



**Eastern Turkey & Georgia:
Crossroads of Ancient Civilizations
2021**



Photo: Bob Huberman



Photo: John Wurdeman

Eastern Turkey & Georgia: Crossroads of Ancient Civilizations

From the Black Sea to the Caucasus Mountains

One departure in 2021 – Cultural Series – 18 Days

June 9-26

The rugged sunburnt Anatolian Plateau of Eastern Turkey and the steep-sided green valleys of Georgia are brilliantly paired on this unusual backroad exploration. Begin in iconic Istanbul, where both continents and cultures collide, and follow traces of the old Silk Road through arid valleys and rocky hills rich with the traces of early civilizations. Then explore the beautiful little country of Georgia, where guests are welcomed at tables laden with some of the finest food and wine on earth.



Daily Itinerary

Day 1, Wednesday, June 9	Arrive Istanbul, Turkey
Day 2, Thursday, June 10	Istanbul • fly to Van
Day 3, Friday, June 11	Van • day trip to Akhtamar Island
Day 4, Saturday, June 12	Van • Dogubeyazit • Kars
Day 5, Sunday, June 13	Kars • day trip to Ani & Bogatepe village
Day 6, Monday, June 14	Kars • Akhaltsikhe, Georgia • Vardzia
Day 7, Tuesday, June 15	Vardzia
Day 8, Wednesday, June 16	Vardzia • Batumi
Day 9, Thursday, June 17	Batumi • Zugdidi • Mestia (Svaneti Region)
Day 10, Friday, June 18	Mestia • Ushguli (Svaneti)
Day 11, Saturday, June 19	Ushguli (Svaneti)
Day 12, Sunday, June 20	Ushguli • Okureshi • Kutaisi
Day 13, Monday, June 21	Kutaisi • Signagi
Day 14, Tuesday, June 22	Signagi • day trip to Kakhetian villages Tibaani, Qedeli
Day 15, Wednesday, June 23	Signagi • Tbilisi
Day 16, Thursday, June 24	Tbilisi
Day 17, Friday, June 25	Tbilisi
Day 18, Saturday, June 26	Depart Tbilisi



MIR Signature Experiences

- Visit the Van Carpet Weaving Center, an EU supported project to support rural families, and learn how Kurdish *kilims* and their blue, red and white patterns are produced by the women of Van.
- Board a boat for the trip from Van across the lake to Akhtamar Island.
- Inspect the 1,000-year-old Armenian Church of the Holy Cross on Akhtamar Island; which held its first Christian service in 95 years in 2010.
- See the fabled Biblical Mt. Ararat with its snow-covered peak.
- Visit a former dairy farm turned cheese museum in Bogatepe village, and lunch at a village cooperative.
- Discover the Vardzia wine terraces with a Meskhetian winemaker, and enjoy a wine tasting of natural *qvevri*-made wines.
- Enter medieval fortress towers of stacked stone and visit the mountain homes of the Svan people.
- Learn about Svanetian culture over a meal with a family in a private home.
- Visit Ushguli, reportedly one the highest continuously inhabited villages in Europe.
- Be a guest at a 140-year-old family home in Okureshi village and taste Usakhelouri wine, a rare and ancient red wine variety of the Lechkhumuri region of Western Georgia.
- Enjoy lunch and a wine tasting of Georgian *qvevri* wines in Chardakhi village.
- Savor an authentic “Georgian Table,” featuring an abundance of local specialties with a Georgian toast-master, a *tamada*.
- Experience a performance of Georgian polyphonic vocal traditions over dinner.
- Stroll through the pedestrian streets of Tbilisi and stop to admire the uniquely Georgian architecture of houses adorned with carved wooden balconies.

Trip Highlights

Istanbul	Welcome dinner
Van	Van Archaeological Museum, Van Castle, Van Kedi Evi (Van Cat House), boat ride on Lake Van, Cavustepe Royal Urartian citadel, Van carpet weaving center
Akhtamar Island	10th century Church of the Holy Cross, which saw its first Christian service in 95 years in 2010
Dogubeyazit	Muradiye Waterfall, Ishak Pasha Palace, views of Mt. Ararat
Kars	Old Citadel of Kars, 10th century Church of the Apostles
Ani	Medieval Armenian capital of Ani
Bogatepe village	Former dairy farm now cheese museum, lunch in a village cooperative
Akhaltsikhe	Rabati Castle
Vardzia	Vardzia cave town, Vardzia wine terraces with a Meskhetian winemaker, wine tasting of <i>qvevri</i> wines, lunch with family in village outside the city
Saro village	Ancient ruins of three megalithic fortresses, old Meskhetian dwelling
Goderdzi Pass	Travel by 4WD toward western Georgia with village visit en route
Khulo village	Tobacco plantation visit
Batumi	Capital of the Ajara region Black Sea resort area
Zugdidi	Gateway to Svaneti, capital of the Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti region
Mestia	9th century Latali Church, National Ethnographic Museum, examples of traditional Svanetian buildings, home-cooked meal with a Svan family
Svaneti	Svaneti Region (UNESCO World Heritage Site), medieval stone watchtowers
Ushguli	One of the highest continually inhabited villages in Europe, Ushguli Museum, 12th century, Lamaria Church, spectacular views of Mt. Shkhara, optional hikes
Okureshi village	Family visit at a 140 year old home sampling Usakhelouri wine, a rare and ancient red wine variety of the Lechkhumuri region of western Georgia
Kutaisi	Fabled city of the Golden Fleece, Bagrati Cathedral and Gelati Monastery (UNESCO World Heritage Sites)



Chardakhi village	Lunch and wine tasting of <i>qvevri</i> wines by one of the country's renown natural winemakers
Signagi	"Georgian Table" feast at Pheasant's Tears Restaurant, walking tour through narrow streets toward the defensive walls, Signagi Archaeological & Ethnographic Museum, Bodbe Monastery
Tibaani village	Vineyard tour and wine tasting at Pheasant's Tears vineyard at Tibaani in the valley, lunch at the on-site Crazy Pomegranate restaurant
Kakheti villages	Visit a private small-scale silk farm in Zemo Magharo village and taste local craft beer onsite at the Lost Ridge Brewery in Qedeli village
Tbilisi	Narikala Fortress and Mother Georgia Monument, walking tour of Old Tbilisi, Gabriadze leaning tower, Anchiskhati Basilica, stroll through pedestrian streets adorned with carved wooden balconies, sulfur bath area, Sololaki neighborhood stroll

Daily Itinerary

Day One, Wednesday, June 9

Arrive Istanbul

Arriving in Istanbul you are transferred to the hotel to rest and refresh. Gather this evening for a welcome dinner and to meet fellow travelers.

Meals: D – House Hotel Karakoy, 10 Karakoy or similar



photo: Republic of Turkey Ministry of Culture



Day Two, Thursday, June 10

Istanbul • fly to Van

Take a flight this morning to Van, in eastern Turkey (anticipated schedule is for an early a.m. flight, with schedules subject to change).

Explore the **Van Archaeological Museum**, and after lunch continue to **Van Castle**, which dates back to Urartian times. There are still some extant inscriptions in Urartian cuneiform that may be seen here. The castle also features great views over the old city of Tusba, and over Lake Van itself.

This region is home to a unique breed of cat with distinctive long white fur and one blue and one green eye. Time permitting, stop in at **Van Kedi Evi (Van Cat House)** to learn more about this longhair cat breed.



Return to the hotel for dinner and overnight.
Meals B, L, D – *Elite World Van Hotel or similar*

Day Three, Friday, June 11

Van • day trip to Akhtamar Island in Lake Van

From the shores of **Lake Van**, travel by boat to visit **Akhtamar Island**. The 10th century **Church of the Holy Cross**, perched above the beach, greets visitors to the island. The small church, constructed of pink sandstone blocks, is the first Armenian church to display high-relief carvings on its exterior. Three bands of the beautiful carvings show scenes from contemporary life as well as from the

Old Testament; its interior frescoes are some of oldest in the region. Restored and re-opened as a museum by the Turkish government, the 1,000-year-old church saw its first Christian service in 95 years in 2010, when an Armenian archbishop celebrated a historic mass for a large crowd that included many Armenian worshippers.

The **church setting is spectacular**. It stands on a small island that lies in a huge mineral lake, whose light and variable color somehow defies precise description; the view from the church is of a ring of mountains rising 8,000 to 14,000 feet. One end the island rises steeply to sheer cliffs, providing nesting sites for the local birdlife.



Returning to the mainland, stop at the **Urartian fortress and palace complex at Cavustepe**. Both Hosap and Cavustepe defended the route between Mesopotamia and Anatolia, a route that is as important today as it was in the 10th century BC.

The day ends at the **Van Carpet Weaving Center**, supported by EU funds as part of the GAP project to support rural families. Here we have the opportunity to learn about the beautiful Kurdish kilims woven in blue, red and white patterns produced by women of Van.



Photo: Republic of Turkey Ministry of Culture and Tourism

Dinner at the hotel restaurant.
Meals B, L, D – *Elite World Van Hotel or similar*

Day Four, Saturday, June 12

Van • Dogubeyazit • Kars

This morning's drive, about five hours in total, skirts the Iranian and Armenian borders and passes scattered camps of nomads, traveling through high, jagged volcanic terrain to **Dogubeyazit**, a small Kurdish town set in the shadow of **Mt. Ararat, at 16,960 feet**. This dramatic region of Turkey is called Eastern Anatolia, and its mountains average 9,000 feet.

Along the way, stop at the broad **Muradiye Waterfalls** on the Bendhi Mahi River flowing into Lake Van, formed by the extinct volcano, Tendurek Mountain.



Above the town, on a hillside looking down on the Silk Road sits beautiful **Ishak Pasha Palace**, built over a span of 99 years in the 17th and 18th centuries. Kurdish governor Ishak Pasha and his father, Colak Abdi Pasha, built the beautiful palace using six different types of stone. Its photo is often featured on the covers of coffee-table books about Turkey. Sample the local dessert, *asure*, Noah's pudding, said to have been made with the last remaining ingredients in the Ark. After exploring the palace courtyard, halls and mosque, enjoy lunch at a restaurant in Dogubeyazit.



photo: Republic of Turkey Ministry of Culture &

If it's a clear day, enjoy the view of the **fabled Biblical Mt. Ararat** with its snow-covered peak.

In the afternoon, continue across rolling hills dotted with grazing animals, passing near the Armenian border, and climbing up to the high steppe of northeastern Anatolia to the **town of Kars**. Located in territory that has been bitterly disputed for centuries, Kars has been controlled by early Armenians, Ottoman Turks, Russians, Soviets, and the Republic of Turkey. The nearby border with Armenia has been closed since 1993 to protest Armenia's acquisition of the enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Dinner and overnight in Kars.

Meals: B, L, D – *Kars Hotel, Hotel Cheltikov or similar*

Day Five, Sunday, June 13

Kars • day trip to Ani

This morning visit Ani, located about 30 minutes from Kars on the banks of the Arpa River, which forms the border with Armenia. Located along a major east-west caravan route, the medieval **Armenian capital of Ani** dates back as early as the 5th century. Ani flourished from the 10th to 13th centuries; at its zenith its population was around 100,000 – larger than any European city. Ani suffered heavily at the hands of Mongol invaders during the 12th century, as well as from multiple earthquakes, including an especially devastating one in 1319. Ani's territory had previously been disputed by the Byzantines and the arriving Turks, with control passing back and forth between the two powers. Though most of Ani now lies in ruins alongside a small village, the fact that several 1,000-year-old churches are still standing attests to the quality of early Armenian craftsmanship.

Next, visit **Turkey's first cheese museum, opened on a former dairy farm in Bogatepe village**. Restored by villagers in 2010 and transformed into a museum, here visitors can see tools used in the cheesemaking process, along with casks for yeast, salt molds, and storage tanks.

Lunch will be arranged in the village cooperative, organized by women of the village.



In the afternoon return to the center of Kars and visit the old **Citadel of Kars**. On an outcropping above town and surrounded by lush pastureland, the citadel dominates the town. It has passed through as many incarnations as the city itself has, and displays Turkish, Armenian, Caucasian, Kurdish, and Russian aspects. One of the oldest buildings in Kars is the 10th century **Church of the Apostles**. Recently restored, it is now an active mosque, but still exhibits many features of an orthodox church, including a beautiful iconostasis.

Celebrate the last night in Turkey with dinner at local restaurant.
Meals: B, L, D – *Kars Hotel, Hotel Cheltikov or similar*

Day Six, Monday, June 14

Kars • Akhaltsikhe, Georgia • Vardzia

Get a very early start this morning for the drive to Georgia, the planned crossing is at the Turkgozu/Vale border. Please note that procedures can be quite time-consuming, and extra patience will be needed today. Arrive in Vardzia later this afternoon.



Stop en route at the small city of **Akhaltsikhe**. Its **Old Town, called Rabati**, was a crossroads of the old Silk Road, and encompasses the ruins of an ancient fortress. Recently renovated, Rabati sits on a 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 *darbazi*, traditional Georgian houses.

Continue on to the Mtkvari River Valley where the caves of the monastery of Vardzia are tunneled into a bluff over the river. Check in to the modern resort hotel across from the caves for a delightful dinner that might include fresh trout caught that day in the river.

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





Day Seven, Tuesday, June 15

Vardzia and environs

Today explore the **Vardzia Cave Monastery**. Twelfth century King Giorgi III began digging the caves at Vardzia as a stronghold against the Turks. Giorgi's daughter, Queen Tamara, completed the complex and transformed it into a monastic center. Over the centuries, earthquakes have altered the layout of the 3,000 caves and corridors that existed in Tamara's time. Remaining frescoes in the caves represent the pinnacle of the Golden Age of Georgian painting; among them are portraits of King Giorgi and Queen Tamara. Hike around the cut-rock town, admire the old wine presses, and drive up the canyon for sweeping views of the Javakheti

Plateau and Abuli Peak, towering at nearly 11,000 feet above sea level.

Continue on to the **Vardzia Terraces** to meet with a local **Meskhethian winemaker** and taste **Meskhethian varieties of Georgian qvevri-made wines** grown from regional grapes. In this process 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. Learn more about the techniques of making rich Georgian wine using this natural method.



Venture onward to Nijgori village for **lunch with a local family**, then visit **Saro village** en route back to the hotel. Hike into Saro's history among the ancient ruins of

three megalithic fortresses, located on a high plateau with stunning mountain views about 15 miles north of Vardzia. Wander among the large 9-foot stone blocks – covered in golden-yellow lichen – used to create walls and arches without any concrete or mortar, yet still intact after thousands of years. A small 7th-century medieval church still stands on this archaeological site, looking out on the cliffs and valleys of the Samtskhe-Javakheti region.

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



Day Eight, Wednesday, June 16

Vardzia • Batumi

Get a very early start this morning for a **4WD-vehicle drive over Goderdzi Pass** toward western Georgia and Batumi, where we will arrive later this afternoon.

Along the way, stop in Khulo village to meet the representative of a **local tobacco plantation** and learn about this important crop. Lunch is in the village before continuing on to Batumi.

Batumi sits where mountains meet the sea, in a tropical setting on the **shores of the Black Sea**. Capital of the autonomous region of Ajara, Batumi is the most important port and resort city in this area of the Black Sea Coast. The town is filled with broad, tree-lined streets and a leisure ambience where the locals drink coffee – considered the best in Georgia – at streetside cafes.

Enjoy dinner at a local restaurant and an overnight in this favorite vacation spot for Georgians.
Meals: B, L, D – *Hotel Divan Suites or similar*

Day Nine, Thursday, June 17

Batumi • Mestia (Svaneti Region)

Following a hotel breakfast, set out into the mountains today to the **Svaneti Region**, a remote and distinct mountainous region of Georgia, designated as a **UNESCO World Heritage Site** for its remarkably preserved medieval appearance.

Stop for lunch en route in the town of **Zugdidi**. It's also referred to as the **Gateway to Svaneti**, since it's at the beginning (or end) of the only road leading in or out of this distant region. A small city of about 40,000 located about 20 miles inland from the Black Sea Coast, Zugdidi is the capital of the Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti region, which includes both Samegrelo (also known as Megrelia) and Svaneti.

Unreachable by car until 1935 when the cart track from 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; 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, the majority of which are in Mestia.

Upon arrival to Mestia, check-in to the hotel. Dinner this evening is at the hotel or a local restaurant.
Meals: B, L, D – *Hotel Banguriani or similar*



Day Ten, Friday, June 18

Mestia • Ushguli village

Embark on an exploration of the town of **Mestia**. Start at the **Ethnographic Museum** with its 10th-12th century manuscripts, unique 14th century metalwork, and icons. Perhaps the museum's finest exhibit is the 11th century **Icon of the Forty Martyrs**, which was probably painted in central Georgia, but transported to Svaneti for safekeeping from invading Muslim forces. The rendering of the forty individuals is reminiscent of European Renaissance portrait painting.

Next, visit a **Svan dwelling** with several examples of 12th century Svanetian architecture. The typical Svanetian house, or *machubi*, was built around a central room with stalls for cattle and livestock on all sides. A family group of twenty could live in such a house with sleeping quarters above the cattle for warmth. Fodder and food-stores would be kept in the nearby watchtower.



This afternoon, take a 29-mile drive in 4WD vehicles to Ushguli village. At an altitude of 7,218 feet, Ushguli is reportedly among the **highest continually inhabited villages in Europe**. Set at the foot of Georgia's highest peak, Mt. Shkhara, Ushguli is a stunningly beautiful place. Several of its medieval watchtowers are included in the **UNESCO World Heritage Site of Upper Svaneti**; an ethnographic museum is located in one of them.

Enjoy dinner and overnight at the guesthouse.
Meals: B, L, D – *Guesthouse Ushguli Maspindzeli or similar*

Day Eleven, Saturday, June 19

Ushguli

Today the choice is yours: relax, explore the village on your own, or join a moderate-to-challenging **guided hike towards Zagri Pass** (12,303 ft) and enjoy spectacular mountain views with a picnic lunch.

Return to Ushguli for dinner and overnight.
Meals: B, L, D – *Guesthouse Ushguli Maspindzeli or similar*

Day Twelve, Sunday, June 20

Ushguli • Okureshi village • Kutaisi



After breakfast at the guesthouse this morning, depart via 4WD vehicles for the city of Kutaisi, with a stop en route at Okureshi village.

Along the route from Ushguli to Kutaisi, observe abundant wildflowers and local fauna typically in bloom between the mountain and lowland regions this time of year. Georgia's central position in the Caucasus gives it a unique and diverse range of environments, from high mountain alpine zones to moist, subtropical climates along the Black Sea Coast. As a result, the country has a vast variety of endemic flora; Georgia lays claim to around 4,200 wild-flowering plant species, and over 8,500 spore-bearing ones.

Erythronium caucasicum, Scilla siberica, various Corydalis species, and Caucasian peonies are typical in this part of the country.

Pay a visit to the small **village of Okureshi**, located in one of Georgia's prime grape and wine-producing regions. Here, taste Usakhelouri wine, a rare and ancient red wine variety of the Lechkhumuri region of western Georgia, used to produce some of the country's most flavorful and expensive wines.

Okureshi is known for having some of the country's longest living people, with a large portion of residents living 90 years or more. Meet with a family of "long livers" in their **140-year-old home**, and enjoy a tour and tasting in their personal cellar of rare wines made from the indigenous Usakhelouri grapes.



Later this afternoon, continue to Kutaisi and check-in upon arrival. **Kutaisi** is an ancient city that served as an important merchant center on the route from Greece to India; it was the capital of Georgia from 978 until 1122, when King David the Builder moved the capital to Tbilisi. It's believed that Jason and the Argonauts crossed the straits of the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus to reach the Kingdom of Colchis, where King Aetes reigned and guarded the Golden Fleece.

Our time here is limited, but you may briefly view the 11th century **Bagrati Cathedral**, which sits at the top of Uk'imerioni Hill in central Kutaisi. Damaged by the Turks in the 17th century, the domed cathedral has undergone careful restoration since 1952. Along with **Gelati Monastery, Bagrati Cathedral** is now a **UNESCO World Heritage Site**.

Georgia's most famous king, David the Builder, founded **Gelati Monastery** in 1106; his son completed it in 1130. The monastery housed Georgia's first academy and was the burial place of the Georgian rulers. The well-preserved ensemble's stone churches and secular buildings are decorated with lovely frescoes, mosaics, enamel, and metal work. The Gelati Monastery represents the flowering of art and architecture in Georgia's "Golden Age."



photo: Bob Huberman

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

Day Thirteen, Monday, June 21
Kutaisi • Signagi

Check out of the hotel today and head toward eastern Georgia; the destination is the town of Signagi in the Kakheti region.

Stop en route for lunch and natural Georgian wine tasting in Chardakhi village, then visit Jvari Monastery. Set at the confluence of the Kura and Aragvi



photo: Bob Huberman

rivers, the 6th century **Jvari Monastery of the Holy Cross** contains one of the first Christian churches in Georgia, and is part of the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Mtskheta. The cross-shaped church was built over the spot where St. Nino erected the first wooden cross in Georgia.



Arrive in **Signagi**, one of Georgia's most charming towns, and check-in to the hotel. 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; townspeople were to gather at their village's tower in times of trouble. Wander the narrow streets and admire the richly carved balconies and green valleys below. The town's location in an agricultural region helped it to grow quickly, and it became an important agricultural center for the Soviet Union. Following the fall of the Soviet Union, Signagi suffered an economic crisis, but has since undergone an extensive reconstruction project.

This evening, stroll over to **Pheasant's Tears Restaurant** for a celebratory traditional **Georgian Table Feast** and wine-tasting, along with a performance of polyphonic songs. The name of the winery and restaurant comes from a Georgian legend in which the hero claims that it takes a "wine beyond measure" to make a pheasant cry tears of joy. Pheasant's Tears organic wine is now served at world-class dining establishments far beyond Georgia, including Spain's "El Celler" and Denmark's "Noma," and consistently rated in the "Top 3 World's Best Restaurants" list.

The menu might include the restaurant's signature herbal cheese pie, whole wheat bread leavened with wine lees and baked over grapevine branches, or an eggplant stew called *adjapsandal*. Grapevine branches provide the heat for a roast sauced in a reduction of pomegranate and red onions.

While dining, listen to spine-tingling **Georgian polyphonic singing**, 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.



Stroll back to the hotel for overnight.
Meals: B, L, D – *Kabadoni Hotel or similar*

Day Fourteen, Tuesday, June 22

Signagi • Kakhétian village visits

Today we'll head outside Signagi to explore several villages of the Kakhétian region. Visit **9th century Bodbe Nunnery**, where St. Nino is buried. It's 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 fine frescoes, with refreshing surrounding gardens. Some of the nuns here may speak English.

Head down into the valley to the sloped vineyards at **Pheasant's Tears Winery**, near Tibaani village. Wander through rows of grapevines, producing organic wines from varietal grapes that grow well in the Kakhetian micro-region. **Sample some of the natural wines** – including several ancient varietals – in the 250-year-old tasting hall. See where the grapes are grown, and visit the cellars where the organic wines are macerated in *qvevri*.



Enjoy a meal of traditional Georgian favorites at the on-site restaurant of the Pheasant's Tears wine cellar in Tibaani Vineyards, **The Crazy Pomegranate**. The restaurant is headed by chef Ketavan Mindorashvili, one of the country's rising female culinary stars; she's also a professional polyphonic singer.

This afternoon visit the village of Zemo Magharo to meet-up with a **home silk producer**, who raises silk worms, rabbits, sheep, and chickens, and also cultivates a flourishing garden. She is happy to share her encyclopedic knowledge of silk, silk weaving, and silk worms. Next, stop at Qedeli village for refreshments, including **tasting craft beer brewed onsite** at the Lost Ridge Brewery & Inn.

Return to Signagi for time on your own and an independent dinner.

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

Day Fifteen, Wednesday, June 23

Signagi • Tbilisi

Spend time discovering Signagi this morning, with free time in the afternoon to explore on your own before heading for Tbilisi, arriving in early evening.

Visit the **Signagi Museum**, part of the Georgian National Museum consortium. Its focus is on regional ethnography, with an especially strong collection of artifacts discovered during archaeological digs around David Gareja Monastery.



photo: John Wurdeman



The museum also has 16 paintings in its collections by the Georgian master painter Pirosmiani, who was born in Kakheti Province.

Check out the **Signagi walls close up**, or just explore the town after an independent lunch this afternoon. Later depart to Tbilisi, approximately a two to two-and-a-half-hour drive.

Arrive this evening in Tbilisi, Georgia's thriving capital city, in time for dinner at one of the city's many wonderful local restaurants. Meals: B, D – *IOTA Hotel, Museum Hotel Orbeliani, or similar*

Day Sixteen, Thursday, June 24

Tbilisi

Explore fabulous **Tbilisi** today, set in a strip of central lowlands in the Mtkvari River Valley that has long been an important link between East and West. The city has changed hands many times. Most notably, the Arabs ruled the city for 400 years before King David the Builder defeated them in 1121 and moved his capital from Kutaisi to Tbilisi. The Georgian king fostered tolerance for Tbilisi's Arab population, and the city still has a multi-ethnic atmosphere.

Begin with a visit to the **Simon Janashia Museum of Georgia**, a component of Georgia's National Museum, with a look at some of the country's most significant archaeological finds. On display is one of the largest collections of ancient gold decorative arts: 5th century BC golden jewelry and artifacts discovered in a tomb in Akhagori, along with a golden trove of treasures from 3,000-year-old burial mounds of the Trialeti culture. The most famous exhibit here is the 1.8-million-year-old Homo erectus skulls unearthed at Dmanisi, Georgia from 1991 to 2005. This site was discovered by David Lordkipanidze, the museum's General Director.

Next, embark on a walking tour of Old Tbilisi past the Gabriadze leaning tower, to the Anchiskhati Basilica, strolling along pedestrian streets adorned with carved wooden balconies to Narikala Fortress, Mother Georgia Monument and the sulfur bath area.



photo: Peter Guttman



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; most of the current buildings date from that time. The domed sulfur baths and the stone **Anchiskhati Church** were all that survived.

Tbilisi's earliest **sulfur baths** were probably built during Arab rule in the 7th or 8th centuries, when it was discovered that hot springs were 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 six or seven, with most of those in use built in the 17th



photo: Peter Guttman



century. Pedestrians can see steam escaping from the dome-shaped underground baths as they pass by.

Enjoy lunch at a local restaurant, then visit the nearby art nouveau Sololaki neighborhood just west of Tbilisi's central Old Town. Here are abundant examples of the Georgian uniquely carved balcony architecture; many of the structures were 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 after Georgia was annexed by the Soviet Union. It suffered additional 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 has transformed it into the city's up-and-coming restaurant district.

This evening, enjoy dinner at another of the city's up and coming restaurants featuring a modern take on traditional Georgian dishes.

Meals: B, L, D – *IOTA Hotel, Museum Hotel Orbeliani, or similar*



Day Seventeen, Friday, June 25

Tbilisi

Enjoy a day at leisure to explore more of Tbilisi on your own. You may wish to take some time to browse the **Dry Bridge Market**, where vendors spread their blankets and rugs and lay out their treasures, usually including tableware, silver, jewelry, artwork, and cutlery.

On request, your guide and tour manager will be happy to suggest how to spend your free time.

This evening toast the journey at the Farewell Dinner, a sumptuous farewell “**Georgian Table**” feast, featuring Georgian food, wine and musical entertainment at one of the city’s amazing restaurants.

Meals: B, D – *IOTA Hotel, Museum Hotel Orbeliani, or similar*



Day Eighteen, Saturday, June 26

Depart Tbilisi

Today the journey comes to an end with transfers to the airport for international departures.

Meals: B





photo: Mike Belton

Package Prices

5-16 travelers, \$7,295 per person, double occupancy
Single supplement \$1,195
Plus internal air \$150 (economy class, subject to change)

Tour Includes

- Shared accommodations in hotels per the itinerary.
 - Meals per the itinerary – 17 breakfasts, 14 lunches, and 16 dinners.
 - Restaurant tips for included meals.
 - Services of an experienced, English-speaking MIR Tour Manager with local guides at specific sites.
 - Arrival/departure 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.
 - Transportation throughout itinerary by private coach or van (size of vehicle depends on group size).
 - Guided sightseeing tours and entrance fees as outlined in itinerary.
 - Special events, excursions, and cultural performances per the itinerary.
 - Baggage handling where available.
 - Gratuities to local guides and drivers.
 - Complete pre-departure information including detailed packing list, reading list, insurance information.
 - *Touring with MIR* handbook with country-specific information, maps, and travel tips.
- Final document packet including luggage tags, final updates, and more.



Not Included

- International airfare or taxes – available through MIR; please call for rates.
- Meals not specified as included in the itinerary.
- Alcoholic beverages.
- Single supplement charge, if requested or required.
- Items of a personal nature (phone calls, laundry, etc).
- Gratuities to Tour Manager.
- Visa fees.
- 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.

Cultural Series

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

Important Notes: Is This Trip Right For You?

While the accommodations are chosen to be comfortable for travel in this region, they will vary from comfortable three- to four-star hotels. It is important to keep in mind that Eastern Turkey and Georgia may not be 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 or 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. Visiting Uplistsikhe cave town involves walking uphill over packed or loose dirt; and some 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 Turkey and Georgia, this may not always be possible. Only those willing to accept these conditions should consider joining this program.



Are You Prepared?

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

Weather

Turkey and Georgia experience hot summers and cold winters. Expected temperatures are from the mid-fifties to the mid-nineties, and precipitation is expected to be quite low.

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 carrier for this tour is Turkish Airlines, as they offer convenient itineraries and competitive rates from multiple cities across the U.S. to Turkey and Georgia.

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

Visas

At this time, only a Turkish visa is required for this tour for U.S. passport holders. The Turkish visa is now an e-visa, issued online and paid directly by your credit card. The process costs \$20 and does not require the physical passport to be sent to an embassy or consulate. MIR will provide detailed instructions on how and when to complete the online process for the Turkish visa.

No Georgian visa is required for U.S. passport holders. For **non-U.S. passport** holders a Georgian visa may be required, and all travelers may also need a visa for any country which you fly through in order to join the tour.

Pre- and Post- Tours

MIR can arrange for an extended program in Istanbul or in the South Caucasus countries of Azerbaijan or Armenia; or Western Russia or Eastern Europe. All of MIR's destinations are open to you. Please contact MIR for more details about exciting options for extended travel.

Also Nearby...

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

Flexible Essential Trips – Classic Private Journeys

Essential Georgia & Armenia, 13 days The warm, green countries of Georgia and Armenia are full of fruitful valleys and saw-toothed mountains. Explore magnificent cave towns, enter medieval fortress towers, and bask on the Black Sea coast.



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

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

Small Group Tours

A Taste of Georgia, 13 days. Explore gorgeous Georgia on a culinary and cultural caravan that traverses a country entwined with grapevines, overflowing with wine and abounding in hospitality. In the company of local MIR hosts – a winemaker and an ethnologist who are in love with Georgian food, wine, and culture – experience the never-ending Georgian Feast like a local, dining and toasting in wine cellars, fine restaurants, vineyards, and the homes of family chefs all over Georgia.

Treasures of the South Caucasus, 15 days. Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan share stunning mountain backdrops, powerful stone architecture and a strong code of hospitality. Georgia's renowned winemaking traditions, Azerbaijan's Zoroastrian and Islamic background, and Armenia's multitude of ancient churches combine to make this distinctive journey more than the sum of its parts.

Silk Route Odyssey: Caravan Across Uzbekistan, 15 days. The center of Central Asia, Uzbekistan is home to three of the most renowned of the Silk Road oases – Samarkand, Bukhara and Khiva. Journey through these UNESCO Sites and the lush Fergana Valley, where Central Asia's silk production began with two cocoons hidden in the headdress of a royal Chinese bride.

Journey Through Central Asia: The Five 'Stans, 22 days. More than 2,000 years ago, the great trade routes that linked Europe and China opened Central Asia to foreign cultures, customs and religions. Join a modern-day caravan on an epic journey to five of these exotic countries — Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan.

Conditions of Participation

Your participation on a MIR Corporation trip is subject to the conditions contained in the 2021 Tour Reservation Form and Release of Liability and Assumption of Risk Agreement. Please read this document carefully and contact us with any questions.

Cancellation and Refund Policy

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

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

Small Group Tours



Cost of cancellation, if received:

61 or more days prior to departure, deposit due or paid in full of \$750;

31-60 days prior to departure, 50% of land tour cost

30 days prior to or after trip departure, no refund

References

We encourage you to speak directly with satisfied past travelers. Please request a list of references.

Why MIR?

Regional knowledge is crucial to the success of any trip to our corner of the world. MIR combines detailed information about geography and infrastructure, history and art, language and culture, with the depth of knowledge that comes only from decades of regional experience. You may wonder how we differ from other tour operators...

Destination Specialization

MIR focuses exclusively on the exceptional region at the crossroads of Europe and Asia. This area has been our overriding passion since 1986; we don't do the rest of the world. Our hard-earned expertise gained over the last three decades can take you from end to end of the largest country in the world – Russia – and to all of its neighbors. We specialize in travel to Siberia, the Silk Route, St. Petersburg & Beyond. Our destinations include: Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, the Baltics (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania), the Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Slovenia), Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan), the South Caucasus (Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan), 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 like *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.

MIR Corporation

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