruction of most of Armenia's ancient houses by the Arabs, when the kingdom was at its most tenuous position, the politically astute Bishop Davit called the Siunik princes together at the vank and convinced them to grant the monastery estates worthy of the relics it housed; relics that were meant to protect the kingdom from the infidels. These included relics of St. John the Baptist, S. Stephen, S. Hripsimeh, Grigor the Illuminator and a piece of the True Cross.

The ensuing wealth enabled the monastery to expand, the old church replaced with the magnificent domes cathedral of Poghos Petros in 895-906, during the reign of Bishop Ter-Hovhannes. According to the chronicles, Ter-Hovhannes was a peasant, with little hope of advancement. As fate (or God) would have it, one day when he was sent to tend the mayor's chickens by his stepmother, and when he lost the flock, rather than face her wrath, he joined the monastery, where his intellectual prowess was soon recognized and developed at the burgeoning academy (soon to be university).

His ascent was rapid and he was elected bishop by acclamation and determined to turn the monastery into a place worthy of the See of Siunik.

By the end of the 10th century the monastery had a population of 1,000 clergy and students, and controlled numerous villages, amassing great wealth.

The **future university** was also founded at the beginning of the 10th century, at the time Poghos Petros was dedicated. It was one of the oldest universities in the world, the students of which studied humanities, sciences, music, art and illustrated manuscripts. The school was of great importance, inspiring the creation of the Gladzor University in Vayots Dzor and the opening of similar academies at monasteries throughout Siunik, such as Gndevank, Tsakhatskar and Bgheno-Noravank.

Stepanos Orbelian wrote that Tatev housed 600 monks, philosophers "deep as the sea," able musicians, painters, calligraphers, and all the other accoutrements of a center of culture and learning. The monastery produced teachers and manuscripts for the whole Armenian world.

The university reached its zenith in the 14th century, when Gladzor University was closed as a result of the 1338-48 Mongol internecine wars (See below).

Tatev and the Tondrakian Heresy The Tondrakians were an heretic sect of Christians who fought for social welfare and the end of the feudal system and its perceived arm, the church.

Appearing in the 9th century, they shared their belief in social equality with the Paulicians (who also flourished in Armenia, in the 7th-9th cc), and they structured their cells along the same lines of their 7th century compatriots (they believed in the four gospels, select epistles, but refused to accept the Armenian Church fathers and the Marian title *Teotokos*; Mother of God). They believed in equality of class and between men and women. To this they added their rejection of the afterlife, immortality, and especially the feudal rights of the church.

As their popularity grew, their precepts became more radical; they denied all rights of the church, and fought for its end and the equality of all classes. At their end, radical branches professed atheism and preached class warfare. Waning in the late 10th century, they were eliminated as a threat in the mid 11th century by the Vardapet

Grigor Pahlavuni (Magistros), though social unrest among the peasants—like that in Europe and Asia at the same time—smoldered throughout the feudal period (in Armenia, until the 20th century).

In Siunik, the rebellion was sparked in 906 by the founding of Tatev, when Prince Ashot of Siunik gave a number of villages to the monastery as a gift. Flatly rejecting the edict, the peasants of certain villages (Tsuraberd, Tamalek, Aveladasht and others) began a protracted struggle against the church, which several times turned into violent uprisings.

Using forces sent by Smbat, the monastery suppressed the revolt in Aveladasht and Tamalek, but it immediately sprang up in Tsuraberd (present Svarants), whose peasants attacked and ransacked the monastery, resulting in a number of deaths. Smbat was called in again to suppress the revolt, but after a short period the peasants revolted again. Uprisings throughout the region continued with short periods of uneasy peace for the rest of the century, until King Vasak Siunik burned Tsuraberd down in 990 and slaughtered its inhabitants.

Pacifying the villages closest to the monastery, the savage destruction of the peasant village had the reverse effect desired; it led instead to the widespread acceptance of the Tondrakian principles among the lower class of all Armenia. The movement was not considered neutralized until the mid 11th century.

11th-12th cc In 1067 the St. Astvatsatsin (Blessed Virgin) tomb-church was dedicated, and the monastery began to enter its first golden period; it had a large matenadaran (library) with 10,000 manuscripts, many with miniature paintings; huge amounts of plate and gold, and one of the more important universities in the country. The monastery owned 264 villages in 10 provinces, each paying taxes to the monastery.

This came suddenly to an end with the Seljuk invasion of Siunik in 1170. Knowing the danger, the monastery sent the entire library and its treasure to Baghaberd, the strongest fortress in the kingdom, in 1169. It made no matter; the Seljuks stormed the castle and sacked it, burning the entire library of 10,000 volumes in the process.

Tatev recovered with the entry of the forces of the Georgian king led by the Zakarians, who liberated Siunik in the late 12th century, handing it to their vassals in the early 13th century. For 40 glittering years, the monastery recovered and exceeded its early period of splendor, adding treasure, education and spiritual leadership to the region. In the 13th century it is recorded to have owned 680 villages, and it added S. Grigor Lusavorich Church in 1295.

The Orbelians recognized the monastery's importance, though they showed some favor on their own lands in Vayots Dzor, moving the Bishopric to Noravank and establishing the university at Gladzor.

The monastery benefited from the Pax Mongoliana established in 1240, when the Orbelians made pact with the Khan, and its university's golden period begins at this time. As the universities of Sanahin and Haghbat faded, Gladzor and Tatev benefited, taking in the students and teachers from these august institutions.

When Mongol peace evaporated with the internecine wars of 1340-1350, Vayots Dzor was ravaged and Gladzor sacked. Protected by Siunik's mountains and strong princely families, Tatev became the largest university in Armenia, and for a few decades, home for its last golden age.

Tatev University's golden age is traced to 1390-1435, when the vardapetaran (university) maintained the last major education institution in the country. It was led in this time by two of Armenia's most erudite and talented teachers, academicians, scientists and artists; Hovhan Vorotnetsi (1315-1388) and Grigor Tatevatsi (1346-1411).

Vorotnetsi studied at Gladzor, and when it fell, he moved to Tshghuk to establish a new school. The Orbelians arranged for him to move the school to Tatev in the mid 1340s, where he quickly combined his curriculum with that at Tatev to create the new university. It became famous, attracting students from throughout Armenia and Kilikia. Using his experience at Gladzor, Vorotnetsi improved the curriculum, and regulated student admissions and teacher qualifications.

His most brilliant student was Grigor Tatevatsi, who took up his teacher's position when he died, raising the university's level to a new height. His

were the most productive years of the institution, contributing to the kingdom's culture and political strength.

An artist as well as philosopher, Tatevatsi created several miniatures for the 1297 Gospel, and is the subject of a rare portrait for the teacher and his students in the 1449 miniature in the "The Interpretation of David's Psalms". His miniatures show a new style in Armenian art, with great detail and vivid color.

The monastery lasted until the Timurid invasion in the late 14th century, setting fire to the site and plundering the treasury and library, chipping the wall carvings off the walls, where they were carried to Samarkand, ending up in a Timurid monument. The monastery must have stopped working at this point, for there are no records of it for the next two hundred years.

The monastery was revived in the 18th century, and successfully so, apparently, for it drew the attentions of Fath Ali Khan in 1782 (who, unable to take the fortified monastery, made parlay with the monks, saying he only wanted to visit the place and view the sites, and when the gates opened, instead sent his army, who stole the treasury and killed all in sight), and quickly recovering, built the beautiful Grigor Tatevatsi Tomb in 1787.

In 1796 Agha Mohamed Khan, facing a rebellion of the Siunik Meliks, attacked the monastery, again plundering its treasury and dispersing clergy.

During the Russo-Persian war, the monastery had been pillaged, the bishop tortured and carried off to Tabriz. It finally recovered after the Russians usurped Siunik following the war, though its authority over the peasantry waned as the European example set by the Russians took hold.

In 1830, two English historians visiting the site found two bishops, ten vardapets and two deacons supervising a diocese of 74 villages and 62 priests. By the end of the century, the monastery controlled less than half that much, and was finding it increasingly difficult to tax locals.

In the 1920s the Fedaiyi Garegin Nzhdeh stayed at the monastery as he planned the defense of Siunik from the Ottomans, which successfully led to the preservation of the territory in the Soviet Republic of Armenia. In the same decade the monastery was closed and the clergy finally dispersed.

The earthquake of 1931 did considerable damage, some of which has recently been repaired. It again became a working church in the 1990s and is undergoing renovation.

[PLAN]

Complex

Tatev complex is quite large, deserving of its reputation as a magnificent historic and natural sight. The entire complex is located on an impregnable precipice thrust over the Tatev and Vorotan gorges. Sheer rock walls and deep hills drop 700-800 meters to the river floor, making the site impervious to invasions on two sides. Its other sides are wrapped with thick stone walls with defensive round towers and slit windows. The complex includes the outer walls and mill, main Poghos Petros Cathedral, Astvatsatsin Church, S. Grigor Church, the Grigor Tatevatsi Tomb, the Gavazan, dining halls, university classrooms, meeting halls, kitchen, library and numerous service buildings and monk cells.

Walls

The current walls are 18th-20th century renovations of 9th century defenses, but they preserve the outline and basic structure. The round tower has narrow slits for its windows, used to ward off arrows from the enemy while allowing defenders to shoot from within. Note the protruding stones on the outer surface. These are remnants of those which ran the entire length of the wall, and open to an inner room where boiling oil could be poured onto attacking forces (I kid you not). As with other fortresses of the time, the walls were further strengthened by building offices, rooms and cells against their interior lines, creating a series of natural buttresses against battering rams. In effect the wall was the entire space between the inner and outer walls, with the living and storage quarters within.

The walls are not as tall as they once were (20 meters in parts), and are missing sections that ran around the mill, and to the canyon edge.

Outer buildings, Mill The mill is in the 13th c building that butts up against the N hill, near the E round tower. The mill has two large rooms, and a massive millstone that was used to make oil. The large fireplaces were used to prepare the oil for its final packaging. The oil made here was sacred *meron*, used in the liturgy service, and distributed

to churches and dioceses throughout the lower kingdom.

The main gateway is on the east, leading through a narrow passage to the large, broad courtyard.

Poghos-Petros Church

The main church, and the largest, is Poghos Petros, built for the ambitious Bishop Ter-Hovhannes, who was determined to create a church worthy of his position as spiritual head of the Siunik kingdom. Built at the end of Arab suzerainty and the start of the Bagratuni dynasty of kings, the church was a magnificent testament to the aspirations of the reborn kingdom (and Ter-Hovhannes' ego).

Completed between 895-906, the church was dedicated in 906, the monastery receiving grants of lands and villages from the Siunik King Smbat, who spent the rest of his reign suppressing unhappy villagers who refused to be sold.

The church is one of the largest in Armenia, a domed cruciform with four annexes in the corners. Its exterior is simply decorated, with some cross framing on the tall drum and the wall cornices.

Exterior Its most noticeable feature is the drum of the dome, which is one of the tallest in Armenia, and dominates the building. The building is designed as a cruciform, with elongated east and west halls. The four corner rooms are delineated by the exterior walls, and form the main buttressing for the large dome. The dome is topped by a 32-fold tent roof.

The north façade has **carvings** of the donors for the church; Prince Ashot, his wife Shusan, Grigor Supan of Gegharkunik, and Prince Dzagik.

On the eastern façade there are two deep triangular niches with scalloped arches that are edged with ornamented framing that includes long snakes facing either side of a human head at the top of the arch. Snakes are ancient symbols of protection to Armenians, who still use the image in their homes. The human figures are not thought to be representative, but rather angelic figures guarding the eastern end of the church, its holist spot.

Bell Tower The cathedral bell tower was added in the 17th century and forms a grand entry to the church. The structure is only partially rebuilt, and

consisted of the massive entryway you see now and gradually thinning levels above that were topped with the bell. The whole was meant to be a series of transition for the heavy (and secure) base to a central story of open arches to the top floor with eight columns and conical roof.

Cathedral Interior One of the first things you notice on entry is just large the inner space is. A cruciform on the outside, the inside more resembles a hall, with narrow niches on the north and south ends.

The great dome is placed over a wide drum, and dominates the interior space, which was once plastered and completely covered with frescoes in the 930. Fragments of the original frescoes do survive; look immediately to your left as you enter the hall; on the wall there are a couple of large hanging canvases with fragments of the original frescoes, and others are on the south, north and eastern apse walls. Some fragments are substantial enough to pick out figures.

The main apse fresco was of Christ enthroned, flanked by three prophets and four saints. The western wall was taken up by an enormous fresco depicting the Day of Judgment, and the north with scenes of the Nativity. The monumental figures are still lifelike showing complex movements (a man rising from a coffin, an angel in flight), with particular attention to garment details. Predominant colors are white, light blue, yellow and dark red.

The artists-who probably worked with European artists of the time (explaining the High Gothic and pre-Renaissance influence), were connected with the school that was founded at the monastery in the 10th c, a forerunner of the 14th c university that the monastery is most famous for. Students underwent a rigorous curriculum of humanities, sciences, music, scriptural readings, art and painting.

Another great feature of the church is the massive chandelier that hangs below the dome. It replaces an original that was the same size.

As you leave look up on the wall just by the entry, where a stone is missing. The stone looks to have been deliberately removed. The stone opened onto an alcove where part of the treasure was kept. Monks thought its obscure position would protect the treasure, but it was found out anyway.

The destruction of churches by Seljuks, Mongols and especially Timurids is primarily attributed to their search for gold, not to desecrate the sanctuary.

S. Grigor Church

The 1295 church adjoins Poghos-Petros on its southern wall. According to history it replaces an older church that was built in 836-848. The western door is framed with thick cornice work and an oriental arch.

The church is a single nave hall type with a semicircular apse and vaulted roof, typical for the period. The eastern window is shaped into two crosses with a sun disc above. The altar apron is decorated with geometric cross stitching, a nice touch for an otherwise restrained interior.

The small structure outside the church and immediately to the left of the entry is the 1787 **Grigor Tatevatsi Monument**, built over his grave. The structure is built to resemble a church, with carved archways, roof and small dome. There are a row of khachkars lining the wall.

The south wall of the cathedral shows the remains of the arching and piers for a huge **gavit** that once stood there. The gavit wrapped the southern wall of the cathedral, the western a wall of S. Grigor and part of the inner courtyard. It was destroyed during Timurid raids, and never replaced.

A number of fine **khachkars** lie in the inner yard and on the south wall of the cathedral. Some are believed to be "school projects" by students of the original school and university.

Gavazan

This unique tower was erected in 904 at its present spot, near the Bishop's residence. The eight-sided pillar of stone is topped by a capital that held a hidden hinge which in turn holds the khachkar. The metal bands are not used to keep the pillar of small stones from falling apart, but it was mortared together in its day, engineered with hinges at its bottom and top so that it could "shake". There are two thoughts about why it was built like this. One is scientific; the pillar would move during earth tremors, hence it was a monitoring device. The other says it was designed to so move (when pushed it would bend over at both hinges, and then right itself) as a defense. It is reported to have terrified Seljuk warriors who

entered the compound, sending them fleeing from the "demonic tower".

The Bishop **Residence, offices and refectory** are around the inner courtyard. Two rooms end in arched walls that open directly to the outdoors—there is no sign of there being a stone wall in these rooms, suggesting they were deliberately open. There is a large vaulted kitchen, gigantic fireplaces and a number of hallways to explore.

Climb on top for good views of the courtyard and canyon, but be careful of ceiling holes or fireplace chimney spouts flush with the roofline--they are not marked and easily hidden in the grass.

Astvatsatsin

This square 11th c church, set on top of the entryway if both beautifully proportioned and rare. The design is not typical for Armenian churches, a small vertical structure covers a domed hall with niches on all facades save the west. The dome drum has a pointed conical roof.

In some ways it resembles the small Karmravor church in Ashtarak (Aragatsotn), except it has a hall interior and its dome is much taller. The entry has a wonderfully detailed wooden door.

Other

The rest of the complex is made up of numerous **rooms** that open from the outer walls. They include the church **office** and **souvenir shop**, with a small **museum** of items found in church excavations, including the original bell; **dwellings** and **service rooms**, and a **long hall** on the northern side with an exquisite wooden carving on its western wall form an almost complete circle around these structures. They were capitolly rebuilt in the 17th-18th centuries. There were many secret depositories in solid rock.

View from the southwest Hill Hike or drive around the vank to the SW hill (under the large electric tower), about 1 km distant. The view and photo-op is wonderful.

Old Tatev Road Continuing on this road, which alternates asphalt with rock and gravel, leads in 41 km through pristine nature and a number of old villages, to Kapan (see [alternate route to Kapan](#), p. 24).

Information There is an information center/café on the side of the road as you approach the

monastery. Friendly owner is full of information, can find a spot to spend the night, arrange trips into the region, and serve hot food. What a deal!

Overnight There are several B&Bs in Tatev, with generous, friendly hosts and excellent home made food.

B&B "LENA & JOHN", Arzumanian Tamara, tel. (1-07)3-92, email: zarinev@yahoo.com, pgayane17@yahoo.com, can host two or three guests in their upstairs room with modern furniture. Hot water, breakfast. Price negotiable.

B&B "MEGHU+" ("BEE+"), Arshakian Sarmen tel. (1-07) 3-32, has a room for two or three people. Hot water, large garden and bee hives. Offers honey and herbs with the included breakfast. Price negotiable.

B&B "GAGO", Petrosian Gagik tel. (1-07) 4-48, has an orchard, kitchen, bath with hot water, toilet and two bedrooms in the house. We can host up to 10 people. Breakfast included. Price negotiable.

B&B "AT RUBIK'S HOME", Khachatryan Rubik, left entry, is located in the south part of the village, on the right side of the main street., and has three bedrooms on the second floor. There is green patio in front of the house-rounded flowers. Breakfast included. Price negotiable.

Food at the **INFORMATION CENTER/CAFÉ** on the road to the monastery from the village.

Camping in the area (near the monastery, or across the river in the opposite forest): **overnight** in village home (some rustic, 4000-5000 AMD for B&B is fair): **food** at information center/café; **springs** in the village.

Tatev Environs

➡ **From** Tatev --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: **Svarants** (pop.) See Old Tatev Road

➡ **From** --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: **Tandzatap** (pop.) See Old Tatev Road

➡ **From** --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: **Tandzaver** (pop.) See Old Tatev Road

➡ **ALTERNATE ROUTES:** You can either continue on the **Old Tatev Road** to Kapan from here (60 km of alternating dirt and asphalt roads, but navigable, see next Trip), or backtrack to and take the **paved (M2) Highway** to Goris. The sites on the Old Tatev Road can be visited from either this point or north from Kapan.

➡ **Old Tatev Route:** Use the following [Trip 4](#) for details (p.28).

➡ **Goris Route:** Backtrack to the highway, turn R (E) and continue for 7 km (past Lake Sdikh at 2.5 km) to [GORIS](#) (p. 25).

ALTERNATE ROUTE TO KAPAN ▲

From Tatev, continue south on the dirt road that is surprisingly navigable (our Lada did it in a snap), that lumbers up and over several mountain ridges and through some truly spectacular forests and valley views. Stop at any of these sites as you wish, they are all about equal in terms of ruins and incredibly friendly villagers.

You can make a loop by going down either route, returning on the other. If you are pressed for time, the Old Tatev Road—no matter how beautiful—is probably not going to fit your schedule—you need at least half a day to travel.

- ➡ **From** Tatev to (DD)
- SIDE TRIP: **Svarants** (pop.)

- ➡ **From** --- to (DD)
- SIDE TRIP: **Tandzatap** (pop.)

- ➡ **From** --- to (DD)
- SIDE TRIP: **Tandzaver** (pop.)

- ➡ **From** --- to (DD)    
- SIDE TRIP: **Verin Khotanan** (pop.)

- ➡ **From** --- to (DD)    
- SIDE TRIP: **Shrvenants** (pop.)

- ➡ **From** --- to (DD)    
- SIDE TRIP: **Nerkin Khotanan** (pop.)

- ➡ **From** --- to (DD)    

SIDE TRIP: **Dzorastan** (pop.)

➡ **From** --- to (DD)    

SIDE TRIP: **Okhtar** (pop.)

➡ **From** --- to (DD)    

SIDE TRIP: **Vanek** (before Gharatgha, pop.)

➡ **From** --- to (DD)    

SIDE TRIP: **Antarashat** (pop.)

➡ **From** --- to (DD)    

SIDE TRIP: **Arajadzor** (pop.)

➡ **From** --- to (DD)    

SIDE TRIP: **Norashenik** (pop.)

➡ **From** --- to (DD)    

SIDE TRIP: **(Jaghats** (pop.)
Rest Area

➡ **From** --- to (DD)    

SIDE TRIP: **Khaladj, Achanan** (pop.)
Copper mine on right

Road passes Khordzor (pipeline ?) before ending at the Kapan Highway (M2) at Sznak, by the airport.

A left (E) turn will take you towards [Goris](#) (p. 25) and the villages of eastern Kapan province. A right (W) turn leads to central [Kapan](#) (p. 34).

GORIS ▲

(DD 39.50346 x 46.32626, elev. 1664m)

✚ **GORIS - ԳՐԻՍ (Գրիսի) ▲** (known as Goru in ancient texts, pop. 14,500) is located in a bowl carved by the Goris River (Vararak River). Its entrance is one of the most dramatic in Armenia; the highway enters the town from the high Sissian plateau, with a petrol stop, café and large monument to the town at the crevice of the canyon walls. The road then plunges into the valley, entering the town from the NW end. Forests cover much of the canyon walls on this side, and to the E you can see in the far distance the mountains of Karabakh.

Two things are remarked most by visitors; the beautiful old town, with its black stone houses graced with wooden balustrades on long avenues fronted by the houses, trees and parks; and the tall conical lava spills (we call them “needle stones” in Texas, you probably say something else) covered with hand-carved caves in their thicker parts. These were the first settlements in the valley, and some go back to the Neolithic Era.

The town was made for graceful living, designed by a team of Germans and French engineers in the mid-to-late 19th century, when broad tree-lined avenues and city parks were the craze. Unfortunately, these extraordinarily hospitable people do not always emulate their surroundings; Goris was infamous in Soviet times for producing more than its share of KGB agents, and for reporting on their neighbors (“Gorisetsis” say this is a lie, that it was really the people of Sissian), many of whom never returned. Those times may be forgotten by the young, but they are very much alive among the old. And if you get a wary look, or (as has happened often enough to report here) the cold shoulder in asking for directions, chalk it up to times never completely forgotten; slights not quite forgiven, fear imprinted in those who lived through it all.

The town, benefiting from its location near Karabakh and the success of its citizens who emigrated to Russia and the west, has a prosperous feel about it. Local oligarchs earn their riches from the nearby mines, and from the clear-cutting of forests, something has decimated those around the town. Still, what remains is quite beautiful, especially in the near districts.

Goris has a couple of B&Bs, a fine hotel in its NW neighborhood, and some good food. For exploring this region, Goris is a good one night stop, before heading to Karabakh (49 km to Lachin, 76 km to Stepanakert) or Kapan (61 km)

BACKGROUND

The area was settled in the Neolithic Age (some say mid Paleolithic), by people entering from the Kuras Valley, following the Stone Age “super highway” of the Vorotan River. The first settlers used the extensive cave system (there said to be more than 10,000 in Goris district), in the area, the largest of which is in the river canyon in nearby old Khndzoresk. Artifacts include massive amounts of obsidian and basalt flakes and a large number of bifacial tools and weapons. Ceramic pottery and large tomb fields date to the early Bronze Age (ca. 4000-3500 BCE).

Goris is first mentioned in history as among the 23 countries conquered by the Urartian king Rusa I (8th c BCE, Teishebaini). It was referred to as the kingdom of Gorista.

Later, King Artashes II (189-160 BCE) referred to the town in an Aramaic boundary-stone in Goris.

Goris has a large number of old names (Geriusi, Gerusi, Goraik, Gores, Goru, Kiores, Kuris, Korus, Koru, Kuris, Zangezur) showing is recognition at a very early ages. There is even suggestion that Goris (and Khndzoresk) may have been the locations of the cave cities mentioned in the 401 BCE “Anabasis” (“The March Up Country”) by Xenophon (classical Historians by and large still prefer a route that goes through the cave cities in Cappadocia, but Armenians love a debate).

The most widely accepted explanation of the name says it comes from the Indo-European protolanguage words “gu’or” (“rock”) and “es” (“to be”), hence “to be [on] a rocky place”.

Medieval Goris took up the eastern end of the present town, on the left bank of the river. It was called old *Goirs* and coincided with one of the villages of *Goru* and *Goraik* mentioned by the 13th c historian Stepanos Orbelian.

The present spelling of the name is traced to 1624, in a handwritten letter by Barsegh Erets, and was one of the landholdings of the Melik Husenians in the 17th-18th cc. At the end of the Russo-Persian

war, Goris became a Russian province under the terms of the Treaty of Gulistan (1813).

The modern town was founded in 1870 as the administrative capital of a new Zangezur district on the Russian province of Elizabetpol, by initiative of the Russian General Governor and a local melik, Manuchar-Bek. Its design is attributed to German and French engineers, who enlisted the assistance of the Russian-Armenian architects Janushian, Kozlov, and Khorchenko.

When the Goris-Shushi-Yevlakh road was built in 1882, Goris became an important economic and commercial center. By the time of the revolution, it was the fourth largest Armenian town, after Yerevan, Alexandropol (Gyumri), and Nor Bayazet (Gavar). Even then, it had a population of 2400 in 1897.

Goris was birthplace for a number of Socialist revolutionaries while also supporting the efforts of nationalists to liberate the area and declare a new republic. A house in Goris was the temporary home for Andranik after Allied forces demanded he retreat from his offensives in Karabakh. He disbanded his army and left for Europe in 1919.

Armenian troops from Goris, led by Lt. Col. Arsen Shahmazian repelled a major offensive by Azeri forces in November of the same year. The Azeri push from Lachin and Hajilar was a last ditch effort to seize Zangezur, and the Goris army victory secured Armenia’s land link to Iran, as well as isolated Nakhichevan, minimizing its threat against Armenia.

Goris was Sovietized in 1921-1922 following the capitulation of the Armenian Republic and the entry of the Red Army. In 1930 Goris became the administrative center for Goris district, as part of the Transcaucasian Soviet Federative (or Federated) Socialist Republic.

One of the dark periods of the city’s history is its complicity in the work of the notorious Cheka, the secret police who terrorized Soviet Armenia. Morphing into the KGB, the secret police received a number of officers from Goris, and the city became (rightly or wrongly) known for its citizens willingly ratting on their neighbors for infractions against the Soviet Union (Nearby Sissian was known for same). No local wants to talk about this, but the rest of the country vividly remembers (and repeats) the charges.

Goris was the site of the first Karabakh Liberation movement in February of 1988, which transformed into an undeclared war that lasted until the truce of 1994. Close to the border, Goris was bombarded in the early years of the war, before the Lachin corridor was taken by Armenians in 1992.

That winter was the worst on record to date, and a combined embargo by Turkey and Azerbaijan resulted in the country’s energy crisis, when the city was left without electricity and heat. The current loss of approximately 45% of the forests that once covered the hills surrounding Goris is traced to this period, though in fact, 50% of that loss occurred after the restoration of electricity and heating fuel, initiated by local oligarchs and government officials looking to make a buck.

The Diocese was restored in 1989, and is housed at the new church in town. Famous favorite sons include the writer and Stalin victim Axel Bakunts, the writer Sero Khanzadian, the Gusan (troubadour) Ashot, and Axel’s son, Sevada Bakunts, a doctor of some renown.

HIKING

Goris is a canyon city; the Goris River Valley is rimmed by steep canyon walls, further divided by recess canyons, with their own names and hiking opportunities: Shorin, Tangun, Ghatrineh, Chopchun, D’rnigani. There are hiking trails from the NW end of town (via Verishen and Brun) to Mt. Ishkhanasar (Ughtasar) and from the SE of town to Tatev, following the Vorotan River.

NAVIGATING THE TOWN

Goris is in the (M2) Highway, 229 km from Yerevan and 132 km from Meghri. Goris is easy to navigate, with a handful of main streets running NW-SE, intersected by cross streets set on a grid. The town is 3 km from top to bottom, with the center concentrated on 5 or so main blocks.

The main N-S streets are Siunik (Shahumian) and Mashtots (Lenina) pts, with Ankakhutian between (Marx) p. Main cross streets (N to S) are Avangard, Arshakanuniner (Miasnikian), David Bek (Odshakuli), G. Nzhdeh (Frunze), Gusan Ashot, G. Tatevatsi (Sovetneri) and Narekatsi pts.

The town square is bordered by Siunik (W), Tatevatsi (S), Mashtots (E) and Gusan Ashot (N).

The church is on Mashtots near G. Tatevatsi. The local tradition museum, art museum and culture center are off of Mashtots, close to the square.

The most picturesque street is Mashtots p, where you will find the Goris Local Tradition Museum, Axel Bakunts House-Museum, Modern Art Museum and the last house that Andranik Zoravar stayed at in Armenia, from 1918-1919. You will also find at its upper end the Goris historic district.

The Shuka, culture center, a restaurant, and 19th c "Passage" are at the beginning of Ankakhutian (Marx) p. Cafes and restaurants are on Siunik and Mashtots pts.

The Bus Stop is by the Post Office on Ankakhutian p.

Hotels, guest houses and B&Bs are on Siunik (at David Bek), Avangard & Mravian pts and in the "New Arts" district on the Karabakh highway. There is the excellent small hotel Yeghegnut in the NW neighborhood off the highway from Sissian (signposted), and

SIGHTS

The **old town** is worth exploring. The town is laid out in a grid, unique for Armenian towns, which by and large grew up as they did in Europe; meandering along rivers and creeks and ambling over hills. Goris is a product of the "enlightened" views of French and German engineers who laid out the plan in the mid to late 18th c while they were building nearby mines, following the grand avenue plans then the rage in post 1840 Europe.

The black stone houses are mostly fronted by upper wooden balconies and once boasted clay tile roofs. The tall trees, parks, and wide streets create a Swiss chalet feel to this otherwise solidly Armenian town. Teens and young couples hang out in the old square, near the church, where a city park with cafes holds court on summer evenings. Another café and park are further N, by Avangard p.

CHURCHES

S. Grigor Lusavorich Church, Mashtots and Tatevatsi pts, is new church, built in the last decade or so to house the Bishopric for the district. The church is a domed cruciform, with a small yard around the building. New paintings adorn the

walls, good copies of famous manuscript miniatures.

MONUMENTS

The **Seven Springs Monument**, a popular spot to meet friends and for political rallies, is located next to the "Passage", at the head of the central park (Tatevatsi/Sovetneri p).

There are a number of **Busts** of some of the Dashnak leaders of Zangezur's resistance (1918-1921), first to Azerbaijani territorial aspirations and then to the Red Army. Bust are in the central park above the square, and feature Garegin Nzhdeh, Keri, Khachatur Malitsov, Arabo, Soghomon Teililian and Makhluto.

There is a basalt **WWII monument** in town, at Avangard and Ankakhutian (Marx) pts.

Up on the Sissian side of the rim overlooking the town there is the **Zangezur monument**, a large structure of gray basalt with good views of the town.

MUSEUMS

Axel Bakunts House Museum, 41 Mashtots p, tel. 22966, open 10-4 mon-sat, 500 AMD commemorates the life and work of one of Armenia's great prose writers of the early 20th c, and the first to be arrested (1936) and executed by gunfire a year later. Bukants was born Stepan Tevosian in 1889, in Goris to a family of peasant. In 1923 he finished the Agricultural college of Kharkov and became a senior agronomist for Zangezur region, where he began his literary career. By his death he had become an accomplished writer, scenarist, translator and public activist.

His works include "Pheasant", the story of illicit love in a feudal-like village that has been compared to the later, "The bridges of Madison County", "Alpiakan manushak" (dedicated to Yeghishe Charents' first wife), "Lar-Markar", "Namak rusats tagavorin" ("A letter to the Russian czar"), "and the film "Zangezur". In 1937 he became the literary victim of the Stalin Purges in Armenia and was executed after a 25-minute trial.

The museum has displays of Bukants writings, books, photographs and the oral histories recorded by the museum's curator, Kajik Mikaelian. The courtyard has flower species planted by the

author, including those felt impossible to grow in the region.

Modern Art Museum, Mashtots at Tatevatsi (Sovetneri), open 10-4, tues-sat, 250 AMD, has a collection of local and national artists in its small space. The works of some locals are quite good, and they have occasional exhibitions.

Goris Local Tradition Museum, 1/3 Mashtots p, tel. 22097, is a small museum showing artifacts and photographs from the districts long history. Focus is placed on pre-historic and then the struggles for Zangezur independence (mid-19th to 1921) and the Karabakh war. Goris was under bombardment during the 1988-1994 conflict, and photos show the effects.

Museum of Children's Art, 18 Mashtots, tel. 21435, is very interesting—the insights of a child always are. The museum hosts exhibitions by children, and has a permanent collection with items from local children and from the Yerevan museum. The art is lively, poignant, and innocent. Would that we all still were.

Zoravar Andranik House, 19 Mashtots p, is the site of the last Armenian home for the patriot and leader of the resistance to Turkish armies trying to invade Zangezur. The home has a large bust to the Fedaiyi leader, and the owner welcomes inquiries, proud of the house's heritage.

THEATRE, CONCERTS

Culture Palace, Tatevatsi (Sovetneri) p at Mashtots p, hosts the occasional concert and culture event.

ENVIRONS

Goris is within easy reach of a number of sights.

Shinuhair, Hardjis and Tatev are all within a short drive, or half-to-full-day hike from Goris. From Goris, you can take the Sissian Highway back to the Tatev and Hardjis roads, or go S on the Kapan highway to Karahundj (about 1 km S of town limits) where the poor Khot village road connects to the L fork after 1 km that leads in about 4 km to the Tatev road. From there is it 21 km to Tatev. See [Trip 3](#) for site details (p. 19)

The adjoining villages of **Verishen** and **B'run** have great sightseeing (Verishen has a rare 4th c basilica and a cave village; B'run has an incredible

camping/hiking area NW of town with trails leading to Ishkhanasar). Details in [Day Trip 4](#) (p. 28).

Khndzoresk is an incredible destinations, a city made entirely of caves (3000 and counting), beginning from the Stone Age, and proceeding to the 1980s. Details in [Day Trip 4](#) (p. 28).

Lake Sdikh is a popular picnic spot with locals, located not far from Goris, off the Sissian Highway. Description in Day Trip 4 (p. 28).

Sev Lich, a high altitude lake (2767.5) is located near **Mt. Ishkhanasar** (3550.4m), where a field of petroglyphs is located. Both are described in Day Trip 4 (p. 28)

Mt. Ishkhanasar expeditions can be organized by your lodging host, who will know who to ask. You need an experienced guide to take you to the field, and the lake. Figure one day and 20,000-30,000 AMD for the entire thing (up to 4 people).

OTHER

ArmenCarpet, 9 Madoian p, tel. 010-44-8661, is a working carpet workshops where they still make the carpets on looms by hand. The company was revived by several grants in the 1990s and now owned by the Megerian Carpet company out of New York (www.megerianrugs.com), which has saved this ancient artform in the town. The carpets are exquisite works of art made in painstaking fashion by women in the town. There is tock for sale or for order as well.

Goris State University, 4 Avangard p, tel. 22767, has Internet connection, and is where the young hang out. A place to meet locals, ask for advice in locating home stays, where to go, and get the scoop on what is cool in Goris.

PRACTICALITIES

IN AND OUT AND AROUND

Minivan, Bus Daily buses/minivans connect Goris (Main Bus Stop at the central post office) with Yerevan (Central Bus Station on Admiral Isahaakov; also at the corner of Agatangeghos and Khorenatsi—behind Kino Rossiya; metro: Zoravar Andranik), 2500 AMD.

Regional Minivans (Marshrutni taxis) are caught at the post office or on the Sissian-Stepanakert highway on the n edge of town. Minivans connect Goris with Sissian (350 AMD), Khndzoresk (150

AMD), Karashen (150 AMD) Togh (200 AMD), Karahundj (100 AMD), Shihuhair (250 AMD), Tatev (350 AMD).

Taxi Taxis are more expensive, but the most convenient way to travel (you decide when to go, and where). From Yerevan, taxis depart from behind “Kino Rossiya” at the corner of Agatangeghos and Movses Khorenatsi. Taxis charge around 18,000 AMD for up to 4 people. Call taxis are cheaper, charging by the km. There are a number of taxi services in town—all provide this service.

In town taxis proliferate in the center. Typical fare is 500 AMD anywhere in center, or 100 AMD per km plus extra to wait. Taxis are useful in traveling the area, but negotiate; they know the routes very well and that tourists can pay more. Offer them 100 AMD per km plus an extra 1000 AMD to wait 30-45 minutes. Local call taxis are everywhere, their numbers advertised on the street.

Car Goris is on (M2), which connects Goris with Kapan (61 km), Kadjaran (87 km) and Meghri (132 km) to the south. The (M2) connects Goris with Sissian (32 km), Jermuk (117 km), Vaik (101 km), Yeghegnadzor (116 km), Areni (130 km), Ararat (192 km), Artashat (210 km), and Yerevan (229 km).

Petrol and gas stations are on the highway at both ends of town.

COMMUNICATION, ETC.

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

Phone, telegraphs

Area code is 284
Long Distance: 0284 + local number
From abroad: + (374) 284 + local number
Mobile Phones: 091 Armentel, 093/094 Viva Cell

The town is covered by both Armentel (19 Ankakhutian p) and VivaCell mobile phone services. International calls can be made at the *Central Post Office*, 19 Ankakhutian p. [See HayPost \(HyePost\) site for list \(www.haypost.am\)](#) The post

office has trunk line phone service, sells phone cards and can send telegraphs.

Internet

Arminco (office in Kapan: 1/61 Aram Manukian p, tel. 285-62381, 285-67923, email: balasanyan@arminco.com), provides dial up and soon to come Wi-Fi service. An *Internet café* is on the square, downstairs of Zakeh Shop. Your lodge may have connection. *Teachers House Goris*, 32 Gusan Ashot p, tel. 24000, 22319, email: teachers@freenet.am) has an Internet Center and enjoys meeting visitors.

Bank, Exchange

Money wires and credit card advances can be done at banks; ATMs and exchange at banks; exchange points in town will change money at competitive rates.

Armeconombank, 4 Mashtots p., 11 Tatevatsi p.
Ardshininvestbank, 11 Tatevatsi p

Shopping

There are *mterks* and kiosks throughout town, congregated on Siunik, Mashtots and Ankakhutian pts. The Shuka is at the S end of Ankakhutian.

Film, etc.

Film and batteries can be found at *mterks*. Batteries are unreliable for digital cameras, bring your own.

Pharmacy

Apotekas (Armenian: deghatuner) can be found in the center of town.

Hospital, Polyclinic

For a medical emergency, dial 103. If possible go to Yerevan for medical service or ask at your lodging for recommendation. There is a central hospital and polyclinic in Goris.

OVERNIGHT

Overnights can be had at local hotels, B&Bs and at home stays or apartments. For the latter, ask around when arriving, and expect to pay 3000-5000 AMD for the privilege.

YEGHEGNUT HOTEL, NW neighborhood, tel. 24657, is easy to find as you enter the town from the Zangezour monument on the Sissian side of the canyon rim. As you descend, look to your left, for

a sign marked “Yeghegnut” at a left road that inclines to a clearing and the hotel. This is a find in Armenia! The very clean rooms are doubles, triples and quads with shared baths, or two Lux with private baths. Breakfast included, hot meals on order. The triples and quads are treated like dorm rooms if they fill up, so rent all the beds if you want privacy. SGL/DBL/QUAD at 5000 AMD per bed; Lux (2 single beds) at 15,000 AMD.

HOTEL GORIS, Mravian p, tel. 21667, is a classic Soviet hotelier. Linen is clean, rooms dingy, facilities not clean, no toilet seats. Cold water, tipidelniks on request. Upper floors inhabited by refugees, can be noisy but an excellent chance to meet with locals and see how they struggle to survive. Breakfast not included. DBL/LUX at 4500/7200 AMD.

HOSTEL GORIS (MOTEL GORI), Mravian p next door to Hotel Goris, is far cleaner with hot shower, satellite TV and breakfast in their \$24 (8000 AMD) per person charge.

B&B KHACHIK MIRAKYAN, 13 David Bek p, tel. 21098, email: mirakyanbb@rambler.ru, has 3 bedrooms to let, a bathroom and a small common area with TV (satellite) and a kettle, tea, Nescafe and sweets. The balcony has a great view of the town and far hills, and is used in warm weather for meals. Breakfast included, other meals on order (around 2500 AMD each). 8000 AMD

B&B VIVAS, 65 Siunik p, tel. 24812, 091-333262, email: azo2004@rambler.ru, URL: <http://www.vivas.am>, has three rooms to let, with shared bath (one bedroom has its own bath), living rooms, garden, satellite TV, hot water, and pleasant hosts. Breakfast included, other meals on order (they have a small café). DBL/DBL + couch/QUAD at 12000/16000/28000 AMD. If not full, you might bargain a bit on the price.

MIRHAV HOTEL, Newly built hotel with 15 rooms. Built by Goris traditional architectural style. Nicely decorated with a great restaurant. Large garden overlooking the river, rooms accommodate 2-3 people each, 37 in total. Amenities include hot showers and heat. Expensive for Goris with SGL/DBL/ TRP/ QUAD from 14,5000/ 19,500/ 25,000/ 30,000 AMD.

Restaurant-Hotel, at the entry to Goris (Sissian side), tel. 26540,

FOOD & DRINK

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

Goris is not really an eating out town, except for a couple of oligarch places that are not comfortable to be in when the local mafia are at play, and far from the center of town (one is on the gorge overlooking Khndzoresk) If you stay, the most wholesome, affordable meals are at your lodging.

There are a number of *CAFES* in Goris; a large one is by the WWII monument, Siunik and Avangard, and others in the long park off of Siunik and by the Square.

A *RESTAURANT*, tel, 24540, 26637, is near the square, caters on weekend to celebration and wedding parties.

SKS, downtown, tel. 24200,

A *RESTAURANT-HOTEL*, at the entry to Goris (Sissian side), tel. 26540,

There are *KHOROVS GRILLS* on Siunik—very tasty and reasonably priced.

There are food shops in town as well.

TRIP 4: AROUND GORIS ▲

➡ **From** --- to **VERISHEN** (DD 39.53368 x 46.31487, elev. 1612m)    

✂ **VERISHEN - ՎԵՐԻՇԵՆ (ՎԵՐԻՇԵՆ) ▲** (pop. 1000) village adjoins Goris on its NW end. It is reached by bypassing the Kapan turnoff on the NW edge of Goris (after descending into the valley), continuing forward on the now Stepanakert Highway. About 50 meters past the bridge just past this turnoff, a L (NW) turn takes you to the village center in about 1.5 km.

The small village has a number of **cave dwellings** on the needle stones and limestone hills to the NE, and in its center, the **4th c St. Hripsimeh church**, the largest and oldest extant hall church in Siunik, and one of only a handful of surviving 4th century churches in the country.

The church is uniquely built with a protruding, rounded eastern apse that was clearly added after its original use as a pagan temple was no longer needed. The original building is Hellenistic in design, with 4th century carvings on its walls and framing. Late medieval (1621) renovations placed khachkars into column foundations and the corner walls of the building.

There are also some cyclopean stones in the outer walls as well, which are otherwise made from rough stone. The original corners of the temple can be seen at the point where the protruding round apse begins.

The large basilica once boasted an equally large southern portico; the remains of piers for the vaulting are on the southern walls of the church. And paving stones lies scattered among the Bronze Age and medieval grave stones that are all around.

2007 excavations uncovered a number of **phallus** and **standing stones** from the Iron and Bronze Ages, as well as a northern portico with **Greco-Roman column bases and capitals**. Among the Bronze Age stones there are those with periscope holes along with others with vertical eyeholes; all that are left of their use as observatory stones in a cromlech that was here or nearby.

Excavators also uncovered a number of human skulls, some bearing signs of violent deaths. The skeletal remains are thought to be medieval monks or priests who were often buried in graves adjoining the church walls.

Inside the single apse hall with its massive, thick walls and six huge transverse arches, excavators have carefully placed several khachkars that were found at the bases of interior columns and under the portico. The stones are remarkably well preserved; giving some idea of how clean they must looked when newly minted. One large khachkar that was found at the base of a column wall is inscribed “Թ Վ ջ ղ թ” (In the year 999, or 1550 in our calendar).

There are a number of grapar inscriptions on the church walls.

On top of the mountain ridge to the W of the village you can still see the line of an ancient canal that was built to bring water from Verishen’s Vararaki Springs to the N. An inscription stone there is dated 1294, in Armenian grapar with Persian above, marking its reconstruction to carry the spring waters to Tatev’s estates, some 20 km away.

On a hill among the N village cave dwellings there is a Tukh Manuk; **Nora Knunk** (“New Baptismal”); a cave shrine from the pre-Christian era. The small shrine is enclosed with thick walls on three sides embedded with 4th century cross stones and medieval khachkars. Look at the NE corner for one Bronze Age stone carved with rustic crosses that still shows its ancient eye hole.

Inside the western end of the hall there is a stone enclosure against the rock wall. This covers the pagan spring that once spring from this site, raison de être the name “Baptismal”. Rock-cut steps to the west lead to the upper hills and a number of cave homes.

The old village has a number of **Iron Age graves**, as well as traces of the ancient settlement.

Camping in the area, or on the N road towards Sev Lich; **overnight** in village home (rustic; 3000 MAD for B&B is fair); **food** in adjoining Goris; **springs** in the village.

➡ **From** --- to (DD)    

SIDE TRIP: Brun (pop.)

➡ *From Brun, take the dirt road that heads into the NW valley, where another path climbs the mountain ridge and leads in about 18 km to **SEV LICH** (DD 39.59937 x 46.22033, 2658m) An alternate route is to take the northern road out of Verishen, for about 6 km of twists and climbs, to a L (W) dirt path that navigates its way through mountain chains for about 12 km to **SEV LICH** (DD 39.59522 x 46.24169, elev. 2658m)  *

✂ **SEV LICH- ՍԵՎ ԼԻՃ (ՍԵՎ ԼԻՃ) ▲** is located NW of Goris, reached from jeep (Vlis) only roads departing from the (M2) between Goris and Sissian (about 4.7 km W of the Hardjis road), or, more easily from Goris, via a road at the top of Brun village or taking the asphalt/rock road N of Verishen to a western road that leads to the alpine lake.

The Nature Reservation was established in 1987 and covers the crater and eastern slope of the Mt. Mets Ishkhanasar (3550.4m), 3 km east of the crest at an altitude of 2658 meters. It includes the alpine lake, 176 ha of territory and around 100 meters wide. The site protects a unique alpine watershed with plant and animal communities of volcanic origin, including 102 varieties of plants, clover spreads and prickly and branchy bushes.

Camping at the lake (alpine territory—nights are cold); **springs** at the lake.

*From Sev Lich, take dirt paths and hiking trails that reach in about 3 km the crest of **MT. ISHKHANASAR** (DD 39.58460 x 46.17629, elev. 3550.4m).*

✂ **MT. METS ISHKHANASAR - ՍԵՃ ԻՇԽԱՆԱՍԱՐ Լ. (ՍԵՃ ԻՇԽԱՆԱՍԱՐ Լ.) ▲** (3550.4m) is poised at the Armenia-Karabakh (Azerbaijan) border, about 15 km NE of Sissian and 15 km NW of Goris. Though 15 km as the crow flies from either town, the mountain is difficult to get to, requiring a Jeep (Vlis), a good guide, and patience. It is 90 minutes from the (M2) highway north of Sissian, and about the same from Goris.

The mountain is snowbound between October and May, and best visited between June and August,

when glaciers are at a minimum. The view is magnificent from here, taking in the entire Siunik and Zangezur basin.

Camping at Sev Lich (alpine territory—nights are cold); **springs** at Sev Lich.

➡ **From** --- to (DD)    

SIDE TRIP: Lake Sdikh (pop.)

➡ **From** --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: (Khnatsakh, pop.)

➡ **From** --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: (Khoznavar, pop.)

➡ **From** --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: (Azatashen, pop.)

➡ **From** --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: (Hartashen, pop.)

➡ **From** --- to **KHNDZORESK** (DD 39.50379 x 46.43628, elev. 1437m)    

✂ **KHNDZORESK - ԽՆԶՈՐԵՍԿ (ԽՆԶՈՐԵՍԿ) ▲** (pop. 1000) village is now on the upper rim of Khndzoresk valley, a deep crevice in the mountains with forests on the valley floor and thousands of cave dwellings in its needle stones and in the soft limestone canyon walls.

To reach the old village, take the new village main road to the end, where a right turn begins the descent into the valley. Follow that road to the SE end of the village, where a dirt path winds its way to the valley floor (Jeeps). There is a high point that you can stop at and hike down (15 minutes down, 1 hour up), or, if you have the vehicle that can manage the steep hills, drive down and up in good weather.

No one knows when the first people settled at the site, but the oldest sites found were Neolithic, is the valley floor. Excavators found numerous bones, pottery pieces and utensils from the Neolithic, Bronze and Iron Ages. A number of pagan worship sites were found, and a temple to Anahit is believed to have been a feature of the Hellenistic village.

Most of the caves were carved in the late Iron to medieval period, with the greatest spurt of growth beginning in the early medieval period (5th c), continuing until well into the 19th c. By 1913, three thousand families lived in valley caves, the largest village in Eastern Armenia.

The origin of the word "Khndzoresk" is also unknown, though most accept it comes from the Armenians word Khndzor, or apple. The apples are famous in this part of Armenia. The sound "esk" is not well understood, and another theory says the name is actually quite old, and was originally "Khor Dzor", or Deep Canyon, and gradually over time was phonetically changed to its current Khndzoresk. This is entirely possible if you listen to local's thick accent, a sometimes indecipherable brogue.

The old village was elaborate planned and well made, with surprisingly large homes carved deep into the limestone walls, and additional front rooms, windows, doors, front porches and small gardens in front.

Many homes were stacked on top of each other; one neighbor's garden on the roof of the lower. They were ingeniously rigged with trap doors and interconnecting tunnels, so that in time of Turkish and Persian raids, families could escape into lower houses, warning those below and all escaping further down. One set of houses is reputed to have permitted the entire neighborhood to escape in this fashion to the valley floor where hidden caves sheltered them until the invading forces left.

This might explain why villagers refused to move into the upper rim after threat of invasions passed; in 1913, 3000 families still lived in cave dwellings. A more probable reason is the natural thermal properties of cave dwellings; they maintain a constant temperature and are much easier to heat in the winter. It was also simply easier to stay put than to undertake the extravagance of constructing an exposed house up above. Habits do die hard.

Valley sights

Other than the 1800 remaining cave dwellings, some of which are still used as barns, and others boasting the wallpaper and window casings they had when finally abandoned in the 1980s, the valley has several sights worth exploring, including four churches and a memorial to the 18th c Fedaiyi Mkhitar Sparapet. To fully explore the site, plan on at least 3 hours of steep trekking.

From the main entry into the valley, the dirt path passes a large needle stone with dwellings and after a couple of hairpin turns, passes a picnic area, and not far away the 4th c **S. Tadevos cave church**, partially hewn from the mountainside and set upon a narrow shelf of land.

The single nave hall church has an eastern horseshoe-shaped apse with flanking annexes. It is supported by a row of arches supported by wall piers, and was once plastered and painted with biblical imagery. The outside, southern portal is framed with a later decorate arch, once painted red. The baptismal inside has an oriental peaked arch, suggesting it is from the Persian period.

The large triple nave **St. Hripsimeh** is on the valley floor, close to a spring feeding into the river, on a low shelf of land. The church is hidden by trees and shrubs that hug its walls on three sides, and so hard to find unless you are on the lookout. By taking the main road to the valley floor, passing the large two story building with wooden balcony supports to the river's edge, cross the river and take the nearest path that hugs the riverbed, heading SE (away from the large building), and after a 100 meters or so, and under a crown of trees, you will see the roofline of the church to your L, on the other side of the river. Cross over and find the path that leads to the small church yard.

The church is quite large with a spacious hall made from tall columns and large windows on the south wall. The window frames and main entry are products of its 1665 renovation, described in an inscription over the now-closed western entry. The church once boasted a finely carved wooden door and glass windows. The interior walls were plastered and painted with religious scenes on the apse. The western end has an interesting stone construction; a closed room that once had a honey loaf roof. Structures like this can also be found in the west end of a cave church at nearby [Verishen](#)

(p. 28) and in the Tukh Manuk at Aramus village in Kotaik marz. They are believed by some to be associated with more ancient worship rites at the site, their western orientation hallmarks of their pre-Christian origins, when the main altar was placed on that side of the sanctuary.

Cross back over the river and follow the path(s) that continues SE and uphill hugging the canton hills and in about 100 m you will come across the **Spring Cave** (DD 39.50123 x 46.43169, elev. 1300m), a still sacred site underneath a medieval archway. The springs seem to bleed from the canyon rock, filling several stone troughs before running over the path and down the canyon hills to the river.

Several paths depart from the springs, one going uphill to the canyon rim and a modern restaurant, another that hugs the step hills and continues SE, through a small graveyard with medieval stones and then narrows and bends E to pass under a low shelf of huge rocks. The views from this path are spectacular, taking in huge caves on the other side and a waterfall over tumbled down rocks.

The path lends at a stone doorway onto a small yard with the roofless **Anapat (Hermitage) church** and gravestones. The early Christian church is single nave and mostly in ruins, with greenery springing from the stone walls. In front, there are two large rectangular grave stones, the one in front is for Mkhitar Sparapet, a leader of the resistance against Persian and Turkish forces in the early 18th century.

Continue exploring the valley at your leisure; there are almost two thousand caves, foundations of other houses, natural caves, hundreds of springs and breathtaking scenery. Locals still use the paths on their errands, most with donkeys to carry the firewood and heaping mounds of mulberries, blackberries and herbs they collect in the summer months. All are friendly, and welcome conversation, as well as sharing their collective past.

Internet The Secondary School of Khndzoresk has an Internet Computer Center, and if not busy they may allow you to use their connection.

Camping in the valley: overnight in cave home possible (ask in the new village first) or village home (rustic, 3000 AMD for B&B is fair): food at

village kiosk and mterks: **springs** in village and on valley floor.

➡ From --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: **Karashen** (pop.)

➡ From --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: **Tegh** (pop.)

➡ From --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: **Aravus** (pop.)

➡ From --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: **Kornidzor** (pop.)

➡ From --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: **Karabakh** (pop.)

TRIP 5: VOROTAN ▲

➡ From Goris, take the south main street (M2) for about 3 km to the R (W) entry to **KARAHUNDJ VILLAGE** (DD 39.48071 x 46.35886, elev. 1271m) 🏠 🗺️ 📶 🌐

✳️ **KARAHUNDJ VILLAGE - ԶԱՐԱՀՈՒՆՉ ԳՅՈՐԴ (Զարահունջ գյուղ)** ▲ (pop. 600) is just south of Goris, and is probably best known for its killer vodka, made from mulberries (“tuti oghi”), but there is more than drinking to be had in this quaint village of friendly folks, including a fantastic find in the upper limits, where Bronze Age to medieval rock paintings cover the lower surface of a sacred fallen boulder.

Work your way through the lower village to the center, which is a widening in the village road next to the post office and an old store.

The old center is made of beautiful old houses running along its meandering streets, and it has a number of large stone ruins from the medieval period. The center has a narrow main street with the **S. Hripsimeh church**, a triple nave basilica rebuilt in 1675, using stones from the previous 5th century church and old khachkars in the walls. It has a finely carved archway over the southern entrance, with two 10-11th century khachkar on either side of the door. Interestingly there is what looks like a sacrificial stone in the middle of the abandoned hall, which is otherwise strongly rebuilt, its walls plastered and painted in white. The central stone is in the same position as the ancient boulder uncovered in the same position in the church at [Yeghvard](#), near Kapan (p. 33).

The church is not yet working again, which may well explain the stone, though several elder villagers were quite up front with us about their socialist tendencies and just how proud they are of the 1917 revolution, and just how rotten they think the current regime is for their village. The younger members looked on these vociferous comments with either red-eared embarrassment or with a snicker. Such be the generational moments in rural Armenia.

Outside the church there are two large gravestones; black and white, resting on a ledge. The white is for a local named Tzaturian, who left the village in the 19th century for Baku, and struck it rich in the oil fields. He was reported to have

brought suitcases full of cash whenever he came back to his home village to visit. He died in 1899, but not before he had left the village 2 million dollars in his will, to be kept in a European bank and distributed to the village in 2003. This is not a joke: according to villagers the money was duly dispersed by the bank, but the current government had it delivered not to Karahundj here, but to Karahundj village in Karabakh, where it disappeared. No wonder they are fuming and wishing for a new revolution.

Other than the charming stone houses and flower gardens, the village has a number of **cave dwellings** in its canyon walls, many with doors and windows.

The most fascinating sight in the village—and one of the most important archeological finds in the marz—is “**Yot Barur**” (7 cradles), where a huge boulder separated from the canyon and crashed to its current location (DD 39.47436 x 46.3555, elev. 1329m). Also called “Sh’rani Tak” (under the waterfall), after a large spring that once ran over the stone (a small stream still does at springtime), the site has been sacred from primordial times, its mythology mixed between recent (medieval) and ancient (Stone Age) traditions.

The myth is of seven babies who were crushed by the stone when it fell, their deaths causing the sacred spring to run. Locals are vague about the details—whether the babies were recovered, why they were there in the first place, and why the boulder became so sacred that Neolithic to Medieval artists began drawing pictures on the stone. But the villagers are not native to the village (they are descendants of 1828 immigrants), and so their collective memory is not deep.

The rock is fenced in by a village beekeeper. If he cannot be found, villagers will help you to climb through the small bee keep to get close to the stone. What greets you is absolutely amazing; the entire undersurface of the gigantic boulder is covered with Neolithic, Bronze Age and medieval stone carvings, from the primitive representations of hands, falling stars, armed men and petroglyph symbols for settlements, water, falling stars and animal hunts; to the later, medieval representations of horsemen and obvious attempts to change the Neolithic images to Christian symbols, deliberately carving crosses in the place of swords, phallus and horsemen.

There are sun symbols, a rudimentary sun clock, and a number of hunters with bow and arrow in one hand and oversized extended fingers on the other. This is a recurring theme, the fingers thought to represent to some the number of kills in a hunt (though all of these hands have 5 fingers), to others showing prowess. The number “5” in sacred numerology is made of two unequal parts (2 and 3), and so was the harbinger of ill will. At the same time it represented man (one who stands on his own); handcraft or work; the pentagram.

Locals report finding a number of bones, stone tools and pottery fragments in the soft floor beneath the rock, showing it to have been an ancient burial ground, perhaps the origins of the 7 cradle myth. Seven is a mystical number in ancient mythology, associated with celestial beings and spiritual forces. The combination of 7 buried “infants” (innocents, or the symbol of new life) with a gushing spring (also life), is a powerful mythological symbol. Add to it the numerous Neolithic images of hands, stars and other cosmic symbols, and this was an important pagan site, akin to the Vishap spring stones of yore, with a powerful message for the ancients.

Other
There is a **great khachkar** on top of the mountain crest (Mt. Blur, 1686.7m) above the village, near at a Tukh Manuk and substantial **Bronze-iron Age fortress** ruins. Both are reached by Jeep or a 1 hour step hike.

More **khachkars** are in the village, as well as 4th-5th century church ruins among the cave dwellings to the south of the upper village.

Karahundj vodka is powerful and famous. Each home has a distillery, and the sweet smell of boiling mulberries and their fresh spirits permeates the village air in the late summer, when every home prepares for the coming winter by bottling the potent stuff. The vodka is considered one of the best in Armenia, and connoisseurs of the spirit will plan their travel to stop by the village to buy a few bottles. If you ask, a local may show you the process and even treat you to a glass—beware that fresh from the still!! It is sweet to the tongue, but fire going down, and at 80 proof, it is powerful stuff!

Camping near the village or across the river: **overnight** in village home (rustic; 3000 AMD for B&B is fair); **food** at Misha Mot restaurant just S of

the village on the (M2) highway; **springs** in the village.

➡ From --- to (DD 39.443247 x 46.39216, elev. 928m)

SIDE TRIP: Rock Arch (pop.) Old Bridge

Arch and caves

Misha Mot restaurant

➡ From the rock arch, continue S on the (M2) for about – km and through the bombed out Azeri village of Zivazli to the base of the Vorotan Canyon (DD 39.4274 x 46.373, elev. 731m) 🏠 🗺️ 📶 🌐

✳️ **VOROTAN CANYON - ՎՈՐՈՏԱՆԻ ՁՈՐ (Վորոտանի Ձոր)** ▲ is Siunik’s crowning natural jewel, “Armenia’s Grand Canyon”; a spectacular canyon carved by a river that begins in the ice-fields of upper Siunik and courses 119 km through the heart of the marz, carving rugged canyon walls more than 100 meters deep and 1 km wide at its widest point.

[MAP]

From its headwaters on Mt. Davagioz, the small stream quickly gathers waters from countless springs and melting snows to feed the large [Spendiarian Reservoir](#) (p. 3) west of [Sissian](#) (p. 6) and the first of a number of deep canyons that pass Stone Age cave settlements, Bronze Age fortresses and shrines, Iron Age cities and medieval fortresses, monasteries and villages. The river widens on the Sissian plain, dividing the town into its north and south districts.

Just to the east of Sissian, the river enters its most breathtaking part; a series of fantastically deep canyons that divide into needle mountains and island fortresses, with spectacular multi-colored canyon walls and teeming waters that in the spring make up one of Armenia’s two white-water rafting courses—as yet unbeaten by European whitewater rafting fanatics.

The waters pass [Vorotnavank](#) (p. 16) and the David Bek fortress and the hot springs at [Vorotan village](#) (p. 17), then feed [Shamb reservoir](#) (p. 18), before beginning their final course through the

river's most rugged territory. Passing the stunning canyon below Tatev, the Vorotan continues another 13 km to the spot you are at now, below the massive hydroelectric plant.

The Vorotan is a left tributary of the Arax River, and it travels for 59 km through Karabakh before emptying into the Arax.

The Vorotan **hydroelectric power station** complex consists of 3 power stations on Vorotan river. The total capacity is 405.4 MW, annually the medium planned production is 1.16 milliard KW per hour. The highest-pressure station is this 3rd that you see now, named Tatev hydroelectric power station. Other stations are at the Shamb and Spendiarian reservoirs. The plants are an engineering feat; begun in 1954 and finished in the 1980s. When the energy blockade began in 1988, these three stations saved the country from plunging into complete darkness. There are further plans to increase production using the hydro power in the area, though water is already draining into Lake Sevan to save it from ecological disaster caused by hydro-exploitation there.

Hiking is excellent from this spot; back into the forests you just came through; following the river to the west to Tatev (13 km to Devil's Bridge, 20 km to the monastery) and Shamb reservoir (another 13 km); and to the north to Karahundj village (9.5 km) and Goris (12.5 km), or on top of the north rim, to Khot (11 km on a fantastically twisting and turning road with amazing views), Shinhair (1.5 km W of Khot), Halidzor (another 3 km) and Tatev (19 km from Halidzor). These are challenging climbs, with steep climbs.

Food and overnight

There are several "Haikakan Khohanots" (Armenian cuisine) cafes on the highway, opposite the hydroelectric plant, a couple with rooms to let (5000-10,000 AMD). Basic amenities, not so clean, but a blessing if you are caught without a place to stay.

Camping in the gorge and nearby forests; **overnight** at restaurant-hotel across from the hydroelectric plant; **springs** in the area.

➡ **From** --- to (DD 39.38825 x 46.36025, elev. 1488m) 

✚ **BGHENO NORAVANK - ԲԴԵՆԻ ՆՈՐԱՎԱՆԿ (Բդենի Նորավանք)** ▲ is located in a small clearing south of the Vorotan River, in a place called "Djokhadzor" (Hell's Canyon), off the village road to Bardzravan. The right turnoff for the vank is about 3.5 km from the (M2) highway, just as it bends to the left. The path to the vank is about 100 m from the village road.

Bgheno Noravank was one of the most important religious sites in the Siunik kingdom, a summer residence for Siunik's Bishops and an important university, sculptural school and manuscriptorium which produced some of the country's most beautiful miniatures.

The monastery was built at the site of an early Christian church that may have originally been a pagan temple; Bronze and Iron Age gravestones can be found in the area and there are Stone Age settlements in the adjoining river valley.

In the 10th century this was replaced with the monastery, the clergyman Stepanos commissioning the construction of the church, a hall and a leper-house in white limestone in 936. A century later, the Siunik king Grigor I ordered the church to be rebuilt using blue-gray basalt (1056-1066). Its dedication is normally attributed to 1058.

Later generations renovated and added to the building, including two rooms that were attached to the main hall, and a number of decorative flourishes on the walls and columns.

Bgheno Noravank was one of the more important universities in 10th c Siunik, after Tatev and Tsakhatskar. Education included study of the humanities, arts and scriptures, and both a sculptural and manuscript school developed from the monastery's works.

The sculptural work includes the highly decorated framing and columns on the church walls, as well as a number of exquisite grave stones and tablets carved with portraits of saints and biblical scenes.

The **manuscriptorium** produced thousands of manuscripts, though almost none survived the ravages of the Seljuks, Mongols and Timurids.



One that has survived is the 10th c **Echmiadzin Gospels** (Yerevan Matenadaran, MS2374), created by the scribe Hovhannes for his patron Bishop Stepanos. The book was finished in 989 at the monastery, and has become the most famous manuscript in the Matenadaran collection. The book has 232 extant leaves and is bound by two carved ivory plaques showing the Virgin Mary and scenes of the nativity. The binding is probably 6th c, and made in Byzantium. Also bound with the book are leaves (fols. 228-229) with miniatures dating to the late 6th—early 7th century, the so-called 'Final Four Miniatures'.

End The vank was repeatedly sacked by Seljuk, Mongol and Timurid raiders and abandoned in the mid 14th century. The forest gradually overtook the site, and it was not rediscovered until the early 20th century, when the early Soviet writer Axel Bakunts discovered it on one of his agronomist treks into the forest, in the 1920s.

Complex What remains of the monastery are the reconstructed church and foundations and ruins of other buildings to the north, some of which are from the original church precincts.

The original **hall** is very small; its sacristy about the same size as the sanctuary at Garni. The building' rectangular shape reinforces this impression. The newer parts are the western enclosed portico and the two tiny chapels on either side of the main hall.

The interior is rectangular with a semi-circular apse on its east end. The eastern window is larger than normal, and the large stone in the place of the altar is rough cut, suggesting it may be from a vishap or other pagan stone at the site, not uncommon in early churches.

There are decorated archways on either side of the hall that lead to the annexes, believed to be from the 11th century renovation, the annexes from the 13th. At the top of one of the southern arches you can see the remains of the original 936 wall, which was later cut when the adjoining annexes (narrow halls used by manuscript artists) were added in the 11th c.

The decoration is deeply cut, with a predominance of pomegranate designs in a sort of tree-of-life motif on the inner face of the arch columns, and floral motifs on the arch framing. In fact, the tree of life motif is dominant in the frontal carvings for columns and framings throughout the building, in its inner hall and on the outer portico.

Column bases are also unique, in multiple colored stone and in their carving styles. Inner columns have narrow shelves and sharp edges, while outer are round with geometric sun and water imagery.

In the upper corners of the hall there are **portrait carvings** from the 10th c. One depicts Christ flanked by angels and two others are of saints and

The western doorway is especially elaborate with bands of geometric, vegetal and swastika designs interlaced with crosses and rosettes.

The outer walls are built of rough stone that was covered with polished blue-gray basalt on the façade. On the eastern façade, flanking the window there are two arched niche buttresses, a decorate flourish is not necessary to buttress a dome, but adds depth and interest to the outer wall.

Camping possible near the village and at Yeritsavank; **overnight** in Bardzravan village

home (rustic; 3000 AMD for B&B is fair); **springs** in the village and near the monastery.

➡ **From** --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: **Bardzravan** (pop.)

➡ **From** --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: **Davit Bek** (pop.)

➡ **From** --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: **Kaghnut** (pop.)

➡ *Backtrack to the highway, and continue S for about 9 km to **ARTSVANIK** (DD 39,26516 x 46.47284, elev. 1175m) *

✚ **ARTSVANIK / YERITSAVANK** - **ԱՐԾՎԱՆԻԿ / ԵՐԻՏՎԱՆԿ** (Արծվանիկ / Երիտավանկ)  (pop. 1000), is set on the lower slopes of a line of massive cliffs that run between the village and Davit Bek. A second old village was on top of the cliffs, on a wide undulating plateau of meadows and forests. That village served the important monastery of Yeritsavank.

The **village church** is just W of the main square. It is a triple nave basilica rebuilt in the 19th century over the ruins of an original 4th century church. The door framing has the date 1855 carved on its façade, and the style of reconstruction suggest it was done in the Russian Imperial period, after the village was resettled by Armenians.

The church is beautifully set on a side street, with shrubbery and trees abutting the buildings and flowering vines dripping off its slate roof.

Next door, a two room **regional museum**, is a wonderful trip into village trivial pursuits, with yellowing photographs, pots and looms inside the ramshackle building and prehistoric ram stones and medieval khachkars scattered on the front wooden porch. Ask for someone to bring a key and enjoy the dusty trip into the past.

Yeritsavank

Yeritsavank is located on top of the cliffs that overlook Artsvanik. It is reached by taking the top road out of the village (ask) and continuing to the top in twists and turns. Once reaching the top, continue on the main path that heads towards the hamlet of Kaghnut and a military base, but far before then, as the road turns sharply right at a water trough and some stones, a left rutted path takes off NW and uphill towards a tall hill with trees. Just below it and to the left is the monastery, obscured by some trees.

Background Yeritsavank is one the most important historical monastic complexes in Siunik. The monastery was built in historic Hakhq/Kashiunik village, though now all that remains are the monastery buildings and traces of the guard tower on the upper cliffs near the vank.

Yeritsavank is mentioned in a number of chronicles of the time and was an important spiritual center for the early Siunik kingdom. Reportedly a church was first built at the site in the 3rd century, before the conversion of the country. It replaced a pilgrimage site for pagans, and springs in the area suggest there may have been multiple shrines in the immediate area, and that it is was an important worship site.

Its medieval history begins in the 6th century, when an anchorite priest named Yeritsak who had spent his religious life as an ascetic hermit roaming the countryside in search of salvation (anchorite comes from the Greek word ἀναχωρέω anachōreō, signifying "to withdraw"). Anchorites were popular in the 6th century; Eastern chronicles write of many famous priests who purged themselves of this life in order to achieve salvation. Some, like Simon Stylites, who lived for 37 years on top of a column near Aleppo, were so popular for their self-emulation that they were venerated as saints before their deaths and wielded great political power. Self-emulation was thought to be the one sure way to the soul's salvation, and many a monk wasted away in his cave, or wandering the wilderness, deep in prayer, waiting for his death.

Armenian anchorite monks were also venerated in their lifetimes, and Yeritsak achieved great notice in his lifetime, despite he did nothing to encourage it. By all reports, he shut himself off from the world and lived a reclusive life, in fasting and

prayer to purge himself of the temptations of this existence.

His fervent hermit lifestyle must have drawn attention to him despite his efforts to shun the public life; his name ("Yerits" is an honorific title, as in abbot or head monk) signifies that despite his attempts to remain anonymous, he was known enough to earn a title, and in the mid 6th century he was known enough to be recruited to found the monastery that now bears his name.

It was intended as a hermitage; a place of contemplation and deep prayer. Supported by a Ter Giut, along with 12 servants of God, Abbot Yeritsak began the work of creating the vank, going to far as to participate in the construction itself (one case where "built by" actually means what it says). He supervised construction and went as far as feeding the workers himself.

The church, S. Stepanos Nakhav'ka (S. Stepanos the Precursor) was the result of his efforts; a completely unique single hall church with triple-story walls and a side aisle. The church startled all who saw it—it was one of the largest and most unique churches in the kingdom. The monastery included 40 monk cells, a dining and meeting hall, and service buildings. Sometime later a defense wall was built around the main complex.

The monastery quickly became one of the most important spiritual centers in Siunik (the historian "Patmich" listed it as one of the 30 most important vanks in the kingdom); and despite its focus on the contemplative life, it immediately became hugely popular, attracting large crowds at church services and great material wealth. It had large estates and rich lands, plus in feudal style, it owned a number of villages and serfs.

One of the more interesting stories about the vank is in Stepanos Orbelian's medieval history of Siunik, describing how the desperately shy and reclusive Yeritsak's investiture as bishop of the realm. Following the death of the previous Bishop Mushheh, the Catholicos chose the reclusive Yeritsak to take his place, sending a delegation from the Holy See, members of Siunik's Ishkhan families and his personal secretary.

On seeing them, Yeritsak is reported to have fled in terror to his cell, refusing to accept the office, or even to come out of his room. In due course the Catholicos himself came to the monastery and

commanded an audience with the still resistant priest. It is written that when commanded to accept the office, Yeritsak relented, saying, "Let it be your will then, but not mine".

One can only imagine how the public demands of this office must have weighed on this reclusive, gentle soul, for he did not last long in his new office. In a year, he was dead.

Complex The complex consists of remains of the outer wall, the 6th c S. Stepanos Nakhav'ka church, foundations of monk cells and service buildings, a small church (possibly the Agravi Tapan) and ancient steps carved in the N mountain slope.

The early 6th century **S. Stepanos Nakhav'ka church** was built of rough stone; a three-story single nave church with a peaked vaulted ceiling. The long walls are made from three thick archways that support the rest of the walls and the roofing.

The building is unique. The south archways are blocked in, but the north are open, which appear to be the way the building was intended—a large hall open on three sides (the western wall has an extremely tall arched portal). There may have been a use of wooden doors to close the archways in winter, but there are no signs of it being set into the walls. The stone walls on the south end are later, and not attached to the archways.

The two ends are made of different color stone, suggesting they may also be later additions, or secondary. If they were originally not there, it would have made a startling appearance; a church completely open to nature, but it would also have been in character with this sect of hermits, and do something explain the astonishment of those who first described the church, remarking upon its unique appearance.

Others argue that the church was unique not because it was open to the outdoors (and they say it most certainly was not open to the outdoors), but because the main walls and the roof were deliberately made to be separate from the covering, in case of earthquake.

According to this school of thought, the main walls and roof were one piece of structure, thickly made to absorb shock, and the outer wall that closed off the arches, plus two others on the west and eastern ends, were deliberately separate so they

would further absorb earth tremors and preserve the main hall. Interestingly, the walls that do not survive to this day are those pieces. But that the monk Yeritsak was an engineer and understood the physics of earthquake-proofing a building is not to be found in any records. You decide.

The walls and ceiling of the original hall were plastered and painted, though only sections of the plastered ceiling remain.

The western wall is missing, and seems to have been part of a large **vestibule**, also arched, with two annexes joining the west room. Other **rooms** attached to this space, themselves arched and in various states of disrepair.

The yard to the north of the church is walled in and on its eastern and western end there are foundations for **monk cells** and other **service buildings**.

The ruins to the N of the main complex (hidden by the trees and shrubs) is a candidate for the **Agravi Tapan** (Raven's Ark) or **Chknavor Shrine**. Built in a multi-step platform, this small building was encased in polished stone, but all that remain are the inner rubble walls. Locals variously refer to the small building as the shrine to Yeritsak ("Chknavor" means monk) using both names. There is also a chapel in the cemetery below Artsvanik that is referred to using the same names.

There is a sloping hill and towering cliffs just N of the complex. It begins with a cemetery that includes some very old stones, and has a few steps cut into the rock shelves. The location has traces of walls on its top layer to the east, and is perfectly protected by the high cliffs. The view from here are extraordinary and well worth the trudge uphill.

Near Artsvanik

The **cemetery** is across the highway, reached by taking a left (W) road opposite the school.

Before reaching the cemetery gates you will see a large **tree** to the side of the road with a tiny outdoor shrine embedded into its base. This tree replaces another that was reputed to be 500 years old before it was severed by a lightning bolt in the 1990s.

The fragment of khachkar marks the spot, plus local villager's prayer that the old tree's death is not a bad omen. The entire area around the tree was an old settlement, and there are many lost graves nearby. The cemetery is a mixture of modern and old graves; the oldest are in the center, up the low hill that is now completely encircled with newer graves and wild growth.

An alternate candidate for the **Chknavor shrine / Agravi Tapan** is in the center of the cemetery, surrounded by thistles and stinging nettles. The small 9th c building is very old; there are a number of pre-Christian burial stones in the immediate area, as well as early Christian stones. It has been rebuilt; there are ancient cross stones and khachkars embedded in the walls.

Camping at the monastery and near the village; **overnight** in village home (rustic; 3000 AMD for B&B is fair); **springs** in the village.

➡ From Artsvanik continue S on the (M2) for about 2.5 km to a roadside (**Tukh Manuk**, DD 39.24586 x 46.47517, elev. 1041m)

SIDE TRIP: **Tukh Manuk Shrine** is set on the highway, at a prominent overlook to the lower valley and the large reservoir of incredibly blue water (the color is not natural; it is a byproduct of mining spills in the adjoining mountains). The shrine is made of two small structures each of which protect a khachkar backend by candle offerings. This site may also be the Chknavor Shrine mentioned in chronicles; the actual location has not been confirmed.

➡ From --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: **Sevakar** (pop.)

➡ From --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: **Yegheg** (pop.)

➡ From --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: **Khdrats** (pop.)

➡ From --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: **Agarak** (pop.)

➡ From Agarak, proceed 3 km N to **YEGHVARD** (DD 39.22618 x 46.55824, elev. 1103m)   

✘ **YEGHVARD - ԵՂՎԱՐԴ (Եղվարդ)**  (pop. 450) is located in a finger of Armenian mountainside thrust into Lachin Corridor valleys. The high village is beautifully set among mountain meadows and deep slopes, with large fields of fodder and wild grass. The honey is reputed to be excellent here.

The village church, **S. Astvatsatsin**, is undergoing a fascinating excavation by a team of French Armenians who have uncovered layer after layer of history in the church yard and sacristy. Among the most sensational finds is a gigantic boulder under the floor of the church, an anomaly excavators cannot explain (the rest of the church hall is made of soft earth). One suggestion is that it may be part of a pre-Christian structure at the site, but this unproved.

Outside, in the church yard, excavators have uncovered a number of 4th century, 5th century and 10th century **graves**, and a great number of khachkar fragments. Excavations continue annually, and the excavators welcome inquiries.

Downhill from the village, about 200 meters from the old Soviet farm, several groves of trees in an otherwise open field mark the remains of **White Spring Cross** (Spitak Aghbiur Khach) church, with medieval khachkars and the sparse remains of a medieval market.

The second grave has a Bronze or Iron Age **tumulus grave** pit, dug out by feral pigs that use the groves as daytime shelter. The pigs are harmless, unless nursing, in which case, stay clear of mama!

Nine km E of the village and reached only by jeep or tractor, is "**Shushan Field**", the site of a 1725 battle between Davit Bek and the forces of the Persian Fath Ali Khan Qajar (1668-1726), grand vizier from 1722-1726 and one of the main

political players during the period, which marked the fall of the Safavid Empire.

The defeat of the Shah's army marked a turn around in Siunik's fortunes and led to Bek leadings his band of intrepid partisans deep into the south, where they captured, pillaged and forced the Muslim population into Persia. The entry of Ottoman troops into lower Siunik two years later forced Bek to take refuge in Halidzor Castle in Kapan, from where his men engaged in a miraculous route of an army many times their size, leading to the temporary expulsion of the Turks. See [Halidzor](#), p. 39.

South of the village on the right as you exit (by the village sign, DD 39.20172 x 46.53690, elev. 990) are some very old **cross stones** and an outdoor **Tukh Manuk**: a huge white stone with two fallen cross stones. The stones are gigantic, well older than their reputed 10th c dating.

Camping possible near the village and at Yeritsavank; **overnight** in village home (rustic; 3000 AMD for B&B is fair); **springs** in the village and near the monastery.

➡ From --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: **Uzhanis** (pop.)

KAPAN ▲
(DD 39.50346 x 46.32626, elev. 1664m)

✳ **KAPAN** - ԿԱՊԱՆ (Կապան) ▲ (also pronounced "Kafan", till 1991 "Ghapan", also "Maden", pop. 21,000) is the administrative capital of Siunik marz and a once prosperous city that combined mining riches with light and heavy manufacturing to derive its income. With the closing of the rail link with Baku, the export lifeline for the city was severed, and the city fell on bad times. badly damaged during the 1992-1993 Azeri bombardments of the town, Kapan has made a remarkable comeback in the last 15 years, though area factories are not expected to revive anytime soon if ever. This, plus the 15,000+ reduction in the local population due to mass emigration to Russia and the west, has reduced the strain on social services and the environment, but it has also depressed the local economy. The ones making money seem to be local oligarchs exploiting the mines and natural resources, military personnel at nearby compounds, and those who provide services.

An awful lot of people are still out of work, and there is a depressed look about the place, no matter who charming the layout and beautiful the natural setting. This is the only town in Armenia where we actually witnessed young boys shake down a homeless man and then beat him for not paying up. And not down a dark alley—it was in broad light of a central café, with soldiers and policemen looking on and laughing. There is hard scrabble life here and a bit of old Chicago behind the ears of the desperate populace.

I consider the event I saw an anomaly, but also a warning about not getting too complacent about how safe the country still is. And the next day we met wonderfully friendly and hospitable people in town who prided themselves on the town's accomplishments and true natural beauty. It is still worn, and still recovering from the post Soviet Blues, and the mafia is as strong here as anywhere, with designs on plowing up that natural beauty to make a quick buck, But Kapan is still a beautiful place to see, and worth the stop.

Kapan has a pretty good museum, a wonderful culture center, and some pretty parks. For exploring the region, it is worth an overnight, at one of the local hotels. Near Vahanavank, Baghaberd, Halidzor and the roads to the

Shikhahot Forest Preserve and Meghri, Kapan is still blessed with spectacular scenery and decent people, most of whom are just trying to get by until the better times begin.

BACKGROUND

Kapan is located in the southern half of Siunik, about 290 km from Yerevan on the (M2). The town straddles the Voghchi River and is hemmed in by the towering Zangezur Mountain Range and the foothills of Mt. Khustup, Armenia's "Matterhorn". The climate is mild, the town protected by the worst effects of winter because of its valley location. Days can be hot and humid in the summer. Average lows in winter are +1.6°C. Average highs in July are +22.9 °C. While the town may be basking in warm sunlight, nearby mountains will be snowbound and frigid.

Kapan is one of the oldest cities of Armenia, its rock shelves and canyon caves inhabited in the Stone Age. Original inhabitants entered the territory coming up the Voghchi river canyon, which connected southern Siunik with the Araxes River and the Caspian Sea.

Late Neolithic "Kapanetsis" were probably related to the burgeoning Kura-Araxes culture, using the area's metal ores to forge copper, bronze and iron implements and weapons. They also have been connected to the Metsamor culture in the Airarat Kingdom (5000-2500 BCE), suggesting it was part of a unified culture throughout the Armenian highlands. Area excavations have uncovered numerous artifacts from the Stone-Iron Ages, including seals and pottery styles from the Mediterranean.

The name causes fits among visitors, as locals interchangeably call the town "Kapan", "Ghapan", even "Kafan" or "Ghafan", all of which seem to work. Its name under Qajar (18th-20th cc Persian rulers of Turkish descent) rule was Ma'dan (معدان) which is Persian for Mine, a suitable description for the rich veins of copper, platinum, zinc in the area. Mining began in the Bronze Age, but accelerated in the late medieval and Persian era, expanding under French investment in the 19th c. Additionally, the area is rich with limestone and granite deposits, which are also quarried.

The word "ghapan" denotes "canyon" in old Armenian, and the town has had that name from at least the 4th century BCE, when the fortress town is listed as part of the Kapan area of the

Siunik District of Greater Haik (ca. 400 BCE-428). It is also listed in 5th c Armenian chronicles, as an important political and cultural center for the district.

Medieval Ghapan was located 14-15 km NW of the modern town, close to the Bronze-medieval Age fortress of Baghaberd, and is described in detail in the 13th century *History of Siunik* by Stepanos Orbelian, who noted its massive ramparts, churches and large population of "Azats" (freeman, crafts and trades people), aristocracy and natural wealth. After destruction at the hands of the Arabs, the town fell on lean times, revived at the end of the 9th c, as Orbelian notes, under rule by the Siunik (Siuniats) House of Tzagikian, who had made compact with the Caliphate to secure autonomy. The town was rebuilt and walled for Prince Tzagik, son of Jrvanshir Sisakan (Prince of Sisakan, or greater Siunik).

Ghapan was part of the Bagrat-Kapan fiefdom proclaimed in 987 by Smbat II (the conqueror) Bagratuni, and entered the Second Golden Age of culture, becoming capital of the Siunik Kingdom when it was moved from Shaghat to Ghapan.

There were 15,000-20,000 people in Ghapan in the 11th century, when it reached a new level of importance and wealth, including a sizeable population of Jews who had their own district of the town. After the fall of the Ani in 1045, the kingdom was weakened and Seljuks sacked the city in 1103. The capital moved to the fortress of Baghaberd, while the Siunik Kingdom continued, known in some histories as Kapan, after the town.

The city thrived in the 12th c under Zakarian rule, and then again in the 13th-14th centuries, as Siunik lords made compact with early Mongol Khans, who had devastated the region in their mid 13th c invasions. The focus of the kingdom then went north to Vayots Dzor, and then Goris, as the great medieval Armenian universities of Gladzor and Tatev led the cultural scene. Ghapan remained a town of some note through until it was again sacked by Timurid, Ak-Koyunlu and Kara-Koyunlu Tatar tribes.

The semi-independent Meliks secured control of Siunik in the 17th century, while Tatar tribes and nomadic Turkmen resettled a depopulated area after the forced emigration of Armenians in 1604 to Persia. The population remained majority Muslim for the next 100 years.

Feuding Meliks took up arms against the Persian Shah in the 18th c, when the Qatar House, Turkish descendants, took the Persian throne and attempted to force Siunik's submission to their autocratic rule. Ghapan (then known as "Yotnaberd" or "Seven Fortresses"), which had begun to be resettled by Armenians in the 17th century, became a center for that resistance to Persian rule, ushering in its most famous era, and favorite son, Davit Bek.

Davit Bek The War of Siunik resistance began in 1722, when the rule of the Persian Khans in Siunik (distracted by dynastic troubles and Afghan invasion) was sufficiently weakened to allow the Meliks to strike for full autonomy. A local Melik, Stepanos Shahumian, appealed to the Georgian King Vakhtang (who happened to be a Persian vassal by the name of Hussein Qoli-Khan) for a military leader to liberate the region.

The young Davit Bek, who came from an old Siunik Dynastic House, took the charge, arriving in the region with 400 partisan fighters, priests and monks. Early success in routing Kara-Koyunlu and Jrvanshir nomad fighters and pillaging a Muslim village, Bek won the allegiance of a few local meliks, who helped repel successive (and successively larger) groups of Persian fighters against the Armenians.

Each Persian army sent was defeated at the hands of Bek's small army, and he proceeded to erase all remnants of Muslim control of the region, raiding and destroying Muslim villages, slaughtering the population and loading the booty on camels to take back to Ghapan.

The easy fights ended when Ottoman armies smashed through Persian defenses in 1726, taking Yerevan province and beginning an invasion of Siunik in 1727. The meliks deserted Davit Bek and began to sue for peace, and much of his army that had swollen during the early raids, evaporated. Bek, about 200 men, and 12 priests, took refuge in the Fortress of Halidzor, a convent built in the mid 17th c.

The small company repelled attacks by a force of 70,000 Turks, withstanding a siege of 7 days. Finally, deciding they had no alternative but to attack even if it meant suicidal death, they assembled for blessing, invoking S. Minas, and launched an attack on the unsuspecting Turks.

By miracle, the small band not only startled the Ottomans, they terrified them, and routed the entire army, allegedly killing 12,000 Turkish soldiers in the process.

The massive number of deaths by Bek's small band secured the region's liberation and convinced Bek that he was sent by God to expunge Siunik from Turkish domination. Driving the Turks out of Meghri, he secured a peace with the Persian Shah on the shores of the Arax River, and made his plans to invade Nakhichevan and Yerevan provinces.

The alliance was short-lived, cut short by a resurgent Turkish army, the duplicity of the Persian Shah and the meliks, and Bek's death by illness in 1728. His successor, Mkhitar Sparapet, was murdered by local villagers in 1730 and the rebellion ended.

Ghapan became a mining town beginning in the 18th c, when the new Qajar rulers of Persia began to exploit the zinc, copper and iron mines in the area, encouraging foreigners to settle to work the mines. They renamed the town "Ma'dan", which means "mine" or "mineral" in Persian. The town where it is now is traced to this period.

Russian Kapan begins in the late 18th century, when another melik rebellion, focused on Artsakh and lower Siunik, led to crushing repressions by the Persians, and appeals to the Russian Empire to intervene. The Russians entered the southern Caucasus in 1801, first taking the oil fields of Baku, then in the war of 1811-1813, they fought the Persians, obtaining Siunik and Artsakh in the Treaty of Gulistan. The Russians (unable to pronounce the "gh" sound) called the town Kapan or Kafan, and in 1843 placed it in the new Gubernaya of Elizabetpol.

The town grew throughout the Russian Imperial era, its mining interests becoming its main economic engine. At the time of the Tsar's abdication, imperial Kapan was an important center in Armenia, and became a strong supporter for the liberation of Siunik (now known as Zangezur) from Russian and Turkish domination. As Turkish armies entered the area to expel Armenians and create a land bridge between Turkey and Azerbaijan, Kapan partisans joined the armies led by Garegin Nzhdeh and Zoravar Andranik in defending their lands.

Nzhdeh in particular was responsible of Kapan's defense, securing its independence of Turkish rule and defeating Stalin's plan to sever the region from Armenia and deliver it to Turkish Azerbaijan

Kapan became one of the last Armenian districts to be Sovietized, and resisted its control throughout the early Soviet period. It became capital of the district of the same name in 1930, and had an explosive growth rate under Soviet rule, especially after WWII, when the rail line connecting the town with Baku and the rest of the Soviet Union allowed the town to export raw minerals, plus to developed heavy manufacturing at large factories that lined the river.

The entire manufacturing sector collapses immediately following the end of the Soviet Union, as the rail line was cut by Azeris in response to Armenia's support of Karabakh independence, and both sides entered an undeclared war. The ensuing blockade by Turkey and Azerbaijan robbed the region of vital gas, which led to an energy crisis that lasted until the mid 1990s.

Kapan was shelled by Azeri war planes and sustained significant damage and loss of life, as well as an influx of Armenian refugees from Azerbaijan. The threat against the town did not subside until Armenian forces took the Lachin Corridor, and most of historic Armenian Karabakh in 1994, when a truce was signed between the warring parties.

Kapan became the capital of the new district of Siunik in 1995. Since then, it has struggled to regain its once-envied livelihood, when it was known as one of the richest communities in Armenia. Whole scale emigration of the local population began in the late 1990s, with the eventual loss of what some say is 60% of the population. The rest live off remittances sent home by loved ones working in Russia or the west, or from the small service industry in town. Others earn income from working in the mines, which are beginning to be exploited again, this time controlled by a small group of local oligarchs and government friends.

Strip mining has been proposed several times, recently by a Canadian mining company proposing to clear-cut area forests in the process. Armenian environmental NGOs have led the charge to defeat these proposals, but the threat continues, and is real.

NAVIGATING THE TOWN

Kapan is in the (M2) highway, 290 km from Yerevan to the N and 71 km from Meghri to the S.

The town is easy to navigate, if it winds along two rivers in its back center and meanders down the Voghchi River and its two tributaries, the Vahagan and the Kavart. Mostly built on both slopes of the towering hills overlooking the Voghji River, the town developed a distinctive "step building" architecture that gives the town a vaguely George Jetson feel (with Soviet futurist plans for space cars landing on the roofs) while providing landmarks to help you get your bearings (the "Steps" are all on the north bank).

Shoe-horned between mountain ranges, the town is so narrow, even if you get turned around, it will never be for a minute or so. Just keep walking downhill and you will find yourself at one of the rivers.

The main street is the Meghri Highway (M2), which parallels the river on the north bank and becomes Avetissian (Spendirian) p in town. This is where the "Steps" are located, as well as the Shuka and the lion share of kiosks, mterks, apotekas, clothing shops, hardware, bakeries, etc. There are also khorovats grills and cafes.

At the main bridge, Lernagortneri p. goes N, with shops lining the street. It continues to Bashkend and the village of Kapan, both of which are now within town limits.

The main parallel street on the other side of the river is Alec Manukian (Shahumian) p, which is where the Regional Museum, Darist Hotel and the main square/center is situated.

The Square is laid out in front of the main bridge that connects the two sides of the town, anchored by Hotel Lernagorts on one side of the Vachagan Stream and the Garegin Nzhdeh street on the other, which leads to the Luna Park, Culture Palace, and a back park with the Music and Art Colleges. Nzhdeh leads to the main hospital complex, before turning and climbing to Vaghachan village and Mt. Khustup.

The other main street is Tumanian, which runs parallel to Nzhdeh before turning west behind the stadium. A branch of Tumanian connects with the Culture Palace and the Marzpeteran Square.

Hotels are in the center, at the square, or on the western most limits of the town, all on or within sight of the highway. Restaurants and cafes are on the town square or on the Meghri Highway.

SIGHTS

The **old town** is definitely worth exploring. The town is laid out in along three river beds that join in front of the central square. The Vachagan River is lined on both sides with trees and a broad sidewalk, which is lovely to look at, as it is to walk along.

The town is enclosed by rapidly sloping hills, which hems in the buildings (preventing sprawl) while protecting forests that would otherwise have been cut by now. The far distance crests of Mt. Khustup hovers over the town landscape like clouds, and on crisp mornings its snow-covered top stands out against a powder blue sky.

A loop can be made by taking in the entire old center from Hotel Lernagorts, Nzhdeh and M. Ter-Stepanian pts to the Culture Palace with its large plaza and inviting courtyard café, then to the parks around the Art and Music parks, Luna Park, and then the river front past Darist Hotel and back to the central square.

FORTRESS

Halidzor Fortress (*DD 39.22013 x 46.35781, elev. 1026*) is a 17th c version of an older fortress that sat at this spot. The older structure is believed to have been erected in the Bronze Age, destroyed and rebuilt in succeeding millennia until its late medieval form as a convent. To get there, stop at Navak Restaurant which is below the fortress, and take a steep trail (follow the pipeline) for 500 m to the site (a stiff walk), or take the next left bridge west, where a dirt path climbs the hills and comes within 100 m of the berd.

The walls and its location made the site impregnable from attack, and this drew its attention to the early 18th c freedom fighter Davit Bek, who, along with 300 volunteers moved into the fortress in 1725 and faced a seven day siege by an invading army of 70,000 Ottoman Turks, bent on smashing through Zangezur to create a land bridge with Azerbaijan. From here they charged out in a suicidal attack that ended up routing the Ottomans and securing the region as an autonomous district. Future plans to continue the struggle against Turkey were cut short with his

death in the fortress, of illness. His remains are believed to have been interred at the site, though no definitive spot has been found.

The fortress ruins have undergone a great deal of renovation to restore the site, not all of it successful in preserving the original structures. The basic layout includes a church, side buildings and narrow walkways between. A secret tunnel was built that ran 500 meters to the river to allow inhabitants to draw water. This was one of the reasons the Turks could not subdue Bek's forces in 1725; it was a calculated decision to fight rather than wait it out that resulted in their charge down the hill that terrified the Ottoman troops.

The complex includes a church, chapel, dining hall and subsidiary buildings, all tightly placed in the small fortifications.

CHURCHES

S. Mesrop Mashtots Yekeghetsi, Nzhdeh p opposite the culture center, was dedicated in 2001 to serve as the diocese church. It replaces earlier structures that date back to the Pagan era but which were destroyed during Tatar and Mongol raids in the 13th-15th cc. The slender drum sites over an elongated hall with wings on its north and south for the cruciform. The inside is plastered and painted, with painted copies of the saints and church fathers on the walls and columns.

On the NE edge of town, in a district called Kavard, there is an interesting **Astvatsatsin church** dated to the 17th c, but with all the hallmarks of once being a 4th-5th c basilica. It has cyclopic walls and khachkars as well as a wonderful collection of religious paraphernalia left by the faithful. Ask for directions.

There is a **Greek Church** in Bashkend, N of center via Lernagortsaiyin p, built for the regions Greek miners who first came in the 17th c. The remains of **Achanan Castle** are nearby, a good half-day hike from town.

MUSEUMS

Kapan Local Tradition Museum, 22 Shahumian p, tel. 23150, open 10-4 Tues-Sat, 250 AMD, has a wonderful catalogue of artifacts from the earliest periods of Kapan's history. Too bad most of it is in storage. The museum's displays give an overview of the region's history but leave something to be desired in the presentation. Sissian's is better thought out, and staff more enthusiastic.

The more interesting displays are of the prehistoric period (look for vases with water, mountain and star imagery, and the ethnographic displays of 15th-19th cc Kapan. There is a display of photos of the Karabakh war, with pictures of the substantial damage the city bore under Azeri bombing.

Kapan Museum of Contemporary Art, 8 Romanos Melikian p, open 10-4 Mon-Sat, 250 AMD, has a small collection of art from important (Martiros Saryan) and regional artists. The museum hosts the occasional local exhibition—worth visiting if one is on. Local artists can be exceptionally talented.

THEATRE, CULTURE

Cultural Palace, Nzhdeh p, is a real jewel in Armenia—one of the few preserved and working cultural centers in the country. Even Yerevan cannot boast the same level of activity this energetic team of cultural fanatics achieves, presenting concerts, performances, local revues and recitals by folkloric musical, dance and performance groups. The courtyard café is a magnet for young (and young at heart) aficionados of art, fun and music.

Shirvanzade Theatre, Cultural Center, is named for Alexander Shirvanzade (1858-1935), an Armenian writer and playwright who struggled to "raise" the level of Armenian literature by exploring theretofore unacceptable subjects. His novel "Evil Spirit" explored the life of woman with epilepsy, and his most famous work, *Namus* (1911), is a play about the ill fate of two lovers, who were engaged by their families to each other since childhood, but because of violations of *namus* (a tradition of honor), the girl was married by her father to another person.

The theatre struggles to perform a season, but does produce the odd local and touring production.

The **Children's Creative Center**, Culture Center, is an active part of the local scene, with art workshops, exhibits and other events for local children.

MONUMENTS

The large **David Bek Statue** facing the main bridge at the intersection of Lernagortsaiyin, Avetissian and Nzhdeh, is a modernist depiction of the 18th century warrior charging on his steed.

Closer to reality, Bek spent much of his time fighting Safavid and Ottoman troops from impregnable fortresses lining the canyons of lower Siunik and Artsakh, including Baghaberd and Halidzor in Kapan. His efforts led to the expulsion of Tatar inhabitants from Kapan and Meghri and securing the lower regions for Zangezur, while paving the way for its future liberation/usurpation by Imperial Russia.



The **Hunan Avetissian Memorial** (1955), on the western end of the Luna Park (close to the Ferris wheel), is placed over the grave of a WWII Soviet hero and local boy, a martyr of the Great Patriotic War. In the heat of battle and under fire so great the Soviets could not advance, Avetissian snuck his way towards the enemy position and threw himself in front of a machine gun so his comrades could move forward. The statue shows the determined man striding towards the enemy, a more Soviet politically correct way of presenting an already amazing sacrifice.

PARKS

The small **Central Park** is located in front of Hotel Lernagorts, with fountains, a café and a canopy of trees. Save the café (good cheap eats); the park is poorly maintained, and used mostly by those waiting for a minivan or bus.

The **Culture Palace Plaza** has a large fountain that may or may not be around in 2008—when we were there surveyors were marking off the space for what looked like demolition. God help us.

A **second park/walkway** is located NW of the Culture Palace, with a café, a couple of fountains with a statue ("music") and a grove of trees. It

fronts the Art and Music Colleges and ends at one of the oldest apartment blocks in the city, dating to the early 19th c.

Luna Park is set behind the low apartment blocks fronting Manukian, Tumanian and Nzhdeh p's. The park is large for a town this size, with nonworking and working kiddie rides, a café and an outdoor stage with summer concerts. The place is full in fair weather, as families, couples and youngsters throng the rides, the café and the park benches.

SPORTS

The **Stadium** hosts home games for Gandzasar Kapan football team, and between, locals playing on the weekends. There is a **sports hall** (weights, boxing) west of the stadium. The **swimming pool**, next to the sports hall and the stadium is open in the summer.

KAPAN ENVIRONS

Vachagan is reached by taking Nzhdeh p. to the hospital, jogging right and then left onto a mountain road that leads in 3.5 km to the village. The pastoral village has in its environs an important local site, a tomb for an unknown Holy figure that is the focus of an annual mid-July pilgrimage on the Feast Day of the transfiguration (Vardavar).

[MAP]

Mt. Khustup

The mountain is a further 10 km SW of Vachagan, departing from the SE edge of the village.

You can also reach the mountain in 10 km on a different route starting from the village of Vaghberd), reached on a 3 km village road that departs east of the main square.

The mountain is the largest in the area, topping out at 3201 m. It is a huge jagged dome of granite with forests reaching to about 200 meters altitude or so, before rock peaks take over. The mountain has a number of caves, steep deep ridges and deep valleys, with a lot of blind paths.

The mountain is a serious climbing challenge, considered the "Matterhorn" of Armenian mountains, and it requires a professional local guide and good equipment. There are five basic trails up the North end, which is considered the

most interesting for climbers. One has never been successfully mounted by foreigners.

You can hike up to the rock peaks in about 5-6 hours of moderate climbing. You can also go on horseback (4-5 hours) before a 600 m climb to the top.

Adventure guide with experience leading teams up Mt. Khustup include Spitak Rescue Team (<http://www.rc-spitak.com>) which guide hiking and climbing expeditions throughout Armenia. See [Adventure Travel Guides](#) (p. 2).

Geghanush village is located eastwards, reached by taking the SE road just east of the train station. The village is about 4.5 km from that point. The village is set in a valley, with two ancient churches, one of which is a 15th-16th century renovation of an older structure.

OTHER

Art & Music Colleges face the small park that adjoins the Culture Palace plaza and Tumanian p. Students can give tips on what is happening in town, and advice on where to stay while in town.

PRACTICALITIES

A **Tourism and Business Development Center** was opened in 2005 with US funding, and works in fits and starts. Its director, Armen Movsisian, allegedly can organize tent trips around Kapan. For further information contact the Tourism and Business Centre, Municipality of Kapan, tel. 22666, 091-332283, armen.m_61@rambler.ru.

IN AND OUT AND AROUND

Minivan, Bus Daily buses/minivans connect Kapan (Main Bus Stop around Hotel Lernagorts) with Yerevan (Central Bus Station on Admiral Isahaakov); also at the corner of Agatangeghos and Khorenatsi—behind Kino Rossiya; metro: Zoravar Andranik), 2800-3500 AMD.

Town buses run along main streets and between the various districts and are a good way to get yourself to Halidzor Castle and Hamletavan (100 AMD).

Regional Minivans (Marshrutni taxis) are caught at the same square (Hotel Lernagorts) and connect Kapan with South: Vaghachan (100 AMD), Geghanush (150 AMD); North: Bashkend (100 AMD), Sznak (100 AMD) and Khaladj, Norashenik,

Aradjdzor, Shrvants, Nerkin Khotanan, Dzorastan, Okhtar, Vanek, Antarashat (all 200-250 AMD); South: Chakaten (150 AMD), Shikahogh (150 AMD), S'rashen (200 AMD), Nerkin Hand (250 AMD), Tsav (250 AMD); East: Agarak (250 AMD), Yeghvard (250 AMD); West: Hamletavan (road to Vahanavank, 150 AMD), Baghaberd (150 AMD), Geghi, Kahurt, Getashen, Kard, Ajabaj (200-250 AMD); Dzagedzor (200 AMD), Lernadzor (250 AMD), Kadjaran (250 AMD).

Taxi Taxis are more expensive, but the most convenient way to travel (you decide when to go, and where). From Yerevan, taxis depart from behind "Kino Rossiya" at the corner of Agatangeghos and Movses Khorenatsi. Taxis charge around 20,000-22,000 AMD for up to 4 people. Call taxis are cheaper, charging by the km. There are a number of taxi services in town; all provide this service.

In town taxis proliferate in the center. Typical fare is 500 AMD anywhere in center, or 100 AMD per km plus extra to wait. Taxis are useful in traveling the area, but negotiate; they know the routes very well and that tourists can pay more. Offer them 100 AMD per km plus an extra 1000 AMD to wait 30-45 minutes. Local call taxis are everywhere, their numbers advertised on the street.

Car Kapan is on (M2), which connects to Kadjaran (26 km) and Meghri (71 km) to the south. The (M2) connects Kapan with Goris (61 km), Sissian (93 km), Jermuk (180 km), Vaik (162 km), Yeghegnadzor (176 km), Areni (191 km), Ararat (253 km), Artashat (271 km), and Yerevan (290 km).

Petrol and gas stations are on the highway at both ends of town.

COMMUNICATION, ETC.

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

Phone, telegraphs

Area code is 285
Long Distance: 0285 + local number
From abroad: + (374) 285 + local number

Mobile Phones: 091 Armentel, 093/094 Viva Cell

The town is covered by both Armentel (1 Tumanian p) and VivaCell mobile phone services (11 Shahumian p). International calls can be made at the *Central Post Office*, 1 Tumanian p. See [HayPost \(HyePost\) site for list \(www.haypost.am\)](#). The post office has trunk line phone service, sells phone cards and can send telegraphs.

Internet

Arminco, 1/61 Aram Manukian p, tel. 285-62381, 285-67923, email: balasanyan@arminco.com, provides dial up and soon to come Wi-Fi service. The *Hotel Lernagorts building* has an Internet Café. There are *Internet cafés* in town, ask around for the latest. The *American Corner*, Central Library, 6 Shahumian p, tel. 22151, email: kapan@americancorners.am, has computers with free internet access, first come first serve.

Bank, Exchange

Money wires and credit card advances can be done at banks; ATMs and exchange at banks; exchange points in town will change money at competitive rates.

ACBA-Credit Agricole Bank, 1a Ara Manukian p
Ardshininvestbank, 3 M. Ter-Stepanian p
Unibank, 1/2 Ara Manukian p
VTB, M. Ter-Stepanian p

Shopping

There are *mterks* and kiosks throughout town, congregated on Avetissian, Lernagortneri, Manukian and Nzhdeh pts. The Shuka is off of Avetissian, west of the main bridge.

Film, etc.

Film and batteries can be found at *mterks*. There is a Kodak on Manukian just ad you cross the bridge. Batteries are mostly unreliable for digital cameras, bring your own.

Pharmacy

Apotekas (Armenian: deghatuner) can be found in the center of town, on Nzhdeh and Avetissian pts.

Hospital, Polyclinic

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

Kapan Central Hospital is on Nzhdeh, at the end of the river walk. The *Kapan polyclinic* is nearby.

OVERNIGHT

Overnights can be had at local hotels, B&Bs and at home stays or apartments. For the latter, ask around when arriving, and expect to pay 3000-5000 AMD for the privilege.

HOTELS

HOTEL LERNAGORTS, 2, David Bek Plaza, Tel: (374-85) 6-80-39, is unclean and in poor shape. The beds reek of smoke and sweaty bodies, something the admittedly clean sheets cannot hide. Prices are ridiculous for what you get, and the staff has mad no attempt to cater for foreign tourists, preferring locals who seem to expect nothing for their money. Still, it is much cheaper than nearby Hotel Darist, and if you are in a fix (or a smoker), it will fit the bill. Get the Lux—it is still worn, but at least you can spread out and the shower works. DBL/LUX at 9000/12,000 AMD.

HOTEL DARIST, 1a Aram Manukian p, tel. 62662, is expensive for what you get, but it is where Spiurk Hai and foreign tourists mostly stay, so if hobnobbing with your kind is on the bill, this will fill it. The lobby is dreary, but serves several businesses. The hotel is on the 3rd floor. Rooms are basically OK; beds have clean linen, heating, hot showers, TV. SGL/DBL at 16,000/20,000 AMD.

ENVE'AR HOTEL/RESTAURANT, West Meghri Highway at Kapan town limits sign, tel. 093-391931, is a real find! The small restaurant complex has 6 rooms with incredible views of the river and towering mountain chains. One set of rooms has its own private swimming pool (open to guests when not in use), and the huge Lux with three bedrooms and a gigantic main room has a balcony not 20 meters from the river. Rooms are so-so clean though bedding is immaculate; hot shower, satellite TV, nouveau riche décor. Food was excellent, and nothing beats having it served on your private balcony. The place is busy on weekends, so call ahead. DBL (2 people)/LUX (up to 6 people) at 10,000/20,000 AMD

KARAVAN HOTEL-RESTAURANT, West Meghri Highway (opposite Hamletavan), is not as clean or interesting as Enve'ar, the building a little older and worn, but for the price better than what you get in town. Hot shower, satellite TV, meals to order served in your room or the restaurant with

outdoor cabanas overlooking the canyon. DBL at 12,000 AMD.

GANDZASAR HOTEL-PENSIONAT, 10 km west of town on Meghri Highway, left turnoff opposite Baghaberd, then 4 km back towards Kapan and uphill to the complex, tel. 093-999844 (Vartan Galstian), will open in 2008 with all suite rooms in the completely renovated pensionat nestled into a forest at the foot of Mt. Kaibakh (2971m). Next door is a summer camp that is also being renovated. The sample suite they showed us spared no expense on features (and clashing colors); this is nouveau riche fantasy at its zenith. The amenities will be the best in the area for at least its first year of operation, and the location cannot be beat. Great hiking trails, gorgeous views, and if you overlook the bling-bling on the hairy chests and in the black SUVs, you will be comfortably provided for. DBL/LUX projected to range from \$80-\$250.

Believe it or not, you can talk the management into letting you camp out in the next door summer camp, or in the forests nearby.

Apartments, Home stays are a definite possibility in Kapan. There is no formal arrangement, so ask around when you arrive. Figure 4000-5000 AMD per night. Be sure breakfast is included and ask where it is before trudging uphill to look at what's on offer. The low apartment buildings off of Nzhdeh and around Luna Park are a place to start.

Camping

Kapan is surrounded by forests, in each of which is it possible to find freestyle camping. The further you go the better the chances of being undisturbed; figure 5-10 km from the town for the better, more remote spots.

Good areas for camping include the slopes of Mt. Khustup, the road to and around Vahanavank, NW of Bashkend, and near Geghanush.

FOOD & DRINK

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

Kapan has a number of eateries, in the center and on the Meghri Highway.

The **CENTER SQUARE** includes a **SUMMER CAFÉ** that serves hot meals at reasonable prices (1000-2000 AMD per person).

The **CULTURE PALACE**, has a large café in its inner courtyard. Snacks, sandwiches and some hot food. \$

HRASHK CAFÉ, Nzhdeh p, is a bar-restaurant-café, with decent sandwiches and hot dishes at good prices. \$-\$\$

Other cafes are on **NZHDEH** just south of the **MARZPETERAN SQUARE**, and at the **LUNA PARK**.

Across the river, lining **AVETISSIAN**, there are some **CAFÉS** and **KHOROVS GRILLS** on the river side. \$-\$\$

CAFÉ "GENTLEMEN", Tumanian behind the stadium, is basis but cheap. \$-\$\$

HOTEL DARIST has food on the second floor, serves basic Armenian cuisine. \$\$-\$\$\$

NAVAK RESTAURANT, under Halidzor Castle, Meghri Highway, has good khorovats grill in its small aquamarine color dining hall, \$-\$\$\$

ANVE'AR HOTEL RESTAURANT, West Meghri Highway at Kapan town limits sign, tel. 093-391931, serves tasty khorovats and Armenian cuisine in its private dining rooms, riverside cabanas, and hotel room balconies. Excellent food. \$\$-\$\$\$

KARAVAN HOTEL RESTAURANT, West Meghri Highway (opposite Hamletavan), is better known for its food than its rooms, with decent Armenian fare served in cabanas overlooking the river canyon. \$\$-\$\$\$

There are **KHOROVS GRILLS** on Avetissian and on the both ends of the town on the Goris-Meghri Highway. Very tasty and reasonably priced. \$-\$\$

There are **FOOD SHOPS** in town as well.

Old Tatev Road ▲

(see [Old Tatev Road](#), p. 24) for descriptions and day map. Note you will be traveling in reverse:

Khaladj - Jaghats - Norashenik - Arajdzor - Dzorastan - Okhar- Vanek - Antarashat - Nerkin

Khotanan - Shrvenants - Verin Khotanan - Tandzaver - Tandzatap - Svarants

➡ **From** --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: **Tandzatap** (pop.) (p. 24)

➡ **From** --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: **Svarants** (pop.) (p. 24)

End at [Tatev](#) (p. 20)

➡ **From** --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: **Khaladj** (pop.) (p. 24)

➡ **From** --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: **Jaghats** (pop.) (p. 24)

➡ **From** --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: **Norashenik** (pop.) (p. 24)

➡ **From** --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: **Arajdzor** (pop.) (p. 24)

➡ **From** --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: **Dzorastan** (pop.) (p.24)

➡ **From** --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: **Okhar** (pop.) (p. 24)

➡ **From** --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: **Vanek** (pop.) (p. 24)

➡ **From** --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: **Antarashat** (pop.) (p. 24)

➡ **From** --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: **Nerkin Khotanan** (pop.) (p. 24)

➡ **From** --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: **Shrvenants** (pop.) (p. 24)

➡ **From** --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: **Verin Khotanan** (pop.) (p. 24)

➡ **From** --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: **Tandzaver** (pop.) (p. 24)

TRIP 6: KAPAN - KADJARAN ▲

➡ From --- to **HALIDZOR FORTRESS** (DD 39.22013 x 46.35781, elev. 1026) 🏰 🗺️ 📍

✳️ **HALIDZOR FORTRESS - ՀԱԼԻԶՈՐ ԲԵՐԴ (Հալիզոր բերդ)** is a 17th c version of an older fortress that sat at this spot. The older structure is believed to have been erected in the Bronze Age, destroyed and rebuilt in succeeding millennia until its late medieval form as a convent. To get there, stop at Navak Restaurant which is below the fortress, and take a steep trail (follow the pipeline) for 500 m to the site (a stiff walk), or take the next left bridge west, where a dirt path climbs the hills and comes within 100 m of the berd.

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The complex includes a church, chapel, dining hall and subsidiary buildings, all tightly placed in the small fortifications.

Camping at the fortress and near the village; **overnight** in Kapan: **springs** in town.

➡ From --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: **Hamletavan** before Achkhlu, pop.)

➡ From Hamletavan, continue west on the (M2), 2.6 km past the right fork to Sh'harjik, where a left turn crosses the river and climbs uphill (at each choice, take the path that goes uphill) and past a picnic area to **VAHANAVANK** (DD 39.21753 x 46.33256, elev. 1117m) 🏰 🗺️ 📍

✳️ **VAHANAVANK - ՎԱՀԱՆԱՎԱՆԵ (Վահանավանք)** ▲ is located in a cleft of a mountain slope, overlooking the Voghchi River valley through a thick forest of trees. The vank is west of Kapan and east of Baghaberd, off of a paved and then gravel road that begins about 2.6 km west of village entry to Sh'harjik. The monastery is in the foothills of Mt. Pambak (2971.0m).

Southeast of the monastery is a large Bronze Age tomb field, and the monastery is built on the site of a Pagan temple, which it replaced. The first church was probably 4th century, though there are not enough remains to confirm the date, but it was important as a pilgrimage and worship site to warrant the attention of the Siunik family, which developed it into a major religious and education center in the 10th c.

Background The vank was founded in 911 by Vahan, son of Prince Dzaghik of Kapan, who is reported to have taken the monk's robe to cure himself of demonic possession (Stepanos Orbelian, *History of Siunik*). Attracting 100 like-minded acolytes, he had the original S. Grigor Lusavorich church built, and was buried near the western doorway.

His nephew, Vahan II Jrvanshir, received his training at Vahanavank and rose to become Bishop of Siunik and then Catholicos (968-969). Vahan II commissioned a number of churches and monasteries, none of which have survived intact. The monastery became the religious center for the Siunik kings, as well as for young boys from Baghk and other provinces.

In the 11th c. Queen Shahandukht built the Astvatsatsin church as a burial site for herself and

her family, along with the southern doorway to S. Grigor.

The center was much larger than the buildings you see now; it encompassed all the hillsides around the central complex, with adjoining peasant village to workmen and farmers required to support the monastery. Many foundation stones for this large community can still be found as you scour the area.

The monastery was sacked by Seljuks in the 11th century, repaired, and then sacked again by Mongols, Turkic raiders and finally Timurids, who totally ruined the site. By the mid 14th century it was abandoned.

It remained in ruins until the 20th c, when it was excavated (1966) and plans were made by the Soviet government to renovate the site. After the a collapse of the Soviet Union, the pans were abandoned until the current reconstruction work that is being funded by a local oligarch, without much attention paid to preservation of the original structure.

Complex The complex includes S. Grigor Lusavorich, S. Astvatsatsin sepulchre-church, the gavit, and ruins of service buildings. A Bronze Age tomb field is SE of the main complex.

S. Gregory the Illuminator church was built for Vahan Nakhashinogh and dedicated in 911. It is the oldest surviving building in the complex.

The domed cruciform church is unique in that it has open vestibules in the rear corners of the hall, expanding the space noticeably for large groups of worshippers. The two corners of the eastern end have narrow annexes which are dwarfed by the central hall. The north and south arches and columns supporting the dome are almost even with the outer walls; another unique feature that creates a much wider central hall. This is both a spacious hall for the monastery and a 10th c experiment in church engineering.

The dome is placed on pendentives supported by the four columns. There is no "square" to speak pf, as the four corners are arched and open underneath the support walls for the columns. The walls were once frescoed, but none have survived. However, the white stone used in the construction is well hewn, and beautiful in its own right.

The church was first built of tufa stone, the remains of which are on the SE wall. It was later finished with the same white stone as the interior, and in this the 21st century renovators are being faithful, though they didn't have rebar or poured concrete in the 10th c—the original walls were made from setting the stone in a lime mortar with eggs.

The gavit or western narthex was commissioned by Vahan's nephew, Vahan II in the first half of the 10th c. It included a gallery running along its outer length. The rectangular design is more elaborately decorated than the church; the cornices for the south and north walls are decorated with florid designs featuring vegetal and animal imagery. Another engineering feat of the day was the independently supported arches that helped up the roof; their columns and piers were not connected to the outer walls. This was not entirely successful, as the gavit collapsed during an earthquake when the middle arch caved in.

Befitting this more stately room, the floor is paved with the gravestones for Siunik's royalty; Vahan Nakhashinogh (X c), princess Khuchesh (X c), prince Kiurikid (XI c), the military leader Gevorg Pahlevuni (1101), and others, found during excavations.

The large portico ran the length of the church and gavit, covering a total of 142 square meters. The series of arches which supported the roof rested on 14 piers, semi-columns on the north and south ends of the structure. It had two entries; to the church and the narthex. The portico was built from a darker tufa stone. Like the gavit, the portico floor was paved with royal gravestones: King Smbat II, King Grigor I, Queen Sophie, Queen Dinar, Prince Ashot Jrvanshir, Khaghbak and others. An inscription from 1046 was also found in the portico during excavations.

S. Astvatsatsin sepulchre church In 1086 Queen Shahandukht Siuniats and her sister Katan commissioned the two-story **S. Astvatsatsin sepulchre church**. The small building rests against the rock hill to the west while it sticks out to the east on top of a vaulted serf wall from split stone. Its sanctuary size is the same as the Mythra temple at Garni, and once can imagine it surrounded by Greco-Romans columns and carvings to make an almost perfect twin. In fact, it is too close to the Garni temple to think it does not have a pre-Christian past. Shrines butting up

against solid rock faces are found throughout the Pagan period; as spring shrines, cave sits, or sacred "entries" into the mountain. The cyclopic stones used in the construction also suggest the church was built using the stones of a much older structure. One in particular is on the western wall, with a small circular window space.

The structure once boasted a portico on its north, south and east end, now missing. From the upper porch, there is a magnificent view of the rest of the complex and Vahanadzor (Vahan's canyon). The western end had a small gavit that is now gone, made from dark stone. During excavations, a valuable inscription was found, attributed to the Catholicos Stepanos Orbelian (11th c).

The **refectory** was completely ruined when excavations began to piece it together. Of interest to excavators were the capitals for the arch columns, the cornices of which were painted red. The long hall was paved with slab stones. The arching, piers, columns and stone supports suggest the building was two-story, with living quarters in the upper floor. Also discovered were 11th c fragments of long inscriptions and monastic tombstones.

Other ruined foundations in the complex were for service buildings, monk cells and a still working 10th c cold spring structure made from clay brick.

The vank has a large number of **khachkars** in the area, most dating to the 10th-11th c, including some excellently detailed masterpieces. They lie scattered about with the low gravestones.

To the SE there is a large late **Bronze Age tomb field** dated to the end of the 2nd millennium BCE. Compare stones here with those used in the construction of the vank.

Camping at the monastery and in the area; **overnight** in nearby village home (rustic; 3000 AMD for B&B is fair); **springs** at the site and in village.

➡ From --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: (Bear and Hunter, before Achkhlu, pop.)

➡ From --- to (DD 39.22219 x 46.28036, elev. 1225m)    

✳ **BAGHABERD - ԲԱՂԱԲԵՐԴ (Բաղաբերդ)** ▲ Castle is located on the side of the highway just before the hamlet of Davit Bek (about 3 km west of Hamletavan). It is located to the northwest of Kapan on the left bank of the river Voghchi, on the triangle top of the mountain.



The large **fortress** had double walls and strong towers, two of which are at the bottom of the hill, next to the highway pavement. In some places the rocks were shaped into natural walls. There was a **citadel** on the triangle top of the mountain. The entrance was from the north-eastern end, and there is where the walls are best preserved. Also at the top are the ruins of **Baghak monastery**. Up above, the walls rang the entire top of the hill, at some points the walls yielding to natural barriers of rock, with ramparts that successfully defended the fortress against invaders for hundreds of years.

Built in the 4th Century, Baghaberd is one of the oldest buildings in the marz and one of the largest defensive constructions in Armenia; the walls stand 6-8 meters in height.

According to legend Baghaberd was built for Baghak who ushered from Sisak Nahapet, the forefather of the Siunik race. The fortress does not seem to have replaced an earlier fort, though there are Bronze and Iron Age fortresses in the area, and Sisak is one of the oldest names in

Armenian and the Near East, mentioned in the bible and in Egyptian annals.

Its impregnable walls and strategic location protected the road to medieval Kapan (current Nerkin and Verin Giratagh), and secured the fortunes of the Siunik family throughout its formation. It is from these walls that the 4th c Siunik Prince Andovk Siunik defeated the army of the Sassanid king Shapuh. It remained a stronghold during the Arab period, repelling brigands and raiders throughout the 7th-8th cc. It was a centerpiece of Siunik's Bagratuni capital (10th-12th cc).

In 1169, when the Seljuk's began their attacks on Siunik, the capital moved to Baghaberd, which included the removal of Tatev Monastery's treasury (and its 10,000 manuscripts) to the fortress for safekeeping. The fortress could not hold out against the Seljuk's, who sacked the fortress, slaughtering the inhabitants and burning the entire manuscript library. Its destruction moved the focus of the Siunik realm to Vayots Dzor and the fortunes of the Orbelians and Proshians, who built Gladzor, renewed Tatev and Noravank.

Camping possible near the fortress; **overnight** in village home (rustic, 3000 AMD for B&B is fair); **springs** in villages.

➡ From --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: Gandzasar Pensionat and Camp, (pop.)

➡ From --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: Geghi (pop.)

➡ From --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: Kahurt (pop.)

➡ From --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: Kard (pop.)

➡ From --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: Adjabaj (pop.)

➡ From --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: Dazgedzor (before Musallam, pop.)

➡ From --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: Lernadzor (pop.)

➡ From Lernadzor, continue W on the highway for about 4 km to **KADJARAN** (DD 39.15092 x 46.15839, elev. 1792m)    

✳ **KADJARAN - ԶԱԶԱՐԱՆ (Զաչարան)** ▲ (once Gejevan, pop. 6500) is located on the upper Voghji River, surrounded on three sides by the lower Bargushat, Zangezur and Meghri Mountains. To the west are the tall Kadjaran (3403.2m), Hazmechit (3620.5m), Aguk (3706.8m) mountains, along with Mt. Kaputjugh (3905.2m) on the Nakhichevan border.

The mountain ranges funnel the Caspian winds to the town, creating a bowl of hot, sticky weather in the summer, and a thick cover of snow in the winter.

The town was founded in 1965, in front of an old village by the same name, which traces its lineage to the late Bronze Age (3rd-2nd millennium BCE). Excavations include a Pagan temple, and evidence of metal work, which took advantage of the area's rich deposits of copper. Armenia's copper Age may well have begun here, along with the mines at Alaverdi; findings include exclusively copper smelters that became widespread in the Near East in the 5th millennium BCE, while Stone Age artifacts in the area's caves include rudimentary use of metal ore in tooling weapons and utensils.

Roman helmets and gun shields were unearthed during more recent construction in Kadjaran, a testimony to the devastating defeat endured by Roman legions here two thousand years ago.

Kadjaran's founding is also placed in legend. According to one, a mythical bear saved the primordial population from starvation by bringing the keys to a treasure trove in a nearby mountain,

which was renamed Ganzasar (Treasure Mountain), and turned out to have a mother lode of copper that became a mainstay of the community ever since. The legend is said to be 2000 years old by locals, but it fits more neatly with the Neolithic-Copper Age period of the region, as would a rich habitat for bears, which has all but vanished from Kadjaran region.

Mining all but disappeared during the medieval age, as no mention is made of the mines in any chronicles of the period. It was not revived until the Russian Imperial period, when geologists began exploring the region in 1840, discovering a thick vein of copper ore in 1850. This led to the first modern copper mines in 1910, drawing workers from throughout the Empire, including Greek miners who also worked the mines at Kapan, Goris and Alaverdi.

Discovery of the molybdenum ore in 1930 led to the formation of the Zangezur Mining Concern in 1945, which combined the two mining operations under one umbrella. The mine became the chief supplier of both metals to the Soviet Defense industry.

The mining settlements led to the formation of a unified village in 1965, made from the old villages of Kadjarans, Verin Hand and Okhchi villages. In 1965 it was designated a town.

The loss of state subsidies and Soviet markets caused Zangezur to largely shut down in 1991, though for a time it kept running with a skeleton crew. Since the complex employed 50% of Kadjaran residents, its closure dealt the town a heavy blow, forcing many locals to leave for Russia in search of work. Additional factory shutdowns in the area and the outbreak of war with Azerbaijan in 1992 only made things worse.

Not receiving the international investments it sought, the mine was revived in 1994, benefiting from a resurgent world market and a truce in the war with Azerbaijan. Since 2000, the mine has increased production 10-20% a year, becoming the largest generator of profits in the country.

A Mining Town Kadjaran is a town of miners. The main branch of the economics is the branch of the non-ferrous metallurgy. The leader of the industry is Zangezur Coal-mining CJSC, a subsidiary of [Armenian Copper Company](#), which also runs the copper mine in Alaverdi and is about

begin strip-mining the Teghut virgin forest (See Lori chapter).

Mining in Kadjaran includes coal, but it is centered on the region's molybdenum, the largest deposit in the world (est. 600,000 tons). Used to strengthen steel and make it anti-corrosive, molybdenum has become cash-cow for government members who control the company through their offices. It is also, unfortunately, most easily obtained through strip-mining, which the west has along history of coming to grips with.

As impressive as the strip-mining at Kadjaran may look (take the Meghri Highway to the top of the mountains to get a birds-eye view of the operation and the way waste rock is dumped), it is strip-mining, and no effort has been made by the ACC to return the stripped areas to their previously natural states. The mountain of waste rock that you see will still be here 100 years from now, in the same state—it will not sprout green on its own.

This is really a shame, since the area around Kadjaran and the mine is so beautiful; the tall Zangezur and Meghri mountains still have stands of forest land and their alpine meadows are canvases of flowers each spring with broad strokes of red, blue, yellow and lavender.

SIGHTS

There is not much to see in the town itself; save a few government buildings and the shopping area, which much like others in Armenia. There is not historic district and no museum. Still, the town is a convenient stop for exploring the region, especially if you want to take the Voghchi River Valley in two parts, exploring the mountains west of the town and the string of medieval sites on the Geghi River.

Hiking Hiking in the mountains west of Kadjaran is rewarding for its alpine trails and for its relative peace—few venture this side of the town, since they have to go through the stripped areas to get there, and mistakenly assume that is all there is to see. Locals are friendly, if surprised to see a foreigner even stop here. Despite the enormous wealth generated by the mine, little of it appears in the town itself; which is grubby and half empty—those missing in action are in Russia earning a living wage.

There are also sources of **mineral water** in the territory, though I wouldn't drink anything

naturally sprung here; there is a serious risk of water contamination by mine tailings.

PRACTICALITIES

IN AND OUT AND AROUND

Minivan, Bus Daily buses/minivans connect Kapan (Main Bus Stop around Hotel Lernagorts) with Yerevan (Central Bus Station on Admiral Isahaakov; also at the corner of Agatangeghos and Khorenatsi—behind Kino Rossiya; metro: Zoravar Andranik), 2800-3500 AMD.

Town buses run along main streets and between the various districts and are a good way to get yourself to Halidzor Castle and Hamletavan (100 AMD).

Regional Minivans (Marshrutni taxis) are caught at the same square (Hotel Lernagorts) and connect Kadjaran with Lernadzor (100 AMD), Dzagedzor (200 AMD), Hamletavan (road to Vahanavank, 350 AMD), Baghaberd (400 AMD), and Kapan (500 AMD).

Taxi Taxis are more expensive, but the most convenient way to travel (you decide when to go, and where). From Yerevan, taxis depart from behind "Kino Rossiya" at the corner of Agatangeghos and Movses Khorenatsi. Taxis charge around 20,000-25,000 AMD for up to 4 people. Call taxis are cheaper, charging by the km. There are a number of taxi services in town; all provide this service.

In town taxis proliferate in the center. Typical fare is 500 AMD anywhere in center, or 100 AMD per km plus extra to wait. Taxis are useful in traveling the area, but negotiate; they know the routes very well and that tourists can pay more. Offer them 100 AMD per km plus an extra 1000 AMD to wait 30-45 minutes. Local call taxis are everywhere, their numbers advertised on the street.

Car Kadjaran is on (M2), which connects with Meghri (71 km) to the south. To the East and North the (M2) connects Kadjaran with Kapan (26 km), Goris (87 km), Sissian (119 km), Jermuk (206 km), Vaik (188 km), Yeghegnadzor (202 km), Areni (217 km), Ararat (279 km), Artashat (297 km), and Yerevan (316 km).

Petrol and gas stations are on the highway at the east end of town.

COMMUNICATION, ETC.

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

Phone, telegraphs

Area code is 285
Long Distance: 0285 + local number
From abroad: + (374) 285 + local number
Mobile Phones: 091 Armentel, 093/094 Viva Cell

The town is covered by both Armentel and VivaCell mobile phone services (nearest stores are in Kapan). International calls can be made at the *Central Post Office*, 1 Tumanian p. [See HayPost \(HyePost\) site for list \(www.haypost.am\)](#). The post office has trunk line phone service, sells phone cards and can send telegraphs.

Internet

School # 1 has an ICC center, serving the school and the community. It is possible to use their connection if they are not busy with other projects or students.

Bank, Exchange

Money wires and credit card advances can be done at banks; ATMs and exchange at banks; exchange points in town will change money at competitive rates.

ABB (ArmBusinessBank), 15 Lernagortsneri p.
ASHB, Main Square

Shopping

There are *shuka*, *mterks* and *kiosks* in town, congregated on Lernagortsneri p.

Film, etc.

Film and batteries can be found at *mterks*. Batteries are mostly unreliable for digital cameras, bring your own.

Pharmacy

Apotekas (Armenian: deghatuner) can be found in the center of town, in the shopping area.

Hospital, Polyclinic

For a medical emergency, dial 103. If possible go to Yerevan for medical service or ask at your lodging for recommendation. Kadjaran has a *hospital* and *polyclinic*.

OVERNIGHT

HOTEL GANDZASAR, Lernagortsneri p 700 m west of Meghri turnoff, tel. 33204, 093-193568, is a slice of Soviet Hostelry, with reception and rooms on the 3rd-4th floors. The hotel offers rudimentary amenities (hot water in select rooms), clean sheets and friendly staff in the otherwise dreary surroundings. Cheap enough with SGL/DBL/LUX at 4000/6000/10,000 AMD.

FOOD & DRINK

Kadjaran has cafés/diners off the old square and on the Kapan Highway. There is a café near the shuka and on the street leading to the factory.

TRIP 7: TO MEGHRI ▲

➡ **From** --- to (DD) 🏠 📷 📍 🗺️

SIDE TRIP: (Tashtun, pop.)

Nearby North of Mt. Sarisar (3753.8m), Kapuit Lich (Blue Lake) commands a presence at 3250 m high above sea level, fed by mountain snow. On its still surface, icebergs drift aimlessly, even in summer months. The lake is reached by going upriver on Mulk River, which is about 100 meters S of the village turnoff on the Meghri Highway. Just after the last hairpin curve and the village exit, a Jeep path takes off west, joining the riverbed in about 4.5 km). From there it is about 2.8 km to the lake.

➡ **From** --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: Lichk (pop.)

➡ **From** --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: Vank (pop.)

➡ **From** --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: Kaler (pop.)

➡ **From** --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: Tkhut (pop.)

➡ **From** --- to (DD) 🏠 📷 📍 🗺️

SIDE TRIP: Lehvaz (pop.)

Overnight is possible in the *AIGEDZOR HOTEL* on the highway. It caters to Persian truckers, and the amenities are basic, but cheap at 5000 AMD per person.

Camping in the area; **overnight** at hotel on the highway or village home (rustic, 3000 AMD for

B&B is fair); **food** at the hotel; **springs** in the village.

➡ **From** Lehvaz go NW on the main village road to outside the village, and continue on that village road for about 3.5 km to **VAHRAVAR** (DD 38.95061 x 46.17991, elev. 1295m) 🏠 🗺️

✂️ **VAHRAVAR - ՎԱՅՐԱՎԱՐ (Վահրավար)** ▲ (pop. 350) is located at the upper end of a long valley of trees, on the Vahravar River. The village is one of the most idyllic in Siunik; a tumbled down collection of ramshackle homes that meander through narrow alleyways and running streams, have by and large preserved their 18th century folk designs, with stone and mud brick homes with wooded balconies on narrow lanes. This is one of the most rustic places you can visit, but worth it for anyone looking for a slice of real village living with homes that are practically ethnographic museums in themselves.

At the back end of the village there is a three story house with open balconies that is crying to be turned into a B&B. Villagers make their own brand of Tuz oghi (fig vodka), and are genuinely surprised to see strangers, vying with each other for the right to treat you to a cup of coffee.

While there, ask to meet the artist Peto, who moved to the village years ago to pursue his art and a more genuine way of life. His work is like his dark gentle gaze; warm and wide eyed.

There is a 4th-17th c **S. Gevorg basilica**, down a narrow lane from the village's "Red Square". The triple nave church is made from the rubble of the medieval structure, and is still divided into barn stalls, a legacy from the Soviet period. The western doorway is filled in with stone rubble. It and the South entry are arched with tufa stone, the only décor on the outside. The indoor was decorated in the 17th c with painted walls, fragments of which remains.

About 1 km E of the village is the small but important 4th-10th c Karmravank. The church is built over a Tukh Manuk (Dark Youth) shrine that was modified into a church in the early Christian period. The vank is traced to the 10th century, and was an important monastery in the Siunik kingdom.

The single nave church has a series for wide arched niches on its north and south walls, with the southern wall showing a semicircular apse close to the main eastern altar. The interior of the 10th c church had frescoes, lost when it was destroyed by Mongol and Persian invasions, and when it was rebuilt in the 17th c the builders used rubble stone to recreate the small church. It has narrow slit windows built primarily as a defense against gunshot.

The importance of the local shrine is born by its continued use by villagers who leave small offerings and candles at the site, leaving strips of cloth tied to the outside tree, a modified form of the "burning bush" image in the bible. Leaving a strip of your own clothing on the tree is reputed to bring good luck (It has to be something you are wearing).

Camping near the village and in the NW forests; **overnight** in village home (rustic, 3000 AMD for B&B is fair); **springs** in village.

➡ **From** --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: Gudemis (pop.)

➡ **From** --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: Kuris (pop.)

MEGHRI ▲

(DD 38.89894 x 46.24530, elev. 615m)

✿ **MEGHRI - ՄԵՂՐԻ (Մեղրի)** ▲ (pop. 3,000) is an oasis in the desert; an enchanting land of blood red boulders and emerald green fields of grain, of vineyards, of the succulent pomegranate groves it is justly famous for. There is nothing like Meghri in all of Armenia, and if you have ever visited the “Land of Enchantment” of New Mexico, then you have an inkling of what is in store in this magical world at the base of the country. The difference being that the natural beauty is more graphically drawn in Meghri, using a palette of more vivid colors.

It begins with your entry; through the snowcapped Zangezur range in winter, or the mists of rain and fog, from the Debaghlu Pass (2605.5m) S of Kadjaran, through the hardwood forests and alpine meadows of uplands that suddenly plunge in twists and turns into the long valley floor. With the span of 30 minutes you leave snow and rain and enter a verdant green valley floor surrounded by red, amber and bronze mountains that seem to scratch the powder blue sky, releasing wisps of white streaking across the whole design. The landscape is breathtaking, and deceiving. The arid land is one of the most fertile in the country; all it needs is a bit of water to blossom in a thousand ways, turning out mounds of fresh fruit that is some of the sweetest in Armenia.

The small town feels like no other in the country, its wild stands of Pomegranates and sweet pears hugging the dusty streets. Except for a few low apartment blocks, the town is made up of the same stone and mud brick single family dwellings it has had for millennia, each with a welcome oasis of trees sheltering a garden bursting with beans, tomatoes, peppers and the required collection of sun-ripened apple, pear, peach and pomegranate trees. The town prides itself on its ability to grow “nails with a little rain”, and its long history of resistance to outsiders.

Incredibly friendly and hospitable, “Meghretsis” share their bounty freely with strangers, all the while looking at guests with a secret smile in their eyes, as if to say they may just have discovered the secret of life, right in their back yard.

Meghri is hot in the summer, the sun burns in a matter of minutes. Set on one of the lowest spots

in the country, there is none of the alpine air to cool things down. That makes the welcome oasis of backyards, the town square and the gardens that line the road all that more welcoming.

Things are slower here, and they beg you to take your time (For those of you wondering where things go *fast* in Armenia, this is the last place to look for it.). After your long haul down the spine of the country, Meghri seems made for taking a break, enjoying the desert air and its delights.

In Meghri you will find several good guest houses (which could be anyone’s home, the locals are so hospitable), a newly renovated hotel, and several cafés and restaurants for sustenance.

The town has historical sites including the fortress that looks over the 15th century “new town”, ancient houses in the historic district of old town, and the nearby villages of Agarak (where the Iranian Border crossing is located), Karchevan, and the lost cities of Malyev River valley.

A Night in Paradise

I don't think I have ever seen a pear as big as this, except at the Super-Barn in Amerika, which doesn't count because they may look big but they taste like cardboard (I'll never forget the time R saw his first supermarket apple, marveling at the huge size, the gorgeous color, and even the sweet smell. He beamed as if to say, "Now, this is Amerika!" He took one big bite, started to chew—and all of sudden his smile faded as his chews began searching for that missing ingredient we all crave for at the supermarket. He started at me in distrust as if I had deliberately brought him to a bad store. "Where's the taste?!" he demanded. In that one bite all his dreams of the Amerikan dream were lost).

Sergei had spent the evening pulling this incredibly sweet pears and apples off his trees, rather like a T-shirt Samson lazily reaching for another grape for Delilah to peel. I couldn't get enough of the sweet taste, the juice running off my chin to feed greedy ants on the porch tile.

We had feasted on fruit, fresh cheese and homemade vodka and wine, and were sitting outside listening to Cicadas and waiting for the late night cool breezes to begin.

There is such a difference between this little town and the cold shoulder we felt just 71 km north in Kapan.

Their confident attitude and warm natures are a marked contrast with the cowered looks we got in Kapan, or the cool reception received in Goris.

Perhaps Sergei said it best when I told him about how depressed Kapan seemed, how wary its citizens. He smiled knowingly, smiled a bit and said matter-of-factly, "well, you see, they aren't as advanced as we are here. We've had a lot more practice in living".

Slow that I am, it took me a bit to get his drift. How advanced? This is a village; Kapan is a town. Kapan has mines and government offices and—

Oh. I see.

BACKGROUND

Geography The Karmirnar and Sikar Mountains that erupt closest to the town frame the western skies with their upright sheets of rock and steeply sloping hills. In the early spring (March-April) these hills are as green as Ireland, interlaced with red poppies that are among the biggest and most intoxicating to look at in the Caucasus. To the east, a succession of jagged peaks and steep green valleys push against the towering peaks of Mts. O'uz-Meghri (1262.3m), Kaladash (2163.9m) and Chgnavor (3024.6m).

Meghri’s weather is tropical, with average temperatures of 1°C in January and 25°C in July. Daytime highs can reach 22°C in the winter and 45°C in the summer.

Flora and Fauna Flower lovers will find a gold mine of flora in springtime Meghri region. Endemic species include those that are only found elsewhere in Africa.

For southern Meghri district flora, see [Shvanidzor entry](#) (p. 48).

Northern Meghri flora (above the desert valley): flora include *Iris imbricata*, *Tulipa sosnovskiyi*, *Fritillaria pinardii*, *F. armena*, *Colchicum ninae*, *C. szovitsii*, *Merendera raddeana*, *Crocus adamii*, *Corydalis persica*, *Ornithogalum sigmoideum*, *O. transcaucasicum*, *Genista transcaucasicca*, *Mespilus germanica*, *Scilla mistschenkoana*.

Birding in Meghri-Shvanidzor region is also rewarding. Typical sightings include: *Gypaetus barbatus* (Lammergeier), *Circaetus gallicus* (Short-Toed Snake Eagle), *Hieraetus pennatos* (Booted Eagle), *Accipiter brevipes* (Levant Sparrow hawk), *Falco naumanni* (Lesser Kestrel), *Falco peregrinus* (Peregrine), *Francolinus francolinus* (Black Francoline), *Oenanthe xanthoprigna* (Rufous-Tailed Wethear), *Sylvia hortenzis* (Orfean Warbler), *Sitta neumayer* (Western Rock Nuthatch), *Sitta tefronota* (Eastern Rock Nuthatch), *Parus lugubris* (Somber Tit), *Serinus pusillus* (Red-Fronted Serin).

History

The area is one of the oldest in Armenia, on par with Neolithic and Bronze Age Ararat Valley excavations. The conduit of settlement was the Arax River, which connects Anatolia and the Sumerian plains with the Caspian. You probably traveled 390 km from Yerevan to reach here; but you are only 200 km from the Ararat Valley using the Arax River.

Area excavations include Paleolithic, Neolithic, Bronze and Iron Age settlements throughout the river valley. Bronze Age artifacts include sophisticated metal work, swords, bracelets, necklaces and totems. Iron works appear in the early Iron Age (ca. 1500 BCE) and a number impressive iron knives come from the 7th c BCE, when the settlement was in contact with the Urartian Empire.

Meghri was a part of the Armenian Satrapy in the 5th-4th cc BCE, and then became part of 4th c BCE Artashesian Kingdom of Greater Haik, in the district that would later become known as the Siunik kingdom. The district became known as Siuniats-Arevik, famous for this vineyards and wines, which made their way to the villas of Rome and the palaces of the Parthian Kings.

The area was under Parthian influence for much of its early history, including an affinity for Pagan gods. It is mostly unspoken, but Meghri region did not take quickly to the Christian religion, and the dearth of 4th c churches is not an accident. The region was on the front lines of Parthian invasions, bearing the brunt of Sassanid raids, and lived under their rule after the fall of the Arshakuni House in 428.

To be sure, there were Christians here, and they won the argument over time, but they faced stiff

competition and a populace that was war-weary. The Sassanids were brutal in their repression of the Christian faith, forbidding locals from practicing, or even speaking the Greek tongue, which was the language of the early church (and that of their rivals, the Byzantine Empire). Siunik's resistance to Sassanid rule was fierce and it achieved autonomy in the 5th, before the Treaty of Nvarsak granted autonomy to the rest of the country. The development of churches is traced to this period.

Arabs took Meghri in 640, and destroyed much of the infrastructure, forcing some to apotheosize. Arab rule also introduced a design esthetic (the so-called "Oriental Style") that makes up much of Meghri's decorative choices in its churches and old public buildings. After an initial period of repression, the region began to prosper under Arab rule, with additional trading route to the Arab peninsula and the east via Persia and India. The prosperity came to a halt at the start of the 7th c, as the resistance of Armenian nobles to Arab rule accelerated, resulting in the slaughter of three generations of rulers, decimating some houses. Siunik's autonomy and remote location sheltered it from the worst excesses, but more easily reached Meghri, cut off from Siunik protection, faced increasing raids and Muslim incursion.

Meghri was liberated from Arabs by the Bagratunis in 886, becoming a part of the Siunik Kingdom in 980, which joined a federation with the Bagratunis, though maintaining autonomy. Following the dedication of Tatev monastery in 906, medieval Meghri was given by Smbat Bagratuni to the vank, the region named Karchevan.

With the Seljuk invasion of 1105 during the reign of the Siunik Ishkhan Grigor II, the area was sacked, much of the population wiped out during a raid by Amir-Haron Amira in 1126. Tatar nomads moved into the vacant homes, first establishing their presence in lower Armenia.

Meghri witnessed a short period of reconstruction in the early 13th c, under the rule of the Orbelians, vassal lords to the Zakarians. It was again short-lived, the Mongols invading in 1240 and wreaking havoc on the small town. "Pax Mongoliana" was again short-lived, as Mongol internecine wars begun in 1338 again wiped out the gains made by a now decimated population. The final blow came in 1603, when the Safavids, who had taken Meghri and Siunik 100 years before, forced the entire

Armenian population into exile in the wake of Ottoman advances. The population was mostly sent to Isfahan, where they established an Armenian community that thrived until the 20th c.

Trickling back after the 1639 Treaty of Qasr-e Shirin (also called the Treaty of Zuhab) that ended 150 years of war between the Safavids and the Ottomans, Armenians resettled in the region, and began to rebuild the town. The Old District (Pokr Tagh) was rebuilt, along with the massive fortress on the other side, the first Armenian fortress designed for artillery. Also renovated/rebuilt were the three medieval churches of S. Sargis, Astvatsatsin and Meghru Vank.

As a result of Persian repression in the early 18th century, Meghri appealed to David Bek for help, and in 1722-1727 his small band of 400 partisans plus a handful of priests, stormed the area, driving off and killing the Muslim population. In 1727 Bek's forces held off an Ottoman Army many times their size for 5 days, using the impregnable fortress as their stronghold. The Turks were routed after a bold attack by the Armenians in Kapan, and Meghri was secured for Siunik.

With Bek's death in 1728, the rebellion ended and the Persians resumed control over the district, until the 1801-1805 war with Russia, which resulted in Meghri being granted to the Russian Tsar. In 1828, it was placed into the Russian Imperial Province of Karabakh, before being moved into the Zangezur district of Elizabetpol in 1868.

Under Russian rule, the town grew exponentially, becoming an important center for trade with the Persians, as well as a point on the Arax River route connecting Baku with Nakhichevan and Erivan Province. It was most famous for its produce, which again found its ways to the tables of Empires, this time in Russia and Europe.

Culturally the town grew as well, in 1811 forming its first parish school under Matevos Shahian with the help of the Armenian Poet Raffi.

Meghri held out against Turkish invaders in the 1918-1920 Zangezur war, eventually ending up with a truncated district that formed the southern end of the Soviet Republic. Its phenomenal growth in the Soviet period was based on agriculture and the position of the suburb of Agarak on the rail line connecting Yerevan with Baku, and fell on hard times in the 1990s with the

closing of the borders and the end of trade with Azerbaijan.

The rail line remains closed, but the town has rebounded in recent years due the opening the North-South corridor between Iran and Russia, which passes through the town. The windfall of trade, military and customs support services has not translated into wide spread prosperity, though many think their life is better now than 5 years ago. There is still a lot of poverty, people living off the land in more ways than one. The surge in customs traffic and the nearby military base have had a minimal effect on the local economy, while 50% of the district's population has left for Russia or the West in search of work. Ironically, that is the same percentage of the local economy that is dependent on remittances sent back from those Meghri émigrés.

Locals look to the further opening of trade with Iran to repair their fortunes, as well as a proposal to build a huge oil refinery at the border, exporting gasoline back to Iran. No one counts the environmental costs of such a move, focusing mostly on how to make a buck. Coupled with the recent drought in the region, the area is about to face real challenges to preserve it way of life, and its now splendid ecology.

NAVIGATING THE TOWN

Meghri is quite easy to navigate. It is divided into two "Taghs" or districts. Mets Tagh is on your left as you enter the tow, and is the larger district, where most of the citizens, Hotel, guest houses, cafes, central square and the cathedral Astvatsatsin are.

The main entrance is at the S end of the town, climbing up and around some low apartment blocks to ten Hotel and the town square. From there a street continues uphill to Astvatsatsin, and Melik Ohandjanian p heads west towards the hospital and the cemetery with the Meghru Vank ruins. Opposite the cemetery a steep street leads to two guest houses; Marietta's and across the street, Sergei's.

The other side of the highway from the same highway intersection it Pokr Tagh (Small District), which is the oldest extant district in Meghri, its houses dating to the 17th-19th cc. This side also has the swimming pool (working), culture house and the military camp, all facing the highway. Pokr Tagh is where Arevik traditional guest house

is located, the 17th c S. Sargis with its incredible frescoes, and the ongoing Meghri 1 project to preserve and renovate the old neighborhood.

Shops are located on the highway and around the square. Cafes and restaurants are on the highway, near Agarak and about 3 km N of town center on the Kadjaran Highway.

SIGHTS

POKR TAGH / OLD TOWN

The original settlement is traced to this small area of town, located on the west (right as you drive into town from Kadjaran) side of the river (behind and below the swimming pool). A maze of 17th-19th cc buildings that meander over and seem to cling to the district's rocky slopes, Pokr Tagh is one of the most idyllic areas of the town, with stone houses boasting wooden balconies and hand carved balustrade spindles and fretwork.

It is also the focus of revival, in a project called Meghri 1, led by Armine Petrossian, who has authentically renovated an early 19th c building, turning it into an income generating guest house (Arevik. See overnight below), the funds from which go to continue renovation of the neighborhood, adding art workshops and promoting preservation of the entire neighborhood.

S. Sargis Church

At the top of the district, reached by a series of steps above the guest house, is S. Sarkis basilica, a recently renovated 17th century church that in its turn was built over an older structure of undetermined age. The church is locked during the week, but a house a few steps away has the key.

The basilica has a plaza outside its southern entry to a triple-nave hall type which simple exterior belies the incredible frescoes found inside. This is one of the most impressive painted churches in the Caucasus, covering the entire surface of the interior with elaborate Oriental patterns in rich hues of red, blue and green, punctuated by biblical scenes and depictions of Christ, the apostles, the saints and founding church fathers.

METS TAGH / NEW TOWN

Mets Tagh (Big District) is where most of the town is situated, shoehorned between the fortress walls. Other than a few large apartment blocks, most of the district is made of two-story buildings and

single family dwellings, on streets that climb the slopes of Mt. Achakar.

The town's **Central Square** is uphill from the newly renovated Hotel, and is an idyllic oasis of greenery surrounded by the old Cinema House (now a shop), the Mayor's Offices, some stores, and the impressive **Meghri Aesthetic Center and art gallery** (open 10-4, mon-sat, 250 AMD).

In the center of the square there is a drinking fountain, benches, tall trees and a massive tree stump with a sapling growing in its middle; the stump is all that remains of a 500 year old tree that marked the spot where David Bek and his forces reconnoitered to plan the defense of the town.

Meghri Fortress is truly impressive; it hems in the main district of town on both sides, with gigantic round towers that still have their ramparts and battery gun placements. Steeply up hill, the fortress used the impregnable mountain slopes as natural defenses, then built the walls out on either side to defend against any encroaching army, or to decimate them if they dared entered between the walls and within range (which was anywhere in sight).

The fortress was the most feared fortress of its day, the first fortress in Armenia designed for artillery. Its bulwarks held for 200 years, until more advanced weaponry made the walls obsolete. In small arm battle, it would still be a major deterrent for invading forces.

The fortress is the site of a desperate 5-day hold out in 1727 by David Bek and 400 partisans against a Turkish army of 70,000. Escaping to their main camp in Kapan, Bek's forces made a suicidal charge against the army, surprising and routing the Turks, reputedly killing 12,000, expelling the rest from Siunik. It was a miraculous battle that should have led to the complete autonomy of the region, but instead, at Bek's death in 1728, it ended in disarray, the Persians taking control of the region for the next 75 years.

The fortress is reached by a steep climb up either end, and has great views of the town, the valley, and the adjoining Arax River valley and Iran.

Astvatsatsin Church, a 17th century complete rebuild of an ancient church that once stood at the spot, is a unique structure; made from sliced tufa

rock that resembles brick, the slender octagonal **drum** is decorated with oriental arches and topped with a tent roof made from the same stone. The red-brown stone drum and dome glow in the morning light, taking on hues from the surrounding mountains.

A series of steps leads to the **church yard**, a broad plaza underneath a towering three story house with wooden balustrades. There are a few flower beds and a row of rough grave stones that show a much more ancient lineage for the site than the 17th century building suggests.

The large **building** is rectangular on the outside; with a wide hall inside that is subtly divide into a modified cruciform suggested by the massive support columns and the pendentives for the dome, with open west corners.

The **interior** is white-washed with extensive 19th c frescoes on much of the upper walls. The paintings show scenes from the bible (Adam and Eve, the Flood, the Last Judgment) and portraits of the Apostles, saints and church fathers.

The old **piano** set against the wall is the first piano in Meghri, purchased in 1901 and carried 40 km (on some poor workmen's shoulders) to Meghri from Ordubad. It is still used for Sunday service.

Meghru Vank / S. Hovhannes is on a hill rise in front of the town cemetery, on the east side of the Kadjaran Highway. You will see it on your left as you enter the town, the road to the site set within some new housing. It is about 200 m east of the highway. You can also reach it by taking the main street from Mets Tagh N towards the hospital and top at the cemetery.

The vank ruins are of a 17th c structure, built on a more ancient worship site. The building is in ruins, though substantial portions remain. The gavit is completely destroyed, as are much of the western and northwestern walls. The dome remains, as do a number of primitive frescoes from the 17th c, mostly on the altar end.

The remains of a **ruined 19th century church** are on the eastern side of the city, just left from the road directing to the fortress. The church has oriental arched niches on its remaining walls, and a semicircular apse for the altar space. The appearance is much like Persian mosques of the time, suggesting it might have replaced or

renovated one to create the Christian sanctuary, not unheard of in the times.

ENVIRONS

The **Iranian Border** (*DD 38.88784 x 46.26405, elev. 540m*) is at Agarak, some 10 km distance. The border is open to anyone with the appropriate visa. Visas to Armenia can be bought at the border, but not for Iran. The average wait to cross the border (which is extremely busy with semis) is 1-2 hours for passengers. Iranian border guards are polite but suspicious of westerners entering from Armenia. Expect a lot of questions and to have your luggage searched.

Agarak village is located about 1 km north of the customs point. The village is a dusty backwater of the district, save the few families of local miners who remains, and workmen for the customs operation.

Agarak was first mentioned as a mining village in a 13th century History by Stepanos Orbelian. Its copper and lead mines have been worked from prehistoric times. The modern village was incorporated in 1954 and the large molybdenum mine to the northeast began work in 1958.

The village has two 17th c renovation churches, **Aknakhach** and **S. Amnarkich**. They have interesting stonework.

Karchevan is reached by continuing north on the Agarak road over the next ridge, past a huge Molybdenum Mine operation, about 4 km from Agarak to the top entry that angles back to the left (SW). Karchevan is the name (and site) of the 906 community of Meghri given to Tatev vank by King Smbat Bagratuni (890-914).

The village has an 18th c **Astvatsatsin** church with older foundation, an interesting **cemetery** with Bronze Age stone intermixed with medieval and modern graves, and the remains of a destroyed **castle** close by.

[[Karchevan Hike Map](#)]

Also nearby are some decent **hiking trails** into the Zangezur range as it borders Nakhichevan. There is a waterfall and a small forest of trees.

There are also the ruins of a substantial **mosque** in the area, though locals are deliberately vague

on the subject. The mosque was an important pilgrimage site, and it is suspected the site also includes artifacts from the prehistoric age.

Continuing on the bad village road to the N, you eventually cross a high ridge and the villages of Kuris, Gudemnis, Vahravar and Lehvaz before rejoining the Kadjaran-Meghri Highway.

[[Malyev Map](#)]

Malyev River Gorge is reached by taking a left at the turnoff for Agarak, following the Arax River and the Iranian border for 8.5 km to Alvank (Aldara, 2 km from the highway). The route above (by jeep or hiking) can be a day trip in itself, exploring old ruins and striking landscapes, flora and fauna. For details see [Trip 8](#) (p. 48)

PRACTICALITIES

IN AND OUT AND AROUND

A daily **minivan** from Yerevan to Meghri (Agarak) leaves at 8 am from the central bus station (Admiral Isahaakov pta), 6000 AMD. There are also dedicated taxis that will take you to the same that leave from behind Kino Rossiya (Agatangeghos and Khorenatsi pts), for about 20-24,000 AMD (up to 4 passengers).

Regional Minivans (Marshrutni taxis) are caught at the bus stop on the highway and connect Meghri with Agarak (100 AMD), Karchevan (150 AMD), Vahravar (150 AMD), Lichk (250 AMD), Kadjaran (1000 AMD) and Kapan (2000 AMD).

Taxi Taxis are more expensive, but the most convenient way to travel (you decide when to go, and where). From Yerevan, taxis depart from behind "Kino Rossiya" at the corner of Agatangeghos and Movses Khorenatsi. Taxis charge around 30,000-40,000 AMD for up to 4 people. Call taxis can be cheaper, charging by the km. There are a number of taxi services in town; all provide this service.

In town taxis proliferate in the center. Typical fare is 500 AMD anywhere in center, or 100 AMD per km plus extra to wait. Taxis are useful in traveling the area, but negotiate; they know the routes very well and that tourists can pay more. Offer them 100 AMD per km plus an extra 1000 AMD to wait 30-45 minutes. Local call taxis are everywhere, their numbers advertised on the street.

Car Kapan is on (M2), which connects Meghri to Kadjaran (45 km), Kapan (71 km), Goris (132 km), Sissian (164 km), Jermuk (251 km), Vaik (233 km), Yeghegnadzor (247 km), Areni (262 km), Ararat (324 km), Artashat (342 km), and Yerevan (361 km).

The new Kapan highway opened in late 2007, and cuts about 30 minutes of driving time between Meghri and Kapan, bypassing the Kadjaran pass which is often snowbound in winter, and passing the Shikhahot Forest. It is reached by taking the border highway to Shvanidzor, then taking the new highway to Tsav (34 km), Shikhahogh (44 km) and Kapan (64 km).

Petrol and gas stations are on the highway at both ends of town.

COMMUNICATION, ETC.

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

Phone, telegraphs

Area code is 286
Long Distance: 0286 + local number
From abroad: + (374) 286 + local number
Mobile Phones: 091 Armentel, 093/094 Viva Cell

The town is covered by both Armentel (1 Melik Ohandjanian p) and VivaCell mobile phone services (Kapan: 11 Shahumian p). International calls can be made at the *Central Post Office*, 1 Melik Ohandjanian p. [See HayPost \(HyePost\) site for list \(www.haypost.am\)](http://www.haypost.am). The post office has trunk line phone service, sells phone cards and can send telegraphs.

Internet

There are internet points in town, ask when you arrive for the latest. Your overnight may have an internet connection as well. Armentel sells dial up cards that work in Meghri. Buy at the post office or at the Armentel store on Ohandjanian p.

Bank, Exchange

Money wires and credit card advances can be done at banks; ATMs and exchange at banks; exchange

points in town will change money at competitive rates.

Arshinvestbank, 1 Gordsaranaiyin p
There is also an ATM at the Agarak Customs Terminal.

Shopping

There are *mterks* and kiosks throughout town, congregated on the highway, and around the square. The Shuka is off the highway. There is a Yarmaka and *mterks* in the alleys W of the hotel.

Film, etc.

Film and batteries can be found at *mterks*. Batteries are mostly unreliable for digital cameras, bring your own.

Pharmacy

Apotekas (Armenian: *deghatuner*) can be found in the center of town, and on the highway.

Hospital, Polyclinic

For a medical emergency, dial 103. Ask at your lodging for recommendation.

Minassian Medical Center, 31 Andranik p, tel. 3426, 3345

OVERNIGHT

HOTEL MEGHRI, 2 blocks S of the Square in Mets Tagh, is newly renovated, opening in 2008. The small hotel will provide clean rooms, hotel showers and Satellite TV. Reportedly rooms will run between \$25-100.

AREVIK GUEST HOUSE, 22 Mezhlumian p, tel. 094-328400 (Sirun), 537129 (Armine), is located in Pokr Tagh, uphill and just below S. Sargis Church. The house is a renovated piece of history preserving the most interesting architectural bits, with loving attention to woodworks and the old Meghri style. Rooms share baths and a communal room and kitchen, and are decorated with antiques and wood carvings. Two have balconies overlooking the town. An outdoor courtyard is surrounded by the house, in the old style, and reminiscent of Urartian houses. Rooms from 10,000-30,000 AMD.

MARIETTA'S GUEST HOUSE, 14 Karapet p (street entrance opposite cemetery and Meghru Vank), tel. 3054, has 4 rooms to let in her large house and balcony overlooking her garden. Breakfast

included, and Marietta is a charming hostess. 4000 AMD per person.

SERGEI'S GUEST HOUSE, 15 Karapet (enter street opposite cemetery), tel. 3315, is across the street from Marietta's. He has two rooms he can let, with breakfast, at 4000 AMD. His garden is stocked full of succulent fruit, and he seems eager to share with guests.

HOMESTAY with a local family is a distinct possibility in Meghri. Ask around when you arrive. The Pokr Tagh s closest to the bus stop, and has the oldest homes. Mets Tagh, especially the neighborhood to the N, has houses with gardens. 4000 AMD for B&B is fair.

There are Hotel-Restaurants outside town on both sides, catering to Iranian truck drivers, but also welcoming tourists. There are a few by the Agarak customs point as well. Amenities include hot showers and TV, not a whole lot more. 5000-8000 AMD

FOOD & DRINK

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

Meghri has a number of eateries, most on the Kadjaran-Agarak Highways.

The *HIGHWAY* has a *CAFÉ* and *KHORO VATS GRILLS* that serve hot meals at reasonable prices (1000-2000 AMD per person). \$-\$\$

There is a *CAFÉ* in the center, near the hotel. \$-\$\$

HOTEL MEGHRI will serve food in its new restaurant. \$\$-\$\$\$\$
North of town about 3 km a *ROADSIDE CAFÉ* serves excellent Armenian cuisine in its small space. \$-\$\$

There are food stands, grills and cafes near the *AGARAK CUSTOMS POINT*. \$-\$\$

TRIP 8: SHIKHAHOT FOREST ▲

This route follows the new highway connecting Kapan and Meghri, beginning at its southernmost point.

Malyev River Gorge is reached by taking a left at the turnoff for Agarak, following the Arax River and the Iranian border for 8.5 km to Alvank (Aldara, 2 km from the highway). The route above (jeep) is worth a day trip in itself, exploring old ruins and striking landscapes, flora and fauna. For details see Trip 8, p.

It has a dirt road with a dirt road going 12 km N for to the sites of four abandoned hamlets with five church ruins. The trip is a great drive or hike, starting at the valley floor and working its way to the foot of Mt. Chgnavor: the camp and church ruins at Tos (8.5 km), Amnaprkich at Malyev (10 km), S. Hakop at Verin Malyev (), Apkes Church in Apkes with Sevedan Church nearby (12 km) and. Apkes is 4 km from the ruins of Marzkid, over the eastern mountain.

➡ **From** --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: **Alvank** (pop.)

➡ **From** --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: **Tos** (pop.)

➡ **From** --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: **Nerkin Maliyev** (pop.)

➡ **From** --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: **Verin Maliyev** (pop.)

➡ **From** --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: **Apkes** (pop.)

➡ **From** --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: **Sevedan Kujert** (pop.)

➡ *Backtrack to the highway, and after about 2.5 km take the next L (signposted) onto a 3 km road that leads to central SHVANIDZOR (DD 38.93811 x 46.37204, elev. 676m) 🏠 🏠 🏠*

✳️ **SHVANIDZOR - ՇՎԱՆԻԶՈՐ (Շվանիզոր) ▲** (pop. 300) is located about 12 km east of Meghri on the other side of the – Mts, off of the – highway. The small village is a combination of quaint deserted stone buildings with wooden balconies and well-kept family dwellings with oasis of greenery and frit orchards.

The village is famous for its “tuzi oghi” (fig vodka)—for which Armenians have been known to fly half way around the world just to buy a bottle or two—and its rugged landscape that glows an emerald green, yellow, red and blue in the spring, but a burnt umber in the summer; with large expanses of volcanic rocks eroded into dramatic pinnacles and spires, an interesting variety of vegetation and some unusual wildlife species.

The village is about to receive a windfall of sorts from the new highway connecting the border with Kapan, which passes right by Shvanidzor. Villagers are already planning to open fruit stands, café and overnight for weary and hungry truck drivers, and, they hope, tourists wanting to explore the region.

Still, much of the current village resembles a tumbled ghost town in the Sonoran desert, with the important difference being Shvanidzor is blessed with abundant water from local springs and the teeming Arax River, served by an old medieval aqueduct, the only intact medieval canal in Armenia.

The **aqueduct** is located outside the village, to the left as you enter the village. To get there, taking the L turnoff to the village from the Meghri Highway, at about 2.5 km from the highway, at a deep bend in the road, another village road goes L (west) for about 100 m to the aqueduct, which crosses the road. The metal plaque dates the reconstruction to the 17th c, though the aqueduct is much older, locals saying it dates to the Urartian period. The current structure brings water downhill to a large orchard that is shared by villagers.

Climbing the nearest trail up to the aqueduct, continue uphill to the ruins of a small medieval structure and in the inner yard of the nearest house, an **old shrine with 4th century cross-stones** uncovered by the owner during renovations. Two of the stones with crosses on them also bear petroglyphs of human forms, and of cosmic symbols, suggesting they are much older than their 4th century dating. Outside there are pottery shards from an undetermined period of inhabitation.

In inside the village proper there is a 4th c basilica, rebuilt in the 18th c on the older ruins (note the cyclopean stones in the foundations). The triple nave structure is marked by massive columns and arches, and an extremely large hall.

The upper cornices are punctuated by a row of clay pots embedded in the upper walls; an early form of acoustic engineering inherited from Romans and Greek architecture. Where ever there was a known or planned acoustical problem, clay pots of various sizes would be built into the walls of the church. After many trial and error tests, an employee of the church would fill or empty the pots with ash. The pots at Shvanidzor's basilica are high up, in order to control excessive echo. It succeeds, judging by the still hall.

Flora Shvanidzor is located in one of Armenia's most unique ecosystems, with extremely rare endemic species of flowers, including those that are only else found in Africa.

Shvanidzor flora (May) are found in river valleys, mountain steppes: *Tulipa florensvyi*, *T. confusa*: f. pink, f. red, f. yellow (Tulip varieties); *Iris grossheimii*, *I. Paradoxa*, *I. Caucasica*, *I. Pseudocausasica*, *I. Atropatana* (*Iris*); *Mesendera candissima*; *Colchicum zangezorum* (Autumn Crocus / Naked Ladies); *Hyacinthella atropatana* (*Hoya*); *Fritillaria kurdica*, *F. armena* (*Fritillaria*); *Orchis simma*, *O. schelvcornikovii*, *O. stvenii*, *O. coriphora* (*orchid*); *Steveniella satyroides* (*orchid* family); *Cephalanthera epipactoides* (*orchid* family); *Epipactis latifolia* (*Helliborine*); *Acantholimon fedorovii* (*Acantholimon*); *Reseda globulosa* (*Mignonette*); *Cercis griffithii* (*Afghan Redbud*); *Gladiolus szovitsii*, *G. atroviolaceus*, *G. italicus* (*Gladiolus*); *Punica granatum* (*wild*); *Tournefortia Siberia* (*Tournefortia*); *Calendula persica* (*English marigold*, *Calendula*).

Home stays and camping Homes stays—though rustic—would be one of the most rewarding overnights in Armenia for the intrepid backpacker, with great high-desert hiking trails leading north the to alpine meadows around Mt. Chgnavor, and abundant flora on the lower valleys in April-May.

Camping possible near the village, though with little tree cover; **overnight** in a village him (*rustic*; 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **springs** in the village.

➡ **From** --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: **N'rnadzor** (pop.)

➡ **From** --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: **Old Astizur** (pop.)

➡ **From** --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: **Gumarad** (pop.)

➡ **From** Gumaran ---- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: **Shshkert** (pop.)

➡ **From** Shshkert, --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: **Tsav** (pop.)

➡ *From Tsav continue E on the new highway to the first R (S) outside the village, which crosses the river and heads east on a dirt path and in about 3 km leads into Mtnadzor in the **SHIKHAHOUGH FOREST** (DD 39.0488 x 46.4724, elev. 942m) 🏠 🏠 🏠*

✳️ **SHIKHAHOUGH FOREST - ՇԻԿԱԿՈՂԻ ԱՆՏԱՐ (Շիկաօղի անտար) ▲** is normally entered via Mtnadzor canyon Forest, using a S/SE dirt road the begins just E of Tsav village (the first road after or before the village, depending on which way you drive).

Shikahogh is Armenia's second largest forest reserve, covering some 10,000 hectares (25,000 acres) of land. It has the country's largest hardwood forests, with its largest collection of endemic and rare species found in one site. Unfortunately a number of species are on the listed as endangered in Armenia's Red Book.

Mtnadzor Forest Mtnadzor Forest is a part of the larger Shikahogh Forest, making up about half its size. Mtnadzor ("dark canyon") adjoins the [Nerkin Hand Plane grove](#) (p. 49) and Tsav village, reached by taking the first S road E of the village, a dirt road (Jeep) that ends in the thickest part of the forest. Mtnadzor's virgin forest and unique ecosystem makes this one of the world's great natural heritage sites, and on of the last virgin forests in the Near East.

The name comes from the "eternal twilight" experienced in this part of the reserve, with 40 degree slopes set N/S and thick tree stands that permit only a few hours of bright light a day. As a result, the forest has an inordinate amount of unique flora growing under its tree canopy, and is constantly humid.

The forest is remarkable for its unique *mesothermophilous* (moisture and heat-loving) flora and vegetation, formed by the forest's unique geographic and climatic conditions. Its inordinately warm and moist climate comes from the Caspian Sea, funneled through mountain ranges in Azerbaijan that stop in the forest canyons, which are protected from Armenia's more harsh continental weather by very tall mountains on the North, West and South sides.

This ecosystem hosts 1074 types of endemic and unique plants at the altitude of 1300-1400 meters. 70 those are included in the Red Book of RA.

Flora The reserve is also known for its numerous endemic species, most of which have the place-name "Zangezur"; for example, *Zangezur pear* (*Pyrus zangezura Maleev*), *Zangezur blue-bell* (*Campanula zangezura*), (*Lipsky*) *Kolak* (et *Serdjukova*) and *Zangezur pennycress* (*Thlaspi zangezurum Tzvel*).

Flora in the lower mountain zone (up to 1000m) includes stands of low-growing *Arax oak* (*Q. araxina*) and (*Trautveteria Grossh.*). There is also an interesting Mediterranean types of shibliak (deciduous low growing shrubbery), including

Christ's thorn or *Jerusalem thorn* (*Paliurus spina-christi Mill.*), a dense thorny shrub with yellow-greenish leaves and oval fruit, often used as a living fence for its effective deterrent to animals (and human) intrusion. Other plants include *smoke tree* (*Cotinus coggygnea Scop.*), *hackberry* (*Celtis glabrata*), *barberry* (*Berberis vulgaris L.*) and other xerophilous (drought-resistant) plants with a dominance of *beard-grass* (*Botriochloa ischaemum L. Keng*).

Flora in the mid mountain zone (1000-2200m) is primarily made of oak (*Q. iberica Bieb.* and *Q. macranthera*) and hornbeam (*Carpinus orientalis Mill.* and *C. betulus L.*) on the northern slopes. Oak (*Q. iberica*) occurs at the altitude of 1300-1400 m, while (*Q. macranthera*) grows higher up. Other trees are *Ash* (*Fraxinus L.*), *lime* (*Tilia L.*), *maple* (*Acer L.*) and *elm* (*Ulmus L.*)

Shikahogh has the only forest of *Oriental Beech* (*Fagus orientalis Lipsky*) in Southern Armenia and is the only forest in the country where Hornbeam appears in upper altitudes.

Endemic fruit trees include *walnut* (*Juglans regia L.*), *pear* (*Pyrus L.*), *apple* (*Malus orientalis Uglitzk.*), *plum* (*Prunus Mill.*), *pistachio* (*Pistacea mutica*), *chestnut* (*Castanea sativa L.*), *persimmon* (*Diospyros lotus L.*), *water elm* (*Zelkova carpinifolia*), *pomegranate* (*Punica granatum L.*), *medlar* (*Mespilus germanica L.*), *fig* (*Ficus carica L.*) and others.

Yew and oriental plane also occur in the reserve in groups and individually (see as well [Plane Grove Reservation](#), p. 49). There is a group of 25-30 year-old yew trees in a dark and dense beech forest near the village of Shikahogh.

Flora in the upper mountain zone (above 2200 m) include subalpine meadow vegetation spreads over altitudes above 2200 m with transition zone *resiniferous* species of *astragalus* (*Astragalus*), as well as *prickly thrift* (*Acantholimon*) and *sainfoin* (*Onobrichis cornuta*). In bloom their thorny cushions are entirely covered with yellow, violet and pink flowers.

Risks Up until 2007 the forest has been largely unaffected by Armenia's cataclysmic post-Soviet deforestation due to its remote location and care shown by residents of nearby villages. The construction of a new highway between Shvanidzor

and Kapan to route Iranian semis away from a pass to the west is changing that.

Fauna The Red Book of protected species in the reserve include *Caucasian gray bears*, *wolves*, *foxes*, *porcupines*, *wild boars*, *deer*, *wild cats*, and 27 species of birds.

The most famous endangered species is the Persian leopard (*Pantera pardus tullianus*), which is barely hanging on (it faced terrible slaughter during the Karabakh war, when rogue soldiers entered the forests from the buffer zone and hunted them with submachine guns. One notorious report described a helicopter borne general hunting the forest with machine guns and other artillery). Recent photography and sightings by environmentalists confirm the birth of two cubs to a leopard couple. The World Wildlife Fund is finally beginning operations in the region, and it is hoped they and local eco groups can prevent further decimation of the almost extinct animal.

Fauna Species include a number of reptiles (*Vipera lebetina*, *Natrix natrix*, *N. tessellata*, *Pseudopodus apodus*, *Viper raddei* etc.), birds (*Caspian snowcock* - *Tetraogallus caspius*, *bearded eagle* - *Gypaetus barbatus*, *various species of vultures* - *Gyps fulvus* and others), wolf (*Canis lupus*), fox (*Vulpes vulpes*), wild cat (*Felis silvestris*), roe (*Capreolus capreolus*), hare (*Lepus europaeus*), badger (*Meles meles*), hedgehog (*Erinaceus auritus* etc.).

Others include the Caucasian bearded goat (*bezoar goat*) and mufion (*wild ram*), and the rare Indian porcupine (*Hystrix leucura*).

Camping in the forest is allowed, though (rarely) you may be challenged by a local or illegal logger, and be sure to leave your site in its natural state when you leave; **overnight** in village home possible (rustic, 3000 AMD for B&B is fair); **springs** in the village and in spots on the rivers.

☞ *From Tsav take the Kapan highway E to a fork in the road at about 4-4.5 km, take the right fork that goes into the Tsav River valley towards Lachin Corridor, at about 3 km, another R (S) road rounds a hill and heads back W at the river edge, crosses the river and ends in about 2 km at **NERKIN HAND** (DD 39.0418 x 46.5174, elev. 849m) 🗺️ 📶 📶*

☘ **NERKIN HAND - ՆԵՐԿԻՆ ԳՆՆԻ (Ներկինգ Պանկ)** ▲ (pop. 80) was settled in the 1960s on the western end of a towering Plane Tree grove with giant 800-1000 year old specimens (a few are thought to be as old as the time of Christ). The grove was designated a State Reservation in 1958, and consists of about 60 hectares of specimens of the Plane tree (*Platanus orientalis*, other common names are *Oriental Plane* and *Sycamore*).

The grove is in the river flood plain (700-800 m altitude), at the edge of Mtnadzor Valley Forest, part of the larger Shikahogh Forest Preserve. The grove stretches along the Tsav River, a long and narrow ribbon of towering trees that is roughly 8 kilometers from end to end and only 100-150 meters wide. The grove extends into the buffer zone surrounding Karabakh, now held by Armenian forces and technically off limits (there may be a danger of landmines, so don't be reckless and test it), called the Bastuchai Reservation when it was under Azerbaijan's control (the Tsav River is called Bastuchai in Azerbaijan).

The naturally occurring grove is rare in the Caucasus, the Plane tree having been relegated to the status of cultivated species years ago. The tree is widespread in the Caucasus, Anatolia and Europe, this deciduous tree has become a favorite in urban parks for its long life, beautiful crown and ability to resist drought once established. The truck is "barkless"; a smooth white surface that crusts only in late age.

Armenia's Oriental Plane is a giant variety with a wide crown and long life (up to 2500 years, though record trees are dated 3000 years in age). It is also called a Platane, Platan, or variations in Europe; and Chinar, Chenar or Chenari from Anatolia to the India subcontinent. In North American they are known as Sycamores.

Like other species of the Platanus genus, Oriental Plane leaves grow in alternating patterns on stems, deeply lobed, and resemble maple leaves. Flowers and fruit are round and burr like, in clusters on each stem.

The trees are massive; one famous 2000 year old Plane Tree is in nearby Artsakh (Karabakh), topping out at 54 meters. The average tree at Nerkin Hand is 250 years old, topping out at 45 meter with a trunk diameter of 2 meters. There

are also trees with hollows in their trunk, a not unusual occurrence in naturally occurring platens.

Challenges The adjoining village was settled in the 1980s, and villagers began cutting trees for firewood, construction projects, but mostly to clear the fertile river bottom for farming. The grove census in villagers encroached on the grove's edges to plow fields, leaving a once high population of 5000 trees at around 1,800 now. One local, Derenik Hovhannissian, has started a Plane tree nursery near the site, and wants to enlarge the grove by 20 hectares, a dream needing outside support to realize. The current rate of loss is 12-15 trees a year.

The Plane Tree in Ancient Armenian worship

Plane trees were sacred to prehistoric Armenians, the rustling of their leaves believed to be messages from the spirit world which only elect priests (the Kurms) could decipher. An ancient grove of plane trees near Armavir was especially sacred to Armenians, its lineage traced to naturally occurring plane groves like those at Nerkin Hand. Locals still venerate the trees, even as some cut them to clear land.

"Sosanver", the offer (a form of sacrifice or dedication to the priestly service) of royal sons to the cult, is mentioned in the History Of Armenia by the 5th c historian, Movses Khorenatsi. The name sosanver (sosi ="bark" and never="gift" or "dedication") relates to Anushavan-Sosanver, the fourth son of Armenia's founding demi-god Haik, who dedicated himself to the cult, and became its first Oracle. The word seems to be associated with the eternal and cyclical regeneration of vegetation.

Sadly, the Armavir grove was lost, its last vestiges said to be a victim of the crusade of early Christians to wipe out all traces of the old religion.

As part of Armenia's Shamanistic tradition, the worship of natural elements like the plane tree is believed to be the oldest form of religion in human experience, which would place its origins in Armenia in the Stone Age, when humans first settled the area (ca. 750,000-500,000 BCE).

The grove also appears in modern literature, in the story "Cyclamens" by the early 20th c writer, Axel Bakunts. Bakunts used grove where the Tsav River (known as the Basuta) appears from the adjoining Mtnadzor Valley:

"The river Basuta sounds only in the ravine, [where it] scrapes the riverbank and polishes blue quartz in the riverbed. The river Basuta rolls along in its narrow bed, and it appears like thousands of dogs howling under the white foam, gnawing their chains of white stone."

Plane Trees in History From earliest times the oriental plane was an important species in Parthian and Armenian gardens, which ere planned around two primeval worship elements; water and shade. It was known as the chinar (Hindi) or chinar (Parthia-Armenia-Persia), and mentioned in a number of odes, one by Horace (2.11: "why don't we lie here under the tall plane tree..."), and another by the Persian ruler Xerxes who—as related in Herodotus' "History"—on his way to Sardis, *"By this road went Xerxes and found a plane-tree, to which for its beauty he gave an adornment of gold, and appointed that some one should have charge of it always in undying succession."* The scene is also featured in Handel's opera, "Xerxes".

The plane is also reputed to be the *Tree of Hippocrates*, under which Hippocrates taught medicine at Kos. Pliny's *Natural History* records the westward progress of the plane "introduced among us from a foreign clime for nothing but its shade", planted first at the tomb of Diomedes on the island of Tremiti, then imported to Sicily by the Syracuse ruler Dionysius the Elder (ca. 432-367 BCE), who had the trees planted at his palace in Rhegium (Reggio di Calabria), from where they spread as far as the lands of the Morini in Belgic Gaul in the 1st c.

Camping in the area both possible and pleasant, though be aware of the humid conditions that make it ideal for plants and bugs, unpleasant for humans; **overnight** in village home possible (rustic, 3000 AMD for B&B fair); **springs** in the village.

➡ From --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: **S'rashen** (pop.)

➡ From --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: **Shikhahogh** (pop.)

➡ From --- to (DD)

SIDE TRIP: **Chakaten** (pop.)

End at Kapan.

RESOURCES ▲

Ashot Avagyan
www.armeniapedia.org/index.php?title=Ashot_Avagyan

Petroglyphs
<http://www.iatp.am/ara/library/index.html>
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