

Hiking in the Caucasus to Sailing the Pacific



by Betty Blair

As strange as it may sound, there's a link between Azerbaijan and the Norwegians who made the remarkable voyage on the *Tangaroa* raft this past summer sailing 4,000 miles across the Pacific. The *Tangaroa* was based on the *Kon-Tiki* voyage that the great Norwegian explorer and experimental archaeologist Thor Heyerdahl (1914-2002) had made in 1947. Heyerdahl had visited Baku four times during his lifetime. And it was Heyerdahl who introduced the leader of the *Tangaroa* expedition—Torgeir Higrapp—to Azerbaijan. Torgeir has since visited this country twice. Here's how it happened.

Torgeir Higrapp first heard about Azerbaijan on the single occasion when he met his childhood hero—Thor Heyerdahl. The year was 2000. In Oslo. At the time, Heyerdahl was trying to promote his new book, "In Search of Odin," convinced that Odin could be traced to Azerbaijan and that Scandinavians had roots in the Caspian region.

"Like many of Heyerdahl's other theories," observed Torgeir, "this one was controversial and not appreciated in academia. As school kids growing up in Norway, we read that Odin was a god, but Thor was convinced that Odin was really a human being—something like a respected chief or elder in the community."

Throughout his life, Heyerdahl always paid serious attention to folklore, convinced that legends and myths often provided hints that conveyed truth and reality. Heyerdahl first published his ideas about the Scandinavian ties to Azerbaijan in *Azerbaijan International*. [See "The Azerbaijan Connection: Challenging Euro-Centric Theories of Migration." Spring 1995 (AI 3.1). Search at AZER.com].

After meeting Thor, Torgeir started teaching at Danvik School of Media and Communication in Norway. Known as a "folk school", Danvik is part of the educational system that has been established in Norway, which offers young people the chance to explore their own personal interests during a one- or two-year interim before many of them settle down into the academic rigors of university study and the pursuit of professional careers.

Tore Seierstad happened to be the director of Danvik School at the time. Prior to his appointment, he had been deeply involved with Azerbaijan, directing the Norwegian Humanitarian Enterprise (NHE) there for about five years. It was Tore who urged Torgeir Higrapp to think about taking a dozen Danvik students and hiking in the Caucasus.

Once Torgeir heard about the remote village of Khinalig in the Caucasus, he set his mind on getting there. That was the spring of 2004. At that time, it was really quite difficult to reach Khinalig. Streams and rivers flood from the melt off of snow, making it nearly impossible to access remote villages except a few months of the year. Dirt roads were treacherous. Many places were not even wide enough for two cars to pass. Nor were there any guard rails to prevent vehicles from rolling over the banks, tumbling into the river, hundreds of feet below. But with persistence, Torgeir succeeded.

At Khinalig, Torgeir was amazed to find that many of those villagers looked much like Norwegians with blue eyes and blond hair. There were other similarities also that made him think that Heyerdahl's hypothesis might be worth delving into further.

And now that the Pacific Expedition has been completed, Torgeir does see correlations between hiking expeditions in the Caucasus and sailing expeditions across the Pacific.



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"In both situations, our driving motivation was to get as close to nature as possible and, by implication, as far away as possible from 'civilization'. Both kinds of adventures require the cooperation and coordination of an entire team to reach the designated target safely. Both require detailed planning of the route.

"But because of the great buoyancy of the raft, there really is plenty of space for cargo, which enabled us to take along almost all the stuff we wanted. Not only food and drink, but many things that we actually didn't need." Torgeir figured that the crew could have stored several tons of goods between the balsa logs and the floor. "However, when hiking or camping, you're limited by what each person can physically carry. The only exception is if you can make depots in advance," he said.

Torgeir says he prefers hiking in the Caucasus, rather than the Alps, because Khinalig is one of the most unique places in the world. "The people are a separate nation and have their own unique language, unlike other languages in the world. I really want to go back, some day," he concluded. Hopefully, he won't be disappointed now that since the summer of 2006 the road has been asphalted and bridges constructed. ■



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Photos

1. Alexander Nayasov leading the Norwegian students on a hiking expedition in the Caucasus.
2. Mona Sæverud Higrav, Torgeir's wife, on a hiking expedition with Norwegian students in the Caucasus, Spring 2004. Mona has been a strong moral support for all of Torgeir's explorations, including his trans-oceanic raft voyage across the Pacific this past summer.
3. Torgeir (left) with students from Danvik School of Media and Communication, Norway. The school's rector is Tore Seierstad, who lived in Azerbaijan and directed the Norwegian Humanitarian Enterprise (NHE) program for about five years. Tore is one of those rare foreigners who speaks Azeri and who has maintained close ties to the country after leaving.
4. Khinalig, a small remote village in the Caucasus. In the summer of 2006, an asphalt road and bridges were built to provide better access to the village. Prior to that, only horses, army vehicles, trucks and four-wheel drives could reach this location, and not without enormous difficulty. Often travel was restricted to two or three months of the year because of the necessity of crossing streams and rivers about eight or nine times. Up until 2006, the village rarely had more than 100 visitors each year. The people of Khinalig speak their own distinct language, which is not known to exist anywhere else in the world.
5. Children in Khinalig. Many villagers have lighter features, including blond hair and blue eyes, which Torgeir finds similar to Norwegians.



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