



ARMENIA'S ANCIENT ZORATS KARER STONES

The two provinces in the south of Armenia, Vayots Dzor and Syunik, are a spectacular strip of land at the very bottom of the Caucasus. The highway that runs through them, between the towns of Yeraskh and Meghri, passes over the mountains that separate the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh in the east from the Azeri enclave of Nakhchivan to the west.

The journey is breath-taking, and takes in some of Armenia's cultural treasures: the monasteries of Noravank and Tatev and the wine-making town of Areni are all on the road to Meghri.

The most unusual place in Syunik province is the Zorats Karer stone formation, near the settlement of Sisian – 223 giant boulders that are described, inevitably, as the 'Armenian Stonehenge'. But unlike the stones in Wiltshire, Zorats Karer still stands in the middle of wild nature: you can wander between the rocks, touch and photograph them.

The boulders are more rugged than those at Stonehenge – covered in moss, shoulder-height or smaller, and scattered over the hilltop above the canyon that rises from the Dar river.

For all that travellers have always been free to explore Zorats Karer, no-one knows for sure what these stones really are. In the last 20 years archaeologists from Germany have discovered tombs from the Bronze and Iron Ages underneath the site. Armenian researchers have studied the small holes that have been made in some of the rocks, and revealed an astronomical observatory that charts the movement of the sun, moon and stars.

Zorats Karer means "Army Stones" in Armenian; but they are also known as Carahunge – the Speaking Stones, for the whistling sound that carries through the site when strong winds blow through their holes. It's estimated that the rocks were placed 7,500 years ago. This means that at the time that Stonehenge was creat-

ed, the army stones had already been standing in Sisian for over two thousand years.

At one edge of the site there is a visitor centre in a roomy wooden shack, where you can buy books about Carahunge in several languages, and sip potent Armenian coffee while you browse.

Zorats Karer can easily be included into a Silk Road itinerary. Armenia has open borders with Georgia to the north and Iran to the south. You can arrive in Yerevan by road or overnight train from Tbilisi: from there, Sisian is a 200km drive, past Mount Ararat and Khor Virap monastery, as well as Noravank, Areni and Tatev. Zorats Karer is one of the last places before Meghri, on the Iranian border.

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