



photo: Ann Scheider

Treasures of the South Caucasus 2020



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Treasures of the South Caucasus: Classic Survey of Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia

Five Departures in 2020 – Premier Series – 15 Days

April 12-26 • May 3-17 • August 30-September 13 •
September 13-27 • September 27-October 11

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. The journey begins in Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, to explore the narrow stone streets of the old city. Travel overland to Shemakha and Sheki, both well-known for high-quality works of applied arts.

Cross the Georgian border and retrace part of the ancient Silk Road as it made its way to the Black Sea. Georgia's access to the sea has always marked it as a crossroads between East and West, and the passing trade has put its imprint on the country. The journey continues through Armenia, a country of great beauty and complex history and the first state to formally adopt Christianity (even before Rome). Travel past mountain monasteries, ancient fortresses, and the shores of high-altitude Lake Sevan to Armenia's capital city, Yerevan, taking in its marvelous museums, Soviet-era architecture, and rich artistic and cultural heritage. Admire six UNESCO World Heritage Sites as you discover the deeply fascinating and distinctive cultures of the Caucasus.



Daily Itinerary

Day 1, Sunday	Arrive Baku, Azerbaijan
Day 2, Monday	Baku
Day 3, Tuesday	Baku • day trip to Gobustan
Day 4, Wednesday	Baku • Shemakha • Sheki
Day 5, Thursday	Sheki
Day 6, Friday	Sheki • Signagi, Georgia
Day 7, Saturday	Signagi • Tbilisi
Day 8, Sunday	Tbilisi
Day 9, Monday	Tbilisi • Mtskheta • Ananuri • Gudauri • Kazbegi
Day 10, Tuesday	Kazbegi • Gori • Tbilisi
Day 11, Wednesday	Tbilisi • Dilijan • Lake Sevan • Yerevan
Day 12, Thursday	Yerevan • Garni • Geghard
Day 13, Friday	Yerevan • day trip to Echmiadzin
Day 14, Saturday	Yerevan day trip to Khor Virap
Day 15, Sunday	Depart Yerevan



MIR Signature Features

- 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.
- Imagine yourself a Silk Route merchant as you explore an authentic caravanserai in Sheki.
- Discover the importance of wine and food in Georgian culture as you feast and make merry at an authentic Georgian Table.
- Stroll the streets of Tbilisi, stopping to sample freshly baked bread or pick up a bottle of Georgian wine from a local market.
- Marvel at the vast collection of manuscripts and the reverence for the written word at the Matenadaran Museum in Yerevan.
- Experience the beauty of a live Armenian *a cappella* concert at the majestic temple of Garni.
- Pause for a moment of respect at the moving memorial to the victims of the Armenian Genocide.
- Feel the faith of centuries in the walls of the Geghard Monastery, hewn out of living rock.
- Taste and compare brandies at the Ararat Brandy Company, maker of Winston Churchill's favorite libation.

Tour Highlights

Baku	“Walled City of Baku with the Shirvanshah's Palace and Maiden Tower” (UNESCO World Heritage Site) - Icheri Sheher, Fountain Square, Martyrs' Lane, mud volcanoes, Bibi-Heybat Mosque
Gobustan	“Rock Art Cultural Landscape” (UNESCO World Heritage Site)
Shemakha	Djuma Mosque, reconstructed atop site of one of region's oldest mosques
Sheki	Caravanserai, local market, Kish Village
Kakheti Region	Tibaani vineyards, fortified hill town of Signagi, Bodbe Nunnery, Pheasant's Tears winery, Signagi Museum
Tbilisi	Views of Narikala Fortress and Mother Georgia Monument, Sioni Cathedral, Metekhi Church of the Virgin, Rustaveli Avenue and Old Town
Mtskheta	“Historical Monuments of Mtskheta” (UNESCO World Heritage Site), Svetitskhoveli Cathedral, Jvari Monastery
Ananuri	Ananuri fortress complex, Zhinali Reservoir
Kazbegi	Tsminda Sameba (Holy Trinity) and its bell tower
Gudauri	Highest village on Georgian Military Highway
Gori	Birthplace of Joseph Stalin, Stalin House Museum
Sevan Region	Lake Sevan at an altitude of 6,200 feet, Dilijan Village, Hagartsin Monastery, Sevan Monastery
Yerevan	Historical Museum, Armenian National Gallery, Genocide Memorial, Matenadaran Museum, Vernissage Art Park
Echmiadzin	“Cathedral and Churches of Echmiadzin and the Archaeological Site of Zvartnots” (UNESCO World Heritage Site)
Khor Virap	View of Mt. Ararat, monastery of Khor Virap
Garni	Temple of Garni
Geghard	“Monastery of Geghard & Upper Azat Valley” (UNESCO World Heritage Site)
Ashtarak	Mt. Aragats, villages of Ashtarak



Daily Itinerary

Important note: Please see the notes later in this document under “Pre- and Post-Tour Options” for details on hotel check-in time at the beginning of the program.

Day One, Sunday Arrive Baku, Azerbaijan

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

Day Two, Monday 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 touring with a visit to the **Martyrs’ Cemetery**. Also known as Martyrs’ Lane, it is a beautiful place set on a terraced hill above Baku’s harbor, and was formerly called Kirov Park, after one of Lenin’s contemporaries. Today, it pays homage to the 137 people killed during Black January 1990, when the





Soviets sent tanks into the city and fired on Azerbaijani civilians. The attack marked the turning point in the country's drive toward independence. The memorial has expanded to honor the Azerbaijanis who lost their lives in the conflict with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh.

Continue 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.

Explore some of the sights on the barren, sandy **Absheron Peninsula** today. Flaming natural gas vents here may have inspired Zarathustra, a local resident around 1000 BC, to include fire rituals in his Zoroastrian religion.

There were once more than 30 fortresses dotting the Absheron Peninsula, protecting its inhabitants from invaders crossing the Caspian Sea from the East, but the **tower at Ramana** is the most impressive. UNESCO lists the current building as dating from the 14th century; parts of it have been standing guard over this coastline since before Timur's invasion of Azerbaijan in 1380.

The history of Baku's oil boom is inextricably bound up with the **Nobel family**, including Alfred, the man who established the Nobel Prizes. About 12% of the money he used to fund the prizes came from his interest in the Branobel Oil Company, founded by siblings Robert and Ludvig Nobel in 1876. **Villa Petrolea** is the name the Nobel brothers gave the home they built on the border of the "White City," the residential section, and the "Black City," the industrial section, of Baku. With fertile soil brought in the empty ships that were then filled with oil, the brothers landscaped a lovely park around the villa. The imposing mansion and park were restored and renovated in 2008.

Return to Baku and celebrate the beginning of the journey with a **welcome dinner** at a local restaurant.

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

Day Three, Tuesday **Baku • day trip to Gobustan**

After lunch at a local restaurant, set out for Gobustan, stopping en route at the seaside Bibi-Heybat Mosque. Originally constructed in the 13th century in honor of the sister of Imam Ali, the **Bibi-Heybat Mosque** was completely destroyed in 1934, as a result of Stalin's decrees. Local legends say that a white-robed woman was seen disappearing into the sea the day after the mosque's destruction. Reconstructed from plans and photographs, the new mosque was dedicated in



1998. Today, it sits near one of Azerbaijan's first oil fields, which grew during the first oil boom in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Continue to the important site of ancient petroglyphs, the **UNESCO World Heritage Site, "Rock Art Cultural Landscape" of Gobustan**. The rock carvings here were discovered accidentally by quarry workers in the 1930s. Since then, the carvings depicting men, women, animals and artifacts have been the focus of much study and speculation. The record left by these ancient people does attest to a far vaster Caspian Sea, and gives insight into details of daily life such as hunting and recreation, culture and economy.

Admire the vivid colors and bold designs of Azeri, Caucasian and Iranian carpets on display at the **Azerbaijan Carpet Museum**. The museum collection was begun in the late 1960s, but the carpets in the museum today date as far back as the 16th century. Regional differences and stylistic details are highlighted, revealing how traditional carpets mix practical value, artistic merit, historical significance and beauty.



Take in the stunning exterior of the **Heydar Aliyev Cultural Center**, the swooping architectural work that has become a landmark of modern Baku. Opened in 2012, the center includes an innovative performing arts auditorium and spaces for major art exhibitions. The 619,000-square-foot building was designed by Iraqi-British architect Zaha Hadid and named after Azerbaijan's leader from 1969 to 1982 and from 1993 to 2003.

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

Day Four, Wednesday **Baku • Shemakha • Sheki**

Set off this morning after breakfast; the eventual destination today is Sheki.

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.

Seventy miles west of Baku, stop in **Shemakha**, former capital of the once-powerful Shirvan Khanate from the sixth to the 15th centuries. Explore the town, passing by the recently completed



Djuma Mosque, built on the site of one of the oldest mosques in the Caucasus. Across the valley is the



Yeddi Gumbaz (“Seven Domes”) Royal Mausoleum, where the Shirvan khans were buried. From here, look back at the twin hills overlooking Shemakha, where the 12th century Gulistan Fortress and citadel stood during its years as a capital.

Entering Sheki this evening, check in at the Sheki Saray Hotel and enjoy dinner.
Meals: B, L, D – *Sheki Saray Hotel or similar*

Day Five, Thursday
Sheki

Sheki is one of the oldest towns in Azerbaijan, said 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 got a grip on 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 silks and special sweets.



Embark on a walking tour of the town, exploring some of its small gems including the **local market**.

Continue to **Kish Village**, located on the bank of the river by the same name. What you see today is all that remains of the original town of Sheki before the 18th-century mudslide that all but destroyed it. The oldest discoveries have been ceramics of the Kur-Araz culture, dating from the Early Bronze Age, about 3000 BC.



Before dinner, stop at the **caravanserai**, one of the remaining links to Sheki’s rich past. Caravanserais were the inns of the Silk Road, and Sheki’s still accommodate 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.

Enjoy dinner at the caravanserai and return to the Sheki Saray for an overnight.
Meals: B, L, D – *Sheki Saray Hotel or similar*



Day Six, Friday
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 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. 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, followed by 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 the green valleys below.

In Signagi, take a tour of the **Pheasant’s Tears Winery**, 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 Georgia’s famous wine

region at a tasting, and perhaps purchase a bottle of a new favorite to share with friends and family back home.



After the winery tour, enjoy a taste of a typical **Georgian Table**. The 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, little meat dumplings called *khinkali*, salads and marinated vegetables, just to name a few. A large feast, or *supra*, will have a sort of 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.

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

Please note, Day Six's hotel accommodations may shift from Signagi to a neighboring four star property in Kvareli (Royal Batoni) or Tsinandali (Radisson Tsinandali) two of Kakheti's other famed winemaking destinations. Touring schedules may require some slight adjustment depending on which property is used, but travelers will still see everything featured in the above itinerary. Your tour's point person will provide you with the final details approximately 21-14 days prior to departure.

Day Seven, Saturday Signagi • Tbilisi

Spend time exploring Signagi this morning, beginning with a visit to the Signagi Archaeological and Ethnographic Museum. Part of the Georgian National Museum consortium, it focuses on regional ethnography, with an especially strong collection of artifacts uncovered during archaeological digs around David Gareja Monastery. The museum also has 16 paintings by Georgian master artist Pirosmiani, who was born in Kakheti Province.

A little over a mile from Signagi is 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 some fine frescoes, and its surrounding gardens are refreshing. Some of the nuns here may speak English.



Continue on to the Georgian capital, **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.

The main thoroughfare of Tbilisi, **Rustaveli Avenue** was named for Shota Rustaveli, a medieval Georgian poet. The Parliament and many of the city's museums and cultural centers are located along the street.



Notice the numerous elaborately carved wooden balconies attached to the houses in the Old Town, a feature of the city's architectural landscape that often appears in paintings.

Some of the best views of Tbilisi are found at **Sameba Cathedral**. One of the largest Orthodox cathedrals in the world, the Sameba, or Trinity, Cathedral in Tbilisi was finished in 2004. Rising from Elia Hill in Old Tbilisi, the golden-domed cathedral is part of a complex that includes the residence of the Georgian Patriarch.

Dinner tonight is independent, with suggestions from your guide.

Meals: B, L – *Marriott Hotel or similar*

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Day Eight, Sunday Tbilisi

Touring in Tbilisi continues this morning. 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 Basilica were all that survived.

Enjoy **views of the Narikala Fortress**, the fourth century citadel built to keep watch over the narrowest point on the Mtkvari River. Great views of the fortress can also be found from the 13th century **Metekhi Church of the Virgin**, constructed on an outcropping above the river on the site of David the Builder's former palace. The equestrian statue outside the church is one of the enduring symbols of Tbilisi.

Continue with a walking tour and stop by a **local bakery**, then through the **Azeri Quarter**. Once known as the "Persian District" and now known as the "Azeri Quarter," the Meidani neighborhood of Tbilisi is located in one of the most ancient parts of the city. Here, one can get a true idea of the mixed heritage of this region. An Armenian Orthodox church stands next to a Georgian Orthodox Church, a Jewish Synagogue, and a Muslim mosque.



Tbilisi's earliest **sulfur baths** were probably built during Arab rule in the seventh or eighth centuries, when it was discovered that hot springs are just under the surface in the old part of Tbilisi. In the 13th century, there may have been up to 68 baths in Tbilisi; now there are only six or seven. Most of the baths in use today were built in the 17th century. Pedestrians can see steam venting from the dome-shaped underground baths as they pass by. The temperatures of the different baths are between 75 and 107 degrees Fahrenheit, and are considered therapeutic.

At the spiritual heart of the Georgian Orthodox religion in Tbilisi is the **Sioni Cathedral**, named for Mt. Zion in Jerusalem and located in the Old Town. Though a cathedral has stood in this spot since the fifth



century, what remains today tells the story of Tbilisi itself in its many reconstructions throughout the city's history. The church features unique golden stonework, but the draw for many visitors remains the chance to see St. Nino's Cross. Legend says that when St. Nino brought Christianity to Georgia in the fourth century, she constructed this cross from vine leaves and her own hair; today it is the most important relic in the Georgian Orthodox church.



Weather permitting, take a **cable car** to Narikala Fortress and visit **St. Nicholas Church**. One other feature seen from many vantage points on today's tour is **Mother Georgia**, a soaring monument above the city bearing a sword for her enemies and a bowl of wine for her guests.

After lunch at a local restaurant, make a visit to the top floor of the Georgian National Museum, now home to the **Museum of Soviet Occupation**. Opened in 2006 on the anniversary of Georgia's declaration of independence from the Russian Empire in 1918, the Museum of Soviet Occupation is located on the third floor of the Georgian National Museum. The permanent exhibit was created to commemorate the nearly 900,000 Georgians who were killed or deported during the Soviet years of 1921 to 1991. Photos, videos and archival documents teach young Georgians and remind older generations of the country's history as a Soviet Socialist Republic.

Dinner tonight is at a local restaurant, with a stop beforehand at the **Elene Akhvlediani House Museum**, named for the Georgian artist (1901-1975) perhaps best remembered for her atmospheric paintings of Old Tbilisi. She was one of an influential generation of Georgian artists who began their careers in the early 20th century. Elene's interests included stage and costume design; during her lifetime she produced designs for over 70 productions. Her studio, always a gathering place for artists, musicians and poets,

was transformed in 1978 into a house museum.
Meals: B, L, D – *Marriott Hotel or similar*

Day Nine, Monday

Tbilisi • Mtskheta • Ananuri • Gudauri • Kazbegi

Today, embark on an exploration of the hidden treasures along the **Georgian Military Highway**. The highway was completed by Czar Alexander I in 1817. The czar's engineers simply enlarged a track that





had been used since at least 150 BC – the only north-south route through the Greater Caucasus from Russia to Georgia. The spectacular highway runs from Tbilisi through rolling green hills and steep, arid mountains dotted with ancient stone defensive towers, then travels over the Krestovy Pass at almost 8,000 feet. Along the way, herds of sheep may spill across the road and old, fortress-like churches watch over the villages. The first stop is **Jvari Monastery**, an imposing structure atop a hill overlooking the confluence of the Kura and Aragvi Rivers.

Continue to nearby **Mtskheta**, the capital of the eastern Georgian

kingdom of Iberia from the third century BC until the fifth century AD. Because of its location on the rivers, it was an important market town.

As the center of the Iberian civilization, Mtskheta was both spiritually and culturally significant. Georgia's conversion to Christianity took place here in 337 AD. The Orthodox churches built during this period - **Svetitskhoveli Cathedral**, its interior decorated in murals, and Jvari Church, one of the first Christian churches in Georgia – are considered among the finest in the country. Mtskheta is designated as the “**Historical Monuments of Mtskheta**” **UNESCO World Heritage Site**.



Continue along the highway to Ananuri. The **Ananuri fortress complex** was built by the dukes of the Aragvi Valley in the 17th century in order to control the road below. Its notched fortress walls contain two churches and a 12th century watchtower. The old frescoes in the churches are faded, but the carvings around the doorways and on the outside walls are still vibrant. Below the fortress at the foot of the green hills gleams the blue expanse of **Zhinvali Reservoir**, making this one of Georgia's most beautiful places.





Stop for lunch in **Gudauri**, the highest village on the highway and home to a ski resort built by Austrians. The splendid views and alpine air combine to make the spot a marvelous break from city streets.

Drive through fabulous mountain scenery to **Kazbegi**, a small alpine village set at over 6,000 feet in a monumental bowl of mountain peaks, including the Caucasus' highest, Mt. Kazbek. The town is located on the bank of the Tergi River, and the main occupation here is cattle breeding. Perched on a hill above Kazbegi are the 14th century church of **Tsminda Sameba** ("Holy Trinity") and its bell tower, their silhouettes dark against the mountain. Visit the church and take in the spectacular views of the valley

below.

Enjoy dinner at the hotel with the rest of the evening free to explore.
Meals: B, L, D – *Rooms Hotel or similar*



Day Ten, Tuesday **Gudauri • Gori • Tbilisi**

This morning, depart Gudauri for Tbilisi. En route, stop at **Gori** (from the Georgian word *goraki*, meaning "hill"), once the stronghold of Georgian kings, and today better known for its connection with Stalin, who was born here in December 1879 and lived here until 1883. Stalin's father was a local shoemaker named Vissarion Dzhugashvili. Their original wooden hut, located on Stalin Prospekt, is today the **Stalin House Museum**. Also on the grounds of the museum is **Stalin's private railway car** in which he traveled throughout the Soviet Union.

Stop for lunch at a local restaurant en route back to Tbilisi. Take some time this afternoon to explore independently, perhaps strolling along Rustaveli Avenue before enjoying a "farewell to Georgia" dinner with entertainment at a local restaurant.
Meals: B, L, D – *Marriott Hotel or similar*



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Day Eleven, Wednesday Tbilisi • Dilijan • Lake Sevan • Yerevan

Following an early breakfast, depart for the Sadakhlo border crossing at the Georgian/Armenian border. After undergoing the usual customs formalities, transfer to the Armenian coach for the duration of the trip.

Although less than half of the land in Armenia is arable, the country offers an array of geographical topographies and an abundance of flora and fauna. Armenia has had a long and difficult history, caught as it was between the Greek, Roman, Persian and Ottoman empires.

In the **Sevan Region**, stop near the village of **Dilijan**. The product of both Georgian and Armenian influence, Dilijan is a noted resort town ensconced in gorgeous woodland scenery. Surrounded by Dilijan National Park, the town is renowned as a place frequented by artists, composers and filmmakers.

The intimate 11th century **Hagartsin Monastery** is set in a gorge above a mountain stream and surrounded by a forest of mature oaks. A particularly lovely ensemble, Hagartsin has never been fortified.



The highlight of the region is **Lake Sevan** itself. At an elevation of 6,200 feet, Lake Sevan is one of the largest mountain lakes in the world. Its stunning setting in the hills makes it a popular summer resort for the locals. When the lake was partially drained in the Soviet era for hydroelectric purposes, the receding waters revealed ancient dwellings and evidence of a highly developed Bronze Age culture. Time may permit a visit to the small market in front of the monastery here.

Located on a peninsula that was once an island in Lake Sevan, the **Sevan Monastery** is made up of two remaining churches – the Church of Saint Astvatsatsin and the Church of Saint Arakelots – though it was a much larger compound at one time and ruins of other buildings can be seen. The monastery was founded in 874 AD, and was an important center of pilgrimage for Armenian Christians throughout the Middle Ages. Some of the artifacts from the monastery, such as its 12th century carved wooden doors, are preserved in the State History Museum in Yerevan. Visitors to the site should note the carved green *khachkars*.

Continue on to the **capital city of Yerevan**. Upon arrival, check into the hotel, situated on Yerevan's **Republic Square**. Various governmental offices, the Historical Museum and the Armenian National Gallery are all located on the same square.

Meals: B, L, D – *Grand Hotel, Marriott Hotel or similar*



Day Twelve, Thursday
Yerevan • Garni • Geghard

Yerevan, the present-day capital of Armenia, was founded under the name Erebuni in 782 BC. The Armenian people, a tribe of Indo-Europeans known at the time as the Hayk, took Erebuni from its founders and began their own empire, soon swallowed up by Alexander the Great. Later, Tigran the Great united two separate Armenian kingdoms into one large empire, but this was short-lived as well. Even before the time of Christ, the **Armenian Empire** had come and gone, with all its territory conquered by the Romans.

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, along with a ring of parkland. Mountains surround the city, including the snow-covered peaks of Ararat to the south and the four peaks of Mt. Aragats to the northwest.

Touring today starts with the collection at Yerevan's **Matenadaran Museum**. A vast collection of more than 23,000 manuscripts and over 500,000 archival documents, the Matenadaran has existed since the fifth century and is one of the world's oldest book depositories. The rooms of the museum showcase a variety of modern and ancient languages, with beautifully decorated manuscripts and literary treasures about all aspects of Armenian culture and scholarship. The front of the hilltop building overlooking the city has statues of great Armenian scholars, most notably the inventor of the Armenian alphabet, St. Mesrop Mashtots, in honor of whom the Matenadaran received its own name.

Depart to Garni for a tour of the **Temple of Garni**, which stands on a cliff near the Azat River valley. With walls of huge basalt blocks, the temple was once the summer palace of King Trdat I, who built it in the first century AD. Destroyed by an earthquake in 1679, the monument has been restored by Armenian architects in recent years; skilled work continues on the third century royal baths and their striking mosaics.

Enjoy a live *a cappella* concert, either here or at the nearby **UNESCO World Heritage Site, "Monastery of Geghard and the Upper Azat Valley."**

Visit a village home and enjoy a **home-cooked meal with villagers**. Converse about rural Armenian life as you enjoy regional delicacies.

Next, depart for **Geghard Monastery**. The 12th to 13th-century monastery, carved into the side of a mountain, is one of the most fascinating monuments in Armenia. The church, built beside the river at the foot of the rock, provides access to another building with a roof formed by stalactites. The convent is in a cave adjoining this building; the only way in is through a narrow opening in the roof. It was carved out of the rock by a single craftsman who spent his entire life decorating and enlarging the cave chamber and its smaller alcove, used for burials.



This stunning structure includes monastic cells, churches, tombs and *khachkar* crosses (on the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage List), all hewn from solid rock. Armenia is famous for these intricately carved stone crosses; they are a uniquely Armenian art form. Modeled after early wooden crosses, the first *khachkar* appeared in the fourth-seventh centuries.



Return to Yerevan for dinner at a local restaurant.
Meals: B, L, D – *Grand Hotel, Marriott Hotel or similar*

Day Thirteen, Friday
Yerevan • day trip to Echmiadzin

This morning, visit the city of **Echmiadzin, a UNESCO World Heritage Site** called “**Cathedral and Churches of Echmiadzin and the Archaeological Site of Zvartnots.**”

It was founded as Vargharshapat in 117 AD and was once the capital of Armenia. Echmiadzin is the center of an agricultural area renowned for its fruit and wine, but is better known as the spiritual center of Armenia and the seat of the Catholicos, or Patriarch of the Armenian Apostolic Church. Echmiadzin is a special place of pilgrimage for Christian Armenians the world over. It was here that St. Gregory the Illuminator had a vision of Christ descending to earth, and on this spot the Cathedral at Echmiadzin was built in 301 AD.



The visit begins with a short tour to the nearby seventh century **Hripsimeh Martyria Church** with its beautifully carved wooden door and 18th century mother-of-pearl altarpiece. It is sometimes possible to see the underground crypt where Zoroastrian fire rituals were once performed.

The church complex also includes the ruins of the seventh century **UNESCO World Heritage Site, Zvartnots Cathedral**, located a few miles east of Echmiadzin. In its day, Zvartnots was the largest round church in the world. It was sacked in the 10th century by Arab invaders, possibly because they wanted no building higher than their own mosque. Return to Yerevan in time for lunch at a local restaurant, then set out on an afternoon tour of the capital.

Back in the capital, make a visit to the **Genocide Memorial**, standing in a park at the top of Tsitsernakaberd, or “Swallow Castle.” According to scholarly estimates, over one million Armenians



perished as a result of policies of the last Ottoman government between 1914 and 1918. Thousands were deported to Syria and faced consequent starvation, while others were methodically massacred. Many of the remaining Armenians fled to other countries in what is now called the Armenian diaspora.



Finally, pay a visit to Yerevan's famous **Ararat Brandy Factory**. From 1953 until 1991, it was the sole brandy distillery in all of Armenia. Though that has changed, the factory still produces brandy to the rigid national standards that so impressed Winston Churchill that he allegedly ordered 400 bottles per year. Explore the onsite museum or sample some of the wares at the tasting bar.

Dinner tonight will be independent.
Meals: B, L – *Grand Hotel, Marriott Hotel or similar*

Day Fourteen, Saturday **Yerevan day trip to Khor Virap**

This morning, head to the **Monastery of Khor Virap**, located 27 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**.

Return to the city center and have lunch at a local restaurant. Next, enjoy a **master class** to learn about the *duduk*, Armenia's national instrument. The sound of this double-reeded flute made from apricot wood is unmistakably tied to the region. Listen to an experienced *duduk* player tell about this iconic instrument and its origins, while receiving a live demonstration of *duduk* music.



Time should permit a brief visit to a local market before continuing to **Vernissage, the weekend open-air market**. This is the best opportunity in Yerevan for shopping and people-watching. Here you will find a wide assortment of woodcarvings, ceramics, jewelry, paintings and other high-quality souvenirs. Enjoy some free time to wander and explore.

Return to the hotel to rest before enjoying a festive **farewell dinner** at a local restaurant.
Meals: B, L, D – *Grand Hotel, Marriott Hotel or similar*

Day Fifteen, Sunday
Depart Yerevan

Following breakfast, the tour concludes with transfers to the airport.
Meals: B

Dates for 2020 – Four Departures – Premier Series

April 12-26, 2020
May 3-17, 2020
August 30-September 13, 2020
September 13-27, 2020
September 27-October 11, 2020

Package Prices – 2020

5-16 passengers, \$7,795 per person, twin share
Single supplement \$1,595

Tour Includes

- Accommodations as noted in itinerary.
- 14 breakfasts, 13 lunches, and 11 dinners. A few lunches and dinners are not included so that you may enjoy a chance to experiment on your own.
- 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 minivan (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.



- Baggage handling where available.
- 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

- 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.
- Single supplement charge, if requested or required.
- 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- Four Departures – Premier 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.

April 11-25, 2021

May 2-16, 2021

August 29-September 12, 2021

September 12-26, 2021

Package Prices – 2021

5-16 passengers, \$7,995 per person, double occupancy
Single supplement \$1,695 per person.



Premier Series

MIR's Premier 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. While all MIR trips feature comfortable, well-located hotels, Premier Series programs take advantage of five star or best-in-class properties along the way wherever possible.

Important Notes: Is This Trip Right For You?

While the accommodations are the best available, they will vary from four to five star, large, western-style hotels to a small, private hotel in Sheki. It is important to keep in mind that the countries of the South Caucasus 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 bus rides and the overall shortcomings of the tourism infrastructure. 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 monasteries involve steep steps inside narrow passageways with 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 the Caucasus, 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 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. Late spring and early fall are the best months to travel to these countries. The spring provides a look at the wildflowers, while the fall brings spectacular colors as the leaves change. Rain is minimal. Late May brings temperatures ranging from 60-85 degrees Fahrenheit, and at the peak of mid-summer, temperatures can peak above 100 degrees Fahrenheit in the lowlands. September/October temperatures are slightly cooler, ranging during the day from 60-80 degrees Fahrenheit. Nighttime in both seasons brings cooler temperatures that generally drop to the 50s. Azerbaijan is the warmest of the three countries.

Later fall is arguably the best time of year to visit the Caucasus, and mid-to-late October is no exception. The intense heat and crowds of the summer are gone, and sunshine remains plentiful. Days in the capital cities are temperate. In October all three capital cities may see highs in the mid- to upper-60s. Nights tend to be a bit chillier across the region, with temperatures regularly dropping below 50 degrees. Rain is minimal during this time of year, but Baku and eastern Georgia can be breezy. In the mountainous region of Kazbegi, temperatures are regularly five to ten degrees cooler than in Tbilisi.

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- and Post-Tour Options

Please note that touring begins on Monday (Day Two) of the Treasures of the South Caucasus program. Sunday (Day One) of the program is left completely free as an arrival day. Hotel rooms are available from about 2:00 p.m. Sunday onward, and this night is included in the price of your tour package. Many clients will arrive late night on Day One or early a.m. hours of Day Two, and travelers arriving at those times will have immediate access to the hotel room on arrival. For clients who want hotel room access earlier than that time due to earlier arrival in Baku, MIR will be happy to pre-book an additional night or nights at the tour hotel, at additional expense. Please discuss with your Tour Specialist if you have any questions.

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. 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).

Over 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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