

White-knuckled, I grip the handlebar and ease the throttle gently back. My tyres spin, sending a small shower of pebbles cascading down the slope to my left and over the edge into the seemingly bottomless chasm below. I find purchase and, with a small jolt, start slowly to climb to the brow of the hill ahead, all my attention on trying to maintain control of the quad. As I reach the top, an endless vista unfolds and my shoulders relax. A plain stretches before me as far as the eye can see, its verdant greens hazy through the blue-grey-tinged filter of the disappearing morning mist. On my shoulders the summer sun is starting to make its heat known.

I break into a wide grin. Not for the first time I think of Mikhail Lermontov and Alexander Pushkin reaching the summit of these same mountains to the west of modern Azerbaijan, finding themselves rendered briefly mute by the spectacle of this same magnificent view. Of course, in my mind’s eye, the powerful beast between their thighs is a thoroughbred horse rather than a 120-horsepower all-terrain vehicle, but, you know, the idea is the same. I am taking a trip through the Greater Caucasus as a guest of Hale Kai Mountain Resort – the adventurous offshoot

of Baku’s boutique Hale Kai Hotel – which aims to establish small eco-lodges up here above Quba, kick-starting a much-hoped-for wilderness tourism industry away from the bright lights of the city. It’s an admirable idea and yet my mind keeps coming back to those literary greats who visited the Caucasus; to the lasting impression this wild and dramatic landscape made on them; to how the region went on to colour the nature of the literature of a century. The Caucasus became the backdrop of choice for many of the greatest proponents of 19th-century Russian Romanticism, to say nothing of becoming a beacon for many travellers from elsewhere in Europe at around the same time. It provided a living metaphor for savage nobility, becoming synonymous with the Romantic – the very antithesis of the ordered life of Europe, and especially of the stuffiness of the court of St Petersburg.

Perhaps the greatest of the Russian Romantics, Lermontov first came to the region as a child. He was raised by his maternal grandmother, who brought him here to take a cure after a bad fever – the fresh mountain air and mineral springs of the Caucasus long having been renowned for their restorative properties. The landscape and its people made a great impression on the young writer and, when he was later exiled here by Tsar Nicholas I, he wrote his finest novel *A Hero Of Our Time* (1839). Much of the first part of the novel dwells on physical descriptions of the untamed and untameable landscape. Lermontov describes it, glowering in twilight:

On our left loomed the gorge, deep and black. Behind it and in front of us rose the dark blue summits of the mountains, all trenched with furrows and covered with layers of snow, and standing out against the pale horizon, which still retained the last reflections of the evening glow. The stars twinkled out in the dark sky, and in some strange way it seemed to me that they were much higher than in our own north country.

Lermontov was not the first great Russian writer to spend time in the Caucasus. That honour goes to none other than his mentor and idol, Pushkin. Like Lermontov, Pushkin first came here to recuperate. For Pushkin too, the region and its people made a great impression, creeping inexorably into his fiction. Shortly after his stay in the Caucasus, Pushkin published *A Prisoner In The Caucasus* (1821), in which an unnamed Russian prisoner in the mountains despairs for his life, until freed by a beautiful yet seemingly deadly Circassian girl:

The lovely creature’s lips were searching for words; her eyes were full of pain; and her hair fell in a black wave down onto her shoulders and breast. In one hand glistened a file, in the other an inlaid knife. It was as if she was on her way to some secret combat or martial exploit.

As Pushkin found beauty and danger in his Caucasian characters, so too did Leo Tolstoy. In his final work, *Hadji Murad* (published in 1912 but written more than a decade earlier), Tolstoy fictionalizes the true story of the eponymous Caucasian partisan leader, and in his description exemplifies the 19th-century Russian take on the concept of the noble savage. He dwells extensively on the noble aspect of Murad, contrasting him physically with the flabby, corpulent form of the much-reviled, but by now also long-dead, Tsar Nicholas I:

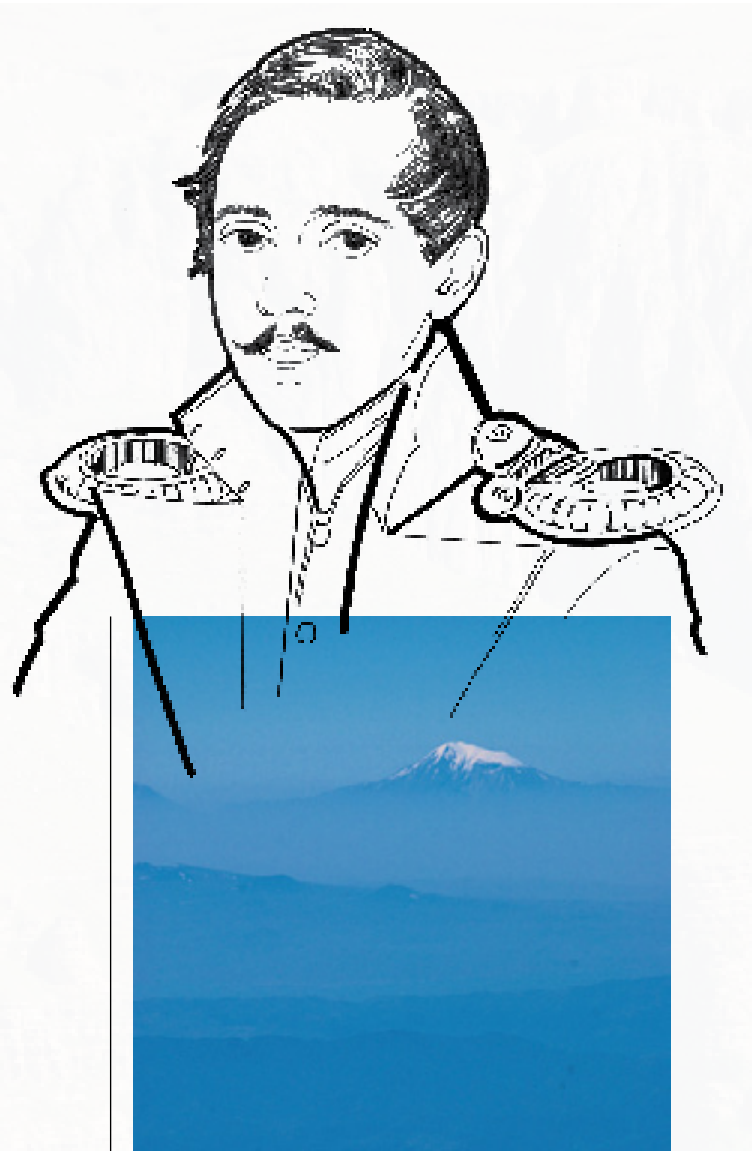
After visiting Azerbaijan, Pushkin was inspired to write ‘A Prisoner In The Caucasus’.



The Caucasus mountains of Azerbaijan inspired many Russian literary greats. We visit the stomping ground of Lermontov, Pushkin, Tolstoy et al.

Words and photographs by BEN ILLIS  
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Nicholas sat at the table... his enormous body – with his overgrown stomach tightly laced in – was thrown back, and he gazed at the newcomers with fixed, lifeless eyes. His long pale face, with its enormous receding forehead between the tufts of hair, which were brushed forward and skilfully joined to the wig that covered his bald patch, was specially cold and stony that day.

Back to my journey, and we stop for lunch at the house of Ali Heydar, director of the school in Qriz, a tiny mountain village that is all but cut off from civilization by snow and ice for half of the year. Around the yard of each house are walls made of bricks of animal dung, drying in the summer winds to be used for winter fuel. There is no smell, but it is an interesting detail of a tough, traditional lifestyle in which everything must be used to best effect. Heydar’s living room is hung in rich carpets, a pile of intricately embroidered and colourful bedrolls heaped up in one corner. He tells me that his school has seven teachers for only 44 children, an astonishing ratio for a village of only around 200 souls. I ask him how old his house is. He shrugs, smiling, and says he doesn’t know. He was born here, as were his father and grandfather before him. He is a warm and intelligent man, justly proud of his life. He serves us honey from his bee hives, vegetables from his garden and fresh cheese from his goats. In Heydar’s strong profile and dark, smiling eyes, it is easy to see the nobility that so impressed Tolstoy. After lunch we head on, more and more spectacular views opening up at every turn. This unending splendour is, of course, also not without literary precedent. In 1848, Moritz Wagner, the German traveller and naturalist, describes:

Such rugged and steep walls of rock and snow, such bold summits as the giants of the central range of the Caucasus exhibit are to be found neither in the Alps of Switzerland, the Taurus, Mount Atlas, the Balkans, the Apennines, nor any other mountains in Europe.

The French playwright and novelist Alexandre Dumas travelled through modern Azerbaijan in 1858, recording his impressions in his travelogue *Voyage au Caucase*. As befits the author of such classic adventures as *The Three Musketeers* and *The Count of Monte Cristo*, Dumas proves an excitable and engaged witness, seemingly not in the least concerned by undertaking his journey at the height of the often-violent conflict between the Russian empire and its partisan enemies. As his translator, Alma Murch, comments in 1962:

The fact that the whole country was in the midst of a bitter war did not deter Dumas in the slightest... to him it merely added to the interest and excitement.

Dumas was quite taken by the places and people of the town of Shemakha. Ever ebullient, he describes the house of ‘one of the richest Tatars in town’ where he attended a soirée:

[Mahmoud-Beg] owned the loveliest Persian-style house I have ever seen, and I saw a great many between Derbent and Tiflis! The great salon was essentially oriental, its decoration so rich and colourful that I cannot find words to describe it.

His admiration extended also to the court dancers who performed in his honour:

Her deep-set, black eyes were still lovely, under the thickly-painted twin arches of her brows. Her nose was thin and well-shaped, her mouth was tiny and her sensual lips, red as coral, parted now and then to reveal little white teeth like pearls. Her luxuriant black hair billowed out from beneath her little velvet cap.

This passage is followed by a rich description of the dancer’s outfit and other exotic costumes among the fine figures of his fellow guests – both male and female – at the soirée.

Nor, of course, was Dumas immune to the power of the landscape, drawing similar comparisons to those of Wagner:

Beyond, there was an almost sheer drop to the plain below... we were between two chains of the Caucasus. The one to our right was wooded at its base, bare and arid on its higher slopes, and crowned with snow. The chain to our left was not so high, its crest gilded by the setting sun and its base lying in purple shadow... Nowhere else, even in Algeria, even in the Atlas mountains, have I found travelling so exhausting, so fraught with danger, as in the Caucasus.

Interestingly, though, it is a woman who perhaps best describes the impact of the mountains. In 1909, astonishingly, Edith Fraser Benn travelled overland from India back to the Britain, recording her experiences in her wonderful book, *An Overland Trek From India By Side-saddle, Camel And Rail*. Fraser Benn describes approaching the Caucasus from the north, having taken the coastal train from Baku north to Derbent:

The mountains rise up suddenly like a great wall. I can compare the view to nothing unless it be to that of the Himalayas, seen by the light of the full moon at midnight from the station of Pathankote... the mountains rise sheer from the plain at arm’s length, as it were, in the full magnitude of their height.

Later on in her journey, as she heads towards the Georgian border, Fraser Benn observes:

The towering hill-sides, vivid green where the sunlight falls on a spur, rise up from the mass of purple shadows at their feet, and saw a jagged white border out of the blue strip of sky which separates their summits.

That night I am invited to stay with a family, further down the valley in another village. We get up early to take advantage of the light. At dawn I see first-hand what the Honourable John Abercromby documented in *A Trip Through The Eastern Caucasus* (1889).

The mist was beginning to fade away... high mountains... became visible. For one brief moment they were tinged with the flush of dawn... To the north, the view was bounded by a rugged chain of mountains... At our feet lay a steep precipice, the bottom of which was invisible.

Like Abercromby, I pass the day with a Lezghin shepherd family, who, as they did in his day, spends the summer months in a tent on a high plateau, tending to their flock. I meet the ferocious sheepdogs, also encountered by Abercromby:

The men dashed off at full speed, swinging their staves behind them to keep off the dogs for curiously enough the dogs of our own bivouac attacked them as fiercely as they did us... they were great ugly shaggy brutes to look at, but made admirable sentries.

I end my journey speeding along the modern road that now connects the once famously isolated village of Xinaliq to the modern world. The road snakes through a gorge, named by the contemporary British travel writer Mark Elliot as Cloudecatcher Canyon. It is an apt description as, even on a hot summer’s day, there are a few wisps of misty cloud, snagged in the chasm’s rocky net.

In my rear-view mirror the mountains fan out behind me, dramatic to the last as they fade into the hazy, blue distance. The mountains of the Caucasus have long held fascination to writers and travellers alike. Anyone lucky enough to visit them will see exactly why. ❧

Travel writer and photographer Ben Illis wrote and photographed ‘Hg2 Baku’ (2010) and co-wrote and photographed ‘Time Out Baku And The Best of Azerbaijan’ (2012).



Both Lermontov (opposite page) and Tolstoy set pieces of their work in Azerbaijan.