

GRAND CAUCASUS

Character:

A cultural delight as we travel to Caucasus to explore the secrets of this hidden land from Yerevan and Tbilisi to dramatic Caucasus Mountains and Silk Road sites frozen in time. Experience Caucasian hospitality at its best, visit wineries, sample Armenian cuisine and Georgian polyphonic singing.

Duration:

10 days / 10 nights

Accommodation:

Superior hotels

Meals:

10 breakfasts, 1 lunch

Mode of travel:

Comfortable, air-conditioned vehicles

Some days involve short walks (1-2 hours round trip); for those that do not want to walk local jeeps can be rented

Tour support:

AdvenTour tour leader/driver, local guides

Included:

Accommodation for 10 nights

Meals as specified in the itinerary

AdvenTour tour leader/driver, local guides

All activities as per itinerary

All transfers in comfortable, air-conditioned vehicles

Welcome to Caucasus information kit

Excluded:

Optional activities

Itinerary

Day 1

Treasures of Yerevan and Classical Armenia

In the morning meet other group participants and tour leader, brief pre-tour orientation meeting. The day starts with a walking tour of Yerevan exploring various layers of its history – medieval shrines hidden behind imposing Soviet-style façades, narrow streets of the old center with sunlight playing on its pink walls, the Republic Square, Mother Armenia, Opera House and ambitious projects of independent Armenia – North Avenue and spacious Grigor Lusavorich Cathedral consecrated by His Holiness the Patriarch of All Armenians in the presence of His Holiness Pope John Paul II. A cultural showcase not to be missed is Matenadaran, one of the world's oldest repositories of Greek, Persian and Arabic manuscripts. Drive east to the magnificent Temple of the Sun at Garni and the legendary Monastery of Spear at Geghard. Explore the mosaic ancient baths and ruins of the royal palace, immerse yourself in the atmosphere of this mythical place and examine remarkable cross stones carved into sheer rock. Back to Yerevan.

Overnight: Hotel in Yerevan

Meal plan: Breakfast

Day 2

Mother Cathedral and Neolithic sites

Breakfast at hotel. Today we continue our exploration of the treasures of Caucasus with a visit to the Vatican city of Armenia, Holy Echmiadzin. Experience a fascinating journey through time, descend to the ruins of the pagan sanctuary beneath the altar and pay tribute to the Treasury of Mother Cathedral with striking collection of relics of Christianity. Continue to the Royal City of Metsamor, a vast archaeological site, now a museum with a spectacular collection of over 22,000 artefacts, jewellery and weapons dating from Neolithic times. There is time to explore the museum and have a walk at the site with the remains of burial sites and a fire temple built 28 centuries ago. On-site explanations offered by local guides and archaeologists working at the site. Return to Yerevan. In the evening we offer you to enjoy the treasures of the cultural life of Yerevan. An exquisite performance at National Opera or a concert at Classical Music Chamber will offer you the best of what is available at the time of your stay (optional).

Overnight: Hotel in Yerevan

Meal plan: Breakfast

Day 3

Mount Aragats and Gyumri

Early start today with a trip to the highest peak of Transcaucasia, Mount Aragats (4,090m), an extinct volcano. Acclimatizing gradually as we ascend the beautiful countryside of Aragats, we reach Amberd Fortress on the southern slope of the mountain. Breathtaking views of the fortress and citadel, snow covered peaks of Aragats, sun scorched grasslands dressed in wildflowers and abundant birdlife combine to provide an unforgettable experience this morning. If we come here during summer months we can visit high-mountain camps of friendly Yezidi tribes who tend their sheep under the towering peaks of Aragats. We will discover the traditional way of life of these people of the mountains, visiting their homes, trying fresh cheese and yogurt. Later we take a ride to Gyumri, Armenian's humor capital and second largest city. Transfer to Marmashen crossing and walk to Marmashen Urartian Fortress with cuneiform inscriptions of Argishti I. This is a prehistoric site accessed by only a handful of tourists and is well worth a visit. Continue to explore Marmashen church, a beautifully sited complex with fascinating history. Back to Gyumri. After optional lunch, we start our walking tour of historical center of Gyumri including Street of Crafts followed by a guided visit to Gyumri Brewery.

Spring special: flower tour of Aragats conducted by expert botany guide (easy walking, 1,5 h).

Winter special: Marmashen Urartian Fortress is replaced by half-day horse drawn sleigh ride to Lake Arpi followed by visit to a local cheese farm.

Overnight: Hotel in Gyumri

Meal plan: Breakfast

Day 4

Frescoes of Akhtala, Northern Armenia

This day takes in some of the less traveled routes of Northern Armenia. The first stop of our journey is mysterious Akhtala Monastery situated on the edge of a narrow ravine. Superb frescoes and amazing legends make Akhtala one of the most beautiful sites of Armenia. Later we continue our exploration and admire the jewels in the crown of Northern Armenia, Haghpat and Sanahin. Severe and majestic design and marvelous bas-reliefs justly rank these sites among the celebrated UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Our trip finishes with a cable-car trip to the upper part of Alaverdi for splendid views of dramatic Debed Gorge. Continue to Dilijan, a picturesque town nestled in deep wooded gorge, our base is a newly renovated hotel. Take a stroll in the old town where strangers are greeted with smiling curiosity. Narrow streets, cozy houses with carved wooden terraces and souvenir shops opening onto narrow alleyways make this an ideal place to relax and have fun souvenir-hunting. Evening visit to newly-opened Dilijan Ethnography Center on historic Shamamberyan street.

Overnight: Hotel in Dilijan

Meal plan: Breakfast

Day 5

Dilijan National Park and Lake Sevan

Day five starts slowly, with time for leisurely breakfast before our journey through Dilijan National Park, a protected area renowned for its serene lakes, picturesque hill trails and peaceful villages. We reach Crystal Lake, a prime hiking area where we enjoy a relaxing morning on foot actively experiencing nature and feasting our eyes on abundant birdlife in the thick groves of chestnut and oak. Change of vehicle (Niva Russian jeep) and cross wildly beautiful Areguni pass to visit Goshavank, a fairy-tale monastery set amidst flower-filled meadows. Afternoon we head for Lake Sevan, one of the highest freshwater lakes in the world - the tranquil majesty of its ever-changing waters, stunning mountains silhouetted against the blue sky, all this inspired its name The Pearl of Armenia. Check-in at your chalet-style hotel right on the beach. Enjoy the scenery, visit romantic Sevanavank Monastery, take a boat ride to Noradus to explore Stone Garden with unique collection of exquisite khachkars, Armenian cross-stones, swim in the emerald waters of the Lake.

Winter special: Free time at Lake Sevan will be replaced by a half-day trip to Tsakhadzor winter resort featuring Kecharis Monastery and short winter walk at the slopes of Mount Teghenis.

Overnight: Hotel at Lake Sevan

Meal plan: Breakfast

Day 6

Old Tbilisi

Early breakfast at hotel and trip to the border. We begin our journey of Georgia's fascinating and historical countryside and head for Tbilisi, the vibrant capital of Georgia. Arrival in Tbilisi and check in at hotel. After rest we visit Georgian Art Museum offering an exclusive collection - the icon of Zazma Monastery, the Chalice of Bedia, Anchistkhati and Khakhuli Triptychs and much more. Proceed to the tour of old Tbilisi. Best explored on foot our tour includes some of the most colourful sites of this ancient city - Metekhi Temple, Narikala Fortress with a marvellous panoramic view of the city, Sulfur Baths dating back to the time of Arab Khalifs, the Synagogue and Sioni Cathedral. Fine masonry with carved woodworks, arts and crafts workshops and oriental bazaars offer us an insight into the fascinating cultural diversity of Tbilisi. Optional sulphur bath with massage in the evening.

Overnight: Hotel in Tbilisi

Meal plan: Breakfast

Day 7

Caucasus Mountains

Breakfast at hotel. Embark on a journey revealing many secrets of the turbulent history of Georgia. Visit the ancient capital of Georgia - Mtskheta founded 3000 years ago, Jvari Church built to house the robe of Jesus Christ and Svetitskhoveli Cathedral, major pilgrimage site listed as UNESCO World Heritage site. Travel the famous Georgian Military Highway and visit Ananuri Fortress. Arrive Kazbegi, a lovely town nestled at the base of Caucasus Mountains. Enjoy the wildly beautiful views of Mount Kazbek (5,047m), one of the six 5,000 m peaks of the Caucasus range where Prometheus was said to be chained. Gergeti Sameba (Trinity), a remote but enchanting church dramatically sited at the foot of Kazbek, is a site not to be missed. In order to reach the

church we will take a winding road uphill through flower-filled meadows enjoying fantastic vistas of the area (walking about 1.5 hours round trip). We spend the night at a comfortable local guesthouse and enjoy genuine Georgian hospitality.

Overnight: *Hotel in Kazbegi*

Meal plan: *Breakfast*

Winter special: trip to Mount Kazbek and Gergeti Sameba will be replaced by trip to Gudauri ski resort with time for cable trip up the mountains for dramatic views of Caucasus mountains.

Day 8

Fortress of God

Breakfast at hotel and proceed to visit Uplistsikhe or Fortress of God, an ancient cave town dating back to I millennium BC. Explore its caves, temples, labyrinth passages and colonnaded streets, all carved out of stone. Wander among the impressive ruins of the amphitheatre, one of the oldest in the world. Travel to Gori, the birthplace of Joseph Stalin. Visit the remarkable Stalin Museum re-creating surreal and revealing scenes from the life of the tyrant. A large statue of the "Leader of the People" still dominates the square of Gori. Arrival Kutaisi, ancient capital of Colchis, Western Georgian Kingdom. Time to explore the town and visit the ruins of 11th c. Bagrati Cathedral. Overnight in a small local hotel.

Overnight: *Hotel in Kutaisi*

Meal plan: *Breakfast*

Day 9

Highlights of Kutaisi and Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park

After breakfast we visit Gelati Academy founded by King David the Builder in the 12th c. From here we drive to Borjomi, a spa town at the eastern edge of the lovely Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park. Once inside the park we are surrounded by the smell of jasmine and wild roses. We proceed to visit the summer residence of Russian Tsars and Timotesubani temple of the 13th c. Time for rest and optional walks in the park. Back to Tbilisi.

Those taking Svaneti extension proceed to Zugdidi after sightseeing in Kutaisi (see Svaneti extension below).

Overnight: *Hotel in Tbilisi*

Meal plan: *Breakfast*

Day 10

Wine and Art

Breakfast and departure from Tbilisi. Today we head deep into the heart of Alazani, a fertile valley boasting three hundred years of wine making. First we visit David Gareja cave monastery consisting of 12 monasteries carved in rocks, watchtowers and secret passages. In the footsteps of ten centuries of pilgrims undertake a light hike up the mountain and explore Lavra and Udabno churches famous for fine frescos and rare examples of cave architecture. We reach the walled town of Signagi with splendid views of romantic Alazani valley. Here we visit a family of winemakers and taste some of the finest red and white wines of the region. We learn first-hand about the local traditions of wine making and sample wine from kvevri, a clay jar kept in the ground. Hospitality here has its own rules – we can leave the house only after a delicious lunch featuring traditional dishes and wines accompanied with folk polyphonic singing, bright colors and rhythms of which add to this truly Georgian experience. In the evening we make our way back to Tbilisi for last minute shopping and a final evening out in the city.

Overnight: *Hotel in Tbilisi*

Meal plan: *Breakfast, lunch*

Those taking Eastern Turkey extension proceed to border with Turkey after breakfast (see Eastern Turkey extension below).

SVANETI EXTENSION (May-October)

If you want to complete your stay in Georgia, consider a side-trip to Svaneti. The highest inhabited point in Europe, surrounded by 4 of Europe's 10 highest peaks, Svaneti is a land of stunning beauty. Upper Svaneti, UNESCO World Heritage Site, is a mythical place dotted by medieval villages, evocative tower-houses, glaciers, high peaks and roaring waterfalls. Ushguli, the highest continually-inhabited settlement in Europe is among highlights of this trip. You will travel by 4WD over rugged terrain and enjoy stunning mountain vistas. You will be guests in small villages, stay in private homes and experience the life of Svans.

Day 1

Svaneti, Land of Thousand Towers

From Kutaisi drive to Zugdidi, meet your local guide and start your 4WD trip to Zemo (Upper) Svaneti - wild Caucasian vistas, snow-capped mountains and amazingly friendly locals essentially cut off from the rest of the country. Visit ethnographic center with Svan lodging complex, Mt. Khergiani Museum with replica of unique temples of Lagami and Gekhtaga, proceed to village of Nakidara with St. George's shrine. Arrive Mestia and overnight at a private home.

Overnight: Private home in Mestia

Meal plan: Breakfast

Day 2

Ushguli, the Highest Settlement in Europe

Depart to traditional Ushguli community located 2,200 metres above sea level with its unique architecture and cult monuments amidst stern landscapes. Experience the life of these proud "people of the mountains". En route we will explore St. Barbare and St. Kvirike shrines, cross traditional villages of Ipari and Kala. Svaneti folk singing can be enjoyed at a meal in a local home, the food is delicious and surprisingly varied with plenty of fresh herbs, fragrant stews, khachapuri cheese bred and wonderful local wine! Evening back to Mestia.

Overnight: Private home in Mestia

Meal plan: Breakfast, lunch

Day 3

Back to Tbilisi

After a hearty breakfast and farewell to our hosts we make our long way to Tbilisi (changing vehicles in Zugdidi).

Overnight: Hotel in Tbilisi

Meal plan: Breakfast

Included:

Accommodation for 3 nights

Meals as specified in the itinerary

Local tour guide/driver

All activities as per itinerary

All transfers in 4WD vehicles

EASTERN TURKEY EXTENSION (May-October)

Round up your Caucasus experience with Eastern Turkey extension. The legendary final resting place of Noah's Ark, Mount Ararat dominates our journey towards the town of Kars, where we visit the ancient Armenian capital of Ani. Continue via the sumptuous splendour of Isak Pasha Palace to Lake Van where to visit Aktamar Island and 10th century church of the Holy Cross.

Day 1

Kars

Meet your local guide at the border. Drive across a landscape dominated by the towering presence of Mount Ararat and reach Kars. City tour of Kars including some of its major historical sites - the citadel, Church of St. Gregory and Ethnography Museum containing samples of jewellery, kilims, ancient pottery and some fascinating reminders of Russian and Armenian influences. Proceed to ruins of Ani, the capital of Armenian kingdom and an important trading point at the great Silk Road. Parts of the citadel and the Cathedral still remain and many ruined churches still retain some of their remarkable decorations and wall paintings. Back to Kars, rest and overnight.

Overnight: Hotel in Kars

Meal plan: Breakfast

Day 2

Van via Dogubeyazet

After breakfast drive to Dogu Beyazet, the site of spectacular Ishak Pasha Palace. It has an eclectic mix of Armenian, Georgian, Ottoman, Persian and Selçuk architectural styles and was said to contain 366 rooms, one for each day of the year. Proceed to explore the nearby bas-reliefs of what is believed to have been an Urartian Citadel, dating from the 9th century BC. After lunch we continue via the cascading falls around Muradiye and arrive at the town of Van, lying on the eastern shores of Lake Van. Overnight at hotel in Van.

Overnight: Hotel in Van

Meal plan: Breakfast

Day 3

Van

After breakfast drive to village of Cavustepe, where we will find the site of Urartian palace of King Sardur II (8th century BC). This, along with the dramatic Kurdish fortress at Hosap will constitute our sightseeing of this morning. The fortress of Hosap Kalesi is an impressive site - a medieval stronghold that dominates the village and was built in the 17th century by the order of Suleyman Bey. Returning to Van we visit the Rock of Van, a rocky plug rising up from the lakeshore, towering above the old city of Van and supporting the imposing mass of the castle built by Sardur I and the tomb of King Argishti.

Overnight: Hotel in Van

Meal plan: Breakfast

Day 4

Akhtamar Island

Boat trip on Lake Van to Aktamar Island. Seven times the size of Lake Geneva, Lake Van is the largest lake in Turkey and the largest saline lake in the world. We will visit Akdamar Island and its Church of the Holy Cross, a superb example of medieval Armenian architecture. Set against the spectacular backdrop of the lake it still retains its majesty, enhanced by the startling diversity of its exterior reliefs and *kachkars*, Armenian cross-stones. After lunch we return to Van, where the rest of the afternoon is free for your own exploration.

Overnight: Hotel in Van

Meal plan: Breakfast

Morning transfer to airport for departure flight to Ankara.

Included:

Accommodation for 4 nights

Meals as per itinerary

Services of local guide fluent in English

All activities & sightseeing with entrance fees

All transfers in comfortable, air-conditioned vehicles

Tour Notes

1. Special notes

The information in these Special Notes covers the average range of conditions likely to be found on this trip. In remote destinations unexpected conditions can prevail at any time, and all adventurous holidays can therefore be subject to unexpected changes; in order to enjoy them you should be prepared to be flexible where necessary.

2. Travel health and insurance

No vaccination is required for traveling in Armenia and Georgia. The countries' climate is very pleasant, with no health risks. Water in both countries is very clean and safe. However, travelers usually prefer bottled spring and mineral water, which can be found in shops and supermarkets.

There are registered pharmacies in all cities and towns with all basic medications. Travelers with special needs are advised to take a supply of those medications that they are likely to require. Medical facilities are numerous with many qualified doctors practicing in all specialties. Doctors and hospitals often expect cash payment for their services. Travelers are advised to consult their medical insurance company prior to traveling to confirm whether their policy applies overseas and covers emergency expenses such as medical evacuation. Also please ascertain whether payment will be made to the overseas healthcare provider or if you will be reimbursed later for expenses incurred. When selecting a travel insurance policy we require that it cover medical expenses including emergency repatriation and personal liability. We also strongly recommend that the policy cover loss of luggage and personal effects.

3. Physical preparation

There will be no extreme fitness requirements and rough traveling. Some of the natural and historical sites we visit will require fair amount of walking with options for more keen travelers and nature explorers. A normal level of fitness will be expected and will certainly help enhance the opportunities to enjoy the trip.

4. Money

You will need to allow enough money for meals as well as optional activities. An average meal in a restaurant should cost between EUR10-12.

Tipping is customized and not compulsory. You should be aware that Armenia and Georgia are still a cash-only economy and credit cards are not accepted in the majority of shops and restaurants. There are several ATM machines in Yerevan and Tbilisi and other cities where you can obtain cash.

Please note: we do not charge sightseeing fees in advance allowing you to choose whether or not you visit sites, depending upon your interests.

5. Communication during the tour

If you need to be contacted while traveling we recommend that you set up an email address that can be accessed on the road. Email cafes are common and are the preferred way for our leaders and travelers to stay in touch.

If someone wishes to contact you in an emergency while you are on an AdvenTour trip we recommend that they contact our operator by phone + 374 91 42 67 45 or E-mail: adventour@netsys.am.

6. Accommodation

We choose facilities that combine high level of comfort and service with unique design and appreciation of the natural beauty of a region. The emphasis is on location, practicality and reasonable degree of comfort. Furthermore, our close relationship with leading hotels allows us to offer you special rates and upgrades.

Hotel/Guesthouse

Accommodation is generally in same sex twin rooms. If you are sharing with another single no supplement is necessary. Our costs are generally based on 3 star properties. If you want higher-class accommodation you can request an upgrade at the time of booking.

Single Supplement

Should you want more privacy during your trip, you can upgrade by the requesting your own room, often at a little extra cost.

Pre / Post-Tour Accommodation

If you require additional accommodation either before or after the trip, we can book this for you provided you notify us at the time of booking. Please contact AdvenTour for current prices. Payment for this must be made to AdvenTour. Please note that AMD 5,000 booking fee is added to the cost.

7. Transport and private transfers

The mode of transport we use is chosen to suit the environmental aspects and local infrastructure. During tours we use comfortable, air-conditioned cars, minibuses and buses as well as some local transport that is well-maintained and supplied with a first-aid kit. In fact, we often use more than one type of transport per trip. And just in case you are wondering – we also travel by foot. Airport transfers are not included in the cost of the trip. Please, let us know at the time of booking if you would like us to arrange a private transfer for you.

8. Staff and support

While on AdvenTour trips, you will be accompanied by a tour leader/driver. The tour leader is in charge of general organization of your trip making sure that you have a most enjoyable time. He/she has broad general knowledge of the places visited, including historical, cultural, religious and social aspects. The tour leader is able to provide suggestions on what to do and see and can recommend great local eating venues. Local guides are an important part of AdvenTour team, they are trained by us and support our groups in sites and locations where their special knowledge of the trails, particular activities or communities will add to the enjoyment of the tour.

9. Meals

The tour cost includes bed and breakfast in the hotels and guesthouses. Meals, when included, will feature local cuisine. Our tour leaders will advise you on the most favourite restaurants and eateries. The options for vegetarians are not limited during the trip. For the detailed meal plan, please refer to the itinerary of the tour you have chosen.

10. Laundry

Facilities are offered by all hotels for a charge.

11. Visas

To obtain a tourist visa for traveling to Armenia, you should apply to the Embassy of the Republic of Armenia in your country or online at

<http://www.armeniaforeignministry.com/eVisa/>.

Another option is to obtain your visa upon arrival at Zvartnots International Airport. Citizens of some countries do not need a visa to enter Georgia, please check the list at <http://www.mfa.gov.ge/english/>. Visa

regulations can and do change without notice. Please check the current regulations in good time to obtain a visa if one is required.

12. What to take

Pack small and light. From early May to late October the weather is generally warm and pleasant with some hot days in July - August. Sometimes it can get cool in the mountains so we recommend taking a couple of warm sweaters. You should also have a day pack to carry your personal accessories during the day.

13. Safety

Armenia and Georgia are safe countries. Anyway, we always recommend the use of a neck wallet or money belt while traveling, for the safe keeping of your passport, air tickets, cash and other valuable items. Hotels usually have safety deposit boxes, which can be used to store your valuables.

14. Responsible tourism

Tourism can be a real help to local communities providing income, positive cultural exchanges and the financial incentive to protect the natural environment. Our trips are designed to use family-based guesthouses in the regions, buy local food, hire local guides, drivers and rent trucks to ensure that as much money as possible is retained within the local economies.

15. Feedback

After your travel, we would like to hear from you. Within two weeks after your departure we will send you a feedback form to complete.

Information in this document has been compiled with care and is provided in good faith. However it is subject to change and does not form part of the contract between the client and AdvenTour.