A portrait of a man with long, wavy grey hair and a very full, long grey beard and mustache. He is wearing a purple short-sleeved shirt with a complex, abstract pattern. He is leaning against a thick, weathered wooden post on the left side of the frame. His arms are crossed over a wooden ledge at the bottom. He is looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. The background is a stone wall with a large, arched opening. The lighting is natural, suggesting an outdoor setting.

MindStormPhoto Armenia 2017

Burt and Evelyn Johnson

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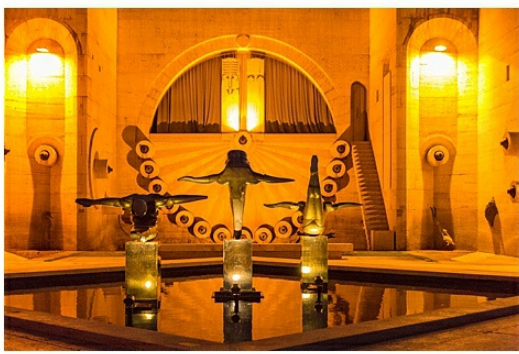
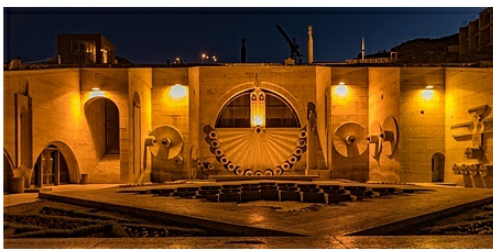
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Armenia 1 – Yerevan, Part 1



The last country of our photographic tour with [Mehmet Özbalci](#) is Armenia, where we started with three days in the capital city of Yerevan. It felt like luxury being able to stay in one (excellent!) hotel for 3 nights, and Yerevan proved to have plenty to keep our interest – and our cameras, happy.

One of our main targets was to photograph Mt. Ararat, the highest local mountain peak, where Noah is said to have landed his ark after the mythical flood. We visited the ruins of the Zvartnos temple, built in the 7th century, showing us an unusually clear view of the mountain top (above block).



Mt. Ararat is special enough to warrant more than a single view, so we also climbed the 500 steps up Cascade, to see the mountain at sunrise. It was very unusual to see the mountain with no clouds around it this morning. Indeed, other than this morning, and the afternoon in the first block, every time we looked towards the mountain, it was hidden in clouds. Clearly Mehmet has the ears of the gods, and made sure we had perfect conditions for our photography!



When driving in the countryside, we stopped at this old railroad car that has been repurposed into a bridge across this small river. As with many things in rural Armenia, it is in disrepair, which only adds to the photographic possibilities.



At one stop, we were able to see women making lavash bread (center and upper row). See the video at the bottom of this post to get a better feel for the work these women do all day long long, to produce the delicious bread we ate at each meal. The paper-thin bread is placed flat on what appears to be an ironing board, then slapped onto the side of the wood charcoal oven where it sticks, and is baked a couple minutes before being removed.

We also visited another cemetery. Each of these is unique in their own way, and all are different from what we are accustomed to in the West. The lower-right gravestone shows three unrelated men, all of whom died in the same year. Given that they are in the same gravesite, it is assumed they died together. Given the image of the flaming bomber on the right, it is assumed they died when shot down in a war incident. Since Armenia was not at war in 1976 when they died, it is surmised they died in some Soviet conflict elsewhere in the world. None of that was detailed on the tombstone though.



One canyon we passed was lined with basalt crystals, forming what the locals call the "symphony of stones." Many of the hexagonal crystals lined up in a way reminiscent of drums of different depths and tones (or the pipes played by the Blue Man Group). Others line up looking like the keys on a piano.

Tomorrow, we will continue with the rest of our experiences in Yerevan.

[Breadmaking in Armenia](#) from [Burt Johnson](#) on [Vimeo](#).

, June 14, 2017

[Tour, Travel](#) · [Armenia](#)

Armenia 2 – Yerevan, Part 2



We visited the Garni temple, built in the 1st century AD, where we found a pleasant surprise, as our guide knew an employee who had not trimmed the ends of his mustache for 40 years. He was completely willing to pose for us, and only asked to use his camera phone to shoot the LCD image of our cameras, since he does not have any email to receive full copies of our results.



The Garni temple is still used for worship (center), though tourists (right-center) now outnumber true believers. Lilit (our local Armenian guide) often posed for our cameras too (lower left).



While walking out of one church, we met the man shown middle-left. He is 92 years old, and a veteran of WWII with 124 medals.

We ate lunch at a small charity that works with underprivileged children, teaching them art and cooking skills. All proceeds from the sale of art were used to support the charity.



We photographed the "blue hour" one evening at St. Gregory's, the largest Armenian Orthodox church (center and top row). Earlier, as we were driving, we had a view of Mt Ararat again with the vineyards in the foreground – our last view when it was not covered in clouds. Lilit posed for us again in that field (lower right).



At one church, Mehmet arranged for us to hear a duduk being played. This is a traditional Armenian wind instrument, that usually plays slow, soulful music. A future post will include a video of Armenian music, which will include a section from this player.



About two blocks from our hotel was the "singing fountains" – a nightly water fountain show set to music. If you have been to Las Vegas, think in terms of the Bellagio nightly show and you will have a good idea of the atmosphere.

, June 15, 2017

[Tour, Travel • Armenia](#)

Armenia 3 – Goris



Enroute to Goris, we got one last view of Mt Ararat behind the Church of Khor Virap, before it disappeared entirely behind a veil of clouds. As we approached this scene, there was heavy cloud cover overhead, and the monastery was obscured in dark shade. Watching the clouds, we saw the possibility of better light coming soon. Sure enough, after waiting about half an hour, the sun reached a hole in the clouds, and the monastery shone through in the scene above.



We made a stop in a small village today, to break up the long drive. I am not sure of the actual name of this town, but it was referred to as "Stork City," because of the large number of stork nests, at the top of most power poles (center). Every nest had one stork protecting two chicks (upper left), while the other parent flew off (lower-left and upper-right) to find food.



We stopped for lunch in another small village, and happened upon a rehearsal at a youth dance school. Our guide asked for permission for us to photograph this. We wandered around town for a short time after the rehearsal, and encountered a few residents in their daily village life.



We frequently came across long lines of newly shorn sheep being herded from their Winter pastures to their Summer feeding grounds. These usually included a cowboy near the front, plus another in the rear, with a few dogs to bring any stray sheep back into line.

We made a brief stop at the [Tatev monastery](#) (right column), built on a high cliff to help its defense during the Middle Ages.



Our last stop of this day was at a small monastery in Tatev. We spent time capturing images from above, then stopped inside the monastery for a visit with the monk. It is run by a single monk (center right), and is actively used for prayer (center and lower-left). The monk blessed our group with a small prayer. Lilit, our Armenian guide, allowed us to photograph her while she prayed here (lower right) as well as shielded us from the building under restoration.

, June 16, 2017

[Tour, Travel • Armenia](#)

Armenia 4 – Dilijan



We continued our travels along the Silk Road, an ancient network of trading routes between China and the Mediterranean. Enroute to our next hotel in Dilijan, we stopped at the Orbeliani Caravansary, a structure where caravans on this Silk Road used to stop for the night. From the outside (upper left), it is rather unimpressive stone building, so we didn't really have very high expectations of achieving memorable photographs when entering.

Once we entered, we discovered that the sun was at just the right position (Mehmet usually worked things this way, without us realizing it until later) to show excellent shafts of light to illuminate the dim room.

Mehmet is a smoker, though he always made a point of only enjoying his vice during breaks, away from all the travelers. He asked us if we wanted him to use his vice to add some character to the shafts of light (upper-middle and upper-right), and we all enthusiastically said yes.

The result was the main, bottom image above, which I rather think was well worth the stop. Mehmet suggested the title for the upper-middle image should be "*Working Hard*," and who am I to object when he did just that?



After staying overnight in Dilijan, we spent some time the next morning wandering "Old Dilijan," a historic part of town preserved for people to sell their crafts to tourists. Our favorite such craftsman was a wood carver (center), who created intricate ornaments, including those seen upper-left.



One of our primary objectives in this region was to visit the "[Armenian Stonehenge](#)." These are "vertical rock circles" estimated to have been created around 6000 BC, supposedly for astronomical observation, very similar to the more famous Stonehenge in England (built around 3000 BC, or 3000 years later than these in Armenia). Our guide stated that such vertical stone circles exist on every continent in the world, except Antarctica, but this is the only one in Central Asia.

We also stopped to photograph a nice waterfall nearby (lower right two images).



The ancient Noraduz cemetery was another photo destination, with graves dating from 1000 years ago up until the present. The oldest gravestones (left column plus upper-middle) are called "Kachkars" and were reputedly dressed as soldiers during the Middle Ages to fool approaching enemies into thinking there was a large army defending the city.

In the 20th century, images of the deceased were added (upper right shows a young woman who died at the age of 21). Others began to include elaborate large busts of the departed (right column, lower two images). This is one of the more unique cemeteries, combining both old and new, and it was clear that most of the cemetery was neglected, with weeds waist high in many places (bottom center).



We stopped at a lot of churches during this tour, and today was the **Haghpat monastery**. As with most of the monasteries in this region, this is an ancient stone structure, with a very plain interior, but is still actively used by the local residents for worship.



Traveling across Armenia required long days in the bus, which were broken up by rest stops where we could stretch both our legs and our cameras. One such stop was at a market, with butcher shops lined across the street, shown above.



Throughout Armenia, we noticed that the signs are almost a work of art, and often do not look like any recognizable text at all.

The Armenian alphabet consists of 39 letters, and was first created in 405 AD.

Prior to that, the Greek alphabet was used in churches, but the Armenian language had never been written down. For whatever strange reason, Mesrop Mashtots felt a completely new alphabet was needed when he proceeded to first write down the Armenian language. The world has been stuck with yet-another-alphabet to confuse communication ever since...



The photo tour is now over, after 6 weeks traversing 5 countries. Enroute to our next destination of Portugal, we landed in Istanbul with a 13 hour layover. Mehmet (our guide for this adventure) generously invited us to his home, introduced us to his family (dietician wife, college age son studying network security, and twin daughters about to enter High School), and fed us a wonderful Turkish home-cooked dinner.

The image above was taken of the Blue Mosque from our Istanbul hotel window, shortly before collapsing into bed.