

# Tbilisi to Baku

written by Marcus | 10 May, 2015



‘For some reason a friend from University had a fascination with Azerbaijan. There were a few occasions while we enjoyed a pint or two of Snakey B in The Lemon Grove that he suggested opening a themed nightclub called “Azerbaijani’s” but at the time I knew nothing about the country so had no idea what that theme would look like. That friend now runs a hotel in Port Isaac and as far as I know has not ventured into the club business but perhaps he’s just waiting for the right moment to open Cornwall’s next big party venue with a Caucasian twist.







Leaving Tbilisi

We hopped back on the George W Bush Highway to get out of Tbilisi, past a flock of sheep huddling under the slip road in

what must be the most inappropriate grazing of the trip so far. Unlike our ride along the same route the week before, we've got a cool, dry day so the potholes are no longer hidden in amongst puddles of an unknown depth and as such are much easier to avoid.



This time we turn off the main road before Satichala and ride north towards Sasadilo, crossing our old friend the Iori river on the way. The valley we ride up is densely forested but without my brother we're stuck trying to identify what the trees are. It feels a lot like a valley in mid Wales with added drizzle for effect. Then the road starts to nudge up a few percent and ahead is a ridge that is a six hundred metres higher than Mount Snowdon, just to remind us we're actually a long way from Gwynedd. We decide to break the climb up and camp before reaching the top leaving the last stretch for the morning. To help extend the life of the drive train I've been swapping between two chains every 1500km and this service



interval is long overdue so I decide to change the chain before setting off. It's a foolish mistake as we have all sorts of trouble getting the gears to engage properly with the new chain on the old cassette (it's usually fine after a day or two once the chain has 'broken in') which means a lot of walking up the hill and a fair bit of unhelpful shouting at the bike. Near the top it starts snowing but we also find a gear that works so can ride to keep warm. Then on the way down the snow turns to sleet then to rain as we lose altitude and get cold again.



Drizzle turns to snow as we climb

Telavi is a town with no cafes, at least none that were open on an Easter Sunday so we grab a Katchapuri from a streetside



serving hatch and continue on. It's our second Easter as the Orthodox calendar is different from the Anglican one and this year they are celebrating a week after the UK. We've seen lots of eggs dyed red for sale but not a single one made out of chocolate.



Georgian Easter cake











After a flat and fast afternoon, for our last night in Georgia we settle down on the edge of a field overlooked by the foothills of the Upper Caucasus. Justin is again missed as he was very useful for wood collection and fire starting duties. He would also have been needed for fire fighting duties when a rogue ember lands on my waterproof jacket melting two neat holes in the back. As one of the more essential pieces of kit, particularly with heavy rain forecast for tomorrow, it's a cause for more angry and unhelpful shouting, this time aimed at the fire.





### Fire vs jacket

Unfortunately the forecast is correct and in the morning we hear the pitter patter of rain on the roof of the tent, always sounding several times worse inside than it actually is outside. Once we've extracted ourselves from the dry and warm shelter and get everything packed, we quickly pedal off towards our next border. One of our last Georgian towns is Ganjala which also seems to be home to several building supply shops. I pull up outside one hoping to be able to find some gaffa tape to patch up my jacket. It seems to be a flooring shop and we're welcomed in to scour the shelves for what we need. Unfortunately the best they have is a type of selotape which doesn't look up to the job but Kirsty is barged out the way so that two of the small crowd that has now gathered can begin covering my back anyway. Meanwhile we're asked if we want a drink and a tray arrives with çay, water and a bottle of vodka. As we've seen all over Georgia, there seem to be jobs for everyone and although this is a small,

specialist shop there are at least three sales assistants, a manager and two tea ladies. Also typical of elsewhere in the country, the ladies have a magnificent set of gold teeth that shine brightly when they smile but are always swiftly covered up by tightly closed lips as soon as the camera comes out.



The flooring shop crew





After a cup of cay, a glass of water, two shots of vodka and only just managing to convince them not to try and make us drink any more (my mime of a drunken cyclist swerving down the road then falling off always seems to work) we get back on the road again. My back is semi mummified in selotape which stays in place for at least 500m.





The rain continues all the way to the border where we meet some friendly guards with wide rimmed hats. Seeing us shivering while we wait to have our passports checked they come out with some çay and two Snickers bars. It creates a good first impression that most border guards could learn from.

*Azerbaijan fact #2:* Out of the 11 different types of [climatic zones](#), 9 are present in Azerbaijan.

It's no drier on the other side of the border but it is very lush and green as a result of all the rain. After 12km we reach the town of Balakan and head for the first of two hotels that are listed on the Garmin. Since Turkey we've been using Open Street Maps on our GPS which are free to download and so far have given a surprising level of detail including shops, ATMs, petrol stations and accomododation.





## Balakan taxi rank

I'm shown two rooms that at first glance have a similar level of degradation with peeling wall paper, cracked bathroom tiles and the type of bed that allows you to feel every single spring in the mattress when you lie on it. But for some reason one is offered at \$20 and the other \$10 so of course I opt for the \$10 room. We soon learn that the extra \$10 would have paid for a heater and hot water.



Heydar Aliyev, the former president, kept an eye on us from billboards all the time while we were in Azerbaijan

We head out to find some food after a tasty kebab and çay we stumble upon a sewing shop. I present my waterproof jacket and



peer through the holes in the back and the tailors soon get the idea. A roll of faux leather in almost exactly the right shade of blue is brought out and I give them the thumbs up. Their resulting handiwork is better than I could have imagined and I have to admit that the smart new blue diamond deftly attached over the holes is actually an improvement on the original design. It also makes for great advertising space so if anyone wants to add their company logo then let me know and we can negotiate a donation to charity.



Azeri tailors at work

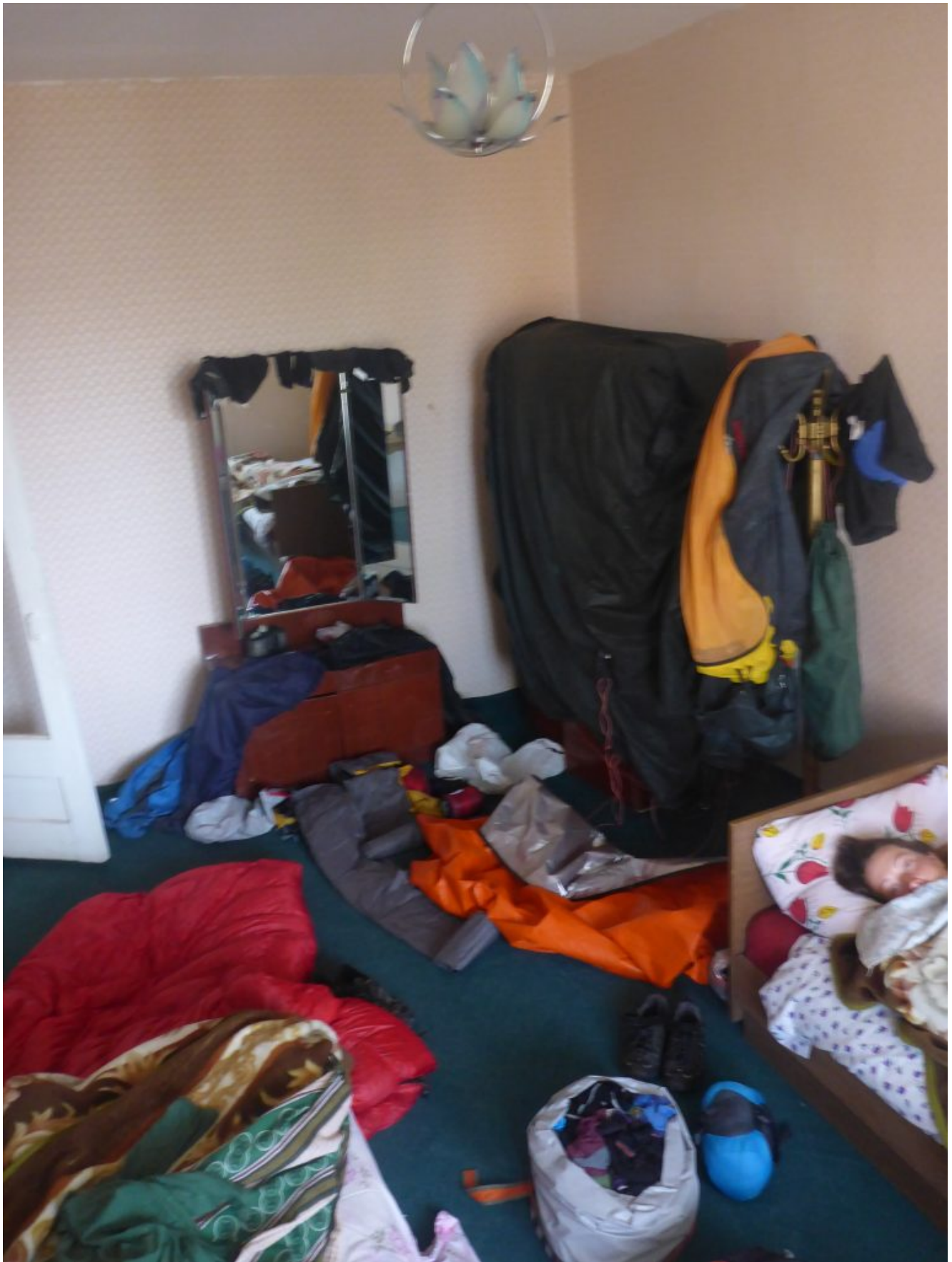


The new improved jacket

Back at the hotel we find that there is a new person holding the fort and he tells us to pack our bags as soon as we walk



into the reception. Not because he wants us out though, he's actually moving us to the penthouse suite. Apart from being larger (we now have 4 single beds) its in a similar state to our previous room compete with another threadbare carpet. However it does have the important addition of hot water and a heater. All our kit quickly gets unpacked and hung from every available hook, door and lampshade to dry overnight.



A full blown kit explosion

*Azerbaijan fact #3:* Azerbaijan is one of the six Turkic countries and shares a lot of the same language as Turkey.





The view from the window is of the local mosque with an impressive brick built minaret that looks a lot like a Victorian, industrial chimney stack. This means we get woken

early by the call to prayer then make our way down to breakfast. The friendlier of the two hoteliers asks if we'd like to climb the minaret which sounds like a great idea. I begin warming up the vocal chords in case they need a new imam to sing the ezan.

The view from the top back into our hotel room is fantastic, and the mountains beyond aren't bad either.





This one goes out to the faithful massive











Back on the road we enjoy some fine sunshine having left the rain back in Georgia but it's a shame I can't try out my new improved jacket. For a couple of days our road follows the



foothills of the upper Caucasus on our left with a series of horrendous invisible climbs. It's the kind of road that looks flat and everything around it looks flat but for some reason we're forced down through the gears and the trip computer shows that we keep gaining altitude. This continues through Katex (hello Katex) and Zagatala before we get to enjoy the opposite effect. The road looks flat but we pick up speed and effortlessly cruise along at 30 kph.



We're now passing green meadows, fields of oil seed rape, fruit orchards and nut groves. In amongst the trees nestles a small cafe, not much more than a plywood roof with a stove at the back but two of its patrons wave and call us over with the promise of fresh çay. We've barely taken a few sips when they decide we need something stronger and the tea is replaced by two large glasses of beer. Our protests that we have more riding to do go unheard so we bravely finish them up. I even struggle through a second one but when the third one is

suggested we have to say our thanks and get going otherwise we'd be there all night (not a bad prospect in hindsight).



Çay and beer in the orchard



Staying close to the mountains, we winch up another long drag into Sheki, famous for its ancient Caravansary, a place to stay for the silk route traders and travelers, and also for its super sticky and sickly sweet baklava that we're obliged to buy and try. While tucking into lunch we get invited to record a sound bite for a national TV show. We're not sure what Ziq Zaq is about but apparently we love them.





Sheki Caravansary. Requires a climb up a steep cobbled hill but worth a look.





Ceiling in Sheki Caravansary





Our first view of a camel train, Sheki





Filming a message for Ziq Zaq TV show

*Azerbaijan Fact #4.* They are very superstitious and believe things like:

"Don't drink cold drinks in winter as you'll get ill".

"Do not lend money or bread at night."

"Do not give sprouts as a present, the plant the sprouts are taken from can die."

"Leaving scissors with opened blades brings misfortune and even death."

"If you meet a person with empty buckets, you are bound for misfortune"

There are huge dry river beds at frequent intervals, ready to take the winter deluge and spring melt water from the mountains. In fact spring has well and truly sprung, bringing with it all kinds of flying, slithering, croaking and biting things out of hibernation. The insect repellent gets dusted off for the first time in many months.



We crossed lots of these enormous dry river beds















Outside Sheki we camp behind an old shack but not out of sight enough to escape the attention of a pair of policemen. They imply we should move on but eventually give up and say we can stay. Later that evening a different pair of law enforcers spot the smoke from our camp fire and also try and move us on with a similar level of success. In the end they even chuck some extra wood on the fire for us and bid us a good night.



Illegal camping near Sheki

We ride across to Oghuz and onto a very tandem friendly road that descends at a 1% gradient. Unlike Turkey where the çay is

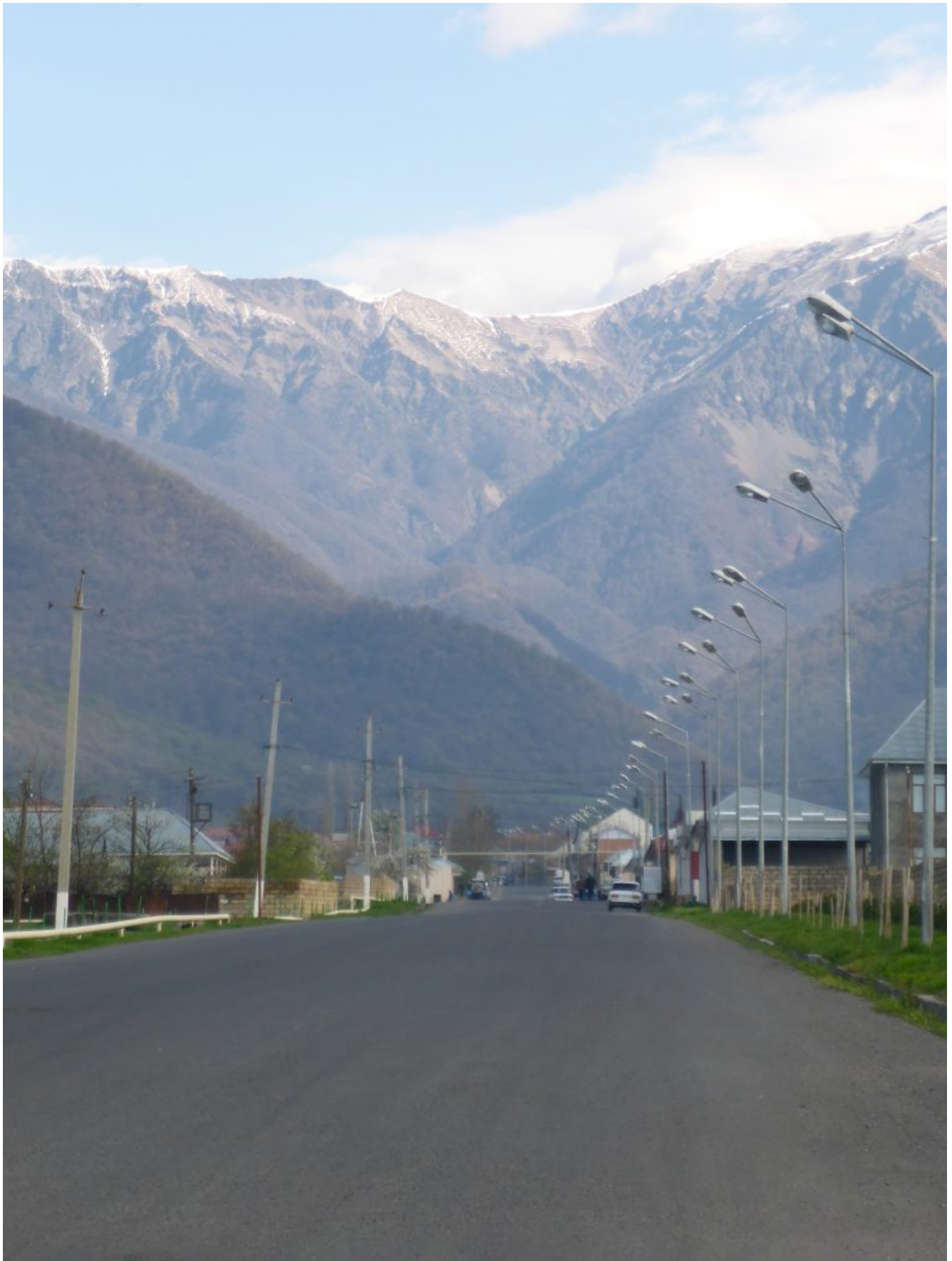


served by the glass, here the cafés give us a whole pot that seems to be bottomless. Kirsty also notices that all of them have a picture of a strawberry on the side. Except in one case where it's a flower instead and she nearly sends it back in disgust.



Roadside bread oven











While passing fields of grazing cattle we spot the unmistakable silhouette and laboured pedal strokes of another touring cyclist coming towards us. Jimbo is from Japan though



we suspect this isn't his real name. His itinerary so far makes us very jealous having taken in the Karakorum highway from Pakistan to China and also 3 months in Iran. Our perfect route would be very similar but we've got to take diversions at both these areas due to visa restrictions. However his tales of a winter on the Pamir highway enjoying -25 degC sound less inviting. He tells us the road up ahead is very good after Ismaili and with that we go our separate ways. It would be interesting to know how many cyclists crawl out of their tents on any given morning, ready to take on another day in the saddle riding slowly towards a faraway destination.



Jimbo from Japan – [www.kotambola.blog.fc2.com](http://www.kotambola.blog.fc2.com)

After Gabala we suddenly find ourselves surrounded by trees in a beautiful forest. Thinking back, we haven't seen this kind of view since Estonia but sadly these woods don't have the well equipped camping facilities that were provided in the Baltics. What they do have are cafes and lots of them. As it's



still early in the year plenty of them are closed but even at peak season it's seems surprising that there would be enough trade to sustain them all. One such closed cafe provides an ideal camping spot but without the fire place and stack of wood that we would have enjoyed in Estonia.



Traditional Azeri head gear







Chocolate pud a l'orange









The forest continues for much of the next morning until we emerge into low rolling hills that then brings us to the foot of a long steady climb back up to 950m. The variety of landscape is astonishing as is the rate that it can change from one km to the next. After the summit we ride a ridge that gives us views to the left to some very stark mountains with little vegetation and another broad but dry river bed snaking between them. On our right are more of the round topped, green pastured hills. Blowing across the ridge is a harsh cross wind that then makes the descent a little too exciting in places and all the way down we can see that our exit from the valley bottom looks to be quite testing.

Hauling ourselves up the other side again at a granny ring spinning, knee creaking 15-20% we arrive puffing and panting at a layby with great views and a cluster of boys trying to sell us flowers. One look at Kirsty tells me this is not the time for romantic gestures so I decide not to buy any and



after a breather we continue on.



Hill top flower seller

Azerbaijan Fact #5: It is referred to as the land of fire and claims

to have the first fire place dating back 700,000 years.

It's much better to cash in hard earned potential energy over a long distance at a shallow gradient than splurge it on a short steep drop. The road down into Shamakhi is lovely and seems to go on for ages with barely a pedal stroke. On the way we pass restaurants with cows heads sat on chairs outside, which seems an unusual advertising idea. Later we see butchers with live sheep and cows penned in outside their shops, waiting for customers to pick which one they want for dinner.





Come and get your fresh cows head





Animals awaiting their fate

Shamakhi is a lively little town and the former capital of Azerbaijan before Baku took over the title. Kirsty pops into a



supermarket while a crowd gathers around me and the bike. One curious taxi driver asks for a ride so I oblige by taking him for a quick spin up the street that brings a lot of amusement to the other onlookers.



Giving the taxi driver a ride. "You'll never guess who I had on the back of the tandem the other day..."

On the outskirts we pass smart walls that seem to be in place to conceal more run down areas of town which is a common technique that we've seen all over the country. It's a bit like trying to sweep the dirt under the carpet. Its still there but now out sight and out of mind.



Before the end of the day we start to get hints of what's to come as the vegetation starts to disappear and in its place the landscape becomes orange and red rock and sand. There's one last long, steady climb to get up before we can pitch the tent and get the stove on for a well deserved cup of tea.







Crawling from the tent and blinking in the morning sun the view could well be of an alpine meadow. Lush, green grass with wild flowers sit in the foreground while the horizon is a jagged range of huge, snowy mountain tops.







The quilt airing ghost







This all changes as the day progresses as the greens and browns become reds and oranges and finally the drab beige of the desert. The desert towns are bleached by the sun with dusty tracks between the buildings while a simple tin roofed mosque is one of the few religious buildings that we've seen. Islam is certainly nothing like as visible as in Turkey and very few women wear head scarves.





Desert mosque



We spend the afternoon charging across the desert with the wind in our faces like a hair dryer, until it begins to give way to more and more civilisation as we approach Baku. The cars get smarter, the drivers more aggressive and the road gets wider and wider until we're on a six lane highway that probably isn't really designed for bicycle traffic.

Azerbaijan Fact #6: When a courting groom's parents meet his potential wife's parents they will drink tea. If the tea is served with sugar then the engagement is accepted, without it's rejected.





But we make it safely into the centre of this very modern looking city and meet up with our host Jess. She and her husband Justin are friends who we used to share a swimming lane with in Bristol. They moved here 18 months ago after Justin landed a job with a dairy product company while Jess has some very useful and very portable English language teaching skills so works at a nearby school.

While in Baku we have a few tasks to complete before we can continue on so we need to be here for a few days. There are visas for Uzbekistan and Tajikistan to apply for and also a few running repairs and maintenance needed on the bike and kit. Once that's all been done we then have to work out how to get onboard the legendary and notorious Caspian Sea crossing but all of that is a story for another post.



Flame towers, Baku



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# Guest Blog: A week in Georgia

written by Justin | 10 May, 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](http://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



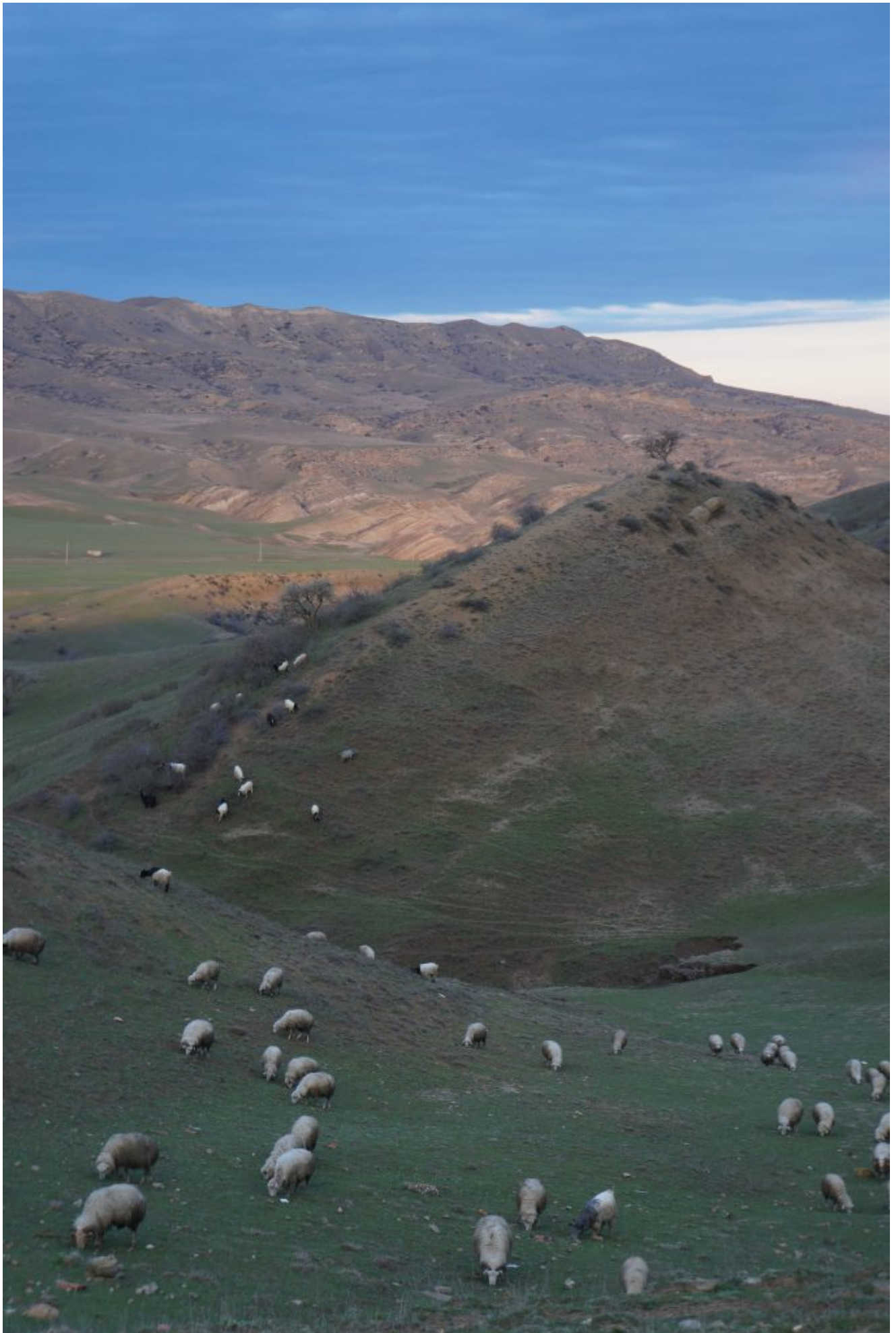
The lifestyle of an Orthodox monk hasn't changed since the 6th century. Only they can now check in on Facebook.



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

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# Trabzon to Tbilisi

written by Marcus | 10 May, 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 Abkhazeti 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, Ladakhs 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](http://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

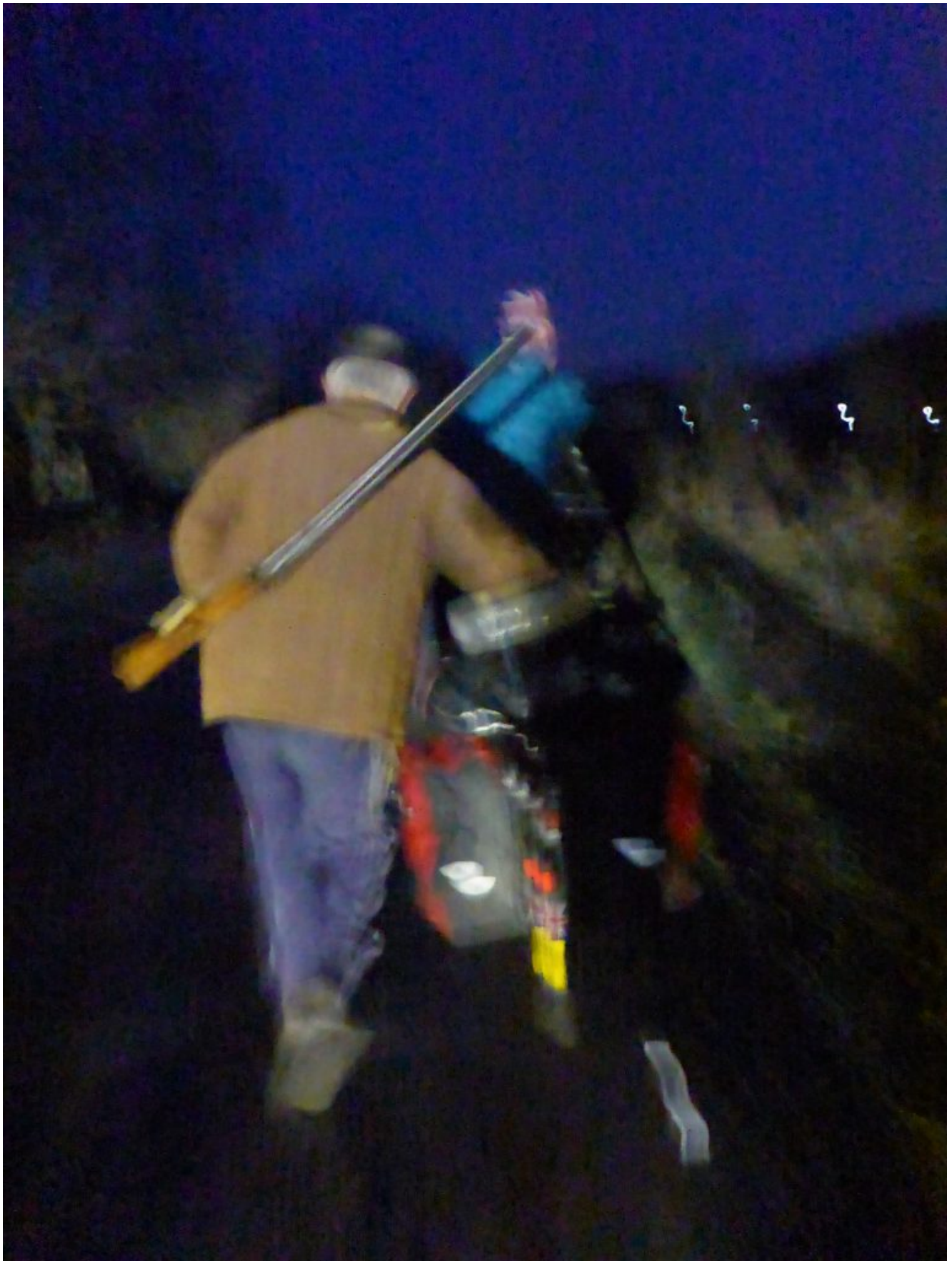
The banks of a small river on the other side of Khashuri provides the perfect setting for the evening but just as we begin preparing dinner a man arrives and he doesn't look happy. He motions for us to pack up and follow him. We're reluctant having just got everything ready but he won't back down. The 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.



Gamarjuss!





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

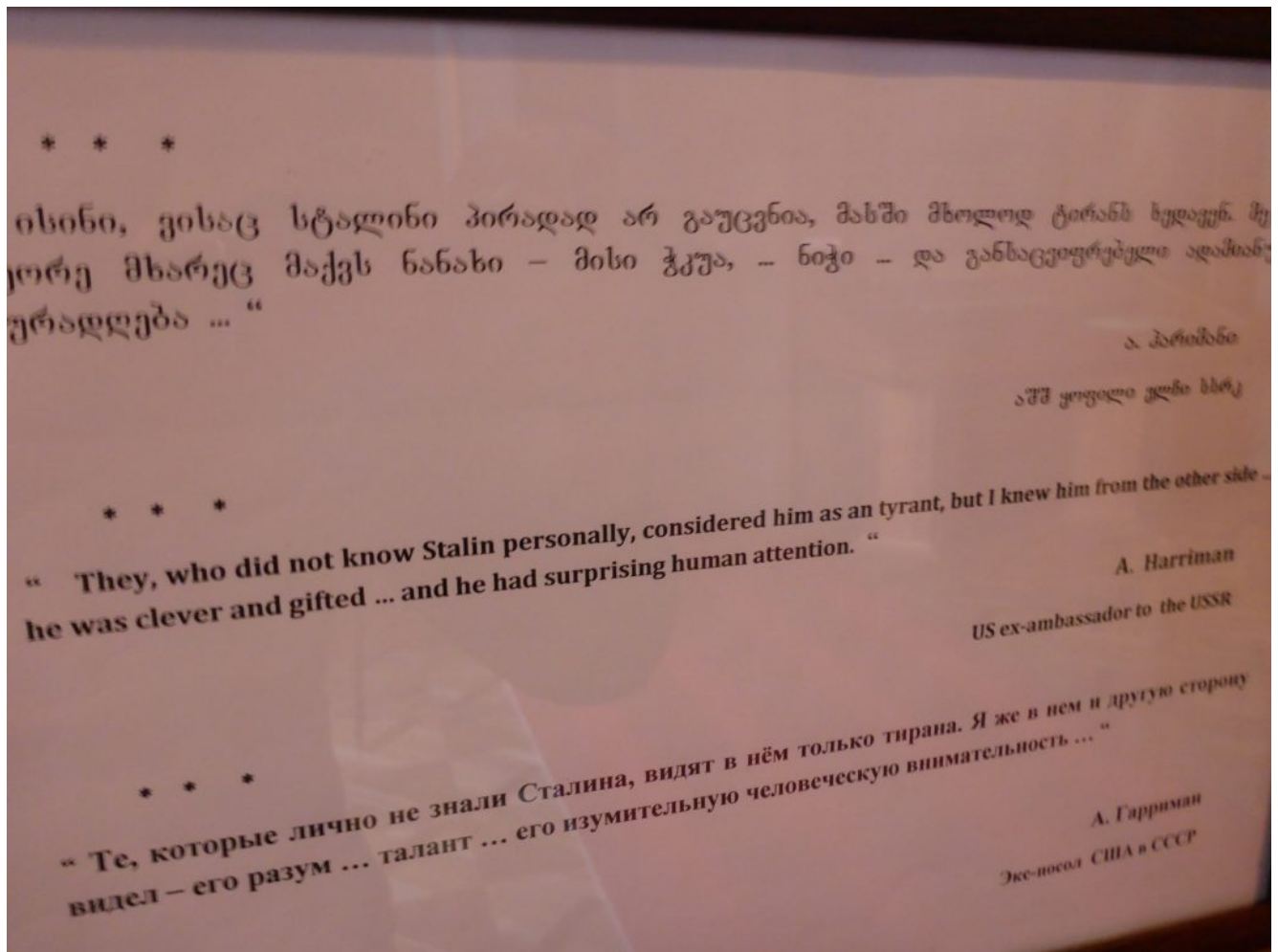


Stalin's birth place, Gori, now housed in its own temple.





## 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





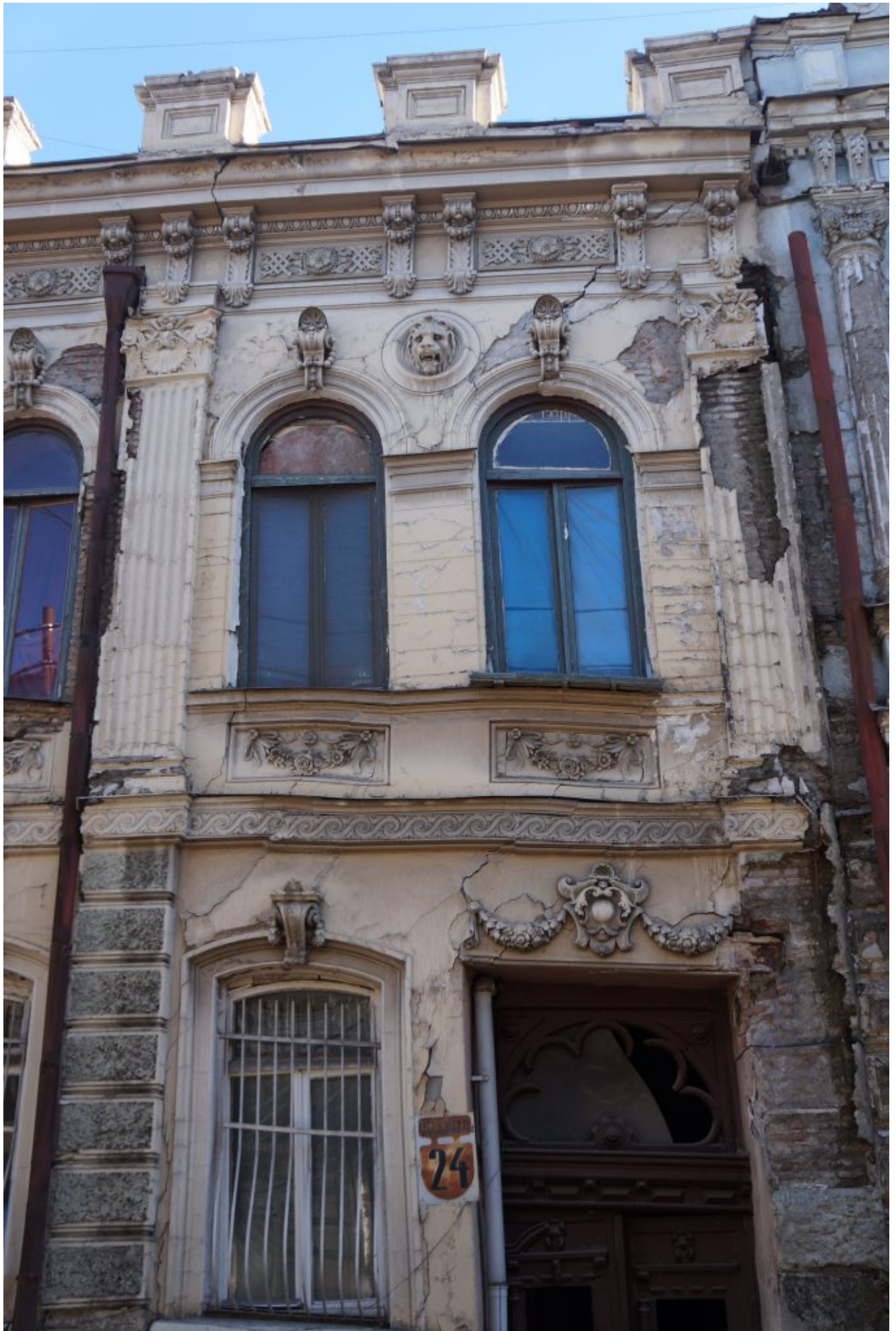


Peace bridge, Tbilisi



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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