

Guest Blog: A week in Georgia

written by Justin | 22 April, 2015



As planned, we met up with Marcus's brother Justin on a rainy Saturday morning in Tbilisi airport. Here's his account of our week together:

I'm sure I can't be the first person to have made a drunken promise in The Woods whisky bar at 2 o'clock in the morning... Eight months later, that promise became a reality as my plane came in for a very bumpy landing at Tbilisi International. You always know when you've had a rough flight when everybody (including the air stewardesses) on the plane breaks into spontaneous applause on landing!! Having landed at the unsociable hour of 4.20am M and K had tipped me off about a fantastic website called sleepinginairports.net. so the first night's, (or what was left of it) accommodation was sorted in the form of a strip of Astroturf, complete with fake plastic

trees under the large escalator



Airport camping

As day broke Kirsty found me busily trying to get my bike back into one piece -it won't surprise you that she and Marcus had already clocked up 25 km cycling down a road affectionately known as the George W. Bush highway from the city centre. (there is a perfectly good train service for those who don't fancy taking on Georgian drivers coming towards you three abreast).



Another police escort

After a quick logistics meeting over an omelette we made the decision to head south-east to a monastery recommended by a

mate from Brigstock who had driven there in his Land Rover 10 years previously. Once there we would see where the roads took us. Georgians are meant to be most friendly and hospitable people in the world, (as already experienced by M and K) and no sooner had we left the airport heading down what would be the equivalent of the M4 motorway that I experienced this first hand, every driver was honking their horn, in some cases, slowing to my pace, winding down their window and waving frantically at me. I duly waved back and smiled... It wasn't until I glanced over my shoulder and realised that they were trying to tell me that I had dropped one of my panniers which was blocking the slow lane $\frac{1}{2}$ mile back that I realised what the fuss was about. It's a great road (even in the rain), we could have bought anything from a 30lb catfish out the back of a Lada to a box tree almost large enough for topiary should we so wished.



Forester at work



Mobile fish stall

Beyond the road we were flanked by vineyards and had been told on numerous occasions that there has been wine in Georgia almost as long as there has been Georgians, archaeological records dating back to the third millennium BC. It was apt that our first stop should be at a wine tasting shop. Having been presented with three different wines we were all very impressed, particularly with the white, which resembled a personal favourite of mine, Blue Nun.



The home of wine making.



Once off the main road, we were able to ride side-by-side and engage in conversation. I soon learned that there were three key priorities to each day on the road: food, cycling, food and sleep. After hard haggling with local market traders in a small town and full panniers we headed on past yet more vineyards and now redundant large-scale collective farms. It became clear that the rain wasn't going to let up and we were never going to make our chosen destination, so we took Kirsty's "campsite of the day" recommendation of a flat piece of ground next to the River Iori, which by now was beginning to swell into an angry muddy torrent. It was at this point that I didn't feel quite so proud about my second-hand purchases from eBay. Dickie Fincher, I will be subscribing to the Outdoor Adventure Guide as soon as I get back.



Chocolate river Iori – Don't go too close Augustus!

We were all woken up early the next morning by a strange noise that sounded like an annoying ring tone on someone's phone. Sticking my head out of the tent I realised we'd been joined by a bubbly flock of Hoopoes, which we would be seeing throughout our trip. These fascinating birds are the size of a mistle thrush and have a pinkish-brown body, striking black and white wings, a long black downcurved bill, and a long pinkish-brown crest which it raises when excited. Despite many attempts, none of us were able to get a good photograph of these birds which appeared to be very camera shy.

We eventually rocked up to our destination of the Davit Gareja monastery complex by mid-morning the following day having passed along an incredible ridge (with a strong wind behind us) where we had the high Caucasus out in the distance on our left, and the low Caucasus on our right. With large flocks of migrating Eurasian Cranes heading north overhead.



Road from Sagarejo with Upper Caucasus on the horizon





Approaching Udabno



Near Udabno



Justin's first puncture of the trip. Could have been prevented if he'd fitted rim tape before leaving.



Near Udabno

Over the course of the morning the landscape had changed dramatically and now resembled virtually open desert in which

were perched over 15 monasteries, many of which were no more than caves, founded in the mid-sixth century by St David. The place is fascinating, although apparently a mere shadow of its former self as the Soviet army used the area as an artillery range, on account that the landscape resembled Afghanistan! And often aiming directly at the monasteries



Road to Davit Gareji



Davit Gareji Monastery



Davit Gareji Monastery



Davit Gareji Monastery



Davit Gareji Monastery



Border with Azerbaijan



Sitting on the border with Azerbaijan



Georgia and Azerbaijan border



Davit Gareji Monastery



Davit Gareji Monastery



Davit Gareji Monastery



The lifestyle of an Orthodox monk hasn't changed since the 6th century. Only they can now check in on Facebook.

The idea was that we were going to spend Easter Sunday bunking up with a monk. However, the monks had other ideas and we were forced to pedal back down the valley to look for alternative accommodation. It didn't take long, within 1 km we found a lovely open spot perched on top of some old ruins with the Azerbaijani border a few metres to the south and open plains grazed by large flocks of sheep and goats carefully tended by shepherds to the north. It was only later that evening when I was perusing through the guidebook that we learnt of the massacre of 6000 monks by Shah Abbas during the Easter night procession in the early 17th century on the very spot we pitched our tent! Was it a ghost I saw that night or just Marcus taking a pee? I will never know.



Valley before Davit Gareji



Grazing flocks, before Davit Gareji



Camping near Davit Gareji



Moonrise

Surfaced roads are rare in this part of Georgia. Most of next morning was spent pedalling along a dirt track through open plains, with only the occasional shepherd or isolated AK47 wielding border guard for company. Food and water was running low, so we had no choice but to head to the nearest town of Rustavi. Rustavi was one of Georgia's leading industrial centres during the Soviet era, and included a vast metallurgical plant now mostly redundant following the fall of communism creating an almost ghost town feel. It was hard to imagine what the place would have been like when it was in full production, smoke noise and lights. Apparently conditions in the factory were us so bad that workers were forced to retire as young as 45 due to ill-health.



Leaving Davit Gareji



Little Donkey



Statue near Rustavi



Rustavi



Rustavi

The shortest route isn't often the quickest as we found out later on that day having headed down an unsurfaced track that

had more potholes filled with cow and sheep piss than the average Cumbrian dairy farm.



Georgian roads can go from bad to worse

Kirsty has a knack for choosing good campsites and tonight was no exception, next to an old fort just outside the town of Bolnisi. It was in pristine condition and home to a convent of Georgian Orthodox nuns. Just as the pasta came to the boil, a white transit van crammed with a group of Azerbaijani workers pulled up to see what we were up to. After offering us beer and some basic sign language, it became clear they wanted us to go with them as opposed to spending the night under canvas. Not wanting to say no, we began to pack things up as darkness descended. Throughout this time, I must admit I felt uneasy as the group got more excited and more interested in our belongings as opposed to us. Our understanding was that they lived 2km away so I was bundled into the back of the transit with all of our bags while Kirsty and Marcus rode

behind on the tandem. The final straw came when I was thrown against the side of the van as it did a handbrake turn at a T-junction before coming to a halt in order to recruit more of their mates at the side of the road. This definitely was not right.



Mosque in Marneuli



Fortress at Parizi



Our new Azeri 'friends'

We hastily unpacked, made our excuses and headed in the opposite direction as quickly as we could. The first available point of refuge happened to be a small cafe serving cold beer and excellent sausages which we devoured whilst nervously looking out of the window for transit vans. The thought of having to pitch the tent again and set up camp was all too much, so after yet more sign language the owners of the cafe very kindly let us sleep on the floor of an adjoining backgammon den. At worst we missed a good night out with the locals, at best we got away with all of our belongings still intact.



A well used backgammon set



Our café hosts in Nakhiduri



Cosy café accommodation, Nakhiduri

Over every hill, the landscape changed yet again, by day 4 we found ourselves cycling along cherry and walnut avenued roads

with the local farming community planting their potato crop on an old-fashioned strip system beyond.



Gorge near Didi Dmanisi

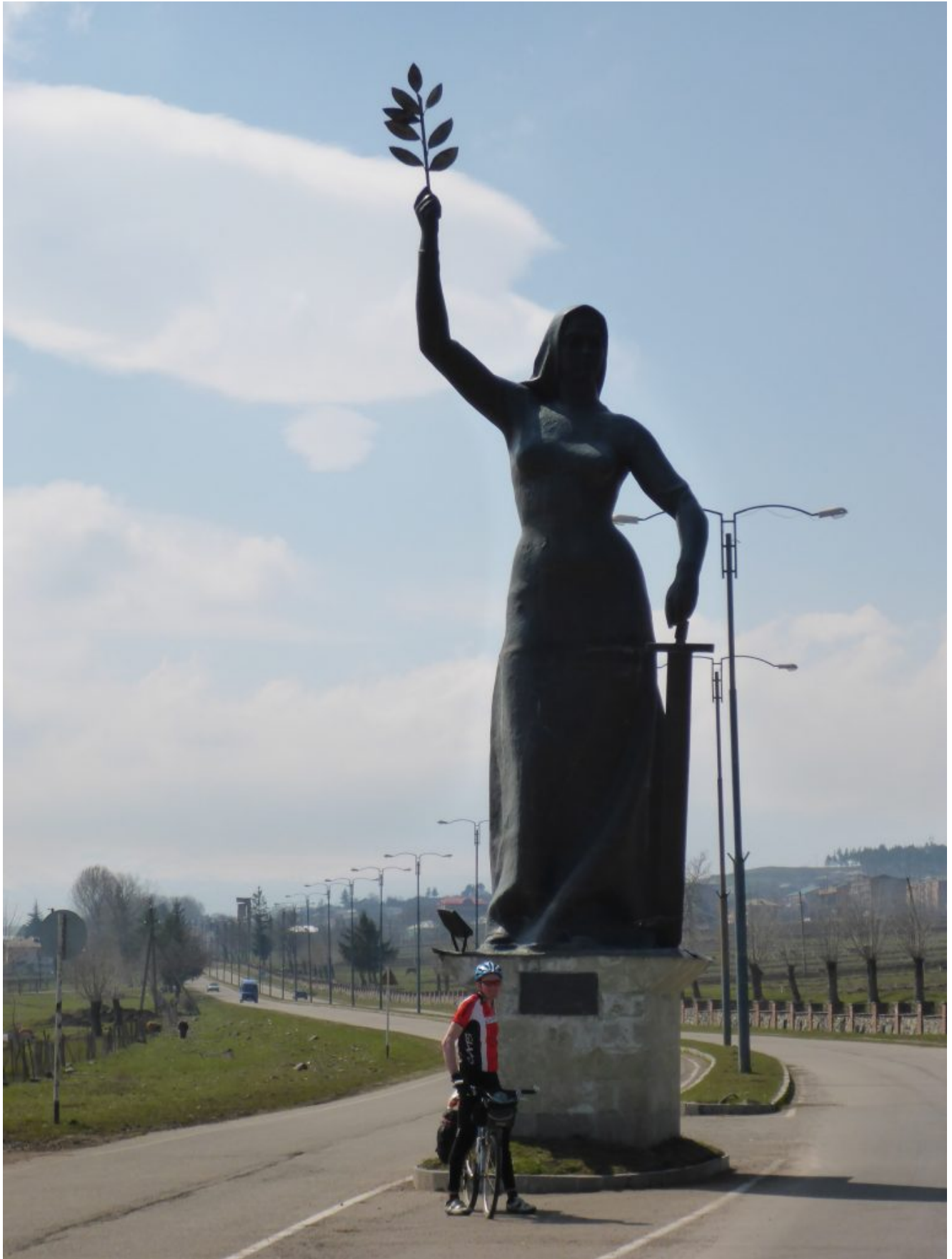




Climb up to Didi Dmanisi



Near Didi Dmanisi



Entering Dmanisi



Cow crossing, Dmanisi



Bovine chicane, Dmanisi



The mountains were always on the horizon and before long we were back, climbing hard along roads you used to see on Top Gear, but instead of an Aston Martin taking the racing line it would be an old Lada Cossack or smokey Russian dumper truck pootling along.



'Top Gear' road, Zemo Karabukaghi

By about 4 o'clock on the fourth day of cycling we had climbed to 1600m with large patches of snow still evident on north facing slopes. As we climbed over a saddleback we were presented with a spectacular view of snowcapped domed mountains rising up in front of us and it was hard not believe we were in Scotland, looking out over the Cairngorm National Park. Having rejected Kirsty's first choice for "campsite of the day" , located on a small plateau some 200m above the road we quickly took up on her second offering which was somewhere that offered equally spectacular views, but slightly more accessible. Although there was no wood to make a campfire we didn't mind as we watched the sunset on the expansive landscape (accompanied by an eclectic mix of tunes laid down by MC MM).



Zemo Karabukaghi



Zemo Karabukaghi



Sunset at Zemo Karabukaghi





Zemo Karabukaghi

Villages and villagers became more remote and more desolate as we progressed towards the Armenian border but the scenery

continued to become more dramatic. At one point the road dropped down over 600m into a beautiful oak, hornbeam and hazel coppice clad gorge before winding its way back out at the other end over along a steep, gruelling unsurfaced series of hairpins. Clarkson should be put on a bike to fully appreciate hunger and tiredness after a day on the road.



Sunrise



Justin on a bridge



Gomareti





Home Sweet Home for someone



Can't fit it in the car? Then drag it with a Lada.







Tough climb out from Hydro Electric plant

Four or five times a day, we could expect the quiet enjoyment of cycling to be interrupted by a dog chase. This involved a rabid canine of either the mangy mongrel variety, or when out in the hills the bear-like Caucasian Mountain dog. Nine times out of 10 their bark was worse than their bite, and after baring their teeth they backed off. Occasionally Kirsty had to give them a squirt in the face from a water bottle, but this was rare.



Caucasian mountain dogs



Friendly Georgians



Another one horse town



Tsalka



Wing mirror envy

We did almost get caught towards the end of the ride, by a particularly aggressive beast which would have definitely got us if we hadn't been able to gather speed going downhill and if it hadn't fallen into the ditch. Note to one's self, get the rabies jab next time, just in case.



Akhalsopeli



Akhalsopeli



Climbing out of Gholovani





Abandoned terraces



Back up into the snow line



Time definitely goes slower when you're on the bike and it felt like I'd been away for ages when we started our descent back into Tbilisi. I'd learnt a lot about the art of cycle touring from Marcus and Kirsty who are consummate professionals at this unique mode of transport.



Lunch time picnic spot



Dropping back into Tbilisi

The whole week had been building up to a big night out with our warm shower hosts in Tbilisi, culminating in a Kinkali (dumpling) eating competition . But before we could enter back into civilisation we cleaned ourselves up in one of the numerous sulphur baths nestled within the old part of the town, it was a bit like the old Malvern lido , but stank of rotten eggs (just what you need to mask the smell of one weeks BO). Kinkali are an interesting dish, it resembles a pale, shaven scrotum which Georgian etiquette dictates must be eaten in a particular way. This involves balancing the sack on a knife with a fork, biting through the pastry, sucking out the juice before eating the remainder in one. I still claim to this day that I made double figures, and demand a stewards enquiry.



Sulphur bath time in Tbilisi



Tbilisi old town



Kinkali (dumpling) eating contest. 10 to Marcus vs 8 to Justin.



Kinkali (dumpling) eating contest

Every now and then discussions came round to what Marcus and Kirsty plan to do once they arrived in New Zealand, the

current line of thinking involves setting up a Artesian bakery based on the many different types of breads and pastries they have sampled on the trip so far. I think that they should get into management consultancy as the way that they conduct their business couldn't be more efficient. They have set a clear vision which everybody knows and understands, they have assigned responsibilities to the most appropriate person with Marcus taking the role of pilot (often barking orders at Kirsty to apply the drag brake) as well as mechanic, sous chef and wordsmith. Kirsty takes on the role of chief navigator, financial director and quartermaster. They have invested wisely in capital which gives an excellent return (the tent has paid for itself. ten times over) and they're able to motivate their staff (mugs like me) to keep up. It was a real joy to be part of the team even it was only for a few days. Thank you so much.

In reality we all know what will happen when they get to New Zealand. It'll be time to come back... Via Santiago de Chile and Anchorage...



No Justin, a stun gun from a street stall isn't a suitable gift for your 6 year old son



Civil service offices



The art gallery that was started by the previous government but never finished as the current government didn't like it



Tucking into Adjaran Katchapuri



Tbilisi river front



Georgian sweets, nuts covered in fruit gum.



Tbilisi



Tbilisi river front by night



'Extreme' Walking tour



Justin's tent nearly lasted the whole week



Anti Putin graffiti



This looks familiar in some way



Still watching...



Cycle touring is too much for some