

REFLECTIONS OF ARMENIA
Written by Nekeisha Randall
2007 University of Georgia Study Abroad in Armenia Program

Barev (Hello)! Mark Twain once said, "Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things that you didn't do than by the ones you did do. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover." Since fifth grade, I have always had the dream of being an international traveler. Being the youngest, being the only girl, and having two older brothers in my family made me feel as though I was invincible in the past because I thought, whatever they could do, I could do. Mrs. Duke, a former History teacher who taught at my local high school, took a group of students to Europe every year. Both of my older brothers were able to travel abroad and I impatiently waited for the time that I would be able to travel also. However, the year that I was eligible to participate in the Europe trip, Mrs. Duke retired, no one took her position as coordinator of the program, and American events such as September 11, 2001 prevented future trips. However, my dreams of following in my brothers' footsteps never vanished, in fact, they were reinforced. Not being able to go abroad in high school made me anticipate traveling abroad more than ever. Now having completed my third year as a University of Georgia (UGA) college student, what started out as a plan to do what my brothers did has turned into a passion to broaden my horizons, explore new surroundings, and learn by doing. Many times, it is very easy for me to only focus on my "bubble" which contains my family, my church, my community, my school environment, and anything that makes up my daily life and routine. However, only focusing on my "bubble" will cause me to overlook the fact that there is a whole world that I have yet to explore. With seven continents, a number of countries, and countless cities to consider, failing to realize that my "bubble" can be expanded and enriched through discovery may lead to regret and missed-opportunities. This is why I chose to explore, dream, and discover by studying abroad in Armenia with The University of Georgia. Once called "A Crossroad of Civilizations and Cultures," the country of Armenia has a complex, but rich history filled with conflict, triumph, pain, and progress. Furthermore, I was excited about immersing myself into a culture that I originally knew little about, instead of only serving as an un-engaged tourist. The community service-learning projects, the beautiful scenic tours, the trips to different villages, and the interviews we conducted with a number of Armenians across the country allowed us to explore the country of Armenia in a more holistic way. As a UGA/Georgia State 4-H Representative and a National 4-H Council Board of Trustees Member, I have been able to travel to many places throughout the United States. However, traveling abroad opened my eyes of unbelief to new-found possibilities even more. Due to the fact that this was my first experience outside of the country, my eyes were wide with wonder and my stomach was filled with excited "butterflies" as I boarded the huge Air France flight to France and Armenia!

Traveling to Armenia was an experience that positively reshaped my way of thinking and gave me positive experiences that I will cherish for years to come. Having the opportunity to learn about a culture that I originally knew little about was not only beneficial in an educational sense, but it was also a worthwhile adventure that helped me grow personally in every aspect of life. The knowledge that was gained from all of the hands-on activities helped broaden my existing understanding of many issues. I have a better sense of agriculture, for example, on the global level and how it compares to the agriculture industry that I am familiar with in America. Furthermore, I realized that

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agriculture is one aspect that is embraced and needed by every country, no matter how the economy is structured. For me, hearing about how a Peace Corp volunteer's host father, in the Khor Virap village, had to teach himself how to be a farmer after being a bus driver for at least twenty years due to economic changes, re-emphasized the importance and long-term legacy of agriculture. Organizations such as the Armenia Tree Project (ATP) express how agriculture does not just serve as a means of revenue, but it is mankind's foundation for survival. Each country depends on food production and needs must be met even if it is done in a variety of ways. I learned that even though Armenia has small-scale agriculture and depends on farming and labor more than America does, even in countries that are separated by an ocean, there are still some agricultural and health issues that are similar. Overall, I realized more and more that no matter how the concept of agriculture changes or how it affects certain countries in different ways, it has and will always be the guiding concept to sustaining people, nature, economies, and cultures.

Since the early foundations of its culture thousands of years ago, Armenia has seen many, many changes. However, in the midst of various changes, the culture has done everything possible to hold on to what makes its native traditions and overall culture unique. Due to the fact that removing the acknowledgment and national identity of Armenians has been the focus of past events, it was very inspiring to witness the way citizens cherish a number of life's aspects that help them remember who they are, where they have come from, and what they hope to accomplish in the future. I realized that although Armenian food is filled with traditional dishes, events including voluntary or forced migration, such as the 1915 Armenian Genocide, introduced other types of food that are generally known to belong to other countries such as the Republic of Georgia, Turkey, and Azerbaijan. Visiting the Genocide Memorial was a very reflective and inspirational experience that re-emphasized just how Armenia strives to be strong and determined in spite of events that were designed to hinder the progression of the country. In spite of changes, one factor that seems to be cherished and preserved in the Armenian culture is the significance and distinctiveness of food. Even though I was told that Armenian food was delicious before traveling to the country, I still was unsure about what to expect. Experiencing new things, such as food, comes with the opportunity of studying abroad and enhances how much you actually learn about a country and its customs. To say the least, I was very pleasantly surprised! Pastries, lavash (Armenian bread), fruit and vegetable preserves, *khovrats* (barbeque), pancakes, and *kyababs* were among my favorites! I observed that there is no need to "super-size" restaurant meals because the portion sizes presented in Yerevan, the capital of Armenia, are large, and are sometimes less expensive in comparison to large restaurant meals that may be eaten in America. Armenia seems to have a collection of historic and native cuisines that nations like the United States may not have because of its size and large-scale diversity. I learned that climate and sun exposure help make Armenian agricultural products ecologically clean and delicious. Armenia's continental climate features dry, hot summers, which are perfect for growing fruit items such as grapes because the sun exposure helps them gain the flavor they need to benefit Armenia's well-known fruit and wine industry. From the Yerevan State University Foreign Guest House, which is where our group stayed, to the different villages we were able to visit, the whole University of Georgia group encountered sincere hospitality in many places around Yerevan and especially in the rural villages on the

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outskirts of the city, where people showed their appreciation and gratitude toward us through offerings of traditional Armenian food. Although some may be concerned about Armenia inevitably neglecting bits and pieces of its traditional cuisine due to modernization, I think Armenia will strive to maintain the uniqueness and individuality that is expressed in its meals. It was also interesting to learn about and witness first-hand the agro-tourism initiatives are also being implemented by local wineries and other businesses in order to attract more revenue, interest, and growth. With approximately 8,000,000 Armenians living outside the country, I learned that Armenia shares its culture, such as its cuisine, with America and many other countries by way of its Diaspora. As the size of the Armenian Diaspora grows larger each year, so does the spreading of Armenian tradition. I found it very interesting to learn more about America's relationship with Armenia and about what the Diaspora has been able to accomplish politically and socially, in America alone.

Two of my University of Georgia research papers were written about Armenia's food consumption patterns in comparison to America's food consumption and the past and present condition of the educational system in Armenia. In addition to eating great food, visiting hospitable people, and experiencing Armenia both in the city and in the villages, it was also very interesting to learn about the past and present structure of the educational system from Arshaluys Tarverdyan, Rector of the State Agrarian University of Armenia. Our group learned a lot about the current United Nations Millennium Development Goals from the United Nations Information Center. It was equally exciting to learn how CARD, the Center for Agribusiness and Rural Development, has initiated educational rural youth and adult leadership programs that teach leadership, responsibility, citizenship, and life skills in different Armenian villages.

Each nation has its share of economic, social, educational, and political challenges and we learned about the challenges that are present in Armenia. However, there is surprising and rapid growth in the country, specifically in Yerevan. As we learned about Armenia's origin and Soviet past, this particular trip incorporated the country's history, present, and future as we discussed issues such as the Nagorno-Karabakh situation while also witnessing Yerevan go from "a city of standing cranes to a city of moving cranes." Just by observing the many construction sites throughout the city of Yerevan, one can see that certain parts of Armenia are rapidly developing and are becoming urbanized. It was very interesting to view the contrast of Yerevan's development compared to the conditions of surrounding villages. However, with the help of various programs, it seems that improvement in rural Armenia is being made slowly, but surely. Money for more development and improvement in the rural areas and in the agricultural industry is available, but if it is not used properly, then the rural situation will continue to remain the same or worsen. It seems as if the Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS), the Armenia World Bank, the Center for Agribusiness and Rural Development (CARD), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the International Center for Agribusiness Research and Education (ICARE) Foundation, the Agribusiness Teaching Center (ATC), and the United States Embassy are a part of various initiatives that focus on the continued betterment of Armenia. It is vital to effectively communicate the mission, ideas, and results of these particular initiatives directly to the citizens of Armenia. For these and other establishments, it is important to continue informing

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Armenians of the purpose of these organizations and inviting citizens to take part in the positive changes that want to be made.

I thoroughly enjoyed the structure of the study abroad program because once we meet with an Armenian business or organization, we were able to travel to different sites to see what type of work was being put into action such as what was being accomplished on the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) project sites in the Noyemberyan village. I gained so much more knowledge and information about Armenia and the overall importance of trees from the Armenia Tree Project, which has been working to plant and restore over 1,500,000 trees in the Caucasus region since 1994 in order to end the consequences that the lack of trees can bring. To say the least, I thoroughly enjoyed traveling to the Spitak Village to visit a sustainable Women's Union project initiated by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) that will continue to benefit the village in the future. I also enjoyed being able to experience Armenia with the seven other study abroad students who were from Georgia, New York, New Jersey, Minnesota, and Texas. We had a great time traveling with and learning from our fearless leaders: Dr. Glenn Ames (Director of the Armenia Study Abroad Program and Director of the UGA Office of International Public Service and Outreach), Vahe Heboyan (Armenia Study Abroad Program Co-director), and Liana Babayan (Armenia Study Abroad Program Assistant). Along with the other students, I benefited from visiting city and village canneries, cheese factories, goat farms, museums, project sites, and cherished Armenian churches such as Etchmiadzin, Noravank, and Zvartnots. In the Khor Virap monastery, our group was able to climb down the steep, slippery ladder that led into the dungeon in which St. Gregory the Illuminator was held for preaching Christianity to Armenians and for refusing to worship pagan idols in 287 A.D. In addition to visiting a school and an orphanage, it was also a pleasure to meet and work alongside the Haroyan family who will soon be moving into the Armenia Habitat for Humanity home that our group had the honor of helping to build. The family was so grateful and it was amazing to see how much our group accomplished through teamwork. Serving as a member of the Habitat for Humanity organization in my home-town and in the Habitat organization that is in operation at The University of Georgia, it was exciting for me to see that Armenia's Habitat for Humanity was very similar to America's Habitat organization. I was thrilled at the opportunity to help a family while in Armenia because it allowed me to give service to a community and a country that provided me with a great study abroad experience.

Needless to say, I thoroughly enjoyed participating in extracurricular activities such as meeting students from Armenia and the Republic of Georgia at the annual Agribusiness Teaching Center (ATC) picnic, trying native Armenian dishes at a variety of restaurants, learning how to make home-made lavash, exploring Armenian's beautiful countryside, making it to the top of the Cascades, attending an Armenian Philharmonic Orchestra Concert at the Opera House, and viewing the historic statues and fountains that grace Yerevan. I took over 500 memorable pictures during my stay in Armenia! Several of my pictures are of Mount Ararat, where Noah landed after the great flood in the Bible's book of Genesis, chapter eight and verse four. We learned about Armenia being the first nation to adopt Christianity as its state religion and it was incredible to be surrounded by the significance and importance of Mount Ararat. Armenia's mountainous scenery was so spectacular! Our group even saw a once-active volcano and how its lava had shaped some

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of the landscape over the years. In addition, it was neat to see many rural farmers attending to their farms as we traveled to different villages such as the Marz of Vayots Dzor and the Marz of Ararat. Also, I really thought it was an awesome sight to see cattle and sheep grazing in the fields and I loved riding beside huge herds of sheep on the road! After learning how to successfully cross the busy streets of Yerevan, it was neat to see people linking arms as they walked side-by-side. To me, this seemed to signify how close the Armenian community is and how much family and friends mean to everyone. Meeting United States Peace Corp volunteers, touring a chocolate factory, and shopping at the large Vernissage Market near Armenia's Republic Square were also highlights of our trip.

Language classes taken at the Agribusiness Teaching Center (ATC) gave me a good starting point when it came to communicating with others. Learning common phrases and trying my best to hold conversations with Armenians encouraged me to improve what little Armenian language I knew. It also helped me better connect to people I met and be even more immersed into the culture. People expressed that they liked the fact that we, as Americans, made an effort to learn their language and gain knowledge about their culture. It was fun to be engaged in the customs of the culture and it was the best way to learn about our course lessons and about Armenia, in general. Traveling to Armenia has motivated me to travel abroad more and learn other languages as well. As an African-American, it seemed as if the friendly Armenians I met learned just as much from me as I did from them. Although my skin color, hair, background, and culture may be different from that of Armenians, it was not only great to learn from those whom I was honored to meet while in the country, but it was fun to find similarities while enhancing each other's world in a unique and memorable way. I look forward to sharing my knowledge about Armenia with my family, friends, and professors while also remembering the grand adventures I had on my first study abroad trip in the "Land of Hospitality."

Special thanks go to my mother, my family, and the UGA College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences for believing in me and for helping make my dream of traveling abroad become a reality. I also greatly appreciate everyone at The University of Georgia, in the United States, and in Armenia who made this study abroad program possible for me and our entire group. *Shat shnorhakalutyun* (Thank you very much)! It was a very enjoyable and unforgettable life experience and I encourage everyone, who has the desire, to travel abroad! This particular summary is only a fraction of what we encountered, but nothing can adequately express what my friendships, my knowledge, my growth, and my overall Armenian experience mean to me. Studying abroad allowed me to gain knowledge and meet people that I may not have come into contact with otherwise. The wonderful concept of studying abroad allows interacting individuals to share common goals, learn from one another, merge diverse features, and participate in positive fellowship. To have everything that a study abroad program offers is to have the most essential pieces when it comes to putting the puzzle of a great college experience together!

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