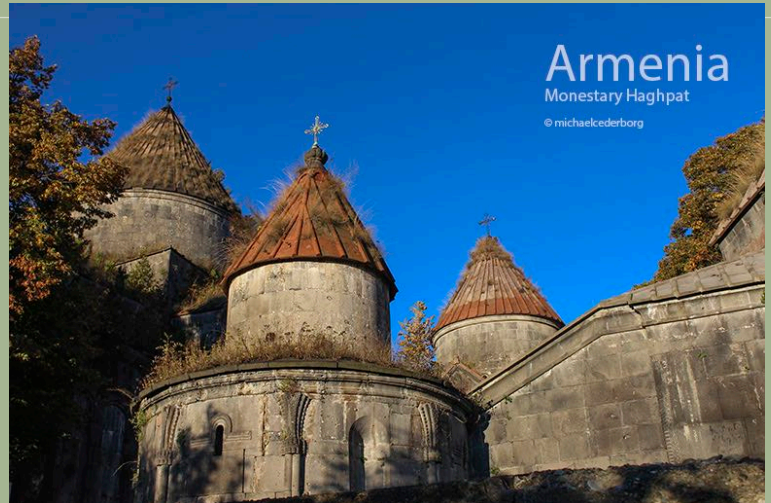
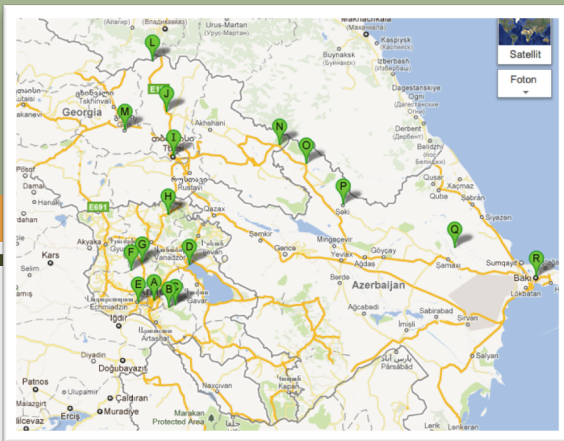


The Caucasus



Armenia, Georgia & Azerbajdzjan

2011



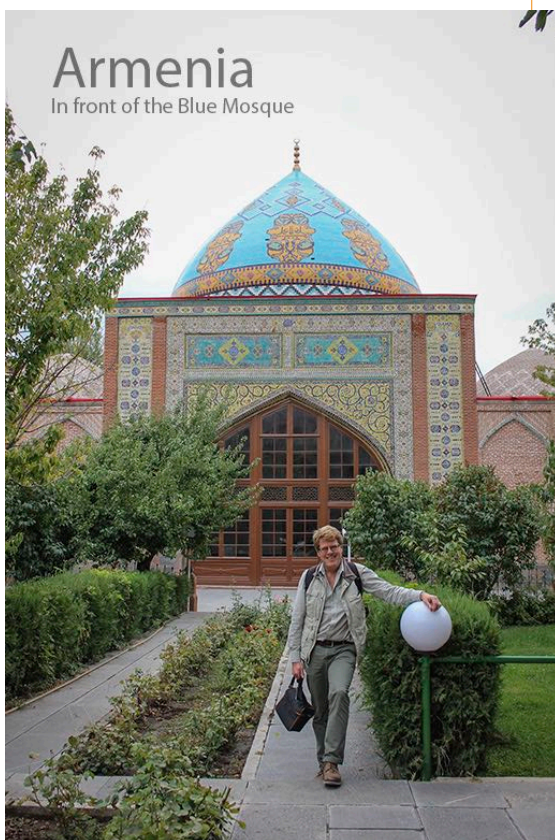
Yerevan, capital of Armenia

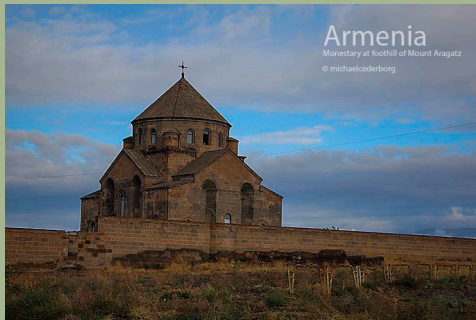
Five days in Armenia is of course not optimal, but I manage to cover the most important sights traveling further onto Georgia as well as Azerbaijan on this trip to the Caucasus. With respect for the fact that Armenia was the first country in the world to officially declare it Christian back in 201 A.D., there are just so many churches on can see in five days!

I believe I counted to nine Monasteries, churches and church ruins which I managed to cover. Many of these were built in strategic places with views overseeing valleys and rivers as well as high up in the mountains in order to detect enemies. These were quite often fought back in those days.

The capital, Yerevan, turned out to be quite a bleak experience with many of the present buildings from the Soviet era. These mixed however with also some lovely quarters with older buildings and winding alleys to discover. I especially enjoyed visiting the Blue Mosque and the local market, which I always make a point of visiting in any new place to which I arrive. They were also very proud of their new opera house.

The Matenadaran is the world's oldest archive of Greek, Persian and Arabic manuscripts and is worth a visit. The cathedral, Grigor Lusavorich, is a newly built cathedral which was inaugurated by the Pope.





Temple of sun & Monastery of Spear

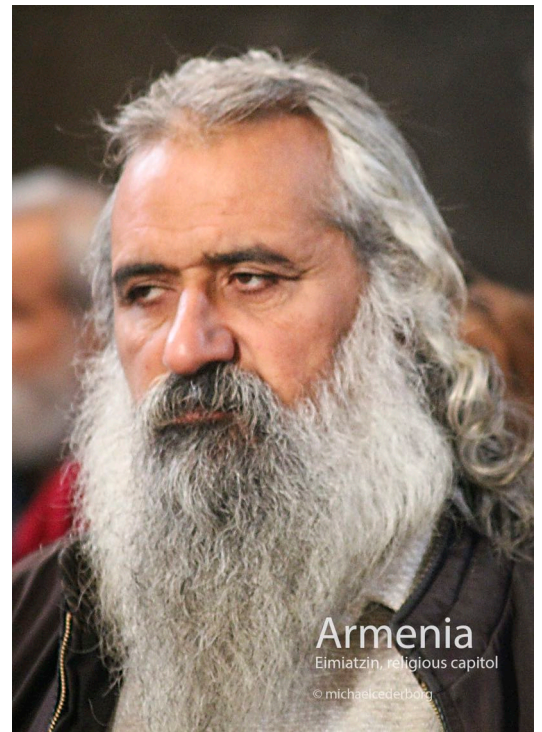
After having seen Yeravan it was time to move on in the direction of Nagorno-Karabakh. We stopped at two of Armenia's most famous monasteries – The temple of the sun in Garni and Geghard monastery located only a few miles from Garni. Rumors has it that it was in this monastery the lance which speared Jesus Christ was kept for many centuries. It has now been moved and is not on display for general public. Geghard was invaded and burnt down in 923 A.D. for the first time by the arabas, only to be rebuilt in the 14th century again. This at the time when the Mongols started coming here.

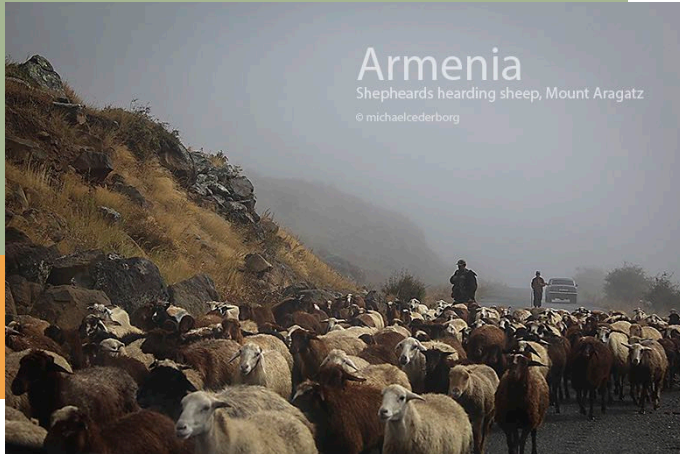
We continue our journey northbound towards two more magnificent monasteries. The Sevanavan, located high up on a hill overlooking the Sevan lake, and then also Ketcharis a short drive away.

In Yeravan, which I use as a base these first days, I noted a good restaurant called Tavern "Caucasus" in the city center. Armenia is the country with the largest number of people being either displaced or having left voluntarily to other countries. Many to the USA. The population has subsequently shrunk from some 3,7 to 3,0 million only in a few years.

People are not happy with the present government whom is not elected on democratic principles. There is widespread corruption and nepotism. Many of the few well managed companies have been taken over by government officials' rumors has it.

On a Sunday morning we travel south west from Yeravan passing by the historical mountain Ararat (5165 m). This is the holy mountain which Moses climbed to fetch the stone tablets. The mountain used to be part of Armenia, but was lost in the war with Turkey. This border is now closed in to Turkey. We stop in the old capital Eimiatzin, where also the archbishop is located. We stop at the church and join the Sunday service. There is a crypt to see and we also stay and enjoy the sermon as well as hearing the choir sing.



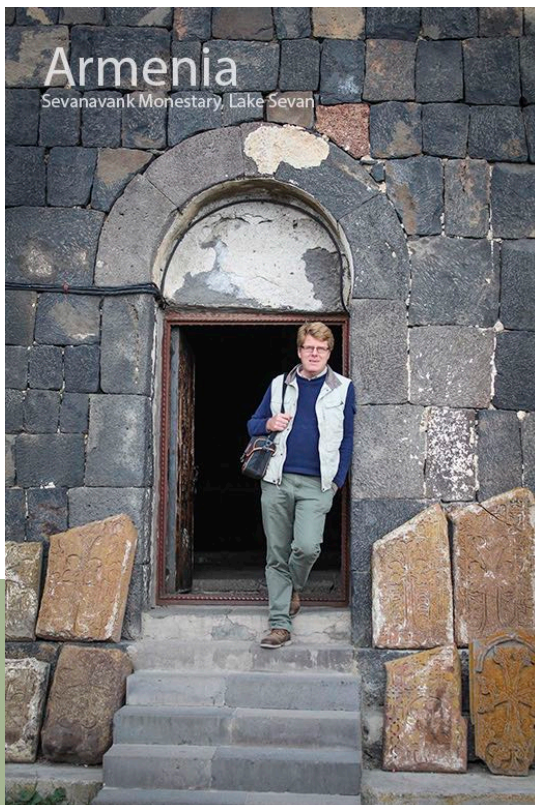


Mount Aragatz (4090 m) Armenia's highest mountain

The snow has just fallen and is currently at 2500 meters level. The peak behind me is **4090 meters – Mount Aragatz**. We continue up to ca: 3500 meter in lovely sunny weather.

Not far from here, we make tot **the Ambered Fortress**, which is hidden behind another mountain. The roads here are not the best and we have to make a break as a shepherd is blocking it for quite some time moving what must be well over 1000 sheep. I have never seen so many sheep in one herd before. We also try and reach as far up as we can, but have to leave our 4-wheel vehicle at 3000 meter and then walk up to 3500 meters. From here we can see the top.

After this stop we get down to 2200 meters in order to get to the road again. Now, the road is cleared of the shepherd and his sheep. We continue to the fortress which is located at a difficult to access place. This is by design of course. They have good views from the fortress in all directions. Even so, the Mongols, back in the 14th century, managed to overtake the castle, they were not able to get in, but waited long enough for the food supply to run out. This, according to history took three long months of waiting. When they eventually gave up and came out from the fortress, they were all killed. The Mongols were known for their cruelty.





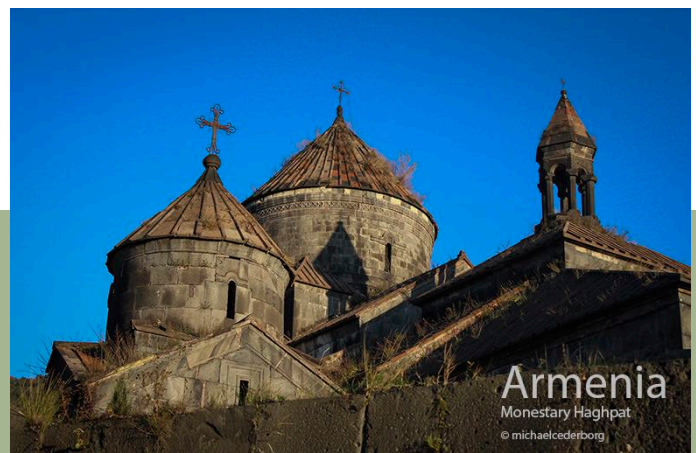
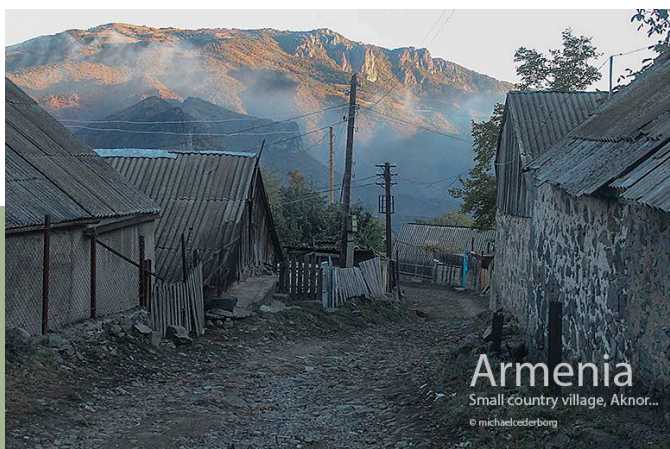
The village of Akner

Homestay with local farmer

After Mount Aragatz we drive north over through Spitak and Vandzor. The area around Spitak was destroyed back in 1987 when an earthquake killed over 60,000 people. Stopped in Aparan and bought my favorite food the godly good cheese-filled bread called Hatchiburi.

We have a long way to travel today, as we need to stop at two magnificent monasteries before coming to the village of Akner. The two monasteries are Sanahin and Hagpat. Hagpat is consider the national symbol of Armenia. When we arrived to Hagpat, at 6:30 PM it was closed. My guide however managed to get the bishop who came and opened up to us so we could see this place. Both Monasteries are protected by UNESCO and listed there. The roads in these parts are often in poor condition and also blocked by farmers moving their cattle and sheep. So, patience is a virtue here ☺

We arrive to the small village of Akner, where a homestay has been arranged at a farmer's place. The home cooked and traditional food stands ready when I arrive. We eat meat-filled paprika, cheese, bread and lovely cabbage columns (meat-filled) and much more. We drink local bear and a bottle of mulberry vodka (this was a first for me). The house and room are not heated, so I sleep under two thick blankets and try to stay warm. Great day again!





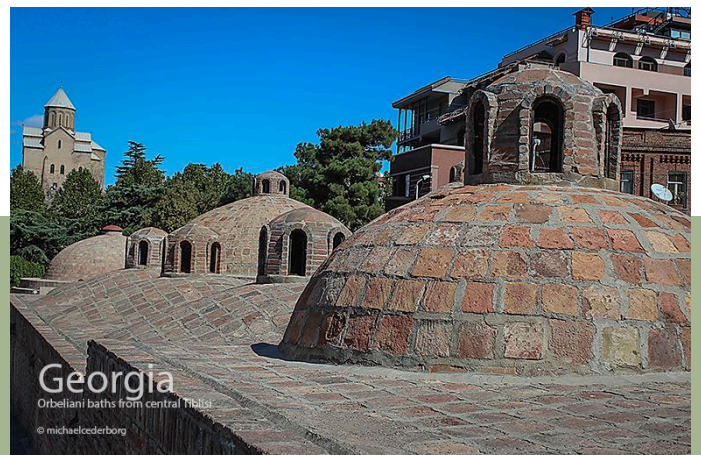
Tbilisi at cross roads The Capital of Georgia

The border crossing between Armenia and Georgia is smooth as I walk across. I am met on the other side by a new driver/guide, Vano (Ivanof). His English is limited, but we do alright. He drives me through a green farming landscape the short distance up to Tbilisi which takes an hour.

The older part of Tbilisi is very beautiful, but a bit run down of course as maintenance has been neglected over the years. The area is called Kala, where many of the buildings are made of wood with elaborate balconies. The streets are lined with trees. This is also the district where many of the hotels, hostels and restaurants are located. I have checked into a hotel called the Penthouse on the Methekti street.

Because of its location on the cross roads between Europe and Asia and its proximity to the lucrative Silk Road, Tbilisi early on become an important center where people settled. The capital has some 1.5 million inhabitants. The city is also well known for its hot Sulphur baths.

The lawlessness which prevails here only some 6-7 years ago during the Shevardnadze time is long gone. Then, local gangsters were seen roaming the streets armed. The police were also at the time extremely corrupt. Now, a young well-educated lawyer has taken over as president since 2004. He has in a few years been able to improve a lot. Yes, people still feel uneasy about the Russians and the occupation through South Ossetia which followed from the short war, when Russia moved in and stood with their tanks only some 40 km from Tbilisi. The scars are still here.





The Military Highway to Kazbegi in the north

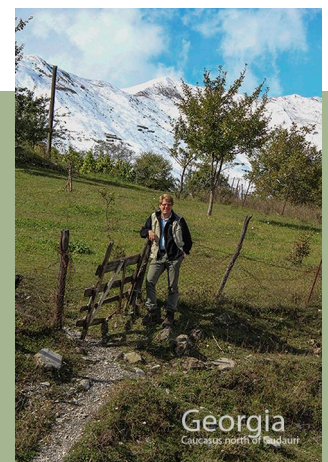
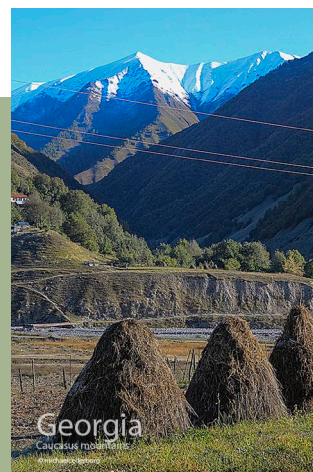
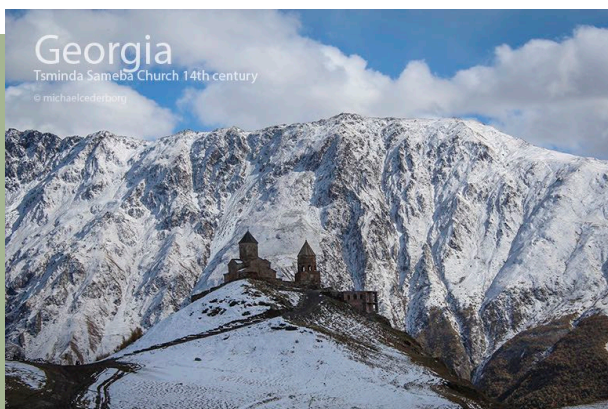
Tbilisi is full of good restaurants. I try out a couple of them on recommendation. The Kopala on 3 Rustaveli street is superb overlooking the city and also Pasanauri on 37/46 Gribneodov street. Both serve traditional Georgian food at reasonable prices.

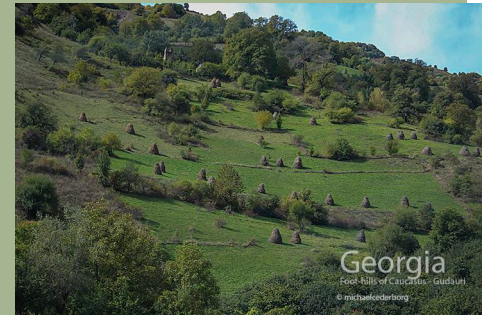
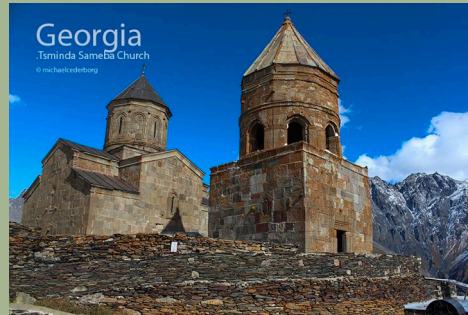
Apart from Metekhi church and Narikala Fortress I also visit the ancient and famous Sulphur baths in the center of Tbilisi. The local markets are, as always, on the agenda. The unemployment rate when I visit in 2011 is as high as 30-40% unofficially. There are also many refugees from Abkhazia in the west as well as from South Ossetia in the north, now occupied by Russia.

Having explored the city for a couple of days, we continue with the Georgian Military Highway or Russian Military highway which it is also called. The road up through the mountainous landscape is amazingly beautiful. The road on which we travel has been used for many hundreds of years for Camel caravans, and more recently for transporting military troops. During the winter months, you cannot travel through here due to snow fall and risk of avalanche. Here is also the highest mountain in Georgia – Kazbek (5047 m).

In order to reach the Gergeti Trinity Church high up in the mountains, we need to change vehicle on a small village. Only military vehicles are allowed up here (picture). We get-up and travel a very steep road up as far as is possible. The last bit we have to trek on foot. There are not many people up here, so have the Church and the spectacular view all to ourselves.

The plan was to try and make it into South Ossetia from this side, but this turned out to be impossible to get through these newly established borders after the occupation. My guide – Vano – was originally from here, but was forced to leave when the Russians came and either killed or forced the non-Russians to leave the area back in 2008.





Searching for Zjuzuna

The small village of Ateni in Georgia

On the way back from the Kazbegi mountains, we pass by the Fortress Ananuri beautifully located by a lake. From here we turn off and travel west, just south of the South Ossetian border. Here we see many newly built refugee camps for people who were forced to leave South Ossetia when the Russians came and took over in 2008.

We are head towards Gori, Stalin's home town. They have a museum here in honor of the tyrant and many are still very proud of him it seems. This also divides the population in Georgia. Some 250 people were killed in Gori back in 2008, when the Russian attacked by air.

Having read an article in a large Swedish newspaper DN a year ago, I read about the 80-year old Zjuzuna Natadze an avid Stalin supporter and also collector of Stalin memorabilia. My plan was to try and located her. This turns out to be easier said than done. After 3 hours of traveling up and down trough smaller villages outside of Gori, we do find here in the small village of Ateni. We come unannounced, but are let in. I show her the article with pictures from the newspaper and we are let in. She invites us in and shows us many of the collected items over the years. Photos, and all sorts of memorabilia. She tells a story that her uncle was quite close to Stalin and even had a document showing he had borrowed 2000 rubles from Stalin. We were served wine and got two bags full of grapes, which she grew on her property. Zjuzuna says that when she dies, she would like to be buried with all these Stalin memorabilia. An astonishing woman with a fascinating story. I am glad I got to meet her.

I leave the article with the photos to her, which makes her very happy.



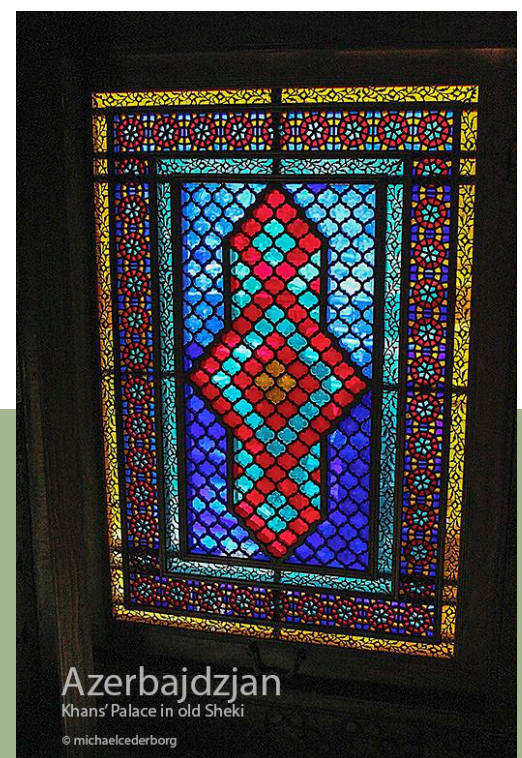


The trip continues into Azerbaijan

From Tbilisi and a drive through the Lagodekhi National Park on the eastern side of Georgia where all the vineyards are located, we continue through this lovely landscape to the border of Lagodekhi. The driver I have only speaks Georgian (Russian) and has the rude habit of farting all through the trip. I am forced to travel the 170 km with a wide-open side window. We stop and marvel at the amazing landscape and also see how they slaughter a pig on the side of the road.

The border crossing here takes a bit more time, as I have previously visited Armenia. They are adversaries over the disputed region Nagorno-Karabakh for ages. So, they are checking that I don't have any Armenian souvenirs or guidebooks with me and thereafter let me pass. On the other side of the border waits my new guide and driver – Yassin. He will be me all the way to Baku with the stops along the way. It turns out he speaks good English and is a student at the university making a bit extra money as a guide.

The landscape here is quite different to the last bit in Georgia. All the roads have trees lined on both sides. We stop and watch how the experienced shepherds cut their sheep. I only dare to get closer once he has called off his rather aggressive shepherd dogs. They use the same sheep scissors that we used in Sweden over 100 years ago. I know, because I have a couple on the wall at home. We travel through the old villages of Zagatala and Qax and make a detour up into the Caucasus mountains to the village of Ilitsa. Here we stop and drink tea with the old men who sit and play Back-gammon in the sunshine. These men seem to know how to relax and enjoy themselves. No rush here...





Sheki on the Silk road

Staying at old Caravanserai over 200 years old



In Sheki at the foothill of the beautiful Caucasus mountain ridge, I check into a very old, but renovated Caravanserai. This was used many hundreds of years back for the Camel Caravans which passed through here on the Silk road. The house is built like a fortress of stone with a large open area in the center. It is not heated so even with two thick blankets it is really cold at night. I have to sleep fully clothed.

We spend two nights here in Sheki to cover the most interesting sights. The market is really cool with all the spices, sweets, meat and vegetables etc. I purchase many different types of nuts to bring home. They also sell livestock, chicken and more. In the evening it is time to try the local restaurant. We eat the local dish "Tappi" which is a very hot lamb stew eaten out of in a clay pot,

We make a stop at the local carpet factory where people still work weaving carpets. Sheki is apparently renowned for their handknitted carpets in silk. I would recommend the local restaurants here – Gagarin – with an outdoor seating area and nice view. The Sabaka, located in the Saki Saray hotel serves also great pasta as an alternative to the local dishes. Last, but not least, the Mekan hotel has a good restaurant also worth trying.

We travel up to the small village of Kish in the mountains. Here is an old Christian church where Tor Heyerdahl, the Norwegian explorer (more famous for the papyrus Ra expedition) has been excavating for many years and found remains from the first century A.D. He believes there are proof of the Vikings having come this way over the Caspian Sea and the river Volga all the way then crossing the Baltic sea to Sweden and Norway. The trip continues from Sheki via Gabela where we stop and visit the archeological ongoing excavations. We were let in even though it was closed to tourists. We walk around the site and there are shards of pots, skeletons and other things scattered everywhere. The head archaeologist invites us for tea and a chat. The findings are from the 6th and 7th century after Christ.





The modern city of Baku

After Gabela and the excavations there we have two more stops to make before Baku. The first one is the mausoleum of Diri Baba in the village of Maraza and the graveyard Sirvan Sahah with the mausoleum of Yeddi Gumbez (The Seven Domes). The Seven Domes consist of, as the name implies, of seven smaller domes which functions as grave sites to local rulers and higher officials. Ancient tombs, leaning in all directions, still standing however have partly been ruined over the years not least because of earthquakes. The place is very beautiful place and has carefully been selected once upon a time.

It is almost 25 degrees Celsius, which is very warm for the season – late October. The landscape has changed yet again being more barren as we are getting closer to the Caspian Sea and Baku. When we arrive to Baku it is already 5 PM and the afternoon traffic is getting more chaotic and denser. The differences between country side and city are huge of course. I see all the expensive cars everywhere indicating there is a lot of Oil- and Gas money going around here.

I check in to Noah's Ark Hotel in the old part of the city with walking distance to most sights which is very convenient. I spend a couple of days exploring the city and the sights. Apart from the Carpet museum down by the water front and the Museum of History, it is also worth while visiting the palace Shirvanshah and of course Nobel's Museum. Alfred Nobel's brother had a lot of business activities here in Baku at the turn of last century. There are loads of restaurants and bars to choose from in Baku. I cover a few of them. The Finnegan's is a good hang-out bar where many expatriates working in the Oil- & Gas field come and relax in the evening. A good place to meet some other westerners. This pretty much summons up my 2-week journey to the Caucasus region. I very much enjoyed this trip and hope to come back again one day.

