This summer, I had the wonderful opportunity to study Georgian in Tbilisi through a summer FLAS fellowship. There were many reasons to spend a summer in Tbilisi, ranging from the constant and delicious supply of fruit and vegetables from the Kakheti region, the casual strolling along Rustaveli Prospect during the warm evenings, or the numerous and oddly affordable open air cafes dotting the old town. But for language study, I was most excited by the opportunity to be immersed in the Georgian language and try to finally be comfortable in its alphabet and impossibly difficult consonant clusters. Yet, by the end of the summer, I began to feel that my schedule of commuting, class, and grocery shopping was beginning to have some diminishing returns, and that it was time to practice my Georgian in a different environment.

One of the reasons I applied to study Georgian this summer was because of a first year paper I wrote which analyzed how tourism reflected Soviet nation-building policies in Georgia, where I began to realize the importance of mountains and mountaineering to early Soviet tourism efforts (as well as the need to work in Georgian sources). Perhaps one of the most impressive and important of these mountains, which constantly appeared in my research, was Mount Kazbegi (or Kazbek in Russian), still a popular destination for both Georgian and foreign tourists located along the Georgian Military Highway on the Russian border. Kazbegi was not a technically difficult summit, but at over 5000 meters, it was an imposing one with constantly changing weather patterns. At some point, an Irish friend of mine named Enda, who didn’t speak Georgian, convinced me that summiting Kazbegi was something we needed to do, with the added bonus that I would get plenty of language practice with the Georgian guide. We were able to make arrangements with a local alpinist named Lasha, who promised to meet us at the base camp, and then guide us to the summit after a day of acclimatization.

The next week, Enda and I made all the arrangements to rent the necessary equipment, and headed off to Stepantsminda, the nearest town to the mountain. Within a day, we were able to make it to the base camp at 3700 meters, where we spent the night and acclimatized to the higher elevation. Lasha arrived as promised the next day, along with some alpinist friends, and all talk was on the weather. Storms had begun to blow in, and Kazbegi was no longer visible, hidden beneath a shroud of imposing grey clouds. The plan was to wake up at 2 am the next morning to begin the summit (the weather is usually calmest in the morning), and Enda and I went to bed around 5 pm in order to get some rest for the next day. But the weather quickly turned worse, and our tent was soon rattled about by 45 mph gusts of wind. Lasha promised to wake us if the weather was good enough to summit, but there was no need as we laid awake freezing, listening to the icy wind blow down off the mountain. The next morning, Lasha explained that conditions were too poor to attempt the summit, and that we would try the next day. I quickly exhausted my weather vocabulary, not finding the right words for the constantly changing winds and freezing conditions. Lasha and his friend Tornike, both experienced alpinists, assured us that this was just “mtis amindi” or mountain weather, a rather convenient phrase for the beginning language speaker. Staring off at the icy mountain and snow in the distance, and blowing into his cold hands, Tornike ruefully stated what every alpinist must have thought at one time, “in the summer I am in the mountains, in the winter I ski, for me every season is winter!” Sitting there in all my clothes trying to warm myself on a bit of the fleeting sun, I couldn’t imagine that just a few weeks prior I had been complaining about the oppressive heat in Tbilisi or that it was even still August.

The next morning, we were awoken by Tornike at 1 am, who happily explained that the weather had changed for the better, and we were ready to set off. After a hearty breakfast of sausage, crackers, and a rich mixture of butter and honey, we headed out, greeted by the clearest skies and only an occasional breeze. As we slowly made our way up the mountain,
the wind picked up but never threatened our pace, and a cool five hours later, exhausted and cold, we made it to the top of Kazbegi. The weather was stunningly clear, allowing us to see the entire Caucasian range, including Elbrus off in the distance, while Vladikavkaz appeared like a toy town below us. As we descended to the base camp, tourists heading the opposite direction kept asking Lasha and Tornike about the weather, but they refused to give a prognosis. By the time we got down to town, Kazbegi was hidden behind menacing clouds, mtis amindi indeed.

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