



Essential Georgia & Armenia 2020



Essential Georgia & Armenia

Between Two Capitals: A Journey to Cave Towns & Mountain Villages

Flexible Essential Trip – Classic Private Journey – 13 Days

Your choice of dates, suggested start day: Thursday

These warm, green countries full of fruitful valleys and sawtoothed mountains are rich with unexpected treasures. Walk through river-cut canyons, explore magnificent cave towns, enter medieval fortress towers of stacked stone, and visit the mountain homes of the Svan people. Spiritual and culinary traditions come alive throughout the spectacular Caucasus countries of Georgia and Armenia. Begin in Armenia at the crossroads of historic trade routes once plied by spice and rug merchants. Explore the capital, Yerevan, home to several great museums; UNESCO World Heritage Site Echmiadzin, the spiritual center of Armenia; and finally Khor Virap Monastery, set before the stunning snow-capped peaks of Mt. Ararat.

Cross the border into Georgia, where hospitality flows like wine, and exuberance for life knows no bounds. Drive over rugged terrain to admire the Svaneti region's gorgeous scenery and tower architecture, be a guest of local villagers, and experience Caucasus mountain life. Hike past the ruins of ancient fortresses, with evenings of sumptuous Georgian food and wine to complete the Svaneti experience. Return down from the mountains to visit Kutaisi, the city famed for its connection to Jason's Golden Fleece, before concluding the tour in Tbilisi, the Georgian capital.



Daily Itinerary

Day 1, Thursday	Arrive Yerevan, Armenia
Day 2, Friday	Yerevan • day trip to Garni, Geghard, and Echmiadzin
Day 3, Saturday	Yerevan • half-day trip to Khor Virap
Day 4, Sunday	Yerevan • Bavra • Vardzia, Georgia
Day 5, Monday	Vardzia
Day 6, Tuesday	Vardzia • Akhaltsikhe • Borjomi
Day 7, Wednesday	Borjomi • Zugdidi • Mestia
Day 8, Thursday	Mestia
Day 9, Friday	Mestia • day trip to Ushguli
Day 10, Saturday	Mestia • Zugdidi • Kutaisi
Day 11, Sunday	Kutaisi • Tbilisi
Day 12, Monday	Tbilisi
Day 13, Tuesday	Depart Tbilisi



Tour Highlights

Yerevan	Capital of Armenia, view of Mt. Ararat, Matenadaran Museum, the Cascade, Victory Park
Garni	Pagan Temple of Garni, lunch in a private home
Geghard	Geghard Monastery (UNESCO World Heritage Site)
Echmiadzin	Cathedral and Churches of Echmiadzin (UNESCO World Heritage Site)
Khor Virap	Khor Virap Monastery
Vardzia	12th-century cave complex with 559 surviving chambers and original frescoes
Borjomi	Mineral springs, Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park
Alkhaltzikhe	Rabati Fortress
Zugdidi	Gateway to the Svaneti Region, Dadiani Palace Museum
Mestia	Svaneti (UNESCO World Heritage Site), watchtowers, Ethnographic Museum, Icon of the 40 Martyrs, Church of St. George, Architectural Museum, Enguri River Canyon
Ushguli	Highest continually inhabited village in Europe, Ethnographic Museum, Lamaria Church, Mt. Shkhara
Kutaisi	Imereti Region, Gelati Monastery (UNESCO World Heritage Site), legendary site of the battle for the Golden Fleece, Bagrati Cathedral
Tbilisi	Dmanisi archaeological site, Sioni Church of Bolnisi, domed sulfur baths, Old Town

Daily Itinerary

Day One, Thursday **Arrive Yerevan, Armenia**

Arrive in Yerevan and transfer to the hotel.
Touring begins this morning.

The capital city of Armenia is even older than Rome. **Yerevan** was founded under the name Erebuni in 782 BC. The Armenian people, a tribe of Indo-Europeans known at the time as the Hayk, took Erebuni from its founders and began their own empire, but it was soon swallowed up by Alexander the Great. Christianity has been crucial to the development of a sense of identity and pride in Armenia. In 310, Armenia's King Trdates III converted to the new creed and adopted it as the state religion, making Armenia the first Christian country. Since that time, Armenia has been firmly Christian, a fact which has greatly affected its history.



Later, centuries of conflict between Arabs, Mongols, Turks, and Persians led to Yerevan changing hands 14 times between 1513 and 1735. A major earthquake destroyed the city in 1679. In 1827, during the second Russian-Persian War, the Russian Empire acquired Yerevan and the city began to grow, adding new European-style architecture, its first printing house, theater, public library, and telephone service.



However, clashes between Christian Armenians and Muslim Turks continued. In the 1890s and during 1915, the Turks embarked on a chain of massacres now classified as genocide.

After Russia's 1917 revolution and a short period of Armenian independence, Yerevan became the capital of one of the 15 Soviet republics and a modern metropolis with over a million people. In 1991, Armenia gained independence with the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

The city center today includes a wide range of architectural styles as a result of the fusion of Armenian and Russian design. The layout of the city features a large central square with broad avenues radiating from it, and a ring of parkland. Mountains surround the city, including the snow-covered peaks of **Ararat** to the south and the four peaks of Mt. Aragats to the northwest.

Victory Park, commemorating victory in WWII, is a green and pleasant park with fantastic views of Yerevan. It is located at the top of the Cascade, a massive white staircase with waterfalls set in a Yerevan hillside. **The Cascade** has become a meeting place and icon of the city. Ride the escalator to the top of the Cascade, where the gardens offer a world-class sculpture collection.

Visit one of Armenia's most important museums, the **Matenadaran**. A vast collection of more than 23,000 manuscripts and over 500,000 archival documents, the Matenadaran has existed since the 5th century and is one of the world's oldest book depositories. The rooms of the museum showcase a variety of modern and ancient languages, with beautifully decorated manuscripts and literary treasures about all aspects of Armenian culture and scholarship. The front of the hilltop building overlooking the city has statues of great Armenian scholars, most notably the inventor of the Armenian alphabet, St. Mesrop Mashtots, in honor of whom the Matenadaran received its own name.

This evening, enjoy an independent dinner.

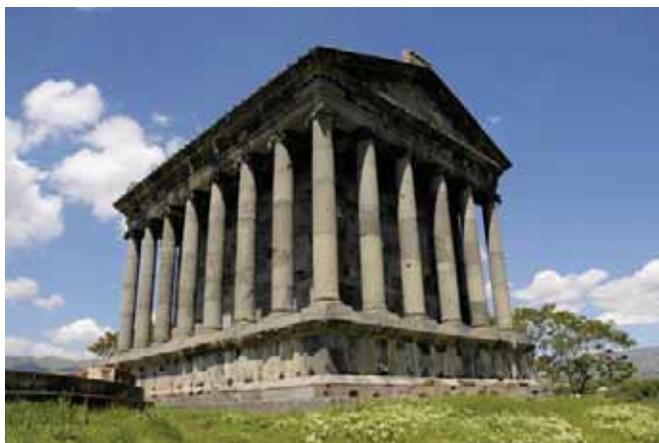
Meals: Independent – *Imperial Palace Hotel, Arma Hotel, or similar*

Day Two, Friday

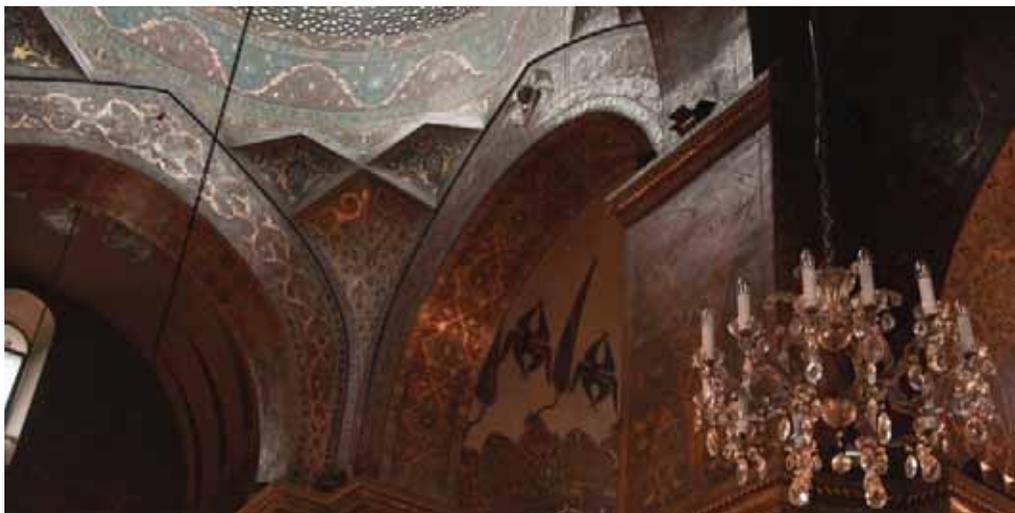
Yerevan • day trip to Garni, Geghard and Echmiadzin

Drive slightly outside of Yerevan to admire the pagan **Temple of Garni**, which stands on a cliff near the Azat Valley. With walls of huge basalt blocks, the temple was once the summer palace of King Trdat I, who built it in the 1st century AD. Destroyed by an earthquake in 1679, the monument has been restored by Armenian architects in recent years, and skilled work continues on the 3rd century royal baths and their striking mosaics.

From Garni, travel just five miles to the 12th-13th century **Geghard Monastery**. Carved into the side of a mountain, the **UNESCO-listed monastery** is one of the most fascinating monuments in Armenia. Built beside a river at the foot of the rock, the 13th-century church provides access to another building with a roof formed by stalactites. The convent is in a cave adjoining this building; the only way in is through a narrow opening in the roof. The compound includes monastic cells, churches, tombs, and *khachkar* crosses, all hewn from



solid rock. The churches are still functioning; special events such as baptisms and lamb sacrifices sometimes take place.



After lunch in a private home, continue to **Echmiadzin**, renamed Vagharshapat in 1995. Originally founded as Vagharshapat in 117 and once the capital of Armenia, this town is the center of an agricultural area renowned for its fruit and wine. However, it's better known as the spiritual center of Armenia and the seat of its Catholicos, or Patriarch. A **UNESCO**

World Heritage Site since 2000, it is also an important place of pilgrimage for Christian Armenians from the world over. It was here that St. Gregory the Illuminator had a vision of Christ descending to earth, and the **Cathedral at Echmiadzin** was built on the spot in the 4th century.

Dinner is independent tonight in Yerevan.
Meals: B, L – Imperial Palace Hotel, Arma Hotel, or similar



Day Three, Saturday Yerevan • half-day trip to Khor Virap

After breakfast, depart for **Khor Virap**. This small monastery is set on a ridge above the flat Ararat Valley, and behind it looms snow-covered Ararat. Gregory the Illuminator is said to have been imprisoned here for 13 years before converting King Trdat I to Christianity.

Return in the afternoon for a visit to the Vernissage, Yerevan's **weekend open-air market**. The Vernissage is the best opportunity for shopping and people watching in Yerevan. Here, one can find a wide assortment of wood carvings, ceramics, jewelry, paintings, and other high-quality souvenirs.

Dinner in Yerevan is independent this evening.
Meals: B – Imperial Palace Hotel, Arma Hotel, or similar



Day Four, Sunday

Yerevan • Bavra • Vardzia, Georgia

Get an early start today, departing Armenia for **Georgia**. Following border formalities at Bavra, begin an introductory tour of the fabulous land of Georgia. Almost four million people live in this country, calling themselves *Kartvelebi* and their country *Sakartvelo*, meaning “the Georgian’s place.” In geographic terms, Georgia sits astride the border of Europe and Asia. Culturally, Georgia has language, customs, and traditions uniquely its own. The beautiful Georgian script is one of only a few world alphabets, and evolved around the 5th century BC, possibly influenced by Aramaic. A very useful Georgian word is *gaumarjos*, meaning “cheers,” a word you will hear frequently during the trip.

On a rocky outcropping above the confluence of the **Javakhta Mtkvari and Artiani Mtkvari rivers** sits the massive stone **Khertvisi Fortress** at **Bavra**, the first stop in Georgia. The sturdy inner keep was built sometime in the 10th century, and during Queen Tamara’s time in the late 12th century, the two main towers were erected. The outer walls seen today were built later. Two secret tunnels led down to the river, one for water and one for communication.

Not far from Khertvisi, arrive in Vardzia. Twelfth century King Giorgi III began digging the **caves at**

Vardzia as a stronghold against the Turks.

Giorgi’s daughter, Queen Tamara, completed the complex and transformed it into a monastic center. Over time, earthquakes have altered the layout of the 3,000 caves and corridors that existed in Tamara’s time - today there are only 559 surviving chambers. Frescoes in the caves that remain represent the pinnacle of the Golden Age of Georgian painting; among them are portraits of King Giorgi and Queen Tamara. A tour includes hiking through the cut-rock town.

Dinner tonight is at a local restaurant.

Meals: B, L, D – *Vardzia Resort Hotel or similar*



Day Five, Monday

Vardzia

After breakfast, spend today exploring some of the region’s smaller towns and villages. **Chachkari Village**, just behind Vardzia, was originally the place where the cave town’s workers grew grapes, made wine, farmed and kept animals to supply the nobles and priests. Today, it features a café, wine-tasting room, and restaurant. For lunch, **visit a local family and enjoy a meal of traditional Georgian cuisine**.

Hike into history among the ancient ruins of three megalithic fortresses in **Saro Village**, located on a high plateau with stunning mountain views about 15 miles north of Vardzia. Wander among the large nine-foot stone blocks – covered in golden-yellow lichen – used to create walls and arches without any concrete or mortar, still intact after thousands of years. A small medieval church dating back to the 7th century stands on this archaeological site, looking out on the cliffs and valleys of the Samtskhe-Javakheti region.



Next visit a **Meskhethian Darbazi House**. Representative of the traditional architecture of the region, these dwellings are buried partially underground and have open roofs allowing in natural light.

After touring, return to Vardzia. Dinner tonight is at a local restaurant.
Meals: B, L, D – *Vardzia Resort Hotel or similar*

Day Six, Tuesday

Vardzia • Akhaltsikhe • Borjomi

After breakfast, depart for Borjomi **via Akhaltsikhe**, in southwestern Georgia near the Turkish border. Arrival in Akhaltsikhe will be late-morning, and timing should permit some touring before lunch. The Old Town here, called **Rabati**, was a crossroads of the old Silk Road, and encompasses an ancient fortress, mosque, and bathhouses. The newly renovated Rabati sits on the hill above town surrounded by ramparts and towers. Originally built in the 9th century, the complex includes examples of the many civilizations that have passed through this region. Admire the medieval and early modern Christian, Jewish, and Islamic buildings as well as some old *darbazebi*, traditional Georgian houses.



Enjoy a **wine-tasting at the cellar of Giorgi Natenadze**. He's a young farmer and winemaker who lives in Akhaltsikhe with his family, overseeing their 300-year-old vineyards. Each year, Giorgi makes a different natural wine from the ancient grape varieties of the Samtskhe-Javakheti region.

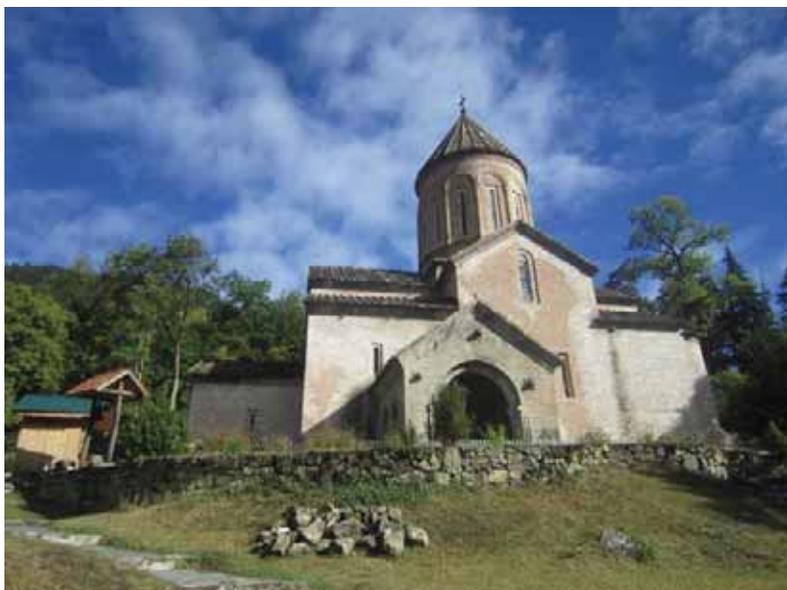
After lunch in a local restaurant, continue to **Borjomi**, a resort town in the beautiful Borjomi Gorge. Borjomi is celebrated for its mineral water, which is still bottled and sold throughout the region. Believed by Georgians to have enormous health benefits, Borjomi's mineral springs were popular both for drinking and for bathing. **Take a side-by-side tasting** after arrival and experience **Borjomi's famous water**.

The mountain scenery and spa water of Borjomi attracted both royalty and commoner alike during the 19th century, when the Romanovs built a summer home here and bottled the water in crystal bottles. Wander the palace grounds and gardens that form **Likani Park and the Romanov Summer Residence**.

Next visit, the **Borjomi Mineral Park**. Dating from 1850, the park is located in town, around the site where the warm original mineral spring was discovered. The park features attractions like a cable car, a Ferris wheel, and a roller coaster, as well as fountains where you can drink mineral water for free. Upstream from the park, a trail leads to an 80-degree-Fahrenheit hot spring. Dinner tonight will be at the hotel.

Meals: B, L, D – *Hotel Borjomi Likani or similar*





Day Seven, Wednesday

Borjomi • Zugdidi • Mestia

After breakfast today, bid farewell to Borjomi and continue into the mountains via **Zugdidi**, arriving in late morning or early afternoon. Lunch will be served here, with a time for a bit of touring as well. Zugdidi is referred to as the **Gateway to Svaneti**, since it is at the beginning of the only road that leads to the distant region. A small city of about 75,000, Zugdidi is the capital of the Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti region, which includes both Samegrelo (also known as Megrelia) and Svaneti. It is situated about 20 miles from the Black Sea Coast.

Zugdidi's **Dadiani Palace Museum** is situated in what was called the Queen's

Palace, belonging to Ekaterine Chavchavadze Dadiani. Built in 1873, it resembles the Alupka Palace in the Crimea, an English castle with eastern influence. The collection includes archaeological discoveries from the ruins of Byzantine Nokalakevi, the death mask of Napoleon Bonaparte and a cloak purportedly belonging to the Virgin Mary. Weapons, military items, and an extensive library round out the collection.

Next continue to **Svaneti**, a **UNESCO World Heritage Site** and a remote and revered region of Georgia. Unreachable by car until 1935 when the cart track from Zugdidi was widened to allow car traffic, Svaneti has maintained its own way of life for centuries. Its remote alpine location served as a refuge for Georgians during times of trouble, and many cultural and historical artifacts were transported to Svaneti for safekeeping from the hands of invading armies. The Mongols never reached Svaneti, and the last czarist governor was expelled in the beginning of the 20th century. It is said that the traditions and culture of Svaneti are "more Georgian" than anywhere else in Georgia. Today, new investment in this region is stimulating growth of the fledgling tourism infrastructure.

The road into Svaneti winds along the **Enguri River Canyon**, providing spectacular views at every turn. Time should permit an en route stop at the village of Latali. **Latali** means "guard," and this is one of the first true Svan villages on the route, having never fallen under feudal rule. Here, visit a **9th century single-nave basilica**. Such small churches are typical of Svan church architecture, built of stone with ornate frescoes. Though officially Christian since 526, the people of Svaneti have incorporated many traditions from their pagan past into their Orthodox practices, such as the sacrifice of rams on certain holidays. St. George occupies a prominent position in Svanetian religious tradition, and the third toast of any celebration is always to St. George.

Arrive in Mestia by evening, and check in to the hotel for dinner and overnight.

Meals: B, L, D – *Mestia Hotel or similar*



Day Eight, Thursday

Mestia

Following breakfast, set out to explore **Mestia**, to see the traditional Svanetian architecture, best known for its **medieval watchtowers**. Touring today will include the **Architectural Museum** with its examples of 12th century architecture. The typical Svanetian house, or *machubi*, was built around a central room with stalls for cattle and livestock on all sides. A family group of 20 could live in such a house with sleeping quarters above the cattle for warmth. Fodder and food stores would be kept in the nearby watchtower. Family-owned and passed on from generation to generation, the towers have served multiple functions as barns, warehouses, cold storage, and defensive battlements. The openings near the top floor serve as strategic apertures through which a variety of missiles could be aimed at invaders. Svaneti boasts at least 200 towers, the majority of which are here in Mestia.

Visit the **Ethnographic Museum** with its 10th-12th century manuscripts, unique 14th century metalwork and icons. Perhaps the finest exhibit is the 11th century **Icon of the 40 Martyrs**, which is believed to have been painted in central Georgia, but transported to Svaneti out of the hands of invading Muslim forces. The rendering of the 40 individuals is reminiscent of European Renaissance portrait painting and is an exquisite work of art.

This evening, enjoy a short walk to nearby mineral springs for an opportunity to enjoy the sweeping vistas of Svaneti.

Dinner and overnight in Mestia.

Meals: B, L, D – *Mestia Hotel or similar*

Day Nine Friday

Mestia • day trip to Ushguli

Following breakfast, set off for the village of Ushguli, a 29-mile drive from Mestia. At an altitude of 6,900 feet, **Ushguli** is the highest continually inhabited village in Europe. Some of its watchtowers are included in the **UNESCO World Heritage Site** of Upper Svaneti. Set at the foot of Georgia's highest peak, Mt. Shkhara, Ushguli is a stunningly beautiful place.

Visit the **Ethnographic Museum**, a local gem located in an old watchtower. It houses an excellent collection of 11th century icons, medieval *repoussé* work, and works of art from all over Georgia.

Next, visit the 12th century **Lamaria Church**. Located on a hill on the outskirts of town, this church enjoys spectacular views of **Mt. Shkhara**, which towers over Ushguli at a height of 16,000 feet. This afternoon, there



will be the opportunity to do some hiking at the foot of Mt. Shkhara, enjoying the mountain scenery.

Return to Mestia for dinner and overnight.

Meals: B, L, D – *Mestia Hotel or similar*

Day Ten, Saturday

Mestia • Zugdidi • Kutaisi

Depart Mestia for the six-to-seven-hour drive to **Kutaisi**, in the Imereti region. The road leaves Svaneti the way it came in, via Zugdidi, so there will be time for lunch there en route to Imereti.



The **Imereti region** is widely recognized for its friendly inhabitants, spicy food, and crisp wines. Georgia's favorite snack, *khachapuri*, is believed to have originated in this region. (*Khachapuri* is like a savory pizza without the tomato sauce, made from leavened bread and commonly stuffed with cheese or egg.) The second-largest city in Georgia, Kutaisi is an ancient place that throughout time has served as an important merchant center on the route from Greece to India. It is thought that Jason and the Argonauts crossed the Straits of the Dardanelles and the

Bosphorus to reach here, the Kingdom of Colchis, where King Aeetes reigned and guarded the Golden Fleece.

The mystery of the **Golden Fleece** might be explained by an ancient gold prospecting technique of putting a sheep's fleece into the river to trap gold flecks floating down from the mountains. It is believed that such a golden fleece was brought along ancient trade routes and presented to King Aeetes.

Upon arrival into Kutaisi, briefly tour **Bagrati Cathedral**. This 11th-century cathedral sits at the top of Uk'imerioni Hill in central Kutaisi. Damaged by the Turks in the 17th century, the domed cathedral has undergone careful restoration since 1952. Next check into the guesthouse for dinner and overnight.

Meals: B, L, D – *Lali's Guesthouse or similar*



This morning after breakfast, take in Gelati Monastery, a little way out of town. Georgia's most famous king, David the Builder, founded **Gelati Monastery** in 1106 and his son completed it in 1130. The monastery housed Georgia's first academy and was the burial place of the Georgian rulers. The well-preserved ensemble's stone churches and secular buildings are decorated with lovely frescoes, mosaics, and enamel and metal work. Representing the flowering of art and architecture in Georgia's "Golden Age," the Gelati Monastery is a **UNESCO World Heritage Site**.

Continue across Imereti, heading for Georgia's capital, Tbilisi.

Around lunch time, before reaching Tbilisi, make a stop at the **Art Villa Garikula**, a multifunctional contemporary arts center that brings together local and international artists to exchange ideas, educate, and work collaboratively on modern art projects. The villa is home to a well-known artist-in-residence program, and also hosts regular symposia and workshops on site. **Enjoy lunch with the artists**, and learn more about their creative work and processes.

Continue to Tbilisi, and on arrival take a tour of the **Simon Janashia Museum of Georgia**. A component of Georgia's National Museum, this site maintains some of the country's most significant archaeological finds. Visitors can see one of the largest collections of ancient gold decorative arts – the 5th century BC golden jewelry and artifacts discovered in a tomb in Akhagori – as well as a golden trove of treasures from 3,000-year-old burial mounds of the Trialeti culture. The most famous exhibit here, however, may be the 1.8-million-year-old Homo erectus skulls unearthed at Dmanisi, Georgia, from 1991 to 2005. This site was discovered by David Lordkipanidze, General Director of the museum.

Just west of Tbilisi's central Old Town is the art nouveau **Sololaki District**, built in the 19th and early 20th centuries by Georgian and European architects. Once the city's most prestigious neighborhood for wealthy bourgeois families, the district had been allowed to fall into disrepair once Georgia was annexed by the Soviet Union, suffering further damages from earthquakes and economic turmoil. In recent years, many of Sololaki's beautifully decorated facades have been renovated, and the growing number of hip cafes and restaurants here has transformed it into the city's up-and-coming restaurant district.

Built between 1903 and 1905, the art nouveau mansion now occupied by the **Writers' House of Georgia** was owned by philanthropist David Sarajishvili and was an important center of the city's cultural life. During Soviet times it was designated a "Palace of the Arts." Since 2008, the Writers' House has had its headquarters here, and is dedicated to the support and development of cultural and literary activities.



At the conclusion of the day, enjoy dinner at **Cafe Littera** at the Writers' House. Opened in 2016, Café Littera serves creative dishes fusing traditional Georgian concepts with surprising new ingredients. Famed chef Tekuna Gachechiladze plays with old methods and recipes, changing them up in unexpected ways, like making traditional *chakapuli* stew with mussels rather than lamb.
Meals: B, L, D – *Iota Hotel Tbilisi, Rooms Hotel, or similar*

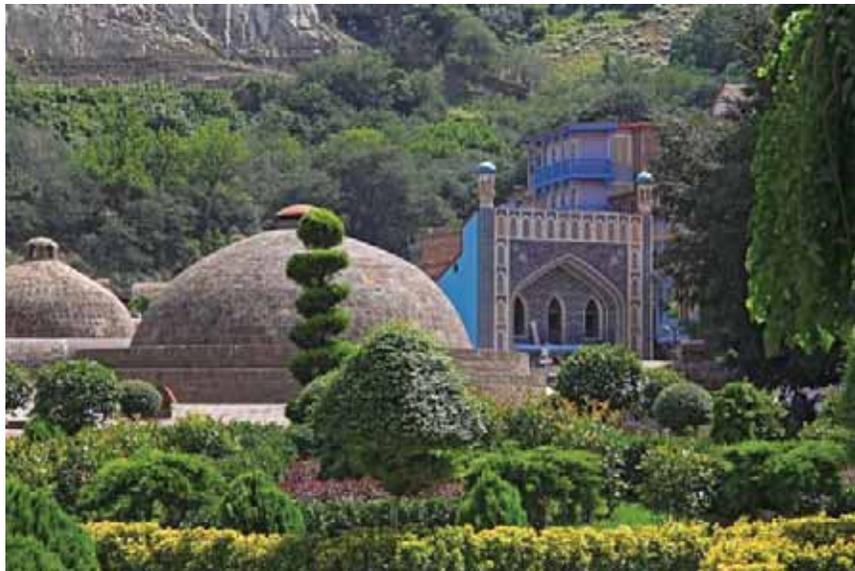
Day Twelve, Monday Tbilisi

Spend a day in the countryside exploring ancient Georgian sites. First, stop at the **archaeological site of Dmanisi**, a medieval town overlooking the confluence of two rivers where Silk Road caravans used to pass. In the Middle Ages, townspeople dug their cellars and storage pits through layers of strange bones and stone tools that in the 20th century were found to belong to some of the earliest hominids found outside of Africa. The discovery here of five 1.8 million-year-old *Homo erectus* skulls have made the Dmanisi site crucial to the study of human evolution.

Next continue to **Bolnisi** to visit what is probably the oldest **Christian church in Georgia**. Called **Sioni**, which simply means “Zion,” the square stone church shelters what may be the oldest example of Georgian script in the country.

After lunch, return to the capital to learn how the city got its name. Tbilisi's earliest **sulfur baths** were probably built during Arab rule in the 7th or 8th centuries, when it was discovered that hot springs were just under the surface in the old part of Tbilisi. In the 13th century, there may have been up to 68 baths in Tbilisi; now there are only six or seven. Most of the baths in use today were built in the 17th century. Pedestrians can see steam rising from the dome-shaped underground baths as they pass by. The temperatures of the different baths are between 46 and 104 degrees Fahrenheit, and are considered therapeutic.

At the conclusion of your tour, say goodbye to Georgia with a traditional farewell dinner.
Meals: B, L, D – *Iota Hotel Tbilisi, Rooms Hotel, or similar*



Day Thirteen, Tuesday Depart Tbilisi

Following breakfast, the tour concludes with transfers to the airport.
Meals: B



Tour Days of Operation

Private departures of this land itinerary can begin on the Thursday of your choice in 2020. Please note you will need to depart the U.S. at least one day prior to your tour start date due to airline flight schedules.

Private Journey Prices

2 traveler minimum, from \$5,395 per person, twin share

Single supplement, from \$875

Solo traveler rate, inclusive of single supplement, from \$8,295

Tour Includes

- Accommodations as noted in the itinerary.
- All room types, even in upgraded properties, are standard entry-level doubles or twins; please call for room category upgrade pricing and information.
- 12 breakfasts, 10 lunches, and 9 dinners. A few lunches or dinners are not included so that you may enjoy a chance to experiment on your own.
- Restaurant tips for included meals.
- One arrival and one departure airport transfer. (Additional arrival and departure transfers available at additional cost.) MIR will arrange for travelers to be met upon arrival and seen off on departure, whether we make your air arrangements or not.
- Ground transportation throughout itinerary by private vehicle (size of vehicle depends on number of travelers in your group).
- Guided sightseeing tours and entrance fees as outlined in itinerary.
- Services of experienced, English-speaking local guides, drivers, and other staff.
- Complete pre-departure information including detailed packing list, reading list, optional insurance information.
- Complete pre-departure information including detailed packing list, reading list, *Touring with MIR* handbook with country-specific information, maps, and travel tips.
- Assistance booking your custom flight arrangements (on request; please note that international airfare is not included in the land tour cost).
- Final document packet including luggage tags, final updates, and more.

Not Included

- International airfare or taxes/fuel surcharges.
- Meals not specified as included on the itinerary.
- Single supplement charge, if requested or required.
- Items of a personal nature (phone calls, email, laundry, alcohol, excess baggage, etc).
- Baggage handling.
- Gratuities to local guides and drivers.
- Visa/passport fees, airport departure fees.
- Expenses incurred as a result of delay, modification or extension of a tour due to causes beyond MIR's control.
- Travel and trip cancellation insurance.

Interested in travel insurance?

To learn more about all the benefits of purchasing a Travel Guard travel insurance plan, please visit www.travelguard.com/mircorp or contact Travel Guard at 1-877-709-5596.

Start Planning Next Year Now

2021 Flexible Essential Trip – Classic Private Journey – 13 Days

At the time of writing, the land itinerary for this program next year is projected to be generally as depicted for this year. Please call if you're ready to book now.

Private departures of this land itinerary can begin on the Thursday of your choice in 2021. Please note you will need to depart the U.S. at least one day prior to your tour start date due to airline flight schedules.

Private Journey Prices

2 traveler minimum, from \$5,495 per person, twin share

Single supplement, from \$895

Solo traveler rate, inclusive of single supplement, from \$8,395

Flexible Essential trip prices may vary by season and are subject to hotel availability for your travel dates. Extensions and additional nights are available on request. Contact us at 1-800-424-7289 for more information.

Flexible Essential Trips – Classic Private Journeys

Flexible Essential Private Trips are compact, well-designed private tour itineraries – researched and ready to book on the dates you choose. They work perfectly as brief overviews of a country or as effortless extensions to group tours – great for solo travelers, couples, or private parties who prefer to travel independently but appreciate a savvy, pre-designed program.

Important Notes: Is This Trip Right For You?

This Flexible Essential program is designed to be adventurous, but also comfortable for travel in this region. Accommodations will vary from three star hotels to basic guesthouses.

Services are improving in the region; however, you may encounter problems with plumbing, bureaucratic service, road conditions, unpaved sidewalks, uneven surfaces and steps, and availability of public restrooms. You are traveling in areas which, relatively speaking, have seen very few travelers, and the infrastructure is not fully developed. Air-conditioning is a luxury and rarely available outside the capitals.

This program is rated as **rigorous touring** due to the extensive walking involved (with some hiking), the length of some van rides over some quite rough terrain and the overall shortcomings of the tourism infrastructure. Flexibility, a sense of humor, the ability to walk 2-3 miles a day comfortably (including some hills and stairs) and manage your own baggage when required (see tour inclusions), and a willingness to accept local standards of amenities and services are essential components to the enjoyment of this trip. **Please note**, some Orthodox churches enforce fairly strict dress codes. Women may need to have head coverings (scarves) with them, and men and women may need to have their arms and legs modestly covered. Your guides will advise you when this is the case. **Please note**, during the walks/hikes, you will be required to carry a daypack with some of your personal belongings.



Every effort has been made to make the information in this schedule accurate. However, trip itineraries are always subject to change. We will do our best to inform you in advance of any changes, but due to the nature of travel in Armenia and Georgia, this may not always be possible. This tour maintains a focus on cultural interaction and the natural beauty of the Caucasus. You will be visiting private homes, sharing meals with local residents, and taking advantage of several opportunities for day hikes. It is therefore important that tour members have a desire to involve themselves in the local culture and be up for hiking/walking in order to enjoy this trip.

Are You Prepared?

A Travel Guard travel insurance plan can help cover your vacation investment, offset expenses from travel mishaps and provide you with emergency travel assistance. To learn more about all of the benefits of purchasing a Travel Guard travel insurance plan, please visit www.travelguard.com/mircorp

Please read the U.S. State Department's Travel Advisory regarding travel to Georgia here: <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/traveladvisories/traveladvisories/georgia-travel-advisory.html>

Please read the U.S. State Department's Travel Advisory regarding travel to Armenia here: <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/traveladvisories/traveladvisories/armenia-travel-advisory.html>

If you are not already enrolled in STEP, Smart Traveler Enrollment Program, a free service to enroll your trip with the nearest U.S. Embassy or Consulate, please consider enrolling. For more information: <https://step.state.gov/step/>

Weather

Armenia has a semi-arid highland continental climate, with four distinct seasons. The summers are hot and the winters are cold, with temperature extremes more pronounced in the mountains. Spring (April-May) and early fall (September-October) are the best months to travel here. The spring provides a look at the wildflowers, while the fall brings spectacular colors as the leaves change. Rain is minimal. May brings daytime temperatures ranging from 60-80 degrees Fahrenheit, and September temperatures are usually similar. At mid-summer, temperatures can peak above 100 degrees Fahrenheit in the lowlands. Nighttime in both seasons brings cooler temperatures that generally drop to the 50s.

Georgia experiences extremely hot summers and cold winters. Late spring and early fall are the best times to travel here. Rain is minimal. Spring (April-May) and early fall (September-October) are the best months to travel here. May brings daytime temperatures ranging from 60-80 degrees Fahrenheit. Summers can be hot in the lowlands, starting in June with daytime temperatures ranging from 75-90 degrees Fahrenheit; and still-warm September brings temperatures ranging from 65-80 degrees Fahrenheit during the day, and around 60 at night.

Please remember, weather at all times of year has an element of the unpredictable. This information comes from weatherbase.com and is based on data from previous temperatures on record. It is always advisable to check with weatherbase.com closer to your departure date for current conditions and forecasts for the specific regions of Armenia and Georgia you will be visiting.

International Airfare

MIR's in-house, full-service air department is available to assist with your air travel needs. Check with MIR before booking air on your own, as we are happy to research and compare the best fares available



through multiple channels. Airfare varies depending on a wide variety of factors, such as dates of travel and seasonality, seat availability, special airline promotions, how restrictive ticket changes are, how long the fares can be held without purchase, routing considerations such as stopovers, and more. Tour dates are based on the land tour only. Routing possibilities include Austrian Airlines, Aeroflot, and Air France into Yerevan, and Turkish Airlines or Georgian Airways out of Tbilisi. An overnight stop in Istanbul may be necessary depending on your final destination following the tour; longer stays in Turkey after the tour, or combinations with Central Asian programs, can also be easily arranged.

Please call us at 1-800-424-7289 to discuss air options and routings for this program, and to request a quote for your specific plans and dates of travel. We will be happy to put together a no-obligation suggested air itinerary and estimate for you at your request.

Visas

At this time, U.S. passport holders do not require visas to Georgia or Armenia. You may need a visa for any country you fly through in order to join the tour (such as Russia or Turkey), or for pre- and post-tour extensions. Non-U.S. passport holders may need visas; please contact MIR to discuss.

Pre and Post-Tour Extensions

You may wish to extend your travels by adding another program before or after this tour. MIR can arrange for a pre-tour extension to **Shoushi, Armenia**, or a post-tour extension to **Baku, Azerbaijan**, **Moscow** or **St. Petersburg, Russia**, or elsewhere in Europe at the conclusion of your tour.

Contact us for more details.

Also Nearby...

For other options to this region, you may want to check out:

Flexible Essential Trips – Classic Private Journeys

Our **Flexible Essential Trips** are perfect as brief overviews of a country or region and with flexible dates of our choice, they are easily combined with small group tours.

Essential Georgia, 8 days. The tiny country of Georgia, hugging the shore of the Black Sea in the shadow of the Caucasus Mountains, has a long history of bountiful table traditions and winemaking. The ancient land of the Colchis, where Jason sought the Golden Fleece, Georgia has lived in myth and legend for centuries.

Essential Caucasus, 10 days. Armenia's intricate stone *khachkar* crosses, the bounteous wines of Georgia and the ancient petroglyphs of Azerbaijan are icons of these three intertwined Caucasus countries, where you can experience five UNESCO masterpieces in 10 days.

Essential Central Asia, 13 days. Explore the markets, mosques, minarets and teahouses of oasis towns on the fringes of the Kyzyl Kum and Kara Kum deserts. Here on the bridge between East and West, spiritual beliefs were the greatest commodities to flow along trade routes, and civilizations blossomed amidst austere natural beauty.

Essential Uzbekistan, 10 days. Roam the great Silk Road oases of Bukhara, Samarkand and Khiva, along with modern Tashkent, the Uzbek capital. Admire their mosques, *madrassahs* and minarets built of mud



bricks and clad in ceramic tiles the color of the desert sky. (*Works great as a pre-tour with a quick flight from Tashkent to Yerevan.*)

Essential Tajikistan, 8 days. Rarely-visited Tajikistan is wreathed in spectacular mountains and colored with the influence of Persia, the Islamic world and Russia. Meet local people at Fergana Valley markets, explore the ruins of ancient Penjikent and share a meal in a warm Tajik home. Visit the country's capital, Dushanbe, where an airy, light-filled space is home to the modern National Museum of Tajikistan.

Essential Kazakhstan, 7 days. Begin in the new city of Astana, capital of Kazakhstan only since 1997. Fly to Chimkent and discover the historic city of Turkistan with its UNESCO-listed mausoleum of a revered Sufi sheikh. Fly to Almaty and explore spectacular Charyn Canyon, with its strange rock formations and colorful strata.

Small Group Tours

A Taste of Georgia: Wine, Cuisine & Culture, 13 days. Explore gorgeous Georgia on a culinary and cultural caravan that traverses a country entwined with grapevines, overflowing with wine and abounding in hospitality. In the company of local MIR hosts – a winemaker and an ethnologist who are in love with Georgian food, wine and culture – experience the never-ending Georgian Feast like a local, dining and toasting in wine cellars, fine restaurants, vineyards and the homes of family chefs all over Georgia.

Treasures of the South Caucasus, 15 days. Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan share stunning mountain backdrops, powerful stone architecture and a strong code of hospitality. Georgia's renowned winemaking traditions, Azerbaijan's Zoroastrian and Islamic background, and Armenia's multitude of ancient churches combine to make this distinctive journey more than the sum of its parts.

Village Traditions of the South Caucasus, 21 days. Step deep into the cultures of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia, experiencing local life in one of the most hospitable regions of the world. Meet the highland people of Georgia's stunning Svaneti and Tusheti mountain regions, an Azeri craftsman in his village home, and a carpet master in small-town Armenia.

Conditions of Participation

Your participation on a MIR Corporation trip is subject to the conditions contained in the 2020 Tour Reservation Form and Release of Liability and Assumption of Risk Agreement. Please read this document carefully and contact us with any questions.

Cancellation and Refund Policy

Payment Terms: Non-refundable deposits are accepted by check, Visa, MasterCard, or American Express. Final land payments may be made by check or credit card for reservations made directly with MIR. If booking through a travel agent, please contact your agent to find out what form of payment they accept. (MIR can accept final payment from travel agents by agency check only.) Airfares are subject to change until ticketed; payment policies vary by carrier.

If you cancel your trip please notify MIR in writing. Upon MIR's receipt of notice the following charges apply to land tours (policies for air tickets, custom group trips vary):

MIR Flexible Essential tours

Cost of cancellation, if received:

61 or more days prior to departure, deposit due or paid in full of \$750;



31-60 days prior to departure, 50% of land tour cost;
30 days prior to or after trip departure, no refund.

References

We encourage you to speak directly with satisfied past travelers. Please request a list of references.

Why MIR?

Regional knowledge is crucial to the success of any trip to our corner of the world. MIR combines detailed information about geography and infrastructure, history and art, language and culture, with the depth of knowledge that comes only from decades of regional experience. You may wonder how we differ from other tour operators...

Destination Specialization

MIR focuses exclusively on the exceptional region at the crossroads of Europe and Asia. This area has been our overriding passion since 1986; we don't do the rest of the world. Our hard-earned expertise gained over the last three decades can take you from end to end of the largest country in the world – Russia – and to all of its neighbors. We specialize in travel to Siberia, the Silk Route, St. Petersburg & Beyond. Our destinations include: Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, the Baltics (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania), the Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Slovenia), Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan), the South Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia), Turkey, Mongolia, China, Tibet, and Central/East Europe (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia).

30 Years of Experience

A travel company doesn't last more than 30 years in the business without a solid track record. MIR has helped thousands of individuals achieve their travel goals. Our dedication and experience have earned us their trust and the trust of many well-respected institutions. Today MIR is the preferred tour operator for museum, alumni and special interest organizations across the country.





Recommended & Respected

MIR has twice been rated one of the “Best Adventure Travel Companies on Earth” by *National Geographic Adventure*. Several of our tours have won awards in top travel publications, such as *Outside* magazine and *National Geographic Traveler*. Our trips have been featured in books such as *Riding the Hula Hula to the Arctic Ocean* and *1,000 Places to See Before You Die*.

More Questions?

Please feel free to call us with questions at 1-800-424-7289, 8:30am-5:30pm Pacific Time.

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