

WHY I WENT TO ARMENIA

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By [Tom Cavanagh](#), [Sherbrooke Record](#) (Quebec), 31 August 2009

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Well, for those who can recall that wonderful children's classic *The Wind in the Willows*, Mr. Toad of Toad Hall - and Mole, Badger and the others also had periodic urges to break away from the sameness and routines of life. "Let us away to a life of Adventure in faraway places," Mr. Toad might cry - or something like that. Let us drink to opportunities for discovery and change. The chances do not come often and once gone they can never be taken back. Like Badger and Mole, Toad never followed his dream but he was great at rhapsodizing.

Those who never experienced *The Wind in the Willows* may remember comparable thoughts expressed in a more nuanced manner by poet's like Robert Frost whose famous work "The Road Not Taken" ends with these three lines:

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I took the one less traveled by,

And that has made all the difference.

I apologize for such a roundabout route to explain why I chose to go to Armenia on a CESO (Canadian Executive Services Overseas) project. It was a chance to break away from the quotidian, it was a short assignment, it looked fairly straightforward, and I had always wished to visit that part of the world. But like every project I have been on, there were difficulties. There are always problems - and sometimes they are incredibly huge. I used to think it was a matter of bad luck but there is more to it than that. I now finally accept that serious difficulties are part and parcel of overseas work. Something will go wrong. If it was a straightforward and problem-free issue, the requesting country would probably never have contacted CESO in the first place.

When I arrived at Gugark Summer Camp in Armenia two plus weeks ago there were over 200 campers ranging in age from about seven to sixteen. During my few weeks there, the camp was winding down operations and in just a few more days (August 31) the 2009 Summer Camp operations will be finished.

Armenians are a friendly people and there were waves of young campers periodically climbing onto departing trains or buses during my visit. Campers came for various lengths of time - two weeks, one month, two months. Hugs and kisses are the order of the day when the time comes to say goodbye. Even a few tears were in evidence as campers bade farewell to old friends and new, and to the unexpected late arrival, Mr. Tom (that's me). On Sunday morning last, before the remaining one hundred or so campers lined up at attention with their hands on their hearts, I raised the flag myself at morning assembly with the national anthem blasting out behind me. Then a few words of salutation and goodbye (translated into Armenian), followed by singing and dancing which is an essential characteristic of Armenian society. Finally I am in the car and away to the capital city and my flight home. The sun sparkles brightly as we pass through the forested canyons, crowded happy memories fill my mind - and all's right with the world. A memorable two weeks which came and went too quickly. They always do. And I am so glad I came.

There is one relatively new reason for turning down the other road - the one not taken - the one with the better claim "because it was grassy and wanted wear." When I was very young, I loved going to our local library and looking up stories of exploration. I was even frustrated that just about every place in the world had already been discovered and explored. How unfortunate I had not been born in an earlier time I used to think (in the forties no one - at least no one I ever encountered - dreamt of exploring the moon and outer space). But there were always those magical names of places that someday I might visit myself. There actually was a song titled Far Away Places With Strange Sounding Names. One brief quote from a childhood song for those readers who have stayed with me this far.

"Goin'to China, or maybe Siam I want to see for myself Those far away places I've been readin' about in a book that I took from the shelf. I start getting restless whenever I hear the whistling of a train, I pray for the day I can get underway and look for those castles in Spain ... "

Well, that partially explains why traveling to foreign lands is something I cannot resist. But I did mention an additional more recent reason that has come into my life: retirement and aging. I could extrapolate on and on about these items, but there is a simpler and shorter way to do so. I turn to another writer, Henry James, who in just a few words explains it all. In his later years he volunteered to raise money and visit and talk to wounded soldiers during World War I. When asked, he said it made him feel less irrelevant, "less finished and doddering when I go on certain days and try to pull the conversational cart up the hill for them." Finished and doddering are not admirable qualities. But making an effort to avoid them is in order. It is worth the effort. I helped no wounded soldiers but there was the sense of involvement - the bringing of your gift.

What was I actually doing in Armenia? A subject for another article.

