

## The monk who lives up a rock to get closer to God

A Georgian monk has lived up a 131ft pillar of rock for 20 years in a lonely quest to get closer to God.



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Maxime Qavtaradze is following in the ancient traditions of the Stylites, or Pillar Saints: men of the Byzantine world who believed residing up pillars would remove them from temptation and provide ample opportunity for prayer and contemplation.

The monk's life of solitude came to light after New Zealand photographer Amos Chapple was permitted to photograph the man and his rock, but only after he had spent four days in intensive prayer.

At first life on the Katskhi Pillar, Mr Qavtaradze's limestone monolith which stands in the Caucasus Mountains that run through Georgia, was tough for the monk.

"For the first two years there was nothing up here so I slept in an old fridge to protect me from the weather," said the 59-year-old monk. Later, Christian supporters renovated a derelict chapel and built a cottage to provide him with a few creature comforts.

Mr Qavtaradze makes the 20 minute and perilous climb down a ladder attached to the pillar twice a

week to pray at a small monastery at the foot of the tower. But he relies on daily provisions winched to him by supporters on the ground.

Once home to Stylites, the Katskhi Pillar had remained derelict for centuries, and it was only in 1944 that a team of climbers scaled the tower, finding at the top the skeleton of its last occupant. Mr Qavtaradze moved in 1993 after taking his monastic vows, and found it moved him closer to God and help banish a troubled past.

"It is up here in the silence that you can feel God's presence," he said. "When I was young I drank, sold drugs, everything. When I ended up in prison I knew it was time for a change.

"I used to drink with friends in the hills around here and look up at this place, where land met sky," he added. "We knew the monks had lived up there before and I felt great respect for them."

Matthew Day - The Telegraph