

Overseas Adventure Travel[®]

THE LEADER IN PERSONALIZED SMALL GROUP ADVENTURES SINCE 1978

Your O.A.T. Adventure Travel Planning Guide[®]



Georgia & Armenia: Ancient Lands of the
Southern Caucasus

2025

Overseas Adventure Travel®

347 Congress Street, Boston, MA 02210

Dear Traveler,

I am thrilled that you are considering exploring the world with O.A.T. There are so many wonderful destinations to discover, and the itinerary described inside is a perfect way to fulfill a travel dream.

When you join us, you will slip seamlessly into local life as you explore off the beaten path in your small group. Like all our itineraries, this one is designed to give you an intimate understanding of your destination, not just a superficial view. You will get to know community leaders and try your hand at local trades during your *A Day in the Life* experience, share traditional fare and lively conversation during a Home-Hosted Visit, discuss the Controversial Topics impacting everyday life, and visit sites supported by Grand Circle Foundation. And if you choose to travel solo, you will enjoy all these cultural experiences at an unmatched value, with our FREE Single Supplements—just one of the reasons we continue to be the leader in solo travel.

To ensure you experience the true culture and feel supported every step of the way, we provide the services of a local Trip Experience Leader from the beginning of your adventure to the end. Along with introducing you to the history and culture of their homeland, these friendly experts will gladly help you out with any special requests to make your trip even more special. You can also rely on the seasoned team at our regional office, who are ready to help 24/7 in case any unexpected circumstances arise.

Plus, you can put your own personal stamp on your trip, like the **87% of our travelers who personalize their experience**. Perhaps you will choose to see more of your destination by adding an optional trip extension to your itinerary. You can also arrive a few days early to explore independently and get acclimated, customize your air itinerary, and more.

I hope you find this Travel Planning Guide helpful. If you have any further questions, do not hesitate to contact one of our Travel Counselors at **1-800-955-1925**.

Warm regards,



Harriet R. Lewis
Chair
Overseas Adventure Travel

CONTENTS

GEORGIA & ARMENIA: ANCIENT LANDS OF THE SOUTHERN CAUCASUS

Your Adventure at a Glance:

Where You're Going, What it Costs,
and What's Included **4**

Your Detailed Day-To-Day Itinerary **6**

Pre-Trip Extension **17**

ESSENTIAL TRAVEL INFORMATION

Travel Documents & Entry Requirements... **21**

Rigors, Vaccines & General Health **23**

Money Matters: Local Currency &
Tipping Guidelines..... **26**

Air, Optional Tours & Staying in Touch **29**

Packing: What to Bring & Luggage Limits... **33**

Climate & Average Temperatures **39**

ABOUT YOUR DESTINATIONS: CULTURE, ETIQUETTE & MORE

Georgian Culture **42**

Armenian Culture **43**

Shopping: What to Buy, Customs,
Shipping & More **47**

DEMOGRAPHICS & HISTORY

Georgia..... **50**

Armenia **52**

Azerbaijan **54**

RESOURCES

Suggested Reading **57**

Suggested Films & Videos **58**

Useful Websites **60**

Useful Apps **61**



Tbilisi, Georgia

Georgia & Armenia: Ancient Lands of the Southern Caucasus

Small Group Adventure

Georgia: Tbilisi, Borjomi, Stepantsminda (Kazbegi), Telavi | **Armenia:** Yerevan

Small groups of no more than 16 travelers, guaranteed

16 days starting from \$6,395

including international airfare

Single Supplement: **FREE**

For departure dates & prices, visit www.oattravel.com/gaa2025pricing

Discover Georgia and Armenia, two ancient countries that have shed their Soviet past and are ready to reveal their splendor to the world. In Georgia, journey from the vibrant capital of Tbilisi to high in the Caucasus to stay in a hilltop town overlooking the oldest wine-growing region in the world. And in Armenia, explore the capital of Yerevan and witness landscapes dotted with pagan temples, ancient churches, and *khachkar* crosses.

IT'S INCLUDED

- 14 nights accommodation
- International airfare, airport transfers, government taxes, fees, and airline fuel surcharges unless you choose to make your own air arrangements
- All land transportation
- 32 meals—14 breakfasts, 10 lunches, and 8 dinners (including 1 Home-Hosted Lunch)
- 20 small group activities
- Services of a local O.A.T. Trip Experience Leader
- Gratuities for local guides, drivers, and luggage porters
- 5% Frequent Traveler Credit toward your next adventure

Prices are accurate as of the date of this publishing and are subject to change.

Georgia & Armenia: Ancient Lands of the Southern Caucasus



ITINERARY SUMMARY

DAYS	DESTINATION
1	Fly to Tbilisi, Georgia
2-5	Tbilisi
6-7	Borjomi
8-9	Stepantsminda (Kazbegi)
10-11	Telavi
12-15	Overland to Yerevan, Armenia
16	Return to U.S.

PERSONALIZE YOUR ADVENTURE

OPTIONAL EXTENSIONS

Azerbaijan: Baku & Shaki

PRE-TRIP: 5 nights from **\$2,195**

ARRIVE EARLY

We recommend that you relax after a long flight or explore more in depth before your trip. Prices shown include accommodations and private airport transfer.

- Arrive early in **Baku** before your Azerbaijan pre-trip extension from **\$220** per room, per night
- Arrive early in **Tbilisi** before your main adventure from **\$250** per room, per night

WHAT TO EXPECT

① ② **③** ④ ⑤ Moderate

Pacing: 5 locations in 15 days with an overland drive of 6 hours and 1 internal flight of about 1 hour

Physical requirements: Travel along a steep, winding mountain road to and from Kazbegi in the Greater Caucasus; an elective 45-minute hike in Vardzia is on rocky, steep terrain

Flight Time: Travel time will be 12-18 hours and will most likely have one connection

View all physical requirements at www.oattravel.com/gaa

GEORGIA & ARMENIA: THE O.A.T. DIFFERENCE

Unbeatable Value: Travel at the lowest price and per diems in the industry.

People-to-People Experiences: Meet a master felt-maker in his workshop in the remote mountain village of Tsdo for an introduction to this craft tradition. Plus, get in touch with the region's spiritual side during visits to ancient Christian monasteries, and learn about one of the world's oldest wine-making regions on a tour of a Georgian vineyard.

O.A.T. Exclusives: Learn about the contested South Ossetia region, and the war that displaced thousands of its citizens, during **A Day in the Life** of Georgia's settlement village of Tserovani, where we'll also enjoy a **Home-Hosted Lunch** with a local family. Plus, we'll meet with a local expert in Georgia to discuss the **Controversial Topic** of the country's history as a former Soviet state, and its uncertain future split between the Russian and western spheres of influence.

Georgia & Armenia: Ancient Lands of the Southern Caucasus

YOUR DETAILED ITINERARY

BEGIN YOUR ADVENTURE WITH AN OPTIONAL PRE-TRIP EXTENSION

5 nights in *Azerbaijan: Baku & Shaki*

Day 1 Depart U.S.

Day 2 Arrive in Baku, Azerbaijan

Day 3 Explore Baku • Visit Heydar Aliyev Center

Day 4 Martyr's Lane Visit • Open-Air Museum of Gobustan

Day 5 Overland to Shaki • Juma Mosque • **Home-Hosted Lunch** in Lahic Village

Day 6 Kish Albanian Church • Khan Palace

Day 7 Transfer to Tbilisi, Georgia • Join main trip

Day 1 Depart U.S.

You depart the U.S. for your flight to Tbilisi, Georgia.

Day 2 Arrive in Tbilisi, Georgia

- Destination: Tbilisi
- Accommodations: Tbilisi Marriott Hotel or similar

Afternoon/Evening: Arrive in Tbilisi, where an O.A.T. representative or driver will arrange for your transfer to your hotel. Here we'll be joined by travelers who took our optional *Azerbaijan: Baku & Shaki* pre-trip extension and those who arrived early in Tbilisi before the main adventure.

Upon arrival, you will check in and receive your room assignment. The remainder of the day is free.

Dinner: On your own. You can dine at the hotel's restaurant, or ask your Trip Experience Leader to recommend a café in Old Town.

Day 3 Explore Tbilisi • Visit Georgian National Museum

- Destination: Tbilisi
- Included Meals: Breakfast, Dinner
- Accommodations: Tbilisi Marriott Hotel or similar

Activity Note: The Georgian National Museum is closed on Mondays.

Breakfast: At the hotel.

Morning: Our small group will gather this morning and meet with our Trip Experience Leader for a Welcome Briefing at our hotel.

Then, we'll explore Tbilisi, starting at the base of Metekhi Plateau to see the sights here. Then, we'll walk to a nearby cable car, which we'll ascend to view Tbilisi's Old Town from across the Mtkvari River. You might spot the metallic sheen of the Mother of Georgia statue in the distance. Originally built in 1958 to commemorate Tbilisi's 1,500th anniversary and replaced by a new statue in the 1990s, this 65-foot-tall aluminum-coated figure towers over the city from atop Sololaki Hill. The statue shows a woman in traditional Georgian dress holding a bowl of wine in one hand and brandishing a large sword in the other. The wine is for those who come as friends. The sword is for those who don't. After our discoveries at the top of the hill, we'll descend back down by cable car to Tbilisi's Old Town.

Lunch: On your own in Old Town. You can choose from many cafés and restaurants in the area or ask your Trip Experience Leader where to find *khinkali*, flavorful Georgian dumplings.

Afternoon: Discover more of Tbilisi's Old Town on a guided walking tour. We'll visit the ancient district of Abanotubani to see the cluster of dome-roofed brick bathhouses built over the sulfur hot springs that gave Tbilisi its name ("warm place" in Georgian). For a taste of everyday life, we'll also explore an underground bazaar where locally made crafts, wines, spices, and jams are sold. Learn more about Tbilisi's religious heritage at Sioni (Zion) Cathedral, home to the Cross of St. Nino, the woman who spread Christianity across Georgia in the fourth century. We'll also stop by the Peace Bridge, the bow-shaped glass and steel structure spanning the river.

Next, we'll enjoy a guided tour of the Treasury of the Georgian National Museum. For richer insights into life in the Caucasus, you'll then be able to view exhibits on Georgia's national dress (when it is open) independently to learn

why it varies by region and its significance in Georgian culture. Later, you may choose to spend time at the Soviet Occupation Exhibition Hall to get a glimpse of life in Georgia during the seven-decade long Soviet rule that ended in 1991. Artifacts that shed light on the repressive nature of Soviet rule include extensive files on "rebellious" Georgian public figures ordered to be exiled or shot.

After our museum visit, the remainder of the afternoon is yours. You may choose to remain at the museum, explore more of the city independently, or return to our hotel to rest.

Dinner: We'll sit down to a traditional Georgian meal during a Welcome Dinner at a local restaurant. As we dine, we'll be entertained by a musical group, who will show off some traditional Georgian folk songs and dances.

Evening: On your own to relax in your room after our hearty meal. Or you can head to one of the city's trendy bars and nightspots.

Day 4 Tbilisi city tour • Controversial Topic: Georgia during the Soviet era vs. Georgia today

- Destination: Tbilisi
- Included Meals: Breakfast, Dinner
- Accommodations: Tbilisi Marriott Hotel or similar

Breakfast: At the hotel.

Morning: Start the day with a guided tour of Tbilisi's trendy Sololaki neighborhood, a buzzing hub of restaurants, shops, and clubs that lends Georgia's capital a lively, vibrant energy. We'll begin in Freedom Square, punctuated by a nearly 150-foot-tall golden statue of Saint George, and make our way to Gudiashvili Square, located in a quieter part of town ideal for romantic strolls or quiet reflection.

Lunch: On your own. Your Trip Experience Leader can recommend a spot for lunch, or maybe you could just grab some *khachapuri*, the delicious local cheese-stuffed bread. It's hard to make a bad dining choice in Tbilisi, but the best dishes are usually found in the smaller cafés and tavern-style cellar restaurants.

Afternoon: You'll have a few hours of free time this afternoon to spend as you please. Perhaps you'll choose to visit Rike Park, enjoying this expansive public recreational area's winding trails and futuristic buildings. And it's supposedly all laid out in an abstract map of Georgia. A walk across the Peace Bridge will also take you right near the historic Armenian district of Avlabari, one of the oldest areas of the city.

Later this afternoon, we'll regroup back at the hotel for a conversation with a local expert about a **Controversial Topic:** Georgia's history as a Soviet state, and its political journey between the collapse of the Soviet Union and the modern day.

During our conversation, we'll learn more about Georgia's complicated political history, and how its people today are mainly divided into three political camps: older Georgians who wish to return to the standard of living they enjoyed during the Soviet era; pro-Western reformers who would seek stronger ties with the United States and western Europe; and those who believe Georgia's main interest should be avoiding further conflict with Russia—the latter country's invasion of Georgia in 2008, and of Ukraine in 2022, stand out as reminders of what an unhappy neighbor is capable of.

Dinner: At a local restaurant.

Evening: You could keep the evening going at a local wine bar. As the world's oldest wine-producing country, Georgians are fiercely

proud of their wines. A great place to discover what makes them so special is a spot called Vino Underground or you can also check out 8000 Vintages.

Day 5 A Day in the Life of the settlement village of Tserovani • Home-Hosted Lunch

- Destination: Tbilisi
- Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch
- Accommodations: Tbilisi Marriott Hotel or similar

Activity Note: During our visit to A Better Future, we will divide the group in half due to the small size of the workshop. While one group visits the enamel workshop, the other will participate in a discussion with the head of the foundation, then the groups will switch.

Breakfast: At the hotel.

Morning: We'll drive to Tserovani, a village where our **NEW A Day in the Life** experience will take place. Tserovani is home to more than 8,000 internally displaced people (IDPs) from South Ossetia, a contested state along the Georgia/Russia border. In 2008, Ossetian separatists and Russians joined forces against Georgia in a war over South Ossetia's sovereignty. Up to 60,000 people are believed to have been displaced in Georgia within a matter of months, and settlements like Tserovani sprang up practically overnight to accommodate them.

Upon arrival in Tserovani, we'll take a brief stroll to better acquaint ourselves with the community. Of the 12 settlements that were built in 2008, Tserovani is the largest: 2,000 identical three-room single story houses arranged in an orderly grid. Over the years, the Tserovani has transformed from a make-shift settlement to a tiny, functioning town, complete with an administrative building,

grocery store, small health clinic, and a school. However, job opportunities are virtually non-existent, so locals must commute to Tbilisi by minibus each day for work.

We will also visit the headquarters of For Better Future, a non-governmental organization (NGO) aimed at promoting the economic and social welfare of displaced women and youth. In addition to teaching leadership skills to women and youth in Tserovani and working to integrate IDPs into a new life, For Better Future is also focused on supporting individuals who remained behind. In doing so, the foundation hopes to serve as a link between wayward South Ossetia and the rest of Georgia.

One of the foundation's top goals is to increase local employment opportunities, and we'll witness those efforts firsthand at an enamel workshop. Here, women learn how to make colorful jewelry, which is sold here and at souvenir shops in Tbilisi. The proceeds pay the artisans' salaries, and any money that is left over is re-invested in For Better Future. Depending on the day, three or four women will be working in the workshop when we arrive; they'll show us the tricks of the trade, and we'll have the opportunity to make an enamel pendant of our own.

Lunch: We'll make our way to local family homes for a **Home-Hosted Lunch**. As we dine on homemade specialties—perhaps *khachapuri* (bread and cheese) or *lobiani* (bread stuffed with beans)—we'll learn about the family's former life in South Ossetia, the challenges of starting over in the settlement, and why they decided to remain in Tserovani after so many years.

Afternoon: You'll have the rest of the day free to explore Tbilisi independently. You might like to visit Narikala Fortress, whose roots go back to the fourth century. It was one of the most fortified and impregnable fortresses in

the heyday of the Silk Road. The views of Tbilisi from the battlements of the fortress are superb. If you do wish to visit the fortress, please keep in mind that it can be reached by cable car, taxi, or on foot. However, it does involve a steep uphill climb with cobblestones and is only recommended for travelers who are steady on their feet without the assistance of handrails.

Dinner: On your own. Your Trip Experience Leader would be happy to suggest options for Georgian fare or a taste of home.

Evening: On your own. Enjoy a glass of wine at the hotel, begin packing for tomorrow's transfer, or ask your Trip Experience Leader to recommend the perfect venue to celebrate your final night in Tbilisi.

Day 6 Overland to Borjomi • Ancient Capital of Mtskheta • Visit Stalin Museum in Gori

- Destination: Borjomi
- Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner
- Accommodations: Crowne Plaza Borjomi or similar

Activity Note: Today, we will depart Tbilisi in the morning and arrive in Borjomi in the afternoon, with stops along the way to break up our transfer.

Breakfast: At the hotel.

Morning: We'll begin our westward journey to Borjomi, a resort town in the forested slopes of the Lesser Caucasus. We'll make a few stops along the way, starting at Jvari Monastery, the first of two medieval religious structures (part of the UNESCO World Heritage Site complex of Mtskheta) located at the scenic confluence of the Kura (known locally as the Mtkvari) and Aragvi rivers that we'll visit.

One of the holiest sites in the Caucasus, the iconic Jvari Monastery was built in the sixth century on a hilltop overlooking the ancient capital of Mtskheta, where Christianity was declared the official religion of Georgia in AD 319. Mtskheta was capital of Iberia, also known as the Kingdom of Kartli in eastern Georgia, from the third century BC up until the founding of Tbilisi in the fifth century AD—but it will always be Georgia’s spiritual heart. There, we’ll visit our second medieval gem, Svetitskhoveli Cathedral. Georgia’s second largest church, Svetitskhoveli Cathedral dates from the eleventh century, and was built over an even older early-fourth-century church. Many of Georgia’s medieval monarchs are buried at Svetitskhoveli—as legend has it that Christ’s robe is buried here, too.

We’ll depart Mtskheta and continue west to Gori, the Georgian town where Joseph Stalin was born.

Lunch: At a local restaurant in Gori.

Afternoon: Unlike the feelings of deep spirituality one gets in sacred places like Mtskheta, Gori brings out a wide range of emotions for visitors. At the Stalin Museum, we’ll hear about Stalin’s early years in Gori and see items like his death mask and collection of pipes. Georgians have a complicated relationship with Stalin. Some consider him one of humanity’s greatest criminals, some are anti-Soviet and pro-Stalin, and some—especially those in Gori—admire him as the hometown hero who defeated the Nazis and shaped world history. Your Trip Experience Leader can tell you about the complex history of Georgia/Russia relations as we stroll past the brick house where “Uncle Joe” was born that sits beside the museum.

After our museum tour, we’ll begin the last leg of our journey to Borjomi, the resort town celebrated for its mountain scenery and spa

water. You’ll have a couple of hours of free time to settle in to your room, or walk around the area to admire the scenery of the swift-running river, alpine forests, and lush green meadows that surround the region. There’s a historic mineral water park and countless nature trails in Borjomi National Park.

Dinner: At the hotel. Our dinner tonight may be family style or buffet.

Evening: You’re free to take an evening stroll through town, turn in early, or relax outdoors with a glass of wine and listen to the wind in the forested slopes of the Lesser Caucasus.

Day 7 Explore Cave City of Vardzia

- Destination: Borjomi
- Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch
- Accommodations: Crowne Plaza Borjomi or similar

Activity Note: This morning’s visit to Vardzia includes about 45 minutes of hiking over steep terrain, including up and down stairs. The services of a minibus to take us to Vardzia may or may not be available; your Trip Experience Leader will inform the group at the time of the visit.

Breakfast: At the hotel.

Morning: We’ll drive deep into the Mtkvari Valley to Vardzia, a vast 800-year-old monastery complex hewn into the side of a mountain. Vardzia’s origins go back to the twelfth century, when King Giorgi III had these hidden fortifications built to protect against the invading Mongols. The king’s daughter, the legendary Queen Tamara, then transformed it into a cave monastery and holy city with a large church decorated with colorful frescoes at its heart. About 2,000 resident monks lived in these rock-hewn dwellings on more than a dozen levels high above the valley floor (and a handful of monks remain to this day). But while

Vardzia kept out the Mongols, it was no match for Mother Nature—less than a century after it was built, an earthquake in 1283 destroyed more than two thirds of the cave city.

We'll explore the caves and view the remaining frescoes of Vardzia before returning to our bus, and driving to a nearby village for our lunch.

Lunch: At a local restaurant.

Afternoon: We'll drive back to Borjomi, where you'll have the rest of the day and evening free to explore.

Dinner: On your own. You can dine at the hotel or ask your Trip Experience Leader for suggestions on cafés and restaurants in the area.

Evening: Yours to relax in the lounge, take a stroll through the small town, or retire to your room.

Day 8 Overland to Stepantsminda (Kazbegi) • Fortress of Ananuri

- Destination: Stepantsminda
- Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner
- Accommodations: Rooms Hotel Kazbegi or similar

Activity Note: Today, our transfer from Borjomi to Stepantsminda will involve an approximately 8-hour bus ride (with stops along the way). The drive on the Georgian Military Highway weaves through some of Europe's largest mountains, and includes many steep and winding sections of road and narrow switchbacks. Travelers prone to motion sickness may wish to carry medication.

Breakfast: At the hotel.

Morning: We'll leave Borjomi and set our sights on the dramatic peaks of the Greater Caucasus. To reach Stepantsminda, we'll travel along the historic Georgian Military Highway—a

road built by Russian soldiers 200 years ago that follows the same winding path used by Silk Road traders and invaders for more than 2,000 years. Along the way, we'll make a brief stop for photographs at one of Georgia's most captivating medieval sites, the Fortress of Ananuri. This centuries-old castle complex perched above turquoise waters was the site of many bloody battles, and has two 17th-century churches within its defensive walls.

Lunch: At a restaurant along the Georgian Military Highway.

Afternoon: We'll continue our scenic journey to Stepantsminda, making a brief stop to enjoy the scenic vistas where a rather unusual structure stands—the Treaty of Georgievsk Monument, built in 1983 to celebrate the friendship between Georgia and then-Soviet Russia (though the treaty it commemorates was signed 200 years earlier, in 1783). With years of simmering tension between the two neighboring nations in the modern era, this massive semicircular monument seems oddly out of place at such an idyllic locale. Please note that there may be instances where we visit this monument at a different time today.

Then, we'll drive through the Jvari Pass (at 7,800 feet) on the final leg of our journey to the Greater Caucasus and should reach our lodgings in Stepantsminda by late afternoon. Still referred to as Kazbegi, Stepantsminda is set on a mountainside at an elevation between 5,700–5,900 feet above sea level in a green river valley flanked by towering mountains. You'll have time to settle in to your room before we meet later for dinner.

Dinner: At the hotel.

Evening: Free to rest in your room, have a drink in the lounge, or walk outside to take in the dramatic mountain scenery—but bring a jacket as it can get quite cold after the sun goes down.

Day 9 Explore Kazbegi • Conversation about gender roles in Georgia • Lunch in local home • Visit Gergeti Trinity Church

- Destination: Stepantsminda
- Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner
- Accommodations: Rooms Hotel Kazbegi or similar

Breakfast: At the hotel.

Morning: We'll begin our day by looking at a complex issue in Georgian culture during a conversation about the changing role of women in Georgian society. We'll meet a local woman who is involved with a number of charitable organizations dedicated to improving the lives of Kazbegi's citizens. During our conversation, we'll hear how the role of women in Georgian society has changed, especially in the mountainous regions like Kazbegi.

After our conversation, we'll visit a local studio for a felt-making master class. We'll meet with the wool felt master and learn all about this centuries-old craft tradition in this mountainous region. Then, we'll depart by four-wheel-vehicles for a drive to the village of Tsdo for a special lunch.

Lunch: At a village home in Tsdo, where we'll experience Georgian hospitality. Our meal will also be educational, as we'll have a lesson on how to make authentic *khinkali*—meat-filled dumplings whose origins are in the mountains of Georgia. When we sit down to our delicious home-cooked Georgian meal, we may wish to ask our gracious hosts what life is like in the Caucasus, especially in such a tiny, remote village of very few inhabitants just across from the Russian border.

Afternoon: After saying our farewells to our hosts, we'll set off on the day's next activity: a four-wheel-drive through the region to view the alpine vistas of the Greater Caucasus. A highlight will be our drive up to

the dramatic hilltop setting of the Gergeti Trinity Church. The silhouette of this remote 14th-century church perched on a hill with mighty Mount Kazbek in the background has become one of Georgia's most iconic landmarks.

We then return to our hotel for a few free hours this afternoon. You can relax at the hotel, explore town, or perhaps go for a nice long nature walk in these scenic mountain surroundings to work up another appetite for tonight's dinner.

Dinner: At the hotel.

Evening: Relax in the bar area, take an evening stroll, or retire to your room to begin packing for tomorrow's transfer to Telavi.

Day 10 Overland to Telavi

- Destination: Telavi
- Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner
- Accommodations: Holiday Inn Telavi or similar

Activity Note: Select departures will instead stay in the town of Sighnaghi for the next two nights, located about an hour's drive away from Telavi. All departures will enjoy the same included tours and activities, though the order of events is subject to change. Check with your Trip Experience Leader for details.

Breakfast: At the hotel.

Morning: We'll leave the mountains behind and make our way to southeastern Georgia and the rolling vineyards of Kakheti, one of the oldest wine-producing regions in the world. With a wine-making tradition that goes back some 8,000 years, many Georgians stand by the ancient process of crushing grapes and letting them ferment below ground in earthenware vessels called *kvevri*.

Lunch: We'll enjoy lunch at a local restaurant en route to Kakheti.

Afternoon: After lunch, we continue driving to Telavi, where we'll check in to our hotel. You'll have a few hours free before dinner to unpack, stretch your legs, freshen up, or get in some quick independent exploration.

Dinner: At the hotel (departures staying in Sighnaghi will dine at a local restaurant).

Evening: The evening is free to spend as you please.

Day 11 Explore Telavi • Winery visit • Discover Monastery of St. Nino at Bodbe

- Destination: Telavi
- Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch
- Accommodations: Holiday Inn Telavi or similar

Activity Note: Travelers staying at the hotel in Sighnaghi instead of Telavi will visit the monastery in Bodbe on Day 10 instead of Day 11.

Breakfast: At the hotel.

Morning: We'll walk to a colorful market to mingle with the locals and sample a few nuts, dried fruits, and traditional Georgian sweets. Then, we'll prepare ourselves for a tasty of another local Georgian specialty as we make our way to a local winery.

Lunch: At a family-owned winery, where we'll sample some local vintages accompanied by a light lunch of traditional Georgian dishes.

Afternoon: We'll stop in the village of Bodbe to visit the Monastery of St. Nino, one of Georgia's major pilgrimage sites. Now a nunnery, the hilltop monastic complex with ninth-century roots is the revered burial site of St. Nino.

Then, our regional discoveries continue with a drive to the Nukriani Community Organization, whose mission is to preserve rural Georgian traditions. We'll visit one of the workshops here to learn about a trio of favorite Georgian food items: *shotis puri*, the canoe-shaped Georgian bread; *churchkhela*, the candle-shaped Georgian sweet made with grape juice and walnuts; and a stuffed pastry called *Nazuki*.

After our visit, we'll return to our hotel, where the rest of the day is free to spend in Telavi as you please.

Dinner: On your own. Ask your Trip Experience Leader for dining suggestions.

Evening: The evening is free to spend exploring independently.

Day 12 Overland to Yerevan, Armenia

- Destination: Yerevan
- Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner
- Accommodations: Armenia Marriott Hotel Yerevan or similar

Activity Note: Today will be a long travel day as we cross the border into Armenia. We will drive for a total of about 11 hours, including several stops along the way.

Breakfast: At the hotel.

Morning: We'll make our way to the Armenian border, a drive of about 4 hours including stops. After we cross and pass through customs, we'll drive to a local restaurant on the Armenian side of the border for lunch.

Lunch: At a local restaurant in Armenia.

Afternoon: We'll continue our journey to Yerevan, driving for another approximately 5 hours. Depending on when we arrive, we may check in to our hotel before heading to a local

restaurant for dinner; if we arrive in town on the later side, we'll head to the hotel after our meal.

Dinner: At a local restaurant.

Evening: We'll return to our hotel after dinner and check in.

Day 13 Explore Yerevan • Visit Genocide Museum • Meet a local musician

- Destination: Yerevan
- Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch
- Accommodations: Armenia Marriott Hotel Yerevan or similar

Activity Note: The Matenadaran Museum is closed on Sundays, Mondays, and national holidays. In these instances, our Trip Experience Leader will rearrange activities as needed to include these visits on a different day.

Breakfast: At the hotel.

Morning: We'll set off by bus to explore Yerevan, present-day capital of the first nation in the world to adopt Christianity as a state religion in AD 301. Yerevan was founded in 782 BC (when it was named Erebuni), making it older even than Rome. After a short drive to the Cascade architectural complex, a decorative system of staircases linking Yerevan's downtown to the residential areas of the surrounding hills, we'll be able to see views of the city sprawled out before us with Mount Ararat in the distance.

Then, we'll delve into Armenia's ancient past at the Matenadaran, a fortress-like museum and research institute that is one of the largest repositories of medieval manuscripts in the world. We'll learn about Armenia's more recent past at our next stop, the Genocide Memorial & Museum. Here, we'll learn the tragic story of

the first genocide of the 20th century—when 1.5 million Armenians were exterminated during the waning days of the Ottoman Empire.

Lunch: At a local restaurant.

Afternoon: We'll drive to the home of a local musician, who will welcome us and show off a number of uniquely Armenian woodwind instruments—such as the *duduk*, *zurna*, and *shvi*, typically made from Armenian-grown apricot wood. Our host will tell us about the illustrious history of these instruments, and about the important role they play in Armenia's cultural identity, forming the backbone of much of the country's national folk music. Our small group will also be treated to a private concert in the home's garden.

After our visit, we'll return to our hotel in Yerevan, where the rest of the day is free.

Dinner: On your own. You can ask your Trip Experience Leader to recommend a local restaurant.

Evening: Relax with a cocktail at the hotel's bar or head back in your room. But Yerevan is quite pretty at night, and is filled with clubs, pubs, and cafés. You could always head to Republic Square and join the throngs who gather each to watch the Singing Fountains show (when in season between May and October—and when in operation, as the fountains usually shut off for maintenance twice a week).

Day 14 Khor Virap Monastery • Echmiadzin Mother Cathedral • Zvartnots

- Destination: Yerevan
- Included Meals: Breakfast, Dinner
- Accommodations: Armenia Marriott Hotel Yerevan or similar

Breakfast: At the hotel.

Morning: Drive south to begin our day at an important Armenian pilgrimage destination, the monastery of Khor Virap. Set on a hillock at the foot of Biblical Mount Ararat, Khor Virap (Armenian for “deep dungeon”) is notable for holding the future Saint Gregory the Illuminator (who later helped turn Armenia into the first Christian nation) in a pit for 13 years. The first church was built at this holy site in AD 642 and the present incarnation dates from the 17th century.

Next, we’ll drive to Armenia’s premier pilgrimage locale, Echmiadzin Mother Cathedral, the center of the Armenian Apostolic Church and the oldest Christian cathedral in the world. Said to have been built where Christ struck the ground with a golden hammer, the original cathedral was finished in AD 303. The current one mostly dates from the 1600s and is said to contain relics of the holy lance and pieces of Noah’s Ark.

Lunch: On your own. Your Trip Experience Leader can help you find a café or restaurant.

Afternoon: We’ll drive to Zvartnots, an archaeological site with remains of other early Christian buildings—which is also part of the area’s designation as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. After discovering the site, we’ll leave this holy city and drive back to Yerevan.

Dinner: Enjoy an included Farewell Dinner at a local restaurant, where we’ll share Armenian cuisine accompanied by a *duduk* (an Armenian oboe) performance of traditional Armenian melodies.

Evening: Yours to spend as you choose. Perhaps you’ll continue the festivities in the city, or reflect on your discoveries with fellow travelers in the hotel’s bar.

Day 15 Visit Geghard Monastery • Discover Temple of Garni

- Destination: Yerevan
- Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch
- Accommodations: Armenia Marriott Hotel Yerevan or similar

Breakfast: At the hotel.

Morning: Drive to the monastery at Geghard, named for the lance used to wound Jesus at the crucifixion. Geghard began as a small cave chapel in the fourth century, and grew into this elaborate monastery complex partially carved into the cliff face of the Azat River Gorge.

Following our visit to this remarkable UNESCO World Heritage Site, we’ll discover another ancient site that might have you thinking you left Christian Armenia and arrived in ancient Rome. The Temple of Garni, perched on a cliff overlooking the Azat River, is a colonnaded Greco-Roman temple thought to have been built in the first century AD. But much remains unknown about this impressive symbol of pre-Christian Armenia.

Lunch: At a local restaurant, featuring a short lesson on making *gata*, a traditional Armenian pastry.

Afternoon: We’ll return to Yerevan after lunch, arriving back at our hotel in the mid-afternoon. The rest of the day is free to explore independently.

Dinner: On your own. Your Trip Experience Leader can recommend restaurant options.

Evening: You can choose to go out and explore more of Yerevan, or prepare for tomorrow’s return flight home.

Day 16 Yerevan • Return to U.S.

- Included Meals: Breakfast

Breakfast: At the hotel. Boxed breakfasts will be made ready for those with early morning flights.

Morning: Transfer to the airport for your return flight to the U.S.

PRE-TRIP

Azerbaijan: Baku & Shaki

INCLUDED IN YOUR PRICE

- » 5 nights accommodations
- » 12 meals—5 breakfasts, 4 lunches, and 3 dinners
- » 6 small group activities
- » Services of a local O.A.T. Trip Experience Leader
- » Gratuities for local guides, drivers, and luggage porters
- » All transfers

PRE-TRIP EXTENSION ITINERARY

Neither Europe nor Asia, Azerbaijan is the link between the most influential empires of the world. From ancient mosques to grand palaces and gaseous mud volcanoes, there's much to discover in this multi-faceted land and former Soviet republic nestled between the Caspian Sea and Caucasus Mountains. Begin your travels to Georgia & Armenia with an exploration of this "country at a crossroads."

Day 1 Depart U.S.

Afternoon/Evening: You depart today on your overnight flight from the U.S. to Baku, Azerbaijan, including any connecting flights depending on your itinerary.

Day 2 Arrive in Baku, Azerbaijan

- Destination: Baku
- Accommodations: Hilton Baku or similar

Afternoon: Arrive in Baku today, where an O.A.T. representative will meet you at the airport and help you transfer to your hotel.

Dinner: On your own—check with your Trip Experience Leader for suggestions.

Evening: You're free to explore Baku by night, enjoy a cocktail with fellow travelers at the hotel bar, or retire early to rest up before tomorrow's discoveries.

Day 3 Explore Baku • Visit Heydar Aliyev Center

- Destination: Baku
- Included Meals: Breakfast, Dinner
- Accommodations: Hilton Baku or similar

Breakfast: At the hotel.

Morning: We'll gather as a small group for the first time, and meet with our Trip Experience Leader for a Welcome Briefing at the hotel.

Then, we'll drive into town, where our Trip Experience Leader will lead us on a walking tour of Baku's Old City, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. This walled section of the city is filled with ancient caravanserais, *hammams* (bath-houses), and mosques. We'll also behold the twelfth-century monument known as Maiden Tower. Widely considered a symbol of the city, this tower's history is laced with legend: The most popular story references a girl with fire-colored

hair—born out of flames, she saved Baku from enemy invaders, and the tower was built in her honor. Plus, we'll later discover the Palace of the Shirvanshahs, a 15th-century palace described as one of the "pearls" of Azerbaijan's architecture. This resplendent complex includes burial vaults, a mausoleum, bath ruins, and more.

Lunch: On your own—check with your Trip Experience Leader for restaurant recommendations around the city center.

Afternoon: We'll drive to the Heydar Aliyev Center, a famous performance venue and exhibition space housed in a wave-like building that is a symbol of modern Baku. Events and items on display here center on cultural heritage and the history of Azerbaijan.

After returning to our hotel, we'll enjoy a couple hours of free time before dinner, during which you may wish to rest at your hotel. Or perhaps you'd like to visit Green Bazaar, a lively local market that sells everything from fresh produce to cheese and seafood.

Dinner: Enjoy an included Welcome Dinner at a local restaurant.

Evening: On your own. You're free to rest up after your first full day in Baku, or ask your Trip Experience Leader for recommendations on where to venture for additional exploration.

Day 4 Martyr's Lane Visit • Open-Air Museum of Gobustan

- Destination: Baku
- Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch
- Accommodations: Hilton Baku or similar

Breakfast: At the hotel.

Morning: We'll drive to visit Martyr's Lane, a memorial dedicated to the people of Baku who were killed by the Soviet Army during Black January in 1990, considered the starting point of Azerbaijani independence.

Then, we'll drive to Gobustan, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. There, we'll explore the Gobustan Museum, which includes prehistoric carvings, ancient human bones, and ancient tools. The petroglyphs we'll see here portray images of prehistoric life in the Caucasus, an area situated between the Black Sea and Caspian Sea. We'll observe such images of ancient populations traveling on reed boats, men hunting large fauna, and women dancing—all of which are tens of thousands of years old. We'll return to Baku after our tour.

Lunch: At a local restaurant in Baku, featuring regional cuisine.

Afternoon: After lunch, we'll enjoy free time for the remainder of the day. Check with your Trip Experience Leader for suggestions on how to make the most of your day.

Dinner: On your own. One of the most famous dishes in Azeri cuisine is *plov*, saffron rice, meat, onions, prunes, dry fruits, eggs, and fresh herbs (though there are many variations of this dish).

Evening: The remainder of the evening is free for your own discoveries. Consult with your Trip Experience Leader for ideas, if you'd like.

Day 5 Overland to Shaki • Juma Mosque • Home-Hosted Lunch in Lahic Village

- Destination: Shaki
- Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner
- Accommodations: Macara Sheki City Hotel or similar

Breakfast: At the hotel.

Morning: We'll depart Baku in the direction of Shaki, a town in northwestern Azerbaijan. Along the way, we'll stop at Juma Mosque, an important place of worship originally constructed in the twelfth century and rebuilt a number of times over the centuries. Architecturally, this is a particularly interesting structure because of the more than 200 wooden columns supporting its roof, a number of which date back to the tenth century. Furthermore, Juma is unique in that both *Shia* and *Sunni* people can pray together here, while in other places in the world, they remain segregated.

Then, we'll depart Juma Mosque and drive to Lahic Village, located on the southern slopes of the Greater Caucasus. Lahic is known for its authentic handicraft traditions, particularly relating to copper. Upon arrival, we'll walk through the village to enjoy a **Home-Hosted Lunch** with a local family.

Lunch: At a local home, featuring freshly-made, regional cuisine.

Afternoon: After lunch, we'll tour a coppersmith's workshop, where we'll witness ancient methods for processing copper in order to make everyday tools. We'll observe parts of the process and have the opportunity to ask any questions we may have.

Then, we'll drive to Shaki, our final destination for the evening. Upon arrival, we'll check in to our hotel. You'll have a little time to settle in, relax, or explore as you wish before the group reconvenes for a walk to a local restaurant.

Dinner: At a local restaurant.

Evening: The remainder of the evening is free for your own discoveries. Check with your Trip Experience Leader for activity ideas.

Day 6 Kish Albanian Church • Khan Palace

- Destination: Shaki
- Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner
- Accommodations: Macara Sheki City Hotel or similar

Breakfast: At the hotel.

Morning: Drive to Kish Village, a small mountain town situated on the Kish River. Upon arrival, we'll trade our motorcoach for several smaller vehicles and make a short drive to a prominent former place of worship, now a museum: Kish Albanian Church (also known as Church of Saint Elishe and Holy Mother of God Church). Dating back well beyond the Christian era, this church functioned over the years as a Caucasian Albanian Apostolic church, a Chalcedonian church, and also as an Armenian Apostolic church. In addition to admiring the remarkably-preserved architecture, we'll have the opportunity to peer into glass-covered grave excavation sites which house Bronze Age skeletons and artifacts, dating around 4000 B.C. and the beginning of 3000 B.C.

After our tour, we'll drive back to Shaki, where we'll tour Khan Palace, built as a summer residence for the *Shaki Khans* in the late 18th century. This UNESCO World Heritage Site is renowned for its lavish decoration, featuring colored glass mosaics, wooden latticework, floral tile panels, and elaborate frescoes. A local guide will lead us through the former residence, giving us the opportunity to ask any questions we have about this architectural masterpiece.

Next, we'll walk to a local *shebeke* (glass window) workshop to learn more about this Azerbaijani craft tradition. We'll talk to one of the master craft workers to hear about the history of this ancient tradition, which dates back to around the eleventh century, and see for ourselves the love and care that goes into creating a finished work.

Then, we'll drive to the town center for a walking tour through the old town to discover the many cultural and architectural charms of Shaki. Our first stop will be at Caravanserai, a 19th-century historical monument representing the prominent role the town played in international trade along the Silk Road. This complex functioned as a roadside inn for caravanners looking to recover from their journey, and today, it operates as both a symbol of its important history as well as a hotel. Later, we'll taste a variety of street food, such as *halva*, a dense confection made from *tahini* or other nut butters.

Lunch: At a local restaurant.

Afternoon: Your afternoon is free to spend as you wish. If you're up for an active afternoon, you might choose to visit the local market, widely considered to be one of the most energetic markets in Azerbaijan, where you can soak up local culture as you try to find your flow among the chaotic assembly of stalls. Or, for a calmer experience, your Trip Experience Leader can guide you toward a panoramic hill, where you can enjoy sweeping views of the city below.

Dinner: At a local restaurant, featuring regional cuisine and *mugam* music, a genre native to the area.

Evening: The remainder of the evening is free for your own discoveries. Perhaps you'd like to grab a traditional dessert with your fellow travelers, such as *mutekke*, cardamom and walnut cookies. For alternative ideas, check with your Trip Experience Leader.

Day 7 Transfer to Tbilisi, Georgia • Join main trip

- Destination: Tbilisi
- Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch

Activity Note: Today's border crossing into Georgia will last about 7 hours, with stops along the way, including at passport control check-points. This border crossing could take up to 1.5 hours. Please note that, upon arrival at the border, travelers must carry their own luggage slightly uphill for about 20–30 minutes during this time. Photos are forbidden at the crossing.

Breakfast: At the hotel.

Morning: Today, we embark on a roughly 7-hour journey to Tbilisi, Georgia. First, we drive to the Mazimchay border crossing, where we'll get off the bus and walk through passport control with our luggage, first on the Azerbaijan side and then on the Georgian side.

Once we're through, we'll board the bus again for the remaining 4 hours to Tbilisi, stopping for lunch along the way.

Lunch: En route to Tbilisi after our border crossing.

Afternoon: We'll arrive in Georgia's capital in the mid-afternoon, at which time we'll check in to our hotel and join our main adventure, *Georgia & Armenia: Ancient Lands of the Southern Caucasus*.

TRAVEL DOCUMENTS & ENTRY REQUIREMENTS

Your Passport

- Must be in good condition
- Must be valid for at least 6 months after your scheduled return to the U.S.
- Must have the required number of blank pages (details below)
- The blank pages must be labeled “Visas” at the top. Pages labeled “Amendments and Endorsements” are not acceptable

Need to Renew Your Passport?

Contact the National Passport Information Center (NPIC) at **1-877-487-2778**, or visit the U.S. Department of State’s official website at **www.travel.state.gov** for information on obtaining a new passport or renewing your existing passport. The U.S. Department of State allows for passport renewal by mail or, for applicable citizens, renewal online. We advise you review the process and requirements for online passport renewal on the official website.

You may also contact our recommended visa service company, PVS International, at **1-800-556-9990** for help with your passport.

Recommended Blank Pages

Please confirm that your passport has enough blank pages for this adventure.

- **Main trip only:** You will need 3 blank passport pages.
- **Pre-trip extension to Azerbaijan:** You will need an additional passport page, for a total of 4 pages.
- **Stopover in Munich or Doha:** You will need to add 2 additional pages to the applicable total listed above.
- **Stopover in Dubai, Istanbul, or Warsaw:** You will need to add an additional page to the applicable total listed above.

Visas Required

We’ll be sending you a detailed Visa Packet with instructions, application forms, and fees about 100 days prior to your departure. In the meantime, we’re providing the information below as a guideline on what to expect. This info is for U.S. citizens only. All visas and fees are subject to change.

- **Georgia and Armenia: No visas required.** Neither of these countries require visas for U.S. citizens.

- **Azerbaijan (pre-trip extension): Visa required. Can only be obtained in advance.** You must get your visa before you depart the U.S.
- **Turkey (optional stopover only): No Visa required.**
- **Qatar (optional stopover only): Visa required.** For U.S. citizens, a free visa waiver can be obtained at arrival for a stay of 30 days or less as long as your passport is valid for the next 6 months and you have proof of a return flight.
- **United Arab Emirates (optional stopover only): Visa required.** Currently, the United Arab Emirates (U.A.E.) allows U.S. citizens to get a tourist visa free of charge on arrival in Dubai.
- **Europe Stopovers (Germany, Austria, or Poland):** Starting in 2025, U.S. citizens will be required to fill out an online European Travel Information and Authorization System (ETIAS) visa-waiver to enter countries in the European Union. There is no confirmed start date for the ETIAS at the time of printing. The ETIAS will be valid for 3 years.

Traveling Without a U.S. Passport?

If you are not a U.S. citizen, or if your passport is from any country other than the U.S., it is your responsibility to check with your local consulate, embassy, or a visa services company about visa requirements. We recommend the services of PVS International, a national visa service located in Washington D.C.; they can be reached at **1-800-556-9990** or **www.pvsinternational.org**.

Traveling With a Minor?

Some governments may require certain documentation for minors to enter and depart the country or to obtain a visa (if applicable). For further detail on the required documentation, please contact your local embassy or consulate.

Emergency Photocopies of Key Documents

We recommend you carry color photocopies of key documents including the photo page of your passport plus any applicable visas, air itinerary, credit cards (front and back), and an alternative form of ID. Add emergency phone numbers like your credit card company and the number for your travel protection plan. Store copies separate from the originals.

If you plan to email this information to yourself, please keep in mind that email is not always secure; consider using password protection or encryption. Also email is not always available worldwide. As an alternative, you could load these documents onto a flash drive instead, which can do double-duty as a place to backup photos during your trip.

Overseas Taxes & Fees

This tour may have taxes and fees that cannot be included in your airline ticket price because you are required to pay them in person onsite. All taxes are subject to change without notice and can be paid in cash (either U.S. or local currency). If applicable, you will receive a list of these fees with your Final Documents.

RIGORS, VACCINES & GENERAL HEALTH

Is This Adventure Right for You?

Please review the information below prior to departing on this adventure. We reserve the right for our Trip Experience Leaders to modify participation, or in some circumstances send travelers home, if their condition would adversely affect the health, safety, or enjoyment of themselves or of other travelers.

PACING

- 5 locations in 15 days with an overland drive of up to 6 hours along a steep winding road through the Greater Caucasus

PHYSICAL REQUIREMENTS

- Not appropriate for travelers using wheelchairs, walkers, or other mobility aids
- You must be able to walk more than 3 miles unassisted each day and feel comfortable walking up and down stairs
- We reserve the right for Trip Experience Leaders to restrict participation, or in some circumstances send travelers home, if their limitations impact the group's experience

CLIMATE

- While it can get hot and dry in the summer and cold in the winter, temperatures are generally pleasant throughout the year in both Georgia and Armenia, who share a continental climate
- Weather is less predictable in the higher altitudes of Georgia's Kazbegi region of the Greater Caucasus Mountains, where heavy snows can occur at any time

TERRAIN & TRANSPORTATION

- Some walking tours are along cobblestone streets and loose, uneven surfaces
- Travel on air-conditioned coach, four-wheel-drive vehicles, and cable car

FLIGHT INFORMATION

- Travel times from the U.S. to Tbilisi will be 12-18 hours with at least one connection

ACCOMMODATIONS & FACILITIES

- All accommodations are hotel-standard, with a variety of amenities and personal service, as well as private baths

Steps to Take Before Your Trip

Before you leave on this adventure, we recommend the following:

- Check with the CDC for their recommendations for the countries you'll be visiting. You can contact them online at **www.cdc.gov/travel** or by phone at **1-800-232-4636**.
- Have a medical checkup with your doctor at least 6 weeks before your trip.
- Pick up any necessary medications, both prescription and over-the-counter.
- Have a dental and/or eye checkup. (Recommended, but less urgent)

No Vaccines Required

Recommended Vaccines

At the time of writing there were no required vaccines for this trip. The CDC recommends that all travelers be up to date on their routine vaccinations and on basic travel vaccines like Hepatitis A and Typhoid, but these are suggestions only. However, this could change in future so we encourage you to check with the CDC yourself before meeting with your doctor.

Medication Suggestions

- An antibiotic medication for gastrointestinal illness
- Altitude medication, but only for short visits in the mountains (i.e. Gergeti Trinity Church at about 8,858 feet above sea level)

Not a medicine per se, but a health recommendation: The CDC recommends travelers to Azerbaijan bring insect repellent to avoid mosquito bites.

Traveling with Medications

- **Pack medications in your carry-on bag** to avoid loss and to have them handy.
- **Keep medicines in their original, labeled containers** for a quicker security screen at the airport and a better experience if you get stopped by customs while overseas.
- **Bring copies of your prescriptions**, written using the generic drug name rather than a brand name to be prepared for any unforeseen loss of your medications.

We recommend checking with the State Department for medication restrictions by country: **travel.state.gov** (Go to "Find International Travel Information", select "Country Information", then enter the country into the search bar; if you don't see any medications specifically mentioned under the "Health" section, then you can presume major U.S. brands should be OK).

Bringing medicines to Georgia: Some prescription medications are restricted in Georgia, especially narcotics/opiates or psychotropic drugs. As a visitor, you are allowed to bring a personal supply for up to 31 days of any such medications. However, we suggest that you document your personal supply by bringing one of the following: the original prescription bottles, a copy of your prescription, or a doctor's note. Codeine in particular is not allowed in Georgia, so please do not bring any medications that contain it.

Staying Healthy on Your Trip

Jet Lag Tips

- Start your trip well-rested.
- Begin a gradual transition to your new time zone before you leave or switch to your destination time zone when you get on the plane.
- Attempt to sleep and eat according to the new schedule.
- Avoid heavy eating and drinking caffeine or alcoholic beverages right before—and during—your flight.
- Drink plenty of water and/or fruit juice while flying
- Stretch your legs, neck, and back periodically while seated on the plane.
- After arrival, avoid the temptation to nap.
- Don't push yourself to see a lot on your first day.
- Try to stay awake your first day until after dinner.

Allergies

If you have any serious allergies or dietary restrictions, we advise you to notify us at least 30 days prior to your departure. Please call our Travel Counselors at **1-800-221-0814**, and we will communicate them to our regional office. Every effort will be made to accommodate you.

Water

- Tap water is not safe in Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan.
- Drinks that are safe include bottled, filtered, or disinfected water; carbonated drinks; hot coffee or tea; and pasteurized milk.
- Ice should be avoided unless it is made from bottled, filtered, or disinfected water. Likewise you should avoid salads or produce that was washed in local tap water. When in doubt about the water/ice/salads, ask your Trip Experience Leader.

Food

- We've carefully chosen the restaurants for your group meals. Your Trip Experience Leader can suggest restaurants for the meal you take on your own.
- Be very careful with food sold from vendors on the street, and with uncooked foods.

MONEY MATTERS: LOCAL CURRENCY & TIPPING GUIDELINES

Top Three Tips

- **Carry a mix of different types of payments**, such as local currency, an ATM card, and a credit card.
- **Traveler's checks are not recommended.** They can be difficult to exchange and the commission fee for cashing them is quite high.
- **You will not be able to pay with U.S. dollars on this trip;** you will need local currency instead.

Local Currency

For current exchange rates, please refer to an online converter tool like www.xe.com/currencyconverter, your bank, or the financial section of your newspaper.

Georgia: Georgian Lari (GEL)

Armenia: Armenian Dram (AMD)

Azerbaijan: Azerbaijan Manat (AZN/₼)

How to Exchange Money

If you want to exchange money before your trip, you can usually do so through your bank or at an exchange office. Your departure airport in the U.S., a travel agent, or an AAA office are also possible outlets. Or you can wait and change money on the trip instead—but it might be helpful to arrive with some local currency in case you run into a bank holiday or an “out of order” ATM.

On your trip, the easiest way to obtain local currency is to withdraw funds from a local ATM. The ATM will give you local money and your bank at home will convert that into U.S. dollars.

You may be able to exchange cash at some hotels, large post offices, and money exchange offices, however they do not typically offer good exchange rates and can be difficult to find. To exchange cash, you'll usually need your passport and bills in good condition (not worn, torn, or dirty). New bills (post 2004) are best.

Please note that many banks in Western Asia will only exchange money for their own customers. Never exchange money on the street. All exchange methods involve fees, which may be built into the conversion rate; ask beforehand.

ATMs

When using the ATM, keep in mind that it may only accept cards from local banks, and may not allow cash advances on credit cards; you might need to try more than one ATM or more than one card.

Many banks charge a fee of \$1–\$10 each time you use a foreign ATM. Others may charge you a percentage of the amount you withdraw. We recommend that you check with your bank before you depart.

Lastly, don't forget to memorize the actual digits of your card's PIN number (many keypads at foreign ATMs do not include letters on their keys—they only display numbers.)

In most countries, ATMs are widely available in major cities. If you are in a rural location, it will likely be harder to find an ATM.

Georgia: ATMs are plentiful in cities and towns throughout Georgia.

Armenia: There are lots of ATMs in Yerevan that accept both credit cards and debit/ATM cards.

Credit & Debit Cards

While traveling, most countries and major cities will accept credit cards. Even if you don't plan on using a credit card during your trip, we still suggest that you bring one or two as a backup, especially if you are planning a large purchase (artwork, jewelry). We also suggest that you bring more than one brand of card (i.e. Visa, MasterCard, American Express) if possible, because not every shop will take every card. For example, although Discover and American Express cards are accepted in some countries outside the U.S., they are not widely adopted, so other brands will work at a much larger range of stores, restaurants, etc.

If you are visiting a country that does not commonly accept credit cards, they will be listed below.

Georgia: You can make purchases by Visa and MasterCard at some shops, restaurants, and hotels in Tbilisi. Outside the capital, it will be harder to use a credit card.

Armenia: Major credit cards (MasterCard, Visa, and sometimes American Express) are widely accepted in Yerevan. If you travel to the countryside, then cash is more common.

Azerbaijan: Major credit cards are accepted at larger establishments, such as big hotels and restaurants. However, the economy still relies heavily on cash, so be sure to ask before making a purchase and we strongly recommend keeping cash on hand.

Chip Cards

Many countries have adopted credit cards that have an embedded computer chip. These cards are inserted into the reader instead of swiped. The card owner then authorizes the purchase using a PIN instead of signing.

Though this technology is common in the U.S., occasionally there are machines in other countries that can't read U.S. cards or the machine can read the card, but asks for a PIN. This doesn't happen often, and is nothing to worry about. You can usually resolve the situation by asking the cashier to let you sign. (If you don't speak the language, just mime signing on your hand.) If you are not able to sign for a purchase, such as at an automated ticket booth, you can use another form of payment, such as a debit card that has a PIN.

Notify Card Providers of Upcoming Travel

Many credit card companies and banks have fraud alert departments that will freeze your card if they see suspicious charges—such as charges or withdrawals from another country. To avoid an accidental security block, it is a good idea to notify your credit card company and/or bank you will be using your cards abroad. You can do this by calling their customer service number a week or two before your departure. Some banks or credit card companies will also let you do this online.

You should also double-check what phone number you could call if you have a problem with a card while you are abroad. Don't assume you can use the 1-800 number printed on the back of your card—most 1 800 numbers don't work outside of the U.S.!

Tipping Guidelines

Of course, whether you tip, and how much, is always at your own discretion. But for those of you who have asked for tipping suggestions, we offer these guidelines:

- **O.A.T. Trip Experience Leader:** It is customary to express a personal “thank you” to your Trip Experience Leader at the end of your trip. As a guideline, many travelers give \$10–\$14 USD (or equivalent in local currency) per person for each day their Trip Experience Leader is with them. *Please note that these tips can only be in cash. If you are taking any of the optional extensions, your Trip Experience Leader during the extension(s) may not be the same as the one on your main trip.*
- **Housekeeping staff at hotels:** \$1–\$2 per room, per night (in local currency)
- **Waiters:** Many restaurants in Georgia will add a service fee to the bill, in which case you do not need to tip. If there is no service fee than 10% of the bill is customary. In Armenia, any service charge usually goes to the back of the house rather than your waiter. To tip the waiter, leave about 10% in cash. In Azerbaijan, also tip about 10%. Tips are usually in cash only; it is rare to be able to tip on a credit card. Your Trip Experience Leader will tip waiters for included meals.
- **Taxi drivers:** In this part of the world you often negotiate your fare beforehand (rather than relying on a meter), so tipping is not common. But if you want to give something you can round up the fare and let the driver keep the change.
- **Included in Your Trip Price:** Gratuities are included for local guides, drivers, and luggage porters on your main trip, extensions, and all optional tours.

Please note: Tips are quoted in U.S. dollars for budgeting purposes; tips can be converted and paid in local currency (this is usually preferred) or in U.S. dollars. Please do not use personal or traveler's checks for tips.

AIR, OPTIONAL TOURS & STAYING IN TOUCH

Land Only Travelers & Personalized Air

Quick Definitions

- **Land Only:** You will be booking your own international flights. Airport transfers are not included.
- **Air-Inclusive:** You booked international air with us. Airport transfers are included as long as you didn't customize your trip's dates (see next bullet).
- **Arrive Early or Stopover (select adventures only):** If you chose one of these Personalization options and purchased air through O.A.T, accommodations and airport transfers are included. However, if you chose one of our Personalization options, but did not purchase air through O.A.T., accommodations are included, but airport transfers are not. If you chose one of our Personalization options, and purchase air through O.A.T. but not the accommodations, the airport transfers are not included. We have included transfer options below.
- **Personalization on Your Own:** If you have not purchased air through O.A.T. and decided to arrive early, stay longer, or stop in a connecting city on your own, you are responsible for airport transfers and accommodations. For your convenience, a preliminary list of your included hotels is available on your My Planner at www.oattravel.com/myplanner under "My Reservations" to help you with selecting a hotel for your additional time.

Air Inclusive Travelers

If you have purchased international air with us, there are some points that may be helpful for you to know.

- **U.S. Departure:** If you are among a group of ten or more travelers who depart the U.S. from your international gateway city, it is our goal to have an O.A.T. Representative assist you at the U.S. airport with the check-in of your flight. Unless there are extenuating circumstances beyond our control, the Representative will be at the check-in counter three hours before your departure time. If you are flying domestically before your international flight, the representative will be stationed at the check-in counter for your departing international flight, not at the domestic arrival gate.
- **U.S. Return:** If you are among a group of ten or more travelers who return to the same U.S. gateway city, an O.A.T. Representative will meet you as you exit Customs and help you find taxis, buses, hotel accommodations, or connecting flights. Again, it is our goal to have our Representative waiting to assist your group. In rare instances, unforeseen circumstances may prevent this service.

- **Flying with a Travel Companion:** If you're traveling with a companion from a different household, and both of you are beginning and ending your trip at the same airport on the same dates, let us know you'd like to travel together and we'll make every effort to arrange this (please note, however, that this is not always possible). If you request any changes to your flights, please be sure that both you and your companion tell us that you still want to fly together.
- **Selecting Your Seats:** If your airline allows pre-assigned seats, you will be able to select and view them directly from the airline's website after booking. Some airlines will not allow seat confirmation until your reservation is ticketed 45–30 days prior to departure, and/or they may charge a nominal fee. You may locate your itinerary on an airline's website utilizing the Record Locator Number found on the Air Itinerary in your My Planner.

Airport Transfers Can Be Purchased

For eligible flights, airport transfers may be purchased separately as an optional add-on, subject to availability. To be eligible, your flight(s) must meet the following requirements:

- You must fly into or fly home from the same airport as O.A.T. travelers who purchased included airfare.
- Your flight(s) must arrive/depart on the same day that the group arrives or departs.
- If you are arriving early, you must have arranged the hotels through our Arrive Early personalization option

Airport transfers can be purchased up to 45 days prior to your departure; they are not available for purchase onsite. To learn more, or purchase airport transfers, please call our Travel Counselors at **1-800-221-0814**.

If you don't meet the requirements above, you'll need to make your own transfer arrangements. We suggest the Rome to Rio website as a handy resource: www.rome2rio.com

Optional Tours

Optional tours are additional add-on tours that allow you to personalize your adventure by tailoring it to your tastes and needs. And if you decide not to join an optional tour? Then you'll have free time to relax or explore on your own—it's about options, not obligations.

What You Need to Know

- All optional tours are subject to change and availability.
- Optional tours that are reserved with your Trip Experience Leader can be paid for using credit/debit cards only. We accept MasterCard, Visa, and Discover credit cards; we can also take MasterCard or Visa debit cards as long as the card allows you to sign for purchases. (You won't be able to enter a PIN.)

- To ensure that you are charged in U.S. dollars, your payment will be processed by our U.S. headquarters in Boston. This process can take up to three months, so we ask that you only use a card that will still be valid three months after your trip is over. The charge may appear on your credit card statement as being from Boston, MA or may be labeled as “OPT Boston”.
- Your Trip Experience Leader will give you details on the optional tours while you’re on the trip. But if you’d like to look over descriptions of them earlier, you can do so at any time by referring to your Day-to-Day Itinerary (available online by signing into My Planner at www.oattravel.com/myplanner).

Communicating with Home from Abroad

Cell Phones

If you want to use your cell phone on the trip, check with your phone provider to see if your phone and service will work outside of the U.S. It may turn out to be cheaper to rent an international phone or buy a SIM card onsite. If you want to use a local SIM, just make certain your phone can accept one.

Calling Apps

Another option is to use a smartphone app like Skype or FaceTime. These services are usually less expensive than making a traditional call, but you’ll need a Wi-Fi connection and the calls may count towards your phone plan’s data allowance. Many smartphones—and some tablets or laptops—come with one of these apps pre-installed or you can download them for free from the appropriate apps store.

Calling Cards and 1-800 Numbers

When calling the U.S. from a foreign country, a prepaid calling card can be useful because it circumvents unexpected charges from the hotel. Calling cards purchased locally are typically the best (less expensive, more likely to work with the local phones, etc.).

One reminder: Do not call U.S. 1-800 numbers outside the continental United States. This can result in costly long distance fees, since 1-800 numbers do not work outside the country.

Internet

Most hotels in Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan have wireless Internet service (WiFi). This service is often (but not always) free for guests. Some cafes, bars, and city centers will also have free WiFi service. For example Tbilisi, Georgia has a municipal network that covers most of downtown (although it can be slow).

How to Call Overseas

When calling overseas from the U.S., dial 011 for international exchange, then the country code (indicated by a plus sign: +), and then the number. Note that foreign phone numbers may not have the same number of digits as U.S. numbers; even within a country the number of digits can vary depending on the city and if the phone is a land line or cell phone.

Georgia: +995

Azerbaijan: +994

Armenia: +374

PACKING: WHAT TO BRING & LUGGAGE LIMITS

Luggage Limits

MAIN TRIP LIMITS	
Pieces per person	One checked bag and one carry-on per person.
Weight restrictions	Varies by airline. The current standard is 50 lbs for checked bags and 17 lbs for carry-ons .
Size Restrictions	Varies by airline. Measured in linear inches (<i>length+width+depth</i>). Generally, 62 linear inches is the checked bag limit; carry-on limit is 45 linear inches .
Luggage Type	Duffel bag or soft-sided suitcase. Please do not bring a hard-sided (clamshell) suitcase.
TRIP EXTENSION(S) LIMITS	
Same as the main trip.	
REMARKS/SUGGESTIONS	
<p>Luggage rules: Luggage rules and limits are set by governmental and airline policy. Enforcement of the rules may include spot checks or may be inconsistent. However one thing is the same across the board: If you are found to have oversized or overweight luggage, you will be subject to additional fees, to be assessed by—and paid to—the airline in question.</p>	

Don't Forget:

- **These luggage limits may change.** If the airline(s) notify us of any changes, we will include an update in your Final Documents booklet.
- It's a good idea to reconfirm baggage restrictions and fees directly with the airline a week or so prior to departure. For your convenience, we maintain a list of the toll-free numbers for the most common airlines on our website in the FAQ section.
- **Baggage fees are not included in your trip price;** they are payable directly to the airlines.
- The luggage limits above are based on your regional flights, which may be less than your international flights. Even if your international airline offers a larger weight limit, you will need to pack according to the lower restrictions.

Your Luggage

- **Checked Luggage:** One duffel bag or soft-sided suitcase. Look for one with heavy nylon fabric, wrap-around handles, built-in wheels, and a heavy duty lockable zipper. Please do not bring a rigid (plastic shell) suitcase.
- **Carry-on Bag:** You are allowed one carry-on bag per person. We suggest a tote or small backpack that can be used as both a carry-on bag for your flight and to carry your daily necessities—water bottle, camera, etc—during your daily activities.
- **Locks:** For flights that originate in the U.S., you can either use a TSA-approved lock or leave your luggage unlocked. Outside of the U.S. we strongly recommend locking your luggage as a theft-prevention measure.

Clothing Suggestions: Functional Tips

As you will experience a wide range of temperatures and weather conditions, we suggest several layers of clothing. If you like to hand-wash your clothes, look for fabrics that will dry out overnight. You can buy clothing designed especially for travel, with features like wrinkle-resistant fabric or built-in sun protection.

- **Footwear:** You'll be on your feet a lot during the trip, and walking over some rough and slippery surfaces. The soles of your shoes should offer good traction.
- **Outerwear:** Rainfall can occur any time of year, so don't forget a waterproof jacket, poncho, or folding umbrella. In early spring and winter, temperatures can be chilly or freezing, and snowfall can begin in the Caucasus Mountains as early as mid-spring or the end of October. Bring some warm gear such as a fleece, sweater, jacket, or winter coat for these times of year.

Dress Codes & Style Hints

During our adventure, we'll visit local religious sites, which generally will fall into one of four denominations: Eastern Orthodox (Georgia), Armenian Apostolic (Armenia), or Shia Muslim (Azerbaijan). Your Trip Experience Leader will remind you about upcoming visits the day before so that you can plan your outfit accordingly, but here is what to consider when packing:

- **Eastern churches and monasteries strongly prefer that visitors of both genders dress modestly.** In this context, "modestly dressed" means covered knees and shoulders—no skirts above the knee, no sleeveless shirts, and no low or revealing necklines. Shorts are not allowed for women or men, but many churches or monasteries will have wraps or apron-style skirts that you can borrow to cover up. However, some will not allow men to wear these skirts, so male travelers are advised to bring at least one pair of long trousers for religious visits.
- **In Armenia, the dress code for churches is more relaxed,** although shorts/skirts should be at least to the knee, and shoulders covered.

- **Shia mosques follow the same rules as Orthodox churches, but with one additional rule—that you remove your shoes.** You may wish to bring a couple extra pairs of socks for these occasions.
- **For all denominations it is common for local women to cover their hair inside a church or mosque.** Female travelers are not usually required to do this, but covering your hair would be a nice gesture of respect. Sometimes you can borrow a scarf from the church or mosque, but we suggest bringing one from home that is large enough to double as a wrap for chilly evenings. (That way you'll get more use out of it.)
- Depending on scheduling, we may also have the opportunity to visit a Jewish synagogue during the pre-trip extension in Azerbaijan and during the base trip in Tbilisi, Georgia. If so, the dress code is similar to the mosques, and you may be asked to remove your shoes (which is a local practice not always found in other synagogues around the world).

Suggested Packing Lists

We have included suggestions from Trip Experience Leaders and former travelers to help you pack. These packing lists are only jumping-off points—they offer recommendations based on experience, but not requirements. We recommend using www.weather.com and consulting the “Climate” chapter of this handbook.

And don't forget a reusable water bottle—you'll need it to take advantage of any refills we offer as we are working to eliminate single-use plastic bottles on all of our trips.

Recommended Clothing

- ☐ Shirts: A mixture of short and long-sleeved shirts in a breathable fabric, like cotton or cotton-blend. Polo shirts are more versatile than T-shirts.
- ☐ Trousers and/or jeans: Comfortable and loose fitting is best. Avoid tight-fitting jeans for comfort and ease of movement.
- ☐ Light wool or fleece sweater; vest or another layer for warmth, like a warm jacket.
- ☐ Shoes and socks: Shoes should be comfortable walking/ running shoes or low-cut hiking shoes, with arch support. Bring at least a couple pairs of medium- to heavy-weight socks for long walks or hikes.
- ☐ Underwear and sleepwear
- ☐ Light rain jacket/windbreaker with hood
- ☐ Wide-brim sun hat
- ☐ Swimsuit for hotel pools or saunas

- ☐ At least one outfit for visiting religious sites: Long trousers or a skirt that falls below the knees, and a shirt with sleeves; plus a headscarf (for female travelers).

Seasonal Clothing Recommendations

For summer departures:

- ☐ A pair or two of shorts if fine for summer departures. But you should bring long trousers for up in the mountains and religious sites.
- ☐ Sleeveless tops are OK in cities, but most locals will opt for short sleeves instead.

For spring and early fall departures:

- ☐ Sweater and/or a warm jacket
- ☐ Gloves, and a scarf

For late fall and winter departures:

- ☐ Winter coat, hat, warm gloves, scarf, and long underwear

Essential Items

- ☐ Daily essentials: toothbrush, toothpaste, floss, hairbrush or comb, shaving items, deodorant, etc. Our hotels will provide the basics like soap and shampoo, but most hotels do not provide a washcloth, so you may wish to pack one.
- ☐ Spare eyeglasses/contact lenses
- ☐ Sunglasses, 100% UV block
- ☐ Sunscreen, SPF 15 or stronger
- ☐ Insect repellent
- ☐ Cold-water hand-wash laundry soap such as Woolite and plastic hang-up clothespins
- ☐ Light folding umbrella
- ☐ Photocopies of passport, air ticket, credit cards
- ☐ Moisturizer and sun-blocking lip balm
- ☐ Packets of pocket-size tissues or small roll of toilet paper

- ☐ Moist towelettes (not individual packets) and/or anti-bacterial “water-free” hand cleanser
- ☐ Reusable water bottle
- ☐ Electrical converter & plug adapters

Medicines & First Aid Gear

- ☐ Your own prescription medicines
- ☐ Travel first aid kit: Band-Aids, headache and pain relief, laxatives and anti-diarrhea tablets, something for upset stomach. Maybe a moleskin foot pads, antibiotic cream, or allergy medication.
- ☐ An antibiotic medication for gastrointestinal illness
- ☐ Optional: Altitude medication for short visits in the mountains
- ☐ Optional: Motion sickness medication (for long bus rides, if you are prone to motion sickness)

TIP: *The State Department says that if you are bringing prescription medications into Georgia, they recommend carrying a copy of your valid U.S. prescription. That way, if customs officials ask, you have proof that your prescription medication was lawfully obtained in the United States.*

Electricity Abroad

When traveling overseas, the voltage is usually different and the plugs might not be the same shape.

Voltage

Electricity in this region is 220–240 volts. In the U.S. it is 110 volts. Most of the things a traveler will want to plug in—battery chargers, smart phone, tablets or computers—can run off both 110 and 220–240. But you should check the item or the owner’s guide first to confirm this before you plug it in. If you have something that needs 110 volts—like a shaver or a hairdryer—you can bring a transformer to change the current. (But transformers tend to burn out, so it might be better to leave whatever it is at home.)

Plugs

The shape of plugs will vary from country to country, and sometimes even within a country depending on when that building was built. To plug something from the U.S. into a local socket you’ll need an adapter that fits between the plug and the socket. Because there are many different types of plugs in this region, it may be easier to purchase an all-in-one, universal adapter/converter combo. Versatile and lightweight, these can usually be found at your local electronics

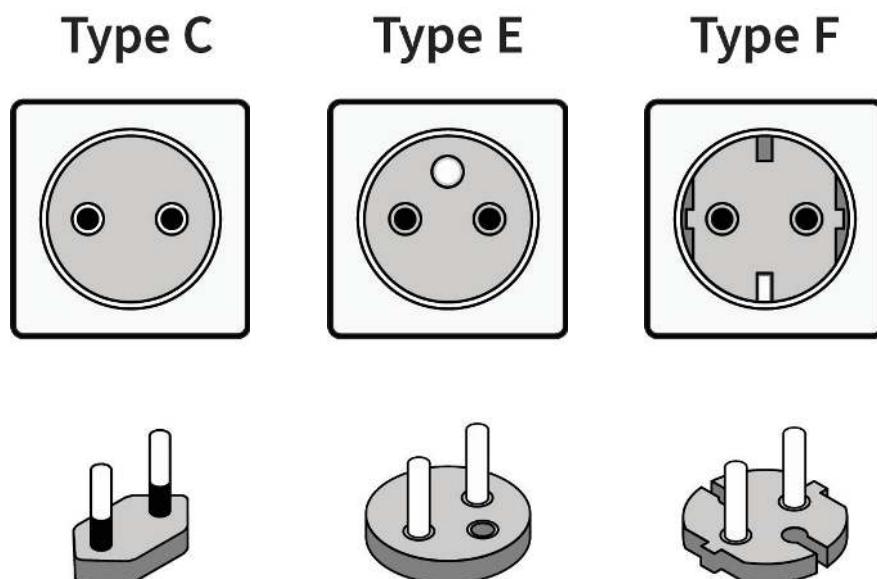
goods or hardware stores. Sometimes you can buy them at large retailers too, like Target or Walmart. If you forget to bring an adapter, you might also find them for sale at the airport when you arrive at your destination.

Different plug shapes are named by letters of the alphabet. Standard U.S. plugs are Type A and Type B. Here is the list of plugs for the countries on this trip:

Georgia: C and F (note that Type C plugs can fit into Type F sockets)

Armenia: C and F

Azerbaijan: C, E, and F



Availability

Barring the occasional and unpredictable power outage, electricity is as readily available on this adventure as it is in the U.S.

CLIMATE & AVERAGE TEMPERATURES

Georgia: With the Greater Caucasus mountain range acting as a barrier to cold air from Russia, most of Georgia's climate is influenced by the Black Sea to the west. For this reason, it is generally warmer/wetter in the western lowlands and colder/drier in the east. But elevation also plays a part. Towns in the mountains or foothills (like Stepantsminda) will be 20 degrees colder than the rest of the country, so pack accordingly.

Tbilisi, Georgia: Summers are generally sunny with moderate highs in the mid-70s to mid-80s range; at night the lows will be in the 60s. However, lowland cities like Tbilisi get sticky and humid in the summer, especially in August. Fall is cooler (in the 50s and 60s during the day) and more comfortable. Winter temps drop below freezing so snow is not uncommon, but it doesn't accumulate. Spring brings back pleasant temperatures but is also the rainiest season.

Stepantsminda/Kazbegi, Georgia: Set in a high plateau in the Greater Caucasus Mountain Range, this region is known for its winter sports like skiing, meaning its climate is comparable to part of northern Utah or Vermont/New Hampshire. Winters are very cold, with temperatures often below freezing, and with lots of snow. Spring doesn't really begin until May and summer highs rarely go above the high 60s/low 70s. Fall is lovely but short as snowfall can begin as early as October.

Armenia: Armenia has a continental climate with dry, sunny, and hot summers (temperatures can spike up into the 90s) lasting from June to mid-September. In contrast, winters are very cold with plenty of snow and temperatures ranging the 20s and teens. Spring and fall are the nicest times of year, when the temperatures are more moderate.

Yerevan, Armenia: Summers are very hot, with highs in 90s—and a heat wave can make it even hotter—but it is sunny with little rain. Spring and fall are much more comfortable, with highs in the 70s or 60s. Note that September is a transition month—the early part will be more like summer. Winter is cold and windy. It does snow in the city, but the snow rarely stays. Rain can happen any time of year, but is most likely in the autumn or spring.

Azerbaijan: In Azerbaijan, you'll find cold winters with temperatures in the low 30s and hot, arid summers with highs in the mid-80s to low-90s. In the lowlands along the Caspian Sea, Baku experiences wind all year long, with particularly strong winds during the winter months. Though the lowlands remain relatively dry throughout the year, there are light and frequent showers in the fall and winter. Mountainous regions experience slightly colder temperatures and more rain throughout the year, resulting in lush green forests during the warmer months. Along the southern coast in the foothills of the Talysh Range, rain and heavy snowfalls are common.

NOTE: If you are taking one of our optional stopovers before or after your OAT adventure, please be aware the climate and temperatures might be different from what you experienced during your tour. To prepare for weather differences and pack appropriate clothing, we recommend the following world weather sites:

- www.intellicast.com
- www.weather.com

- www.wunderground.com

Climate Averages & Online Forecast

The following charts reflect the **average** climate as opposed to exact weather conditions. This means they serve only as general indicators of what can reasonably be expected. An extreme heat wave or cold snap could fall outside these ranges. As your departure approaches, we encourage you to use **www.weather.com** for a more accurate forecast of the locations you visit.

Average Daily High/Low Temperatures (°F), Humidity & Monthly Rainfall

MONTH	TBILISI, GEORGIA			STEPHANTSMINDA, GEORGIA		
	Avg Temp. (High-Low)	% Relative Humidity (Avg)	Average # of Days with Rainfall	Avg Temp. (High-Low)	% Relative Humidity (Avg)	Average # of Days with Rainfall
JAN	43 to 28	87	7	26 to 16	--	14
FEB	46 to 30	84	8	32 to 20	--	13
MAR	54 to 36	82	11	34 to 19	--	15
APR	65 to 45	76	11	46 to 30	--	25
MAY	74 to 54	75	10	60 to 43	--	27
JUN	82 to 60	71	7	66 to 50	--	30
JUL	87 to 66	77	4	66 to 50	--	29
AUG	87 to 66	82	6	68 to 50	--	20
SEP	79 to 59	84	7	55 to 41	--	26
OCT	68 to 49	89	9	54 to 38	--	16
NOV	55 to 39	89	6	40 to 26	--	8
DEC	46 to 32	87	8	33 to 20	--	12

MONTH	YEREVAN, ARMENIA			BAKU, AZERBAIJAN		
	Avg Temp. (High-Low)	% Relative Humidity (Avg)	Average # of Days with Rainfall	Temp. High-Low	% Relative Humidity (am-pm)	Monthly Rainfall (inches)
JAN	33 to 17	80	11	44 to 35	--	1.4
FEB	38 to 21	75	10	43 to 35	--	0.8
MAR	51 to 32	60	11	49 to 39	--	0.8
APR	66 to 43	60	13	61 to 47	--	0.8
MAY	76 to 51	55	13	71 to 57	--	0.5
JUN	84 to 58	50	8	81 to 66	--	0.3
JUL	92 to 64	50	4	86 to 71	--	0.1
AUG	91 to 64	50	3	85 to 72	--	0.3
SEP	83 to 55	55	3	78 to 66	--	0.8
OCT	69 to 45	65	9	67 to 55	--	1.3
NOV	55 to 36	75	8	68 to 47	--	1.2
DEC	39 to 25	80	8	49 to 40	--	1.3

ABOUT YOUR DESTINATIONS: CULTURE, ETIQUETTE & MORE

O.A.T. Trip Experience Leaders: A World of Difference

During your adventure, you'll be accompanied by one of our local, Trip Experience Leaders. All are fluent in English and possess the skills, certification, and experience necessary to ensure an enriching adventure. As locals of the regions you'll explore with them, our Trip Experience Leaders provide the kind of firsthand knowledge and insight that make local history, culture, and wildlife come alive. Coupled with their unbridled enthusiasm, caring personalities, and ability to bring diverse groups of travelers together, our Trip Experience Leaders ensure that your experience with O.A.T. is one you'll remember for a lifetime.

Georgian Culture

So is Georgia in Europe or Asia? One definition of Europe marks the Caucasus Mountains as its border, which would put Georgia firmly in Asia. Another definition places the whole Caucasus region, including Georgia, firmly in Europe. Georgians would most likely tell you they belong in Europe. And if you take a stroll down a leafy boulevard in the Georgian capital of Tbilisi, you might be reminded of a European city like Paris. And the trendy English-speaking locals you see wouldn't look out of place somewhere like Berlin.

Georgia's cultural traditions of tolerance, generosity, and hospitality are closely tied to its geography. Set at the midpoint between the Muslim East and the Christian West, trade routes were established here since ancient times. Merchants, traders, and travelers from around the world passed through Georgia, with many of them pausing for a restorative dip in the famous thermal baths of Tbilisi, the Georgian capital. Centuries of welcoming weary travelers gave rise to a deeply ingrained code of chivalry that extends to present-day Georgia. Many countries are known for their hospitality, of course. But a country that believes "every guest is a gift from God" means that traditions of hospitality are taken to a whole new level in Georgia.

Georgia's welcoming nature might be best expressed in the national monument that stands high above Tbilisi. Called Kartlis Deda—Mother of Georgia—the statue bears a goblet of wine in one hand to welcome guests. But not all guests were friendly, so the statue bears a sword in the other hand. That's because Georgia's geography had a real downside. Its prized location made the country too tempting a target. And a wave of invaders came calling, with Arab, Ottoman, Mongol, and Russian forces each leaving behind their distinctive cultural mark.

It shouldn't come as a surprise, then, that Georgian culture is centered on things like hospitality, food, and wine. As the world's oldest wine-producing country, Georgians are fiercely proud of their wines—and continue to make much of it in ancient underground clay pots (*kevri*), a tradition dating back to the eighth century BC. And they're equally proud of their food. The country's celebrated culinary traditions stem from Silk Road times too, when Georgians began cherry-picking the best flavors and dishes of Europe and Asia and improving upon them.

Georgian food and wine traditions all come together in a traditional feast called the *supra*, a treasured national ritual characterized by endless plates of food and glasses of wine—and an almost equal number of rules. *Supra*, which translates to “tablecloth,” is a centuries-old Georgian feast directed by the tamada, who will lead the party in dozens of toasts—to Georgia, to peace, to women, to deceased loved ones, to nature ... It’s a multi-hour, multi-course extravaganza where the wine is invariably followed by a bottle of *chacha*, the lethal Georgian schnapps.

Even when not at a *supra*, the quality of Georgian food and the generous portions make it difficult not to overindulge. Georgians even have a word for this: *shemomechama*—whose literal translation is “I accidentally ate the whole thing.”

Religion and family also figure prominently in Georgian culture. While many European nations have seen a drop in religious adherence, attendance and respect for the Orthodox Church are on the rise in Georgia. With roots that back to the fourth century, the church is credited with helping Georgia keep its musical traditions alive during the Soviet era. Being dominated by so many foreign powers through the centuries has also left Georgians deeply distrustful of government, which may be one reason why family and friends are held in such high regard. In times of crisis, Georgians rely on family.

Armenian Culture

Like in Georgia, geography played an important role in shaping Armenian culture, whose people have existed for thousands of years. A mountainous, landlocked nation, Armenia found itself occupied by neighboring empires throughout much of its history—and Armenian culture faced the threat of extinction time and again. That Armenians have managed to preserve their unique culture and national identity while under the thumb of so many other dominating cultures is nothing short of remarkable.

Unlike many other cultures, Armenians developed their own unique language, alphabet, customs, and traditions. Armenia was first country in the world to adopt Christianity as the state religion in AD 301—and the church is the unifying force that links Armenian culture not just to the people living in Armenia but among the diaspora communities of Armenians throughout the world. Soon after the adoption of Christianity, a wealth of churches, monasteries and other Christian monuments were constructed throughout the country. Then, by the fifth century, the church had developed the Armenian alphabet, which became an invaluable tool in preserving national identity. While Armenians already had a rich heritage of music and dance dating back centuries before Christ, the alphabet allowed for the preservation of ancient literature and texts, translations of the Bible and the Holy Liturgy, and the development and preservation of new sacred music. While Christianity didn’t originate in Armenia, they would endow it with their own language, music, and unique architecture.

It isn’t just religion that has shaped Armenian culture, of course. At the crossroads of civilizations, it has naturally absorbed a blend of Eastern and Western cultural influences. As a stop along the Silk Road, traditions of hospitality have endured in Armenia. Guests are

always welcome into Armenian homes and are greeted with warmth and a table piled high with traditional cuisine—including lavash, the flatbread whose recipe or cooking method hasn't changed for centuries that is recognized by UNESCO on its list of Intangible Cultural Heritage.

Families and family life remain a cornerstone of Armenian culture. Weddings may no longer last for several days, but they are exuberant affairs with many joyous rituals and include extended families of the bride and groom. Traditional Armenian families welcome many children and even have a formal celebration when a baby's first tooth appears. As a largely patriarchal society, Armenians particularly revere boys—with first male child usually given the honor of being named after his fraternal grandfather.

Some notable diaspora Armenians include Cher, Andre Agassi, and yes, the Kardashians. An Armenian brandy became quite notable at the Yalta Conference in 1945. Churchill, who was said to have been smitten with the Ararat brandy offered to him by Stalin, would later say his secret to a long life was "Never be late for dinner, smoke Havana cigars, and drink Armenian brandy." One other Armenian cultural trait of note: With more grandmasters per capita than in any other country, Armenians are pretty good chess players, too.

Taking Photographs

The etiquette of photographing people in most countries is about the same as it would be on the streets of your hometown. You need permission to take a close-up, but not for a crowd scene. Be especially polite if you want to photograph children or older women. If you want to shoot a great portrait, show interest in your subject and try to have a bit of social interaction first. Then use sign language to inquire if a picture is OK.

Please do not take photographs of military personnel, military compounds, or other official institutions/personnel (such as police). This may result in the confiscation of your camera.

In museums or at archaeological sites, there may be restrictions on using your flash. Please obey any signs or directions by staff; the no-flash rule protects the fragile artifacts and artwork from damage by repeated exposure to light. Occasionally, there may also be a small fee levied by the museum or site for the privilege of taking photos.

Safety & Security

As you travel, exercise the same caution and awareness that you would in a large American city. Don't be overly nervous or suspicious, but keep your eyes open. If you are venturing out after dark, go with one or two other people.

Carry a one-day supply of cash, and your passport, in a travel pouch. Don't leave valuables unattended in your hotel room. Most hotels will offer use of a hotel safe at the front desk or an electronic in-room safe (for which you can set your own personal number). Please utilize this.

Pickpockets may create a sudden distraction. In any sort of puzzling street situation, try to keep one hand on your wallet or money belt. If an encounter with a local turns out to be long and complicated and involves money or your valuables, be very careful.

Georgian Cuisine

Your introduction to Georgian cuisine might begin at a **supra**, a traditional, spontaneous feast where the food and wine just keep coming, along with many sentimental toasts and heartfelt hospitality. The *supra* table will undoubtedly include **khachapuri**, which can refer to any number of cheese-filled breads, usually served with a raw or sunny-side up egg. Georgian chefs make good use of herbs such as parsley, fenugreek, and cilantro, but the iconic flavor profile comes from tarragon, which accents everything, including a bright green, carbonated lemonade (**tarkhuna**).

- **Khinkali:** You will most likely begin your meal with this chunky dumpling filled with soup and lamb, beef or pork; or spinach, mushroom, or cheese. The dough is twisted to create a handy knob on top.
- **Chrianteli:** A cold soup made from puréed cherries, garlic, cilantro and dill.
- **Shkmeruli:** A chicken in garlic sauce that is served as the main course.
- **Grilled sturgeon:** This is another main course dish. The sturgeon is garnished with dill and served with a pomegranate sauce; or hot and spicy beef **ostri** in tomato sauce.
- **Satsivi:** Chicken or turkey braised with a paste of walnuts, garlic, and herbs.
- **Tklapi:** You will find these rolled-up sheets of dried fruit purée as you are walking through the markets.
- Georgians do wonderful things with vegetables and one of their most inventive dishes is a salad called
- **Pkhali:** This salad comes in many varieties (such as carrot, spinach, or beet) and is actually more of a pâté that you can spread.
- **Churchkhelas:** These waxy-looking confections are walnuts strung like beads, then dipped in a thick, sugary syrup made with grapes, apricots, pomegranates, or other fruit. It's sometimes called "the Georgian Snickers".
- Whatever you choose, you will have some wonderful Georgian wines to pair it with, since viniculture has been prevalent here for 7,000 years. Try a dry, white **Mtsvane** or a tannic, ruby colored **Orovela**.
- **Orange wine:** Don't be fooled by the name: there are no oranges in it. The deep amber color comes from the grape skins which have been fermented along with the grapes, adding a rich color and a depth of fruity flavor.

As you may have noticed walnuts are a popular ingredient here. If you have a nut allergy, let your Trip Experience Leader know early on and ask them to write something down in Georgian for you to show the waiter when dining on your own.

Armenian Cuisine

If you've had Armenian food here in the States, you may be surprised by what you are actually served in Armenia. The diaspora that happened after the Armenian genocide, sending refugees to places as far-flung as the U.S. and Canada, Syria, Lebanon, and Iran, meant that many cherished recipes were adapted to accommodate new local ingredients. Meanwhile, back in Armenia, the Soviet era introduced a whole other culinary style (along with food shortages that spurred even more invention). Many Armenians eventually returned from abroad, bringing cosmopolitan touches to the regional cooking styles they'd grown up with. So the Armenian table is a fluid, varied, and delectable thing.

- **Harissa:** (not to be confused with the spicy North African condiment) is a historical Armenian food that symbolizes the courage of Armenians during the Ottoman rule. Peeled wheat and meat or chicken are simmered for 4–5 hours until everything has melded together into a thick porridge. It is served with melted butter on top. This is Armenian comfort food.
- **Khorovats:** Kebabs made of beef, pork, or lamb. The meat is always seasoned before the barbeque with salt and pepper and served with a “salad” of fried tomatoes, eggplant, peppers, greens and onion. It all gets wrapped up in chewy **lavash** flatbread. You might see men cooking *khorovats* on charcoal grills (called **manghals**).
- **Zhengyalov:** Or “zhengyalov hats”. It is a traditional fried flatbread from the Armenian Highlands, based on a dough made with flour, sour cream, and seasonal greens like cilantro, parsley, spring onions, dill, spinach, lettuce, or beet leaves. It gets fried in a pan until both sides are golden.
- **Lahmejun:** (*Lahmacun*) is essentially an Armenian pizza, though it doesn't usually have cheese. It's a savory round, thin flatbread topped with sautéed minced beef, finely chopped onions, garlic, and peeled crushed tomatoes. Baked until the crust is crispy, it is served with mint and lemon.
- **Kyufta:** Little cones of minced meat, mixed with crushed wheat and spices, and simmered in broth.
- **Ishkhan:** A meaty trout that is prepared many ways, including stuffed with hazelnuts and apricots; or simmered in wine and seasoned with basil, tarragon, chives and red pepper.
- **Dolmas:** Popular all over the Caucasus, and in Armenia, besides rice, these pickled and rolled grape leaves can be filled with lentils and chickpeas (*pasuts dolma*). They're often served with **matsun**, a fermented milk yogurt mixed with garlic.
- **Manti:** This dish is perfect if you like dumplings. It is made from open pockets of dough filled with meat and cheese, then baked in pan with tomato sauce and served with a garlicky yogurt dipping sauce.

- **Gata:** An eggy, bread-like glazed filled with a mix of flour, sugar, walnuts, honey, and cinnamon. It's melt-in-your-mouth good—a staple for every important holiday in Armenia.

Azerbaijani Cuisine

Thanks to Azerbaijan's versatile climate, fertile farms, and a location along the Caspian Sea, Azeri chefs have a rich larder of ingredients from which to create their culinary magic. They also have a trove of influences ranging from Persian palace cooking to Ottoman confections to Eastern European stalwarts. Prepare to explore the multi-cultural wonder with dishes like these:

- **Plov:** The national dish of Azerbaijan, **plov** is a saffron-scented rice pilaf that can also include dried fruits, barberries, eggs, meat or poultry, chestnuts, and any variety of herbs and spices. Sometimes it is baked in a pan lined with **lavash** bread, which also forms the top crust. The entire thing is turned out on a platter like a rice-filled cake. Called **shah plov** or **shah pilaf**, it is a popular treat at weddings and banquets. There is quite a bit of ceremony attached to any **plov**. It will be served with fanfare between the second and third courses, and the ingredients will be based on what comes before and after.
- **Dolmas:** A dish of stuffed grape or cabbage leaves. While common throughout the Caucasus region, the Azerbaijani version has a distinctive round shape, as opposed to the tubular ones enjoyed elsewhere. They are usually filled with chopped meat, onions, rice, salt, pepper, butter, and fresh herbs such as coriander, dill and mint. Sometimes, that filling goes into a stuffed tomato dish called **domates dolmasi**. Both are served with a tangy yogurt sauce.
- **Doygha:** A cold or hot soup is made with **gatigh**, a fermented milk product similar to yogurt, plus eggs, rice, spinach, herbs, and occasionally, meatballs. It is a staple at weddings and other special occasions, and a good palate cleanser.
- **Lavangi:** A whole chicken or fish stuffed with walnuts, onions and plum paste, and roasted in a clay pot.
- **Piti:** A slow-cooked stew of lamb, chestnuts, onions, potatoes, peas and garlic.
- **Gutab:** A quesadilla-like snack made from thinly rolled, unleavened dough filled with meat, cheese, herbs, pumpkin, pomegranate seeds, onions, and chestnuts. It gets cooked in a flat cast-iron pan, and you just roll it up and pop it into your mouth.
- **Badambura:** A flaky dessert pastry filled with almonds, sugar, and ground cardamom.
- **Yayma:** A traditional Azerbaijani dessert rice pudding flavored with saffron, and typically topped with butter, cinnamon, and honey.

Shopping: What to Buy, Customs, Shipping & More

There may be scheduled visits to local shops during your adventure. There is no requirement to make a purchase during these stops, and any purchase made is a direct transaction with the shop in question, subject to the vendor's terms of purchase. O.A.T. is not responsible for purchases you make on your trip or for the shipment of your purchases.

Returns

If you discover an issue with an item, you should contact the vendor directly and expect that any resolution will take longer than it would in the U.S. We recommend that you keep a copy of all your receipts, invoices, or contracts, along with the shop's contact information. Keep in mind, local practice may vary from U.S. standards, so don't assume that you have a certain number of days after the purchase to speak up or that you are guaranteed a refund.

Crafts & Souvenirs

Georgia

With plenty of artisan shops in the capital city Tbilisi, you'll soon find that handmade items are the best souvenirs you can buy in Georgia. Blue and white tablecloths known as *supra* have been part of the country's culture for centuries and have designs featuring birds, deer, and other figures. Traditional drinking horns called *kantsi* are also popular choice, as are textiles and ceramics. Although not handmade, brightly colored *khinkali* socks are another unique souvenir—the print is of traditional Georgian dumplings. You may also wish to take some of Georgia's famous wine back home.

Bargaining: Bargaining is common in open-air markets, but not in shops.

Armenia

Traditional souvenirs include carpets, dried fruits or fruit leather, decorative tiles, jewelry with natural stones, soviet coins, local cognac, and anything with pomegranates (the symbol of Armenia) or famed leader Tigran the Great on it. *Kachkars* are carved stone decorations with crosses and other symbols; *mushurbas* are metalwork "gurgling cups", so-called because of the noise they make while in use.

Bargaining: Prices are generally fixed, except at open-air markets, where some bargaining is expected.

Azerbaijan

Traditional souvenirs include woven carpets, gold and silver jewelry, ceramics, oil paintings, woven products with the national pattern (Buta), copper cookware, and homemade jams in unique flavors, such as white cherry.

Bargaining: In Azerbaijan, prices are usually flexible and negotiating is normal. The only rule is that if you make an offer, you should be prepared to buy at that price. Bring a mix of small bills so that you can pay in exact change.

U.S. Customs Regulations & Shipping Charges

For all things related to U.S. Customs, the ultimate authority is the U.S. Bureau of Customs & Border Protection. Their website, www.cbp.gov has the answers to the most frequently asked questions. Or you can call them at **1-877-227-5511**.

The top three points to know are:

- At time of writing, your personal duty-free allowance is \$800 for items brought with you. Items totaling more than \$800 are subject to duty fees.
- **Items shipped home are always subject to duty when received in the U.S.** Even when the shop has offered to include shipping and duties in the price, this typically means shipping to the nearest customs facility and payment of the export duties—not door-to-door shipping or payment of the import duties. All additional duties or shipping charges would be your responsibility. Unless an item is small enough to send by parcel service (like FedEx), chances are you will need to arrange shipping or pick-up once the item is in the U.S. and will need to pay customs duties.
- It is illegal to import products made from endangered animal species. U.S. Customs & Border Protection will seize these items, as well as most furs, coral, tortoise shell, reptile skins, feathers, plants, and items made from animal skins.

DEMOGRAPHICS & HISTORY

Georgia

Facts, Figures, & National Holidays

- **Area:** 26,911 square miles
- **Capital:** Tbilisi
- **Government:** Unitary Parliamentary Republic
- **Languages:** The official language is Georgian
- **Location:** Georgia is a country in the Caucasus region. Situated at the juncture of Western Asia and Eastern Europe, it is bounded to the west by the Black Sea, to the north by Russia, to the south by Turkey and Armenia, and to the southeast by Azerbaijan.
- **Geography:** The terrain is largely mountainous with the Great Caucasus Mountains in the north and Lesser Caucasus Mountains in the south, lowlands that open to the Black Sea in the west, and the Mtkvari River Basin in the east.
- **Population:** 3.997 million (estimate)
- **Religion:** Eastern Orthodox 83.4%, Muslim 10.7%, Armenian Apostolic 2.9%, other or unaffiliated 2.9%
- **Time Zone:** Georgia Standard Time: four hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time, or nine hours ahead of Eastern Standard Time. When it is noon in Georgia, it is 3am in New York, and midnight in Los Angeles. Georgia does not observe Daylight Savings time, so during the summer months these times would be 1 hour different (so noon in Georgia would be 4am in New York and 1am in LA).

National Holidays: Georgia

In addition to the holidays listed below, Georgia celebrates a number of national holidays that follow a lunar calendar, such as Easter. To find out if you will be traveling during these holidays, please visit **www.timeanddate.com/holidays**.

01/01 New Year's Day

01/07 Orthodox Christmas Day

01/19 Orthodox Epiphany

03/03 Mother's Day

03/08 International Women's Day

04/09 Day of National Unity

05/09 Day of Victory over Fascism

05/12 St. Andrew's Day

05/26 Independence Day

08/28 St. Mary's Day

10/14 Svetitskovloba (first Christian church in Georgia)

11/23 St. George's Day

Georgia: A Brief History

Archaeological evidence of human habitation in the region of present-day Georgia dates back almost two million years. Archaeologists have also traced the world's earliest known wine creation to the people of the South Caucasus in around 6,000 BCE—a time when early Georgians discovered that grape juice buried underground in clay pots for the winter would turn into wine. Over the millennia, the early Georgian Colchis Kingdom had contact with the Greeks, giving way to the legends of Jason and the Argonauts and the Golden Fleece.

Early in the fourth century CE, Georgia became the second country in the world to convert to Christianity (after Armenia), followed by the development of a unique alphabet with characters specific to the Georgian language that helped spread Christianity throughout the country. Then, in the 5th century CE, western Georgia became tied to the expanding Byzantine Empire, while the eastern and southern regions fell under Persian control. The Persians were then briefly driven out by the man considered to be the father of the Georgian nation, King Vakhtang Gorgasali, who moved his capital from Mtskheta to Tbilisi. In 654, Arab invaders set up an emirate Tbilisi.

After time spent under the Persian, Arab, and Turkish empires, the 11th through the 13th centuries would represent Georgia's Golden Age, a period when it flourished as a regional center of education, science, and literature. Just as the Georgian Empire reached its zenith, the Mongols arrived in 1220 and ended up ruling for the next century. Then, Timur (Tamerlane), the Turco-Mongol scourge of Central Asia, invaded Georgia eight times between 1386 and 1403, ravaging the country but never establishing firm control over Christian Georgia.

By the middle of the 15th century, a unified kingdom of Georgia collapsed, fragmenting into several independent kingdoms. Neighboring Persian and Ottoman Empires took advantage of a weakened Georgia and conquered and occupied most territories for the next two centuries. Finally, in 1762, Heraclius II became the king of a unified Georgia for the first time in three centuries. But searching for a reliable protector to ensure Georgia's survival, Heraclius then signed the Treaty of Georgievsk in 1783, which made Georgia a Russian protectorate.

After a Persian invasion in 1795, the Russian Empire formally annexes Georgia in 1801. Under Russian rule, almost all Georgian territories taken by the Persian and Ottoman Empires are recovered. Then, following the Russian Revolution and collapse of the Russian Empire, Georgia declares its independence in 1918—the first time it is free since its Golden Age. It didn't last long, however. In 1921, the fledgling Georgian state was absorbed into the U.S.S.R., and would remain so until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

While declaring its independence in 1991, the next several years were difficult times in Georgia. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the disputed regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (backed by Russia) declared their independence and broke away from Georgia. A five-day war between Georgia and Russia in August 2008 resulted in the expulsion of ethnic Georgians from South Ossetia. While both regions receive military and economic aid from Russia, the international community still considers them to be a part of Georgian territory.

Armenia

Facts, Figures & National Holidays

- **Area:** 11,484 square miles
- **Capital:** Yerevan
- **Government:** Unitary Parliamentary Republic
- **Languages:** The official language is Armenian
- **Location:** Southwestern Asia, between Turkey (to the west) and Azerbaijan (to the east), Georgia (to the north) and Iran (to the south)
- **Geography:** Most of the country is in the Armenian Highlands with mountains, although there are some forests and valleys like Ararat Valley.
- **Population:** 2.99 million (estimate)
- **Religion:** Armenian Apostolic 92%, Evangelical 1%, other or none 7%
- **Time Zone:** Armenia Standard Time: four hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time, or nine hours ahead of Eastern Standard Time. When it is noon in Armenia, it is 3am in New York, and midnight in Los Angeles. Armenia does not observe Daylight Saving time, so during the summer months these times would be 1 hour different (so noon in Armenia would be 4am in New York and 1am in LA).

National Holidays: Armenia

In addition to the holidays listed below, Armenia celebrates a number of national holidays that follow a lunar calendar, such as Easter. To find out if you will be traveling during these holidays, please visit **www.timeanddate.com/holidays**.

01/01–01/04 New Year's

01/06 Armenian Christmas

01/28 Army Day

03/08 International Women's Day

04/24 Genocide Remembrance Day

04/25 Citizen's Day

05/01 Labor Day

05/09 Victory and Peace Day

05/28 Republic Day

07/05 Constitution Day

09/21 Independence Day

12/31 New Year's Eve

Armenia: A Brief History

The oldest known ancestors of modern Armenians are the Hayasa-Azzi, a Bronze-Age tribal group who settled in the lands surrounding Mount Ararat and sections of modern-day Turkey. The Hayasa-Azzi mixed with other local tribes, which led to the founding of the Kingdom of Urartu (Assyrian for "Ararat") in the 9th century BCE, comprised of several smaller kingdoms across Armenia, eastern Turkey, and northwestern Iran. In the late 8th century BCE, the Urartian king Argishti I founded the Armenian capital of Yerevan.

Following the decline of the Kingdom of Urartu, another Armenian kingdom was established by the Ervanduni Dynasty, which was eventually subdued by Achaemenian Iran. Due to invasions of Alexander the Great in the fourth century BCE, Armenia then found itself embroiled in the Hellenic world. Then, late in the first century BCE, Armenia was unified under King Tigranes the Great to become one of the most powerful empires in Asia. But it didn't last long.

By 30 BCE, Rome conquered the Armenian Empire, and for the next four centuries Armenia would find itself smack in the middle of two powerful empires—the Roman and Persian. But in 301 CE, Armenia adopted Christianity as a state religion to become the first Christian nation in the world. And just a century later, the Armenian alphabet was created, which helped to preserve the Armenian language and culture and protect Armenians against assimilation during the centuries of invasions to come.

In the ensuing centuries, Armenia's prime geographical position at the crossroads of the Silk Road left it vulnerable to a number of invaders: Turks, Mongols, Egyptians, Byzantines, until it was once again divided between powerful empires—the Ottoman Empire (most of western Armenia) and Persian Empire (eastern Armenia, including the capital Yerevan) in the 16th century. Then, with the demise of the Persian Empire in the 19th century, eastern Armenia was annexed by the Russian Empire, while the western region remained under Turkish rule.

As Christians in a Muslim country, Armenians did not fare well under Ottoman rule. In the early years of the 20th century, when many Western nations raised concerns about the treatment of the Armenian people, the response by the now crumbling Ottoman Empire was to forcibly evict the entire Armenian population leading to the deaths of about 1.5 million Armenians in what is now known as the Armenian Genocide—which began on April 24, 1915.

Following World War I, Armenia was briefly united with Georgia and Azerbaijan in a newly created Caucasian Federation. Then Armenia formed an independent republic from 1918 until 1920, when it was invaded by forces from Turkey and the Soviet Union. Armenia would remain under Soviet power until declaring independence in 1991. Today, Armenia counts itself among a number of post-Soviet republics that has established itself as proud independent nation for the first time in thousands of years.

Azerbaijan

Facts, Figures & National Holidays

- **Area:** 33,436 square miles
- **Capital:** Baku
- **Government:** Presidential Republic
- **Languages:** The official language is Azerbaijani
- **Location:** Azerbaijan is located in southwestern Asia, bordering the Caspian Sea between Iran, Armenia, Georgia, and Russia.
- **Geography:** Azerbaijan is about the size of Maine and has a varied geography. Azerbaijan is surrounded by the Greater Caucasus mountain range along the northern Russian border and the Lesser Caucasus mountains along the Armenian border with sloping hills and mineral springs. There are eight large rivers which flow from the mountains through the lowlands into the Caspian Sea.
- **Population:** 9,961,396 (estimate)
- **Religion:** Muslim 96.9%, Christian 3%, other <0.1%, unaffiliated <0.1%
- **Time Zone:** Azerbaijan goes by Gulf Standard time: four hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time, or eight hours ahead of Eastern Standard Time. When it is noon in Azerbaijan, it's 4 am in New York, and 1 am in Los Angeles. Azerbaijan does not observe Daylight Savings time, so during the summer months Azerbaijan is an additional hour ahead of the U.S.

National Holidays: Azerbaijan

In addition to the holidays listed below, Azerbaijan celebrates a number of national holidays that follow a lunar calendar, such as Ramadan and Feast of the Sacrifice. Some of these holidays may be observed on the following Monday if the holiday falls on a weekend day. To find out if you will be traveling during these holidays, please visit www.timeanddate.com/holidays.

01/01 New Year's Day

01/20 Martyr's Day

03/08 Women's Day

03/20 Nowruz/Spring Holiday

05/09 Victory Day over Fascism

05/28 Republic Day

06/15 The Day of National Salvation of the Azerbaijan People

06/26 Azerbaijan Armed Forces

11/09 State Flag Day

12/31 World Azerbaijan Solidarity Day

Azerbaijan: A Brief History

Up until the end of the 20th century, Azerbaijan has enjoyed only brief periods of independence. It was part of Persia, overrun by Mongols, conquered by Ottoman Turks, disputed by Armenia, and annexed by Russia and later, the USSR. Its religion has changed several times, as has have its borders and its very name. In fact, no specifically Azerbaijani state existed before 1918.

The historic region now called Azerbaijan was known to the ancients as Caucasian Albania (unrelated to the modern Adriatic nation). It was closely linked to Persia, and from the 6th century BC, the Zoroastrian religion was dominant. Starting around 625 AD, the people began adopting Christianity, and came under the cultural influence of the Armenians. By the 7th century, Arabs began advancing into Caucasian Albania, consolidating power through local rulers called shahanshahs. Next came the Seljuks, who brought with them the Turkic language that is the basis of the modern Azeri (Azerbaijani) language spoken today. They also built impressive fortified cities, but they could not withstand the devastation wrought by the Mongol invasions that began with the start of the 13th century, and were complete by 1235.

Even during the Mongol era, one polity survived and that was the Shirvan Shah dynasty, which lasted from the mid-9th to the early 16th century. Originating from the Caspian region that presently includes the capital of Baku, the Shirvan dynasty fostered a golden age of art and culture. Modern Azerbaijanis identify with it as a forerunner to the Azerbaijani state.

By the 18th century, the region had fragmented into a collection of autonomous khanates. Fearful of a re-emerging Persia, they turned to imperial Russia for help, but got more than they asked for when Russia annexed them. To solidify their control, Russia began transplanting Christians from Russia, Armenia and even Germany, a move that set the stage for later ethnic conflicts. After the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, Russian Azerbaijan joined forces with Armenia and Georgia to form the anti-Bolshevik Transcaucasian Federation. It lasted less than a year and when Azerbaijan then proclaimed its own independence in 1920, the Red Army stepped in and made it a Soviet republic.

Over the next decades Azerbaijan's borders shifted, causing ongoing tension with neighboring Armenia. But it remained part of the USSR, and suffered greatly during the Stalinist purges that killed or imprisoned more than 100,000 Azeris. Throughout this period, there were enclaves of ethnic Armenians living in Azerbaijan, and vice versa. In the 1980s, disputes over the sovereignty and status of these minorities erupted into violence bordering on ethnic cleansing. After the Soviets intervened by sending the Red Army into Baku, killing dozens of civilians, the people of Azerbaijan declared (and won) independence in 1991.

That was not the end of the ethnic struggle. A large-scale conflict broke out between Armenia and Azerbaijan in 1992, and the Armenian side took over major areas of Azerbaijani territory. In 1994, a ceasefire was reached with Russian mediation. But still, a million Azeris were displaced. Money from Azerbaijan's oil boom helped to provide housing and services for some, but it came very late in the game. That oil wealth has also transformed the look of the capital, with its glittering modernist skyline, and is now invigorating regional cities across the country.

RESOURCES

Suggested Reading

Georgia

The Caucasus: An Introduction by Thomas de Waal (2nd Ed 2018, History) An accessible overview of the complex history and region of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia. Includes coverage of Georgia's break-away regions, the "Five-Day-War" between Russia and Georgia, and recent political upheavals in all three countries.

For the Love of Wine: My Odyssey Through the World's Most Ancient Wine Culture by Alice Feiring (2016 Non-Fiction) A lively account by an acclaimed journalist who meets with winemakers, craftspeople, and artists throughout Georgia while collecting recipes and stories.

The Eighth Life: (for Brilka) by Nino Haratischvili (2014, Fiction) Tells the story of one Georgian family as they protect a secret recipe for chocolate throughout the ups and downs of their country during the 20th century.

My Dear Son: The Memoirs of Stalin's Mother by Keke Jughashvili (2012, Memoir) Preserved in an archive for 70 years, the book is a transcript of the memories of Ekaterine (Keke) Jughashvili, Georgian-born Stalin's mother, which she dictated in 1935, two years before her death. It does make for fascinating reading.

Stories I Stole by Wendell Steavenson (2003 Travel Literature) Very well received book from a journalist at *Time's* London office who leaves her job on whim to spend two adventurous wine-soaked years getting to know the former Soviet Republic of Georgia.

Armenia

The Spice Box Letters by Eve Makis (2015, Fiction) When Katerina finds a hidden diary in a spice box she inherited from her grandmother, it sets her off on a quest to find out more about her grandmother's life and how it was impacted by the Armenian tragedy of 1915.

The Sandcastle Girls by Chris Bohjalian (2013, Historical Fiction) From the bestselling author of *Midwives*, this is a deeply moving love story an American volunteer and an Armenian engineer set against the backdrop of the Armenian Genocide. The author is also the grandson of survivors of the Armenian Genocide.

The Crossing Place: A Journey Among the Armenians by Philip Marsden (1994, Travel/History) The noted English travel writer Philip Marsden recounts his travels through the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and the Caucasus in search of the Armenian diaspora.

Visions of Ararat: Writings on Armenia by Christopher J. Walker, Editor (2005, Anthology). A fine collection of the best writing on Armenia by travel writers, historians, soldiers, artists, and more.

The Hundred-Year Walk: An Armenian Odyssey by Dawn Anahid MacKeen (2016, History/Memoir) An award-winning journalist recounts the harrowing story of her grandfather, who escaped death during World War I at the hands of the Ottoman Turks who set out to exterminate Turkey's large ethnic Armenian population.

Azerbaijan

Solar Plexus, A Baku Saga in Four Parts by Rustam Ibragimbekov (Fiction, 2012) This saga spans the years between 1940 and the 1990s to explore lives and loves of families and friends who all grew up around a certain courtyard in Baku.

The Black Garden by Thomas de Wael (2013, Nonfiction) When first published in 2003, this was the definitive study of how Armenia and Azerbaijan were pulled into a conflict that helped deliver their independence and end the Soviet Union, but left a residue of suffering and simmering tension. This updated edition has new material covering events through 2011.

Azerbaijan Diary: A Rogue Reporter's Adventures in an Oil-rich, War-torn, Post-Soviet Republic by Thomas Goltz (1998, History/Memoir) A first-person account of life in post-USSR Azerbaijan written by an American reporter.

The Colonel's Mistake by Dan Mayland (2012, Fiction) The first of the Mark Sava spy novel series. It follows an ex-CIA station chief attempting to live a quiet life as a professor in Baku. But complications both political and personal draw him back to the world of high-stakes espionage.

Ali and Nino by Kurban Said (1937, Fiction) A love story between a Muslim Azerbaijani boy and a Christian Georgian girl at the end of World War I. Although first written in the '30s, it is frequently reissued as it is considered a classic.

Suggested Films & Videos

Georgia

Father of a Soldier (1964, War) This WWII classic recounts the story of an aging Georgian winemaker searching for his son, an army lieutenant who has been injured—but when the father arrives at the hospital, his son has already been sent back to the front. This award-winning film about the strength of family bonds is often available on Amazon Prime and is worth seeking out. Russian with English subtitles.

Tangerines (2014 War). Considered a small masterpiece, the film takes place in 1992, when the Georgian region of Abkhazia fights to secede and an Estonian man wants to harvest his crop of tangerines while war rages on around him. Georgian with English subtitles (should be available on Amazon's video service).

Armenia

The Color of Pomegranates (1968, Avant-Garde/Art) A visually stunning film by famous Soviet director Sergei Parajanov recounts the life and works of eighteenth-century Armenian poet Sayat-Nova. This revolutionary work of filmmaking reveals the splendor of Armenian culture, but with all surreal images and little dialogue, it may not be for everyone. Russian with English subtitles.

Yeva (2017, Drama) Critically acclaimed Armenian/Iranian film tells the story of a young woman in Yerevan who escapes with her daughter to a small village following the tragic death of her husband. Armenian with English subtitles.

Azerbaijan

Ali and Nino (2016, Drama) Based on a famous novel, this story depicts the forbidden love between a Muslim boy from Baku and a Christian girl from Georgia. Set during World War I, it is a vivid portrayal of life in Azerbaijan 100 years ago.

Buta (2017, Drama) A seven year-old boy who has lost his mother is befriended by an old man, a soap merchant who once loved the boy's grandmother.

Absurdistan (2008, Satire) Filmed in Azerbaijan (but set in an indeterminate country in the Caucasus), this comedy is about a forgotten village where the water supply is threatened by a broken pipeline. When the men of the town fail to address the issue, the women go on a sex strike to force some action. Young lovers Aya and Temelko are caught in the middle.

Useful Websites

Overseas Adventure Travel

www.oattravel.com

Overseas Adventure Travel Frequently Asked Questions

www.oattravel.com/faq

International Health Information/CDC (Centers for Disease Control)

www.cdc.gov/travel

Electricity & Plugs

www.worldstandards.eu/electricity/plugs-and-sockets

Foreign Exchange Rates

www.xe.com/currencyconverter
www.oanda.com/converter/classic

ATM Locators

www.mastercard.com/atm
www.visa.com/atmlocator

World Weather

www.intellicast.com
www.weather.com
www.wunderground.com

Basic Travel Phrases (80 languages)

www.travlang.com/languages

Packing Tips

www.travelite.org

U.S. Customs & Border Protection

www.cbp.gov/travel

Transportation Security

Administration (TSA)

www.tsa.gov

National Passport Information Center

www.travel.state.gov

Holidays Worldwide

www.timeanddate.com/holidays

History & Culture

en.wikipedia.org

Useful Apps

Flight Stats

Track departures, arrivals, and flight status

LoungeBuddy

Get access to premium airport lounges around the world

Timeshifter

Personalized tips for avoiding jetlag, based on neuroscience and your own data

GoogleMaps

Maps and directions anywhere in the world

Triposo

City guides, walking maps, and more – and it works offline

Rome2rio

Where to go, what to see, and what to do in more than 160 countries

Flush or Sit or Squat

Find a clean toilet anywhere

Uber

Ride sharing around the world

Visa Plus and Mastercard Cirrus

ATM locations

Shows the location of the nearest ATM in your network

TunnelBear

Provides a secure VPN (virtual private network) that will encrypt your browsing data when you use a public WiFi network

What's App, Skype, or Signal

WiFi calling anywhere in the world

Duolingo, FLuentU, or Babbel

Learn dozens of foreign languages

Google Translate

Fast and simple translations

XE

Currency conversions

SizeGuide

Clothing and shoe sizes in all countries

Best Units Converter

Converts currency, mileage, weights, and many other units of measurement

Tourlina

For women only, it connects you with other female travelers

Happy Cow

Locate vegan and vegetarian eateries in 195 countries

Eatwith

Dine with locals all over the world

Meetup

Connects you with locals who share your interests

Skyview

Identifies constellations and heavenly bodies

Travello

Find travel friends on the road

ALIX for One

Created by and for women, it identifies solo-friendly dining spots in major international cities

TripWhistle

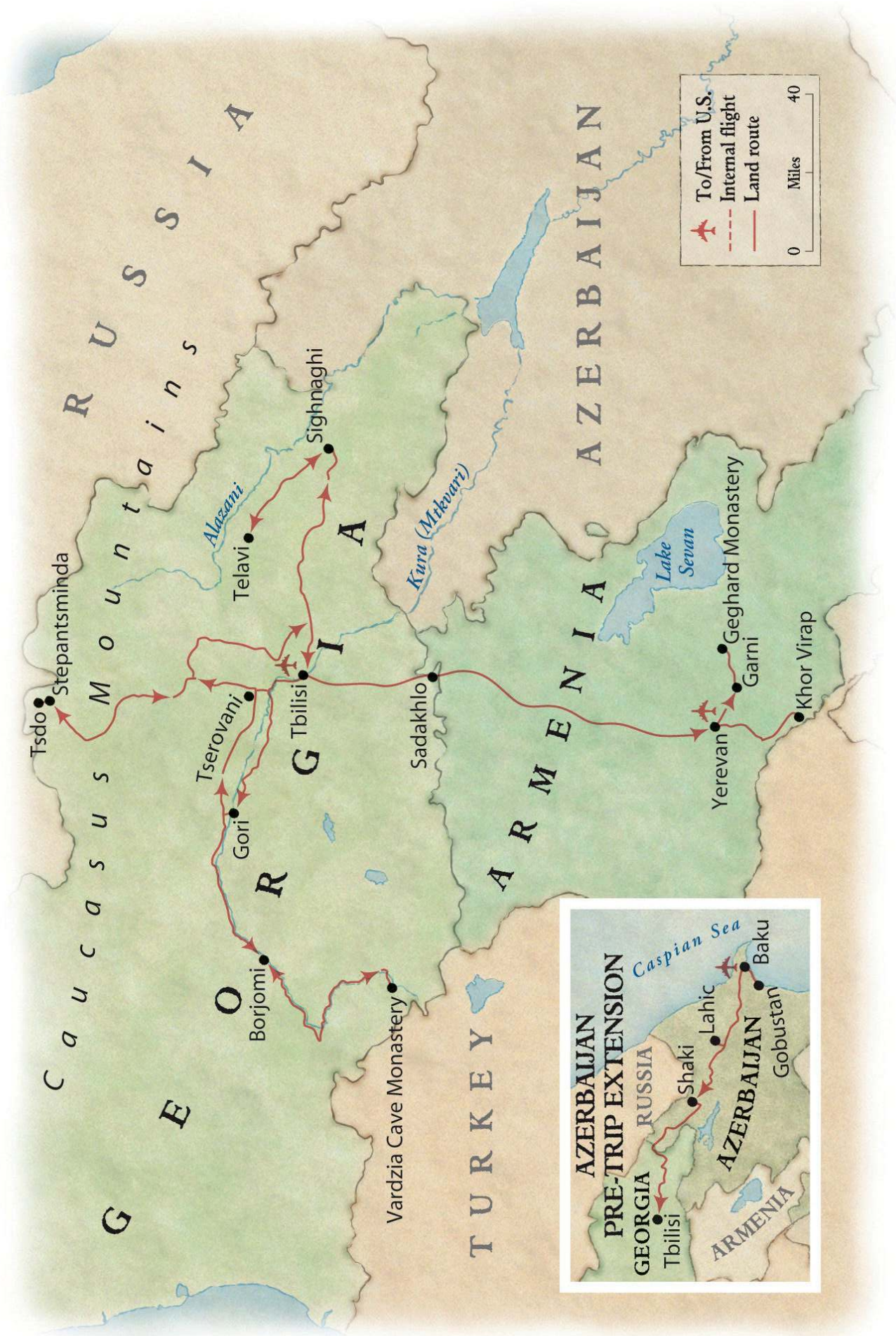
Maps your location and provides emergency numbers for police, medics, and more

GeoSure

Safely navigate neighborhoods around the world

Chirpey

For women only, connect with other women, find out what's safe, meet up, and more



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