

**CAUCASUS GEORGIA:  
BIRDS, ANCIENT CHANTS AND WINE  
SEPTEMBER 23 – OCTOBER 9, 2021  
©2020**



**A medieval tower in Svaneti, Greater Caucasus Range © Rafael Gálvez**

*The ancient nation of Georgia in the South Caucasus is legendary for its copious “feast and wine” hospitality, its otherworldly chanting traditions, and for one of the most prominent bottlenecks for migratory birds. The Republic of Georgia lies in a region with a diversity of habitats ranging from semi-deserts to subtropical forests, bisected by rugged mountain ranges between the Black and Caspian Seas, and offering rich natural history and cultural experiences.*

*During the fall season, when grapes are harvested in the valleys and the year’s vintage is drawn from earthen “qvevri,” more than a million birds of prey are counted along the coast. Georgia offers a broad assortment of Eurasian species, regional specialties and others found nowhere else. It is also a place of endemic language and culture, with a bountiful musical heritage deeply seated in the past. This multi-themed departure is geared for those interested in experiencing stunning landscapes, a spectacular migration, and plenty of food and beverage in a rustic and welcoming setting. Accommodation in excellent three-star hotels throughout.*



*The tour starts in the country's prime wine region, east of the capital where we will enjoy a traditional Georgian feast and wine, and some leisurely birding in order to acclimate. After we have explored the arid and vast habitats east and south of Tbilisi for a couple of days, we will head west towards the slopes of Adjara, along the Black Sea. We will visit sites near Batumi where numerous Short-toed, Booted, Steppe, and both spotted eagles are tallied. These are fantastic sites for birds of prey in general, including kites and harriers, while the surrounding region consistently turns up a diversity of shorebirds such as Sociable Lapwing and Black-winged Pratincole. The possibilities for songbirds include Thrush Nightingale, Moustached, Blyth's and Paddyfield warblers.*



Lesser Spotted Eagles migrating © Ami Ben-Dov

*Continuing into the highlands, we will visit Svaneti where mountains shelter fortified hamlets with clusters of medieval towers. We will be treated to a rich and energetic chanting tradition that echoes the daunting terrain. Historians wrote of ancient Greek armies arriving to western Georgia, Colchis*

*– the “Land of the Golden Fleece,” and shivering at haunting chants from Caucasian warriors resonating down the gorges. Svaneti long served as protectorate for Georgian treasures, and still to this day, the museum is packed with 10<sup>th</sup> century religious manuscripts and icons, ancient coins, and Bronze Age mining tools and weapons.*

*We will spend time in the Greater and Lesser Caucasus ranges, surrounded by stunning snow-covered peaks and dramatic vistas in search for both Caucasian and Caspian snowcocks, the endemic Caucasian Grouse, Gldenstadt’s Redstart, Alpine Accentor and Lammergeier. Mountain passes may grant us Mountain Chiffchaff, Krper’s Nuthatch and Fire-fronted Serin. Lakes and wetlands may host Great White and Dalmatian pelicans and large numbers of waterfowl including Velvet Scoter. To the south and east, landscapes will grow increasingly drier. Carved out of the cliffs, the medieval cave settlements of Vardzia and Gareji will blend into the semi-desert as we look for Western Rock Nuthatches, Calandra Lark, Tawny Pipit, Pied Wheatear, Egyptian Vulture and Imperial Eagle.*



**Gergeti Trinity Church, Kazbegi © John Graham**

*On special evenings during this tour, we will enjoy the renowned Georgian table tradition, treated to a variety of authentic dishes and the best of regional wines, hosted by a toastmaster and accompanied by local song. By combining birds, music, and the rich cultural heritage of Georgia, this multi-themed program assures a travel experience unlike any other.*

**September 23, Day 1: International Flight Tbilisi.** Most flights from the United States will depart the USA for Tbilisi, Georgia, Shota Rustaveli International Airport (airport code TBS) on September 23 (Day 1), arriving at different times on September 24 (Day 2) Flights into Tbilisi from the United States typically arrive late at night or very early in the morning.

Depending on your flight routing and if time permits, you may want to depart the USA on September 22 in order to be in Tbilisi in time for the initial group meeting on September 24, or to allow for potential flight delays and to be well rested. VENT will be happy to assist with additional lodging arrangements and transfers should you choose to arrive prior to September 24.

NIGHT: Aboard aircraft in transit to Tbilisi

**September 24, Day 2: Arrive in Tbilisi.** Tbilisi is the capital of Georgia. Upon arrival in Tbilisi and clearing customs and immigration, you will be transferred to our hotel in the city. Early this evening we will meet for a group welcome and introduction followed by wine, dinner and a brief introductory presentation.

During the 5<sup>th</sup> century, the Georgian King Vakhtang Gorgasali was hunting outside of Mtskheta when a Ring-necked Pheasant flew from under cover. The king sent his Peregrine Falcon after the pheasant and the falcon caught its prey. However, both birds tumbled into a spring of hot water and died. That event and the discovery of thermal springs at that site impressed the king so much that he founded a settlement known as Tbilisi – translated as warm place. Soon thereafter it grew to become the capital city of Georgia and has remained a center of trade and conflict for centuries. Despite having been raided countless times by various invaders through the ages, it survives today as a modern hub of the South Caucasus.

Nevertheless, the historic downtown area of Old Tbilisi is full of winding cobblestone streets, small shops and restaurants, as well as the many public museums, churches, synagogues, and mosques that underscore the diversity of this unique country.

NIGHTS: Onboard international flight (Day 1)  
Astoria Hotel, Tbilisi (Day 2)



**Montagu's Harrier © Peter Csonka**

**September 25, Day 3: Grape Harvest, Winery and Supra.** This morning we will do some birding as we head eastward towards Georgia's prime wine region. We may choose to stop for migrants at any of the preserves outside of the capital, or along the Gombori Pass. We will also stop at historical sites, including ancient monuments and churches to learn more about Georgian history, before reaching the family-owned winery where we will have our first *supra* – or traditional Georgian feast.

Continued discoveries of grape seeds and vine remnants thousands of years old, sealed within ancient clay vessels have reinforced the notion that Georgia played a high position in the origins of viticulture. Georgians have taken pride in their winemaking for many generations. Mention of sophisticated winemaking practices in Ancient Georgia can be found in the writings of Homer and Apollonius of Rhodes. It is even said that the unique Georgian alphabet is modeled after the shape of the vine's curled offshoots.



Vineyard in Kakheti. Left photo © John Graham; right photo © Pheasant's Tears

At the family-owned Georgian vineyard and winery, we may stroll along the vines in a beautiful valley as migratory birds continue their southward movements. We may pause for some birding, and for some leisurely grape picking. We will also visit the winery and learn about the Georgian winemaking process and sample some wine. The tradition calls for handcrafting wines that are fermented and aged in clay vessels – or *qvevri*. Georgia boasts hundreds of endemic grape varietals, yet most westerners are not familiar with any. Here we may have an opportunity to savor the bold *Saperavi*, or black table wine with deep fruity character, or perhaps the full-bodied *Shavkapito* with its gentle aromas. For those interested in lighter offerings, the renowned *Rkatsiteli* has a brighter citrus flavor, while a sparkling *Chinuri* may be offered to liven the moment. For lunch we will be treated to a fantastic feast, a Georgian *supra* hosted by our local toastmaster or *tamada*, at a table heaping with regional delicacies and wine. After enjoying an afternoon of feast, wine and music, we will return to Tbilisi for an afternoon's rest, before a light dinner.

NIGHT Astoria Hotel, Tbilisi



Clay vessels and a feast at a family cellar © John Graham



**Pied Wheatear (left) and Black-eared Wheatear (right) © Ecotours Wildlife Holidays**

**September 26, Day 4: Jandari Lake, David Gareji.** From Tbilisi we will head east towards a vast semi-arid steppe region with rocky outcrops, shallow lakes and riverine forests. First, we will visit Jandari Lake at 950 ft. (291 m) in elevation, with a good breeding population of Pygmy Cormorants and a great stopover site for waterbirds. Here we are likely to find ducks, grebes, herons, shorebirds, terns and gulls including Armenian Gull. Several pairs of Imperial Eagle breed near the lake and we will look for these magnificent raptors as they forage over the adjacent grassy plains.

We will then continue eastward to David Gareji, a monastic complex hollowed out of the rocky hillsides at the border with Azerbaijan, established in the 6<sup>th</sup> century as an Eastern Orthodox Christian cloister and still an active monastery with much history, and captivating frescos preserved in cave cells. It is a marvelous experience to stroll along the ledges overlooking the vast landscape and watching birds perched nearby, including Egyptian Vulture, Western Rock Nuthatch, Blue Rock-Thrush, Pied Wheatear, and at times even Wallcreeper! The steppe surrounding the complex can be good for Tawny Pipit, Calandra Lark and Greater Short-toed Lark, as well as Long-legged Buzzard.

NIGHT: Astoria Hotel, Tbilisi



**The ridge above David Gareji, at the border between Georgia and Azerbaijan © John Graham**

**September 27, Day 5: Tbilisi – Mtskheta – Batumi.**

This morning, we will leave the capital city early with bags packed and loaded, with southwestern-most Georgia as our destination. Before reaching the Batumi, we will spend the morning in Mtskheta, the ancient capital of Georgia. We will do some site-seeing and visit key historical locations.

Dominated by the 11<sup>th</sup> century Cathedral of the "Living Cross," Mtskheta was once the thriving trade center of ancient "Iberia" – the East Georgian kingdom – but is now a quaint hamlet at the confluence of the Mtkvari and Aragvi rivers. The Romans reached Mtskheta in 65 AD and maintained intermittent control of the region until the 7<sup>th</sup> century.

Contemporaries of Roman emperor Constantine the Great, Georgian King Mirian III and Queen Nana converted to Christianity in 337 AD. Mtskheta has a bounty of UNESCO sites, showcasing the high artistic and cultural level attained in medieval architecture by this ancient kingdom. We hope to visit a number of such historical landmarks. We will then continue westward towards Adjara, in western Georgia, arriving to the coastal city of Batumi in the afternoon.



**Short-toed Snake-Eagle © Peter Csonka**

NIGHT: Downtown Boutique Hotel, Batumi

**September 28, Day 6: Batumi and Raptor Migration at Sakhalvasho.** We will take a short drive to the Batumi Botanical Garden in the morning with the primary aim of finding Krüper's Nuthatch and possibly some migrants. We will spend part of the morning at this site before heading towards one of the world's primary hotspots for migrating raptors! We will drive up to the Sakhalvasho Raptor Watchpoint overlooking the Black Sea and spend the rest of the day there. Most of our time will be dedicated to enjoying the significant numbers of migratory raptors cruising overhead on their way southward. We will have fun honing our identification skills, since this is a prime location for several species of eagles, buzzards and hawks. However, the true joy will come from simply appreciating the raptors flowing past us at this world-class site.

This evening, we will enjoy dinner at an authentic and evocative Georgian restaurant, accompanied by traditional folk singers from the region.

NIGHT: Downtown Boutique Hotel, Batumi

**September 29, Day 7: The Black Sea Coast and Migration at Shuamta.** Batumi is a city in Adjara, western Georgia, known for its subtropical climate. The city and its famous beaches are on a hook that juts out into the sea, created over time by deposits of gravel sediment from the Chorokhi River, born in the Mescit Mountains of Turkey some 270 miles away and reaching the Black Sea just south of the city. Due to its location along an important migratory flyway and the variety of ecotones found at this confluence of river and sea, this delta has become one of the most exciting and surprising migration hotspots in the Caucasus. The diversity of habitats ranging from mudflats and beaches to marshes and thickets are a magnet for migrants, and the delta has been designated an Important Bird Area. We will start our day in search for waders, shorebirds, gulls and songbirds. Gull species at the site include Slender-billed, Armenian, Black-headed, Yellow-legged, Little and Caspian, among others. At this time of year Parasitic Jaegers, Yelkouan Shearwaters and several tern species may be present, while Black-winged Pratincole, Red-necked Phalarope and Gray-headed Swamphen are all possible. This site has also turned heads by producing imperiled Sociable Lapwings and many surprises. Our birding will then take us to the northeastern-most point of Batumi, where we will stroll along the shoreline and foliage at Miracle Park and Batumi Boulevard where a variety of migratory passerines are possible. Red-breasted Flycatcher, Pied



**The Greater Caucasus as seen from Svaneti © John Graham**

Wheatear, Bluethroat, Thrush Nightingale, Red-throated Pipit, Moustached and Paddyfield warblers among many others make for an impressive range of possibilities.

We will then get back on the road and drive to the Shuamta Raptor Watchpoint, at the heart of the Batumi bottleneck. The bottleneck forms each fall after southbound raptors have flown over passes along the Greater Caucasus range and descend into the lowlands, congregating between the sea and the coastal ridge in numbers over one million individuals as they continue southward! At this time of year, we can expect to see large numbers of Steppe (Common) Buzzards, with up to 84,000 counted this day in 2019! We can expect also to see significant numbers of Black Kites, Honey Buzzards, Greater and Lesser Spotted Eagles, and up to four species of harriers including the beautiful Pallid Harrier. Black Storks, large numbers of Wood Pigeons, falcons and a broad range of surprises are possible. This promises to be a wonderful time at a striking migration hotspot.

NIGHT: Downtown Boutique Hotel, Batumi

**September 30, Day 8: Through Colchis, towards the Greater Caucasus.** Today we will drive north along the Black Sea coast in direction towards Svaneti, the ancient land of the Svans, a region within Georgia with distinct cultural and linguistic characteristics. Before beginning our ascent to the Greater Caucasus range, we will visit Kolkheti National Park, near the port city of Poti. As the name of the national park implies, this region is considered the gateway to the ancient kingdom of *Colchis*, the destination of the mythical journey by Jason and the Argonauts as they searched for the Golden Fleece. It is an area of wetland forests and lakes at the mouth of the Rioni River, which was called *Phasis* in antiquity. It is worth noting that the word “pheasant” derives from the name of this river, and that the Ring-necked Pheasant – *Phasianus colchicus* – was first described from this region.



**Medieval hamlets in Svaneti © Rafael Gálvez**



Depending on timing, we may explore the wetlands of Kolkheti or even take a short boat trip along Lake Paliostromi. Kolkheti's wetlands often host a number of interesting shorebirds and gulls including Curlew and Broad-billed sandpipers, Slender-billed and Caspian gulls, White-winged Tern and many other possibilities, while the lake itself may render grebes, ducks, White-tailed Eagle and other raptors. From the coast we will continue inland and climb 5,000 ft. (1,520 m) up into the Greater Caucasus Range, to arrive at our base in Svaneti.

NIGHT: Mestia guest house TBA



**Güldenstadt's Redstart and Rufous-tailed Rock-Thrush © Ecotours Wildlife Holidays**

**October 1, Day 9: Svaneti.** The Greater Caucasus is a daunting mountain barrier that separates the North Caucasian republics and ethnic groups – within the borders of the Russian Federation – from the South Caucasian peoples, most of which reside within the borders of Georgia. Several peaks in this mountain range surpass 15,000 ft. (4,570 m) in elevation, making this a region where native endemic peoples have found refuge through the ages from waves of invaders and geopolitical structures. More than 30 languages are spoken in the Caucasus, many of which are non-Indo-European and spoken nowhere else on the planet! In this manner, the Svanetian people have preserved an ancient form of South Caucasian language and traditions that are different from that of the other South Caucasian groups. Likewise, the mountains preserve an unspoiled wilderness, with dozens of the largest glaciers in the region dotting the mountains of Svaneti.

This day, we will explore a number of historical sites and birding locations from our base in Mestia. During this or the following day, we may visit the forested slopes around Mount Tetnuldi. This area can be great for woodland species such as Coal Tit, Goldcrest, Hawfinch and woodpeckers. These slopes can also render specialties such as Krüper's Nuthatch, Mountain Chiffchaff and Ring Ouzel. This evening, we will have our second supra – or feast, accompanied by traditional singers.

NIGHT: Mestia guest house TBA

**October 2, Day 10: Svaneti – Kala.** This morning we may drive up to the Chalaadi Glacier or do some birding along glacial streams and forests. Here, several species are possible including Lammergeier (Bearded Vulture), Cinereous Vulture, Yellow-billed Chough, "Caucasian" Water Pipit, Firecrest, Fire-fronted Serin and Güldenstadt's Redstart. As we continue our drive up Mount Tetnuldi, we will stop for incredible views of the Svaneti range, and then continue to the village of Kala, one of the highest inhabited settlements in the Caucasus Mountains and a UNESCO World Heritage site. We will spend some time exploring this medieval village full of 10<sup>th</sup> century defensive towers. While in Upper Svaneti, we may tour the iconic Lamaria Church, with architectural features dating back to the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries, and fresco remnants from the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. If time

allows, we will explore the foothills of the Lamara Mountain, with spectacular views of Mount Shkhara – the highest peak in Georgia at 16,627 ft. (5,068 m) – and its main glacier in search of avian highlights.

NIGHT: Mestia guest house TBA

**October 3, Day 11: Svaneti to Kutaisi.** With our bags packed and loaded, we will bid farewell to Svaneti and start our descent from the Greater Caucasus range southward towards the Lesser Caucasus range, the chain of mountains that parallels Georgia's southern border with Turkey, Armenia and Azerbaijan, eventually merging imperceptibly with the highlands south of the Caspian Sea. Along the way we will likely see evidence of the continuing raptor migration. Species such as Alpine Accentor, White-throated Dipper, Horned Lark, Water Pipit and Fire-fronted Serin may be found at our higher elevation stops. We may also do some birding along mountain passes and subtropical forests within the Sataplia Nature Reserve, a territory dotted with karst caves, beech and hornbeam groves, alder, azalea and other flora distinctive of the Kolkhetian forest system. However, our primary focus during this travel day will be to reach the city of Kutaisi with anticipation, well before dinner.

Kutaisi was once the capital of the ancient kingdom of Colchis in western Georgia. There, we will visit the impressive 10<sup>th</sup> century Bagrati Cathedral, positioned on a promontory overlooking the city and may have an opportunity to hear some sacred chanting. We will be treated to traditional folk singing during dinner, accompanied by Georgian wine.

NIGHT: King David Hotel, Kutaisi



The "Caucasian" Mountain Chiffchaff is a specialty of the region © Ecotours Wildlife Holidays

**October 4-5, Days 12-13: Zekari Pass and Javakheti.** After leaving Kutaisi, we will explore the southern mountain passes in the Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park, one of the oldest and largest conservation areas in Georgia, occupying more than 1% of the nation's territory. Although the park received its current status 20 years ago, it was already a renowned nature preserve for members of the Romanov family during the 1860's under the Russian Empire, following a long tradition as a hunting territory for Georgian nobles dating back to Georgia's Golden Age under Queen Tamar's rule in the 1200's. This morning we will cross a sliver of the park along its western edge, into the Lesser Caucasus Range by driving up the Zekari Pass on the slopes of the Meskheta Mountains.

As we climb the slopes, we will be surrounded by coniferous and humid forests where we will hope to find Black and White-backed woodpeckers, stopping at streams in search of White-throated Dipper, and ever-vigilantly in search for Mountain Chiffchaff. At around 6,200 ft. (1,890 m) in elevation, we will reach subalpine meadows where our focus will turn to the elusive Caspian Snowcock, a rugged gallinaceous species restricted to this mountain range system, which we'll hope to appreciate through scope views. The area may have much more to offer, including Water Pipit, Horned Lark and maybe even Caucasian Grouse.



**The cave complex of Vardzia © John Graham**

During this and the following day, we will explore a number of sites near our base of Akhaltsikhe, including Javakheti. The vast open landscape of the Javakheti Plateau has been a traditional summer destination for semi-nomadic pastoral communities stretching to Anatolia for ages. In this manner, it is thought that the Cappadocian missionary St. Nino first brought Christianity to Georgia during the 4<sup>th</sup> century, carrying her grapevine cross through Javakheti, eventually reaching the ancient Kingdom of Iberia in eastern Georgia and converting Queen Nana and King Mirian III.

Our attention will turn to the arid plains and lakes of this distinct region. We will search the brush and surrounding thickets for migratory passerines, with a broad array of possibilities that could include short-toed larks, warblers, buntings, pipits and wagtails. The plains may hold resting Long-legged Buzzards and several other raptor species could be foraging overhead, including three species of harriers. The large lakes may hold many dabbling ducks of several species, as well as Red-crested Pochard, Tufted Duck, Ruddy Shelduck and with some persistence even the uncommon Velvet Scoter (now strictly *Melanitta fusca*) – a well-deserved recent split from the North American White-winged Scoter (now *Melanitta deglandi*). Dalmatian and Great White pelican are to be looked for in these lakes,



**Dalmatian Pelicans © Ecotours Wildlife Holidays**

## *Caucasus Georgia: Birds, Ancient Chants and Wine, Page 12*

as well as a wide possibility of shorebirds and waders. The “eastern” form of the Common Crane (*G. g. lilfordi*) is to be looked for here, with a breeding range contained through Transcaucasia it is a near-endemic, distinctive by having a reduced red patch on the crown and being paler above.

At some point during these two days, we may also descend into the Mtkvari River valley and visit the remarkable cave complex of Vardzia, a settlement of dwellings carved out of the mountainside in a Byzantine-Cappadocian style, dating back to the 12<sup>th</sup> century, and preserving an impressive series of frescos within the main church. In recent decades, it has been reinhabited by Eastern Orthodox Christian monks. We may also explore the fields near Sapara Monastery or megalithic walls near the village of Saro, depending on time. The nearby Khertvisi Fortress may offer migratory songbirds along the adjacent river. The dry and continental climate of the area hosts a number of east-Mediterranean species and can be particularly interesting for vultures including Egyptian and Eurasian Griffon, as well as Golden Eagle, Short-toed Snake-Eagle, and at times even Imperial Eagle. Chukar may be common in the area, and the crags and ledges may hold Rock Sparrow, Rock Bunting, Western Rock Nuthatch, Rock Sparrow and Crag-Martins. Black-eared and maybe even Finsch’s wheatears may also in the area, as well as seasonal and altitudinal migrants including Mountain Chiffchaff and other warblers.

NIGHTS: Lomsia Hotel OR Gino Wellness Hotel, Akhaltsikhe



Akhaltsikhe © John Graham

**October 6, Day 14: Akhaltsikhe to Kazbegi.** During this travel day, we will head once more towards the Greater Caucasus range, making brief birding stops along the way as we drive up the renowned Georgian Military Highway, a traditional route used since time immemorial, which now connects Tbilisi to North Ossetia in the Russian Federation. On the way, we may look around the impressive 17<sup>th</sup> century Ananuri Fortress complex and the adjacent Zhinvali Dam. The adjacent forests can turn up a variety of seasonal and altitudinal migrants including Fire-fronted Serin, warblers and residents including Long-tailed Tit, Black Woodpecker and others. At roughly 7,200 ft. (2,200 m) and above the tree line, we will reach Gudauri, where a brief stop may render both Red-billed and Yellow-billed choughs, and with luck a Lammergeier (Bearded Vulture.) We will also make another stop at the Jvari Pass, where the highway reaches its highest elevation at 7,815 feet (2,379 m) in search of species such as Water Pipit, Ring Ouzel, Alpine Accentor and White-winged Snowfinch.

Finally, at 5,710 feet (1,740 m) we will reach the hamlet of Stepantsminda (St. Stephan) at the slopes of Mount Mqinqvartsveri, Georgia’s most famous peak at 16,581 feet (5,054 m) in elevation. Both the mountain and the village are colloquially called Kazbegi, the name given to the area when Georgia was under Russian rule. This will be our base for the next two nights, making it a very scenic location below the snow-mantled massif – a dormant volcano shrouded in white.

NIGHT: Alpine Lounge OR Porta Hotel, Kazbegi



Illustrations by Rafael Gálvez. Caucasian Grouse, Caucasian and Caspian snowcocks, featured in "Birds of Kolkheti" (Buneba 2005) – showcasing Georgian script.

**October 7, Day 15: Kazbegi.** This morning we will drive from our base at Stepandsminda to the Gergeti Trinity Church located at an altitude of 7,120 ft. (2,200m) overlooking the valley below and the peak of Mount Mqinavartsveri – or Kazbegi. From here we will scan the slopes for the endemic Caucasian Black Grouse and listen for the haunting calls of Caucasian Snowcocks from the surrounding hillsides, searching for birds perched upon clifftops or flying along the slopes. If we are very fortunate, inclement weather may push *Güldenstadt's Redstarts* and *Great Rosefinches* from the higher regions and we will be vigilantly in search of these two beautiful and sough-after species. Here we are also likely to see *Lammergeier* (Bearded Vulture), *Griffon Vulture*, the pale "Caucasian" *Twite*, *Fire-fronted Serin*, *Alpine Accentor*, *Rufous-tailed Rock-Thrush* and *Black Redstart*. With persistence, we may even catch glimpses of an interesting goat-antelope – the endemic *East Caucasian Tur* – which can sometimes be seen on rocky outcrops. As we search, a brief splash of crimson may reveal the butterfly-like movements of a *Wallcreeper* against the mountain. The forests below the church may hold *Mountain Chiffchaff* and other woodland species – with luck maybe even a late *Green Warbler*. Bushes down in the valley are often teeming with migrants, while migration of *Black Kites*, *Steppe Buzzards* and *harriers* may be continuing strong above us.

This evening we will have dinner at a family dining room while traditional *khinkali* dumplings are being made. Guests will be welcome to observe and participate in the kitchen.

NIGHT: Alpine Lounge OR Porta Hotel, Kazbegi

**October 8, Day 16: Kazbegi to Tbilisi.** Early this morning, as we descend Kazbegi we will search along the river for migratory songbirds foraging in the bushes and marshes. The possibilities include a variety of *Sylvia* and *Phylloscopus* warblers such as *Barred*, *Blackcap*, *chiffchaffs* and others. As we descend the Greater Caucasus, we will make several birding stops, particularly along the spectacular *Jvari* (Krestovy) Pass and at the forest near the *Ananuri Fortress*. If weather conditions are favorable, good numbers of raptors may be seen flying south following the course of the valley. We will arrive to Tbilisi in the afternoon. After checking in to our final base, we will set out to explore a bit of the Georgian capital city and arrive to an authentic restaurant for our final supra feast together, once again hosted by a toastmaster and accompanied by wine and song.

NIGHT: Astoria Hotel, Tbilisi

**October 9, Day 17: Departure for home.** We will organize transfers to the airport throughout the day. When booking your return flight please keep in mind that transfers will depart from the hotel about 3 hours before the scheduled departing flight times. Invariably, many flights departing Tbilisi leave in the early hours of the morning, so you may want to consider giving yourselves one or two full extra days to explore some of Tbilisi's 25 public museums, the various historical sites, and world-famous dining.

**EXTRA ARRANGEMENTS:** Should you wish to make arrangements to arrive early or extend your stay, please contact the VENT office at least three months prior to your departure date. We can very easily make hotel arrangements and often at our group rate, if we receive your request with enough advance time.

**MEDICAL EVACUATION INSURANCE REQUIREMENT:** All participants will be required to purchase a medical evacuation policy for this tour and will be asked to sign and return to the VENT office a waiver stating that this has been done. Such a policy should be available from any insurance company which provides trip cancellation coverage.

**TOUR SIZE:** This tour will be limited to 14 participants.

**TOUR LEADERS:** This tour will be led by **Rafael Galvez** and **Attila Steiner**. **John Graham** will be host during special events and **David Beridze** will be the cultural guide and translator.



**Rafael Galvez** has been birding and illustrating birds since childhood. He has combined his love of art and birds while collaborating in several publications, including field guides and school textbooks in the Republic of Georgia and Latin America. He gained knowledge of the Caucasus while traveling extensively through the region, soon after the fall of the Soviet Union, while producing musical recordings and documentary shorts. He published a broad collection of secular and sacred chants, as well as art books under his own label. He has worked with several traditional ensembles in Georgia including Mtiebi, Anchiskhati and Zedashe. His branding and graphic work with traditional wineries helped reawaken an interest in Georgian wines. He served as a board member of the BirdLife International affiliate in the Republic of Georgia and Audubon in the U.S., developing educational and conservation programs. After

working with raptor research along the Black Sea, he returned to Florida to spearhead the Florida Keys Hawkwatch migration monitoring project.

**Attila Steiner** is a keen birdwatcher and naturalist. He worked for WWF on species conservation and wildlife trade before joining Ecotours Wildlife Holidays, for whom he leads tours to most countries in Eastern Europe, plus Ghana and Ethiopia. Attila has traveled extensively throughout most of Europe, Africa, Asia, and the American continent. He speaks English, German, and Spanish. His thorough knowledge of not only birds, but butterflies and dragonflies as well, is complemented by a special sense of humor.





**John Graham** joined the Yale Institute of Sacred Music as a post-doctoral teaching fellow in 2015-2016. He was lecturing, writing, and teaching a graduate course titled, "Early Polyphonies East and West." His PhD at Princeton University, "The Transmission and Transcription of Georgian Liturgical Music" (2015), encompassed a comprehensive investigation of the written and audio sources for the liturgical chant tradition of the Georgian Orthodox Church, both medieval and modern. He lectures regularly on topics relating to the history and revival of Georgian sacred music, and gives practical workshops on Georgian folk and sacred music. At Princeton, he directed two Georgian folk choirs, and started another while at Yale University. John has been organizing and leading cultural tours in the Caucasus every year since 2006, and has been successful in every way at this venture. Currently the business has expanded to include many private tour groups including tours that

specialize in trekking, birdwatching, choral performance, medieval Christianity and frescoes, wine industry and viticulture, and general culture tours. John Graham Tours now operates beyond Georgia in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Ethiopia.



**David Beridze** was born and raised in Tbilisi, but his family is from Akhaltsikhe, a city in southern Georgia. He is married with two children, and sings traditional chant in the Kashveti Church together with John Graham. His education is in history and cultural and physical geography, and he has been working as a guide for ten years. Originally he worked as a hiking guide which is his main passion, but in recent years he has been operating a variety of private cultural tours because of his vast knowledge and interest in Georgian history and arcana. His passions remain hiking, singing, and being with his family. "Dato" is mild-mannered, quiet, but owns a lot of knowledge about every topic, and is entirely dependable as a driver and guide. He has worked with John Graham Tours for many years and has excellent reviews.

**FINANCIAL ARRANGEMENTS:** The fee for the tour is **\$7,995** per person in double occupancy from Tbilisi. This includes all meals from dinner on Day 2 to dinner on Day 15, accommodations as stated in the itinerary, ground transportation during the tour, gratuities, and guide services provided by the tour leaders. It does not include airfare from your home to Tbilisi and return, baggage fees, airport departure taxes, alcoholic beverages, special gratuities, phone calls, laundry, or items of a personal nature. Rates are based upon group tariffs; if the tour does not have sufficient registration, a small-party supplement may have to be charged.

The single supplement for this tour is **\$590**. You will be charged a single supplement if you desire single accommodations, or if you prefer to share but have no roommate and we cannot provide one for you.

**EXCHANGE RATE SURCHARGES:** In the erratic global financial markets of today, it is difficult to predict foreign currency exchange rates over the long term or at the time of operation of a tour or cruise departure. Tour prices are based upon the rate of exchange at the time of itinerary publication. If exchange rates change drastically, it may be necessary to implement a surcharge. If a surcharge is necessary, every effort will be made to minimize the amount. In many cases, these additional foreign exchange rate surcharges are passed to VENT by its vendors and suppliers.

**FUEL AND FUEL SURCHARGES:** In the uncertain, often volatile oil market of late, it is difficult – if not impossible – to predict fuel costs over the long term, and more specifically, at the time of operation of this departure. Our prices are based upon the prevailing fuel rates at the time of itinerary publication. While we will do everything possible to maintain our prices, if the fuel rates increase significantly, it may be necessary to institute a fuel surcharge.

**REGISTRATION & DEPOSIT:** To register for this tour, please contact the VENT office. The deposit for this tour is **\$1,000** per person. If you prefer to pay your deposit using a credit card, the deposit must be made with MasterCard or Visa at the time of registration. If you would like to pay your deposit by check, money order, or bank transfer, your tour space will be held for 10 days to allow time for the VENT office to receive your deposit and completed registration form. The VENT registration form (available from the VENT office or by download at [www.ventbird.com](http://www.ventbird.com)) should be completed, signed, and returned to the VENT office.

**PAYMENTS:** All tour payments may be made by credit card (MasterCard or Visa), check, money order, or bank transfer (contact the VENT office for bank transfer information). These include initial deposits, second deposits, interim payments, final balances, special arrangements, etc. Full payment of the tour fee is due 150 days (April 26, 2021) prior to the tour departure date.

**CANCELLATION & REFUNDS:** Refunds are made according to the following schedule: If cancellation is made 180 days or more before the tour departure date, a cancellation fee of **\$500** per person will be charged unless the deposit is transferred to a new registration for another VENT tour that will operate within the next 12 months, in which case the cancellation fee will be **\$100** per person. If cancellation is made between 179 and 151 days before departure date, the deposit is not refundable, but any payments covering the balance of the fee will be refunded. If cancellation is made fewer than 150 days before departure date, no refund is available. This policy and fee schedule also applies to pre- and post-tour extensions. **For your protection, we strongly recommend the purchase of travel insurance that covers trip cancellation/interruption.**

<u>If you cancel:</u>	<u>Your refund will be:</u>
180 days or more before departure date	Your deposit minus \$500*
179 to 151 days before departure date	No refund of the deposit, but any payments on the balance will be refunded
150 days or less before departure date	No refund available

\*Unless the deposit is transferred to a new registration for another VENT tour that will operate within the next 12 months, in which case the cancellation fee will be \$100 per person. To qualify, cancellation must occur 180 days or more before departure date; deposit transfers must be made at the time of cancellation; and one transfer per deposit.

Upon cancellation of the transportation or travel services, where you, the customer, are not at fault and have not cancelled in violation of the terms and conditions of any of the contract for transportation or travel services, all sums paid to VENT for services not received by you will be promptly refunded by VENT to you unless you otherwise advise VENT in writing. This policy does not apply to air tickets purchased through VENT or to any special arrangements, such as additional hotel nights, that fall outside the services described in the tour itinerary.

**Victor Emanuel Nature Tours is not a participant in the California Travel Consumer Restitution Fund. California law requires certain sellers of travel to have a trust account or bond. This business has a bond issued by Travelers in the amount of \$50,000. CST #2014998-50.**

**TRAVEL INSURANCE:** To safeguard against losses due to illness, accident, or other unforeseen circumstances, we strongly recommend the purchase of travel insurance as soon as possible after making a deposit. VENT has partnered with Redpoint Resolutions as our preferred travel insurance provider. Through Redpoint, we recommend **Ripcord Rescue Travel Insurance™**. Designed for all types of travelers, Ripcord is among the most highly regarded travel insurance programs available.

Critical benefits of **Ripcord Rescue Travel Insurance** include a completely integrated program with a single contact for emergency services, travel assistance, and insurance claims; **medical evacuation and rescue services**



from your point of injury or illness to your hospital of choice; comprehensive travel insurance for **trip cancellation/interruption**, primary medical expense coverage, and much more. **Waiver for pre-existing conditions is available but must be purchased within 14 days of tour deposit.** Optional expanded insurance coverage is available and includes items such as security evacuation coverage in case of a natural disaster or other security events, and a “Cancel for Any Reason” clause (must be purchased within 14 days of tour deposit). Ripcord is available to U.S. and non-U.S. residents.

For a price quote, or to purchase travel insurance, please visit: [ripcordrescuetravelinsurance.com/ventbird](http://ripcordrescuetravelinsurance.com/ventbird); or click the **Ripcord Rescue Travel Insurance™** logo on our website (click Help and Trip Insurance); or call +1-415-481-0600. Pricing is based on age, trip cost, trip length, and level of coverage.

**MEDICAL EVACUATION INSURANCE REQUIREMENT:** This tour visits remote locations where immediate access to primary medical care may **NOT** be available. **For this reason, travel insurance which covers you for emergency evacuation is required for participation on this tour.** This coverage is included in the **Ripcord Rescue Travel Insurance™** program. Through Ripcord, “emergency evacuation” can be purchased as a stand-alone benefit or as part of a comprehensive travel insurance policy. If you choose not to purchase insurance through Ripcord, you are required to obtain it through another provider.

**AIR INFORMATION:** Victor Emanuel Travel is a full-service travel agency and wholly owned subsidiary of Victor Emanuel Nature Tours (VENT). Victor Emanuel Travel will be happy to make any domestic or international air travel arrangements from your home and return. Please feel free to call the VENT office to confirm your air arrangements. ***Please be sure to check with the VENT office prior to purchasing your air ticket to confirm that the tour is sufficiently subscribed to operate. VENT cannot be responsible for any air ticket penalties.***

**BAGGAGE:** The airlines now strictly enforce baggage regulations. Excess baggage charges, which can be substantial, are the personal responsibility of each participant. Please consult your airline to find out specific weight restrictions. Due to ever-changing circumstances in the government’s attempts to improve airport security we recommend that you check the website of the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) for the most updated information: <http://www.tsa.gov/>.

We request you limit your luggage to one medium-sized piece and one carry-on bag.

As a precaution against lost luggage, we suggest that you pack a change of clothes, toiletries, medications, important travel documents, optics, and any other essential items in your carry-on bag. Due to ever-changing circumstances in the government’s attempts to improve airport security we recommend that you check the website of the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) for the most updated information: <http://www.tsa.gov/>

**CLOTHING:** Casual dress is the rule for this trip; however, short pants, short skirts, and halter-tops are not recommended for a tour of this region. You may want to pack one set of slightly “smarter” clothes to wear at our hotel in Tbilisi or *supra* feasts. A dress code is observed when visiting sacred sites such as churches and monasteries, which are part of this itinerary. At such sacred sites, women are asked to cover their hair and shoulders with a personal scarf, a shawl or some kind of hat. They are also asked to wear a wrap-around skirt over their pants, if they are not already wearing a skirt. Such wrap-around covers are provided at most church entrances. Men are asked to wear closed toe shoes – meaning that sandals for men are not allowed at sacred sites. The wearing of sandals in general is discouraged during this tour for all, except inside hotels.

Hard-wearing, easy-to-wash-and-dry field clothes are ideal. Participants should bring layers rather than one or two large items. Nights, evenings, and mornings can be quite cold at higher elevations such as in Svaneti and Kazbegi regions, where temperatures can change suddenly from hot to cold or vice versa. Several layers of clothing are much recommended as temperatures could drop to near freezing. Particularly on the peaks of the Caucasus or in the open steppe, the wind can be piercingly cold so be sure to pack a good down jacket, warm

sweaters or vests, a warm hat and gloves. Silk or synthetic thermal long underwear have been highly rated by participants during early morning and cold nights, so at least a light set is recommended. Sturdy, rainproof jackets and pants are strongly recommended (shower proof plastic jackets are not sufficient). For example, a single day in October in the Javakheti Plateau can offer temperatures in the 30s° F with a light rain during early morning birding, persisting for a couple of hours, yet by midday temperatures may rise to the mid-70s° F under sunny skies.

Other items you may consider bringing include a balaclava, in addition to a regular birding hat and a scarf. Thick socks that absorb perspiration and cushion one's feet from hard surfaces are important. It is also useful if the socks are long enough so that the bottom of one's pants can be tucked inside.

**FOOTWEAR:** Sturdy hiking boots with a solid lug sole are essential; sneakers or sports-type shoes are not appropriate, as the ground will be rough, sandy and occasionally wet and possibly slippery a lot of the time.

**LAUNDRY SERVICE:** Laundry service is available in most hotels, but is not covered by the tour fees. Note that such services tend to have pricing based on a per-item cost, with each item costing between \$1-\$3 USD.

**CLIMATE & WEATHER:** Georgia is a mountainous country in the Caucasus Region roughly 26,900 mi<sup>2</sup> (69,700 km<sup>2</sup>) in size – slightly larger than the U.S. state of West Virginia. The climate of Georgia ranges from mild and rainy on the coast and western plain, to continental and arid in the central, eastern and inland areas. The Greater and Lesser Caucasus ranges are typically colder, variable and relatively unpredictable. We will be at sea level along the Black Sea, but will reach altitudes over 7,000 ft. (2,100 m) in the Greater Caucasus.

The southwestern coast of Georgia is typically humid and subtropical. In late September and early October, temperatures along the coast range from 55° F (15° C) to 75° F (24° C). This is also at the peak of rain season along the coast and Batumi receives 99 in. (2,500 mm) per year, and 10.2 in. (315 mm) of rain in October. The Greater Caucasus average at 45° F (7° C) in October, with early mornings and nights reaching freezing temperatures, and unpredictable alpine weather than can bring showers, cold gusts or strong sunshine throughout the day. The vast open landscape of Javakheti in October can be swept with cold winds in the low 40s° F (4° to 6° C), but can also expose one to periods of strong sun. The arid regions around David Gareji range from 45° F (7° C) to 80° F (27° C) in October, with little chance of precipitation and greater sun exposure. In the capital of Tbilisi, October temperatures range from 50° F (10° C) to 68° F (20° C). The weather in Georgia at this time of year is varied, ranging from cold to hot and dry to wet, so layers will be important. It is essential to carry a day pack and always have warm clothes with you in the vehicles, even on sunny days.

**CONDITIONS:**

**Accommodations:** Over the last decade, many parts of Georgia have been modernized, while remote regions remain minimal in infrastructure. Our accommodations will be comfortable throughout, ranging from excellent hotels in cities and authentic guesthouses in remote areas.

**Altitude:** During this tour will be a sea level along the Black Sea, but will reach altitudes over 7,000 ft. (2,100 m) in the Greater Caucasus. In the Lesser Caucasus we will spend a morning at around 6,200 ft. (1,890 m) in elevation, while we will spend a pair of day in the Javakheti Plateau where altitudes average at roughly 6,500 feet (2,000 m). Tbilisi averages at 2,515 ft. (767 m) in elevation. Elevations will be reached by driving, with walking excursions within close proximity to vehicles during most situations. Overall, most if not all the walking will be on fairly flat, albeit sometimes rocky, rough, stony or dusty terrain. We will seldom be walking along paved roads. However, we will walk at a slow pace, so this should not be a matter of concern for anyone in moderate to reasonable condition. Those with heart or respiratory concerns should contact their doctor prior to departure.

**Travel:** In order to reach the various habitats and birds of this diverse country, there will be a good amount of driving. After driving on paved roads along the main highways, we will occasionally be traveling on dirt roads and sometimes bumpy and dusty tracks. At other times we will traverse dried up (in some cases not so dry) riverbeds, where many large boulders make the journey uncomfortable. We'll be using vehicle well suited to the

purpose and making frequent stops, but some discomfort is inevitable. Because of this, breakdowns, flat tires and getting stuck in terrain can happen. Although this can appear frustrating at first, almost everybody in Georgia (including our ground crew) are experts in these situations, and with so many birds to see, a half hour delay is often a good chance for more birding. There will be the occasional strenuous uphill walk such as when searching for the likes of snowcocks. Elsewhere, we'll be wandering around fairly flat open landscapes at altitudes often around 6,500 ft. (2,000 m), making plenty of stops for birds.

**EQUIPMENT:** One of the most important aspects of having an enjoyable travel experience is being prepared with proper equipment. The following items will come in handy during your trip to Georgia:

- **Backpack** – Good for carrying extra clothing, field guides, supplies, and optical equipment, etc.
- **Notebooks and pens**
- **Travel alarm clock** – Battery operated is best.
- **Polarized sunglasses with good UV protection** – Essential! Bring a back-up pair as well.
- **Sunscreen, lip balm, skin lotions** – All essential items.
- **Personal toiletries**
- **Cameras, lenses, memory cards, and extra batteries** – Please bring all the camera equipment, spare flash-cards, batteries, and film that you will need. Flash-cards and film will be almost impossible to obtain once we are away from cities. **Nearly everyone brings too few batteries and too little film or flash-card space, and this can cause some distress.** UV and polarizing filters are recommended, especially at higher elevations where glare can be a problem. Please read the section under “**Electricity**” below and make sure to bring the necessary adapters to charge your devices.
- **Small flashlight or headlamp** – A good flashlight or headlamp is essential, so please ensure that yours is in good working order and that you have spare bulbs and batteries. Couples should bring one flashlight or headlamp each.
- **Plastic bags** – Plastic bags are very useful for protecting equipment from rain and dust.
- **Handy-wipes** – These are very important, and paper tissues are also especially useful. All participants should carry sufficient amounts for their personal needs for the entire tour.
- **Tissue packs**
- **Water bottle** – Drinking water is always provided. While bringing a bottle of your own is not essential, some people prefer to have their own bottle for having an extra supply on hand.
- **One bath towel and washcloth:** Please bring an extra towel if you require more than the basic provided allotment.
- **Umbrella:** The collapsible type is easy to carry and useful both against rain and sun.
- **Walking stick** – Collapsible walking sticks will come in handy in several situations. They are strongly recommended for those with balance problems.
- **Small folding stool** – Many people find this item extremely useful when we are at the raptor migration watchpoints, or when we are patiently waiting for shy birds.
- **Snacks** – Snacks are always provided during the day before lunch including nuts, chocolate, and dried fruit. However, other western-style snacks may not be readily available. As such, if you require more, we recommend bringing a supply of other snacks such as granola bars or protein bars.

**BINOCULARS & SPOTTING SCOPES:**

**Binoculars** – We strongly recommend good binoculars of at least 7x35, 8x42, 10x40, or 10x42 magnification. We recommend that you do NOT bring mini-binoculars of any kind. Some people like “minis” because they are small and lightweight; but they have an extremely small field of view and very poor light gathering power. Trying to find a bird in your binoculars using minis is like trying to read a book through a keyhole. You will be very frustrated, and even if you do manage to get the bird in your binoculars before it flies, you will have a poor view. You will find that 7x35 or 8x42 binoculars are compact and light enough.

**Spotting Scopes** – Your tour leaders will have scopes available for group use throughout the trip, but if you have one and wish to bring it, we strongly recommend that you do so. We will spend a lot of time scanning for snowcocks and other alpine species. The more scopes we have available, the better.

### **TRAVEL DOCUMENTS:**

**PASSPORTS** – A valid passport is required for entry into Georgia. Please check the expiration date on your passport. **If it is not valid for at least six months after your trip return date, you will need to get it renewed.** You will also want to make sure that you have at least two blank pages in your passport for stamps.

As a safety measure, photocopy the first two pages of your passport and keep the photocopies in a safe place, so if your passport is lost you will have proof of identification. Your passport should be signed and easily available at all times. You will need it for check-in at the airport on your first day of departure, so **do not pack it in your checked luggage.**

**VISAS** – A visa is not required for U.S. citizens visiting the Georgia republic for stays of 365 days or less. Rules and regulations pertaining to non-U.S. citizens may vary; please check with the appropriate consulates or embassies.

For more information on current requirements see the Consular Information Sheets at the Bureau of Consular Affairs web page: <http://travel.state.gov/>. The Embassy of Georgia's website also posts current updates on travel requirements: [https://georgiaembassyusa.org/consular\\_services\\_eng/](https://georgiaembassyusa.org/consular_services_eng/).

**CURRENCY:** Your tour fee includes all necessary expenses; however, you will want to bring enough cash to cover personal expenses not included in the program, such as gifts, laundry, gratuities, meals on your own, and personal items. It is best to carry small denominations of cash in U.S. Dollars as some exchange facilities may be unable to provide change for large bills. Bank notes need to be in good condition as banks and other money changing places may refuse damaged or torn notes.

The Georgian Lari (GEL) is the sole legal tender on the territory of Georgia. The symbol for the Georgian Lari is ₾. Lari are divided into 100 Tetri. USD can be exchanged at the Shota Rustaveli International Airport upon arrival to Tbilisi, at banks in Batumi, Kutaisi and Tbilisi, and exchange houses at other locations. ATM machines are widely available in major cities. In general, Georgia remains a relatively traditional economy and most transactions occur in cash. In select locations where credit or debit cards are accepted, Visa and Mastercard tend to be preferred over American Express, while Discover cards are rarely accepted throughout Georgia. Please check with your bank and credit card issuer for more information regarding banking and the use of ATM and credit cards overseas.

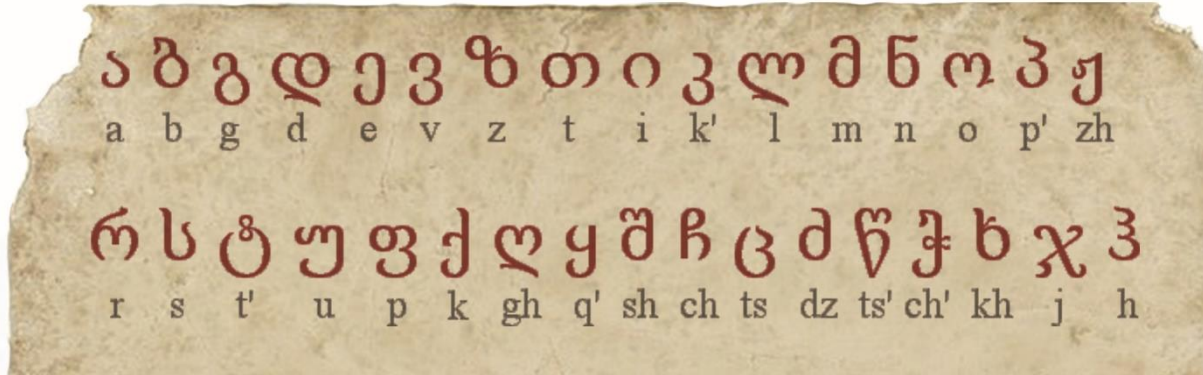
**ELECTRICITY:** Georgia uses 220 volts, 50 cycles, AC. The sockets are designed to accommodate two round prongs in the European style. Make sure to pack your own adapters. Type F electrical plug (also known as a Schuko plug) adapters can be used, which have two 4.8 mm round pins spaced 19 mm apart and two earth clips on the side. Simpler Type C electrical plug (or Europlug) adapters can also be used. All hotels are equipped with electric sockets in each room, and guests should have no problems recharging electronic devices with the right adapters.

**INTERNET:** Internet service is relatively good throughout Georgia and should be available at most hotels except in the highlands, such as Svaneti.

**LANGUAGE:** The native name of the nation of “Georgia” is **Sakartvelo**. The name is derived from Kartli, the core region in central Georgia. The Georgian people are Kartvelians, an endemic non-Indo-European ethno-linguistic group that is not related to Slavs or other Indo-European groups, nor to Turkic or Mongol ethno-linguistic groups. The official language of Georgia is Kartuli. Three other Kartvelian languages are spoken in Georgia in addition to Kartuli: Svan, Megrelian and Laz. Kartuli is by and large spoken throughout the territory. Svan is native to the highlands of the northeast – Svaneti. Megrelian is spoken in western Georgia, south of Svaneti

and along the coast to Poti. Laz is spoken primarily in the Georgia-Turkey border areas south of Batumi.

The Georgian alphabet is endemic to the country, and shares no letters with any other alphabet in the world. The written language is almost purely phonetic, in that it is written as it is spoken. The modern alphabet in broad use was created in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, derived in part from two older alphabets that are used only in liturgical texts and can also be found depicted in church frescos and carvings.



Georgian alphabet

**THE GEORGIAN FEASTING TRADITION:** Regardless of size and type, a *supra* – or Georgian feast – is always led by a *tamada* – or toastmaster – who introduces each toast during the feast. The tamada is elected by the banqueting guests or chosen by the host. A successful tamada must possess great rhetorical skill and be able to consume a significant amount of alcohol without showing signs of drunkenness. During the meal, the tamada will propose a toast, and then speak at some length about the topic. The guests raise their glasses, but do not drink. After the tamada has spoken, the toast continues, often in a generally counter-clockwise direction. The next guest who wishes to speak raises their glass, offers a toast on the topic, and then drains their glass. If a guest does not wish to speak, they may drink from their glass after some words that particularly resonate for him or her. Eating is entirely appropriate during toasts, but talking is frowned upon. Once everyone who wishes to speak on the theme has done so, the tamada proposes a new toast, and the cycle begins again. Some popular traditional themes include toasts to Georgia, family, friends, ancestors, God and the mother of God, various saints and so on. However, the theme of each toast is up to the tamada, who should be able to tailor his or her toasts to the occasion.

**THE GEORGIAN SINGING TRADITION:** Georgia is renowned for its multi-voiced singing tradition, and recently Georgian polyphony was enshrined by UNESCO as representative of intangible heritage of humanity. Singers used to sing for all occasions of daily life including work and pleasure, travel and feasting, marriages and funerals. Even today, when wheat threshing songs are no longer heard in the farm yard, polyphonic song often accompanies church festivals, family gatherings, and public ceremonies. Georgians prefer to sing in a strident direct tone, as if singing outside, and enjoy close-interval harmony. Each region enjoys its own distinct harmonic and melodies styles, and the local liturgical music also reflects regional harmonic conventions. In east Georgia, the basses sing a drone, while in west Georgia the basses are more active and the top voice sometimes sings a unique form of yodeling called *krimanchuli*. In Svaneti, a unique tuning system is preserved to this day, which music connoisseurs find mesmerizing and thrilling. Meanwhile, the more modern 19<sup>th</sup> century "urban songs" – a mix of Georgian nationalist poetry and imported Italian-Neopolitan music styles –remains the favored genre for both Georgians and their guests.

**TIME:** Georgia Standard Time (GET) is 4 hours ahead of Coordinated Universal Time (UTC) and is 8 hours ahead of Eastern Daylight Time (EDT).

**SHOPPING:** For those interested in traditional souvenirs, Georgian folk artisans can be found at a number of locations where they may be depending on sales as a primary source of their income. Felt crafts in the form of scarfs, jewelry and accessories, woollen toys and hand knitted slippers are popular souvenirs. Ornamental

decorated daggers can be found at many locations, and are popular souvenirs. Intricate wood carving has a long tradition in Georgia, and carved utensils, decorative panels and ornaments are also typically available. During this tour, there is a possibility we will be in close proximity to stalls selling such crafts in Tbilisi, Mtskheta and elsewhere. However, this tour is not tailored for shopping, and such an opportunity will be made available if the schedule allows.

**HEALTH:** Vaccinations for Hepatitis A and pre-exposure rabies are recommended by the U.S. Department of State – Bureau of Consular Affairs. In addition, Diphtheria/Pertussis/Tetanus (DPT), Typhoid and Hepatitis B immunizations are suggested. As standard travel precautions, you should always be up to date with vaccination against a variety of preventable diseases, including the **routine vaccinations**, which are Measles/Mumps/Rubella (MMR) and Varicella (chickenpox).

If you are taking prescription medication or over-the-counter medicine, be sure to bring an ample supply that will allow you to get through the tour safely. Please consult your physician as necessary. Remember to pack all medication in your carry-on baggage, preferably in original containers or packaging. As airline baggage restrictions can change without warning, please check with your airline for procedures for packing medication.

**Food and water:** Although piped water throughout much of Georgia is potable, environmental sanitation, food safety, and the availability of piped potable water can be problematic and unpredictable in parts of the country. Participants are advised NOT to drink tap water or unboiled water placed at the table unless advised by your tour leader. Bottled drinks (including bottled water) will be available at all times. You should not eat uncooked foods such as meat or vegetables, or food that has cooled and/or been sitting in the open, permitting flies to settle. Unpeeled fruit is fine, provided you wash the exterior first in clean water.

**Biting insects:** Mosquitos and biting flies could be a nuisance to some individuals in wetter areas. We suggest bringing a stick-type repellent for your face and hands. We also recommend the usual precautions of wearing pants and long-sleeved shirts at all times when in the field.

**Animal bites:** Some populated areas may have significant numbers of stray dogs roaming the streets. The temptation of getting close to a cute dog begging for food can result in bites, particularly when dogs are foraging in a feral state. Having to deal with the consequences of a dog bite, including the problem of rabies prophylaxis, is best avoided, so reasonable caution is advised. Recent efforts in Georgia have rendered favorable results in vaccinating strays against rabies.

Georgia has eight venomous snake species, all of which are uncommon to rare and will not likely be encountered during our tour. However, all snakes should be treated as potentially venomous, considering that few medical facilities have antivenin serum.

**Sun Exposure:** The sun's ultraviolet rays are damaging to the eyes and skin with prolonged exposure, particularly at higher elevation. Anytime you are outdoors you will want to protect your skin, including your lips, eyes, nose, and ears. Severe sunburn is potentially very painful and will affect your level of enjoyment. Always protect yourself when outdoors and be sure to bring an ample supply of high SPF sunscreen and lip balm. We strongly recommend the use of ultra-violet blocking, polarized sunglasses.

**Notes on medical care in Georgia:** Medical facilities in Georgia that meet most Western standards are available in Tbilisi and Batumi. American Medical Centers Georgia, an American owned and managed clinic of American Medical Centers, is a 24-hour on-call urgent care, assistance, and specialty care clinic staffed with international and Georgian doctors with facilities in both cities. They specialize in family medicine, pediatrics, gynecology, ENT, physiotherapy, psychiatry, dermatology, trauma, gastroenterology and orthopedics. Contact information can be found at [www.amcenters.com](http://www.amcenters.com).

Outside major cities, medical facilities in Georgia are limited. In the highlands or volcanic plateau of the south, medical facilities and treatment are extremely limited or non-existent. Serious medical problems requiring

hospitalization and/or medical evacuation to the United States can cost thousands of dollars. **Therefore, VENT requires all tour participants to purchase a medical evacuation insurance policy. Please be aware of this before joining the tour. Furthermore, western doctors are few and far between outside of Tbilisi or Batumi.**

In addition to your physician, a good source of general health information for travelers is the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta. The CDC operates a 24-hour recorded Travelers' Information Line 800-CDC-INFO (232-4636) or you can check their website at [www.cdc.gov/travel](http://www.cdc.gov/travel). Canadian citizens should check the website of the Public Health Agency of Canada: [www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/new\\_e.html](http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/new_e.html) (click on travel health).

**SUGGESTED READING and LISTENING:** Our website, [www.ventbird.com](http://www.ventbird.com) offers an affiliated online store that carries a wide variety of items for birding and nature lovers, including over 6,000 books. A portion of the sales from this store benefits the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. You may also visit such other online stores such as [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com), and for those out-of-print or hard-to-find titles, [www.abebooks.com](http://www.abebooks.com) or [www.buteobooks.com](http://www.buteobooks.com) which specializes in ornithology books.

### **Field Guides:**

#### ***Birds:***

Svensson, L., K. Mullarney and D. Zetterström. *Birds of Europe: Second Edition*. Princeton Field Guides, 2009. Also known as *The Collins Guide*, this is definitive field guide to the diverse birdlife of the Western Palearctic, and lauded by many experts as the best field guide ever produced, with excellent illustrations by Mullarney and Zetterström. Includes all avian species we are likely to encounter in Georgia, the common birds of the Palearctic and vagrants native to Siberia and Central Asia. The Second Edition by Princeton University Press is highly recommended, since others editions are outdated.

*Collins Bird Guide* – App. Available for Apple and Android devices.

This is the app version of the famed *Birds of Europe* by Lars Svensson, Killian Mullarney and Dan Zetterström (Second Edition 2009, available through Princeton University Press). The app includes all avian species we are likely to encounter in Georgia, the common birds of the Palearctic and vagrants native to Siberia and Central Asia. The app is superbly illustrated, easy to use and most importantly it includes recorded vocalizations for most species. This app makes a great supplement to the printed version and could be used as the sole guide for the region by those accustomed to using electronic apps frequently.

Aye, R., M. Schweizer and T. Roth. *Birds of Central Asia*. Princeton University Press, 2012.

This beautifully illustrated guide covers the region east of the Caucasus, from the Caspian Sea to China and can be a strong supplement to *Birds of Europe*, particularly when sorting through uncommon eastern species. However, it is not comprehensive for the birds we will see in Georgia.

Adamian, M. S., D. Klem Jr. *A Field Guide to Birds of Armenia*. American University of Armenia, 1997.

Although this guide is intended for the neighboring country of Armenia and is somewhat outdated, it remains the sole field guide dedicated to all avian species in a nation within the Caucasus. It is beautifully executed. Its strengths are in that it addresses subspecies found in the Caucasus. However, not all species found in Georgia are contained in this guide, and range maps are only limited to Armenia.

Galvez, R. A., L. Gavashelishvili, Z. Javakhishvili. *Raptors and Owls of Georgia*. Buneba Print, 2005.

A compact identification guide co-authored and illustrated by one of the leaders of this tour, Rafael Galvez. At 130 pages, it easily fits on a back pocket. The text is both in English and Georgian Kartuli – nicely demonstrating the native script and a regional perspective. This was a project in partnership with the Georgian Center for the Conservation of Wildlife in order to discourage the trapping and hunting of raptors in western Georgia during migration – a problem that still persists to this day. This guide was disseminated to local falconers, school children and enthusiasts as part of a large educational program that has bared fruit in the last 15 years since publication.

#### ***Mammals:***

Aulanger, S. et al. *Mammals of Europe, North Africa and the Middle East*. Bloomsbury Wildlife, 2009.

**Plants:**

Fischer, E. A. Gröger, W. Lobin. *Illustrated Field Guide to the Flora of Georgia (South Caucasus)*. Universität Koblenz-Landau.

**Music:**

Zedashe Ensemble. *The Raising of Lazare*. Archivos Alba, 2002. Available as a digital download\* from <https://zedashe.bandcamp.com/album/the-raising-of-lazare>.

Features traditional polyphonic chants, sacred and secular music from three Georgian regions: Svaneti, Kakheti and Mingrelia. Produced by Rafael A. Galvez, your tour leader, and the Zedashe Ensemble, it captures the early days of the reawakening of Georgian traditions after the fall of the Soviet Union. Produced in a field recording style, performed by a native family choir in authentic settings. Some of the recordings even capture the songs of birds on site.

\*Those that purchase the digital download, contact Rafael Galvez at [galvezbirds@gmail.com](mailto:galvezbirds@gmail.com) to obtain free support material about the music.

**History and Current Affairs:**

King, C. *The Ghosts of Freedom*. Oxford University Press, 2008.

An engaging and easy read, mostly about Georgia and Armenia during the Russian Imperial period. Brings readers right up to speed on the most important events of the current era through succinct discussion of pertinent 19th and 20th century events. Pdf available here: [http://georgica.tsu.edu.ge/files/06-History/Nationalism & Identity/King-2008.pdf](http://georgica.tsu.edu.ge/files/06-History/Nationalism%20&amp;%20Identity/King-2008.pdf)

Suny, R. G. *The Making of the Georgian Nation*. Indiana University Press, 1994.

A somewhat controversial account – albeit a comprehensive treatment that follows Georgian history from the first millennium B.C. through the years of Russian and Soviet rule, to the rise of an independent republic in 1991.

Nasmyth, P. Georgia: *In the Mountains of Poetry*. Abrams, 2017.

Although originally published in 1998, this book remains a beloved eyewitness account of Georgia's rebirth and creates an unforgettable portrait of its remarkable landscape, history, people and culture. Based on personal experience and offering fascinating insights into the life of ordinary and high profile Georgians, it is essential reading for anyone who does not yet know, or wants to know more, of this astonishing place.

**Poetry:**

Rustaveli, S. *The Knight in Panther's Skin*. Translated by Lyn Coffin. Poezia Press Ltd.

The 12<sup>th</sup> century Georgian poet and philosopher Shota Rustaveli is considered by literary critics and scholars throughout the world as one of the most significant poets in the history of medieval literature. Rustaveli is considered equivalent to Shakespeare in the Georgian language. This epic poem is a fascinating tale of chivalry, love and friendship, impossible to put down once you've started it! Many translations exist, this one is recommended.

**TIPPING:** Tipping (restaurant staff, porters, drivers, local guides) is included on VENT tours. However, if you feel one or both of your VENT leaders or any local guides have given you exceptional service, it is entirely appropriate to tip. We emphasize that tips are not expected and are entirely optional. Tips should be given directly to your tour leader; they should not be sent to the VENT office.

**RESPONSIBILITY:** Victor Emanuel Nature Tours, Inc. (VENT) and/or its Agents act only as agents for the passenger in regard to travel, whether by railroad, motorcar, motorcoach, boat, or airplane and assume no liability for injury, damage, loss, accident, delay, or irregularity which may be occasioned either by reason of defect in any vehicle or for any reason whatsoever, or through the acts or default of any company or person engaged in conveying the passenger or in carrying out the arrangements of the tour. VENT and its agents can accept no responsibility for losses or additional expenses due to delay or changes in air or other services, sickness, weather, strike, war, quarantine, or other causes. All such losses or expenses will have to be borne by the passenger, as tour rates provide for arrangements only for the time stated. The right is reserved to substitute hotels of similar category



for those indicated and to make any changes in the itinerary where deemed necessary or caused by changes in air schedules. The right is reserved to cancel any tour prior to departure, in which case full refund will constitute full settlement to the passenger. The right is reserved to substitute leaders on any tour. Where this is necessary, notification will be given to tour members. No refund will be made for any unused portion of the tour unless arrangements are made in sufficient time to avoid penalties. The prices of the tours are based on tariffs and exchange rates in effect May 28, 2020, and are subject to adjustment in the event of any change therein. The right is reserved to decline to accept or to retain any person as a member of any tour. Baggage is at owner's risk entirely. The airlines concerned and their agents and affiliates are not to be held responsible for any act, omission, or event during the time passengers are not on board their aircraft. The passenger ticket in use by said airlines, when issued, shall constitute the sole contract between the airlines and the purchaser of these tickets and/or passenger. The services of any I.A.T.A.N. carrier may be used for these tours, and transportation within the United States may be provided by any member carrier of the Airline Reporting Corporation.

GRG:20210923

5/14/2020 – RG

8/23/2021 - PS