



## President's Letter



Dear Friendship Force Central Iowa Members,  
This year is a year for changes. As Greek philosopher Heraclitus said "The only constant in life is change." We started out the year with high excitement looking forward to having Brandon, Canada visiting our club in September, unfortunately, that did not work out. Our club was offered the chance to embrace change and our incoming journey became an out-going journey to Richmond, VA. I have never been to Richmond, VA and I know I am excited about this opportunity. If you have not completed the survey, please see the information below and complete the survey using the link.

We have had a calm year so far and I hope we will be able to have some planned gatherings for the rest of the year. All Iowa Gathering (Picnic) will be in Des Moines on June 28th. See info below and form attached.

We have also been given an incoming journey for 2026. We did not request an incoming but need to let Taryn know if our club is up for an incoming journey. Having begun planning for the incoming journey for Brandon which did not come to fruition, some of the work for the incoming journey should be done. See the info below and complete the survey to give me your input.

Jerry and I are planning another trip to Western Australia and that will conflict with our planned Annual Meeting. The board will be reviewing the calendar to plan another date.

We have several events coming up and are requesting that you RSVP in advance. People work hard to create a fun event and it is important that we respect their efforts by confirming your attendance. It is also important that we pay attention to the dates and times so we arrive promptly.

Change is a challenge; it also can be good.

Alta Byg  
FFCI President

## Calendar of Upcoming Events

**FFCI Board of Officers,  
Tuesday, June 17th**

**4 pm at Marcia Thompson's House  
2728 Meadow Glen Rd, Ames, IA 50014  
Snacks and wine will be provided**

**The meeting is open to all members, please confirm your attendance by email at [altajerbyg@gmail.com](mailto:altajerbyg@gmail.com) or phone at 515-450-8397.**

**All Iowa Friendship Force Gathering  
Saturday, June 28**

**Machine Shed Restaurant  
11151 Hickman Road, Urbandale IA 50233  
\$20 per person Fee  
Payment due: June 20  
See ad elsewhere in this newsletter**

**Outbound Journey to Richmond VA  
Sept 9 - 16, 2025**

## Senior Expo was a Great Event

Thanks to the efforts of all the members of Central Iowa Friendship Force, the group was able to spread the word about Friendship Force to people in the Ames area.

We gave away a gift basket created by many of the members of our club. The winner of the gift basket was David Younie from Ames. I invited him to join our club on some of our local events.



New Members

Lots of Excitement - all day

# Journey to Azerbaijan and Armenia

Jerry and Alta just got back from a journey to Azerbaijan and Armenia. Also joining the group was Rose Schultz (journey coordinator) who was a previous member of our club, and Sedalia who a current member of our club. Jerry and I were home hosted with a delightful family, Niyameddin Amrullayev, (mother) Vusle (father), four daughters: Nuray, Zeyneb, Naiba, and Ruzgar and one son: Xaqan. We also met their grandmother: Nargiz.

Due to holidays many of the planned events had to be changed from the original dates, although we were able to get all planned stops included throughout the week. To get us acclimated the first event was a bus ride to Gobustan Rock Art to view the museum and then a challenging walk to view petro glyphs. The scenery was beautiful although very arid. We learned about the history of Baku, and the country; visiting many historical places including; Shirvanshakh's Palace, Martyrs' Avenue where the graves of the 196 people who were killed in 1990 when Russia invaded. From this view, the 3 Flame towers are magnificent to view. At night these towers are lit with ever-changing lights.



We visited the Yanar Dag (the Burning Mountain), Baku has natural gas seeping from the ground and the flames from the ground is forever burning.

We toured the Nobel Brothers home museum (Villa Petrolea), learning about the other Nobel brothers. Ludvig and Emmanuel Nobel had the house built in 1880. They chose this site to be in the middle of their oil production and company Branobel. Sheki

We had a wonderful welcome dinner where we ate much and well. There was another group who were celebrating someone's birthday so the music was loud and energetic. If you cannot talk,

what do you do? You dance! The farewell dinner in Baku, was held at Sizvansak restaurant. We hosted the family and there was plenty of food, music, and dancing. The family enjoys taking pictures and especially selfies. My camera is full of views of the family and the restaurant.

After 5 days of touring Baku, we loaded the bus to visit Sheki. Sheki is a small town where we stayed in a hotel while visiting The Sheki Khan's Summer Palace/Museum, we were able to climb a very precarious stairway to the women's area while exiting through the men's area with a much more substantial stairway. We visited the Sheki Bazaar, the Sheki Shabaka Workshop where they make the wooden and colored glass windows for the palace. Everything is made without glue or nails, they are put together as you would a complex puzzle. Everyone took on the challenge to put together a small 3 inch by 4-inch window to see if they could accomplish that puzzle.



Day 8 we packed up the bus to begin our trip to the Georgian Border. The day started with rain and ended with even more rain. We were not allowed to enter Armenia directly through Azerbaijan. We needed to go through Georgia. The journey was long and wet. At the border we had to exit the bus at the Azerbaijan border, take all our luggage through the check point into Georgia. It rained the whole way and did not stop while we transitioned to the new bus in Georgia. At the Armenian boarder, we had to exit the bus, take all our luggage, and making our way through the Armenia border checkpoint. We were very wet, cold, and were not looking forward to the upcoming week since it looked like the rain was supposed to stay. We arrived very late in Yerevan, Armenia. A late snack was provided for us, although most were just very happy to just find our room and go to bed.



Our mornings started later, most of the time at 9:30, most enjoyed the chance to recoup. The club in Armenia is a very new club, they only have 7 members and this was only their second incoming journey.

We were very happy to see that the rain from the day before was gone and the weather was beautiful. The first day we had a day of sightseeing.

Traversing the Cascade from the top with “Mother Armenia” down to the bottom was a drop of 991 feet and includes 572 steps. The afternoon visited the Echmiadzin Cathedral and then to the Machanents House for the

“Welcome” dinner. At the end of the dinner, we were invited to a master class to learn how to do some Armenian dances. The following day we visited the Tsitsernakaberd Memorial dedicated to the victims of the Armenian Genocide

of 1915. While there, a bus load of Polish Armenians arrived and said a prayer for the people who perished. The memorial is surrounded by trees which have been planted by visiting dignitaries. Each April 24<sup>th</sup>, Genocide Remembrance Day, thousands of people gather to lay fresh flowers out of respect for all the people who died in the Armenian Genocide.

Lunch that day was Lahmajune, which is Armenian Pizza. We each received our own pizza which was huge. Our drink was a yogurt drink which tasted somewhat like a mixture of yogurt and buttermilk. Kind of sour. Not many enjoyed the “healthy” drink.



The following day, we visited Garni which is an antique temple as well as Geghard a monastery located in the gorge of a mountain river Goh. For lunch we watch women making Lavash which is large thin flatbread which is placed over a large cushion which is then slapped against the hot clay underground oven walls. We then tore off pieces wrapped cheese, cucumbers, tomatoes, and herbs rolling them into type of tortilla. That afternoon, we walked down national monument called the Symphony of Stones. Three of us walked to the bottom and back up to the top all the rest rode the mini-train back to the top. It was a very steep road, so they went very fast to make it up the hill.

I heard that the ride was very bumpy, I’m glad we walked.

The evening on the 4<sup>th</sup> day, a barbecue was planned. The men of the group cooked the pork and the potatoes on the grill and the women prepared the salads and bread. There was more food than we could eat. One of our favorite salads was a shredded carrot salad. We have asked our hosts to send us the recipe, although we



are waiting with our fingers crossed. We had plenty of leftovers and most of us were able to enjoy them the following day.



The 5<sup>th</sup> day in Armenia was a day of Lakes and Monasteries, we visited Lake Sevan and toured Sevanavank Monastery. The climb to the top of the hill was a challenging, not only was it a lot of steps but it is located on a hill

which is 1916 meters above sea level. There were a lot of places where we could rest to catch our breath, since at that height, the air is thinner and it is harder to breath. After the climb to the top, we went to Lake Sevan to have a bite to eat along with a sample of Apricot Vodka. A couple of the brave Canadians donned their swim suits to take a dip. They were sure that the water could not be that cold, but were surprised that it was colder than Canadian lakes. They did not stay in the lake very long. Stopped and visited the Church of the Holy Mother of God, also known as St. Mary's Church or Surb Astvatsatzin, is located within the Khor Virap Monastery complex. This monastery is a historical and religious site where Gregory the Illuminator was imprisoned.

The 6<sup>th</sup> day we packed an overnight bag to travel more than 4 hours close to the to the Azerbaijan boarder. We visited many churches and Monasteries. We visited the Noravank monastery which was founded in 1205, which is the closest to see Mount Ararat. We stopped by a small roadside stop to watch a woman make Jingalov Hats. This is normally an Easter dish, it is a thin bread dough which has 17 different chopped herbs wrapped in the center of the dough and fried on a hot flat stove on both sides for about 2 to 3 minutes on each side. We stopped at Surenavan a city where the Storks come each spring to nest and raise their chicks. We saw whole streets of telephone/electric posts with Stork nests on them. The picture is also a picture of Mt. Ararat.



We visited the ancient cave dwellings in the village of Khndzoresk. The museum at the base was overseen by a man who had lived in one of the caves as a youth. To get to the main village you must cross a swinging bridge. The village was inhabited until the 1950's when the Russian Government decided that the caves were not proper housing for the Armenian people.

We spent the night at a hotel Rubin, in Goris, Armenia, so we would be able to view the Tatev Monastery which was more than a 4-hour drive from Yerevan. The road through the mountains which was very curvy and close to the Tatev was considered one of the most beautiful pieces of Armenian architecture which was built in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. Following the visit to the Monastery we entered the longest reversible cable car in the world which is in the Guinness Book of Records. The Wings of Tatev Cable car ride was amazing. Following the



cable car ride, we stopped at the Shaki waterfall which is considered the most beautiful and picturesque waterfall in Armenia. Getting to the waterfall was about a 15-minute walk from the parking area. We purchased some snacks to enjoy near the parking area.

We had our Farewell Party at Ar Areni Restaurant where we had a cooking lesson on how to cook fish, Armenia Style, which we were able to enjoy for lunch after a wine tasting, enjoying the wine prepared at this small winery.

Our long trip back to Yerevan was filled with many winding, curving roads, and we were very tired from our fun filled trip not only from Armenia but from Azerbaijan. Each journey was unique; in Azerbaijan we enjoyed our home stay with the young family. In Yerevan, we were not able to have a home-stay, staying in the hotel we got to know our fellow travelers better and we hope to reconnect with them at some future date. Although we were not looking forward to the long flights home, we were ready to check out our own bed once we got home.

# All-Iowa Friendship Force Gathering Saturday, June 28

11:30 am Social | Noon –

Welcome | Lunch | Program (including club reports)

Machine Shed Restaurant,  
11151 Hickman Rd, Urbandale, IA 50322

Paid reservations are due June 20.

Make checks payable to FFGDM and mail to Ginny Renda, 2821 Wolcott Ave, Des Moines, IA 50321.

Please include a note with name(s), and email address with your check.

## Journey to Azerbaijan and Armenia (Cont.)

Our last day of experiencing Armenia began with a breakfast at the hotel. Our first stop of the day was at another monastery, our last for this journey, the Tatev Monastery built in the 9th century. We had a group photo with the monk in residence.

The Wings of Tatev was our next experience. It is the longest reversible cableway in the world (5752m) and is recorded in the Guinness Book of Records. The ride is over 2 mountain canyons, impressive, one end originates at the Tatev Monastery.

The picture is of the lowa contingency where we boarded the cable car.

On our way back to Yerevan, we stopped at the Shaki waterfall, it was beautiful, but compared to Iguazu Falls it is about 1/1000th of the falls.

Our last stop was at the Ar Areni Winery in Areni where they grow the Areni grapes.

This is one of the wine regions in Armenia. This grape is native to the area and the only grape wine he made was from this grape.

This was also the place for the Farewell Dinner. We had a demonstration of putting the meat and potatoes on skewers and placed in a tandoor where it cooked while we had our wine tasting. Before the tasting he also demonstrated how he prepared the trout fish for our dinner. We went to the basement and tasted 8 different wines, 5 of which were made from the Areni grapes, treated in different ways producing different wines. After the tasting we were served dinner in the backyard, lots of good food. The potatoes with the meat drippings were delicious.

After a few toasts and presentations we left for Yerevan to pack and be ready to depart for the airport at 12:30am.

