

Transcript of Podcast 087: Georgia - Country of Cheese and Garlic

{Intro standard announcement:

Hello. Thank you for tuning in. You're listening to Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure, a podcast looking at unfamiliar places across the world, and aspects of travelling you may never have thought of. I'm your host, The Barefoot Backpacker, a middle-aged Enby with a passion for offbeat travel, history, culture, and the why's behind travel itself. So join me as we venture ... beyond the brochure.}

{Music fades. Podcast begins}

Hello :)

It's been brought to my attention that my recent podcasts have been lacking in their usual quality. Not quality in terms of content, I mean, that's a given, but quality in terms of technical aptitudes. I'm speaking too quickly, and slightly slurring words. There's too much rustling. The recording itself isn't as crisp. And yes, there's been a lot of that.

Part of the issue is, when I lived in Glasgow, I had a nice setup whereby I had cardboard walls around my desk, which was easy to drape a duvet over like a kind of roof. Those walls were high enough to provide good room between my microphone and the duvet. I don't have the same setup here in Manchester, in part due to logistics – I can only really put my desk in one place and if I had cardboard walls they'd interfere with the windows and access to parts of the room. One of my recent podcasts I recorded using my day job's headphones and microphone, which isn't great quality, and while my last episode was recorded with my decent mic, it was done so sitting on the floor in a hotel in Glasgow with the duvet literally resting on my head, and often on the microphone, which meant it picked up every little movement I made. I edit out the most obvious bits but sometimes there's nothing I can do save re-recording. And that would make it sound odd for different reasons, as well as making it longer to get an episode out.

I also need to remember not to record my podcast after eating a curry. Heavy amounts of garlic and ginger do interesting things to my upper digestive system.

Do I speak quicker than I used to? One of my friends suggested it was a worm of nervousness; I'd like to think it's more like giddy excitement about braindumping my latest hyperfocus onto you all, but honestly I think it's mostly 'I just want to get this recorded as quickly as possible without too much hassle or need to edit', and the faster I talk the quicker it takes and the less time I have to think about the possibility of making mistakes. Not sure about the slurring, but I suspect it's a facet of talking quickly. I don't generally record podcasts after beer. Writing them, sure, but not hosting them.

Anyway I'll pay a bit more attention to things going forward.

Yeh, I was in Glasgow a couple of weekends ago. Mainly I was up there for a kind of personal identity workshop, which I'll go more into on a future podcast as it's not really appropriate for this one (and would take too long to explain), but in a nutshell, there were about 16 of us and it was very interesting and I've lots of information that'll help things going forward.

I was also up there to get new glasses. I had the eye test back in late January but it's taken me this long to get the actual glasses themselves, because, well, it's in Glasgow and I'm not. You might wonder why I don't change opticians; the fact is they did such a thorough test first time that it feels like they know my eyes pretty well, so it makes sense to just stay with them. My new glasses allegedly have fancy lenses that change focus slightly when I move my eyes (making it theoretically clearer and easier to switch between close-up and far-away glances) but I've not quite figured out how to use them effectively yet. Being new means they're also very clear, but also still a bit stiff – they're still rubbing on my ear a bit at the moment but that'll ease over time.

I'm actually quite glad I went up that weekend; I was originally going to go the following week but then I found out last minute the existence of the workshop. But the thing is, a few days after I came back I had notification from my bank that someone had tried to use my bank card in an unusual place at an unusual time, and was it me. Listener, it was not me. So my bank cancelled my card and said they'd send me a replacement, which'd arrive within 6 to 8 business days. That's quite a long time to be without easy access to cash – without the bank card I not only can't use it to pay for stuff, obviously, but it meant I also can't draw money out of a cashpoint

with it. Fortunately I had some cash lurking around in my room, plus some leftover US dollars from my trip to Vietnam all those months ago, but even then this opens up a few issues – so many places these days either don't take cash payments (including several of the pubs I frequent) or make it really hard to do so (so many mini-supermarkets concentrating on self-service machines and cutting back on the number of staffed checkouts). This could reasonably turn into a whole rant about a cashless society being detrimental and discriminatory to entire portions of society, but that's a debate for a different podcast; it's just worth noting for now. For me personally though, I've also been conscious that when you can't get cash, you need to be very careful what you spend your cash *on* - which is also something I experience in certain countries when I travel whose banking systems might not be reliable or frequent - so I've been eating and drinking far less than usual. This has also brought to my mind just how easy it *is* to spend money when all you're doing is booping a contactless card on a payment device. 'Oh it's only £1.20' you say as you buy another small bottle of iron-bru or packet of crisps. You don't notice it when it's not physically in your wallet or coin purse. But it all adds up. And before you know it, you've spent your paycheque on beer and sandwiches.

If you're wondering, no I don't use my phone to pay for stuff because clearly that's dangerous for my ADHD mentalities, but also, even if I had, it'd be linked to my card not my bank account so wouldn't have worked anyway. I could still pay for stuff through PayPal, so buying online wasn't a problem, but while it seems to be theoretically possible to pay for stuff contactless with the PayPal app, nowhere seems to have the function to actually do it. Including the PayPal app.

As things stand I have my new card now, but not my new PIN, which I need to activate my new card, otherwise it's just a small piece of embossed plastic about as useful as my old cards. One minor downside is having to update some websites with my new deets, including Booking Dot Com through which I've already booked accommodation for next month I'm yet to pay for, using my old card. The other aspect is it means I will have a whole new card number to have to memorise, so that's going to take a bit of getting used to. I have also been thankful to Laura for buying things for me on her card and tallying up how much I owe her; it'll be offset against our next couple of short trips away because I'm in charge of organising hotels and some internal transport. Which is mostly done anyway but has been put on hold while I get a new card.

Speaking of trips away, let's get back to the Caucasus area. So, when we left our purple-haired-but-not-barefoot enby backpacker, they were loitering in Baku Airport having made it through the complicated environs of Koroğlu metro station. Let's see what they get up to in the next country on the list – Georgia.

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There's not many places you can fly to directly from Baku Airport. And most of the places you can fly are in Russia, including lesser-attested places like Mineralnye Vody, a town which Wikipedia does not tell me if it contains spas or springs as its name would suggest. I had been to Baku Airport once before; a stop-over on the way back to the UK from Tashkent in Uzbekistan where I had to transfer between terminals, because all the ex-Soviet planes flew into a different terminal to the other international ones. This caused a bit of confusion amongst the staff and had me being led through secret back passages, always exciting, since to transfer properly would require being stamped into the country, and I did not have a visa.

One of the two terminals is much plusher than the other. Flights to Tbilisi, being an ex-Soviet city, do not fly from anything approaching a plush terminal. What it did have was a café with some very nice cake. I may have over-eaten.

My flight to Tbilisi was delayed by about half an hour, and it was becoming pretty warm and uncomfortable in the terminal, especially as we were all standing up at the gate. Because there were so few seats. But it was still easier and quicker than overlanding.

The border guard was very confused by my passport and that I'd already got a very recent entry stamp for Georgia, and she did ask if I had a return or onward ticket, which is theoretically true but that'll be after another exit and re-entry which I don't have a ticket for and which they don't need to know about.

In fact, as an aside, my later journey from Georgia to Armenia is the one trip I couldn't book in advance. I mean, I tried; Georgia railway's website seemed to only have details about domestic rail journeys easily available, while the Armenia Railway site was incredibly hard to use and prone to breakage. And defaulted to Russian. When I did finally manage to find a way to not only find the right train on it but also a link to booking tickets, it gave me very few options and then only accepted Mastercard. Possibly issued from a domestic bank.

Anyway, I gave up and figured I'd do it when I got there.

I had intended to that on the day I arrived, but because of the delay at Baku, by the time I got to Tbilisi city centre it was dark and I was a bit grumpy. The latter because while the bus from the airport was very easy to catch, only cost 1 Lari (about 30p), and I could pay with contactless bank card from a terminal in the bus itself (I never worked out how ticket inspectors would be able to check if you'd done that given in many places, like the buses in Glasgow, you don't get a paper ticket or receipt after doing so), the journey took an hour and felt like a day. It just kept going down long straight roads and stopping at every stop. In the bus was a real-time journey screen but it ... wasn't a lot of help as it was zoomed in to show only the next three or so stops.

With hindsight it turns out the bus stopped very close to where my hotel was, near a major metro station, but I didn't know that at the time, because I had no way of pre-plotting the bus route (all it told me when I was looking in advance was about two or three of the roads it took in the very centre of Tbilisi), and I didn't have roaming internet switched on on my phone, because, well, you know why. Anyway, had I known it would have saved me the best part of an hour; I knew anyway the bus terminated at the railway station and it was about a 55 min walk from there to the hotel. Or half an hour cos I walk quick.

Without roaming meant I had to reply on screenshots I'd made of the route through Google Maps, which were not terribly detailed cos I'd taken them quite far zoomed out without many road names nor named buildings and shops listed on it, because, I don't know, I just find taking endless screenshots really boring and messy and leads to too much clutter on my phone that I then shy away from looking at. But anyway it was an easy walk and I didn't get lost, which in the dark in a city you don't know, is quite impressive.

Normal people would have taken the subway, or a taxi, but, you know, and anyway I hadn't worked out how much money I'd need to draw out.

My hotel was the Eleon Boutique Hotel, in a quiet part of the lesser-visited of the older parts of town. Tbilisi seems to have two 'old town' areas; my hotel was on the far side of the river from the big old town and the centre of the new town, so it was quite quiet and didn't feel very touristy. It wasn't a long walk into the centre, although the easiest way there by foot was either via a very steep hill (going down to the city) and then a weird route over a large road junction, or taking a long set of steps followed by crossing a very busy road with no easy crossing points.

Or, you know, the subway.

It did mean it had a good view though - I had a balcony in my room, but a much better view was from the floor above where there was a roof terrace, from which you got pretty much a 270° view across much of the city and surroundings. The city is kind of built in a river valley - the Kura River, which flows from Turkey mainly south-eastwards to the Caspian Sea in Azerbaijan not far from the Iranian border. The name is likely to come from a word meaning 'Water', like the River Avon, and there are several similarly-named rivers in the wider region. Wikipedia tells me that some people consider the river to mark the boundary between Europe and Asia, assuming Europe exists as a separate entity and it isn't just a peninsula of Asia anyway. This would make Tbilisi a trans-continental city, like Istanbul. Armenia lies entirely to the south of this river. Just for future reference. But in terms of a view from the hotel, it meant I could see not just the city lights of the old town below me on the far side of the river, but also how it climbed up the hills beyond it. Tbilisi is Not A Flat Place. Sadly, it being, you know, Winter, meant especially after dark, the roof terrace wasn't a place to comfortably spend much time. Although I was the only person on it. There was at least one other person staying in the hotel because I heard them come in and out a couple of times, and one of the receptionists was a very friendly and chatty chappie who gave me a lot of help and useful information, including giving me a Tbilisi travel card (and instructions how to load and use it), and a bit about local food.

On that note, the hotel was near a 'traditional Georgian restaurant; Khinkali House. Khinkali is a type of regional dumpling, which I did not eat there because at the time I didn't think of it. Rather I had two other local dishes. One was a soup called Tatarikhni (the Georgians are very fond of soup), which was basically garlic with some beef broth and chillies. And coriander. But mainly garlic. Like, I could smell it long before it reached my table. The other was a Khachapuri. This is a very famous and signature food from Georgia that's ... I think the best way of describing it is imagine a large piece of bread that looks like a cross between pizza and naan, and which is filled with cheese. You can get it with different toppings, often based on what's the speciality of the different regions of the country; I had the 'special', that turned out to be topped with ... more cheese. There's a meme about that. Anyway it was so rich and filling, I couldn't eat the whole thing, or indeed much

more than half, but it did mean I had breakfast sorted.

Cheese wasn't just limited to the food. The layout of the restaurant made it feel more like a lounge, with soft couches rather than chairs, including a couple that were like sea-shell shaped. By the bar area was a small raised stage with a microphone and sound system, and oh my, these were used. A couple of times during my time there the lights darkened and, someone, and I don't know if he was a noted cabaret singer or just a friend of the owners, gave a mini-concert of about 10 minute segments where he sang lounge-versions of what I assume are Georgian folk songs. At one point the table near me, which seemed to be a mix of family and friends, and covered a couple of generations, got up onto the floor and danced to it, both en masse and individually. At other times I'd've found it a bit a cringe, but honestly, I was in the mood for that kind of entertainment. It made me smile, anyway.

The hotel had no internet on my first night so I ended up going to bed relatively soon after coming back. Because I'm not a party animal. We'll see about that.

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At this point I want to give a shout out to a travel blogger called Emily Lush, who blogs at wander-lush dot org. An Australian, her niche is Georgia, and indeed she lives there now. I've never met her, and indeed I didn't even know she existed until I was planning my trip, but last year she updated a post on her website called 'how to travel by overnight sleeper train from Tbilisi to Yerevan (or Vice Versa)'.

On that post she not only talks about the train itself, when it runs, how long it takes, what time of night to expect the border crossing (and therefore why she'd not suggest catching the train from Yerevan to Tbilisi), and what's on board, and I'll talk about my experiences on the train at the end of this episode, but also, more pertinently for me, detailed and specific instructions on how to buy a ticket at each end of the line. Including how to enter Tbilisi station (it's not entirely obvious, especially coming from the metro, as there's no clear signage and the surrounds are covered with market), where in the station you need to go, and what details you need to take with you (like, you need your passport and they only take cash).

This is exactly why travel blogging is important, and why I'm not a travel blogger. I couldn't hope to keep that sort of informational page updated with regular changes that would happen, but I'm absolutely indebted to Emily for doing just that. It made buying the ticket to Yerevan an absolute breeze, as I knew exactly where to go and what to expect.

Similarly, what was also a breeze was using Tbilisi's metro system, because as I say the hotel receptionist / owner was very chatty and helpful. All I needed to do was wander to the metro with the plastic credit-card-sized card he gave me, find a woman on the left hand side just after the doors, give her some money and tell her how much I want to be loaded onto it, and then tap the card on entry. Tbilisi's metro doesn't appear to have automated kiosks to do this.

In fact Tbilisi's metro is interesting to compare with Baku's. It's very clear to see which is the poor relation. It looks its age - the trains are maybe as old as I am, the décor is faded and some of the ceilings at the stations and especially on the escalators are worn and peeling - it has the same vibes as the Clyde Tunnel footpaths in Glasgow which are ... eerie, and a good setting for a horror movie. But that's a tale for a different podcast.

The metro is deep, very deep; the escalators seemed to take almost as long to ride as some of the journeys. Each journey is quite cheap - 1 Lari per ride, and the 'ride' is valid for 90 minutes so transfers are included. And the trains seemed to come quite frequently - every 5 minutes or so. The one thing that did confuse both me and one of my travel blogger friends was at each station there are two timers. One (in green) counts down to when the next train is going to arrive. The other (in red) seems to count up from when the last train departed. We (neither me nor my friend Juliet, who I'll come on to later, not a euphemism) couldn't figure out why you would need to know this.

I caught the metro quite a few times in my time in Tbilisi, partly because there were stations conveniently close to places I needed to be, and partly because it saved having to cross that busy road and walk up that steep hill to get back to the hotel. And because it was only 30p a ride.

There's only two lines to the metro - the red line that goes in a kind of horseshoe through the centre of the city and out to the east, and the green line that starts at the railway station (which is a little off-centre to the north, by

the way, hence the trek on my arrival) and heads into the western suburbs. It's not very extensive, but for a tourist the red line gets you almost everywhere you need to go. They keep mentioning extensions, and have done almost since it was built, but sadly there's no real evidence of anything actually being done about this.

Most of the rest of the city is served by buses; while waiting for the airport bus back on my last night of my trip I noticed that even at 10pm there were still buses running maybe every 30-45 seconds from just that one stop to places in the 'burbs, and the electronic destination display boards at every stop rarely showed buses more than 3-4 minutes in advance. The buses too are just 1 Lari, as I say even the bus to the airport which is a good few km. That was the only bus I took, but that was mainly because I didn't really need to take any others. There was one place I didn't visit that I'd've liked to have done that was way off the metro line, but I didn't get the chance to in the end; that was the Chronicle of Georgia monument, which I'll talk about at the end of the episode.

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Apart from buying my ticket to Armenia, my first full day in Tbilisi was spent mostly wandering. I had about 5 hours to kill before my first pre-conference event, so I went to the Georgian National Museum and then walked slowly around the Old Town, the main bit anyway, not the small bit my hotel was in. As an aside, I noticed there was free wi-fi in Tbilisi City Centre, but I never quite worked out the limits of its coverage. It doesn't reach the Old Town, seeming to stop at the large Liberty Square (also known as Freedom Square) which kind of marks the boundary between the old and newer towns, and which serves as an unofficial 'centre of the city' point. It's a large road junction surrounded by shops and offices, and in the middle of it is a tall monument. It's 35m (115 feet) tall, made of granite and gold, and it shines, with a 5 and a half meter bronze and gold statue on the top of St George. It was erected in 2006 and replaced a statue of Lenin which was torn down as the Soviet Union disassembled itself in August 1991. It's very much the focal point of the city - get here and everywhere else is pretty easy to reach.

The Georgian National Museum, just up the road from Liberty Square, is one of several linked and related museums in Tbilisi, and the ticket you get seems to cover them all. That said, this was the only one I went to, partly because, whisper it quietly, I've never been fond of museums, save those that are hyper-local or of specific interest. I should probably do a pod on museums though as some of the ones I have liked have been quite esoteric and interesting. Despite its name, what it didn't go into was any real detail on the history of Georgia itself. Fortunately, the 80 Days Podcast did an episode all about it a couple of years ago; link in shownotes for that.

This particular one though was spread over four floors; on the ground floor was a series of exhibits around flora and fauna of the region, past and present, with stuffed representations of animals that reminded me that a wild boar is considerably bigger than I always think it is (even a pig isn't as small as in my head to be honest though), and a large open room lined with replicas of humanoid skulls showing the development of Homo Sapiens Sapiens from all the way back in the days when we were just apes. Which is quite odd when it's the first thing you see when you walk into the main body of a museum.

In the basement was a whole series of displays on numismatics. Coins, from ancient and medieval empires, that had been found or used in the history of the Georgia region, including ones from Ancient Rome, several of the Persian Empires, and also domestic ones. I do like me a good coin sometimes; it's very definitely a way to visualise history, and of course the usage of coins far away from their origin is fascinating and shows the extent of trade and even tourism. That there have been Roman coins found in what is now Vietnam and Cambodia really shows you how small the world is, even then. And though it's less of a Thing nowadays, and I'm not thinking because of digital payments but more because of the coins themselves having been rendered symbolic rather than actually valuable due to their manufacture - a quick search suggests that a £1 coin, at 9.5g and made up of 70% copper, 24.5% zinc, and 5.5% nickel is actually worth the grand total of around 4 pence -, back in the day they would have been made of material that would itself have the value that was stated on it regardless of where in the world you used them, so in a way I guess it would have been easier to use 'foreign' currency in far off lands.

Much of the rest of the museum was dedicated to old stuff, really old stuff, like prehistoric artefacts, Now I've never been one for prehistoric stuff, you know like flint tools and beaded necklaces, because, I guess, I just don't have the ability to visualise them being in use, and because they tend to look the same regardless of where in the world you are - like there's a reason a flint axe looks the way it does, and that's because it's the most efficient way of making one, really. It's like pyramids. Why did so many empires across the world build

pyramids? Boringly, it's because they were good at maths.

Half the top floor though was given over to a small section about the Soviet occupation, and was mostly dedicated to those who died trying to liberate it over the seven decades it occurred. This included things like army and governmental memos talking about who to watch for, photographs of victims, and items they would have used, or had used on them. Like the door to a prison. It, along with quite a lot of graffiti I noticed in the city, all showed just how much the Georgians don't like the Russians. With, you know, good reason. As an aside, it's notable just how many Ukrainian flags you see on the streets.

After the museum I explored the Old Town area. This is a little to the south of the main city centre, and is mostly made up of narrow streets, many lined with cobblestones, quite a few pretty buildings, some even with colonnaded balconies of the like that I saw in Baku, and an awful lot of hills. Some of them quite steep, in an 'if I stop moving I'll fall backwards' kind of way. The majority of these hills are immediately on entry into the old town area, suggesting it was originally built on the ridge and slowly edged downwards. It's not like Baku's 'old town'; this is not an area defined by a city wall, and there's no major iconic building in it. Rather it's just a pretty and charming part of town that melts into the city centre just south of one of the major traffic streets.

One thing that is quite common there is street art. One of the most prolific is someone called @goshaart (two 'a's) on Instagram whose shtick is silhouetted drawings of black cats (often around a girl) in various settings, including being given a broken heart by the girl, catching fish off a washing line, and one on an electricity box where the scene is of an electric-powered cat-scratcher with two mechanical arms powered by a motor. A good use of setting, I think.

If you can wangle a way to get between the parked cars, there's some spots where there's a gap between the houses and buildings, where you can get a good view out over the rest of the city. There is an easier place to get an overview from (I mean, aside from my hotel roof terrace, but not everyone gets that opportunity), and that's from even further up the hill at the back of the old town, near the Mother Georgia monument at the top of the cable car, yes, Tbilisi has a cable car, but that's something for later.

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Now. As you heard from my pod on Brno, with these Travel Blogger Conferences, there's always pre- and post- events. I chose not to apply for the post- events this year because there were only two of them, and one involved skiing, a lot of skiing, which is beyond my remit for oh so many reasons, although a couple of my travel twitter friends have said they'd pay good money to watch me try. I did however book myself on two pre-conference activities; it would have been more but the others were booked out by the time I got to them. It may not surprise you to learn that one of the two activities involved beer. Doubly so because it was a Thursday and that's always beer day, because of the bloody UnTapped beer app and its "New Beer Thursday" badge. The idea behind this event though was we'd all meet up at 4pm (they called it 'Crafternoon!'), and take two hours to visit a couple of decent craft beer pubs and bars in Tbilisi's old town, and of course it being an organised conference event, all the beer would be paid for by the Traverse organisation.

It ... didn't quite work out as they intended. For one thing, several people had been on other events earlier in the day which had overrun considerably so instead of getting back for 2 or 3pm, many people didn't return to Tbilisi off the back of them until well past 4. So by half past 4 there were still only three of us when there we supposed to have been about 12. People drifted in over time though, and we stayed in the first bar (a brewtap called 2-Tona, or '2 Tons') for much longer than perhaps we'd intended. Not a bad place; it's one of several they have over the region, and this one was quite airy and open-plan, had maybe 10 beer taps on, and also did some big portions of standard pub fayre like fries and pizza.

I've no idea what time we hit the second pub but it was still light, that's all I can tell you. This was the Black Dog bar, a short walk round the corner a bit, and vibed like a proper pub rather than a hip trendy bar setting. It wasn't that big, having a bar and only a couple of tables, but it had a few decent beers on tap. It was most notable for having a derogatory image and caption for Vladimir Putin behind the bar with a Ukrainian flag and the words "We don't speak Russian" next to it.

Bar three, because why not, was the Tsota Tsota bar. This felt a little more like an underground hipster joint, with murals on the walls and shelves lined with bottles of beers either currently or previously available. This is where the party split as some people headed off to find an evening meal, while the hardcore drinkers stayed for more beer. We were here quite a while, time enough for me to have two of the worst beers I've ever had in my

life. Disclaimer: we were expecting them, as we'd heard rumours about them, and I only had sips of someone else's, I absolutely did not get my own. They were both from the local brewery 'Megobrebi' (of which I had four other decent 'proper' beers, by the way, what we have here isn't a bad brewery, just a brewery that likes to make Choices. Kind of like Vault City back in the UK).

The first was 'Micheladze', a 5.5% Tomato Gose, (Gose is, to all intents and purposes, a type of sour beer), to which my comment on UnTappd was simply "no, just no". I probably don't need to explain it further. My beer buddy Jon (Everybody Hates a Tourist) was more positive, saying "I didn't expect to like this? But it's quite good" to which all I can say is 'the beauty of beer is that there's something for everyone'. The other somewhat dubious beer was called 'Kharcho', a 7% sour beer that ... so, Kharcho is one of those traditional Georgian soups, like Tatariaxmi, and is generally made with meat (any, but beef or chicken are common), rice, plum puree, walnuts, and coriander. Surely the beer is just named after it, you might think. Surely they haven't made a beer with meat, rice, plums, nuts, and coriander?

Listener, it tasted like chicken stock. Spicy chicken stock, at that. I remain unconvinced that this beer needs to exist. The brewery says "it has a winter feel to it and is perfect for the cold and dark months". Jon said it "tastes like spicy ramen!", and gave it an even higher score than the tomato beer. I ... have Questions.

The final bar we went to was called Bunker. Because it was underground, like as if it were in a bunker. It was the most grungy of them, with very low narrow tables, graffiti-like muraling on the wooden beamed frame, quite a low ceiling relative to the others, and, if I recall correctly, I think there was a snooker table. I can't recall a lot correctly about this place given the quality of beer I'd already had to this point, and it certainly took me a long time to drink my two drinks in here. By this time there were only a couple of us; indeed it wasn't long until it was just me and Claire (Tales of a Backpacker) who herself had arrived quite late (joining us not long after we'd got to Tsota Tsota in fact) but who had quickly made up for last time. I'd met Claire before, back in Brno; she's the person that got me to dance at the closing night party when I was feeling a little out-of-place, so it seems we have a habit of late-nightery. Anyway we shared a pizza before finally deciding to leave at about 1am. She took a Bolt and I walked back to the hotel, which even that early in the morning involved crossing the main road that was still pretty busy. As an aside I only managed to get back because my walk involved passing one of the other bars from where I managed to pick up the wifi (with my phone battery on 6%) to find out I was going slightly the wrong way. Sometimes I'm not great with direction.

The next day when I passed the hotel receptionist/owner, he told me he'd got worried about me because he didn't see me come back that night and wondered if something had happened to me in a city I didn't know much about. Bless.

{section separation jingle}

The other pre-conference event I'd booked on to was a day trip to the old cave city of Uplistsikhe, which is a word I frequently mispronounced. Present Me was very grateful to Past Me for choosing a tour that started three metro stops away at 10am rather than 8am that the other tours on that day did, because Present Me was very very tired. As it turns out, Present Me was also developing some kind of cold or flu bug, which nobody else seemed to be. Also as it turns out, I had unexpected company on this tour; on arriving at the pickup point, I saw my Travel Twitter friend PolarBearJuliet waiting. I knew she was at the conference, even though she was being mysterious about it in the run-up, but I didn't expect to see her quite then. Despite having been chatting for quite a few years, maybe 7 or 8, this was the first time we'd ever met up; we pretty much hung round together largely because I don't get travel-sick. Even after an inordinate amount of beer and very little sleep, it appears.

Anyway, Uplistsikhe is, simply, a 3,000 year old town that's been carved into the sandstone hillside. Its age makes it amongst the oldest evidence of habitation in Georgia as a whole, and at several points in history it's had a population of over a thousand people, which doesn't sound a lot in modern settings but it's pretty big for back then, especially for somewhere built literally on a hillside.

It's built overlooking the Kura River, the same one that flows through Tbilisi, although a bit more upstream so it's not as wide or fast-flowing here. You can see quite a wide vista from points in the town, and while it might feel quite 'nowhere' now, it was quite central back in the day; consider that it's a very easy site to defend and protect, given its commanding view across the plains and down the river valley, and its location in the hillside. It was also easy to channel water from the river below - indeed a 'secret passage' was built for this purpose, that now serves as one of the pedestrian exits from the site. These days though it's simply a staircase constructed

down the tunnel and not any kind of difficult passageway you have to crawl or slide down or anything.

As for the surrounding landscape, well, this might be a strange thing to say, but it reminded me a little of parts of the Scottish highlands, with wild bare trees, a river with tributary streams with river-banks that are barely perceptible, quite flat, rough ground that without the trees would feel quite barren and bleak, and with distant snow-topped mountains. Obviously those mountains are higher than the ones in Scotland, but the vibe is still there.

Also note the ancient capital of Georgia, well, Iberia, the dominant nation state in the region, Mtskheta, isn't too far away down the the same valley; indeed one of the reasons for Uplistsikhe's decline was because people moved further down the valley to places that were easier to expand, farm at, and trade from. Well that, and because the Mongols pretty much destroyed it in one of their advances, because the Mongols were quite partial to that sort of thing and tended to be able to overcome most levels of defence, so the locals felt they might as well commit to moving on rather than rebuild, or is it recarve?

At the riverside, by the way, is the ruins of a small village that was abandoned in the early 20th Century because of persistent river flooding. We were told by the guide that the village had existed from the time when the main Uplistsikhe site was abandoned – some people, rather than moving eastwards, had stayed in the area but settled in more conventional housing.

The old city of Uplistsikhe itself rises up the hillside and feels like it ... just ... keeps going. It's not that wide, having the vibe of what we might call a 'linear village', but it apparently covers an area of 8 hectares, or 8 rugby/football pitches, which doesn't actually sound that big really. But it is if you're climbing it I guess.

When I say the city was built into the sandstone I mean exactly that. To all intents and purposes the 'buildings' and 'rooms' look like caves. In some of them, the roof has fallen in so it's just an open area, but a lot of them are still quite enclosed, and have things like carved shelving in the rock, fireplaces, and even the remains of ornamentation on the ... ceiling? Roof? I'm not quite sure of the right word to describe them. There are clearly defined 'roads' between the buildings, carved into the floor of the stone either by purpose or by overuse. The problem for modern-day visitors of course is that sandstone can get quite slippery and there's little in the way of stairs, save on the really worn bits. Given that and the topology, it's quite a nightmare for dyspraxics, but I didn't fall over!

Some of the locations were clearly commercial or administrative – one for instance is known to be a pharmacist, complete with alcoves where drugs would have been stored, while another is clearly a large hall used in the running of the city. There were also prisons; or at least a couple of spots where there were wells in the ground dug for the purpose of storing prisoners, complete with grill gate so that the rain could get in or people could throw rubbish or whatever down the 'well' just to annoy the prisoner.

In fact though, the vast majority of named and identified sites in the city relate to religion. The name 'Uplistsikhe' means 'The Lord's Fortress', and given the profusion of sites in the city which were used as churches and cathedrals over its usage lifetime, it may be tempting to presume who the Lord in question is. However, the site itself is older than Christianity and my research hasn't given me an indication when the name was first used. And it never occurred to me at the time to ask the guide who took us round. Note that at least one of the churches was constructed on the site of an earlier pagan temple.

Speaking of religion and ancient towns though, our way back to Tbilisi took us past Mtskheta, actually, We stopped off there for a Georgian banquet meal, which I'll mention in a minute, But Mtskheta itself I'd wanted to visit on the trip the day before, but it was full. With hindsight this may have been a good thing as I'd've not made it to the beer crawl anywhere near in decent time.

It's one of the many candidates for the longest continually inhabited places in the world. Its current population is only 7,500 because Tbilisi is only 20km away so why wouldn't you? But go back a couple of thousand years and it was the centre of Georgian culture.

These days it's mostly famous for housing some of the oldest churches in the country, including Svetitskhoveli Cathedral, which itself dates from the 11th Century, though it's on the site of earlier churches that go back as early as the 4th Century. We didn't really have time to explore any of the churches; we were just here on a stopover pretty much, but it was nice to have a bit of a walk around and see what we could.

It very definitely has the vibe of a tourist-town - the main street past the cathedrals is cobbled, and lined with shops and cafes on one side, and stalls selling things like scarves, hats, and rugs on the other. The buildings are low-rise, almost cottage-like, and many of them serve as hotels. It was quite quiet on my visit, although still wasn't close to being empty, so I'd imagine the place would be absolutely heaving in summer and around religious festivals.

There's lots of dogs in Georgia, and I mention it now because both at Uplistsikhe and at Mtskheta we had several just casually follow us around. They weren't ever aggressive, just kind of, well, not even curious, just following us as we walked as something to do, it felt like. One of the tour party was already aware of this - to be honest the same can be seen across Tbilisi, it's just more obvious here as there's less to distract you, and them - and brought dog treats with her to give to dogs she'd know she'd meet. Which is good forward planning. Mtskheta was also the scene of something I think I've only ever seen in cartoons - a dog chasing a car and trying to bite its wheels. And it happened twice.

{section separation jingle}

This seems like a good spot to mention a bit more about Georgian food, given we had a banquet in Mtskheta. And by banquet, what I mean is, we all sat on several tables in a restaurant, which felt like one of those places where someone had realised there's a lot of tourists here and had opened up one of the rooms in their house and turned it into a dining hall; it had the vibe of being lived in, with domestic decor and a lot of natural light, rather than having built specifically. And the staff came around with different plates for us to share. And every so often, just kept doing it. Again. And again. It wasn't like we had 'courses', although that's kind of what they were; rather they just came out every now and then to put more food on the table and hopefully by the time a later course came, we'd've eaten all of one of the earlier courses so they could remove the plates. Oh, yeh, this isn't food served individually; they'd put a whole bowl of salad or a plate of chicken cutlets, for example, on the table and we'd just take what we wanted. The meal consisted of an awful lot of cheese and garlic, obviously, but also several vegetable dishes (often including aubergine), several fish, and many different barbecued meats, along with salads and lots of bread. We even had wine, local of course, which even though I wasn't feeling entirely in-sorts, I had to have a small glass of.

Apparently this was one of the reasons all the tours the previous day had arrived back late. A couple of people on this trip had been on those tours and also pointed out this banquet was smaller than their previous one, so maybe the hosts had learned something about our capabilities.

Later on the Friday night there was a pre-conference 'mingle' at a city centre hotel venue. Due to my dodgy health, which I'd thought was caused by simply a late night and too much beer, but which seems to have become more of a 'my immune system is weakened by having a late night, too much beer, and an early start, so let's take advantage by giving them fatigue, a cough, and a stuffed nose', I didn't stay too long, although also in truth I was also feeling kind of socially overwhelmed and felt a bit 'out of place'. The trouble with these conferences sometimes is there's so many people there, most of whom I don't know, but they know enough people to chat in small groups with each other and I always feel awkward breaking in to them. I went primarily to show my face, but stayed only just over an hour. Which, to be fair, was enough time to have a couple of glasses of Georgian wine and some nibbles, and to say hello to the few people I knew who also turned up, including Claire again but also Jason and Carla (Don't Miss The Plane) who I'd been on the beer trip with after the Brno conference in 2022.

Georgian wine, by the way, is very nice. It's quite light on the throat, and very smooth. I recall the final couple of hours at one World Travel Market, I'm guessing 2018, where quite a few of us decamped to the Georgia stall and had a very merry time chatting with the tourist board. That's about all you're getting from me about wine, because as you know I'm much more of a beer person, but when in Rome, as they say.

Then, on the Saturday evening I met up separately with a couple more of my travel twitter friends attending the conference, including Francesca (LittleLostTravel) who I'd also first met in Brno in 2022, and Sandra (BlueMarbleVagabonds). They'd been told of a cute restaurant on Shota Rustaveli street that sounded interesting, and they invited me along. There was due to be a whole meetup afterwards in one of the pub/bars I'd been to on the Thursday, but I simply Could Not, so this was a good compromise.

The place was called Salobie Bia, and seems to be a part of the National Theatre. It's quite an eclectic place, with a plethora of sculpture and artwork in the rooms, and even the toilet spaces. It was quite busy and we were relegated to the slightly plainer back room, but only slightly plainer.

Obviously it served traditional Georgian food, and this time I had the Shkmeruli - essentially chicken cooked in a garlic sauce. A very garlic sauce. Because obviously. My friends tended towards other variations of Khachapuri. They also had some local wine, while I stuck to a jug of non-alcoholic traditional homemade lemonade, which was nicely lemony. No garlic. Which is possibly just as well.

I did finish with some alcohol though - chacha, a Georgian grape spirit, kind of like grappa. This particular variant was made with mint and tarragon. It was pale green. And it wasn't as bad as you'd imagine, though being somewhere in the 60% strength, you can imagine it wasn't an easy thing to drink. Locals claim it has medicinal properties, including relieving indigestion, stomach pains, and, oddly, acne. It did nothing for my cold and fatigue, I have to say.

In case you're wondering, yes I was wearing face-masks for many of the sessions at the conference. I don't know if they did any good, but I didn't hear of anyone else falling ill afterwards. Unlike Brno where a whole host of people got Covid after the final night, including people I was dancing with. No idea how I avoided it, but I'm putting it down to all the Czech beer I drank in the subsequent days; no-one ever considered Pilsner to be a good vaccination alternative to the Covid Jabs but I'm all for that one. The secret evidently is to drink *after* contact, not before it.

There was another conference meetup on the Sunday night, at a restaurant some way out of town that laid on a full Georgian banquet and traditional dancing & singing. It looked quite fun on the Instagram Stories I saw, but again I simply Could Not, especially as it was quite a trek out of town and I didn't want to be reliant on the organised transport, so after the conference finished on the Sunday evening, I headed back to my hotel area via the metro along with PolarBearJuliet; we parted ways after nattering for an hour - she headed to the sulphur baths and spa, which I know nothing about but she does so go check out her blog, while I popped into another type of Spar, the local minimart chain, to grab some nibbles before a very early night and a much longer sleep than anticipated. Welcome it was too.

Continuing the theme of casual meetups with bloggers, I met up again with Francesca on the Monday; she was staying in a hostel in the Old Town that I'd passed on Thursday but for some reason was incapable of finding in good time today, because the Old Town is like that. Signposts seem to be a nice-to-have in much of the region, it seems. Anyway, we had a wander but eventually settled on quite a modern-vibing restaurant near the conference venue. Mainly because it was open.

Here we had Kinklade - very light dumplings; ours were cooked with "Indian spices", according to the menu, and yeh it gave them a bit of a curry-like taste, although not terribly 'hot' spicy; not that I'm the best person to judge that, as even without a cold I'm fairly immune to quite a few levels of spice-heat. We also had another Khachapuri - this one was smaller and was served with an egg in the middle of it, which to be honest is, if you search for it online, the stereotypical image you're likely to find. Still didn't manage to finish it because it was so heavy.

Ah, Georgian food, well ... all I can say is it definitely helps if you like garlic and cheese.

For drink, I had chocolate lemonade. Because it was available on the menu and I was curious. Honestly I still am curious. It looked like chocolate milk. It tasted exactly like you'd expect, if you put a slightly bland soda pop drink and mixed it with chocolate milk. It had the texture of fizzy chocolate mousse. I have Questions, one of which (though not the most pressing one) was 'how does this not curdle?'. It was, I mean, I liked it. I don't know if I'd necessarily have it again, but I'm glad I had it.

For the record, although not as bad as I had been over the conference, I still wasn't entirely feeling in-sorts; partway through our meal I had a less-than-convenient nosebleed, which was embarrassing. I didn't feel headache though, just tired and stuffy, and a bit out of breath. We parted ways about 3pm and Francesca went to the airport by Bolt; I lingered for a few hours as my train wasn't until 8.20pm, so after wandering past an exhibit on photo-journalism along a walkway underneath a bridge over the river, and a trip up the cable car to the Mother Georgia monument, which I'll come onto shortly, I ended up in the 2-Tons bar again, where I drank two beers very slowly. Weirdly, that seemed to help, so by the time I got the train I was feeling quite fresh again. I have a feeling one was a Pilsner-style beer, interestingly. There's a conspiracy theory worth spreading, then.

{section separation jingle}

But first, as I'm onto the topic, I want to talk about the train journey I took out of Tbilisi overnight to Yerevan, the capital of Armenia. It had been a while since I'd taken an overnight train, I think not since my Inter-Rail trip in late 2019; we would have taken one in Vietnam and maybe with hindsight we should have, but it was what it was and that's that.

I'm always quite keen on overnight trains, especially ones with flat bunks as opposed to seats. It is, as I often point out, the only form of transport I'm guaranteed to be able to sleep on; I think honestly it's because I'm able to lie down rather than sit. It's partly the ability to stretch out, and partly the sheer act of lying down - I sleep better on my side. Also there's the nice efficiency of both travel and accommodation for a combined price that's less than the two separately, and the ability to arrive at a decent time in the centre of your destination. Well, not necessarily on this trip as we were due to arrive at 7am and my hostel check-in wasn't till 3pm, but you know what I mean.

But let's start at Tbilisi station. Following instructions from WanderLush again, I knew exactly where to go to catch the train. Or at least, I knew where to wait. Tbilisi Central railway station only has a handful of platforms and the waiting area is, to all intents and purposes, directly above them. Few trains run through here - I had the same vibes in Chisinau actually, of a station that for most of its daily life isn't actually used for its intended purpose; at least here in Georgia it has a secondary role as a shopping centre. For the capital of a country, even domestic services are only a few times a day and at the moment the Yerevan service, running every second day, is the only international routing. The advantage here though is that I knew that everyone else waiting, sitting, lurking, was also there to catch the train, There didn't seem to be many of us ...

Although there was a screen with arrivals and departures - six or seven services, with times well into tomorrow - there were no announcements at all, even as the time ticked round. Departure was scheduled for 8.20pm so just before 8pm I ventured out to the door to the platform. A casually-stood railway official checked my ticket and waved me through. So I descended to the platform to meet my train ...

Which was much smaller than I expected. I mean don't get me wrong, this wasn't a two-carriage Northern Railway service from Manchester Victoria to Headbolt Lane. That said, my experiences of trains in the ex-Soviet Union has been mostly of trains long enough to be able to see around corners [with the exception of the train from Minsk to Vilnius that pretty much *was* a two-carriage Northern Railways train, but that was only a 2 and a half hour morning journey]; this train maybe had five, six long carriages - one with 2-bunk cabins, one with four-bunk cabins, and most of the rest being third-class six-bunks-next-to-the-corridor types. I was in one of the four-birth cabins; sharing with three strangers is not unlike a hostel dorm, with the advantage of no-one coming back drunk at 3am.

A brief orientation of my carriage: doors at either end. My cabin was nearer the less interesting end, where there was the personal cabin of the train official who looked after this carriage (I assume there's one official per carriage, whose role consists of handing out bedding, checking tickets, and letting us know when we were arriving somewhere where we needed to Do Something). There was also a water dispenser here, with both hot and cold water taps, though in my experience of using them on this journey, both dropped hot water, which is not what you want when you just want to chug some water.

The majority of the carriage consisted of a corridor on one side lined with windows and the occasional informational poster, while on the left were a series of sliding windowless doors that lead into the individual cabins. There were about eight or nine in my carriage, each with four bunks. They were laid out in two-by-two formation, so the door opened out into the middle of the cabin, where there was a table and, on the far wall, a window. Either side of this area, along the inner partitions of the carriage, were two fixed benches. Above these were two more benches that by default were stored upright against the wall but could, if needed, be pulled down and fixed in place to give four places people could lie down on. The cabins also had a series of lights, one main one overhead and a couple of smaller ones by each bench, and a series of electric points. They worked. Unlike the advertised train wi-fi, which did not.

At the other end of the carriage were the toilets. There were two toilet cubicles; one had the standard toilet unit and wash-basin, the other also had a shower. I was a little surprised by this; I've never tried having a shower on a moving train and honestly, I'm not sure I would.

All the signage in the train was in two languages. Given that it was a train ploughing the route between Georgia and Armenia, you can probably guess which two languages it was. Sadly, you'd be correct; everything was in

Russian and English. This train had very definite ex-Soviet vibes and while I'm not saying it was older than me, as a lot of things in this region seem to be, I am saying that it was probably older than the current iterations of both an independent Georgia and an independent Armenia.

Anyway. We left on time, which low-key surprised me, and lo!, I had a 4-birth cabin all to myself. I didn't know if we were stopping at any other stations en route but I was comfortable in expecting, if no-one had boarded at Tbilisi, no-one was going to board at any of them either. In actual fact, one other person was booked into my cabin but given the paucity of travellers on the journey, he made his way to one of the other empty cabins. He had choice. That's how empty this train was. When we all got off at the border, I calculated there couldn't have been more than 40 of us.

It was two hours' journey to the first border post, to leave Georgia. It didn't feel like we were going that quick, but then I wasn't expecting to. To pass the time without internet, I listened to podcasts, including one from Amanda Kendle's Thoughtful Travel Pod where she interviewed a chap from Armenia who'd helped out with a hostel there providing local tours to boost traveller interaction with the local community, and had done the same in Georgia and Cambodia. The name of the hostel and the tour was not mentioned. I noted that the hostel I was staying at did local tours that served the community and had a branch in Tbilisi, though Cambodia was not mentioned on their website. An amazing coincidence? Who can say.

Anyway. We were stopped at the first border post for quite a while; maybe about 45 minutes though it certainly felt longer. After a short while, a border guard came on for a customs check, which to be honest for me was an incredibly short conversation: "Anything to declare?" "No." "Fab.". A little while later though the train official came through and told us we needed to deboard in order to pass passport control, so we all sauntered off. I was at completely the wrong end of the train for it so it was a long walk along the platform and I guess I would have been one of the last to be stamped out. It was quite chilly on the platform in the dark night, so yes I put my shoes back on for this. I've crossed many a border barefoot but not generally at night in Winter.

Having been stamped out (which involved having a photo taken), we reboarded and waited to leave, which didn't happen for quite a while. Long enough, in fact, for another border guard to come on and check said stamp. For reasons not made clear.

The journey time between border posts was around 20-25 min. It's different on the road as the border posts are right next to each other - on a train they tend to be the nearest stations either side. Which aren't necessarily near each other. I always find this interesting, as I don't honestly see why you can't just build a private station type complex at the border, but I guess There Are Reasons.

We were stationary at the Armenian border for maybe an hour, although at no point did we have to get off the train onto the platform. I did keep my shoes on though just in case. For stamping in to the country, a border guard came on board with a cute computer-in-a-box and scanner, and what sounded like really soft keys. It was a box with a laptop on top, in effect, and had the vibe of an old bus conductor unit. It was a bit more of a thorough conversation, asking questions like what the name of the hotel was I was staying in, and how long I was planning to be in the country for. He did observe that I had been to Azerbaijan and enquired politely about this. The two countries don't get along, which is one of those epic understatements; they don't get along enough that, never mind the border being closed, the two countries are forbidden by organisations like UEFA from playing each other in international competition. Back in the day you weren't even allowed into Azerbaijan if you had evidence of having visited Armenia in your passport; although this restriction seems to have been relaxed now, it is one reason on this trip I visited Azerbaijan first. Oddly the reverse has never been true or an issue; they may pull a face but officially you've never been banned from Armenia having been to Azerbaijan.

A while after he passed through, it was the turn of the customs official on the Armenian side to make sure I wasn't smuggling anything illicit over the border. He was a bit more thorough, and wanted to make sure that yes, 90% of what I was carrying was clothes and yes, 80% of them were dirty. Customs is a fun job, especially when you have a train half-full of backpackers. It is much easier to navigate though when you're only carrying a 40L backpack; though heaven knows what he thought when faced with twice-worn boxer shorts (the hotel in Tbilisi did not have laundry facilities).

Eventually, sometime between 12.30am and 1am, we started moving again; I was in Armenia properly, my 90th country (etc etc); all quite exciting. Even if it was dark and I wouldn't even get to wake up with views of Mount Ararat. The journey through Armenia was expected to be about 6 hours from the border crossing, which was enough time to grab some sleep. The carriage official had given me a sheet, a pillowcase, and a blanket thing

(and a towel) at the start of the journey, and the cabin itself contained pillows, so it was just a case of setting up and lying down. I'm not saying I slept the whole way; I did get the impression we stopped at a couple of stations, sometimes for while, but while I did wake up a few times I did manage to get back to sleep again.

It wasn't long till we were arriving in Yerevan; we got our notifications about 6.30am, still in the dark. Because it was Winter. How would I feel about Armenia? That's a tale for another podcast!

{section separation jingle}

My overall impression of Tbilisi is of a city that's, quite literally, been through the wars, and very definitely a place that's showing its age. I don't mean that it's looking old in the sense of worn-out, I mean you walk through it and you can definitely get a sense that people have been here a long time. It's a very ... patchwork city; you can walk down one street and be amongst mediaeval-looking architecture only to then look out over a soviet-era apartment block, and oh, is that next to something that looks quite Arabic, but to get there you have to walk down a street with a very late 19th-century Parisian boulevard vibe. I likened it to the city in Terry Pratchett's Discworld, Ankh-Morpork, where a series of invaders had each come to ostensibly take over the city, only to end up merged into the throng with everyone else.

It's not an easy city to get around as a pedestrian, not because there's a lack of pavements, but more because it's quite hard to cross the road. Many of them are wide, with no crossing points, and indeed in some cases fences along the roadside. One particular road junction up by Rustavelli metro stop is so wide and complex with regard to traffic and layout (including an altitude change) that as a pedestrian you have to wander through a series of passageways taking a couple of 270° turns, taking the simple task of crossing the main road into a weird rabbit warren that feels quite illogical.

Or, you know, you could just run. I'm insured. Still not made a will though.

The junction at Rustavelli metro station, where the conference tours tended to meet up at, also gives an example of something else Tbilisi is noted for - weird shit. There's a huge sculpture of a bicycle there, on the pavement near the Radisson hotel, and the land is such that the view from behind it looks at the river quite some way below, and over to the lowlands on the far bank. By 'huge', the thing is approximately 8m long and considerably taller than I am, even when I'm wearing shoes. It was installed around 2011, designed to be theoretically ridden (by, I don't know, some kind of cheese giant) in either direction, and apparently is dedicated to people who like to ride as part of a healthy lifestyle, or something. Even if I could ride a bike, I'm not sure I'd like to in Tbilisi, not just because of the traffic, but because, as noted earlier, it's ... not just hilly, but those hills are pretty steep.

Weird statues and sculptures are scattered around the city, including a couple of street scenes on either side of Nikoloz Baratashvili Bridge, one of the main road links across the river. One side has someone taking a picture of another person whose dress is flapping in the breeze, while between them someone else is about to dive into the water. On the other are five people posing, well, two of them are posing leaning against the railings, a third is sat on the railings in a typical instagrammer influencer pose, and the other two are kissing. The bridge is known as the Bridge of Love. I know nothing of these things; all I will say is that one of my travel twitter friends did kiss me when we departed after having been around each other for a while. I'm not saying who or when, but it was not on that bridge; that would have been, well, cheesy.

Other statues include the Toastmaster statue in the old town area, which is a person, wearing some kind of dress, sat on a chair on top of a cube of rock, and holding a wine glass in their right hand, looking down the cobblestoned Old Designer Street; the saxophonist on Shota Rustavelli Avenue who's built into the wall such that only his upper body, one knee, and the tips of his shoes are visible - kind of like bad rendering on an old-school First-Person-Shooter video game; and a whole series of statues at the top end of Ioane Shavteli Street, including a janitor, some mediaeval soldiers, two Georgian actors from 1960s Soviet comedies sat on a bench, and a circle of quite flamboyant dancers with flair that's known as the "Berikaoba" statue. This is either a representation of a traditional folk dance that celebrates the coming of spring ('rebirth') that's practiced in the far east of the country, or it's a related form of masked theatre with the same origins, that came to have satirical tones. Either way, they look like they're having fun.

The biggest statue of all though is the Soviet-era Mother Georgia statue. It's 20m (or 66 feet) tall, and stands at the top of what effectively amounts to a cliff edge - the hill between it and the old town rises almost vertically after a point - and thus is easily seen from most of the city. Which I guess was the point. Where it can't be seen

from very easily at all is right next to it; the hill rises behind it and the small road it's on curves so it's hard to get it all in your eyeline, and even then you're only really able to see it side-on, since even if you walk down the stairs on the cliff edge a bit, the view above you is obscured by overhanging trees. It's of a woman in national Georgian dress, holding a bowl (apparently of wine) and a sword; this is apparently symbolic of literal 'are you friend or foe' vibes. It was designed in 1958 to celebrate 1500 years of Tbilisi, but comes across as very ... communist. If I tell you there are at least two other 'Mother' statues in ex-Soviet republics, you would not be surprised.

You get to the statue by cable car. This starts from an odd little parkland just at the bottom of the cliff my hotel was on, on the opposite side of the river from old town and linked to it by the Peace Bridge, a weird modern structure of a footbridge that has a roof resembling a flowing wave, and which when you walk over it at light, responds with LEDs lighting your way. Also in the park is a small children's play area complete with odd animal statues, a huge spherical hot air balloon tethered to the ground that, in good weather, rises up vertically offering an alternative view of the city, and a small bar set in an old tram carriage that seems to be constantly playing very loud blues/honky-tonk music.

The cable car itself take a route that climbs 94m over a length of around 510m, and according to the sign at the cable car station, the journey takes 1m42 seconds. I did not time it to make sure. I am aware that sounds like a maths question to calculate the speed; I will not be checking your answers. Each cabin sits 6-8 people, and it's one of those contraptions that slows right down at either end but does not stop - the cabs just go round and round in perpetuity. The route takes you pretty much directly over the old town, so you get great views of the whole city as you rise. These views continue at the top, where there's like a promenade along the cliff edge and you can stand and look over, or sit on the top of the wall and pretend to be a cute instagrammer for selfies. I did not do this.

Also accessible from the top of the hill are the botanical gardens and a zip-line over the top of them, which I also did not do, you may be unsurprised to know. But it exists.

It's possible to walk up and down the hill to the Mother Georgia monument, so I walked down; several flights of stairs do the journey depending on where in the old city you want to go, but the one I took led me past two or three old churches and ruins which was nice to stop and rest and look at - I was still feeling quite weary and out-of-breath at this point from whatever bug I had so that was useful. It was also nice to just stand and watch the cable cars pass by.

One strange monument I was unable to get to because of time and logistics was that of the Chronicle of Georgia. This is a spot way out in the northern suburbs, quite some distance from the metro, and up a hill. It's a series of huge pillars (some 30m tall) that attempt to tell the history of Georgia, and, oddly, the history of Christianity, through the use of statues and carvings. Construction started in 1985 and it's ... still not finished, because people had more important things to spend money on, like, you know, defending the country from another Russian invasion. PolarBearJuliet went, though, and tells me that it's still being worked on, albeit at a much smaller and less structured level, and that there are workshops and classrooms on site where you can even learn how to make the panels on the columns. Though I doubt she'd recommend doing so.

It's a shame I never got there as it feels like it's exactly the sort of weird and quirky place that proves 'everywhere is interesting'. Juliet herself continues her thoughts by suggesting that 'if aliens land in the Caucasus region, this is where they'll make their demands from' and goes on to say she feels it's strangely representative of such a 'patchwork' city as the chronicle itself doesn't really fit with any of the groups that have made it 'home' in all the years it's designed to cover.

Maybe I'll go back. I've still got a few coins, after all.

{section separation jingle}

One final impression to end with. Continuing the theme from Baku, I never really thought about the way I was presenting myself, the way I was dressed. It didn't seem, well, terribly important? People seemed to like the hair, including random Georgians; I had a couple of people just walk past me and tell me, at least. I kinda noticed other people were just staring, but I never had any negative interactions. Certainly I never felt out-of-place or awkward or self-conscious about it.

As for how I presented myself at the Conference itself; quite badly, but that was more because I was full of cold

and coughing way too much. I was definitely vibing enby, but very neutrally so - remember I was only travelling with hand luggage so there was a limit to how much funky stuff I could carry, so it was entirely dungarees, which, to be fair, is my standard attire these days.

{end pod jingle}

And to think I was originally planning to do all of this in one pod! Glad I didn't now. Join me next time as I reach Armenia. Until then, remember, too much cheese gives you weird dreams, and if you're feeling off-colour, maybe thanks to all that cheese, keep on getting better.

{Outro voiceover:

Thank you for listening to this episode of Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure. I hope you enjoyed it; if you did, don't forget to leave a review on your podcast site of choice.

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Until next time, have safe journeys. Bye for now.}