

From February to April 2022 alone by train and coach from Hamburg to საქართველოს

In the beginning, there was the pretty Georgian script that I began learning in October 2021. I renewed my profile on workaway.com without any concrete travel plans yet. In this network I got to



During the Church Service, snow slowly turned the square outside Holy Trinity Cathedral of Tbilisi into an ice rink.

know Teona, a young Georgian who was working in Italy. We met on Zoom for language exchange, and after a couple of weeks she invited me to the home of her parents and her six siblings in Tbilisi. Since her family was always quite happy to have guests, she said I could stay in her room for as long as I wanted. That sounded great! Would I dare to go? 3000 kilometers over land as I don't fly? Alone? Across the whole of Turkey? With Servas and my heart pounding: yes. Conni, the National Secretary of Servas Germany, gave me more encouragement. On February 2, 2022 I set off, and according to the motto, "the journey is part

of the trip", I decided to enjoy the 3000 kilometer journey as much as possible. From Munich to Istanbul, the route followed the tracks of the former Orient Express. To get me in the mood for my destination, on the first evening of my trip Servas host Judit, also a Georgia fan, and her daughter welcomed me at the Georgian restaurant Hachapuri in downtown Budapest. A nice idea! In Bucharest I experienced so much kindness, too. Servas host Simona showed me her town and the lovely village museum with traditional wooden houses, and even some churches, from different regions of Romania. Since trains from Bucharest to Istanbul only run from April to October, if at all, I covered the remaining distance to Tbilisi by bus which is very reliable, unrivaled in terms of climate-friendliness, possible without advance reservation and inexpensive: for example, the 1900 kilometers from Bucharest to Batumi (Georgia) cost just under € 80. In the Istanbul spring sunshine, it was time to dust off the bicycles and cycle along the seafront promenade of Caddebostan with host Nazife and her friend Arzu! A few days later I carried on over snow-covered passes to Ankara, which is almost 1000 meters above sea level. There at 4 a.m. I took the bus to Tbilisi, which goes along the southern coast of the Black Sea for almost a day. In the early evening in Sarpi, on the Georgian border, passengers had to leave the bus to have their luggage checked and walk across the border. To my surprise I wasn't allowed to enter Georgia. My bus? It went on to Tbilisi



On April 3 in Istanbul on my way back from Georgia, with my dear day host Özlem on the Galata Tower. I had not taken off the Svaneti hat since Melita gave it to me in Tiflis. The spring wind almost blew it away here...

without me! Suddenly standing alone behind the border in a fantastic sunset, holding my suitcase and bags still a little bit upset, I met Art from Belarus and his girlfriend Tonka from Ukraine who

turned out to be my guardian angels: fleeing the war in a car around the Black Sea, they were going to Tbilisi, too. Like me, they needed a PCR test to cross the border and were just asking the Turkish taxi drivers for directions to the closest test center: we had to drive 20 kilometers back to the



I spent my last, finally warm evening in Georgia in Batumi: When I left the country on March 31, spring had arrived.

hospital in Hopa! Around 35 hours later, with the negative test results in our pockets, we finally reached Tbilisi on the night of March 9. Teona had been absolutely right. Her parents Tina and Shota and her siblings were very welcoming, caring hosts. I stayed with them in Tbilisi for almost three weeks, enjoying every single day. I met Servas day host Nino and her friends, attended folk dance classes given by fabulous dancer Melita Lomadze, accompanied Tina to orthodox church services, climbed snow-covered Mount Mtatsminda, which means Holy Mountain, and enjoyed Tina's incredibly delicious vegan dishes eaten in Georgia in the 40-day period of Lent prior to Easter (my favorite dish was Badrijani, eggplant rolls with walnut filling and pomegranate seeds). The warmheartedness of the Georgians accompanied me through March, the coldest March with the heaviest snowfall the country had experienced in the last 140 years. I went back home with two-day-stops in Batumi, Istanbul, Sofia and Prague by bus and from there by train. In

autumn 2023, I would like to go back to Georgia to see everybody again and get to know more of the country, go hiking, help with the grape harvest and continue learning Georgian. The journey being part of the trip, again via Budapest, Bucharest and Istanbul, hoping to meet the new Servas friends on the way, too. And if I'm lucky, next year the Bosphorus Express from Bucharest to Istanbul which is suspended this summer will run again, on a renovated track, so that part of the journey will become even more comfortable.

Daniela Papenberg, Hamburg, June 2022