



Why I returned to an eatery in Georgia every day for five days

Sarwat Nasir



Have you ever repeatedly been drawn to a restaurant on your travels and found yourself wondering why? Was it the quality of food, the ambience, the affordability or something else?

For me, the one that called me back was a quaint restaurant in a town with just 150 families. When I first spotted the Koshki Restaurant in Mestia, Georgia, I said to myself, definitely not going there, it's small and the staff is socialising with the customers too much for my liking. Not in the mood for that! Little did I know that I would eat there every day for the five days I was in Mestia.

On my first day, around lunch time, I spent 20 minutes searching for a restaurant that served international cuisine. It seemed like all of them served exclusively Georgian food. Don't get me wrong, I love their traditional meals, but I had been eating the local cuisine daily during my week-long stay in other Georgian cities. And how many more kachapuris (thick, round bread with egg/potato in the middle) or kinkhali's (cheese/meat dumplings) can a girl eat?

Koshki was my last stop in my hunt for nourishment. The restaurant had a small wooden fence surrounding its outdoor seating area, which was split in two by the entrance door of the eatery. It had a modest, old-fashioned setting, with wooden tables and chairs and

small flower pots on each table. The view of Mestia's snowy mountain peaks, the chill in the air and the nearby stone towers added to the ambience.

I, obviously, had opted for the last available outdoor table and didn't even bother going inside. A young, smiling, waiter (easy on the eyes, too) brought me the menu. Spaghetti, pizza, meat pies... I was relieved. After I placed my order, another staff member, an older-looking man, came by to say hello. Ramaz Ashordia was the manager of the restaurant. We struck up a conversation and our afternoon was filled with banter, mostly me complaining about the lack of international food in his medieval stone town.

My first impression of him was that he was polite, but reserved. Later I found that Ramaz had interesting tales. He'd keep me company for a bit and then go check on other tourists, mainly from Russia and Europe. I'd see him running in and out of the restaurant, working hard ensuring that standard of the food was okay. And



RAMAZ ASHORDIA: Manager of the Koshki Restaurant, with a friend

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the food, thankfully, was acceptable as per the standards of my spoiled and picky taste buds.

To my surprise, I returned to Koshki in the evening as well. Where else was I supposed to find pizza? This time, on my second visit, I sat inside. The ambience had completely shifted. A live band consisting of a group of young men (again, not bad on the eyes) were singing Georgian music, with the help of an accordion and banjo. Russian tourists were dancing. I had started to like the place.

The next morning, I was at Koshki again, chatting with Ramaz over a cheese omelette and café latte. He was starting to open up about his background. His lips were always curled into a smile though I never saw that smile reach his eyes. When I finally asked him for his story, the smile diminished. I had unintentionally caused him pain. As he began to recall his tragic experience, his face dropped and the smile faded.

Ramaz was a soldier back in 1993, fighting in the Georgian Civil War. During the war, he lost his father and brother. He never heard from them. Even now, he doesn't know if they are dead or alive.

"The troops had taken over my town

of Samegrelo. It was a beautiful city and was full of tourists—until it turned into something so ugly with war. People lost their homes, their family members... I miss my father and brother, but I wish I had gotten to see them one last time," Ramaz told me.

He then moved around, to Turkey, to different cities within Georgia. "Are you married? I asked him "Do you have any children? A girlfriend?"

"I never settled down, no wife, no kids. Just my mother who lives further away," he said.

Ramaz isn't the only one with a tragic tale in that stunning town. According to him, more than 3,00,000 people in Georgia have similar stories.

The next three days, I headed to Koshki for all my meals. It was a decision that came naturally to me. I had started to feel like a local in Mestia. The friendly waiter, the flirty musicians from the band, the Alaskan Malamutes that would hang around, Ramaz's company, the chilly weather, the view of the mountains—I had become so comfortable.

On my last day, I spent a few hours at Koshki again, feeling sad that I was leaving my new friends. Thank goodness for Facebook, though! We all added each other before I left.

When I was back in Dubai, I realised Koshki was the only restaurant I had ever visited so consistently. What drew me in? Was it the food, the ambience, the affordability or simply that it was the nearest eatery? All of the above, surely, but I suspect, it was the people, my new friends.

sarwat@khaleejtimes.com
When not reporting or playing the piano, Sarwat's at karaoke



TOURIST MAGNET: The Koshki Restaurant has live Georgian music and pizzas going for it