

## Travel Tales

# Nakhchivan? Say What?

## Part 1

by

**Lew Toulmin**

Today I'll tell you a true story about a sort-of country that I bet you never heard of. What do you want to bet?

I am talking about Nakhchivan (or Naxçivan, or about ten other similar names), and it is just east of Turkey, northeast of Iran, and southwest of Armenia. I'll bet I won our bet!



*See! I told you the place existed!*

If it makes you feel better, I had never heard of it either, until it was added a few years ago to the list of worldwide “countries and sovereign territories” compiled by the Travelers’ Century Club (TCC). The TCC is a club for people who have been to more than 100 places on their list of 315 countries, and there are about 1000 members in various chapters around the world.

Naturally, since it is remote, little-known, on the list, and I am a TCC member, I had to go.

That is not easy. Nakhchivan is an Autonomous Republic of Azerbaijan, but is an “exclave” of that country, meaning it is separated from Azerbaijan by a disputed area, held by Armenia. You cannot take a train, since those were stopped decades ago by Armenian gunfire, and you wouldn’t want to try to drive from Azerbaijan, unless you dipped down into Iran to avoid

Armenia. Like most Americans, I am a tad nervous about dipping into Iran. And eastern Turkey is a rather dangerous these days.



*Nakhchivan is an "exclave" of Azerbaijan, surrounded by Armenia and Turkey*

The only feasible way to get there is to fly from Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan. There are one hour flights every day, which (oddly) fly over Armenian airspace, headed west to the capital of Nakhchivan, which is, naturally, Nakhchivan. You can't book your flight from abroad, but must work with an Azerbaijani travel agent, who will also help you get a visa for Azerbaijan. (Don't bother with the Government of Azerbaijan website that promises to get you a visa -- it doesn't work and apparently never has!)

By the way, most people do not know that Azerbaijan means "land of the fiery lane straddlers," after their driving habits going back to Neolithic times.

The Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic has a population of about 434,000, and the capital has 86,000 inhabitants. The "country" has 2100 square miles, a little smaller than Delaware. As I flew in, I started to wonder why I was going. The land was arid, ridged and brown, with apparently no crops, no trees, no grass – pretty much no nothing. Taking a taxi in to town from the airport, I was reminded of those former Warsaw Pact countries I had worked in during the early 1990s after the Iron Curtain fell. The architecture and the cars were very blocky and Soviet, the infrastructure was run down, the buildings had peeling paint, the streets were dusty and full of potholes, and there was little traffic -- unlike oil-rich Baku, which was stuffed with late model Range Rovers.



*A Neva Soviet Army jeep – a typical vehicle in ex-Soviet Nakhchivan*

The Tabriz Hotel, the largest and finest in the Republic, had some issues, too. The heating in December was on full blast, so the temperature in my room was 95 degrees F (typical Soviet style). To get the temperature down to something livable, I had to open the window and the door, and pry off the part of the wall covering the heater, to turn it off. Naturally, the Internet connection did not work, so I could not look up the local sights.



*The Hotel Tabriz, the best, largest and hottest in the land*

But I remembered some interesting facts from my previous Internet research. The name Nakhchivan means “place of descent” or “first landing” – meaning the place where Noah’s Ark first touched down after the Flood. Local residents say that the top of nearby Snake Mountain was hit by the keel of the Ark. Mt. Ararat in Turkey, where the Ark finally came to rest, is only 70 miles away from the city of Nakhchivan, and just 30 miles from the closest part of the Republic of Nakhchivan.

Nakhchivan’s history goes back to Biblical times, but its present existence and borders are largely the work of Vladimir Lenin, who in 1920 ordered a referendum asking the residents whether they wanted to be part of Azerbaijan or Armenia. If you can trust Lenin, the vote was 80 percent for Azerbaijan.

Next month we will go on a tour of the exclave, and I will fight a titanic battle to send the last post card ever mailed from Nakhchivan.

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Lew Toulmin lives in Silver Spring with his wife Susan, and has visited over 175 countries and sovereign territories on the TCC list.

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