
Avant-garde Armenia.

By Janet Forman
Globe and Mail

8/7/2007

Yerevan, Armenia - Finding the gas gauge in the trunk of my Lada should have been a clue. The commendable bottle of Armenian cabernet sauvignon for \$1.70, versus Internet fees three times that price, should have been another hint.

But it took repeated encounters with companies such as Lemon Rent-a-Car, Viagra Bar and Mafia Pizza, (we won't even discuss Barf laundry detergent) to realize that in Armenia, my "cultural disparity alert" ought to be set on "High." Even its location can be in question: Some atlases include it in Europe, others in Asia, while its borders with Georgia, Turkey, Azerbaijan and Iran seem to place it in the Near East. Armenia can be a confusing place.

Which is why after reading that the Avan Marak Tsapatagh boutique hotel was located "65 kilometres from the Sevan peninsula's hustle and bustle," I wasn't entirely surprised to be driving an hour past Armenia's small resort region - stopping every 20 minutes to check the gas gauge in the trunk - along a road so remote that a service station, a postcard stand, even a peddler hawking cheesy gewgaws would have been welcome.

Two hours from Armenia's capital city Yerevan, the monumental fieldstone walls of Avan Marak Tsapatagh finally appear against the lonely lakefront.

This and two more stylish boutique hotels are the idiosyncratic vision of rug manufacturer James Tufenkian, a 53-year-old prosperous Los Angeles-born diaspora Armenian, a descendent of those who fled the genocide here a century ago. Now, six million Armenians live outside the country as opposed to three million inside, their devotion toughened by 70 years of isolationist Soviet rule that made visiting difficult, and a chaotic political transition in the early 1990s that left Armenia bereft of even bare essentials such as food and power.

Tufenkian, who built his successful international enterprise on a combination of business acumen and design savvy, is determined to help rekindle Armenia's economy, partly through high-end tourism, and partly by reviving the artisan skills that withered with industrialization; artistry still visible in richly adorned vintage rugs, elaborate metal work and feathery carvings in the pastel-hued volcanic Tufa stone.

Settling into my duplex suite, I discover a subtle harmony between the remote environment and these inventive design elements that appear wrested from the earth: closets enclosed by a weathered iron cage, rough stone tabletops, a stairway bordered by stout iron spokes that recalls a medieval dungeon.

Meals under the cathedral ceilings of the hotel's restaurant, Zanazan - which means "various," to reflect the local multi-dish serving style - draw on tradition with country foods such as matsun, mountain yogurt that can be runny as tart buttermilk or unctuous as crème fraîche; palate-teasing rose-petal jam, which is like eating flowers

off the vine; and a treacherous-looking sword piercing the whole crisp-skinned Ishkhan lake trout.

Still, for all its avant-garde style, at the time of my visit, Avan Marak Tsapatagh had no working phones, fax or e-mail and I feel a bit unmoored heading north to Tufenkian's hotel, Avan Dzoraget, in the pine forested Lori, a region that promises moody medieval ruins, untrammled hiking trails, but little hope of encountering an Internet cafe.

Lori's deep mountain valleys create a kaleidoscope of microclimates that wash swiftly from alpine to forest to desert, which according to Jeff Tufenkian, head of the family's Armenian Forests NGO, has spawned one of the most species-dense regions on Earth, with 100 types of flora and 365 varieties of birds.

In the valley below, the Avan Dzoraget hotel rises like an improbable postmodern fortress on the banks of the rushing Debed River, filled with fanciful design notions such as lamps made of brushed steel wrapped in gauzy wool shades, distressed metal twisted into headboards, desks, even "Do Not Disturb" signs and yellow faux-leather chairs beside weathered nickel pots and a 200-litre clay butter urn in the lobby.

The kitchen puts a sophisticated spin on rustic dishes such as yogurt omelettes with honey, and crisp lavash pancakes with apricot jam, while just outside the hotel's front door, villagers fill water pails from a spigot, freshly shorn wool dries on lattices and chickens scurry across the square.

So after a stirring but challenging week immersed in peculiar cultural pairings, I'm happy to be on the smooth multilane road south to Yerevan.

My fragile taxi needs three running shots to scale the hill at Tufenkian's most urban property, Avan Villa, a pink Tufa stone mansion fronted by wrought iron gates. Although the location is a bit inconvenient to Yerevan's flaming club scene, where young Armenians kick open cultural doors to the West at raucous rock venues like Stop, the 20-minute taxi ride seems fair trade for my room's expansive mountain views. This genteel townhouse on the edge of a hardscrabble city evokes Armenia's heyday as a prosperous Silk Road trading state with thick carpets, walls lined with rare 19th-century flat-weave kilims, and elaborate handiwork such as knitted bedspreads and museum-quality carved walnut furniture casually offered for everyday use.

This is a rare moment to visit Armenia - for those who don't mind quixotic communications and flights landing in the dead of night while the airport is upgraded - before ghostly relics of 12th-century churches become sanitized tourist sites, while stylish hotels still boast of "hot and cold water 24 hours a day," and before Armenia joins the West in becoming rational, sensible, predictable, or the least bit tamed.

Special to The Globe and Mail.

GETTING THERE

British Airways has the most humane schedule to North America; Lufthansa may have the best business-class sleeper seats.

WHERE TO STAY

Avan Marak Tsapatagh: 34 rooms including 18 duplex suites on the shores of Lake Sevan. Single rooms from \$66. Airport pickup \$115. Credit cards not accepted at this hotel.

Avan Dzoraget: 34 rooms in the mountainous Lori province, near UNESCO Heritage Sites Haghpat and Sanahin. Singles from \$62. Airport pickup \$139.

Avan Villa, Yerevan: 14-room mansion overlooking the capital. Singles from \$95 including airport pickup.

Reservations for all Tufenkian Heritage Hotels and tours: 374 (1) 547-888, 542 707; hotels@tufenkian.am.

TOURS

Tufenkian's iconic 12-day "Armenia Reborn" tour is \$1,058 per person/double, plus 20 per cent VAT, which includes accommodation in Tufenkian hotels, ground transportation, airport pick ups, breakfasts and museum entry fees. Book through: hotels@tufenkian.am, 374(1) 547 888, 542 707.

DON'T MISS

Kima's Place /Restaurant Getik: 374 (2) 680-3076. On a road outside the Alpine town of Dilijan, accessible to Tufenkian's Avan Dzoraget hotel. No reservations; just turn up any day between 9:30 a.m. and 10 p.m. for Klima's

Rock club Stop 37, Moskovian Street, Yerevan; Phone: 374 (1) 056-0780. Entry \$2.53. A basement cave where Armenian hipsters and young expats gather

Vernissage Flea Market: Saturday and Sunday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

MORE INFORMATION

Armenia visitor information: www.armeniainfo.am.

<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/story/RTGAM.20060708.warmeniatra0708/BNStory/specialTravel/home>
