

The Caucasus

Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia

Departs 31st May 2024

Blue Dot Travel



Itinerary correct as at 15 Mar 2024, but subject to change. ALL flights to be confirmed: www.bluedottravel.com.au



THE CAUCASUS AZERBAIJAN, GEORGIA AND ARMENIA

At the crossroads of Asia and Eastern Europe, between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea, the Caucasus is a unique travel destination. Few tourists visit this fascinating region but those who do are struck by its beauty, culture and history. On this trip, you'll pass snow-capped mountains, glaciers and gorges; dine with local families; and explore rock-hewn villages, mosques and UNESCO World Heritage-listed monasteries and churches.

Azerbaijan is a country boasting a history that dates back to prehistoric times and evidence of stone-age settlements. From the dynamic capital city of Baku to charming villages filled with stone buildings and cobblestone streets, to the ancient city Sheki, it is a country of contrasts. Azerbaijan was an important part of the Great Silk Route, and nowadays its economy is based on the abundance of oil and gas reserves. It is home to the UNESCO World Heritage-listed rock art site Gobustan and is the birthplace of the ancient Zoroastrian religion.

Georgia has an ancient culture and a unique alphabet found nowhere else in the world. Over the centuries all her neighbours have coveted over her land. Turks, Persians, Mongols, Arabia and the Russians have invaded and periodical civil war has also left its mark. But nowadays, it is a peaceful country becoming known for its quality wines and spectacular scenery. The capital, Tbilisi, has a modern European vibe, with cosy cafes, art galleries and theatres. Yet, leave the city and it may feel like travelling in medieval times, amongst palaces, castles, fortresses and rock-hewn villages. The UNESCO World Heritage-listed ancient capital Mtskheta sits at the confluence of the Aragvi River, and its 11th-century Svetitskhoveli Cathedral is where Christ's robe was buried. Admire the views of snow-capped mountains, gorges and glaciers as we travel through the country and the higher Caucasus Mountain range, reaching heights of over 5,000 metres.

This fascinating region has been overlooked by travellers for too long. Now is the time to visit, as it emerges as a destination for adventurous travellers.



Day 1, Friday 31st May IN TRANSIT

Depart Australia for Baku, the capital city of Azerbaijan. Flights (not included in your tour cost) will be confirmed but will likely be via Doha or Dubai.

Meals in flight

Day 2, Saturday 1st June ARRIVAL AND OLD CITY TOUR

On arrival, your guide will meet you at the airport and allow you to check in to the hotel for three nights. (Flight arrival TBA). After a freshen-up, your tour



starts with a visit to the Highland Park. Highland Park is located on a hill in the western part of the city. This is the best place to see the city and Baku Bay. Then visit the Old City - with its fortified walls, historic buildings and narrow cobbled streets. Guests will appreciate the main attractions of the Old Town, including the Palace of the Shirvanshah (external view), the city's symbol - Maiden Tower (external view), Karvansarays, mosques, Old Town walls, preserved till nowadays, narrow, cobbled streets and

numerous labyrinths show full flavour and historical value of Baku and its citizens. There's a welcome dinner planned at a local restaurant. *D*



Day 3, Sunday 2nd June GOBUSTAN AND HEYDAR ALIYEV CENTRE

After breakfast, we'll drive to Gobustan. The reserve is well known for its perfectly preserved rock paintings - petroglyphs - a kind of artistic "archive" of human evolution on the Earth. Gobustan Rocks reflect the history of this region for nearly 15,000 years - from the end of the era of the Upper Paleolithic till the Middle Ages. Azerbaijani scientists have found, described and studied more than 4,000 petroglyphs (rock painting in the stone carving art), and this important work continues. You'll also visit the interactive museum with the same name, where, with the help of special programs and multimedia touch screens, you will hear more about the flora and fauna of Gobustan. After this visit, drive to the fascinating mini mud volcanos just north of the city, heading back to Baku. The tour visits the Heydar Aliyev Center, built by world-famous architect Zaha Hadid. An internationally recognised architectural work, the building of the Heydar Aliyev Center has become a signature landmark of modern Baku due to its innovative and cutting-edge design. Dinner at a local restaurant tonight. *B/D*



Day 4, Monday 3rd June **BAKU – GUBA – KHYNALIQ – KRASNAYA SLOBODA**

After an early breakfast, you'll head north for a fascinating day trip. Guba is located on the northeastern slopes of Mount Shahdag in the Greater Caucasus, at 600 m above sea level, on the banks of the river Gudial, 168 km from Baku. Even though Guba is now a small town, in the Middle Ages, it was the capital of Guba Khanate, and a thriving centre. Krasnaya Sloboda is a unique place in the Caucasus,



where 3,000 mountain Jews live compactly. This settlement has existed in Guba since the 13th century. In 1742, the local ruler Falihan permitted the Jews, persecuted

by Islamic fundamentalists, to settle on the left bank of the mountain river Kudial-chai opposite the city itself. There are seven synagogues in the village.

After lunch, a trip to the Khynalyg village (visiting of Khynalyg is possible only under appropriate weather conditions). Khynalig is located high in the Caucasus mountains, at 2350 m above sea level in the Guba region. Khynalygs have been living in the Caucasus for thousands of years. The village is inhabited by 2,000 light-skinned, blue-eyed people who consider themselves descendants of the Prophet Noah. Guests can take a short walk around the village. In good weather, the slopes offer a view of the snow-capped peaks of the Caucasus. Then, drive to Baku for dinner at the hotel. **B/D**



Day 5, Tuesday 4th June **BAKU – LAHIJ – SHEKI**

Check out from the hotel after breakfast and drive to the North regions of Azerbaijan. We head north-west of Azerbaijan through the Caucasus Mountains. The dry landscape around Baku was replaced by dense forest mountains. We'll visit Lahij village in Ismayilly district (subject to weather conditions). Most of the 2,000 people living in Lahij are involved in ancient crafts such as engraved copper work and carpet weaving. In the mid-19th century, there were more than 200 workshops in Lahij. Traders discovered Lahij crafts many centuries ago, and sold them for high prices at bazaars in Baghdad [now Iraq], Shiraz [now Iran] and other Middle Eastern cities. Lunch in the local guest house in Lahij. Then, arrive into Sheki and have a tea stop with the locals. In Sheki, visit the Albanian church, which is located in Kish village. As the legend says, this church is the first Christian church built not only on the territory of Caucasian Albania but in general - in the whole of

Transcaucasia. Dinner at a local restaurant near the hotel. Check-in for one night in Sheki. **B/L/D**



Day 6, Wednesday 5th June **SHEKI CITY TOUR – GEORGIAN BORDER – TBILISI**

Check out the hotel after breakfast for a tour of Sheki - one of Azerbaijan's most famous and ancient places. Situated in 700 m (2297 ft.) above sea level, the city, like an amphitheatre, is surrounded by mountains and forests of oak trees. This ancient city was long famed as a silk Centre and an important stop on the Great Silk Route. We'll start our Sheki tour by visiting the 18th-century Khan's summer palace (entry) with magnificent frescos and exquisite stained-glass work. We will visit "Shebeke" workshop, where the tourists will meet with local craftsmen who will tell us about "Shebeke" making. After, we will visit the workshop of Sheki baklava, which is famous all over Azerbaijan. At around 2.00 pm, we'll be dropped at the Georgian Border to be collected by our new guide. Be prepared for a 1km walk through no-mans land with your luggage.

WELCOME TO GEORGIA

Next, we drive to Signaghi. The city was established in the XVIII century and was fortified with a 5 km long wall, which is still evident today. Modern Signaghi is a beautiful architectural site of combined Georgian and Italian design. You can walk in the parks and cobbled streets, aligned with the local handicraft studios and markets. Visit a local wine cellar, where we can taste different varieties of Georgian wines. Then on to Tbilisi. Dinner at a local restaurant. **B/D**



Day 7, Thursday 6th June **TBILISI**

This morning brings a tour of Tbilisi, including the National Museum and the Sameba Cathedral, the largest in the Caucasus. Discover the fashionably cozy cafes and art galleries of Shardeni Street before we visit the cosmopolitan and arty scene of Rustaveli Avenue. In the afternoon, a visit to Old Tbilisi. (Note, you can explore Tbilisi at leisure when returning. Dinner is at a local restaurant, and then we'll take a short walking tour across the Freedom Bridge to see the lights at night. **B/D**

Day 8, Friday 7th June **KAZBEGI VIA MTSKHETA AND ANANURI**

After breakfast, take a short drive to Mtskheta, a UNESCO-listed site and an ancient capital of the Georgian Kingdom from the 3rd Century BC. We will also visit the magnificent C11th Svetitskhoveli Cathedral, where Christ's robe was buried, and the C6th Jvari monastery sitting high on a rocky mountaintop. The stunning drive along the Tergi River leads to Kazbegi, which passes Ananuri Castle and Jinvali water reservoir. Dinner is planned back at the hotel in Kazbegi. **B/D**



**Day 9,
Saturday
8th June
KAZBEGI**

After breakfast, we'll transfer to 4WD vehicles to drive to Gergeti Trinity Church, located at an

altitude of 2170m. This is one of the great sights of Georgia. Weather permitting, catch a glimpse of Mt Kazbegi, one of the highest mountains of Eurasia at 5047m. Afterwards, drive to the Dariali Gorge and have a short trekking tour of the Gveleti waterfall. Return to the hotel for a free afternoon to hit the bar or relax. Dinner is at the hotel. **B/D**



**Day 10, Sunday 9th June
KAZBEGI – KUTAISI VIA GORI AND
UPLISTSIKHE**

If you don't mind rising early, grab your camera and, weather permitting, take a photo of the sun rising on Mt Kazbegi. After breakfast, we'll drive to the 11th-century city of Gori and visit the Joseph Stalin Museum plus his personal train. We'll also see the home where he was raised. Then, a drive to nearby Uplistsikhe, an ancient rock-hewn town known as "The Lord's Fortress". Built high on the rocky left bank of the Mtkvari River, some structures date from 2000 BC through to the late Middle Ages, and it is also notable for its unique combination of different styles of rock-cut cultures. (Some of the walking here is a little steep, and there is also a tunnel to walk through (if open), so for those who don't like enclosed spaces, you may want to wait at the café below. Later we'll arrive in Kutaisi – the country's second-largest city and former capital. Check in to the hotel for a two-night stay and dinner. **B/D**



**Day 11, Monday 10th June
KUTAISI**

We'll tour Kutaisi this morning, visiting the Bagrati Cathedral and impressive Byzantine Gelati Monastery, a 12th-century masterpiece of the Georgian Golden Age that is now a UNESCO World Heritage site. Archaeological evidence indicates Kutaisi functioned as the capital of the ancient Colchis kingdom and at the end of 2012, it resumed its role when re-established as Georgia's governing city with the new parliament building designed by Spanish architect, Alberto Domingo Kabo. **B/D**



**Day 12, Tuesday 11th June
KUTAISI – MESTIA VIA ENGURI DAM**

After breakfast, we will drive to the Samegrelo Region and visit the Martvili Canyon, one of Georgia's best nature sites. 700 m long stone paved circular route starts from Martvili Canyon visitor centre and crosses the Dadiani historical trail. There are 2 bridges, 3

platform views and a historical 30 steps stairs constructed of large limestone boulders. Next, we take a boat tour in Martvili Canyon before heading to the Svaneti region, one of the tour's highlights. The scenic drive to Mestia in the Svaneti region of high mountains and glaciers is stunning. (Consider some snacks for the road trip, as there aren't many places to stop for lunch). Before arriving in Mestia, we'll visit the Enguri Dam, which, at 271 metres, is the second-highest concrete arch dam in the world and creates a reservoir in the picturesque gorges of Samegrelo and Svaneti mountains. Check in to the hotel for dinner and a four-night stay. **B/D**



**Day 13,
Wednesday
12th June
MESTIA**

After breakfast, the group will drive to the Chalaadi glacier (20 minutes from the hotel) for a challenging walk to see nature at its best (about 3.5 hours return, with some sections rated hard). This walk is only for active travellers. Lunch is arranged at a local restaurant in Mestia, and the afternoon is free before dinner. Those not up to the walk can stay at the lodge and meet the group for lunch or visit the small township. **B/L/D**



**Day 14, Thursday 13th June
DAY TRIP TO USHGULI**

Cameras ready! Today is another highlight. The group will take the most scenic drive by 4WD Jeeps to UNESCO-listed Ushguli, a community of four villages which, at 2200m, is considered Europe's most populated place. We'll have lunch at a local guesthouse and learn how to make the local specialty of cheese and kubdari. Visit the local ethnographic museum before driving to Nakipari to visit the 12th-century St George's church. If you have the chance, take a walk through a few of the villages and meet some of the locals. On the way back to Mestia, drive to Tetnuldi ski resort, which offers wonderful views. Return to Mestia for dinner. **B/L/D**



**Day 15, Friday 14th June
MESTIA**

This morning, we'll visit Mestia's Ethnographic and Machubi Museums. In the afternoon, take the cable car (weather permitting) to the top of Hatsvali Mountain ski resort and enjoy the panoramic mountain views – this is a great option for lunch (at your own expense). There may be an hour or two of free time in Mestia, and a great tip is to watch a local Georgian movie in the small café/cinema just 5 minutes from the centre of town, overlooking the river. Your guide will provide details. **B/D**



**Day 16,
Saturday**

15th June MESTIA – BATUMI

Today, we'll drive to Batumi, located on the Black Sea and arguably Georgia's most beautiful city.

(It's almost opposite Istanbul if you look due west). We'll stop for a pick-up lunch at Zugdidi (or nearby). Of the several sculptural artworks of particular interest is the "Ali and Nino" statue by Georgian sculptor Tamara Kvesitadze – two towering human forms made out of metallic discs and constantly on the move. The figures draw closer and kiss before continuing their path and passing through one another, eventually parting and facing in opposite directions, tragically representing a Muslim boy and Christian girl separated by the invasion of Russia. Check in to the hotel for a two-night stay with dinner at a local restaurant. If you're up for it, stroll around the hotel to get a feel for the city at night. **B/D**



**Day 17,
Sunday 16th**

June BATUMI

This morning we'll stroll Batumi's busy boulevard, a park strip fronting the main beach –

with its trees, paths, fountains, cafes and beach bars, it's the life and soul of Batumi. We'll also walk through the lovely botanical gardens, which will take about 2 hours (up and down hills), and take in some lovely views over the Black Sea. Later, enjoy a short boat trip on the Black Sea to view the city from the water. **B/D**



**Day 18, Monday 17th June
BORJOMI**

Today is mainly a day of transfers. After breakfast, we'll drive to Borjomi. On arrival at our hotel, check in and stroll around the small township, including the gardens and waterfall. Make sure you try the "unusual" warm spring water. About 3.5 km from the entrance of Borjomi Central Park, you will discover a treasure of nature - Hot Sulphur Pools between the forest and the rocky river. Sulphur Pools - an average temperature of 32-38 C° - are very beneficial for health. The territory has free Wi-Fi, a café-bar, changing rooms and showers. **B/D**



**Day 19, Tuesday 18th June
BORJOMI TO AKHALTSIKHE AND VARDZIA
CAVE**

After breakfast, we'll travel to Vardzia, a rock-hewn complex on the bank of the river Mtkvari, founded in

the 12th and 13th centuries. Initially planned as a town fortress, the complex became a well-fortified monastery that played a significant role in the country's political, cultural, educational and spiritual life. In the middle of the complex is a Church of Assumption, richly decorated with mural paintings. Note that there is some uphill and cave walking, which could be considered challenging and not for everyone. (Even if the local minibus takes you up the hill, there will be about 500 metres to walk, mostly uphill). After the excursion, we'll have lunch at a local restaurant in Vardzia. Then, drive to Akhaltsikhe and visit the Rabati fortress, the town's main sight. Return to Borjomi. **B/L/D**



**Day 20, Wednesday 19th June
BORJOMI TO TBILISI**

After breakfast, transfer from Borjomi back to Tbilisi, which takes about 2 hours. Today is free to enjoy the sights of Tbilisi or to shop and mix it with the locals in the area right near the hotel. There are many things to see and do, and your tour leader will provide options. Note that today is at your own leisure and not guided or hosted. Dinner at a local restaurant. **B/D**

**Day 21, Thursday 20th June
TBILISI TO BAVRA BORDER**

After breakfast, we'll transfer to the Armenia border. Today is mainly a day of driving. After border formalities, there will be a change of transport and guide. Arrive at Bavra late in the afternoon. (Note: there is a 500-metre walk into "no man's" land between borders, and you must carry your luggage along a bumpy road as there is no transport option).

WELCOME TO ARMENIA

In the afternoon, we'll arrive in Gyumri - the second largest city in Armenia and an important cultural centre in the late 19th and early 20th century. We'll see the historical centre of Alexandropol, which has many traditional 19th-century houses, and visit a museum in one of them. Check into the hotel (which is ultra-kitsch) for a lovely dinner and an overnight stay. **B/D**



**Day 22, Friday 21st June
TO YEREVAN VIA EJMIATSIN**

Breakfast starts around 8.30 am at this hotel, so we suggest you walk through the local markets near the hotel if you are an early riser. Chat with the friendly locals with perhaps some hand signals and a smile. If you need currency, ask the hotel manager for the local bank manager to come to the hotel – they offer great service. After breakfast, we'll drive to Ejmiatsin

and visit the main cathedral and Hripsime church. Ejmiatzin means “the coming of the only begotten” because it is said Jesus descended here from heaven to show where he wanted a church to be built. Continue to beautiful Yerevan and check into the hotel for a three-night stay. Time permitting, stroll around the hotel as it's very safe and has many shops, cafés and parks. Dinner is at a traditional restaurant where you can taste national Armenian cuisine. **B/D**

 **Day 23, Saturday 22nd June
YEREVAN AND EXCURSION TO GEGHARD
AND GARNI TEMPLE**

Today take an orientation drive around Yerevan city and visit the manuscript museum, home to one of the world's richest depositories of medieval documents and books spanning many subjects and in many



languages. Make the short drive to the Geghard Monastery, whose name derives from the legendary lance used to pierce the body of Christ and housed here for centuries.

Though the exact foundation of the monastery is unknown, the present complex was built in the mid-13th century. Enjoy a choir performance before walking along the canyon, past the beautiful 9th-century basalt bridge over the Azat River. Visit Garni, a pagan Temple built in the 1st century. We'll stop for a late lunch at a local family's home (Abelyan's House), and be show how they make their delicious bread! Return to Yerevan for dinner at a local restaurant. **B/L/D**

 **Day 24, Sunday 23rd June
YEREVAN AND SURROUNDS**

Start today's tour of Yerevan city with a short drive to Khor Vira Monastery, where Gregory the Illuminator, who introduced Christianity to Armenia, was imprisoned for about 13 years. Enjoy the spectacular view of the sacred Ararat Mountain, an immortal symbol of Armenia (now on Turkish soil). Back in town, visit the history museum in Republic Square to gain a good general understanding of the history and culture of Armenia and its people. Then we'll drive to the Genocide museum, which can be very emotional but a must-see as it's a very important part of the country's recent history. Back mid-afternoon to the hotel. Dinner is at leisure tonight with many great local



options. A good tip would be to walk down to the square past the opera house, where you have many choices! **B**

 **Day 25, Monday 24th June
TO DILIJAN VIA SEVAN AND GOSHAVANK**

Depart Yerevan for Lake Sevan, one of the world's largest high-altitude lakes at 2000 metres above sea level and a popular vacation spot. Discover the beautiful church on the hilltop (about 250 steps up). Then, stop at a local bakery to buy lunch. Visit the local museum in Dilijan to learn about the region's history before departing for the impressive 12th-13th century Goshavank monastery. Dinner tonight is at the hotel. **B/D**



 **Day 26, Tuesday 25th June
HAGHPAT ALAVERDI AND YEREVAN**

The first stop today is at the UNESCO-listed medieval Haghpat Monastery, built halfway up a hillside on a mountain cirque – when not wreathed in clouds, the views are lovely. The monastery's oldest Holy Cross Church structure was built before 1000 AD. Then, drive back to Yerevan. **B/D**



**Day 27, Wednesday 26th June
DEPARTURE**

After breakfast, we'll transfer to the airport for the flight home to Australia, arriving home the following day. **B**



Icon indicates a day where there is **moderate physical exertion**. A basic level of fitness is required: eg. A trek over 'mostly flat' terrain or climbing several flights of steps without the support of handrails or elevators.



Icon indicates a day where there is a **particularly active section**. A good level of fitness is required: eg. A longer trek over non-groomed, uneven terrain, or ascending to reach a panorama. May also include exposure to higher altitude. **An alternate activity may be offered if you choose to sit out an active section.** Please call - we are happy to discuss each tour in more detail.