



DISCOVERING THE LAND OF FIRE

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*To us, our families and friends.
May love always be a shelter.*

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PREFACE



Technology has added spice to human existence in many ways. For us, one of them was staying connected and, as a result, kept a friendship which started in Baku flourishing and mature. We have spent time teaching and learning Spanish, enjoying English conversations, talking Argentina, Belgium and Ecuador in between, and dreaming Paris and a potential move to Bratislava; evoking friends in common and taking sweet and bittersweet memories back and forth. One of those memories, actually a dream, in fact started almost as a joke; to tell the world how our lives unfolded in Azerbaijan, what we learnt, how we learnt, and most importantly, why we had to learn.

This book is the result of that dream, a *two-shore* hard work, between Argentina and Belgium, with many other destinations in between, dozens of informal talks with friends, colleagues, former professors, and hundreds of hours on Skype in between continents.

We are conscious of the fact that you may find a more complete and detailed touristic information online or elsewhere; it is however worth noting that we do not attempt to compete such publications, rather we share our real time life experiences as foreigners while in Azerbaijan. The experiences shared in this book go beyond a mere travelogue but a combination of visits,

interactions, encounters and escapes from our perspectives as first-time visitors to staying for two years.

We acknowledge the book may not exhaust all aspects of life in Azerbaijan, yet it reveals some useful information based on personal experiences of two international students from the shores of Argentina and Ghana who lived in Azerbaijan between the years 2013 and 2015 as Alimardan bay Topchubashov fellows at ADA University (ADAU).

We titled this book "Discovering the Land of Fire" not because Azerbaijan is not on a map but because this country is hidden to many around the globe, as we happened to find out. More often than not cultural differences, prior information and the lack thereof creates unusual or funny situations such as buying *ayran*¹ as milk; a sign that every new journey presents itself challenging in the tinniest detail of life, which may not be necessarily a big deal.

As time passed, we have grown fond of our memories on the Land of Fire and with those still healthy and alive in our minds we have

¹ *Ayran* is a cold savory yogurt-based beverage that is mixed with salt and usually is taken with meals not only in Azerbaijan but in many countries in the region.

focused on sharing stories emanated from our experiences that took place between the years aforementioned.

We also share interactions with friends, colleagues and expats before and after the time frame, those ones we believe could be a guide to any first timer, foreign student or visitor to Azerbaijan. We have tried to be as honest as our subjectivity has allowed and we acknowledge that there is nothing like living abroad without having to experience issues, such as cultural shocks and even misunderstandings.

This project is derived from our personal diaries and memories, some of which are years after our time on the Land of Fire. We have changed some names of course mates, lecturers, friends, acquaintances and expats in order to make the stories more inclusive. We have encapsulated time, compressed the sequence of events and altered minor facts in some passages to make the reading enjoyable. In as much as we do not claim objective historical, journalistic, or academic accuracy, everything in the following pages is as true as we experienced, perceived and remember.

Welcome to our imaginary tour through the Land of Fire.

Let the journey begin!

ONCE UPON A TIME



1

ONCE UPON A TIME

"Why in the world would you choose Azerbaijan as a place to study? Wait, where is Azerbaijan again?"

ANONYMOUS FRIEND

The East of the capital is sprinkling with the sun rising calmly and less hot, people are on the walkways dressed up in business casuals, suite and tie and uniforms rushing to catch a bus or taxi, while others are on the wait for a private pick up to work, school or perhaps an appointment.

It's a good AM in Accra and goodness! I'm a graduate with a diploma sitting on the table in the living of my parents. Life just got real; it is time to face it. School is done but no job yet, just waiting to be posted for national service – a semi-compulsory 10-month work placement required of every college/university graduate in Ghana.

In between the times, I am left to enjoy my after-school life and plan my next move. I found ways of keeping an active life though

enjoyed quiet some good rest too. It is seven thirty Monday morning in August 2010, two months after graduation, the start of another week of nothing and my phone rings, it is Zee my bosom friend calling. We got into our usual catch-up conversations and she let me in on a little secret; 'We might return to our Alma mater as Teaching Assistants for our national service', she said. "Really! Wow!", I exclaimed. What else is more exciting than such news on the first morning of a week I had no idea how it was going to turn out.

It is October 4 same year and I find myself in the company of individuals who were my professors, deans, college directors and president just five months earlier, and Zee's little secret shared with me is now a reality. Life just hit me on the right note. Here I am back at a place I have spent the past few years of my life with other students, some of whom will now sit in my tutorial sessions. It had just been four months since I said goodbye to the university and here I am again. This time things are a bit different: I teach instead of being taught, grade instead of being graded and attend faculty meetings instead of student meetings, but two things remained constant: the campus and my hostel. I slept in the same student hostel and walked on the same campus. After all, some things never really change.

My new environment aroused my interest in academia and I wanted to do more for myself in order to fit in and be comfortable. In short, I found myself envious of the prestige that comes with the profession and wished to do a Master, then a PhD, and rise to the occasion of a professor someday; a dream I still live. I had all the right people around me for advice and recommendation so, let's get to work. But, wait a minute! I didn't want to study for a Master in Ghana and said to myself, "Let the hunt for further study abroad begin". Spending time with my fellow teaching assistants, I realized that Zee, Gee and Wizzy were all searching for further studies and fortunately, or not, they were all looking abroad. "OMG! I am not alone and it's getting exciting". We did apply to some schools and it's time to wait.

It was July 2011 in Ghana and we were excited having increased our spell of living together and getting to know ourselves much better for almost another year. It was the time of the year where students go on long vacations, popularly known in the West as summer break, so we got some time on our hands to hangout after office hours. We met one Saturday morning and *abracadabra*, we all got news of graduate admissions. I was heading to LSE, Zee to Leeds University, Gee to Coventry University all in the UK while Wizzy took to joining a theological

seminary in South Korea. There was but one common concern, no one had a scholarship yet. Damn! How do we pay for tuition fees and cover our living expenses on a foreign land? Well, if you care to know, my monthly allowance was not enough to consider saving for grad school abroad, yet I had a dream.

In August 2011, we were called to a faculty meeting and the president after a romantic speech announced that all service personnel would take their leave. We had been released of our duties, as if our unfunded graduate admissions were not enough worry. What just happened? Well, Gee heard out to work for Emirates, Wizzy joined a missionary program from his church and Zee went on to serve with the local government at Cape Coast while the Dean drafted me into a part-time teaching at the School of Professional Studies, ensuring an extension of my stay at the university but in a different capacity. In the process, I had another teaching gig at Mericom Professional and tripled as a volunteer coordinator for Youth Redeemers foundation, travelling to rural communities to create health awareness and implement projects benefitting children, youth and women.

Life was not that disappointing nevertheless, I never forgot about my little dream and this time I kept a fixed eye on scholarship

opportunities. Life was not *extra' O* but things were getting better, my then girlfriend and I had got an apartment, she's got a job and I've got my part-time gigs. Life was getting back to normal. In December 2012, during one of my usual searches for scholarship, I came across Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy (now ADA University) located in the city of Baku, the hub of Azerbaijan. The university's website had just two graduate programs on offer but quiet an interesting vision –an effort to bring global attention at its door step. Mind you, I had never in my life heard of a country by that name not to talk of the city. I knew and recited the names of many countries and cities in Europe, Africa, Asia, the Americas –Central, North and South– and Australia. I even knew some of the countries under Soviet era, yet I had not heard about this Eurasian country.

Well, a new dawn had reached me, and this would resonate with many Ghanaians, perhaps Africans. I visited the page again weeks after and by chance discovered a *no-application-fee* promo for anyone who submitted their application within the New Year's period and the deadline was in two days. I recall saying, "this is my chance to know what's really happening here". Heck No! I was not going to pay application fee to a university I had never heard about, in a city I knew nothing about and a country I had no clue

even if it does exist on a map. Behold, the deadline of the no-application-fee promo, I signed up for the Master of Diplomacy and International Affairs *aka* MADIA. I got my shot to know if this is real. In the meanwhile, I had applied to other *known* universities and held admissions of my deferrals from the previous year.

It's May 2013 and I received an email stating my admission into the MADIA program is pending an interview. I crossed that huddle and it was official, I had been admitted to ADA with a scholarship but there was a condition to pay 250 Azerbaijani manat, a currency almost equal to the value of Euro, then. "Really? If I got a scholarship, why the need to pay this amount to secure my place?" I questioned, while seated at a café. It was good news with a hitch, yet the deadline for payment was two weeks away. I had read stories where fraudsters used the same narrative to get their victims send money to them and before they could say *jack*, the money was gone. I was not about to lose 250 Euros to anyone. Not convinced to continue the admission process, yet I paid the money to secure a place I was not sure existed. Nonetheless, I received a confirmation email for receipt of payment and my placement. I caught up with my former Dean, Dr T., sometime later in his office and mentioned the Azerbaijan development. To my surprise, he visited Baku two years earlier

for an oil and gas conference and we engaged in a lengthy conversation about the country. My thoughts on this new journey began to ease with frequent exchange of emails, yet I was not certain if I still wanted to continue. I went on with my teaching gigs and volunteer activities, when necessary.

It was August 20, 2013 and time to report for school in Azerbaijan, yet I had not settled to take this risk and Ms Sar (Director for International Students), had requested for my travel itinerary but I didn't have one. Ten days past the day of arrival I still didn't have an itinerary; I decided to reserve a ticket, valid for 24hrs, and not pay for it in order to get an itinerary. This changed multiple times within a space of two weeks and after a hearty chat with Bee, we concluded to take the risk. On September 3, 2013, I confirmed a ticket, sent my final itinerary and two days later embarked on a journey to the land of the unknown and life you will read about in a few.



I have been living back in Argentina for the last five years. I changed my beloved Rosario city for the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires *aka* CABA. With a little patience and time, I have managed to get used to my new life, new beginning and a

reencounter with the very well-known Argentinean flavors, customs and so on.

Time has passed, nevertheless I can recall my life in Azerbaijan and cannot avoid feeling overwhelmed, sort of homesick and still deeply in love. Instead of being sad it rather reminds me of the wonderful moments there, which I would love to keep alive.

Currently, I am a resident of one of the most touristic neighborhoods in Buenos Aires, San Telmo. To me, it feels like the very heart of the capital city where cultures converge, which makes it unique. You can smell history walking around the old fashioned and vintage streets with their colorful bars and cafeteria. San Telmo is a dream neighborhood, at least to me, in here, you can, not only breathe Buenos Aires, Argentina, *tango*, *asado* (barbecue), *empanadas*, but also coffee and Latin experience at every corner.

You can of course have *mate*², our national beverage, similar in flavor to tea but stronger. *Mate* is also common in Syria, but they do not share, rather they have one cup to each person. In sum,

²A traditional beverage in South America, especially in Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay. The drink is made from an infusion of dried leaves of herb called *yerba mate*.

just for your information, drinking mate is a very distinctive element of Argentina's identity so, if by chance you visit, give it a try.



San Telmo's *feria*, or market, is held every Sunday and tourists fill up Defensa Street and Plaza Dorrego (Dorrego square) to visit the many stalls selling antiques, hand-made crafts and souvenirs. The popular street is closed to traffic, extending at least 3 kilometers, in the biggest open-air fair in town. At hand, you will find from homemade food to leather clothes and handmade craft to Colombian coffee and many more. Also, live music and performances of all kinds are part of the attractions.

San Telmo, like many other touristic places, is always full of people from different latitudes, speaking in as many languages as you have ever imagined existed. In San Telmo, Buenos Aires and Argentina, you can breathe the beauty of diversity; the same kind of beauty which took me on a journey to Azerbaijan five years ago.

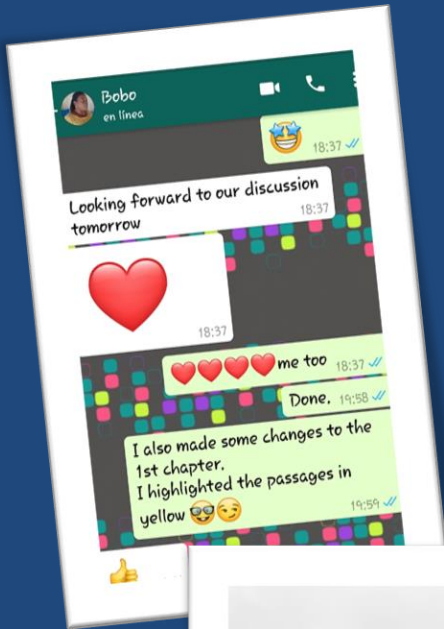
Just around the corner of my new home, is a traditional open market set within an old building called *Mercado de San Telmo* (San Telmo's market). I usually go there to feel closer to Baku, because somehow it reminds me of the *8-ci Kilometer Open*

Bazaar in *Neftçiler*, a place I spent many Saturday mornings during my two-years in Azerbaijan. Certainly, they are not the same, but I like to fantasize that they are, and fuel my imagination with the colors of the place and the voices of the shoppers and buyers alike, bargaining, talking and walking around. Even when the market does not smell like *çay* (tea), *bakhlava* and *tandır* (bread) but coffee and barbecues, sometimes I lose myself in the vision of being back in Azerbaijan and it feels cozy.

A couple of weeks ago at the market, I was amazed to discover that its *nar* (pomegranate) season and, in an instant, got caught in the illusion of being back in *Neftçiler*. It only lasted a few seconds then remembered *nar* in Argentina costs at least three times the price in Azerbaijan, as it is imported from only God knows where. In spite of this, I still bought one and complimented the taste with tea; in honesty, it was not even close to the flavors I tasted in Azerbaijan. I miss the Azeri flavors... I miss the flavor of Azerbaijan.

It has been five years already and I am still that friend, sister, daughter who lived in Azerbaijan for two years and kept reminiscing almost all the time. Sometimes, that makes me a matter of amusement for those who imagine Azerbaijan is full of palms, camels and Muslim extremists. In such occasions, I devote

my time to share my experience and humble opinion; but often times my acquaintances do not know as much as I do and, even in my explanations, might not understand because words, sometimes, cannot always describe life experience accurately.



Left to right: How it all started (November, 2017)
Noemí (Pico) lived within walking distance of the Heydar Aliyev Center.
Six kilometers toward the city center from the Koroğlu environs is one of the most, if not the most important cultural center in the country: the Heydər Əliyev Fondu (Heydar Aliyev Foundation). Photo credits: Noemí Rabbia.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Noemí was born in Cerrito, Argentina.

She is an International Affairs Analyst and writer. Holds a BA in International Relations and a MA in Diplomatic Affairs.

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This is her third book.



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More chapters available soon.

Stay tuned!

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