Tour Code
AZ1

ADVENTURESABROAD

THE CAUCASUS

Azerbaijan, Georgia & Armenia

15 days

Created on: 28 Mar, 2024

Day 1 Arrival in Baku

Today we arrive in Baku, Azerbaijan.

Overnight in Baku.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

Day 2 Baku: City Tour

Azerbaijan is situated at the crossroad between Europe and Asia, and the atmosphere one discovers bears witness to an exciting melting pot of influences, from historical Muslim empires to the Soviet Union. Baku is a city brimming with history, and there is no better place to start our exploration than with a tour of the Old Town 'Iceri Sehir', which is also a fortress. Baku's medieval core is a UNESCO-protected site surrounded by 12th-century walls.

During our touring we will see the highlights of Iceri Sehir including the Palace of the Shirvans, the most striking example of the Medieval palace structures in Azerbaijan, dating to the middle of 15th century; and the Maiden's Tower, the ancient, eight storey fortress originally built as a fire beacon.

We will also visit the Heydar Aliyev Cultural Center, one of the most recognized architectural landmarks of modern Baku. The center hosts different educational and scientific competitions and projects for the development of science, education, health, sports, culture and economy. It has also hosted solo exhibitions of the world famous artists, sculptures and photographers.

Overnight in Baku.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 Baku: Gobustan National Park

This morning we travel south to the Gobustan National Park. The UNESCO protected Gobustan Rock Art Cultural Landscape is a national reserve that covers three areas of a plateau of rocky boulders rising out of the semi-desert of central Azerbaijan. Here we find an outstanding collection of rock engravings bearing testimony to 40,000 years of rock art. During our visit we will not only explore the Gobustan Museum and ancient petroglyphs, but we will also see some nearby bubbling mud volcanoes.

After our morning exploration we will head back to Baku and en route we will stop at the Martyrs' Cemetery, located on the higher slopes of the city's west end. This is the best place for viewing the city and the Bay of Baku. You will then have some free time for lunch and exploring on your own. Beyond the Old City there is no better way to get a feel for Baku's relaxed, Mediterranean atmosphere than by strolling along the much-loved Seaside Boulevard – the capital city's promenade.

Overnight in Baku.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Baku - Shemakha - Sheki

This morning we leave the capital and travel by road west to Shemakha, for a long time the capital and trade centre for western Azerbaijan and now a small town. We briefly visit the Juma ("Friday") Mosque, a very large and attractive building from the late 19th century; and the Yedi Gumbez 'Seven Tombs', yet only three of these desecrated octagonal royal tombs remain reasonably complete. They are the 18th-19th

century mausoleums of the Khans of Shemakha.

We continue to Sheki, one of the most ancient settlements and architectural centres of Azerbaijan founded more than 2,700 years ago. The setting here is stunning -- lying in forested hills with views of the Caucasus. On arrival we visit the mosaic-fronted Khan's Palace, a beautiful piece of Islamic architecture, and the History Museum. We will also have a walk through the busy market of Sheki.

Overnight in Sheki.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Sheki, Azerbaijan - Telavi, Georgia

This morning we travel along the foothills of the Greater Caucasus range and arrive at the Azerbaijan border/Lagodekhi check-point. After completing customs and immigration formalities (which can be lengthy!) we continue to Telavi. Please know that this a very full day of travel and sightseeing.

Throughout this region, snowy peaks can just be made out through the haze, and the towering white poplar tree. The emptiness of the road today belies the fact that this is an ancient trade route, a tiny part of the old Silk Road that linked China with Western Europe before an alternative route was discovered by sea. In the Telavi area, we visit some of the highlights of Georgian architectural monuments: Alaverdi Cathedral (11th c) and Gremi Complex, which is what has survived from the once flourishing town of Gremi located southwest of the present-day village of the same name.

Overnight in Telavi.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Telavi - Davit Gareja Monastery - Tbilisi

Today's journey takes us through Kakheti Province, Georgia's famous wine district, a landscape dotted with fine old churches and vineyard after vineyard.

We then drive to Davit Gareja Monastery,* situated deep in semi-desert about 75 km (47 mi) south-east of Tbilisi. Founded in the 6th century by the Christian Father St. David, the monasteries are remarkable for their original frescoes that date from the 8th to 13th centuries, and the site is considered to be one of the most important landmarks of Georgia. The main complex on which we concentrate our visit, is located just adjacent to the parking area and constitutes a highly satisfactory visit with respect to what the entire area has to offer, though we regret that our tour here will not be as comprehensive as is possible given time contraints and accessibility problems.

* The area and the footing can suffer from very changeable weather conditions. Your Tour Leader can provide further information en route, but kindly be advised that the nature, duration, and content of our visit is the prerogative of your Tour Leader.

Later in the day we arrive in Tbilisi.

Overnight in Tbilisi.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Tbilisi: City Tour

Tbilisi, capital of Georgia from the 5th century AD, has a long and fascinating history. Founded in the 4th century by King Vakhtang Gorgasali on the site of its warm mineral-water springs, it developed into the main city of the Caucasus. By the 12th century Tbilisi was one of the more important political, economic and cultural centres of the region, a key stop on the famous Silk Road on the border between Europe and Asia.

Tbilisi's Old Town, the most ancient part of the city, is renowned for its wonderful mix of cultures. The mosque, the synagogue, the Armenian and Roman Catholic churches mingle harmoniously with the splendid Georgian churches and architecture. The balmy sulfur baths have

hosted poets, writers, musicians, and kings down through the centuries. The multi-ethnic markets with large variety of produce and languages, give the city an Eastern, cosmopolitan feel.

We will explore much of the old town by foot, starting at the Metekhi Church (12th C), Abanotubani, the area famous for the sulphur baths with Asian style buildings and 19th C Georgian houses. We visit the National Museum (which has a very interesting exhibit about the Soviet Occupation) and walk Rustaveli Avenue, the most beautiful street of Tbilisi.

Balance of the day for independent exploration.

Overnight in Tbilisi.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Tbilisi - Mtskheta - Kazbegi (Stepantsminda)

This morning we leave the capital and depart for Mtskheta, an ancient town of extraordinary importance to the Georgian nation, located about 20km out of Tbilisi. It was the capital of the eastern Georgian kingdom of Iberia (not to be confused with the European peninsula) from the 3rd century BC to the 5th century AD. Mtskheta was the site of Georgia's adoption of Christianity in 334 and remains the headquarters of the Georgian Orthodox Church. We visit the Svetitskhoveli Cathedral (11th c.) and Jvari Monastery (6th c.); both are among the finest architectural monuments in Georgia.

We continue along the Georgian Military Highway, a historical road leading north from Tbilisi into Russia. It passes the spectacular Ananuri Fortress (we'll make a stop here), and then climbs the sides of the dramatic Aragvi River Valley, over the Jvari Pass (2395m / 7,857 ft) and down into Kazbegi (officially Stepantsminda; 1700m / 5577 ft). Surrounded by gigantic mountains, Kazbegi is a picturesque settlement overlooked by the biggest of them all -- Mount Kazbek (5047m / 16,558 ft) -- one of the six 5000+ metre peaks of the Caucasus.

Time permitting upon arrival, we'll begin our area sightseeing. The town and rugged surrounds provide some of the most picturesque scenes in Georgia.

Overnight in Kazbegi.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 Kazbegi Area

Today will be spent exploring the Kazbegi. We can walk up (or drive) to Gergeti Trinity Church (snow level permitting) and enjoy the spectacular views of Mt. Kazbek (5047m/16,558 ft). This is a popular area for walking and trekking, and our time here is somewhat freeform allowing for some easy walking in the beautiful surrounds and the tiny, charming village.

Overnight in Kazbegi.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 10 Kazbegi - Uplistsikhe - Akhaltsikhe

Today we continue down the Georgian Military Highway and turn east to Gori, the birthplace of Joseph Stalin. We'll visit the Stalin Museum here before travelling the 8 km to Uplistsikhe, ('the Lord's Citadel'), a cave town hewn into rock. The citadel dates back to the 7th century BC, and had served as a strategic point on the ancient Silk Road from ancient times until the 15th century AD. As part of our visit, we'll see the large central hall for pagan rituals, living rooms, and a 9th century church.

We continue to Akhaltsikhe, a small city of about 50,000 and the capital of Samtskhe-Javakheti. The city has been around for at least 800 years, and was a regional administrative center for the Ottomans from the sixteenth century up to the Russo-Turkish War. Until the twentieth century Akhaltsikhe was majority Armenian, but today, unlike most of the province, it is majority Georgian.

Arrive in Akhaltsikhe.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11 Akhaltsikhe - Vardzia, Georgia - Gyumri, Armenia

Today we travel to Armenia, stopping at first at Vardzia in the Meskheti province of southern Georgia. Here we see a thirteen story cave town built between 1186-9 by Georgia's famous Queen Tamara. It stands as a unique example of the Georgian 'renaissance' construction in an area of many medieval sites.

We then drive south of Ninotsminda to the border with Armenia at Bavra. We break up our journey to Yerevan with an overnight stop in Gyumri, a city of stately Russian architecture, cobbled streets, and a bustling market. Depending on our timing today, we may do some Gyumri sightseeing today and / or possibly tomorrow before departing for Yerevan.

Overnight in Gyumri.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 12 Gyumri - Garni Temple & Geghard Monastery Complex - Yerevan

Today we head for Yerevan, stopping at two places where local people expressed their beliefs: the Hellenistic Mithras Temple of Garni, dating back to the first century, and the Geghard Monastery in the gorge of the River Asat. Garni Temple was destroyed by an earthquake in 1679 and reconstructed in the 1970s. The temple is erected on a basalt base, on top of the gorge of the river Asat, surrounded by the ruins of the Garni Citadel, which also served as the summer residence of the Armenian kings in the third and fourth century.

The monastery at Geghard is a unique architectural construction, partially carved out of the adjacent mountain, surrounded by cliffs. While the main chapel was built in 1215, the complex was founded in the 4th century.

Today we'll also visit a brandy factory for a tour and tasting and include a typical lunch at a private home.

We then continue to Yerevan, the present-day capital of a nation that was the first in the world to adopt Christianity as a state religion (AD 301). The Yerevan of today is a city of Christian cathedrals, theatres and museums, universities and academies, parks, squares and industrial sites and, finally, an art-loving and sophisticated people.

Due to the size of our lunch today, we do not include dinner.

Overnight in Yerevan.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Lunch

Day 13 Yerevan: City Tour

Today we tour Yerevan, including a visit to the Matenadaran's Manuscript Collection, of prime importance for the study of the history and culture of Armenia, as well as Transcaucasia, Asia Minor and many Middle Eastern countries. Works by some philosophers of antiquity survived only in their Armenian translation. These include Eusebius of Gaesaria's "Chronicle", the ancient Greek philosopher Xenon's treatise "On Nature," and many others. The archives preserve over 100,000 documents of the fourteenth to nineteenth centuries: various deeds, decrees, treaties and letters, which contain vast material on the political and socio-economic history of Armenia and neighbouring countries.

We also visit the National History Museum on Republic Square. The square was built in the 1940s in a traditional Armenian architectural style. The arches of the buildings lining the square and the motifs of the bas-reliefs are unique in their conception and resemble the structural shapes of the Armenian architectural and spiritual monuments of the 10th-13th centuries. In Yerevan, most buildings comprise a pink shade of "tuff" stone quarried locally. This is the most prominent feature of Yerevan's otherwise utilitarian Soviet architecture and is unique to Armenia. While in Yerevan we will also visit the Echmiadzin Cathedral (AD 301) located outside the city. This is the centre of the Armenian Church and their most important Orthodox cathedral.

You'll have a some free time this afternoon for independent exploraiton.

Overnight in Yerevan.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 14 Exploring South of Yerevan & Leisure Time in Yerevan

This morning we visit Khor Virap Monastery (AD 4-17 c). Khor Virap has a very long and rich history, both secular and religious. It is situated in the Ararat Valley against the Biblical Mt Ararat (where Noah's Ark cast anchor) on the left bank of the River Araks on one of the high hills. From ancient times Khor Virap was highly esteemed for its geographical and territorial advantages. Weather permitting we will have spectacular views of Mt Ararat from the Yerevan-Artashat motorway.

While in Yerevan we'll also visit the Genocide Memorial and Museum at Tsitsernakaberd ("Swallow Castle"). The memorial sits on the site of an Iron Age fortress, all above-ground traces of which seem to have disappeared. The museum's testimony to the 1915 destruction of the Armenian communities of Eastern Anatolia is moving, and the monument itself is austere but powerful. The spire symbolizes the Eastern and Western branches of the Armenian people. From here the view over the Ararat Valley is striking.

We return to Yerevan where you have some much-deserved leisure time before tonight's dinner at a typical Armenian restaurant, possibly with live Armenian music.

Overnight in Yerevan.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 15 Departure

Departure from Yerevan.

BON VOYAGE!!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast