



Georgia

📍995 / POP 4 MILLION

Includes ➔

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Best Places to Eat

- ➔ Cafe Littera (p49)
- ➔ Shavi Lomi (p49)
- ➔ Old Boulevard (p80)
- ➔ Pheasant's Tears (p105)
- ➔ Mukhatsakatukha (p50)

Best Places to Stay

- ➔ Rooms Hotel (p91)
- ➔ Rooms Hotel (p47)
- ➔ Zeta Camp (p93)
- ➔ Skadaveli Guesthouse (p46)
- ➔ Roza Shukvani's Guesthouse (p84)

Why Go?

From its green valleys spread with vineyards to its old churches and watchtowers perched in fantastic mountain scenery, Georgia (Saqartvelo, საქართველო) is one of the most beautiful countries on earth and a marvellous canvas for walkers, horse riders, cyclists, skiers, rafters and travellers of every kind. Equally special are its proud, high-spirited, cultured people: Georgia claims to be the birthplace of wine, and this is a place where guests are considered blessings and hospitality is the very stuff of life.

A deeply complicated history has given Georgia a wonderful heritage of architecture and arts, from cave cities to ancient cathedrals to the inimitable canvases of Pirosmiani. Tbilisi, the capital, is still redolent of an age-old Eurasian crossroads. But this is also a country moving forward in the 21st century, with spectacular contemporary buildings, a minimal crime rate and ever-improving facilities for the visitors who are a growing part of its future.

When to Go

- ➔ The ideal seasons in most of the country are from mid-May to early July, and early September to mid-October, when it's generally warm and sunny.
- ➔ July and August can be uncomfortably humid in the lowlands, with temperatures reaching 40°C. But this is an excellent time to be in the mountains, and it's high season on the Black Sea.
- ➔ Best months for hiking in the Great Caucasus are June to September.
- ➔ Early autumn brings the festive wine harvest in Kakheti, from about 20 September to 20 October.
- ➔ The eastern half of Georgia often suffers below-freezing temperatures between December and February.

FAST FACTS

Currency

Lari (GEL)

Language

Georgian

Emergencies

☎112

Visas

More than 90 nationalities need no visa for stays of up to one year. Those who need visas can apply online and receive them by email.

Resources

- ➔ **Agency of Protected Areas** (www.apa.gov.ge)
- ➔ **Civil.ge** (www.civil.ge)
- ➔ **Georgia** (<http://georgia.travel>)
- ➔ **Georgian Journal** (www.georgianjournal.ge)
- ➔ **Georgian National Museum** (<http://museum.ge>)
- ➔ **Georgian Wanderers** (www.facebook.com/groups/Georgianwanderers)

Exchange Rates

| | | |
|------------------|-------|----------|
| Australia | A\$1 | 1.73 GEL |
| Canada | C\$1 | 1.72 GEL |
| Euro zone | €1 | 2.60 GEL |
| Japan | ¥100 | 2.02 GEL |
| NZ | NZ\$1 | 1.61 GEL |
| UK | UK£1 | 3.54 GEL |
| USA | US\$1 | 2.41 GEL |

Daily Costs

- ➔ **Budget accommodation** per person 25 GEL
- ➔ **Two-course meal** 15–20 GEL
- ➔ **Museum** 3 GEL
- ➔ **Beer** per bottle 2–3 GEL
- ➔ **100km marshrutka ride** 8 GEL

TBILISI

☎32 / POP 1.1 MILLION

Tbilisi (თბილისი) has come a long way since the Rose Revolution of 2003 ousted the post-Soviet Shevardnadze government.

To Tbilisi's eternal charms of a dramatic setting in the deep valley of the swift Mtkvari River, picturesque architecture, an ever-lively arts and cultural scene, and the welcoming Georgian lifestyle have been added a whole new 21st-century dimension of inviting cafes and restaurants serving ever-better food, up-to-date lodgings from backpacker hostels to international five-stars, funky bars and clubs, spruced-up museums, galleries, parks, plazas and whole streets, modernised transport and a sprinkling of eye-catching contemporary architecture. All of which make it a much easier, and more fun, city to visit and live in than it was less than a decade ago.

But the old Tbilisi is still very much here too. The Old Town, at the narrowest part of the valley, is still redolent of an ancient Eurasian crossroads, with its winding lanes, balconied houses, leafy squares and handsome churches, all overlooked by the 17-centuries-old Narikala Fortress. Neighbourhoods not far from the centre still retain a village-like feel with their narrow streets, small shops and community atmosphere. Small traders still clog up the pavements around metro stations selling fruit, vegetables, cheese and nuts fresh from the countryside.

The bus stations are still rooted in about the 1930s, too – but you can't have everything. Modern and ancient, Tbilisi remains the beating heart of the South Caucasus and should not be missed by any visitor.

History

Evidence of settlement in the area stretches back more than 6000 years, but Georgians like the legend that King Vakhtang Gorgasali of Kartli founded Tbilisi in the 5th century AD. The story runs that when the king was hunting, a wounded deer fell into a hot sulphur spring here and was miraculously healed. In fact, Gorgasali won the already-existing town back from the Persians, and moved his capital here from Mtskheta. But there's no doubt that it was Tbilisi's magnificent hot springs that gave it its name (Georgian *tbili* means warm).

The city's location, commanding a crossing of the Mtkvari River on age-old trade routes between Asia and Europe, has always been prized. In 645 Arabs captured Tbilisi and kept it as an emirate for four centuries, but in 1122 King David the Builder (David Aghmashenebeli) made it capital of his united Georgia, building a palace near the Metekhi Church. David invited Armenian