

Discovering Georgia –the country, not the state!

September 1, 2006

August is a time for vacations in Armenia and because I'm in Armenia now, I decided to go on a little trip myself. Since January, I had been promising my Georgian students at the Agribusiness Teaching Center (ATC) I'd visit their country again. (I visited another Individual Volunteer in Mission Marcia Evans for Thanksgiving 2005 when she was in Tbilisi after living with me together in Yerevan.) So I packed my bag and headed north for a one-week visit to a whole new world.

By marshutka (15-passenger van), it's about a six-hour ride when you consider at least a half-hour stop so the driver can eat a little horavats (grilled pork) or kebob (ground meat on a skewer.) You also have to factor in at least an hour at the Armenian-Georgian border so passports and luggage can be checked and stamped.

From there, it's just another hour and a half until you find yourself winding your way through the city streets of the Georgian capital of Tbilisi. Everything from the architecture and lay-out of the city to the way people dress and the alphabet on the signs is different from Armenia!

Just before I boarded the marshutka in Yerevan, I realized that I really have never traveled to a foreign country alone – except when I first came to Armenia two years ago! I was a little scared, but I friends here who encouraged me, my cell phone in my pocket, ATC students Nino and Nana Olgesashvili at the other end to welcome me, and a deep trust that God would give me strength to make the trip. All proved invaluable!

Nino met me at the bus station and we took another one-hour trip in two different vans to get to her house on the far end of Tbilisi. Nestled against a 15-story or so apartment building was the Olgesashvili's unfinished – inside and out – brick house surrounded by at least a seven-foot-tall solid metal fence. Stepping into it was wonderful! The courtyard surrounding three sides

of the house was filled with flowers, vines, a fig tree and other delights! Outside the gate, around the corner and down a small lane – shared by people and roaming cows alike – was the family garden filled with the same fruits and vegetables we'd see in Wisconsin.

We ate a little, rested and ate some more. (Whether in Armenia or in Georgia, eating and eating are a MUST!) The girls, their mom and I also walked away from the apartment buildings clustered in the same area, up a big hill and I was surprised with a sight reminiscent of a place like Colorado. There was a lake at the foot of some mountains, a small village climbing up the mountain side, a Georgian Orthodox Church cross and a glorious orange and deep blue sunset.



Nana in the courtyard area.





After sleeping at a friend's house in the adjacent apartment, the girls and I spent the next day traveling to the Goodwill (pronounced Good-vill) supermarket. It's like a big American supermarket with everything under one roof. A small luxury I definitely wanted to give myself – and a sure source of finding things like cranberry juice and Kraft mayonnaise as well as Miracle Whip. (I haven't opened them yet, though, to see if they taste the same as their American-made counterparts.)

Gaga with a gift for his "favorite" teacher!

That evening, ATC student Gaga Nikabadze took me to lake high above Tbilisi where we sat under the stars and talked about his summer internship. All ATC students had internships for about eight weeks, and all had stories to tell. We also just sat and looked at all the city lights that stretched for miles. Tbilisi is a long, thin city compared to Yerevan, which is more circular.

The next morning, it was time for a family birthday party honoring one of Nino's and Nana's cousins – except that he's in New Jersey right now. So I was sort of the stand-in. By subway and then mini-van, we traveled about an hour or so to a village to meet the rest of the family. Then we – and a live goat someone brought – piled into three or four cars and a van (I presume the goat was in the van.) There were good dishes, silverware, baked breads and covered bowls of food packed, too, amid babies and tatiks (grandmas) and dangling limbs crammed into corners of the car so everyone would fit.

It was a four-wheeling adventure into the forest about 30 minutes away. Up steep gravel roads cut through pine forests, we finally pulled into a small parking lot of what turned out to be a beautiful church nestled just above the trees. Nino explained it was ancient and, during wars, people from the surrounding areas would find refuge in it. The air was cool and the smells from the forest again reminded me of Wisconsin. The church held such history – and power. Peering inside – I didn't have a skirt on so it would have been impolite to go all the way in – showed walls painted with saints, Jesus and prophets from the Bible amid icons, burning candles and praying women.

We walked up a short hill to join those relatives – mostly men – who didn't go

into the church. Tatik was already scrubbing a big pot and I noticed the lamb had been skinned and was in the process of being gutted. We were having a barbecue; however, unless Armenia, this fresh lamb would be boiled in the pot. A long table just off from the butchering area was quickly laid out with just a few foods to nibble on – sweet breads, cakes, a few little salads. I was full by





then and crawled under a tree on a blanket with Nino for a little rest – while most of the other women re-set the table for the big meal!

By the time I sat up, there was so much food on this table that you couldn't find a spot for even one more grape! The toasts began and the Georgian men stood, with a horn filled with wine in their hand, to deliver a small dissertation. OK, it wasn't quite that long, but Georgians are definitely known for the length of their toasts! While I didn't make a toast, some were said for me and I also had the great "honor" of being offered one of the sheep testicles. Of course, I didn't

ask nor did I really want to know what it was before I took a bite. It's more palatable that way. Later Nino told me that women usually do not get such an honor. I think it was the fact that I was filling in for the missing cousin in New Jersey that I got such a prize! Plus, everyone says Georgians love Americans – ever since President Bush visited the country about 18 months ago. I try to be a good, polite American and appreciate the big as well as the little things people offer!

At one point, I was full and needed a little walk. I heard some beautiful music off in the distance and went downhill to the church to listen as well as feel the Spirit in this place and at that time. It calmed my soul – and my stomach – and filled me with contentment. To be taken in by complete strangers who don't know a lot about you and cared about so much, it overwhelmed me. And I just kept thinking about how much my life has changed and been changed in these past few months.

Yet, the adventure of discovering Georgia and seeing my students was not over. Nino and I got into one of the early-departure cars and headed back to the village, where we caught the mini-van back into Tbilisi as well as the subway to the train station. It was time to head to Batumi and the Black Sea to visit more students – and swim!

The train ride would have been great – it started great. The ticket-taker was Armenian and the first person I could talk to directly to give Nino a rest from translating into Georgian. The police officer on the platform knew Nino and I were going to Batumi because his nephew – Guladi Tkhalishvili – is one of my students and told his uncle to look for us. As the train started, we met two Spanish guys – one who lives in Georgia and works for the International Red Cross in Abkhazia and one who lives in Dublin, Ireland, and works for a construction company. We visited awhile because Nino is especially interested in visiting Abkhazia sometime. It was the site of a vicious war after the break-up of the Soviet Union. She's heard stories, but wants to see it herself.



Well, the train windows didn't open in our sleeper compartment and to get air from the ones in the hall meant we'd have to leave the door open all night – which we didn't want to do. It was so hot that neither of us as well as a mother and daughter in the other bunk could sleep at all. The Armenian ticket-taker had fallen asleep and wasn't available to switch the air conditioning back on after each stop between Tbilisi and Batumi! By morning, all I wanted was to jump in the Black Sea to cool off and refresh myself!

We rode into town with the Spanish guys and washed up in a restaurant we found open at about 7 in the

Jaba's brother and his grandmother.

morning! Then we walked to a small park to wait for Jaba Putkaradze to pick us up...because we couldn't get in touch with Guladi. A few minutes after getting into Jaba's car and sitting in traffic, we ran out of gas! Jaba ran down to the station for a plastic soda bottle filled with fuel, but then it wouldn't start. So Nino and I pushed the BMW car to the station, where some men in a truck got out to help Jaba!

After four-wheeling up some mountain roads, we pulled into a gated yard and some of Jaba's family! It all reminded me of times in Jamaica with Volunteers in Mission teams from Wisconsin. The mountains were cool with the same terrain and some of the same vegetation. The big, brightly painted houses dotted the mountain sides and farm animals could be heard and smelled. We ate a little, rested, grabbed our swimsuits and headed to the beach.

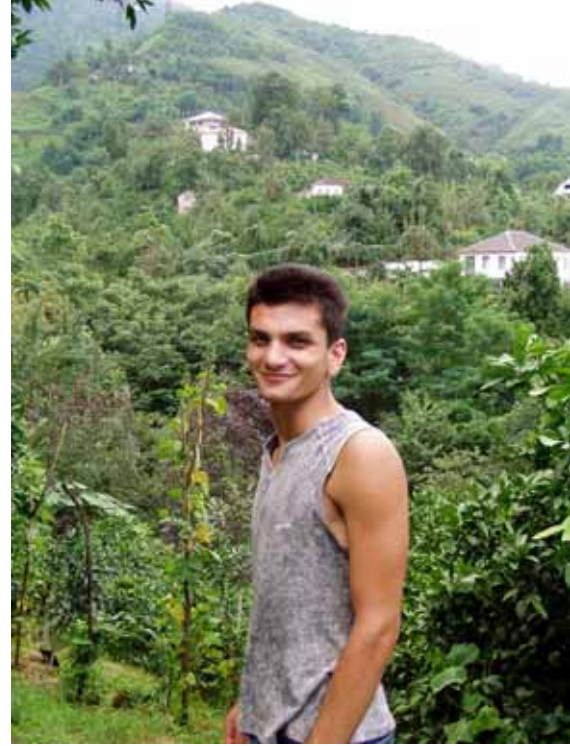
We all agreed we wanted to make these few days easy and fun. So we sat on the beach, swam with new ATC student Ilia Gogichaishvili and some of his friends, ate traditional Georgian foods with "super senior" ATC student Nodari Putkaradze and drank Georgian wine and beer. In the evening, we'd walk a little, look at a few sights such as a water fountain that changed light and patterns to the beat of mostly

American songs. We swam a little at night and then lay on the rock beach to dry ourselves while listening to a rock concert – in Georgian or Russian – off in the distance. Nino and I just relaxed, while

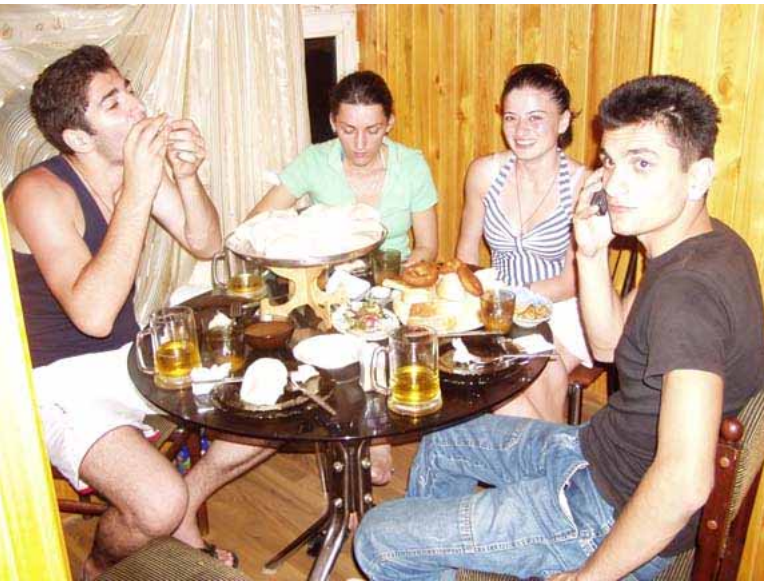
Jaba got to spend a little extra time with his new girlfriend, who he thinks could become his wife but not until they both finish university – in about four years. However, nothing is official yet so they don't spend much time alone nor would Theo (tay-o) think of coming with his

Nodari showing us the finer way to eat kinkali, a pasta pocket filled with meat, spices and lots of juice!

It was again while lying on the rock beach at night, feeling the wind, listening to the surf and people talking as they walked by that I was filled with a strength and courage. I was in awe – of myself. Here I was in a country where I didn't know all but two words – how to say hello and what to say before taking a drink of wine. I was at the Black Sea, talking to these young people, thinking about life and



Jaba in his mountainside garden



Nodari showing us the finer way to eat kinkali, a pasta pocket filled with meat, spices and lots of juice!



Ilia (center) and friends with us in the shade



*Guladi (far left) finally showed up for dinner.
Nodari, friend and brother to another ATC student Misha
(who doesn't speak English) and Nino were there, too, of course!*

knowing that I had made the right decision to return to this region of the world to serve others.

Often, my students or some of my friends or even complete strangers I meet at a family table will toast me, for being here as a volunteer, for trying to make a difference, for making a difference. They hold me in such esteem and I remain humbled by it. In fact, sometimes I start to cry because I can feel inside myself how important it is to them. Not me as much as the idea of someone caring so much and trying so hard

to help change lives.

We spent Saturday about 15 kilometers west of Batumi in a little border-town area called Sarpi. About a third of a mile from where we were you could see a small white building as well as a mosque spiral marking your entrance into Turkey. The beach area definitely looked like Jamaica with its rocks from which we could jump into the warm water, the clear blue water, the densely treed mountains running right into the water. It was glorious!

And by Sunday, we only had about two hours on the beach because we needed to buy me a new swimsuit (the one from home is now about five sizes too big!), save a little more to eat and coffee with "super senior" ATC student Gia Lominadze meeting up with us before catching the van back to Tbilisi so I could catch the other van on Monday to get back to Yerevan! By the time I got back to my apartment on Artsakh Street, I was rested and had fulfilled my promise to my Georgian students.

More importantly, I felt affirmed in the fact that my life is evolving into something completely different from what I had ever imagined. I really think that getting so wrapped up in planning and worrying about "what if" will not help me as I continue to walk this path. God has filled me with the Holy Spirit and God is looking out for me. I might not go in the direction others want me to go or do things exactly as they would do them. But my heart is pure in its desire to serve and I am gaining more courage and strength after spending so much time alone and using it to develop a closer relationship with God.

I went to Georgia to discover all the things my students had talked about in their speeches. What I really discovered was a better sense of myself. And that is the most overwhelming part about serving others. They keep thanking me for what little I can do when it is I who must say over and over again

THANK YOU because of what you give to me and add to my life!



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