



Georgia Uncovered

Treasures of the Southern Caucasus

16–26 September 2024 (MK 438)

11 days • £4,690

Lecturer: Ian Colvin

Churches and monasteries dating from the sixth century and earlier.

Exquisite jewellery and metalwork from the Bronze Age and Antiquity.

Spectacular mountain landscapes.

A delicious and varied regional cuisine in a land that is the cradle of wine.

Georgia is a country that evokes many mythical and historical associations and yet, paradoxically, is little known in the West. This is partly geopolitical circumstance. For centuries Georgia was cut off from Europe, first by the Islamic caliphate and the Ottoman Turks, and then by Imperial Russia and the USSR. Opportunities for travel there were few.

Set on the borders of Europe and Asia, a Christian country surrounded by Muslim neighbours, it is an heir to the civilisations of both continents, and at the same time preserves its own language and a rich cultural heritage that is peculiar to the South Caucasus.

An ancient land, its past, like that of neighbouring Armenia, is deeply intertwined with the history of the empires and civilisations that surround it. Georgia appears in the stories of the earliest peoples of the Fertile Crescent and Anatolia. It is linked closely with the Iranian empires to the southeast. They fought the Greeks, Macedonians, Romans, Byzantines and Ottomans to the west for hegemony in this borderland. The Georgian kings called in aid from the nomads to the north, or laboured to bar the mountain passes to them: Scythians, Sarmatians, Alans, Huns, Khazars, Turks, Mongols and Timurids – and finally their geographical heirs, the Russians. Even today, Russia, America, Turkey, Iran and the EU play a complex game in the South Caucasus, competing for political and economic influence in a region of vital oil wealth.

Georgia has frequently found itself in the vanguard of global history. The metal ages came early in the South Caucasus, and the exquisite archaeological finds displayed in the gold rooms of the Tbilisi Museum confirm the reputation of its ancient smiths. It adopted Christianity early in the fourth century ad; and its beautiful and unique alphabet was created in the early fifth century to help evangelize the



Tbilisi, wood engraving c. 1880.

people. Georgian and Armenian architects evolved a distinctive South Caucasian religious architecture in the sixth and seventh centuries, even as their churches fell out over Christological differences.

In the eleventh and twelfth centuries the Bagratid kings unified Georgia and built a multi-ethnic empire that extended from the Caspian to the Black Sea, and from the Armenian highlands to the North Caucasus. It was demolished by the Mongols and Timurids and the country was again divided into a series of fractious principalities, preyed on by Ottoman Turks, Safavid Persians and Lezgi raiders from the north Caucasus.

Georgians greeted the Russians as their Christian saviours on their first arrival at the end of the eighteenth century, but soon fell out with their colonial masters. The Tsars' viceroys brought European fashions to Tbilisi, remodelling the city with a European quarter to stand alongside the Asiatic Old Town. At the beginning of the oil age, English, international and local investors, including Rothschilds, Nobels, Gulbenkians and Mantashevs built fortunes investing heavily in the Transcaucasus to bring Baku's oil to world markets. The Art Nouveau palaces of this first age of globalisation still adorn Tbilisi and Batumi.

In the same period, Stalin first impressed Lenin with his organising of the workers of Batumi, Tiflis and Baku and with the notorious Tiflis bank robbery of 1907. When war and the Bolsheviks brought the whole edifice crashing

down, it was Stalin who built it up again at huge human cost. Nationalism and a longing for 'freedom' brought the end of the Soviet Union. It brought civil war too, economic collapse and stagnation, finally ended in 2003 by the first of the 'colour revolutions' and a new oil boom. Georgia's new confidence is conspicuous, its promise great, its challenges evident.

Itinerary

Day 1: London to Tbilisi. Fly at c. 6.30am from London Heathrow to Tbilisi via Istanbul (Turkish Airlines). Arrive at c. 8.00pm. Transfer to the hotel in the heart of the city. First of four nights in Tbilisi.

Day 2: Tbilisi. The Asiatic Old Town set beneath the Narikala fortress remains a twisting maze of streets, caravanserais and ancient churches, adding contrast to the subsequent architecture erected by the tsars' viceroys, by merchant princes, Bolsheviks and post-Soviet presidents' favourite modern architects (the vast post-Soviet Sameba – Holy Trinity – Cathedral, rivals the ambition of the great cathedrals of the Middle Ages). Past the ancient bath district built on Tbilisi's thermal springs, the church at Metekhi is set on cliffs above the Mtkvari River.

Day 3: Kakheti. Drive over the scenic Gomburi mountains to Tsinandali in fertile Kakheti, the country estate of the princely Chavchavadze family. Built by Alexandre (1786–1846)

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continued

diplomat, poet and general, raised at the court of Catherine the Great – and one of the first to introduce enlightenment ideas and modern agricultural methods to Georgia – in 1854 the house was the scene of a notorious raid by the Imam Shamil's Daghestani fighters. Today it is a small museum affording a glimpse of 19th-century Georgian noble life.

Day 4: Tbilisi. Tbilisi's open air Ethnographic House Museum displays examples of the architecture and ethnographic traditions of Georgia's 14 different regions in a hillside park above the city. The National History Museum preserves its archaeological treasures, while its subterranean treasury is a highlight, demonstrating the remarkable skill of its smiths from the Bronze Age through to Antiquity. There is free time to explore Tbilisi's pleasures: the enamels and icons of the Fine Art Gallery, the modern paintings of the Art Gallery, or perhaps Prospero's Books, Tbilisi's English language bookstore.

Day 5: Mtskheta, Kazbegi. Just north of Tbilisi is the old capital, Mtskheta, scene of the country's fourth-century conversion and still the religious heart of this strongly Christian country. Its spiritual landmarks include: the sixth-century Jvari Church, perched high above the town; and the 11th-century Cathedral of Svetitskhoveli, symbol of Georgia's Conversion. Follow the Georgian Military Highway, the route the Russians constructed at the turn of the 19th century to secure their hold on their Transcaucasian possessions. First of two nights in Kazbegi in the high Caucasus Mountains.

Day 6: Kazbegi. The 14th-century Gergeti Sameba Church on the slopes of volcanic Mount Kazbek is in perhaps the most dramatic setting in Georgia. Then to the Darial Gates, a natural gorge, where the Terek cuts a narrow passage beneath cliffs that tower nearly 1,000 metres above. Legend has it that Alexander the Great set iron gates here to protect the settled lands of the Near East from the rapacious nomads beyond.

Day 7: Gori, Kutaisi. The cult of Joseph Stalin, Georgia's most famous son, was officially abolished by Khrushchev in 1956, but at his birthplace in Gori the Stalin Museum continues to operate. Although Stalin is a source of embarrassment to many modern Georgians, this museum has been preserved as it was at the fall of the Soviet Union, a fascinating museum of the museum built by his henchman Beria. First of two nights in Kutaisi.

Day 8: Kutaisi, Vani. A morning walk through Kutaisi, ending at the Green Bazaar, one of the largest indoor produce markets in Georgia. An optional visit to the Kutaisi Historical Ethnographic Museum, which houses artefacts dating back to the 9th century BC from across Georgia. We visit the world heritage sites of the 12th-century academy and monastery of Gelati, with its frescoed interiors, and the controversially restored 11th-century Bagrati Cathedral. The museum at the Vani archaeological site displays finds from the 8th to 1st century BC.

Day 9: Nokalakevi, Batumi. The imposing ruins at Nokalakevi are the remains of the ancient capital of the kingdoms of Colchis and Egrisi-Lazika, whose massive fortifications date to a period when the region was a focus of Byzantine-Sasanian rivalry, but the site overlooking the Colchian plain, the 'Land of the Golden Fleece', has a much longer history. Excavations have been on-going since the 1970s and have uncovered buried remains through the Hellenistic period to the Late Bronze Age. Since 2001 our lecturer, Ian Colvin, has led an international team in a joint project with the Georgian National Museum. First of two nights at Batumi.

Day 10: Batumi. The Bathus Limen, or deep water port, of Greek settlers of the 6th to 5th centuries BC was a sleepy provincial backwater under the Ottomans, until the Russians annexed it in 1878. Subsequently international investment brought a railway and pipelines to bring Baku oil to an eager European market. While Nobels, Rothschilds and Mantashev's invested in Batumi's oil infrastructure, Stalin cut his teeth organizing their oil workers' strikes. The elegant 19th-century seafront boulevard is undergoing an investment boom, but the architecture of the first great period of globalization pre-First World War remains, alongside the post-Soviet towers.

Day 11: Batumi to London. Fly at c. 10.30am from Batumi Airport to London, via Istanbul, arriving at Heathrow at c. 4.00pm (Turkish Airlines).

Lecturer

Ian Colvin. Historian and Byzantinist specialising in Late Antiquity and the South Caucasus, with interests in the wider history of the region. Trained at Oxford, he is now a researcher at the University of Cambridge. He has directed an ongoing archaeological expedition to ancient Archaeopolis in the South Caucasus since 2001, and leads a number of tours in the region.

Practicalities

Price, per person. Two sharing: £4,690 or £4,040 without flights. **Single occupancy:** £5,350 or £4,700 without flights.

Included: flights (standard class) with Turkish Airlines; travel by private air-conditioned coach; hotel accommodation as described below; breakfasts, 9 lunches and 9 dinners with wine, beer, water and coffee; all admissions to museums and sites visited with the group; all gratuities for restaurant staff and drivers; all state and airport taxes; the services of the lecturer, tour manager and local guides.

Accommodation: Marriott Tbilisi (marriott.co.uk/hotels): a 5-star hotel behind a 19th-century façade that is within walking distance of Tbilisi's central attractions. **Rooms Hotel, Kazbegi** (roomshotels.com): a former Soviet resort, now a modern hotel. It has spectacular views of the mountains. **Best Western, Kutaisi** (bestwestern.co.uk): a new, 3-star, contemporary hotel in a good, central location. **Radisson Blu, Batumi** (radissonblu.com/Batumi): a large hotel with good amenities and views of the Black Sea. *Single rooms are doubles for sole use throughout.*

How strenuous? You will be on your feet for long periods. Many of the sites are reached by steep, uneven steps sometimes without handrails. The tour would not be suitable for anyone who has difficulties with everyday walking and stairclimbing. There are some long coach journeys (average distance by coach per day: 53 miles).

Group size: between 10 and 22 participants.