



# Georgia

The ancient land of the Colchis, where Jason sought the Golden Fleece, Georgia has lived in myth and legend for centuries. Mostly mountainous, Georgia's lush lowlands and sunny Black Sea coast round out the character of the country – demanding and uncompromising, but also welcoming and abundant.

The green hills and the fertile valleys have inspired in travelers throughout the centuries the desire to remain, living easily off the fruits of the land, tending their sheep and drinking the deep-flavored wines crushed from their own grapes. In the end, the indigenous Georgian people have prevailed over a parade of rich and powerful nations that have tried at various times to claim their territory.

Today Georgia is one of the travel world's undiscovered jewels – a fabulously beautiful country that claims to be the place where the wine grape originated; that invented one of only a few world alphabets; that has a population with a tendency to shower hospitality on guests, and a government that has recently made huge strides in infrastructure improvement, like new airports, better roads and visa-free status for U.S. and EU visitors.

## **People and Place**

The **peaks of the Caucasus** mark the northern borders of the small country of Georgia. To the west lie the **subtropical shores** of the Black Sea, and to the south the hills of the **Lesser Caucasus** rise from the floor of **Georgia's central lowland**. The Caucasus is a **geologically active** chain of mountains that is slowly being thrust upward as the Arabian tectonic plate nudges into the Eurasian plate.

This movement is responsible for the hot springs that the area is famous for, as well as for the highest peaks – which are volcanic cones – and the region's periodic earthquakes.

Russia borders Georgia on the north, and encompasses the Caucasus' highest mountain, **Mt. Elbrus**. On the south lies Turkey, Georgia's Black Sea neighbor, and to the southeast and east are Armenia and Azerbaijan, the other countries of the southern Caucasus. In recent years, Georgia's roads have improved greatly, shaving time off the wildly scenic drives through the mountains.

The population of Georgia numbers just under **five million**. In the early days of independence, many Georgians emigrated to find better job opportunities, and the population has since remained less than what it was during the Soviet era. Notable people connected to Georgia are, of course, **Joseph Stalin**, whose real name was Iosep Dzhugashvili; famed choreographer **George Balanchine**, born Giorgi Balanchivadze; and the Olympic luger, **Nodar Kumaritashvili**, who was killed during a training run at the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver, Canada.

### **Climate and Clothing**

Protected from northern winds by the Caucasus range, western Georgia is warmed by the **damp winds** that blow in from the **Black Sea**. As the land rises to the plateaus of eastern Georgia, the climate becomes semi-arid and continental, with **hot, dry summers and cold winters**. Up in the mountains it is always cooler than down in the lowlands. Late spring and early fall are the best times to travel here. Rain is minimal. Spring (April-May) and early fall (September-October) are the best months to travel here.

Here are the average low/high temperatures in the cities you will visit in October (°F):

Tbilisi: high 40's / mid 60's

Kazbegi: mid 30's / mid 50's

Signagi: mid 40's / mid 60's

Georgia is a modern country, and its youth can be seen sporting all the **latest European fashions**. The older generations dress more conservatively; don't expect to see shorts except on the shores of the Black Sea or in the capital. **Women who want to enter churches should not wear sleeveless or low-cut blouses, and will need to wear a headscarf.** Dress for **hot weather** if you are traveling in the summer, but bring **layers** for evenings in the mountains. If your trip is mid-winter, bring a selection of clothing for cold and windy mountain weather and for the warmer seacoast.

Weather is always unpredictable – it is best to check a weather reporting service close to the time of your departure for the best prediction of how the weather will be during your travels.

### **History**

Georgia's **mountainous geography** and its location between the landlocked seas, the Caspian and the Black, have dictated its history. Georgia's strip of central lowlands has long been an **important link** between East and West. In modern times, this corridor presents a logical route for **oil pipelines** from the Caspian region. It is also a fabulously beautiful country with fantastic diversity – mountains, semi-arid steppe and seacoast. It's not surprising that the ancient **Greeks, Romans, Scythians, Persians, Turks, Russians and Soviets** have all quarreled bitterly over the South Caucasus region, but the **indigenous Georgians** populating and defending the mountains and their passes are still here today.

Archaeologists have unearthed traces of human settlements around Georgia's Black Sea coast that date back to **100,000 BC**. By the early Bronze Age, around 3000 BC, the metalwork from the Georgian area was well known in the Middle East. Toward the end of this era, an Indo-European group invaded the western Caucasus, strongly influencing the indigenous culture. The resulting culture then assimilated many pre-Hittite people fleeing from Anatolia; these people are considered the **first Georgians**.

The mountainsides and the hilltops of Georgia are dotted with **fortresses and stone fortifications**, evidence of the harsh battles and the daily difficulties of the Georgian tribesmen. As Georgian history

progressed, empires large and small struggled for sovereignty in its hills and valleys. Christian Rome and Byzantium fought against Muslim Persia here for centuries, with Georgia and Armenia won over by the Christians and Azerbaijan by the Muslims. In the 7th century AD, the Persians conquered the area, and immediately began struggling with the Seljuk Turks.

Georgia's "Golden Age" of art, literature and architecture stretched from 1089, when **David the Builder** became king, until around 1220. After the death of his great-grand-daughter **Queen Tamar**, the Mongols began making forays into the area. Under repeated attacks, the temporarily unified kingdom disintegrated into feuding princedoms.

After the fall of Byzantine Constantinople in 1453, the **Ottoman Turks** began gaining power, and split the south Caucasus between themselves and the Persian Safavid Empire. When the Safavid Empire collapsed in the 1720s, the Ottomans filled the power vacuum. By this time, **Peter the Great** of Russia had realized the area's importance as a trade and military route, and began sending his troops to skirmish with the Ottomans and the Persians over control of the lowlands.

For the next two hundred years, **Russia, the Ottoman Turks and Persia** battled in the Caucasus, with Russia finally subduing the area in the late 1800s. Russia's tactics of burning crops, looting and destroying villages, and deporting their people made it an unpopular overlord.

After the 1917 **Bolshevik Revolution**, Georgia was assimilated into the Soviet Union as an "Autonomous Republic", and its produce, wines and wool were redistributed by the USSR's Central Planning Committee. **Georgian independence** was restored at last in May, 1991.

**Eduard Shevardnadze**, former Soviet Foreign Minister and key player in the dissolution of the USSR, was elected President in 1995. In spite of his earlier reputation as a corruption-fighter, by 2003 his regime was accused of widespread corruption and toppled in the largely peaceful Rose Revolution. **Mikheil Saakashvili's** election in 2004 brought market reforms, a move toward more democratization and more interaction with the U.S. (Saakashvili received his LL.M from Columbia Law School in 1994.)

In August of 2008, Georgian military action in South Ossetia resulted in a Russian military response in the breakaway areas as well as parts of undisputed Georgian territory. Russia eventually withdrew its troops from much of the territory they had occupied, but soon unilaterally recognized **Abkhazia and South Ossetia** as independent nations. Tensions remain between Georgia and Russia along their shared border.

In June 2014, Georgia signed an **agreement formally establishing closer ties with the EU**. In 2016, the Georgian Dream coalition, led by Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili, won a second term in office in Parliamentary elections.

For recommended books on Georgia, see: <http://www.mircorp.com/plan-your-trip/reading-lists/>

### **Language**

Because of Georgia's mountainous terrain, its people lived for centuries with little contact among tribes. Consequently, three different though related languages evolved here from a common ancestor, **Old Kartvelian**. Old Kartvelian itself is not related to any language except its own group of Southern Caucasus languages.

Modern Georgian is now spoken throughout the country, although at home many people still speak their own particular branch of the language. The beautifully curling **Georgian script** is **one of only a few world alphabets**, and evolved around the 5th century BC, possibly influenced by Aramaic.

### **Food and Drink**

Books have been written about Georgian hospitality and the abundance and flavor of its foods and wines. Georgians believe that **travelers are sent by God**, and they treat them accordingly. A Georgian

feast, or *supra*, is a cultural and culinary experience that can include dozens of dishes and countless toasts. The table is covered with plates of delicacies – chicken in crushed walnut sauce, *katchapouri* (a savory cheese pie), puff pastries, little meat dumplings called *khinkali*, salads and marinated vegetables, just to name a few. A large feast will have a sort of toastmaster, called a *tamada*, who is charged not only with toasting and inviting others to toast, but with telling stories and jokes and sometimes leading songs.

**Fruits, vegetables, nuts, grains and grapes** all grow beautifully in southwest Georgia's Mediterranean climate, and its food is characteristically **rich and varied**. **Lamb** and **mutton** are favorites, but **pork** and **chicken** are featured in many dishes. A Georgian table will have numerous room-temperature salads and vegetable dishes displayed at the beginning of a meal, and the hostess will bring more as the evening wears on. Hot dishes, such as roast suckling pig, *mtsvadi* (shish-kebob), *chanakhi* (baked whole tomatoes with greens, eggplant, lamb and peppers) and soups may be presented at any time to supplement the room-temperature dishes.

At the market you may buy **churchkhela**, a candy made by stringing walnuts and dipping them in a hot grape mixture, then hanging them to dry. The various breads are crusty and baked in clay ovens. **Katchapuri**, cheese pies like pizzas without the tomato sauce, are baked in every home, but the bell-shaped meat dumplings called *khinkali* can usually be found only in special restaurants called *sakhinkle*.

### **Shopping**

The famous Georgian dagger, or *khanjali*, is an example of fine Georgian **metalwork**. Traditional **winehorns**, called **khantsy**, are made from the horns of mountain rams, and can be filled with Georgian wines, which are an excellent value here. Georgian ceramics, embroidery, carpets, jewelry and clothing make authentic gifts and keepsakes. All of these (except the wine) can be found in art galleries or tourist shops. Most of Georgia's outdoor markets sell food rather than handicrafts, but can be fascinating nonetheless.

**Antiques must be accompanied by an export license from the Ministry of Culture** to be allowed out of the country. Official tourist shops or your MIR guide can help you with these requirements if you find you must buy older rugs or icons.

### **Currency**

The currency of Georgia is the *lari* (GEL). One *lari* equals 100 *tetri*.

**1 U.S. Dollar = 2.42 lari**, as of March 29, 2018. See: <http://www.xe.com/ucc/> or any universal currency converter for updated exchange rates. **Make sure the bills you bring to exchange are crisp, new and unmarked, or they will be rejected at the exchange point.**

**ATMs:** ATMs are widespread in Tbilisi.

**Credit Cards:** Accepted in upscale hotels, restaurants and shops, and all banks in Tbilisi. Away from Tbilisi, it is better to have cash.

**Travelers Checks: Are impossible to use in Georgia;** don't bring them.

**Reminder: Contact your credit card/debit card company** a week or so before you depart the U.S. to let them know you will be traveling in Georgia. This will help prevent your funds from being frozen.

### **Communications**

**Mobile Phones:** Mobile coverage is good in Georgia, but may be more sparse in the countryside, especially in the northwest.

**Buying/renting a cell phone in Georgia** is not recommended. Purchasing a cell phone is possible, but is rather expensive. Your best option is to bring a **compatible GSM cell phone** from the USA, especially when visiting several countries in Europe.

If you will be in Georgia for a while, it might make sense to buy a **local SIM card** to use in your GSM phone, as long as it is unlocked.

**Internet Access:** There are several Internet cafes in Tbilisi. Your hotel will have wifi access in the rooms.

**WiFi:** Websites such as this one <http://www.hotspot-locations.com/> can help you locate up-to-date info on fee/free WiFi.

**Special Notes For Georgia:** The two separatist regions, **Abkhazia** (in northwest Georgia, on the coast) and **South Ossetia** (along the Russian border in the middle of the country) have experienced periods of civil war and unrest since Georgian independence. The Abkhazian people consider themselves a separate Caucasian ethnic group and the Ossetians are an Iranian ethnic group said to be descended from a Scythian tribe. Both regions have had close ties with Moscow, and have had independent aspirations for many years. Since the fighting in August 2008, the U.S. State Department advises “to **exercise caution** when traveling in the mountainous areas of northern Georgia bordering the Russian Federation.”

**Visa & Passport:** A passport is required for U.S. citizens to enter Georgia. Georgia has been visa-free for Americans for several years.

**Air Travel:** Georgia's national airlines, **Georgian Airways**, is a **member of IATA** (International Air Transport Association), whose Operational Safety Audit (IOSA) program is an internationally recognized and accepted evaluation system designed to assess the operational management and control systems of an airline.

Normally, MIR uses international airlines, such as Lufthansa, Austrian or Turkish, to fly people into or out of Georgia. The airport in Tbilisi is new and modern. There is also an international airport at Batumi on the Black Sea, serviced by Turkish Air with direct flights to Istanbul.

**Customs Regulations:** Georgian customs sometimes enforce strict regulations about the import/export of **alcohol, tobacco, jewelry, art and antiques**. The Department of Expertise and Evaluation of the **Ministry of Culture** must issue a license for any valuables such as artwork, antiques, jewelry, or paintings. Speak with your local guide if you have any questions about your purchases.

There is **no limit on the amount of currency** you can bring into Georgia, but if you bring in large sums, it's recommended that you declare it. Take note: if you take more currency out than you declared on your way in, you will be required to show that you obtained the currency legally.

**Cultural Tips:** It is acceptable for both men and women to **kiss each other on the cheek in public**. Women shake hands less often than men do. As a rule, the closer the relationship between two people, the closer they stand to each other.

**Electricity:** Electricity in Georgia is 220 volts at 50Hertz. Outlets generally take a plug with two round pins.

**Health regulations:** There are no health warnings or inoculations required to visit Georgia at this time. It's always wise to check with the U.S. Centers for Disease Control before you go. <http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/destinations/traveler/none/georgia>

### **Interesting Facts about Georgia**

- Some Georgians do not toast with **beer** – it is reserved for toasting enemies.

- Georgians call themselves *Kartveli-ebi*, a name derived from the **pagan god Kartlos**, father of all Georgians. The Western European name for the Georgian people may come from the word *Gurj*, which the Arab world calls them, rather than from St. George, the country's patron saint.
- The furry grey Caucasian Shepherd is an ancient breed of dog, bred to guard herds of sheep and goats. It is said that they are too proud and arrogant to do normal dog-like things, such as chasing sticks.
- George Balanchine, celebrated choreographer and co-founder of the New York City Ballet, was born Giorgi Balanchivadze in St. Petersburg, the son of a Georgian father and a Russian mother.
- In the mountain region of Khevsureti, people sometimes speak to each other **in verse**.
- The **special taste of homemade Kakhetian wine** is caused in part by fermenting and aging it in clay vessels called *qvevris*, which are buried in the ground. In traditional Georgian homes, the **birth of a baby boy** is marked by burying a *qvevri* of new wine, which is unearthed and drunk only on the boy's wedding day.
- A small population of Georgians concentrated in villages on the shores of the Black Sea speaks a language called **Pontic Greek**, a form of Greek that more closely resembles Ancient Greek than does the language spoken in modern-day Greece.

**For more information on Georgia, go to:**

<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/index.html>

and

<https://travel.state.gov/content/passports/en/country/georgia.html>

**The Embassy of the United States of America in Georgia**

We suggest registering your travel dates with the U.S. Embassy in Georgia. See <https://step.state.gov/step/> for details.

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