

Slate

dispatches

Cycling the Silk Road

Breakfast beers in a Georgian jail.

By Mike Church and Greg Grim

Updated Tuesday, Feb. 13, 2007, at 7:21 AM ET

From: Greg Grim

Subject: Batumi, a City of Missing Manhole Covers

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We crossed the border from Turkey to Georgia in the same state as the bleary-eyed majority of Georgians—drunk. It's the best way to cross any border and earns the respect of the local folk. Georgians are renowned for their hospitality and drunkenness. It's debatable whether the latter is a legacy of decades of Soviet influence, the abominably high unemployment rate, or a 7,000-year-old obsession with wine production. The border guards were so pleased with our drunkenness and so confused by our touring bicycles that we passed through smoothly.

A couple of miles into Georgia, a drunken fisherman flagged us down. He pointed at himself, dragged his thumbnail from one side of his neck to the other, then pointed at us. Cam, Mikey, and I looked at each other, silently questioning the decision to ride our bikes from Turkey, through Central Asia, into China. Sensing our hesitation, the fisherman cleared things up by pouring us shots of *chacha*—a vile, homegrown liquor fermented with anything from grass clippings to turnips. *Chacha* bears a close resemblance to household cleaning fluid, but we were so relieved by the cessation of death threats that we slugged it down. It turns out that we had misunderstood his hand signal. The same gesture Georgians use to say "I'm gonna get you drunk," Americans use to say "I'm gonna kill you."

Last spring, I flew from Washington, D.C., along with two college friends, to Istanbul, Turkey. Allah, our bikes, and corrupt ex-Soviet dictators willing, we would bike to China. Our proposed route loosely followed the fabled Silk Road. After Georgia, we'd cycle across Azerbaijan, where a ferry over the Caspian Sea would land us in the most bizarre of the ex-Soviet dictatorships—Turkmenistan—and then onward through the deserts that house the ancient caravan cities of Uzbekistan. Muslim extremists permitting, we would pass safely through the Ferghana Valley and connect with Tajikistan's remote Pamir Highway. Alongside mujahideen, we'd trace the Afghan border on one of the highest and most poorly constructed roads in the world. Kyrgyzstan's glaciated mountains would be our last challenge en route to the deserts of far-western China. Then a flight to Thailand for some R&R.

U.S. interests and a visit by President Bush have created a positive relationship with the Georgians. U.S.-funded groups played a large role in the 2003 [Rose Revolution](#), which toppled President Eduard Shevardnadze. The "interests" I speak of mainly include safeguarding a recently completed pipeline from the Caspian Sea through Azerbaijan and Georgia ending in Turkey on the Mediterranean.

In Central Asia, the relationship is not so cozy. Rampant poverty, corrupt dictators, and the lack of free press or religious freedom create a perfect breeding ground for Muslim extremists and consequent governmental instability. Mikey, Cam, and I aimed to show these folks that not all Americans are fat, rich, Muslim-hating warmongers. Rather, we're people just like them, with the same needs, questions, and desires. But diplomacy isn't our sole mission: It doesn't hurt that these lands are breathtaking in their beauty and baffling in their culture.

Our initial impression of Batumi, our first stop in Georgia, was less than positive. In growing darkness, we circled the city for three hours searching for the cheapest hotel listed in our outdated guidebook, all the while dodging potholes and bands of drunken, bottle-hurling teens. Occasionally, I'd meet the eyes of Georgian men. If they're not drunk and alone (I've seen men walk into walls and moving cars, and at least 10 men passed out cold on the sidewalk in the middle of the day), they stand in packs, dressed like comic-book Russian mafiosi: black dress shoes, dark pants, and a dark sweater invariably covered by a black leather jacket. In a dark and unfamiliar city, their glare is intimidating. The lack of streetlights, street signs, and manhole covers corresponds neither with the map nor the guidebook's description of "the charming capital of a banana republic."

The explanation for the missing manhole covers helped shed light on the general decrepitude of Batumi. The collapse of the Soviet Union and subsequent years of vicious civil wars have ruined the economy. Seventy percent of Georgia's exports go to Russia, which periodically cuts off the two biggest: wine and mineral water. Unemployed and broke, but with wine and creativity flowing freely, Georgians steal manhole covers to sell as scrap metal to China. Reluctantly acknowledging that 10-foot-deep holes in traffic lanes were a hazard, the chronically unmotivated police cracked down.

The thieves' solution was genius. Why not cut a big hole out of the floors of their cars? That way, they could drive over a manhole in broad daylight, snatch up the cover, and move on, one manhole cover richer. To complete the stupefying elegance of the scheme, they also sold the floors of their cars. Entering a cab, you have to step very carefully, lest you fall through the floor and, at least conceivably, down a 10-foot hole.

We planned to spend one night in Batumi, but rain coaxed us to stay three. The morning brought broken bits of sunlight, Turkish coffee, baklava, and a new perspective on Batumi. We strolled the town's potholed boulevard, searching for entertainment. Two sketchy characters approached asking, "What do you want?" Initially, we wanted nothing to do with the pair, but we reconsidered once we learned that we were in the presence of greatness. "Chimera" and "Chog-J" turned out to be two of Georgia's self-proclaimed premier rappers. They were into all the new rap—Cypress Hill, Run DMC, and Public Enemy. It'll be a couple years before Vanilla Ice starts blowing up Batumi's pop charts.

Celebrities on their lunch break, they showed us around town and bought us a meal. We were warmly received by all their "fans," but the greatest reception came from George—owner of the local pool hall and the most misplaced hat in Georgia. (It proudly announced "Born American, Ordained Texan by the Lord.")

A day with our new friends transformed our initial reaction to the city. We were introduced to the glaring packs of mobsters, all of whom turned out simply to be curious. Eager to welcome us, one of the crowd bent down to a 2-foot-by-2-foot hole in the wall. Seconds later, an old woman's hand passed up shot after shot. Before long, our perception was aligned closer to our new friends'. This tiny country's problems remain, but they are constantly blurred for many Georgians; they were blurred for us, too, for a time.

Smiling coolly, "Chog-J" pulled up his North Carolina T-shirt to reveal the pinnacle of cultural exchange, a tattoo of the late rapping great "[Ol' Dirty Bastard](#)." May he rest in peace.

From: Mike Church
Subject: Breakfast Beers in a Georgian Jail
Posted Tuesday, Feb. 13, 2007, at 7:21 AM ET

There's nothing like a night in a Georgian jail to refresh the mind and body of a beleaguered tourist. Especially when the jailor—the chief of the Oni police—buys his guests Kazbegi beers for breakfast.

Leaving Kutaisi, Georgia's second-largest city, Cam and I cycled up beautifully forested slopes and into the mountains of the Racha region of Northern Georgia. Greg had gotten on a bus and headed back eastward in pursuit of our Turkmenistan visas, which are notoriously difficult to get.

The sight of vibrantly green springtime foliage mixed with the scent of spruce in the air invited us onward. Raising our eyes from a badly potholed road, we occasionally spotted crumbling medieval fortresses perched on precarious spurs or dramatic 10th-century Georgian Orthodox churches poking out of the valley floor.

Our plan was to buy some supplies in Oni, Racha's largest town—though it's really nothing more than a dusty mountain village—and then go find a camping spot before dark. By chance, a police officer came upon us and asked us to come with him. We reluctantly complied. But as the light faded, he became engrossed in a conversation with another man over a fence, and we gave him the slip, making our way out of town.

While we stopped at a dacha—a Russian-style country house—for water, a Soviet-era police jeep came roaring down the road. As it ground to a halt, a tough-looking guy in a stocking cap and camouflage jacket opened the door. He announced that he was the chief of police, and he requested our documents. Being generally wary of rendering our passports to strangers, we delayed by pretending not to understand him. This was hard to keep up for very long, since he spoke nearly perfect English. Eventually, we handed over photocopies of our passports.

"Would this be possible in America? When police ask for document, you give photocopy?" the chief asked. I thought to myself, *No, but in America you don't have to worry about the police holding your passport for a bribe.*

"Where are you going?" asked the chief.

"Uhh ... Tschinvalli," Cam mumbled, massacring the pronunciation of the capital of South Ossetia.

"Do you know?"

"Uhh ... Do I know? I don't know if I know. What?"

The chief explained that Tschinvalli was not a safe place to be, as South Ossetia had now effectively seceded from Georgia, and no one in Georgia could ensure our safety. Over our months of bike touring, we'd heard a lot of people claim that places were "unsafe," "filled with bad people," and so on. Every single time thus far, it had been a case of cops not wanting to be responsible for dumb Americans on bikes in their district, or xenophobia of the neighboring ethnic group. Our outdated guidebook claimed that South Ossetia was safe, and we assumed we would have heard if that had changed.

We were annoyed by the delay, but the guy seemed legit, and we decided to hand over our passports. Not that we had a lot of choice. Reaching into his bag, Cam blurted out, "Wait a minute, dude! We don't even have our passports!" In a terror-filled moment, I clutched at my chest, where I normally keep my passport. It dawned on me that at that moment our passports were with Greg, somewhere in Turkey.

"Look at this, boys!" the policeman exclaimed. "You are about to head off on bicycles into a dangerous and remote region of a foreign country where you don't speak the language! South Ossetia is occupied by Ossetian and Russian troops. All of them are going to be very suspicious of some random Americans snooping around, claiming to be tourists in a region that no one in their right mind would visit! At the very least, you will not be allowed back into Georgia without passports!"

With the flip of a coin, we decided that we would take the chief up on his offer to lodge us for the evening. It was a satisfying conclusion for both parties: The chief could keep a close eye on the

troublesome foreigners, and we got to stay out of the snow.

Late that night, the chief detoured from his patrol to unlock the Oni government office, a drafty Soviet-era monstrosity. Although the cracked windowpanes didn't do much to keep out the cold, it had a good Internet connection. A quick Google search confirmed the chief's concerns.

In 1991, violence broke out when Ossetians seeking greater autonomy were faced with growing nationalistic sentiment in the newly independent Georgian state. During the following months of fighting, many Georgian and Ossetian villages and schools were attacked and burned. Approximately 1,000 people died, and 60,000 to 100,000 refugees fled the region. Most crossed the border into North Ossetia. South Ossetia has been a de facto separatist state since 1992, propped up by a Russian military presence (ostensibly there as a *peacekeeping* force), which prevents Georgian intrusion into the region. The Russian ruble is the only accepted currency, and anyone caught speaking Georgian had better start explaining fast. South Ossetians' ultimate aim is to be united with their brothers across the Russian border in North Ossetia as part of Russia. Or so says Google.

That sealed it. The following morning, over breakfast beers and coffee, we announced to the relieved chief our intention of returning the way we had come. On his morning rounds, he escorted us out of town. We followed sheepishly, simultaneously feeling like idiots for not going to Ossetia and like fools for even considering going there. Twenty miles down the road, another police escort was waiting for us, just to make sure we didn't try any funny business. Ah, but we gave them some funny business: We stopped right in front of them and put on a calisthenics show in our skimpy spandex bike shorts.

A few days later, in Tbilisi, during a game of ultimate Frisbee, we met a foreign aid worker. "You might have escaped from Ossetia alive, but without your possessions," he told us. It was lucky for us that we turned back. Not because we're so attached to our possessions but because Russia had just refused to accept Georgia's wine and water. Instead of getting glum about the economic ramifications, the Georgians partied all week in the streets of Tbilisi. Do your worst, Russia.

Greg Grim lives in Washington, D.C., and builds bogs and does carpentry in Annapolis, Md. Mike Church lives and works in Annapolis, Md., where he builds bogs and does carpentry. The third cyclist, Campbell Moore, is serving in the Peace Corps in Gambia.

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