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Why I'd Take Tbilisi Over Rome or Zurich

By Paul Rimple

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When CNN published a travel story earlier this month showing Tbilisi's ranking as one of the worst cities in the world, it sent locals in a tizzy. Georgians think Tbilisi is the bellybutton of the universe. It might be crazy, but that's part of its charm. Calling it inferior reflects a second-rate way of seeing the world.

The bogus ranking was reflected in the 2012 Quality of Living Survey by Mercer, a U.S.-based consulting firm. Mercer bases its criteria on factors such as safety, education, hygiene and political-economic stability in an effort to help multinational companies decide where to open shop and how much to pay employees.

Tbilisi, the worst city in Europe according to Mercer, came in at No. 213 out of 222 and was tied with Nouakchott, Mauritania, a city with a dwindling supply of fresh water in a country that is a hotbed of terrorist activity. Mercer is simply out of touch with reality.

Sure, Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili released more than 8,300 inmates from prison, but Tbilisi's streets are still some of the safest in Europe — and perhaps the most honest. Once

a young man found my wallet on Tbilisi's main drag, tracked me down and returned it the next day, along with my money.

Driving might be Georgia's most notorious hazard, but there are less road deaths than in Russia, Mexico and 76 other countries. While education reform is a much-discussed topic, the adult literacy rate is 99.5 percent.

If a multinational company wants to open up a factory here, it might want to consult the Heritage Foundation, which ranks Georgia as the 21st freest economy in the world. That's four points higher than Vienna, which is Mercer's No. 1 ranked city for quality of living.

Tbilisi, like every city, has its shortcomings. Zurich might be slum-free, but good luck finding a cup of coffee for less than $3. Try asking a bus driver in Paris to stop wherever you want to get off. In Georgia, they do.

Sure, the water and electricity occasionally go off in Tbilisi, and pedestrians are afforded the respect of insects, but that doesn't make Tbilisi any less livable than Rome, with its horrendous traffic, smog and crime.

In Tbilisi, at least, I can walk past blossoming fruit trees to the corner baker. He'll reach deep into a stone oven to pull out a hot loaf a bread and slide it through the window with a smile.

Tbilisi is the least livable city in Europe? Nonsense.

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