CAUCASUS GEORGIA

Birds, Ancient Chants and Wine

September 23 – October 9, 2027



A medieval tower in Svaneti, Greater Caucasus Range © Rafael Gálvez

The ancient nation of Georgia in the South Caucasus is legendary for its copious “feast and wine” hospitality, its otherworldly chanting traditions, and for one of the most prominent bottlenecks for migratory birds. The Republic of Georgia lies in a region with a diversity of habitats ranging from semi-deserts to subtropical forests, bisected by rugged mountain ranges between the Black and Caspian Seas, and offering rich natural history and cultural experiences.

During the fall season, when grapes are harvested in the valleys and the year’s vintage is drawn from earthen “qvevri,” more than a million birds of prey are counted along the coast. Georgia offers a broad assortment of Eurasian species, regional specialties and others found nowhere else. It is also a place of endemic language and culture, with a bountiful musical heritage deeply seated in the past. This multi-themed departure is geared for those interested in experiencing stunning landscapes, a spectacular migration, and plenty of food and beverage in a rustic and welcoming setting; accommodation in excellent three-star hotels throughout.



The tour starts in the country's prime wine region, east of the capital where we will enjoy a traditional Georgian feast and wine, and some leisurely birding in order to acclimate. After we have explored the arid and vast habitats east and south of Tbilisi for a couple of days, we will head west towards the slopes of Adjara, along the Black Sea. We will visit sites near Batumi where numerous Short-toed, Booted, Steppe, and both spotted eagles are tallied. These are fantastic sites for birds of prey in general, including kites and harriers, while the surrounding region turns up a diversity of shorebirds, terns and gulls, such as Armenian, Slender-billed and Pallas's. Yelkouan Shearwaters may be visible offshore, while the possibilities for songbirds on the coast include Thrush Nightingale and Siberian Stonechat.



Lesser Spotted Eagles migrating © Ami Ben-Dov

Continuing into the highlands, we will visit Svaneti where mountains shelter fortified hamlets with clusters of medieval towers. We will be treated to a rich and energetic chanting tradition that echoes the daunting terrain. Historians wrote of ancient Greek armies arriving to western Georgia, Colchis – the "Land of the Golden Fleece," and shivering at haunting chants from Caucasian warriors resonating down the gorges. Svaneti long served as protectorate for Georgian treasures, and still to this day, the museum is packed with 10th century religious manuscripts and icons, ancient coins, and Bronze Age mining tools and weapons.

We will spend time in the Greater and Lesser Caucasus ranges, surrounded by stunning snow-covered peaks and dramatic vistas in search of both Caucasian and Caspian snowcocks, the endemic Caucasian Grouse, Güldenstadt's Redstart, Alpine Accentor and Lammergeier. Mountain passes may grant us Mountain Chiffchaff, Krüper's Nuthatch and Fire-fronted Serin. Lakes and wetlands may host Great White and Dalmatian pelicans and large numbers of waterfowl including Velvet Scoter. To the south and east, landscapes will grow increasingly drier. Carved out of the cliffs, the medieval cave settlements of Vardzia and Gareji will blend into the semi-desert as we look for Western Rock Nuthatches, Calandra Lark, Tawny Pipit, Pied Wheatear, Egyptian Vulture and Imperial Eagle.



Gergeti Trinity Church, Kazbegi © John Graham

On special evenings during this tour, we will enjoy the renowned Georgian table tradition, treated to a variety of authentic dishes and the best of regional wines, hosted by a toastmaster and accompanied by local song. By combining birds, music, and the rich cultural heritage of Georgia, this multi-themed program assures a travel experience unlike any other.

September 23, Day 1: International Flight Tbilisi

Participants should arrive into Tbilisi, Georgia, Shota Rustaveli International Airport (airport code TBS) no later than 4:00 pm on September 24th. Most flights from the United States will depart the USA for Tbilisi, Georgia on September 23 (Day 1), arriving at different times on September 24 (Day 2). Flights into Tbilisi from the United States typically arrive late at night or very early in the morning.

VENT will be happy to assist with additional lodging arrangements and transfers should you choose to arrive prior to September 24.

NIGHT: Aboard aircraft in transit to Tbilisi

September 24, Day 2: Arrive in Tbilisi

Tbilisi is the capital of Georgia. Upon arrival in Tbilisi and clearing customs and immigration, you will be transferred to our hotel in the city. Early this evening we will meet for a group welcome and introduction followed by wine, dinner and a brief introductory presentation.

During the 5th century, the Georgian King Vakhtang Gorgasali was hunting outside of Mtskheta when a Ring-necked Pheasant flew from under cover. The king sent his Peregrine Falcon after the pheasant and the falcon caught its prey. However, both birds tumbled into a spring of hot water and died. That event and the discovery of thermal springs at that site impressed the king so much that he founded a settlement known as Tbilisi – translated as warm place. Soon thereafter it grew to become the capital city of Georgia and has remained a center of trade and conflict for centuries. Despite having been raided countless times by various invaders through the ages, it survives today as a modern hub of the South Caucasus.

Nevertheless, the historic downtown area of Old Tbilisi is full of winding cobblestone streets, small shops and restaurants, as well as the many public museums, churches, synagogues, and mosques that underscore the diversity of this unique country.

NIGHT: Old Meidan Hotel, Tbilisi



Montagu's Harrier © Peter Csonka

September 25, Day 3: Grape Harvest, Winery and Supra

This morning, we will do some birding as we head eastward towards Georgia's prime wine region. We may choose to stop for migrants at any of the preserves outside of the capital or along the Gombori Pass. We will also stop at historical sites, including ancient monuments and churches, to learn more about Georgian history before reaching the family-owned winery where we will have our first *supra* – or traditional Georgian feast.

Continued discoveries of grape seeds and vine remnants thousands of years old, sealed within ancient clay vessels, have reinforced the notion that Georgia played a high position in the origins of viticulture. Georgians have taken pride in their winemaking for many generations. Mention of sophisticated winemaking practices in Ancient Georgia can be found in the writings of Homer and Apollonius of Rhodes. It is even said that the unique Georgian alphabet is modeled after the shape of the vine's curled offshoots.

At the family-owned Georgian vineyard and winery, we may stroll along the vines in a beautiful valley as migratory birds continue their southward movements. We may pause for some birding, and for some leisurely grape picking. We will also visit the winery and learn about the Georgian winemaking process and sample some wine. The tradition calls for handcrafting wines that are fermented and aged in clay vessels – or *qvevri*. Georgia boasts hundreds of endemic grape

varietals, yet most westerners are not familiar with any. Here we may have an opportunity to savor the bold *Saperavi*, or black table wine with deep fruity character, or perhaps the full-bodied *Shavkapito* with its gentle aromas. For those interested in lighter offerings, the renowned *Rkatsiteli* has a brighter citrus flavor, while a sparkling *Chinuri* may be offered to liven the moment. For lunch we will be treated to a fantastic feast, a Georgian *supra* hosted by our local toastmaster or *tamada*, at a table heaping with regional delicacies and wine. After enjoying an afternoon of feast, wine and music, we will return to Tbilisi for an afternoon's rest, before a light dinner.

NIGHT: Old Meidan Hotel, Tbilisi




Vineyard in Kakheti. Left photo © John Graham; right photo © Pheasant's Tears




Clay vessels and a feast at a family cellar © John Graham



Pied Wheatear (left) and Eastern Black-eared Wheatear (right) © Ecotours Wildlife Holidays

September 26, Day 4: Jandari Lake, David Gareji

From Tbilisi we will head east towards a vast semi-arid steppe region with rocky outcrops, shallow lakes and riverine forests. First, we will visit Jandari Lake at 950 ft. (291 m) in elevation, with a good breeding population of Pygmy Cormorants and a great stopover site for waterbirds. Here we are likely to find ducks, grebes, herons, shorebirds, terns and gulls including Armenian Gull. Several pairs of Imperial Eagle breed near the lake and we will look for these magnificent raptors as they forage over the adjacent grassy plains.

We will then continue eastward to David Gareji, a monastic complex hollowed out of the rocky hillsides at the border with Azerbaijan, established in the 6th century as an Eastern Orthodox Christian cloister and still an active monastery with much history and captivating frescos preserved in cave cells. It is a marvelous experience to stroll along the ledges overlooking the vast landscape and watching birds perched nearby, including Egyptian Vulture, Western Rock Nuthatch, Blue Rock-Thrush, Pied Wheatear, and at times even Wallcreeper! The steppe surrounding the complex can be good for Tawny Pipit, Calandra Lark and Greater Short-toed Lark, as well as Long-legged Buzzard.

NIGHT: Old Meidan Hotel, Tbilisi



The ridge above David Gareji, at the border between Georgia and Azerbaijan © Rafael Gálvez

September 27, Day 5: Tbilisi – Mtskheta – Batumi

This morning, we will leave the capital city early with bags packed and loaded, with southwestern-most Georgia as our destination. Before reaching the Batumi, we will spend the morning in Mtskheta, the ancient capital of Georgia. We will do some site-seeing and visit key historical locations.

Dominated by the 11th century Cathedral of the "Living Cross," Mtskheta was once the thriving trade center of ancient “Iberia” – the East Georgian kingdom – but is now a quaint hamlet at the confluence of the Mtkvari and Aragvi rivers. The Romans reached Mtskheta in 65 AD and maintained intermittent control of the region until the 7th century. Contemporaries of Roman emperor Constantine the Great, Georgian King Mirian III and Queen Nana converted to Christianity in 337 AD. Mtskheta has a bounty of UNESCO sites, showcasing the high artistic and cultural level attained in medieval architecture by this ancient kingdom. We hope to visit a number of such historical landmarks. We will then continue westward towards Adjara, in western Georgia, arriving at the coastal city of Batumi in the afternoon.

NIGHT: TBA, Batumi

September 28, Day 6: Batumi and Raptor Migration at Sakhalvasho

We may take a short drive to the Batumi Botanical Garden in the morning with the primary aim of finding Krüper's Nuthatch and possibly some migrants. We will spend part of the morning at this site before heading towards one of the world's primary hotspots for migrating raptors! We will drive up to the Sakhalvasho Raptor Watchpoint overlooking the Black Sea and spend the rest of the day there. Most of our time will be dedicated to enjoying the significant numbers of migratory raptors cruising overhead on their way southward. We will have fun honing our identification skills, since this is a prime location for several species of eagles, buzzards and hawks. However, the true joy will come from simply appreciating the raptors flowing past us at this world-class site.

This evening, we will enjoy dinner at an authentic and evocative Georgian restaurant, accompanied by traditional folk singers from the region.

NIGHT: TBA, Batumi

September 29, Day 7: The Black Sea Coast and Migration at Shuamta

Batumi is a city in Adjara, western Georgia, known for its subtropical climate. The city and its famous beaches are on a hook that juts out into the sea, created over time by deposits of gravel sediment from the Chorokhi River, born in the Mescit Mountains of Turkey some 270 miles away and reaching the Black Sea just south of the city. Due to its location along an important migratory flyway and the variety of ecotones found at this confluence of river and sea, this delta has become one of the most exciting and surprising migration hotspots in the Caucasus. The diversity of habitats ranging from mudflats



12th - 17th century frescos, Kutaisi © John Graham



Short-toed Snake-Eagle © Peter Csonka

and beaches to marshes and thickets are a magnet for migrants, and the delta has been designated an Important Bird Area. We will start our day in search for waders, shorebirds, gulls and songbirds. Gull species at the site include Slender-billed, Black-headed, Yellow-legged, Little and Caspian, among others. At this time of year, Parasitic Jaegers, Yelkouan Shearwaters and several tern species may be present, while Black-winged Pratincole, Red-necked Phalarope and Gray-headed Swamphen are all possible. This site has also turned heads by producing imperiled Sociable Lapwings and many surprises. Our birding will then take us to the northeastern-most point of Batumi, where we will stroll along the shoreline and foliage at Miracle Park and Batumi Boulevard where a variety of migratory passerines are possible. Red-breasted Flycatcher, Pied Wheatear, Bluethroat, Thrush Nightingale, Red-throated Pipit, Moustached and Paddyfield warblers among many others make for an impressive range of possibilities.

We will then get back on the road and drive to the Shuamta Raptor Watchpoint, at the heart of the Batumi bottleneck. The bottleneck forms each fall after southbound raptors have flown over passes along the Greater Caucasus range and descended into the lowlands, congregating between the sea and the coastal ridge in numbers over one million individuals as they continue southward! At this time of year, we can expect to see large numbers of Steppe (Common) Buzzards, with up to 334,171 counted this day in 2025! We can expect also to see significant numbers of Black Kites, Honey Buzzards, Greater and Lesser Spotted Eagles, and up to four species of harriers including the beautiful Pallid Harrier. Black Storks, large numbers of Wood Pigeons, falcons and a broad range of surprises is possible. This promises to be a wonderful time at a striking migration hotspot.

NIGHT: TBA, Batumi



Broad-billed Sandpipier © Peter Csonka



The Greater Caucasus as seen from Svaneti © John Graham

September 30, Day 8: Through Colchis, towards the Greater Caucasus

Today we will drive north along the Black Sea coast towards Svaneti, the ancient land of the Svans, a region within Georgia with distinct cultural and linguistic characteristics. Before beginning our ascent to the Greater Caucasus range, we will visit Kolkheti National Park, near the port city of Poti. As the name of the national park implies, this region is considered the gateway to the ancient kingdom of *Colchis*, the destination of the mythical journey by Jason and the Argonauts as they searched for the Golden Fleece. It is an area of wetland forests and lakes at the mouth of the Rioni River, which was called *Phasis* in antiquity. It is worth noting that the word “pheasant” derives from the name of this river, and that the Ring-necked Pheasant – *Phasianus colchicus* – was first described from this region.

Depending on timing, we may explore the wetlands of Kolkheti at the delta of the Maltakva River, where Lake Paliostromi meets the Black Sea. Kolkheti's wetlands often host a number of interesting shorebirds and gulls including Curlew and Broad-billed sandpipers, Slender-billed and Caspian gulls, White-winged Tern and many other possibilities, while the lake itself may render grebes, ducks, White-tailed Eagle and other raptors. From the coast, we will continue inland and climb 5,000 ft. (1,520 m) up into the Greater Caucasus Range, to arrive at our base in Svaneti.

NIGHT: Old Seti Hotel, Mestia



Medieval hamlets in Svaneti © Rafael Gálvez





Güldenstadt's Redstart and Rufous-tailed Rock-Thrush © Ecotours Wildlife Holidays

October 1, Day 9: Svaneti

The Greater Caucasus is a daunting mountain barrier that separates the North Caucasian republics and ethnic groups – within the borders of the Russian Federation – from the South Caucasian peoples, most of which reside within the borders of Georgia. Several peaks in this mountain range surpass 15,000 ft. (4,570 m) in elevation, making this a region where native endemic peoples have found refuge through the ages from waves of invaders and geopolitical structures. More than 30 languages are spoken in the Caucasus, many of which are non-Indo-European and spoken nowhere else on the planet! In this manner, the Svanetian people have preserved an ancient form of South Caucasian language and traditions that are different from that of the other South Caucasian groups. Likewise, the mountains preserve an unspoiled wilderness, with dozens of the largest glaciers in the region dotting the mountains of Svaneti.

During this or the following day, we may visit the forested slopes around Mount Tetnuldi, and if weather permits, make it to the summit in search of Caucasian Snowcocks and Caucasian Grouse. This area can be great for woodland species such as Coal Tit, Goldcrest, Red Crossbill and woodpeckers. Specialties such as Krüper's Nuthatch, Mountain Chiffchaff, Ring Ouzel and Alpine Accentor are also possible. This evening, we will have our second supra – or feast, accompanied by traditional singers.

NIGHT: Old Seti Hotel, Mestia

October 2, Day 10: Upper Svaneti

This morning, we may drive up to the Chalaadi Glacier or do some birding along glacial streams and forests. Here, several species are possible including Lammergeier (Bearded Vulture), Cinereous Vulture, Yellow-billed Chough, "Caucasian" Water Pipit, Firecrest, Fire-fronted Serin and Güldenstadt's Redstart. As we continue our drive up Mount Tetnuldi, we will stop for incredible views of the Svaneti range and then continue to the village of Kala or Ushguli, one of the highest inhabited settlements in the Caucasus Mountains and a UNESCO World Heritage site. We will spend some time exploring these settlements full of 10th century defensive towers. While in Upper Svaneti, we may tour the iconic Lamaria Church, with architectural features dating back to the 9th and 10th centuries, and fresco remnants from the 12th and 13th centuries. If time allows, we will

explore the foothills of the Lamara Mountain, with spectacular views of Mount Shkhara – the highest peak in Georgia at 16,627 ft. (5,068 m) – and its main glacier in search of avian highlights.

NIGHT: Old Seti Hotel, Mestia

October 3, Day 11: Svaneti to Kutaisi

With our bags packed and loaded, we will bid farewell to Svaneti and start our descent from the Greater Caucasus range southward towards the Lesser Caucasus range, the chain of mountains that parallels Georgia's southern border with Turkey, Armenia and Azerbaijan, eventually merging imperceptibly with the highlands south of the Caspian Sea. Along the way we will likely see evidence of the continuing raptor migration. Species such as Alpine Accentor, White-throated Dipper, Horned Lark, Water Pipit and Fire-fronted Serin may be found at our higher elevation stops. We may also do some birding along mountain passes and subtropical forests within the Sataplia Nature Reserve, a territory dotted with karst caves, beech and hornbeam groves, alder, azalea and other flora distinctive of the Kolkhetian forest system. However, our primary focus during this travel day will be to reach the city of Kutaisi with anticipation, well before dinner.

Kutaisi was once the capital of the ancient kingdom of Colchis in western Georgia. There, we will visit the impressive 10th century Bagrati Cathedral, positioned on a promontory overlooking the city and may have an opportunity to hear some sacred chanting. We will be treated to traditional folk singing during dinner, accompanied by Georgian wine.

NIGHT: King David Hotel, Kutaisi

October 4-5, Days 12-13: Zekari Pass and Javakheti

After leaving Kutaisi, we will explore the southern mountain passes in the Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park, one of the oldest and largest conservation areas in Georgia, occupying more than 1% of the nation's territory. Although the park received its current status 20 years ago, it was already a renowned nature preserve for members of the Romanov family during the 1860's under the Russian Empire, following a long tradition as a hunting territory for Georgian nobles dating back to Georgia's Golden Age under Queen Tamar's rule in the 1200's. This morning we will cross a sliver of the park along its western edge, into the Lesser Caucasus Range by driving up the Zekari Pass on the slopes of the Meskheti Mountains.



The "Caucasian" Mountain Chiffchaff is a specialty of the region © Ecotours Wildlife Holidays

As we climb the slopes, we will be surrounded by coniferous and humid forests where we will hope to find Black and White-backed woodpeckers, stopping at streams in search of White-throated Dipper, and ever-vigilantly in search for Mountain Chiffchaff. At around 8,000 ft. (2,435 m) in elevation, we will reach subalpine meadows where our focus will turn to the elusive Caspian Snowcock, a rugged gallinaceous species restricted to this mountain range system, which we'll hope to appreciate through scope views. The area may have much more to offer, including Water Pipit, Horned Lark and maybe even Caucasian Grouse.



The cave complex of Vardzia © Rafael Gálvez

During this and the following day, we will explore a number of sites near our base of Akhaltsikhe, including Javakheti. The vast open landscape of the Javakheti Plateau has been a traditional summer destination for semi-nomadic pastoral communities stretching to Anatolia for ages. In this manner, it is thought that the Cappadocian missionary St. Nino first brought Christianity to Georgia during the 4th century, carrying her grapevine cross through Javakheti, eventually reaching the ancient Kingdom of Iberia in eastern Georgia and converting Queen Nana and King Mirian III.

Our attention will turn to the arid plains and lakes of this distinct region. We will search the brush and surrounding thickets for migratory passerines, with a broad array of possibilities that could include short-toed larks, warblers, buntings, pipits and wagtails. The plains may hold resting Long-legged Buzzards and several other raptor species could be foraging overhead, including three species of harriers. The large lakes may hold many dabbling ducks of several species, as well as Red-crested Pochard, Tufted Duck, Ruddy Shelduck and with some persistence even the uncommon Velvet Scoter (now strictly *Melanitta fusca*) – a well-deserved recent split from the North American White-winged Scoter (now *Melanitta deglandi*). Dalmatian and Great White pelican are to be looked for in these lakes, as well as a wide possibility of shorebirds and waders. The “eastern” form of the Common Crane (*G. g. lilfordi*) is to be looked for here, with a breeding range contained through Transcaucasia. It is a near-endemic, distinctive by having a reduced red patch on the crown and being paler above.

At some point during these two days, we may also descend into the Mtkvari River valley and visit the remarkable cave complex of Vardzia, a settlement of dwellings carved out of the mountainside in a Byzantine-Cappadocian style, dating back to the 12th century, and preserving an impressive series of frescos within the main church. In recent decades, it has been reinhabited by Eastern Orthodox Christian monks. We may also explore the fields near Sapara Monastery or megalithic walls near the village of Saro, depending on time. The nearby Khertvisi Fortress may offer migratory songbirds along the adjacent river.



Dalmatian Pelicans © Ecotours Wildlife Holidays

The dry and continental climate of the area hosts a number of east-Mediterranean species and can be particularly interesting for vultures including Egyptian and Eurasian Griffon, as well as Golden Eagle, Short-toed Snake-Eagle, and at times even Imperial Eagle. Chukar may be common in the area, and the crags and ledges may hold Rock Sparrow, Rock Bunting, Western Rock Nuthatch and Crag-Martins. Eastern Black-eared and maybe even Finsch's wheatears may also be in the area, as well as seasonal and altitudinal migrants including Mountain Chiffchaff and other warblers.

NIGHTS: Gino Rabath Hotel, Akhaltsikhe



Akhaltsikhe © John Graham

October 6, Day 14: Akhaltsikhe to Kazbegi

During this travel day, we will head once more towards the Greater Caucasus range, making brief birding stops along the way as we drive up the renowned Georgian Military Highway, a traditional route used since time immemorial, which now connects Tbilisi to North Ossetia in the Russian Federation. On the way, we may look around the impressive 17th century Ananuri Fortress complex and the adjacent Zhinvali Dam. The adjacent forests can turn up a variety of seasonal and altitudinal migrants including Fire-fronted Serin, warblers and residents including Long-tailed Tit, Black Woodpecker and others. At roughly 7,200 ft. (2,200 m) and above the tree line, we will reach Gudauri, where a brief stop may render both Red-billed and Yellow-billed choughs, and with luck a Lammergeier (Bearded Vulture.) We will also make another stop at the Jvari Pass, where the highway reaches its highest elevation at 7,815 feet (2,379 m) in search of species such as Water Pipit, Ring Ouzel, Alpine Accentor and White-winged Snowfinch.

Finally, at 5,710 feet (1,740 m) we will reach the hamlet of Stepantsminda (St. Stephan) at the slopes of Mount Mqinvartsveri, Georgia's most famous peak at 16,581 feet (5,054 m) in elevation. Both the mountain and the village are colloquially called Kazbegi, the name given to the area when Georgia was under Russian rule. This will be our base for the next two nights, making it a very scenic location below the snow-mantled massif – a dormant volcano shrouded in white.

NIGHT: Hilltop Hotel, Kazbegi



Illustrations by Rafael Gálvez. Caucasian Grouse, Caucasian and Caspian snowcocks, featured in "Birds of Kolkheti" (Buneba 2005) – showcasing Georgian script.

October 7, Day 15: Kazbegi

This morning, we will drive from our base at Stepandsminda to mountain slopes at an altitude of 7,120 ft. (2,200m) overlooking the valley below and the peak of Mount Mqinvartsveri – or Kazbegi. From here we will scan the slopes for the endemic Caucasian Grouse and listen for the haunting calls of Caucasian Snowcocks from the surrounding hillsides, searching for birds perched upon clifftops or flying along the slopes. If we are very fortunate, inclement weather may push Güldenstadt's Redstarts and Great Rosefinches from the higher regions, and we will be vigilantly in search of these two beautiful and sough-after species. Here we are also likely to see Lammergeier (Bearded Vulture), Griffon Vulture, the pale "Caucasian" Twite, Fire-fronted Serin, Alpine Accentor,

Rufous-tailed Rock-Thrush and Black Redstart. With persistence, we may even catch glimpses of an interesting goat-antelope – the endemic East Caucasian Tur – which can sometimes be seen on rocky outcrops. As we search, a brief splash of crimson may reveal the butterfly-like movements of a Wallcreeper against the mountain. The forests below the church may hold Mountain Chiffchaff and other woodland species – with luck maybe even a late Green Warbler. Bushes down in the valley are often teeming with migrants, while migration of Black Kites, Steppe Buzzards and harriers may be continuing strongly above us.

This evening we will have dinner at one of the traditional family-style restaurants where traditional *khinkali* dumplings are made.

NIGHT: Hilltop Hotel, Kazbegi

October 8, Day 16: Kazbegi to Tbilisi

Early this morning, as we descend Kazbegi, we will search along the river for migratory songbirds foraging in the bushes and marshes. The possibilities include a variety of *Sylvia* and *Phylloscopus* warblers such as Barred, Blackcap, chiffchaffs and others. As we descend the Greater Caucasus, we will make several birding stops, particularly along the spectacular Jvari (Krestovy) Pass and in the forest near the Ananuri Fortress. If weather conditions are favorable, good numbers of raptors may be seen flying south following the course of the valley. We will arrive at Tbilisi in the afternoon. After checking in to our final base, we will set out to explore a bit of the Georgian capital city and arrive to an authentic restaurant for our final supra feast together, once again hosted by a toastmaster and accompanied by wine and song.

NIGHT: Old Meidan Hotel, Tbilisi

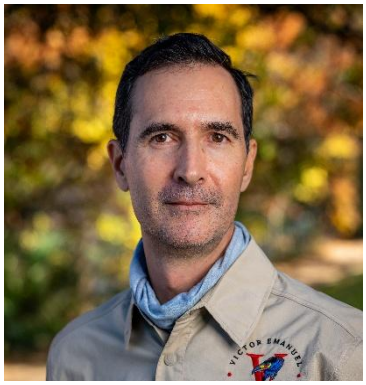
October 9, Day 17: Departure for home

We will organize transfers to the airport throughout the day. When booking your return flight please keep in mind that transfers will depart from the hotel about 3 hours before the scheduled departing flight times. Invariably, many flights departing Tbilisi leave in the early hours of the morning, so you may want to consider giving yourselves one or two full extra days to explore some of Tbilisi's 25 public museums, the various historical sites, and world-famous dining.

Essential Tour Information

TOUR SIZE: This tour will be limited to 12 participants.

TOUR LEADERS: This tour will be led by Rafael Galvez. John Graham will host during special events and Dato Beridze will be the cultural guide and translator.



Rafael Galvez has been birding and illustrating birds since childhood. He has combined his love of art and birds while collaborating in several publications, including field guides and school textbooks in the Republic of Georgia and Latin America. He gained knowledge of the Caucasus while traveling extensively through the region, soon after the fall of the Soviet Union, while producing musical recordings and documentary shorts. He published a broad collection of secular and sacred chants, as well as art books under his own label. He has worked with several traditional ensembles in Georgia including Mtiebi, Anchiskhati and Zedashe. His branding and graphic work with traditional wineries helped reawaken an interest in Georgian wines. He served as a board member of the BirdLife International affiliate in the Republic of Georgia and Audubon in the U.S., developing educational and conservation programs. After working with raptor research along the Black Sea, he returned to Florida to spearhead the Florida Keys Hawkwatch migration monitoring project.



John Graham joined the Yale Institute of Sacred Music as a post-doctoral teaching fellow in 2015-2016. He was lecturing, writing, and teaching a graduate course titled, "Early Polyphonies East and West." His PhD at Princeton University, "The Transmission and Transcription of Georgian Liturgical Music" (2015), encompassed a comprehensive investigation of the written and audio sources for the liturgical chant tradition of the Georgian Orthodox Church, both medieval and modern. He lectures regularly on topics relating to the history and revival of Georgian sacred music and gives practical workshops on Georgian folk and sacred music. At Princeton, he directed two Georgian folk choirs and started another while at Yale University. John has been organizing and leading cultural tours in the Caucasus every year since 2006 and has been successful in every way at this venture. Currently the business has expanded to include many private tour groups including tours that specialize in trekking, birdwatching, choral performance, medieval Christianity

and frescoes, wine industry and viticulture, and general culture tours. John Graham Tours now operates beyond Georgia in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Ethiopia.



David Beridze was born and raised in Tbilisi, but his family is from Akhaltsikhe, a city in southern Georgia. He is married with two children and sings traditional chant in the Kashweti Church together with John Graham. His education is in history and cultural and physical geography, and he has been working as a guide for ten years. Originally, he worked as a hiking guide which is his main passion, but in recent years he has been operating a variety of private cultural tours because of his vast knowledge and interest in Georgian history and arcana. His passions remain hiking, singing, and being with his family. "Dato" is mild-mannered, quiet, but owns a lot of knowledge about every topic, and is entirely dependable as a driver and guide. He has worked with John Graham Tours for many years and has excellent reviews.

TOUR COSTS & PAYMENT INFORMATION

TOUR FEE: **$9,625** per person based on double occupancy or **$10,395** for a person requiring single accommodation. This includes all meals from dinner on Day 2 through dinner on Day 16, accommodations as stated in the itinerary, all ground transportation during the tour, and guide services provided by the tour leaders. It does **not** include airfare to nor from the starting/ending city; however, flights within the tour (if any) are included. The fee also excludes laundry, personal expenses, and other items of a personal nature. For information about gratuities, please see the "TIPPING" sub-section below. If the minimum group size is not met, each participant will be charged a small-group supplement—shared equally and communicated in advance—to allow the tour to proceed.

REGISTRATION & DEPOSIT: You may register for this tour through the VENT website or by calling our office (512-328-5221). The initial deposit for this tour is **$1,000** per person. At 180 days VENT will collect a second deposit that brings the total deposit amount to 40% of the tour price. We accept MasterCard and Visa for both deposits.

PAYMENTS: All tour payments may be made by credit card (MasterCard or Visa), check, money order, or bank transfer (contact the VENT office for bank transfer information). These include initial deposits, second deposits, interim payments, final balances, special

arrangements, etc. Full payment of the tour fee is due 120 days (may 26, 2027) prior to the tour departure date.

EXCHANGE RATE SURCHARGES: Tour prices are based on the rate of exchange at the time of itinerary publication. If rates change drastically, it may be necessary to impose a surcharge. If a surcharge is necessary, every effort will be made to minimize the amount. In many cases, these additional foreign exchange rate surcharges have been passed to VENT by its vendors and suppliers.

FUEL SURCHARGES: Our prices are based on fuel prices at the time of itinerary publication. While we will do everything possible to maintain our prices, it may be necessary to institute a fuel surcharge.

TIPPING: An important part of the value of a VENT tour is knowing that tips for local service providers at our destinations—restaurant staff, hotel staff, drivers, local guides, and various other support staff—are included in your tour fee. If you would like to offer any of your local guides an additional tip, $5 to $10 a day is a common amount.

Tips for your VENT tour leader(s) are **not** included, but it is customary to tip one or both if you feel that you have received exceptional service. To assist in your planning, we recommend tipping your VENT tour leader(s) $15 to $20 per day, or the equivalent of approximately 2–4% of the tour fee.

If you plan to give tips by cash, they should be given directly to your tour leader at the end of the tour and **not** sent to the VENT office. Some of our tour leaders use mobile payment applications such as Venmo, PayPal, and Wise. If you would like to use this method, please ask your tour leaders directly whether they can accept tips through such an application.

We emphasize that tipping is optional and that these amounts are only recommendations. The amount you decide to tip is based entirely on your experience and at your discretion.

CANCELLATION & REFUNDS

CANCELLATION BY PARTICIPANT:

- **More than 120 days prior to the tour start date:** A refund of all monies paid will be issued, less 50% of the deposit (including initial and second deposit)
- **120 days or fewer prior to the tour start date:** No refund will be provided.

- **Optional add-ons:** Some tours offer optional add-ons that are designated as non-refundable. Any such add-ons are clearly identified as non-refundable at the time of booking. By selecting and purchasing an optional add-on, the participant acknowledges and accepts its non-refundable status. Fees paid for non-refundable add-ons are not refundable under any circumstances, regardless of when the tour is cancelled.

This cancellation policy applies to all participants and all tours (Pre-Tours and Extensions are considered self-contained tours separate from the main tour). Because unexpected events can occur, we strongly recommend the purchase of travel insurance.

CANCELLATION BY VENT:

If VENT cancels a tour prior to departure without cause or good reason, VENT will provide the participant a full refund, which will constitute full settlement to the participant.

If VENT cancels or delays a tour or any portion of a tour as a result of any Force Majeure event, VENT will use its reasonable best efforts to refund any payments on the balance of the tour fee to participant; provided that, VENT will have no obligation to provide a participant with a refund and will not be liable or responsible to a participant, nor be deemed to have defaulted under or breached any applicable agreement, for any failure or delay in fulfilling or performing any term of such agreement. A "*Force Majeure*" event means any act beyond VENT's control, including, without limitation, the following: (a) acts of God; (b) flood, fire, earthquake, hurricane, epidemic, pandemic or explosion; (c) war, invasion, hostilities (whether war is declared or not), terrorist threats or acts, riot or other civil unrest; (d) government order, law or actions; (e) embargoes or blockades; (f) national or regional emergency; (g) strikes, labor stoppages, labor slowdowns or other industrial disturbances; (h) shortage of adequate power or transportation facilities; and (i) any other similar events or circumstances beyond the control of VENT.

This VENT Cancellation & Refunds policy does not apply to air tickets purchased through VENT or to any special arrangements, such as additional hotel nights, that fall outside of the services described in the tour itinerary.

Victor Emanuel Nature Tours is not a participant in the California Travel Consumer Restitution Fund. California law requires certain sellers of travel to have a trust account or bond. This business has a bond issued by Travelers in the amount of $50,000. CST #2014998-50.

TRAVEL INSURANCE

MEDICAL EVACUATION INSURANCE/PROTECTION REQUIREMENT: This tour visits remote locations where immediate access to primary medical care may not be available. For this reason, travel insurance/travel protection which covers you for emergency evacuation is required for participation on this tour. This coverage is included in the Ripcord Rescue Travel Insurance™ program. Alternatively, comparable service can be obtained through Medjet and its MedjetAssist plan. If you choose not to purchase insurance/travel protection through Ripcord or Medjet, you are required to obtain it through another provider. Please refer to the TRAVEL INSURANCE/TRAVEL PROTECTION section for additional information.

SUGGESTED OPTIONS: To safeguard against losses due to illness, accident, or other unforeseen circumstances, we strongly recommend the purchase of travel insurance as soon as possible after making a deposit. VENT has partnered with Redpoint Travel Protection as our preferred travel insurance provider. Through Redpoint, we recommend its comprehensive Ripcord plan, which includes a medical evacuation benefit. With this in mind, it is important to note that medical evacuation is not offered by Redpoint as a stand-alone policy or benefit. For travelers not interested in comprehensive travel insurance, VENT recommends Medjet and its MedjetAssist® plan. Medjet is not an insurance company, and Medjet Assist is not an insurance product; rather, Medjet is a membership-based air-medical transport company specializing in moving hospitalized travelers from an admitting hospital to a medical facility of choice. Medjet does not provide medical evacuation service from the point of injury or illness; yet, the MedjetAssist plan offers robust enough travel protection to satisfy the medical evacuation insurance requirement in place for many VENT tours.

About Redpoint Travel's Ripcord Plan

Ripcord is a completely integrated travel insurance program with single contact for emergency services, travel assistance, and insurance claims. Critical benefits include comprehensive travel insurance for trip cancellation/interruption, medical evacuation from your point of injury or illness to your hospital of choice; medical expense coverage, death of pet, and much more. Optional expanded insurance coverage is available and includes items such as evacuation coverage in case of a natural disaster or political or security reasons, waiver for pre-existing medical conditions exclusion, and a "Cancel for Any Reason" benefit. Ripcord is available to U.S. and non-U.S. residents.*

For a price quote or to purchase travel insurance, please visit:

https://ripcordtravelprotection.com/ventbird; or click the Ripcord logo on our website (click Help and Trip Insurance); or call +1-415-481-0600. Pricing is based on age, trip cost, trip length, and level of coverage.

*To be eligible for the pre-existing medical condition exclusion waiver and the optional Cancel for Any Reason (CFAR) upgrade, you must purchase your policy within 15 days of making your first trip payment. The CFAR benefit provides reimbursement for 75% of covered costs, and increases the policy premium by approximately 50%. Policies may be purchased either for the full value of the tour fee at the time of deposit or in segments as individual tour payments are made (deposit, second deposit, final balance, additional arrangements, etc.). The "pay as you go" approach reduces up-front expense and ensures that the amount paid toward your full policy premium is in proportion to the amount paid toward the full tour fee. If you choose to "pay as you go," you must cover each deposit or payment within 15 days, and insure all non-refundable trip costs in order to maintain the CFAR benefit. Please refer to the policy for a full description of coverage.

About Medjet's MedjetAssist Plan

MedjetAssist is a membership program that functions like AAA for motorists. The company's primary service is air medical transport. Critical benefits of MedjetAssist include a staff on call and ready to provide assistance 24 hours a day, 7 days a week; all-expenses-paid air medical transport in the United States and internationally to medical facility of choice, regardless of medical necessity; repatriation of remains; and no exclusions for pre-existing conditions.

For travelers under 75, MedjetAssist may be purchased as Short-Term Memberships of 8, 15, 21, and 30 days, or Regular Annual Memberships from 1 to 5 years. For travelers 75–84, Medjet offers a Diamond Membership that is the same program but with a few additional conditions.

For a price quote or to purchase MedjetAssist, please visit: Medjet.com/VentBird or call 1-800-527-7478. Pricing is based on type and term of membership.

GETTING THERE & REQUIRED TRAVEL DOCUMENTS

AIR TRAVEL: Victor Emanuel Travel is a full-service travel agency and wholly owned subsidiary of Victor Emanuel Nature Tours (VENT). Victor Emanuel Travel will be happy to make any domestic or international air travel arrangements from your home and return. Per person fees apply for each set of travel arrangements: $50 domestic; $75 international.* Many of our travelers choose to

make their own air travel arrangements, but we emphasize the benefits to using our services. If you book your air arrangements yourself, Victor Emanuel Travel is unable to provide support in managing any flight delays and/or cancellations that could occur before and during a tour. When you purchase air tickets through Victor Emanuel Travel, our staff has ready access to your air ticket record and can provide assistance as problems arise. Please feel free to call the VENT office to confirm your air arrangements. Please be sure to check with the VENT office prior to purchasing your air ticket to confirm that the tour is sufficiently subscribed to operate. VENT cannot be held responsible for any air ticket penalties.

*An air ticket will be purchased by Victor Emanuel Travel on behalf of the traveler with the traveler's consent. A purchase is considered final upon receipt of payment. If a ticket is subsequently reissued at the behest of the traveler (i.e. voluntary change of plans), the same fee rates apply for the reissue process, in addition to any fees that may be charged by the airline.

BAGGAGE: The airlines now strictly enforce baggage regulations. Excess baggage charges, which can be substantial, are the personal responsibility of each participant. Please consult your airline to find out specific weight restrictions. Due to ever-changing circumstances in the government's attempts to improve airport security we recommend that you check the website of the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) for the most updated information: http://www.tsa.gov/.

We request you limit your luggage to one medium-sized piece and one carry-on bag.

As a precaution against lost luggage, we suggest that you pack a change of clothes, toiletries, medications, important travel documents, optics, and any other essential items in your carry-on bag. Due to ever-changing circumstances in the government's attempts to improve airport security we recommend that you check the website of the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) for the most updated information: http://www.tsa.gov/

TRAVEL DOCUMENTS

PASSPORTS: A valid passport is required for entry into Georgia. Please check the expiration date on your passport. If it is not valid for at least six months after your trip return date, you will need to get it renewed. You will also want to make sure that you have at least two blank pages in your passport for stamps.

As a safety measure, photocopy the first two pages of your passport and keep the photocopies in a safe place, so if your passport is lost you will have proof of identification. Your passport should be signed and easily available at all times. You will need it for check-in at the airport on your first day of departure, so do not pack it in your checked luggage.

VISAS: A visa is not required for U.S. citizens visiting the Georgia republic for stays of 365 days or less. Rules and regulations pertaining to non-U.S. citizens may vary; please check with the appropriate consulates or embassies.

For more information on current requirements see the Consular Information Sheets at the Bureau of Consular Affairs web page: http://travel.state.gov/. The Embasy of Georgia's website also posts current updates on travel requirements: https://georgiaembassyusa.org/consular_services_eng/ .

WHAT TO BRING

CLOTHING: Casual dress is the rule for this trip; however, short pants, short skirts, and halter-tops are not recommended for a tour of this region. You may want to pack one set of slightly "smarter" clothes to wear at our hotel in Tbilisi or *supra* feasts. A dress code is observed when visiting sacred sites such as churches and monasteries, which are part of this itinerary. At such sacred sites, women are asked to cover their hair and shoulders with a personal scarf, a shawl or some kind of hat. They are also asked to wear a wrap-around skirt over their pants, if they are not already wearing a skirt. Such wrap-around covers are provided at most church entrances. Men are asked to wear closed toe shoes – meaning that sandals for men are not allowed at sacred sites. The wearing of sandals in general is discouraged during this tour for all, except inside hotels.

Hard-wearing, easy-to-wash-and-dry field clothes are ideal. Participants should bring layers rather than one or two large items. Nights, evenings, and mornings can be quite cold at higher elevations such as in Svaneti and Kazbegi regions, where temperatures can change suddenly from hot to cold or vice versa. Several layers of clothing are much recommended as temperatures could drop to near freezing. Particularly on the peaks of the Caucasus or in the open steppe, the wind can be piercingly cold so be sure to pack a good down jacket, warm sweaters or vests, a warm hat and gloves. Silk or synthetic thermal long underwear have been highly rated by participants during early morning and cold nights, so at least a light set is recommended. Sturdy, rainproof jackets and pants are strongly recommended (shower proof plastic jackets are not sufficient). For example, a single day in October in the Javakheti Plateau can offer temperatures in the 30s° F with a light rain

during early morning birding, persisting for a couple of hours, yet by midday temperatures may rise to the mid-70s° F under sunny skies.

Other items you may consider bringing include a balaclava, in addition to a regular birding hat and a scarf. Thick socks that absorb perspiration and cushion one's feet from hard surfaces are important. It is also useful if the socks are long enough so that the bottom of one's pants can be tucked inside.

FOOTWEAR: Sturdy hiking boots with a solid lug sole are essential; sneakers or sports-type shoes are not appropriate, as the ground will be rough, sandy and occasionally wet and possibly slippery a lot of the time.

EQUIPMENT: One of the most important aspects of having an enjoyable travel experience is being prepared with proper equipment. The following items will come in handy during your trip to Georgia:

- Backpack – Good for carrying extra clothing, field guides, supplies, and optical equipment, etc.
- Notebooks and pens
- Travel alarm clock – Battery operated is best.
- Polarized sunglasses with good UV protection – Essential! Bring a back-up pair as well.
- Sunscreen, lip balm, skin lotions – All essential items.
- Personal toiletries
- Cameras, lenses, memory cards, and extra batteries – Please bring all the camera equipment, spare flash-cards, batteries, and film that you will need. Flash-cards and film will be almost impossible to obtain once we are away from cities. Nearly everyone brings too few batteries and too little film or flash-card space, and this can cause some distress. UV and polarizing filters are recommended, especially at higher elevations where glare can be a problem. Please read the section under "Electricity" below and make sure to bring the necessary adapters to charge your devices.
- Small flashlight or headlamp – A good flashlight or headlamp is essential, so please ensure that yours is in good working order and that you have spare bulbs and batteries. Couples should bring one flashlight or headlamp each.
- Plastic bags – Plastic bags are very useful for protecting equipment from rain and dust.

- Handy-wipes – These are very important, and paper tissues are also especially useful. All participants should carry sufficient amounts for their personal needs for the entire tour.
- Tissue packs
- Water bottle – Drinking water is always provided. While bringing a bottle of your own is not essential, some people prefer to have their own bottle for having an extra supply on hand.
- One bath towel and washcloth: Please bring an extra towel if you require more than the basic provided allotment.
- Umbrella: The collapsible type is easy to carry and useful both against rain and sun.
- Walking stick – Collapsible walking sticks will come in handy in several situations. They are strongly recommended for those with balance problems.
- Small folding stool – Many people find this item extremely useful when we are at the raptor migration watchpoints, or when we are patiently waiting for shy birds.
- Snacks – Snacks are always provided during the day before lunch including nuts, chocolate, and dried fruit. However, other western-style snacks may not be readily available. As such, if you require more, we recommend bringing a supply of other snacks such as granola bars or protein bars.

Binoculars: We strongly recommend you bring a pair of good binoculars of 8x32, 8x42, or 10x42 magnification. Please do not bring mini-binoculars of any kind. Some people like them because they are small and lightweight; but they have an extremely small field of view and very poor light gathering power. You will find that 8x32 binoculars are compact and light enough.

Spotting Scopes: Your tour leaders will have scopes available for group use throughout the trip, but if you have one and wish to bring it, please feel free to do so.

DESTINATION INFORMATION & LOCAL CONDITIONS

CLIMATE & WEATHER: Georgia is a mountainous country in the Caucasus Region roughly 26,900 mi^2 (69,700 km^2) in size – slightly larger than the U.S. state of West Virginia. The climate of Georgia ranges from mild and rainy on the coast and western plain, to continental and arid in the central, eastern and inland areas. The Greater and Lesser Caucasus ranges are typically colder, variable and relatively unpredictable. We will be at sea level along the Black Sea, but will reach altitudes over 7,000 ft. (2,100 m) in the Greater Caucasus.

The southwestern coast of Georgia is typically humid and subtropical. In late September and early October, temperatures along the coast range from 55° F (15° C) to 75° F (24° C). This is also at the

peak of rain season along the coast and Batumi receives 99 in. (2,500 mm) per year, and 10.2 in. (315 mm) of rain in October. The Greater Caucasus average at 45° F (7° C) in October, with early mornings and nights reaching freezing temperatures, and unpredictable alpine weather than can bring showers, cold gusts or strong sunshine throughout the day. The vast open landscape of Javakehti in October can be swept with cold winds in the low 40s° F (4° to 6° C), but can also expose one to periods of strong sun. The arid regions around David Gareji range from 45° F (7° C) to 80° F (27° C) in October, with little chance of precipitation and greater sun exposure. In the capital of Tbilisi, October temperatures range from 50° F (10° C) to 68° F (20° C). The weather in Georgia at this time of year is varied, ranging from cold to hot and dry to wet, so layers will be important. It is essential to carry a day pack and always have warm clothes with you in the vehicles, even on sunny days.

ACCOMODATIONS: Over the last decade, many parts of Georgia have been modernized, while remote regions remain minimal in infrastructure. Our accomodations will be comfortable throughout, ranging from excellent hotels in cities and authentic guesthouses in remote areas.

ALTITUDE: During this tour will be a sea level along the Black Sea, but will reach altitudes over 9,000 ft. (2,750 m) in the Greater Caucasus. In the Lesser Caucasus we will climb to around 8,000 ft. (2,440 m) in elevation, while we will spend a pair of days in the Javakheti Plateau where altitudes average at roughly 6,500 feet (2,000 m). Tbilisi averages at 2,515 ft. (767 m) in elevation. Elevations will be reached by driving, with walking excursions within close proximity to vehicles during most situations. Overall, most if not all the walking will be on fairly flat, albeit sometimes rocky, rough, stony or dusty terrain. We will seldom be walking along paved roads. However, we will walk at a slow pace, so this should not be a matter of concern for anyone in moderate to reasonable condition. Those with heart or respiratory concerns should contact their doctor prior to departure.

TRAVEL: In order to reach the various habitats and birds of this diverse country, there will be a good amount of driving. After driving on paved roads along the main highways, we will occasionally be traveling on dirt roads and sometimes bumpy and dusty tracks. At other times we will traverse dried up (in some cases not so dry) riverbeds, where many large boulders make the journey uncomfortable. We'll be using vehicle well suited to the purpose and making frequent stops, but some discomfort is inevitable. Because of this, breakdowns, flat tires and getting stuck in terrain can happen. Although this can appear frustrating at first, almost everybody in Georgia (including our ground crew) are experts in these situations, and with so many birds to see, a half

hour delay is often a good chance for more birding. There will be the occasional strenuous uphill walk such as when searching for the likes of snowcocks. Elsewhere, we'll be wandering around fairly flat open landscapes at altitudes often around 6,500 ft. (2,000 m), making plenty of stops for birds.

CURRENCY & SPENDING: Your tour fee includes all necessary expenses; however, you will want to bring enough cash to cover personal expenses not included in the program, such as gifts, laundry, gratuities, meals on your own, and personal items. It is best to carry small denominations of cash in U.S. Dollars as some exchange facilities may be unable to provide change for large bills. Bank notes need to be in good condition as banks and other money changing places may refuse damaged or torn notes.

The Georgian Lari (GEL) is the sole legal tender on the territory of Georgia. The symbol for the Georgian Lari is ₾. Lari are divided into 100 Tetri. USD can be exchanged at the Shota Rustaveli International Airport upon arrival to Tbilisi, at banks in Batumi, Kutaisi and Tbilisi, and exchange houses at other locations. ATM machines are widely available in major cities. In general, Georgia remains a relatively traditional economy and most transactions occur in cash. In select locations where credit or debit cards are accepted, Visa and Mastercard tend to be preferred over American Express, while Discover cards are rarely accepted througout Georgia. Please check with your bank and credit card issuer for more information regarding banking and the use of ATM and credit cards overseas.

ELECTRICITY: Georgia uses 220 volts, 50 cycles, AC. The sockets are designed to accommodate two round prongs in the European style. Make sure to pack your own adapters. Type F electrical plug (also known as a Schuko plug) adapters can be used, which have two 4.8 mm round pins spaced 19 mm apart and two earth clips on the side. Simpler Type C electrical plug (or Europlug) adapters can also be used. All hotels are equipped with electric sockets in each room, and guests should have no problems recharching electronic devices with the right adapters.

INTERNET ACCESS: Internet service is relatively good throughout Georgia and should be available at most hotels except in the highlands, such as Svaneti.

LANGUAGE: The native name of the nation of "Georgia" is Sakartvelo. The name is derived from Kartli, the core region in central Georgia. The Georgian people are Kartvelians, an endemic non-Indo-European ethno-linguistic group that is not related to Slavs or other Indo-European groups, nor to Turkic or Mongol ethno-linguistic groups. The official language of Georgia is Kartuli ena.

Three other Kartvelian languages are spoken in Georgia in addition to Kartuli: Svan, Megrelian and Laz. Kartuli is by and large spoken throughout the territory. Svan is native to the highlands of the northeast – Svaneti. Megrelian is spoken in western Georgia, south of Svaneti and along the coast to Poti. Laz is spoken primarily in the Georgia-Turkey border areas south of Batumi.

The Georgian alphabet is endemic to the country, and shares no letters with any other alphabet in the world. The written language is almost purely phonetic, in that it is written as it is spoken. The modern alphabet in broad use was created in the 11th centruy, derived in part from two older alphabets that are used only in liturgical texts and can also be found depicted in church frescos and carvings.



Georgian alphabet

THE GEORGIAN FEASTING TRADITION: Regardless of size and type, a *supra* – or Georgian feast – is always led by a *tamada* – or toastmaster – who introduces each toast during the feast. The tamada is elected by the banqueting guests or chosen by the host. A successful tamada must possess great rhetorical skill and be able to consume a significant amount of alcohol without showing signs of drunkenness. During the meal, the tamada will propose a toast, and then speak at some length about the topic. The guests raise their glasses, but do not drink. After the tamada has spoken, the toast continues, often in a generally counter-clockwise direction. The next guest who wishes to speak raises their glass, offers a toast on the topic, and then drains their glass. If a guest does not wish to speak, they may drink from their glass after some words that particularly resonate for him or her. Eating is entirely appropriate during toasts, but talking is frowned upon. Once everyone who wishes to speak on the theme has done so, the tamada proposes a new toast, and the cycle begins again. Some popular traditional themes include toasts to Georgia, family, friends, ancestors, God and the mother of God, various saints and so on. However, the theme of each toast is up to the tamada, who should be able to tailor his or her toasts to the occasion.

THE GEORGIAN SINGING TRADITION: Georgia is renowned for its multi-voiced singing tradition, and recently Georgian polyphony was enshrined by UNESCO as representative of intangible heritage of humanity. Singers used to sing for all occasions of daily life including work and pleasure, travel and feasting, marriages and funerals. Even today, when wheat threshing songs are no longer heard in the farm yard, polyphonic song often accompanies church festivals, family gatherings, and public ceremonies. Georgians prefer to sing in a strident direct tone, as if singing outside, and enjoy close-interval harmony. Each region enjoys its own distinct harmonic and melodies styles, and the local liturgical music also reflects regional harmonic conventions. In east Georgia, the basses sing a drone, while in west Georgia the basses are more active and the top voice sometimes sings a unique form of yodeling called *krimanchuli*. In Svaneti, a unique tuning system is preserved to this day, which music connoisseurs find mesmerizing and thrilling. Meanwhile, the more modern 19th century "urban songs" – a mix of Georgian nationalist poetry and imported Italian-Neopolitan music styles –remains the favored genre for both Georgians and their guests.

TIME: Georgia Standard Time (GET) is 4 hours ahead of Coordinated Universal Time (UTC) and is 8 hours ahead of Eastern Daylight Time (EDT).

LAUNDRY SERVICE: Laundry service is available in most hotels but is not covered by the tour fees. Note that such services tend to have pricing based on a per-item cost, with each item costing between $1-$3 USD.

SHOPPING: For those interested in traditional souvenirs, Georgian folk artisans can be found at a number of locations where they may be depending on sales as a primary source of their income. Felt crafts in the from of scarfs, jewelry and accessories, woolen toys and hand knitted slippers are popular souvenirs. Ornamentally decorated daggers can be found at many locations, and are popular souvenirs. Intricate wood carving has a long tradition in Georgia, and carved utensils, decorative panels and ornaments are also typically available. During this tour, there is a possibility we will be near stalls selling such crafts in Tbilisi, Mtskheta and elsewhere. However, this tour is not tailored for shopping, and such an opportunity will be made available if the schedule allows.

HEALTH & SAFETY

HEALTH: VENT follows Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommendations for standard travel precautions, which includes vaccination against a variety of preventable diseases. Among these so-called Routine Vaccinations are measles/mumps/rubella (MMR) vaccine,

diphtheria/pertussis/tetanus (DPT) vaccine, poliovirus vaccine (boosters for adult travelers), and Varicella (Chickenpox). You should also be up-to-date with Hepatitis A and Hepatitis B vaccinations.

If you are taking personal medication, prescription or over-the-counter, be sure to bring an ample supply that will allow you to get through the tour safely. Please consult your physician as necessary. Remember to pack all medication in your carry-on baggage, preferably in original containers or packaging. As airline baggage restrictions can change without warning, please check with your airline for procedures for packing medication.

Food and water: Although piped water throughout much of Georgia is potable, environmental sanitation, food safety, and the availability of piped potable water can be problematic and unpredictable in parts of the country. Participants are advised NOT to drink tap water or unboiled water placed at the table unless advised by your tour leader. Bottled drinks (including bottled water) will be available at all times. You should not eat uncooked foods such as meat or vegetables, or food that has cooled and/or been sitting in the open, permitting flies to settle. Unpeeled fruit is fine, provided you wash the exterior first in clean water.

BITING INSECTS: Mosquitos and biting flies could be a nuisance to some individuals in wetter areas. We suggest bringing a stick-type repellent for your face and hands. We also recommend the usual precautions of wearing pants and long-sleeved shirts at all times when in the field.

ANIMAL BITES: Some populated areas may have significant numbers of stray dogs roaming the streets. The temptation of getting close to a cute dog begging for food can result in bites, particularly when dogs are foraging in a feral state. Having to deal with the consequences of a dog bite, including the problem of rabies prophylaxis, is best avoided, so reasonable caution is advised. Recent efforts in Georgia have rendered favorable results in vaccinating strays against rabies.

Georgia has eight venomous snake species, all of which are uncommon to rare and will not likely be encountered during our tour, However, all snakes should be treated as potentially venomous, considering that few medical facilities have antivenin serum.

SUN EXPOSURE: The sun's ultraviolet rays are damaging to the eyes and skin with prolonged exposure, particularly at higher elevation. Anytime you are outdoors you will want to protect your skin, including your lips, eyes, nose, and ears. Severe sunburn is potentially very painful and will affect your level of enjoyment. Always protect yourself when outdoors and be sure to bring an ample supply of high SPF sunscreen and lip balm. We strongly recommend the use of ultra-violet blocking, polarized sunglasses.

Notes on medical care in Georgia: Medical facilities in Georgia that meet most Western standards are available in Tbilisi and Batumi. American Medical Centers Georgia, an American owned and managed clinic of American Medical Centers, is a 24-hour on-call urgent care, assistance, and specialty care clinic staffed with international and Georgian doctors with facilities in both cities. They specialize in family medicine, pediatrics, gynecology, ENT, physiotherapy, psychiatry, dermatology, trauma, gastroenterology and orthopedics. Contact information can be found at www.amcenters.com.

Outside major cities, medical facilities in Georgia are limited. In the highlands or volcanic plateau of the south, medical facilities and treatment are extremely limited or non-existent. Serious medical problems requiring hospitalization and/or medical evacuation to the United States can cost thousands of dollars. Therefore, VENT requires all tour participants to purchase a medical evacuation insurance policy. Please be aware of this before joining the tour. Furthermore, western doctors are few and far between outside of Tbilisi or Batumi.

In addition to your physician, a good source of general health information for travelers is the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta. The CDC operates a 24-hour recorded Travelers' Information Line 800-CDC-INFO (232-4636) or you can check their website at www.cdc.gov/travel. Canadian citizens should check the website of the Public Health Agency of Canada: www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/new_e.html (click on travel health).

SUGGESTED READING & TRIP PREPARATION

Our website, www.ventbird.com offers an affiliated online store that carries a wide variety of items for birding and nature lovers, including over 6,000 books. A portion of the sales from this store benefits the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. You may also visit such other online stores such as www.amazon.com, and for those out-of-print or hard-to-find titles, www.abebooks.com or www.buteobooks.com which specializes in ornithology books.

Field Guides:

Birds:

Svensson, L., K. Mullarney and D. Zetterström. *Birds of Europe: Second Edition*. Princeton Field Guides, 2009. Also known as *The Collins Guide*, this is definitive field guide to the diverse birdlife of the Western Palearctic, and lauded by many experts as the best field guide ever produced, with excellent illustrations by Mullarney and Zetterström. Includes all avian species we

are likely to encounter in Georgia, the common birds of the Palearctic and vagrants native to Siberia and Central Asia. The Second Edition by Princeton University Press is highly recommended, since others editions are outdated.

Aye, R., M. Schweizer and T. Roth. *Birds of Central Asia.* Princeton University Press, 2012. This beautifully illustrated guide covers the region east of the Caucasus, from the Caspian Sea to China and can be a strong supplement to *Birds of Europe*, particularly when sorting through uncommon eastern species. However, it is not comprehensive of the birds we will see in Georgia.

Adamian, M. S., D. Klem Jr. *A Field Guide to Birds of Armenia*. American University of Armenia, 1997. Although this guide is intended for the neighboring country of Armenia and is somewhat outdated, it remains the sole field guide dedicated to all avian species in a nation within the Caucasus. It is beautifully executed. Its strengths are in that it addresses subspecies found in the Caucasus. However, not all species found in Georgia are contained in this guide, and range maps are only limited to Armenia.

Galvez, R. A., L. Gavashelishvili, Z. Javakhishvili. *Raptors and Owls of Georgia.* Buneba Print, 2005. A compact identification guide co-authored and illustrated by one of the leaders of this tour, Rafael Galvez. At 130 pages, it easily fits on a back pocket. The text is both in English and Georgian Kartuli – nicely demonstrating the native script and a regional perspective. This was a project in partnership with the Georgian Center for the Conservation of Wildlife in order to discourage the trapping and hunting of raptors in western Georgia during migration – a problem that persists to this day. This guide was disseminated to local falconers, school children and enthusiasts as part of a large educational program that has borne fruit in the last 15 years since publication.

Mammals:

Aulanger, S. et al. *Mammals of Europe, North Africa and the Middle East.* Bloomsbury Wildlife, 2009.

Plants:

Fischer, E. A. Gröger, W. Lobin. *Illustrated Field Guide to the Flora of Georgia (South Caucasus)*. Universität Koblenz-Landau. An authoritative and beautifully illustrated book. This guide is excellent and a must for plant aficionados, however it is 830 pages thick, so consider packing restrictions.

Music:

Zedashe Ensemble. *The Raising of Lazare.* Archivos Alba, 2002. Available as a digital download* from https://zedashe.bandcamp.com/album/the-raising-of-lazare. Features traditional polyphonic chants, sacred and secular music from three Georgian regions: Svaneti, Kakheti and Mingrelia. Produced by Rafael A. Galvez, your tour leader, and the Zedashe Ensemble, it captures the early days of the reawakening of Georgian traditions after the fall of the Soviet Union. Produced in a field recording style, performed by a native family choir in authentic settings. Some of the recordings even capture the songs of birds on site.
*Those that purchase the digital download, contact Rafael Galvez at galvezbirds@gmail.com to obtain free support material about the music.

History and Current Affairs:

King, C. *The Ghosts of Freedom.* Oxford University Press, 2008. An engaging and easy read, mostly about Georgia and Armenia during the Russian Imperial period. Brings readers right up to speed on the most important events of the current era through succinct discussion of pertinent 19th and 20th century events. Pdf available here: http://georgica.tsu.edu.ge/files/06-History/Nationalism & Identity/King-2008.pdf

Suny, R. G. *The Making of the Georgian Nation.* Indiana University Press, 1994. A somewhat controversial account – albeit a comprehensive treatment that follows Georgian history from the first millennium B.C. through the years of Russian and Soviet rule, to the rise of an independent republic in 1991.

Nasmyth, P. Georgia: *In the Mountains of Poetry.* Abrams, 2017. Although originally published in 1998, this book remains a beloved eyewitness account of Georgia's rebirth and creates an unforgettable portrait of its remarkable landscape, history, people and culture. Based on personal experience and offering fascinating insights into the life of ordinary and high-profile Georgians, it is essential reading for anyone who does not yet know, or wants to know more, of this astonishing place.

Poetry:

Rustaveli, S. *The Knight in Panther's Skin.* Translated by Lyn Coffin. Poezia Press Ltd. The 12th century Georgian poet and philosopher Shota Rustaveli is considered by literary critics and scholars throughout the world as one of the most significant poets in the history of medieval

literature. Rustaveli is considered equivalent to Shakespeare in the Georgian language. This epic poem is a fascinating tale of chivalry, love and friendship, impossible to put down once you've started it! Many translations exist; this one is recommended.

CLO Apps

eBird. **Cornell Lab of Ornithology.** Among the largest and most successful citizen science projects in existence, eBird is an essential tool in promoting bird study and conservation. Among a range of benefits, eBird allows users to keep a variety of lists in a single application. When taxonomic splits are incorporated, lists are automatically updated. Additionally, trip leaders can share daily lists, so one only needs to accept a shared list and it will upload to your files. Highly recommended.

Merlin Bird ID. **Cornell Lab of Ornithology.** Merlin is an app designed as a birding coach for beginning and intermediate birdwatchers. Excellent for use in the field, Merlin asks the observer a series of questions about his or her bird sighting, including date and location, and color, size, and behavior of a bird. Merlin then processes the viewer's responses to present a shortlist of possible identifications, from which the user can choose the likely bird. Species profiles include a brief physical description, photographs, and sound samples. The Photo ID feature allows anyone with a camera to snap a photo and obtain a list of suggestions. Merlin's Sound ID feature allows identification of birds through audible recognition. To use Merlin, download the app and the appropriate regional "pack." Highly recommended.

Collins Bird Guide – App. Available for Apple and Android devices. This is the app version of the famed *Birds of Europe* by Lars Svensson, Killian Mullarney and Dan Zetterström (Second Edition 2009, available through Princeton University Press). The app includes all avian species we are likely to encounter in Georgia, the common birds of the Palearctic and vagrants native to Siberia and Central Asia. The app is superbly illustrated, easy to use and most importantly it includes recorded vocalizations for most species. This app makes a great supplement to the printed version and could be used as the sole guide for the region by those accustomed to using electronic apps frequently.

TERMS, CONDITIONS & RESPONSIBILITIES

Victor Emanuel Nature Tours, Inc., a Texas corporation, and/or its agents (together, "*VENT*") act only as agents for the participant in regard to travel, whether by railroad, motorcar, motorcoach, boat, or airplane and assume no liability for injury, damage, loss, accident, delay, or irregularity which may be occasioned either by reason of defect in any vehicle or for any reason whatsoever,

or through the acts or default of any company or person engaged in conveying the participant or in carrying out the arrangements of the tour. VENT accepts no responsibility for losses or additional expenses due to delay or changes in airfare or other services, sickness, weather, strike, war, quarantine, terrorism, or other causes. All such losses or expenses will be borne by the participant, as tour rates only provide for arrangements for the time stated.

VENT reserves the right (i) to substitute hotels of similar category, or the best reasonable substitution available under the circumstances, for those indicated and (ii) to make any changes in the itinerary that are deemed necessary by VENT or which are caused by third party transportation schedules (i.e. railroad, motorcar, motorcoach, boat, airplane, etc.).

VENT reserves the right to substitute leaders or guides on any tour. Where VENT, in its sole discretion, determines such substitution is necessary, it will notify tour participants.

VENT reserves the right to cancel any tour prior to departure with or without cause or good reason. See the VENT Cancellation & Refunds policy set forth above.

Tour prices are based on tariffs and exchange rates in effect on November 4, 2026, and are subject to adjustment in the event of any change thereto.

VENT reserves the right to decline any participant's Registration Form and/or refuse to allow any participant to participate in a tour as VENT deems reasonably necessary, in its sole discretion. VENT also reserves the right to remove any tour participant from any portion of a tour as VENT deems necessary, in its sole discretion, reasons for such removal include but are not limited to, medical needs, injury, illness, inability to meet physical demands of a tour, personality conflict or situations in which such removal is otherwise in the best interest of the tour, the tour group and/or such participant. A participant may also voluntarily depart from a tour. If a participant is removed from a tour or voluntarily departs from a tour, such participant will be responsible for any expenses associated with such removal or departure, including but not limited to, transportation, lodging, airfare and meals, and VENT will have no obligation to refund or reimburse any such removed or departed participant for any tour payments or deposits previously paid by such participant.

Baggage is carried at the participant's risk entirely. No airline company, its employees, agents and/or affiliates (the "*Airline*") is to be held responsible for any act, omission, or event during the time participants are not on board the Airline's aircraft. The participant ticket in use by any Airline, when issued, will constitute the sole contract between the Airline and the purchaser of the tickets

and/or the participant. The services of any I.A.T.A.N. carrier may be used for VENT tours, and transportation within the United States may be provided by any member carrier of the Airlines Reporting Corporation.

GRG:20270923

1/13/2025-RG

Rev. 11/3/2026 – PS

Rev. 11/11/26 – DE

Publish Date: 11/11/26