

Dear Friends, Gamarjobat! Welcome to Georgia!

Georgia is an exotic and fascinating country, at the focal point of interest for global politics, international trade, modernity and antiquity. While the tourist industry is still in development, now is the perfect time to become acquainted with this land, its people, and traditions. The itinerary reflects a focus on the monasteries and architectural monuments of Georgia's medieval period, yet we hope to explore all the delights of fine cuisine, beautiful countryside, traditional music and arts, and of course, the famous Georgian hospitality.

Our intention is to lead a tour that shares the sights, sounds, and history of Georgia – through visits to monasteries, churches, fortresses, modern cities, and small towns – and the people in each locale. We will meet with specialists of church frescos, architecture, liturgical chant, folk songs, folk-lore, and depending on the interests of the group, learn to sing some of the famous Georgian songs ourselves.

Tour package amenities...

Among the many things that Georgia is famous for, the tradition of welcoming guests is paramount. We guarantee that you will be the honored guests at several traditional supra feasts throughout the tour, both in homes and in restaurants – an occasion which calls for the best in home cooked meals, homemade wine, toasts, and song. Excellent food is a priority for the tour organizers, and did we mention that Luarsab's family is involved in the Tbilisi restaurant business? ☺

In general, breakfast will be served at the guesthouses and hotels around 8am with a leisurely morning departure at 9am, times to be determined by our schedule on each day. Lunches, usually at restaurants inbetween destinations, will be around 1-2pm, and dinners in restaurants and homes, will be around 7-8pm. All food, drinks, and of course wine are included in the tour package.

You have all secured flights to and from Georgia. Either Luarsab or I will personally pick you up at the Tbilisi airport, and we will also arrange for taxi service back to the airport for your departure.

Other helpful tips...

Georgians wear a lot of black, but don't let that stop you from dressing like yourself. It will be helpful to take into consideration however, that while on tour, we will sometimes meet with clergy and will frequently be visiting active religious sites. A general rule of thumb is to wear comfortable, business-casual clothing (skirts/slacks for women, khakis/jeans for men) with comfortable shoes for plenty of walking.

Visiting Georgia during the summer means packing for warm, sunny weather, but be safe and bring a sweater, jacket, and knit cap just in case – it may be warm during the day, but evenings can be cool, especially for our overnight stay in the high Caucasus. Temperatures in Sighnaghi during the day will be in the upper 80s, during the evening it could be in the 50s. In the high Caucasus, it will be about the same temperatures, with less humidity, with a higher chance of summer rain and clouds in the afternoons.

When visiting churches and monasteries, it is appropriate for men to wear long pants and short sleeve shirts, and shoes (no sandals). It is suggested that women wear long skirts (though wrap around skirts are often provided now outside convents), shirts that cover the shoulders, and

colorful head-scarves. Being respectful of the Georgian Orthodox custom will be a priority for our pilgrim group, as we wish to cultivate a sense of respect and reverence for local traditions.

What to bring...

Sunglasses, sunscreen, sunhat, flashlight with extra batteries, small bath towel (not provided at homestays), toilet wipes (also available in Tbilisi), camera with accoutrements, mini-disc recorders or other recording devices for music/conversations, journal, insect repellent, travel board games, musical instruments, and songbooks (if you like to sing!). It is best to bring your own pharmaceuticals, but there are also many pharmacies in Georgia with over the counter drugs (we will have a supply on tour). Especially recommended is immodium or similar stomach bug medicines to get through the initial adjustment to food in a new country.

Airports

Traversing the globe naturally takes its toll. We understand that after arriving in Tbilisi you will be quite tired, and we look forward to whisking you straight from the brand new, state-of-the-art airport to a hotel (a 15 minute drive). After passing through customs, with a letter of invitation that we will supply you (no visas necessary for 3 month tourist visits), you will find me waiting in the reception area (probably the only blond person in the room, I won't be hard to spot!)

Luggage – Laundry

We would like to travel somewhat light, so it would be best to bring one medium sized suitcase, with a backpack/daypack for day-trips. For some reason, laundry is quite expensive and difficult to do in Georgia, but we have contracted someone to do laundry for us while we're in Tbilisi. Expect to be able to do some essential laundering at least once on the tour.

Bring something from home...

As much as we will be the visitors in Georgia, and treated like kings and queens as a result, Georgians will be curious to know more about us – who we are, where we're from, and what we do – and tour participants will be equally curious, so bring photos of family and friends. Also, Georgians love cultural interaction, so if there are any songs or games, or stories that you have from home, be thinking how you might be able to share these. Small gifts from your hometown (postcards, goodies, tapes/cds of local music, etc) are always well appreciated by the owners of guesthouses and B&B's, local musicians and specialty guides that we have occasion to meet.

The language...

Georgian is like no other language, and therefore won't look or sound familiar to European or English language speakers. It is one of sixty languages in the Caucasus language group, and is the most widely spoken of the four languages in the "Kartvelian" sub-group. A small phrasebook is available via the internet at <http://www.survivalgeorgian.com/> for \$10.50 plus shipping and handling and is a valuable purchase. Many of you will be interested to tackle the beautifully scripted Georgian alphabet, designed to translate the Bible sometime before the fourth century AD.

Make a connection...

If you are interested in establishing contact between your hometown and a village or city in Georgia, bring letters of invitation from your local government and we will invite local

government officials to receive them. Georgians are looking to the West for friendship and support!

Contact

Internet access will be available at any number of internet cafes in Tbilisi, but outside of the city, internet will be blessedly absent.

John (Georgia) +995 99 36-53-72

Luarsab +995 99 54-82-29

John (States until June 8th, 2008) (802) 922-3264.

The Georgian postal service is not always reliable, and post offices are limited, even in Tbilisi. It may be best to save outgoing mail until your return to your home country.

A few key phrases...

Gamarjobat - *hello*

Nakhvamdis - *goodbye*

Gmadlobt - *thank you*

Didi madloba - *thank you very much*

Diakh - *yes* Ara - *no*

Tu sheidzleba - *please*

Tualeti - *toilet* Restoranti - *restaurant* Sastumro - *hotel*

Sad aris - *where is?* Ratom? - *why?* Romeli? - *which one* Ra ghirs? - *how much?* Vin? - *who?*

Es minda - *I want that one*

Puri - *bread* Qeli - *cheese* Ghvino - *wine*

“Tu sheidzleba, erti ghtismshoblis troparia sheidzleba vigalobot am sauketeso lamazi da mnishvnelovani tsmindari eklesiashi?” - *If it wouldn't be too much to ask, would it be possible to sing one hymn to the Holy Theotokos in this most incredible and beautiful of holy churches?*

“Joni, tu sheidzleba, gaacheret tkveni sagaloblebi da tsavidet khachapurze, ra!” - *John, will you please quit singing and let's go get some more khachapuri (cheesebread), okay!*

A final thought...

There is a saying in Georgia that “Guests come from God...” meaning that no matter who arrives on the doorstep, whether friend or foe, they must be welcomed as if they were sent from God. Hospitality is paramount in Georgia. Sometimes, this means that we change our schedule in order to accommodate extraordinary events that warrant our time. Spontaneity and the willingness to be flexible will make our tour in Georgia more enjoyable!

Please contact us if you have any questions, and we look forward to meeting you in Tbilisi as part of the 2008 Monastery Tour to Caucasus Georgia!

Gamarjos! Blessings!

John A Graham

Luarsab Togonidze

Aurelia Shrenker