



Modern family

As the Middle East Bureau Chief for Russia Today, Jo'burg-born Paula Slier (@PaulaSlier_RT) has had her fair share of hair-raising encounters. She shares first-hand encounters of her travels off the beaten track

Even war correspondents have families. So when my mother planned a two-week mother-daughter holiday, my intention was to somehow juggle the trip between reporting and catching up with her. Our parting words as she boarded the plane in Jo'burg were that I'd meet her on the other side – the Middle East.

And I did, but it was with the news that I needed to leave immediately for Georgia. I'd received the assignment while my mother was being served beverages somewhere over Zambia. What to do?

In a flash of genius, it occurred to me that if you can't beat 'em, join 'em.

So my first words of greeting as she got off the nine-hour flight were: "Mom, how do you fancy a trip to Georgia?" Which explains why, a few hours later, correspondent, cameraman and mother were checking

ABOVE: Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia.

A FEW HOURS LATER, CORRESPONDENT, CAMERAMAN AND MOTHER CHECKED INTO A QUIANT HOTEL IN GEORGIA'S CAPITAL, TBILISI

into a quaint hotel in Georgia's capital, Tbilisi.

It was a year to the day since war had broken out between Georgia, Russia and the Russian-backed, self-proclaimed republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The former Soviet state was on the receiving end of the full wrath of Moscow in what is widely regarded as the first European war of the 21st century. Although it lasted only five days, hundreds died and both sides still blame each other. I'd reported from the capital for Russian television.

I spent a few days in Joseph Stalin's birthplace, Gori, where a museum dedicated to the former Soviet leader showcases the small wooden hut in which he was born and spent his first four years. I remember asking a tour guide what she thought of the ruthless leader who is notorious for killing millions. "It's just Western propaganda," was her response.

Rockets were landing in the town square and dazed citizens kept repeating that they didn't understand how Russia and Georgia – brothers, they told me – had suddenly become enemies.

And now here I was, a year later, returning to see how they were faring – and I'd brought my mother with me.

I'd love to tell you that her response as I met her in the arrivals hall was, "Wow, I've always wanted to visit Georgia!" It wasn't. It was rugby season and she was much more fazed about having to miss seeing the matches on television. My dear mother, if nothing else, is a die-hard South African rugby fan and South Africa was scheduled to play Australia.

We spent the week driving around the city with an elderly taxi driver, George, who couldn't speak a word of English and had no front teeth. He took an instant fancy to my mother, who in turn begged us never to leave her alone in the car with him.

One afternoon we found ourselves in an abandoned building where refugees from the war had sought shelter. A lovely woman whose name I have since forgotten welcomed us into her "home" and, in honour of our visit, brought out slightly cracked porcelain cups that she'd managed to escape with. We left my mother and her alone as Boris and I went out to film. Two hours later we returned to the two of them kissing, hugging, laughing over family photographs – and not understanding a word the other was saying. As we left, she took two rings off her fingers and handed one to my mother and the other to me. We didn't want to take them – they were clearly valuable to her – but she wanted us to have something by which to remember her.

Two days before we were scheduled to leave Georgia, my mother was walking down a side street when she suddenly saw a sign advertising the now infamous South Africa-Australia rugby match to be screened in a nearby bar. Needless to say, that's where we landed up: Boris, myself, an Australian, a New Zealander, a few Georgians and my mother. It seemed somehow appropriate that we beat the Aussies. 🇷🇺