

**KOTAİK marz**  
**Կոտայկ մարզ**

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*Note about pronunciation: we transcribe words into English using local dialect, and substitute "j" for "y" as in Sarigiugh instead of Sarigyugh. "p." stands for poghots (street), 'pts.' for poghotsner (streets), 'pta.' for poghota (avenue).*

*Note: GPS coordinates are in decimal degrees (DD) Latitude x Longitude. Elevation (elev.) is in meters. Population counts (pop.) are estimates for 7 km radius from place and due to ongoing migrations the numbers are not exact.*

**INTRODUCTION**

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

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

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

Not one to show its charms lightly, KotaiK makes you work for your pleasures, whether they are on top of the Geghama Lehr or hiking through the forests on its western border. Since most visit Armenia in the heat of summer, the sun blasted landscape can be intimidating, like those in Armavir and Ararat marzes, but a little

**Highlights**

- **Visit Garni, Armenia's Residence of Kings, with its Greek Temple and Bronze Age Fortress** (p.14)
- **Visit Geghard Monastery, built to house the True Spear and carved from solid rock** (p.)
- **Explore Levon's Divine Underground," a subterranean labyrinth of stone carved entirely by hand.** (p.)
- **Stay at the winter and summer resorts at Tsaghkadzor** (p.)
- **Take the waters at Arzni's mineral spa** (p.)
- **Hike up the Geghama Lehr to Aknalich to view Armenia's ancient petroglyphs (15,000-5000 BCE, p.)**
- **Hike the nature trails at garni Gorge (p. ), Arzakan (p. ) and Hankavan (p.)**
- **Savor the freshwater trout grown in the mammoth springs at Akunk (p.) and Garni Gorge (p.)**
- **Climb the four faces of Arailehr** (p.)
- **Take the gateway to Khosrov Preserve and visit the stunning 12th c Havuts Tar convent** (p.)
- **Stop by** (p.)
- **Visit** (p.)
- **Visit** (p.**Error! Bookmark not defined.**)

persistence, a study vehicle and driver with *cajones* will take to you to some of the most spectacular and awe inspiring places in the country.

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

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

**NATURE** ▲

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

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

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

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

**Flora.** Kotaik's flowers are breathtaking if you are lucky enough to catch them in season. Unfortunately, the typical tourist comes at High Season in July and August, which is murder on wild flowers in the district. The best time to flower watch is from mid-April in the lower elevations through mid June in the upper regions, as the wildflowers lace themselves in bands uphill. The showiest are the native poppies in the spring and the goldenrod, straw flowers are but a few of the delights that await you.

**Flowers in Kotaik (Geghama Lehr)** include *Merendera trigyna*, *M. raddeana*, *colchiam bifolium*, *Purdominia scilloides*, *Scilla armenia*, *S. siberica*, *Tulipa julia*, *Iris caucasia*, *Muscari caucasicum*, *Bellevalia pycnantha*, *Ornithogalum schelkownikovii*, *O. brachystachys*, *O. hyastanum*, *Fritillaria caucasia*, *Nectarosordum tripedale*, *Osp of gagea*, *Myosotis alpestre*, *Amenone caucasia*, *Orchis coriophora*, *Gladiolus tenuis*.

**Lower Elevation sagebrush steppe flora** includes *Gladiolus atroviolaceus*, *Nigella oxypetalata*, *Actynolema macrolema*, *Gundelia tournefort*,

*Verbascum saccatum*, *Lallemanita iberica*, *Roemeria retracta*, *Scabiosa argentea*, *Scorronera paposa*, *Muscari beglecta*, *Stchys inflata*, *Astragalus distyophysus*, *A. kochianus*, *Achillea tenuifolia*, *Helichrysum rubicundum*, *Silena spergulifolia*.

**River Gorge flora** include *Alkanna orientalis*, *Cerasus incana*, *Prus*, *salicifolia*, *Cerasus mahaleb*, *Amygdalus ferzlinia*, *Spirala crenata*, *Saxifraga cymbalaria*.

**Mountain Steppe flora** includes *Gladiolus atroviolaceus*, *Nigella oxypetalata*, *Actynolema macrolema*, *Gundelia tournefort*, *Verbascum saccatum*, *Lallemanita iberica*, *Roemeria retracta*, *Scabiosa argentea*, *Scorronera paposa*, *Muscari beglecta*, *Stchys inflata*, *Astragalus distyophysus*, *A. kochianus*, *Achillea tenuifolia*, *Helichrysum rubicundum*, *Silena spergulifolia*.

**Wild relatives of crop plants** include **Cereal grains** (*Secale vavilovii* Grossh, *Hordeum spontaneum*, *C. Koch*, etc.), **Cereal-Beans** (*Pisum elatius* Bieb., **Fruits** (*Cerasus mahaleb* (L.) Mill etc., *Ficus carica* L., *Amygdalus fenrliana* (Fritsch). *Lipsky* etc., *Prunus spinosa*), **Grape and Berry** (*Fragaria vesca* L., *F. Viridis* Duch.), **Vegetable Melons** (*Allium akaka* S. G. Gmel ex., *Schult* etc., *Beta macrorrhiza* Stev etc.) *Daucus carota*, and **Fodder** *Armenian pit* (*Onobrychus hajastana* Grossh etc.)

For detailed information and list of species see [TourArmenia Flora pages](http://www.tacentral.com/nature/flora.asp) ([www.tacentral.com/nature/flora.asp](http://www.tacentral.com/nature/flora.asp))

**Fauna.** *Mountain leopard* (very rare), *Caucasian wildcat*, *Caucasian ram* and *mountain goat* (very rare), *mole*, *lynx*, *porcupine*, *squirrel* and *marten*. *In Kotaik*, *deer*, *wildcat*, *mountain leopard* (very rare), *squirrel*, *wild bore*, *lynx*, *nutria*, *white panther* (extremely rare), *fox* and *bear* (rare).

**Birds.** With its limited topography, Kotaik doesn't have the variety of birds that can be found elsewhere, but still has its birding rewards for those willing to trudge the terrain and be patient. Best times are Spring and Fall (migration) and high summer in the upper elevations.

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

**Scrub** species include *Bohemian Waxwing*, *Red-backed Shrike*, *Dunnock*, *Rufous-tailed Scrub-*

*Robin*, *Common Stonechat*, *Lesser Whitethroat*, *Black-headed Bunting*, *Snow Bunting*, *Eurasian Linnet*, *Eurasian Tree Sparrow*, *Isabelline Shrike*

**Semi-desert to Mountain Steppe** species include *Lesser Kestrel*, *Common Kestrel*, *Saker Falcon*, *Chukar*, *Pin-tailed Sandgrouse*, *Black-bellied Sandgrouse*, *Little Bustard*, *Great Bustard*, *Houbara Bustard*, *Collared Pratincole*, *Black-winged Pratincole*, *Stone-Curlew*, *Eurasian Dotterel*, *Caspian Plover*, *European Bee-eater*, *Blue-cheeked Bee-eater*, *European Roller*, *Bimaculated Lark*, *Calandra Lark*, *Lesser Short-toed Lark*, *Greater Short-toed Lark*, *Crested Lark*, *Horned Lark*, *Tawny Pipit*, *Red-backed Shrike*, *Woodchat Shrike*, *Lesser Grey Shrike*, *Northern Shrike*, *Rufous-tailed Scrub-Robin*, *Bluethroat*, *White-throated Robin*, *Northern Wheatear*, *Isabelline Wheatear*, *Rufous-tailed Wheatear*, *Finsch's Wheatear*, *Black-eared Wheatear*, *Pied Wheatear*, *Desert Wheatear*, *Ring Ouzel*, *Olivaceous Warbler*, *Upcher's Warbler*, *Orphean Warbler*, *Menetries's Warbler*, *Yellowhammer*, *Corn Bunting*, *Ortolan Bunting*, *Black-headed Bunting*, *Black-billed Magpie*, *Eurasian Jackdaw*, *Rook*, *Common Raven*

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

**Rocky Cliffs, River Gorge** species include *Rock Dove*, *Eurasian Eagle-Owl*, *Common Swift*, *Alpine Swift*, *Eurasian Crag-Martin*, *Northern House-Martin*, *Red-rumped Swallow*, *Dunnock*, *Black Redstart*, *White-winged Redstart*, *Western Rock-Nuthatch*, *Eastern Rock-Nuthatch*, *Wallcreeper*, *Eurasian Linnet*, *Red-billed Chough*, *Yellow-billed Chough*

**Mountain Slope** species include *Red-footed Falcon*, *Merlin*, *Eurasian Hobby*, *Rufous-tailed Rock-Thrush*, *Blue Rock-Thrush*, *Sombre Tit*, *Rock Bunting*, *Grey-necked Bunting*, *Crimson-winged Finch*, *Red-fronted Serin*, *Trumpeter Finch*, *Mongolian Finch*, *Eurasian Linnet*, *White-Winged Snowfinch*, *Eurasian Tree Sparrow*, *Spanish Sparrow*, *Pale Rock-Finch*, *Rock Sparrow*, *White-winged Snowfinch*, *Rose-coloured Starling*

**Woodlands, Thickets, Farmland, Orchard** species include *Levant Sparrowhawk*, *Eurasian Sparrowhawk*, *Northern Goshawk*, *Black Francolin*, *Pheasant*, *Eurasian Woodcock*, *Common Wood-Pigeon*, *European Turtle-Dove*, *Common Cuckoo*, *Eurasian Scops-Owl*, *Tawny Owl*, *Barn Swallow*, *Wood Lark*, *Red-throated Pipit*, *Firecrest*, *Common Goldcrest*, *Icterine Warbler*, *Willow Warbler*, *Eurasian Chiffchaff*, *Greenish Warbler*, *Greater Whitethroat*, *Winter Wren*, *Dark-throated Thrush*, *Fieldfare*, *Redwing*, *Song Thrush*, *Mistle Thrush*, *Eurasian Blackbird*, *Crested Tit*, *Corn Bunting*, *Pine Bunting*, *Red-fronted Serin*, *Twite*, *Eurasian Siskin*, *Chaffinch*, *Brambling*, *European Greenfinch*, *European Goldfinch*, *Eurasian Bullfinch*, *Hawfinch*, *Eurasian Tree Sparrow*, *Rose-coloured Starling*, *Common Starling*, *Black-billed Magpie*, *Eurasian Jay*, *Rook*

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

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

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

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

## Thermal and Mineral Springs

In Kotaik, springs abound in the lower marshlands around Abovian and in the Hrazdan Gorge. There are a few prominent mineral springs in the marz, including those at the Mineral spas at Arzni (treated carbonated sodium) which still host hundreds of people each year, Bjini (treated carbonated sodium), on the Tsaghkuniats Range (carbonated sodium), Piunik (carbonated pure), and Hankavan (carbonated sodium, treated carbonated sodium).

For a complete list of thermal and Mineral springs see [TourArmenia Springs pages](http://www.tacentral.com/nature) ([www.tacentral.com/nature](http://www.tacentral.com/nature)).

**Soaking Etiquette.** Springs can be located by the roadside, which are reserved for drinking, on clearly marked paths, or in out of the way locations. Many springs are considered community property, with villagers and visitors making stops to soak or collect water in bottles. If it's a drinking spring, then it's not for soaking, no matter how appealing. A spring for soaking is fairly obvious: it empties into a pool, is fairly secluded, and is not stocked with fish (and fishermen) being bred for market. Often there will be others already taking in some of the effervescent waters. Men feel quite at home stripping down to their underpants to soak provided women are no where in sight. Nudity is not allowed. Bring a swimsuit if you are more modest. Women visitors can feel free to soak, but wear a swimsuit, and if there are any local men around, be prepared for a lot of attention, which can make the experience unpleasant.

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

**Eco Challenges.** Kotaik is threatened by a number of environmental problems and may be the best measure of just how bad the country's environment will be if steps are not taken to reverse the trends. Lush and green for a few weeks in the spring, the marz is cooked brown the rest of the year, a result of desertification brought on by large scale illegal logging in nearby Lori and Tavush.

Believe it or not, Kotaik was once verdant with thick stands of forests cascading down the mountains into the valleys. Kotaik's ancient stands of forests were cut to feed the thriving metal industry in the Bronze and Iron Ages, but real loss began with the Mongol invasions, as invading tribes burnt the forests or cut them down to create pasturage. Still, enough trees survived to prevent whole-scale desertification until one of the worst losses occurred in the 17th c, when Shah Abbas I forced the local population into exile and executed a scorched earth policy, burning anything

that might support the pursuing Ottoman army. The few stands of trees that survived these onslaughts are on the mountain slopes to the West, where the Soviets built resort areas and pensionats. Even these few forests are at risk as illegal logging continues to fell trees, spurred on by corrupt officials exporting wood to Georgia, Iran, Russia and (surprisingly) France and Germany, who forbid illegal logging in their own countries.

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

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

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

Water can seem abundant in the marz, if your measuring sticks are the *Karasounakn* (Forty sources) aquifers by Akunk and those at Garni, hydroelectric plants on the Hrazdan River and the snow caps on the nearby mountain ranges, but otherwise the area is threatened by a great loss of water. The massive springs around Akunk (near Abovian) feed the ever-growing thirsts in Yerevan and slowly drain the underground aquifers that

formed during the Paleocene Era. Diminishing forests have cut the amount of precipitation the country experiences, and lately the snowfalls have not been enough to make up the difference.

## DO: ▲

Visit the 1<sup>st</sup> c BCE temple at Garni with its surrounding 4<sup>th</sup> c BCE fortress, and the incredible monastery at Geghard, carved from solid rock and nestled within a steep gorge. Visit Tsaghkadzor, Armenia's ski area and Olympic training center. Travel the highway to Hankavan, staying at one of a dozen summer camps and pensionats, en route to the Greek Village. Climb the hill to the Chalcedonian Tezharuik monastery by Meghradzor. Visit Bjini, with its 9th-10th c monastery and nearby Pahlavuni Fortress excavation which uncovered a royal church and palace in 2006. Visit the handsome village of Yeghvard, with its cottage homes and the impressive 1301 Astvatsatsin Church, one of a handful with the upper chapel still intact, its drum decorated with Arabic inscriptions. Nearby, visit the 7th-13th cc Tegheniats Vank monastery by Buzhakan, its substantial ruins richly decorated with floral and animal imagery.

On the outskirts of Yerevan, at Zovuni, visit the Karmir Berd (Red Fort) remains perched over the deep Hrazdan Gorge, itself the location of Stone Age quarries and settlements. See "Levon's Divine Underground" at Arinj, its subterranean rooms carved entirely by hand and set 20 m below the surface. Visit the still thriving city of Abovian, Armenia's research center then travel the few km to the *Karasounakn* (Forty sources) by Akunk to dine on fresh caught fish bred in water pouring from a complex of Armenia's largest fresh water springs. See the elegant hilltop church at Kaputan with stunning views of the surrounding mountains. Visit the Black Castle at Sevaberd.

**Natural Armenia:** Cross the Garni Gorge and hike the mountain trails in the Khosrov Preserve to the 12th-13th c Havuts Tar Monastery, its convent walls covered with lacey carvings. Explore the Garni River from the Azat reservoir to the Geghama Lehr, hiking below the ancient temple at Garni and the monastery at Geghard and then up the Chor Selav River to the petroglyphs at Mt. Nalsar and Azhdahak. Likewise, travel up the Geghama Lehr, past Sevaberd and through summer camps used by Yezidi shepherds, to camp at Aknalich (Akna Lake), then hike to the nearby petroglyphs between the mountain 'breasts' of Mts. Seghanasar (Zeinari Aresh) and

Geghmaghan. Soak in a mineral spring at Piunik, Bjini or on the Tsaghkuniats mountains.

## WHEN? ▲

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

## HOW LONG?

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

**Hitting the Highlights.** Garni route: Voghchaberd, Garni, Geghard (half to 1 day). Western Kotaik: Yeghvard, Buzhakan, Bjini, Hrazdan (1 day). Tsaghkadzor (1-2 days). Hankavan Valley (1-2 days). Eastern Kotaik: Abovian, Akunk, Kaputan, Hatis (1 day). Geghama Lehr: Sevaberd, Petroglyphs, Aknalich (1-2 days).

**HISTORY ▲**

Kotaik is often tied to its neighbors for its history, to the fates of the royal domains of Aragatsotn and the colonies of Lake Sevan. But it has a distinct history all its own while sharing the fates of its nearby districts. Kotaik's history begins with the first people to inhabit the Armenian plateau, believed to have lived on the (then) warm and humid volcanic mountains that gave shape to the Hrazdan plateau in the Miocene and Paleocene eras. The river is a treasure trove of Stone Age (Paleolithic) open air workshops and settlements from early times, including ca. 500,000 year old hominid fossils discovered in the gorge. Considering that 2 million year old hominid fossils were uncovered just 150 km north in Georgia, it is likely the same can be found in the river gorge, it being a major conduit of trade and civilization from the earliest of times.

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

A conduit of trade, the marz was also a conduit of armed forces using Kotaik to colonize and defend the outlying areas to the North and to invade and conquer the rich Ararat Valley below. The region was favored by the Nairi and Urartu before blossoming under the Arshakuni Kings who prized the forests around Tsaghkadzor and built defensive castles along the Hrazdan River and at Garni. The kings and their nakharar rivals the Mamikonians, Artsrunis, Rshtunis and Kamsarakans each in their turn added to Bronze Age fortresses at Bjini, Garni, Sevaberd and elsewhere, adding to the culture and development of the region. The Bagratunis and their kinsmen the Pahlavunis left

held it in possession during the second Golden Age, and it was later used as defense against marauding Seljuk and Mongol tribes from the north, becoming the domains of the great Zakarian brothers and their subject lords the Vachutians and Kaghbakians (Proshians) during the great period of enlightenment in the 13th c, when the monasteries at Bjini and Garni rivaled all others for beauty, wealth and position. The 13th c was the last great period of Armenian culture in its long history. The ensuing turbulent times of Seljuk, Mongol, Ottoman and Persian invasions ended thousands of years of Armenian autonomy, but left behind magnificent castle walls & monasteries as testament of its heritage.

**PREHISTORIC AGE ▲**

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

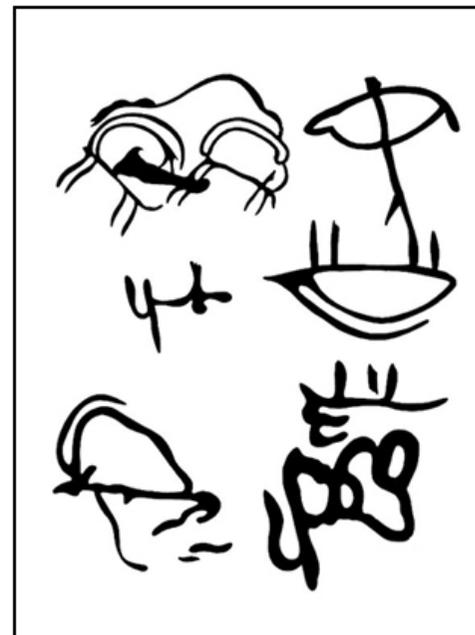
During the late quaternary (Pleistocene) and the Holocene periods (roughly 500,000-12,000 years ago) the volcanoes began to cool, though they still radiated enough heat to create a moist climate so that the slopes of the mountains were covered with alpine grass and trees, with abundant wildlife and game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

Stone Age sites were built near hot springs and along the great Hrazdan River (later called Ildaruni by the Urartians and Zanga by marauding Turkic tribes), excavations showing a remarkably developed culture with sophisticated tools and an understanding of food cultivation and animal breeding. There is also evidence that inhabitants were aware of the medicinal properties of mineral water, constructing baths and drinking fountains at several sites, most notably Arzni, with Paleolithic (Acheulian – 300,000-100,000 BCE) stone tool workshops in the river gorge.

The most remarkable testament to early life in the district are on the face of the Geghama Lehr, where hundreds of petroglyphs and pictograms dating back to the Paleolithic (15,000-12,000 BCE), Mesolithic (12,000-7000 BCE), Neolithic (7000-5000 BCE) and the Chalcolithic/Copper-Bronze Age (5000-2000 BCE) cover fields of stone.

It is from these carvings (located about 10 km from Sevaberd on the top of Mts. Seghanasar/Zeinari Aresh and Geghmaghan, along with other fields in SE Kotaik and north Vayots Dzor) that some archeologists and historians trace the beginnings of the Armenian script. They say that letters of the current alphabet have their prehistoric origins in symbols carved on these rocks more than 17,000 years ago. By no means is this universally accepted (and there is nothing like watching the dog fight between dueling positions at a local café) but there are plausible arguments for asserting an ancient origin for the modern script.

See TourArmenia's [History : Beginnings \(www.tacentral.com/history\)](http://www.tacentral.com/history)



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

**Stone Age sites** in Kotaik include the petroglyphs by Balahovit (Yerevan), Mts. Seghanasar and Geghmaghan, Nalsar & Azhdahak, open air

workshops at Arzni, Mt. Hatis, Jraber & Nurnus and the Mousterian-Mesolithic cave sites (Lusakert I-II) and Bronze Age burial sites at Aragal.

**COPPER AND BRONZE AGES ▲**

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

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

**Copper-Bronze Age sites** in Kotaik include fortresses at Garni, Zovuni, Dovri, Yeghvard, Kaghsi, Bjini and a massive fortress at Sevaberd, and excavations at Zovuni, Aragal, Karashamb, Astghaberd, Dovri and the Geghama Lehr.

**URARTIAN, PERSIAN, GREEK & ROMAN PERIODS ▲**

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

Urartu was one of the most powerful empires of its day, a developed culture that had extensive

contacts with the major empires of the Ancient world stretching between the Mediterranean and India. At constant war with its neighbors, Urartu was mostly fixed in battle against the greatest power of the day, Assyria, conquered by and conquering its southern neighbor in turn. Straddling one of the major routes of trade and invasion by Scythian tribes, Kotaik was used as buffer zone and exploited for its natural resources, including obsidian, tufa and gold as well as its abundant forests. The first wholesale logging of the area is traced to this time.

The forests around Tsaghkadzor became hunting grounds and a retreat for Urartu's governors while the Hrazdan Valley with its trading route to Lake Sevan and the Kur River Valley was dotted with outposts and fortresses, like those excavated at Dovri, Teghenik, Aramus, Zar, Sevaberd, Hatis and Garni. Excavated finds include copper and bronze jewelry, utensils, plates and shields, plus the important Iron Armenia fed to the budding empire.

Exhausted by constant warfare with Assyria, Urartu's collapse came under attack by Cimmerians and Scythians (the Scythians progenitors of the Tadjiks that invaded during the medieval period) who used the Hrazdan Valley to invade the Ararat heartland.

**Urtian sites** in Kotaik include sites at Dovri, Teghenik, Aramus, Zar, Sevaberd, Hatis and Garni.

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

The **Greek period** began with the invasion of Persia by the armies of Alexander the Great, which skirted Armenia proper but left an indelible mark on the region as Greek deities, architecture and art took hold. With the passing of the Yervanduni dynasty in 188 BCE and the ascension of Artash I (Artashes I or Artaxes I) the Hellenistic period

began, spreading in earnest under the reign of Tigran II (95-55 BCE) and his wife Cleopatra of Pontus. In Kotaik this resulted in Greek temples being built over Bronze Age vishap stones and Zoroastrian shrines, buildings that incorporated Armenian motifs into the Greek design. There is belief that Greek gods took hold so rapidly in Armenia because their characters actually came through (some say *from*) Armenia over time, their characters simply wending their way back to a place they had been before (The Greek Zeus = the Armenian Aramazd, the Greek Artemis = Anahit, the Greek Athena = Nuneh, the Greek Aphrodite = Astghik, etc. ).

See TourArmenia's Mythology chapter [www.tacentral.com/mythology.asp](http://www.tacentral.com/mythology.asp)

The Greek culture transformed the Armenian culture from its identification with Iranian roots to one looking to the west, changing it forever. The Greek language was used at court, Greek plays performed at the Armenian capital Artashat and its most lasting example survives in Kotaik—the Greek Temple to Mythra at Garni. The combination of ancient Armenian beliefs (the goddess Mythra) housed in a Greek temple is a perfect example of the melding of the cultures, and the way Armenia would repeatedly incorporate outside influences while transforming them into something distinctly its own. The temple was rebuilt under the reign of T'rdat I (62/66-75 AD), considered the first Arshakuni King by the chronicles.

Garni was a favorite summer retreat for kings from the Bronze Age, with more famous Arshakuni (Arshacid) royal inhabitants in the Roman-Parthian period, as the kingdom became a buffer zone between the great Empires and faced total annihilation on several occasions.

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

#### EARLY CHRISTIAN – MIDDLE AGES ▲

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

Kotaik did not convert easily. Only a few Christian shrines and churches survive from the 4th c in Kotaik, at Voghchaberd and on top of Mt. Arai, not surprising since the district was used as a bastion of paganism during the holy wars that occurred after T'rdat's conversion. The earliest surviving Christian structures are from the 6th c, 200 years after S. Grigor preached the new faith. The district's fate as one of the main routes of invasion by northern tribes and its relatively remote location from the main action in the Ararat valley kept its development at bay for most of the early Christian era, its people and agriculture supporting the struggles against the Sassanid Persians, its lands owned by the powerful *sparapets* (commanders of the army and protectors of the king) Mamikonian family up to and past the fall of the Arshakunis in 428, when the district was absorbed into the Persian Empire, starting a new round of war between Persia and Armenia, this time over Persian demands that Armenians abandon their faith and reconvert to paganism.

This period is the first in which we have multiple surviving Christian churches and shrines in Kotaik, at Yeghvard, Karenis, Bjini, Voghchaberd and Garni. Built over pagan temples, they lie on the Hrazdan and Azat Rivers, the principal routes of trade and power in the early period.

Armenians owed their allegiance to their lords, the Mamikonians, who used the region for regional seats but primarily as a hunting ground in the forests that covered 40% of the marz at this time.

A 449 CE edict by the Sassanid court of Yazdagerd II (439-457) decreed that Armenians were to convert to Zoroastrianism, the age old religion of the Persians and once, of Armenia. Called to court, the Mamikonians and other Armenian princes did convert, though on their return to Armenia many recanted when faced with the wrath of the church. "Defending" their honor and the new religion, the Armenians began a rebellion in 450 and where many were killed at the battle of Avarayr in Western Armenia, including their leader Vartan Mamikonian. Both sides retreated into the mountains, the Armenians using Kotaik as one of its staging grounds for sorties against the Persians in the Ararat Valley. In 484 Armenia emerged from the 30 year war against the Persians, who had suffered a crushing defeat by the Huns and came to terms with the Armenians. Freedom of religious worship was restored with the Treaty of Nvarsag in 484 while Vartan's nephew, Vahan Mamikonian, assuming the title of marzpan of the

Armenian marzpanate, a fully autonomous district that assumed itself a newly freed kingdom.

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

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

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

Khosrov II managed to reconquer the lands he ceded to Byzantium in 611, but the religious differences between the Byzantines and Armenians over the decision of the council of Chalcedon in 451 (about the nature of Christ) and Byzantines demands that Armenia accept Chalcedony had grave repercussions when the Armenians faced the Arab invasion of the 640s. In 648-49 the Armenians made a final break with the Byzantines, refusing Chalcedony and making tier peace with the Arabs, who initially promised not to interfere with their internal matters and to grant freedom of religion.

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

In 693, the Umayyad Caliph appointed his brother governor of Armenia and in 698 the Byzantines attempted to retake the country, supported by the Armenian Ishkhan Smbat Bagratuni and nakharars. The Arabs were merciless in their subjugation, destroying monasteries and cities and

sending inhabitants into captivity. This ushered in a new era of rule, more harsh than anything before, ending the reign of nakharar families (including the Mamikonians) and the ‘Golden Age’ of Christianity in the country. The arts virtually stopped for one hundred fifty years.

**Early Christian and Middle Age** sites are at Zoravan, Yeghvard, Buzhakan, Tegheniats, Ptgni, Karashamb, Karenis, Teghenik, Nurnus, Aramus, Bjini, Voghchaber, & Garni.

## THE BAGRATUNIS & ZAKARIANS (SELJUKS – MONGOLS) ▲

The next 400 years saw the rise of the Bagratunis and the Golden Age of Armenian culture, its fall to the Seljuk Turks, recovery under the Georgian Bagratunis and destruction by Mongol armies. Not until after the complete destruction of the country by Timur the Lame (Tamerlane) and the return of the Iranian Emirs did Armenia begin to recover, if divided again between world powers.

The rise of the Bagratunis came after three unsuccessful revolts against Arab rule. The once great nakharar families—the Arstrunis, Rshtunis, Mamikonians, Gnumis and Amatunis—gradually faded, their strength sapped by each crushing defeat. By the time of the revolt against the Abbasids in 775, the great houses were exhausted and what emerged were newer families more adept at navigating (some say selling out) to the new Arab power. Greatest of these were the Bagratunis, who, starting with Ashot M'saker (Ashot the Meat Eater) in the early 9th c expanded their control over the region as the Abbasid caliphs began to lose their iron grip on the country.

The Bagratuni were based in northwest Armenia with their capital at Ani, while their cousins, the Pahlavunis, expanded eastwards into Lori-Tavush, Aragatsotn, Kotaik and Gegharkunik. In Kotaik they established their seat at Bjini under the patronage of the Pahlavunis, establishing monasteries and rebuilding Iron Age fortresses. At Tsaghkadzor, Grigor Magistros Pahlavuni established the great Kecharis monastery (early 11th c) and at Bjini the great church was erected and the nearby fortress enlarged into a substantial castle, becoming the capital of the region and its namesake until its destruction at the hands of Timur 300 years later.

Other churches and monasteries were built at Ptgni (Dzagavank), Arzakan (Neghutsi S. Astvatsatsin Vank), and Vardanavan (Vardanavank), Solak (Mairavank Astvatsatsin), the enchanting

Tegheniats Vank at Buzhakan and at Garni. They also expanded fortresses throughout the marz (Sevaber, Zoravan, Mt. Hatis, Solak, Garni) blocking the path to invading armies from both directions.

**The Second Golden Age.** For Kotaik, the golden age established under the reign of the Bagratunis and Pahlavunis was in many ways its first. The marz had resisted much of the development of the early Christian period and existed on the fringes of the great centers in the Ararat Valley and western Armenia. But it took advantage of this second period, establishing monasteries, academies and churches throughout the district, promoting study and learning along with spiritual devotion. Perhaps the most famous person to be connected to the district at this time is **Grigor Magistros Pahlavuni** (990-1058), a linguist, scholar and diplomat and founder of Kecharis Monastery.

Grigor was a lay member of the Pahlavuni family, the son of the Prince Vassak and quickly gained fame as a scholar and diplomat in the Byzantine court after the fall of Ani, when he became governor-general of Edessa, the emperor Constantine IX Monomachus making him a Duke. Magistros is most famous for his scholarly work; he studied sacred and secular texts in Syriac as well as Greek, teaching many Ecclesiasts of the period. Magistros assembled the most complete collection of Armenian texts up to his period. The scientific and philosophical texts include the works of Anania Shirakatsi (610-685) and translations from the poet and critic Callimachus (305-240 BCE), the dramatist Andronicus (284-204 BCE) and the Neo-Platonist Olympiodorus (496-570). He translated several works of Plato — *The Laws*, the *Eulogy of Socrates*, *Euthyphro*, *Timaeus* and *Phaedo*.

He is most famous for his eighty “Letters,” used by scholars to glean the political and religious problems of his day. A poet, Magistros’ poetry resembles both the epic style of Homer and the fluid romanticism of Arabic poetry of the time and he was the first to introduce rhyme into Armenian literature. His chief work is a long narrative of the Bible, written in three days at the request of a Muslim noble who, we are told, on reading it converted to Christianity. A wordsmith, Magistros created an absolutely unique style of writing, coining phrases and words as he wrote, making his writings hypnotically melodic and unintelligible at the same time.

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

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

At the beginning of the 12th century, Historic Armenia was divided again between Byzantium and different Seljuk and Kurdish warlords. Kotaik was a patchwork of Kurdish and Seljuk fiefdoms, with Armenian strongholds clinging to their holdings though now subservient to their Muslim lords. The fortresses that dot the landscape in Kotaik became increasingly important in this period as ruling families retreated to their remote estates during the worst attacks. Forging alliances with the new rulers (who were fighting themselves with Kurdish and Iranian emirs), the region became a major conduit for trade on the Silk and Spice trails, which coursed through the region en route to Dvin and Persia.

**The Zakarians.** With the transformation of Georgia into a major military power at the end of the 12th c the political situation for Armenians improved decisively. Reaching its apogee during the reign of Queen Tamar (1184-1213) and led by the Armenian brothers Ivaneh and Zakareh Zakarian, the Armenian-Georgian armies smashed Seljuk control of the northern regions, including Bjini and Kotaik in 1201. The land under the control of Zakareh Zakarian and his son Shahnshah were in the northwest of the reconquered territory (including Lori, Ani & Aragatsotn) while that of his brother Ivaneh and his son Avak were to the east and included Bjini,

(Kotaik), Yerevan, Dvin & Gegharkunik (along with Vayots Dzor, Artsakh, Siunik & Nakhichevan). By his death in 1213, Zakareh had recovered lands as far as Lake Van, Tabriz and Persian Azerbaijan and Georgia was the most powerful state in the region.

Kotaik experienced a new flowering of culture, unlike anything it had seen before. The Bagratuni era may have been a second golden age, but the period of enlightenment under the Zakarians in Kotaik was extraordinary. The monastery at Geghard, built to house the True Spear and carved from solid rock, was expanded to include the large Airavank monastery and the Proshian (Kaghbakian) mausoleum, built for Prosh Kaghbakian (1223-1284), heir to the family that secured Bjini, Dvin and Vayots Dzor for Ivaneh Zakarian. Ivaneh himself established the Chalcedonian (Georgian Orthodox) monastery of Tezharuik in 1196-99 at Meghradzor, marked by its extravagant design as opposed to the severe simplicity favored by Armenian Apostolic churches built for his brother Zakareh.

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

Other works include the octagonal church at Garni, the exquisite Havuts Tar convent by Garni, Kecharis Vank at Tsaghkadzor, the glorious Kaptavank Church at Kaputan (1349), the expansion of monasteries at Tegheniats Vank (Buzhakan), Dzagavank (Ptgni), Neghutsi S. Astvatsatsin Vank (Arzakan), Makravank (Hrazdan) and Bjini as well as a number of other churches and shrines.

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

this period as well, reaching new heights of accomplishment, with collections of period khachkars at Yeghvard, Bjini, Tegheniats, Kecharis, Ptgni and Geghard.

**The Mongols.** The glories were short lived as Kotaik fell to invasion by Jalai-al-Adin in 1225, whose armies of Turkmen and Kipchuk mercenaries pillaged the countryside, burning orchards and crops and initiating a period of famine in Armenia, so weakening the country that when the Mongol Hordes invaded in 1236, there was no organized resistance. After initial rebellion Armenian lords made peace with the Mongols, who showed better mercy than Jalai-al-Adin and trade and religious life continued as before, even expanding under early Mongol patronage. They employed Armenian merchants in their court, and merchants and religious figures were found both in court and at all points on the caravan routes which became enormous conduits of wealth under Mongol protection, generating unimaginable wealth for the new "middle class" of traders and sellers, who erected expensive monuments and churches to advertise their good fortune.

Changes occurred in the late 13th century as the Ghazan Khan converted to Islam and the Mongol nomadic way of life led to a severe depletion of the land and population. The Mongols had expropriated vast tracts of lands for grazing, especially the meadows of Kotaik and Aragatotsn, taking the upper lands of the regions for their herds ("Yaylas"), while taking lower lands for winter pasturage.

As a result, once cultivated farmlands went fallow, eroded and quickly became a semi-desert, no longer able to support the local population. Famine and disease became commonplace in the 14th century, along with the constant in-fighting by rival Mongol chieftains, ravaging the countryside and weakening the country for another invasion, its last from Central Asia, and worst.

Among the new inhabitants in the marz were the Yezidis (Zoroastrian-influenced descendants of Mongol/Kurdish invaders from the 11<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> cc), whose presence in Kotaik is traced to this period, and who continue to live in the marz, annually taking their sheep herds to alpine pasturage in the summers.

**Timur.** Unable to put up any defense, the remaining Armenians could but just watch as the lame Timur (Tamurlane or "Tamur the Lame") led three successive waves of attack in 1386-1387,

1394-1396 and 1399-1403. The attacks were brutal, enslaving local peasants and Azats alike, pillaging towns and villages and burning croplands and pastures as they passed. His invasions prevented crop planting, and a severe famine ensued. Cannibalism was reported in some areas.

Encountering resistance by King Giorgi II of Georgia, Timur led his final and worst attack against Northern Armenia and Georgia in 1399, enslaving over 70,000 people and depopulating many districts in Northern Armenia, including Kotaik. Those that remained lived in remote caves as a matter of course, eking out their existence as best they could. Cave complexes from this period are at Voghchaberd and in the Hrazdan and Azat River Gorges. Timur died in Samarkand in 1405, ending his reign of terror but leaving a power vacuum in Armenia.

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

**12th-14th c sites** include the octagonal church at Garni, the exquisite Havuts Tar convent by Garni, Kecharis Vank at Tsaghkadzor, the glorious Kaptavank Church at Kaputan (1349), the expansion of monasteries at Tegheniats Vank (Buzhakan), Dzagavank (Ptgni), Neghutsi S. Astvatsatsin Vank (Arzakan), Makravank (Hrazdan) and Bjini. Cave sites are at Voghchaberd, Garni and Arzni.

#### **OTTOMANS & PERSIANS ▲**

The Seljuks that survived Timur's invasion ruled in Persia, facing a new threat in the Ottomans, who took Constantinople in 1453 and began to expand their empire eastwards.

The Ottomans under Mehmet I defeated the Seljuks in Anatolia, only to square off with a new power, the Safavids in Persia, who under Ismail Shah expelled the remains of Seljuks in Armenia and took possession of the country. Mehmet's successors defeated Ismail Shah and conquered the majority of Armenia in 1514-1516. The Ottomans consolidated their gains under Suleiman II, and gradual encroachment wrested the titular remainder of Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan into Ottoman control by 1585.

The Safavid Persians under Shah Abas I managed to wrest Eastern Armenia from the Ottomans

during the long and brutal Ottoman-Persian war of 1602-1620, using Armenia for the battlefield. At first overwhelmed by superior Ottoman forces, Abas turned the tide of the war by using a slash and burn tactic, destroying Armenia's land and forcing Armenians to emigrate to Persia, where they settled near Isfahan at New Jhulfa. Mostly abandoned to Mongol pasturage, the lands of Kotaik were further harmed during the campaign as farms and forests were burned during the retreat. Some say it is this campaign that irreversibly destroyed much of the forests of Kotaik, relegating the remainders to the fringes of the western border.

After eighteen years of war Armenia was finally divided between Persia and Ottoman Turkey with Eastern Armenia (including Kotaik) awarded to the Safavids. Shah Abas' successors were not as enlightened as he and began repressive measures against the Armenian population, by now a minority in their own country. Pogroms against Christians became so harsh that a number of Armenians married into Muslim families and converted just to escape the harsh treatment of their Christian cousins. So many made the switch that some say Armenian DNA can be found in perhaps 40% of the Persian and Turkish populations.

By the late 17th c the Russian Empire had expanded to the gates of the Caucasus, its imperial ambitions coinciding with its perceived duty to liberate its Christian brethren to the south. Armenians were no strangers to the Russian court; for more than a century Armenians had been migrating to Russia, serving as middle men in the Persia-Russia caravan route. By the late 17th c large populations of Armenians had immigrated north, to escape the Turko-Persian repressions in their own lands, its artisans recruited by Peter the Great to help build his new capital at St. Petersburg.

At the request of Armenian and Georgian emissaries Peter the Great sent expeditions into the Caucasus in 1700 and 1722, at first retreating from Persian forces but not before bolstering local resistance by Armenian Meliks in Karabakh (Artsakh) and Northern Armenia. Led by David Bek, they acceded to Persian authority in name only.

The Turko-Persian war resumed mid century, each side taking and retaking parts of Eastern Armenia, including areas of Kotaik, which became a refuge for locals hiding in the mountain caves at

Voghchaberd, Garni canyon and in the Hrazdan gorge by Argel, Karashamb, and Solak.

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

#### **19th CENTURY ▲**

Kotaik's rebirth did not occur in the 19th c, unlike the rest of Russian Armenia which experienced steady growth and industrialization during the Czarist period. Relegated to farming, herding and mining, the district was a provincial backwater, favored of hunters and those seeking fortunes in exploiting raw materials, but little else.

It did recoup its population after the Turko-Russian war of 1828, which established the border further west in Ottoman Turkey and caused a significant shift of populations; Muslims moving west and south into Turkey and Persia, Christians moving east and north into Armenia.

The 1828 migration recovered land laid fallow since the invasions of the Mongols and Timur, establishing villages throughout Kotaik, most in fact tracing their contemporary origins to this period. Greeks first established the village of Hankavan in the late 18th c, but its greatest growth came at this time, as those escaping Turkish pogroms immigrated to the mountain village at the foot of Tukh Manukh Pass. They brought with them their customs and the old Pontic dialect of Greek, considered by historians the closest surviving dialect spoken by Plato and Homer. Yezidis, nomadic herdsmen of Kurdish Shaddadid and Turkic origins, were divided; Muslim believers mostly leaving the marz while their Christian-Zoroastrian brethren stayed behind to continue herding sheep and cattle on the fertile meadows. They remain a mystery to most Armenians, unfortunately facing discrimination to this day.

Missing out on the industrialization and development in neighboring districts, Kotaik likewise missed out on the political turmoil of the times and the suppression of Armenian liberation cells by czars bent on crushing any opposition to their autocratic rule. Kotaik's rebirth came later,

after the events of the First World War when its growth exploded under the direction of the Soviet Empire and it finally entered the modern age.

## FIRST REPUBLIC ▲

As WWI began, Armenian patriots joined the Czarist forces and Russian incursions into Turkey were quick and decisive, causing the virtual collapse of the eastern Ottoman Empire and liberation of the Ottoman held Armenian provinces. The reaction to the Russian invasion was the initiation of the Armenian Genocide by the Young Turks. Goaded by their ottoman leaders, Kurds and Turks rounded up Armenians under their control and force marched them into the Syrian deserts, raping, drowning, spearing and burning alive countless innocent people in their attempt to wipe out the Armenian race.

Despite its attempts to declare independence and establish the First Republic, Armenia faced certain annihilation after the Russian army under Lenin retreated to fight the White Army in Russia. Armenia was left alone to face the Turkish army in 1918 determined to demolish the Armenian state and create a Pan-Turkic empire. The Turks were stopped by Armenians at Sardarapat and retreated. Armenia established its first Republic May of 1918.

Owing to the genocide, the population of the country had swelled from 300,000 to more than one million, straining the republic's infrastructure (over 20,000 starved or died of typhus in 1918). The Turks attacked again in 1919 and the Allies betrayed Armenian hopes of reuniting Anatolia with the Republic during peace talks. The British particularly acted against Armenia's interests in the treaty of Sevres and the allies refused to recognize the republic until 1920, a few months before the Red Army attacked in April 1920 through Tavush and Kotaik, having taken the oil rich city of Baku and Azerbaijan. During the battle, the Turks moved in to take lands it had lost in WWI, including Mt. Ararat. On December 2, 1920 Armenia signed the treaty of Alexandropol with Turkey and on the same day it was annexed to the Soviet Union.

## THE SOVIET PERIOD ▲

Soviet Kotaik experienced tremendous growth, especially after World War II, developing from a backwater district that exported raw materials to an industrial center churning out finished goods and supplying the country's electrical needs through a series of hydroelectric plants built on the Hrazdan River. Tapping into the hydropower of the

region was key to building the new Soviet Armenia and the Soviets began construction of the hydro dams on the Hrazdan gorge in the 1930s.

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

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

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

## 2ND REPUBLIC ▲

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

one that continues to this day. While official statistics show a population of 272,000 in 2004, they are notoriously unreliable with the actual population perhaps 50% of that number.

## KOTAİK NOW ▲

The missing 50% seems to be gone for good. Mostly head of households and young adults have made the exodus, many to benefit from the construction boom in Moscow, some to Yerevan, while those who can, emigrate to Europe and the US. The money sent back is used to fuel a limited merchant economy, though the empty shops and kiosks at Charentsavan and Hrazdan show a collapse of even that small economy, the countless empty apartments pointing to a mass exodus of the population. Few believe the great factories will ever restart.

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

The largest concern in the district is Kotayk Brewery, a successful company that supports local initiatives. Owned by Gagik Tzarukian ("Dodi Gago"), Armenia's wealthiest businessmen (second only to Serj Sargsyan, the Minister of Defense), the income from the brewery and his other businesses being used in part to help the poor in some well-publicized hand outs and to rejuvenate local villages and arrest the brain drain in the marz. In Abovian, funds are allocated to pay student tuition and transportation costs to attend universities in Yerevan, an effort that has paid off with a distinctly higher standard of living in the city, one of the few that has not witnessed a whole scale loss of population. Tzarukian is also setting his sights on the presidency, opening 400 offices around the country for his political party, *Prosperous Armenia*. Critics say (perhaps with some justification) that his acts of charity are simply ruses to get elected and that once in office, he and his close fiend the current president will resort to form, forgetting his altruistic urges. 2007 will tell.

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

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

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

## IN AND OUT ▲

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

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

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

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

From Yerevan, the main road in and out of the marz is the **Yerevan-Sevan highway** (M4/M24) that travels north by Abovian, Charentsavan, Hrazdan and Tzaghkadzor en route to Gegharkunik and Lake Sevan. From Yerevan it is 16 km to Abovian, 24 km to Charentsavan, 33 km to Hrazdan, 42 km to Tzaghkadzor and 67 km to Sevan City. Parallel to the highway on its east is the **Abovian-Hrazdan road** (H1) which passes villages en route.

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

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

The **Yeghvard Road** (H4) connects Yerevan to Yeghvard (19 km), Aragiugh (Arai Lehr) (29 km) and Buzhakan (36 km).

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

To the east there are a series of **mountain roads** radiating out from Abovian, one leading east to Kotaik (6 km), Akunk (7.5 km), Zar (12.5 km), Sevanberd (18 km), then on a twisting path to Aknalich (29 km) and the petroglyphs on the Geghama Lehr (27 km). Another leads southeast from Abovian to Aramus (5.5 km), Kamaris (8 km) and Geghashen (12 km). A third leads north of Abovian to Kotaik (6 km), Kaputan (12 km), Hatis (17 km) then around Mt. Hatis to Zar (10 km).

To the Southeast is the **Garni-Geghard Road** (H3), which runs along the northern edge of Ararat Marz and the Khosrov Preserve, leading from Yerevan to Jrvesh (4 km), Voghchaberd (10 km), Garni (22 km) and Geghard (33 km). At Garni there is a jumping off point into the Kossrov Preserve to hike the trail to Havuts Tar Monastery

or drive (with permission) to Aghjots Vank and Kakavaberd.

**Public Transport** includes intercity buses and minivans (Mashrutni Taxis) that travel from village to village and village to city.

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

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

*Cars with drivers and taxis* can be hired in Yeghvard, Abovian, Charentsavan, Hrazdan, Tsaghkadzor and at many villages, like Akunk, Arzni, Biureghavan and Garni/Geghard, most welcome day trips, even on short notice. Figure 100-150 AMD per kilometer plus something extra for stops or negotiate a day rate of around \$20-40, for up to four passengers. If you stop for food, feed the driver as well. Ditto if you decide to overnight and his home isn't nearby.

## OVERNIGHT/EAT ▲

**Lodging.** Kotaik has a variety of overnights, from three star wonders to pensionats, summer camps, motels and flop houses ("Bosetuns") that rent by the hour. The amount and variety is surprising for such a small district, with most located in scenic areas. *Tsaghkadzor* has the most on offer with the Olympic Center and hotels (including a recently opened 3 star hotel), resorts, pensionats (6000-40,000+ AMD), spas (7000-30,000 AMD) and cabins (5000-25,000 AMD) throughout the town. The area is popular year round, packed to the gills during ski and summer seasons. *Hankavan Valley* has a number of summer pensionats, several in states of renovation (6000-30,000 AMD), summer camps that accept walk-in visitors (3000-5000 AMD) and the Hankavan Spa, a Soviet era behemoth that is cheap and comfortable despite its age (6000-15,000 AMD). *Arzakan Valley* has pensionats (6000-15,000 AMD) lining the road that arcs up into the Tegheniats Mountain Range, popular in the by vacationers watching the spectacular fall foliage. The *Sevan Highway* has a

few motels (5000+ AMD) lining the road, connected to khorovatz stands. These are mostly used for tête-à-têtes but come in handy if nothing else is available. *Abovian* has a couple of motels and one really elaborate hotel with fountains and café in front (5000-15,000 AMD). *Hrazdan* has one terrible Soviet hotel, not worth the visit, Charentsavan' hotel is closed. Around Akunk there are several fish restaurants with motel rooms (5000-20,000 AMD). *Arzni* has a working spa (6000-15,000 AMD) and a motel-restaurant at the top of the gorge.

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

*Villagers* will put up anyone in need; the amenities will be sparse, but the hospitality will be warm and inviting. You will have to insist to pay in many cases, villagers especially taking offense at the idea of selling their hospitality. 3000-4000 AMD for bed and breakfast is reasonable.

*Camping* is exceptional along the Hrazdan River Gorge and the western mountain forested areas (Tsaghkadzor, Arzakan, Arai Lehr, and Hankavan Valley) as well as to the east at Aknalich and Mt. Hatis. It can be chilly at night in the upper elevations. Sites are mostly in wild areas or river canyons. Before setting up camp, be sure you are not trespassing on private property, especially if you are close to a village or farm. Ask and you will almost certainly be given permission—and probably food, drink and an evening of stories into the bargain.

Details for lodging are listed in individual Day Trips.

**Eating out** in Kotaik is as varied as lodging. Tsaghkadzor has the most to offer, with restaurants, cafes and khorovatz stands throughout the town. Tsaghkadzor is also the most expensive venue, as are the fish restaurants around Akunk, though Akunk has the better food

and atmosphere. Abovian has a couple of restaurants and several cafes, as well as khorovatz stands. Hrazdan has a restaurant on the lake, cafes and khorovatz stands. Charentsavan has just a few kiosks. Yeghvard has home cooking and kiosks. There are restaurants and khorovatz stands on the Hankavan and Arzakan Roads, as well as on the road to Garni. There are restaurants and cafes at Arzni, in and above the gorge.

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

## DESTINATIONS ▲

Kotaik has a lot more to offer than skiing at Tsaghkadzor and church hopping at Bjini.

**Picturesque locales** include the Hrazdan River Gorge (especially by Zovuni, Arzni, Nurnus, Karenis, Karashamb and Bjini), Mt. Arai Lehr and Buzhakan, the Arzakan Valley, Tsaghkadzor, Hankavan Valley (Piunik, Meghradzor and Hankavan), Voghchaberd, Garni, Garni Gorge (Azat River), Geghard, Aknalich, Voskejur River, Geghama Lehr.

**Prehistoric sites** include the petroglyphs by Balahovit (Yerevan), between Mts. Seghanasar and Geghmaghan and Mts. Nalsar & Azhdahak, open air workshops at Arzni, Mt. Hatis, Jraber & Nurnus, the Mousterian-Mesolithic cave sites (Lusakert I-II) and Bronze Age burial sites at Aragel.

**Copper-Bronze Age sites** include fortresses at Garni, Zovuni, Dovri, Yeghvard, Kaghsi, Bjini and a massive fortress at Sevanberd, and excavations at Zovuni, Aragel, Karashamb, Astghaberd, Dovri and the Geghama Lehr.

**Urartian sites** in Kotaik include sites at Dovri, Teghenik, Aramus, Zar, Sevanberd, Hatis and Garni.

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

**Early Christian and Middle Age** sites are at Zoravan, Yeghvard, Buzhakan, Tegheniats, Ptgini,

Karashamb, Karenis, Teghenik, Nurnus, Aramus, Bjini, Voghchaberd, & Garni.

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

**Medieval sites (12th-14th c) sites** include the octagonal church at Garni, the exquisite Havuts Tar convent by Garni, Kecharis Vank at Tsaghkadzor, the glorious Kaptavank Church at Kaputan (1349), the expansion of monasteries at Tegheniats Vank (Buzhakan), Dzagavank (Ptgni), Neghutsi S. Astvatsatsin Vank (Arzakan), Makravank (Hrazdan) and Bjini. Cave sites are at Voghchaberd, Garni and Arzni.

## NATURE TOURING

**Natural areas** include the windswept alpine vistas on the Geghama Lehr, including the crystal blue lake at Aknalich and the nearby petroglyphs on the stones of Mts. Seghanasar and Geghmaghan, as well as Mts. Nalsar & Azhdahak further south; the spectacular gorge below Garni (Azat River) with its "organ pipe" stones and unique valley floor, replete with fresh and mineral water springs, pools, forests and hiking trails; the amazing cliffs, mineral springs and caves in the Hrazdan Gorge, especially at Zovuni, Arzni, Argel, Karenis, Karashamb and Bjini; Mt. Arai Lehr, a volcanic cone with alternating alpine and deciduous forest zones; the forests around Tegheniats Vank above Buzhakan and the Arzakan Road; Tsaghkadzor; the Hankavan (Marmarik River) Valley; the forested mountains above Hankavan.

**Hiking and trekking** is great in Kotaik, especially on the *Geghama Lehr* in the east, and on the *Tegheniats mountains* in the west. The *Geghama Lehr* is not a difficult climb for the fit climber, with a steady incline and peaks around 3300m, though the barren mountain sides provide no cover from the sun. Hiking to Aknalich from Sevaberd is a good day's hike, another day to visit the petroglyphs at Mts. Seghanasar & Geghmaghan. Another great 1-2 day hike with camping on the Geghama Lehr is *uphill from Geghard*, following the Voskejur River to the Gegharkunik pass above Lake Sevan or the Chor Selav River to the petroglyphs at Mts. Nalsar and Azhdahak. The *Garni Gorge* (Azat River) provides equally good hiking on the river floor, from Geghard or Garni to

Azat Reservoir in Ararat Marz, where fishermen can ferry you across the lake to natural hot springs and mud baths. Garni is the gateway to the *Khosrov Preserve* in Ararat Marz, which is officially off limits to everyone but rich and powerful, but a wonder of nature and medieval ruins, including the Havuts Tar convent, St. Stepanos and several prehistoric and medieval village ruins. In the middle of Kotaik is the spectacular *Hrazdan Gorge*, with good hiking, mineral springs (hot and cold), caves and prehistoric-medieval sites along the way. The best vistas are by Zovuni, Arzni, Argel, Karashamb and Bjini. In the west is *Mt. Arai Lehr*, a volcanic cone with great views of Kotaik and Ararat and is a favorite of alpinists commemorating the genocide on April 24. Just above is the *Tegheniats Mountain Range* with great 1-2 day hiking and camping opportunities up the Araget River (Buzhakan and Tegheniats Vank), Arzakan River (over run by campers on the river bed), Tsaghkadzor (too many too trendy in town, but fewer and fewer the higher up and west you go) and west of Hankavan Village (mostly deserted forests at the end of the road to the Tuxhmanuk Pass into the Aparan plateau).

**IMountain treks** Mountains include Arai Lehr (2576 m) north of Yeghvard, which is a favorite spot for Armenia's mountain climbers to commemorate April 24; the Tegheniats Mountain Range with Mts. Mamadali (2502.7 m), Kerkidash (2659.4 m), Teghenis (2851.1 m) and Arkaitlehr (2687 m), which pass on to Araratotn marz and the Aparan plateau. Also part of the Tegheniats Range are Mt. Vankiglugh (2243.7 m) where the Tezaruiki Monastery is and Mt. Tsaghkadzor (2118 m) and Tsaghkuniats (2820.5) near Tsaghkadzor, the latter the ski slope for the resort area. The upper Kotaik mountains include Mt. Damlikiuduk (2781.6 m), Tuxhmanuk Pass into Upper Aparan (2631 m) and Mt. Davakar (2861 m). In the north of the marz is the Pambak Mountain Range, dividing Kotaik from Lori Marz, with Mt. Khalkali (3049.6 m), Mt. Shekhar (2350.4 m), Mt. Kiroghli (2929.1 m), Mt. Baban (2448.9 m), Mt. Taikal (2715 m), Mt. Tezhlehr (3101 m), Mt. Ampasar (3052.1 m), Mt. Toptsel (2735.7 m), Mt. Dzor (2628.4 m). The eastern part of the marz is the Geghama Lehr, with Mts. Hatis (2529.4 m), Gutanasar (2299.6 m), Gharibikogh (2236.6 m) and Menaksar (3499.4 m) just east of the Sevan Highway between Abovian and Hrazdan; while on the eastern border are Mt. Pkhrakar (2358.1 m), Mt. Azhdahak (3087 m), Mt. Sevkatar (3225.1 m), Mt. Karhank (3139.6 m), Mt. Shishtara (3259.1 m); the petroglyphs Mts. Geghamaghan (3319 m) & Seghanasar (3220.3 m); Mt. Shekhichingil

(3139.4 m), Mt. Dimatslehr (3307 m) with its petroglyphs on its south face, Mt. Azhdahak (3597.3 m), Mt. Nalsar (3177 m) with petroglyphs on its south face, Mt. Nazeli (3312 m) & Mt. Spitakasar (3555.7 m). North of the road to Garni/Geghard is the Voghchaberd Range, with Mt. Voghchaberd (2092.9 m) northeast of the village of Voghchaberd and Mt. Bezaklu (2242 m) on the north side of the range between the Geghashen and Kamaris Rivers and about 2 km northwest of Lake Ghazigiol.

For most hikes or climbs, an experienced mountain guide is required, for safe travel and to navigate the local areas and populations. They also know which areas are off-limits (some sections are restricted military areas, and not marked) as well as the secret cubby holes and gorges with rare delights. See [Adventure Tour Operators](#) (on page 10) for experienced guides.

**Caving.** Kotaik has dozens of caves, with concentrations on the Hrazdan and Azat (Garni), River Canyons. Unique cave sites are on the Hrazdan River at Arzni, Argel (Paleolithic cave complexes) with natural caves all along the gorge. Garni Gorge has natural caves below Garni and along the gorge in both directions. There is a Stone Age-Medieval cave complex at Voghchaberd. A large cave complex is at the Poghos Petros Shrine between Akunk and Zar at the base of Mt. Hatis. For more details on caves see [TourArmenia Caving](#) [pages](#) ([www.tacentral.com/nature/natural\\_story.asp?story\\_no=3](http://www.tacentral.com/nature/natural_story.asp?story_no=3))

**Flower Watching.** Some flowers begin to bloom as early as February in the river canyons but the main show is from mid April-May on the plateau (Yeghvard, Abovian, Charentsavan, Hrazdan, Akunk), continuing uphill in May and June at higher elevations. Even in July alpine flowers may be in bloom at Aknalich and the tops of the Geghama Lehr, though the peak season ends by mid July. Best places to look are (February – March) Hrazdan and Azat River Gorges, (March-April) the main plateau around Yeghvard, Abovian, Akunk, Sevaberd, Charentsavan, Hrazdan, Hankavan, (April-June) upper elevations around Sevaberd, Mt. Hatis, Geghama Lehr, Arai Lehr, (June-July) Aknalich, Lake Ghazigiol, Mt. Azhdahak. See [Flora](#) (on page 2)

**Birding.** Spring (March-April) and Autumn (September-October) are the best times to observe migrating birds, which will congregate at the marshlands and fish ponds around Akunk, as

well as on the Hrazdan and Azat Rivers. More remote rivers (Geghashen and Kamaris) are other places to bird watch mountain steppe birds. Mountain birds (eagles, ospreys and hawks) are abundant throughout the marz, especially on the slopes of the Geghama Lehr and above the river canyons. Best places are in the *Hrazdan, Azat, Geghashen, Kamaris, Araget and Dalar River Canyons* (Rocky Cliffs, River Gorge, Mountain Forest Area), the *Kotaik Plateau* and *Mountain Slopes of the Geghama Lehr and Pambak Range* (Mountain Slope, Subalpine, Mountain Meadow), the forests around *Buzhakan, Arzakan, Tsaghkadzor* and *Hankavan* (Woodlands, Thickets, Mountain Forests) and around *Yeghvard and Buzhakan* (Scrub, Semi-desert to Mountain Steppe, Mountain Steppe). See [Birds](#) (on page 2) and [Resources](#) (on page 52).

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

For details talk to *Armenian Aviation Club*, 24 Khorenatsi p, Yerevan, email: [aac@unesco-clubs.am](mailto:aac@unesco-clubs.am)

You can also contact Dan Retz with questions about Armenian flights at [dan\\_retz@yahoo.com](mailto:dan_retz@yahoo.com), or visit [www.xcaucasus.org/armenian.html](http://www.xcaucasus.org/armenian.html).

## Adventure Tour Operators

*Ashot Levonian* (tel. +374 10 57 03 28 home, mob. +374 91 49 58 34), e-mail: [levash77@mail.ru](mailto:levash77@mail.ru) is an expert hiking/climbing/camping guide, his team arranges hiking, mountain climbing, caving, geology tours, churches and fortresses. They will arrange hotels in Yerevan, airport pickup, transport, sight-seeing, etc. Group support includes guide, translator, cooker, rescue doctor and driver. Standard tour is a two-week hiking trip averaging 5-10 km walking a day: Yerevan - Mt. Aragats - Alaverdi - Ijevan - Dilijan - Sevan - Martuni - Yeghegnadzor - Kapan - Meghri - Jermuk - Yerevan.

*Armenia Green Cross* Ecological NGO ("AGCE"), 14-10 Batumi, Vanadzor (tel. 24066, fax. 58449, mob. + 93 32 32 84) is a local NGO that provides eco-tours as part of its mission to preserve and enlarge ecologically vital areas of the country. Eco-tours are expert-led hiking, climbing and camping tours, including hiking and climbing equipment, tents, sleeping-bags, emergency and

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

*The Armenian Mountain rescue teams* "Spitak" stationed in Yerevan and Stepanavan, can organize hiking, rock climbing and mountain expeditions. Guides are experienced rescuers-rock climbers, and they can also arrange horse riding along picturesque routes, by a horse cave and "Ancient Armenian horse games". Spitak Rescue Center, 50 Halabian p., Yerevan, Armenia, tel: +(374 010) 350006, email: [spitak@yerphi.am](mailto:spitak@yerphi.am), [moon.yerphi.am/~spitak/adventure.htm](http://moon.yerphi.am/~spitak/adventure.htm).

One of the most experience mountain climbers in Armenia is *Andrey Chesnokov*, who has climbed most of the mountains in Armenia and is a recommend, reliable guide. Contact him at Andrey Chesnokov, 10 Vardanants St., Apt. #49, Yerevan, Armenia 375010, tel. (374 010) 576757, email: [ruzan@aua.am](mailto:ruzan@aua.am)

*The Eco-Tour Center* arranges nature tours, climbs and camping, as well as birding, flower watching and other nature tours. Contact Zhanna, 2 H Hakobian St. apt. 22, 375033 Yerevan, Armenia tel. +(374-10) 27 87 28 / 27 40 12, email: [zhanna@netsys.am](mailto:zhanna@netsys.am), [www.ecotourismarmenia.com](http://www.ecotourismarmenia.com)

*Armenian Alpine Federation* is a highly qualified group of mountaineers and nature lovers, able to organize individual to group tours in any region of the country. Specialties include Archeological, Trekking And Hiking, Geological, Climbing, Camping and Helicopter Tours. 127 Terian p., tel. +(374 10) 584288, [alpfedt@yahoo.com](mailto:alpfedt@yahoo.com)

*Hike & Go*, tel. (+33 6) 88 34 04 11, cell: (+374 9) 204138 email: [info@hikeandgo.com](mailto:info@hikeandgo.com) an adventure travel group operating out of Armenia and France (English spoken) is an interesting group that features tours of Armenia combining traditional touring with hiking into Armenia's wilderness and off-the-beaten-path monuments, some of which can only be reached by hiking. [See web site \(www.hikeandgo.com/\)](http://www.hikeandgo.com/)

*AdvenTour Travel* arranges adventure, birding, botanical and historic tours. 39 Pushkin p., Yerevan, Armenia, 375002 (tel. +374-10 539609, 231240, Fax: +374-10 231240, Cell.: +374-91 426745), Email: [adventour@netsys.am](mailto:adventour@netsys.am), URL: [www.armeniaexplorer.com](http://www.armeniaexplorer.com)

*Apaga Tours* (tel. Yerevan (010) 57 03 28, cell: (091) 49 58 34), [www.apaga.info](http://www.apaga.info).

[artak@artak.net](mailto:artak@artak.net), specializes in classical and nature tours in the area.

*Oxalis Tours*, 68 Landseer Road, London N19 4JP UK (tel, (UK) +44 20 7870 8037, (USA) 201 984 1420; Fax: +44 20 7681 3131 URL: [www.oxalis-adventures.com/armenia/index.php](http://www.oxalis-adventures.com/armenia/index.php) provides trekking, climbing and botanical tours to Armenia, specializing in combining off-the-beaten paths with primary sites. They hire expert guides from in and out of the country and provide full tour services. Worth looking into, very well organized.

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

### Archeological Tours

*MassTour*, 8 Komitas, Yerevan, (tel./fax. + 374 10 27 78 32), e-mail: [info@masstours.com](mailto:info@masstours.com), URL: [www.masstours.com](http://www.masstours.com), specialize in archeological tours and participation in archeological digs supervised by working archeologists include the Urartian fortress Erebuni (Arin Berd) forerunner of present day Yerevan, the Bronze Age temple-city of Agarak, Bronze -Iron Age tomb field of Aghavnatun, Paleolithic caves in the Kasakh River Canyon near the village of Apnagiugh, guided visits to the petroglyphs in the Geghama mountain range. They also run basic tour packages with expert guides. Excavation packages begin from \$750/week for full service land-expeditions.

**Sacred Geometry.** Archeological expeditions are scientific by definition and not for the casual tourist, though a stop by an active dig is informative and fascinating when they are uncovering fresh finds. The information can also be useful in understanding the religious beliefs of ancestral Armenians and how they applied these in worship, building temples and burying their dead. This evolved into something called Sacred Geometry, which dictated the ways things were built, even to the angles, measurements and number of steps in a building! At sites such as the temple of Mythra at Garni, these rules are rigidly applied and can easily be seen, if you know what to look for. See our [Sacred Geometry chapter \(www.tacentral.com/architecture.asp?story\\_no=2\)](http://www.tacentral.com/architecture.asp?story_no=2) for more information about sacred geometry.

EXPLORING THE REGION ▲

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

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

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

- 🏕️ camping possible
- 🏠 overnight
- 🍷 food and drink
- ♨️ thermal, mineral spring

TRIP 1 : GARNI - GEGHARD ▲

**YEREVAN – (J'rvesh) – (Dzoraghbiur) – VOGHCHABERD – (Geghadir) – (Hatsavan) – GARNI - NEAR GARNI (Garni Gorge – Khosrov Preserve – Baibert – Mets Gilanlar – HAVBUTS TAR) - (Goght) – GEGHARD**

UPPER CASE destinations are worth a longer visit, (side trips) are worth the stop if you have the time. You can visit all sites on this trip in one day, depending on how long you stay at each stop.

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

Not known to most visitors is that the same curving road that arcs through the Voghchaberd

Mountains and traces the Azat River canyon is one of the oldest roads in mankind, following a path of civilization from the Stone Age to the present day. First used by Mesolithic-Paleolithic tribes who inhabited caves on the Azat canyon and at Voghchaberd, the area became a prized possession of warring factions, Bronze Age tribes harnessing stone from the nearby mountains to build cyclopean fortress walls at Garni.

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

The canyon protected religious enclaves as well, one of the most stunning next to the village of Geghard. Known also as Airavank, Geghard monastery was built to house the True Spear believed to have pierced Christ's flesh, its oldest church carved from solid rock. Begun in the 9th c under Bagratuni rule, the monastery grew to epic proportions under Zakarian and Proshian rule in the 12th-13th c, and continues to be one of Armenia's most enigmatic medieval creations. You haven't lived until you have heard Armenian verse sung in the cavernous enclave.

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

But the canyon is worth a serious visiting, for its river bottom forests, the ice cold waters of the Azat River with pools of water to soak in, the extraordinary "symphony canyon" walls of perfectly cut diamond shaped granite, basalt, slag and andesite stone and towering tree canopies over picnic and camping spots. A unique ecosystem, Garni gorge provides excellent hiking in either direction, ending at the Azat Reservoir on

the south or Geghard Monastery and the gates to Lake Sevan on top of the Geghama Lehr to the north.

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



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

**Eat:** Garni restaurant, roadside stands.

**Springs:** Voghchaberd. Garni, Azat River Gorge.

➡ From Yerevan Center, take Abovian Street and connect with the Sevan Highway (sign-posted) and continue about 3.7 km to the Massis (Nor Nork) exit onto Gai p. Take Gai p. through Nor Nork/Massis about 1.8 km to a T-intersection and a left turn onto the Garni Road. Continue for about 2.5 km to a right turn into (J'rversh, DD 40.1856 x 44.5869) 🏠 🍷 ♨️

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

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

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

➡ From the J'rvesh dachas (about 3.7 km east of the village) turn R on the north Dzoraghbiur road and continue for about 3 km to central (Dzoraghbiur, DD 40.2050 x 44.6431) 🏠 🍷 ♨️

**SIDE TRIP: (Dzoraghbiur - Ջորաղբյուր pop. 1750) lies under Mt. Dzoraghbiur (1600.3) and gets its name ("Canyon Springs" from the springs in the J'rvesh River nearby. The village has a water mill and cemetery (medieval-21st c) on its south side by the school and nearby and the ruins of a Bronze-Iron Age Cyclopean fort on the southern slopes of the Voghchaberd Mountains. About 900 m south are the Chuzhachi ruins and on a dirt path about 2 km SE are the Mangluz ruins set in a gorge.**

**Camping** is possible near the village on the mountainside or at the ruins; **Overnight** in village home possible (rustic, 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** in the village and at the river.

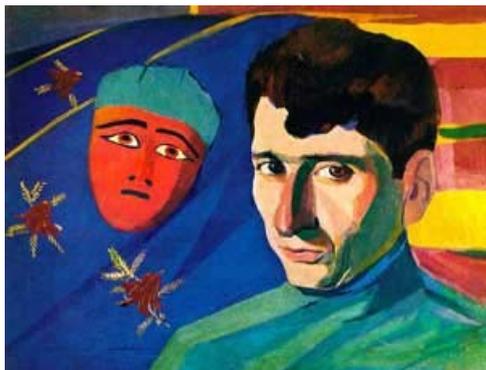
➡ Backtrack to the J'rvesh dachas and take a right onto Garni Road and continue to the 15 km marker and the **CHARENTS ARCH** (DD 40.2050 x 44.6431)

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



But the arch is named for one of Armenia's best loved poets, Yeghishe Charents (1897-1937), a revolutionary artist during the turbulent years of the Genocide, WW I and the formation of the Soviet Union. Charents was born Yeghishe Soghomonian in Iran and received his schooling in

Kars (1904-1912), then a part of the Armenian Provinces of the Russian Empire. In 1914 Charents joined Armenian Volunteer brigades on the Caucasus front and fought with Russian Imperial troops as they routed the Turks and liberated western Armenia, as far as van and Erzurum. During this campaign Charents witnessed first hand the ravages of the Armenian Genocide, which strongly affected his poetry, as did his support of the Russian revolution, joining the Red Army in 1918 and fighting against resurgent Turkish troops that were invading the Armenian republic.



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

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

eyes on the feudal vestiges in Armenia, then against the new society itself. For more about the Futurists and Mayakovsky visit ([mayakovsky.com/](http://mayakovsky.com/))

This put him at odds with an increasingly totalitarian government, and, to save his own life, Charents was forced to renounce Futurism in 1924, and his mentor in Russia. The disillusionment and what had to have been a feeling of betrayal and guilt at what he had done against those he had held in such high regard, profoundly affected his work, and he never quite recovered from this blow. Especially after Mayakovsky killed himself in 1930, Charents' views grew darker, in his work and in his life, his bitterness and sense of betrayal apparent in his last work which devoted itself to nation over internationalism, the individual over the collective, completely at odds with the world views of the Soviet powers, and Stalin. Charents was killed in 1937, one of the millions murdered during the Great Purge. He was rehabilitated in 1954 after Stalin's death, and became widely read by the local population. His home-museum in Yerevan houses his works and the story of his life.

Charents published six volumes of poetry plus a novel: *LYRICAL POEMS, DANTEAN LEGEND (1916), THE FRENZIED MOBS (1918), POEMS (1923), LAND OF NAYIRI (1923) EPIC DAYBREAK (1930), BOOK FOR THE ROAD (1933)*. Charents also wrote many unpublished poems.

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

➔ Continue for about 1 km to **VOGHCHABERD**, DD 40.16872 x 44.64746) 🏰 🗺️ 🌊

**SIDE TRIP:** (*Voghchaberd - Ողջաբերդ* - also *Voghjaberd* or *Voghjabert*, elev. 1769m, pop. 3500) is an ancient settlement, with cave dwellings at the top of the village going back to

the Paleolithic Era. The cliff dwellings continued to be hot property during later invasions, protecting the local populace from the ravages of the invading armies while providing defenses for Armenian fighters.

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



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

An enigmatic find in the village's apple orchards are the remains of a **4th c church**, part of the original village and, if the dating is correct, one of the oldest church of its type. It's a bit of a winding journey there, but the view of Ararat and the orchards is stunning, especially in the early morning dew. To get there, take the main highway E about 200 m past the asphalt turn to the cliffs, and turn right (at the store/kiosk) into a rocky path that goes down into the valley. Go

for another 200 m or so to where a fence on the right protects the orchard. Turn right and then right again, following the grassy, rocky path, into the orchard. More fences mark off the orchards, but a sort of alley will divide two. Climb over or open the make-shift gates and walk about 150 m to a small opening and the church ruins.



The church is a small basilica with a protruding apse, and is small indeed. Perhaps able to house half a dozen worshippers, its basic form and size closely follows that of earlier pagan shrines, and markings on the few stones that remain appear to be a combination of pagan and Christian symbols. The size, shape and markings make this a good example of how early Christians "baptized" pagan shrines; erecting crosses over them and obliterating the pagan iconography with Christian symbols.



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

them something. You can also leave some drams under a rock at the gate entrance—they will find it.

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

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

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

➡ From central Voghchaberd, continue E on the winding highway for about 1.6 km to central (**Geghadir** DD 40.1564 x 44.6511) 🏰 🗺️ 🌊

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

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

➡ From Geghadir continue E then S on the highway for about 2.5 km to S turn off to (**Hatsavan** DD 40.1378 x 44.6522) 🏰 🗺️ 🌊

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

➡ Continue E/SE on the highway for about 4 km to the Garni Valley and a full 7 km to **GARNI** (DD 40.11749 x 44.73286) 🏰 🗺️ 🌊 🌳

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

**[CITY MAP]**

**History**

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

Throughout its more than 4100 year history, the site was an important linchpin in the defenses and rule of the country. According to a cuneiform record found on the territory of Garni, the fortress was conquered by the Urartian king Argishti I in



masis.am

the first half of the 8th c BCE. It was fortified several times in the ensuing centuries, becoming a summer residence for Armenia’s kings, their troops and retinue stationed in the village and surrounding area (Hatsavan, Geghadir & Voghchaberd, plus across the gorge in the current Khosrov Preserve).

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

Armenian goddess Astghik, the Greek Hephaestus for the Vahagan, Artemis for the goddess Anahit.

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

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

The Artashessians and Arshakunis did much to shape the Armenian nation, expanding its territories to its greatest size and fending off encroachments from Persian (Parthian) and Roman armies. They brought prosperity and rule to the country, allowing it to evolve into a regional power

and center of culture. They were also a remarkably petty bunch, not immune to internal fratricide, with the construction of the current temple is traced to one such blood feud.

During this period the Romans were in a protracted battle with the Parthians for control of the Near East, using Armenia as their battleground. In the 1st c the country was ruled by the Arshakuni king Myhrdates of Iberia (35-37, 42-51 CE), propped up by Rome. For offending his overlords he was slain by his nephew, Rhadamistes (51-54), who usurped the throne with the blessing of the Roman Emperor Nero. The new king lasted 3 years before he was deposed by the Parthian candidate T'rdat (53-60, 62/66-75 CE), the younger brother of the Parthian king of kings Vagharshak (Vologeses), who like the Arshakuni kings before him, had Parthian blood. In retaliation, Rome invaded Armenia in 57 CE, razing the capital at Artashat in the year 58 and was about to annex Armenia outright when they were surrounded and defeated by T'rdat's armies at Kharput in 62 CE. In a stunning reversal (Or not, considering how often people changed sides in those days), T'rdat sued for peace with Nero and lay down his diadem before an effigy of Nero, agreeing to go to Rome to get it back from the man himself. He also needed—and may have already been offered—Rome's money to rebuild his capital at Artashat

The trip to Rome took nine months and was reported by historians as a great Cecil B. DeMille affair: following Zoroastrian practices, the Armenian king traveled by land to avoid polluting the sea, his wife wore a helmet of gold instead of a veil, his train had a cavalry of 3000 retainers, Magian priests, a contingent of Roman legions, there were bespangled horses, treasure laden pack animals and fair maidens winding their way to his meeting with Nero at Naples. His arrival was a success—not least because it started with a scandal when the recalcitrant Parthian refused to disarm himself in the presence of Nero and ended with gladiator games in his honor and a coronation at the forum in Rome decked out with banners and gold, T'rdat kneeling before Nero and saying, *"Master . . . I have come to thee, my god, to worship thee as I do Myhras (Mythra). The destiny thou spinnest for me shall be mine, for thou art my Fortune and my Fate, (Dio, LXII; vol. VIII)*

Nero was greatly pleased, placing the diadem on T'rdat's head and entertaining him at the theatre of Pompey, which had been covered with gold and

shaded by purple cloth stretched over head. There were more entertainments, and Pliny the Elder reported that the Armenian king initiated Nero into certain Magian rites, thereby beginning the cult of Mythra into the Roman pantheon of gods.

T'rdat returned in triumph with Roman legions and two million sesterces (gold), Roman craftsmen and permission to rebuild his capital at Artashat. T'rdat raised the city and renamed it Neroneia in honor of his big brother in Rome.

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

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

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

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

Its glory as a summer residence was renewed in the Bagratuni and Zakarian periods (9th-13th cc),

as the 11th c Astvatsatsin and 12th c "Little" or "Mashtots Hairapet" churches attest. There were also lively communities across the river in the Khosrov Preserve, royal hunting grounds founded by T'rdat's 3rd century descendent Khosrov the Great. The Zakarian (also Proshian) period saw the rise of great monasteries and convents in Armenia, and by Garni one of the most amazing was Havuts Tar, just across the river and uphill. Others in the area include Aghjots Vank, S. Stepanos and the (now ruined) village of Baiburd.

The fortress became less and less important in the late Middle Ages, its use as an important defensive position unnecessary by the Ottoman-Persian wars in the 16th-17th cc. From the 13th c on it was abandoned except as a hunting lodge for Mongol, Shaddadid and Safavid-Iranian noblemen. The village survived, villagers scrambling into the gorge or up nearby mountains to hid during raids and war, returning to rebuild their huts and plant the rich soil on the Garni valley in time of peace.

For 1700 years the temple stood intact, succumbing only to earthquake in 1679. It remained destroyed for almost 300 years until the Russian orientalist Nikolai Marr and his colleague Yaakov Smirnov rediscovered the ruins. During the great Soviet revival of Armenian studies in the 1930s Prof. Nikolai Biunatov made a faithful reconstruction of the temple, and the temple was rebuilt ca. 1966-1976.

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

**SIGHTS**

**Garni Temple Complex** (DD 40.11721 x 44.73560) The complex includes several buildings, most famous of which are the 1st c CE temple to Myhras (Helios), the 7th-9th c circular church, the palace with a throne room and a columned hall and the Roman bath-house. These are located on the southern end of the promontory, grouped around a large open square. The northern end of the complex was reserved for buildings and quarters for the king's garrison and servants.

The **fortress** occupies a triangular promontory (180 x 330 x 330 meters) surrounded on two sides by steep gorges. On the northern, shorter side (180 meters) it abuts against a plateau, the site of

the equally old and continuously inhabited Garni village.

**[COMPLEX MAP]**

The **cyclopean stone wall** that protects the northern approach is 2 meters thick with stones projecting out of the external side. Originally the wall was 12-14 meters high, what remains are 2-4 meters of finely hewn stone. The cyclopean blocks are held in place with iron clamps and laid without

- |                        |                  |
|------------------------|------------------|
| Garni Temple Complex   | mortar, a        |
| 1. Car Park            | construction     |
| 2. Fortress Walls      | technique        |
| 3. Temple to Myhras    | perfected during |
| 4. 7th-9th c church    | Roman times,     |
| 5. Column hall, Palace | leading some to  |
| 6. Palace foundations  | think the walls  |
| 7. Roman bath-house    | were actually    |
| 8. curtain wall        | built in the     |
|                        | Roman period.    |

In fact this technique was common for millennia before the Roman period in Armenia and the stones were first laid in the 3rd millennium BCE by ancestral Armenians who developed the region into one of the greatest metallurgical and trading powers in Asia Minor. In the 7th c. Arab invaders destroyed most of the wall, but they were rebuilt in the 10th c. the gate showing medieval carving details.

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

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

The temple was dedicated to Myhras (also, Mythra, in Armenian/Persian "Mehr / Mihr"), a deity popular in the near East which found its way to Greece and Rome, becoming the patron goddess of the Roman Empire in its last period before Christianity. The name "Mythra" is synonymous with the Greek word "Helios", which means the sun or sun god, and is a variant of earlier Vedic

("Mitra") and Persian ("Mihir/Mehr") deities. In some descriptions, the temple is called the Temple to Helios. Interestingly, the Armenian and Persian word "Mehr/Mihir" means both "Love" and "Sun". Usurped by the Romans in the 1st c BCE, the deity is believed to have originated in India, evolving in Persia and Armenia into its Zoroastrian form during the Bronze and Iron Ages, from where it was carried to Greece by remnants of Alexander the Great's armies in the 4th c BCE, where its Manichean form was incorporated into the Greek concept of the Helios god. During the 1st c BCE, Roman legions, familiar with the concept of Helios, were exposed to its older version in Armenia and Persia, and brought its fire image back to the Roman Empire, where it evolved yet again.

Pagan temples had been at the site for as long as the site was settled, and this one was built on top of an Urartian temple, with the same floor dimensions as the temple of Sushî at Erebuni (5.05 X 7.98 meters). It is not known exactly which Urartian it was dedicated to (Khaldi? The war god Tesheba?), but its conversion to the Zoroastrian deity came early, T'rdat referring to Mythras as his supreme god in his subjugation speech to Nero in Rome.

The temple is not alone in its style; buildings like it can be found in Asia Minor (Sagala, Pergamum), Syria (Baalbek) and Rome and though its architectural shapes are basically Hellenistic local traditions do appear. Sacred buildings of this type with columns and pediments were known in Armenia as early as the Urartian period, for example Sushî at Erebuni and the temple at Musasir, which can be seen on an Assyrian bas-relief.

There are two views on the temple's date. Movses Khorenatsi (5th c. CE), credited as the writing the first history of Armenia, writes that the temple was built by T'rdat II (287-330 CE). In his history he writes that when T'rdat completed building the fortress 'He set up a villa (meaning a temple) with columns ornamented with remarkable high-relief moldings for his sister Khosrovidukht, leaving in memory of himself a Greek inscription.' Lost for centuries, the inscription carved on basalt was discovered in the Garni Village graveyard in 1946. The inscription reads in part,

*"Helios! T'rdat the Great, King of Armenia, when the ruler built the agarak (castle) for the queen and this inaccessible fortress in the eleventh year of his reign, Meneus with the Ter's permission, being a liturg of the great sparapet*

*(general), by way of gratitude (purchased) in the presence of witness Matheus...'*

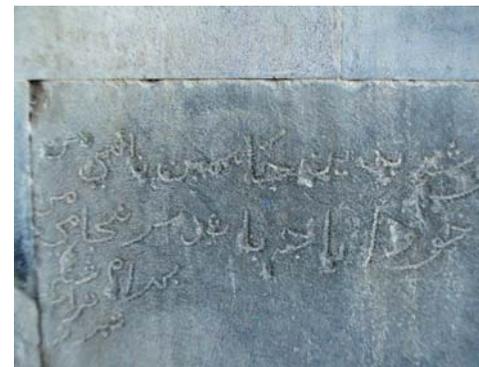
This inscription suggests that Khorenatsi confused T'rdat III with T'rdat I, who reigned in the 1st century CE. Other contemporary accounts by the Roman historians Dionisius Cassius and Tacitus mention the journey to Rome by T'rdat I, where he ceremonially received his crown from the hands of the Emperor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

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

Uniquely, T'rdat's temple is not oriented east-west but rather on a Northwest-Southeast axis, following the contour of the promontory on which it sits but defying the Zoroastrian principles of orienting temples east and west. It is thought by some to have been given this orientation because of the shape of the temple on which it was built and Urartian temples were oriented both North-South and East-West. A North-South orientation can be found at Erebuni in the temples to Khaldi and Adana, but the temple of Sushî, considered Garni's foot print at Erebuni, is distinctly east-west. There are rare examples of Roman temples built on a North-South axis, one of which could be the model for the temple art Garni, but there is no active debate on this point and unlike modern builders who squeeze buildings where best they fit,

the builders of sacred structures in the 1st c took their jobs seriously, orienting temples to benefit the gods who were believed to live their. Jury still out, take your best guess.

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



The **cellae** (sanctuary) is surrounded by a colonnade of 24 columns (6 in front, 8 on the sides), with finely molded capitals (two sided on the corners). The entablature at the top of each corner and the pediments at the apex of the roof are carved with floral motifs. The frieze work features leaves twined around lion masks that appear to be molded, though they were carved from solid stone.

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

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

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

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

The **cornice** is decorated with evenly placed lion busts, their mouths open. The lion motifs—along with oxen—were common Urartian design, seen on murals, shields and seals of state. The lion heads jut out from the cornice and along with the floral bas-relief crown the columns and entablature with their florid detailing. This is unlike simpler Hellenistic temples that by and large stopped decoration at the frieze level and with its floral ornamentation and the repeated lion motif the design is further lent a distinctly Near Eastern (Armenian) flair.



Ancestral Armenians for thousands of years. Voodoo physics to you and I, the laws of numerology and sacred geometry (Pythagorean theory) were devoutly followed in the attempt to make contact with the gods. Use this section to help you “read” the temple as the ancients did, deciphering the numbers and geometric compositions not only as symbols but how they were used to literally bring the cosmos to earth. And gratefully, this primer is short.



Ancestral Armenians built their lives around the laws of nature, carefully studying the seasonal ebbs and flows that governed their lives. Predicting the spring thaw and summer’s rain was more than a show of magic, it was crucial to the survival of the culture. Considering how dependent they were on the elements, it is not such a great leap of faith to equate natural cause and effect with supernatural force, nor to apply that belief in daily life. In religion, control of the elements became synonymous with control of the gods, not only bringing them closer to earth to bless their lives with abundant crops or long lives, but also to literally control them, so their wrath did not strike against the people with flood, drought or pestilence.

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

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

as well as a recreation of the universe itself, on earth.

In *Sacred Geometry*, numbers are combined with shapes to create a harmonious whole. The idea was to reunite humanity with the cosmic whole. Similar geometric patterns can be found in Sun Worship Temples throughout Mesopotamia and the Armenian Plateau, the shrines of Isis in Egypt, the tabernacles of Jehovah, the sanctuaries of Marduk, Christian churches and Islamic mosques. Throughout history, commonly described are a few basic geometrical forms from which all the universe was believed composed (the sphere, the circle, the Equilateral triangle, the square, the pentagram, the hexagram & the golden section). These can be generated by the means of two tools used by mathematicians and builders, the straight edge and the compass. Their construction does not require measurement.

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

In short, the number was believed both a symbol and actual incarnation of its meaning. So the number *one* which meant whole and indivisible in sacred numerology came to stand for and was believed to be the undivided universe itself (in mathematics and in the actual world). If one stood for unity, *two* was believed to represent the first division, opposites. *Three* is still in our conscious thinking, standing for the three deities of all great religions while for Christians the Holy Trinity of God the Father, Son and Holy Ghost. It was considered the holiest number. *Four* represented the division of time (the four seasons), the four directions, the four rivers of paradise—it was unity divided into equal parts. The number *Five* is made of unequal parts (2 and 3) so was considered a harbinger of misfortune. It also represented man (one who stands on his own), the five fingers of the hand, the pentagram. *Six* is made of 3+3 or 1+2+3 and so was considered perfect. God created the world in six days, Christ was crucified on the sixth day, and he perished in the sixth hour. *Seven* was associated with celestial beings and spiritual forces; there are seven days in a week, there were seven known

planets in the ancient world; 7 evil spirits. The Augustinian God was the God of seven: he rested on the seventh day and Christian life is ordered by seven; seven capital sins, seven virtues and seven sacraments. *Eight* is the first number after seven, and was considered the symbol of life; Christ resurrected on the eighth day, the eight sided octagon is the favored form for the baptismal font. If three was considered a holy number, then *nine* was the holiest doubled, consisting of 3 x 3. It was literally believed to mark the place of God. *Ten* is the round and perfect number that forms the basis of the decimal system and was the universal number for the Pythagoreans. To Augustinian it was the perfect number (3 + 7) and to the Hebrews and Christians it meant completion. The Ten Commandments are divided into two sets of laws; the first 3 are to the love of God, the last 7 to the love of their neighbor.

Finally, the number *twelve*, which formed the basis of the Sumerian and Babylonian numerical system; there are twelve signs of the zodiac, twelve months of the year, twelve hours of each part of the day, twelve gates of paradise, twelve tribes of Israel, twelve bronze calves, twelve apostles, twelve stars around the head the apocalyptic woman, etc.

Another way of using numerology is to add the digits within a number to its final equation. So the number 18 is made of 1 and 8 digits. Add the digits (1+8) and you get 9, the holiest number. All compound numbers followed the same formula (for example, 24 = 2+4 = 6, 123 = 1+2+3 = 6, etc.). Their “real” meaning was believed to be the end result of adding their digits ( 24 = 2+4 = 6, or perfection, etc.)

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

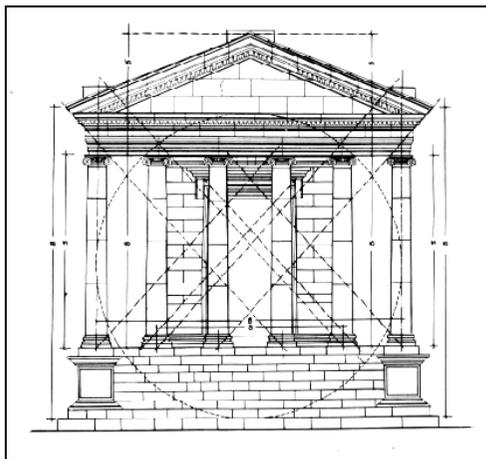
In fact, the structure itself is a representation of the cosmos, with a raised platform (the heavens) at the top of 9 Steps leading to the main entrance (nine being three times three, or three times the holy triad). The temple has a column to inter column ratio of 1 to 3 (1 being the primary number of the universe and 3 representing the Greco-Roman triad Jupiter, Juno and Minerva).

The **pediment** is undecorated while architrave soffits (undersides), portico ceilings and temple wings are all extensively decorated with floral motifs and octagonal (8 sided) and diamond shaped motifs. The ornamentation and its medium give the lie to the idea that the temple and its contemporary reconstruction of Artashat were made exclusively by Roman craftsmen lent by Nero. Romans specialized in working with marble, a softer material, while the decorative components at Garni are carved from basalt, a much less forgiving medium to work with. Fragments of basalt carvings were also found at Armavir, Yervandashat, Vagharshapat, Giumri, etc., locations not included in Nero’s “lend-lease” workman program, suggesting native craftsmen were responsible for at least the decorative parts of the building, if not its layout and dimensions.

**Sacred Geometry and the Temple of Garni.** Though the temple of Garni was built along classic Hellenistic lines, it also embodies much of the sacred numerology and geometry used by

There are 24 columns representing the clouds or vapors (add 2+4 and you get 6, the perfect number;  $24 = 8 \times 3$ , or in sacred geometry life x the sacred trinity, god given life) and the ceiling a dome of the heavens (both of which were borrowed directly by S. Grigor in his vision of Echmiadzin). The columns are arranged with 6 in front and back (considered a perfect number) and 8 on the sides (the first number after seven, the symbol of life).

There is a sophisticated use of the equilateral triangles, squares, pentagons and hexagons in its design.



[Figure 1]

Figure 1 shows the front of the temple with embedded geometric patterns. A circle can be made beginning with the first step and rising to the top edge of the cornice. Note how the circle is dissected by imaginary lines drawn from key points in the building. Two perfect equilateral triangles are formed, which draw your attention to another three equilateral triangles inside, which again draw your attention to another set of triangles -six triangles having 3 sides ( $6 \times 3$  or  $18$  or  $1+8 = 9$ ). Each set of three triangles has a combined 9 sides.  $9 = 3 \times 3$ , or the holiest number doubled. The priests and faithful would ascend 9 steps (again, the holiest number doubled), which also represented the 7 known planets, plus man on earth, god above ( $7+1+1$ ). Each set of three triangles is mirrored by another set, one pointing from heaven down, the other from earth up. Their intersection is a perfect square shaped like a diamond--which forms the Inner sanctum, where

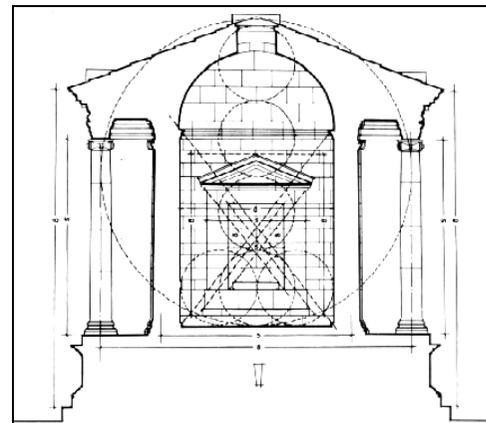
the deity lay. The diamond square happens to form the exact dimensions of the inner walls of the sanctum.



The intersection of the triangles is also the point where man and god meet, the point of enlightenment. And still we have the number 18. Add the numbers in 18 ( $1+8$ ) and you have... a nine. Over and over the temple has the repetition of nine: nine steps, nine sides to each set of triangles, or 18 sides to the triangles, (also a 9). In the number 18, there is 1 (the elemental, unifying number) and 8 (the eight cardinal directions). Combine the four sides of the square with the 18 sides of the triangles and you get 22 (or in sacred numerology,  $2+2 = 4$ ): Four corners of the world, the four seasons—time and space. This temple was the holiest of holy, a symbol and place of the deities controlling all earthly matter; it represented everlasting time; all that is, all that was, and all that ever will be. The circle and triangles draw your attention—even if unconsciously—to the inner sanctum—exactly to the point where the statue of Mythra the goddess stood.

In Figure 2, the sanctuary is drawn with imaginary lines showing a perfect circle (1 = the unifying whole), with a group of 6 circles placed within ( $3+3$ , the perfect number). The lower four circles fill the space where the statue and sacred fire were placed. Dissecting the lower circles with angles creates three sets of perfect triangles, reinforcing the number 9 from the outer temple design, the triangles meeting where the idol stood, most probably on her face. The numbers 8 and 5 are repeated in the dimensions of the lines of measurement. Eight is the symbol of life, the day of resurrection, the day after god rested, and the symbolic day when earth's history really began.

Five is a misfortune number in some cultures, but with the Greeks and early Armenians, it was also the sign of the pentagram, the sign of making things (the five fingers). Note that inside the sanctuary, five is always the length of horizontal lines, while eight is always the length of vertical lines. Cosmically this could be interpreted to mean that the resurrection and new life which came from above and below (some gods lived in the under world), met the horizontal human world, unable to enter the realm of the gods without their help.



[Figure 2]

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

See our chapter on Sacred Geometry and Numerology ([www.tacentral.com/architecture.asp?story\\_no=2](http://www.tacentral.com/architecture.asp?story_no=2)) for more.

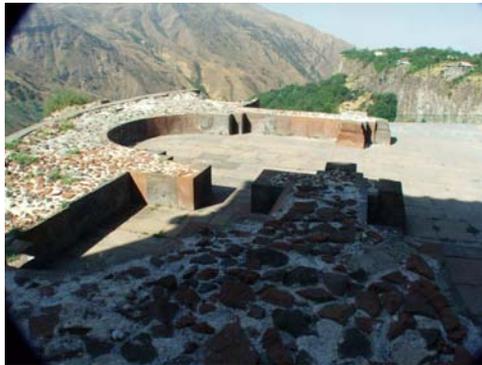
The temple overlooks the steep **Garni or Azat River Gorge**, at the tip of a triangular promontory. Directly below the temple mount and

along the basalt cliffs are a number of *caves*, inhabited as early as the Paleolithic Era, and more recently during the myriad invasions by Seljuk Turks, Arabs, Mongols, Turks and Persians. It is a 100 m drop to the river floor and a whole other world from the Hellenistic site above (see "[The Other Side of Garni](#)," p. 22).

Opposite the river is the Khosrov Mountain Range and one of the entries into the Khosrov Preserve (see Near Garni, p. 23). At the top of the ridge just in front is the **Queen Katranideh Shrine**, built over a Tuxh Manuk (pagan shrine converted to Christian purposes). Follow the mountain line over to your left and on a clear day you can detect the outline of *Havuts Tar*, a gorgeously decorated convent that was patronized by the Zakarians and Proshians during the 12th-13th cc. It's a 45 minute hike from Garni, well worth the climb (Havuts Tar is described in Near Garni, p. 22) Further to the left and still across the canyon are the upper ridges of the Khosrov Mountains, leading to the Geghama Lehr and Lake Sevan. Note the "flatiron" plateau, at the confluence of the Goghti and Azat Rivers. The plateau is a favorite of mine, emerald green in springtime and burnt umber during the summer. The Goghti River meanders about 11 km to the base of Mt. Yerakatar (2589.6 m), and beyond Mts. Dimatslehr (3307 m) and Nalsar (3177 m), the location of some of Armenia's petroglyphs.

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

Next to the Temple are the foundations of an **897 CE church**, which was built over the grave of the Katolicos Mashtots. Partially excavated in 1907 and 1909-1911, the site was covered over, and rediscovered when excavations resumed in 1949. The church was a variant of the central dome church built along a cross axis. The interior of the cruciform walls form four semi circular apses, with annexes between having entrances in the arms of the cross. The central square lay beneath the dome. The church itself was entered on the Northern and Western sides. The entire structure rested on a plain inscribed into a 24 faceted sphere with a diameter of 24 meters, on top of a two stepped stylobate. 2-3 rows of finely polished tufa block masonry set in lime are what remain of the church.



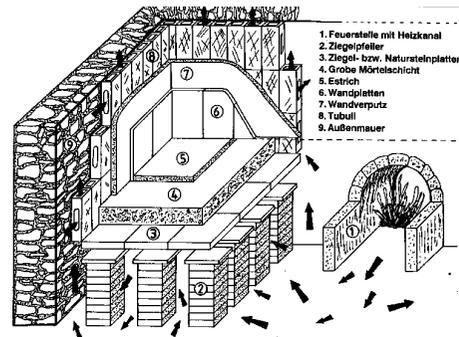
Adjacent to the church are the foundations for the **Summer Palace**. Approximately 15 x 40 meters in size, the two-story building lay against the precipice of the canyon. Called "a house of coolness" in Armenian chronicles, the building had long porticoes on its sides and was constructed to capture the cool breezes coming off the Garni Canyon. By the time it was built, Rome had perfected climate control and the Garni palace would have been a good candidate to incorporate the latest Roman "air conditioning" technology, which was actually invented by the Persians who brought ice from mountain tops and forced air over the blocks to cool palace rooms.

The palace consisted of the main building and outer buildings to its northeast. What remains of the complex is the excavated basement, apparently used for household purposes, including a winery. A series of eight pylons divided the large basement into two naves. Pilasters on the outer walls supported arches that joined with the pylons to form a barrel vault ceiling. It is assumed the main hall lay above, the northern end taken up by residential quarters. Like the bath house the palace was built of irregular blocks set with lime.

The building had a wooden roof, resting on inner wooden pillars resting on stone bases. There may have been wooden capitals to the columns, none have been found. In this, Garni Palace resembles other palaces in the region, particularly the columned hall at Bagineti near Mtskheta, Georgia.

Fragments found at the site suggest that the façade, which faced the main square. Fragments of dark red frescos in the upper chambers suggest both residential and throne rooms were richly ornamented.

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



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

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

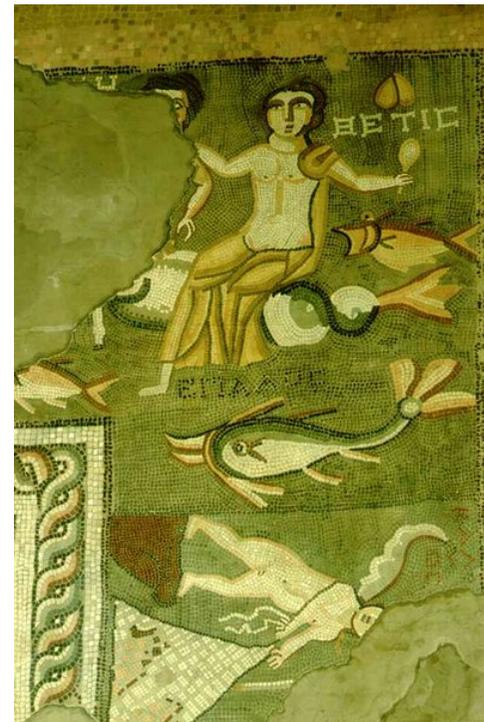
Other bath houses of this type were found in Syria and Asia Minor, notably the bathhouses in Mtskheta — Armazi (2nd-3rd cc) in Georgia, in Dura-Europos and in Antioch on the Orontes coast (3rd c).

Fragments of colored plasterwork have survived in several of the rooms, showing a two row design; a white lower layer and a pink upper layer. The floor mosaics are perhaps the most impressive part of the houses, the only surviving intact mosaic in Armenia.

The **3rd-4th c mosaics** are made from stones in 15 hues and depict figures in mythology. That in

the main mosaic (2.91 x 3.14 m) depicts a water scene with the sea goddess Thetis and other mythological figures set against a light green background. The inscriptions on the mosaic are Greek but the facial types are oriental, depicting fish, Nereids and the Ichthyocentauri.

The Nereids are the fifty daughters of Nereus and Doris who dwell in the Mediterranean Sea. These beautiful women were always friendly and helpful towards sailors fighting perilous storms. They are believed to be able to prophesize. They belong to the retinue of Poseidon.



The Ichthyocentauri (or Ikhtyokentauroi) were a pair of centaurine sea-gods with the upper bodies of men, the lower fore-parts of horses, ending in the serpentine tails of fish. Their brows were adorned with a pair of lobster-claw horns. The Sea-Centaurs probably developed from the divine Fish of Syrian mythology which carried Ashtarte ashore following her watery-birth and were set amongst the stars as the Constellation Pisces.

They were named Bythos (Sea-Depths) and Aphros (Sea-Foam), half-brothers of Kentauros Kheiron, and like him probably regarded as wise teachers.

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

*ΜΗΔΕΝ ΛΑΒΟΝΤΕΣ ΗΡΙΑΣΑΜΕΘΑ ΚΑΝΕΝΑ ΝΕΚΡΟ ΔΕ ΜΑΣ ΕΔΩΞΕ Η ΘΑΛΑΣΣΑ ΟΥΤΕ Ο ΩΚΕΑΝΟΣ (We receive no dead from the sea neither from the ocean)*

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

#### OTHER GARNI SITES

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

#### Churches

Just down the street from the temple is the important **4th-5th c Garni Basilica** (DD 40.11826 x 44.73340). To get there, backtrack to the main village road, turn right and stop at the post office (just past the school, on the R). Opposite the post office is an alley that leads to the church (past the delightful Sergei Tun folk restaurant) in about 50 m.

The basilica is a large building for its time, a single nave structure with an arcade (portico) on its S side. By its layout it appears to have been built over a Pagan temple to an unknown deity. The church had a deep semi-circular apse with a vault that was strengthened by three archbands resting on pilasters. This church is reminiscent of that at K'asakh. Both of these churches had ornamental moldings in the east façade. It was a type of molding characteristic of the 5th and 6th centuries.



Historically the portico was developed for a couple of reasons, neither of which was for pure decoration. As people adopted the Christian faith early churches needed to expand to hold all the worshippers. Adding an open arcade or portico was a way to handle the overflow, as well as serve as a community space for less-sacred meetings. In this light the portico can be seen as an early gavit (narthex). Another purpose is more intriguing, and given the convoluted way Christianity incorporated pagan rituals may be more correct.



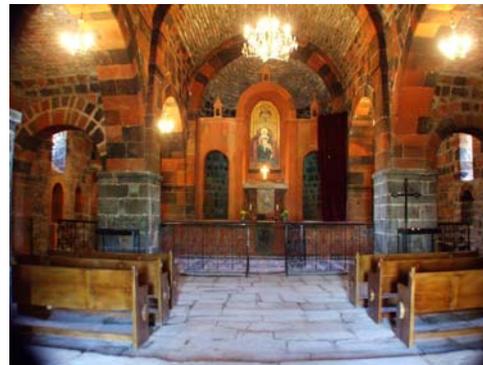
Worshippers (especially affluent nobility) were not always square with the church, bickering with them on dogma, refusing to accept their authority, incorporating pagan rites into the worship service (the dueling services must have been something to observe). The most egregious were refused entry into the sanctuary. Others simply violated Church commandments, and were unworthy to pray inside. Until they were accepted back into the fold, they were still expected to attend service,

just not inside with the 'favorites of God.' The 4th-5th c portico, with an apse on its E end, seems to have provided this purpose, putting the 'sinners' on display while allowing them to make their peace with the new Christian order.

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

Further East, past the village square and next to the bakery is the **7th-12th c Astvatsatsin** (DD 40.11721 x 44.73560). To get there, backtrack to the main road, turn L (E) and continue to where the street ends at a T-intersection. Turn R (S) and take the next L (E), and continue forward for about 400 m on the curving road to Astvatsatsin.

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



The tall vaulting is striking, for both its exposed pattern of stone and brick and its elegant primitive

style. The vaulting resembles that of other churches of the 7th c, including Yeritsavank in Siunik. There is a small domed aperture in the center of the nave ceiling, rarely seen in churches of later periods, also suggesting an earlier dating. The apse walls are likewise made of small stone fragments and brick set with lime, framed by finely hewn red and black tufa stone. If the earlier date is true, the walls were once plastered and painted, though nothing remains from the recent renovation to show this and locals are unable to help. Stripped of its décor, the exposed brick and stone patterns create grandeur more decorated churches in Armenia lack. Form follows function looks pretty remarkable here.

Further east is the **12th C. "Little" or Mashtots Hairapet Church** (DD 40.11866 x 44.73788). To get there, backtrack to the T-intersection (the village "square") and continue forward (N) to the next intersection, turn R (E) and in about 100 m, on the left a short alley leads up a small hill to the church.



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

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

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

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



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

**Other**

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

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

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

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

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

[MAP]

## PRACTICALITIES

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

## IN AND OUT

### By Bus, Minivan

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

**Buses** from Yerevan run every 50 minutes between 8.45 and 21.30, stopping at J'rvesh, Voghchaber, Hatsavan and Garni. In Yerevan they leave from 14/3 Gaiyi p. (near Kino Rossiya off of Khandjian/Agetangeghos ps.) 250 AMD.

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

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

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

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

## AROUND

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

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

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

## COMMUNICATION, ETC.

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

## Phone, telegraphs

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

## Shopping, Film, etc.

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

## OVERNIGHT

### B&B, GUEST HOUSES

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

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



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

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

## HANGESTAN GOTI

Just as you come into Garni Valley (about 2-3 km from Hatsavan) there is a road veering S leading to a *Hangestan Goti* (Rest Area/Camp). 3000-5000 AMD for day pass or overnight camping. Keep on the road to the entry to the gorge, where a series of Hangestan Gotis lay on the river bed

## CAMPING

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

## FOOD AND DRINK

There are a couple of khorovatz stands at Hangestan Gotis on the way into town and in the river gorge. Food can also be bought at Mterks (food shops) and kiosks in town.

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

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

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

*Hangestan Gotis* off the highway from Hatsavan and in the River Gorge offer

*Springs are at the temple site, in the village and along the river. Yerevan's drinking water gushes from the Cliff sides of the gorge below the village.*



CONTINUE TRIP 1

✦ NEAR GARNI

[GARNI GORGE](#) - [KHOSROV PRESERVE](#) - [HAVUTS TAR](#) - [BAIBERD](#) - [METS GILANLAR](#) - [AGHJOTS VANK](#)

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



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

At the bottom of the descent the road ends in a T-intersection: R (W) leads to the forest, picnic areas and a Hangestan Goti (3.5-4 km) and eventually to the Azat Reservoir (about 6 km), while L (E) leads in about 1.5 km past the Fish restaurant to the

bridge over the river and then heads back on the other side for another 800 m to the Khosrov Preserve Gate and the hiking trail to Havuts Tar.

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

✦ GARNI GORGE (ԳԱՆՆԻ ԶՈՐ) ▲

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

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



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

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

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



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

**The Fragility of a Summer's Day Out**

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

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

*I think it was Rafi who first said, "My God! They went over the edge!" but I cannot be sure. Both lines of cars stopped, we scrambled out to follow the line of dust which by now was a thin cloud arcing down the steep Cliffside to the campground below. Staring up at us was the bottom side of a Volga. A crowd of onlookers, children crying, parents rushing to grab their kids, others running around crying for help, everything slowed down to a crawl, nothing in real time. People below started to open the car, a large van pulled up, ready to take the wounded (or the bodies, we never found out) away.*

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

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

### The Young Man and the Sea

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

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

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

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

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

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

*But as we boarded the boat to return to the nature preserve and the temple of Garni, the sun set on the crystalline waters that formed diamonds of light on the canyons walls and underneath the pier, the sound of a gull hung in the air, and I thought that if this life was not perfect, it was the most nearly perfect these men could have made at that time; in the solitude of nature, in an island on piers in the center of a beautiful lake, by a campfire on a mountainside with each his own thoughts and the star studded night for companionship, free from the restraints of the other side, the side we call civilization.*

on the Red Book, an official listing of endangered species in the former Soviet Union. As we walked, a cloud of pale blue butterflies suddenly flutters into view, flying in a circle in a pool of sunlight. Above it is close to 37c, but here in the forest it rarely gets above 24c.

About 3 km from Garni is an **electric station and picnic area**. The electric station is gratefully

partially hidden from view with thick trees and greenery, and several huge wild rose bushes. An old wisteria vine clings to the sides of the deserted station, and the pastel purple blossoms hand like grapes, sweetly scenting the air.

From here the canyon grows wilder and more beautiful, with occasional meadows and fields of sweet hay and goldenrod covering the patches of

open land. In May the river swells and covers some of the natural path, but the terrain is easily navigated. Just after a narrowing in the canyon, the land widens into a **dense forest**, and it seems to be the most remote place on earth, with only the sounds of birds and a startled fox keeping company. A little beyond are the signs of civilization in the ruins of stone buildings covered with moss.

Once a thriving village, the **forest settlement** was forcibly removed to the canyon rim by revolutionists, and for a while residents hid in caves and rock outcroppings on Mt. Yeranos (1823.7 m), which plunges to the river edge on the other side. What are left of the settlement are a few white-washed walls standing alone in the thick underbrush and a chimney that juts defiantly into the trees. When we visited there was also a single family dwelling butted up against the edge of the canyon wall, inhabited by descendants of those who hid on the opposite side of the river. A mother and her daughter greeted our party as we wandered through the settlement ruins, mama calling out at us, "If you see Ashot, tell him to come back for supper," as if we were neighbors from just across the street. Do the good thing and look out for Ashot as you plod on.

The river widens long before it reaches the lake which suddenly appears in one bend on the path, the rumbling sound of the river crashing over rocks disappearing, replaced by a few cicada and the faint cry of a seagull off in the distance. Backing up more than a kilometer from the tip of the lake, in the spring the water floods the forest floor and entire tree trunks torn from their base form a log jam and natural bridge from one side of the river to the other. After a few ledges you will reach the lake. "

The lake, **Azat Reservoir (Ազատի Ջրամբար)** is a welcome respite after a day's hike, but beware its waters—fed by the ice cold springs bursting from the Azat River Canyon, even on the hottest day a dip in the lake will suck the breath out of most swimmers (the locals preferring to call it 'bracing'. I think 'nut-nesting' is more accurate). Shallower waters are warmer, but the deep are to be taken seriously. Fishermen on the lake will take you to the other side, where a cold water **mineral spring** feeds a stone pool on a mound encrusted with mineral salts. Mud from the lake is considered medicinal, locals alternating from the mineral bath to the river to mud baths.

**Camping** is possible in the river gorge or nearby, and along the lake shore (ask if people are nearby), and at the Hangestan Goti; **Overnight** in Garni (rustic, 3000-5000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** along river bed and across the lake.

### ✚ KHOSROV FOREST PRESERVE - ԽՈՏՐՈՎԻ ԱՆՏԱՌ ՊԵՏԱԿԱԿԱՆ ԱՐԳԵԼՈՅ ▲



Directly across from Garni temple are the Khosrov Mountains and the western entry to the **Khosrov Forest Preserve**. The preserve is one of Armenia's largest protected areas and its most unique, hosting dozens of rare or endangered species of insects, birds and mammals, including wild boar, the Armenian mouflon (ram), the Caucasian Bearded Goat and the extremely rare Persian Leopard.

The preserve covers land once inhabited by Armenians, Kurds and Turkish settlers and numerous village ruins dot the 30,000 hectare preserve. Among the more important, and within a day's hike from Garni are the Chalcedonian monasteries **Havuts Tar** and **Aghjots Vank**, and the ruined villages **Baiburt** and **Mets Gilanlar**.

#### Khosrov Preserve

Khosrov Forest Preserve was established in the 3rd c CE by the Arshakuni King Khosrov the Great, grandfather to T'rdat III. Khosrov is reputed to have had planted over one million trees, creating a private hunting preserve while saving a piece of Armenia's unique ecosystem for generations. Most of the forests from his time are gone, clear-cut by Mongols, Safavid Persians and modern Armenians on illegal logging expeditions.

The preserve is still important and quite large, consisting of 29,196 hectares, 9000 of which have trees, mostly scrub and cedar. The national park protects more than 1800 species of plants, 156 of which are considered rare, endangered or on the verge of extinction, listed in the Red Book. Fauna include rare insects, amphibians, snakes, the Armenian mouflon (*Ovis orientalis gmelinii*), Caucasian Bearded Goat (*Capra aegagrus*) and the Caucasian or Persian Spotted Leopard.

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



Male bearded goats are marked by large, scimitar-shaped horns, their front edges in a sharp keel with a series of bold, sharp-edged, widely separated knobs above. Females are smaller than males and have short, slender horns, but no beard. The goat favors rugged country at all

levels, descending into the lower valleys in the winter and upper regions in the summertime.

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

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

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

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

The leopards are remarkable felines, able to hunt in trees as well as on the ground, feeding on everything from insect and rodents to fish and large game. Excellent tree climbers, leopards often protect their larger kills by carrying them up a tree.

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

For more information visit the Persian Leopard web site at [www.persianleopard.com/index.htm](http://www.persianleopard.com/index.htm)

Other fauna in the preserve include Eurasian lynx (*Lynx lynx*), Wild cat (*Felis silvestris, ornata* group), Jungle cat (*Felis chaus*), Brown bear

(*Ursus arctos*), Red fox (*Vulpes vulpes*), Gray wolf (*Canis lupus*), Stone marten (*Martes foina*), Roe deer (*Capreolus capreolus*), Wild boar (*Sus scrofa*) Indian porcupine (*Hystrix indica*), European hare (*Lepus europaeus*), Jay (*Garrulus glandarius*)

Among the 67 types of **birds** registered in the Armenian Red Book are sixteen in the preserve, including Egyptian, Black and Griffon Vultures, Lammergeier, Golden and Lesser Spotted Eagles and Northern Goshawk.

**Flora** in the preserve is as rich and varied as its stunning terrain, with over 1800 plant species (more than half of Armenia's total), 156 of which are considered rare, endangered or verging on extinction. A number of species listed in the Red Book grow only here. Khosrov Preserve is the only Caucasian natural preserve of mountain xerophytes; terrain combining semi-deserts, phryganoid formations, arid thin forests and tragacanthys steppes.



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

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

#### ECOLOGICAL ALERT

*The preserve is under ecological attack by international and local huntsmen and an ambivalent to cynical government that instead of protecting endangered species or those at risk instead actively hunts or sponsors hunts into the officially protected area. Reports of military officers organizing helicopter hunting trips into the preserve, where protected species are hunted down with automatic weapons are common. While gatekeepers stop eco-tourists from entering the area, generals, ministers and wealthy international hunters use the park as their private hunting grounds, further endangering the species that attempt to survive in the park.*

*I don't mind hunting per se, images of Bambi aside and despite my own repugnance of the sport. Responsible hunting does have its purposes and it brings important income to local communities as well as helps to preserve the environment by seeking to preserve it. However, Armenia is blighted with hunting firms that organize the hunting of endangered species in Armenia, including the Armenian mouflon and the Bearded Goat (Ibex) these three easily found online:*

**Outfitters hunting endangered species:**

**Safari International**  
[info@safariinternational.com](mailto:info@safariinternational.com)

**Blue Water Big Game**  
106 Medalist  
Austin, TX 78734  
ph: 1-512-261-1990  
fax: 1-203-774-2002

**Powers Internationale**  
[powersint@aol.com](mailto:powersint@aol.com)

*Please contact these companies and tell them how you feel about their targeting endangered species in Armenia, and contact Green Peace ([www.greenpeace.org](http://www.greenpeace.org)) and World Wildlife Federation ([www.worldwildlife.org](http://www.worldwildlife.org)) to lend your support to stop animal extinction in Armenia.*

➡ **To Havuts Tar.** From Garni, take the Garni Gorge road into the canyon, and at the T-intersection at the river, take a L (E) and continue on the pitted road about 1 km (and past the excellent fish restaurant) to the Yerevan Water works and the bridge across the river. Take the bridge, turn R (E) and continue uphill to the entrance to the Khosrov Preserve. You are not allowed into the park without a permit, but park

outside the gate and you can take a path to the left of the gate that quickly climbs above the gate and slowly trudges uphill about 2 km or 30-45 minutes to **Havuts Tar Vank** 🏰 🗺️

🌸 **HAVUTS TAR - ՀԱՎՄԱՆՑ ԹԱՆ**

The path to the convent is narrow and surprisingly difficult for such a slight incline. There are few shady spots on the way, in hot weather take a hat and water. A spring is about 2/3rds of the way up.



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

Just past this khachkar the **ruins of the village** begin, a myriad of stone foundations of homes, shops and shrines for the once thriving community that supported the convent's work and farmed its lands. The ruins cover the hillsides all around the

complex. About 500 m past the 12th c khachkar is the gate to the walled Havuts Tar complex.

**Background**

Havuts Tar is one of Armenia's most beautiful ruins, its stones dripping with delicate lacework as elaborate as any monastery in Armenia.

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

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

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

The convent was destroyed and rebuilt during Seljuk, Mongol and the Timurid invasions, succumbing to the 1679 earthquake which did the greatest damage. It was finally rebuilt in the 18th

c for the Katolikos Astvatsatur, saving the western Amenaprkich Church and the main basilica in the compound. This lasted barely to the 20th century, when the struggling convent was deserted and left to ruin by the Soviet Armenian government.



*The Savior of All of Havuts Tar, 9th century.*

**The Complex**

The complex is large, taking up several hectares inside the walled compound, with the remains of the surrounding village and two churches from the

7th-10 c on a western hilltop, the site of the original pagan temple and the convent's first Christian structures.

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

- |     |                             |
|-----|-----------------------------|
| 1.  | 4th-13th c wall and gate    |
| 2.  | Red Khachkar                |
| 3.  | Khachkar                    |
| 4.  | Khachkar                    |
| 5.  | Khachkar                    |
| 6.  | 9th-13th c Church           |
| 7.  | 9th-13th c Chancellery      |
| 8.  | 9th-13th c church           |
| 9.  | 9th-18th c Storage Rooms    |
| 10. | 9th-18th c Service Building |
| 11. | 13th c gavit                |
| 12. | Dormitory, Dining, Storage  |
| 13. | 11th c Amenaprkich          |
| 14. | 7th c Church                |

[PLAN]

The **Red Khachkar** above and the left of the main gate is probably from the 12th c, though its highly stylized design may place it in the Zakarian/Proshian periods. I am not sure who it celebrates, but it seems likely to be a memorial stone to a benefactor or—more likely—the tombstone of a venerated member of the community, the khachkar making a sort of 'talisman' for the reconstructed convent. On the opposite side of the gate there are **three khachkars** in the upper walls, again either for benefactors or venerated saints from the original convent.

In front of the gate and to the left are the foundations of one of the two churches in the walled compound, a **basilica** from the 9th c with major renovations during the 12th-13th centuries. The layout is close in form to pre-Christian temples and may well have been built over a pagan footprint, expanded over time. The walls are

made from gray basalt clapped over rubble stone set with lime. The décor is more severe than its neighbor to the north, attesting to its earlier 'iconoclastic' origins.

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

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

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

The second church, a **9th-13th c cruciform** type with a square exterior was built like its southern neighbor, with gray basalt clapped onto strong rubble walls fixed with lime. The church once had a drum and dome set above its central space, supported by protruding wall abutments supporting the main arches. You can detect the slight curve of the arch base inside. The four corners were open to the main space, marked off

by the abutments. When erected, it must have had a keen sense of space. Other churches of the time closed off the corners into chambers and focused on a tight space before the apse. This church appears basilica in form, with a large volume of space for worshippers. Its foot print is almost identical to the earliest cruciform churches in Armenia (Echmiadzin), which were universally built over pagan fire temples. The heart of the walled complex, this church is almost certainly pagan in form, "baptized" with stone and Christian iconography to the new religion.

The exterior is elaborate, a precursor to the rich ornamentation that lies inside. Recessed walls, arched niches and faux columns are on the western façade, while deeply incised religious symbols adorn the gray stones, including a royal brand of the Bagratuni or Zakarian dynasty.



The scattered capitals, columns and stones on the ground outside the church, as elaborate and beautiful as they are, are but a taste of the magnificence that awaits you inside. The 13th c renovation of the church included replacing gray basalt stone with decorative red and black tufa, adding extravagantly carved stone casements and frames throughout the building.

The effect is breath-taking, and unlike any other church we have seen in Armenia. Many churches of the 13th century added florid details on their walls, but none so completely, or luxuriantly as Havuts tar. The comparison to lace embroidery is not an exaggeration, niches, columns and frames are covered with intricate lace patterns of never-ending lines, unbreakable cords and flora and geometric details.



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



The southern wall is as elaborately carved as the northern, with crosses, icons and royal markings on the façade.

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

About 100 m to the west, on a rough path marking the main street of the medieval village is the 10th c Amenaprkich with a 7th c basilica next door. **Amenaprkich** was built in 1013 for the young Grigor Pahlavuni a.k.a. Grigor Magistros, well before he became his nom de plume and during the last heyday of the Bagratuni period.



Amenaprkich is a classic cruciform central dome type with antechambers in the four corners. The

building is built from red and black tufa clasped over rubble filled walls. The antechambers on the east side flank the horseshoe-shaped apse and were used as vestal changing room and chapels. The rear chambers were probably chapels as well. The structure was well-built, surviving a number of invasions and attempts to destroy it, succumbing only to the forces of nature, when the 1679 earthquake toppled the dome and severed the western and eastern walls, which no doubt must have seemed a judgment of God's wrath to the faithful, like he rending of the temple cloth in Jerusalem. Even so, the building has survived well the last 300 years, retaining most of its original structure. There is relatively little of the extravagant decoration found inside the walled compound, window casings and some framing shows signs of 13th c carving, but otherwise the church maintained its original integrity and the beauty of its rich lines. This was a building meant to impress, and it continues to, despite its ruined status. The view of the Garni valley is wonderful form here. Bring your binoculars or zoom lens.

The impressive altar apron is decorated with a series of khachkars with prominent tree of life iconography, popular in the 10th c. The apron is framed with another popular design motif, the pre-Christian water line, representing the Biblical flood and redemption by baptism for early Christians but recognized by lingering pagans as the symbol of life, the primordial 'soup' that spawned all of creation in pagan mythology.

The **7th c church** to the south is also considered a chapel, but its age and position next to the impressive Amenaprkich indicates a more important status. Most of the building has collapse, save the northern wall and part of the arched western façade. Built over a pagan site, the building carefully follows the imprint of the original structure, a single aisle basilica with a gabled roof. The deity worshipped here in Pagan times is not known, but considering it has a companion pagan site inside the walled compound, it is possible this was part of a large site with several temples in honor of Hellenized Armenian gods and goddesses (Artamazd, Anahit, Nuneh, etc.). We may never know.

There are numerous gravestones and khachkars all around the convent, and exploration may uncover signs of medieval plumbing, well worth exploring on a pleasant day.

**Camping** is possible at the site or nearby; **Overnight** in Garni (rustic, 3000-5000 AMD for

B&B is fair); **Spring** about 2/3rd of the way to the site from the preserve gate.

✂ **BAIBERD, METS GILANLAR, AGHJOTS VANK:** Permission to enter the Preserve is required to explore Baiburt, Mets Gilanlar and Aghjots Vank. Contact Samvel Shaboyan (tel: +234 21-352)

➡ **To Baiberd:** Start from the gate into the preserve and follow the dirt road (jeep or Vilis/UAZ) upstream along the Azat River about 4.5 km to the Milli Creek (**Միլիի Վտակ**) bridge, with a locked gate on the other side (key is in the house on the hill to your left and back a little). Before the bridge take the left rough parth for about 200 m to **Baibert** 🏠 🌿

✂ **BAIBERD - ԲԱՅԲԵՐԴ**

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

**Camping** is possible in the river gorge or village (permission required); **Overnight** in Garni (rustic, 3000-5000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** in the area.

➡ **To Mets Gilanlar** From Baibert take a northern mountain track (Jeep or Vilis/UAZ) uphill for about 2.3 km of treacherous, cliff-hugging terrain to the remains of **Mets Gilanlar** 🏠 🌿 🌳

✂ **METS GILANLAR - ՄԵՇ ԳԻԼԱՆԼԱՐ**

Mets Gilanlar's few huts are all that remain of a village that thrived on sheep herding and simple farming. Like the residents of Baibert, inhabitants were force-marched to Persia in the 17th c, and later Kurdish and Azeri residents left in the 20th century. The area is now a prime breeding ground

for several of Armenia's Endangered species, including the Persian Leopard, Armenian Mouflon and the Armenian/Persian Ibex. The terrain is rough and sparsely vegetated, and while there are some excellent hikes to the North and East, it can get bloody hot in the summertime and sun screen, bottled water and a good hat is required. A good guide is also strongly advised, both to get to the good spots for bird and animal watching, and as part of your permission to enter the preserve. A local guide can be found in Garni (Call Samvel Ohanian at tel.: -----) and through one of the [Adventure Tour Operators](#) listed at the beginning of this chapter.

**Hikes.** A good 1-3 day hike with overnight on the Geghama Lehr, is to strike out NE following the Gilanlar River (now Karahun River), which in about 10.3 km runs to the south of Vishaplich Lake (the lake is about -1.5 km to the north), a good camping spot and the site of several Pagan monuments. At the end of the river (another 3.5 km) you pass between Mts Vishaplehr (3157.7 m, 3 km to the north) and Geghasar (3443 m, 6 km to the south), with Mt. Ughtusar (3170 m) about 3.5 km to the south of Geghasar. Ughtusar is one of the prime breeding grounds for the Armenian Ibex and prime hunting ground by international hunt expeditions after the endangered species. Be very careful if you come across hunters, they are armed and should be considered dangerous.

**[HIKE MAP]**

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

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

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

✂ **AGHJOTS VANK - ԱԳՋՈՏ ՎԱՆԵ**

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



If the Christian church was established in the 4th century, it was probably a wooden structure, rebuilt in later centuries before becoming an important vank that was greatly expanded in the 13th c, giving it its current layout. Sacked in 1603 during Shah Abbas' deportation of Armenians, the vank was partially restored in the 18th c along with Havuts tar, only to be sacked again in the same century and permanently ruined during Azeri/Armenian fighting in 1905-06.

The vank was quite large, as big as nearby Havuts Tar and possibly bigger. The **outer walls** once rung around the entire complex but all that remain are on the western and northern edges. The remaining walls contain the ruins of outer buildings, sunken chambers and still to be excavated residential quarters.

**S. Stepanos**, a central dome type, dates to the 11th c, about the same time as Amenaprkich at Havuts Tar. The dome has collapsed, but the bulk of the church remains, showing its classic cruciform type with antechambers at the four corners. The tall central hall was buttressed by strong corners of basalt stone, which in turn supported the drum arches. The church was made of red and black tufa, now discolored by wear but

in their heyday a colorful addition to the hill top. Cornices are edged with smooth ribbing, as are the windows. Inside, the simple lines of the structure are enhanced by ribbing while the apron has geometric patterning and places where a series of painted icons once stood.

The **13th c gavit** was added in 1207 for the vank's benefactors, Atabeg Ivaneh Zakarian and Prince Grigor Khaghbakian. Unlike the gavit at Havuts tar, the gavit at Aghjots Vank has enough remaining walls to give some sense of its large size. And height. The walls tower above the central plan, matching the church walls but increasing the volume of the entire structure exponentially. The roof was supported by interconnecting arches, supported by central columns and columns placed along the outer walls. A 'ghosting' of the arches can be seen on the western façade of the church and the remaining gavit walls, showing how the gavit was divided into 9 square spaces. The aperture, and the roof, no longer remains, but the style is classic, much as the remaining gavits at Haghbat and Hovhanavank. There are a number of inscriptions on the gavit wall and the floor was once paved by tombstones.



The jewel of the vank, and what all that travel was for, abuts the north wall of S. Stepanos, the stellar S. Poghos-Petros (Sts. Peter and Paul) chapel built in 1270. The little chapel is covered on its western façade with extraordinary carvings of khachkars, geometric patterns and two remarkable depictions of S. Petros (Peter, left) and the S. Poghos (Paul, right). The depiction of religious figures this large on the façade of a church is very rare in Armenia, I haven't found any other quite this large in the country. Others do exist, in the western Armenia, famously at Lake Van in present day Turkey.

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

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



CONTINUE TRIP 1

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

**SIDE TRIP:** (Goght - Գոցիտ elev. 1594, pop. 850) was called Goghot in 13th c. manuscripts. The small village rests above the Goghthi River canyon and was an adjunct to Garni village for much of its history. The village has the ruins of a 5th-7th c basilica church, built over pagan shrine, destroyed during the 15th c Timurid and 17th c Persian invasions, rebuilt in the 18th c using stone and khachkar fragments from its earlier periods. A pretty church in a nice location. The gorge is worth investigating if you have the time, with cold spring water popular with village kids in the summer. From Goght it is about 3.5 km to Geghard Monastery.

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

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

↻ From **Goght**, take the Geghard Highway and continue E for about 1.6 km to the Geghard Village turnoff (L), instead continue forward as signposted for another 3.5 km and past the statue of a lion holding a spear to **GEGHARD VANK** (DD 40.13763 x 44.81539) 🏠 🗺

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

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

The area around the monastery is beautiful, with trees clinging to craggy rock cliffs and mountain tops, and the Goghthi River running along the southern side, great hiking into the forests around the monastery lead upstream to Mt. Yerakatar (2589.6 m), Vishap lich and in a one day hike, Lake Sevan.

**Background.**

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

The ascetic tradition was strong in Asia Minor, reaching a status ranking with, and in cases rivaling the political powers of the day, especially

in Syria and Greece, both of which had profound influence on the Armenian Church. Monks at Aiyrivank worked, and lived, in small crevices that were open to the elements, becoming famous for their suffering and believed by some to have reached a type of divine connection. The monastery is mentioned in early chronicles as an important place of worship, and seat of power.

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

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

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

The oldest surviving buildings at the site, the small Grigor Lusavorich church, gavit and the first cave church are traced to Atabeg Ivaneh's patronage. In the mid 13th century the monastery was purchased by a vassal of the Zakarians and progenitor of the Proshian Dynasty, Prosh

Kaghbakian (1223-1284) whose wife ordered the construction of the second cave church and adjoining patriarchal Sepulchre and zhamatun (narthex), a meeting hall and academy (collapsed in the mid-20th century) and additional monk cells, one of which was inhabited by the 13th century historian Mkhitar Ayrivanetsi. The Proshians continued to endow the vank during the short reign, installing an irrigation system in the 1200s and adding some of the extraordinary carvings in the complex. During their reign Geghard was also known as the Monastery of the Seven Churches and the Monastery of the Forty Altars.

The monastery was famous for its relics, including the Relics of Andrew and John, donated in the 12th c, and as recorded in 1250, the relic that gave it its present name, The Lance, the spear believed to have pierced the side of Christ on the Cross. One of Armenia's most popular pilgrimage sites, the vank benefited from the numerous wills, land grants, manuscripts and treasures donated by wealthy pilgrims, many of which are celebrated in the khachkar stones in the complex or on the walls of the monastery. Donations of goods to gain good will or salvation were as common then as they are now, if we prefer secular pursuits today.

As famous as it was, Geghard could not escape the ravages of the kingdom by jealous feuds between Armenian nakharars, weakening the country when it needed strength to stave off invading armies. As a result of 13th-17th c Mongol, Timurid and Persian invasions, the monastery was deserted, the main church used to shelter flocks for Karapapakh (Turkish) shepherds.

Geghard remained deserted until the Russian Era, when a few monks from Echmiadzin re-consecrated the monastery in the early 19th c, slowly renovating the complex. The site was left to decay during the early Soviet period, regaining importance and state sponsorship in the 1970s during the great cultural thaw in Armenia. Restored for tourist purposes but now with a small ecclesiastical presence, the site is still a major place of pilgrimage.

Geghard is a working church. Nearby villagers and the faithful visit the site to worship. Besides being one of Armenia's premiere tourist sites, Geghard is often crowded on Religious Holidays, weddings and baptisms, when extended families come out in force to celebrate. Geghard is one of the more popular sites for making "Matagh" or ritual sacrifice as supplication for a wish, or as thanks for

good fortune. Matagh is a holdover from pagan times, and the church condones it only as far as symbolically blessing the animal before it is slaughtered. No part of the sacrifice is allowed in the sanctuary of the church. If you're squeamish, you do not want to watch this. But as a tradition thousands of years old, one that binds the Armenian culture together in thanks to God, the ritual is both alive and taken very seriously by those who perform it. Religious Holidays of particular importance are Armenian Christmas (January 6), New Years (January 13), and the Feast of the Virgin Mary (August 11, which in the Main Style Armenian Calendar was the New Year).

### The True Spear

The story of Geghard is intertwined with the story of the True Spear, covering thousands of kilometers, centuries of intrigue and dueling claims that simmer to this day. While dozens of True Spears surfaced throughout history, no less than four claimants still assert their spear is the one true lance that pierced Christ's flesh, one of which is the Spear of Geghardavank.

All begin with the fate of the spear's first owner, the Roman soldier Longinus, who used it to pierce the side of Christ. The mixture of water and blood that flowed from the wound splashed Longinus, curing his vision. He converted to the new Christian faith and began preaching in the Near East, carrying the lance with him when he wandered into Armenia. He later settled in Caesarea of Cappadocia, where he was martyred.

**The Vienna Spear.** Nothing is heard of the Lance until 287 CE, when it was recorded in the hands of a certain Maurice, an Officer in a legion of Christian soldiers from Upper Egypt during the reign of Emperor Maximian Herculeus. His legion, as many as 6600 men, was massacred en masse by their own side when they refused to participate in pagan sacrifices prior to battle. Maurice was canonized as the first black saint, becoming the patron saint for Rome. The Lance disappears again until it resurfaces in 318, when Constantine carried the spear in the battle of Milvian Bridge and while surveying the layout of his new city, Constantinople where it is venerated.

Some say the spear stayed there until the sack of Constantinople in 1453, while others find it wending its way to the Holy Roman Empire and Charlemagne the Great (771-814), who carried the Spear through 47 victorious battles, but died when he accidentally dropped it. From there it went to the Saxon Kings of Germany, landing in

Nuremburg in 1424, then Vienna, where it was lusted by Napoleon, held for a time by the Kaiser Wilhelm, returned to Vienna, and finally seized in 1938 by Hitler, who used it as an icon for the Third Reich. Hitler had seen the lance in 1912 and wrote, "I felt as though I myself had held it in my hands before in some earlier century of history - that I myself had once claimed it as my talisman of power and held the destiny of the world in my hands." The Lance was kept in Germany for 6 years, liberated by the American Army and returned to Vienna where it remains on display at the Shatskammer Museum.

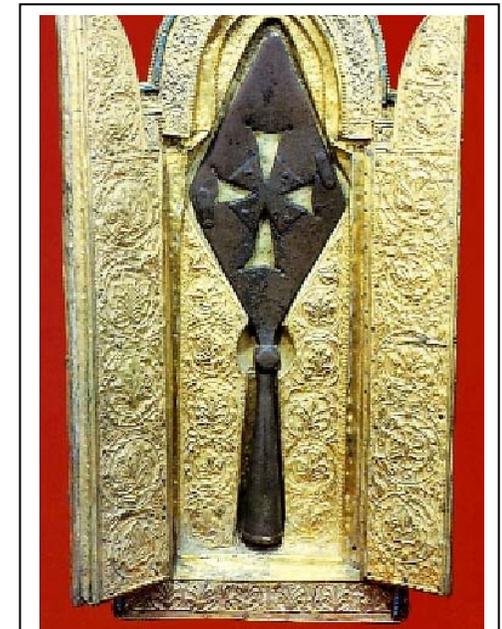
**The Lance of Krakow.** Another legend states that the Spear, kept by the Kings of the Holy Roman Empire and handed down to Otto III (983-1002), was given to the Polish Princes in his reign to secure their alliance. The Lance remains in Poland, housed at the Wawel cathedral in Krakow. Unfortunately the "true" lance, in appearance much like the Vienna Spear, has been dated to ca. 1000 CE, when Otto gave it to Poland, while others claim the spear is a 12th c copy. Still Poland insists theirs is the True Spear, while not questioning the validity of the others. Curious.

**The Spear of Antioch.** Another spear has been recorded in history, though it is now lost. The Spear of Antioch was 'discovered' during the siege of Antioch in 1097/98 by the peasant Peter Bartholomew, who claimed to have seen the lance in a dream, buried at the city's St. Peter's cathedral. "Finding" the spear, the crusaders wielded it in battle, routing the Muslim forces who claimed that "the dead rose to fight with the living," vanquishing the Arabs. Continuing on to Jerusalem, the authenticity of Bartholomew's spear were questioned, and he attempted to prove his claim by walking through fire carrying the spear. The fire won and the spear was lost. This legend is incorporated into that of the Armenian Spear, below.

**The Vatican Spear.** This spear is first recorded by the pilgrim St. Antoninus of Piacenza (570 CE), describing the holy places of Jerusalem, says that he saw in the Basilica of Mount Zion "the crown of thorns with which Our Lord was crowned and the lance with which He was struck in the side". A mention of the lance also occurs in the so-called Breviarium at the church of the Holy Sepulchre. In 615 Jerusalem was captured by the Persian forces of King Khosrov II and the point of the lance, which had been broken off, was given in to Nicetas, who took it to Constantinople and deposited it in the church of Hagia Sophia. The tip

was enshrined in an icon in 1244 and sold by Baldwin II to Louis IX of France, who had it enshrined with the Crown of Thorns in the Sainte Chapelle in Paris. The tip was lost during the French Revolution.

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



**The Lance of Armenia.** The shaft has a diamond-shaped plate attached to its end; a Greek cross with flared ends is cut through the plate. A special case was made for it in 1687, now kept in the museum at Echmiadzin monastery.

exact drawing of the point of the lance, and that in comparing it with the larger relic in St. Peter's he

was satisfied that the two had originally formed one blade. This relic has remained in Rome, where it is preserved with Longinus' remains under the dome of Saint Peter's Basilica, although the Roman Catholic Church makes no claim as to its authenticity.

**The Armenian Spear.** The Geghard of Armenia is traced to the Apostle Thaddeus, who preached in Armenia with the Apostle Bartholomew in the 1st c CE. Thaddeus entered Armenia through Edessa, Syria, Arabia and Mesopotamia (43-66), while Bartholomew came from Cana (60-68 CE), a town three miles from Nazareth. It was at Cana that Jesus performed his first miracle and it may have been that Bartholomew invited Jesus to the wedding feast. Both began their ministry in Armenia in the southeastern provinces of Siunik, Goghtan (Goltan) and Artaz, Thaddeus bringing the True Spear with him. In 66 CE St. Thaddeus established the first church in Armenia, on the ruins of a pagan temple in Artaz. The church (S. Thadei) remains a place of pilgrimage. Both were put to death on order of King Sanatruk, who vehemently defended the cult of Myhras, and buried in Armenia.

The next we read of the spear, it was in the hands of Grigor Lusavorich when he led the conversion of the kingdom in the early 4th c. Installed at Aiyrivank in the medieval period, the relic was worshipped by countless pilgrims to Geghardavank, which was lavished with patronage by wealthy pilgrims and the Zakarian and Proshian families. The spear seems to have been spirited away to Cilicia sometime in the next period, with some overlap of time (and relics) between the spear recorded at both Geghard and Antioch, found 200 years earlier.

The confused history shows the spear at Geghard, while it surfaces at Antioch in 1097/98, when the peasant Bartholomew had a vision showing the spear at St. Peter's cathedral in the besieged city (see Antioch Spear, above). In this story, instead of perishing by fire, this Bartholomew was a crusading knight who passed the spear to the Katolikos at Sis in Cilicia Armenia. After the fall of Cilicia the spear was moved to Echmiadzin in 1441, along with a number of relics, where it remains now in the Cathedral Treasury. I have yet to hear an explanation putting both spears into the same coherent timeline, but no doubt one awaits the historians.

These are but five spears claiming to be the true spear but in fact there were numerous spears

venerated as the true lance, before and after Vienna received its spear, Otto made his gift to the Poles, the cross was discovered at Antioch, landed at the Vatican or Thaddeus brought it to Armenia. Which begs the question, "didn't they know it was a fraud?"

The answer is probably as frustrating as the question, buried in the medieval mindset, which could believe each copy of a relic they worshipped was the real spear, the real thorn, the real shroud or the real Cross. For if one believed that God was all powerful, and miracles (or the possibility of miracles) happened every day, then God could surely multiply relics, each one true and original, no matter how many there were. In science they might call this cloning, but in the Middle Ages, it was God's gift to the monasteries.

### The Complex

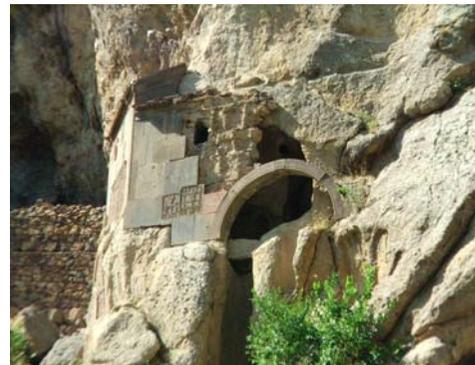
The monastery consists of the walled compound, two churches, gavit and zhamatun, the Proshian patriarchal Sepulchre, monk caves and service buildings. Most of the building works date to the 12th-13th centuries, with the walls and service buildings to the 19th-20th c renovations.

Even before you reach the monastery, you pass the oldest surviving structure at the site, the **chapel of Gregory the Enlightener**, which was built ca. 1177, and is about 100 meters from the monastery gate, high above the road. The chapel was partially carved from the cave that it replaced, which was a site of Pagan worship, beginning in the Bronze Age when a Vishap stood at the spot. A spring once emitted from the cave. The basilica has a horseshoe-shaped apse and several adjoining passages and small antechambers on varying levels, all hewn from solid rock. The chapel has a few bits of fresco paint, fragments of murals that once adorned the walls. The exterior façade has khachkars and stone crosses carved into the stone, as well as the cliff side.

To reach the main gate you climb a small hill from the car park, greeted by pigeon sellers, fruit and souvenir vendors and a small group of musicians trying to get your attention/money. Feel free to bargain on the food or trinkets, the dried fruit can be excellent in the autumn and the rolled plum juice, a kind of fruit jerky, is better and cheaper her than at the Shuka in Yerevan. And drop a few coins for the musicians. This *IS* their day job.

#### GEGHARD PLAN

- 1) Main temple
- 2) The "gavit" of the main temple
- 3) The first cave church
- 4) The Proshian's Sepulchre
- 5) The Church of St. Astvatsatsin
- 6) "Gavit" of Papak & Ruzukan
- 7) Service premises
- 8) An Inn
- 9) Father Superior's premises
- 10) The refectory
- 11) Grigor Lusavorich chapel



You will also see the monk cells on cliffs above and behind the walled compound, as well as niches in the walls, some of which were adorned with painted images. Just before the front gate there are a couple of low niches in the cliff wall with pebbles on the ground in front. Legend says those who toss a pebble on the ledge and get it to stay will gain luck. A bit of fun, this is one of the rituals finding its way from Pagan times to the present day (Where do you think tossing a coin in the fountain came from?).



The arched gate is a 19th renovation of an original 12th c gate, and leads to the inner **courtyard**. The rebuilt 12th-13th c walls run around the complex on three sides, the cliffs behind the monastery serving as the fourth defensive wall.

The **walls** were built to house rooms for storage, monastery personnel and wealthy pilgrims, and preserve the original layout of their 13th c forebears. The ground on your left is tiered, with fragments of khachkar stones imbedded in the walls. The steps at the end of the tier, next to the large gavit, leads to an upper chambers and zhamatun, while a crevice in the cliffs between the gavit and steps goes into an inner chamber. The 13th c gavit and 12th c katoghike are the large roofed buildings on the left (north) of the courtyard.

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

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



The **1215 Katoghike** (cathedral) and its adjoining gavit (narthex) were built adjacent to the inside churches. The katoghike has a central plan, a cruciform with the cross assuming the shape of a rectangle. The eastern wing of the cross ends with a semi-circular altar apse. The dome rests on the

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



The southern façade of the cathedral has a large **portal** with exquisite carvings, showing the flair Ivaneh Zakarian was known for. The tympanum is elaborately carved with stylized trees and vines dripping with pomegranates and bunches of grapes, both symbols of long life and prosperity. The intertwining trunks frame four arched sections, the fruit of the vines and trees filling in the space. The whole is framed by an arch covered with star patterns, flanked by two doves, symbolizing peace, while the lion and ox icons above the main frame of geometric patterning “protect” the entire ensemble, while advertising the Prince’s power.

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

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

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



The building is central in plan, much like other gavits of the period, with four heavy, squat columns supporting intersecting arches that in turn divide the space into nine squares while they support the gabled roof. The center aperture is

topped with a tent-roof open dome, the ceiling stones shaped like stalactites, popular in the 13th c in Armenia and Asia Minor. The floors alternate geometric patterns with tombs for the nobility, rich patrons and favored members of the monastic community, mostly the prior.

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



**Two passageways** on the north wall connect the gavit to the most impressive part of the monastery, entirely carved from solid rock for the Zakarian and Proshian families.

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

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

There is a claim that both this zhamatun and the adjoining church were built in the late 13th c by

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

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

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

The square room has deep niches and arched vaults on the east and north ends, the north reserved for the Proshian family. The sarcophagi are missing, but must have been an elaborate affair if others of this period give any indication; carved with floral and geometric patterns and rung by arcature, religious symbols, perhaps pictures of saints or the fallen on the sides, the top surprisingly simple, etched to indicate the human

**Rating the Armenian Nobility**

*Both the Zakarians and Proshians come from a tradition new in Armenian History; the self-made prince, who created his position on the force (in the case of the Zakarian generals) or wealth (the Proshians) he was able to amass in his lifetime. But they borrowed their 'royal lineage' from their noble Arshakuni forebears, intermarrying and adopting their insignia as suited their purposes. What is remarkable is how closely they followed the dictates of the 2000 year old nakharar tradition.*

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

**Zoranamak** was based on the military strength of relative houses, namely how many cavalry, infantry and support staff you had, how trusted you were to defend borders, the number of troops you lent the king in time of war. The **Gahnamak** listed noble houses based on their political and economic power; the size of their estates, their wealth, their political connections and ability to sway politics at court. The **gahnamak** was composed and sealed by the king, the **nakharars** treated as his vassals.

There were two other designations given within the **Gahnamak** and **Zoranamak** lists, **bardz** or place at the royal table (*bardz* literally means "cushion") which indicated your status, which in its turn was dictated by the **pativ** (honor or esteem) of your house in the royal pecking order.

So, the Zakarian generals who made their name by liberating the country by force, not only had good karma, they had "good zoranamak" too, gaining economic and political esteem (**gahnamak**) as a result. The Proshians, vassals to the Zakarians, had "good zoranamak" too, only not as much, though you might not know it looking at the impressive carvings on their sepulchre wall.

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

Other high relief designs depict a large cross with geometric patterning, sun symbols and numerous crosses on the walls and columns. One niche (also

called a chapel) to the right of the entry to Astvatsatsin shows two mythical figures (sirens?) with crowned human heads and the body of an eagle or hawk, the crypt for noble relatives to or vassals of the Proshians. Flanking the entry to the church is a platband frame with two figures in the upper corners, their arms poised as if to emphasize a point, halos behind their bearded faces. Ss. Petros and Poghos has been suggested for these figures, as have the apostles Bartholomew and Thaddeus, perhaps more likely since the monastery housed the True Spear Thaddeus is said to have brought to Armenia. Others say they are members of the Proshian family, but the halos would make their sainthood a bit premature.

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

**Astvatsatsin church** is next door, its history confused between the 13th c founding benefactor, Ivaneh Zakarian and the Proshians, who added their coat of arms to the site and probably enlarged and decorated the church form eh original when they commissioned their sepulchre in 1283. The Zakarian family received the monastery in the early 13th c and it is believed to have been constructed between 1215-1225 CE. Later touches might be traced to the architect Galdzak, the same as is responsible for the Cave Spring church and the upper gavit.

The small domed cruciform church has three small antechambers, the two flanking the broad semi-circular apse are chapels and the third lies off the northern wall, itself a chapel to an unknown saint. The half columns at the corners of the central hall support the arches, which in turn support a drum and the cupola, itself divided into twelve sections by high relief carvings, decorated with stylized vines and tree-of-lives bearing pomegranates and grape bunches. The walls of the church are similarly decorated with high-relief designs, geometric patterns, platbands and elaborate sun symbols on the walls and framing. To the left of the altar there is a large protruding cross set upon an almost indecipherable tree of life and sun symbol, with two figures on either side. The tips of the cross are carved with smaller crosses, a

uniquely blocky depiction of the Cross. The figures each have a spear, though one has raised a cup to the cross. Presumably a depiction of the two Roman soldiers at the crucifixion, the one with the spear is by legend Longinus. The figures on the apse are similar to those in other 13th c churches, symbolic figures and borrowed from Pagan iconography, including a goat figure at the altar stairs, patterns of diamonds and squares, rosettes and other geometric designs. The church also features carved stalactites made from trefoils and quatrefoils. The floor is paved with tombstones.

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

Go back to the Gavit and take the NW passage (left as you face the north wall of the gavit) passage to the northwest **cave church Avazan** (basin), carved out of rock at the site of a prehistoric cave shrine, its spring still venerated to this day. The worship site predates the Hellenistic period of "Greek" deities and was probably first dedicated by a Vishap in the late Paleolithic or early Bronze Age.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Monk cells.** Integral to the complex are the dozens (some say more than 100) were used in Geghard's heyday) of monk cells carved in the hillside. The monastery had an ascetic tradition, and monks lived, worked and prayed in the cells, some never leaving their cramped quarters until they died.

Several are at the top of a stone stairway to the east of the katoghike and show how primitive the quarters were. A few have carved alters and work tables, and look onto the main cathedral. The monks who lived here were originally hermits, they came to this difficult to reach site to meditate and live apart from earthly desires. As the monastery assumed importance, and especially when it began to house the 'Christ Spear' relic, the monastery became famous for its hospitality, allowing travelers to find safety at night in one of its vaulted cells, or in the nearby area.

Other than the religious buildings, Geghard boasts a number of secular structures, carved from rock

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

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

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

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

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

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

➡ END OF TRIP 1



TRIP 2: YEGHVARD - BUZHAKAN ▶

YEREVAN – ZOVUNI - YEGHVARD - (Nor Yerznka) - MT. ARAI LEHR - (Zoravan) - (Pokravan / Dovri) - ARAGIUGH - (Saralandj) - BUZHAKAN / TEGHENIATS VANK - (Karasham – Arzakan pensionat)

UPPER CASE destinations are worth a long visit, (side trips) are worth the stop if you have the time. Note that [Agarak, Dzorap, Tegher and Orgov] are also on Trip 1, and can be skipped or visited as part of either day trip.

This trip explores the western part of Kotaik, an undulating land of farms and orchards that suddenly erupt with the volcanic cone of Mt. Hatis (2575.9 m), which boasts some excellent hiking to its conic crest, with springs, a pagan shrine and some incredible flower watching May-June, including rare species of irises. The trip also visits the base of the Hrazdan Canyon with Caves and Bronze/Iron Age forts, the pastoral village of Yeghvard and pagan and early medieval sites including one of Armenia's rare examples of the conversion of Armenian churches into mosques under Moslem domination.

The land gradually rises to the Tegheniats Range and rocky land gives way to pine forests at Buzhakan, a twisting rocky road leading to the haunting ruins of Tegheniats Vank, an incredible achievement of architecture in the 10th-13th centuries and rival to the great monasteries of its day. One of the most beautiful monasteries in Armenia, the carvings on the vank's stones are unique in Armenia, for their obviously pre-Christian roots and the masterful way they were carved. Like Havuts Tar in Trip 1, this is one vank not to be missed, though it often is. The forests above Buzhakan provide superb hiking and camping, plus a nearby pensionat.

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



**Stay:** Overnight in Biurakan.

**Eat:** Biurakan, Kari Lich.

**Springs:** Biurakan, Kari Lich, Amberd.

☞ From Yerevan take the Davitashen Bridge and take the first R off ramp (NE) towards Zovuni and Kanakeravan. Follow the NE road that trace the Hrazdan River for about 3 km to the Kanakeravan turnoff (R) and ZOVUNI (DD 40.23199 x 44.51846) 🏠 🚶 🌳

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

Villagers are very friendly and if you have been to their old village near Aparan, they take a special interest in your insights. This can be a good (if rudimentary) place to crash if you can't afford the hotel rates in Yerevan and are on the way out of town. But you are roughing it.

Just outside the village is the Hrazdan River Gorge with **Stone Age Caves & workshops** and the Paleolithic/Bronze Age/Iron Age/ Urartian/Medieval **Karmir Berd (Red Fortress)** built on a citadel overlooking the canyon and the Kotaik plains.

To get there, take the Kanakeravan turnoff from Zovuni, which takes you into a batch of village homes and alleys. About 250 m from the highway turnoff, turn R onto a rocky dirt road, take the L fork that winds downhill about 200 m to a T-intersection, take the L then immediate R for another 250 m or so to Karmir Berd, set on top of a promontory overlooking the Hrazdan Canyon.

The citadel is made from 4-5 concentric rings of earthen works paved with stone slabs. The present structure is a combination of several epochs, beginning with cyclopean stone walls erected sometime in the Early Bronze Age laid on top of Copper Age earthworks. Later tribes renovated and enlarged the fortress in the Bronze

and Iron Ages, continuing to work in cyclopean tufa and basalt stone. Traces of the Urartian period survive at the NE gateway, where there is a large basalt stone carved with (untranslated) Urartian cuneiform. If true to form, the inscription announces to entrants the King to whose glory the fortress protects, and the lands he conquered. The fortress overlooks one of the key routes to Yerevan, then the Urartian citadels Erebuni and Teishebaini (current Karmir Blur) and the Ararat (Ararat) valley.

Arshakuni kings used the fortress as a defensive position in the 1st-4th centuries and it continued it function in the early medieval period, when the red tufa stone was set with lime mortar, giving it its present color and name.

Much of the fortress has collapsed, leaving large heaps of rubble to remind us of just how large this fortress was, a formidable obstacle to invading tribes from the NE hinterlands. The ramps leading to the fortress give some idea of the quality of craftsmanship; the boulders have been leveled to create an even incline circling to the gate. The stones still show the tool marks left from the smoothing process. The ramp is broad enough for horse drawn carts and mounted militia to enter or leave the fortress, in its time an engineering achievement. One need only grab an iron chisel and hammer and pound away at a large chunk of basalt (elsewhere! Not here!) to understand the immense effort used to create this entryway. It also speaks to its importance as a regional site, not just to protect, but evidence of a large settlement around the citadel speaks to a regional trade center as well.



The site overlooks the Hrazdan Canyon and unfortunately the abandoned Kanakert Factory to

the SW. The river is about 100 m down a sheer drop, locals know the best climb down (there is a vehicle turnoff about 2.2 km E on the Kanakeravan highway). The canyon has large **Stone Age Cave sites**, as well as an open air **workshop** with fleck of obsidian and basalt stone to show for the once-thriving settlement.

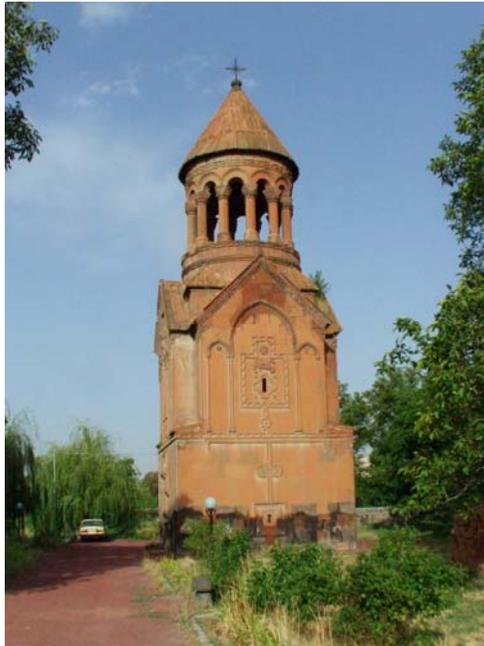
**Camping** is possible in either river gorge, or above the village on the rim, but ask first; overnight in village home (rustic, 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair), springs in village and in gorge below.

☞ backtrack to the Kanakeravan/Zovuni intersection turn R (N) and continue past Zovuni for about 10 km from the intersection into Yeghvard town, at the end of the divided highway where some shops are on the left. Turn R (SE) road that rings the SE of the village, take the first left fork onto a small village road for about 500 m to S. Astvatsatsin in central YEGHVARD (DD 40.31960 x 44.28473) 🏠 🚶 🌳

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

Dead center is the 10th-14th century jewel, **S. Astvatsatsin**, a two-story structure with an upper chapel under the tall dome. Said to have been built in 1301 or 1321, the church was most likely built over a pre-Christian temple, its small footprint closely imitating pagan shrines of the Hellenistic period. The **lower floor** is now a few steps below ground, but in its day it was level to the surface, a small central dome cruciform type

with a horseshoe-shaped apse. The shallow cupola serves as a concave arch for the upper floor. The blackened walls are due to centuries of burning candles, and obscure some of the fine details on the walls: geometric patterns, marble dais front and red and black tufa mosaics forming a large rising sun on the back of the upper apse.



The western plaza in front of the church was once a 13th c **gavit**, with a few column fragments to show what was there. The layout of the gavit seems much the same as others of the period, a very large square plan with intersecting arches that supported the gabled roof and central aperture, which was domed.

Entry to **upper chapel** is blocked; the narrow steps that once led from the ground to the chapel are missing, perhaps removed during the construction of the gavit, though the caretaker insists they were removed much later. Other churches with upper chapels that added gavits removed the outer stairs and found another way to ascend to the upper floor. Astvatsatsin had a back way up, which has been sealed as well. The upper floor is made from finely hewn tufa stone clasped onto thick walls, with windows on the north and south sides, divide by columns on the north and

south. The layout of the chapel is cruciform with a shallow cupola supporting ghte flor of the bell tower, much as the lower church, but the decoration on the inner walls are more elaborate, its architectural lines more dynamic.

The building's **façades** are extremely elaborate, showing some of the best examples of Medieval carving in the country. Bold, high relief depictions of the cross and religious figures are incorporated into distinctly Asian geometric patterning, imported by Mongolian invaders in the 13th-14th centuries. The result, though, is distinctly Armenian, using elements of Central Asian motifs while maintaining the integrity of the Armenian overall design. You can tell this is influenced by outer sources, but still, the essence of the design, as with the building, is distinctly Armenian. On the **western façade**, the main entrance to the lower church is more plain (suggesting a 10th c building) but the **upper chapel walls** are covered with a powerful presentation of design and insignia. The entry is framed multiple times in various design motifs, with pointed arches flanking the framework. A concave stalactite arches over the door while highly stylized eight-pointed stars in rich embroidery are in the inner frame. The frame is topped by two figures, a **bull and a lion**, symbols of the surviving Orbelian family, its benefactors. That is in turn tipped by a large, intricately carved **cross**, its upper arms flanked by two depictions; the Madonna and Child (left) and another figure (S. Grigor Lusavorich?) on the right.



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

incorporated into the Zakarian and Proshian family seals as well.



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



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

of its kind in the eastern kingdom, certainly as elaborate.



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



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

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



At the time of its construction, Yeghvard and the marz was under duress with a dwindling Armenian population. The slopes of Mt. Aragats and Arai Lehr were emptied in the 13th-14th c by Mongol and Turkic tribes who converted the area's farmland to summer *yaylas* (pasturage). Astvatsatsin was built during this period of upheaval, under the reign of the Mongol Ghazan Khan (1295-1304) and his successors Khuda Banda (1304-1316) and Abu Sa'id (1316-1335), who had converted to Islam, when Christianity quickly passed from a favored religion to a tolerated religion, beginning the persecution of the 14th century. Ghazan Khan mitigated the persecution in his later years, suggesting that the church may indeed have been built in 1301, during his reign, his successors actively suppressing the Christian religion. Placing Islamic tiles on the façade of the upper floor would have been deemed a smart move, showing the Mongol lords obeisance and even, as at Tegher Vank in Aragatsotn where niches are topped with Mongol pointed arches, misleading them to the actual purpose of the church (yes, this really happened). The ceramic tiles at Yeghvard's church would then have served as a way to "blend in" with the Mongol population, or even, as some suggest, to announce its conversion to a mosque, no matter how

temporary. The tall, slender tower would have reminded Moslems of the minarets of their mosques. Still, it seems likely to me at least that it was more an idea of survival by imitation, without actually converting. You decide.



**5th c Basilica.** Yeghvard also boasts a 5th century basilica, about 350 m N/NE of Astvatsatsin. To get there, backtrack west on the road by the church and take the first R, then the next R, next L, then R on the asphalt road, and the next L onto a lane. The remains of the large basilica will be on the left, just before a large block building.

The triple-nave hall was quite large (14.1 x 27.3 m) for its time, built of finely hewn blocks of tufa. There are enough remains to show the size and volume of the church, and some of the detail. The hall was divided into three aisles by four pairs of T-shaped columns supported arches that ended on large abutments on the outer walls. Sections of the protruding abutments and the beginnings of the large arches can still be seen on the surviving walls. The hall has 7 entries, three on the south and north walls and one on the west. The lentils for the doors were decorated and the one surviving southern door incorporates Hellenistic dentil molding and beaded lines.

The central hall was larger than the side naves, common for churches of the 4th and 5th centuries, suggesting an earlier founding period. To be sure, the church was built over or adjacent to an earlier pagan site, and, given Yeghvard's importance as a regional center in pre-Christian times, it is possible the temple site was nearly as large as the church that replaced it, but that has not been proved. The narrow outer naves end with side apses facing the hall perpendicularly, absolutely unique in

Armenian churches and never again duplicated. This further suggests the site may have been incorporating features of an earlier temple. Again, not proved.



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

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

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

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

and they swear supernatural happenings occur all the time.



**South Route to Mt. Arai Lehr:** At the north end of the village there are a couple of trails that lead to the South face of Mt. Arai Lehr I about – km, passing Tsaghkevan (S. Kuis Varvara, Sister Barbara) shrine and monolithic natural monuments on the way. The trail crosses the Arzni-Shamiram canal, and heading N/NW to the south peak.

[MAP of hike to south peak]

**Camping** is possible in the area, not very comfortable (wait for Arai Lehr), ask first; **Overnight** in village home (rustic, 3000-5000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Spring** in the village.

☛ From central Yeghvard you can take the old Ashtarak highway W for about 5.7 km until it meets the Nor Yerznka reservoir, then skirt around the new reservoir on bad roads or open fields into Nor Yerznka, or backtrack S on the Zovuni Road to the new Ashtarak Highway (about 2.8 km from the start of the divided road bit in Yeghvard) and take the R (W) exit, following it for about 4.5 km to where it joins the old highway, then in another 1 km or so take the R (N) Nor Yerznka turnoff, continuing another 1.7 km to (**Nor Yerznka DD 40.3133 x 44.4047**) 🏠 🚶 🗺

**SIDE TRIP:** (**Nor Yerznka - Նոր Երզնկա** founded 1949, elev. 1291, pop. 800) sits at the base of Mt. Arai Lehr, surrounded by farm fields and orchards irrigated by the Shamiram (Semiramis) canal. The village is a pleasant hamlet of a few houses and friendly farmers plus the occasional surge of mountaineers who use the village as a base for climbing **Arai Lehr** from the south.

The southern approach leaves from the Karbi road in the NW of the village, arriving at the S/SE crest in about 15-20 km depending on the upper path you choose (see below for detailed directions).

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

#### ☒ MT. ARAI LEHR - ԱՐԱՅԻ ԼԵՆ

(DD 40.412842544007816 x 44.456520080566406) For Satellite image of Arai Lehr, go to [www.maps.google.com](http://www.maps.google.com) and enter 40.412842544007816, 44.456520080566406 in the search box. Great image.

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



Photo © Tigran Nazaryan.

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



Photo © Tigran Nazaryan.

The mountain is a unique combination of geological strata, with andesite-basalt rock formations on its Eastern slope and fields of "stone hail," rounded volcanic stones formed sprays of lava that hardened while falling to the ground or formed while rolling down the hardened slopes. Other slopes (south, east) have tall rock monoliths with natural caves and rich, fertile volcanic loam that nurtures an incredible variety of flora, a number of species of which are unique to Arai Lehr. The northern slopes are forested; thought illegal logging is slowly stripping the mountain of this vital resource that prevents land erosion and desertification. The forests consist of hardwood species (oak, maple) with birch and seven species of ash along with others. In addition the forests have a number of wild fruit trees and berries. About 50 species of shrubbery grow on the slopes. Western slopes show the effects of clear-cut logging; emerald green during a few weeks of Spring, the slopes quickly dry in May, turning a harsh shade of brown for most of the year.

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

Arai Lehr officially has 650 species of vascular plants, an amazing concentration of twenty percent of Armenia's total. Twenty species on the

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

Additional information on Arai Lehr's eco-system is in the Mt. Arai Lehr section of the Aragatsotn chapter. See adventure [tour operators](#) for expert flora guides.

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

#### [MAP of TRAILS]

**Nor Yerznka Trail** The trail begins just NWW of the village and across the Arzni-Shamiram canal, where a dirt path forks off to the R about 250 m from the canal. The path (navigable by off road vehicles most of the way up) crosses grassy meadows and farmlands for about 9 km before meeting up with the path from Yeghvard Village. From there it begins the climb in earnest (another 9 km), passing natural outcrops, mountain streams and ridges plus the Kuis Varvara (Sister Barbara) shrine, also known as Tsaghkevank ("Flower Monastery"), inside a cave with a spring. The water from the spring is reputed to have curative powers, especially relating to eyesight. There is a significant level of zinc in the water, known to assist in eye sight, along with joint and muscle cramps. Drink up!

The moss-covered shrine reputedly contains the tomb of the saint along with an altar and (in season) candle sellers, belying its original Pagan use, and probably hiding the resting place of pre-

Christian bones to boot. The Spring once had a Vishap (phallus), sadly gone. **Zinc water content.**

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

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

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

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

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

☞ **Backtrack** to Nor Yerznka, then L (E) on the Yeghvard Highway (H6) to the far (NE) side of Yeghvard, taking the left fork towards Buzhakan and continue for about 4.5 km to the turnout to (Zoravan DD 40.3569444 x 44.5230556) 🏠 🚶



**SIDE TRIP:** (**Zoravan - Չորավան** formerly Pokravan elev. 1488, pop. 1154), is set upon slightly rolling meadows and fields that—while verdant green and carpeted with wild flowers in the spring—quickly dry in the hot season to parched brown, its fertile land pockmarked with crops watered by the Arzni-Shamiram canal which stretches to the village. The village is a hard scrabble sort of place, with friendly folks but not much in the way of amenities.

Current villagers came from Ottoman Turkey in the 19th and 20th centuries, though the village is very old, going back to the Paleolithic era when the site was first settled. The Bronze Age saw some advancement, including a circle of stones and cromlechs that can be found at the Zoravar church site. The church was once very rich and locals still believe caches of treasures are there to be found. The fabled gold has even entered local humor, one current joke gong, “Let’s go find the gold and give it the government officials, maybe then they will be satisfied and leave us alone.” Hmmm.

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

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

The small **funerary chapel**, dedicated for an unknown family is a single-nave structure with thick tufa walls and a vaulted ceiling, topped with a pitched stone-gable roof. Nearby is the **grave yard** with scattered tombstones and khachkar fragments to stand for what was once there. Among the fallen stones look for 4th-10th c khachkars, including one beautiful prone

6th c khachkar with strong primitive lines capturing the cross and its flanking tree of life.

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



According to the 13th c historian Vartan Bardjerberdtsi (Vartan of Bardjer berd), the church was built for Prince Grigor Mamikonian (661-685). The church was built in the same period as the great central apse cathedral Zvartnots near Echmiadzin (built 643-652), which spawned a number of imitations throughout the kingdom, including the eight-

sided Irind cathedral and later eight-apsed Amenaprkich at Ani and Varzan (destroyed) and a six-apsed church at Ani.

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

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

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

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



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

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

➡ Backtrack to and cross over the highway onto a dirt path (opposite an old stone-cutting plant) on the other side that leads SE in about 1 km to (**Dovri** DD 40.34 x 44.54) 🏠 🚰 🌿

**SIDE TRIP:** (**Dovri - Դովրի** elev. 1480, pop. 100) is a tiny farming hamlet, its inhabitants descendants of immigrants from Western Armenia who immigrated in the second half of the 19th c. There is a small 1879 church with medieval khachkars from the abandoned medieval village in the walls.

**[MAB]**

The village lies near the much older Dovri fortified settlement and citadel with remains from mostly the Urartian period but also Bronze Age, Hellenistic and medieval fragments. The settlements lie under the current village and on rounded hills to the NE.

**Hiking Trails.** A couple of hiking trails strike out from Dovri. A passable 5 km vehicle route heads out over rolling meadowland (bone dry in the summer) from the NE of Dovri towards Lernakert and the Hrazdan Canyon. The second, foot-only path heads toward the SE Hrazdan gorge, beginning from the SE of Dovri, where two village streets merge, veering left (NE) under power lines and meeting a cross path in about 1.5 km where a right turn leads in 3 km to the deserted Asharabad ruins at the gorge, or continuing forward for about 3.8 km Lernakert.

**Camping** is possible in the area or village, but ask first but better to be had at Buzhakan or the Hrazdan gorge; **Overnight** in village possible (rustic, 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** in the village.

➡ Backtrack to the highway (Zoravan) and turn R (NE) continuing on the highway for about 4.5 km to the village cemetery and an intersection with a right (E) fork to Karashamb and a left (NW) fork into (Aragiugh DD 40.40311 x 44.54684) 🏰 🗺

**SIDE TRIP:** (Aragiugh - Արագյուղ till 1946 Gharajoran or Karajeiran elev. 1645, pop. 988) lies between the northern **Cheli or Kishi** Dzor River (also called the Araget) and the Araiget (or Saralandj) River to the SW, a place of orchards and farm fields. The village was the birthplace of an early Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic Minister of Finance, whose Stalin-like visage looms over the village cemetery and road at the Village entry.

There are three sites worth seeing here, including 5th and 6th c. churches and a pre-Christian Tukh Manukh shrine at the village's edge.

Passing the statue and turning left at the cemetery then straight on to an alley (ask) leads to a fork in the road, in front of which is the **5th c church** (DD 40.40327 x 44.54744), a single nave hall type with walls of thick tufa and basalt blocks that supported a wooden roof. The small rectangular building is unique for the square apse at the eastern end, suggesting a prior purpose, the layout and size of its footprint akin to pre-Christian temples, which this may well have been, simply converted to its Christian form with Christian symbols added to the walls during the conversion.



The simple lines around the door frame are based on earlier patterns and the rudimentary

crosses carved on window and niche lintels suggest a conversion rather than original construction. Embedded in the walls are khachkar fragments and even a small tombstone from the early medieval period: the church was destroyed and rebuilt several times, the latest during the Soviet era when red militia tried to tear down the building, eventually using it as storage.

Facing the 5th c church, take the right fork and follow the alley for about 50 m to the **6th c. S. Astvatsatsin** on the left side of the street. The family opposite the church care for the church and have the keys. The church was renovated in 2004 by the Mezhlumian family, in honor of family members who worshipped and were buried there, the mother remembered for single handedly stopping the Communists from tearing down the church. The small hall church was lovingly reconstructed with bits of stone and khachkar carvings cemented together and covered with a new tin roof.



The walls are lovingly decorated with the small treasures of faith villagers in Armenia tend to give: plastic Madonnas, paper prints of Jesus, Mary and saints, bronze-pressed pictures of Akhtamar and Ara Geghetsik, photos of Echmiadzin, seascapes, bits of fabric, satins and gold color cloths—inexpensive icons of prayer that represent a simple, naive devotion unique to rural Armenia. They might be cheap enough alone, but taken together they are a poignant expression of faith. Sadly, the church is fighting this devout expression of faith (see inset), the local caretakers indicating they kept the keys not just to lock out teenage hooligans but also visiting wardens from the big city trying to tear down their presents to God.

The village Tukh Manukh is on the ridge of a hill overlooking a brook. To get there, backtrack to the 5th c church, and then take the left fork, a rutted alley. Passing a right alley, take the next left, the next right, the next left uphill to the site (ask for "Tukh Manuk", DD 40.408 x 44.54444, elev. 1658m). Pagan in origin, the outline of the old temple is clearly seen in the reconstructed walls. Built with basalt and tufa stone and topped with a tin roof, the building has a south portico on the western end with a small doorway into the hall. The inside is remarkable, with rough wooden pillars supporting the wooden ceiling and roughly dividing the hall into three naves, though you would scarcely think of the wide open hall as triple nave. White washed walls cover earlier frescos, though some attempt has been made to recreate some of the wall paintings, on either side of the apse.

Medieval and 19th century renovations mostly obscure the original Tukh Manuk shrine, but a visit to the small annex to the right of the apse confirms its early purpose; three finely hewn sarcophagi (Hellenistic?) on the eastern wall of the candle-soot covered room, their tops dotted with candle wax and small "wishing" stones. Like the wishing ledges at Geghard and the Sisak & Misak graves at the Tukh Manuk at Tsoghamark in Shirak marz (see Shirak chapter, trip 4), wishing stones are a product of pre-Christian rites, whether placing pebbles on sacred stones (graves) or playing a kind of game of chance, getting one to stick to a sacred stone (Tsoghamark) or tossing it on a ledge (Geghard).

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

In a less deadly method than warring iconoclasts of the 7th-9th centuries who murdered 'heathen' icon-carrying believers, the battle between church officials in Echmiadzin determined to clean Armenian churches of unapproved iconography and villagers wanting to express their faith by displaying whatever bits of religious items they can afford, is very real. There is anger seething beneath local compliance and a "plastic Jesus" guerilla

### Cleaning for God

You couldn't help but notice the pile of religious items in the corner of the small chapel; bronze and metal framed icons, paintings of the Madonna, Christ, and S. Grigor, photographs of Echmiadzin, rosaries, candelabras and bits of expensive fabric. They were tossed in a heap, disposable religion.

An efficient looking woman with a scarf on her head smiled broadly as we entered; busily sweeping the dollops of candle wax her children were peeling from the walls. Bella asked why all the religious items were piled on the floor and she smiled again, then quoted something the priests had taught her at her home church in Kond, Yerevan. It seems the church was exerting its primacy in the new world order, wiping the walls of Armenian churches clean so that only church-approved items would remain (bought from the church, of course). This industrious woman was a member of a group that spent their weekends going from village to village "educating" the locals and destroying their beloved bits of plastic Jesus. She despaired of the villagers of Aragiugh; no sooner did she leave the church clean but they returned with more plastic Madonnas and paper photographs of the mother church in Echmiadzin.

Watching her work, oblivious to the furtive looks of locals peering on (looking very much as if they had their hands on a plastic Madonna in a hip pocket, ready to pounce once this busybody from Yerevan took off for her next village crusade), I was reminded of the 'cleansing' done by Communists crusading against 'heathen icons' and educating these self same ignorant masses. Then I thought of earlier crusades, when iconoclasts warred against the orthodox, literally prying icons from dying hands. And I thought some of the items locals chose questioned my taste, but some had been squirreled away during Communist times, waiting for liberation and open-veneration. And the church was wiping it clean.



campaign has begun to replace items torn from walls almost as soon as they are removed.

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



**Camping** is possible in either river gorge and in the area, but ask first and better camping to W on Mt. Arailehr or N above Buzhakan; **Overnight** in village (rustic, 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** in the village and on the riverbed.

➡ From the W edge of Aragiugh, take the Saralandj mountain road (pot-marked) for about 1.6 km from the Buzhakan intersection to (Saralandj DD 40.399722244.5186111) 🏠 🏠

**SIDE TRIP: (Saralandj - Սարալանջ** (elev. 1661, pop. 1003) is set in farmlands and rolling hills with forested slopes of Mt. Arai Lehr to the west. The inhabitants are descended from 20th c survivors of the genocide, from Mush. They scrape by farming the fertile slopes south of the village, along with herding cattle and sheep. The fruit from the small orchards is incredible, ask to buy some and refuse to take it for free. The village is one of the jumping off points for [hiking up Mt. Arai Lehr](#).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

➡ END OF TRIP 2



TRIP 3: HRAZDAN RIVER, LEFT BANK ▲

YEREVAN - [Zovuni] - (Kanakeravan) - (Mgrashen / Alt: canyon road) - (Nor Hachihin) - ARGEL - (Karenis) - (Karashamb) - (Teghenik) - (Arzakan) - BJINI- (Kaghsi)- HRAZDAN

This trip features



**Stay:** Camping at Kari Lich and in the cone.

**Eat:** Concession stand at Kari Lich.

**Springs:** Dozens of springs and pure water streams on the mountainside.

(E) bank of the Amberd River, its outskirts perched over the River gorge. The village is prosperous, as much for its greenhouses growing the flowers you pay a fortune for on Sayat Nova p. in Yerevan as for its farm fresh produce and dairy products.

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

➡ END OF TRIP 3



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



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

The village has some **early (5th-9th c) khachkars**. There are also a couple of dirt tracks that make good hiking trails following the Amberd River. The first turns off the main road just before the main part of the village (as it starts to bend to the NE), and goes over grasslands to the E for

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

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

🌿 **BIURAKAN - ԲՅՈՒՐԱԿԱՆ** ▲ (also known as Biurakan, elev. 1438m, pop. 3034) is on the right

✠ **HRAZDAN - ԱՇՏԱՐԱԿ** ("Tower" elev. 1139, pop. 34963) Intro here.

## [MAP]

**Background.** Background here

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

**Weather.** Abovian

**Bearings** The town is

The main streets are

From Yerevan,

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

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

## SIGHTS

The town's main site

### S. Marineh

### Museums

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

### Theatre, Concerts

The Ashtarak Culture Palace, located in the center of town, still hosts the occasional performance of musicians, folk dancers and plays, most done by local artists. There are also occasional art showings. The "season" is usually in the Fall and Spring, check at the center to see if something is showing, it can be well worth the 100 AMD to see

## PRACTICALITIES

Area Code: 232

Long Distance: 0232 + local number

From abroad: +(374) 232 + local number

Mobile Phones: 091 Armentel, 093 Viva Cell

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

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

## IN AND OUT

### By Bus, Minivan

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

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

**Minivans** (Marshrutni taxis) leave from the Abovian Bus Station on Yerevanian p. by the main square

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

### Yerevan-Abovian Taxis

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

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

**By Car** Abovian is at the crossroads of the Giumri-Yerevan,

Petrol stations and rest stops/kebab stands proliferate on the highway near Abovian and in nearby Agarak, Ujan and Kosh.

## AROUND

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## TRAVEL AGENCIES

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

## COMMUNICATION, ETC.

Fire – 101

Police – 102

Ambulance service – 103

Gas emergency service – 104

Trunk Line – 107

Telephone directory information – 109

Paging service – 189

### Phone, telegraphs

Ashtarak is covered by both Armentel and Vivacell (Proshian p.). mobile phone services. International calls can be made at the *Central Post Office*, 1 Sisakian p. Two others are at 4 Mashtots p. and 2 Gitavan p. [See HayPost \(HyePost\) site for list \(www.haypost.am/EN/abt\\_offices.html\)](#). The post office has trunk line phone service, sells phone cards (30 minutes 3000 AMD) and can deliver telegraphs.

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### Internet

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

### Bank, Exchange

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

*ArmSavingsBank*, 18 Hanrapetutian (3-5376)

*ACBA*, 1 Yerevanian p.

*ASHB*, Proshian p.  
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*Converse Bank*, 23 Ogostos

## Shopping

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

## Film, etc.

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

## Pharmacy

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

## Hospital, Polyclinic

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

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

*Polyclinic*, tel. 3-3335.

## Dentist

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

## OVERNIGHT

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

## HOTEL / MOTEL

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

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This is a distinct possibility in Ashtarak, though done informally, there are no organized rentals. Ask around when you arrive. 3000-5000 AMD per person with breakfast is quite fair.

## CAMPING

*Free Camping at the River* is possible, though you may want to move a bit away from town as the area is also a favorite trysting spot for local teens.

## Near Abovian

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

### Sevan Highway

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

## FOOD AND DRINK

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

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



**Tsaghkadzor** ▲  
(DD 40.30167 x 44.35917)

[MAP]

✠ **TSAGHKADZOR - ԱՇՏԱՐԱԿ** ("Tower" elev. 1139, pop. 34963) Intro here.

**Background.** Background here

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

**Weather.** Abovian

**Bearings** The town is

The main streets are

From Yerevan,

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

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

**SIGHTS**

The town's main site

**S. Marineh**

**Museums**  
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**IN AND OUT**

**By Bus, Minivan**

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

**Buses** stop at Abovian on routes from Yerevan, Giumri and Vanadzor-Aparan. Several *Yerevan-Abovian* buses run daily between the Yerevan bus and minivan stop at *4 Paronian, west of the end of Mashtots just before 'khorovats street' a.k.a. Proshian* begins and from the Abovian Aftokaiyeran at the main square on Yerevanian p. Bus #111 is the Yerevan-Abovian bus, Bus #502 is the Yerevan-Abovian-Voskevaz bus. 250 AMD.

**Minivans** (Marshrutni taxis) leave from the Abovian Bus Station on Yerevanian p. by the main square in Abovian. Minivans do not have a set schedule, they leave when they are full and generally run once or twice a day to outlying villages, so ask. Minivans connect Abovian with the Yerevan bus and minivan stop at *4 Paronian, west of the end of Mashtots and before 'khorovats street' a.k.a. Proshian* (250 AMD), *Aparan* (250 AMD), *Vanadzor* (300 AMD), *Biurakan* (100 AMD), *Aghst/Agaraka* (100 AMD), *Aruch* (100 AMD), *Talin* (150 AMD), *Mastara* (250 AMD) and *Giumri* (350 AMD).

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

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**By Car** Abovian is at the crossroads of the Giumri-Yerevan, Aparan/Vanadzor-Echmiadzin and the Abovian highways. There are also side roads to Biurakan/Amberd/Kari Lich, Oshakan and Voskevaz. **Highways** serving Abovian are the A327/M1 which runs between Yerevan and Giumri via Talin (Yerevan: 20 km, Talin: 46 km, Maralik: 68 km, Giumri: 92 km), th

Petrol stations and rest stops/kebab stands proliferate on the highway near Abovian and in nearby Agarak, Ujan and Kosh.

**AROUND**

**On foot** is a bit of a hike from the river to the top of the canyon, but the left bank is easy enough to navigate on foot, you can cross the center within 15 minutes, ditto down to the gorge. [See Bearings](#) (above) for a layout of the town.

**Taxis** Abovian has plenty of taxis, in the center, and at the Abovian Dzor Restaurant/Motel. The service is good, the drivers knowledgeable (few speak English), and willing to show off the city. The rate is 100 AMD per km. One taxi service is (tel. 33400, 3540).

**Regional Taxis** Taxis are a good way to explore the near region, and very reasonable if you are two or more and split costs, which are per vehicle. Negotiate before starting on your journey, figure 100 AMD/km as fair, add 500 AMD per hour for waiting. Taxis can take you from the center to (all distances from Abovian center): Oshakan (4 km) &

Voskevaz (6 km); Agarak (6 km), Kosh (17 km) and Aruch (23 km); Biurakan (11 km), Amberd (27 km) & Kari Lich/Mt. Aragats (34 km); Dzorap/Aghst (8 km) & Tegher (13 km); Mughni (2 km), Ohanavan (7 km), Saghmosavan (14 km) and Aparan (40 km). A full day's trip into region and back should cost around \$20 Note you buy the driver's meal if you stay out all day and overnight if he can't go home at night from where you settle in.

**Taxi Services**

Look for taxi service ads at the center and area cafes, restaurants and motel. They change by the season, sometimes by the week. Also inquire at your lodging. Most offer the service or will find someone for you. You can also call Voyage in Yerevan (010-54-54-05, 54-54-06), they say they will charge one way for pickup in Abovian (3600-4000 AMD).

**TRAVEL AGENCIES**

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

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

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## FOOD AND DRINK

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TRIP 4 : HANKAVAN VALLEY ▲

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

Trip 4 takes you into



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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

**Alternate route to Mt. Arai Lehr:** The village faces Mt. Arairlehr (2575.9 m) to the SE, reached by following the river on the E edge of the village for about 1.5 km to the Kasakh River then following that NE for about 500 m to the base of a waterfall and a small stream opposite. Follow /climb the small stream up the SE canyon walls to the base of the mountain, where a dirt track begins up the mountain. From there it is a 4.2 km hike to the crest of the mountain.

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

➡ From central Kuchak, go N on the Aparan highway for about 8 km to the Kasakh river bridge in **HRAZDAN** (40.59300 x 44.35616)

✳ **HANKAVAN - ԱՊԱՐԱՆ** (till 1935 Bash Aparan, elev. 1898m, pop. 2566) [MAP] town, listed by the 2nd c. geographer Ptolemy as Kasakh, descends from a long line of settlements from each period of human activity on the plateau. From a Bronze Age beginning, the town developed as Kasakh throughout the Medieval period, serving as a seat of power for the Vachutian Family in the 13th c. It was devastated by Mongol, Seljuk and Kurdish attacks, depopulated in the 15th c after Timur rode through and only resettled after the Russo-Turkish War of 1826-1828 awarded the region to the Russian Empire.

**SITES**

**Central Square / Tigran Petrossian Square**

The central Square, also known as the Square of Letters for its monuments to literary and cultural figures, is located

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➡ END OF TRIP 4



TRIP 5 : SEVAN HWY, HRAZDAN CANYON, RIGHT BANK ▲

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

This trip visits -----



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

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

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

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

**By Car** Abovian is at the crossroads of the Giumri-Yerevan,

Petrol stations and rest stops/kebab stands proliferate on the highway near Abovian and in nearby Agarak, Ujan and Kosh.

**AROUND**

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Fire – 101

Police – 102  
 Ambulance service – 103  
 Gas emergency service – 104  
 Trunk Line – 107  
 Telephone directory information – 109  
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**Phone, telegraphs**

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

**Bank, Exchange**

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

**Shopping**

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

**Film, etc.**

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

**Pharmacy**

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

**Hospital, Polyclinic**

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

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

**Dentist**

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

**OVERNIGHT**

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

**HOTEL / MOTEL**

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

**BOARDING/APARTMENT**

This is a distinct possibility in Ashtarak, though done informally, there are no organized rentals. Ask around when you arrive. 3000-5000 AMD per person with breakfast is quite fair.

**CAMPING**

*Free Camping at the River* is possible, though you may want to move a bit away from town as the area is also a favorite trysting spot for local teens.

**Near Abovian**

**Avan**

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

**Sevan Highway**

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

**FOOD AND DRINK**

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

\$ = 2000 AMD or less for meal w/o drinks  
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*Khorovats Stands* proliferate on the highway arching around Ashtarak. They offer good value at 1000-1500 AMD per shish or 500 AMD for kebab.

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

✂ **AIBUBEN PARK - ԱՅԲՈՒԲԵՆԻ ԱՅԳԻ**

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

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

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



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

*Alternate route to Mt. Arairlehr: The village faces Mt. Arairlehr (2575.9 m) to the SE, reached by following the river on the E edge of the village for about 1.5 km to the Kasakh River then following that NE for about 500 m to the base of a waterfall and a small stream opposite. Follow /climb the small stream up the SE canyon walls to the base of the mountain, where a dirt track begins up the mountain. From there it is a 4.2 km hike to the crest of the mountain.*

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➡ END OF TRIP 5



**Abovian** ▲

(DD 40.30167 x 44.35917)

✠ **ABOVIAN - ԱՎՍՏՐԱԿ** ("Tower" elev. 1139, pop. 34963) Intro here.

**Background.** Background here

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

**Weather.** Abovian

**Bearings** The town is

The main streets are

From Yerevan,

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

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

**SIGHTS**

The town's main site

**S. Marineh**

**Museums**

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

**Theatre, Concerts**

The Ashtarak Culture Palace, located in the center of town, still hosts the occasional performance of musicians, folk dancers and plays, most done by local artists. There are also occasional art showings. The "season" is usually in the Fall and Spring, check at the center to see if something is showing, it can be well worth the 100 AMD to see

**PRACTICALITIES**

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

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

**IN AND OUT**

**By Bus, Minivan**

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

**Buses** stop at Abovian on routes from Yerevan, Giumri and Vanadzor-Aparan. Several *Yerevan-Abovian* buses run daily between the Yerevan bus and minivan stop at *4 Paronian, west of the end of Mashtots just before 'khorovats street' a.k.a. Proshian* begins and from the Abovian Aftokaiyeran at the main square on Yerevanian p. Bus #111 is the Yerevan-Abovian bus, Bus #502 is the Yerevan-Abovian-Voskevaz bus. 250 AMD.

**Minivans** (Marshrutni taxis) leave from the Abovian Bus Station on Yerevanian p. by the main square in Abovian. Minivans do not have a set schedule, they leave when they are full and generally run once or twice a day to outlying villages, so ask. Minivans connect Abovian with the Yerevan bus and minivan stop at *4 Paronian, west of the end of Mashtots and before 'khorovats street' a.k.a. Proshian* (250 AMD), *Aparan* (250 AMD), *Vanadzor* (300 AMD), *Biurakan* (100 AMD), *Aghst/Agaraka* (100 AMD), *Aruch* (100 AMD), *Talin* (150 AMD), *Mastara* (250 AMD) and *Giumri* (350 AMD).

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

**Yerevan-Abovian Taxis**

**From Yerevan**, just about any taxi will take you to Abovian at around 100 AMD per kilometer (double cost to cover driver's return) and dedicated cars to Abovian are located at *Kino Hairenik (Kino Rossiya)* at the corner of Agatangeghos and Movses Khorenatsi Pts. Cars normally charge 3000 AMD for up to four passengers, though be prepared to bargain and for

the taxi driver who wants to wait for a full carload to make the extra fare. You can also order a taxi by phone. The going rate is around 3000 AMD. Most Yerevan taxi services provide this service, but we use Voyage tel: (010) 54-54-05, 54-54-06 and have had good experiences.

**From Abovian**, taxis in Abovian are all around town or at the *Aftokaiyeran* (bus station) by the main square on Yerevanian p (near the university building) as well as at the Abovian Dzor Restaurant/Motel. Late in the day you may have to bargain a bit or add something for return, but normally this is not a problem. Taxis to Yerevan are around 3000 AMD ( 2700 AMD at 100 AMD per km), to Talin around 4000 AMD, to Aparan around 2500 AMD. [See taxi list for call taxi](#) on page 44.

**By Car** Abovian is at the crossroads of the Giumri-Yerevan, Aparan/Vanadzor-Echmiadzin and the Abovian highways. There are also side roads to Biurakan/Amberd/Kari Lich, Oshakan and Voskevaz. **Highways** serving Abovian are the A327/M1 which runs between Yerevan and Giumri via Talin (Yerevan: 20 km, Talin: 46 km, Maralik: 68 km, Giumri: 92 km), th

Petrol stations and rest stops/kebab stands proliferate on the highway near Abovian and in nearby Agarak, Ujan and Kosh.

**AROUND**

**On foot** is a bit of a hike from the river to the top of the canyon, but the left bank is easy enough to navigate on foot, you can cross the center within 15 minutes, ditto down to the gorge. [See Bearings](#) (on page 44) for a layout of the town.

**Taxis** Abovian has plenty of taxis, in the center, and at the Abovian Dzor Restaurant/Motel. The service is good, the drivers knowledgeable (few speak English), and willing to show off the city. The rate is 100 AMD per km. One taxi service is (tel. 33400, 3540).

**Regional Taxis** Taxis are a good way to explore the near region, and very reasonable if you are two or more and split costs, which are per vehicle. Negotiate before starting on your journey, figure 100 AMD/km as fair, add 500 AMD per hour for waiting. Taxis can take you from the center to (all distances from Abovian center): Oshakan (4 km) & Voskevaz (6 km); Agarak (6 km), Kosh (17 km) and Aruch (23 km); Biurakan (11 km), Amberd (27 km) & Kari Lich/Mt. Aragats (34 km);

Dzorap/Aghst (8 km) & Tegher (13 km); Mughni (2 km), Ohanavan (7 km), Saghmosavan (14 km) and Aparan (40 km). A full day's trip into region and back should cost around \$20 Note you buy the driver's meal if you stay out all day and overnight if he can't go home at night from where you settle in.

**Taxi Services**

Look for taxi service ads at the center and area cafes, restaurants and motel. They change by the season, sometimes by the week. Also inquire at your lodging. Most offer the service or will find someone for you. You can also call Voyage in Yerevan (010-54-54-05, 54-54-06), they say they will charge one way for pickup in Abovian (3600-4000 AMD).

**TRAVEL AGENCIES**

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

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

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

**COMMUNICATION, ETC.**

- Fire – 101
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## Sevan Highway

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TRIP 6 : SOUTHEAST, GEGHAMA LEHR

▲ ABOVIAN -  
 (A): (Mayakovski) - ARAMUS - (Kamaris) - (Geghashen) - ARAMUS - (Nor Giugh) - (Kotaiik)  
 (B) : (Kotaiik) - KAPUTAN - (Hatis) - MT. HATIS - (Zovashen)  
 (C): (Kotaiik) - AKUNK - (Zar) - SEVABERD - GEGHAMA LEHR: AKNALICH (lake, Vishap) / GEGHAMAKAN PETROGLYPHS

This trip visits -----



**Stay:** Hotel in Talin (of the most basic kind), motels between Udjan and Kosh, village homes (basic), camping by Kosh reservoir, Kakvadzor.  
**Eat:** Talin cafes, Agarak/Udjan cafes, roadside stands.  
**Springs:** Udjan, Kotaiik, Kosh, Avan, Aruch, Nerkin Bazmaber, Kakvadzor, Verin Bazmaber Ashnak, Irind, Katnaghbiur, Yeghnik.

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

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↻ END OF TRIP 6



RESOURCES ▲

READINGS

- "Early Christian Architecture of Armenia," Murad Hasratian (Yerevan 2000)
- "Architectural Ensembles of Armenia," O. K. Khalpakchian (Iskusstvo Publishers, Moscow 1980)
- "Compositions of Domed Structures in Georgia and Armenia" (R, Agababian, Yerevan 1950)
- "The History of Armenian Architecture" (V. Arutunian, Yerevan 1985)
- "Armenian Architectural Monuments" (V Arutunian and S Safarian, Moscow, 1951)
- "Architettura Armena del quarto al diciannovesimo secolo," P. Cuneo (Rome, 1988)
- "Armenian Civil Architecture (Dwelling Houses and Public Buildings)," O. Khalpakchian (Moscow, 1971)
- "Domed Cross Compositions in Armenia and the Byzantine Empire in the 5<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> Centuries," S. Mnatsakanian (Yerevan, 1989)
- "Materials on the History of Armenian Architecture," T. Thoromanian (Yerevan, Vol. 1, 1948)
- "Old Armenian Architecture," N. Tokarsky, (Yerevan, 1946)
- "Armenian Architecture in the 4<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> Centuries," N. Tokarsky (Yerevan, 1961)
- "Armenian Architecture," A. Zarian (Yerevan, 1996)
- "A History of the Armenian People, Vol. 1," George A Bournoutian (Mazda Publishers, Costa Mesa)
- "The Armenian People, From Ancient to Modern Times, Vol. 1," Richard Hovannisian (St. Martin's Press, New York)
- "Armenia, A Journey Through History," Arra Avakian (The Electric Press, Fresno)
- "The Heritage of Armenian Literature, Vol. 1 From the Oral tradition to the Golden Age," Agop Hacikyan, editor (Wayne State University Press, Detroit)

- "Byzantium The Early Centuries," John Julius Norwich (Knopf, New York)
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- "The Armenians," Sirapie Der Nersessian (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970)
- "The Ancient Civilization of Urartu: An Archeological Adventure," Boris B. Piotrovsky (New York: Coules Co. 1969)
- "The People of the Hills," by Charles Burney & David Marshall Long (London: Baylis & Son, 1971)
- "The Armenians," by John M. Douglas (J. J. Winthrop Corp., 1992)
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- "Histoire de l'Armenie," by Pardejian
- "Zoroastrianism in Armenia", by James Russell
- "Armenian Khachkars" (Editions Erebuni, 1978)
- "Armenian Medieval Churches," Swiss Institute for Technology, Department of Architecture (ETH, Zurich, 1996)
- "Architecture of the Soviet Armenia," (Stroysdat, Moscow, 1986)
- "Russian Arkitektura Sovietskoy Armenie 20th Century," (Sovietakan Grogh, Yerevan, 1980)
- "The Armenians: A Colossal Bibliographic Guide to Books Published in English," (Armenian Reference Book, 1993)
- "A Brief History of Armenia," Rev Sarkis Papajian, Mid-Cal Publishers, Fresno 1974.
- "Armenia and Armenians," Dennis R. Papazian, The University of Michigan, Dearborn, September 8, 1987.
- "A Very Brief History of Armenia," Christopher J. Walker, Printinfo, Yerevan 2003
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- "Unique Geological Monuments of Armenia: Guidebook for tourists, " Ashot Avanesian, Edward Malkhassian and Sergey Nazaretyan, (Armenian Foundation of Seismic Protection Yerevan 2000)

- "Armenia Traveler Encyclopedia," K. S. Khudaverdian, S. S. Arevshatian, V. N. Belyi, Sh. G. Khachatryan, A. V. Kakosian, E. L. Melkonian (Armenian Soviet Encyclopedia, Yerevan 1990)
- "Wetlands in Armenia – their values and threats and their contribution to sustainable development and poverty alleviation," [PDF FILE](#)
- "First National Report to The Convention on Biological Diversity incorporating A Country Study on the Biodiversity of Armenia" [PDF FILE](#)

ONLINE

Regional

- Endangered Species  
[www.iucnredlist.org/search/details.php/3786/all](http://www.iucnredlist.org/search/details.php/3786/all)
- [www.enrin.grida.no/biodiv/biodiv/national/armenia/general/dvthr.htm](http://www.enrin.grida.no/biodiv/biodiv/national/armenia/general/dvthr.htm)
- [www.hetq.am/eng/society/0502-safari.html](http://www.hetq.am/eng/society/0502-safari.html)
- [www.persianleopard.com/cons.htm](http://www.persianleopard.com/cons.htm)
- Wings Over Armenia  
[www.archaeology.am/index.html](http://www.archaeology.am/index.html)

Proshians

- Shaddadids  
[www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shaddadids](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shaddadids)

History, Culture, Background

- [The Armenian Nobility](http://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Armenian_nobility)  
[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Armenian\\_nobility](http://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Armenian_nobility)
- [www.armenian.ch](http://www.armenian.ch)
- [Hye Etch](http://www.hyeetch.nareg.com.au/)
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#### ABOUT THE AUTHORS ▲

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

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

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

In a previous life Rafi was the Assistant to the Minister for Sports, serving 6 ministers, before meeting Rick when they worked together on several humanitarian aid projects funded by USAID and managed by the Armenian Assembly of America and Fund for Democracy and Development. In a world where engineers are taxi drivers, Rafi became the Finance Manager for these projects, learning computer skills and creating the first multi-denomination accounting system for USAID projects in the Caucasus.

In an even earlier life Rafi was an athlete, competing in Light Athletics (Track) where he set the All Armenia record for the 60 meter dash, a record that still stands. He was a Sports Teacher and an Honored Coach of the Republic of Armenia. He lives in Yerevan, is a proud Yerevantsi, one of the few who did not leave in the dark years of 1991-1995.

**Bella Karapetian** (Editing, Translations, Russian Edition) first met Rick in 1993 when she came to the American University and worked in his office as Faculty services Manager and Special Events Coordinator, where she learned patience and good humor working with American professors (God give us patience and a dose of Pantalgin). She then worked at the World Food Program in Armenia for 11 years as an administrator and Program Officer. At the same time she collaborated with Rick on articles and the first TourArmenia CD-ROM. In her previous life Bella worked with International architects at ArmStateDesign Institute as an information program assistant and translator, as well as learning the form and function of design in life, a gift she carries with her to this day. History and architecture is her true love and she has traveled to China, Thailand, Malaysia, Italy, Germany, and Lebanon and throughout the former Soviet Union. Bella tops this off by maintaining her membership in the World Esperanto Association. *Saluton!*

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KOTAİK REGION MAP ▲

ABOVIAN MAP ▲

**H OVERNIGHT**

- 10. Argishtii Hotel
- 14. Hotel Gross
- 24. Gugark Hotel
- 36. Hakobian Hotel

Edik Amirbekian's B&B, 3a Aghababian  
 Lusine Simonian's B&B, 26 Orbeli  
 Haykants Tun Holiday House, 21  
 Maimekh

**S SPA**

- 49. Vanadzor SAR Aroghjaran

**▲ FOOD & DRINK**

- 5. Iceberg Restaurant
- 11. Argishtii Restaurant
- 32. Tavush Restaurant
- 37. Bellissimo Restaurant
- 43. N'shkhark Bakery
- 46. Lahmajo Restaurant
- 48. Elkani Restaurant
- 50. Flaminko Restaurant

**☕ CAFE**

- 34. Café Oasis

**🚌 BUSES -MASHRUTNI TAXIS**

- 4. Aftokaiyan

**🚆 TRAIN**

- 3. Railroad Station

**🏛️ MUSEUMS, ART GALLERY**

- 18. Museum of Local Lore of Tavush  
 Pambak

- 35. Fine Arts Museum
- 40. Aesthetic National Center
- 44. Stepan Zorian Home Museum

**🏛️ MONUMENTS - SITES**

- 7. Monument to the Exiles
- 8. Vazgen Sarkissian Statue
- 19. Mon. to Victims of World War II
- 30. Hovhannes Abelian Statue
- 52. Mon. to 40th Anniversary of Soviet  
 Armenia

- 1. Takavoranist – Bronze Age  
 Settlement

**🏛️ CHURCHES**

- 2. S. Astvatsatsin Church
- 6. Russian "Cossack" Church
- 45. S. Grigor Narekatsi church
- 51. S. Sargis church (Primacy of the  
 Gugarats Diocese)

**🎭 THEATRES, MUSIC**

- 20. Chamber Theatre "BOHEM"
- 22. Song Theatre
- 31. State Dramatic Theater after H.  
 Abelian
- 38. The Chamber Orchestra
- 39. Chamber Choir
- 41. Cinema ANI
- 42. Puppet Theatre

**🛍️ SHOPS, SHUKA**

- 15. Shuka (Market)

- 17. Yarmaka (Market)
- 33. Univermag

**🏟️ STADIUM**

**✉️ INTERNET, PHONE, POST**

**🏛️ GOVT. OFFICES**

- 25. Vanadzor Mayor's Office

**🏦 BANK, ATM**

- 9. Converse Bank
- 12. Unibank
- 13. Ardshininvestbank
- 26. Inecobank
- 27. ACBA Bank
- 28. Armeconombank
- 29. ATM

**🏪 APOTEKAS**

**🏥 CLINICS - HOSPITALS**

- 16. Vanadzor Hospital #2
- 47. Vanadzor Hospital Medical Center

**🌳 PARKS**

- Culture Palace Park
- Botanical Gardens
- Sayat-Nova
- Hrant Matevosian
- Takavoranist

**🚻 PUBLIC TOILET**