



# Off the beaten path

A long-term scouting project kicked off earlier this year, aiming to create the first Transcaucasian hiking trail across Georgia and Armenia. **Chris Fitch** hitched a ride to observe how such an ambitious undertaking can be achieved in this remote and mountainous region of the world

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRIS FITCH

**T**he odds were not in our favour. All the way up the mountain road, our questions had been met with pitying glances and shaking of heads. One elderly cattle herder, wrapped in a thick jumper and multiple layers of waterproofs, opted to just stare at the ground despondently until we left, while a young man with his head stuck out the side window of a passing van, his family squeezed into the cabin beside him, had just one word for us: *აბა* (pronounced 'ara'). No. The feeling we were heading directly into a dead end was hard to shake.

We were attempting to find a road that would enable us to successfully drive between the settlements of Gomismta and Bakhmaro in the eastern regions of the Lesser Caucasus mountains in Georgia. All summer, an expedition team led by explorers Tom Allen and Alessandro Mambelli, both residents of Yerevan, Armenia,

had been driving a Land Rover Defender (courtesy of the RGS-IBG Land Rover bursary) around the Caucasus region in search of suitable trails which could potentially be connected to form the first Transcaucasian hiking trail (TCT), running from the Georgian Black Sea coast, up to the Greater Caucasus border with Russia, and all the way down to the Armenian border with Iran.

Two days earlier, at the La Belle Verte eco lodge in the hills surrounding Batumi, a city in the Georgian region of Adjara, I'd watched Tom flip open his laptop, open Google Earth, and create a new folder entitled 'To scout: Adjara'. Since setting off on the expedition back in April, Tom and Alessandro had traversed multiple remote parts of the region - including Syunik Province in southern Armenia, and the Geghama Mountains near central Lake Sevan - places they believe could eventually form part of the TCT.

'It's about joining the dots, one section at a time,' Tom

had explained, sipping tea sweetened with a drop of local honey. Adjara was the latest of these sections, and – crucially – contains one end of the trail, on the Black Sea, where future hikers will either start or finish their journey. ‘It’d be nice if there was a really good beach,’ smiled Tom.

Our challenge, therefore, was to establish the feasibility of sending the TCT directly between Gomismta and Bakhmaro, two such ‘dots’, both with known roads connecting them to other towns along the planned route.

The next day we had set off early on a cool and drizzly morning, Alessandro running through his expedition pre-driving checks as the rest of us scrambled aboard. The Land Rover splashed through large puddles from the previous night’s storm, rainwater dripped from the trees,



OPENING PAGE: Tom Allen and the Land Rover, in the midst of exploring another unknown road across the Lesser Caucasus mountains; LEFT TO RIGHT: local residents provide essential knowledge about the best routes between settlements; cattle and their herders are the most frequent traffic encountered on Caucasus mountain roads; the remote town of Gomismta, a former Soviet resort

**OPENING UP THE MAP**

‘It’s basically Wikipedia for maps,’ is how Alessandro had explained OpenStreetMap as I’d peered over his shoulder at the lodge. ‘You edit your section of data, you submit it, and most of the uploads are live within seconds.’

Unlike the big tech giants which have taken over the mapping world, OpenStreetMap sells itself as a community-led project, supported by the OpenStreetMap Foundation, and constantly being updated by a contributing network of passionate mapping enthusiasts.

‘In urban environments, because there is more demand, and they’re more accessible, the data is usually more up-to-date,’ said Alessandro. ‘When it comes to wilder areas, in some places there is very, very little. You get to know a lot of strange remote areas and villages and access routes to valleys. There’s so much to process, you’re definitely not going to look at everything in one go. This is never-ending work.’

‘I’ve got a plug-in set up on Google Earth where I can have OpenStreetMap data styled in various different ways and overlaid on top of the image,’ Tom had explained, as we had poured over the various maps. ‘So, I can see very quickly how well mapped an area is and compare it to what I can see on satellite imagery. You can almost guess where there are going to be trails, by looking at the 3D modelling. Then you’re ready to hike it!’



Houses constructed from rough planks of wood and rusty-looking sheet metal dotted the landscape

and curious locals peered from their windows at this heavily loaded vehicle crashing past their houses.

We headed north, the surrounding land gradually switching from urban to agricultural, as we passed fruit nurseries and Georgia’s iconic vineyards. The sat-nav made a valiant yet doomed effort to issue instructions that we should ‘continue on this road towards Sajavakho-Chokhatauri-Ozurgeti-Kobuleti’.

At 10.45am, following a brief stop for some Khachapuri, a traditional Georgian dish of cheese-filled bread, we reached the Lesser Caucasus mountains. Alessandro reached up and swiped open the smartphone attached to his dashboard, opened the OSM Tracker app, and activated the installed GPS software to begin tracking our movements. We gently rode the gravel road upwards through the valley, with lush, wet and misty vegetation clinging to the steep cliff sides. Traversing along the hill road, Alessandro brought the car to a halt at the first sign of water. He hit a few buttons on the smartphone – first ‘drinking water’, then ‘medium stream ford’. A few turns later, he gently eased the car over a small bridge. Swipe, tap. ‘Bridge!’ declared Alessandro, already pulling away as the app acknowledged his voice memo.

In this way, Tom and Alessandro have collected a wide variety of data about the landscapes it is envisaged the TCT will eventually run through. After each scouting mission, all the data is imported into OpenStreetMap where it then becomes available for anyone to follow.

Despite the pessimistic messages we received during our ascent into the mountains, the existing map data of the region suggested a navigable route between Gomismta and Bakhmaro was possible. We ploughed on with cautious optimism. The altimeter clicked through 2,000m as we crested a mountain plateau, and entered

what felt like a ghost town. This was Gomismta – a half-empty settlement high over the Georgian lowlands. Houses constructed from rough planks of wood and rusty-looking sheet metal dotted the surrounding landscape and sprawled along the single road which wound its way across the hills.

‘The whole settlement is built from scrap,’ observed Beka Bukhrashvili, vice-president of the Georgian National Hiking Federation and essential liaison for the project’s work in Georgia, as we crossed a small bridge clearly hewn together from old military kit. Beka explained that the town was once, so like many others in this part of the world, a Soviet Union resort. However at this time of year, at the end of the tourist season and with snow not far away, most residents had by now taken for lower ground to wait out the winter.

We got out and hiked a narrow path through fields of wild Caucasian rhododendrons to just below the nearby 8,523ft Mt Khino. Just as we were packing up and preparing to continue our search, an old man with a lined forehead and black woolly hat emerged from the mist. Over a handful of mixed nuts, he told us of a rumour of a pass to Bakhmaro. ‘He hasn’t tried it himself, but behind the mountain there could be a really bad road,’ translated Beka, his tone clearly telling us not to get our hopes up.

‘What brought us all together on this project was a frustration at the lack of information and infrastructure on hiking in this region,’ explained Tom. ‘We’ve got to create it all from scratch.’ Central to this is working with remote communities across the region, to both create the best trail possible, and to ensure it doesn’t create conflict with locals – indeed, to ensure it is actually beneficial to them, through sustainable tourism. ‘It’s digging out all that knowledge from people’s heads,’ he added.

Back in Gomismta, we were buoyed by such local knowledge. A man carrying a whole menagerie of gardening tools outside his house pointed firmly into the mountains, claiming that the route we were searching for did exist, and was in fact fixed up just last year. At first, the deep trenches and rocky terrain on this road made a mockery of this idea. Yet, as we persisted across the cloudy, bare mountain ridge, past a herd of wild horses

and a tiny hamlet on a rocky outcrop, a far superior road started to emerge. The increasingly smooth ride suggested that this route had at least semi-regular Jeep usage, another promising sign.

We continued driving through the misty mountain, Alessandro gingerly applying the throttle. Another ghostly settlement appeared, little more than a few groupings of houses lined up together along the road. Curious faces peered out of windows as we crawled down towards where a small truck was being loaded. After a lengthy conversation, Beka reported that continuing along this way would take us to Zotikeli, a small town not far from Bakhmaro. Regretfully turning down an invitation to stay for refreshments, we headed off again. A succession of pointed fingers from various local villagers and bored-looking shepherds along the way gave clout to this being the right way to go.

The next hour passed in silence as we all stared out at the majestic valley we were passing through. It’s this kind of discovery which underlines why the TCT vision exists; the opportunity to hike through such impressive landscapes as this, with barely another soul in sight.

Finally, the low rumble and unmistakably smooth ride of asphalt indicated that we were back on a modern road. This was Bakhmaro, our final destination. We’d proved it was possible to drive here through the mountains from Gomismta. It’s only one section of the much larger Transcaucasian trail, but once the whole route is successfully scouted out in this way, the long process of turning it into an actual trail can begin.

‘All that needs to happen now is for everything to be put on a map, and for someone to go and hike it,’ Tom says. ‘But that’s some fun for later.’

*The Transcaucasian Trail is a community-orientated long distance hiking trail, crossing the Greater and Lesser Caucasus mountain ranges in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. The trail, funded by public donations, crowd-funding, bursaries and grants, shall be 3,000km long and be suitable for both wilderness camping and village to village hikes. Find out more at [transcaucasiantrail.org](http://transcaucasiantrail.org) or follow the expedition at [transcaucasian.com](http://transcaucasian.com).*

## TEN OF THE BEST

Hiking used to be about getting back to nature. But as **Chris Fitch** discovered, with modern technology, you can do so much more. From apps that track hidden trails, to portable camera drones that make the most of the picturesque mountain scenery, modern-day hiking has come a long way from a man, a knapsack and a good, sturdy walking stick...

### 1. Jacket

**Páramo Velez Jacket - £275; 605g**

The perfect all-round waterproof for cool, damp mountain terrains. Light and airy, it's easy to carry around all day, whether zipped up tight around your body, or rolled up in your rucksack, and can easily be thrown on as soon as the rain starts to fall.

### 2. Drone

**DJI Inspire 1 Pro - £3,100; 3.4kg**

With such dramatic scenery, it would be a great shame not to embrace the opportunity for aerial photography (and, indeed, aerial scouting, for those hard-to-reach locations). The Inspire 1 Pro is very much up to the job. With uncomplicated flight controls, auto take-off and landing, and the ability to capture aerial photos at 16 megapixels, it's an eye-catching way of exploring the mountains in as much depth as possible.

### 3. Light

**Streamlight Siege AA - £34.99; 249g**

Waterproof light sources can be an absolute lifesaver in these parts of the world, and the Siege can fill all your lighting needs - lantern, torch, SOS signal - while simultaneously being tough and waterproof. Plus, it is small enough to fit easily in your pocket.

### 4. Map software

**Google Earth Pro - Free**

The ability to zoom in and around 3D models of remote mountains using high resolution satellite and open-source mapping GIS data before actually heading out to trek them is astounding.

### 5. Sleeping bag

**Hill Venture Agate 400 - £199.99; 400g**

When you're up in the mountains, the sun has gone down, and you find yourself clutching a bowl of noodles to



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keep your hands warm, there is little more reassuring than knowing you have a thick and extremely comfortable goose down sleeping bag waiting for you when it's finally time for sleep. The Agate 400 is perfect for the job.

### 6. Storage bag

**Aquapac 13L Pack Divider - £13; 55g**

For peace of mind that cameras, phones, and other electronics will be safe from water damage if the heavens open, a waterproof storage bag is great value for money.

### 7. Insect repellent

**Incognito anti-mosquito spray - £9.99; 100ml**

When mosquitoes start flying, a small bottle of insect repellent can make the difference between an uncomfortable night and a nice relaxing evening watching the sun set over the Black Sea.



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### 8. GPS tracker

**OSM Tracker - Free**

Capturing the details of a trail with a simple GPS-enabled smartphone. With options available for voice or text memos, or simply utilising the customisable one-tap display, it becomes possible for anyone to quickly and easily make detailed notes on a path or surrounding terrain, all set to be easily uploaded to OpenStreetMap at the end of your expedition.



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### 9. Wash bag

**Scrubba wash bag - £45; 142g**

Dirty clothes from a few days outdoors? The Scrubba can clean those for you in just a few minutes, no matter how remote you happen to be. Nothing beats the feeling of clean socks.



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### 10. Vehicle

**Land Rover 110 Defender - £30,000; 2,000kg**

As if turning heads all over the Caucasus mountains wasn't enough, the Land Rover makes crossing extremely difficult and remote terrain remarkably easy, and makes it possible for the rest of the expedition's specialist kit to come along for the ride too.



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**DON'T FORGET...**

... whatever you use to carry drinking water. Georgia is littered with clean water sources, from springs to streams and random hoses flowing down from the hills. Ensure you are carrying something you can easily reach whenever you come across one and you'll stay hydrated.