

GEORGIA INSIDER TOUR

SEPTEMBER 14-25, 2024



HISTORY

Nestled in the Caucasus Mountains, between the Black Sea and Caspian, Georgia is a country of incredible natural beauty, filled with magnificent history and rich culture. Georgia is famous for its food, hospitality, theater, music, painting, and literature and is considered by many to be the birthplace of wine, with archeological evidence of grape fermentation dating back some 8,000 years. Historically, the ancient Georgian kingdoms of Iberia and Cholchis (the location of the “Golden Fleece” sought by Jason and his Argonauts) were known to the Greeks and Romans of antiquity. During the Middle Ages, King David the Builder and Queen Tamar the Great ruled kingdoms that stretched across the Caucasus during a “golden age” of literature and culture.

The region was broken up into a patchwork of small kingdoms and principalities following the Mongol invasions of the 13th century, and the Georgian lands were vassal states under Persian suzerainty in the east and Ottoman control in the west. Beginning in 1801, the Russian Empire “annexed” the Georgian kingdoms, and the multicultural city of Tbilisi (then called Tiflis) became the capital of the Tsarist political and military administration of the Transcaucasus.

After the Russian Revolution of 1917, an independent Georgian Democratic Republic was declared that lasted from 1918 until the invasion of the Bolshevik Red Army in February 1921. Georgia was thus incorporated into the Soviet Union, leaving a paradoxical legacy. Native son Joseph Stalin (Ioseb Jughashvili) became the Great Leader who shaped the USSR to his will. Under Stalin, particular destruction was wreaked on those in the Caucasus who knew the reality of his biography that was re-invented and shaped in a “cult of personality”. At the same time, Georgia remained a subtly rebellious Soviet province where writers, artists, and filmmakers strained the limits of Party censorship and tolerance. That creativity is still on display today.

Georgia was among the first republics to eagerly declare independence when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. While it has endured a brief war with Russia in 2008 and separatist conflicts and state collapse during the 1990s and early-2000s, in more recent years it has flowered as a (still) out-of-the-way tourist destination and as new mecca for adventurous foodies and wine connoisseurs.



The Insider Experience

From the winding, cobble-stone streets of Tbilisi’s old city to the sheer cliffs of the Georgian Military Highway and the medieval castles and cave monasteries at Akhaltsikhe and Vardzia, on this tailored 10-day tour American Councils’ field staff, program participants, alumni, and local people will give you a first-hand view of Georgia’s cultural heritage and legendary cuisine that few tourists ever experience.

insidertours@americancouncils.org



CULTURE

Georgia has sat at a crossroads of civilizations for many centuries. There are strong influences – in language, food, music, and traditions – from the Persian, Turkish, and Arabic worlds, and more recently from Russia and the Soviet Union. Ethnic Georgians now make up about 85% of the population, a majority of whom are Orthodox Christian; there are also large populations of Armenians, Azerbaijanis, and representatives of other ethnic groups. The capital city of Tbilisi is particularly multicultural, and residents take pride in having an Orthodox church, a Catholic church, an Armenian church, a Jewish synagogue, and an Islamic mosque all in one neighborhood in the Old City.

Georgian cuisine became famous throughout the Soviet Union for its exotic, colorful, and spicy dishes, and recently is starting to get its due internationally. Similarly, Georgian wines – and the unique approach to aging in clay vessels (called “qvevri”) rather than in wooden barrels – are gaining attention on the world stage. Typical souvenirs from Georgia include carpets (many of them come from Azerbaijan, Central Asia, and as far away as Afghanistan), enamel jewelry (“minankari”), drinking horns, elaborate daggers, traditional blue dyed tablecloths, ceramic dishes, and woolen and felt hats.



insidertours@americancouncils.org

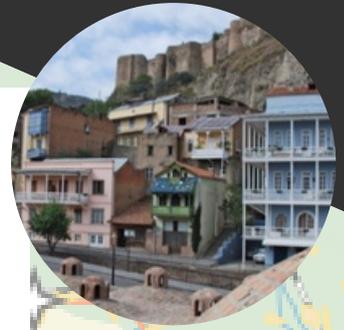
ITINERARY

Sep
14-15

September 15: arrival to Tbilisi and hotel check-in

Rest and explore Tbilisi (previously Tiflis), a city of 1.6 million that has been the capital of Georgia since the 6th century. Historically a multicultural melting pot and trading station along the Silk Road, Tbilisi is known for its hilly cobblestone streets with a kaleidoscope of balconies and staircases in "Italian yards" in the Old City and imperial architecture and elaborate Arts Nouveau entranceways in the "Russian" part of the city around the central Rustaveli Avenue.

Welcome Dinner
Review of itinerary



Sep
16

Tbilisi city tour and visit to Narikala Fortress

Narikala Fortress is an ancient fortress overlooking Tbilisi and the Kura River. The fortress consists of two walled sections on a steep hill between the sulphur baths and the botanical gardens of Tbilisi.

Welcome session at American Councils Georgia
Alumni panel and reception



Sep
17

Georgian National Museum

The Georgian National Museum presents internationally significant collections of art and dynamic, changing exhibitions, providing audiences with inspiration and knowledge of Georgia's wonderful world of culture, art, science, and education. The traces of the oldest humans in Eurasia are displayed together with magnificent medieval Christian art and masterpieces of Oriental, Western European, and Russian decorative arts. The "Gold Fond" holds remarkable treasures from the Shuleveri and Kura-Araxes cultures as well as from the Sythians. The "Museum of Soviet Occupation" permanent exhibition gives the Georgian perspective on recent political history.

Lunch at Samikitno Restaurant

Tbilisi City Museum

Founded in 1910 as the City Municipal Museum, the current Tbilisi History Museum has been located since 1984 in a restored "caravanserai", representing the city's historic role as a Silk Road trading outpost.

Anchiskhati Basilica

One of the oldest standing structures in Tbilisi, the Anchiskhati Basilica of St. Marie was built in the early 6th century during the reign of King Dachi of Iberia. It is named after an Icon of the Savior that was made in the Ancha Monastery in what is now Turkey and moved to Tbilisi to protect it from an Ottoman invasion in 1675. The church's brick belfry was constructed in that same year. The Anchiskhati Choir is one of the most famous in Georgia.

Dinner at Funicular Restaurant

Constructed in the early 1900s by a Belgian engineer, the 500-meter-long Tbilisi funicular connects the city with the Mtatsminda Pantheon and a park at the top of the mountain. The Funicular restaurant building at the top of Mtatsminda (which means Holy Mountain) was constructed in 1938 but destroyed during the 'Tbilisi War' in 1992 as the Soviet Union collapsed. It was reconstructed and reopened in 2012. It currently houses four different restaurants and cafes.

Sep
18

Drive to Gori (1 hour)

Gori is a city in eastern Georgia, which serves as the regional capital of the Shida Kartli region. As of 2002, it had a population of 49,500. Gori is also known as the birthplace of the Soviet leader Joseph Stalin, ballistic missile designer Alexander Nadiradze, and philosopher Merab Mamardashvili.

Stalin House Museum

The Stalin House Museum complex consists of the memorial house, where Stalin was born, exposition building with tower and Stalin's personal train coach with interior, by which he traveled to Tehran, Yalta, and Potsdam. This museum houses Stalin's personal items, his study room from the Kremlin, manuscripts, and gifts from all over the world.

Explore the city center and Gori Fortress

The Gori Fortress has watched over the city since at least since the Middle Ages and placed a key role in wars with the Turks and Persians in the 15-17th centuries.



ITINERARY

Sep
18
continued



Drive to Akhaltsikhe (1.5 hours)

Meaning “new castle” in Georgian, Akhaltsikhe was formerly called “Lomsia” and is the historical capital of the Samtkhe region. For several hundred years from the 16th to the 19th centuries, it was part of the Ottoman Empire (as the Pashalik of Akhazik) and was re-incorporated into the Georgian lands under the Russian tsars with the Treaty of Adrianople in 1829, following the Turkish defeat in the Russo-Turkish War of 1828-1829.

Check-in and dinner at **Hotel Lomsia**

Sep
19



Khervisi Castle

Khertvisi fortress is one of the oldest in Georgia and was functional throughout the Georgian feudal period. According to legend, Khertvisi was once sacked by Alexander the Great.

Vardzia

Vardzia is a cave monastery site in southern Georgia, excavated since the Middle Ages from the slopes of the Erusheti Mountain on the left bank of the Mtkvari River, 30 kilometers from Aspindza.

Outdoor picnic

Return to Akhaltsikhe

Visit to School No. 1 and dance performance

Dinner at **Hotel Lomsia**



Sep
20

Rabati Castle Complex and Museum

The Rabati Castle located above the Akhaltsikhe dates from the 9th century and was rebuilt under the Ottomans in the 17th and 18th century. It was again renovated under the government of Mikheil Saakashvili in the 2000s, restoring the Akhmediya Mosque and an Orthodox church and relocating the Akhaltsikhe city museum there, as well as installing a restaurant and café.

Depart Akhaltsikhe for Borjomi (1 hour)

Located at the source of the eponymous spring water that became famous all over the Russian Empire and the USSR. Borjomi developed as a resort town in the late Tsarist period, and many aristocrats, including the Russian royal family took treatments or built dachas there. It currently has a population of about 14,500 and remains a popular tourist destination, especially for relaxation and hiking. Together with the nearby ski-resort town of Bakuriani, Borjomi unsuccessfully applied to be the site of the 2014 Winter Olympics.

Borjomi National Park

The Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park is one of the largest national parks in Georgia and covers 851 kilometers of native forest and alpine meadows. Although there are many trails and tourists can spend days or weeks exploring the park, the National Park Information Trail is 3 km and takes approximately 90 minutes, passing the St. Nino Church and offering stunning views of the Borjomi spa-resort.

Depart for Tbilisi (2.5 hours)

Sep
21

Depart for Kazbeki (Stepansminda) via the Georgian Military Highway (3 hours)

Ananuri Castle

Ananuri is a castle complex on the Aragvi River, about 45 miles (72 km) from Tbilisi. The Ananuri castle was the seat of the Eristavis (Dukes) of Aragvi, a feudal dynasty which ruled the area from the 13th century.

Lunch and khinkali-making lesson

A meat-filled dumpling, most likely brought to the region by the Mongols and a relative of the Turkic “manty”, Russian “pelmeni”, and Central European “pierogi”, khinkali in Georgia are associated with the mountainous regions, and especially the northern parts around Kazbegi and the Georgian military highway. In the mountains, khinkali are often made with lamb, though more typically they are made of beef or pork (or some combination thereof). More recently vegetarian khinakali, filled with mushrooms, potatoes, or cheese, have started to become popular in the cities.



ITINERARY

Sep
21

continued

Walk or drive up to Gergeti Trinity Church

Immortalized in Pushkin's poem "The Cloister on Kazbek", the Holy Trinity Church (Tsminda Sameba in Georgian) was built in the 14th century on the top of a steep mountain, with Mt. Kazbeki itself rising up behind it. The striking view has become a symbol of Georgia.

Dinner in Pasanauri

Return to Tbilisi (2.5 hours)



Sep
22

Depart for Mtskheta (30 min)

Mtskheta was the capital of Georgia (up to the 5th century) and was a major political and trade center of the Kingdom of Iberia at the convergence of the Mtkvari (Kura) and the Aragvi rivers, and it boasts archeological finds going back 3,000 years to the Bronze Age. It is considered to be the place Georgia adopted Christianity in the early 4th century.

Svetitskhoveli Cathedral

Literally meaning "Cathedral of the Living Pillar", Svetitskhoveli is a UNESCO World Heritage Site that was built in the early 11th century and has served as the seat of the Georgian Orthodox Church as well as was a burial place of Georgian kings. Its name derives from the legend that a Georgian Jew from Mtskheta brought the robe of Jesus from Jerusalem, and when his sister Sidonia touched it, she was overcome with emotion and died on the spot. She would not let go of the robe, and was buried together with it, and a cedar tree grew on the spot of her grave. When St. Nino brought Christianity to Georgia, she had the tree chopped down to make seven pillars that would serve as the foundation for the cathedral. The 7th column was so holy that it floated in the air and returned to the ground only after St. Nino prayed all night.

Jvari Monastery

A UNESCO World Heritage Site, the Jvari Monastery was built in the 6th century on the spot where supposedly St. Nino of Cappadocia converted King Merian III of Iberia to Christianity in the early 4th century. "Jvari" means "cross" in Georgian, as here St. Nino erected a cross on the spot of the previous pagan temple to mark the conversion. The structure remains little changed since its construction and is one of the oldest Christian churches in the world.

Lunch at Salobie Restaurant

Return to Tbilisi

Dinner at Gabriadze Cafe



Sep
23

Departure for Kakheti Region (2 hours)

Kakheti is a mountainous region in the east of Georgia, and the country's largest wine-producing district, especially in the micro-regions of Telavi and Kvareli.

Tsinandali Estate

Tsinandali is a village in the Kakheti region and the 19th century palace and historic winery-estate of the Georgian noble Chavchavadze family. It was sacked during a raid by forces loyal to mountaineer leader Imam Shamil in 1854 during the Caucasus War, who also abducted a number of the Chavchavadze family members, together with their French maid, whose later memoirs became a sensation in 19th century Europe.

Lunch and walking tour in Telavi

With a population of some 20,000, Telavi is the capital of the Kakheti region and the historical seat of the medieval kingdom of Kakheti, whose royal palace is still preserved in the city center. Archeological findings here date back to the Bronze Age, and Telavi was mentioned in Greek and Arab sources even prior to the emergence of the Kakhetian Kingdom in the 10th-12th centuries. It has recently become a popular tourist destination, as many come to visit the old and new wineries in the region.

Alaverdi Monastery

The Alaverdi Monastery was founded by an Assyrian monk from Antioch in the 6th century and was rebuilt during the 11th century. Still an active monastery (whose monks are known for their wine making), it is one of the largest churches in Georgia.

Vineyard visit

Return to Tbilisi (2.5 hours)



ITINERARY

Sep
24

FREE day in Tbilisi
Staff will be available to offer suggested itineraries and tips for shopping.
Dinner at "Tsiskvili" (The Old Mill) Restaurant



Sep
25

Pack up your souvenirs and depart in the early morning. Farewell!



LOGISTICS

Dates: September 14-25, 2024

Cost:

\$4,000 per person (including a \$750 tax-deductible donation to American Councils)
For two travelers sharing a room, the cost is \$7,000 (\$1,250 tax-deductible).

Excluded:

- Airfare to/from Shota Rustaveli Tbilisi International Airport (TBS). *Travelers may purchase their own flights or book and purchase through American Councils.*
- Airport transfers at the home airport
- Travel insurance

Included:

- Hotel accommodations (single occupancy for individual travelers and double occupancy for travel companions)
- Local transportation, including airport transfers in Georgia
- All meals, scheduled activities, and admissions

Next Steps: Register online at <https://ais.americancouncils.org/insider>.

Group Size:

Participation is limited to 20 people; a minimum of 10 registered participants is required for the trip to take place.

Advisory:

This program is reasonably strenuous and will include a fair amount of walking over sometimes uneven pavement, often including stairs. If mobility accommodations are not available in the cities and locations visited, there will be no alternatives but to walk. In some locations, you may need to walk for up to an hour with no option for a cab or a bus. Please consider your physical stamina and abilities prior to registering.



Full payment is required by June 30, 2024.

insidertours@americancouncils.org

GEORGIA INSIDER TOUR

SEPTEMBER 14-25, 2024



RESOURCES

Recommended Reading:

Peter Skinner, *Georgia, Land Below the Caucasus: a Narrative History*
Charles King, *Ghost of Freedom: A History of the Caucasus*
Donald Rayfield, *Edge of Empires: A History of Georgia*
Nino Haratasvili, *The Eighth Life* (novel)

Recommended Viewing:

And Then We Danced (2019)
Tangerines (2013)
In Bloom (2013)
Power Trip (2000)
Blue Mountains, or Unbelievable Story (1983)
Mimino (1978)



The Insider Experience

From the winding, cobblestone streets of Tbilisi's old city to the sheer cliffs of the Georgian Military Highway and the medieval castles and cave monasteries at Akhaltsikhe and Vardzia, on this tailored 10-day tour American Councils' field staff, program participants, alumni, and local people will give you a first-hand view of Georgia's cultural heritage and legendary cuisine that few tourists ever experience.

insidertours@americancouncils.org