



## Armenia - An experience for life

*By Elena*

Marshrutka: the public minibusses which you can stop with the wave of a hand, which cost 100 drams (ca. 20 ct) no matter where in the city you go, which play Russian pop songs alongside „Diamonds in the sky“ and Armenian traditional folk songs out of old speakers, are maybe the best representation of the country.

A relict of the Soviet era, they don't have a timetable, they also lack a transport map so you have to ask around what number you have to take. But they will take you where you have to go.

Half a year ago I was sitting on the wooden, modern chairs of the Munich Metro, reading on the Armenia Wikipedia page about the country I would be spending my EVS in. And thinking back so much has changed since moving from one country to another, from, some would say one continent to another.

The first thing I noticed, while riding Marshrutka 25 to my shared flat in Mush, is that there is never a woman sitting in the front seats of the bus, near the cigarette smoking driver. Also never a woman smoking. I came here with my European mindset, and directly from my Munich left-leaning, green, feminist bubble. So I immediately thought to myself „oh, sexism“. And yes, sexism is big, but upon asking I got told that it is a sign of respect towards the woman that she does not have to sit next to the driver. Far more shocking was to me the fact that, after I enquired about a co-worker whom I hadn't seen for a long time, the answer was simply „she got married“. And that was it. It was never questioned that she would then move away with him, to Yerevan, the capital, because he had a job there. Here in Armenia I often feel uncomfortable with wearing certain dresses, not because the country is not safe, but because of the looks I'd get, but back in Germany the hassle wasn't much different; am I prepared to get judged, maybe even slut-shamed, for how I choose to look? So staying here I also learn to reflect on woman's rights in Europe and how we still have a long way to go there, too.

Another big change is the omnipresent Soviet influence, shown for example by the fact that when I go to the supermarket most products are imported from Russia and that there is a ton of old, Soviet war hero statues around the city. The influence of being a former communist country can also be felt by the way the society is structured nowadays; it is a very communal society. And an incredibly hospitable one as well. The space on the Marshrutkas is limited, and often they are overcrowded, but people will smoosh in on the little seats. Those people who still have to stand will hand over their bags into the lap of one of the „Tatiks“ (Armenian grandmas), completely trusting them with all their valuables. It was on one of these overcrowded Marshrutka drives that I

first truly experienced the Armenian hospitality: two women, after a co-volunteer and I had smooshed in next to them, started asking us where we were from and invited us over for dinner. Just like that, because they knew we weren't living with our parents any longer and they took it onto themselves to look after us.

In the same way as they looked out for us, in this communal society you take care of each other; neighbours watch out for each other, there is no public health insurance because your family will have your back.

This very trusting and intimate atmosphere makes volunteering at YIC a very enjoyable experience because the people there truly treat you as a part of their family. At lunchtime we laugh about our co-volunteer's newest conquests together, in the morning everyone comes into each office room to say „Bari Luis“, literally good light, and after work, we get invited to their places to celebrate the beginning of a new year together. One big office family.

And by the way, that entire office family could smoosh into one Marshrutka.