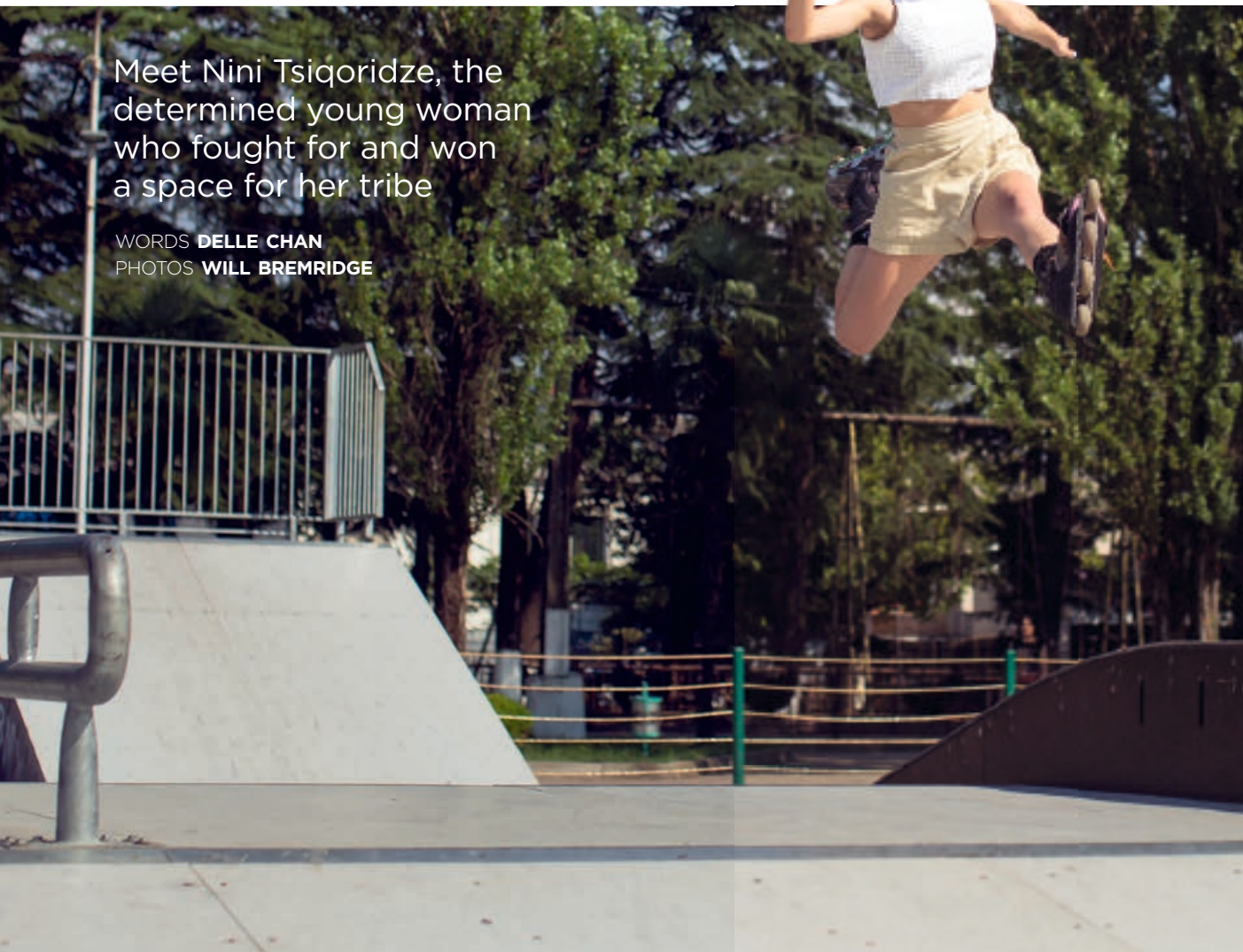


“I love skating. It gives me a sense of freedom”

Meet Nini Tsiqoridze, the determined young woman who fought for and won a space for her tribe

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Nini Tsiqoridze
in-line skater, 19

Temo Biliseishvili
skateboarder, 18

Elene Begalishvili
in-line skater, 13

Giorgi Robakidze
skateboarder, 11

Not long ago in Kutaisi, a young girl became an unlikely advocate for urban renewal. Georgia's historic second city is best known for its religious architecture and lively markets, as well as for the glorious countryside that surrounds it. But in 2010, Nini Tsiqoridze decided that her hometown needed something else.

Now 19, Tsiqoridze has been in-line skating since she was seven, picking up pointers from YouTube videos. Putting theory into practice was difficult, though, because there were no facilities in town that catered to the sport. So Tsiqoridze would often practice right in front of the city hall.

Soon, the spirited 10-year-old started writing letters to local authorities, asking them to build a skate park, all the while rallying other local kids to the cause. This went on for a good seven years, to no avail – until Giorgi Chigvaria came along. During his 2017 mayoral election campaign, the candidate pledged to build a skate park in Kutaisi, and made good on his promise within a year of taking office. →



“My hero is [renowned in-line skater] Greg Mirzoyan, and my dream is to meet him one day”

Nini Tsiqoridze

“I have been skating for about three years now, and I learned most of my tricks from YouTube. My favourite move is the kickflip”

Temo Biliseishvili



bikers and scooter riders come together to practise their routines.

The afternoon I visit the park, the air is thick with humidity, the grey clouds heavy overhead. Despite the approaching storm, there are several kids horsing around and blasting music. A boy in a black T-shirt deftly steers his bike up the graffiti-scrawled quarter pipe. Nearby, a skateboarder chases after a large, lolloping dog as his laughing friends look on. On the sidelines, a few older youths survey the scene with the kind of studied boredom only teenagers can muster.

At the centre of everything is the petite, smiling girl who started it all. Wearing a white cropped top and mustard trousers, Tsiqoridze whizzes around the park, doing dizzying spins and high-speed dips, riding on her toes, her →

In September 2018, Tsiqoridze’s stubbornness finally paid off. Kutaisi’s long-awaited skate park was announced to great fanfare – the guest list for the opening ceremony included Mayor Chigvaria, Shavlego Tabatadze, the local state representative-governor, and, of course, Tsiqoridze herself. Today, the facility is the sole Olympic-standard skate park in all of Georgia.

The new skate park, located in the Kutaisi Youth Park, south-west of the city centre, isn’t enormous, but it has all of the essentials: a quarter pipe, a funbox, a grind box, an airbox and a pyramid. The scene livens up in the evenings, when skateboarders, in-line skaters,





“Nini was the one who taught me how to skate. I like the sport because it can be quite extreme”

Elene Begalishvili

arms outstretched like a ballet dancer’s. At one point, she hurtles up the pyramid and takes flight, which is such an impressive sight that even the listless teens take notice. “My parents thought skating was dangerous at first,” Tsiqoridze says afterwards, “but now they’re okay.”

It’s not only the kids who appreciate the new park. Deputy mayor Nino Tvaltadze describes it as “a great way to promote a healthy lifestyle among the youth”. An added benefit is that there are no more youths doing kickflips on the forecourt of the city hall. “Previously, they would be doing stunts everywhere,” the deputy mayor adds, “so it was rather risky.”

Later, using the grind box as a makeshift bench, the kids sit around sharing tips and fist bumps. “I love skating. It gives me a sense of freedom,” Tsiqoridze says. “I would love to become a professional skater one day.” Her friends nod in agreement. Meanwhile, on the off-chance that she doesn’t become a professional skater, Tsiqoridze has enrolled at university in Tbilisi, 230km away. Which, of course, means that she doesn’t get to practise as much as she used to. Might she lobby for a skate park to be built in the Georgian capital? She smiles. She might.



“My favourite thing about skateboarding is when I can pull off the tricks successfully. I especially love doing the heelflip”

Giorgi Robakidze

Get active in Batumi

This Black Sea resort, a couple of hours’ drive from Kutaisi, has been named Europe’s top emerging tourist destination in this year’s World Travel Awards. Here are our top three ideas for enjoying all its elements...



AIR

Soar over Batumi’s glittering coast with Fly Caucasus, which offers tandem paragliding flights. flycaucasus.com



LAND

For something a little closer to the ground, Mtirala National Park has two breathtakingly beautiful hiking trails with waterfalls – and perhaps even brown bears – along the way.



SEA

Take to the sparkling waters on a paddleboard with local outfit Supbatumi. It may look like a lot of standing about, but don’t be fooled – it’s a great core workout. fb.com/supbatumi

PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES

✈ Wizz Air flies to Kutaisi