



The Apricots Road

I have that love for liberty that is peculiar of an aristocracy whose last hour has struck. The aristocracy has three successive ages: the age of superiority, the age of privilege and the age of vanity, once it has left the first behind, it degenerates in the second and expires in the last.

Chateaubriand

There are only two car models around Armenian roads, the glorious Soviet-made Fiat 124, locally known as Lada, built in the Togliattigrad factories of the old 1970 Italian plant, probably cheaper than the price of metal, and the glorious Bavarian-made BMW X-6, built in Munich in the futuristic third Millennium German plant, probably the most expensive piece of metal east of London. The first model is generally found everywhere in the country except the Yerevan city centre and the driver average age is 50. All cars look exactly alike, in mint conditions, age unknown (anywhere between 40 and 10 years old), the main differential factor being the colour. White looks a winner, but many proud citizens can boast bright blue, bright light blue, purple and the smashing eggplant hue. Not a single model has a metallization nuance, this is probably due to the lack of ovens in the local mechanics. On the other side, all X-6s look exactly alike, in mint condition, black metallized, age between 0 and 2 years old, the main differential factor being the number plate. They are found within the few streets of downtown Yerevan and almost nowhere else and the driver average age is 25.

It was already said that airplane travel is like sleeping at the movies. One has to consider also the road between the airport and the city centre. Developing countries are rarely reached with private transport, therefore most visitors fly in and catch a cab downtown. Even the dumbest administrator won't start from that road to rebuild a highway system. Without going too far, where Georgia went for example, rebuilding the highway new and naming it after GW Bush in occasion of his visit, Armenia did well. There are no potholes and the road seem to flow effortlessly through shopping centres, new buildings and casinos. Especially casinos, of which I counted 15, mainly small, but all very, very bright. The presence of casinos is rarely a sign of wisdom, but certainly a sign of money – the desire of it. Indeed a casino is a perfect system of redistribution of wealth, only it works the other way round than taxes, and the flow is from the bottom to the top. Indeed money is the only fluid that defies entropy. Once downtown, Yerevan shines with a vast and very well polished Republic Square, boasting rich soviet palaces in the typical and pleasant native architecture, an orgasm of arches and ochre sandstone blocks. Marriot hotels bought the old nomenclatura hangout and now you can really enjoy being in the Caucasus at the superb bar, sipping local cognac and munching 10euros sandwiches. And a consistent traffic of very expensive cars lining outside. Like everywhere, basically. The message is clear, there is dough around here.

The sight that Armenia offers to the independent traveller driving from Georgia, especially from Alaverdi and Debed Canyon, is slightly different. Maybe it was the murky, drizzly and grey weather we found, and it's quite a known fact that murky, drizzly and grey weather does not enhance the beauty of a deep and twisted canyons. Or again it was the scattered archaeological industries rusting around. Or maybe the unlit, narrow and crumbling tunnels where potholes reached the greatest depth right where you cannot see them. Still, the first impact with the country was not love at first sight. Alaverdi was a particularly dreadful show. The first impression was Dresden circa 1946... I was told that there were nice monasteries on top of the plateau, and indeed there is a gondola carrying both, natives and tourists, with a strong prevalence of the former, to the rim of the canyon, where a gentler town could be enjoyed. But incentive to do so was very light – as the Sahara desert can be considered a very light soil, last but not least for the age of the gondola.

Upon arrival, through the fogs of my helmet the walls of the canyon were dark, and the horizon consisted in a huge expanse of wrecked iron ruins in the middle of which stood an impressive smokestack. The copper mine, a very rich one they say, is still working and smoke exits copiously from the chimney. In soviet times Armenia was a rather technologically advanced republic, and lots of electric components were built here, cleverly I would say, close to the copper ore. Some components were *only* built here. When USSR split up in 1991 many other factories using these components found themselves in deep trouble and it took a while to find other sources. But the Armenian side had the worst of it: they lost all their customers overnight. 'Easy,

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piece of cake' they thought 'Now we have a World market to conquer, eager to buy our stuff'. But the products were both overpriced and outdated, and only the mere mining of copper was left for a whole city to eke on.

Everything was grey. Sky, road, town, houses, people. Shut off the sun from a place like this and suddenly fun becomes a very remote possibility.



While industrial archaeology might have its estimators, soviet-style architecture applied to domestic dwellings has far less followers.

Other travellers and surely better men would have bravely dug in the endless possibilities offered by Alaverdi and its people, wonderfully welcoming, but it was raining, we were drenched and decided to give it a miss to find relief in the warm pool of a 5star hotel nearby. Our decision to travel along the Silk Road in English old Style was adamant and while the contact with the locals is one of the main reasons for this journey, this does not mean we have to share the sufferings. Politically incorrect travelling.

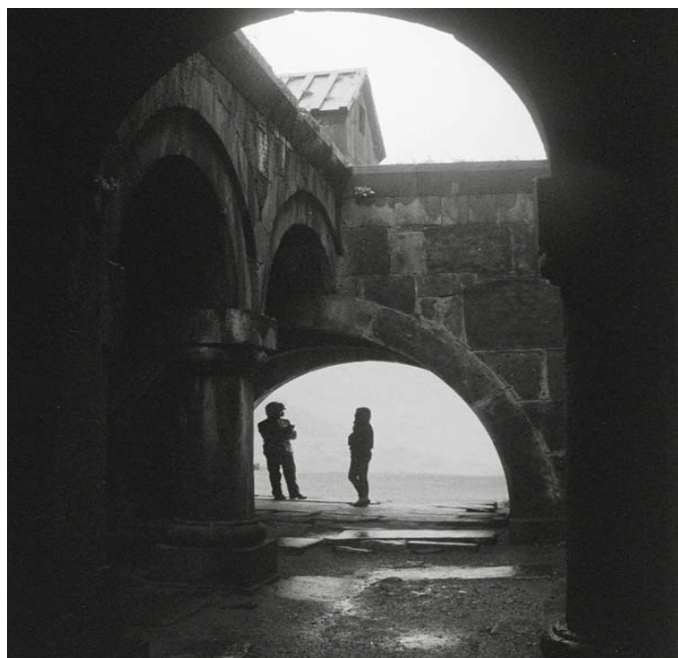
While N-bombed mining towns perform badly in grey weather, other sights may gain in atmosphere. Such is the case of the Haghpat monastery complex. The word complex should not convey the impression of a large number of organized buildings full of monastic 'action'. Monks are in fact nowhere to be seen, the place being a collection of several buildings left to silence, sparrows and darkness. Someone probably takes care of the basic needs of the place, and the lawn is indeed mowed. But apart from a group of vendors outside, visitors are pretty much left to themselves. Bas-reliefs and sacred stones are scattered everywhere and with a good truck one could make a very convenient, although morally flexible, art shopping.

Unesco listed the site because *the monastic complex represents the highest flowering of Armenian religious architecture, whose unique style developed from a blending of elements of Byzantine ecclesiastical architecture and the traditional vernacular architecture of the Caucasian region.*

Hard to believe there's no ticket office for such a marvel. The bell tower was built in 1240 and presently was playing with the low clouds darting by. Dark corridors with arches and chapels made for a mystical atmosphere.

Any averagely educated Italian tend to have had his fair share of churches, monasteries and cloisters by the age of 16, with only a minor number of staunch fans who keep wandering around Europe in search of every possible variation, usually dressed very funnily and smoking pipes. Admirable fellows, no doubt, but not even a moderately curious adult will keep gaping at arches and naves for much longer into the age or reason. More peculiarity is very welcome, and I value silence and loneliness over all. Give me a wrecked monastery well below par in architectural charm but no one around instead of floods of Japanese retired and a ticket office, and I'll go for it. Quietness is worth buying, especially when free.

Not a bad spot to wait for the rain to abate. There is a section of the complex that used to a refectory is outstanding, even in the dark.



Lake Sevan

Deben Canyon ends more or less in Vanadzor, another industrial town constricted at the bottom of a valley. Thankfully, one might say, the sprawl of ruins finds a natural border. But the town centre and the residential area are definitely better than Alaverdi, although we were not yet tempted to invest in local real estate. But yes to stop at a local mechanic. There is a very long line of them lined up close to the main crossroad, at least 30 shops the size of a small American home garage, one after the other, busy repairing cars. Surely there is no shortage of work, for the local selection of models balanced the lack of variety with old age. And that X6 squeezed in one of the shops must have surely been a fortuitous case, say a flat tyre. From many years spent in 'developing' countries, I came to learn that they breed the best mechanics, for the same reason Israel breed the best pilots: lots of practice and few resources.

The road leaves Vanadzor and continues in a valley cut in the high plateau to the mountain resort of Dilijan, the Switzerland of Armenia. I am sure the weather again was mischievously playing tricks on us, but we failed to find comparisons between this town with any corner of the private banking capital of Europe. Elevation, yes, pastoral surroundings, yes, a consistent bovine population, again yes, but here the similarities end. With the notable exception of a single 5-star hotel, belonging to the same chain we were going to know so well, the houses were short of their Swiss counterparts in almost every aspect, last but not least the geraniums on the balconies. But they try hard indeed, and the use of wood in domestic architecture certainly deserves a mention and there are many nice houses around. Definitely more photogenic are the very young shepherds tending herds from the top of very tall horses.

After Dilijan the road kept climbing and the trees became sparser towards the Sevan pass, where the clouds disappeared completely to reveal a truly remarkable scenery. If one measures happiness with the green colour, he'll probably disagree, but surely down there, resting in the quiet embrace of gentle mountains covered in yellow grass, lay an exceedingly blue and very big lake. Elevation helps, for the basin is at nearly 2000 metres of height, and does not make for a pleasant off-season swim. Or even a summer dip for the matter, unless one loves water never reaching the 20s... The main peninsula boasts the usual monastery, and here one wonders if foreigners visiting Italy have the same impression of churches being almost all the same. But the really attractive side is the eastern coast: a line of beaches, a strip of green trees then yellow pastures rising up with a gentle grade towards the Azeri border that runs on the ridge of ancient mountains that look more like hills from here.

The Soviets probably had wild expectations about this whole area, because they even built a railway along the road. The line is still in use, but I have no metre to judge its





quality. Armenian Railways have a Facebook page, I've just discovered, and I had the thrill of being the absolute first to like the page. The Italian railways have a Facebook page too, with around 2800 fans, probably all working for them. This does not say a lot about the quality of their Armenian counterpart. Stations are hard to judge too, being composed of a slightly elevated concrete platform and a single rusty sign with the name in Cyrillic. The line ends by the gold mine in Zod, which in my humble opinion is the most fascinating short city name ever. The longest being Afyonkarahisar, the black opium fortress.

At the northern corner of the lake it's hard to miss a vast structure that either was or wanted to be a very large hotel.



The image speaks for itself. I was told it was thriving in Soviet times and it's still very popular among quadrupeds anyway, and one must admit that the grounds are very well kept.

The road following the lake is a magnificent drive. There is absolutely no one around, apart from rare shepherds and wild horses. The winters must be harsh and the small villages tend to hide in the small valleys, sheltered by willows and orchards, and here the apricot reigns supreme. Life did not change much during recent history, I suppose... Cattle, sheep, fruit and honey. The locals are probably very much alike their neighbours on the other side of the mountains, living on cattle, sheep, fruit and honey, but raised with a different religion. The last conflict, like probably all conflicts, surely did not have roots in the peasants and working classes. In the Caucasus one never knows for how long one will share the same neighbours. Borders were drawn and redrawn, population displaced, families broken, but for all the time Azeri and Armenian shepherds have shared the same high pastures, and while along the Turkish border the Kurds carry big guns, I doubt these folks can afford one. The border close by is one of the most disputed around, and it's sealed, but soldiers around are rare and friendly.

The villages tend to be far from the shore, where winter blizzard is not conducive to winter warmth. Better in the sheltered valleys, among the orchards. Several are along the north-eastern coast, all equally charming and welcoming. Only one of these, though, can boast a hotel, and a nice one at that. At least if we want a functioning hotel, because there is a dozen structures in different levels of construction but all equally abandoned. Still I am totally sure that a hotel is not essential, because it would be enough to stand by every villager's house to be invited in, shown around and offered bed and apricots. And such was indeed the case when I decided to take a picture of a spotlessly maintained Lada. Husband and wife invited us to see their orchard and their nice house, that was far from shabby even if the presence of any object also present in Milan design museums was scarce. The man was certainly proud of his orchard and not very happy about a recent hailstorm, that shrapneled the trees and the maturing fruits – pears, apricots and apples. The local apricots are famous for their great taste, but the main problem is that they ripen all together, and are ubiquitous in August, so most village houses offer a thick carpets of the fruit. Our hosts were drying some of them on a table by the house, and indeed

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they were good especially if you did not consider bacteria in the definition of good, for flies too were finding the apricots tasty.



The house had a very peculiar distribution of spaces: two very large bedrooms, a tiny living area between them with a couch and a small kitchen, and 'modern' toilets outside. The lady surely does not spend too much time cooking. A garage outside was full of tools. Their gestures stressed the cosiness of the guest bedroom, and it was not difficult to imagine that they were offering a place to stay. Too bad we already had a room in the hotel nearby and a sauna booked for soon after, so we just nodded all along smiling, which is basically (the nodding I mean) the only thing one can politely do in these occasions right?

The village was more or less complete: there was a 'station' – the concrete platform - a tiny school with playground, a major's office, a 'bar' doubling up as tiny shop, a mechanic and more or less 50 houses all pleasantly covered with corrugated iron.

The purists of architecture are scarce in corrugated iron fan clubs, and I wish they were more numerous: it's always cheap and easy to paint, never offensive to the eye and seldom poisonous as some of its substitutes that killed scores. Even the original Swiss alpine huts must have a corrugated iron roof, and it's indeed very practical in the high plateaus. True, in the Caucasus they tend to splurge, using it also to enclose balconies and to make walls, but some of its uses attain the level of genius, minarets for example. One does not have to walk far to enter Muslim lands from here, basically a day walk almost in any direction will take you to a Muslim village (if you pass the barbed-wired-sealed border). The Turkish villages by the Georgian border for example, those far from the Kurds and once standing in the Christian side, can boast magnificent mosques that look built in Gstaad and transported here, with their wooden walls, small windows and iron roofs. Only, Canton Bern is not famous for minarets, and these had to be probably made on the spot. So what about a long cylinder built joining rolled corrugated iron sheets, and capped with a cone shaped corrugated iron roof? The result is truly magnificent, especially when backed by a deep blue sky, and best appreciated when the regulatory megaphones are off.

To make a long story short, we found a village in which I would be ready to buy property. True, this is due to the astonishingly low value of land around here, and last but not least for the excellent restaurant of the hotel.

After the pleasant dinner we noticed a very peculiar guy on the terrace, who braved a dinner outside, among the penguins basically, to breath in a kodakrome sunset that was performing on the lake. Visitors in this corner of the world are scarce and we soon found ourselves with a glass of cognac in the hotel lobby. A New Yorker if there ever was one, James was the owner of the hotel chain we were assiduously using, Armenian by origin and a prominent member of the Diaspora, that is to say the 7 million-strong Armenian community living out of the republic. Not at all proficient in the native language, somewhat shy and definitely low key, especially when considering the 16100 google hits he can boast, hairstyle out of fashion since '*The Dark Side of the Moon*', he looks a fish out of water in this country that he's so strongly helping to rebuild.



Producer of famous handmade Tibetan and Armenian carpets, he invested lavishly in Armenia in the carpet, hotel and food industry, and is probably very well off. There must be a link between forced nomadism and business ability. Jews are renowned for their propensity towards profitable activities, and this ability might be the result (or the cause according to others) of millennia of being kicked around. Armenians are remarkably alike in history and propensity.

The Turks killed at least a million Armenians in 1915-1918, and with an efficiency that would have admired the Germans: very few concentration camps, that are hard to conceal and make for very bad press, but a silent walk in the desert. In those days the Armenian population was living mainly on the land of present day Turkey, in Eastern Anatolia. Hundreds of churches are still there, silent and deserted, when spires and minarets rivalled in beauty and higher forms of religious marketing were preferred to manslaughter. The Ottomans lost all their European empire before WWII and were forced to find a place for nearly a million displaced muslims, who where settled mainly in Armenian lands, and the refugees played a big role in the massacres that followed. Since the first massacres started, the Ottomans showed remarkable efficiency. They used mass burnings, drowning, forced marches, drugs, deportation and extermination camps. The Genocide Sanctuary in Yerevan is as touching as its counterpart in Jerusalem. But the main difference is that while the Germans are now on good terms with the Jews, the same cannot be said about the Armenians and the Turks, even if much more time has elapsed.

Anyway, Jews and Armenians share many common characteristics: most of the population lives around the World, they rarely loose money and they control a quarter of Jerusalem.

The Armenian Diaspora, locally *Haykakan spyurk*, has very often disagreed with the population living on spot. Well, suppose your brother one day escaped abroad in rags to search for a better future and became rich, while you eked out decades of misery, communism, earthquakes and war to keep the house going, then when you finally reach freedom you discover that without your bro's cash you'd be ruined, wouldn't that suck? Some contrasts have to be put into account. From what James says about the Yerevan political authorities, the contrast is harsh.

'This country is in the hands of very few families, and they are immensely rich'

'And is the people happy?'

'You see, 70 years of communism changed the order of things'

'In what sense?'

'In this country, if you are rich it means that you deserved it'

'So no revolution in sight?'

'Afraid not... here money justifies itself'

'And probably it's hard to make another revolution when the first one failed miserably, I suppose'

'Exactly'

'So if you are poor you are bad'

'I would not say bad, but certainly unworthy of respect, that's why people does not buy motorcycles here'

'Because you look poor on one?'

'Yes, you would not be respected, but the question of respect is the lesser evil'

'Which is the worst?'





'The powerful people do whatever they want to do, and they are actually supposed to behave like this'

One could only feel very sorry for a brave entrepreneur fighting the corrupt politicians, even if the sudden and massive deterioration of the road just a couple of metres after the hotel junction might indicate that the situation is not that bad after all.

Riding on top of the World on a semi-deserted highway between gentle hills and a deep blue lake, right on the Silk Road connecting the last Christian country with the Muslim World, with Mount Ararat and Noah's Ark in sight, is certainly thrilling. Only, it makes you think. These roads should be thriving with traffic, this is the place where it all began, where scores of civilizations were born, where traders walked, rode and drove since the dawn of ages. Have a quick look at a World map, and no matter which main meridian you choose, once you know where the 3000 years old western civilization and the 4000 yo eastern counterpart were born and grew, and there's no doubt that the main junction is here. Here, of all places, there should be a McDonald. If this highway is now almost deserted, something along the way must have gone spectacularly wrong. You can still find the old service stations and motel: the *caravanserai* right at the Selim Pass is perfectly preserved and could be used even today (especially if you like dark places where you live in very close contact with animals and their by-products), and it was a very popular stop when Newton was catching falling apples. It's a different story today. No camels, no trucks, no cars, no one. History has been sadistically efficient with this country in raising its most formidable obstacles: political boundaries, the most horrible invention ever. From the Selim pass or its close neighbour, one just have to stand and look around, and there are very few places one can go without risking to be shot. Walk east, and you have Azerbaijan – border sealed. Walk south and you have a tiny border post with Iran, that has been closed for ages. Walk west and you have Turkey – border sealed. Walk north and difficulties might arise depending on your passport, still there are very few incentives to hike in Ingushetia, South Ossetia and other equally welcoming names.

The western border has a long story and fluctuated east and west with great flexibility between 1850 and 1921, when the Russians showed little interest in a wide strip of land between Mount Ararat, Kars, Ardahan and Artvin. The extreme north-east of Turkey is still called the Georgian Valleys, and Kars' only contribution to Turkish urban decency comes from the old Russian palaces. But this strip of land now lies in Turkey and Armenians have been deprived of their two major symbols. One is, of course, Ararat. For the first Christian nation, losing to the Moors the place where the World was reborn after the deluge is a total disaster. And it's not like, say, a sword or a palace, something that you can just forget because it's far from your eyes, no. Ararat is over 5 thousand metres high, standing alone on top of a plain, and Yerevan is actually built on a slope so that it affords to almost every terrace a perfect view of the mountain.

The second is Ani, the ancient capital of the Armenian empire. Although not as visible and prominent, the location of the place borders the joke, being the old city actually just on the wrong side of the river.

Ani is without doubt a magical place. Once a city with over a hundred thousand inhabitants along the prosperous Silk Road rivalling with Constantinople, it's now a forgotten area where churches, walls and other ruins are scattered. It attained the peak of its splendour in the year 1000, then was conquered by the Arabs in 1036. They did not exactly use a velvet glove:

'The army entered the city, massacred its inhabitants, pillaged and burned it, leaving it in ruins and taking prisoner all those who remained alive...The dead bodies were so many that they blocked the streets; one could not go anywhere without stepping over them. And the number of prisoners was not less than 50,000 souls. I was determined to enter city and see the destruction with my own eyes. I tried to find a street in which I would not have to walk over the corpses; but that was impossible'.

Later it was the turn of the Mongols, and of the Ottomans... A small town with walls until the 17th century, it gradually crumbled apart. But if one is into old stones, this is by far the most fascinating and interesting place for miles. You need to get to the Roman ruins on the Aegean sea to find a rival. Part of the fascination depends on the fact that the place is more or less forgotten. If you are annoyed by the miles of fences that treat you like cattle in the more famous sites around the globe, if you usually feel like a boy at school been shown something you cannot touch and be part of because of the thick herd you have been squeezed into, then Ani is your place.





There is indeed a bored man at the ticket office, but it does not take a comprehensive look to discover that the site is unfenced and travellers with more elastic morals could easily just walk in at the end of the walls. The whole crowd of visitors at peak hour consisted of 5 Italian bikers and a TV troupe, there to convince Turkish people to visit the place, and somewhat surprised that foreigners were abreast of the existence of this place. We were duly interviewed and explained that to consider 'secret' a place that earns the Highlights list of the Lonely Planet guide could be a far fetched idea. Still, it's easy to perceive in the atmosphere a certain reluctance and lack of enthusiasm in promoting Christian sites on the Turkish part. Even if less spectacular than Ani, there are tens of churches in Eastern Anatolia, and some jewels are utterly abandoned.

Whatever the reason, to wander alone the gravel paths between these old churches, columns and ruins of palaces, mysteriously forgotten on this high, wind-beaten and barren plateau is priceless.



Proposals have been made to build a peace bridge to let Armenians visit their old capital, but I doubt they are actually ready to come to terms with the Turks. Both the Diaspora and the locals seem absolutely convinced that Turkey is now so economically powerful that will simply sweep Armenia away.

A region squeezed between unfriendly and heavily armed neighbours may create a certain confusion among the visitors, but it does not appear to bother the natives too much. The villages in the Vayats Dzor province of Armenia are peaceful, friendly, pastoral and welcoming. The most rural of them might even be considered '*charming*' by some well disposed tourist in a rush, therefore content of taking pictures from the road rather than checking under the carpets. There is a ubiquitous and very Mediterranean habit of gathering in front of the local 'bar' to chat and eventually address the passing riders fighting with unreadable Cyrillic and a devilish Armenian. The large number of folks standing idle in these places on a weekday might confirm the rumours ranking Armenia as the second worst performing economy of the planet in 2011, and quite possibly the only place where the share of agriculture is actually increasing. These are not good signs for a prosperous future. But the south-eastern corner of Armenia, while certainly far from prosperous, has had many advantages. The soviet Union was a very large country indeed, and good old Joseph made an excellent work in centralizing everything. But distance helps, and it's a very long way from Moscow to the Iranian border. More, you have first to cross the northern Caucasus, then a couple of very high passes to arrive in a place like Goris. Even the staunchest and most incorruptible politburo official found very light incentives to travel down here and mess up with the locals. So there are no old factories around, and very few signs of the Soviet days. Sure, there is a fair quota of ghastly buildings, but all in all it's pleasant to walk around the spacious streets lined with old two-storeys houses where the arch, the Armenian architectonic 'piece de resistance', is widely represented. In my humble opinion the arch represents both tradition and

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emancipation from Soviet style. When I describe Breznev era houses as ghastly I should also mention that for some reason they are also photogenic, especially when the ladies living in them provide a touch of colour. Two strange things happen to the traveller going east that will never happen to the one going west: west means a single alphabet and the drier, east is Babel and clothes drying out. And travellers like to take pictures of drying clothes, because it tastes of native. It provides a subject and a fake meaning to a picture that would have barely any. And in Armenia they achieve the highest standard, with lines between tall buildings with underwear peacefully flying ten storeys high.



Back in Yerevan. Villa Delenda hosts a *literary café* in Italian, to which Italians are always invited. I forgot to ask why they call it *café*, because the drink was noticed mainly for its absence, but it was a unique insight on two generations of Armenian. The two teachers are well dressed and relatively well off, even if somewhat rigid in my humble opinion. The menu offered a reading in Italian of famous Armenian poems ranging from 1830 to 1930, from the so-called '*Awakening*' period, when the nation received the revolutionary contagion of 1848 both in politics and in language, when finally the 'vulgar' was adopted also by high men of letters. The Romantic part is actually just romantic, and certainly a group of girls in college could have chosen nothing else, but the patriotic part was incredibly felt in choice, tone and comments. Men, these girls feel Armenian indeed. I can barely imagine an Italian girl reading romantic poems about flowers and blue skies, and fire and country... She'd be ostracised from life, totally uncool. Only a nerd could do something like this, but these chicks were no nerd in any way. What I learned from the gathering is that young people here has that 'hunger' from the new Millennium Mantra '*Stay hungry, stay foolish*'. To many of us, as I sadly notice while joining the line, the hunger has gone, and foolishness alone does not work. Or maybe, at least in my case, the hunger has a different form. These chicks are seriously determined to get something from life, more or less like the generation of our parents.

To attend a reunion of a bunch of 20-something, most exceedingly attractive, reading love songs, is not exactly easy when one landed at 4 am the previous night. The mood of the harem had to be directed onto something less sugarish, and they were extremely quick to brand the sword when I asked them if there was something they were hoping for the future, in relation to the two neighbours of their country. I am now positively sure that every single Armenian is brought up with the absolute conviction that Turks are pure evil and they rather just stare at Ararat rather than compromise, and that they do not give a shit as Baku as they got what they wanted and consider Azeris a somewhat inferior species of biped unworthy of the time of our conversation.

Then I asked the teachers what they thought about the soviet days when they were just one country. And that was a mistake. And a big one at that.

'We? A single country? NEVER, who told you that? We were Armenians and thanks to our brave leaders we enjoyed a high level of autonomy'

'But could not you travel freely around?'





'Yes, and so what?'

At this point a girl chips in sowing further outrage, saying that yes they were told that USSR was a big single country. God forbid!

'How you dare, who told you that!'. If she had added 'you little slut' I would have not been surprised. 'Yes, true there were good things about those days and some have nostalgia, but thank god those days are over and we are Armenia now, as we have always been'

It never happened to me to perceive such sanguine feelings in a selection of population under the age of 70. It's as clear as daylight that both at home and at school the atmosphere is full of atavistic resentments, fears and anger, as usual fuelled by the cultural intelligentsia that in the Caucasus appears to have found a '*raison d'etre*' in stirring nationalism. Holding the passport of a nation where nationalism sparks only at the football World Cup, I was touched.

Yerevan, as we said, offers a stark contrast with the rest of the country. Between the Armenian/Soviet Republic square – Armenian for the arches, soviet for the general atmosphere – and the Opera, the local plutocrats invested heavily in new buildings, that appear to be seldom inhabited. A consistent number of 20-storey condominiums are changing the skyline of the city, with new avenues full of shops and the usual brands. Very expensive Suvs pack the streets close to the fancy bars and a ghastly picture of an Italian very famous nouveau rich announces that soon even Yerevan will boast the stench of a Billionaire night club. I doubt that the literary café girls will become pin up, but the simple idea is revolting. The long trip east is for now a confirmation that, even if cultures are different, the Spirit of the Time tends towards the same direction, with the people of Macedonia, Iran and Armenia tending to a similar lifestyle. Or even worse we notice a growing confusion between culture and lifestyle, where the former loses the battle. That's why the girls of literary café save Yerevan to my eyes. Let's really hope they will have the upper hand, because even if I love proper food, it's sad to see a country that jumps from a hunter-gatherer economy to a Billionaire club, bypassing McDonalds and its golden arches, notably missing in Yerevan.

