

GEORGIA – Advice from Fulbright Alumni

The following are extracts from Fulbright Grantee Reports and are not meant to reflect the views of the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA), its cooperating agencies, or the U.S. Embassy.

Interacting with Georgians

I found Georgians generally to be very kind, patient and generous

Future Fulbrighters should realize how generous Georgian hosts can be! It is nearly impossible to pay for a dinner to which Georgian hosts invite you--in fact, it borders on the insulting if you try to do so. So, a trick to remember is to do the inviting first! In that way, the burden of paying is on you.

As a general rule in Georgia, I keep my mouth shut about anything concerning Georgia's progress as a developing country. I also do not vocally criticize perceived inefficiencies as I would in the States. I try to think of myself at all times as a guest, and hope to make myself a welcome one.

Kissing is a common greeting for friends or even close acquaintances. You see this often, so don't be surprised if you get a kiss (on the left cheek) from someone you have befriended. Yes, men kiss men!

I and some of my other foreign friends have adopted a "never say no" policy. This means that, when invited to do something, never say no (barring obvious reasons to decline such as things that may be dangerous, culturally inappropriate, etc.). Even if you are feeling overwhelmed or nervous, some of my best friends and connections, as well as some of my most "Georgian" experiences, have been made when I said "yes" to such invitations.

It is important for visitors to Tbilisi to remember that while BMWs and Mercedes are plentiful in the capital city, especially in the posh neighborhoods in which expatriates tend to live, the median family income in the country is still very low. Education levels are very high, and the Georgians are culturally very rich, but a typical Georgian household brings in less than \$400 per month.

Interacting with Expatriates

There is a small, but vibrant and helpful expatriate community enduring in Tbilisi that you should consider getting to know. Besides the social element, they will be able to help you with the myriad issues that may arise. The Caucasus Research Resource Center (www.crrccenters.org) is a great boon, with academic "Works in Progress" talks where you can meet others doing research (or just living the expat life) and get to know Tbilisi's expatriate community. Hans Gutbrod is the director of CRRC and a great resource for Fulbrights. Timothy Blauvelt is the director of the American Councils (affiliated with the US Embassy) and former Fulbright and he manages an email listserv, "Megobrebs." To join, send Timothy an email (tbildir@amcouncils.ge) and request membership. He can help connect you to language study and is a great resource for finding good translators and research assistants as well. Tbilisi State University's Center for Social Science holds frequent talks (in English) by Georgian and foreign scholars, so keep that on your radar as well (www.ucss.ge, or email Diana Lezhava dlezhava@ucss.ge). There's a "Hash House Harrier" chapter in Tbilisi, a group of bon vivant runners; in order to join, email tbilisi-hash-house-harriers@googlegroups.com. Friday evenings see a weekly expat "bayna" group in Tbilisi's famous Turkish baths (contact Blauvelt for details), which is another great way to meet others in town.

Housing

Strongly recommend arranging housing after arrival. Flats in Tbilisi are plentiful, and the quality varies tremendously. The situation surrounding the flat needs to be taken into account before inking any deal; don't just rely on an email and some jpegs. One should see if it is located on a busy street, a noisy place (lots of construction?), a safe doorway, et cetera. Opening a bank account at TBC or some other major Georgian bank might be the right answer to those with American banks that charge high fees for ATMs, exchange rates, etc.

When you meet a prospective landlord, it is important to work out details. Paying utilities is easy if you can read Georgian, as Tbilisi has instituted a system of electronic pay boxes. If you will need help with negotiating that process, make sure your landlord knows this or get some other means to do so. Come to mutual understandings about what furniture and kitchen amenities will remain in the unit, what happens if something breaks (like the furnace), who will arrange or provide for the wireless. Expect to pay more than the Georgian rate for things in general, including housing. While it is not as wheeling and dealing as a carpet bazaar, there is some limited room for negotiations in these matters.

I secured my apartment prior to arrival and it worked fine for me. (I worked with Rentals.ge, below.) Proximity to my university was key and I let other requirements slide. Plus the agent sent a driver to the airport to retrieve me and take me straight to my apartment -- a big bonus at 3:30 a.m. Use caution, however, in calculating proximity to your university as many universities have more than one building and these can be quite spread out. Be certain about the location of the building in which you will be teaching.

Rent an apartment through a realtor. If there are problems, the realtor will help solve them. (Try www.makler.ge) I had arranged for a guesthouse for the first few days and a ride from the airport (from a referral from a former Fulbright), which was extremely helpful. I also met the Peace Corps volunteers in Georgia very soon after I arrived, and their wealth of knowledge about Georgia was extremely helpful. I would encourage future Fulbrights both to meet the PC volunteers in Georgia, and to consider trying to find a host family to live with, at least for the first few months, in order to better understand Georgia and immerse themselves.

Housing in Tbilisi can be very good, but you should get on line to find a good place near where you will be working. I taught at Tbilisi State University and found a place literally next to one of the university buildings. A 5- minute commute is really nice! You can expect to pay about \$650 per month for a nice, one-bedroom place in Vake, which is probably the best neighborhood in town.

University Teaching and Research

As for teaching, if you want students to attend class, you should make attendance mandatory. I had heard that students often don't attend class, so I made class participation worth 20% of the grade. This was not sufficient to ensure attendance. A bunch came only for the exams and failed the class. Given that they have been able to pass other courses without attending class, their failure to pass my course came as a surprise to them. Another teaching tip is that cheating on exams seems to be tolerated. If you want to deter cheating, take active steps. For example: I made students sit apart from each other; administered two or three versions of an exam by rearranging the order of questions and/or the order of multiple choice options; and recruited another proctor. On the research front, the concept of

calendar appointments doesn't translate well in Georgia. The downside to this is that some appointments will be canceled and rescheduled (multiple times for some people). The upside, however, is that I was sometimes able to secure an appointment within a day or two of contacting someone. Also related to research, there is not much of a culture of scholarship at Georgian universities. Faculty are paid by the number of classes they teach so there is no incentive to engage in research. Consequently, you may not get much support for your research from your host institution. But, depending on your discipline, you might find logistical and/or moral support from the independent Caucuses Research Resource Center or the Center for Social Sciences affiliated with TSU.

I taught at the graduate level and the students were well trained in technology.

Food

While in many ways Georgia is an ideal culture for vegetarians and in some cases vegans, individuals with food restrictions should be aware that they will be strongly offered meat and other meat products when invited over to someone's house for dinner.

I have most definitely changed my diet; Georgian food is very rich and wine is abundant and expected to be drunk at every gathering.

Georgian cuisine is good and the produce you can find is spectacular. If you plan to do a lot of cooking and aren't good at estimating, bring a meat thermometer and a measuring cup for US measurements. Neither is available in country (and imprecise oven temperatures made a meat thermometer desirable).

Money and Banking

It certainly helps that prices in Georgia are so much less than in the U.S., so that for an American the price is cheap, even though for a Georgian it is not.

ATMs dispense Lari and Dollars, so don't fret if your rent is due in Dollars.

Money in the local currency (Lari) is easily obtained from ATM's located everywhere. Use an ATM affiliated with a bank (Bank of Georgia). U.S. funds can be obtained this way, too.

So far as money goes, there are ATM machines everywhere, taking instructions in English and Georgian. Getting what you need is no problem, but be certain that YOU HAVE NOTIFIED YOUR CREDIT/DEBIT CARD COMPANIES THAT YOU WILL BE CHARGING/DEBITING FUNDS IN GEORGIA. It can be a huge hassle to notify from Georgia (although it can be done), so take care of this BEFORE you leave.

There is no need to acquire a Georgian bank account. Instead, it is easy to withdraw money from any ATM with a U.S. checking card - both in USD and GEL. Individuals should be aware that, outside the capital, Georgia is primarily a cash economy; charge cards should be used for withdrawing cash, but it is difficult to find establishments that accept credit or debit cards.

I have maintained banking with my state credit union in the United States. ATMs are very common and numerous in my town, and I have had no difficulties withdrawing funds.

Local Transportation

Taxis are plentiful and relatively cheap. Some people recommend that you agree on a price before you take a cab. I did this a few times but it was awkward. After I got a sense of typical cab fares, I began to

hand over what I thought was a reasonable fare at the end of the ride, usually with a little extra in case my estimate was off. This seemed to work better for me than either trying to negotiate in advance (with limited language skills) or asking what the fare was at the end of the ride. Asking at the end seemed to imply that you were clueless and a couple of cabbies took advantage of this to insist on double the regular fare. But when I simply gave over the money, no one asked for more. A few even provided change back to me.

There are subways in Tbilisi. Buses and taxis are readily available everywhere.

Role of Women

Important also to know that women in Georgian also shoulder proportionally large burdens--they are over represented in higher education, likely to have employment in the service sector, and provide most of the child care.

Georgia, as a whole, is more conservative than the States. The role of women is more narrowly and strictly defined; women, particularly in the regions, are more limited in their interactions and lifestyle. Women, in general, often do not go places alone (especially at night), do not eat at cafes or restaurants without a companion, nor sit in parks or other recreational areas without company. Future Fulbrighters should also be aware that, as foreign women, they may attract unwanted attention from men, though this attention is generally harmless. For the Georgians, it is important to remember that dating is rarely considered casual.

Language

My first priority was to begin language lessons to increase my comfort with Georgian. Additionally, I adopted a policy of saying yes to as many activities as legality and time would allow. This policy ended up getting me invited to go camping with a group of Georgians within the first two weeks of being here. Another strategy was to engage in the academic community as much as possible.

While I was able to do most of my research in English, you need either Russian or Georgian for general day-to-day existence. I learned a little Georgian before I arrived through a "Talk Now" CD (see "web sites" , below), and found a small "Georgian Phrasebook & Dictionary" invaluable. You can buy the phrasebook at Prospero's bookstore on Rustaveli Avenue. Because many people under the age of 30 do not speak Russian, Georgian is the most useful language. A little goes a long way. Most people were incredibly patient with my language abilities (or lack thereof) and thrilled that I had bothered to learn a few words and phrases.

Google translate can now do Georgian or Russian to English translation and vice versa, a very helpful tool when you need it.

Travel Inside and Outside Georgia

In my view, the best way to get to Tbilisi is via Istanbul. That way, you avoid Munich and other northern routes that can get congested, particularly in bad weather in the winter. I also recommend that if you want to travel around the country, say from Tbilisi to Kakheti, you hire a taxi, rather than take a marshrutka (a van), because the ride will be more comfortable and probably much safer and quicker. A taxi is more expensive, of course, but the convenience is worth it.

Safety and Health Issues

Living and working in Georgia was largely comfortable and easy. This was true even as a woman traveling solo; security was not a particular concern.

The local culture is very warm and helpful. People go out of their way to help in any way they can. Crime is not a problem at all.

I have never felt as secure in a medium-large sized city as in Tbilisi. The same was true for my female colleagues. This feeling was true day or late into the night.

The primary safety issue is car accidents. People drive very recklessly and with little concern for other drivers and pedestrians. Pedestrians should not assume that they are given the right-of-way and must be very aware of their surroundings at all time. Additionally, they should be cautious about whom they ride with in a car, the condition of the vehicle itself, and wear a seat belt whenever possible.

Stray animals are probably my greatest (and possibly only) real safety concern. Though I haven't yet witnessed any strange behavior suspicious of rabies or other diseases, the animals are starved, abused, and wild, and I do my best to stay far away.

The main problems in Georgia are pollution and traffic. My experience is that most people will have some stomach illness within their first weeks of being here. People should come prepared for minor food related illness

Web sites and other helpful resources:

For housing, see www.rentals.ge and www.makler.ge. The Makler site maps out some apartments so you can get a sense of the city even though Tbilisi maps are nearly impossible to locate before you arrive. For Georgian news, see civil.ge and georgiandaily.com. The Georgian language CD is found at: <http://eurotalk.com/us/store>. See also the new iPhone and iPad app under the uTalk link on this site. Google search is the best way to find internet information. I used my home university's portal for my work.

Stay tuned to Georgian politics and news. For English language coverage, see Civil.ge, eurasianet.org, rferl.org, georgiandaily.com, to name a few.

Acquire business cards when you arrive and get your mobile number squared away. Get them with English on one side and a Georgian translation on the other. They are cheap and easy to acquire in Georgia. Expats in Tbilisi can help you find one of the many places that can do this.

There is now a private company, "USA to Georgia," that essentially serves as a mechanism for you to buy things on Amazon or some other mail order service in the US and get them to Tbilisi. The rates are fairly reasonable given the service rendered. Georgia does not have home delivery mail, but "USA to Georgia" will deliver to your home or office (or you can you pick up in their office in Saburtalo for a slightly cheaper rate).

Items to consider bringing

While many items that you may need are available or perhaps even cheaper in Georgia, there were several things that proved challenging to acquire, whether it was a matter of availability or price.

- External hard drive(s). USB flash drives are plentiful and cheap, but quality varies.
- Quality pocket knife. For a land of wine and food, Georgia is bereft of reasonable quality corkscrews, paring knives, and the like. Bring a Swiss Army Knife, and you won't regret it.
- Georgia gets cold in the winter, and quality footwear and jackets are hard to come by: bring yours.
- Bring some tchotchkes or swag from your home institution or alma mater. USB drives with your college's logo, little flashlights, key chains, whatever, just small and numerous. You will frequently be in situations where a small gift to a host will be in order.
- Carbon monoxide detector/alarm. Many heating units in Tbilisi predate Khrushchev.
- Ziploc bags.
- A Kindle or other reader that can get download books from a wireless network.
- Small LED flashlight. Because many stairwells lack lighting, many Georgians and expats carry a tiny LED light on their key ring or have one built in their mobile phone.
- The top half of a water filtration pitcher with a couple extra filters.
- Some small spice packets (McCormicks and the like). Georgian food is fantastic, but you may yearn for chili or some other comfort food from home.
- Georgian guidebooks are available but more expensive in Georgia, so bring it.
- From the pharmacy: Your favorite pain and upset stomach relief. Pharmacies ("Apoteka") are plentiful and many medications are available over the counter, but it's nice to have something familiar available. Other related items you should consider bringing rather than discovering include birth control and extra contact lenses and solution.
- Unlocked mobile or smart phone. They certainly can be purchased in Tbilisi, but if you have one, bring it. The major providers (Geocell, Beeline, e.g.) have SIM cards/plans for smart phones that work in Tbilisi and elsewhere. If your phone is not unlocked, do not bother bringing it as it will not work.