

# Jinishian Memorial Foundation gears up to host two special Study Tours across Armenia in 2009

By Sona Hamalian

Among the key aspects that make the Jinishian Memorial Foundation unique is its profoundly compassionate approach to the design of its programs, and, ultimately, its beneficiaries. Rather than provide quick fixes or handouts, the organization invests in the lives of individuals and entire communities, guided by both an abiding sense of empathy and a vision of long-term development – in terms of fostering economic self-sufficiency, social equality and vibrancy, educational excellence, and spiritual growth.

Sponsored mainly by the Jinishian Memorial Program of the Presbyterian Church USA, the Jinishian Memorial Foundation operates a comprehensive program in Armenia, focusing not only on direct aid to disadvantaged families, but also community development, education, economic development, civil-society growth, health services, and spiritual uplift.



*Eliza Minasyan in JMF office in Yerevan, Armenia*

Since 1993, the foundation has assisted some 2.2 million individuals in Armenia, and supported the work of over 150 grassroots NGOs through collaborative projects. Given the enormously positive impact of its work in the Armenian homeland, today the foundation enjoys the partnership of major aid organizations such as the United States Agency for International Development and Delegation of the European Commission, as well as the support of a number of diaspora and Armenia donors.

Recently the foundation announced two extraordinary Study Tours in Armenia (May and September 2009), intended to give tourists the opportunity to experience the very best of Armenia, through guided sightseeing, and also gain first-hand insight into the work of the foundation.

The following is a conversation with **Eliza Minasyan**, Country Director of the Jinishian Memorial Foundation in Armenia. I caught up with her in Yerevan, at the headquarters of the Jinishian Memorial Foundation, where she was busy responding to a flurry of overseas inquiries about the upcoming Study Tours.

**Sona Hamalian: How did the idea of organizing the Study Tours come about?**

Eliza Minasyan: The idea came about in response to a variety of needs but also considering our foundation's key capacities for organizing such tours.

First, the needs:

- there is a need in the diaspora to learn about the motherland, to discover not only the wonderful cultural heritage of our ancestors but also the everyday life and aspirations of the Armenian people ;
- there is a need in the Armenian tourism industry to introduce unique, extraordinary tours that offer visitors the sights, sounds, and aromas of modern Armenia and also explorations of the country's timeless historic destinations;
- there is a need among current and potential donors and supporters to gain first-hand insight into Armenia's economic, social, cultural, and educational aspects as well as the ways to address core issues in a proven and effective manner;
- and there is a need for external expertise and funds to help Armenians overcome ongoing social and economic adversities.

As for the capacities:

- our foundation has extensive development experience throughout Armenia, with projects dedicated to economic and community development, education, health, and spiritual uplift. This means that those taking the Study Tours will get to see most of the country's regions, interact with people from all walks of life, and visit all the institutions around which Armenian life thrives – such as universities and schools, children's art centers and theaters, churches, community organizations, and hospitals. It's important to note that these visits will not be “passive.” Rather, they will give diaspora visitors the chance to communicate and spend time with students, priests, and professionals from various fields including NGO representatives, farmers, and community activists;
- many of our staff members, including myself, have considerable experience in guiding tours. In addition, for the past ten years, I've witnessed a growing need for what I like to call “living” tours, which would enable visitors to gain a real sense of the country;
- finally, the Study Tours are being jointly organized by our mother organization in the U.S., the Jinishian Memorial Program, whose great reputation gives tour takers the confidence that they will enjoy a professionally planned, well thought-out, and profoundly fulfilling travel experience.

### **Are the Study Tours open to all tourists or just Jinishian Foundation supporters?**

They are open to everyone, though our current donors are being offered special rates. Depending on the applications, the Study Tours can also be customized for specific groups, based on traveler preferences and even the age of participants.

### **What will the sightseeing components of the tours entail?**

They will comprise all the major attractions and much more. Cities will include Yerevan, Echmiadzin, Vanadzor, Dilijan, Goris, Jermuk, Sevan, Gyumri, as well as Stepanakert and Shushi in Karabagh.

Specific sites will include Khor Virap, a place of pilgrimage for Armenians all over the world; Noravank Monastery (13-14th centuries), situated on a ledge over the Arpa River gorge and surrounded by fantastic red rocks; Tatev monastery (14th-15th centuries), on the edge of a gigantic canyon; Holy Echmiadzin, the Vatican City of Armenia and the center of the Armenian Apostolic Church; Zvartnots Cathedral, famous for its unique architecture; the magnificent Odzum Church (7th century); the Sanahin monastery

complex; and also Ghazanchetsots Cathedral and Gandzasar Monastery in Karabagh. Of course, the tours will also include visits to a number of major museums and theaters.

**So it seems to me that tour participants will get to visit not only popular destinations but also unusual, off-the-beaten-track sites.**

Exactly. That is the main purpose. Some of the places I mentioned are usually left out of commercial tours because they're considered inconvenient or too time-consuming for big groups. But that's not an issue with us, since we're flexible and our groups will not exceed 12 people each. In short, the Study Tours will definitely go further than conventional, business-driven tours.

**In terms of becoming familiar with the work of the Jinishian Foundation, what are some of the sites that tour participants will be taken to?**

They will visit regional universities where we implement projects that provide students with the necessary skills and experience for contributing to the country's civic life. Tour participants will join school debates to discuss topics of vital importance to the youth. They will witness the dedicated work of medical personnel at a rehabilitation center in Stepanakert. Participants will also view artworks produced by socially disadvantaged children and interact with farmers and villagers in some of Armenia's most pristine rural communities.

All the site visits included in the Study Tours are designed to encourage meaningful communication and socialization. Thus local-community members and leaders will be meeting us, telling us their stories, expressing their feelings, and even joining visitors for dinner or lunch.

**What were some of the major achievements of the Jinishian Foundation in 2008?**

Well, we worked hard and enjoyed it. One of the most significant achievements was that we increased private donations from the diaspora for our current projects, without even any serious PR or fundraising activities on our part. We really treasure those who trusted our work and supported it. I am not in the least diminishing the crucial importance of donor outreach or saying we won't engage in serious fundraising in the future. I just confess my sincere acknowledgment of those who trusted us with their heart.

**What are some of the foundation's priority-assistance areas for 2009?**

While we consider all of our program areas as priorities, in 2009 we will place additional emphasis on projects that assist communities (including farmers, students, families, and children with special needs) in many of Armenia's remote rural areas.

**Is there a major challenge or hurdle that the foundation still faces in implementing its projects?**

The main challenge that we face is not logistical in nature but rather psychological. It has to do with certain social stereotypes and taboos that have been inherited from the Soviet era. But in this sense Armenian society has come a long way since independence, and I am confident that greater social awareness and equity are constantly being fostered.

**Do you agree that beneficiary participation is a core element of the success of your programs? In this sense, how would you generally characterize the foundation's relationship with its beneficiaries, at both the individual and community levels?**

Our beneficiaries play an enormous role in all of our projects. We work with them very closely in terms of both project design and implementation. In certain instances, beneficiaries are now actually running the projects and doing a much better job than would be expected from any professional NGO staff.

**What would you say is the role of the diaspora in the ongoing success of Jinishian projects? And what can the diaspora do to help ensure the long-term viability of these initiatives?**

The diaspora's role is essential, and also greatly facilitated by the fact that we're a diaspora-based foundation. The Jinishian Memorial Program, our main supporter and mother organization, was founded through an endowment fund established by Vartan Jinishian. He bequeathed all his property to Armenian communities in need. His generous gift has helped change millions of lives since the 1960s, bringing hope and support to Armenians not only in Armenia, but also Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, Iraq, and elsewhere. In addition, the foundation is assisted by private donations from numerous diasporans, whose support helps nurture a sense of both unity and responsibility in the Armenian world.

I would say that at this point I consider the biggest help from the diaspora would be understanding and awareness of realities in Armenia. I know that love rests at the heart of altruism. Yet constructive, practical help comes out of understanding.

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For more information or to book a Jinishian Memorial Foundation Study Tour for 2009, please visit [www.jinishian.org](http://www.jinishian.org) or contact Sara Todd, Program Manager, Jinishian Memorial Program, at 502-569-5291 or [Sara.todd@pcusa.org](mailto:Sara.todd@pcusa.org).

*Sona Hamalian is a philanthropic advisor based in Yerevan. She also heads Creative Networks, an international public-relations firm promoting nonprofit organizations, cultural and educational institutions, and artists.*