A wide-angle photograph of a mountainous landscape. In the foreground, a grassy hillside dotted with yellow wildflowers slopes upwards. Four hikers with large backpacks are ascending this slope, moving from the bottom left towards the middle right. The middle ground shows a lush green valley with scattered trees. In the background, a range of jagged, snow-covered mountain peaks rises against a blue sky with scattered white clouds. The overall scene is bright and clear, suggesting a sunny day.

Establishing a Long Distance Trail: The Caucasus and UBES(ters)

Cat Easdon

Why Establish A Trail?

“When does a trail, route, or path become more than a line on a map? When the journey’s course goes from logistical necessity to a track connecting points of discovery. When the universe widens in ways you could never have imagined while taking that first step...”



Why Establish A Trail?

By definition, trails do this by making community-based, responsible tourism their core enterprise...The benefit to travellers is immense. They receive new knowledge, skills, friends, recipes, music, and appreciation for all of the planet's citizens. But the hosts on these trails – often in rural areas where traditions have been maintained for centuries – also receive great value. They are able to share their pride of place, customs, food, wine, and stories.” - ITB Berlin 2019



What If You Lived In A Place Where Adventure Didn't Exist?

By Tom Allen December 17, 2015 32 Comments

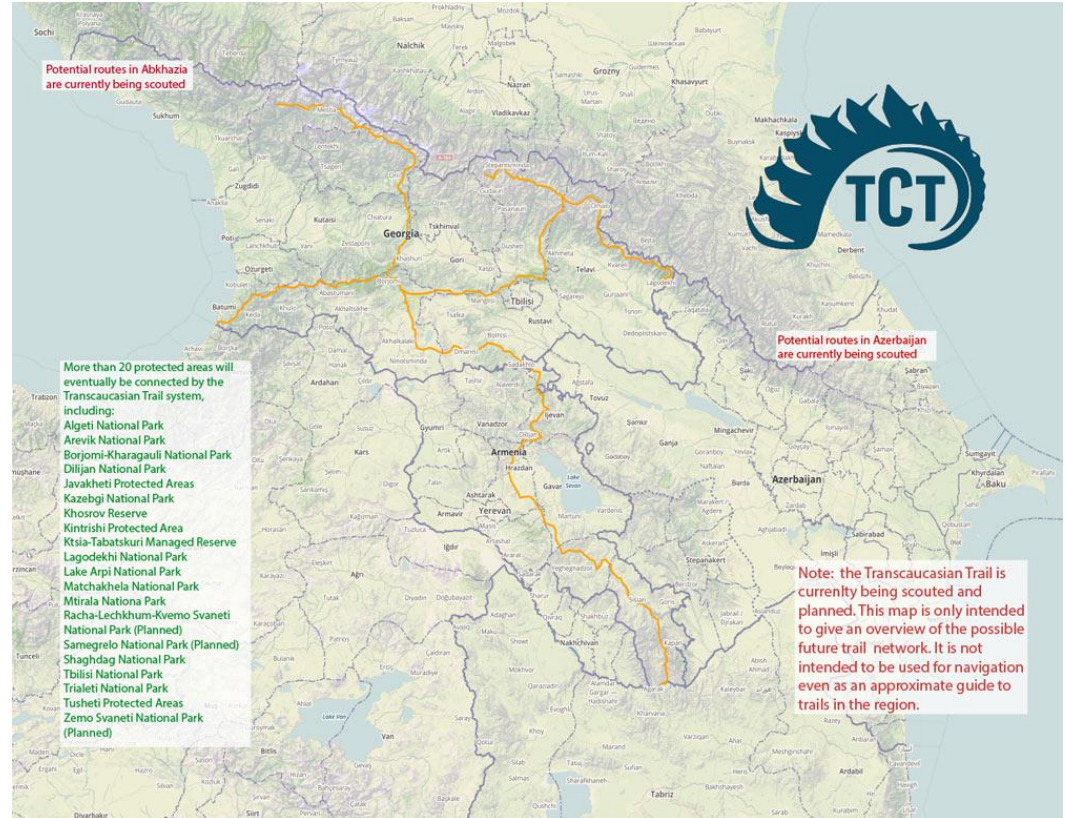


"I'd been wandering the mountains of Armenia for some weeks, struggling to find good routes with no maps or information in any language I could understand. Then I met a Frenchman who'd walked all the way from Paris. He listened with great patience to my moaning about the lack of a good long-distance trail across the Caucasus. Then he replied, quite simply, 'well, why don't you build one?'"

– Tom Allen

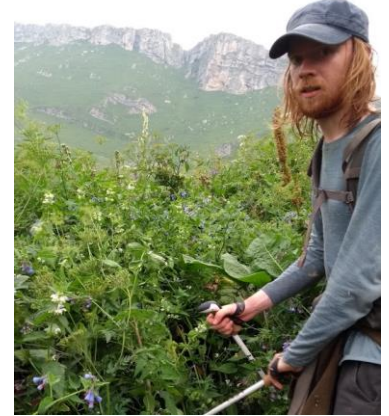
The Transcaucasian Trail

- Established in 2015
- **Two trails** (due to two separate founders!)
 - **Greater Caucasus** through Georgia (+ Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Azerbaijan?...)
 - **Lesser Caucasus** through Armenia and Georgia from the Iranian border to Batumi
- Approx. 3000km total
- **Aims:** tourism for economic development and cultural exchange; conservation; unite historically divided countries and communities



New Trail Challenges

1. Route scouting and mapping
2. Working with the local community, national parks, tourism boards. Rights of way and landowner permission, funding. Historic and ongoing regional conflict.
3. Recruiting volunteers, trail marking, trail *building*, accommodation, writing trail guides, marketing
4. Never-ending quest for volunteers + funding, trail maintenance, managing impacts of increasing tourism



UBES Georgia 2017

- **Goal:** route scout Toba Lakes section and test built section Ushguli - Chuberi for suitability for backpacking (rather than day hiking)
- **Grants:** £150pp + Garmin inReach GPS/SOS device for UBES
- **Challenges:** snow, landslides, *navigational regrets*, illness, no access to recent GPS data
- **Outcomes:** hugely educational for the whole team - an intensive intro to Georgian culture and the Caucasus. Gathered route data and identified priority trail areas for maintenance.

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Highlights

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Lowlights!

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Thru-Hikes

- Lesser Caucasus TCT: UBEster Val Ismaili (2017), Lea Geibel (2018), James Stearn (2019)
- Greater Caucasus TCT: no official route yet, but several hikers have done traverses (Richard Hartfield, Viktorika Hlaváčková...). Jean-Marc Caminaire planning to hike L-G-Istanbul May 2020



Armenia 2018

- **Goal:** gather mapping + guidebook data for the unmarked Alaverdi - Dilijan section (only prior hikers Val + Lea)
- **Challenges:** heat, illness, extremely overgrown terrain, getting access to GPS data
- **Outcomes:** map + “guidebook” data + geotagged photos, guidance for the TCT team about blazing feasibility



Project Armenia (2019)



“Located at 2000m, the limestone escarpments [of the cliffs of Dilijan] extend for 7 kilometres ranging from 50 - 300m high. As of yet, there has been no exploration of these walls. This expedition seeks to establish a number of first ascents, help develop the climbing community by teaching local school children to climb, and setting a range of rock routes accessible to all levels of climbers.”

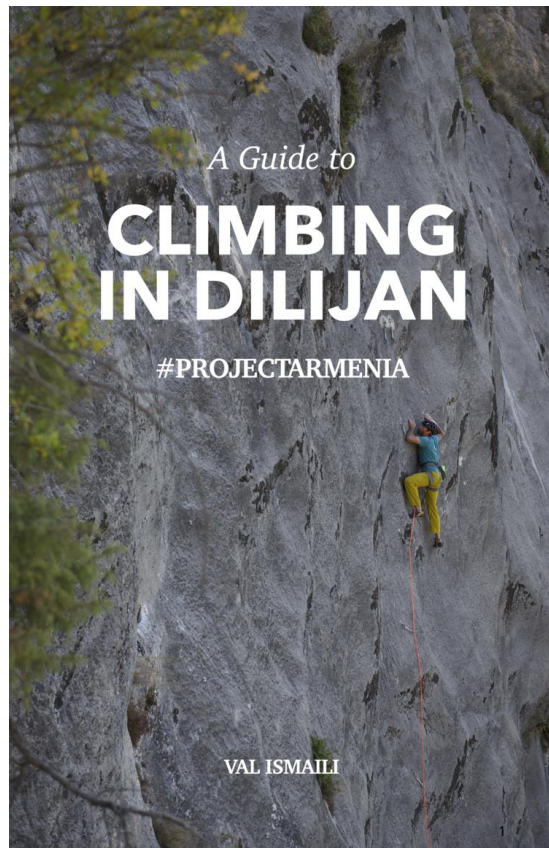
Team: Val Ismaili, Peter Rosso, Florence Wallace, Tadeh Karapetian, Jasiek Kędzia, Kim + Graham McGrenere, Aleksandra Wierzbowska

Exped themes: **women in climbing, recovery, mental health**



Your Turn!

- 500km of the TCT route is now publicly available:
 - **Ushguli - Chuberi** in Svaneti, Georgia (marked)
 - **Khachardzan - Hovk** in Dilijan National Park, Armenia (marked)
 - **Gegham Mountains**, Armenia (unmarked)
 - **Vayots Dzor**, Armenia (partially marked, “hiking hell” section newly rebuilt!)
- Also trailbuilding camps, fundraising hikes which enable the above
- Whether on the TCT route or your own: the Caucasus is stunning and worth exploring!
- Check out <https://www.caucasus-trekking.com/> and Project Armenia’s Dilijan climbing guidebook (<https://www.projectarmenia.co.uk/guide>).



A wide-angle landscape photograph of a mountain village. In the foreground, a river flows through a lush green valley. To the left, a steep green mountain slope rises. To the right, a cluster of small, colorful houses with red and blue roofs is nestled in the valley. In the background, more green mountains are visible under a cloudy sky. The text "Thank you for listening!" is overlaid in the center of the image.

Thank you for listening!