



Village Traditions of the South Caucasus 2020



Photo credit: Bob Huberman

Village Traditions of the South Caucasus

Local Life & Landscapes of Georgia, Armenia & Azerbaijan

Two Departures in 2020 – Explorer Series – 21 Days

July 26-August 15 • August 16-September 5

Step deep into the cultures of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia, experiencing local life in one of the most hospitable regions of the world.

Out where the city streets fade into dirt roads, and luxuries are few, rural people still live the way their grandparents did – and their grandparents before them. In the towns and villages of the South Caucasus, seek out these old-school communities, meeting farmers, shepherds, beekeepers, cheese-makers, and natural winemakers. The landscapes are as diverse as their inhabitants, ranging from the liana-entwined Black Sea coast, through tea and tobacco plantations, gently sloping vineyards, rocky crags, and plunging valleys with narrow mountain roads cutting through the greenery. Share stories and warm home-hosted meals in mountain villages, sample natural wines and fantastic local cuisine, meet craftspeople who work in clay, stained glass, metal and wood, all of it set to a soundtrack of polyphonic singing that can give you goosebumps, and traditional instruments playing the old, old songs of love and heartbreak.



Daily Itinerary

Day 1, Sunday, July 26 / August 16	Arrive Baku, Azerbaijan
Day 2, Monday, July 27 / August 17	Baku
Day 3, Tuesday, July 28 / August 18	Baku • Shemakha • Lahij
Day 4, Wednesday, July 29 / August 19	Lahij • Sheki
Day 5, Thursday, July 30 / August 20	Sheki • Signagi, Georgia
Day 6, Friday, July 31 / August 21	Signagi
Day 7, Saturday, August 1 / August 22	Signagi • Omalo
Day 8, Sunday, August 2 / August 23	Omalo • day trip to Dartlo
Day 9, Monday, August 3 / August 24	Omalo • Tbilisi
Day 10, Tuesday, August 4 / August 25	Tbilisi
Day 11, Wednesday, August 5 / August 26	Tbilisi • Kutaisi
Day 12, Thursday, August 6 / August 27	Kutaisi • Mestia
Day 13, Friday, August 7 / August 28	Mestia
Day 14, Saturday, August 8 / August 29	Mestia • Batumi
Day 15, Sunday, August 9 / August 30	Batumi • Akhaltsikhe
Day 16, Monday, August 10 / August 31	Akhaltsikhe • Vardzia
Day 17, Tuesday, August 11 / September 1	Vardzia • Phoka Nunnery • Gyumri, Armenia
Day 18, Wednesday, August 12 / September 2	Gyumri • Yerevan
Day 19, Thursday, August 13 / September 3	Yerevan
Day 20, Friday, August 14 / September 4	Yerevan
Day 21, Saturday, August 15 / September 5	Depart Yerevan



MIR Signature Experiences

Azerbaijan

- Appreciate the contrast of the very old and the very new in Azerbaijan's capital, Baku.
- Retrace the ancient Silk Road from the shores of the Caspian Sea through the foothills of the Caucasus Mountains.
- Learn first-hand how Azerbaijanis make their yogurt and butter, at a local home in the countryside.
- Join a family for dinner in the Azerbaijani craft village of Lahij, famous for knives and engraved copper utensils.
- Visit the Khan's Palace in Sheki, one of the oldest towns in Azerbaijan.
- Drop in at the workshop of a local artist in Sheki, who creates the vivid stained glass windows called *shebeke*, using a method that does not use glue.

Georgia

- Be a guest at a traditional mountain village festival in Tusheti, a mountainous region so far off the grid that its inhabitants come down to the lowlands every winter.
- Take in an electrifying performance of polyphonic singing and Georgian folk dancing at the celebrated Pheasant's Tears Restaurant.
- Discover the importance of wine and food in Georgian culture as you feast and make merry at an authentic Georgian Table.
- Sample natural wines made according to traditional Georgian methods at an underground wine bar.
- Visit a ceramicist to see how to make *qvevri*, huge earthenware vessels used in a traditional Georgian winemaking method that has been designated a world cultural treasure by UNESCO.
- 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.
- Taste handmade cheeses, as well as wild honey straight from the hive at little Phoka Nunnery.

Armenia

- Visit the workshop of a master metalsmith, who demonstrates the art of working with iron using old-school blacksmithing tools.
- Enjoy lunch at the 170-year-old home of Mrs. Hripsime, prepared using traditional old Armenian recipes handed down from her grandmother.
- Admire the looming snow-capped peaks of Mt. Ararat from the hilltop monastery of Khor Virap.
- Enter a local home for a friendly meal of Armenian specialties, and learn how your host distills different flavors of vodka at home.
- Climb or ride to the top of Yerevan's sculpture-rich Cascade stairway for wonderful views of the city.
- Visit the studio of a master musical instrument craftsman, one of the finest makers of the traditional Armenian reed instrument, the *duduk*, a UNESCO world cultural treasure.



Tour Highlights

Azerbaijan

Baku	Capital of Azerbaijan, “Walled City of Baku with the Shirvanshah’s Palace and Maiden Tower” (UNESCO World Heritage Site) – Icheri Sheher, Fountain Square, local bazaars, Carpet Museum, dinner in a private home
Shemakha	Diri Baba Mausoleum, Friday Mosque, Yeddi Gumbaz
Lahij	Village visit to yogurt-makers, copper master’s studio, dinner in a local home
Sheki	Khan’s Summer Palace, caravanserai, local market

Georgia

Kakheti Region	Wine country, Tibaani vineyards
Signagi	Pheasant’s Tears Winery and Restaurant, Georgian Table feast, House Museum of Niko Pirosmiani, Bodbe Nunnery
Tusheti Region	Most remote mountain region of Georgia
Omalo	Tiny mountain village - gateway to Tusheti
Dartlo	Village celebration, medieval watchtowers
Tbilisi	Capital of Georgia, views of Narikala Fortress, Sololaki District, Vino Underground wine-tasting, Georgian National Museum, Gallery 27
Imereti Region	Jvari Monastery (UNESCO World Heritage Site), qvevri maker, Imeretian cuisine, winemaker’s family
Kutaisi	Gelati Monastery (UNESCO World Heritage Site)
Svaneti Region	Remote and revered mountainous region (UNESCO World Heritage Site), medieval watchtowers
Mestia	Museum of History and Ethnography
Batumi	Port and resort city on the Black Sea, Old Town, tobacco plantation in the nearby highlands
Akhaltsikhe	Silk Road town, Rabati (Old Town), dinner with local family
Vardzia	Rock-hewn monastery
Phoka	Phoka Nunnery

Armenia

Gyumri	Armenia’s second-largest city, Cherkezi Dzor Fish Farm and Restaurant
Ashtarak	Workshop of master metal smith, Saghmosavank Monastery, 170-year-old home of Mrs. Hripsime
Khor Virap	View of Mt. Ararat, monastery of Khor Virap
Noravank	13th century monastery, meal with vodka-maker, home of master rug and carpet maker
Yerevan	Capital of Armenia, Historical Museum, Republic Square, Cascade, Opera and Ballet Theater, studio of master musical instrument maker

Daily Itinerary

*Day One, Sunday, July 26 /
August 16*

Arrive Baku, Azerbaijan

Following customs procedures, transfer to the hotel for overnight.
Meals: Independent – *Shah Palace Hotel or similar*

*Day Two, Monday, July 27 /
August 17*

Baku

Get an early start this morning to take in Azerbaijan's capital, **Baku, and its environs.**



Parts of Azerbaijan, notably Gobustan below Baku on the Caspian coast, show evidence of human habitation beginning in the Stone Age. Flaming natural gas vents on the Absheron Peninsula, where Baku is located, may have inspired Zarathustra, a local resident around 1000 BC, to include fire rituals in his Zoroastrian religion. Baku was first mentioned in the ninth century, and its people were reported to burn oil that came from the ground in their lamps.

Baku's inhabitants stayed behind the 14th-century walls of their town almost until the 19th century, when the Russian empire began exploiting in earnest the great oil reserves under the waters of the Caspian. An oil boom that lasted from 1880 to 1915 left a region of beaux arts mansions built by the newly rich.

The city is at the beginning of the strategic Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline running from the Caspian oilfields through Georgia and Turkey to the Mediterranean Sea. Few travelers come here for the history and culture as opposed to the business of oil; enjoy the comfortable improvements the city of Baku has invested in to cater to western business people.

Begin with a walking tour of the city center and **Icheri Sheher (the Old Town)**, including a visit to the Fountain Square. Baku's **UNESCO-listed Old Town** was once the whole city, and is the best place to picture its history. It is completely encircled by the old city walls with their medieval gates. The winding streets and alleyways are home to private residences, mosques and *madrassahs*, carpet merchants and tiny shops. The aura of the past that permeates the town rewards exploration and careful investigation with surprising glimpses of a bygone era.

On a hill above the walled Old Town, the **Shirvanshah's Palace complex** is part of a UNESCO World Heritage Site, along with the Maiden Tower and the Old Town itself. Founded in the 13th century, most of the Shirvanshah's Palace complex was built in the 15th century. Encompassing the royal residence, mosques and tombs, the complex is a highlight of Azerbaijani architecture.



Overlooking the sea to one side and the Old Town to the other stands the **Maiden Tower**, the oldest component of Baku's UNESCO-listed district. Scientific and historical researchers have a difficult time firmly fixing the date of its construction, the reason for its existence or the function it once served. Stories and theories abound: that it once touched the sea, that it was a place of Zoroastrian sky burial, that a maiden chose an honorable death by plunging from its parapet to the sea, or that it was simply a part of Baku's defensive battlements. The 98-foot structure is a beacon to travelers now as it may once have been to sailors.

Located just outside the Old Town walls is Baku's **Fountain Square**. The square is a pedestrian plaza, a place to sit and relax, and a great vantage point from which to people-watch. Enjoy a snack or a drink at one of the many cafes, or circle the fountains and examine the surrounding pre-Soviet architecture.

After a festive lunch to officially kick off your adventure, set off for one or two of Baku's local markets: **Yashil Bazaar and/or Teze Bazaar**.

Dinner tonight is in a **private home**, before overnight at the hotel.
Meals: B, L, D – *Shah Palace Hotel or similar*



Day Three, Tuesday, July 28 / August 18

Baku • Shemakha • Lahij

This morning after breakfast, visit the Carpet Museum. The vivid colors and bold designs of Azeri, Caucasian and Iranian carpets are on display at the **Azerbaijan Carpet Museum**, a modern building designed to resemble a rolled-up carpet. The extensive collection of wonderful carpets dates back as far as the 16th century. Learn how traditional Azerbaijani carpets are woven of naturally-dyed wool and cotton as weavers give demonstrations of traditional techniques. Regional differences and stylistic details



are highlighted, revealing how handwoven carpets unite practical value, artistic merit, historical significance and beauty. In 2010 UNESCO added the traditional art of weaving Azerbaijani carpets to the list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.



After the museum, set off for Lahij, by way of Shemakha.

Stop near the town of Mazara to climb to the **Diri Baba Mausoleum**, set in the side of a hill. Constructed of stone blocks, the mausoleum is a two-story structure. The second floor mosque is reached by a steep winding stone staircase, and is decorated in carvings.

Arrive in **Shemakha**. A renowned grape growing and winemaking district, Shemakha through most of its history was the major commercial center of western Azerbaijan. Present-day Shemakha is known for its finely woven carpets and the 10th century Djuma Mosque, the oldest mosque in the Caucasus.

Explore the town, passing by the recently completed **Friday Mosque**, built on the site of one of the oldest mosques in the Caucasus. Across the valley is the Yeddi Gumbaz royal mausoleum where the Shirvan khans were buried; from here you can look back at the twin hills overlooking Shemakha where the 12th century Gulestan Fortress and the citadel stood during its years as a capital.

The domes of **Yeddi Gumbaz** may have originally numbered seven, but today only three octagonal royal tombs remain, from the 18th and 19th centuries. The mausoleum is surrounded by ancient gravestones.

After lunch, stop in at a village farm on Shemakha's outskirts to **learn how the Azerbaijanis make their yogurt and butter**.

Continue on to **Lahij, an ancient, almost untouched village** that seems worlds away from Baku. Virtually isolated in its location surrounded by tall mountains layered with limestone, sandstone and clay, its inhabitants speak an ancient dialect of Persian known as Tat, as well as Farsi, Azeri and Russian. The village is known for its apple orchards and is home to coppersmiths and carpet weavers, trades which have been





practiced here since the Middle Ages. Beautiful hand-tooled plates, goblets, trays and samovars are produced. Drop in at the **studio of a copper master**, and learn about casting and working with copper.

Check in to the guesthouse, then **join a local family for dinner in their home.**

Meals: B, L, D – *Evim Guesthouse or similar*

Day Four, Wednesday, July 29 /

August 19

Lahij • Sheki

After breakfast, begin the drive out into the foothills of the Greater Caucasus, the mountain range that runs northwest from the plains around Baku, following a segment of the old Silk Road along its route from the Caspian to the Black Sea.

Sheki is one of the oldest towns in Azerbaijan, claiming to have been founded some 2,700 years ago. Surrounded by beech and oak forests, Sheki was moved in 1772 after a terrible mudslide destroyed the original town.



Having chased out Persian rule, Sheki was an independent khanate until the 1820s when Russia finally took hold of it. It is home to a well-preserved khan's palace with 500-year-old trees in its rose garden. The town is renowned for its carpets and its special type of sweet halvah.

Visit the mosaic-covered **Khan's Summer Palace** with its brilliant stained glass work, called *shebeke*, and the fortress that surrounds the palace, with its History and Crafts museums. The beautiful building is on the UNESCO Tentative List.



Visit the workshop of a local artist who creates the vivid **stained glass windows** called *shebeke*, using a method that does not use glue.



After lunch at a local restaurant, explore the **old caravanserai**. One of the remaining links to Sheki's rich past is this massive stone caravanserai building, one of five in this city. Caravanserais were the inns of the Silk Road, and Sheki's still accommodates travelers today. The courtyard of the old building once served as stables for camels and horses while their merchant owners slept in private rooms above them.

Visit a **silk factory** to observe the process of making silk scarves. Drop in at a local bakery and sample the fragrant fresh bread.

Dinner is in the caravanserai, where a **musical performance** provides the evening's entertainment.
Meals: B, L, D – *Sheki Saray Hotel*

Day Five, Thursday, July 30 / August 20
Sheki • Signagi, Georgia

Following an early breakfast, depart to the Georgian border for customs and passport formalities, then transfer to the Georgian coach.



Today marks an introduction to the fabulous country of **Georgia**. The native Georgians call themselves “Kartveli” and their country “Sakartvelo,” meaning “the Georgians’ place.” In geographic terms, Georgia belongs neither to Europe nor to Asia. Culturally, Georgia has language, customs and traditions all its own. The beautiful Georgian script is one of only a very few unique world alphabets, and evolved around the fifth century BC, possibly influenced by Aramaic. A very useful Georgian word is *gaumarjos*, meaning “cheers,” a word you will hear frequently during the trip.



This afternoon, travel through the **Kakheti region**, Georgia’s wine country. Georgians were originally sun worshippers and believed that the sun’s chosen plant was the grape vine. St. Nino, who brought Christianity to Georgia, was said to have made a cross of grape vines and bound it together with her hair, symbolizing the sun’s rays. The winding characters of the Georgian alphabet resemble the trailing growth of the vine, and this motif is found in Georgian architecture throughout the country.

Kakheti Province is also the birthplace of Georgian master primitivist painter, Niko Pirosmani. In the villages, houses are backed up against each other, with one family’s roof serving as another’s terrace, and so on up the hill. This part of Georgia historically suffered from

foreign invasions, yet the architecture allowed defenders to retreat through the maze of interconnected houses if necessary.

Stop in **Tibaani Vineyards**, owned by the Pheasant’s Tears Winery based in Signagi. Enjoy a chance to walk through the vineyards, to see where the grapes are grown and to visit the cellars where the grapes are macerated and aged in huge ceramic vessels lined with beeswax. Called *qvevri*, the clay jugs have been used for winemaking for over 8,000 years in this part of the world. Enjoy a **wine-tasting** and a light lunch, as you **learn more about Georgian culinary traditions**.

Continue to the royal town of **Signagi**. King Erekle II constructed a defensive wall around the hill town of Signagi in the 18th century. Its towers were named for the surrounding villages, and the townspeople were meant to gather at their tower in times of trouble. Wander the narrow streets and admire the richly carved balconies and green valleys below.

For dinner visit **Pheasant’s Tears Winery & restaurant**, producing organic wines from varietal grapes that grow well in the Kakhetian micro-region. Co-owned by an American expatriate, the name of the winery 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. Sample wines from this famous wine region at a tasting, and perhaps purchase a bottle of a new favorite to share with friends and family back home.



Enjoy the phenomenon of a typical **Georgian Table**, an experience that 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, little meat dumplings called *khinkali*, salads and marinated vegetables, to name just 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 also with telling stories and jokes, and sometimes leading songs.

An ensemble of traditional **singers and dancers** entertains during dinner. 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.

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

Day Six, Friday, July 31 / August 21

Signagi

Spend some time exploring Signagi and the surrounding villages this morning after breakfast.

Drive through the hilly countryside around Signagi, stopping to visit Khirsa Monastery and admiring the old brick architecture of **Panaani and Machkhaani** villages. Georgia's beloved painter, **Niko Pirosmani**, was born in the village of Mirzaani, and wandered the fields and forests of this beautiful place gathering inspiration for his paintings. Visit his small stone family home, a museum displaying some of the family's belongings, including a *kilim* woven by his mother. A nearby exhibition hall displays some of the artist's work.





Continue on to **Magaro Village** for a visit and a meal with Lamara Bezhashvili, who raises silk worms, rabbits, sheep and chickens as well as a wonderful garden. Lamara is happy to share her encyclopedic knowledge of wild and cultivated medicinal and edible herbs, old recipes for cheese rennet, leavening for breads, and natural remedies for grape vine diseases and pests. Enjoy a **lunch of ingredients that Lamara has raised herself** in her backyard paradise.

After lunch, head to ninth 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 several fine frescoes, and its surrounding gardens are refreshing. Some of the nuns here may speak English.

On the way back to Signagi, stop in at Qedeli Village for **craft beer tasting at the Lost Ridge Brewery and Inn**. For those interested, an optional horse ride from the nearby Georgian **horse ranch**, can be arranged.

Return to the hotel for a light dinner and overnight.
Meals: B, L, D – *Kabadoni Hotel or similar*



Day Seven, Saturday, August 1 / August 22

Signagi • Omalo



Today begin a breathtaking and adventurous drive to the mountainous region of **Tusheti**, located in the far northeastern corner of Georgia and the country's most remote and difficult-to-access mountain region. The one access point is a winding mountain road that is open only from June to October. Travelers entering Tusheti will traverse this narrow, dirt road in 4x4 vehicles as they ascend to the top of the 9,350-foot **Abano Pass**. While navigating this steep ascent, visitors will take in spectacular, unencumbered views of rounded peaks, steep slopes, and pristine rivers. Most of the region's former year-round residents have moved to winter quarters in the more accessible areas of Georgia. Yet, shepherds continue walking their flocks up from neighboring Kakheti in

the spring before returning in mid-fall. Despite their remoteness, the region's small villages are increasingly opening themselves to visitors from all over the world.

Take some time for a picnic lunch along the mountain road before continuing on toward Omalo.

Omalo is the largest and most important village of Tusheti. It's located on a plateau that connects the region's three valleys, which are dotted with smaller villages. Omalo consists of a lower and an upper town, and is relatively more modern and developed than the rest of Tusheti's villages. The village is the terminus of the vertiginous Pshaveli-Abano-Omalo road.

Check into the hotel and enjoy an evening walk through the pastures and gardens in the verdant countryside around the hotel before dinner at the hotel.

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

***Driving time** today will total about 5-6 hours, covering a distance of 160 km (100 mi). The drive from Signagi to Omalo over the Abano Pass is steep with rough, dirt roads, many switchbacks, and no guardrails.



Day Eight, Sunday, August 2 / August 23

Omalo • day trip to Dartlo



This morning after breakfast, depart for Dartlo. **Walk the first part of the route this morning**, or choose to ride in the vehicle. Either way, **continue by vehicle to Dartlo**.

Only a handful of families live in **Dartlo village** these days, although the setting is idyllic. Several **medieval watchtowers**, narrower at the top than the ones in Svaneti that we'll see later, still guard the jumble of two- and three-story slate-roofed stone houses with wooden balconies that all seem to face the same way – toward the afternoon sun. At 6,000 feet in the Caucasus Mountains, people need all the sun they can get.

The time in the villages here will hopefully coincide with a **local festival**. You may have an

opportunity to take part in making *khinkali* – **or at least eating them**. *Khinkali* are juicy flour dumplings filled with a mixture of ground mutton and spices, and then boiled. In the Georgian mountains, cooks mix in special signature spices that set their region's *khinkali* apart. Preparing *khinkali* for a festival can take a whole village, and eating them is a serious business. You don't use utensils – pick up a hot dumpling, bite a hole in the top and drink the juice before finishing the rest. Home-brewed beer is the proper accompaniment to a *khinkali* feast.

Brewing beer in huge copper cauldrons is part of the preparation for summer festivals – a tradition specific to Tusheti. The men gather in a special men-only beer hut to brew the beer and prepare food. Festivities include lots of eating, drinking, dancing, polyphonic singing, playing traditional instruments, and games.



After a festive day in and around Dartlo, return to Omalo for dinner and overnight at the hotel.
Meals: B, L, D – *Samzeo Hotel or similar*



Day Nine, Monday, August 3 / August 24

Omalo • Tbilisi



This morning depart on the long but **beautiful drive to Tbilisi**. There will be plenty of opportunities to stop for photos and refreshments. Part of the drive is through the Kakheti lowlands, and part through the green Gombori Mountains that divide the region into two parts.

Before arriving in Tbilisi, stop for lunch at a private home-based cafe, whose owners are known for their **fantastic house-made cheeses and Georgian delicacies**, and have a chance to converse with the homeowners.

After dinner, continue to Tbilisi, where you will check into the hotel for a two-night stay. Dinner at the hotel or nearby restaurant.

Meals: B, L, D – *Old Tiflis Hotel Boutique or similar*

***Driving time** today will total about 5-6 hours, covering a distance of 186 km (116 mi). The drive from Omalo to Tbilisi over the Abano Pass is steep with rough, dirt roads, many switchbacks, and no guardrails.



Set out this morning to explore Tbilisi. Georgia's strip of central lowlands has long been an important link between East and West. **Tbilisi** is set at the mouth of this passageway, in the Mtkvari River valley,

and has changed hands many times. Most notably, the city was ruled by the Arabs for 400 years before King David the Builder defeated them in 1121 and moved his capital here from Kutaisi. The Georgian king fostered tolerance for Tbilisi's Arab population, and the city still has a multiethnic atmosphere.



Photo credit: Bob Huberman

The **red-roofed Old Town**, its houses sporting carved wooden balconies, sits beneath the Narikala Fortress on the hill above. Tbilisi was last razed in 1795 by Aga Khan, and most of the current buildings date from that time. The domed sulfur baths and the stone Anchiskhati Church were all that survived.

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

Enjoy **lunch and a wine-tasting** at one of these hip venues, the Vino Underground. This underground wine bar and cafe offers comparative tastings of delightful natural Georgian wines paired with cheeses and breads. Vino Underground was Tbilisi's first natural wine bar cafe.

After lunch, visit the Simon Janashia Museum of Georgia, a component of the **Georgian National Museum**, for a look at some of the country's most significant archaeological finds. Visitors can see one of the largest collections of ancient gold decorative arts – 5th century BC golden jewelry and artifacts discovered in a tomb in Akhlagori – and a golden trove of treasures from 3,000-year-old burial mounds of the Trialeti culture. The most famous exhibit here, however, may be the 1.8-million-year-old *Homo*



erectus skulls unearthed at Dmanisi, Georgia, from 1991 to 2005. This site was discovered by David Lordkipanidze, General Director of the museum.

Next, browse one of Tbilisi's contemporary art galleries, **Gallery 27**, and enjoy tea with a local artist sitting on the terrace of one of the most unique houses in Old Tbilisi. Converse with Nino Kvavilashvili, one of the local fabric artists who founded the popular La Maison Bleue Craft Studio.

Dinner tonight is at Azarpesha, a chic wine restaurant with a classy interior decorated with old photos and various antique drinking vessels. Azarpesha features a selection of natural Georgian wines as well as innovative cuisine.

Meals: B, L, D – *Old Tiflis Hotel Boutique or similar*



Day Eleven, Wednesday, August 5 / August 26

Tbilisi • Kutaisi

Depart this morning for Kutaisi, with stops along the way.

The first stop is at **Jvari Monastery**, set 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.

Continue to 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. It's similar to a cheesy pizza without the tomato sauce, made from leavened bread and commonly stuffed with more cheese.

Stop in at the **workshop of a qvevri maker**, who produces the 200- to 900-gallon earthenware vessels used for fermenting and storing Georgian natural wines. Because of the increasing interest in natural



traditional-made wines, the demand for *qvevri* has increased greatly in recent years. The *qvevri* maker will explain and demonstrate the *qvevri*-making process, and present the resulting vessels.



Lunch is at a local restaurant featuring **Imeretian-style 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.

Farther on toward Kutaisi, pause to visit an **Imeretian winemaker's family** in the Zestoponia area, and enjoy regional wine and snacks. Meet the family and take a walk in the village, surrounded by small vineyards. The innovative winemaker has been making wine since he was a child. He bottles one white and one dark red wine, which he ferments in *qvevri*.

Arrive in **Kutaisi**, an ancient city that served as an important merchant center on the route from

Greece to India. It became the capital of Georgia from 978 until 1122, when King David the Builder moved the capital to Tbilisi. It is thought that Jason and the Argonauts crossed the Straits of the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus to reach the Kingdom of Colchis here, where King Aeetes reigned and guarded the Golden Fleece.

The Colchis Fountain, in the center of Kutaisi, was inspired by rich golden jewelry discovered in early Colchian graves in nearby Vani. Two golden horses, copied from a pair of grave earrings, take center stage, while other golden animals ring the fountain. Many of the 28 Vani graves, dating from 400 BC, demonstrate the prosperity of the ancient Kingdom of Colchis.

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

Check in to the hotel and enjoy a light dinner.
Meals: B, L, D – *Hotel Argo* or similar



Photo credit: Bob Huberman



Day Twelve, Thursday, August 6 / August 27

Kutaisi • Mestia

Board the coach for the dramatic drive through the mountains to Mestia, in the Svaneti region. Along the way, make a stop to admire **Gelati Monastery**, founded in 1106 by Georgia's most famous king, David the Builder, and completed by his son in 1130. The monastery housed Georgia's first academy and was the burial place of the Georgian rulers. The well-preserved ensemble's stone churches and secular buildings are decorated with lovely frescoes, mosaics and enamel and metal work. Representing the flowering of art and architecture in Georgia's "Golden Age," the Gelati Monastery is a **UNESCO World Heritage Site**.



The **Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti region** includes both Samegrelo (also known as Megrelia) and Svaneti, where you are heading after lunch.

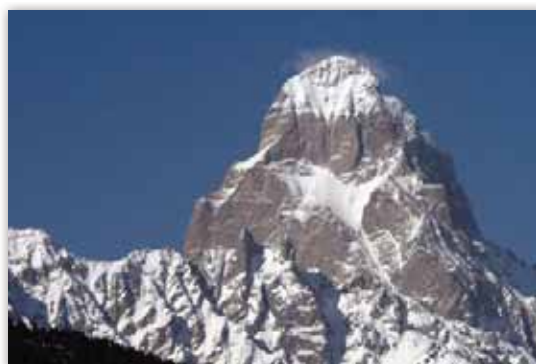
Lunch today is at the home of the **proprietors of the Oda Winery**. ("Oda" means a traditional Megrelian wooden house.) They have planted new stands of rare old grapes, Ojaleshi and Tchvitiluri, as well as other local varieties, and enjoy showing people around their spread.

Our hosts will be serving **Megrelian cuisine**. This way of cooking and eating has been 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. More is better here: Megrelian hot pepper

relish, *adjika*, is hotter and pepperier than in other regions of Georgia, its signature cheese, *sulguni*, is creamier and saltier, and its polenta dish, *elarji*, takes the everyday Georgian polenta-with-cheese dish called *ghomi* and dresses it up with even more cheese.

Continue up the road to Svaneti, with stops en route to take photos of the steep canyons and sharp peaks of the Caucasus Mountains.

Svaneti is a remote and distinct 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. It is said that the traditions and culture of Svaneti are "more Georgian" than anywhere else in Georgia.



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 serve as strategic apertures through which a variety of missiles could be aimed at invaders. Svaneti boasts at least 200 towers, many of which are around Mestia.



Arrive in Mestia this evening and check in to the hotel. Enjoy a light dinner at the hotel or a local restaurant.

Meals: B, L, D – *Tetnuldi Hotel, Hotel Svaneti or similar*

Day Thirteen, Friday, August 7 /August 28

Mestia

Set out to explore the town of **Mestia**. Start at the main **Museum of History and Ethnography** with its 10th-12th century manuscripts, unique 14th century metalwork and icons. This museum has a

comprehensive and beautifully mounted collection, labelled in English as well as Georgian. The exhibits include a historic collection of 1890s Svaneti photos by Italian Vittorio Sella, and a hall with reproductions of famed Svaneti church murals, but the highlight is the two-room treasury: Here you can see a Persian silver jug given to Svaneti by Queen Tamar, a number of beautifully illuminated gospels, and golden altar crosses and chased-metal icons of amazingly high quality – all from the 9th to 14th centuries. One rare icon shows St. George spearing Emperor Diocletian instead of his usual dragon.

Then see a typical Svanetian house or *machubi* which 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.



Lunch is in a local home during today's touring.

In the afternoon, take a drive even farther uphill to some of the villages of Upper Svaneti, such as Latali Lenjeri and/or Mulakhi villages.

Afterward, drive back down to the hotel in Mestia before gathering for dinner.

Meals: B, L, D – *Tetnuldi Hotel, Hotel Svaneti or similar*





*Day Fourteen, Saturday, August 8 /
August 29*

Mestia • Batumi

This morning embark on a **drive from the mountains to the Black Sea**, arriving in Batumi this afternoon. The landscape between Svaneti and Batumi eventually flattens out and begins to reveal palm trees, lemon trees and tea plantations along narrow curving roads with small communities where many Georgians come to spend their holidays. Batumi sits where the mountains meet the sea - in a tropical setting on the shores of the Black Sea.

Batumi is the capital of the autonomous region of Ajara and the most important port and resort city on this section of the Black Sea Coast. It is a lovely town with broad tree-lined streets and a leisurely pace where the locals drink coffee (considered the best in Georgia) at streetside cafes. Batumi was a burgeoning resort during Soviet times, and after a period with few foreign travelers visiting is now making a comeback.

Take a walking tour of Batumi's renovated **Old Town**, whose 19th century oil baron facades contrast with its slick modernized waterfront. Seafood is on the menu at dinner tonight.

Meals: B, L, D – *Divani Hotel, Port Batumi or similar*



Day Fifteen, Sunday, August 9 / August 30

Batumi • Akhaltsikhe • Vardzia

Drive through the **Ajara region** to the old town of Akhaltsikhe. The small Ajara region in southwest Georgia encompasses both the popular Black Sea beaches of subtropical Batumi, and the forested foothills and peaks of the Lesser Caucasus, some of them nearly 10,000 feet high. The humid climate of the lowlands fosters **tea and tobacco plantations**, as well as avocados and citrus fruits. Ajara was under Ottoman control for almost 200 years, but by 1878 Russia had won it away from the Turks.

While you are still in the lowlands, make a stop to explore a tobacco plantation. Enjoy **lunch at the farm** before driving the rugged road over Goderzi Pass, admiring the sensational views.

Arrive in **Akhaltsikhe**, near the Turkish border. The town was a crossroads of the old Silk Road, and encompasses the ruins of an ancient fortress, mosque and bathhouses. The newly renovated **Rabati, or Old Town**, of Akhaltsikhe 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 several old *darbazebi*, traditional Georgian houses.

Check in to the hotel for dinner and overnight.

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



Day Sixteen, Monday, August 10 /

August 31

Vardzia

Begin this morning with a tour of the cave town of **Vardzia** in the Samtskhe-Javakheti Region, a primarily agricultural area where Armenians make up a little over half of the population. Formerly called Meskheti, the region includes Borjomi, Bakuriani and Vardzia.

Along the way, stop to visit a **local family-owned farm** for conversation and lunch.



Arriving at **Vardzia**, take a walk through the rock-hewn monastery. 12th 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.

Have **dinner with a local family** in their home tonight.

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

*Day Seventeen, Tuesday, August 11 /
September 1*

**Vardzia • Phoka Nunnery
• Gyumri, Armenia**

Check out of the hotel and begin the drive toward Armenia, crossing the volcanic Javakheti Plateau, an alpine steppe region dotted with lakes, wetlands and birding sites.

Stop at the delightful **Phoka Nunnery** of St. Nino to meet with some of 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 honey products from their bees, and chocolates. They have also revived the art of enamel cloisonné, and sell all these products in their lovely little gift shop.

After lunch at a local cafe, continue to the Georgian border at Bavra, and undergo border formalities.

After clearing customs, transfer to Gyumri for dinner at **Cherkezi Dzor Fish Farm and Restaurant**. Enjoy just-caught fish and many other traditional Armenian dishes in wooden pavilions surrounding the fish ponds here. Sturgeon and Lake Sevan trout, among other varieties, are prepared as you stroll through the gardens or watch a baker baking *lavash* in a *tone* clay oven.

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



Day Eighteen, Wednesday, August 12 / September 2

Gyumri • Yerevan

Gyumri, at a little over 150,000 people, is Armenia's second-largest city. Known as Leninakan in Soviet times, it drew world-wide attention when the city was nearly destroyed in 1988 by a devastating earthquake. More than 25,000 people died and 60% of the buildings were destroyed. Most of these were relatively new Soviet apartments and schools, and the plan to replace them faltered when the Soviet Union did. Unfinished apartments built after the quake have been left to decay around the edges of the city. The czarist-era city center retained some of its better-constructed historic buildings.



On the way to Ashktarak, visit the **workshop of a master metal smith**, who demonstrates the art of working by hand with iron, heating it until it's red hot and malleable, then pounding and twisting it into his desired shapes. The master explains his process as he handles the fiery metal; examples of his handiwork line the stone walls.

The **Ashtarak** region is located on the southern slope of Mount Aragats. The area is ancient and has been inhabited since time immemorial; today it is dotted with stone monuments and ancient burial

places.

Perched on a rocky bluff over the Kasakh River, 13th century **Saghmosavank Monastery** (Monastery of the Psalms) is built of red and black stone and encompasses two churches, a graveyard dotted with *khachkar* crosses, and a special book repository. The monastery was famous for its illuminated manuscripts. Built by Prince Vache Vachutyan in the 13th century, Saghmosavank is representative of the central dome construction style typical of the period.

Enjoy lunch at the 170-year-old **home of Mrs. Hripsime**, the oldest house in Ashtarak. Meals are served in the beautiful old wine cellar, and prepared using traditional old Armenian recipes handed down to Mrs. Hripsime from her grandmother. If we're lucky, we will taste her lentil soup, *tolma* (stuffed vegetables) and *pokhindz*, an Armenian dessert porridge.

Continue on to **Yerevan**. The capital city of Armenia is older even than Rome. Yerevan was founded under the name Erebuni in 782 BC. In the 4th century, Armenia became the first nation in Europe to adopt Christianity as its official religion. The Armenian peoples' faith, culture and language have managed to survive through centuries of conflict with Arabs, Mongols, Persians and Turks: Yerevan changed hands 14 times between 1512 and 1735.

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



Check in to the hotel for dinner and overnight.
Meals: B, L, D – *Imperial Palace Hotel or similar*



Day Nineteen, Thursday, August 13 / September 3

Yerevan

This morning, head to the **Monastery of Khor Virap**, located 37 miles south of Yerevan, not far from the Turkish border. It is here that Gregory the Illuminator is thought to have been imprisoned with early Christian preachers. Today, one can see the monastery, which has been reconstructed and enhanced over time, and its **beautiful backdrop, Mt. Ararat**.



Continue to **Noravank**. Surrounded by red cliffs, the 13th century monastery of Noravank, with its fine 14th century Astvatsatsin ("Mother of God") Church, stands on a ledge above a gorge. The two-story church has remarkable carvings and a reconstructed stone roof.

Enter **Norik's home for a friendly meal** of Armenian specialties. Norik shows you how he distills different flavors of vodka at home, and how to make Armenian cheese. Visit his wine cellar and taste his wines, vodkas, and cognacs.

Next, visit the home of Michael, a **master rug and carpet maker** who has been nominated for several awards. His basement has been transformed into a modern studio. Michael lives in Nor Kharberd Village, where about half the population of some 6,000 is Yezidi.

Back in Yerevan, enjoy dinner at a local restaurant.
Meals: B, L, D – *Imperial Palace Hotel or similar*

Day Twenty, Friday, August 14 / September 4

Yerevan

Set out to explore **Armenia's capital city** today, noting the many layers of its history: medieval shrines hidden behind imposing Soviet-style façades, narrow lanes of the Old Town with its stone walls, Republic Square, the new icon of the Cascade, soaring Mother Armenia, Opera House, and North Avenue, the ambitious project of an independent Armenia.

Republic Square is Yerevan's central square, designed in 1924 by renowned architect Alexander Tamanian and built of the characteristic pinkish tuff that the city is known for. Called Lenin Square until 1990, Republic Square features evening sound and light shows centering on its surging fountains.





The giant **Cascade** stairway links central Yerevan to the Mother Armenia Statue in Victory Park. The top of the Cascade and along the stairway offer fantastic views of Yerevan and Mt. Ararat on a clear day. Modern sculptures dot the outside of the structure, including signature pieces by Colombian sculptor Fernando Botero and Barry Flanagan. The Cafesjian Museum of Modern Art, built on the extensive collection of Gerard Cafesjian, is located inside and focuses on sculpture, glass, and paintings from contemporary artists.

Ride the escalators towards the top of the stairway, and walk the rest of the way up until you reach the **Mother Armenia statue**. Designed so that its interior resembles the iconic St. Hripsime Church at Echmiadzin, the base of this 167-foot monument was first used as a museum dedicated to WWII. In 1995, it was renamed the Military Museum of Mother Armenia and also includes exhibits pertaining to the Nagorno-Karabakh war.

Pass by Yerevan's award-winning **Opera and Ballet Theater**, which is situated in the center of the city on Republic Square. The classical circular theater was designed by acclaimed architect Alexander Tamanian, who also designed Republic Square and the Cascade. Opened in 1933, the theater contains two performance halls, the Khachaturian Concert Hall and the Spendiaryan National Theater, both with excellent acoustics.

Visit the studio of **master craftsman Karen Hakobyan**, who is one of the finest makers of the traditional Armenian reed instrument, the *duduk*, as well as other Armenian reed instruments. With a sound somewhat like an oboe, the *duduk*'s roots go back several thousand years. The *duduk* and its music were inscribed on the **Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity** in 2008. Learn about Armenian instruments and enjoy tea or coffee with the master.

This evening, gather for a farewell dinner, featuring **Armenian folk music and dance**, to toast your journey.

Meals: B, D – Imperial Palace Hotel or similar

Day Twenty-One, Saturday, August 15 / September 5

Depart Yerevan

Following breakfast, the tour concludes with transfers to the airport.

Meals: B



Dates for 2020 – Two Departures – Explorer Series

July 26-August 15, 2020

August 16-September 5, 2020

Package Prices – 2020

4-12 passengers, \$8,295 per person, twin share

Single supplement \$1,095

Tour Includes

- Accommodations as noted in itinerary.
- 20 breakfasts, 18 lunches, and 19 dinners.
- 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, minivan, or 4WD vehicle (vehicle type will depend on group size and terrain).
- Guided sightseeing tours and entrance fees as outlined in itinerary.
- Special events, excursions and cultural performances per the itinerary.
- Bottled water at group meals.
- Gratuities to local guides, drivers, porters and other service personnel
- Complete pre-departure information including detailed packing list, reading list, *Touring with MIR* handbook with country-specific information, maps, and travel tips.
- Assistance booking your custom flight arrangements (on request; please note that international airfare is not included in the land tour cost).
- Customized visa application and instruction kit.
- Final document packet including luggage tags, final updates and more.

Not Included

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

Interested in travel insurance?

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

Start Planning Next Year Now

Dates for 2021– Two Departures – Explorer 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. **Note, the Tour Manager for our July 25, 2021 departure of this program is scheduled to be Michel Behar.**

July 25-August 14, 2021

August 1-21, 2021

Package Prices – 2021

4-12 passengers, \$8,495 per person, double occupancy
Single supplement \$1,195 per person.

About the Tour Manager: Michel Behar

July 25-August 14, 2021 departure **only**.

This journey will be accompanied and led by Michel Behar. Michel has been leading tours for MIR since 1998 and has led over 100 tours throughout MIR's realm. These include all the former Soviet republics, China, Tibet, Mongolia, Iran, Eastern Europe and the Balkans. He studied Russian and Arabic at the University of Amsterdam, and also studied Arabic at the University of Khartoum, Sudan. In addition, Michel, who lives in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, has an excellent command of English, French, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Turkish, Russian and Hebrew, speaks some Farsi and Greek, and of course speaks his native Dutch. He specializes in current affairs (politics, economics etc.) and 19th and 20th century history of the ex-USSR, Central-Asia, the Balkans, Near-East and North, West and Horn of Africa. Michel's interests include photography and world music.



Explorer Series

Explorer Series tours, with a maximum of 12 travelers, are the perfect match for those seeking a more active adventure. These interactive cross-cultural journeys are more limited in size and more spacious in depth and focus. We use a variety of accommodations ranging from small private hotels to bed and breakfasts to rustic lodges and homestays, and trips may feature hiking opportunities.

Important Notes: Is This Trip Right For You?

While the accommodations are comfortable and centrally located in the primary cities on this route, it is important to keep in mind that the accommodations in the more remote corners of the south Caucasus countries 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, unpaved, steep, mountainous 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, particularly in the Tusheti region of Georgia.

While this program is designed to be comfortable for travel in this region, this is very intentionally an adventuresome tour by nature of the destinations. 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, without handrails), the length and roughness of some overland drives, including mountainous single lane road travel by 4WD in the Tusheti region of Georgia, as well as other regions, and the overall shortcomings of the tourism infrastructure, particularly in Tusheti.

This program makes use of rustic hotels in the mountainous Svaneti region of Georgia. Electricity is not always a constant. If you rely on electricity for CPAP (continuous positive airway pressure), or for any other reason, you must have your own battery or other back-up, or please reconsider participation.

This itinerary features a significant amount of touring on foot. Some attractions are only accessible via steep staircases with tall, uneven steps, and some of the sites may involve steep steps inside narrow passageways with limited light. Travel within the Tusheti and Svaneti regions of Georgia includes mountain driving along very steep, narrow, winding roads without guardrails and at some elevation. To reap the full rewards of this adventure, travelers must be seeking adventure and able to walk at least a mile a day, keeping up with fellow travelers including on the steep steps and through villages with dirt paths and uneven terrain. 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 the South Caucasus, this may not always be possible. Only those willing to accept these conditions should consider joining this program. We strongly encourage you to talk with us about any questions you may have regarding the rigors of this trip or destination when considering this tour. If you are looking for a less adventurous experience, MIR offers two other scheduled small group tour options featuring more comfortable accommodation and which do not venture into the remote and undeveloped Tusheti region. Please ask for details on these tours (**Treasures of the South Caucasus** and **A Taste of Georgia**) as well as a custom private journey which may be a better match for your interests and physical capabilities.

Are You Prepared?

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

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

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

Please read the U.S. State Department's Travel Advisory regarding travel to Azerbaijan here: <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/traveladvisories/traveladvisories/azerbaijan-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

The South Caucasus countries experience hot summers and cold winters. At the peak of mid-summer, temperatures can peak above 100 degrees Fahrenheit in the lowlands, but the highlands can be much cooler. Nighttime brings cooler temperatures that generally drop to the 50s - again cooler in the highlands. Azerbaijan is the warmest of the three countries.

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

International Airfare

MIR's in-house, full-service air department is available to assist with your air travel needs. Check with MIR before booking air on your own, as we are happy to research and compare the best fares available through multiple channels. Airfare varies depending on a wide variety of factors, such as dates of travel and seasonality, seat availability, special airline promotions, how restrictive ticket changes are, how long the fares can be held without purchase, routing considerations such as stopovers and more. Tour dates are based on the land tour only. Our preferred carriers for this tour are Lufthansa, Austrian Airlines, United and Aeroflot, as they offer convenient itineraries and competitive rates from multiple cities across the U.S. to the Caucasus region.

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

Visas

At this time, US citizens only require one visa for this itinerary: Azerbaijani. You may also need a visa for any country you fly through to join the tour (such as Russia or Turkey) or a Georgian or Armenian visa if you are a non-U.S. passport holder. MIR will apply for the Azeri e-visa on your behalf, but we will need you to send us a color scan of your passport issuing/signature page, and a color scan of a passport photo in order to start the process. The cost of the Azerbaijan e-visa will be added to your tour invoice. The estimated cost is \$35 per person, visa fees are subject to change.

Please be aware that at the time of this writing, Azeri visas can no longer be obtained on arrival at the airport in Baku.

Visa processing for this tour will generally take about 1-2 weeks. With the transition to electronic visas, it is no longer necessary to send away your physical passport before the start of your trip. Please contact us with any questions you may have regarding the timeline for visa processing.

Pre-Tour Connection

This program is specially timed to connect to our **Return to the North Caucasus** tour which takes place before this one, **July 13-26, 2020**. Please find a brief description of this trip below:



Discover the ravishing mountain landscapes, medley of cultures, and overflowing hospitality of North Ossetia, Ingushetia, Chechnya, and Dagestan in the North Caucasus region, where ancient mountain tribes have guarded their way of life for thousand of years.

The programs connect with a full day drive from Makhachkala to Baku, at additional expense (from \$475 per person based on a minimum of four travelers). Please call if you're interested in extending your time in the region this way.

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

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

Essential 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.

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

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

Small Group Tours

Return to the North Caucasus, 14 days. Discover the ravishing mountain landscapes, medley of cultures, and overflowing hospitality of North Ossetia, Ingushetia, Chechnya, and Dagestan in the North Caucasus region, where ancient mountain tribes have guarded their way of life for thousand of years.

Conditions of Participation

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



Cancellation and Refund Policy

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

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

Scheduled MIR 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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