

# From Lisbon to Tbilisi-

## A transcontinental bus journey

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An article by Fabienne dos Santos Sousa

My journey began with an invitation by Liza - one of my best friends - to spend the summer visiting her and her family in Georgia. 'The country' she joked, referring to countless times people have confused her home with the U.S. state. I immediately accepted her invitation, excited to take a break from beautiful but rainy Cambridge in England, where I am currently pursuing an integrated PhD in Public Health. 'There is just one problem' Liza reminded me, 'you don't fly!'.

When people first find out about my fear of flying, they usually have one of two reactions. Most people immediately discuss various remedies that they are convinced will help me to conquer my fears (hypnosis being an all-round favourite). Others congratulate me for helping the environment. What unites both groups is that they usually express dread at the realities of long-distance bus or train travel.

To me, though, there is no better way to travel. I find that travelling by bus or train is about more than just reaching a destination - the journey becomes as much of an adventure. I was beyond excited to see what adventures this transcontinental journey across Europe would bring.

### Portugal

After leaving Cambridge, the first stop on my journey was Sesimbra, a beautiful seaside town in Portugal. While Portugal is definitely not on the direct route to Georgia, it was an essential stop on my journey. My grandparents are Portuguese emigrants who moved to Germany in the 1960s to seek work as part of a formal guest worker program and I try to go to Portugal every year to visit my family.

My journey started with a bus from London to Paris, before I hesitantly entered a 24-hour bus to Lisbon. I was dreading the countless mountain ranges of Spain that had resulted in me being violently ill for most of a previous bus trip to Portugal. This time however everything went well and I slept for an astonishing thirteen hours.

I spent the next few days in Portugal meeting up with family and friends, relaxing at the beach and going on countless walks along the seaside. While my time in Portugal was not particularly adventurous it was a wonderful break after a busy academic year - as I jumped onto my next bus I was full of energy and enthusiasm for the journey ahead.

## **France and Germany**

The next stop on my journey was my home country, Germany.

I commenced my journey with a 24-hour bus to Paris. I had booked my travels to allow me to spend half a day in Paris so I walked across the city all afternoon, visiting the Louvre and the Eiffel Tower. I particularly enjoyed watching last minute preparations to clean the Seine for the Olympic and Paralympic games. Let's just say I've never been happier not to be a professional swimmer.

I spent the next few days visiting relatives across Germany. I first went to the north-west of the country to stay with my immediate family in Sassenberg, my home town. Sassenberg is a small rural town but it is paradise for those, like me, who love white asparagus.

My next stop in Germany was my mum's hometown, Heiligenstadt, a charming town nestled in the wooded hills in Thuringia. Once part of the German Democratic Republic, also commonly known as East Germany, it lays just kilometres from the inner German border, a 1,381-kilometre divide that split the country and European continent into two parts. As we drove, we passed a familiar memorial sign for the inner German border. Though I've seen it countless times, it always fills me with gratitude for my mum and hundreds of thousands across Central and Eastern Europe who courageously protested in the revolutions of 1989. Without their bravery, I wouldn't exist, and Europe might still be divided by the Iron Curtain today.

## **Bulgaria**

After a few days in Germany, I said goodbye to my family and set off for Sofia in Bulgaria. Not even my usual enthusiasm for bus travel helped me to conquer the feeling of dread as I embarked on a twenty-two-hour ride in an unacclimatised bus, sweltering in 37-degree heat.

When I arrived in Sofia, I was sweaty but excited to explore the city. I had little more than a day in the city, so I wanted to make the most of my time. Given my phone and power charger were both drained from the long journey, I spoke to a few locals to ask for help in navigating the city. This proved to be a whole lot easier once I realised that Bulgarians mean "yes" when they shake their head from side to side.

After these initial difficulties, I first visited the Regional Museum of Sofia, which is located in the stunning former Central Mineral Bathhouse. I then set out to explore one of the most impressive buildings in the city - the St. Alexander Nevsky Cathedral - which dates back to the 1880s and has room for 10,000 people. Amidst the heat, it was a perfect place to cool down. After walking around town for a few hours, I ended my night in a charming local restaurant close to the Vitosha Boulevard - Sofia's main shopping street.

## **Turkey**

I was disappointed to leave Sofia so soon - I would have liked to spend more time exploring the city. Nonetheless, I was also intrigued by what lay ahead. After only ten hours of bus travel I arrived in Istanbul.

With a population of over 15 million people, Istanbul is the largest city in Europe. Initially overwhelmed with its sheer size, I was quickly captivated by the beautiful landmarks such as the Hagia Sophia, the Blue Mosque and the Bosphorus Strait, the boundary between Europe and Asia. I enjoyed a few days exploring the city and local cuisine.

I then took a bus to Ankara, Turkey's capital city. Due to a chance encounter, I had a long itinerary of places to visit and foods to try. While taking a bus in Germany a few months earlier, I had started talking to a young man from Turkey. He was a journalist who had been forced to leave Turkey because of his political opinions. When he had found out about my plans to visit Ankara, his home town, he had written me a long list of suggestions. Over the next few days I closely followed his itinerary and visited many of Ankara's famous landmarks such as the Ankara castle, the Old Quarter and the Kocatepe Mosque.

Then I got ready for the longest stage of my journey: the Eastern Express (Turkish: Doğu Ekspresi), a 28-hour train journey from Ankara to Kars, in northeastern Turkey. What followed was one of the most beautiful train journeys of my life, travelling through endless mountains and arid steppe.

With only a short layover in Kars, I quickly hopped onto the next bus to Hopa (pun intended), a seaside town close to the Georgian border. This journey revealed even more of the natural beauty Turkey had to offer and I spent several hours marvelling at the crystal-clear, mirror-like lakes of Eastern Anatolia.

## **Georgia**

At the border crossing to Georgia my first real problem of the journey was waiting for me. The Turkish border officer flipped open my passport, and to my horror, a few banknotes tumbled out. Somehow, in my rush, I had stuffed my cash into the same pocket as my passport. I held my breath as the officer's eyes narrowed, his face darkening with suspicion that I may be trying to bribe him. He angrily glared at me for what felt like an eternity before shoving the passport, cash included, back into my hands. 'Go!' he barked, pointing towards the gate. Without giving him time for second thoughts, I rushed through.

Shortly after crossing the Georgian border, my friend Liza and her family picked me up and we drove to Batumi, Georgia's second-largest city located on the Black Sea. On our first night we visited a beautiful restaurant in the nearby mountainside, renowned for having hosted Hillary Clinton. There we had a *supra* - a traditional Georgia feast which involves tables laden with abundances of delicious dishes, such as Khachapuri (golden, cheesy bread), Mtsvadi (juicy charcoal-grilled meat skewers) and Khinkali (plump dumplings filled with spiced meat). This night alone was enough to make me fall in love with Georgian cuisine. When I offered to pay my share of the bill, I quickly learned that Georgian hospitality is not just a gesture but a way of life. There was no way Liza and her family would let me pay - it took me more than two weeks to figure out an elaborate scheme to sneakily pay the dinner bill just once.

After a beautiful short stay in Batumi, we drove to Tbilisi - Liza's home town. Tbilisi is the capital of Georgia, lying on the banks of the beautiful Mtkvari river and home to a population of approximately one million. Over the next few weeks we explored some of Tbilisi's most beautiful sights, including the stunning gold treasures at the Okros Pondi museum and the Holy Trinity Cathedral of Tbilisi, also known as Sameba. Sameba, with its stunning golden dome and intricate Georgian architecture, is the third largest Eastern Orthodox cathedral in the world and one of the most impressive religious buildings I have ever visited.

Another one of my highlights was visiting Kartlis Deda, or "Mother Georgia," a monumental 20-metre aluminium statue overlooking Tbilisi from Sololaki Hill. Although there is a cable car to Kartlis Deda, Liza and I opted to climb up through Tbilisi's historical and stunning Old Town where each cobblestone seems to whisper tales of the rich 1500-year past of the city. When we arrived at Kartlis Deda, Liza showed me that Kartlis Deda holds a bowl of wine and a sword. Liza explained to me that this embodies the Georgian national character as the bowl represents hospitality and warmth towards guests, while the sword signifies readiness to fight against enemies. Erected in 1958, the symbolism of this statue remains profoundly relevant today, especially as 20 percent of Georgia's territory continues to be illegally occupied by Russia.

During my time in Georgia, Liza's family also showed me other stunning places across the country. Our journey brought us to the Kakheti region in the east of Georgia, where we explored beautiful mediaeval monasteries and hilltop churches which often date back to the 5th or 6th century. We also travelled to Kutaisi in western Georgia, which is one of the oldest cities in the world. We visited the nearby Prometheus Cave and explored the stunning cave which is 11km long and more than 80 metres below ground level. At the end of our trip we visited the Dadiani palace in Zugdidi - one of the most stunning palaces in the Caucasus. Regardless of where we went in the country, I was always amazed by the stunning architecture, fascinating history and inspiring resilience of the Georgian country and people.

What surprised me most about Georgia, is just how European it feels. Georgia is often spoken about as a transcontinental country in the media, however travelling across Georgia made it abundantly clear that the vast majority of Georgians view themselves as European and strive for European integration. Everywhere I looked I was greeted by EU flags, often proudly proclaiming "We are Europe!" and "Georgia is Europe!". Almost all Georgians I met spoke with burning passion about their country, Georgia, and its future within Europe. This enthusiasm is something I have never experienced in any other European country I have lived in or visited and it filled me with hope and optimism for the future of European integration. I never would have thought that I would find the heart of Europe at its geographical edge.

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I also want to warmly thank Liza, her beautiful sisters, her wonderful parents and her entire family. I am beyond grateful that you opened your home to me. Your hospitality, kindness and friendship has profoundly touched me. I loved exploring your beautiful country, Sakartvelo, with you!

### *Notes*

My return journey from Tbilisi to Cambridge will be told in a separate article and will talk about my experiences and encounters in Greece, North Macedonia, Serbia and Austria.

# From Lisbon to Tbilisi – Photo Impressions

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## Portugal

Arriving in Lisbon



Taking a restful break in Sesimbra





France

Taking a quick stop in Paris in advance of the Paris 2024 Olympics and Paralympics





## Germany

Memorial sign for the inner German border



*Translation:* Until the 12<sup>th</sup> of November 1989 at 12:25PM Germany and Europe were divided here.

Bulgaria

Visiting the Saint Alexander Nevsky Cathedral in Sofia



(Unsuccessfully) trying to read the Bulgarian Cyrillic alphabet





Turkey

Visiting Galata Tower in Istanbul





Visiting the Blue Mosque in Istanbul



Crossing the Bosphorus



Overlooking Ankara from Ankara Castle





Approaching Georgia (Turkish: Gürcistan)



Georgia

Reuniting with Liza – one of my best friends





Kartlis Deda overlooking Tbilisi



Visiting the Holy Trinity Cathedral of Tbilisi (also known as Sameba)





Discovering EU flags all over Georgia





## Voices of Europe

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On this transcontinental journey, I spoke to many interesting people from all over Europe. I asked all of them the same question: “What thoughts or images come to your mind when you think of ‘Europe’?”. Some of their answers are presented below.

### Elisabed, 25 years, Georgian hoping to relocate to Germany

I often equate Europe with the European Union. This is perhaps paradoxical as I am from Georgia, a country that is currently not an EU member country. Georgia has recently gained EU candidate status but our political future is far from certain. In my opinion, joining the EU is one of the main priorities for the economic, ideological and political future of my country. It is my hope that joining the EU would allow my country to thrive in a climate of stability, peace and security.

In my personal life, I have experienced the line that separates Europe from the European Union. Despite having completed my engineering degrees in three current and former EU countries (UK, Portugal and Spain), relocating to the EU presents itself as an incredible challenge. I hope that the European Union can truly unite all Europeans one day.

### Yesim, Turkish-French living in Paris

When I think about Europe, I think of the diversity, freedom and open-mindedness of the people. I am thinking of the rights of children, women and therefore of humanity. I am also thinking of the beautiful countries and their magnificent landscapes. But above all, I am thinking of a continent that must stand in solidarity with people in need, of a Europe that opposes wars, violence and abuse. I am thinking of a Europe that wholeheartedly desires peace

### Fabienne, 27 years, Austrian living in Vienna

When I think about Europe, the first thing that comes to mind is an image of very different countries and cultures. From sunny cities and beaches in the south to incredibly vast landscapes in the north; very different languages and yet also similarities.

Incredibly different landscapes, from high mountains with views, geysers, volcanoes and beaches with sand or rocks. A continent that gives a different, beautiful image of itself in each of the seasons. A continent with a high standard of living and yet shaped by current political events and oppressed by crises; a patchwork carpet with different solutions, which makes the continent so special.

### Andrea, 57 years, grew up in divided Germany

I grew up in the non-free part of divided Germany. In second grade, I said that politicians should open the borders. All the adults around me said that this would not be possible. They explained to me that the systems are too different. They warned me not to express this though publicly. But even at the age of eight, I knew exactly that I did not want to live in a country where I wasn't allowed to think, speak and act freely. I wanted to travel and see the 'other' Europe that I otherwise only knew from illegal Western television.

Even today, I often hear that the systems are too different. This time, this declaration refers to Europe and seems to excuse the structural, economic and social inequalities that divide us and the people of our continent. But I am convinced that, despite all the cultural differences, we can overcome these inequalities with courage, commitment and European integration. Because if we want real peace and security for all people in Europe, we must first overcome the borders in our minds.

### Willy, 60 years, child of Portuguese emigrants

I was born in a foreign country. As a child of Portuguese immigrants, my childhood in Germany took place between two cultures. Although my parents integrated very quickly in rural Germany, their strong ties to their home country remained steady. Every summer, we drove our car for days on end across the many national borders that separated Germany and Portugal.

Even though there are fewer physical borders in Europe today due to advancing European integration and the associated freedom of travel, the responsibility that comes with this freedom has not yet arrived in everyone's minds. Far too often, people only think about their national interests. It should not be the case that one evades this responsibility in the event of difficulties.

Instead, I am sure that European and global thinking is needed to create peace and create a good standard of living for all people in our world. My own biography shows me that we can do this despite all our differences if we are interested in a real exchange between people and their cultures. This would be facilitated by a common language spoken by all Europeans. In addition, it should be the standard that all young people get to know the culture in at least one other country.

### Musa, 26 years, Kosovar-German living in the UK

When I think of 'Europe', my first thoughts are about the European Union. Being born in a (wealthy) EU country has awarded me with many privileges and immensely enriched my life. I have no doubt that the European Union is the key to lasting peace and prosperity in all of Europe. However, I am concerned that this currently happens at the expense of others. Therefore, I believe there is an urgent need to address the European Union's role in ignoring

injustices and perpetrating harm in both historical and modern contexts in Europe and beyond.

## Voices of Europe – Original versions

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### Yesim, Turkish-French living in Paris

Lorsqu'on me parle de l'Europe, je pense à la diversité, à la liberté et à l'ouverture d'esprit des peuples. Je pense aux droits des enfants, des femmes et donc de l'humanité. Je pense aussi aux beaux pays et à leurs magnifiques paysages. Mais je pense surtout à un continent qui doit être solidaire des peuples dans le besoin, à une Europe qui s'oppose aux guerres, à la violence et à la maltraitance. Je pense à une Europe qui souhaite de tout cœur la paix

### Andrea, 57 Jahre, aufgewachsen hinter Mauern

Ich bin im nicht freien Teil Deutschlands aufgewachsen. In der zweiten Klasse habe ich gesagt, dass die Politiker die Grenzen aufmachen sollen. Alle Erwachsenen um mich herum haben gesagt, dass dies nicht möglich ist. Sie erklärten mir, dass die Systeme zu unterschiedlich sind. Sie warnten mich davor, diesen Gedanken öffentlich zu äußern. Doch schon mit acht Jahren wusste ich genau, dass ich nicht in einem Land leben möchte, in dem ich nicht frei denken, sprechen und handeln darf. Ich wollte reisen und das andere Europa sehen, das ich sonst nur aus dem illegalen Westfernsehen kannte.

Auch heute höre ich oft, dass die Systeme zu verschieden sind. Dieses Mal bezieht sich diese Erklärung auf Europa und entschuldigt scheinbar die strukturellen, wirtschaftlichen und sozialen Ungleichheiten, die uns und die Menschen auf unserem Kontinent trennen. Doch ich bin überzeugt, dass wir trotz aller kulturellen Unterschiede diese Ungleichheiten mit Mut, Engagement und europäischer Integration überwinden können. Denn wenn wir wirklichen Frieden und Sicherheit für alle Menschen in Europa wollen, müssen wir zuerst die Grenzen in unserem Kopf überwinden.

### Willy, 60 Jahre, Kind portugiesischer Auswanderer

Ich bin in einem fremden Land geboren. Als Kind portugiesischer Einwanderer fand meine Kindheit in Deutschland zwischen zwei Kulturen statt. Obwohl sich meine Eltern sehr schnell im ländlichen Deutschland integrierten, blieb stetig ihre starke Bindung an das Heimatland. Jeden Sommer fuhren wir tagelang mit unserem Auto über die vielen Landesgrenzen, die Deutschland und Portugal trennten.

Auch wenn es heute durch die fortschreitende europäische Integration und dazugehörige Reisefreiheiten weniger physische Grenzen in Europa gibt, ist die Verantwortung, die mit dieser Freiheit einhergeht, noch nicht in allen Köpfen angekommen. Viel zu oft denken die

Menschen nur an ihre nationalen Interessen. Es sollte nicht sein, dass man sich dieser Verantwortung bei Schwierigkeiten entzieht.

Stattdessen bin ich mir sicher, dass es europäisches und globales Denken bedarf, um Frieden zu schaffen und einen guten Lebensstandard für alle Menschen auf unserer Welt zu schaffen. Meine eigene Biografie zeigt mir, dass wir dies trotz all unserer Unterschiede schaffen können, wenn wir an einem wirklichen Austausch zwischen den Menschen und ihren Kulturen interessiert sind. Diese Zusammengehörigkeit kann durch eine gemeinsame Sprache, die von allen Europäern gesprochen wird, unterstützt werden. Zudem müsste es der Standard sein, dass alle jungen Menschen längerfristig die Kultur in mindestens einem anderen Land kennenlernen.

Fabienne, 27 years, Austrian living in Austria

Wenn ich über Europa nachdenke, dann kommt mir als erstes ein Bild von ganz unterschiedlichen Ländern und Kulturen in den Kopf. Von sonnigen Städten und Stränden im Süden bis hin zu unglaublich weiten Landschaften im Norden; ganz unterschiedliche Sprachen und doch auch Gemeinsamkeiten.

Unglaublich verschiedene Landschaftsbilder, von hohen Bergen mit Ausblick, Geysiren, Vulkanen und Stränden mit Sand oder Gestein. Ein Kontinent welcher in jeder der Jahreszeiten ein anderes, schönes Bild von sich gibt. Ein Kontinent, mit hohem Lebensstandard und doch geprägt von aktuellen politischen Geschehnissen und bedrückt durch Krisen; ein Fleckerlteppich mit unterschiedlichen Lösungen was den Kontinent dann doch so speziell spannend macht.