



EXPLORE SOUTH CAUCASUS

AZERBAIJAN, GEORGIA & ARMENIA

September 18 - October 05, 2024

Led by Local Guides

Journey through more than five millennia of history of the Armenian Plateau, the legendary landing place of Noah's Ark. Learn about one of the earliest civilizations in the world, referred to by many as one of the cradles of civilization. Visit monasteries precariously perched on mountains; ruins of once imposing castles and fortresses; the most extensive collection of khachkars or stone crosses, and vishaps, ancient megaliths dating from 1500 BC unique to the Armenian Plateau. Travel through part of the old Silk Road and see the only surviving intact caravansary in Armenia. Explore archaeological excavation sites and watch the past, undisturbed for thousands of years, emerge before you.

Georgia will mesmerize you with its magnificent history and unparalleled natural beauty, from the shores of the Black Sea to the soaring peaks of the Caucasus Mountains, from the prosperous vineyards to the arid deserts. The Georgians have built a modern country based on their rich and ancient culture, a perfect blend. Georgia's world-famous wine, unique and tantalizing cuisine, and legendary hospitality make this a favorite destination for the curious and sophisticated traveler. You will be accompanied on your voyage of discovery by archaeologists and other scholars selected for their expertise and eagerness to share their passion for learning.

Azerbaijan is a magnificent country with rich natural resources, ancient culture, and history. The lifestyle of the people represents a harmonious blending of the traditions of many different cultures and civilizations, with a powerful Persian influence. A visit to this fascinating country with its unique culture, history, and traditions will round out your journey to the land of the Trans-Caucasus.

Ihab Zaki
Managing Director

Wednesday, September 18
Arrive in Baku (AZERBAIJAN)



Upon arrival in Baku, meet and transfer to Shah Palace hotel or similar for check-in and overnight.

Note: Standard check-in time at hotel is 3:00 pm. if you arrive on September 10 or early morning of September 11; an extra hotel night needs to be booked.

Thursday, September 19
Baku



Begin the day exploring Azerbaijan's capital Baku. The residents stayed behind their 14th-century walls until the 19th century when the Russian empire began exploiting the great oil reserves under the waters of the Caspian Sea. Before entering the old city, visit Martyrs Lane for the site and the beautiful panoramic view of all of Baku. The Old City includes the **Shirvanshah's palace**, the **Maiden Tower**, several **caravansaries**, the **old city walls** and gates, 19th century **St. Bartholomew church**, the nearby **Fountain Square**, and much more. After lunch in the afternoon, head to visit the **Carpet Museum** and **Mini Venice**, then return to the *Hotel* for dinner and overnight. **(B,L,D)**

Friday, September 20
Baku



Begin the morning with a visit to the **UNESCO Petroglyphs** on the Gobustan Peninsula and the nearby Mud Volcanos. After lunch by the Caspian Sea, visit the amazing **Heydar Aliyev Center/Museum**, designed by the world-renowned architect Zaha Hadid. Continue the visit to see the **Zoroastrian Fire Temple** on the city's northern outskirts. After dinner in the Old City, take a walk in Baku's twinkling lights illuminating the night sky, then return to the *Hotel* for dinner and overnight. **(B,L,D)**

Saturday, September 21
Baku - Sheki



Begin the day with a drive to **Sheki**, with stops at the rock-hewn cliffside **tomb of Dir Baba**, an important Sufi Mystic, the **Shemakha**, the former capital of the once powerful Shirvan Khanate from the 6th -15th centuries, see the **Djuma Mosque**, the largest mosque in the Caucasus, dating from the 9th century. High above, overlooking the town, is the **Geddi Gumbez Necropolis**, which contains several unique domed mausoleums of important personages from the Shirvan dynasty. After an earthquake flattened the city, the capital was moved to Baku. Have lunch, then continue to Sheki and transfer to *Sheki Saray Hotel* or similar for check-in and overnight. **(B,L,D)**

Sunday, September 22
Sheki



Sheki is one of Azerbaijan's oldest towns, founded 2,700 years ago. It was an independent Khanate until the 1820s when Russia finally invaded it. The town tour will include **Khan's palace**, the **caravanserai**, and the **local market**. Stop at the nearby **cobblestoned village** of Kish to see the oldest church in the Caucasus, dating back to the 4th century. Return to the *Hotel* for dinner and overnight. **(B,L,D)**

Monday, September 23
Sheki - Signagi - Tbilisi (GEORGIA)



After breakfast, begin the day with a drive to the Georgian border, going through customs and formalities before transferring to the Georgian side. In geographic terms, **Georgia** belongs to neither Europe nor Asia. Culturally, Georgia has language, customs, and traditions uniquely its own. Stop in the royal town of **Signagi**. King Erekle constructed a defensive barrier around town, in the 18th century, with much of its walls and gates remain.

Just outside the city is the idyllic convent of Bodbe dedicated to Saint Nino, an important pilgrimage site where the believers come to drink from the holy water in the spring that burst when Saint Nino prayed here in the 4th century. After lunch, stroll through the picturesque town, then continue the drive to Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia and transfer to *Mercurie Hotel* or similar for check-in, dinner, and overnight. **(B,L,D)**

Tuesday, September 24

Tbilisi



Tbilisi, set on the Mtkvari River, has changed hands any times. The Arabs ruled it for 400 years before King David the Builder defeated them in 1211 and moved the capital here. Overlooking the city is the Narikala Fortress. Tour the **old town** to see its monuments, **picturesque churches, basilicas, synagogue, old baths, fortress**, the main **Cathedral** outside the town, and much more. Take a great view of the old city from the **Metekhi Church of the Virgin**. On Rustaveli Avenue, visit the **State History Museum**, where one of the highlights is the "Gold Room," containing solid Gold artifacts and jewelry from over 2,000 years ago. Return to the *Hotel* for overnight. **(B,L,D)**

Wednesday, September 25

Tbilisi - Gudauri



After breakfast, head to explore the treasures along the Georgian Military Highway. The first stop will be at the **Jvari Monastery**, an impressive structure overlooking the Kura and Aragvi Rivers. Nearby is **Mtskheta** (UNESCO World Heritage), the capital of the Eastern Georgian Kingdom of Iberia from the 3rd Century BC to the 5th century AD. Georgia's conversion to Christianity took place here in 337 AD. The many historical monuments of Mtskheta make up this great UNESCO Site. Continue to the **fortress complex of Ananuri** before heading further north to **Kazbegi**, just a stone's throw from the Russian border.

Head to visit the famous **Tsminda church** high above the town. Access is via 4-wheel drive vehicles, and the views of Kazbegi and the surrounding Caucasus Mountains are magnificent. Upon arrival in **Gudauri**, transfer to the *Marco Polo Hotel* or similar for check-in, dinner and overnight. **(B, L,D)**

Thursday, September 26

Gudauri - Gori - Kutaisi



Begin the day with a drive to **Gori**, once the stronghold of Georgian kings. The town's present claim to fame is that it is the birthplace of Joseph Stalin. Visit the **Stalin** estate, now a **museum**, housing his lifelong artifacts as he grew up to become the leader of the Soviet Union. You will also see and enter his private railway car. Depart on a scenic drive to **Kutaisi**, Georgia's second city. Upon arrival, head to the **Bagrati Cathedral** for a visit. It is an early 11th century built during the reign of King Bagrati III) and the **Gelati Monastery** with its magnificent frescoes (founded in 1106 by King David IV). Both are UNESCO

World Heritage Sites and masterpieces of medieval Georgian architecture. Transfer to the *Best Western Hotel* or similar for check-in & overnight. **(B,L,D)**

Friday, September 27

Kutaisi - Borjomi - Akhaltsikhe



After breakfast, depart for **Borjomi**, the picturesque spa town famous for its mineral waters. Upon arrival, stroll in **Rustaveli**, its picturesque main street, named after Shota Rustaveli, the famous medieval Georgian poet. After lunch, head to **Akhaltsikhe**, the location of **Rabath Castle**, built in the **12th century**. Explore the extensive complex that is surrounded by medieval walls. The Dukes of Jakeli governed this area for centuries. It then fell into the hands of the Ottoman Empire, who ruled here from 1688 to 1828 before finally being invaded by the Russians. Transfer to *Gino Rabath Hotel* within the castle walls for check-in, dinner, and overnight. **(B,L,D)**

Saturday, September 28

Akhaltsikhe - Tbilisi



Begin the day with a drive passing through the beautiful scenery and picturesque villages on the way to **Vardzia**. This unique cave monastery is one of the most dramatic sites in Georgia. The broad cliff face houses a labyrinth of ancient caves with interior passageways, dwellings, and churches. The main building period was the late 12th century, during the reign of Giorgi III and his daughter Queen Tamar. Drive back to Tbilisi via Paravani Lake and transfer to *Mercurie Hotel* or similar for check-in, dinner, and overnight. **(B,L,D)**

Sunday, September 29

Tbilisi (David Gareja)



Begin the day with a visit to **David Gareja**, an important complex of 12 cave monasteries. Begun in the 6th century, it was named after one of the thirteen Syrian founding fathers that lived in these natural caves. By the 12th century, there were over 2,000 monks living here. It was sacked and looted in the 13th century by the Mongols and later overrun by Tamerlane's armies in the 14th century. Return to the *Hotel* in Tbilisi for dinner and overnight. **(B,L,D)**

Monday, September 30

Tbilisi - Tbilisi - Armenia border - via Haghpat Sanahin - Dilijan (ARMENIA)



After breakfast, depart for Armenia, which had a long and challenging history, caught between the Greek, Roman, Persian, and Ottoman Empires. Yerevan was founded in 782 BC under the name Erebuni. In 301 AD, Armenia converted to Christianity under King Tiridates III and adopted it as the state religion, making Armenia the first Christian country. Stop at the **Monasteries** of **Haghpat** and **Sanahin**, two important UNESCO World Heritage Sites built between the 10th and 13th centuries. Enjoy a "welcome lunch" at a local restaurant near the monastery of Haghpat, then continue to **Dilijan** and, upon arrival, transfer to *Best Western Paradise Hotel* or similar for check-in, dinner, and overnight. **(B,L,D)**

Tuesday, October 01



Dilijan - Lake Sevan - Noravank - Khor Virap - Yerevan

Begin the day with a drive to the south of the country, following the path on the Great Silk Road, and visit **Lake Sevan** before continuing along one of the main junctions on the Silk Route, Selim or Varenyes Pass to **Noravank** (a World Heritage Site). Have a BBQ lunch in the grotto near the site, and then tour one of the wineries along the way to Yerevan. If time permits, stop to visit **Khor Virap Monastery**, a place of pilgrimage for Armenians worldwide. Enjoy the stunning views of the biblical Mount Ararat from the monastery, barely a stone's throw away. Continue to the capital **Yerevan**, and transfer to *National Hotel or similar* for check-in, a free evening to explore the city center on own, and overnight at the *Hotel*. **(B,L,D)**

Wednesday, October 02



Yerevan

Yerevan is one of the oldest cities in the world, 29 years older than Rome. Archeologists have discovered inscribed stones (cuneiform inscriptions) that serve as the "birth certificate" of Yerevan, dating the town to more than 2800 years old. Yet, it is more of a contemporary city with colorful and unique architecture, beautiful squares, and parks. On a clear day, one can even see Mount Ararat, a mere 35 miles away, just across the border in Turkey. The city tour will include the **Republic Square**, **Panorama Ground**, the **Genocide Memorial**, the **Opera House**, the **Cascade**, and other city landmarks. Visit either the **History Museum** or the **National Art Gallery**. If time permits, you may want to spend time at the picturesque "Vernissage" **Art Park**, then return to the *Hotel* for dinner and overnight. **(B,L,D)**

Thursday, October 03



Yerevan (Etchmiatsin)

Begin the day with a drive to the must-see, the Catholics of the Armenian **Apostolic Church** and the **Cathedral of Etchmiatsin**; both are UNESCO World Heritage Sites from 301-303 AD. Later in the day, enjoy some free time to explore the city on your own, then return to the *Hotel* for dinner and overnight. **(B,L,D)**

Note: An optional visit to the cognac factory in Ararat for \$ 25.00 pp can be arranged.

Friday, October 04



Yerevan (Garni & Geghard)

Begin the day with a drive to the **village of Garni** to visit the ancient fortress (1st century BC) and the **Hellenistic pagan Temple** dedicated to the Goddess of the Sun, also 1st century. Continue to the **Gueghard Cave Monastery**, another UNESCO World Heritage Site. The name Gueghard derives from the spear a Roman guard used to pierce the side of the crucified Christ. Geghard monastery is uniquely carved into the side of a mountain and is one of the fascinating monuments of Armenia. The structure contains monastic cells, churches, tombs, and "Khachkar" crosses, all hewn into solid rock. These crosses first appeared in the fourth to the seventh centuries. Enjoy a

family-hosted lunch in Garni. Return to Yerevan and head to visit **Matenadaran** - Repository of Ancient Manuscript, yet another UNESCO World Heritage Site housing more than 18,000 illuminated manuscripts. Return to the *Hotel* and gather for a farewell dinner and overnight. **(B,L,D)**

Saturday, October 05



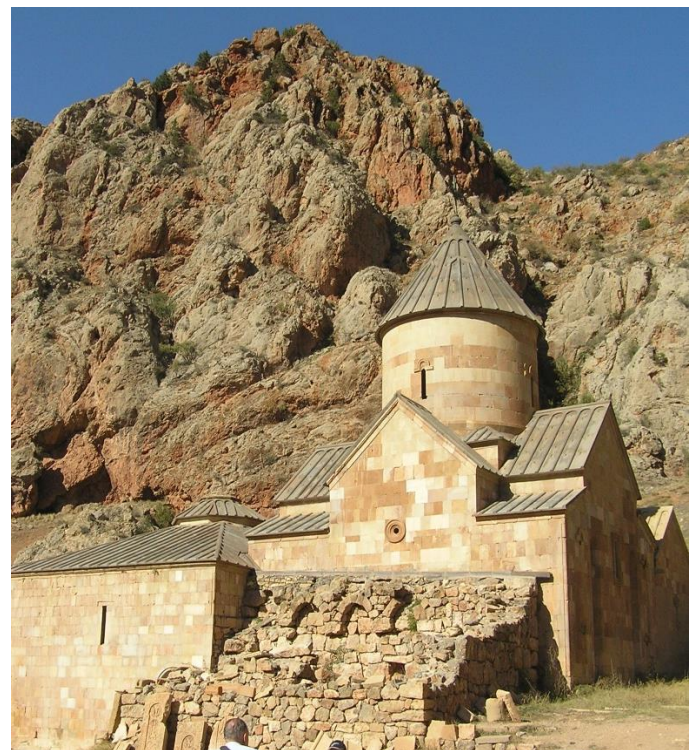
Armenia - USA

Enjoy your breakfast and then transfer to the airport for your flight back to the US. **(B)**

"We reserve the right to change the order of activities/visits or sites due to unexpected events such as flight cancellations or changes of schedule, or any other reasons beyond our control. We will do our best to ensure that any necessary changes when/if needed to meet the needs of our clients".

Special Trip Remarks:

Anyone wishing to join this trip must be physically ready to participate in the day-to-day activities. While not strenuous, the itinerary does include some walking up hills to reach perched monasteries and caves. Border crossings can be tedious and consume time. The hotels are pretty comfortable, but some may lack the luxuries of the west. By signing up for this tour, participants are acknowledging their complete understanding and acceptance of all terms and conditions and are admitting that they are in good physical and mental health and are equipped with an open mind, a sense of adventure, and a tolerant and patient spirit to cope with the tour.



Tour Cost (Land Only):

6 - 7 travelers: \$6,995.00

8 - 12 travelers: \$6,495.00

Per person sharing in double occupancy

Single Supplement: \$1,495.00

Price based on group size minimum of 6 participants and maximum of 12 participants

Trip Grade: II Lodging Level: *_******



Tour Includes:

- Arrival and departure transfer in a private A/C car with meeting & transfers to/from all airports.
- Accommodation in Superior (4*) accommodations in centrally located *Hotels* on bed and breakfast basis.
- English speaking guide in each country.
- Travel by modern, air-conditioned van or minibus.
- Meals as mentioned in the itinerary (B: Breakfast, L: Lunch and D: Dinner).
- Mineral water during the touring days (one bottle per person per day).
- All Tours as per itinerary & entrance fees to the sites and museums mentioned.
- Wine tasting in Georgia and Armenia.
- Porterage of luggage at hotels.

Trip Grade:

II Active: Some hikes, slightly more demanding walks at or to sites, few elevations, comfortable but busy schedule and some long rides and extensive drives.

Lodging Level:

***** Superior:** Lodges and hotels with additional amenities, refined service, and comfort level acceptable to western standards. (4 stars)

Note on Visas:

Armenia and Georgia: No visas are required, but a valid US passport is required to enter the countries.

Azerbaijan: An e-visa must be obtained prior to departure and will be arranged by our agent. A scanned copy of your passport is required to complete this procedure.

Tour does not include:

- International airfare USA-Baku / Armenia-USA.
- Azerbaijan e-visa (\$50.00 obtained online prior to departure - subject to change).
- Gratuities to the guides, drivers, porters etc.
- Any required pre arrival & pre departure PCR tests.
- Items of a personal nature (camera fees, laundry, emails, excess luggage, etc.).
- Transfers if not arriving/departing on tour dates.
- Dayroom/overnights necessitated by changes in airline schedules.
- Trip surcharge to operate below required minimum participants.
- Travel protection insurance. (Highly recommended).

