

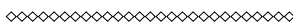
Tövkhön

Zanabazar's Retreat and Workshop

Location: N47°02.343 – E102°13.574. Övörkhongai Aimag. The easiest route to Tövkhön is the road from the sum center of Kharkhorin southwest up the valley of the Orkhon River. It can also be reached from the resort town of Khujirt, either by fording the Orkhon River (conditions permitting) or using the Orkhon River Bridge on the way to the Orkhon Waterfall, a well-known tourist attraction. The final mile or two up the steep hill to the temples may be impassable after heavy rains.

In 1648, about the time he had founded what is now Shankh Monastery on the Shariin Gol, Zanabazar noticed an unusual armchair-shaped peak among the ridges west of the Orkhon River. He soon concluded that the mountain, known as Shireet Ulaan Uul, was an auspicious spot. Upon his return in 1651 from his first trip to Tibet he had a small stone-walled meditation hut built here.²⁰ In 1653 he visited Erdene Zuu, founded by his great-grandfather, and appeared before a convocation of Khalkh nobility. While there he prevailed upon his followers to build a temple and retreat at Shireet Ulaan Uul for his own personal use. Later it also became a workshop where many of his most famous artworks were created, including the five Transcendent Buddhas now located in the Zanabazar Fine Arts Museum and the Chojjin Lama Museum.²¹ Zanabazar also reportedly designed his famous Soyombo alphabet while residing here.²² During Zanabazar's lifetime the retreat was called *Bayasgalant Aglag Oron* (Happy Secluded Place). After his death it became known as Tövkhön Monastery, the name by which it is known today.

The small temples were heavily damaged by the communists during the upheavals of the late 1930s. Restoration work began in the early 1990s and on October 27, 1993, the temple complex was officially reopened. During the summer of 1997 extensive ceremonies were performed here, and a new statue of the deity *Gombo Makhgal* (Mahakala) was placed in one of the refurbished temples and consecrated. Several monks now live at the complex full time.

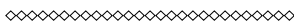


The peak on which Tövkhön is located resembles an easy chair with arm rests on either side. In the seat of the chair, several hundred feet above the base of the peak, are several small temples. A stone staircase wide enough to accommodate horses leads from the base of the peak to the temples. According to legend, only Zanabazar was allowed to ride right up to the temples. Others had to dismount at the base of the peak and walk up.

Near the top of the staircase, to the right of the temples, are two wells about fifteen feet from each other. One has fresh water in it, while the other has slightly brackish water. No one has been able to explain why one is brackish and the other not, or for that matter, how there can be wells at all here in the solid rock very close to the summit of a mountain where ordinarily there would not be any underground water courses. This, according to monks in residence, is just one of the many oddities of this place.

In the main temple, on a shelf above several statues of deities, rests a small statue of Zanabazar. Beside the statue is a large chunk of rock in which can be seen an impression that, with a little bit of imagination, resembles a human hand. This, according to legend, is the hand print of Zanabazar himself. From the temples a trail to the left, when facing the mountain, leads to two meditation caves. In the one favored by Zanabazar is a small altar where he supposedly sat and meditated. Near the caves is “Zanabazar’s Throne,” a stone seat where, according to monks in residence, Zanabazar would sit each morning at dawn. On a sloping shelf of stone below the caves, pressed into the native rock, are the imprints of several feet. Local monks say one is the bare foot of Zanabazar as a small boy, while another is of his foot as a grown man, shod in Mongolian-style boots. There is also an imprint of what is said to be his horse’s hoof. Yet another footprint is said to be that of one of Zanabazar’s main disciples, Luvsannorovsharav, who went on to found the Mandal Monastery at Mandal Bag in Bayankhongor Aimag.

To the right of the temples a path leads upward to the summit of the peak. One branch of the path leads to the Mother’s Womb, a narrow passageway which pilgrims crawl through to be symbolically reborn, cleansed of their sins. Nearby, an underground passageway leads to the other side of the peak. This was a secret escape route from Tövkhön which local monks claim Zanabazar used to flee from the forces of his arch-enemy Galdan Boshigt during the war between the Khalkh and Zungarian Mongols in 1688. An extension of the path continues to the summit, where a sizable flat area created with the help of stone



retaining walls is surmounted with a large ovoov. According to tradition, women are not allowed on this summit, although with the advent in recent years of many visitors from other countries this prohibition is now sometimes ignored. At the bottom of the peak, near the parking lot, is “Zanabazar’s Hitching Post,” which Zanabazar allegedly made by tying together the tops of two saplings which then grew together in the form of an upside-down U.

