

# You Have Traveled to Armenia. But Have you ever been to *Karabagh*?

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Have you ever been to Karabagh?

The question is simple, but when the answer is yes, the response can fill a book. Or more.

For part of every year since 1995, we have been traveling throughout Karabagh on journeys that blended business—law and environmental studies—with the thrill of exploring our homeland.

We photographed everything and everyone—remote cultural sites such as G'Tichivank and Dadivank, and national treasures such as Gandzasar. We traveled on roadways that appeared to have been forgotten, and we arrived in villages that were seldom visited by outsiders.

Our travels inspired us to tell everyone about our discovery, and our photography served as our voice. In 1999 we published “Out of Stone: Armenia and Artsakh,” an exquisite photography book that celebrated the region and that introduced Karabagh to many Americans.

Within just two more years we had published the world’s first travel guide to Karabagh [“Edge of Time: Traveling in Armenia and Karabagh”]. We have released three more books on Karabagh since then. The economic and political progress of Karabagh during the past decade is reflected and tracked in each book.

Karabagh and tourism are seldom discussed in the same conversation, but thanks to the leadership of the Hayastan All-Armenian Fund, visitors are finding that they can get to Karabagh easily, and that they can get around once they’re there, too. New roads, combined with our guidebook, have opened up Karabagh to many first-time tourists.

So many, in fact, that we’ve found it necessary to reprint our travel books on Armenia and Karabagh three times since 2001— each time with updated information about the newly-paved roads of the Hayastan All-Armenian Fund. Our newest book, “The Stone Garden Guide: Armenia and Karabagh,” was released in September 2006 and it is the best selling English language book about Armenia and Karabagh.

When we started traveling from Yerevan to Karabagh in 1995 and 1996, the

journey often took two days. On many trips, the winding mountain road that linked Armenia to Karabagh was open to traffic for just a brief period at Noon each day. During one of our journeys, we were stranded in the middle of this so-called Lachin Corridor until a bulldozer pushed aside a mountain of dirt and rock and cleared a path for us. Today, zipping along the modern road, it's difficult to imagine such an event.

A decade ago, Karabagh was freshly independent, and the spirit of adventure and comradeship with other travelers was inescapable. Still, to get there, four-wheel drive was essential.

We drove a Russian-manufactured Willys (pronounced "Vill-ees")— a jeep with a tough reputation for driving straight up cliffs and through raging rivers—a reputation that we tested whenever possible.

The maps suggested that Karabagh was no larger than the tiny US state of Delaware— a micro state a fraction the size of Armenia. And yet it loomed larger than Texas when we were exploring in the late 1990s. Distances were exaggerated by the terrible road conditions, which either forced us to drive along at a crawl, or to travel long and circuitous routes. It was commonplace for us to endure eastward journeys that took us outside the nominal borders of the Nagorno Karabagh Republic simply to reach a destination that should have been just a short skip north.

Today we marvel at the modern North-South Highway, the road that everyone rightly calls the backbone of the country. Traveling in Karabagh now feels less like being in sprawling Texas, and more like being in, well, Karabagh. The trek from Stepankert, the capital city, up to Gandzasar, has become an easy half-day trip for any visitor. Amaras, Martakert, and even Dadivank, are all within easy reach of Stepanakert.

The primary purpose of the roads, of course, is not to facilitate tourism, but rather to make it possible for Karabagh's economy to grow, and for Karabagh's people to be able to move goods to market. Tourism is an important part of economic development, however, and encouraging more visitors is a vital part of the campaign to ensure Karabagh's survival.

Tourists who are nostalgic about the old days when it might take four hours to travel forty miles need not fret. We suggest that you try to visit G'Tichivank, the mountain top monastery in the south of the country. Even in Karabagh, there will always be some roads that never get paved, and it's at the end of one of these roads that we expect we'll always find G'Tichivank.

*Matthew Karanian and Robert Kurkjian are co-authors of The Stone Garden Guide: Armenia and Karabagh. This article is reprinted from the Annual Report (2007) of the Hayastan All Armenian Fund.*