

## Iran: Cones of Kandovan

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Kandovan is an ancient village tucked away in the northwest corner of Iran at the foothills of Mount Sahand and near the city of Tabriz. The historical village of Kandovan is one of the three rocky villages of the world. Houses in this village look like beehives built in the heart of mountains.

There are two other rocky villages in the world, one in North Dakota in the US and the other in Turkey. However, Kandovan, situated in Oskou District, is the only rocky village of the world inhabited by people for some 6,000 years.

A living example of human adaptation to exceptionally unusual natural surroundings, Kandovan village is located 50 km to the south of Tabriz, Osku, on the northern slopes of a valley at the foothills of Mount Sahand. A river originating from the Sahand peaks passes through the valley.

There are a number of natural springs to the north of the river, the water from which has traditionally been used for the treatment of kidney stones, according to the locals. The physical structure of the village looks like images from fairy tales. Natural cones, scattered over a vast area, serve as human dwellings on rock formations which themselves seem to have been the work of certain sculptors. The road from Tabriz goes through this natural artwork.

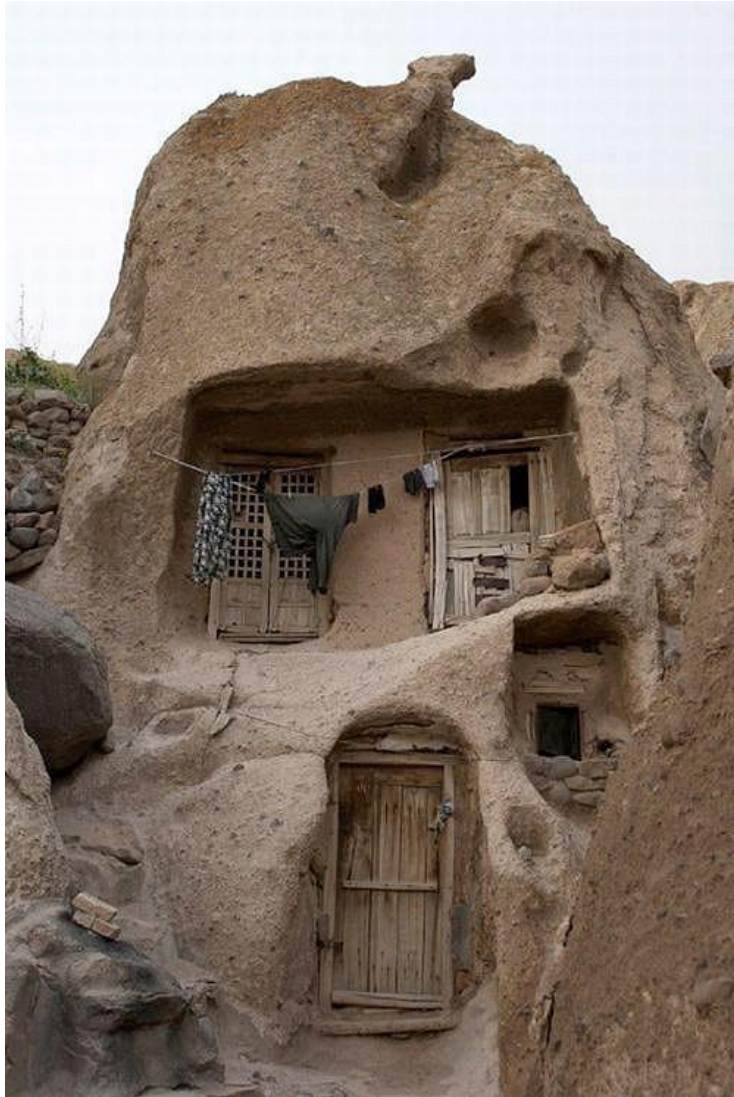


On getting nearer to the dwellings, the visitor finds out two or three of these hollow interconnected cones with features such as openings on their surface playing the role of actual windows. The lowest cones are used as tables and those on top as the living quarters.

The village of Kandovan is also part of the Lake Urmia region (also spelt Urmiyeh or Urmiya), the region where the predecessors of the Persians and the Medes first entered recorded history in a 844 BCE Assyrian inscription, and the region that is central to the start of the second phase of Zoroastrian history.

It is our understanding that the unusual cone formations were formed from volcanic ash and debris spewed during an eruption of Mount Sahand being hardened and shaped by the elements over thousands of years. The formation of volcanic ash cones is local to Kandovan. Elsewhere, the ash blanketed the land. The existence of a high volume of ash and pumice far from Sahand's crater indicates that Mount Sahand erupted with a gigantic explosion in the distant past. Sahand's rock is about a million years old and the last eruption of Mount Sahand is thought to have occurred within the Holocene epoch, that is within the last 11,000 years. Today, Mount Sahand is a dormant volcano consisting of a crater lake encircled by twelve peaks, the tallest of which rises to a height of 3707 m. or 12,162 feet.

Most of the cave houses are two to four storeys in height. In a typical four storey house, the ground or first floor is used as an animal shelter, the next two floors are used as living areas, and the top floor is used for storage. There are reports of tunnels connecting towers owned by a person or family.



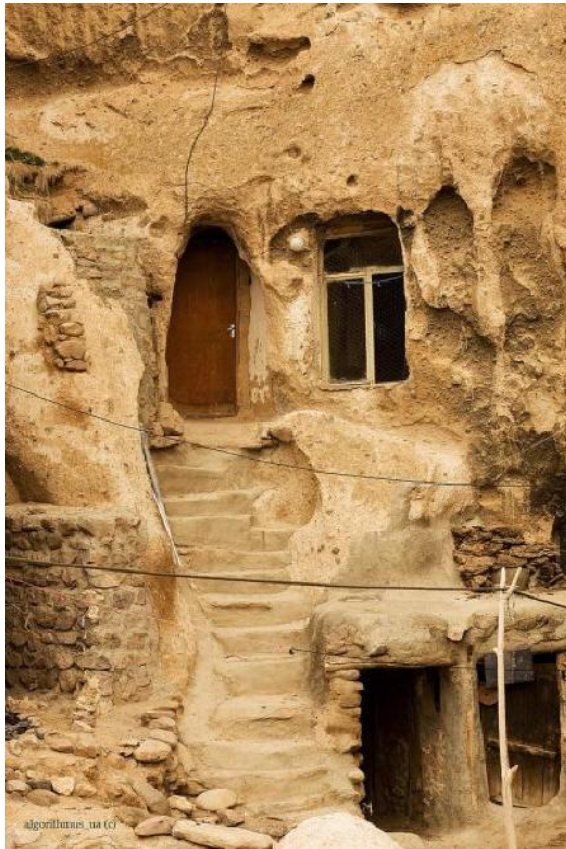
Legend has it that Kandovan's first inhabitants moved there in the 13th century to escape from the invading Mongol army. They dug hideouts in the volcanic rocks but eventually decided to settle in these caves which they gradually developed and transformed into multi-storey, permanent houses. Since then, many generations of their descendants have continued living in the same houses.

The houses are known as *karan* in the local dialect. One interpretation has the word Kandovan being a plural form of *kando*, a bee's hive. Another interpretation says that Kandovan means Land of Unknown Carvers. The use of 'van' to indicate the plural is found in the Avesta: cf. *ashavan*. Nowadays, residents speak a Turkic dialect but have traditional Iranian family names,

names such as Kayani. The mountains and rivers in the region have both Persian and Turkic - and perhaps even Assyrian - names.

The present residents say that their village is around 700 years old, and was formed by people fleeing from an advancing Mongol army and who used the caves as a refuge and a place of hiding. Even after the Mongol occupation of the country came to an end, many of the refugees decided to continue living in the caves and gradually expanded their cave homes to form permanent multi-storey houses. Another legend states that eight hundred years ago a body of soldiers hid in the caves during a military campaign.

However, there are indications that the present cave dwellers are successors of earlier 1600-3000 years ago cave dwellers which would have made them contemporaneous to the first known presence of Zoroastrians in the region.



While we must await systematic archaeological and anthropological studies of Kandovan to confirm any direct connection to early Zoroastrians, the style of the Kandovan settlement has some parallels to a form of settlement mentioned in Zoroastrian scriptures, the Avesta. The first mention and description of a planned Aryan township in the Avesta is the Jamshidi Vara (also see Pamiri houses). If, as some have done, the word vara is translated as 'cave', then Kandovan becomes a candidate for a Jamshidi style vara even though the body of references to the location of the early Aryan homeland is more towards Central Asia and the Pamirs than towards the Middle East.

The climate of Kandovan also coincides with the Avesta's description of a weather change that instigated the creation of varas, namely, a greater number of cool months than warm months in a year accompanied by the onset of severe winters. While the weather in the region has likely changed over the past ten thousand years, Kandovan still receives a fair amount of winter snow. In addition, the number of cool months in Kandovan exceeds the number of warm months.

South from Kandovan are reports of other cave dwellers and their choice of living style.

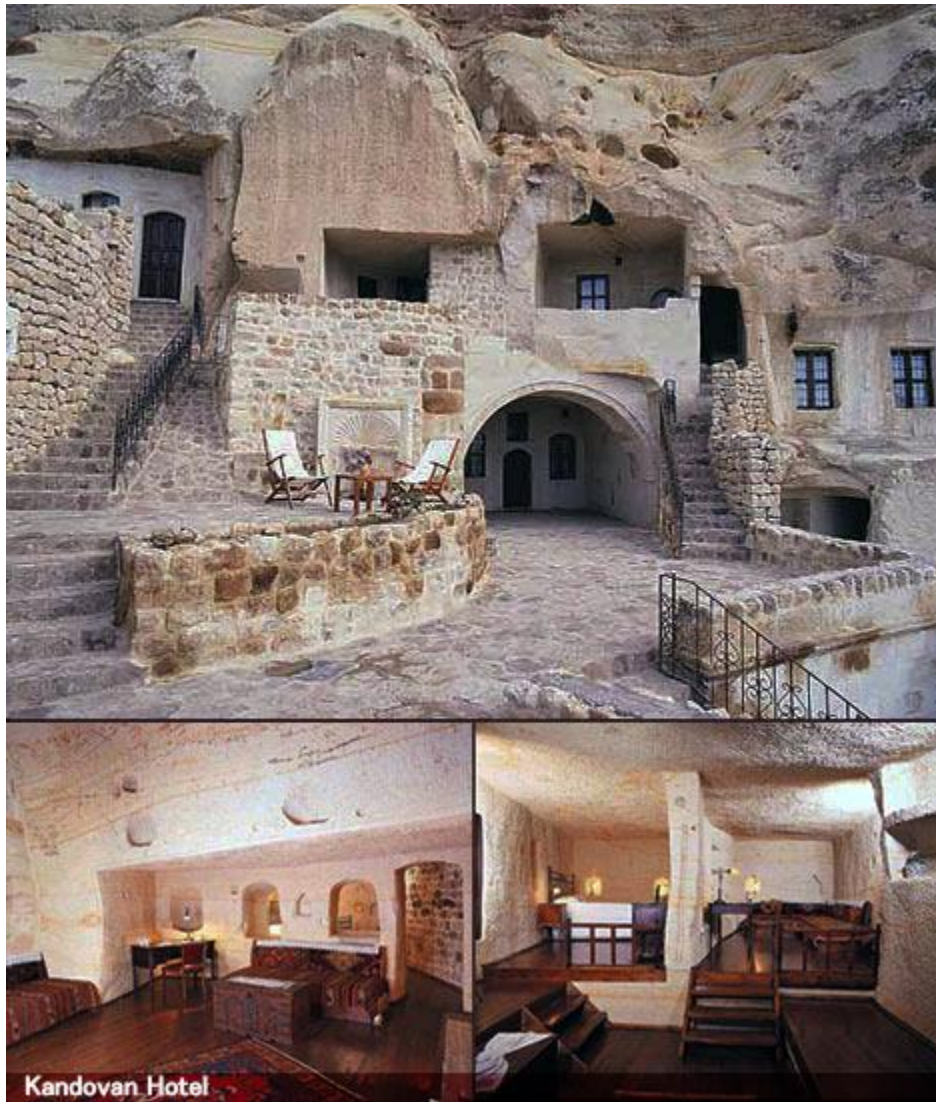


In 317 BCE, the Macedonian commander Antigonus Monophthalmus is quoted as saying that he encountered Kossaeans (Kassites), calling them cavemen.

In *Nomads and the Outside World*, p.103, Anatoly Michailovich Khazanov states "Curtius Rufus (1st century CE) describes how the Mardeans (one of the nomadic Persian people according to Herodotus) dug caves in the mountains and hid in them with their wives and children (V.6.17)...". Khazanov adds as a footnote, "It is curious that the habit of using caves as winter shelters for livestock continues has been preserved up to the present day by semi-nomadic Kurds and Lurs..."

Some translations of the word vara as a cave add an underground feature to the caves. To find the closest examples of a settlement based in a network of underground caves, we need to look to the ancient land of Cappadocia presently in Central Turkey. Cappadocia was mentioned by the historian Strabo as having a fire temple.

The cave settlements in Turkey are similar to the cave settlement of Kandovan. They have also been the subject of archaeological examination. As a result, we may be able to glean some concept of the antiquity of Kandovan's cave dwellings from the study of the Turkish cave dwellings, where, even though the recent phase of habitation dates from the 5th to 6th century CE, murals and monuments indicate pre-Turkic habitation in the (Indo-Iranian) Hittite period (18th to 12th century BCE). Certain cave-based settlements in Turkey have evidence of habitation since 4000 BCE.



The attractions of Kandovan, however, are not restricted to its unusual cave dwellings. It is located in a green and scenic valley where wild plants and particularly natural spring waters are reputed to have healing properties. The spring waters which are traditionally used to cure kidney problems draw many people from surrounding towns and beyond to this area. The combination of Kandovan's natural landscape and resources, and above all the unique way in which its inhabitants have adapted to the environment, has made it a popular destination for visitors.

Some of the area's wild plants are also reputed to have healing and vitality-giving properties. The combination of Kandovan's unique natural landscape, beauty, and the manner in which its inhabitants have adapted to the environment, has made Kandovan a popular destination for visitors.

About 300,000 people visit the village each year (the resident population is only 670) and a cave hotel with ten rooms was opened in 2007 to accommodate visitors who wish to stay over a night or more. Before the opening of the hotel, visitors to Kandovan were obliged to make a day trip from Tabriz 60 km to the north. It is only a matter of time before the local population begins to rely on tourism as a major source of income, thereby supplanting their traditional pastoral and agricultural way of life.

While Mount Sahand itself is somewhat stark, the surrounding country abounds in a natural beauty that is today but a shadow of a legendary past. Some believe that legendary past beauty is preserved in the biblical story of the Garden of Eden. Ancient Persian gardens, also called baghs, were renowned for their spectacular beauty. Their name pairidaeza became the English word paradise. The baghs were a paradise on earth.