

Discover The Caucasus: Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan (21 days)

May 3-23, 2022
September 8-28, 2022

September tour precedes our tours to Iran



This extraordinary tour takes us to an extremely complex and interesting part of the world. Persians, Khazars, Arabs, Huns, Turko-Mongols, and Russians have invaded and migrated into the Caucasus and have provided the region with its rich ethnic and linguistic complexity as well as its astounding architecture. As if this diversity were not enough, the Caucasus also offers a variety of pristine landscapes and stunning vistas just waiting to be discovered.

Our journey through the south Caucasus begins in Armenia, a country whose tiny size belies its importance in the history of this region. Christianity came early to Armenia (in about 301 A.D, making it the first Christian nation) and today this mountainous country is dotted with an astonishing number of churches, cathedrals and monasteries, mostly dating back to the 9th and 10th centuries - Armenia's golden age. Arguably the origins of all western church architecture can be traced back to this rugged land.

We cross into Georgia, a remote, mysterious and romantic country, steeped in myths and legends - it was here that Jason found the Golden Fleece, Prometheus was chained to Mt. Kazbegi after he stole fire from the gods, and the fearless women tribe, the Amazons, lived beside the Tergi River. Tucked between Azerbaijan, Turkey and Armenia, Georgia could be described as Europe's final bastion and despite being invaded throughout history, maintains its own unique culture and heritage.

Our journey culminates in Azerbaijan, a fascinating country whose complex history stretches back several millennia. We travel via Sheki, an important silk weaving centre in former years, to the capital Baku, situated on the Caspian Sea.

Armenia

May 3/Sep 8 Day 1: Arrival in Yerevan / Imperial Hotel 4*

Met at airport and transfer to hotel. NOTE: if your arrival is early am, extra cost for immediate check-in. Best airline options: Fly Dubai, Air France/Delta, Lufthansa, Turkish Air, Qatar Air.

May 4/Sep 9 Day 2: Yerevan / Imperial Hotel 4* (B, L,D)

We will meet our guide in the hotel lobby at 9 am and start the day with a walking tour of Yerevan exploring various layers of its history—medieval shrines hidden behind imposing Soviet-style facades, narrow streets of the old center with sunlight playing on its pink walls, Republic Square, Cascade, Opera House and the ambitious project of independent Armenia—North Avenue.

Afterwards, we'll embark on an excursion to Echmiadzin, (also spelled Etchmiadzin or Ejmiatsin) the former capital. In Echmiadzin we visit the following sites:

Hripsime Cathedral, the 7th century Armenian Apostolic Church, is one of the oldest surviving churches in the country. The church was erected by Catholicos Komitas to replace the original mausoleum built by Catholicos Sahak the Great in 395 AD that contained the remains of the martyred Saint Rhipsime (Hripsime) to whom the church is dedicated. The current structure was completed in 618 AD. It is known for its fine Armenian-style architecture of the classical period, which has influenced many other Armenian churches since. It is listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site along with other nearby churches, including Etchmiadzin Cathedral.

Ejmiatsin Cathedral, the mother church of the Armenian-Apostolic Church. According to scholars, it was the first cathedral (but not the first church) built in ancient Armenia; and is considered the oldest cathedral in the world.

Zvartnots Cathedral -the ruins of St Gregory's church- one of the earliest churches in Armenia and in its day reputedly one of the most beautiful in the world.

We'll have lunch at Restaurant Tteni near Zvartnots Cathedral.

Our next stop is the Armenian Genocide Museum http://www.genocide-museum.am/eng/museum_info.php

The Armenian Genocide Museum opened its doors in 1995, concurrently commemorating the eightieth anniversary of the Genocide. The Museum structure, planned by architects S. Kalashian, A. Tarkhanyan and sculptor F. Araqelyan, has a unique design.

The impressive two-story building is built directly into the side of a hill so as not to detract from the imposing presence of the Genocide Monument nearby. The roof of the Museum is flat and covered with concrete tiles. It overlooks the scenic Ararat Valley and majestic Mount Ararat.

The first floor of the Museum is subterranean and houses the administrative, engineering and technical maintenance offices as well as Komitas Hall, which seats 170 people. Here also are the storage rooms for museum artifacts and scientific objects, as well as a library and a reading hall.

The Museum exhibit is located on the second floor in a space just over 1000 square meters. The exhibit is split up into three indoor halls and one outdoor gallery.

The western wall of the Museum's **first exhibit hall** has a map, nine meters wide and five meters high, engraved in stone, which illustrates the Armenian Plateau and neighboring countries. It clearly depicts Armenia being bordered by the Black Sea to the North, the Caspian Sea to the East, the Iranian Plateau to the South, and the Mediterranean Sea in the Southwest. The map also illustrates the Armenian settlements on the territory of Western Armenia and Ottoman Empire as they existed until the systematic death marches, which began in 1915.

The Introductory Hall exhibits photographs and demographic tables with information about the Armenian settlements and populations circa 1914 in Ottoman Turkey. The content also portrays information on the number of Armenian churches and schools which were functioning in the region at that time. Photo materials in exhibition tables present the peaceful life of Armenian population before Genocide.

The second exhibit hall (700 square meters) presents eyewitness reports and documents about the massacres and atrocities perpetrated against the Armenians. The exhibit has many large photographs taken during 1915-1917, archival documents, portraits of prominent Armenians, victims of the atrocities, friends of the Armenian people, and documentary films.

The tables displayed in the **third hall** compare the Armenian population figures in 1914 and 1922 and also define the number of people deported and killed. Various publications about the Armenian Genocide written in many languages are also exhibited here. This hall also contains population data about the number of Armenians living in Europe, Asia, Africa, the Americas and Australia after the Genocide.

In the same hall, granite pedestals support crystal vases which hold earth from historic Armenian regions: Karin (Erzerum), Van, Baghesh (Bitlis), Sebastia (Sivas), Kharpert and Tigranakert (Diarbekir). Here you also find a granite tree with its branches spread symbolizing eternity and the rebirth of Armenian people.

The last hall of the Museum is essentially an **outdoor patio**, a traditional feature found in old Armenian structures. A semicircular basalt wall, divided into twelve equal segments has inscribed statements condemning the Armenian Genocide by prominent foreign politicians, diplomats, scientists, and writers circa 1915. The hall looks like a courtroom where eyewitnesses "present" their condemning evidence. The last word belongs to the visitor.

Dinner at Restaurant Arvasar with an opportunity to taste the traditional Armenian dish Khurdzin.

May 5/Sep 10 Day 3: Yerevan - Garni – Geghard – Yerevan / Imperial Hotel 4* (B,L,D)

This morning we will start with a visit to the National Museum of Armenian History, founded in 1920 and located on Republic Square.

Afterwards, we drive about 45 min to the Pagan Temple of Garni, which is the only non-Christian temple currently standing in Armenia; and cave monastery in Geghard. The structures of the fortress of Garni are in perfect harmony with the surrounding nature. The fortress is situated in a picturesque mountain locality and commands a broad panorama of orchards, fields and mountain slopes covered with motley carpets of varicoloured grass.

Lunch at a local house in Garni where we will have opportunity to observe how Armenian bread "lavash" is baked and the barbeque process in the underground stove called "tonir."

Northeast of Garni, higher up the gorge of the Azat river, there is a magnificent monument of medieval Armenian architecture - Geghard Monastery included in UNESCO World Heritage list. Geghard is another incredible ancient Armenian monastery, partly carved out of a mountain. Return to Yerevan.

Visit to cognac factory for tasting of famous Armenian cognac. **NOTE:** Armenian brandy is not permitted to enter Azerbaijan, so if you purchase brandy with the intent to take it home, buy a bottle of inexpensive Georgian brandy and pour the Armenian brandy into it before crossing the border or it will be confiscated. Dinner at a local restaurant.

May 6/Sep 11 Day 4: Saghmosavank – Hovhanavank – Amberd – Yerevan / Imperial Hotel 4* (B,L,D)

Visit Saghmosavank and Hovhanavank medieval monastery, situated at a breathtaking site in the deep canyon of Ashtarak. Saghmosavank Monastery of 13 c. is translated as "monastery of psalms." According to the tradition when the first church of the monastery was built the priests kept reading psalms for 40 days.

Tour to Fortress of Amberd, 9th century, 6 km from the village of Byurakan, stands halfway up Mt. Aragats, at the height of 2300m. Lunch with a local family in Ashtarak. Dinner at a local restaurant.

May 7/Sep 12 Day 5: Yerevan— Khor Virap –Noravank – Carahunge-Goris / Hotel Mirhav (B,L,D)

We start with a drive to Khor Virap Monastery, 4- 17th c. Khor-Virap has a very rich history, both religious and secular. The monastery was built in Artashat during the reign of the Arshakids dynasty. At that time it was used as a pit- dungeon for convicts. In the 60s of the 4th century Artashat was ruined by Persian invaders. It is situated in the Ararat valley against the biblical Ararat Mountain, where Noah's arch cast anchor. The importance of it is connected with Gregory the Illuminator, who introduced Christianity to Armenia and is considered to be the first Armenian Catholic. Here you will also have an opportunity to take a lit candle from the pit like His holiness Paul II did while his visit to Khor Virap. Khor Virap is the closest point to Mount Ararat from Armenia. The biblical mountain rises behind the monastery providing a great opportunity for photos.

Afterwards, we visit Areni Winery, to observe the production of wines, and be treated to a tasting. Lunch.

Next, we explore the medieval Monastery of Noravank, a 13th century structure with beautiful stone crosses surrounded by rare flora. This monastery is considered to be the pulpit of Syunik bishops. The main church, St. Karapet, was built in 1227.



Next, we visit Carahunge, an ancient observatory quite similar to Stone Henge in England. This Prehistoric Monument consists of hundreds of standing columns that sit like soldiers on a hill on a territorial area of approximately 7 hectares. Many of these stones have smooth angled holes of 4 to 5cm in diameter, the angles of the holes being directed at different points on the horizon and outer space. The age of Carahunge has been estimated to be 7500 years or older (VI millennium BC). The 204 stones near Sisian have been ascribed with mystical, fertility and cosmic powers, but rarely have ancient monuments caused such a sensation in astronomical circles.

May 8/Sep 13 Day 6: Goris – Tatev Monastery - Villages of Khndzoresk - Goris / Mirhav Hotel (B,L,D)

Depart after breakfast, with a stop near “Devil’s Bridge” before continuing to board the “Wings of Tatev” to visit the most magnificent monastery in Armenia, Tatev.

Wings of Tatev is a 5.7 km cableway between Halidzor and the Tatev monastery in Armenia. It is the longest reversible aerial tramway built in only one section, and holds the record for Longest non-stop double track cable car.

Tatev Monastery (9-13cc), is a former center for science and art, where many famous Armenians lived and worked centuries ago. The Tatev Complex consists of three churches, a refectory, a library, a vault, and several residences. Magnificent canyons surround the monastery.

Lunch at a local restaurant. Visit the cave village of Khndzoresk, a picture –perfect valley with a stream running through it, where many caves and rock formations are waiting to be explored.

Dinner at a local restaurant.

May 9/ Sep 14 Day 7: Goris – Selim Pass - Sevan / Harsnaqar Hotel 4* (B,L,D).

Our drive today will be approx six hours. This morning we will pass by Noradous - an ancient cemetery of Middle Ages. This is the biggest cemetery of khachkars (cross-stones) in Armenia, dating back to 7-10 c

Our tour continues via Selim Pass- a thoroughfare since the medieval ages when the Silk Road was operating. Lunch on the way.

Lake Sevan, the largest alpine in the world. This huge mountain lake which takes up to 5% of Armenia's surface area is about 2,000 meters above sea level and is the second highest freshwater lake in the world. Enjoy the tranquil beauty empty beaches and white sands of Lake Sevan. Dinner at the hotel restaurant.

May 10/ Sep 15 Day 8: Lake Sevan- Dilijan- Haghartsin- Gosha Vank –Dilijan / Best Western Dilijan Hotel (B,L,D)

This morning we drive one hour to Dilijan (also Romanized as Dilizhan, Dilichan, Dilidjan, and Tilichan), a spa town located in the northern Armenian province of Tavush. It is one of the most important resorts of Armenia, situated in Dilijan National Park. The forested and reclusive city is home to numerous Armenian artists, composers, and filmmakers and features some traditional Armenian architecture. Sharambeyan Street in the center has been preserved and maintained as an "old town," complete with craftsman's workshops, a gallery and a museum. The natural beauty of Dilijan is so, that it is also called "Armenian Little Switzerland."

Dilijan has a rich historical and cultural heritage. During excavations in the prehistoric cemeteries of Golovino and Papanino near Dilijan, bronze items of almost three thousand years old were found, including armors, daggers, pitchers, earrings.

We start with a tour of Old Dilijan’s old town and drive to Dilijan's most popular religious site - the Haghartsin Monastery, 12 kilometers east of the city. It consists of three churches and a dining hall. The monastery was built in the Middle Ages. The oldest of the monastery's churches, St. Gregory, was built in the 10th century. The other churches, St. Stepanos and St. Astvatsatsin, date back to the 13th century. There are a number of khachkars (cross stones) in the complex.

Lunch at a local family house where you can taste the Armenian dish “tolma” (dolma).

We continue (30 min drive) to Goshavank (12-13 cc), the monastery ensemble of the Dilijan district., in the upper reaches of the Agstev Rver and situated in dense oak woods, in the gorges of small but turbulent mountain rivers.

Built in 1191, the monastery became Armenia's biggest cultural center in 13th century due to its legend about Mhitar Gogh after whom the monastery is now named. Gosh developed and wrote down his own vision of universal order which served as the basis for the code of laws adopted in Armenia. One of the best and most well known khachkars (cross stones) in Armenia is in the Goshavank Monastery. It dates to 1291 and stuns with its sharp-cut shapes. Carved from monolithic tuff, from a distance it looks like lace or clay filigree, but a close up look reveals its patterned surface is hewn from stone. Dinner at hotel restaurant.

Georgia

May 11/Sep 16 Day 9: Sanahin –Haghpat -Georgia-Armenia border (Sadakhlo)-Tbilisi / Courtyard by Marriott (B,L,D)

We start the day with a drive to the city Alaverdi, where we visit the monasteries of Sanahin and Haghpat, touted as the best architectural examples of Armenian religious art between the 10th and 13th Centuries.

Sanahin Monastery (10-13cc.), is comprised of several churches and chapels. Haghpat Monastery (10-13cc), is associated with the glory of the Bagratuni Royal Family. The oldest structure of the monastery, the holy Cross Church was built in 977 - 911. Both monasteries are UNESCO World Heritage sites.

Lunch in a local restaurant here we enjoy Armenian barbeque.

In the afternoon we drive to Georgia-Armenia border (Sadakhlo), change guide and vehicle and after border formalities continue our tour to Georgia.

We arrive in Tbilisi, allowing some free time to wander the boulevards and back streets of the city and through local bazaars, absorbing its unique ambience. Dinner at hotel restaurant.

Optional Activity/Additional Cost/Pay Direct: Attend a performance at the Nabadi Theatre. The theater's repertoire consists of ballads, legends and sagas, which demonstrate Georgian history, folklore and culture. This is a theatre for people interested in Georgian culture, traditions, history and everything connected to the country. The performance "Nabadi" lasts for about 90 minutes. The theatre will not bore you with long talks and dialogues as the main focus is on the movement and music. The audience may enjoy Georgian wine and sweets during the performance. The ticket cost is approximately USD 45. Advanced reservations not required. The theater is approximately 7-10 minute walk from the hotel. The performance generally starts at 8 pm and lasts two hours. Just let your guide know you are interested and he will direct you.

May 12/Sep 17 Day 10: Tbilisi Full Day Tour / Courtyard by Marriott (B,L,D)

One of Europe's most fascinating capitals Tbilisi is an ancient and cosmopolitan city where about 1.2 million inhabitants live. It was founded in 5th century AD by the Georgian King of Kartli, Vakhtang Gorgasali. There is a synagogue, a mosque, a Georgian basilica, an Armenian church and a Zoroastrian Fire-Worshipper's temple all within a 15-minute walk. Tbilisi is the main industrial, cultural and social center of Georgia.

In the morning we enjoy a walking the narrow streets of Old Tbilisi exploring the religious and secular architecture. Here we see churches, synagogues, mosques, as well as famous 19th century houses with wooden multi-colored balconies. We visit the sulfur baths that made an unforgettable impression on Pushkin, Lermontov and Dumas. During the tour we enjoy superb panoramic views.

Old Tbilisi and Sulfur Baths - According to the legend, King Vakhtang Gorgasali discovered these sulphur baths while hunting. So the name Tbilisi derives from Georgian word "Tbili", meaning warm.

Narikala Fortress - built in 4th century. It was occupied by Iranian, North Caucasian and Byzantine, Arab conquerors in various periods of time. Now the Church of St. Nikoloz, built in 13th century, is located within the castle.

Trinity Church (commonly known as Sameba) -is the biggest cathedral not only in Georgia, but also in whole Caucasus region. The height of the cathedral is 100 meters. There are 12 churches within the interior of the church. Great ecclesiastic relics are kept there. Among them there is the unique manuscript of the Gospel written during 1984-2004.

Metekhi Church - was first built in 5th century when Vakhtang Gorgasali was the king of Kartli. There are breathtaking views of Old Tbilisi from the church.

We'll enjoy lunch at the Folk Garden Restaurant, outdoor seating on a back terrace. The menu offers a wide variety of meats, chicken, fish and vegetarian dishes.

In the afternoon, we visit the stunning treasury of the Georgian History Museum, before taking a stroll along Rustaveli Avenue – the main street in Tbilisi. We will also visit an open-air ethnographic museum with many models of Georgian houses from all the Georgian regions.

Dinner and folk show at Tsiskvili, located on the river.

May 13/ Sep 18 Day 11: Tbilisi—Mtskheta-Gori- Borjomi - Akhalshike /Lomisa Hotel (B,L,D)

Morning we drive to Mtskheta, a beautiful small town, the ancient capital (3000 years old), and considered the centre of Georgian Orthodox and Apostolic Church. We visit its historical places: Jvari church (6th century) and Svetitskhoveli Cathedral (11th century) where the Robe of Christ is buried. Both Jvari and Svetitskhoveli are UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

Svetitskhoveli Cathedral - First church was built in 4th century (UNESCO World Heritage Site). Through the centuries it became the largest and the most impressive church of Georgia. Christ's mantle is buried here, which was brought here from Jerusalem. Jvari Monastery - is a Georgian Orthodox monastery of the 6th century. There are picturesque views of both Tbilisi and Mtskheta from the monastery. Jvari monastery is an active church and the monks live there.

We continue to the town of Gori. The city was founded by one of the greatest kings of Georgia, David the Builder (1089–1125). Samtavisi is an 11th century Georgian Orthodox Cathedral. The first monastery on this place was founded by the Assyrian missionary Isidore in 572 and rebuilt later. Visit the Joseph Stalin Museum in Gori, dedicated to the life of the town's most famous son. Lunch at a local restaurant.

Afterwards drive to the mineral water town Borjomi where we taste carbonated mineral water straight from its source. Here we also see a large model of Georgia's map.

Continue 1 hour drive to Akhalshike for dinner and overnight.

May 14/Sep 19 Day 12: Akhalshike -Vardzia- Akhalshike / Lomisa Hotel (B,L,D)

In the morning we travel to Samtskhe-Javakheti Province where we will visit some exceptional sites.

A 1.5 hr drive brings us to the magnificent cave town – Vardzia (12th century) is one of the highlights of the trip. It is a striking complex hewn in rock, regarded as the cultural and educational center of the time. Stretching over half of kilometer along the river Mtkvari, it has 19 tiers. There used to be 3000 caves with a church hewn in rock with amazing 12th century frescos. The complex also includes dwellings quarters, small hall-type churches, refectories, wine cellars and pharmacy.

We also visit the Khertvisi Fortress (10th century) that, according to legend, was seen along with other Georgian fortresses by Alexander of Macedonian in the 4th Century BC during his campaign in the east.

May 15/ Sep 20 Day 13: Akhalshike - Uplistskhe- Gudauri / Marco Polo Hotel (B,L,D)

In the morning we visit Uplistsikhe, "the lord's fortress," an ancient rock-hewn town in eastern Georgia near Gori. Built on a high rocky left bank of the Mtkvari River, it contains various structures dating from the 2nd ML BC to the Late Middle Ages, and is notable for the unique combination of various styles of rock-cut cultures from Anatolia and Iran as well as the co-existence of pagan and Christian architecture.

With the Christianization of Kartli early in the 4th century, Uplistsikhe seems to have declined in its importance and lost its position to the new centers of Christian culture – Mtskheta and, later Tbilisi. However, Uplistsikhe reemerged as a principal Georgian stronghold during the Muslim conquest of Tbilisi in the 8th and 9th century. The Mongol raids in the 14th century marked the ultimate eclipse of the town; it was virtually abandoned, and only occasionally used as a temporary shelter in times of foreign intrusions.

This is the place where the Great Silk Road used to pass and is now an interesting complex with dwelling quarters, wine-cellars, bakeries, a three-nave basilica church hewn in rock and even a theatre.

Lunch at a local restaurant.

Afterwards we drive up the famous Georgian Military Highway (leading to the Georgian-Russian border) and Zhinvali Lake. On the way visit Ananuri architectural complex (17th century), the two churches and the fortress overlooking the Zhinvali water reservoir. The drive is very scenic through high Caucasus Mountains. Dinner and overnight in Gudauri.

May 16/Sep 21 Day 14: Gudauri- Stepantsminda (Kazbegi)-Tbilisi / Courtyard by Marriott / (B, picnic L,D)

A stunning drive from Gudauri to Tbilisi along the Tergi River will bring us to Stepantsminda (formerly Kazbegi) – the main town in the region.

Stepantsminda, literally "Saint Stephan," was named after a Georgian Orthodox monk Stephan, who constructed a hermitage at this location on what later became the Georgian Military Highway. It came under the control of a local feudal magnate, the Chopikashvili clan, who were in charge of collecting tolls on travellers in the area in the late 18th century. After the expansion of the Russian Empire into the Kingdom of Georgia in the early 19th century, the people of the region revolted against Russian rule. However, the local lord Gabriel Chopikashvili, son of Kazi-Beg, remained steadfast in his loyalty to Russia and helped to suppress the revolt. In return, he was promoted to officer in the Russian Army. He adopted the surname Kazbegi, and the village under his control was also frequently referred to as "Kazbegi." Gabriel Chopikashvili-Kazbegi's grandson, the famed Georgian writer Alexander Kazbegi, was born in this town. The name was officially changed to Kazbegi under the Soviet rule in 1925. In 2006, the town reverted to its original name of Stepantsiminda.

From Stepantsminda we get into 4WD to drive 30 minutes through beautiful valleys and woodland leading on a mountain trail to Gergeti Trinity Church located at 2170m above sea level on the right bank of the river Chkheri (the left tributary of the river Terek) under Mount Kazbegi.

The Gergeti Trinity Church was built in the 14th century, and is the only cross-cupola church in Khevi province. The separate bell tower dates from the same period as the church itself. Its isolated location on top of a steep mountain surrounded by the vastness of nature has made it a symbol for Georgia. The 18th century Georgian author Vakhushti Batonishvili wrote that in times of danger, precious relics from Mtskheta, including Saint Nino's Cross were brought here for safekeeping. During the Soviet era, all religious services were prohibited, but the church remained a popular tourist destination. The church is now an active establishment of the Georgian Orthodox and Apostolic Church.

Picnic lunch. Weather permitting you may catch a glimpse of one of the highest glaciers in the Caucasus – Mt. Kazbegi (5047m). We return to Kazbegi, change back to our vehicle and drive to Tbilisi. Dinner at a local restaurant.

May 17/Sep 22 Day 15: Tbilisi- Davit Gareja- Sighnaghi / Kabadoni Hotel (B, picnic L,D)



Morning a two hour drive to visit Davit (or David) Gareja, perhaps the most remarkable of all Georgia's ancient sites. Comprising about 15 old monasteries spread over a large, remote area, its uniqueness is heightened by a lunar, semi-desert landscape that turns green and blooms with flowers in early summer. The complex includes hundreds of cells, churches, chapels, refectories and living quarters hollowed out of the rock face. The area is also home to protected animal species and evidence of some of the oldest human habitations in the region.

Monstrously neglected during the Soviet era, era the area was used for military exercises, and some of the first demonstrations of the perestroika period in Tbilisi were protests against this vandalism. Ironically, the Georgian army then used the area for training in the mid-1990s. These maneuvers were stopped when protesters camped in the firing range.

Davit Gareja has since seen some restoration and is now again inhabited by monks. Two of the key monasteries, and the most visited, are Lavra (the only inhabited one today), and, on the hill above it, Udabno, which has beautiful frescoes (not to be confused with the village Udabno several km north).

Lavra, the first monastery here, was founded by Davit Gareja, one of the 13 ascetic 'Syrian fathers' who returned from the Middle East to spread Christianity in Georgia in the 6th century. The religious complex grew until there were monasteries spread over a wide area. Here manuscripts were translated and copied,

and a celebrated Georgian school of fresco painting developed. The monasteries were destroyed by the Mongols in 1265, revived in the early 14th century by Giorgi V the Brilliant, sacked by Timur and then suffered their worst moment of all on Easter night 1615 when Persian Shah Abbas' soldiers killed 6000 monks and destroyed most of their artistic treasures. In 1675 King Archil initiated some restoration and gave stipends to the monks. The monasteries never regained their former importance but remained working until the end of the 19th century.

The Lavra Monastery is on three levels, with buildings dating from many different periods. The watchtower and the outer walls are from the 18th century. You enter by a gateway on the middle level that is decorated with reliefs illustrating stories of the monks' harmony with the natural world. From the gateway you go down past the 17th-century Church of St Nicholas to the lower level, where the caves of Davit and his companions are. Davit and his Kakhnetian disciples Lukiane and Dodo are buried in the 6th-century cave Peristsvaleba (Church of the Transfiguration) on this lower level. Monks are now living in the monastery again, and you can not enter their quarters (caves in the rock above those of Davit and his companions. You should refrain from making too much noise. They will also be offended by inappropriate clothing.

OPTION: for the physically fit of the group: walk up the steep hill above Lavra to Udabno to explore some of the fine frescos of the 8th-13th c. and cave architecture. The monastery's refectory, where the monks had to kneel to eat at low stone tables, is decorated with beautiful light-colored frescoes, the principal one being an 11th-century depiction of the Last Supper. Paintings on the north wall of what was the main church show Davit Gareja and Lukiane surrounded by deer, a reference to the story that deer gave them milk when they were wandering without sustenance in this remote wilderness. Below them are figures of Kakhnetian princes. Finally, the path climbs up to a stone chapel on the hilltop, then down past a cave known as Davit's Tears (because of the spring inside) and the top of Lavra monastery.

We enjoy a picnic lunch and continue drive to the fortified royal town of Signaghi (18th century), situated in Kakheti Province, the very eastern part of Georgia, with cobbled streets and multi-colored balconies. The town preserved its original image and now offers visitors stunning views of the surrounding Caucasus Mountains. Signaghi faces the Alazani field (750 m elevation). Dinner at a local restaurant.

Azerbaijan

May 18/ Sept 23 Day 16: Signaghi -Azerbaijani- Sheiki / Sheki Saray Hotel (B,L,D)

This morning we take a short, guided walk around the town, explore the defensive wall surrounding the city and have a view from one of the towers to the amazing Alazani Valley.

Next, a 10-15 minute drive brings us to Bodbe Monastery, a Georgian Orthodox monastic complex and the seat of the Bishops of Bodbe located 2 km from the town of Signaghi. Originally built in the 9th century, it has been significantly remodeled, especially in the 17th century. The monastery now functions as a nunnery and is one of the major pilgrimage sites in Georgia, due to its association with St. Nino, the 4th-century female evangelist of Georgians, whose relics are enshrined there. On June 1, Orthodox Church of Georgia marks the day of St. Nino's entrance from Cappadocia. Her tomb is still shown at the Bodbe Monastery. St. Nino has become one of the most venerated saints of the Georgian Orthodox Church and her attribute, a Grapevine cross, is a symbol of Georgian Christianity. The Bodbe Monastery is nested among tall cypress trees on a steep hillside overlooking the Alazani Valley.

From here we go to a local family guesthouse to enjoy a delicious home-made lunch, and then we visit a local farmer's wine-cellar to taste Georgian wine.

Afterwards, we drive to Azerbaijan-Georgian border in Lagodekhi (150 km/2.5 hrs). After border formalities, we meet our Azerbaijan guide and driver and continue to Sheki, 150 km. Time permitting, we may see the Sheki Palace today.

May 19/ Sep 24 Day 17: Sheki / The Sheki Saray Hotel / (B,L,D)

Lost In the folds of the forested slopes of the Caucasus foothills and surrounded by snowy peaks of the Greater Caucasus, Sheki, one of the oldest towns of Azerbaijan, has for centuries been an important market town on the east-west trading route running across the Caucasus from the Caspian Sea in the east to the Black Sea in the west. A further trade route across the mountains to Dagestan in the north turned Sheki into a thriving commercial centre - especially during the 18th and 19th centuries, when there were no fewer than five working caravanserais providing safe lodging to merchants and traders.

In the morning, a walking tour, first a stroll though the old bazaar and then to visit Sheki Khan's Palace complex, the History Museum and local workshops of shebeke style vitrages. Azerbaijan's answer to stained glass is an ancient vintage craft work called 'shebeke', that can also be found across the borders, in Iran and in Georgia. Shebeke windows bring color and life to buildings.

The Palace of Shaki Khans was a summer residence. It features decorative tiles, fountains and several stained-glass windows. The exterior is decorated with dark blue, turquoise and ochre tiles in geometric patterns and the murals were colored with tempera and are inspired by the works of Nizami Ganjavi. Along with its pool and plane trees, the summer residence is the only remaining structure from the larger palatial complex inside the Sheki Khans' Fortress, which once included a winter palace, residences for the Khan's family and servants' quarters. It was built in 1797 by Muhammed Hasan Khan and restored between 1952 and 1967 by a team lead of architects led by Niyazi Rzayev.

Measuring thirty-two meters by eight and a half meters on the exterior, the summer residence is a two-story masonry structure elongated on the north-south axis and covered with a wooden hipped roof with long eaves. The summer residence is renowned for the lavish decoration of its exterior and interior. Large portions of the residence's façade, including the entire southern elevations of the central halls on both floors, are covered by a mosaic of colored glass set in a wooden latticework (shebeke) that was assembled without nails or glue. Muqarnas hoods crowning the four iwans are highlighted with gold on the lower level and covered with mirror fragments on the first floor. Remaining surfaces on all façades are decorated with floral tile panels and tile mosaics. The interior walls of the residence are covered entirely with frescoes painted at different times during the eighteenth century. Many of the frescoes feature flowers in vases, while a series of paintings on the first floor halls depict hunting and battle scenes.

Shebeke: These beautiful and intricate panels are made of small wooden pieces (usually walnut) assembled in a giant jig-saw puzzle that can have tens of thousands of elements. Each latticework frame is custom cut and pieced together and then the glass is cut to fit. No nails or glue are used to assemble the lattice framework pieces, all hand made. The measurements must be precise within a millimeter or the whole thing will have to be scrapped. In general the spaces are filled with colorful glass pieces, but some times just the wooden frame is used. Gracious geometrical motives are prevalent. The technology of the work is rather complicated and known only to a few artisans who pass the knowledge from generation to generation. Shebeke is a central feature in Azeri architecture - it can be found in historical places like the Khan's palace in Sheki, the Shah Abbas mosque in Ganja, in modern religious buildings like the Martyrs mosque in Baku and in some of the residences of Azerbaijan's Nouveau riche (both in windows and doors).

Sheki hosts a wealth of historical museums and some of the most important in the country. The Sheki History Museum is one of the main museums, considered one of the most important for artifacts of the Khanate period.

As of 18th century, five big Caravanserais (Isfahan, Tabriz, Lezgi, Ermeni and Taze) were active in Sheki but only two of them have survived. The upper and lower Caravanserais were built in 18th century and used by merchants to store their goods in cellars, who traded on the first floor, and lived on the second. The caravanserais were rather big: the Upper one was 6,000 sq.m; the Lower - 8, 000 sq .m. Their height was about 14 m. Each one had more than 200 rooms. According to the tradition, caravanserais had two and even four entrances. When closed, caravanserais turned into fortresses. The upper caravan serai today is used for it's original purpose - it is a hotel complex.

In the afternoon we visit the nearby village of Kish, from where there is an attractive walk through deciduous woods to the ruined remains of Gelersen Gorasen ('come and see') castle, so named because in the 1740s the Khan of Sheki defied the ruling Persians, challenging them to come and see the strength of the fortifications for themselves. We will see "Mother of All Eastern Churches" - the first Christian church built in Caucasus. According to VII-VIII century historian Moses Kalankatuy, Euliseus who was the follower and of apostle Faddey, was sent by the Jerusalem patriarch Jacob to Caucasian Albania and established a first church here. This church was erected in 62 A.B. thus making it the first church to be built in Caucasus, even earlier than the first church in Armenia.

NOTE: Today is a very full day so we will be moving along in order to see everything we can.

May 20/ Sep 25 Day 18: Sheki - Shemakha-Baku / Shah Palace Hotel / (B,L,D)

Today we travel the historic trade route from Sheki to Baku (five hours drive), on the Caspian Sea, a scenic if winding journey in the shadow of the mighty Caucasus. The land is incredibly varied: from lifeless deserts at one extreme to dense green forests at the other. We stop en route to visit Seven Tombs (Copals) and Djuma Mosque in Shemakha; and the Diri Baba Mausoleum in Maraza.

Arrival in Baku, capital of Azerbaijan. Depending on time and energy, we will walk to the promenade to view the Baku Lights.

May 21/ Sep 26 Day 19: Baku Old City Tour + Absheron Peninsula / Shah Palace Hotel (B,L,D)

The history of Baku is long and fascinating, not least its recent past since the 'oil boom' of the early 20th century, when Azerbaijan produced more than half the world's supply of oil and the capital Baku grew uncontrollably. The city is shaped like an amphitheater, descending down to the Caspian Sea.

This morning we start with a panoramic view of Baku from Shelhidler Khiyabani (Martyrs Lane) and then a walking tour through the delightful winding alleys of the Old City-Icheri Sheher, whose old mosques, caravanserais and overhanging wooden balconies tell of a quieter era in Baku's history. We see the Maiden's Tower, a powerful, eight-storey fortress, and the Shirvanshah's Palace complex, parts of which date back to the 15th century and the old bazaar square.

Our lunch will be at Firuza, an atmospheric underground restaurant offering traditional Azerbaijan cuisine.

This afternoon we discover the Absheron Peninsula to visit the remarkable Zoroastrian Ateshgah (Ateshgyak) Temple, often called the Temple of Fire or Fire Worshippers Temple. It was nominated for the list of World Heritage Sites, UNESCO, in 1998.

The Absheron Peninsula, an extension of the Caucasus Mountains, juts 35 miles into the Caspian Sea, the largest inland sea in the world, covering 386,400 sq. km. (149,200 sq. miles). The wide plain contains ravines and salt lakes, and some parts are frequently flooded by tides. Vineyards and tea plantations are located here, but the region is particularly noted for its oil deposits. Even in ancient times oil was known to exist on the Absheron Peninsula, and there were various religious cults connected with the oil and gas fields.

The Ateshgah (aka Ateshgyakh) Fire-Worshippers' Temple is located within Greater Baku in the village of Surakhany (9 miles from Baku). The historical roots of the monument go back to the days when Azerbaijan statehood was only taking shape and establishing itself, and Zoroastrianism was the dominant religion in the country. People worshipped fire, seeking its protection against adversity and oppression and begging it for happiness and well-being. These ancient fires are believed to have given Azerbaijan its name, which is thought by some researchers to mean "a land of fires."

The inscriptions on stones set in the walls, made in Persian, Sanskrit and Hindi, testify to the Indian origin of the Ateshgyakh Temple. Medieval Azerbaijan carried on trade and exchanged cultural values with many countries; one of them was India.

Thus it happened that these structures were built one after another for a century and a half, from the late 17th to the mid - 19th century. The pentagonal complex, which has a courtyard surrounded by cells for monks and a tetrapillar-altar in the middle, looks not unlike a regular town caravansary - a kind of inn with a large central court, where caravans stopped for the night. As distinct from caravansaries, however, the temple has the altar (altar) at its center with tiny cells for the temple's attendants- Indian ascetics who are devoted to the ritual of fire, and for pilgrims, lining the walls.

In the course of time, the "eternal fires" of Absheron ceased to be viewed as divine. It was abandoned in the late 19th century, probably due to the dwindling Indian population. The natural "eternal flame" went out in 1969, after nearly a century of exploitation of petroleum and gas in the area, but it is now lit by gas piped from the nearby city.

Return to Baku and enjoy some free time.

Dinner this evening will be at Old City Restaurant, located in the Baku architectural reserve called Ichery Sheher. Dishes of the national Azerbaijan cuisine are prepared by award winning chef, Master Shah.

May 22/Sep 27 Day 20: Baku: Gobustan Mud Volcanoes and National Park/Museum / Shah Palace Hotel (B,L,D)

We will depart at 8 am for an excursion to visit the Gobustan Mud Volcanoes (60 miles south of Baku), then the National Park and Museum, about 40 miles southwest of the centre of Baku on the west bank of the Caspian Sea.

In 1966 Gobustan was declared a national historical landmark of Azerbaijan in an attempt to preserve the ancient carvings, relics, mud volcanoes and gas-stones in the region. In 2007 Gobustan was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site considered to be of "outstanding universal value" for the quality and density of its rock art engravings, for the substantial evidence the collection of rock art images presents for hunting, fauna, flora and lifestyles in pre-historic times and for the cultural continuity between prehistoric and medieval times that the site reflects.

We arrive close to the volcanoes at about 9 am and transfer from our larger van to smaller vehicles to driving 15 more minutes to the mud volcanoes. Over a thousand mud volcanoes are known to exist in the world, and some 400 of those are in the coastal area of Azerbaijan. Mud volcanoes are closely associated with hydrocarbon and petrochemical stores underground, hence the gas trying to escape to the surface. A few of these gas leaks are constantly on fire, shooting small perpetual flames into the air and some believe that these perpetual flames are strongly connected to the appearance of the Zoroastrian religion in Azerbaijan some 2,000 years ago. Local people call them "yanardagh" (burning mountain), "pilpila" (terrace), "gaynacha" (boiling water) and "bozdag" (grey mountain) alongside its geographical name – mud volcanoes.

After this visit we return to our main vehicle and drive about 30 minutes to Gobustan National Park and visit the new museum. Following this visit we drive approx. 15 more minutes to see the petroglyphs in an open area.

The most ancient petroglyphs have been identified as belonging to the 12-8th century B.C. However, it is assumed that life existed here even earlier and that Gobustan was one of the cradles of civilization. This research was published in a book entitled "Gobustan" in 1978.

Return to Baku at approx. 12:30 pm for a brief city tour covering the central part of the city showing the most interesting historical and architectural sites: Liberty Square, Javanshir Bridge, The building of the

Executive Power (XX century), Fizuli Square, The old bus station, Park of Izmir, Statue of a free woman, Academy of Sciences, Honor Alley, Funicular.

The rest of day is free for personal exploration in this fascinating city, perhaps a visit to the renowned Carpet Museum or old Baku's antique and carpet shops.

Our final dinner together will be at Restaurant Faeton, a popular restaurant located in the city centre. It is listed as one of the preferred restaurants by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism. We meet in the lobby at 6:15 pm and walk a few minutes to the restaurant.

May 23/Sep 28 Day 21: Depart / (B departures after 830 am)

Transfer to airport for flight home. Check out is 12 noon. **If you have a late evening flight you might want to consider departing on the evening of May 24.**

PRICE: \$5685 based on 6 people, \$5885 based on 4 people. Single room Supplement: \$1366.

NEW: two single room supplement offered at 50% discount on first come basis **if the group size is min 6 people.**

Extra night hotel in Yerevan: \$82 per person twin share, \$145 single room

Arrival Transfer if not on Day 1 PM: \$52 per car

Includes: accommodations as listed or similar, all meals days 2-20, breakfast only day 21; accompanying guide, entrance fees, arrival/departure transfers on the tour days.

Does Not Include: international air, visa fees, alcoholic beverages except the wine-tastings mentioned in the itinerary, camera fees, airport transfers if not arriving/departing on tour dates, tips to drivers/guides, personal expenses such as phone calls, laundry.

Hotels: Based on availability. 3-5* best available located in the heart of or near the historic old towns.

Please Note: Hotel ratings are not based on western standards. In the rural areas these are the best available. They offer pleasant ambiance, clean rooms and good locations. Do not expect English language television, hair dryers in the room or abundant American breakfast buffet in the rural areas.

Yerevan: Imperial Hotel 4* boutique hotel opened in summer 2013 in one of the nicest areas of the city. It is near Matenadaran Opera House, restaurants and shops; a short walk to Republic Square. Spacious rooms; some with views (no guarantees). <http://www.hotelimperial.am>

Goris: Mirhav Hotel 3* boutique hotel, new hotel built in the old Armenia style, centrally located, considered best place to stay in Southern Armenia. <https://www.hotelmirhav.am/en> **WL for Sep.** OR Mina Hotel <http://hotel-mina.am/?lang=en>

Sevan: Harsnaqar Hotel 4* <http://harsnaqarhotel.am/en/>

Dilijan: Best Western Paradise Hotel 4* contemporary style, modern facilities. <http://www.paradisehotel.am>

Akhalsbike: Lomsia Hotel in the heart of town, next to Central Park. <http://www.lomsia.ge/index.php/en/>

Gudauri: Marco Polo Hotel 4* in the very heart of Gudauri village off the main road. <https://marcopolo.ge/>

Tbilisi: Courtyard by Marriott, 5* 118 rooms, fabulous location at Freedom Square near museums, theaters and other points of interest. <http://www.marriott.com/hotels/travel/tbsey-courtyard-tbilisi/>

Sighnaghi: Solomon Kabadoni Hotel 4* standard room street view, boutique hotel in the center of town. One side overlooks vineyards of the Alazani Valley; the other side reveals the town's historic center. The interior is a mix of art nouveau, ancient Georgian & eastern motifs. **Option upgrade valley view room \$45.** <http://kabadoni.ge/>

Sheki: The Sheki Saray Hotel, 5* with views of the Caucasus Mountains. Its' architecture evokes the rich history of Sheki and with elements from the Mediterranean, Middle East & Europe. A blend of local stone, fabric and wood, muted colors and décor such as arches, lamps and columns create a sense of tradition where guests enjoy relaxing in a peaceful environment. <https://www.shekisaray.az/>

Baku: Shah Palace Hotel 4* stylish hotel in the heart of old Baku, walking to art galleries, museums, restaurants, 300 mtrs from the sea. <http://www.shahpalacehotel.com/>

VISA NOTES:

Georgia does not require visas for US or Canadian citizens,

Armenia requires visa, however it can be obtained at the point of entry for approx \$10

Azerbaijan DOES require a visa. You obtain the e-visa online. Cost \$23. Complete the visa application online:

<https://evisa.gov.az/en/>

If you are not able to use the internet, our partner can secure the visa for you, cost \$60.

GENERAL NOTES: We have created a fairly in-depth tour and days are quite full. We start out usually around 8 or 9 am and arrive at our final destination in time for dinner. All three countries are quite small and the driving distances each day are not long. The longest drive from point to point is approximately five hours. The rest of the distances are much shorter. This allows us to cover many sights each day. The roads for the routes we are taking are in good condition.

There are a few places where there is uneven surface. Steps are at almost all monasteries/churches. The only climb in the itinerary is at David Gareja Monastery complex, but this is optional for the more physically fit travelers.

Day to day sequencing of activities is subject to change due to timing and other local situations.

Fall: our Iran tour follows. If you plan to join, Azerbaijan Airlines flight 9017 departs 9:30 am, arrives Tehran 10:25 am, approx. \$115 online/schedule & price subject to change. **These flights between the tours are not included in our tour price.** You can book on your own on any website search engine such as Expedia, Travelocity etc. There is also a link on our website, <http://www.originalworld.com> on right side bar. They have very good prices.