

# TRAILBLAZING

The Transcaucasian Trail is a planned long-distance route across the Caucasus, the mountainous region where Asia and Europe meet. Stepping outside her comfort zone, **Anna Richards** heads to Armenia to tackle a 350-mile section of this still-emerging trail, and discovers solitude and heart-warming hospitality in equal measure.



KNOCKING BACK VODKA shots with a group of beekeepers as skewers of pheasant crackled on an open flame wasn’t what I’d expected to be doing that evening, but it made a change from dehydrated meals, eaten in solitude. But then, nothing about my experience of trekking across Armenia proved to be as I’d expected. It’s difficult to have preconceptions when you’re part of the first cohort to tackle a trail.

The newly-opened Transcaucasian Trail (TCT) spans 1,500km across Armenia and Georgia, and, political situation permitting, will one day double in length when linked with Azerbaijan too. It’s been a work in progress for seven years, a collaborative effort between Tom Allen, Ashot Davtyan, Meagan Neal and Paul Stephens, four trail planners scattered across the Caucasus. Two years of lockdowns and travel restrictions are hardly conducive to building a transcontinental thru-hike, but as I bushwhacked through foliage taller than me, it was clear that Covid-19 has been far from the only problem when mapping a route here.

I caught the bus from the capital Yerevan to Meghri, the lowest town in the country at 610m above sea level, virtually straddling the country’s southern border with Iran. For northbound hikers, it’s the start of the trail. As the rickety old marshrutka rattled and lurched through the nine hour journey, the landscape became increasingly arid, as though a malfunctioning Hoover had suctioned up any drops of liquid and spewed out dust chaotically in its place. I chatted to an Iranian man heading home, who was perched on a milk crate next to me. As I relished what would be my last social interaction for some time, an almighty bang punctuated our conversation. The driver skidded to a halt at the side of the highway, pulling over long enough to retrieve part of the bus roof that had fallen off, and threw it at our feet. We recommenced the bumpy journey, this time with a skylight.

INTO THE WILD

As the lowest part of the Armenian trek, Meghri is also the hottest, and never more so than early August when I began my odyssey. It’s not uncommon for daytime temperatures to approach 40 degrees Celsius, so I set off before dawn. Panicking about the potential scarcity of water for the first few days, I began the hike carrying 11 litres, feeling like a camel whose humps had been stuffed with rocks. Arevik National Park, the first stage of the trail, hardly looked hospitable. Blanched white sheep skulls littered the rubble, forest fires had reduced most of the trees to charcoal stumps (and with them, most trail markings), and I climbed steeply until I could blot out Meghri, that tiny green dot of civilisation, with my finger.

Six months ago, I hadn’t heard of the TCT. My knowledge of Armenia was limited to historical horrors. Topography-wise, I couldn’t even have told you if it was mountainous, but after seeing a post about the new trail on Twitter, my interest was instantly piqued. In under 24 hours I’d gone from planning a summer of alpine adventures with friends within spitting distance from my home, to preparing to walk as much of Armenia as I could within a month, completely alone. I joined my first Slack training session that same week and met fellow hikers from across the globe,



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enrolled in Armenian conversation classes and desperately (and unsuccessfully) tried to obtain good-quality physical maps of the country. I’d never prepared so thoroughly for a hike, nor felt so clueless. As a faithful disciple of guidebooks, the lack of guidelines on how long a section should take, or how many kilometres to tackle each day, was already a breach of my comfort zone.

Mountains often look toothy, but Arevik National Park was more like the abraded, chipped enamel of an ill-kempt mouth, creating a natural and impenetrable-looking border with Iran. I felt very alone that first night, and very small. The wind funnelled thick layers of stormy clouds across the sky and every so often a beam of sunlight would break through, spotlighting solitary mountain peaks. I imagined the mountains rolling on forever and ever, ➡







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with my tent no bigger than a grain of sand amidst them. As the crow flies, I’ve been much further from civilisation, but it was still three days before I saw a human face, a beekeeper in a village 54km from my starting point.

As I adjusted to the solitude I passed ruined villages, sometimes so overgrown that the first I knew of them was a large boulder catching under my boot. I scrambled up scree into dense cloud and followed barely-there tracks through sticky patches of forest peppered with giant hogweed. We’d learnt about this in training; the sap could burn your skin and cause permanent scarring, and at the beginning of the trail, I cautiously dressed and undressed with the regularity of a cabaret performer, donning long trousers and my waterproof jacket each time I spotted it. A week later I was pushing through unbroken stalks in shorts and T-shirt.

**FOUR-LEGGED COMPANY**

I adopted a family of four stray dogs (or rather, they adopted me) that accompanied me for several days, sleeping and scratching their fleas outside my tent. I gave them all names and spoke at length with them, and felt that if I hadn’t been insane to embark on this adventure, I certainly would be by the end.

After largely climbing the first few days, the trail began to yo-yo, plunging into the belly of gorges before rising steeply again the other side, and I began to pass settlements. Poster-paint rows of wooden beehives, Soviet-era LADAs taking day-trippers to picnic sites, and wizened men chain-smoking by village water fountains who couldn’t have looked at at this small, grubby woman who had appeared in their midst with greater surprise if I’d sprouted tentacles. I sought shade between the cool walls of millennia-old monasteries, which while almost derelict inside, were often perfectly preserved on the exterior.

With civilisation came the legendary Armenian hospitality. My gender, for the (not infrequent) problems it posed, afforded privileges. Meal invitations came in their flurries, and sometimes I even stayed with families, enjoying wood-fired showers and leaving with my bag full of ripe apricots and thick, folded blankets of lavash, a tortilla-like Armenian flatbread. As the land flattened out the people multiplied. Had there always been so many, just hidden behind the clenched knuckles of the mountains? Instead of pitching my tent in a nondescript dip in the hillside, places where I slept now had names: Tandzaver, Tatev, Shamb.

**THE VALLEY OF WOES**

Vayots Dzor, or the “Valley of Woes”, sounds like a Lemony Snicket creation, but looks like an Indiana Jones film. It was still impossibly dry, but the rocks were flame-hued and pockmarked



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like giant termite mounds. Towns and rivers in the gorges created ribbons of green against the red, like a reversed Christmas wreath. ‘Rush hour’ was meeting a herd of cows, languidly swatting flies from their haunches. The hoof prints of livestock were interspersed with the fat pawprints and berry-filled droppings of bears. Postcard-worthy monasteries perched on cliff tops and the sun reflected from every surface, evenly cooking me from each angle.

After the scorching temperatures, Wild Western canyons and the threat of night-time visits from Paddington Bear’s less amenable relatives who I feared may have fancied a more substantial meal than a marmalade sandwich, the wide open plains of Armenia’s highest mountain range, the Geghams, were a welcome change. Rising to 3,597m, the route covers over 100km without passing a settlement, and is described as the remotest part of the trail. I anticipated that its desolate volcanic craters and windswept lakes would be Arevik on steroids, and was sure that if I was already conversing with dogs, I’d be quite bonkers enough to be chatting to flies by the end of it.

There is a complete silence which falls above a certain altitude. All of a sudden, the orchestra of crickets playing music with







their legs fell quiet. There were no bees, no flies, no trees to rustle in a breeze. It felt as though someone had muted the television. And with this muffled, cotton wool silence the landscape became more grandiose, a volcanic plateau laid out before me in epic proportions. I no longer struggled to identify overgrown livestock trails because my route was visible for several kilometres. The sheer space elated me, lifting my mood with the altitude. Resilient patches of hard-packed snow still clung resolutely to mountains that sparkled with loose rubble, and I felt so very small, as I had at the beginning, but less oppressively so.

But in these soundproofed surroundings I was far from alone. Nomadic camps complete with herds of sheep and gruff-looking shepherd dogs began to appear around every corner. Usually the dogs would smell me before I saw them, breaking the stillness with a cacophony of barks, snapping at my heels. As I shouted “nstell!” (“sit!”) the shepherd would appear, and as though teleported, I’d find myself inside a yurt, enjoying thick, Armenian coffee and fresh watermelon.

The full Armenian section of the TCT is 832km, and with just four weeks to complete as much as I could between the strict schedule of weddings which dictate all plans when you are in your late 20s, I began to get selective. I hitchhiked a couple of sections and beelined towards the lush forests and limestone cliffs of Lori Province, in the north of the country. It was September now and the trees were turning, creating Impressionist dabs of colour where they clung to the cliffs. The route still lurched up and down, often gaining more than 1,500m of altitude in a day, but water sources were plentiful and good camping spots easy to find. Occasionally I even saw the trekker’s lighthouse: the red and white hiking trail signs painted on rocks, although these were often more of a wrecker’s lantern, marking a different trail.

**FAMILIAR FACES**

On the 28th day, my final day, I saw a familiar face. Sakar, the pig farmer, had hosted me for lunch the day before. He’d also fed me copious amounts of brandy which I’d mistaken for apple juice, only realising my mistake when I hit the trail again rather wobbly. Moments like this hadn’t been common; in four weeks I’d fleetingly crossed only four other hikers (three on one day), all heading in the opposite direction. But here was Sakar, waving



energetically, bellowing my name. He was visiting his brother, who lived in this village.

Out came honeycomb, cream, fresh bread and mud-like coffee. The women shook their heads at what I was undertaking and the men tried to fill my glass with vodka, although it was only 10am. As I left, the family and all their neighbours poured out of their cottages to wave me on my way.

When I arrived in Tumanyan, an old textile-making town nestled in a gorge between limestone cliffs, I’d walked 580km from my starting point in Meghri. I was relieved that I wouldn’t need to climb them. Named after Hovhannes Tumanyan, one of Armenia’s most famous writers, a little arts festival was in full swing when I arrived. The former textile factory had been occupied by Russian refugee artists, and although there were only a hundred or so people at the festival, I felt as though I’d arrived in a bustling metropolis.

Preparing myself for a final night in my tent on the football pitch, as the little town was bursting at the seams, I found myself instead sharing a crumbling, Soviet-era townhouse with an Armenian silk printer. Coffee, cakes, salted sheep’s cheese and fruit packed the little table. Once again, Armenian hospitality had turned up trumps. 🗡️

[top left] Sxxge [above] Dxxge [below] Bxxx



## The Transcaucasian trail

A quick look at the history of this epic emerging trail – and the logistics of walking it yourself.

The Transcaucasian Trail (TCT) has taken seven years to create, planned and painstakingly put together by Tom Allen, Ashot Davtyan, Meagan Neal and Paul Stephens. They couldn’t understand why no hiking route existed to traverse the mountainous region of the Caucasus and set out to resolve this. As the TCT website says: “Bordering Europe, Asia and the Middle East, the Caucasus ... is one of the most biologically, culturally and linguistically diverse regions in the world. Now, united by a shared vision of a long-distance trail network across the region, a growing community of local and international hikers, cartographers and conservationists is putting this hidden gem on the map to help ensure that the landscapes and heritage of the region can be enjoyed by future generations.”

The trail is planned to be more than 3,000km (1900 miles), joining the Black Sea with the Caspian Sea, but it is still a work in progress. As of 2022, 832km (517 miles) of the Armenia section can be ‘thru-hiked’ in full, as described in this feature by Anna, but the trail is still very much in its infancy. There are multi-day section hikes available in other parts of Armenia and Georgia.

For the Armenian thru-hike, the route passes alpine meadows, volcanic plateaus, desert scrubland, forests, canyons, gorges and subtropical plains. In some areas, hikers will need to carry food for up to seven days. Potential dangers from wildlife include shepherd dogs, particularly in the Gegham Mountains, bears, ticks, snakes and giant hogweed.

The TCT requires a high level of self-sufficiency and off-route navigation. It is still a trail very much in development. The TCT organisation can provide training, trail guides and maps, but it is still likely to feel like a step into the unknown for hikers used to parts of the world where hiking infrastructure is very well-established.

**Getting There** Pegasus Airlines flies from London Stansted and Manchester via Istanbul Sabiha Gökçen to Yerevan (www.flypgs.com). For northbound hikers, from Yerevan, a marshrutka (small bus) runs from Sasuntsi David Metro Station to the trail start in Meghri (daily, nine hours, reservations recommended via their Facebook page Yerevan Meghri Agarak Kapan Qajaran | Facebook).

Southbound thru-hikers beginning in Georgia should fly to Tbilisi (which can also be reached using Pegasus Airlines via Istanbul Sabiha Gökçen) and catch a train to Zugdidi (daily, six hours). From Zugdidi it’s a 40 minute taxi or marshrutka to the trailhead in Anaklia.

**Navigation** A reliable GPS app which works offline is essential. Anna used Gaia GPS (Hiking Trail Maps, Ski Touring, 4x4 Offroad App | Gaia GPS) in conjunction with CalTopo (Map the Backcountry with CalTopo). GPX files for the Armenia section are available through the Transcaucasian Trail website (Hike across the Caucasus on the Transcaucasian Trail).

**Seasonality** The Transcaucasian Trail can be thru-hiked between June and September. Snow lingers on Armenia’s Gegham Mountains year round and flash storms are common. In July and August, temperatures on low-lying parts of the trail can be as high as 40 degrees Celsius, and marked water sources and rivers will often be dry.

**Distance and ascent** Anna covered 580km and 21,000m of ascent. The full Transcaucasian Trail comprises 1,500km and 67,000m ascent. 832km of the trail lies in Armenia.

**Sleeping** Much of the route requires wild camping (widely tolerated in both Armenia and Georgia), but many towns and villages en route have guesthouses or campsites. It’s