Riding high

You see a country in a different light from horseback. On an epic trip across the open plains, Samantha Weinberg learns to ride – and drink – like a Georgian cavalryman

Sweet Georgia
Levan Kobakhidze (*right*) and the author on the grey, Lurja

PHOTOGRAPHS **AYMAN OGHANNA**

Enjoying the ride
Lou on Koro (*left*) and Nic on Alamud

We are two hours into the first day of our ride, trotting up a swathe of open heath, when the clouds come down. Instinctively, our horses bunch behind their leader. We turn up our collars and fasten our coats. Out of the mist come two huge dogs who bound towards us, snarling. They wear spiked collars around their necks. Levan calls for us to keep close while Achiko, who has been guarding the rear, keeps the dogs at bay.

I feel my shoulders tense, but my horse, Lurja, keeps trotting on, his neat ears pricked. And then, as if they had been spirited into being, we find ourselves surrounded by a herd of sheep, shaggy-coated goats and cattle, heading purposefully down the hill. For a few minutes we are engulfed, like stones in a rushing stream. The mist starts to clear and we see three figures on rough ponies, chivvying the animals from the edge. Their faces are obscured by woollen hats pulled low over their brows. Levan shouts at them in Georgian and then they are gone.

"They are moving the animals from the summer pastures in the mountains," Levan says.

"Why do the dogs have those collars?" I ask.

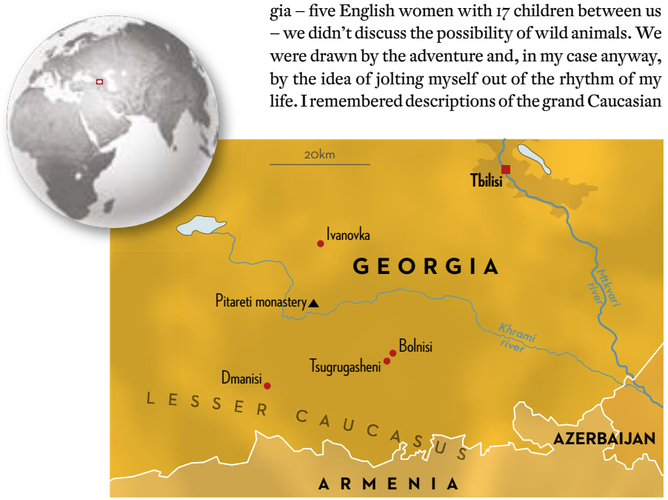
"To stop the wolves getting them at first bite."

"Are there many wolves here?" Nic asks.

"Yes. And bears and jackals and leopards – but we probably won't see them at this time of year."

No doubt he means to be reassuring, but when we stop for a loo break, heading one-by-one behind bushes, we look around before easing down our jodhpurs.

When we met to plan our riding journey across Georgia – five English women with 17 children between us – we didn't discuss the possibility of wild animals. We were drawn by the adventure and, in my case anyway, by the idea of jolting myself out of the rhythm of my life. I remembered descriptions of the grand Caucasian landscape in Lermontov's "A Hero of Our Time", and of the dashing, moustachioed Georgian horsemen. As the trip approached we assembled our kit: thick bedrolls, boots and various sleeping aids to help us through nights under unfamiliar canvas. No one mentioned the need for spiked collars.



We had little idea what our journey would entail; that was the excitement of it (that and leaving our children behind). We arrived in Tbilisi in the early hours and woke the next morning to find the city glittering below our hotel balcony. We spent two days exploring – museums full of Georgian enamelled jewellery, restaurants with singing waiters. In Sioni Cathedral, I lit a candle in front of an icon of St George – the patron saint of Georgia as well as of England – sitting on a prancing white horse. We listened to polyphonic chanting in the vast new cathedral on the other side of the Mtkvari river, bought golden grapes from street stalls, and when we hiked up narrow streets to the little church of Bethlehem, we got propositioned by a handsome monk in a scarlet robe.

We were already more than a little in love with Georgia when Levan Kobakhidze picked us up from our hotel one bright morning and took us to his horse HQ, an hour west of Tbilisi, on a former Soviet poultry farm. He explained that he had always loved horses and how, when he was 12, he'd persuaded his mother to allow him to ride. His obsession grew and now he has 21 horses and spends every holiday guiding riders around the foothills south of Tbilisi. "That way I cover the cost of maybe 19 of the horses," he said, looking at us with one of his eyes, while the other pointed slightly to the side. "I have chosen your horses."

I liked Lurja on sight; he had the look of St George's steed about him. "What does Lurja mean?" I asked.

"Grey horse," he replied.

Compared with our pampered, grass-fat ponies back in England, the Georgian horses were lean and battle-scarred, their tack – old dragoon saddles and bridles – stiff and utilitarian.

We climbed aboard. Levan kicked his horse, Zeskho, into canter and we followed as he leapt over a thorny hedge. When we pulled up, he asked if we were OK. "The English are too careful with their riding," he said. "Many people do not want to canter downhill. But what would happen with the cavalry? When they lined up for battle, did one side put up their hands and say 'Do not charge yet, please, until we have walked down this hill?' In Georgia, we canter downhill. OK?"

The mist clears, we climb stiffly off our horses and, legs still bent, backs moulded into position, hobble off to tie them up at the edge of a thick forest. We retrieve our packed lunches from the saddlebags and sit down on our coats. We have two sandwiches: ham and cheese and a sort of chorizo, both enveloped in Georgian bread, pillowy and light. In Tbilisi we had developed a liking for Georgian bread verging on devotion. Levan produces tomatoes and cucumbers that had clearly never seen a supermarket shelf.

"Yum," someone says. "A perfect picnic." Then it's time to heave ourselves back into the saddle.

"It is about three more hours," Levan tells us. "We will have some cantering." This news is greeted with a mixture of enthusiasm and dread at the thought of the aches this cocktail of speed and endurance will engender; while the five of us share a passion for horses, we have little time to oil our riding muscles. I am soon back in what I have realised is Lurja's preferred position: fairly close to Zeskho's tail.

"I ride him sometimes," Levan explains. "He is practising to be the next leader." When Lou's horse, Koro, tries to overtake, Lurja flashes his teeth. Over the days to come, I get to pepper Levan with questions. We pass above a rail track to our left.

"That line comes from Colchis, where that idiot Jason tried to steal our Georgian gold," he says. "About 3,000 years ago, some ships arrived at the coast. We Georgians, people of great hospitality, invited the sailors ashore. The king, Aeëtes, was father of Medea. She fell in love with Jason and helped him to steal the golden fleece. Now the truth behind the story is that at the time the rivers were flowing with gold and the Georgians used sheepskins to pan the gold. Jason stole the technology – and Medea." His head shakes in disgust at Jason's abuse of the warm Georgian welcome.

It is dusk and 30 miles later when we arrive in Ivanovka. We pad into the village along dirt roads lined with villas that must once have been grand, with balconies and large gardens. There is no immediate sign of life; everything is covered in dust and mud. Rounding a corner we catch sight of Levan's little blue van, a Soviet-era Yaz with a kindly face and dogged temperament. We untack and, moaning, walk back to our guesthouse.

Our landlady is called Leila and, Levan tells us, she is a refugee from Abkhazia. I get a sense of resigned approval; Georgians like people who flee from the Russians. They don't like Russians – at least not those in power. In Tbilisi, we went to the Museum of Soviet Occupation, a chilling hall with larger-than-life photographs of Georgians killed by Stalin's men. We'd heard that the exhibition had been closed for a while at the express wish of Putin, but reopened after an outcry from the Georgian people, who wanted visitors to see the terrors wrought by their disowned son. Georgia, over the centuries, has welcomed many refugees from across the region: Greeks and Muslims, Jews, Turks and Russians.

Leila from Abkhazia is wearing a corduroy skirt, purple ankle socks and wedged sandals. She smiles a lot, but speaks not a word of English; our Georgian has not progressed beyond *madloba* (thank you). She shows us to our rooms upstairs, which have large beds with shiny covers and contain piles of boxes of "Quality Glassware", a gift from BP, whose pipeline passes close by on its way from Azerbaijan to the Mediterranean. We lay our sleeping bags on top of the beds and >

"That line comes from Colchis, where that idiot Jason tried to steal our Georgian gold about 3,000 years ago"

The old ways
ABOVE In the Caucasian foothills, life goes on as it has for centuries.
OPPOSITE BELOW Leila from Abkhazia

> get out the Turkish Airlines turquoise mini-pillows that we had thought to steal from the flight out. There is electricity, but no heating. Leila has lit a small stove in the downstairs bathroom to heat water for showers. The loo is in a small and not very fragrant hut in the garden.

We come downstairs to find a table and chairs have emerged from the van, Leila has put two flat loaves of *khachapuri* – Georgian bread stuffed with cheese – in the stove and Shalva, our ample chef, is busy over a barbecue. Levan pours local red wine out of a plastic bottle and raises his glass: "To the first day of riding!" He drains his wine and pours another glass – and so we are introduced to the Georgian custom of toasting.

TWO YEARS AFTER the end of the second world war, John Steinbeck travelled around the Soviet Union with Robert Capa, the war photographer. His aim was not to judge, but to "write what we saw and heard", the results of which were published as "A Russian Journal". Towards the end of their time, they visited Georgia – and found a constant party. After a particularly toast-some feast, he wrote: "In these terrific Georgians we had more than met our match. They could out-eat us, out-drink us [no mean feat], out-dance us, out-sing us. They had the fierce gaiety of the Italians, and the physical energy of the Burgundians. Everything they did was done with flair. They were quite different from the Russians we had met… Nothing can break their individuality or their spirit. That has been tried for centuries by invaders, by tsarist armies, by despots, by the little local nobility."

After too much Georgian spirit and a more-or-less reviving night on Leila's shiny coverlets, we are ready to get going. Lurja tucks behind Zeskho as we ride through ancient beech woods and across hills with views stretching north to the Lesser Caucasus. I realise that, after a day and a half in the saddle, we have yet to see a fence; just open grassland, studded with bright red rosehips, like tangles of Christmas lights. I am struck by the smell: it is fresh, more like spring smells, without that sweet-and-sour hint of autumnal rotting leaves.

Levan is determined to get us riding like Georgian cavalrymen. At the first promise of a downward dip, he turns and, fixing us with his right eye, calls "Trotting!" We are barely in our stride when he commands us to canter, and we soon find that cantering downhill is not something to be feared on our nimble horses.

"We used to be a nation of horsemen," he tells me. "But in the war, the horses were needed to pull the heavy guns into the mountains. Then the soldiers ran out of food so they ate the horses. Afterwards, horses were regarded as a luxury and in Soviet times no luxuries were allowed. We lost our connection to horses. It is coming back slowly now."

As dark clouds begin to blot out the sun, we break for lunch. From our saddlebags, we retrieve a facsimile of the picnic of the day before. And the days to come.

It starts raining. We pull on waterproof trousers, but by dusk, we are soaked through. We ride up past a monastery to a ridge where we find Shalva, a row of small tents to sleep in, and a larger mess tent, which is soon hung through with our wet clothes. Slightly dryer (though with feet still sloshing in boots), we walk down to the 13th-century Pitareti monastery. It is beautiful outside, with ornate carving, but when we go in it is as if we have entered an ancient and still world. There are no pews or chairs – Georgians do devotion standing up – but tiny candles flicker in front of dark icons and I catch a waft of incense. In one corner a monk with a fuzzy beard and long dark robes is standing at a lectern, chanting. His deep voice seems to come from another century. He does not stop at the sight of the mothers-of-17 – and we stand around the edge for a while, listening.

That night, cosy inside the mess tent, Levan raises his glass: "To be laughing at the end of the day!" We are getting the hang of it and raise ours in turn: "To keeping relatively dry; to different landscapes and many monasteries; to a good night's sleep!"

NIC HEARD JACKALS calling in the night, but the horses are still there, just visible in the morning mist, when we crawl out of our tents. The rain has stopped and there is time to warm our boots by the fire before leaving. Levan makes us wait for the van to go first: "There is a river to cross…" We pay little attention, admiring instead a seventh-century fort on the side of the roadway, the pale verdigris lichen on the rocks, the wild mint growing on the verges.

We reach the Khrami river to find the blue van perched on a little island half way across. I am amazed it got that far; the Khrami runs fast. We wade across to Shalva. Once again, I praise Lurja for his bravery and sure hooves; a person could not have crossed this river without being swept downstream. Levan and Shalva have a loud conversation, after which we ride away, leaving Shalva bellowing into his phone.

"I must get a new van," Levan says. "Out of five times this year, it has got stuck three. I am paying the farmer a fortune to pull it out with his tractor."

We ride through woods, along invisible paths. Levan learnt the way from woodsmen and hunters, some of whom we see occasionally, standing quietly beneath dripping trees amid the mushrooms. Back on a track, we are wading through mud when, improbably, an old Mercedes comes towards us. I look in through the window but the driver doesn't smile. Then we hear a thwack. Boika, who is running free as a spare horse, has kicked the car. For the next ten minutes, Levan and the men shout at each other. I worry that they are hunters with guns, but eventually they come to an arrangement and Levan rides back to the front. "Typical mountain people," he says. "Not enough iodine in their diets."

There is something troubling Lurja; he has kicked out a few times, which is uncharacteristic behaviour for my brave horse. At lunch Levan checks his saddle to find a place where his coat has been rubbed by a runkle in his saddle blanket. For the afternoon I ride Boika, a rangy three-year-old stallion; in England I would never get on a stallion – or a youngster. The sun is shining when we emerge onto open ground and gallop downhill for four miles, jumping ditches and whooping. Lurja is running free now, but keeping his number-two position, biting anyone who dares to challenge him.

We clatter into the town of Dmanisi, which, as a result of its position in a lava bowl on the Silk Road, grew to be one of Georgia's great cities in the 12th century. Time passed and its importance faded until, in 1991, a team of archaeologists unearthed the skeleton of an early hominid. Carbon-dating ages it as 1.8m years old, making it the oldest to have been found in Europe, from a time when it was previously thought that the ancestors of man had not yet left Africa.

That evening, sitting in the hall of our simple guesthouse, we eat very garlicky chicken – a Georgian speciality known as "Wife's Guarantee", because after eating it she knows her husband won't get lucky elsewhere – and toast hairy hominids.

DAYS IN THE saddle are long, but never dull. One time, our hooves trot along the same ways that Tamerlane had ridden from Samarkand when he tried to conquer Georgia, for the eighth time, in 1403. "Everyone has tried to invade Georgia," Levan says. "But it is not so easy: look, we are still here now while Samarkand is just a museum." Later that morning, we ride through the woods on paths made blue by copper oxide. To either side are ferns and thick moss. Butterflies of white and the palest lime flit through the trees.

We've just had lunch when a storm cracks out. Levan shouts for us to switch off our mobile phones. Mine has been playing up and refuses to shut down; by the time I stop trying, it is irrecoverably soaked.

Another rainy night in Georgia. At our camp in the fold of a steep valley, we sit in the mess tent listening to the eerie howl of jackals, our toes warmed by *tartariakhli*, soup made of beef, garlic, coriander, saffron, dill and cloves, and toast Georgian toasts.

IT IS NOT raining when we climb up to the convent of St Tevdore, named after a 17th-century priest. Levan tells how a marauding Persian army was hunting down the Georgian royal family which, they'd heard, was at the summer residence without many guards. The cavalry lost their way in the valleys, where they encountered Tevdore and asked for directions. He took them in the wrong direction. When they realised, they tack- >

"These terrific Georgians could out-eat us, out-drink us, out-dance us, out-sing us"
Steinbeck

> led him. "Why on earth did you think I would show you the right way?" he said. They killed him on the spot.

The convent is being restored, slowly, by nuns. As we stand under the arched roof, it starts to rain. We climb up a sopping valley to the nun's chalet to find it empty, guarded by a cat. A pair of old Prada sandals sits on top of a wheelbarrow full of logs, alongside some teddy-bear slippers.

It is the first of three beautiful churches. Later that morning, we slip into Tsugrugasheni, perched on the side of a steep valley, before heading back down to Bolnisi-Sioni, the oldest cathedral in Georgia, dating back to the fifth century. Riding through the town, splayed across the broad base of a valley, it feels as if we are at the crossroads of time. In one direction lies Tbilisi, with its sharp new bars and modernist architectural landmarks; in the other Bolnisi, where the wooden balconies of the houses are festooned with drying corn cobs and strings of chillies, in readiness for the hard winter ahead. In one direction, the mountain people are herding the animals into the winter pastures; in the other the fuzzy-bearded priests with jeans poking out beneath their robes are rushing outside to take phone calls between chants.

We climb into the mist above the village, heading for our last camp. On the high plains, the soil is deep, but the horses carry on cantering, mile after mile. I feel immense respect for honest Lurja; I have fantasies of riding him home to England, feeding him big buckets of bran mash until his hindquarters become round and shiny. But I know that this warrior horse would hate to stop cantering downhill across fenceless plains.

Our last camp is on the banks of the Khrami river. We rub off the horses for the last time; we are quiet for a change. I pull my bag into my tent – still a little damp on the inside – and change into the closest thing I have to clean clothes. I don't want this journey to end. I don't want to go back to my warm, dry life. Then I walk into the mess tent. There's a fug inside. Instead of his customary beer, Achiko is finishing off the *chacha* – a particularly virulent home-brewed Georgian liquor our photographer had brought with him from Tbilisi (along with a brutal hangover). Shalva is cooking homemade sausages. Levan pours glasses of brandy "to take the chill off", then opens the wine. We raise our glasses:

"To Shalva's sausages!"

"To two countries protected by the same saint!"

"To stinking!"

"To cantering downhill!" ■

rideworldwide.com organise Georgian riding trips. Go in May-June or September to avoid the rain

WHEN IN ...

New York

Keep your eyes peeled for sunsets and secret doorways. **Emma Parry** on life in the city that doesn't sleep

DO bag the window seat for landing, climb the Rockefeller or hover by helicopter; even natives get a kick from that glittering hypodermic skyline.

DO walk – through the shadowed canyons of Midtown, off-grid in the Village, past tango dancers and trapeze artists in Hudson River Park.

DON'T be blasé. If you try to act unimpressed, you'll miss the endless human ingenuity on every block.

DO visit a swanktastic hotel even if you're staying for a song at the Jane, or enjoying the benefits of Airbnb. The bars at the Carlyle, the Mercer, or the Gramercy Park reward the drinking.

DO catch Manhattanhenge – when the setting sun lines up with the cross streets. Failing that, any rooftop at sunset will do.

DO take a tuk-tuk through Times Square even if you'd never consider lingering for a musical.

DO eat on the street. Whether it's a pavement café on the Upper East Side or a food truck: Comme Ci, Comme Ça and Frites'n'Meats serve particularly fine fare.

DON'T wear headphones and miss hearing the word on the street. Catching New Yorkers on gender, therapy and Armageddon is a treat.

DO seek out unmonied anomalies. The Westbeth; the Bowery; the last carcasses being loaded amid the meatpacking district's silly millions give a glimpse into the city's Dickensian divide.

DON'T miss Chelsea Galleries; you'll see museum quality shows free. On Thursday nights stream between openings with the cognoscenti.

DO museums too. Choose between the Cloisters' legitimately pillaged religious interiors; the Guggenheim; the serenity of the Frick, MoMA...

DO shop for one-offs in Nolita and knock-offs on Canal Street; savour the holiday window displays at Barneys and Hammacher Schlemmer.

DO find an insider to initiate you into the city's secret haunts. Enter through phone booths, unmarked doors and Chinatown sweatshops to feel the thrill of a speakeasy.

DO take refuge from the relentless sensory impressions in the garden at St Luke's, the Seminary in Chelsea or the artful rewilding of the Highline.

DON'T resist the tyranny of grooming. Get a blowdry while you read the *New Yorker*. Have a manipedi and consider the quantity of toenails-clippings harvested each day.

DO tip, double the tax in restaurants and 20% for beauty salon treatments.

DO cross the water to Brooklyn or Staten Island to see the electric prettiness of the city and its bridges.

DO feast when here: Balthazar for breakfast, lunch at the Gramercy Tavern and the Hudson Clearwater for dinner. See newforkcity on Instagram for the inside scoop.

DON'T be tempted by psychics.

ILLUSTRATION **NEIL GOWER**