

Welcoming Sword and Defensive Nature

Remnants of the old Communist way of life can be found in the states of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. Beyond the concrete and old Communist statues are Orthodox churches, exciting cities and ancient cave paintings. Although Russia is still the dominant power of the area, the Caucasus are steadily gaining more independence from their northern neighbor.

The Communist aura can be felt while visiting Vanadzor in the north of Armenia. The city has a lot of concrete including the Soviet style hotel I stayed at and a couple of big statues, including Soviet style World War II memorials. The barely used train station is a leftover from Communism as are the police uniforms which look similar to old Communist ones. There are a couple of parks with rainbow-colored benches to add some color to the drabness. The parks also have rides and music at night to add some fun to the city. What really adds to the city is the scenery, including the hills that surround Vanadzor.

Most people go to Vanadzor not to see the ugly concrete but to see the beautiful



monasteries. Haghpat Monastery was built in 967 and is currently a World Heritage Site. The main church is the Cathedral of St. Nishan with several smaller ones including St. Gregory. Many of the religious buildings had people praying or singing high-pitched chants. Other buildings of interest include the cemetery, crypt and dining hall. Most buildings had orange tiled roof with moss growing in between. The area also had straw in between the buildings as they tried to use all

available land. Sanadin is another old monastery which is accessed by a cable car from the nearby town. There were more mossy roofs and larger buildings in this complex.

Georgia's capital Tbilisi has many cultural options. The central area includes a city hall, theater and statue of the founder of Tbilisi. There are many people that play in the water surrounding the statue; many of whom are children that beg for money. Heading away from the fountain are mini statues of famous Georgian people as well as Parliament which was built in Soviet times. It is the place where Georgia's independence took place and was the beginning of the 2003 Rose Revolution. Moving south of this area is a large Orthodox church, the Kashveti Church, where female worshippers must put on head scarves. The Rustaveli Theater and

Paliashvili Opera House are both from the late 1800's. Continuing south is Freedom Square or Rose Revolution Square.

Despite all of these city center options, there are a variety of other attractions throughout the city. There is a park where people sell religious paintings and old Communist items such as passports and military medals. On the outskirts of the old town is a mosque with baths where I got the traditional lousy customer service you'd expect in an ex-Communist country. The big guy doing the massage helped his regular customers first even though I was there first and then was more concerned about eating his sandwich than me catching a bus. He reluctantly gave me the backrub and waited on his sandwich. Nearby, the botanical gardens overlook the old city and also have a nice waterfall. On the north end of the gardens is Kartlis Deda or Mother Georgia, a large aluminum statue. She is holding a sword in one hand to defend from invaders and a cup of wine in another to welcome friendly visitors.

The spirit of Mother Georgia was illustrated throughout my time in Georgia. One memorable example was as I was reentering Georgia from Azerbaijan. I asked one of the border guards when the next bus to Tbilisi from the border was. He turned and talked to another border guard and said if I could wait half an hour, I could go on the minibus with them. The guards work 24 hours straight so when they get done with work, they like to leave off some steam. We traveled about an hour and then stopped to eat. There is a tradition in Georgia to do many toasts to family and country with many bottles of wine. One of the female guards gave an impassioned toast to her brother who had died in the recent war with Russia. This was a prime example of Kartlis Deda's sword to fight and her wine to welcome.

Georgia is perhaps best known for the Soviet leader who was born in the city of Gori, Joseph Stalin. Despite his murderous rampage, there are streets and a large museum dedicated to him. The museum depicts his young life including his poetry, pictures of Stalin and Lenin and how everyone loves Stalin, his creepy death mask and gifts given to him including a letter written to him on a grain of rice from India and vases from China. Outside the museum is basic train carriage that Stalin used.

There are reminders of the recent war with Russia in a nearby museum dedicated to both World War II and the Russian war. Included are numerous military uniforms from the Russian and Georgian conflicts, with photos of those who died as well. On top of Gori Fortress, one can see the refugee camps that were used in 2008 during the Russian-Georgian conflict. Most of the fortress is from the Middle Ages with statues of faceless and armless knights adorn the base of the fortress.

An interesting day trip from Gori is to the cave city of Uplistsikhe. The caves in the mountains date to 1,000 BC. At one time 20,000 people lived in the city until the Mongols destroyed them. What remains is a standing church and areas cut into the rock including a place to collect water as well as living quarters.

Moving north along the scenic Georgian Military Highway towards the Russian border is the mountain village of Kazbegi. There is a small museum dedicated to Alexander Kazbegi, a journalist and writer who lived in the village named after him. The real attraction is hiking through the hills and mountains surrounding the village. Traversing through farmers fields one makes it to Tsminda Sameba Church



located at 2,200 meters. The views are probably better than the church, but the church has an odd carving of two dinosaurs on its bell tower. The walk down is also of interest as one walks past long legged pigs and abandoned buildings on the outskirts of town.

Azerbaijan has a crescent moon on its flag but the Muslims here generally aren't overly religious and there is an odd mix of Muslim, Russian and decadent capitalism. The country is much more modern and wealthy than many would think due largely to oil money. They had the claim to the largest flagpole but then Jordan beat them out and what remains is the flagpole but



no flag is attached. While laying on the beach in Baku, one can see the oil rigs in the distance, sometimes called the James Bond oil rigs because they were in one of the Bond movies. There are several modern buildings including the city hall and philharmonic. In the adjoining hills is the Martyr Museum which has an eternal flame and recognizes Azerbaijanis killed by Armenians with many plaques. Many people walk along the promenade, especially at night which has a pier for

the numerous boats.

Despite the modern there is still an old city in Baku. The Shirvan Shah complex is the palace and has a display with clothing and inlay and a tower over 90 feet tall with an exhibition and lookout. Also in the complex are Thirteenth Century stones, tombs, Bakuvi Mausoleum, Shah Mosque, a bath, and a replica of a typical Arabian room and a reception hall.

Heading south of Baku past a huge sandy mosque is the caves of Gobustan. A small museum shows Viking ships, lions and seals. The actual caves have writing from 6,000 BC year and include people, boats and buffalo. There are also depictions of goats, horseman, bulls, domestic animals, fishing nets, pigs and pregnant woman. Outside the caves there are fig leaves, honeycombs, modern lizards, stones that produce different sounds when rocks hit them, holes to hold rain water and tombs from the Fifteenth Century.

The scenic route west from Baku out of the Caucasus includes a stop at Kish which has an Armenian monastery and stone roads. In Sheki, the colorful palace located near the fortress overlooking the city is unique due to its design and opulence. The natural beauty here in Azerbaijan as well as in Kazbegi, Georgia along with the monasteries of Armenia could not be destroyed by Soviet concrete. The welcoming nature and defensive sword of Mother Georgia could be found throughout the Caucasus.