

Monastery of Geghard and the Upper Azat Valley (2000)

The monastery of Geghard ("Գեղարդ" in Armenian) is a unique architectural construction in the Kotayk province of Armenia, being partially carved out of the adjacent mountain, surrounded by cliffs. It is listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

While the main chapel was built in 1215, the monastery complex was founded in the 4th century by Gregory the Illuminator at the site of a sacred spring inside a cave. The monastery had thus been originally named Ayrivank, meaning "the Monastery of the Cave". The name commonly used for the monastery today, Geghard, or more fully Geghardavank (ԳեղարդաՎանք), meaning "the Monastery of the Spear", originates from the spear which had wounded Jesus during his crucifixion, allegedly brought to Armenia by Apostle Thaddeus, and stored amongst many other relics. Now it is displayed in the Echmiadzin treasury.

The spectacular towering cliffs surrounding the monastery are part of the Azat river gorge, and are included together with the monastery in the World Heritage Site listing. Some of the churches within the monastery complex are entirely dug out of the cliff rocks, others are little more than caves, while others are elaborate structures, with both architecturally complex walled sections and rooms deep inside the cliff. The combination, together with numerous engraved and free-standing khachkars is a unique sight, being one of the most frequented tourist destinations in Armenia. Most visitors to Geghard also choose to visit the nearby Garni temple, a Parthenon-like structure located further down the Azat river. Visiting both sites in one trip is so common that they are often referred to in unison as Garni-Geghard.

Today the monastery complex is located at the end of the paved road, and the walk up from the parking lot is lined with women selling sweet bread, sheets of dried fruit (fruit lavash), sweet sujukh (grape molasses covered strings of walnuts) and various souvenirs. A group of musicians usually plays for a few seconds as visitors approach, perhaps willing to play longer for money.

At the approach to the main entrance on the west there are small caves, chapels, carvings and constructions on the hillside. Right before the entrance are some shallow shelves in the cliff onto which people try to throw pebbles in order to make their wish come true. Just inside the entrance to the compound are the 12-13th century ramparts protecting three sides of the complex, and the cliffs behind protect the fourth. Walking across the complex will take one to the secondary entrance on the east, outside of which is a table for ritual animal offerings (matagh), and a bridge over the stream.

The one- and two-storey residential and service structures situated on the perimeter of the monastery's yard were repeatedly reconstructed, sometimes from their foundations, as happened in the 17th century and in 1968—1971. It is known that most of the monks lived in cells excavated into the rock-face outside the main enceinte, which have been preserved, along with some simple oratories. The rock-faces over the whole area bear elaborate crosses (khatchkar) carved in relief. More than twenty spaces, varying in shape and size, were carved, at different levels, in solid rock massifs surrounding the main cave

structures. Those in the western part of the complex were for service purposes, and the rest are small rectangular chapels with a semicircular apse and an altar. There are twin and triple chapels with one entrance, some of the entrances ornamented with carvings. There are many often richly ornamented khachkars cut on rock surfaces and on the walls of the structures or put up on the grounds of Geghard in memory of a deceased or in commemoration of someone's donation to the monastery.

Source: -- Wikipedia [<http://www.wikipedia.org>]