

Season 14 – Part 3. Through Georgia.



We 16.11.2016, day 493. Into Georgia (Zagatala – Lagodeki, 45 km)

The weather forecast had announced miserable rainy and cold weather for the day, so we wrapped ourselves up in our rain gear and headed off. The weather turned out to be quite OK, there was a bit of drizzle and it was quite cold, but not the soaking miserable downpour we had expected.

We stopped at a Döner Kebab place for a Pide, Kebab and two Corba soups and soon were approaching the border to Georgia. Passing the border was again largely hassle free. On the Azerbaijan side a grim looking officer in camouflage uniform ordered us to “open bag!”, then “close bag!”, then “open this bag” and so on. When we got to the guitar he barked “what is this!”. I unpacked the guitar and played a little song. Everyone laughed. On the Georgian side everything felt very different. The people looked very different, the language was very different and there were Christian crosses and statues all over the place. In fact it felt as if we had been teleported straight to Greece.

The customs officer spent a very long time looking at me and comparing me to the photo in the passport. He sourly complained about my long beard, asking how he was supposed to tell if it was my passport or not. But soon we were also through this checkpoint and now found ourselves in country number 25 of our trip.

A few kilometres after the border we rang the doorbell of Hotel Lago in the small town of Lagodeki. No one was home, but we got chatting to a very friendly local who turned out to be a retired Soviet pilot who had flown all sorts of Soviet planes all over the world.

Finally Madonna, the lady running the hotel returned. It was a fantastic place. Not a hotel at all but a homestay in the family home.

In the evening we went for a walk around town, I went and shaved off my beard for 80 cents, then we went to a rather seedy bar / restaurant for a beer to celebrate reaching Georgia. We finally stayed for dinner that turned out to be delicious. We had the local dumplings that were huge and wrapped in thick pastry, but were very tasty. Also some sizzling mushrooms, a tomato and cucumber salad, a huge pile of bread and some of the famed local wine. The wine was quite a surprise. It was more like apple cider than like wine. The colour was a light brown. Having not had any alcohol at all for the last weeks we were soon feeling slightly tipsy. When we had finished a huge glass of wine appeared on our table. The merry group of elderly gentlemen at the table opposite had invited us to some more wine. Georgia certainly has made a wonderful first impression on us!

By the time we made our way homewards we were very tipsy indeed. We stopped at the local store where we bought 2 large KitKat Dark bars and a whole box of Brantwein chocolates. Back at the homestay we finished the lot and dozed off only to wake up at midnight, still fully dressed.







Th 17.11.2016, day 494. Rain day (Lagodeki, 0 km)

I woke up with a small hangover. It was pouring rain outside. I was glad that I only had to stumble out of bed to find the homemade Georgian breakfast waiting for us. After a couple of coffees, I was starting to feel ready to face the day. Should we head out into the pouring rain? We both didn't really feel like it, so we decided to stay put and see how the weather developed. At midday, it was still very grey and drizzly, so we told the landlady that we would stay one more night. No sooner had we done so, then the sky cleared and the sun poked out from between the wispy clouds.

We nevertheless decided to stick to our plan of staying put and so went for a little walk through town and up into the forest behind. I realized that it has been a long time since I last took a walk through a forest and this one was particularly impressive with really large old trees. Only when you are in a real old growth forest, do you realize that most, if not all the forests in the west are artificial and cultivated, consisting mainly of young trees with undergrowth and dead trees cleared.

We went back to the same restaurant we were at the day before, but took it easy on the wine, to be sure to be in shape for the up-hill bike ride of the next day.









Fr 18.11.2016, day 495. Wild Pomegranates and snow covered peaks (Lagodeki - Sighnaghi, 80 km)

Once more we enjoyed the splendid Georgian breakfast at Lago Homestay: 2 different potato salads, feta cheese, yoghurt, bread, honey, stuffed eggs, some kind of very rich fresh cheese, etc... It was again quite cold and very damp as we headed off. However the sun soon burnt off the mist and it turned into a wonderful biking day. We covered the first 30 km or so very quickly as it was mostly downhill. We then reached the foot of the climb up to Sighnaghi, where we were held up by a huge flock of sheep that were being herded along the road. It was a fascinating sight. One poor goat was sold off right there and then at the roadside.

After a quick snack we started the 500 m climb. The road was lined with wild pomegranate bushes that were full of fruit. I picked a couple not expecting them to be very tasty.

Sighnaghi is an old walled town with cobblestone streets perched right on top of the hill with great views of the Caucasus mountains to the north. It is however also very touristy. We slowly biked through the town taking in the sights then stopped at one place that didn't look too much like a tourist trap for some tea and soup.

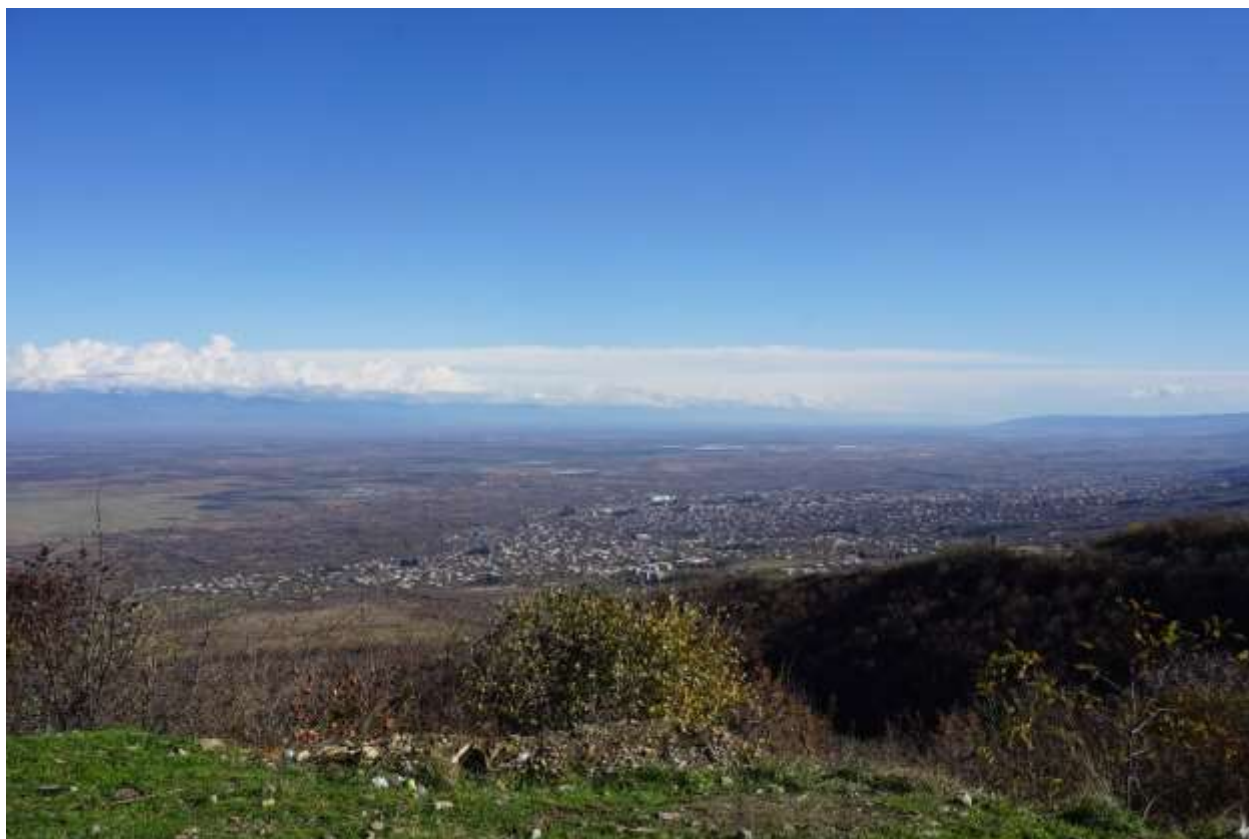
We were still over 100 km away from Tbilisi and it was a hilly ride, so we decided to cover as much distance as we could so we soon headed off again continuing the climb up to the top of the hill catching a glimpse of the monastery for which Sighnaghi is famous. We didn't make too good progress after we had finally crossed the top of the hill, as an icy wind set in and blew straight into our faces forcing us to pedal while going downhill.

As the sun was setting at about 5 pm we found a spot that looked OK to pitch our tent off down a mud road along a vineyard. The road was extremely muddy and it was the nasty kind of mud that sticks to the tires and jams the mudguards. We carried our bikes through some thorny shrubs to find some shelter from the wind. We weren't feeling too hungry and so we just had some biscuits and rice cakes for dinner. I also cut open the pomegranates I had picked and to my surprise they were utterly delicious!

















Sa 19.11.2016, day 496. Tough day with really cold start (Signaghi - Tbilisi, 90 km)

We are starting to realize that Georgia is a very damp place in November. The humidity was so intense that condensation was forming everywhere inside the tent, running down the walls and also forming on my sleeping bag. Half way through the night the down in my sleeping bag was collapsing and forming clumps due to the moisture and I started to feel very cold. I was really happy when dawn started to break and I pulled on my damp clothes and got up to greet the morning. The tent, our bikes and the fields around us were covered in frost. It was foggy and no sun came out to warm us up a little. We packed up and pushed our bikes back up along the muddy road. Mud was getting everywhere. After scraping the mud off our tires and shoes as well as we could we headed off and were very glad to find a small little roadside place where we could sit inside, have a hot chai and warm ourselves a little next to the wood fired stove. We ordered some scrambled eggs and bread for breakfast and we also had fresh, homemade yoghurt out of clay pots. It was the best yoghurt I have ever had!

We had quite a miserable ride towards Tbilisi. We somehow were not making headway at all. The road narrow and very hilly. Traffic was heavy and the drivers very aggressive, overtaking whenever they could. We were forced off the road countless times by cars coming straight at us.

To make things worse, I soon found I had a puncture. Checking the tire I found a huge 1 inch thorn. I mounted a new tube but soon also this tube developed a puncture. I carefully rechecked the inside of the tire for any wire or thorn but found nothing and so I mounted yet another tube. A brand new one. But also this tube soon developed a slow puncture! I ended up having to pump up the tire every half hour or so all the way into Tbilisi.

What helped us on our way, was yet another encounter with a trail angel. This guy in his car first stopped to give us a snack of fresh bread and cheese. About an hour later he overtook us again and stopped to give us “Georgian Snickers” (a string of walnuts or hazelnuts covered by a gelatinous layer of grape juice, they look a bit like a candle).

We arrived at the outskirts of Tbilisi at dusk. The ride in was very unpleasant, traffic was atrocious. At least most of the time there was a service road running parallel to the highway. It was very bumpy, but at least it had very little traffic. The last stretch in the city we followed the bike route on MapsMe that took us along all sorts of interesting tiny little roads and also right across the railway tracks of the main train line running into Tbilisi.

We finally arrived at the corner where our WarmShower host was living. We had no phone to call him, so we started knocking on random doors looking for the right apartment. Finally, we asked a passer-by to call him. The guy we asked was stone-drunk, but very friendly.

A short while later Tamaz came out to greet us and soon we were enjoying bread, salad, cheese and a some local beer, that we bought from the corner store, at his funky student digs.











Su 20.11.2016, day 497. Day in the capital of Georgia (Tbilisi, 0 km)

We left Tamaz' digs at about half past nine to organize our train journey onwards to Batumi. The city was still fast asleep. The only place we found for breakfast was a small fast food booth at the railway station. I went to enquire about tickets and was told that it is not permitted to take bikes on any train heading for Batumi. I insisted that there must be some trains that take bikes as I knew of several people who had taken bikes. I was passed from one counter to the next and finally directed towards a yellow telephone, where I could call information. Finally I learned that the only train taking bikes was the night train that leaves every other night. So I bought tickets for the following night. This meant we would lose one day, but we'd have two full days to explore Tbilisi.

We spent the afternoon wandering around the city and we were really impressed. There are lots of things to see, historical old town with narrow streets, lots of orthodox churches, cool restaurant and bar districts and throughout the city there is also a sprinkling of very modern glass and steel buildings with very interesting architecture. Tbilisi would make a great destination for an extended week-end getaway.

Weather was pretty miserable, cold and drizzly. In the afternoon it started to rain and so we escaped into a wine bar and had a bottle of the famed Georgian wine. The sommelier went to great lengths to explain how wine is made in Georgia.

We spent a quiet evening in Tamaz' place over tomatoes, cucumbers, cheese, bread, beer and wine chatting to all sorts of youngsters who came and went, some were living there, others just popping over for a bit of gaming.









HAPPINESS
IS
BUYING
YOURSELF
SOMETHING
NICE







Mo 21.11.2016, day 498. Another night Train (Tbilisi - Train, 0 km)

It was again a very cold and drizzly day. We went out in search of some coffee at about 9:30 with Tamaz still fast asleep and soon found a Coffee&Bean. A perfect place to sit in front of a large window looking out at the cold wet weather!

In the afternoon, I first fixed the latest puncture and also fixed the punctures in the other tubes I was carrying. I then made a little excursion over to Velo+. There were quite a few things needing doing: the rear sprocket was seriously worn and two teeth had already snapped off, the chain was also stretched out of any tolerance and the front rotor of the disc brake was wafer thin. Every time I braked, the disc would heat up, warp and rub against the pads until it had cooled down again. The brake pads were also worn all the way down to the metal support. Finally I also needed to get the trailer yoke screwed together. The guys at the shop got all the work done in under two hours, just enough time for me to slip off and have a cappuccino and chocolate croissant.

We again had a meal of bread, cheese, fruit and vegetables at Tamaz' place, then it was time for us to brave the cold drizzly weather of Tbilisi for the night's ride over to the train station to catch the midnight train to Batumi. We were not allowed to wait inside with our bikes, so we shivered on the platform for about an hour until our train arrived. I was expecting it to be a hassle to take the bikes on the train, especially as the train turned out to be a very small modern sub-urban type of train. But I was wrong, it was no problem at all. The bikes went up against one of the doors together with the trailer and we had a comfortable twin seat with plenty of space for all our bags. It was certainly worth while spending the extra bit to get first class tickets, about 15\$ instead of 12\$.

The train pulled out of Tbilisi bang on time and I relaxed and listened to some podcasts and soon dozed off.

