

Epic family journey



Anna Sulewska and Thomas Alboth had a dream: that they could combine having a young family with their passion for travel. The result? The ‘family without borders’ trawling around Asia, baby in hand.

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When journalist Anna Sulewska and her partner, photographer Thomas Alboth, had a baby together, they had to concede, as every new family does, that their lives would change. But one thing they couldn't bear to compromise on was their passion for travel – and so, when baby Hanna was six months old, the family embarked



on their first epic road trip together. Setting out from their home in Berlin, they drove down to the Black Sea and back again, crossing 10

countries in six months, and recording their experiences in their award-winning travel blog, *The Family Without Borders*.

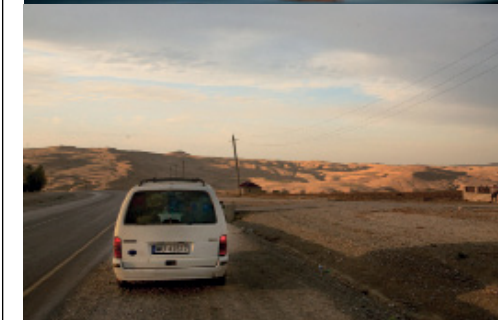
‘We had the idea of circling the Black Sea, but that would have meant visiting only Georgia and Turkey,’ says Sulewska. ‘Then, staring at the map, we realized we'd be mad not to visit the



Caucasus. I had visited friends in Baku before, but this trip gave us a real chance to discover Azerbaijan. I assumed that going back, this time as

a wife and mother, would change things. I was right.’

Hanna put a completely new spin on the couple's travelling – and rather than clipping the wings of her free-spirited parents, her presence was a real asset. It meant they had to make a planned stop every night, either staying with friends, camping or sleeping in the car (‘our tough Renault Espace’). And with Hanna in tow, Sulewska and Alboth felt they



received a warmer response from the people they encountered along the way – and a deeper insight into what life is really like in the many remote places they visited.

The couple planned to spend 10 days driving through Azerbaijan, exploring every region, and seeking out the hidden spots often left off the usual tourist itinerary. They wanted to get a real glimpse of what the Azerbaijani lifestyle and heritage is about. ‘We devised a plan to drive through the north, then along the coast, and finally up to the border with Iran,’ says Sulewska. ‘The major stops coincided with seeing friends in Baku and their relatives in Zira and Qusar.’

So, what was their first impression of the country? ‘Leaving Georgia, we came across a sign: “Azerbaijan border – good luck”. And, in a way, it was true: on the border had to wait almost six hours. It was one of the many forced stops you encounter on this kind of trip and we were prepared: we had food, Hanna was playing contentedly. It was then that we first met the locals. I asked the most talkative border controller what the Azerbaijani people

are like. ‘We are strong and angry,’ he replied.’

Intrigued by that no-nonsense warning, the family carried on. ‘We were amazed at how different everything was once we were over the border,’ says Sulewska. ‘The landscape was arid and empty; the heat was searing. People's attitudes were different too: we found them immediately more open towards us. The restaurant menus changed, the main option being shashlyk (kebab), and the cows we'd seen on the streets in Georgia were replaced by sheep. Nevertheless, we had a 10-day visa for visiting this big country – almost 90,000 sq km – and we dedicated ourselves to making the most of it.’

So, the family struck out, spending their first few days in the north-west – ‘where the rivers seemed to be literally made of stones’. They followed the road along the border of Dagestan, spent a few nights up in the mountains, and stopped over in Ilisu (near the area of Qax); in Kis (near the old Sheki); the hills around Samaxi, including the sweet mountain village of Lahic; and Laza (close to Gabala)

– from where they witnessed ‘unforgettable views and waterfalls’, Sulewska wrote on her blog. ‘The valley of the Qusarcay River, along which a ski resort is being built, is surely the most beautiful place to be in Azerbaijan.’

As they tell me about their trip, it becomes clear just how much



Clockwise from top far left: travelling from Laza in Azerbaijan; the warm Caspian Sea; their tough Renault Espace; Besbarmaq Dag (Five-Finger Mountain); Tom in caravanserai, Sheki in Azerbaijan.



they loved those mountain landscapes. I ask them to describe their favourite place. 'The village of Lahic, lost in the mountains, will stay in our memory,' says Sulewska. 'You reach it after driving for 20km along a rocky clifftop road. Legend has it that it was founded more than 1,000 years ago and now, many carpet makers and metal workers have set up shop here – it's a real treat for tourists.'

One thing that always put the couple at ease was the sense of hospitality found in the smaller areas – something they did not expect in such a harsh landscape. 'At one point when we were driving in the mountains, we noticed a car following us,' recalls Sulewska.



Clockwise from top: driving to Laza; Baku; a fun fair in Baku; views from a hotel café; Anna and the hills around Samaxi in Azerbaijan.

'When it finally caught up with us, it turned out that we had already "met" this person when we first crossed the border. For "meeting", I mean just seeing each other, but the man felt that he could not have left us like that, on the road, and wanted to

invite us to his home. So he called his wife, she prepared food and they gave us their bedroom. It was not the only time in Azerbaijan that we felt somebody was opening not only their doors but also their hearts to us.'

Having Hanna along helped break the ice with new acquaintances, and she enjoyed the adventure – spanning, as it did, a huge part of her life, from age six months to a year, and the incredible transition from baby to walking, talking toddler: 'Every day there were new scenes and experiences for her to discover,' says Sulewska. 'And we are proud that our daughter heard her first "moo" from a real cow, rather than from the television. The part I think Hanna liked the most was in the hills around Samaxi: that is where she received a present for her first birthday – a swing – and it was the first place we could actually use it. I think Hanna will always



remember that she spent her first birthday in this country.'

After their rural sojourn, the family's next stop was Baku, to visit friends. One of the interesting things about Azerbaijan is its geographic dualism – while the beautiful countryside appears unaffected by the march of time, the capital is simply a different story, with a glorious past and the electric vibe of an emerging must-visit destination. On her blog, Sulewska noted that 'glass and steel towers rise over the city, growing higher and higher. The streets are quiet during the sunny daytime, and the squares are full to bursting come late evening – such is metropolitan life.'

For someone used to Berlin's weather, Baku's summer temperatures were a little challenging, and Sulewska recalls walking from shadow to shadow, from one ice-cream shop to another, before discovering the Eleven Restaurant and café on the 11th floor of the Hotel Park Inn. With a baby in tow, it couldn't have been a better stop-off. 'A lovely view together with air conditioning – that was a match made in heaven!' Despite the obvious contrast between Baku's booming metropolis and the countryside they'd recently left behind, they noticed the locals' reaction to Hanna was unchanged: 'People were smiling at Hanna wherever we went.'

Escaping the heat of Baku, they made a couple of detours to visit friends and acquaintances – first to beautiful Qusar, back up in the mountains, where they experienced life with the locals; and to Zira island, just off Baku's coast, where they stayed with the family of their city friends, 'ate traditional food, listened to stories, and learned about habits and traditions'. Hanna loved swimming in the Caspian Sea – 'it was like a warm bath,' says Sulewska. Then it was back on the road to continue their trip, clocking up a total of

20,000km across 10 countries in six months. They ended their journey in Serbia (where their car ultimately gave up). Of their many highlights, they fondly remember drinking wine with Arthur Cherari, the Gypsy Baron of

Moldova; becoming good friends with a family in the autonomous republic of Transnistria; and falling in love with the breathtaking landscapes of Crimea, in Ukraine, where the mountains and sea become one. They found time to relax in the Chechen villages of Georgia and everywhere they visited they were impressed by the people: generous and dignified, despite sometimes obvious hardships.

The family's most recent trip has seen them venturing into central America – now with two daughters, aged three years and



HANNA ENJOYED THE ADVENTURE – SPANNING, AS IT DID, A HUGE PART OF HER LIFE, FROM AGE SIX MONTHS TO A YEAR, FROM BABY TO WALKING, TALKING TODDLER.



18 months. This time, they travelled from Mexico to Panama, crossing Honduras,

Guatemala and Belize – eight countries within six months, following their tried and tested pattern.

When I ask them if they would ever go back to Azerbaijan, I get an enthusiastic response. They feel the south of the country deserves a visit, and tell me that they would love to fly to Nakhchivan. During their journey they made new friends with whom they keep in touch, and have filled a photo album with memories they will cherish forever. Before we end our chat, I ask them if they have any tips for anyone wishing to follow in their footsteps in Azerbaijan. 'The view over Baku from a high building is a must,' says Sulewska. 'So is bathing in the Caspian Sea. Finally, we would suggest a trip to Lahic, Sheki and Laza and you could check out the north of the country as well. Last but not least, pick the right season: learn from our experience and avoid the hottest months.'

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