

Transcaucasian Trail Notes: Sheki - Zagatala, Azerbaijan

IMPORTANT DISCLAIMER

The TCTA strives to provide accurate, current information as to trail conditions and the trail route. However, actual trail conditions may be different, and such information may not be accurate or complete. Trail users are urged to consider all the information available from other sources and to heed local advice when available. Trail users are ultimately responsible for all decisions as to the trail routes, trail conditions, weather, and safety.

In addition to the hazards posed by steep terrain and mountain weather, hikers should be prepared for difficult route-finding and challenging trail conditions, the possibility of washed-out bridges and dangerous river crossings in high water, aggressive dogs guarding sheep and cattle, giant hogweed, and frequent summer thunderstorms with extremely intensive periods of lightning. Access to emergency medical care and search and rescue is not always available.

QUICK FACTS:

Total Distance: 97 km

Elevation Min/Max: 505 m / 2,730 m

Elevation Gain/Loss: 6,367 m / 6,784 m

Status: Open & partly marked

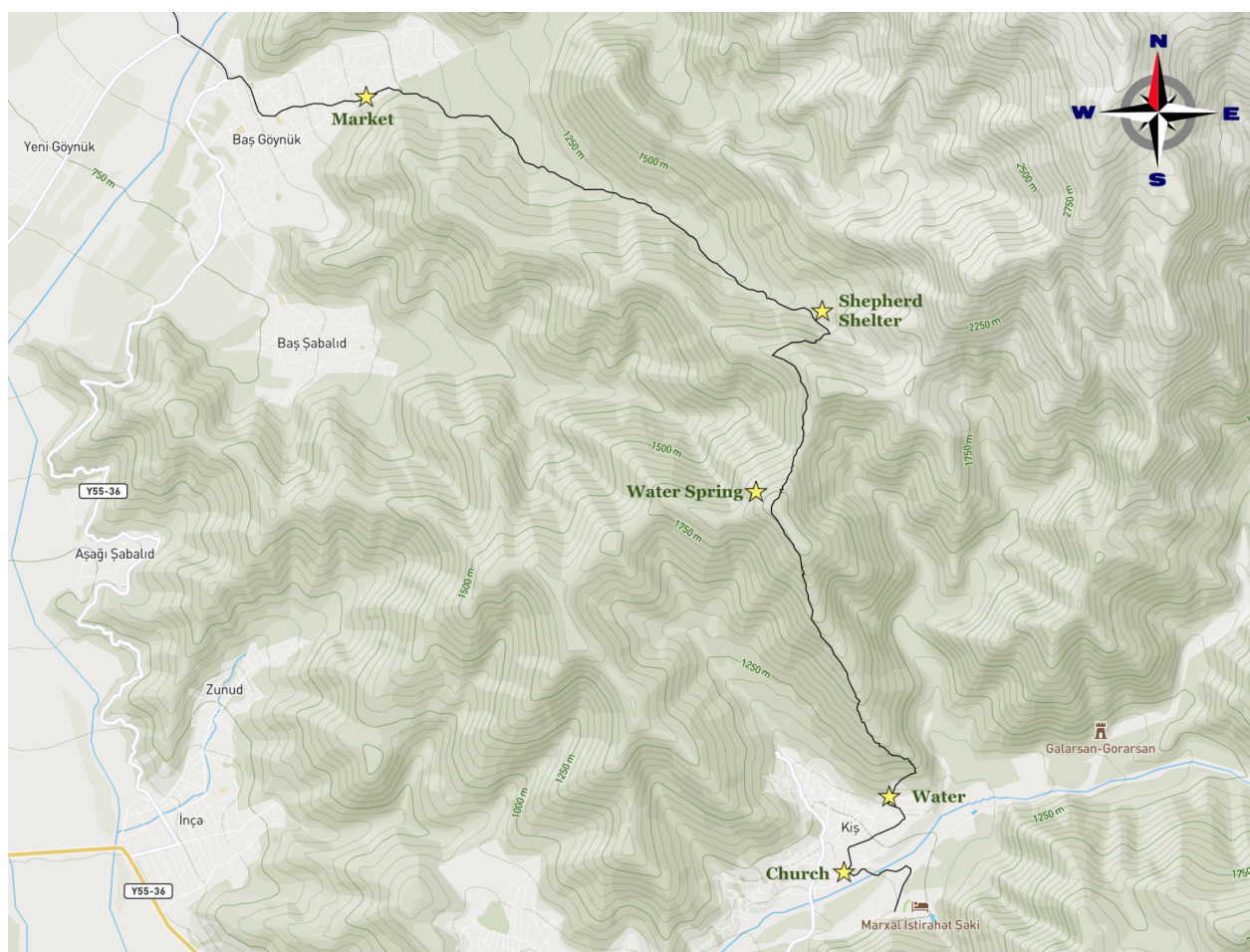
Marking Type: directional signposts, red & white painted blazes, some unmarked sections.

Emergency Services: 112, 113

Trail Notes

Note: These trail notes are written in the east-to-west direction. This route may be hiked in either direction; however, the 44 kilometer section between Ilisu and Mamrukh is 33% ascent / 66% descent in the east-west direction, which may make it an easier journey to complete. If you decide to do the more difficult west-east option of this hike, keep in mind that there are also less spots suitable for camping in the ascent from Mamrukh.

Please note that the trail between Ilisu and Mamrukh is only recommended for experienced hikers at this time. The path is unmarked and includes a narrow ridge that may be challenging for hikers who prefer to avoid heights. More information below.



Markhal – Kish – Bash Goynuk (Marxal – Kiş – Baş Göynük)

21km, +1281m / -1376m

Between Kish and Bash Goynuk, this route has been marked by the Azerbaijan Tourism Board. You will find Swiss-style yellow signposts along the trail pointing you to your destination.

Water: There are no sources for water replenishment during this section, until descended from the mountain. Be sure to stock up beforehand (the last place to do so is at the village water station on the outskirts of Kish), so as to avoid dehydration, especially in the warmer months.

Food and lodging in Sheki / Markhal: It is recommended you arrive from the city of Sheki, where you may enjoy the historic city, as well as to stock up on any goods you may need for your hike. There are various hotel options, from Central Hostel which charges 13 AZN/night, to the five-star resort of Marxal. In Sheki, you will find plenty of market and restaurant options around the town to stock up for your journey.

Food and lodging in Kish: There are a few cafes in Kish, marked on OpenStreetMaps, as well as a campsite on the outskirts of the village. Accommodation options in Kish:

- Hilal boutique hotel: 055 977 9968
- Gasimov Samir: 077 681 2988
- Yunusova Aygul: 055 526 9660
- Huseynova Samira: 050 383 7922
- Huseynzade Ilhama: 050 631 0246

Food and lodging in Bash Goynuk: There are a few markets in the village of Bash Goynuk, with a number of them marked on OpenStreetMaps. There are also a few restaurants, the most convenient of which may be Su Sesi, which is located to the left of the bridge as you cross towards Bash Layisqi. Accommodation options in Bash Goynuk:

- Ibrahimkhalilov Elvin (before the river): 070 580 1138
- Osmanov Movlud (after the river): 055 583 5847

Hikers may start this path from Marxal Palace Resort, or the village of Kish itself, both of which are accessible by taxi from Sheki. If arriving from Marxal, you will have to cross the river bank (which is dry during the hotter months), and follow a road that leads into the village of Kish.

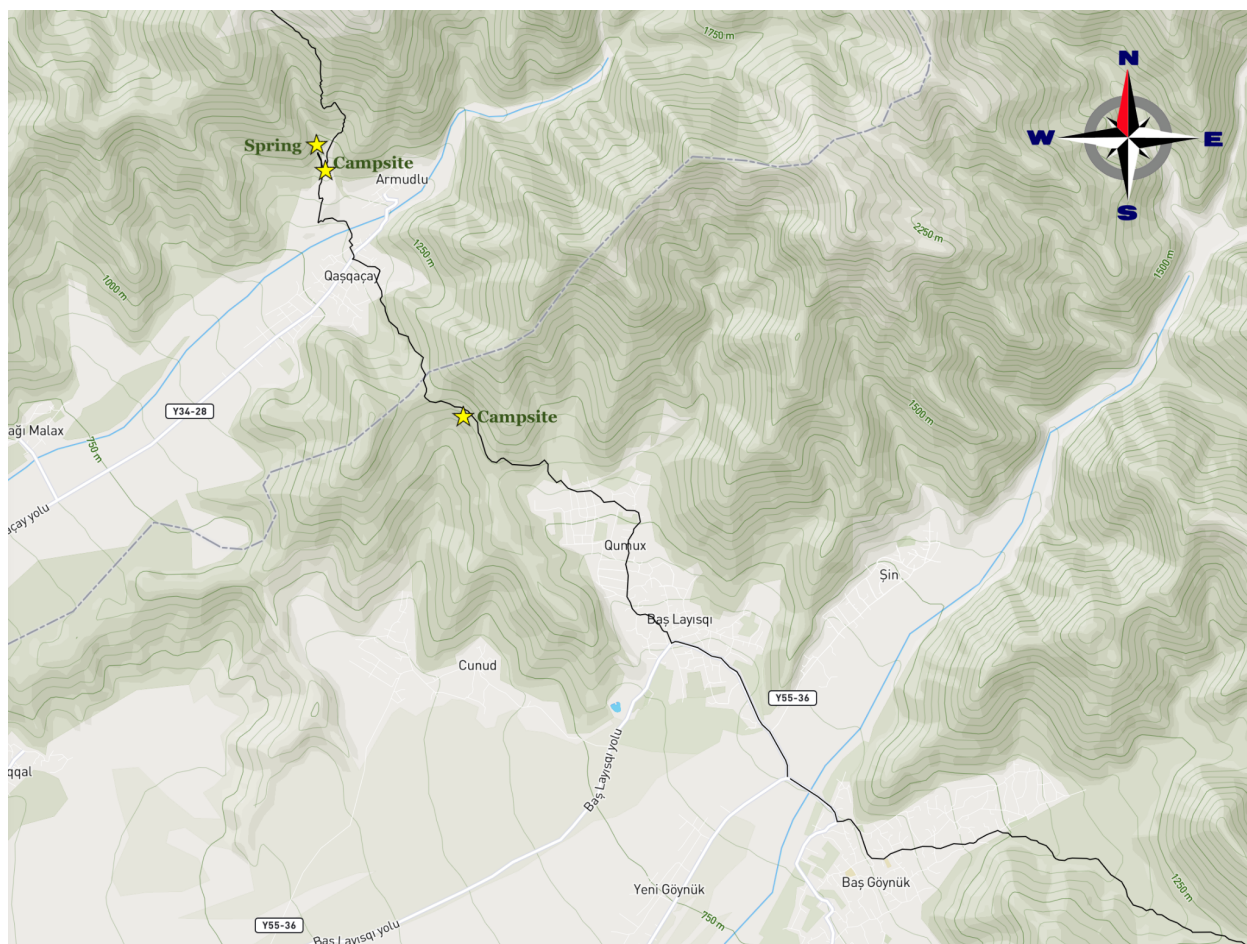
There are signposts pointing towards the Church of Kish; you may also ask locals for directions to the church. To enter the Church and courtyard, there is a fee of 4 ₼ for foreigners, and 2 ₼ for locals. A narrated excursion costs an additional 3 ₼.

After you finish at the church, follow the cobblestone road northeastward to the edge of the village. At the end of the village, you will find Kish's water dispersing system. You may use the sink to fill up on water, but take care to return everything to its original position when finished. There are painted white-red arrows directing you towards the path. You will reach a tree-shaded bowl-shaped trail, which takes you up the mountain. Nearing the top of the treeline, you come out to a narrow trail along the grass. At the top of the ridge, be sure to take in the panoramic views of Sheki and the surrounding mountains from an altitude of 2000 meters!

You will then begin the descent toward Bash Goynuk by following the trail and signposts. The last few hundred meters of the descent are steep and rocky; be sure to proceed with caution so as to avoid slips and falls. At the bottom of the mountain, there is a shepherd shelter – feel free to stop by and say hello, and replenish on water from the hose of the water trough, if needed.

You will continue down a flat rocky path, for about 7 kilometers towards Bash Goynuk. If it has rained recently, expect mud and standing water. Bash Goynuk is a large village, and there are various markets and restaurants you may stop at (see above). Follow down Gulara Qadirbayova street, stay right on Sherif Idrisov street. Continue down this street, which will turn you right along the main road, and cross a bridge over the river.

If you stop here for the night, it is recommended you stay in a guesthouse in Bash Goynuk; otherwise, you may set up camp on flat ground near the river on either side of the bridge.



Bash Layisqi – Gashgachay (Baş Layışqı – Qaşqaçay)

13.5km, +731m / -402m

This route takes a long way through Bash Layisqi after Bash Goynuk, and requires you to take an asphalt road up to the edge of Gumukh. You may catch a marshrutka up part of this road if you'd like. The hike continues through the forest on a dirt path, and is a fairly simple and straightforward route into Gashgachay.

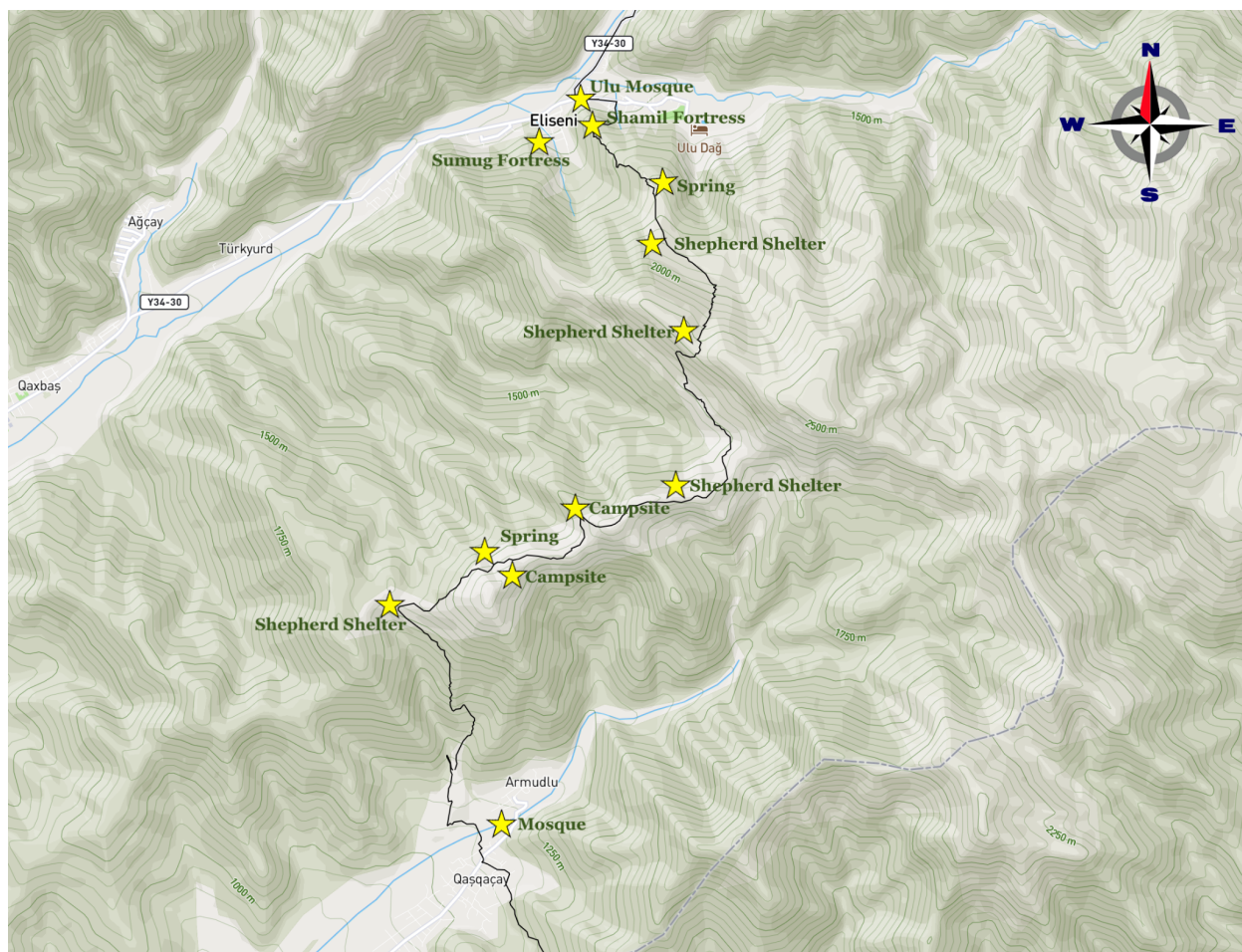
Bash Layisqi food and lodging: There are places to eat in Bash Layisqi, but the spots are out of the way in regard to the trail. It is recommended you stock up in Bash Goynuk, where you can also find a guesthouse to stay at.

Gashgachay food & lodging: Gashgachay has a market and teahouse (which serves food), and a restaurant a few kilometers off the path.

The connection between Bash Goynuk and Bash Layisqi is currently only available via a car road. To walk, follow the main route (Y55-36), along Ahmad Yusubov street. (There is also a marshrutka for less than a manat that passes along this road, if you would like to take it into Bash Layisqi). In Bash Layisqi, follow Bakirov street, which turns into Heydar Aliyev street, towards the mountains. This area is called Gumukh, and is a hamlet off Bash Layisqi. Following the GPS tracks, exit the village.

Follow the dirt path. You will reach a wide, mounded dirt path going uphill, which continues into a wide and clear path in the forest. Nearing Gashgachay village, the trail becomes a bowl-shaped path, taking you to a village road. Continue into the village. Along this way, in the village, there will be a market and a teahouse. There is a restaurant a few kilometers up northeast in the village.

Following the GPS tracks, take the road out of the village and take a path across the river. The path takes you to a grassy field leading to the mountain. Here the main path ends, although it reappears a couple times as you climb uphill. Once you find flat land (around 1200m elevation), this is a good spot to settle in for camp. There is a path to the left side of the hill, taking you down to a creek, where you can refill on water.



Gashgachay – Ilisu (Qaşqaçay – İlisu)

18 km, +1560m / – 1546m

Although the previous Gumukh – Gashgachay section is not long and may take hikers only half a day, it is not recommended to begin the Gashgachay – Ilisu trail late in the day, due to lack of water sources and campsites in the upcoming mountain.

Food and lodging in Ilisu: Ilisu is a fairly populous village, and a popular tourist spot. You will find numerous markets and restaurants down the main road, as well as guesthouses and hotels. Accommodation options:

- Gojayeve Azer: 051 808 5274
- Mirzayeva Gulum: 050 484 9694
- Sangar Gala Hotel: 051 930 55 05
- Hotel Pension Ilisu: 050 328 5615

This path was marked by the Azerbaijan Tourism Board. It is a long and fairly difficult route, and there are not many dependable water sources along the way. Be sure to sufficiently stock up on food and water.

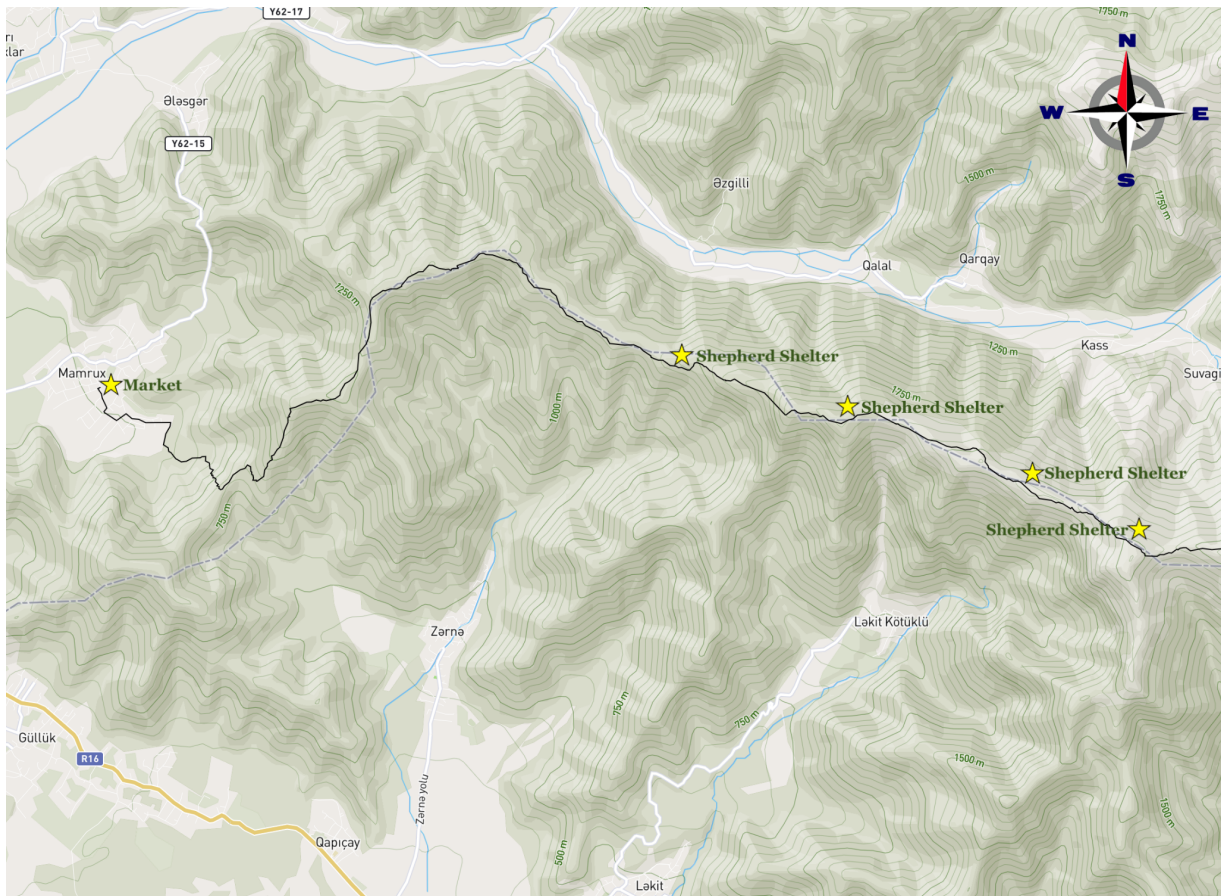
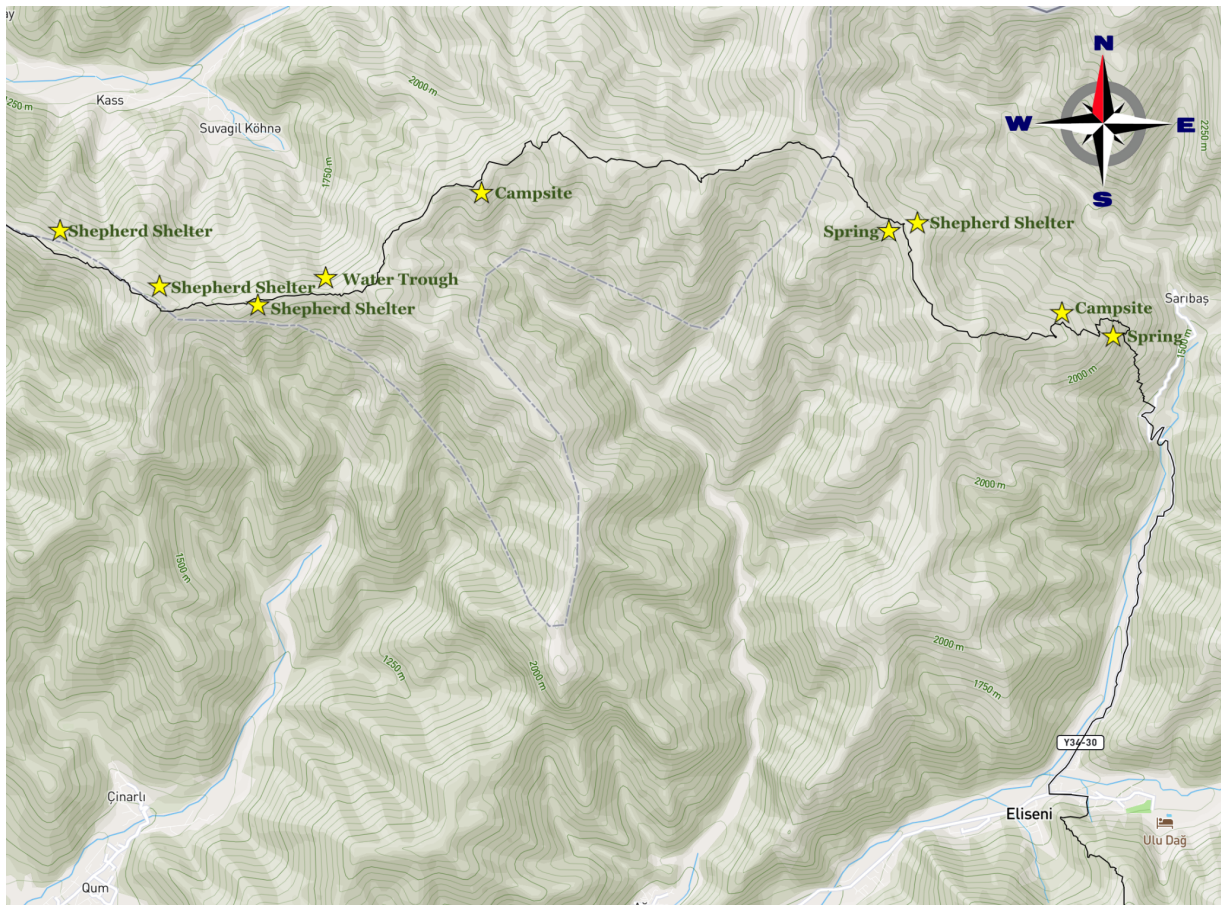
Leaving Gumukh, the hamlet outside of Bash Layisgi, from the campsite, continue uphill to a narrow, rocky dirt trail. Follow the path up the mountain, coming to a clear path in the forest. There is a spring here where you may fill up on water. Along the path, you will come across a wooden gate. Be sure to open it carefully and close it behind you. Be prepared to go through a small section of overgrown bushes and vines. Above the treeline, there will be a shepherd shelter along the trail.

Follow the trail to the right of the shelter. As you go uphill, follow the steep old dirt road, which leads to a narrow footpath along the left side of the mountain. There is another spring for water nearing kilometer 5, which you can find under a wall of white rock and moss. The trail continues and remains mostly clear, although a few short sections are overgrown. Atop the mountain, the trail disappears in the grass, but you should continue straight. The trail will reappear and lead you to a shepherd shelter. The trail continues

around the shelter. Following the path you will shift from the left face of the mountain, to climb toward the peak to the right (northwards).

Following this last push up hill, you will find yourself at another shepherd shelter. After the shelter, continue your way downhill along a rocky descent. A path in the grass will appear. Be sure to follow the direction of the GPS tracks, so as to not fall upon intersecting animal paths. The path becomes fairly steep for a winding 2 kilometer section through sometimes narrow trail between trees and bushes.

You will come across the ruins of the 19th century Galacha, also known as Shamil's fortress. Descend into Ilisu by following the wide path to the right of the fortress. This is a fairly large town, and you will find plenty of markets and restaurants along the main road.



Ilisu – Mamrukh (İlisu – Mamrux)

44 km, +2795m / -3460m

This trail is not marked, and the path varies in clarity. This route is challenging, including a pass along a narrow ridge. Because of this, at this time, we only recommend this route for experienced hikers who are comfortable with heights.

This is a long multi-day hike without villages along the way, and may take 2-3 days depending on the fitness of the hiker. Water sources along the way are limited and may be seasonal. It is important to properly stock up on food, water, and any other resources you may need while in the backcountry.

Leaving Ilisu, you will take a car road northwards towards Saribash. Along the beginning of this road, there are some more cafes and restaurants of Ilisu. About **2 kilometers** in, the road is no longer paved and changes to a gravel/rocky road. Continue along the valley, to the right of the river. About **6 kilometers** in, there is a spring to fill up on water.

The bridge that used to cross the river no longer exists. You must cross the river yourself. The water is not usually too high, but be cautious of rocks. This trail forks after a right-left-right switchback, but both paths eventually converge. Continuing along the road, there is another river crossing at **kilometer 7.5**.

Optional side trip: This road leads to the small village of Saribash, which you may visit if you continue for about another 2 kilometers. Be sure to visit the beautiful mosque and its front-garden, and the shepherd statue overlooking the river valley and Ilisu down below. Should you choose to stay here, the field behind the shepherd statue is a good spot to set up camp (although you may be approached by border-station soldiers). There are no markets or restaurants in this village. When leaving Saribash, you may return through the village the same way you arrived, or take a shortcut back out to the road from beneath the shepherd statue. Follow the trail back down to the road, and follow along the right side (west) of the main river valley. About two kilometers down, take a right (westwards) to find a trail that takes you up into the mountain, back in the east facing Saribash.

If you are **not** stopping by Saribash, take a left at about **kilometer 6.5**, and follow onto a path that leads up the mountain. Continue upwards, as the trail occasionally disappears and reappears. About a kilometer up the mountain (around **kilometer 7.5**) you will come across a water spring. At about 2000m elevation, the trail disappears again for about 150 meters, but if you follow westwards, you will come back across the shepherd trails. The trail continues to ascend, and occasionally becomes obscured by a field of strewn rocks, before showing itself again. These flatter areas may be a good spot to set up camp if you would like to stop for the day.

Around **kilometer 9**, you will come approach a shepherd shelter. A fence lines a field facing the valley to the right of the house. Follow the inside of the fence, downhill, to reach a water spring, if needed. Return back to follow a sunken trail which continues to the right of the shelter. You will continue slowly ascending, and eventually switch over to the right face of the mountain.

At **kilometer 13**, you will approach a flat, grassy spot where the trail disappears. This is another convenient spot to set up camp. Following the direction of the route, there is another shepherd shelter on the right side. As you continue along the path along the ridge, westwards, the trail alternates between being very clear, to semi-clear, and unclear. However, the direction remains the same. Be careful around the spots where the trail has partially deteriorated. At about **kilometer 16**, make sure to remain on the right side of the ridge. Hikers should remain extra cautious around this area. The path is steep and rocky and at times narrow; make sure to have the tools to ensure your balance.

Shortly after, near **kilometer 17**, turn left (south) when you come to where the ridge diverges. Follow along the ridge, then take a right descending onto the path leading north. The path is covered in grass but still visible. The path becomes gravel, and back to grass again. Keep right along the side of the mountain, but make sure to follow the correct mountain by following GPS tracks. Continue going downhill in the grass around **kilometer 18**, and find the trail again. It will disappear and reappear, but you will continue following peak after peak along the right side of the ridge. Stopping at one of the flat spaces between ridges may be a good spot for a campsite.

Follow along the ridge. After the long stretch of black-rocky path, you will find shepherd trails down to the right side of the mountain. The trail disappears for a bit, but you will continue in the direction of the ridge, not straying too far from the top of the mountain. At **kilometer 23**, there is an animal water trough,

where you may refill your bottles from the hose. About a half kilometer further, there is a shepherd shelter to the left.

There is a clear path after the shepherd shelter. It may get grassy in sections, but follow along the direction of the ridge. At **kilometer 25**, there is another shepherd shelter. Afterwards, you will have to descend down the ridge, then climb up the next one headed northwest. When the route gets grassy, follow the direction of the ridge, including along a descent around **kilometer 25.5**. There will be another shepherd shelter at **kilometer 26**. There is a rocky extension followed by a small rocky field, before a clear path that leads to more shepherd trails appears. There is another shepherd shelter at **kilometer 27**. After the shepherd shelter, there will be parallel shepherd trails which you can follow, and a main, wider path, a little further below.

There is another shepherd shelter at **kilometer 29.5**, where the path disappears. Continue in the same direction, descending and following the top of the ridge, and a clear path will appear. About a half kilometer later, the path becomes slightly obscured by rocks on the trail, but continues. The trail changes from grassy, to rocky, to forested.

At **kilometer 31.5**, you come across another shepherd shelter. The flat ground around this area may be a good spot to set up camp if you would like to finish the day here. There is a trail that follows close to the fence of the shepherd shelter. Follow the trail through the bushes and trees. A short section of the trail passes through the trees on the right side of the ridge.

At **kilometer 33**, you are back in the forest. The trail may be obscured by leaves. Continue along the top of the ridge. Tracks may diverge around sections of bushes or trees, but they lead to the same direction. Around **kilometer 36.5**, the direction of the route changes from westwards to southwards. They change back westwards for less than a kilometer at **kilometer 38**, then change back to southwards.

Nearing **kilometer 40**, you will turn right (west) and descend onto a trail leading to Mamrukh village. At **kilometer 40.5**, the trail ends and a car path begins. Cars from the village drive to this point, and hunters and woodchoppers take the trail to the top of the mountain. At **kilometer 41.5**, you will see another car road diverging right. This is the old car road used by locals. Although they lead to the same place, keep on the left track, which is the new car road, and in better condition.

Stay on the path into the village of Mamrukh. There are no guesthouses in this village. If you follow the navigation, you will arrive at a market and cafe. Across the street is a bus stop, where a marshrutka can pick you up to go to Zaqatala's district center for less than a manat. You may also call a taxi by asking locals or dialing 077 508 90 09.