

A Brief Account of Climbing Ararat

and a Visit to Ani

In the beginning of September, 2007, I had the pleasure to complete the “Armenian Triangle,” consisting of Yerevan (which I had been to before), Ararat (a.k.a. Masis), and Ani (the ancient Armenian capitol). I traveled with five other Peace Corps Volunteers. We left from Gyumri, a city in the Northwest of Armenia, traveled up to Georgia, went straight down to Dogubayazit (a city near Ararat), climbed the mountain over a span of four days, drove up to Ani, then through the “Georgian Valleys” of Eastern Anatolia (the Easternmost region in Turkey), stopped for a day in Batumi, and came back to Armenia. The journey was a success, though for me, it felt rushed. Of course, when one is in a larger group, one has to make compromises. This is a short account of the preceding, which may be interesting to some or useful for others attempting a similar trip.

Currently, the border between Armenia and Turkey are closed. There have been rumors of whole busloads of tourists “slipping across” – but these have proven to be only that. Alas, the journey that could have taken only an hour or so by car had the border been open, took fourteen. We hired a driver in Gyumri to take us to the Posof border crossing linking Georgia and Turkey. A shiny new border compound greeted us, and we knew that we were leaving the Caucasus. Unfortunately, the border really is in the middle of nowhere, kilometers from the nearest town in Georgia, though the nearest settlement in Turkey is closer (perhaps an hour’s walk away). There have been reports of public minibuses serving the route between Posof and Kars (our next destination), but, from the Georgian side, we were not able to ascertain the truth of them, and locals said that there is only one – in the morning. Although we hoped to get to the border as soon as it opened, at 10 a.m. Georgian time (which is 11 a.m. in Armenia, or 9 a.m. in Turkey), it was already noon. So we struck a deal with the driver to continue taking us, all the way to Dogubayazit, our final destination. Being his first time in Turkey, he was quite excited. Leaving Georgia was no hassle, and entering Turkey wasn’t difficult either except that nobody spoke English or Russian (or Armenian), which made communication difficult. Registering the driver’s minivan took an hour (and cost \$88), after which we were free to enter. Tourist visas were issued without problem (\$20 for Americans, \$15 for Armenians).

As we entered Turkey, we were amazed to see beautiful vast mountain ranges, forests, and several very modern compounds facilitating the newly built Azeri-Turkish pipeline (which bypasses Armenia). As we continued driving South, we left behind the lush valleys, grabbed a tasty kebab in Kars, and encountered barren rocky landscapes more reminiscent of Armenia. The road took us quite close to the border with Armenia, so much so that we were able to see the lookout towers on the other side. The sentiment that if only the borders weren’t closed our journey would have been so much shorter was repeated many times. Before the next major city, Igdir, we reached a comparatively lush valley with red cliffs surrounding it. The setting sun made it a serene yet profound scene. The rest of the journey to Dogubayazit was uneventful, we only stopped for the military checkpoints that are prevalent in the region, and necessary as smuggling is apparently a problem. This is no surprise, since Ararat sits in a small protrusion of Turkey into a

niche between Armenia, Nakchievan (the Azeri enclave), and Iran. From the top of Ararat one can see four countries, though it is hard to distinguish between them as the borders cannot be seen without a telescope. One of the checkpoints was manned by several young men who were quite content with the machine guns hanging at their sides. When they found out that we were tourists, they smiled, and when they saw our driver’s Armenian passport, one of them outright laughed, though not mockingly, more like how a parent laughs at a folly of a child. Nearing our destination our driver seemed more and more at ease. He kept stopping every five



Compound for the Azeri-Turkish pipeline



Landscape near the border of Armenia

minutes, asking for directions, which would have been useful had we needed them. He also saw an abandoned fruit stand and got out to buy an apple. The people at the nearby house were reluctant to come out, finally a young man came and laughingly put the whole box of apples in our van to our utter amazement. We drove on cheerfully to Dogubayazit.

The Turkish government requires tourists to obtain a permit before climbing Ararat, and they must also hire a guide. Prices are exceedingly high, certainly fixed centrally. For our five-day trip, we paid over 400 euros each. This is not to say that we were displeased, the owner of the tour company, Mustafa, was a very friendly Kurd and spoke English well, and we were happy with everything except the price.

The next morning a van was waiting to take us to the drop-off point slightly up the mountain. Two horses carried our food, tents, and sleeping bags. We carried our personal belongings. Unlike the side seen from Armenia, the Turkish side rises gradually and makes the climb doable for anyone in good shape. We certainly weren't the only ones on the mountain, though we were the youngest. On our journey and at the camps we met groups from France, Germany, Iran, Nakhchievan, and even Russia. Certain national competition between the groups was present, but in the end it was a personal journey for everyone.



Ararat, from the "other" side



View of the peak from base camp
- only 2,000 meters to go!



View from second camp; base camp
can be seen near the middle

On the first day we walked up until base camp, at 3,200 meters. Having been warned of altitude sickness, most of us used Diacarb, two pills a day, to help us adjust to the thinner atmosphere. Other than some headaches and the almost inevitable upset stomach, we didn't have any health problems. Although our walk had not been strenuous, we were already very high above the valley floor. The food was most excellent; to my pleasant surprise Kurdish cooking strongly resembles Hungarian.

On the second day we did an "acclimatization climb" to second camp at 4,000 meters. We stayed there for a few hours and then came back down to base camp. As the effects of altitude sickness are exaggerated at night, it would have been difficult for us to sleep at second camp that night. On the third day we went up to the second camp "for good." Although the climb was certainly more difficult than the one up to base camp, it only took two hours. We were now closer to the clouds than the valley below, and the view was magnificent!

We started our push for the summit on the morning of the fourth day, at 2 a.m. In the dark we had no sense of scale. During the descent later on we remarked that this probably helped us, as seeing how far we had to go could have been overwhelming. But as it was, all we saw was what our headlights illuminated, and some other teams making their start far below. It was cold. The air was now very thin, and we had to manage our pace not to be constantly out of breath. After perhaps two hours of climbing we reached the snow line and put our crampons on to help our shoes



The peak, the moon, and dawn

grip the icy snow better. After passing the first major ridge, we were able to make out the peak just from the light of the stars. During one of our breaks a little later on we saw the moon rise behind the peak. At first it seemed too faint, and then we realized that the crescent we're seeing is just the unlit side of the moon – and then came the side lit by the sun, so bright in the darkness! We were able to see our shadows and we started to be able to judge how much farther we still had to go.

Soon after, the darkness gave way to dawn. Nearing our destination, we of course were quite excited and quickly got across the snowy valley that still separated us from the last climb. We reached the peak right as the sun was coming up. So beautiful! I kept my camera under my jacket and was able to only take a picture or so with it before it stopped working again because of the cold. A very strong wind tore at the half-torn flags at the top. We were able to see little-Ararat (Sis), the valley Yerevan sits in, and the mountains to the East and South. As the sun ascended, we saw the enormous shadow of Ararat behind us, stretching until the horizon. I was also surprised to find that really there are two peaks, one slightly higher than the other. From Armenia Ararat seems to end in a sharp point!

After twenty minutes we started heading down and on the way passed the Iranian group we routed on the way up. Farther down we saw the other groups making their way up. It was a good feeling to know that, at least on that one day, we were the first to the top! It was also nice to get to the top and have no one else around. The descent to second camp was loooong and strenuous. I really didn't realize we had climbed so long! We got back around 8:30 in the morning and, after a cup of tea, went to sleep only to be woken up an hour later by our guide. We then descended until base camp, where we spent the rest of the day. The next morning we said goodbye to our high-altitude guide and descended the mountain with our cook, who promptly got us lost. We ended up going until a small Kurdish settlement at the very foot of Ararat, from where our cook was able to call the minivan driver and tell him know where we were.



The shadow of Ararat from the peak;
Scott, me, and our guide at the top;
the peak at sunrise

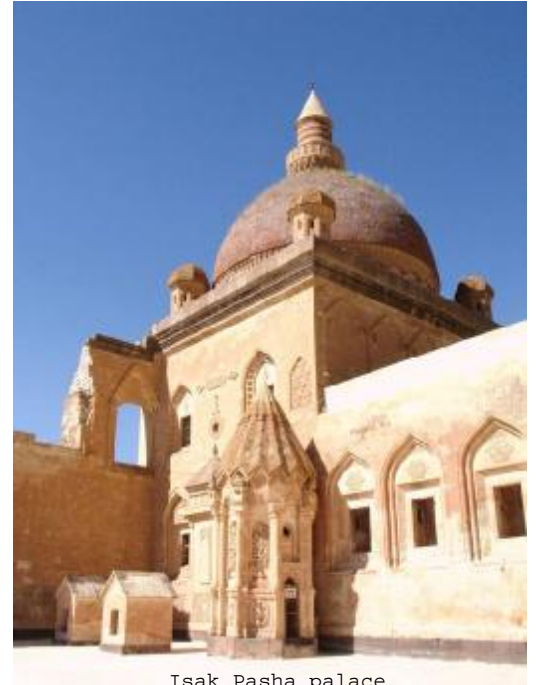


Passing other teams as we descend the mountain



The "team" (from left to right): me, the cook, Alex, Scott, Dominic, our high-altitude guide, Rud, Kyle

The day we spent sightseeing: first we saw Isak Pasha's intricately carved palace, and then proceeded to Ani. We arrived quite late and, as the site is closed after 6 p.m., only had an hour to look around. This really was unfortunate since there was so much to see! I had seen ruins before, but never those of an entire city, abandoned hundreds of years ago. Half-collapsed churches, buildings underground still supporting the tourist path above them, a village built into the side of the canyon surrounding the city on three sides, ancient bridge that collapsed long ago, a monastery built into the rocks. So much to see, so little time. But, perhaps, it was just as well; it made the experience more condensed, the memory more vivid. We also spent some time in Kars, which had also once been Armenian, but was now part Kurd part Turk. In general I was very pleasantly surprised to find Eastern Anatolia to be like Europe. Of course, the calls to prayer, which these days go out from loudspeakers at the exact same time from dozens of Mosques five times a day, reminded us that we are not in a Christian country. But otherwise, the contrast could not have been more striking. 60 km from Armenia, Kars is a world away. Credit cards are accepted everywhere, small shops offer a wide variety of quality goods, and Western and Japanese cars replace the rows of identical Ladas and Nivas that typify much of the Caucasus.



Isak Pasha palace

We had done everything we set out to do. Most importantly, we had reached the summit, which was something we worried about, since a team we talked to before us said they got 300 meters to the summit but had to turn back because of bad weather. We were now able to relax. We struck a deal with the driver our tour guide gave us, and so he took us until the Hopa border crossing back into Georgia. Leaving Turkey was no problem; entering Georgia was slower due to their computer system crashing. We knew we were back in the Caucasus. People cutting in line. Garbage. Only a semblance of the rule of law.

We spent the evening in the Black Sea resort-city of Batumi. It was pleasant to relax on the beach. In typical Caucasus style, the situation turned rather comical rather soon when two of us tried to go into the somewhat rough sea only to be "rescued" against their will by the lifeguards, whose only job, it seemed, was to get people happily playing in the water out of it.

Our trip back was very very long. The following is only useful for someone else attempting a trip from Batumi to Gyumri. Half of our group went up to Tbilisi and descended from there to Eastern Armenia, apparently without much hassle. I went with two others "directly" to Gyumri. Unfortunately we didn't know that the 180 km road from Batumi to Akhaltsikhe is very damaged, so we were surprised to find that our public minibus took a very long way around making that first part of the journey last six hours! Luckily in Akhaltsikhe we were able to catch another minibus very quickly to Akhalkalaki. From there, however, there were no more buses to Armenia that day (apparently they only run until 1 p.m. – it was past 4). So we had to hire a driver, which, at 85 Lari, was very expensive (should have been 40). But, no matter, we were happy to be able to get back to Armenia before nightfall and to drink a good beer in celebration of our trip in the comfort of familiar surroundings.

- Laszlo Lieszkovszky



Views of Ani