



South Caucasus tour: Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan

Exotics, tradition, unique culture and charm of antiquity, ancient monuments, delight at places and things seen and regret about the travel coming to an end - that's what awaits you during our tour of the South Caucasus! A connecting point between East and West, birthplace of ancient states, intersection of trade routes, a melting pot of different peoples and cultures... This region, sandwiched between the Caspian and Black Seas, has always been a coveted prize for the great empires. This land, covered with myths and legends, has always attracted travelers with its stories of its miracles and riches. We're going to get to know the three countries of the South Caucasus - Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Day 1. Arrival - Tbilisi tour

Day 2. Tour in Georgia: Tbilisi - Mtskheta - Ananuri - Kazbegi - Gudauri

Day 3. Tour in Georgia: Gudauri - Uplistsikhe - Gori - Kutaisi

Day 4. Tour in Georgia: Kutaisi - Gonio - Batumi

Day 5. Tour in Georgia: Batumi - Borjomi

Day 6. Tour in Georgia: Borjomi - Vardzia - Gyumri

Day 7. Tour in Armenia: Gyumri - Yerevan

Day 8. Tour in Armenia: Yerevan - Ararat - Yeghegnadzor - Yerevan

Day 9. Tour in Armenia: Yerevan - Vagarshapat - Yerevan

Day 10. Tour in Armenia: Yerevan - Sevan

Day 11. Tour in Armenia: Sevan - Alaverdi - Bolnisi - Tbilisi

Day 12. Tour in Georgia: Tbilisi - Udabno - David Gareja - Signaghi

Day 13. Tour in Azerbaijan: Signagi - Shaki

Day 14. Tour in Azerbaijan: Shaki - Qabala - Baku

Day 15. Tour in Azerbaijan: Baku - Absheron - Baku

Day 16. Farewell to the South Caucasus

Duration: 16 days / 15 nights

Length: 2 800 kilometers

Overnight stay:

Tbilisi – 2 nights

Gudauri – 1 night

Kutaisi – 1 night

Batumi – 1 night

Borjomi – 1 night

Gyumri – 1 night

Yerevan – 3 nights

Sevan – 1 night

Signaghi – 1 night

Shaki – 1 night

Baku – 2 nights

Arrival in Tbilisi and the first emotional shock - dive into the unique character of the Georgian capital sung to by classics for centuries! Abanotubani -the best sulfur baths, famous for their healing properties. Across the river stands beautiful Metekhi church and it has been there since XIII century. The center of the ancient city cannot be imagined without the caravanserai Karvasla. Here, for more than a thousand years urban life has been flowing and overflowing. Would you like to see old Tbilisi spread out before your eyes? Then take the cable car up to the Narikala fortress.

This fortress has been guarded the Georgian capital starting from the VII century. The fortress offers another beautiful view - this time one of the Botanical Gardens. On the other side, hanging over the city stands huge and magnificent Sameba Cathedral. Below lies ancient Sioni Church and even more ancient Anchiskhati basilica in a tolerant environment of ancient temples of different denominations. You will be brought back to the modern times by a walk on Chardin Street in the evening. The street named after French traveler XVII is a tourist center and a favorite place for regulars of cozy cafes. Goodnight, Tbilisi!

Day 2. Tour: Tbilisi - Mtskheta - Tbilisi

To the North - to high mountains and crystal air of the Greater Caucasus! Along the way, we cannot not stop and enjoy places sung by poets of the XIX century (Lermontov, for example). Jvari monastery described by the poet is a perfect harmony of architecture and nature. The church of the VI century blends into the surrounding landscape and an unforgettable view of "Little Jerusalem" opens from there.

Monuments of the town of Mtskheta - ancient capital of Georgia - are listed among the UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Among those is Svetitskhoveli Cathedral, where you touch the walls that date back to the XI century and see "Life-giving pillar" under which rests the tunic of Jesus Christ. Samtavro convent which is from the same period as Svetitskhoveli also houses numerous relics.



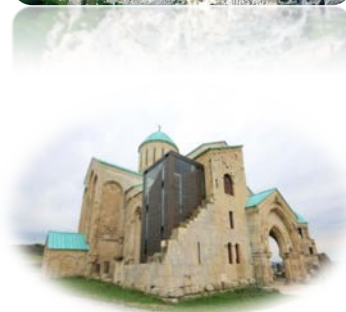
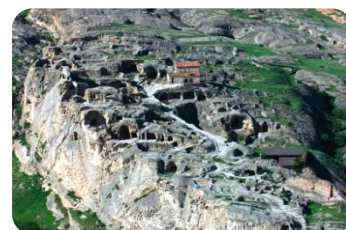
Less than an hour, and you find yourself in Ananuri castle on the banks of Jinvali reservoir. Defense tower fortifications, carved facades of churches, picturesque view and a small fair with daggers, mountaineers' hats "phaphakhi", embroidery and other souvenirs. The next stop is Jvari Pass - a place where the land ends and the sky begins, clouds float and springs flow. At the end of the path we come to "the gates of the Caucasus" - beautiful Dariali gorge. On its bottom lies the settlement of Stepantsminda. Just nearby proudly erect stands one of the symbols of Georgia - Trinity Church at the top of Gergeti adorning the Dariali gorge against the backdrop of huge Mount Kazbek. We will spend the night in the famous resort of Gudauri.

Day 3. Tour in Georgia: Gudauri - Uplistsikhe - Gori - Kutaisi

Georgia will win you over with this ancient city carved in the rock. Uplistsikhe cave complex was founded in the late 2nd millennium BC. All stages of the turbulent history of Georgia left their imprints on these stones. This city that was carved in the rock will demonstrate all its credentials as the pagan cult capital, commerce center and a military facility. You will marvel at patience of ancient people who carved all these hundreds of rooms, halls, stairways, cellars, temples and sacrificial pits in sandstone.

A ten-minute drive away from there is a house-museum of "Father of the People" Joseph Stalin. In his hometown the memory of the Soviet dictator, who less than a century ago wielded power and decided fates of the world, is carefully preserved. Having soaked up the feel of the modern history, we can head to Western Georgia - home of mythical Medea from the story of the Argonauts. Ahead lies the picturesque Serpentine road of Rikoti Pass, where alongside the road local residents staged a small museum of Georgian folklore with their roadside fairs.

Here we are in Kutaisi - the parliamentary capital of Georgia, which lies on the banks of the Rioni River. It was indeed this very river, up which and through the legendary Colchis, Jason and his companions sailed to the court of formidable King Aeetes. Monument of the later period - Bagrati Church built in the X century offers opportunity to take beautiful pictures of the architectural masterpiece and a wonderful panorama of Kutaisi. Near the town stands Gelati monastery complex that consists of three churches, chapels and buildings of the academy where in the middle ages Georgians studied ideas of Aristotle and Plato's philosophy.



Day 4. Tour in Georgia: Kutaisi -Gonio - Batumi

A reward after a long drive is Georgian coast of the warm Black Sea. Batumi! New tourist mecca and a symbol of modern Georgia! City - sun, city -sea, city - fun, city - romance, city - song! Large ships in the harbor of Batumi port, restaurants and cafes in Seaside Park, relaxed afternoon rest and vigorous nightlife! Would you like some history? Visit the local museum! Not enough history for you? Then go to the neighboring village of Gonio to see Roman fortress Apsaros with racecourse, thermal baths and the tomb of Apostle Matthew.

We vouch that you will like Batumi and will want to return to this city, which glitters with neon lights, flashes with vibrant squares, sings with musical fountains, shines with light shows, attracts with lively beaches, entertains in all sorts of ways and pleases the eye with masterpieces of modern art that have already become new faces. There are so many discoveries, and most importantly - they never seem to end!

Day 5. Tour in Georgia: Batumi - Borjomi

If mineral water then it can only be "Borjomi". The most intense, the most healing water, properties of which were known to Georgians from some 2000 years ago. You will have a rare chance to drink real - not a bottled "Borjomi" - but a real one straight from the magical source! Around you there is natural health resort of the Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park, a magical climate and beautiful scenery of which are made for relaxation. Fragrances of pine needles and honey floats in the air, while the Borjomi museum keeps evidence of antiquity. Chitakhevi monastery, founded in the IX century will provide wonderful views for your photos. But an even better view opens from a mountain plateau, where we will find another spring, this time a sulfur one. The evening will be passed in walks through Borjomi Park that is lined with attractions, while at night you will inhale deeply special aura of this unique place...

Day 6. Tour in Georgia and Armenia: Borjomi -Vardzia - Gyumri

Getting there is not that easy! Tmogvi fortress rises high above the left bank of the Mtkvari river connecting with it with only a goat trail, running down an almost vertical cliff. A rare tourist climbs here, but we can conquer this stronghold through the bypass road. Nearby, at the bottom of the gorge lies large fortress Khertvisi - according to a legend, the first walls in this place were attacked by soldiers of Alexander the Great. Just a few kilometers away - and before your eyes will appear incredible ensemble of the cave city and monastery Vardzia in all its beauty. This grand monument of the Golden Age of the XIII century Georgia is closely connected with the name of Queen Tamar - the greatest monarch of Georgia. From there she sent her army to defeat powerful enemies, and here this proud queen committed an act of the greatest humility.

But it's enough talking of Georgia. After all, we are in a very close proximity to the border of brotherly Armenia! Nearest Armenian city Gyumri will provide us with a comfortable night rest.

Day 7. Tour in Armenia: Gyumri - Yerevan

Fruit gardens, fields and hillsides - this is a view that opens from the walls of the fortress of Garni, built back in the I century BC. Armenian kings loved this place. Garni served as their residence and was the seat of royal troops. After the advent of Christianity in the pagan temple was turned into "summer house" where royal family members spent hot months.

"Spear" - this is the translation of the name of Geghard. First it was called Ayrivank, i.e. "cave monastery" because it is carved in the rock of the Kokht gorge. And "spear" became the name of the church after it became a preserver of a weapon of a Roman soldier that pierced Jesus at the crucifixion on the Golgotha.

Further ahead, there comes Yerevan and a dinner in the capital of Armenia, with which we can start with our close encounter with Armenian cuisine. It is not like that of Georgia, but still - very tasty!



Mystical part of our stay - Khor Virap Monastery. It was once a prison for those sentenced to death. It was here, according to the legend, that the pagan king Tiridates threw Gregory the Illuminator into a pit with snakes for preaching Christianity. He did not go unpunished for this - 14 years later the king went mad and turned into a pig. Tiridates was able to regain human form only after he ordered the release of the saint.

"New Church" that is a translation of the name of Noravank monastery. Here you will see Astvatsatsin - the church of Blessed Virgin - the latest work by the renowned Armenian architect Momik, who was nicknamed "designer of the beauty". After the visit to this this monument we can return to Yerevan.

Day 9. Tour in Armenia: Yerevan - Vagarshapat - Yerevan

The place worth visiting! All tourists are united in this opinion. Matenadaran - one of the largest repositories of manuscripts in the world. The library is named after the creator of the Armenian alphabet Mesrop Mashtots. It contains over 17 000 ancient manuscripts, 100 000 old archival documents, 2 000 manuscripts in different languages!

Great "Descent of the only begotten" can be seen in the Cathedral of Etchmiadzin, the residence of the heads of the Armenian Apostolic Church. This sacred place is surrounded by legends. It is said that the Savior himself pointed to Gregory the Illuminator as to where St. Hripsime Church should have been erected - Hripsime was executed by King Tirrdad for what refusing the ruler.

Greatness of Echmiadzin church can only be contested by the cathedral of Heavenly Angels - Zvartnots. It continues to be considered as the pearl of Armenian architecture. You can fully appreciate the beauty of this monument before leaving for the capital of Armenia.

Day 10. Tour in Armenia: Yerevan - Sevan

Lake Lake. No, it's not a tautology - that is how the name of the biggest lake in the Caucasus - Sevan - is translated. A legend has it that a young woman forgot to put the cover over a spring and it poured over flooding homes. And it now is the inside "sea" of Armenia.

On its shore there is the monastery complex of three churches - Sevanavank. It was built in the IX century by traveling monks who made a stop on their way and have been very impressed by the beauty of the place. Today here is the Vazgen I Seminary, and a nice place to walk around along the lake shore before a dinner and a night at a local



Enough of these visits! It's time to go back to Georgia! But Armenia is in no hurry to part with you. On the way to the border you will have to stop at Alaverdi. The city situated in the gorge Derbet was named after a nomad Turk. We will visit two of the Byzantine monasteries - Sanain and Akhpat to know why they are called different brothers... And in the village of Odzun you will see basilica of the VI century. It will be interesting to compare it with the Georgian ones of the same age!

The object to compare will be seen shortly after crossing the border. Bolnisi Sioni - "father" of the Georgian church architecture. Its walls hold the first literary text in Georgian language and the earliest images of Bolnisi cross that adorns the Georgian flag. We are quickly taking photos to remember and rushing to Tbilisi. This city has already missed its guests!



Day 12. Tour: Tbilisi - David Gareja - Signagi – Telavi

One cannot come to Georgia and not visit its main wine cellar of the country. Kakheti region is home to vineyards and the birthplace of the best brands of Georgian wine. We travel across Kakheti to go to the desert Udabno to see the monastery complex David Gareja on the border with Azerbaijan. Unusual nature attracts attention. The monastery of the VI century mesmerizes with its beautiful towers, cave-cells and a clever system for collecting and storing rainwater carved in the rock.



From Monastery of Saint David we will be heading to home of great Pirosmeni. It was fortress-city Signagi that has given the world this artist-primitive. At the Pirosmeni museum one can see original paintings of this genius exhibited, while the view from the castle walls offers you a breathtaking picture of the heart of Kakheti - green Alazani Valley with glowing peaks of the Caucasus Mountains against the backdrop. Not far from there is a beautiful church in the convent of the IX century - Bodbe with the grave of St. Nino of Cappadocia who converted Georgia to Christianity. And again - relaxed atmosphere and charm of Signagi, pleasant walk and a delicious dinner...

Another, bigger part of the complex is located behind the mountain. At the end of the ascending path opens a view after seeing which you will immediately forget about tiredness. By the way, you have just crossed the state border without any stamps in your passport! But do not worry - Georgian and Azerbaijani border guards will not start checking of documents, but only direct you to the most interesting caves.

Today we find ourselves again in Azerbaijan, but this time all border procedures are in place. Narrow gorges, green valleys, pristine waterfalls and mineral springs... We are in Sheki. Archaeologists believe this city to be the most ancient settlement of the Caucasus.

The famous Palace of the Shaki Khans is a wooden structure without a single nail! Windows of colored glass are assembled and set in delicate lattices - it must be seen!

Shaki is known for its artisans, and you will see with your own eyes how "shebeke" - pictures of colorful glass connected without glue are made. The rest of the day can be passed in getting a closer look at the work of Shaki masters and local cuisine before settling in a hotel.



Day 14. Tour in Azerbaijan: Shaki - Qabala - Baku

It's time to see Gabala - the capital of Caucasian Albania. In Chukhur-Gabala there is a royal residence the remains of a large barn and 33 holes where they half buried pitchers. You will visit the ethnographic museum and mysterious two-story mosque-mausoleum Diri Baba.

Why the architect decided to "hang" the tomb of the saint in the air? It still remains a mystery! But we can devote too much time to searching for an answer. In fact, after Diri Baba it is Shemakha - fortress of the XII century and Gulistan - burial vault of seven representatives of the Shirvan Shahs dynasty await us. At the end of the route - magnificent night Baku!

Day 15. Tour in Azerbaijan: Baku - Absheron - Baku

Want to see real exotics, Azerbaijan-style and see burning natural gas seepages? Then we should go to the Apsheron Peninsula, name of which translates as "salt water". Here you will see the temple of eternal fire - Ateshtyag, with its history of 1 000 years. It mesmerizes with its secrets and Hindu roots.

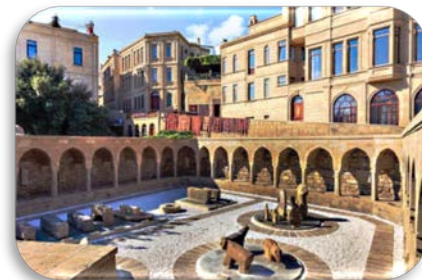
In ancient times, a structure where believers - fire worshipers paid tribute to Zoroastrianism stood at this place. The monument continues to remain in excellent condition and resembles a small minaret with arches. Inscriptions on ancient stones can be read with the naked eye.

The next delightful sight awaits us at Gobustan Reserve. Just imagine - thousands of petroglyphs in one place! The petroglyphs date back to 5 000 years! Savour the memory of them till we return to night Baku, which will continue to dazzle us with its wealth and hospitality!

Finally, we can set eyes on the capital of Azerbaijan in the daylight! Here it is - a city where not one pair of lovers found refuge! Old quarters of Icheri Shekher takes us back in the history. While areas around them today are experiencing the Renaissance era: mosques, caravanserais, baths, houses and museums...



And here is the jewel of the Baku - famous Maiden Tower - Giz Galasi. According to a legend, a Shah's daughter threw herself from the height of the tower to escape an unwanted marriage forced upon her by her father. Since then Giz Galasi became a symbol of strength... Where else can you see a grape tree 30 centimeters thick, surrounded by olive trees? Only in Palace of Shirvanshahs! It is located just 10 minutes walk from the Maiden Tower. The impressive complex was built in the XVI century. Its underground tombs and the mausoleum gate represent amazing masterpieces of oriental architecture!



It is time to go to the Baku airport, but we do not want to leave... But then, can the magic called South Caucasus ever end? Once started, it continues to live by itself... And we will be waiting for you to come again!