



IN THE LAND OF A THOUSAND TOWERS

Stunning scenery and unique traditions are among the attractions of **Georgia's** mountainous Svaneti region – and new flights and roads are making this remote region accessible to tourists, says **Kalpana Sunder**

Crumbling churches, carpets of yellow daisies, buttercups and azaleas, and wild horses grazing in emerald green pastures against the backdrop of the gargantuan Caucasus mountains, the Svaneti region in the northwest of Georgia is known to only a few. The region is a series of rustic hamlets and hiking trails dotted with medieval watchtowers 20 metres high, called *koshkebi* that were built between the ninth and the 13th centuries, to fortify the town and protect them from enemies and neighbouring clans. Georgia's appeal is growing – last year, the European country welcomed six million passengers at its three international airports, with flights increased by almost 23 per cent according to the Georgian Civil Aviation Agency, and from Asia, you fly into the capital, Tbilisi, then take a domestic flight to Mestia.

“The Svans were always independent-minded people and resisted outside control. The towers were places of refuge, during feuds and natural disasters. The number of towers and their height was an indication of the wealth of the family,” explains our local guide, Guro Alaphishvili. Because of their remote location, disputes were handled between communities and blood feuds and vendettas were common.

Thanks to their isolation from the rest of the country and its brutal winters, the Svans have a unique culture and traditions that they have guarded down the ages. The region has also served as a hiding place for precious relics and treasures, which were brought from other parts of the country for safekeeping during the Persian and Mongol invasions. After the fall of the Soviet Union, this region was lawless for some time, with bandits and criminal gangs taking refuge. But today, it's a popular place for hiking trails into the mountains.

Upper Svaneti, which has been included in the UNESCO World Heritage Site list since 1996, is one huge open-air museum. We make the five-hour drive from Kutaisi to Mestia, the main town in these parts, which is situated at a confluence of two rivers, to a backdrop of alpine meadows and snow-capped mountains. With its cobbled streets and stone towers, the town is popular with hikers, and there are small family-run hotels, cafes and restaurants set against the forbidding twin peaks of Ushba, referred to as “the Matterhorn of the Caucasus” for its attractive spire-shaped double summit. Walking up to the Margiani house museum, with its huge stone



from top left: Inside the ancient Lamaria church in Ushguli dedicated to the female deity of fertility and motherhood; old, carved wooden chest on display at the Svaneti Museum of History and Ethnography in Mestia; hiking through Ushguli, a community of five villages nestled in the mountains; inside the Margiani House Museum in Mestia



tower made of craggy stone, we meet the present owner Tamuna, who shows us the 12th-century family house or *machubi*, where a dark, cavernous hall has a central hearth and a special chair for the head of the family.

This was where the family remained marooned in the harsh winters, with women even delivering their babies in a small adjacent room.. Dappled light filters in from the windows, as I imagine how hard life must have been here. There is no chimney and stones above the hearth prevented fires. “The smoke acted like an antiseptic and that’s why the interiors are so well preserved,” Tamuna explains.

During the harsh winters, livestock would also live inside the room, the pens built around the walls acting like heaters for human beings. In the basement, we see the cellar where wine and oil were stored in clay, and a small cell or jail for those the family caught stealing or behaving fraudulently. She shows us the stone tower, reached by rickety stairs, which had secret tunnels leading to the house. This was where the young and old would take shelter in times of conflict.

At the beautifully curated Svaneti Museum of History and Ethnography, which reopened in Mestia in 2014 in a modern building, we step further back in time. On display is everything from bronze age artefacts and handwritten religious books to richly painted icons, and items bought or donated by visitors to one of the hundreds of churches that dot the mountainsides. With an incense burner decorated with scenes from the life of Christ in the fifth century, and a 13th-century painted altar cross from Venice, encrusted with pearls, this is a visual feast.

A lot of what’s on display is metalwork, icon painting and frescoes made by Svan artisans. Christianity came late to this area, and pagan traditions flourished longer. Between the 11th and the 13th century, Svaneti developed its indigenous schools of devotional art. Egnate Gabliani, a native of Mestia, established the museum, along with art historian Giorgi Chubinashvili, who persuaded the villagers to part with their church treasures.

Come evening, we walk through the main street of Mestia, which is lined with cafes and restaurants that echo with the sounds of melodious guitars and full-throated singing by local bands. Georgian Polyphonic singing is on





the UNESCO oral heritage list, and folk songs and religious hymns are sung by young men in sync, holding the audience in thrall. Guests sit at tables laden with local dishes like *kubdari*, a leavened bread stuffed with meat, onions and spices, and clap to the music.

We drive down winding roads lined with small villages, taking in wild horses in pastures and glacial streams along the way, to remote Ushguli, a UNESCO heritage site made up of five tiny villages. Situated at the foot of Mount Shkhara near the Russia-Georgian border, it's considered the highest settlement in Europe at 2,200 metres above sea level. Ushguli has remained unchanged since almost the 12th century, marooned in the wilds, far away from the rest of Georgia. You can walk, bike or go horse riding out of here to valleys, spruce-covered gorges and high peaks.

Located on a hilltop dominating the village, Lamaria is a simple but meditative 10th-century orthodox Christian church, named for the ancient Svan goddess with a dark altar lit by flickering candles illuminating the icons. From here, we take a trail to the village, crossing small guesthouses and homestays, and see horses grazing in pastures and fields of colourful wildflowers. Decrepit orange shale towers dot the landscape and an ethnographic museum housed in an old tower displays ancient icons and treasures from the area.

Svaneti is also famous for its distinctive cuisine. "Long ago, when it was difficult to carry bags of salt to this region, the locals started adding spices to salt to stretch their reserves, including



coriander, blue fenugreek, crushed red pepper, dill, marigold petals and wild caraway seed, and today each household has its own distinctive blend of Svaneti salt," explains Guro.

To get a greater understanding of the region's culture and tradition, you can take a class in woodcarving and folk music or even learn to pan for gold in rivers. One of my most memorable experiences is a cooking lesson with Lali Nikoloziani, who runs a class at her guest house in a small village outside Mestia. In an outdoor gazebo with a panoramic view of the mountains, I learned to make local dishes like *tashmijabi*, a dish made up of piping hot potatoes stirred with briny cheese; *chvishtari*, a crispy cornbread stuffed with cheese; and the meat stuffed bread that I'd already sampled, *kubdari*.

Slowly, change is coming to the villages of Svaneti with paved roads and increasing numbers of tourists flying into Mestia Airport, which saw a nine per cent increase in arrivals in 2023 compared to 2022. While visitors to this beautiful region are on the up, remote, pristine Svaneti remains largely untouched by tourism. I take back a small packet of Svanetian salt and alpine honey with me, to remind me of my sojourn in this hidden land in the heart of the Caucasus. ■

from top left: Sunset over the mountains in Mestia; cooking lessons with Lali Nikoloziani; Georgian polyphonic singing is inscribed on UNESCO's Intangible heritage list