

Stone Garden: the inside story

by Maral Habeshian

Since they met over a decade ago in Armenia, Matthew Karanian and Robert Kurkjian have produced three beautifully photographed and meticulously compiled travel guides to Armenia and Artsakh, along with a coffee-table book of photos of the two republics.

The coffee-table book was their first project; their most recent is the revised, second edition of the *Stone Garden Guide to Armenia and Karabagh*.

Why three separate travel books in the last six years alone? Besides that fact that the region keeps evolving with the construction of roads, hotels, restaurants, and the emergence of foreign and local offices and businesses, the two are also on a mission to promote travel to the region.

“There is something dormant inside, and it takes an event to trigger it,” says Karanian, explaining that it took a trip to Armenia 11 years ago to awaken him.

“We know what impact going to Armenia had on us; it changed our lives. Much of what we are doing is just saying ‘you go too.’ Go, because you’re going to be a better person. It’s going to change your life,” he explains. “We know how much it moved us, and we want to share that with as many people as possible. And that’s really the impetus behind everything.”

Attorney Karanian and environmental scientist Kurkjian both grew up in the Armenian communities of the eastern United States. Their fateful meeting took place in 1995, when they arrived in Yerevan within days of each other to teach at the American University of Armenia (AUA).



Robert Kurkjian checks a proof of the cover to *Armenia and Karabagh* during the printing of the book last fall in Pasadena, Calif.



Matthew Karanian photographs a landscape in southern Armenia during research for *Armenia and Karabagh* in 2005.

“I was teaching environmental science at AUA and was the director of their environmental research program. Matt was in the law department,” says Kurkjian.

From 1995 to 1998 the two traveled throughout Armenia and Artsakh and took photographs in preparation for publishing a photo book. In 1999, their first book,

Out of Stone: Armenia – Artsakh, was published.

Almost immediately, they began to get calls from people overwhelmed by the beauty of Armenia and Artsakh. “They would ask questions about getting there, the best time of year to travel, what to see, what to do,” explains Kurkjian.

So instead of constantly having to explain these details, they set out to write a travel guide. They initially targeted only Artsakh because the republic lacked a tourism industry. But because that market was limited, they decided to cover both Artsakh and Armenia. Their first travel book, *Edge of Time*, was published in 2001; that immediately sold out. They published a second edition a year later; that also flew off shelves.

The contents of the travel guides have become noticeably more sophisticated with each new venture, even covering ecology, conservation, and preservation of monuments—just a few examples of what the duo's latest travel guide, the second edition of *Stone Garden Guide to Armenia and Karabagh*, holds.

Branded "Stone Garden," the first edition of this particular title was published in 2004.

That 304-page guide, which sold 5,000 copies and is currently out of print, featured 25 full-color maps and 75 stunning color photographs.

Take two

Besides the fact that the first edition of *Stone Garden Guide to Armenia and Karabagh* sold out, it also became somewhat antiquated. Kurkjian realized this one day while in Armenia.

"I kept a copy of the old book at my desk side, as if it were my phone book and directory," he says. But when trying to contact a certain nongovernmental Organization (NGO) listed in the travel guide, Kurkjian knew that things had changed.

"I was used to going right to the index to find, for example a NGO, but I discovered toward the end of that press run that the book was out of date. These NGOs—they were gone; different people were there."

He also noticed while driving around Armenia that some of the things the travel guide told people

not to do were things people could do now.

He gives the example of taking a trip from the south of Lake Sevan to Yeghegnatsor. When he initially took the Selim Pass as a short cut, it was a disaster. "It took six hours, and I wrote in the book, 'Don't do this; it's crazy.'"

When he took that pass again a couple of years later, he found it had been re-engineered, paved, and was now a short cut. "I realized the book needed to be re-done," says Kurkjian.

With grants from philanthropists Caroline Mugar and Sarkis Acopian, Karanian and Kurkjian began to create their most comprehensive travel guide to Armenia to date.

Karanian would be in charge of research and writing, while Kurkjian worked on design and photography. "If we had titles—which we don't—he would be the photography editor, and I would be the writing editor," says Karanian.

To undertake the task of updating every bit of information in the guidebook, Karanian would begin making phone calls each night at ten o'clock. "I would basically call all the hotels and restaurants," he recalls.



A young woman tests the water at one of resorts on the north shore of Lake Sevan.

When he returned to the U.S. right before the Christmas holidays, he allowed himself a break, and then plowed back into work, full-time from January to July 2006, researching, writing, designing, and working on the photography.

Both agree that if cost weren't an issue, the 300-page publication could easily have been a thousand pages. "We had a section in there about historic Armenia that we truly wanted to include and we had great photography because

The Kirants Monastery in northern Armenia is obstructed by wild flowers in mid-June.



The Armenian flag waves proudly during a celebration of Yerevan's 2,780th anniversary at Republic Square in 2005.



we'd been there several times," says Karanian.

But the duo had to face reality and ask: if one were to go to Yerevan, would they really end up going to historic Armenia as well? "Chances are no," Karanian says, because the logistics are so difficult. So that section came out.

Although they have narrowed the contents of the book to 300 pages and have had to cull through thousands of photos and pages of content to get there, during a recent interview with NPR, Rick Steeves asked how the two could justify compiling such a big travel guide, considering the size of the tiny country.

"I had to take a breath," Kurkjian says, "because economically you don't justify it, because it's not commercially viable to do something like this." In answer to Steeves' question, they told the radio audience that Armenian Americans have a unique perspective about Armenia that others perhaps don't. "But his comment was rather telling, and our re-

sponse is that we don't justify it. We are Armenians."

While their consumers are in fact mostly Armenian, they don't necessarily target Armenians because of the biodiversity, history, beauty, not to mention hospitality of the country. "It's also off the beaten path so you're not fighting the crowds," Kurkjian stresses. "It is obviously a great place for anyone to visit."

One of the challenges they have faced, however, is to be truly honest about everything. "How do we portray Armenia the way we would to a friend?" asks Karanian. He points to the photographs that depict preparation of *lavash* and villagers on donkeys, saying they in no way represent the real image of the country. "It's a big challenge to show everything and to say this is all accurate; we talk about the newly engineered roads, but we're not afraid to show they're not always in good condition."

Both used to get bombarded with questions about the level of

corruption in the country. But Kurkjian explains that it is one of the least corrupt countries in that region. "Others used to criticize that we present it in almost too good of light, but we see all sides of Armenia, and like to put the best foot forward, as they say; it has its problems—economic, environmental, political, but I'm not an expert on these issues, except for the environment."

They nevertheless get their share of good questions along with the odd, strange, and sometimes insulting ones. Karanian recounts that a man approached him after a recent event to promote the book, asking why they only convey the good about Armenia. "Isn't there anything wrong with it?" the man had pressed.

"You're going to hear about the bad things if you read the paper, but I'm here to tell you why you should go to Armenia and why you should support it. I don't need to go through a list of ten or 12 top problems, I want to tell you why you should go. I want to show

you the big picture, because these are little problems, and I want to look at the big picture.” Karanian stresses.

While many have dubbed them “ambassadors of Armenia” because of their gift and passion to promote, Karanian explains that it was inevitable because their lives had changed after embracing and eventually embodying the country. “You can’t help but be an advocate and a benefactor.”

It is perhaps the one obvious quality that both Karanian and Kurkjian share. While one promotes the well-being of the environment, the other, in his role as an attorney, promotes the interests of others.

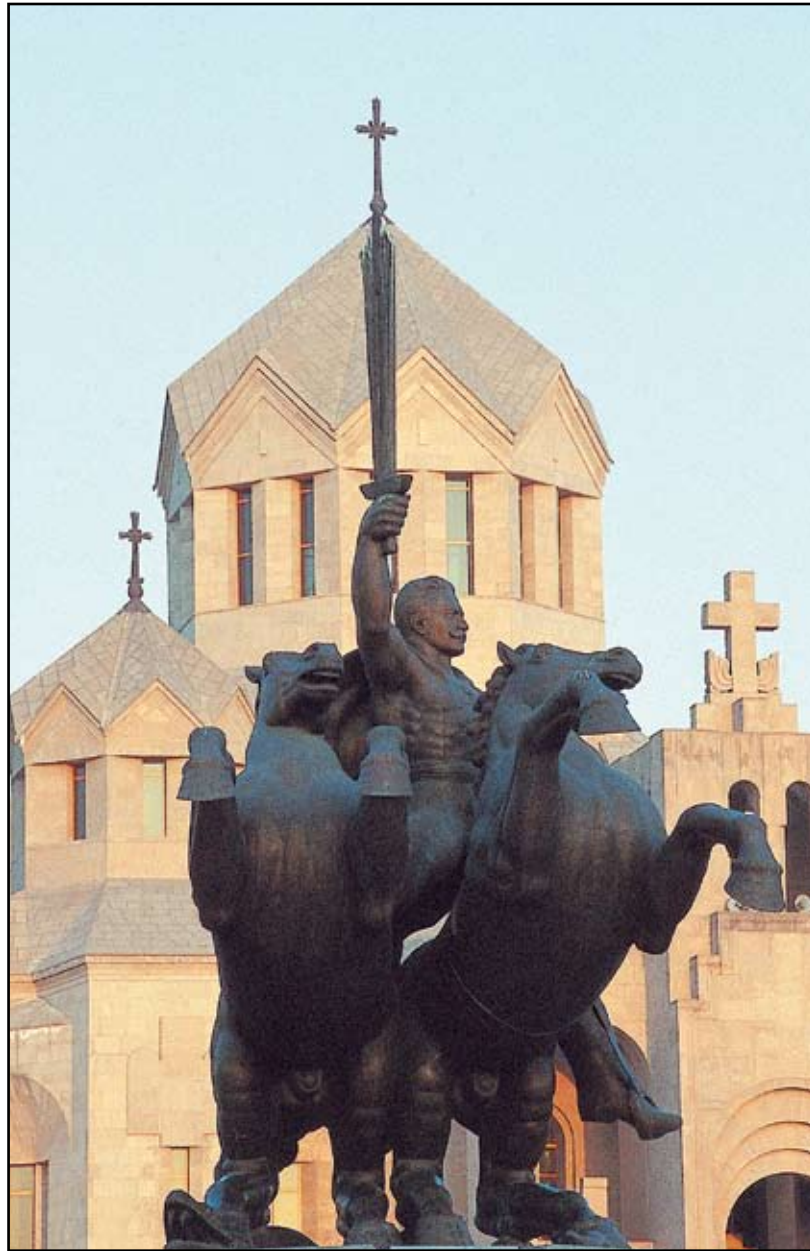
Kurkjian, an environmental consultant, recently joined a Pasadena-based international company. Karanian, who was doing defense and trial work, now does intellectual property and contracts. Both are 46 years old.

Kurkjian’s grandfather, a photographer in Western Armenia, actually photographed General Antranig. “We have the original,” he proudly boasts.

Karanian’s grandfather and great uncles were all writers, some very famous. In fact, one of them was a cartographer who produced incredibly detailed maps, along with large maps of Van. “It’s in our blood; we went there, and it came full circle and jelled inside of us,” explains Karanian.

Even after great achievements in producing previous Armenia travel guides, the Kurkjian-and-Karanian team does not leave much to chance. Besides having established an extensive research library, the two have visited each and every site they cover, to verify information.

Over the course of time, they have approached many an experts to write feature sections, and have consistently spoken to experts in or order to tackle technical sections such as economics. For this, they worked with the



A monument honoring Commander Andranik stands in front of Yerevan’s new Cathedral of St. Grigor Lusavorich (Gregory the Illuminator). This image was created by Robert Kurkjian in 2005. More than one half century ago, when Andranik was living in the U.S., he posed for a portrait at Kurkjian Studios – and was photographed by the grandfather of Robert Kurkjian.

Armenian International Policy Research Group.

But they do not stop there. They hound friends and others—Armenians and non-Armenians for impressions. “We approach people who do not know anything about Armenia, who aren’t jaded.” Karanian explains.

The second edition of *Stone Garden Guide to Armenia and Karabagh* features 304 pages, and includes 27 full-color maps, 135 vivid color photographs, and is a steal for \$24.95.

Its coverage of Armenia and Artsakh is comprehensive and

includes a total of 9 sections, including “Land and People” that covers history, population, language, politics, economy, geography, environment, climate, natural habitat, architecture, and religion. It also covers a section on attractions and sightseeing, museums, shopping, entertainment, sports and recreation, children’s activities, hotels and places to stay, restaurants.

It can be purchased on the web at stonegardenproductions.com, at Borders bookstores, or any Armenian bookstore in the country. ☞