



PHOTO: Jennifer Herron

AGENDA

*JENNIFER HERRON is a social worker, teacher and traveller. She shares with us some of her experiences travelling through the Caucasus.*

# Travels in Georgia

**I**t took eight hours by train from Zugdidi, east to the capital of Georgia, Tbilisi. I was with Jane, an English woman.

While waiting for the train to leave I popped into a little cafe on the platform for a Turkish coffee and found the proprietor doing business accounts with an abacus. We travelled in first class for which we had to fork out AU\$6. It turns out first class is primarily about being in air-conditioning. The carriage was one of those ridiculous designs where every third seat is windowless.

The air-conditioning didn't work very well. Jane, being far less passive than me, went around opening all the windows. At one point she struggled with a woman over the opening of the window and it was amusing. No doubt the locals were thinking 'pesky foreigners' whereas I was thinking "don't blame me". Although I would much prefer to have the windows open I would never insist on it against the wishes of the locals.

The landscape changed over a few hundred kilometres, from fertile plains to a dry landscape, with bare smooth mountains often topped by a decaying castle, mottled with caves or 'cave cities', albeit always with a rushing

river at the base of the valley.

I later visited one of the cave cities, Uplistsikhe, an important political and religious pre-Christian centre existing between the 5th century BC and 1st century AD, with temples primarily dedicated to the sun goddess. After the Arabs invaded Tbilisi in AD 645, it became the residence of the Christian kings of Kartli. There is not much left now, but it is in a beautiful location overlooking a valley with a full river.

In Tbilisi, I am staying with a mother and daughter in a charming old flat with a parquet floor, antique furniture, icons, paintings and various interesting paraphernalia. They design and make clothes and lecture in design. Medea, the mother, has a mop of black hair and is full of tales about Georgian history and spirituality. She does not speak English but Ketu, the daughter, does a good job of translating.

This morning, after I washed my hair, Medea appeared with her authentic Soviet hairdryer brought back from the Soviet Union by her husband in 1977. A highly sought-after object no doubt. It is stored in its original attractive cardboard box labelled with Cyrillic script, and consists of a square pink and white plastic

box which, when plugged into an electric socket, generates the warm air which flows down a blue material pipe joined to a head piece, like a shower cap which is placed over the head. It was very effective, simple, hardy; a thing of the past, good simple technology.

She also took care of my spiritual needs. Prior to a late breakfast she presented me with some holy bread and holy water, and along with breakfast, an appropriately small but lovely glass of blow-your-head-off raki, a Turkish alcoholic drink that she had made from walnuts. She always prays before eating, which is not unusual in itself, but Ketu says that she believes that praying before eating also assists in lessening the negative effects of chemicals in the food.

Medea also communicated her fascination and love for the three ancient Georgian scripts. There is one that is used primarily for religious purposes and each letter not only has a unique meaning in itself – for example it is a symbol of God, or eternity, or the tree of life – but it has numerical meanings and can be used to represent sound, when used in a combination of letters.

The symbol for the cycle of life is the swastika. I had not realised that this symbol was associated with the

Georgian religious script. I am not sure how it ties into the use of the same symbol in India and Nepal. The Nazis used the symbol but with the arms pointing in a different direction.

**I** have not been able to grasp the concept of the Kabbalah, but the Georgian Kabbalah responds to the Georgian alphabet. Georgians have a prediction from the 10th century: "During the second coming the Lord will judge the world in the Georgian language". Consequently the Georgian language is believed to be the language of Judgement Day and also the language of the 'first principle' as everyone and everything in this world returns to its origins.

The beginning of everything is in the Georgian gene, Georgian language and Georgian alphabet. Thus Georgian is seen as the original language of the world. I suspect that the Assyrians believe the same about Aramaic or Syriac, and the Muslims about Arabic.

Tbilisi is cold and rainy. It gives me an excuse to lie in bed in the mornings and gaze through my window at the leafy tree, and listen to the distinctive sound of

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car tyres rasping over the cobble stones below. I have lost my energy and have to stop moving for a while; travelling takes its toll. Fortunately my Airbnb hosts love hanging around in their dressing gowns until late in the day, so we are kindred spirits.

One day I managed to drag myself out of the flat by 2pm or so, having set myself the goal of visiting a place called Mtatsminda Park on the top of a mountain overlooking the city. It costs 35 cents to take Bus 124 along a winding road up to the park. A funicular railway, built in 1905, leads from the top down to the centre of the city.

The park was a pleasant surprise, being a fun park with bizarre and large other-worldly characters moulded from concrete. There were fun park rides, including an ‘extreme zone’, which I avoided, and a huge Ferris wheel soaring out of the trees on the edge of the mountain. It seems that every self-respecting city must now have a Ferris wheel gracing its skyline.

The park is also set in attractive gardens and a desirable place for wedding parties to be photographed. Lots of young women totter dangerously up and down paths on ridiculous shoes.

I really miss the cay bahcesis (tea gardens) in Turkey. The Turkish know how to appreciate a beautiful or historic site by putting a tea garden on the site in a tasteful way. It is challenging to find an attractive place to have a drink in Georgia, apart from a park bench in a lovely park but at the moment it is raining so that is not such a pleasant option.

Minutes later I have found myself overlooking the city in probably one of the most expensive restaurants in Tbilisi, where a glass of good wine costs 12 lari, or about AU\$7; at least the khinkali, dumplings filled with meat and spices, are only 50 cents each. I can sit here on a terrace overlooking the city, wrapped in a blanket and write.

I’ve been checking the Internet about Georgians in Australia. They are rare creatures here. There are 489 according to the 2011 Census. Perhaps many may have listed their country of birth as the USSR.

I visit Prospero’s Books, a lovely bookshop with lots of interesting books in English, which is situated under the Canadian Consulate and beside the British Council. I read a rather poor English-language newspaper called *The Messenger*.

There is a new president, Giorgi Margvelashvili. He has been in government for the last few months. He leads a coalition government called the Georgian Dream. He replaced Mikheil Saakashvili, who was in government for about 10 years or so, and is reported to have made some significant achievements such as turning around the lawless and violent society that existed during the 1990s, replacing virtually the entire police force and attacking crime and corruption head on. However, he involved Georgia in a disastrous war with South Ossetia and no doubt became power hungry and grandiose after being in power.

Apparently there is a dispute between the president and prime minister about who will be attending the UN Climate Change conference. The current president also apparently will not be moving into the new 26 million lari (about AU\$15 million) presidential palace, the building of which commenced under the former president; he is happy with the old one.

I am enraged by the huge wastage of public money on frivolous grandiose projects, especially when there is so much poverty and crumbling infrastructure in Georgia that needs ongoing investment.

The paper reports that Russia and Georgia have resumed regular flights between the two countries, suspended since 2008, at the time of the South Ossetia conflict. The United Arab Emirates are set to increase investment in the energy and transport sector in Georgia.



PHOTO: Jennifer Herron

I visit the national museum, which was once a seminary where Stalin was studying for the priesthood until he was expelled for revolutionary activities. Now, according to the rules of entry, “internally displaced and socially unprotected people” - perhaps those who have missed out on the expected benefits of the newish free-range capitalism - can get in for free, instead of the five lari (about AU\$3) that others pay. No doubt they will be flocking in hordes.

The treasury of the museum has beautifully displayed gold jewellery and objects from the Kolkheti or Colchis region on the eastern coast of the Black Sea, a region which in antiquity was home to the well-developed Bronze Age culture, known as the Colchian culture. The Colchian late Bronze Age (15th to 8th century BC) saw the development of significant skills in the smelting and casting of metals. The word “kheti” comes from the Georgian word “khe” which means tree, which is mythologically associated with the tree of life.

Kolkheti was rich with gold, silver and iron and the Greeks dedicated it to the story about the quest of the Argonauts for the Golden Fleece. Recent archaeological excavations have revealed more evidence about the actual

existence of the civilisation on which the Argonauts tale is based.

Much of the golden jewellery was found in burial sites. It is incredible to think that such beautiful objects are buried with their rich owners. It is fortunate for those of us who live 2500 years later.

The museum also has a collection of remarkable Qajar Iranian paintings from the late 18th century and early 19th century. Qajar art refers to the art, architecture, and art-forms of the Qajar dynasty of the late Persian Empire, which lasted from 1781 to 1925. The roots of traditional Qajar painting can be found in the style of painting that arose during the preceding Safavid empire. During this time, there was a great deal of European influence on Persian culture, especially in the arts of the royal and noble classes.

European art was undergoing a period of realism and this can be seen in the depiction of objects especially by Qajar artists. According to Wikipedia, heavy application of paint and dark, rich, saturated colours are elements of Qajar painting that owe their influences directly to the European style.

Stretching north of Tbilisi the Georgian Military



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Highway connects Georgia and the Federation of Russian republics, the nearest being Chechnya. It was cut through the mountainous terrain when Russia invaded the Caucasus in the 19th century. It reaches its highest point at Jvari Pass at 2379 metres, part of the Southern Caucasus mountain range.

I took a day trip to visit the 14th century Tsminda Sameba church which is perched on top of a little mountain that is dwarfed by the mighty Mount Kazbegi, a snow-capped colossus of a mountain. Unfortunately Mount Kazbegi was covered with clouds when we reached the church after a jeep climbed up muddy roads past miserable looking climbers sloshing upwards through the mud for two hours.

Apparently the Soviets, with their talent for ugliness, built a cable car up to the church but the locals destroyed it. The other mountains alone were worth the trip along the wondrous valleys and past salty mineral mountain springs.

In winter, the highway is covered in two metres of snow but it is always open due to its strategic importance. On the day of our trip there had been a rock fall at some point and there appeared to be over a hundred huge

trucks lined up beside the road waiting for the rock fall to be cleared.

On the way back the tour group stopped for a Georgian banquet. In the Georgian tradition there was red wine and vodka and everyone had to make a toast. It was an interesting process as toast making inevitably means that people will make statements about what is meaningful to them.

**T**here was a diverse group - Polish, Ukrainian, Belarusians, Dutch and me. Russian was the common language, except for me and the Dutchman, but he could speak Polish as he has a Polish wife. As per usual I am shamefully monolingual. Most of the toasts were around the topic of tolerance and peace amongst peoples. Travellers are sometimes forced to take a default stance of goodwill towards each other and local people.

Driving back from Kazbegi we passed a road sign that indicated the road to Yerevan, Baku and Tehran. It is exciting to be so close to all these exotic locations - Armenia, Azerbaijan and Iran respectively, though the sign indicated that Tehran is 1269 kilometres away.



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Not that close but not that far either. Slowly, piece by piece, the Caucasian jigsaw puzzle of culture, history and interactive influences begins to fall into place for me.

The last evening in Tbilisi, I bought a ticket for the Tbilisi symphony orchestra in the Djansug Kakhidze Tbilisi Centre for Music and Culture. I had no idea what was being played but the music was divine. A female Georgian solo pianist played a grand piano which rose from a pit in the front of the stage. I now notice Georgian piano players all over the place on classical iTunes sites. Their names end in 'ili' or 'adze'.

During a pre-concert dinner, I savoured my last khinkali - dumplings. I know how to eat them now, with fingers and without using knives to open them as it has the effect of losing the bouillabaisse juice trapped in the pastry bag. They must be eaten together with cold semi-sweet red Georgian wine.

Georgia is a great country for vegetarians as it has many distinct and tasty vegetarian dishes with beans and walnuts, eggplant and walnuts, spinach and walnuts, salads, and dumplings with potato, cheese and mushrooms inside. There are also various types of cheese

and pickles, and wheat and corn bread.

I like the lack of tipping culture in this country - I think it is dignified. In fact my bill at the restaurant came to 21 lari (about \$12), and I left 23 lari, the waitress says: "But it is only 21 lari!". In the museums there are guides that are paid to be guides. In general they are excellent, and they never hang around expecting a tip.

I have mastered the metro which is fabulous running every four minutes. Built in 1965 it has a severe, sombre Soviet socialist aesthetic which I love - simple red or white marble and clean lines with a minimum of decoration. It is easy to get around at any time of day and runs until midnight.

My local metro is Rustaveli Square, named after Rustaveli the poet, it has fountains, a statue of Rustaveli, street dogs romping around, gypsy kids, young want-to-be punks, old women selling balloons and plastic junk, and a rundown terrace cafe.

I have become fond of this country and its people who go about their difficult lives in an unpretentious and dignified manner. It is hard to say goodbye. R