Skiing In Georgia (No Sweet Tea and Peaches Here)

Contributed by Sven Brunso

In “Conflict Powder” (October, 2012) Sven Brunso explores the backcountry potential of the Republic of Georgia. While you’ll have to see the issue for the full story, Brunso was kind enough to prepare the basic travels tips that any non-Russian-speaking skier will need to visit the Caucasus Mountains.
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Travel tips for skiing in the Republic of Georgia

The Republic of Georgia is slowly emerging from its 2008, armed conflict with Russia over a barren swath of the Caucasus Mountains known as South Ossieta. This hotly contested zone is home to political fireworks and loaded with massive, skiable peaks that puncture the sky like pearly white incisors.

Getting There:

Daily flights from the United States to Tbilisi, Georgia (TBS) via Munich from United and Lufthansa. Use a shuttle to transfer from Tbilisi airport to Gudauri Travel. The distance is about 120km, and the trip takes two hours. It is best to have your transportation to/from Gudauri arranged before landing in Tbilisi as the communication with travel companies at the airport can be challenging due to the language barrier.

Money: The Georgian currency is the Lari. A U.S. dollar will exchange for approximately 1.65 Georgian Lari. Exchange your money in Tbilisi (at the airport or in the city) before going to Gudauri. There are ATM's in Gudauri but they don’t always have money in them. For most products, prices in Georgia are lower than those in the U.S.

Avalanche Info: Avalanche info is not easily available. Book a guide (info below) for updates on conditions and endless touring options in Gudauri and the Caucasus Mountains.

Language: Very few people in Gudauri speak English. The ski guides are the mostly fluent in English and can speak well enough to cover the basics. There are a few young people in Gudauri that have recently learned some English at the university in Tbilisi, but the older generations only speak Russian and Georgian.

Lodging: Hotel Gudauri Hut or Hotel Truso.

Winter pricing is around $60 (USD) per person/night including breakfast and dinner.

Backcountry Guide Service: Gia Apakidze is your man, certified by the International Federation of Mountain Guides Associations (IFMGA, Switzerland) and the Georgian State School of Mountain Guides. Apakidze has fourteen years of guiding experience in Gudauri area. For more information visit Gudaurihut.com

Caption: The Caucasus Mountains are loaded with massive peaks, many taller than 16,000 feet. Backcountry options are simply endless in the area surrounding Gudauri. [Photo] Sven Brunso

Skiing: The Gudauri Ski Area has six lifts including two high-speed quads and a brand new gondola. The resort has about 3,000 vertical feet of lift-served and the sidecountry access is immense. Countless backcountry touring options are available just past Gudauri along the Georgian Military Highway.

Reading: Visit gudauri.travel and gudauri.info for updates on weather and snow conditions

Must Do: Be sure to spend a couple days at the end of the trip in capital city of Tbilisi (pop. 1,500,000) to experience the history, food and culture. Walk the old city and explore ancient Orthodox churches and the old town. Lodging at the Holiday Inn Tibilisi. A Tbilisi taxi ride from the Holiday Inn to the old town (about 5 miles) costs three dollars.

Tips: It is worth hiring a guide in the city of Tbilisi to learn about the history and culture. English-speaking guides are available (exploregeorgia.com) and can take you to the best local restaurants and get you to places such as the Dry-Bridge market to buy local crafts.

I found the people of Georgia to be very honest and felt very safe throughout the trip. At one time Georgia was considered one of the most corrupt countries in the world, but the Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili has completely reversed this trend and made Georgia a model nation. Tbilisi is a city of 1.5 million people so there is crime, but I felt safe throughout my travels

The people in Georgia are still getting used to the idea of foreign visitors. The government is actively promoting tourism, but this country went many years without any outside tourists so they still seem shy when dealing with foreigners. With my blond hair and blue eyes, I stood out and people, while friendly, came across as a bit reserved. The locals that we did spend more time with opened up and were quite friendly.

For the whole story on skiing in Georgia, check out“Conflict Powder” in the October, 2012 issue. Subscribe today to get the issue or pick it up on newsstands during October.
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