

GEORGIA

I stepped up to the window with the government official sitting behind it, having nothing in my hands but my passport. I was not given any forms to fill out, no paperwork to turn over to him, which was a first in more than fifteen years of crossing borders for international work and travel.

"Hello." No response was given to my greeting. He quickly looked over my pages, found an empty spot, picked up his stamper and pressed it hard to the page. He then turned, reached behind him, picked up a small red box and handed it to me with my passport.

"Welcome to Georgia," he smiled. "Enjoy the wine!"

Just like that: non-existent bureaucratic processes, no-hassle entry to the mystical land situated in the Caucasus, gifted a small bottle of wine by the guy behind the window stamping passports. I found a new home.

Considered to be the birthplace of wine, with more than 8,000 vintages, the Republic of Georgia sits at the crossroads of Asia and Europe. It has 5,000-meter-high mountains along its northern border with Russia and there are seemingly never ending miles and miles of family vineyards in its eastern Kakheti province. Tbilisi, the nation's capital, is a European-like city that can serve

as basecamp for exploring the country, and it is also home to some seven days of mountain biking possibilities in the foothills and mountains of the Trialeti Range of the Lesser Caucasus Mountains on the city's outskirts.

"We ... flew over mountains that were gaunt and brown, like the mountains of California Then we flew through a pass, the mountaintops level with us, and came over the valley of [Tbilisi.] It is a huge and dry valley which looks like New Mexico." —John Steinbeck, 1948, A Russian Journal

MTB. Davit, of the Georgian mountain biking club and touring service called Georiders, and I meet up with two other local riders in a city park on a pleasant Saturday morning. The camaraderie is immediately high, as they cannot wait to show off their trails and I am feeling the combined stoke of heaping cups of coffee in my veins, dry mountain air in my lungs and the excited energy of exploring unknown trails firing across my synapses.

Up to Kus Tba (Turtle Lake), we climb steadily through tight singletrack and some double track,

adjusting our bodies from the walking to the pedaling cadence as we go. At the lake, families are already weekend merry-making, the early lunch hour upon them. Kids run about, paddleboats lazily move across the water, and lakeside restaurant tables hold bottles of beer and plates of meat, bread and cheese. We stop for some photos, drink some water, and then make our way around the lake onto a super smooth, fast, gorgeous stretch of mountain lakeside trail through pines that has, in one quick blur, exceeded all expectations I had of Tbilisi mountain biking. The ride is not even thirty minutes old yet.

Wine. I am handed a small clay saucer filled with more red wine by my host. I cannot refuse. Being handed the clay bowl is an honor. His home is a family vineyard with a stone house built in the late 1800s. Next to his house he makes wine. I am his guest. I am in his home. He has already asked me to stay the night with his family. Georgian hospitality is alive.

The clay bowl. Before tossing it back, I await another toast. No people anywhere toast like the

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Georgians do. The toastmaster is the *tamada*. Cultural lesson: only the *tamada* gives a toast during the *supra*—a feast, sometimes celebratory and festive and sometimes somber. That is perhaps what holds the nation's social fabric together. My head is already swimming in wine. The *tamada* is done. I put the bowl to my lips and swallow it in one big gulp. A cheer goes up from the table. The spirit is festive. I smile. The bowl is filled again. It is handed to me. I am not smiling. When will this end?

"In these terrific Georgians we had met more than our match. They could out-eat us, out-drink us, out-dance us, out-sing us." —John Steinbeck, 1948, A Russian Journal

MTB. We connect unmapped trails under the guidance of Davit, the trail master, stopping every now and then to refill water bottles at springs coming out of the side of

the mountain. Georiders, on this day, travel lightly with regard to rehydration, carrying only an empty plastic water bottle. Why carry a heavy water load on your back when there is mountain spring water all along the ride?

We turn the tires toward a grassy opening that leads to a lookout. Out on the edge, we stand, taking in a majestic view of the Trialeti Range. Davit and the others point out on the landscape the various other rides they have in their tour quiver. For each one, they tell the tale we all tell about our home trails when around people visiting our local scene for the first time: "This is one of my favorites ... this one is great because ... you have to do this one ... before you leave we have to ride"

Two eagles fly high above us. The Georgians see it as a positive sign. We will continue to have a good day of riding, they say. I

watch them as they look out at the mountains. How proud they surely feel to call this land "home."

We lift our bikes off the ground and saddle up. I look again at the mountains. Spectacular.

Climbing up and up a little more, we eventually summit out for the day. After more than a thousand meters of near continuous upward riding, the only direction now is down.

Wine. Winemaking in clay vessels using methods and traditions going back 1,000s of years is alive and well in Georgia today. The winery I visited in Kakheti still uses the underground *kveri* (or *qvevri*) fermenting and storage method. I stand and look around the earthen room, thinking. Eight-thousand vintages; two-hundred-plus native grape varieties; four-hundred-plus total grape varieties grown today.



Not France. Not Italy. Not Spain. Yes, evidence, thus far, shows that the Republic of Georgia is where wine was first produced.

Wine is crafted in some quantity by nearly every household in the republic, I am told. It is life in Georgia. There is no pretense about it. Wine has and always will be at the table, at gatherings—no different than bread or a vegetable dish.

MTB. I am way back off my seat, my stomach grazing it, and my hind side is a few inches above the rear tire. We are taking a shortcut, it seems, and connect into what for some mountain bikers would be “killer bro” twisting downhill singletrack. We swoop through the initial portion of the descent off the mountain. The trees are tight around us but not worrisome close. The line is fun. There is no other way to describe it but “fun.” We are hooting and hollering, smiling

and having a good time. I am on MTB cloud nine, for sure.

“You guys have what many of us dream about,” I say when we drop out onto doubletrack. “That was some of the best riding I’ve done in a long while. Do you know how good that is?!”

They smile. They know that to them it is good riding, but they do not gloat or try to impress their opinions upon me. Their humility shines through their smiles that are not encumbered with braggart words. They are glad that I like their trails, and knowing that is good enough for them.

Wine. The *supra* seems to be coming to a close. I am asked to join in one final round of a toast. The *tamada* offers blessings upon everyone present. Over the course of the evening, blessings have been offered to guests, to compatriots, to

fallen heroes, to women especially, grandmothers, mothers, wives and daughters, to the poets and musicians of history and times present, to their *patria*—Georgia. This time around, the American guests are the noted recipients of the toast. The *tamada* looks me straight in the eyes and says with sweet sincerity, “Thank you for visiting me and my family.”

His authenticity moves me. Humanity touches.

I am offered one final drink of wine, and humanity slaps me in the face. I can only think of one thing: how am I going to drink another gulp? My stomach is filled with red and white wine, with barbecued beef and pork and trout and potatoes and tomatoes and bread and sheep and cow cheese. Out of nowhere, into my head pops Steinbeck and the *paisanos* and their jugs of wine. I realize

that I am now surrounded by new *paisanos*. I take the wine glass and say to my host, "Thank you for a beautiful evening. I will dream of coming back." With that, we raised our glasses and swallowed a final round of wine for the evening.

MTB. The Georiders are ahead of me. They are truly bombing down the side of the mountain. I take the newbie approach, not fully letting go since I do not know the trail's character. Before long, however, we are back on a doubletrack that I recognize and I am able to let go.

We are soon pedaling beside Kus Tba. The merry-making has not subsided. The picture is perfect: warm, sunny afternoon, people relaxing and enjoying life, serene body of water, and four mountain bikers with a salt burn on their brows passing through.

Back through the singletrack we started out on a few hours earlier, we go. Thinking we are pretty much done, some roots nearly send me crashing to the ground. Luckily, I keep the bike upright, a mental lapse having almost caused some blood to be outside of my body.



The road to the city park is what is left of the ride. They hammer down. I coast behind them. I do not want the day to end. I am feeling a little bummed out.

"I wish I was here a few more weeks." "Come back. We'll be here. We can go to my village and ride there, and also up to the Caucasus, to the big mountains." "I would love that." "Just come back."

It is a magical place, Georgia, and it becomes dream-like the moment you have left it. And the people are magic people. It is true that they have one of the richest and most beautiful countries in the world, and they live up to it. And we understood thoroughly now why Russians had always said to us, 'Until you have seen Georgia, you have seen nothing.'

—John Steinbeck, 1948,
A Russian Journal

I am sitting in the Istanbul airport enjoying a second cup of coffee and scratching out some notes that will become this article. At this time I do not yet know of Steinbeck's *A Russian Journal*. Also, I know not why or how Georgia and its people seem to have become embedded so deeply in my being. I was taken in completely by the realness of their hospitality, by the natural beauty of the countryside and mountains, and being somewhat of a wino, I had not experienced a truer understanding of wine and food and sharing coming together as it did during the *supra*. Then there is its history: the Roman, Persian, Ottoman, Mongol, and Soviet Empires, among others, all have been in Georgia, though it is Georgia that has survived them all. All of that comes together to create a backdrop without compare for mountain



biking with a group of riders that have options for everyone.

You might ask, "Is Georgia somewhere I should consider for my next mountain biking trip?"

To that, I offer this as a possible answer: We are off the dirt trails and are riding through the city streets of Tbilisi back to Davit's apartment. Cars slow down and give us the right of way, and they provide ten solid feet of space as they slowly pass by us. "Is this really happening," I wonder silently.

We carry the bikes up nine flights of stairs and secure them inside his front door. I change my clothes.

"When I come back, I'd like to see more of Tbilisi mountain biking. I would also like to do a several-days journey into the Greater Caucasus."

"We can do that. We have the bikes. We can do it anytime you are able to come back during the riding season," Davit assures me.

Steinbeck's magical Georgian dream lofts around my head. Images of year-round ice and snow-capped mountain peaks stand jagged against azure blue skies. Visions of human and animal mountain footpaths serving as singletrack, along with trekkers' routes and mountain roads, through summer, green, alpine beauty dance alongside thoughts of sharing jugs of wine by a campfire with my new friends. Smoke rises up in the starry night after a day of cranking the Georgian Caucasus. Sleep comes easy, knowing tomorrow we will get up and do it all over again. s

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