

BAKU DIARIES (no. 5) – March 08

Hello there and **Happy Novruz!** (will tell you more about that later)

This 5th article marks a full year since we moved to Azerbaijan! A blink of an eye and a year older but thankfully not regretted it at all.

So what have we been up to since the last time I wrote? In January we arrived back in Baku after 2 weeks in Mexico (fabulous) to the biggest snow dump and coldest weather in Azerbaijan for 70 years. Our flight was the last to get in before they shut the airport for a few days.

There's something very disconcerting about seeing a Lada shooting along a snowy, icy road. No grip on the tyres, no seat belts, no air bags. And because snow is unusual, no idea how to drive in it... this is well seen by the number of pirouetting cars. But the place looked great and we got 2 days off school/work, so not all bad news.

On the cultural side, we continue our quest for new experiences - we are now proud Azerbaijan carpet owners. Graeme, I and two friends spent an evening in a smoke filled shop in the Old City talking carpets. We went through about 50 of them – the carpet seller enthusiastically told us the history, production method, age, ownership of each. Don't know much about it all, but we had a lovely evening and we're pleased with our purchases.

Not stopping at that, the next weekend we went round various art galleries and now own a rather large painting of Baku. It's a kinda 'naive' juxtaposition of old and new Baku if you know what I meanAnyway, whatever the technical terms, we like it!

Graeme's recent cultural experience left me weeping with laughter. He went to a hammam i.e. a sauna, massage, spa thing for blokes. Graeme and 3 other guys went. Not only did they have a massage, steam and all that, but they also got a birch beating - I cracked up when he told me about lying there with no clothes on and being beaten by birch twigs all over – apparently the 'whipper' was a little enthusiastic around certain areas. The guys say they will go back but said might give the beating a miss!

We've also been continuing to look round the local area. We visited Sumgayit, a nearby city that during the Soviet era had the highest infant mortality rate in the world due to the number of chemical plants spewing out waste. We visited a children's' graveyard. Very sobering. Then we went to the 'beach' and went into a little tea house on the sands. They were a bit bemused at these foreigners invading them. Using our best Azerbaijani, we ordered 3 teas and a coffee. We got 7 of each...mmm, the lessons are obviously not working.

The big highlight of February was the school rugby trip to Dubai! There was a party of 181 people – 67 players and the rest being parents and sibling hangers on. It was fantastic – the kids, who don't play many competitive games in Baku, really pulled it out of the hat and gave their all. The team Fraser was in came third which was tremendous. And as so many of the camera class students were on the trip (adults) we have literally thousands of good action pics. The trip was so hectic that we've decided to go back to Dubai for the March break and have a look round. We leave in 12 hours, so I am typing fast!

On the topic of photos, if you are interested in seeing the contrasts of Baku and Azerbaijan, go to www.flickr.com and search on those words to see some great pictures.

Not sure if you know this, but darts does not appear to be a game known in Azerbaijan. Graeme and I are now one of 16 expats in the Baku Bulls Darts League. OK, we named it ourselves, meet every month and have a good evening. Graeme has won all rounds so far. Jammy swine. I on the other hand occasionally hit the board.

And oh, yes, work – hectic as usual but really interesting. Just now is salary review time; a joy in all HR people's lives! However, this is really interesting – with so many expats from so many countries, the co-ordination and use of market data from around the world is immense. Then there is the national salary review and use of market data which is a maturing concept.

I've managed to get offshore again – this time in February so a bit more like being in the North Sea than my trip in September in blistering temperatures. At least I had the familiarity of the survival suit and trying to

lift your leg into the helicopter but not succeeding as it's so tight! The helicopter was like a fairground ride – a 12 seater. Very chummy.

At the start I said 'Happy Novruz' to you. Novruz Bayram, Azerbaijan's main festival, is an ancient 'new year' festival celebrated at the spring equinox. Each Tuesday before Novruz has a special significance heralding spring through celebrating the four elements (earth, water, air and fire). The last Tuesday has special significance and kids jump back and forth across street bonfires; a tradition which anthropologists link to an ancient Zoroastrian rite. It is a time of cleansing, cleaning and renewal – so families spring clean, buy a new outfit and grow wheat in plates to symbolise rebirth and the coming of spring. On the mercenary side, it does mean that we have 8 public holidays to deal with...March is a quick month!

We celebrated Novruz with the team at a restaurant – Azerbaijani food (lots of it), singing and dancing (a nation known for it's love of both). Though not traditionally Azerbaijani, there was also a very nimble belly dancer – she even managed to get Graeme up with her showing his gut.

Right, I better go pack for going away. I think I will celebrate Novruz by buying myself some new clothes in Dubai!

Take care and make sure you keep in touch. It's always good to hear from home.

Until the next time – *sahol* (bye in Azeri) or *paka* (Russian).

Susan Gordon

BAKU DIARIES (no. 6) – June 08

Salam! (hi)

I sit down to write this on a hot summer's day at the end of June. The last three months have been amazing.

I ended my last article saying we were off to Dubai for a break. We shopped, swam and went on a desert safari. This was a wild trip in a 4x4 on the dunes followed by dinner under the stars watching belly dancers. We had excitement in just getting there when the tyre blew at 70mph...but we made it. I got to ride a camel and Fraser (son) surf-boarded down the dunes.

My Azerbaijani cultural experiences continue. If you recall I told you about Graeme (husband) going to the hamam (traditional bath house). Not to be outdone, I went to a ladies' hamam..... you have to get very comfortable with your 'own skin' pretty quick as towels are not allowed. Which is disturbing when you are with your boss and colleagues and trying to get up to the top level of the sauna....then into the plunge pool of freezing water (up a ladder and hitch your leg over the top). Afterwards you lie on a slab in the general area and have a lady with gold teeth and big black pants with holes in them (and nothing else on – oh, yes, I do mean this) who gives you a rather vigorous 'scrub down' all over. Very clean afterwards. All over clean. The hamam ladies were most intrigued with my colleague's tattoos which they tried to scrub off. Oh well... when in Baku!

We have also been trying to see some of Azerbaijan. In early May, five families left the brownness of Baku for the lush green hills near the Russian border. It was a bit dank and misty where we stayed, but the scenery was truly amazing, as were the roads! My knees were jelly driving on the narrow slippery roads with sheer drops plus the 5 hour drive up there on what is the main road to Russia was just shocking. There are the biggest potholes you have ever seen with lorries and cars overtaking on both sides at once and on blind corners. We got as far as the highest village in Azerbaijan - Xinaliq (pronounced "Hin-a-lick" for those that have an urge to know), where bright clothes and mud were the order of the day. This was an fascinating place - kids loafing around in their Dad's

shoes, whilst old ladies with beautiful skin busily pick the stones out of their two foot garden patch, or check to see if their dung pats are dry enough to put on the fire.... before popping inside for a quick cup of chi and to watch whatever is on the satellite TV. A contrast of old times and new. The intrepid amongst us (not me) then went further up the valley, very off-road, to visit one of only two special places in the world for Zoroastrians (little-known Azerbaijani / Pakistani religion) - an "everlasting natural fire". This was very special for one lady in our group who is Zoroastrian and it was touching to share that evening with her as she felt she had found peace.

Another new experience was visiting the home of a few Baku folks, one of them being our driver. The hospitality and warmth shown by Azerbaijanis is immense – my friend and I were made to feel like queens. The table was groaning with food and the vodka flowed freely. Not surprisingly, a fun afternoon was had, including dancing in the living room to the video of one of his daughter's weddings!

For my own wedding anniversary, I went away for another trip with two girlfriends (sorry Graeme!) to a town called Sheki, near Dagestan. Another 5 hour journey but this time I wasn't driving which meant I could focus on the most stunning scenery – we passed through places that looked like Mongolia (what I imagine it would look like), France, Switzerland and Scotland. Sheki has an attractive royal palace, a sea of tiled roofs, a 12th century Albanian Christian church apparently founded in AD78 by a disciple of Jesus' brother. There are two huge skeletons preserved there; apparently they are Norwegian in origin. We also went to the caravanserai (a stopping point for travellers) and sat in a small booth and smoked a shisha pipe (apple and tobacco). Yuck, won't be doing that again!

On mid-summer's night, for the first time since I was 16, we went camping! This time only a 3 ½ hour drive into the hills, but more scary roads...I am certainly finding out how to drive a 4X4!! Despite not getting much sleep as we were on a bit of a slope, it was a great setting and we'll be going back.

We continue to have a very social time. We have new patio furniture in the front garden and neighbours drop by for a cup of tea or a

beer in the warm evenings. The kids continue to be happy; they are always outside having water fights. (strange to think that 6 months ago they were sledging down the road). Fraser came second in the kids' triathlon and was voted Prom King which pleased him immensely. (Amy thought he was the 'Prawn King' which made her very happy too for some reason...)

The saddest part for us has been saying goodbye to several good friends we've made who are moving on; that the part of expat life which we will need to get used to.

For the fashionistas amongst you, you will be interested to know that this season's top colour in Baku is canary yellow. Now, whilst the beautiful dark haired Azerbaijani ladies easily carry off a yellow matching ensemble, a middle aged Scottish woman looks more than faintly ridiculous. So that's one cultural experience I haven't indulged in.

26th June was Army and Navy Day – one of the 20 plus public holidays. This year was the 90th anniversary of the forming of an Azerbaijani army in 1918. We stood on top a large hill overlooking the crescent shaped bay of Baku and saw the large battle ships in the bay, fly overs of helicopters and the equivalent of the Red Arrows streaming out the colours of the Azerbaijani flag, green, red and blue. I understand that in the city centre there were parades and marches but we didn't go and see as it was mobbed. I am told that some roads have to be re-laid as the tanks churned them up.

Work has been fascinating and I am continuing to learn how to work in a different culture. One recent example is working on the emergency response procedures and dealing with delicate matters such as injury and death and the impacts of religions and culture. The Azerbaijani culture is very different from the Western perspective and so this led to healthy discussion with national colleagues, and certainly a wider appreciation by me of different approaches to fundamental life events.

One of the proudest moments for the department was the graduation of 15 of our HR team from Nottingham Trent University with their CIPD qualification. This has been the culmination of 2 years of distance learning and lectures and is an amazing feat

in a second and sometimes third language. The marks were very high and the course tutor commented on the commitment and energy shown by all students.

Right, better away. I always seem to end these articles by telling you about my next holiday. This time I am off for a three centre break – Inverness, Aberdeen and Poole!

Continue to drop me notes and let me know what you want to hear about.

Until the next time – *sahol* (bye in Azerbaijani)

Susan Gordon

BAKU DIARIES (no. 7) – Sept 08

Salam! (hi)

After returning back from the summer break, once again I'm struck by how time flies – is it age? Is it that it's been busy? Both of the above?

My enduring memory from this last quarter will be the conflicts in Georgia and issues in Turkey. This business has people not only in Azerbaijan (both onshore and offshore) but also about 400 in Georgia. This is the first time I have, as an adult, been so close to a war zone and have known people who have been caught in the conflict. We evacuated all the expatriates (staff and agency) out of Georgia but obviously that left all our national folks there. In times of distress, there are some people who show such courage, and I am immensely proud to say that the HR team, and very particularly the HR Manager based in Georgia (a Georgian herself), were spectacular in how they dealt with the issues and put others first. A humbling though harrowing experience.

At the same time we had issues with an explosion on part of a key pipeline in Turkey and production had to be shut in. Since then it has been restarted but again has given the business huge challenges in what is an important geopolitical region of the oil world.

Politics remain a part of the forthcoming agenda in Azerbaijan as on 15th October there is the next presidential election. If asked for a view, most Azerbaijanis would say that the current president will be re-elected. But as these things are never cast in stone, we will need to see. In the meantime, the company has to work with the government to provide voting facilities on offshore platforms and remote locations which is a mega logistical task.

So I suppose the cultural experiences I have had these past few months have been more serious in nature. It is currently Ramadan, which as you know is a time for solemn reflection and so I have been trying to be sensitive to that. On a lighter note, I looked around at a recent HR leadership team meeting and thought 'wow' at the richness of cultural diversity in the room – Azerbaijani, Indian, American, British. And again I was struck by what a fabulous

experience this is and how lucky I am. Each person there, a professional in their own rights, coming at topics from very different angles and backgrounds. Perhaps that's why the HR team here is doing some great things.

My trips offshore continue; I visited our newest platform a couple of weeks ago – it just started producing in May and is HUGE, both literally and in business terms. One thing that amused me was the 'bronzie deck'. Yup, as it sounds – sunbeds set up to catch the rays. The OIM (Offshore Installation Manager) made it clear that safety is still a top concern so everyone has to use the factor 30 sunscreen which is freely issued. If there is just one case of sunburn, the whole thing will be stopped. Because it's been so busy on the platform during start up, some nightshift guys have taken to sleeping there during the day rather than listening to their cabin mates snoring.

When I was on the platform it was in the early 40s and waaaayyy too warm for me. I had a tour at 11pm and even so was soaked through by the time I got back into the accommodation module. Pleasant (not!) but made me appreciate people working in the heat of the day.

The other interesting activity is bringing a crew change boat into the Caspian. This is currently being piloted and has several HR issues (e.g. policy, employee relations) which my team is working through. I and some of the HR team went for a look over the vessel and in order to experience it fully, my graduate HR Advisor went on the ship's maiden voyage. Whilst she coped admirably (forgive the pun) there were some ruffy tufty types who struggled a bit (go girl!).

My family continue to enjoy their time here. We have been camping a couple of times with 6 other families close to Besh Barmaq (Five Finger Mountain). This involves a 3 hour very bumpy ride on the main road to Russia – which is still dug up and contains the biggest potholes you have ever seen. It's is much like driving on a dried out river bed. Deep breaths needed as you see a large lorry and a Lada both overtaking a speeding vehicle precariously balancing hay bales on top, with oncoming traffic. 'Mental' is the best way to describe this. Once you get off road then you're up into the hills, winding through some dirt tracks then onto no

tracks. We camped in a spot that later turned out to be where the shepherd grazes his sheep. We figured this out as a flock of 100 scraggy sheep came roaming our way with 3 serious sheepdogs looking after them. Like Shetland ponies they were. Friends had their poodle with them and the sheepdogs took a fancy to him. At one point it was like a scene from '10,000BC' when women were scooping up kids and running for cover and the fearless men were shouting and beating sticks on the ground to scare the dogs off. Luckily the shepherd had good control of his dogs and called them off. He later offered to slaughter one of the sheep for us to put on the BBQ. We declined. We did give him a bottle of wine, so when we went back a couple of weeks later he was fine with us being there on his grazing land. This time we were treated to a lightening storm for 2 hours – but it was over the Caspian and other than a couple of spots of rain and some thunder, we weren't affected.

Our other find is a small fish restaurant on a stretch of beach on the Caspian Sea (you may know it's actually a lake so there isn't a tide). We sat by the beach and looked at those lying on the sand and swimming with the backdrop of a drilling rig in the close background. Then as the sun set, they moved the table onto the sand, right next to the gently lapping waves and we had chi (tea). Most agreeable.

Oh, I have to tell you – I am a winner! I won the Baku Bulls Darts League (ladies) and Graeme (husband) won the mens. Given that I needed my glasses to see the board, it probably gives you some idea of my level of skill...I think luck and good partners were my secrets of success. Graeme won it fair and square. We have our winnings proudly displayed – 2 beautiful hand painted Azerbaijani plates. And because we won, we get to organise the next league. Joy.

But now, the summer is nearly over. We've had our share of kids having water fights, sunbathing by the pool, the restaurant on the beach, camping in warm weather and me walking for 20 minutes in the morning. It's turning cooler (in the 20s now) and it's dark in the mornings so it's getting tough to keep going with that pretend fitness campaign.

I am getting ready for our first ever visitors - my brother and 20 year old niece are coming for a few days. I can guarantee they have never been anywhere like Azerbaijan. It's a country full of contrasts and surprises. I do hope they enjoy it, and that they come again.

The next time I write will be December – by then I will be able to tell you about the roving dinner party (128 people taking part this year), the family holiday to Turkey, the HR team talent competition (oh no), a girls' shopping trip to Dubai, and Graeme going to the Azerbaijan Golf Open (...in Dubai) plus more serious things if I really have to.

Thanks so much for the notes back from my last newsletter – the hamam seemed to cause amusement! Keep in touch.

Until the next time – *sahol* (bye in Azerbaijani)

Susan Gordon

BAKU DIARIES (no. 8) – Dec 08

Salam! (hi)

Here's hoping this finds you well. Lots has happened since I last wrote so I'll see what I can fit in here.

First I thought you might be interested to know a little about the HR profession in Azerbaijan. Whilst in the UK, HR has a long history, here it is a new and emerging career, and probably not yet accepted as a 'profession'.

During the Soviet period, HR was seen purely as an administrative function, dealing mainly with completion of Labour books (legislative requirement) and personal files of employees. This gradually started to change in 1992 when international companies entered the local market. Currently there are over 100 HR representatives from local and international companies mainly concentrated in Baku, and the approach moving more towards HR being business partners.

Whilst BP have sponsored HR staff through the CIPD programme delivered by Nottingham Trent University (my last article mentioned the first graduation), there is no CIPD Branch in Azerbaijan. However, the American Chamber of Commerce HR Committee is the HR forum in Azerbaijan which joins HR practitioners together for discussion and debate. Contrast this with the large infrastructure of HR colleagues (CIPD or otherwise) who you can turn to for information and support as well as the CIPD facilities online and otherwise.

The Azerbaijani HR community may be small in number, but don't let that fool you; there are many impressive individuals dealing with huge, complex problems in an exciting part of the world. I anticipate you'll see more of these folks around the world in big HR jobs in due course.

On a lighter note, we recently had an HR team Talent Competition. The HR leadership team scratched our heads and finally decided on doing a Strip the Willow (tip - never look that dance up on the internet from your work computer..). We had a Scot, American, Englishwoman, Indian and 4 Azerbaijanis -and we gave it what for. The

men wore borrowed kilts and the ladies, a tartan sash. It went down a storm.

On the wider social front, it's also been busy. We have had the Halloween celebration (hundreds of kids roaming the streets around us), the School Winter Fair (it's not 'Christmas' as there are so many faiths represented at the school that this would not be appropriate). We've also taken part in the ball season including the St Andrews ball - 500 people, seemingly all dancing at once (to different tunes in their heads I think) and a pipe band flown in from Scotland. Made me feel very patriotic!

Back in September we also took part in the Stonepay Roving Dinner party (the area we live). There were about 130 people taking part - you have a starter, main course and dinner at 3 different houses and are mixed with different guests each time; afterwards there's dancing back in a central area. It's great fun getting the opportunity to meet people you normally wouldn't get a chance to. I left the party at 3am to go to the airport to pick my brother and niece up as they were visiting. They had a good visit - I think my brother might actually come back to see us and I was happy that he could see we are doing well here.

As usual, we continue our quest to find out more about this fascinating country and its customs. Recently we have had the chance to take part in very important ceremonies - a wedding and sadly, a funeral. Both events are handled very differently compared to what I am used to, probably more so the funeral.

The wedding was of Gulnar, one of my HR Advisors to Javid. The tradition is to get registered in a private ceremony and then a few days later, have a party at a wedding house. There are loads of wedding houses in Baku - function suites which cater for hundreds of guests. There were about 350 people at this one (a medium sized wedding I am told); the tables groaned with food and drink, well known singers and musicians played and the bride was *stunningly* beautiful! It was such a pleasure to be there - and be taught to dance Azerbaijani style. I can demonstrate should you wish. OK, maybe not.

The funeral clearly was a different matter. But it is through these fundamental human

experiences where you can get a glimpse into the heart of another culture. The Muslim religion dictates that the person is buried within 24 hours. Then on the first day after the death, 7th day and every Thursday till 40 days and on first anniversary there is a gathering of family and friends. I attended the 7th day gathering. A funeral tent was set up outside the apartment building, with different invitation times for men and women. Food, drink, tea, cakes are served in abundance to those who have come to pay respects and people sit together to talk about the recently deceased person. It struck me as a very supportive and respectful custom.

This weekend is Gurban Bayram, a holiday that Azerbaijan has celebrated since independence in 1991. The festivities last for two to three days or more. Eid al-Adha (Arabic) occurs the day after the pilgrims conducting Hajj, the annual pilgrimage to Mecca by Muslims worldwide, descend from Mount Arafat. It happens to be approximately 70 days after the end of the month of Ramadan. In Islam, as a religious rite, sacrificial offering embodies a high spiritual state, helping the poor and hungry.

Muslims who can afford to do so sacrifice their best animals (usually sheep, but also camels, cows, and goats) as a symbol of Ibrahim's (Abraham's) sacrifice. According to the Quran, the meat is divided into three shares, one share for the poor, one share for relatives and neighbors, and the last to keep for oneself. A large portion of the meat must be given towards the poor and hungry people so they can all join in the feast. The remainder is cooked for the family celebration meal in which relatives and friends are invited to share.

How this shows up to a non-Muslim foreigner is that many street corners in Baku have small flocks of sheep waiting to be bought. The sacrifice is commonly carried out at the side of the road with the meat being taken for sharing thereafter. It's an important religious holiday, so it's interesting to be given the opportunity to observe it.

I've also been to my first music concert here – an artist called Arash. He's an Iranian Swedish guy who does what I can only describe as 'techno-Arabic' music – the belly

dancers and flame throwers who were entertaining the flag waving crowds really wiggled themselves to the beat. And of course we joined in. Good fun.

We've continued travelling but more outside the country. We had a family holiday with friends from Aberdeen in Turkey. Turkish overlaps with Azeri so I felt pretty chuffed I could communicate a little. Turkey was beautiful; I recommend it. I also had a shopping weekend with the girls – we stayed in the Kempinsky Hotel in Dubai and one evening had a meal overlooking the new opulent Atlantis Hotel (which boasts an aquarium with 65,000 fish..). Graeme is in Dubai this weekend with 75 guys playing in the 'Azerbaijan' Golf Open. It's a tough life isn't it?

We are going to have Christmas in Baku and then a Scottish Hogmany. So perhaps I will see some of you over this period.

If not, here's wishing you a fantastic 2009.

Until the next time – sahol (bye in Azerbaijani)

Susan Gordon

