

HARVARD

ALUMNI TRAVELS



## EXPLORING THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

### AZERBAIJAN, GEORGIA, ARMENIA

*VENERABLE CULTURES, FABULOUS FOOD & WINE, AND TOWERING TERRAIN*

**OCTOBER 17–31, 2024**

## PROGRAM SCHEDULE

The three countries of the South Caucasus, Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia, interlock like puzzle pieces across the Caucasus range at the border of Europe and Asia. They share stunning mountain backdrops, sturdy stone architecture, and a legendary devotion to hospitality. The food and wine of Georgia, which claims to be the first area to cultivate the wine grape, rank among the world's most underrated gastronomic pleasures. Azerbaijan was closely connected with pre-Islamic Persia; it is sometimes said that burning natural gas vents on its Absheron Peninsula inspired Zoroastrian fire rituals. Beautiful Armenia was the first country to adopt Christianity as its official religion, early in the 4th century. Get to know these small but strategic countries, talking with local people, hearing their songs and stories, and learning about their hopes for the future.

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### Highlights

- Discussions with representatives from local NGOs, journalists, entrepreneurs, students, and religious leaders
- Special evening performance in Baku of Azerbaijani mugham, added to UNESCO's List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity
- Private reception at Baku's Villa Petrolea Nobel Brothers' Museum
- Specialist-led tours of impressive Azerbaijani Museum of Carpets, and the UNESCO World Heritage site of ancient petroglyphs, Gobustan
- Experience an authentic "Georgian Table," a joyous celebration of food and wine
- Meet with a religious leader at Echmiadzin, the UNESCO site and spiritual center of Armenia
- A live demonstration of duduk music and its iconic instrument

# SCHEDULE BY DAY

*B=Breakfast, L=Lunch, R=Reception, D=Dinner*

## THURSDAY, OCTOBER 17 DEPART US

Independent departures from the U.S.

## FRIDAY, OCTOBER 18 ARRIVE BAKU, AZERBAIJAN

Arrive in Baku, Azerbaijan this evening and transfer to the hotel for overnight. Due to evening arrivals, program activities will start the following day.

Overnight: *Hilton Baku* or similar (Meals: Aloft)

## SATURDAY, OCTOBER 19 BAKU

Following breakfast, enjoy a lecture by the Harvard Study Leader.

Begin the touring program mid-morning with a visit to the Martyrs' Cemetery, set on a terraced hill above Baku's harbor. This beautiful place pays homage to the 137 people killed during Black January in 1990, when the Soviets sent tanks into the city and fired on Azerbaijani civilians. The attack marked the turning point in the country's drive toward independence. The memorial has expanded to honor the Azerbaijanis who lost their lives in the conflict with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh.

Continue with a walking tour of Baku's Old Town. The old city walls with their medieval gates encircle winding streets, private residences, mosques and madrassahs, carpet merchants, and tiny shops. Stop at the Maiden Tower, the oldest component of Baku's UNESCO-listed district. The 98-foot structure is a beacon to travelers now as it may once have been to sailors.

On a hill above the walled Old Town, the Shirvan Shah Palace complex is part of Baku's UNESCO World Heritage site—along with the Maiden Tower and the Old Town itself. Founded in the 13th century, most of the Shirvan Shah complex was built in the 15th century. Encompassing the royal residence,

mosques and tombs, the complex is a highlight of Azerbaijani architecture.

Following lunch at a local restaurant, take some time to stroll about Fountain Square, enjoying the pedestrian plaza as a place to sit, relax, and people-watch.

The vivid colors and bold designs of Azeri, Caucasian, and Iranian carpets are on display at the National Museum of Azerbaijani Carpets. Tour the extensive collection of carpets dating back as far as the 16th century with a senior museum representative. Learn how Azerbaijani carpets are woven of naturally dyed wool and cotton as weavers give demonstrations of traditional techniques. In 2010 UNESCO added the traditional art of weaving Azerbaijani carpets to the list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

End the day at the Villa Petrolea Nobel Brothers Museum. The history of Baku's oil boom is inextricably bound up with the Nobel family, including Alfred, the man who established the Nobel Prizes. About 12% of the money used to fund the prizes came from his interest in the Branobel Oil Company, founded by siblings Robert and Ludvig Nobel in 1876. Enjoy a reception here with a sparkling wine and caviar tasting.

Afterwards, transfer to a welcome dinner at a local restaurant featuring a performance of Azerbaijani mugham, a musical fusion of Persian and Turkic traditions added to UNESCO's list of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

Overnight: *Hilton Baku* or similar (B, L, D)

## SUNDAY OCTOBER 20 BAKU / DRIVE TO SHEKI

Set out overland this morning for Sheki, stopping in at the Bibi-Heybat Mosque en route.

Continue to Gobustan, added to the UNESCO World Heritage list in 2007. Quarry workers discovered the rock carvings at Gobustan by accident in the 1930s. Since then, the carvings depicting men, women, animals, and artifacts have been the focus of much study and speculation.

Stop in Shemakha, the formal capital of the Shirvan Khanate. Explore the town, including

the 10th century Djuma Mosque, the oldest mosque in the Caucasus.

Arriving in Sheki late this afternoon, check in at the Sheki Saray Hotel. Enjoy dinner at the hotel or a local restaurant this evening.

Overnight: *Sheki Saray Hotel* or similar (B, L, D)

## MONDAY, OCTOBER 21

### Sheki

Sheki is one of the oldest towns in Azerbaijan. Surrounded by beech and oak forests in the foothills of the Greater Caucasus, Sheki was moved in 1772 after a terrible mudslide destroyed the original town. It is home to a well-preserved khan's palace with 500-year-old trees in its rose garden. The town is renowned for its carpets and its special type of sweet halvah.

Embark on a walking tour of this very charming small town, exploring some of its gems, including the caravanserai\*, a visit to the local market, and a chance to meet with a stained-glass maker.

\*The Caravanserai in Sheki is one of the remaining links to Sheki's rich past. The massive stone caravanserai buildings were the inns of the Silk Road, and Sheki's still accommodates travelers today.

In the afternoon, continue to Kish Village. On the bank of the River Kish, little Kish Village is all that remains of the original Sheki before the 18th century mudslide. Since 1998, archaeologists have been excavating near a 6th-century Albanian church that survived the slide. The oldest discoveries have been ceramics dating from the Early Bronze Age of the Kur-Araz culture, about 3000 BC.

Return to Sheki this evening for an independent dinner and evening.

Overnight: *Sheki Saray Hotel* or similar (B, L)

## TUESDAY, OCTOBER 22

### SHEKI / DRIVE TO SIGNAGI, GEORGIA VIA THE KAKHETI WINE REGION

After breakfast, drive to the Georgian border, undergo customs and passport formalities, and transfer to the Georgian coach for the rest of today's journey.

Travel through the Kakheti region, Georgia's wine country. In some of the villages, the houses are backed up against each other, with one family's roof serving as another's terrace, and so on up the hill. This part of Georgia historically suffered from foreign invasions, and the architecture allowed defenders to retreat through the maze of interconnected houses, if necessary.

Arrive at the Alazani River Valley mid-day and stop at the Tibaani vineyards of the Pheasant's Tears Winery, one of the largest and most acclaimed natural wine makers in the country.

Enjoy a walking tour of the vineyards that produce organic wines from varietal grapes that grow well in the Kakhetian micro-region. Tour the cellars and see where the grapes are macerated and aged in huge ceramic vessels lined with beeswax. Called *qvevri*, the clay jugs have been used for winemaking for over 8,000 years in Georgia. Enjoy a tasting of the *qvevri* wines and a wonderful meal served at the on-site restaurant.

Transfer to the hotel in the center of Signagi. Enjoy a free evening to talk a walk and enjoy dinner at a local café is you wish.

Overnight: *Kabadoni Hotel* or similar (B, L)

## WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 23

### SIGNAGI / DRIVE TO TBILISI

Following a lecture by the Harvard Study Leader, explore Signagi, one of Georgia's most scenic towns. Walk through its narrow streets and admire the town's famous wooden balconies, richly carved with lacey ornamentation.

Enjoy panoramic views of the brilliant green of Kizikhi's fertile farmland surrounding the town. In the 18th century, King Erekle II constructed a defensive wall around the hill-town of Signagi. Its towers were named for the surrounding villages, and the townspeople were meant to gather at their tower in times of trouble. The town's location in an agricultural region helped it to grow quickly, and it became an important agricultural center for the Soviet Union. Following the fall of the Soviet Union, Signagi suffered an economic crisis and has since undergone an extensive reconstruction project.

Depart toward Tbilisi with a few stops en route.

A little over a mile from Signagi is the 9th century Bodbe Nunnery, where St. Nino is buried—one of the holiest sites in Georgia. It is said that toward the end of her life she lived as a hermit in the Bodbe Gorge and died here. The working convent overlooks the Alazani valley and was used as a coronation venue by the kings of Kakheti. Its main basilica features some fine frescoes, and its surrounding gardens are refreshing.

For lunch, stop in the village of Qedeli at Lost Ridge, an eco-village tourism development project comprised of a boutique hotel, horse ranch, brewery, and gardens. Enjoy the craft beers made on site and see how traditional Georgian bread is made.

Continue towards Tbilisi, arriving in the early evening. Dinner tonight is on your own with recommendations for your tour director. Tbilisi is brimming with fantastic dining options to choose from.

Overnight: *Tbilisi Marriott Hotel* or similar (B, L)

## THURSDAY, OCTOBER 24 TBILISI

Following a lecture by the Harvard Study Leader, get acquainted with Tbilisi, Georgia's capital city.

Georgia's strip of central lowlands has long been an important link between East and West. Tbilisi is set at the mouth of this passageway, in the Mtkvari River valley. The red-roofed Old Town, its houses sporting carved wooden balconies, sits beneath the 4th century Narikala Fortress on the hill above. Tbilisi was last razed in 1795 by Aga Khan, and most of the current buildings date from that time. The domed sulfur baths and the stone Anchiskhati Church were all that survived.

Take a guided walking tour of central Tbilisi. Begin at Tbilisi's sulfur baths, the earliest of which were probably built during Arab rule in the 7th or 8th centuries, when it was discovered that hot springs are just under the surface in the old part of Tbilisi. In the 13th century there may have been up to 68 baths in Tbilisi; now there are six or seven. Pedestrians can see steam issuing from the dome-shaped underground baths as they pass by.

Today's tour includes views of the Narikala Fortress, the 4th-century citadel built to keep watch over the narrowest point on the Kura River. The hike to the fortress may be undertaken if time permits, but if not, the view from Metekhi Church of the Virgin is perfect. Also visible from many vantage points within today's tour is Mother Georgia, a soaring monument above the city bearing a sword for her enemies and a bowl of wine for her guests.

Visit the 6th-century stone Anchiskhati Basilica, the city's oldest church. Pause at Sioni Cathedral, sheltering the Cross of St. Nino, the woman who brought Christianity to Georgia, and pass by the 19th-century caravanserai built to house traveling merchants.

See the 13th-century Metekhi Church of the Virgin, constructed on an outcropping above the river on the site of David the Builder's former palace.

Following lunch at a local restaurant, return to the hotel briefly.

Next, visit the Lado Gudiashvili Museum for a private tour and reception.

Lado Gudiashvili passed away in 1980, leaving behind a significant collection of artworks including oil paintings, graphics, book illustrations, and designs for theatre and film. Devoting nearly 70 years of his life to his craft, he emerged as a prominent figure in Georgian artistic heritage. His final resting place is the pantheon for writers and public figures on Mt. Mtatsminda, overlooking Tbilisi. The Lado Gudiashvili Foundation was established in May 2011. With its outstanding exhibition spaces, this foundation has become a prominent art venue in the Georgian capital, providing a diverse audience with the opportunity to explore the life and artistic achievements of Lado Gudiashvili. The Exhibition Hall regularly features changing displays of the artist's works, allowing visitors to appreciate creations from different periods of Gudiashvili's career.

Stroll back to the hotel along Rustaveli Avenue, the main street of Tbilisi, and soak up the special atmosphere of Tbilisi.

Dinner this evening will be independent—another wonderful opportunity to experience Georgian cuisine at one of the up-and-coming restaurants the city is becoming known for.

Overnight: *Tbilisi Marriott Hotel* or similar (B, L)

## FRIDAY, OCTOBER 25

### TBILISI / DAY TRIP TO TSEROVANI & GORI

This morning is set aside for a lecture.

Later, travel to the town of Gori, stopping along the way in temporary IDP (internally displaced persons) village, Tserovani. Here, on land owned by the Georgian government, 2200 individual houses were constructed in about a week's time, and thousands of displaced individuals live in small, private cottages. Learn more about the important issue of IDPs in Georgia while here.

Continue to Gori, birthplace of Georgia's most infamous son, Joseph Stalin. Gori's name comes from the Georgian word *goraki*, meaning hill. A 7th-century Georgian chronicle marks the first mention of the fortress, but the surviving walls date from the Middle Ages.

Stalin was born here in December 1879 and lived here until 1883. Stalin's father was a local shoemaker named Vissarion Dzhugashvili. The family's original wooden hut on Stalin Avenue is today the Stalin House Museum. On the grounds of the museum is Stalin's private railway car, used to carry him in style throughout the Soviet Union.

Visit the nearby cave town of Uplistsikhe, meaning Lord's Castle. It was once one of the most important stops along the trade route linking Byzantium with India and China and was primarily inhabited by artisans and merchants. People may have populated the naturally occurring caves before 1000 BC. Some of the caves were used to celebrate early pagan rituals before the country was fully Christianized. Although heavily eroded and damaged by earthquakes, the town is still fascinating to explore.

Return to Tbilisi and enjoy an independent evening.

Overnight: *Tbilisi Marriott Hotel* or similar (B, L)

## SATURDAY, OCTOBER 26

### TBILISI / DAY TRIP TO MTSKHETA AND ANANURI

Today, embark on an exploration of the hidden treasures along the Georgian Military Highway. Completed by Czar Alexander I in

1817, the spectacular highway runs from Tbilisi through rolling green hills and steep arid mountains dotted with ancient stone defensive towers, then over the Krestovy Pass at almost 8,000 feet. Along the way, herds of sheep may spill across the road and old fortress-like churches watch over the villages.

Leaving Tbilisi, the first stop is Jvari Monastery, an imposing structure atop a hill overlooking the confluence of the Kura and Aragvi Rivers. Continue to Mtskheta, a UNESCO World Heritage site. Mtskheta was the capital of the eastern Georgian kingdom of Iberia from the 3rd century BC until the 5th century AD. Because of its location, it was an important market town. As the center of the Iberian civilization, Mtskheta was also significant spiritually and culturally. Georgia's conversion to Christianity took place here in 337 AD and the Orthodox churches built during this period, such as Mtskheta's Svetitskhoveli Cathedral, are considered among the finest in the country.

After lunch, continue along the highway to Ananuri. The Ananuri fortress complex was built by the dukes of the Aragvi Valley in the 17th century to control the road below. Its notched fortress walls contain two churches and a 12th-century watchtower. The old frescoes in the churches are faded, but the carvings around the doorways and on the outside walls are still vibrant. Below the fortress at the foot of the green hills gleams the blue expanse of Zhinvali Reservoir, making this one of Georgia's most beautiful places.

Return to Tbilisi for a dinner of traditional favorites known as a Georgian Table, with an accompanying performance of traditional Georgian polyphonic singing. A Georgian Table experience can last several hours, with dozens of dishes and countless toasts. The table is covered with plates of delicacies balanced on top of each other—chicken in crushed walnut sauce, khachapuri (a savory cheese pie), puff pastries, little meat dumplings called *khinkali*, salads, and marinated vegetables, just to name a few. A large feast, or *supra*, will have a sort of toastmaster, called a *tamada*, who is charged not only with toasting and inviting others to toast, but with telling stories and jokes and sometimes leading songs. Georgia has one of the oldest and most intriguing polyphonic vocal traditions in Europe. Developing independently of Western European rules of

harmony, Georgian vocal music has been passed down by ear for hundreds of years—possibly since the 5th century BC. Its tuning system is based on fifths rather than octaves, giving its choral music a rich yet slightly discordant sound (to western ears). The traditional structure of these old songs incorporates one voice singing the high part, one in the middle and one or two taking the low part, often a drone. Each of Georgia's ethnic regions has its own typical harmony and way of singing.

Overnight: *Tbilisi Marriott Hotel* or similar (B, L, D)

## **SUNDAY, OCTOBER 27** **TBILISI / DRIVE TO YEREVAN,** **ARMENIA**

Following breakfast, depart for the Sadakhlo border with Armenia. After the usual border crossing formalities, transfer to the Armenian vehicle and continue the drive to Yerevan.

Armenia famously claims to be the first country to embrace Christianity as a state religion, and this record informs its history. Powerful old churches, built of huge blocks of red or yellow stone are silhouetted on the hilltops or tucked away in the valleys. Thousands of basalt khachkar crosses, lovingly carved and filigreed memorial stones dating from the 10th century onward, draw the eye towards the east.

Drive through the Lori Region, home to one of the largest wilderness preserves in the South Caucasus, and dotted with remote mountain monasteries.

Stop to visit Haghbat, an introduction to Armenia's ancient spiritual history. Classified as a World Heritage site "Monasteries of Haghpat and Sanahin," this complex was built in the 10th-13th centuries and comprises a monastery, several khachkars (stone crosses), the church and the Sanahin monastic seminary and royal mausoleum.

After lunch at a private home, continue to Yerevan, arriving in the evening. Just off the road between Artashavan and Yerevan, a quiet outdoor monument to the 39 letters of the Armenian alphabet sits in the middle of a field. The freestanding letters were designed and carved by celebrated architect J. Tarosian and unveiled in 2005 to celebrate the 1,600th anniversary of Mesrop Mashtots' creation of

the curvy alphabet. Check in to the hotel for an independent evening.

Dinner is on your own with recommendations. Your hotel's location makes it very easy to take a stroll around central Yerevan and find ample options for dinner at a local restaurant, should you desire it.

Overnight: *Alexander Hotel* or similar (B, L)

## **MONDAY, OCTOBER 28:** **YEREVAN / DAY TRIP TO KHOR** **VIRAP, GARNI, GEGHARD**

This morning, visit the Monastery of Khor Virap, located 37 miles south of Yerevan, and not far from the Turkish border. It is here that Gregory the Illuminator is thought to have been imprisoned along with early Christian preachers. The monastery has been reconstructed and enhanced over time. This vantage point has fantastic views of Mt. Ararat on clear days.

In the afternoon, tour the Temple of Garni, which stands on a cliff near Azat River valley. With walls of huge basalt blocks, the temple was once the summer palace of King Trdat I who built it in the first century AD. Destroyed by an earthquake in 1679, the monument has been restored by Armenian architects in recent years, and work on the third century royal baths and their striking mosaics continues.

Lastly, visit the nearby Geghard, part of the UNESCO World Heritage site "Monastery of Geghard and the Upper Azat Valley." The 12th-13th century monastery, carved into the side of a mountain, is one of the most fascinating monuments in Armenia. The church, built beside the river at the foot of the rock, dates from 1215 and provides access to another building with a roof formed by stalactites. The convent is in a cave adjoining this building; the only way in is through a narrow opening in the roof. A single craftsman spent his entire life decorating and enlarging the cave chamber and its smaller alcove, used for burials. This stunning structure includes monastic cells, churches, tombs, and khachkar crosses all hewn from solid rock. Armenia is famous for these intricately carved stone crosses. They are a uniquely Armenian art form, created in both pagan and Christian periods. Modeled after early wooden crosses, the first khachkar

appeared in the 4th-7th centuries. Here, enjoy a private concert of sacred music.

Enjoy an independent evening. Central Yerevan is filled with new restaurants and cafes and is an enjoyable place to stroll and people watch.

Overnight: *Alexander Hotel* or similar (B, L)

## **TUESDAY, OCTOBER 29 YEREVAN**

Today explore Yerevan itself, the capital of Armenia, and reportedly a city older than Rome.

Yerevan was founded under the name Erebuni in 782 BC. In the 4th century, Armenia became the first country in Europe to adopt Christianity as its official religion. The Armenian peoples' faith, culture and language have managed to survive through centuries of conflict with Arabs, Mongols, Persians, and Turks: Yerevan changed hands 14 times between 1512 and 1735. The city center today includes a wide range of architectural styles as a result of the fusion of Armenian and Russian design.

The layout of the city features a large central square, Republic Square, with broad avenues radiating from it, and a ring of parkland. Mountains surround the city, including the snow-covered peaks of Ararat to the south and the four peaks of Mount Aragats to the northwest. The giant "Cascade" stairway links central Yerevan to the Mother Armenia Statue in Victory Park. The top of the Cascade and along the stairway offer fantastic views of Yerevan and Mt. Ararat on a clear day.

Within the steps of the Cascade, the exciting Cafesjian Museum of Modern Art is built on the extensive collection of Gerard Cafesjian. It focuses on sculpture, glass, and paintings from contemporary artists. Outdoor sculptures include signature pieces by Colombian sculptor Fernando Botero and Barry Flanagan, and indoors a great collection of glass art features pieces by Dale Chihuly and the Czech duo, Stanislav Libenský and Jaroslava Brychtová.

Also visit the Genocide Memorial, standing in a park at the top of Tsitsernakeberg, or "Swallow Castle." According to scholarly estimates, over one million Armenians perished due to policies of the last Ottoman

government between 1914 and 1918. Thousands were deported to Syria and faced consequent starvation, while others were methodically massacred. Many of the remaining Armenians fled to other countries in what is now called the Armenian Diaspora. Visit the underground museum at the memorial site to learn more about this harrowing period of history in Armenia.

Visit one of Armenia's most historic museums, the Matenadaran. A vast collection of more than 17,000 manuscripts and nearly 300,000 archival documents, the Matenadaran has existed since the 5th century and is one of the world's oldest book depositories. The front of the hill-top building overlooking the city has statues of great Armenian scholars, most notably the inventor of the Armenian alphabet, St. Mesrop Mashtots, in honor of whom the Matenadaran received its own name.

Time may permit to make a brief visit on your own to the nearby Vernissage, the open-air market. This is the best opportunity in Yerevan for shopping and people watching. Here you will find a wide assortment of woodcarvings, ceramics, jewelry, paintings, and other high-quality souvenirs.

Enjoy a free evening to explore independently.

Overnight: *Alexander Hotel* or similar (B, L)

## **WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 30 YEREVAN / DAY TRIP TO ECHMIADZIN**

The morning is set aside for a lecture by the Harvard Study Leader.

Afterwards, explore Armenia's religious history. Drive to the town of Echmiadzin, founded as Vargsapat in 117 AD and once the capital of Armenia. It is best known as the spiritual center of Armenia and the seat of the Patriarch of the Armenian Apostolic Church. It is a special place of pilgrimage for Christian Armenians the world over. It was here that St. Gregory the Illuminator (who converted Armenian King Trdat III to Christianity at the end of the second century) had a vision of Christ descending to Earth, and on this spot the Cathedral at Echmiadzin was built in 301.

Also make a stop at the 7th-century Hripsimeh Martyria Church. It is sometimes possible to see the underground crypt where Zoroastrian

fire rituals were once performed. The church complex also includes the ruins of the 7th-century Zvartnots Cathedral. In its day, Zvartnots was the largest round church in the world. It was sacked in the 10th century by Arab invaders, possibly because they wanted no building higher than their own mosque.

Finish the day's program back in Yerevan with an opportunity to learn about the duduk, Armenia's national instrument. The sound of this double-reeded flute made from apricot wood is unmistakably tied to the region. Listen to an experienced duduk player talk about this iconic instrument and its origins, while receiving a live demonstration of duduk music.

This evening, toast your journey at a festive farewell dinner.

Overnight: *Alexander Hotel* or similar (B, L, D)

## **THURSDAY, OCTOBER 31**

### **DEPART YEREVAN**

The tour concludes this morning with transfers to the airport for international departures.

(B—air schedules permitting)