



by Ir. Chin Mee Poon

## Castles of the Assassins

**AFTER** visiting so many mosques, palaces, museums, tombs and bazaars in Iran, we decided to see some natural beauty, so we took a road heading to the northeast direction from Gazvin, a city on the old Silk Road.

We had chosen the Alamut Valley and the Shahrud Valley for our appreciation of the natural side of Iran. These two valleys are in the Alborz mountain range in the northern part of Iran close to the Caspian Sea. The 5671m high Mt. Damavand at the eastern end of the mountain range is the highest peak in Iran.

After about 20km, the road became very winding. We were already in the Alborz mountains. Unlike the mountains in our country which are covered by lush verdant vegetation, what we saw here were mainly bare ground of white, yellow, red and brown patches making up giant wrinkles on the earth's surface.

Oases of vegetation and villages were only seen in the valleys. The Peugeot 405 that we were travelling in wound its way up and down steep mountain slopes, changing our views from one of being sandwiched by insurmountable walls in one instant to one of unobstructed spread of umpteen mounds in another. I had never seen anything like this before. It was simply spectacular.

We spent the night in a hamlet known as Gazor Khan beside a tributary of the Alamut River. About 700m further upstream was an old castle perched on top of a rocky hill. It was the Alamut Castle, one of more than 50 that once overlooked the valleys of Alamut and Shahrud, and are today collectively known as the "Castles of the Assassins". The castles were built in the 12th Century AD by followers of Hasan-e Sabbah, spiritual leader of Islam's heretical Ismaili sect.

According to a popular story, some of Sabbah's followers murdered or kidnapped leading political or religious figures of the day, believing that such actions



would help them gain access to heaven. This belief was inculcated in them by showing them beautiful secret gardens filled with enticing young maidens when they were under the influence of hashish. They were thus known as "hashish-iyun" which has given rise to the English name "assassin".

I believe there is little truth in this story. It is more likely that the followers of Sabbah had chosen to build castles in this highly inaccessible place to escape persecution by the mainstream orthodox practitioners of Islam. A parallel can be found in the monasteries of Meteora near Kalambaka in central Greece.

After visiting Alamut Castle, we went on to visit another assassin's castle, the Lamiasar Castle near Razmiyan in the adjacent Shahrud Valley, taking in the fascinating scenery on the way. ■