

Women's Travel Group: Caucasus

Azerbaijan • Georgia • Armenia: full of UNESCO Heritage Sites, mountain scenery, exotic trading villages, wines and fine cuisine This trip is suitable to anyone who can walk on cobbled streets. If you have difficulty, ask our guide for alternatives.

October 9-20, 2021



Overview Daily Itinerary

Day 1, Sat, Oct 9	Depart USA
Day 2, Sun, Oct 10	Arrive Baku, Azerbaijan
Day 3, Mon, Oct 11	Baku
Day 4, Tue, Oct 12	Baku • drive to Sheki
Day 5, Wed, Oct 13	Sheki
Day 6, Thu, Oct 14	Sheki • drive to Telavi, Georgia
Day 7, Fri, Oct 15	Telavi • drive to Tbilisi
Day 8, Sat, Oct 16	Tbilisi
Day 9, Sun, Oct 17	Tbilisi • drive to Yerevan, Armenia
Day 10, Mon, Oct 18	Yerevan
Day 11, Tue, Oct 19	Yerevan
Day 12, Wed, Oct 20	Depart Yerevan

Descriptive Daily Itinerary

Day 1, Sat, Oct 9

Depart USA

Depart today on international flights bound for Baku, Azerbaijan.

Meals: in flight

Day 2, Sun, Oct 10

Arrive Baku, Azerbaijan

Upon arrival to Baku, transfer to centrally located hotel.

Meals: in flight



Shah Palace Hotel or similar

The boutique Shah Palace Hotel is located in the Old Town, and features a fine restaurant with terrace dining, a cafe and a stylish wine bar, a fitness center with sauna and Turkish bath. The rooms include TV, air conditioning, WiFi, minibar, tea/coffee set, safe, bathrobe and hair dryer.

Day 3, Mon, Oct 11 Baku

AMtake a walking tour of **Baku's Old Town**. It is completely encircled by the old city walls with medieval gates. The winding streets and alleyways are home to private residences, mosques and madrassahs, carpet merchants and tiny shops. The aura of the past that permeates the town rewards with surprising glimpses of a bygone era.

On a hill above the walled Old Town, the **Shirvan Shah Palace** complex is part of a UNESCO World Heritage Site, along with the Maiden Tower and Old Town. Founded in the 13th century, most of Shirvan Shah complex was built in the 15th century. Encompassing the royal residence, mosques and tombs, the complex is a highlight of Azerbaijani architecture.



The vivid colors and bold designs of Azeri, Caucasian and Iranian carpets are on display at the **National Museum of Azerbaijani Carpets**, a modern building designed to resemble a rolled-up carpet. The extensive collection of carpets dates back to the 16th century. Learn how traditional Azerbaijani carpets are woven of naturally-dyed wool and cotton. Weavers give demonstrations of traditional techniques. Regional differences and stylistic details are highlighted, revealing unite practical value, artistic merit, historical significance and beauty. In 2010 UNESCO

added traditional weaving of Azerbaijani carpets to Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

Tour the interior of the **Heydar Aliyev Cultural Center**, the swooping architectural work landmark of modern Baku. Opened in 2012, the center includes an innovative performing arts auditorium and spaces for major art exhibitions. The 619,000-square-foot building was designed by famed Iraqi-British architect Zaha Hadid, one of the most influential female architects of the 20th and 21st century.

Gather this evening for a **festive welcome dinner**. *Meals: B, L, D*

Day 4, Tue, Oct 12 Baku • drive to Sheki

Head overland past Baku's oilfields to **Shemakha**. A renowned grape growing and winemaking district, Shemakha was the major commercial center of western Azerbaijan. Present-day Shemakha is known for finely woven carpets and the 10th-century Djuma Mosque, the oldest mosque in the Caucasus. Stop for lunch and **explore the town**, passing by the recently completed Friday Mosque, built on the site of one of the oldest mosques in the Caucasus. Continue on in the afternoon, arriving to Sheki in time for dinner and overnight.

Meals: B, L, D

Sheki Saray Hotel

One of the most modern hotels in Sheki, Sheki Saray offers rooms furnished in earth tones with comfortable furniture. Each room is equipped with TV, free wifi, climate control, a minibar, and private balcony. The Restaurant is known for gourmet regional and European cuisine. Guests relax at the Buta Bar, a full bar/lounge.

Day 5, Wed, Oct 13 Sheki

Sheki is one of the oldest towns in Azerbaijan, claiming foundation 2,700 years ago. Set in the foothills of the Greater Caucasus and surrounded by forests, Sheki was moved in 1772 after a mudslide destroyed the original town. Embark on a walking tour of the town, exploring some of its gems including local crafts market, where old-fashioned manufacturing is alive, and stop in a local bakery to sample baklava or halvah.



The **Historic City of Sheki** was added to the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2019. It is home to a well-preserved khan's palace (also a UNESCO World Heritage Site) with 500-year-old trees in its rose garden. The town is renowned for its carpets and its special type of sweet halvah. Visit the mosaic-covered **khan's summer palace** with brilliant stained glass work, and fortress that surrounds the palace. The beautiful building was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2019. Small museums crafts and history are in the complex.

Continue on 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 a 6th century Albanian church that survived. The oldest discoveries are ceramics dating from the Early Bronze Age about 3000 BC.

Return to Sheki at the end of the day.

Meals: B, L, D

Day 6, Thu, Oct 14 **Sheki • drive to Telavi, Georgia**

Get an early start and head overland towards the Georgian border. At the border, meet our Georgian guide and driver, and continue to the Kakheti grape growing region.

Stop in **Tibaani Vineyards**, owned by the Pheasant's Tears Winery. Enjoy a walk through the vineyards and visit the cellars where grapes are macerated and aged in huge ceramic vessels lined with beeswax in a system over 8,000 yrs old. Afterwards enjoy **lunch and a wine tasting at the Crazy Pomegranate Restaurant** on site.



This afternoon, explore **Signagi**. King Erekle II constructed a defensive wall around the hill-town of Signagi in the 18th century. Wander the narrow streets and admire the richly carved balconies and the green valleys below.

A little over a mile from Signagi is 9th century **Bodbe Nunnery**, where St. Nino is buried. 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. Some of the nuns may speak English. Continue on to Telavi for dinner and overnight.



Meals: B, L, D

Chateau Mere or similar

The Château Meré complex near Telavi features a nice restaurant, swimming pool and gift shop a winery and stables. The spacious rooms are fitted with antique-style furniture and include all the usual amenities, rounded out by WiFi.

Day 7, Fri, Oct 15 **Telavi • drive to Tbilisi**

Visit the **Alaverdi Monastery and Cathedral**, one of the tallest churches in Georgia and one of the most striking. The village of Alvani is a gateway to the spectacular mountainous province of Tusheti.

Stop in at the workshop of a ceramicist who makes qvevri, the 200 to 900-gallon earthenware vessels used for Georgian wines. The ceramicist will demonstrate and explain the qvevri-making process and present the resulting vessels. Walk through the town of **Telavi**,

the administrative and cultural center of Georgia's wine-growing region. The town has been in existence from at least the 1st century, when it was a stop on one of the trade routes from the Middle East to Europe. Telavi is home to the only well-preserved palace in Georgia, the 17th century castle of Herekle II.

Enjoy a visit to the home of chef Sopo Gorgadze for lunch. Her husband makes four different types of cheese from their cow and goats, using French and Italian technology. They make about 10 kilos of cheese a day, including their specialty, Bona, made from pasteurized goat cheese and named after their first goat, Bona. Enjoy wonderfully creative fresh-cooked meals featuring their cheeses and produce.

Tsinandali Village is best known for the **family estate of Alexander Chavchavadze**. A 19th century Georgian aristocrat and poet, Chavchavadze managed to serve admirably in the Imperial Russian army during the times he wasn't fighting Russia for Georgian independence. His estate was a center of the intellectual life. Here he and his father founded the first and foremost winery in the country, which still produces dry white Tsinandali wine. His mansion is a museum in honor of the poet and hero.



End the day with dinner in Tbilisi.
Meals: B, L, D

Marriott Courtyard Hotel or similar

Located in the city center within walking distance of galleries, gardens, museums and other attractions, four star Marriott Courtyard Hotel offers spacious and comfortable accommodations. All rooms include wireless Internet, individual climate control, ironing board, safe and hair dryer. Enjoy the hotel's La Brasserie Restaurant with international cuisine and famous Georgian wine, as well as the onsite fitness center.

Day 8, Sat, Oct 16 Tbilisi

Today explore Georgia's capital city, **Tbilisi**. 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 city was ruled by the Arabs for 400 years before King David the Builder defeated them in 1121 and moved his capital here from Kutaisi. The Georgian king fostered tolerance for Tbilisi's Arab population, and the city still has a multiethnic atmosphere.

Visit the Simon Janashia Museum, a component of **Georgia's National Museum**, for a look at some of the country's significant archaeological finds. Visitors can see one of the largest collections of ancient gold decorative arts – 5th century BC golden jewelry and artifacts discovered in a tomb in Akhlagori – and a golden trove of treasures from 3,000-year-old burial

mounds of Trialeti culture. The most famous exhibit, however, may be the 1.8-million-year-old Homo erectus skulls unearthed at Dmanisi, Georgia, from 1991-2005.

Explore the oldest part of the charming town of Tbilisi. Proceed walking towards Gabriadz's leaning clock tower. Visit the Anchiskhati Basilica and then continue walking to the Maidan and the Abanotubani Historic District, where famous Sulfur Baths are located.

View Narikala Castle and walk towards the Mother of Georgia Statue to enjoy lovely views. Take a walk down the slope to visit Betlemi Street and its famous stairs, continue walking through pedestrian streets towards Kote Apekhi Street and then on to Freedom Square.



Browse the wonderful high-quality handcrafted goods at Gallery 27. Set in a partially restored 18th century building, the space is filled with original handmade clothing, textiles, ceramics, jewelry, and artwork exclusively from Georgian artists. The owner, Nino Kvavilashvili, is an artist herself, and is committed to supporting local Georgian artists who incorporate natural materials and traditional techniques. Enjoy an opportunity to meet and converse with Nino.

After lunch, enjoy afternoon at leisure or join a tour of the **Dry Bridge Market**, where vendors sell wares that run the gamut from jewelry, tchotchkes, carpets, and tableware to car parts and tools. Paintings and handicrafts are exhibited in a small park nearby. Dinner this evening is independent.

Meals: B, L

Day 9, Sun, Oct 17 Tbilisi • drive to Yerevan, Armenia

Get an early start and head overland to Yerevan, Armenia. At the Armenian border, meet our Armenian guide and driver. Continue on to Yerevan with stops en route.

The village of Dilijan, at Lake Sevan, is the center of the Armenian Switzerland. The town is located in a gorge, just 18 km from the fine 11th-century Hagartsin Monastery. The intimate monastery is set in a gorge above a mountain stream and surrounded by a forest of mature oaks. A particularly lovely ensemble, Hagartsin has never been fortified. Lake Sevan, situated at 1,800 meters, is one of the largest mountain lakes in the world. It has a stunning setting, and is a popular summer resort for the locals.

There is a small island in the lake with church buildings dating from the fourth to ninth centuries, but archaeologists have found evidence of far more ancient settlements around the lake. Not far from Sevan, outside of Lechashen village, prehistoric cave dwellings have been found and some once-submerged hills have turned out to be Urartu settlements. The cuneiform tablets identify King Argisti and the city of Istikuni. Archaeologists have unearthed

an almost complete four-wheeled carriage, bronze vessels, axes, jewels and daggers, evidence of a highly developed Bronze Age culture.

Armenia is also famous for khachkar, intricately carved stone crosses. These masterpieces are found in various area, but the Sevan region is home to hundreds. They are a unique art form, distinct to Armenia, which originally appeared in pagan and Christian periods. Initially wooden, the first stone crosses appeared in the 4th-7th centuries. Arrive in Yerevan this evening in time for dinner and overnight.

Meals: B, L, D

Tufenkian Hotel or similar

Opened in 2013, the Tufenkian Hotel is located in the city center just off Republic Square, and features a restaurant serving international and Armenian cuisine, coffee shop and bar/lounge. The rooms include air conditioning, satellite TV, minibar, WiFi and bathrobes.

Day 10, Mon, Oct 18 Yerevan

Start the day with a walking tour of the main sites of central Yerevan. **Republic Square** is Yerevan's central square, designed in 1924 by renowned architect Alexander Tamanian built of the characteristic pinkish tuff that the city is known for. Called Lenin Square until 1990, Republic Square features evening sound and light shows centering on its surging fountains.



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The giant "Cascade" stairway links central Yerevan to Mother Armenia Statue in Victory Park. The top of the Cascade and along the stairway offer fantastic views Mt. Ararat on a clear day. Modern sculptures dot the outside, including signature pieces by Colombian sculptor Fernando Botero and Barry Flanagan. The Cafesjian Museum of Modern Art, built on the extensive collection of Gerard Cafesjian, is inside and focuses on sculpture, glass, paintings from contemporary artists.

Ride escalators towards the top of the stairway, and walk the rest of the way up until you reach the Mother Armenia statue. The base of this 167-foot monument was first used as a museum dedicated to WWII. In 1995, it was renamed the Military Museum of Mother Armenia with exhibits pertaining to the Nagorno-Karabakh war.

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 rooms showcase modern and ancient languages, with beautifully decorated manuscripts and literary treasures. The documents are not only in written in Armenian, but also in Greek, Latin, Arabic, Persian, Syrian, Hebrew, Hindu, Japanese, and other languages.

The **Armenian Genocide Memorial** stands in a park at the top of Tsitsernakeberd, or “Swallow Castle.” According to scholarly estimates, over one million Armenians perished as a result of policies of the last Ottoman government between 1914 and 1918. Thousands were deported to Syria and faced consequent starvation, while others were massacred. Many of the remaining Armenians fled to other countries in what is now called the Armenian diaspora. Learn about the tragedy at the nearby **Genocide Museum**. *Meals: B, L*



Day 11, Tue, Oct 19

Yerevan

The **Temple of Garni** stands on a cliff near the 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 in recent years, and skilled work continues on the third century royal baths and their striking mosaics.



Carved into the side of a mountain, UNESCO-listed **Geghard Monastery** is one of the most fascinating monuments in Armenia. The church dates from 1215. The convent is in a cave adjoining this building; the only way in is through a narrow opening in the roof. The compound includes monastic cells, churches, tombs and kachkars all hewn from solid rock. The churches are still functioning and for special events, such as baptisms, sacrifices of lambs sometimes take place.



Enjoy lunch in a private home with a **lavash bread baking demonstration**. Return to ce Yerevan and visit **the fruit and vegetable market**, where you can find locals selling spices, fresh fruits and vegetables, dried fruits, candied nuts, and much more. This evening, gather at a local restaurant for a **farewell dinner** to toast the end of the trip.

Day 12, Wed, Oct 20 Depart Yerevan

The tour concludes today with international transfers to airport. *Meals: B (time permitting)*

Photo credit: Peter Guttman, Richard Fejfar, Jered Gorman

LAND TOUR COSTS

\$4,595 land tour cost per person, double occupancy

Single room supplement \$800

EARLY BIRD RATES

\$4,495 per person for participants who register before July 1, 2020

Single room supplement \$800

Inclusions:

- Accommodation based on double occupancy with breakfast daily, local service charge and tax (standard hotel check-in/out times apply unless otherwise noted): Baku (2 nights); Sheki (2 nights); Telavi (1 night); Tbilisi (2 nights); Yerevan (3 nights)
- Private vehicle transfers for those arriving to Baku on the program start date (October 10) and departing from Yerevan on the program end date (October 20). Early arriving or late departing travelers can book transfers at an additional cost.
- Transportation per itinerary by private vehicle and driver
- All sightseeing and excursions including entrance fees per itinerary
- National escorting guide will travel with the group in each country: Azerbaijani guide will stay with group from arrival until departure from Telavi; Georgian guide with group from arrival to Telavi until departure from Tbilisi; Armenian guide with group throughout the program in Armenia.
- Welcome and Farewell dinners including 1 alcoholic drink per person (local beer or wine); note that alcohol is not included at other meals
- Meals as listed in itinerary, breakfast daily, 9 lunches, and 7 dinners
- Bottled/purified water with meals and on the bus during the touring days and transfers
- Baggage handling at the hotels where available
- Destination preparation information packet
- **Azerbaijan e visas for tour participants**

Not Included:

- International airfare between the U.S. and the start and ending cities; air taxes or fuel surcharges; increases in local taxes/VAT; pre- or post-tour services; gratuities to escorting guides and drivers; visa or passport fees; medical and trip interruption insurance; evacuation costs; food or beverages not included in group meals; items of a personal nature such as laundry, alcohol, telephone expense, excess baggage fees, photo/video expenses inside museums (where allowed); other items not expressly listed as included.

Important Notes

- Rates are based on receiving a deposit and the final payment in advance by check, ACH or wire transfer in USD. Final payments by credit card will incur a 3% processing fee.
- **Azerbaijan e visas** required. The visa cost is included to the package and MIR will apply for the visas on behalf of the travelers in advance. To this end, travelers will be required to submit clear, color scans of their passports and some simple personal details to MIR Corporation at least 60 days prior to departure. Georgia and Armenia do not require visas for U.S. Citizens. Canadians do not require a Georgian visa, but will need to purchase an Armenian visa (currently costing around \$10USD) when entering Armenia.

We recommend that you read the U.S. State Department's Country Information regarding travel to the destinations on your itinerary. Check

<https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/international-travel.html> for up-to-date travel information.

Travelers should consider enrolling in STEP, Smart Traveler Enrollment Program, a free service to enroll your trip with the nearest U.S. Embassy or Consulate. For more information: <https://step.state.gov/step/>