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**EXPAND YOUR HORIZONS:  
Travel Experiences While Serving Others**

By Doris Styche Sweet

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# EXPAND YOUR HORIZONS



**TRAVEL EXPERIENCES  
WHILE SERVING OTHERS**



**DORIS STYCHE SWEET**

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## Introduction

According to the trip log, the ambient temperature was zero degrees centigrade, and ice floated in the freezing water of Neko Harbour, Antarctica, which was the location for the challenging Polar Plunge. As also recorded in the trip log, “The highlight was a joint jump of our oldest and youngest passenger from the marina platform of the Greg Mortimer.” The oldest passenger is me; the youngest, a Canadian fellow in hot pink bathing trunks who agreed to accompany me in my plunge. As a concession to the fabulous Expedition Leader, who wasn’t too happy with my intention to jump, but with no valid reason to deny it, I donned a life jacket for safety. Although I had booked time for the hot tub upon exiting the freezing water followed by a session in the sauna, I didn’t want to overthink it. The truth of the matter is when you feel a yearning for an adventure such as this one, having too many questions and confusion may often stop you from having the best experiences of your life. Many people never take the first step—many never take the plunge—toward the most wonderful adventures of their lives because they fear getting out of their comfort zone.



*Figure 1.1 Polar Plunge Photo Credit: Massimo Bassano-Aurora Expeditions*

## *Expand Your Horizons*

What is the purpose of the book? First, it can be considered a wonderful travelogue of interesting, informative, meaningful, useful, and often exciting experiences for 79 percent of my volunteer adventures from around the world. Second, the book is an inspirational piece, providing encouragement for people to do different things, regardless of their age or other seemingly limiting factors. I am here to tell you none of these things matter in comparison to the amazing experiences waiting for you out there. With age, humans tend to lose their drive—their curiosity and sense of wonder with even the simplest of things. We need to return to that childlike wonder and curiosity—like that we would have when we would joyfully play with the box that held the gift perhaps more than with the gift itself. We need to create situations that promote opportunities for discovering more exciting and memorable “first” experiences. In the same vein, the book lauds the rewards the trips provided not only to me, but also to the scientific expeditions or project sponsors and communities served. Finally, the book is serving a didactic purpose—it is a process analysis, if you will. The book describes how to select, plan, and execute the types of trips I have made central to my life.

The book, which is organized thematically, not chronologically, will reveal regardless of the topic, or where in the world the project occurs, a common thread exists. There are always opportunities for meaningful experiences while serving others. Each trip is described in an individual, free-standing essay recognized by a heading including the trip number, location, participants and project type. Therefore, reading this book from the start to the end is not required. I hope you will find the contents enjoyable, educational, and perhaps motivational as you consider *Travel Experiences While Serving Others to EXPAND YOUR HORIZONS!*

## Chapter Seven

### Senior and Women's Program

I selected a program to supply an alternative to the more traditional Senior Center activities in Chapters Three, Nine and Supplements. Also, a special project to assist women entrepreneurs is included.

#### 22) Gyumri, Armenia—Solo: Earthquake Documentation

This expedition was to document culturally significant buildings and styles throughout the city, which then would be provided to local planners to help retain Gyumri's character and charm. Earthquakes in 1988 damaged or destroyed 80 percent of the buildings in the city of Gyumri, leaving half a million people homeless and between 25,000 and 60,000 dead. The Kumayri Historic District, a neighborhood of Gyumri, features historic houses built with volcanic rock. Small teams would sketch, measure, and photograph historic buildings and architectural details. They would also interview homeowners. The text was reviewed, and all the photos were provided by *Principal Investigator, JB Greenwood, AIA Emeritus*.

**SURPRISE: The lovely young woman who was our on-site coordinator and translator was quite excited. She and her family had just recently moved into permanent housing after being in shipping containers as temporary quarters for multiple years! I can't even imagine what that would have been like. I was unaware of the earthquake event and equally surprised that it shared December seventh as a**



**historical date with the USA. Same day, different year, and still recovering!**

After we began our journey to the north, we passed numerous fields of flowers with an occasional square, multistory, ugly cement-looking building with windows at each level. I was informed it was housing for factory workers built by the Russians during the occupation, but with the factories no longer operating, the buildings have been abandoned.

We were warmly welcomed at the expedition destination, assigned to a team, and had some instructions for fulfilling the task of documenting a specifically preselected property. My huge house was on a corner lot with the front width on the main street about one-quarter the depth of the building on the side street. The senior woman owner lived in several rooms in the front of the house accessible by entering under the adjacent arch through a driveway.



*Figure 7.1 The owner hosted the team with tea and treats in her cramped quarters.*

About a dozen steps led to a small porch to enter the dwelling, which was positioned where the courtyard widened behind the building on the other side of the driveway. The courtyard was bounded by the side of the house, a back wall with a small stable in the corner of the house (now used for storing wood) and a stream opposite the house with an overhanging

family sized outhouse. There was indoor plumbing for the house installed; it was blocking the front entrance, but I did see several men come in the driveway to the courtyard to use the previous sanitary facility. Earthquake damage was visible on both street façades as well as in the courtyard.



*Figure 7.2 Viewing the damage in the rear of the house with the owner and translator*

I think because I was the most senior aged volunteer (more her peer, even though I was unable to speak the language), the owner wanted to show me the rest of the house by myself—not even with the young woman translator. There was an enormous ballroom with a gigantic chandelier in the midsection and several uninhabitable apartments with private entrances in the rear section of the dwelling with the floors no longer parallel to the ground. Under the midsection she rented storage space to a businessman, who I think sold souvenir items. I attempted, not very successfully, to create a floorplan. We measured some of the blocks, particularly in the driveway, and counted the rows to get an idea of the massive size of the dwelling.

Enough about the structure of the building, time to share some details about the occupant. This property was owned by her family, but the Russian military took occupancy when they invaded, and the family was forced to live in the stable for the

duration. For the second time—I can't even imagine what this would be like and don't know exactly how long it lasted. Then came the earthquake and all the disruption and disaster; now one of her daughters is undergoing chemotherapy to treat cancer and she herself has some mobility issues. I had an idea that I proposed to the Principal Investigator for a personal service project within her final expedition days. I wanted to remove the very tall thorny weeds growing between the blocks in the driveway and courtyard. She approved, and the owner requested I stack them near to the stairs for her to use as kindling for starting her wood stove fires in the winter. That solved my problem of how I was going to dispose of them, and recycling as kindling was the perfect solution.



*Figure 7.6 Weeding in the driveway*

I just wanted her to have a more pleasant view from her porch as she had triumphed over so much adversity; she deserved something special, and I wanted to provide it. I think she enjoyed our visits and am happy the PI selected her dwelling and assigned me to the team responsible for gathering the documentation.

**BONUS:** As has happened previously, another volunteer desire to tour some of the Silk Road in Armenia would provide the perfect conclusion. I joined her. We had a driver who spoke English and arranged a delightful circle route visiting several of the possible animal rest stops. They were constructed of stone like a long narrow cave, not easily seen from the road, with the interior having a series of stalls. There was a huge sign just inside the entrance written in Russian. So, I had no idea what it said but was surprised it had not been removed or defaced with graffiti after all this time. During the tour we observed multiple convoys of Iranian fuel tanks passing through. The driver shared he was not allowed to go to Azerbaijan even to participate in competitive sporting events.

### **23) Hohoe, Ghana—Solo: Women’s Financing Evaluation**

When I departed for Ghana, I thought I would be teaching in a primary school. I went with several other volunteers the first day to the school, but for some unknown reason, I never returned. Instead, I was reassigned and joined a volunteer who had been there the previous week working with the Director and small staff for a pilot microfinancing program.

**SURPRISE: I thought that a farmers’ market meant that farmers brought the produce to the market to sell. Wrong! The farmers would gather at a warehouse (same place unsold products are stored overnight) and meet women who would buy the produce, and who would then resell at the market. So, all the offerings were from the same sources and the stalls selling the same product were positioned together in the same area of the market. An area for potatoes, tomatoes, etc. with the women generally having a single product as the middle marketers between the farmers and consumers.**

My new assignment is to provide an evaluation of the pilot program for microfinancing business loans for about twenty-five to thirty women members per cooperative. The director provided all the training material so I could become familiar with how the program is organized. I don't know how long it had been operating, but I surmise at least three years since one group that I would be observing has been functioning for that long; the other one was for three months as a comparison. The organizational structure was very well defined with rules, positions, and responsibilities clearly stated. Membership dues included the contributions required for the loan fund and rules for obtaining loans and an additional fee for a social fund to assist members in need. However, the program was only designed for a year. The 3-year cooperative was pleading for help in obtaining external financing, wanting to expand the funds from their internal contributions for additional loans. I provided an extensive review of the existing process, which I shared with the director in a long meeting on my final day. I complimented him on all the procedures which were working well and offered financing suggestions. In the initial year the cooperative needs to establish credit with a local financial institution and obtain a small loan and promptly repay to become credit worthy for future loans. Also, each cooperative is set to dissolve after a year in the pilot program and needs to be reinstated frequently with the same members; provide a path to just renew and continue with no disruptions. Concurrently, a marketing plan needs to be introduced and communicated so that the members are aware of each other and what they sell and can support one another with their purchases. I have no idea if any changes were made or if the program still exists, but the director was very receptive to the suggestions. I don't know whether he had the authority or ability to implement any modifications, but I felt that my effort was truly appreciated by him.

**BONUS:** This project assignment allowed me to use my business skills and expertise more than teaching third grade primary students. I'm truly grateful for the change. Even if none of my ideas were adopted, it was a stimulating and interesting project for me to pursue. It is not possible to know if there was any impact. However, the other volunteer was continuing for another week and was trying to convince me to stay because I had accomplished so much in this week. On my final free day, I returned to the market and made two more discoveries. The first were the stalls providing some homemade foods were selling out. The second was a woman selling baby clothes and items (she spoke English) and shared that she had revised her inventory to include disposable diapers. Now that it was the rainy season, the washed cloth diapers took too long to dry. It was a delight to encounter a true entrepreneur before departure. My desire to visit a shaman was realized. I'm not sure what I was expecting, but the session was uneventful with only the large white handkerchief he used in the ceremony gifted to me as a reminder of the event.

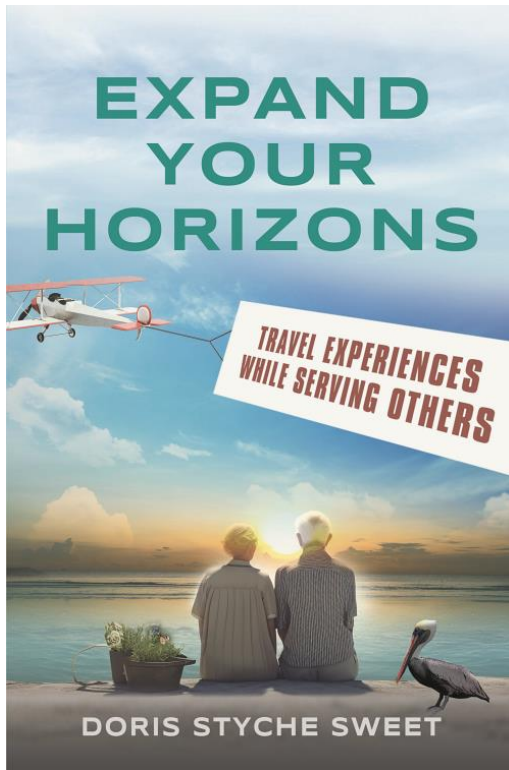
## About the Author



*Photo Credit: Bruce F Press Photography*

Doris Styche Sweet was born, and continues to live in the greater Baltimore, MD area. Her sister is in Charleston, SC; daughter and husband locally in Harford County, MD; and grandson with his partner and daughters reside in the Philippines. She has a master's degree from Johns Hopkins University and is now a retired Program Manager from a computer manufacturer. She was a designer and implementation manager of complex information technology projects for the government. During her career, she was introduced to the joys of traveling for volunteer service by her husband, Donald. Upon his death after sharing nine experiences, her grandson, Don, carried on the tradition by joining Doris for thirteen projects. She has completed an additional five with others and nineteen by herself in the past almost forty years.

Doris continues to volunteer locally and was inducted into the Maryland Senior Citizens Hall of Fame for assisting the Maryland Public Television [MPT] network—as well as many theater and cultural institutions in Baltimore. More recently she was included in an article, “Defying Expectations,” in *Baltimore Style Magazine*, featuring adventurous seniors. She can be found online at **[doris-sweet.com](http://doris-sweet.com)**



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