

January 2001

It's been ages since I've written, so I hope you won't mind making a short trip back to the holidays before I get in to my trip to Armenia . . .

Christmas was very strange away from my friends and family. Ultimately, though, the minimal holiday hype in Skopje helped. My internal calendar was completely fooled by not being bombarded with Christmas carols and Christmas decorations for weeks before Christmas. Before I knew it, it was the holiday weekend, and I really hardly noticed. The office Christmas party was nice. I had my first lessons in Balkan dancing there, which in its most basic form consists of holding hands and walking in circles in time to the music. The major bonus to this is that most guys in the Balkans have no problems dancing. I also discovered that traditional songs can last for a very very very long time - to the point where your shoulders start to go numb.

Christmas Eve dinner was at the country representative's house with the handful of other expats who hadn't left the country for the holidays. That was nice, as well. Turkey dinner with all the trimmings - including cranberry sauce. C. smuggled cranberries back from her last trip to the States. Christmas Day, T., L. (both in the regional education office) Tr. (the Fellow working with the Food Aid program) and I had planned to have dinner at T.'s apartment. We were originally planning to have turkey as well, but decided that by the time we got finished converting pounds to kilos and Fahrenheit to Celcius and allowing for altitude, we didn't stand any chance of having an edible dinner. So we went next door to Vero and bought a roasted chicken instead. We also invited A., the receptionist at the office, who's just great. She made us a special Macedonian traditional dish. She told us all about how it was the first time she'd tried to make it, and she had to go to all this trouble to get the ingredients because it wasn't the best season for it, and how she hoped we'd like it. Then L. asked "What's in it?" and A. said "Intestine" and I said, "Oh, sausage! Right guys, it sounds just like sausage!" Well, it wasn't, but we didn't really want any more details. We all had a piece of course. It really didn't taste like much itself, but it was really chewy. The sauce it was cooked in was very good, though. All in all, it was a pleasant Christmas - very low key.

New Year's Eve we braved the crowds and the firecrackers in the streets (it was crazy - there were times I was sure I was going to see someone lose a couple toes) to go to a café with A. and some of her friends. It was fun - lots of Macedonian music and the aforementioned circle dancing. But as T. said later, it was so much like New Year's at home that it made the differences seem especially obvious. Like the fact that none of the music was familiar, and that everyone was holding hands and walking in circles. I think I actually missed home more on New Year's than on Christmas.

On to Armenia! The worst things about the trip: the cold, and the flights. Flights in this region can be complicated. Often you can't get a direct flight between cities, particularly the smaller ones. For instance, if I wanted to fly from Skopje to Sofia, I'd have to fly via another airport, probably one in Western Europe. It's something like flying in a triangle. In Armenia's case, the triangle's apex is in either Zurich or London. So I flew 2 hours to

Zurich, had a 4 hour layover, and flew 3 hours to Yerevan, arriving at about 5 a.m. Far from ideal.

The airport in Yerevan is slightly scary. Not in a threatening way, but it has a “Twilight Zone” kind of feel to it. It manages to combine “Soviet” and “Third World” in a really interesting fashion. It’s dingy, smoky, and lit with greasy yellow florescent lights. And after you clear customs, there are lots of men in beat-up black leather coats and furry hats standing around waiting. They’re cabbies, obviously, but at 5 a.m., after spending a full day in planes and airports and having been awake for 20+ hours, an overactive imagination could easily paint them as Russian Mafia goons waiting to shake down unwary tourists.

Fortunately, I didn’t have to get up and go to the office on Friday. There was a farewell reception for the departing country representative at the hotel where I was staying in the afternoon, so I met up with E., the microfinance program manager, there. Then we went back to the office to prepare for the local microfinance partner’s inauguration party that evening. The partner organization was formed out of a merger of two programs launched by US-based international development organizations, and now it’s been merged into one organization that has been handed over to local management. As far as we know, it’s the world’s first instance of two international organizations merging their local microfinance programs into a new organization. I’d been following the process since I first heard about in early 2000, so I was excited to be at the inauguration.

The inauguration was very nice. It was well-attended, and I met lots of interesting people. Most importantly, the speeches weren’t too long, and the food was good. Afterwards, we went to this really nice jazz club, and then we went dancing. The nightclub was nice, and the music wasn’t bad. But there’s this odd phenomenon in Armenia known as “mirror dancing.” People will dance in front of one of the mirrors all by themselves. No holds barred. It’s totally bizarre to watch.

Saturday, E. took me to dinner at a Mexican restaurant with two of her friends. It was a really cute place – lots of bright colors and bamboo decorations. They had much better food than the one Mexican place in Skopje. They even had a live band playing Latin music. It really has gone global. Speaking of music, is Tom Jones making a comeback in the States? He’s got a couple songs that are all over the radio here. I’m wondering if it’s a worldwide occurrence, or a freak European phenomenon like David Hasselhoff’s singing career.

Sunday, E. took me to the crafts market in Yerevan. There were absolutely beautiful things there – woodwork, pottery, carpets, jewelry, embroidery. I picked up some really nice things from vendors that E. knows. It was fun to go shopping there. Skopje doesn’t have any crafts markets. Besides, nothing is open on Sundays, and the shops close by 2 or 3 on Saturdays, so I don’t often get to go shopping on the weekends.

Afterwards, we left the city to visit some historical sites. The drive through the mountains was beautiful. The first place we went to was Garni, which was the site of a royal summer palace centuries ago. There are ruins of a Greek temple, Roman baths and

a palace all within steps of each other. It was set on a cliff overlooking a river valley. It must be lovely in the spring, when trees and the grass are green. It's a little bleak in the winter, but a striking view nonetheless. I had lots of pictures, but I lost the card they were on somewhere in Armenia.

*The sole surviving photo from Garni:*



After that we went to Gerhart, which was really interesting. It's an ancient church that was built by two brothers centuries ago. It was partly cut out of the mountainside, and partly built up out of it. The stonework on the façade is exquisite. The church is tiny, with little cavelike rooms. It's very plain, but there were some paintings of saints that had little sand-filled alters full of tall, narrow candles in front of them. While were there, E. told me a bit about the history of Christianity in Armenia. It was the first country to adopt Christianity as its official religion in 301 AD. It split with the Catholic Church and developed its own set of customs and practices. She showed me a small altar in a hidden courtyard where animals are sacrificed. There were fresh spots of blood on the walkway leading up to it. When babies are christened, the family sacrifices an animal and draws a cross on the child's forehead with the blood.



*These pictures in no way do any sort of justice to Gerhart, which was truly spectacular, but they are, unfortunately, all I've got.*



I spent Monday at the partner, which was interesting. I went to visit clients with one of the promoters and a woman who was just hired as a promoter. The clients were traders, with stalls in the markets. Some of them were outside, some were in buildings, but none of the buildings were heated. It speaks volumes about people's need for work that they're willing to stand outside or in unheated buildings all day in the cold to make money. Many of them became traders as a sideline because they can't make enough money from their regular jobs. The clothing markets aren't too bad, but the food markets, in addition to being cold, smell of dirt and cheese and blood from the butchers' stalls. There's no electricity in most of the markets, so there's no refrigeration. Some stalls had frozen chicken legs and chunks of meat just sitting out on the counter. I guess its okay in the winter, when it doesn't get warm enough to thaw them, but I can't imagine how they get by in the summertime.

Poverty here is different from what I've encountered in other developing countries. In most places I've visited, people are poor because they have little, and have never had much. In this region, though, just over 10 years ago, many people felt they were doing okay. They had jobs, they were making money, they had regular vacations and pensions. Then the economy started to collapse, and people who had once had something now found they had nothing. People who had worked in factories or schools found that they had to become entrepreneurs to make ends meet. People who got degrees in law and engineering are taking jobs as secretaries because they can't find work in their field in the country, and don't have the means or the desire to leave to work elsewhere. Our receptionist and admin assistants are better-educated than I am. And then there are the men and women who have had to come out of retirement because the government has no money to pay their pensions. There's an older man who sells gevrek (dense, circular pastries covered in sesame seeds that are popular for

breakfast here – so close to bagels, and yet so far) outside the office in the morning. He comes to work early every morning with his little push cart full of gevrek, in a grey pinstripe suit and dress shoes. I don't know enough Macedonian yet to ask him what he used to do, but he doesn't look like someone who's been a gevrek seller all his life.

A funny thing happened while we were on the client visits. We had to take a mini-bus to the markets. Mini-buses are vans that run regular routes through Yerevan. As many people as possible stuff themselves into them. I'd been standing in the aisle, bent over double for about 15 minutes before I could get a seat. Then, once I finally sat down, there was a large bump and a screeching sound. The bus had hit a huge pothole that ripped the rear tire right off! Fortunately, we didn't have to wait too long for another mini-bus to come along.

Wednesday, I went to Vanadzor to visit the branch office there. Vanadzor is in the northern part of Armenia, about 2 hours from Yerevan. In 1988, a severe earthquake hit the city, destroying large sections of it. The city has yet to recover. There are neighborhoods where people are still living in houses made of shipping containers. They just cut a door and a couple windows out of the sides. It looks a bit like a trailer, but not even put together as well as that. Whole families are living in these conditions, without running water or electricity. There's no pavement, so their "houses" are standing in a sea of mud. The partner has some former clients in these neighborhoods. All of them defaulted on their loans because they were unable to repay them. But to preserve the professional image of the loan program, the promoters have to visit them to ask them to repay what they can, when they can. Inside, the container houses are as clean as they can be, and surprisingly warm, at least in the rooms with wood stoves. But they must be unbearably hot in the summertime. It's shocking to think that people have been living in these conditions for more than a decade.

Thursday, I went to Gyumri, another city in the north that was also destroyed by the earthquake. There are the same neighborhoods of container houses, damaged buildings that have never been repaired and buildings that have been abandoned by people who left after the earthquake. The clients in Gyumri are some of the poorest that the partner works with. Some of them started out with loans of only \$30. Yet Gyumri is also one of the most active and fastest growing branches, and it has large, busy marketplaces. Somehow, people are managing to get by.

I had to wonder, as I was visiting these clients in the marketplace, how they manage to keep their businesses competitive. You can walk past entire rows of stalls where all the vendors are selling basically the same things. Most of the people who sell textiles and manufactured goods even buy them in the same place. Nearly every client we spoke to mentioned that they purchase their inventories from a city just across the Georgian border, where goods are cheaper. There doesn't seem to be much differentiation in product among the items they sell, so I imagine that there can't be much variation in prices, otherwise all the business would go to the vendors with the lowest prices. It also makes me wonder how people shop. You could go to half a dozen stands and find the same item at similar prices. There's a bewildering array of stands you could choose to buy from, and they all looked the same to me. I guess that people must have their

favorites, like the promoters, who buy only from their clients. Every client we spoke to said that they never have a week go by without turning some profit, even during the slow season.

I really enjoyed visiting the clients in Gyumri. They were so enthusiastic about and appreciative of the microfinance program. Two of them – little round grandmothers in babushkas – said thank you and kissed me. One of them wanted me to marry her grandson. He wanted to go to America. Some of them wanted to give me gifts from their stands. It's overwhelming, sometimes, the generosity of people who have so little to give.

I was glad to be able to get out of Yerevan on the trips to Gyumri and Vanadzor. Armenia is a beautiful country, in a stark way. The road to Gyumri was interesting. The landscape is very rocky and barren. And every so often we'd pass under exposed pipes that cross above the road, or a giant "heroic" sculpture, or some landmark created in the "Soviet oppressive" style. It's like time ground to a halt in Armenia when the Soviet Union collapsed. Try to imagine: their economic system was suddenly undermined, repressed conflicts with their neighbors suddenly flared up, and then there was a devastating earthquake in the northern region. Donors and development agencies consider "earthquake relief" an immediate need in the north . . . 12 years later. Trivia corner: only Israel receives a larger amount of direct aid per capita from the US than Armenia (due to the strength of the Armenian-American lobby in the States). It's not immediately obvious where that aid is going. For instance, a Spanish company built a water park outside of Yerevan, while at the same time, thousands of people in the city have no access to running water.

The drive from Vanadzor was gorgeous. Straight over and through the mountains. It was late in the day and the sunset was just starting to color the sky. There were deep shadows on the mountains, and the road was steep and winding. We came over a small hill just outside a little town and suddenly found a shepherd with about two dozen sheep and a couple of goats in front of it. (Not that it's an autobahn, but this is sort of the equivalent of a highway in Armenia – imagine how strange it would be to see a herd of sheep on I-95!) There's this one particularly gorgeous section of the road, coming up over the last ridge before reaching Yerevan. The road finally changes from driving up into the mountains to driving down into the lower area where Yerevan sits. Just when I was getting tired of seeing mountains all around, we crested the top of the ridge and were looking down over a broad, high plain of snow, tinged rosy and golden in the distance, like the sky. Ahead of us, the mountains opened up, and off in the distance, I could see the cone of Mount Ararat, rising out of (as cliched as this sounds) purple mists. Seriously, they were purple. It was breathtaking.

So Armenia is on my list of places to return to, preferably at some point when it's significantly warmer than 20 degrees. The Sevan Lake area is supposed to be beautiful. Getting here is a bit of a nuisance, but I would be happy to come back.