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Russians Rediscover Georgia's Wonders

By James Brooke

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When I first visited Georgia as a reporter in September 1991, residents in Tbilisi had spray-painted out all Russian language signs and were jamming Russian language radio and television broadcasts.

Over the next 17 years, Georgia's relations with Russia went from bad to worse, culminating in the August 2008 war between Russia and Georgia. Today, with thousands of Russian troops in Georgia's breakaway provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, there are no diplomatic relations between Georgia and Russia. Although Russia joined the World Trade Organization last year, it bans imports of Georgian fruits and vegetables.

To try to loosen things up, Georgia unilaterally dropped visa requirements for Russians 18 months ago. But Georgians still must get visas to visit Russia.

Despite these obstacles, the flow of Russian tourists to Georgia this year is expected to hit 500,000 people. Russians are the fastest-growing segment in Georgia's tourism industry. Russians, who were once at the back of the pack, are suddenly second only to Turks in the

number of tourists visiting Georgia.

Operating as "charters" to technically avert the commercial travel ban, the twice-a-day flights from Moscow to Tbilisi are packed.

A few days ago, I was lucky to get a seat on one of the five flights a week from Moscow to Batumi, Georgia's Black Sea port. There are now three charter flights a week from Moscow to Kutaisi, Georgia's second largest city.

On Aug. 7, marking the fifth anniversary of the war, Russia and Georgia formally agreed to restore normal car, bus and truck traffic. In 2006, Russia suspended road traffic with Georgia, and it has only been partially restored since.

"It is good they are not coming on tanks," grumbled Alexander Rondeli, the head of a Tbilisi think tank who has sour memories of the war, when Russian soldiers cut his country in half.

For Russians visiting Georgia, there is the pleasure of rediscovering the age-old Georgian hospitality, history and cuisine that their mothers and grandmothers told them about. In return, Georgian wine now flows north again.

Earlier this year, wine tasters at Russia's Consumer Protection Agency solemnly "inspected" Georgian wines. No matter that people have been enjoying Georgian wines since 5,000 B.C. or that Georgian wines are popular in more than 50 countries. With great ceremony, Gennady Onishchenko, Russia's top food inspector, announced that 65 Georgian winemakers had passed his test.

Moscow supermarkets now charge $60 for Georgian wines that retail in Tbilisi for $6 a bottle. This price-gouging fiesta may be short lived. By the end of this year, Russia may import as many as 5 million bottles of wine from Georgia.

Behind wine bottles flowing north and tourists flowing south, there is a new pragmatism. Without saying so openly, the leaders of Russia and Georgia agree to disagree on the issue of the two breakaway regions controlled by Russian troops. The Russians have dug in and show no sign of pulling out.

Faced with this reality, Georgia's pragmatic prime minister, Bidzina Ivanishvili, has focused on deliverables: wine and tourists. In my recent interview with him, Ivanishvili welcomed Russian visitors.

The day before, Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev shared with an RT television reporter his forecast for Russia-Georgia relations: "In this regard, I am a total optimist. I'm convinced that everything will be fine. Our peoples aren't enemies."

Yet in Tbilisi, there are still no signs in Russian.

But an entrepreneurial Georgian friend shared his idea to publish a new Russian-language monthly travel magazine on Georgia. His goal is to introduce a new generation of Russians to Georgia. Sounds like a winner to me.

James Brooke, based in Moscow, is the Russia/CIS bureau chief for Voice of America.

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