



Pilgrimage to the historically Armenian enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh 22nd July- 31st July 2011



First, congratulations to all who joined the pilgrimage for having the courage to leave your familiar homes and 'comfort zones' to join a pilgrimage with a strange group of people!

For some of you, we were 'strange' in the sense of being strangers - many of you came, not having met us before. And some of you joined the strangers, arriving on your own! And for all of you, we were we were all 'strange' in the sense of embarking on a pilgrimage through an unrecognised land with grim warnings of various dangers in any Foreign Office or other official publications.

Yet you all came, in spite of these challenges!

Secondly, I thank each and every one of you for contributing your own individual and distinctive personal contributions. I will never forget how everyone 'mixed and matched' - sharing fun, fellowship, laughter and problems according to every changing situation.

Thirdly, thank you for being such a blessing to the people of Artsakh. You must have noticed how much your presence meant to them: the fact that you cared enough to visit them in their beautiful but isolated land and that you entered into their tragic history and contemporary achievements with enthusiasm, sensitivity and appreciation.

You left behind warm smiles, great encouragement and many new friends who will always be eager to welcome you back to their land and to their legendary Armenian hospitality.

-Baroness Cox



A journey through Karabakh

An international walk across Nagorno Karabakh reveals the strength and spirit of a country recovering from war.



Over the past 16 years, Nagorno-Karabakh, in the south-eastern Caucasus, has made impressive advances in rebuilding itself after a devastating war. It now functions as a de facto independent country with a multi-party democracy, however it lacks international recognition, and has little say in negotiations about its own future. It remains economically and politically isolated, and its inhabitants continue to live with high levels of poverty and the threat of a return to conflict. Given the pressing humanitarian situation and the volatile political climate, the lack of international awareness about the situation in Karabakh is stark. It was with this in mind that at the end of July Baroness Cox led 35 Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust supporters and volunteers from around the world in a pilgrimage across the area. We wanted to discover what life is like for ordinary Karabakh Armenians, to hear first hand about their experiences and to encourage and facilitate dialogue about the situation.

Beginning in Lachin in the south-west, the group weaved its way across the entire region, flanked all the while by magnificent mountains, to arrive, 142 miles and 8 days later, in Gandzasar, a 13th century monastery in northern Karabakh. The international group included 35 members from the United Kingdom, the United States, South Africa, Burma, Australia, France, Germany and the Netherlands, and were joined by local Armenians and patients from the Nagorno-Karabakh rehabilitation centre, a project set up by a partner of HART. The expedition was supported by an invaluable network of Armenians, who helped with everything from the organisation to the cooking and the setting up of tents. Many villages and towns we passed through along the way hosted welcoming ceremonies, with traditional music and dancing, and animated speeches, and as we walked people came out of their houses or yelled from their cars to greet us. The majority of the group camped along the way, in stunning locations ranging from a cliff above a gorge, where local villagers put on a concert of traditional music and dancing, to shaded river valleys. Washing facilities consisted of a number of rivers, into

which we gratefully plunged after a day's walking in 40-degree heat, sometimes watched by unnervingly nosy cows, and once accompanied by an unwelcome water snake.

Alongside this, a smaller group was involved with photographing local Armenians, and interviewing them about their experiences of the war and their hopes for the future. The pictures and stories will be collated into a photo exhibition to be shown first in the UK and then around the world, creating a visually powerful forum to document the situation in Karabakh and to give a glimpse into the lives and hopes of ordinary Karabakh Armenians. This will contribute to a much-needed increase in understanding and awareness of Nagorno-Karabakh within the international community.

The pilgrimage was an opportunity to engage with the history and culture of the region and to understand better the Armenian perspective of the current situation of Nagorno-Karabakh. Historically and ethnically Armenian, it was during the 1920s that the area was assigned to Azerbaijan by Stalin. Armenians and Azerbaijanis lived together relatively peacefully until 1988, when the Armenians of Karabakh sought to be reunited with Armenia, as the USSR was dissolving. Azerbaijan responded with Operation Ring in spring 1991, involving the forced and violent expulsion of Armenian residents from the area. In October of the same year, Azerbaijan launched a general invasion of the region, using GRAD missiles and helicopter gunships against civilian targets. Karabakhi and Armenian forces fought back, eventually clearing Azerbaijani forces from most of Karabakh. In May 1994 a ceasefire was brokered, but a formal peace treaty has never been agreed. Nagorno-Karabakh remains at the centre of prolonged peace negotiations, which will have extensive repercussions across the Caucasus, yet the Armenians of Karabakh have little say in the negotiations that will decide their own future. Meanwhile, they feel a constant threat of invasion as Azerbaijan builds up its military,

spending more on arms than Armenia's total state budget. Economic growth has been severely stunted by a trade blockade imposed by Turkey and Azerbaijan, leaving over half of the population living below the poverty line, and yet few international aid organisations are working in the area. The accounts of local Armenians of the history of the region, combined with Baroness Cox's endless supply of stories from her visits to Nagorno-Karabakh, many during the war, helped us to understand the current situation on a more personal level.

We found a country with a sharp recollection of war, in which most families lost at least one member. Photographs of every soldier killed during the fighting stretch across the walls of two poignant museums in Stepanakert, one for fallen and one for missing soldiers. However, to an even greater extent, we found a country full of warm, spirited people, with ready smiles and particularly catchy folk music, who exceeded their already high reputation for hospitality. On the final night of the pilgrimage, rounds of toasting and a long speech from a local Armenian man ended with a blessing to the pilgrims, "may you always feel at home in Karabakh", exemplifying the whole-hearted way in which we were welcomed into a country as friends and family. Whilst some hollow bombed out buildings are still visible, much of the region has been rebuilt, and we witnessed, as

Baroness Cox said, a country which has "created beauty from the ashes of destruction", from the elegant new churches which rival the beauty of their ancient counterparts, to the inspiring rehabilitation centre, which has become internationally recognised as a Centre of Excellence. Stories of loss and atrocities endured also involved accounts of bravery and hope, such as a mother whose son is missing, uncontactable in an Azeri prison, who has set up solidarity meetings between Armenian and Azeri mothers, because, as she said to us, suffering does know not nationalities. With breaches of the ceasefire having increased markedly in 2010, and Azerbaijan investing vast amounts of money in building up its military, it is clear that the region is in acute danger, and the need to increase international attention and pressure is urgent.



Diary entries from members of the group

The tiredness fades but the memories remain!

As the plane touched down in Yerevan, I was blessed with my first glimpse of Mount Ararat, standing proudly, its snow-capped summit glinting in the setting sun. The returning Armenians gave a heartfelt round of applause for the Captain and crew of our Armavia flight now safely on home soil again!

By the time we had checked into the Erebuni Hotel, darkness had already fallen. The illuminations together with brightly coloured water fountains bathed Republic Square with an exotic glow. It was good to be here amongst groups of contented folk, families, the three generations all happily mingling and strolling in the warm night air.

A nine hour coach journey the following day allowed us time to acquaint ourselves with fellow pilgrims. Travelling through mountainous terrain, hairpin bends marking our circuitous climb was thrilling and chilling at the same time. Eagles soared above us heralding our arrival.



We sailed through the frontier of Nagorno Karabakh and were escorted by police thanks to our Lady Baroness Cox who was leading our pilgrimage. With their daughter at the helm, the people of Artsakh overflowed with joy and celebration as they welcomed us at every turn. Beautiful chords of folkloric music combined with elegant dance steps lit up smiling children's faces. Warm welcomes wherever we went made us feel valued and lent us an importance we were not sure we really deserved.



I felt tearful expressions of sadness give way to the firm adjustment of sunglasses over my eyes as I tried to block out the intensity of sun and emotion. The reverential laying of flowers for the Fallen at the foot of the War Memorial added gravitas to the ceremony and we were reminded once again that we were in a very sacred land.

The spirit of this resilient people shines forth amid horrifying and painful tales of the dark days during the nineties' conflict. The miracles and anecdotes that are shared by Baroness Cox fill us with wonder and elation tempered with sorrow and grief.

Camping in green pastures alongside quietly flowing streams makes us feel alive again as children tasting their first night's sleep in the great outdoors. The sound of raindrops beat first gently then furiously as the thunder claps and the lightning flashes and we curl up ever more tightly inside our cozy sleeping bags. When the storm has passed, we sense the air is somehow clearer and cleaner. We are left alone with our thoughts and we try to make sense of all we have seen and heard these past few days. We think we can hear the faint cries of human voices and then realize that our imaginings have strayed too far. It is the howl of jackals rebounding from the neighbouring hillsides culminating in a chorus of wailing. We are in the open - vulnerable as the Armenian generation before this and the generation before them - a never-ending cycle of suffering in this beautiful Christian state.

The visit to the Rehabilitation Centre was rewarding for each and every one of us - whether it be our Armenian pilgrims or one of the representatives of the nine different nationalities in the group. We were all so impressed by the enthusiasm, tenacity and dedication of the patients, staff and volunteers that we wanted to capture it all on film. Two of the most treasured souvenirs of our pilgrimage will be the pictures that I bought there. They were painted by two patients who are incredibly talented and they are both called Eric!

Vartan, the Director of the Rehabilitation Centre is one of the Heroes of the Peace. He is inspirational as he is charming and he has great vision for the Centre and for the future - a powerful symbol of hope in Artsakh.



We had the good fortune to visit many churches on our journey through Karabakh and we were particularly privileged to discover that a baptism was taking place upon our arrival at Gandzasar Monastery, the final destination on our walk. As we completed our last ascent, we heard the faint sounds of celestial singing coming from this holy shrine - the zenith of our pilgrimage! We were also amazed to see the unexploded bomb in the side of the monastery wall, a sure



sign of Divine Providence. The outline of two angels imprinted on either side of the altar were surely emblems of Faith and Godly Protection for the Christians of Artsakh, yet another of the Miracles of Grace Baroness Cox had mentioned. The faithful lit tall slim candles and offered up their petitions there. So respectful were they that they walked out of the church backwards, genuflecting on the way so that they would not turn their back on their Saviour.

The memories that remain with me are interwoven in the sweet scent of pines, mint and incense. They are in the Armenian strains of accordion notes and flutes and drums. The taste of home made yoghurt, cheese and local jam comes back to me amid tasty stews, salami and stuffed vine leaves. The views of fields and hills and majestic mountains contrasting with valleys, rivers and streams make me think Artsakh has the best of Worlds. The feel of grass, earth, stones and cemented road beneath my feet as I try to walk the many miles in the glaring sun will always stay with me. This beautiful country and its generous, friendly and spirited people will remind me always how lucky I was to make

this memorable and uplifting journey of a lifetime!

-Kate

July 24th 2011- Lachin (Berdzor) to Lisagor, in the Kashatagh Region.

Today marks the first day of our walk. Thirty kilometers in scorching heat over hilly terrain would be an intimidating distance for some, but there is a contagious energy amongst the group that overpowers any anxiety about the conditions.

The group begins to disperse and is paired together according to their pace, I'm joined early by a local, Gregory Hakobyan. Gregory volunteered to hold my heavy backpack as I attempted to search its pockets for my camera. After retrieving the camera, Gregory refused to return the bag to me; instead, he insisted that he carry it until the next checkpoint. Gregory was quick to hush my requests to carry the backpack for the remainder of the thirty kilometer walk. I could see how tired he was, but he did not utter a complaint, his hospitable nature would not allow for it.



Driving through the Armenian countryside on the way to Artsakh revealed this area's beauty, but nothing can compare to a slow walk through the hills. A walk enables you to capture the smallest details about the land: the scent of the grass, the livestock hidden in the brush, sharing a hello with a stranger, the taste of the natural spring water. There is an appreciation gained that would be impossible to achieve traveling by vehicle.



The half-way point gave us an opportunity to rest and divulge our level of pain or exhaustion. Most had walked the first twelve kilometers, there would be eighteen to go, some elected at this point to forgo the endurance challenge and join Lady Cox on the enjoyment phase of the pilgrimage. I was determined to press on, even though the prolonged rest had rendered my legs fairly useless. So, I made my way, with Gregory, still clutching to my bag, refusing to let me carry any burden.

The pain of my legs would eventually fade as they stretched back out, so much so that I decided to take the long walking routes when others decided to scale hills for shortcuts. One particularly tricky hill got the attention of our police escorts as Gregory, Paul, and Alice fought up a difficult climb. At that point, the police escorts were fed up with us, we were at the back of the pack; those that were previously behind us had decided to take the bus to the next checkpoint. The police were adamant that we get into the car and catch up to the rest, but we stubbornly rejected their plea and with a unified thumbs up sign.

With five kilometers to go, we were again pleaded with to get on the bus and finish, but we would again refuse. This as a challenge was important to us; for some it was about proving something to themselves, whether it be overcoming something that was physically demanding or a promise that they had made to themselves to finish.

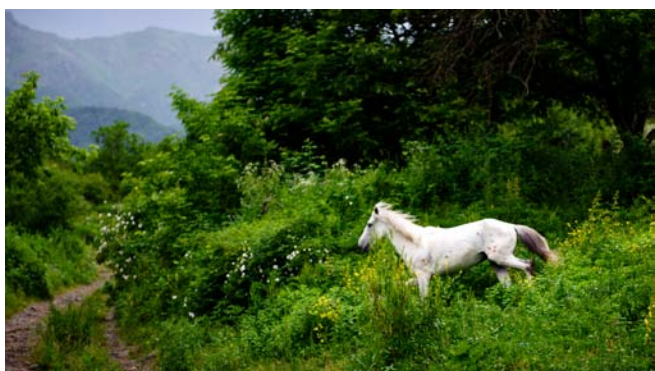
I managed to finish with Gregory, Paul, and Pierre not far behind, the watermelon at the finish line tasted better than any watermelon I had ever tasted. Before this journey, admittedly, I was in pretty lousy physical shape so I felt a strong sense of accomplishment finishing this leg of the pilgrimage on foot. It is the conclusion of the first day, and not only did I learn something about myself, but something about the goodness of the people of Artsakh. Not only did Gregory carry my backpack for thirty miles, but he spurned my attempt to buy him ice cream once in town, and treated me instead. We sat down alongside our other local caretakers and overcame a language barrier to share a few laughs.



We have come from all corners of the world to take part in this historic pilgrimage, and during this moment we stood alongside the locals in solidarity; we had been welcomed not as visitors, but as neighbors, as friends, as family. We formed a bond that transcended national identity; we were at this moment, the brothers and sisters of Artsakh

-Ryan

July 24th 2011- Lachin (Berdzor) to Lisagor, in the Kashatagh Region

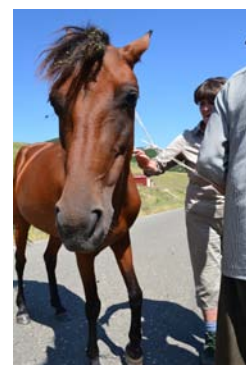


The invitation to come on this Armenian pilgrimage was compelling for 3 reasons: the old historic ruins of monasteries and churches, the opportunity to learn about Armenia from its dedicated supporter and patron in Baroness Cox, and a beautiful picture of a wild white horse galloping down a steep green mountainside.

As we approached our campsite down a steep valley and ascent on about night 2 of our trip, I scrambled along up a steep embankment, then turned to wave to the others who were following. As I

looked across to my left I saw a beautiful white horse and a brown horse grazing amongst the green foliage of the mountainside.

I thanked God for this wonderful sight, and felt sure this was God's gift to me that day. The horses were not wild, just 'free range', as are so many of the Armenian farm animals, but it was a heart-warming sight after a long hot day's journey. Later the 2 horses came up close to the campsite, seemingly very content with their beautiful grazing grounds.



-Judith

Much of this journey was an eye-opener: the traditional sat very comfortably with the new. It was good to see Khor Virap Monastery still standing, after 1,700 years and contrast this with the modern, purpose-built parliamentary hall at Stepanakert. Most memorable, though, was the Artsakh people starting at Lachin, where we saw the first of many warm greetings, bear hugs and smiles that made the eyes disappear.



-Michael

Return.

The act of coming back.

I sit here, once again, in mountains of Martaket with its rolling mountains and far-stretching forests. I had not expected to be here again so soon. It is marvellous. And yet how more marvellous to have see the enjoyment of this great team of travellers, to see them become captivated with a land and a people that for the last four years has so captivated my own attention. To hear so many deep-hearted exclamations of 'I want to come back' before we have even completed our journey is to realise an experience that has truly been shared.



And why should we not want to come back?! We arrive unaware of where we are travelling to and leave embraced as part of the family.

That is what I love about Karabakh. It is full of great juxtapositions.

It is noticed when you are invited to play catch in the midday sun on what the world tells you is a treacherous mountain pass.

It is heard from the mothers who have lost fathers, husbands and sons but refuse to hope for revenge but for a country in which their children can learn, create and play.

It is felt when you pass through a town, the name of which is disputed throughout the world, its people supposedly not there, its buildings supposedly in ruin but you stand there, on its outskirts and are either invited for a meal or to join in the songs and dances that have been celebrated for centuries.

It is triumphed by a centre that refuses to give up on those who doctors say are beyond help and instead chooses to champion and empower them into incredible individuals.

And it is so poignantly seen when ancient mountains that have witnessed to such devastation and division stand alongside their young inhabitants who all dream of tomorrow and hold out for what peace could promise.

One young man who we interviewed stated that his hopes for the future was as follows: 'A new generation with a new mindset.' He knows it is difficult, he knows the world tells him that it is impossible, but he wants to play his part in bringing together the youth of both Armenia and Azerbaijan, putting an end to years of mistrust and misgivings. What and honour to meet such a visionary!

Maybe this is the real reason that those who visit Nagorno Karabakh will only leave on condition that they be allowed to return? Beyond the hospitality, the terrain, the culture and, of course, the people (all of which would take a lifetime to properly understand) we uncover something that we did not expect. We find humility and hope interplaying in a fashion far too uncommon in the West. It breathes a life that is difficult to leave.

Oh to have been granted the opportunity to revisit friends and family in Karin-Tak, Shoushi, Stepanakert and the villages of Martaket! To be able to retrace steps and embark on new pathways! I leave Karabakh hoping and praying that my many new found friends will also have the great privilege of building further ties to this land.



Until next time, photographs and memories will have to do. The heat and tiredness will pass and we will remember toasts, dancing around camp fires and holding hands with some of the most remarkable people the world chooses to forget. That is, until we do something about it.

-John

The first stop on our pilgrimage was the site of an old monastery and church situated on the road from Yerevan but looking out over the mountains of Ararat, the site of the landing place of the ark of Noah and Old Testament fame. The sight was awesome! I had not expected to get a chance to see them for myself. They rise majestically above the plain.



The mountains have two peaks; the higher had two clearly discernable plateaux where one could imagine a ship the size of the ark could have grounded. The higher plateau had a thick covering of snow like a glacier even though the weather at the base was very hot. The mountains are now within the boundaries of Turkey, and one could see a river marking the border. This side were vineyards reminding me of the story of Noah planting one on his descent and getting drunk on the fermented wine.

After a long coach journey we arrived at our first campsite, where the tents and cooks' kitchen was set up, and settled down to a meal. Right from the start I was struck on how kind and helpful everyone was. This impression remained throughout the pilgrimage, and the

young people all showed wonderful helpfulness and good manners. We represented nine different nations, and it was easy to make new friends. I nearly always had someone to talk to and hear their stories.

Every morning after breakfast the keen walkers set off for the next destination, but I soon found the prevailing heatwave and distances too great, and thankfully made use of the accompanying transit vans transport, so enjoyed the scenery in greater comfort! Lady Cox was insistent that no-one be embarrassed to take advantage of the lifts. The spectacular scenery was very interesting and varied. The mountains, situated in the South-Eastern Caucasus, were in parts quite bare and rocky, while others were covered with deciduous forests right up to the top. The roads wound over the mountains often in hairpin bends. We saw small farms, some farmers herding just a few animals or of concentrations of beehives, the bees of whom would have benefited from the profusion of wild flowers on the mountains and in the valleys.

A feature of the pilgrimage was the stories Baroness Cox told us of her involvement with the people of Artsakh during their dark days of the war with Azerbaijan. We saw the evidence of the ruined houses in the countryside and in the towns along the way, and of her adventures as she sought to bring aid to the people. We were met in almost every village and town by delegations of local dignitaries, local people and school children who performed speeches, dances, songs and poems for us. They all loved Baroness Cox and had not forgotten what she did for them and greatly appreciated us visiting them in their isolation, and for her advocacy of Artsakh. We had been featured in their television and members of our party had been interviewed at various stages of the journey. I was aware that I was basking in undeserved reflected glory!



Many campsites were located in beautiful places, beside rushing mountain rivers, where some of the young people dashed in to bathe and cool down after their strenuous and hot day. On one occasion I stayed with a local family. They drove me up and up to a village high in the mountains, on roads more like dried up river beds, to arrive at a home with all the children up despite the late hour. They were very sociable, and gave up the master bedroom for me. Before dropping off to sleep at one in the morning I heard the sound of jackals hunting across the mountains ahead of us, it sounded almost like wolves but different, with a mixture of yaps and howls, which did not endear to me the idea of having to go outside to the family 'privy' in the small hours! Fortunately I slept right through! Off again next morning, I was amazed that their cars could survive such a challenge to their springs! It was really nice to be able to stay with a family that once.

Finally we took the long coach ride back to Armenia and Yerevan, the capital. I am really grateful for the opportunity I was given through HART to visit such an interesting part of the world.

-Gill

July 29th 2011- Khachen River to Vank Village in the Martakert



Time to leave the campsite across the swiftly flowing river. No suitable dry stepping stones at the crossing, and people alternatively slipping and sliding across on the mossy rocks, some falling with a splash into the water. How to get across? I took off my boots and socks, not at all confident that I could make it without getting soaked. Then Paul saw my anxiety and offered me a lift on his back! What a special sacrifice! As we crossed, I tried not to pray too hard, feeling that was a lack of faith... However, while everyone watching urged him to be careful, Paul was as steady as a rock. He placed each foot so carefully and with thorough care,

determined not to fall. Even when we reached the other side, he insisted on placing me right beside my dry boots and socks which had been passed across.

The crossing reminded me about the story of the man whose job was to take people across a deep river crossing on his back. One day a child came to be carried across, and as the man entered the deepest part of the river the child grew heavier and heavier, until the man thought he was going to drown. In spite of the almost intolerable burden, he persisted, and when he finally struggled across safely to the opposite bank, he found that he had been carrying the Christ child. The memory of that story made my crossing with Paul very special.

-Judith

July 30th 2011- Vank Village to Gandzasar Monastery

The last day was in many ways the most incredible day of my life. Starting out with breakfast I ate my last yogurt and jam sandwich with Irina, Armine, Artac and Mum while we talked of the future. In such great company I could not be sad and after many photos and chatting to the people around us, we set off on our last few kilometers. Although we were sad to be leaving we were all in high spirits, regaling each other with stories and jokes from the week – particularly several incidents which included Armenian cows, and dead crickets! However what stands out most was our arrival at the Monastery of Gandzasar. Having visited Gandzasar once before I already knew something of its beauty, yet somehow I could not have expected what was awaiting us. There was a sense that, not only had we reached our final destination, but also that we were part of something that was only just beginning, a new baptism - literally! There was Hope.



-Natalie

July 30th 2011- the return to Yerevan

An amazing experience.

The highlight of the trip was meeting the old Professor at the tree planting ceremony in Lachin. I knew instantly when I saw his broad smile, wisdom lines and his walrus style moustache that I was in for a treat, and I was not disappointed.



Full of vigour, full of life, full of enthusiasm, the Professor spoke with passion of his deep admiration for Caroline, reminiscing of the past whilst excitingly looking forward to the future. He could not contain his excitement that the Pilgrims were present and was overjoyed, when handed a copy of the Pilgrims programme.

During that brief tree planting ceremony, many photos were taken, glasses were raised, joyful laughter was heard, stories of the past were told and God was honoured.

For me, the very best of an amazing experience was saved for last. As we departed for Yerevan, there was a real sense that we have just been in the presence of a truly great man, and an impression that something significant had just taken place for the future of Artsakh.

-Pierre



Visiting Armenia was beautiful. The mountain scenery; refreshing rivers to bathe in, and the starry skies we sat beneath around the campfire - these I shall never forget. However, imprinted deepest on my memory from the trip was the beautiful way the Armenians welcomed us with generosity and kindness. I learned a great deal from the hospitality of the Armenian people. I shall always remember the tables laden with watermelon at each village we visited. I was also impacted by the deep faith in God many of them held. A faith that seems to have endured and grown stronger through the suffering they experienced. It was a privilege to visit Armenia with Caroline and have the opportunity to hear stories from the days of war and turmoil and to see how different Karabakh is now.

Another wonderful part of the visit was getting to know each person on the pilgrimage - the opportunities to have long conversations while walking through the mountains of Karabakh were lovely. By the end of the visit it felt as though we had become family - Armenians and international visitors alike. I loved the evenings we spent Armenian dancing together!



-Hannah

Writing some kind of an account of the trip seemed a good way of spending the time between flights in Moscow airport, but my mind was a blur of so many experiences, images and thoughts, I did not know where to begin. So, to try and get some kind of order, I made four lists: welcomes, campsites, hotels, and special things. The last was the longest, and could still get longer.

The welcomes included the informal as well as the formal. It seemed extraordinary for us all to be sitting in the debating chamber talking to the Prime Minister in Stepanakert, but some of the informal greetings of Lady Cox were also special - like the woman who had been looking out in Lachin and came across the road, carrying the little boy Eric with his amazing mass of plaited curls, to greet her as she walked by.



For my favourite campsite, I am torn between the gorge and the riverside with its shouting frog, the watersnake (which I heard about but I did not see) and the sound of the jackals.

The hotels were more than adequate and so not very interesting to write about - but there was a nice dog at the Ani Paradise, as well as the pool which so many people enjoyed, and the Sea Stone in Vank was just a bit bizarre.



Special things - so many! The abundance of wild flowers in the verges, and the insects to go with them, and the constant sound of cicadas; on the other hand I saw disappointingly few birds, and, apart from an eagle, the most interesting were road casualties - a hoopoe and a bee-eater - but I suppose if we had not been walking on the road we might have seen more. It was nice to look down on the swallows and martins flying in the gorge. The starry skies were wonderful, but I didn't see the moon at all, and missed it rather. Other special things: the group from the Rehabilitation Centre and their amazing capacity for laughter - they always seemed to be giggling about something; going down into St Gregory's dungeon (and coming up again - the angle of the ladder meant that for a fleeting moment I thought I might need to stay 13 years); having the opportunity to visit the monastery at Amaras with its tomb dated 344, its roughly scythed grass and mulberry trees; hearing that the people of Shushi had consulted Shiites on restoring the mosques; seeing Mount Ararat; and planting the walnut trees - unanticipated and maybe best of all.

-Katherine

ARTSAKH

Land of towering mountains
Majestic in their beauty
Silent witness to crimes against Humanity

Seat of Christian Learning and Tradition
Holy Place of Worship and Prayer
Gravely lost to conquering duplicity

Sanctuary to a resilient people
Hearth of warmth and hospitality
Robbed of sweet homes and family

Abundant in verse, art and music
Verdant with flowers, fields and forests
Plundered then razed to a black garden

Kingdom of a noble much persecuted race
United in freedom, fraternity and faith
From the debris of destruction a new spirit is born.

-Kate



