

BAKU DIARIES (no. 16) – March 2011

Salam! (hi)

As per usual, lots to tell you about. You'd think that after 4 years of writing these articles I'd run out of hot air – but no, I still have plenty left.

The last few months have again seen travel to exotic lands including an impromptu visit to Germany. An hour out of Heathrow for a Christmas trip home, we were diverted to Bonn airport due to the weather chaos. Having spent most of night in the airport, about 4am we eventually found we could check in to a hotel for a while. So off went by a scary taxi ride to the middle of nowhere in the snow. Amy (daughter) threw up in the taxi but luckily I had acquired a flight sick bag (which are like hens teeth on the carrier we were on) and managed to (mostly) save the poor chap's car...

As the hotel was so full we ended up having 9 of us in the same room (us, our friends plus a teacher from the school my kids go to. Cozy). Ach, it could have been worse. We were with nice people, had a bit of a laugh (until the Sense of Humour Bypass took effect one the second day) and we were warm and safe, albeit not comfortable. Sadly the Azerbaijanis on the flight didn't have visas and had to stay in the drafty airport all weekend.

For those who could leave, some decided to go by train, taxi, ferry to the UK – but we eventually returned to Baku and I went back to work for the week. Attempt 2 started on the 25th December after having Christmas lunch in a Chinese restaurant in Baku (everything is open here of course as it's not a holiday). We spent Christmas night in a Travel Lodge (bet you're jealous) and then off to 'sunny' Inverness and Aberdeen. I will never watch 'Trains, Planes and Automobiles' again without recalling the trip...

New Year was in a friend's house with 45 people – all of whom we met in Baku but now live in/around Aberdeen! So living here I now know more people back home than I ever did. Bizarre old life isn't it?!

But I've also had other experiences...like beauty salons. Now I know that doesn't sound fascinating but you have clearly never been to an Azerbaijani salon and be looked after in Azerbaijani style...

Three of us went off to get sorted out to go to a ball – 3 hours it took and with no one speaking English we got 'big hair', nails manicured (fingers and toes) and the full metal jacket of make up. The salon ladies were amused at these clearly bemused foreigners and treated us superbly well. Salons back home could learn a thing or two about customer service. We did look good but it only lasted till I washed my face – then bam, I was back to normal.

Also recently when in Ankara, Turkey, for work, a colleague's boyfriend who is a make up artist gave me a lesson in applying make up. So again without the aid of speaking the same language, I now know how to 'apply', 'blend' and 'highlight'. Maybe this will last longer – but only if I can be bothered every morning with that caper. I think natural Scots beauty will out...won't it??

Talking about Scots – one fun thing this year was an entry to be a contender for the Azerbaijan Eurovision song contest. She is a lovely blonde, Glaswegian, PE teacher from the international school, She was great but think she could only get so far not being Azerbaijani.

I decided to make a New Year's Resolution this year. Everyone goes for losing weight or getting fit etc but I decided as it's so pricey and difficult to get it here that I want to learn how to make chutneys! My friend (Gill, now christened 'Nigillian') has taken me under her wing and showed me how to make the most stunning chilli coriander chutney. Next is jam when the fruits are in season. (Am I showing my age yet??).

I have also been inspired by my neighbour who is a real Master Chef and last week hosted a 'Fine Dining' evening for 10 people (including Master Chef friend). Bubbly on arrival, mushrooms stuffed with haggis, roast venison and veg, summer berries with ice cream and toffee sauce, cheese board, liquors. Most ingredients bought in Aberdeen during the eventful trip in December... Very yummy and thanks to Caroline and Roddy in Inverness for the recipes!

In terms of eating and drinking I was also treated to a wine tasting in a vineyard in the heart of the Azerbaijani countryside in January. I was visiting the pump stations and community projects in towns around Ganja (yes, name is for

real – it's the old capital of Azerbaijan) and happened to mention to those I was with that I didn't have a birthday present for my husband. These great folks arranged for the vineyard to be opened (as closed for the winter) and one evening we had a tour and a little wine tasting. Don't let anyone tell you that there is no good Azerbaijani wine – they haven't tried this stuff! Very tasty – though I think I had more fun getting the wine than my husband did in receiving the gift!

The rest of the trip was fantastic too – we were invited to dinner at a colleague's apartment and met his family. His wife is a tremendous Ukrainian woman who is a child psychologist (very unusual profession in these parts, especially for a woman). It seems to be the trip to meet wonderful ladies as there was also the magnificent Community Centre leader resplendent with her gold teeth who loved it when I shared the phrase – 'if you want a job done well, ask a busy woman'.

The rest of the trip included trips to a football field (not much more than a mud pitch) at the foothills of the mountains that border Armenia, meeting a lady working with the Peace Corps, a greenhouse providing year round products for the community, schools where the heating is not allowed to be gas and so stoves sit in the middle of rooms, a boy's wrestling club and so much more. I still can't believe that this is my job and I get to meet such diverse folks who have such different perspectives and ways of living.

Going back to expat life, February saw the annual rugby trip to Dubai. This year about 80 kids (TISA Titans) travelled to play in the international event. With parent, siblings, grandparent the travelling party totaled 210 people! So a marathon logistical affair although we couldn't organise a game for the Baku Babes (ladies touch rugby team) or there would have been more.

One heart warning moment was when TISA Titans under 14s had their final match and the only Russian team in the tournament stayed to cheer them on. This apparently was because our guys spoke to them in Russian during their own game and showed them courtesy. So they wanted to repay the compliment and cheered them on against the might

of the other team. Brought a tear to a glass eye that did, especially when they were the first ones on the pitch to shake our players' hands at the end of the game.

This year was Amy's debut international (aged 7) but Fraser (aged nearly 14) has played every year we have been here. Amy got what she started playing rugby for – the medals (materialistic...of course not!). I was proud of Fraser being asked to be captain but not so chuffed when he fractured his arm in the second match. Being such a great mother, I sent my husband to the hospital with him and I watched Amy play rugby. Actually Fraser asked for that as I have a history of passing out when he's getting treated. He's fine though and enjoyed (a bit too much) the attention from the teenage girls offering sympathy. Two weeks later he is 'forgetting' that he needs the sling and playing basketball.... Grrrr!

Work continues to be challenging and fun. Just today it was confirmed that I will be moving to a new role (still based in Baku) looking after international mobility and immigration, resourcing and university relations, HR systems and performance Management, Learning and Development. This still covers Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey so thankfully I'll still get to travel and get a wide perspective on life and the Region. I suspect this new role will keep me entertained and busy! But hopefully I will be able to take time for the next article.

Until the next time – saghol (bye in Azerbaijani)

Susan Gordon

BAKU DIARIES (no. 18) - December 2011

Salam! (hi)

So, it seems that climate change is a reality judging by the weather we have had in Baku!

Snow is not a common phenomenon here and certainly not so early in the year. The first snow fell during the Gurban Bayram holidays (early Nov) disrupting the traditions of selecting a sheep (live at the point of selection) and then visiting friends and family to gift the fresh cuts of meat that you have specially chosen. Blizzards and closures made this tricky.

With the change in normal weather patterns, the lack of preparation on the roads, variable familiarity and skills of driving in such conditions, driving has been a 'bit of an experience'...little Ladas sliding about, BMWs with their wheels spinning whilst guys with no-grip shoes manfully push, buses broken down across the road, U-turns in the blocked traffic, coming the wrong way down a dual carriage – you get the idea. We've had more snow here in two weeks in than in the last two years...plus for the first time in the 4 ½ years I have been here there has been frost on the car in the morning. What's that all about then?

On the work front it continues to be a matter of learning something new every day. I have been settling down into my new role. I now look after all the HR specialist teams for the region (Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey) meaning that more than ever my head is chock-a-block ...from resourcing, reward and benefits, talent management, information systems, learning & development, international mobility. So as I say definitely learning all the time!! Not sure how I'll top this experience.

Adapting to changing immigration regulations is always a challenge and again we have been updating procedure and process to accommodate recent changes. With the high volume of applications and the importance to the business (and individuals), this has been entertaining to say the least.

The business in the region continues to be exciting. This includes the recent Shah Deniz gas sales and transit agreements in Turkey, the fruit of close cooperation

and negotiation with governments and partners. I am sure you will have seen this in the press but it's fascinating to be here and be part of history in the making.

Changing to a very different topic, I have been struck recently with the real difference in how cultures grieve. Sorry, I know it's not a cheery topic but gives a real insight into moving moments that make you feel privileged to be allowed into local culture a little more.

First, we had a very sad situation where the partner of an expatriate died in country; all very sudden and shocking. The company offered support in interfacing with the local authorities, which is difficult in any country at such times. Ultimately it was decided to have the ceremony and burial in Baku as he was so happy in Azerbaijan. It was a sobering time witnessing how expatriates deal with such issues so far away from home. My thoughts go to his partner who has decided to stay here and continue working.

My reflections on differences came when an Azerbaijani friend lost her dad; it is the Muslim way to bury the individual before sun down (men only attending) and then on the 3rd, 7th and 40th days people come to pay their respects. On these days ladies go at one set time, gents at another. You are welcomed in a large tent which is put up close to the deceased person's home, for example, in a courtyard or even just placed across the road; often times you might have to re-route due to a funeral tent. In the tent there are rows of tables and chairs and the mullah (in this case a lady mullah) sits at the front with the bereaved and chants, prays and preaches whilst people sit, pray and cry. There is no music or raised voices, but there is a genuine open display of grief and the support this ceremony gives to the family is palpable. Paying your respects is done partially by drinking the tea and eating the traditional spread including pilaf and lamb and chestnut stew. It is important to at least take a little of the halva that is offered.

Now, changing tack completely...

The kids are still glorying on. Amy (8 now) is very taken with her art classes (a beautiful Columbian mum teaches her) and Amy has deigned to take up rugby

again (after declaring that she had the medal from last year so the job was done, no need to go back). She is also very excited about being in the 1st Baku Brownies pack. I just wish they would get iron on badges...

Fraser (14) is still keen on sports. Recently the school hosted a volleyball and football tournament. There were about 60 kids who came from Georgia plus some other locally based teams. We hosted two 17 year old Georgian lads...I think they were impressed that I could speak Georgian (well, a comprehensive rendition of 'hello' and 'thank you' may have exhausted my repertoire and they did laugh, but I am sure they were impressed nonetheless...). Anyway, Fraser's team won the football tournament so all good there.

In October we also had International Day at the school. The flags from all 41 countries represented were marched in to the ceremony. Amy was very proud to be the one to carry the St Andrews Cross! It made a great sight to see all the flags lined up at the front once they had all trooped in. Then there were songs and dances from numerous countries with parents as well as kids joining in. For example a dad with his two teenage sons did a few American rock songs, the Latino mums did a funky South American dance (that kept the dads interested for a while) and the Turkish mums did a traditional dance with lots of whoops and fun. I just sat in the audience and cheered them all on!

Maybe by next year I will be good enough at my new endeavor to do a little show... I have taken up belly dancing. But being stiff as a board and with a family pack rather than six-pack, I don't think it will ever be a thing of beauty. But having a laugh with 12 other ladies shaking our jingly skirts is enough for now. I do, however, dread future parties where after two glasses of wine I will decide I am the next best thing to Shakira...

The Baku Babes (ladies touch rugby) also see their 3rd season – that's pretty impressive given that I started the team only for a bit of fun and exercise. We are currently deep in discussion on an important matter...this season's kit, the team colours continuing to be shocking pink and black. The debate continues.

We have also continued our cultural journey not just into Azerbaijani culture but also the multicultural community we live in with a great invite to Thanksgiving dinner. This was the first time I have ever heard of (forget about eat) pumpkin cheesecake! Yes, correct, not a typo – it was actually fab! And it did me give one of my 5-a-day (or so I kid myself). The folks who hosted us are a super American/Norwegian family and they also hosted Danish, Welsh, English as well as us Scots. Most enjoyable.

The roving dinner party a few months ago was also a multicultural extravaganza. This is the annual party hosted in our complex – there were 125 people this year who met on a late summer's evening to toast with champagne then go to a variety of houses for each course. That evening I ate with Egyptians, Turks, Georgians, Americans, Dutch, British, Bolivians, Brazilians, Columbians, Indians...how dull a night out in Aberdeen will seem when I have to come back.

We have also had great evenings at concerts that generally aren't 'my thing'...including the Baku Jazz Festival (the Duke Ellington band) and also the Baku Student Chamber Orchestra, the famous conductor for which is a friend's dad, which made it all the more engaging.

We've also recently been to a Russian wedding. The couple was very 'non-traditional' and it was all very different to other Azerbaijani weddings I have attended here. The bride spoke during the ceremony (very unusual) and the entertainment was everything from Russian pop songs, traditional Azerbaijani dancers carrying in flaming pilaf and wild male dancers through to a flash mob dance! By the way, have you seen the flash mob in the centre of Baku that is doing the rounds on the internet? – I was gutted that I wasn't in on it! Maybe once my belly dancing gets better...

Until the next time – saghol (bye in Azerbaijani)

Susan Gordon
