

A Postcard from Armenia (2001)ⁱ

A long weekend in Armenia, travelling independently?" Impossible?" No, "highly practical." There are direct British Airways flightsⁱⁱ from Heathrow to the capital, Yerevan. "Car hire?" Not immediately obvious. A couple of years ago when I phoned one international car rental company, they clearly had not heard of Yerevan and simply responded "No, we don't hire Eurovans" Another well-known company said "You require GLOBAL RESERVATIONS!" in a deep resonant voice which implied that we were trying to arrange some form of intergalactic travel - but even Global Reservations had not heard of Armenia. The guidebooks say that you can only hire cars with drivers, but in fact two Armenian companies, Elitar and Acquarius, will book hire cars without drivers over the internet. And obtaining a visa was a simple matter from the consulate round the corner from High Street Ken tube station.

So, early on a Thursday morning, fresh (or perhaps not so fresh) from the overnight flight, we drove out of Yerevan's Zvartnots Airport in our almost new Fiat Punto. We had declined the somewhat cheaper Lada on offer from Elitar, and were soon to find that even Fiat Puntos turn heads in small Armenian villages. As driverless car hire is a recent development in Armenia, Elitar had thoughtfully given us a letter in Armenian addressed to all local police chiefs explaining the concept of car rental, and making it clear that the car was not stolen.

We wondered what we would find. We had downloaded and printed dozens of pages from Raffi Kojian's excellent web site www.cilicia.com, including Brady Kiesling's Rediscovering Armenia, and Raffi's own descriptions and photos of many churches and monasteries. Even so, our knowledge was limited - recently, the bitter war with Azerbaijan and the calamitous earthquake in the winter of 1988; formerly part of the Soviet Union; a Christian country amidst Moslems; longer ago; the Turkish genocide of one and a half million Armenians in 1915. Apart from that, just evidence of the Armenian Diaspora; the Armenian traders who run much of the bazaar in Istanbul; the Armenian cathedral in a suburb of the Iranian city of Isfahan; in eastern Turkey, majestic views of snow-capped Mount Ararat, where according to legend, the remains of Noah's ark were found; the venerable Armenian run Barons Hotel in Aleppo, Syria where Agatha Christie, Theodore Roosevelt, Kim Philby and Kemal Ataturk all slept in the same room; and the dated, now embarrassing (if not downright racist), sketch of the Armenian who loved his sheep in Woody Allen's Everything You Wanted to Know about Sex but were Afraid to Ask.

First impressions were not encouraging; abandoned factories from the Soviet era, grey concrete and rusting iron, with broken windows. Empty streets of dull workers' housing, but then, less than ten minutes from the airport, we came upon H'ripsime, a perfectly preserved seventh century church on a small hill, with the backdrop of the twin peaks of Mount Ararat. The exterior is plain and square, but inside four apses rise-up to a circular cupola. The church feels higher than it is wide, imposing without dominating. There is a clean, uncluttered feel - some frescoes of saints beneath the altar, a few crosses and a simple but bold, very Armenian looking Madonna and Child altar piece. Four nuns had lit orange bees wax candles and were reading from the scriptures. Later, one of them, in near perfect English, told us that they were setting up the first congregation of nuns in Armenia for three hundred years.

H'ripsime was typical of the next four days. A mix of friendly, welcoming people and beautiful churches and monasteries, built in a classical Byzantine style, mainly between the sixth and twelfth centuries A.D. Most are cruciform, with a central dome, covered on the outside with a conical, tent like structure. Inside they are unadorned, except for a lectern and a deep red curtain in front of the altar. Some have crosses, almost Celtic in shape, carved in the stone walls. The larger monastic complexes comprise churches, large vaulted gavits (vestries), book depositories with wall niches and separate belfries. Akhtala, not far from the Georgian border in the north, has rich blue and yellow frescoes of bishops and saints, with Greek inscriptions. Many were built in stunning locations - on the summits of mountains, overlooking lakes, on the lips of ravines, surrounded by oak forests or in groves of fruit trees. Others are in more mundane settings, in the middle of villages, among stacks of hand-scythed hay, with goats and geese in the foreground. Some have khachkars, intricately carved stone tablets, generally depicting a cross emerging from a seed, which were erected to commemorate notable events. Near to many churches, there are holy trees, adorned with handkerchiefs tied round branches in the belief that prayers will be answered.

As we approached Haghartzin Church, we passed a wedding convoy of old Moskvitches and Volgas making its way back through the woods from a feast in the thirteenth century refectory. In Echmiadzin, the seat of the Katholikos (bishop) of all Armenians, there were groups of black cassocked, bearded priests. At Bjhni an aged priest donned sumptuous lilac and gilt vestments, above his carpet slippers, and held a silver cross high. In Kecharis a proud altar boy put on a claret, white and gold cassock to pose for a photo in front of the altar. At Karmravor, a dinky seventh century church less than ten metres square, there were a couple of artists and girls who insisted on giving us handfuls of cherries. At ruined Havuts Tar, we met three young men who had hiked for an hour to camp out for the night, but many of the churches and monasteries were deserted, leaving us free to ponder in silence the vicissitudes of the seventeen centuries since Christianity was first adopted as the state religion in Armenia.

Perhaps the highlight is the subterranean cave church of Geghard . The location is dramatic, but the interior is even more stunning. As we approached, we saw a collection of grey stone monastic buildings nestling in woods at the end of a gorge. Inside the single church which is apparent from the outside, there are openings into three more churches, carved underground out of the solid rock, as well proportioned and decorated as any building constructed above the ground, with apses, cupolas and a bold carving of an eagle with its talons gripping the back of a lamb.

Much of the west of the country is treeless. The road from Gyumri to Tasir crosses the Karachard Pass, 2,272 metres above sea level. Bare, rolling, steppe like mountains, with soaring eagles and cowherds riding horses. Genghis Khan and his hordes would not be out of place, swooping down from the next ridge. The east has a more European feel; temperate rain forest, with oaks and beeches, and deep rocky canyons.

Outside the towns, there are not many cars, and even fewer road signs. This was never a problem. People by the road side were always happy to direct us, and we soon learnt that priamo meant

straight on in Russian (as we were foreigners, many people thought that we understood Russian.) Some, notably an army officer, insisted on getting into the car and going miles out of their way to ensure that we ended up in the right place. The only problem with driving was the condition of the roads - although some are in good condition, many are badly potholed ("cratered" might be a better description) and some red roads are fast deteriorating to a state that is worse than many English farm tracks.

There are British, American and Armenian tour operators who organise holidays in Armenia, but during our five days, the only foreigners we encountered were an American Armenian couple and a group of young Armenian folk dancers from New York. Outside Yerevan hotels are not plentiful, but with some thought, it is possible to find good accommodation. In Yerevan and Gyumri (near the epicentre of the 1988 earthquake) we found hotels which were definitely up to western standards. Near Dilijan, which Raffi describes, rather optimistically, as "Little Switzerland", we found a good motel, a mile or so off the main road, with clean rooms and large dinners for a total of less than US\$30 for two. At Sevan, Armenia's premier beach resort (no, there is no sea coast, but there are sandy beaches on Lake Sevan, more than 6,000 feet above sea level) we found a hotel with good value rooms at \$US20. We never discovered its name. Although the rubbish bins all bore the word "Nirvana", this was unlikely to be its name since the adjoining chalets resembled lock-up garages. It was only in the northern town of Alaverdi that we failed to find a decent hotel room. The only hotel, the Debed, looked fine from the outside - a seven storey, sixties or seventies Soviet style building, but inside it was dirty, with the main staircase in a worse state than many inner London tower blocks. In the bathrooms, the lack of electricity mercifully made it impossible to determine the source of the running water - it wasn't the shower or the taps, which were both dry, even when turned on. We decided we would rather spend the night in the car and drove on to the next village, only to find a Russian teacher from Georgia who ordered us into her own home, gave us supper of fresh produce from her garden and insisted we spent the night. In the morning, she refused all offers of payment.

ⁱ Published in the ADJ Bulletin in Winter 2007.

ⁱⁱ Sadly, no longer.