



An aerial photograph of a vast, snow-covered mountain range. The terrain is rugged and mountainous, with deep valleys and ridges covered in white snow. The sky is a clear, bright blue. The overall scene is one of a high-altitude, alpine environment.

# Svaneti

## The Heart of the Caucasus

Story and Photos by Paul Oelerich

Kenzie McDonald and Will Smyth-Osbourne if full view of the Caucasus. Mt. Elbrus at the center in the distance.

**IT WAS A LONG TRIP TO GET TO GEORGIA.** And yes, not that Georgia as I had to explain every time I told someone I was going there for skiing, the Republic of, not the US State.

My wife and I each drove a car from our home in Hailey, Idaho to Salt Lake City, with our three kids in haul. It was the last week of a three-week Christmas break, and we try to split it up by heading someplace warm. For a lot of trips in the winter, we drive to SLC as the large airport never shuts down, while flying out of the Sun Valley airport it can be a 50/50 chance during snowy weather, which will adversely affect your itinerary. From SLC, we were off for a week in sunny Mexico.

Heading back it went like this for me- Los Cabos to SLC, where I said goodbye to my family, and a next day 4-hour afternoon flight to Minneapolis. A 4-hour layover here, and then an overnight 9-hour flight to Paris, where I had an additional 6-hour layover. Another late afternoon flight of four hours got me to Tbilisi, Georgia at around 11 pm local time. Exhausted.

As I approached the immigration kiosk, I'm summoned by a straight-faced (as always) officer, asking for my passport. With a brief look and a quick stamp, she handed it back accompanied by a small bottle of wine. "Welcome to Georgia", she said with a smile. In Georgia, which claims the origins of winemaking, they have been making wine for around 4000 years; and they like to share their heritage with visitors.

I collect my baggage and meet Kenzie McDonald who is on our team, he's traveled from his home in Toronto and we were on the same flight from Paris. We're able to identify and meet by seeing each other with our ski bags, the only ones on the carousel. These bags also identify us to Paata Chkonia, our local liaison and Georgian guide who will drive us to our hotel, and see that everything on the ground runs smoothly for our group in his country. I hit the hotel room at the comfortable Sharden Villa and instantly crash, exhausted after nearly 36 hours on the move. I barely stir at 4 am when my friend/roommate and our lead guide for the trip, Brennan Lagasse, comes in the room after his own long travel itinerary (see page 50).

I'm up at 9 am, and sneak out while Brennan sleeps. I've got a down day to explore Tbilisi while the rest of the team arrives. I grab a couple of cups of coffee at a café right outside the hotel in Old Town Tbilisi, a small part of the sprawling city, which dates back to the 5<sup>th</sup> Century. There are wine stores, and wine bars everywhere, and above this part of town on a prominent ridge sits the ruins of the Narikala Fortress, which has origins back to the 4<sup>th</sup> Century AD. It's a short hike or a shorter gondola ride to the fort, which sits next to a looming 70-foot aluminum structure of Kartlis Deda or Mother of Georgia. In one hand she holds a sword, which is an expression of the many battles the country has endured due to its strategic location. In the other hand she holds a glass of wine, as a welcoming symbol to those who would be friends. I prefer the latter greeting.

First I locate a nearby café renowned for its preparation of a local dish, *Khachapouri*. Essentially a boat shaped loaf of bread filled with cheese and a couple of eggs on top. Simply delicious, and a sample of the many wonderful breads we'll enjoy on this trip. It's filling, and an ample start exploring this amazing city. I venture to the local flea market, a sprawling affair in a city park filled with local treasures and many relics from the Soviet era. I score an old Soviet General's fur *Ushanka* hat and matching belt, both with the hammer and sickle. After checking out some of the other sights of Tbilisi, I venture to the famous *Abonotubani* sulfur baths in Old Town, which date back to the 5<sup>th</sup> century. I'm able to book a private room for 2 hours for a soak to relax any jet lag away, and rejuvenate for a week of upcoming ski touring.

Back at the hotel the team gathers and we head out for dinner in Old Town wandering down cobblestone streets to a spot where we enjoyed local stews, roasted beef and an amazing selection of fresh baked breads, along with a couple of bottles of Georgian *Saperavi* wine. After dinner, guide Keith Davis and his wife Sabrina Bellecci from Tahoe, Brennan and I find a pub for a nightcap. A local jazz combo provides ambiance. Kenzie, Liam Brown from Toronto, and Brit Will Smyth-Osbourne head off into the night in search of livelier entertainment, which they confirm the next morning was easily obtainable.

We all reconvene early the next morning with Paata and our gear to load into the 12 seat passenger van for our 10-hour drive to Mestia at the foot of the Caucasus Range. The freeway out of town passes by Gori, the birthplace of Stalin, and we catch glimpses of snowcapped peaks and rolling vineyards



Keith Davis climbs a ridge in the Caucasus near Ushguli. Photo- William Smyth-Osbourne





around us. Soon we are on a two-lane highway twisting through hills with a fair amount of traffic, a bit of snow starts to glaze the road as well.

Quickly and often we learn the Georgian technique for passing on a highway. The key is to get right on the ass of the guy in front of you and ride it until there is a slight opening in the oncoming lane. Next, pull out and pass staying as close next to the vehicle you are passing, the closer your side mirror to theirs, the better. Then pull in front of him with inches to spare. Always exchange a friendly wave of thanks- as both drivers do; in the US, you would undoubtedly receive an angry flip of the bird.

Things get treacherous as we begin climbing into the mountains outside of Mestia, and a snowstorm gathers strength as we continue climbing along deteriorating roads. Our driver forges ahead, and thankfully (?) it is dark so we can't really see what he is up against, but he is unfazed and we eventually reach our hotel. We are now in Mestia, population 2000, and the famous region of Svaneti.

We awake the next morning to cold temps and a foot of fresh on the ground. We load our gear into a different van that Paata will be taking us around in while we are here. Today we're heading to Tetnuldi, a 'resort' where we'll use the lifts to bump us up 3000 feet to access the backcountry slopes where we'll skin around for the day. The road to Tetnuldi is rough, steep and drifted with fresh snow, and on the way we catch our first views of the famous Svaneti towers. It's cold, and there is at least a foot of fresh powder glistening in the clearing skies. The high peaks of the Caucasus begin to reveal themselves, and our excitement is high. From the top, after riding three linear chairlifts, we get our first views of the spectacular Ushba (15,453 ft.) in the distance.

But our excitement is short lived. Despite knowing beforehand that the area was having one of the driest years in memory, the slopes appear to be covered with a deep snowpack. Dropping in for our first turns, we cut through the fresh layer of powder, and then sink into the heavily faceted snow layer underneath, striking the surface and accompanying rocks. There is no 'body' to the snowpack to float on and glide through.

We quickly regroup and scout some of the surrounding terrain. There are glaciated slopes spilling off of Mt. Tetnuldi, at 15,938 ft., the 10<sup>th</sup> highest peak in the range. Brennan sees some slopes with potential, and we put on skins and head out. We're rewarded with a zone that gives us cold, but challenging, faceshots, and we repeat for a couple of runs. A long traverse across treeless slopes with big skiing potential brings us back to the piste, and we shred down to the bottom and a cold brew at the minimal lodge.

Back at the hotel that night, we are the honored guests of the staff, and are brought into the celebration of the Old New Year, or Orthodox New Year, which is celebrated on January 14<sup>th</sup> according to the Gregorian calendar. Other guests from Russia and Ukraine fill the restaurant, and we are treated to numerous shots of "Chacha" from our new friends. Chacha is a national drink of Georgia, which is a clear pomace Brandy with high alcohol content. The stuff provided to us by the hotel is smooth and goes down quickly, while the shots from our Ukrainian friends, which is homemade, is akin to lighter fluid. Being polite westerners, we indulge their gracious hospitality and their homemade firewater.

A group of local men in traditional Svan clothing details their heritage to us through song, story and dance. The Svans are known as fierce warriors, and tough mountain people who were able to defend their remote mountain valleys for centuries against marauders including the Mongols. The added difficulty of gaining access to the Svaneti region deterred many would be aggressors from even trying. We end the night at a local wine bar where we share bottles of *Saperavi*, and the host shows us how to make our own *Churchkhela*, a homemade local candy made of grape juice and walnuts. Fireworks boom throughout the mountain valley all night.

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**THIS PAGE** ALocal traffic in Ushguli

**OPPOSITE PAGE** Brennan Lagasse and Keith Davis take in the impossible to escape prominence of Ushba.



In the morning we are off to Ushguli, at 6900 ft., it is one of the highest continually inhabited regions in the world, nestled in a valley comprised of four villages at the foot of Shkhara, at 17,037 feet, the highest point in Georgia, and whose summit ridge shares a border with Russia. We're fortunate to be able to make the drive here, as it is also very inaccessible, and the road through the gorge to the villages is nerve-wracking. A slip on the road here could be catastrophic, but Paata grips the wheel, stomps the gas pedal, and pushes us through. Should a significant snowfall occur while we are here, we may well be stranded for a few days, and we may not have packed enough beer with us to get through an extended stretch, and there are no options for any supplies. Ushguli is incredibly remote, and a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the area is filled with Svan towers, and the local chapel dates to the 10<sup>th</sup> Century.

We check in to a comfortable guesthouse where a huge lunch spread awaits. After filling up we head out for a tour and find cold snow while skiing and taking in the amazing surroundings. Later, back at the guesthouse, a couple of local kids pay us no mind with our fancy touring setups as they schuss down the alley and off of their hand built kicker. The crux is avoiding the cows loitering on the landing zone, but what impresses us is the gear they are using is vintage early 1980's, with rear-entry ski boots that rise to their kneecaps.

After a comfy evening, we rise to ski the next day with a tour from the lodge. The kids are out showing off on the kicker, and a dust cloud rises off of Shkhara along with a roar as a huge icefall avalanches. The spectacular Massif glistens under a sparkling blue sky. Our intended slope is thin with snow, but also has tracks from previous skiers saying it is skiable. It is low single digits cold, but we are soon shedding layers as the sun warms us on our long climb. A posse of local dogs, looking for treats from us tourists, joins us on the skintrack; something we gather is a regular practice in this remote area. They are strong outdoor canines; forbidden from coming inside the houses to escape the cold, try as they may. They follow us up the entire 3500-foot ascent, where the full view of Shkhara smacks us in the face. So many options for skiing present themselves, but the logical route under present conditions is that we return the general way we came. At the bottom, we traverse over to the chapel for a look, and as we are poking around, we're surprised to be greeted and invited inside by the pastor/caretaker. It is cramped as we duck inside the Ushguli Church of the Mother of God, and are humbled by the faded 10<sup>th</sup> century frescoes of Jesus on the ceiling of the apse. These frescoes are considered to be a national treasure of

Georgia, and we are visiting them in our ski boots.

The next day we head out for an extended tour, and find the best skiing of the trip. Fresh, cold snow awaits us after a long traversing climb. We top out on a high plateau after around 4000 feet of climbing, and our vista extends from Shkhara, to Tetnaldi, to Ushba, with views of Elbrus off in the distance, wholly in Russia. Our descent ends in Chazhashi, one of the villages of Ushguli, which is home to dozens of medieval structures including 13 Svan towers, of which one is believed to be the summer home of Queen Tamar from the 12<sup>th</sup> Century. We poke around on our skis, and I notice a small sign allowing entry to one of the towers, admission fee is 2 *lari*, or \$.60US. I knock on the door and a young woman answers, a bit skeptical of us wanting to go in the tower in our ski boots. She obliges us, as it is the off-season for tourists. This exploration may well be our crux of the trip, climbing the wooden ladders of the tower, which are definitely not OSHA approved, in the dark through separate rooms, 60 feet above the ground.

We depart Ushguli the next morning, back to Mestia, and on to Mazeri, new terrain for exploring. As we gear up in the frigid shadows, a dark figure, appearing to have skis races up the trail before us. We think nothing of it and begin a climb up a summer trail. As we reach the top, we find two locals, clad in wool trousers, caps and sweaters- carrying their vintage skis, boots locked into bindings, over their shoulders. They are walking up the trail in their worn leather boots, with no pack on their back. They left the trailhead maybe 20 minutes before us, and are at the same point of the climb as us, 3000 feet up. It's been a slog to this point, so Keith, Sabrina and me turn back and schuss down the road, hitting open meadows filled with crystal facets along the descent. It's cold back at the car so we bundle inside with the heater cranked. Soon enough, one of the locals comes hauling ass into the trailhead meadow, riding his tails with both ski tips going in opposite directions. A huge grin on his bearded face. It's amazing what folks will do to experience the joy of sliding on snow.

That night we bunk at a local house and enjoy true local hospitality. Our hosts speak no English, but they do manage to understand that since we, or they, have no beer, perhaps we would enjoy a shot of homemade Chacha. We of course, oblige.

In the morning we pack up Paata's van with our luggage, as we will be skinning over the pass from one valley to another to our next destination. He'll reconnoiter with us at the hotel.



Paata, we have discovered, is like some of the other Georgian skiers we've met on this trip. He has joined us on all of our tours so far, and is game to join us today, gear shuttle be damned. His gear is slightly dated and heavy, but he's always right there with us on climbs and descents. We've made it a point to try to teach him how to de-skin and transition without taking his skis off, and it has been entertaining at times to witness his attempts. Of course we also enjoy teaching him American slang, and we learn some Georgian gems from him as well. He has been an invaluable asset to our trip and is always there when we've needed him. We can tell that he is bummed to not be skiing with us today.

Regardless, we head off under sunny skies on a south slope to the pass to descend into Becho at the foot of Ushba. We linger at the pass as we've now come to another crux; the descent options are highly variable with no discernable way to the valley 4000 feet below us. There is either no realistic option as open slopes are devoid of snow, and the slopes that do have snow are heavily wooded. Accesses to the heavily wooded slopes are also below nervous looking snowfields loaded with sugary facets. At least we have the jewel of the Caucasus to gaze at; Ushba is a mesmerizing peak from all angles at this vantage. We poke around and cross over a few low summits to look for a way down. Brennan and Keith locate a summer trail on a map, and it looks like it will be the best option for descending. As we rip skins and prepare for a low angle descent through some upper powder fields, we spy a lone tourer in the distance. It's Paata, and he has come up from the other side in an effort to join us.

We navigate a long and faint trail through the woods down to the village and to our hotel, the Grand Hotel Ushba. A warm shower, soft beds, beer, wine and a gourmet meal await. Richard, the proprietor, is an expat Norwegian, and an expert on the area, having written several extensive guidebooks. He gives us a warm welcome, and a caution to not turn off any of the faucets in our rooms as the above ground water system will then freeze for the entire property. No big deal, and we enjoy a hearty dinner complete with extra bottles of wine and beer to make up for our previous days scarcity.

As we gear up in the morning, a passive/aggressive Richard gives us the news. The water has frozen overnight, and perhaps our group is to blame? We

disagree, and it's a bit tense as we head out. There are other guests at the hotel, and singling us out, is- we think- unfair.

We head out for our tour in sparse conditions. It's been a great week, and we linger and enjoy our last ski day despite the low snow conditions in this zone. We enjoy a long lunch in the sun on the slopes below the towering summit of Ushba, and make the most of turns where we can. Will has delaminated his ski under the binding, so it's a good thing this is our last day. We are scheduled to head back to Mestia tonight, but we do love the accommodations at the Grand Hotel, despite Richard's sudden change of demeanor about our group, so we decide to stay another night. We enjoy another fine meal accompanied by many bottles of Georgian wine, and toast to our success, adventure, and new friendships formed with our group of skiers from four nations. Richard is in a better mood, as he has been able to repair the water situation, and we are running up a hearty tab in his establishment. We are extra cautious not to turn off any water that night, and the hotel is filled with other skiers from various European countries. Everything is upbeat and Georgia is beautiful. As we pack the next morning to head back to Tbilisi, Richard is sullen at breakfast. The water has frozen again.

We bid a farewell to Richard, and to Paata, and begin a 10-hour drive back to Tbilisi. Brennan flies out that night to China, and the rest of the team convenes for one last dinner at a fancy spot high on the bluff overlooking the beautiful city. We enjoy a toast of Chacha in the same room that was a favorite dining spot of many communist leaders from another era.

We all have different itineraries heading home, my flight leaves at 7 am, so I'm up early headed to the airport. It's a 4-hour flight to Paris, then a 7-hour layover. Then a short flight to London and a 10-hour overnight layover before heading direct to SLC on a 10-hour flight the next morning, and a 4-hour drive back to Hailey.

I pick up 3 bottles of Chacha at the Tbilisi airport and pack them in my luggage; hopeful it will be enough to last until I get the chance to return to the Republic of Georgia. ♥

*My trip to Georgia was organized by 40 Tribes Backcountry, a backcountry tour operator specializing in worldwide trips to exotic locations for skiers and splitboarders. An American company based in Colorado, you can check out all of their offerings at [40tribesbackcountry.com](http://40tribesbackcountry.com)*