



## A BRIEF INTRODUCTION



Dear readers,

Thank you for purchasing my travel guide. Right from the start, I'd like to warn you that it might be a bit different from what you're used to.

I've been working on various projects in Georgia since the war in 2008. I spent a full four years here as the director of the newly founded Czech Centre in Tbilisi. Over the years, I have travelled extensively across Georgia, experienced, learned, and understood a great deal, made many friends, and even became part of some families. But of course, the

longer I stay, the more I realize how much I still don't know.

What sets my guide apart is my personal and subjective view of the country and its people. I hope you won't mind. I sometimes exaggerate, so please take that into account. If my opinions annoy you, feel free to skip them. I won't be offended. I believe that anyone living abroad must inevitably come to terms with the fact that a "foreign" society behaves differently. Some things work better here, while many others work much worse.

For years, I've been involved in development and transformation aid in Georgia, trying to help make things better, though it doesn't always succeed. That has led me to reflect on the nature of Georgians. I deeply wish for this country to flourish, to be beautiful and prosperous. However, progress is painfully slow, and often unnecessarily so.

People often ask me how I ended up in Georgia. As is usually the case, it was a combination of chance and some initiative. After the war in South Ossetia, the country was flooded with thousands of desperate refugees who had to leave everything behind in the Russian-occupied territories. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic tried to help them integrate into the community and find a new purpose in life through small-scale projects.

It started innocently. In December 2008, I arrived in Georgia, where I had last been twenty years earlier as a university student. That night, Tbilisi was covered with a light dusting of snow, making the city look strikingly clean. But it was dark, with barely any shops open and just one small hotel in the Old Town. No souvenirs, not even a postcard to be found. Why would there be? The country was emerging from war.

Sometimes there was no running water or electricity.

I went for a walk through the Old Town, enchanted by its winding alleys. I climbed toward the Narikala Fortress in hiking boots, slipping on the icy path. Many buildings looked as though they were on the verge of collapse (and, as I later learned, many indeed did collapse that winter). Suddenly, a door of one of the crumbling houses opened, and a woman stepped out. She was wrapped in a coat and a woolen scarf, wearing high heels, and walked down the steep, icy street toward me. She was breathtaking. Even with ten years of effort, I could never hope to match her grace and beauty.

That's when I realized what an incredible and resilient nation the Georgians are. A people that has survived centuries of invasions by Turks, Persians, and Mongols, massacres and deportations, as well as earthquakes and natural disasters. A nation that speaks a language unlike any other, surrounded by Muslim neighbors, yet remains devoutly Christian, and that loves their freedom and country above all else.

That's when my love for Georgia began, and it hasn't let go of me since. I suspect it never will.

Sometimes I poke fun at Georgian peculiarities. Sometimes they irritate me. But Georgia and its people are deeply rooted in my heart. And so, I'll try to offer you a glimpse of what it feels like to live among Georgians and explore Georgia.

Many guidebooks to Georgia exist, among which I must highlight the excellent guide by Tim Burford, published by Verlag Berndt. I don't dare to compare mine with theirs or compete with them. My guidebook won't dive deep into historical monuments or Georgian history, as you can find that in more specialized books. Instead, I want to offer practical

travel advice and answer the most frequent questions travelers ask me or post in online forums.

You'll find descriptions of Georgia's main sights and landmarks, but also answers to practical questions like: "I'm arriving in Tbilisi with three days to spare, what should I see nearby?" The same goes for Kutaisi, which has direct flights from many places in the world.

Naturally, all travel guides age. And for a guide to a country as rapidly developing as Georgia, this applies doubly, so please double-check essential information before traveling.

People often ask me, "I want to go to Georgia. What should I see?" That always slightly annoys me. I think you should first read a guidebook, then think about the country, and then make a plan. But I'll try to answer, even though it's a broad question, because everyone wants something different. Some want to tackle tough treks in the high mountains. Others want to visit all the monuments. Some want to lie on the beach for a week. So, I'll answer broadly as well.

What can I say in conclusion? The charm of Georgia lies in a special, irresistible mixture of poverty and nobility, friendship and openness, the simple way of life of its people, fantastic nature, and beautiful architecture on the one hand, but also unmanaged recycling, crumbling slums, and packs of stray dogs on the other. The list could go on forever.

I hope this book helps you see Georgia as it really is. As I've come to know and love it over the years. I hope it helps you understand Georgia and perhaps fall in love with it too.

When planning a trip to Georgia, it's important to consider several key factors that will help you travel safely and



# TRANSPORTATION



## GETTING TO GEORGIA

The fastest way to travel to Georgia is by plane, but the most adventurous way is by car. However, driving through Turkey takes a long time. Flights are available with regular airlines such as Turkish Airlines, Lufthansa, and LOT, as well as budget airlines like Pegasus and Wizz Air, departing from cities such as Katowice or Budapest. When flying low-cost, you must take into account high baggage fees. The Georgian airline, Georgian Wings, has recently launched a new seasonal direct flight from Prague to Tbilisi. Direct flights were also once operated by the niche Georgian Airways, which now

flies from Vienna, for example. For flights to Kutaisi, you must also factor in the additional cost and time of getting to your final destination. However, Omnibus and Georgian Bus provide comfortable transport to Tbilisi for each flight, including a snack stop and scenic views en route.

## GETTING AROUND TBILISI

During the day, you can use the airport bus <https://www.tbilisiairport.com/en-EN/bus/page/bus>. At night or if you don't want to walk far with your luggage, use the Bolt app for taxis. Taxis wait at the airport, so just remember the vehicle type and number, as there are many. Free airport Wi-Fi lets you order a taxi even without a local SIM. Prices vary by time of day, but 30–50 lari is a decent rate.

Navigating Tbilisi is straightforward. You can use Google Maps to find your route and station. You pay for bus rides with plastic transit cards, which you can buy in the subway and then recharge at machines around the city, but you can also pay by card on the bus. The transit card requires a deposit of 2 lari. If you want to get your 2 lari deposit back at the end of your stay, keep your receipt. Without it, they will not refund you. Metro rides cost 50 tetri, buses 60, and marshrutkas (mini-buses) 80 tetri, regardless of distance traveled. You usually pay in marshrutkas upon exiting, but you can also pay when boarding. Some stops are now announced in English, which is a nice change from the days when all signs were only in Georgian and nothing was announced. Forget Western etiquette like "letting others exit before entering" on Georgian public transport.

Tbilisi has large buses, often with dedicated lanes. Digital signs (in Georgian and Latin scripts) at stops show arrival times.

Another common form of transportation is marshrutkas (minibuses), which stop on request and are used throughout the country. In the city, they now stop only at designated bus stops, which wasn't always the case. In the past, if two women 50 meters apart each flagged a marshrutka, it would stop twice, causing a traffic jam. Of course, both women would board gracefully, unhurried, as if nothing was wrong.

The metro in Tbilisi also works well. It is fast, very deep underground, and a bit unsettling due to Georgia's seismic activity. The metro is Soviet-style, noisy, and not confidence-inspiring in terms of safety, but very efficient.

For taxis, it is ideal to use an app so that you don't have to haggle over the price and always have the exact change on hand. I use Bolt. Yandex is a Russian app. I have a card set up for payments, which is charged automatically.

## TRAVELING ACROSS GEORGIA

Outside Tbilisi, things get trickier. The train network is sparse, so I recommend using trains only for long-distance routes, such as to Batumi or Zugdidi.

The Tbilisi–Batumi train ride is a lovely experience. It takes about 6.5 hours through beautiful landscapes, and the trains are clean, comfortable, and may even offer Wi-Fi in the future. They run slowly (in case of cows on the tracks), so you can enjoy the views. There are no dining cars, but at almost every stop, vendors come up to the train to sell khachapuri.

You can get all the info at the main station. There are apps for Georgian Railways, but they're not very reliable.

Long-distance bus or marshrutka timetables are also unre-

liable. It's best to ask a local or go to the station. Tbilisi has two main bus stations: Didube (for western Georgia) and Ortachala (for the east). However, finding the right bus can be tricky.

Near the bus stations, there are also "shared taxi" stands where drivers look for passengers, promising quick travel. Once the car is full, it departs. I've used them several times, and it's always an adventure. These drivers typically run the same route multiple times a day (e.g., Isani–Telavi) and tend to drive like maniacs, convinced that nothing can surprise them. Marshrutka drivers are often just as reckless.

**Details for eastern Georgia:** Marshrutkas and shared taxis to Telavi, Lagodekhi, and other Kakheti destinations depart from the Isani metro station. A shared taxi to Telavi costs 20 lari and operates from around 6 AM to 10 PM. Marshrutkas to Signagi depart from Samgori metro. Both destinations are also served from the Ortachala bus station. From Isani metro, walk slightly left after exiting and cross the street on the left side to find the departure point.

In conclusion: For long trips, take the train; for shorter ones, marshrutkas (despite their flaws). For remote mountain regions like Khevsureti or Tusheti, hire an experienced driver and don't skimp. Every Georgian will tell you they can drive you anywhere, often for suspiciously low prices. Don't accept those offers unless you want unpleasant surprises.

## GEORGIANS AND CARS

Cars are very important to Georgians. They are, of course, a means of transportation, as travel here can be complicated. You won't reach remote villages by public transport, and transporting chickens by marshrutka is no easy task either. In Tbilisi, you may come across massive, expensive, intimidating-looking black cars, ideally with tinted windows, whether they're Toyotas, BMWs, or Mercedes. Owners sometimes even go into debt just to own such a vehicle. In the villages, however, what dominates are crumbling wrecks often missing large parts of the bodywork, yet still happily driving along. You'll see Moskvitches, Zhigulis, ancient Opels, military GAZ trucks, Ladas, and more. It's not uncommon to see super-durable Volgas, often equipped with rooftop frames for transporting goods. In Georgia, a car is not only a symbol of wealth or social status, but also a key tool for asserting one's will at intersections and on major roads. Right-of-way rules, such as yielding from the right or left, have largely been replaced by the principle of "first come, first go" or even "whoever has the bigger car goes".

I wouldn't say Georgian drivers are road pirates; they just drive very badly. I'm not sure if it's because many drivers are older people who did their driving course on an airport runway, or because they now have more powerful cars than they used to. If they want to park, they park, regardless of who's behind them. If they want to pull away from the curb, they don't bother checking whether someone is coming. Here, it's always considered your fault if you hit someone from behind. In 90% of cases, though, it's actually the fault of Georgians who are inconsiderate to others. On top of that,

they overtake dangerously, especially in places where visibility is poor. So be particularly careful on bends. Anything can happen.

To this day, I haven't met a Georgian who knows how to properly navigate a roundabout. Then again, few Georgian roundabouts are standard. There are lots of them nowadays, popping up like mushrooms after the rain, but nobody really knows how to drive through them. The truth is that rules vary widely. Some roundabouts do follow the rule that vehicles already in the roundabout have the right of way, but others rely on markings on the road. So as you're approaching, you have to quickly scan the pavement for a white triangle indicating you must yield. Understandably, foreigners are not used to this. Sometimes, roundabouts are located slightly off the main road, so drivers speed straight through without even thinking that someone else might be coming and have the right of way. So be careful at roundabouts! One more note about honking: in Georgia, the klaxon is an important communication tool for letting others know you're there, not an expression of aggression.

Driving in the mountains is a whole different story. It requires a very good car and an experienced, attentive driver. Roads like the one to Roshka or the famous route to Tusheti are not for inexperienced European drivers renting a 4x4 and proudly setting off.

Allow me to quote my friend Vendy, who rented a car in Georgia for the first time. Here are her observations, or in other words, things worth knowing:

- White lines, markings, and lanes on the road are just decorative elements; no one pays attention to them.
- Even with a 50 km/h speed limit, a solid line, and three oncoming cars, there is no excuse not to overtake a slow truck.
- Police cars always have their lights on everywhere you go. It is nothing personal.
- The most effective speed bumps are cows or pigs on the road.
- Roundabouts are not always what they seem; sometimes they are just two nearly parallel streets with a patch of land in between.
- Honking is an essential form of communication. It can be a polite heads-up or a last-minute warning before disaster.
- Traffic jams in Tbilisi are a part of life, and everyone expects them. Even if you are in the far-right lane of a four-lane road because you took a wrong turn twice and need to turn left, just signal, edge your car into the left lane, and everyone will let you in with no stress and no angry honking.

That's about it for driving.

## CYCLISTS

Cyclists (and in fact all other road users) are most at risk on the roads almost everywhere in the world. Georgia is no exception.

Cyclists are practically nonexistent here, so drivers are not accustomed to them, and there are no lanes or bike paths (there are, however, two notable exceptions). Georgians still treat bicycles as something of an attraction, cheerfully honk-

ing and waving at cyclists. In the city, cycling can be a matter of life and death, and outside the city, it is hardly any safer.

If you really want to cycle here, you need to find less busy, ideally mountainous roads, for which local knowledge is very helpful. I am not discouraging mountain cycling at all, but it is important to carefully plan your routes with a local expert, arrange transportation, and only then set out on your bike. Not to mention, even with careful preparation, cyclists still have to deal with the ever-present dogs.



# GASTRONOMY, SHOPS, AND SERVICES



## GEORGIAN CUISINE

Georgian cuisine is often said to be the fourth best in the world, and I couldn't agree more. Georgian cooking traditions have developed over centuries and are characterized by a diverse use of ingredients and spices that give dishes a unique, unforgettable flavor. Most ingredients are organic, which naturally enhances their taste.

Meals are served on small dessert plates, with each plate considered a separate dish. There are no "side dishes" as such. Even a plate of potatoes is seen as a standalone meal. Plates are arranged on the table so that everyone can reach

the full spread, which means that plates are often repeated (depending on the number of guests).

No Georgian feast is complete without khachapuri (cheese-filled bread). Every hostess takes pride in her version, which varies from region to region. Don't miss out on khinkali (meat-filled dumplings), pkhali (a walnut and spinach or beet paste), stuffed eggplant, salads, mtsvadi (meat roasted on a skewer, often known by the Russian term "shashlik"), chicken satsivi, and dozens of other delicacies. Excellent Georgian bread includes lavash or shotis puri, ideally fresh from a subterranean clay oven in someone's home. The local vegetables and fruit are full of flavors you can hardly find back home anymore. There are some eight varieties of tomatoes, and every single one tastes like a real tomato! Even simple cucumbers and onions are delicious. Then there are exotic fruits uncommon in Europe. My favorites include shindi (cornelian cherry), mushmala (loquat), karaljok (persimmon), jujuba (jujube), peichoa, and others. Georgian cuisine is also rich in garnishes and condiments, like pickled vegetables and spicy sauces such as tkemali (sour plum sauce), satsebeli (a tomato-based sauce), and more.

While traveling, the following list of essential dishes may be helpful. Menu items are often listed only in Georgian, so I've included transliterations for easier ordering:

Starters:

ხაჭაპური khachapuri – cheese-filled bread or pie; achma is a layered dough version popular on the Black Sea coast.

ლობიო lobio – beans, often served as a thick soup, with each cook having their own unique recipe.



a small village supra – Georgian feast

ბადრიჯანი badrijani – eggplants typically stuffed with a walnut filling, vinegar, spices, and pomegranate seeds.

შემწვარი სულგუნი shemtsvari sulguni – fried white cheese.

გებჯალია gebzhalia – cheese with a fresh mint and yogurt dressing.

ფხალი pkhali – chopped beet greens or spinach with walnuts, ground chili, spices, and pomegranate seeds.

მუჟუჟი mujuji – pork trotter aspic in wine vinegar.

ცოცხალი tsotkhali – small, boiled river fish.

Even the pickiest eaters will be enchanted by Georgian soups:

ჩიხირთმა chikhirtma – chicken broth with beaten eggs, vinegar, vegetables, and cinnamon.

ხარჩო kharcho – a spicy soup made with meat and crushed rice, spiced with aromatic pepper and chili.

From the main courses, I recommend trying:

შქმერული shkmeruli – roast chicken in a garlic-walnut sauce.

საცივი satsivi – turkey or chicken in a spiced walnut sauce.

თევზი ბაჟეში tevzi bajeshi – fish in a walnut sauce.

ჩაქაფული chakapuli – lamb or veal with sour plum sauce, tarragon, and cloves.

ჩახობილი chakhokhbili – stewed poultry or lamb in tomato sauce with herbs and pepper.

ჩანახი chanakhi – stewed lamb with eggplants, potatoes, tomatoes, and spices, cooked and served in clay pots (thikh-is khotani).

კუპატი kupati – grilled sausage filled with minced pork, beef, or lamb, offal, spices, and pomegranate seeds.

ხინკალი khinkali – dumplings filled with spiced minced meat (pork, beef, or lamb), cheese, or mushrooms.

ღომი ghomi – thick cornmeal porridge (similar to polenta), often served with fried dishes and hot sulguni cheese.

მწვადი mtsvadi – grilled meat skewers (shashlik) made from lamb, pork, or veal.

მჭადი mchadi – cornmeal flatbreads.

გოზინაყი gozinaqi – traditional Georgian candy made from hazelnuts and honey.

the destruction of the site's historical character. This was the case in Tbilisi's Old Town (where nearly all buildings were rebuilt and lost their heritage value), the bizarre glass-fronted square in Mestia (where cows now roam through intended shop spaces), parts of Mtskheta, Telavi, and others. Fortunately, Signagi underwent far less invasive reconstruction.

On weekends, the town is a popular destination for wealthy Tbilisians seeking a fun getaway. Signagi has many pleasant restaurants, hotels, and budget-friendly guesthouses. In summer, numerous folk performances and festivals take place here. It's no surprise that Signagi is one of the top tourist destinations in Georgia. It's definitely worth visiting!

Signagi is home to many artisan workshops and several wineries. There's also a workshop producing traditional hand-woven old Georgian carpets, said to be the only one of its kind in the country. It is run by David Beraia and located in a beautifully restored former Soviet carpet factory. Signagi is also the birthplace of the world-famous naïve painter Niko Pirosmani, whose works are displayed in the local museum. The best time to visit Signagi is during the grape harvest at the turn of September and October.

Two kilometers from Signagi lies the Bodbe Monastery complex (St. Nino of Bodbe), the seat of the Bishop of Bodbe. In the Middle Ages, this was the coronation site of Kakhetian kings and, most importantly, the final resting place of St. Nino, also known as the "Apostle of Georgia," who brought Christianity to the country. The monastery, always considered exceptional among Georgia's many monasteries, was allegedly founded by St. Nino herself in the 4th century and later expanded. In the 8th–9th century, a basilica was built there. Most of the religious structures date from the 17th

century, when the site underwent major renovations. In 1924, only three years after Georgia was occupied by Soviet Russia, the Bolsheviks closed the monastery and turned it into a hospital. It was restored as a religious site in 1991. Today, the monastery is beautifully renovated and is one of Georgia's most important pilgrimage sites. It also houses a girls' theological seminary.

The grounds boast one of the most beautiful flower beds in Georgia. As the area is enclosed, wandering cows cannot enter, and the nuns grow vibrant wildflowers here. PHOTO 36 – Caption: At Bodbe

Next to the original old basilica with an interesting iconostasis, a completely new, grand church has recently been consecrated. The interior is made entirely of marble and the exterior is richly decorated. Remarkably, the main nave is heated by a so-called Svan stove – a tiny metal heater with its chimney exiting through a church window.

Roughly 3 kilometers from the monastery is a spring that, according to legend, appeared thanks to the prayers of St. Nino and is said to have healing powers. In the 1990s, a small chapel dedicated to Saints Zabulon and Sosana was built at the site.



## MULTI-DAY TRIPS FROM TBILISI



Gremi

### KAKHETI

Spending only one day in Kakheti would be a bit of a shame. The region offers numerous interesting sites, so I recommend dedicating several days to it. This easternmost region of Georgia is known for its dry, warm climate, which is ideal for winemaking. Its northern border is formed by the Greater Caucasus ridge, behind which lies Russia's Dagestan province. To the east and south, it borders Azerbaijan. The Alazani River flows below the Caucasus ridge and forms the central valley of Kakheti. The region has a rich history, with Kakhetians still preserving

their own dialect and customs. From the 8th to the 12th century, Kakheti was an independent kingdom. It was annexed by Georgia in the 12th century by the famed King David the Builder, only to separate again in the 15th century. It was re-integrated into Georgia after the Russian annexation.

### GETTING TO KAKHETI VIA THE GOMBORI PASS

If you take this route, you can stop at Ujarma Fortress, located in the Gombori range. Legend has it that King Vakhtang, the founder of Tbilisi, built the fortress. A large medieval town once surrounded it. The fortress has been partially restored, although its tower still leans significantly. Inside, you'll find an unusual two-story church and various archaeological findings. Further along the road, you'll pass a turnoff for Lake Sioni, a popular swimming spot for locals. I strongly advise skipping it because there is no real beach or access, and the nearby



Dzveli Shuamta



Telavi

forest is heavily littered.

Heading toward Telavi, you'll reach the Gombori Pass, which rises to about 1,620 meters above sea level. There are several roadside stalls here where you can grab refreshments. It's also a nice place to stop for a short hike along the ridge perpendicular to the road. A one-hour walk offers beautiful views of the surrounding landscape. Beyond the pass, to the left, you'll spot the ruins of Psitsikhe Fortress high on a hill. The dense beech forest also hides the monasteries of Akhali and Dzveli Shuamta (New and Old Shuamta). Dzveli Shuamta is especially beautiful.

The capital of the Kakheti region is Telavi, a prosperous town whose center is dominated by a massive fortress housing the newly restored palace of Georgia's last king, Erekle II, a small museum, and two churches. In front of the fortress stands the king's equestrian statue, and nearby grows a 300-year-

old plane tree, a local landmark. In the town center, there is a large market offering vegetables, fruit, meat, fish, and clothing. From Telavi, there are beautiful views of the Greater Caucasus Range.

Not far from Telavi, in the village of Tsinandali, be sure to visit the beautifully restored and maintained Chavchavadze family estate. It houses an exceptionally charming and very popular museum, along with a wine cellar where you can enjoy tastings. The property is surrounded by an expansive park featuring a "wishing tree" adorned with ribbons and streamers, which can be purchased in the museum shop. According to tradition, you should whisper a wish into the ribbon before tying it to the tree. Unlike the trees covered in plastic or weather-worn tissues often seen elsewhere, this one is brightly colorful. The park also hosts classical music concerts.

From Telavi, you can drive to the majestic Alaverdi Cathedral, considered the most important church in Kakheti and the second most beautiful in Georgia after Svetitskhoveli in Mtskheta. Built in the 11th century by King Kvirike III the Great in the Alazani Valley, the cathedral features a high, undecorated dome but exudes a serene atmosphere. Iosif of Alaverdi, one of the 13 Assyrian missionary fathers who brought Christianity to Georgia, is buried here. Other abbots from the adjoining monastery were also interred in front of the cathedral.

Over the centuries, the complex suffered invasions and earthquakes. It was restored by King Alexander I in the 15th century, but another earthquake damaged it in 1530. It was repaired again by King Levan. Around 1700, Lezgins damaged the site, and another earthquake struck



## MAIN MOUNTAIN AREAS IN THE GREATER CAUCASUS



Svaneti, Koruldi Lakes

### SVANETI

The gateway to Svaneti is Zugdidi. It is a neat town of 74 thousand inhabitants with a definite attraction – the neo-Gothic castle of the noble Dadiani family in a large park. The castle is not in the best condition and the museum is not all that fascinating either, but it is worth a visit. To my surprise, the director was not informed at all that two noblewomen from the Dadiani family married Czech noblemen from the Kinsky family.

The Mosaica house in Zugdidi is also of interest. It is a project of the Danish Refugee Council on March 8th Street, featur-



Dadiani Palace in Zugdidi

ing exhibitions and workshops.

On the way to Svaneti, you should not miss the Enguri Dam on the river of the same name. Once the highest arched dam in the world, it remains a truly monumental structure. If it were operating at full capacity, it could reportedly supply enough electricity for all of Georgia, but somewhat neglected maintenance prevents this. Fortunately, the ambitious recreational development projects once proposed for the dam have not yet been realized, so visitors can still enjoy its unspoiled grandeur and, on rare occasions, visit the engine room.

Svaneti lies in the northwestern corner of Georgia. It is divided into Lower Svaneti, located in the Tskhenistskali River basin, and the more attractive Upper Svaneti, which lies



Enguri Dam

in the basin of the Inguri River. The region is isolated from the outside world by the high ridges of the Caucasus. In the north, the mountains rise to over five thousand meters, and in the south, slightly less. Upper Svaneti is the highest permanently inhabited region in the entire Caucasus.

Georgian authorities consider the Svans to be an ethnographic subgroup of Georgians, and the Svan language, which is incomprehensible to Georgian speakers, is officially referred to as a dialect of Georgian. About 40,000 people in Georgia identify as Svans, around fifteen thousand of whom live in Upper Svaneti and twelve thousand in Lower Svaneti. The Svans are indigenous to the Caucasus and today live not only in Upper and Lower Svaneti, but also mainly in Tbilisi, Zugdidi, and in areas near the borders with Azerbaijan and

Armenia. Many of them were resettled there in the late 1980s, when Upper Svaneti was struck by catastrophic landslides and a series of avalanches.

Svan is one of the four Kartvelian languages (together with Laz, Mingrelian, and Georgian), which form an independent Caucasian language family. The Svan language has no written form of its own. UNESCO has classified Svan as one of the world's most endangered languages.

Upper Svaneti is undoubtedly one of the most attractive regions in Georgia. For several years now, it has been accessible year-round thanks to a modern road connecting it to the western Georgian city of Zugdidi. The region attracts tens of thousands of tourists annually, and accommodation and transport prices reflect this growing popularity.

The settlement pattern of Upper Svaneti still largely consists of isolated communities (Ushguli, Mulakhi, Mestia, Becho, Kala, Ipari, Pari, Lachamula, Latali, Lenjeri, Nakra, Khaishi, Tsvirmi, Tkhumari, Chuberi, and Etseri), each made up of several villages. The local geography can sometimes cause confusion among visitors, as guidebooks and maps often mix up the names of individual villages and the larger communities to which they belong.

Most of them were built by their ancestors in the turbulent medieval period of the Caucasus. Climbing into one of these towers is an adventure in itself. There are no stairs, and reaching the upper floors requires ascending steep, precarious ladders. The oldest family towers are over a thousand years old and are regarded by the Svans with almost sacred reverence. Today, the highest concentration of towers can be found in the eastern part of the region. Their number de-



Shatili

7th to the 13th centuries and served as a Georgian border fortress. The fortress was never conquered, although it was besieged countless times. Only after 1820 did the Russians bring cannons over the Datvis Jvari saddle and fire on the stone towers.

Shatili is located at an altitude of about 1,400 meters, and its climate is influenced by the Caspian Sea, making it relatively mild. Individual families, who owned towers and residential houses, cultivated fields high in the surrounding mountains.

No one currently lives in the historic fortified village. In the 1950s and 1960s, Soviet authorities forcibly relocated the local population to the lowlands. In the 1980s, a new road was constructed, and a new village of Shatili, designed by prominent Georgian architects, was built next to the old settlement. The new Shatili originally featured uniform traditional stone houses on one side and farm buildings on the other. Today, most of these houses are used as family guesthouses.

Unfortunately, with the growth of tourism, residents have expanded the buildings without regulation, significantly affecting the village's appearance.

During the winter, which lasts more than half a year, the village is inaccessible by land. Shatili is connected to central Georgia only by a narrow, unpaved road over the Datvis Jvari Pass at an altitude of 2,676 meters. The road is only passable from June to October; otherwise, supplies are provided by helicopter. Shatili, which administratively belongs to the Georgian region of Mtskheta-Mtianeti, has been proposed for the UNESCO list.

Also impressive is the newly restored fortress of Mutso, which received the Europa Nostra award for its renovation. It is located 6 kilometers beyond Shatili on the road to Ardoti. In old Ardoti, beautifully situated on a mountain ridge, you can find a modest but authentic guesthouse, as well as the rare remains of a domed church, a relic of Imperial Russia's attempts to Christianize this region. Above old Ardoti, on a small hill, there is a beautiful new guesthouse with glass walls that offer spectacular views of Tebulo, the highest border mountain.

## TUSHETI

Until recently, getting to Tusheti was quite a perilous adventure. Today, the situation is somewhat better, but the unpaved road over the Abano Pass at an altitude of almost three thousand meters is sometimes called one of the most dangerous roads in the world. The reputation is confirmed by the numerous monuments to the victims of road acci-

dents along its edge. Tusheti, like the neighboring Upper Khevsureti region with the village of Shatili, is also cut off from the rest of Georgia for more than half a year. The Abano Pass is usually passable from June to the end of September.

Tusheti lies beyond the main Caucasus Ridge, and the region itself resembles an impregnable fortress, with towering mountains forming its natural walls. The center of Tusheti is the village of Omalo, home to a Georgian border guard base, a small airstrip, several family guesthouses, and the headquarters of the national park, which serves as the Tbilisi government's outpost in this remote area. There are approximately forty villages in Tusheti, most of which are inhabited only in the summer (from June to October). The Tushetian people still practice a specific form of Orthodox religion (for example, they do not eat pork, women are forbidden from entering religious shrines, and so on).

In this mountainous region, defensive ancestral towers are also a typical feature of villages, but their shape is more similar to those in Chechnya than to those in Svaneti. The ancestral towers on the Keselo hill are the most significant example of Tushetian defensive architecture. Their construction dates back to the 15th–16th centuries, following the raids of Tamerlane's armies, after which the threat from Dagestan increased (Tushetian legends in particular mention the Didoi tribe). The towers were usually inhabited in summer, when the danger of raids was greatest. They remained in use until the 19th century, when the threat of attacks diminished considerably after the suppression of Shamil's uprising in 1859 and the stabilization of Russian control in the Caucasus region.



Tusheti

Most families now go to the lowlands for the winter. The king allocated the Tushetians lands around Akhmeta (especially Zemo and Kvemo Alvani), where they mostly live during the winter. Although tourism is playing an increasingly important role in the life of the Tushetians, sheep breeding is especially important. The semi-nomadic lifestyle of the highlanders is interesting, as they wander throughout the year between winter pastures in eastern Kakheti and summer pastures on the roof of the Caucasus in the mountainous Tusheti.

Tusheti is among the most dynamically developing regions in Georgia in terms of tourism and attracts more and more tourists every year.

Villages with ancestral towers are worth visiting, such as Kes-



a gift from the Georgian government. Thanks!

On the way home, I realize that this was truly one of the most beautiful vacations of my life, and that anyone who hasn't tried it doesn't know the sheer joy of riding a horse from Shatili to Omalo!

## BASIC INFORMATION ABOUT GEORGIA



Official name: Georgia (Georgian: Sakartvelo, საქართველო)

Government: republic

Area: 69,700 km<sup>2</sup> (roughly the size of Ireland; 12,500 km<sup>2</sup> is not controlled by the Georgian government, but occupied by the Russian Federation)

Population: 3.7 million (2014 census)

Capital: Tbilisi (according to the 2014 census, it has 1.118 million inhabitants)

Currency: Georgian lari (GEL) = 100 tetri

The national flag of Georgia is called the “Five Cross Flag” because it features one large red cross and four smaller red crosses in the corners, all on a white background. The red cross symbolizes Georgia’s national patron saint, Saint George. Between 1990 and 2004, Georgia used a completely different flag. The current flag became a symbol of the opposition led by Mikheil Saakashvili against then-President Eduard Shevardnadze. After Saakashvili came to power, the parliament officially adopted it as the national flag. However, the Five Cross Flag was already used during the time of the medieval Kingdom of Georgia: the simple cross of Saint George dates back to the 5th century, and the other four crosses were probably added in the 14th century.

## ADMINISTRATIVE DIVISION

Georgia is divided into 12 regions, including two autonomous republics:



Administrative division of Georgia

In predominantly subtropical western Georgia: Abkhazia, Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti (Mingrelia–Upper Svaneti), Guria, Adjara, Racha-Lechkhumi, Kvemo Svaneti (Lower Svaneti), and Imereti. In the drier, continental eastern Georgia: Samtskhe-Javakheti, Shida Kartli, Mtskheta-Mtianeti, Kvemo Kartli (Lower Kartli), Kakheti, and the capital city, Tbilisi. Abkhazia and Adjara officially hold the status of autonomous republics.

The separatist regions of Abkhazia (capital: Sukhumi) and South Ossetia (formerly an autonomous oblast in the Soviet era, now officially part of Shida Kartli according to Georgia’s administrative system; capital: Tskhinvali) are de facto independent and effectively occupied by Russia. Russia helped South Ossetia maintain its independence during the 2008 war. In contrast, Adjara (capital: Batumi) in the west abandoned any separatist attempts and, although it is an autonomous republic, its level of self-government does not significantly differ from other Georgian regions.

## CLIMATE

Despite its small size, Georgia has an exceptionally diverse climate. Parts of the country have a subtropical climate with hot summers and mild winters, while smaller areas experience a nearly continental climate. At high altitudes in the Greater Caucasus in the north and the Lesser Caucasus in the south, the climate is alpine.

On an annual average, the warmest region is the western Colchis Lowland along the Black Sea, where humid air flows into Georgia. In contrast, dry air comes from the east near the Caspian Sea, causing rainfall to decrease from west to east. Eastern Georgia even has dry steppes and semi-des-