

Reflection on the GEEA Study Tour to the Republic of Georgia

Stacy Dockter

Earlier this summer, I had the incredible opportunity to travel with GEEA to the *other* Georgia, the Republic of Georgia! This was my third study tour with GEEA, and it was a memorable experience. Georgia is a country I knew very little about, so traveling there afforded me the ability to learn a tremendous amount in a short period of time.

As always, my favorite part of the Study Tour was the school visits. I love meeting students and teachers in other countries and seeing how school is “done” in other parts of the world. As always, I was impressed by their English language skills. I’m routinely embarrassed when students/people abroad apologize for their “poor” English abilities when I know only one or two words or phrases in their language! I especially enjoyed the school visit in Qeda where we observed the students working in small groups performing advertisements for their products. These students were enthusiastic and very engaged in their class activity. They also seemed to be excited to have visitors. Their presentations were informative and entertaining, especially the group that incorporated Zendaya in their advertisement! Furthermore, I loved having the opportunity to interact with them directly as we “purchased” their products. I would have liked to learn more about the project they were working on. Initially, I thought the students were working on a mini-company project like those we saw in the Baltics. I was under the impression that *they* had created the products themselves. However, some of the other teachers in our group stated that these were *existing* local products that had been assigned to the student groups. I would have been interested to know more about the project/activity. Was this one activity in a multi-part project/unit? Was this a standalone project? More context would have helped me to better understand the activity.

A new experience in this Study Tour was the two teacher workshops we conducted in Tbilisi and Batumi. While I did not model any of the lessons (I thought the high school economics teachers were better suited for this role), I played an active role in the training sessions both assisting our teacher presenters and the Georgian teachers as they worked through the various activities. I love that our trainings were organized such that the teachers played the role of “students” and participated in the activities as their own students would. When I first moved from Michigan to Georgia, I connected with GCEE and began attending their teacher workshops (I’ve attended countless ones over the years!). In the first several that I attended, Mike Raymer played the role of “teacher” and I was one of his students. This was the first professional learning experience I had that was formatted as such and I found it to be incredibly engaging and beneficial. Not only did this format enable me to confidently go back to my classroom and use the lessons with my own students (because I knew exactly how they

worked), but it allowed me to anticipate where my students may get stuck, have questions, want to dig deeper, etc. - essentially, how to differentiate for my students. I am pleased with the format of the Georgia teacher training sessions because I am confident that they had a similar experience. They also had positive feedback, especially the teachers in Batumi.

One aspect of the Republic of Georgia that I found to be similar to the State of Georgia is the diverse landscapes: cities, beaches, mountains, vineyards, forests, waterfalls, and more. The State of Georgia is home to these landscapes as well! It is one of the reasons why the state has become such a popular site for the television and film industry - the variety of settings/backdrops for filming! I appreciate that the Study Tour included visits to all these different parts of the country. Even though we were based in two cities, Tbilisi and Batumi, we took excursions throughout the country and were able to get a very good "taste" of Georgia. Unit one in the Georgia Studies course I teach is all about Georgia's geography. I plan to put together a presentation for students comparing the two Georgias. The presentation will include photos of the landscapes listed above to show students geographic similarities. My students know virtually nothing about the Republic of Georgia, so these photos and information will be enlightening for them! Not only will the presentation help educate students about the Republic of Georgia, but it will hopefully also help reinforce their understanding of their own state's geography.

One activity that almost didn't happen was the visit to the Georgian National Museum. I was really disappointed when it turned out not to be open the day we were scheduled to go there because I had looked forward to learning more about Georgia's history through the museum's exhibits. Thankfully, Corey, David, Manjula, and I were able to fit in a visit on another day. I toured two of the exhibits, one on the Soviet Union's occupation of Georgia and another on religious art. After visiting the Occupation Museum last summer in Latvia, I was particularly interested in learning about Georgia's experience. The museum in Latvia was one of the more memorable activities from that study tour for me. Based on the artifacts and text information in the exhibit, it was apparent that Georgia's experience under Soviet occupation was very similar to Latvia's (and the Baltics in general). Political and religious repression, prison camps, executions, and an unstoppable desire for freedom. One part of the exhibit that especially stood out to me was an excerpt of a letter written by a prominent Georgian to the United States government in the 1930s. The letter was asking for support from America against the Soviet Union and referred to the U.S. as one of Georgia's best/closest allies. I found the words about the U.S. being such a great ally of Georgia sad and ironic given the current political situation. Both in terms of tariffs and the dismantling of USAID, the U.S. is not a great friend to nations like Georgia these days. As for the exhibit on Georgian religious art, I did not expect to enjoy it as much as I did.

We had visited a number of religious sites in Georgia by this time, and I thought the museum exhibit would simply be more of the same. How wrong I was! The exhibit was full of absolutely gorgeous pieces of art from old churches. There were altar pieces, tryptichs, mosaics, and much more. The design and attention to detail in the pieces was incredible. They sparkled with bold jewels and gold plating and I could not take my eyes off of them! They also provided me with new vocabulary to learn; the term cloisonne being one example. According to Google's AI, cloisonne is *an ancient decorative art technique that involves soldering or gluing thin metal wires, called cloisons, onto a metal base to create a design, then filling the resulting compartments with vitreous enamel and firing it to create a colorful, intricate surface. This technique originated in the Near East and was later adopted and refined in various cultures, most notably in Byzantine and Chinese art.* Much of the art exhibited incorporated this technique and it was just beautiful. I am grateful to have visited this museum.

One thing I noticed that surprised me was the lack of overt support for Ukraine. After traveling to the Baltics last summer (and Estonia again this past Spring), I expected to see sites like we saw there. For example, we saw entire flowerbeds planted in the colors of the Ukrainian flag, Ukrainian flags flying outside government buildings, and effigies of Putin being hanged. While we did see a spray-painted message "F*ck Russia" in Georgia, it was not necessarily in direct response to the Ukrainian War. I'm not sure if the Georgian people are more reserved in their criticism of Russia, if they're more concerned about reprisals from Russia (we did hear about Russian troops encroaching at the border), or what the reason is for this lack of obvious support for Ukraine. I wanted to ask Nino or Baia about this, but I did not because I was concerned it would come across as being critical of the Georgian people.

Overall, the Republic of Georgia Study Tour was an incredible experience, and I am grateful to GEEA and John Brock for giving me the opportunity to participate.