

# A WALK IN THE CAUCASUS

A GEORGIAN TRAVELOGUE



CHRIS THARP

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CAUCASUS**

*A Georgian Travelogue*

**by Chris Tharp**

## The City

There is a notion among some travelers that the real magic only happens once you dive in deep and savor your new surroundings; that you've got to put in the time to reap the rewards. While I've certainly embraced this point-of-view, I've also found that some of the most gratifying moments happen early on, when you initially set eyes on that big destination. Whether it's that first glimpse of the Manhattan skyline or the instant you round the corner in your tuk-tuk and behold the alien spectacle of Angkor Wat, this primary impression is more than often a whap to the pleasure center that courses through your veins, electrifies your skin, and lets you know that you've finally *arrived*.

I'm certainly not immune to such a rush; in fact, I kind of live for it, and in this regard Tbilisi didn't disappoint. The city just seemed to appear out of nowhere: suddenly there I was, in post-Soviet Rivendell. Sure, I'd seen the orang-ish glow in the distance as my taxi rattled in from the airport set on the far edge of town, but it wasn't until we reached the flow of the Mtkvari River and I took in the settlement built up on both sides that I came to appreciate just where I had landed. This place was spectacular — an enchanting warren of alleys and streets winding between stone houses straight out of fairy tale land. The twin sentinels of a cathedral and the presidential palace kept vigil from their cliff side perches; a handful of bridges spanned the rolling river, and the whole scene was illuminated by brilliant amber lights — giving it the look of a lived-in, real-time museum. Tbilisi put its best face forward after the sun went down, and I was immediately mesmerized, so much so that I didn't even flinch when my cab driver overcharged me for the ride. I just laughed and handed him too many *lari*, accepted the fleecing as the price of admission.

Tbilisi is an undeniably comely town, but I was also in a vulnerable state. Part of my exhilaration (and susceptibility to getting ripped off) surely sprung from the fact that I'd just endured a twenty-four hour slog via China Southern Airlines (their motto: "You'll Probably Get There") predicated by a sleepless night before I'd even left Busan; I was positively zombified and eternally grateful just to have arrived at my destination in one piece, gulping down the fresh night air while relishing the freedom that comes from no longer being cooped up in a sitting position in a moving tube. I had taken two taxis, two trains, and three airplanes to get where I was and would have been kissing the ground in Mogadishu or Mosul if those had been my final stops. So after checking into the Valiko Bar & Hostel (it was a Monday night and their bar was closed), I headed out for a brief sample of the local flavor, which, at this point, meant booze.

I had done my research and learned that bars in Tbilisi are as ubiquitous as say, phone shops in Korea. Just a saunter up the slightly crumbling, graffiti-tagged block confirmed this fact, and soon I was in a basement joint populated by a smattering of Georgian, Russian, and European customers.

The bartender was a dude who looked like he could be the coverboy for *HIPSTER WEEKLY*. He was young, inked to the gills, and sported a cascading jet black beard that was a thing of pure beauty. This was the first time I'd come face-to-face-with the work of art that is a Georgian beard; add a few cool tattoos, and it makes their young men the world's most photogenic hipsters. No one can beat those beards, including

me, who at age forty-seven can still really only manage a brown and grey peppered patch of moss.

“*Gamarjoba*.” I said, employing the standard greeting, one of a handful of Georgian words I’d learned before arriving. When travelling, my default meter is usually set to “East Asia,” which means I assume nearly no one speaks English.

“Hey,” the young beard responded. “What do you wanna drink?”

“Uh... an IPA... I guess.”

Now I didn’t want an IPA, but this place only had craft beer on tap, an unfortunate trend that invariably raises my hackles. But at 5 lari (\$2.25) it certainly wasn’t breaking the bank. Still, I longed for a crisper, lighter choice. As the late-great Anthony Bourdain once said: “You know what kind of beer I like? Cold beer.”

Still, I surrendered to the prevailing winds of ale, paid the young barman and even gave him a “*madloba*” (“thanks”) along with a small tip. He ignored both, which, along with the hosing from my cabbie, led me to wonder if the Georgian reputation for warmth and hospitality just may be greatly exaggerated. Still, I was in a hipster bar in the major city and major city dwellers everywhere are known for their occasional cuntiness; I was also too frazzled, too old, and too clueless as to how things rolled on the ground to ever be embraced by these kids at this hole-in-the-wall boozier. So I slunk to the corner and nursed my pint in shunned silence, beaten down from a day of hard travel — sleep-deprived, dizzy, and utterly incapable of stringing together more than two or three words at a time.

I slammed my hop bomb and made a beeline back to my hostel, where I timbered onto the bed and was enveloped in black.

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Georgia is a small country nestled on the southern flank of the Great Caucasus, squeezed in right between Russia and Turkey. This land of just under four million also shares borders with fellow Caucasus states Azerbaijan and Armenia, and like a lot of diminutive nations, it has often been subjected to the whims and desires of its more powerful neighbors. In the past, “Georgia” was a collection of tiny kingdoms that, when not fighting each other, was invaded and subjugated by the Mongols, the Persians, the Ottoman Turks, and ultimately the Russians, who absorbed it entirely into the Czarist Russian Empire; Tbilisi was built and designated as Russia’s headquarters for its possessions in the Caucasus and flourished accordingly.

After the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, Georgia, as a nation state, enjoyed a flash of actual independence. This taste of freedom was, of course, short-lived, and by 1922 the country was once again incorporated into the Great Bear, this time as a member of the Soviet Union, where it remained until its secession in 1991. Since then Georgia has attempted to cut its own path, doing its best to break free of its long-forged dependence on Russia, which at times has been paid in Georgian blood.

As I walked the streets of Tbilisi, I could see the Russian fingerprints everywhere — from the beautiful, stately Czarist-era buildings to the brutalist Soviet eyesores that

still stood in defiance of the changing tides. And while Japanese cars seemed to be the vehicle of choice, a few old Russian Ladas and military trucks still rumbled down the city's wide avenues, reminding us that the days of communism were not so far behind. I could also hear Russian everywhere. Despite a brief but nasty war in 2008, Georgia now welcomed Russian visitors, who flooded Tbilisi accordingly and didn't hesitate to use their language, which was also understood and spoken fluently by any Georgian over the age of forty.

In fact, Tbilisi was thrumming with tourists from all over the globe, especially in the city's historic old town, where the lion's share of hotels and guest houses are located. In addition to Russians, I came across scores of Europeans, Turks, Iranians, Arabs, Chinese, and even the odd North American. And while there was definitely a young backpacker contingent, the visitors in Tbilisi covered a wide-range of ages, races, and social classes. It was a terrific mix of humans strolling these old streets and soaking up a very unique and well-aged ambiance.

And while the Georgians were definitely doing their best to take advantage of this newfound boom in tourism by offering excursions, changing money, selling souvenirs, and opening restaurants and cafes, it was never too much. At no point did I find myself awash in a sea of touts or schlocky bric-a-brac, where the act of profiting off of tourism overwhelms and takes over the place itself. I got the sense that tourism in Tbilisi — while no longer in its infancy — was somewhere in its toddler years, and I was grateful to have gotten there in time.

Over the years I have developed a now deeply-held belief that the best way to get to know anywhere is to lace up a pair of shoes and hoof it, so I spent two days wandering the city. I'd leave my guesthouse in the morning, sit for a coffee and a pastry at the Magherita Bakery on the cobblestoned Kote Afkhazi Street (which doubled as the main tourist drag) and then let my feet lead the way. I walked without destination or purpose, except to take in as much as possible. I meandered through alleys and side streets populated by huge sleeping dogs; along wide sidewalks between grandiose government buildings and even wider avenues transformed into rivers of cars; through musty pedestrian subways filled with sad little shops, dirt-cheap bakeries, and vibrant, multicolored murals; I hiked up the mountain behind old town, poked through the ruins of a fortress, and took in the red and orange rooftops of the splayed-out town below from the base of the "Mother of Georgia," a massive statue of a sword-wielding woman standing guard over her city and nation; I rode a funicular railway up to a tatty amusement park that reeked of neglect and despair, watching as bored attendants waited for the trickle of customers that may or may not appear; I crisscrossed the river over the city's many bridges, gazing down at the fat, brownish flow of the Mtkvari.

Tbilisi is an ancient town with a not-so-ancient attempt at Soviet makeover, which thankfully never fully took root. With the exception of a few shopping centers and newly-built commercial centers, the buildings are all aging, made of brick, stone, and unpainted, rough concrete. The cumulative effect is one of an enchanting shabbiness, a kind of bohemian brush applied to large swaths the city. Whether it is a splintering wooden window frame, cracks in the stone, or paint peeling from the walls, everything looked just a bit worn down, lending the place a kind of working class authenticity. And so many of the city's structures seemed to be on the verge of falling over —

dilapidated and creaky — or precipitously perched over cliff sides and river embankments, as if to suggest that one sneeze or earthly tremor could send it all tumbling onto the rocks or gurgling water below.

Unlike other parts of Europe, Tbilisi isn't a place of immaculate tidiness or straight lines. Crookedness reigns supreme, which only adds to the charm. Whether this is the result of building practices or just the rigors of time is up for debate, but many of the roofs sag just so, and half the houses are literally crumbling away or tilting in manner that makes the whole city seem half drunk. This very lived-in feel only served to relax me, like I was visiting a big friendly family living in an old, welcoming house, as opposed a stuffy relative who covers the furniture in plastic and dusts three times a day.

If the bones of the city looked a little drunk, maybe that's because they were, as Tbilisi, and Georgia in general, is easily the booziest place I've ever visited (and I live in the Alco-Holy Land known as Korea). Beer and wine and chacha (their local firewater) flow mightily, offered up in cafes, cellars, and bars everywhere, and at most hours of the day. Georgians like their tittle and when you visit it is generally expected that you will freely imbibe as well. There were a good deal of Muslims tourists, but I even saw many of them knocking back a cheeky pint or glass of vino at the outside cafes with nary a hint of shame, which is probably one of the reasons they come.

I knew that Georgia was a drinker's destination well before I bought my ticket. This of course, was a major selling point, so much so that when it came time to book accommodations, I chose a hostel built around a bar. It's not that I would have had any trouble finding another place to drink, but there's something to be said about the one stop shopping offered up by an establishment that includes a boozier and a bed under one roof.

The Valiko Bar and Hostel is located in Old Town, just a stone's throw from Liberty Square, which is the roundabout and landmark that acts as the nucleus that section of the city. The place is named after a Georgian filmmaker from the days of silent movies, and occupies three floors of a gorgeous old building.

As the name suggests, it's a hostel with dormitory-type rooms for the younger backpacker set, but there are also a couple of private rooms to be had. I opted for their version of a penthouse, which was clean, roomy, and comfortable, and set me back about \$35 USD a night.

But the real gem of this place is the bar itself, which is situated on the third floor. It's a place that manages to be intimate without ever feeling stuffy, set in a room with a high relief ceiling and big windows that bathe the space with sunlight during the day. Two of the windows open up to small balconies with a table each, where you can sit out and savor a drink or a coffee and watch the street life flow by underneath. At night the place comes alive with a steady rotation of customers; down tempo techno music pours from the speakers, while a projector beams footage of the silent films made by the bar's namesake onto the walls.

By day I explored Tbilisi and by night I sat at Valiko's small bar where I drank and traded stories with Kobus, the South African owner, and his partner, Masha, along with other guests who wandered in for a beer, a cocktail, or a glass of vino. It was here

where I became acquainted with *chacha*, the unrefined brandy that is Georgia's official hooch. Kobus kept several varieties behind the bar and poured shots liberally. Chacha is one of those raw, high-octane drinks that you can either ingest for pleasure or use to power your tractor. It burns going down and then hits you with a wall of fumes, causing you to jump up from your bar stool and do a dance of pain, victory, and exhilaration. It's a kind of liquid speed and found everywhere in Georgia, so cheap that it's nearly free.

There was something eminently satisfying about having a boozier just sixty seconds from my bed. Rather than wander the neighborhood in search of nightlife, I let the nightlife come to me. And at this point my storied drinking career, I like a small, friendly bar with strong character and strong drinks, a place with a enough patrons to give it life, but never so crowded and loud as to overwhelm and ruin the experience. Valiko fit this perfectly, and during those two electrified, blurry nights I fell in love with the place, along with Tbilisi as a whole. I got the feeling that I had arrived in Georgia during a special time, that the country was just stepping into the spotlight. Things felt exciting and vital, and I was more than glad that I had come. But as charming as the city could be, I hadn't come to Georgia to booze it up in bars for days on end: it was time to head up into the mountains and hike.

## The Mountains

At first glance, Mestia could be a ski town in the Rockies or the French Alps. It's an alpine burg with one main strip, home to hotels, shops, restaurants, cafes, bars, and packs of tourists strolling along the sidewalks and soaking up the mountain air. It's not until you step back and take the place in as a whole that you understand its ancient glory. Scores of stone watchtowers (*koshkebi*) stand guard over the town, harkening back to a more treacherous time, when marauding bands and invading armies were a going concern.

It took me twelve hours to get to Mestia from Tbilisi, via three *mashtuka*, the minivans that perform the heavy lifting when it comes to public transportation in this part of the world. I was fortunate to be the sole passenger during the final leg as we snaked up the two-lane road into the Great Caucasus, the forbidding wall of rock and glacial peaks that runs from the Black Sea to the Caspian. I took slugs of brandy from a bottle I'd brought and attempted to join in with my driver as he sang along with the spirited Georgian folk songs warbling from the van's speakers. At one point he pulled into a roadside cafe and treated me to an impromptu meal of *kupdari*, a kind of savory meat pie that is a hallmark of Svan cuisine. It was well after dark when we pulled into Mestia itself; he embraced me warmly and planted a single kiss on the side of my face, which I took a sign of respect and hopefully great things to come.

My optimism bore fruit the next morning, as I awoke to a dazzling sun which washed over Mestia and the heights surrounding it like a kind of luminous honey. After a

bang-on breakfast at my guesthouse (cucumber/tomato salad, potato fritter, bread, jam, egg, local cheese, tea and Georgia's national dish of *khatchapuri*, a kind of thick quesadilla made with salted, sour cheese), I headed out into the shimmering day with the intention of getting my walk on.

Mestia serves as a kind of base for exploring the Svaneti, which is the highest inhabited area of the Caucasus and home to some of range's highest summits. I intended to set off on a four-day trek the next day, but first wanted to do a local hike to get my bearings and warm-up for the upcoming jaunt.

As I crossed the over the glacial froth of the Mulkhra River and walked into the town, I noticed a large cross atop the mountain that looms over the settlement. This immediately struck me as a destination worth checking out, and soon I was heading up a stone road, past a cluster of houses and watchtowers, until the road gave way to a dirt path.

This trail climbed steeply through pine forest, and I found the going rough. My heart was banging through my chest and I found myself gasping for breath. The late-morning heat wasn't helping my cause, nor was the altitude, which, at over 1500 meters (5,000 feet), was just enough to make me work just that much more. I was also stoked to finally be on the trail in Georgia and approached the hike with a bit too much zest; I had anticipated this moment for months and was basically running up the damned mountain, which responded by kicking my ass.

I had all day to hike and soon embraced the wisdom of taking things a bit more slowly. There were other people on the trail, all whom were suffering from the heat and steepness as well. I greeted them all, and even came across a guy from Seattle, which for a moment shrunk the world; he would be the only other American I would meet during my week in Svaneti.

Eventually the trail joined a larger dirt road, which climbed at a much less ball-busting grade, and soon I was at the top, standing underneath the massive cross.

This is where things really opened up: not only could I see the expanse of the valley below, but the jagged ridges and pinnacles of the Caucasus now came into full view. I was surrounded by alabaster-capped peaks; a look in any direction revealed glorious mountains under the wash of a late-summer sun. This ripped the air from my lungs and let me know that I had entered a realm of exquisite beauty — natural scenery of an abundance and scope that I'd never quite witnessed before.

The cross was erected on what was the first of several "summits" on a bald ridge rising up to the twin peaks of Mt. Ushba, a 4,700 meter (15,419 feet) massif that dominates an already impressive and dramatic landscape. The trail continues up the spine of the ridge and after a brief rest I resumed climbing, seemingly pulled along by the elemental magnetism of Ushba, until I eventually arrived at Koruldi Lake, which, unless you're a mountaineer bent on summiting the peak, is the the end of the line.

The lake itself was small and muddy, with a smattering of hikers lounging in the grass along its shore, as well as a couple of parked vans that had driven visitors up the dirt track from the town, people who were either too lazy or intimidated to make the hike. I tend to share the view of the writer Edward Abbey when it comes to idea of building



roads in pristine natural areas: We should never do it, even if that means forbidding access for people who, due to disability or age, are physically unable to walk in. Tough titty. That's a price worth paying when it comes to not ruining everything.

That said, a couple of vans did little to diminish the moment, despite the fact that one of them blared Georgian pop music, which briefly made me fantasize about shooting it with a rocket propelled grenade. But before I could get sucked into the spiral of my petty obsessions, I was once again gripped by the glory of my surroundings when I saw the vivid avian forms of two paragliders riding the wind below, soaring on summer gusts before the backdrop of a craggy alpine wonderland. For just a moment my spirit joined them.

What is it about the high mountains that hits us like a really good drug? To stand in the presence of a gargantuan mass of rock and ice is to have your breath snatched away and then blown back in twofold. It ignites a kind frenzied fire inside, which pulses through your wiring and then shoots out as a shower of invisible sparks, leaving you soothed and warmed in its aftermath. This fantastic world is an blast to the system and as I stumbled back down the path toward Mestia, I found it hard to believe that I was just getting started.

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I had come to Georgia to walk and decided on a mountain trek that went from Mestia to the village of Ushguli, a UNESCO World Heritage Site that claims to be the highest continually-inhabited village in Europe. This nearly 60-kilometer hike was to be the centerpiece of the trip and is most often done over the course of four days, though a highly motivated hiker could bang it out in two or three. I was in no rush and keen to savor my environs, so the four-day itinerary suited me just fine.

It was an overcast morning when I set out from Mestia's main square. The forecast called for an afternoon deluge so I was prepared to get wet, but hoping to log most of my kilometers before the sky opened up. Rain on a hike is rarely fun, but getting caught out in a thunderstorm on the side of a mountain is not only a recipe for misery: it's dangerous, as getting blasted by lightning is an actual concern.

Armed with a big, knobby wooden hiking stick that I had found during my jaunt the day before, I made good time, crossing the river and following the dirt track that rose out of town. I passed a few other people on the trail, mainly in clusters of two or three. This was the height of summer and this trek was definitely on the radar of anyone who came to Georgia with the intention of walking, so I had to quickly disabuse myself of the notion that I'd be experiencing four days of solitude.

Sometimes, however, a trip can be made by the people you meet, and I was about to find this out firsthand. Just twenty minutes in I came to a fork in the road with no sign or marker suggesting the route. A grey-haired man in a "Lao PDR" baseball cap stood at the fork, looking at an actual, printed-out map (a rare item in today's digital age), He was soon joined by his companion, a tall guy whose face bore an uncanny resemblance to the late actor Steve McQueen. The two of them scrutinized the map and conferred.

My inclination was to take the left fork, as it appeared to be the more defined of the two. Yes, I know that “the road less traveled” is seen as a great metaphor for life, but this is not always practical advice when it comes to not getting lost in the mountains. Luckily for me, I had a savoir in the form of the map-holding man just feet away.

“Which way?” I asked.

“To the right, I believe.” He double checked the map for good measure. “Yes, it’s definitely to the right.”

His name was Paddy. The other guy was Ian. They were from Scotland.

“Are you guys related?” I inquired, noticing a possible resemblance.

“What, do you think I’m his father?” Paddy said, laughing and scoffing at the same time.

“Well it doesn’t hurt to ask, now, does it?” I replied.

“We’re just mates,” said Ian. “Long time walking buddies. But thanks for the compliment.”

I stuck with them as the right fork devolved into a narrow trail and climbed up toward the pass through a dark stand of pines. We traded bits of stories and personal info as we hiked on, and found ourselves laughing more than not. Both Paddy and Ian possessed a casual, wry sense of humor, which made me like them straight away. On top of it, I could tell that these guys were serious, experienced hikers who, like me, had been looking forward to this trek for some time now.

Now I had planned on doing the whole trek on my own, which was nothing new for me. I hike solo in Korea all the time, but I was immediately comfortable with these two, so I just let it blurt out: “If you guys don’t mind, I’d like to join you for at least today’s leg.”

They graciously agreed and just thirty minutes in, I was part of a crew.

We stopped for a drink of water at the crest of the ridge. While not super hot, it was properly muggy, and Paddy was suffering accordingly, being more accustomed to the chilly drizzle of Scotland than the late morning’s press of humidity. I had just endured a sauna-like Korean summer, so to me this was kid’s play, but to be non-acclimated to sultry conditions is no joke. Nothing saps a hikers energy more quickly than heat combined with moisture.

Eventually, after passing through an expansive meadow, we reached the pass, which looked down onto long a valley, home to a handful of villages and their omnipresent watchtowers. Our destination, Zhabeshi, sat at the head of the valley, in the shadow of Mt. Tetnuldi, a 4,858 meter (15,938 feet) peak that was obscured by a growing cloak of clouds. In fact, the sky was now turning from grey to purplish black, and we could hear the rumbles of thunder above the ridgelines, which served as motivation for us to make double time.

We took a high route that skirted the ridge above the valley and eventually descended through a couple of villages made up of farm houses and stone ruins. The landscape was grand and stark, with a storm wind whisking down from the mountaintops, imbuing our simple walk with a sense of drama; the images of collapsing medieval towers only served to enhance this feeling that we had been transported to the set of an epic fantasy film. I was half-expecting a band of orcs to set upon us from behind a dilapidated wall.

Paddy opened up to me as we walked, filling me in on his life and other things in between. He was a retired teacher and lived just outside of Edinburgh, and now spent most of his time hiking the hills of Scotland and travelling the world. He was actually born in Ceylon (Sri Lanka), to an English mother and Irish father, but after independence in 1948 his parents headed to the UK, where they raised their family in Scotland.

Paddy was a gifted storyteller and bon vivant. He could carry on about politics, geography, religion, history, and languages — especially with regard the old Scots dialect and the different permutations of Gaelic found throughout the British Isles. He knew a lot about the States as well, having even traveled through my neck of the woods in the mid-70's, where he wowed me with a story of seeing Jethro Tull play the Seattle Center Coliseum. I decided early on that this was a guy I could listen to for days, so I did.

Ian was the quieter of the two — unassuming and kind — one of those rare people who you meet and immediately trust. Despite his comparative reticence, he had a sense of humor that could slice like a blade, and often had me in stitches with just one well-placed line. He worked in construction and was the father of three kids, one of whom was currently working on a PhD at Stanford, so he'd obviously done something right.

Despite making good time in attempt to avoid the inevitable rain, by the time we reached the little road on the valley's floor, the skies opened up, starting with a trickle and gaining in strength and intensity by the minute. We donned our raingear (I envied my Scottish friends' very high-end jackets), covered our packs, and continued up the valley, past the incongruity of a small cement plant and into the lush pasture land beyond.

Soon we were in the village of Chvabiani, which, while a kilometer and change short of our destination of Zhabeshi, looked like a very nice place to spend the night, especially since the rain was now coming down in buckets. We quickly found a clean, welcoming guest house, and before you know we were out of the elements enjoying hot showers, dry clothes, and most importantly, cold beer.

The rain kept up for three solid hours and then stopped just as suddenly as it began. I took the opportunity to step outside of our farmhouse and breathe it all in, and was greeted by a tiny rainbow. I walked along a mucky road away from the village, making my way through herdlets of cows, who seemed to outnumber people in Svaneti. Rivulets of mist ran down the flanks of the mountains, while a kind of ethereal steam rose from the fields and stone structures. The whole scene shimmered as if covered by a thin layer of glistening jelly, while a diffused, early evening light angled through gaps in rapidly dissolving clouds.

Dinner that night was sufficient, but not much more. We were joined by a Belgian guy who had dragged his wife and two kids along on the trek as some kind of family bonding session. It had been a wet slog of an afternoon and morale was low, especially for the oldest boy, a cocksure, sullen kid who glowered through dinner, refusing to touch a bite of this peasant food and no doubt wishing he was back in civilized Europe where he could savor his adolescent joys away from the watchful eye of mom and dad and these supremely uncool, old foreigners.

We ended the night with, well, all the beers (we drank the place dry), and a small bottle of chacha, which put a nice exclamation mark on the day. The Belgian guy joined us for a few rounds and to my surprise, expressed a modicum of empathy for Trump supporters once the conversation veered into politics (which it always does when Europeans and Americans drink together). He was no right-wing firebrand, but expressed real concern that his neighborhood in Antwerp was now unrecognizable, having been effectively taken over by fully bearded, fully burkha'd Muslims. This was by no means the first time I've come across pretty strident anti-immigrant attitudes from otherwise liberal Europeans, but it did cause me to take note and realize that this nativist zeitgeist that helped to bring about Trump is also boiling over on the other side of the Atlantic.

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We awoke to a brilliant, glorious day, accompanied by a breakfast that would have satiated a rugby team. Soon we were off, leaving Chvabiani and ascending the hillside underneath a cloudless sky.

We were among the first on the trail, and as we climbed and looked below us, we could see scores of other hikers, streaming up the path like multi-colored ants. Many of these trekkers were from a single Israeli contingent; the young Hebrews often travel in large packs, and I was told during this trip that Georgia is now on their radar, and from what I saw that morning I believed it.

While initially busy each morning (everyone set off at roughly the same time), the way was never mobbed, and given the different sizes of the groups and the paces they set, things spread out pretty quickly. There was usually only about an hour of close quarter walking, and given the immediately steep climb, that morning's was the worst of the trip.

Still, the number of hikers had us concerned that lodgings in Adishi, our next destination, could book up, so we made it a priority to be the "point of the spear" and get there while the pickings were good.

After about two hours of relatively strenuous hiking, the trail joined a wide new road being built to serve the Tetnuldi ski resort. In fact, we could make out the silhouette of the resort's chairlift during the whole of the ascent, and once we came upon the road, we followed the deceptively steep way until we reached the high point. From there we enjoyed a nearly 360 degree view of the Svaneti Caucasus, including Mt. Tetnuldi and the two peaks of Mt. Ushba, where I had been just two days before.

We jumped off the road onto a small path that skirted the ridge and dropped down, where we soon came across a splendid little alpine "cafe." This very welcome center of

hospitality was made up of a crude wooden hut and a handful of tables, right there on the side of the mountain. Ian bought a round of beers and soon we were lounging, sipping ice-cold Natakhtari lager while basking in the million dollar view and barely believing our good fortune.

The trail gently descended through wide meadows before entering forest, and within two hours we had come to the village of Adishi, which is set in a narrow valley and only reveals itself once you're right up on it. A handful of other hikers sat and sunned on an outcropping overlooking this beautiful, crumbling little village, but we pressed on down the slope, hoping to secure accommodation before the Israeli army arrived.

Upon arriving we found that we had succeeded in our mission of being "The Point of the Spear," since we were among the first in our guest house, a clapboard affair run by a grumbling lump of a woman. The lodgings were rudimentary but more than sufficient for our rather basic needs, and within 90 minutes the place was booked. My bed sagged so much as to pretty much assume the role of a fluffy hammock, but we managed to procure beer, as well as local wine, which was served in recycled lemonade bottles and tasted like grapey cat piss. Still, that didn't stop Paddy and me from downing a few glasses as we sat outside in the ebbing daylight, watching the locals as they rode in their horses, rounded up the cows, and led them all into shelter for the night.

Adashi was a change from the villages we had been through (and slept in) the day before, in that it really felt cut off from the rest of the world. The hamlet sits in a wild valley served by a crude dirt road and is in a state of collapsing disrepair. Life is hard in Adishi, so much so that we were told only two families live there year-round, a testament to the brutal winters that, at 2080 meters (6824 feet), the village certainly is made to endure. This new summer infusion of hikers (and their stacks of *lari*) must be a boon to the residents, who, without a doubt, scratched out the most bare bones of an existence before their arrival.

In this sense it felt good to be there, staying in their homes, eating their food (*khatchapuri* up the whazoo), buying their beer and turpentine-ish wine, while supplying them with a fat stream of cash that had no doubt lifted the fortunes of the whole community. The tourism that hit them in ever-growing waves for a couple months of the year didn't overwhelm this out-of-the-way village. Somehow the residents found a way to accommodate the 40–80 people a day who poured in during these peak weeks, feed them mightily, and send them on their way, only to sweep the floors, make the beds, wash the dishes, and do it all over again. I suppose this is the very definition of "win-win."

Above all, Adishi is a gorgeous place that could stand in for a settlement in the realm of Rohan in Lord of the Rings. The village and the valley it called home radiated history and untamed enchantment, so much so, that when Ian sent his wife some photos, she responded with: "Have the dragons taken the day off?"

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We awoke to a breakfast of such immensity that, after stuffing ourselves, most of the twenty guests seated at the table snatched hunks of bread and slices of *khatchapuri* to take along as lunch provisions. The meal, like all the guesthouse breakfasts, was an

absolute whopper, enough to fuel us for hours of tough walking with nary a micro-pang of hunger. The Svan, to their eternal credit, really know how to throw down a morning spread.

The day was so far unmatched in its brilliance. The sun blasted in arcs just over the long ridge without a single cloud in the sky. This weather was an invaluable gift, as summers in Svaneti see just about as much rain as clear skies. Only a week before our arrival, it had pissed down for days on end, shrouding the peaks and soaking the trekkers with a ceaseless drizzle. Aside from an afternoon of thunderstorms on the first day, the weather during our walk had gone from great to absolutely perfect.

The trail headed up the valley, with the river gurgling in a silver rush to our right. We were among the first to leave Adishi and as I turned back to take it in for one last time, I was sorry to be walking away, as I my gut told me that even if I return in the near future, it wouldn't be the same. Still I pressed on, turning up the heat of my pace, leaving my companions behind and cruising past duos and clusters of Euro-hikers, until I approached the head of the valley and gazed upon what was to be the showpiece of the walk: Mt. Tetnuldi and the Adishi Glacier.

I had seen couple of glaciers up this point, but the trail brought me face to face with this monster of an ice flow, which oozed down from the Lakchkhilda Range, the spine of peaks that make up the border between Russia and Georgia. As the trail hooked right and approached the river, I came upon a Belgian couple that I'd met at our guesthouse. They were taking a break, staring up at the glacier with saucer eyes. I asked them to snap a photo, which they obliged, and when I turned back around to behold the site, I let a ecstatic groan.

"There are no words," the Belgian man said. "No words."

The trail soon came to a ford in the river, where the locals provided horses to ferry the hikers across the glacial rush, for a fee. Paddy had carried on the necessity of "supporting the local economy," which, while a principle I agree with, I felt we had done several times over through the purchase of beer and wine. Most all of the other hikers would enjoy perhaps a single beer and call it a night; we drank like we fucking well meant it. The river, while running swift, was running relatively low, and being a hiker from the land of swollen water known as the Pacific Northwest, I fancy myself a kind of expert when it comes to fording streams, and couldn't justify forking out cash for a 30-second horse ride when I could easily wade the thing myself. So I did.

Paddy and Ian arrived presently and paid the ferryman accordingly, and soon we were off, humping the last real climb of the hike. I was still in cruise mode, and shot up the side of this mountain like an amped-up goat, overtaking the few hikers ahead of me, until I reached Chkunderi Pass.

I shed my light pack (the great thing about village hiking is that you needn't pack a tent, sleeping bag, stove, food, etc.) and waited for Paddy and Ian, who were not far behind, which came as no surprise. They, along with me, were probably the oldest cats on the hike and blazed by nearly everyone, including Israeli kids straight out of the army. It's not that they hiked so "fast," but rather, they found a steady, comfortable pace and just stuck to it with minimal breaks. This is the mark of an experienced walker.

Joined once again by my Scottish comrades, I climbed the side path up from the pass to the summit of Mt. Chkunderi, where, along with the few other jubilant hikers, we took in the full splendor of the Adishi Glacier and the surrounding range, along with the Zaresho-Khalde Glacier (which sat at the head of the next valley over) and the behemoth form of Mt. Tetnuldi. This was the emotional, spiritual, and literal apex of the trip, a mind-blowing panorama that left us all in awe. We just stood there, shaking our heads and attempting to verbalize platitudes would never be adequate for the occasion. This was what we had come for, and like our Belgian companion said, there were no words.

This spectacular view must have infused Paddy with a renewed sense of vigor, for he screamed down the trail into the next valley, practically jogging, passing everyone in his way. I had burned too much gas coming up the mountain and now found myself running on fumes as I descended down towards the Khaldechala River, but after a break for some icy spring water and even more khatchapuri, I found my second wind, and in about an hour and half I reached the ruined village of Khaldze, which was razed by the Russian Army in 1876. The shells of those old buildings still stood, along with a much more lived-in structure, which also served as a guest house and cafe, complete with a spacious outdoor patio and, of course, cold beer.

After knocking back three icy bottles of Argo lager, we once again hit the trail, and before we knew it we had arrived in Iprali, our destination for the day. Our guesthouse was a massive, brand-new complex that felt like a hotel. The young woman who showed us room exuded the charm of a pit viper, but the place was clean and well-stocked with all of the necessities (read: cold beer and drinkable vino). Still, the family that ran the place saw fit to post a series of admonishments on the wall, complete with multiple exclamation points and the threat of monetary sanction.

**DO NOT SPOIL THE TOWEL!!!**

**25 LARI FINE!!!**

**DO NOT DO LAUNDRY IN THE SINK!!!**

**25 LARI FINE!!!**

**DO NOT BRING TREKKING BOOTS INSIDE!!!**

**25 LARI FINE!!!**

We spent the afternoon sipping bottles of Natakhtari at a picnic table in the back yard with a group of agreeable young Germans, and took down a feast of a dinner with around 40 other guests, including a late-arriving faction of Chinese. Afterwards we lingered over a couple of late drinks with Arni, a Norwegian guy who had moved to England decades back, and his son, a bright, easy-going kid who had suggested this trek to his pops in the first place. We learned that their joint passion was walking and it was clear that they both found great joy doing it together, which seemed a world away from the Belgian father two nights back and his sour, ill-tempered son.

After yet another epic breakfast we slid into our packs and headed out into the dazzling morning, descending a dirt track that joined up with the bigger dirt road heading up to Ushguli. Right before we reached the road, however, a river of humans with trekking poles and backpacks emerged from a guesthouse at the bottom of the hill: for the first time on the trip we would have to contend with the 30-plus party of Hungarians making the hike.

I had heard about this posse from other people on the walk and dreaded coming across them. I just can't understand what would possess people to take a multi-day mountain hike in such large numbers. Not only would you be constantly surrounded by other humans while supposing getting "away from it all," but such a mob can only move as fast as its slowest member; it's constantly bogged down by people needing to retie their boots, adjust their packs, pee, retrieve snacks and water bottles, or just sit and catch their breath every few minutes due to a lack of fitness or experience on the trail. To hike in such a group just seemed ludicrous to me, completely at odds with the whole reason for heading up into the mountains in the first place. Still, these Hungarians (and Israelis) insisted on showing up en masse, and while it sucked to get caught behind them first thing in the morning, they were indeed as slow as you would expect, and we blasted through them like butter.

We continued along the rutted, stony road, crossing a bridge over the frothy tumble of the river and leaving the village behind. Our original plan was to jump off the road and take the walking path that ran parallel through the woods above, but we had somehow missed the turnoff and pressed on, at this point more concerned with getting to Ushguli than the route itself.

We made great time, burning up the road, stopping only for the cars, vans, and trucks that rumbled past. But as the morning went on, the traffic increased in volume, especially vans carrying tourists into Ushguli from Mestia. Most of these vehicles kicked up dust and some belched black smoke, which made an otherwise easy hike rough at times.

We mostly walked in the shadow of a gorge, with the sheer rock walls of the mountains rising on both sides. As we approached Ushguli, however, this little canyon opened up into pasture land, and soon we could see the village's guard towers welcoming us as we strolled up the road.

Ushguli is a remarkable place, a settlement which, at 2160 (7086 feet) meters, claims to be the highest continually inhabited place in Europe (if you count Georgia as being Europe, which *most* people do). While its altitude is impressive, what makes it a wondrous village is its timeless feel and above all, its location. Ushguli sits at the foot of Shkhara, a 5,201 meters (17,060 feet) behemoth that is the third highest peak in the Caucasus. The remoteness of the village, along with its designation as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, has secured its preservation. With the exception of a cluster of cars and vans ferrying tourists in from Mestia, the place looks largely as it must have done hundreds of years ago, making it the perfect place to end our little journey.

This being Georgia, there was, of course, a little cafe overlooking much of the village, and once the three of us sauntered into the midst of Ushguli, we had a quick look around, shot a few photos, and made a beeline for the plastic tables outside, where we



parked our asses and savored three victory beers, as we were the fist hikers from our whole cohort to make it to the finish line. Not that it was a race, but we still took it as a point of pride that “The Point of the Spear” had lived up to its name.

We were soon joined by a chubby young German dude and his girlfriend, a duo who seemed to be everywhere we were during the past three days. He was one of these guys who always seemed to be trying to impress the people around him just a bit too much, though I’ve got to say that he did blow me away with his encyclopedic knowledge of the current and past lineups for the Seattle Seahawks, something you don’t often find in Euros. I found him harmless enough though he seemed to grate on my Scottish companions. Paddy rolled his eyes when the young Teuton approached and commented under his breath:

“Here comes our ‘buddy.’”

“I cannot believe we have been beaten by three old men,” the young German remarked.

“Aye,” remarked Ian. “You should never underestimate the determination of the elderly.”

“Scotland uber alles,” replied Paddy, raising his bottle of Argo in mock triumph. “*Sláinte.*”

Ushguli was everything it had been made out to be, but as more vans and taxis full of tourist rolled in, we decided that we’d roll out. We could have done a day hike up to the glacier and even stayed in another guesthouse for the night, but when a waiting taxi offered to take us back for 30 lari a head, we jumped in and made the two and half hour trip on the catastrophe of a road back to the relative creature comforts of Mestia. Our trek was finished, and it had indeed been brilliant.

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Rather than head back to Tbilisi straight away, I elected to spend a few more days in Mestia, where I rested up, wrote, ate loads of *shashlik* (meat skewers), and did one final day hike with Paddy and Ian.

We headed up to the Chaladi Glacier just out of town, walking the whole way, which was a stupid thing to do, as the entire road to the trailhead was a massive, scarred-out construction zone. They were building a water purification station and laying miles of pipe to transport the water into Mestia and beyond, resulting in 9 kilometers of a dusty grey gravel pit. I suppose this was a kind of penance for the gut-busting scenery we’d been privy to for the past many days; we had to take this particular hike to remind us just how ugly the real world of “civilization” often is. It brought us back down to earth, in a way.

And even though the Chaladi Glacier was yet another wondrous field of ice spilling down the face of a mountain in the Great Caucasus, in the end it was somehow underwhelming, compared to what we had witnessed before. It was smaller and dirtier than any of the glaciers we’d seen during the trek. At this point we had been

spoiled beyond rehabilitation, at least until the next big hike. It was time to head back to the city.

That night we ended our fellowship at a local restaurant and bar that seemed to be party central for Mestia. The place, like a few others in town, featured live music — a six piece band that played the spirited music of Svaneti, music that makes you want to drink, stomp on the floor, and howl at the sky. Georgian music just bursts with passion, beauty, and a big dose of sadness, and this band, playing for a roomful of international and Georgian visitors, nailed it. This is a band that, during the summer, does their thing nightly, but I never sensed that they were phoning it in. They played with verve and heart, delivering these traditional tunes like they meant it. Despite the fact that they were playing for tourists, this was no tourist show: It was real music played by real musicians.

Paddy and I split a nice bottle of wine, while Ian stuck to his lager. At this point we stopped talking, instead soaking up the music and the atmosphere with the satisfaction and melancholy of people who understand that they're experiencing something fleeting and extraordinary.

At one point the band left the “stage” and was replaced by a bald singer who delivered what I took to be Georgian standards — which to me sounded like a melding of Russian bravado and Middle Eastern minor scales — to programmed backing tracks. The band took its shift meal at a table by the door, and the three of us continued to drink.

The singer finished his short set, and before the sound man could put on the recorded house music, a voice erupted, *a capella*, from the band's table. They had finished their food and were now sipping a few beers, but the show wasn't quite over. This singer slid up into a soaring note, sung with the full-belted commitment that is the Georgian style. Immediately he was joined by another singer, and then another.

These three voices melded into one perfect power chord, demonstrating the three-part polyphonic singing that Svaneti is known for. Soon they were accompanied by a man on a hand drum, while the two other members began clapping and banging on the chairs and table itself with a vital, driving rhythm.

The joint came back to life. Most every patron jumped to their feet, surrounding this table of musicians who were pouring forth the blood of their culture in a thumping, harmonic incantation that absorbed the room and shot out into the night. I was mesmerized by this sonic spell, which ended as suddenly as it began with single roll and final shot on the drum.

Suddenly I came to and snapped out of hypnotic state. At that moment I knew that I'd had my fill. This was the final drop of a dreamlike week and I required no more. I grasped hands with my Scottish friends and burst out the door, drunk on wine but high on music and mountain air.

## Tbilisi Redux

It was nearly eleven as I stumbled into the Valiko Bar and Hostel after a rough day of cross-nation travel. Koebus and Masha greeted me like an old friend, but sadly informed me that my room was booked for the weekend. The only thing available was a berth in the dorm: I would have to suffer the indignity of sharing a collective space (and toilet/shower) with a pack of 20-something Euro backpackers. While even the suggestion of this would normally grip me with despair, I was far too zombified from ten hours on the road to even care, and after depositing my bag in the shared room, I sidled up to the bar for a couple of quiet drinks before crashing out in the bottom compartment of a surprisingly comfortable bunk bed.

I had just a couple of days left in Georgia and elected to spend them in the capital after my dizzying week in the mountains of Svaneti. Tbilisi had charmed me the first time around and I was determined to peel the onion even further. There was a palpable energy afoot that you could just taste in the air, so I knew I had to see more.

After splurging for a room in a very small, brand new hotel situated on the precipitous hillside beneath the fortress overlooking Old Town, I set out for an afternoon walk, this time with a specific location in mind: Fabrika.

Fabrika is a Soviet-era sewing factory that has since been transformed into a sprawling, multi-use compound. The complex is home to a hostel, artist studios, shared work and educational spaces, cafes, bars, a record store, and even a barber shop. The main building is an immense example of Soviet functional design that's been given a modern makeover. Outside is a massive courtyard where people can sit, eat, drink, and soak in the post-industrial ambiance.

I came very close to booking a room at Fabrika before coming to Tbilisi, but decided against it after reading a few reviews online. While most everyone praised the design of the place, several commenters mentioned that it was not a good place to roll up solo, that the sheer size of the complex made it impersonal and even intimidating — not a good place to meet people on your own. I was looking for something more intimate and friendly, which is why I ended up booking at Valiko, which takes the aesthetic of Fabrika and boils it down to its essence, in a way.

Still, I was intrigued about the place as a whole, and made it my afternoon pilgrimage that Saturday. I must admit that I was more than ready to hate the place just for its inherent hipsterism. And when I finally came across the building, located in otherwise nondescript neighborhood, I braced for the worst. The grey exterior was splashed with colorful graffiti, and once I walked in, I felt like I had stumbled upon the set of an Apple commercial. Fashionable millennials inhabited the space, almost every one of them absorbed in either a smartphone or a tablet, while down tempo hip hop thumped at a moderate volume from the sound system encompassing the cavernous room.

I grabbed a table, ordered a beer, and took stock of my surroundings. Sure, part of me wanted to hate this place simply because it was younger, more beautiful, and far more

with the times than my increasingly flabby, pushing fifty ass could ever hope to be, but it was an undeniably cool spot. It was perfectly arranged and as I opened my notebook and began scribbling away, I quickly let go of my hang ups and relaxed in the afternoon glory of Fabrika's main space.

Slats of light angled through the factory windows that lined the wide, airy room. The international, multi-racial sprinkling of other guests sat on sofas, kicked back in lounge chairs, chatted at tables, or lolled in hammocks over the concrete and oriental carpet covered floor. A line of load-bearing pillars stood in formation in the middle of room, with potted leafy trees sprawling up from their bases. A single exposed pipe ran the length of the white ceiling, while a solitary disco ball hung for full effect.

Before embarking on this essay, I hesitated to employ the term "hipster," as it has become nearly largely devoid of meaning over the past few years. And when this certain subculture is brought up, it's usually made a punching bag. Nearly no one will admit to being a hipster, and nearly no one will admit to liking one. Our image of the prototypical hipster is of a shallow, sneering poser — all hat and no cattle — to employ one of the better cowboy metaphors. They are blamed for gentrifying neighborhoods and driving up prices and largely viewed as a sect of urban play-actors, the very essence of inauthenticity.

In our rush to condemn hipsters, however, we often overlook the good they do. Sure, the neighborhood was cheaper before they moved in, but you also couldn't get a good cup of coffee, or any real choice in food or beer. And that factory on the corner used to just be that: a dirty, noisy factory: now it's a wonderful oasis of design where anyone willing to pay the price of a cup of coffee or a beer can walk in and to their thing.

Tbilisi, it seemed to me, was in the midst of a hipster revolution that was improving upon the already terrific foundation the city is built on. Fabrika is the perfect embodiment of this phenomenon, even if, at times, it comes across like an Apple marketing exec's wet dream.

While Fabrika may be the future of Tbilisi, the next place I came across spoke straight to my heart. It was a basement bar. Guns 'N Roses blared from the speakers and sign on the outside let us all know where this particular establishment stood, politically.

*RUSSIA OCCUPIES 20 PERCENT OF MY COUNTRY. PUTIN IS A BASTARD. IF YOU AGREE YOU ARE WELCOME HERE.*

*Well shit, I thought. I guess I better grab a beer.*

The joint was called Shot Time, and as soon as I descended the stairs into the musty little booze-soaked basement, I knew I was home. This was a proper dive specializing in cheap beer, strong drinks, and loud rock 'n roll. I sat at the bar, ordered a 3 lari (\$1.25) lager served in plastic cup, and proceeded to lose myself while screeching vocals and electric guitar washed over me in volumes unacceptable.

It didn't take long before I was joined by three younger dudes, two thickly bearded Georgians, and a balding Armenian kid who had spent some time in the States. They spoke impeccable English and were even more fluent in the language of rock and roll. We swapped stories over endless beers and white hot shots of chacha, singing along

with the classic/punk rock soundtrack and smoking cigarettes outside of the shitty little bar's main entrance (I don't really smoke but when in Rome...).

Eventually the night warped into a full blur, and it was time for me to justify the 60 bucks I had spent on my room on the hill. I staggered out into the Saturday night air, past the street musicians jamming away for crowds on the sidewalks of Freedom Square, through the winding alleys, and up the slope underneath the glow of the lit-up fortress.

Only I couldn't find my hotel. Yes, I was catastrophically drunk, and no, I hadn't bothered to get a business card with the address and phone number (a rookie mistake), but I have a sense of direction like a homing pigeon and knew I was in the right location. I recognized two of the hotels and the one hostel that I knew were just next to my place, but fuck me, I couldn't find it.

I wandered. I circled the zigzag blocks multiple times. I scanned. I jumped into a taxi hoping he could take me there. He instead capitalized on my inebriation by taking me to the other side of town and back and then soaking me for even more money with a slight of hand trick when I went to pay the fare. At one point I even employed the help of some locals, who charged up my dead phone in their apartment in hope of finding a clue as to where my elusive hotel just may be. This proved fruitless, and in the end I was back where I started, exasperated, dejected, and ready to embrace the eventuality of curling up on the cobblestone and calling it a night.

And then it came to me, right as I was staring right at the place. My hotel was just a few rooms built into a sunken terrace of the hillside. No one had heard of it because it had just opened up, perhaps days before, in a neighborhood bursting with brand-new accommodations. And the management, in its infinite wisdom, had elected to turn off every light in the place—including the sign—rendering it invisible to all but the very accustomed eye. At 12 a. m. my "hotel" was just a black spot behind a massive wall. It looked like a private house where the residents had gone to bed hours ago, and even sober me would have had a bitch of time finding it.

\*

I had planned to take a day trip to Josef Stalin's hometown of Gori the next day, but wine got in the way. It was just way easier to ameliorate my champion hangover by wandering from wine bar to wine bar all afternoon rather than suffer the ballache of heading out to the edge of the city and arranging a *mashtruka* (minivan) out of town. Besides, did I really want to pay admission to the museum that celebrates perhaps the biggest mass murderer in human history? Georgians know Stalin was a complete bastard, but they're still slightly proud of him. After all, he's *their bastard*, a kid from small town Georgia who went on to rule the Soviet Union, arguably the greatest empire of the 20th century.

That night I found myself back as Shot Time, punctuating the booziest trip of my life with one last throw back. The bearded Georgians and Armenian kid were there, along with a hulking dude who, for the first two hours, spoke no English.

This guy had the burly look of a farm-raised kid who would think nothing of hauling a calf on his back across a pasture and then digging a ditch or two. He was a mass of muscle and vitality, a kind of prototypical young Georgian man.

At one point he asked me for smoke and we went outside to light up. It turned out his English was decent, but he was so shy that he needed to get half-cocked in order to speak it. This is often the case with foreign languages: it's scary to engage with a native speaker, and the inhibition-crushing quality of alcohol definitely aides in this endeavor.

I was happy that this bruiser took a shine to me, as I was slightly intimidated by him from the get go; sure, he was he large, but I could also tell straight away that he knew how to utilize his size. He'd certainly thrown more than a handful of punches in his life, and I was damn sure that I didn't want to be the target of his next..

But it turns out that he was a sweetheart, and very curious about me and my impressions of Georgia. Of course at this point I was firing away hard on all cylinders, storytelling and raving and just letting loose about about my journey in this awesome corner of the world.

The big man listened raptly, but visibly winced at times. Now it must be said that I love to cuss: my language if often laced with casual profanity, especially when I'm drinking. Shit gets salty quick, and I throw out the word "motherfucker" likes it's nothing. Because to me, it is nothing. Nothing more than a bit of conversational seasoning.

My towering Georgian drinking buddy, however, didn't quite see it that way. After what was perhaps my third or fourth time spitting out the word, he saw it fit to intervene.

"Okay, my friend. I must stop you. I know, in English, 'motherfucker' is maybe... joke. No problem. But here.. is problem. You can no say 'motherfucker.' I am Georgian. In Georgia we have *sister*. We have *mother*. You say 'motherfucker'... you fuck *my* mother. Please, my friend. No."

He leaned in for effect and, valuing my still intact cranium, I apologized. I launched back into another tirade and, just a couple minutes later, accidentally let slip another MF bomb.

The big man held up his hand.

"Oh no, my friend, no. No 'motherfucker'"

"Oh, man, I'm sorry, I forgot."

"Is okay. But no more."

"Okay okay okay okay. I won't say it again."

I continued on with my rant, only to blurt it out on more time.

“No no no no no,” intervened the big man. “I tell you before. NO ‘MOTHERFUCKER.’ I say one. I say two. I know, for you, ‘motherfucker’ okay. For me? NO OKAY. One more ‘motherfucker’ and...we fight. I’m sorry. I don’t want fight. But if you say ‘motherfucker’ one more time, we have fight. You must understand.”

“I understand,” I slurred. “If we have to fight, I will fight. You will prolly kill me... so I really really really don’t wanna fight. I’m sorry.”

“Okay.” He took a sip of his beer. “You have cigarette?”

I gave him the whole pack and skedaddled, heading up into the twisting maze of streets and locating my hotel on my first attempt. I fell into black in relative luxury, grateful that that motherfucker didn’t break my motherfucking neck.

\*

I had just a few hours left in Georgia, and while I hadn’t done it all, I felt like I’d given the country a pretty fair shake, that in two weeks I’d delved deep enough to really get a taste of the place. There was just one experience that had yet eluded me: a visit to the legendary sulfur baths of Tbilisi.

This complex of public baths was right around the corner from where I was staying. I had spent this final day roaming the streets in one final wander and was covered in sweat, grime, and the sticky film of hangover shame. Two weeks of walking and drinking had taken its toll on my muscles, joints, and organs; I was more than ready for a good soak.

For many Americans, the idea of bathing naked with strangers conjures up feelings of disgust and intimidation: such a thing just isn’t part of our culture and you’ll be hard pressed to find a fellow Yankee who leaps at such an opportunity without some reservations. I quickly got over such a complex just months into my first year in Korea, though, and have since embraced the mantle of sauna devotee. I go all the time back in Busan, so the idea of doing the same in Georgia wasn’t a big leap for me.

Still, it was a leap, of sorts. Georgian baths have their own traditions and etiquette very much removed from the variety found in East Asia. I discovered this out straight away as I headed into the front door of one of the complexes.

In Georgia, you have the option of a private room, which you can rent by the hour. This, is a great option if you come with a group, but when you roll in solo you opt for the public room, which, at 3 lari (\$1.25), is well worth it.

But there are hidden costs: you can buy slippers, soap, shampoo, razors, and toothbrushes. I declined all of these, but as soon as I made my way into the locker room, the hulking attendant charged me another 10 lari (\$4) for two towels and tea afterwards. I knew that this had to be the “foreigner price,” but I wasn’t about to argue with this bear of a man. And when he offered a massage for another 20 lari, I couldn’t say no.

The public room at this particular establishment was dark, dank, and reeked of acrid, boil eggs. Metal pipes fixed to the ceiling brought in cold water, which could be activated by spigots underneath. The trouble was that most of these spigots only

released this cold water in a trickle. The one or two that had a steady stream were dominated by the massage guy, who put his bucket underneath (to be used to splash off the massage). At one point, after soaking in the room's sole hot pool, I tried to cool off under this steady flow, only to be growled at by the heavy-bellied masseuse, who soon motioned to the massage table and mauled me with his meaty paws.

The massage was short and brutal, with a lather up and splash from one of his precious buckets. Thailand this was not, but I still arose feeling relaxed and cleansed, and after a visit to the steam room, I emerged a new man into the locker room, where I sat with a few Russian dudes and took down a glorious glass of sugared up tea.

I love taking saunas and this was no exception. Sure, it was a bit grungy and rough around the edges, but there is magic in that sulfur water. It penetrated me to the bones and I walked out of that place a rubbery, happy soul — relaxed, cleansed, and high on this crazy chemical that seemed to soak into the center of my very spine. A blond Russian sat smoking outside, blissing out on the aftermath of his soak. When he saw the smile on my face he juted his thumb into the air to let me know he felt equally as great, and in an instant that bonded us.

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I didn't want to leave Georgia. Sure, I missed my wife and my pack of animals back home, but this was one of those trips where I felt like I was just catching on to the secret of the place right at the end. But like it or not my time was up, and having had my fill of scammy taxi drivers, I chose instead to take the bus to the airport — a clean, relatively quick affair that set me back a whopping 20 cents. As we wound out of the city, I sat there and tried to digest the previous two weeks. I was grateful for the chance to visit this terrific country in the midst of transformation, but also aware of the futility of attempting to boil down such an experience into a few pithy lines.

I guess you can say that the secret is out: Georgia is now a top destination and the world is catching on. The locals I talked to described a twofold increase in visitors over the last year alone. Central Tbilisi and Mestia are in the midst of a construction boom, with new accommodations popping up daily. I stayed in places so new that the smell of drying varnish and paint could only be overcome by constant open windows. One guest house didn't even have a sign erected until my second day there. This was in late summer, well beyond the start of the season. The demand is so great that locals are opening up places late into the game in order to get a piece of that pie.

And why shouldn't they? After all, it's Georgians who have done the work to make this happen. 20 years ago, a visit to the country would have been nearly unthinkable. It was a corrupt, lawless place, with crumbling roads, rampant crime, and very little amenities for visitors. Today's Georgia, while still developing, barely resembles this chaotic backwater. Crime is so low as to be almost nonexistent by European or US standards. The air is clean and the water pure, and I saw a massive effort underway throughout the country to upgrade the infrastructure. In fact, much of this work has already been done. Even the most ramshackle of guesthouses on the Svaneti Trail offered up wifi, and from my admittedly surface point-of-view, the country largely works. The nuts and bolts move and the people seem to have something to aspire to.



The big question mark in Georgia's future, of course, is Russia, which still occupies large swaths of their territory. Georgia, of course, wishes to join the Western fold, but until these disputes with Russia are put to bed, membership in the EU and NATO may be a bridge too far. This was the opinion of more than one German I met on this trip, and say what you want, Germany is the real engine of the EU, not to mention arbiter of who gets admitted to the club.

I am hopeful that Georgians can break these chains with Russia and for the time being, at least, they seem very much in control of their own destiny. One visit showed me that, and the Georgians of course, realize this. Part of the key to this success is tourism, and if that means opening up their gut-punching scenery and historical wonder to foreign visitors, then who's to stop them?

I do fear, however, that once this tap is turned on, the flow will become too mighty, and the magic of Georgia will be snuffed out underneath the footfalls of the hordes. Too much tourism can ruin a place, after all.

At least I can say I got there in time.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Originally hailing from Olympia, Washington, Chris Tharp has called Korea home for a long time now. He is the author of *Dispatches from the Peninsula* and *The Worst Motorcycle in Laos*, as well as the co-author of *Jeff Monson: My Road as a Fighter*. His award-winning pieces have appeared in National Geographic Traveller UK, Green Mountains Review, enRoute, Smile, Pindledyboz, Monkeygoggles, Escape from America, Haps Magazine, Travelers' Tales, Road Junky, 10 Magazine, and many others. He lives in Busan with his wife and a shifting number of animals.