

The North Caucasus Explorer

22 Day In-depth Exploration of North Caucasus

June 6-27 & September 8-29, 2022



Many people have been to Georgia, but almost no one has been to the Republics to the north of the Great Caucasus Ridge. In the past, these regions were considered dangerous or difficult to go to. It is now safe and we make it easy to travel in the North Caucasus.

Here you will experience the authentic culture. You'll be guests of the local people. And you'll be alone with the beauty of the mountains and its' silence, not among hundreds of tourists.

We have selected the best available hotels.

Road infrastructure is poor so there are some drives, especially in the mountains on bumpy pot-holed roads.

Arriving from the US: Fly to Moscow for a connection to Makhachkala.

Day 1 Jun 6/Sep 8 Arrival in Makhachkala, capital of the Republic of Dagestan (D)

Transfer to hotel (20 minutes). Have rest after the trans-Atlantic flight.
We'll go downtown area of Makhachkala for dinner.

Day 2 Jun 7 /Sep 9 Explore Makhachkala-Drive to Derbent / Scarlet Sails Hotel (B,L,D)

We'll visit the greatest food-market in North Caucasus and the museum of local arts. We'll walk in the historical center of the city and visit the rehearsal hall of the city's dance ensemble to observe the tradition of Caucasian dancing.

The highlight of the day - we'll visit the kitchen of a restaurant of traditional cuisine - the best place to know how they make traditional meals. We'll make lunch ourselves under the guidance of a professional chef.

In late afternoon, we depart Makhachkala for Derbent 135 km (2.5 hours).

Day 3 Jun 8/Sep 10 Derbent / Scarlet Sails Hotel (B,L,D)

A full day in Derbent exploring Old Town with many historical UNESCO sights and meeting locals.

Derbent claims to be one of the oldest cities in the world and the southernmost one of the Russian Federation. The first settlements were set up during the early Bronze Age, 4th century BCE.

The significance of the Caspian passage, made it of strategic importance to the numerous nomad and steppe's tribes such as the Scythians, the Sarmatians, the Mongols, the Alans etc. This was one of the most important Silk Roads corridors as the crossroads of civilizations connecting the East and the West, the North and the South by the maritime and land routes. Derbent was one of the important cities along the Silk Roads.

The Citadel, Ancient City and Fortress Buildings of Derbent were part of the northern lines of the Sasanian Persian Empire, which extended east and west of the Caspian Sea. The fortification was built in stone. It consisted of two parallel walls that formed a barrier from the seashore up to the mountain. The town was built between these walls and has retained part of its medieval fabric. The site continued to be of great strategic importance until the 19th century.

Day 4 Jun 9/Sep 11 Kubachi Village / Private home (B,L,D)

We begin our discovery of the villages of Dagestan. After about an hour drive, we stop in Majalis, the modern "capital" of Kaytag district. Here we will learn about Kaitag embroideries - local tradition, which was revived by British ethnographer Robert Chenciner. You can read about the Kaitag Embroideries here: <https://nazmiyalantiquerugs.com/antique/caucasian/kaitag-embroideries/>

Afterwards, we drive 1.5 hours (90 km); (if the new road is finished – .5 hours) to Kubachi village.

On arrival in Kubachi, we go to the watchtower for a great view and a talk by the guide about the history and culture of the area. We visit the small museum in the tower.

Kubachi is a quiet village with an artistic ambiance and well known for its' crafts. Jewelry of Kubachi is exhibited in the Metropolitan Museum in New York and in Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg. We'll meet masters and observe their life.

We will go to one of the houses for lunch and social interaction. We will visit "museum room" - each house in Kubachi has this room, where they keep a collection of porcelain, antique copper pitchers and boilers. The master of the house will show a few of his best pieces of art. The women will show their best kazes and show how they make this golden embroidery.

After lunch and this visit, we go to the Soviet factory, mostly abandoned, but it still contains a collection of Kubachi jewelry produced in the Soviet era. We then have a walk in the old part of the village.

At about 5:30-6 pm, our group will divide to go to different houses for dinner and overnight.

In each house will be 2-3 guests. We have 2 houses in Kubachi, with locals speaking English. And also one big house, which can accommodate up to 8 guests. Our guide will stay there and translate for those guests. There are single rooms in the big house. All houses have modern facilities with hot water showers and western toilets. There are no decent restaurants in the village, which is why we have both lunch and dinner in family homes. The food will be fantastic!

Day 5 Jun 10/Sep 12 Balkhar, Chokh and Gunib Villages / Gunib: Eagle's Nest Hotel (B,L,D)

Depart this morning driving approx. 2 hours to Balkhar village, a very traditional photogenic highland village of Laks.

We shall see local (very archaic!) pottery tradition. We'll have a pottery class here (each guest will have possibility to make something of clay) and lunch.

Then we'll drive about 2 hours to the Avar Mountains and visit Chokh village, known for architecture of XIX century. Dinner in the village and drive approx. 45 minutes to Gunib Village for overnight.

Day 6 Jun 11/Sep 13 Gunib - Chechnya / Kezenoy-am Hotel 3* (B,L,D)

We will depart at 7:30 am and visit a few historically important places, related to the Great Caucasian War of XIX century. Then we'll start our way to Chechen mountains (approx. 5 hour drive (190 km).

We stop after 1.5 hours in Untsukul Village where we meet a master woodworker. We will see his workshop and enjoy tea with him. Then we continue 1.5 hours drive Botlikh village where we have lunch.

Afterwards, we'll visit Rakhata village to see how they make burkas (Caucasian felt coats) and urbech (Dagestani traditional Nutella).

Continuing the drive (1-1.5 hrs) to Kezenoy-am lake, on the border between Chechnya and Dagestan, we pass through the border (no immigration/security check) and transfer about 30 min to the hotel.

We estimate arriving at 6 pm and dinner will be about 6:30 pm.

Day 7 Jun 12/Sep 14 Grozny / Grozny City hotel 5* (B,L,D)

This morning drive 2.5 hours (105 km) to Grozny. En-route we stop in the town of Argun to visit the Aimani Kadyrova *Heart of the Mother* Mosque, named for the wife of the first president of Chechnya). It is called a hi-tech mosque for its ultra modern design. During the day, depending on the weather, the cupolas of the mosque change color, from light-gray to turquoise. At night, the mosque and the surrounding territory are illuminated with multicolored LED lamps and floodlights.

Continue to Grozny where we check-in to the hotel and have lunch at the rooftop restaurant of our hotel. Grozny City Hotel, is among one of the many skyscrapers in the city.

Afterwards we'll go for a walk in the city and visit the museum of Akhmad Kadyrov - the first president of Chechnya.

In the evening we'll taste traditional Vainakh cuisine.

Day 8 Jun 13 /Sep 15 Mountains of Ingushetia / Armkhi Mountain Resort (B,L,D)

In the morning we'll visit the Dondi-Yurt Museum – a private ethnographic museum of Adam Satuev. After the excursion and tea with him we'll depart to the mountains of Ingushetia (3.5 hr drive/ 170 km).

This afternoon, we visit Tkhaba-erdy - one of the most ancient Christian churches of Russia, Vovnushki - the most impressive towers probably of all the Caucasus, which are built on the top of cliffs.

At sunset we'll see Djeyrakh and Targim Valleys from the Tsey-Loam Pass.

Day 9 Jun 14/Sep 16 North Ossetia: Vladikavkaz / Alexandrovsky Hotel 4* (B,L,D)

In the morning we'll visit complex of medieval towers "Erzi" and have lunch in the village to taste local cuisine and talk about local life (the valley is inhabited by Sufis).

After lunch we'll drive 45 min (35 km) to Vladikavkaz - the capital of North Ossetia.

Day 10 Jun 15/Sep 17 Vladikavkaz / Alexandrovsky Hotel 4* (B,L,D)

We have a full day to explore the city.

Vladikavkaz was the center of Western culture in Caucasus from XIX century. We'll see many examples of Russian Modern architecture of the beginning of XX century, visit museums and experience the multicultural spirit of the city, visiting Kirche, Orthodox and Armenian churches and a Sunni mosque.

We also browse the food-market to try local cheeses.

In the evening, we'll meet an ensemble of traditional Ossetian music.

Day 11 Jun 16/Sep 18 Excursion to the Mountains of North Ossetia / Alexandrovsky hotel 4* (B,L,D)

Departing at 9 am, we head to mountains again to visit holy places of traditional Ossetia, a mixture of Paganism and Christianity. We'll visit mountain valleys and cross couple of picturesque passes.

After a 2 hour drive, we reach the picturesque villages of Urson and Dagom in Alagir Valley.

Then we go to Upper Fiagdon where we have lunch.

In another 40 minutes drive, we'll come to the "City of the Dead" near Dargavs village, a huge complex of medieval crypts. People that lived in the valley buried their loved ones along with their clothes and belongings. The valley stretches for 17 kilometers, and the cemetery contains almost 100 ancient stone crypts. We shall see what at first appear to be lots of little white houses but are actually stone crypts, the oldest dating back to the 16th century. In front of every crypt there is a well that was used to tell if a person made it to heaven. Visitors drop a coin into the well, and if the coin happened to hit a stone at the bottom of the well, it was said to be a good sign. Each crypt belongs to one family or clan.

Ossetians say that the cemetery helps them understand how people lived 400 years ago. Archeologists, also, are very interested in exploring the site more completely, as there have been interesting items found that have attracted some scientific attention.

Return to Vladikavkaz (approx 1 hr drive) for overnight.

Day 12 Jun 17/Sep 19 Nalchik / Nalchik hotel (B,L,D)

After breakfast, we drive 2 hours to Nalchik, the capital city of the Kabardino-Balkar Republic, Russia, located in the foothills of the Caucasus Mountains.

On this day, we'll meet a few people who keep the soul and traditions of the Kabardian nation. The most important of them is Felix Nakov - the master of Kabardian martial art.

Also we'll have a short city-tour in Nalchik and taste Kabardian cuisine.

Day 13 Jun 18/Sep 20 Mount Elbrus-Pyatigorsk / Bristol Hotel 4* (B,L,D)

Wear your bathing suit under your clothes as we stop at a hot springs.

Today we have an off-road adventure to Mount Elbrus, the highest mountain in Europe, (5642 m) and the tenth most prominent peak in the world. A dormant volcano, Elbrus is in the Caucasus Mountains in Southern Russia, near the border with Georgia. Elbrus has two summits, both of which are dormant volcanic domes.

We'll have opportunity to see Mt. Elbrus from its' base as well as visit Djili-suu - the area of thermal springs and waterfalls at an altitude of 2400 meters. Djili-suu is located on the right bank of river Chon-Kyzyl-Suu near the village of Kyzyl-Suu (Issyk-Kul is the south coast). The water temperature is 109 degrees F, clear with the smell of hydrogen sulfide. You can take a quick dip here if you like.

In the evening we'll arrive in Pyatigorsk - the capital of the North Caucasus federal district.

Day 14 Jun 19/Sep 21 Pyatigorsk and other SPA towns / Bristol Hotel 4* (B,L,D)

Pyatigorsk is a city in southern Russia. Cable cars travel to the peak of Mount Mashuk. On the mountain's Mikhailovsky spur, the circa-1831 Aeolian Harp pavilion plays harp music. Nearby, the 19th-century Tsvetnik Park has landscaped gardens and the Lermontov Gallery, a colored-glass pavilion that hosts concerts. The State Museum MU Lermontov, former residence of the poet Mikhail Lermontov, commemorates his life.

Pyatigorsk, as well as other towns of the Caucasian Mineral Springs area, (Essentuki, Kislovodsk, Zheleznovodsk, Lermontov) was built in 19th century as an Imperial Spa Resort of European culture.

We'll explore architectural heritage of that time and also experience Soviet mud baths and gym of 19th century.

Day 15 Jun 20/Sep 22 Alania-Arkhyz / Romantik Hotel 4* (B,L,D)

This morning we'll drive 2 hours to Gum-bachi Pass for another Elbrus view.

Afterwards we drive 1.5 hours to Zelenchukskaya Village where we visit Radio telescope Ratan-600, a part of the Soviet astrophysical observatory, which is the biggest one on Earth. We can interact with scientists working there.

From here, its approx. 20 minutes drive to Lower Arkhyz, where the heritage of Alania - medieval state of mighty warriors, is kept alive.

Alania was a medieval kingdom of the Iranian Alans (proto-Ossetians) that flourished in the Northern Caucasus, roughly in the location of latter-day Circassia and modern North Ossetia–**Alania**, from the 8th or 9th century until its destruction by the Mongol invasion in 1238-39. Its capital was Maghas, and it controlled a vital trade route. It was destroyed by Timur in 1395.

In the last years of the Soviet Union, as nationalist movements swept throughout the Caucasus, many intellectuals in the North Ossetian ASSR called for the revival of the name of Alania, a medieval kingdom of the Alans. The term of "Alania" quickly became popular in Ossetian daily life through the names of various enterprises, a TV channel, political and civic organizations, publishing house, football team, etc. In November 1994, the name of "Alania" was officially added to the republic's title (Republic of North Ossetia-Alania).

We'll see churches built in X century in picturesque mountains. The Zelenchuksky Churches are an archaeological preserve extending for 4 kilometres (2.5 mi) around the ruins of Nizhnearkhyzskoe gorodishche, tentatively identified as the medieval capital of Alania, a Christian state destroyed by the hordes of Möngke Khan in the 13th century. No Byzantine document mentions the name of this city, whereas al-Mas'udirefers to it as Ma'as, or Maghas.

The most remarkable feature of the site is a cluster of three early medieval churches, whose construction is associated with the missionary activities of Patriarch Nicholas Mystikos in the Northern Caucasus. These structures bear much resemblance to the Shoana Church and Senty Church, situated in the neighboring valleys. In the 19th century the churches were affiliated with the monastery of St. Alexander Nevsky. A monastic community was revived there after the fall of the Soviet Union.

The North Church is supposed to have been the cathedral of the diocese of Alania between the 10th and 13th centuries. The dome rises to a height of 21 meters; the western wall is twice as long. The narthex formerly contained a baptistery. A 19th-century traveler described the faded Byzantine frescoes that were still visible on its walls.

The Central Church appears to have been conceived somewhat earlier than the two others, in the form of a regular cross, but was extended to the west during or shortly following the construction. It is much larger than the South Church, which was built of coarse rubble masonry, extensively restored by the monks in 1899, fell into disuse during the Soviet years, and was re-consecrated to St. Elijah in 1991. The South Church bears the distinction of being the oldest functioning church in all of Russia.

Within 30 km from Nizhny Arkhyz a short grave inscription was discovered in 1888. Although it is written in Greek characters, the inscription (alternatively dated to 941 or 963) was interpreted by Vasily Abavey as the earliest preserved text in the Ossetic language. Another interesting site in the valley is a Mandylion-type rock painting of Christ datable to the 10th century but discovered only recently.

We continue another 40 minutes drive to Arkhyz village, located in the valley of the Bolshoy Zelenchuk River, a mountainous region in the Republic of Karachay–Cherkessia, Greater Caucasus, Russia, about 70 km inland from the Black Sea shore. The modern village was founded in 1923 near the confluence of the Arkhyz and Pshish Rivers.

Transfer to our hotel.

Day 16 Jun 21/Sep 23 Mezmai / Mezmai Hotel (B,L,D)

From Karachay we'll travel to the plains of Krasnodarskiy Kray and the Adygea Republic (3.5 hours drive).

In the suburb of Maikop we'll visit the house of Zamudin Guchev and his home museum. Zamudin is a master of weaving Adyghe rugs and Adyghe music.

We continue another 1.5 hours drive to Mezmai village to experience the culture of Cossacks and Russian colonists. We will first check-in to our hotel and change into your bathing suit. We are invited to a "black banya" - steamed bath heated by open fire, in a private home. There is an outdoor shower to rinse off and you can change into dry clothing in the house.

After the steam, we will have dinner with our hosts.

Day 17 Jun 22/Sep 24 Sochi / Park Inn (B,L,D)

In the morning, we'll enjoy visiting locals to observe the lifestyle of Russians in the deep south of the country.

We will depart at about 11 or 12 noon, stopping for lunch at one of the small towns of south Russia (Apsheronk or Khadyzhensk).

Late afternoon arrival in Tuapse town, located on the Black Sea. From Mezmai, a 3.5 hr drive. We take the high speed train to Sochi, dep 4:30 pm, arrives 6:30 pm.

In the evening, we'll walk around Sochi center with our guide and have dinner at local restaurant.

Day 18 Jun 23/Sep 25 Eastern Abkhazia: Sukhumi / Leon Hotel (B,L,D)

Depart at 9 am for the 40 minute drive to Abkhazia. Abkhazia is a disputed territory on the eastern coast of the Black Sea, south of the Greater Caucasus mountains, in northwestern Georgia. Abkhazia and South Ossetia are partially recognized republics in the Caucasus, claiming independence from Georgia. They recognize each other and have recognition from six and five UN Member states respectively as well as several non-UN member states. Georgia and the majority of countries in the world do not recognize their independence. Georgia considers them as sovereign territories of the Georgian state under Russian military occupation.

After crossing the border, we first, visit Old Gagra - one of the first resorts, built by Russian noblemen on the Black sea coast.

Then, drive 30 minutes to visit Pitsunda - the resort, which was luxury in Soviet Era and till now keeps the spirit of that time. Other reasons to visit Pitsunda is to walk in the relic groove of endemic pines and touch the antique and medieval heritage of this place.

Also we'll visit Ambara Church and Myussera, an abandoned town in the jungles of Pitsundo-Myussersky Reserve.

Then we'll drive one hour to Sukhumi - the capital of the country, for overnight.

Day 19 Jun 24/Sep 26 Sukhumi / Leon Hotel (B,L,D)

We'll dedicate the whole day to the town.

We'll visit Botanical Garden of Sukhumi, which is small but has really interesting collection. Founded in the 1800s, it's believed to be the oldest in the Caucasus. Then we'll visit the National Museum, the best museum in Abkhazia for learning about its' history and culture.

Next, we enjoy a walk in the historic part of town and have lunch in the best traditional cuisine restaurant.

After lunch, we enjoy coffee with local history and culture experts, visit souvenir shops.

Then we'll go for wine tasting to the nursery of aboriginal grape varieties, which belongs to the biggest winery of the country-Sukhum Factory of Wines.

Dinner at local restaurant.

Day 20 Jun 25/Sep 27 Eastern Abkhazia-Sukhum / Leon hotel 4* (B,L,D)

We'll depart at 9 am, driving 1.5 hrs to Bedia village and visit the church, built in X century.

Next, after 30 minutes drive, we come to Tkuarchal - the ghost-town, which was the industrial center of Abkhazia in Soviet times. We'll meet residents of the town and visit the local museum.

Afterwards, another 30 minutes to Arasadzykh village where we have lunch (a long traditional feast) with a local family.

On our return to Sukhum, a 20 minute drive to visit another 10th century church in Mokva village and after another 20 minutes, we relax in thermal springs of Kyndyg village.

Return to the hotel, 40 minute drive.

Day 21 Jun 26/Sep 28 Sukhum-Sochi / Alana Royal Hotel (B,L,D)

Today we'll visit the small town of New Athos, a 40 minute drive from Sukhum. Here we'll visit ruins of the first capital of Abkhazian kingdom, then the huge New Athos karst cave, the New Athos Monastery and other places.

Afterwards, we drive 1 hour and enjoy a farewell dinner in Old Gagra in the best restaurant of the country with traditional Abkhazian dancing.

Cross the border back to Sochi, Russia (20 minute drive to border, 1 hr for border formalities). Transfer 30 minutes to hotel near the airport. Flights may depart late night or early am.

Day 22 Jun 27/Sep 29 Depart Sochi

Transfer to the airport for your departure. Carriers departing Sochi with connections to US include Aeroflot, Turkish Air, FinAir.

PRICE: \$6890 based on min 6 people, \$7725 based on 4 people; single room supplement: \$750. Extra night in Makhachkala: \$48 per person twin share; \$90 single rom. \$35 airport transfer.

Includes:

21 nights Accommodations with breakfast:

Makhachkala: Hotel Jacques 4* <https://www.hoteljacques.ru/>

OR Central City Hotel 4* <https://centralcityhotel.ru/>

Derbent: Scarlet Sails Hotel 4* <http://www.scarletsails-derbent.ru/ru>

Kubachi Village: Private homes

Gunib: Eagle's Nest Hotel <http://turcomplex.ru/prozhivanie/>

Chechnya: Kezenoy-am Hotel 3*

Grozny: Grozny City Hotel 5* <http://groznychcityhotel.ru/en/>

Ingushetia Mountains: Armkhi Mountain Resort <https://ingkurort.ru/accommodation>

Vladikavkaz: Alexandrovsky Hotel 4* <http://aleksandrovski.ru/en/>

North Ossetia Mountains: Alexandrovsky hotel 4* <http://aleksandrovski.ru/en/>

Nalchik: Nalchik Boutique Hotel, comfort rooms <https://hotelnalchik.ru/#nomera-i-ceny>

Pyatigorsk: Bristol Spa Hotel 4* <http://spahotel-bristol.ru/>

Arkhyz: Romantik Hotel 4* <http://hotelromantik.ru/about-the-hotel-complex/>

Mezmai: Mezmai Hotel 3* <https://mezmai-hotel.ru/>

Sochi: Hotel: Park Inn <https://www.parkinn.com/hotel-sochi/>

Sukhum: Leon hotel 4* <https://leonhotel.net/>

Sochi: Hotel Alana Royal4* near sea & 15 min to airport <https://alanaroyal.ru/>

Airport transfers on the tour dates.

Transport by ac micro bus (size depending on # of people, we will have more seats than people)

Accompanying professional English speaking guide

20 lunches, 21 dinners including beverages of water, soft drinks, tea/coffee

Bottled water in the vehicle during drives and touring (2 one litre bottles per person per day)

All entrance fees to sites mentioned

All taxes

Does Not Include: Trip cancellation/travel insurance, visa fees, tips to driver and guide, personal expenses such as laundry, phone calls, alcoholic beverages.