

SOPHIE BECKINGHAM
LONDON TO AZERBAIJAN
27th February 2023 - 6th July 2023

I had the pleasure of travelling to over forty destinations across fourteen different countries overland¹ from London to Baku. I had made a pact with fellow Jesuan and Art History student, Rose Asquith, in September 2021 to go travelling as a gap year before we went into the 'real world'. We agreed to do it all overland, partly for the challenge but mainly because going to all of these (40!) places by plane in such quick succession would be environmentally immoral. With only a bag each and limited funds (although thankfully more due to this grant!), we set off at the end of February 2023!

Highlights

Georgia

- I struggle to answer the many questions people have about travelling sometimes, as the experience was actually a multitude of diverse experiences. However, whenever anybody asks me what my favourite country was, the answer is undoubtedly Georgia.
- The food, people, hospitality, and natural beauty were all beyond wonderful, and some of my favourite memories come from this country.

Zagreb (Croatia) and Mostar (Herzegovina)

- Two of my favourite cities I visited, partly because I did not expect to love them so much and was even debating skipping them at one point! Both were aesthetically beautiful and exciting in their own way, but their unifying brilliance, for me, was in how they told their stories of strikingly recent conflict balanced with finding life beyond it.
- Two essential visits, in my opinion, would be the Zagreb Contemporary Art Gallery and Mostar's official Free Walking Tour, run by Sheva. Sheva was brilliant, an ex-soldier who had lived right in the middle of Mostar during its siege. The tour really brought home the complexities and nuance of the violence and the false discourses that often surround it. Zagreb Contemporary Art Gallery was also overtly political and stayed strong to its storytelling and proving of art's place in the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s.

Berlin

- Berlin I loved mainly for the people we were with out there. Rose's Mum and her friend came out to join us and we were taken under the wing of their old family friend and her family - eccentric art collectors who were hilariously disenfranchised with Germany. Very dry sense of humours, lots of stories that

¹ Well, nearly all overland. After speaking to a few other travellers in Ohrid (North Macedonia), I realised that the land borders to Azerbaijan had been shut since the pandemic began. They had monthly reconsiderations so it was possible that they could have opened them before I needed to cross, but this sadly did not happen so a flight from Tbilisi to get to Baku was essential. Annoying as the next stop was Sheki, which is right by the Georgian border!

sounded like they had not heard the light of day for decades, and some fantastic art!

- I got a glimpse into another side of living in Berlin through a friend's brother who had just moved there. He was living in a commune with some eccentric Berliners - one wanted to set up a daytime KitKat club cafe? On a boat? It sounded like a health and safety nightmare to be honest but I wished them all the best!

Istanbul

- I kind of knew this one was going to be a showstopper before even setting foot here, but it went above and beyond expectations.
- There is nowhere else quite like it - it is like a city turned up to full power. Noise, colours, smells, people EVERYWHERE. My parents (absolute country mice) came to visit and loved it, although it was quite hair-raising when I lost them for two hours.
- This was also my first time visiting Asia! I took a ferry over the Bosphorus to the Asian side, which did have a completely different atmosphere. It was much calmer and felt more like locals were around me, with some brilliant markets of course!

Plovdiv (Bulgaria)

- Plovdiv is one of the few cities I visited that I can actually imagine living in, and loving it. It might have been the time of year we were there (mid April), or that the weather was lovely, but it truly was the perfect balance of everything you could want in a city. There was so much history there, a spectacular amphitheatre, loads of little museums, and bustling bars and restaurants. Oh, and great coffee! On the Sunday everyone was joyfully strolling around the main park, many coming together to do some traditional dancing in the square. Really lovely!

What I learnt:

- **How British I am, for better or for worse.**
 - From road crossings, to pubs, to plug sockets, it was the little things that made me miss home. I loved everywhere (ok, most of the places - Azerbaijan did not make the highlights list for a reason...) I visited, and actually really did not think I had that much of an attachment to my home country, but I must say 'Jerusalem' was stuck in my head as my plane home came into land. Bring me that darn bow of burning gold...
- **How unique it was to be one of two women travelling alone together overland**
 - And with this, how women are perceived so differently in different places. I guess I knew this, in theory, before, but to see it in practice was quite eye opening.
 - I really developed a kinship with not just Rose but so many other women travelling or living in the places we went to. Obviously there is nuance to this experience (had I been a transgender woman I think my views would change

again) but I really do have a different sense of womanhood and attachment to it than I did before I left.

- **What exactly I do and do not like**
 - Spending so much time with myself meant I became really attuned to who I was and what I did and didn't like. I do like: a daily coffee, preferably in a good people-watching coffee shop. I don't like: night buses. At all.

- **I really developed an interesting (for me) relationship with religion on this journey.**
 - Religion has really not been a part of my life before - I have kind of enjoyed it from afar but to be quite honest I am quite firmly agnostic and sort of left it for other people to enjoy.
 - Through the trip I grew to love the theatricality that comes with the rituals of prayer and dedication. The modesty and respect for places of worship, the tactility of icon worship and sensory experience of an orthodox mass. The visuals of the frescoes, and sacredness of the painted figures. The quiet bustling of a Mosque. My room back in the UK is now full of icons and incense bought at various gift shops across the Balkans, Turkey, and the Caucasus.
 - There have been multiple times, especially on long (often over 20 hour) journeys that I have had time to think through my opinions and the complexities that come with my way of interacting with various branches of Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and Islam. I had the privilege of passing through and aesthetically enjoying them, and was able to detach from perhaps not personally loving the country and politics that intertwines with them so much. Things I have thought about before in a detached way, but suddenly being in the centre of these ideas brought it all home.

- **That people like the way I write!**
 - Our social media page, which I ran, got such a great reception! We gained several hundreds of followers over the course of the trip, and got so many messages from people saying they save our posts until the end of the day to read through, and how we were their favourite travel account.

What funding helped achieve:

- **Being able to get as far as I did!**

- **Experiences and not just distance**
 - The amount of museums and galleries and places I went to would not have been possible without the bursary. I had worked for around five months prior to setting off, and this money would have enabled me to (maybe) go from A to B, but the trip was so much further enriched by the extra funds. And thus, hopefully, my travel writing is also enriched!

Future Plans:

- **I am currently writing a book, something that I was encouraged to do by people back home and that I met whilst travelling.**
 - The book will be in the style of what I put out on social media, which went down so well; a non-romanticised account of what happened, in the tone of someone who never really knew what they were doing at any point but loved every second!

- **Hopefully an exhibition with Jesus College.**
 - I painted and drew what I experienced at many points along the way, and have been painting since I have returned. I want to exhibit my works at Jesus, and feel this would be mutually beneficial for the college and myself.

- **I am now working at the BBC**
 - After returning, I felt ready to enter the world of work and managed to secure a job at the BBC and moved to London from Cheshire. I really love my job, in the services department, and am excited about where it will take me next.

This journey would not have been possible without the help of the Tom Parkinson Travel Writing Bursary, and it enabled me to have so many once-in-a-lifetime experiences and to develop my passion for and skills in travel writing. Thank you to the family of Tom Parkinson for their generosity, and to Jesus College for orchestrating such a brilliant scheme.





