

BAKU DIARIES (no. 19) – March 2012

Salam! (hi)

Well, this greets you from an Azerbaijan that has had its worst winter in living memory! As I type it's snowing again ...this started in November with two big dumps of snow...and just kept going! The kids have been delighted because there have been numerous snow days and the school has shut but its caused chaos on the roads and in workplaces. The infrastructure is just not in place for snow, no matter how little. Roads aren't built for it, drivers aren't trained for it, heating systems can't cope and generally it's not been a great time for most folks.

However, next week sees the Novruz holidays – the welcoming of spring – and with that the hope that this all changes and we're back to being smug about the sunshine and warmth...

Last night we were treated to traditional Azerbaijani Novruz celebrations which were laid on by the Azeri ladies who live in the housing area we are in. There were men on horseback, fires, men and kids jumping over fires to take away the bad vibes from the previous year (eh, what risk assessment?) plus dancing, lots of dancing – men, women and kids! There were traditional savory and sweets plus plenty of nice hot chay...what a great memory!

We have just had International Women's Day – a great tradition I feel – when men celebrate women and there is a public holiday to mark the occasion! The guys in the office did us proud; they gathered us all together and treated us to an Azerbaijani rap song they had written, a poem comparing women to angels (true) and finishing with a presentation of a red rose each and a huge cake with each of our photos on it. It did feel a bit odd chomping into my face and had to peel the picture off before I could continue...

The last little while has been a smorgasbord of international cultural experiences. January saw Burns Night of course and we were invited to a friend's house. The hosts and us were the only Scots...the Selkirk Grace, toasts to the haggis and the lassies were Englishmen, the Reply on behalf of the Lassies was Australian and we also representation from Australia, Denmark, Norway, Holland, South Africa and America! We

had a fantastic evening with our touch of international tartan especially as everyone had taken along a different whisky to sample!!!

I was also at another work meeting and as I looked round the 12 people at the table realized that we had 8 different nationalities who speak 13 different languages between them. How cool is that?! Of course I didn't contribute much with the number of languages given my ongoing pitiful attempts at learning Russian. (Though I know enough to watch kids' TV, the adverts and nose into some conversations...)

In January we also had the annual trip to Dubai where the kids play in an international schools rugby tournament. Both my kids played again this year and were two of the 90 kids that we took to play! With the families and hangers on there were 220 people in our party – and what a party! My son Fraser decided to make it a two in a row series of having to visit the hospital when in the last 30 seconds of the final (that they won) he fractured his collar bone. Last year it was his arm. I worry about what it's going to be next year.

Anyway, he was fine, a bit of a hero and arrived at the Award ceremony straight from the hospital to get presented with the Most Valued Player medal. So with a sling and a medal you can imagine a nearly 15 year old lad takes the opportunity to play that to his advantage.

Amy on the other hand had done what she did last year – gave up training as soon as the medal was round her neck...she's rarely been back to the sessions since. She may re-energise in August when she focuses on the next prize – but this time she'll be playing tackle rugby, so we'll see...

The other rugby milestone was the 10 year anniversary of the kids' rugby club. It was an idea couple of dads had over a pint who on their first trip to the Dubai tournament took 16 kids with a total travelling party of 20 people. This grew over the years to it being the well represented club that it is now, which is pretty amazing given that rugby is a little known sport in Azerbaijan. To celebrate there was a rugby dinner with Dean Richards as the guest speaker. It made me chuckle that some guys believed it

would be a full on traditional 'rugby dinner' when in fact it was to reflect on 10 years of kids playing rugby. Photos from the years were on a continual loop through dinner and of course the audience was more diverse that it might normally be. So I think those guys may not have had the same level of 'intellectual chat' they were expecting. And then the next morning we were all at the pitch, with the Committee serving up bacon rolls (bacon from a well known UK supermarket) and coffee to a jaded group. Then Dean and the coaches put the kids through their paces. Fraser's shoulder had made a miraculous recovery and every time I looked round he was throwing himself over the try line with me shouting stupid mumsy sounding things in frustration!

The other big thing that the city is preparing for is of course...Eurovision. The countdown is on, the buildings being finished off, roads being torn up and re-laid, building facades being renewed, the airport having a refurb. And for the first time there are bus stops that are more than a group of people standing on the street corner and blocking the road when the bus stops for them. Oh no, these are shiny new glass structures with a little clock tower showing time, temperature and bus route. It's taking a bit of getting used to for people but given the dreadful weather I think people have been pleased to have the shelter.

And I am also preparing - my two friends, one from Inverness and one from Aberdeen will come out for the big event. I don't think we will be going to see Humperdinck in person, but rather we will join a party with a big screen and party on down there. Eurovision is to Baku what the Olympics is to London - logistics, security, hotel rooms...all being planned to the hilt. Here's hoping it's a fantastic event.

Everyone will be well turned out of course - as I have mentioned before everyone here takes a real pride in their appearance - which puts me to shame. I was in the salon in our housing compound not so long ago and was struck by how strange it is - I say 'hi' to my neighbour who is having a pedicure from the nail technician who herself clearly has a night out as she is sitting there in her rollers whilst she does my friend's nails. Very casual, I love it!

And we have had a couple more Azeri weddings. I took the kids to one of them and they were fascinated by the differences. Amy amazed me by never being off the dance floor with her Azeri dancing. Fraser however just watched quietly from a distance, having taken his sling with him in case he was asked to dance! Azerii men love dancing, and with each other, so he this Scots lad was taking no chances...

I have of course 'popped into work' every so often; I suppose that's why I am here after all.

One of the most exciting things has been the development and launching of a brand new benefit for national staff. It's effectively a subsidy programme and is the first of its kind in Azerbaijan. Even the banks have had to change their offerings and some have accommodated this very new approach. It's amazing to be part of that and to see the drive and determination some of my HR colleagues have committed to get this benefit in place. It's been phenomenal.

So here's me planning to be off for the Novruz break. I am packing my bags this evening and in the morning we head to Oman. It's so close but we have never taken the opportunity till now. With only a year or so left for me here, we are trying hard to make sure we travel as much as we can.

So I better head off and look out those shades whilst the sleet bashes against the window...

Until the next time - saghol (bye in Azerbaijani)

Susan Gordon

BAKU DIARIES (no. 20) – June 2012

Salam! (hi)

Wow! What a few months! I know I always say that but I do have justification this time.

I think the only place I can start this diary entry is with...Eurovision in the Land of Fire! Months of preparation, road construction, building cladding and bus stop building culminated on 26 May with a fantastic evening at the Crystal Hall in Baku. And I was there! But more of that later.

Eurovision fever hit all parts of Baku...including the school our kids are at with a visit from none other than Jedward! ('Who?'...I now know). You can imagine the number of Facebook posts with kids in their Jedhead hats! Apparently they were fantastic with the kids, all packed into the school hall and working them into a frenzy, much to the worry of the teachers. Our office is also adjoined to one of the big hotels in town and many folks spent time spotting 'celebs' coming and going.

I managed to blag an invite to a more refined event hosted by the Norwegian Embassy which was held at the outdoor stage of the Philharmonic Hall; a cozy 1000 people on a balmy summer evening. I rubbed shoulders with the Scandinavian stars, including the winners from Sweden. This was just a warm up to attending the final – which I enjoyed more than a grown-up has a right to!

The Big Evening started in the afternoon. We had two friends visiting from Scotland and so together with my husband and another Baku friend we went off in to town to sample the atmosphere. After a traditional (?) Mexican meal and frozen margaritas we went down to the Boulevard where the place was heaving with people and flags and laughter. We got sucked into all sorts of photographs which will be round the world by now! It was a beautiful evening and so we stopped by a little chay xana (tea house) and made a right fool of ourselves trying a shisha pipe with apple tobacco and spluttering unglamorously. Then my Baku friend and I headed off to meet others as it was only us who had tickets for the final of Eurovision.

We walked from the centre of Baku to the Crystal Hall as it started to get dark and what a sight! The now iconic Flame Towers had light shows like I've never seen – burning flames, a man waving the Azerbaijani flag 'walking' round the three towers or just the flag itself across the three towers...breathtaking! The actual event started at midnight (to catch TV times in the West) and we were off!! Everything from the Hump, to the Azerbaijani entry (Sabina) whose sister works in the same office as me, to the rather odd Turkish entry that everyone but me seemed to love. I was really impressed by the slick organization of the event, the light shows and good humoured atmosphere. I was part of history in the making! Even though I did get home at 5 in the morning as the birds were waking up.

But it wasn't back to normal, as I had my two friends here and took some time off work to be a tourist with them. We did loads – we saw the Fire Temple, we had a kebab lunch on the beach in Mardakan, we went to the mud volcanoes and petroglyphs, we climbed a large rocky outcrop (called Five Finger Mountain, revered for its powers) to reach the top where a little hut greets pilgrims who kiss the stone and offer gifts. As you descend the steep, rickety ladders having old ladies in what looks like slippers passing you and not looking too chipper, the noise of picnickers rise up and when you get back down you can chose your sheep to slaughter and barbeque for your picnic. We also did a city tour with a guide, went to the bazaar, had a birthday party for me and a 'ladies leaving lunch' for my friends who had quickly settled in and so were honoured with a traditional leaving lunch!

I did have to go to work at some point and there the challenges around immigration continue. One unfortunate story (I am sure he will look back and laugh) is that of my friend who was coming home on the Friday ready for pick up at 5.30am the next day to go on a golfing trip with my husband and some others. As his immigration papers were not yet back, he had to get an Exit Permit. All being well, the sun shining, he cranked the music up in the car, rolled down the window and set off home...only for one plastic wallet to be sucked out of his briefcase, slap him in the face, then a 'pop' as the paper in the wallet was sucked out never to be seen again. And

yes, you guessed it, that piece of paper was his Exit Permit. So no holiday for him... the consolation prize being he still has the plastic wallet. Everyone says that it must have happened for a reason...

It has continued to be very social – the kids and adult triathlons were completed in 30 plus degree heat, and Fraser did well again winning his age for the kids group and being part of the 3 person team coming second in their category at the adult triathlon. Thankfully he was not one of those who came off his bike and scraped the skin off...

Some sad social events also happen at this time of year, as expats whose assignments are ending prepare to leave and you have to say goodbye. This year will be particularly tough as Graeme and I as well as the kids will lose several good friends. We are going to Cyprus in the summer to have Fraser stay with a friend he hasn't seen for a couple of years since they left. So hopefully we will keep in touch with these folks leaving now too.

Yesterday was another new experience for me – taking part in a Chili Cook off! Never having heard of this apparently American/Trinidadian institution before, I got into the swing and together with a friend designed the T-shirt and ideas for the stall. It was a charity event and happened in what must have been mid-40 degree heat....everyone was a sweaty mess between tasting the different chilies (with names like 'Ass Blaster') and the blazing sun. There were 15 entries and we were most pleased to win the best T-Shirt design (despite me modeling it on stage) as well as best decorated table!! Whoo hoo! I can get into this!

Taking us back to April, I thought you'd like to know about a trip my No Exit Permit friend and I took to the local refugee bazaar. He is a great photographer and I wanted to sharpen my skills so off we went on a misty spring morning to take atmospheric pictures of fruit and veg. But we forgot how much Azerbaijani men love their pictures taken! We spent two hours being led to all corners of the bazaar snapping faces that tell stories of tough lives. The potato man, the fish man, the lemon lady, the chicken man in a mad furry hat...I even had a proposition of marriage from a man with gold teeth (he said he'd

have to do away with his current wife first). Nice. We had such a blast, and the next weekend we went back with 50 printed out photos and handed them back to those we could find. We caused much excitement! Though it turns out that the artistic black and white ones were not what people wanted. (Seen as cheapskates I think!)

Another fun, silly moment was when I got a text as I was at the salon from a friend asking me for a coffee. I said where I was and joked that she should feel free to bring me one. Ten minutes later there she was with a thermos and two mugs and sat by me for a chat much to the amusement of the salon staff. They would be right to think we are mad. But I loved it!

And here I am now on a plane on the way to a conference in Madrid. It's a global gathering focusing on HR information systems and future plans. I am really looking forward to the connections and the learning and of course you can't complain about the location either.

Until the next time – saghol (bye in Azerbaijani)

Susan Gordon

BAKU DIARIES (no. 21) – September 2012

Salam! (hi)

So, that's summer done and autumn setting in. But I can't complain as the weather has been great and only now have there been some thunder storms and it's cooling down.

Summers here in the expat world are a little strange as the families disappear off whilst the working individual stays around; so I was 'home alone' for a couple of weeks in the housing compound. You'd think this would be ideal for getting caught up with work, which to an extent it is, but actually the house and housing complex is so quiet that it's unsettling! I ended up having a few of the home alone guys round and for the first time making homemade naan bread just to keep me entertained. Living life on the edge...

But when people are around, it's great, and the weekends are busy. We've had a couple of day trips to the Caspian sea-side areas. We've swum in the sea at an isolated area at Zira next to the well heads sticking out of the water. And we've had our picnic on the beach at the 'resort' of Nardaran where you pay for your plastic table and chairs on the sand and a pot of chay. We sat in the sea on our camping chairs reading and cooling off in the body temperature waters. A most pleasant way to spend a day!

We also were fortunate enough to have a team away day at a recently opened five star hotel at another beach. Having negotiated a great rate, we had a fabulous day with business discussions till 4.30pm then some leisure activities and evening dinner finishing off with coffee in the restaurant on stilts watching the sun set. My celeb spotting was complete when I saw the President of Tajikistan mooching about the beach in his swimming cossie.

Myself and four friends (a Dutch lady, Australian lady, another Brit plus a Norwegian guy) decided to head off to explore Nakhchivan for the weekend without our families. Nakhchivan is the land locked enclave of Azerbaijan, surrounded by Armenia, Iran and Turkey. The name comes from 'Noah Jahan' meaning 'colony of Noah' as Noah's Ark is said to have grounded itself on the

slopes of Mount Ararat after cleaving through another mountain (Ilam-dag, 'snake mountain') which you could see clearly from our hotel.

Nakhchivan is not a common tourist location for foreigners so we didn't quite know what to expect...but it was amazing! I was only there for 48 hours but there were so many pleasant surprises and experiences.

We hired two taxis (brothers) and they took us everywhere from the border crossing to Iran, to a tea house in a gorge in Ordabad surrounded by butterflies and mosques. We dunked ourselves in our birthday suits in the naturally occurring hot (very!) spring spa waters in the hills (separate pools for men and women thankfully) and dried ourselves off with towels no larger than tea towels. We watched the kids go into the first day of school which is a big event here – the girls all with their hair in bunches and bows and flowers and gifts for the teachers!

We went to the border with Armenia to see the lakes with floating islands – reminded me of Scotland what with the mist and rain and lush green hills. The salt mine that served the whole of the Soviet Union and is now a sanatorium was decidedly disconcerting - you can stay underground in one of the 350 beds to breathe in the salt air to cure ailments. And the trip to Ashabu Kaf (a mountain) where the pilgrims wind their way up the steep steps to pay homage at the mosque at the top was fascinating. All sorts made the trek – old ladies, babies being carried in their mums' arms and women praying asking for children to be blessed to them.

One of the amusing moments was dinner in our hotel – the avocado ruced satin chair covers to the translated menu were all 'interesting'. The main question was - how can you really choose from the culinary delights of 'eggs must grudge' or 'strange sandals' or even the mouth-watering 'internal organs barbecue'? Although we ordered them all, sadly they were off the menu that night. Oh well, at least we got 'eggs in the butter with black' for breakfast (fried eggs with black pepper).

However, the funniest moment was when my friend dropped her expensive sunglasses down the public toilet (hole in

the ground variety) at the pilgrim mountain with many visitors having clearly availed themselves of the facilities. With the words *'those are expensive, my husband will kill me...I'm going in...'* she proceeded to kneel on the toilet, thrust her hand round the dubious U-bend and retrieved her glasses...now known as the '50 shades of brown'. I couldn't breathe as I was laughing so much and we attracted quite a crowd of onlookers. I was threatened with a month in that salt mine for my shocking lack of support to her (and for taking photos to capture the moment).

My cultural experiences continue both in and out of work.

As I have mentioned before, paying condolences on the death of an individual is extremely important in Azerbaijan. I have recently attended a couple of funeral services. Whilst I have been to a few of these that have been held in a funeral tents that gets put up in the road, this was the first time that I attended in a mosque. At 11am one morning I went with 20 other ladies from work and we went down the winding back streets of Baku to an old mosque where we went into an ante-room. Over the two hours there must have been about 80-90 ladies. (Men attend separately in the afternoon). The lady mullah chants in Arabic from the Koran and then discusses the passage in Azerbaijani. Whilst the mullah does this you are sitting at long tables being served and are encouraged to eat heartily as it is seen to help the spirit to pass over more quickly. It takes getting used to showing your respect in such a way.

Other cultural moments have been at work. Two examples come to mind. First, it was brought home to me how much of a difference there is the approaches to mental health across the world. We are currently retendering our medical insurance provision for Azerbaijani nationals and we want to add in some elements of treating psychiatric disorders. In discussing this with the project team and the insurance providers, I realised that this is a fairly new concept. The models of treatment of mental health and medical infrastructure are such that it will take some time to mature but I am pleased that we have been able to make some provision and in

some small way help progress this for our employees in Azerbaijan.

The other example comes from attending a formal meeting with the immigration authorities. We went to their grand offices and met in a very large room across a shiny, long table. On one side there were six impressive looking Azerbaijani men in grey or black suits and one woman in uniform; on our side three expats and two Azerbaijanis. Because of the expats present, whilst the meeting was conducted in Azerbaijani we have the help of a translator. Not only was experiencing a detailed, information rich meeting through a translator interesting (and tiring!) but this was also done against the backdrop of the normal 'tea ceremony' where you are served tea in the pear shaped tea glasses (armud) with sweets in accompaniment. And do you know how difficult it is to unwrap a sweetie quietly, whilst listening to a translator, watching the body language and trying to look professional when you accidentally make loud sucking noises on said sweet? It's an art, I have not yet mastered it.

I am also really proud that we have just launched a new technical training centre supporting our goal of doubling petro-technical graduate recruitment. We took on 65 new trainees on top of 42 graduates...now that's what's called a talent pipeline! Hopefully when I am in my rocking chair I will look back and say 'I was part of that' in a way that I am proud to have been in HR and affected not only a company but also a county's path in such a positive way.

'Inshallah' as they say here!

Until the next time – saghol (bye in Azerbaijani)

Susan Gordon
