

Georgia Kayaking Expedition 2019

Imperial College Exploration Board Post Expedition Report

Imperial College Canoe Club



1. Post Expedition Report

1.1. General Notes

The trip was slightly shortened from our original plans due to work commitments from Mo as well as volunteering commitments from Ben. This meant that the actual expedition was four weeks from Saturday 31st August – Sunday 29th September. Mo flew out a day early with the rest of the team flying out a day later. The team rendezvoused on the morning of Monday 2nd of September and the expedition began.

After discussions with our contact Misha, it was agreed that the best and most authentic way to experience Georgia was to sleep in guesthouses. These are aplenty in Georgia and are often simply spare rooms in a family's house. This proved to be a wise decision as it allowed us to experience Georgia culture first-hand, as well as authentic Georgian cuisine at an affordable price.

1.2. Expedition Logbook

Day 1 Sunday 1st – Monday 2nd September – Errands and Tvishi Gorge



Figure 1. The UK team ready to set off at Luton airport

After a delayed flight, we finally landed just before 3am. As we deliriously watched our kayakers go round and around the baggage carousel, we realised we had actually made it to Georgia without losing any equipment. Our driver Goga picked us up and we arrived at Orange Hostel just before 5am. Needing our sleep we had a late start, getting up at 11am. We had a delicious breakfast comprised of salted potato, tomatoes, cucumber, spring roll-esque local delicacies and cheese. First port of call was getting local sim cards, exchanging cash, and buying some emergency food supplies.



Figure 2. The kayaks arrived safely at Kutaisi Airport

Once the errands were run, we had just about enough time to squeeze in a warm up run on the Tvishi gorge section of the Rioni. Whilst the water level was quite low, we blasted down a 12km section which started off as a wave train grade 2 before getting a little bigger with some grade 3 rapids before the takeout. Cameron was the first to get his hair wet, by testing his roll still worked on the 3rd attempt. At this moment Andrew realised he had screwed up the accommodation slightly as we had accommodation reserved north of us and had left our bags back in Kutaisi. Misha, our saviour, organised a taxi to bring our bags from the hostel to us as we got off the river. After a large amount of faff we finally made it to Tsesi around 11:30pm and dined on a delicious meal of Tagine style pork, potato salad, walnut based salad and bread. We got to sample the local wine as well with a Georgian toast of gomajos.



Figure 3. UK team arrives safely in Kutaisi and gets picked up by our driver Goga

Day 2 Tuesday 3rd September – Rioni Utsera Section

We set an alarm for 8 am ready to give us plenty of time to run the section of river that we had planned. After getting up, the owner of the guesthouse promptly offered us a breakfast of pancakes, eggs and sausages which we thought would be rude to decline (that is except for Mo who refused to eat anything but bread & spread for breakfast). A small amount of faff and a car ride later and we were at the river inspecting the most difficult section. Concluding that it didn't appear too difficult, we decided to head further upstream and run the Utsera section of the Rioni. The river comprised of extended sections of bumpy grade 2 before the crux of the rapid, a grade 3-4 boulder garden, where Ben wanted to carefully inspect the riverbed while upside down in his kayak. Some more grade 2 later and we were at the take-out where Goga was waiting for us. The pleasant realisation that we were in no hurry to get anywhere set in and we took our time getting changed and reloading the boats onto the top of the van. In the evening we were fed a generous helping of similar food to the evening before, as well as taking part in a series of toasts with vodka and the all-important chasing watermelon. Feeling satisfied we headed to bed for a *slightly earlier night.



Figure 4. Our transportation, Goga's 'Monster Truck'#

Day 3 Wednesday 4th September – Upper Upper Rioni

The day started with a bang when the balcony door almost fell on Ben and the glass shattered everywhere. Once we had swept up all the glass and determined the wind must have blown it on, we were ready to start the day. Yet another lovingly prepared Georgian style breakfast set us in good stead for what was to be the most taxing day of paddling yet. The uppermost section of the Rioni paddable at this time of year is a mere 3km long, but is also a rigorously continuous grade IV. A lengthy but spectacularly beautiful walk-in across the glacial plane led us eventually to the put-in. Our first attempt was decidedly tentative, with a decent amount of scouting (particularly for a rather dicey 2m drop followed by a long chute). It was on this section that in typical fashion Mo made the entire thing look rather easy, and Ben discovered the virtue of actually paddling towards the line one wishes to take. Shortly after, Andrew took his role as expedition leader to heart and nobly undertook the expedition's first swim, having become pinned on an errant rock.



Figure 5. The first picture of the whole team ready to tackle the uppermost section of the Rioni

At the takeout, a hasty lunch was had before making our way back to the start for a much more confident second attempt. In sharp contrast to the first run's near 3-hour paddle time, we bombed the entire descent in less than 45 minutes, allowing plenty of time for some pre-dinner rest. Upon our arrival back to the guesthouse, a hearty dinner of Georgian meat stew was enjoyed by all, washed down by a mandatory post-swim vodka for Andrew.



Figure 6. Proof of Andrew's swim



Figure 7. No probing one of the larger rapids



Figure 7. Cameron following Mo's line



Figure 8. Ben dropping into the next rapid

Day 4 Thursday 5th September – Lenheti Gorge - Tsenkhali

We departed the Rioni region and made our way West through Tsegeri to Lentekhi. The section between Tsegeri and Lentekhi was recommended to us as a grade 3 bimble. As we drove up the valley the level looked quite low and Mo wasn't convinced it was worth running. Arriving at the put in we saw a much steeper drop which looked nasty but runnable. We contacted Misha and enquired about the section above which is rated 4-5. He warned us of the danger and a portage. We drove up the valley, inspecting the river as we went and decided it looked within our ability. We put in on the flat water just above the bridge and had the most epic run of the expedition so far. We were rewarded with 8km of continuous class 4 rapids. A few inspections were necessary since not everything could be seen from our boats. We took our time, taking 4 hours to run the section. As it began to ease off into read and run grade 3 for the last kilometre, we chose to take out at one of the foot bridges. Goga drove us to our guesthouse in Lentekhi where we met the man, the myth, the legend, Misha. We all enjoyed a celebratory drink as we partook in the Georgian tradition of toasting to new friends.



Figure 9. Ben boofing Sticky Hole

Day 5 Friday 6th September – Lentekhi gorge

A somewhat slow start meant Cameron, Ben and Mo took a morning nap as Tom and Andrew headed up the Khledura valley to see if it was worth running. Whilst the run did look fun, it needed at least another 6 inches of water to be worth running. Returning empty handed we had a quick lunch, but discovered the car had suffered a puncture on our morning excursion. Whilst we waited for Goga who had driven off to fix the tyre, we took the time to sift through our mountain of footage. By 3 o'clock we were ready for our speed run of the Lentekhi gorge. Cameron was on team media today whilst Mo, Tom, Andrew and Ben blasted down the section we had done yesterday. Knowing the lines, and aware that there was nothing heinous ahead of us meant we completed it in just over an hour. We stopped at the landslide section which was a recommended portage. Mo ran it without trouble, but the rest of us walked. We finished the river shortly after 5pm. As Andrew emptied the lake which had formed inside his boat, he discovered a crack on the underside. First casualty of the expedition. The evening was spent welding the boat back together, writing river descriptions and naming rapids. Ben continued his habit of accidentally breaking things by snapping his bed in half as we wrote this blog!



Figure 10. Mo dropping into the Landslide rapid on the Lentekhi Gorge



Figure 11. The team blasting down the Lenekhi Gorge

Day 6 Saturday 7th September – Tekhuri

Today Vera joined us, a German paddler who had spent the last week with Misha. We drove over to Taleri to paddle the Tekhuri which is meant to be one of the classic runs. Unfortunately, the river level had dropped by the time we got on the water. There was also a little bit of confusion as to where the put in was, and we ended up starting 1km downstream from the recommended put-in, missing the hardest section above. The run was quite a scrape sadly, but with a little bit more water it would have been a very enjoyable class 3+ (the lower part) with lots of drops over and around large boulders. We had a spectacular triple pin on one section where the river level meant there was no clean line through. Ben had a roll and got pinned sideways, Tom and Cameron then abruptly pinned themselves just above to avoid crashing straight into him. Vera and Andrew jumped out of their boats to help, whilst Mo stayed downstream to pick up any kayaking equipment that might float past. After some strong persuasion, all three were freed from their pins and we were able to continue downstream. We decided not to paddle the 3km of flat to the bottom rapid, since the water level would have made for a very long 3km scrape.



Figure 12. Ben's headcam looking upstream at the tripple pin

Day 7 Sunday 8th September – Khobistskhali

Vera also paddled with us today and she knew the Khobistskhali. She led with Mo in tail. We took a look at the gorge section above, but couldn't see much from the road. We sent up the drone for the first time and got a view of the heinous syphon which is formed by a giant boulder in the river. This is the mandatory portage we had heard of. Deciding that it was too late in the day to attempt this gorge section, we put on the lower section. Again, unfortunately the level was a bit low, but it was a nice easy grade 3 pool drop river. Slightly more water would have made the lines much cleaner and resulted in less scraping down rapids.

We finished the run around 3pm and didn't spot Goga at the finish. What ensued was perhaps the longest confusing miscommunication 5 hours of our lives. Tom, Andrew and Cameron decided to walk up to find Goga. After an hour we still hadn't found him, and his phone had no signal. Eventually we lost phone signal as well as we walked further into the valley. We attempted to hitch hike and eventually got picked up by one of the wood trucks that worked up the valley. After a short lift we found Goga quite flustered trying to fix his car. It turns out the hydraulic brake system had failed, meaning he couldn't safely drive the car back down. He had been limping it down to us by repeatedly fixing the hoses, but the car wasn't going to make it back down the valley. Our initial plan was to catch the wood truck on its way out of the valley and get a lift back to Taleri. Supposedly, it would only be 90 minutes. We had contacted Misha, but the only driver he knew nearby would only be able to fit 4 people. Convinced the wood truck would be back soon we waited. Almost 3 hours later as we were weighing up our different options the truck returned, filled with passengers already. Goga negotiated that they would send a minibus from town to pick us and our kayaks up and drive us back to the accommodation.

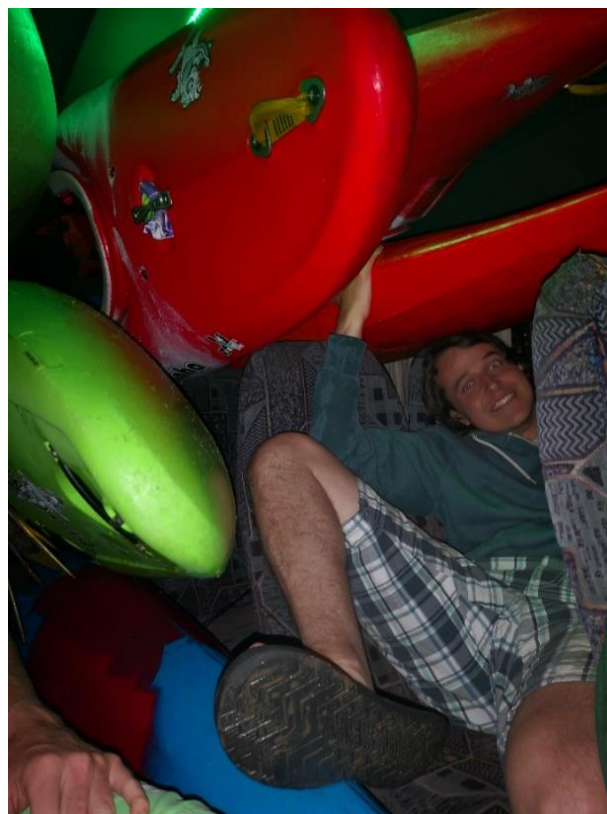


Figure 13. Trying to squeeze 7 kayaks into a minibus. Mo was an integral part of the tetris.

Over an hour later a minibus finally appeared. We emptied Goga's car since we weren't sure when it would be recovered and jumped in the minibus. We met the other 3 at the bottom who were quite cold by this point, it was close to 9pm. They got changed as we attempted to squeeze 6 boats, 7 people and all our equipment into this minibus. With the combined tetris skills of all 7 of us we finally managed to fit them in. We then endured the frantic minibus driver barrelling around country roads with Georgian country music blaring through the bus. We finally made it back to our accommodation around 10:30. Half the people ran into the village to try and buy food for dinner, whilst the rest of us cooked the emergency meal we had.

Something always goes wrong on an expedition, you just have to hope it isn't something major.

Day 8 Monday 9th September - Nenskra

Misha was able to arrange a replacement driver for us Merabi, who owned a very spacious Mercedes sprinter minibus. Unfortunately, his English is very limited so we resorted more to hand signals. Nonetheless, we packed everything into his minibus and made our way north to Mestia, stopping to paddle the highly recommended Nenskra river on the way. We drove up the valley, past a small gorge section until we found a reasonable put on close to the road, near the new dam construction. We paddled down a few scrappy kilometres of the Nenskra which would have had some very nice clean rapids if the water level had been higher. We made it to the short gorge and eyed up what had become a grade 5 rapid. It started with a pour over with a huge towback, closely followed by a corner rapid with a very tight line, immediately after one would have to roll underneath a tree just above the river. After this you would roll back up to run a 4m sloping drop. We deliberated for a while but decided it was not quite worth it and took off the river there. We loaded the boat back on the bus and drove on to Mestia.



Figure 14. The tree across the Nenskra just above the water level

On the way to Mestia we stopped to inspect the Nenskra gorge section. A very short 2km section with one horrendous syphon, and one most likely mandatory portage.



Figure 15. Tom Scouting the Nenskra Gorge

When we arrived in Mestia we met with Bartosz and the group he was guiding around Georgia. Much Georgian Cognac was enjoyed and we made some new kayaking friends with his group. Knowing we had a rest day the following day, we didn't make it to bed early tonight.

Day 9 Tuesday 10th September – rest day/inspection day

Today we took our first rest day. Mo decided to stay at the accommodation and properly rest. Ben explored Mestia and Andrew Tom and Cameron headed out in the minibus to scout the uppermost section of the Enguri. It would have been a beautiful 9km gorge section but needed noticeably more water. On the way back we also scouted the Mulkhara sections which we were planning to paddle the following day. The evening was spent listening to some traditional Georgian Folk music at one of the bars in Mestia.



Figure 16. Upper Enguri gorge section

Day 10 Wednesday 11th September – Mulkhara Third Canyon.

After a rest day, we were reasonable well prepared to hit the water again. We put on just above the third canyon on the Mulkhara which Bartosz had run with his group two days before. He warned us that there were two trees to be wary of. We made our way down this grade 3 section which had a few notable rapids but again required slightly more water to make the run nicer. As we entered into Mestia we decided to paddle onwards towards our accommodation and through the central Mestia gorge. This resulted in a few blind drops which were incredibly difficult to scout. After much reconnaissance we were able to make it through the first corner. Further on another blind corner meant more scouting, and here a right, centre then left line was required to join the confluence ride the curler wave and then duck under a tree. Just after this tree we once more jumped out of our boats as we were faced with a horizon line across the entire river. Mo went first, demonstrating how far left one had to go on the entry rapid to avoid the hole. Andrew went next, didn't make it left enough and rolled through the rapid. What we didn't realise was that there was another blind drop shortly after this one. Mo ran the tongue, Andrew hit it far left and ploughed straight into the hole, getting his boat vertical. Tom came down next, managed the first rapid fine, but let his guard down and got pushed into an undercut before the blind drop. Andrew and Mo heard the call of swimmer downstream and prepared to pick up the pieces. The paddle washed down first, and as we tried to regain sight of Tom, he swam through the blind drop, after taking his time to choose a line, and we pulled him out onto the rocks below. Having hurt nothing but his pride we then waited for his boat to wash out of the undercut. 20 minutes and one live bait later, we had recovered all the equipment and were ready to carry on, once Ben and Cameron had successfully made it through the rapid. We continued another 100m and found a particularly bony looking constriction. Everyone except Mo decided to walk round it and considering we had already had enough drama of one swim, and significant intimidation from the blind drops, we decided to call it a day and get off the river. The bonus was we had finished paddling at the guest house.



Figure 17. Scouting the blind horizon line in the Mestia canyon

Day 11 Thursday 12th September – Mulkhara Second and First Canyon

We decided to attempt the second half of the river which we hadn't managed the day before. Mo wanted to run the Mestia canyon again so we drove upstream slightly and ran the must run canyon. Unfortunately, it turned out this section is the kryptonite for our group. This time Cameron got stuck in the hole on the blind drop and got washed into the undercut. Mo retrieved his boat and Ben rescued Cameron, but his paddle was having fun riding the merry-go-round in the eddy above. We waited for what felt like hours for his paddles to wash out, watching them spin round and round 100m above us. We finally gave up and dug out the split paddles for Cameron to use. Paddling onwards a few hundred meters to the guesthouse we decided Andrew and Mo would shuttle back up to the top and run the gorge again to retrieve Cameron's paddles. However, whilst we were waiting for the shuttle the paddles washed out and everyone watched as Cameron and Tom sprinted downstream after them. Cameron was reunited with his paddles once again as they washed into an eddy. We then had to cancel the shuttle and ask Mera to drive back to the bottom and wait for us. We paddled onwards coming face to face with the gates of hell.



Figure 18. The Entrance to the Gates of Hell on the Mulkhara Second Canyon

The entire river funnelled into a 3m wide gap where the light barely penetrated. Having drone scouted the section the previous day (A luxury our predecessors wouldn't have had) the section looked good to run, but it was still one of the most intimidating sights we had come face to face with on the river. We paddled into the gorge without incident and cautiously made our way through. A few must run rapids only made it more committing, though not challenging, until we came face to face with a horizon line. Jumping out of our boats we took a look at a particularly nasty 4+ rapid. Large holes and boxed in undercuts made the line rather unappealing. Everyone portaged the first two drops and Mo put on for the last two drops of the rapid whilst everyone else only ran the last drop. Mo nailed the line of the drop pulling off a huge rock splat to clear the drop. Paddling onwards we faced a few more blind drops, but which had clear lines. After this the river opened up to a big bouncy section, we had completed the middle canyon. All that remained was the supposedly easier final canyon. This turned out to be a fantastic run, starting with big and bouncy continuous grade 3 before the river constricted into the canyon. Here we were rewarded with large waves and clean drops as the force of the water stormed through the narrow canyon. We blasted through this last canyon enjoying the ride until the confluence with the Enguri and we took out at the next bridge. Unfortunately, the road down to the bridge was for 4x4 cars only. We all worked up quite a sweat carrying our boats 500m round some very steep hairpins to where Mera had been able to park the van.



Figure 19. The final rapid in the Second Canyon

Day 12 Friday 13th September – Mulkhara Second and First Canyon

Since we had enjoyed our first run of the Second and Third canyons so much we decided to run them again. We put on from the guesthouse, just below the constriction and ran through the second canyon (gates of hell) We all portaged around the 4+ again because the line just wasn't particularly clean. We were noticeably tired as all of us were missing lines and rolling more times than we should. We bombed through the Third Canyon again and were relieved to see Mera had managed to drive the van down to the bridge which meant we didn't have to trek up the hill with our boats. Since everyone was quite tired, we decided not to attempt a second run, but instead explored Mestia for the afternoon.



Figure 20. Large waves in the Mulkhara Third Canyon

Day 13 Saturday 14th September – Driving

Today we left the Mestia and Svaneti. Our intention was to put back on the Nenskra where we had got off on our first day in Sveaneti. However, when we reached the Nenskra we found the level was significantly lower than the last time we had run it. The enticing gorge section at the end would now require a few more portages, and the lines weren't as clean as they had been previously. The heinous syphon was still present, but not quite as dangerous as it had been in higher flows. Due to the low levels, and Ben suffering from food poisoning, we decided not to run the Nenskra.



Figure 21. Scouting the Nenskra Gorge and Enguri confluence

We carried on out of the Enguri valley and stopped off at the Instra Waterfall hike in. Here Tom, Andrew and Cameron hiked the hour to the 20m Instra waterfall. We knew it wouldn't be running without heavy rain, but still wanted to scout it out. We found the 20m drop and understood why in previous reports people hadn't run it. It is quite high and the plunge pool is a little uncertain. The three hikers took the opportunity to swim in the plunge pool, which was absolutely freezing! Cameron and Tom then went off exploring further down the river to try and find the 10m waterfall. Progress was slow since full kayaking equipment would have made it much easier to scout the river. They got near the top of what looked like the next waterfall but couldn't continue. Back on the trail we were able to see glimpses of the bedrock falls which we had seen pictures of. However, the entire river was very dry and would require substantially more water. That evening we stopped over in Taleri, with the hope of running the Tekhuri in the morning.



Figure 22. The Instra Waterfall

Day 14 Sunday 15th September – More Driving

We awoke to a very dry Tekhuri river, which put a damper on our plans of running it. With no water in the North West we decided to head East. Our six hour drive to Tblisi was broken up by a stop at a hot spring which flows into a runnable river. Unfortunately, since the whole region was dry, this river was also very low and not worth kayaking. Nonetheless, we took some time to enjoy the hot spring which was scorching hot. We stayed overnight in Tblisi and explored the Nan fortress in the evening, before exploring the old town and grabbing food. Afterwards, we found a bar with traditional Georgian folk music and soaked in the atmosphere, enjoying a well earned rest at the midpoint of the expedition.



Figure 23. Tom and Ben making the most of the Sulphur hot springs

Day 15 Monday 16th September – Tergi

The day began with another 3-hour drive as we headed north into the mountains to paddle the Tergi. Being one of the few rivers that is fed by a large glacier, it was almost guaranteed to have water. However, an overcast and cold day meant the river wasn't too high. We drove up to the Truso Gorge section which was supposedly a grade 4(5). With more water we could see how it would be a pushy continuous class 4 run, but with our low water levels it was a continuous class 3. Having driven all the way there and having not paddled for 2 days we donned our kayaking gear and set off. It looked scrapey from the road, but when we made it on the river the lines were quite clean. We had a pleasant run down, navigating between rocks and finding the cleanest lines before the gorge ended and we reached the flat land. The Tergi was nice enough but needed more water to warrant a second run. We all changed and headed north to Stepantsminda where we would spend the night.



Figure 24. Ben dropping into one of the rock slides on the Tergi



Figure 25. Ben practicing his leading on the Tergi

Day 16 Tuesday 17th September – Mveti waterfall and Tergi

Sadly, with no overnight rain, and the discovery that the Devali gorge was a dam released river, we had very few options of what to paddle. The dam wasn't releasing enough for us to paddle the gorge, and there hadn't been enough rain to bring up the levels on the Argavani. This meant the only option was for us to run the Tergi gorge section again. However, before heading back South we managed a short hike to check out the Mveti waterfall.



Figure 26. Tom and Ben testing the waters of the Mveti Waterfall

At this point we decided there wasn't enough in the area worth paddling that we would stay and wait for rain. If we had to wait for the rain, we would much rather do it on the Black Sea Coast where there are many more options. With this in mind, we headed South. We stopped off to paddle the Tergi, with the exception of Mo who was on team media today. We put on slightly further up than the previous day and looked at the 1.5m drop (grade 5 in high flows). Unfortunately, there wasn't quite enough water to make the drop worth running, it would be a very tight squeeze through the right-hand channel and none of us thought it was worth it. A quick portage around that section and Ben took the opportunity to practice his leading as we eddy hopped our way down the Tergi.



Figure 27. Portaging around the grade 5 on the Tergi gorge

Another paddling day completed, and considering we were planning to head to the South West, we decided we would spend two nights in Tblisi so that we had a full day to explore. We made it to our guesthouse around 6:30pm headed out for dinner and then met up with Goga for some evening drinks. He took us to one of his local watering holes so that we could experience a more authentic Georgian evening, rather than an overly touristy one. A very enjoyable evening was had by all as we sampled the beer, wine and local meats. The night did end on a slight downer as Cameron was savagely mauled by a stray kitten. Having drawn blood, this would prompt our first hospital visit the next day.

Day 17 – An expedition wouldn't be complete without a trip to a foreign hospital

We awoke slightly later than usual as we didn't have to drive anywhere today or search for good water levels. Instead we were picked up by Goga and we began a great tour of Tbilisi's hospitals until we finally made it to the immunisation centre where we had a very broken English conversation with one of the doctors. His main concern was tetanus since Cameron had been scratched and not bitten. Once we had confirmed that Cameron's tetanus was up to date, we then had to worry about rabies which was our main concern. The doctor, and the recommendations we had read, said you are unlikely to catch rabies from a scratch compared to a bite, but it is still possible. The doctor recommended that we keep an eye on the cat and if it dies within 10 days then it most likely had rabies and Cameron would have to get the injection. Since the cat is a regular at the bar, we went to Goga got the number of the bar and said he would call every day to make sure the cat is still alive. With our fears somewhat reassured we thanked the doctor and departed. Goga then took us to one of his local eateries where we tried an egg version of Kachapuri, but everyone had eaten breakfast far too recently to finish their meals. Afterwards we bid farewell to Goga as he went in search of spare parts to fix his car. The five of us hiked up to the Golden cathedral on the hill and wandered its many underground chambers. Ben had to cover himself with provided shawls as both his knees and shoulders were bare. Afterwards we made our way to one of the naturally fed public baths which Tbilisi is famous for. We made the most of the hot water, which was a stark contrast to the glacial melt we had become accustomed to paddling in.



Figure 28. Evening view over Tbilisi

Day 18 Thursday 19th September – Drive to Batumi

Not the most thrilling day, we had an almost 8-hour drive. We drove 6 hours all the way from Tbilisi to Batumi. Then we wandered round Batumi to see what the city was like. A very commercialised holiday resort which could be likened to a tacky Las Vegas. We did enjoy a walk along the coast along a very nice boardwalk which stretched on forever! This was a welcome chance to stretch our legs having been stuck inside a minibus all day. Craving familiar food, we ate out at an Indian restaurant where Mo revelled in the fact there was an entire page dedicated to Vegetarian dishes.



Figure 29. The team 'relaxing' on the day long drive to Batumi

Day 19 Friday 20th September – Scouting Day

With the rain forecast for tomorrow, and all the rivers too dry to run, today became a scouting day. Andrew and Tom jumped in the van and headed south to scout out the Machakhela and Chvanitsqali. The Machakhela looked promising, though needed more water. We spent a considerable amount of time trying to find a decent put in. A bridge over a tributary was one option but we were hoping to put on higher up. Sadly, we couldn't find a better spot. When the rain comes, we should be able to run the Machakhela on one of the later days since it has one of the largest catchment areas. We also checked out the Chvanitsqali which resembled more of a low volume British creek than anything else. Again, it needed significantly more water, but a large amount of wood directly below the put in did not seem promising. By the time we had finished scouting it was almost 5 o'clock and it was a 2.5-hour drive back, so we headed back to the others. We found Mo, Cameron and Ben still lounging on the beach.

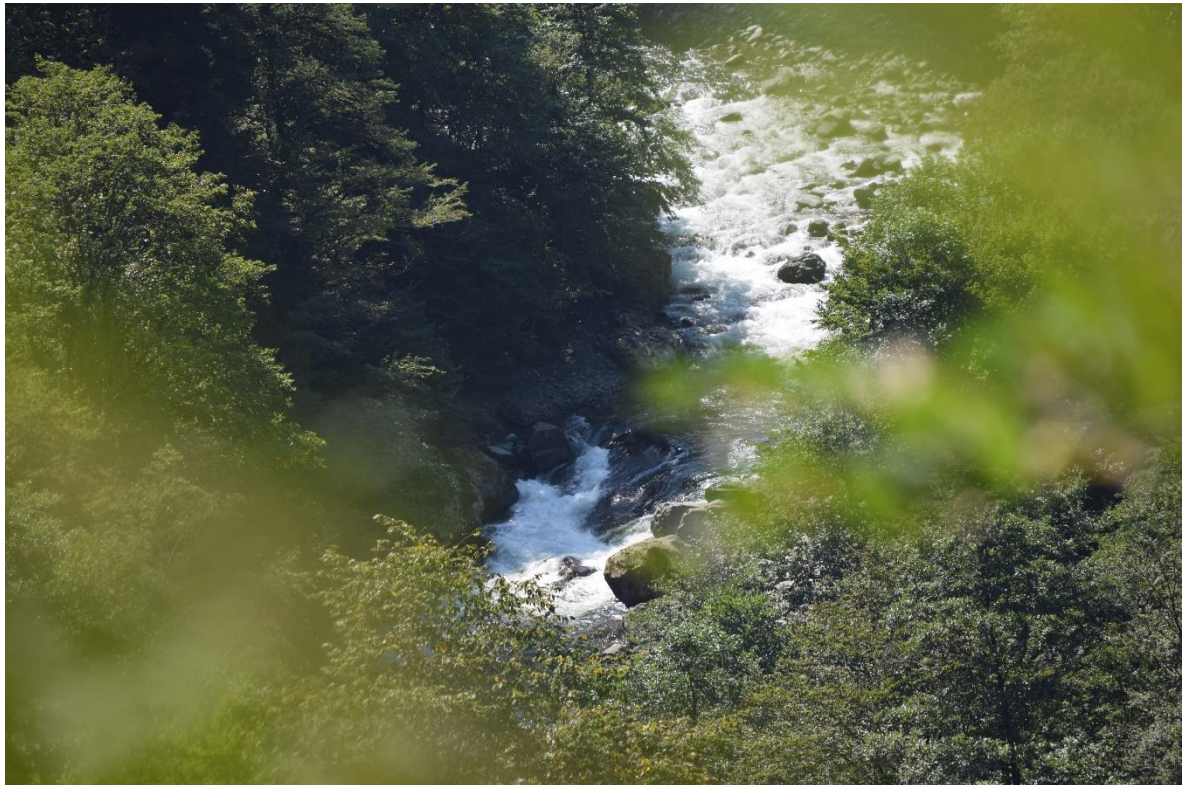


Figure 30. Glimpses of the upper parts of the Machakhela which we were unable to find a put-in for

Day 20 Saturday 21st September – Kintrishi – The rain finally came

It poured all night, and it was heavy rain. It didn't stop raining either, we awoke to persistent rain which continued into the next day. After some advice from Misha we decided to look at the Kintrishi since it rises and falls very quickly. Looking at the water level from the takeout bridge it was high, very high. Continuing up the off-road track, supposedly only suitable for 4x4s, our brave sprinter soldiered on. After an hour of off-road we made it into the national park and finally to the put in. What followed was one of our most adventurous days so far. The Kintrishi was a supposed grade 4 river with a few 4+ rapids. Whilst this is a correct judgement, as there is nothing horrendous on the river, it is totally relentless. Blind drop leads into blind drop, requiring constant inspection. After just over 3 hours we made it through the first 4km with few issues, but a lot of time out of our boats finding lines. We expected the river to ease up after the bridge to the national park, but it ratcheted up a notch. Longer blind rapids appeared before us and line of sight between the team became increasingly difficult. A few times we lost sight of each other and had to bush whack up the banks to find each other again. The eddies became smaller and smaller as we conquered each rapid until we came to one very long large boulder garden. The river disappeared over a horizon, almost the entire river then funnelled through a 2m wide slot, followed immediately by a sharp right hand flare round a boulder, next the river split into two channels around another huge boulder and after this, was the first eddy, almost 150m downstream. After explaining the line to Mo, he made his way down with Tom in tread. This left Andrew Cameron and Ben to follow. Since Andrew had scouted, he led the way followed closely by Cameron and then Ben. Cameron followed closely to view the lines, whilst Ben left more distance. Ben recounts as he saw everyone disappear after the slot, not realising how long the rapid was, and fighting his way through the last 2 drops. All made it through successfully, though the water was very pushy. One more major rapid blocked us. A small eddy just above a horizon line was caught by all except Tom, who was helped out of his eddy from behind a boulder just downstream. A quick scout revealed that one of the main channels was blocked by a tree, leaving only the centre left channel free. To make the line required ferrying out just above a drop which would lead directly into the tree filled channel if you got it wrong. Ben and Cameron portaged, along with Tom's whose boat was already further downstream. Andrew and Mo ran it without incident and concluded it wasn't as bad as it looked. This was our last test before the river eased up and flattened out as we reached the dam. Getting off the river at 5:30pm everyone was relieved but also buzzing after a 6-hour decent of one of the most epic rivers we had accomplished so far. We made it back late that night, around 7pm when we bid farewell to Merabi and emptied all our equipment from his van.



Figure 31. One of the larger boulder gardens on the Kintrishi

Day 21 Sunday 22nd September – Supsa + Gubazeuli

Misha managed to find us a driver for the day, a Russian paddler by the name of Sergui. He arrived with his small Mercedes Sprinter which was far too nice on the inside. Today only Tom Andrew and Cameron paddled since both Ben and Mo were resting their injuries. With only 3 members, and down our most experienced member we decided to take things easy. We began with a lap of the Supsa which is supposedly grade 2 with some grade 3 rapids but can apparently become grade 4 in high water. We definitely had high water and the 3 of us bombed down it through some incredibly large wave trains. Andrew got stuck in one hole but was kindly nudged out of it by Cameron's ribcage which slammed into the back of him. Having smashed down the entire 6km in just over half an hour we concluded it was a big and bouncy 3+. We debated having another lap since it was a fun blast, but decided instead to explore the Gubazeuli which we had very little information about. A supposed grade 3-4, we found a put in and jumped on. This too was at a high level, but we were still bouncing off rocks, suggesting that you wouldn't want to run it in anything below high levels. For the record, there was a considerable amount of water flowing over the dam. The river started out as a fairly continuous grade 3 with just a lot of rock dodging. The only challenging part was the significant lack of eddies which meant we simply flushed down the first half of the river. After Cameron freed himself from the one eddy he got stuck in we continued on and the difficulty of the river suddenly increased. The lack of eddies made scouting almost impossible. With a glimpse of clear water at the bottom we flushed down some incredibly steep grade 4 rapids which could be likened to riding a rollercoaster. The intimidating horizon lines continued for a few corners and Andrew had the pleasure of probing the drops first. After these steeper rapids the river calmed down and we had made it to the takeout without any carnage. Having completed a more challenging river we decided to call it a day since the three of us were getting tired and we didn't want to push our luck any further with a small team.



Figure 32. Wave trains on a very high Supsa river

Day 22 Monday 23rd September – Bzhuzha + Supsa

Today Otto arrived in his trusty Mitsubishi Delica which we would be squeezing into for the remainder of our expedition. With his extended roof rack, we quickly loaded the full complement of boats now that the whole team was back paddling. Our first stop was the Bzhuzha river which is famous for having a race section. We tried to scout the top 1km of grade 5 but could not find anywhere to put on. Nonetheless, we were still looking forward to the 2km of grade 4 directly below it known as the long race section. Ben stepped up to practice his leading on this section with Mo following closely behind for support. This 2km turned out to be a fantastic section with many individual rapids in a pool drop style. This allowed time to recover after each rapid. We took our time and scouted when necessary as a few of the rapids were longer and a line was not clear from the boat. The crux of the river was a longer rapid ending with a 1.5m waterfall. All of us except Cameron ran it with varying degrees of success. Ben ended up almost vertical. After this the river began to calm down a little with only a few more horizon lines, one of which Andrew probed and got stuck in before flushing out. After a successful run down the Bzhuzha we decided to head over for a quick race down the Supsa since Mo and Ben hadn't run it yet. Unfortunately, it had dropped from when the team of 3 had paddled it the previous day, but that didn't stop a seal launch style boatercross down the entire 5km. Despite starting 4th, Cameron showed off the speed of the ripper and finished first followed closely by Tom who had started first. Then came Ben and Andrew 30 seconds apart, followed sometime after by Mo. He hadn't quite taken this racing malarkey to heart. Mo then had his first swim of Georgia on the calm grade 2 section at the takeout. Dishonourable!



Figure 33. Tom ploughing through the 1.5m drop on the Bzhuzha

Day 23 Tuesday 24th September – Chakvitskali

On Misha's recommendation we headed over to the Chakvitskali which was a supposed 3-4 run with a 4+ crux. Driving up the valley the water level looked a little low but still runnable. Mo decided to sit this one out which left just 4 of us. Cameron was elected as river leader today in Mo's absence so he could practice his skills. Whilst the river did have a fair few horizon lines, most of it was read and run, and admittedly, it was a little scrapey until the confluence. From here it stepped up a notch from easy grade 3 to slightly harder 4- as the lines became a little tighter. One particularly nasty line is a large sweeping bend behind a boulder. As we committed to it, we each had a choice of a left or right slot, Cameron ran the left slot backwards and rolled directing everyone else to go right. All three remaining members of the team took the right slot Andrew and Ben both upside down and rolled up in the eddy below. Not our best moment. We continued to the crux of the river just below the ranger station. Here we got out to scout the rapid and unfortunately found a large tree blocking the only clear line. Since we were only 500m from the finish and the portage looked awkward to say the least, we decided to take out here and rope the boats up to the road. We called Otto and he came to grab us. On our way back to Kobuleti, we decided to check out the surf near Batumi, but the lack of wind meant the surf spot we had identified a few days ago was non-existent.



Figure 34. Ben boofing the ledge drop on the Chakvitskali

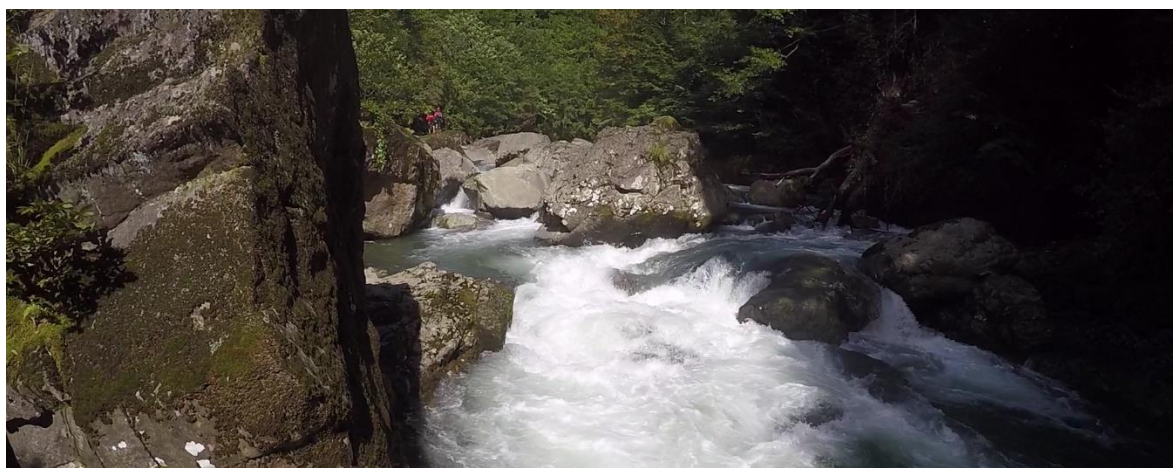


Figure 35. The tree on the Chakvitskali blocking the only runnable channel on river left

Day 24 Wednesday 25th September – Machakhela

We decided to run the Machakhela since it has a larger catchment area and holds its water better than some of the smaller rivers in the area. The only tricky part was finding a good put-in. Tom and Andrew had attempted to find a better put in upstream a few days earlier but had had no luck. Therefore, we went with Misha's suggestion which was a tributary about a third of the way down the section we wanted to run. After a few warmup rapids we came across the grade 5 which was just a little unpleasant. No particularly clean lines and quite jagged rocks meant Andrew, Cameron and Ben didn't think it was worth it and decided to portage. Tom and Mo successfully snuck down the far right of the rapid avoiding the nastier sections in the middle of the river.



Figure 36. The grade 5 rapid on the Machakhela

We continued on and enjoyed a few more rapids before making it to the first road bridge, a potential take out. Since we had only paddled around 4km we decided to carry on a bit further to the next bridge. We believed the next section was easy grade 2-3 which it was, except for one corner rapid which snuck up on us. The river dropped away very quickly before going around the corner. Mo and Andrew went down first and lost sight of the group, but everyone continued through the rapid with the knowledge that this section was easier than what we had just paddled. However, we were all caught slightly off-guard. The river dropped into a pool of boil which could only be avoided by powering hard left away from the rocks. Everyone managed the line, but none of us were expecting it to be that difficult. Slightly more cautiously we continued down the rest of the river until we came to the next bridge where we called it a day.



Figure 37. The whole team at the takeout bridge

Day 25 Thursday 26th September – Driving/Scouting

With the water levels dwindling we attempted to head deeper into the mountains. We had heard scattered reports of the Shkalta river which was meant to be a pushy 4+ in higher levels but gets easier in lower levels. Unfortunately, our 3 hour drive out to the river was only met with dry riverbeds. Having spent the best part of the morning and early afternoon making our way out East only to find the rivers too low, we ended up driving back down the valley the way we had come empty handed. No paddling today sadly, but we were coming to the end of the expedition, everyone was tired, and the priority was to make it home in one piece and not injure ourselves in the last few days.



Figure 38. Otto's Mitsubishi Delica which we squeezed into for the last week of the expedition

Day 26 Friday 27th September – Tekhuri

With the water levels in the South drying up we headed back to the central regions to look at the Khobistskhali and Tekhuri. The Khobistskhali looked a little low so we made our way over to the Tekhuri and put on higher up than we did previously. Although this did require crossing a very questionable bridge, we knew the Ex-Soviet wood trucks used this route and they are significantly heavier than us. The upper section of the Tekhuri was a wonderful boulder garden with larger clean drops. One 4+/5- rapid required inspection by everyone as the line was very tight. Mo went first and made it look easy, Andrew followed with a boof of the ledge within the slot, though he did get slightly stuck in the towback. Cameron and Tom became well acquainted with the slide wall of the slot, whilst Ben nailed the line and sailed through the slot beautifully. As we made it to the first bridge the river became familiar. Thankfully, no one got pinned in the same spot as last time where we had a slight epic. We kept our eyes out for the one mandatory portage, a pour-over which landed directly on another rock. Once safely through this section, we enjoyed the scenic gorge before the river flattened out and we got off. We enjoyed a final meal at the local restaurant in Taleri before getting in the car and driving back to Kutaisi for the night.



Figure 39. The questionable bridge to the put-in

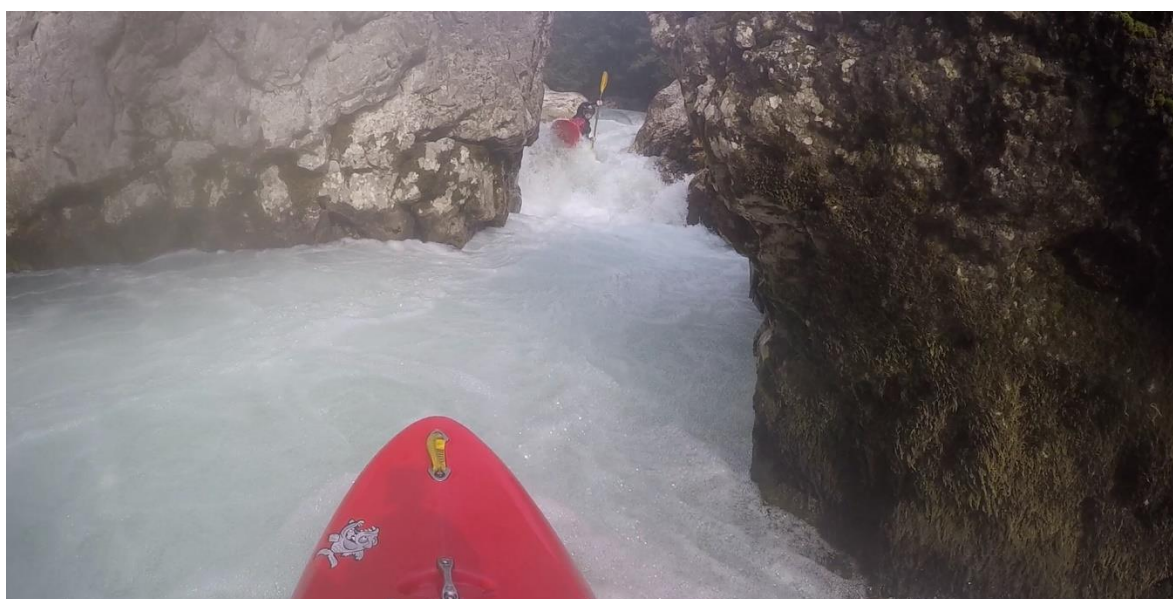


Figure 40. Ben nailing the boof on the slot drop

Day 27 Saturday 28th September – Tekhuri + Chanchibadze street

Our final kayaking day. Mo flew out tonight so we got up early to try and fit in a short blast of the Tvisihi gorge section on the Rioni. This was the same section we had started with on our first day in Georgia, so it felt apt to paddle it on our last day. Whilst the level was a little low, which meant some longer flat sections, the large volume of the Rioni meant there were some enjoyable wave trains as well as the occasional hole to smash through or boof. As we got off the river the heavens opened. We drove back through Kutaisi to find the roads flooding. We had a final team meal in town before we bid farewell to Mo and Otto. Otto would drive Mo to the airport and then head back to his home in Tbilisi. We had attempted to dry our kit for the plane, but the torrential rain thwarted that plan. There was so much rain that the hostel courtyard flooded! The road outside was covered in 3-4 inches of water and Cameron seized the opportunity for a first descent of Chanchibadze Street. Grabbing one of the kayaks we ventured out into the pouring rain, Cameron jumped in a boat and we towed him down the road. We may not have managed a first descent as a team, but Ben and Cameron did manage a first descent of the roads of Kutaisi.



Figure 41. Camerons First Descent of Chanchibadze Street

Day 28 Sunday 29th September – The Journey Home

Today we made our way home after 4 weeks in Georgia. We were a little late to the airport due to traffic, resulting in us attempting to check our boats in 45 minutes before departure. Despite this all our kit made it on board. After a 6-hour flight, the hardest part of the expedition was trying to navigate all our equipment and kayaks through Luton airport to the car pick up. Andrew's dad was there to take the all the equipment as well as Andrew Tom and Cameron back to London, whilst Tom's parents picked him and his kit up. We loaded the car in the rain, embraced each other with soggy hugs and parted ways.

Expedition Accomplished.



Figure 42. Trying to sneak 4 kayaks through customs...

1.3. Expedition Finances

Item	Breakdown (£ per person)	Totals
Flights	£507	£2,536
+ kayak transport	£54	£270
Driver Fees	£497	£2,484
Fuel	£115	£575
Accommodation	£317	£1,584
Food	£184	£923
Equipment Purchases	-	£500
Satellite Phones	£56	£282
Insurance	£250	£1250
Total Expenditure	2,081	£10,404
Lord Mayor's Funding		-750
RCSU Funding		-500
CGCU Funding		-2000
Exploration Board Funding		-3000
Exploration Board Insurance		-985
Total Cost	£584	£2,919

1.4. Final Remarks

We would like to thank a few people for making this expedition a reality.

Firstly, our thanks go out to Tim Burne for getting this expedition off the ground in the first place. He encouraged us to do our own expedition and explore instead of tagging on to someone else's trip. He also put us in touch with Misha without whom this expedition would not have been possible.

We owe Misha a great deal. He is a logistical genius and was our invaluable man on the ground when it came to chasing the water and looking for accommodation.

Our expedition would not have been a success without our three drivers, Goga, Merabi and Otto. We parted ways with Goga before we were meant to due to the sad breakdown of his car. And whilst we were sad to see him go, our thanks go out to Merabi and Otto for stepping in to help us complete our expedition without being stranded.

Finally, we would like to thank the Exploration Board of Imperial College London, The Royal College of Science Association, The Old Centralian's Trust and the Lord Mayor's 800th Anniversary Awards Trust, for their financial support which made this expedition both possible and accessible to students.

1.5. River notes

River Notes still in progress, please see kayakgeorgia.home.blog