



**A Taste of Georgia:
Wine, Cuisine, & Culture
2020**



A Taste of Georgia: Wine, Cuisine & Culture

An Epicurean Adventure Across Georgia's Wine Country

One departure in 2020 – Cultural Series – 13 Days

September 30-October 12

Your Georgian MIR hosts will ensure your immersion in Georgian culture, cuisine and organic winemaking (and wine-tasting), with outstanding access and insight. The menus and tastings will be curated by chef and vigneron (winemaker) John Wurdeman, a polyphonic singer, artist, and owner of the now famous Pheasant's Tears Winery and Restaurant.

Expect to meet artisans in their workshops, chefs in their kitchens, and natural winemakers in their vineyards and wineries as you discover the history and living traditions of this as-yet-undiscovered little gem.



Daily Itinerary

Day 1, Wednesday, September 30	Arrive Tbilisi, Georgia
Day 2, Thursday, October 1	Tbilisi
Day 3, Friday, October 2	Tbilisi • day trip to Kartli
Day 4, Saturday, October 3	Tbilisi • drive to Kutaisi
Day 5, Sunday, October 4	Kutaisi • drive to Svaneti region
Day 6, Monday, October 5	Svaneti region • day trip to Mestia
Day 7, Tuesday, October 6	Svaneti region • drive to Borjomi
Day 8, Wednesday, October 7	Borjomi • Vardzia via Akhaltsikhe
Day 9, Thursday, October 8	Vardzia • drive to Tbilisi via Phoka
Day 10, Friday, October 9	Tbilisi • drive to Signagi via Ikalto, Telavi
Day 11, Saturday, October 10	Signagi • day trip around Kakheti region
Day 12, Sunday, October 11	Signagi • drive to Tbilisi
Day 13, Monday, October 12	Depart Tbilisi

Georgia: A country of superlatives. Arguably the oldest wine producing area in Europe, dating back some 8,000 years, Georgia is home to the earliest hominid remains yet discovered in Europe. The Svaneti region, set in the sloping valleys of the towering Caucasus Mountains, is the highest inhabited place in Europe, while on the subtropical Black Sea Coast, citrus and tea plantations flourish. The Georgian method of fermenting home-grown grapes in big earthenware vessels called qvevri is handed down from parent to child, as is their joyous method of polyphonic choral singing. Celebrated by UNESCO as world cultural treasures, wine and song are an inseparable component of traditional Georgian life. But don't take our word for it – come and see for yourself!



MIR Signature Experiences

- Enjoy natural food and wine tastings throughout with menus curated by John Wurdeman, *vigneron* and owner of Pheasant's Tears Winery and Restaurant.
- Sample natural wines made according to traditional Georgian methods by one of very few female winemakers.
- Visit a ceramicist to see how to make *qvevri*, huge earthenware vessels used in a traditional Georgian wine-making method that has been designated a world cultural treasure by UNESCO.
- Get your first taste of iconic Georgian "street food," such as the warm cheese-stuffed bread called *khachapuri* and the juicy bundles of hand-rolled dumplings called *khinkali*.
- Taste the wines of Mukhrani Chateau vineyards, whose fine wines were winning gold medals at the Paris Wine Exhibition in the late 19th century.
- Stop at Katskhis Sveti, a tall limestone pillar where medieval hermit monks perched, praying and fasting in solitude far above the valley.
- Visit vineyards and wine cellars near Kutaisi, and meet members of 10 families who have owned their local wine cellars since the 17th century.
- Drive through saw-toothed mountains and tidy green valleys to the secluded Svaneti region, best known for its UNESCO-listed medieval watchtowers and its proud highland people.
- Sample Megrelian cuisine, including the polenta-like *ghomi*, a recipe handed down for thousands of years among Megrelian Georgians, whose culture and language date back to the pre-Christian Colchian era.
- Take in an electrifying performance of polyphonic singing and Georgian folk dancing at celebrated Pheasant's Tears Restaurant.
- Accompany the Pheasant's Tears chef to the village market where he selects fresh local produce daily.

Tour Highlights

Tbilisi	Walking tour of Old Tbilisi, Anchiskhati Basilica, Sioni Cathedral, Maidan Square, Ghvino Underground wine tasting, Writers' House of Georgia, Georgian National Museum, traditional Georgian Table experience, Dry Bridge Market, dining at the city's most up-and-coming restaurants, featuring natural food and organic Georgian wines
Mtskheta	Tasting of Kartlian wine made by one of very few female Georgian winemakers, 11th century Svetitskhoveli Cathedral (UNESCO World Heritage Site), Saguramo Wine Research Station, tasting at Mukhrani Chateau vineyards
Kutaisi	Town of Chiatura and its old cable cars, Katskhis Sveti where medieval monks lived atop a natural pillar, sampling of Imeretian cuisine, Gelati Monastery (UNESCO World Heritage Site)
Svaneti	The Svaneti region (UNESCO World Heritage Site), views from Becho Valley, Ethnographic Museum, visit to private home, performance by Svan singers
Zugdidi	Sampling of Megrelian cuisine
Borjomi	Soviet spa resort town known for its mineral water
Vardzia	Akhaltiskhe's Old Town, Vardzia cave monastery, high-altitude Lake Paravani
Phoka	Delightful Phoka Nunnery of St. Nino
Telavi	Ikalto Monastery, lunch at Cafe Marleta, option to visit Telavi Theater or <i>qvevri</i> maker
Tsinandali	Tsinandali Village, family estate of Alexander Chavchavadze, tasting of the Tsinandali white wines
Signagi	Pheasant's Tears Winery and Restaurant, <i>al fresco</i> meal in the vineyards, Signagi Museum, 9th century Bodbe Nunnery, meeting with local woman who raises silk worms, spins and weaves silk, farewell dinner with folk ensemble and costumed dancers, dance class
Manavi	Wine-tasting at Manavi Fortress



Daily Itinerary

Important note: Please see the notes later in this document under “Pre-tour Information” for details on hotel check-in time at the beginning of the program and the best arrival times in Tbilisi.

Day One, Wednesday, September 30

Arrive Tbilisi



Georgia's strip of central lowlands has been an important link between East and West since the time of the Silk Road. Situated at the mouth of this strategic passage, **Tbilisi** reflects the merging of Georgian, Arab and Russian cultures and is an exciting combination of old and new.

The afternoon is left free to the hotel to rest and refresh. Meet your hosts and fellow travelers over a glass of wine in the lobby later on.

Meals: Independent – Marriott Courtyard, Iota Hotel, Betsy's Hotel or similar

Day Two, Thursday, October 1

Tbilisi

Hit the streets today to explore Georgia's capital, including historic monuments, museums, and Tbilisi's exciting main street, and get your first inkling of what is in store for your palate and your taste buds in this Garden of Eden.

Step aboard the **funicular railway** that runs up the wooded slope of Mtatsminda plateau above town for wonderful views of Tbilisi. Originally opened in 1905, the funicular was meant to help develop the top of the plateau. Ride to the viewpoint at the top.

The **red-roofed Old Town**, its houses sporting carved wooden balconies, sits beneath the **4th century stone Narikala Fortress** on the hill above, and the **domed Arab sulfur baths** steam lightly as you pass by. **Vibrant street life** has colonized the boulevards and tantalizing aromas waft from food carts, cafes, open markets and modern wine bars.



Observe **Mother Georgia**, a soaring monument above the city bearing a sword for her enemies and a bowl of wine for her guests, and the 6th century stone **Anchiskhati Basilica**, the city's oldest church. Pause at **Sioni Cathedral**, sheltering the Cross of St. Nino, the woman who brought Christianity to Georgia, and the 19th century caravanserai built to house traveling merchants.



Stop at the **Writers' House of Georgia** for a tour and lunch at the terrace café. Built from 1903-1905, the art nouveau mansion now occupied by the Writers' House 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.

After lunch take a tour of the **Georgian National Museum**. The mission statement of the museum is to preserve Georgian heritage, but much of what can be seen here is important to humanity at large. Visitors can see one of the largest collections of ancient gold decorative arts as well as very well-preserved medieval *cloisonne*. The most famous exhibit here, though, is the **1.7 million year old hominid skulls** found in Dmanisi, Georgia.



Later this afternoon, dip down into the cool cellar wine bar **Ghvino Underground for a tasting of rare natural wines** from across Georgia, with vigneron John Wurdeman of Pheasant's Tears Winery. Sample both reds and whites from different *terroirs* and regions. The Ghvino Underground was established to introduce the modern wave of all-natural Georgian wines to the neophyte as well as to the aficionado.

Check in at **Azarpesha Restaurant** for a "Georgian Table." A **Georgian Table experience** can last several hours, with dozens of dishes and countless toasts. The table is covered with plates of delicacies balanced on top of each other – chicken in crushed walnut sauce, *khachapuri* (a savory cheese pie), puff pastries, juicy little meat dumplings called *khinkali*, salads and marinated vegetables, just to name a few. A large feast, or *supra*, will have a toastmaster, called a *tamada*, who is charged not only with toasting and inviting others to toast, but with telling stories and jokes and sometimes leading songs. A **Georgian vocal ensemble** joins the company, periodically breaking into song. Georgia has one of the oldest and most intriguing

polyphonic vocal traditions in Europe, and their songs can give you chills.

When your feast comes to an end, return to the hotel for overnight.

Meals: B, L, D – *Marriott Courtyard, Iota Hotel, Betsy's Hotel or similar*





Day Three, Friday, October 2

Tbilisi • day trip to Kartli

After breakfast, it is time to explore the region around Tbilisi, Kartli. One of the oldest parts of the country, Kartli is layered with reminders of succeeding cultures, and its wine and cuisine are refreshing and light.

The **Kartli region** is Georgia's historical core. Encompassing the central to eastern part of the country, the region includes Tbilisi, the Mtkvari River valley and the Gori and Mukhrani plains. Kartli's hot and dry summers are perfect for ripening grapes. Kartli grapes are used to produce many European style wines, including sparkling wines.

The first stop is **Jvari Monastery**, at the confluence of the Kura and Aragvi rivers. The 6th century monastery, containing one of the first Christian churches in Georgia, is part of the **UNESCO World Heritage Site of Mtskheta**. The cross-shaped church at Jvari was built over the spot where St. Nino erected the first wooden cross in Georgia.

Next, inspect the acres of assorted grapevines at the Saguramo Wine Research Station. Established in 2007 as a special nursery for the propagation and testing of Georgian wine varieties, the **Saguramo Wine Research Station** offers wine-tastings of its seasonal varietals. One of the center's most important tasks is to collect grape genes from each region of Georgia so that they will not be lost.

Pay a visit to a winery here where a female winemaker maintains her own label. **Taste some of the wines from her cellar and enjoy a cooking class and a home-cooked meal.** Kartlian wines are light, ethereal and refreshing, in contrast to the heavier, earthier Kakhetian wines. Our host and her husband are gourmet cooks as well, and will prepare and serve a menu drawn from the local gardens, fields and rivers. Quail, homemade cheeses and walnut pâté are some of their favorites.

North of Mtskheta is the fertile **Mukhrani region**, watered by the Kura River and its tributaries. Planted and tended for thousands of years, the lowland region is renowned for its special wine grapes.



Taste the wines of Mukhrani Chateau vineyards, where a perfect microclimate nurtures vines selected through centuries, and the grapes are picked by hand. Chateau Mukhrani was the palatial estate of the royal family of Georgia. In 1875 its owner Prince Ivane Mukhranbatoni returned from a journey to the winemaking regions of France and began combining Georgian and French grape varieties and techniques. By the end of the century, his fine wines were winning gold medals at the Paris Wine Exhibition.



Fast-forward to the 21st century: In 2002 renovations of the estate and the wine-making facilities began, and in 2014 Chateau Mukhrani wines won two Double Golds and two Golds at the China Wine and Spirits Awards, a prestigious wine and spirits competition in China. Stroll the vineyards, where the grapes are still picked by hand, explore the prince's castle, and taste the exclusive wines grown from heritage Georgian and French grapes.

Continue on to Mtskheta, the capital of the eastern Georgian kingdom of Iberia from the 3rd century BC until the 5th century AD. Because of its location at the confluence of the Kura and Aragvi rivers, it was an important market town. As the center of the Iberian civilization, Mtskheta was also significant spiritually and culturally. Georgia's conversion to Christianity took place here in 337 AD, and the Orthodox churches built during this period are considered among the finest in the country.



A tour of Mtskheta includes a walk through the old town and a visit to the massive **UNESCO-listed 11th century Svetitskhoveli Cathedral**, its interior once decorated in murals and its façade ornamented in arcades. The complex includes the palace and gates from the same period.

Return to the hotel for overnight.

Meals: B, L – *Marriott Courtyard, Iota Hotel, Betsy's Hotel or similar*

Day Four, Saturday, October 3

Tbilisi • drive to Kutaisi

Embark on a drive to the west today, toward the **Imereti region**, 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* resembles a savory pizza without the tomato sauce, made from leavened bread and commonly stuffed with cheese.



The drive takes you through a region of small farms, vineyards, fields and orchards, where lone cows and an occasional pig share the road with vehicles. Stop for lunch in the **little village of Koreti**, where you visit vineyards and wine cellars, and meet members of the ten families who have owned their local wine cellars since the 17th century. Lunch is with local hosts at one of the wine cellars.



Continue past the crumbling factories of the haunting town of **Chiatura**, its bluffs festooned with cable cars leading up to the old manganese mines. Stop to admire **Katskhis Sveti**, a natural limestone pillar nearly 140 feet high, where the remains of a tiny medieval church and hermitage were surveyed by a research expedition in 1944. The buildings testify to the presence, for perhaps hundreds of years, of Christian ascetic monks called Stylites, who sought to **live, pray and preach from atop pillars**. The top of this pillar, measuring some 1,600 square feet, had room for the church, hermit cells, a crypt for the dead, and eight *qvevri*, the earthenware vessels used to make and store wine. A reconstruction of the original tiny church now emerges from the top of the monolith.



photo: John Wurdeman

Arriving in Kutaisi, check into the hotel for a rest before dinner. Dinner tonight will feature **traditional Imeretian cuisine**, considered one of the most complex and interesting cuisines in Georgia. Typical dishes might be young hen in a blackberry reduction sauce, stone ground corn bread, wild mushrooms, or kid baked in clay ovens.

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

Day Five, Sunday, October 4

Kutaisi • drive to Svaneti region

Your first stop today is at beautiful and stately **Gelati Monastery**, where archaeologists are excavating the original wine cellar and *qvevri*. 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," Gelati Monastery is a **UNESCO World Heritage Site**.

Then set out on the road to **Svaneti**, a remote and dramatic mountainous region of Georgia, designated as a **UNESCO World Heritage Site** for its remarkably preserved medieval appearance. Unreachable by car until 1935 when the cart track from the town of 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.

The drive to Svaneti is long but astoundingly beautiful, through saw-toothed mountains and tidy green valleys. Stop along the way in the **historic province of Samegrelo** south of Svaneti to sample some of the region's polenta and spicy stews, reminiscent of some Indian curries.



Svaneti is best known for its **medieval watchtowers**. 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 served as strategic apertures through which a variety of missiles could be aimed at invaders. Svaneti boasts at least 200 towers.

This drive also takes you into the steep-sided **Becho Valley**, which provides wonderful vistas of thickly forested slopes at every turn.



After your ascent, check into the hotel and enjoy a light dinner.

Meals: B, L, D – *Banguriani Hotel, Tetnuli Hotel or similar*

Day Six, Monday, October 5

Svaneti region • day trip to Mestia

It is said that the traditions and culture of Svaneti are “more Georgian” than anywhere else in Georgia. The harsh mountain climate limits food choices while encouraging creativity. The Svan people know how to do a lot with a little, as you will find at a meal cooked by a family chef and at an informal concert of their thrilling polyphonic singing.

Set out to explore the Svan town of **Mestia**. Start at the **Ethnographic Museum** with its 10th-12th century manuscripts, and unique 14th century metalwork and icons. Perhaps the finest exhibit is the 11th century Icon of the Forty Martyrs, which was probably painted in central Georgia, but transported to Svaneti to keep it out of the hands of invading Muslim forces. The rendering of the forty individuals is reminiscent of European Renaissance portrait painting. (**Note** the Ethnographic Museum’s schedule may not permit this visit.)



Drive up to the **Hatsvali viewpoint**, a great place to get a panoramic view of the watchtower-studded valleys and the jagged peaks of the Caucasus Mountains. 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 twenty could live in such a house with sleeping quarters above the cattle for warmth. Fodder and foodstores would be kept in the nearby watchtower.



If you choose, you can pay a visit to a **family of architects and painters** whose home is filled with original art, architectural models, historic photographs and wooden artifacts. Learn about life and art in Svaneti with these fascinating hosts.

Enter another Svanetian **family home for a fantastic gourmet lunch** cooked by your host, who is a great family chef. Specialties could be hen roasted in rose petals, braided cheese with mint flowers or bread stuffed with herbs.

Return to the hotel with time to rest up or enjoy a short walking tour of the Shikhra valley.

This evening, enjoy dinner accompanied by **local Svan singers**. Georgia has one of the **oldest and most intriguing polyphonic vocal traditions** in Europe. Developing independently of Western European rules of harmony, Georgian vocal music has been passed down by ear for hundreds of years – possibly since the 5th century BC. Its tuning system is based on fifths rather than octaves, giving its choral music a rich yet slightly discordant sound (to western ears). The traditional structure of these old songs incorporates one voice singing the high part, one in the middle and one or two taking the low part, often a drone.



Each of Georgia's ethnic regions has its own typical harmony and way of singing. In Svaneti, the songs are startlingly non-Western, some of them dating from the pre-Christian era, and are often accompanied by traditional dances.

Meals: B, L, D – *Banguriani Hotel, Tetnuli Hotel or similar*

Day Seven, Tuesday, October 6 **Svaneti region • drive to Borjomi**

Leave the mountains of Svaneti today, winding along the road near the river down to the plains.

Stop in at the town of **Zugdidi**, referred to as the Gateway to Svaneti, since it is at the beginning (or the end) 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.

At lunch in Zugdidi, sample **Megrelian cuisine**, its recipes handed down for thousands of years among the Megrelian people, a sub-ethnic group of Georgians whose culture and language date back to the pre-Christian Colchian era. Traditional dishes include *ghomi*, reminiscent of polenta, *sulguni*, a special cheese with a high fat content, and the pepper sauce, *adjika*. Spicy chicken with walnuts, *satsivi*, is served on holidays.



After eating, continue on the road to Borjomi. Stop en route to pay a visit to a village craftsman who makes **qvevri**, the **200-to-900-gallon earthenware vessels** used for fermenting and storing Georgian wines. Because of the increasing interest in natural, traditionally made wines, the demand for qvevri has increased greatly in recent years. The artisan and his assistants will demonstrate and explain the qvevri-making process and present the resulting vessels.

Borjomi is a resort town in the beautiful Borjomi Gorge. Nearby is the Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park, a protected area that began as the hunting reserve of Czar Alexander II's nephew, Mikhail. 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. After the revolution, Soviet vacationers replaced 19th century royalty at the spas and sanatoria.

Upon arrival to Borjomi, check-in to your hotel.
Meals: B, L, D – *Likani Palace Borjomi or similar*



Day Eight, Wednesday, October 7

Borjomi • drive to Vardzia via Akhaltsikhe

Driving into southwestern Georgia near the Turkish border, you come to the small city of **Akhaltiskhe**. Its **Old Town, called Rabati**, was a crossroads of the old Silk Road, and encompasses the ruins of an ancient fortress. 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 *darbaze*, traditional Georgian houses.

Continue on to the Mtkvari River Valley where the caves of the monastery of Vardzia are tunneled into a bluff over the river. Take some time to explore the **Vardzia cave monastery**. 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. 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. Hike around the cut rock town, admire the old wine presses, and drive up the canyon for a sweeping view of the Javakheti Plateau and Abuli Peak, some 11,000 feet above sea level.



Check in to the modern resort hotel across from the caves for a delightful dinner that may include fresh trout caught that day in the river.

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

Day Nine, Thursday, October 8

Vardzia • drive to Tbilisi via Phoka

Today's drive to Tbilisi leads through the Samtskhe-Javakheti Region, primarily an agricultural area where Armenians make up a little over half of the population.

Stretch your legs at **Lake Paravani**, a lovely high-altitude volcanic lake situated at some 7,000 feet. Several small rivers empty into the lake, which gets its water from snow, rain and underground springs. Paravani is a popular fishing destination.

Stop at the delightful **Phoka Nunnery of St. Nino** to meet with the nuns and enjoy a tasting of the many varieties of cheese they produce themselves. The convent encompasses gardens, an apiary, a vineyard, and pastures where their animals graze. The Phoka nuns make not only cheese, but also honey products from their bees as well as artful chocolates. They have also revived the art of enamel cloisonné, and sell all these products in their tasteful gift shop. Enjoy lunch here before continuing to the capital.

Arriving in Tbilisi, check in to the hotel and enjoy some free time. Dinner is independent tonight.

Meals: B, L – *Marriott Courtyard, Iota Hotel, Betsy's Hotel or similar*



Day Ten, Friday, October 9

Tbilisi • drive to Signagi via Ikalto, Telavi

After a hotel breakfast, head east through the Gombori Mountains to the **Kakheti region of eastern Georgia** – wine country – where you visit the regional capital, little **Telavi**, and have a fabulous lunch at **Marleta's**. The Kakheti region is the **most important wine-producing area of the country**.

Explore **Ikalto Monastery**, established in the 6th century by one of Georgia's 13 Syrian Fathers, Zenon. It became an important place in the 12th century, when David the Builder established a wine academy here.

Arrive in the **lovely town of Telavi**, the administrative center of the Kakheti region. An old city encompassing the remains of medieval stone fortifications, Telavi faces the ample folds of the Greater Caucasus range and overlooks the fields and vineyards of the Alazani Valley. In an interesting sidelight, Telavi is the **sister city of Napa Valley, California**, premier wine-growing region of the U.S.



Sit down to a wonderful lunch at **Cafe Marleta**. The cafe is named after chef Sofi Gorgadze's first cow, Marleta. Her husband makes cheese from their own cow and goats. Dishes might include their wonderful goat cheese, crusty fried corn cakes, crispy *khachapuri* with homemade cheese, grape leaves stuffed with meat and served with a sour plum sauce, and home-made prosciutto.



Continue driving through little towns with gardens of grapevines, tomatoes, and walnut trees, chickens scratching in the yards. Arriving in **Signagi**, check in to the hotel for some free time before dinner. The buildings on Signagi's narrow streets are graced with the town's famous wooden balconies, richly carved with lacy ornamentation. Enjoy panoramic views of the brilliant green of this region's (Kiziki's) fertile farmland surrounding the town.

In the 18th century, King Erekle II constructed a defensive wall around the hill-town of Signagi. Its towers were named for the surrounding villages, and the towns-people were meant to gather at their towers in times of trouble. The town's location in an agricultural region

helped it to grow quickly and it became an important agricultural center for the Soviet Union.

This evening take a stroll over to **Pheasant's Tears Restaurant**, host and vigneron John Wurdeman's restaurant, for a marvelous dinner and wine-tasting. The name of the winery and restaurant comes from a Georgian legend in which the hero claims that it takes a "wine beyond measure" to make a pheasant cry tears of joy. Pheasant's Tears organic wine is now served at world-class dining establishments well beyond Georgia, including Spain's "El Celler" and Denmark's "Noma," rated #1 and #3 respectively on the World's Best Restaurant list 2015.

On the menu may be their signature herbal cheese pie, whole wheat bread leavened with wine lees and baked over grapevine branches, or an eggplant stew called *adjapsandal*. More grapevine branches provide the heat for a roast sauced in a reduction of pomegranate and red onions.

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





Day Eleven, Saturday, October 10
Signagi • day trip around Kakheti region

This morning set out for **Tsinandali Village**, best known for the family estate of **Alexander Chavchavadze**. A 19th century Georgian aristocrat and poet, Chavchavadze managed to serve admirably in the Imperial Russian Army during the times he wasn't fighting Russia for Georgian independence. His estate was a center of the intellectual life of the time. Here he and his father founded the first and foremost winery in the country, which still produces the **dry white Tsinandali wine**. His mansion has been transformed into a museum in honor of the poet and hero.

Explore the **gardens and the Tsinandali enoteca** (literally meaning "wine library") where you can learn about some of the regional wines.

Continue to the sloped vineyards at **Pheasant's Tears Winery**, near Tibaani Village. Wander through the rows of grapevines, producing organic wines from varietal grapes that grow well in the Kakhetian micro-region. **Sample some of the natural wines**, including some ancient varietals, in the 250-year-old tasting hall. You can see where the grapes are grown and visit the cellars where the wines are macerated in huge ceramic vessels lined with beeswax, qvevri.

Enjoy a **mid-day meal *al fresco* in the vineyards**.



Returning to Signagi, replete with good wine and food, tour the **Signagi Museum**, a part of the Georgian National Museum consortium. Its focus is on regional ethnography, with an especially strong collection of artifacts discovered during archaeological digs around David Gareja Monastery. The museum also has 16 paintings by the Georgian master painter Pirosmiani, who was born in Kakheti Province (Pirosmiani's art is featured on page 2 of this itinerary).

A little over a mile away, visit **9th century Bodbe Nunnery**, where St. Nino is buried. It is said that toward the end of her life she lived as a hermit in the Bodbe Gorge, and died here. The working convent overlooks the Alazani Valley, and was used as a coronation venue by the kings of Kakheti. Its main basilica features some fine frescoes, and its surrounding gardens are refreshing. Some of the nuns here may speak English.



Stop at Qedeli Ranch, overlooking the green Alazani Valley, for a coffee break and a meet-up with a **home silk producer**, who raises silk worms, rabbits, sheep and chickens, and cultivates a flourishing garden. She is happy to share her encyclopedic knowledge of silk, silk weaving, and silk worms.

Returning to Signagi, you can choose to rest up before the coming feast, or, alternately, attend a dance class where young people learn the traditional dances of Georgia.

Celebrate a **traditional Georgian Table feast** at Pheasant's Tears Restaurant this evening, accompanied by a **folk ensemble and costumed dancers** performing the spirited dances of the Caucasus. The seasonal menu for this **farewell dinner** is selected and prepared by the winery's famed chef. Toast the ending of this delectable journey through the cornucopia of Georgian regional wines and cuisine.
Meals: B, L, D – *Kabadoni Hotel or similar*



Day Twelve, Sunday, October 11

Signagi • drive to Tbilisi

On your last full day in Georgia, you can **accompany the Pheasant's Tears chef on his daily shopping trip to the village market**, where he searches for the freshest in-season fruits, vegetables and herbs to feature on the day's menu. Sample and perhaps purchase your own herbs, salt blends, and spices, such as crushed marigold petals; you'll be hard-pressed to find them in the supermarket at home.

Then head back to Tbilisi for a final night. En route, drive the steep dirt road to the remains of **Manavi Fortress**, perched on a hill above the vineyards and orchards of Kakheti. The fortress most likely dates back to the 10th or 11th centuries, and the stone walls and towers lie mostly in ruins.



Here, join a winemaker for a comparative **tasting of varietal wines** made from the medium-sized yellow-green Mtsvane grape, an old Georgian grape that can stand alone or be used as the basis for blends. The special microclimate of the Manavi *terroir*, with its volcanic soils and high altitude, produces the fine balance of acidity and the fresh, rich aroma of **Manavi Mtsvani wine**. Enjoy a light lunch to accompany the wines, and admire the panoramic views of the surrounding countryside, covered with a patchwork of fields and vineyards.

Arriving back in Tbilisi, take some time to browse the **Dry Bridge Market**, where vendors spread their blankets and rugs and lay out their treasures, usually including tableware, silver, jewelry, artwork and cutlery.



Check into the hotel for some free time to wander the city, rest or pack for departure. Dinner is independent tonight – perhaps try some of the ubiquitous *khachapuri* in streetside cafes and bakeries.

Meals: B, L – Marriott Courtyard, Iota Hotel, Betsy's Hotel or similar



Day Thirteen, Monday, October 12

Depart Tbilisi

The journey comes to an end this morning with transfers to the

airport for international departures.

Meals: B



Dates for 2020 – One Departure – Cultural Series

The land itinerary is scheduled to be operated on the following dates. Please note that you will need to depart the U.S. one day prior to the tour start date due to airline flight schedules.

September 30-October 12, 2020

Package Prices – 2020 Pricing Information

6-16 travelers, \$5,295 per person, twin share
Single Supplement \$1,095

Tour Includes

- Accommodations as noted in itinerary.
- 12 breakfasts, 11 lunches and 8 dinners, per the itinerary.
- Restaurant tips for included meals.
- Services of experienced, English-speaking local guides, drivers and other staff, including a MIR Tour Manager.
- Arrival/departure airport transfers. MIR will arrange for all travelers to be met on arrival and seen off on departure whether we make your airfare arrangements or not, provided you arrive and depart on the tour start/end dates in the tour start/end cities.
- Ground transportation throughout itinerary by private coach or minibus (size of vehicle depends on group size).
- Guided sightseeing tours and entrance fees as outlined in itinerary.
- Special events, excursions and cultural performances per the itinerary.
- Baggage handling where available.
- Gratuities to local guides, drivers, porters and other service personnel.
- Assistance booking your custom flight arrangements (on request; please note that international airfare is not included in the land tour cost).
- Complete pre-departure information including detailed packing list, reading list, *Touring with MIR* handbook with country-specific information, maps, and travel tips.
- Final document packet including luggage tags, final updates, and more.

Not Included

- Internal airfare (internal airfare is quoted separately and is subject to change by airlines).
- International airfare or taxes/fuel surcharges.
- Meals not specified as included in the itinerary.
- Alcoholic beverages, except as noted.
- Single supplement charge, if requested or required.
- Items of a personal nature (phone calls, email, laundry, alcohol, excess baggage, etc).
- Gratuities to Tour Manager.
- Expenses incurred as a result of delay, modification or extension of a tour due to causes beyond MIR's control.
- Visa fees, if required (Note: no visas are required for U.S. passport holders).
- 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

Dates for 2021– One Departure – Cultural Series

At the time of writing, the land itinerary for this program next year is projected to be generally as depicted for this year. Next year's dates and prices are shown below – please call if you're ready to book now.

September 29-October 11, 2021

Package Prices – 2021

6-16 passengers, \$5,495 per person, double occupancy
Single supplement \$1,195 per person.

Cultural Series

MIR's Cultural Series programs feature some of our most distinctive tour concepts and include uncommon and educational experiences, including visits to small towns and villages outside the major urban areas and capital cities. All trips feature comfortable, well-located hotels.

Important Notes: Is This Trip Right For You?

While the accommodations are comfortable and centrally located, it is important to keep in mind that the accommodations in the country of Georgia are not up to the standards North American travelers expect. Services are improving in the region; nevertheless you may encounter problems with plumbing, bureaucratic service, road conditions, unpaved sidewalks, uneven surfaces and steps and availability and quality of public restrooms. Some areas, relatively speaking, have seen few travelers, and the infrastructure is not yet fully developed.

While this program is designed to be the most comfortable possible for travel in this region, this is an adventuresome tour. It is rated as **rigorous touring** due to the daily walking involved (there are a lot of steps – some steep – at many of the sites on this itinerary), the length of some overland drives and the overall shortcomings of the tourism infrastructure. Some hotels in Svaneti, which may be used, such as the Grand Hotel Ushba, offer common WCs and shower facilities that are not en suite to the sleeping accommodations.

This itinerary features a significant amount of touring on foot. Some attractions are only accessible via steep staircases with tall uneven steps. Some site visits involve steep steps, narrow passageways and limited light. To reap the full rewards of this adventure, travelers must be able to walk at least a mile a day, keeping up with fellow travelers. Flexibility, a sense of humor and a willingness to accept local standards of amenities and services are essential components to the enjoyment of this trip.

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 Georgia, this may not always be possible. Only those willing to accept these conditions should consider joining this program.



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 on travel to Georgia here:

<https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/traveladvisories/traveladvisories/georgia-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

Georgia is a wonderful place to visit any time of the year. Fall weather should be quite nice, and bring spectacular colors as the leaves change, with daytime temperatures ranging from 70-85 degrees Fahrenheit in October. Rain is minimal in the fall months.

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.

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. Our preferred carriers for this tour are Lufthansa, Austrian Airlines, and Aeroflot, as they offer convenient itineraries and competitive rates from multiple cities across the U.S. to Georgia.

Please call us at 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

Please note that no visas are required for this itinerary for U.S. passport holders. Citizens of other countries **will likely require** visas for travel to Georgia; please call for more information.

Pre-Tour Information

Please note that touring begins on Thursday, Day Two of this program. Because of common flight arrival times into Tbilisi, for your convenience MIR has pre-booked the Tbilisi hotel from the Tuesday before Day One, with rooms available for check-in after 2:00 p.m. on Tuesday. Many clients will arrive late Tuesday night or in the very early hours of Wednesday morning (12:30 a.m. or similar). These clients will have access to their rooms on arrival. Clients needing room access before 2:00 p.m. on the Tuesday before



Day One will need to have an additional night or nights pre-booked at additional expense, which MIR will be happy to assist with.

Pre- and Post-Tour Options

MIR can arrange for an extended program in Tbilisi, Armenia, Azerbaijan, or Russia before or after your tour. Please call us for suggestions and rates.

Also Nearby...

For more tours to the Caucasus region, you may want to check out:

Flexible Essential Trips – Classic Private Journeys

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 ten days.

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.

Small Group Tours

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.

Essential Georgia & Armenia, 13 days. 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.

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.) Air fares 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).

Small Group 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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