



PHOTOS BY GIG GWIN/Special to Stars and Stripes

The daily preoccupation for men in Nakhchivan is playing a game called Nard, which is similar to backgammon. Rules include rolling dice and aggressively slapping checkers on the board.

Historic Nakhchivan museum is in the city center. The rounded, domed brick chimneys use an early style of air cooling.



The leaning tower of Nakhchivan is actually the seventh-century Momine-khatun Mausoleum. Today, this handsome but crooked building serves as a museum displaying artifacts.

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This might seem a bit repetitive, but remember, we have a New York, New York.

When I arrived at the airport, local authorities bewildered by the rare sighting of an American passport politely detained me inside Customs. I became a real item. A gathering of men in black coats crowded around me, chattering, making arm gestures and asking me unintelligible questions in the local language. I answered with my best charade gestures and got little or no results, thus concluding that English was definitely not their second language.

It was night, I was alone — it was worse than being trapped in an elevator. Suddenly they handed me my passport and escorted me out of Customs. Free at last!

I secured a local driver who pretended to be a taxi and left the dark airport toward what I hoped would be the town. I quickly concluded that this was not a large metropolitan area, because the main road had a one-lane bridge, no street lights and no sign of life

except for an occasional chicken crossing. I arrived at the Grand Hotel, where I saw only a dim lobby light. The manager greeted me and gave me a room and a thick wool blanket, which I needed for my invigorating sleep. By the way, in retrospect, the name “Grand” seemed a slight overstatement.

A small city by population, Nakhchivan sits in a picturesque valley encircled by snow-capped mountains. The range lies outside the Nakhchivan boundaries in Iran and Armenia. In addition, the stunning silhouette of Turkey’s Mount Ararat is visible throughout the city. A 16,945-foot triangular mountain, Ararat dominates the region. Intriguing

theories point to the possibility that the remains of Noah’s Ark are frozen in the permanent glaciers. It’s a mystical story for a mystical land.

A city not known for its tourism, Nakhchivan provides a sprinkling of pleasant sites. Two well-kept museums, including “the Leaning Tower of Nakhchivan,” which is actually Momine-khatun Mausoleum, display artifacts. Other notable sites include a central avenue wide enough for a May Day Parade, a modern university campus and a natural grotto providing fresh drinking water in this arid climate. Although military checkpoints slow traffic, by and large this is a safe city.

I entered a tea house and shortly joined men gathered around a gaming table. They were engaged in the local game, Nard, which is similar to backgammon. The players became quite passionate as they slapped down their checkers, presumably showing their gaming skills. I spent an hour sipping sweet tea and learning the basic rules of the game.

Later in the day, I wandered the narrow streets hoping to buy souvenirs, but with no luck. Shoppers take note: Due to zero demand, local trinkets, T-shirts and even post cards do not exist in Nakhchivan. Nevertheless, goat-skin belts are a hot item. Colorful fashion trends have



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Tea is a popular daytime beverage in the region. It is generally sweetened with sugar cubes and served in a clear glass with a local pastry.

bypassed this area. Local dress is predominantly dark leather jackets or black business suits.

My lasting impression of this little-known region of the world are the imposing white-tipped mountains visible in every direction. They are a natural wonder that give this remote part of the world a special personality.

Would I recommend a visit to Nakhchivan for the average traveler? Probably not. Did I find the area a change of pace from my suburban lifestyle? Absolutely: I discovered a rudimentary culture with genuine people. And best of all, I had achieved a victory of sorts — I could check a new destination off the list.

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See the country list

Each January, the Travelers Century Club provides an updated list of the world’s countries. You might enjoy reviewing the 2005 list and counting the number you have visited. To see the list, and for more information and an explanation of the club’s rules for membership, go to www.travelerscenturyclub.org.

— GIG GWIN