Armenian maze turns into a tourist draw

Levon spent 23 years digging the network of caves and tunnels, initially planned as a storage space for potatoes

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

When Tosya Gharibyan asked her husband to dig a basement under their house to store potatoes, she had little idea the underground labyrinth he would eventually produce would prove to be one of Armenia’s major tourist draws.

Their one-storey house in the village of Arinj outside the capital Yerevan may not look like much but today it brings in visitors from all over the globe after a 23-year labour of love by Ms. Gharibyan’s late husband, Levon Arakelyan.

They come to see a twisting network of subterranean caves and tunnels known as “Levon’s divine underground.”

In the cold and quiet, Ms. Gharibyan leads tourists through corridors that connect seven chambers adorned with Romanesque columns and ornaments like those on the facades of mediaeval Armenian churches.

“Once he started digging, it was impossible to stop him,” she said of the project that began in 1995. “I wrangled with him a lot, but he became obsessed with his plan.”

A builder by training, Levon would toil for 18 hours a day – only pausing to take a quick nap and then rush back to the cave, confident that he was being guided “by heaven”. “He never drew up plans and used to tell us that he sees in his dreams what to do next,” his widow said.

Over more than two decades, he hammered out the 3,000 square-foot space, 21 metres deep into strata of volcanic rocks – only using hand tools. “My primary childhood recollection is the loud knock of my father’s hammer heard at night from the cave,” said his 44-year-old daughter Araksya.

At the start, he had to break through a surface layer of black basalt, but at the depth of a few metres Levon reached much softer tufa stone and the work progressed. He pulled out 600 truckloads of rocks and earth, using only hand-held buckets.

Levon died in 2008 at the age of 67.