

## **BAKU DIARIES (no. 9) – March 09**

Salam! (hi)

Well, this article marks the second anniversary of us being in Azerbaijan. They say age makes time pass more quickly, but this is getting ridiculous! It feels like a blink of an eye since we took a deep breath and moved the family here.

As I drove along the bumpy, potholed roads looking at the buildings ranging from the less attractive Soviet blocks to the beautiful French and Italian styled architecture, I did have a surreal moment thinking 'wow, this is home!' A Scots woman, born in Calcutta, now living in Baku...

I heard from an Azerbaijani lady who is a CIPD student in Aberdeen. Thank you to her for taking time to say that she enjoys hearing about her homeland through these articles; that makes it worthwhile. But weird that she's in Aberdeen, and I'm in her home city!

Anyway, what news since last time? Well I suppose starting with where I left off last time, we spent Christmas in Baku. Given that it is not a Christian country, there were no 'ho, ho, ho' Santas and interminable jolly music playing – for me that was just great (I am a bit of a bah-humbug person) though it was odd sitting at my desk on Boxing Day. We had a lovely family Christmas day cooking the meal when the gas eventually got turned back on. For New Year we were back in Scotland. Again, strange as we spent Hogmanay at a party in Aberdeen consisting of people we have met in Baku. The editor of the local magazine 'InBaku' was also there and so we turned up in the pictures for the article called 'InBaku in Aberdeen'.

Whilst we were in Scotland, there was a huge fall of snow in Baku, but by the time we'd come back, all that was left were the dirty mounds of ice piled up at the side of the road. And then it snowed in Scotland – so we've managed to miss the snow this year (fingers crossed I haven't cursed that!).

Getting to know more about the history and people of Azerbaijan continues.

The 20<sup>th</sup> January is a very solemn day in Baku. This is also called Martyr's Day and is the anniversary of the day 26,000 Red Army

troops marched into the city and hundreds of Baku civilians were killed and injured. On the 20<sup>th</sup> January, Bakuvians in their thousands take flowers to the graveyard (Martyr's Alley). We visited the day before and saw the hundreds of gravestones which have one each the engraved pictures of those who were involved – men, women and children. A sobering experience, especially poignant with the eternal flame burning alongside the gravestones laden with red carnations.

A group of us also visited a Russian orthodox church accompanied by a lady from work whose church it is; there are not many of these churches left in Azerbaijan. This one has remained whilst most were razed in c 1918 by those who did not want such lavish displays of wealth and power by the church. Again this was a respectful and fascinating visit, made all the more special by Natasha guiding us.

This is all in contrast to later in January when we went to the Caledonian Society's Burn's Supper. A great set of speeches including one as if Rabbie had come to Baku for a visit and was commenting on all that is both fascinating and frustrating about the country. A good night.

Once again (we did it last year), the highlight of February was the school rugby trip to Dubai! There was a party of 165 – 65 kids who were playing and the rest being parents, siblings and even some grandparents who were visiting. Watching the kids who get little to no chance to play competitively in Baku, and then seeing them pulling it out of the bag and playing with such passion and determination warms the cockles of your heart! Fraser (son) is now in the Under 12s team and they did well, coming 4<sup>th</sup> out of 9 teams (many teams had a couple of hundred kids to choose the squad from but Fraser's team had all 14 choices with them!).

Back in Azerbaijan, the other not so pleasant experience was that Graeme (husband) and our driver were involved in a car accident. A truck did a sudden U-turn in front of them and smacked into the front of the car. Graeme had to climb out another door as the vehicles were locked together. Thankfully no one was hurt. It turns out the truck driver was a young lad with no licence. Apparently he'd got a bit confused

between left and right and the brake and accelerator... This is just an example of the dreadful driving in Baku and this, coupled with the bad state of the roads, leads it to be a challenging place to drive. You really need your wits about you. The traffic police are also seen as a pain and frequently stop expats for fines – both justifiable and not. The baton they carry is jokingly called a 'Manat Stick' (manats are the currency of the country)...

In the last couple of weeks I have also been to a traditional Azeri dance show and to a 'pop' concert. The dance show included one dance with what seemed to be real swords which sparked when they struck each other. Very entertaining but had you on the edge of your seat a little!

The concert was by Roya – she is one of the top celebrities in Azerbaijan with concerts that are popular and well attended, and she is very controversial. She is a sultry lady known for her 'liberal' artistic style and has appeared topless in some of her celebrity photos. She also appeared on the Azerbaijani reality TV-show Mashin, where she used profane language liberally – clearly in a predominantly Shia Muslim country this is not what is expected of a young lady. However, the evening I saw her, she sang alongside the State Philharmonic Orchestra and then in the second half a little more 'poppy' but still in a very traditional Azeri style. She has a very strong voice and is clearly well loved evidenced by the numbers of presents and bouquets that people went up to the stage with throughout the performance. If you are interested, look on 'YouTube' as there are some clips of her. In fact, whilst you're there, also look up 'Azeri weddings' and you'll see some great dancing, particularly from the men who love to dance, especially with each other. The dancing seems to get started by the women in an elegant fashion and then gets taken over by the men who give it what for!

In amongst all this, it has been the usual hectic first quarter at work – for us this is the quarter of completing on the previous year's performance cycle and undertaking the annual salary review with all that those activities bring. So, whilst it sounds like I've been only been involved in social activities, that's really not reflective of the truth! I continue to broaden my experience of working in a very different culture – just

when I think I've cracked it, something else new and thought provoking turns up and I learn something else.

Well we are about to enter the Novruz Bayram holiday period. This is Azerbaijan's main celebration and 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 which purify and awaken nature (water, fire, earth and air). Being the 'land of fire', Azerbaijan has rich traditions relating to it; fire is the symbol of purification. Bonfires are built during Novruz and people jump seven times over one, or once over 7 bonfires. The fire is never put out by water; it burns down by itself. Young boys and girls take the ash of the fire and throw it far from their house. This is symbolic of throwing away all the misfortune of the family with the ash.

In Azerbaijan, traditions related to water symbolize the new year. Jumping over flowing water in the New Year clears a person from their past year's faults. Members of the family splash water on themselves before going to bed at night on the eve of New Year day. And those who drink from this water on the evening of the New Year protect themselves from diseases and illness in the coming year.

So Novruz 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. A mirror, with coloured eggs on it and candles should also be on the table. A candle is the symbol of fire and light (keeping a person from harm); a mirror is the symbol of happiness. On 18th March there is the referendum to determine if a president can be re-elected for more than two terms – so that will also be an interesting time. All in all, March will be a short month.

So, I'll sign off here and wish you a Happy Novruz.

Until the next time – sahol (bye in Azerbaijani)

Susan Gordon

## **BAKU DIARIES (no. 10) – June 09**

Salam! (hi)

Hello again. As per usual, these past few months have been busy.

The main change for me has been a change in job. On April Fools' Day I played a joke on my team saying that I was being moved on early. They were shocked, until one of them spotted what day it was. But, that evening, I got a call from my boss saying that I would swap roles with another HR Manager, still based in Baku. (You can imagine my team didn't believe me when I told them!). So on 1st May, I moved from looking after offshore and drilling into new territories for me. Now I look after the part of the business which includes the largest terminal outside the Middle East, some geo-politically prominent pipelines running across three countries plus offices in Georgia and Turkey as well as in Azerbaijan. I have HR Advisors based in all these countries so, I am learning to manage and lead from a distance as well as across cultures.

As you can imagine, the last few weeks have been fascinating. I have visited my team in Tbilisi, been to one of the pump stations on the BTC pipeline, gone to Sangachal terminal, the Energy Centre and Training Centre outside Baku plus also conducted interviews in the Ankara office. Going back to Georgia this week.

Obviously the three countries are very different, but so too is the practice of HR in each. The HR profession is pretty new in all three countries, with Turkey seeming to be the longest established. I am in the process of trying to hire a Turkish national for an HR position in Ankara, and whilst I realise mine is not a research based examination of the HR profession, it gives me the feel that in Turkey, HR is seen more as a 'hiring and firing' function rather than a business partner. In Georgia, again it is a relatively recent strand to business and my team are encouraging local firms to adopt some professional HR practices.

The scope of the business is just amazing. As an example, the BTC pipeline is 1,768 kilometres (1,099 mi) long, a crude oil pipeline from the Azeri-Chirag-Guneshli oil field in the Caspian Sea to the Mediterranean Sea. It connects Baku,

Tbilisi, and Ceyhan, a port on the south-eastern Mediterranean coast of Turkey, hence its name. It is the second longest oil pipeline in the world. The first oil that was pumped from the Baku end of the pipeline on May 10, 2005 reached Ceyhan on May 28, 2006. This pipeline crosses mountainous terrain as well as almost desert conditions. It is hugely sensitive as you can imagine, and I have been learning about the business ramifications of geo-politics as well as geo-hazards (like extremes in temperature, landslides and earthquakes). There are over 700 points in Turkey alone where the pipeline crosses rivers; these are critical due to the shifting land conditions and need to be monitored closely. And on some parts of the pipeline the only way to patrol it is on horseback – so we actually have to employ folks to do this!

I intend to travel to Georgia and Turkey relatively regularly and so as I learn more, I'll share it with you.

Also recently, the HR team have moved offices in Baku due to an office restack. We were a little sad to leave Villa Petrolea, as this is a very atmospheric building. In its history it has been an army hospital and also a Communist Community Centre; what was the theatre stage now hosts state of the art video conferencing technologies. The ceilings have mouldings of hammers and sickles, oil rigs and beautiful paintings and the mail room has a huge bronze statue of oil workers. You know that you aren't just in any office building.

As well as the new angle at work, I continue to look for new experiences. One that my brother's reaction to was *'aren't you too old for that'* was taking part in a mums vs. girls rugby game. It came at the end of season rugby BBQ and although it lasted 20 mins tops, I was exhausted. But the mums had so much fun that we are thinking of setting up a ladies' team after the summer – we'll call ourselves the Baku Babes! It'll be touch rugby only, nothing that breaks a nail...do remember I said that.

I, Amy (my daughter) and my friend and her daughter went into the Old City one day so that the girls could take pictures of the numerous statues for a school project. To get there we took the metro; this metro system has a violent history. In the chaos of

the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union it was subject to terrorist bombings and was the site of the worst subway disaster in the world in 1995, killing several hundred people. It also happens that the metro stations house some of the best examples of public art in Baku. For example, Nizami Station, named after the medieval poet, possesses glittering mosaics illustrating episodes from his poems. In Neftçiler Station, which has maintained its communist name honouring oil workers, enormous mosaics represent men taming a vortex of whirling petroleum as a Bolshevik maiden leads the proletariat with an unfurled red flag.

Unfortunately, however, all of Baku's Soviet-built metro stations are considered classified. It is forbidden to take photographs of them, even from the top of the hundred-foot long escalators that ferry commuters into their depths. (Soviet metro systems were, after all, designed in the 1960s to be mass bomb shelters in the event of nuclear attack). In exchange, however, the traveller is treated to cheerful, jangly melodies played as the trains arrive at each station. I've been told this is the only subway system in the world to have such a thing.

You may have been aware of a dreadful incident in Baku in April when many people (reports have differing numbers) were shot dead at the State Oil Academy, by what was apparently a troubled individual. Baku is a large city but one in which everyone knows someone who was affected by that event. It was a real shock to all and still felt particularly as it is perceived to not be a gun culture.

On a happier note, we have continued to be welcomed by local Azerbaijanis – we have been to more weddings where you eat heartily, dance delicately as ladies and watch the men dance frantically with each other and just have a good time.

One exciting moment recently was when Azerbaijan came third in the Eurovision song contest! Arash was the pop singer that I went to see in December in Baku so I have to admit that I was rooting for him and Aysel to win!

We also went along to support Azerbaijan in the World Cup qualifier against Wales

(sorry Welsh supporters) – we sang the Azerbaijan national anthem with gusto. This was the first football match we'd been to here – armed police on horses at the entrance and shoulder to shoulder soldiers around the pitch. But it was a good humoured, though not very skilled affair where sadly Azerbaijan lost 1-0. I was struck that my attitudes are changing as I glared at some visiting supporters who were drunk in public (not acceptable in a Muslim country) and bare-chested supporters chanted songs (the men, thankfully, but still not a good look, particularly with the sun burnt bellies jiggling about). Really not sure how I'll cope back at home when that's the norm again!

It was my birthday in May and I got a gift from my neighbour of something that I am sure that most of you can never claim to have received. That is, a packet of home made bacon with a specially printed label for me - delicious!!! Richard is a closet butcher and hankers after a life in rural England with a small working farm and tea shop attached. He has two chill cabinets in his garage where he hangs his meat and makes tasty food for us all but I suspect that in future we'll be visiting Richard's Tea Shop...

We had a foray into fancy dress parties recently – Graeme went as Captain Jack Sparrow and I was the Evil Queen from Snow White – as someone said to me – 'I see you've come in your work clothes' ...I like to be in keeping with my core self.

We have been camping again – we spent a gorgeous weekend in May up in the hills in fields of spring flowers – stunning! And also a couple of weeks ago we camped on a beach in the Shirvan Nature reserve. The guide book says that there are 220 species of birds and the last surviving herds of Caucasian Gazelles. We saw a few gazelles (cute min-antelopes with little white tails) and a few seagulls and we had a great time but overall my summary is - been there, done that, taken pictures of the snakes, ticked it off the 'to do' list. ...and still taking anti-histamine for the mosquito bites...

We are looking forward to welcoming three guys next week who are raising money for charity by travelling from the UK to Mongolia in a mini-van. They needed a letter of invitation to get through Azerbaijan and

after 6 visits to the Consulate we managed to get that organised for them. We will be interested to hear their observations of travelling through Turkey, Georgia and Azerbaijan and then they will head off on the ferry to Turkmenistan and beyond.

There are some days if you wonder if there is more out there – oh, I think there is! Take care and have an exciting few months before I write again.

Until the next time – sahol (bye in Azerbaijani)

Susan Gordon

## **BAKU DIARIES (no. 11) – October 09**

Salam! (hi)

I hope this finds you well. Once again, I have lots to share with you.

Fresh in my memory is a trip I have just returned from - a three day journey travelling along the pipeline in Azerbaijan visiting our sites and community projects. It was amazing, from both a work perspective and just finding out more about the country and its people.

I travelled with three colleagues, leaving Baku Central Station early one October morning on the train bound for Ganja, six hours away. Ganja is Azerbaijan's second city and is close to the pipeline we were visiting. Very few locals have enough knowledge of Jamaican English to realise the funny side of both the name and the irony that xash (said hash) is a local delicacy (sheep boiled down into a jelly like substance).

Anyway, back to the point - we got on a carriage attached to the regular train but purely for the staff to get to site, where they normally work 14 days on, 14 days off.

As you may recall, I recently changed jobs and moved from supporting offshore platforms and drilling operations to looking after onshore operations across Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey. The intent of this journey was to visit some of the onshore Azerbaijan facilities, meet staff at one of the pump stations and also a pigging station (no, it's not a farm, it's a technical plant) and talk to local communities. And it was all magnificent!

I particularly enjoyed discussions with the staff, talking about their daily work and experiencing their living conditions in the camps and guest houses they live in when they are on rota. I was struck by the positive team dynamics and enthusiasm of our technicians and team leaders. I also had a chance to literally feel the flow of oil through the pipeline - the pipe is very warm to the touch.

But this trip not only allowed me to meet with folks on the sites, but also to understand the wider context in which our business operates and what it means to the

people of Azerbaijan. I got a great opportunity to see some of the community programs financed by the company and its co-venturers. I drank the water that was taken from the burn, filtered and made safe at a water filtration plant; I drove along upgraded roads to once remote villages; I visited schools where the kids previously had to walk 8km each way to school before this one was built; I went to a small village maternity hospital where all the local babies are born and saw the construction of a community centre which will give the village a 'centre point' and give a base for a hairdressers and other businesses once finished. We even got the chance to herd sheep on a local farm!

It was interesting to observe how the wealth generated by the scale of oil and gas projects spreads over to neighbouring areas. And it's heart-warming and humbling to see how people talk with such passion about what they do and why they do it - community leaders, NGO representatives, local villagers, children and adults alike.

At one school we visited it was like stepping back in time - the children were in very small classrooms (they'll be in the same room for the 9 years they are at school). They were all meticulously turned out in 'old fashioned' uniforms; they stood to quiet attention when we entered and a few more forward ones smiled shyly when we left. The students, who were studying everything from language to physics, were clearly proud of their school and engaged in learning. Two students from a village of less than 600 were going on to advanced education - quite an accomplishment.

I also had the chance to expand my culinary repertoire. For breakfast I ate the traditional qaymag (said 'guymac'), which is basically clotted cream, together with fresh bread and runny honey and tea in a glass. Delicious! But a bit heavy on the calories. I also tried, for the first and last time, boiled goat; another local delicacy. It tasted bland at the time but the memory leaves me screwing my nose up...apologies to those whose favourite meal this is.

The autumn countryside that we passed through reminded me of a line from Keats' 'To Autumn' poem - 'season of mists and mellow fruitfulness' But I knew this was no English scene as although there were mists,

there were also trees heavy with pomegranate and persimmon fruit.

Other interesting cultural moments have been coming in thick and fast. For example, I have successfully recruited our first Turkish national HR person. When interviewing, it struck me how employment regulations and cultural expectations differ between the UK, Turkey and Azerbaijan. For example - the attitude to age of employee... (there are no age discrimination laws in Turkey). It's only when your own personal norms are challenged that you find out what they actually are!

In all this excitement and learning I have found time to relax. One special trip I had was a girls' weekend to Moscow. Four of us (one a native Russian speaker) headed off and stayed in a great hotel near Red Square. We walked miles, seeing some of the sights, art galleries, churches, ate Russian pancakes and more sushi than I thought possible outside of Japan and also just sat in the park to watch 'normal life' unfold before us. The Moscow metro was fascinating and thanks to our Russian speaking friend, a breeze to navigate - without her we'd have been literally lost. We met up with a couple of guys we have worked with before. They now have jobs which basically come with a body guard! So I can now say that I have had dinner with mean looking Russian body guards watching over me. I almost felt important. I wouldn't tangle with them though...

Also recently we have had the roving dinner party that happens in the gated community in which we live. This year 125 people joined in and partied till 3am. It kicks off at 6.30pm with a champagne reception in a tent on the lawn of one of the houses, and then you have starter, main course and dessert at three different houses (split up from your partner) and then go back to the tent to dance if you want. A very good night was had and I met some nice new folks.

The HR team have also been busy with an HR Oscars (Eskars) night. The HR leadership team decided to do 'Slumdog Millionaire' - complete with traditional Indian dress, a quiz with appropriately naff questions and then a bit of Bollywood dancing. The video footage is under lock and key! My team also did a take off of Zorro - lead role of Zorro Gordono - for which we

won an Esker... of course, I'd like to thank my family, my teachers.....

In the last few weeks I have done what I said I'd do - I have founded the Baku Babes ladies rugby club. We are up to 18 ladies who have joined in. I have to admit that I am older than I think I am so did pull my calf muscle badly, but I'm back to peak (kind of) fitness and having a ball (no pun intended).

Well, when you read this I will hopefully (exit visas permitting) be on vacation in Turkey having a half term break with some friends from Aberdeen. When we return to Baku we will no doubt be treated to the normal welcome when the plane lands on the Heydar Aliyev runway when all the passengers burst into polite applause to show appreciation for the pilot. A very nice touch and makes me feel welcome back.

Until the next time - sahol (bye in Azerbaijani)

Susan Gordon