

Travel Tales

The Last Post Card from Nakhchivan Part 2

Thanks for putting down your mesmerizing smart phone and picking up a real live print newspaper. Today I will continue last month's story about the little-known exclave of Azerbaijan known as Nakhchivan, which is southwest of Armenia, east of Turkey, and north of Iran.

I wanted to learn more of the history of this Autonomous Republic, so my travel agent provided me with an "expert" guide from the Tabriz Hotel, the largest in the country. She was named Inger-something – I never could get a clear answer on that -- and unfortunately her English was pretty hopeless.



Guide Inger-something, charming but hopeless

I told Inger-s that I wanted to see the local sights, but I particularly wanted to go to the local Post Office, to mail a Nakhchivan post card to my friend in Japan who collects post cards and stamps from unusual places. So I suggested we do the city tour, then the Post Office, then the three other locations on the prepared program. "OK," she said. Our van and driver headed out into the country, where we huffed and puffed up hundreds of steps, into a giant cleft and cave in a mountain.



A cave where Allah did something or other, a long time ago

I asked Inger-s what this place was. Her answer was, “Ten children make sleep indecipherable mumble mumble Allah wills it mumble indecipherable most important site.” I asked what happened to the city tour and the Post Office, and she said, “OK.”

Next we drove through the country to the other big attraction, the defunct local salt mine. We walked about 1000 feet horizontally into the mine, and Inger-s said that, “Ill people come here to sleep night, get better.” The air was thick with salt. On the way out, I asked about the city tour and the Post Office. “Soon,” she said.

Then we drove through the dusty town to see a tower, “Build in twelve century.” (I later learned that this was the mausoleum of Momine Khatun, the wife of a great ruler of the area, and it was built in 1187.) Inger-s asked if I wanted to go in, to see the beautiful interior and carpets. “Sounds good!” I enthused. “Is closed,” she said.

Then we drove to the Tabriz Hotel parking lot. “When do we go to the Post Office?” I asked, fearing it was shut by now. “Why you want to go?” she asked. “I WANT TO GO TO THE POST OFFICE, **NOW!**” I hollered. “What is ‘Post Office?’” she asked. Since she knew some French, I said, “La Poste, la Poste! Allez! Allez!” Reluctantly I was driven to the main Post Office in the country.

I asked my guide and the three postal officials for a post card and enough stamps for Japan. “What is ‘post card?’” they all asked, simultaneously. I drew pictures, I tried French, I tried everything. It was clear they had no idea what a post card was. They asked if I wanted to send “a letter.” In despair I agreed, and asked for some writing paper. They went through a foot-high stack of forms and envelopes, looking for some blank paper.



The mausoleum of Momine Khatun, built in 1187 – closed to tourists

Suddenly I shouted, “STOP!” Almost at the bottom of the pile of paper I saw a post card! Then another, and another! I grabbed them and said, “Post card! Post card!” They all carefully examined this bizarre find, which they did not understand at all. I bought two, one for my friend in Japan and another for my wife Susan in the USA, and some stamps.

But there was another problem. The postal officials refused to mail the post cards. They shook their heads sadly. This was clearly not a legal form of postal missive. They insisted that I place the post cards into envelopes, and that the envelopes have their own stamps and addresses. After 30 minutes of arguing I agreed, on the condition that the post card stamps were stamped and cancelled. Total cost of all this: the equivalent of nine US dollars.



My passport page with a real Azerbaijan entry stamp above, and a postal stamp from Nakhchivan, pasted-in below.

Then another postal battle erupted. I had the bright idea of having my passport stamped with the Nakhchivan postal cancellation, which said “Naxçivan,” as proof that I had been there. Postal officials in Northern Ireland, Robinson Crusoe island, San Marino and elsewhere had been happy to do this for me. This request caused immediate outrage. I could not understand most of what was said, but I gathered that they thought I was trying to create a diplomatic incident by getting Naxçivan recognized as a separate country by the USA.

Finally, in desperation, I dramatically put my passport in my back pocket. “No passport!” I declared. “Letter stamp,” I requested. Instantly they were back on familiar territory. Smiles broke out. They gave me a stamped envelope and cancelled it with two marks indicating “Naxçivan.” No charge. I left, smiling too, and at the hotel cut out the cancellation marks and pasted them in my passport.

I am still trying to find out if my post cards ever made it to the USA and Japan.

Note this vital fact: there is still one last post card left in Nakhchivan. I left it for you, so you too can go on your own postal quest to that storied, faraway land, find the Holy Grail/post card, and mail it to

Hey, I'm telling a story here! I don't care if your smart phone twitted or twerped! Get your eyeballs back on this page! Over here! ARRGGHHHHH!

Lew Toulmin lives in Silver Spring with his wife Susan, and both prefer books to smart phones.

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