

CALL OF THE CAUCASUS

SITUATED AT THE INTERSECTION OF EUROPE AND ASIA, GEORGIA IS AN ANCIENT LAND OF COMPLEX HISTORY AND RUGGED LANDSCAPES.

JOE YOGERST EMBARKS ON A JOURNEY TO EXPLORE HOW THE FORMER SOVIET REPUBLIC'S STORIED PAST (WHICH INCLUDES THE WORLD'S OLDEST WINE CULTURE) INFORMS ITS ENERGETIC PRESENT.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY FRÉDÉRIC LAGRANGE



MISTY MOUNTAINS
Morning fog rising from a medieval mountain village in the Svaneti region of northern Georgia.



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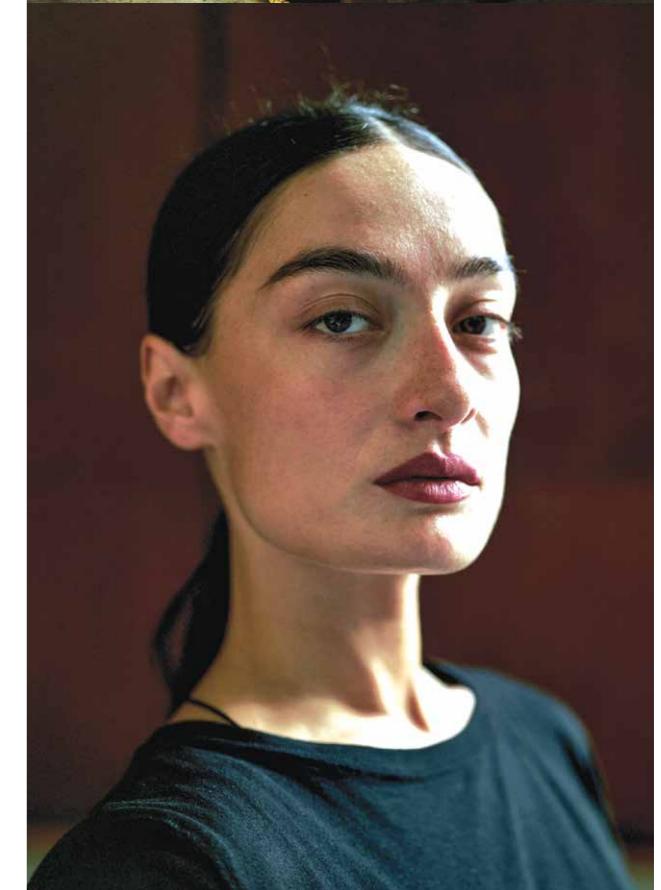
Reminders of Lenin are almost impossible to find in modern-day Georgia — his statues and other likenesses were relegated to the literal scrapheap of history after the country broke away from the disintegrating Soviet Union in 1991. Yet Stalin, who was far more sinister, remains in the public eye, I suppose because he was a native son. This is particularly true in his hometown of Gori, where the Stalin Museum enshrines the Soviet dictator's private railcar, the humble cottage where he was allegedly born, and numerous other mementoes. Given the murderous nature of his rule, I was surprised by the number of visitors.

But Stalin wasn't the only reason for my visit to Gori. Before I drove here from Tbilisi, an hour to the east, someone had recommended a restaurant called Erisoni as the best place to eat between the capital and the Black Sea. Having already fallen hard for Georgian food, I was keen to check it out. The menu was all about traditional dishes like savory *khinkali* soup dumplings, boat-shaped *khachapuri* (cheese-stuffed bread), and grilled patties of minced beef and pork called *cutleti*, a Gori specialty. But with its industrial-chic decor, smartly clad patrons, and expensive cars parked outside, Erisoni also reflected the zeitgeist of today's Georgia: a fervent longing to shed its Soviet past and segue into modern Europe.

When I asked one of the young waiters about Gori's most famous son, he smirked. "They say Stalin's real father was a Russian secret agent sent here after the Russian conquest. So the Russians claim he is Russian. I don't care because I'm ashamed of him. The Russians can have him."

After lunch, I ventured much deeper into Georgia's past at Uplistsikhe, a "cave town" on the outskirts of Gori that's been short-listed for UNESCO World Heritage status. Founded in the second millennium B.C., this is one of the Caucasus region's most ancient urban settlements. The site encompasses naturally formed caves and rock-hewn homes, palaces, churches, and other structures that honeycomb a

GEORGIAN REVIVAL
From top: A church in the mountains north of Tbilisi; a dancer at the Georgian National Ballet. Opposite: Tbilisi's Freedom Square Square is overlooked by a statue of St. George.



sandstone hillside overlooking the Mtkvari River Valley.

"Uplistsikhe is unusual, not just because the inhabitants lived in caves, but also because it shows both pagan and Christian influence," my guide, Tatia Tvauri, told me as we climbed the stone stairs leading from the visitor center to the caves. "In pagan times the people here worshipped Barbale, the sun goddess." She explained how the ancient beliefs began to wane with the arrival of Christianity in the fourth century; Georgia was one of the first places anywhere in the world to adopt Christianity as the state religion. Rather than build new churches, the Christians of Uplistsikhe usurped the old pagan cave shrines.

But there was one form of sun worship the early Christians couldn't eliminate: the *djodjo* lizards (Caucasian agamas) that eagerly sun themselves on what seems like every flat surface at Uplistsikhe. Tvauri laughed when I insisted on photographing them. "There's a legend that during pagan times they used to have a festival here where the young girls would meet with the *djodjos* and ask them if they should marry the boy who was romancing them. If the *djodjo* ran away, the answer was no. If it stayed, the answer was yes."

I asked her if she had ever consulted a *djodjo*. "Not yet," Tvauri joked. "But for sure I will let a lizard decide who becomes my husband."

MY JOURNEY THROUGH Georgia had begun a few days earlier with my arrival in Tbilisi on a midnight plane from Doha. At that hour on a weekday night, I would have expected the streets to be nearly empty. But the city was humming with people roaming

between the many bars and restaurants, or just hanging out on the tree-lined boulevards.

"This is where everything happens," my taxi driver said as we rumbled across the cobblestones of Freedom Square in downtown Tbilisi. "So many important things in Georgian history. Where we celebrated the end of World War II. Where we gathered in 1991 when we declared our independence. Where we protested during the Rose Revolution in 2003." Instead of the Lenin monument that once towered above the passing proletariat, the column in the center of Freedom Square is now topped by a golden equestrian statue of St. George — the nation's namesake and patron saint — slaying the proverbial dragon.

Some of Tbilisi's best hotels inhabit Soviet-era relics along Rustaveli Avenue, the main thoroughfare. The former Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute now serves as the lobby and conference center of The Biltmore, whose glassy tower is a dissonant addition to the skyline. Three blocks down,

the Tbilisi Marriott is housed in an elegant 1915 edifice that was seized by the city's powerful trade unions after the Bolshevik takeover. I'd booked a room at the hip Stamba Hotel in Vera, a leafy residential district at the center of Tbilisi's bohemian scene. Reflecting the building's former incarnation as a communist printing plant, a mechanical newspaper conveyor floats through the middle of the five-story atrium lobby — though the

LAND OF PLENTY
Below, from left:
A plate of khinkali,
Georgia's traditional
soup dumpling;
a resident of the
city's old quarter.
Opposite, from
left: Lopota Lake
Resort & Spa in
the wine country
of Kakheti; harvest
time at a vineyard
in the same region.



glass-bottomed swimming pool that serves as the lobby's roof was definitely not a perk enjoyed by the printers and typesetters who once worked here.

Like many first-time visitors, I hopped the aerial tramway to the summit of the Sololaki Hills to get an overview of the city, and then hiked downhill past the ruined Narikala fortress into the heart of Dzveli T'bilisi (Old Tbilisi). Beyond obvious landmarks like Sioni Cathedral and the Persian-style sulfur baths that gave the city its name (*tbilisi* means "warm place" in Georgian), the compact historic quarter is known for its distinctive residential courtyards. Although built during the 19th century, they came to be called *Italiuri ezo*, or Italian courtyards, supposedly because of their similarity to the courtyards that appeared in Italian movies popular in Georgia during the Soviet period. In reality, they are a unique Tbilisi creation — communal quads where residents from the surrounding buildings would come to gossip, play, eat, and drink. They've largely lost that function now. But here and there I came across courtyards that weren't crammed with parked cars. One had been transformed into an artsy café, its outdoor tables shaded by a huge tree. In another, a dozen boys were engaged in a fierce game of football.

History is never far away in Old Tbilisi. A marble plaque marks the house where the German engineer Walter Siemens lived in the 1860s while overseeing the construction of the first telegraph line between Europe and India. A 10-minute stroll to the east, a narrow lane flanked by old wooden homes brings me to the remains of Atashgah, an ancient Zoroastrian fire temple

TSINANDALI ESTATE'S WINE COLLECTION INCLUDES THE OLDEST BOTTLING OF GEORGIAN WINE — A DUST-COVERED 1841 SAPERAVI.

built some 1,500 years ago when Georgia was part of Persia's Sassanid Empire.

One of the neighborhood's most conspicuous buildings is the Writers' House on Machabeli Street. Built in 1905 by entrepreneur and philanthropist David Sarajishvili — who made a fortune making brandy and founded Georgia's first university — the handsome art nouveau mansion is now dedicated to promoting literary and cultural activities, with a couple of small on-site museums. Many of the rooms have been restored to their original elegance, including one that honors the many Georgian writers and artists killed during Stalin's purges. But nothing prepares you for the Oriental Room, an ornate fantasia of mirrors, Venetian tiles, Middle Eastern rugs and lamps, and fine Persian-style *muqarnas* cornices.

ALTITUDE ADJUSTMENT
Mountain scenery on the road from Tbilisi to Kazbegi.



"Mr. Sarajishvili created this room because he wanted to show that Georgia was a crossroads between East and West," museum manager Mariam Giguashvili explained as we stepped over the threshold. "But the amazing decoration was covered in white paint by Soviet authorities trying to erase our culture." It took more than US\$40,000 to return the room to its former splendor, she said, a process that saw restorers use needles to meticulously remove the whitewash from the intricate cornices and ceiling.

My visit in June came just a few months after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Given the abundance of Ukrainian flags draped from balconies and windows in Tbilisi, it wasn't hard to guess who the Georgians were rooting for. Not surprising, when you consider that Russia invaded Georgia without provocation in 2008 and still controls around a fifth of the country. Without prompting, a good number of the people I met during my trip brought up the current war and their own struggle against Russian military and cultural aggression going back centuries.

EIGHT THOUSAND YEARS AGO, a group of Stone Age farmers living in what is now southern Georgia were the first people to discover that grape juice could be fermented into wine. In order to achieve that sublime state, they buried the juice in *qvevris*, large earthenware vessels that predated the amphorae of the Mediterranean world.

Today, Georgians are still making wine in *qvevris*, especially in the wine-growing region of Kakheti, about a two-hour drive east from Tbilisi. But rather than the cookie-cutter cellars you find in so many wine regions around the world, I was amazed at how different the Kakheti wineries were from one another.

Château Buera, for instance, is part of the sprawling Lopota Lake Resort, which complements its winemaking with fishing, boating, ATV and horse-riding tours, and spa treatments. The vibe is overwhelmingly international. During my stay, the property hosted an enormous Lebanese wedding and launched a new Asian fusion restaurant.

"Before my father bought the place back in 2008, it was a rose farm and rosewater factory," Lopota's current owner, Ana Maisuradze, explained as we sat beside the lake. "He had this vision of making it both a winery and a tourism resort. But that was the year of the Russian invasion, so it wasn't easy at first. We started with just seven rooms. Now we have more than 200 rooms and we are shipping our wine to restaurants in Japan and New York City."

Thirty minutes to the south, Tsinandali Estate was founded by Prince Alexander Chavchavadze in the early 1800s as both a country house that hosted numerous 19th-century luminaries (including Alexandre Dumas and Alexander Pushkin) and as one of Georgia's first modern wineries. I explored the old stone-and-fretwork palace on the obligatory guided tour and then ducked into the underground Oenotheque, a huge cellar whose historic wine collection safeguards more than 16,000 bottles, including the country's oldest bottling of native wine — a dust-covered 1841 Tsinandali Estate saperavi.

The three monks who oversee the *marani* (wine cellar) at Alaverdi Monastery, meanwhile, make wine from grapes grown in vineyards surrounding an 11th-century church that is said to house a piece of the True Cross. Although the good brothers produce only a handful of wines, they cultivate 104 grape varieties on a small plot inside the monastery's austere walls.

"It's like a showroom for local people to demonstrate how rich



Journeying through Georgia

GETTING THERE

There are no flights to Tbilisi from Southeast Asia, but connections can be made via Istanbul, Dubai, or Doha.

WHERE TO STAY

Stamba Hotel

Tucked into an old print factory, the Stamba offers designer-savvy decor, a brooding bar, and lively restaurant in downtown Tbilisi, within walking distance of the Old Town, national museum, and other sights. There's also a rooftop pool (stambahotel.com; doubles from US\$200).

Rooms Hotel Kazbegi

This rustic 155-room bolt-hole perched high in the Caucasus excels at mountain views, cuisine, and lounge-around-the-fireplace ambience (roomshotels.com; doubles from US\$155).

Lopota Lake Resort & Spa

Located in the heart of Kakheti's wine country, this lakeside resort offers multiple restaurants, a range of outdoor sports, and 231 guest rooms spread across a 60-hectare vineyard and forest property (lopotaresort.com; doubles from US\$135).

WHERE TO EAT

Rigi Dougan

A laidback spot in Tbilisi's old German quarter for Georgian specialties like *nigvziani badrijani* (walnut-

stuffed eggplant rolls) and *khachapuri* cheese bread (rigidougan.ge).

Barbarestan

Transporting you back to old Georgia in terms of taste and elegance, the kitchen at this traditional restaurant resurrects recipes from the cookbook of a legendary 19th-century Georgian chef (Tbilisi; fb.com/barbarestan).

Café Littera

Chef Tekuna Gachechiladze's acclaimed nouveau Georgian cuisine is matched by equally splendid surrounds in the rear garden of the historic Writers' House building (fb.com/cafe_littera.cheftekuna).

Erisoni

Gori cutleti with mashed potatoes and mint lemonade are two of the signature treats at this chic riverside eatery in Stalin's hometown (Gori; erisoni.kovzy.com).

WINERIES

Tsinandali Estate

Home to a wine museum, a vodka distillery, two hotels, and an 18-hectare garden, this 200-year-old estate is a must-visit for any wine lover (Kakheti; tsinandaliestate.ge).

Alaverdi Monastery Marani

The trio of monks residing at this ancient sanctuary produce traditional white and red *qvevri* wines (Kvemo Alvani village, Kakheti).

Georgian viticulture is," said Zaza Makharadze, who described himself as both the winery's caretaker and "the guy who does everything" around the property that its monks can't carry out themselves.

As we hiked the surrounding vineyards, Makharadze told me how the monastery was shut by the Soviets and repurposed as a garage for farm trucks and machinery. When the monks returned after independence, they found old *qvevris* among the debris and decided to produce wine in

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GEORGIA

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both the ancient manner and with stainless-steel vats. "So we are making wine the same way as 8,000 years ago," he said proudly. "Alaverdi was the first example in Georgia of restoring all the functions of a traditional monastery, including the winery."

LEAVING WINE COUNTRY, I ventured into the Caucasus Mountains with Guro Alapishvili, a veteran trekking guide who has led hundreds of hikes through the range that divides Europe and Asia (as well as Georgia and Russia). Apart from his trail skills, Guro's broad knowledge of Georgian mountain culture and his personal connections in the highlands helped me understand how the region differs from lowland Georgia.

Our road into the mountains was the Georgian Military Highway, which follows a route between western Asia and the Russian steppes used for millennia by traders and invaders. After annexing Georgia in the early 19th century, Tsar Alexander I ordered the construction of a proper road to facilitate trade and troop movements. By the 1930s, colorful posters were advertising the highway as an auto touring route and it remains that way today, the primary access for the region's summer adventures and winter sports.

Making our way north, we passed thousands of sheep grazing in the mountain meadows and hundreds of Georgian Orthodox pilgrims trekking to Lomisa Church, a tiny stone structure tucked high above the highway. A series of wicked switchbacks took us to Gaudari ski resort and Jvari Pass, at 2,395 meters the highest point on the highway. "Welcome to Europe!" Guro said as we paused to admire the continental divide. It is possible that *The Stationmaster*, a short story by Pushkin, was inspired by the writer's visit to Jvari Pass during his years of internal exile. What's known for sure is that German POWs helped maintain the highway during World War II — a handful of them are buried in a small cemetery at the crest.

Breaching the pass, the highway descends into the spectacular Terek River Valley and Kazbegi, an area framed by

snowcapped peaks that rise more than 4,900 meters above sea level. These are not just the highest mountains in Europe, they are the highest west of the Hindu Kush on the entire Eurasian landmass. And they remain incredibly wild, home to Caucasian leopards, eastern imperial eagles, badgers and bears, and mountain goat-like creatures called turs.

I had a wide-angle view of the summits from my balcony at the Rooms Hotel Kazbegi in the town of Stepantsminda. Recent renovation makes the five-story wooden structure seem brand new. But it's got an intriguing backstory. During Soviet days, it was a sanatorium for Communist Party elite, a posh mountain retreat off-limits to ordinary citizens. Nowadays the lobby, indoor pool, and massive outdoor deck are filled with visitors from around the world. I must have heard a dozen languages during my stay. Among the few relics of the old days are the Soviet-era posters promoting movies, travel, or the joy of labor. Like the happy Georgian peasant woman beaming down at me from the wall in my room.

Across the valley, shrouded in clouds on a mountaintop, is one of Georgia's most iconic sights. Built in the 14th century, Gergeti Trinity Church has served as both a house of faith and a place to stash the nation's royal and religious treasures during times of invasion and other calamities. Worshipping here was prohibited during the Soviet era, though the church began to attract pilgrims again after independence. Considering the number of people taking selfies, I'd wager it's also Georgia's number one Instagram spot.

Trying to snap my own perfect photo of the church set against a backdrop of mountains and swirling clouds, Guro and I scrambled up a grassy hill. At the top was a small shrine with a wooden cross and a blood-stained sacrificial stone.

"This is a *khatti*," Guro explained. "It means 'icon place' and you find them all over the mountains. The mountain people are very spiritual. Even though they are Christians, they still believe in the pagan icons. They sacrifice sheep and other animals to the icon and then cook it and have a feast. With lots of wine. So it gets crazy. Dancing and singing and toasts to many things. If you saw, it would remind you of a Viking feast in the movies."

Later that day, we trekked a narrow mountain valley to Gveleti Waterfall

in Kazbegi National Park. Three eagles wheeled in the updrafts high above the trail, flitting back and forth across the ridge that divides the park from Russian territory.

After the hike we visited a tiny village called Sno. In addition to having a ruined medieval castle, Sno is the hometown and workplace of sculptor Merab Piranishvili, renowned for his giant stone heads of monarchs and other notable people from Georgian history.

It wasn't hard to find Piranishvili; his cabin and open-air gallery sit right beside the highway as you drive into town. And it just so happened the artist was at home. Inviting us to sit on a wooden bench beside the cabin, he insisted on serving us food and drink. It's a tradition that I had already encountered numerous times in Georgia — only this time, the drink was



ESTATE OF GRACE
Right: The former home of Prince Chavchavadze at Tsinandali Estate in Kakheti.

a potent homemade wine.

"Sorry, I'm a little hungover today," he explained, nodding his chin to a *khatti* beside his field of giant heads. "Yesterday there was an icon feast. They had a big party," he laughed. Promptly refilling our glasses, Piranishvili launched into a series of toasts that required us to down the wine in one gulp each time. "To God, who gave me the skill to make this art!"; "To the highland people, who never let anyone invade Georgia through our passes!"

The toasts ended with a nod to my profession. "May you always write good things about Georgia," the sculptor offered. Given the warm reception and the many intriguing places I had come across during my travels through the country, I told him that wouldn't be difficult to accomplish. ☺