

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

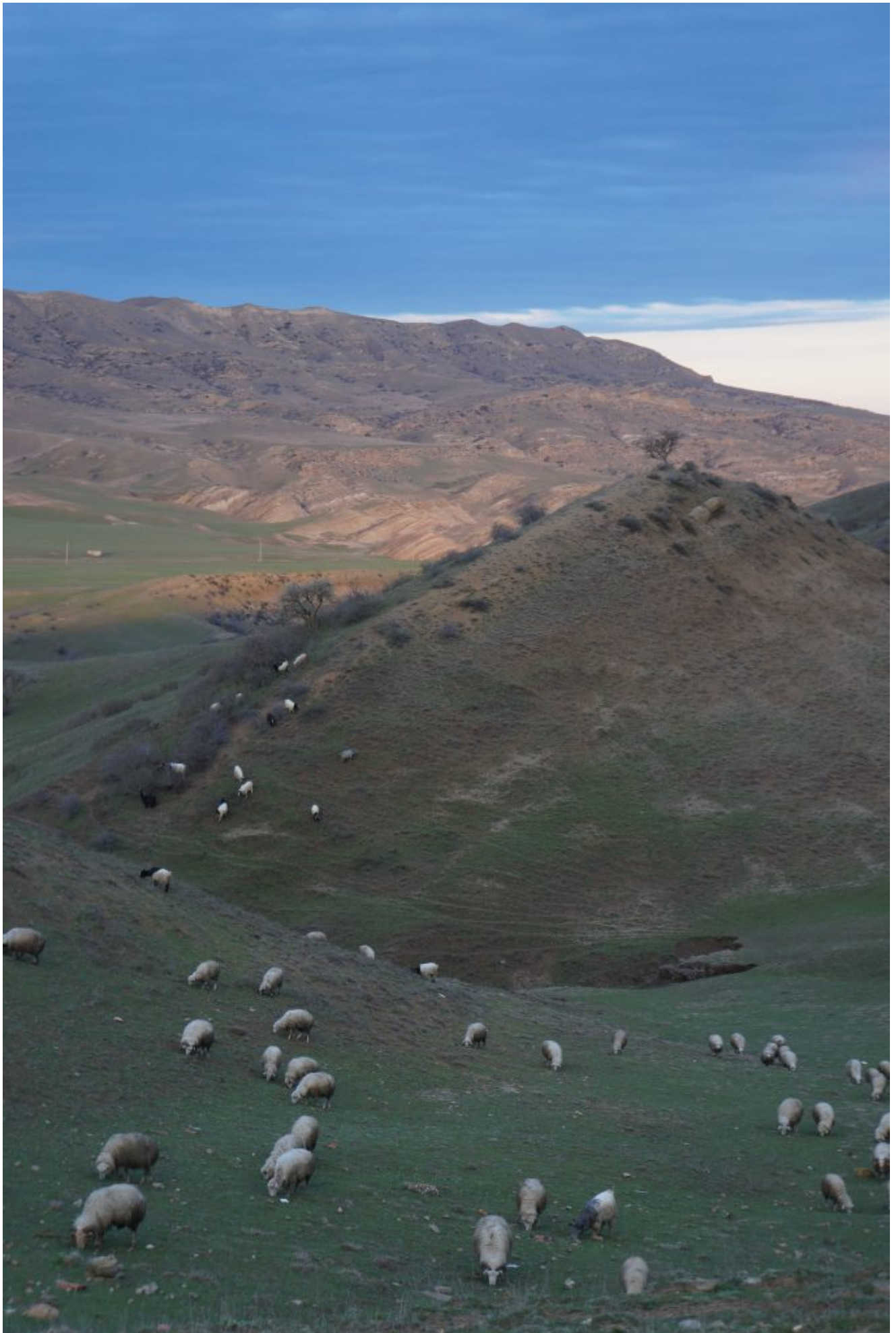


The lifestyle of an Orthodox monk hasn't changed since the 6th century. Only they can now check in on Facebook.

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

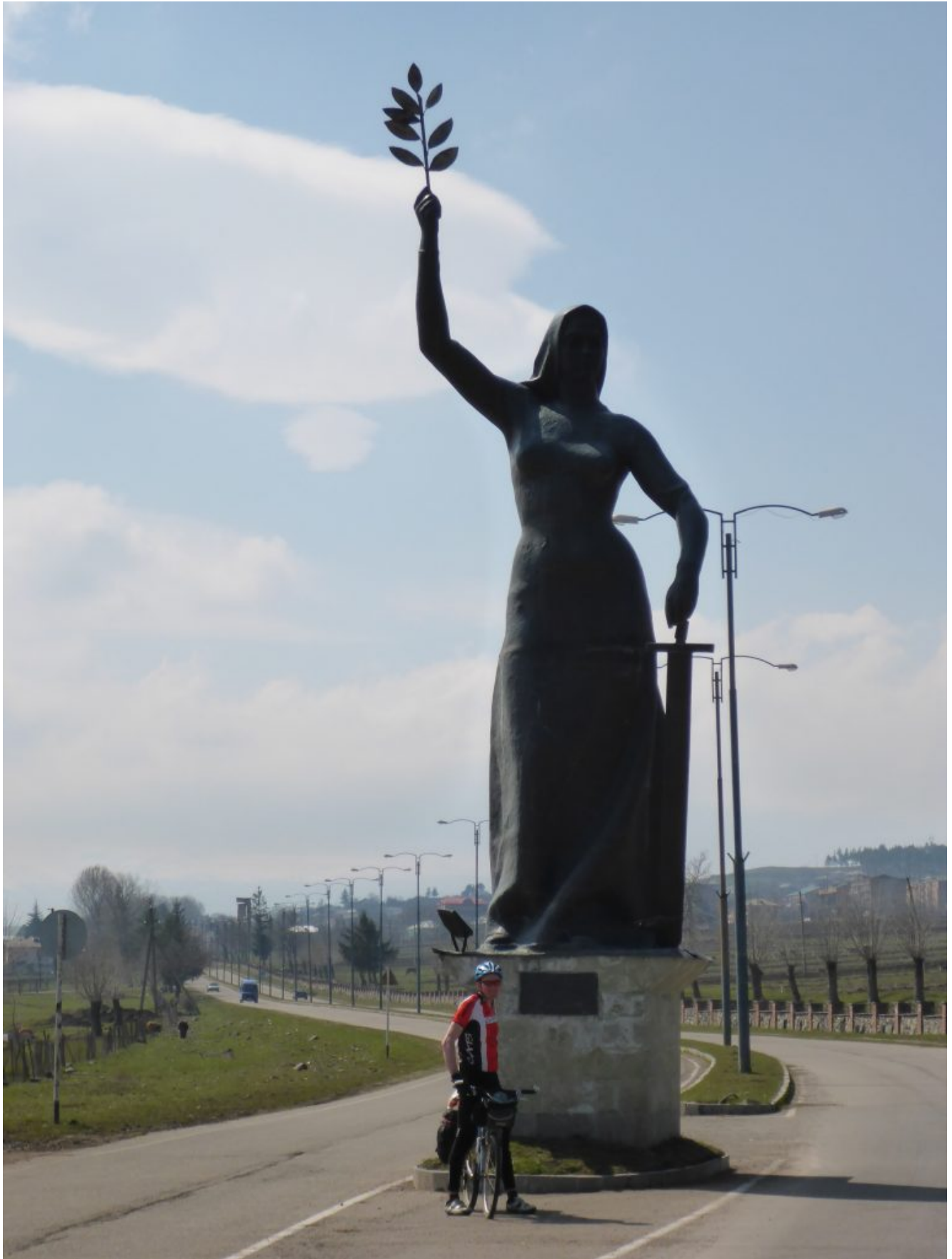




Climb up to Didi Dmanisi



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

Trabzon to Tbilisi

written by Marcus | 22 April, 2015



Leaving Trabzon behind us we head out east again. To our right the feet of the mountains keep threatening to kick us into the Black Sea and barely leave enough room for the main road and a few coastal towns. From time to time though the hills make it right to the water so we have to brave the infamous Black Sea tunnels that give this stretch of road a bit of a reputation amongst touring cyclists. They range from 200m to nearly 2km and are not for the faint hearted. As we ride through them the noise of the traffic approaching from behind us builds to a deafening roar and we brace ourselves for what sounds like a juggernaut on a collision course, only to then get passed by a small minibus. In fact all the traffic gives us plenty of room

as the tunnels have two lanes and our retina-searingly-bright flashing rear light gives them due warning that we're there.



Tunnel. Light at end not shown.

Once back in the daylight we begin passing small tea plantations with terraces cut into the steep hillside. There are pulley systems and zip lines for getting the crop down from the top and then off to the many processing plants that we also begin seeing.



Views from the Black Sea coast road

Apart from tea and tunnels the most remarkable feature of this part of the journey is the number of green gyms. Here on the Black Sea coast the combined good intentions of the local authority and what must have been a very slick selling pitch from the green gym equipment manufacturer have resulted in dozens of gyms all along the road. We didn't count them all but there must be one every 2 miles or so. And just like all the others we've seen, nobody seems to use them.



Pristine, unused green gym



The tunnels help iron out the road so we get the easy return to riding that we'd hoped for to test our injured bodies. A few niggles aside we both seem to be coping OK and 110 sunny km pass by quickly.

Just after the appropriately named Çayeli we make a u-turn onto a side road that takes us through a narrow tunnel to a small pebbled beach and a very closed cafe. Once the local goat herder has finished staring at us and ushered his flock away we set ourselves up for the night on the cafe floor. It's a beach hut with plastic sheeting for walls that should offer enough protection.



Black Sea Shepherd



Just as we climb under the quilt a van drives right onto the beach and parks within 2m of where we are lying. There's just the plastic sheeting between us and the vehicle. We both hold our breath expecting to be discovered at any second but the driver and his female companion have other things on their minds. The radio gets turned up and if I could see the bumper I'm sure it would have a sticker that said "If the vans rockin' don't come knockin'".



Beach side accommodation, near Cayeli



Two nervous hours pass with the Turkish equivalent of Barry White blaring out of their car stereo and then thankfully they drive away and we're left alone. Well, nearly alone. It turns

out the cafe does already have a resident in the form of a large rat. Kirsty comes nose to whisker with it when it scuttles over to have a look at its new guests and she stifles a scream. I quickly pack away all our food and the rat seems to lose interest. The only thing left out is a large apple that we'd been given in Çayeli and which Kirsty had left in her helmet, suspended from the bars of the bike.

In a Mission Impossible manoeuvre the hungry rat manages to shin up the bike frame, climb into the helmet and nudge the apple out onto the floor where it takes a few bites then leaves it in search of something more tasty. Luckily it's not able to undo the buckles on our rack bag.

The next day we pedal the last few km of Turkey, enjoying a final complimentary cup of çay on the way, and arrive at our 24th border. We've had some of the best of times and the worst of times in Turkey so it's a country that will leave us with plenty of memories and a few scars but now it's time to cross into Georgia.



Georgian border

There's a 1km long queue of trucks waiting to get across but we get waved past them all and have to wheel the bike through

what looks like an airport terminal. Apart from an impatient Georgian woman trying to push us out the way to get her passport checked before ours, unsuccessfully, we get through quickly and easily. We also lose 2 hours in the process as Georgia is in a new time zone.

On the other side a friendly tourist information lady issues us with maps and some information about Adjara, the region of Georgia we're now entering. There are 12 regions in Georgia and each one has its own unique cultural traditions and local delicacies. Some of them have such a strong identity that they function as autonomous states and Adjara is one of those. More controversial are South Ossetia and Abkhazia who are fighting to be entirely independent and as such visiting tourists are strongly dissuaded from going there.

Out on our first Georgian road the change compared to Turkey is immediate. We're no longer on a smooth dual carriageway and instead have pot holes, Ladas and herds of cattle to negotiate.



Georgian welcoming committee



Georgian welcome commitee



Entering the Caucasus

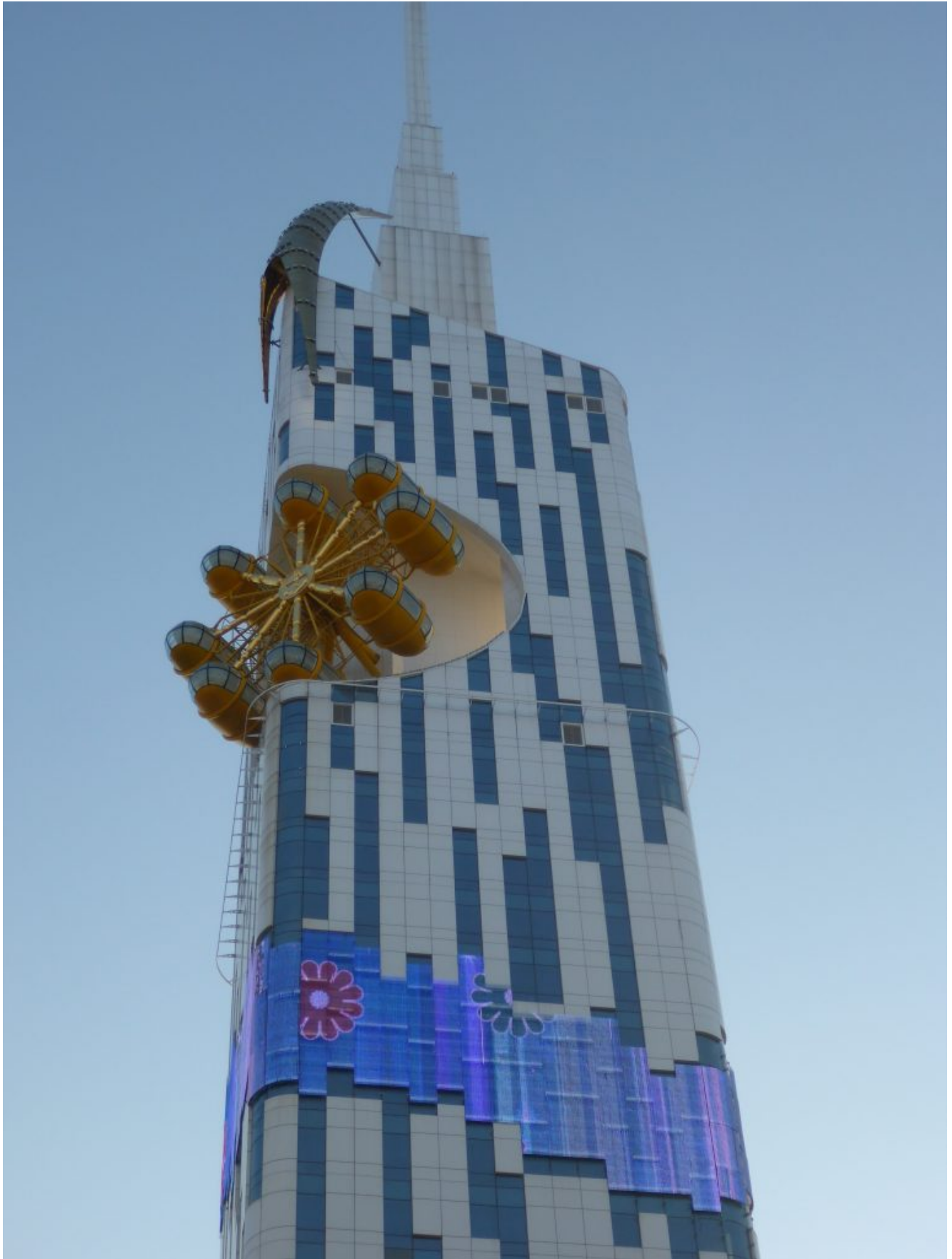
Approaching Batumi we get some fantastic views of the lesser Caucasus mountains but the sights in Batumi are even more extraordinary. We pedal along the sea front boulevard where there seems to be a competition to see who can build the most ridiculous looking hotel. The one that looks like half of the Colosseum wins in my mind but it's a close run thing. Further up the boulevard there's a tall skyscraper with an enormous TV screen wrapped around it and a small Ferris wheel hanging off the side. Then at the far end we see the Alphabet Tower, an enormous ball perched on top of a twisted structure that shows the unique Georgian alphabet running around it in a spiral.



Batumi Boulevard



Alphabet tower, Batumi



The Shard vs the London Eye



The architect should have put his pencil down much sooner.
It reminds us of Las Vegas and like its Nevada big brother,
Batumi has lots of casinos to draw in visitors from Turkey,

where gambling is illegal, and wealthy Russians. But underneath the glitzy façade the skyscraper is completely empty and the restaurant planned for the top of the Alphabet Tower was never finished. It seems there is still some work to do to bring in the crowds to support the prosperous image that the town is trying to portray.



Alphabet tower by night



Love sculpture

After a bite to eat we head off to find somewhere to camp and find ourselves alongside a big lake where a huge dancing fountain display is taking place, in time to various classic rock ballads. Another hint at Vegas and it's almost like standing in front of the Bellagio.



Batumi fountain display

At the end of the lake is a derelict Chinese restaurant on its own island so we set ourselves up amongst the pagodas and watch the end of the fountain display from the tent.

If we'd read the booklet we'd picked up from the tourist information we'd have found out that one of the fountains on the boulevard spouts the local tippie ChaCha at 7 every evening.

After a morning looking round the town we set off up the coast, past bamboo plantations and stalls selling bamboo ladders. It's hillier than we expected and as we grind up a particularly steep gradient the cars and trucks come a bit too close for comfort. Drivers in Georgia are appalling and every other car has a bumper missing or a cracked windscreen. There's a Lada with a wheel off or a bonnet open on most street corners and always with a crowd of men in leather

jackets gathered round trying to assess the problem.



Lada graveyard

I'm keen to take my last chance for a dip in the Black Sea so

we camp behind some hotels overlooking a long beach in Kobuleti. In the summer the water temperature averages 25 degC but in late March it's a bit cooler so its a case of splash and dash. Despite being over 30km away across the bay, we can still see the bright lights of the TV screen attached to the skyscraper in Batumi.



A swim in the shiny Black Sea

Our road turns away from the sea the next day and we ride a roller coaster of small hills through quiet villages, slaloming around various animals in the road. By lunchtime we arrive in Ozurgeti. There are rows of tiny shops most of whom are selling bales of hay and cattle food but in amongst them are a few small windows behind which are bakers and grocers so we stock up for lunch and find a park to have a picnic.



Up into the hills towards Ozurgeti



Ozurgeti

Just as we get everything unpacked a man wanders over and invites us into his café so we chuck our provisions back in the bag and follow him. We thought the offer was just for a coffee but he brings out a number of plates and bowls loaded with bread, cheese, spring onions and a traditional bean hot pot. Our picnic will have to wait until dinner time! We try to pay but he refuses to accept our cash making a gesture to indicate it was his pleasure. This is our first example of the famous and generous Georgian hospitality. Here they have a saying that a guest is a gift from God.



Generous and delicious Georgian hospitality



Ozurgeti moped

As we ride out of town a police car drives up behind us and sounds its siren. Unless the speed limit is less than 15kph I'm not sure what we've done wrong but I pull over anyway. The policeman then tries to tell us we should be riding on the pavement on the other side of the road. Given half the paving slabs are missing and the kerbs are 30cm high at each junction we don't really think this is such a good idea. I tell the policeman as such so he then suggests we just ride on the other side of the road, against the traffic. Also not good so I smile and try to tell him we'll just ride carefully on this side thanks and begin to ride off. He then follows us very slowly for at least 3km until we're beyond the town limits and presumably out of his jurisdiction.



Traditional Georgian bread oven

The police presence in Georgia is very visible with American style police cars everywhere and always with their blue lights flashing. There are also very smart looking police stations in even the smallest villages. Kirsty found a statistic that said that 98% of Georgians think their country is 100% safe and given how heavily it's policed we can see why they might think that. Later that day we see a car pulled over and a handful of cash being offered through the window to the policeman so this security comes at a price.



Every pond we passed was full of noisy frogs

After a lengthy climb at a comfortable gradient we drop into a steep sided, wooded valley and the village of Chakhatauri. Kirsty spots a picnic table next to a small river which looks like a good camping spot so we roll down to investigate. Before we have time to unload we're joined by an old man who seems very excited to meet us. After a short conversation where we point and mime to explain what we're doing he invites us back to his house.



Georgian road hazard

We stroll up a rough track past free roaming pigs and a half dozen geese to his home where he sits us down at a table outside and disappears inside. There are chickens everywhere and they follow the man up the wooden ramp that leads to his front door and some make it into the house. Shortly after the man emerges, shooing chickens out the door again as he brings us bread and a huge round of home made cheese. While we all tuck in, the occasional chicken hops on to the table to try and steal some bread, sometimes successfully.



Keeping an eye out for chickens



Bread thief



Our host for the night (the man not the chicken)

After a while it's time to head back and pitch the tent but the man insists we stay with him. He's very persistent so we

thank him and fetch the bike.



Inside the house is very sparse with only two rooms being occupied and the kitchen just having a dirt floor. He lives

there alone but he has told us about his daughter and twin grand daughters who now live in Tbilisi but we don't find out where his wife is. We're sat down in front of a TV and spend the rest of the evening being made made to watch Georgian game shows, which are probably no less bizarre even if we could understand what they were saying.

There are two single beds pushed together in the room and we realise that is where all three of us will be sleeping. It's not a comfortable night with Kirsty and me squeezed into one and the man snoring away right next to us but we have to be grateful for his generosity and the wind and rain that lash at the windows overnight mean we probably wouldn't have got much sleep in the tent either.



Three to a bed

When your house is surrounded by chickens there's no need for an alarm clock so after the first cockerel has crowed we're

all up and get ready to go. There's no running water in the house so we wash from a kettle filled from an outside tap. After several handshakes we say our goodbyes and roll on down the track. A wonderful display of Georgian hospitality again and given how our host is grinning from ear to ear he's obviously enjoyed looking after us.

We quickly drop out of the hills and onto a wide plain that sits with the huge Upper Caucasus mountains to the north and Lesser Caucasus to the south. The two mountain ranges create a natural funnel for a strong wind that blows across the plain, which builds throughout the day and of course blows right into our faces.



Race the train into Kutaisi

By late afternoon we're through Kutaisi, the 2nd biggest city in Georgia and also through with battling the wind so find a sheltered clearing in a wood and hope it's calmed down by

morning.



Confusing Georgian alphabet. Confusing Georgian village name
It hasn't. In fact it's so strong the next day that holding the handlebars is like wrestling a particularly disgruntled goat. After being blown off the road two or three times the decision is made that it's too dangerous to ride so we begin walking. After 13km, where we occasionally have to stop as the wind is even too strong to be able to stand up, we find shelter in a well stocked cafe. A staple Georgian speciality is Katchapuri. This is a baked cheesy bread with plenty of butter that is perfect fuel for hungry cyclists (and walkers). Each region has it's own version and all of them are deliciously filling.



Too windy to ride

By the time we've washed the Katchapuri down with a coffee the wind has dropped enough for us to actually ride. On the other side of Zestafoni we meet German (prn. Herman) who has ridden from Barcelona and following a similar route to us so we agree to camp together. He's had a rough time in Georgia having had his pans stolen in Batumi by a policeman who he'd asked to look after his kit (a higher bribe may have been required), and then having knee trouble meaning he's been forced to rest in an abandoned house for the last two days. He's glad of some company but needs more rest so the next day we leave him to his morning siesta and hope to see him again later in the trip (www.monkeyonthebike.com).



Leaping dog



Big tent, little tent with German the Spaniard



German strikes a pose

We have drizzle and a lengthy climb during the morning that culminates in a long tunnel that takes us through the top of

the hill then we drop down into Khashuri. On the way we pick up some sweet bread from one of the many road side bakers and it tastes so good we stop to buy another a couple of hundred metres further on.



Official guard dog of Zestafoni



A big scary tunnel before Khashuri



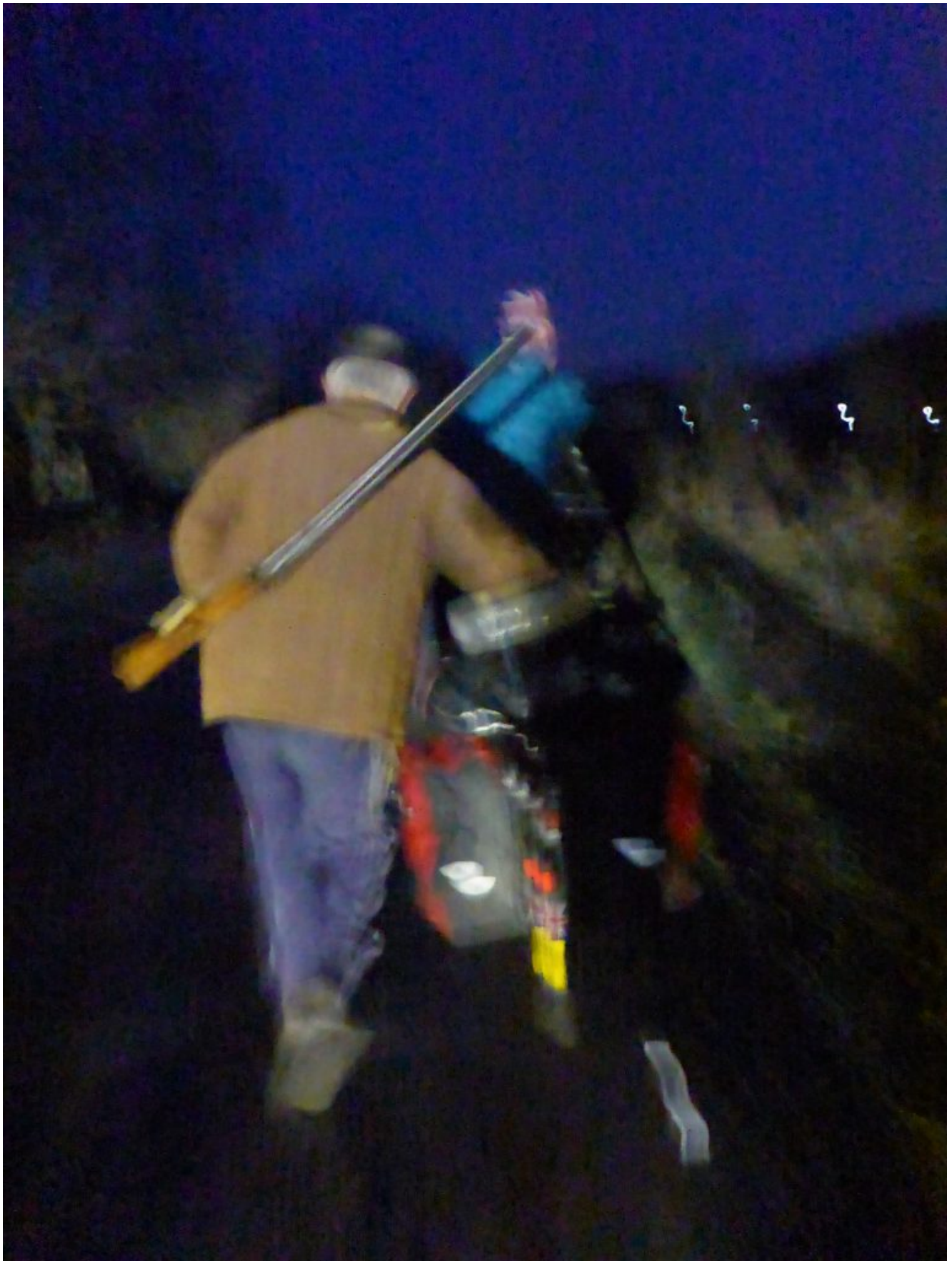
Sweet, sweet bread

The banks of a small river on the other side of Khashuri provides the perfect setting for the evening but just as we begin preparing dinner a man arrives and he doesn't look happy. He motions for us to pack up and follow him. We're reluctant having just got everything ready but he won't back down. The fact that he has a shotgun on his shoulder and a large knife in his belt make him very persuasive so we eventually concede and dismantle the tent.



He had a gun, I didn't. He won the argument.

Our armed escort takes to the rear of the bike as we push it up the road into the nearby village, not really knowing what will happen next. But this is Georgian hospitality by force and after parking the bike in his garage Jimali and his wife Nora treat us to an evening of food, home made wine and much miming and gesticulating in place of conversation before providing a bed for the night.



Armed escort



Jimali was very proud of his portrait of Stalin

Breakfast consists largely of cognac and homemade cha cha with ever more animated toasts with each of his neighbours who come

round to have a look at us. We then pay a visit to the local church and meet an English teacher who is able to explain to us that no self respecting Georgian would allow a visitor to their country to sleep in a tent if they had a bed available. If we'd managed to decline the offer then Jimali would have been very offended. Using a gun to round up guests still seems a bit strong though.



Gamarjusi!



Jimali and Nora

We're sent on our way with a huge bottle of Jimali's wine strapped to the panniers and some high strength cha cha and

don't have the heart to tell him they'll be more of a hindrance than a help.



Jimali and Kirsty with the village priest

Next stop is Gori that holds the dubious claim to fame of being the birthplace of one Joseph Stalin. The museum dedicated to one of history's most ruthless leaders seems to treat him as something of a local hero. Although there is very little in English there seems to be some major omissions concerning some of his most brutal acts, with more emphasis on his role in creating the mighty Soviet Union and defending it from the Nazis. History can be interpreted in many different ways.



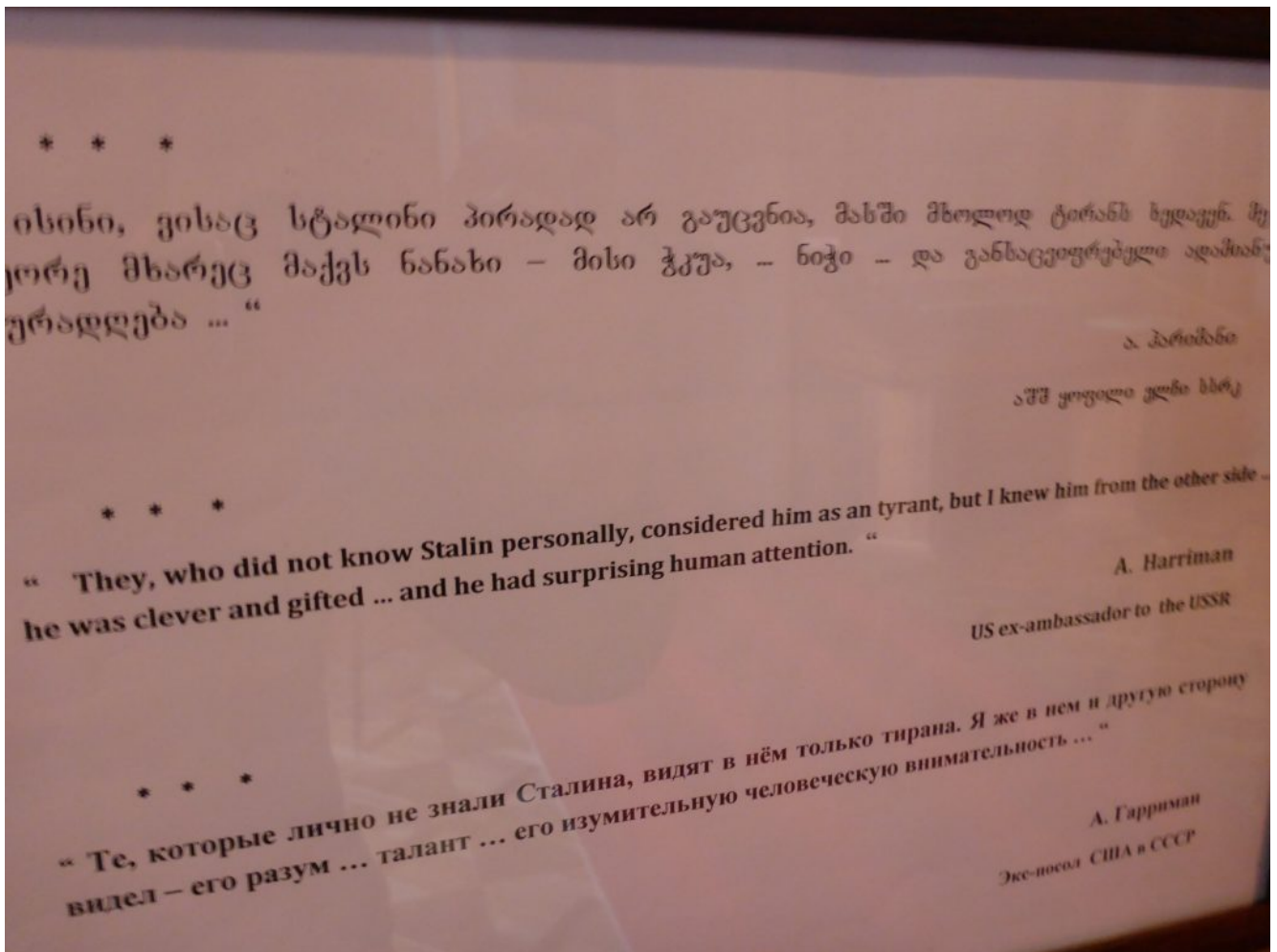
JS in casual pose



Stalin's birth place, Gori, now housed in its own temple.



Stalin's personal train carriage



He was actually a nice guy, really he was.

The next day we arrive in Tbilisi under the cover of a large rain cloud and make our way to our host, Zak's flat to make apologies for dragging soggy kit through his living room. Zak is from Dubai and his flatmate Danidu from Sri Lanka, both are studying medicine as the university in Tbilisi offers a very good course for a fraction of the cost of studying in other countries.



Leaving Gori



Taking a tree for a walk

Our main task in Tbilisi is to apply for our Azerbaijani visas. Once we find the embassy we hand over our passports, completed application and a confirmation of a hotel booking for our first night's stay. Despite what we read online, this isn't good enough and the official tells us we need a hotel confirmation for every night of our stay which is difficult when we plan to stay in our tent. To remedy this I walk up the road and use a travel agents computer to change our hotel booking to 28 nights, print 2 copies of the confirmation and head back to the embassy. This time the official smiles and says that will be perfect, but we now need to pay the fee of \$118 each (nearly three times as much as other EU citizens). To do this we must catch a taxi to the Azerbaijani national bank 10 minutes up the road, handover the fee in Georgian Lari and then take the receipt back to the embassy. We arrive back 10 minutes after they are supposed to have closed but thankfully we're allowed back in and hand everything over.

Within three working days our visas should be ready for collection so we have time to kill.



View of Tbilisi from the fortress

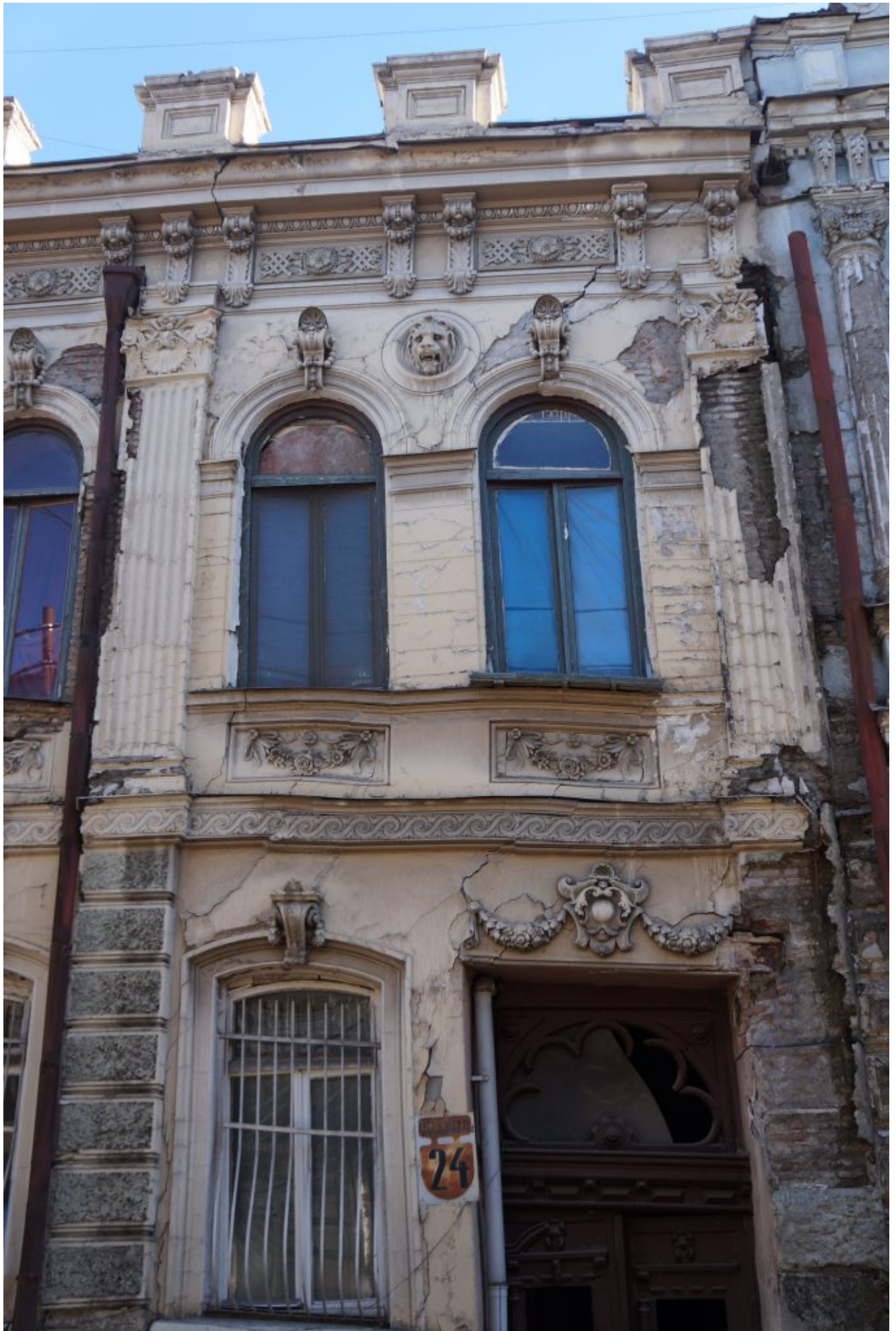




Peace bridge, Tbilisi



Frescoed Orthodox Church



Many buildings in Tbilisi look like they could fall down at any second



Very deep metro station

Luckily this coincides with a special guest who we will be meeting at the airport the next day to join us for a week of riding in the Georgian countryside so we don't mind waiting. My brother, Justin is joining us for his first ever cycle tour and he's been invited over on the pretext that we want to see him but in reality he's being used as a useful kit mule for various bits and pieces that we need from the UK. Hopefully he and his bike will make it into the country safely given he only has a 25 minute transfer in Riga on the way over.

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