

Studying Abroad - Reversed

Interview with Lusine Gevorgyan, an international student from Armenia.

What did you think of Leiden when you first arrived?

Pretty, small, “very student”, international, and very neat. Everything seemed to be in such a meticulous order in Leiden, that the city seemed to be built in one day, by one person only. And of course my first “shock” – bikes!

Why did you choose to study in Leiden? How did you end up here?

Before coming to the Netherlands, I used to work at Yerevan State Linguistic University after V. Brusov, where the first Dutch Language Department was initiated by the Dutch Language Union (Nederlandse Taalunie). Each year a new teacher is sent to our university to teach Dutch. The Nederlandse Taalunie announced a scholarship for an enthusiast who would learn Dutch in the Netherlands and Flanders, and would work as a Dutch language teacher at the University after the completion of the programme. Just like I had always been, I was yet(?) again open to something very new and very exciting. It was indeed a very unexpected decision; I had to face many questioning looks when I told my friends and family that I had decided to learn Dutch. Leiden was chosen as my starting point, and I am going to do my third year in Flanders.

Did Leiden University live up to your expectations (please be honest!)?

Leiden University did not only live up to my expectations, but it was even beyond them! Honestly! The people I met here, the university staff, the professors ... they are all so helpful, so friendly, and so very professional! I have to be honest though, the first introductory day I was very nervous and after having met the professors and having received my schedule, I was scared. I thought, “No, this is nothing for me. I speak almost no word of Dutch, and the programme is so intensive. I won’t be able to catch up.” But thanks to my professors I understood that I could actually do more than I thought I could.

What is the most striking difference between studying at Yerevan University and Leiden University?

At the university where I studied in Armenia there is more to be done in classroom, while Leiden University requires lots of self-study, which I am perfectly used to now. The classes are more flexible. The student-professor relationship is less formal here, which helps you to become “friends” with the professor and not be afraid to be judged if you speak out your mind. The computer labs and the conveniences here are remarkable, and the feeling that you “stay connected” all the time is something students don’t always have in our universities.

Armenia is very different from the Netherlands, both in the way it looks and in its culture. Armenia is a very mountainous country, with harsh snowy winters and very hot summers. Not much rain, either, if you know what I mean ... People are very warm and hospitable. For a foreigner it may take some time to get used to the warmth and to the “oh so you are from the Netherlands, or maybe from France, in any case you are a friend, come and eat something with us!” attitude.

Armenia is the first country in the world to adopt Christianity as its official state religion in 301, while some Christian communities already existed in Armenia since AD 40. Some of our temples and churches are even from this period, so from the first century. Armenia is a country that has faced many wars and tragedies throughout its history, such as the Armenian Genocide (1915]), but it has always fought for its independence and dignity and it has kept its identity till today.



Henri Verneuil was a prominent French-Armenian playwright and film maker, who enjoyed a successful career in France. The guys from System of a Down (believe it or not!) are Armenian, and of course my favourite singer Charles Aznavour, one of the most well-knowns chanson-singers in the world.

There is also a relatively big Armenian community in the Netherlands. I am very happy I have learned about the Armenian Cultural Center of Abovyan in Den Haag, where I find the warmth and the culture that I miss. Now I'm busy with the other members of the Abovyan Center with organizational works of the Armenian Film Festival, which is going to take place from 8 till 14 October in Den Haag. Various Armenian films are on the agenda. Anyone who wants to know more about the Armenian history, culture and cinematography is very welcome (for those who are interested, you could check up the news on the film festival on <http://www.abovian.nl>).

Do you find that there are a lot of cultural differences between Armenia and The Netherlands? If so, which is the most prominent?

One of the most important differences that I noticed from the very start was the straightforwardness of Dutch people. Armenians are less straightforward. They are honest in their own way. It's very difficult for an Armenian to say "no", even when you really feel like it. Here saying "no" is not impolite. The "neighbour culture" is very Armenian. I have the feeling that here the neighbours don't always know each other. In Armenia neighbours know everything about each other.

How do you experience the normal Dutch day-to-day life?

I think it is actually more relaxed than the one I was used to in Armenia. I think people give more importance to holidays, travelling and "having fun". In Armenia the days seem longer, maybe it's due to the fact that the working day finishes quite late (normally a working day in Armenia would be something like from 9.00 am. to 6.00/7.00 pm). What would never happen in Armenia, for example, is going into a bar at 10:00 pm. and being told that they can serve you only one more drink and then the bar is closed. I was surprised not to find these 24/7 hour shops here; there are lots of them in Yerevan.

How is your Dutch coming along? What would you say, is most difficult about the Dutch language?

Mijn Nederlands is al redelijk goed. Ik kan alles begrijpen en uitleggen alles wat ik wil. Maar ja... it's always a bit difficult to speak to the native speakers, you don't always understand them. They speak very fast, and often in shops I start with "Hallo, mag ik een broodje, alstublieft?" and most of the time end up with, "Sorry, spreekt u Engels of Frans?" I must confess that even though I speak other foreign languages, Dutch was the most difficult one for me. I still can't get the Dutch "woordvolgorde" right, it is horrible! The Dutch sound system comes quite easy to me, since I am used to the very complex Armenian sound system.

What do you miss the most, now that you are studying so far away from home?

The first thing that I think would come to every international student is family and friends. I really suffered without my Armenian friends in the beginning. Now I already have both Dutch and international friends, so it's much better. I missed the food! And of course, I miss the sun. There are days that I simply go crazy without the warmth of the Armenian sun. I also miss the view of the Biblical Mount Ararat, which you can see from almost every spot of Yerevan.

Have you got any tips for other international students, or for people who plan to study abroad for a while?

Make as many friends as possible. Having Dutch friends will help you know these people better. Do not miss any opportunity to travel around the Netherlands. Just take your bike (I am sure you will get one as soon as you are here) and pedal through the valleys. It's a beautiful country with amazing flat landscapes. Do not let the bad weather spoil your mood. You can't change it, so it's better to change your attitude towards it and be like the Dutch, just keep on biking in the rain, in the sun and in the wild Northern wind!

by Anna Visser