

BOOK REVIEW:

‘Intelligent’ New Armenia Travel Guide Features ‘Exquisite’ Photographs, ‘Meticulous’ Research

By Neil C Scott
The Yerevan Times
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[Ed. Note: This book review is for the First Edition of the Stone Garden Guide, Pub. 2004]

(Yerevan) Armenia has become increasingly visited over the last decade so that this new publication, *The Stone Garden Guide to Armenia and Karabagh*, which is beautifully illustrated by the authors’ own photographs, is particularly welcome.

It is authoritative and highly informative, and written by authors Matthew Karanian and Robert Kurkjian who have each explored the country thoroughly with intelligent and observant eyes. Their coverage of environmental issues adds significantly to the value of the book.

The Stone Garden Guide to Armenia and Karabagh starts with three introductory chapters covering the history of Armenia, the basics of getting to the country and travelling around it, and its ecology and environment.

Useful historical summaries by Robert Suny set the political scene, while two other excellent contributions by Jason Kauffeld and Daniel Klem on the forests and birds of Armenia respectively, emphasise the fragile state of the country’s ecology and the

measures that are being taken to try to protect it. As in other parts of the book, useful links are provided to stakeholders and other interested organisations.

A further seven chapters describe Yerevan, the regions, and Nagorno Karabagh. The chapter on Yerevan provides an excellent summary of where to stay and what to see, including those intriguing parts that nobody else knows about – such as the city’s oldest religious centre, the Katoghikheh Chapel, tucked away behind the Linguistics Institute in Abovian Street. This chapel is so small that many worshipers have to stand outside it during services!

The authors also draw attention to the development challenges that Yerevan is facing and commendably highlight the absence of planning controls that have allowed unwelcome incursion into the city’s fast-diminishing greenbelt, as in the area adjacent to the monumental Opera House. The bulk of the *Stone Garden Guide* is devoted to the country’s regions, with emphasis on sites of historical interest. As might be expected, these focus on monasteries and other religious artefacts but the authors set these in the context of contemporary social and political life, thereby making their coverage relevant to Armenia today. For instance, the problem of emigration and the legacy of the 1988 earthquake are

discussed, and attention drawn to the strange, isolated Russian Molokan communities in the Dilijan area, where Armenian is not spoken or understood.

More attention could have been paid to the changing industrial scene and of the country's Soviet and contemporary architecture. This could be included in the enlarged Guide that the authors are planning for the future, which will provide a more complete coverage of historical Armenian sites in Eastern Anatolia. These are discussed in Appendix in this Guide.

The chapter on Karabagh is particularly welcome since this Armenian enclave in Azerbaijan has only recently been accessible to tourists from Armenia. Throughout the book, detailed information is provided on how to get to places of interest and where to stay, based on Matthew Karanian and Robert Kurkjian's

own meticulous on-the-ground research in their trusty Niva jeep.

Useful maps and plans of the principal cities as well as many exquisite photographs support the lucid text, while the book's layout is clear and easy to follow. The Stone Garden Guide: Armenia and Karabagh is priced at less than \$25, making it exceptionally good value. It will undoubtedly become the standard reference volume for travellers to Armenia for many years to come.

At a Glance:

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