

THE FIVE STANS & THE CAUCASUS

35 days

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Day 1 Arrival in Tashkent

Today we arrive in Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan (hotel check-in from 2 pm).

Overnight in Tashkent.

Day 2 Tashkent: City Tour

Today we tour Tashkent, capital of Uzbekistan, the third largest of the former Soviet Republics. Uzbekistan is prospering under independence and this shows in the modern capitol building at the centre of town.

We visit the Old City, which has mosques and madrassas (Islamic schools) housing craft workshops and dating from the 14th century. Chorsu Bazaar, a huge open market beside Kukeldash, draws crowds of people from the countryside, many in traditional dress. We also include Kafelsashi Mausoleum, Barak Khana Medressah, Tila Shaikh Mosque and archives.

Later we have an orientation drive by Independence Square and Amir Timur's Square. We will also make a stop for a visit of the Applied Arts Museum.

Overnight in Tashkent.

Day 3 Tashkent - Fly to Nukus - Ayaz Kala - Toprak Kala - Khiva

This is a full-day of travel and sightseeing. This morning we fly to Nukus (approx 2 hours), the capital of the autonomous region of Karakalpakstan (arguably the "Sixth Stan" of our tour to Central Asia) to visit the famous Savietsky Museum with its avant-garde art collection. Karakalpakstan is considered to be autonomous due to their ethnic and cultural similarities with neighbouring Kazakhstan. The Soviets once included Karakalpakstan within the boundaries of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic but transferred it to the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic in 1936 as part of Stalin's divide and rule strategy in Central Asia.

Our destination within Karakalpakstan is the region known for the Ellik-Qala, or Fifty Fortresses. These ruins date as far back as 2,000+ years ago and they represent the varied settlements of the famed Khorezm empire. We will visit two of the well-known Qalas (fortresses) on our journey. We begin with Toprak Qala (4th-5th century A.D.), now left as a series of mud walls and excavated rooms that entails a short hike up to the top of the complex for great views of the surrounding area. Nearby is Ayaz Qala, commanding a great view over the arid plains surrounding this promontory.

We continue our road journey to Khiva, once the most remote of the Silk Road's oasis cities. Upon arrival in the late afternoon we check into our hotel.

Overnight in Khiva.

Day 4 Khiva: City Tour

Legend has it that Khiva was founded when Shem, son of Noah, discovered a well here. The town certainly existed by the 8th century, as a

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minor fort and trading post on a Silk Road branch to the Caspian Sea and the Volga. In the early 16th century, Khiva was made capital of the Timurid Empire, becoming a busy slave market and pivot of the khanate for the next three centuries. Khiva is an ancient walled city and looks much like it did in centuries past; it is one of the few sites in Central Asia where one can easily imagine life during the time of the emirates.

We will spend the morning wandering its maze of ruins and great mosques. Our tour includes Ichan Kala (walled city), Kalta Minor Minaret, Kunya Ark (inner citadel), and Madrassa Rakhimkhon. Later we walk to see Mausoleum of Pakhlavan Makhmud, Islam Khodja Minaret and Museum, the medieval Friday Mosque, and Tashauli Palace and Harem.

Your afternoon is free to further explore the walled city.

Tomorrow's journey to Turkmenistan: Your Tour Leader can arrange to have our big bags shipped ahead to Bukhara for us, which can make the border crossing into Turkmenistan crossing easier as it involves a "no man's land" of a considerable distance between border posts, over which you must carry/wheel your luggage (there is no one available/allowed to help). This is not mandatory, but if you choose to go this route, please bring a collapsible bag (ie duffel) that you can fill with things you will need until we arrive in Bukhara.

Overnight in Khiva.

Day 5 Khiva, Uzbekistan - Darvaza Gas Crater, Turkmenistan

Today we travel by road to the Turkmenistan border, arriving about mid-morning.* We complete immigration and customs formalities and then proceed to the nearby Turkmen city of Dashauz (Dashoguz), where we will have the opportunity to have some lunch.

We then embark on our drive (4WD vehicles) to the Darvaza gas crater, known locally as the "Door to Hell" or "Gates of Hell". This is a natural gas field collapsed into an underground cavern located in Derweze (Darvaza). Legend has it that Soviet archaeologists intentionally set it on fire to prevent the spread of methane gas, and it is thought to have been burning continuously since 1971. We'll travel to/from the crater in 4WD vehicles; on arrival we'll have our initial view of the crater. We'll then enjoy a BBQ dinner at the nearby yurt camp, after which we'll view the crater again.

Tonight we will overnight in the yurt camp situated very close to the gas crater. The yurts are basic but comfortable. Toilets and showers are located approximately 25-70 metres from the yurts.

* This border crossing involves crossing a "no-man's land" of about 1km. This is made easier by the availability of vans to ferry group members across (it may take several trips). This can be a long day with the border crossing acting as a bit of a "wild card."

Overnight at Darvaza Gas Crater yurt camp.

Day 6 Darvaza - Ashgabat: Afternoon City Tour

We depart early this morning for our drive by 4WD toward Ashgabat (Ashkhabad), meeting our coach halfway between the crater and the capital to continue the drive (total drive time of 4+ hours).

Ashgabat is located in a spectacular natural setting, between the Kara-Kum Desert and the Kopet-Dag mountain range. A settlement on the site of the city was successively occupied by the Parthians, Seljuk Turks, and the Mongols. Under Russian control, it became the administrative capital of the Trans-Caspian oblast, and was the centre of trade between the Russian empire and Persia; the Trans-Caspian railway reached here in 1885. The transliteration of the town's name was changed in 1992 to more accurately reflect the Turkmen original.

After a break for lunch we have an afternoon tour of Ashgabat, including a guided tour of the incredible collection at the Carpet Museum, a visit to the National Museum, and an orientation tour of the capital's incredible architecture. We will also have the opportunity to see the famous Akhal-Teke horses of Turkmenistan, a source of immense pride for the Turkmen people.

Overnight in Ashgabat.

Day 7 Ashgabat: Morning City Tour - Fly to Merv (Mary)

After breakfast, we continue our touring of the capital. We begin by driving out to the ancient Parthian capital of Nissa, a short drive away from the city. We then continue to the massive Spiritual Mosque of Turkmenbashi, Turkmenistan's first president. We will then continue to the city centre to explore the Russian Bazaar.

Later this afternoon we fly to the city of Mary, located nearby the famous Silk Road city of Merv. Several cities have existed on this site, which is significant for the interchange of culture and politics at a site of major strategic value. It is claimed that Merv was briefly the largest city in the world in the 12th century. The site of ancient Merv has been listed by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site.

Upon arrival at the airport, we will transfer to our hotel in Mary.

Overnight in Merv.

Day 8 Merv, Turkmenistan - Bukhara, Uzbekistan

This is a full day of travel and sightseeing; our border crossing can also impact the overall length of our day.

After an early breakfast, we will depart for our drive to the vast site of ancient Merv, visiting the ancient Hellenistic fortress of Gaiyur Kala, and the sites of Erk Kala and Sultan Kala. We shall also see the impressive mausoleum of Sultan Sanjar, one of the most powerful Khorezmian rulers.

After our visit and a chance for lunch we travel by road across the Karakum Desert ("Black Desert") toward the city of Turkmenabat. We will cross the border in the late afternoon and back into Uzbekistan to drive to Bukhara,* former capital of the once powerful Emirate of Bukhara.

En route we stop at the Chor Bakr Necropolis**. With buildings spanning 1,000 years of history and a thoroughly lived-in city centre that hasn't changed much in two centuries, Bukhara is one of the best places in Central Asia to catch a glimpse of pre-Russian Turkestan. Most of the city centre is an architectural preserve and includes a massive royal fortress, plenty of former madrassas, a number of ancient public baths and the remnants of a once-vast market complex.

* This border crossing also involves a "no-man's land" over which we should be able to utilize vans to bridge the distance. You will still need to be independent with your luggage between buildings.

** If our border crossing delays us longer than expected, we will take the opportunity to visit Chor Bakr later in our time in the Bukhara area.

Overnight in Bukhara.

Day 9 Bukhara: City Tour

We spend today exploring the old quarter of Bukhara on foot.

The region around Bukhara has been inhabited for at least five millennia and the city itself has existed for half that time. Located on the Silk Road, the city has long been a center of trade, scholarship, culture, and religion. The historic center of Bukhara has been listed by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site.

The highlights of today tour include Labi-hauz, a 17th century plaza built around a pool; three domed bazaars; the 12th century Kalan Minaret, once the tallest building in Asia; and the Mausoleum of Ismail Samani, the town's oldest structure (completed around AD 905) and surely one of the most elegant in Central Asia.

Overnight in Bukhara.

Day 10 Bukhara - Train to Samarkand

This morning we depart Bukhara and travel via Sitorai Mokhi-Khosa, the summer residence of the last Emir of Bukhara. The first structures in this picturesque area were built in the mid-19th century during the rule of Emir Nasrullakhan. In the 1880s, his successor Muzaffarkhan built a palace for his beloved wife Sitora-bonu. The most skillful Bukhara craftsmen were sent to Russia to learn the best practices of country residence construction. Soon after that they constructed a sumptuous set of rooms, including throne room, which had a peculiar mixture of European and Asian architectural styles.

We return to old town in Bukhara (our bus leaves to Samarkand with our luggage) and take the afternoon bullet train from Kagan train station (40 minutes' drive from Bukhara) to Samarkand (2 hours 15 minutes). Upon arrival in Samarkand we will be met by our tour bus and transferred to our hotel for a nicely-placed 3-night stay..

Overnight in Samarkand.

Day 11 Samarkand: City Tour

Samarkand, sometimes called the 'Rome of the Orient', was already flourishing when Rome and Babylon were founded. During the course of our full day tour we visit the Bibi Khanum Mosque, Mausoleum of Tamerlane, Observatory of Ulugbek, and the site where Uleg Bek, grandson of Tamerlane, made some of the greatest achievements of the pre-telescope era of astronomy in the 15th century. We also visit the regal mausoleums of Shah-i Zinda, site of Central Asia's most sacred Islamic shrine, and the museum on the site of the ancient Afrosiab archaeological site. The ancient core of Samarkand is located on the Afrasiab hill, named after the legendary Turanian king. The settlement arose in the 8th-early 7th centuries BC and occupied more than 200 hectares; river bluffs on the north and east and deep ravines in the south and west protected it. During the Achaemenids period, the city was encircled with a massive wall having an internal corridor and towers. Scholars identify Afrasiab with ancient Sogdian capital Marakanda, destroyed in the 4th century BC by Alexander the Great.

Overnight in Samarkand.

Day 12 Samarkand: Registan Square

We keep our sightseeing program to a relaxing visit to the Registan Square this morning. The impressive Registan ("Sandy Place" in the Tajik language) has been compared favourably to the Wonders of the World. Here three Madrassahs stand solemnly: the Ulug Bek Madrassah (built 1417-1420) to the west, the Tilya-Kori Madrassah (built 1646-1660), and the Sher-Dor Madrassah (built 1619-1636). Our sightseeing will take us through a careful exploration of the Madrassahs, now filled with various arts and crafts demonstrations, old photos of the monuments taken before the reconstruction by the Soviets and many varied handicrafts for sale.

After our formal sightseeing visit, you are free for the rest of the day to further explore the Registan and other lane ways and alleys of Samarkand, the second largest city in Uzbekistan.

Overnight in Samarkand.

Day 13 Samarkand, Uzbekistan - Penjikent, Tajikistan

We depart Samarkand by coach and transfer to the Uzbek-Tajik Jarteppa border connecting Samarkand with Penjikent,* Tajikistan's third largest city. After undergoing border formalities, we say goodbye to Uzbekistan and meet our small vehicles on the Tajik side to take us to the city, a scenic journey that takes in some of the foothills of the Fann Mountains. Upon arrival in Penjikent, we will visit the Ancient Panjikent Town ruins – a walled inter-city, Sarazm Settlement, Rudaki Museum of History and Regional Study, Olim Dodkho Mosque and Medressah.

* This is the longest distance (approx 700m) that you will be expected to transport your luggage between border points, though it is a flat surface and we will have plenty of time to stop and rest along the way. Presently there are usually no vans available.

Overnight in Penjikent.

Day 14 Penjikent - Iskanderkul - Dushanbe

This is a full day of travel and sightseeing. After breakfast we drive to Dushanbe via Iskanderkul Lake where we will have some free time to enjoy photos and some easy walking by the lake. Afterwards we continue our panoramic drive through the dramatic mountains of Tajikistan towards Dushanbe, briefly reaching a peak of 2500m/8,200 ft (the highest point on our tour) before descending to Dushanbe (706m).

With a rural hinterland of grassy pastures and snow-capped mountains visible from downtown, Dushanbe is a delightful city built around parks, lakes and fountains. With the frenetic building project of the past decade mostly complete, there is a palpable air of satisfaction about the city centre. Its grand plane tree boulevard, Rudaki, threads past pastel-hued remnants of the Soviet era and just as proudly past the modern icons of statehood.

Overnight in Dushanbe.

Day 15 Dushanbe: City Tour

Today we include a tour of the Museum of Antiquities in Dushanbe. The huge reclining Buddha, the burial place of the Sarazm princess, Tajikistan antiques and ancient wall paintings from Penjikent can all be found here. Dushanbe means "Monday" in Tajik, and the name reflects the fact that the city grew on the site of a village that originally was a popular Monday marketplace. Our tour will also include a visit to the privately funded Navruz Palace, a magnificent cultural centre recently completed by skilled local artisans. We will also tour the city's beautiful Botanical Gardens, and we will take a walk through the Bag-i-Rudaki (Rudaki Gardens), featuring the towering statue to Tajik hero, Ismail Somoni.

Overnight in Dushanbe.

Day 16 Dushanbe, Tajikistan - Fly to Almaty, Kazakhstan

Today we fly to Almaty. Depending on our flight time, we may accomplish some Almaty sightseeing shortly after arrival. We will aim to visit Zhenkov's Cathedral, built in 1904, and an extraordinary example of a Russian Orthodox church built in wood. We will also take the opportunity to visit Panfilov Park in which the Cathedral is located, enjoying the afternoon family atmosphere. Furthermore, we will have a chance to visit the recently reopened Museum of Musical Instruments, also located in the park.

This is a fairly easy-going day; however, the flight time can impact the convenience factor.

Overnight in Almaty.

Day 17 Almaty: City Tour

Today we have a full-day tour of Almaty.

Compared to other cities in Central Asia, Almaty is quite young. It was founded in 1854 by Russians in the valley of Almaty and was just a fort at first. Its name was Zailisky, then it was named Verny. In 1921 it became Alma-Ata ("Father of Apples") and in 1929 it became the capital of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic. In 1993 the name was changed to Almaty.

We will begin our tour of the Almaty area with a visit to the high-altitude speed-skating complex of Medeo and the Medeo Dam. We will also visit Kok-Tobe, a large promontory featuring stunning views over the city and the nearby Zailiyskiy Alatau mountain range.

Back in Almaty we'll visit the Central State Museum with its excellent displays of Scythian art and some rock drawings depicting the ancient Nestorian pilgrim movement on the Great Silk Routes. A hall dedicated to the nomadic tribes of Kazakhstan is the highlight of the ethnic section of the museum.

We may also take the opportunity to have a short visit of a couple of the Almaty metro stations (completed quite recently in 2011). The metro currently features two lines, with several stations adorned with unique and artistic designs, reflecting local culture and history.

Overnight in Almaty.

Day 18 Almaty, Kazakhstan - Bishkek, Kyrgyz Republic

This morning we travel by road across the border* to Bishkek in the Kyrgyz Republic and embark on a city tour on arrival.

Originally, Bishkek was called Pishpek. In 1926 Pishpek became the capital of the Kyrgyz Autonomous Republic. In 1936, as the capital of the Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic, Pishpek was renamed Frunze in honour of a major political organizer of the Civil War who was born in Pishpek to a Moldavian family. Today Bishkek is a modern city with vast squares, crowded bazaars, impressive administrative centers, and educational institutions.

Our tour includes Oak Park, Central Square, Statue of Manas, and Victory Square. We will also visit the National Historical Museum. At the northern end of Bishkek's central square, this enormous example of socialist realist architecture was once the Lenin Museum, entirely devoted to the man himself. After independence, two of its three floors were cleared to make way for exhibits that reflected Kyrgyzstan's new status as an independent state. Luckily for visitors one floor has been preserved, along with a huge centrepiece statue of Lenin leading the revolutionary masses.

* This is an easy crossing with a short distance across a bridge.

Overnight in Bishkek.

Day 19 Bishkek - Lake Issyk-Kul

Today's scenic drive takes us along the shores of scenic Lake Issyk-Kul (1607m/5,272 ft), the tenth largest lake in the world by volume and the second largest saline lake after the Caspian Sea. Although it is surrounded by snow-capped peaks, it never freezes; hence its name, which means "warm lake" in the Kyrgyz language.

In and around the town of Cholpon-Ata, on the shores of Lake Issyk-Kul, we will have the opportunity to view the Petroglyphs located above the town. Most of these etchings are from the time of the Saka-Usun peoples who lived in the area before the arrival of the Kyrgyz. These carvings are between 1,900 and 2,800 years old. Many of the carvings depict animals such as wolves and deer, and include the hunters that pursued them. We will also visit a small regional museum that feature many artifacts from the region and ethnological displays.

This is another full day but quite leisurely with plenty of sightseeing stops.

Overnight at Lake Issyk-Kul.

Day 20 Lake Issyk-Kul - Bishkek

This morning we depart for our drive back to Bishkek along the same road that we took to get to the lake. On the way back to Bishkek, we will stop and visit the Burana Tower, located at the mouth of the Shamsy Valley. An eleventh century monument, restored by the Soviets in the 1950's, you may choose to climb the minaret to get a view over the old city walls of Balasagun, a fortification built by the Sogdians.

Nearby Burana Tower, we will have an opportunity to witness a demonstration of some of the nomadic games carried out on horseback. Young men from the village will perform examples of "horse wrestling" (where two riders compete with one another to try and wrestle each other off of the horse); snatching up bags from the ground while the horses gallop at top speed; and a game of "Kok-Boru" or horse polo. However, in this version, instead of a ball they take a headless, limbless goat and use that as the object to score into the opposing team's goal. The effort to wrestle and carry this off demands great strength and skill as the two teams face off against one another. The winners get to keep the goat which will be used for the evening meal in their village.

This is a full day but a relatively short distance broken up with several stops of interest. This evening back in Bishkek we'll enjoy our last Central Asian dinner.

Overnight in Bishkek.

Day 21 Bishkek, Kyrgyz Republic - Baku, Azerbaijan

Today we fly to Baku and transfer to our hotel - Welcome to Azerbaijan!*

This evening we will be meeting any participants who are arriving on their tour of the Caucasus (tour AZ1).

* Due to the low-volume nature of this route, we will likely have a connection (ie in Turkey), possibly making this a full day of travel.

Overnight in Baku.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 22 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 'Icheri 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 Icheri 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.

Day 23 Baku: Gobustan National Park

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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.

Day 24 Baku - Shemakha - Sheki

This is a full day of travel and sightseeing.

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 Gumbaz '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.

Day 25 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 is 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.

Day 26 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 constraints 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.

Day 27 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.

Day 28 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.

Day 29 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.

Day 30 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.

Day 31 Akhaltsikhe - Vardzia, Georgia - Gyumri, Armenia

Today we travel to Armenia, stopping at first at Vardzia in the Meskheta 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.

Day 32 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.

Day 33 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 Caesarea'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.

Day 34 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.

Day 35 Departure

Departure from Yerevan.

BON VOYAGE!!