

Armenia, the thousand faces and kindness of the population

I walked around Yerevan, the capital of Armenia, through the buildings, monuments and I remembered Yangon¹. Namely I recalled the mystic atmosphere, kindness of the population, delicious and tasty food that was well prepared and the historical sites and museums which collect manuscripts and pieces from old ages. In Yerevan, one can see a variance of Soviet buildings some of them kept in a decadent status as well as new buildings which mirror the Soviet style. In a few corners or hidden in the yards there are some witnesses of the architecture which dates back before the Soviet era. The city is enriched by different artistic works which stand in some part of the centre. In particular, in Cascade and in Alexander Tamanyan Park one admires some works of contemporary art which form a perfect harmony with the atmosphere and environment of the city. These works also contribute to make Yerevan a relaxing city where walking without getting boring or tired.

Cascade is one of the nicest places in Yerevan. It is a meeting point for young people who like to chill out in the late afternoon and evening, admiring their city as it changes colour while the sun goes down. From the highest top it is possible to look over the whole city and on Mount Ararat. Numerous trees cover the streets from the sun and make Yerevan a pleasurable walking city in the summer. Around 05:00 PM a wind usually blows in the city refreshing the air for the night.

All bars and restaurants are well decorated with an original style and the furniture seems perfectly to hide in the mystic and relaxing atmosphere of the city and the country. One can note how the owners care about each detail. In some bars one can see the typical oven used for cooking the traditional bread.

Not far from the Cascade, in Sarayan street, one can taste the wine in one of the wineries, which also serve some tasty snacks, not properly local food but well prepared. This street is also one of the meeting points for the nightlife in Yerevan.

People in Armenia are very kind and friendly. I met and spoke for a long time with young people whose faces and expressions transmitted me joy, simplicity and proudness of living in their land as well as the desire to carry on living in their country in peace without being forced to go abroad for searching a better life.

Armenia is a country of a thousand faces who aim at the same direction; old men educated following the Russian culture who thank Russia and trust it for their future safety; young people who did not complete their studies and speak only Russian; young people who speak English and would like to have a more independent nation; yet all of them look at the same direction: the proudness of being Armenian. They each and all seem to have a sense of hospitality, the mystic attraction to the holy places and the desire to live in their country in peace. This last aspect of living in peace is very important at this time because part of the population do not feel safe in their country; they are afraid that something could happen and they will loose all things they own.

The last war² left a scar on the population; young people sometimes prefer to not speak about that, since it reminds them of bad memories of their friends who died there. *“Yes, some of my friends died in that war; it is always a sorrow to speak about that”*, replied my friends Vardhui while walking and speaking with me about the war.

Citizens usually help poor people in the streets and try as much as possible to take care of them. When one is seated in a bar or restaurant outside, one may see how the population is fond of their homeless or unlucky persons. An image caught my attention, while the waiter tried to chase them away, the clients stopped the waiter, call the needy people and gave them money.

¹ The capital of Myanmar.

² The war with Azerbaijan in Nagorno Karabach.

It touched my heart when I visited the Memorial Complex of Tsitsernakaberd in Yerevan³, while I was listening to the guide, seeing the different images, reading the texts and waking around the trees which are planted when the representatives of the state or of the national and international organizations and committees come to visit the Memorial complex. The museum is not big, but it contains enough documents and images that totally envelope visitors and take them back into that horrible period and realize the suffering endured by the population. It also shows the political, cultural, social, economic and musical skills of the Armenian population before they were persecuted. This museum should be visited by the students of high schools based in foreign countries.

The Mount Ararat seems the “*Leitmotiv*” of a travel in Yerevan, and in many historical and holy places near the capital. This 5,137 meters high mountain hovered over me as an imaginary and safety guide while visiting the sites. The feeling that the view of this mount transmitted to the population and visitors depended on the place from where they admired it. From the top of Cascade in Yerevan city Centre the view of this mountain created a fairy-like and relaxing atmosphere and gave me the sensation of being the character of a postcard in a beautiful landscape.

Echmiadzin, a town 20 kilometers from Yerevan hosts the Centre of the Armenian Apostolic Church, and the oldest cathedral of the world, named Mother Cathedral and whose construction began in 303 A.D. The view of the Mount Ararat kilometers away contributes to enshroud this place into a mystic atmosphere. It seems to recall to the population and pilgrims their origins and gives them a sensation of being closer to their holy traditions. It is like a spiritual guide. Closed to the cathedral it is situated a museum which contains many treasures discovered in Armenia during the years such as the lance which wounded Jesus Christ and the wooden piece of the Arch of Noe. In the same area one can admire an old refectory whose architecture and walls are still perfectly preserved since the foundation. Now it is a restaurant and bar where one can taste delicious foods while enshrouded in the beauty of this ancient place.

On the way to the Monastery of Khor Virap the Mount Ararat accompanied me and became closer the more I was approaching this holy place. At both sides of the road, local people were exposing and selling their agricultural products. I stopped at one of these kiosks and one seller offered me some delicious fruits without asking any money and said “*This is a present from my land for you, it is a pleasure that you are traveling around our beautiful country*” The hospitality is one of the characteristics of this population and it becomes more evident outside the cities. The Monastery of Khor Virap is the closest point for admiring the Mount Ararat. The view of this mount with its 5,137 meters high is amazing both as a religion and natural point of view. The snow descending from the top gives to the place a magic atmosphere.

In this monastery lived Gregory the Illuminator the first Armenian person who adopted the Christian religion. He was firstly imprisoned in a pit and then released by the king after he cured the king of a disease. The king then started to believe in the God of Christians and decided to introduce Christianity as the religion of state. The structure of the monastery is well preserved, and one can perfectly realize how it was in the past, totally entering the old period. The pit where Gregory was detained is only accessible through the hole from where some women passed him the food, by using a vertical stair fixed to the wall. In this place the priests carry on nowadays living following their old traditions and in the same ancient buildings of their predecessors. While leaving from the monastery, many local people were climbing up to pray or simply give thanks to God for the good things which happened to their lives.

After the visit, I proceeded through an alternance of mountains, canyons and rocks which form a landscape which in some parts reminded me of Maroc and Tunisia. I stopped at the famous cave of Areni village where archeologists discovered the most ancient winery which dates back at least 6,000 years, formed by objects used for producing and conserving the wine. In this cave, archeologists also found the most ancient leather shoe of the world which belonged to a woman. In the middle of the caves the temperature is almost constant round year without humidity, thanks to a system of

³ The memorial of the Armenian genocide.

ventilation, which was perfect for the conservation of the food. The guide clearly explained the history of the cave and told me that there are still many things to discover, “*Yes, we have also many witnesses of the presence of the ancient Mongolian empire which occupied Armenia many years ago and in this part it passed one of the famous Silk Roads, so we expected to discover still many objects that may allow us to better reconstruct the ancient period*”. I thanked the guide and took the road to Goris which in the past was part of the Silk Road. After a mountain pass, a river appeared surrounded by a green vegetation which terminates into a marvelous lake. Goris is a town near Karabach where one can taste some delicious typical foods and see old women in the bakeries who prepare the typical bread following the traditional method. This bread is called “*Lavash*” and was designated an Intangible Cultural Heritage of UNESCO. It is extremely interesting to see how it is produced and baked in the old ways.

Not far from Goris, one can visit the rest of the Khndzoresk village where the population lived in the rocking houses. In one of the houses there is a small museum exposing the old and traditional objects which have been found and some images which give one an idea of the daily life there. An Armenian guide, speaking only Russian⁴, was very happy to give me an explanation of the village. During the travel around Armenia and Georgia, sometimes it was not easy to find an English guide outside the big cities, but most of them spoke Russian. The first impression that rises to me is why young people are not as fond of their land as their relatives and are not interested in conducting tourists, which come from everywhere, through the marvelous of their countries. It is a pity since one could better understand the population, the traditions and the history of such historical sites. I had the same sensation in Geghard monastery and in Vardzia⁵ where I had to hire a Russian guide. Although the Russian was clear and the guide very kind and available to explain me everything about the places, I was still thinking about how could other people which speak only English fully understand the significance of these beautiful places in case they do not come from Yerevan or from other cities of Georgia with their personal guide. There are some books which clearly explain to one the history of the places, but many times a guide is very important for understanding different aspects of the place one is visiting and of the population.

A beautiful natural landscape will always accompany visitors while moving from one to another place. Although one might be familiar with the landscape, it is worth it to stop sometimes and admire some sites such as the Armenian Stonehenge, the small Shaki waterfall formed in a narrow part of a canyon where the sun reflects in the water and designs a rainbow and finally the breathtaking landscape around the Monastery of Tatev, which is situated at the top of the mountain overhanging the rock. It is linked by the village through the longest non-stop double track cable car in the world built in 2010.

This Monastery was in the past an important “*university*”, where young people could study different subject matters and had also the possibility of living there. This holy place is nowadays an important destination of pilgrimage. People come here not only for praying and thank God, but also for sharing with others their joy for having well passed a bad moment. In fact, it is common, following one of the principles contains in the holy scriptures “*Help others*”, when one survived from a disease or just passed a bad moment to invite to the monastery needy people from the village around and offer them a meal.

The name of Tatev means in Armenian, “*Give wings*” and it comes from the history of the builder who, once terminated the construction of the monastery said “*May the Holy Spirit send down the wings*” then jumped off the monastery. As he was falling two wings grew behind his back. Outside of the monastery old local women sold their culinary wares. I highly advice trying some of these products like Lavash fruits or the Armenian typical cake called “*Gata*”.

Passing through Tatev village one may see how local people still live following their traditions. Some of these families have some tables outside for receiving the guests and prepare them tasty dishes

⁴ Of course, Armenian

⁵ In Georgia.

with their vegetables and fruits just taken from the ground or from the trees, as well as other home-made products.

Armenia is also the land of different types of mineral waters and of the geysers, of course not those that one can admire in Island, but enough for giving to people an idea of the phenomenon and make a bath in the hot water. On the way back to Yerevan the car proceeded to Jermuk, a mountain town known for its geysers, and the mineral waters which come from hot springs through different fountains standing in a beautiful building called the mineral water gallery. The water which flows through these fountains each has a different taste and temperature.

I came back to Yerevan in the evening with good memories about the first impression of the life in south of Armenia, the people I met and the monuments that I saw.

The beauty, originality of the ancient Armenian style and the mystic atmosphere are clearly visible in Geghard Monastery which is situated a one hour driving from Yerevan. This Monastery is also called the cave Monastery since it has some rooms carved into the rock and in one of these rooms it is still present the holy water flowing from the rock.

The structure of Geghard Monastery also demonstrates the attention of the Moncks for the acoustic while singing religion texts or songs during the divine services. A room on the second floor completely carved into the rock has a hole in one of the corners in the lower part which allows the voice to reach the room below where the priests and the population gathered for praying. It is so curious to try to sing some songs, to have an idea of the good acoustic.

On the way back to Yerevan I stopped in a beautiful house⁶ with a big garden full of fruit trees and various vegetables. At the entrance, a woman hosted me with a warm welcome and notwithstanding there was a preparation for a big celebration, the staff served me the most tasty food I ever tried during my travels in Armenia. The hospitality which I received reminded me of the ancient Greek legend and mythological stories where the hosts were considered sacred as they were to be considered to be from Gods. The food was prepared and served with accuracy.

In the following days I carried on walking around Yerevan for discovering other hidden corners, monuments and museums. The Persian blue mosque, dating back 18th centuries, stands in the middle of a quiet garden and presents a façade of beautiful decorations and designs which deserve a visit.

The carpeted sector plays in Armenia an important role in the daily lives of the population. The population both put them on the floor and hang them on the wall of their houses and apartments. Each carpet is decorated following the traditional Armenian designs which represent the history, culture and religion of the country. For instance, the arch symbolizes a gateway to paradise, the eagle is the symbol of Christ and Resurrection and the dove is the symbol of human beings who seek salvation. Green and red colors symbolize the glassy sea and fire, namely the Heavens.

I left Yerevan in the morning for reaching Gyumri, declared capital of the culture in 2013, one of the most ancient cities in Armenia and in Caucasus, almost 3,000 years old. It was not destroyed during the Soviet Union occupation, and the buildings still preserve the ancient architecture and design. The time in this city seems to have stood still, some young people who still speak only Armenian and Russian and seem not to care about the evolution of the rest of the world. This fact left me thinking a lot about the concept of evolution and development, since in western countries English is synonymous with evolution, but not for many people around the world who do care a lot to still live following their own traditions. For these people, evolution seems more to signify peace. Some of the houses give to visitors a perfect idea of the life in the pre-Soviet Union period. The old city has two parts: in one part the houses have never been restructured and one can still admire how the people lived in the past. Walking around this protected area allows one to become immersed in the old era by seeing the doors of the houses, cobblestones paving of the streets, windows and balconies. One of these balconies attracts many visitors and it has been chosen as a set for the movie "*The tango of our Childhood*", shot in Gyumri. In the second part of the old town, the buildings are well restructured following the old and traditional architecture, style, and colors. The material used for building up

⁶ A Restaurant and hotel called Garni HinYard.

these houses demonstrates the skill of this population to find material which can last for centuries, resist earthquakes and isolate the houses from the heat in summer and from the cold in winter. For instance, they used the tufa since it has a better resistance to the earthquakes and the clay pipes served to isolate the houses from the hot and from the cold. The historical city Centre is an alternance of Guest houses, small theatres, bars with music, some of them stand in a beautiful yard and museums.

Before reaching the border with Georgia, I saw St. Haghartsin Monastery Complex, situated not far from Dilijan and formed by three churches which still preserve inside some inscriptions. Every church has a different history, meaning and shape.

Every town, city, monument, monastery I saw and person I met in Armenia left me with different memories and feelings to gather and form a puzzle which represent and talk about the beauty of this country. It is worth it to stop and carefully see every site and reflect some minutes, to catch the particularity of every place and what they may transmit to you.