

Destination Georgia, Armenia & Azerbaijan

Sitting at one of the earth's great crossroads, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan occupy a mountainous zone on the southern flank of the mighty Caucasus mountains. Here two continents meet between two seas and many worlds commingle at a frontier between Islam and Christendom – all under the watchful gaze of three bigger, much more powerful neighbours: Russia, Turkey and Iran.

Such has been the to and fro of empires and conquerors across these lands – from Roman legions to Mongol hordes, the Red Army to the Ottoman Turks – that it's a wonder they exist as independent nations. Indeed, for much of their past they didn't, and when they did, they often had very different borders from the ones they have now. But through all their tribulations their peoples have forged very different, and proud, identities. All three countries share a recent past as republics of the Soviet Union. Today, while their fates remain as intermingled as ever, post-post-Soviet Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan present three distinct faces to the world.

Islamic Azerbaijan, now ruled by Ilham Əliyev (son of its long-time president Heydar Əliyev), is riding the crest of an oil boom. But while skyscrapers sprout in its Caspian-side capital, Baku, life goes on much as before in the timeless villages of the Caucasus mountains. Armenia and Georgia are the two oldest Christian nations on earth. Today Armenia is dubbed the Caucasian Tiger for its economic growth rates, and manages to remain friendly with Russia, the USA and Iran all at the same time. It is however at loggerheads with neighbouring Turkey over the almost-intractable WWI genocide issue. This has some farcical results, such as when trucks carrying goods between the two countries have to travel a very long way round through Georgia because the Armenia–Turkey border is closed. Georgia got a later start in the economic recovery business but is now making strides; its problem is its fraught relations with giant northern neighbour Russia. And while Georgia rubs along fine with Armenia and Azerbaijan, the latter pair are tensely stalemated over Nagorno-Karabakh, a now de facto-independent area of Azerbaijan for which they fought a very bitter war in the 1990s.

For travellers a profound joy of the region is the sheer beauty of its gorgeous, untrammelled scenery, decorated with fascinating castles, palaces, churches and mosques from an extraordinarily rich history. In the three capital cities – Tbilisi, Yerevan and Baku – the contradictions of economic rebirth are plain: vast wealth for some coexists with poverty for others. All three cities are very old, but leafy, balconied, church-strewn Tbilisi is the one that most retains the atmosphere of an ancient Eurasian crossroads. Yerevan is the most relaxed and arguably the most sophisticated, and competes with Baku for the title of most expensive. All three abound in good accommodation, food, shops, cafés and entertainment, and they are the places that will feel most familiar to Western visitors – yet they all retain their strange, part-Eastern, part-Soviet atmosphere.

Away from the big cities, life moves to the different rhythm of rural life, the perfect complement for varied travels. All three countries afford unlimited opportunities for travellers to get out amid spectacular nature,

'These are three of the most welcoming and hospitable peoples in the world'

from the snowy Caucasus to the verdant valleys of Armenia or semi-tropical southern Azerbaijan. Modern tourism is still in its infancy in all three countries, but is more developed in Armenia and Georgia. Travel in Azerbaijan is definitely more challenging (though no less rewarding). But you don't have to scratch far beneath the skin of any of the three countries to find one thing they all have in common. These are three of the most welcoming and hospitable peoples in the world – something you'll probably remember longer than anything else from your travels here.

Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTES

CITY TO CITY

Two to Three Weeks / Yerevan to Baku

The Armenian capital **Yerevan** (p145) is a laid-back mecca for café-goers and a hub of cultural activity, with the backdrop of legendary Mt Ararat. The core treasures of the ancient Armenian church are close by: **Khor Virap Monastery** (p176) sits beneath Ararat's snowy peaks; **Geghard Monastery** (p169) once protected the holy lance that pierced Christ's side; and **Echmiadzin** (p171) is the Armenian equivalent of the Vatican. **Tbilisi** (p47) is the most attractive city in the Caucasus, with tree-lined boulevards, charming old churches and the style of a city moving forward in the 21st century. Take excursions to the old Georgian capital **Mtskheta** (p70) and up to **Kazbegi** (p100) for a taste of Caucasus mountain majesty. En route to Baku, detour to the extraordinary cave monasteries of **Davit Gareja** (p113) and the mountain town of **Şaki** (p274), with its 18th-century khan's palace. Vibrant **Baku** (p236) combines the architecture of two oil booms – one 100 years ago and the other right now – with a medieval walled city at its core. From Baku, venture out to the raw, primordial landscape of petroglyphs and mud volcanoes at **Qobustan** (p260).



A trip centring on the three capitals, with their quality accommodation, restaurants and services, plus excursions to some of the cultural and natural wonders around them.

COAST TO COAST

One Month to Six Weeks / Batumi to Baku

Get a relaxed and easy introduction to the region at **Batumi** (p89), Georgia's fun-loving Black Sea resort. Head on to pretty **Kutaisi** (p77), with the beautiful Bagrati Cathedral and Gelati monastery, then experience the surreal side of Stalinism in the old dictator's home town, **Gori** (p73). Enjoy the quirky buzz of **Tbilisi** (p47), where Europe embraces Asia and the present coexists with the past, and take in the splendours of the nearby old Georgian capital, **Mtskheta** (p70). Veer south into mountainous Armenia, visiting the World Heritage monasteries of **Haghpat** (p201) and **Sanahin** (p201) en route to **Yerevan** (p145), packed with cafés, galleries and museums. From Yerevan take easy day trips to **Khor Virap Monastery** (p176), with its great view of Mt Ararat, and the rock-hewn **Geghard Monastery** (p169). Admire turquoise **Lake Sevan** (p177) and stay in forested **Dilijan** (p190).

Return to Tbilisi and venture up into the magnificent high Caucasus at **Kazbegi** (p100). Moving east, enjoy the amazing cave monasteries at **Davit Gareja** (p113) and the welcome of Georgia's wine-growing region, **Kakheti** (p106). Cross into beautiful northern Azerbaijan with its nut-tree forests, poppy-filled fields and mountain vistas. Old **Şaki** (p274), with its khan's palace, and **Lahıc** (p270), a unique Persian-speaking coppersmith village, are the best places to get an insight into provincial Azeri life. The landscape mutates into harsh semidesert as you approach **Baku** (p236) with its big-city boomtown buzz; explore the Old Town and enjoy the vibrant nightlife. Venture along the **Abşeron Peninsula** (p258), where unusual Islamo-animist beliefs, a fire temple and a collection of medieval fortress-towers await beneath a Mad Max facade of oil-industry degradation.

A trip from end to end of Transcaucasia, visiting the three national capitals and most of the region's best-known sights.



ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

DISTANT MOUNTAINS, HIDDEN VALLEYS

Two Months

Deep in the south of Azerbaijan, Talysh is a region of spectacular scenery, remote villages and sleepy towns such as **Lerik** (p287), and **Lankaran** (p285). Swing through Baku and to the carpet-weaving town of **Quba** (p263), then to **Laza** (p266) for the hike to the mountain-top village of **Xinaliq** (p265) and (if it's summer and you're fit) on over the 2915m Salavat Pass to **Vandam** (p273), near Qəbələ. Continue to historic **Şəki** (p274) and either **İlisu** (p279) or **Zaqatala** (p279), both great bases for mountain walks. Crossing into Georgia you immediately come upon the remote **Lagodekhi Nature Reserve** (p115), with its beautiful woodlands and glacial lakes. Continue north to astonishingly beautiful **Tusheti** (p104; only accessible in summer). From Tbilisi, swing down to southern Armenia, with the ancient churches and forts of the **Yeghegis Valley** (p209), the stalactite-filled caves near **Areni** (p207), and **Tatev monastery** (p216) perched above the Vorotan Canyon. Venture into Nagorno-Karabakh, where the ruined Azeri ghost city of **Agdam** (p301) is possibly the most striking place in the Caucasus. **Gandzasar Monastery** (p306) is both a living religious centre and ravishingly beautiful. Head back to Georgia for the long ride to the region's ultimate mountain retreat – the remote valleys and stone towers of **Svaneti** (p94), at the feet of 5000m-plus giants like Ushba and Shkhara. **Mestia** (p96) makes a good base. The mountains of southern Georgia hold Queen Tamar's cave-monastery complex at **Vardzia** (p121), and a back door into Turkey via Posof.



A thorough exploration of some of the region's lesser-known but most intriguing corners, for people with a sense of adventure, more time than money, and some basic language skills. Accommodation outside the capital cities might not be up to Best Western standards, but local hospitality more than compensates.

TAILORED TRIPS

CASTLES, TOWERS, CHURCHES, MOSQUES & CAVES

Much of Transcaucasia's architectural heritage is set in impossibly beautiful locations. Start with Tbilisi's **Metekhi Church** (p55) and **Narikala Fortress** (p55), then move out to the old churches of **Mtskheta** (p70) and to the sublime **Tsminda Sameba Church** (p102). Enjoy Kutaisi's **Bagrati Cathedral** (p79) and **Gelati monastery** (p81) before you head up to the towers of **Svaneti** (p94). Don't miss the cave monasteries of **Vardzia** (p121) and **Davit Gareja** (p113).

Within a day trip of Yerevan are **Echmiadzin** (p171), with its 15th-century Mayr Tachar cathedral, and rock-hewn **Geghard Monastery** (p169). Magnificent

Amberd fortress (p174) sits on the slopes of Mt Aragats. Northern Armenia's Debed Canyon is home to the monasteries of **Haghpat** (p201) and **Sanahin** (p201). Down south there's masterly monastic architecture at **Noravank** (p207) and **Tatev** (p216). Nagorno-Karabakh too has monastic gems, at **Gandzasar** (p306) and **Dadivank** (p307).

Baku's **Içəri Şəhər** (p243) is home to both the 15th-century Palace of the Shirvanshahs and the 7th-century Maiden's Tower. The fire temple at **Suraxani** (p258) is the only one of its type. The best historic mosque in Azerbaijan is the **Cümə Mosque** (p268) at Şamaxı, while the decorated **Möminə Xatun mausoleum** (p289) in Naxçıvan is Azerbaijan's most impressive tower.



TAKE A WALK

With its beautiful valleys and high, spectacular yet accessible mountains, the Caucasus is a walker's paradise.

The main mountain range provides much of the best country. The peaks, valleys, passes and glaciers of Georgia's **Svaneti** (p94) are the natural counterpart to the architectural drama of its ancient defensive towers. The **Kazbegi area** (p102) offers walks to glaciers and beautifully sited churches. **Tusheti** (p104) is a remote region of steep valleys, sharp black crags and dramatically perched villages. An exciting long trek (10 days to two weeks) connects Kazbegi to Tusheti via intriguing **Khevsureti** (p103).



In Azerbaijan the villages of **Xinalq** (p265) and **Laza** (p266) are the top choices for hiking, including the trek from one to the other. The **Lahic area** (p270) is lovely too.

Armenia, especially its hilly north, is particularly good for day hikes, through the valleys between **Haghartsin Monastery** (p192) and **Dilijan** (p190) or the mountain forests around **Goshavank Monastery** (p192), or in the **Yenokavan Canyon** (p194). Closer to Yerevan you can hike the country's highest mountain, **Mt Aragats** (p175), or explore the beautiful area around **Garni** (p169) or the Khosrov Nature Reserve (p176).

The best way of all to explore Nagorno-Karabakh is on the well-marked, 190km **Janapar Trail** (p307), which links old monasteries, caves and quaint villages.

Georgia's **Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park** (p118) and the **upper Mtkvari valley** (p121) near Vardzia cave monastery both have excellent networks of marked trails.

Snapshots

CURRENT EVENTS

The three Caucasus countries have staged a remarkable economic turn-around since the dark days of the 1990s. By 2006 they were posting some of the best economic growth rates in the world. The most spectacular numbers were those of Azerbaijan, with an astounding growth rate of 34%, thanks in large measure to the new Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline, pumping Azerbaijan's Caspian oil to the Turkish Mediterranean port of Ceyhan. Even Georgia, the slowest off the mark in economic recovery, could claim a healthy 9% growth rate. Critics point out that the wealth is spread unevenly, that most of the new wealth in all three countries is controlled by a small number of 'oligarchs' and that little of it trickles down to the general populace (this is probably least true in Armenia). While the city centres and wealthy suburbs of Baku, Yerevan and Tbilisi are full of people in expensive clothes parking expensive cars outside expensive cafés, life has certainly improved a lot less in the working-class suburbs and the countryside, and for professionals in non-commercial fields like health and education. Still, the general direction is up, thanks in Armenia and Georgia to energetic free-market reforms which began in the late 1990s in Armenia but only after the 2003 Rose Revolution in Georgia.

For many people outside the region, the only exposure they've had to Caucasus culture was Georgia's and Armenia's entries in the Eurovision Song Contest. But arts too are thriving here – Yerevan and Tbilisi boast very active theatre and gallery scenes, and both Baku and Tbilisi stage top-drawer annual jazz festivals.

Less promising is the story on corruption: Georgia, with its avowedly anticorruption government, was ranked only 79th out of 180 countries on the Corruption Perceptions Index of Transparency International in 2007. Armenia was 99th, and Azerbaijan came a dismal 150th (equal with Zimbabwe and the Congo Republic).

Armenia has made steady progress on democratic standards, and its 2007 parliamentary elections were judged largely fair by international observers. Rarely have impartial observers been moved to commend Azerbaijan's Əliyev dynasty for holding free and fair elections or encouraging free speech.

Georgia seems to have good democratic credentials, with a government that was carried to power by protests against the flawed elections of 2003. Yet President Mikheil Saakashvili's track record took a knock with the bizarre events of late 2007, beginning when opposition parties mounted exactly the same kind of Tbilisi street protests against poverty, corruption and authoritarianism that Saakashvili himself led against his predecessor, Eduard Shevardnadze. The protests were dispersed with some violence, and Saakashvili declared a temporary state of emergency, making it known he believed the protests were part of a coup attempt backed by Russia and the Georgian media magnate Badri Patarkatsishvili. Saakashvili then called a snap presidential election for January 2008, which he won, with international observers declaring the vote democratic despite some irregularities.

Attempted coup or not, relations with Russia were pro-Western Saakashvili's biggest ongoing problem. Spooked by Georgia's desire to join NATO and the EU, Russia has subjected its small neighbour to all manner of bullying including a boycott on imports of Georgian wine and mineral water from 2006.

Armenia receives over US\$1 billion per year in remittances. Three fourths of that comes from Russia.

Armenia meanwhile manages to pull off the incredible juggling feat of remaining on friendly terms with Russia, the USA and Iran all at once, and reaps the rewards in terms of investment and aid. It is however deeply at odds with Azerbaijan and Turkey over Nagorno-Karabakh and with Turkey over the WWI genocide issue, although there have been faint hopeful signs of the beginnings of a thaw in Armenian-Turkish relations.

Any solutions to the region's bitter territorial and ethnic quarrels – which caused so much loss of life in the 1990s and still leave hundreds of thousands of people refugees in their own lands – are still very far away. Georgia has ambitions of bringing South Ossetia back into the fold by negotiating with Ossetians who oppose separatist leader Eduard Kokoity and favour a federal status for South Ossetia within Georgia. But there is no inkling of rapprochement between Georgia and the breakaway region of Abkhazia, nor between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the bitter territorial dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh. At least there has been no serious fighting since 1994.

HISTORY

This mountainous isthmus between the Black and Caspian Seas, today at the frontiers of Europe and Asia, Islam and Christendom, has been one of the great melting pots of history. Innumerable waves of conquerors and colonists washing into and over the region from all directions make its story one of the most complicated, and most fascinating, in the world – and have left one the world's trickiest ethnic jigsaws. The three Caucasus nations today are just the latest of scores of republics, kingdoms, principalities, emirates, khanates and satrapies that have blossomed and died here down the centuries.

It is essential to look beyond current national boundaries to gain an understanding of Caucasus history. Georgia first came together when a number of small principalities were united in the 11th century. By the 15th century, this united Georgian kingdom disintegrated and only began to reunify in the 18th century. The current Republic of Azerbaijan is less than half the size of historic Azerbaijan, the rest of which, with perhaps two-thirds of the Azeri people, lies in Iran. Modern Armenia is just a tiny part of ancient Armenia, which at one time held sway from the Caspian Sea to Lebanon. Over the centuries large parts of the region have been incorporated into Macedonian, Roman, Persian, Byzantine, Arab, Mongol, Ottoman, Russian and other empires. Georgians, Armenians and Azeris see themselves as inheritors of ancient national traditions and they look to the past to define themselves in the present. Such has been the ebb and flow of rulers and boundaries down the centuries that almost any territorial argument can be backed up by pointing to some period of history.

Early Empires

Some aver that the history of the Caucasus region began in the unspecified time when Noah's Ark grounded on Mt Ararat (in modern day Turkey, just west of the border) in the biblical flood. What is known is that Stone Age tribes inhabited the region at least 100,000 years ago. The Caucasus' first significant influence on the outside world, many millennia later, may have been such basics of civilisation as astronomy and astral timekeeping, which some historians believe emerged from here rather than from Babylonia or Sumer, Iraq. Astronomical complexes at Zorats Karer and Metsamor in Armenia date from around 3000 BC. Perhaps 4000 years ago, the Aryans swept east from the region to create Vedic India, and it may have also been from the Caucasus that the founders of the Hittite empire reached Anatolia (central Turkey) around the same time.

Armenia has had recent success in raising the water levels of Lake Sevan. The level has gone up 2m since 2003.

Sergei Paradjanov's great 1968 film *The Colour of Pomegranates* recreates the world of Sayat-Nova, Erekle II's Armenian court poet, who died defending Tbilisi from the Persians.

To find out more about the Caucasus region's special ecological value, check www.biodiversityhotspots.org or www.panda.org/caucasus

Greeks, Persians and Romans brought the classical pagan faiths and philosophies to the Caucasus in the 1000 years before Christianity took hold, helping to create rich local cultures. The Greeks established colonies in Colchis (western Georgia) perhaps as early as the 8th century BC. The Armenians originated as a group of Anatolians (from central Turkey) who took over the decayed Urartu kingdom at Van in eastern Turkey in the 6th century BC. They were incorporated successively into the Persian Achaemenian Empire, the Macedonian Empire and the Seleucid Empire. When the Romans defeated the Seleucids in 189 BC, they allowed two former Seleucid satraps (provincial governors) to set up independent Armenian states. These were united by Tigranes the Great (r 95–55 BC), who built an empire 10 times the size of modern Armenia with its capital at Tigranakert, west of Lake Van.

Tigranes made the mistake of allying with Mithradates of Pontus (in northern Turkey) in opposition to Rome. General Pompey arrived in 66 BC to crush the resistance, and Rome took control of Armenia and Georgia. Armenia ended up as a buffer between the Romans and the Persians, who fought long wars for control of the region.

First Christian Kingdoms

The Armenian church records that two apostles visited their country and won followers in the decades after the death of Jesus. In 301 King Trdat III was converted to Christianity and Armenia became the first nation officially to embrace the religion. The eastern Georgian kingdom of Kartli (or Iveria), and the state of Albania in what's now Azerbaijan (no relation to Balkan Albania), followed suit within the next 30 years or so.

As the Christian Byzantine Empire expanded towards the east from Constantinople, western Armenia and western Georgia fell under its sway, while their eastern areas came under Persian control. But Armenia successfully resisted Persia's efforts to impose the Zoroastrian religion.

The Arrival of Islam

Muslim Arabs arrived in Azerbaijan in 642, set up an emirate in Tbilisi in 654 and gained control of Armenia in 661. Opposition to Muslim conversion saw many Armenians leave for Byzantine territory, the beginning of the vast Armenian diaspora which is now spread worldwide. In the 9th century the Arabs recognised a local prince of the Bagratid family, Ashot I, as king of Armenia, while another branch of the family had managed to install itself in the Tao-Klarjeti region, straddling the border of modern Georgia and Turkey. By the 11th century the latter branch controlled most of Georgia.

The Seljuk Turks, originating from Central Asia, brought death, plunder and destruction to much of the Caucasus region in the 11th and 12th centuries, but Georgian king Davit Aghmashenebeli (David the Builder, 1089–1125) managed to drive the Seljuks out of Georgia, establishing its medieval golden age. David's great-granddaughter Queen Tamar (1184–1213) controlled territory from western Azerbaijan to eastern Turkey, including many Armenian regions. The 12th century was also a time of material and cultural progress in Muslim Şirvan, as modern Azerbaijan was by then known.

The whole region was flooded by the next great wave from the east, the Mongols, who invaded in the 1230s, soon followed by the Black Death and then in the late 14th century by another ruthless Asian conqueror, Timur (Tamerlane). The Şirvan khanate did manage to retain some autonomy and by the 15th century Baku was a prospering trade-route centre. In 1501 Şirvan was conquered by fellow Azeris from what's now northern Iran, who converted it from Sunni to Shia Islam.

The next pair to fight over the Caucasus region were the Persia-based Azeri Safavid dynasty and the Ottoman Turks, who had taken Constantinople and swept away the Byzantine Empire in 1453. Georgia came to be divided between the two in the 16th century; in 1514–16 the Ottomans took over all of Armenia – and kept most of it for nearly 400 years. After the Safavid collapse in 1722, a new Persian conqueror, Nader Shah, installed Bagratid princes in eastern Georgia.

Russia Arrives... & Stays

Peter the Great began the great Russian push south in the 1720s, capturing the Caspian coast as far as Baku before being pushed back by the Persians. The east Georgian king Erekle II accepted Christian Russian control at the Treaty of Georgievsk in 1783 in exchange for protection from his Muslim foes, and Russia went on to annex the Georgian princedoms one by one through the 19th century. Russia wrested the khanates then comprising modern Azerbaijan, as well as Yerevan and Naxçıvan, from Persia in the early 19th century, and took the Batumi area (southwest Georgia) and Kars and Ardahan (northeast Turkey) from the Turks in the 1870s.

Russia's involvement in the Caucasus opened up a whole new cultural frontier for it, as well as a territorial one. The region inspired much romantic art and writing about flashing spurs and mountain guerrillas, with Pushkin, Tolstoy, Lermontov and others bringing the Caucasus into Western literature. At the same time, incorporation into the tsarist empire introduced new dimensions to life in the Caucasus. Improved education brought with it new ideologies such as nationalism and socialism. The latter was encouraged by the oil boom at Baku in the late 19th century, where appalling working conditions reminiscent of the Californian and Australian goldfields coexisted with the wealth garnered by the investing classes.

A good half of historic Armenia and perhaps 2.5 million Armenians were left in the Ottoman Empire after the end of the Russo-Turkish War in the 1870s. Many Armenians emigrated to the Russian-held corner of their traditional homeland, but unrest among those who stayed led to a series of massacres of Armenians in the 1890s, and in 1915 the Young Turk government in Istanbul ordered the killing or deportation of virtually all the Armenian population within the Ottoman Empire. Deportation meant walking into the Syrian deserts. In all, well over a million are thought to have died.

Following the Russian Revolution, Transcaucasia declared itself a federation independent of Moscow on 22 April 1918, but national and religious differences saw it split quickly into three separate independent republics: Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. A resurgent Turkish army under Mustafa Kemal pushed into the region, before the Red Army came south to reclaim it 1920–21; Turkey still managed to emerge with eastern and northeastern areas that had been in Armenia and Georgia.

Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan were thrown together in the Transcaucasian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic, one of the founding republics of the Soviet Union in 1922. Antinationalist repression, led by Georgian Bolsheviks Stalin, Beria and Ordzhonikidze, and the Great Terror of the 1930s saw hundreds of thousands of people from the region executed or banished to the Gulag. It was also Stalin, as Commissar for Nationalities, who placed Karabakh, with its mainly Armenian population, within Azerbaijan. The Transcaucasian Republic was split into separate Georgian, Armenian and Azerbaijani Republics in 1936.

The later Soviet period, after Stalin's death in 1953, was relatively calm, despite worsening corruption. Today this is looked back on with some nostalgia by many older people as a time of stability and jobs. But the wider

Winston Churchill had a taste for Armenian brandy, which Stalin obliged in some quantity.

Stalin's mother believed her son should have stayed at the seminary and become a priest.

Soviet economy stagnated, and Mikhail Gorbachev's efforts to deal with this through *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (restructuring) unlocked latent nationalist tensions that would tear both the Caucasus region and the whole Soviet Union apart.

Independence

The late 1980s saw violence and upheaval flare in the Caucasus. In 1988 Karabakh declared its wish for unification with Armenia, Armenians were massacred in the Azerbaijan town of Sumqayıt, violence spiralled in both republics, and the large numbers of Azeris in Armenia and Armenians in Azerbaijan started to flee. By 1990 Armenian and Azerbaijani militias were battling each other in and around Karabakh; Soviet troops had to fight their way into Baku to maintain Soviet control there. The Georgian independence movement became an unstoppable force after Soviet troops massacred 20 peaceful demonstrators in Tbilisi in April 1989. The Azeri region of Naxçıvan was actually the first part of the Soviet Union to declare independence (beating Lithuania by a few weeks) in January 1990, but soon rejoined Azerbaijan. Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan all declared independence in 1991, and the Soviet Union formally split into 15 different nations in December that year.

The Caucasus region was immediately plunged into savage internal strife. Independent Georgia's first president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, was driven out in a civil war in 1991–92, and bloody fighting in South Ossetia (1991–92) and Abkhazia (1992–93) left both these regions effectively independent of Tbilisi. The entire 250,000 ethnic-Georgian population of Abkhazia was driven out. In Karabakh, several years of vicious fighting ended with a 1994 ceasefire and a victory for the Armenian and Karabakhtsi forces over the Azeri army. The war resulted in the loss of an estimated 30,000 lives and hundreds of thousands of refugees were forced to flee. Karabakh has been a de facto independent state ever since.

The economies of all three countries nosedived with the wars, the refugee problems and the ending of Soviet state support for industry and agriculture. In Georgia, former Soviet foreign minister Eduard Shevardnadze managed to stabilise the political situation but without much economic progress and with ever-growing corruption. In Azerbaijan, another ex-Communist boss, Heydar Əliyev, returned to power in 1993 and managed to restore stability, overseeing the Karabakh ceasefire and negotiating a lucrative deal with Western oil companies over Azerbaijan's Caspian oil reserves. In Armenia, President Levon Ter-Petrossian weathered several years of instability before resigning in 1998, to be replaced Robert Kocharian, who oversaw the beginnings of an economic revival.

PEOPLE

It's interesting to consider each nationality's view of its neighbours. The Armenians may have fought a war with the Azeris, but person to person they prefer them to the Georgians, whom they see as proud, wilful and only superficially Christian. The Georgians don't like the Armenians very much either, especially their country's friendly relations with Russia. They regard the Armenians and the Azeris as less sophisticated and less European than they are. The Azeris, with 800,000-odd refugees among them, are bitterly opposed to the Armenian occupation of Karabakh and its surrounding territories. An Armenian joke sums it up well: a boy asks his grandfather why the Armenians haven't sent a man into space. The old man replies, 'If the Armenians sent a cosmonaut into space, the Georgians would die of envy. If the Georgians die of envy, the Armenians will die of pleasure. And if the Georgians and Armenians die, the Azeris will be left with all the land.' Add

The 2003 documentary *Power Trip*, directed by Paul Devlin, reveals much about the tribulations of the transition as it chronicles an American company's attempts to bring paid-for electricity to Tbilisi.

Ezster Spat's *Yezidis* is the fruit of several years of close contact with these enigmatic mountain people.

in some other feisty nationalities – notably the Abkhaz, the Ossetians, the Chechens, the Lezgins and the Talysh – and the Caucasus is like Asia and Europe in miniature.

The only Armenians still living in Azerbaijan tend to be those married to Azeris and their children; likewise the only Azeris still in Armenia are those in mixed marriages. Otherwise the ethnic cleansing of Azeris from Armenia and Armenians from Azerbaijan during the late 1980s and early 1990s was extremely thorough, as was that of Georgians from Abkhazia. Georgia has around 300,000 Azeris and 300,000 Armenians in its 4.7 million population today, chiefly in areas near the Azerbaijan and Armenian borders, and there's some discontent among the Armenians, with calls for local autonomy in Javakheti, the region where they're most heavily concentrated. A few Georgians live in northwest Azerbaijan, especially around Qax, but almost no Georgians live in Armenia.

The Russian and Ukrainian minorities have largely departed the region, unless they too are in mixed marriages. Baku, the biggest city in the region, has the largest remaining Slavic community.

While the total population of Azerbaijan has been growing at a steady 50,000 or so per year, both Georgia and Armenia have seen their population shrink by about 15% since independence, chiefly through emigration. In Armenia at least, economic recovery is slowing the decline, and Armenia's population is expected to start growing again by about 2010.

RELIGION

The religions of the Caucasus have enjoyed a big revival since the end of Soviet suppression. New churches and mosques are being built, old ones are being restored, and attendance at services is high. Most Georgians adhere to the Georgian Orthodox Church, one of the Eastern Orthodox churches (which include the Greek and Russian Orthodox Churches). Georgian liturgical music is particularly beautiful and the church's strong traditions of monasticism and fresco and icon art have also revived during the modern era. The church is a conservative and nationalist force in Georgian life.

The Armenian Apostolic Church was the first legal Christian church in the world, dating back to AD 301. It has followed a lonely, independent path separate from the Eastern Orthodox and Catholic churches. It belongs to the Oriental Orthodox churches, along with the Coptic Egyptian and Ethiopian churches. The Armenians have always been mobile as well as pious, and they have held onto a quarter of Old Jerusalem beside the Jews, the Muslims and other Christians since at least 1000 years ago.

Azerbaijan is the only Turkic country to follow Shia Islam, established there in the 16th century by the Safavid dynasty, but in contrast to its Shia neighbour Iran there is little fundamentalism in Azerbaijan. Shia Muslims consider the descendants of the Prophet Mohammed's son-in-law Ali to be the true bearers of Mohammed's message.

Some Abkhaz, Lezgins (in Azerbaijan) and Adjarans (in Georgia) follow mainstream Sunni Islam. The Yezidi Kurds living on the highlands around Mt Aragats in Armenia are among the last followers of the independent Yezidi religion in the Middle East, following an ancient mix of Gnosticism, mystic Islam and hints of the old Persian religion Zoroastrianism. Yezidis have leaders named sheiks who keep their holy books secret.

There have been Jewish communities living peacefully in Georgia and in the mountains of Azerbaijan for millennia, though many have emigrated to Israel since the end of the USSR.

It's hard to beat Kurban Said's *Ali and Nino* for a fictional look at the Caucasian dichotomies of nationality, religion and continent.

People in the Caucasus tend to identify with their religion, even if they don't attend churches or mosques. The old traditions of tying bits of cloth to wishing trees, visiting shrines and graves, and spending lavishly on funerals is pretty common everywhere, more so among rural Georgians than the urban sophisticates of Baku.

ENVIRONMENT

The different habitats of the Caucasus countries embrace deserts, glaciers, alpine, deciduous and semitropical forests, steppes, coastal wetlands and hundreds of endemic plant species. The region is considered a biodiversity hotspot, although many of its species (including 80 animals) are endangered.

Harsh Soviet industrialisation left scars all over the Caucasus; the post-industrial desolation of Azerbaijan's Abşeron Peninsula shows it clearly enough. Deforestation has been going on for millennia – the stark plains around Georgia's Davit Gareja monastic complex were once covered in woodlands – but was stepped up with the energy shortages of the 1990s. Throughout the region, fuel-wood collection and poaching are among the biggest threats to wildlife, along with illegal logging of the thick belts of beech, oak and hornbeam on the lower mountain slopes and larch, pine and spruce higher up. Armenia's Metsamor nuclear power station, which generates 40% of the country's energy, is to be decommissioned because it does not meet international safety standards, but it is to be replaced by a new nuclear plant built with Russian aid. For the future, it's perhaps not so encouraging that Azeri oil is by far the region's biggest global export.

Conservation movements were some of the first civic organisations to appear as a result of Gorbachev's 1980s *glasnost* reforms. In some ways the pressure has eased on the environment since the fall of the USSR – pesticides aren't used with such giddy abandon and some of the nastier polluters such as chemical plants have shut down.

The region has a growing network of national parks, nature reserves and other protected areas, now covering about 12% of Armenia, 8% of Azerbaijan and 6.6% of Georgia. Visitor infrastructure has been developed in some parks, especially in Georgia, with the aim of using tourism to help preserve these areas. Other reserves and parks are still only functioning at a skeletal level.

The reserves protect some rare and spectacular animal species, including the endangered Persian leopard, about 25 of which remain in places like Azerbaijan's Hirkan National Park and Armenia's Shikahogh and Khosrov Natures Reserves (one has also been spotted in Georgia's Vashlovani National Park). Numbers of the two threatened species of Caucasian tur (large mountain goats) are down to about 4000 for the eastern species and 6000 to 10,000 for the western one. Azerbaijan's Şirvan National Park protects the last significant population of the elegant little goitred gazelle (also called the Persian gazelle or ceyran) in Eurasia or Europe. The striped hyena is probably close to extinction in the Caucasus, although Tony Davidson reports seeing one not too far from Kazbegi in his great book *Bread and Ashes*.

The mountain areas are home to majestic birds such as the lammergeier (or bearded vulture) with its 2.5m wingspan, plus brown bears (600 of these remain in Georgia), wolves, lynx, deer, chamois and more. The Black Sea and Caspian coastlines are key summer and autumn migration corridors for many birds. Altogether over 370 birds have been identified in the region, including the endemic Caucasian snowcock.

The Caucasus Environmental NGO Network (www.cenn.org) is a good source of information and contacts on environmental activity in the region.

Many Caucasus drivers now convert their cars to run on natural gas. It burns cleaner than petrol, and is half the price.

On the Road

THIS IMAGE
NOT AVAILABLE
IN PICK & MIX

JOHN NOBLE *Coordinating Author*

I never cease to be amazed at the skill, love and time that medieval stone carvers must have put into their work, and Georgia is an absolute wonderland for any lover of beautiful old architecture. This church doorway is at Ananuri.

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IN PICK & MIX

DANIELLE SYSTERMANS

An incredible wonder of Azerbaijan is its sheer variety of landscapes. On this day I'd hiked in the bucolic oak woods of Altı Ağaç, found dozens of curious little fossils in the pink-striped Candycane Mountains, and now here I was staring out across Arizona-style badlands. All within 40km.

THIS IMAGE
NOT AVAILABLE
IN PICK & MIX

MICHAEL KOHN On this particular day, hitching through the Debed Canyon, I was picked up by an extended family that was transporting a convoy of cars to Yerevan from Tbilisi. After about 20 minutes of driving we stopped at a roadside *khoravats* joint and ordered up a feast of grilled meats and vegetables, plus vodka shots. Just another day on the road!

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