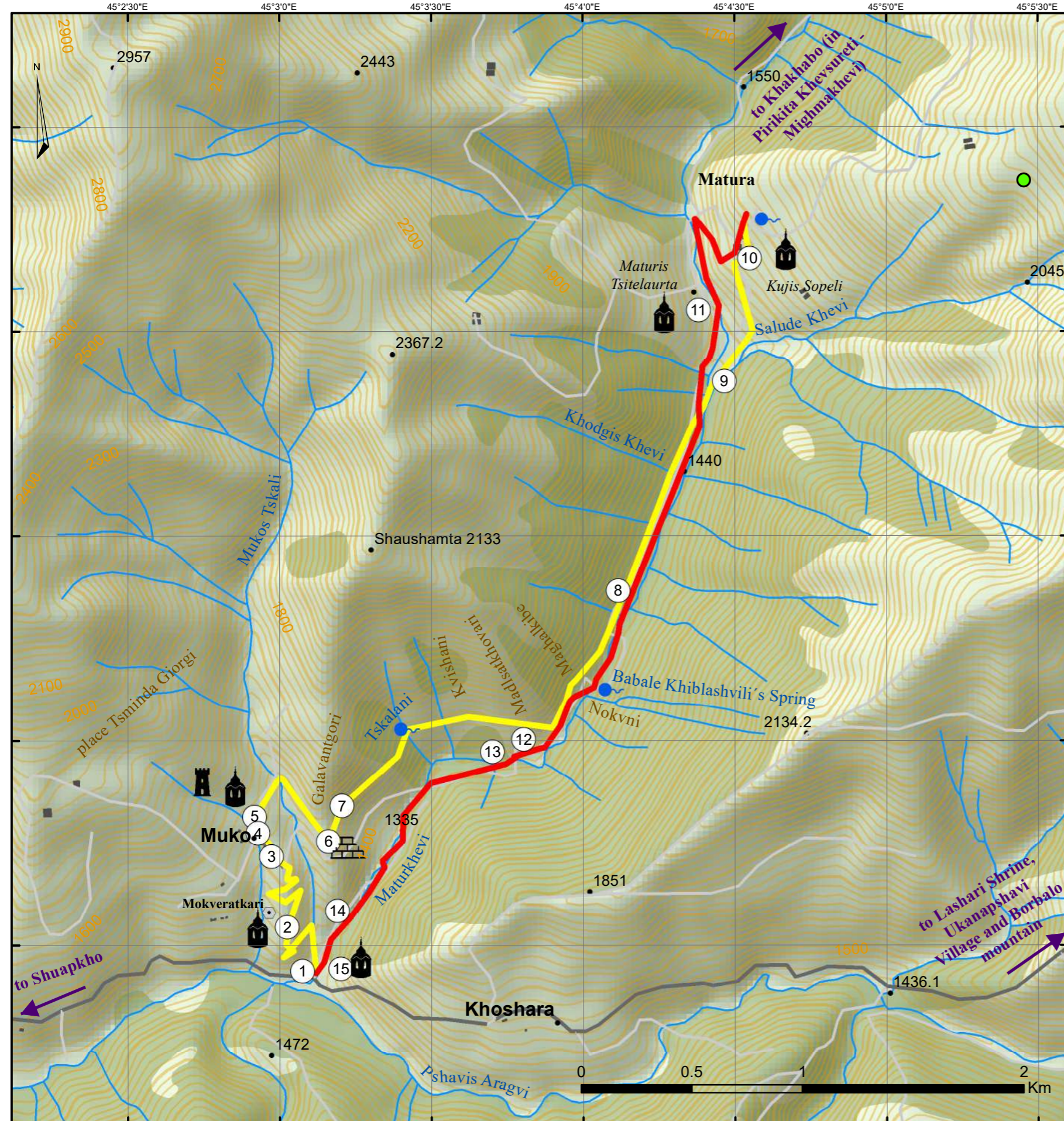
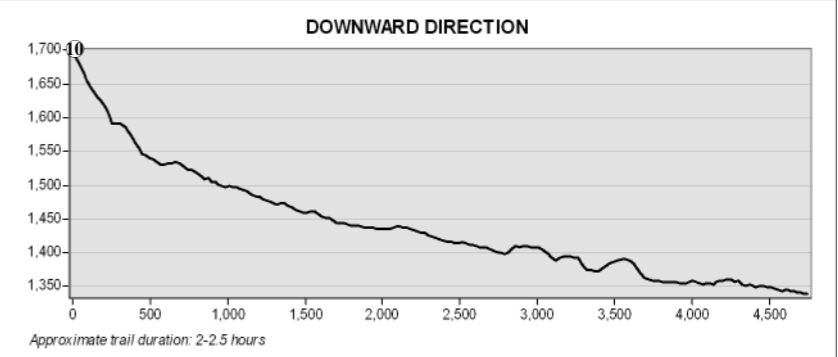
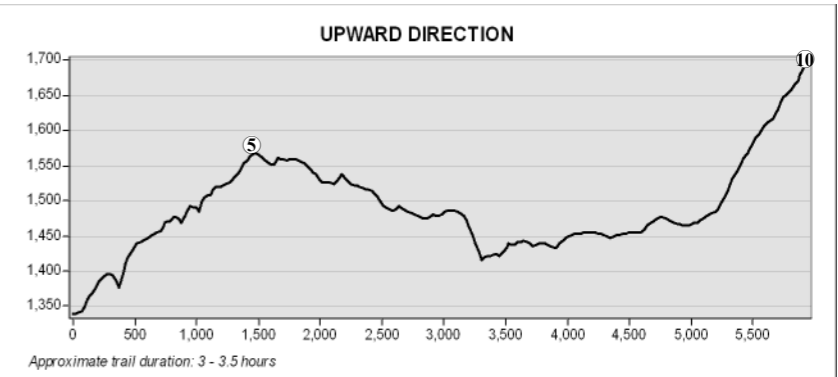


The map was designed in frame of the project Enhancement of Tourism Potential of Mountainous Regions in Georgia as a Means of their Development (donor Czech Development Agency, implementor Agora CE) 2017

MUKO TRAIL

LEGEND

- | | | | |
|---|--|---|---|
| • | Mountain and Elevation | ① | Aragvi Valley (Start/End Point) |
| | River | ② | Khone Archangel |
| | Local Road | ③ | Cemetery |
| | Path | ④ | Church |
| | Buildings and Settled Area | ⑤ | Muko Mother of God (Mokharnade Ghvtsismshobeli) |
| • | Village | ⑥ | Tsotskolaurta Galavani |
| • | Abandoned Village | ⑦ | Karapistavi |
| | Topography | ⑧ | Kvarikhi |
| | Forest Area | ⑨ | Butskhi |
| | Grass Area | ⑩ | Matura Archangel (Mtavarangelози) |
| | Fortress | ⑪ | Mother of God (Ghvtsismshobeli) |
| | Shrine | ⑫ | Zurab Kakichashvili's Cross |
| | Spring | ⑬ | Sakulukho Chala (meadow) |
| | St. George Tower-Shrine (Baghauri Tower) | ⑭ | Chokhelateuli (meadow) |
| | St. George Tower-Shrine (Baghauri Tower) | ⑮ | Damasturi St. George (Lord of Weather) |
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- | | | |
|--|--------------------|-------------------------------------|
| | UPWARD DIRECTION | MUKO TRAIL |
| | DOWNWARD DIRECTION | Upward direction - Length: 5.8 km |
| | | Duration: 3-3.5 hours |
| | | Downward direction - Length: 4.7 km |
| | | Duration: 2-2.5 hours |



If you climbed Borbalo Mountain after a demanding track from Tusheti or Kakheti region, or you just hike down Pshavi Alazani Valley, consider the possibility to stay for a day in the scarcely visited Pshavi Aragvi Gorge to enjoy comparatively mild mountains and friendly nature. Friendly people would be pleased to show you the beauties of the region, since their hospitality hasn't been dampened by mass tourism yet. If you prefer to stay overnight in nature, one of the best options for camping would be the place where our track started – near the confluence of Maturkhevi and Pshavi Aragvi with a fine grove and perfect bathing opportunity in the river.

If you are going to spend a day or two hiking with your children in a mild terrain, but still wanting to show them the appeal of East Georgian alpine zone, our track can delight you as well. Especially combined with visiting of main mountain shrine of Lashari in the vicinity of Khoshara nearby. Still, consider that – as for 2017 – there are actually no operating guesthouses yet in Core Pshavi Valley.

Pshavi (Bude Pshavi)

Among East Georgian mountaineers, the Pshavians, along with Khevsurs are widely viewed as renowned warriors, courageous herders and most ardent followers of a peculiar syncretic religion, which incorporates the most venerated Christian saints into older pantheon of hero deities, worshipped in mountain shrines – their actual dwellings. The present day Pshavs and Khevsurs were called jointly Pkhovians by medieval Georgian chronicles. The Pshavians now inhabit quite a large territory, including vicinities of Chargali and Magharoskari in the lower part of basin of Pshavis Aragvi River, surroundings of Tianeti in Iori basin, as well as far-away villages in several regions of Georgian lowlands. Ancestors of all Pshavian families stem from a short strip of land along the Pshavis Aragvi river. Its spring is at the foot of Borbalo Mountain and in Ortskali (“Two waters”, i.e. confluence) under Shuapkho it is joined by Khevsureti Aragvi. Therefore, precisely the upper part of the valley is called Bude Pshavi, which means Core (“Nest”) Pshavi in Georgian. In this very valley are situated the main sanctuaries of the deities, equally revered by Pshavians as well as Khevsurs, Tushs, Gudamakarians and other mountaineers. The principal sacred place of the vast region is *Lasharis Jvari* (literally Lashari Cross) with the widely attended festival of Lasharoba. Among other prominent shrines we should mention *Kopala*, *Iaksari*, *Kviria* and *Pirkushi*. The correspondent heroes/deities (*ghvtisshvili* “sons of God”) are venerated in many small *nishi-s* (“chapels”, branches/dependencies) in the mountains and lowlands as well: *Kopala* and *Iaksari* are known as belligerent exterminators of the demons (*devi-s*), *Kviria* played a role of mediator between folk and God, whereas *Pirkushi* (literally “grim, gloomy”) was a divine smith, helping other heroes in the campaigns against evil spirits. The cultus in the sanctuaries (called *jvari* “cross” or *khati* “icon”) is performed by the shrines elders (so called *khevisber-i*) and is completely independent from Georgian Orthodox Church hierarchy.

Historically there were twelve communities in Core Pshavi, each composed by several villages. Now only about 150 inhabitants live in the valley's thirteen villages, including the main village of Shuapkho (38 residents). Among the reasons for still ongoing depopulation harsh natural conditions, feuds between the clans and partially forced resettlement to the lowlands can be mentioned.

The descendants of all Pshav families each year gather in their mountain shrines to pray, sacrifice and feast during the main summer holidays, reciting pieces of their superb folk poetry and poems of dramatic nature and human tragedies, written by the famous kinsman, Vazha Pshavela (1861-1915). Thus the peculiar cultural traditions of Pshavians are far from being extinct.

As for the cuisine, Pshavian home made beer (brewed for religious feasts) and *dambal-khacho* (surface ripened white cheese) is steadily gaining popularity in Georgian lowlands.

The Pshavi valley is visually dominated by venerated Borbalo Mountain (the highest one 3135 m). From its peak, besides Pshavi, paths head for several regions: Tusheti (Alaznistavi Hollow), Khevsureti (Mighmakhevi Valley), Tianeti (Iori Valley) and Pankisi (Alazani Valley). From 2018, Pshavi Valley should become a part of the newly established Aragvi Protected Landscape.

MUKO TRAIL (Aragvi Valley – Muko – Matura – Aragvi Valley)

Our route is a circle starting and ending in Pshavi Aragvi Valley near the bridge on Maturis Khevi under Muko Village. Two comparably short sections of the route are identical in both ascending and descending the Matura Gorge (described as “upward” and “downward” direction respectively in map legend). The route can be easily done during a one day stay in Pshavi for light family hiking or during a rest before/after more demanding track to Borbalo Mountain and onwards to Tusheti, Pankisi (upper part of Alazani Valley) or Tianeti (upper part of Iori Valley).

Although the upward and downward direction of our track were quite close to each other, it was diverse enough to enjoy due to the elevation difference we walked in a sub-alpine dry, partly brush, landscape up the valley, while descending we find ourselves in humid bottomland bright-green forest along Maturis Khevi stream.

From the starting point we followed the winding dirt road heading for Muko Village. In the middle of the ascent, we noticed the ash trees grove on our left. These sacred trees indicate the presence of a shrine – Khone Archangel, which served for the abandoned village Mokveratkari nearby.

We paid attention to the proper behavior in the environments of the shrines, which is common for all East Georgian sacred places. Women are not allowed to enter the precincts of the shrine. The men are permitted to enter the yard of the shrine and to light there a candle, but even for them it's prohibited to touch the sacred structures or to enter the interior.

Further up, in Muko village (now about 10 inhabitants) we noticed the cemetery, church and Mokharnade Mother of God Shrine. Above the village, there was one more medieval tower/shrine looms (see the legend below). On the outskirts of the village, on the right we saw the remnants of the fortress of Tsotskauri family. From here we gradually walked up to the upper part of Matura Gorge, passing the stream through a bridge. In the half-abandoned village of Matura (there is no road there) we lit a candle at the renovated shrine of Mtavarangelozhi (Archangel) and enjoyed conversation with only inhabitants, local khevisberi and a beekeeper-tuned poet-Baudelaire translator. Downwards we followed the Matura Valley to the very confluence with Aragvi, where the Weather Lord (Dar-Avdris Batoni) Dumasturi St. George Shrine is revered on a rock.

<p>In the times of constant clashes between Georgian and Chechen (Kist) mountaineers, a Kist warrior was going to take captive certain Baghiauri, Pshavian from Muko, sleeping on a meadow. Though Baghiauri was able to defeat the Kist, who appeared to be captive himself. As the Kists were renowned as tower builders, he was obliged to build for Baghiauri a fortress above the village for the promise of freedom. When the construction was completed, Kist with Baghiauri went on the top to assess the tower. Baghiauri felt fears about freed Kist knowing all the secrets of the tower and decided to throw him down. For this treacherous deed he was cursed by the fate with all his descendants. In order to redress the crime, the Baghauris are gathering by the abandoned fortress (called St. George now) each year to pray for forgiveness.</p>
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