

# Attack the best form of defence when driving in Georgia

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Matt Gross, a columnist for the *New York Times* once called Georgians "the 'worst drivers in the world".

Since I am unaware of any internationally-recognised driving index to quantify motorway-scariness, I don't feel particularly confident calling Georgians the worst, especially after a harrowing experience in New Jersey.

Still, my first reaction to Georgian driving was certainly a mixture of shock and fright. The second reaction was a sudden bout of religiosity and rediscovery of the Hail Mary and the Act of Contrition.

advertisement It was my first marshutka ride (Georgians drop the 'r' from Russian '*marshrutka*' - a minibus); the vehicle was packed beyond capacity and there were no seatbelts. I was cramped between two complete strangers in the dense heat of late June, but no-one seemed inclined to open a window.

To make matters worse, at least three of the men on board found it necessary to puff away at cigarettes to the beat of the unnecessarily loud pop music blaring over some tired, wheezing speakers.

After an unanticipated delay - something I later learned to anticipate - the vehicle started and my "adventure" began. First the driver hurled his clunky, oversized van into the messy labyrinth of traffic. Actually, I don't even know if "traffic" is the way to describe it, since such a term implies some kind of organisation.

Lanes are optional at best, generally discouraged, and often improvised - on the shoulder, the sidewalk, a nearby patch of grass . . . I was pressed against my seat, watching cars reversing across the traffic. There were cars suddenly stopping in the middle of the road as two friends noticed one another. There was a complete disregard for any type of pattern, and it dawned on me that in Georgia offensive driving is your only defence.

The "highway" is a two-lane gauntlet. That means if you want to pass anyone it must be done by moving into the opposite flow lane. Passing involves a terrifying moment of screeching onto the opposing lane, flying headlong into the face of another vehicle and coming within metres of one another as you barely scrape in front of the slow offender. And all this at some ungodly speed for which the *marshutka* was undoubtedly not designed.

The best part is seeing the intermittent crosses and headstones - etched with their namesake's likeness - marking the many instances where some cavalier driver misjudged his timing.

The funny thing about highway passing is how everyone does it. On every other road I've used, there are usually one or two cars that pass everyone, the slow clunkers that everyone passes, and everyone in between. In Georgia, those distinctions seem far less evident. Despite an initial impression that your vehicle, having done so much passing, must be quite far ahead of the first car you passed, it's not uncommon to see that same car pass you six or seven times as well.

But the strangest part of all this is how quickly one gets used to it. A few months later, I realised how desensitised I'd become in a text message conversation with a friend at the front of the *marshutka*.

"Hey, what's the deal? Are we going to pass this *debilo* ("idiot") or is *bebia* ("grandmother") going to keep snoozing up there?" I asked. Our driver seemed unwilling to pass the sluggish 50s-era truck in front of us. "No kidding," my friend replied. "I think at the next stop I'm going to buy *bebia* a broom so she can do some real work."

Then it clicked. I had conquered my fear of Georgian driving. Where before I had seen my life flash before me, I now saw opportunities for passing that simply must be taken.

While there are some who may never get used to it, most people eventually learn to appreciate the Georgians' seemingly erratic style. I expect if Mr Gross ever comes back and stays a while, he might just agree.

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