

Travel Caucasus

The clock on the wall reads 5.30pm. Irina sits chatting at the large round table as her young grandchildren, Giorgi and Mariami, play beside her. Outside, chickens and pigs root around in the grass. Behind the house is forest and a dramatic mountain backdrop, the green fields and trees fading away to grey, rocky summits lined with snow and ice.

It's a peaceful scene in Gona, in the Racha region of western Georgia, 5,500ft above sea level in the Caucasus Mountains. This was once a thriving village, but the remaining scattered houses are mostly deserted after the molybdenum mines closed in the 1950s; butterflies and wild flowers have claimed the gateways of abandoned properties. Irina and her family are the only full-time residents, and even they only spend eight months of the year here, as the road is impassable from November to March due to snow. A few other families come for a week or two of holidays.

We're here, just a few miles from the Russian border, to experience Georgia's less familiar areas, those untouched by tourism. We had to get permits to hike in the area and a local driver to bring us here in a 4x4, up a bumpy potholed road. The Racha highland region promises endless hiking trails, pristine mountains and glaciers, amazing food, wineries and a slow-travel experience away from better-known areas such as Tbilisi and Svaneti. Even most of the Georgians I meet elsewhere haven't been here.

When we visit Irina and her family – her husband, Gia, their son David and his wife, Maka – they give us, a group of four slightly dishevelled hikers, a warm welcome. “They’re offering us cheese bread,” says Zviad, our guide, who is translating. Mariami’s crayons are cleared away and a plate of *khachapuri* appears on the table. Next, a tomato and cucumber salad. Then fruit.



GLAMPING GEORGIA: PHOTO/ALAMY; YVONNE GORDON

GLAMP IT UP IN GEORGIA

The remote republic is doing a roaring trade in glamping sites, hiking trails and homestays.

Yvonne Gordon warms to life in the mountains



ESCAPE POD Clockwise from top, the view from the country's first glamping site; *khachapuri*; the space-age tents at Glamping Georgia; and an Orthodox church near Ambrolauri



Soon the table fills with ham, cheese, wild onions and sour cream. Gia fills wineglasses and proposes the first of many toasts – to thank us for coming here. It's typical Georgian hospitality, where guests are seen as a “gift from God”. The mines may be closed, but there are signs that the fledgling tourist industry will bring more people to the area. Irina proudly shows us a visitors' book. Everyone is provided with just such a feast and not charged a penny.

Earlier in the day, we'd hiked to the nearby Kirtisho glacier through woods of pine, chestnut, beech and rich green ferns, and along a forestry trail filled with wild roses, daisies and butterflies. The distant mountain peaks looked grey and moody, with pockets of snow and ice between rocky ridges. Meltwater rushed from a cave under the glacier to the river below.

That evening, at Sergo's Guest House, in the village of Ghebi, we gather at a communal dining table for a feast of chicken, potatoes, bread and wine. Fellow guests from Belarus join our enthusiastic toasts, even though they don't understand them. After dinner, we watch Sergo's aunt making Racha cheese. There are four shared rooms – Sergo is adding more accommodation and a dining room to meet growing demand. After dinner, his builders, Giorgi and Zuriko, play dominoes under the stars as the haze of the Milky Way stretches over the silent mountains in the distance.

In the next few years, the Transcaucasian Trail, a long-distance hiking route being developed in the Caucasus, will connect to the region, linking Svaneti to Ghebi and bringing more hikers to the area. Indeed, the walking is the highlight of our days. From the resort town of Shovi, a four-mile, 3½-hour (each way) trek takes us up to the Buba glacier. The trail starts steep and muddy, through pine and beech forest. After a couple of hours, it opens up to subalpine meadows, with the long grass full of pink and white daisies, buttercups and butterflies.

At the top of the meadow, at 8,000ft, we take in the scene – 360-degree views of jagged mountaintops. We fill our water bottles with cool water from a stream and watch as puffy clouds slowly push shadows over the green hills.

At the country's first glamping site, Glamping Georgia, in Ambrolauri, six space-age-looking round white tent pods are set on a hill, overlooking a valley and slopes of dense pine forest. Inside the air-conditioned tents, there's a bathroom and a kitchenette; outside, a private deck with wicker rocking chairs. Linden, oak and apple trees surround the

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Travel Georgia



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tents. The clean, fresh air is rich with birdsong and insects zip back and forth. The only other sound is the Krikhula River below. It's the perfect place to disconnect. A canopy of stars opens up overhead and Giorgi, the owner, drops by to give us a bottle of his homemade wine. Ambrolauri is famous for wine – at a winery, we learn how it is made in the traditional way, using *qvevri*,

large clay pots that are buried underground to keep the temperature constant. We also visit the area's bakeries, museums and churches.

We spend the final days of our trip in central Georgia, at Borjomi, a summer retreat for the Romanovs, famous for its mineral waters and sulphur baths. Covering 210,000 acres, the Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park has one of the largest areas of pristine virgin forest in Europe, and

many flora and fauna habitats. There are 12 marked trails for hiking, riding and snowshoeing, as well as tourist shelters and camping areas.

We hike the Nikoloz Romanov Trail from Likani to Lomis mountain, where a river valley leads up through forest to alpine meadows of tall grasses and wild flowers. We pass only a handful of other hikers. I know that the reward at 7,200ft will be the views. What I don't expect to find at the top is free-roaming horses with glossy brown coats, a tiny decorative church and carpets of wild blooms.

This is what we came for – unspoilt nature and slow travel. It's a few hours' hike back down, but all I want to do is lie down amid the flowers, close my eyes and just breathe.

Yvonne Gordon was a guest of the Georgian National Tourism Administration (georgia.travel). Two-person tent pods at Glamping Georgia start at £40 a night, B&B (glampinggeorgia.com). A nine-day trip across Racha and the Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park starts at £950pp, including full-board guesthouse accommodation, activities and transfers, but not flights (gobarefoot.travel)



WILD NEIGHBOURHOOD Free-roaming horses in Racha

LEVISON WOOD IT'S A FRONTIER LAND FIT FOR INDIANA JONES

I first travelled to Georgia way back in 2004 as a backpacker. I was immediately drawn in by the variety of the landscape and the raw beauty. The country is the gateway to the Silk Road and the frontier between Europe and Asia, so you find this incredible crossroads of different cultures, and a deep sense of history and diversity.

Everywhere I went, people were inviting me into their homes. They don't want anything in return. I never once felt in danger. It's such a welcoming place.

Georgian wine has a history dating back 8,000 years and is very drinkable. There are vineyards everywhere. The food, too, is a superb blend of Persian and Turkish influences. They have this national dish called *khachapuri* –

a cheese flatbread with an egg in the middle, plus barbecued meat and veggies. So good.

Go to the Caucasus Mountains to see the huge 13th-century Svaneti stone towers, and don't miss Tbilisi's hipster restaurants and bars. But the best place is in the far south, at Vardzia, where there is a medieval cave monastery concealed in the cliffs. Christian monks would hide there when the Mongol hordes attacked.

You can go in and explore it – in the tunnels, there are all these frescoes on the walls. It's proper Indiana Jones stuff.

Levison Wood's book *Eastern Horizons*, on his travels in the Caucasus and beyond, is published by Hodder (£8; amazon.co.uk)



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