

Pottery in Georgia.

with Jane Gibson

Georgian wine in locally made earthenware jugs was a staple feature of our trip and we enjoyed both.

I was on another pottery adventure. Our "Exploring Georgia" trip took us from the capital, Tbilisi, across the central belt, taking in museums, monasteries and churches with their stunning frescoes. North into the dramatic Caucasus to stay in Mestia marvelling at the famous tower houses and beautiful scenery. Then south to the Lesser Caucasus to see cave dwellings, fortresses and traditional skills of baking bread, cheese manufacture and Georgian dancing.

Ceramic History

In Tbilisi we visited the Academy of Arts where we talked to teachers and students who were keen to demonstrate their work. We were shown traditional wheels and kilns and learned about the history of Georgian ceramics from a famous ceramist, Gigicha Pachkoria.



(Pic 1)



(Pic 3)



(Pic 2)

A clay wine vessel from the Neolithic period with details of grapevines and considered the oldest in the world was found in Georgia. This showed that winemaking was part of local culture from a very early age. Over time, vessels became colourful as glazes were introduced and animal and bird features were added.

Mongol invasions in the 13th century slowed down the production of crafts. Pottery-making would not resume until the 18th century, at which time it became a part of folk culture. In the 20th century, up to 50 potteries opened up around the country in an effort to keep up with the thousands of years of tradition. And this is ongoing today, with every Georgian region featuring at least one pottery studio. We learnt about Georgian Blackware which is produced by firing with a type of resin.

Modern Potters

We visited the site of an old brick factory in the suburbs now surrounded by tower blocks. It is a hub for studio potters as well as containing a small factory making decorated bottles and jugs for wine. The bottles were bought by wineries, filled with wine, corked and sold to tourists. They were slip-caste in the local earthenware clay mixed with volcanic ash before being covered with a white slip and hand decorated with oxides and sgraffito. They were fired in an electric kiln to 1150c. We were shown around the studios and chatted to the potters before being tempted to buy souvenirs in their gallery. (Photos 1,2,3)

In an old village, now a tourist attraction, there were many stalls up narrow cobbled streets leading to an independent studio potter. He made carved, glazed ware and gave us a demonstration. Many of his pots had "Georgia" on them which was good for tourists but did not tempt me. (photos 4,5)

Another local artist, Otar Vepkhvadze had actually built his own house. He worked in porcelain and many other disciplines. We saw interesting brick work in many places and locally made ceramic roof tiles with beautiful fire makings. I was taken with them.



(Pic 4)



(Pic 5)



(Pic 6)



(Pic 10)



(Pic 7)



(Pic 8)



(Pic 9)

Traditional Pottery

On our road journey to the Caucasus we suddenly saw many road side stalls full of pots. It was a "stop the bus" moment. (Photo 6) This area was where red clay came from and traditional potters still make domestic ware of all shapes and sizes. However very few were creating the traditional and famous huge jars which were sunk into the ground and used to mature wine. Now stainless steel drums have been substituted although we did see the jars still being used in the winery of a guest house. We were privileged to visit the house of Temuri, a potter who creates these vessels which are called "kvevri". They are included in the UNESCO heritage list as a national treasure. A single 2 tonne "kvevri" takes up to 8 weeks to make but can be used for many years. Temuri utilises two local clays mixed which are yellow coloured firing to red. They are coiled slowly upwards, several being made simultaneously and woodfired to 1200c. Photos (7,8) We watched him demonstrating how the base of the jars are formed. He also showed us how he coiled a jug before we joined his family for the customary toasts of a distillate from local wine. Photos(9,10)

Many thanks to Christine - Ann and Gulnora for another brilliant trip.

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