

# Take a journey through nature, history, and culture in Aladagh Mountains



In the heart of northwestern Iran lies a province that often escapes the international traveler's radar—Zanjan. Instead of heading to the well-known cities of Isfahan, Shiraz, and Tehran, those in the know are attracted to Zanjan for its unspoiled landscapes and wealth of cultural heritage.

Among its many treasures, none shines quite as brightly as the Aladaghlar Mountains, a rugged and majestic range that offers an unparalleled blend of natural beauty, adventure, and history. Before we delve into the wonders of the Aladaghlar Mountains, it's essential to under-

stand the context in which they are set. Zanjan Province, with its capital city also named Zanjan, is situated in the northwest of Iran. It shares borders with Ardebil Province to the north, Gilan Province to the northeast, Qazvin Province to the east, Hamedan Province to the southeast, and Kurdistan Province to the west.



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## Historical significance

The history of Zanjan stretches back millennia, with evidence of human settlement dating as far back as the 4th millennium BCE. Throughout its long history, the region has been under the rule of various empires, including the Medes, Achaemenids, Seleucids, Parthians, Sassanids, and later, the Islamic caliphates and Iranian dynasties. This rich tapestry of cultures has left an indelible mark on Zanjan's architecture, traditions, and way of life.

## Economic and cultural identity

Today, Zanjan is known for its handicrafts, particularly its exquisite knives, *charoogh* (handwoven women's shoes), and *malileh* (filigree). The province is also famous for its agricultural products, with olives, garlic, and grapes being key exports. However, it's the province's natural beauty that is increasingly drawing visitors from around the world, and at the heart of this appeal are the Aladagh Mountains. The Aladagh Mountains are a prominent mountain range located in Zanjan Province. The name is of Turkish origin, reflecting the Turkic influence in the region's history. "Ala" means colorful or motley, while "daghlar" means mountains, so the name can be roughly translated as Colorful Mountains.

## Geographical location and features

The Aladagh Mountains are part of the larger Alborz Mountain range, which stretches across northern Iran from the border with Azerbaijan to the southern end of the Caspian Sea. The Alborz Mountain is home to Iran's highest peak, Mount Damavand, and forms a natural barrier between the Caspian lowlands and the Iranian Plateau. Within this grand geological context, the Aladagh Mountains rise majestically in Zanjan Province. The range is characterized by its rugged peaks, deep valleys, and dramatic cliffs. The highest summit in the Aladagh Mountains reaches an impressive altitude of over 3,000 meters (about 9,800 feet)

above sea level, making it a challenging target for mountaineers and a stunning sight for all visitors.

## Climate and ecosystems

The climate in the Aladagh Mountains varies significantly with elevation. At lower altitudes, the region experiences a semi-arid climate typical of much of Iran's interior. Summers are hot and dry, while winters are cold, with temperatures often dropping below freezing. However, as you ascend the mountains, the climate becomes progressively cooler and moister.

**Mountain Forests:** Between 1,500 and 2,500 meters, the slopes are covered in mountain forests. Oak, maple, and wild almond trees dominate these woodlands, providing habitat for a variety of wildlife.

**Steppe:** Below 1,500 meters, the landscape transitions into steppe—a semi-arid grassland dotted with hardy shrubs and small trees adapted to the dry conditions.

## Flora and fauna

The Aladagh Mountains are a biodiversity hotspot, supporting a wide range of plant and animal species, many of which are endemic to the region.

In terms of flora, the alpine meadows burst with color in the warmer months. Here, you'll find species like the Zagros lily, mountain tulip, and various types of bellflowers, buttercups, and forget-me-nots. In the forested areas, wildflowers like primroses and violets carpet the forest floor in spring.

The Aladagh Mountains host a diverse range of fauna, including the endangered Persian Leopard, agile bezoar ibex, omnivorous brown bear, majestic golden eagle, and charming Persian squirrel. Each species is uniquely adapted to the rocky slopes and forested areas, making wildlife sightings in this region a special experience. The Aladagh Mountains aren't just a natural wonder; they're steeped in history and cultural significance.

## Ancient trade routes

For thousands of years, trade caravans traversed the valleys and passes of the Aladagh Mountains.

These routes were part of the broader network that we now call the Silk Road—a series of trade routes that connected China with the Mediterranean world. Traders carrying silk, spices, and other luxuries from the East would pass through these mountains on their way to markets in Persia, Mesopotamia, and beyond.

Evidence of this history can be seen in the remnants of caravanse-rais—fortified inns that provided shelter, food, and protection for travelers. Some of these structures, built from the sturdy stone of the Aladagh Mountains, still stand today, offering a tangible link to this vibrant past.

## Nomadic heritage

The slopes and valleys of the Aladagh Mountains have long been home to nomadic peoples, particularly the Shahsavans. The Shahsavans are a Turkic people who have practiced a semi-nomadic lifestyle for centuries, moving their herds between summer pastures in the mountains and winter quarters in the lowlands.

This seasonal migration, known as transhumance, is perfectly adapted to the varied ecosystems of the Aladagh Mountains. In spring and summer, the nomads lead their flocks of sheep and goats up to the alpine meadows, where the animals fatten on the rich grasses. Come autumn, they descend to the warmer, more sheltered valleys to escape the harsh mountain winter. The Shahsavans are renowned for their handicrafts, particularly their vibrant, geometrically patterned rugs and kilims. The wool for these textiles comes from their own flocks, grazed in the meadows of the Aladagh Mountains, while many of the dyes are derived from plants gathered in the same region.

## Sacred sites and legends

Mountains have often been seen as places of spiritual power, and the Aladagh Mountains are no exception. Throughout the range, you'll find shrines, some modest and others more elaborate, dedicated to various saints and holy figures. These sites attract pilgrims who

come to seek blessings, make vows, or give thanks.

One such site is the tomb of Pir-e Aladagh, a Sufi mystic who, according to local tradition, lived as a hermit in these mountains several centuries ago. His simple stone tomb, located high on a mountain slope, is a place of profound peace. Pilgrims tie colorful ribbons to nearby trees as symbols of their wishes and prayers.

The Aladagh Mountains also feature in many local legends. One tale speaks of a hidden valley, accessible only through a narrow, easily overlooked pass. In this secret glen, it's said that the last survivors of the Assassins—the famed medieval sect—found refuge after their strongholds were destroyed by the Mongols. While historians are skeptical, the legend adds an air of mystery to any hike through the mountains.

## Activities and attractions

The Aladagh Mountains offer a wide range of outdoor activities and experiences for visitors. This includes hiking and trekking on various trails of different difficulty levels, rock climbing on limestone cliffs and granite towers, wildlife watching tours to spot Persian leopards and various bird species, cultural experiences such as staying with nomad families and taking Silk Road heritage tours, and winter sports like skiing and snowshoeing.

The diverse range of activities available in this region makes it a popular destination for outdoor enthusiasts and those looking to immerse themselves in nature and local culture.

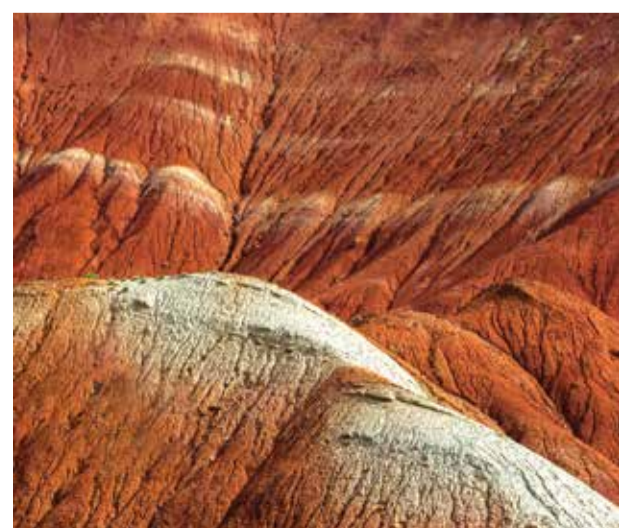
The Aladagh Mountains offer a variety of outdoor activities for visitors. Rock climbing enthusiasts can explore routes like Shahsavans Wall and Eagle's Nest. Wildlife watching tours allow visitors to observe Persian leopards and a diverse array of bird species. Cultural experiences such as Nomad Homestays and Silk Road Heritage Tours offer opportunities to engage with the region's history and traditions. In winter, the mountains become a winter sports destination for skiing and snowshoeing.



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