



the loneliest planet a film by julia loktev



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synopsis

Alex and Nica are young, in love and engaged to be married. The summer before their wedding, they are backpacking in the Caucasus Mountains in Georgia. The couple hire a local guide to lead them on a camping trek, and the three set off into a stunning wilderness, a landscape that is both overwhelmingly open and frighteningly closed. Walking for hours, they trade anecdotes, play games to pass the time of moving through space. And then, a momentary misstep, a gesture that takes only two or three seconds, a gesture that's over almost as soon as it begins. But once it is done, it can't be undone. Once it is done, it threatens to undo everything the couple believed about each other and about themselves. All the while, they are not alone. They are always with the guide, who witnesses their every move. The film plays off the relationship between young travelers and the places they travel to, between guide and guided. But at heart, it is a love story -- a tale about betrayal, both accidental and deliberate, about masculinity, failure and the ambiguities of forgiveness.



rises up, traps us. Cinematographer Inti Briones and I had a rule about the sky. We didn't want to see the tops of mountains, to allow the sky give us an escape. The sky could only come in slivers.

I thought about a Russian film where landscape plays a character, Kalatozov's *The Letter Never Sent*, I thought of *Stalker*, but maybe only in a superficial way -- there is green everywhere, there is a guide. But the film I probably thought of most was Rossellini's *Voyage in Italy* -- there is a couple, they are on a trip, they come apart, perhaps they come together.

flow

When I approached Gael García Bernal to play Alex, he said he had dreamed of going to the Caucasus ever since he read Lermontov's *Hero of Our Time* in grade school. Hani I found accidentally, looking through Israeli movies, but once I saw her, I couldn't see anyone else as Nica. I loved how they fit together. Both Gael and Hani are very physical actors, comfortable using their bodies to communicate, playful yet not afraid of silence.

Casting Dato the guide, I saw nearly every middle-age Georgian actor, plus nearly every professional guide or mountaineer. I liked the idea of

casting a real guide. A guide would likely speak English, would know how to behave in the mountains, but most importantly, a guide is a kind of actor, a guide puts on a performance on every tour. The nature of the relationship between guide and guided is inherently complex. A guide is both entertainer and protector. He's someone you've hired, someone doing his job. At the same time, you're on a fun trip together in the middle of the wilderness, so you become friends. Next week he'll likely have new friends.

All the mountaineers pointed me to one man, Bidzina Gujabidze, the top mountaineer in Georgia, who has climbed six 8000m peaks, including Mt. Everest twice. The only problem was, Bidzina had no interest at all in acting and was busy planning an expedition to the Himalayas. He made a misstep though, inviting me to dinner with his wife and kids. They got so excited by the idea of the movie that they wouldn't leave him alone until he agreed to do it, postponing the expedition. Bidzina's family became part of our team -- his daughter worked on production design, and his son was our 2nd AC -- and we became part of Bidzina's family.

There's a beautiful absurdity to casting Georgia's top mountaineer to play an ordinary village trekking guide, a man who hikes in sneakers and worn dress pants. For Bidzina, the trek in the film is a stroll in a park. Bidzina brought a depth and veracity to the character, an innate sense of how to move, how to be in the mountains. Our rehearsal consisted of an

overnight hike on Mt. Kazbeg. Bidzina advised us to take just one tent to save weight. So Gael, Hani and I slept together in a 2-person tent. Bidzina insisted on sleeping outside under a sheet of plastic. We woke up in a rainstorm and ended up with all four of us huddled in that 2-person tent.

I incorporated jokes and stories Bidzina told me into the script, and I based the guide's other anecdotes on things other people had said to me in Georgia. I like weaving threads of documentary through a fiction, working off stories I hear, throwing actors into a real world setting, creating a situation and watching it play out. For example, for the guesthouse scenes, we spent a day filming Gael and Hani at a family's home in our base village. Of course, I then weave threads of fiction into the documentary, I change the curtains, guide the situation, alter the stories that I hear.

Shooting in the mountains was even tougher than I imagined. We had to hike to most locations, taking the equipment on our backs, sometimes with one or two horses for support, and we spent many nights camping. Our small amazing crew was a mix of film professionals and local mountaineers, who knew these mountains inside out. And then there was the "crew" in the sky, which was less cooperative. Filming in mountains, you're minutely aware of every change in light, entirely at the mercy of nature's moods. When we scouted, there were clouds and lovely diffuse light. During the shoot, we got slammed with a historic heat wave. To

avoid the glaring sun and get the right look, we had very limited hours to shoot. DP Inti Briones developed extensive technical light charts for each location, detailing the exact time the sun would hide behind mountains; for example, we could film a particular location between 6:15am and 8:15am, and pointing the camera only in one direction. We would spend hours waiting for the right light, preparing, then try to shoot very quickly before the light changed again. When we switched to nights near the end, it was a relief to film all night and not wait for the sun. Along with the sky, the ground was a challenge too. Most scenes were shot in long takes, and required the camera operators and actors to move through elaborate choreography while hiking on rough terrain.

We shot on the RED camera, using vintage Soviet Lomo prime lenses. Inti and I looked at a lot of old Soviet films as a reference. The Lomos had a certain softness, a magic. We found them gathering dust in a box. A very kind man rescued them from the garbage when the Georgian state film studio shut down. Converting the Lomos to use with the camera involved some international intrigue. We had to send them to Russia, but it's impossible to travel directly from Georgia to Russia. So our Armenian art director took the bus to Yerevan, and then her mom flew to St. Petersburg with the lenses.

confluence

I'm not interested in bad things happening to good people. I'm interested in good people doing bad things. Neither Alex nor Nica acts how they would ever expect themselves (or each other) to act; neither acts how they would want to act. The central rupture catches them off guard, throws them off course. They are not who they thought they were, not who they want to be.

I'm struck by how differently people respond to the central moment. I worried viewers would find the act unforgiveable, would write Alex off forever, "He's not a man." And some people do. Yet others say, "What's the big deal? He tried to correct it. Why is she so upset?" I'm starting to realize the way people respond to the film tells as much about them as about the film, is really based on their own cultural and personal background. I hope it might lead to some interesting date conversations.

I'm interested in the core question of masculinity, what does it mean to be "a man." I think it must be very confusing to be a man now, at least for most men I know. The expectations are not so clear. In Georgia, things seem much clearer. When we were shooting the rain scene, with the three of them huddling under a plastic sheet, I tried to position Gael in the middle. Bidzina refused, "No, the woman goes in the middle." He said this with the same certainty he might say, "Water is wet."







There was no question. This was an absolute. The woman must be protected from the rain. The woman goes in the middle. I realized this would never occur to most men I know. I'm not sure if this is good or bad, but it is telling. And as a woman, I'm not so clear on what I expect from a man. Like Nica, I like to think of myself as independent, strong (the nature of this job consists of telling people what to do), and yet I catch myself wanting to be protected. The desire unnerves me, embarrasses me a little. For all my feminist education, I admit the story would be entirely different if the roles were reversed. There would be no story.

The central moment really is just a moment, a momentary gesture. Alex attempts to undo it. The danger passes. They are more than one day's hike from town. Nica makes the decision to keep going. So they keep going. But where do you go from here? What do you do next? What is there to do? What is there to say?

The first words in the film are, "Sorry, sorry, sorry," Alex apologizing for the delay in bringing the hot water kettle. We say I'm sorry every day, for the most insignificant offenses. Are these same words adequate now? Or do they trivialize the transgression? The stronger formulation is "forgive me," which has an almost religious connotation of absolution. It's interesting that in some languages like Spanish or Russian, there's a common form of apology that literally means "remove my guilt." But what if you do not want your guilt removed? What if you don't feel you



deserve to be forgiven? After the initial shock wears off, could it be easier for her to forgive him than it is for him to forgive himself? But how do you forgive someone who does not want to be forgiven?

He doesn't ask for forgiveness, leaving her little room to move. She doesn't reproach him, leaving him little room to move. He might prefer that she yelled at him, but she does not. There is no opportunity for catharsis. We did film a scene where Alex and Nica eventually try to talk, a scene about the impossibility of talking -- everything they said sounded hollow, trite. Ultimately, it was more interesting to imagine what they could say, to imagine what they really couldn't say.

In any case, they have little opportunity to talk. The entire second half of the film passes the same day as the incident. They don't have time to process what happened, and in the middle of this vast landscape, they don't have the space either. They have no chance to be alone. They're always with the guide. He has seen everything, continues to see everything. They are all trapped together in this vastness. Even if they turned back, it would take them more than one day to walk to the village. They might act very differently if they were alone, if they were at home, or if the whole thing happened in a city, if they could go back to the hotel, if they had even a few minutes to be alone or to be alone together. But they don't. Maybe later they will act differently, but for now we just have this day.

For now they don't know what they feel, what they want, what to do. So they just do whatever they can manage to do in the moment, and it keeps shifting from one moment to the next. Unable to talk, they make little attempts to communicate through small physical gestures, lifting a backpack, offering a dried apricot, gestures that might otherwise mean nothing, but that suddenly come to mean everything. Sometimes the movement of a hand, the slight shift of a body, interests me more than anything someone could ever say. Alex and Nica take turns attempting to close the space between them. But they are out of sync. Each time one tries to come closer, the other pulls away, like magnets that can't quite touch.

They engage in this dance of failed tiny gestures, Dato the guide is always there, complicating the plot. From the beginning, Dato is a slippery presence, a jester, a protector, maybe a destroyer, maybe a redeemer. The guide comes with his own narrative, his own story, a story based loosely on old friends of my parents, fellow Russian immigrants, whom I knew as a child. Dato is the mystery element, a little like the Holy Ghost in the trinity -- we're not quite sure what his role is. Nica and Alex need Dato. Without him they would be lost, they would never find their way out of here, and maybe he does point a way out in the end, maybe not in the most obvious way.



cast

Gael García Bernal (Alex)
Hani Furstenberg (Nica)
Bidzina Gujabidze (Dato)

2011 USA / Germany 113 min
35mm 1:1.66 color stereo
language: English

crew

writer/director: Julia Loktev
director of photography: Inti Briones
camera operators: Daniel Leibold & Inti Briones
editors: Michael Taylor & Julia Loktev
production designer: Rabiah Troncelliti
sound designer: Martín Hernandez
music: Richard Skelton
based on "Expensive Trips Nowhere" from the collection *God Lives in St. Petersburg* by Tom Bissell
line producer: Jana Sardishvili
producers: Jay Van Hoy, Lars Knudsen, Helge Albers, Marie Therese Guirgis
executive producers: Dallas M. Brennan, Rabinder Sira, Chris Gilligan,
Shelby Alan Brown, Gregory Shockro, Hunter Gray

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