Solution to Pop-Pop's Perplexing Postcards

First, we'll focus on the first six postcards. The final postcard is only important during the last step.
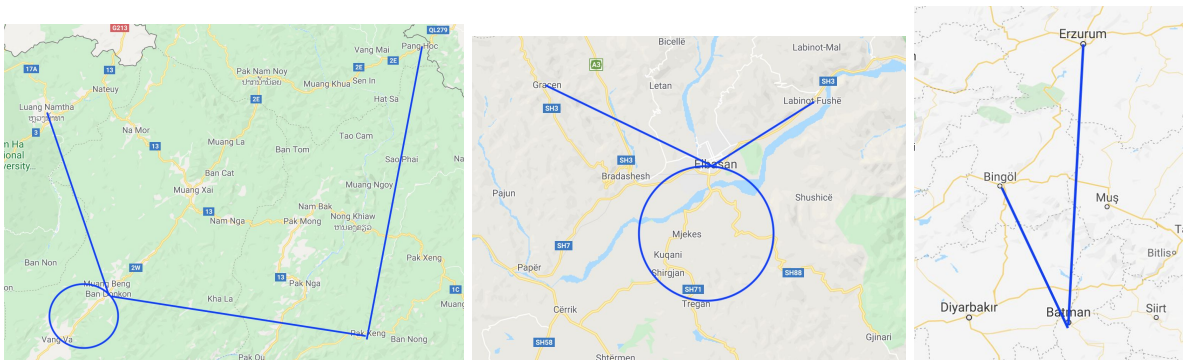
Each of the first six postcards says "Greetings from", followed by some number of question marks corresponding to the length of a place name. Each also begins with Pop-Pop describing the general type of place he visited (a city or a country). We can figure out where he went by looking up the specific places mentioned later in each postcard. (The images on the postcards are also from the correct places, but I doubt this will be of much use to solvers when they can just look up the specific towns visited.)
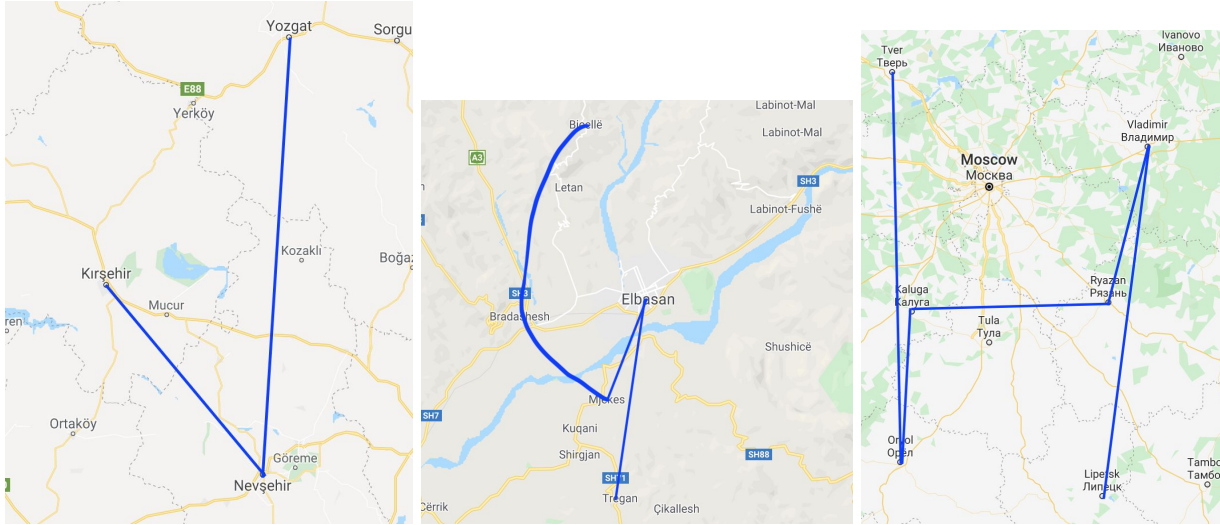
The answers are, in the order that the postcards appear on the page:

LAOS
ELBASAN
TURKEY
TURKEY
ELBASAN
RUSSIA

Taking the first letter of each location spells "LETTER".

Each of the first six postcards also describes a path that pop-pop takes. The paths between cities are all assumed to be straight lines, except when specified otherwise via a phrase like "circled around" or "curved around". Tracing these six paths on a map yields the following:
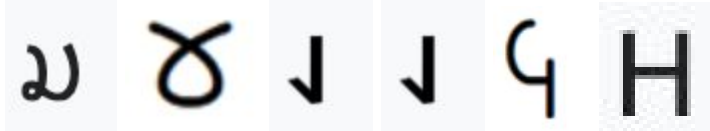
At first, these may seem like meaningless symbols. However, one might notice that the last one looks a lot like the letter H. After some further digging, one finds that each symbol is a letter -- but they're from a variety of different alphabets. Each letter is in an alphabet related to the country/city that the trip takes place in.

(Note: there are actually two places named "Pak Xeng" in Laos. Fortunately, they're close enough to each other that the shape of the path is pretty much the same regardless of which one you use. So, you get the correct letter either way.)

The alphabets are:

Lao script
Elbasan script
Old Turkic script
Old Turkic script
Elbasan script
Russian alphabet

The characters corresponding to each path are:

The English equivalents of these letters spell MULLEN. That's not a common word, but it does sound like English. What could it mean?

We now turn to the final postcard. Pop-Pop challenges us to determine his final destination. We also get a photo of Ireland with twelve question marks instead of a location name. From this, we determine that the final answer is a twelve-letter place related to Ireland. (It can't just be Ireland, since that's only 7 letters.)

There were 6 prior postcards and the final answer is 12 letters, so we suppose that each of the prior postcards clues two letters of the final answer. Earlier, we extracted "LETTER" and "MULLEN" from those postcards. We do some googling and we find that LETTERMULLEN is an island in Ireland. That's the final answer! Hooray!

(Note that postcards are letters in the sense that they are sent through the mail, tying into the overall theme of letters.)

Design Commentary

I always like puzzle answers to relate to the rest of the puzzle. So once I decided on LETTERMULLEN as my answer, I started thinking of ways to incorporate letters into a puzzle. "Letter" can mean a character in the alphabet, or it can mean something sent in the mail. I decided on a puzzle told via mail letters about alphabet letters. English letters are pretty boring, so I decided to use foreign alphabets. Combining mail with foreign countries led to the theme of someone traveling the world and mailing letters home documenting their travels. I decided to call them postcards instead of letters to avoid half of the final answer appearing verbatim in the puzzle while maintaining the thematic link.

I decided on the mechanism of paths on a map making letters from local alphabets pretty early on. Just decoding 12 letters in various languages seemed kind of boring to me, though. I wanted to encode some information in the places used. This led to each postcard encoding two letters of the final answer: one via the path traced, and one from the first letter of the place visited. At first, I wanted to make each postcard's two letters consecutive in the answer, but this turned out to be too difficult. The final version gives the solver the English word "LETTER", confirming that taking the first letter of the places is the right thing to do.

I think it's a bit unfortunate that MULLEN isn't a common English word. (Merriam-Webster says that it is in fact a word, though: https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/mullein.) Solvers might extract MULLEN and think they've done something wrong. I think the final postcard helps with this a bit by cluing that the final answer is twelve letters. This way, solvers should figure out that both LETTER and MULLEN are just half of the final answer. From there, googling "mullen letter" gives nothing, and googling "letter mullen" brings up the Wikipedia

article on Lettermullen. Combining this with the picture of Ireland on the final postcard cements that the final answer is LETTERMULLEN.

I'm also a bit sad that I had to use Elbasan as one of the places visited. I wanted them all to be countries to be consistent, but I couldn't find a country starting with E that has a writing system besides the latin alphabet capable of expressing the English letters U and E. Ethiopia comes close, but the Ge'ez script doesn't have separate letters indicating vowels. So, I settled on Elbasan.

The constraints of construction also meant that I had to use lots of obscure, tiny towns to mark the paths. This is fine for people using google maps, which I imagine most solvers will do. But, it might present problems for solvers using other map services.

Overall, though, I think this puzzle turned out well. I think it's a bit on the easy side, but that's intentional. I tend to prefer short and sweet puzzles to complex ones that can seem to drag on forever. I hope you all had some fun solving it!