

# Hemşin: traveler's Guide:

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## **PART1: A Unique Land**

On a rare clear day, the coast between Pazar and Ardeşen offers an unforgettable panorama of the Kaçkar Range. Lush forested hills, covered with the ubiquitous tea plantations and scattered farmhouses, ascend by degrees to a soaring range of snow-capped peaks. The black horn of the Kaçkar (3937 meters) can be seen towering above the snowline, trailed to the west by the grouped peaks of the Tatos (3560) and the Verçenik (3711).

These are some of the highest spots that can be seen at sea level anywhere on earth, rivaled only by a few points on the Andes and in New Guinea. Mark your bearings at the spot where the torrential Firtına River flows into the sea just outside Ardeşen. The highway bridge over the river offers the best unobstructed panorama of the Kaçkar range from the coast. Aptly, it is also the turnoff point to enter the extraordinary world of the Hemşin valleys.

During your climb up the Hemşin this river will be your constant companion—a scattered torrent crisscrossing the broad valley base here, a gushing, cascading waterfall in the forest depths or an icy streamlet trickling from under the great Kaçkar glacier. Its persistent roar is one of the defining features of the Hemşin experience.

"Hemşin", a word of obscure origin, is used in eastern Black Sea as a term for the highlands. Hemşin proper is the large triangular region on the northern slopes of the Kaçkar massif drained by the Firtına and its subsidiaries. It is a unique country, a strange environment shaped by two extreme features of its geography: rain and inaccessibility.

It is, by a wide margin, the wettest part of Turkey. It gets as much as 250 days of rain per annum (compared to an average of 170 in 'rainy' Rize), and a yearly precipitation of up to five meters in some places. The result is a natural flora of astonishing wealth and diversity; a 'tropical' luxuriance one would not normally expect this far north on the globe.

The Kaçkar Mountains are practically impassable, barring access to Hemşin on the south. Unlike the rest of the Black Sea littoral, the north side, too, is far too steep and forested to allow the easy penetration of coastal settlers. As a result, the region is almost totally isolated, and has remained so through the ages. Both the Byzantine and Ottoman states made only token efforts to assert their authority over Hemşin; the coastal Laz clans were never able to push far inland in their perpetual fight with the highlanders; the Valley Lords who dominated the rest of the region in Ottoman times never managed to gain a foothold in Hemşin.

## PART 2: The People of Hemşin



Out of this historic isolation has emerged a unique breed of highland people, the Hemşinlis. Their origins are obscure. They may very well be descendants of the native tribes whom Classical Greek sources called Heptacometes. Until some time in the last century they seem to have spoken the Armenian language. Traces of Armenian survive in place names and "folkloric" terms; Hemşinli communities of the highlands of Hopa who claim to have originally migrated from Hemşin proper still speak a dialect of Armenian. This may suggest a history of settlements originating from the interior, arriving via the mountaintops. Or one may suppose a pattern of cultural influence received from the inland, just as the lowland Laz were originally converted and accultured by the coastal Greeks.

The history of the Turkification/ Islamization of Hemşin is equally obscure. It took place certainly more than 100 and possibly less than 200 years ago, although it is remarkable that not a single mosque seems to have existed in the region prior to the 20th century. A relaxed attitude toward the precepts of Islam still characterizes the region's denizens, who regard the devotional excesses of Of-Rize-Çayeli, and even the relatively enlightened Laz coast, with a certain gleeful cynicism.

They are fiercely independent mountain folks, loners, people accustomed to live under endless rain and fog in solitary far-away valleys. They have larger-than-life stories to tell. Many have gone to the ends of the world to escape the gloom of their primeval forest, but have returned, unable to resist the lure of Hemşin. One has returned to the valleys a fugitive from political persecution; another, after dissipating a fortune in gambling; a third has found himself unable to leave after serving time in the mountains on some government duty.

They are "Nordic" in the range of their moods. They live in an environment where an atavistic fear of the forest ever lurks in the background, and loneliness can strike at unexpected moments. Most take refuge in drinking. One often hears the boast that Hemşin has the highest per capital consumption of rakı in the country. They also gamble,

compulsively, at the rickety log cafes perched above some wild cascade or tucked in an unlikely recess of the forest. When gloom threatens, they move on the high yayla, far above upper limit of regular habitation, to the intoxicating atmosphere of the mountains. Here take place in summer some of the headiest festivals in all Turkey.

### **PART3: Migrations**

Only about 15,000 people, scattered over a wide area, inhabit the valleys permanently. A larger number of Hemşinlis live in the diaspora. The emigrating trend started at the end of last century when Hemşin first came out of its isolation under Russian influence and many people went out to Batumi, Odessa and Moscow mainly to work as pastry cooks. Nowadays they own just about every pastryshop worth its salt in Istanbul, Ankara and elsewhere in Turkey, as well as some of the top restaurants in the land. Other native boys include an illustrious line of top bureaucrats and politicians.

Whatever their status and employment, most come back each summer for a few days or months to be spent at the yayla. People talk about a strange, mystical tie that pulls them back to the magic land of their ancestors. It is partly the call of the wild, the feeling of exhilaration-and danger, both physical and spiritual-at the outer edge of civilization; partly, one suspects, an opportunity for people to meet and mate.



Starting in June, entire families, from aged grandparents to screaming infants, make the long, 2-3 day trek to their respective yayla retreats. Some arrive in trucks carrying family and goods-prize bulls, antique standup clocks and baby carriages. Others show up in late model Mercedes which keep getting stuck in the mud. Most walk. Women put on the traditional garb of bright orange silk scarves, black woolen skirts and multicolored mountain socks. They carry babies on their backs and struggle to keep the herds of cattle in line, while men stumble behind-ready to heed the flimsiest excuse for another rakı break. Cafes are located at convenient intervals along the way. They offer old friends not seen in a year, decks of cards and often a few beds upstairs to accommodate the stragglers.

The yayla-a cluster of ancient stone houses, usually above the timberline, sometimes at the very edge of permanent snow-comes to life overnight in a total confusion of knee-deep mud, fiery bulls fighting to establish this year's bovine hierarchy, the pungent smells of burning pine-wood and tezek (dried cowdung) and dead-drunk men running high on the sheer excitement of the yayla. The festival season begins almost immediately, each yayla

holding its own vartavar on a different weekend, with that of Ayder as the crowning event of the year.



#### PART 4: Çamlıhemşin

The town of Çamlıhemşin is the bottom end of Hemşin and the starting point of all treks up the mountain. An excruciatingly bad 24-kilometer drive along the roaring Fırtına brings you there, penetrating deeper and deeper into the forest as the valley gets narrower and tea terraces on either side approach the perpendicular. The first couple of villages along the road are Laz. At the last cluster of houses before Çamlıhemşin, Hemşinese Turkish replaces the boisterous accents of Laz, orange-and-black headgear replaces simpler white scarves, and the warm brown of chestnut houses replace smaller wood-and-stucco whites. There are a handful of Laz who have settled in Çamlıhemşin and above, but from here on they are from the minority. Along the way there are three fine specimens of the ancient hunchback stone bridges which constitute a familiar sight of the region. More than a dozen others are located further up in the Hemşin area. Each has a different span and curvature; all are marvelously graceful and display remarkable technical skill. A couple have been dated to the 17th century; others are older but show hardly any sign of aging.



Çamlıhemşin is the administrative center of the district (*ilçe*), having replaced in the 50s the older capital of Ortahemşin (Pazarhemşin) which is reached by a different route via Pazar. It is a village of 2000 souls, built in a narrow gulch on the banks of a thunderous Fırtına Several waterfalls burst above, beside and near the main (and only) street. Landmarks include two very basic hotels where the roar of the water is the only matter one should have reason to complain about, a dozen shops and an equal number of cafes/saloons.

Hoşdere Restaurant (the name means Happyriver) serves a good meal on its balcony hanging over the river and acts as an information cen-ter in the absence of anything more formal. The district prefect, the judge and the gendarmerie commander can be seen hard at play in the "Teachers Club", a simple enough teahouse across the PTT. The mayor, a burly philosopher in plaid backwoodsman's shirts, is usually too loaded to participate.



Two grocery stores sell the woollen handmade socks and silk scarves that are the hallmarks of Hemşin attire. In case you decide to buy, make sure someone teaches you the elaborate method of wearing the scarf. Any woman would oblige, and in the process flash one of those spectacular Hemşin smiles that will come back haunt you in your dreams.

Houses are scattered in the steep hills, clinging precariously to the mountainside 100 or 200 feet above the river. A couple of the most impressive traditional residences of the district can be seen at Andon Mahallesi, two kilometers beyond downtown Çamhhemşin. The grand mansions presiding over a sea of tea terraces reflect turn-of-the-century fortunes made in Russia. Some of the furniture, the stained glass and wood carvings date from Czarist times. One belongs to the proprietor of the best restaurant in Ankara (the Washington), a descendant of the original owners. As usual in Hemşin, the visitor will be welcomed and served tea and food with no questions asked and no favors expected. Exploring the Mountains: Beyond Çamhhemşin, it is advisable to seek out, if not necessarily a guide then at least friends, introductions and recommendations. They help set up hiking routes, find a home and a bed in remote yaylas, be invited to festivals and weddings and cast for trout without being bothered by the gendarmes. Savaş Güney is your first choice: but just about anyone you approach (except officials) will help.

Above all be patient. As a rule of thumb, assume that you will spend at least twice the amount of time you had planned in Hemşin. The mountains are unpredictable and deserve respect: people will inevitably ask you to stay: you will have to put up with, then enjoy, the Hemşin habit of having "one last glass" of rakı before moving on, hopefully, to your next destination.



Above Çamhhemşin the river branches in two, with the right (east) fork leading to Ayder and the Kaçkar peak, and the left (main) fork climbing to Şenyuva village, Zilkale, Pokut and the glacier lakes of Mount Tatos. You may take your pick, probably depending on what your guide says or where your Hemşinli friends take you. Or you may spend a few days exploring both.

A Wilderness Idyll: Şenyuva, six kilometers beyond Çamhhemşin, is notable mainly for the Farm of Savaş and Doris Güney where you can find accommodation or camping space. The farm is one of the principal attractions of Hemşin quite on its own and Savaş is the person to place yourself in the hands of if you want to go beyond the surface of the Hemşin experience.

An intellectual-turned rustic who made an engineering career in West Germany in the 60s, Savaş came back to the land of his ancestors in 1974 accompanied by his German born wife, determined to sever as many ties as possible with the civilized world. They aimed at total self-sufficiency, growing their own vegetables, baking their own bread, milk-ing their own cows. Electricity came in 1984. At first, they made ends meet by growing and selling azaleas. Then casual visits by friends and relatives from Germany began to expand into an ever-widening circle of visitors from around the world who arrived purely on word-of-mouth. At last the accomodation of friends and friends-of-friends turned into a more or less full-time occupation.

The farm is located on a bank of the stormy Firtma, with a terrifying rope-and-pulley contraption as the only means of getting across the river. Once safely landed, a chorus of farm animals and a delightful trio of nature-healthy children greet the visitor. The guest bungalows contain roaring fireplaces, the skins of unlucky bears who stumbled into the farm at one time or another, and what might well be the best collection of quality English and German books to be found east of Ankara. Unless previously notified Savaş is likely to be off in the mountains with the latest group of his Dutch or Israeli or Australian friends. Doris, with her matter-of-fact charm, will convince even the most time-pressed traveller to hang around for a few days until Savaş can come back to organize a proper hiking trip.

## **PART 5: The Main Valley**

The fairy tale fortress of Zilkale is a 1.5 hour hike from the farm, or a half-hour minibus ride on a road which reasonable people consider undrivable. It is straight out of the dreams of a 19th century romantic-a moss-covered ruin soaring on a wild crag in the forest high above the cascading Firtina. On a wet day, with clouds hiding the valley base and wisps of vapor enveloping the fortress, it is one of the most unforgettable sights of all Turkey. Its history, like much else in this land, is shrouded in mist. One speculation traces it to Justinian's Lazic Wars in the 6th century; another points out to the Genoese who, very improbably, may have tried in the 13th century to develop Hemşin as a trade route. The strategic rationale for building such a fine stronghold on a dead-end valley is elusive and one is tempted to muse that the whole setup may have been created for the sheer scenic effect.



From Zilkale a brutally steep stretch of road leads to Çat, at about 1300 meters, where leaf forests give way to conifers and the snow-capped mountain peaks finally come in full view. Çat is a perfect base for short day hikes. The village itself consists of a few timber chalets, a general store and a pleasant little inn called Hotel Cancik, complete with bar, backgammon boards and a fantastic collection of old Turkish cigarettes spanning 50 years above the counter.



Situated at a fork in the valley, two separate routes are possible from Çat. The right fork will take you past the ruins of Zilkale's sister castle, Varoş-kale up into the Tatos Range and the Verçenik Peaks (3711 meters). More than a dozen glacier lakes are to be found in this region, two of them in a dramatic setting in the great circus at the top of the Tatos massif. One should not attempt to go beyond Varoşkale without a good guide, as this is serious mountaineering country and the weather can be extremely variable.

The left fork is ideal for the layman. A two hour hike will bring you to Elevit (2000 meters), a typical yayla village of stone houses encircled by treeless hills and an endless horizon. There is one pension in Elevit run by cantankerous old Mesut Bey: If you are not careful he will charge you \$20 for a meal and bed, spartan at best. In 15 minutes the price may have been brought down to a fourth of the original and you may have made good friends with Mesut Bey. No vehicles go beyond Elevit. Tirevit, an even older yayla community at 2200 meters which consists entirely of houses made with great yellow blocks of stone, is an easy 2 1/2 hour hike. Covkun Gölü the most accessible of all glacier lakes, is a 45 minute walk past Tirevit. Also above Elevit is the Star lake (Yıldız Gölü), where at 8:00 on a clear morning mysterious stars glitter upon the surface of the water. A 3 1/2 hours hike, it is a splendid camping site. For the really ambitious, a hard 6 hour trek from Elevit climbs to the eagle's nest of Haçevank at the edge of permanent snow. At 2800 meters, this is the highest village in the Black Sea region, inhabited in July and August only. From there, another 6 hours will take you across the Capug Pass (3200 meters) and Başyayla to Varoşkale, where you can catch a minibus back to Çat and Şenyuva.



Pokut: A more accessible and highly picturesque yayla settlement can be reached directly from Şenuva, where a dirt road served by minibuses will take you to Pokut. Pokut is a much-photographed locus classicus of the Hemşin yaylas. It sits just above the tree line, a collection of weathered wooden chalets grouped together on a grassy knoll which has one of the most striking panoramas of the Kaçkar peaks. Houses have been paintstakingly constructed, the foundation consisting of cement-free slabs of stone and the upper half made of timber. Doors and window frames are painted cheerly blues and reds, where turbaned grandfathers and colorfully scarved Hemşin beauties greet your arrival. Happy cows decked out in ponpons moo their acknowledgement. In Pokut you can stay at the cozy hostel run by Fikret Demirci and Memiş Akay. A rambling wooden farmhouse, it is heated by an antique wood stove and can sleep up to 25 - as long as everyone brings a sleeping bag. Beds may be available if you get in touch in advance. This can be attempted at Çamlıhemşin or at Güen Pastryshop, run by a brother, in downtown Trabzon. The two bosses are quintessentially Hemsinli-garrulous, moody, poetic, in love with the mountains-and famous drinkers. At a certain point in the evening, Fikret will bring out the tulum, the Hemşin version of the bagpipe, and hold forth with its maddening Dionysiac screech. The two have quite serious dreams about developing Pokut as a center for mountain excursions. Boar, wild goats, roe deer and large numbers of bear roam these hills and hunting expeditions can also be organized in advance. Other yayla settlements in Hazındag, Samistal, Amlakit and Palovit can be reached on hikes of varying length from Pokut.

Ayder and Kaçkar: Reached easily by minibus from Çamlıhemşin, Ayder is known regionally for its mineral hot springs located in the center of town. Recognized as a cure for every sort of bug and pestilence, the springs attract a primarily local clientele, the unfortunate result being a slew of breeze-block cement hotels. The Saray Hotel, a great sagging house of dark timber, exudes an air of faded grandeur and recommends itself as a creative alternative to its cement counterparts. The baths are located in a small domed building by the river. It opens to women 9 to 5, and men from 7 pm onwards. The protector of the baths and Ayder's one-man police force is the rifle-toting Bekçi Ahmet. An exuberant presence around town, Ahmet is known to sneak into the baths with his friends during the offhours between 5 and 7 to avoid the crowds. Thus for men the best time to show up is during this period, as Ahmet invariably runs an open house during his ablutions. The bath itself is excellent for dispersing the aches and pains of overworked limbs.

The other major attraction of Ayder is its location at the base of the Kaçkar Peak. A three hour hike leads through the yayla settlements of Aşağı and Yukarı Kavrun to the foot of the mountain. The peak, while not a particularly difficult one for the professional, is certainly not a feat to be attempted by amateur hiker. The latter, in exchange, could well under-take a hiking and camping tour de force, the spectacular trek which crosses the Kaçkar range at 3200 meters over into Artvin. This is a two day expedition from Ayder. It involves a four hour hike to Balakçor, where several different paths can be taken to tackle the mountain. After a night spent in the very different scenery of the south slope, it is an easy walk down to the large village of Hevek (Yaylalar). There, with luck, a minibus can be found to take you to Barhal to get your first taste of the medieval splendors of Artvin land.

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