



population per sq km



Georgia, Armenia & Azerbaijan Today

Unneighbourly Conduct

The consequences of post-Soviet conflicts still loom large. Armenia and Azerbaijan are as far as ever from agreement over Nagorno-Karabakh, the Armenian-majority region within Azerbaijan that has been de facto independent since the Karabakh War of 1989 to 1994. Occasional skirmishes still break out along the Armenia–Azerbaijan border and the ceasefire line, and Azerbaijan's recent hike in military spending may suggest that it intends one day to regain at least part of its lost territory.

Karabakh also bedevils any efforts at rapprochement between Armenia and its western neighbour Turkey, who have long been divided over the early-20th-century genocide issue. Turkey is Azerbaijan's firmest ally and refuses to normalise relations with Armenia before the issue is settled.

Any prospect of Georgia coming to terms with its breakaway regions, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, all but vanished with the 2008 South Ossetia War, when Russia briefly invaded Georgia then recognised the independence of these two territories, stationing thousands of troops in them. Many Georgians fear that Russia is waiting for an opportunity to impose its will yet more strongly. Meanwhile most of the hundreds of thousands of refugees from these conflicts within Azerbaijan and Georgia remain in temporary accommodation of varying degrees of squalor.

The Rich and the Poor

All three countries have made big economic strides since the desperate 1990s, especially Azerbaijan which is riding a boom based on exporting its Caspian Sea oil to the West. Economic progress in Georgia and Armenia was knocked by the world recession of 2008–09 (and in Georgia's case the 2008 war), but has made a comeback of sorts – although Armenia was still judged the world's second-worst economy by *Forbes* magazine in 2011.

Income per head 2010

- » **Georgia**
US\$2700 (year
2000: US\$673)
- » **Armenia**
US\$3090 (year
2000: US\$613)
- » **Azerbaijan**
US\$5180 (year
2000: US\$636)

Dos & Don'ts

- » In religious buildings, covered shoulders are obligatory; long skirts for women, long trousers for men. Headscarves for women demonstrate respect.
- » Public kissing and physical affection are frowned on and will offend near religious buildings.

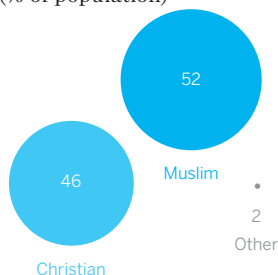
- » Shorts are widely considered very odd: in Azerbaijan shorts on men can actually cause offence anywhere except central Baku.
- » Short skirts are rare, especially in rural areas.
- » Women don't have to cover their hair in Muslim Azerbaijan.

Films

- The Loneliest Planet** (2011) Backpacking duo go awry in the Caucasus (dir: Julia Loktev)
- Here** (2011) Couple discovers Armenia (dir: Braden King)
- The Legacy** (2006) French travellers entangled in a Georgian blood feud (dir: Gela Babluani)

belief systems

(% of population)



if Georgia, Armenia & Azerbaijan were 100 people



Throughout the region there is a gulf between those who gain from the new economies (typically well-educated, well-connected urbanites working in the private sector, along with powerful bureaucrats and politicians) and those who have been left behind (the older, the unqualified, government employees and those in the countryside). Impressive new buildings, glitzy shops and flashy cars in the cities do nothing to help farmers subsisting on the produce of their own fields. Many older folk look back nostalgically to the late Soviet era when there was a job and security for everyone.

Free and Fair?

Georgia has the strongest democratic credentials, although Mikheil Saakashvili, who led the Rose Revolution of 2003, is often criticised by opponents for too much top-down decision-making, and Georgia has been criticised by international bodies for using excessive force against political demonstrators. Georgia has certainly attacked corruption and crime head-on: almost its entire police force was replaced soon after the Rose Revolution.

Armenia still suffers the fallout of its 2008 presidential election, won by Serzh Sargsyan but largely condemned as fraudulent by international observers. Yerevan sees plenty of protests in favour of democratic reforms and greater press freedom.

Political freedoms remain restricted in Azerbaijan, where ex-Communist boss Heydar Əliyev died in 2003 but is still revered as the 'National Leader' and was seamlessly succeeded by his son İlham. But Azerbaijan's economy is booming and democratic dissent is thin on the ground.

While Georgia was ranked 64th best of 182 countries in Transparency International's 2011 corruption league table, Armenia stood 129th and Azerbaijan 143rd. In the 2011 press freedom rankings of Freedom House, the three countries stood respectively 118th, 146th and 171st.

LOCAL SENSITIVITIES

It's not a good idea to come out with strong opinions on political issues unless you know someone pretty well. Locals can, unsurprisingly, be very sensitive about these matters.

Greetings

- » A handshake is the normal greeting between men.
- » Women generally don't shake hands, though if foreigners don't follow this it won't be an insult.
- » Friends (of whatever sex) normally give each other a peck on the cheek.

Books

- Bread and Ashes** Tony Anderson walking the Caucasus
Georgia: In the Mountains of Poetry Peter Nasmyth roaming
Azerbaijan with Excursions to Georgia Mark Elliott
Rediscovering Armenia Brady Kiesling and Raffi Kojian

Etiquette

- » When visiting someone's home, take a gift, and offer to remove your shoes.
- » Don't be ashamed to say you can't eat or drink any more.
- » If invited to a dinner or overnight stay, tactfully offer some money, but don't insist.

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