

TBILISI – CAPITAL OF GEORGIA

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One of the fun things about travelling is that one meets so many interesting people from all over the world and that provides the perfect excuse to visit yet more far-flung destinations.

Seven years ago I met Niko, a young architect from Georgia who was working with an Indian firm of Architects in South Calcutta for a year and somehow we struck up a firm friendship. A country about the size of Holland with a population of under 4 million and poised on the edge of the Black Sea, Georgia began to tickle my imagination. Later Niko was working in Istanbul where I visited him (my readers may remember) and then he worked in Milan for several years. But he was always asking me to visit his homeland, and since he has now set up his own Architectural practice in Tbilisi and is based there, I decide to go and explore.

Niko meets me at the airport in Tbilisi, the capital city, and whisks me away to stay at the classy “Rooms” Hotel. I love it from the start. It feels very European, delightful décor, beautiful tiled floors and walls lined with books, very stylish and different, and provides one of the best breakfasts I have had anywhere. The hotel is a renovated Soviet utilitarian building, but imaginatively re-designed and beautifully appointed.

That first night we walk miles. It seems Niko wants to show me the entire city on foot with all its different stages of Architecture even though I just arrived! Eventually

we get to the *Eben*, a charming open courtyard restaurant filled with trees and long wooden tables, and meet up with some of his friends. He orders *Khachapuri*, a kind of cheese-filled pizza boat, and some sliced cold meats. Georgian dinners tend to be long-drawn-out affairs with much philosophising and imbibing of the excellent local wines.

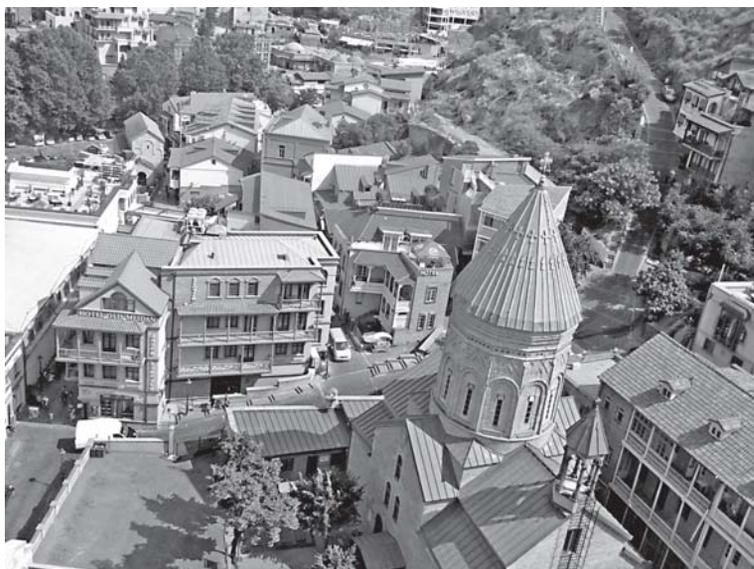
As much as anything Georgia is a delightful culinary experience, influenced by both Asia and the Mediterranean. Added to the fact that the climate is generally mild and perfect for growing every kind of vegetable and fruit, the country has borders with Russia, Turkey, Armenia, Azerbaijan and the Black Sea, and the rich diversity of the diet is drawn from all of these, yet remains unique.

Making wine in Georgia is an Art form, refined over 8000 years. In fact it was probably one of the first places in the world to distill alcohol and today it is still done in the traditional way. The 70-year Soviet occupation of Georgia has left many marks. One of these was that they stopped the local people making wine and industrialised the process, using mainly red *Saperavi* grapes. But after the Rose Revolution in 2003 people gradually went back to making Artisanal wines and they are delicious and today once more becoming famed worldwide. The wine is matured in huge earthenware amphorae called *qvevri*, which are buried up to their slim necks underground to allow the wine to ferment slowly. They do not use sulphides and therefore risk the occasional spoiling, but that just makes it more challenging! Many different cepages are being used again, like the *Tsolikouri* grapes from the Imereti and Kakheti regions and the delicate *Rkatsiteli* for the white wines.

The Tea-growing industry was also mechanised by the Soviets to satisfy the enormous appetite the Russians have for tea. Now the old Tea plantations, largely abandoned

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Aerial view of the City

after the Soviets left, are also being revived and all sorts of specialist teas being grown.

Apart from wandering around with Niko and his friends, I decide to explore Tbilisi in my usual way – that is by taking the Big Red Bus which takes me to all the main attractions and I can hop on and off at will. The city has always occupied an important strategic location being a crossroads of EuroAsian culture, in a deep valley straddling the Mtkvari River. After a chequered and much fought over history the city flourished under the rule of King Davitt the Builder who united the country in 1120 AD. He invited local Armenian workers to help build the new Golden Age city and prosperity reigned until the invasion of the Mongols and then Tamburlaine the Great who destroyed much of it in 1386. Suffering long under Persian and Russian invasions, the country seems now to have found a new stability and prosperity and tourism is a fast-growing industry.

The Bus goes to Liberty Square, taking the long wide boulevard that is Rustaveli Avenue, lined with impressive buildings of various architectural styles, and through the Sololaki district until we arrive at the Peace Bridge. Here I alight and cross the futuristic Bridge, all wavy glass and steel, on foot. Designed by an Italian and opened in 2010, it has become an important landmark and symbol of Georgia's forward-looking government under President Mikheil Saakashvili. Descending to the other side I find a small boat taking passengers and spend a delightful sunny hour sailing upstream along the Mtkvari River. We pass under the Metekhi Bridge with its Church high on a promontory and the famous equestrian statue of King Vakhtang.

One side of the river is a huge rock face with small caves and tunnels built into it, the mountain rising high above the city. After half an hour we turn back to the Peace Bridge where I hop back on the Bus to get to the foot of the Cable Car.

From the southern end of Rike Park the Cable Car takes me up to Kartlis Deda and the Narikala Fortress which dominates the city – a swift and exhilarating ride. I walk around on top taking in the magnificent views over the whole City. There is a grand statue of Mother Georgia at the highest point and I am reminded of the huge statue of Mother Volga at the confluence of the Volga and the Baltic Canal waterway in Russia. Later I meet Niko for supper in the Old Town at the oldest and best-known cafe, the Kala,

where we have chicken in red wine and green plum sauce with spinach which is delicious.

As ever I am looking for Classical music but sadly the Opera is closed for the Summer season and there are no concerts on during my stay. The marvellous Paliashvili Opera House is on Rustaveli Avenue and I pass it many times – an imposing 150-year old building in Moorish style.

One afternoon Niko takes me on a long walk through the Old Town. We pass the crooked Clock Tower then visit the oldest church in Tbilisi, the Anchiskhati Basilica built in the 7th century, listening to the Chanting at the end of a service while admiring the wonderful frescoes. This part of the city is bustling with restaurants cafes and bars – and Churches! We stop for a mint lemonade and hummus at the charming Cafe Leila, decorated with stucco work and Persian style paintings. The famous Roman Baths are built of red brick with Domes for the Hammams, a mixture of Christian and Muslim, and the natural spring water is hot, hence the city's name, as *tibili* in Georgian means warm. There is an impressive waterfall at the end of the river but I resist going for a hot bath! We walk as far as the Metekhi Church above the River which used to be a prison, with its iconic equestrian statue, and later witness an exciting fight with plenty of men running, blood flowing and police everywhere. Georgians can be very hot-headed! Dinner (at last) is again at Niko's favourite cafe, the Cafe Kala, which is excellent.

Next day we meet for breakfast at the Cafe Linville, on a charming terrace filled with trellised plants and flowery vines and over copious cups of coffee we talk! As always. And make plans to visit Mtskheta that afternoon,

an ancient monastic complex about an hour's drive from the City.

He drives fast but well. It is still baking hot when we arrive at Mtskheta. We walk through the little town which encircles the main Svetitskhoveli Cathedral and buy *Churchkhela*, the favourite snack of Georgians, made of grape must, walnuts and flour cooked in caramel – the waxy sweet is strung on long wicks like candles and can be seen everywhere hanging in gaily varied colours depending on the wine base.

It is quite a climb up the hill from the cemetery and monastery of Samtavro to the Jvari Chapel at the top but worth it for the fabulous views of the White River and its convergence with the Black River.

This is one of the oldest and most hallowed churches in all Georgia and it is lovely, very spiritual, dating back to the 4th century. A perfect example of early classic Georgian tetraconch design, it has four exactly symmetrical arms crowned by a low dome on an octagonal base. Apparently Saint Nino (a woman) who had embraced

Christianity, converted King Mirian who erected the cross high on this mountain and built the small bare stone walled chapel around it and many pilgrims still climb up the hill to touch the foot of the cross today.

Marijuana has just been decriminalised! It is the first day and Niko has a small party at his place. Whilst one cannot deal or sell the drug, it is now legal to grow it and use among friends one can use it. To celebrate, we all smoke a little, and it really goes to my head ... not a happy experience! But it is a charming party, his Georgian friends are delightful, welcoming, friendly and curious, also welltravelled educated and intelligent.

During my stay I make several sorties out into the countryside to discover the local towns and villages of rural Georgia, leaving Tbilisi for two or three days at a time. In the next piece I shall be recounting some of these travels from the green lowland Valleys to the mountains of the Great Caucasus, visiting the most important sites and sharing images of this most delightful landscape – truly a Green and Pleasant Land! □