

Discovering the Land of Hospitality: Reflections from Study Abroad Trip to Armenia

By Vahé Heboyan
Co-Director, UGA Study Abroad
in Armenia

Armenia became the destination of four University of Georgia students and four students from non-UGA institutions – Fordham University in New York, Ramapo College in New Jersey, University of Minnesota, and Texas A&M University – during the Maymester 2007 (May 13-June 3). The students represented a wide range of majors - agricultural communications, international business and accounting, economics and history, and social work – who blended together to explore the culture, history, economy, international relations, and politics of this strategic country in the Caucasus Mountains bordering Turkey, Iran, Azerbaijan, and Georgia.

The State Agrarian University of Armenia (SAUA) and its Agribusiness Teaching Center (ATC) in Yerevan were the host institutions for the three-week program of special presentations at the World Bank, U.S. Embassy, United Nations Development Program, and the Center for Agribusiness and Rural Development and field trips to economic development projects, historical and religious sites, and volunteer service with *Habitat for Humanity Armenia*. The program was designed to expose students to the rich culture and history of Armenia. The group was housed at the Yerevan State University's Foreign Guest House located on Mashtots avenue in the central Yerevan, next to the Opera House, Nairi Cinema, the Cascade, and the Matenadaran.

Students with Armenian heritage discovered the land of their grandparents and the warm hospitality of today's Armenia. As one student noted, "Growing up, the word Armenian seemed like a foreign term to other children. I remember almost being embarrassed to say I was half Armenian because no one really knew where or what Armenia was. However, as I began to learn more about the rich culture of the country through my grandparents I only wanted to expand my knowledge ... and be immersed within the vastness of the culture."

This study abroad course was designed to let students discover this ancient country in transition from seventy-one years of central planning to a democratic and market oriented society. This program was unique in a way that it gave the students an opportunity to personally meet and learn about Armenia's history, culture, reli-



Nekeisha Randall of the University of Georgia

gion, economy, international relations, and regional geo-politics during field trips and discussions with officials from governmental, non-governmental and international organizations and owners of local businesses and community members. The program was encouraging student initiative in exploring various aspects of cultural, social, economic and political life in the country.

The program minimized classroom instruction to learning basic Armenian and primarily focused on field trips and sight visits. Students learned about the mission and work that major international organizations do in Armenia, such as the World Bank, United Nations Development Programme, US Department of Agriculture, and US Embassy. They saw themselves the accomplishments and the positive impact of those projects on improving livelihoods and social welfare of the poor and communities in need.

A boat trip on the Lake Sevan and a day spent with the Armenia Tree Project (ATP) helped to understand the environmental threat that Armenia faced since the collapse of the Soviet Union and unplanned destruction of its water and forest resources. The students

learned about the current state of the environment, governmental policies, and current programs aimed at restoring the ecological and environmental balance in the country. In particular, the trip to the ATP nursery and project sights gave the group a wonderful chance to learn about the breathtaking flora of Armenia and the exceptional project undertaken by the ATP with the support of the Diaspora Armenians.

Trips to the agribusinesses and local communities helped the students to learn and understand the development trends in the rural communities and the role of international projects in assisting Armenia's rural areas in their sustainable development. The students were able to observe the contrast between the levels of development in urban versus rural communities. The field trips helped to learn about the ongoing programs that were aimed at economic and social development of the country, with a specific emphasis on the rural communities.

One of the highlights of the program was the service learning component of the course. The students volunteered with the Habitat for Humanity Armenia (HHA) project and visited a rural school

for kids with special needs. The students and program administrators assisted the HHA Armenian crew to finish the house for the Haroyan family located in the Khor Virab village in Ararat region. We have used bucket brigades to carry lava rock insulation to the roof and constructed a concrete sidewalk. The visit to the school for the kids with special needs perhaps was the hardest to make. It was filled with emotions, hope, and compassion. The staff of the school has been doing a very impressive job in bringing a new life for those students, opening up new opportunities for them and helping them to understand the value of the better life.

After day long trips, language instruction, and cultural experiences the students had the opportunity to relax, socialize and immerse into the cultural life of the Yerevan by spending evenings to learn about the local and foreign cuisines, experiencing the rich nightlife opportunities that Yerevan has to offer, and socializing with the students from the host university. The farewell dinner at the Old Erivan was a joyful event as the students tasted the delicious salads, appetizers, and khorovats, and danced traditional Armenian dances with a famous Armenian folk dance ensemble. The evening was also sad because early next morning the group was to leave Armenia leaving behind many friends, but taking back joyful memories and stories to share with their families, friends, and community members.

Alisha Santoorjian of University of Minnesota writes about her experience in Armenia:

"It's hard not to love Armenia. The people welcomed us with smiles and delicious food, we traveled through beautiful mountains, we saw historical churches from years long ago, and we played with goats. During the three weeks we were there I learned an astonishing amount about the Armenian culture, language, and food, the economic and geopolitical situation of the Caucasus, the role of the Armenian Diaspora, and the agricultural and political problems facing Armenia today. I enjoyed exploring the wonderful city of Yerevan, despite a few close calls trying to cross the street. I went into this trip not knowing much about Armenia, and I left feeling a deep connection with the Armenian people and the Armenian land." She concludes her overall experience in the following way: "I had more new experiences in Armenia than I've had my whole life."

Nekeisha Randall of University of Georgia writes the following about her first ever international experience: "For me, Armenia was a great place to study abroad for the first time because this particular program allows students to be more than just 'tourists' by helping them become more globally aware through hands-on experiences and interactions that immerse them in a unique and admired culture."

Richard Ohanian of Fordham University (New York) shares the following from his experience in Armenia: "As a descendant of the Armenian Diaspora, part of this trip was to uncover my family's past and learn more about the culture and the people make up a large fraction of my identity. I had never been exposed to this part of my heritage, so going to Armenia was definitely a blind and inspiring adventure. As it turns out, the UGA trip turned out to be a great chance to observe the stark realities of an emerging nation, while discovering its distinct culture, marvelous countryside, and fascinating people with a history all their own."

Jeanette Laudicina of Ramapo College has a more personal reflection of the trip: "Looking back at my journey to Armenia it has left me of the profound feeling of how small I am within this large world. The Armenian families I met, and the local people I encountered treated me as if they had known me my whole life. It was a feeling I have never felt within America. Hospitality was shown in various ways and from people who have the least, which just reiterated the overwhelming kindness that seems inherent. I met a girl named Rose who I plan to be friends with forever, she taught me so much in a short period of time. I am grateful to this experience and can't wait until I return."

For information about UGA Study Abroad in Armenia program to be offered for 2008, please visit our website (www.uga.edu/internationalpsa/armenia) and/or contact Mr. Heboyan directly.

Vahé Heboyan is the co-Director of the UGA Study Abroad in Armenia Program and a PhD student in Applied Economics at the University of Georgia in Athens, GA, USA. He may be reached at (706) 542-0856 and/or VahéHeboyan@gmail.com.

E-mail a
Letter to the Editor To:
The California Courier
CalifCourier@cs.com