

Dear Friends,

Although I have been back from Armenia and the Republic of Georgia, in the Caucasus, for more than two months, I am just getting around to writing this letter. What took me so long? Well, it was One Thing After Another, and You Know How It Can Be, and [Where Does the Time Go?](#) I had some minor surgery, I spent a week in Louisiana and Florida on family affairs, I had a book to put through the press,<sup>1</sup> and to be honest I knew that no one was exactly clamoring to hear about my trip. But I try to write these trips up anyway, so I won't forget where I went and what I saw and did. So here's my letter. Better late than never? Opinion is divided on that.



At left is a map of the Caucasus, the relatively narrow strip of land between the Black Sea on the west and the Caspian Sea on the east.<sup>2</sup> Russia, Turkey and Iran are the principal neighboring states; all of them dominated the Caucasus at different times. There are now three internationally recognized independent Caucasian states: Georgia (green on the map), Armenia (blue) and Azerbaijan (red). Georgia and Armenia are ancient Christian countries conquered by the Russian Czars and incorporated into their empire, emerging briefly independent after the Russian Revolution and then reabsorbed by the Russian Communist régime. Azerbaijan is Moslem and was never quite independent.<sup>3</sup>

Why would I go to the Caucasus? First, of course, I had never been there, and I could increase my Country Count. Second, I had long wanted to visit it – it has more centenarians than anywhere else, and some of its languages have more consonants than any others (and some remarkable alphabets – more on that below). And wild and exotic scenery, and distinctive architecture, and famous wine even though I don't drink wine, and what have you. And third, I was invited to attend the First Georgian National Conference of Vexillology and Heraldry, sponsored by the State Council of Heraldry at the Parliament of Georgia in Tbilisi.<sup>4</sup> I had not sought this invitation – perhaps I was on the list because I had sent the Georgian Heraldry Office

<sup>1</sup> The forthcoming *Flags and Emblems of Colombia*, of which notice will be given in due course. I know you can hardly bear to wait any longer for it to appear, but try to show a little discipline! For the children!

<sup>2</sup> The Caspian Sea is where the best caviar comes from.

<sup>3</sup> There was also, briefly, a fourth independent entity romantically called the Mountain Republic, following the old Czarist title *Lord of the Mountain Princes* (roughly areas 4-8 in the yellow (Russian) zone on the map above). But it too was absorbed by the Communist régime.

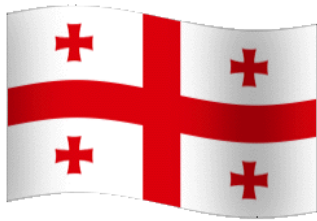
<sup>4</sup> *Vexillology* is the awkward but durable name for the study of flags.

a copy of my book [\*The Double Eagle\*](#). But once the invitation appeared in my in-box, it did not take me more than a few seconds to decide to go.

Once I decided to go, the rest of the trip fell easily into place. If Georgia, why not Armenia too? OK, Armenia too. Well then, why not also Azerbaijan? Because that would have made the trip too long, plus it is not as interesting a country as the other two, plus the border with Armenia is closed due to feuding between the two countries, plus like many former Soviet republics (but not Georgia or Armenia) Azerbaijan requires Americans to get a visa, and these visas are expensive and not easy to get. OK, Azerbaijan, be that way!

Many baroque and speculative itineraries through other countries fell before the practicalities of air travel. Did I want, for example, to spend an additional \$4000 to stop over in Ukraine? (No.) I ended up signing on for the cheapest, shortest and easiest route (still an exhausting 24-hour journey), changing planes only once each way (in Istanbul) and arriving at midnight. I engaged a driver/guide for each country – my mobility has declined to the point where I need a driver for city tourism and shopping. My loyal GPS, which works almost everywhere in the world, would not work in Georgia or Armenia, so I wasn't going to be able to drive myself. I invited my nephew Noah, strong and vigorous and good company, to come with me as companion and *aide-de-camp*. And then one day (it was the 26th of September, 2016) I climbed into a big iron bird and flew eleven time zones away, to Tbilisi in the Republic of Georgia (country #81).

## I. GEORGIA



Georgia (flag at left, arms at right) is a small country, only slightly larger than West Virginia.<sup>5</sup> The capital Tbilisi (formerly Tiflis) contains almost a third of the whole population (more counting the entire metropolitan area)



– the city itself stands in population somewhere between San Jose and Dallas. The conference was held at the Hotel Old Tbilisi, so that's where I stayed for my whole time in Georgia. Although convenient for the conference, this turned out not to be such a great choice. I had a roomy suite and a spectacular view of the ancient citadel across the River Kura that runs through the center of town. But the hotel was not very well organized, especially the food service, which declined from offering the same single meal of

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<sup>5</sup> Georgia: 26,911 square miles; West Virginia 24,230 square miles (about 10% smaller). Georgia's population of around 3,720,000 is about midway between those of Connecticut and Oklahoma. Mamuka Gongadze, who designed the Georgian state coat of arms, was present at the conference. St. George, shown on the arms in his traditional dragon-killing posture, was a martyred Roman officer who became the legendary embodiment of Christian chivalry. He has been a central image in Georgian state symbolism for centuries; there is a huge gilded statue of him (and the dragon) on a high column in the main square of Tbilisi. The word *Georgia* is an exonym, though – a place-name used by foreigners – derived from not from the saint's name but from an Old Persian word meaning *Land of the Wolves*. Georgians call their country *Sakartvelo*.

stew and chicken salad for lunch and dinner every day, to offering only chicken salad, to offering finally nothing at all. But there we were, and so we made the best of it.<sup>6</sup>



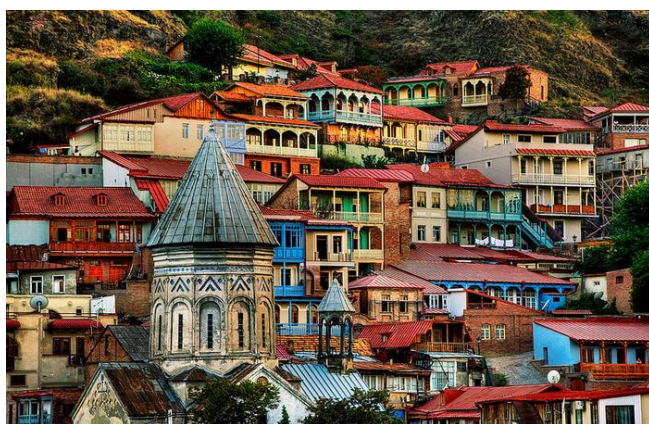
The heraldic conference began in a function room of the Hotel Old Tbilisi. We were seated around a long assemblage of tables;

my place was marked with a nameplate (left) in English and Georgian.<sup>7</sup> Many of the participants were Georgians, but lots of Europeans were there, too; I knew most of them. Over the next few days we listened to learned papers, some of which were interesting and some less so. There was also a field trip to a series of monasteries, followed by a long boozy lunch, and a visit to the Presidential Palace, a huge inflated Soviet-style structure with a glass dome. Right: a snapshot of me in



the Presidential salon, flanked by the national and presidential flags, with the distinguished Polish heraldic scholar and artist Alfred Znamierowski.<sup>8</sup>

My Georgian guide and driver never actually appeared herself, but sent substitutes to drive Noah and me around Tbilisi. One day we spent shopping – I was looking for heraldic books, and books of display fonts in the Georgian alphabet, and other such items which we mostly did not find. But we got a good look at Tbilisi (plus a boat ride on the river). What is called *Old Tbilisi* is not all that old, as the Persians burned the city to the ground in 1795. But it is a lot older than New Tbilisi, and very appealing and romantic in places. Below left: a hillside in Old Tbilisi; below right: an Ottoman-style balcony in the old quarter.



<sup>6</sup> There was a nice simple checked-tablecloth Armenian restaurant (oddly called the Café Palermo) just down the street, where we could get the meals our supposedly fancy hotel could not provide.

<sup>7</sup> I now include my Georgian name დევიდ ფილიპსი among my favorite [pseudonyms](#).

<sup>8</sup> The presidential flag includes elements of the arms of the former Georgian royal dynasty of the [Bagrationi](#). I saw many of their armorially-decorated tombs at Svetitskhkaveli Cathedral.

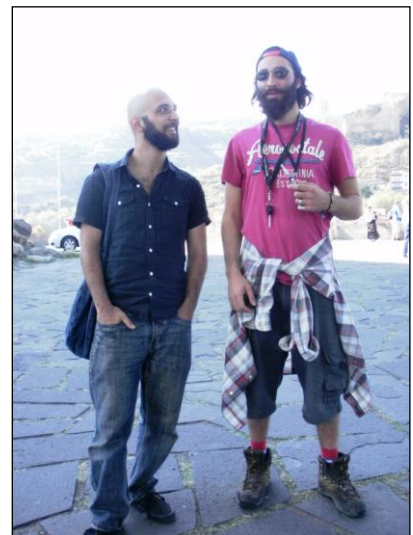


Downtown Tbilisi presents a mixture of styles. Parts of it are modern European, parts are ex-Soviet, parts are down-at-the-heels shabby and parts are gleamingly postmodern. There is one street (below left) done in an elegant *fin-de-siècle* European style, and plenty of unremarkable others (below right) where you could be in Athens or Brussels. Georgia is definitely in Asia, but Georgians like to think of their country as European, and the city reflects this divided identity.



After Tbilisi, I wanted to see something of the Georgian outback. Our second substitute guide, George, who was to take us there, appeared one morning bounding across the parterre of the deeply *déclassé* Hotel Old Tbilisi in his cargo shorts, pink t-shirt, sunglasses, and backwards baseball cap, with a Rasputin beard, a stoned grin, and an e-cigarette on a lanyard around his neck. He was a startling sight, but he did a good job for us – here he is, below, with Noah.

Georgia is a beautiful country in places, but we could not get to the best places. The nearby mountains were more or less off limits because of Russian soldiers. The easternmost dark green patch within light green Georgia on the map on page 1 is South Ossetia. South Ossetia is internationally considered part of Georgia, but the local régime there insists it is independent and is backed up by Russia. Constant conflict and attempts by Georgia to enforce its sovereignty in South Ossetia culminated in 2008 in a [war with Russia](#). Russia invaded Georgia, occupied substantial portions of the country, and bombed Tbilisi (and might have occupied it too had a delegation of European foreign ministers not been in the city at the time). The Russians eventually withdrew from Georgia (except for South Ossetia and another satellite territory, Abkhazia, in the northwest), but relations are still tense and the mountain roads north of Tbilisi are not for idle tourists. The Black Sea coast is also quite lovely, and Georgia’s second city, Batumi, is a somewhat tawdry attraction with its swanky hotels and casinos.<sup>9</sup> But it was too far



<sup>9</sup>

A Trump Tower was announced for Batumi in 2012, but somehow never got built. Now whatever problems were holding it up [may fade like the morning mist](#). But also now (mid-December) Trump hints that this deal, like other “new deals,” may be off. Do you believe him, either way?

away to reach by car and return in a reasonable time. And we were going to go south later anyway, on our way to Armenia.

So we saw a lot of rural Georgia in the areas to the east and west of Tbilisi, but most of what we saw was scrubby brownish low-lying country (below left) without much to make a traveler gasp. We kept to the back roads as much as we could, and ate some elaborate lunches. One night on the road we stayed in Borjomi, a picturesque foresty resort area (below right, somewhat greener than we saw it in October) where the fizzy mineral water comes from that I guzzled by the liter instead of Georgian wine.



The most interesting place we saw in central Georgia was Stalin's home town of Gori. In my view a town has to be pretty desperate for attention to play up a Stalin angle, but the Gorians are not at all shy about it, and there are Stalin souvenirs and memorabilia on sale everywhere. The centerpiece is the Stalin Museum, where the tiny bungalow he was born is now enveloped by a temple (below left), and the elegant aristocratic palace next door, where his mother worked, has been transformed into a Stalin Museum (below right).



The most interesting single sight I saw in Gori was outside the Stalin Museum, in the armored railroad car Uncle Joe used during the war to travel around the Soviet Union (which of course included Georgia). Painted a lurid green, the car is divided into a series of compartments – for guards, for secretaries, for aides – until you reach the Marshal's own suite. The suite was commendably spartan – no gold faucets like those *some people* favor – but it did have a private





bathroom. There, next to the covered bathtub, was Stalin's very own toilet. Staring into its historic bowl, which was only a few feet away, intimately connected as it had been with the dread tyrant's



very own soft pink bottom, I could not help but see, in my mind's reluctant eye, His Nibs straining away on the pot as the train chugged across the endless *versts* of Russia.<sup>10</sup> This uncomfortable vision has stayed with me to this day – I doubt I will ever be quite free of it. Noah used it as the subject of a painting, which I show on page 12 below.

## II. ARMENIA



Finally the day came (October 7) to go to Armenia, and our guide Hayk Avagyan showed up at the Hotel Old Tbilisi, a less dramatic figure than George but supremely competent. We all piled (including George) into his comfortable SUV, drove to the border station, and crossed into Armenia



(country #82; beautiful flag at left, rather awkward and clumsy national arms at right).<sup>11</sup>

We headed for the capital, Yerevan, one of the most ancient settlements in the world but with a population about the same as San Jose, California. Although Georgia was a pleasant country, and I was glad to have been there, Armenia seemed immediately a lot more appealing. I quote from my journal.

Armenia at once more interesting, scenic, *haimish*!<sup>12</sup> Fabulous views of mountains, canyons, mesas, fields of grain, black eagles below us, Mount Aragats above us,<sup>13</sup> mountain ridges against the mist, leafy roads, wooded cliffsides, Yezidi village, giant abandoned Soviet factory with huge smokestack.

<sup>10</sup> Despite the Marshal's gruff demeanor and homicidal disposition, his bottom was of the softest and pinkest. I regret that I cannot reveal how I know this.

<sup>11</sup> The arms are based on those hurriedly adopted at the time of Armenia's first independence in 1918. The bottom stripe of the flag, shown here in yellow, should really be a rich orange. Armenia, at 11,484 square miles, is a little smaller than Maryland but larger than Hawaii by about the same amount.

<sup>12</sup> A Yiddish word meaning *comfortable, cozy, homelike*. It seemed the right word even though Armenia was nothing like home.

<sup>13</sup> Not Mount Ararat, of which more later.

In Yerevan, remembering our Tbilisi lodging experience, we checked into a fancy American-style brand-name hotel, and it proved worth the expense.<sup>14</sup> The next day we went on the same shopping trip we had tried in Tbilisi, but instead of finding nothing we hit pay dirt almost at once. Here I am at the bookstall section of the open-air market, wallowing in the treasures people are bringing up to offer me, especially the books of display fonts in the Armenian alphabet.



This might be a good place to talk about the alphabets. Georgia and Armenia have unique alphabets, used for no other languages. The



[Armenian alphabet](#) is attributed to St. Mesrop Mashtots (362-440) (left).<sup>15</sup> Some say he created the [Georgian alphabet](#) too. Here they are, below right: top, the Armenian alphabet, upper and lower cases; bottom, the Georgian alphabet (it has only one case but uses three different scripts, only one of which is used for ordinary writing).

Georgians seem very remarkably blasé about their astonishing alphabet, so books about it are hard to find. Armenians, on the other hand, celebrate their alphabet as a key part of their culture, and display it on plaques and

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ՄՅՆՇՈՉՊՋՌՆՍՎՏՐՑԻՓՔՕՖ  
աբգդեզէըթժիլխծկհձղն  
մյնշոչպղռսվտրցւփքօֆ

Յ	Զ	Է	Ը	Թ	Ձ	Ղ	Ճ	Մ	Ե	Ն	Շ	Տ	Ր	Ց	Ի	Փ	Ք	Օ	Ֆ
ani	bani	gani	dani	eni	vini	zeni	tani	ini	k'ani	lasi									
ժ	Ե	Մ	Յ	Ձ	Ղ	Ճ	Մ	Ե	Ն	Շ	Տ	Ր	Ց	Ի	Փ	Ք	Օ	Ֆ	
mani	nari	oni	p'ari	zhani	rae	sani	t'ari	uni	pari	kani									
Կ	Գ	Շ	Ի	Յ	Ը	Թ	Ձ	Ղ	Ճ	Մ	Ե	Ն	Շ	Տ	Ր	Ց	Ի	Փ	Ք
ghani	q'ari	shini	chini	tsani	dzili	ts'ili	ch'ari	khanj	jani	hae									

monuments, on souvenirs and works of art, in books (see page 13) and manuscripts (where the letters were worked into animal figures), on bracelets with the letters carved individually as charms – there is even a park devoted to the Armenian alphabet, with statues of the individual letters (right).

In practice Armenian writing looks a lot like *Romanji* (as the Japanese call the Roman script we use), but seen without our reading glasses. Especially in a [serif font](#) (not available on my computer), the letters appear to resolve into Roman letters, except the words they seem to form mean nothing in any



<sup>14</sup> About the same as a Best Western motel in Fort Smith, Arkansas.

<sup>15</sup> The painting *Saint Mesrop Mashtots Introducing Armenian Alphabet*, by Rubik Kocharian (2013), is copied from his [website](#). Mount Ararat is seen in the background.



language. Georgian, on the other hand, looks like Martian. Here they are side by side.

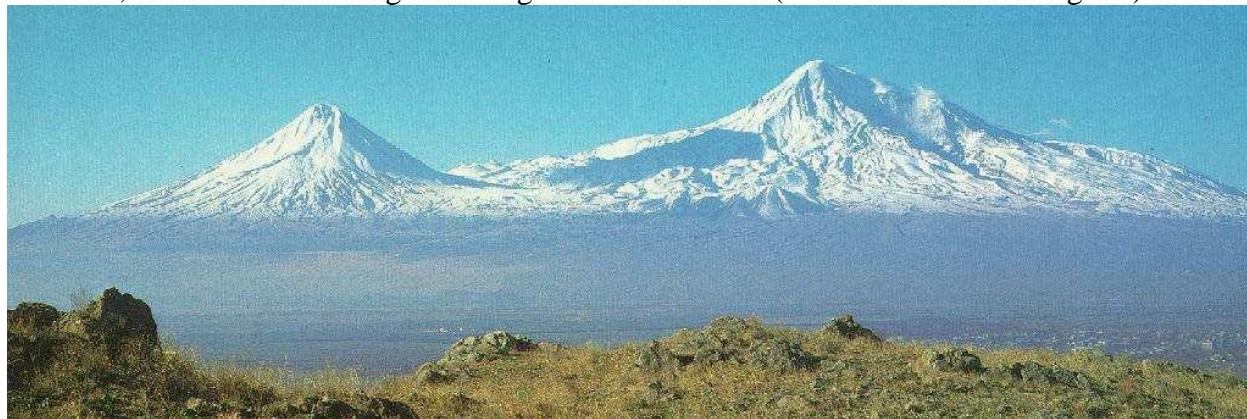
English	Georgian	Armenian
And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness. <sup>16</sup>	და თქვა ღმერთმა: იქმნას ნათელი და იქმნა ნათელი. და იხილა ღმერთმა ნათელი, რომ ეს იყო კარგი: და ღმერთი გაყოფილი შუქს სიბნელე.	Եւ Աստուած ասաց. Թող լոյս լիսի, եւ լոյս եղաւ: Եւ Աստուած տեսաւ, որ լոյսը, որ դա լավ էր, եւ Աստուած լոյսը բաժանեց խաւարից:

But I digress. Over the next few days Hayk (seen below with Noah) drove us through 10 of the 11 provinces of Armenia.<sup>17</sup> It was a continually shifting landscape of mountains and plains, rivers and gorges, agricultural and grazing land and seeming desert, and of course a huge lake.



Mount Ararat, where Noah's Ark is said to have come to rest when the waters of the Flood receded (Genesis 8:4), is the emotional center of Armenian national feeling. So it is extremely galling to the Armenians that, after many territorial adjustments between Turkey and Russia over the past couple of centuries that took little account of Armenian sentiment, Mount

Ararat ended up (for now anyway) in Turkey. Its distinctive double peak is tantalizingly visible from Armenia – the silhouette, as familiar there as that of Fujiyama is in Japan, is seen all over Armenia, in art and on signs and graffiti and even (as a four-stroke diagram) on the



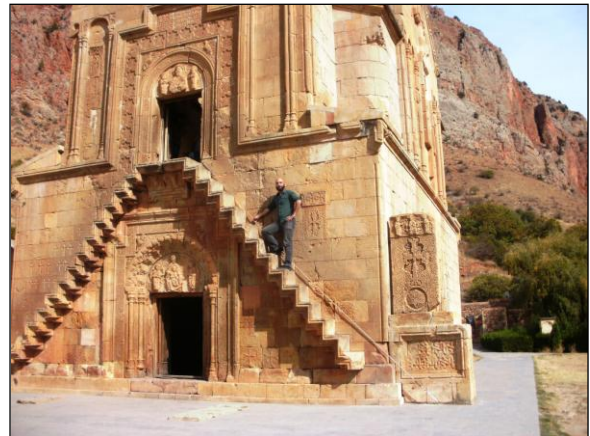
<sup>16</sup> Genesis 1:3-4.

<sup>17</sup> Counting Yerevan City as a province. The only one I missed was Shirak Province in the northwest. In Georgia I got to six of the 12 administrative divisions.



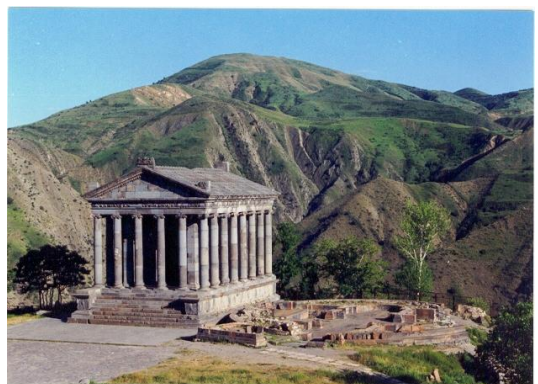
Armenian visa stamped in visitors' passports. Above is a view of Mount Ararat, looking across the border into Turkey.

Armenia is full of churches and monasteries, of which we only saw a few of the choicest. As in Georgia, the church buildings in Armenia favor thick walls pierced by windows only narrowly if at all, most of the light coming from a cylindrical lantern at the top where a western Renaissance church might have set a dome. Many of these churches were built more than a thousand years ago, had fallen (or more likely been pushed) into ruin, and were then painstakingly rebuilt stone by stone until they looked somehow old and new at the same time. One of the best was the famous monastery at Tatev (below left), which we approached by a cable car. At the top Hayk found an old army friend with a Land Rover who took us to the viewpoint above the monastery complex from which this photo was taken. Below right: Noah climbing up the façade of a different Armenian church.



Another church Hayk showed us – more of a hermitage or shrine now – was hidden on the side of a steep cliff leading down a deep canyon. It was only visible from the very edge of the cliff. Hayk and Noah encouraged me to totter all the way to the edge, leaning on my cane and on them, until I could just see it through a veil of vertigo. Why was it put in such an inaccessible spot? So the Mongols (who invaded Armenia in the 13th century) would not see it and destroy it. It was from this canyonside that we saw flights of eagles cruising silently below us, searching with eagle eyes (of course) for hapless prey below.

Another reconstructed monument was the famous Garni Temple, which had been sacred to the Armenian sun-god Mihr in antique times. Destroyed by an earthquake in 1579, it has been rebuilt in the same convincing fashion as the medieval churches – it now looks as if it has stood undisturbed for centuries. Its Greek design and lonesome location (right) induces classical reveries that probably match only very slightly the actual practice during ancient sun-worship rituals.



There are a lot of sheep in Armenia. We saw flocks of them on the roads, being driven by shepherds on horseback, herded by dogs. I was warned to stay in the car so the dogs wouldn't bite me, but I trusted to their professionalism and took the picture below. We also saw gauchos on horseback herding cattle and goats. One of the sensations I hope I will long remember is the crunching sound the hooves of the sheep made as they passed me on the road.



I haven't mentioned the food, have I? Hayk brought us to places he knew where the food was deeply memorable – juicy roasted lamb, fresh Armenian bread still so hot from the oven it was hard to handle, *kompot* (a kind of strained boiled fruit juice) made from fresh local fruit, crisp cucumbers, trout just plucked from the river right below us, an orange berry drink like nothing I'd ever tasted before. Յաւ!<sup>18</sup>



As a kind of dessert following our two-course meal of Georgia and Armenia, we went to the southeastern corner of Armenia and crossed into the Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh.<sup>19</sup> This country (the dark red patch on pink Azerbaijan in the map on page 1), although populated by Armenians, was within the borders of Azerbaijan as the Caucasian countries re-emerged after the



collapse of the Soviet Union. After a [bitter, destructive war](#), in 1994 the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh expelled the Azerbaijani forces and declared their own republic. It is recognized only by Armenia, but I feel OK about claiming it as country #83.<sup>20</sup> Flag at left, arms at right – the flag

<sup>18</sup> Yum! See, just *try* not to read Յաւ as Zwu.

<sup>19</sup> Or Republic of Artsakh if you prefer. From points on this road we could see the mountains of Iran. The roads were clogged with Iranian trucks, and Iranian visitors looking for alcohol.

<sup>20</sup> If I can claim Northern Cyprus (#80), recognized only by Turkey, if I can claim Taiwan for that matter (#23), why not Nagorno-Karabakh? Did I not have to go in person to their embassy in Yerevan and get a visa, and present it at the border?



shows graphically a small part of the Armenian nation separated from the rest by an artificial border.

Nagorno-Karabakh is a little larger than Rhode Island; its population is about the same as Bridgeport, Connecticut. The capital, Stepanakert, is a small but prosperous-looking place, supported in the absence of international recognition and trade largely by Armenia and the Armenian diaspora (especially that in the United States).<sup>21</sup> Hayk took us to the nearby town of Shushi, heavily shelled by Azerbaijan during the war. Even 22 years later rebuilding is nowhere near complete, and ruined buildings and structures marked by holes from bullets and shells are everywhere. It was a somber reminder, if yet another reminder were needed, of the endless violent struggles that have marked this small part of the world as far back as records go, and no doubt considerably further.

After Nagorno-Karabakh we started on the long journey home – Stepanakert to Yerevan to Tbilisi to Istanbul to San Francisco (New York for Noah). I don't intend to travel much in the coming year – maybe 83 countries are enough for a while? I have a lot to do here as the shadows lengthen. I still have many journeys planned out in my mind, but if they stay there I will not be greatly disappointed.

David

December 2016



Left: Noah and me in native costume (Yerevan).

Above: Crossing the Turdo in Georgia.

<sup>21</sup>

The Armenian diaspora, found in many places around the world, supports Armenia at least as passionately as Jews support Israel, and without any of the conflicted layering of that relationship. When I visited a public library in Yerevan they were just unpacking a huge carton of books sent as a gift from America, printed *in Armenian* by an Armenian publishing company in Los Angeles.

Painting by Noah





Page from Fred Africkian,  
*The Art of Letter-Type: 120 Tables of Armenian Decorative Types*  
(Yerevan, 1984)

