

ARMENIA

GUIDE
BOOK

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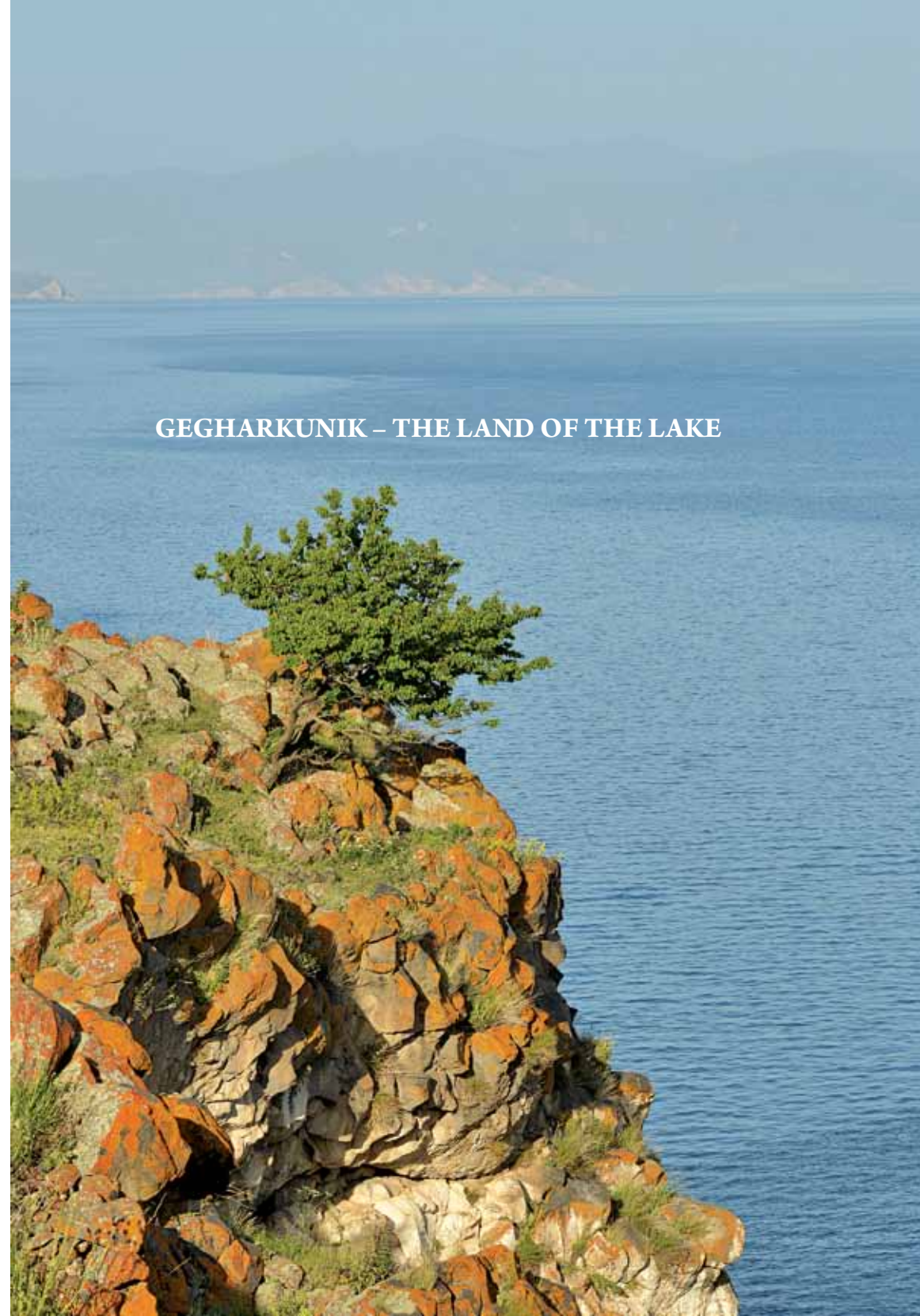


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GEGHARKUNIK – THE LAND OF THE LAKE



FOREWORD

Gegharkunik is “the must see destination”, or “the summer fun of the country”, and its lake is the “Armenian blue pearl”. It all seems too good to be true, but, with stunning scenery, varied flora and fauna, an amazing wealth of historical monuments and supremely friendly locals, Gegharkunik really does live up to the hype.

Gegharkunik is located in the eastern part of the country, occupying 18% of the territory, which makes it the largest of all the Armenian provinces. Gegharkunik’s biggest attraction is Lake Sevan: a magnificent body of crystal water covering the surface of 940 square kilometers. Lake Sevan accounts for almost one sixth of the province’s total area, but this breathtaking beauty is also important in many other ways. It is home to an abundance of flora and fauna one cannot find elsewhere in the country. Its clear waters and many beaches make it a sought-after destination, especially for locals in search of summer fun. On the northern lakeshore, simple cottages give way to luxurious hotels, just opposite to the largely desolated and pristine beaches of Artanish peninsula at its eastern tip.

Many travelers pass through the province for only one or two days, intent on racing through to Armenia’s ‘bigger’ attractions. This is a shame, as Gegharkunik has much to offer. There is plenty to see for history lovers, as the province is home to several sites of great historical relevance. The western and southern shores of Lake Sevan are peppered with impressive churches, khachkars (stone-carved crosses), and Urartian citadels. The obvious highlights are Sevanavank, one of Armenia’s iconic landmarks, and the Noratus cemetery, an open-aired museum with the largest collection of khachkars in the country.

There’s also plenty here to keep you active since Gegharkunik’s landscape is surprisingly diverse. Take the time to explore the highland wilderness and climb one of the several mountain ridges that surround the lake. Head first for the misty heights of Mt. Azhdahak on the Geghama Mountain Range, where you’ll find crater lakes, mysterious petroglyphs, endless rolling grassland and some of the most enjoyable hiking routes in all of Armenia.

Feel the wind in your hair while riding a horse on the Argitchi River plateau, soar like an eagle over the mountain ridges with a paraglider, step back in time and sail the turquoise Armenian “sea” on a 13th century medieval merchant ship, or simply soak up the vibrant local flavor and you’re sure to find yourself seduced.

NATURAL ATTRACTIONS

Lake Sevan

Armenia has no access to the sea, and although this might be a killjoy for many people, it has Lake Sevan, which is a treasure Armenians would never trade for anything. Lake Sevan is the largest lake in Armenia and the Caucasus region. With an altitude of 1,900 meters above sea level, it’s one of the highest lakes in the world. The name Sevan is of Urartian origin, and is derived of Siuna, meaning county of lakes. The lake is divided into two sections: Big Sevan and Small Sevan. Big Sevan covers 972 km² and has a maximum depth of 46 meters. Small Sevan has 284 km², while its maximum depth reaches almost 100 meters. The lake is fed by 28 rivers and streams, and is the source for only one - the Hrazdan River.

In summer, Sevan becomes a tourist magnet and becomes crowded by locals who spend their summer holidays at the lake. Tourists can camp by the lake and enjoy one of the many beaches along the shore, the most popular one being a 2.5-kilometer stretch located on the northern side. There are a few resorts and smaller facilities, as well as camping grounds and picnic areas to choose from. The Eastern shore running from Tsovag-yugh to Shorzha is less developed and offers fewer facilities for tourists. The climate here is considerably colder than in the rest of the country due to high altitude, and the water can be brisk for swimming.

The Legend of Lake Sevan

There was once a land with bountiful fertile soil and lush gardens which was watered by a spring. It was a small but strong spring and the flow had to be contained by a boulder. One day a girl came to the spring to fill the jugs with water. Being young and playful she left the spring forgetting to replace the boulder. During the night disaster struck—the water from the spring poured out and became a small river, flooding the entire neighborhood. People woke and saw the waters rising. An old man, angered by someone’s carelessness, shouted “May the person who did this turn to stone!” At that moment the forgetful girl awoke and walked out of her house. As soon as she stepped into the street she turned to stone. The powerful waters were still rising and eventually they formed a lake with a rocky island. Today this rocky island still dominates the blue surface of Lake Sevan, looking like the head of a neglectful girl.

Sevan National Park

Sevan National Park was established in 1978, with the aim of protecting the important high mountainous lake ecosystem, endemic fish species (Sevan trout, Sevan beghlou, Sevan koghak), plants and animals, including the Armenian gull and resting sites of migratory waterfowl. The national park is a habitat for 1,145 species of high vascular plants (including 3 endemics of Armenia and 5 endemics of Lake Sevan) as well as for 336 species of vertebrate animals. The park has four reserves and two sanctuaries and covers the area of 147,300 hectare acres, out of which 22,600 hectare acres are lakeside land territories.

Artanish peninsula

Artanish Peninsula, located on the eastern coast of the lake, is among the most striking areas within the park's reserve. Isolated and largely undisturbed, the peninsula boasts three separate bioregions and provides shelter for many of the park's 267 species of birds. It is also home to some 34 mammals, including leopards, wild goats, otters and wolves.

Geghama Ridge

70 km long and 48 km wide, Geghama range stretches between Lake Sevan and the Ararat plain. The range is of volcanic origin and includes many extinct volcanoes. The highest point is the Azhdahak volcano (3,597.3 m above sea level) which rises in the western part of the range. There is a lake in the crater of the Azhdahak volcano that is formed from melting snow.

Vardenis Range

82 km long, Vardenis Range divides Gegharkunik from Vayots Dzor Province. The mountains are sloping but rugged with some interesting volcano cones and lava flows. The range offers fantastic views of the lake and poses in its treasures numerous petroglyphs, caves and ancient settlements. The highest peak is also named Vardenis and is 3,522 m high.

The range was named after Varderes – a woman who put on a helmet and started fighting Arab conquerors. During the fight she fell off the horse. Seeing her beautiful long hair, Arabs captured her and wanted to take her to a harem. On the way through the mountains Varderes threw herself down from a rock, and the mountains where this occurred were named Vardenis.

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Mt. Armaghan

Mt. Armaghan (2,829 m) is an extinct volcano located to the West of the Martuni-Selim Pass road near the village of Madina. There is a volcano crater on top which is partly filled with a lake. In 2009, a basalt domed church was built right above the lake on the place of an ancient chapel. Mt. Armaghan offers a stunning 360° view of Sevan Lake and the surrounding mountain chains. The mount is also a popular picnic destination for locals and one of the best paragliding sites in the province.

Natural Bridge

The Natural Bridge was formed as a result of water erosion and is composed of two arches. The larger arch that stands right above the river is about 10 m high and 5-6 m wide, while the smaller arch is 2 m high and 5 m wide. The ruins of an old water mill can be seen under the smaller arch in the old river bed. This natural monument is situated south-west of the Tsakkar village, in the basin of the river Bakhtak and is accessible through private property.

Frozen Stone Wave

The natural monument Frozen Stone Wave was formed as a direct result of water erosion as it was previously part of the old lakeside before water reduction. It is situated to the north-east of the village of Shorzha, along the Tsovaghyugh-Shorzha highway.

Gili Cave Shelters

The Gili Cave Shelters are artificial caves which served as hiding places and shelter. They are situated 1.5 km to the south-west of the village of Gili, to the left side of the Tsovaghyugh-Gili road. The cave shelters are accessible from the road and on foot over railway line. Previously, when the level of the lake was higher, they were accessible only from their eastern side, via the mountain range, thus providing a perfect hiding place.



HISTORICAL AND HERITAGE ATTRACTIONS

With approximately 10,000 accounted historical monuments, Gegharkunik may have more excavations per square meter than any other province in the country. The monuments pertain to different periods, starting from the Stone Age to modern times. During recent excavations, numerous artifacts and ruins have been found including Stone, Bronze and Iron Age tools, petroglyphs, Urartian cuneiform inscriptions, ruins of Cyclopean fortresses, ancient water canals, pagan mausoleums, war chariots, monasteries, chapels, churches and khachkars.

One thing to consider when visiting the heritage sites in the province, in particular Stone to Iron Age archaeological sites and Urartian citadels, is that they don't appear to be attractive in their current appearance and condition of preservation. In this regard, having a good and very well informed guide is a must, because only after getting acquainted with the history of the site will it stop appearing as just a pile of stones. You can use your imagination to draw the layout of those sites in your mind, adding some colors and breath of life into them.

Sevanavank Monastery

The Sevanavank Monastery is the symbol of the province and one of the most visited sites in Armenia. The Black Monastery or Sevan Holy Apostolic Monastery is situated on Sevan Peninsula. The proposal of building such a monastery was initiated by Catholicos Mesrop Eghivardeci and was developed by Princess Mariam, the daughter of king Ashot I in 874 on the ruins of a 4th century monastery destroyed by Arabs. St. Mesrop Mashtots had a vision of 12 figures walking across the lake, who pointed him the place where the church had to be erected. Sevanavank Monastery was originally a complex of three churches, two of which are still perfectly preserved to this day. When it was completed, the level of water in Lake Sevan was much higher than it is today and the whole monastic complex was located on an island. Later, during the twentieth century, the lake was artificially drained and the level fell about 20 meters creating the peninsula. Besides the churches the complex included printing house, guest houses, warehouses and a refectory. In the 19th century the monastery was a place to reform errant monks – there was a strict regime and no women were allowed.

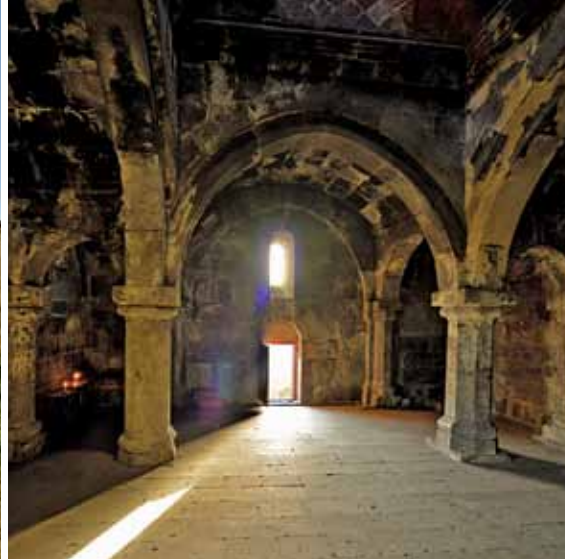
Hayravank monastery (9th-12th cc.)

Perched on a rocky outcrop above the lake, this beautiful 9th-12th century monastery may not attract the crowds the way Sevanavank does, but it's still just as attractive a site as its more famous neighbor. Hayravank is actually comprised of two sections. The 9th century church and 10th century chapel are the older part of the complex, whereas the gavit was a 12th century addition to the complex. There are several magnificent kachkars in the churchyard and a small souvenir shop.

A medieval cemetery (9th-15th centuries) in Noratus with a large number of early khachkars

The Cemetery at Noratus village is a home to the largest collection of "khachkars" in Armenia. Here you will find 900 cross-stones varying in style and age. The prominent feature of many khachkars, most of which date back to the 10th century, is a cross surmounting a solar disc. The rest of the stone is usually decorated with leaves, grapes, pomegranates or abstract patterns. A





wander around this huge village cemetery offers a glimpse into the past lives of the region's inhabitants. From afar, the khachkars resemble an army poised for battle, so it's easy to see how a local folk tale arose, in which the villagers dressed the stones up in clothes and helmets to protect the village from the invading army of Tamerlane.

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Lchashen Cyclopean Fortress-Settlement and Burial Place (4rd millennium -7th c. BC)

Lchashen village houses one of the most important archaeological monuments of Armenia. The site occupies 55 ha and includes monument complexes of the 4rd millennium -7th c. BC – a Cyclopean fortress, habitations, the cuneiform inscription of king Argishti I and a necropolis with around 430 mausoleums. The fortress, which stretches over 15 hills, has 2 citadels and 22 small and medium stone hills and towers. Excavations showed that the ancient settlement of Lchashen had a system of straight streets on two sides of which there were dwellings with round and square bases. The burial ground was uncovered in 1956, after water level of Sevan decreased, providing scientists with multitude of artifacts from 4th-2nd millennia BC. The Lchashen collection is of diverse nature: it includes unique wooden four-wheeled and two-wheeled carts, bronze sculptural groups representing hunting scenes, statuettes of birds and animals, weapons with artistic decoration and symbols of power. Original pieces of art are various objects of worship, ritual and everyday use, ornaments of precious metals and stones, colored and engraved pottery. Among the most attractive monuments of Lchashen is the cuneiform message of king Agrishti I of the Kingdom of Van.

Petroglyphs

A great number of petroglyphs have been found in the surroundings of Mt. Azhdahak. Most images depict men in scenes of hunting and fighting, as well as astronomical bodies and phenomena: the Sun, the Moon, constellations, the stellar sky, lightning, and many others.

Sevsar Ancient Astronomical Observatory

Armenia's star gazing tradition is as old as recorded time. Recent studies suggest the birthplace of the naming of the constellations and the creation of the zodiac is in the Armenian plateau. One of such places used for star observation is located on the western slopes of Mt. Sevsar, east of the Martuni-Selim Pass. Here one may see an ancient observatory with a unique image of bolide carved on a huge stone block, astronomical calendars and pictograms from 3rd - 1st Millennia BCE. There are all together 15 pictured rock-pieces within an area of 50 by 20 meters. There is a theory that the big round image represents a bolide, and the adjoining pictures are constellations. Thus, an assumption can be made that this is a stellar map, which shows a sector of the sky from which the bolide descended.

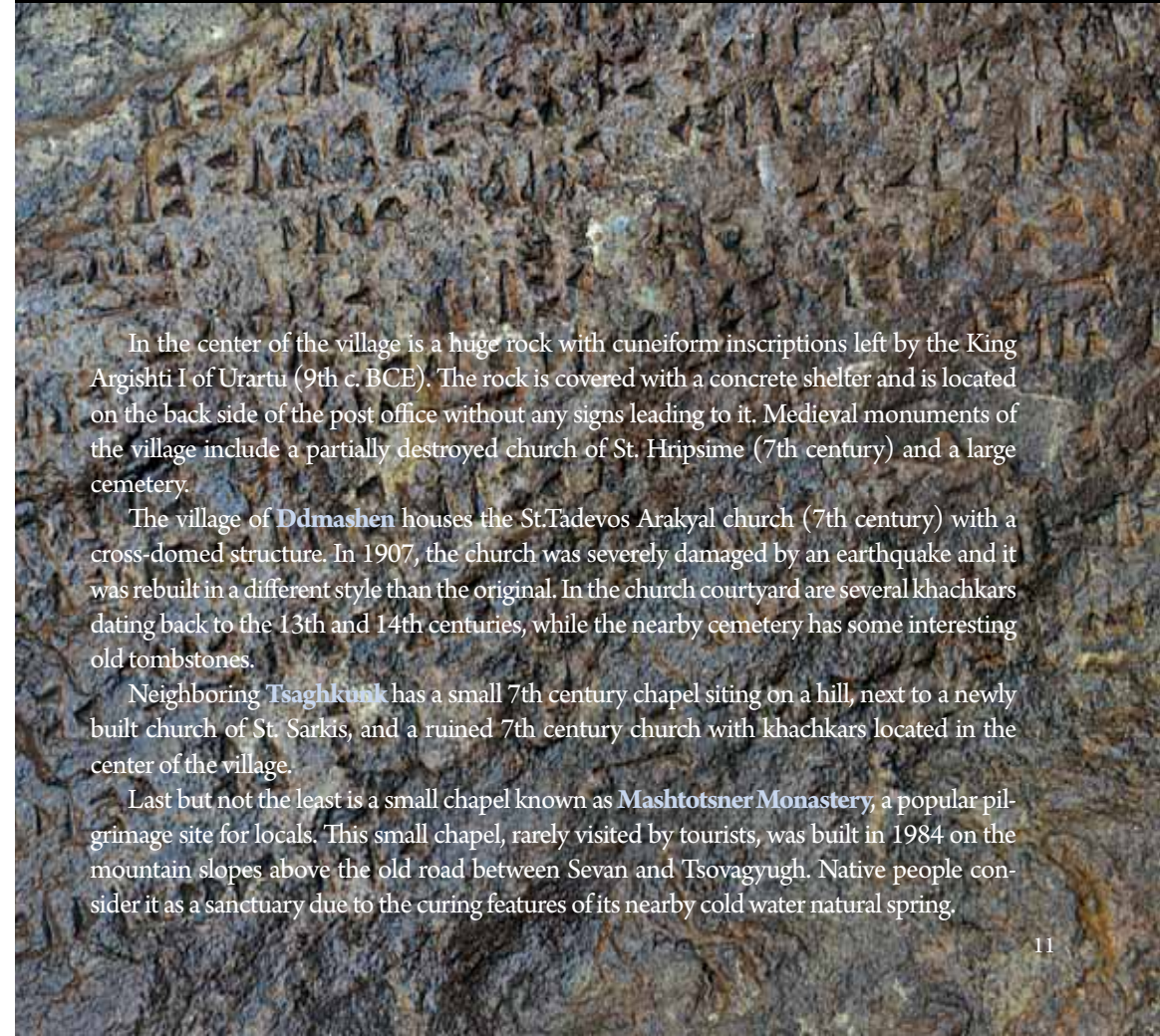
SEVAN REGION

The Sevan region occupies the north-west corner of Gegharkunik and is the most popular summer holiday destination in Armenia. Thanks to its favorable geographical position, the number of sunny days here reaches 250, while during summer months an average temperature range of 20 to 30 degrees, providing relatively cool weather. Armenians say that they don't need a sea when they have Sevan Lake. But only the coast around the Sevan town is crowded with people, where the greatest concentration of hotels and beach resorts is located. It's enough to drive 15 km north or south of the town to come across a coast that is empty, dotted only with some never finished hotels and camping places.

Sevan town ("Black hill") sits at the north end of the hills that ring the lake at a height of more than 1,900 meters above sea level. In comparison with other settlements in the province, it is a new town, established in the 19th century by "Russia's Old Believers" – the Molokans. Exiled by Catherine the Great to the hinterlands of the Russian empire, Molokans settled in Sevan in 1842, which is considered the founding date for the town. They created a tidy little settlement and named it Elenovka, earning their living from farming and fishing. The place kept the name until 1935 when it was renamed Sevan, after Lake Sevan. Although it has a nice setting, it is primarily an industrial town with Soviet style concrete apartment blocks and only a few traces of the once thriving Molokan community. None of the economic boom of the nearby lakeshore has reached the town which still needs large investments in infrastructure to kick off. The town is home to the beer manufacturer Sevan Brewery, which produces a variety of lager beer under the brand Kellers. Places of interest include Sevan Museum of Natural Science, Sevan Botanical Garden with 443 species of trees and Mt. Metsep (2,220 m) which rises right above the town.

The hub of all the summer fun is the **Sevan peninsula**, with numerous beach leisure areas, restaurants and souvenir stands. Located 3 km east of Sevan town, the peninsula is home to one of the most visited places in the country, the Sevanavank Monastery. Considered the symbol of the region, the Sevanavank Monastery (5th-13th centuries) is up a long flight of steps on the peninsula's hill. The first church is St. Arakelots, followed by St. Astvatsatsin with a courtyard filled with khachkars. If you continue up the hill past the foundations of the St. Harutyun Church, you will reach the highest point of the peninsula with stunning views of the lake. On the far side of the hill are two buildings: one belongs to the National Writers' Union, the other is the president's vacation home, protected by a high fence. The building on the north side of the peninsula is a new seminary for the Armenian Apostolic Church.

In addition to Sevanavank Monastery are several other monuments of historical importance in the region. The most significant is a Bronze Age archaeological site located south of the village of **Ltchashen**. The excavations have proved that the settlement of Ltchashen originated at the end of the 4th millennium BCE. In the middle of the 3rd millennium BCE, it was converted into a fortress surrounded by a cyclopean stone wall. The finds certify the existence of agriculture, cattle rising, pottery, smelting, wood carving weapon crafting and jewelry making.



In the center of the village is a huge rock with cuneiform inscriptions left by the King Argishti I of Urartu (9th c. BCE). The rock is covered with a concrete shelter and is located on the back side of the post office without any signs leading to it. Medieval monuments of the village include a partially destroyed church of St. Hripsime (7th century) and a large cemetery.

The village of **Ddmashen** houses the St. Tadevos Arakyal church (7th century) with a cross-domed structure. In 1907, the church was severely damaged by an earthquake and it was rebuilt in a different style than the original. In the church courtyard are several khachkars dating back to the 13th and 14th centuries, while the nearby cemetery has some interesting old tombstones.

Neighboring **Tsaghknisk** has a small 7th century chapel sitting on a hill, next to a newly built church of St. Sarkis, and a ruined 7th century church with khachkars located in the center of the village.

Last but not the least is a small chapel known as **Mashtotsner Monastery**, a popular pilgrimage site for locals. This small chapel, rarely visited by tourists, was built in 1984 on the mountain slopes above the old road between Sevan and Tsovaghyugh. Native people consider it as a sanctuary due to the curing features of its nearby cold water natural spring.



GAVAR REGION

The Gavar region spreads further to the south, covering a large portion of the lake's western coast. The region is named after the town of **Gavar**, the capital of the Gegharkunik province. Gavar was founded in 1830 by Armenian migrants from the city of Bayazet. Also known as "New Bayazit", the settlement achieved the status of a city in 1850. However, the area of modern-day Gavar has been inhabited since the Bronze Age. Many historical tombstones, dating back to the 2nd millennium BCE, as well as the remains of the Berdi Glukh cyclopean fort, are found on a hill at the center of the town. It is believed that the fortress, which dates back to the early Iron Age, was the royal capital of the Araratian region of Velikukhi that was surrounded with more than 22 minor fortifications. The fort occupies a long, slender rocky hill, now a modern cemetery, parallel with the Gavaraget stream behind the Haldi hotel at the main square. The fort includes early cave dwellings, towers and an underground passage to the Gavaraget. Many medieval monuments, in-

cluding khachkars, gravestones and a chapel can also be seen in the fort.

Gavar has several important churches. The oldest are St. Mariam Astvatsatsin (898 CE) and Grigor Lusavorich (4th century) churches in the Hatsarati suburb of Gavar. On the main square is St. Grigor Lusavorich cathedral (19th century), which was considered the tallest church in Armenia till the late 1990s. Nearby is the recently renovated St. Hovhannes Karapet basilica. The church was originally built in 1848 by compatriots who had immigrated to Armenia from Bayazet, led by brothers Barsegh and Mkrtich Artsruni Aghaner; the founders of New Bayazet. Worth a visit is the Gegharkunik Geological Museum with a significant collection of archaeological and ethnographic artifacts.

During the Soviet era Gavar was highly industrialized, though following the USSR's breakdown, most of the factories and industrial facilities closed, leading to a great number of qualified specialists becoming unemployed. Education continues to be one of the main values in the society of Gavar. With its five faculties, the Gavar University is a major educational center for the entire province of Gegharkunik.

Many villages in the region house important historical monuments. In the village of **Berd-kunk**, which was a transit point on the ancient Dvin-Partev road, there is a cyclopean fortress called Ishkhanats Amrots. Unfortunately, the local villagers closed the path that leads to it to prevent cattle from going to the area, so you will have difficulties to find your way up the hill.

Noratus, the major village of the province, contains the famous cemetery with the largest number of khachkars in Armenia, as well as a monastery and church dated to the 9th century, and a ruined basilica built by Prince Sahak. Noratus is first mentioned in the Middle Ages, when it was a much larger settlement. The bronze-age megalithic fort near the village points to the notion that Noratus is one of the most ancient continuously-inhabited settlements in Armenia.

South of Gavar is Gandzak village with St. Gevorg church (9th c.), and a small St. Mariam Astvatsatsin basilica (4th c.). St. Gevorg church was partially destroyed during the invasion of Tamerlan, and it was roofless till 1910.

Further south is the village of **Hayravank** with the Hayravank Monastery perched on a rocky hill with a fine view of the lake. The complex consists of a 9th century church, a 12th century gavit, and khachkars. The rocks just to the north-west preserve substantial walls of a Bronze Age--through-medieval fort and settlement. Nearby are Iron Age tombs. In the village there are two shrines with inscribed khachkars.

West of Gavar is **Tsaghkashen** village, founded in 1859, with the St. Hovhannes church of the 9th-10th centuries. The village is a starting point of several hiking, biking and 4WD trips in the Geghama Range including Gri Dzor valley, Mt. Azhdahak and Akna Lake.

Landjaghbyur houses Ilikavank or Paravi Vank monastery and the ruins of a massive 70 hectare cyclopean fortress. Ilikavank is stylistically dated to the 7th c., although some sources give the 10th-11th cc. and even 13th c. as the time of construction.

Finally, visit **Karmirgiugh**, with its Urartian ruins, khachkars and the Kanagegh medieval settlement with dramatic views of the lake. The forth is situated on a large cape plateau, 12 km SE of Gavar, covering an area of about 30 ha. The beauty of the site is unfortunately destroyed by a large cattle farm erected between the forth and the Kanagegh medieval settlement.

The Martuni Region covers the southwestern part of the province between Sevan Lake on the north, Geghama Range on the west and Vardenis Range on the south. The primary natural assets of the region comprise of the Lichk Reserve, Tsakkar Natural Bridge, Mt. Armaghan and the Argichi River, which divides the Ridges of Geghama and Vardenis.

The center of the region is the town of Martuni, the former capital of Gegharkunik province. In ancient times it was known as Mets Kznut. In 1926 its name was changed to Martuni in honor of the first Soviet premier of Armenia, Aleksandr Myasnikyan, whose nom de guerre was "Martuni". Historical assets include the St. Astvatsatsin church, rebuilt in 1886, and an Iron Age fort excavated in 1997. There is also a carpet factory where one can see the process of handmade waving and the town gallery with an interesting collection of paintings.

There are many villages with monuments of historical significance throughout the region. On the western coast visit the medieval settlement at **Dzoragiugh**, with the ruins of Shoghaga Monastery built for Princess Mariam of the house of Bagratuni, rising on a hill on the western side of the settlement. There is also the 9th c. St. Karapet church, known as Masruts Anapat hermitage, and the 40 ha large Sangiar cyclopean fortress. See the 9th c St. Lusavorich church at **Tazagiugh** before stopping at **Lichk** with its medieval town remains, mineral springs, cyclopean fortress and St. Astvatsatsin church with khachkars.

The southern shore is dotted with numerous monuments of historical importance. Only 5 km from Martuni in **Nerkin Getashen** you can find the masterpiece of Syunik architectural school, the ruins of the 9th c. Kota Monastery with a large cemetery next to it. Within the village is also a ruined basilica called "Jam" by the locals with khachkars built into its walls, and not far away is a small shrine. There are also two large stone forts from the Middle Ages located 2 km to the east and 3 km the west of the village. In the early Middle Ages the village was the capital of the region known during that time as Kot

The Teysheba (Odzaberd or "Serpent Castle") Urartian city-fortress (8th century BCE) founded by Rusa I (approximately 735-713 BCE) is positioned on a hill cut by the old road between Tsovinar and Artsvanist. Teysheba, named after Urartian god of storms and thunder, is the best-preserved Urartian fortification in the Sevan Basin. The site is best reached from the spur to Artsvanist, turning right (west) on a little dirt road toward Tsovinar. Carved into a low cliff below the road is a worn cuneiform inscription of Rusa I recounting his conquest of 23 countries. Up the hill there are various walls of boulders, preserved particularly on the south side of the hill fortress.

In a gorge south of the Artsvanist village is the early 10th century monastery of **Vanevan** and a large but broken medieval khachkar nearby. The main church of St. Grigor (left) was built in 903 by Prince Shapuh Bagratuni, brother of King Smbat and his sister Mariam. The church on the right-hand side may be contemporary, but the gavit between them was added later. Restoration works were done during 1983-1985. There is a spring and a shallow cave behind the monastery. Continuing straight south through the village, one sees on the left, across the gorge, the remains of an early cemetery and church. 3 km south is Kolataki St. Astvatsatsin church of the late 9th-early 10th centuries, and Hnevank of the 10th century. In the same area is the Bruti Berd cyclopean fortress.

MARTUNI REGION





VARDENIS REGION

The Vardenis region is located in the southeastern part of Gegharkunik. The current territory of the region, confined by the Sevan, Eastern Sevan and Vardenis Mountain Ranges, previously formed a part of the historic Sotk county of Syunik province. The largest river which flows through the region is the Masrik Rivers, which is of great importance for ichthyofauna. The river is a spawning destination for several endemic species such as the Sevan koghak (*Capoeta capoeta sevangi*), Gegharkunik trout (*Salmo ishchan gegarkuni*) and Sevan beghlu (*Barbus geokschaikus*), the last two of which are included in the Red Book of Armenia.

Located at 1,943 meters above sea level, the town of **Vardenis** is one of the oldest settlements in Armenia. According to legend, it was founded by Gegham, the grandson of the forefather Hayk and named Geghamabak. The first written reference to it dates back to

the 9th century, when Gaburn Vasak, the prince of Syunik, established a settlement on this territory. Once the Arshakuni dynasty fell, the Sotk county was left in the hands of new rulers from the dynasty of Smbatyan. Various nomadic tribes raided the town after that, and the name of the settlement was changed to Basargechar. In 1969 the town was renamed Vardenis after the mountain range. In the center of Vardenis is the church of Surb Astvatsatsin (Holy Mary) built in 1905, where the Armenian historian Hovhannes Tsar etsi worked. The church is surrounded with numerous khachkars, dating back to the 14th -17th centuries. The town still preserves some old crafts. There is a khachkar-master who is making replicas of historical Armenian khachkars and a lavash bread bakery in Vardenis.

The region has a rich historic and cultural heritage, mostly concentrated around Vardenis town. A total of 568 recorded monuments can be found in the area, the most notable ones being the Makenyats monastery, the basilica in Sotk, the chapels of Ayrk, Karchaghbyur, old tombs dating back to the 3rd-1st millennia BCE, Cyclopean walls and medieval khachkars.

Makenyats monastery (9th century) is located in **Makenis** village, 15 km from Vardenis. Currently, there is a monk living in it, a rare case to be seen in Armenia. A ruined 7th century St. Astvatsatsin Cathedral is in **Sotk** village, 14 km from Vardenis. The church has undertaken several restorations during which many of the 13th century kachkars have been used in the walls as construction material.

In **Ayrk** village, just 10 km from Vardenis, are the chapels of St. Gevorg and St. Astvatsatsin from the 8th century, as well as many khachkars from the 8th-16th centuries. In the village of **Tsovak** there is an Urartian inscription and many 11th century khachkars.

On the largest hill of **Karchaghbyur** village, parts of the walls of the Cyclopean castle have been preserved. At the western foot of the hill there are two semi-rock chapels with stone doors. For this reason, both the territory and the chapels are called "Qareh Dur" ("Stone Door").

Akunk village was founded on the site of a Bronze Age settlement and has a fort dating from the 6th- 4th century BCE. There are two Tuxh Manuk pilgrimage sites in the village as well. West of Akunk is the Klor Dar cyclopean fort.

Mets Masrik has been inhabited since the 7th century and has a khachkar dated to 881 CE, two shrines from the 12th and 13th centuries, and a 17th century church. Nearby is Pokr Masrik (little Masrik) with a church and the khachkars from 12th – 13th centuries.

The area is rich in metal and non-metal resources. Various types of rocks can be found here, including ones that can be used in construction and semi-precious stones. The mine at Sotk, which is still active, exploits the largest gold deposit in the Caucasus and has been in use since antiquity. From a historical point of view, the region around Sotk is unique in the South Caucasus due to the intense interaction of prehistoric settlements and early gold mining. This naturally defined area has long been a terra incognita for pre-historians due to the lack of archaeological and archaeo-metallurgical investigations. Recently, an Armenian-German archaeological survey discovered geo-archaeological evidence which seems to point to Early Bronze Age mining in the region.

CHAMBARAK REGION

Chambarak region lies in the north-east of the province, encompassing the territory between Lake Sevan to the west, Azerbaijan to the east, Tavush Province to the north and Vardenis Region to the south. It is usually considered the least interesting of all regions in Gegharkunik, but only by people who never had the chance to visit it. In fact, Chambarak is one of the last pristine areas in Armenia with beautiful mountains, picturesque river valleys and untouched native forests.

Unfortunately, together with Vardenis, it's one of the poorest regions in the country. This unfavorable situation is conditioned by a number of factors. Many communities of these bordering regions are populated by refugees. There are no big or medium-sized enterprises in the region and agriculture and cattle breeding are the main spheres of employment of the population.

To explore the region, take the road from Tsovaghugh to Shorzha which runs along a narrow coastland squeezed between the Areguni Range and the lake. It is a sparsely populated area, with no villages and only few pensionats and hotels along the shore. After about 25 km, there is a fork which leads to Drakhtik village, a starting point for a mountain trail to Kalavan village. Two km further to the south is the next intersection. If you continue straight you will reach **Shorzha**, a popular summer destination with nice beaches and several leisure areas. There is a 17th century chapel and cemetery on the south edge of the village. Further to the south is the wild Artanish Peninsula.

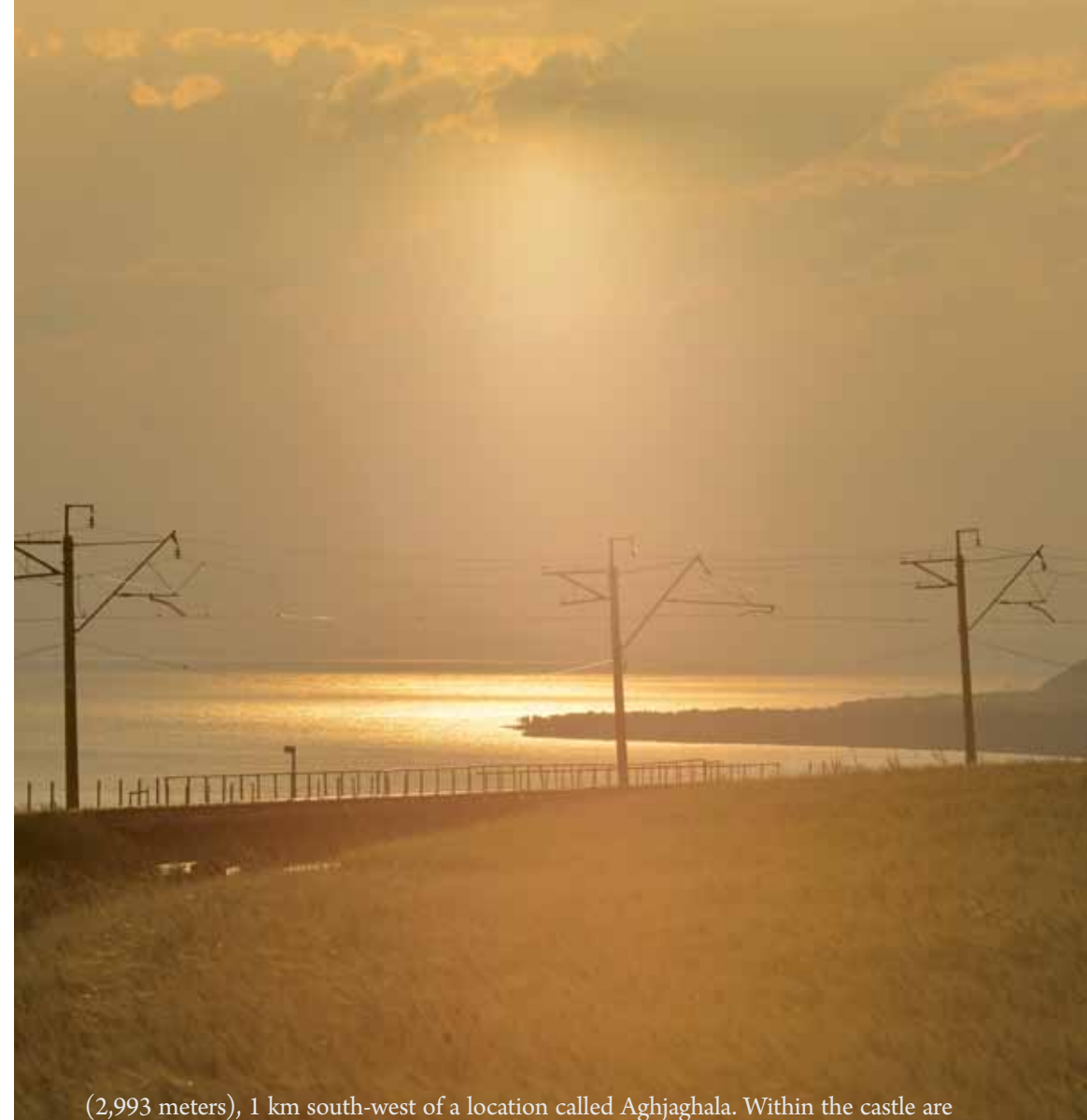
If you turn left you will reach the highlands up through the Chambarak valley. The low traffic asphalt road passes through picturesque alpine pastures and is ideal for cycling tours. After 15 km you will reach border town of **Chambarak**, comfortably settled into the folds of a high valley. This small mountainous town of less than 8,000 inhabitants is the administrative center of the region. It was founded in 1835 as Mikhaylovka by the Russian immigrants. Many 13th century khachkars found in the town confirm the existence of a settlement during the Middle Ages.

The road continues through the picturesque Getik River valley, which is to the right of the tributary of the Aghstev River. Follow the villages of Getik, Martuni, Aygut and Drpabak, which all have excellent opportunities for rural tourism development.

The **Getik** village was founded in 1922 by settlers from Hin Bashkend, and has megalithic monuments, khachkars and an Iron Age cyclopean fort by the name of "Mughani Khach".

Just after Martuni take the left turnoff. A good dirt road, crossing the river about 100 meters before two wooden houses on the right, leads south and up through woods to the ruins of the **Old Getik Monastery**, predecessor of Goshavank or New Getik. The Old Getik monastery (9th -12th centuries), also known as Karmir Eghetsi, was one of the prominent spiritual and cultural centers of medieval Armenia. The monastery was ruined in an earthquake, and the remaining walls are only about 2 meters high.

Spitak Berd (White fort) is a medieval fort situated between the villages of Martuni and Aygut. The fort is erected on the southern foothills of the Murkhuz Mountain Range



(2,993 meters), 1 km south-west of a location called Aghjaghala. Within the castle are the preserved ruins of a large settlement, a church (13th -14th centuries) and several cemeteries also dating back to the 10th – 14th centuries.

If you turn left Drpabak, you will reach the village of **Kalavan** where a group of Armenian and French archaeologists recently discovered an open Stone Age settlement, the first of that kind in Armenia. Excavation showed that the proto-settlement, located on the right bank of the river Barepat, was planned and organized. A year before, archaeologists found early Bronze Age graves with remarkable ceramic and metal articles. Deeper exploration revealed stone constructions, obsidian and flint quarries, primitive weapons, and bones of animals with spearheads inside. Archaeologists concluded that this may be not just one site but a settlement consisting of several Stone Age camps.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL TOURISM

The extraordinary archaeological discovery in Kalavan village inspired a young archaeologist, Robert Ghukasyan, to develop an exciting archaeological tourism project. A replica of a Stone Age settlement was constructed where visitors can learn the different skills of the primeval men, such as building houses, setting fires, collecting food and making tools and weapons. A Stone Age walking trail with animal shaped signs was designed to guide the visitors to several different locations around the village where they can practice these skills. Archery tournaments, horse chariot rides, hiking, biking, bird watching and the “Mammoth” intellectual team building game complete the offer. Accommodation can be chosen between homestays (5), tents (35 people) and Stone Age houses.

Packages:

1. Basic program for groups of min. 5 participants with one scientist/instructor – 9,500 AMD/person/day.
2. Upgraded program with more activities and one or two scientists/instructors – 14,000 AMD/person/day. This package is available for individual tourists, as well as groups.
3. Special program is designed for min. 2 persons with three scientists/instructors – 25,000 AMD/person/day. The program is more scientific.
4. Extra program is for groups of min. 5 people. It consists of the series of lectures given by all the specialists included in the project – 65,000 AMD/person/day.

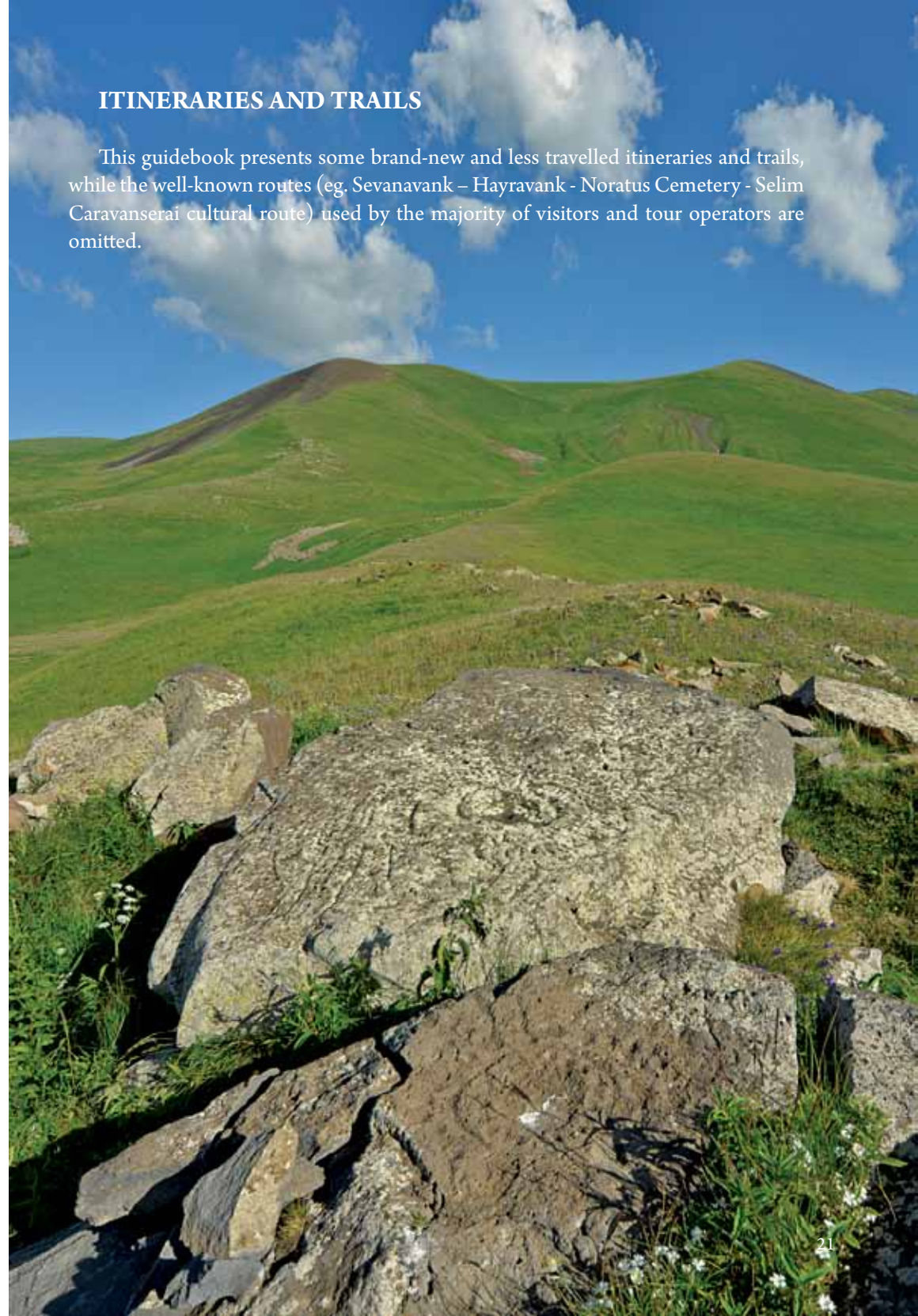
All packages can last from one to seven days. Food and accommodation are included in the price. Children prices cover only food and accommodation costs (or they can bring the food and sleeping bags and tents from home), while the lectures are free.

RURAL TOURISM

In the last couple of years, several villages in Gegharkunik have become centers of rural tourism development in the province. In Sevan region, it is the village of Tsaghkunk with the “Tsaghkunk” Guesthouse and a network of B&Bs and crafts manufacturers. Located in Vardenis is the “Areguni” NGO, a strong promoter of rural tourism, which offers hospitality with local families, organizes cooking and dancing classes, craftsmen visits and cultural excursions. In the region of Chambarak, the villages of Getik and Martuni the “Cross of Armenian Unity” started an agritourism initiative including cheese and honey producers, rural households offering B&B services, different activities, such as carpet waving, cooking and fishing, initiated by the “Cross of Armenian Unity”.

ITINERARIES AND TRAILS

This guidebook presents some brand-new and less travelled itineraries and trails, while the well-known routes (eg. Sevanavank – Hayravank - Noratus Cemetery - Selim Caravanserai cultural route) used by the majority of visitors and tour operators are omitted.





Biking

Panoramic biking tour: Sevan Peninsula -“Akhtamar” Hotel in Tsovaghyugh

Overview: Short and easy biking tour along the old road between the town of Sevan and the “Akhtamar” Hotel in Tsovaghyugh village

Distance: 2 h / 13.5 km

Starting point: Sevan Botanical Garden

Road condition: low traffic asphalt road from Sevan to Tsovaghyugh; steep dirt road toward the Sevan peninsula viewpoint and Mashtotsner Monastery.

Description: From Sevan Botanical Garden, follow the asphalt road to Tsamakaberd village. Don't turn right in Tsamakaberd, but keep the elevation and continue forward to the Sevan peninsula. At the 3rd km, in the valley opposite to Sevan peninsula, turn left after finding an abandoned house. The steep dirt road will take you to a hill with an amazing view of the peninsula. Take the same way back to the asphalt road, then turn left and continue until the next fork. On the slopes above the road, you will see the Mashtotsner Monastery. A short dirt road leads to the chapel. Continue toward Tsovaghyugh village, and after 3.2 km you will reach the hotel. The whole trail offers beautiful panoramic views of the lake, peninsula and Areguni Mountain Range.

Tsovaghyugh – Kalavan Biking Tour

Alternatively, this tour can be done by jeeps.

Overview: Biking tour across the Areguni Mountain Range

Distance: 18 km

Starting point: Tsovaghyugh village

Road condition: easy to follow dirt road with some overgrown parts on the last section

Description: Above the village of Tsovaghyugh take a dirt road that goes east and climbs to Areguni Mountain Range. For a while the road runs parallel to the ridge and offers beautiful vistas of the lake and Sevan Peninsula. After couple of kilometers the road crosses to the other side of the ridge, still keeping the elevation. Inland views open up showing mountain slopes covered with lush forests. These are bordering areas of Dilijan NP. After approx. 11 km take the road that goes down till Kalavan. This section can be overgrown and hard to pass on some points. Detailed information about this trail can be obtained from the “Gardman” Tour Travel Company (www.gardmantour.com), which frequently organizes bike and 4WD tours along this way.

Drakhtik – Kalavan Biking Tour

Overview: Biking tour across the Areguni Mountain Range

Distance: 16 km

Starting point: Drakhtik village

Description: The trail follows a river valley NW of Drakhtik, traverses a mountain pass at 2187m and continues along the Barepat River valley before reaching Kalavan. Detailed information about this trail can be obtained from the “Time Land Scientific Study Fond” NGO from Kalavan, which is in the process of development a detailed map and placing proper signage along the path.

Hiking

Having some of the most challenging and stunning landscapes in the country, Gegharkunik offers plentiful in scope for hiking. The most spectacular tracks are along the Geghama Range with Mt. Azhdahak (3597m) being the main target for the hikers. Other interesting mountain tops are Mt. Metz Spitakasar (3555m), Mt. Pokr Spitakasar (3443m), Mt. Armaghan (2829m), Mt. Kartakary (3392 m), Mt. Vardenis (3521m).

To the top of Mount Azhdahak lead several different tracks. The shortest, and the most frequented, road is from the village of Tsaghkashen, which lies 9km SE of Gavar. With a 4WD you can reach a stone mine, and from there to the summit is a 3 to 4h long walk. Other possible roads to Mt. Azhdahak start from the villages of Gegharkunik, Lanjaghbyur and Sarukhan, and are accessible by jeeps.

Tsaghkashen village is a starting point to other interesting destinations: the beautiful Akna Lake in the Geghama Range and Gri Dzor valley with several mineral springs. Mt. Spitakasar (3555 m) can be reached from the villages of Yeranos or Dzoragyugh .

Mount Armaghan (2829m) can be accessed from the Martuni-Selim pass motorway, via the picturesque Madena village. A standard car can take you to the bottom of the mountain and then there is a 30 minute walk left, or you can take a 4WD to the summit. The best time to climb is from the end of May until the end of September.

Tsaghkunk village is a starting point for a day log hike to Dilijan.

Mount Metsep Hiking Trail

Overview: Short hike to the top of Mt. Metsep

Hike duration: 2 h / 3.5 km one way – in total 7km

Altitude: Gomadzor - Mt. Metsep 2220m

Starting point: Gomadzor district of Sevan town

Hike description: Follow the road that runs through Gomadzor valley to the north until the end of the inhabited area, then turn left and take the zigzag path that climbs up to the top. There is a TV areal and a small chapel on the top. From Mt. Metsep, at a 2220m altitude, one can admire the Lake Sevan's surface, as well as Sevan city. If the weather permits, the whole Geghama Ridge can be seen as well as Mt. Ararat and Mt. Aragats far away in the horizon.

Gomadzor district is a starting point for another short hike (5 km one way) with panoramic vistas of the lake and Areguni Mountains. At the end of the settlement, there is another dirt road which climbs up till the end of the valley (N) and then follows the Arjanots Range to Tsovaghyugh village, and the further to the north. You can move down to the Akhtamar Hotel, taking a dirt road or the rope way.

Artanish Peninsula Loop Hiking Trail

Overview: Splendid wilderness with views of Lake Sevan and the Geghama Mountain Range

Hike duration: 4h/14km

Altitude: Guardhouse 1910m – mountain pass 2185m

Starting point: On the intersection leading to Artanish village on the the Shorzha-Vardenis road, turn right (W) onto the road to the peninsula, which is well marked with a sign. Follow the road until you reach a military base. Bypass the base by taking a dirt road on your right, take left at the first fork, and follow the dirt road until you reach the national park guardhouse, a small wooden house by the shore surrounded by a cyclone fence and trees.

Trail condition: First 9.5km is a dirt road, easy to follow. Later, only a dry riverbeds can be found, occasionally overgrown.

Hike description: Take the dirt road behind the guardhouse down to the shore at the corner of the bay. Climb up a few meters and walk parallel to the shore. There is no clear path until you reach the main peninsula road in 10-15 minutes. Alternatively, you can take the dirt road up the hill which leads to a farm in the next cove, but watch out for dogs! After rounding the head of the peninsula, the road runs between cliffs on the right and the shore on the left. Continue straight until you reach the second opening in the cliff wall with a 2 meter concrete post next to a dirt road leading left down to the water (N 40° 27' 46,5"; E 045° 18' 33.7"

W1). With your back to the shore, you will see two dry riverbeds, one straight in front of you and one further to the right. Take the dry riverbed straight in front of you which ends to the right of the red rocks and the ruins. After a few hundred meters climb over a large rock and continue keeping right whenever smaller dry beds join it. When the riverbed becomes overgrown with bushes, veer off to the left and walk straight up towards the pass in front of you. From the pass you can see the guardhouse. Follow a riverbed downhill to the guardhouse.

Alternative route: Instead of crossing the mountain pass, follow the main dirt road leading around the peninsula until you reach the main asphalt road running along lake Sevan. On your left will be the village Shorja.

Horseback Riding

With an abundance of open spaces and high Alpine meadows, the province offers unlimited possibilities for horseback riding. However, this opportunity is largely unexploited by local service providers. Currently, horseback riding tours are organized only in the Martuni Region (the contacts are provided in the accompanying map).



Argichi River Plateau Horseback Riding Tour

This tour is designed specifically for beginner riders. The starting point is Tsaghkashen, a shepherds' summer settlement near the Selim Pass, and includes one to several hours of training on the meadows of the Argichi River Plateau.

Prices: 3000 AMD/h for individual training; 20000 AMD/h for groups (up to 12 persons).

Mt. Armaghan Horseback Riding Tour

Six hour long tours to Mt. Armaghan are for experienced riders. The ride starts from pastures near Tsaghkashen, continues over the vast Argichi plateau to the top of Mount Armaghan. After taking a rest near the Armaghan Lake, return the same way back to the starting point.

Prices: 15000 AMD per person; dinner – 2500 AMD.

Selim caravanserai – Lichk Horseback Riding Tour

Duration: 2 days

Description:

Day one: Selim caravanserai - Argichi River plateau-Mount Armaghan. Overnight in a campsite set up at the bank of Argich River. Campfire dinner with traditional music (duduk players) and dances.

Day two: A ride to the headwaters of Argichi River with St. Vartan sanctuary and the southern tip of the Geghama range with a viewpoint.

Prices: horse rental with equipment is 15000 AMD/day/person; guiding service – 35000/60000 AMD/per day/per group (the higher prices is for the groups with more than 6 participants); meals are 7000-7500 AMD per person; musicians – 30000 AMD.

Bird Watching

For birdwatchers, Gegharkunik is a veritable treasure given the plethora of different kinds of birds in the province. Sevan National Park, recognized as a globally important habitat for the conservation of bird populations (Important Bird Area (IBA)), has 267 registered bird species, out of which: 39 species are included in the Red Data Book of Armenia, one is endemic (Armenian Gull (*Larus armenicus*)), and 83 are included in the Agreement on the Conservation of African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbirds. The recorded birds belong to 17 different families, out of which the following are represented with the highest numbers of different species:

- Podicipediformes (Grebes) - 7
- Ciconiiformes (Herons, Egrets and Ibis) - 11
- Falconiformes (Carnivores) - 30
- Anseriformes (Waterfowl) - 28

- Gruiformes (Cranes and Rails) - 9
- Charadriiformes (Shorebirds and Gulls) - 49
- Passeriformes (Perching and Songbirds) - 102

Lake Sevan and its surrounding wetlands serve as a stopover point for many migratory waterbirds and shorebirds which stop to rest during their lengthy journey at spring and fall migrations. Such rare birds as the Great Egret (*Casmerodius albus*), Glossy Ibis (*Plegadis falcinellus*), Mute Swan (*Cygnus olor*), Whooper Swan (*C. cygnus*), and Demoiselle Crane (*Grus vigro*) are documented here regularly during the migrations.

Half a century ago, Lake Sevan was known as the greatest inland breeding area for waterfowl between the Black and the Caspian Seas. However, because of the artificial water-level drop and draining of most of wetlands, its role as breeding area has been much reduced. From approximately 60 breeders formerly, only about 25 species are registered as breeding during recent years. Fortunately, after a substantial increase in the water level,



which began in 2000, the situation has slowly started to improve. In 2008, the first colonies of Black-crowned Night Herons (*Nycticorax nycticorax*), Squacco Herons (*Ardeola ralloides*) and Little Egrets (*Egretta garzetta*) have appeared and are re-establishing their breeding practices in the region for the first time in 30 years.

Bird fauna of the Geghama Mountain Range is also amazing and includes about 250 species, which makes about 70% of all of Armenia's avifauna. Stony slopes are an irreplaceable habitat for birds of prey, such as: Golden Eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*), Egyptian Vulture (*Neophron percnopterus*), Cinereous Vulture (*Aegypius monachus*), Imperial Eagle (*Aquila heliaca*), Griffon Vulture (*Gyps fulvus*), and Bearded Vulture (*Gypaetus barbatus*). Another excellent spot for raptors observation is Argichi River plateau with Mt. Armaghan.

Lake Sevan Bird Watching Tour

Overview: A circular tour around Lake Sevan which includes several bird watching sites.

Duration: 4 days

Timing: Spring (March-April) and autumn (October-November) are the best times to observe migrating birds.

Itinerary:

- Sevan Region (day one) - Lake bay adjacent to Lchashen village, Norashen Reserve, Noratus cape
- Martuni and Vardenis Regions (day two) - small lake within Lichk Reserve, Masrik River estuary
- Chambarak Region (day 3): Gil area and Artanish Peninsula
- Chambarak Region (day 4): Mt. Areguni Range slopes

Description of the sites:

Norashen Reserve was established to protect a unique and well-known breeding ground of Armenian Gulls (*Larus armenicus*), the so-called “Gull Island”. The large colony of Armenian Gulls which breed on the island makes up a significant proportion of the entire species population in Asia Minor. Other species that can be found in the Norashen Reserve include the Great Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax carbo*), Little Grebe (*Tachybaptus ruficollis*), Great-crested Grebe (*Podiceps cristatus*), Black-necked Grebe (*Podiceps nigricollis*), Slender-billed Gull (*Larus genei*), Little Gull (*Larus minutus*), Long-tailed Jaeger (*Stercorarius longicaudus*), Purple Heron (*Ardea purpurea*), Black-crowned Night Heron (*Nycticorax nycticorax*) and Northern Shoveler (*Anas clypeata*). Also, a variety of shorebirds such as the Green Sandpiper (*Tringa ochropus*) and Little Ringed Plover (*Charadrius dubius*) can be seen foraging along the shorelines of the lake. During migration period, many flocks of wild geese and ducks, including Common Shelduck (*Tadorna tadorna*), Common Pochard (*Aythya ferina*), Red-crested Pochard (*Netta rufina*), Garganey (*Anas querquedula*) and Common Teal (*Anas crecca*), are seen flying over the area and occasionally stopping to rest on their journey further south. Norashen Reserve has two hiking trails with total length of 3.5km, which are specially designed to facilitate observation of the birds.

The second day of the tour is devoted to a marshland on the southernmost side of the lake, which is home to wetland birds never seen at this altitude in other parts of the world, among them the stork and pelican. **Lichk Reserve** near Martuni, comprised of a pair of small lakes, has a high concentration of water and wetland dependent birds. Covered with dense stands of aquatic vegetation, Lichk offers excellent opportunities to many water- and shorebirds as a breeding, foraging and stopover site. Coots and divers such as the Common Pochard (*Aythya ferina*) and Red-crested Pochard (*Netta rufina*) breed here. A good number of herons, egrets, cormorants and waders such as Common Snipe (*Gallinago gallinago*) and Green Sandpiper (*Tringa ochropus*) are regular visitors, while most of them stay into winter.

Among the most striking areas within the national park is the **Artanish Peninsula**. It's isolated and largely undisturbed shores provide shelter to the Eurasian Coot (*Fulica atra*), Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*), Greylag Goose (*Anser anser*), Glossy Ibis (*Plegadis falcinellus*), and White Stork (*Ciconia ciconia*). Also, the peninsula offers good opportunities for some extreme-

ly rare sightings like Great White Pelican (*Pelecanus onocrotalus*), Dalmatian Pelican (*Pelecanus crispus*) and Greater Flamingo (*Phoenicopterus roseus*).

Accommodation: “Best Western Bohemian Resort” Hotel in Sevan, “Aregouni” homestays in Vardenis, “Tufenkian Avan Marak” Heritage Hotel in Tsapatagh village, and “Blue Sevan” Hotel Complex are excellent choices for overnight stays.

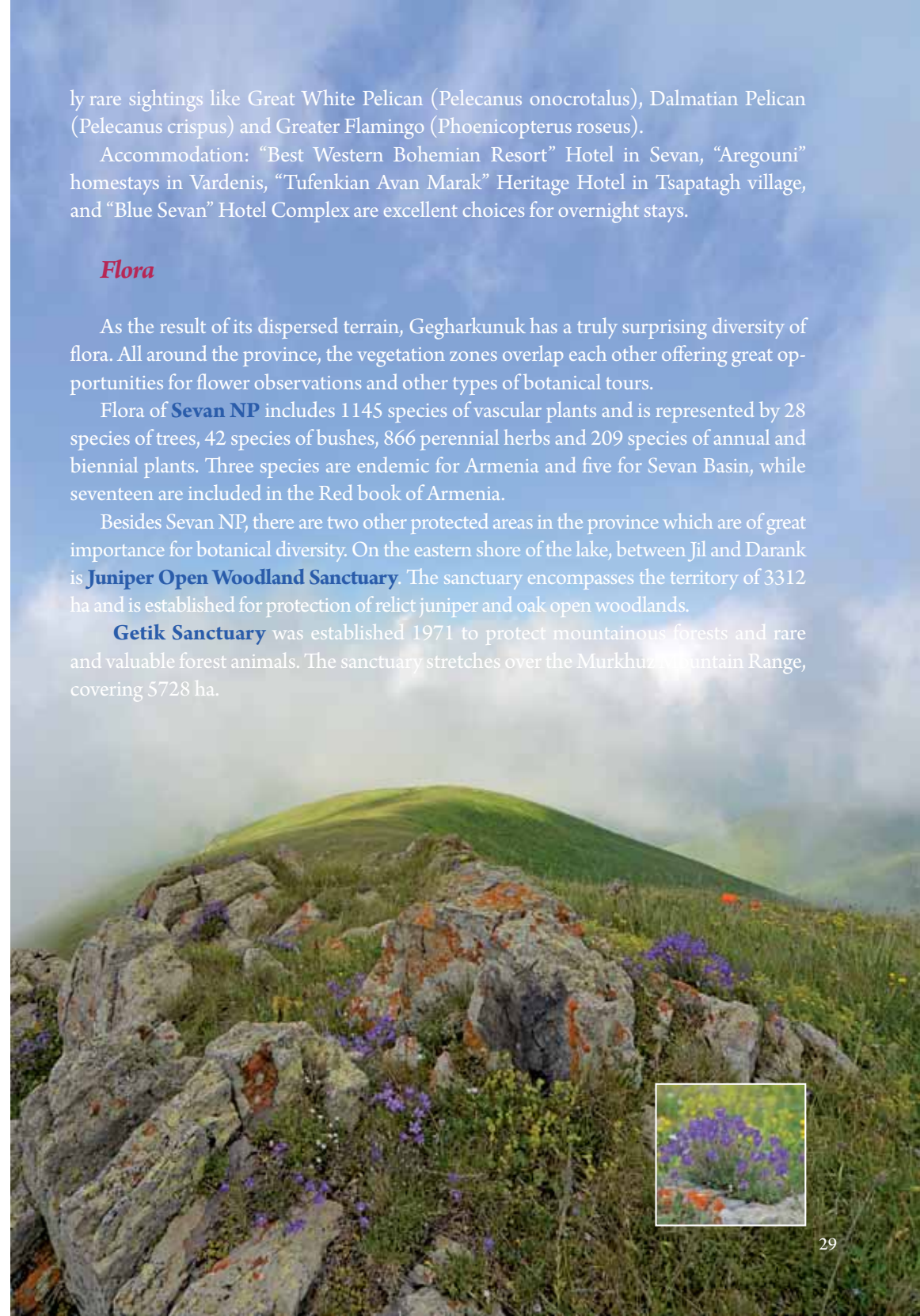
Flora

As the result of its dispersed terrain, Gegharkunuk has a truly surprising diversity of flora. All around the province, the vegetation zones overlap each other offering great opportunities for flower observations and other types of botanical tours.

Flora of **Sevan NP** includes 1145 species of vascular plants and is represented by 28 species of trees, 42 species of bushes, 866 perennial herbs and 209 species of annual and biennial plants. Three species are endemic for Armenia and five for Sevan Basin, while seventeen are included in the Red book of Armenia.

Besides Sevan NP, there are two other protected areas in the province which are of great importance for botanical diversity. On the eastern shore of the lake, between Jil and Darank is **Juniper Open Woodland Sanctuary**. The sanctuary encompasses the territory of 3312 ha and is established for protection of relict juniper and oak open woodlands.

Getik Sanctuary was established 1971 to protect mountainous forests and rare and valuable forest animals. The sanctuary stretches over the Murkhuz Mountain Range, covering 5728 ha.



Geghama Mountains also have an abundant wealth of flora. Typical plants that grow on the range include: *Jurinea moschus*, *Arabis caucasica*, *Catsfoot diclinous* (*Antennaria dioica*), *Gentiana pontica*, Red everlasting (*Helichrysum pallasii*), Lady's-mantle (*Alchemilla grossheimii*), Alpine cinquefoil (*Potentilla crantzii*), *Sibbaldia* (*Sibbaldia parviflora*), *Merendera Radde* (*Merendera raddeana*), *Oxytropis Lazica* (*Oxytropis lazica*), *Vavilovia Oshe* (*Vavilovia aucheri*).

Botanical Tour

Duration: 4 days

Timing: May-July

Itinerary:

- Day one: Sevan Botanical Garden, Sevan Peninsula, Sevan Pass
- Day two: Argichi River Plateau, Mt. Armaghan
- Day three: Artanish Peninsula
- Day four: "Forest kitchen" in Kalavan village

Description:

Day one: The tour starts with the visit to the Sevan Botanical Garden, where, at an altitude of 2000m, over 420 various species of European and Asian vegetation can be seen, out of which 50 are coniferous, 339 are deciduous and 5 are evergreen species. The collections are divided in four alleys ("poplars and mountain ashes", "pines", "oaks", "ash-trees and birches") and on exposition plots. (More information is provided in the accompanying map.)

The next stop is **Sevan Peninsula** with its startling floristic contrasts. Although the territory of the peninsula is small, its north and south slopes have completely different climate zones and flora. The south and south-east slopes are covered by upland plants (*Astragalus* spp., *Prangos ferulacea*, *Festuca ovina*), pale rose poppies (*Papaver fugax*) and deep red Persian poppies (*P.persica*). North slopes are covered by more moisture-loving plants such as forget-me-nots, crowfoots (*Ranunculus*), wind flowers (*Anemone fasciculata*), primulas (*Primula*) and similar plants. There is a sign above the Sevanavank Monastery which identifies rare flowers in five languages and a short walking path designed for flora observation.

The rest of the day is spent along one of the most popular flower-watching road in Armenia, the Sevan-Dilijan Road (via the village of Semyonovka), which climbs to **Sevan Pass** (2114m) and crosses over the Sevan Ridge. Sevan Pass flora includes *Iris furcata*, *Anemone fasciculata*, *A. ramunculoides*, *Primula ruprechtii*, *P. macrocalyx*, *Trollius patulus*, *Caltha polypetala*, *Veratium lobelianum*, *Palsatilla armena* among other species.

The second day of the tour starts with the hike to **Mt. Armagan**. This dormant volcano is extremely beautiful at the end of June, when brilliant displays of poppies, irises, germaniums, gladioli and lilies cover its slopes. The cone of Mt. Armaghan is rising from the **Argichi River Plateau**, which is the only habitat in Armenia for the aquatic opposite-leaved pondweed (*Groenlandia densa* (L.) Fourr).

The third day is entirely devoted to the most spectacular ecosystem within Sevan NP - **Artanish Peninsula**. The 2500 ha large peninsula is made from mountain slopes (2100-2200 m) with completely different ecosystems on its different sides. The southern rocky slope has the remains of artificial forests (pine, poplar, sea-buckthorn etc.) planted when the water table first dropped. Above these are endemic stands of plants with juniper (*Juniper polycarpus*) rose (*Rosa* L.), barberry (*Berberis* L.), spirea (*Spireae* L.), astragalus (*Astragalus* L.) and prickly thistle (*Acantholimon*). Further up, the meadows are rich with endemic species while the Artanish Gulf shores are the only habitat of sedge species (*Carex secale* Willd. Ex Wahlenb.) in Armenia.

The last day is reserved for the "**Forest kitchen**" project, which was developed by "Time Land Fund" NGO and implemented in the village of Kalavan. Here, you will be thought how to recognize, collect, process and cook medicinal herbs, wild edible plants and mushrooms. It is registered that in the territory of the Sevan National Park and its buffer zone, about 60 herbs have medicinal properties, while more than 100 plants and about same number of mushrooms are edible. That makes the region an excellent choice for the gathering of ingredients for a healthy vegetarian feast!

Accommodation: "Tsahkung" Guesthouse, campsite with tents on Argichi River Plateau, "Tufenkian Avan Marak" Heritage Hotel in Tsapatagh village, rural homestays in Kalavan village.

Gastronomy Tour

One of the most important cultural experiences a traveler can have is eating and drinking. While traveling through the province is a stunning and unforgettable experience, navigating yourself through food in Sevan, Gavar, Vardenis and Chambarak is also an adventure in itself.

Duration: 5 days

Itinerary:

- Day one: Cooking classes given by the chef of "Tsahkung" Guesthouse, Yurik Sargsyan / Tsahkung village
- Day two: Learning how to prepare famous Kyavar qyufta / organized by "Geghareg" NGO in Gavar
- Day three: Sea buckthorn wine and vodka tasting, cheese tasting, cooking classes organized by "Aregouni" NGO / Vardenis
- Day four: Motal cheese tasting, honey tasting / Chambarak, Martuni village
- Day five: "Forest kitchen" / Kalavan village

Paragliding

Paragliding is an excellent way to take in the splendor of the region from the bird's eye perspective. Perfect combination of the mountains and lake, together with the good flying possibilities and endless landing zones rank Gegharkunik high on the scale of popu-



lar paragliding destinations in Armenia. Paragliders are often seen in the sky above the Tsovagyugh village, which is probably the most frequented flying site in the province, due to its attractiveness, easy access and good ridge soaring conditions. The list of the take-off sites with the exact GPS coordinates is given below (source: "Paragliding Earth" Website):

1. Tsovagyugh

GPS: takeoff - 40°35'35" (40.5933)N; 44°56'47" (44.9465)E; Elevation - 2189 m.

Site/ Take-off description: A popular site for new pilots, as well as experienced pilots, as lots of airtime can be obtained without lots of effort. During the summer, a very consistent sea breeze from Lake Sevan provides dynamic ridge soaring. Thermal flying is possible, but is hard to climb more than 300 meters above launch. A grassy launch is approached via a 20 min walk. Watch out for over-developing clouds capable of cloud suck. Many landings in the large LZ require the use of big ears or spiral dives to get down.

2. Maydan Range

GPS: take-off - 40°36'16" (40.6047)N; 44°51'40" (44.8612)E; Elevation - 2330 m.

3. Mt Large Lchasar (Thermal flight)

GPS: take-off - 40°29'45" (40.4959)N; 44°53'6" (44.8851)E; Elevation - 2157 m.

4. Mt. Armaghan

GPS: take-off - 40° 03' 57" (40.066)N; 45° 12' 36" (45.2102)E;

5. Mrghuz

GPS: take-off - 40°42'17" (40.7049)N; 45°15'32" (45.259)E; Elevation - 2589 m.

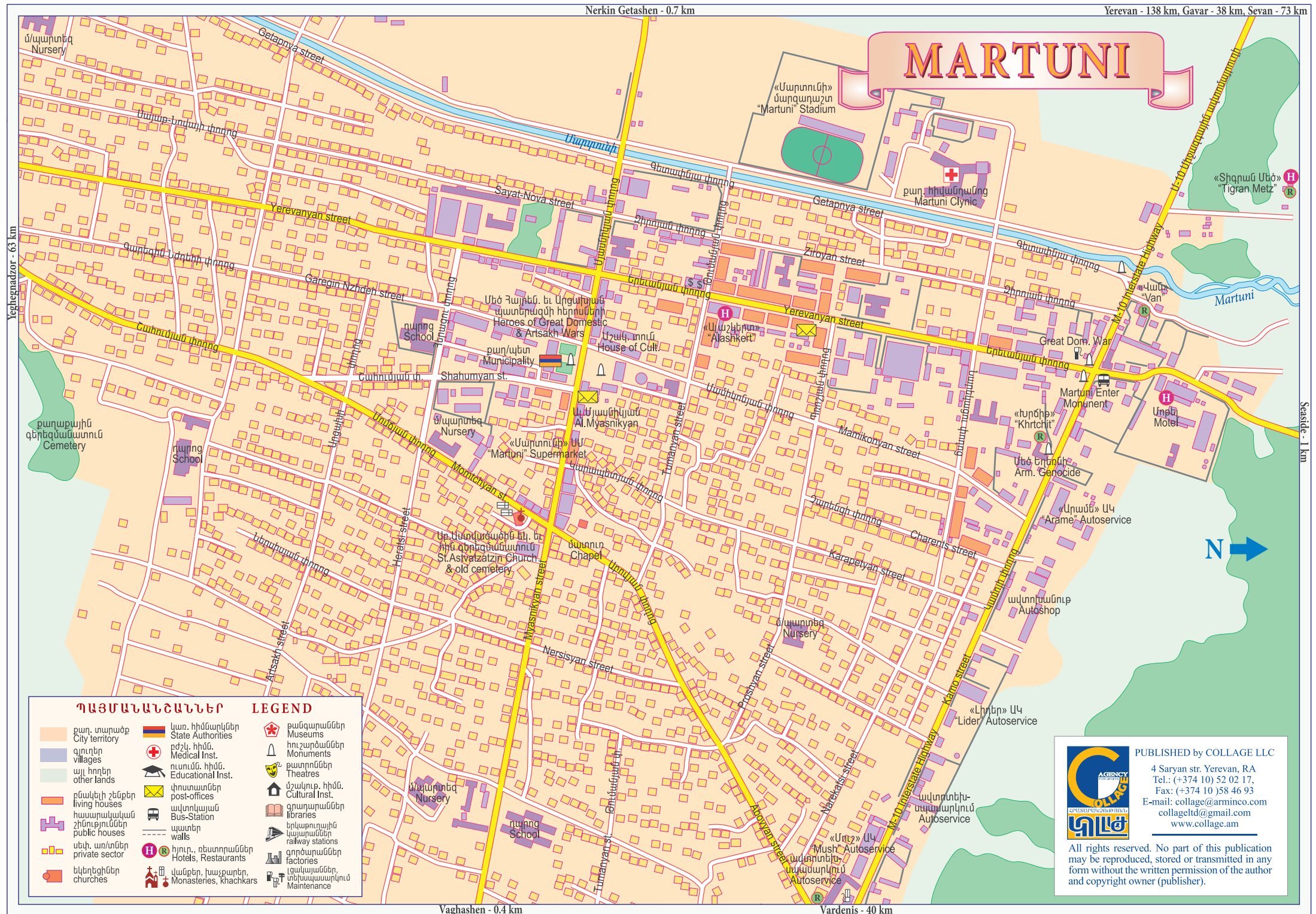
6. Aghberk

GPS: take-off - 40°32'11" (40.5364)N; 45°17'49" (45.2972)E; Elevation - 2544 m.

Site/ Take-off description: This site is located north of Shorzha, at the height of approx. 600 m from the flatland. It is accessible by 4WD through an unpaved road from the Aghberk village. There is a big tower on it, which can serve as an orienteer. The launch site is clean, grassy and has a plenty of place.

Yerevan has several professional paragliding clubs where you can get full equipment and professional guides for this sport. If you are not experienced, try tandem flight with an expert pilot who will take care of the launch, flight and landing for you.







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