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: (2850) 35 01
Haypost, Tel: (2830) 43 85

Megri:
Hospital, 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 the country and the Caucasus. He is equally friendly and professionally focused, insuring safe climbs.

Spitak Rescue Team, 50 Halabian p, tel. 010-350066, 350186, email: spitak@mail.yerphi.am, is a highly trusted group of mountainring 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 ) Vorotan Pass, (pop. )
- From --- to (DD ) Goraik, (pop. )
- From --- to (DD ) Mets Karakhach (pop. )
- From --- to SPANDARIAN RESERVOIR (DD 39.67405 x 45.81127, elev. 2105m)  

SPANDARIAN RESERVOIR - ՍՊԱՆԴԱՐԻԱՆ ԲԱՍԱՆՑ (Մղանք)  
 begins on the eastern end of Goraik and stretches for 7 km to the west end of Sararnkunk. 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 Tshakh 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 each 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. Davagloz or Ughtasar, and hikes south and west explore the Sisniq/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.

SIDETRIP: Mets Karakhach (pop. )

- From --- to (DD )

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

TRIP 1: TO SISSIAN

- From --- to (DD )

SIDETRIP: Vorotan Pass, (pop. )

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 Karahunj near Sissian; the standing stones with their carefully carved eye-holes are all around the village; in church walls, cemeteries, and in village backyards.

The village churches were first erected in the 4th-5th cc, incorporating preChristian 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 Sisniq history came from Angeghakot, including the famous 17th c Melik, Israel Ori, who
covened 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 39.56876 x 45.94052, 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 springs in villages.

SIDETRIP: Spandarian (pop. )

- From --- to ANGEGHAKOT (DD 39.56876 x 45.94052, elev. 1845m)  

ANGEGHAKOT - ԱՆԳԵՂԱԽՈՂ  
(pop. 1000) is one of the oldest settlements in Sisniq, 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 Sisniq using the (M2) highway.

SIDETRIP: Mets Karakhach (pop. )

- From --- to (DD )

SIDETRIP: Tshakh (pop. )

- From --- to (DD )

SIDETRIP: Sararnkunk (pop. )

- From --- to (DD )

It is located above pastures of Sararnkunk village in Sisniq region, on the surface of Ughtasar and Djemajur rocks, which are 3000-3300m above sea level. The deepness of each rock picture is 1.5m. 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.

SIDETRIP: Spandarian (pop. )

- From --- to (DD )

SIDETRIP: Mets Karakhach (pop. )

- From --- to (DD )

- From --- to (DD )

From --- to ANGEGHAKOT (DD 39.56876 x 45.94052, elev. 1845m)

- From --- to (DD )

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 39.56876 x 45.94052, 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
The village has three standing churches, out of 7 recorded in history.

S. Stepanos Nakhab’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 17t 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 altar 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 pilastered 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 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 facing 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 Sianik 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 common burial site 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 see now.

The variety of stones and their carving is amazing; some 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 Dзор and Sianik; not seen elsewhere, and they are believed to be the graves for members of a local Jewish community that served the local nakharars; they congratulate in front of the multi-step royal monument.

Both Vayots Dзор and Sianik 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 Yegegis, the Orbelian capital in the 13th c.

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

Near Angehakot

On the road to Shaghat/Geghardot, about 1 km from Angehakot, is the S. Vartan pilgrimage site (DD 39.57365 x 45.93861, 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 Avarar 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 Avarar heroes. After their legendary visit, miracles attributed to Avarar’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 roughstonework 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.

Siunik Marz : 4 of 51 - TourArmenia © 2009 Rick Ney ALL RIGHTS RESERVED - www.TACentral.com
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 (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 - ÇUĞH (Cuğh) ▲ (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.
The town has a wonderful, small ethnographic museum, worth a visit to understand the current of history in upper Sisian (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 Sisian is wonderfully cool weather. Sisian 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.

Sisian is a great way station for exploring the region. It is close to the Petroglyph fields on MtS, Mets Karahch and Ughtasar, the Bronze Age Observatories 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
Sisian prides itself on being the oldest continually inhabited settlement in Armenia (Yerevan’s, Gimr’s and other town’s claims aside), a self-proclaimed historic based on 1960s-1990s excavations that have uncovered a rich, complex series of settlements going back to the Paleolithic era. The nearby petroglyph fields on MtS. Mets Karahch 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 Artimeis).

Early chroniclers placed Sissian into the historic Tghuk province of Mets Haik (formed ca. 4th c BCE), at least one calling the town Sisian; another Sisavan. The region was the largest of twelve districts/feudoms in Sisian Kingdom, Sisian 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.

Tghuk (Sissian) was the largest of Sisian’s districts, about the same size as it is now (stretching from the gates of Zangezur to Goris; from the Sisian range to the Zangezur mountains), and included the lands of Tatev and Hardjins, now in Goris district. Tghuk 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 Tghuk/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 intercine wars of succession and the conflicts 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 Turcic and Persian dominance during the 15th-18th cc.

Sissian was sacked more than once, and its old name Gharkilisa (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 pastureag 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 Elizabetpoliskyaya Gubernarya, Gharkilisa/Sissian prospered as émigrés from Persia and Turkey settled in the town in 1813-1930. However, the town of Sissian remained a village, with only 70 Armenians and 40 Tatars listed in eh 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 Nahchichevan and Karabakh. Russian efforts to control the independent populace results in Nahchichevan and Karabakh being separated from the district.

Gharkilisa/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 Sissian, 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, with Kapan, 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 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 that runs parallel to the river, leading to the ancients to erect an observatory nearby. In the summer Sisian is wonderfully cool weather. Sisian 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.

Sisian is a great way station for exploring the region. It is close to the Petroglyph fields on MtS, Mets Karahch and Ughtasar, the Bronze Age Observatories 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
Sisian prides itself on being the oldest continually inhabited settlement in Armenia (Yerevan’s, Gimr’s and other town’s claims aside), a self-proclaimed historic based on 1960s-1990s excavations that have uncovered a rich, complex series of settlements going back to the Paleolithic era. The nearby petroglyph fields
before the main square that faces the new Lalner 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.

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.

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 Lightasar.

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 Karahundj (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.

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

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

Those caught at the Bus Stop on Sisakan p, one block west of the central stop connect to Shakesn (100 AMD), Angelesh (150 AMD), Angahtyan (150 AMD) and Gorai (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.

Siunik Marz : 8 of 51 - TourArmenia © 2009 Rick Ney ALL RIGHTS RESERVED - www.TACentral.com
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 Rossia” 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 (150 km), Aratash (176 km), and Yerevan (205 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 (HayPost) 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: balasyanyan@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
Ardishinvestbank, 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.
Films 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 Israeli (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 mushy, 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.

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 Lalander, serves good food in their bar-restaurant, and also cater to weekend celebrations. $-$$-

HOLSTEN, Yerevan-Sissian Highway, tel. 6447, serves very decent fare in their new surroundings. Armenian cuisine, fish or khorovats. $$

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

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

JRAHARS, by the bridge off of Israelian, serves decent fare in their large restaurant. Sandwiches to khorovats. $-$$
TRIP 2: AROUND SISSIAN

Sissian North
Karahunj, Ughtasar

From KARAHUNJ (DD 39.55060 x 46.02898, elev. 1778m) to KARAHUNJ (DD 39.55060 x 46.02898, elev. 1778m)

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 to read 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 Ughtasar, sometimes 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 up 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 Barsgezian conducted the first astronomical study of Karahunj in 1983. Archeologists thought the stones were simply placed around the Bronze Age graves as monuments or ritual stones. Parsamian and Barsgezian 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 design of the observatory at the Metsamor observatory— 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 2-5 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 facts 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 thought they had the discovery to themselves—scoffed at Parsamian’s theories, and to this day the older ones refuse to admit the stones might have any astronomical purpose, despite the mounting evidence to the contrary.

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 at the graves, 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.

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 henge.

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.

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 (“antsker”), 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 Arab, Seljuk, Mongol and Timurid armies and early Christians trying to destroy the pagan worship site.

Siunik Marz : 10 of 51 - TourArmenia © 2009 Rick Noy ALL RIGHTS RESERVED - www.TACentral.com
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.

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.

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 around 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.

Werfer 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 of 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 doors way. That’s the only way you could spot something in the sky. There are many of these stones and holes, so (Stephen) Hawking 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.”
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 years.

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 “Ghosun 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.

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 ‘hungh’ or ‘hang’, which would make Stonehenge ‘hanging stones.’

Another says it is a variant of the Armenian word for voice (‘h’unchi’), 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 Karahunj, continue N to the Goris Highway (N2), cross over to a village road that continues N for about 1.5 km to the village of Ishkanasar (Kizitshuk), 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) .

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 to 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.

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.

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 (anthropomorph), 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.

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 paleontological plants that only come to us in fossil form.

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 geyers of hot water spewing into the air and a generally warm, moist climate that nurtured 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.
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, mouflon, 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.
Let's break down the information from the text:

**Sissian Southwest / South**

- **BRNAYOT** - Located 7 km from Sissian, it is a famous Melik (local governors) center of the Siunik.
- The village is famous both for its monuments, church, and 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 near the village.

**SIDE TRIP:**
- **Ashotavan** (pop.)
- **Salvard** (pop.)
- **Hatsavan** (pop.)
- **Tasik** (pop.)
- **Arevis** (pop.)

**Tanahat Vank**

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

**SIDE TRIP:**
- **Tolors Reservoir** (pop.)
- **Akhlatian** (pop.)
- **Torunik** (pop.)
- **Dastakert** (pop.)

**BNUNIS**

- **SIDE TRIP:**
  - Torunik (pop.)
It is situated on the eastern borders of Sisian, in front of the Siunik fortress, on the right-hand high area of the Vorotan’s gorge nearby to the village Utys. This amazing monument has not almost been studied and its partial studies and geometrical calculations have brought to the initial conclusions that from Utys 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 Qarner have been preserved. This monument excesses 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.

AGHITU / AGHUDI - Աղիթու / Աղիթու (Աղիթու / Աղիթու)  (before Aghudi, pop. 500) is located 7 km E of Sisian on the crest 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 arch 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 monoliths 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 only 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 khakhars.

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 Avarai 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 thoughts 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 Sisian. 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) and continue for about 1.6 km down hill and around the cliffs into the Vorotan canyon and the R turn to VOROTNAVANK (DD 39.49631 x 46.12133, elev. 1471m) .

VOROTNAVANK - Վորոթանավանք (Վորոթանավանք)  was built on a promontory looking out over the Vorotan Canyon, 14 km east of Sisian. The monastery has two large churches, a gavit dormitory, refectory and monk cells, and impressive walls running along two sides of the Vorotan.
The larger domed cruciform S. Karapet dedicated in 1006, commissioned by Orbelian, and again in 1438 for Sarkis 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 paved with gravestones of important (pillar) has been partially reconstructed on the S side of S. Karapet. This pillar designated the monastery as permitted to The eastern façade of S. Karapet is niched, part of the buttressing system and to delineate the interior space. The niche have 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.

The larger domed cruciform S. Karapet was dedicated in 1006, commissioned by Shahandukht’s son, Sevada. It was renovated in 1504 by Arshak (Asht) and Pughota Orbelian, and again in 1438 for Sarkis Angeghakotis. The rectangular exterior houses a cruciform shape on the inside annexes in the complex: the eastern area 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 was too 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 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) and south the NW chamber. An opening in the southern wall leads to the SW chapel. The hall is completely without carvings or signs of decoration, as a result of its repeated desecrations during 13th-15th cc. invasions.

Travel Guide®

Camping near the vank and down 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)
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 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 fortresses 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 Yazdgert 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 castle for 50 years. The castle was captured by the Seljuks in 1104 and later recaptured by Ivaneh Zakarian in 1219. Liparit Orbelian was the founder of the Armenian branch of the Orbelian dynasty, which ruled from their castle for 50 years. The castle was captured by the Seljuks in 1104 and later recaptured by Ivaneh Zakarian in 1219.

The Orbelians thrived during the Mongol 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.

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.

In medical 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.

The castle was captured by the Seljuk Turks in 1104 and later recaptured by Ivaneh Zakarian in 1219. Liparit Orbelian was the founder of the Armenian branch of the Orbelian dynasty, which ruled from their castle for 50 years. The castle was captured by the Seljuks in 1104 and later recaptured by Ivaneh Zakarian in 1219.

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 on the battlefield and overran his own troops. The castle was captured by the Seljuk Turks in 1104 and later recaptured by Ivaneh Zakarian in 1219. Liparit Orbelian was the founder of the Armenian branch of the Orbelian dynasty, which ruled from their castle for 50 years. The castle was captured by the Seljuks in 1104 and later recaptured by Ivaneh Zakarian in 1219.

The Orbelians thrived during the Mongol 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 medical 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.

The castle was captured by the Seljuk Turks in 1104 and later recaptured by Ivaneh Zakarian in 1219. Liparit Orbelian was the founder of the Armenian branch of the Orbelian dynasty, which ruled from their castle for 50 years. The castle was captured by the Seljuks in 1104 and later recaptured by Ivaneh Zakarian in 1219.

The castle was captured by the Seljuk Turks in 1104 and later recaptured by Ivaneh Zakarian in 1219. Liparit Orbelian was the founder of the Armenian branch of the Orbelian dynasty, which ruled from their castle for 50 years. The castle was captured by the Seljuks in 1104 and later recaptured by Ivaneh Zakarian in 1219.

The castle was captured by the Seljuk Turks in 1104 and later recaptured by Ivaneh Zakarian in 1219. Liparit Orbelian was the founder of the Armenian branch of the Orbelian dynasty, which ruled from their castle for 50 years. The castle was captured by the Seljuks in 1104 and later recaptured by Ivaneh Zakarian in 1219.
TRIP 3: TATEV

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

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, “Shingarian cultural archetype genetic memory” and enfant terrible of the local art scene, Ashot Avagyan (email: ukhitaras@mail15.com, URL: http://www.naregatsi.org/Ashot/). A teacher of art in the Sissian Art School, Ashot it 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 lightasar petroglyph fields, at Karahun 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 (D)

SIDE TRIP: Kotrats Standing stone & Caravanserai (pop. 250) is a tiny village that sits above the ruins of its medieval self, with the remains of its foundations and 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 early 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, 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.

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 filed, and in another ~km to the top of TATEV GORGE/‘GMBET (DD 39.38991 x 46.27721, elev. 1352m).

TATEV GORGE / G’MBET - ՍՈՒՑՈՒՆ ՀՆԻ / ՔԱՐԱՐ ՓՈԽ / ՔՐԱԴ ՔՐՈՒԳ (Սարծիկ Ձեռնարկ / Քրար Քրուգ) is located at the deepest section of the Vorotan Canyon; 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 39.3928 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 and 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 natural 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 1976 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 (5) 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 - Տաթև վանք (Տաթև վանք) A (pop. 250) is located in the village of the same name, on top of a crest overlooking the Vorotan and Tatev gorges.

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 think of as Tatev, 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. Hiripimsei, 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 assent 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 Glazdor University in Vayots Dзор and the opening of similar academies at monasteries throughout Siunik, such as Gndevank, Tsakhatskar and Ghegno-Noravank.

Stepano 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 Glazdor 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 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 equality of class and between men and women. To church.

In 1338-48 Mongol internecine wars (See below). 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 assent 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 Glazdor University in Vayots Dзор and the opening of similar academies at monasteries throughout Siunik, such as Gndevank, Tsakhatskar and Ghegno-Noravank.

Stepano 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 Glazdor 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 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 equality of class and between men and women. To 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 gathered 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 Vask Vaski 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 Baghberd, the strongest fortress in the kingdom, in 1169. It made no matter; the Seljukos stormed the castle and sacked it, burning the entire library of 10,000 volumes in the process.
The earthquake of 1931 did considerable damage, some of which has recently been repaired. It again became a working church in the 1990s and has undergone renovation.

An artist as well as philosopher, Tatevatsi created 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 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 Tsghuk 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, clipping 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 recouping, 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 dispensing 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 Fedaiy 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 buts 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 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 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 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 holiest spot.

**Bell Tower**

The cathedral bell tower was added in 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 Tsghuk 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.

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 holiest 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

Siunik Marz : 21 of 51 - TourArmenia © 2009 Rick Ney ALL RIGHTS RESERVED - www.TACentral.com
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 Last Judgment and the north with scenes of the Nativity. The monumental figures are still life like 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 opens 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 1878 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 southern rooms, suggesting they were deliberately replanned. 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 outlets 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 has a pointed conical roof.

In some ways it resembles the small Karmravor church in Ashtarak (Aragatsotn), except it has a hilt 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 capitaly 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 monasteries, to Kapan (see alternate route to Kapan, p. 24).

Information
There is an information center/café on the road to the monastery from the village.
Tatev Environs

.Side Trip: Tatev --- to (DD)

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

.Side Trip: --- to (DD)

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

.Side Trip: --- 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: 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 ▲

Goris (DD 39.50346 x 46.32626, elev. 1664m) 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 spalls (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 German 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 ("Gorisesis" say this is a lie, that it was really the people of Sissian), many of whom are still returned. Those names will not 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 Stepanakert) or Oshakan (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 expanded village 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 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 Goirs villages of Goraik and Khndzoresk. The present spelling of the name is traced to 1624, (DD 39.50346 x 46.32626, elev. 1664m) 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 spalls (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 German 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 ("Gorisesis" say this is a lie, that it was really the people of Sissian), many of whom are still returned. Those names will not 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 Stepanakert) or Oshakan (61 km).

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 the same). No local wants to talk about this, but the rest of the country vividly remembers (and repeats) the charges.

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 Soro Khanzatian, the Soviet (toubadour) Ashot, and Axel's son, Sevada Bakunts, a doctor of some renown.

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 Stepanakert) or Oshakan (61 km).

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 the same). No local wants to talk about this, but the rest of the country vividly remembers (and repeats) the charges.

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 Stepanakert) or Oshakan (61 km).

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 the same). No local wants to talk about this, but the rest of the country vividly remembers (and repeats) the charges.

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 Stepanakert) or Oshakan (61 km).

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 the same). No local wants to talk about this, but the rest of the country vividly remembers (and repeats) the charges.

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 Stepanakert) or Oshakan (61 km).

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 the same). No local wants to talk about this, but the rest of the country vividly remembers (and repeats) the charges.

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 Stepanakert) or Oshakan (61 km).

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 the same). No local wants to talk about this, but the rest of the country vividly remembers (and repeats) the charges.
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 Zarorav 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 Ankahkhatun (Marx) p. Cafes and restaurants are on Sliunik and Mashtots pts.

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

Hotels, guest houses and B&Bs are on Sliunik (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

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/Sovtveri p).

There are a number of Busts of some of the Dashnash leaders of Zangezur’s resistance (1916-1921), first to Azerbaijan territorial aspirations and then to the Red Army. Bust are in the central park above the square, and feature Garegin Nzhdeh, Keri, Khachatur Maltoev, Arabo, Soghomon Teillian and Makhlito.

There is a basalt WWII monument in town, at Avangard and Ankahkhatun (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. Bakunts 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”, “Aplikan 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 Bakunts 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 (Sovtveri), 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 house has a large bust to the Fedaiyi leader, and the owner welcomes inquiries, proud of the house’s heritage.

THEATRE, CONCERTS

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

ENVIRONS

Goris is within easy reach of a number of sights.

Environ, 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 Karahun) (about 1 km S of town limits) where the poor knot 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.

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 Ishkhansar). 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. Ishkhansar (3550.4m), where a field of petroglyphs is located. Both are described in Day Trip 4 (p. 28).

Mt. Ishkhansar 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 arform 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 Ishakaqov; also at the corner of Agantagehos and Khorensat—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
AMERICAN DOLLAR (USD), Armenian Dram (AMD), Russian Ruble (RUB), European Union Euro (EUR), British Pound Sterling (GBP), Egyptian Pounds (EGP).

Food and 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, Karashen (150 AMD), Tegh (300 AMD), Khorovats Grills, Mashtots (100 AMD), Karahunj (100 AMD), Shinvahur (150 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 Rossia" at the corner of Agatangeghos and Movses Khorovats. 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), Madzkan (87 km) and Meghr and Sisian (132 km) to the south. The (M2) connects Goris with Sisian (32 km), Jermuk (117 km), Vaik (101 km), Yeghegnadzor (116 km), Areni (130 km), Ararat (192 km), Arashat (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, telegrams

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

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 telegrams.

Internet

Arminco (office in Kapan: 1/61 Aram Manukian p, tel. 285-62381, 285-67923, email: balasanyan@arminc.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 Asht 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.
Arshininvestbank, 11 Tatevatsi p

Shopping

There are mterks and kiosks throughout town, congregated on Sisian, 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.

YEHEGNUT HOTEL, NW neighborhood, tel. 24657, is easy to find as you enter the town from the Zangezur monument on the Sisian 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 rooms 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. 21088, email: mirakyanbb@rumber.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 Sisian p, tel. 24612, 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 14500/ 19500/ 25000/ 30000 AMD.

Restaurant-Hotel, at the entry to Goris (Sisian 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.

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.

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.
TRIP 4: AROUND GORIS

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 "M B A (In the year 999, or 1550 in our calendar).

There are a number of graphar 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 springs to (pop. )

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 and in its center, the church is located (Khnatsakh, pop. )

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 periocular holes in the outer walls with vertical eyeholes; all that are left of their use as observatory stones in a cromlech that was here or nearby.

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 BB is fair); food in adjoining Goris; springs in the village.

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 "M B A (In the year 999, or 1550 in our calendar).

There are a number of graphar 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 springs to (DD 39.53368 x 46.31487, elev. 1612m)

VERISHEN - ՎԵՐԻՍԻԿ (ալաբամ) (pop. 1000) village adjoins S 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 periocular 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 "M B A (In the year 999, or 1550 in our calendar).

There are a number of graphar 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, reason de être the name "Baptismal": Rock-cut steps to the west lead to the upper hills and a number of cave homes.

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, reason 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 BB is fair); food in adjoining Goris; springs in the village.

From Brun, take the dirt road that heads into eh 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 ԼԻԽ (ՍԵՎ ԼԻԽ) is located NW of Goris, reached from jeep (Visi) 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 trials that reach in about 3 km the crest of MT. ISHKHANASAR (DD 39.58460 x 46.17629, elev. 3550.4m).

MT. METS ISHKHANASAR - ՄԵՏՍ ԻՍԽՈՒՆԱՍԱՐ (ալաբամ) (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 (Visi), 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 Sdikht (pop. )

From --- to (DD )

SIDE TRIP: Khoznavar, (pop. )

From --- to (DD )

SIDE TRIP: Hartashen, (pop. )

From --- to (DD )

KHDZORESK - ԽԴԶՈՐԾԵՔ (ԽԽԴԶՈՐԾԵՔ) (pop. 1000) village is now on the upper rim of Khdzoresk 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 tools 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 then 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. Fedayi Mkhtiar Sparapet. To fully explore the site, plan in village and mterks; in the area, and not far away the 4th c. St. Tadevos cave church, partially hewn from the mountainside and set upon a narrow shelf of land.

The single nave hall church has an eastern 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 is on the valley floor, close to a spring feeding into the river, 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, 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 loaf roof. Structures like this can also be found in the west end of a cave church at nearby Aravus (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 sites, 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. There are small springs along the way; the river is still close enough to hear the water, but not far away the Spring Cave, a small cave, an early Christian church is single nave and mostly in ruins, with greenery springing from the stone walls. The church once had a wooden door from the outside and a large window with old glass panes inside. The 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, 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 tumbled down rocks.

The path leads 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 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 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.

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.

SI UNIK MARZ : 29 of 51 - TourArmenia © 2009 Rick Ney ALL RIGHTS RESERVED - www.TACentral.com
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 - ԿԱՐԱՀՈՒՆԾ ՉՈՒՐ (Քաղաքային գյուղ) (pop. 600) is just south of Goris, and is probably best known for its killer vodka, made from mulberries ("tut 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 khachkars 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 Vaghard, 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-eyed 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. He was involved 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 village 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'raini 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 in through the small bee keep to get close to the stone. What greets you is absolutely amazing; the entire undersurface of the gigantic stone 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 horsemens.

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 ancient mythology is made of two unequal parts (2 and 3), and so was the harbingear 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. Buir, 1686.7m) above the village, near at a Tukh Hot 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 one person). Food at Misha Mot restaurant just S of the village on the (M2) highway; springs in 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. 721m).

KARAHUNDJ VILLAGE - ԿԱՐԱՀՈՒՆԾ ՉՈՒՐ is Siunik’s crowning natural jewel, “Armenia’s Grand Canyon”; a spectacular canyon carved by a river that begins in the icefields 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.

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

Just to the east of Sisian, 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 Vorotin village (p. 17), then feed Shamb reservoir (p. 19), before beginning their final course through the...
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 Karahunj 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), Shinuhaie (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.

The original hall is very small; its sacristy about the same size as the sanctuary at Garni. The building’s 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 a vistasp or other priestly 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 Virgin.

The outer windows 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 decorative flourish is not necessary to buttress a dome, but adds depth and interest to the outer wall.

Bgheno Noravank is 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.

The Vorotan hydroelectric power station 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 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.

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 Virgin.

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 Virgin.

The Vorotan hydroelectric power station 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 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.

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 Virgin.

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 Virgin.

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 Virgin.
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.

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 church was built of rough stone; a three-story building is unique. The south archways are 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 unique in character with this sect of hermits, and do something explain the astonishment of those who visited the vank.

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.

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 extensively 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

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 them, the road turns again towards 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 of the most important historical monastic complexes in Siunik. The monastery was built in historic Hakhov/ Kashiuni 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 was an important worship site. When 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 (anchorites comes from the Greek word ἀναχορέω, 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 Styliates, 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 desire to be left alone, 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 on 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 Musheh, the Catholics 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 Catholics 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”. In a year, he was dead.

Siunik Marz : 32 of 51 - TourArmenia © 2009 Rick Ney ALL RIGHTS RESERVED - www.TACentral.com
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 Chknnavor Shrine. Built in a multi-platform step, this small building was encased in polished stone, but all that remain are the inner rubble walls. Locals various refer to the small building as the shrine to Yeritsak ("Chknnavor" 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 lightening 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 Chknnavor 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 backed by candle offerings. This site may also be the Chknnavor 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 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 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 Aghblur 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 leading 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. )
Feuding Meliks took up arms against the Persian Shah in the 18th c, when the Qatar House, Turkish descendents, 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. The War of Siunik resistance began in Shikhahot Forest Preserve and Meghri, Kapan is 1722, when the rule of the Persian Khans in Siunik 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 soldiers. 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 semi-independent Meliks secured control of Siunik in the late medieval and Persian era, expanding 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 Shaghpat 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 meliks, who helped repel successive (and successively larger) groups of Persian fighters against the Armenians. The name 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 (Ma'dan) 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.

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 Shaghpat to Ghapan.

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 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.

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 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.
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 repressiones y 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 Guberniya of Elizabetpol.

The town grew throughout the Russian Imperial era, it 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 Armenian and land bridges were proposed: 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 years. It became part 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 Balkan 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 Voghir River, the town developed a distinctive "step building" system that allowed them to capture the sunlight. 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, you will never be for a minute or 2. 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 (Spendiarian) p in town. This is where the "Steps" are located, as well as the Shuka and the lion share of kiosks, markets, 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 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 Marzpetan square.

Siunik Marz : 35 of 51 - TourArmenia © 2009 Rick Ney ALL RIGHTS RESERVED - www.TACentral.com
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 octagonal 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 fist 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 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 Heghri and securing the lower regions for Zangezur, while paving the way for its future liberation/usurpation by Imperial Russia.

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 Heghri 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 WW II 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 shank 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 it eh city, dating to the early 19th c.

Luna Park is set behind the low apartment blocks fronting Manukian, Tumanian and Nzhdeh pts. 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).

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 Vaghaberd, 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

Minivans/Buses Daily buses/minivans connect Kapan (Main Bus Stop around Hotel Lernagorts) with Yerevan (Central Bus Station on Admiral Ishashaov; also at the corner of Agatangeghos and Movses 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 Hamletvane (100 AMD).

Regional Minivans (Marshrutni taxis) are caught at the same square (Hotel Lernagorts) and connect Kapan with South: Vaghanakan (100 AMD), Geghanush (150 AMD); North: Bashkend (100 AMD), Sznak (100 AMD) and Khalad; Norashen, Ararajdzor, Shrvants, Nerkin Khotanats, Dzorastan, Okhtar, Vanek, Antarsharat (all 200-250 AMD); South: Chakaten (150 AMD), Shikahahog (150 AMD), S'ashen (200 AMD), Nerkin Hand (250 AMD), Tszv (250 AMD); East: Agarak (250 AMD), Yeghvard (250 AMD); West: Hamletvane (road to Vahanavank, 150 AMD), Baghbereg (150 AMD), Geghi, Kahun, Getashen, Kard, Ajabaj (200-250 AMD); Dzagedzor (200 AMD), Lernagort (250 AMD), Kadjaran (250 AMD).

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 Rossyia” 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), Sisian (93 km), Jermuk (180 km), Valik (162 km), Yeghednagudzor (176 km), Areeni (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.


Mobile Phones: 091 Armetel, 093/094 Viva Cell

The town is covered by both Armetel (1 Tumanian p) and ViveCell mobile phone services (11 Shahrumian). 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 telegrams.

Internet

Aminco, 1/61 Aram Manukian p, tel. 285-62381, 285-67923, email: balasanyan@aminco.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 Shahrumian 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, 1 Arar Manukian p, Arazhishininvestbank, 3 M. Ter-Stepanian p Unibank, 1/2 Ar 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, 1 Aram Manukian p, tel. 62662, is expensive for what you get, but it is where Spurk 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 Hamletvane), 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

Siunik Marz : 37 of 51 - TourArmenia © 2009 Rick Ney ALL RIGHTS RESERVED - www.TACentral.com
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. Kalbakh (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 Geghanus.

**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 KHOROVATS GRILLS on the river side. $-$$

CAFÉ “GENTLEMEN”, Tumanian behind the stadium, is basis but cheap. $-$$

**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 KHOROVATS GRILLS on Avetiissian 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:


- From --- to (DD )

**SIDE TRIP:** Tandzatap (pop. ) (p. 24)

- From --- to (DD )

**SIDE TRIP:** Svarants (pop. ) (p. 24)

End at Tatev (p. 20)
The church was first built of tufa stone, the 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 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 an earthquake when the middle arch caved in.

The large portico and gavit, covering a total of 142 square meters. The series of arches which supported the roof 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 Catholicoi (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 Bagh and other provinces.

In the 11th c. Queen Shahandukht built the Astvatsatsin chapel 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 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 Nakhchinosig 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 of, 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 still white, 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 the 21st c 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 or eggs.

The gavit or western narthex was commissioned by Vahan’s Vahan II in the first half of the 11th 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 Nakhchinosig (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, Khagbik 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 sites, 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 gavî 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 slabs 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.

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, Baghaderd 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 Baghaderd 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 Baghaderd, 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.

KADJARAN - ©Baghaderd (Baghak) ▲
(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), Hazmchet (3620.5m), Aguk (3706.8m) mountains, along with Mt. Kapetjugh (3905.2m) on the Nakhichevani 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 local 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, benefitting 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 Voghri 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 ventures 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 missteps 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 Rossiiya; metro: Zoravar Andranik), 2800-3500 AMD.

**Regional Minivans** (Marshrutni taxis) are caught 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 Rossiiya” 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 empty—those missteps in action are in Russia earning a living wage.

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 telegrams.

**Internet**

**School** # 1 has an ICC center, serving the school and the community. Ti 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.


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 AİGEDZOR 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 VAHRVAR (DD 38.95061 x 46.17991, elev. 1295m) ▲

VAHRVAR - Վահրավար (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.

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 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. )

Lehvaz
MEGHRI (DD 38.89894 x 46.24530, elev. 615m)

 megetri - Մեղրի (Մեղր) (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 Degaghlu 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 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 that one 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, "Meghretis" 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.

There is such a difference between this little town and the cold shoulder we felt just 71 km north in Kapan.

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 guesthouses (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 America, which doesn't count because they may look big but they taste like cardboard (I'll never forget the time R.J. saw his first supermarket apple, marveled at the huge size, the gorgeous color, and even the sweet smell. He beamed as if to say, "Now, this is America!". He took one big bite, started to chew— and all of sudden his smile faded as his cheeks began searching for that missing ingredient we all crave for at the supermarket. He started at me in disgust 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 American 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 Deliah 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.

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".

Me I see.

BACKGROUND Geography

The Karmirmar and Sikar Mountains that erup 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 Mt. Ołuz-Meghri (1563.9m), Kaladash (2163.9m) and Chgnavor (3204.6m).

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.

Birding

Birding in Meghri-Shvanidzor region is also rewarding. Typical sightings include: Gyaepetus barbatus (Lammergeier), Circaetus gallicus (Short-Toed Snake Eagle), Hieraaetus pennatus (Banded (Crested) Serin), Falco naumanni (Lesser Kestrel), Falco peregrinus (Peregrine), Falco francolinus (Black Francolin), Oenanthe xanthophrinna ( Rufous-Tailed Wheatear), Sylvia hortensis (Orean Warbler), Sitta neumayner (Western Rock Nuthatch), Sitta tefronata (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 Artaleshian Kingdom of Greater Halk, in the district that would later become known as the Siunik kingdom. The district became known as Sianistas-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 affiliation 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 their faith, 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 significant victories, including defeating a Sassanid Army in 180 BC. In 178 BC, Agriculture was re-introduced to the region, and the centuries of Sasanian occupation were ended.

Arabs took Meghri in 640, and destroyed much of the infrastructure, forcing some to apostatize. Arab rule also introduced a design ethic (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 routes 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 Bagratan in 886, becoming a part of the Siunik Kingdom in 980, which joined a federation with the Bagratan, though maintaining autonomy. Following the dedication of Tatev monastery in 984, medieval Meghri was given by Smbat Bagraturi 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-Harun Amir in 1126. Tatir 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, and interminable wars began 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 Ifskhan, 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 the Treaty of Kars. Once 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 increased tourist traffic and services has not translated into widespread 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 emigres.

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 “Tags” 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 Meke Melik Ohandjanian Pheads 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.
single family dwellings, on streets that climb the slopes of Mt. Achakar.

The town's Central Square is uphilled 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, 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.

Astsvatsatsin 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 domes 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.

Meghri Vank / S. Hovhannes is on a hill 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 century 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.

The village has two 17th c renovation churches, Aknakhach and S. Amnaprkich. They have interesting stonework.

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 cemetery with older foundation, an interesting castle.

The village has an 18th c Astsvatsatsin 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.

The Iranian 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.

Akarag 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.

Akarag 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. Amnaprkich. 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 Astsvatsatsin 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.

The village has two 17th c renovation churches, Aknakhach and S. Amnaprkich. They have interesting stonework.

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 Astsvatsatsin 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.

The village has two 17th c renovation churches, Aknakhach and S. Amnaprkich. 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 Astsvatsatsin 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.

The village has two 17th c renovation churches, Aknakhach and S. Amnaprkich. 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 Astsvatsatsin 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.

The village has two 17th c renovation churches, Aknakhach and S. Amnaprkich. 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 Astsvatsatsin 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.

The village has two 17th c renovation churches, Aknakhach and S. Amnaprkich. 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 Astsvatsatsin 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.
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). 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.

ArshinInvestBank, 1 Gordsaranaiyn 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 Karapat 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.

SERGEIT’S GUEST HOUSE, 15 Karapat (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 KHOROVATS 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. $$-$-

There are food stands, grills and cafes near the AGARAK CUSTOMS POINT. $-$

There are hotels, motels and kiosks throughout town, and on the highway.

Travel Guide®
Ardshininvestbank

Siunik Marz : 47 of 51 - TourArmenia © 2009 Rick Ney ALL RIGHTS RESERVED - www.TACentral.com
TRIP 8: SHIKHAHOT FOREST

This route follows the new highway connecting Kapan and Meghri, beginning at its southernmost point.

Malavy 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 Alvang (Aldara, 2 km from the highway). The route above (jeep) is a worthwhile 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 Malavy (10 km), S. Hakop at Verin Malavy ( ), Apkes Church in Epits with Sevadan Church nearby (12 km) and. Apses is 4 km from the ruins of Marzid, over the eastern mountain.

From --- to (DD )

SIDE TRIP: Alvank (pop. )

From --- to (DD )

SIDE TRIP: Tos (pop. )

From --- to (DD )

SIDE TRIP: Nerkin Malavy (pop. )

From --- to (DD )

SIDE TRIP: Verin Malavy (pop. )

From --- to (DD )

SIDE TRIP: Apkes (pop. )

From --- to (DD )

SIDE TRIP: Sevadan 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) (1 km) and. Apses is 4 km from the ruins of Marzid, over the eastern mountain.

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 problem or planned acoustical problem, clay pots of various sizes would be built into the walls of the church. After many trials 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. Pseudocaucasia (Iris); Mesendera candissima; Colchicum zangezurum (Autumn Crocus / Naked Ladies); Hyacinthella atropatana (Hoya); Fritillaria kurdica, F. armena (Fritillaria); Orchis simma, O. schelvcornikovii, O. stvenii, O. corphora (orich family); Cephalanthera epipactoides (orich family); Epipactis latifolia (Helliborine); Acantholimon fedorovii (Acantholim); 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, 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'madzor (pop. )

From --- to (DD )

SIDE TRIP: Old Astizur (pop. )

From --- to (DD )

SIDE TRIP: Gumarad (pop. )

From Gumaran ---- to (DD )

SIDE TRIP: Shishkert (pop. )

From Shishkert, --- 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 Mnadzor in the SHIKHANOUGH FOREST (DD 39.0488 x 46.4724, elev. 942m) (1 km) and. Apses is 4 km from the ruins of Marzid, over the eastern mountain.

Shikanogh Forest - ՀՇԽԱՆՈՂ ՈՒԼՍՆԻ (Chiqunno ulunun) is normally entered via Mnadzor 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 on the North, 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 1300-1440 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 penny-cress (Thlaspi zangezurum Tzvel).

Flora in the lower mountain zone (up to 1000m) includes stands of low-growing Arax oak (Q. araxina) and (Trautvetteria Grossh.). There is also an interesting Mediterranean types of shibiak (deciduous low growing shrubbery), including Christ's thorn or Jerusalem thorn (Palirus 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 coggygria Scop.), hackberry (Celtis glabra), barberry (Berberis vulgaris L.) and other holophious (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.), perry (Pisica (Pitacea 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 thistle (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 semi's 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 (Panthera 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 degradation of the almost extinct animal.

Fauna Species include a number of reptiles (Vipera lebetina, Natrix natrix, Pseudopodius apodus, Viper raddei etc.), birds (Caspiann 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 mufllon (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 it 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.

ERINK HAND - ՆԵՐԿԻՆ ՀԱՆԴ (ՆԵՐՅՈՒՆ) 20 կմ է ծայրամերձ է Կարաբախի հյուսիսային մարզում ( Refuge area 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; 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 Artskah (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 are planned around two primeval worship elements; water and shade. It was known as the chinari (Hindi) or chinair (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.

**SIDE TRIP:** S’rashen (pop. )

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

End at Kapan.
RESOURCES ▲

Ashot Avagyan
www.armeniapedia.org/index.php?title=Ashot_Avagyan

Petroglyphs
http://www.iatp.am/ara/library/index.html
http://www.armrockart.nt.am/

Literature

Petroglyphs


ISHKHANYAN, Rafayel A. 1987 The Rock-Carvings Tell. "Gitutyun ev Tekhnika" (Science and Technique), #5, Yerevan (in Arm.).

ISRAELYAN, Hasmik R. 1973 Cults and Beliefs in Late Bronze Age Armenia, Yerevan (in Arm.).


KHALZADYAN, Emma V. 1967 The Culture of Armenian Highland in 3rd Millennium BC, Yerevan (in Arm.).

KHALZADYAN, Emma V., MKRTCHYAN, Koryun H. and PARSAMYAN, Elma S. 1973 Metsamor, Yerevan (in Arm.).


MNATSAKANYAN, Asatour Sh. 1955 The Armenian Ornamental Art, Yerevan (in Arm.).


PETROSYAN, Garegin B. 1988 About the Date of Discovery of Zodiac and Adjacent Questions. "Patma-Banasiranakan Handes", #4, Yerevan (in Arm.)


TUMANYAN, Benik E. 1972 History of Calendar, Yerevan (in Arm.).

UYANIK, Muvaffak 1974 Petroglyphs of Southeastern Anatolia. Asiatic Rock Paintings and Petroglyphs, Graz, Austria.


VASILYAN, Varuzhan 1985 From the Legends to Byurakan, Yerevan (in Arm.).

Karahundj

HEROUNI, Paris M. 1998 The Karahoune of Sissian: the Oldest Observatory. "Garun" (Spring), #5, Yerevan (in Arm.).

Karahundj

HEROUNI, Paris M. 1998 The Karahoune of Sissian: the Oldest Observatory. "Garun" (Spring), #5, Yerevan (in Arm.).