

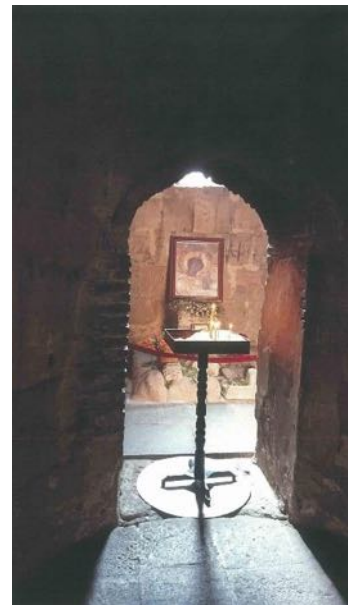
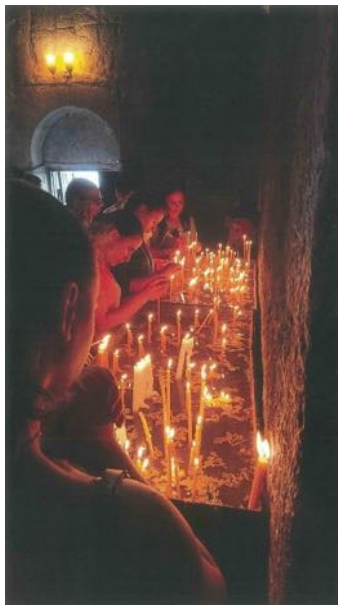
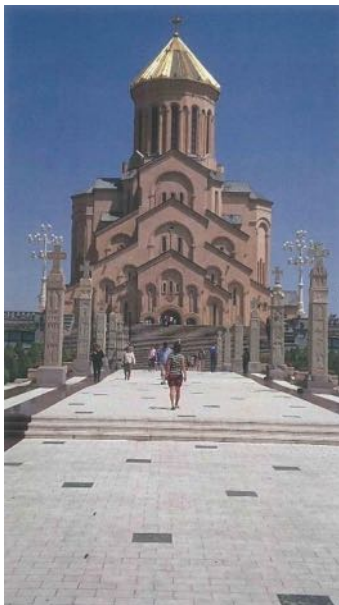
On Beauty, Sadness, Transcendence, Nicole Kidman, ice cream and so forth...

Tour of Georgia and Armenia with John Graham Tours, 9-23rd July, 2018

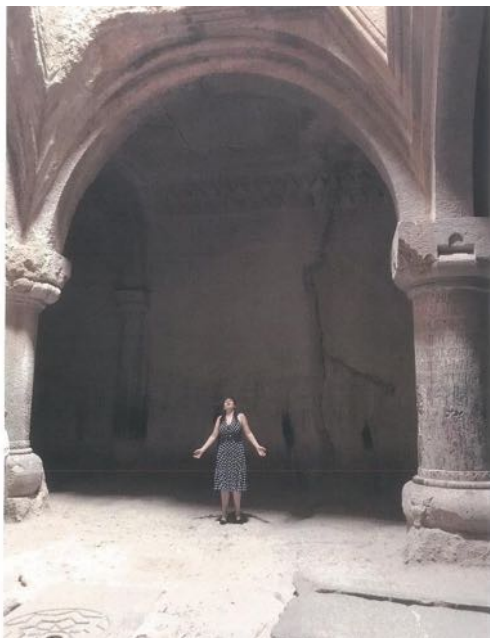
“I like (watching) Nicole Kidman,” the monk said. “What about Cate Blanchett ?” asked I. “O, yes, Cate Blanchett, too. .. and Djokovic as well!”. The mention of this unlikely trio occurred in **Sameba, The Holy Trinity Cathedral** in Tbilisi, on my last day there before returning to Australia. My interest was in the new frescoes painted by Amiran Goglidze, probably the leading contemporary Georgian iconographer. His monumental **Christ Enthroned** was there in the apse, under the dome, completed, while the dome itself remained untouched. Why was not the dome painted first as customary in Orthodox churches? Monk John just shrugged shoulders before we said our goodbyes; he did not know and did not seem particularly fussed by the issue.

My tour of Georgia and Armenia with **John Graham Tours** (www.johngrahamtours.com) was extended for one day after the regular 13 days to make possible yet another beautiful encounter, gather information, or just relax and partly process the immensity of what was seen in a fortnight. And, after the visit to Sameba Cathedral, in the evening I went to another performance by Rezo Gabriadze, in his famed puppet theatre by the twisted tower clock, decorated with hundreds of mosaics, which he also created. Both are a must for any visitor to this city- but more of this later.

“A good traveller does not know his destination. A perfect traveller does not know where he comes from” (Lao Tse).



Well, I thought I knew what was I supposed to see and experience in Georgia and Armenia: many churches, monasteries, museums, ancient sites, interesting landscapes, Mount Ararat, old frescoes, ancient manuscripts, the best stone-carved crosses you could find anywhere in the world... all of it was there, plus daily surprises and injections of unexpected beauty, seductive Georgian chanting and Armenian singing, long festive spreads awaiting for us peckish pilgrims, always in agreeable, sometimes spectacular, settings... The tour was run masterfully by John Graham who combined his insider's knowledge of the area, especially Georgia, with his openness, pleasantness and endless patience. He is also one of the rare tour leaders who thoroughly grasped the importance of ice cream and its magical, restorative powers which removes tiredness and grumpiness, replacing them with joy and an unbearable lightness of being. Our serotonin levels were kept high at all times. The biggest stress was a decision whether to have a coffee or an ice cream after the meal, or both.



The tour was almost constantly illuminated by “highlights”. The images and names tended to become a blur after a while but the emotional impact and memories remain, all of us feeling echoes of the tour long after its finish. However, some highlights remain simply unforgettable! An impossibly beautiful couple of Armenian opera singers performed for us firstly at the **Haghpat Monastery cloister** - I had impression that the heavens were descending upon us- and then at the Garni temple they sang secular folk songs. We were told that these were usually performed while working the land with oxen. The delivery was so transcendental that I wondered what their love songs would sound like if they had songs such as these for everyday toil? Another Armenian, a winemaker extraordinaire, Avag Harutunian, spoke of wine- making as the most elevated and spiritual exercise, practically as a sacred esoteric ritual. His presentation was spell-binding, and we all felt in the

presence of a master, whose objective was to educate and spread the philosophy of wine consuming, rather than to charm us into buying some of his produce.

Armenia is obviously a country of wonderful people. Their immense suffering in the past and ever continuing struggle has not deprived them of their great sense of humour. However, when we are talking about the joy and beauty, we should also mention the sadness, which we experienced in the Museum of Genocide. Perhaps these emotions are meant to go hand in hand, as beautiful Mothers of God in Orthodox iconography whose faces always carry a shade of sadness, as the Theotokos is constantly aware of the future Passion of her Son. If anyone anywhere had any doubt about the Armenian genocide and the cruel magnitude of 1,500,000 lives lost in vain, they should just come and visit this place of sorrows where Museum presenters try to be dispassionate when they talk about the deviant misdeeds perpetrated upon their beloved people.

Counterbalancing this, I recall wonderful **Aram Saroyan** (William Saroyan), a writer whose humour is uplifting at all times. Armenians are perfectly capable of making jokes, even in face of constant adversity. They consider themselves as one of the most ancient peoples in the world and Armenia was the first state to adopt Christianity as its official religion. A couple of my favourite jokes were the one that says that one day, Noah's Ark landed on Mount Ararat and surrounding villagers could see the disembarkation of animals, and Noah's family. Their conclusion: "**Circus is back in town**"... Or, thinking of joining forces with Georgia and becoming one country, they also thought of a name which would accommodate both of them and in the end they came up with: "**Giorgio Armani**"?!

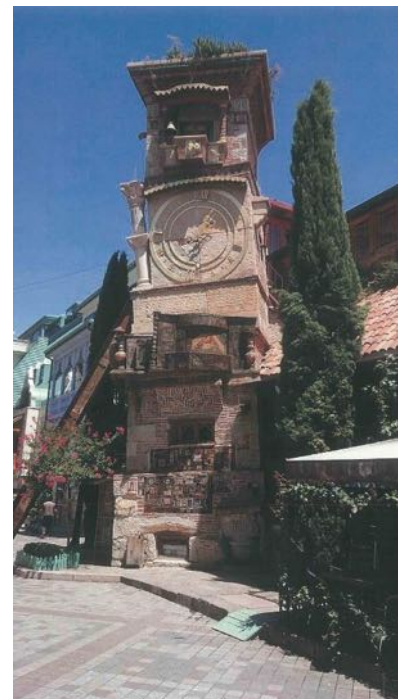
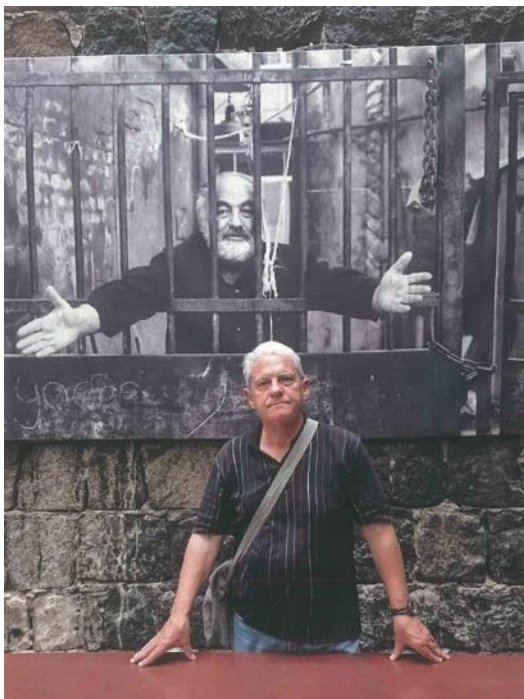
My personal highlight, however, still has to be the visit to the **Museum of Sergei Parajanov** in Yerevan. Hitherto, my knowledge of Parajanov's mastery was limited to one film: *The Colour of Pomegranates* (Sayat Nova), about the life of a medieval Georgian poet. That film, which I saw three times on the Australian SBS TV channel at least some 25 years ago, is a showcase of aesthetic and cinematique mastery of the first water. Being in the league of its own, it defied any classification and although there were echoes of Pasolini and even Eisenstein, it was a unique voice in the world of cinema - and still is, after some 50 years. Of its creator, Sergei Parajanov, I knew nothing and now had the perfect opportunity to learn. The museum's guide told me so much about this man who looked like a Hemingway from the Caucasus and was a person of the highest possible individuality. Born of Armenian parents in Tbilisi, where he grew up, working later in the Ukraine, he died and was buried in Yerevan, which he considered his source, although he obviously belonged to the world of art with no frontiers. His two incarcerations, one of 4 years and 11 days and the second of 8 months, have largely contributed to wearing down the body of this genius, but never managed to control his human and artistic freedom. Great Parajanov was born free, celebrated life and died a free spirit.

The museum contains his drawings and paintings but above all, his whimsical collages and assemblages, often realised with the least likely of materials, such as fish scales. Some of these collages are absolute gems. There are letters of support and pleas for pardons from world-renown artists and personalities including Pasolini, Fellini, Lilya Brik, and Aragon, as well as several posters from various world film festivals featuring his films. One of them shows Parajanov with a Dadaistic hat, and two sentences in French:

Pourquoi filmez vous, Parajanov?

Pour sanctifier la tombe de Tarkovski!

To me, visiting this place meant a tribute to the Man and his creative, indomitable and ever-free spirit. It was also a reminder that an artist does not need a high-tec or state-of-the-art materials, or lofty manifestos for his work; just a creative spirit, constantly exploring and pushing his own boundaries.



Another manifestation of outstanding creative was when our group visited the ***Rezo Gabriadze puppet theatre*** to see the performance, ***Stalingrad***. I must admit I didn't know what to expect as the subject matter is of the heaviest and bleakest, a gory siege battle where hundreds of thousand people and horses died - why make a theatre piece out of that? Fortunately, it proved to be one of the best performances, puppets or otherwise, I have ever seen. Again, it had to be a true artist of the highest level, to pull this off! ***Revaz***, or ***Rezo Gabriadze*** is one such creative genius. He is also responsible for the twisted clock tower nearby, decorated with hundreds of mosaics, which has

become a must for every visitor to Tbilisi to see and photograph. Born in 1936 in Kutaisi, Georgia, Gabriadze studied art, then journalism, and then scriptwriting, Rezo proved to be a kindred spirit with Parajanov, albeit without the ill-fate of the Armenian. His puppet theatre was formed in 1981, and it underwent major reconstruction in 2010. Rezo is also widely known as a painter, graphic artist and sculptor. In 2016, a permanent exhibition of his paintings, graphics, sculptures and ceramics was opened in his gallery in Tbilisi.

I had previously arranged to stay one extra day after the tour finished, as a good traveller, not knowing exactly where I would be going. Well, it proved that besides checking out the local iconography scene, I was able to get a ticket (no small feat!) for another performance in Rezo Gabriadze's theatre. This time, the title was ***Ramona***, a beautiful and tragic love story of two steam engines?! How simple and yet most poetic and symbolic! Again, one does not need great and terribly sophisticated ideas to base one's art on, sometimes a plain, simple love story can do and do so much!

On a hot and windy July night, on the outskirts of Yerevan, we had an evening feast after a long and weary day. It was after this lavish banquet that Jayashree Rao got up and delivered her *tamada*, or a toast, for which Georgians are so famous. In part, this is what she said:

"... When we set out to go see a different place or country, we can do it in many different ways and at many different levels of experience. At best, we are fortunate to learn about a new country as well as learn something new about ourselves..."

"...My wish is that at the end of this journey may each and everyone of you meet [a stranger who is none other than yourself.](#)"

Indeed, I think I met myself on this magnificent tour, but certainly also a number of remarkable people.

Did I mention ice cream?

Michael Galovic, August 2018

