THE LAND OF NOAH

Nakhchivan. All of us know the story of Noah and the Ark told in Genesis (chapters 6-9). But do you know where Noah's grave is?

Genesis 9:28-9 says "Noah lived after the flood three hundred and fifty years. And all the days of Noah were nine hundred and fifty years, and he died." But it doesn't tell us where.

Yet there is a tradition thousands of years old that he died and is buried here in the Land of Noah – Nakhchivan. "Noah" is the Anglicized spelling of the Hebrew *Noach*, pronounced "knock" here, spelled "nakh." "Van" means "land," "chi" means "of." (And yes, the map above has the place spelled wrong but it was the best I could find.)

Nakhchivan is an isolated enclave of Azerbaijan, cut off from the rest of the country by a strip of Armenia reaching Iran. You never heard of it because it's unknown with a strange name – but the name literally means the Land of Noah. His tomb has been built, destroyed, rebuilt, and destroyed again repeatedly over the millennia. It's now been built yet again on the original site. Here it is:

It’s empty of course – robbed eons ago. But here’s sketch of the site drawn over 200 years ago:

See that huge rocky peak sticking out in the background? That’s Haça (*hatcha*) Dag, the Notched Mountain – the story being that Noah’s Ark ran aground on it as the Flood waters were receding

and carved a notch on the summit ridge before finally coming to rest on Mount Ararat about 50 miles to the north.

Ararat is entirely in Turkey today, right where Turkey borders Iran, Nakhchivan, and Armenia. The mountain has been in the control of many peoples and empires as has the whole region since ancient times. Nakhchivan has, however, somehow been able to maintain a separate identity survived to this day.

The geographer of the ancient world, Ptolemy of Alexandria (100-170 AD), described it and its main city as “Naksuana” – the Greek pronunciation of Nakhchivan – one of “the oldest cities in the world” founded more centuries ago than he knew. Conquered by Sassanid Persians, Byzantines, Arab Moslems, and Seljuk Turks, it always managed not to get swallowed up in someone else’s empire.

At least not for long. When invading Arab hordes forced their religion of Islam upon them, the Nakhchivanis joined the Zoroastrian rebellion of Babak Khorramdin (785-738 AD) – to the extent there is a statue of him in the city named after him, Babek, as their national hero.

The Seljuk Turks took over in the 1000s, the Mongols decimated them in the early 1200s, and Tamerlane in the late 1300s. Somehow, they always revived and created a bubble of autonomy within surrounding empires. The same with the Persians in the early 1700s whom they persuaded

to let them have their own Nakhchivan Khanate.

But then the Persians sold them out to the Russians 100 years later, prompting an unceasing effort to liberate themselves from the Kremlin's yoke. Their rebellions were always put down with typical Russian brutality, but they thought they really had a chance during WWI and the Russian Revolution of 1917.

Nakhchivan declared independence in conjunction with Azerbaijan on May 28, 1918. It was crushed by Lenin's Bolshevik soldiers and incorporated into the Soviet Union on July 20, 1920. In a typical move to divide peoples within the USSR, Stalin drew the internal borders so that an Armenian oblast was created within Azerbaijan (Nagorno-Karabagh) and Nakhchivan isolated from Azerbaijan (the Meghri Strip).

As the Soviet Union began to disintegrate with the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989 (now World Freedom Day), slightly more than two months later on January 19, 1990, the Nakhchivan ASSR (Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic) became the very first part of the USSR to declare its independence from Moscow.

The Soviet Union formally ceased to exist at the end of December 1991, almost two years later. Azerbaijan declared its independence the previous October, but Nakhchivan only joined Azerbaijan when its president, Haidar Aliyev also became president of Azerbaijan as well in 1995. Today, it still has its autonomy running its own internal affairs.

I came here to make a pit stop on my way to Kathmandu and my Kingdom of Lo expedition. I've been fascinated by this critical yet mysterious geopolitical crux for years. I was surprised by what I found.

*The people are wonderfully friendly. I was always told I was "welcome" everywhere. I was even spontaneously invited to a wedding party in a remote village – for many, I was the first American they'd ever spoken to. They sure knew about America though – I saw kids with t-shirts from Miami, New York, Honolulu – and even Chattanooga:

*Nakhchivanis are Moslem-lite. I never saw a woman in a head scarf (except for old peasant women in villages which is just traditional), much less a hijab or burqa. Remember that Noah invented wine in the Bible – and sure enough, they make, and drink wine here… beer too. Most Nakhchivani mosques have no minarets. Men and women are open and free. Religion is a part of their lives, but only part; they respect Islam, but it's far from all-consuming.

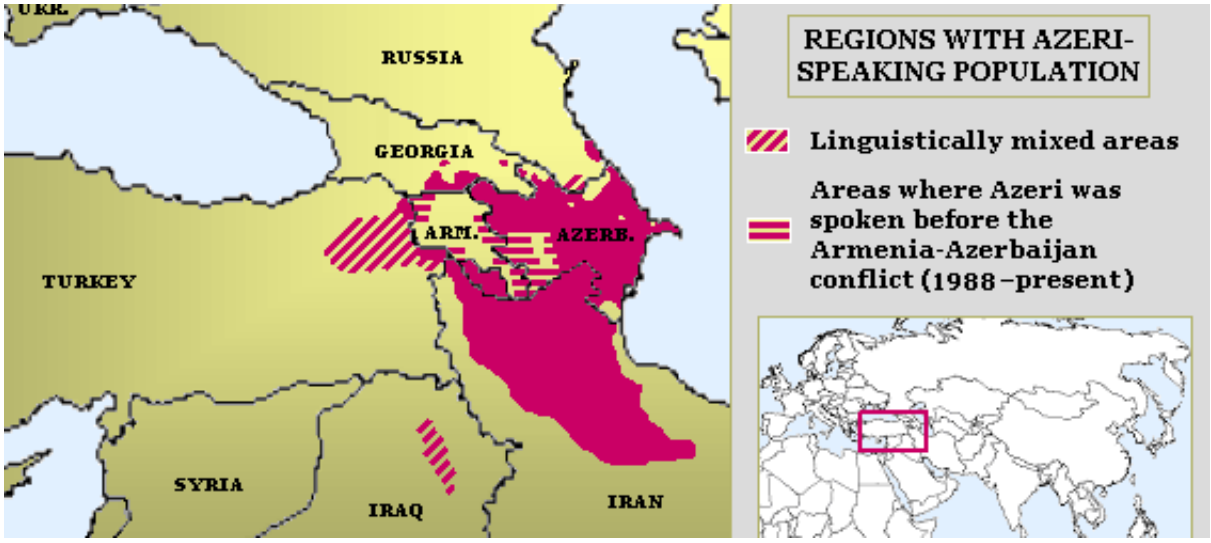
*A major indicator of the moral worth of a culture is how it treats women. So I found it frankly extraordinary not that women are treated like normal people (a concept a lot of Moslem countries can't fathom), but that historically, for centuries, women are cultural heroes.

The most revered monument in all Nakhchivan is that in honor of Momina Khatun, the beloved wife of Shamsheddin Eldeniz, ruler of the Atabeyler Kingdom of Nakhchivan from 1136 to 1175. There are several other such historical monuments to revered women throughout Nakhchivan. It's a favorite place for couples to gather and talk. And yes, it leans like Pisa.

*For all its isolation, this is no Third World backwater. The cities and towns are spotless – no dirt or litter anywhere. Things are modern, from service stations to stores to office buildings to homes. There are gardens everywhere, immaculately landscaped. People work hard and are industrious – yet there's no rush, no frenzy, traffic jams are unheard of – people pace themselves and always have time for their families.

*Most important, they bear no enmity for past grievances or their neighbors. They would just like to get along with them. This is not easy to do when you're surrounded by Mullah Iran, Islamist Turkey, and Russophobe Armenia.

The Mullahs of Iran are terrified of Azerbaijan. Azeris (including those of Nakhchivan) are not Persian, they are Shia Turks – Persians and Turks have been at each others' throats for a thousand years – and there are over 20 million of them in northern Iran:



That's why most Azeris refer to northern Iran as Southern Azerbaijan. In turn, Tehran is treating Armenia with brotherly love, fully supporting the isolation of Nakhchivan via the Meghri Strip.

Turkey's Islamist ruler, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, is putting pressure of Nakhchivan to Islamicize, so far to little avail.

But the main problem is Armenia. The background to must-read here is The Survival of Asian Europe, written when I was in Armenia in July 2012. Armenia is a problem for the entire region because it insists on picking fights with all its neighbors – oh, except for Moslem Terrorist Iran – including fellow Christian Georgia. It would rather lick Russia's boots.

As an aside, the Wikipedia article on Nakhchivan is written by Armenians and is too biased for me to link to. Armenians not only claim Nakhchivan is an Armenian name – which it isn't – they claim that Nakhchivan should be forcibly taken from Azerbaijan and made a part of Greater Armenia.

I've had a marvelous time here with marvelous people. You might consider visiting the Land of Noah to have a wonderful time yourself. The people of Nakhchivan deserve our support, deserve a good and peaceful future. That's my hope for kids like this:

I like to
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