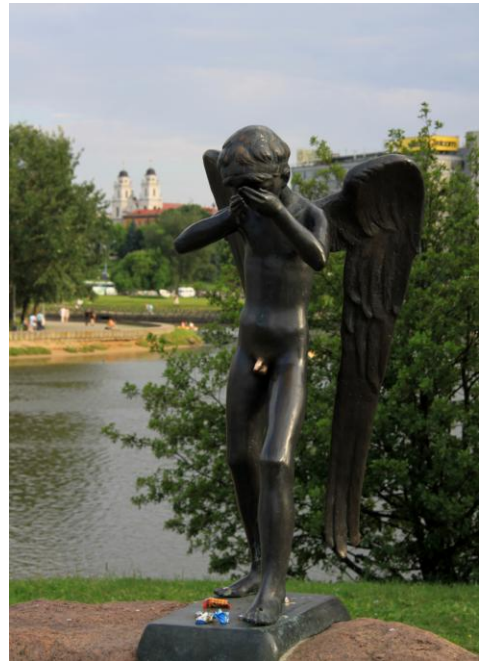


Belarus and the Caucasus

Belorussian Roubles

June 12th, 2010. Minsk, Belarus

The Belorussian Roubles is an amusingly devalued currency. Our flights from Brussels to Minsk cost us over one million Belorussian Roubles, the first time I have spent over a million of anything. Our dinner out at a great Japanese place – we dropped a 100,000 Rouble note. The lower denominations have so little value that coins have dropped entirely out of circulation. Walking along the gardens of the Svislach River we visited the Afghan War Memorial (1979-89 war) on the Island of Tears. A small fountain outside has a crying winged boy, the grieving and powerless guardian angel of Belarus. A local tradition appears to consist of rubbing the angel's penis and throwing money into the pond at this feet. Of course, with the absence of coins, the wishing well is full of soggy 20 Belorussian Rouble notes, in various stages of decay.



The fabulously wealthy Radziwills

June 13th, 2010. Nesvizh, Belarus

There is wealthy, and then there is Radziwiłł wealthy. The Radziwiłłs owned half of Belarus for over 500 years, with 23 palaces, 426 towns, 2032 estates and 10,053 villages. This made them richer than the Royal family, and far more long-lived – as Belarus was conquered over and over, the only stability was the wealth of the Radziwiłł family. One story of the Radziwiłłs includes a fabulously decadent dinner party. The guests went to bed satisfied, but concluding that the excesses of the Radziwiłł family were merely legend. When they woke up, they looked outside onto the summer estate to find it seemingly covered with snow – actually it was a layer of salt, bought in at enormous expense from Poland – with the Radziwiłłs racing around the winter-land on carriages pulled by bears.



We came to Belarus to see two of the Radziwiłł's estates, Nesvizh Castle and Mir Castle. They are called castles, but with the Radziwiłł's habit of colluding with any conquerors in order to keep their wealth, they were rarely used for defence and both have been remodelled into decadent residential palaces. There appears to be remarkably little non-Russian tourism to

Belarus. We made separate inquiries into getting a Belorussian visa, booking a tour and reserving a hotel, and in each case the same tourist information officer, Lyudmila, answered our inquiries. When we booked an English-speaking tour around Belarus, we expected a large mini-bus full of people, instead we had a taxi driver and a personal guide, Natasha, who told us that she only gets non-Russian speakers 3-4 times a month.

Nesvizh Castle was owned by the Radziwiłłs from 1533. From 1582 Mikołaj Krzysztof "the Orphan" started to convert the castle into a renaissance-baroque palace, surrounded by gardens and lakes. The palace was sacked in 1706 during the Great Northern War, but the Radziwiłłs survived and built it up again, even larger and more decadent. In 1770, the Russians seized the castle, and the famous Radziwiłł library was moved to Saint Petersburg, but again the Radziwiłłs reclaimed the site and restored it, until they were finally expelled for good by the Red Army in 1939.

Mir Castle was built by Duke Ilinich around 1500, and in 1568 it fell into the hands of Mikołaj Krzysztof "the Orphan", who was "adopted" by the wealthy, and childless, owner of the Castle. The Orphan was less concerned with defence than the original builder, and finished off the castle in Renaissance style. A dark chapter in the Castle's history was its use during WWII as a ghetto for the local Jewish population. As one of the most Jewish countries in the world before WWII (most cities in Belarus were around 50% Jewish), some of the most horrendous mass murders of the war occurred here.



A bastion of tyranny in Europe
June 13th, 2010. Minsk, Belarus

Belarus is the pariah of Europe for the authoritarian control of its leader, Alexander Lukashenko (the other leader of an authoritarian state, the Pope, is considered a moral leader). United States Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice even labeled Belarus one of the six nations of the global "outposts of tyranny". There is something to this – Belarus is a profoundly undemocratic state, and yet Belarus has challenged my concepts on the importance of democracy.



Despite not being a functional democracy, Belarus struck us as being a rather nice place to live. People on the street appeared happy, society is comparatively liberal (the authoritarian control of Lukashenko over the economy is not extended over the private life of its citizens) and our guides felt comfortable arguing politics with each other in our presence. Minsk was surprisingly clean and beautiful, with grand buildings, well manicured parks throughout the city and artistic statues along the main boulevards. Even the Soviet Era apartment blocks ubiquitous in the outer suburbs of post-Soviet capitals were freshly painted and well maintained, rather than being in a crumbling and decrepit state as is common across the former USSR. Out in the small towns the housing was not as polished, but we did not see any third world hovels, and, indeed, the houses would not be out of place in any small town in Australia. The safety rating of Belarus on the Australian government website is the highest level – above that of Belgium!

So what is the purpose of democracy? George W. Bush had a naïve and simplistic view, that democracy was an end in and of itself, believing that the simple institution of democracy would bring about all the positive traits of civilization. Ronald Reagan, on the other hand, had a much more cynical view, in that democracy was only desirable when it resulted in the election of people he liked, thus justifying the overthrow of democratically-elected left-wing governments in South America.

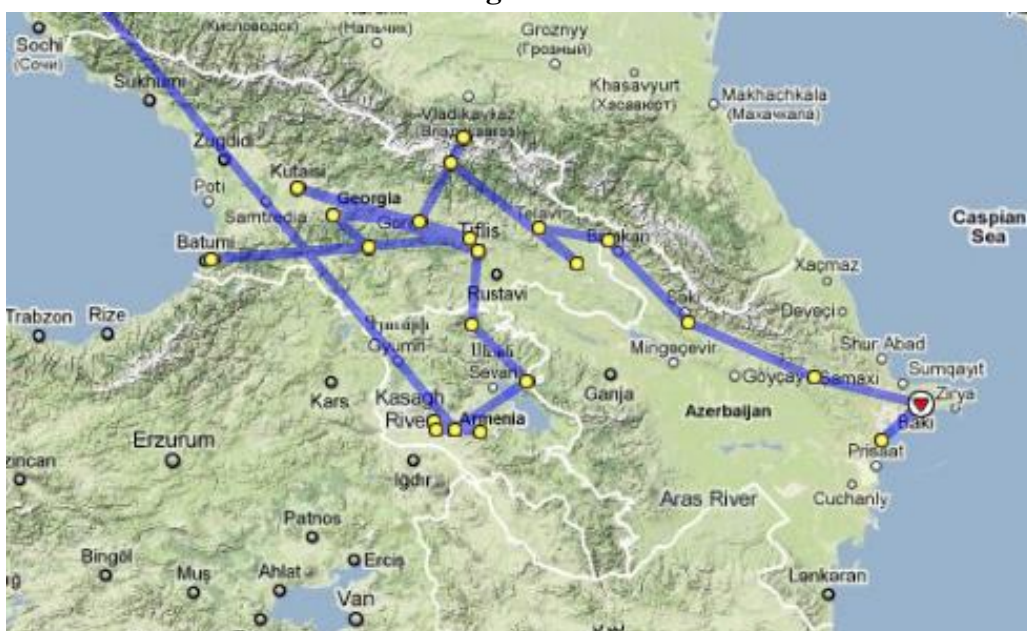
I can see two advantages of democracy. The first, and strongest, advantage is that democracy can increase the likelihood of a stable state that respects the rights of its citizens. The second advantage would be the less tangible benefit of allowing people to have control over the political aspect of their lives.



But how do these advantages stack up when unstable democracies like Iraq and Colombia are compared to non-democratic stable countries like Cuba, China or Belarus? Democracy is not the first step that inevitably leads to civilization. Other aspects of statehood are arguably more important – having a judiciary independent of the executive, the development of an independent and thoughtful media, consistent provision of state services in health and education, protection of individual rights through a Constitution (which is, in effect, profoundly undemocratic in that it prevents the rights of the minority to be infringed by the majority), and so forth. A state that succeeds in all or most of these aspects is going to provide its citizens with all the necessities for a civilized life – and it is hard to imagine these citizens turning to rebellion just because they don't have the vote, as long as they have food, jobs and health and education for their children. After all, in many established democracies enormous effort is required by the government to get a bare majority of citizens to even turn up and vote. Perhaps democracies are like trade unions – victims of their own success. Trade union membership is greatest when conditions for workers are worst – and success in improving conditions decreases incentive to join a union. Likewise, the push for democracy is highest when conditions are worst, when the people change the state so that it meets most of their criteria they have less incentive to turn up. Thus, while democracy may aid the development of a civilized state, that is not to say that a civilized state cannot develop without democracy, and if an undemocratic state reaches this condition the drive for democracy may be weak.

How about the second advantage of democracy, allowing people to have control over the political aspect of their lives? At face value, the power of democracy is unarguable – self-determination is an intrinsic right. But does democracy actually equate to self-determination? Democracy could equally be considered the giving up of individual self-control to that of the whole population. An individual voting in the US has around 0.000001% control over the government, if “control” is the right word when the two dominant parties are indistinguishable on many issues and the political media is superficial. Furthermore, not all votes are equal – a hand-full of voters in Ohio and Florida heavily swing outcome, while 100 million US residents have no right to vote, either due to age, criminal record, immigration status or due to living in a territory rather than a state. As an immigrant in the US, my voting power was identical to that I would have in Belarus – zero. The greatest power in a democracy is in fact not the vote, but having influence over the voting pattern of others. Perhaps it is being too dogmatic to assume that democracy is the only viable model to a civilized state. That said, a vote is a right that I treasure and always exercise.

Travels through the Caucasus



The dusty inferno

June 14th, 2010. Yerevan, Armenia

The sun is hammering the colour out of the sky, parching the dirt which rises into the sky, further bleaching the landscape. The earth itself looks like the sun has beaten it into submission, so dry and compacted that even the shreds of dead grass pushing up through it seem remarkably improbable. The heat is not unfamiliar to Australians, but the ramshackle houses don't fit the climate. The hard Soviet concrete and stone stand like the exposed cliffs of a desert mountain, but inbetween the stone blocks stand wooden houses that look like they belong to the tropics of South-East Asia, where poverty and climate combine to rot away the timbers, before being baked to preservation under the harsh Caucasian sun.

In the hard light of summer, Yerevan struck me as being the twin of developing cities across north Africa and the Middle East. In winter, when the biting cold grips the country, I'm sure the contrast

could not be greater, but today Armenia could have passed for Morocco, Egypt or Jordan. The contrast within the position of the people must be even greater, between those baking in the heat of run-down hovels and those wearing designer clothes and ordering frosted fruit juices in the shaded cafes that seem to line every street. Fortunately, while the country is hard, Armenians have been soft and generous to us.



Touring the Armenian Brandy factory

June 15th, 2010. Yerevan, Armenia

In Armenia, cognac refers to Ararat, the premium Armenia brandy developed in 1887. The developer of the brand was far-sighted not only in bringing French brandy making to Armenia, but also in making use of stealth marketing tactics, hiring handsome and rich men to travel around Europe and to try ordering Armenian brandy in all the most expensive restaurants. The tactic obviously worked, as Armenian brandy developed a following in the best circles. Winston Churchill was a famous proponent, ordering 360 bottles of aged brandy every year, which he attributed to his longevity. During Stalin's reign, Churchill reportedly noticed a drop off in the quality of the brandy. On ringing the factory he found out that the chief distiller had been sent to the Siberian gulags, whereupon he promptly phoned Stalin and insisted on a reprieve. The chief distiller was not only released from the Gulags, he was granted a medal of "Socialist Hero". His first task back in the job was to blend a "Siberian strength" brandy, smooth and 50% alcohol, to warm his colleagues left behind in the Gulags.

The Yerevan Brandy Factory has had some very notable tourists on its premises. One of the traditions of the factory is to reward any visiting Presidents with their own personal barrel and their own weight in bottled brandy. According to our guide, when Alexander Lukashenko, the President of Belarus, visited, the President's bodyguards used their feet to weigh down the scales of the President, to ensure a little bit of extra brandy. The owner wisely decided to treat it as a complement

to the brandy. Boris Yeltsin took a great interest in the personal brandy barrel reserved for him (the tradition is to preserve a full barrel, from which the President or any of their future descendants can request bottles at any time), asking about its age. When informed of the tradition to start a fresh barrel, he mournfully complained that he'd die before it was worth drinking – and he was right. A final barrel is the “Peace Barrel”, reserved for opening on the day that a peace treaty is finally signed between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh issue.

We finished up with a brandy tasting session. Unfortunately, I think I agree with Tsar Nicolas of Russia, who started the Russian tradition of drinking brandy with a slice of lemon – not to accentuate the flavour, but rather so that everyone would assume the sour face he was pulling was due to biting into the lemon, rather than distaste for the decadent drink.

Noah's Ark, and other Just So Stories

June 16th, 2010. Ejmiatsin, Armenia

The Etchmiadzin Cathedral lays claim to being the state-established oldest church in the world, being built by Saint Gregory the Illuminator in 301-303, when Armenia became the first country in the world to adopt Christianity as the state religion. It still remains the most holy site in the Armenian Church and is the seat of the Catholicos, the head of the Holy Armenian Apostolic Church.

Among the holy collection of relics within Etchmiadzin Cathedral are a fragment of the “true cross”, the right arm of John the Baptist, and the spear head of the “holy lance”. Our guide informed us that while five other churches may claim to have the spear head of the “holy lance”, they are all fakes and only the Armenian version has been “scientifically proven” to be the actual holy lance (funny how religion tries to co-opt the credibility of science, when it isn't busy trying to destroy it). She claimed that the spear had been brought to Armenia straight from the crucifixion in the first century, actually, a crusader, Peter Bartholomew, had a “vision” in 1098 that told him the spear head was buried in St Peter's Cathedral in Antioch, when he then dug up and pawned to the Armenian Church.

My favourite, however, was the piece “Noah's Ark” which they claimed to be preserved in the church. Incidentally, one of the myths of the name Yerevan comes from the Noah myth, with Noah landing on Mount Ararat and exclaiming “Yerevats!” (“it appeared!”), of course the Armenians know that Noah spoke Armenian). How can a slow corruption of the Urartian military fortress called Erebuni, founded in 782 BCE, compare to that story? The Noah's Ark myth is such a wonderful illustration of the veracity of the Bible. Beyond claiming that Mount Ararat is the highest point of land on the globe (it is almost as if the writer was a stone-age chieftain using local knowledge and mores, poaching an older myth from the Epic of Gilgamesh, rather than receiving divine inspiration), the absurdities in the claims of the two-by-two animals on the ark are delightful. My favourite must be the design of the ark as described by Hippolytus, with three stories – the lowest for wild beasts, the middle for domestic animals and the top for humans. Best of all, Noah built a fence of sharp stakes down the



middle of the ark to separate the male animals from the female animals – apparently, the ark meant to preserve all animals was not a place for mating!

The Armenian Genocide

June 17th, 2010. Yerevan, Armenia

The Tsitsernakaberd Memorial is dedicated to the more than one million victims of the Armenian Genocide, during the last stages of the Ottoman Empire and during the Great War period. The most brutal government minister coordinating the systematic eradication of the Armenian population was Enver Pasha. A savage war-monger, Enver Pasha pushed the Ottoman Empire into the Great War, by allowing German warships through the Dardanelles, without the approval of his government. He followed this up by an ill-planned attack on the Russian Army in the Caucasus. His army nearly destroyed, he blamed his defeat on the local Armenian population, who had sympathies with the Russians, and started his eradication plans. Enver Pasha was so savage in his eradication that he recruited psychotic killers from prison to run his “Special Organisation”. The new Turkish



government court-marshaled for “plunging the country into war without a legitimate reason, forced deportation of Armenians and leaving the country without permission”, and sentenced him to death, but he managed to escape.

Today the Turkish government has retreated somewhat from this position, acknowledging the wide-spread death of the Armenian people within the Ottoman Empire, but denying that it was part of a deliberate intent to eradicate and instead characterising it as part of the intra-ethnic violence of the Empire in its closing hours. This retreat from recognising the genocide is the overwhelming reason for the closed border between Armenia and Turkey. Unfortunately this issue does not appear to be dying down with time, instead the positions appear to be becoming more and more entrenched on both sides. The official tour guide of Tsitsernakaberd even went so far as to tell us that the 2002 conversion of an empty Armenian Church into a Mosque was part of the ongoing cultural genocide of Armenians being carried out by the current Turkish government.

Geghard and Garnj

June 17th, 2010. Geghard, Armenia

We visited two ancient temples today. The first was the monastery of Geghard, carved out of the rock in the mountains of Kotayk. The site was considered sacred since pre-Christian times, due to the trickle of a tiny stream within the inner caves, with the original temple demolished when St Gregory the Illuminator came in the 300s CE and started erecting Churches.

The second was Garnj Temple, a Classical temple built to the Roman God Mithras by King Tiridates I of Armenia after a visit to Rome (probably funded by Emperor Nero) and the declaration of Armenia as a province of Rome. The temple was nearly entire destroyed by Tamerlane's army in 1386 and a major earthquake in 1679, with the reconstruction in the 1970s using 70% new basalt to reproduce the original classical design.

A perfect day in the mountains of Armenia

June 18th, 2010. Amberd, Armenia

Yerevan may be one of the world's oldest continuously-inhabited cities, dating back to 782 BCE, but there is relatively little of historic interest there today, and I was very happy to be leaving the city behind and heading up into the mountains of western Armenia. We drove up through the high plains, with a striking resemblance to the plains of Iceland, too cold for trees, with just sparse grass and rock. In winter the plains are abandoned, but with the spring grasses Yezidi Kurds had set up tent villages and were grazing their sheep and cattle. Further up it was too mountainous for grasslands, and in the absence of grazing beautiful wildflowers covered the hills, with vibrant reds, yellows, blues and purples.

It was a perfect day for wandering around on the mountain tops, with the warm sun, the brilliant wildflowers and the stunning scenery of deep gorges and distant rivers. The addition of the ruins of Amberd Fortress was the icing of the cake, a shell of a castle, founded in ~800 CE by the House of Kamsarakan and upgraded 400 years later by the House of Pahlavuni. A small church, the Church of Surb Astvatsatsin, was added in 1026. The castle was used as a summer residence for the Kings of Armenia until it was destroyed by the Mongols in 1236. We topped off a delightful day with lunch in Oshakan village, an afternoon swimming in Yerevan and dinner accompanied by the unique sounds of the Duduk.



Armenian churches

June 19th, 2010. Chambarak, Armenia

We saw churches across Armenia today, from the Turkish border to the shores of Lake Sevan. We started with Khor Virab, the 7th century monastery where Saint Gregory the Illuminator (the patron-saint of Armenia) is said to have been imprisoned for 13 years by the Armenian King Trdat III, as Gregory was the son of Anak, the man who assassinated the previous king. We visited the deep dungeon underneath the monastery where Gregory is alleged to have been kept, until God turned the king mad, such that he started crawling around like a beast. According to local legend, the King's sister had a dream that only Gregory could restore the King, so he was released and the King duly restored to humanity. In return, the King converted the entire country to Christianity, in 301 CE, making Armenia the first country to institute Christianity as a state religion. After his death, Saint Gregory must have been dismembered, as his head is claimed to be in Italy, his right hand in Lebanon, and we saw what was claimed to be his left hand at Echmiadzin a few days ago.

We followed up the monastic tour with a sampling of what is said to be the best wine in Armenia, at Areni village. The dry red was tolerable, the semi-dry was insufferably sweet and the rosé stripped the throat like turpentine. Perhaps a sign of the quality of the winery is that the bulk is purchased in reused coke bottles, especially as it is close to the Iranian border and the incongruous cover allows importation of a forbidden vice. Presumably the border guards are not overly strict, as a Sprite bottle filled with red wine and recapped with a Fanta lid hardly seems like James Bond-esque subterfuge.



Noravank, an Armenian Apostolic monastery built in 1339, was notable for the unique entrance, with stepped ornamentation on the façade being used as a stairway to the main door, in order to prevent entry by animals, high up in the wild mountains. It was the final work of the famous sculptor Momik, who fell from the roof and died in the final stages of the construction. We drove over Selim Pass, with its perfectly preserved caravansari from the medieval Silk Road, before finally reaching Lake Sevan. At Lake Sevan the partially completed shells of Intourist Hotels silently demonstrate the crippling effect that the dissolution of the USSR had on the Armenian economy.

The Monastery of Haghpat

June 20th, 2010. Haghpat, Armenia

Even after an exhaustive tour of churches in Armenia, Haghpat was something special. The complex was founded by Saint Nishan in 966 CE, during the reign of King Abas I. The monastery includes several churches, a cathedral, a meeting hall and a mess hall for the monks. Everything is perfectly preserved after a

thousand years without any restoration, as the complex survived each tragedy to befall the country. One of the most charming aspects of the complex is the large populations of Swifts that inhabit the otherwise empty building, swooping in and feeding their clutch of hungry chicks in the spherical nests the birds make out of spit and mud.

Tbilisi

June 20th, 2010. Tbilisi, Georgia

Tbilisi (pronounced thee-lee-see) was quite a surprise after Yerevan. Barely 250km apart, the two capitals are chalk and cheese. Yerevan looked and felt like a Middle Eastern city, while Tbilisi, surprising me, feels like a decidedly European city. There are strong hints of Prague and Saint Petersburg, intricate buildings full of character in the old town, monumental palaces and artistic flairs in the new town. Georgia has embraced the West fully – in case it wasn't obvious from the buildings and the commercial orientation, they put it on signs for us "Our foreign policy priority is the integration into NATO".

The old town of Tbilisi

June 21st, 2010. Tbilisi, Georgia

Today we walked around the old town of Tbilisi, the core of houses and monuments that have been preserved since the founding of the city in the 5th century by Vakhtang Gorgasali. In the centre of the old town is the bath district, where hot sulfurous springs rise from the ground. According to myth, King Gorgasali was hunting in the forest with a falcon, when it caught a pheasant. Both birds fell into a spring and died from burns received in the water. The King was so impressed with the hot water that he decided to build a city on the location. Also within the old town are the Narikala fortress, guarding the hill top, Anchiskhati Church, Sioni cathedral, the Church of Metekhi, a mosque and a synagogue (one of the few places in the world where churches of three religions stand on the same street).



My favourite part of the day, however, was stumbling across a boy's choir, dressed in traditional Georgian garb and practicing Georgian Polyphonic Chant, the unique quintave song native to Georgia.



Georgian polyphonic chanting (1).m4a



Georgian polyphonic chanting (2).m4a



Two improbable myths

June 22nd, 2010. Mtskheta, Georgia

In the Georgian State Museum we saw what was claimed to be the face of Christ. According to our guide and local legend, a Georgian painter went to Jerusalem in order to paint Jesus. He followed Jesus around and tried to paint him, but the paint would never stick to the canvas (kind of like vampires and mirrors, I guess). He asked Jesus about the problem, and Jesus took a cloth and pressed it to his face, leaving a perfect image of the face of Jesus (presumably inverted, but that may be over-thinking the story). That night, the painter was outside the city walls and worried someone would steal his magic cloth – so he hid it under a wood pile. Low and behold, in the morning the image had transferred from the cloth to the wood, which he then carried to Georgia and presumably sold for a lot of money. So for anyone who wants to know what Jesus looked like, gazing upon this image shows a perfect representation of his face. Coincidentally, Jesus looked rather Georgian, but with disproportionately large eyes, a lot of facial hair and a nose that appears to start in the middle of his forehead. The museum curator was rather more prosaic, and described the wood as an early form of wax painting from the fourth century.

Our second improbable myth for the day was in Svetitskhoveli Cathedral in Mtskheta, the spiritual heart of Georgia. The foundation myth of the church involves a Georgian Jew from Mtskheta named Elias, who was supposedly in Jerusalem when Jesus was crucified. He bought a robe from a Roman soldier and brought it back to Georgia. When he presented the robe to his sister Sidonia, she immediately died (overwhelmed by the emotion). Sidonia was later buried still clutching the robe, which could not be removed from her grave. Several hundred years later, St Nino came to Georgia

and converted the King of Georgia to Christianity, who forcibly converted the rest of the country in 317 CE. When he decided to build a cathedral he chose the grave of Sidonia as the site, only to find an enormous cedar tree growing in the location. They naturally chopped the cedar tree down to make seven columns, and the seventh column made from the tree levitated and floated in the air by itself, leaking magical fluids that cured all diseases. Rather than keep this miracle active for all to see, St Nino conveniently performed a miracle by prayed for the magical column to come down to rest (no wonder there are so many saints if the threshold for miracle working is making a wooden beam **not** levitate magically).

Jason and the Argonauts

June 22nd, 2010. Kutaisi, Georgia

Kutaisi is the mythic home of the Golden Fleece, sought by the famous Jason and his Argonauts. Like many classical myths, each player in this tragic tale is somewhat contemptible. The tale of Jason starts with the evil Pelias, a power-hungry lord who killed his brother, the king, and all his brother's descendents, missing only the infant Jason. Years later when Jason returned to claim the throne Pelias said, "To take my throne you must go on a quest to find the Golden Fleece." So Jason gathered up a crew of heroes and set sail on his ship the *Argo* to Kutaisi, the ancient capital of the Kingdom of Colchis (interestingly, the basis for the "golden fleece" may be a Georgian tradition of collecting alluvial gold in mountain rivers by using a sheep fleece). After many adventures across Greece and Turkey, Jason and the Argonauts arrived in Kutaisi and Jason claimed the Golden Fleece from King Aeetes of Colchis. King Aeetes promised him the fleece if he could perform three tasks: plow a field with fire-breathing oxen, sow the teeth of a dragon into the field and overcome the Sleepless Dragon. Jason (never the most heroic of the Argonauts) could never have achieved these tasks if Hera has not caused Aphrodite and Eros to make King Aeetes' daughter Medea fall in love with him. Medea gave Jason an ointment to protect him from the oxen's flames, taught him how to defeat the skeletons that would sprouts from dragon's teeth, and gave him a potion to finally cure the Sleepless Dragon's insomnia. She even killed her own brother Apsyrtys and chopped him into pieces to aid Jason's escape. Jason asked Medea to marry him, took her back to Greece and then dumped her for the politically connected Creusa, daughter of the King of Corinth (charmingly



telling Medea "don't blame me, it was Aphrodite who made you fall in love with me"). Medea then gave Creusa a cursed dress that stuck to her body and burned her to death, and Jason died lonely and unhappy, crushed by the rotting body of his own ship, the *Argo*.

The Autonomous Republic of Adjara

June 23rd, 2010. Batumi, Georgia

For such a small country, Georgia has a lot of autonomous regions (actually, Georgia is twice the size of Belgium, but much of the land is uninhabitable, so the population is half that of Belgium. There are three autonomous republics within Georgia. Abkhazia and South Ossetia have gone so far as to declare independence, and with the Russian military behind them and a sealed border with Georgia they are off our itinerary. The third region, the Autonomous Republic of Adjara, is, however, still within the loose control of Georgia, after a failed attempt at independence in 2004.

Under President Saakashvili, Georgia has been very keen to reduce the autonomy of these republics. Saakashvili succeeded in a show-down



with President Abashidze of Adjara in 2004, forcing Abashidze to back-down and leave the country. Since then the autonomy of Adjara has been reduced. This success perhaps went to the head of Saakashvili, resulting in the disastrous policy he ran with Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

The history of Adjara is a good example of the autonomy of the region. For nearly 400 years, Adjara had a different history to the rest of Georgia, being controlled by the Ottomans in 1614, the Russians in 1878 and the British in 1919. Until Georgian independence in 1991, there was in fact only a period of 8 months in 400 years in which Adjara was a part of an independent Georgia (from the 20th of July, 1920 to the 11th of March, 1921). The long period of Ottoman rule, in particular, left its imprint, with conversion of the population from Christianity to Islam and a shift in the language. The claim of Georgia over the autonomous regions in fact dates back to the Middle Ages, when the territory of Georgia not only covered modern Georgia and the autonomous regions, but also parts of Azerbaijan, Armenia, Turkey, Iran and Russia.

We spent our day in Adjara at Gonio fortress (a Roman-Ottoman fortress, first referred to by Pliny the Elder, in the 1st century CE) and wandering the sea-side cafes of Batumi – a charming tourist resort and cultural/economic powerhouse within Georgia.

From Kutaisi to Bakuriani

June 24th, 2010. Bakuriani, Georgia



We are staying in the town of Bakuriani, once the training ground of Winter Olympians for the USSR and now a ski resort. The town recently came to the popular attention after the death of one of its residents, luger Nodar Kumaritashvili, on the first day of the Vancouver Winter Olympics.

After starting the day in Kutaisi we visited three Georgian churches. The first was Bagrati Cathedral, built in 1003 CE and now undergoing extensive repairs. The second was Motsameta, a small church on a cliff side celebrating the bad decision of two Christian brothers to face death by torture rather than convert to Islam (presumably it didn't occur to them that they could just lie). The third was the complex of Gelati, founded in 1106 by King David (called "the Builder") and full of 12th century faded frescos over the walls and ceiling.

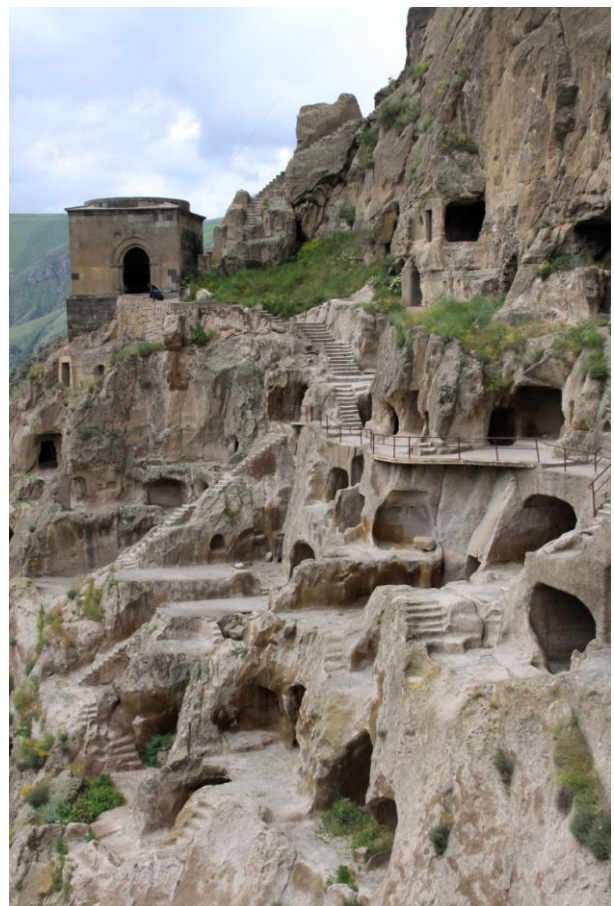
On the drive to Bakuriani we stopped off at a small village that specialised in pottery. In a small house surrounded by cows and dozens of small chicks running around we watched a local potter craft piggy banks and vases, before unsuccessfully attempting the same.

The cave town of Vardzia

June 25th, 2010. Vardzia, Georgia

Today we visited the cave town of Vardzia and Khertvisi Fortress. The cave town of Vardzia is said to date from 1185, when Queen Tamar of Georgia was riding through the valley with her Uncle. She wandered off to explore some caves, and when her uncle called out for her she shouted out "Vardzia" ("Here I am Uncle"). The caves were developed into a city, with 3000 caves over 19 levels. Most of these were destroyed by an earthquake in 1456, with only 550 caves remaining.

Khertvisi fortress is one of the oldest fortresses in Georgia, founded ~200 BCE. The fortress is old enough that it was destroyed by Alexander the Great on his campaign to the east. The present walls are much younger, built in 1354, but today the only inhabitants were a cluster of four cows, who for some reason had climbed up into the fortress and had taken up residence in one of the towers. As has been the case across rural Georgia, the cluster of houses around the fortress was teeming with farm life, with a pace of donkeys, a raft of turkey chicks and three adorable puppies who really liked to have their bellies scratched.





The occupation of Gori

June 26th, 2010. Gori, Georgia

We caught the train down from Bakuriani to Gori, to visit the Stalin Museum. As the birthplace of Stalin, the city abounds with Stalin's presence – the main street is Stalin Street, the Stalin Museum is almost the only tourist site and until 24 hours before we arrived a giant statue of Stalin stood in front of the town hall. This statue, one of the few giant Stalin statues that survived Krushchev's de-Stalinsation program, was taken down in secret in the early hours of the morning, to prevent the outcry that occurred when the newly independent Georgia tried to pull it down in 1991. The Stalin Museum is really one of memorabilia, rather than an objective look at the man who turned rural poverty-stricken Russia into an industrial powerhouse and murdered millions of people in designed famines and the Gulags. The museum was built just outside the house where Stalin was born, which now stands beneath what could best be described as a shrine. Next to the museum stands Stalin's personal plate-armoured train carriage, his sole form transport (as he refused to fly).

Gori is not only famous for producing one of the largest mass-murderers of all time, paranoid Stalin, but also as an epicentre of the recent South Ossetian War between Georgia and Russia. Despite the reflexively anti-Russian assumptions of the Western media, the situation in South Ossetia does not paint Georgia in a good light. Before the break-up of the USSR, South Ossetia operated as the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast, an autonomous region within the Georgian SSR. Despite different ethnicities, cultures and languages, Georgians and Ossetians lived rather peacefully side-by-side during Soviet times, with a high rate of interactions and intermarriages (interestingly, the same can be said of most large empires, where a shared nationality blurs the boundaries of ethnicity). Unfortunately, when the USSR dissolved, ethnic tensions throughout the Caucasus flared, as smaller ethnic groups wanted to take the opportunity to gain independence, and resisted being incorporated as minority regions within the newly formed states. Within months of Georgia declaring itself independent in 1991, South Ossetia declared itself an independent identity. With a much closer relationship with Russia (especially with the North Ossetians living just over the Russian border), ex-Soviet military units aided the South Ossetian separatists, allowing the

region to become de-facto independent, although officially still a part of Georgia. A large exchange of population made both Georgia and South Ossetian more ethnically homogenous, entrenching positions and reducing any chance for future reintegration.

This situation was maintained for the best part of twenty years. In 2006, South Ossetians had a referendum on independence, where 99% of voters supported full independence from Georgia. More than 85% of South Ossetians acquired Russian citizenship, allowing closer ties with North Ossetia in Russia, and Russian became the predominant second language of the region, far ahead of Georgian.

Everything changed on the night of the 7th of August 2008, when Georgia launched a large-scale military attack against South Ossetia. It still isn't clear why President Saakashvili decided to try to reclaim territory long-lost, but perhaps he was emboldened by his success in facing down the President of the Autonomous Republic of Adjara, when Russia did not intervene. For whatever reason, Saakashvili not only authorised Georgian troops to attack the position of the combined South Ossetian militia and Russian troops, but he personally commanded troops in battle, despite having no military experience.

Predictably, the Georgian military were outclassed, and the Russian troops defeated the attack and countered on the 8th of August, occupying Gori and destroyed a substantial proportion of the Georgian military's offensive hardware. Just as predictably, the response of Western media and government was superficial. Saakashvili, skilled at media manipulation, presented himself as David battling Goliath, even though he was the aggressor in the war and anti-democratic at home – during Saakashvili's rule, Freedom House downgraded Georgia's democracy ranking. George W. Bush even toyed with the idea of starting WWII, considering launching air strikes on the Russian military, before settling on issuing a laughably ironic statement: "Bullying and intimidation are not acceptable ways to conduct foreign policy in the 21st century." A year later, the independent report commissioned by the Council of the European Union (prepared by a group of 30 military, legal and history experts), analysed all the evidence and found that the Georgian strike into South Ossetia



“was not justified by international law” and that there was no evidence for the Georgian claim that Russia struck first. To be fair, the report also found that the Russian reaction to the Georgian attack was disproportionate. Unfortunately, the report did not also assess the hysterical response of Western media and governments, who happily parroted Georgian misinformation at the time.

The effect of that ill-advised venture can be seen across Georgia today. On the road between Tbilisi and Kutaisi we passed the refugee village from Georgians who fled Gori and the border region. Row upon row of identical small houses laid out on a grid pattern, covering a vast area. No roads, shops or employment opportunities, not a real city, just a holding area for displaced people. And yet, while many Georgian people can see the stupidity of Saakashvili in attacking South Ossetia, they do not see a resolution of the war, insisting that South Ossetia should be part of Georgia. I really can't stand to see historical claims to be used as justification for war. Yes, for a period of time a few hundred years ago, people in Georgia ruled over people in South Ossetia. Why should this give the President of Georgia today the right to cause death and mayhem in order to control South Ossetia today?



What now for Georgia?

June 26th, 2010. Gori, Georgia

Since the South Ossetian War, only a handful of countries have recognised the independence of South Ossetia. The blockade against recognition makes practical sense, in that most states uphold the grounds of territorial integrity, where only the state has the right to allow division rather than the right of self-determination existing for each people. Morocco doesn't want Western Sahara to be allowed to declare unilateral independence, Spain doesn't want Catalan to be allowed to declare unilateral independence, China doesn't want Tibet to be allowed to declare unilateral independence - and these countries consistently apply the same principle to other nations. Less understandable are those countries that treat Kosovo and South Ossetia as somehow different circumstances. The parallels between the two could hardly be more striking, both were once integrated into a larger multi-ethnic country, both ended up being a minority in a heavily nationalistic state after post-USSR statehood used defunct borders to define nations, and both have overwhelming majorities with a distinct culture and language that want independence. It is hard to find any principle of self-

determination theory that would allow a country to support Kosovo but not South Ossetia, or vice versa. Yet of the 65 countries that have recognised Kosovo, only one has recognised South Ossetia. Likewise of the 4 countries that have recognised South Ossetia, only one has recognised Kosovo. So kudos to Nauru for being the only country to consistently apply self-determination theory.

As I have been thinking about self-determination theory today, there is one strongly detrimental theory that jumps out to me. Self-determination promotes the fragmentation of countries into every smaller packages of humanity, divided by ethnicity, language and religion. Obviously the case can (and, I think, should) be made that this is the right of a community, but having a right does not always mean that using that right is a positive move. One of the striking features of large multi-ethnic countries is the high rate of interactions, internal migrations and intermarriages. When you look at countries such as the USSR, the Ottoman Empire, Yugoslavia, the Indian Empire and so forth, one notable feature is the relatively high rates of interactions and intermarriages across language and ethnic barriers. Whatever flaws these countries may have had, they did facilitate heterogeneity. And in each case, when the country was broken up into more homogenous nationalist blocks, ethnic tensions rose up into violence. As part of the USSR, South Ossetia was only 2/3rds Ossetian, but in the violence following the independence of Georgia ethnic Ossetians across Georgia migrated into South Ossetia, and Georgians in South Ossetia migrated into Georgia, leaving both regions far more homogenous than before. During the violence of the Partition of India, 15 million Hindus and Muslims migrated from mixed communities to generate more homogenous countries. At the breakup of the Ottoman Empire the Great Powers forced ethnic Turks and ethnic Greeks to migrate from Turkey and Greece to create homogenous states. The theory was that heterogeneous states have internal tension. That may be so, but internal tension is not always a bad thing. Being in a diverse state challenges the population to recognise that there are multiple ways to live, that acceptance of diversity works both ways. Besides, internal tension is clearly better than external tension. Muslims and Hindus may not have had a perfect relationship within the Indian Empire, but who would argue that the partitioned situation is better, with nuclear-armed Pakistan and India facing off across a border? What happened to Europe when the rise of ethnic nationalism created relatively homogenous states, where the State could command loyalty

from the people and the coincidence of political, language, ethnic and religious boundaries made it so much easier to identify "us" and "them"?



Today there are 192 members of the United Nations. Of these, 109 countries became sovereign only within the last 50 years, by splitting off from larger entities. In the same period there have been only a handful of unifications - Germany, Yemen, Vietnam, Tanzania and the UAE. A large part of my admiration for the European Union comes from the solution it poses to the conflict between self-determination and diversity. By reducing the isolating impact of national borders, the EU encourages migration, diversity and interaction, while at the same time allowing political self-determination. If Flanders split off from Belgium or Catalonia split off from Spain within the umbrella of the EU, it would not really be such a big deal in practical terms. Self-determination would not necessarily result in homogenisation. The EU allows individuals to have multiple non-overlapping identities, making the "us" vs "them" dichotomy difficult to maintain.

The torture of Prometheus

June 27th, 2010. Kazbegi, Georgia

Last night we drove up the Georgian military highway, the long winding road through spectacular mountain scenery that links Georgia to Russia (at least, it used to, until the border was closed). Working our way up into the Greater Caucasus the mountains were first covered in a blanket of dark green coniferous forest. Higher up we reached the alpine meadows, with a rolling plateau of grass populated by sparse herds of sheep and cattle. Above us further still loom craggy stone peaks of the highest mountains in Europe.

Today we drove up to Gergeti Trinity Church, partly way up Mt Kazbegi. We had the choice of hiking up or taking a LADA 4WD, and made the best choice ever in the 4WD. We got up to the plateau while the weather was picture perfect and had an opportunity to walk around on the plateau and picnic in the sun looking out into the spectacular mountains. We decided to head back when the weather turned and a storm started to roll in – just as the hikers were arriving up.

Mt Kazbegi is the scene of one of the most dramatic scenes in classical mythology, the torture of Prometheus (or Amirani, in the local variation). Prometheus was a Titan, the elder gods of the world, who chose to side with the Olympians during the Titanomachy and helped Zeus defeat the Titans. After securing victory for Zeus, Prometheus played a minor trick on him, placing two sacrificial offerings before him and allowing him to choose. Zeus chose bull bones wrapped in glistening fat over a side of beef hidden inside an ox's stomach, a foolish choice allowing humans to thereafter keep the meat for themselves after sacrifice to the gods. Enraged over his own superficial choice, Zeus punished humanity by taking from them the secret of fire. Prometheus, always the supporter of humans against the gods, giving humanity writing, mathematics, agriculture, medicine and science, stole back fire from Zeus. Zeus, seemingly never one for proportionate retaliation, punished men by creating Pandora, the first woman (seriously, what is the issue with religions always seeing women as a torment for men?), and punished Prometheus by chaining him to a rock on Mt Kazbegi. Prometheus was to be tortured for eternity by having an eagle eat his liver every day, to be regenerated every night, but fortunately Hercules killed the eagle and freed Prometheus.



As an interesting aside, Prometheus, the bringer of all gifts of civilization, also brought humanity sexual ambiguity, according to Aesop. "The answer lies once again with Prometheus, the original creator of our common clay. All day long, Prometheus had been separately shaping those natural members which modesty conceals beneath our clothes, and when he was about to apply these private parts to the appropriate bodies Liber [Dionysos] unexpectedly invited him to dinner. Prometheus came home late, unsteady on his feet and with a good deal of heavenly nectar flowing through his veins. With his wits half asleep in a drunken haze he stuck the female genitalia on male bodies and male members on the ladies. This is why modern lust revels in perverted pleasures." - Aesop's Fables #517. Somehow this story doesn't seem to be as popular as the Tortoise and the Hare, and so forth.

A loyal friend in Signaghi

June 28th, 2010. Signaghi, Georgia

Our highlight today was visiting the walled town of Signaghi. The 18th century walled town has been completely restored, giving it the shiny new look of a faux-medieval village in a theme park. Just after we arrived a small chocolate brown puppy found us, and escorted us all around the town, faithfully following us and waiting outside when we went into shops. To reward our little friend we feed her a salami, which she consumed with great joy, before heading off to Telavi.



Georgian wine

June 29th, 2010. Telavi, Georgia

Our final day in Georgia was spent visiting the wineries of the Kakheti region. We visited both a small scale home-brew place, where they had been making wine in their cellar for 300 years, in large vats buried into the ground, and a commercial export venture, which had operated for 500 years and made the semi-sweet red wine that was Stalin's favourite. For all that Georgian wine is famous, I found the home-brew stuff hideous, and even the commercial export was decidedly average, but then I'm a beer person rather than a wine person.

Azerbaijani border guards

June 29th, 2010. Lagodekhi, Georgia

Crossing the border from Georgia to Azerbaijan at Lagodekhi can be quite an ordeal. Georgia and Azerbaijan have very good relationships, but after seeing Armenian stamps in our passports we came in for extra scrutiny. Relations between Azerbaijan and Armenia are frosty, to say the least, with 20% of Azerbaijan's territory under occupation by Armenia (the region of Nagorno-Karabakh). Azerbaijan has responded by not only closing the border with Armenia, but banning the

import of anything Armenian into the country. The Lonely Planet even has a warning in it that the book tends to get confiscated at the border. They say they don't understand why, but it seems pretty obvious to me, they give Nagorno-Karabakh an independent section in the guide book, rather than listing it under Azerbaijan (for some inconsistency they list Abkhazia and South Ossetia under the Georgian chapter). Ahead of us a baggage search found some Georgian postcards, which resulted in an extensive conversation between the border guards as to whether the church depicted on the postcard was Georgian (acceptable) or Armenia (contraband). Looking back at my photos I'd be stretched to tell the difference. We inadvertently found a way to smuggle past the border guards – on opening a bag the border guard looked with mystification at a box of tampons, opening them up and trying to work out what they are. When the translator said a few quick words in Azerbaijani, the guard quickly shoved them back and waved the whole bag along without a thorough search.

Staying backstage in a Mugham Opera production

June 30th, 2010. Sheki, Azerbaijan

We stayed in Sheki in a converted caravanserai from the 18th century, once a trading centre for merchants working the Silk Route between the Caspian Sea and the Black Sea. When we arrived we found cameras set up and a choir assembled for a major performance, only to find out that there was an international folk music festival due to start that evening in our caravanserai. In the small courtyard where camel trains were once picketed, the young girls in the choir smiled and giggled while the Cossack-style dancers limbered up. Finally the important dignitaries filed in and took their seats and the music began. The high-light was undoubtedly a young man, with stress plastered over his face, who walked out into centre-stage to sing a solo Mugham ballad. He stood there and sang in an oddly metallic voice, moving a stretched hide against his face to change the echoes, in a song reminiscent of the Islamic call to prayer, but which really needs to be heard to be understood.

Our second night, after a day spent exploring the elaborate palace of Sheki, was the scene of a Mugham opera, with dancers using the room next door to ours to change costumes between acts, and people running around the hallways and stairs of the caravanserai while all was calm and perfect down in the courtyard.



Azerbaijani opera (Mugham).m4a



Azerbaijani opera (instrumental).m4a

The deserts of Azerbaijan

July 1st, 2010. Samaxi, Azerbaijan

In Sheki, Azerbaijan was geographically very similar to Georgia, with fertile valleys and wooded hills. As we drove from Sheki to Samaxi, however, the land became progressively flatter and drier, to form the semi-arid hills where the dead tombs of forgotten Kings lie. After Samaxi, Azerbaijan became a parched desert, with the molten sun beating down on bare rock for endless flat kilometers. The desert landscape really shows in a nutshell exactly why the Azerbaijani government are so sore

about having the region Nagorno-Karabakh, the most heavily forested in Azerbaijan, occupied by Armenia for the last twenty years.

Baku, old and new

July 2nd, 2010. Baku, Azerbaijan

New Baku is one of broad boulevards, amusement parks along the Caspian Sea and designer clothes stores and cafes in the city.

Old Baku reaches as far back as the Maiden's Tower, built sometime between the 7th and 15th centuries. There are two explanations behind the name "Maiden's Tower", once concerning a maiden who

threw herself to her death, rather than be forced to marry her father, and the other (more prosaic, but equally distasteful in concept) that it is so named as it has never been taken by force. The Palace of the Shirvanshahs, several preserved Caravanserais and the Gasimbey bathhouse finish off the 15th-16th century architecture of the city, with more recent additions in the 19th century from oil barons made rich by the first major industrial extraction of oil (including the Nobel brothers, the Rothschild family and Rockefeller). Outside the city, old oil wells litter the landscape like dead trees surrounded by oily sand, but within the city centre the oil wealth left behind stately mansions and grand public houses.



Mud volcanoes and petroglyphs

July 3rd, 2010. Qobustan, Azerbaijan

Today we visited the region Gobustan, famous for its mud volcanoes and petroglyphs. Mud volcanoes are low temperature volcanoes that burp and bubble mud rather than lava. Over half of all the thousand mud volcanoes in the world are on the Caspian coastline of Azerbaijan, with a special concentration in Gobustan. The mud volcanoes formed bubbling pimples on the surface of the desert plain, with slow motion mud flows and the occasional belch of mud flying through the air,



accompanied by the sound like a heavy smoker's cough. The methane bubbling up through the mud occasionally catches on fire (hence Azerbaijan, the land of eternal fire), making the site sacred to early Zoroastrians in Azerbaijan.

The petroglyphs of Gobustan are carved into the rock walls of the deep ravines that cut through the mountainous part of the region (Gobustan means "country of ravines"). The pictures of humans and animals date back from 3000 BCE to 40,000 BCE. Also carved into the rock at Gobustan is the most Eastern record of Latin script, engraved between 84 CE and 96 CE, by the Roman legion Legio duodecima Fulminata (Twelfth Lightning-Struck Legion), sent to guard the Eastern border of the Empire at its pinnacle.



Azerbaijan – an Islamic eye-opener

July 4th, 2010. Baku, Azerbaijan

Among many atheists there is a trend to rank Islam as representing the worst of religious excesses (conversely, Eastern religions tend to get off the lightest, at least among Western atheists). The rationale for this ranking appears rather weak. Clearly, it is very easy to spot abuses of religious power among the Islamic world, but the same can be said of the Christian world. Yes, there are Islamic terrorists, but equally there are many Christian terrorists - terrorism in Northern Ireland (more than 2000 killed), the Ku Klux Klan (a hundred years of terrorism), anti-abortionist terrorists in the US (on average 10 attempted bombings/arsons per year and five murders/assaults every year) and so forth. Historical acts of Christian violence would probably well and truly exceed that of Islamic violence - Crusades, witch burnings and the Spanish Inquisition are just the beginning.

So why does Christianity tend to get let off relatively lightly by many atheists? I think there are two major reasons. The first is that anyone receiving media in the Western world is exposed to what I'll call "the black man" effect. If someone is murdered by a black man, the media will constantly talk about the murder by "a black man", while if someone is murdered by a white man, the media will just talk about the murder by "a man". Likewise the reporting of any attempted bombing by an Islamic man will constantly mention his religion, while an attempted bombing by a Christian man

will rarely ever mention his religious identity, even when clearly linked to motivation (such as abortion clinic bombings). The second reason, perhaps, is observer bias. It is all too easy for an atheist living in a post-Christian country to look at the Islamic nations that are most frequently in the press (Iraq and Afghanistan) and say - "sure, religion is causing problems here, but look at what Islam is doing to girls in Afghanistan!" Certainly Islam has much to answer for in Afghanistan, and other countries, but using modern western Europe as the control Christian country is a farce: firstly, the control countries are largely post-Christian with a wall between Church and State; secondly the past record of these countries, when controlled by the Christian church, was appalling (even today, child rape stories are constantly leaking out of the Church); and thirdly the comparison does not take into account development status, stability and other (non-religious) factors that can influence the outcome. Religious abuses show much greater parity at the regional level - Islamic terrorism in Sudan competes with the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda (a major Christian terrorist organisation complete with child soldiers, massacres, mutilation, torture and rape) for the biggest death toll, genital mutilation of girls is practiced by Christians and Muslims across North Africa with equal frequency, Christian Ghana and Islamic Guinea both agree on horrific prison sentences for homosexuality, and so forth.

The other side of the argument is demonstrated by countries like Turkey and Azerbaijan. Turkey is often touted as the modern model of an Islamic country, with highly religious people but a staunchly secular state. To me this makes Turkey analogous to the US, while Azerbaijan is a better example of the modern European model. Both Turkey and Azerbaijan are secular states with largely Islamic populations, but unlike Turkey (which is highly religious), Azerbaijan must be the closest example we have of a post-Islamic state.

95% of the population is Muslim, yet this Islamic population guarantees religious freedom under article 48 of its Constitution and a recent Gallup Poll showed Azerbaijan to be one of the most irreligious countries in the world, with 50% of the population ranking religion as having "little or no importance in their life". Azerbaijan is an eye-opener because it is a country full of people who self-identify as Muslims, but don't let it get in the way of their life - just as western Europe is full of people who self-identify as Christians but don't let it dictate "morality". And this makes a major difference - Azerbaijan was the first democratic secular republic in the Muslim world, and granted women equal voting rights to men in 1918 - before the United Kingdom or the United States. In our week in Azerbaijan I only saw a bare handful of women wearing a headscarf and no men with the traditional Islamic beard. Local restaurants all served alcohol and pig-products, and couples strolling along the boulevard hand-in-hand or sitting down and kissing were commonplace. Azerbaijan is less religious and less conservative than neighbouring Armenia or Georgia, both Christian with a shared history. Perhaps the biggest eye-opener is that Azerbaijan is not exotic. It is just a normal country full of normal people doing normal things, an image I wish more people would see before making religious comparisons.

