

Welcome to the Caucasus

Breathtaking natural beauty, deeply hospitable people, quaint rural backwaters and cosmopolitan capitals make the South Caucasus region a thrilling, offbeat discovery.

Cultural Cornucopia

The region is smaller than the UK yet takes in three distinct countries (two Christian, one Islamic), three breakaway territories and at least 16 local languages. This is a cultural crossroads where Europe meets Asia and tomorrow mingles with yesterday. Russian, Persian, Turkish and other influences have been absorbed into proudly distinctive local cultures where social attitudes remain traditional, with family networks supreme. Travel weaves you between rapidly modernising capitals and slow-paced countryside where most families still live off their land.

A Feast for the Senses

Astonishing natural beauty is in your face throughout the Great Caucasus, soaring mountains that stride from the Black Sea to the Caspian in a sequence of dramatic peaks fronted by green river valleys and quaint, remote villages. The Lesser Caucasus and Talysh ranges have glories of their own, while at lower altitudes terrain incorporates idyllic patchworks of farms and woodland plus arid semi-deserts and rocky gorges. Savour all this with deep-rooted hospitality, fresh fruity cuisine and wines from the world's original home of viniculture.

The Great Outdoors

The mountain regions are strung with spectacular walking and riding routes with ruined castles, towers and ancient churches often perched in achingly picturesque locations. Each country has great day-trip hikes but high in the Great Caucasus, Georgia's Svaneti, Kazbegi and Tusheti regions are particularly ideal for longer-distance village-to-village treks. Each of the nations has ski resorts. Rafting and paragliding are possible in Georgia where climbers can scale Mt Kazbek and other 5000m peaks. Delve underground in Armenia's many caves, or explore Azerbaijan's Caspian hinterland where natural curiosities include mud volcanoes and fire phenomena.

Food for the Mind

Antique forts, monasteries, mosques, churches and excavations pepper the region. History buffs can delight in disentangling their Bagratids from their Bolsheviks. The cities boast well-presented museums, splendid galleries and a rich theatrical heritage. Tourism infrastructure can seem modest by European standards but linguistic and logistic challenges help push visitors to interact with friendly locals – ideal for those who want to go well beyond the beaten path.



Why I Love Georgia, Armenia & Azerbaijan

By Alex Jones, Writer

In 1995 I stumbled off a train into a Tbilisi still bruised by the recent civil war and with barely functioning basic amenities. Northern Armenia hadn't fully recovered from the 1988 earthquake and Baku had yet to show a glimmer of the future oil boom. Yet, while poverty seemed to reign in each country, I was constantly enveloped by the most extraordinary hospitality. Despite unsolved conflicts, I've watched the Caucasian states transform themselves beyond belief in the last 20 years. But disarming hospitality remains a core defining feature of each of the three remarkable nations that comprise this ever-fascinating region.

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Above: Khor Virap Monastery (p175), Armenia, with Mt Ararat (Ağrı Dağ, Turkey) in the background