



ARMENIA
TRAVEL
GUIDE
BOOK

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GUIDEBOOK



USAID
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EDMC
Enterprise Development &
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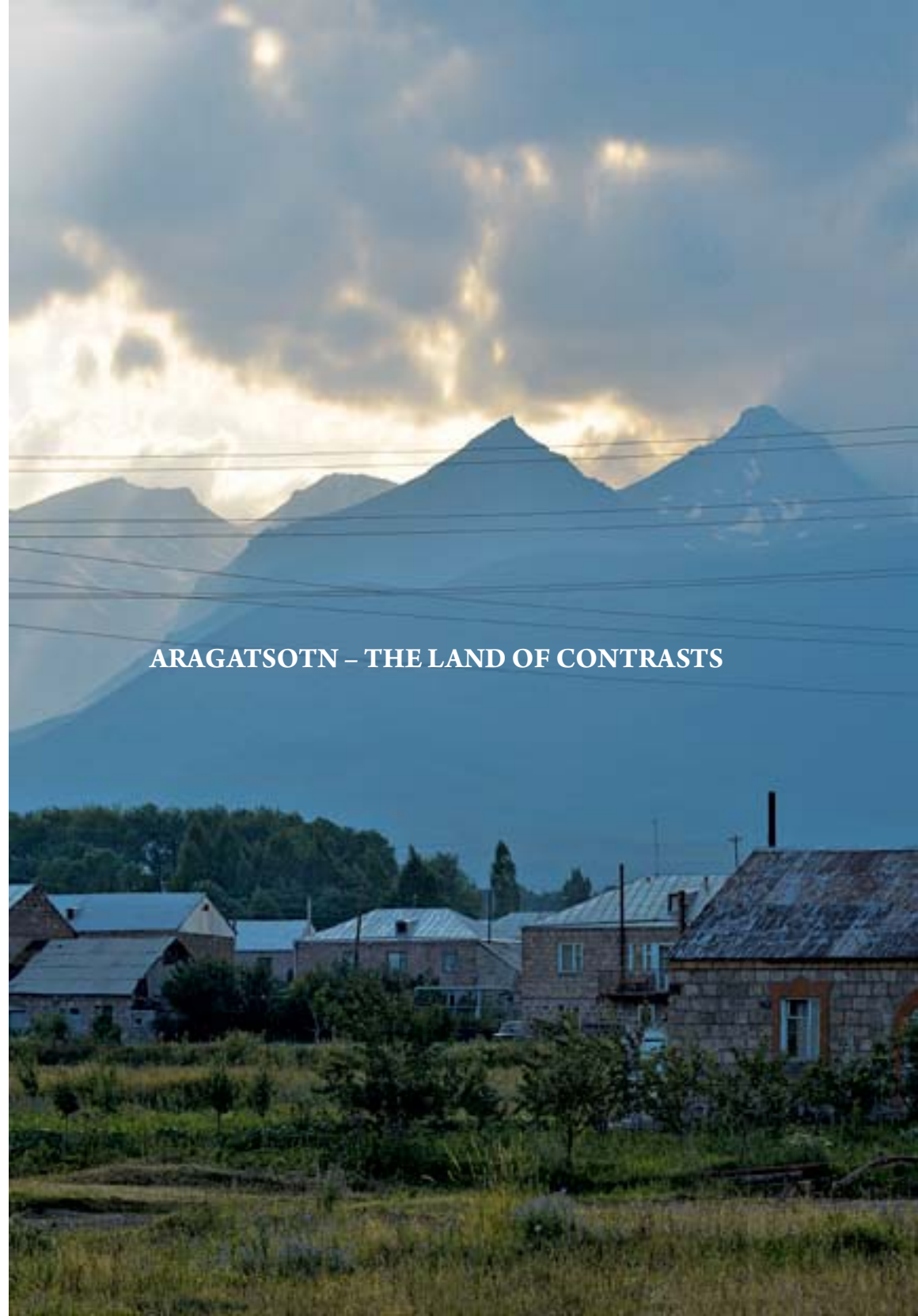


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ARAGATSOTN – THE LAND OF CONTRASTS



FOREWORD

Most people associate Aragatsotn simply with the massive Mt. Aragats, a dormant volcano that hovers over the northern reaches of Armenia. Though tiny in area, Aragatsotn contains a remarkable profusion of landscapes, from Aparan's verdant meadows, through the deep river gorges of Kasakh and Amberd, over the patchwork of vineyards and orchards around Ashtarak, to dry lunar like landscapes west of Talin. Above all, like a crown of the region, rises the cone of Aragats, with its four crests, crystal lakes and fragile alpine ecosystems.

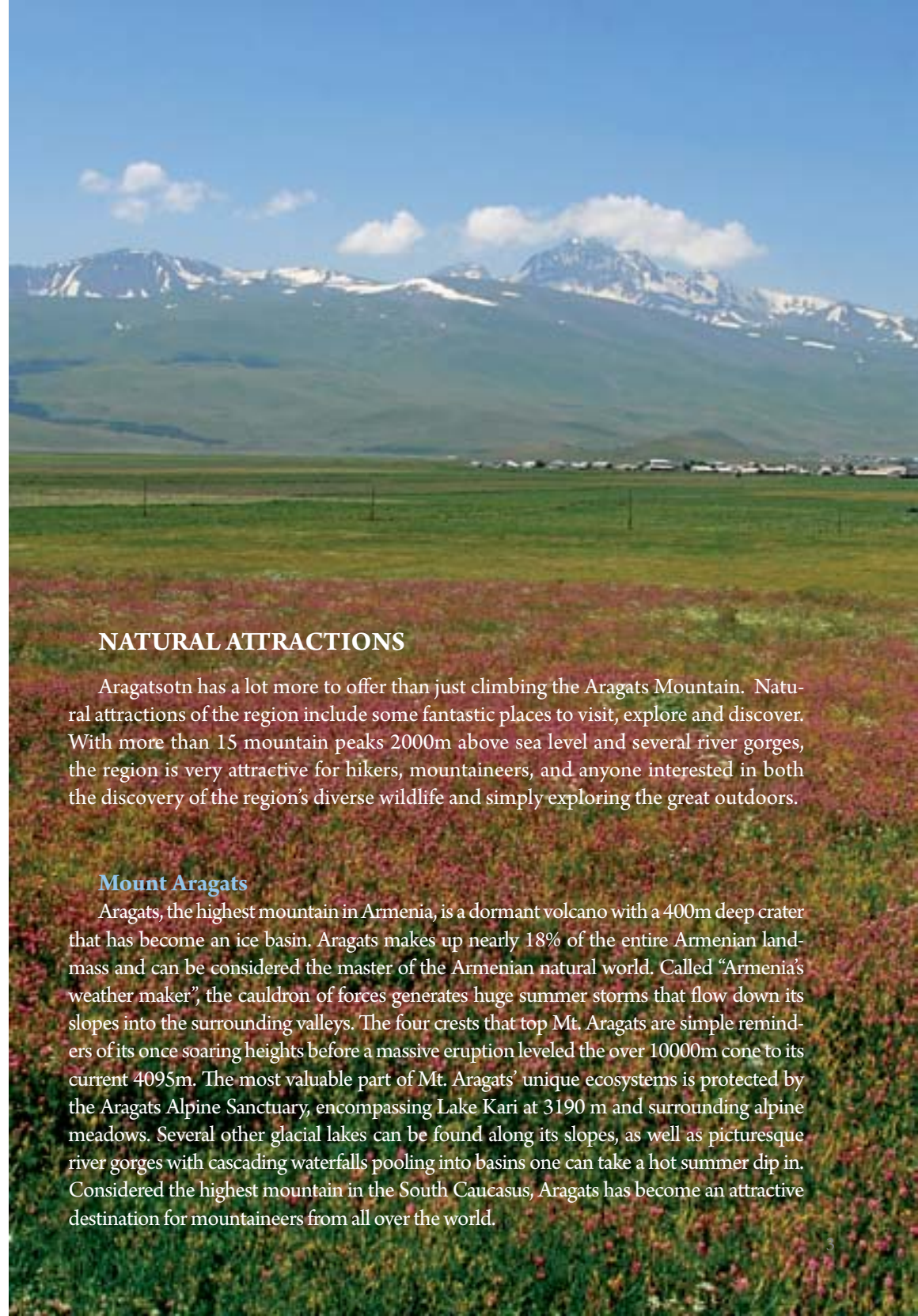
The history of Aragatsotn, or the "foot of Aragats" as the name translates, can be traced to the time when the volcano was still quite active. The province is blessed with an astonishing array of historical monuments. Mysterious Bronze Age citadels, haunting monasteries, and looming fortresses perched close to the sky, are only some of the many treasures the region has to offer; there are plenty more hidden mysteries for those who are keen to search them out.

Aragatsotn is where Byurakan Observatory is located, with the second largest optical telescope in Eurasia and the Cosmic Ray Division station, one of the world's largest institutions for research of cosmic ray physics. These scientific institutions are situated high on the slopes of Mt. Aragats, as alongside the many dachas (summer homes) of wealthy Yerevan dwellers who find the cooler climate and its proximity to the capital undoubtedly attractive.

During the Middle Ages, the region was traversed with several caravan routes connecting the old Armenian capital Dvin with Ani and Vanadzor. Many caravanserais and fortresses remain from those times, including the abundance of olden architecture through the churches and monuments found in Ashtarak, a city situated at their crossroads. Today, Ashtarak is the capital of the Aragatsotn province, with numerous restaurants and leisure areas built along the Kasakh River gorge.

Within a radius of just 20 km around Ashtarak, you will find a multitude of villages worth visiting. Wander through their winding, dusty streets and savor the beauty of olden dwellings, lush gardens fenced in by stone walls, shrines hidden in the shade of walnut trees, and a slow pace of life, wherein time itself seems to have stopped. If you have a chance to enter one of the village homes, you will be rewarded with a feast fit for a king. Locals pride themselves on their cuisine and will often go far out of their way to ensure you are well fed. The region also has a long tradition of viticulture and wine-making. Discover the most distinct wineries and traditional cellars through a unique wine tasting journey from Osakan to Kosh. The northern territories are known as one of the best sources of the cheese and dairy products in the country, produced by seminomadic Yazidis, a pagan Kurdish sect making up Armenia's largest minority population.

As a result of its startling landscapes and contrasting geography, the region offers excellent opportunities for different forms of outdoor activities. Although some historical sites increasingly attract package-tour crowds, Aragatsotn remains a destination for the connoisseur – the archaeology amateur, hardy hiker, horse lover, intrepid paraglider and the indispensable wine devotee trekking the world for a taste of rarity.



NATURAL ATTRACTIONS

Aragatsotn has a lot more to offer than just climbing the Aragats Mountain. Natural attractions of the region include some fantastic places to visit, explore and discover. With more than 15 mountain peaks 2000m above sea level and several river gorges, the region is very attractive for hikers, mountaineers, and anyone interested in both the discovery of the region's diverse wildlife and simply exploring the great outdoors.

Mount Aragats

Aragats, the highest mountain in Armenia, is a dormant volcano with a 400m deep crater that has become an ice basin. Aragats makes up nearly 18% of the entire Armenian landmass and can be considered the master of the Armenian natural world. Called "Armenia's weather maker", the cauldron of forces generates huge summer storms that flow down its slopes into the surrounding valleys. The four crests that top Mt. Aragats are simple reminders of its once soaring heights before a massive eruption leveled the over 10000m cone to its current 4095m. The most valuable part of Mt. Aragats' unique ecosystems is protected by the Aragats Alpine Sanctuary, encompassing Lake Kari at 3190 m and surrounding alpine meadows. Several other glacial lakes can be found along its slopes, as well as picturesque river gorges with cascading waterfalls pooling into basins one can take a hot summer dip in. Considered the highest mountain in the South Caucasus, Aragats has become an attractive destination for mountaineers from all over the world.

Mount Ara

Mount Ara, named after the mythical Armenian hero Ara the Beautiful, is an extinct volcano located northeast of Ashtarak, on the border with Kotayk. From a distance, the outline of the mountain resembles a man lying with the hands folded on his chest. According to legend, it is the body of King Ara, slain by the Queen Semiramis (Shamiram in Armenian), who magically transformed the top of the mountain into his sarcophagus. The irregular sunken cone is open on several sides, allowing melted snows to form the mountain streams that feed into the Kasakh and Hrazdan Rivers. Mt. Ara has a very rich ecosystem, combining mountain highlands and steppe with traces of the native forests on its northern side. With 650 registered species of vascular plants, it encompasses an amazing concentration of 20 percent of Armenia's flora. The mountain is recognized as a globally important habitat for the conservation of bird populations, due to its rich wildlife. Mt. Ara has excellent options for day hikes, a favorite destination for mountaineers who are rewarded with a breathtaking 360° degree view from its top.



Kasakh River

The Kasakh River begins at the northeastern slopes of Mt. Aragats and flows down along its eastern slope, joining the river of Metsamor. Kasakh River is best known for its beautiful gorge, which extends 70km in length, with maximum depths of 150 to 200m. The river gorge is a natural jewel, seldom explored by the trekkers, but worth the effort for the unique flora, rock formations, and fauna. The perpendicular basalt and lime cliffs of the gorge contain many natural and artificial caves, which were used as human shelters and hiding places for many a millennia. The most picturesque section of the gorge stretches from Karbi village to Saghmosavank, at a length of approximately 10km. The river, with its beautiful panorama and abundance of fresh water, attracted the Armenian king Tiridates III and George Illuminator, who built their summer residences in the region. The gorge has the highest waterfall in Armenia with a 71m long drop, the St. Hovhannes shrine with a sacred spring, and several other beautiful points of interest.



HISTORICAL AND HERITAGE ATTRACTIONS

Amberd Fortress (7th-14th cc.)

Amberd, the largest standing fortress in Armenia, is located on the southern slopes of Mt. Aragats, on a triangular cape where the rivers Arkashen and Amberd join. Amberd means "a fortress in the clouds", a fitting name given its elevation at 2300m above sea level. The mansion and some sections of the walls were constructed in the 7th century by the noble house of Kamsarakan. In the 10th century, it was rebuilt by Vahram Pahlavuni, who added thick stone walls and three bastions along the ridge of the Arkhashyan ravine. During the following period, the fortress became the military defense center of the Pahlavuni and Bagratuni kingdoms, as well as the summer residence of the rulers. The complex of Amberd derives its great historical importance from its uniqueness, being one of the best examples of Armenian fortress construction. The site incorporates a rich variety of buildings, including a church, a chapel, baths, walls and several gates. In 1026, Vahram Pahlavuni built the Surb Astvatsatsin church within the fortress. It is the first church constructed with double entries from all four corners of the cross-wings. Following a turbulent history spanning several centuries and destructions caused by the invasion of the Seljuks, Mongols and Tatars, the fortress finally lost its significance and became a completely desolate construction in 14th c.



Hovhannavank monastery (5th-14th cc.)

Hovhannavank monastery (5th-14th cc.), a wonderful sample of Armenian Apostolic Church architecture, is perched atop the Kasakh River, situated in the village of Ohanavan. The oldest section of the monastery was built in the 4th century by the first Armenian Catholicos, Grigor Lusavorich. The centerpiece of the monastery is the cruciform domed Church of Karapet built between 1216 and 1221 through the donation of Prince Vache Vachutian. The high protective wall which surrounds the monastery dates back to 13th-14th cc. The cathedral has an umbrella-shaped dome, unique to the architectural design of Armenian churches, and several important carved scenes. Between the 12th and 17th centuries, Hovhannavank was known as an important educational and theological center within the region, complete with a scriptorium.

Saghmosavank Monastery (13th c.)

Within the vicinity of Ohanavank, another majestic monastery complex peaks over the Kasakh River gorge: the Saghmosavank Monastery. Its main temple, the Church of Zion (1215 AD), belongs to the same type of cross-winged domed structure with two-floor annexes in all the corners of the building as the Church of Karapet in Hovhannavank. Saghmosavank was a significant center for quality scholarship and calligraphy, with an established medieval higher structure of schooling. A constant rivalry among the monasteries of Saghmosavank and Hovhannavank raged for the title of the most beautiful of all the churches in the province. To decide which of the two deserves the title, one must visit them both!



Tegher monastery (13th-14th cc.)

Tegher Monastery or Tegheri Vank is an early 13th c. monastery located on the southeastern slopes of Mount Aragats, near the modern village of Tegher. It was built for Princess Khatun (also known as Mamakhatur), the wife of Prince Vache Vachutian, who had purchased the district of Aragatsotn from the Zakarian brothers. Designed by Vardapet Aghbayrik, the same architect who built the monasteries of Saghmosavank and Hovhannavank, it consists of the church of Surb Astvatsatsin (1213 AD) and adjacent gavit completed in 1221. The monastery remained intact during a time when Mongol invasions plagued the lands.

St. Grigor Cathedral church (661-666) of Aruch and Grigor Mamikonyan's palace (7th c.)

The church is the largest of Armenia's early medieval domed halls (34.6 x 16.95m) and is famous for its prestigious architecture and intricate frescoes. According to historians, this particular church was built during the reign of Prince Grigor Mamikonian. From inside, the temple was covered with frescos from the 7thc., representing the scene from the Resurrection. To the southeast of the cathedral are the excavated ruins of the Grigor Mamikonian palace, identical in layout to the Palace for the Catholicos at Dvin. The palace consisted of two buildings, a great hall and a column hall, as well as the throne. The throne (1.3x1.6m) is made of tufa and is the only surviving sample of its type in Armenia.

Talin Cathedral (5th-6th cc.)

The huge temple of Talin is a unique monument of Armenian church architecture and belongs to the three-nave vaulted style of basilicas. The exact date of its foundation is not known. From a number of existing manuscripts, the oldest was dating back to 783AD, although there is a belief that the construction may be taken place around one or two centuries earlier. This remarkable monument was partially destroyed because of the earthquakes in 1840 and 1931. It was partly renovated in 1947 and essentially reconstructed between 1972 and 1976. During this time period, excavations found a one-nave basilica, remainders of the palace building, and pedestals.

St. Gevork Monastery of Mughni (14th c.)

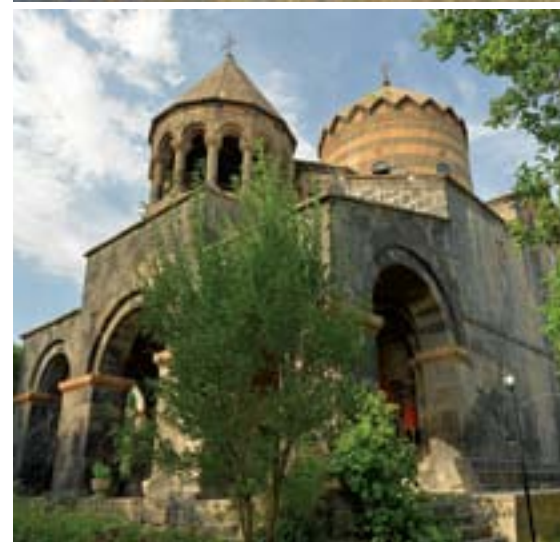
The monastery of Mughni has been a renowned holy site housing the relics of the famous Christian saint, St. Gevork; it was mentioned for the first time in 1278 and 1280 in two separate manuscripts. The church of St. Gevork stands within a rectangular walled monastery, has a single cylindrical drum notable for the horizontal alternating striped pattern that surrounds it, and is completed with a conical umbrella type dome above. Numerous religious frescoes around the apse and on the left line the interior of the building, most likely painted in the 17th c. As it housed the relics of the Christian Saint Gevork, the monastery became a well-known pilgrimage destination for local and foreign visitors to the region. Clergyman and author Mesrop Taghiadian' (1803-1858) designated) St Gevork was the most crowded pilgrimage spot in the Ararat valley after the Holy Etchmiadzin, visited not only by Armenians, but also by Georgians and Muslim Persians. The whole complex is very well maintained and has a souvenir shop as well as a well maintained park to stroll along in.

Church and mausoleum of St. Mesrop Mashtots (4th, 19th-20th c.)

The church of St. Mesrop Mashtots is located in Oshakan village. Mesrop Mashtots (362-440 AD) was an Armenian theologian, linguist and hymnologist, best known for having invented the Armenian alphabet in 405 AD. After his death, the renowned figure was buried in Oshakan. In 443 AD, Vahan Amatuni built a cruciform chapel over his grave, while from 1875 to 1879 Catholicos Gevorg IV built a new basilica over the existing architecture. In 1884, a two-story cylindrical bell tower was added to the eastern side of the church. This bell tower is unique to Armenian architecture, both in terms of its shape and placement, as its entrance is from the altar of the church. In the 1960s, the interior of the church was decorated with frescoes by artist H. Minasyan. The grave of Mesrop Mashtots, under the altar of the church, is a pilgrimage site visited by locals and tourist alike.

Agarak Archaeological Site (3rd Millennium BC-18th c. AD)

The archaeological site of Agarak is located on the western bank of the Amberd River, near the village of Agarak. It stretches on both sides of Ashtarak-Gyumri highway and covers an area of 200 hectares, a portion of which (118 hectares) has now been declared a historical and cultural preserve by the Government of Armenia. It is a multi-layered settlement which sees human settlement beginning in the early Bronze Age and was subsequently left inhabited in various archaeological epochs. The site can be considered a large open-air sculpture. Taking into account the special characteristics of the local relief, formed by tuff flows, the inhabitants transformed the landscape at the cost of considerable effort, turning natural masses of the tuff bricks native to the volcanic region into a gigantic system consisting of collections of stone structures. Within the limits of the Armenian Plateau and the territories bordering on it, no other such site has been discovered. It is unique in terms of its unusual composition and design, as well as its volume and area. Large quantities of wine presses and wine storage vats discovered in the excavated sectors indicate the predominant role of viticulture and wine-making in the economic life of the inhabitants of Agarak. As one of the most important points along the trade route leading from Airarat to Shirak and Ani, Agarak developed a flourishing





ASHTARAK REGION

The Ashtarak region, famous for its wines and sun-dried fruit production, is dotted with a multitude of small, historic villages that could be considered a tourist destinations. After presenting the town of Ashtarak, we will start our village tour from Oshakan, located 6 km SW from Ashtarak, and continue clockwise until we reach the villages situated on the NE, along the Kasakh River gorge.

Ashtarak (“Tower”), the capital of the province, is one of the oldest settlements in Armenia. Though the first written reference to it dates back to the 9th century, many monuments including Darabavor caves, fortresses and settlements from the Bronze Age, prove that it was inhabited long before. Situated in the gorge of the Kasakh River, Ashtarak is a town of contrasts, where aged basilicas and heritage houses share the city streets with new and Soviet era buildings. The remarkable dwelling houses (19th-20th cc.), industrial and public buildings (mill dated to the late 19th c., bath going back to 1900, etc.) are examples of the unique architecture of the town. The most ancient part of the town is “Berdatagh” (Fortress Quarter), the name deriving from a Cyclopean fortress nearby. The town’s main attraction is its collection of Medieval Churches, encompassing 1000 years of religious construction, beginning from the conversion of the country in the 4th c. Some churches are left in ruins, but they still retain their innate splendor and illustrate the breadth of experimentation and innovation that are hallmarks of the medieval Armenian building and design.

Karmravor church, also known as Surb Astvatsatsin, is one of the rare monuments of the 7th century that has remained almost intact. This small, but rather interesting, church features a reddish tiled roof (hence the name Karmravor, which means “reddish”).

Tsiranavor (“apricotish”) is a large basilica built in the 5th-6th cc, by Catholicos Nerses II Bagrevandtsi. It is the oldest monument of that era in Ashtarak. The church is a rectangular triple-aisled basilica, with the horseshoe-like altar and two chambers to the left and right. Walls remain intact but the roof has collapsed. Since the church was built directly over the gorge, it also played the role of a defending construction surrounded by protective walls.

Spitakavor (“whitish”) church (13th-14th cc.), is located further down the road from Tsiranavor. Built right on the edge of the cliff, it provides great views to the Kasakh River gorge. It is a small church made of orange tuff with a collapsed roof and a few khachkars on the altar.

The Legend of Three Sisters

Karmravor, Tsiranavor and Spitakavor churches can be called sister churches owing to the legend around them. In ancient times, three sisters lived in the town of Ashtarak. Unfortunately, all of them fell in love with the same man, Prince Sargis. The elder sisters decided to sacrifice themselves for the sake of the happiness of the youngest one. They threw themselves into the gorge, one wearing red and the other wearing an apricot dress. The youngest sister fell into despair. She put on a white dress and threw herself into the gorge, as well. Prince Sargis became much like a hermit upon hearing of this tragedy and erected three small churches at the edge of the gorge. Each church was given its name based on the color of each sister’s dress.

economy and commercial sector, especially within the 3rd and 4th cc. B.C. and in the 2nd through 4th cc. AD. Evidence of this development is provided by the discovery of painted urban pottery, a drakhm of Alexander the Great, a silver denarius of Octavian Augustus, and several signet rings found in sarcophagi burials belonging to the late Antique Period of the site.

Tsaghkevank Monastery - St. Varvara Pilgrimage Site

Built high in the rocky cliffs of Mt. Ara, in a mossy cave with sacred springs, is the beautiful Tsaghkevank, or the Monastery of Flowers. Known also as the shrine of Kuys Varvara (the Virgin Barbara), the cave holds the saint’s tomb, altar and of the many gifts brought by the faithful population. According to legend, the cave was the place where virgin St. Varvara the Martyr was hiding from persecution by her pagan father for adopting Christianity. She was discovered, tortured and condemned to death by beheading. People believe that the spring which flows in drop by drop from the upper part of the cave is sacred, while the drops represent the virgin’s tears. It is also believed that this water is medically beneficial, especially for eyesight. Every year on the Feast of the Ascension, a pilgrimage is made to the holy shrine with the participation of many a clergymen and the faithful from different regions in Armenia.

Petroglyphs of the Mt. Aragats System

As a result of the recent archaeological studies and surveys, a series of open-air rock engravings were discovered along the Mt. Aragats Mountain Chain. Specific locations with ancient rock carvings include the Voskehat-Aghavnatun-Lernamerdz group, Vardenut, and other such places on the southern and western slopes of Mount Aragats, the western shoreline of the Aparan Reservoir near Kuchak, as well as a shelter with new rock paintings in the canyon of the Kasakh River. Unfortunately, they are not easy to locate, and you will certainly need a knowledgeable guide or lot of luck.



Other historical places of interest include St. Marine church, St. Sarkis church, an old cemetery with khachkars and a vaulted bridge. St. Marine church is situated in the central part of Ashtarak, northWest from Karmravor Church. It was built in the year 1271 or, according to some sources, 1281, and has a beautiful umbrella dome it rests under. St. Sarkis Church, built in the 19th century upon older foundations, is situated at a promontory overlooking the Kasakh River gorge. It offers a fine view to the old part of town and the three churches of Tsiranavor, Spitakavor, and Karmravor. A large cemetery (11th -17th cc.) located east of Karmravor church has some interesting khachkars worth visiting (Ashtarak “Great Khachkar” from 14th c., khachkar “Three Brothers” from 13th c.). The reddish tuff stone Ashtarak bridge was built in 1664 by a wealthy merchant known as Grigor Motsakents, and features two equal sized smaller pointed arches on either side of a larger central arch.

Throughout Armenia, the village of **Oshakan** is quite well known as the burial place of St. Mesrop Mashtots, the 4th century scientist and philosopher from Echmiadzin. St. Mashtots was the inventor of the Armenian Alphabet, which is still in use today with slight changes introduced during the Soviet Era but kept intact with the addition of two letters in the diaspora, and the founder of the first known Armenian School in 404 AD. After his death in 442, he was buried in Oshakan.

Oshakan village was an important settlement throughout the vast history of Armenia. In written records, it was mentioned by Armenian historians in 440 AD, but the history of the village goes far back to the Urartian period. During the Artaxiad and Arsacid Dynasties (1st c. BC-4th c. AD) Oshakan was known as a royal summer residence. Monuments erected during different centuries can be found today on the village territory. The excavations of Didi Kond hill in the center of the village revealed archeological monuments dating back to the 2nd millennium BC, spanning to the 5th century AD. Massive walls of an Urartian fortress (7th-6th centuries BC), with a citadel, palace and temple complexes, can be seen on the top of the hill. The village is rich in shrines and other historical heritage sites, ensuring it deserves a full day’s visit. One can discover the Tukh Manuk chapel, St. Sarkis shrine, Golgotha shrine and an old bridge over Kasakh River built in 1706 within the vicinity. In the nearby Mankanots valley, stands a reconstructed St. Sion church (7th c.), and a pillar on a plinth believed to mark the grave of either the Byzantine emperor Mauricius or his mother (6th-7th cc.).

Voskevaz village, with its stunning vineyards, long viticulture tradition, and preserved examples of folk architecture (17th – 19th cc.), will very likely soon develop into one of the main stops along the future Armenian Wine Route. The village houses the “Voskevaz” Wine Cellar, which is currently in the process of ongoing modernization. Once completed, it will become a tourist hotspot. The complex will include a chateau with degustation room, restaurant, shop and art gallery among other. Historical sites of the village include centrally positioned St. Hovhannes church (7th - 12th cc.) currently undergoing reconstruction, a olden mansion (18th c.) and cemetery (17th -19th c.). Two and half kilometers to the southwest of the village, strategically positioned atop the Kasakh River Gorge, is a historical complex consisting of the Aghtamir fortress (III-I Millennia BC), ruins of Badali Zham church (5th -7th cc.) and a vishap (dragon stone) monument (II Millennium BC).

The village of **Agarak**, situated on the banks of the Amberd River, 8 km east of Ashtarak, was founded in 1919 by the Armenians coming from Van and Tbilisi. The village is apparently located on the site of a Neolithic, Early Bronze Age through medieval period settlement, with traces of its glorious and distinctive past visible at every step. The most important monument is the archaeological site of Agarak, which dates back to the third millennium BC. The complex is “multi-layered”. People resided there and built up the area during different historical epochs. In the center of the village, a massive wall of an earlier building stands, currently converted into a church (St. Hovhannes), possibly in the 5th-6th cc., through the addition of an apse. Not far from the church are the St. Gevorg shrine, the Tukh Manuk church foundations (10th c.), a medieval cemetery, as well as an interesting, but considerably ruined, mosque from the late Persian period. Approaching the village from the Gyumri highway, on the left one can find a bird's wing monument dedicated to the heroes of the battle for Van. The monument is built on the site of the Bronze Age graveyard of Verin Naver, with substantial chamber tombs of coarse boulders surrounded by stone rings and covered with a grassy mound.

Byurakan, one of the largest and best-known villages of Armenia, lies on the slopes of Mt. Aragats, at 1500m above sea level. This picturesque village with winding streets and old home dwellings is extremely rich in historical monuments. The history of Byurakan reaches as far back as into the pre-Christian era, which some archaeological discoveries of late confirmed. At the beginning of the 20th century, an obelisk supposedly representing a boundary stone for the borders established by Armenian king Artashes I (reigned 190 – 160 BC), was found in the vicinity of the village. The most prosperous era for Byurakan was the Middle Ages. In written sources, it was first mentioned by historian Catholicos Hovhannes Draskhanakertsi in the 10th century, who made Byurakan his homestead, built the important St. Hovhannes basilica, and established the Monks' Union. About 1km northeast from the center of the village is the ruined Artavazik church of the 7th century. The name of the church goes back to the Armenian king at the time, today presumed to be its founder. The church is a small cruciform monocoque structure with a long west arm and a semicircular eastern apse. In the northeast corner adjacent to the apse is a “study” or prayer room. The belfry, which had been added in the 13th century, has recently collapsed. Behind the church and across a small ravine is a huge khachkar monument from the 13th century with a shed roof found at the rear. In the center of Byurakan, found to the left side of the road to Antarut village, are interesting khachkars and gravestones. An unusual pillar style khachkar with a Maltese Cross is located down the road from the Saint Hovhannes church.

The village is also the site of the Byurakan Observatory, named after academician Victor Hambartsumyan. The Byurakan Observatory is a branch of the National Academy of Sciences and is considered the cradle of astronomical achievements of the Armenian nation. The observatory was established in 1946, and it is one of the largest centers of its like in the world. It has a one meter diameter Schmidt Telescope, one of the largest in the world, as well as a 53 centimeter Schmidt Telescope alongside 50 and 40 centimeter mirror telescopes. The



main directions of the scientific research are: the galaxy and its components, radio-astronomy, astral cosmogony, and extra-galactic astronomy. In a house located within the territory of the observatory operates in, lies the Victor Hambartsumyan House Museum where this outstanding astrophysicist lived and worked for a number of years.

Aghtsk village, formerly Dzorap, is located 4km northeast of Agarak. The village is known as home to the Arshakid Mausoleum, a large grave monument complex constructed in the midst of the 5th century. The tomb preserved the ashes of the pagan and Christian kings of the Arshakuni dynasty, the longest dynasty of Armenian kings, which encompassed 400 years of Armenian history. Sassanid King Shapur II (reigned from 309 to 379 AD), in an effort to dispirit the Armenians, exhumed the bones of the Armenian kings and took them to Persia, symbolically taking their fame, power and courage. Only the burial vault of King Sanatruk, an incredibly strong and ingeniously built structure, remained intact. However, the Sparapet Vasak Mamikonyan, after defeating the Persian army, took the relics back, thus restoring the prestige of the kingdom. He buried them in Aghtsk, where they have been preserved in a two-story stone underground crypt with a cruciform foundation, having pagan kings separated from the Christian. The tomb has vaulted cover with horseshoe styled arcs and carvings within its interior which incorporate early Christian and pagan motifs. On the right is a design of the biblical story of Daniel in the Lion's Den and a motif of rams. On the opposite wall is a depiction of fantastic mythical heroes or gods, with astrological imagery of birds, a bull calf amid a grape vine, a cross in a circle with two birds perched on top, and a hunter with two dogs striking a wild boar. The mausoleum continued to be used until the 5th century when the line of Arshakuni kings ended. It eventually fell to invasions and earthquakes and the late historian, Movses Khorenatsi, wrote about a decision finally made to inter the royal dynasty in Echmiadzin.

The architectural and historical complex of Aghtsk includes a 5th century basilica, reconstructed in the 19th century. In the Amberd River gorge, right below the mausoleum, are the medieval cave dwellings and the remains of a cyclopean fort from II-I Millennia BC.

Travelling further to the North, the road arrives at the village of **Thegher**. Tegher, meaning “medicines” (degheh), earns its name from the large assortment of medicinal herbs that grow on its territory. The village contains the Monastery of Tegher built in 1213. The ruins of the 9th century village of Old Tegher, with numerous foundations as well as the remains of a Tukh Manuk funerary chapel of the 5th century, sit a short distance from the monastery. A medieval to 19th century cemetery with mausoleums and khachkars, a large radio telescope, and an unfinished solar power plant from the Soviet era dot the surrounding landscape.

Passing the lively village of Ujan, with its numerous food stands and small eateries, the Gyumri highway reaches one the most interesting stops along its way, the village of Kosh. The village houses several historical monuments, clustered around the old cemetery: St. Grigor Lusavorich chapel (13th c.), and partially reconstructed Kosh castle (5th -13th c.) with beautiful views to the Ararat valley. The true gem of the village is hidden in the nearby gorge, the Koshavank monastery (7th -14th cc.), built right on the edge of the cliff. The surrounding area has lots of natural caves, once used as hermitages.

In the closest vicinity of the **Shamiram** village, on the cape between the two canyons, are the ruins the historical-architectural monuments from the second half of the 2000 B.C. and the beginning of the 1000 B.C. The complex covers the territory of about 10 hectares. The archaeological site of Shamiram includes the ruins if the old city, an artificial water reservoir, the remnants of residences, as well as a group of tombs with megalith towers. Preserved are also some remnants of the monumental constructions, a worship site, and an old water reservoir that still works surprisingly well. The excavations of Shamiram revealed how the iron culture was well developed in Armenia in 10th -9th cc B.C.. The city was destroyed around the end of the 9th-beginning of the 8th century B.C., due to the numerous attacks.

The village of **Aruch** was first mentioned by the historian Yeghishe (5th c.), according to whom it served as a winter-camp for the royal army of the Arshakuni kings. However, its most important period is connected with Prince (Hayots Ishkhan) Grigor Mamikonian (661-685), when Aruch became his official seat of power as granted by the Arab caliph. The village is the location of the 7th century Armenian monastic complex Aruchavank. Remains of the Mamikonians’ palace still stand proud weathering the winds of time, alongside Bronze Age tombs, an old fortress and caravanserai preserved to date in Aruch.

On the northern outskirts of Ashtarak is the village of **Mughni**, with the splendid Surp Gevorg Church whose construction was completed in 1669, featuring striped bands of stone around its central drum and a classic half-folded umbrella cone on top. Across from the church is the “Nkanak” bakery, a charitable project with an aim to provide support to vulnerable families residing in the region.

Karbi, the next village north along the Kasakh gorge, has known inhabitation since the 13th century. During the Persian occupation, it was the administrative





center of the mahal of Karbi Basar. Though ravaged and plundered repeatedly, several churches remain: St. Astvatsatsin basilica (14th c./reconstructed in 17th c.), the ruins of St. Kirakos or St. Gevorg church (11th -13th cc.), St. Tsiranavor (5th or 7th c.), Tukh Manuk (7th c.), the St. Grigor Lusavorich (10th c.) church with a sizeable khachkar, the “Zargarents Jam” chapel, and an old cemetery (starting from 7th c.)

Recently, the village municipality began a communal project for rural tourism development. Their first steps included the establishment of two B&Bs, a walking tour around the village, and several hiking tours through the Kasakh River Gorge and to Mount Ara.

Less than 3 km north of Karbi is the village of **Ohanavan**. Perched at the edge of the village, overlooking the gorge, is the 7th century monastery of Hovhannavank, famous for producing immaculately detailed manuscripts and its wealth of inscriptions and decorative carvings. Situated right on the lip of the gorge, a large cave can be found below its foundations, with a secret passage that runs up to the church.

Ushi contains a small 10th century chapel, with the ruins of the large monastery complex of St. Sargis of the 7th to 13th centuries located approximately 1 km outside the village. The monastery is a well-known pilgrimage site as one of the centers of spiritual education in Armenia. Many fine examples of early Armenian architecture from various periods can be seen around the complex, including the St. Sarkis chapel of the 10th century, the Surp Astvatsatsin church, an adjacent gavit from the 11th-12th cc., as well as a vestibule, belfry, refectory, vaulted guest-chambers, housing for monks, and utility rooms. A fortification wall built in 1654 with two-storey circular towers in three of the corners surrounding the monastic complex. During the earthquakes of 1679 and 1827, the monastery was reduced to ruins. The only structure left standing was the single-nave vaulted chapel that houses the grave of Saint Sarkis. The chapel newly faced preliminary restoration efforts. Currently, archaeologists are working to piece together parts of the collapsed church and gavit. On top of the hill, adjacent to the monastery complex, are the collapsed remains of an Iron Age Fortress one can take the time to avidly explore.

The last village to the north is **Saghmosavan**, with its majestic Sagmosavank monastery complex from the 13th century. The monastery was built in 1215 by the princely family of Vachutyans. The overall construction of the complex was completed in 1250. Since the 13th century, a medieval higher institute of schooling operated in the monastery. Several prominent figures such as Armenian historian, geographer and philosopher Vardan Areveltsi; writer, scholar and composer of sharakans Gevorg Skevratsi; Armenian historian Zakaria Kanakertsi; and many others lived and worked in the monastery. Saghmosavank was also a center significantly well-known for its mastery of calligraphy. Several manuscripts elegantly written and dutifully copied there have been preserved.

TALIN REGION

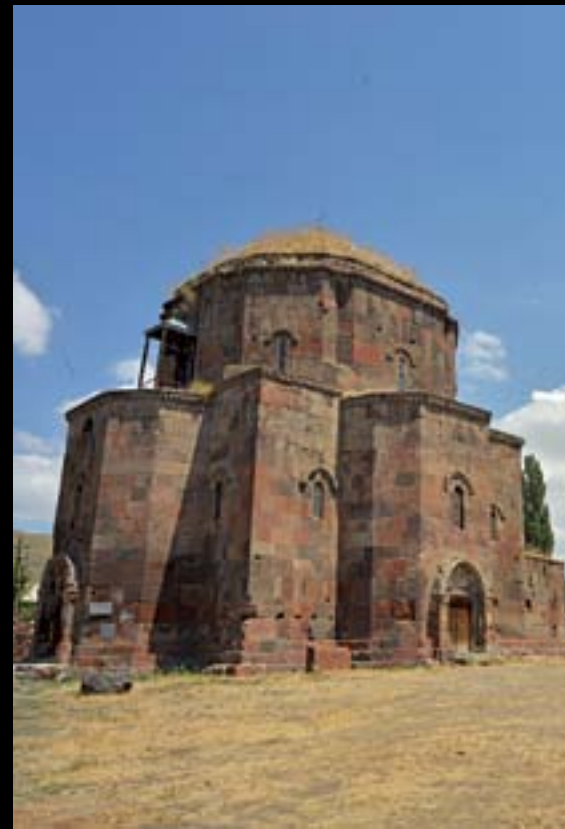
The Talin region encompasses the western section of the province, up until its official border with Turkey. Geographically, it is an upper plateau dotted with small mountains, with an almost lunar landscape. The semi-desert steppe is teeming with wildlife, and the land, if irrigated, is still quite fertile. The tallest mountain is Mt. Arteni (2047m) with several Stone Age sites and one of the most unique ecosystems in the country. Other peaks include Mt. Zarnja (1758m), Mts. Tsaghkadsar (2219m) and Garnasar (2295m), also dotted with Bronze Age sites.

Talin, the third town in the province by its when classified by size and importance, is one of the oldest settlements of the Aragatsotn district. First mentioned in the 1st and 2nd centuries, it appears in event descriptions and the writings of medieval Armenian historians. Just west of the town center, a large historical complex looms over the town with the impressive Talin cathedral. The Catholic church, built much in the style of the Cathedrals of Ani and Aruch, is the most important of Talin's historical-architectural monuments. The exact date of its foundation is not known. From a number of existing manuscripts, the oldest was dated to 783, although it is believed that it was constructed one or two centuries before. Near the entrance to the grounds a smaller, tiled-roof church and a stela are situated, both from the 7th century. Kamsarakan, the constructor of Talin's small church, is known in history by the nickname "Churchbuilder". South of Talin, on the way to Dashtadem, are the ruins of a huge medieval caravanserai, which once served the town.

Dashtadem village is made famous by its castle, one of the best preserved fortresses in Armenia. Several years ago, the Armenian government began its reconstruction. Unfortunately, work stopped and, other than the partially rebuilt defensive walls and citadel, the rest of the fortress is a large deserted construction site with no touristic facilities. Another place of interest can be spotted from the castle walls if looking towards the South. It is St. Kristopori (St. Kristofor Vank) from the 7th century, one of three of its kind in Aragatsotn (the other two are Karmravor church in Ashtarak and St. Sion in Oshakan). Next to it is a unique square tower (13th c.) with some strange markings on its building stone blocks, beautiful inscriptions that leave one baffled with their uncertain origin and meaning.

Mastara, close to the border with Shirak is another historically rich paradise. The unique 5th century church of St. Hovhannes, with its polygonal cupola, and several other historical sites, including the Great Mastara Khachkar (13th c.), Merelharuts (Resurrected from the Dead) shrine (13th-14th cc.) next to the St. Hovhannes church, Tukh Manuk chapel (5th c. / reconstructed in 14th c.), and Surb Stapanos Nakhavka church perched atop the hill above the village make for a holy site, complete with archaeological excavations nearby.

Just a few kilometers from Mastara to the northeast lies the **Zovasar reservoir**, with the remains of a medieval settlement and two churches from the 5th and 7th centuries. The roads end in **Garnahovit**, where the faithful are treated to the impressive St. Gevorg church from the 7th century.



APARAN REGION

Just a few kilometers to the north from the Saghmosavan and Artashavan villages, the climate instantly changes, becoming cooler and more pleasant. During the hot summer days, a typical characteristic for the Ararat Valley, this is the best possible welcome to the Aparan Region, where verdant green meadows lay in stark contrast with the parched brown landscapes of Ashtarak and Talin.

The region is confined by Mt. Aragats to the west, Mt. Ara (2605 m) to the southeast and the Tegheniats mountain range (2851 m) spanning from northeast to east of the area, dividing the province from Kotayk. Other geographical features include the Aparan Reservoir, the Kasakh River gorge, and the Gegharot River, which runs down from the Mt. Aragats crater.

The region is positioned along the old trade route to Vanadzor and holds some rarely visited monasteries and monuments, including a 13th century caravanserai and the several Tukh Manuk (Black Youth) shrines. A modern highway from Ashtarak to Vanadzor follows the same old route, traversing the region from the South to the North.

The first stop along this road is Aibuben Park (Alphabet Park), a collection of jumbo-sized carved stone blocks representing the letters of the Armenian alphabet, with the statue of St. Mesrop Mashtots seated above. Popular for locals and tourists alike, it is always crowded with people who wander around and take photos. Only a few hundred meters away, a huge metal cross-shaped sculpture has been erected on a hill above a new church. Lighted during the night, the cross is visible from quite a distance.

Arai village, situated at an altitude of above 1800 m, was an important stop on the ancient trade route. The village preserves the remains of a caravanserai built in 1213 for the Zakarian brothers and rebuilt once again in the 19th century.

Further north is a crossroad with a left fork leading to Aragats village. The village is the beginning point for the eastern tracks to Aragats, with a number of summer encampments for Yezdi and Armenian shepherd tending their herds.

The right fork moves into the Astvatsinkal Monastery (5th-7th cc.), located within the Kasakh gorge. The monastery is currently under reconstruction. The nearby village of Yernjatap has the St. Nshan church, built in 1901. An alternative hiking trail to Mt. Ara starts south of Yenjatap and passes through the forests that cover the northern face of the mountain.

Further to the North is the Aparan reservoir. It is the largest hydrological feature of Aragatsotn which supplies Yerevan with drinking water. Beneath the waters of the reservoir are the ruins of the old Zovuni village, with its increasingly important Poghos Petros (5th-6th cc.) church. The church is a single nave structure which was changed into a domed hall in the first quarter of the 6th century. It is the oldest example of this type in Armenia, and one of the first in religious architecture in general. What now stands is a partial ruin, but an important one, originally forming one part of a group of three monuments, including the shrine of Tukh Manuk (5th c.) and the mortuary chapel, believed to be the mausoleum of Zoravar Vardan Mamikonian, the hero of the battle of Avarayr. The two other monuments in the group were moved to higher ground with the flooding of the



village during the construction of the Aparan reservoir in the 1960s. The church of Poghos Petros was carefully researched, but left in situ. The waters of the reservoir rise and fall with the season, partially inundating the church. More precise information about the attractions around the Aparan Reservoir is provided in the Itineraries and Trails chapter, within the section covering the Aparan Reservoir Biking Tour.

In the village of Yeghipatrush is the remarkable 10-13th century St. Astvatsatsin church. Some 100m beyond it, an early cemetery with a fragment of a 5th century basilica can be found in addition to a khachkar shrine. The village is a starting point for the Yeghipatrush – Aghveran (Kotayk) hiking trail (12 km), which treks over the ridge of the Tegheniats mountain range. Another interesting trail, suitable for hiking and jeep tours, follows the Tegheniats ridge to the south, until the village of Buzhakan in Kotayk province. Nearby in Buzhakan is the Teghenyats monastery (12th c.) complex, with an impressive half-intact gavit situated beside the ruined church, parts of a monumental dining room (13th c.), and several sheep and horse-shaped tombstones.

The villages of Chknagh, Ttujur, Dzoraglukh, Saralanj and Lusagyugh, being located at the base of Tsakhunyants range, have some good hiking trails to Hankavan, Artavaz and Aghveran in Kotayk. Some of the best paragliding sites are also located here, on the hills above the villages.

Finally, the road comes to the town of Aparan, the regional center and unequivocal place of the famous Pash-Aparan battle. The first reference to the town was made by Ptolemy during the 2nd century. Sites of interest include the celebrated 4th century Aparan Basilica of the Holy Cross (or Surp Nshan Basilica of Aparan), which was partly restored in 1877, as well as the monument to the Battle of Aparan erected in 1978 with an adjacent park and Mausoleum of General Drastamat Kanayan (within the complex of the battle memorial), reburied in Aparan on May 28th 2000. However, the most frequented place in the town is the “Gntunik” bakery, known as the best bakery in Armenia. Here one can see hordes of people waiting at any time of the day to buy fresh baked bread, tasty sandwiches, and delectable pastries.



ARAGATS REGION

Aragats Region lies in the far north of the province, encompassing a small pocket of land between Shirak, Lori and Kotayk. Known as a home to Yezidi shepherds, this area is characterized by vast open grasslands, a cool climate, and some incredible pre-historic sites that have only recently seen the light of the day. The **Tsaghkahovit Plain**, at the central part of the region, is a high elevation plateau set between the northern slope of Mt. Aragats, the southwestern slopes of the Pambak range, and Mt. Kolgat. It is one of the most ancient inhabited areas in Armenia as recent excavations proved by uncovering traces of a settlement that is more than 7,000 years old. The ongoing archaeological project “ArAGATS” published some amazing findings from the Tsaghkahovit Plain, including the discovery of early Bronze Age fortresses in Tsaghkahovit, Gegharot and Aragatsiberd (near Jamshlu village). Other discoveries include Iron Age fortresses in Hnaberd, Geghadzor, Sahakaberd, Berdidosh (near Lernapar) and multitude of kurgans, hills. More information on the “ArAGATS” Project, Tsaghkahovit Plain excavations and latest findings can be found by visiting the project’s link: <http://aragats.arts.cornell.edu/>. An archaeology specialist who will guide the visits to these sites is recommended.

In the south of the region lies the Yezidi village of **Rya Taza** with two interesting monuments. One is a 13th century cemetery with animistic tombstones carved to look like horses, some of which may mark the remains of Mongol warriors. The other is a 4th or 5th century chapel, built over a small pagan shrine that was venerated by

the Yezidis after their arrival to this area. The chapel was heavily destroyed during the Timor invasion at the end of 14th and the beginning of 15th centuries. Another place of interest is the hamlet of **Mirak**, which contains the ruins of a 5th century church and a late Bronze Age cyclopean fortress, perched on the east bank of the Kasakh. There is a small water reservoir near the village.

The region is mostly inhabited by Yezdis, a subgroup of Kurdish nomads who found refuge in this area. Yezidis belong to an ancient and secretive, pre-Islamic sect, whose unusual traditions have led to them being incorrectly labeled devil-worshippers. Leading semi-nomadic lives, they spend winter in their villages and, in April, start their track up to Alpine pastures on Mt Aragats. There, they live in large tents within temporary summer settlements called “yaylas”. Famous for their excellent dairy products, Yezidis specialize in making chechir panir (string cheese). If you decide to visit their camps, pay attention to the overprotective and often unleashed shepherd dogs!

The Tsaghkhahovit Plain has good potential activities such as for horse-riding, cross-country skiing and paragliding, as it has a popular flying site on a cone shaped hill above Vardablur. Additionally, some good hikes can be done from Melikgiugh village to nearby Mt. Shoghakat (2,639 meters) and Mt. Davakar (2,861 meters).

RURAL TOURISM

Many villages in Aragatsotn province have many predispositions for rural tourism development, such as fruit growing and wine making traditions around Ashtarak and cheese and dairy production in the Aparan and Aragats Regions. At the moment, rural tourism in the province is still in its beginning phase, and there are only few households located in Oshakan, Karbi and Mastara that offer B&B services. The more adventurous who don’t mind basic conditions and language barriers will be rewarded with many new experiences, delicious meals and genuine hospitality that will make their stay truly memorable. If nothing else, pay a visit to a Yezidis summer settlement on Mt. Aragats, and one or two historical villages around Ashtarak. The best historical villages to visit are Byurakan, Aghdzk, Tegher, Voskevaz, Oshakan, Ushi and Karbi.





WINE TOURISM

Armenia is considered one of the most ancient cradles of grape growing and wine making in the world, where original traditions and ancient grape types have been preserved to today. Vine is in fact an indigenous plant in the valleys of Armenia. The wild vine (*Vitis vinifera silvestris*) was established in this region over a million years ago. The Bible states that vine was God's gift to Noah who, after the Great Flood, who planted the first vine in the Valley of Ararat. For those who prefer science over legends, the recently discovered 6,000 year old winemaking facility, the oldest mass production equipment ever found, is the best example of how much the grape and wine have always been important products in this country.

Ashtarak Region, geographically a part of Ararat Valley, has a long tradition of viticulture and wine-making. With about 2,700 hours of sunshine per year, long summers that give grapes the opportunity to ripen fully, its suitable position on the southern slopes of Mt. Aragats, and, finally, the fertile volcanic soil, this region has ideal conditions for vine growing. If we add abundance of historical and architectural monuments and its proximity to Yerevan, Ashtarak, together with its satellite villages, has all the predispositions to become a top wine tourism destination. However, most of this potential goes untapped due to the lack of information, adequate infrastructure and established wine routes which would conveniently link attractions with wine makers.

Fortunately, the prospects for wine tourism development in Ashtarak region are brightening. Recently, several new wineries have been established, while old Soviet-style production is in the process of modernization. In total, there are six wineries, located in the villages of Sasunik, Oshakan, Voskevaz and Kosh. At the moment, wine tasting is possible only in two wineries, but starting in 2015, many new facilities plan to become operational, including several tasting rooms with restaurants and a hotel built among 180 hectare acres of newly planted vineyards. Besides different types of grape wines, tasting packages include cognac, pomegranate and other exotic fruit wines.

Wine makers have a lot of projects and plans regarding wine tourism development, from the establishment of a wine museum and clay pottery workshops, to different types of activities that include grape harvesting and making your personal wine blend. So stay tuned! Detailed information about wineries, wine tasting and other wine related options are provided in the accompanying map.

ITINERARIES AND TRAILS

This guidebook presents some brand-new and less travelled itineraries and trails, while the well-known routes (eg. Ashtarak – Agarak – Byurakan – Tegher – Amberd - Kari Lake cultural route or Oshakan – Ashtarak – Ohanavank – Saghmosavank - Amberd) and hiking trails used by the majority of visitors and tour operators are omitted.

The Route of the Caravans

Follow the numerous trade routes traveled by caravans that once traversed the region laden with spices, silk, carpets, gold, and precious gems. Explore their mighty fortresses, arched bridges and fine old khans whose vaulted niches are blackened with the smoke of centuries.

Duration: 1-2 days

Accommodation: “North Star” Intellectual Tourism, Sport and Health Center

Itinerary: Aparan, Astvatsnkal Monastery, Arai, old bridge near Apnagyugh, Ashtarak, Amberd, Kosh Castle, Aruch, Talin, Dashtadem Fortress.

Description: The province was an important conduit for trade into the northern regions, the most important route traveling from Armenian capital Dvin to Ani and Lori Berd via Ashtarak and Oshakan. It was in this period that Ashtarak (“tower”) developed, surpassing Oshakan as the administrative center and trade city. The routes once traveled by caravans are the same used today by trucks ferrying goods from Iran to Georgia, running via Ashtarak to Gyumri or north via Aparan to Vanadzor. Here are descriptions of the sites:

- The first stop after Aparan is the Astvatsnkal Monastery, placed on a hillside overlooking the Kasakh River, an ancient travel route for caravans wanting to pass between Ashtarak and Lori.
- The next stop is Arai village, which holds the remains of a caravanserai built in 1213 for the Zakarian brothers and rebuilt in the 19th century when the new routes to Vanadzor and Tbilisi were built over the Pambak and Spitak passes. The caravanserai is some distance from the village, which was a common practice in medieval times.
- There is a medieval three-arched bridge located southwest of Apnagyugh village.
- The partially reconstructed 13th century Kosh Fortress was built on a large rocky cliff looming above the village, from which the entire region can be seen. It has right-angled corners and circular towers, built with clear cut large red tuff stone blocks. The entrances are situated in the north and south with ceiling-covered corridors. Originally, the building was much higher than it is now, with towers that looked out over the entire Ararat Valley.
- The reconstructed Aruch Caravanserai was built in the 10th century and used

over the next two centuries. This caravanserai has been newly rebuilt with enough new stone to show the outline and function of the building.

- The ruins of a huge medieval caravanserai that served Talin are located 1 kilometer from the electric station in Talin on the way to Dashtadem. Though neglected, the ruins are still impressive, with traces of the support arches that held up the elaborate vaulting. The size of the complex shows a building able, in its time, to house large numbers of caravans.
- Dashtadem Castle is one of the largest intact fortresses in Armenia whose perimeter walls are entered through an arched gateway that is laden with interesting carvings of animals. Built according to the best theories of castle building, the gateway requires anyone entering to turn through a right angle, thus preventing horsemen charging the entry. Within is a keep of the 9th or 10th century to which half-round towers have been added at some later date and under which large cellars can be explored. An Arabic inscription of the month of Safar 570 (September 1174) on the fortress records that it was then under the control of Sultan Ibn Mahmud, one of the Shaddadid Seljuk princes who ruled in Ani. The castle is currently undergoing reconstruction.

The route can be done in one day, as described above. If additional sites are added, it can be split into two days, covering the northern and the western sections separately. In that case, an overnight in the “North Star” Intellectual Tourism, Sport and Health Center in Byurakan is suggested.



Cycling

Wine and Bike Tour

Discover the wine traditions of the Ashtarak Region by meeting local wine producers and learning about the ancient wine making skills that were first mentioned in pre-Christian Greek and Roman historical annals. Start from a historic home wine cellar in Ashtarak and finish in a newly planted, impressive vineyard south of Kosh. Taste the sweet pomegranate wine, aged cognac and homemade food. Gourmet stages are combined with the rich historical heritage of this region.

Duration: 2-5 days

Distances: 20-25 kilometers/day

Road type: Dirt roads

Accommodation: Marine Tumanyan's B&B or “Hats ev Kats” Guesthouse in Oshakan and the “Golden Grape Armas” Hotel

Tour description: Place of departure is Ashtarak from where you have a superb location to visit the sites of the historical center of the town. The tour loops out into the countryside via the villages of Sasunik, Oshakan and Voskevaz, with a finish in “Golden Grape Armas” vineyards south of Kosh. The itinerary tends to avoid the traffic, using the dirt roads that wander through the charming vineyards and orchards.

Day One: “Tatoyents qotuk” (Ashtarak), cycle to Sasunik village where you can visit the “Van Ardi” vineyard and winery and “Armenia Wine” Winery. Then cycle to Oshakan village to witness the sunset on Didikon Hill. Dinner is in a historical ice house (“Sartsetun”). Overnight in the Oshakan's B&B or guesthouse.

Day Two: Begin with a tour of “Ashtarak's Wines” Winery in Oshakan, followed with a visit to the “Voskevaz” Winery in Voskevaz village. Then cycle to the “Golden Grape Armas” vineyards, stopping off at the archaeological site of Aghtamir on the way. Overnight is in the “Golden Grape Armas” Hotel.

Days 3-5: Using “Golden Grape Armas” vineyards as a base, many different biking tours to the nearby villages of Kosh, Shamiram and Aruch can be made as well as hiking trips to the two hills south of the vineyards toward Nore Yedesia.

Aparan Reservoir Biking Tour

Overview: Circular biking tour around Aparan reservoir with several historical sites from different periods

Distance: 30 kilometers

Road type: Dirt roads and low traffic asphalt road

Tour description: The tour starts from the Astvatsnkal monastery (5th-7th centuries), located over Kasakh river gorge, 5 kilometers east of Hartavan village. Take the dirt road that goes along the west side of the gorge. After 3 kilometers, you will reach Jrambar village. Turn right (east) across the dam (the guards at the gate should let you in if you tell them you are seeking Poghos Petros) and take the dirt road that goes slightly uphill of the abandoned pension and goes towards the pine forests. The road leads to a series of sites on Aparan Reservoir.

The first stop is after 3.5 kilometers on a low hill overlooking the reservoir with St. Vartan mausoleum (5th century), Tuxh Manuk Shrine (BCE), khachkars and stele (5th-7th centuries). These monuments, originally from the old village of Zovuni, were dismantled when the reservoir was filled in Soviet times and rebuilt on this spot block by block. A hundred meters below are the ruins of the important Poghos Petros basilica (5th-6th centuries), inhabited by swallows and occasionally flooded by lake. Beneath the lake's waters in front the church are the ruins of the old settlement of Zovuni.

Take your time to contemplate the beauty all around you here. The road goes back to the hill and continues to Yeghipatrush village, passing next to the Bank Swallow (*Riparia riparia*) nest colony. Yeghipatrush village has an impressive 10th century St. Astvatsatsin church with a gavit. The 13th century gavit, with a two-story watch tower, was once used as a seminary and religious academy. The size and elaborate decoration of the complex show how important this monastery was for the area. About 100 meters away is a burial ground, with a fragment of a 5th century single nave basilica and a 13th century khachkar shrine. The road circles further around the northern shore of the Aparan reservoir to reach Kuchak after 10 kilometers. Turn left approximately 2 kilometers before Kuchak to visit Kasakh single nave basilica. About two-hundred meters away, on the nearby hill, you'll find the important Tuxh Manuk (Black Youth) Shrine, which borrows Christian and pagan elements in its form and use. Venerated by locals, the place is full of icons, drawings and gifts of all kinds.

The tour ends along the west shore of Aparan reservoir, where you can look for Kuchak petroglyphs. About 60 pictograms with mainly geometric symbols that may be Iron Age linear script (2nd-1st millennium BCE) are carved on the stones scattered along the shoreline. Unfortunately, 50 are underwater 8 months of the year, emerging only between July and October. Keep your eyes peeled!

Mastara-Garnahovit Cycling Tour

You can cycle from Mastara, with its spectacular 6th century round church and numerous shrines, past a remarkable collection of Stone, Bronze and Iron Age fortresses, Medieval settlements and churches on the road to Garnahovit village. This village has its own impressive St. Gevorg church from the 7th century. The picturesque landscape, charming Zovasar reservoir and good road conditions are enough to provide a memorable cycling experience.

Distance: 10 kilometers

Road type: Low traffic asphalt road

Tour description: Take the northeast village road out of Mastara for about 2.4 kilometers through the river gorge to Dzoragiugh. Nearby are traces of a Bronze Age settlement and a field of tombs. Continue to Zovasar reservoir which is situated on the right side of the road. On the opposite side of the lake are the remains of a medieval settlement with a few surviving structures, including the remains of the St. Amenaprkich single nave church (5th century) and St. Astvatsatsin church (7th century), rebuilt at

the beginning of the last century. The place is ideal for picnicking or just soaking up the surrounding beauty. Further on, the road continues through Zovasar and ends up in Garnahovit, which borders with Shirak province. After visiting the St. Gevorg church, one of Armenia's best preserved Tetrakonch churches, you can go back the same way to Mastara. In addition, you can continue to the neighboring village of Sarnaghbyur in Shirak province, which is a famous pilgrimage site as it houses the Grigor Lusavorich cave church. Accommodation is available at the B&B in Mastara.



Hiking

The region has some spectacular hikes, especially on Mt. Aragats, the Republic's tallest mountain. The most accessible route up the mountain is the southern face starting from Kari Lich, which is a 3 hour hike to the summit on a steady slope. More difficult climbs can be found on the other three summits, two requiring rock climbing (North and East). You can choose between several routes to climb down. The most interesting way is through the crater and along the Gegharot River gorge to Aragats village. The trail is 14 kilometers long and passes next to Gegharot's waterfall, which is included in the list of Armenian natural monuments. The 17 meter high waterfall is located at an altitude of nearly 3,000 meters and is a popular stop for hikers. Other routes will bring you to the Mantash reservoir in the Shirak province or, following the north ridge, to the village of Hnaberd in the Tsaghkahovit Plain.

Mt. Ara, heavily eroded with mysterious volcanic crater, is not an easy climb. The mountain is famous for being one of the most visited in the region. Mt. Arteni, with its two peaks and several Stone Age sites, is another tempting hiking destination.

Interesting hikes are also found along the Kasakh River canyon, starting at Ashtarak and continuing north to Mughni, Ohanavan and Saghmosavan. For the really fit, continue about 15 kilometers to Artashavan, Jrambar to Aparan Reservoir for camping.

Other hikes through nearby canyons include the Amberd River canyon from Orgov to Kari Lake, Tegher River canyon which leads to the Tegher Monastery, and the Talish River that climbs for about 20 kilometers to the southern slope of Mt. Kakavasar. In the Talin region are several river canyons leading uphill from Irind, Yeghnik and Karmrashen.

Kari Lake-Amberd Fortress Hiking Trail

Overview: Pleasant, easy walk down the slopes of Mt. Aragats

Hike duration: 3h 30 min / 17 kilometers

Altitude: Kari Lake 3,190 meters – Amberd fortress 2,120 meters

Starting point: Cosmic Ray Division Institute (CRD) on Kari Lake

Hike description: Enter the CRD complex and exit it via the dirt road to the left. Before reaching the red metal house, you will see an overgrown dirt road heading through the fields on your left. Follow this road through a large stone field to the base of Mt. Amberd. Take the clearly visible path on the right slope of the hill. The Amberd valley and river will be to your right. Follow the path parallel to the valley along a large plateau. The path forks after approximately 70 minutes of walking. Take the left fork (W1 40°25'39.80"N, 44°10'35.23"E). When the slope becomes steeper and the path becomes barely visible (W2 40°25'0.14"N, 44°11'30.39"E), look ahead and to your right. You will see a dirt road winding along the slope of a small hill with a dark rock on top. Take this road and continue to descend. Soon you will reach the asphalt road leading to Amberd Fortress. Take the right fork to avoid walking on the asphalt, then the left fork a few meters later, which leads you straight to Amberd Fortress.

Mount Ara Loop Hiking Trail

Overview: Ascending Mt. Ara, with the breathtaking views of Mt. Aragats and Mt. Ararat

Hike duration: 5 hours 30 minutes / 10 kilometers

Altitude: base 1,705 meters – Mt. Ara 2,605 meters

Starting point: The end of the asphalt road that begins in Karbi village, crosses the Kasakh gorge and passes next to the huge apple orchards on its way to the bottom of the mountain.

Hike description: Follow the dirt road on the right for about 100 meters and then turn left towards the mouth of the Mt. Ara crater. The track ends at the bottom of the two clashing rocks (approximately 1 hour of walking), with the Tsaghkevank church to the left. To go to the summit, continue forward following the natural way through the crater. Once you reach the saddle between the two peaks in front of you, walk left, across the tops of the several smaller peaks. You will see in the distance the highest peak (2605 m). From the top, skirt around to the right of the rock ledge, and then bear left. Keep left until you see the road you hiked up. Follow the ridge to hike down the livestock paths.

Kasakh River Gorge Hiking Trail: Hovhannavank-Saghmosavank Monasteries

Overview: Scenic and easy walk through Kasakh River Gorge between two major historical monuments.

Hike duration: 2 hours / 9 kilometers

Altitude: Hovhanavank 1,340 meters / gorge bottom 1,489 meters / Saghmosavank 1,649 meters

Starting point: From the main highway Ashtarak –Vanadzor, turn right to Ohanavan and follow the main road into the village. Turn left in the center of the village to reach the new cemetery, which is the starting point. (Tip: Instead of using the highway, take the old and more interesting road through the villages of Mughni and Karpi. Visit the beautiful St. Gevork Monastery in Mughni and St. Astvatsatsin church in Karbi on your way. Before starting the hike visit, Hovhanavank Monastery (12th-13th centuries) that is perched over the Kasakh River gorge).

Description: Take the dirt road leading down into the gorge, then walk along the bottom of the gorge heading upstream. After a while the dirt road disappears and is replaced by big stones that are easy to walk on. Continue walking on the left side of the river until you reach an abandoned concrete house. Climb straight up through the stone field until you find a small path that zigzags to the top of the cliff. Turn left at the top of the cliff and continue through the fields along the gorge back to the Saghmosavank Monastery. After visiting the monastery, take a rest and refresh in the Patvakan Tadevosyan's garden (next to the monastery), with the stunning views of the gorge and Mt. Ara.

Kasakh River Gorge: Hovhannavank Monastery –Karbi Dzor

Overview: Short hike through the picturesque Kasakh gorge with the stops at the 71 meters high waterfall and several historical sites along the way.

Hike duration: 4 kilometers / 2 hours

Altitude: Hovhanavank 1,340 meters / Karbi Dzor 1,174 meters

Starting point: From the new cemetery in Ohanavan village, as explained in the Hovhannavank - Saghmosavank Monasteries trail overview.

Attractions: The Hovhannavank Monastery (12th-13th centuries); 71 meter high waterfall, the highest waterfall in Armenia; several caves (not accessible) used as human shelters and the “Red” cave from the 3rd century; St. Hovhanness shrine with healing water and sacred tree; ruins of an old mill (8th – 10th century), which operated till 1915; and, the “Karbi Dzor” Leisure Area with a swimming pool.

Description: Take the dirt road leading down into the gorge and walk along the bottom of the gorge heading downstream. Keep walking along the left bank of the Kasakh River. To reach the St. Hovhannes Shrine, you need to cross the river jumping from stone to stone. Return the same way to the main path. The trail ends at the “Karbi Dzor” Leisure Area. For more information about the trail and guiding, you should contact Karbi village municipality.



Horseback Riding

Aragatsotn provides several options for horse lovers from riding classes, leisure riding, equestrian sports (professional riding) to horseback riding tours and horse care. The most developed riding facilities and professional services are provided by the “Ayrudzy” Horse Riding Club in Ashtarak.

The Centaur Association of Hippotherapy and Equestrian Sports NGO organizes several horseback riding tours that start in the village of Ushi. The tours last between 3 hours to two days and cater to different levels of experience.

Tours:

- Saint Sargis Monastery, where remains of the Armenian saint are buried;
- The ancient village of Persi, placed over the beautiful Kasakh River Gorge;
- Byurakan forest;
- Amberd fortress;
- Saghmosavank Monastery;
- Mt. Ara and the Tsakhkevank monastery, famous for its healing spring waters located at the bottom of the mountain (2 day tour).

Tsaghkahovit Plain Horseback Riding Tour

Vast open spaces of the Tsaghkahovit Plain offer excellent conditions for horseback riding. The tour combines horseback riding with mysterious circle of exquisite Bronze Age citadels creating a truly memorable experience.

Distance: 20 kilometers

Riding duration: 4.5 hour ride (6 hours with sites visits)

Itinerary:

- Gegharot (Bronze Age citadel housing an intact religious center with a fire altar);
- Vardablur (paragliding take off point with a beautiful view of the plain and Mt. Aragats);
- Tsaghkahovit (Bronze Age Tsaghkahovit fortress with citadel, three ancient settlements that date back to Iron Age and a cemetery); and,
- Hnaberd (Hnaberd Citadel, an Urartian fortress built over the ruins of previous fort

Bird Watching

Aragatsotn is a birding secret that needs to be shared. With its diverse terrain and vegetation zones overlapping one another within such a compact area, the region attracts diverse bird species that do not normally inhabit the same terrain. Thus, it is possible to observe desert and forest birds, waterfowl, high plains and alpine species all living in the same area (sometimes in the same square mile). Best places for bird watching are the slopes of Mt. Ara, and Mt. Aragats (especially around Amberd), rocky cliffs of Kasakh and Tegher River gorges, semi-desert steppe around Talin, Dashtadem and Mt. Arteni.

Bird Watching Tour

Duration: 2 days

Timing: Spring (April-May) and Autumn (September-October) are the best times to observe migrating birds on lower elevations, while summer is good for river canyon species.

Itinerary: Kasakh River gorge, Mt. Aragats, Mt. Ara, and the Aparan Reservoir.

Day One: The tour starts with a short hike along the ridge or through Kasakh River gorge with several observation points along the way. The Kasakh River is an excellent place for observing the bird species whose habitat is on the rocky cliffs such as Eurasian Eagle-Owl (*Bubo bubo*), Common Swift (*Apus apus*), Eurasian Crag-Martin (*Ptyonoprogne rupestris*), Red-rumped Swallow (*Cecropis daurica*) and Dunnock (*Prunella modularis*).

The tour continues to the slopes and canyons around Amberd Fortress and up to Kari Lake. Here, at the altitudes between 2,000 and 3,200 meters above sea level, more than 200 bird species can be seen including: the Alpine Accentor (*Prunella collaris*), Horned Lark (*Eremophila alpestris*), Snow Finch (*Montifringilla nivalis*) and Caucasian Twite (*Acanthis flavirostris brevirostris*). The raptors that inhabit the area are impressive and include Eastern Imperial Eagle (*Aquila heliaca*), Lesser Spotted Eagle (*Clanga pomarina*) and Long-legged Buzzard (*Buteo rufinus*) in summer and Pallid Harrier (*Circus macrourus*) and Steppe Eagle (*Aquila nipalensis*) in autumn.

Day Two: The second day is devoted to the exploration of Mt. Ara, recognized as a globally Important Bird Area (IBA). The protected area of 2,540 hectare acres spreads between 1,874 - 2,571 meters in altitude, is the best place for observing Caucasian Grouse (*Lyrurus mlokosiewiczii*), European Honey-buzzard (*Pernis apivorus*) and Corncrake (*Crex crex*). The day ends at the shores of the beautiful Aparan reservoir with the possibility to observe waterfowl and Bank Swallow (*Riparia riparia*) nest colony. Here it is possible to observe these small birds that live in hundreds of nest burrows dug into the vertical banks of sandy earth..



Botanical Tours

Aragats becomes carpeted in colorful and fragrant throughout the sunnier times of the year, especially in mid-summer (July to early August) when alpine species flower along the mountain slopes. It is also highly recommended to visit Amberd during the Spring/Summer to see the bouquets native to the area. Other interesting locations include Mt. Ara and Mt. Arteni.

Amberd River Flower Tour

Overview: The Amberd River flows from the top of Aragats to the Kasakh River near Ashtarak, flowing through a number of topographies and climate zones that are home to some of Armenia's rarest flowers and birds. Enjoy spectacular views of Ararat and rare flowers on a self-guided hike through this wildlife reserve.

Hike Duration: 1 hour / 4 kilometers

Starting point: Amberd fortress

Description: The tour starts from Amberd castle, where the dividing line between alpine and upper forest strata lies, and winds down a trail that follows the Amberd River canyon. The area around the Amber castle is in bloom from May till July and features some extraordinary flower species including: *Tulipa Julia*; *Daphne transcaucasica*; *Chartolepis glastifolia*; *Scilla armena*; *Nectaroscordum tripedale*; *Phelipaea tournefortii*; *Ornithogalum gabrielianae*; *Globularia trichosantha*; *Corydalis nariniana*; *Ornithogalum sigmoideum*; and, *Solenanthus stamineus*. Signs on the way to the castle and on the castle grounds identify the area's rare flowers, history and other points of interests in five languages. The trail ends on the edge of Antarat village.

Paragliding

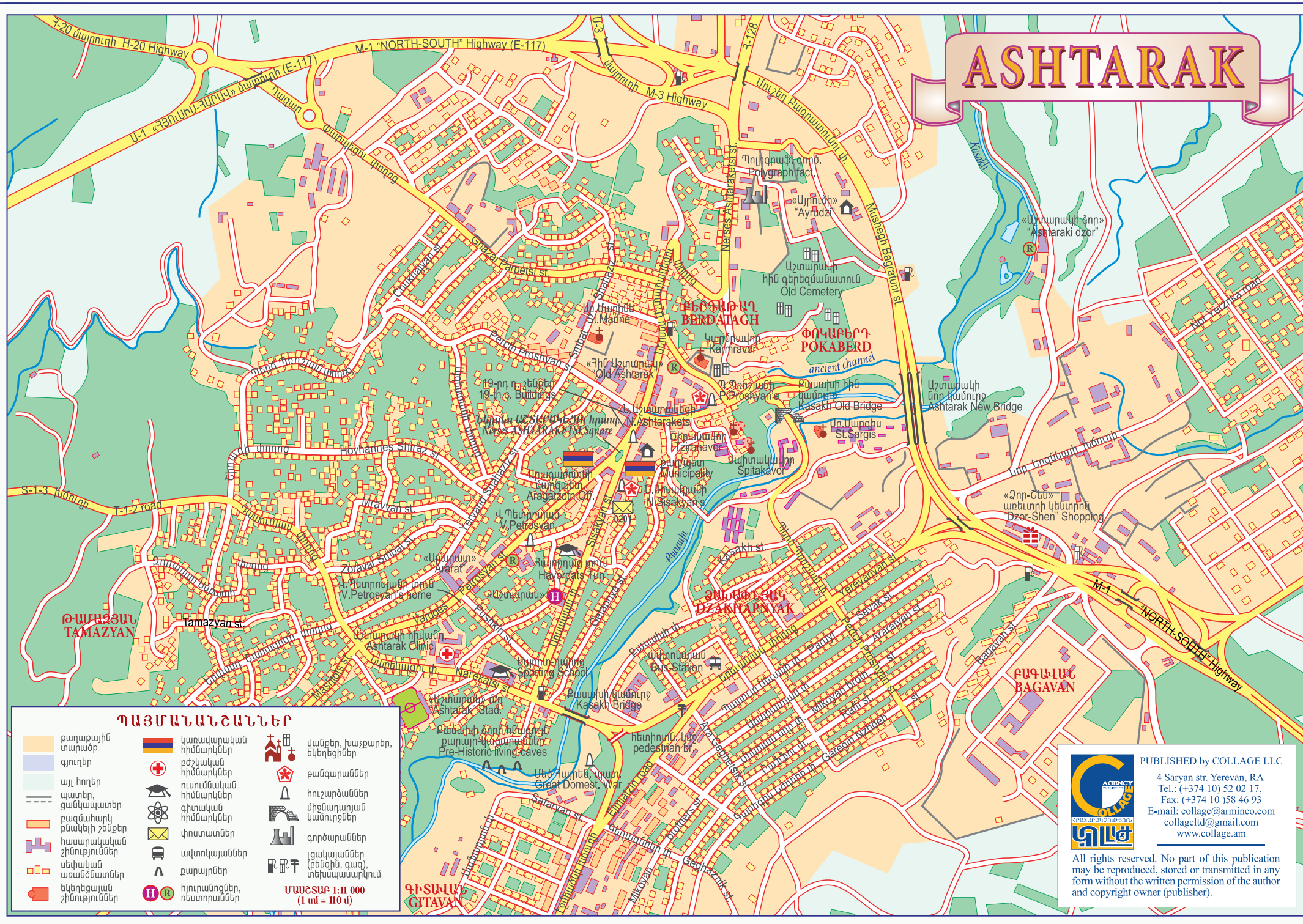
Aragatsotn is the home of a budding paragliding sport. Paragliders can soar like an eagle above the crater of Aragats, taking in the wonders of the region from the bird's eye perspective! If you are not experienced, try tandem flight with an expert pilot who will take care of the launch, flight and landing for you.

Mt. Aragats is certainly the most attractive flying destination in the province. Its slopes provide good thermals, and paragliders have been known to glide from the summit to the Ashtarak basin. Other good take-off spots can be found to the north and east of Aparan. These sites are surrounded by large agricultural fields, allowing flight in any wind direction and endless landing zones. The list of the flying sites with the exact GPS coordinates is given below (source: "Paragliding Earth" Website):

1. Aragats Mountain-south top GPS: take-off - 40°30'13" (40.5037)N; 44°11'2" (44.1841)E; Elevation - 3783 m.
2. Aparan GPS: take - off - 40°35'28" (40.5913)N; 44°28'26" (44.4741)E; Elevation - 2424 m.
3. Lusagyugh GPS: take- off - 40°37'18" (40.6218)N; 44°24'54" (44.4151)E; Elevation - 2562 m.
4. Avan GPS: take-off - 40°20'9" (40.3359)N; 44°10'6" (44.1686)E; Elevation - 1688 m.
5. Mirak GPS: take-off - 40°38'0" (40.6335)N; 44°21'5" (44.3515)E; Elevation - 2264 m.
6. Teghenis GPS: take-off - 40°30'29" (40.5082)N; 44°30'16" (44.5045)E; Elevation - 2765 m.
7. Vardablur GPS: take- off - 40°40'41.90"N; 44°13'56.77"E; Elevation - 2286 m.

Yerevan has several professional paragliding clubs where you can get full equipment and professional guides for this sport.

ASHTARAK





CONTENTS

• Foreword	2
• Natural Attractions	3
• Historical and Heritage Attractions	5
• Ashtarak Region	11
• Talin Region	20
• Aparan Region	22
• Aragats Region	24
• Rural Tourism	25
• Wine Tourism	26
• Itineraries and Trails	27
I. Cycling	28
II. Hiking	31
III. Horseback Riding	34
IV. Bird Watching	35
V. Botanical Tours	36
VI. Paragliding	37

ARAGATSOTN

The image features a landscape of a mountain valley with a lake and green slopes, viewed through vertical bars. The landscape is reflected in the water of the lake. The sky is blue with some clouds. The overall scene is a natural, scenic view of a mountain region.

GUIDE BOOK