



September 9, 2019

THE ROCKY ROAD TO MESTIA

Our first foray into the Caucasus Mountains was only a preview of what was to come. Once we had returned to Tbilisi from Stepantsminda, there wasn't much down time before we were to head out again. Except, why even come back to Tbilisi if we're planning on staying in up in the mountains anyway?

Well, let's look at a map for a minute here.



Stepantsminda, our first destination in the mountains, is in Khevi, almost due north from Tbilisi. This puts it east of South Ossetia. Our second mountain destination, a town called Mestia, is in a region called Svaneti, which is to the *west* of South Ossetia. There's no crossing that border from the Georgian side; it's almost another Russian state/oblast at this point. The logistics of entering South Ossetia are complex enough as is when going from Russia, and they're impossible from Georgia.

Furthermore, Mestia is actually closer to Abkhazia than Ossetia. In order to get there, we actually had to get really close to the Abkhazian border. We had applied for visas to Abkhazia and unfortunately didn't get them, so this was as close as we were going to get. I think I blew my budget of visa luck on Turkmenistan.

Because of Mestia's location, a day trip like the one we made to Stepantsminda just isn't possible. So we planned several days there, delving deeper into that part of the Greater Caucasus. But first, we actually had to *get* there.

ANGER MANAGEMENT

The first step on the route to Mestia is by train. There's other ways to do it, namely by marshrutka, but we elected to take the train. It's only 20 USD for a second class seat in a fast train, so just do that. There's a night train option to Zugdidi, but I can't imagine being on a train that long for such a short ride. It took a little less than five hours to make it from Tbilisi to Zugdidi.

Things didn't get interesting until we got to Zugdidi and were trying to work out our way to Mestia. I've been talking about *marshrutkas* since I got to Kyrgyzstan, but I'm not sure that I've shared anything about *why* they're such an adventure.

Quick recap — marshrutkas are the minibuses that zigzag all over the former USSR from Ukraine to Kyrgyzstan. And lemme tell ya — marshrutka drivers are some impassioned people. At a market in Osh, I watched a brawl that started with two drivers and ended with at least five. That was a little amusing, but I had never really witnessed a legitimate fight before (except for a drunken scuffle in the courtyard below my apartment window in Kathmandu), so I didn't know what to think.

Here in Zugdidi, though, was an argument blown to epic proportions. No punches were thrown nor shoves given, but the anger was palpable. Never have I seen the vein in someone's forehead and neck bulge so much. Georgian expletives flew. Fistfuls of cash and change were thrown to the ground to be collected by a lucky bystander. Every so often, our driver (the instigator and primary belligerent in this fight) would come back to our marshrutka and prep for the journey into the high mountain roads.

First, he came and put the keys in the ignition and turned on the bus. Then he went back to resume his tirade, re-integrating the other drivers who seemed to care a little less. He returned to us and stuck his head in the window with a smile, though his forehead still glistened with anger sweat.

"Yes, good, we leave soon!"

He undid the parking brake and chased down his foe to resume their fight. An anxious restlessness began to rise in our fully-packed bus. One couple in the back decided they didn't want such an angry driver to bring them into the mountains, and began to crawl over the bags that packed the aisle. Meanwhile outside, our driver had a finger pointed in the face of another, his other hand clenching a fistful of cash and waving it around. He held it above his head, eyes wide and spit flying, waving it around. The couple was halfway down the aisle, clumsily falling forward next to me. I looked at them, and they looked at me, eyes wide.



Outside, our driver's fight had reached its climax. We looked again to see that fistful of cash make one more circular wave before he spiked it to the ground, bending at the waist to put his whole body behind it. He stood again, staring down his opponent, red-faced as his cash fluttered slowly to the ground. Then he turned on his heel and marched back to the bus while the other drivers shrugged and collected the money. I'm *pretty* sure that was most of our bus fares.

As he approached, the couple froze and realized this time he was going to start driving. They started crawling over the bags faster, eyes fixed on the door. He got in the driver's seat as they got within arm's reach of the door. After dabbing the sweat off his forehead and taking a deep breath, he looked back.

"Mestia, yes?"

The couple tried to protest.

"We would like to get off!"

He laughed and the door locked with a loud *thunk*. Then we were off to Mestia and the couple who had been *that* close was tumbling about in the aisle, trying to get back to their seats.

CASUALTIES ON THE ROAD TO MESTIA

Almost as soon as we set off on the bumpy road towards the mountains, Peter and I noticed something unnerving. Two German mountaineers had their ice axes strapped to the outsides of their packs, which were now precariously balanced in the overhead storage. On the bottom of each ax was a sharp metal spike, which stuck out from the bag towards the aisle. One was positioned above Peter and I. The other was directly behind the driver, aimed right for his neck. Now, nothing actually happened with these, but every bump made them tilt towards their possible targets precariously. We wanted to relax and enjoy the scenery, maybe nap, but we couldn't take our eyes off them for several hours, reaching up to steady the bag we could reach every time a bump jostled it.

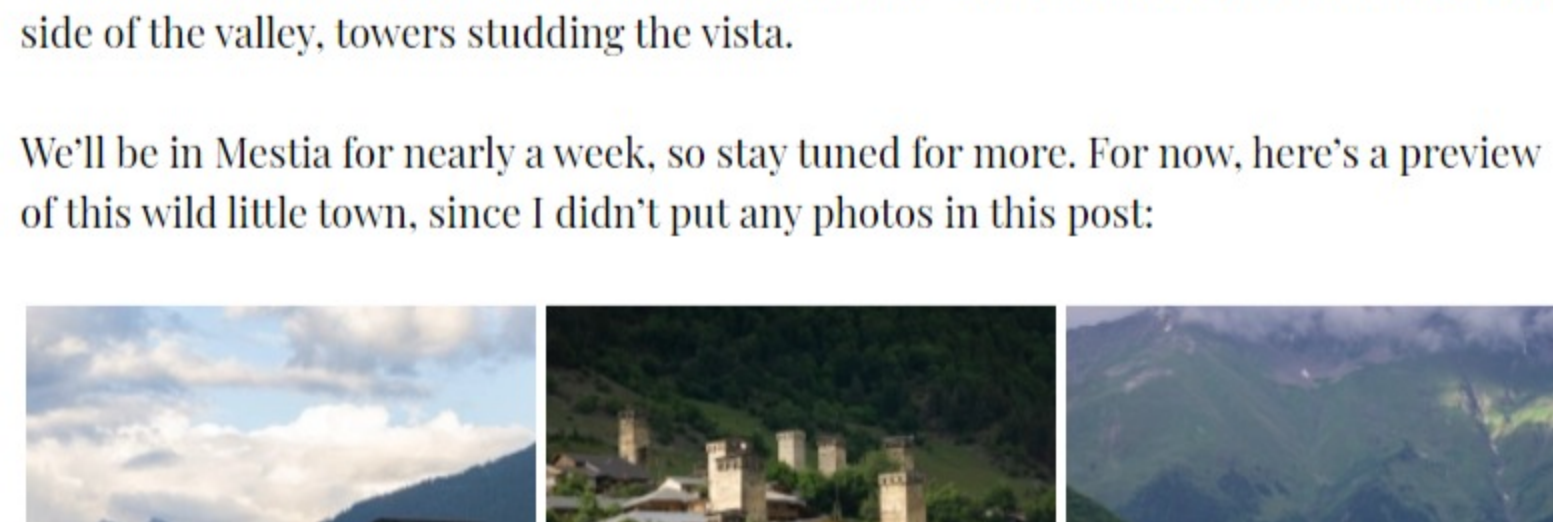
Once it became apparent that the axes weren't a threat, we started to relax. The winding mountain roads had other plans.

After about an hour of fast twisting and turning, the first vomit came. Not from either of us, thankfully, but I was admittedly close by the time we got to Mestia. For the rest of the drive, this poor kid was leaned out the window, looking down the steep cliffs to the river below, waiting for his next round of carsickness. After another period of time, he was sharing with a woman who had her toddler stuck halfway out the window with the same issue.

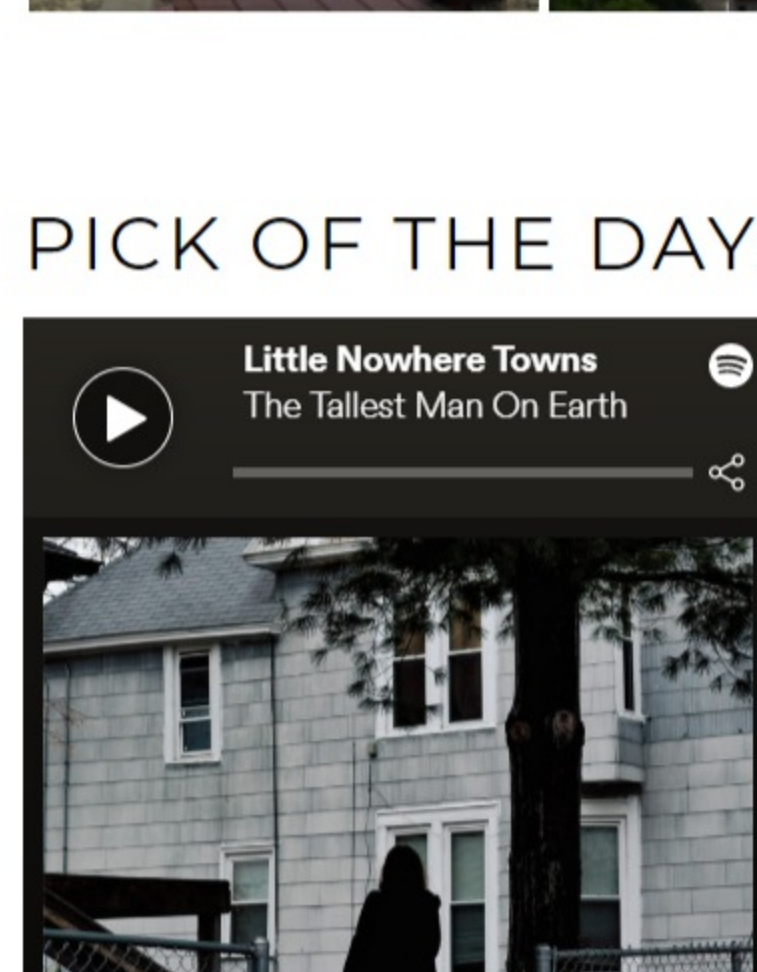
The road wound on through the mountains, which were becoming steeper and more dramatic. Elevation-wise, the Caucasus are hardly the highest mountains in the world, but they sure are among the most spectacular. The air got colder and the clouds closer. The snow-dusted ridges were what felt like an arm's reach away, the raging river of the valley hundreds of meters below.

Mestia is in Upper Svaneti, which up until relatively recently, wasn't exactly *accessible*. Even with a paved road that goes straight to the town, it's not for the faint of heart. Our driver, impassioned though he may have been, was an expert. We came rolling into Mestia in early evening when the sun was low in the sky. The town sprawled across the side of the valley, towers studding the vista.

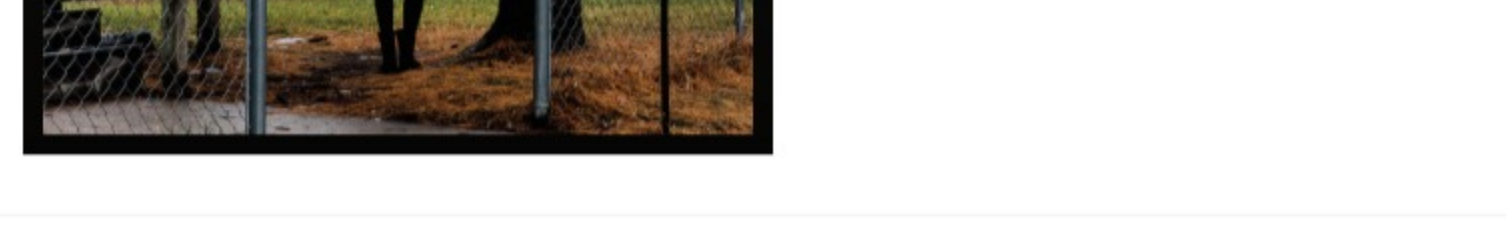
We'll be in Mestia for nearly a week, so stay tuned for more. For now, here's a preview of this wild little town, since I didn't put any photos in this post:



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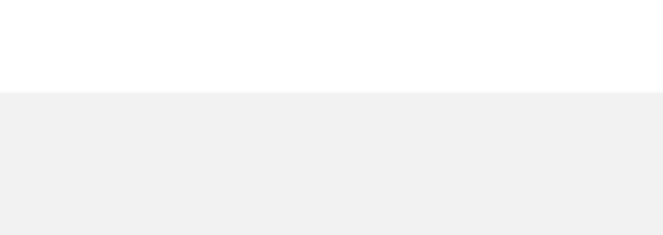
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3 THOUGHTS ON "THE ROCKY ROAD TO MESTIA"



September 9, 2019 at 5:27 pm

wow! some wild adventurer you are! yep, you got me hooked!

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