



Treasures of Travel

Treasures of the Caucasus (Armenia, Georgia & Azerbaijan, 2024 ~ 27 days/ 25 nights ~

For years the art, old crafts, and cultural traditions of these gems of the Caucasus lay undiscovered by the rest of the world. Now we have the opportunity to observe their emergence first-hand, as well as experience the beautiful mountain sceneries, unforgettable monasteries, mosques and the joyful people who love to dance, sing and sample their own cognac and wine! The combination of these three countries offers an interesting cross-cultural travel experience as you discover their ethnic, linguistic and religious histories.

Day 1 ~

Leave the USA for Yerevan, Armenia.

Day 2 ~ Yerevan

In transit.

Day 3 ~ Yerevan

Early in the morning upon your arrival in Yerevan airport and following the visa and custom formalities, you will be met and **transferred** to the hotel. You will have some time to rest after your long journey to the capital of Armenia. In the second half of the day we'll tour two sites not far from Yerevan: **Echmiadzin Monastery**- the religious center of the Armenian Apostolic Church, has also served as a residence of the Armenian Patriarchs since the 15th century; and the ruins of outstanding **Zvartnots Cathedral** with majestic appearance of Mt. Ararat and Mt. Aragats in the background. Upon our return to Yerevan we'll visit **Matenadaran**, the ancient Armenian manuscripts library-museum with 17,000 manuscripts and 100,000 medieval and modern documents to learn about the birth and development of Armenian alphabet and language; and drive up to the top of the mountain where the a massive statue of **Mother Armenia** is, with a splendid location overlooking the city. Overnight in Yerevan. Hotel Aviatrans or similar.

Day 4 ~ Yerevan

Today we'll have another short trip outside Yerevan making the first stop at **Garni**, the Hellenistic temple which was built in the 1st century AD and served as a summer residence of Armenian kings. Upon coming back to Yerevan, we'll spend the late afternoon on touring **the State History Museum of Armenia** with its rich collection dating from ancient times to modern era, the **National Gallery of Armenia** holding a big exhibition of European, Russian and Armenian masters; as well as visiting colorful covered **fruit/food market** and the open market of antiques and souvenirs, the **Vernisazh**, which is held every day, with Saturday and Sunday being the busiest. Here you can find all kinds of national crafts including: jewelry, carpets, woodwork, ceramics, canvases, paintings and many other works of art. Our sightseeing tour of **Yerevan** will also include the major avenues such as Marshall Baghramian Poghota where embassies, the presidential palace and national assembly are lined up, and squares of the city such as Republic Square. Overnight in Yerevan. Hotel Aviatrans or similar.

Day 5 ~ Yerevan

In the morning we'll head to the 11th century **Amberd Fortress** located on the slopes of Mt. Aragats at almost 7,000 feet above sea level, in Aragatsotn province, name literally means 'a foot of Arargats' and is primarily inhabited by Armenians but also holds a significant Yazidi Kurdish minority, who mostly follow nomadic way of life. Possibly we'll see some of them camping and herding their animals in the area on the way to Amberd fortress and back, and we may stop for a short visit.

As we return back to the capital in the afternoon we'll tour **the National Folk Art Museum** and the **Genocide Museum**. We'll end our day with a special treat, touring **Ararat Brandy Factory** of Yerevan and enjoying happy hour of brandy tasting at the end of it. Overnight in Yerevan. Hotel Aviatrans or similar.

Day 6 ~ Goris

This morning we will leave Yerevan and drive to **Khor-Virap**, one of the holiest sites in Armenia. Khor-Virap is home to the underground pit where Gregory the Illuminator was imprisoned before converting King Trdat III (the same as Tiridates III) to Christianity. Our next stop will be at the beautiful **Noravank Monastery**, a unique monastery situated in Noravank Canyon. The high rocks on both sides of the road almost cover the sky above until the picturesque view of one of the most remarkable monastery complexes in Armenia opens.

Next we'll head to **Goris**, one of the most picturesque parts of the country, where we will see the true Armenian heart and soul. Driving through spectacular landscape which is a combination of splendid mountains, valleys, rivers, meadows filled with some of the most beautiful wild flowers of all colors especially in spring, is truly enjoyable attraction. In the evening we'll arrive in charming town of Goris Overnight in Goris. / Mirhav Hotel or similar.

Day 7 ~ Goris

We'll spend all day exploring the surrounding area of Goris, home to some of the country's most attractive sites. In the morning we'll first head to **Khondzoresk**, widely famous for its canyon with picturesque rock formations and medieval cave settlement. We'll stop to view the man-made cave dwellings largely hewn into volcanic sandstone going back to prehistoric times, which used to be inhabited till the 1950s. Next we'll drive to **Tatev Monastery Complex**, first founded in the 9th century, the complex was more developed and expanded in the following centuries, as it became the religious, cultural and educational center. In the 14th and 15th centuries Tatev Monastery housed the most important Armenian medieval university, the University of Tatev, which contributed to the advancement of science, religion and philosophy, reproduction of books and development of miniature painting.

The monastery location provides breathtaking views over the valleys, rivers and still settled or abandoned villages below. In the evening we will return to Goris for overnight. / Mirhav Hotel or similar.

Day 8 ~ Dilijan

Today we'll have another scenic drive to **Dilijan**, with some sightseeing and rest stops on the way. As we enjoy magnificent landscape and views, we'll follow up the Selim Pass which has been known since the medieval ages when one of the side routes of the Silk Road was operating. Here we'll explore the 14th century **Selim Caravanserai**, the best preserved of all medieval caravanserais in Armenia, located at an altitude of 7,200 ft above sea level, and enjoy the splendid view over the valley below with some small villages and animal herds. This building is an excellent example of Armenian secular architecture in the middle ages.

Our next destination today is **Lake Sevan** – “the pearl of Armenia”. This fresh-water lake of volcanic origin is situated at an altitude of about 6,500 ft and is one of the biggest high altitude lakes in the world. Here we will visit **Sevan Monastery** overlooking the lake and at the same time observe the water change its colors surrounded with snow-capped mountains. We'll continue to beautiful Dilijan for overnight. / Hotel Tufenkian or similar.

Day 9 ~ Tbilisi

We will spend the morning exploring **Dilijan**, the Armenian Switzerland, the most charming little town in the country tucked in the valley surrounded with mountains. We will visit the local **Ethnographic Museum**, which represents a beautiful 19th century house offering the rich collection of the area's ceramics, wood and metal carvings, as well as textiles. We will walk up along the old street lined with typical local houses to visit the pottery shop, wood carving and other local craftsmen shops. Next we will drive through the twisting gorges of Lori province to visit **Haghpat Monastery, the UNESCO World Heritage site** with its breathtaking setting and fantastic scenery. After lunch we'll be **transferred to Armenia-Georgia** border to go through border crossing formalities and meet our new guide and driver from Georgia. A 90-minute drive will bring us to Tbilisi for overnight. / Marriot Courtyard Hotel or similar.

Day 10 ~ Tbilisi

If you haven't yet visited Prague, Budapest or Vienna, Tbilisi is the city you want to see in a more pleasant, relaxed and welcoming atmosphere. Tbilisi is one of the oldest and the most cosmopolitan cities in the world, home to many different national and religious minorities, who have resided together peacefully all throughout the history of the capital. The proof to it is **the Old Tbilisi** crowded with Georgian, Armenian, Catholic churches, as well as a synagogue, mosque and even what is believed to have been once, ancient Zoroastrian temple. We will start exploring the attractive capital of Georgia, spread along the banks of the Mtkvari River, with **Metekhi Church**, the spot where the history of the city started in the 5th century AD, where you can feel its heartbeat, also offering a superb view of the **Narikala Fortress, Kartlis Deda (Mother Georgia), the Old Town and the Mtkvari River** below. We'll see many interesting churches during our walking tour of the old city, including the 6-7th century **Sioni Cathedral** (the center of religious life in the capital), the **Anchiskhati** (the oldest church in Tbilisi, built in the 6th century), as well as the **Synagogue** and mosque. At the end of the Old city tour, we'll sit in a charming local cafe for a little rest and refreshing cold or hot drinks, before proceeding to the cable car station and taking a cable car to the **Narikala Fortress**, to walk over to the **Statue of Mother Georgia** and descend to historical **Bath-house street** known for **sulphur baths**, where famous writers such as Dumas, Pushkin and Tolstoy spent many pleasant hours. After lunch, we'll tour the stunning **Treasury of the Georgian National Museum** with its incredible display of gold artifacts and jewelry; and **Treasury of Georgian National Art Museum**. A visit to the capital without a stroll along the famous **Rustaveli Avenue** with all kinds of different government and civic buildings, shops, main squares would not be complete. The rest of the day will be free until dinner time for your own exploration or rest. Overnight in Tbilisi. / Marriot Courtyard Hotel or similar.

Day 11 ~ Akhaltsikhe via Mtskheta, Gori

We'll leave Tbilisi in the morning. Our first stop outside the capital, will be at **UNESCO World Heritage Site Mtskheta**, the ancient capital and religious center of Georgia, touring it will include visits to **the Cross Church** and **the Cathedral of the life-giving Pillar**. We'll also have a short stop in **Gori**, the birthplace of **Stalin- Joseph Jughashvili, to visit the complex** where his home, museum, and the train carriage by which he traveled are located. We'll enjoy the beautiful scenery of the Lesser Caucasus Mountains and picturesque valleys, dotted with some small villages and resorts on the way to **Akhatsikhe** for overnight. Akhaltsikhe means 'New Castle' in Georgian, in fact the castle that dominates the town dates from the 12th century. / Lomsia Hotel or similar.

Day 12 ~ Akhaltsikhe

In the morning we'll spend some time in Akhaltsikhe to get the feeling of the town by touring recently restored 12th century **Rabati Castle**, and then head to **Cave Town Vardzia**, with some rest and photo stops on the way namely at **Khertvisi Fortress**. Vardzia was mainly constructed in the second half of the twelfth century. The caves stretch along the cliff for some 500m/ 0.31 ml and in up to nineteen tiers. The Church of the Dormition, dating to the 1180s during the golden age of Queen Tamar and outstanding Georgian writer Shota Rustaveli, has an important series of wall paintings. The site was largely abandoned after the Ottoman takeover in the sixteenth century. After sightseeing the cave complex we'll head back to Akhaltsikhe for overnight. / Lomsia Hotel or similar.

Day 13 ~ Kutaisi

Our destination today is **Kutaisi**, the second largest city in Georgia. On the way we'll stop in **Borjomi Park**, home to famous Borjomi mineral water, where we can taste it. Once we arrive in Kutaisi we'll visit the **Bagrati Cathedral**, which nests on the hill above the Rioni River and affords a splendid view over the city, and the walk from here down to the colorful **local market** and browse through it. Overnight in Kutaisi. / Hotel Bagrati 1003 or similar.

Day 14 ~ Mestia

We'll do some more sightseeing in Kutaisi before leaving for Mestia. In ancient times Kutaisi was known as Aia, the capital of the powerful kingdom Colchis and home to famous Golden Fleece, which according to ancient Greek myth became the reason of adventurous voyage of legendary Jason and the Argonauts. The city is spread on the banks of the river Rioni, earlier known as Fazisi navigated by the Argonauts to reach the capital of Colchis.

In the morning we'll tour the **UNESCO World Heritage Site, Gelati Academy**; the oldest buildings in the complex, built by King David the Builder in 1106, combined a church and a school. After lunch we'll leave Kutaisi for stunning Great Caucasus Mountains making our way to **Mestia**, administrative capital of Svaneti region at 1,500 m/ 4,921 ft above sea level. Overnight in Mestia. / Hotel Tetnuldi or similar.

Day 15 ~ Mestia

Impossibly beautiful and mysterious, Svaneti is an ancient land, locked in the Great Caucasus Mountains. The population is mostly Svans, a cultural and linguistic subgroup of the Georgians. Despite its small size, it was an important centre of Georgian culture for centuries and contains a number of medieval monuments, such as churches, forts, most notably characteristic to the region defensive towers, included in the list of **the UNESCO World Heritage Sites**. Today we'll have a relaxed day in Mestia, which will include some sightseeing, as well as the enjoyment of the spectacular surrounding nature. We'll explore the town on foot, making our way to **the Museum of History and Ethnography**, which houses the two-room treasury with unique collection of old icons and beautifully illustrated manuscripts and gospels, as well as, a historic collection of 1890s Svaneti photos by Italian Vittorio Sella, and a hall with reproductions of famed Svaneti church murals; next will be **Mikheil Kehrgiani's House Museum**, who was a living legend of Svaneti and he still is even after decades since his tragic death (stone fall) in Italian Dolomites. Museum offers the background of Svaneti's climbing history, old climbing equipment, photographs, and paintings. We'll also visit **Margiani House museum** to explore Svaneti's traditional house- muchubi, which is the property of a well known local family. The Margiani family possessed eight towers from which only four remain. The height and the quantity of the towers was historically the proof of the wealth and strength of the family. Due to weather conditions if cable car is operating we'll drive up to its station and have a ride to the top of the mountain for the splendid view of the surrounding area, mountain tops, including one of the highest peaks Ushba at 4,700m/15,420ft. (Cable car ride isn't included in the tour price) Overnight in Mestia. / Hotel Tetnuldi or similar.

Day 16 ~ Mestia - Ushguli - Mestia

Today we'll make a trip to **Ushguli, the UNESCO World Heritage Site** and one of the most fascinating villages in Georgia at an altitude of 2,200m / 7,220 ft above sea level, which is believed to be the highest permanently inhabited place in Europe. Ushguli has beautiful setting at the base of **Mt. Shkhara**, one of the highest peaks of the High Caucasus Mountains at 5,193 m (17,040 ft) above sea level, it offers picturesque view of its multiple old defensive towers and **12th century Lamaria church of Virgin Mary**. We'll enjoy lunch in one of the charming, simple, local cafes before returning to Mestia.

On the way we'll notice many old, traditional villages. One more interesting fact about Svaneti, connects it to Jason and the Argonauts' mythic quest for the Golden Fleece which, scientists say, took inspiration from an actual voyage sometime between 3,300 and 3,500 years ago. Jason went from Greece to a kingdom near the Black Sea renowned for using sheepskins to collect gold grains and flakes from mountain streams.

Mountain streams in the Svaneti region of Georgia carry bits of gold and gold-specked gravel that erode out of bordering rock formations. Even nowadays local villagers put sheepskins in these streams to catch floating gold, a technique that goes back thousands of years - suggesting that the region is the province of the ancient Colchis Kingdom.

You'll have some free time in the evening to enjoy sipping tea/coffee or good Georgian beer/wine on the deck and relax admiring the surrounding beautiful nature. Overnight in Mestia. / Hotel Tetnaldi or similar.

Day 17 ~ Batumi

It's time to descend from the mountains to the sea level today, to a beautiful resort city **Batumi**, the pearl and the most attractive of all cities on Georgia's Black Sea coast with its old town, inviting beaches, cafes, restaurants, wide boulevards. Besides, Batumi is one of the oldest cities in Georgia, as it existed as a Greek colony by the start of the 2nd century BC. Upon arrival in Batumi we'll have a walking orientation tour of the city around **the harbor and boulevard** with its beautiful colonnade, a symbol of Batumi, the musical fountains, a tiny bamboo grove, the sparkling blue sea, and subtropical vegetation. Overnight in Batumi. / World Palace Hotel or similar.

Day 18 ~ Batumi

We will dedicate our day to the exploration of Batumi. In the morning we'll have a visit and a refreshing walk through **Batumi Botanical Garden**. Upon coming back to the city we'll tour **the Museum of Adjara**, which houses materials from Bronze Age to Medieval times, excavated throughout Adjara and Batumi, and **Fine Art Museum**, with well displayed collection of Georgian art including works by Niko Pirosmani and Elene Akhvediani, as well as 19th and 20th-century European and Russian paintings.

You will be able to enjoy free time in the city at your leisure or rest until dinner time.

A visit to the charming **Adjarian House Restaurant** which offers delicious Georgian dishes along with cuisine characteristic to Adjara, is a must while visiting this part of the country. Overnight in Batumi. / World Palace Hotel or similar.

Day 19 ~ Signaghi

After Breakfast we'll head to Kakheti, most important wine producing region in Georgia. In the late afternoon we'll arrive in a stunning 18th century fortified town **Signaghi** on the top of the mountain overlooking fertile Alazani valley bordered with the High Caucasus Mountains in the horizon. The name of the city comes from the Persian word for 'shelter'. Easy to guess why it was called so, when seeing its location. We'll have a short walking orientation tour before dinner time. Overnight in Signaghi. / Hotel Kabadoni or similar.

Day 20 ~ Signaghi

In the morning we'll visit **the Signaghi Museum**, which besides local artifacts, also houses the collection of the famous **Georgian self-taught painter Niko Pirosmani**.

Next we'll follow the **Kakhetian wine route** offering a wonderful landscapes dotted with vineyards and wine producing villages, this route will take us to several of them in order to get acquainted with the Georgian way of wine-making, which is quite different from European one. The roots of Georgian viticulture have been traced back by archeology to at least 6000 BC, from 4,000 BC Georgians were cultivating grapes and burying clay vessels, *kvevris*, in which to store their wine ready for serving at perfect ground temperature. Presently, the wine is produced by thousands of small farmers (using primarily traditional techniques of wine-making), as well as modern wineries; touring some of both type of wineries will enable us to learn more about Georgian viticulture, as well as give us the chance to taste some home-made and commercially produced Georgian wines. We will first stop in **Tsinandali**, and tour the estate and the home museum of the 19th century poet, public figure and Kakhetian nobleman, Alexander Chavchavadze. Next we'll reach **Schuchmann's Winery** to enjoy wine tasting and lunch. Our final stop of the day, before returning to Signaghi, will be in the village of **Velistsikhe** to visit **Nunu Kardenakhishvili's wine cellar**, which is an amazing combination of winery, museum, and beautifully arranged wine tasting room. Here we'll have a wonderful opportunity to discover lots of antiques this lady collected throughout her life and **taste some varieties of homemade Georgian wine**. In the evening we'll have a farewell Georgian dinner at the famous winery **Peasant's Tears** including more wine tasting. Overnight in Signaghi. / Hotel Kabadoni or similar.

Day 21 ~ Sheki (Azerbaijan)

In the morning we will head to Georgia-Azerbaijan border (Lagodekhi). After going through border crossing formalities and meeting our new guide and driver from Azerbaijan, we'll continue our tour to Sheki, which is a lovely small town with its charm, character and beautiful mountain setting. Overnight in Sheki. / Sheki Saray Hotel or similar.

Day 22 ~ Sheki

We will have a full day walking tour in atmospheric Sheki. Our sightseeing will start with **the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Khan's Palace, Caravanserai, and the History Museum, Sheki Handicraft School and the old bazaar** as well as the local **Halva shop including tasting**. Overnight in Sheki. / Sheki Saray Hotel or similar.

Day 23 ~ Baku

Today we will head to **Baku** making some stops on the way, such as Lahij which represents antique urban and architectural art. This medieval town with cobbled streets and squares is one of the most famous craft and trading centers in the Caucasus and beyond. It is believed that the legendary Manomakh's cap, worn by Russian tsars for many centuries, was made here. Lahij became especially famous for manufacturing knives and copper utensils, decorated with engraved designs. Even today a dozen workshops operate here, demonstrating hereditary blacksmiths who make various household items. Our next stop will be at **mud volcanoes** by the main highway. In the evening we'll arrive in **Baku**, a rapidly changing, modern metropolitan city with high-rise buildings, beautifully located on the Caspian Sea. Overnight in Baku. Central Park Hotel or similar.

Day 24 ~ Baku

Today we'll have a full day sightseeing tour of Baku. **UNESCO World Heritage Site of Ichery Sheher** -the old city of Baku, is fascinating with all kinds of different architecture, restored old palaces such as **Palace of ShirvanShahs** and **the Maiden's Tower** from where you have a spectacular view over the old city and the Caspian Sea, houses, restaurants, cafes; it is a feast for the eyes to enjoy the harmony and charm between the buildings wherever you look. During the tour we'll have enough time to enjoy some tea at local teahouse.

In the evening you will have some free time to explore the city at your leisure or rest. Overnight in Baku. / Central Park Hotel or similar.

Day 25 ~ Baku

In the morning we'll drive out of the capital and visit **the UNESCO World Heritage Site Gobustan Rock Art Cultural Landscape**, which is considered to be of "outstanding universal value" for the quality and density of its petroglyphs presenting fauna, flora, hunting and other lifestyle scenes of pre-historic times. Next we'll drive to Absheron peninsula to visit **Ateshgah fire temple** and see **Yanardagh Fire Mountain**. Overnight in Baku. / Central Park Hotel or similar.

Day 26 ~ Baku

Today we will tour some museums which are among the best ones in the country, starting with **the Museum of Contemporary Arts**, presenting over 800 works of art of the Azerbaijan artists and sculptors of the last 70 years. Next will be **the Carpet Museum**, which shows Azerbaijan's long history of carpet weaving and offering a vast collection of old carpets, whose patterns and designs are characteristic to the country's many carpet-making regions. Before it's time to have the rest of the day at your leisure to walk around or get ready for your departure back home, we'll also tour **the Museum of Nobel brothers - Villa Petrolia** built in 1882 by Nobel brothers. The home museum of the famous family offers the collection of everyday life objects used by them. Our day will end with a **Caspian Sea cruise** to experience splendid panorama of Baku. Overnight in Baku. Central Park Hotel or similar.

Day 27 ~ Flight Home

We will **transfer** you to the airport for your flight home.

Best time to travel:

Spring and Fall