

Armenia



Arriving yesterday after dark, all I did was take a taxi to my hotel and go to sleep. Smoke. That was the first thought that entered my head when I woke. I could smell the stench of cigarette smoke even in a non-smoking room. The sheets and duvet were heavy with it and I must have been too tired last night to notice or care.

I opened the curtains and could see Mount Ararat, snow-covered, in the distance. Going down to breakfast the landings in the former Soviet style hotel were still covered with plastic sheeting to save the near thread-bare carpets from the workers trudging dirty feet back and forth whilst busying themselves on lift repairs.

Breakfast was a strange affair as I sat alone in the cavernous restaurant being waited upon by bored and overly attentive waiters. Having lived in Russia meant I could read some of the menu and be able to order food that I enjoyed rather than taking a chance and being served what the waiters thought a Westerner might want instead.

Immediately I finished breakfast I collected my bag from my room and settled my bill at reception. I then sat in the foyer writing postcards and waiting for my dear friend, Evgeny, to arrive. Armenia is not a country visited by many tourists from outside the former Soviet Union yet over the coming days it was to show me many wondrous sights and tantalise my taste buds with all manner of delicious foods.

Evgeny arrived with his uncle and they drove me to his antique shop for tea. Up an old staircase with broken steps that would put off most inquisitive tourists who otherwise might venture in to see his carpets and other items for sale. I was shown some rare carpets, old Soviet photos, bayonets, swords, medals and so on. We drank tea on the balcony overlooking the street below. How many people could even place Yerevan on a map? A bustling capital city steeped in history and brimming full of restaurants, cafes and museums just waiting to be 'discovered' by mass tourism. The thing that puts people off is their inability to communicate coupled with widely held misconceptions about almost all of the former Soviet Union countries. To me this is precisely what makes it so special and worth visiting.

During the following days, I was made welcome at the family home and fed extensive meals of delicious food usually washed down with copious glasses of neat vodka. At one of the most memorable meals I was dished out four large pieces of lamb complete with vertebrae and spinal cord, green leaves and bread – all to be eaten by hand. Then glasses of neat vodka and brandy were laid out in front of me. The brandy was 20 years old when bottled in 1978 and still bore the Soviet markings on the label. A really generous gesture. This was followed up by beer and more beer. It was still only midday!

Immediately after lunch, half drunk and in need of sleep I was told that I should get myself ready and was shoe-horned into a cramped old taxi. With the sun shining brightly, and with windows fully open we left the town behind us and drove out to Garni Temple. The only standing Greco-Roman

structure in the whole of the former Soviet Union. Perched, impressively on a promontory surrounded by vertical drop-offs into the gorge below. Hard to believe that this lone building has been here for 2,000 years and is so little-known outside of Armenia. In the bottom of the gorge a river meandered between the basalt cliffs. It was utterly spectacular.

Beside it were the remains of an old Roman bath house and lots of Christian gravestones. The nearby vendors hoping to sell you anything from jars of home-made pickles, strings of dried apricots to grim looking animal pelts. Evgeny got me to taste some traditional pomegranate wine and I was just about to buy it but was told it was of poor quality. That was then end of that and I was ushered away. I felt a bit sorry for the toothless old lady who probably longed to make a sale.

We went on along a lumpy road to Geghard Monastery which would not have looked out of place as a backdrop in Game of Thrones or in a King Arthur film. At the end of a small valley surrounded by high cliffs on all sides there's a large white cross on one of the cliff faces which probably served as a marker for those travelling here in years gone by. Perhaps the more cynical might suggest it is a more recent addition that provides a good tale to tell to visiting tourists.

We walked up a wide, steep path and before going through the main arch we stopped to throw stones at some small hollows in the rocks. It's said that if one of your stones lands in one of the hollows your wishes will come true. I cast five small stones and none of mine made it so I guess my wishes are doomed.

The main archway was topped with intricate Christian crosses carved into the stonework. It surely would have been an amazing site for monks and pilgrims to see after a lengthy and arduous journey. As you enter the main courtyard you are immediately struck by the quality of masonry and carving that surrounds you. But the best is yet to come. As you enter into the main building you will note that the majority of it is carved into a solid rock face, much like Petra in southern Jordan and the great churches at Lalibela in Ethiopia. One side of the monastery though seems to have been built in cut stones and joined on. The place is staggeringly beautiful.

We travelled on to Lake Sevan, the largest lake in the Caucasus. My hosts had hired a private dining room and the food, including locally caught trout was lavish to say the least. Beetroot salad, delicious potato dishes, vegetables and fruits I had never before seen, various breads and Smetana – the staple accompaniment to most meals here. It is like sour cream.

It was a long drive back and more apricot brandy and beer were provided in the car. I'd really had enough alcohol for today so I pretended to sleep which would avoid causing offence. My bed was the sofa, uncomfortable and too short. When the lights in the kitchen went out I put my bedding on the floor and slept there.

When we drove out today we skirted the Turkish border. We stopped and bought apples and delicious honey from some vendors at the roadside. In total, we drove more than 75 miles to get to Noravank Monastery to see the stunning 13th century Surb Astvatsatsin church. Nestled, as most places here seem to be, amongst towering red cliffs it was a sight of great beauty.

Lunch today was had at Vorskan in an unusual wooden stilt house over a river. It was rather odd having the river flowing under us as we ate and ducks freely roaming around. Some of the food was similar to yesterday but we were also treated here to potatoes with blue mushrooms, fabulous goat stew in pastry parcels, meat and pork, and fruit compote. Needless to say an abundance of beer, wine, vodka was on offer and I, as the guest, was expected (almost forced) to drink a great amount of each.

That evening we drove slowly on to Jermuk and stayed in a hotel that was a former asylum in Soviet days. In a beautiful setting, surrounded by forests dusted in snow and with part frozen rivers just beginning to thaw. The following day I started my own journey home as Evgeny returned to Moscow and I left my new-found friends in Yerevan with the promise that I would return to see them soon.

Mike Laird

Belgrave Halls, Belgrave Road, Corstorphine



Following recent speculation as to what is going to be built on the site of Belgrave Halls, I thought I would share some memories before the Halls disappear.

These Halls formed The Scottish Episcopal Church of St. Margaret. I remember worshipping in the church as a child with my family during the 50s and 60s.

The interior was simple. The altar and lectern were at the east wall. There was a font at the west end and all the windows were leaded panes of small rectangles of coloured glass with a few scattered diamond shapes. The walls were white painted clap board. There was a colourful heraldic banner depicting St. Margaret. Two slender wooden Angels adorned opposite walls. The Organ was simple affair consisting of an air pumped organ at the west end of the church near the entrance porch and a cube sound box supported on the apse joists above the organ. At Christmas, a Nativity tableau was placed in the church.

According to Corstorphine Trust archives, the Church was established in 1913 as an offshoot of the Scottish Episcopalian Cathedral of St. Mary, first temporarily in Mr. Sidney Salmon's Photographic studio in Manse Road then in Corstorphine Freemason Hall before its present location. The stone Hall was built in 1930 in ground gifted up from the wooden church. The services were taken by Rev. Canon A.W. Stevenson who lived with his wife in a semi-detached villa at 38 St. Ninian's Road.

The congregation was quite small and most lived locally. To name a few – Mrs Shepherd and Miss Herdman lived in villas on Clermiston Road, Miss Betty Balfour (a music teacher and church organist) lived opposite in Belgrave Road.

Others attending included Hugh Walpole and his sister Dr Dorothea (two of the children of a Bishop of Edinburgh at The Scottish Episcopalian Cathedral of St. Mary in Palmerston Place). Dr Dorothea had a surgery at the foot of Templeland Road. The church received a new font in 1959 dedicated to the memory of Dorothea.

There were also the Crossfords who lived at the junction of Templeland Road and Corstorphine Bank Drive – No. 17. They were related to the Eyre-Todds whose son Forbes ran the former Duchess Café as a Newsagent.

The Church Hall was used for all the usual church activities such as Sunday School and its stage for the annual Nativity Plays. I suppose you could say it was a right-of-passage that you were first an angel then a shepherd or king.



The stage was also used for musical concerts organised by Betty Balfour - I am seen here with Betty. Valerie Mann was the star pupil. She went on to teach music and married Alan Walker of Forrester Road; their son is the musician and conductor Garry Walker.

Other activities included Sales of Work, Beetle and Whist Drives and on Friday nights Cubs and Scouts. Oh, the local gardens that were weeded in the name of "Bob a Job" week; probably today it would be seen as child slave labour.



There were Sunday School Picnics and they generally took place at Lady Greg's Estate down at Barnton Avenue West – the House reputedly built from the remains of the House of Shaws. The gardens were brilliant for the games with sweeping lawns, two ponds with a connecting rill, a Wendy Tree House in a wooded area and tennis courts in a walled garden with herbaceous borders of tall bearded irises. (Much of this land has now been

developed for housing.)

When Canon Stevenson retired in 1968 the Church was sadly closed down and the congregation was invited to worship at the Church of the Good Shepherd in Murrayfield. The wooden angels can still be seen as they flew to pillars in St. Mary's Cathedral and the dedicated font is nearby. The Church and Hall were bought by the nearby St. Anne's Parish Church of Scotland and hosted dance and fitness classes till 2014 when they were sold off due to being surplus to requirements.

David J. Currie 2017