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An Experiment in Nanotourism

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by Ruth Terry

On the car radio, the Georgian folksingers' voices lilt and soar, but as I take in my surroundings, my stomach sinks. We've already passed the Soviet apartment buildings near the airport, the cobblestoned streets lined with faded Art Nouveau edifices, and the traditional Georgian houses of the old town, with their lacy wooden lattice-work balconies. Now, we stop in an eerily lit construction zone with unpaved roads pocked with gutted structures and building detritus.

Thankfully, my driver, who is my Airbnb host's father, knows which apartment is mine. As with many structures in the vicinity, it's hard to tell where one unit ends and the next one begins. My flat is newly renovated and clean, but it's on the ground floor and has large windows that face the courtyard. I remind myself that getting to know the neighbours is part of the plan, tamp down feelings of vulnerability, and lock myself in.

Due to some bureaucratic quirks, I had to leave Turkey for a few days. Though normally averse to pandemic-time travel, I saw an opportunity to finally test out nanotourism – a quietly radical travel concept grounded in the creation of

intentional and meaningful connections. I discovered nanotourism randomly when someone in my travel writers Facebook group posted a link to an online symposium on the topic.

"Nanotourism is critical, as opposed to conformist," explains Aljoša Dekleva, a Slovenian architect who coined the term with his partner and fellow architect, Tina Gregorič. "It is also participatory, as opposed to being passive. It is responsible. It is obviously local."

Dekleva and Gregorič typically explore the potentialities of nanotourism through the AA Visiting School, a programme of the School of Architecture in London that functions as a mobile R&D lab for rethinking tourism and rapidly prototyping new ways to experience specific sites with local partners. My main question for Dekleva during our interview is: How do you do this nanotourism thing on your own? He answers that it can be as simple as picking up trash and disposing of it properly – something he and his family did on their trip to the Croatian islands last year. "We were responsible to our environment to leave something better when we left," he says. He also suggests that I lean into my own

interests. "If you are aware of travelling somewhere when you can participate with your own skills, or interests, or whatever you find interesting that you have to give to other people, instead of just kind of exchanging monetary value, that's something which makes you a much better visitor."

This turns out to be easier said than done. Pre-vaccination travel complicates everything – especially on a relatively short trip that will ultimately require three PCR tests. I find a co-working space and a hostel where guests give presentations and participate in events... but they are fully booked. I join a Facebook group for expats and tourists in Georgia, and in an attempt to add value, I offer to bring along items from Istanbul. But I run out of time to procure the random items people request. Connecting to a local knitting circle – I'm an avid knitter – is another fail, in part due to inclement weather that prevents meeting outdoors.

My new neighbourhood is decidedly less grim in the sunshine. The armoured Kartlis Deda, the gargantuan statue known as the "Mother of Georgia," stands guard on nearby Sololaki Hill. The cacophony of construction work feels optimistic.

I start to interact. I see my neighbours, Giorgi and Roin – both construction workers – feeding two tabby cats, and I explain through photos and gestures that they remind me of my cats in Istanbul. I notice that the family above them has hung their vegetables outside in plastic bags suspended from nails, so I improvise and hang my veg on the hinge of my kitchen window. (Inventive!)

Restaurants and bars are closed to patrons on weekends, but UZU House – a local iteration of a Japanese nonprofit whose mission is "creating a place for people from all over the world to interact," according to their website – continues to host gatherings at the end of my street. As I walk by, I note that the guests are likely to be maskless, conversing and laughing over beer or wine.

The pandemic is making personal connections challenging, so I decide to focus on nanotourism's "educative" aspects with a trip to the Museum of Fine Arts. The attendant takes my temperature at the door. I am the only patron. The exhibition features 40 years of work by painter and sculptor Zurab Tsereteli, most of them inspired by imagining Charlie Chaplin in Tbilisi – a fantastical visit that



never took place. The paintings feature outsized clown-like figures in acidic colours, positioned against black backgrounds. I hate clowns and find the effect a little nightmarish.

Continuing my artistic education, I head to Gallery Artbeat to see Maia Naveriani's "New Wave Tourist" show – abstract, mixed-media reflections on tourism created during pandemic isolation. The scribbles and sharp lines of Naveriani's drawings are tensely juxtaposed with their candy colours and untethered forms. There is a recurring motif: a landscape drawing in a circle. It's like viewing a destination through a plane window or seaman's scope.

I spend a lot of time walking alone around the city. A serendipitous turn leads me to the exact Airbnb near the Opera House where I stayed with my partner and best friend on our 2019 trip to Tbilisi. Lonely, I start seeking out other places we visited on our trip. I walk to the Dry Bridge Market. And this is where my nanotourism experiment begins to fall apart.

As a Black woman traveller and Istanbul resident, I am used to curious stares. But the middle-aged men on the bridge – many of them vendors – stare at me so intensely that I begin to crumble inwardly. Though I've heard hip-hop blaring from cars and seen Georgian women rocking box braids, I haven't actually seen any other Black people here.

I keep my head down and stride purposefully toward Fabrika, a complex in a renovated Soviet factory full of concept stores and eateries. I feel another man's eyes on me and let him pass, then catch him smirking back at me. I arrive at Fabrika

panicking. It feels too crowded, too many people, too many voices. I have a drink and text a Black woman I met in the Facebook group to ask about the staring. They may think you're a prostitute, but they're harmless, she says of the men. Sure enough, when I'm back in my own neighbourhood, another oldish man looks me up and down and says, "How much, you?"

Trust is an aspect of nanotourism that Dekleva had not previously included in his founding tenets (though when it comes up during our interview, he says he may add it). With trust comes risk and vulnerability – something that, given my anxiety disorder, I shouldn't have underestimated. I tried to engage the city on its own terms, and now I feel unsafe *and* betrayed. I spend the next day holed up inside. How can I meaningfully interact with anyone when all I want now is to be invisible and ignored?

The only places I feel safe are enclosed. Fortunately, Tbilisi's architecture offers many outdoor courtyards. I eat at Sonia Melnikova's Fantastic Douqan, a garden restaurant that serves traditional Georgian fare and a few anomalous Asian-inspired dishes. I stick to the salad with walnuts, with earthy beetroot and plump sun-dried tomatoes. I have a few shots of chacha, Georgian firewater made from winemaking byproducts. I very rarely drink anymore, and I know I am doing it to feel invincible. I try to channel Kartlis Deda with her silver broadsword.

In a surprise turn, the backstreets to my Airbnb actually feel safer at night than during the day, and I walk home without incident. There are mothers with children picking up a few dinner

items from the local grocers, and young couples making out in dim doorways.

I arrive home elated and ready for another drink. The Russian journalists in the Airbnb next door offer me wine. We eat khinkali, Georgia's famed meat-filled dumplings. Giorgi, Roin, and their friends, Chabuki and Mamuka, join us. Between Russian, English, Georgian, and Turkish we manage to have a conversation. Giorgi shows me a selfie of him and a Black construction worker and my heart swells at the gesture. I also learn that he built my Airbnb.

Mamuka offers us dark, pungent honeycomb and homemade honey liquor so incredibly strong it makes regular chacha feel like chardonnay. I teach the guys how to knit. Mamuka gifts me the half-kilo of remaining honeycomb. *This is it! This is nanotourism!*

Then, the boundaries begin to blur. Giorgi sits close to me as we scroll through pictures on my phone. We haven't been wearing masks because we're outside and drinking. But now he is too close. When he sees a picture of my hair in an Afro, he is incredulous. I pull out my ponytail to prove it is indeed my hair, and he touches it. Later, Mamuka kisses my hand.

In the morning, I am hungover and nervous. I worry I have coronavirus. I worry that last night's shenanigans have irrevocably shifted the boundaries on personal space – not to mention mask-wearing. The pounding of construction is incessant, and workers I don't know are going in and out of Giorgi's house. I panic and Bolt (how apt) to the Holiday Inn. On the way, I regift the honeycomb to UZU House for their next event.

The moment I cross the hotel's threshold, the true appeal of mass tourism and chain hotels crystallises in my mind: I relish the clearly demarcated lines between public and private space, the personalised anonymity of having people cater to your basic human needs at a professional remove. I shift into autopilot. It feels so safe.

On my last solo day – my partner will join me this weekend – I take a Bolt about 20 minutes outside the city to Dog Organisation Georgia, a no-kill shelter where 40 stray dogs live. It was easy to set up the volunteer dog-walking opportunity through Facebook, and it is, of course, an outdoor activity. Maita, the caretaker, gives me a tour, and then I walk Blackie, a dog who is older but clearly doesn't know it. He energetically veers from the path, digging holes and sniffing out a terrified turtle.

I return to the shelter around the same time as Maita's partner, Martin. His mask is upside down and keeps slipping from his nose. I tell him about my nanotourism experiment, and he has ideas for next time, like my giving a journalism presentation at a local school. Maita and Martin give me a ride back to a main road so I can Bolt back to the hotel, along with an open invitation to come back anytime.

When I imagined my first foray into nanotourism, it was supposed to be full of moments like these. I'm trying not to think of this experiment as a failure. But I vastly underestimated the mental and emotional toll my experiment would take as a Black woman traveling alone during a pandemic. I'll try it again sometime, but right now, all I want to do is book an all-inclusive. –