



# WIRED FOR Adventure

## TRAVEL BEYOND LIMITS

ESTABLISHED 1995 ISSUE 176 £9.99

### TRAVEL JORDAN

DISCOVER EXTRAORDINARY  
WILDLIFE IN WADI AL-HASA

### HUT-TO-HUT HIKES

BIG VIEWS AND EPIC TREKS  
WITH JUST A DAYPACK

### HIDDEN GEORGIA

HIKING THROUGH THE  
CAUCASUS MOUNTAINS

✦ PACKRAFT THE VERDON GORGE, SCRAMBLING IN THE PEAK DISTRICT, SEA KAYAKING SCOTLAND,  
HIKING IN THE RIF MOUNTAINS, WEEKEND ADVENTURES IN NORWAY, COOKING GEAR REVIEWS

WA



# THE TOWERS OF SVANETI

In the north of Georgia, nestled in the slopes of the Caucasus Mountains, lies Svaneti. Home to the Svan people, this region is renowned for its historic villages, which are among the highest in Europe, and the timelessness of its culture. **Elizabeth Lavis** tells us the best way to discover this spectacular part of the world

**A**sk about Svaneti, or the Svan people, in any basement wine bar in Tbilisi, Georgia, and you'll hear myriad answers. Wool hats and mysterious tall towers. Fierce mountain people whose lands are laced with the golden sands of Grecian lore. The home of Dali, the famous goddess of the hunt. The site of the doomed Svaneti-Khalde revolt against Russian Tsar Alexander II in 1875.

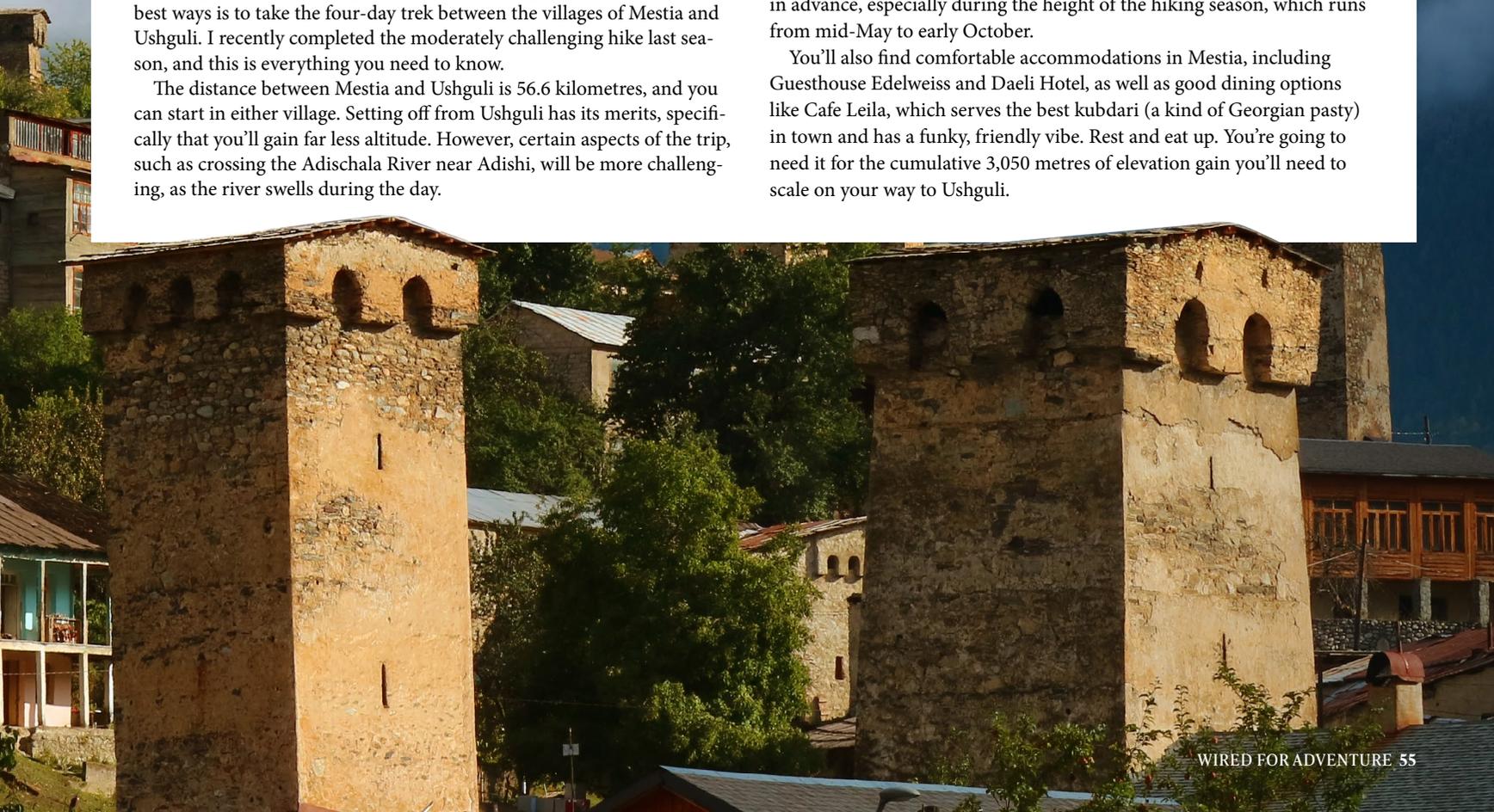
Visit Svaneti, and meet the Svan people, and you'll understand where these legends come from. Svan villages are trapped in time, dominated by their defensive Svan tower-houses (primarily dating from the 9th – 12th centuries), set against glacier-capped mountains that reach above 5,000m, and the people are warm, proud, and hospitable. To fully experience Svaneti's unique beauty, one of the best ways is to take the four-day trek between the villages of Mestia and Ushguli. I recently completed the moderately challenging hike last season, and this is everything you need to know.

The distance between Mestia and Ushguli is 56.6 kilometres, and you can start in either village. Setting off from Ushguli has its merits, specifically that you'll gain far less altitude. However, certain aspects of the trip, such as crossing the Adischala River near Adishi, will be more challenging, as the river swells during the day.

I chose to walk from Mestia to Ushguli, primarily for logistical reasons. There are plenty of places where you can buy camping gear, ponchos, and hiking poles in Mestia, plus you can pick up paper maps from the marshrutka (shared van) station, which is right on the main road near Seti Park, Mestia's main greenspace. There are also several ATMs in Mestia, including those of Credo Bank, where you can withdraw up to 1,000 lari (the Georgian currency) or approximately £270 at a time. You'll need cash on your trek, so it's wise to stock up while you can. No guesthouses take cards, and there are no banks or ATMs outside of Mestia.

Mestia is also easily accessible from Tbilisi. Vanilla Sky operates semi-regular direct flights to Mestia Airport, a ten lari taxi ride from the centre of town. You can also take a train from Tbilisi to Zugdidi and then a marshrutka for the rest of the way. Book your train and airplane tickets in advance, especially during the height of the hiking season, which runs from mid-May to early October.

You'll also find comfortable accommodations in Mestia, including Guesthouse Edelweiss and Daeli Hotel, as well as good dining options like Cafe Leila, which serves the best kubdari (a kind of Georgian pasty) in town and has a funky, friendly vibe. Rest and eat up. You're going to need it for the cumulative 3,050 metres of elevation gain you'll need to scale on your way to Ushguli.





The Svan towers dominate the skyline of Mestia in northwest Georgia

## KEEP IN MIND

While the trail from Mestia to Ushguli is mostly well-marked with red and white trail markers and yellow signs, there are areas where the route may be unclear. Download an offline map or bring a paper map to stay on the safe side. You may encounter some sheepdogs on your travels. These dogs are working animals and can be aggressive, so give them a wide berth and err on the side of caution.

## INTO THE MOUNTAINS

The first leg of the journey is from Mestia to Chvabiani, with a bracing but doable 758m of elevation gain, although you're instantly rewarded with stunning views of the dramatic and imposing Ushba (4,710m) and Tetnuldi (4,858m) mountains. Along the way, you'll pass through plenty of tiny villages, wide open pastures, and some ruins of old houses. Although my trek from Mestia to Chvabiani started clear and sunny, the day quickly devolved into ominous skies, torrential rain, and a few scary, too-close bolts of lightning, which was a sign of the weather to come. I had to take shelter in the ruins of a village, sharing the space with a herd of tolerant cows. This was the first leg of the trip: bovine companionship and slick trails.

The route is very well-marked with yellow signs and red and white striped rocks, and for the most part, the path is clear. There's also a small cafe on the route, where you can pet some friendly dogs, enjoy a hot coffee, and catch your breath on the ridge. The cafe isn't marked on Google Maps, but you can't miss it if you stay on the trail, and it's a lovely place to relax.

I stayed at Irina Guesthouse in Chvabiani and enjoyed a lovely, home-cooked meal, a bit of chacha (Georgian spirits, typically made from leftover grape residue from winemaking, similar to grappa), a warm bed, and a hot shower before setting off the next day.

## BERRIES AND BLISS

The second day of the trek begins with a gruelling, 850m climb out of Chvabiana. I'll let you in on a secret: it's possible to skip it. If the weather's bad, or if you haven't got your trail legs yet, you can opt to take the ski lift to the Tetnuldi Ski Resort. Some might think that's slightly cheating, but instead of slogging up the hill, I was sipping a coffee in the village while the rain pounded down, so I think I made the right choice.

Once you've reached the location of the ski resort (whether you've walked or taken the lift), the landscape expands into glorious views of the Upper Caucasus. The trail is leisurely from here for the rest of day two, giving you the chance to slow down, soak up the scenery, and pick a couple of the fresh berries that flank either side of the trail. It's worth enjoying the relaxed pace of day two, since you'll be facing a couple of tougher days ahead.

After a few switchbacks and a wander through some well-trod cow paths, Adishi will come into view, half-shrouded in mist, nestled down in the valley below. Adishi is a popular town along the route and was my favourite place that I stayed. It's worth checking out the Nino & Tarzan Guesthouse, which has a huge outdoor area with beanbag chairs, epic views, and serves up delicious food for dinner and breakfast. It's exactly the kind of respite you'll need before tackling one of the trek's most notorious sections: the Adishchala River crossing.



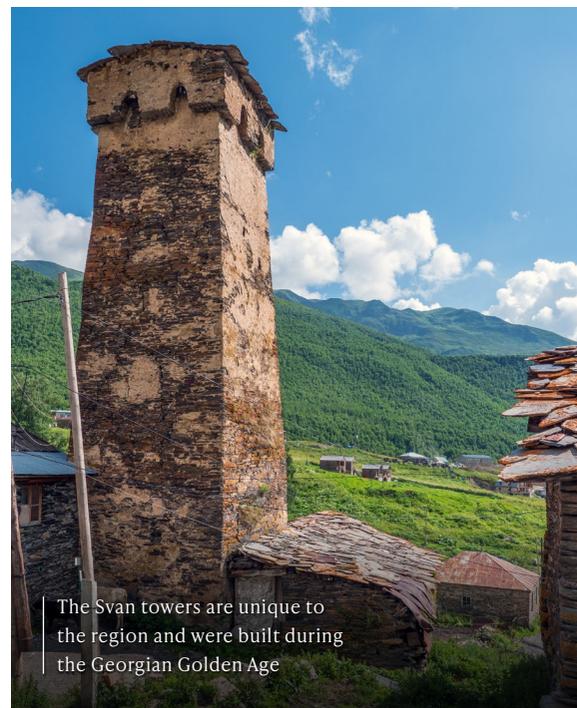
Svan towers are equal parts homely and intimidating



The impressive peak of Mount Ushba rises in the distance



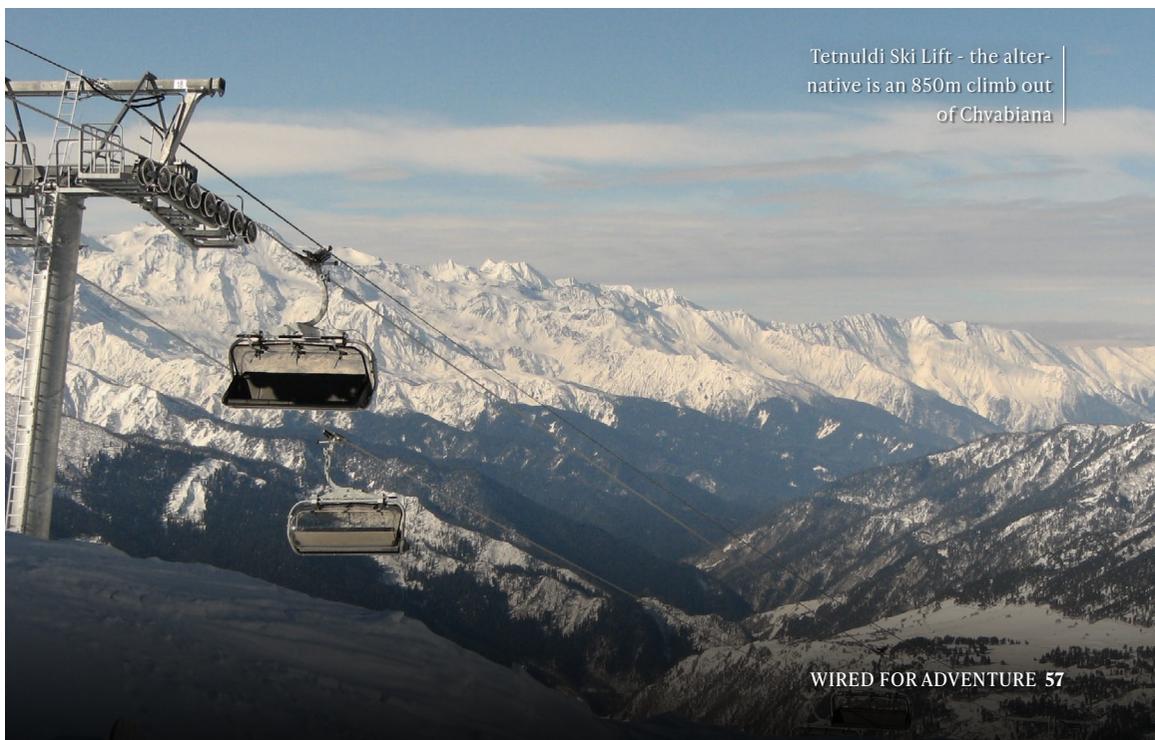
Svan towers were built as defensive dwelling, these days they keep unruly cows at bay



The Svan towers are unique to the region and were built during the Georgian Golden Age



Dramatic mountainscapes form the backdrop for this wonderful hike



Tetnuli Ski Lift - the alternative is an 850m climb out of Chvabiana

The best way to cross the Adishchala River? Horseback



### CROSSING RIVERS

Day three is full of big challenges, but they come with big rewards. It's the most visually spectacular day of the trek, but also the most difficult, thanks to a demanding 895m elevation gain and a knee-busting jaunt down tiny cow paths on the way down.

Many hikers choose to walk from Adishi to Iprali on this day, but you can also opt to stay in the slightly closer location of Khalde instead, which shortens this tough third day. Since I had developed a big, nasty blister on my heel and gotten a bit too much sun while traversing the Chkhuhnderi Pass, this is what I chose to do.

Only a short distance after leaving Adishi, you'll come across the fast-flowing Adischala River. You've got two options here: ford the glacial river or take a horse across. Many people choose to wade across, but if you decide to do this, take caution. I saw plenty of errant hiking poles and gear shooting downstream, their owners scrambling behind to reclaim them from the flow, as I sat atop the horse. Crossing the river on a horse costs 20 lari and makes life easier, but the price can increase up to 60 lari depending on demand.

After the river, the trail winds upward towards the Chkhuhnderi Pass, which reaches an elevation of 2,655m. The trail is thin and tough to navigate as you climb over the pass, but you're rewarded with breathtaking views of the mountains and the vast Adishi glacier in the distance, which you can soak up from a wildflower-strewn plateau at the top of the pass. Rest up, and then start picking your way down tiny paths that snake into the Khaldeschala Valley as you descend towards Khalde.

Khalde is a tiny village with minimal tourist infrastructure compared to Iprali, which is three kilometres further down the road. There's only the Guesthouse Khalde to stay in, but it's a welcoming and hospitable place to rest, with a pleasant café, great views, and most importantly, soft, warm beds.

Khalde is the site of a famous rebellion against Russian imperialism, the Svaneti-Khalde uprising of 1875-76. The villagers of Khalde, although hopelessly outnumbered, held out for almost a week against the advancing forces of Tsar Alexander II of Russia. However, the rebellion was eventually put down when the defenders ran out of ammunition, and the village was razed to the ground. Ruins from the uprising can still be seen scattered around the rebuilt settlement.



The medieval village of Ushguli is one of the highest inhabited settlements in Europe

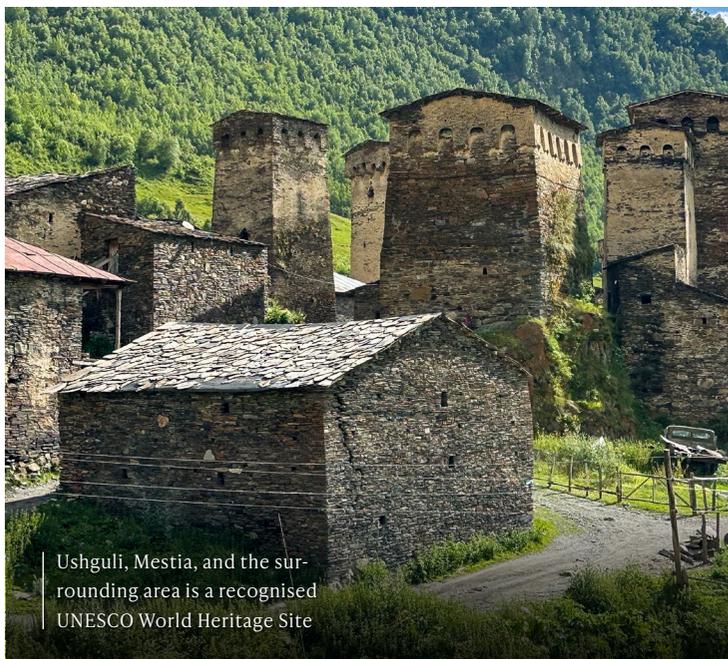
## THE FINAL STRETCH

The majority of the fourth and final day is spent walking along a skinny ridge trail towards Ushguli, one of the highest continuously inhabited villages in Europe. To get up there, you need to cut through a row of houses, climb a ladder, duck under some electrical wires, and continue climbing upwards to the higher trail that sits on the edge of the ridge. As the village is located at 2,100m, the climb up is formidable, but the trail is so interesting that it's easy to forget how much altitude you're gaining.

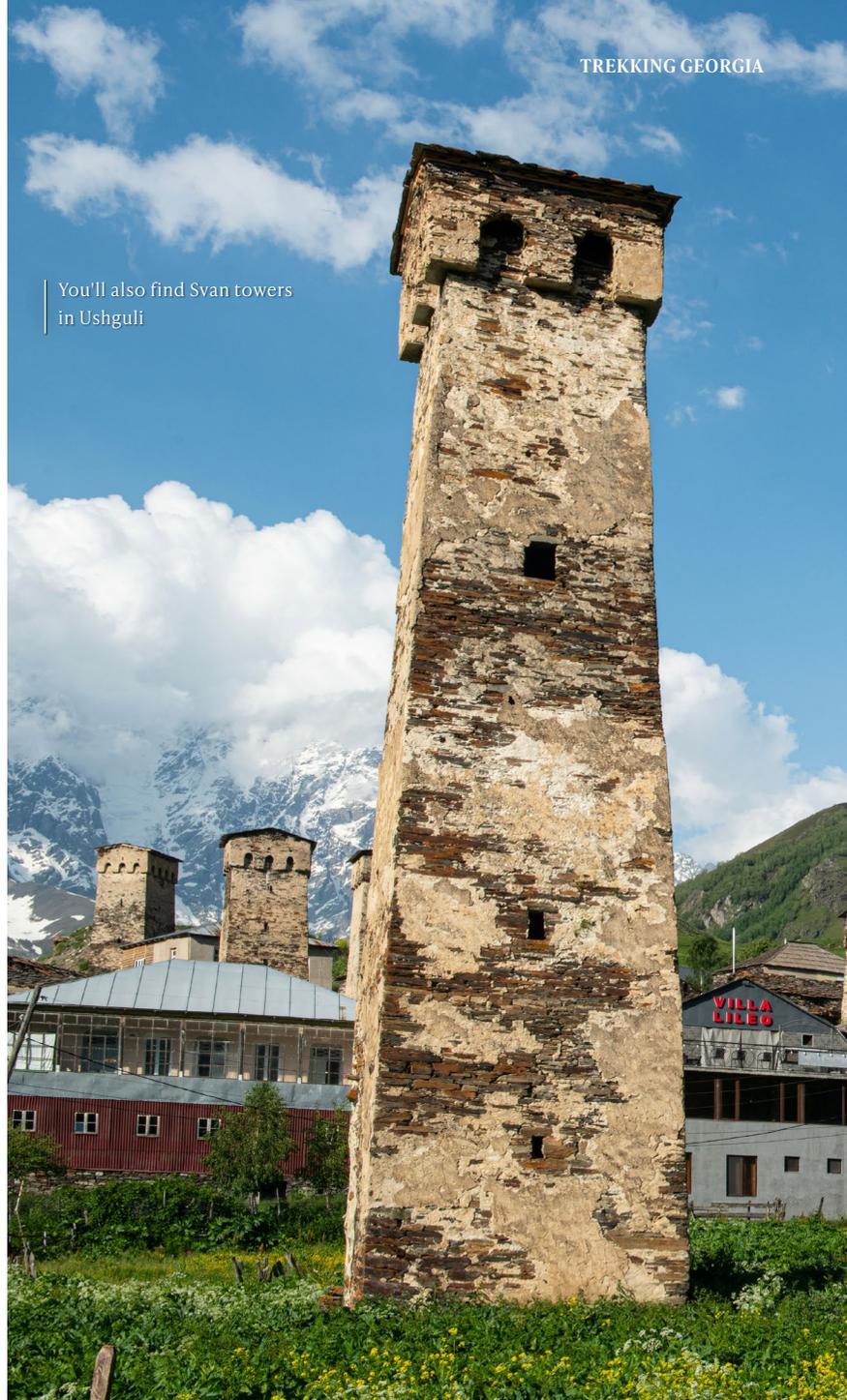
This part of the trek isn't as well-marked as the others, but it's hard to get lost because you're basically just going in one line, with very few turns or switchbacks. When in doubt, gaze over the side of the ridge and squint until you spy Ushguli in the distance and with it, the end of the trek.

Once you're in Ushguli and you've completed the trek, you have a few options. You can grab a marshrutka back to Mestia, or you can spend the night in one of the handful of guesthouses. I like Guesthouse Cafe Nita, which also offers a decent wine selection and some handmade Svan hats. If you're so inclined, you can hike from Ushguli to the Shkara glacier or take a shorter hike to the historical Lamaria Church just outside of the village.

From the breathtaking and imposing Upper Caucasus mountains to the fascinating history of the Svan region, the four-day trek from Mestia to Ushguli is a brilliant way to explore one of Georgia's most beautiful regions. It's still one of the most unforgettable experiences of my life. [WA](#)



Ushguli, Mestia, and the surrounding area is a recognised UNESCO World Heritage Site



You'll also find Svan towers in Ushguli



Beautiful views from the Chkhunderi Pass