

# The Aak Hills

Most of the deep ocean floor has undulating terrain to a greater or lesser extent. The Aak Hills though are of a rarer kind of more substantial ocean floor topography, set in the eastern part of the Kachayan (or Sea Devil) Province of Kelchayn. Most of the Hills are relatively low-lying, composed chiefly of sand and silt over rockier cores. The highest peak in this range is about 480 feet (145 metres) above the general sea floor level nearby. The line of the Hills trends roughly southwest-northeast for about 25 miles (40 kilometres). At its northeastern end is an area of more upstanding, rocky, hill terrain, with only a veneer of sand and silt on some of its higher peaks. Most of these peaks reach more than 850 ft (260 m) above the mean sea floor. The highest of all, the most northerly, has a height of 1,105 ft (337 m). However, perched atop this hill is the 130 ft (40 m) mobile boulder of the Rocking Stone, making the apparent height around 1,235 ft (377 m). The average level sea floor nearby lies below roughly 11,800 ft (3,600 m) of ocean.

This contour map illustrates the topography, along with some of the more significant constructed features, and those creatures more likely to be encountered in the area. Simple, though oversized, icons have been used to show the approximate locations of the items illustrated. For greater precision, use the centre of the markers, or the point where the vertical and horizontal lines meet for those symbols drawn with a surface line, except where noted in the descriptions below.

Three classes of symbol are identified using coloured glows. The sole orange-outlined icon is that marking the Ketorka (Sea Orc) cavern village of Aak, from which the name of the Hills derives (or perhaps the settlement is named from the Hills - no one is really sure). Red-limned items are Kachayan constructions, while pale grey outlining indicates animals, their remains and lairs, or constructions of unidentified source. This tripartite division is used to order the following descriptions.

## The Ketorka Settlement of Aak

A separate map and description of Aak is available elsewhere in the Community Atlas.

## The Kachaya and Kachayan Constructions

**The Kachaya** are of a generally humanoid form and Human-like size, thus have a body with four limbs and head, all of which are scaled, with hands and feet also similar to those of Humans, but rather larger, with sharp claws instead of nails, and webbing between their fingers and toes. Roughly 1 in 200 is born with four usable arms instead of two; typically, they grow to be taller than the average. Males and females are physically similar, though females are more commonly magically proficient. All have small control fins on their arms, legs and back. Their heads are ruggedly square by Human norms, their faces flattened, with large, dark, forward-facing, fish-like eyes, a mouth full of robust, sharply pointed teeth, and spines around the edges of their faces which can look like horns, partly hence their common name of "Sea Devils". They are all able to breathe freely above or below the water, though they can breathe air for only quite short periods. They prefer to live in deep, quiet waters, which is where they are more liable to be encountered, and hence their own name for themselves of "The Quiet-Water Folk". Their

communication is largely telepathic when undersea, within eye-to-eye range (they have a normal vision range even in the darkness of the Deeps, albeit seeing only in black-and-white unless some light is present), or vocal speech in air, though they can use either at any time. They have a bioluminescent patch above each eye that they can show or hide at will too, which can be used to communicate over greater distances in the dark. They are also able to use a sonic attack when in water from time to time, over typical hand-to-hand combat distances. They pair-bond and maintain loose family structures, giving birth to live young that mature to adult forms in 8-10 months, young that are able to feed and look after themselves independently from birth. While social standing can be determined by heredity, aptitude and forcefulness are more important, because although adults can live to be 50 or so, most die younger, often by violence or accidents.

A few favour a wandering, nomadic lifestyle, similar to land nomads, though most Kachaya, including those likely to be encountered in the Aak Hills region, prefer a more fixed existence. Their seafloor settlements are normally of domed buildings with round access-points. They carry out some fish and cold-water coral farming, but like the nomads, they will supplement this by raiding other undersea settlements and surface vessels. Kachayan leaders tend to be physically and/or magically strong individuals, and although they have an aristocracy of sorts, their leaders do not necessarily come from it. Such leaders usually survive only as long as their strength and success lasts. Each province has its own leader, and the whole mapped area here falls within Kelchayn Province, part of a loosely-bonded realm that comprises seven other scattered Provinces elsewhere. This realm owes allegiance to a ruler in a city, Karruch, far to the south, a physical separation which makes this Province, and its leaders, relatively autonomous. Kelchayn's eastern border effectively runs right along the eastern edge of the map closest to the northeastern, higher, Aak Hills.

Constructed Kachayan features are described below in alphabetical order according to their map labels.

**Arch:** A small settlement of about 200 Kachaya by the map's northern edge, this is primarily a military post, from where regular border patrols are sent daily. The population varies in size as a result. There are several larger barrack domes here, including a substantial shark stable, since for speed, ease and effect, most such patrols are shark-borne. In common with many undersea surface settlements, most Kachayan settlements have at least one elevated lookout post, often a tower. In the deep oceans, where most creatures use bioluminescence for communication, defence, protection, disguise or as a lure, these raised lookouts are used to keep watch for such lights, and if necessary, send out scouts to triangulate the lights' location and distance. Arch has two towers, one each at the north and south ends of the other settlement buildings.

Its name means "Gate" or "Doorway" in Kachayan, although it is unclear how influential the great carved black basalt gateway arch on the southwestern side of the settlement may have been in its naming. Kachayan border posts commonly have the "arch" element in their names anyway. The gateway has no gates; it is simply a finely-crafted arch of cut stone blocks around 50 ft tall, 30 ft wide and 20 ft long (15 m by 9 m by 6 m). Its exterior is carved in low-relief with flowing, apparently abstract, designs, all done in a typical, if ancient, Kachayan manner. The gateway is aligned northwest-southeast, which does not conform to the current layout of Arch. The Kachaya are strongly attached to this object and its preservation, yet have no tales recalling who built it, when, or why, odd given such freestanding architecture seems to have no clear purpose now.

**Boundary Stone:** Standing on the highest of the lower silty hills in the Aak range (480 ft, 145 m), this is a substantial Kachayan boundary marker. It is a stone pillar, roughly cylindrical in form, and round-topped, cut from the local black seafloor basalt. It stands 12 ft tall above the current surface, by 5 ft in cross-sectional diameter (3.7 m by 1.5 m). It has some pictorial designs of several Kachayan deities and their symbols cut in low relief, along with a lengthy Kachayan text carved into the rest of the stone. The latter describes, in a tediously archaic fashion, that the sea here is “forever” Kachayan, listing the curses the illustrated deities will rain down upon transgressors, including those who move the pillar without permission. A relatively recently-cut, though still formulaically archaic, codicil suggests the stone was once located elsewhere, as it details the generosity of the Kachaya in permitting the Ketorka to retain their settlement of Aak nearby, including lists of access-rights and limits the Ketorka must follow. Careful reading between the lines might suggest there is nothing here the Ketorka probably weren't doing already, with an unstated implication the Ketorka were likely here long before the Kachaya claimed the region as part of Kelchayn Province.

**Great Air Fountain:** This Kachayan stone-built fountain-head, made of black basalt, lies on a flatter area below a steeper slope leading up to the northern side of the Rocking Stone peak in the higher, rockier, northeasterly Aak Hills. Its piping is fed by a substantial natural gas reservoir deep within the structure of the Hills. Pushing a simple stone control mechanism on the western side of the low, circular wall surrounding the Fountain, releases a burst of gas of variable strength and duration, expelled in much the same way as a water fountain might do on land. As the gas interacts with the seawater nearby, it sparkles with bioluminescence. The low ring-wall is around 40 ft in diameter (12 m). About three feet/one metre inside the wall, a carved stone pinnacle rises around 80 ft (24 m), in the shape of a gigantic squid with tentacles pointing up. It is probably roughly life-sized in comparison with a real deep sea giant squid. The squid's eyes are level with the top of the ring-wall, so it seems as if it is emerging from a hole in the hillside. Numerous outlets for the gas are set all over the squid's tentacles, of which only some are activated at each use of the Fountain. Two domed buildings are located on this flat area too, about 800 feet away (245 m). Between 6 and 12 Kachaya may be found in or around these, including the priest in charge of operating the Fountain. More Kachaya may be present on ceremonial occasions. Further notes regarding the use of the Fountain can be found under the “Oracular Shrine” entry below.

**Metal Totem:** Some distance north of the lower Aak Hills, in what seems an otherwise unremarkable area of open sea floor, stands this square-section, flat-topped metal pillar, some 18 ft tall (5.5 m). Its sides face the cardinal directions, each about 6 ft broad (1.8 m), and are covered in chased, swirling designs of sharks and shark-like creatures right to, and across, its top. Clearly of Kachayan design, and radiating a weakly magical aura, the untarnished dark metal is unidentifiable. Swarms of bioluminous jellyfish sometimes congregate nearby.

**Oracular Shrine:** One larger, elaborately squid-decorated dome, and several smaller, plainer, ones, with a separate single lookout tower, are scattered across a flatter area on the higher western slopes of the Rocking Stone peak in the northeasterly Aak Hills. The main dome is the Oracular Shrine of the Goddess Sarama, Kachayan deity of knowledge and foretelling, often portrayed as a gigantic squid, or as a Kachayan humanoid with a

squid head. There is a permanent presence here of between 60 and 70 Kachaya, including the Oracular High Priest, her acolytes, assistants, servants and guards. Visitors come to the Shrine whenever any pressing question needs answering. The process varies, but in essence the priests interpret the sounds made by the Rocking Stone when it is disturbed by the enquirer. The Stone is called The Voice of Sarama by the Kachaya. In some cases, the enquirer might be guided to swim past the Stone, or more rarely, to touch it lightly, always under direct priestly supervision. For greater matters, an elaborate ceremony, with rituals sometimes lasting many hours, may be performed, culminating in a solemn procession led by the Oracular High Priest and the enquirer to activate the Great Air Fountain (see its entry above) on the hill's mid northern slopes. The priestly interpreters lie still on a cleared, level, flat rock surface within the Shrine's great dome, an ideal spot for the conducted, quiet, sounds from the Rocking Stone to be distinctly heard. None of this is a free service, of course.

**Patch:** A small settlement of 100 or so Kachaya in the long valley that trends southwest-northeast, leading up to the Boundary Stone hill in the southwestern Aak Hills. The place has a mix of typical Kachayan domes, some subterranean excavated tunnels and caves, and the usual lookout tower. Its proximity to Aak means there is often an additional military presence here, including stopping-off border patrols most days. The origins of its name are uncertain, though it is likely a phonetic variant on the common "arch = gateway" element meaning used in border post names elsewhere.

**Stone Altar:** Atop one of the lower, silty Aak Hills, towards their southwestern end, is set this ancient basaltic Stone Altar. It is carved with low-relief, archaic, Kachayan pictorial designs. The Altar is roughly 8 ft long by 4 ft wide and high (2.5 m by 1.25 m). It is clearly kept free from silt (by the locals from Patch), but whether it is still used, or for what purpose, cannot be told from a simple examination. It is still used by folk from Patch, but only on very rare occasions. It is kept regularly cleaned on a rota basis by selected Patch citizens, which is considered an honour, rather than a duty/chore.

**Stone Gateway:** This is described with the adjacent settlement of Arch above.

### **Natural Features and Unidentified Structures**

**Cave:** See under the "Giant Octopus" entry below, as this is its lair.

**Colossal Bird Skeleton:** Intriguingly relatively intact, if lightly covered with silt in parts, this is the skeletal remains of a gigantic bird, possibly a roc or something still larger, as its wingspan seems to have been close to 100 ft (30 m). It lies now on the upper eastern slopes of one of the northeasterly Aak Hills.

**Colossal Nautilus Shell:** On the lower northwestern rise of the Aak Hills is a huge, empty, colourfully-striped, coiled nautilus shell, roughly 25 ft (7.5 m) in its longer dimension. No trace of the animal once living in it remains. The shell seems to have lain here only a relatively short while, as there is very little silt over it or in its opening.

**Fallen Stone Slab:** Towards the lower southern slopes of the Aak Hills lies a large, formerly standing, stone slab. It is now broken into two main pieces, and partly buried by accumulated silt, some at least likely disturbed by its fall. Several smaller fragments and

its buried base (the fallen slab seems to have snapped-off at around the previous ground level), might be found among the silt by careful investigation. The fallen stone is of the common local black basalt. It has been skilfully cut into a rectangular slab which, when intact, would have been around 12 ft long, 4 ft wide and 4 inches thick (3.7 m × 1.2 m × 10 cm). The still-buried base is about 8 ft long (2.5 m). Both main flat faces of what had been the above-ground part of the slab (only) are covered with incised-line animalistic designs in a series of intertwining, quite complex forms. The style is archaic, relatively naturalistic, and that of an unrecognisable creator. It is not Kachayan or Ketorkan.

**Fish Shoals:** Groups of edible fish often congregate near the marked areas. In turn, these may attract animal, Kachayan or Ketorkan predators, and such hunters might be met with further afield too. Two such Shoal areas are marked towards the northern edge of the map, though others may occur from time to time elsewhere.

**Giant Jellyfish:** For unclear reasons, these creatures favour a valley on the western edge of the rockier northeastern Aak Hills, with one, or several, or their intricate bioluminescent displays, commonly spotted nearby.

**Giant Octopus:** Whereas similar creatures marked on The Cliff map tend to be more aggressive, and thus more likely to be met with inadvertently, other, seemingly identical, animals are more reclusive, like this one. It may be encountered in the deep seas nearby when hunting, though the chances of meeting it are greater near its natural Cave lair, about halfway up the southeastern flank of the easternmost of the higher, rockier, Aak Hills.

**Jellyfish Swarms:** Groups of frequently dazzlingly bioluminescent jellyfish are especially liable to be noticed around the two marked areas, one near the Kachayan Metal Totem northwest of the lower Aak Hills (which Totem seems something of a focus for them, perhaps due to its magical aura), the other on the eastern fringes of the Aak Hills.

**Killer Whale Skeletons:** A pair of partly silt-covered killer whale remains lie near the mouth of the long northeast-southwest-trending valley in the southwestern Aak Hills, southwest of Patch. While not uncommon on the sea bed, a pair so near one another is more unusual.

**Ribbon Fish:** Groups of these marine, serpent-like, deep water fish commonly appear towards the southeastern edge of the Aak Hills. The Ketorka of Aak rather revere the creatures and keep many as pets and companions in their cavern home, although how or whether such wild creatures found here may be related to those, is unknown.

**Rocking Stone:** Known to the Kachaya as The Voice of Sarama (see under the Oracular Shrine notes above), this huge boulder is perched on top of the highest peak in the rocky, northeastern Aak Hills. It is around 130 ft (40 m) across, and rests on only one small region of the peak, in such a way that the Stone cannot roll away, only gently rock to and fro, making a tapping sound at each limit of its swing. Ordinarily, the Rocking Stone is still and silent, but even a light touch, a large creature, or several smaller (human-sized) ones, swimming past close-by, is enough to set it in motion. On dry land, such boulders occur naturally where the boulder has proven more resistant to erosion than the underlying rocks, or where a boulder has been deposited by a retreating glacial ice-sheet,

for example. Quite how such a stone has ended up here, roughly 10,800 ft (3,300 m) below sea-level, and around 600 miles (950 km) from the nearest continental landmass, is unknown. It appears to be of similarly dark, basaltic rock to that of the seabed. The Kachaya use it as an oracle, while the Ketorka sometimes use it as a signalling device to their clan-folk in Aak (see the description of Aak elsewhere among the Nibirum Community Atlas maps for details).

**Ruined Marble Blocks:** In a valley of the lower eastern Aak Hills lie a substantial number of prepared, neatly-squared - if often now chipped and damaged - blocks of grey marble. Many are buried almost entirely by silt. They do not seem to have ever formed any structures nearby, while the rock is completely different to the normal seabed black basalt. They may have been once the cargo of a wrecked ship, perhaps.

**Standing Crystals:** A trio of what elsewhere might be standing stones, these are single, translucent crystals, set up in an irregular triangle on the northern end of what is approximately the central hilltop among the lower silty Aak Hills. The northerly crystal is yellow, the southwestern one pale blue, while that to the east is light red. Their forms seem uncut, if naturally faceted, and each is about 4 ft tall (1.2 m). About a further foot of each (30 cm) is firmly buried as support beneath the surface. They have not grown here, and there is no indication as to who set them up, when or why.

**Wrecked Longship:** A reasonably intact wooden longship hull lies southwest-northeast on the northern flanks of the lower Aak Hills. Any mast and loose contents have long since vanished, replaced only with local silt. There are no markings to identify the craft's builders or sailors.