

MYSTERIES AND SACRED SITES OF
STEPANAVAN DISTRICT
TRAVEL GUIDE
2010

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If Armenia was to be considered an open-air museum, then the Lori region must be one of the richest and most remarkable collections of that museum. In historical Armenia, Lori was part of the Tashir district of Gugarat's Land. It was renamed Lori after the 10th century, when Lori Fortress and town became the center of the Tashir-Dzoraget Kingdom.

The largest region in Armenia, Lori is an exceptionally beautiful area, known for its hidden graceful corners, sublime mountains, scenic forests, clear mountain springs, and mild and advantageous weather. The mountains surrounding it (Virahayots, Javakhk, Gugarats and Bazum) are dressed in green and largely afforested. Lori also has a number of scenic gorges, caves and rivers (Debed, Dzoraget & Pambak). The beauty is complemented by its luxuriant meadows and alpine pastures, and rich with cultural assets, which include fortresses, churches, monasteries, medieval bridges, fountains, shrines and khatchkars: all the pride of our nation and Lori's (Tashir-Dzoraget) architectural school's distinctiveness, high class and longevity.

Armenia is a birthplace of metal. The ores required to produce copper and iron were abundant here, along with fuel to operate the kilns and the water to grow the abundant crops and animal resources necessary to support large settlements. Lori was the focus of mining at an early age; its copper veins still producing ore today. The profusion of copper, iron, silver, gold, lead and zinc, in relatively easily mined locations, led to the early development of metallurgy here. Prehistoric excavations in the Lori region include the Copper Age settlements at Spitak and Vanadzor, and Bronze Age and Iron Age settlements at Stepanavan, Lori Berd, Arevatsag, Lorut, Takavorakan, Pambak, Debed and along the Tashir-Dzoraget corridor.

One of the fringe tribes of the Nairi in the 2nd millennium BCE, Lori became a part of the Urartian Empire in the 8th century BCE. Urartu was a remarkably developed culture that had extensive contacts with the major empires of the ancient world, stretching between the Mediterranean and India, and rivaled them for trade, military and cultural hegemony. The fall of Urartu is in part traced to the invading Cimmerians, also known as Scythians, from the north, who entered through Lori en route to Anatolia. Urartian settlements in Lori include Lori Berd, Tashir, Dsegh, Vanadzor, Alaverdi, Teghut and Margahovit. Roman/Arsacid sites can be found at Tashir-Dzoraget, Lori, Vanadzor and Alaverdi.



Haghpat Monastery



Sanahin Monastery

Lori lived a constructional ascent during the Bagratuni-Kyurikian Kingdom (X-XII c.) – Haghpat and Sanahin Monasteries were broadened, Kobayr, Khorakert and Horomayr Churches were founded and Lori, Akhtala and Kulet Fortresses were built during this period. At the end of 11th century, Seljuks conquered Lori - they robbed and ruined Haghpat, Sanahin and Lori Berd (Lori Fortress-town). In 1122, Lori obtained freedom with the help of the Georgians and rule passed to Georgian Orbelians. In 1185, it passed to the noble Zakarian Dynasty; followers of the Georgian Orthodox Church. During this period, Lori blossomed and reached new cultural heights. Many churches and monasteries were built and completed during this period. Between the 12th and 13th centuries, a branch of the noble

Mamikonyan Dynasty started to undertake large-scale construction in Dsegh. After being conquered a number of times, only in 1801 was Tashir-Dzoraget, along with Georgia, connected to Russia. Lori has always played an important role in the development of Armenian – Georgian relations.

On a dramatic green Lori plateau, beside the remarkable gorge of the Dzoraget River, is situated Stepanavan, the city and former regional capital, named in honor of the great Marxist revolutionary Stepan Shahumyan. Other important Lori towns include Vanadzor, Spitak, Alaverdi, Tashir, Akhtala, Tumanyan and Shamlugh, and the village of Dsegh (birthplace of the famous poet, Hovhannes Tumanyan).

Stepanavan (Jalaloghli before 1923) is located on both sides of the Dzoraget River, about 1380m above sea level. It is located 167km from Yerevan (a similar distance from Tbilisi) and has always been an important hub between the two capitals. The afforested Bazum mountain chain surrounding it from the south gives it a special beauty. Stepanavan has a mild mountain climate, considered the best in Armenia since the air is always fresh and clear. Characteristics of the location include the low range in air temperatures, the tasty waters of mountain springs, sunny days and green meadows, full of various flowers and herbs. The town is far from industrial pollution, so its rich pine forests create an atmosphere saturated with oxygen. Stepanavan, and its surrounding villages, are not only naturally beautiful, but also rich with a number of cultural treasures; Lori Fortress, Dendropark, Dorbandavank, Jgrashen, Hnevank, Pushkin pass, Shushanik's and Vardablur's Fortresses, etc.

Stepanavan, with a population of 15,000 is considered the second largest town in Lori.

Prehistoric sites in Stepanavan, such as Lori Fortress, date back to the Stone Age. Stepanavan with surrounding areas was part of the Tashir Province and was included in the Artashesian Dynasty, and later part of Arshakunyats Kingdoms. In 385, after division of Greater Hayk Tashir Province, Stepanavan was left in the area of Armenian principality. Since the 9th century, Shirak's Bagratuni Dynasty have governed the area and joined several neighboring provinces together to create Tashir -Dzoraget Province of Lori Kingdom under Kyurikians. The greatest period of the Kyurikian Kingdom was from 980 to 1048 AD, during the reign of Davit Anhoghin and after him, Kyurike, when the area was expanded at the expense of Gandzak and the Tbilisi Provinces. The kingdom stretched along the Pam-bak and Debed rivers with the center being Lori Berd.

In medieval times, Stepanavan was the mansion of the Zakarian Dynasty. It also served as a summer resting place for Armenian kings. As for Lori Fortress, it was the Armenian King, Ashot Yerkat's (the Iron's) favorite summer home.

The town was once a district of Lori Berd; history showing that by the end of the 13th century, a branch of the Prince of Khachen, Hassan-Jalal Dola's Dynasty and 110 families inhabited the town plateau. The residential area was named Jalaloghli, after the Jalal Dynasty, when it was officially founded in 1604 by Armenian refugees running from Persian ruler, Shah Abass, during his Armenian



Stepanavan



Stepanavan

campaign. The Armenian poet, Hovhannes Tumanyan, also received his primary education here, writing about the area in his later life. His school (school number 3) is currently named after him and exhibits a large mosaic wall depicting his fairy tales in his remembrance. Seven hundred years later, on behalf of the Bolshevik Armenian, Stepan Shahumyan, the town was renamed Stepanavan and became the administrative center of the region.

Stepanavan, is surrounded by Bazum and Lalvar mountains, producing a mild mountain climate considered the best in Armenia. The air is always fresh, clean and oxygen-rich from the pungent pine forests. People with bronchitis and other respiratory illnesses often choose to come and rest in Stepanavan. The town is blessed with tasty waters from mountain springs, and green meadows full of colorful flowers and herbs. It is also famous for its cheese. The area used to produce twenty types of cheese, and provided the Soviet Union with the famous Lori ghee and Armenian 'Swiss' cheese. It is also known for its tasty yogurt, numerous other dairy products and honey. Locals use a number of salad vegetables and mushrooms during the season – cooked, marinated or pickled. In June, you can also find wild strawberries in the fields and raspberries in the forests. It is also a great place for hiking, camping and river rafting.

Stepanavan and its surrounding villages have a lot to offer to visitors. There are many fortresses, churches, bridges and sacred places to admire and enjoy. Later in this travel guide, you can also find locations suitable for day trips, if you have decided to stay in Stepanavan.

- 1) One of the places to visit in the town is **Stepan Shahumyan's House-Museum**. Located in Stepanavan Square, the Stepan Shahumyan Museum was built around Shahumyans' cozy and



Kuybishev Lake

beautiful house. The museum not only provides information about the life of the revolutionary, but also offers an insight into the history of the Stepanavan community through a variety of interesting historical artifacts and displays, largely from Lori Fortress. Inside Shahumyan's house is a model of the underground press in Tbilisi where Shahumyan secretly printed communist leaflets. Also, the many artifacts found by different archeologists in Lori Fortress over the years are exhibited at the museum. They include weapons, tools, jewelry, coins, clay jars, glass, ceramics, pottery, bones and stone objects.

- 2) If you start your tour near **Armanis village** (8km from Stepanavan), on the outskirts of Stepanavan, you will see **St. Nshan Basilica** (XI c.), which provides a spectacular view of the town. Dzoraget Canyon is a wonderful place to walk, hike, swim and indulge in an Armenian barbeque. Throughout the canyon there are many spots where people like to camp during the summer months. Continuing your tour from Armanis village, you will see the beautiful **Chrchran Waterfall** below the gold mines. It is a beautiful walk all the way into Stepanavan. There are nice valleys, bulrushes, spots to rest and you might be lucky to find shepherds with horses to ask for a ride. The closer you get to Stepanavan, the closer you will get to **Bager**, a collection of former Soviet farms on your left. It is located on the hill besides the small bridge in the middle of the twisting roads connecting both sides of Stepanavan. If you go up the hill, besides the farms you can walk about 5km to get to **Kuybishev Lake**. It is (1-1.5 hour walk from Bager) a real secret beauty in the heart of Lori's alpine meadows with



Chrchran Waterfall

beautiful views of the mountains and a lake covered with gorgeous lilies and bulrushes. You may be able to spot the Armenian water lily that can only be seen in July and August when Armenia's other flora begins to brown and go to seed. There are only two known lakes in the Caucasus where these flowers survive; both near Stepanavan. One lake is 7 ha and 200m deep; the other is 1 ha in size.

- 3) The medieval **'Lori Berd' Fortress Town** (7km from Stepanavan) was founded by David Anhoghin of the Kyurikian branch of Ani's Bagratuni Dynasty between 989 and 1048 AD. In 1065, King Kyurike I proclaimed Lori Berd as the capital of the Kyurike Kingdom (Tashir – Dzoraget) after losing the town of Shamshilde to the Georgian King, Bagrat IV. Located on the northern trade route, Lori was a large craft and commercial center in medieval Armenia. Roads connected the town to Ani, Dvin, Tppghis, and other cities. It had a population of approximately 10,000 between the 11th and 13th centuries.

In 1105, Lori was taken over by the Seljuks, then by the Georgian Orbelian Lords in the early 12th century. Later, it came under the rule of the Zakarian brothers, Ivane and Zakare. In 1236, Chagatai, the commander of the Mongolian army took over the town and raised it to the ground. They pillaged Shanshah Zakarian's treasures and demolished the chapel and tomb named after King David Anhoghin's wife. In the 14th century, Lori came under the rule of Armenian Orbelians. Between the 15th and 17th centuries, Lori remained a strategically important fortress. Then in the 18th century, it was captured by the Turks, Persians, and Georgians. It finally lost its role as a

fortress in the 18th century and the new inhabitants, Armenian immigrants, displaced from different locations, settled and created today's Lori Berd village.

The ruins of Lori Fortress, occupying 35 hectares, are surrounded on three sides by the gorges of the Dzoraget and Miskhanna Rivers, making it inaccessible from these directions. On the exposed side, the walls stretch for 214m with consecutive round and quadrangular towers.

The archeologists of Yerevan State University have been excavating the Lori Fortress area since 1966. Two 11th to 13th century baths – one consisting of a cloakroom, three bathrooms, clay pipes, a furnace, cold water reservoir, and heating system, have been excavated. The bathrooms and cloakrooms have two floors; the lower floor exhibiting a furnace that produced smoke and steam to heat the upper floor, as can be seen at Garni, Ani and Amberd. They also excavated a two-story palace, a small church, two fountains, and a chapel devoted to King David Anhoghin's wife. The stone from Mecca in the southern wall of another preserved building is a reminder of Muslim occupation of the fortress during the 14th and 15th centuries.

- 4) Besides Lori Fortress, there are the ruins of **Shushanik's Fortress** (X-XI c.) around Stepanavan that only few people know of. If you take the road along part of Dzoraget River called 'Achajur', you will see a large area with small caves, where people lived thousands of years ago and the remains of a village of 40,000 people. Looking carefully inside the caves, you will still see the spots where inhabitants placed long sticks to cover the caves with horse leather, making it more homely, and evidence of the fires burnt inside for survival. One of the caves also reveals stone beds. Along the path, you will also see a nice pool where you can drink water emerging from mountain springs. This is called **Hamni Waterbed**. Finally, you will reach a point where the river forks. In the middle is the citadel of Shushanik's Fortress, built during the reign of Askanaz I, King Ashot Yerkat's sister, Shushanik's husband. Look for a small wooden house in front of it. You need to take the road on the right to reach the bridge to cross over to climb up to the fortress. In the fortress, a picturesque view will be opened in front of you; the fortress ruins surrounded by the river on three sides, the citadel, far off mountains with their impressive

Lori Berd



view and the town of Stepanavan. You will find the ruins of the military unit from where they protected the fortress, stones with holes that served as buckets for storing water and cheese, the sites of houses, etc. The area has not been excavated yet, but there is a lot to discover.

- 5) In Stepanavan, you can also find '**Mayori Dzor**' or '**Communists' Cave**'. You can get there by walking down to the gorge from the Baghramyan and Arevelyan Street crossroads. Stepanavan is considered to be the birthplace of Communism in Armenia. Evidence of Shahumyan's role in contributing to the revolution remains in the form of the mysterious 'Mayori Dzor', located in the face of the Dzoraget gorge cliffs; reputed to be where the leaders who created the first Marxist group in Armenia in 1899 began meeting secretly together with Shahumyan. Bass-relief carvings depicting Shahumyan can be found on the cliffs near the caves, created by the self-taught artist, Kamsar.
- 6) Stepanavan is where **H. Tumanyan** received his primary education. Nowadays school N 3 is named after him.
- 7) Not far from H. Tumanyan's school is **St. Sargis Church**, where people gathered on weekends to participate in holy mass.
- 8) Also, on the outskirts of the town, in Amrakits (Kirov) Village (2km from Stepanavan), you can see a unique **Russian church – 1789**. The church was built by Old-Believers (Molkans) who were forced into exile by the Russian Queen, Catherine the Great. Settling in the Lori region, where they received a warm reception, they built magnificent church towers

over the village that can be seen from the highway as you approach the village. This village is very famous for its Russian 'babushkas' (grandmothers) who used to sit on the highway and sell sunflower seeds they grew throughout the village.

- 9) Stepanavan is surrounded by beautiful forests, popular for picking mushrooms and breathing the special aroma of pine-trees. There is also **Lovers' Trail** that takes you to an open valley. Near it is Anahit Holiday Hotel with its forest sauna and restaurant. You need to make reservations in advance.
- 10) Gyulagarak's (Garden of Roses) **Tormakadur Church** (VI-VII c.) is located on the right hand side of the road on the way to Stepanavan's Dendropark (Botanical Garden); just 1km from it. It is located on the spot of the former Tormakadur village. Today it is partly in ruins but still has an impressive view with its monumentality and slenderness with the stunning fortresses and colorful fields behind it. It is considered to be one of the most unique and best examples of Armenian architectural one-nave churches. Tormakadur was built from finely cut basalt blocks, its main hall terminating on the east in a semi-circular apse with a horseshoe-shaped arch. The church used to be surrounded by walls. Some parts of the walls have been protected only from the western and northern parts.
- 11) If you continue along the road for another 1km and turn left, a miracle will be opened in front of you; the famous **Stepanavan Dendropark** (Botanical Garden - 13km from Stepanavan). It was established in 1933 and later taken care of by engineer-forester Edmon Leonovich. He introduced new trees into natural forest glades and left the main forest-forming species, the Si-



Communist Cave or Mayori Dzor



Tormakadur Church

berian pine, as a natural background. The arboretum is 35 hectares in total, of which half consists of natural forest and 15 hectares of ornamental trees. Leonovich is buried in the park and his son, the director, currently takes care of the park. The park consists of a number of trees from all over the world that attract thousands of Armenians and foreigners each year. Pollination takes place for 10-15 days at the end of May; the best time to visit for those with bronchitis or other breathing ailments. The seeds fly in the air like a snowfall and the smell of the trees bewitch you. Trees include wild-sourced species of Walnut, Poplar, Pear and Apple, avenues of Small-leaved Lime, Magnolia, Larch, Cypress, Redwood and Siberian Pine. Native species include Hornbeam, Beech, Oak and Pear. Outside the gates of the Dendropark, locals sell Pine pollen (Shiski Meghr) made from green pine needles after the pollination season. They are also considered a medicine for bronchitis and a blocked nose.

- 12) **Pushkin Pass** (2037m – 25km from Stepanavan) – is located on top of the road tunnel (900m) taking you from Vanadzor to Stepanavan. It is named after the Russian writer, Alexander Pushkin; the founder of modern Russian literature. Pushkin traveled the Caucasus during the Russian Imperial period (1829) when Russians were claiming Armenian lands under Turkish control. His 'Journey to Arzrum' (Erzurum), mentions his passing through Stepanavan when he met the dead body of another well-known Russian writer, Griboyedov, being transported from Iran to Russia. The passage was named after him and a monument built on the spot where they met. If you make it up to the tunnel, you will get spectacular views from the top and the monument itself. The pass is also the location of Armenia's first wind farm. The four wind turbines are expected to secure Vanadzor's energy needs once they become operational.



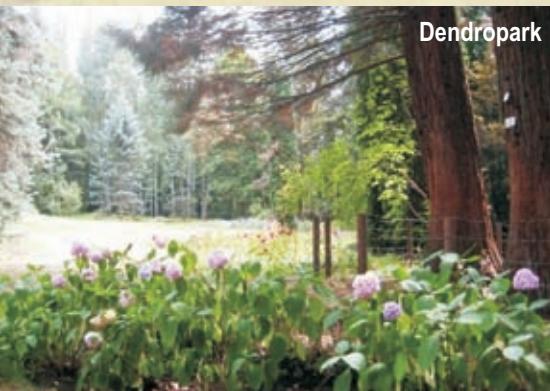
Pushkin Pass

Along the Dzoraget River

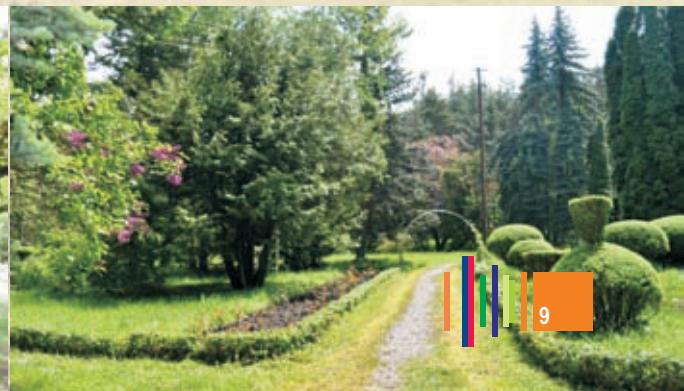
Agarak (10km from Step.) is one of Armenia's oldest villages and known for its 'Darmanatagh' old village (X-XIII c.), St. Astvatsatsin Church (V-VI c.), fountain monument (X-XI c.) and beautiful gorges.

Lejan (13km from Step.) has a cute 19th century Karmir Church on 5th century foundations. In 1907, Lejan hosted the 3rd Conference of Borchalu Bolsheviks.

Greek families can be found scattered among many villages in Lori Marz, especially around Alaverdi city. The Armenian Greeks came from Eastern Anatolia (Kars, Erzurum and Bayazet) which they had left, together with local Armenians, as a result of the discriminatory policy against Christians that Ottoman Turkey pursued in the late 19th century. However, the history of the Greek community in Armenia dates from the 18th century when the first Greeks settled in the Caucasus. In 1763, around 800 Greek households from the Ottoman Empire were moved to the north of Armenia to develop silver and lead mining. The descendants of those Greeks now live in the Marneuli Region of Georgia and have many relatives in Armenia and Greece.



Dendropark





Places to visit along the Dzoraget River

Later, Greeks from the Ottoman Empire founded other settlements in Armenia and Georgia. The first Greek villages founded in Armenia were **Akhtala**, Alaverdi and Shamlugh, later Bendk, Armutili, **Yaghdan**, **Koghes** and Madan. Their forebears came from the shores of the Black Sea, from historic Pontos and then Gyumashan. Their language is an older version of Greek; different to the modern version spoken today. The Armenians and Georgians referred to the Pontic Greeks as Bertsens.

In the early 20th century, Lori became Armenia's most multiethnic region. Until the collapse of the Soviet Union, Lori Marz, and especially Alaverdi city and its surrounding villages, had an important proportion of ethnic minorities. Alongside Armenians and Greeks, other ethnic groups included Russians, Ukrainians, Georgians, Azeris, Osettians, Laz, Tats, Moldavians and Jews.

Many of the young Greeks have migrated back to Greece since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

In **Yaghdan** (15km from Stepanavan) you can see a 13th – 15th century medieval bridge and **Karmir Khach Church**. Before reaching the church on the left side of the bridge, you will see a water shrine, and next to it 'Ttu jur' (sour/mineral water) coming out of the ground containing iron and iodine.

Driving towards **Koghes** (20km from Stepanavan), on the outskirts of the village, you will see a medieval cemetery in the river gorge hosting the tomb of **Prince Tutik** (1241), who died in the turbulent times of the Zakarian period. The Zakarians were ministers of all northwestern historic Armenia from the late 12th century to 1260. The Zakarians gained most of present day Armenia from the Geor-



Tomb of Prince Tutik

gian Orbelian kings, for military service in abating Seljuk attacks. Their founders, Zakare and Ivane, are featured on the walls of the magnificent Harichavank in Shirak. Zakare assumed possession of the northern regions, including the current Lori and Aragatsotn marzes, with his capital being Ani. He and his son, Shahanshah, began a new era in Armenia, a Silver Age that saw Lori Berd and Lori Marz grow with churches, monasteries and centers of learning. Lieges to the Zakarians were old ministers' families like the Pahlavis, Artsrunis and Mamikonyans. Trade with Italians in Venice and Asia brought enormous wealth to this region, the river valley you are in benefiting from the spices and goods on their way to Cilicia and Lebanon. Prince Tutik died in a tumultuous time of his reign, at the end of the age of chivalry in Georgia and Armenia, when Mongols began a systematic conquering of the Caucasus. The Orbelian kings in Georgia retreated in the face of the Mongols, leaving the Zakarians to fend for themselves. Prince Tutik died defending his lands during the war when the Mongols destroyed Lori in 1238.

Koghes village is also very famous for its gorge. Two roads lead to the gorge. One starts from behind the **monument devoted to the victims of WWII**. A narrow path will take you to a beautiful viewpoint from where you can decide to continue or not. You will see a narrow path along the rocks which runs for about 4km; a little dangerous and adventurous. If you decide to continue, you will finally reach a place where you will see a hidden and **beautiful waterfall** inside the gorge between high rocks. Here you can also see huge **vultures** that have their nests among these rocks. In some places you will have to make the path yourself in order to reach your destination. It will take you towards a small hidden **Greek church** in an



Koghes Gorge



Lazar's Cave

unexpected corner among the rocks. If you continue along the entire path, you will finally come to the other end of the village. However, to make it safer, you can go back to the viewpoint and go down the road where the Koghes school is situated and to a nice plunge pool and **Lazar's Caves**; deep and impressive. There are a few more caves, one of them with two floors, and another where sheep are being kept. The track is quite long and will take you to the middle of the village, to the yard of someone's house. If you continue walking, you will be able to see the church from afar and will not have to walk towards the dangerous parts to get close to it. The scenery is magnificent and places are beautiful, but it is up to you to take the risk. It might be a good idea to find a local guide.

There is the third option to go all the way down to the river from the village school path and view everything from a distance.

From Koghes, on the way to Ardvi village, there is the **Red Church (X-XI c.)** on the left hand side. It was built with large yellow-red polished felsite (red-yellow stone), leading to its name. It is famous for the methods of stone processing and the exceptionally high quality of masonry.

Ardvi (40km from Stepanavan) is one of the oldest villages in Armenia, located between Koghes and Odzun. Ardvi's name is connected with the sage Catholicos, Hovhan Odznetsi. Also, agrochemist Papa Kalantarian and archeologist Askharhabeq Kalantarian were born there. The Kalantarian Dynasty's cemetery is located next to **Surb Hovhannes or Hovhan Odznetsi's Monastery** (VIII-XVII c.). It is a beautiful monastery, surrounded by striking nature and fountains.

Below Hovhan Odznetsi's Monastery is the **'Snake's (Dragon's) Bellybutton'**. It has a very interesting legend, according to which the priest of the Hovhannavank used to have twelve monks. One day he asked one of them to go out to the field to bring water for everyone. The monk went out and never came back. Then, he sent out the second one, then the third, the fourth and when he realized that it took so long for the last one to return, he went out himself to see what happened to them all. Near the monastery, he saw a huge snake about to swallow the last monk. He ran to the snake and hit it on the head with his staff, yelling "May you turn to stone with water coming from your bellybutton, and those drinking from it get healed from all illnesses". At that very moment a woman with a bag of bread on her shoulder stepped over the snake's tail to bring bread to her husband in the field. She also turned to stone. Today you can see the snake with its head in the river drinking, healing water coming out of its bellybutton, and the woman at the end of its tail. Locals and those who know about this place believe that the water has healing properties. Scientists from Yerevan have found that it contains some gold and silver. This is perhaps why, if you keep water in a bottle for up to a year, it does not change color or leave any sediment. People in the region tell a number of stories of how it has healed people over the centuries.

St. Horomayri's & St. Nshan Monastery (VII c. - 35km from Stepanavan) is situated 1.5km south-east of Odzun village on the left hand side of the Odzun – Danushavan main road. It consists of two groups of monuments. The first, the upper part, is located at the edge of the gorge and can be seen from the road. However, the second hidden splendor is set on the left side of the Debed River



Snake's (Dragon's) Bellybutton



Places to visit along the Dzoraget River

among huge rocks and within a deep river gorge. You need to step down from the upper part to be able to see it, surrounded by trees and rocks. In Armenian manuscripts it is mentioned that it belongs to the 8th century and is connected with the name of the Catholicos, Hovhan Odznetsi. It has been one of medieval Armenia's educational and cultural institutions; a number of hand-written manuscripts found in nearby caves give evidence for this. The monastery was named after Greek Prince Horom, who devoted himself to an ascetic life in one of the caves and probably followed the Chalcedonian belief. The bell tower has an entrance to a cave room revealing a floor of tombstones. The walls are built by polished basalt stone about 1.5m wide at the bottom. The only northern entrance has two big angels standing on each side with crosses on their hands. In the monastery, you can also see the facial sculpture of Jesus Christ with bay leaves underneath. He has his right hand raised and the bible on the left hand. On both sides of the entrance the initials of Jesus Christ are written.

Odzun, formerly Uzunlar, (38km from Stepanavan), the largest village in Lori, is about 2km south of Sanahin Railway Station. It was once one of the oldest residences of historic Tashir district and its center. It was also the birthplace of Catholicos Hovhan Odznetsi Wiseman (717-728 AD) and one of the settlements of the Kyurikian Kingdom. Odzun was an important medieval cultural center. One of its most exceptional monuments is the **Odzun's Domed St. Basilica Church (VI c.)**, with an unusual 7th century funerary monument with two sculpted obelisk-shaped steles depicting biblical scenes and the Christianization of Armenia. The monastery is beautiful and strikes one's eye because of its perfect union with the surrounding



Odzun's Domed St. Basilica Church

nature. It can be seen from all parts of the village. According to S. Safaryan, it is a "real explosion of creativity and a monument of architectural mastery".

Along the Gargar River

Dendropark (see above).

Vardablur village (Hill of Roses) is only 15km from Stepanavan. Here you can find **St. Jgrashen Church** (V-VI c.) where **Komitas**, the founder of modern Armenian classical music, wrote and sang for the first time his famous '**Lori Horovel**' song. While at the church, on your right hand side above the cemetery, you will see on top of a hill, **Vardablur's Fortress** with **St. Sargis Church** between Vardablur and Kurtan villages. The church is visited by both sets of villagers. The fortress is not a difficult to reach and the path provides an array of wild flowers.

If you continue your route towards **Kurtan village**, one of the largest and most developed villages in Armenia, you will see one of Armenia's single-nave churches, **St. Astvatsatsin Basilica** (V c.). Continuing further towards **Kurtan Gorge**, from the top of the gorge, you will be astounded by the magnificent scenery. Here, **Hnevank Monastery Complex** (35km from Step.) used to have three churches surrounded by mountains, the Dzoraget River and flower fields. Today, only the middle church has survived; the oldest and basic part of the Monastery (VII c.). It was renovated in the 12th century during the reign of Smbat Kyurikian/Orbeli, founder of the Syunik Orbelian family. The monastery has a unique octagonal dome on



St. Horomayri's & St. Nshan Monastery

the outside and is detailed with geometric forms popular at the time. On the right hand side of the monastery, among two rocks, you can see Dsegh from far; the birthplace of Hovhannes Tumanyan.

Kurtan village is also famous for the jokes made of its people because they are said to always do or say the opposite of what they are supposed to.

If you have a jeep, you can directly drive along Debed river to Dsegh from Kurtan village as the roads are not in great condition, or through Vanadzor.

Dsegh (70km from Stepanavan), one of the oldest and most famous villages in Armenia, is the birthplace of the “The most Armenian, the most nationalist writer” (Av. Isahakyan) - Hovhannes Tumanyan; also called the “Pan-Armenian Poet” during his lifetime and till today. The history of the village is strongly connected with the Mamikonyan Dynasty. Every monument, every stone and monastery show their influence in the village. In Dsegh, it is possible to see the cozy **House-Museum of Tumanyan**, which became a museum in 1939. His house-museum contains about 300 items from his life and work, though the majority is in his museum in Yerevan. It is important to walk through the village, enjoy the fantastic scenery of rocks and mountains, caves, castles and monasteries and get into the mind of the greatest poet. Hovhannes Tumanyan was born in 1869. He went to primary school in Dsegh, then went to school in **Stepanavan** and later to Nersessian School in Tiflis. As many famous people described him, he was a largely self-educated and an extremely well-read man, a real genius who wrote comedies, tragedies, poems, stories, and essays about life, children's stories and fairy tales. He was loved by everyone. He



Hnevank Monastery

wrote in a romantic style, but was comfortable with realism and the nationalistic patriotic style. His masterpieces include 'Sako from Lori', 'Maro', 'The dog and the cat', 'One drop of honey', 'David of Sasun', 'In the Armenian mountains' and his masterpiece 'Anush', based upon which Armen Tigranian composed the **Anoush Opera**. In front of his house, you can find the bust of the poet and a small chapel where the poet's heart is buried; the rest of his remains are still in Tbilisi where he spent most of his life.

Across the road is **St. Grigor Lusavorich Chapel** (XII-XIII c.) with graveyard around it. H. Tumanyan's father is buried there. He was the priest of the village at the time and brought a number of innovations, including electric light to the village. The chapel was rebuilt by the Mamikonyans in the 12th century and their emblem can be seen on the eastern wall of the chapel (a two-headed eagle grasping the lamb of Christ in its talons). Not far from the chapel on the left side, you can find the Mamikonyan medieval cemetery with many unique cross stones in it. At the entrance of the cemetery, you will see the most outstanding khatchkar (cross stone) with carvings of Jesus Christ crucified on the cross.

Behind the museum, there is a road that takes you to the fields. There you will see a large cemetery on the hill. Behind it, down to the gorge is '**Sirun Khach**' (XIII c.), a 'beautiful cross stone' that was carved during the reign of Mamikon and his son Vardan Mamikonyan. The view behind the cross is the one displayed on the AMD 5000 note. 100m to the left of 'Sirun khach' is a small picnic spot. Directly below that is the path taking you down (500m) to a hidden miracle in the magnificent rocks and forests; **Bardzrakash S. Grigor Monas-**

Vardablur's Fortress





**Bardzrakash
S. Grigor Monastery**

tery (XIII c.), considered to be one of the masterpieces of Armenian architecture. It was built on the order of Hamazasp, Mamikonian's grandson and Sarkis's son, Mertzpan, during the reign of the Georgian Queen Tamar's son, Giorgi IV, in the dukedom of Ivane Zakarian. The monastery is now in ruins (one of the old writers has said that it is like a beautiful, young corpse in a green grave). The complex consists of two churches, vestibule, chapel, cemetery of the Mamikonian Dynasty, a large stone for making oil and cross stones.

Before reaching **Bardzrakash S. Grigor Monastery**, on your left side, is **Gikor's Mountain Spring**. Gikor was one of the heroes of Tumanyan. In the film, the father of a poverty-stricken family sends his son to Tbilisi to find work and have a better life. The family, to which he entrusts his boy, banishes the boy to the elements and he soon dies of exposure and starvation. The father, en route to retrieve his son's body, stops at this spring, the same he and his son drank from when they first went to the great Armenian city in the north.

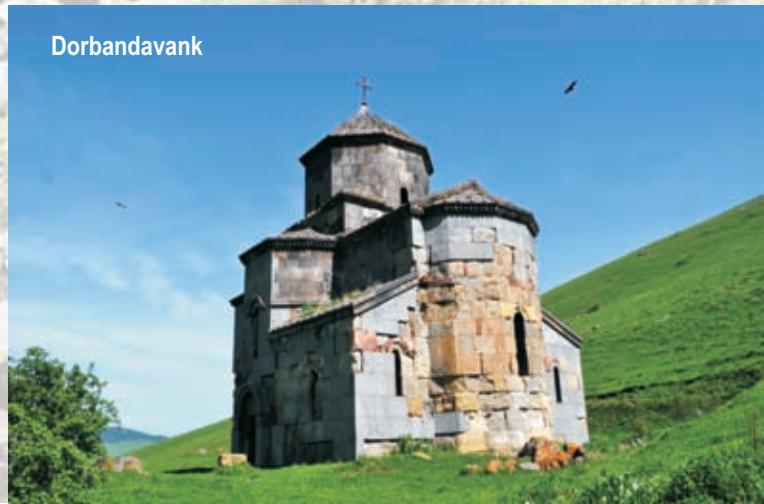
North from Stepanavan

Sverdlov village (Haydarbek prior to 1940) was named after the Bolshevik leader, Yaakov Sverdlov, the son of a Jewish engraver. 13km from Stepanavan, it is surrounded by beautiful mountains

and fields full of colorful flowers; a beautiful place to enjoy nature. This village is also famous for its honey because of the diversity and quantity of flowers. It has an old and beautiful church called **St. Gevorg Church** (XI-XII c.). The church is a single nave hall church, and lost both its annex and the apse during renovations at the beginning of the 19th century. At the rear of the church is a small 13th century single nave church that belonged to the Chalcedonian faith. There is another church **Dorbandavank/St. Astvatsatsin** (VI c.), which is 3km from Sverdlov and is on the right hand side on the way to **Privolnoe**, a Russian village. It is a cruciform three-altar church, similar to Hnevank and Talin. Dorbandavank is very beautiful and has a great view with the Lalvar Mountain protecting it from behind. This is the pride of the Haydarbek people, where natives gather on the second Sunday of every August from Russia, Georgia and Armenia to make sheep sacrifices and celebrate. Privolnoe village is a great place for picking mushrooms.

There are also the **Khuchap** (XIII c.) and **Khorakert Monasteries** (XI - XIII c.); considered two masterpieces of Armenian architecture hidden in the forests. They are located on the northern and western foot of the Lalvar Mountain, on the border between Armenia and Georgia. It is very difficult to get to Khorakert because of the poor roads and you also have to pass the border and go through Gaili Dur, then Jiliza to get there. There are still unsolved border issues between Georgia and Armenia because of this monastery. The monastery of Khuchap situated near the border village of Privolnoe, however, is easier to get to. Armenia and Georgia have managed to come to a mutual agreement to leave the monastery within Armenia's borders. If possible, they are a must to see.

Dorbandavank



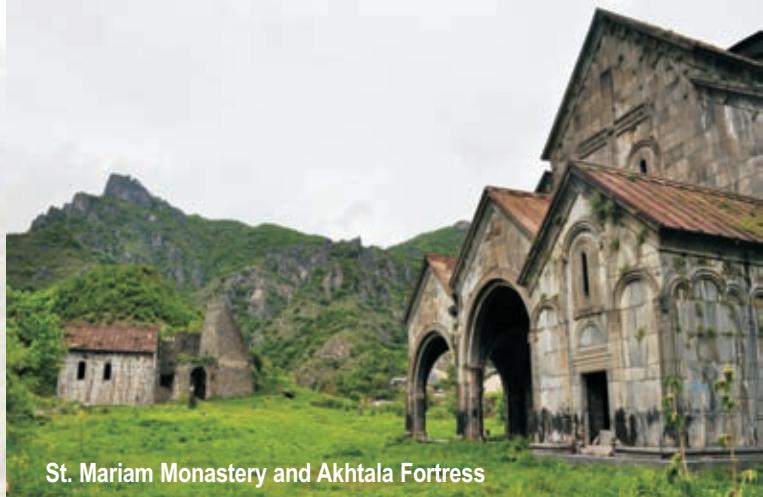
Along the Debed River (Day trip from Stepanavan)

Kobayr Monastery (60km from Stepanavan) belongs to the list of most distinguishing architectural monuments of medieval Armenia. The name Kobayr comes from 'kob' (cave in Georgian) and 'ayr' (cave in Armenian). It is strongly connected with medieval Armenia's significant feudal houses such as the Kyurikian branch of the Bagratuni Dynasty and representatives of the Zakarian Dynasty (Shahanshah, Giorgi and others) who were followers of the Georgian Orthodox Church. From Vardan Areveltsi's manuscripts, it is known that Kobayr was already a developed and famous convent from the mid 13th century. It is located on the left side of the Debed River on a steep rocky mountain. Being surrounded by rocks and green mountains, Kobayr is a hidden pearl in the spectacular nature. From the top of Kobayr on the right side of the Debed River, you can see the beautiful Dzaghidzor, now called Tumanyan district. Kobayr is unique for its valuable architectural monuments; developed methods used for processing the stone and its ornaments and frescos.

It was one of the most important cultural and educational centers in medieval Armenia in the 12th century, with which David Kobayretsi's activities are connected.

Sanahin Monastery (X-XIII c.) is located on Sanahin plateau. Together with Haghpat Monastery, they are two of Armenia's World Heritage sites. Both were built in the same era and both have played an important role in the spiritual and cultural life of Armenia. They are also the best examples of the medieval Silver Age, when Bagratuni and Orbeli Kings, and the Kyurikian and Zakarian princely families led to an extraordinary flowering of culture. The two monasteries symbolize the highest blossoming of Armenian religious architecture, unique styles developed from a blending of elements of Byzantine ecclesiastical architecture and the traditional vernacular architecture of the Caucasian region.

Sanahin Monastery (90km from Stepanavan) is one of Armenia's eye catching medieval architectural masterpieces. Its famous students include Catholicos Dioskoros, Anania, Hakob and Hovhannes Sanahnetsis, Grigor Tatevordi and the greatest bard/singer, Sayat-Nova. Sanahin consist of many buildings, such as St Astvatsatsin Church, a spiritual school, bell tower, vestibule and the Zakarians tomb. The complex was robbed by Seljuks and Persians many times, and many of its buildings did not survive long. On the left hand side of the monastery, on top of a hill, you can also see Kayan Fortress (XII c.) The Sanahin Bridge is also one of Armenia's distinguished engineering works. It was built in the 13th century by Zakare and Ivane's sister, Queen Vaneni, on behalf of her prematurely deceased husband, Kyurikian King Abass.



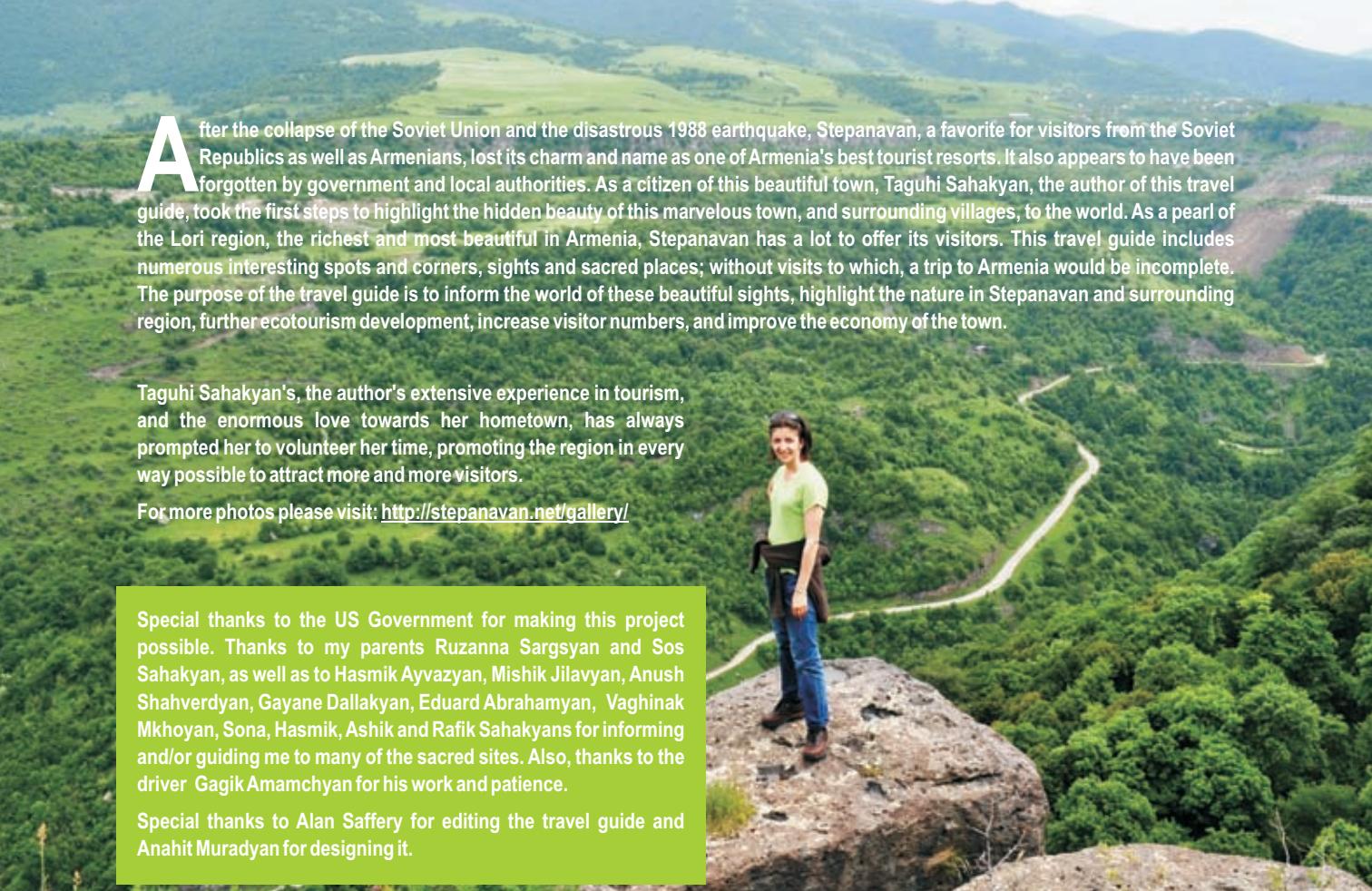
St. Mariam Monastery and Akhtala Fortress

Near Sanahin is the Mikoyan Brothers House Museum – Anastas and Artem Mikoyan. Artem Mikoyan (1905-1970) was a famous Armenian aircraft designer, academic and colonel-general of Engineers, who was the co-creator of the MIG plane.

Haghpat Monastery (X-XIII c.), where famous singer Sayat Nova was priest, is one of UNESCO's World Heritage Sites in Armenia. The complex (120km from Stepanavan) has eight buildings surrounded by secured walls: the first structure of the monastery, St. Nshan (X c.), St. Grigor Church (X c.), The Holy Virgin Chapel, Corridor – burial ground, the book depository & refectory (XIII c.), the great cloister (XII c.), the campanile (XII c.) and the bell tower (XII c.)

Akhtala (140km from Stepanavan) is the home of the spectacular **St. Mariam Monastery and Akhtala Fortress**. The fortress was built on a cliff with sheer slopes on three sides. The fortress outline is similar to that in Lori Berd and Ani. The monastery was the focus of religious turmoil, as the center of Georgian Chalcedonianism in northern Armenia, surviving Zakare and Ivane Zakarian's attempts to forcibly unite Armenian Monophysite and Georgian Chalcedonian churches unsuccessfully. King Heracles II of Georgia force-marched Greek miners to work the copper ore. You can find their signatures on monastery walls. The monastery is inside the fortress and has three churches, a bell tower, galleries and friary. The main church of St. Mariam or St. Astvatsatsin (XIII c.) has highly artistic frescos covering the inside walls. The landscape is beautiful and attractive.

There are also the ruins of Lenk Temur's Fortress in the village, which can be seen from Akhtala Monastery. According to the legend, Lenk Temur's wife was buried in the rock and in her grave were various treasures and gold. So as to protect the treasures from looting and losing track of them, the soldiers who buried his wife were killed on command of Lenk Temur. Ask villagers for directions to get there.



After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the disastrous 1988 earthquake, Stepanavan, a favorite for visitors from the Soviet Republics as well as Armenians, lost its charm and name as one of Armenia's best tourist resorts. It also appears to have been forgotten by government and local authorities. As a citizen of this beautiful town, Taguhi Sahakyan, the author of this travel guide, took the first steps to highlight the hidden beauty of this marvelous town, and surrounding villages, to the world. As a pearl of the Lori region, the richest and most beautiful in Armenia, Stepanavan has a lot to offer its visitors. This travel guide includes numerous interesting spots and corners, sights and sacred places; without visits to which, a trip to Armenia would be incomplete. The purpose of the travel guide is to inform the world of these beautiful sights, highlight the nature in Stepanavan and surrounding region, further ecotourism development, increase visitor numbers, and improve the economy of the town.

Taguhi Sahakyan's, the author's extensive experience in tourism, and the enormous love towards her hometown, has always prompted her to volunteer her time, promoting the region in every way possible to attract more and more visitors.

For more photos please visit: <http://stepanavan.net/gallery/>

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