

Regional Directory

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ACCOMMODATION

The accommodation scene in the Caucasus countries has improved out of sight in the past few years. Genuinely comfortable new midrange hotels are sprouting all around the three countries, a burgeoning network of inexpensive homestays and guesthouses welcomes budget travellers (especially in Georgia and Armenia), and international top-end chains like Hyatt, Hilton and Marriott are setting up shop in all three capitals. Old

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PRACTICALITIES

- All three countries fall into DVD Region 5 (along with other ex-Soviet countries, Africa and a few Asian countries) and the predominant video format is SECAM.
- Electric power is 220 volts AC, 50Hz. Sockets are designed for European-style plugs with two round pins. Power cuts still happen, but with nothing like the frequency of a few years ago.
- All three countries use the metric system – see the Quick Reference page inside the front cover for conversion from imperial measurements.

Soviet hotels have nearly all closed or been totally rebuilt. The days are gone when your choices were limited to a smelly sanatorium or a crumbling concrete hotel with dodgy plumbing.

Sleeping recommendations in the larger cities in this book are divided into budget, midrange and top-end categories. Midrange means a typical room for two people for the equivalent of between US\$50 and US\$150 in Tbilisi, US\$50 and US\$200 in Baku and US\$80 to US\$200 in Yerevan. Outside the capitals accommodation prices plunge, and while the range of quality accommodation is much smaller, value for money is generally much better. A good midrange room, often in a brand-new hotel, won't cost you more than US\$100, and frequently a lot less.

Homestays, guesthouses, B&Bs and pensions in the three countries typically cost between US\$15 and US\$25 per person, often including a couple of meals, and these are the best option in small towns and rural areas – the hospitality is usually wonderful and it's a chance to get a taste of local life and sample some of the endless variety of Caucasian home recipes. Only occasionally will you have to resort to a dilapidated, dreary Soviet relic for budget accommodation.

Note: the air-conditioning icon, , is used in this book to denote accommodation places

that have air-con in at least some (not necessarily all) rooms.

B&Bs, Guesthouses & Homestays

These types of accommodation are people's homes – which could be a city apartment or a village house with a garden and animals – with a few rooms available for guests. In cities you get the occasional upmarket guesthouse with very comfortable, even luxurious, rooms and most of the facilities of a hotel. But most guesthouses, homestays and B&Bs are budget establishments, not luxurious but usually well cared for.

They may have dorm-style accommodation with several beds in each room, or private rooms, or a combination of the two. What most of them offer in common is a friendly welcome, good home-cooked meals and the opportunity to get a feel for local life. Owners are often more than willing, without being intrusive, to dispense local information, help you find guides and rent jeeps, or get the local marshrutka (minivan) driver to pick you up at the door when you leave.

The more popular of them are also very good places to meet other travellers. Bathrooms increasingly feature hot showers and Western-style toilets, though there are still some that don't. All in all, these places provide the perfect accommodation network for budget travellers, though for the moment they are less common in Azerbaijan than in the other two countries.

Camping

There are very few commercial campsites except for a few seaside or lakeside places that open for the summer school holidays. Those that do exist have few facilities besides a basic amenities block with cold water and maybe earth toilets. It's not always safe to camp just anywhere, so if you plan to pitch a tent get good information on local conditions and if you're near a village, ask if it's OK to camp there.

If you can ask permission to camp on someone's land, people are usually happy to oblige.

Hotels

Attractive, modern, midrange hotels – some even meriting the sobriquet 'boutique' – have sprung up all over the region, many of them on a refreshingly small scale with attentive,

friendly service. They range from Finnish-style wooden cottages in the woodlands of Azerbaijan to modern Art Nouveau mansions in Batumi. Some older hotels have been attractively renovated. Such places provide well-equipped, comfortable rooms (air-conditioned where necessary) and usually have a decent restaurant and probably a bar and a couple of leisure facilities. Staff are increasingly professional and amiable. The grumpy old Soviet service ethic has pretty much gone the way of Intourist.

The few still-dowdy old Soviet hotels that haven't been renovated provide alternative budget accommodation in some towns. Only a few hotels are still used as housing for refugees.

International-standard top-end hotels from the likes of Radisson, Hyatt and Marriott are generally restricted to the three capitals.

Rental Accommodation

In Yerevan renting an apartment is quite a common practice among visitors as a cost-cutting tactic.

In the peak summer season, around US\$60 a day will net you a conveniently located two- or three-bedroom apartment.

Short-term rentals are harder to find in other cities that don't have Yerevan's summer influx from the Armenian diaspora. Some apartments are available in Baku from US\$40 a night but you usually need to stay at least a few days.

Sanatoriums

A great many Soviet sanatoriums were built in the days when an entire Ukrainian metallurgical plant would be bussed in for a week of regimented spa treatments, local feasts and compulsory toasts of *druzhiba narodov* (friendship of peoples, a central Soviet slogan of unity). Some were run by Soviet ministries as retreats for the upper echelons or for favoured artists and members of the writers, cinematographers and musicians unions.

Almost any kind of mildly health-giving environmental factor could serve as an excuse to build a few sanatoriums – the fresh air of the Black Sea or Caspian coasts, the thick forests of Armenia's Dilijan area, the iron-bearing sand of Ureki, or any kind of mineral-water spring.

Today some sanatoriums lie derelict in forest valleys across the Caucasus. A few soldier