

Travel



Trail blazers

A new network of hiking paths through the Caucasus mountains gave *Yvonne Gordon* the opportunity to explore the glaciers, lakes and peaks of remote Georgia

When it was announced that a long-distance hiking trail – known as the Transcaucasian Trail (TCT) – through the countries of Georgia and Armenia was being developed, hikers around the world clicked their poles with glee. The Greater Caucasus Mountains are on many hikers' lists, so the trail sounded like an exciting way to experience the mountain range.

While the TCT is still in development, there is a new network of trails being built in the Caucasus mountains that will open sooner – next year, in fact. I walked with some of the people behind the trails while exploring the Racha region in western Georgia, a highland area in the Greater Caucasus. We planned to hike through forests to mountain peaks, glaciers, lakes and mountain villages.

Bordered by Armenia, Azerbaijan, Russia, Turkey and the Black Sea, the country of Georgia is 69,000 sq km – about the same size as the Republic of Ireland and, in many places, just as green. The Caucasus run 1,200km, from the Black Sea to the Caspian Sea. They are higher than the Alps, with many peaks more than 5,000m, but Racha, which is off the main tourist path, is not well known.

The prospect of going to a remote area struck me with a mix of excitement and



trepidation, especially when we'd need a 4x4 vehicle and driver for some of the difficult roads, plus permits for the Russian border. I planned the trip with the adventure travel specialist James Scipioni of Go Barefoot Travel, one of the TCT's founding team members, and we had a hiking expert, Zviad Kelenjeridze, a Georgian native who develops new hiking trails for the Georgian Adventure Tourism Development Association, along with us to point the way.

We set off from Tbilisi by train for the town of Ambrolauri – wine culture here goes back thousands of years and the area

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Yvonne Gordon at the Sairme pillars, an unusual sandstone formation; above, hiking from Shovi to Buba glacier, a six-hour, 7km round trek

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A LEGACY OF
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Travel

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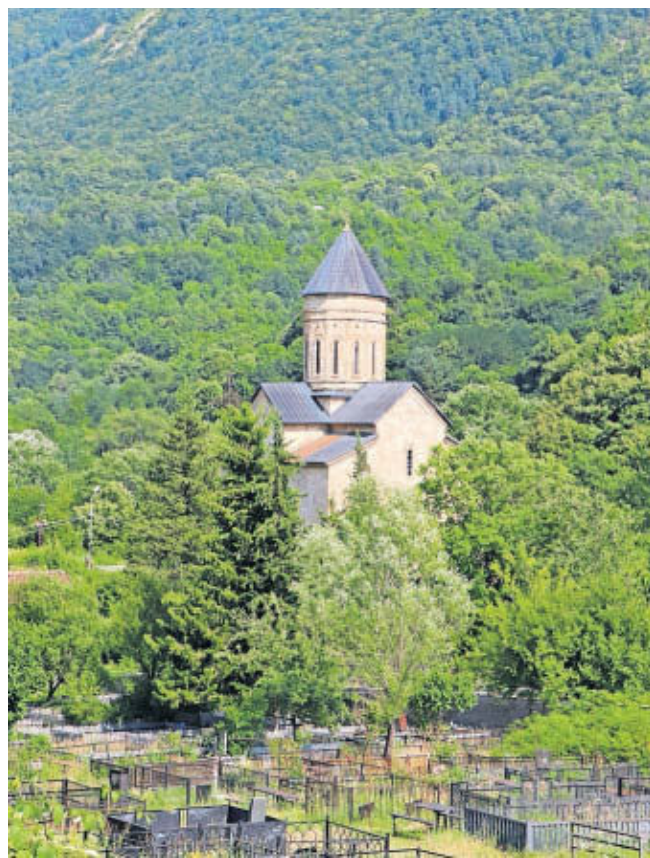
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is known for its red wine. From here we got our first glimpse of the mountains, a grey distant outline behind a row of lush green hills. We met our Georgian driver Zaza and left town in a van, the mountain outline soon turning into a row of defined jagged peaks, some with patches of snow even in summer. It was a magnificent view, set against blue skies with puffy white clouds.

We drove on a winding road with a river gorge on one side, rocky walls on the other and a rough surface underneath, our driver sometimes navigating puddles the size of parking spaces, while a road sign from the Roads Department of Georgia apologised for the inconvenience. Beyond the dry riverbed thick green forests stretched into the hills. We made a short stop at the town of Oni, 830m above sea level, to get permits to hike near the Russia-Georgia border.

As we ascended towards the mountains the road twisted more. In places some of it was washed away by rain, but when it opened out into green meadows full of wildflowers, any inconvenience was soon forgotten – even when a puncture forced an unplanned pause. We passed vineyards, houses with well-kept gardens and overall a relaxed, rural scene. Later we came to two cows lying on the road, their bells tinkling gently as we passed.

When the main road ran out we switched from the van to a 4x4 Jeep and continued up to the isolated village of



Above, Nikortsminda church, which dates from the 10th century; left, khachapuri, a traditional cheese bread; below, the mountains of Racha

Gona, at 1,680m above sea level. We bounced along the bumps, admiring the scenery while clinging to our seats. Along the roadsides were wildflowers and butterflies. The first sign of the village was a wooden house with a line of laundry hanging out in the fresh mountain air.

There used to be hundreds of people living here, but when the mines closed in the 1950s they moved away. Many families only stay a few months and only one family live here year-round; the roads out are impassable in winter. When they saw us, they welcomed us in with a Georgian feast – fresh salads, fruit, wine and a cheese bread called *khachapuri*. There is a tradition in Georgia that guests are a gift from God and always welcome.

From here we took a short hike in the direction of Mount Kirtisho glacier. The land was green, with white and pink daisies and lots of butterflies. We walked a forest trail of pine, spruce, beech and chestnut trees, soaking up the fresh air. We soon came to the bottom of the glacier, with meltwater from higher snows emerging from under the ice and pouring onto a stony riverbed.

Later, after going back down the bumpy road, we got our first glimpse of Ghebi, a village at 1,350m above sea level, with houses dotted along rolling green pastures under the pointy mountains,

looking more like a scene from a Swiss postcard. There are just a few hundred people living in Ghebi, with a couple of guesthouses with rooms for hikers.

At Sergo's guesthouse we gathered at a large table in the kitchen. There was a dresser full of crockery and a low ceiling with lightshades made from cups and saucers. We tucked into a feast of chicken, potatoes, cheese, salad and wine, and as with local tradition, we toasted everything enthusiastically. Later I wandered outside to see an uninterrupted ceiling of stars overhead – with the Big Dipper, the Milky Way and slow-moving satellites, plus fireflies dotting around.

We spent the next few days hiking – our highest walk was a six-hour, 7km round trek from Shovi to Buba glacier, at a height of 2,488m. The first part was steep, through shaded pine and beech forest, then it opened up to mountain meadows of daisies and buttercups, shepherds' huts and finally panoramic views of the other mountaintops and the glacier itself, an incredible scene to take in.

Another day we hiked 5km to the sandstone formation Sairme pillars. Some days we met docile cows, free-roaming horses with glossy coats or angry shepherd dogs (something hikers need to be wary of). Other days we had serene moments on summits and in churches such as the ornate Nikortsminda, which dates from the 10th century. At night we filled up with magnificent food, *khachapuri* and wine. We played dominoes with locals, befriended guesthouse dogs and even ended up at the Georgian version of a ceili dance.

Scipioni says that he loves hiking in Racha because it's so wild. "The mountain trails are unique and you always get a warm welcome from locals."

Kelenjeridze says that being in the Greater Caucasus and being surrounded by such high mountains is an overwhelming feeling. "Even for all of us experienced hikers, it doesn't matter how often you go there, it's so impressive the amount of high mountains all around you," he says. "I am lucky to have the opportunity to get so close to such spectacular nature."

He runs hiking trips, but during the pandemic he has been working for the Adventure Tourism Development Association on a new hiking network that will connect three national parks in eastern Georgia – Kazbegi, Pshav-Khevsureti and Tusheti, all in the southeastern part of the Greater Caucasus.

After a 28-day research trip through the mountains he identified the trail routes, and the first 205km of waymarked trail will open next year, from Omalo to Shatili. There are easy, moderate and difficult sections and you can do anything from a few hours up to 11 days. There will also be new mountain huts in remote places where there are no guesthouses.

Kelenjeridze believes that this network will become iconic for travellers who are looking to explore the Greater Caucasus, the nature and the authentic culture and living styles of the local population. Let's hope there are just enough visitors to appreciate the magnificent scenery, while keeping it wild.

THE BRIEF

A seven-day hiking and wine tour in Racha, including wine tasting, accommodation, food and transport from Tbilisi costs from €650 per person (for groups of 4-6 people, excluding flights); trailsandwines.com. For more information on Georgia see georgia.travel



YVONNE GORDON, ALAMY