

March 18, 2007

## THE RETURN HOME – AND A BOTTLE OF COGNAC

### Day 9 Diary from John Tocci

Well, all things must end. We set out on our return to the land of the brave and the home of the free. No slight intended, believe me. If you find anyone who doesn't come away, after visiting Georgia and Armenia, with a profound sense of gratitude, check their pulse. If I was asked for an immediate impression of the places we visited, I'd sum it up in one word, "cold". It was cold on the streets, in the alleys, in the schools, in the blown out high rise apartments, and even in the Yerevan airport. The cost of fuel was a huge problem even before the two fold cost increase in oil over the past year. These countries are certainly close to, if not in, a heating crisis.

Visitors to Armenia must pay to leave. Yup, you heard me right; pay to leave, 10,000 Drams (\$28 US) each. After paying for the three of us and receiving multicolored stamped and official looking certificates we could check in. I suspect the stamps and things are a hold over from Soviet times. We've heard, from friends living in other former Soviet countries, about the multitudinous manifestations of certifications, approval documents, affidavits, and permits, all requiring lengthy stays in lines presided over by official governmental obstructers. Certainly not like that here though where they take money efficiently (grin).



Exit duty certificate

Again, as in the flight into Tbilisi, our 6 am flight was the only departure scheduled out this morning. One other (aging) plane sat on the tarmac. It was from Russia, Krasnodar Air. This reminded me of a Wall Street Journal article published last week that chronicled recent air disasters, discussing problems with developing countries, use of sketchy aircraft, airframes with multiple past lives and undocumented repair and maintenance histories. Hmmm. Our flight turned out to be fragrant but uneventful. Other folks are not



as concerned with body aroma as Americans. That scent combined with the nice smell of full dinners of Armenian food warming in the galley and well worn seat fabrics which had absorbed all these airs for several years, remembering them all well. But the plane is warm and so are the people. We settled in for the flight to Amsterdam.

Most of us dozed off or stretched out. Seat assignments, like roadway lane dividers, are suggestive rather than rigid. Lila and I sat in a more capacious exit row. We don't speak a word of Armenian (except "very thanks to you") but no one asked about our ability to handle evacuations in the event of an emergency. Five hours later we landed about twice as fast as we should amidst spontaneous applause from the passengers. This time I joined the crowd. We were happy to be on the terra firma.

I am going to close this journal with a final story. We had a two and one half hour layover in Amsterdam before catching our flight to Boston. I love to observe design, branding, imagery and furnishings in nicely designed airports. Amsterdam is one of the best (IMHO) in the world. By this time my family and friends had grown weary of my picture snapping at meaningless (to them) retail buildings, logos, chairs, lounges, light fixtures, bathrooms, interior plantings, banners, and on and on. Oh well. Someday I'll just fly alone from one well-designed airport to another well-designed airport again and again circling the world. I'll schedule four hour layovers to photograph everything even though some people get pretty squirrely about a guy in black taking photos of them and their stores. Some have even chased me. Really! I put the camera away for awhile.

While we were in Armenia Yeva planned a visit to the Ararat Cognac factory in Yerevan for us. She arranged for them to keep the whole factory open past hours and we were the only ones touring when we did. Ararat is world renown and this cognac ("brandy" to you in the EU) has won dozens of medals and prizes over the past couple hundred years. At the end of the tour and tasting we bought a bottle of 20-year-old Cognac for dear friends. This stuff is like buttah (butter). Like silk. It has the aromatic power of gladiolas from three Italian funerals combined. Airline security in the Caucasus's (Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan etc.) is quite relaxed so we packed our bottle of Armenian nectar in our carry-on. We forgot that flights to the US are a different matter altogether. Security in Amsterdam would not let us take our bottle on board our Boston-bound flight. Even the sight of men crying couldn't persuade them. They told us it would have to be thrown out. Couldn't do it. It would be a sin (venial) to throw it out.

We tried to swap it at a nearby Duty-Free shop because liquors purchased at the airport are exempt. Nope. I went to a bar and lounge next to the gate and offered it to the bartenders free of charge. They knew the situation well. They were very nice but were prevented from accepting it. We told them to take it home. "Can't, we'll lose our jobs". But, the lady bartender offered us brandy glasses to drink it there. Eureka! I said, "Really?" She said, "Surely". I said, "We'll invite fifty of our closest friends" and turned to the crowd seated opposite the bar. "Who wants to join us in glass of fabulous 20 year old Cognac?" Their eyes and faces said "Who is this weird guy?" I announced our predicament in a loud voice, to them all again. No takers. Lila is to be commended for not walking away from me at this point. But after 32 years



she's developed the gift. I opened the bottle and the aroma filled the whole area. Two incredulous guys, in line at the bar, joined us, one then the other. Both of them were Americans. Naturally. One was an Iranian born software consultant from Southern California flying to Teheran. We shared our story and it turns out he was a sponsor of World Vision children in Africa for more than 5 years and loved doing it. His kids grew up and out of the program and he didn't follow up with others. After hearing our stories he will again.

Another American joined us. He was in his late twenties, tall, good looking and highly educated. Lila and I both immediately thought he looked like a future World Vision staffer. As we filled his glass he told us he's a software company business development professional trying to get back to the U.S. Most flights were cancelled the prior day due the blizzards on the east coast. He continued, before hearing our story, to tell us that he was thinking about going into international relief or development. Bingo! We shared our story. He hadn't heard of World Vision. The guy headed to Teheran took over from us with his personal testimony about World Vision. We expect the young man's resume to be received in Washington any day now.

After about 15 minutes, and another glass, we heard the last call for boarding our plane. We left them with a little more than half the bottle remaining. I commissioned them with the ministry and mission of finding others to share the balance of the flask and spread the good news about World Vision's work. They accepted the charge and I anointed them both with the solemn commission.

We felt warm.

Thanks to everyone at Tocci Building Companies who do their jobs well every day. You made this trip possible. Thanks to the people here who care, who perform, who earn and who give back. Thanks, most of all, to the people of World Vision who do it in the most unselfish and effective ways we've ever seen. Yes, you do have the best job in the world. Keep fighting the good fight. Good night.