



*The Cross in Bloom, Detail
Liturgical Cuff, 18th century.*

PHOTO: GURAM BUMBIASHVILI
EMBROIDERY COLLECTION
GEORGIAN NATIONAL MUSEUM (GNM)

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ON THE COVER: IMERETI, 1919, OIL ON
CANVAS, DAVID KAKABADZE (1889-1952);
COVER PHOTO: GEORGE DARCHIASHVILI

FROM THE EDITOR

It has been a pleasure for our editorial team to create this Special Issue of National Geographic Georgia with the sponsorship of our National Tourism Administration. Our purpose is to promote our country's many unique features, although it has been a challenge to compile Georgia's long history in only 140 pages.

Scholars in different fields point out that each subject consists of numerous facts worth telling. Therefore, our editorial team decided to extract what we felt was the most important and would help convince those who have not heard much about Georgia to visit us. We had an important objective – to condense this huge amount of information, sort it into logical units that answer basic questions – What is Georgia in a nutshell? What have Georgians and their ancestors done in the past? What most characterizes the country today? What cultural creations most attract visitors and keep them coming back?

The history of Georgia is a story of daily struggle, wars and hard work. You feel it everywhere, whether you are sipping our famous wines or visiting a museum, walking urban streets or exploring a high-mountain village and the unique landscapes of our protected areas. Even here, in natural surroundings, you feel that the importance of these Georgian treasures is secondary. Culture is not responsible for the creation of mountains, seas, forests, deserts and species. They were created by evolution. However, culture is important for restoring and preserving it – not only for the sake of nature itself but to ensure the harmonious co-existence of humans and other living things. This required daily struggles (sometimes “wars”) and hard work. Have we fought to reach this objective?

Yes, we have. Could we change and improve the country for locals and visitors? Yes, we could. Much has yet to be done, but even today there are lots of things to see, ways to have a life-changing experience.

So come and see! Like the famous proverb says – “It is better to see once than to hear a hundred times.”

We hope you will enjoy it!

Levan Butkhuzi, *Editor in Chief*



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MINISTRY OF ECONOMY AND SUSTAINABLE
DEVELOPMENT OF GEORGIA

*Spectacular protected area
in the Martvili canyon is
open for visitors interested
in speleology and cave
diving (Samegrelo, Georgia).*

PHOTO: VIKTOR LYAGUSHKIN







Georgia at a glance





"Khevsuruli" – Georgian mountain dance that originated in the region of Khevsureti. Looking like a clash in a real battle, only woman can stop the fight throwing her veil between fighters. As if obeying to a stroke of a magic wand, men freeze and the veil floats down to the floor.

By Tamar Bagashvili

The Caucasus Mountains huddle against the sky at an altitude of 2000 meters, and from stone-roofed houses along the flooded village road smoke rises from many chimneys. I feel safe in my hosts' cozy guesthouse as night descends. Such home-stays provide a unique insight into Georgia's intimate family circles and permit us to see and feel what they live and breathe. "The guest is God-sent" is a common local folk proverb, and this is easy to understand when you are surrounded by such simplicity and hospitality. Slowly breathe in, then breathe out – this is your brand new sixth sense – Georgia!

With its pearls of nature and cultural sites, Georgia fulfills the desires of even the most discerning travelers searching for authenticity. If you doubt this, consider that the country's winemaking heritage goes back 8000 years! Today Georgia's unique traditional winemaking technology using age-old qvevri earthen jars has been recognized by UNESCO as an element of the "Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity".

The archeological site of Dmanisi in southwest Georgia was home to the first hominids migrating to Europe, and whose skulls and other remains have been dated to 1.8 million years.

At the heart of this tiny land, the capital Tbilisi is a combination of tradition and modernity, both chic and timeless. Colorful rugs with exotic Caucasian designs carpet the pavements before the shops in the Old Town, making the bustling streets more inviting. Small shops and the flea market at the Dry Bridge display antique and Soviet objects, including vintage photo cameras and limited editions of books and posters from the 70s and 80s.

If you wander along the narrow cobble-stoned

On the crossroads between East and West, Georgia always was famous with its traditional cuisine. Homemade jams and sauces in street market of old town.

streets lined by houses with their multi-colored wooden balconies, you'll certainly meet local trades people like bakers, butchers, booksellers and artisans... Many artisans demonstrate extraordinary skills, for example the traditional Georgian cloisonné enamelwork. The unique style and craftsmanship of cloisonné jewelry reveal true artistry and fine workmanship that have developed over centuries as the techniques were passed down. Today highly skilled artists carry on this long tradition.

Fashion design has become increasingly





well-known outside of the country, perhaps due to the natural sense of elegance Georgians have cultivated over centuries. New designers are entering this competitive industry, and each year the Mercedes Benz Fashion Week Tbilisi gives them a chance to make the capital a stylish center of haute-couture. To seduce trendy fashionistas and avid shoppers, there is a fusion of traditional Georgian style and daring modern forms. Deep colors interesting textiles embroidered with mystical birds and floral patterns are capturing hearts on international catwalks.

As a native Georgian I've been asked many times by my foreign friends about our intriguing alphabet, and whether it is "elfish". They say it reminds them of something from "The Lord of the Rings"...However what they were staring at had nothing to do with the fictional world of elves in Tolkien's epic trilogy, but Georgia's unique language and alphabet. It has no analogue and is spoken only by the 4 million Georgians in the country and around the globe. The Georgian script is unique in its appearance, and indeed there are three historical systems

of written Georgian, another element that was recently awarded a distinction by UNESCO as “Intangible Cultural Heritage”. Georgian script first used for Christian texts originated in the 5th century AD. A postcard showing Georgian script always makes an exotic souvenir, and recipients will be trying to decipher the intriguing script for quite a while, with the twisting and bending movements like Georgian dance.

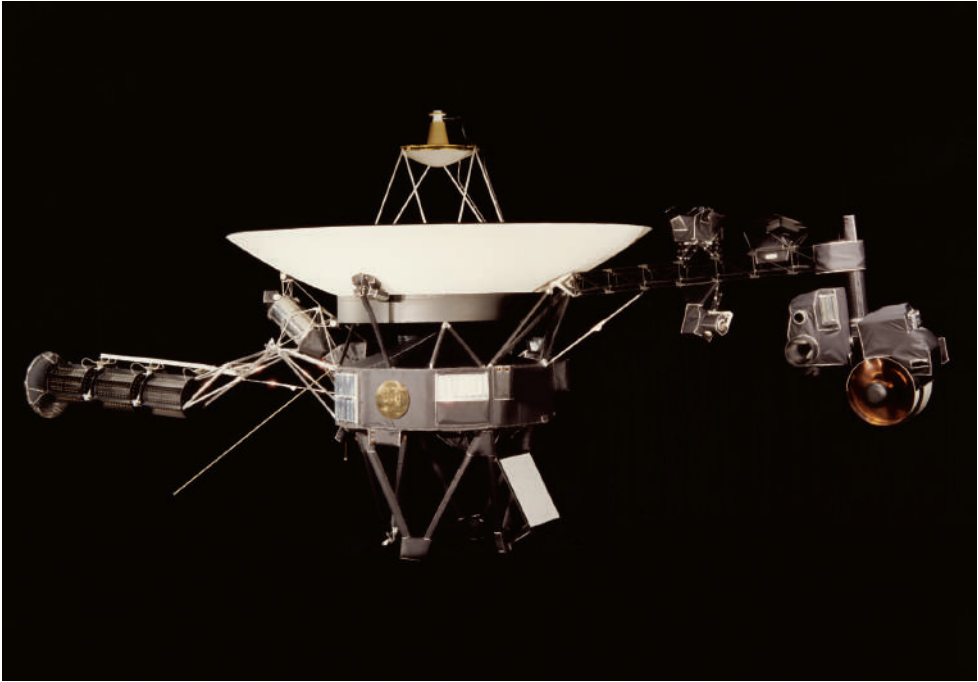
In Georgian culture many customs reflect aspects of other traditions. The variety of national dances is a good illustration of how conflict and recovery have colored the country’s history, and the deep cultural roots remain imbued with the temper and rhythms of the Caucasus. Through regional costumes and distinctive movements, Georgian dances take you on a breathtaking journey through the country and tell the stories of sorrow and joy, dignity and courage, friendship, love and bravery. The khorumi dance has been performed on stages all over the world, and celebrates the valorous spirit of Georgian warriors throughout the centuries. The dance radiates strength and energy with powerfully rhythmic drums and its precision of lines and unique movements that make even the captivated viewers feel intrinsically part of something glorious.

Many Georgians are very religious and treasure the sacred in their lives. Many aspects of everyday life are reflected in their relationship with Orthodox Christianity, including the fine arts, architecture, legends, holidays, wine and food. The Nikortsminda Cathedral, built during the Georgian Renaissance in the 11th century, is an example. It is generously decorated with ornamental reliefs that depict scenes from the New Testament, and includes real and fantastic beasts, making it one of Georgia’s best examples of sacred architecture. At the same time the country shows tolerance for its other ethnic groups and religions, as witnessed by the Mosque, Orthodox churches and Synagogue that are situated close to each other in the capital.

Georgia’s churches are busy with many other activities than regular rites and worship—they are a central part of many rituals of daily life such as weddings and baptisms. The famous polyphonic music is heard both in secular and sacred contexts, including at weekly mass and during the many religious holiday celebrations. Some Georgian songs are linked to the cult of the grapevine and many were sung as far back as the 8th century. Thus, a chance visit to a local church might suddenly become an exceptional moment of discovery, with authentic traditional music that bursts into an unexpected celebration of the senses. In both urban and rural areas the multi-voiced melodic Georgian music survives, and never stops to thrill those who hear. When you are sitting comfortably in an airplane high above the clouds or in your home in the evening after work, try listening to Bindisperia Sopeli or Chakrulo. The latter was actually chosen for its cultural value to accompany the Voyager spacecraft in 1977 when it was launched to study the outer solar system and portray the diversity of life and culture on Earth.

When you visit Georgia you will most certainly hear and perhaps even take part in polyphonic singing, sometimes at a traditional festive banquet, called a supra. The supra is a key component of Georgian culture, where racial, religious and political views have no place – all that matters is the wholehearted participation of each guest! The unique experience of participating with many others at a long table full of mouthwatering dishes, hardly knowing what delicacy to taste next and trying to look reputable even after your seventh glass of Georgian qvevri wine, is what makes you feel completely at home... or perhaps better than at home! Once you’ve tried Georgia’s world-famous cheese pie known as khachapuri, or grilled eggplant with walnuts and cilantro, you will know what I mean. If not – congratulations! You have a celebration of flavors ahead!

“Name one thing that differentiates foreign from local!” a friend once dared me. “The to-



The Georgian polyphonic song, Chakrulo, was chosen for its global value to accompany the Voyager spacecraft in 1977 when it was launched to study the outer solar system and to portray the diversity of life and culture on Earth.

mato!” I responded. His expression showed the answer was unexpected, but seriously, what can better exemplify that difference than the luscious deep taste of a sun-ripened tomato fresh from the vine?...The country has always been known for its eco-friendly agriculture. The name used internationally, Georgia, was likely derived from the Greek word *georgos* meaning “those who till the earth”. There is always an abundance of local, organic and fresh products in season, and locals enjoy shopping, where the smile of the merchants and the colors of fruits, vegetables and spices provide perfect settings for vibrant photos. Walnuts, hazelnuts, herbs and garlic – whatever spices up delicious national dishes – can all be found in the main bazaars and small shops. Georgians are eager to talk, and my foreign friends were surprised by a gift of fruits at times, or even a precious recipe – one even managed to learn how to

make *chikhirtma* – chicken-in-walnut sauce – from a local merchant lady who said it was “her grandmother’s secret”. Judging by my friend’s expression of satisfaction I could see that for him the contortions and gestures he had made to get the recipe were well worth the trouble!

For those who spend hours on the internet calculating their budget and dreaming of the perfect get-away or holiday escape, there’s little doubt that Georgia will satisfy most or all of their requirements at once.

In the silence of the 12th-century tower, the roof covered with snow, crystal freshness freezes the air. A sip of locally-brewed beer softens my throat. The medieval Pshavi mountain dwellers who developed this brew must have been alchemists. The last sunrays glide to dim at the horizon... This is only the middle of my story of Georgian marvels. But maybe this is where your story can begin...?



PHOTO: BADRI VADACHKORIA



Breathtaking landscapes and their organic architecture are best preserved in Tusheti



For more information including maps, access routes and roads as well as tour agencies please visit: www.georgia.travel




Gudauri

Gudauri is a mountain ski resort on the southern plateau of the Greater Caucasus Mountains, at an altitude of 2200 meters. The region enjoys a maximum number of sunny days per year, which makes it a remarkable destination for winter sports tourism. Visitors can ski and enjoy other fresh-air activities as well. Skiers of all levels will enjoy the offers – high-speed downhill skiing or slaloming down giant slopes, or the lower slopes for beginners, all equipped with lifts and other facilities.

For those who like extreme sports, heli-skiing is offered for higher, off-piste skiing. The slopes are covered by snow for four or five months a year, from December until late April, which also creates perfect opportunities for snowboarding. The depth of the snow can reach 2.5 meters. The cableway begins at 2200 meters and skiers can attain the altitude of 3285 meters. The total length of Gudauri slopes adds up to over 57 km, and they meet the most rigorous international standards, equipped with rope tows, chairlifts, cable cars and “magic carpets” or conveyer lifts.



For more information including maps, access routes and roads as well as tour agencies please visit: www.georgia.travel



Sighnaghi City of Love

Sighnaghi is a small and picturesque town in eastern Georgia, located on the slopes of the Caucasus above the Alazani plains. It was built in the 17th century by King Erekle II as a fortification city, and the entire fortress walls have been preserved, with their guard towers. From the towers there is an incredible view of the immense green Alazani Valley. By 2007 Sighnaghi had become a European style town with steep, cobble-stoned, serpentine streets and low houses, covered with red clay roof tiles, such as those found in traditional south Italian villages. The three medieval churches in the town are being restored, and many cozy hotels and hostels began catering to the increasing number of tourists. Street cafés and restaurants offer delicious local foods and homemade Kakhetian red and white wines, such as Saperavi, Kindzmarauli, Rkatsiteli and Mtsvane.

Sighnaghi is a convenient starting point to explore the upper regions of Kakheti. Around 50 kilometers away are two important landmarks – the oldest Nekresi Monastery, which boasts the most delicious water in Georgia, and the famous Gremi Fortress. The two largest towns in the Kakheti region are Kvareli and Telavi, both of which offer unique sights and tastes. The Lagodekhi Protected Area is also found within the vast Kakheti Region. Thus Sighnaghi offers the ideal base for your discoveries and experiences in eastern Georgia.

Georgia is like this

A walk across the globe, and straying
into the heart of the Caucasus...





Mt. Ushba (4710 m). Svaneti, Georgian Caucasus



By Paul Salopek

You roll down a high snowy mountain into a country you never expected to be in.

It is a crossroads. It is a cul de sac. It produces poets. It is home to mass murderers, like Stalin and Beria. It invented wine. You have read one good book about it in English.

Two weeks in, you encounter the author of the book. She is visiting, by chance, from Paris. The bars are closing. It is 3:30 a.m. She sways in the middle of a cobbled street, holding up a man: a colleague, a local scribe. They weep into each other's shoulders—for friends dead in the Caucasus mountain range, for the shared dead of war. The man, whom you do not know, whom you have just met, and who looks like a languorous Spanish count, and whose name you will not recall through the ax blows of a morning hangover, holds up a regal finger. He gallantly volunteers to walk with you across his country: 250 rugged miles over high crags and across frothing rivers, for days atop punishing pavement, wrestling mud and

You'll find that multi-cultural Tbilisi offers goods from all over the Caucasus countries.

rain and snarling shepherds' dogs for nearly a month. And he does it.

Georgia is like this.

You fall down a high snowy mountain into a country you never expected to be in.

One February day in, you sit inside a backstreet café where the barista is a burly Homerologist—an expert on Homer. In walks a tai chi master from Tehran. The Homerologist yanks tables aside. And the master, named Ali, performs a spontaneous dance of such grace and beauty that the silent café rings. The man chaperoning Ali is an artist: He photographs nudes wearing nothing but flower petals and





crows' wings. You found this café on your first day in-country. You told the Homerologist, smugly, that you had just strolled in that day from Ethiopia. "That's interesting," the Homerologist said, "because the man sitting over at that table just walked in from France." And it was true.

Georgia is like this.

You fall down a snowy mountain into a country you never expected to be in.

One midsummer day in, when the plane trees blaze green above the boulevards, you wake up to find a woman sitting in your rented flat. She is not really sitting. She has keeled

forward. She is resting her forehead on the table. She is a guest—one of dozens who have homesteaded in your apartment, rendering it a kibbutz. She has been up all night for many nights. She has been searching on a computer for a foreign specialist who will treat her dying infant nephew. At the local children's hospital, a homegrown doctor who actually saves the boy, a weary man with uncombed hair and a hangdog face, is overwhelmed. Not by the anguish of his young patients. But by the parents. His phone rings day and night. He takes a call. He sighs. He tells you a 14-year-old just died in his ward. As you leave, he pulls



Night view with the illuminated Narikala Castle; the sights of Old Tbilisi are truly breathtaking.

a bottle of saperavi from a drawer. He hands it across his battered and cramped desk. It is the practiced gesture of defiance in a place that has been conquered and invaded many times, that has known rage and defeat and tragedy, that has rebuilt many times from rubble. The bottle of wine stands among sonograms, cardiograms, X-rays of tiny skulls and limbs. The doctor smiles a thousand-year-old smile.

Georgia is like this.

You fall down a snowy mountain into a country you never expected to be in.

One autumn in, and you are walking out—making for the next border, the next country. Making for China. You start in mountains that stopped the Arabs cold in the seventh century. You walk literally from home to home. Ethnic Azeris. Armenians. Georgians. (“The

only difference between us and our Georgian friends,” a Muslim Azeri man tells you warmly, “is our geography. We got our heads chopped off first whenever the Persians invaded.”) Nobody turns you away. Not once does nightfall find you without shelter. Your guide, the new friend who looks like medieval Spanish royalty, the tipsy journalist, clocks quick yard-long strides before you. He is walking away from a houseful of troubles, from bills, pressures, headaches, responsibilities. From middle age. Walking turns him into a tinker. He begins to fix things along your route. The doorbell in one house. The toy helicopter of a child. He fixes your GPS device. One night, you hear him imploring your latest host, a careworn old woman who is flummoxed by his insistence on mending her bicycle. “All it will take is one bolt!” In



Cafés and outdoor restaurants on Chardin Street and others in the Old Town are favorite gathering places for locals and visitors.

this way, mile by mile, he is repairing himself. Georgia is like this.

You fall down a snowy mountain into a country you never expected to be in.

And ten months later it is behind you. You trudge across a concrete bridge to a checkpoint under a new flag.

What surfaces to mind during this eventless departure is not the country's light—that strange yellow glow that hovers above the Black Sea coast—nor the arm-aching rounds of toasts over khachapuri and roast pork, nor the Abkhaz refugee woman on the sidewalk who whispered your name to God Almighty when you bought her McDonald's coffee, nor even the iceberg blue shadows in snow above Mestia. No. What you recall instead is the simple little room on the fourth floor of the na-

tional museum where you did your work. You remember the people who walked through its door: the famed paleoanthropologist who gave you that space and the translator of Rimbaud into Georgian, the Russian tutor who was a chess prodigy and the folk dancer with the face of a Picasso masterpiece. You remember the night guard armed with a scowl and a Kalashnikov, who always flung open your door in the wee hours, tapping his watch, scaring you witless. And how he stopped by on the day of your leaving to sadly shake your hand. And you recall how, on warm days, when a green wind blew in from the mountains and through the open windows, the chants of the parking attendants far down below went "Modi! Modi! Modi!"—"Come! Come! Come!"

Georgia is like this.

Through the cities – Part one

Tbilisi



Night view of Tbilisi's Old Town. Tbilisi is the capital and largest city in Georgia, lying along both sides of the Mtkvari River.

By Irma Kakhurashvili

The e-mail ended like this: “Dear Irma, we are ready to fall in love with Tbilisi and Batumi in 10 days. We are arriving a little earlier than we planned, but hope that you will be happy to see us! Kisses, Alyona and Sergey.”

The unexpected message from acquaintances in Minsk came as a shock—how was I to reconcile a relentless schedule of journalistic work and act as a tour guide every day for 10 days? They intended to visit two major Georgian cities within that time and, more importantly, “fall in love” with them – and I was to be personally responsible for making this happen!

Several cups of tea later, and after several messages of apology dashed off to my editors, I calmed down. I closed the Belarusian friends’ e-mail with its sprinkling of positive emoticons, and opened an austere page in MS Word. Creating a 10-day itinerary for them was less difficult than expected. Given that designer Alyona and nutritionist Sergey are a rather ordinary, middle-aged and curious couple who entertain themselves by occasional visits to new countries, and then uploading selfies in front of historical sites to social networks, the draft agenda turned out to be quite promising.

The very next morning, Alyona and Sergey were asleep on my sofa bed. In the afternoon, we began implementing the first part of the itinerary – a five-day plan to become acquainted with, and then fall in love with Tbilisi...

Day One (Itinerary: Shavteli Street – Erekle II Square – Bridge of Peace – Riqe – Cableway – Narikala)

Tbilisi is a small city, but packed with cars. Thus reaching the center, Freedom Square, took an hour by marshrutka (public minibus) – from the most remote part of the city where I live.

The colorful old districts are concentrated





A woman baking traditional Georgian “shoti” bread in a deep clay oven called a tonne.

close to the center, south of downtown Tbilisi. Crisscrossed by narrow lanes and blind alleys, basement shops and restaurants, houses with wooden balconies and centuries-old churches, the old town is alive with diverse people and many small businesses. Mosque and Synagogue, Gregorian and Orthodox Churches all peacefully coexist here – something we Georgians are very proud of.

I decided to show my guests one of the shortest streets and most agreeable neighborhoods, near Shavteli Street, not far from Freedom Square. We took the first commemorative photos beside the statue of the Georgian artist Niko Pirosmani's Janitor at the beginning of the street. A few more steps and we stopped at world-famous puppeteer, Rezo Gabriadze's, Marionette Theater, with its unusual, whimsical leaning tower. We were lucky—the clock struck noon and a small angel appeared from the tower, accompanied by the sound of an old Georgian song. My guests joyfully applauded the delightful show and recorded it for posterity...

On the same street, we visited Tbilisi's oldest church, Anchiskhati, built in the 6th century, then followed the cobble-stoned Shavteli Street to where it narrows considerably and passes before the high walls of the Georgian Patriarchy. Here we entered Erekle II Square, where—in the 19th century – locals would gather to share and discuss the news.

From this point we had to decide whether to walk back to Erekle II Street with its refined Georgian-European restaurants and cloisonné enamel museum-workshop, or to continue, and cross the Mtkvari (Kura) River to Riqe Park by way of the new Bridge of Peace, built by the famous Italian architect Michele De Lucchi.

While my guests were considering which way to go, I explained that if we viewed the city from

above, for example by helicopter, we would see clearly how the city stretches along both sides of the river forming two narrow strips, and how mountains close in on the city from three sides, almost like a natural amphitheater. When I mentioned a helicopter, the Belarusians became keen to take the aerial cable cars or “gondolas” moving slowly overhead, linking Riqe Park with the Botanical Gardens and the Narikala Fortress above.

The colorful older districts are concentrated close to the center, south of downtown. Tbilisi's Old Town bustles with people from widely diverse backgrounds.

A journey through the air in the glass cable cars made Alyona and Sergey excited as children – panoramic views of Old Tbilisi, the languid Mtkvari with a few motor cruisers, the postcard-like statue of Tbilisi's founder, King Vakhtang Gorgasali –all spread before them below.

At the top of the cableway several tourist paths offered the choice of either walking up to Narikala Fortress, or to the Bo-

tanical Gardens, overlooked by the enormous Soviet-era iron-clad statue of Mother Georgia. My Belarusians chose the ancient fortress, impressed by its long walls built for defense in the 4th century.

Narikala is adjacent to the 128,000-hectare Tbilisi Botanical Gardens. On a warm day there is nothing better than strolling through these gardens and marveling at the unique flora, but, since it was chilly and we were all quite famished, we hurried down to civilization along the street bordering the Botanical Garden, where traditional balconies adorn rows of houses, small hostels and souvenir shops. We could only think of finding the best hot khinkali meat dumplings and khachapuri oozing with cheese...

Tbilisi Old Town (above) and Abanotubani is an ancient district, known for its sulfur baths.



Day Two (Itinerary: Abanotubani – Leghvtakhevi)

It had been raining since morning, so our plans to walk were thwarted. On one hand I was glad—Alyona and Sergei woke up late, which gave me time to finish writing an article. Luckily I remembered a friend’s advice about what to do on rainy days, and proposed we go to the colorful Baths District –Abanotubani, a historically rich neighborhood of Old Tbilisi. Here the legend was born telling of the pheasant—caught by the falcon of King Vakhtang Gorgasali while he was hunting – that fell into the hot thermal waters. This inspired the King to name the city using the word for warm, *tbili*, in Georgian.

Alyona likes cycling and, despite the rain, proposed that we cycle to our destination, but not only are there no bike lanes in Tbilisi, given the city’s typical pace of life, public offices wouldn’t be open until 10 am when the heaviest traffic begins. Indeed, by 4 pm the traffic jams become impossible to navigate by bicycle – so it was out of the question. Instead, we took the metro. There are 21 metro stations in Tbilisi and they open at 6 am; it is the cheapest and fastest public transport in the city.

The Abanotubani area is incredibly full of life, with small businesses catering to locals and tourists alike. Both the exterior and interior of the Persian-style baths are doubtlessly influenced by Iranian architecture, and centuries ago Tbilisi’s Bohemian bon vivants often finished their leisurely days here in the steam of the hot sulphur waters. The large public bathhouse is still frequented mainly by locals, while the round domes of small private baths that dot the area provide a special treat for visitors. The perfect bliss of tea with sweet fruit jam (*muraba*) served by the host was waiting for us in one of the baths. We decided we had no worries in the world – who cared about the rain? “I feel reborn!” Sergey said – “Our banya could never compete with these sulphur waters!”

Most importantly, many bathhouses have their own attendant – the *mekise*. It’s vital to ask for this skillful magician, as he or she can give you

Tbilisi’s flea markets are common in Tbilisi, with everything from tea pots to vintage cameras, from souvenirs and toys to retro objects.



the perfect ‘scrub’ with the traditional sponge, allowing you to experience the benefits of thermal waters to the fullest.

After the baths it had stopped raining, so as we felt newly invigorated we followed a nearby tourist pathway in Leghvtakhevi that ends at an impressive waterfall plunging from the heights of the Botanical Gardens. The Leghvtakhevi Gorge is truly impressive with its colorful balconied houses like those found in other parts of Old Tbilisi—here we were both in the middle of Tbilisi and standing in awe of a natural waterfall pouring over the rocky cliff...We were filled with unusual, positive energy!

On we went to Chardin Street, passing several



interesting cafés. Wherever we went, we would receive a generous welcome and the best Georgian wines.

Day Three (Itinerary: Avlabari – Trinity – Wine Street– Bethlehem District – Leselidze Street)

Sergey had enjoyed too much alcohol on Charidin Street the night before – first wine, then Svanetian chacha (with a very high alcohol content) distilled from grapes. Not only is Georgia the cradle of wine, where over 500 types of vine are known, chacha is also a traditional drink. There are different kinds – Svanetian chacha burns your mouth and throat; Mingrelian quickly makes you warm; and Kakhetian chacha works on you gradually...

So Sergey was suffering from a serious hangover and decided to stay home, letting Alyona and I continue alone for the next day of the itinerary. We decided to visit the largest cathedral in Tbilisi – the Trinity, or Sameba—and took the metro to the Avlabari Station nearby. Once inside the enormous Cathedral, Alyona lingered, fascinated, before the images and impressive interior of the huge structure– the 2,380 m2 church is 84 meters high!

As we left, we decided to systematically photograph details of the oldest part of Tbilisi – the Metekhi district. Near the steep road known as Ghvinis Aghmarti or Wine Street, water seeps out naturally from the “weeping rock” along the sides



like a marvelous, transparent curtain. Along the same steep road we were invited into the Basement Café to taste Georgian dishes. The owners said that for several centuries, this café received its wine directly from Kakheti brought by oxcart. Alyona busily photographed Darejan's Palace, named for Erekle II's third wife, Darejan Dadiani. The rounded building is perched like a nest at the top of a cliff, an example of late feudal secular architecture. Today the building is a convent.

We hurried—almost running—back across the Mtkvari, and past Meidan Square to explore the Bethlehem District, the most “organic” part of Old Tbilisi. I took Alyona up a steep ladder-street to the Mother Georgia (Kartlis Deda) monument above, amused at her comments along the way: “This must be a fairy tale, such a steep winding road!” Along the way many of the houses and their wide balconies with decorative woodwork are

centuries old. The street disappeared into a myriad of tiny passageways, and the density of the buildings immediately created an atmosphere of intimacy and friendship. The sounds, colors and sights appealed to all our senses as we explored this old neighborhood where diverse ethnicities share common courtyards.

From Bethlehem, we walked down to Leselidze (Kote Apkhazi) Street. Formerly there were numerous taverns, workshops and caravanserais concentrated in this old commercial district. Passing the Catholic Church, the Synagogue, and an Armenian norashen we found a plethora of small fast food businesses and pleasant cafés, wine bars and gift shops with traditional Georgian souvenirs, unique Caucasian carpets and open stalls hung with sweets such as churchkhela, which intrigued Alyona. She succumbed to the colorful temptation of the grape juice and hazelnut versions, resembling long candles. I also bought her some ‘fruit leather’, dried and slightly

sour sheets of quince and apple puree, called tklap. We decided that these sweets would definitely help Sergey deal with his hangover.

Day Four (Itinerary: Tsinamdzgvrishvili Street – Dry Bridge – National Museum and National Gallery – Rustaveli Avenue)

To travel in time without a machine and visit a not-too-distant past, take a walk along Tsinamdzgvrishvili Street across the river, then come

back over the Dry Bridge to the center. No area of Tbilisi is linked to the Soviet past as closely as this bridge and its open-air flea market. It is a Mecca for curious photographers, tourists and enthusiastic collectors.

As we left the house, Alyona remembered that she had inherited an old Zenith camera from her father and that it needed a screw. Perhaps she could get it on the Dry Bridge? Even if she couldn't, she wouldn't be disap-

pointed, she said, because she has a soft spot for antique everyday items, jewelry, last-century tableware, Soviet lapel pins and rare records.

We began with Tsinamdzgvrishvili Street (Vrontsov Bridge connects this street with the Dry Bridge) which begins with several seemingly bleak shops with dilapidated appearances. However, the abundance of valuables in their dark recesses are truly like Ali Baba caves, with works by painters from past centuries and other priceless objects that could compete with those in a museum.

Once back on Rustaveli Avenue, our itinerary included two important museums, although Sergey was more interested in the technology of baking bread in a traditional tonne oven than what museums might offer. However, his wife lured him first into the grandiose Georgian National Museum, and

Vendors in the streets of Tbilisi's Old Town offer traditional souvenirs and sweets, such as churchkhela (hanging)

Street vendors selling handmade Georgian souvenirs and local foods are found all over the country.

then to the National Gallery. Without describing the treasures and objects in detail, it's important to understand that the country's cultural identity is truly reflected in the wide array of objects gathered over centuries and across the unique geography of the country. It is where the oldest hominid remains are found, of populations that emerged in prehistory from Africa into Eurasia; unique archaeological and ethnographic artifacts that cover many empires from Ancient pre-Christian and Classical eras to the rich heritage of the Christian culture in Georgia, and more recent discoveries. The treasury holds sublime gold and silver jewelry, coins and precious stones. Indeed it is best to reserve a half day to fully explore the Treasury within the National Museum of Georgia.

To make Serge happy, we finally descended the steps and stopped in a traditional tonne bakery near the National Parliamentary Library next to the National Gallery. It appeared that the baker had served in the Belarusian army—thus as a gesture of friendship he presented Alyona a hot, boat-shaped shoti, and then dived back to his baking and the red hot tonne.

Night life in Tbilisi is perhaps passive compared to other places, but I promised my guests we could hear live music. The best cafés and bars open until early morning with live music are found on a street called Bambis Rigi (Cotton Row), Chardin Street, Erekle II, Galaktion Tabidze, Abashidze, Kiacheli and Akhvlediani Streets.

Day Five (Itinerary: Turtle Lake – Ethnographic Museum – and a great supra, or feast)

Finally, on the fifth day, Alyona uttered the dream words for me: “Last night, I transferred all the Tbilisi photos to the computer and suddenly realized that I have never seen such a lively city, and one so proud of its history!”

Thus, her mission to fall in love with Tbilisi had nearly been accomplished, and it was up to me to make final flourishes before the Batumi trip. To be able to plan their trip to Adjara I sent Alyona and Sergey to Turtle Lake by themselves, and decided to prepare a festive dinner for their return in the evening.

They took the new cableway from Chavchavadze Avenue (Vake District) up to Turtle Lake. It was obvious that they had certainly appreciated this wonderful recreational zone, as they came back tanned from their walks and the pedal boat adventure on the small lake, after a lunch by the water. They had walked the short distance down the road to the open-air Ethnographic Museum, the best in the Caucasus. These model houses from all parts of the country are truly unique, as they were brought here directly from their traditional contexts and villages, from all over the country. The homes each have a host who shows tourists the use of everyday objects from centuries gone by, including the ironsmith's forge and – on certain days—bread making and other traditional activity. This unique museum is a way for visitors to understand the high diversity of Georgia's different regions and cultures—not to be missed!

That evening the dinner was noisy and cheerful, especially as my relatives joined us in the traditional toasting and feasting.

The last morning, I wasn't sure why, but Alyona wrote down six points on her small laptop, and showed me:

1. Georgians tend to be late to festive events, but this is not considered bad manners at all.
2. You do not need to take off your shoes when you are visiting a Georgian family.
3. If you are planning to leave a traditional Georgian supra (feast) early, tell your hosts a half hour before because the toastmaster—tamada – will not let you go for quite a while.
4. A guest's wish is the law for a host.
5. At the table, Georgians like to discuss politics loudly; they are crazy about small children and polyphonic singing – which I had not heard in any other part of the world.
6. We are definitely coming back to Tbilisi.

Khinkali: *Georgian ravioli-like pasta delights, filled with meat (and sometimes onions and herbs such as mountain savory). Originated in the 13th century with the invasion of the Mongols into the Caucasus Mountains. Today it is one of Georgians' favorite traditional foods.*





PHOTO: GEORGE DARCHIASHVILI

Through the cities – Part two

Batumi



Batumi is the second largest city of Georgia, located on the coast of the Black Sea in the country's southwest. Since 2010, it has been transformed by the construction of modern high-rise buildings, as well as the restoration of classical 19th-century edifices lining its historic Old Town.



The moving metal sculpture "Ali and Nino" by sculptor Tamara Kvesitadze has become a trademark of Batumi.



By Irma Kakhurashvili

They looked very sweet when they waved at me from the Batumi train, and then they suddenly disappeared.

We Georgians don't say goodbye quite so quickly – we take our time seeing off our guests, hugging and kissing them, asking them a million times to let us know how their journey was going. So when the last wagon of the train silently disappeared, I felt a little sad...

Early that morning I had slipped a piece of paper folded four times into Alyona's jeans pocket. I had spent the night writing a five-day plan of what they could see in Batumi, a Georgian Black Sea port city I love very much. To me, Batumi means old, low-rise houses and the unusual glow of its cobblestone streets after the rain, the cheery noise of holiday-makers gathered in colorful cafés in the evenings; a special, boat-shaped khachapuri and the amazing Botanical Gardens; it means courtyards saturated by the smell of coffee and decorated with colorful laundry hung high across the courtyards on clotheslines; it means fishermen lining up on the side of the port with their fishing rods and one of the longest – 7 km – seaside boulevards in the world; and it means boiled corn on the cob, hawked by vendors on the beach.

Alyona and Sergey had left for the dolce fa niente and hospitality of Batumi, while I had to stay with my computer and work. We agreed I'd get daily e-mail reports from my Belarusian friends about what they saw and what they liked.

First Day: Letter 1

Dear Irma, It was such a great idea to have us take that comfortable train! We arrived in Batumi in only five hours. We were glued to the window the whole trip— Georgia's nature and, especially the mountains, are truly diverse. We've seen similar mountainous places in Switzerland before, and Ajara's mountains will probably be incredible, too.

We found a place to stay in Batumi – renting a private flat or a hotel room is not a problem here. We dropped off our bags and immediately went out to eat at the very first café we saw. Here we were introduced to some local cuisine...first we had an Ajaran khachapuri with a coddled egg floating in the middle, and for dessert, we had baklava like in Greece and Turkey – the crisp pastry with walnuts and honey. It was total bliss, and so substantial that we didn't feel hungry again until late in the evening.

After that, we went to the seaside but the waves were rough so we couldn't swim, but the facilities they offer near the beach are great for all kinds of recreation. We wanted to take a scooter ride but when Sergey asked for one it turned out that only lifeguards are allowed to ride them. We'd have to go further along the coast to Gonio or up to Makhinjauri, where special lanes have been created.

We decided to sunbathe a little, and then returned to the Old Town. We were charmed by the decked facades of Old Batumi's coastline buildings. In particular, we liked Memed Abashidze Street...we decided that choosing to stay in the old district of Batumi, Azizie, between Gogebashvili and Baratashvili Streets, was the right decision.

When we looked at the map of Batumi we realized that most of the streets lead to the sea. This helps solve the problem of orientation in the city and it encouraged us to go down to the Batumi Sea Port which turned out to be not only the main sea port of Ajara but one of the main ones for Georgia. There were high tonnage ships and several well-equipped terminals.

At the port, Alyona engaged in a photo session. We chatted with a couple of fishermen, then and as it was getting dark, we headed back to the old part of town and found ourselves in a very beautiful square, called the Piazza. This public space is made up of a square, a hotel, a food court and shops. It is especially notable for its artwork - wall paintings, mosaics and stained glass. A Georgian band was playing outside, so we had a cocktail and danced. We learned that international stars have spent time enjoying the Piazza, including Plácido Domingo, Chris Botti, Sting and Macy Gray, who visited Batumi before us. Can you imagine?

Hugs and kisses, Alyona and Sergey

Second Day: Letter 2

Good evening! You did warn us that the temperatures in most of areas of Georgia are over 30°C in the summer but we never thought it would be this hot! We went to the beach in the morning but it was already way too hot in the sun. On the plus side, we met a very tanned Ukrainian couple who, apparently, have spent their holidays in Batumi for years, and then they go to the mountain resort of Bakuriani. Maybe we should plan this itinerary too someday?

The Ukrainians knew Batumi like the palm of their hand, so when they invited us to a nice café for lunch, we happily accepted. The café was decorated in vintage style and the windows looked out on the Boulevard. Out of respect to Batumi we had another traditional dish. This time it was a mix of salty butter and cheese, borano, washed down with kiwi compote. There are many citrus fruits cultivated in Ajara.

The Ukrainians advised us to rent bicycles. How happy we were to see a bike lane! Bike terminals are found along the coastline so first we rode along the Boulevard looking at the amusement rides, the shell-shaped marriage registration hall, the city lighthouse, dancing fountains with their colored lights, pensioners playing backgammon, in the shade of enormous magnolia trees, and watching squirrels jump from



The Batumi Piazza is famous for its open air cafés and restaurants. Delicious Ajaran boat-shaped khachapuri , with cheese and eggs, is sometimes baked right before the visitors.





PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK



Batumi has an important sea port and includes industries like shipbuilding, food processing and light manufacturing.

branch to branch in the pines. We saw the new Batumi, with high-rise apartment buildings and hotels, and the bustling construction going on. We circled around Ardagani Lake, fascinated by the number of sports halls and international hotels. We realized that Batumi is a new attraction for visitors from everywhere!

We were very keen to see the seven-meter LOVE sculpture that's in all the advertising flyers. We weren't disappointed—it was really impressive close up. We found that the former post office was one of the most fascinating buildings in this city, with the large beautiful clock built into the dome.

On Europe Square where large-scale events are sometimes organized, we went into Batumi's oldest book store and got a sketchbook—Alyona says she is going to make sketches of the sea

Talk to you tomorrow! Sergey

Third Day: Letter 3

You were right – the ritual of drinking ground coffee boiled in a coffee pot, *cezve*, has an important place in the social life of Batumi. This energizing liquid is drunk any time of the day or night. Why? Probably because Ajara borders on Turkey—or else it's because Ajarans, who have to attend to so many guests, need more energy, and coffee helps them deal with it!

The tourist season here starts in June and continues until late October. All summer the city bustles with tourists and guests. In the winter usually business visitors arrive – frequently conferences and official meetings are held in local hotels. But now that it is summer, and we are not officials, we were happy to wander the city and explore. We spent a long time in the 6th of May Park by Nuri-Geli Lake where the flora is unique. There were lilies from Japan, osmanthus from China and cypress from the Mediterranean coast... Alyona was making sketches of the lake while I enjoyed lying in the grass until it was time to go to the show at the Dolphinarium.

Like in Tbilisi, different confessions are found in Batumi, and especially here, as many Ajarans

are Muslim. The St. Barbara Church on Rustaveli Avenue was turned into a hospital by the Soviet authorities but regained its function after the collapse of the Soviet Union. We really liked the Nativity of Mary Cathedral, which is a High Gothic building that harmoniously blends into the city's architectonics. We were told that the stones of the cathedral change color according to the weather!

We spared no effort and visited the Orta Jame Mosque and the Armenian Apostolic Church that was designed by Austrian architect Robert Marfeld in 1890. We learned that there is even a Synagogue that Batumi Jews are proud of because it is identical to the Synagogues in The Hague and Amsterdam.

Today we walked so much that we were exhausted – but we didn't give in—we implemented your plan right to the end. We took the 2,650-meter-long cableway from near Batumi Port to the top of Peria Mountain in the Khelvachauri District. What we saw from up there – now that is a view! Villages ensconced into mountain slopes, the dark shining sea and, in places, Batumi lit up with evening street lights. It was absolutely incredible!

Kisses, Alyona

Fourth Day: Letter 4

Time flies unbelievably quickly in Batumi! We want to do everything at the same time – get tanned, see the marina (the Yacht Club) and visit the museums. There are more than enough museums in Batumi, so the important thing is to decide what you are interested in. You can see the Ajaran State Museum of Art with paintings, drawings and sculptures by 20th-century Georgian artists. In the Khariton Akhvediani State Museum there are unique archaeological artifacts from the 5th and even 12th-10th centuries BC. There are Ancient Greek krater covered in black varnish, engraved axes and the Gonio treasure – an embossed gold plate from the 1st or 2nd century.

There is a museum of archaeology and of re-



A common scene in Batumi is that of fishermen at night. The famous Batumi Dolphinarium is a popular attraction for locals and visitors.







The Alphabetical Tower is a 130-meter structure in Batumi that symbolizes the uniqueness of the Georgian alphabet and people. The structure resembles DNA with two helix bands rising up the tower holding the 33 letters of the Georgian alphabet, each 4 meters high, made of aluminum.

PHOTO: GEORGE DARCHIASHVILI

ligion in Batumi. There is one dedicated to the Nobel Brothers. This last features the technological innovations that turned Batumi into an industrial city. The famous Nobel brothers introduced the rail and pipeline transportation of oil to Batumi from Baku. This railroad became the main factor driving the development of both the city and the port.

The marina is one of the most colorful and coolest places in Batumi – the temperature in the shade here is considerably lower than elsewhere in the city. It's on Gogebashvili Street next to the ferris wheel and seaport. At the marina, you can take a ride by boat, either on a short cruise with the children, or by private motorboat for an adrenaline-filled experience!

In the evening, we met up with our new Ukrainian friends and, since they had a car, we all went to Gonio, 12 km away. It's close to Sarpı, which is the border crossing to Turkey from Georgia. In Gonio, there is a fortification that was built with large precisely hewn boulders, called the Gonio-Apsaros Fortress. The wall is 900 meters long and 5 meters high. It served as a defense against pirates and other enemies that came by sea.

Returning to Batumi, we continued on to one of its most colorful neighborhoods – the Fish Market – which you strongly advised us to see. This market is on the other side of the city, on the way to Makhinjauri. Here we realized we are definitely in a port city as the busy vendors at exotic stands plied their trade. It seems there are 185 species of fish in the Black Sea, and the market offers anchovies, mussels, horse (or jack) mackerel and Atlantic chub mackerel, pink salmon, mullet, flounder and other tasty kinds. The selling point of this market is that the fish is cleaned in front of the client, who has the choice of taking it home or having it deliciously prepared in a nearby restaurant.

Of course, fish goes well with beer and fun... would we ever miss the chance for that combination? Until tomorrow!

Yours, Alyona and Sergey.



Batumi Boulevard offers many attractions.

Fifth Day: Letter 5

Our flight leaves tonight – now we are very sorry that we jumped headlong on the high-speed Batumi train without hugging or kissing you properly!. We promise to make up for this mistake in the nearest future and return to Georgia – we still have to visit the mountains!

The sheet of paper you gave us with your plan for our stay is tattered now, but it is high time too—as we only have one day left here. Today we visited the Botanical Gardens on the Green Cape, about 9 km north of Batumi.

It was amazing to see one of the world's most unique botanical gardens spread over 113 hectares of land! Two centuries ago, the famous decorator



Mecheslav D'Alphonse began laying out the garden, then the romantic traveler and gardener, Andrey Krasnov continued what D'Alphonse had started. We spent the whole day in the gardens, where plants from different climatic zones coexist. Several phyto-geographic sections are based on the origins of the plants: East Asia, North America, New Zealand, South America, the Himalayas and others. The plant collection comprises over 5,000 species and subspecies; for example there are around 1,200 kinds of roses! Surreal!

There are landscape displays in the garden, similar to an open-air museum. We especially liked the miniature Japanese gardens with level areas where flowers bloom according to the season, surrounded

by borders and interspersed with decorative ponds.

To get the most out of our visit we sought out a Russian-speaking guide. Within the gardens we could travel around in electric cars for visitors, and at the end we even bought two plants grown in the local greenhouse.

We really wanted to visit the Mtirala National Park in Chakvi as it is only a few kilometers away from the Botanical Gardens but there was no time. We learned that the territory covered by the pristine Colchian forest is divided into several interesting tourist routes, promising exciting adventures to wanderers like we are...so this is yet another reason to come back!

Thank you so much for everything!
See you soon, Alyona and Sergey.



PHOTO: GEORGE DARCHIASHVILI

Green Cape

Batumi Botanical Gardens – one
of the globally important plant
conservation areas in the world





Batumi's Botanical Gardens are located approximately 9 km north of the city and cover 113 hectares, or almost 268 acres.





The gardens have thousands of endangered species from all over the world.





Georgian Hospitality: Wine, Supra and Tamada

It is a belief among Georgians that wine was first developed on modern Georgian territory. This belief is supported by discoveries of gigantic, refrigerator-sized clay pots. In this kind of vessels – the predecessors of the legendary kvevri – they kept grain and honey as well as wine. One of these pots is decorated with the images of grapes. Discovery attracted much of attention worldwide.

“We have no interest in claiming that winemaking started in Georgia,” says Georgian National Museum Director Davit Lordkipanidze - “This is not our goal. There are more important questions: why was this activity started? How did it spread in the ancient world? How are the modern-day kinds of wine connected to the wild vine?”

Naturally, having such an old roots in Georgian culture, wine has been one of the most sacred

drinks in this country, which also determines the tradition of “supra”, or festive meal when guests are present. It is also one of the foundations of famous Georgian hospitality.

“Hospitality is a defining cultural trait of Georgians wherever they may live, expressing itself most passionately at the table, and especially during the “supra.” – says Swiss-American Anthropologist Dr. Mary Ellen Chatwin – “Food and drink – whether simple or elaborate – are “blessed” by toasts, expressed by the “tamada”. The tamada, as head of the table, leads guests through the traditional path of ordered toasts, and as guests consume traditional wine and delicious fresh dishes of cheese, meat and vegetables they experience the culture and feelings that are dearest to the Georgian heart” –says Dr. Chatwin.



Vintage Feast, circa 1910s, Niko Piroshvili (Piroshvili, 1862-1918), GNM's Piroshvili collection (above). Seated Figurine, holding a rhyton for wine, Bronze, 7th-6th centuries BC, (right).

Scholars are more concerned with their own research subjects but then there are facts about the culture of Neolithic Era – Shulaveri-Shomu – whose burials in Georgia appeared during a pluvial period in the South Caucasus and contain the first signs of the existence of agriculture prior to the Iron Age. The population used stone and bone tools. A biochemical analysis of the above-mentioned clay vessel conducted by Patrick McGovern, a molecular archaeologist from the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, shows tartaric acid – an indicator of grapes brewing. These artifacts are 8,000 years old! Georgia's winemaking heritage precedes the other ancient, wine-related facts by centuries.



Ghost of the Vine

The image shows the interior of a traditional stone cellar. The walls are made of rough-hewn, light-colored stone. A series of arched windows with wooden frames runs along the left wall, providing natural light. The floor is also made of stone and features several large, circular, brick-lined openings, which are used for storing large clay amphora-like vessels called "kvevri". The ceiling is made of dark wooden planks with thick wooden beams. The overall atmosphere is rustic and historical.

Large clay amphora-like vessels called "kvevri" have been used for almost 8000 years to keep wine underground while the vinification process takes place. This modern "marani" or cellar in the region of Kakheti's Alazani Valley resembles its ancient predecessors.



By Paul Salopek

Meet Maka Kozhara: a wine expert. Young, intelligent, friendly.

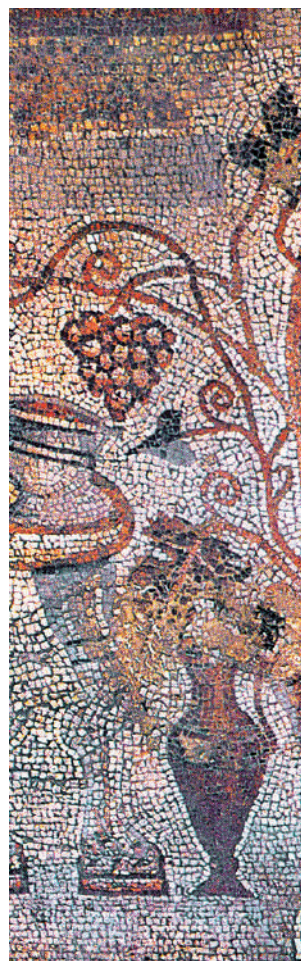
Kozhara sits in an immense cellar in a muddy green valley in the Republic of Georgia. The cellar lies beneath an imitation French chateau. The vineyards outside, planted in gnarled rows, stretch away for miles. Once, in the late 19th century, the chateau's owner, a Francophile, a vintner and eccentric Georgian aristocrat, pumped barrels of home-brewed champagne through a large outdoor fountain: a golden spray of drinkable bubbles shot into the air.

"It was for a party," Kozhara says. "He loved wine."

Kozhara twirls a glass of wine in her hand. She holds the glass up to the ceiling light. She is interrogating a local red—observing what physicists call the Gibbs-Marانونi Effect: How the surface tension of a liquid varies depending on its chemical make-up. It is a diagnostic tool. If small droplets of wine cling to the inside of a glass: the wine is dry, a high-alcohol vintage. If the wine drips sluggishly down the glass surface: a sweeter, less alcoholic nectar. Such faint dribbles are described, among connoisseurs, as the "legs" of a wine. But here in Georgia wines also possess legs of a different kind. Legs that travel. That conquer. That walk out of the Caucasus in the Bronze Age.

The taproots of Georgia's wine are muscular and very old. They drill down to the bedrock of time, into the deepest vaults of human memory. The earliest settled societies in the world—the empires of the Fertile Crescent, of Mesopotamia, of Egypt, and later of Greece and Rome—probably imported the secrets of viticulture from these remote valleys, these fields, these misty crags of Eurasia. Ancient Geor-

Mosaic floor in the ancient city Dzalisa (Kingdom of Kartli/Iberia), 3rd century AD, close to Mtskheta, Georgia



gians famously brewed their wines in clay vats called kvevri. Today, these bulbous amphoras are still manufactured. Vintners still fill them with wine. The pots dot Georgia like gigantic dinosaur eggs. They are under farmers' homes, in restaurants, in parks, in museums, outside gas stations. Kvevri are a symbol of Georgia: a source of pride, unity, strength. They deserve to appear on the national flag. It has been said that one reason why Georgians never converted en masse to Islam (the Arabs invaded the region in the seventh century) was because of



their attachment to wine. Georgians refused to give up drinking.

Kozhara pours me a glass. It is her winery's finest vintage, ink-dark, dense. The liquid shines in my hand. It exhales an aroma of earthy tannins. It is a scent that is deeply familiar, as old as civilization, that goes immediately to the head.

"Wine"—Kozhara declares flatly—"is our religion."

To which the only possible response is: Amen.

"We aren't interested in proving that wine-making was born in Georgia," insists David Lordkipanidze, the director of the Georgia National Museum, in Tbilisi. "That isn't our goal. There are much better questions to ask. Why did it start? How did it spread across the ancient world? How do you connect today's grape varieties to the wild grape? These are the important questions."

Lordkipanidze oversees a sprawling, multinational, scientific effort to unearth the origins of wine. The Americans have NASA. Iceland



has Bjork. But Georgia has the “Research and Popularization of Georgian Grape and Wine Culture” project. Archaeologists and botanists from Georgia, geneticists from Denmark, Carbon-14 dating experts from Israel, and other specialists from the United States, Italy, France and Canada have been collaborating since early 2014 to explore the primordial human entanglements with the grapevine.

Patric McGovern a molecular archaeologist from the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia and a member of this intellectual posse, calls wine perhaps the most “consequential beverage” in the story of our species.

“Imagine groups of hunter-gatherers meeting for the first time,” McGovern says. “Wine helps to bring people together. It’s social lubrication. Alcohol does this.”

Human beings have been consuming alcohol for so long that 10 percent of the enzymes in our livers have evolved to metabolize it into energy: a sure sign of tippling’s antiquity. The oldest hard evidence of intentional fermentation comes from northern China, where chemical residues in pottery suggest that 9,000 years ago our ancestors quaffed a dawn cocktail of rice, honey and wild fruit.

Grape wines came a bit later. McGovern



*Rtveli – Grape harvest
in Kakheti Region,
Eastern Georgia*

surmises that their innovation was accidental: wild grapes crushed at the bottom of a container, their juices gone bad, partly digested by airborne yeasts. For thousands of years, the fermentation process remained a mystery. This gave wine its otherworldly power. “You have a mind-altering substance that comes out of nowhere,” McGovern says, “and so this drink starts to feature at the center of our religions. It became embedded in life, in family, in faith. Even the dead started to be buried with wine.”

From the beginning, wine was more than a mere intoxicant. It was an elixir. Its alcohol content and tree resins, added in ancient

times as wine preservatives, had anti-bacterial qualities. In ages when sanitation was abysmal, drinking wine—or mixing it with water—reduced disease. Wine saved lives.

“Cultures that made the first wines were productive, rich,” says Mindia Jalabadze, a Georgian archaeologist. “They were growing wheat and barley. They had sheep, pigs, and cattle—they bred them. Life was good. They also hunted and fished.”

Jalabadze is talking about a Neolithic culture called Shulaveri-Shomu whose mound sites in Georgia arose during a wet cycle in the southern Caucasus and date back to first inklings of agriculture, before the time of metal. The villagers used stone tools, tools of bone. They crafted gigantic pots the size of refrigerators. Such vessels—precursors to the fabled kvevri—held grains and honey, but also wine. How can we know? One such pot is decorated with bunches of grapes. Biochemical analyses of the pottery, carried out by McGovern, shows evidence of tartaric acid, a telltale clue of grape brewing. These artifacts are 8,000 years old. Georgia’s winemaking heritage predates other ancient wine-related finds in Armenia and Iran by centuries. This year, researchers are combing Shulaveri-Shomu sites for prehistoric grape pips.

One day, I visit the remains of a 2,200-year-old Roman town in central Georgia: Dzalisa. The beautiful mosaic floors of a palace are holed, bizarrely pocked, by clay cavities large enough to hold a man. They are kvevri. Medieval Georgians used the archaeological ruins to brew wine. South of Tbilisi, on a rocky mesa above a deep river gorge, lies the oldest hominid find outside Africa: a 1.8-million-year-old repository of hyena dens that contain the skulls of Homo erectus. In the ninth or tenth centuries, workers dug a gigantic kvevri into the site, destroying priceless pre-human bones. Georgia’s past is punctured by wine. It marinates in tannins.

For more than two years, I have trekked



north out of Africa. More than 5,000 years ago, wine marched in the opposite direction, south and west, out of its Caucasus cradle.

“Typical human migrations involved mass slaughter,” says Stephen Batiuk, an archaeologist at the University of Toronto. “You know, migration by the sword. Population replacement. But not the people who brought wine culture with them. They spread out and then lived side-by-side with host cultures. They established symbiotic relationships.”

Batiuk is talking about an iconic diaspora of the classical world: the expansion of Early Trans-Caucasian Culture (ETC), which radiated from the Caucasus into eastern Turkey, Iran, Syria, and the rest of the Levantine world in the third millennium B.C.

Batiuk was struck by a pattern: Distinctive ETC pottery pops up wherever grape cultivation occurs.

“These migrants seemed to be using wine technology as their contribution to society,” he says.

“They weren’t ‘taking my job.’ They were showing up with seeds or grape cuttings and

Many scientists, including Georgians, believe that wine was first developed here almost 8000 years ago. It has remained the most sacred drink in the country.

bringing a new job—viticulture, or at least refinements to viticulture. They were an additive element. They sort of democratized wine. Wherever they go, you see an explosion of wine goblets.”

ETC pottery endured as a distinctive archaeological signature for 700 to 1,000 years after leaving the Caucasus. This boggles experts such as Batiuk. Most immigrant cultures become integrated, absorbed, and vanish after just three generations. But there is no mystery here.

On a pine-stubbed mountain above Tbilisi, a man named Beka Gotsadze home-brews wine in a shed outside his house.





Gotsadze: big, affable, red-faced. His is one of tens of thousands of ordinary Georgian families who still squeeze magic from *Vitis vinifera* for their own enjoyment. He uses clay *kvevri* buried in the earth; the hill under his house is his incubator. He pipes coils of household tap water around the jars to control the fermentation. He employs no chemicals, no additives. His wines steep in the darkness the way Georgian wine always has: the grapes mashed together with their skins, their stems.

Gotsadze says, “You put it in the ground and ask God: ‘Will this batch be good?’”

He says: “Every wine producer is giving you

his heart. My kids help me. They are giving you their hearts. The bacteria that ferment? They came on the wind! The clouds? They are in there. The sun is in there. The wine holds everything!”

Gotsadze took his family’s wines to a competition in Italy once, to be judged. “The judge was amazed. He said, ‘Where have you been hiding all this time?’ I said, ‘Sorry, you know, but we’ve been a little busy over here, fighting the Russians!’”

And at his raucous dinner table, a forest of stemmed glasses holds the dregs of *tavkveri* rosé, *chinuri* whites, *saperavis* reds. The eternal ETC thumbprint is there.



👉 For more information on protected areas including maps, access routes and roads as well as tour agencies please visit: www.apa.gov.ge



Prometheus Cave

Formed in the thick-layered limestone of the Barremian (Early Cretaceous) age, the Prometheus Cave near Tsaltubo in western Georgia is notable for its remarkably beautiful accretive shapes. The stalactites, stalagmites, stalagnates, helictites, petrified waterfalls and suspended stone curtains illustrate the gradual creation of many unique geological formations. The total area of the cave covers 46.6 hectares, and unlike many other caves, Prometheus Cave has wide corridors. The width in some areas is 25-30 m, with ceilings at a height of 20 to 25 meters. There are 17 halls of various sizes; and some are up to 100 meters long. The cave's total length is 20 kilometers.

The Prometheus Cave offers a 1.5 kilometer trail through the halls that can be visited using recorded commentaries. There are two exits; one is a pedestrian exit where visitors leave on foot and the other is by way of a stream, where boats wait to take visitors to the outside.

In the Palms of a Giant

PHOTO: VIKTOR LYAGUSHKIN



Underwater cave in the Martvili Canyon. Georgia's mountain river caves often reveal prehistoric fossils such as one-meter shell ammonites or fossilized dinosaur footprints.

A speleologist waits for his fellow team members opposite the most dangerous passage in the Okatse Canyon.



PHOTO: VIKTOR LYAGUSHKIN

By Bogdana Vashchenko

The walls of the canyon were closing-up on us, and the river path running through the stone gorge was becoming increasingly circuitous. The August heat had left us behind, and five guys wearing helmets, outfitted with climbing carabiners were shivering in the cold air. The sun was setting quickly, ensuring a cold night ahead when it would be impossible to continue the journey. There is no way back or up: polished by the river, the rocks are completely smooth, there is nothing to grab hold of, and the cold stream knocks you down. None of the five in the group know what awaits them after the next turn of the stone walls: that's because no one in the world has ever been here before.

There is a stone tusk protruding from the stream, a convenient place to fix a piton, the metal spike that is hammered into the seam in of a rock, securing a climber from a perilous fall. The guys attach the rope to it and start lowering the first man – the bravest. He is trying to direct them, but a dozen meters down, the thunderous sound of the river drowns-out his voice. After five more meters, a ledge hides his silhouette. Now the vibration of the tense rope is the only way to tell what is happening to him. His friends release the rope slowly and evenly. Ten more minutes of tension and the rope finally becomes slack. Then three strong tugs let the others know that the first one down found a suitable place. The others can now descend.

There is a small waterfall at the end of the gorge. They cross it by using a rope. For another 30 minutes the guys wade waist-deep in water. Finally, the walls of the canyon part, and the roaring sounds of the river quiet down. The flow calmly divides into small streams that trickle around large stones. The most difficult part is over, but the explorers still need to reach the road where

a car is waiting for them. They are now walking along the river valley bottom with high and steep slopes. The left slope seems less steep, from time to time game trails can be seen there; these could be used to ascend, but the guys know that there is no human dwelling there. The darkness had already started falling when the pioneers finally noticed an inconspicuous pathway leading to the right. It was pitch dark when they finally reached the car. This is how the Okatse River canyon was navigated for the first time.

The arsenal of tools that nature uses to create canyons is diverse. It includes stones, sand and tree trunks that the swollen waters of the spring bring with them, eroding the river bed as though they are using sandpaper. Boulders leave impact pits, which the tireless river immediately widens and deepens further. The river jams tree trunks into crevices and pushes the levers with all of its force.

With karst rocks – the kind of rocks that water can gradually dissolve leading to the formation of caves – everything is even more diverse: rivers can wash out deep crevices and flow inside a rock entirely, or hide part of its flow in an underground cave. Many of the rivers of western Georgia contain this type of rock, especially Okatse River with part of its flow streaming along the bottom of the canyon and part of it through the underground passageways. These rivers are both beautiful and diverse, which is why they are becoming increasingly popular among extreme recreation enthusiasts like rafters, kayakers or tourists who simply crave adventure.

The five pioneers were the first to conquer the Okatse Canyon, but they were not the only explorers. Not long before their journey, members of a youth club called Tetnuldi visited the canyon. The party was comprised of students and teenagers, but they didn't have the skills or experience to

do what their older colleagues would do several months later. What they did have however, was a GoPro camera. So the Tetnuldi members covered a small section and filmed a brilliant video about their adventure.

The video became a huge sensation online throughout Georgia; the waterfalls and fascinating forms of washed-out walls were incredible, and enchantingly beautiful. So the Georgian government decided to establish a national park on the territory of Okatse Canyon. As little as one year later, the impassable wilds were crisscrossed by white stone footpaths, and a suspended road was built above an impressive, 100 meter-deep precipice. These days, hundreds of visitors come to Okatse every year. This in turn has been spurring the return of inhabitants to the nearby villages (after all, an uninterrupted flow of tourists has the potential to generate a significant amount of income). Summer camps have sprung-up as well, offering students programs to study Georgia's nature.

We, as the film crew of National Geographic magazine, wanted to replicate the pioneers' journey in order to photograph the most difficult places and communicate the spirit of pioneering. The head of Tetnuldi club, University of Kutaisi Professor Irakli Julakidze, was our guide.

"The water there is very cold! Terribly so!" Irakli warned us, and, together with photographer Vitya Lyagushin, we put on 5 mm wetsuits to keep us warm. For a couple of hours, we were walking along the river bed, ankle deep in the water. It was August, just like when speleologists from the Georgian Speleological Association were passing through the canyon for the first time. The sun was rising, and it was becoming noticeably hotter. We began stopping at every shallow pool of water, using our helmets as ladles to pour water on ourselves to cool down. Our mood brightened a bit when we entered the canyon, as it was cool in there. However, we hadn't walked for more than half an hour when Irakli hesitantly glanced at our photo equipment and informed us that the next section would be difficult, and that we would risk losing it. He suggested we take a detour instead,

avoiding the perilous path. So we did, and walked through the jungle in 45-degree heat, wearing thick wetsuits, and carrying a full load of photo equipment. We spent six hours wandering there. It was impossible to take off the suits because of the thorny lianas on the path before us. From time to time, our guide from Tetnuldi club would approach the edge of the canyon and ruefully called out Irakli's name, but there was no response.

By the time we left the thorny jungle and found Irakli, we were thanking God that the sun had almost set and the air had become cooler.

After leaving the National Park, we met two sturdy guys in an old park outside the summer residence of the Dadianidukes. The men greeted Irakli in a friendly manner. They turned out to be canyon pioneers Valeri Barbakadze and Gigo Oniani. After learning that we had just tried to walk through the canyon, they took our guide aside, and the conversation continued in Georgian in raised voices. However, the guys soon returned together with Irakli and explained the commotion:

"We did not know who you were, so we started scolding Irakli for taking everyone through the canyon. Okatse is quite a dangerous place and an unprepared person can easily get injured or even killed. In addition, Okatse is a mountain river and its level could rise unexpectedly, significantly increasing the chance of a tragedy."

The Agency of Protected Areas, the department currently in charge of the Okatse Canyon National Park, has considered completely banning "rogue" passing and only allowing qualified people through. It is not yet clear however, who will determine the qualification level of the candidates.

I keep asking the guys about their pioneer journey, about what it is like to be the first somewhere no one had ever been before.

"I remember that it was very cold," Barbakadze says with a laugh. "We did not have wetsuits at the time, we only had enthusiasm. Nor did we have special boots – just military boots. It's always very hard to be the first, but passing a canyon that no one had ever passed before is very cool!"

When the guys learned that Vitya Lyagushin



PHOTO: VIKTOR LYAGUSHKIN

Descending into the waters of the Martvili Canyon to explore them for the first time.



Speleologists practicing their skills in the Okatse Canyon waters in Western Georgia , where there are still many unexplored canyons they would like to discover.



and I were divers, they livened-up.

“There is a canyon where it’s possible to dive, but we never managed to go there. Let’s go together and you will find out what it’s like to be the first.”

And here we are at the Martvili Canyon. We set up diving equipment right there by the car: the water is not far from the road, a mere 50 meters. There are 5-meter tall sheer cliffs from which we have to get into the water. We have to recall our climbing skills and descend using a rope.

A carabiner clicks – we freed ourselves from the rope – and the mountain river flow softly swoops us up and carries us ahead into the unknown. I worry: what does the next turn have in store? The rocky bottom of the canyons like a maze running left and right, becoming wider and deeper, forming a round hall, and then becoming narrow like a cave passage. The washed-out walls resembled intertwined bodies of unknown creatures at one point, and then the palms of a giant: it seems as if someone enormous was holding you in his cupped hands.

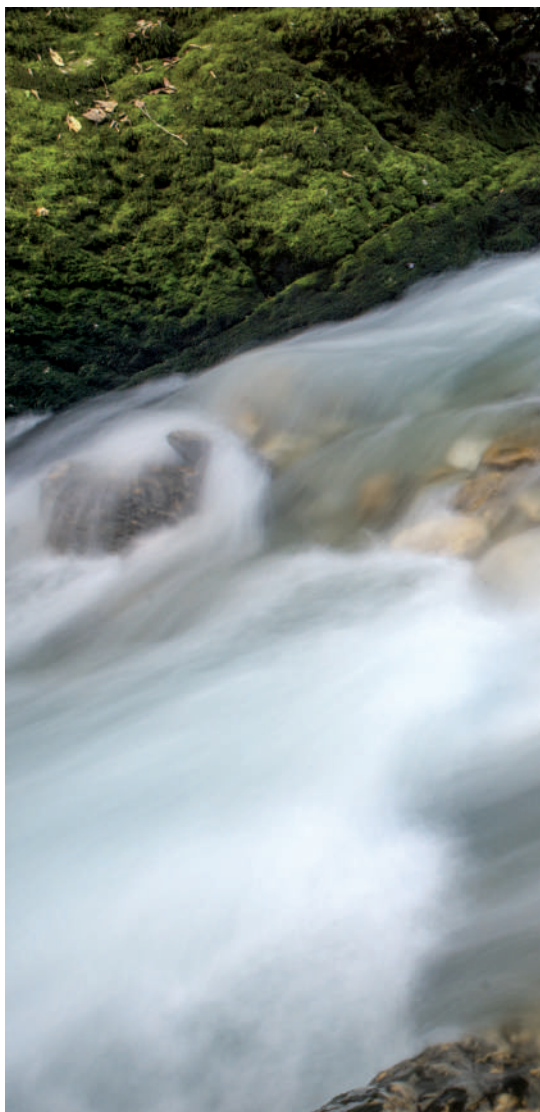
As we step off the edge and jump down, the small silver trout at our feet are initially frightened, but then join us and swim by our side.

Suddenly, the walls of the canyon part, the river becomes shallower, the flow is faster, and large silver fish fan out from behind large stones. The river turns sideways as it jumps over the sharp stones of the riffles, tossing us out to the bank.

We laid there laughing and feeling happy. It was an amazing experience – like the feeling a child has as it courageously ventures out to explore what’s outside the doorstep of his home. It was the same feeling that was radiated by the characters created by Fenimore Cooper and Mayne Reid – nearly inaccessible to us who live in the 21st century – as there are hardly any blanks left on Earth, or places where we could experience this kind of intoxicating emotion.

In the morning, Irakli called to say that he found a new canyon and asked whether we would go there. Valera and Gigo were free the next day and were planning to explore it too.

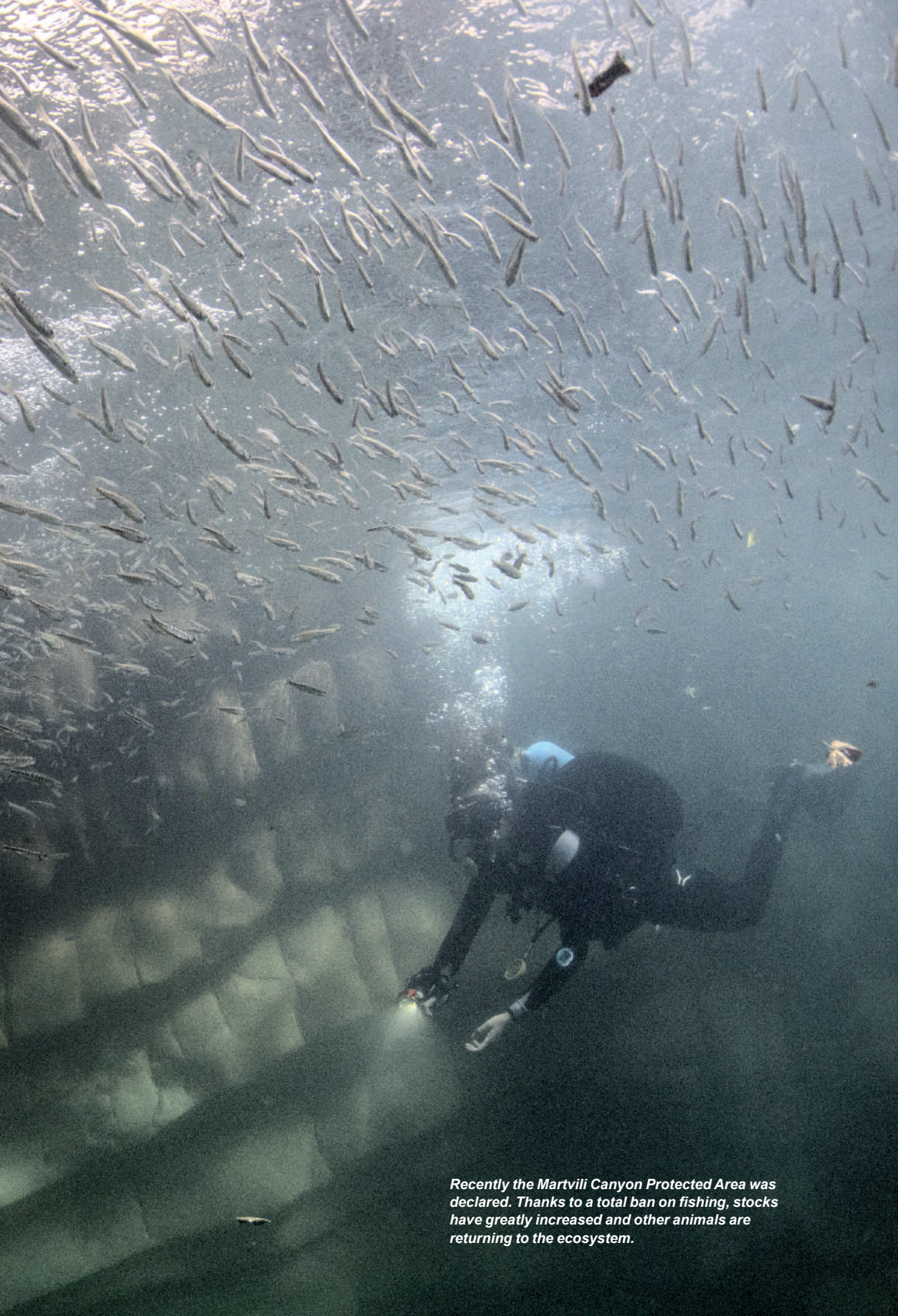
“Of course, Irakli!” we said. “We would be happy to join you!”





Overcoming rapids in the Balda Canyon. Due to the activity of local enthusiasts, the canyons and caves of western Georgia are becoming more and more popular with those practicing extreme sports.





Recently the Martvili Canyon Protected Area was declared. Thanks to a total ban on fishing, stocks have greatly increased and other animals are returning to the ecosystem.



PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK/ EVGENY EREMEEV

Welcome in Winter



Gudauri - View from ski resort

By: *Alexandre Bagration-Davitashvili*

Perhaps there is no such thing as objective reality when it comes to culture—certainly my own “objective reality” is subjective. For example, I love my country very subjectively, and there are things that I am particularly fond of. We don’t always notice our own culture; I am so used to some things that I barely notice them, while those from outside my culture may be crazy about them. To spare you my subjective opinions, I asked a good friend from Turkmenistan to write about what he found most interesting during his short winter trip to Georgia.

Phillip’s Story

I arrived at the Shota Rustaveli Airport, where Zaza, my Georgian friend I met at the Golden Gate Club in Berlin, was waiting for me near the arrivals exit. Funny man, he was holding up a huge poster with a Star of David. A group of Israeli tourists, who had arrived before me, were cajoling him to give them a ride—they were sure he was greeting them! In the meantime, I arrived – and said to them: “Dear brethren, in this case, the star is just for me! L’chaim!”

The locals in the airport were staring at us, or rather, at Zaza’s flamboyant raspberry-red trousers which, as I realized later, looked very un-Georgian. In case you don’t know, anyone wearing raspberry-red trousers in Georgia is weird – just watch the film *Kin-Dsa-Dsa* – a Soviet comedy made in 1986.

“I’d like to take you to a great restaurant,” Zaza said. “It will give you a grand introduction to Georgian culture.” The restaurant, located a few minutes by car east of the airport, was perfectly unremarkable on the outside, but as we entered I realized why we can’t judge by appearances! “You shouldn’t eat something you like every day because you develop immunity and you won’t enjoy it anymore”, said Zaza’s friends who greeted us when we entered—they had waited all day to eat in their favorite *sasadilo* (canteen).

Dry red wine with so much tannin it seeped into all the recesses of my throat gradually awakened my

appetite. I started by having red beans with crushed walnuts. I believe that walnuts and Georgians were created for each other. They add crushed walnuts to many dishes and it tastes different with everything – spinach, pan-fried eggplant, all kinds of beans, all kinds of *mkhali* (minced vegetables mixed with walnuts), and even mixed into an ordinary tomato-cucumber salad. My thoughts about walnuts were interrupted by the arrival of impressive spits straight from the grill, with chunks of excellent roast steak that perfectly filled the space being created by the dry red wine. “Our *mtsvadi* (grilled meat on a spit) is prepared by Shmagi and Gelal!” announced the waiter. I forced myself not to eat too much, however, as we had plans to ski a lot the next day.

It was supposed to snow in the mountains that night and Zaza said there is no place with fresh snow as pleasant as in Gudauri. We made our way towards the capital, Tbilisi. Those residing in that wonderful city probably do not fully realize where they live! This is a dream, not a city.

From the city center, the next morning, we were at the Gudauri ski resort in just over an hour, standing at the top of the mountain, breathing deeply, to let as much of the Caucasus mountain air as possible into my lungs. Zaza had gone off and came skiing down from another summit. He signaled to me to look at a peak not far away. “Let’s ski from Kudebi Mountain now, and then go over to that one, which is about 3,300 m. I want to show you the real high you can have in off-piste skiing!”

Skiing downhill took about 20 minutes, which gave me the time to appreciate the thrilling beauty of the Caucasus Mountains. I noticed that Georgian skiers prefer staying on the main slopes; however we did meet some crazy fans of extreme skiing who left no mound without performing a pirouette. So we changed our course and followed the group, trying to keep up as best we could – until I jumped from a boulder, flipped over, and plowed headlong into two meters of snow!



Few countries still allow heli-skiing, which is available in Gudauri. The road to this ski station is lined with small restaurants that offer simple and delicious Georgian food.







*Locals will passionately convince
you that there is no place with fresh
snow as pleasant as in Gudauri*

PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK

The day continued as we re-joined the group we'd met for some more extreme skiing. From Sadzele to Unagira we daringly took on the sudden obstacles – until one huge 80-degree slope appeared ahead. This is when I nearly freaked out. I pulled myself together and went for it—encouraged by two girls who were skiing right in front of me. After this impressive slope, there was another large slope before the avalanche zone, also with an incline of 80-85 degrees. We skied along the Bidara River gorge, where I sped into a frozen corridor and unintentionally—through pure inertia – turned a full somersault! Thankfully, all ended well. It taught me to steer clear of frozen couloirs, especially at high speeds. Finally, we ended up in the village of Kobi at the foot of the range.

Back in Gudauri I discovered you never wake up with a hangover, even if you've consumed a whole barrel of alcohol—it all passes like an autumn breeze. I was thinking about this while looking out of the helicopter window. We flew from Gudauri towards Kazbegi for a heli-skiing trip. Somewhere in between we were to ski on the slopes of a mountain with a mysterious name – Kamara.

As heli-skiing is prohibited in the Alps, this would be my first time. We mounted into the highest mountain areas, then the helicopter descended towards the ground, hovered over the deep snow – and we jumped. “Can you see the village ahead?” Zaza asked. A very large settlement could be seen ahead in the valley, spread between two mountains. “The last house on the right is mine. A cableway will soon pass nearby, and we'll be able to go skiing straight from the house!” Luckily I'm in good shape or I couldn't have kept up with Zaza! We descended in sync, painting nearly identical zigzags all the way down. A small river appeared below with huge rocks along its banks. There was everything we needed to feel happy in the brilliant sunshine.

On our way back from Gudauri to Tbilisi, we stopped by a small sakhinkle, where delicious traditional ravioli-like khinkali were served. As Zaza put it – “It's food to make you feel the final chord of Gudauri happiness!” Over the door was the head of a deer with a huge set of antlers—it added to my excitement of having been in the natural environ-



Gudauri slopes are suitable for skiers of any level. The area has 57 km of ski runs and 7 lifts.

ment all day. Perhaps it was because I was happy with my 'high' from the excitement or because I had been skiing all day and was very hungry, or maybe for no reason at all – but I have never tasted anything so delicious. These boiled ravioli-like pasta delights, stuffed with meat and flavored with mountain savory, resemble Russian pelmeni but they are larger and more refined. I could taste spices like a hint of red pepper, other unidentified and marvelous mountain herbs and phenomenally delicious meat – all of this moistened by the soup stock inside the dough cases. I am not particularly familiar



with Greek mythology but I do think that khinkali must be the Caucasian equivalent of ambrosia. In fact they were introduced in the 13th century with the invasion of Mongols from the steppes...I ate 15 at least—possibly more—but the evidence remained—that’s how many small twisted pieces of dough that close each khinkali at the top remained on my plate.

Tbilisi showed me another surprising contrast that evening—I’d never imagined that such a traditional country would have a well-developed electronic music scene. My first discovery was in a discrete club near the large Dynamo Stadium. You’d never find it if you didn’t know where to look. The hum coming from underground might be mistaken for the metro – the club is underneath the stadium

and called “the best club of the East”. The “best of the West” is the Berghain Club in Berlin. I didn’t know how this kind of techno could be played in a former Soviet republic! The club interior is also amazing – you descend into a basement and walk through several dark passages, to find yourself in a huge dark space. It resembles a swimming pool. In fact, it was a swimming pool – transformed into a club.

The international press writes a lot about Georgian clubbing, but I could never have imagined anything like this. “Forget London and Berlin – the new place to dance is eastern Europe,” The Guardian wrote, mentioning this club under the stadium and another one under a bridge not too far away – Yet another place, formerly a fish restaurant built

Ushguli is a community of four villages located at the headwaters of the Enguri Gorge in the region of Svaneti. It is recognized as the Upper Svaneti UNESCO World Heritage Site, and is the highest continuously inhabited settlement in Europe (2100m).



PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK



during Stalin's rule, and overlooking the Mtkvari River was turned into a club by two musicians. We danced until morning. Young people in Tbilisi are energetic and trendy. They like black clothes and soft sneakers, like clubbers do everywhere. Zaza introduced me to friends whose names I promptly forgot...A great moment was when I met some of my Berlin friends who had come to Georgia to visit the club scene! Tbilisi resembles Berlin in the 1990s, innocent and full of enthusiasm, like our Berlin before tourism, though the German city could never compete with Georgian cuisine.

The next day, we flew out to Mestia in western Georgia from Natakhtari, where a famous brewery is located, a chocolate factory – and a small airport, just 20 minutes' drive from Tbilisi. Georgia's great advantage is that it is small. In winter, you can go from one resort to another easily and quickly. At least one of them is bound to have fresh snow and, if you are a maniac like me, you will definitely go from Gudauri to Mestia, from Mestia to Goderdzi, from Goderdzi to Bakuriani and so on. You definitely need to have a crazy companion like my friend Zaza – skiing alone, like many other things – is very boring.

In Mestia there are two main places to ski, both of them forested. In Khatsvali the slope is short but you can ski down through the forest and go for the full extreme experience. You might also “hug” a tree with your skis like I did – but so what! Tetnuld is the biggest skiing zone in Eastern Europe, where any skier or snowboarder would like to find themselves. Cable cars take you through the trees, and then suddenly you find yourself on a clear slope, leaving the trees behind.

Here in the unique region of Svaneti I was surprised no one made khinkali and that Zaza could not understand the local language, a Kartvelian language like Georgian, but quite different. Khinkali were seamlessly replaced by kubdari and millet with cheese khachapuri, preceded by brief ethno-linguistic introductions...

Skiing in Ushguli, the highest inhabited village in Europe and above Mestia (capital of Svaneti), was more interesting than anywhere else. One can ski



Tbilisi nightlife can be fun. Describing many concrete underground areas in Tbilisi, Arthur House wrote in *The Guardian* (2016) that these places are not just about the venue and music: there is a real sense from the crowds that this is a new and exciting scene, something positive and long overdue.

from the highest point in the village and descend between fences and towers. Along the way, as the chickens scatter quickly, you can enjoy a few good ski-jumps.

It took a much shorter time to reach Batumi on the Black Sea from Svaneti than I had imagined. From Mestia to Zugdidi took two and a half hours and from Zugdidi to Batumi another two hours. It was late December but the temperature was +15°C



in Batumi on the beach. We relaxed and tanned until evening, then after sundown we toured the fish market, picked out some gurnards and horse-mackerel from the evening catch, then had them grilled at a restaurant next door. One day of sub-tropical bliss made me want to go back to the mountains even more.

So off we went to Goderdzi, in the mountains of Adjara! The place is like a fairy tale. What was even more magical was getting there from the warmth of the December sea. It took only three hours from Batumi to Goderdzi. Fir-trees and small wooden houses appear from the fog as you ski. And it is quiet, with only the sound of skis cutting the snow. Once in a while, black rooks appeared and cawed

raucously, and local children watch you jump-ski a fence, then try to copy you.

The delightful three-day trip finished as we were back in Tbilisi again. After being on the road for hours, that night I joined a large group at the sculpture baths. Trust me on this: after skiing, indulging yourself in naturally hot water is the best therapy in the world. The pool, massage, kisa (the traditional scrub), with tea and conversation, just can't be beat. Agha Mohammad Khan Qajar, Alexander Pushkin or Alexander Dumas – all three raved about these baths. When we left, after two or three hours of heavenly relaxation, I was told I'd been baptized the Tbilisi way—now I'm called “Phillip of Tbilisi”, aka “Phillip the Clean”.





Tusheti

The Tusheti State Natural Reserve and National Park created in 2003 is managed by the Administration of Tusheti Protected Areas, located in the village of Kvemo Alvani, in the Municipal district of Akhmeta. The Summer Administration is located in Omalo, Tusheti's main town. Inside the National Park, the Protected Areas Administration building also offers hotel rooms, a cafeteria and a visitors' center. It includes an exhibition hall, a conference hall and information displays in several languages. At the Administration office, visitors receive information about available services and can plan tours of the region, how to hire a guide, plan tours on horseback or rent tourist equipment. The Tusheti Protected Areas offer 11 tourist routes which cover most of Tusheti's unique historical-cultural and natural landscapes.



For more information on protected areas including maps, access roads as well as tour agencies please visit: www.apa.gov.ge



Vashlovani

The Vashlovani Natural Reserve, founded in 1935, became the Vashlovani Protected Areas in 2003, and is situated in the furthest southeastern section of the region of Kakheti, on the Iori Plateau. Its altitude ranges from 100 to 900 m and the area totals 35,065.5 hectares. In 2003, when the complex was unified, it was made up of the natural reserve, national park and natural monuments. Today these include the Vashlovani State Natural Reserve, the Vashlovani National Park and several monuments, including Artsivi (Eagle) Gorge, the Alazani Floodplain Forest (Kaklis Kure – Walnut Bay) and the Takhti-Tepa mud volcanoes. This unusual landscape is of special importance for its biodiversity, as it includes both “standard species” for Georgia such as wolf, bear, jackal and wild boar, as well as small populations of black-tailed (or goitered) gazelle and striped hyena – both of which are extremely rare in Georgia. The network of tourist trails in the Vashlovani Protected Areas offers a wide choice of one- or several-day hikes. They are marked and easy to hike. Along the trails there are bungalows, picnic tables and camping spots that can be reserved. The National Park offers activities such as hiking, geological, cycling, photo, cultural, safari and educational tours.

Borjomi

The Borjomi Natural Reserve, established in 1935, is located in central Georgia, forming the eastern part of the Lesser Caucasus Mountains. In the 1990s it was combined with additional territories; thus the Borjomi-Kharagauli Protected Areas were created, made up of a Natural Reserve and a National Park with a total area of 107,083 hectares. This is more than 1% of Georgia's total territory. The Reserve and Park consists of six districts, including the municipalities of Borjomi, Kharagauli, Akhaltsikhe, Adjigeni, Khashuri and Baghdati. The Administrative and Visitors' Centers of the National Park are located in Borjomi and Kharagauli.

The park administration manages four different categories of protected areas: Borjomi Natural Reserve, Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park, Ktsia-Tabatskuri and Nedzvi Managed Reserves, as well as the Goderdzi Petrified Forest Natural Monument. The Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park tourist trail network offers hiking for one or several days, with varying altitudes from 400 to 2642 meters. The trails are marked and easy. They are equipped with tourist shelters, picnic tables and camping spots. Special places are allocated for making campfires. The National Park offers hiking, horseback riding, cycling, snowshoe tours, as well as cultural and educational tours.



PHOTO: GEORGE DARCHIASHVILI



Lagodekhi

The Lagodekhi Natural Reserve was created in 1912. It is notable for having one of the world's best preserved pristine natural landscapes. It is located in Georgia's farthest northeast on the southern slopes of the Caucasus Mountains at an altitude of 590 to 3500 m. Today, Lagodekhi Protected Areas include the State Natural Reserve (19,749 ha) and the Managed Reserve (4,702 ha). There are five scenic, safe and informative tourist trails in the Protected Areas, namely: Grouse Waterfalls, Ninoskhevi Waterfalls, Machi Fortress, Black Rock Lake and Nature Interpretation Trail. Lagodekhi is very interesting in summer and early fall when, during rut, or mating season, it is possible to see herds of deer and possibly the predators that hunt them, including wolf, lynx and bear. The East Caucasian tur and chamois, as well as a very rich bird fauna are trademarks of Lagodekhi wildlife.

PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK/ MARK BRIDGER



Javakheti

Javakheti is the newest of Georgia's protected areas. Created in 2011 with a total area of 16,614 hectares, it is made up of the Javakheti National Park as well as the Bughdasheni, Khanchali, Madatapa, Sulda and Kartsakhi Managed Reserves. It is situated on the unique Javakheti Plateau in the southern region of Samtskhe-Javakheti on territories of the Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda Municipalities.

The region has no forest cover except for some pine groves planted by local communities, and small fragments of natural forest. As there are many lakes on the Javakheti Plateau, including the largest in Georgia, Paravani Lake, it is a world-known fly-way for migrating water birds. The Didi Abuli Mountain is the highest point in Javakheti, reaching 3300 m altitude. The Javakheti Plateau is the coldest populated area in Georgia with a very low annual temperature and a dry continental climate. In winter, the lakes are frozen for many months. However, in summer the ideal climate makes it a fascinating region to discover, with temperatures slightly lower than elsewhere.

An aerial photograph of a mountain range, likely the Blue Ridge Mountains in Georgia. The image shows a series of ridges and valleys. The ridges are covered in green vegetation, while the valleys are filled with snow. The perspective is from a high angle, looking down on the terrain.

Anthem to the Rising Sun

Once virtually closed to all but the Community Party nomenclature, today Georgia's protected areas are open to everyone, permitting them to enjoy the natural diversity of the country.



This road to Tusheti is the only way to access the protected area by car; The road is closed during the autumn/winter seasons.

PHOTO: BADRI VADACHKORIA

By: *Levan Butkhuzi*

There are 25 biodiversity hotspots on the planet today. One of them is the Caucasus, and Georgia is an integral part of this region. The Caucasus Mountain system is one of 200 eco-regions identified by the World Wildlife Fund as being of global significance for their high diversity of species, level of endemism, unique taxonomies, distinctive evolutionary processes and characteristics of the historical development of flora and fauna. Georgian fauna is also remarkable for its diversity. Wolf, bear, jackal, fox, lynx and other predators as well as many ungulates such as roe deer, chamois, wild boar, bezoar goat and the beauty of the Caucasus Mountains – the wild tur – are found both within and outside of Georgia’s protected areas. Georgia is undoubtedly a bird watching paradise as well, with over 350 species of birds that inhabit the country!

Yet only two decades ago, all of this was in grave danger. There was a real threat that the network of ecosystems, unique landscapes and diversity of species would never survive until 2017. Using examples from several protected areas, I would like to show you the path that Georgia’s natural environment took from decline to restoration. I have no illusion that today everything is in order, but progress was definitely made and I sincerely invite you to come and enjoy Georgia’s wonderful protected areas with their biological and landscape diversity!

I have been studying Georgia’s wildlife for almost 25 years and, due to my current position as Editor of this magazine I remain closely connected to this sphere. Since I was a child, I knew I would become a zoologist, especially as my father used to take me to the zoo quite often. Since then I knew I wanted to see Georgia and the world, and to work with wild animals. Obsessed with this idea, I became a biology student, and for the next 25 years I witnessed Georgia’s contemporary history, from the Soviet collapse to its independence. I experi-

enced the civil war of the 1990s, the increased destruction of nature and the loss of many people. I have seen how small natural reserves – scattered like little dots on the map and accessible only to Communist Party nomenclature – gradually become national parks, then formed an organic network of protected areas where anyone – not just the “privileged” of society – can enjoy the biological and landscape diversity of their country. However, Communism did leave a truly bitter legacy.

Until 1993, there was a bounty system set up under the Soviet system to eradicate predators. Upon presentation of pelts from wolf, bear, lynx or hyena or the claws of birds of prey, the State would pay a hunter 100 rubles for each specimen. This was a substantial amount at the time—enough to ensure that predators were killed on a mass scale. Naturally, poaching flourished too. Even after Georgian independence these laws were in force. Everywhere, anything that moved was shot at. Scientists became concerned to see how biodiversity in general, something Georgia was so famous for, was steadily declining. Disaster appeared imminent.

Fortunately, even from the beginning of the 1990s, there were those who resisted, and who persistently looked for ways to save nature. Putting pressure on the government was pointless, since it was powerless to act, and the atmosphere increasingly reeked of civil war.

In the late 1980s I had just been admitted to the Faculty of Biology at Tbilisi State University when I first met Jason Badridze, a specialist of large mammals. He was working in two directions: first on a method for the recovery of captive-raised species into their natural habitat; and secondly on creating an organization which would support the re-introduction of these species into targeted protected areas of Georgia in accordance with his own method. I became very interested in this idea.

In 1989 I met several of his collaborators there, including Zura Gurielidze, Natia Kopaliani and



The population of the Egyptian vulture (above) is small, and found mainly in eastern Georgia. The Red-footed falcon is endangered in Georgia; however it can be spotted in some protected areas.

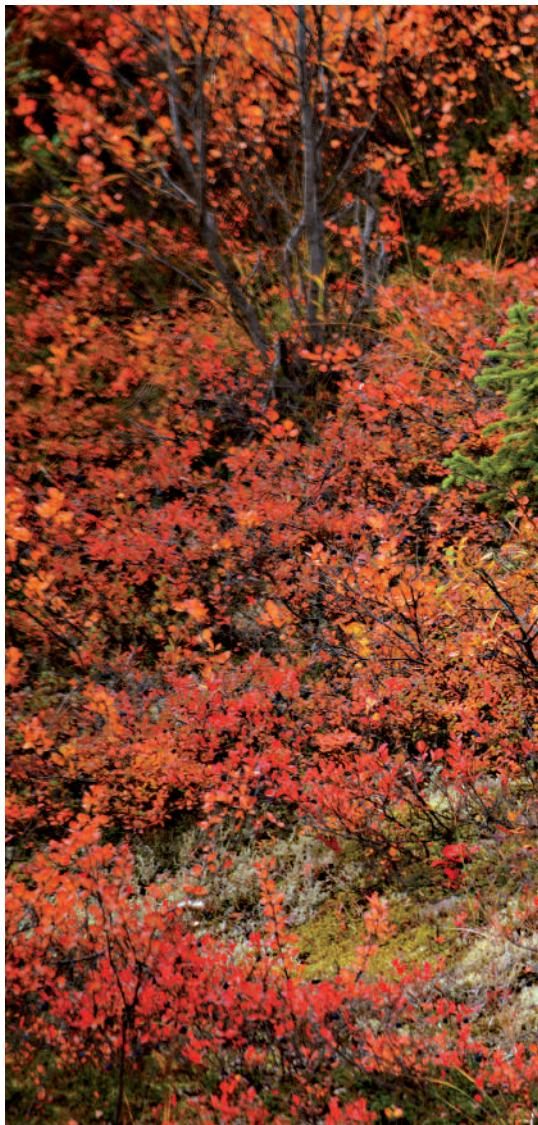


Gia Todua. We officially registered an NGO in the early 90s, based on Badridze's dream organization, and called it NACRES (Noah's Ark Centre for the Recovery of Endangered Species).

Much has changed in Georgia and in our lives since those first years, yet NACRES has never stopped working to save endangered species. I spent 23 years with the organization, and met many who supported our work, including some from abroad. One beloved friend of the team, from Switzerland, Mary Ellen Chatwin was a socio-cultural anthropologist who encouraged us in those dark days. She began supporting our group in 1990 with organizational contacts from abroad. NACRES decided to explore the country to understand the issues faced by protected areas, sometimes staying for months to study ecosystems all over the country. We experienced the civil conflicts of the 1990s first-hand—and sometimes we, like the animals, were chased by submachine guns.

My role in the group was modest at first, as I was a student. I became Zura Gurielidze's assistant. He was researching predator/prey relations between wolves and deer in the Lagodekhi Natural Reserve. Dramatic processes were under way, and I was tasked with following him and collecting wolf excrement to determine their diets. That is how I got to know Lagodekhi for the first time – in 1990.

Although this area was just a small, mountainous natural reserve at the time, the situation was more difficult. For example there was only one, very narrow trail leading up into the high mountains, cutting across the mountain range and continuing into Dagestan (a region of the Russian Federation after Georgian independence). It took about eight hours on horseback to reach the middle of the natural reserve, the meteorological station. The road was terribly tiring, and the climb up a nearly vertical surface seemed to have no end in sight. You cursed yourself and swore never to come again. This was the path we, the scientists, used at the time. Tourists were not allowed yet, and it was disappointing because such beauty should not be restricted to only a select few. It is a treasure belonging to everyone! We continued





The Brown bear population has been increasing in recent years, and the species is now quite common in almost all protected areas.



The Tur is endemic to the Caucasus, meaning it is only found in this region, and can be spotted along the entire Greater Caucasus mountain range.

PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK



the last part on foot, and after five hours I knew that soon I would collapse. Suddenly, we reached a plain. It was twilight, and ahead of us we saw a huge herd of deer that had just fallen asleep. The herd was startled by us, and they began to run in all directions. It was a truly magnificent sight – I thought I was living a fairy tale. At that moment, I felt my fatigue disappear without a trace. I knew I was where I had wanted to be since childhood. It was paradise!

The next morning Zura and I woke up at the meteorological station. There was a spring about 200 meters away from the house and I went to bring water. Several chamois crossed my path, sending shivers of delight through my whole being! By the spring, there was a bear that—thankfully – saw me first and ran away. I felt completely overcome! On the same day at noon, I spied a lynx with a cub not far away. The next day we continued on the trail through deep forest into the alpine zone where the “Beauty of the Caucasus Mountains” – the wild tur – was waiting for us! I was shooting photos with my primitive film camera.

Every night, Zura and I would sit in the yard of the meteorological station, which was several hours’ walk from inhabited villages. I remember thinking that no one would be able to help us had anything happened – there were no mobile phones then. However, this solitude had its own wild allure. Looking up at the sky, I thought there is no place where stars shine the way they do here, in Lagodekhi! On the last day, I woke up before sunrise. I took my binoculars and looked at the opposite mountain, hoping to see a herd of wild tur. This was the hour they like moving from the forest to the alpine zone to graze on the dew-drenched grass. Suddenly, in the dawn light, I caught saw a wolf on the slope of the mountain. Until that moment we had only encountered excrements but I had never seen a wolf in the wild!

Because of the bounties on predators at that time wolf numbers had decreased dramatically, and as a result, the red deer populations rose sharply. For millennia the natural habitat of red deer was the middle altitude, wooded regions of

mountains - neither in the foothills close to human habitat, nor in Alpine zones . The healthy wolf population kept deer within this mid-altitude area. Due to decades of the disastrous bounty system, wolf populations were decimated. This meant that the deer population expanded both up to Alpine regions and down to the foothills, where it suppressed the resident roe deer populations. The roe deer, in turn, were forced down towards village and towns where they were killed by poachers. At the same time, the increased deer populations pushed chamois from their former common territory into higher mountains, thus making them compete with the stronger wild tur population. In this severe “ecological battle” between chamois and tur the chamois populations were disadvantaged and began to decline. At the same time the red deer fed on vulnerable young shoots in this fragile ecosystem. We observed such serious signs of destruction throughout the entire ecosystem.

The wolf I had just spied, though, was slowly following the trail, head down. The magical creature moved unhurried as the sun rose slowly over the mountains. Suddenly, the wolf stopped, sat down, lifted its head and gave a long howl. It was such an impressive sound I could only shudder. The howling expressed a mystical energy – the kind we feel when an anthem of triumph is performed. Indeed it was an anthem to the rising sun.

The 1990s in Georgia were very difficult, with the violent toppling of the government and with wars in two Georgian regions where the governments of central and autonomous republics fought each other. As a result, a great number of automatic weapons ended up in the hands of the population; hardly anyone cared about the destruction of nature when people were so merciless towards each other. Robberies, murders... And infrastructures broke down – often there was no electricity or gas.

There was a feeling that the state had simply disappeared. Many thought that the work of so many enthusiastic environmentalists, doing their jobs for peanuts, was pointless. However, years have passed. Today Lagodekhi is one of the best preserved protected areas in the world, with



Populations of both lynx and chamois are showing steady increases in Georgia's protected areas. The lynx can be sighted in Lagodekhi, Boromi and Vashlovani, while chamois are found mainly along the eastern parts of the Greater Caucasus range.





PHOTO: VIKTOR LYAGUSHKIN



Vashlovani National Park has become a safe haven for the goitered gazelle (or Jeiran's gazelle), helped by population restocking from nearby areas in Azerbaijan and Turkey.

diverse and primordial landscapes that start at almost 600 meters and reach 3500 meters in altitude. Today, this well-protected and safe environment has numerous tourist trails. It has become the perfect place for nature-lovers, far removed from the times when hunters with submachine guns ran amok there.

The World Wildlife Fund (today the Worldwide Fund for Nature) started its work in Georgia in the middle of these “dark 1990s”. Everyone began to realize that the natural environment would be destroyed if there was no active intervention. Natural reserves needed to be physically protected but even more so they needed to be transformed into more effectively protected areas with buffer zones between the reserves and the local population. Tourist trails and infrastructure systems needed to be created. This is when the idea of turning natural reserves into national parks was born, yet it took years to implement the ideas. This is when World Wildlife Fund hired us, Georgian zoologists, botanists and other environmental scientists, and sent us to all Georgian natural reserves to collect basic information.

The Borjomi Natural Reserve is covered with a mixed forest. Winters here are harsh and very snowy, and summers are exceptionally beautiful. During my assessment visit I discovered that the beauty of the Central Caucasus, bezoar goat and deer, had become nearly extinct in this ecosystem. There were only a few bears left. In short, the situation was not favorable and, in addition to developing a longer-term protection policy, rapid planning was needed for species recovery. But how could you increase the rangers’ salaries and reduce corruption, given the underlying general poverty

Nevertheless, the project to establish the Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park began. Today the total area of this protected area is 107,083 hectares, more than 1% of Georgia’s whole territory and is very rich in biodiversity. In the 1990s, who could have thought there would be such an amazing network of tourist trails in Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park with one- or several-day hikes? This network of marked and very accessible trails starts

at 400m and ends at 2642m, offering tourist shelters, picnic and camping sites.

All the former Natural Reserves were gradually transformed either into National Parks or other categories of protected areas which are an important part of Georgia’s tourism. The interrelation between tourism and biodiversity is also exemplified by two favorite places for birdwatchers—the Kolkheti Plain and the Javakheti Plateau. Visitors come principally to see two flyways of global significance that are part of these ecosystems. Note that the Kolkheti wetlands (Kolkheti National Park) and Javakheti’s exceptional high-mountain lakes (declared a Protected Area in 2011) are among the most important sites in the world for the seasonal migration of numerous species of birds. Many thousands of migrating birds rest here and/or pass the winter.

Georgia’s best-known natural sites are its seaside and green mountains, yet few know that the country’s southeast region resembles a savanna with a semi-desert climate and its unique species. The Vashlovani Natural Reserve became part of a unified national park and natural monument complex in 2003. It also has a tragic history. Most likely it was in the 1980s when a small bullet in Vashlovani mercilessly killed Georgia’s last goitered gazelle. This hypothetical but completely feasible scene marked the death of the last specimen of an animal that had always been a symbol of beauty in our country. It signified the end of many centuries that saw goitered gazelles roam freely all over eastern Georgia, even up to the outskirts of Tbilisi.

Beginning in the 19th century, unregulated hunting began to drastically diminish the gazelle population, and finally made it extinct. Individual gazelles still lived near the border, in Azerbaijan. Animals, however, do not recognize administrative borders, and gazelles that would stray into Georgia, immediately fell victim to poachers. The administrative border thus became a de facto population border! The exceptionally beautiful gorge and floodplains that are so attractive for tourists today also used to be



Protected areas of Georgia are particularly rich in amphibian and reptile species. Vashlovani National Park is famous for its invertebrates, many of them endemic.



home to the leopard and striped hyena until the last century; their natural prey included goitered gazelles. With the decline and disappearance of the gazelle population and because of increased poaching, these predators also disappeared. In the 1990s, when I first went to Vashlovani, these dramatic events had already taken place. Despite this, I was nonetheless astonished not only by the unusual landscapes but also by the diversity of the remaining species. Large mammals included bears and wolves, although it was not easy to spot them. I returned to Tbilisi with a heavy heart after that visit. It was a monitoring visit and the task of NACRES zoologists was to care for and restore the populations of large mammals. The plan was simple, but very ambitious. We were tasked with restoring the goitered gazelle! The implementation of this plan took an entire decade and the involvement of numerous local and international organizations and governments, including Turkey and Azerbaijan. In the autumn of 2009, the project to restore the population of goitered gazelles began in Georgia. Even today, individual animals are brought in from these countries, kept in large, well protected enclosures, or released near the protected area. In this way, goitered gazelles can safely and quickly reproduce. Even though this might not restore populations of leopard and striped hyena as a “side effect”, it will hopefully facilitate the increase of the existing wolf and bear populations. Predators such as leopard and hyena would have to be artificially reintroduced, since their species are fully extinct today.

During those 1990s, many zoologists, botanists, landscape architects and other specialists began exploring the Vashlovani area to help plan the new natural reserve. A wide network of protected areas was planned. Today, about 20 years later, the area of Vashlovani Protected Areas in Georgia’s most southeastern region now totals 35,067.5 hectares.

Today only a few goitered gazelles roam Vashlovani. Unexpectedly, and – perhaps not due to their presence but to better protection and effective planning—all these efforts have borne fruit – the populations of bear and wolf are growing!





The Dalmatian pelican is one of many bird species that cross Javakheti's alpine lake ecosystem during migration. The yellow skin under their beak becomes bright red during mating season.

Welcome to the National Museum

Georgia entered the world civilization as the cradle of the first Europeans, ancient wine and the country of the Golden Fleece. The country is distinguished by its magnificent landscapes, varied and unique endemic fauna and flora, and five climate zones that range from humid sub-tropical on the Black Sea and nearby wetlands, to high plateaus and alpine regions, to the semi-desert areas of the southeast and the temperate zones of central Georgia. Its extraordinarily varied natural resources have supported uninterrupted human habitation for thousands of years.

Here at the Georgian National Museum the evidence and confirmation of the oldest human settlements in Eurasia can be viewed, as can the stunning gold and silver jewelry from the ancient land of Colchis, magnificent medieval Christian art, spectacular modern paintings by Georgian artists and masterpieces of Oriental, Western European and Russian decorative arts.

The museum's origins can be traced to 1852, when the first museum in the Caucasus region, the Caucasian Museum, was founded. The rich photo-archives of the Georgian National Museum harbors invaluable documentation from as early as the 1840s. The early Caucasian Museum also exhibited objects from cultures all over the Caucasus and had a rich natural history collection. In collaboration with National Geographic Georgia, the Georgian National Museum has reconstructed the zoological exhibition of the Caucasian Museum with its original display cases and museographic style, offering the possibility to recognize the contribution from our museum's predecessor



The General Director of the Georgian National Museum Prof. Dr. David Lordkipanidze

and to showcase the unique collection of our natural world as it was originally displayed.

In 2004, the unification of the main museums, the National Gallery, house museums and research centers into one system formed the Georgian National Museum (GNM), the largest museum complex in the country today. The establishment of the GNM reflects the beginnings of structural, institutional, and legal reforms in Georgia's cultural heritage sector. It is an example of international importance showing how to renovate post-Soviet museums into modern, innovative, creative, us-



er-friendly institutions that are integrated into the urban and regional social fabric.

Our task is to build regional museums in harmony with the culture and environmental identity of the local communities. We are neither a temple nor a storehouse. Instead we are an active community learning center that links our past with our present, to better prepare us for tomorrow. Good examples of this approach include the recently renovated Svaneti Museum where the richest collections of Christian art are preserved; the Samtskhe-Javakheti History Museum, illustrating the multi-cultural nature of our country; and the Sighnagi Museum, the first one built according to modern standards and which showcases the

famous wine-producing region of Kakheti. If there were a public opinion survey carried out on priority issues for Georgia, the main response would be “Education”. If you then ask Georgians what the country’s main factors of national identity are, the answer would include the rich cultural history and religiosity.

Indeed I am sure that museums have great potential for contributing to educational and cultural processes, and for developing a balance between faith and knowledge. I believe that the synergy of Art + Science is a strong tool for developing democratic societies where academic and artistic freedoms are key ingredients within the process.

Take a Journey With Us

Start your adventure
at the Georgian Na-
tional Museum, and
discover the history of
the country through
its unique collections.

*Underside of golden goblet from the Trialeti
region, first half of the 2nd millennium BC.
The goblet is decorated with lapis lazuli,
cornelian, et and amber.*

PHOTO: GURAM TSIBAKHASHVILI
ON DISPLAY AT THE EXHIBITION ARCHEOLOGICAL TREASURY. GNM'S S. JANASHIA MUSEUM OF GEORGIA.





By Annie Davarashvili

It's been a world of constant discovery for me since I first entered the Georgian National Museum (GNM). In fact, it's hard to remember a time when I wasn't connected to it. At present I am part of the largest umbrella organization that sets out to unify the major museums of our Country. Every day seems like the beginning of a new adventure for me. I start by traveling through history in Dmanisi where the first Europeans were discovered. I was very lucky in this regard, as I went to Dmanisi together with the world's leading scientists whose discoveries have changed the perception of human history. In an interview, famous French paleontologist Michel Brunet said: "We are here because the first humans came here. This place is extremely important for studying our history." I should note that those are the words of the paleontologist (Brunet) who discovered the skull of the oldest hominid nicknamed Toumaï in Central Africa that dates back 7 million years.

Needless to say, my eyes widened. I even tried to be more careful stepping on the ground. I was standing on the 13,000-square-meter archaeological site of Dmanisi, located 85 km from Tbilisi. Only five percent of this site had been excavated at the time, so I imagined the layers hiding underground and the scale of history it might reveal. It was then that I overheard paleoanthropologist Donald Johanson say: "This is a unique place, there are unique discoveries everywhere you look. This is probably the most important site of this layer in the world." Johanson is credited with discovering a fossil in Africa nicknamed Lucy that dates back 3.2 million years.

I had always understood the significance of the discovery, but now the scale was growing. David Lordkipanidze was standing on the discovery site telling its story. The time machine was turned on, taking me exactly 25 years into





Dmanisi Archeological Museum-Reserve, home of the First Europeans, Dmanisi, Georgia. Site-Museum opened for public in 2009



*Epigonation, fragment of an
18th century embroidery.
GNM's embroidery collection.*

PHOTO: GURAM BUMBIASHVILI



the past – back to 1991 to be exact. I, too, was a participant in that discovery. The National Museum staff who had gathered there looked younger on the expedition. I have always liked detective stories. I think this was the best place for me to be – fossils, evidence, a lower jaw dating back 1.8 million years, a total of five skulls and over 70 skeleton bones – the history of the world was changed.

Then the Dmanisi time machine took me directly to the Simon Janashia Museum of Georgia. Upon entering the museum, I immediately spotted the exhibition of skulls. The exhibition title was in plain sight. It read: Stone Age Georgia. One step in, and you enter the Georgia of millions of years ago – kudus, hyenas and hominoidea (*Udabnopithecus*), rhinoceroses, ostriches and elephants... The exhibition was arranged in accordance with Spanish paleoartist Mauricio Antón's sketches, showing not only the bones, but history as a whole. If you immersed yourself in this world, along with the artifacts that come to life, you followed the entire process of human evolution.

I approached the fifth undamaged skull that was discovered; it dates back 1.7 million years. The imagination really begins working when one starts imagining what their ancestors were like. Science is advanced enough now for us to be greeted by a reconstructed model, next to Mzia, Zezva and their offspring. I remember still being a student when I met the first Europeans – Mzia and Zezva. I was looking at them and thinking: Mzia seems to be smiling. I learned that the paleo artist, when working with the reconstruction, did in fact find signs of a smile by observing the indicators on a muscle. Can you imagine how advanced contemporary science and technology is? Today, it is amazing how many things we can learn about a human being who lived 1.7 million years ago.

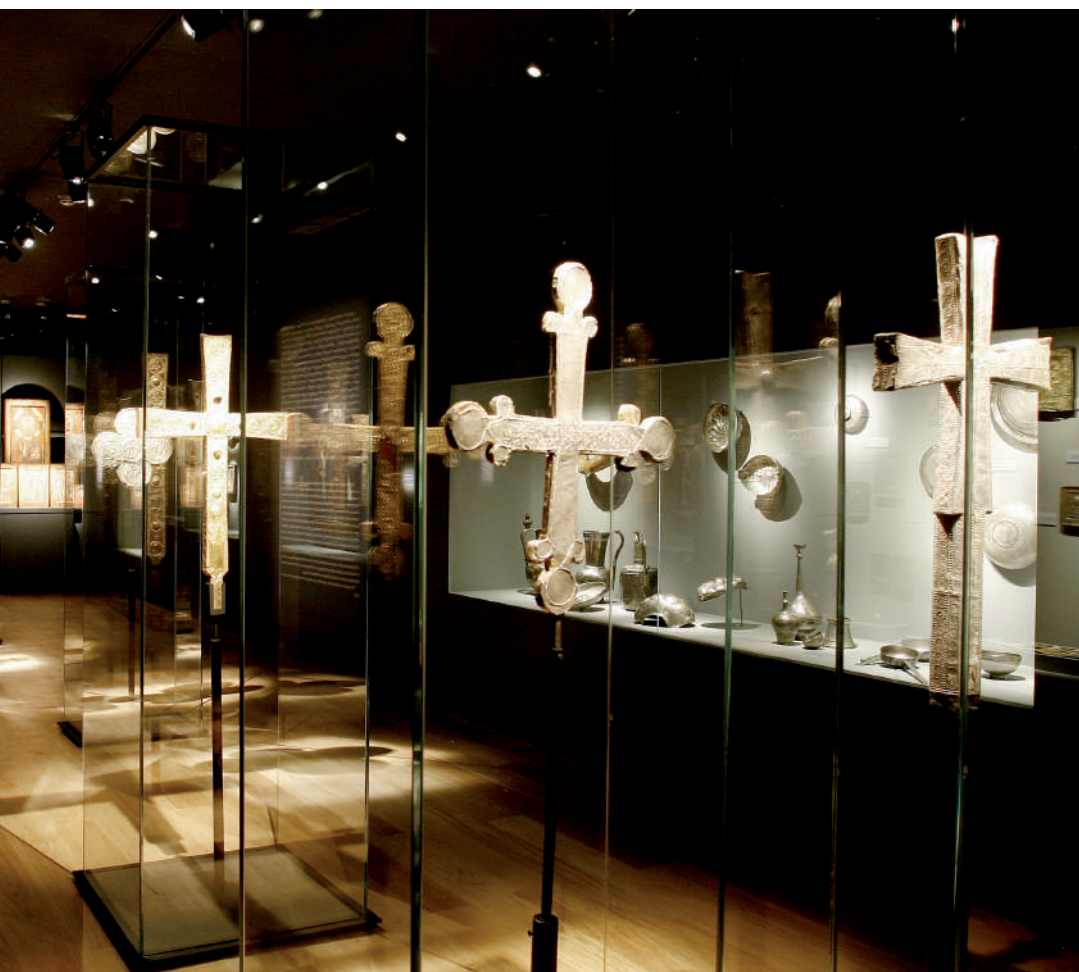
I left the exhibition space laden with new discoveries. But the Archeological Treasury exhibition was still ahead. Walking down the stairs, I got the feeling as though a burial mound filled

**Medieval Hall of the
GNM's Svaneti Museum,
Mestia, Georgia**



with treasures awaited me. I took a deep breath and prepared myself for yet another new adventure. The lighting had been chosen so carefully that I involuntarily fell silent – even the thoughts in my head became silent. On the way, I met a group of school-aged students. They were listening to the guide and eagerly taking photos. The guide was explaining the rules of conduct in the Treasury and providing a brief introduction to the exhibition.

“Children, have you heard about the Kingdom of Iberia? Do you know the myth about the Argonauts?” The students could not conceal their fascination on hearing such familiar titles, and



grew increasingly impatient. I then realized that a great adventure was awaiting them too!

As soon as you enter the hall, the magnificent culture of the Great Mounds of Trialeti come to life – the history behind the gold and silver ceremonial chalices and inlaid necklaces made with exceptional mastery. What interests me most of all is the country of the mythical golden fleece – the Kingdom of Colchis, the very kingdom that is mentioned in Greek and Roman sources as a kingdom rich in gold.

In showcase after showcase, looking at the artifacts invoked both aesthetic pleasure and astonishment. Everything came to life again,

prompting me to recall a story of one of the excavated burials. I was trying to imagine the noble woman whose burial contained hundreds of pieces of jewelry dating back to 350-300 BC.

Lost in my fantasies, I moved on to the hall that featured numismatic treasures with its rich collection of coins. Each one of them was discovered in Georgia, which points to the country's geopolitical significance. There I also found several unique coins that can be viewed only on our exhibition and surprisingly they grab your attention as soon as you start wondering.

Next to the numismatic treasures is the Medieval Treasury exhibitions. The exhibition



Above: Imereti, 1919, oil on canvas, David Kakabadze (1889-1952); Below: Merani, 1918, oil on canvas, Lado Gudiashvili (1896-1980)

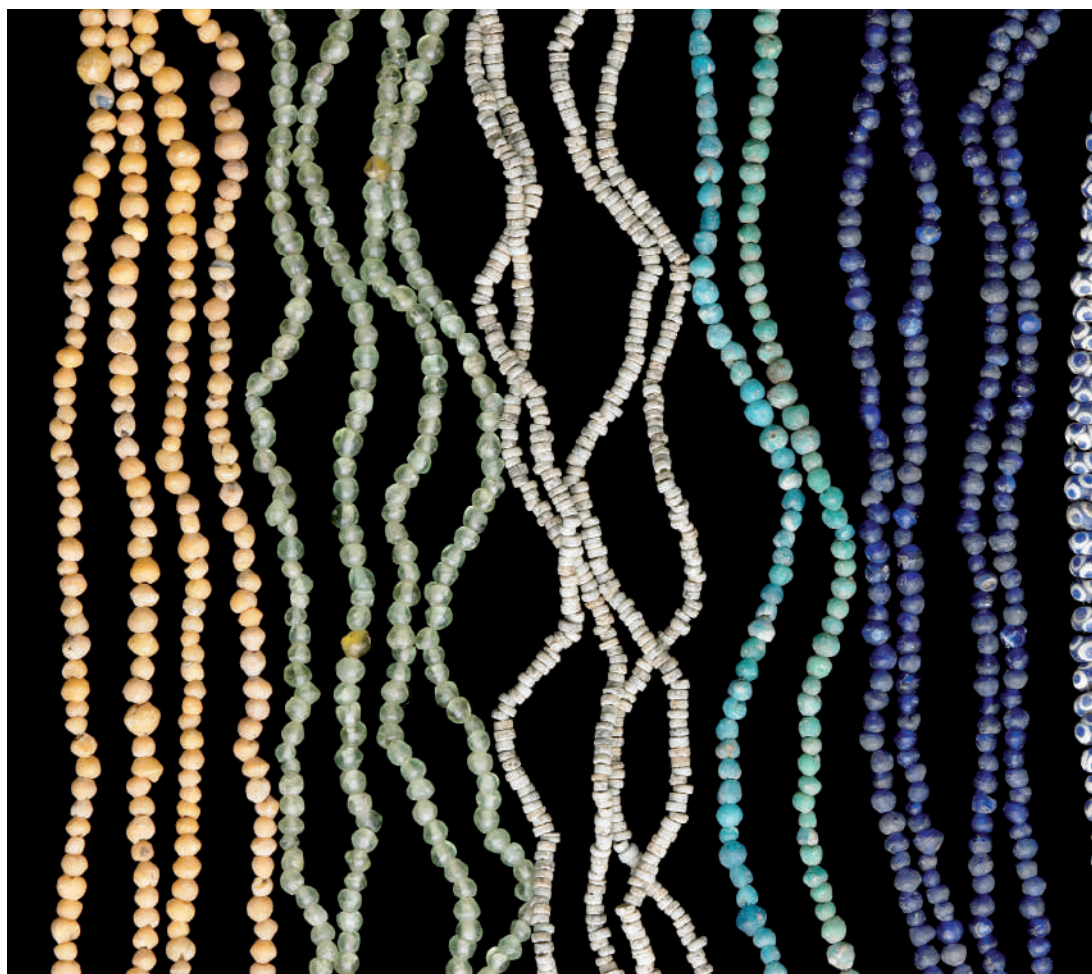


**PHOTO: GEORGE DARCHIASHVILI
ON DISPLAY AT THE PERMANENT EXHIBITION OF THE DISTINGUISHED GEORGIAN ARTISTS OF 20TH CENTURY. GNM, NATIONAL GALLERY**



Above: In Memory of the Young Deceased Friend, 1920, oil on canvas, Shalva Kikodze (1894–1921); Below: Winter, Kakheti, 1924, oil on canvas, Elene Akhvdiani (1901-1976)



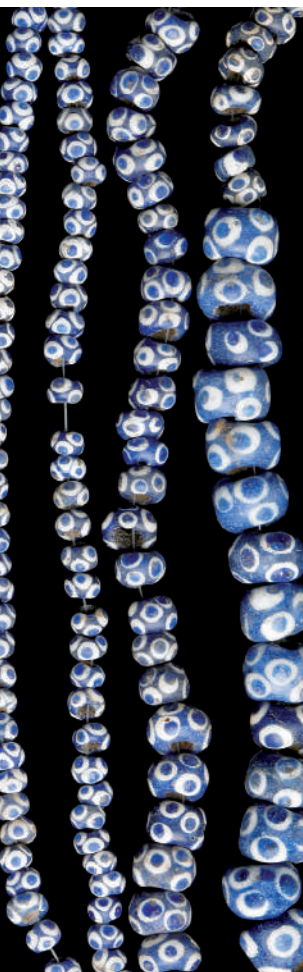


provides the possibility to view the identity and continuous development of Georgian art, which originates in pre-Christian art. My fascination became visible. The entire collection of medieval visual art was gathered in one room, and everything I had ever studied was right there before my eyes. I could look at antique Georgian embroidery, icons and manuscripts for hours. Along with artistic Georgian masterpieces, the exhibition featured the medieval technologies and tools that were used to create them. I was having a hard time comprehending how such masterpieces could be created with tools so modest.

I left the museum filled with impressions, visualizing the country's history and culture merged inside my head. Thinking about this, I approached the Georgian National Museum's Dimitri Shevardnadze National Gallery.

The exterior of the building immediately caught my eye. It was constructed in 1888 by the Tbilisi-based architect of German origin Alexander Saltzman, who took as a prototype for the initial design the Exhibition Palace in Rome.

The building has a glass roof, so its long exhibition hall was flooded with natural light. Suddenly, a sense of calm poured over me, as I started looking at the artwork. I thought about



Polychrome Beads for Shroud Decoration, Vani, second half of the 4th century BC. Blue, green, opaque yellow, translucent green and brown glasses, glass paste and "eye" beads

how aptly named the gallery was - Temple of Glory. At the same time, I recalled Dimitri Shevardnadze. The time machine took me back to the future, when Dimitri Shevardnadze was collecting works created by Niko Piroshmanashvili, still unknown at the time. From the world of Piroshmani, I passed by Iakob Nikoladze's sculptures and walked through the artworks of Lado Gudishvili and David Kakabadze. The correctly chosen color of the walls added a sense of grandeur and power to the space. I automatically continued towards Kakabadze's avant-garde paintings: Constructive-Decorative Composition turns the whole space and reality upside down. I stood looking

at it for a long time thinking that it is one of the best works to help one understand him or herself. By looking at the works of the 20th century classics of Georgian visual art, the chain that I had started constructing in Dmanisi became stronger and more logical.

At this point I assumed that I had already experienced all the emotions possible, but my next stop was Svaneti. I was engulfed by a mountain landscape: the highest populated region in the Caucasus surrounded by the peaks of the Caucasus Mountains, some of which rise five thousand meters into the sky. Alongside the Svaneti towers, a modern three-story building caught my eye – it was the Svaneti Museum of History and Ethnography!

The trip began with the archaeological artifacts discovered in Svaneti, demonstrating a continuous line of history from the third to the second millennia BC – the Early Bronze Era up until the Middle Ages. The next hall was entirely dedicated to the numismatic collection. These spaces housed the treasures of Christian art dating as far back as the 9th century. Then came an exposition of religious and secular manuscripts and printed books. The last gallery welcomed us with a rich ethnographic collection. Hardly breathing, I was looking at the unique artifacts, thinking how organically nature and cultural heritage are merged and preserved. Svanetian culture is like Svanetian landscape – strong and vast.

For centuries, Svaneti was Georgia's treasure vault, and the Svans took exceptional care of it. The cultural heritage kept here attests to the fact that it is part of a unified system of Georgian culture and, despite geographic location, was actively involved in the processes unfolding in the world. Today, the Svaneti Museum is a cultural and educational center that complies with the international standards of the 21st century.

I return to my desk full of emotions and think about how I can convey all these emotions to a wider audience. Then I realize – just visit us! The very first step will ensure that you have an adventure here!

Svaneti Museum of History and Ethnography. In 2016 was nominated on the European Museum of the Year Award, the longest running and most prestigious museum award in Europe, presented each year by the European Museum Forum under the auspices of the Council of Europe



PHOTO: MIRIAN KILADZE





Zezva and Mzia. Based on the scientific data, the French sculptor Elisabeth Daynès created an artistic reconstruction of the Dmanisi skulls. They were symbolically given old Georgian names – Mzia and Zezva.

The First Europeans

By *Natia Khuluzauri*

In 1991 the first international archaeological expedition began working in the small southern Georgian town of Dmanisi. It had already been established that there were prehistoric remains under those of a medieval city in the area, as stone tools and the bones of prehistoric animals had been found. The approximate age of the prehistoric site had also been determined - at one million years... However, these preliminary results were not part of a large-scale or interdisciplinary study, and the Georgian archaeologists decided to enlarge the research project to include German scientists.

Only small-scale excavations had been planned for the first study season, mainly in places where excavations had already been made. However, on the last day of the scheduled timeframe, expedition members made an astounding discovery - one that would change not only their own lives, but the history of human evolution itself. On that 24th of September many bones, including a jaw bone, were suddenly discovered in one of the excavations. David Lordkipanidze, Paleoanthropologist and Head of the expedition recalls, "I remember becoming so nervous! We stared at the object and realized it was definitely the lower jaw of a hominid! I could feel something grand was happening, but could never have imagined the scale of this discovery!"

Samples were sent to Germany for analysis, and the age of the fossil was finally determined - at 1.8 million years! Together, the team decided to make the first presentation of the lower jaw the same year, at the International Senckenberg Conference in Frankfurt that would commemorate the 100th anniversary of the discovery of homo erectus. The main conclusions of the conference presentation, prepared under the supervision of Professor Leo Gabunia, Member of the Academy of Sciences, were that the lower jawbone from Dmanisi was linked to the African group of homo erectus (homo ergaster). Today, even after more detailed examinations of the bone, this opinion



Lower jawbone discovered in Dmanisi in 1991. In the world of science, it is known as D-211

still largely stands, as does the estimate of the age of the prehistoric Dmanisi site. Although these results were contested by some scientists in 1991, the skulls that were later discovered in Dmanisi have completely dissipated the scientists' skepticism.

Twenty-five years have passed since this discovery was made. The data have been thoroughly substantiated by the best laboratories in the world, and today scientists agree that the remains of hominidae discovered in Dmanisi have considerably altered earlier theories of human evolution. Research supervised by the Georgian scientists working with international colleagues has confirmed that the remains discovered in Dmanisi are the earliest and the most primitive found in Eurasia, and this has been widely recognized. In 2000, Science, one of the world's most reputable magazines, listed the Dmanisi discovery as third most important of the 10 most significant scientific events of the world. And in 2013, a fifth skull was discovered and named "fossil of the year". In 2016, the International Senckenberg Conference was held in Tbilisi. It was dedicated to the 125th anniversary of the discovery of homo erectus and the 25th anniversary of the discovery of the first homo erectus jawbone.

Today, international scientific studies and archaeological research and discoveries are continuing on the Dmanisi site.



Colchian golden Diadem with radial temple rings, 1st half of 4th century BC., Vani, Georgia

The Land of Golden Fleece

El Dorado or the Kingdom of Aeëtes?

The Golden Fleece is the embodiment of gold as a symbol of power and wealth, revealing the knowledge of how to obtain this precious metal. The greatest heroes of Hellas, the Argonauts, sailed the "most famous ship, Argo" (Homer, *Odyssey*, Book 12) on their first distant trip to the Black Sea coast – to Colchis. Once in this land ruled by King Aeëtes they managed to obtain the Golden Fleece with the help of his daughter, the Princess Medea, a sorceress. The name of this mythical Country is still used referring to western Georgia. Myth and reality are sometimes hard to separate. This is illustrated by the phenomenon of Colchian goldsmithery and the tradition of extracting gold from rivers using a sheepskin, just as it was described in Greek and Roman written sources, and as it is still practiced in Svaneti – a mountainous region of Colchis. Countless artifacts of Colchian gold work found in archaeological excavations explain why Greek sources used the epithet "Rich in Gold" when describing Colchis, just as they did for Mycenae, Sardis and Babylon. Typical for Colchis were unique radial earrings and pendants (directly symbolizing the Sun) and diadems adorned with rhomboid plaques divided in two, which represent eternity, or constant movement. The plaques usually carry images of solar symbols or scenes of animal fights. In these struggles the lion, as symbol of the sun, brightness and power, is always the winner - as if reminding us we are in the Kingdom of Aeëtes, son of Helios - and that the Greeks did not choose it randomly as the land of the Golden Fleece. – *Nino Lordkipanidze*



Golden Necklace with amethyst gem, glass paste, almandine and amethyst stones. 2nd-3rd centuries AD., Armaziskhevi, Georgia

Unrivalled Beauty

This necklace, dating from the 2nd-3rd centuries AD, was discovered in one of the rich graves at the Armaziskhevi in Mtskheta, which was the capital of the Kingdom of Kartli (or "Iberia of the Caucasus" according to Greek and Roman written sources). The necklace is considered a masterpiece of gold jewelry from the Roman era. It is unique for its amethyst cameo, with the head of a ram, and for its complex composition, created to be a pendant to serve as an amulet case and a vessel for aromatic oil. Fragments of a primary, or 'milk' tooth, remained in the amulet case, and the amethyst – considered an amulet stone – indicates the function of the pendant. The ram, considered a symbol of power, and best expressed by the Golden Fleece, indicates the high social status of the owner of this piece of jewelry. A stela with a bilingual (Greek and Aramaic) epitaph was also discovered at the burial site, where persons from the local elite were buried. In all likelihood the epitaph offers information about the owner of this necklace, an Iberian noblewoman, Seraphita: "She who was of unrivalled beauty died at the age of 21".

The Kingdom of Kartli, created in the 3rd century BC, reached its highest point of political and economic power in the 2nd-3rd centuries AD. One of the main factors that contributed to the kingdom's development was the advancement of various sectors of artistic workmanship, including a local school of goldsmithery. This is indeed the story told by Seraphita's necklace, as well as by other masterpieces of Iberian goldsmithery that are on display in the Archaeological Treasury permanent exhibition at the Georgian National Museum in Tbilisi. - *Nino Lordkipanidze*



Georgian Literacy

By: Nino Lordkipanidze

In 2001, during reinforcement and repair works on the foundations of the Svetitskhoveli Cathedral in Mtskheta, Georgian archaeologists made one of the most important discoveries of recent years--a rich tomb dating to the 3rd -4th centuries AD. Within the tomb were luxury items, objects of goldsmithery and glyptics, and a unique writing tool set. Here in Mtskheta, the capital of the Kingdom of Kartli at the time, a person buried with such exceptional respect was clearly someone of high social status and very likely someone who held an important position. The valuable writing tool set was an indication of this status, and contained an openwork gold plate with an inscription in Greek, "The King of Ustamos and also Eugenios".

The silver writing tool set has no analogy, either in terms of its complexity of design or of its artistic value. The main parts are silver pens; a silver case for storing them – a pen box decorated with gilded

relief images of the Muses; miniature silver figurines of Homer, Demosthenes and Menander; the inscribed openwork gold plate; and a gold inkpot that was likely attached to the pen box. It is especially noteworthy that the precious inkpot contains the powdery remains of ink, thus it is probable that it was being used before being placed in the grave for eternity.

The well-conceived iconographic design suits the purpose of the writing tool perfectly. It is presented through the images of all nine Muses and such key representatives of Greek culture as the legendary poet Homer, the statesman and orator Demosthenes and the comedy dramatist Menander. This work of art is a clear manifestation of the link between form and substance. The origin of this masterpiece of Roman metalworking has not been established but, given the complicated political and cultural processes that were under-

way when the Roman Empire was nearing its end, the fact that it was discovered specifically in Georgia is especially important. In addition, unexpected as it is, this archaeological artifact could become a key to understanding the topical issue of the origins of one of the alphabets known to the world – the Georgian alphabet.

For any nation, and especially one that is very small like Georgia, having its own alphabet is one of the main factors defining its unique nature and its statehood. A main source of ancient Georgian history, The Georgian Chronicles by Leonti Mroveli, says that the first King of Kartli, Pharnavaz, created “Georgian literacy” in the 3rd century BC. However, the oldest surviving Georgian inscriptions that were made, in the Asomtavruli script, date to the period following Georgia’s conversion to Christianity in the 4th century. These inscriptions include one of the most important Early Christian Georgian churches, Sioni of Bolnisi, made in 493-494 and in 502-503. The oldest Georgian literary monument, the hagiographic work entitled The Martyrdom of Shushanik, also dates back to the 5th century.

The old Georgian Asomtavruli alphabet was the immediate predecessor of the Nuskha-Khuturi script and of the most commonly seen script today, Mkhedruli. It is categorized as one of the Christian era alphabets created on the basis of the archaic Greek writing system. According to Georgian linguist Tamaz Gamkrelidze, “Christianity was likely to have significantly facilitated the rapid development of national literary traditions in Georgia. The new Georgian culture and literacy were created and the realization of a national unity of Georgians was formed, based precisely on this religion. The Georgian Asomtavruli script might not even be the first attempt at creating an alphabet for the Georgian language. It is possible that pre-Christian Georgia had even older writing traditions. It cannot be ruled out that the new, Christian-era Georgian alphabet, Asomtavruli, replaced a writing system from the pre-Christian period. Possibly this is what Leonti Mroveli inferred when writing about King Pharnavaz introducing “Georgian literacy” in the 3rd century BC.”



Left: Writing set, used are gilt silver and gold, 3rd-4th centuries AD., Mtskheta, Georgia. Above: Relief of the King Ashot the 1st Kuropalates, early 9th, Century AD., Monastery of St. John the Baptist, Opiza, historical Georgian province of Klarjeti (now Turkey)

Other archaeological materials related to writing discovered in Georgia date to the same period as the unique writing tool set found in Mtskheta. Most were found in or around the capital of the Kingdom of Kartli (also known as Kingdom of Iberia). These discoveries permit a clearer picture of the cultural situation which, along with the spread of Christianity in the Kingdom of Kartli, facilitated the creation of a unique alphabet as national language and the creation of full-fledged literary works.

It is not only for reasons of chronology that the writing tool set from the 3rd-4th centuries is the first artifact that visitors see at the Medieval Treasury exhibition in the Georgian National Museum. Displays include masterpieces of Georgian Christian art and show their origins to demonstrate the continuity of traditions as a main characteristic of Georgian culture. There is no Georgian medieval cultural sphere which does not have its roots in the pre-Christian era, including the Georgian alphabet. The writing tool set found in the courtyard of Svetitskhoveli Cathedral, decorated with elements of Greek culture – the main basis for European literacy – is an important symbol of “Georgian literacy”, a phenomenon that was a main driving force behind the development of Christian culture in Georgia.



Icon of Forty Martyrs of Sebaste. 12th century. Wood, canvas, priming, plate gold, tempera. The icon was preserved for centuries by the 10th century Ipkhi Church of St. George in Svaneti.

Crown of Eternity

The forty martyrs of Sebaste, who were killed for their Christian faith, were soldiers in the army of the Roman Empire in the 4th century. They refused to make sacrifices to the Roman gods and were thrown naked into the freezing waters of a lake. To tempt the soldiers back out of the water, warm baths were prepared nearby. One of the soldiers failed to resist the temptation and ran towards the baths – but he died on the way. One of the guards nearby had a vision of the Savior waiting for the soldiers in heaven, holding their golden crowns. He took off his clothes and went into the freezing lake to die with the others. This icon shows the whole range of human emotions: obedience, fear, desperation, steadfastness, faith... Above everything is the depiction of the symbol of human and divine nature, the idea of sacrifice and salvation – by the Savior himself. The icon shows him blessing the martyrs with both of his hands, standing in a heavenly light among the crowns of immortality, against the background of a red medallion. The development of medieval Georgian Christian art was based on the Christianity of dyophysitist ideology, illustrating the Georgian cultural connection with European values, where there was a greater emphasis on human nature with the divine. This became one of the pillars of the Renaissance. This icon is an individual representation of a theme popular in the Byzantine world after Christianity became an official religion, and is a classic example of Georgian icon painting that shows clear connections to European culture. – *Salome Guruli*



Hunting in India – a scene we can safely say Piroshvili had never seen, around 1910, by Niko Piroshvili (1862-1918).

Piroshvili

Some say that the Georgian painter Niko Piroshvili (1862-1918) was a talented creator and self-taught “naïve” artist. In reality, however, he was a very educated artist with broad horizons who intentionally resorted to a so-called primitive style as a means of self-expression. Knowledge of painting techniques is clearly visible in his works, which also reveal his remarkable imagination and ability to think systematically. His painting entitled *Hunting in India* is an outstanding example. In this painting Piroshvili, better known as Piroshvili, depicts a highly dramatic hunting scene with incredible authenticity, where tigers, an elephant, a bear and a boar are shown with hunters on the foreground. However, we can say for certain he had never witnessed such a scene. For Piroshvili, Georgia was his whole world, yet here he still painted the primordial, traditional activity of a distant country – India – with the same calm credibility that he used to create an advertising signs in Tbilisi. No one knows for sure how he came up with this subject. We only know that in 1913 he had already painted *Hunting in India*, and Ilya Zdanevich, the French-Georgian avant garde artist, added it to his list of Piroshvili paintings. The Georgian National Gallery purchased the painting in 1930. It is noted in the inventory book that the museum received it in a severely damaged state. A fragment had been cut out from the top of the painting – a man with a stick warding off a bird from its nest. The museum purchased the fragment later too. Since the main work had been so severely damaged, it was never exhibited. However, until 1938 the cut-out fragment was presented to the public several times, as a separate painting. In 2004, the National Museum decided to restore this unique painting. First technical studies determined the chemical composition of the paints used by Piroshvili. It appeared he had used a combination of ready-made paints as well as natural colors, which to some extent shed light on the secret of the unique colors of Piroshvili paintings. In January 2015 the restoration of the painting, which had taken nearly 10 years, was finally accomplished. Piroshvili's painting *Hunting in India* was then exhibited at the Georgian National Museum in its exquisite and complete form. – *Natia Khuluzauri*



Various types of Georgian swords. Dagger, 1850 (above). Next page, left to right: Persian, Imeretian and Georgian Davitperuli swords, 18th c. Tbilisian sword, 19th c. Georgian Kaldimi sword, 18th c. Horizontally: Khevsurian sword, 18th c (above). Georgian Gorda sword, 18th c (below).

Georgian Damascus

According to the eminent researchers of metallurgy, Robert Forbes and Lesley Aitchison, the ancient Kartvelian tribes, Chalybes, were the first to make steel in the region. The discovery was so important that the technology of producing steel was kept a strict secret for centuries. The famous metal smiths, the Elizarashvili brothers, knew the technology of making Georgian Damascus which was decisively important for defeating the enemies. In 1828, Giorgi Elizarashvili's son Karaman revealed the technology and thus gave out the secret of the production method to the metal smiths from Russia.

“Georgia cannot compete with a leader such as Japan when it comes to the modern technology of steel production but it is possible to astonish Europe by restoring an ancient method, and producing steel based on this technology,” says steelmaker Zakro Nonikashvili who studied the famous Elizarashvili method. Based on his research he worked with metal smith Gocha Laghidze to develop a new method of producing steel with a banding pattern – known as damascus or wootz steel – and sometimes referred to as cross-grained steel in Georgian. They called it Georgian Damascus steel.

After several fruitless attempts to make steel with a banding pattern with his apprentices, Prof. Serp Wissler of the Fine Metalwork faculty of the Antwerp Academy of Fine Arts invited the Georgian metal smiths to conduct a two-day master class. Zakro took a special pot for steel-making and local river sand, as well as some of his works and, together with Gocha they went to Antwerp to familiarize European smiths with the technology for making Georgian Damascus. The Belgians said the method was a production break-through.

In an era of modern technology it is possible to create details of any shape, but the technique for making Georgian Damascus is a treasure that fascinates even technologically advanced countries.

– Natia Khuluzauri





Tbilisi Baths

The Tbilisi sulphur baths were famous throughout the entire Near East. Those who came here –friends and foes alike – would first and foremost visit the baths. When Russian rule was established in 1801, the Tbilisi baths became a focus of interest for the Russian nobility, and when envoys were sent to from Russia to Turkey or Iran on diplomatic missions, they would stop on the way to visit Tbilisi's famous baths.

The main benefit of these baths is their hot, sulphur water. The private baths' vaulted interiors were characteristic of their charm, with dimly lit halls and decorations adorning the larger pools – this atmosphere made an indelible impression on visitors. The mekise, or bath attendant, was invariably present and assisted in bathing the visitor or giving a thorough scrub with special sponges, or a therapeutic massage. Bathing would often end with "Asian" refreshments.

The baths were a place of entertainment for men and women alike, a relaxing "club" where bathers could rest, enjoy the company of others, hear the latest news and rumors, and even partake in feasts. – *Maia Makaridze*