

Ski-touring in Georgia

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SKI-TOURING IN GEORGIA

In the last week of March 2017, a colleague from Princeton and myself went for a week of ski-touring in Georgia. After meeting up at the stop-over airport of Munich, we flew directly to the capital Tbilisi, which we visited on our first day. Tbilisi is a pleasant, walkable capital with exciting old and new buildings and tasty, often cheese-based dishes. We particularly liked the traditional cheese-filled bread Khachapuri and the candle-shaped candy called Churchkhela, less so the wine, which many say was invented in Georgia. For the end of the first day, we had pre-arranged a transfer for the slightly over two hours journey from Tbilisi to our base camp in the Gudauri ski resort.

Gudauri is based in the Caucasus area, along the Georgian military road to North

Ossetia in Russia, just before the 2,400m-high Jvari Pass behind which the 5,033m high Mt. Kazbek is located. Together with the more remote area of Svaneti, Gudauri is one of Georgia's two most suitable areas for ski-touring. We had picked Gudauri over Svaneti due to the shorter drive and more infrastructure, which seemed advantageous for our first trip to Georgia. We also thought that in Gudauri it would be easier to meet other ski-tourers. The drawback was that while Gudauri is practical for ski-touring, it consists mainly of hotels without much of a traditional town centre. It is also popular as a base for climbing Mt. Kazbek. However, when we were there, conditions on Kazbek were said to be suboptimal and we would have had to spend most of the week on the other side of the Jvari pass to

Mountains beyond Gudauri (photo Christoph Basten)



acclimatize, so we chose to focus on single-day trips from Gudauri.

Thanks to helpful suggestions from Alex Oswald whom I had met through the AACZ and who had ski-toured Gudauri on her bike trip from Zurich to Beijing, it was not difficult to figure out possible tour options. At the same time, with only large-scale hiking maps and not very detailed weather reports, we found it difficult to make sufficiently reliable judgements on the avalanche risks on the different routes. Consequently, we started with two clearly safe tours on our own but then joined the local "Wild Guru" guided group for several days. Most of Wild Guru's tours consisted of driving us up to near the Jvari pass, hiking a little from there, skiing down one of the many valleys on the other side, and then being picked up by car again. That implied less walking than

we would have liked, but it did result in a lot of great skiing thanks to Wild Guru's local knowledge. Nationality-wise, the group was quite mixed with participants from Finland, Romania, Slovakia and Germany.

On one of the tours we did on our own, we also met an older ski-tourer from Austria who told us how he had participated in building the ski resort during Soviet times, when he had been able to heli-ski exciting hills on the other side of the valley, an area that now belongs to South Ossetia. In 2017, that area was off limits for ski-touring due to the presence of Russian military. Interestingly, we found that despite the nearby border with South Ossetia, an area debated between Georgia and Russia, many skiing tourists as well as one of our guides were Russian and they all reported to get along well with the Georgians in Gudauri.

Walking up from Gudauri (photo Christoph Basten)



On the way back to Tbilisi, we stopped in the former capital and nice old town of Mtskheta and organized a last day trip to the old cave monasteries of Davit Gareja, nearby the border with Azerbaijan. Overall this was a trip we would clearly recommend: The skiing quality is not necessarily

better than in Switzerland, but is excitingly different, and the trip allows one to combine ski-touring with the exploration of new sights, food and people.

Christoph Basten

POWDER EXPLORATION IN SIBERIA

Siberia is known for its massive trove of natural resources, whose exploration started about five centuries ago. Its most precious resource however, the “powder snow”, was discovered only a few years ago and until today its exploitation is limited to few places within Siberia’s enormous territory. In November 2017, a group of seven enthusiasts, which I was lucky to be a part of, went to one of those places called Mamai, to get a taste of Siberian powder skiing. Powder skiing at the beginning of November? That sounded quite early, but Kostya, the local guide who knows the area very well, assured us that we should not worry and rather pack our broadest skis.

The Mamai gorge is located next to Lake Baikal. It was discovered by locals a few years ago. It all started very wild and simple, when people used to come on snowshoes or by foot. They had to carry their skis, snowboards and other equipment on their back and set-up tent villages. Nowadays it’s “Siberian luxury”, with a few small winter huts built in the gorge by enthusiasts to accommodate guests in winter. The huts are very simple, with a stove and eating area on the ground floor and sleeping places un-

der the roof, where our tallest team member could barely sit. Recently, even a Russian sauna hut called “banja” opened its doors to meet European needs for higher hygienic standards. So that nobody stays too long in the cozy banja, the Russian sauna ceremony includes not only hot vapors and cold snow-diving, but also a brutal massage with a birch broom.

Our journey started in Zurich, from where we first flew to Moscow to get our passports thoroughly checked and where some of us participated in a challenge called “get your avalanche backpack through the Russian customs”. After all was successfully completed, we could relax and cool down on the airplane to Irkutsk, where we were warmly treated by the flight crew who supplied our group with unlimited portions of ice-cream. Ice-cream seems to be THE thing in winter in Siberia. We bet you can warm yourself up eating ice-cream when temperatures drop below -25 °C.

When we landed in Irkutsk, the closest city for transit to Mamai, it was still hard for us to believe that there should be any skiable snow around. We weren’t even able to mea-