

ARMENIA – Advice from Fulbright Alumni

The following are extracts from Fulbright Grantee Reports and are not meant to reflect the views of the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA), its cooperating agencies, or the U.S. Embassy.

Some Cultural and Historical Notes

It isn't enough to merely talk about the cultural experience in Armenia; diversity sensitivity is required as well. From my perspective, I felt personally affiliated with Armenians and shared their certain social or cultural characteristics. The notion "Armenian culture" is a restricted term that does not cover the peculiarities of the Armenian people. Anyone can talk about the Armenian culture without involving the people who live outside the current borders of the republic of Armenia. Armenians speak constantly about the "Armenian Diaspora" . Every family relates to someone outside Armenia, living somewhere in the world. They are proud of having Armenians who have excelled in the arts, sciences, technology, music, business, etc., outside the boundaries of the republic. Many ethnic jokes run around and are loudly told by Armenians on Armenians. They tell foreigners about "Armenians invented X, Y, Z...." , because "Armenians were the first that did X, Y, Z...in the world" . Those are their stories that are incorporated into regular conversations to ignite hospitality, camaraderie, and good-fellowship. One assumes that an Armenian has certain characteristics simply because she or he is a member of the Eurasian region. Due to the fact that Armenia was under Soviet rule from 1920 through 1990, for example, we may assume that all Armenians drink vodka because of the direct Russia's influence for many decades, a vodka-producer sector. The fact is that all Armenians are proud of being one of the countries in the regions that drink Cognac because they produce the "best cognac" in the world.

An amazing piece of the culture is that of the Armenian alphabet. Most Armenians know about the creator of the thirty-six letters of the alphabet, Saint Mesrop Mashtots. An Armenian student recites for you the letters of the alphabet and is able to identify the two letters added in the 12th century, long O and F. In Yerevan, you can locate a major street with the name of Mashtots. In any school, a year-long bulletin board has the alphabet and the history of it. From kindergarten to high school, the name of Mashtots is infused in the curriculum content.

The beginning of Christianity is a main point in the cross-cultural conversations with Armenians. Armenia is considered the first nation to have adopted Christianity as the state religion in A.D. 301. The country is rich in providing evidence of the presence of Christianity. Not far from Yerevan, the capital city, the consortium of monasteries and churches of Echmiadzin hosts the residence of the Supreme Catholics of all Armenians and is the centre of the Armenian Apostolic Church. Echmiadzin is a holy city that holds the title of one of UNESCO World Heritage Site (UWHS).

The country, especially Yerevan, is an unlocked museum. Everywhere you go, you find historical monuments. Sculptures are in all places, streets, parks, open spaces of the cities. Any form of architecture can be found. As I was watching TV, a Yerevan news anchor interviewed people in the streets of Yerevan. He was standing closer to a sculpture of Alexander Tamanyan, the chief architect of the Republic Square asking to identify the monument figure. I must say that 90% of regular individuals knew about Tamanyan's work.

Going to the circus and the puppet theater can provide some insight into Armenian culture as well as fun outings.

Hospitality, Food and Drink

The emphasis on respect for guests is considered a sign of hospitality and generosity. For example, I had to be proactive in seeking for "things to do" in my job post after two full weeks of drinking surj (Armenian coffee) made in a jazzve, a coffee pot. My Armenian colleagues showed different degrees of hospitality and friendship making sure that I enjoyed their surj, cognac, and chocolates from Grand Candy, the most important chocolate chain in the country.

Food is the most highlighted form and expression of any culture. In Armenia, food is not an exception. It bounds people, family, newcomers, and visitors. Food is used to show hospitality and friendship. From very simple meals to very elaborated ones, Armenians speak of friendship by saying that "we have bread and salt among us." I had many opportunities to experience Armenian specialties and delicatessens. For example, the white panish (cheese) in different degrees of flavors, from strong salty to a mild bland cheese, with fresh lolik (tomatoes) and varung (cucumbers) and any sort of greens to start the family conversations at the dinner table, accompany with lavash, a very popular Armenian flat and rollable bread. The khorovats, barbecued meats and vegetables, are the most lovable food of Armenians. Any family or any social gathering would not be complete unless the khorovats is on the table! Family dinners are long and include the drink of wine and cognac. You can expect cognac at any time, breakfast, lunch or dinner. Something unique about Armenian meals is that you know when you start but you do not know when it will end. They truly enjoy food, drink, and the verbal interactions related to any topic, national or international, generated at the table dinner. The most typical dessert is a plate of seasonable fruits that includes pomegranate, the national fruit associated with fertilization, and the strong Armenian coffee. I have to say that healthy food is the norm, not the rule.

Role of Women

The role of the women is still in debate. Armenian females constitute the largest number of inhabitants in the country. Graciously, they claim to be 7 women for one man. Women are considered the transmitter of the culture, customs, and traditions as well as being the one responsible for child rearing. Women married very young as they are still attending college. The beauty of Armenian women is evidenced in all aspects of life. They are very fashionable, well dressed, extremely careful and aware of weight issues, healthy eaters, good manners, and still submissive, obedient and compliant as compared to men. Although they have a predominant number in the Armenian society, women are not occupying important roles in the political, industry, technology, social spheres of Armenian society. Yet some fields have become labeled "female." For that reason, women fill the classrooms of colleges and universities that have traditionally offered humanities, arts, and education fields. There is still a lot of work to do in that direction.

University Teaching

In my opinion, the most important thing that incoming Fulbright Scholars need to understand is the need to be flexible. Host institutions do not do things like we do in the US: they may not use syllabi, level of English comprehension for Armenian faculty and students may not be what US faculty are led to believe, and Armenians just simply move at a different pace than Americans. Armenians also do not like to tell people that they cannot do something. I would ask a question, be told that I could do something, and then be told that in fact, no, I could not do that. Having said that, the Armenians are truly warm people. They are very nationalistic and have immense pride in their country and culture.

The academic culture in Armenia is unlike any other teaching and/or learning environment I have ever experienced. On the one hand, it was very rewarding to be teaching students that were eager to learn

from non-Armenian professors; however, on the other hand it was hard because nothing I was teaching would be reinforced by the Armenian faculty following me. For example, a way of teaching that encourages student discourse, pedagogical approaches and philosophies, grading, written and verbal feedback on projects and assignments, and use of email for faculty and student correspondence. The students also expressed disappointment over this.

Living and working in a foreign country certainly has its ups and downs, and even though I have given lectures and presentations in other countries, I was not prepared for the lack of personal and professional courtesy shown to lecturers during classes. For example, the use of cell phones in class (by students and faculty) is not only disruptive but rude. Even when instructed to turn off their phones, they do not and will even carry on a conversation. Most surprising and disturbing is the fact that even faculty colleagues would answer their phones and carry on conversations. This was not aimed at me personally, it is a cultural attitude that places more importance on the cell phone than anything else that might be happening at that moment.

This may sound like a gross generalization, but nothing in Armenia happens on time. When attending a cultural event plan for it to start 10 minutes late. By the same token, the majority of students cannot be in class on time. The rationale for this is not clear but there is no mechanism for preventing it. Also, students might not show up for several weeks and then all of a sudden they appear. The professor is then expected to help the student make up the work.

The level of English comprehension on the part of the student is not what American faculty are led to believe. This creates problems for several reasons: 1) students have to translate for their class mates while the professor is trying to lecture, and 2) it is not fair to penalize a student for their language deficiencies if they attending the class they were told to attend. The students I was teaching were in their first year of graduate school but they lacked the personal and mental maturity one would expect of graduate students. Plagiarism and cheating are widely accepted in Armenia, not just at the student level but also at the faculty level. Also, the buying of grades is a widely accepted practice.

It took some organizing and a few meetings to get my teaching assignment organized. Be patient. The cultural pace is slower in Armenia

Interacting with Armenians

The Armenian people are friendly and open. Many are curious about what America is like and how America shapes its citizens. I made many Armenian friends who were eager to show me their country and share their culture. I would encourage future Fulbrighters to make every effort to be involved in the community they live in while on assignment. For example, in my apartment building I made lots of friends and that became the hub of my social life in Yerevan. This requires a certain openness and patience. Many of my neighbors, for example, didn't speak much English, but we were able to get along just fine. It was at a dinner party at a neighbor's apartment that we were introduced to lavash, a kind of Armenian flat bread. We learned an Armenian saying, lavash is a bread, lavish is a plate, lavish is a napkin.

I have found it very important to develop Armenian friendships, something that at first may seem difficult, though I have generally found people so friendly and hospitable, and excited to share Armenia and Armenian culture with me that I have found relationships easier and easier to develop.

Housing

Yerevan is a very small and walking city with great transportation system, very accessible from every neighborhood. Housing ranges from \$400 to \$800 depending on the location. Downtown places are higher. I found a beautiful, one bedroom, new condominium, three blocks away from the metro station, closer to American university campus, and 25 minutes walking distance from downtown Yerevan, for \$400. Be aware that you will have to pay the first and last month rental to the landlord. Also, 50% of the first month is required for the broker dealing with the rent. Most buildings in Armenia have no light in the internal stairs. You must have a flashlight with all the time. It would also help during the blackouts that happen very frequently. Be ready with water buckets since water may lack sometimes without warning. Also, do not be despair as you see the outside facade of the buildings. The apartments are mostly well preserved and possess the minimum of amenities and conditions needed to live in a country that is in the process of developing. There are many new buildings in development. Many of them are located in downtown Yerevan ready to be occupied but the prices are inaccessible. The majority of the buildings remain dark and there is no presence of residents living there. There are many hypotheses on who built them and for what purposes.

Housing in the center of the city can be more expensive due to location, but the apartments are older and may not have the most up-to-date amenities. The newer apartment blocks will have apartments more in keeping with US standards, but the construction may not be as good and heating and cooling costs will be higher. Also, water and electricity can still go off periodically so make sure to ask your landlord to let you know when service interruptions are planned.

I arrived in Yerevan in the middle of the night in summer. I had rented a lovely apartment before I got there and I was able to go directly to my apartment from the airport and that worked well for me and I would recommend trying to do that if possible. My apartment was on the Cascade, a park with a monument built into a hill that has 555 steps that I climbed each morning and on clear days the top of the Cascade stairs may provide the best view in the city of Mt. Ararat. My apartment was centrally located so I could walk to shopping.

As might be expected, housing in the center of the city is more expensive than in the "suburbs" but make sure you factor transportation costs and travel time when determining where to live.

Daily Life

There were lots of adjustments that were necessary and in the end those adjustments became critical learnings for me. The water and electricity often went off, the phone in my apartment that functioned on a landline was often down. When I asked my neighbor why it was hard to have enough water for a hot shower he said, "It is a bullshit." That was as good an explanation as any. I had a Russian washing machine in my apartment that I had difficulty taming. An Armenian friend tried to help by translating the directions. My favorite was "prepare for preliminary cruching," which I believe was the spin cycle. Street signs are mostly in Armenian and Russian, although English signs were going up as I was leaving. I was in Yerevan with my son who was writing his master's thesis and he was always eager to start a new adventure. We spent time going on long walks exploring the city, going to the many museums, and as I mentioned above socializing with our Armenian friends, including my students from the university. I was in Yerevan for two holidays - Independence Day and Yerevan Day. Both were festive events with lots of parties throughout the city with lights and music galore.

Part of what you have to do to get to know the culture is the same as you would do anywhere: take public transport, buy groceries in small shops and off the vegetable ladies on the street, not just in

supermarkets, chat with your neighbors. Having a language teacher also helps, not just to make it easier to interact with locals but also because our language teacher is more than happy to teach us about the culture as well.

A change I have had to make regards scheduling. I tend to be a very punctual person, very scheduled. I have found that I have had to be more flexible here in Armenia, whether at work or in my social life. Meetings often change at the last minute, and so you must not only be consistent in confirming meetings, but also have back-up plans for when events are rescheduled or cancelled.

As a woman there's really nothing that I have had to avoid doing alone. Walking home at night has never caused me any problems but I do have to put up with a fair amount of verbal harassment and/or being followed by men in cars. Refusing to engage in conversation with them is usually enough to get them to leave.

It is hard to travel outside of Yerevan unless you have a friend or colleague with a car, or you travel with local tour companies. Travel in Yerevan is quite easy and cheap: subway, marshrutka (mini-bus), and taxi. However, drivers can be quite reckless. Pedestrians do not have any rights and even though you might be in the "zebra" (crosswalk) and you still have 10 seconds to cross the street, you might find a car or taxi cutting in front of you.

I shopped mostly at local corner markets. This required a fair amount of pointing and pantomime since you must ask for most items in those stores and I didn't speak Armenian or Russian. There are also grocery stores, but the prices tend to be higher. I was only five minutes from where I was teaching, so it was an easy walk.

There are many open air cafes while the weather is good and sitting in those provides for ample people watching and orienting to a new place. Artbridge Cafe, The Club, Taco Maco and Square One Cafe provide English speaking wait staff and some familiar foods for home sick kinds of days.

.One cautionary note is to be careful crossing the street. The out of control taxi drivers in their old, beat up Russian Lada's won't slow down and as soon as a light changes the cars start rolling. Bartering for purchases at the Vernissage, a large open air market that is organized on the weekends, is something you shouldn't miss.

Mail service is challenged in Armenia and it is best to plan to stay in contact with friends and family electronically.

The metro only has one line and if you live far away you might have to take a series of mini buses (marshrutka) which are always overcrowded. Plus, they do not have designated stops so you have to tell the driver when to stop. So, make sure you learn the Armenian phrase for "next stop, please."

If you are interested in easy walking / hiking trips around Armenia contact Apres Zohrabyan <bnatachar@yahoo.com>. He offers day-long hikes on Saturday and Sunday.

Water can be a health issue, but I have never had any problems with it, though this is mainly due to the fact that I never take risks with it. In my apartment I boil my water, and outside of it I drink bottled, although the cleanliness of bottled water may vary. At least one mineral water brand, Jermuk, does contain arsenic.

Much of Armenia's electricity comes from the country's nuclear power plant (some 35 km-approx.-from the capital). The plant is old and lies on seismic faults, and so is a risk.

Second-hand smoke is something I have regrettably had to get used to. Rarely will you find smoke-free area designations, and much of the population smokes.

Money, Credit Cards, and Banking

The exchange rate fluctuates every day. If you are bringing dollars, exchange directly from exchange stores. The SAS supermarket usually offers good rate as compared to any other place for exchange. The ATM machines are accessible all over the country, but there is a fee depending on the bank and depending on the amount. Always exchange a large amount and keep it at home. You may need to use cash most of the time. Very limited use of credit cards in the city stores, museums, small restaurants. It is important to have small change and coins daily. Most restaurants and coffee shops prefer cash. The same is for any other service, beauty salon, utilities payment, etc.

Money can easily be exchanged at the local grocery store chains (SAS, Moscow Market, Yerevan City) and usually have a better rate of exchange than the banks.

If you can exchange money in advance of your arrival that would be better but there is a kiosk for money exchange near the visa counter. However, there might be a long queue if a number of flights arrive at the same time.

I just used my ATM card to withdraw money from my US account. Most ATMs in Yerevan accepted my card and it did not seem like the international fees would end up costing me more than opening a new account.

It is easy to exchange money and the most popular place for doing that is the SAS grocery store. They have stores all over town and are open 24 hours. There are also lots of ATMs in Yerevan but make sure you notify your home bank in advance if you plan on using a foreign ATM. And, not all ATM machines will take your ATM card so you might have to try several before you find one that will work with your ATM card

Dress

Yerevan is a very formal city. People dress very well everywhere. For example, it is not well seen to attend Opera House concerts wearing jeans and sandals. Most offices, government, universities, hospitals, non-for-profit organizations, K-12 schools, etc., are entities in which women and men show the best of their wardrobe daily. Being well dressed is perceived as a symbol of respect for the institutions and the culture. It is expected that the "leading person" (teacher, faculty member, researcher, politician) wear professional clothes for different events. More relaxing clothes can be worn at the cinemas, shopping centers and open cafes.

There are many stores to buy clothing although much of it is probably over priced for a foreigner.

Weather

When I arrived in Yerevan it was the dead of summer and the heat was burning. Most of the buildings in Yerevan are constructed out of pink tufa stone, the idea of Alexander Tumanyan an Armenian architect, and in the hot morning sun of summer the entire city has a pink glow. I left Yerevan right before Christmas and the weather was changing. Life was getting colder. The sidewalk cafes were closed and the winter was bringing a fossilized effect as if the entire city had been blasted by some unspeakable spell. Erosion was grinding away with complete impunity, scratching, rasping, peeling, chipping away at monuments with calm power. The cratered sidewalks and white horizon seemed to say, this is the way

things are now. It seemed like the whole world was starting to freeze and decay, whichever was coming first.

If you travel in the summer time, and due to the fact that the climate has changed everywhere, pack enough summer pieces of cloth, since the summer may last until late October. Even in November, early in the mornings and late in the afternoons, the weather would be ranging temperatures from 60 to 65 F. At noon, the temperatures climb up to 80 degrees!

Driving and Road Safety

The biggest issue I have had is with traffic and road safety, although I don't know exactly what to recommend as far as that is concerned. In Yerevan there are some taxi companies that have newer cars with seatbelts, but it's not very reasonable to take taxis all the time. Even in a taxi, standards for safe driving are very different here from what most Americans will be used to. In all likelihood a Fulbrighter here will spend a lot of time on poorly maintained roads in poorly maintained soviet vehicles with no seatbelts. I think it's just important for grantees to be aware that road safety is not something that can be taken for granted here like it can in the States, so when considering an out of city trip in a marshrutka (or even in a taxi), you have to ask yourself: Do I like these weather conditions for driving? Do I want to be on that road in this vehicle in the dark? Whereas back home I would never have thought to reschedule a trip for reasons like darkness or rain, I now take those factors into account when planning travel.

Driving rules are not enforced, roads are often in need of repair, and many vehicles should not be on the road. While there is a seat belt law, many cars, especially taxis, do not have seat belts available in the back seats, and sometimes not even in the front seat. In my first two weeks in country I was involved in a serious auto accident and had no seat belt to wear. I was able to walk away from the crash, but the dangers of transportation were glaringly obvious.

International Travel

If you are purchasing your own ticket to Armenia, check every trip internet websites such as Orbitz, Expedia, Travelocity, and any European site. There were many discrepancies between my airplane ticket and the rest of my Fulbright fellows although we traveled with less than three days difference. Because of the fact that we must comply with Fly America Act, you may want to check directly the airline websites first and then the other sites. The difference in prices can be from \$500 to \$1200! My ticket was very expensive, over \$2,000 leaving from Washington DC to Moscow. Check other routes, if possible from any point to Istanbul to Tbilisi to Yerevan. Or any flight to London or Viena to Yerevan. The Moscow route is the most expensive and the Moscow airports are very unfriendly to visitors, especially to Americans. Be aware that most flights arrive in Yerevan very early in the morning (4:00 to 5:30 am). There is no public transportation (bus, metro). Only taxis travel from the airport to the city center. Do not pay more than 5000 DRAM (\$15). Clothing

Visas and Residency Permits

Getting a residency permit was a little cumbersome - the residency permit process could not start until we had letters from our universities, which we could not obtain until our first official meetings with the universities.

It is perfectly fine to wait to get your Visa at the airport though I got mine in advance. I spent my first week in Yerevan living at the Envoy Hostel while I looked for an apartment. If you don't know anyone in Yerevan that you could stay with, I highly recommend Envoy (it costs just under \$20/night).

U.S. Embassy

Margarita Tadevosyan, the US Embassy liaison I worked with was terrific and the embassy personnel are very available for assistance. I also attended a few embassy receptions which were fun and interesting.

The American Embassy has a weekly e-letter that gives useful information on events and activities. When you have your security briefing ask the Embassy about getting on the mailing list.

Web sites or other helpful resources:

www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Armenia

www.gov.am

www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/Armenia

www.lonelyplanet.com

<https://travelregistration.state.gov>

www.armeniaforeignministry.am

travelinfo@state.gov

<http://www.armeniaemb.org/>

<http://www.armeniainfo.am/>

Tour Armenia: <http://www.tacentral.com>

Rediscovering Armenia Guidebook:

http://www.armeniapedia.org/index.php?title=Rediscovering_Armenia_Guidebook

Text Translator: <http://translator.am/en/translate.html>

<http://armeniabirding.info> information about birds and ecology

<http://www.armeniapedia.org>

<http://www.armsite.com>

Solomon, S. (2010). Armenia: The essential guide to customs and culture. London: Kuperard.

Tour Armenia: <http://www.tacentral.com>

Armenian Monuments Awareness Project: <http://armenianmonuments.org/en/>