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The Coast of Resorts And Rubble

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By [Bay Brown](#)

The tiny breakaway republic of Abkhazia is a treasure trove of architectural gems. A war damaged many, and as Bay Brown reports, neglect threatens the rest.

SUKHUMI, Abkhazia -- "And when will you people fix the building?" a young mother with baby on hip angrily implored upon discovering Anzor Agumova's identity as a city employee. "When there is money," an apologetic Agumova replied as he dragged on his L&M. It is an answer those living in the war-torn republic of Abkhazia are used to hearing.

For the bearded and slight Agumova, a specialist with the Department of Historic Monuments in the Abkhazian capital of Sukhumi, this reply to the resident of the bomb-damaged former Villa Chachba was especially difficult. Before the 1992 to 1993 war in Abkhazia, the 1905 Villa Chachba was the historian's favorite of the 50 or so turn-of-the-century dachas nestled in the hills, overlooking the blue waves of the Black Sea. It was just meters from this very mansion, built with the voluptuous curves of the Style Moderne, that bombs first struck as Georgian soldiers began an offensive to oust Abkhazians from the hills, Agumova said.

Bomb attacks, artillery shellings and systematic house burnings that were part of the war's successive ethnic cleansing campaigns have left dozens of legendary landmark resorts abandoned, burned or bullet-riddled. Thus far, funding for reconstruction has been out of the question as the entire republic is stifled by an economic blockade and a collapsed tourism industry. Today the resort republic only sees a trickle of tourists: those willing to brave the tightly controlled border with Russia to this place where landmines still lurk. Once one of the most sought after vacation spots in the entire Soviet Union, Abkhazia is now in a time warp of decay.

Before the 16-month war began with the August 1992 landing of Georgian soldiers on a Sukhumi beach filled with sunbathers, Abkhazia was the kind of place where bikini-clad tourists waited at fanciful bus stops in the shape of gigantic clamshells. The population has shrunk from a pre-war figure of 525,000 to about half that today. Now, the nearly empty roads are much more likely to be traversed by speeding four-wheel-drive vehicles belonging to UN military observers, the Red Cross or the armored personnel carriers of Russian peacekeepers.

Subtropical Abkhazia located between Russia to the north and east and Georgia to the south is a paradise where the Black Sea laps at palm trees and a shoulder's turn exposes the white-capped peaks of the Caucasus mountains. Its favorable geography and climate made it a pre-Revolutionary hot spot, a romping ground for the Communist Party elite and, now, prime real estate to which 150,000 Georgian refugees and their government have no intention of granting full independence.

Just this past week the situation came to a head as the deadline expired for renewal of the mandate for 1,500 Russian peacekeepers deployed in Abkhazia since a shaky ceasefire ended hostilities in 1993. Friday, President Boris Yeltsin said he planned to invite Georgian president Eduard Shevardnadze and Abkhaz leader Vladislav Ardzinba to a Moscow meeting next week to hammer out a peace deal. If the Russians do leave, fighting may start up again. In this volatile political climate, the future

of the republic's architectural monuments is far from safe.

For example, earlier this week Interfax reported that a group of Chechens led by field commander Shamil Basayev had taken up residence in one of Stalin's former palatial dachas now used by Abkhazian President Vladislav Ardzinba. Such sites as this historic dacha stand in imminent danger of even further destruction as the prospect of renewed fighting looms.

In the absence of war but lacking a firm peace, reconstruction is not a viable option even if outside money were available, said an expert on post-war rebuilding. But, pre-emptive measures such as temporary roofs are invaluable, said John Stubbs, director of the New York-based World Monuments Fund, which supports the preservation of historically important sites that are seriously endangered due to neglect, economic depression or war.

The situation in Abkhazia is especially critical because of the republic's vast architectural wealth. In June, UNESCO sent a team to assess the situation. And the brutal nature of the long-simmering conflict -- essentially pitting ethnic Georgians against ethnic Abkhazians -- make the survival of landmarks even more tenuous.

"When two ethnic groups are in conflict, as in eastern Turkey or Bosnia, the stakes are even higher due to the tendency of aggressive militias to target prominent historic landmarks as part of psychological warfare or ethnic cleansing," stated Jon Calame, projects coordinator of the nonprofit World Monuments Fund.

As part of first the Russian Empire and then the Soviet, Abkhazia enjoyed a stability that by the end of the 19th century brought growing numbers of wealthy summertime residents who built an enclave of fantastic resort homes like the Villa Chachba.

"They came from all over the Russian Empire. There were merchants, nobility and other well-to-do people," said Agumova, whose life's work is the preservation of the city's landmarks. "At the turn of the century there were at least 40 doctors living in Sukhumi, and before the Revolution 30 architects lived here."

At the same time these homes were being built, Sukhumi was drawing others in search of better health.

"In 1898 an international congress of doctors held in Moscow voted that Sukhumi was the best place in the Russian Empire for those with lung disease," said Agumova. With this auspicious dictum Sukhumi became a center for the treatment of tuberculosis. Amid dachas and resort hotels, grand, elegant sanatoriums were erected to treat those who came south to be treated for the consumptive disease. These mammoth structures mark in masonry a crucial era in Abkhazia's modern history.

North of Abkhazia's tense southern border with Georgia, on the main coastal highway just outside Sukhumi, a sprawling brick and limestone three-story palace is nestled on a verdant hillside. With its turrets, mansard roofs and more than 300 rooms, the fortress-like mansion suggests a French nobleman's provincial estate. Built in 1913 in the then-internationally popular French chateau style with all its aristocratic trappings, it is one of two neighboring sanatoriums that sit as decaying monuments to Sukhumi's heyday as a health resort.

Moved by his own daughter's battle with tuberculosis, scientist and philanthropist Nikolai Smetskoi funded the construction of the structures. Later both were used as hospitals during World War II and then, during the recent war, by Georgian forces. While never the target of bombs, their post-war abandonment has left them just as vulnerable as those monuments that were shelled.

Ascending the winding road up the hill that affords the chateau a majestic view of the sea, closer examination reveals that the central roof has collapsed. Still fronted by gargantuan elephant palm trees, the building's entrance reminds the rare visitor of a modern-day crack house with hypodermic needles and other refuse the Georgians left strewn across the threshold as they fled the site of their ad hoc hospital. Inside, its massive cast-iron chandelier has plummeted from the top of the grand stairwell to rest among the animal feces that are scattered throughout.

"If there was money they could be renovated into elegant hotels," sighed Agumova in frustration as he walked away from the rubble.

Driving further north into Sukhumi proper, the car passes the one working hotel in a city that once boasted, at the turn of the century, 20 hotels. Their rich and diverse architectural styles together tell the story of the people who built them, stayed in them and worked in them.

In the city's downtown, Agumova singled out a trio of hotels that once anchored Sukhumi's beachfront and now sit as ruined monuments.

Bombardment and months of fighting for control of Sukhumi left the eclectic 1914 San Remo a white-stuccoed carcass. Its restaurant, sumptuously panelled in marble, is now open to the elements and serves as an impromptu public toilet. Across the street, The Orientale, a 1908 Style Moderne gem which once rivalled the beauty of Moscow's Hotel Metropol, and the Stalinist-era Hotel Abkhazia sit skeletal after both were ravaged by kitchen fires in 1989. Reconstruction had begun when the war broke out, abruptly halting work.

As elsewhere in the Soviet Union, Abkhazia's new resorts of the '20s were constructed in the avant-garde design reflecting the idealistic hopes of the new Socialist order. But under Stalin's leadership, the sleek, pure geometric forms of Constructivism were replaced with the grandiose neoclassicism -- part of the Socialist Realism movement -- that can be found at the Hotel Abkhazia. As Stalin's pet genre, Socialist Realism looked to the time-honored styles of past empires to imbue his own regime with a sense of omnipotence. Because the resorts of the Black Sea were the playground of powerful Muscovites, it is not surprising that the country's most lauded architects were given the commissions to build these sumptuous and sprawling compounds. The Hotel Abkhazia was designed in 1933 by Stalin darling Vladimir Shchuko.

Even now in its ruined form, the Hotel Abkhazia remains the city's pride and joy. Images of the hotel in quaint pastels or enormous oil paintings are still being proffered in the handful of souvenir shops that compete for the occasional tourist, aid worker or UN employee.

"The Hotel Abkhazia was Sukhumi's visiting card," said Agumova with a sentimental smile.

Outside of the half-empty city of Sukhumi, sequestered in the hills and behind high walls are the homes of the "Great Architect of Socialism" himself -- Stalin. Throughout the small republic a full seven of Stalin's dachas can be found. In some he spent a month at a time, in others a week here and a weekend there. While four compounds were actually constructed for the leader -- always in green stucco with classical imprint -- the others were pre-Revolutionary mansions that were appropriated by Stalin.

"It was a strict secret who the architect of Stalin's dachas was, but he surely came from Moscow," said a burly and jovial Anatoly Katsiya, an architectural historian who serves as Sukhumi's building inspector. "Local records show no indication of his dachas. And of course no photographs were allowed."

In one dacha where a vast security team was once deployed, \$40 now buys guests a night in Stalin's bed, three meals a day and sundry health treatments. Last year, a mere 25 people slept and supped in Stalin's home called Kholodnaya Rechka, located outside the seaside town of Gagra, two hours northwest of Sukhumi.

From the coastal road, on a long, steep driveway, past a dormitory built for Stalin's guards, the stucco house painted the ubiquitous forest green and vaguely designed in Stalin's favorite neoclassical style comes into view. Engaged columns, fluted pilasters -- the jargon of classicism -- frame the house. Upon approaching this seemingly pristine landmark, one is confronted again with the physical evidence of the ethnic conflict.

"During the war the house was stormed by paratroopers who came up the beach," said Raisa Lazarcheva, the empty resort's manager of 30 years, as she stood on the second-floor terrace sweeping her hand across the majestic Black Sea vista.

The scars of a fire caused by a bomb detract from the placid sea below. The "Wooden House" built for Stalin's guests is now no more than a pile of charred rubble. Shards of the sea-foam green ceramic tiles of the bathroom mix with burnt splinters. The remnants of cypress and fir trees stand black and limbless.

Such a high-profile target is not without precedent. In the last outburst of Abkhaz nationalism in 1978, one of Stalin's dachas in the mountainous Lake Ritsa area was destroyed by a fire.

Kholodnaya Rechka director Beniya Avsantovich prefers to talk of when the green dacha still blended in with a healthy forest. "The color masked the house from the sea and from airplanes above," said the neatly-mustached Avsantovich, redolent with the aroma of a mid-morning vodka.

"Joseph spent every September here between '46 and '52," said Avsantovich, calling the dictator by his first name. "He came to look at it when it was finished in '39, but then no one came here during the war."

"He loved it very much here," said Avsantovich. "He had many important visitors here, but only he was allowed to sleep here."

Even Stalin's daughter Svetlana Alliluyeva could not stay in the house with her father. The girl was given her own little green dacha or the "Rock House" on the compound, said Lazarcheva. In another quirk, even when the leader ate alone he had the entire table set, explained Lazarcheva as she pointed to the long dining room table in the vacant home.

As in his other dachas, wood panelling in precious teak and Karelian birch with elaborate classical detailing were crafted throughout and a billiard and projection room were constructed. Much of the original furniture remains, including demure Art Deco tables and oversized leather armchairs that would have swallowed the 1.65-meter dictator.

"Stalin slept in different bedrooms so no one knew where he slept," said Lazarcheva in the "red bedroom" as she pointed to one of the couches where she said the leader preferred to sleep.

Leaving Kholodnaya Rechka, heading south on the desolate main road, a reminder of the roots of Abkhazia's ethnic troubles is evident in the stuccoed-brick, two-room cottages that dot the landscape. An old man in a dark crumpled suit resting on the roadside describes them as Berevsky domi, or Beria houses, that were built expressly for Georgians resettled in Abkhazia by Stalin security chief Lavrenty Beria. Abkhazian government statistics claim an increase of 66,200 Georgians between 1939 and 1959.

Another Stalin dacha with a much richer wartime history is the former Dacha Smetskoi. On the southern edge of Sukhumi, this 1892 mansion served as a Georgian military headquarters for a time and, as director Aouhat Djoubei noted, Shevardnadze even slept in Stalin's bed while he was personally directing a battle for Sukhumi. Now, Ardzinba uses it for high-level meetings.

"In transitional cultures like Abkhazia, people are often looking to use the past to justify future ambitions," Stubbs of the World Monuments Fund said.

In this case both sides seem drawn to the site. The mansion, however, remained relatively unscathed by the war. Granted, the bust of philanthropist Smetskoi lost its nose when blown off by Georgian soldiers who, Djoubei said, had assumed the ethnic Swede was an Abkhazian. Today, Stalin's legacy has been co-opted by some to serve the Abkhazian cause.

"When Stalin visited here he would stay one or two days and then he would go sit and drink with the peasants for a couple of weeks out of nostalgia," said a gracious Djoubei in reverential tones behind the large wooden desk that once belonged to his Georgian predecessor. "Peasants are wise people; they always like to speak the truth."

To Djoubei, Stalin was not only a man of the people, but also an Abkhazian at heart. "Stalin came to Abkhazia as a boy and it seems he liked Abkhazia better than Georgia," Djoubei said, as he counted Stalin's Abkhazian dachas. "Georgia was more important, but the truthful people were more here than there."

No matter how important to Abkhazian history its architectural monuments may be, nothing is being done to preserve them. The government is preoccupied with pressing concerns like sheltering the populace and avoiding war. And international groups like UNESCO must maneuver with extreme delicacy in a nation recognized by no other country.

In June, UNESCO sent a mission to Abkhazia to examine the status of landmarks. The team was sent at the request of the Georgian Ministry of Culture, which had not been active there since the war broke out, said UNESCO historian Giovanni Boccardi from Paris.

"The Abkhazians denied our request to bring a Georgian architectural restorer from Tbilisi," said Boccardi, who ultimately was guided by a team of Abkhazian officials and preservationists but will present his confidential report to the Georgian government.

If and when peace does come to Abkhazia, Stubbs believes that Abkhazia's history -- and future -- as a vibrant waterfront resort calls out for its preservation and redevelopment.

"Abkhazia is a sleeping giant," Stubbs said. "This area is very much underappreciated because of global ignorance."

"It may be a sleeper at the moment, but when this place is stable, imagine what will happen when people come in to redevelop it as a resort area," Stubbs said. "The character of the place needs to be retained. The critical thing is to guard against intrusion."

Thus the fate of Abkhazia's cultural monuments, keepers of the collective memory in mortar and stone and keys to its future, hangs in the balance with Abkhazia's independence.

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