

the high road to the Caucasus

exploring the Georgian Military Highway



*a map to accompany this article
appears on page 7*

by Laurence Mitchell

Some of Europe's most extraordinary roads were constructed as military or political adventures. The twisting road that climbs up from Dublin's southern suburbs into the burnt brown peat of the Wicklow Hills is part of a military road constructed by the British over two hundred years ago to bring a touch of law and order to wayward rebels in the hills. Similarly, in the first half of the eighteenth century, General George Wade had constructed some magnificent mountain roads in Scotland, again more with dominion than communication in mind. As he put it in his 1724 report to King George I, a few decent highways through the glens and over the

hills would allow the sovereign to keep in check the aberrant behaviour of a folk whose "notions of virtue and vice are very different from the more civilised part of mankind."

Much more recently, the Transfăgărășan Highway, constructed in Ceaușescu's Romania in the 1970s, was more about politics than straightforward communication. And around the fringes of the former Soviet Union, there are no end of specially constructed roads that tell a tale of relations between the distant capital and far flung parts of an empire. Guest contributor, [Laurence Mitchell](#), has been exploring a classic of its kind, the Georgian Military Highway.

What a glorious spot this valley is! All around it tower awesome mountains, reddish crags draped with hanging ivy and crowned with clusters of plane trees, yellow cliffs grooved by torrents, with a gilded fringe of snow high above, while down below the Aragvi River embraces a nameless stream that noisily bursts forth from a black, gloom-filled gorge and then stretches in a silvery ribbon into the distance, its surface shimmering like the scaly back of a snake.

*from 'A Hero of Our Time'
by Mikhail Yurievich Lermontov (1841)*



There is always something intriguing about roads that cross mountain ranges, especially when they connect disparate regions of far-reaching territories like the former Soviet Union. The Georgian Military Highway (*Voyenno-Gruzinskaya doroga* [Военно-Грузинская дорога] in Russian; *sakartvelos samkhedro gza* [საქართველოს სამხედრო გზა] in Georgian) is such a road: a pot-holed highway that connects Tbilisi, the Georgian capital, with Vladikavkaz (Владикавказ) in the Russian Federation territory of North Ossetia on the other side of the Caucasus. The route is much older than its name might suggest as, although the current road dates from the early nineteenth century when it was constructed by the Russians in an attempt to control troublesome mountain

tribes, the same route has existed for very much longer as a trade link across the barren Caucasus mountains, a range that boasts several peaks in excess of five thousand metres.

Perhaps because it provides access to a region that has long been considered wild and lawless, the highway has always had romantic connotations in both the Russian and Georgian imagination; Pushkin was an early traveller here, following the highway south in 1829. The landscape — formidable mountains, great defiles of gorges and isolated valleys — inspired

OPPOSITE: *the sixth-century Jvari church that stands beside the highway where the Aragvi and Mtkvari rivers converge;*
ABOVE: *the Tergi river which flows down into North Ossetia*
(photos by Laurence Mitchell)

გზა იყო უდაბური, უსახო, უპირქუბო

Tolstoy, Dumas and Gorky to feature it in their writings. The great Russian Romantic writer, Mikhail Lermontov, set his series of interlinked short stories, *A Hero of Our Time* (Герой нашего времени), around the Georgian Military Highway. And for Georgians too, there is something of the national psyche that takes succour from these mountains. One of the father figures of Georgian nationalism, Ilia Chavchavadze, now a saint canonised by the Georgian Orthodox Church, celebrated the savage freedom of the region in his patriotic manifesto, *Letters of a Traveller* (1861–1871). For Chavchavadze, as for generations of his countrymen ever since, there was something about these clefts and peaks which is intimately bound up with the whole business of being Georgian.

But the Georgian Military Highway is not just history. Even today it forms one of only three road links between Georgia and the Russian Federation. Sadly, none are officially open to holders of non-CIS passports, so western

tourists travelling the Georgian Military Highway today have to be content with exploring the stretch that lies between the Georgian capital and the Russian border.

The route begins in Tbilisi, a curious city that already seems to have something of the whiff of Central Asia about it. Just west of the city, the highway turns north at Mtskheta where the Aragvi and Mtkvari rivers converge. Mtskheta, a town whose name demonstrates a typically Georgian collision of consonants, was the capital of Iveria between the fourth century BC and the fifth century AD. It was also the location of the royal family's conversion to Christianity and the seat of the Georgian Orthodox Church until the twelfth century. As in neighbouring Armenia, Christianity came early to Georgia and as evidence of this the sixth-century church of Jvari ('cross') stands just beside the highway looking down on the confluence of the two rivers below. As its name suggests, the building is in a cruciform style, with the gaps between the arms of the cross filled with small chapels to produce a virtually square ground-plan. The Jvari church and others at Mtskheta together constitute a World Heritage Site and are one of the most out-

the Soviet-Georgian Friendship Memorial: a viewing platform built in 1983 with murals depicting Georgian history in bright colours (photo by Laurence Mitchell)



standing examples of mediaeval religious architecture anywhere in the Caucasus.

From Mtskheta north the highway climbs gradually as it follows the west bank of the Aragvi river. Thirty kilometres or so further on it descends to cross a viaduct at the head of the Zhinvali Reservoir. This is the location of another significant religious site: the late seventeenth century fortified church complex of Ananuri. In Soviet times there were tentative plans to raise the water level of the reservoir here and flood the church but local protests soon dissuaded the authorities from seeing this through.

Continuing north, the river divides at the two-street settlement of Pasaunuri to reveal its two constituent parts: the Tetri 'white' Aragvi, which the road continues to follow, and the peat-stained Shavi 'black' Aragvi that drains the mountains to the northeast. Beyond Pasaunuri the highway veers westwards to climb a series of twisting bends high above the river to eventually reach Gudauri, a ski resort village complete with an Austrian-funded sports hotel. It is a further eight kilometres to the 2379 metre Jvari Pass. Just before the pass is a large circular viewing platform that looks dizzyingly down to the river far below. The structure, built in 1983 and dedicated to Soviet-Georgian Friendship, has a seventy metre long mural stretched across its inner wall that depicts scenes from Georgian history in bright cartoon colours.

The road zigzags sharply downhill from here passing a few abandoned anti-aircraft guns along the way. At the police checkpoint at Almasiani, a rough track heads off to the left (west) from the main road to follow the Tergi river along the Truso Gorge. It is a worthwhile detour: the landscape here could almost be the lower reaches of the Himalayas, and the valley looks as if it might eventually terminate in Shangri-La. In reality it leads, only slightly less fancifully, to the breakaway territory of South Ossetia, a region of would-be secessionists who desire political unity with their kin north of the Caucasus. The gorge opens up as it progresses westwards. Velvet green hills rise sharply above a widening flood plain, and beyond these tower the snow-flecked peaks of the high Caucasus range. The valley's geology determines that water is abundant both above and below ground, and mineral



high fashion along the Georgian Military Highway: a woman selling hats (photo by Laurence Mitchell)

springs trickle through the rock in places. The water has a strong taste of chemical salts, more medicinal than refreshing, but the same could also be said of Borjomi, the state-bottled mineral water.

Truso's villages are largely empty. Many of the stone houses are roofless and churchyards, long abandoned, contain tombstones bearing Cyrillic inscriptions half-hidden in the grass. The few people that remain here are mostly Ossetians, the older men identified by the large flat caps they wear. There are a few newcomers too: further along, where the river divides and a deserted village stands on a bluff, a family are doing their best to patch up an old abandoned house. Potatoes, cabbages and onions grow in a patch of land they have cultivated beside the tent that forms their temporary shelter. Life may be hard here but nature is resplendent. Rare birds seem commonplace: a pair of lammergeiers swoop along scouring the ground for bones to shatter, their long wedge tails twisting effortlessly like rudders; a wallcreeper flutters momentarily against a scree slope, the flashing carmine of its underwing bringing to mind more a tropical butterfly than a bird. Then, another extraordinary sight is heralded by a cloud of dust



a wooden balconied house in Sno village
(photo by Laurence Mitchell)

approaching from further up the valley. It is a battered old Lada with Russian plates, towing a trailer with a wooden crate strapped to it. As it gets nearer, it becomes clear that the crate contains a forlorn-looking brown bear.

Back on the military highway the route continues north. Now the rivers all drain north, running down into North Ossetia and on through Chechnya to reach the Caspian north of Mahačkala (Махачкала). Just past the tiny settlement of Sioni, a minor road leads off east along the Sno valley. Outside the village of Sno is an outdoor sculpture park that has the heads of Georgian poets strewn around the hillside like animated glacial boulders (see front cover). The village itself has a single stone watchtower and a few attractively ramshackle wooden houses. Just beyond the village, lurking ignominiously in the undergrowth of a walled-off orchard, lies an altogether darker figure — the decapitated stone head of a Stalin statue underneath an apple tree.

Kazbegi lies just a little further on. The town is hardly a metropolis, more just a cluster of houses that sprawl either side of the river. Its small central square has a handful of kiosks, manned by doughty *babushkas*, where the essentials of modern Georgian life — vodka, cigarettes and chocolate bars — may be purchased. The hillside to the east has a defunct Soviet-era

hotel planted next to a graveyard, while, across the river, a track meanders uphill to reach the fourteenth century Gergeti Trinity (Tsminda Sameba) church high above the town. The town takes its name from a local novelist and poet, Alexander Kazbegi, who lived here in the late nineteenth century. After studying in Moscow, St Petersburg and Tbilisi, and a brief career as a shepherd, he went on to write plays and novels before succumbing to the insanity that accompanied him to the grave. His name has also been given to the handsome mountain — actually an extinct volcano — that is visible from the town when the weather is clear. Mount Kazbek, at 5047 metres, is the highest point in this part of the Caucasus range. The Ancient Greeks believed that Prometheus was chained here

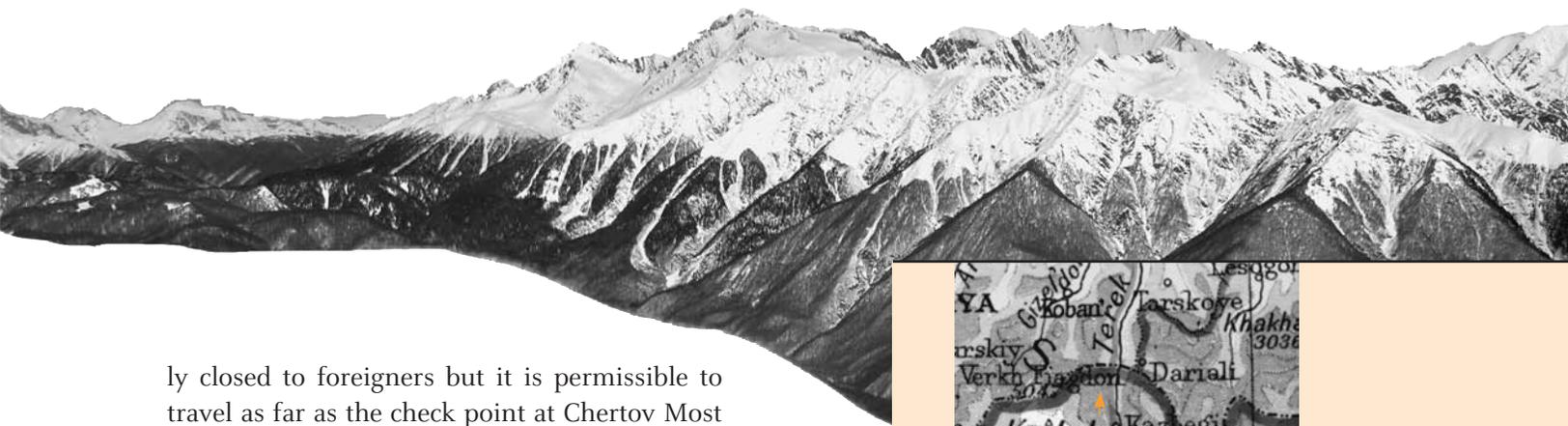
for stealing fire from the gods but most Georgians are more familiar with the mountain's image decorating the label of one of the country's best-selling bottled beers.

Nowadays, Kazbegi is rather run down, hard hit by the slump in the market gardening industry that gave the place some sort of income. Greenhouses that once grew tomatoes, pepper and cucumbers now stand empty, as the Georgian government has upped fuel prices and the greenhouse owners in Kazbegi can no longer afford to provide heating. For years, people survived here by taking produce to market across the border to Vladikavkaz. The demise of the greenhouses, plus the tense situation on the border, which was closed for days in the wake of the Beslan school siege in 2004, mean that 2006 is going to be a lean year in Kazbegi.

The highway continues north from Kazbegi to Vladikavkaz in the Russian autonomous republic of North Ossetia. The border is strict-

travel hints

Direct buses and *marshrutkas* (minibuses) from Tbilisi's splendidly chaotic Didube bus station run as far as Kazbegi. The 150 km journey takes three to four hours, and the *marshrutkas* in particular offer the prospect of a white knuckle ride. Brave drivers may consider car rental, while another option are the excellent tours offered by Caucasus Travel (see www.caucasustravel.com).

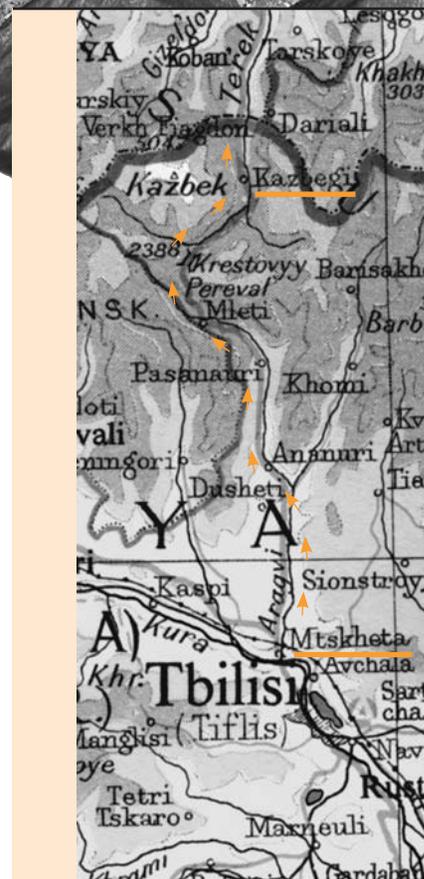


ly closed to foreigners but it is permissible to travel as far as the check point at Chertov Most (Чертов Мост). Leaving Kazbegi behind, the road squeezes between the narrow granite cliffs of the Dariali Gorge before it plunges underground through an unlit road tunnel. Bizarrely, a few horses, long abandoned by their owners, have taken up residence here. The horses appear wild and wraithlike caught in the cold white glare of headlights and gallop spiritedly ahead of each vehicle that passes through. It is as if they are playing a game of their own invention — more in fun than panic.

Leading up to the border post, a sorry line of trucks stretches back for a couple of kilometres. The drivers, unshaven in slippers and shell-suits, sit outside their cabs disconsolately smoking and brewing tea to pass the time. The Russian guards at the checkpoint are mostly blond-haired, blue-eyed boys in oversized hats; they are, perhaps, only seventeen years old but look even younger. They seem nervous and tight-lipped but they could have come off far worse in a lottery that might equally have had them fighting in nearby Chechnya.

Back in Kazbegi, the caged bear from the Truso Gorge makes another appearance. Its kidnappers have parked up in the town square and are attending to business before driving the unfortunate animal over the border to its uncertain fate in Russia. Understandably, the bear looks thoroughly miserable as inquisitive villagers surround the crate to poke at it. With decapitated despots, feral horses roaming free in tunnels and Russian bears reduced to mere objects of curiosity, how many more symbols of post-Soviet turmoil might we find in this extraordinary land at the far edge of Europe?

Laurence Mitchell is a regular contributor to hidden europe. To find out more about his work, visit his website at www.laurencemitchell.com.



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the Georgian Military Highway (marked by arrows) with the towns of Kazbegi and Mtskheta (underlined) (scale 1:1.5m)

troublesome tribes

CONTEXT

If Russia's intent in building the Georgian Military Highway was to bring peace and harmony to the Caucasus region, then the endeavour was a conspicuous failure. For a few years after the Russian revolution, the republics of the north Caucasus were united in the so-called Soviet Mountain Republic. Nowadays, they are clannish fiefdoms that bicker between themselves and, particularly in the case of Chechnya, with Russia. The Highway itself is safe for ordinary travel from Tbilisi to the Russian border, but travellers should not venture into the border areas, or into South Ossetia, a troubled region of Georgia where political separatists find succour from Ossetians across the border in Russia. ■