



ACADEMY  
TRAVEL

TAILORED  
SMALL GROUP  
JOURNEYS

**Khor Virap, Armenia**

# THE CAUCASUS

AZERBAIJAN, GEORGIA & ARMENIA

## OVERVIEW

At the crossroads of Europe, Asia and the Middle East, the Caucasus region encompasses three ancient nations – two Christian, one Islamic – against a backdrop of craggy snow-capped mountains, rolling vineyards and arid semi-deserts.

Our 17-day tour, led by Dr Matthew Dal Santo, takes us first from Azerbaijan and its cosmopolitan capital of Baku along the old Silk Road route and on to Georgia. After two nights in the Kakheti region with its ancient vineyards, we take the scenic Georgian Military Highway into the towering peaks of the Greater Caucasus.

From here we descend to Tbilisi to explore its potent mix of twisting alleys, handsome balconied houses and crumbling Soviet-era apartment blocks as well as its dynamic arts scene and renowned cuisine.

Then we journey across the ridges of the Lower Caucasus to Armenia, an ancient adopter of Christianity dotted with weathered, rock-hewn churches and monasteries, often in stunning locations. We finish our tour in the modern city of Yerevan, the fun-loving capital of Armenia.



## TOUR LEADER

**Dr Matthew Dal Santo** is Associate Professor of Church History and Historical Theology at St Patrick's Seminary University in Menlo Park ("Silicon Valley"), California. Paula Booth will be assisting Matthew on the ground, as Tour Manager.

## TOUR DATES

**June 13-29, 2024** | 17 Days

## TOUR PRICE

**\$16,670** per person, twin share  
**\$2,265** single supplement

## TOUR DEPOSIT

A **\$1,000** non-refundable deposit is required per person to confirm your booking on tour.

## GROUP SIZE

Maximum number of **16** in group

## ITINERARY

Baku (3 nights), Sheki (1 nights),  
Tsinandali (2 nights), Kazbegi (2 night),  
Tbilisi (4 nights), Yerevan (4 nights)

## INCLUSIONS

**16** nights' accommodation in centrally located 3 to 5-star hotels. All breakfasts, 10 lunches and 7 dinners. Services of an expert tour leader and an experienced tour manager throughout. All ground transport, entrance fees and tipping.



## DETAILED ITINERARY

### Start & Finish

The tour starts at 2.30pm on Thursday 13 June, at the Park Inn By Radisson, Baku - Azerbaijan. The tour ends after breakfast on Saturday 29 June, followed by a transfer to Zvartnots International Airport, Yerevan.

Included meals are indicated with B, L, D.

### Thursday 13 June

#### Arrive Baku

We meet in the lobby of our hotel in the early afternoon, followed by a short orientation walk towards busy Fountain Square and Boulevard for great views of Baku's modern skyscrapers. After time to freshen up in the evening, we enjoy a light welcome dinner together. Overnight Baku (D)

### Friday 14 June

#### Traditional Baku

The morning begins with a lecture in our hotel, followed by a tour of Baku's Old Town, whose winding streets, alleyways, mosques, madrassahs, and carpet merchants recall life in medieval Shervan (as Azerbaijan was known in the middle ages). We visit the 14th-century Shervan Shah's Palace as well as Baku's oldest and most mysterious structure, the 30m-high medieval Maiden Tower. Exiting the Old Town through the medieval Double Gates, we enjoy lunch in a nearby restaurant. In the afternoon we return to Baku's Seaside Boulevard to discover Azerbaijan's national art of carpet-weaving at the National Museum of Azerbaijani Carpets. Dinner tonight will be at the renowned Mugham Club. Overnight Baku (B, L, D)

### Saturday 15 June

#### From the Ancient to the Modern

Today we travel by coach to Gobustan, an archaeological site 40km south of Baku whose mud volcanoes, eerie landscapes, petroglyphs and accompanying interpretative centre offer a unique glimpse of human life on the shores of the prehistoric Caspian Sea (c. 10,000 BC). We then plunge into Baku's "high-octane" skyscraper district, White City. Here, we visit the Heydar Aliyev Cultural Centre with its iconic flowing white curves, designed by acclaimed Iraqi-British architect Zaha Hadid. After lunch, we visit the avant-garde Museum of Modern Art (MIM), designed by Jean Nouvel, a French architect of equal renown. To finish the day, we enjoy caviar and champagne at the nearby Villa Petrolea Nobel Brothers Museum. Built in 1884 in early art moderne style, the mansion and its lovely garden belonged to Robert and Ludvig Nobel who had important holdings in Baku's first commercial oil wells. We finish the day with a caviar tasting from sturgeons bred in the ancient Caspian sea. Overnight Baku (B, L)

## TOUR HIGHLIGHTS

### Modern Baku

Uncover a city on the shores of the Caspian Sea where palaces, mosques and madrassahs of Azerbaijan's Islamic heritage mix with the region's most extensive ensemble of award-winning modern architecture.

### The Vineyards of Tsinandali

From our base in a sensitively designed five-star hotel, sample the flavours of Georgia's 7000 year-old viticultural tradition in the rolling green hills of the country's premier wine-making region, Kakheti.

### Driving through scenic Georgia

Enjoy the outstanding views of one of the world's most scenic drives as we climb 1700m in elevation along the Georgian Military Highway - the road follows one of the only passes across the Greater Caucasus Mountains.

### Tbilisi restaurants

Explore the plentiful restaurants of Tbilisi's Old Town and savour the distinctive flavours and textures for which Georgian cuisine is rightly renowned, thanks to its sunny climate, fertile soils, and plentiful winter rains.

### Armenia's monasteries

Discover the alluringly exotic but little-known monastic complexes of the world's oldest Christian country: from the thousand-year old churches of Haghpat to Khor Virap's awe-inspiring vista of biblical Mt. Ararat.



Heydar Aliyev Centre



Bodbe Monastery

## **Sunday 16 June** **The Old Silk Road**

This morning we travel by coach along a stretch of the Old Silk Road connecting the Caspian Sea to the Black Sea. Crossing the plains west of Baku, we ascend through the foothills of the Greater Caucasus Mountains to the town of Shamakhi, capital of medieval Shervan, where we stop to visit the giant Djuma (“Friday”) mosque. After lunch we proceed further up the mountains to Sheki, a wonderful, atmospheric old town. Here we see the busy local markets, the Shah’s summer palace, and the evocative caravanserai, among the arched arcades of which Silk Road merchants once rested with their camels and horses. Dinner is in the hotel restaurant. Overnight Sheki (B, L, D)

## **Monday 17 June** **Georgia: Wine & St Nino**

Today we cross into Georgia, travelling through the premier Kakheti wine region as we venture to the village of Tsinandali – our base for the next two nights. Georgians were originally sun worshippers, believing the sun’s chosen plant was the grape vine, and our first stop is the renowned Pheasant’s Tears Winery to sample some of its organic qvevri wines and enjoy a lavish “Georgian-table” style lunch prepared in the cellar restaurant run by one of the country’s leading chefs. Afterwards, a local ensemble will perform songs from Georgia’s distinctive polyphonic vocal tradition, before we head up the hill to explore the charming walled town of Signagi and visit the Bodbe Convent of St Nino, the resting place of Georgia’s first saint and one of the country’s most important pilgrimage destinations. Another short drive brings us to Tsinandali, where we check-in to our exclusive five-star resort. The rooftop infinity pool overlooking the Caucasus Mountains is not to be missed. Overnight Tsinandali (B, L)

## **Tuesday 18 June** **Telavi & Tsinandali**

This morning we make our way to Telavi, perched on a hill at the foothills of the Tsvi-Gombori Mountain range. Originally a trade route town since the 1st century, it became the capital of Kakheti after Gremi town was destroyed by the Persians in the 17th century. We begin with Batoni Tsikhe in the centre of town, once the residence for the royal family of Kakheti Kingdom and home to the 17th-century palace of Georgia’s last great king, Erekle II. There is a break for lunch in town before we return to Tsinandali, where we explore the wooded avenues and estate of Alexander Chavchavadze, one of the founding fathers of modern Georgian literature. Here he and his father founded the first and foremost winery in the country, which still produces the dry white Tsinandali wine which we will sample. The evening is at leisure to enjoy our hotel. Overnight Tsinandali (B)

## **Wednesday 19 June** **Georgian Military Highway**

Departing Tsinandali today, our destination is the small alpine village of Kazbegi. Our first stop is the UNESCO World Heritage



**Gergeti Trinity Church**



**Tbilisi Downtown**

Site of Mtskheta at the confluence of the Kura and Aragvi rivers. Here we discover some of the most significant monuments of Georgian Christian architecture, including the 6th century Jvari Monastery perched on a rocky mountaintop above the town. Following a break for lunch, we then embark on one of Georgia's most scenic drives: the Georgian Military Highway. Running from the lowlands around Tbilisi across the border into Russia, the Highway follows the route of one of the only extant passes across the Greater Caucasus Mountains. After a stop at the 12th-century fortress of Ananuri, with its impressive stonework and picturesque location overlooking the Zhinvali river, we climb 1700m in elevation through alpine meadows, plunging mountain valleys and snow-capped peaks to arrive at Kazbegi. Dramatically set in a monumental bowl of mountain peaks, the distant silhouette of the church of Tsminda Sameba (Gergeti Trinity Church) sits as a symbol of Georgia with mighty Mt Kazbek rising behind it. After time to freshen up, dinner is in the hotel restaurant. Overnight Kazbegi (B, D)

### **Thursday 20 June Kazbegi**

We begin the day by venturing up to the iconic Gergeti Trinity Church. Dating from the 14th century, this beautifully weathered stone church and bell tower stand at an elevation of 2170 metres and in the 18th century, the church turned into storage for main Georgian relics that were transported here in the time of Persian invasion to Tbilisi. We continue into Dariali Gorge, where we make our way to one of the most pristine waterfalls in the Caucasus mountains - Gveleti waterfall, translated as the Snake's Waterfall. This hidden gem is tucked away at the end of a short trail at the mouth of Gveleti valley on the Little Truckee River. Lunch is enjoyed in the stunning nearby village of Tsdo, where we visit the home of a local family and learn how to make the traditional dish khinkali – savory Georgian dumplings. Returning to our hotel in Kazbegi, the evening is at leisure. Overnight Kazbegi (B, L)

### **Friday 21 June Stalin's Hometown**

Picking our way back down the mountains, we head today for Georgia's capital, Tbilisi. Along the way we stop at the town of Gori, birthplace of Soviet dictator Joseph Dzhugashvili, "Stalin". Almost unchanged since Soviet times, there is a museum centered on the small house in which Stalin grew up. On the grounds we also find Stalin's former private railway car, which he used for travel throughout the Soviet Union and beyond. After enjoying lunch in a local restaurant, we continue to Tbilisi – our base for the next four nights. Dinner is in the hotel this evening. Overnight Tbilisi (B, L, D)

### **Saturday 22 June Historic Tbilisi**

We begin our exploration of Tbilisi with a walking tour of the Old Town, a charming district of narrow, twisting streets along the banks of the Mtkveri River. Starting at Tbilisi's famous



*House of Blue Laces, Tbilisi*



*Niko Pirosmani, A Tatar Fruiterer*

leaning Clock Tower, we descend the Old Town's café-lined main thoroughfare past Tbilisi's oldest church and the 13th-century Sion Cathedral to the historic sulphur bath houses of the Abanotubani district. After stopping at a bakery to sample fresh tonis, we take the cable car to the Narikala Fortress, whose 18th-century walls offer excellent views over the Old Town. In the afternoon, we visit the Lado Gudiashvili museum to see the beautiful portraits of the Georgian artist and learn more about his fascinating life and work. We conclude our day at the gorgeous House of Blue Laces, a two-story Rustaveli Avenue mansion with a traditional Georgian wood-carved, lace-like balcony. Built in 1897 for a Georgian economist, the house was later owned by Stalin's personal physician, Nikoloz Kipshidze, and spared from Soviet destruction. Today the house is still in the family and museum curator Nino Kipshidze and her husband, renowned artist Dato Sulakauri, will take us through the history of this beautiful home over a cup of tea, followed by a visit to Dato's art studio. Overnight Tbilisi (B)

### **Sunday 23 June** **Tbilisi's Modern Arts**

Today begins at the Georgian National Museum, housed in a 17th-century mansion, where we discover Georgia's modernists of the early 20th century – many of whom were repressed during Soviet times. Artists include the acclaimed Niko Pirosmani, Lado Gudiashvili and Davit Kakabadze. Our time here also includes the Simon Janashia Museum of Georgia for a look at some of the country's most significant archaeological finds, including 5th century BC golden jewelry discovered in a tomb in Akhlagori. From here we walk to Orbeliani Square, with time for lunch in the modern bazaar, before exploring the Dry Bridge Market where vendors sell wares that run the gamut from jewelry to carpets. The remainder of the day is at leisure. Overnight Tbilisi (B)

### **Monday 24 June** **Georgian Cuisine**

After a relaxed start to our morning with lecture in the hotel, we attend a traditional Georgian cooking class together in the centre of town. A local chef will take us through Georgia's unique food culture as we learn how to prepare a handful of iconic Georgian dishes. This afternoon there is the option to take the funicular to the top of wooded Mt Mtatsminda for a panoramic view over the city, before returning to our hotel. In the evening we gather for a performance at Tbilisi's renowned State Conservatoire (schedule permitting). Overnight Tbilisi (B, L)

### **Tuesday 25 June** **To Armenia**

Today we cross the Lesser Caucasus Mountains for the ancient land of Armenia. Shortly after crossing the border, we visit the UNESCO-listed Haghpat monastic complex and nearby Sanahin monastery. A masterpiece of Armenian religious architecture, Haghpat represents a unique fusion of traditional



Haghpat Monastery



Zvartnots Temple

architecture of the region and the ecclesiastical architecture of the Byzantine Empire. From here we continue to Lake Sevan, visiting the 9th-century Sevanavank Monastery picturesquely located on a peninsula that was until recently an island. We finish the day's journey in Yerevan, Armenia's modern capital. Dinner is in the hotel restaurant. Overnight Yerevan (B, L, D)

### Wednesday 26 June

#### Historic Yerevan

Older than Rome, Yerevan was founded in 782 BC, but much of the modern city dates from the country's Russian/Soviet domination between 1828 and 1991. Following a morning lecture, we explore Yerevan on foot. Beginning at Republic Square, we uncover the story of Armenia at the History Museum before visiting the Soviet-era Cascade monument and the remarkable Cafesjian Center for Modern Art. We continue to the imposing Matenadaran Institute of Ancient Manuscripts, built in 1959 to house the nation's patrimony of 17,000 manuscripts, some of which are beautifully illuminated. This afternoon we learn more about the traditional Armenian reed instrument, the duduk. With a sound somewhat like a clarinet, the duduk's roots go back several thousand years. Returning to the hotel, the evening is at leisure. Overnight Yerevan (B)

### Thursday 27 June

#### Khor Virap & Echmiadzin

Today we explore Armenia's ancient spiritual capital, Echmiadzin. We first drive south to Khor Virap, a small monastery with one of Armenia's most stunning vistas, across a vineyard-covered valley towards snow-capped Mt Ararat. Gregory the Illuminator is said to have been imprisoned here for 13 years before converting King Trdat I to Christianity. Continuing to Echmiadzin, founded as Vargsapat in AD 117 and once the capital of Armenia, it is today a UNESCO World Heritage Site and an important place of pilgrimage for Christian Armenians. It was here that Gregory the Illuminator had a vision of Christ descending to earth, and the Cathedral at Echmiadzin was built on the spot in the 4th century. After touring the cathedral with its beautiful stonework and Near-Eastern style internal frescoes, and the fabulous treasury with a piece of wood said to be from Noah's Ark, we continue to the temple ruins of Zvartnots, built in the middle of the 7th century and considered to be a masterpiece of Armenian architecture. Returning to Yerevan in the mid-afternoon, we then visit the Genocide Memorial and Museum, a sober and compelling monument to the million or so Armenians who perished in massacres perpetrated by Ottoman authorities between 1915 and 1922. Overnight Yerevan (B, L)

### Friday 28 June

#### Monks and Pagans

This morning's touring offers a window on Armenia's pre-Christian history with a visit to the pagan Temple of Mitra at Garni, dramatically located on a high promontory overlooking

## HOTELS

### **BAKU, Park Inn By Radisson**

(3 nights)

### **SHEKI, Macara Sheki City Hotel**

(1 night)

### **TSINANDALI, Radisson Collection Tsinandali Estate Resort**

(2 nights)

### **KAZBEGI, Rooms Hotel Kazbegi**

(2 night)

### **TBILISI, Tbilisi Marriott Hotel**

(4 nights)

### **YEREVAN, Grand Hotel Yerevan**

(4 nights)

## WEATHER

Owing to the Caucasus's diverse geography, there is a fair amount of regional weather variation. Temperatures tend to be warmer in coastal Baku (around 29°C) and dryer in semi-arid Armenia (around 32°C), while the mountains of the Greater Caucasus are very much cooler (around 27°C). Rain is always a possibility in the mountains and Georgia's Kakheti region.

## FITNESS REQUIREMENTS

### **Grade Three**

This tour is among our most physically demanding. To participate on this tour, you should be able to comfortably undertake up to seven hours per day, over several days. Activities may include travelling long distances, walking on difficult terrain, climbing stairs, embarking and disembarking trains and/or boats, exposure to high altitudes and long days of touring. These tours may include one night stops and early starts.

the treeless Avan Gorge. From here we drive the short distance to the cave monastery of Gerghard, whose monks' cells, churches and tombs have all been hewn from solid rock. In a nearby village, we then observe how local bakers make lavash – the traditional Armenian flatbread – followed by lunch. The afternoon is spent at Yerevan's Ararat Brandy Factory, a favourite of Winston Churchill who allegedly ordered 400 bottles per year! Our tour takes in the onsite museum before sampling some of the wares at the tasting bar. This evening we enjoy a farewell dinner in a local restaurant. Overnight Yerevan (B, L, D)

### **Saturday 29 June**

#### **Depart Yerevan**

The tour concludes after breakfast this morning, with a transfer to the airport for outbound departures. (B)



## ENQUIRIES & BOOKINGS

For further information or to secure a place, please contact **Jamal Fairbrother** on 9235 0023 (Sydney) or 1800 639 699 (outside Sydney) or email:

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