

Georgia

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With sublimely perched old churches, watchtowers and castles dotting its fantastic mountain scenery, Georgia has to be one of the most beautiful countries on earth. This is a place where (except in the drabber, Soviet-built sectors of some towns) the human hand has much enhanced that of nature. Finally putting post-Soviet internal strife and economic stagnation behind it, Georgia is now developing its tourism potential and making the full range of its attractions safely and readily accessible to travellers. Appealing accommodation for all budgets is becoming available across the country and opportunities for exploring by foot, horse or vehicle are expanding fast.

From the snow-capped Caucasus mountains to its semitropical Black Sea coastline, Georgia abounds in natural variety. Tbilisi, the capital and by far the biggest city, has the atmosphere of an age-old Eurasian crossroads, yet it's also a 21st-century city with European-style nightclubs and eye-catching new architecture. Georgia's deeply complicated history has given it a fascinating cocktail of influences from Turkey, Russia, Persia, Central Asia and beyond, with a wonderful heritage of architecture and art. But today Georgia looks to Europe for its future and is the most Western in atmosphere of the three Caucasus countries.

Perhaps its greatest treasure is the Georgians themselves: warm, proud, high-spirited, cultured, obsessively hospitable and expert at enjoying life. This is a country where guests are considered a blessing. The abundant local wine flows freely, tables are laden with fine food and you'll never cease to be delighted by the warmth of your welcome.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 69,700 sq km
- **Capital** Tbilisi
- **Famous for** The Golden Fleece, possibly inventing wine, Stalin, hospitality, mountains and dancing
- **Official name** Sakartvelo
- **Phrases** *Gamarjoba* (hello), *Gmadlobt* (thanks)
- **Population** 4.7 million, including an estimated 250,000 Internally Displaced Persons
- **Patron saint** St George



GEORGIA INDEX

- Litre of petrol 1.60 GEL
- Litre of bottled water 1.25 GEL
- Bottle of beer 1.50 GEL
- Souvenir T-shirt 12 GEL
- Street treat – *khachapuri* (cheese pie) 0.80 GEL, *chebureki* (meat pie) 1 GEL

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Tbilisi** (p47) The delightful Old Town, tree-lined avenues, the Mtkvari River, fine restaurants and fun bars; Tbilisi is the most charming Caucasian capital.
- **Kazbegi** (p100) Superb hiking; Tsminda Sameba Church silhouetted against mythical Mt Kazbek is a truly breathtaking sight.
- **Davit Gareja** (p113) and **Vardzia** (p121) Visit at least one of these extraordinary ancient cave monasteries.
- **Batumi** (p89) Georgia's enchanting Black Sea 'summer capital', with a party atmosphere against a backdrop of green, mist-wrapped hills.
- **Svaneti** (p94) The unique Svan culture, ancient defensive towers and the best alpine scenery in the Georgian Caucasus.

ITINERARIES

- **Three Days** Focus on Tbilisi, the fascinating capital, but take a half-day trip to Mtskheta and a day trip to Davit Gareja.
- **One Week** Starting in Tbilisi, you have time to visit the mountains as well as Mtskheta and Davit Gareja. Try a two-night stay in Kazbegi.
- **Two Weeks** See all the places listed above, before continuing to Gori, Kutaisi, then either the magical mountain stronghold of Svaneti or fun-loving Batumi on the Black Sea.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

The best times to visit Georgia are in May, June and September, when it is warm and sunny but not overly hot. July and particularly August are uncomfortably humid in many parts, and temperatures regularly reach 40°C. However, this is an excellent time to be in the mountains, where it is sunny and cool. This is also the peak season on the Black Sea. Winter

can be grim everywhere, although thanks to the buffer of the Caucasus Mountains which protects the country from the icy northern winds, Georgia rarely freezes. There is a surprising amount of rain year-round. See p312 for climate charts.

CURRENT EVENTS

Georgia enjoyed four years of relative stability following the Rose Revolution of 2003, which swept pro-Western Mikheil Saakashvili and his Georgian National Movement to power. But a new political crisis erupted in late 2007 as assorted opposition parties staged big street protests in Tbilisi against poverty, rising prices, and alleged corruption and authoritarianism in the Sgaakashvili government. Claiming that a coup d'état was threatened, President Saakashvili sent in riot police with water cannons and tear gas to clear the protests, declared a temporary state of emergency, and shut down the Imedi TV station, part-owned by his political opponent, tycoon Badri Patarkatsishvili.

The level of force used against the protests horrified Georgians and alarmed Saakashvili's friends in the West, but the president stood by his justification and called a snap presidential election for January 2008. Saakashvili won this with 53% of the vote over an opposition which had been caught unprepared. International observers adjudged the election to be democratic despite some irregularities, but large opposition protests in Tbilisi over alleged electoral fraud continued even after Saakashvili's inauguration for his new term.

Parliamentary elections due in spring 2008 were likely to have a big influence on the course of events. A good showing by the opposition could lead to further protests and instability. It seems many Georgians still view mass public action, rather than elections, as the way to change a government.

The crisis should at least have a sobering effect on the Saakashvili regime, which in its enthusiasm for free-market reforms is seen by many Georgians as insensitive, inflexible and uncaring. Georgia has won international praise for its business-friendly reforms, and a new breed of young, stylish, relatively wealthy Georgians is enjoying life as never before, shopping in glitzy new commercial centres, quaffing cocktails in fashionable bars and dancing to minimal techno in the nightclubs of Tbilisi and Batumi. But with a national

Georgia in the early 17th century were particularly savage. In 1744 a new Persian conqueror, Nader Shah, installed local Bagratid princes as kings of Kartli and Kakheti. One of them, Erekle II, ruled both kingdoms as a semi-independent state from 1762.

Russian Rule

Russian troops crossed the Caucasus for the first time in 1770 to assist Imereti's liberation from the Turks. At the Treaty of Georgievsk in 1783, Erekle II accepted Christian Russian suzerainty in return for protection against his Muslim enemies. Russia went on to annex all the Georgian kingdoms and princedoms one by one during the 19th century, replacing the local or Turkish rulers with its own military governors.

In the wake of the Russian Revolution, Georgia was briefly independent from 1918 to 1921, but it was invaded by the Red Army and incorporated into the Soviet Union in 1922. During the 1930s, like everywhere else in the USSR, Georgia suffered from the Great Terror unleashed by Joseph Stalin, a cobbler's son from the Georgian town of Gori who had ingeniously taken control of the largest country on earth.

Following Stalin's death in 1953, Georgia began to enjoy a good quality of life – the 1960s and '70s are looked back upon with nostalgia by older Georgians as a time of public order, peace and high living standards. Yet by the mid-1980s Mikhail Gorbachev began his policies of reform and the USSR disintegrated in just seven years.

Independence: From Dream to Nightmare

Georgia's bubbling independence movement became an unstoppable force after Soviet troops massacred 20 hunger strikers outside a government building in Tbilisi on 9 April 1989. Georgia's now anti-Communist government, led by the nationalist intellectual Zviad Gamsakhurdia, declared Georgia independent of the USSR on 9 April 1991. Almost immediately the country descended into chaos. Heavy street fighting overtook Tbilisi in December 1991 as rebel paramilitary forces battled in the city centre to overthrow Gamsakhurdia. He fled to Chechnya and was replaced by a military council, which gained an international respectability when Eduard Shevardnadze agreed to lead it. Shevardnadze had been First

Secretary of the Georgian Communist Party from 1972 to 1985, and Soviet Foreign Minister under Mikhail Gorbachev from 1985 to 1991. He was elected chairman of the parliament and head of state on 11 October 1992.

Shevardnadze's presence did wonders for Georgia's reputation abroad, but at home, devastating internal conflicts continued to worsen. A truce in June 1992 halted the conflict that had beset the region of South Ossetia since it had declared its unification with North Ossetia (in Russia) in 1989. But in August 1992 an even more serious conflict erupted in Abkhazia. For more details about this bitter ethnic war, see p87.

In September 1993 Georgia suffered a comprehensive defeat in Abkhazia, and Gamsakhurdia tried to recapture power from Shevardnadze. A short but bloody civil war in western Georgia was only ended by Shevardnadze's quick negotiation of support from Russian troops already in the country. Gamsakhurdia died on 31 December 1993, possibly by his own hand. The second major consequence of the defeat in Abkhazia was the enforced displacement of approximately 250,000 Georgians from their homes there – a desperate humanitarian and economic burden for a country whose economy was already on the brink of collapse.

The Rose Revolution

For a decade after the Abkhazia debacle, Georgia oscillated between periods of relative peace and security and terrible crime waves, gang warfare, kidnappings, infrastructure collapse and rampant corruption. Shevardnadze at least staved off a total collapse into anarchy, but by the early years of the 21st century, with corruption rampant and economic progress slow, Georgians had lost all faith in him.

Badly flawed parliamentary elections in November 2003 were the focus for a mass protest movement that turned into a bloodless coup, named the Rose Revolution after the flowers carried by the demonstrators. As the highly suspect election results were announced, protestors outside parliament in Tbilisi vowed to remain there until Shevardnadze resigned. Led by former Shevardnadze protégé Mikheil Saakashvili, a US-educated lawyer who now headed the opposition Georgian National Movement, the unarmed throng finally invaded parliament on 22 November. Humiliatingly

bundled out of the back door by his bodyguards, Shevardnadze announced his resignation the next morning.

The 36-year-old Saakashvili won presidential elections in January 2004 by a landslide, and set the tone for his presidency by appointing a team of young, energetic, outward-looking ministers and announcing campaigns against the plague of corruption. He scored an early triumph within months of taking power when he faced down the semiseparatist strongman of Georgia's southwestern region of Adjara, Aslan Abashidze. Just when it seemed Georgia might be plunged into another civil war, Abashidze backed down and left for exile in Russia.

PEOPLE

The Georgian people are one of the chief attractions of this country – their traditions of hospitality and kindness extend to everyone they meet, and until you experience a full Georgian meal with endless courses of sublime local cooking and lengthy toasting ceremonies (see p46), you can't claim to have seen the real Georgia.

The National Psyche

Georgians are irreverent, individualistic, enterprising, good humoured and generally high spirited – pretty much the opposite of the Russian neighbours who dominated them for two centuries. For a good demonstration of the Georgian character, stay in a Georgian home, where you'll be treated like a monarch and fed and watered until you can take no more. Most Georgians are only too delighted to talk with foreign visitors and will go out of their way to help you and make you feel welcome. In fact, few things make Georgians happier than having guests to look after.

Georgians are proud of their culture and their country, but they identify with their own regions as much as with Georgia as a whole, which is something of a mishmash of nationalities.

While some dislike the influence Russia had over the country for two centuries, many Georgians (especially those over 30) speak good, often fluent Russian, are perfectly happy to talk Russian with foreigners, and find it hard to totally dismiss their northern neighbour, having absorbed so much of her culture.

Daily Life

With their agricultural wealth and capitalist instincts, Georgians lived better than anyone else in the USSR. Despite difficulties since independence, most Georgians still manage to live relatively well (and a few live extremely well). City dwellers retain roots in distant villages and will return from visits laden with home-grown produce. Fewer Georgians live in the drab apartment blocks widespread in other ex-Soviet countries; many city homes replicate rural ones, with a variety of small dwellings set around a courtyard.

Most Georgians outside Tbilisi live in big traditional homesteads, often housing three or more generations of a family. Friends and family are of vital importance and Georgians spend copious amounts of time simply enjoying each other's company.

Georgian women generally enjoy a good deal of freedom, holding prominent positions in government and having a large presence in the workplace. But this is hardly a feminist culture – most women are also still expected to be cleaners and cooks in the home.

Population & Multiculturalism

Georgia is a cobbling together of different nationalities and regional identities – some more successfully integrated than others. In the worst cases this has led to secession and war (in Abkhazia and South Ossetia – both areas with languages that are unrelated to Georgian and whose peoples would not consider themselves Georgian). Some 250,000 ethnic Georgians were driven out of Abkhazia during the 1992–93 conflict there and the great majority of them remain internally displaced persons today. Other areas with languages that are part of the Georgian linguistic family, such as Samegrelo (Mingrelia) and Svaneti, have managed to maintain their cultural identity without separation or conflict.

Georgia is also home to around 300,000 Azeris and 300,000 Armenians, mainly near the Azerbaijani and Armenian borders. There is discontent among some members of these groups, especially Armenians, over a perceived lack of attention to their interests on the part of the government in Tbilisi. Some Armenians in the Javakheti area of southern Georgia call for regional autonomy, but these issues have not escalated into conflict.

There is still a small Russian population of around 60,000, mainly in Tbilisi. Anti-Russian

feeling was most pronounced immediately after independence but has surfaced again with the recent worsening of Georgia–Russia relations.

RELIGION

The Georgian Orthodox Church has enjoyed a big revival since the end of the Soviet era, with old churches restored, new ones built, and monasteries and convents repopulated by monks and nuns. You will often notice Georgians crossing themselves three times when a church comes into sight. As a Christian nation often threatened in the past by Muslim foes, Georgians' sense of nationhood is intimately bound up with their church.

A small number of Georgians (chiefly in Adjara, which was under Turkish rule until the 19th century) are Muslim, as is the country's Azeri population, while the Armenians are mostly Armenian Apostolic Christians. Many of the country's age-old Jewish population emigrated after Georgian independence, but there are still working synagogues in Tbilisi and Kutaisi.

ARTS

Georgians are an incredibly expressive people. Music, dance, song and poetry all play big parts in their lives.

Literature

For a little known language with only a few million speakers, Georgian has produced an extraordinarily rich body of literature. The national bard, Shota Rustaveli, wrote *The Knight in the Tiger Skin*, a work which every Georgian can quote from. Written in the 12th century, this classic was not translated into English until 1912 (by Marjory Wardrop, who learned Georgian by comparing a Georgian bible to an English one).

Under the Russians from the start of the 19th century, Georgian literature began to develop with many Western influences, particularly romanticism, as personified by Nikoloz Baratashvili (1817–45). One notable 19th-century movement was known as the Tergdaleulebi, literally meaning 'those who have drunk from the Tergi River', which flows from Georgia into Russia – the reference being to Georgians who had studied in Russia and imbibed liberal ideas there. This group promoted public, educational and political reform in Georgia, and

its leading lights were Ilia Chavchavadze and Akaki Tsereteli.

Some Georgian writers in the second half of the 19th century turned to their country's mountains for inspiration. The most prominent were Alexander Kazbegi, novelist and dramatist, and Vazha Pshavela, whom many consider the greatest Georgian poet after Rustaveli.

The principal poetic movement of the early 20th century was the symbolist Blue Horn group, whose most famous members, Titsian Tabidze and Paolo Iashvili, both met tragic ends. Tabidze was arrested and shot in the purges of 1937, and Iashvili killed himself at a Union of Writers meeting when he heard the news of Tabidze's death. Perhaps the best-loved poet of the 20th century was Titsian Tabidze's cousin Galaktion Tabidze (1892–1959), a superbly lyrical writer who also committed suicide.

Leading contemporary authors writing in Georgian include novelist Aka Morchiladze and novelist, playwright and travel writer David Turashvili. Fasil Iskander (b 1929) is an acclaimed Abkhaz author writing in Russian (and Russian). His novels *Sandro of Chegem* and *The House Under the Cypress Tree* are set in western Georgia and Abkhazia.

Cinema

Georgia was one of the first provinces of the old Russian Empire where a film studio was established, and cinema production is still a strong feature of Georgia's cultural life. Tbilisi stages a big annual international film festival (see p60).

Many Georgians consider Sergo Zakariadze (1909–71) to have been their country's greatest film actor, especially for his famous role as an ageing peasant searching for his soldier son in *Father of a Soldier* (1964). Tengiz Abuladze's *Monanieba (Repentance)* was ground-breaking in opening up the Soviet past – a black portrait of a dictator clearly based on Stalin's Georgian henchman Lavrenty Beria, it won the Grand Prix at Cannes in 1987.

The Georgian directors with most international recognition today tend to be expats based in France. Otar Iosseliani, who has lived in France since 1982, had international success with *Favourites of the Moon* in the 1980s. *Monday Morning* (2002) and *Farewell, Home Sweet Home* (1999) were both filmed in France, although they retain

a strong Georgian identity. Julie Bertucelli's *Since Otar Left* (2003) is a clever tale of three generations of women sharing a Tbilisi flat, while Gela Babluani directed the scary thriller *Legacy* (2007), focused on a blood feud in the Georgian countryside.

One of the best recent films spawned by Georgia (albeit not Georgian-made) is Paul Devlin's 2003 documentary *Power Trip*, about an American company's struggle to provide paid-for electricity in post-Soviet Tbilisi, with all the culture clashes this involves.

Music & Dance

Live music is always close at hand in Georgia. Many homes have a piano and someone ready to play on request, and dinners are often extended by polyphonic singing round the table. Georgian three-voiced polyphonic folk music was mentioned by the Greek historian Xenophon as long ago as 400 BC. It used to accompany every aspect of daily life, and the songs have survived in various genres: *supruli* (songs for the table, the most famous being 'Mravalzhamer', which means 'Many Years'), *mushuri* (working songs), *satrpialo* (love songs) and *sagmiro* (epic songs). Georgian folk festivals, such as Tbilisi's Art Gene Festival (p60) and Svaneti's Kviroba festival in July, are great opportunities to hear the best rural singers, as is the October grape harvest season in Kakheti.

Sagalobeli (beautiful church chants) have been part of Georgian music for at least 1500 years and are enjoying a revival and renewal today. Excellent choirs accompany many church services around Tbilisi, usually at 4pm on Saturday and 9am on Sunday, including at the Anchiskhati Basilica (p53), Sioni Cathedral (p53) and Mamadaviti Church (p58).

Georgia's exciting traditions of folk dance range from lyrical love stories to dramatic, leaping demonstrations of male agility, usually with beautiful costumes and to the accompaniment of string and wind instruments and drums. Top professional groups such as Erisioni and the Sukhishvili Georgian National Ballet are often touring overseas, but don't miss them if they happen to be performing at home.

Jazz too is highly popular in Georgia (Tbilisi and Batumi host annual festivals), while minimal techno is the optimal beat for many Tbilisi clubbers. The most beloved rock

artist is still Irakli Charkviani, even though he died in 2006. Georgia's first major classical composer was the opera writer Zakaria Paliashvili, famous for *Abesalom and Eteri* (1919) and *Daisi* (1923). The most famed contemporary composer is Gia Kancheli, born in 1935 and now living in Antwerp. His works are informed by his devout Orthodox faith, and he has been described as 'turning the sounds of silence into music'.

Theatre

Tbilisi boasts an amazingly lively theatrical scene for a city of its size.

Four directors have dominated Georgian theatre since the early 20th century: Kote Marjanishvili and Sandro Akhmeteli in the 1920s and '30s, and Misha Tumanishvili and Robert Sturua since the 1970s. Marjanishvili and Akhmeteli were both denounced for 'anti-Soviet activities,' and while Marjanishvili died of natural causes in 1933, Akhmeteli was shot in 1937 by the Soviet regime.

With these two men began Georgia's love affair with Shakespeare, continued by Tumanishvili and Sturua. Sturua's *Richard III* (1980) and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* (1975) daringly burlesqued dictatorial regimes and won critical acclaim throughout the world, as did his 1986 London production of *Hamlet* starring Alan Rickman. He is still director of Tbilisi's Rustaveli National Theatre, where he has staged 17 different Shakespeare plays.

Visual Arts

Many Georgian churches are adorned with wonderful old frescoes. The golden age of religious art in Georgia was the 11th to 13th centuries, when Georgian painters employed the fully developed Byzantine iconographic system and also portrayed local subjects such as Georgian monarchs and saints. There were two main fresco schools: one at Davit Gareja cave monastery and the other at the monasteries of Tao-Klarjeti (now in Turkey). During the same period artists and metalsmiths were creating beautiful icons from jewels and precious metals that remain among the country's greatest treasures today.

Perhaps the last major artist in the tradition of fresco painting was one who painted not religious images in churches but scenes of everyday life in restaurants and bars in Tbilisi. Self-taught, and in his lifetime largely

unrecognised, Niko Pirosmiani (1862–1918) expressed the essential spirit of Georgian life in a direct and enchanting way. After his death in poverty and obscurity, his work was acclaimed by the modernists, foremost among whom were Davit Kakabadze, Lado Gudiashvili and Shalva Kikodze. All three lived for a time in Paris in the early 20th century, influenced by the radical artistic ideas they encountered there. Their associate Elene Akhvediani (1901–76) painted colourful scenes of old Tbilisi and Georgian historic sites that still have a lot of appeal. Today Tbilisi has a burgeoning gallery scene with much colourful though not fantastically original art.

Architecture

Georgian church architecture is one of the most distinctive features of the landscape and a highlight of the country – not least because of Georgians' talent for placing their sacred buildings in the most scenically sublime locations.

Early churches took two main forms: the basilica and the central-domed church. Roman-influenced basilicas were rectangular in plan and divided into three parallel sections. In three-aisled basilicas (such as the 6th-century Anchiskhati in Tbilisi) the three parts were separated by arcades. In triple-church basilicas, such as the two at Nekresi, the three parts were divided by solid walls and each had its own barrel vault.

Most central-domed churches had an equal-armed, cross-shaped ground plan, with the dome sitting on a cylindrical stone drum rising above the central space. In the 'tetraconch' variety, each arm of the cross has an apse (semicircular end), and the cross may have its angles filled with corner rooms to result in a square building. The Jvari Church near Mtskheta, built about 600, is a classic tetraconch, and served as the model for Ateni Sioni, Dzveli Shuamta and other early churches.

A fusion of the basilical and central-domed forms yielded the elongated-cross church of Georgia's golden age from the 11th to 13th centuries, with a drum and pointed dome rising above the meeting of the cross's arms. Such are the beautiful tall Alaverdi, Svetitskhoveli (Mtskheta) and Bagrati (Kutaisi) cathedrals.

Invasions put a stop to much monumental building from the 13th to 18th centuries,

although the frequent danger of attack did inspire the picturesque, tall defensive towers that characterise Svaneti and other high Caucasus valleys. Some Persian style is evident in the many balconies and galleries that still adorn houses in the Old Town of Tbilisi and elsewhere.

The 19th and early 20th centuries saw Georgia putting its own quirky twist on styles brought by the Russians, including neoclassicism in Tbilisi and Art Nouveau in Batumi. Contemporary architecture since the fall of Soviet power has focused partly on the building of new churches – in modern materials but traditional forms, most notably Tbilisi's mammoth Tsminda Sameba Cathedral – but also on Western-influenced prestige projects like new luxury hotels and shopping centres, and Tbilisi's eye-catching new presidential palace.

ENVIRONMENT

From the snowy heights and alpine meadows of the Caucasus to the semitropical coast of Adjara and the semidesert border with Azerbaijan, Georgia has a fantastically diverse ecological make-up and is a nature lover's delight. Flora and fauna are particularly diverse in the Caucasus, where wildlife includes bears, wolves, boars, deer, lynx and the two species of Caucasian tur (ibex). Jackals occur all over the lower-lying parts of the country. Georgia also supports 360 recorded bird species, including 11 types of eagle and four vultures, and over 4000 plant species (300 endemic to Georgia).

The Caucasus is connected to the 'Lesser Caucasus' ranges of southern Georgia by the Likhi Range, which you'll cross between Khashuri and Kutaisi on the M1 highway. This forms a barrier between wetter, more lushly vegetated western Georgia and the drier east. Georgia's main river, the Mtkvari (or Kura), rises in northeast Turkey and flows through Borjomi, Gori and Tbilisi and on into Azerbaijan, where it enters the Caspian Sea.

Environmental protection has moved forward since Georgia passed its 1996 Law on the System of Protected Areas, and 6.6% of national territory is now under protection of varying levels, including five national parks. Sustainable tourism is seen as an important support for protected areas, and well-organised visitor facilities are in place at places such as Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park (p118), Kolkheti National Park (p84) and the

KNOW YOUR KHACHAPURI

An excess of these is not the thing for slimmers, but Georgia's ubiquitous cheese pies are the perfect keep-me-going small meal, as well as playing a part in many a feast. Different regions have their own varieties, but you'll find many of them all around the country:

- *khachapuri Acharuli* The Adjara variety is a large, boat-shaped calorie injection, overflowing with melted cheese and topped with butter and a runny egg.
- *khachapuri Imeruli* Relatively sedate, these round, flat pies have melted cheese inside only.
- *khachapuri Megruli* Round, with cheese in the middle and more cheese melted on top.
- *khachapuri penovani* Square and neatly folded into four quarters, with the cheese inside the lightish crust – particularly tasty!
- *khachapuri achma* This large variety arranges its bread and cheese in layers, lasagne-style.
- *kubdari* Not really a *khachapuri*, since it has a minced-meat filling, but it looks like one and does the same job!
- *lobiani* Same story but this time with beans inside.

Lagodekhi Nature Reserve (p115). There's useful information about protected areas on the website of the **Department of Protected Areas** (www.dpa.gov.ge).

FOOD & DRINK

One of the best reasons to visit Georgia is for its food – diverse, fresh, imaginative and filling, it's a joy and, to Georgians, one of the most important aspects of the national culture.

Staples & Specialities

The great staple for everybody, travellers and locals, is the *khachapuri*, essentially a cheese pie (see above).

The second most common dish in Georgia is *khinkali* (meat dumplings). These are usually served without any accompaniment, but they are delicious. You are not supposed to eat the doughy nexus at the top of the dumpling, though this being Georgia, a few people do. It's virtually impossible to order fewer than five of these at a time, even though they are quite substantial.

More substantial Georgian dishes typically involve lamb, chicken, beef or turkey in various spicy, herby sauces or stews – see our Menu Decoder (p46) for an explanation of the most popular dishes.

Drinks

More than anything, Georgians love to drink, and wine is a passion, particularly in Kakheti, where you will no doubt taste the unique homemade white wine made by fermenting the grape on the grape skin – a process used

only for red wine in the West. The pinkish result is a fine drop that tastes nothing like normal white wine. Most commercially marketed Georgian wine tends to be sweet to Western taste buds, although the Saperavi grape is reliably crisp and plummy.

Vodka is a common drink throughout the country, but trying the national firewater, *chacha*, is a real experience.

The two commonest Georgian beers are Kazbegi and Natakhtari. Natakhtari is smoother and creamier than the slightly acidic Kazbegi.

Georgia's favourite nonalcoholic drink is Borjomi, a salty mineral water which was the beverage of choice for every Soviet leader from Lenin on. It polarises opinion, and is certainly an acquired taste. Nabeghlavi is a less salty alternative. Georgians often claim that tap water is safe to drink throughout the country, a boast that is hard to verify. If you prefer bottled water, Borjomi Springs is a fine thirst-quencher: it's neither carbonated nor salty, although it can be hard to find outside big towns.

Where to Eat & Drink

Georgians eat and drink at all times of the day, and restaurants tend to keep suitably long hours, typically noon to midnight (exceptions to this are noted in individual reviews). Breakfast can be the trickiest meal to get outside your accommodation. While some places may serve up eggs, bread and tea early in the morning, others will offer only *khachapuri*.

Outside Tbilisi, restaurants are almost universally cheap – it is rare for a Georgian dish to cost more than 5 GEL or 6 GEL, while a full slap-up feast will rarely be more than 20 GEL per person.

Tbilisi has the best selection and variety of restaurants, but eateries around the country have improved a lot. The surly Soviet service ethic is dead and buried, and while Russian fare remains a popular alternative to Georgian dishes, more restaurants now display an openness to other foreign cuisines. For Georgian regional food, some of the best you'll eat will be offered in homestays and guesthouses.

At the bottom of the Georgian food chain are the *sakhchapure* and the *sakhinkle*, cheap workers cafés where *khachapuri* or *khinkali* are literally the only thing served. Cafés tend to serve sweet dishes – Georgians make some excellent pastries and cakes for those with a sweet tooth.

Some better-quality Georgian restaurants are really party places, where people go for loud music, dancing and lots of drinking as well as eating. These can be lots of fun if you're in company, but not very pleasant for the single traveller or even some couples. Staff will do their best to make everybody feel at ease, but if places like this are your only option, it's a good idea to eat early, before the place fills up with revellers.

Vegetarians & Vegans

Vegetarians will fare well in Georgia. *Khachapuri*, *badrijani nigvzit* (aubergine with walnut paste), *pkhali* (crushed walnuts and garlic with spinach or beetroot paste) and *lobio* (bean paste or stew with herbs and spices) are all standard fare, and breakfast will often provide *matsoni* (Georgian sour yogurt drink) or perhaps bread with cheese or honey. Vegans will find things harder, as much Georgian food involves some sort of milk product.

Habits & Customs

If you are lucky enough to be invited to a *supra* (feast – literally 'tablecloth'), you'll need to understand the basic etiquette of these festive events. While strictly speaking the word *supra* applies to any meeting where food and drink are consumed, it's likely that foreign guests will experience the full works, which usually means staggering amounts to eat and drink. A selection of cold dishes will be followed by

two or three hot courses as well as some kind of dessert. Make sure you try everything, as much to temper the onslaught of concomitant alcohol as to keep your hosts happy.

Bear in mind that Georgians toast only their enemies with beer – wine or spirits are the only drinks to toast your friends with. However, you should only drink when someone proposes a toast. This can be a surprisingly serious, lengthy and poetic matter, even at small gatherings of three or four friends. Larger gatherings will have a designated *tamada* (toastmaster), and some complex *supras* will involve an *alaverdi*, a second man whose role it is to elaborate on the toast, while a *merikipe* is there to pour the wine. If you are toasted, do not reply immediately but wait for others to add their wishes before simply thanking them – you should wait some time and then ask the *tamada* if you can make a toast in reply.

Eat Your Words

Georgian menus often look daunting, even if there's an English translation available, but you'll find that the following list explains a large proportion of most menus.

MENU DECODER

ajapsandali – spicy vegetable mixture
ajika – chilli sauce
apkhazura – spicy meatballs
asetrina – sturgeon
badrijani – aubergine (usually with walnuts and garlic)
bazhe – walnut sauce
chakapuli – lamb with tarragon and plums
chakhokhbili – chicken or turkey in tomato sauce
chanakhi – lamb with potatoes, aubergine and tomatoes
chebureki – triangular pies stuffed with minced meat
chikhirtma – chicken broth with a leg of chicken floating in it
churchkhela – string of nuts coated in a sort of caramel made from grape juice and flour
ghomi – maize porridge
kababi – doner kebabs
khachapuri – cheese pie
kharcho – soup with rice, beef and spices
khashi – tripe and garlic soup
khinkali – spicy meat dumplings
kuchmachi – chopped, seasoned and simmered offal (of chicken, calf or lamb)
kupati – sausage
lobio – bean paste or stew with herbs and spices
matnis supi – yogurt soup
matsoni – sour yogurt drink usually consumed at breakfast

mchadi – corn-flour bread
mtsvasdi ghoris/khbos – pork/beef shashlyk
mzhnavi – pickled vegetables
ojakhuri – meat with potatoes, onion and garlic
pkhali – beetroot, spinach or cabbage paste with crushed walnuts and garlic
plovi – rice with meat, mushrooms or fruit
satsivi – cold turkey or chicken in a spicy walnut sauce, traditionally a New Year dish
shkmeruli – chicken in garlic sauce
sulguni – smoked cheese
tqemali – plum sauce
tskhotskali – boiled river fish, served cold
tvini – brains, usually beef

TBILISI თბილისი

☎ 32 (international), ☎ 22 (domestic) / pop 1.7 million

Almost 10 times the size of any other city in Georgia, Tbilisi is where it all happens. Politically, culturally, economically and socially, this is the hub of the country and the place to which Georgians gravitate for action and excitement. Capital of Georgia (in its various incarnations) almost continually since the 5th century, Tbilisi brims with history and has a dramatic setting on hillsides either side of the swift Mtkvari River. Its Old Town, at the narrowest part of the valley, is still redolent of an ancient Eurasian crossroads, with narrow, winding alleys, handsome religious buildings, and old balconied houses and caravanserais (travellers inns).

Tbilisi is also a modern city moving forward in the 21st century after the strife and stagnation of the late 20th. There is a wide and growing array of good accommodation

GEORGIAN STREET NAMES

The spelling of Georgian street names varies slightly, depending on whether words such as *qucha* (street), *gamziri* (avenue), *moedani* (square) or *chikhi* (lane) are present. In Georgian, Sioni Street is Sionis qucha (Street of Sioni). To simplify matters, we use noninflected names alone in addresses – for example Sioni 23 rather than Sionis qucha 23. Only when there is more than one street with the same name (for example Chavchavadzis qucha and Chavchavadzis gamziri) have we included the full name for clarity.

and places to eat, and a busy cultural scene and nightlife. Prestigious new building projects – from a new presidential palace to five-star hotels, shopping malls and leisure facilities – are giving Tbilisi a new dimension, although little money is steered towards the working-class neighbourhoods (or the chaotic and dirty bus stations). The most attractive of the three Caucasian capitals, Tbilisi is still the beating heart of the Caucasus and should not be missed by any visitor.

HISTORY

Despite evidence of settlement in the area stretching back to the 4th century BC, Georgians prefer the legend that King Vakhtang Gorgasali of Kartli founded Tbilisi in the 5th century. The story runs that when the king was hunting, a pheasant fell into a hot sulphur spring and was conveniently cooked for dinner. Another version has it that a wounded deer fell into the hot sulphur spring and was miraculously healed. Either way, Tbilisi takes its name from the Georgian *tbili* (warm), and there seems little doubt that the magnificent hot springs, which still lure visitors today, attracted the king to the spot.

In fact Gorgasali won the town back from the Persians, who had invaded in 368, and moved his capital here from Mtskheta in the late 5th century. His son King Dachi completed its construction after his father's death. But in 645 the Arabs captured Tbilisi and kept it as an emirate for four centuries.

In 1122 the Georgian King David the Builder (Davit Aghmashenebeli) took Tbilisi and made it capital of a united Georgia, building a palace near the Metekhi Church. Under David and his descendant Queen Tamar, Georgia enjoyed its medieval golden age and Tbilisi developed into a multiethnic city of 80,000 people, known for its production of weapons, jewellery, leather and silk clothing. The golden age was ended with a vengeance by the arrival of the Mongols in 1235, followed in turn by the Black Death, then conqueror Timur (Tamerlane), who destroyed the city in 1386, and the Persians, who captured Tbilisi twice in the 1540s.

Tbilisi made some cultural progress under the Persians during the 17th and 18th centuries, and in 1762, as Persian control waned, the city became capital of a united eastern Georgia under King Erekle II. Erekle's protector Russia, however, withdrew its troops



to fight the Turks, allowing Agha Mohamed Khan to inflict Persia's last and most devastating assault on Tbilisi in 1795. His army killed tens of thousands and burnt the city to the ground; few buildings today predate 1795 in any substantial form. Russia annexed Georgia in 1800 and proceeded to recreate Tbilisi in the imperial mould, laying out wide streets and squares such as Rustavelis gamziri and Tavisuplebis moedani, and building libraries, schools and theatres. By the late 19th century, Tbilisi had a population of 159,000, the majority of them Russian or Armenian.

While the Soviet era saw huge growth and relative prosperity (the city's population passed one million in the 1970s), Tbilisi became a centre of resistance to the late Soviet regime, culminating in troops killing 20 hunger strikers outside the government building on Rustaveli on 9 April 1989. Georgia's parliament declared Georgian independence from the USSR in the same building exactly two years later. Rebellion against the government of Zviad Gamsakhurdia then erupted in fierce fighting on the city's streets in December 1991, destroying several central landmark buildings.

The following years were dark ones. Although gun-toting gangsters ceased to rule the roost, the economy nosedived, and in 1993 Tbilisi had to find room for thousands of Georgian refugees fleeing from Abkhazia. While a few people got very rich in the 1990s, general living standards sank, corruption and crime were endemic, and frequent power cuts blacked out the city.

In the Rose Revolution of November 2003, protesting crowds again filled central Tbilisi and finally poured into the parliament building to drive out President Eduard Shevardnadze. Since then, corruption has been reduced, Tbilisi has enjoyed a new flood of foreign aid and investment, the city centre is being refurbished, and tourism is bouncing back. Though prosperity has yet to trickle down to many of the general populace, Tbilisi has more confidence, energy and optimism than for many a year.

ORIENTATION

Tbilisi is centred on the Mtkvari River, which runs through the middle of it roughly north-west to southeast. The old city lies on the right (west) bank where the valley narrows to a gorge, below Narikala Fortress. Tavisuplebis

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Hotel Kartli.....	43	A4	
Hotel Kopala.....	44	E6	
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moedani (Freedom Sq) marks the northwest edge of the Old Town. Rustavelis gamziri (Rustaveli Avenue), the main artery of modern central Tbilisi, runs 1.5km northwest from Tavisuplebis moedani to Rustavelis moedani (Rustaveli Sq).

Outside these central areas, the main districts of interest to travellers are Vere and Vake to the northwest, with their hotels, restaurants and some sights; and the area with budget accommodation on the east bank between the river and the main Tbilisi train station (which is 2km northeast of Rustavelis moedani).

The airport is 15km east of the centre, to which it's connected by train, buses and taxis.

The two main bus stations are Didube, 4km north of the train station, and Ortchala (for mainly international departures), 2.5km southeast of the Old Town. A metro system

links the northern and western suburbs (including Didube and the train station) with the centre.

Three very obvious landmarks, visible from far and wide, are the massive new Tsminda Sameba Cathedral high on the east side of the city, and the silver-coloured statue of Kartlis Deda (Mother Georgia) and the city's TV tower, both atop hills on the western side.

INFORMATION

Bookshops

Geoland (Map pp48-9; ☎ 922553, 921494; www.geoland.ge; Telegrapis chikhi 3; ☎ 10am-7pm or later) Georgia's best map supplier, Geoland sells Soviet military 1:50,000 sheets (the best available topographic and hiking maps) at 5 GEL per A3 sheet, plus its own excellent 1:250,000 maps covering Georgia in six sheets (30 GEL each), and a 1:650,000 country road map (30 GEL). You can buy these maps at the office or order by email. Geoland also plans to

bring out its own updated 1:50,000 trekking maps and a Tbilisi city map, and it's opening a travellers' café on site. **Prospero's Books** (Map pp48-9; ☎ 923592; Rustaveli 34; ☎ 10am-9pm) This English-language bookshop and café has a terrific if expensive selection including lots of titles on Georgia and the Caucasus region.

Emergency

Emergency services are contactable on the following numbers, but operators are likely to speak only Georgian or Russian. For petty theft or muggings it is best to find a local police station, which should at least provide you with a report.

If you speak no Georgian or Russian and have no local friends who can help you, contact your embassy.

Ambulance (☎ 03)

Fire (☎ 01)

Police (☎ 022)

Internet Access

There are internet cafés in most neighbourhoods of Tbilisi. Recommended central ones include these:

Internet Café (Map pp48-9; Davit Aghmashenebeli 108; internet per hr 1 GEL; ☎ 10am-10pm) Inexpensive basement establishment.

Java Cyber Café (Map pp48-9; ☎ 424789; Rustaveli 18; internet per hr 2 GEL; ☎ 10am-10pm; ☒) Clean, up-to-date, English-speaking, nonsmoking facility.

Prospero's Books (Map pp48-9; ☎ 923592; Rustaveli 34; internet per hr 4 GEL; ☎ 10am-9pm) Two computers in Tbilisi's English-language bookshop; agreeable atmosphere and café service too.

Internet Resources

etbilisi.com Good listings for museums, galleries, theatres, bars and nightclubs.

www.info-tbilisi.com Restaurant, bar, hotel and some entertainment listings.

Laundry

Laundry (Map p56; Chavchavadzis gamziri 33a; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, to 1pm Sat) A traditional laundry, charging around 20 GEL for a full load. It's a tiny yellow building opposite Big Ben supermarket.

Tbisi Laundry (Map p56; ☎ 292992; Mtskheta 8; ☎ 10am-7pm Mon-Fri, to 1pm Sat) Also does dry cleaning.

Medical Services

Private Western-standard medical facilities, all with 24-hour emergency service, include these:

Curatio (Map p56; ☎ 921592, emergency 901; www.curatio.com; Vazha Pshavela 27B) Has English-speaking GPs and provides home visits, in-person consultations and free telephone consultations round the clock.

IMSS (Map pp48-9; ☎ 920928; www.imss.ge; fax 920928; Makashvili 31) Consultations (US\$80, follow-up US\$40) and 24-hour Western-standard inpatient care available with UK- or US-trained doctors. All staff speak English.

MediClubGeorgia (Map p56; ☎ 251991, emergency 899581991; www.mcg.com.ge; Chavchavadzis gamziri 5) All doctors speak English.

Medicines are widely available at pharmacies (*aptiaqi* in Georgian, but often signed 'Apotheka'). Even if your Western brand name is not stocked, they will usually have a chemically identical local version. Twenty-four-hour pharmacies include these:

Aversi (Map p54; Pushkin 11)

Aversi (Map p56; Chavchavadzis gamziri 54)

PMG (Map pp48-9; Marjanishvili 33)

Money

Tbilisi is full of ATMs issuing lari on MasterCard, Visa, Cirrus and Maestro cards. There are also plenty of exchange offices where you can buy lari for cash euros, US dollars and often roubles or British pounds. At the airport there are several ATMs and at least two 24-hour bank branches offering currency exchange.

Some ATMs, including those of **TBC Bank** (☎ 272727; www.tbcbank.com.ge) Marjanishvili (Map pp48-9; Marjanishvili 7); Rustaveli cinema (Map pp48-9; Rustaveli 5); Tbilisi Marriott Hotel (Map pp48-9; Rustaveli 13); Airport (Tbilisi airport), will dispense US dollars as well as lari.

Post

Fedex (Map pp48-9; ☎ 911940; www.fedex.com; Ketevan Tsamebulis gamziri 39)

Post Office (Map pp48-9; Rustaveli 31; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat, to 3pm Sun) Useful city-centre office where you can also make photocopies and phone calls.

TNT (Map p56; ☎ 250328; www.tnt.com; Melikishvili 41)

Telephone & Fax

Telephone Centre Rustaveli (Map pp48-9; Post Office, Rustaveli 31; ☎ 8am-2am) Aghmashenebeli (Map pp48-9; Post Office, Davit Aghmashenebeli 44; ☎ 9am-8pm Mon-Sat, to 5pm Sun) Pay at the counter for national and international calls from booths. Fax service available too.

You can buy Georgian SIM cards at many outlets (take your passport with you). Here are the main outlets of the three principal mobile networks:

Beeline (Map pp48-9; ☎ 200611; www.georgia.beeline.net; Rustaveli 14) In the centre.

Geocell (Map p56; ☎ 770177; www.geocell.ge; Pekin 24) In Saburtalo.

Magti (www.magti.com.ge) Centre (Map pp48-9;

☎ 921310; Kostava 47) Vake (Map p56; ☎ 253385; Chavchavadzis gamziri 21)

Tourist Information

A city-centre **tourist information office** (Map p54; Tavissuplebis moedani) should be open in front of the city hall by the time you reach Tbilisi. The **airport information office** (☎ 433141; ☎ 24 hr) can give you basic information, such as how to get into the city.

Travel Agencies

Good local agents can take the organisational hassle out of any kind of activity, from a city tour to a hiking expedition, and good guides can open your eyes to things you'd otherwise never know.

A half-day Tbilisi city tour for up to five people with a good agency and a guide speaking English, German, French, Italian or Spanish costs around US\$40 to US\$70 per person. Day trips out of the city can cost from US\$50 to US\$120, while a four-day guided Caucasus trip with at least some hiking is typically between US\$350 and US\$650 per person.

Badagoni Tour (Map pp48-9; ☎ 936243; www.badagoni.tour.com; Tavissuplebis moedani 4) Badagoni specialises in wine and food tours but also offers a range of other trips in Georgia, Azerbaijan and Turkey.

Caucasus Travel (Map p54; ☎ 987400; www.caucasustravel.com; Leselidze 44) Long-established Caucasus Travel can set up just about any group or individual trip, from half-day city tours to climbing awesome Ushba. It's a very professional outfit which also books accommodation and rents cars (it's the local Hertz agent).

Explore Georgia (Map p54; ☎ 921911; www.explore.georgia.com; Chakhrukhadze 6) This young company, headed by highly experienced mountain guide Nick Erkomaishvili, focuses on activity-based travel, including climbing, hiking, horse riding, bird-watching and archaeological tours.

GeorgiCa Travel (Map p56; ☎ 252199; www.georgicatavel.ge; Shanidze 22) Well-established, professional GeorgiCa offers a full range of cultural and adventure trips, and will happily construct tailor-made itineraries. Also offers trips combining Georgia with Armenia and/or Azerbaijan.

Levon Travel (Map p56; ☎ 250010; www.levontravel.ge; Chavchavadzis gamziri 20) A US-based outfit, Levon

runs tours in Georgia and offers good deals on air tickets, especially to and from North America.

Wild Georgia (Map pp48-9; ☎ 899941320; www.wildgeorgia.ge; Tsinamdzghvishvili 17) Enthusiastic agency specialising in hiking and horse riding in Tusheti, home town of its director, fluent-English-speaking Eka Chviridze.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Tbilisi has shaken off the very bad reputation it once had for muggings and street violence. We never felt endangered nor heard of any crimes affecting foreigners while researching this edition.

However, Western governments do warn that travellers may still be subject to petty theft and even assaults, urging care on the metro, in marshrutkas (minibuses), and off the main streets in the city centre and the Vake, Vere and Saburtalo districts, especially after dark. Taxis are inexpensive, so don't hesitate to take one if you're uneasy about walking or taking public transport.

SIGHTS

The Old Town, where Tbilisi began, is the most fascinating area for exploring. There's also plenty to see in the Avlabari area, on the left bank of the Mtkvari; the 19th-century city focused on Rustaveli; and the western suburb of Vake. Most of the many churches that are among Tbilisi's most beautiful and interesting sights are open during daylight hours every day.

Old Town კალა

Tbilisi grew up below the walls of the Narikala Fortress, which stands on the Sololaki ridge above the west side of the Mtkvari gorge. Today the twisting alleys of the Old Town, which is known locally as Kala, are still full of hidden courtyards and carved wooden balconies leaning at rakish angles. Though almost no buildings here survived the destruction by the Persians in 1795, many of those standing today date from soon after that and still have the Eurasian character of earlier times.

AROUND GORGASALIS MOEDANI

A good place to get your initial bearings is **Gorgasalis moedani**, now a rather bland, traffic-infested junction but once the setting of Tbilisi's bustling bazaar. From here the Metekhi Bridge crosses the river to the Metekhi Church (p55), busy Gorgasalis qucha heads off southeast along the riverbank, and

Leselidze and Sharden dive into the maze of streets to the north. **Sharden** and parallel **Bambis rigi**, along with Erekle II a little further north, are narrow pedestrian streets lined with fashionable galleries and cafés.

Just above Gorgasalis moedani is the large **Armenian Cathedral of St George** (Map pp48-9; Samghebro), founded in 1251 (although the current structure dates mainly from the 18th century). Its interior is surprisingly small but it has interesting frescoes. King Erekle II's Armenian court poet Sayat Nova was killed here during the Persian invasion of 1795 and his tomb is in front of the main door.

The social hub of the area is further south – Tbilisi's famed sulphur baths, the **Abanotubani** (Map pp48-9; Abano). Alexanders Dumas and Pushkin both bathed here, the latter describing it as the best bath he'd ever had. Abano (Bath St) is full of subterranean bathhouses with beehive domes rising at ground level, most dating back to the 17th century. The most impressive, the above-ground **Orbeliani Baths** (Map p54; ☎ 8am-10pm), has a Central Asian feel to its blue-tile mosaic façade. Entry to the male or female communal pools here costs 2 GEL, while a very invigorating massage is 5 GEL; small private rooms are 10 GEL.

A short distance uphill behind the baths is the **mosque** (Map p54; Botanikuri), built in 1895 and the only mosque in Tbilisi that survived Lavrenty Beria's antireligious purges of the 1930s. Unusually, Shiite and Sunni Muslims pray together here. The interior is prettily frescoed and visitors are welcome to enter (after removing shoes). At the top of this street are Tbilisi's **Botanical Gardens** (Map 000; Botanikuri; admission 1 GEL; ☎ 9am-7.30pm). It's easy to wander for two or three enjoyable hours in these extensive, waterfall-dotted gardens, which were opened in 1845 on what had earlier been the royal gardens.

The main thoroughfare of the Old Town today (though sometimes traffic-clogged) is **Leselidze**. Tbilisi's main **synagogue** (Map p54; Leselidze 47) is a very welcoming place built in 1904. A short walk further up the street is the **Jvaris Mama Church** (Map p54; Ierusalimi 8), where there has been a church since the 5th century. The current structure dates from the 16th century; its frescoes were recently restored in striking reds and blues, and the atmosphere is exquisitely pious and calm. Next door is the disused Armenian **Norasheni Church** (Map p54), dating from 1793.

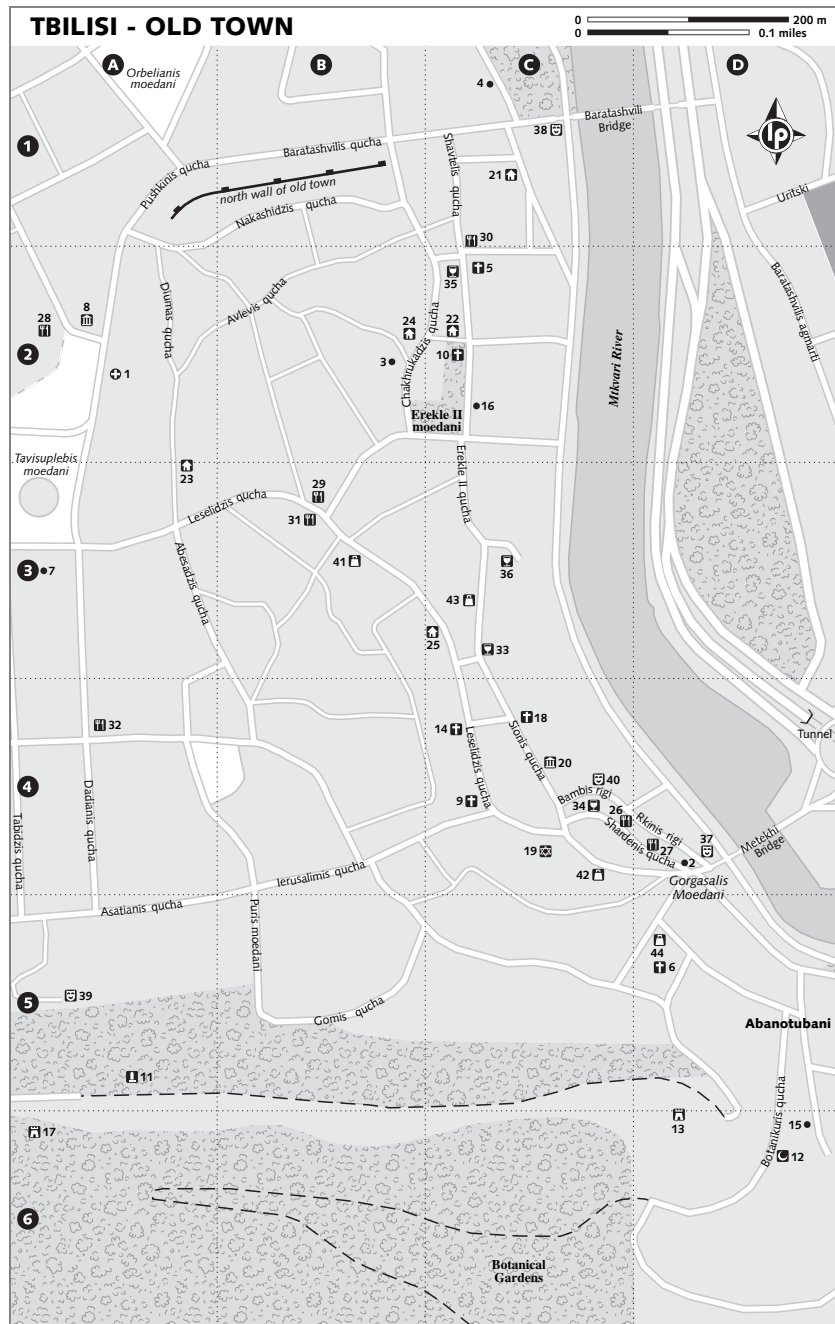
SIONI & SHAVTELI

In times past the Old Town's main thoroughfares and merchants areas were Sionis and Shavtelis quchas, both now quiet pedestrian streets, pleasant for strolling. The **Tbilisi History Museum** (Map p54; ☎ 982281; www.museum.ge; Sioni 8; admission 3 GEL; ☎ 11am-5pm Tue-Sun), housed in an old caravanserai, includes some wonderfully evocative photographs of pre-Soviet Tbilisi and montages of old artisans' workshops.

Next door is the **Sioni Cathedral** (Map p54; Sioni 6). The cathedral was originally built in the 6th and 7th centuries, but it has been destroyed and rebuilt so many times that it is difficult to say which part comes from when, although the south portico is undeniably the work of a shabby 1990s contractor. What you see is mainly 13th-century, though the southern chapel was built and the cupola restored in 1657. The most important sacred object here is the cross of St Nino which, according to legend, is made from vine branches bound with the saint's own hair. A replica of this is displayed to the left of the altar, with the real thing kept safe inside. On the opposite side of the street is a tall bell tower built in 1812, the first example of Russian classicism in Tbilisi.

North of the Sioni Cathedral, Sionis qucha becomes Erekle II qucha, which leads to **Erekle II moedani**, site of the walled **residence of the Catholicos-Patriarch** (Map p54; head of the Georgian church) and of a leafy little park. The large Church of the Archangels here was destroyed by the Mongols in the 13th century. Later, three smaller churches were built from the ruins, one of which is the **Karis Eklesia**, at the north end of the park.

From here Shavteli, once the throbbing medieval hub of the Old Town, continues north. Here you'll find the **Anchiskhati Basilica** (Map p54), the oldest surviving church in Tbilisi, built by King Gorgasali's son Dachi in the 6th century. The name comes from the icon of Anchi Cathedral in Klarjeti (now in Turkey), brought here in the 17th century and now in the Fine Arts Museum (p57). The church is a three-nave basilica that has been restored several times, most notably in the 17th century, when the brick pillars and upper walls were made. In 1958 restorers found the remains of 17th-century frescoes under the 19th-century ones. Just west of the church is a brick bell tower and gatehouse, typical of late-medieval eastern Georgian style. Beyond here Shavteli leads out to busy **Baratashvili**



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SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES		SLEEPING 🏠		ENTERTAINMENT 🎪	
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Armenian Cathedral of St George.....6	D5	Hotel Charm.....22	C2	Night Office.....38	C1
Church of St Nicholas.....(see 13)		Hotel Dzveli Ubani.....23	A3	Tunnel Club.....39	A5
City Hall.....7	A3	VIP Hotel.....25	C3	Two-Side.....40	C4
Fine Arts Museum.....8	A2	EATING 🍴		SHOPPING 🛍	
Jvaris Mama Church.....9	C4	12 Rue Chardin.....26	C4	Carpet Shop.....41	B3
Karis Eklesia Church.....10	C2	China Town.....27	D4	Dom Vina.....42	C4
Kartlis Deda.....11	A5	Kafe Lotus.....28	A2	Green Sun Souvenirs.....43	C3
Mosque.....12	D6	Prestige.....29	B3	Meidan 91.....44	D5
Narikala Fortress.....13	D6	Sans Souci.....30	C1	TRANSPORT	
Norasheni Church.....14	C4	Shemoikhede.....31	B3	Hertz.....(see 2)	
Orbeliani Baths.....15	D6	Genatsvale.....31	B3		

qucha, running alongside the north wall of the Old Town.

Narikala Fortress & Around

Dominating the city skyline (until the TV tower came along, anyway), **Narikala Fortress** (Map p54; Chidini; admission free; ☒ 9am-9pm) is an ancient symbol of Tbilisi's defensive brilliance. The most direct way up to it is to follow the street beside the Armenian Cathedral of St George (p53). The fortress walls date from various periods, the earliest from the 4th century, when it was a Persian citadel. The foundations of the towers and most of the present walls were built in the 8th century by the Arab emirs, whose palace was inside the fortress. Subsequently Georgians, Turks and Persians captured and patched up Narikala, but in 1827 a huge explosion of the Russian munitions stored here ruined not only the fortress but also the **Church of St Nicholas** inside it. The church was rebuilt in the 1990s with the help of funding from a police chief. There are superb views over Tbilisi from the top of the fortress.

From outside the fortress entrance, you can follow a path west in front of the walls along to the statue in front of the walls along to the statue of **Kartlis Deda** (Mother Georgia; map p54). As attractive as a 20m aluminium woman can be, this symbol of the city holds a sword in one hand and a cup of wine in the other – a perfect metaphor for the Georgian character, warmly welcoming guests and passionately fighting off enemies. Beyond Mother Georgia you pass the ruins of the **Shahtakhti (Shah's Throne) fortress** (Map p54), which housed an Arab observatory, and then a modernistic complex that looks like

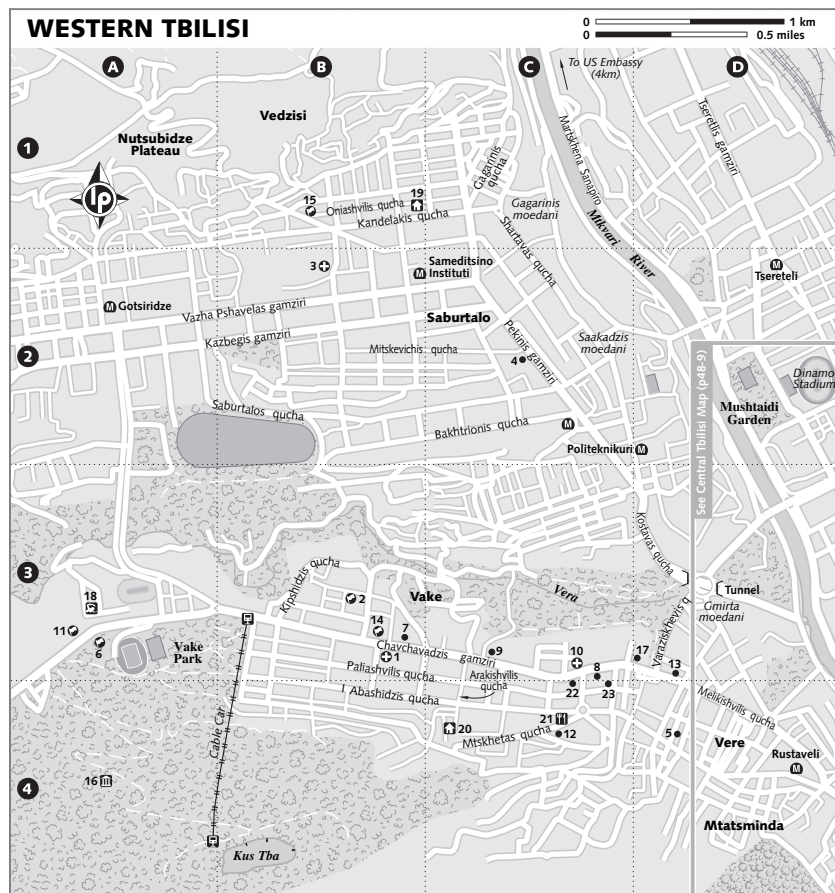
a space station but is actually a new **business centre** (Map pp48-9) built by the Georgian-Russian multi-billionaire Boris Ivanishvili. Beyond here the road loops down to the Sololaki neighbourhood.

Avlabari & the Left Bank

Avlabari is the dramatically located slice of Tbilisi above the cliffs on the left (east) bank of the Mtkvari, across the Metekhi Bridge from the Old Town.

At least twice foreign conquerors (Jalaledin in 1226 and the Persians in 1522) used the bridge for forcible conversion of the Georgian population to Islam (many resisted and were tossed into the river). The bridge was controlled by a fortification on the rocky outcrop above it, where you can now see the **Metekhi Church** (Map pp48-9; Metekhis aghmarti) and a 1960s equestrian **statue of King Vakhtang Gorgasali** (Map pp48-9). This is where Gorgasali built his palace, and the site's original church, when he made Tbilisi his capital in the 5th century. King David the Builder had his palace here too, and it was here that Queen Tamar married her second husband, David Soslan. That palace and its accompanying church were destroyed by the Mongols in 1235. The palace too passed through several incarnations until its final destruction in the Persian sacking of 1795.

The church we see today was built by King Demetre Tavdadebuli (the Self-Sacrificing) between 1278 and 1289, and has been reconstructed many times since. An old-fashioned design for the 13th century, it is thought to be a deliberate copy of its predecessor. The church was converted into a theatre in 1974,



finally being reconsecrated in the 1980s. The tomb of early Christian martyr St Shushanik – tortured by her husband in 544 for refusing to convert to Zoroastrianism – is to the left of the altar.

Historically the Avlabari area housed Tbilisi's large Armenian population, one that has traditionally been focused around the **Echmiadzin Cathedral** (Map pp48-9; Ketevan Tsamebulis moedani), which is currently closed for restoration.

High on Elia Hill above Avlabari rises the biggest symbol of Georgia's post-Soviet religious revival, the **Tsminda Sameba (Holy Trinity) Cathedral** (Map pp48-9); (an unmissable landmark by night and day), consecrated in 2004 after a decade of building work. A massive

expression of traditional Georgian architectural forms in concrete, brick, granite and marble, it rises 84m to the top of the gold-covered cross above its central dome. The main entrance to the cathedral's extensive grounds is on Uritski, reached via Meskhishvili up the hill from Ketevan Tsamebulis moedani. The cathedral is five-aisles wide but its emphasis is on verticality, with a result like one single, many-bulwarked tower. The huge dome creates a larger and much brighter central space than you'll find in most Georgian churches. A big new illuminated manuscript of the New Testament, in a jewel-studded silver cover, stands in a glass case to the right of the altar. There's a whole large second church beneath the main one, down 81 steps from the west

INFORMATION	
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Curatio.....	3 B2
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GeorgiCa Travel.....	5 D4
Iranian Embassy.....	6 A3
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Magti.....	9 C3
MediClubGeorgia.....	10 C3
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Lufthansa.....	23 C4

end. Designed by Archil Mindiasvili, the building was paid for mostly by donations from anonymous businesspeople and citizens. Some controversy surrounded its construction on the site of an old Armenian cemetery.

Not far below the cathedral, Georgia's large new **presidential palace** (Map pp48-9) is under construction between Tsutskiridze and Abdushelishvili. It's an equally unmissable landmark given that it's topped by a large, egg-shaped glass dome equipped with neon lights of constantly changing colour.

Rustaveli & the New Town

Tbilisi's main artery is **Rustavelis gamziri**, running 1.5km north from Tavisuplebis moedani. Laid out by the Russians in the 19th century and strung with elegant and important buildings, it tends to be the place in Tbilisi you always find yourself walking. A refurbishment programme has spruced up Rustaveli: façades have been restored, flower beds planted and new pavements (on which cars can no longer park) laid. Several new top-end hotels are also being added to its landscape.

Tavisuplebis moedani (Freedom Sq), with the city hall on its south side and a Marriott hotel on the west, was Lenin Sq in Soviet times.

Georgia's last Lenin statue, toppled in 1990, stood where a golden St George now spears his dragon.

Just off the northeast corner of Tavisuplebis moedani is the **Fine Arts Museum** (Map p54; ☎ 999909; Gudiashvili 1; admission 1.50 GEL; ☎ 11am-4pm Tue-Sun), a comprehensive if underwhelmingly presented storehouse of Georgian art and artisanry from several centuries BC up to the late 20th century. Sections may be closed because of air-conditioning problems, and at the time of research the museum was due for renovation, which may put it out of action altogether for a while. The major highlight is the treasury section, which can only be entered with a guide (no extra charge). This contains a great wealth of icons, crosses and jewellery in precious metals and stones from all over Georgia and old Georgian churches and monasteries on what is now Turkish territory. Many of Georgia's most sacred and revered objects are here. Don't miss the beautiful little pectoral cross of Queen Tamar, set with four emeralds, five rubies and six pearls – the only known personal relic of the great 12th-century monarch. The museum also has sections devoted to the wonderful paintings of Niko Pirosmiani; 19th-century Persian and Azerbaijani art and crafts; and Georgian, European and Russian paintings of the 18th to 20th centuries. The building was once a seminary: Stalin studied for the priesthood here from 1894 to 1898 until expelled for revolutionary activities.

Off the opposite corner of Tavisuplebis moedani is the well-presented **Museum of Money** (Map pp48-9; ☎ 923806; Leonidze 10; admission free; ☎ 10am-1pm & 2-4pm Mon-Fri), set up by the National Bank of Georgia next door. You can see Georgian money from the 6th century BC to the present day, including the Monopoly-style coupons used in 1993-94 before the lari was introduced.

North along Rustaveli from Tavisuplebis Moedani, almost opposite Tavisuplebis Moedani metro station, is the **Museum of Georgia** (Map pp48-9; ☎ 998022; Rustaveli 3; admission 3 GEL, tour 10 GEL; ☎ 11am-4pm Tue-Sun). This is Georgia's top museum, though in 2007 the whole place was shut for renovations of unspecified duration. The main rooms cover Georgia's history, including a section on the Soviet occupation and an exhibit on the 1.75-million-year-old skulls found at Dmanisi, 80km southwest of Tbilisi, which may be the oldest human remains found outside Africa. Most stunning of

TBILISI IN ONE DAY

Begin with a coffee and *khachapuri* at one of the cafés on **Rustaveli** (p64), before wandering the atmospheric alleyways of the **Old Town** (p52), dropping into some of the fascinating old churches on the way, and crossing the river to the **Metekhi Church** (p55) with its panoramic views. A walk up to the **Narikala Fortress** (p55) and **Kartlis Deda** (p55) above the city will give you great views and help to work up an appetite for lunch at one of the popular Old Town eateries. Visit the **Museum of Georgia** (p57) – or, if it's not open, the nearby **Fine Arts Museum** (p57) – and then wander back into the Old Town or along Rustaveli for some **shopping** (p67). In the evening head out to a traditional Georgian restaurant (p63) with as many people as possible for some serious feasting. For a nightcap and a spot of live music head to the crowded bar and restaurant strip on **Akhvlediani** (p64, p65 and p65).

all is the basement treasury (guide obligatory) with an outstanding collection of archaeological finds including gold artefacts and jewellery from pre-Christian Georgia.

Back on the west side of the street, the high-arched Georgian **Parliament** (Map pp48–9) was constructed as the Soviet government building between 1938 and 1953 and finished off by German POWs. Momentous events in Georgia's recent history have taken place here: the Soviet massacre of 20 Georgian hunger strikers on 9 April 1989; Georgia's independence declaration on 9 April 1991; on 6 January 1992 President Gamsakhurdia fled the building after being besieged in it for two weeks; and the Rose Revolution on 22 November 2003. A small monument in front of the Parliament commemorates the dead of 1989. The next building, **School Number 1** (Map pp48–9), was gutted in the 1991–92 fighting, but was reconstructed soon after. It was founded in 1802 to prepare sons of the Georgian nobility for the Russian Civil Service. In front of the school are statues of the 19th-century writers and reformers Ilia Chavchavadze and Akaki Tsereteli.

Opposite School No 1 stands the **Kashveti Church** (Map pp48–9), on a spot where it is said pagan rituals used to take place. The first church here is supposed to have been built in the 6th century by Davit Gareja, one of the ascetic 'Syrian fathers' who returned from the Middle East to spread Christianity in Georgia. According to legend, a nun accused him of impregnating her. He replied that if this were true, she'd give birth to a baby, and if not, to a stone, which duly happened. Kashveti means 'Stone Birth'. The existing 1910 building was designed by architect Leopold Bielfeld as a copy of the 11th-century Samtavisi Church, 60km northwest of Tbilisi.

On the same side of the road, past the Tbilisi Marriott Hotel, is the elegant **Rustaveli National Theatre** (Map pp48–9), built between 1899 and 1901 in a baroque-cum-rococo style. A little further on is the **Paliashvili Opera & Ballet Theatre** (Map pp48–9), created only slightly earlier (1896) in a fantastic Moorish style.

Just after the post office building made from glass and yellow stone comes **Vardebis Revolutsis moedani** (Rose Revolution Sq; formerly Republic Sq), which has views towards the Caucasus mountains. Rustaveli branches left just before this square towards **Rustaveli moedani**, easily identified by a 1937 statue of the poet himself (and a McDonald's restaurant).

North from Rustaveli moedani, Kostava leads up to the **State Concert Hall** (Philharmonia; map pp48–9) and **Vere Park**. The musical fountains outside the concert hall are a favourite with Tbilisi kids wanting to cavort and cool off in the heat of summer.

Mt Mtatsminda

Mtatsminda is the hill topped by the 210m-high TV mast looming over central Tbilisi from the west. You can get up there by a steep funicular railway from Chonkadze. At the funicular's halfway stop is the **Mamadaviti Church** (Map pp48–9), an 1850s construction on the site of a hermitage of St Davit Gareja. Just below the church, the national **Pantheon** (Map pp48–9) contains graves of writers and public figures including Ilia Chavchavadze and Zviad Gamsakhurdia.

At the top of the hill, **Mtatsminda Park** (Map pp48–9) spreads over more than 1 sq km, with wonderful views and a new amusement park that includes what Georgians consider Europe's highest roller coaster (60m high).

Vake ვაკე

Considered Tbilisi's most prestigious neighbourhood, home to many nouveaux riches and expatriates, Vake is said to have been built over the graves of the victims of the 1930s purges. It's a pleasant neighbourhood of apartment blocks and houses, with a good sprinkling of bars, cafés and shops. Bus 55 from Tavisuplebis moedani runs along Rustaveli, up Kostava then along the length of Vake's main avenue, Chavchavadzis gamziri.

Vake's main claim to fame is **Tbilisi State University** (Map p56), near the start of Chavchavadzis gamziri. The main university building, circa 1906, is elegant, white and neoclassical. It was originally a school for the nobility.

Attractive **Vake Park** is about 2km beyond the university. A sporadically operating **cabl car** (0.40 GEL one-way; ☎ 10am–8pm) sails up to **Kus Tba** (Turtle Lake; map p56), a popular summer spot for sunbathing, swimming, boating and strolling. The **Open-Air Museum of Ethnography** (Map p56; ☎ 230960; Kus Tba 1; admission 1.50 GEL, tour 10 GEL; ☎ 10.30am–9pm Jun–Sep, to 4pm Oct–May) is about 3km beyond, and uphill from, the park. This collection of nearly 70 traditional, mostly wooden houses from around Georgia is spread over a wooded hillside with good views, and makes an enjoyable visit. The most interesting exhibits are in the lower section of the museum (near the entrance), where the buildings are kitted out with fine traditional furnishings, rugs and utensils. There's also an archaeological section, which includes a basilica from the 6th and 7th centuries. You can reach the open-air museum by walking up from Vake Park, or down the road from Kus Tba (about 2km). Or take bus 59 from opposite Marjanishvili metro station or along Kostava or Chavchavadzis gamziri to its last stop, then walk or take a taxi 2km up the road between the concrete pillars opposite.

ACTIVITIES

In the searing heat of the Tbilisi summer, a cooling splash can be just the thing. The open-air **Laguna Vere Pool** (Map pp48–9; ☎ 998231; Kostava 34; admission 15 GEL; ☎ 7am–1pm & 2–9pm Mon–Sat, 8am–1pm & 2–8pm Sun) is popular with locals. It's a mite antiquated but has a clean 50m by 25m pool. First-time visitors need to pay 5 GEL extra for a cursory medical inspection.

Much more luxurious and modern (and expensive) is the beautiful 50m indoor pool

at **Vake Swimming Pool & Fitness Club** (Map p56; ☎ 252575; www.vakefitness.ge; men/women 90/54 GEL; Chavchavadzis gamziri 49B; ☎ 7am–11pm Mon–Fri, 9am–10pm Sat, 9am–9pm Sun). The pool is heated to a constant 28°C. Admission includes use of a state-of-the-art fitness club.

For water-slide excitement, there's **Europark** (☎ 690181; Trikotazi 3; admission 50 GEL; ☎ 10am–8pm; ☎ Elektrodepo), an aquapark opened in 2007 in the Nadzaladevi district, offering 12 slides, four pools, palm trees and several cafés.

Any time of year is good for a traditional bath and massage experience at Tbilisi's famed sulphur baths, the **Abanotubani** (p53).

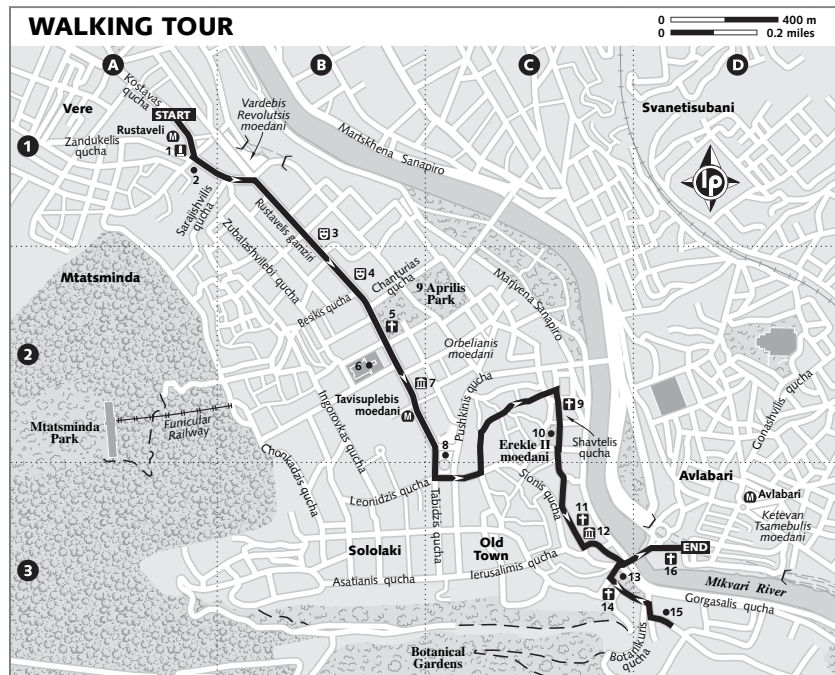
WALKING TOUR

This walk takes you through the heart of Tbilisi's New Town and the narrow streets of the Old Town, then across to the dramatically located left bank of the Mtkvari.

Start outside Rustaveli metro station, one of the city's main hubs and home to the grotesquely large main branch of McDonald's. More interesting are the **monument (1)** to the national bard Shota Rustaveli and the pleasantly Stalinist **Academy of Sciences (2)**; Rustaveli 52), with its landmark tower and spire. Walk along Rustaveli to soak up the bustling, cosmopolitan atmosphere of Tbilisi's main artery, strung with handsome and important buildings such as the **Opera House (3)**; opposite), the **Rustaveli Theatre (4)**; opposite), the **Kashveti Church (5)**; opposite), the **Parliament (6)**; opposite) and the **Museum of Georgia (7)**; p57).

From **Tavisuplebis moedani (8)**; p57) at the end of Rustaveli, head down Leselidze at the far left corner of the square, then along Diumas, the first left off Leselidze. Take the first short lane to the right after the Hotel Dzveli Ubani and then follow Avlevi down to the left through an area of quaint Old Town houses. Avlevi emerges on pedestrianised Shavteli; turn right here, passing the **Anchiskhati Basilica (9)**; p53) and **Erekle II moedani (10)**; p53) and into Erekle II qucha with its cafés. Continue along Sionis qucha, past the **Sioni Cathedral (11)**; p53) and the **Tbilisi History Museum (12)**; p53), and then duck into Bambis rigi or Shardenis qucha, both lined with smart cafés. Either of these narrow pedestrian streets brings you out on **Gorgasalis moedani (13)**; p52), with Narikala Fortress rising on the hill above.

Take the small street (Samghebro) in front of the lovely **Armenian Cathedral of St George (14)**; p53) down to the **Abanotubani (15)**; p53),



WALK FACTS

Start Rustaveli monument
Finish Metekhi Church
Distance 4km
Time two hours

Tbilisi's traditional sulphur baths. Head back to Gorgasalis moedani and across the Metekhi Bridge and up the hill to finish your walk at the emblematic **Metekhi Church (16)**; p55).

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

The highlight of the year is **Tbilisoba**, the festival of new wine and the city's founding, on the last weekend in October.

This is a wonderful time to visit – the whole city comes out to party, and plenty of entertainment and fun take place on and off the streets.

Tbilisi is also big on arts festivals:

Art Gene Festival (www.artgeni.ge) This Georgian folklore festival tours the country and culminates with several days of music, dance, poetry, cooking and crafts in Tbilisi, in June or July.

Tbilisi International Film Festival (www.tbilisifilmfestival.ge) Showcases recent Georgian and international movies; held in the last quarter of the year (dates vary). Season tickets for all showings are as little as 25 GEL.

Tbilisi Jazz Festival (www.easternpromotion.com) International artists fly in for 10 days of jazz in late June; ticket prices for headline acts can be astronomical.

Tumanishvili Georgian International Festival of Arts (GIFT) Mainly international drama performances, around the second half of October.

SLEEPING

Places to stay are located mainly in the Old Town and the New Town in the centre, and in the suburbs of Vere and Saburtalo further north. Prices given here include the tax that is often left out of hotel publicity. Most mid-range and top-end establishments accept credit cards; note that they also quote their prices in dollars, not lari.

Budget

Home from home for backpackers in Tbilisi is Marjanishvili, a leafy street that's full of local life, east of the Mtkvari River but only one metro stop from Rustaveli. Several

homestays of varying character offer inexpensive accommodation here. They don't serve food but there are plenty of economical eateries and food shops nearby.

Khatuna's Homestay (Map pp48-9; ☎ 566281, 899 173609; Chitaia 12; per person 8 GEL) This small apartment between Marjanishvili and the train station offers supercheap beds crowded into its couple of rooms, plus a bathroom with a shower and hot water. It's fine and friendly, and Khatuna and her young daughter speak some English.

Nasi Gvetadze's Homestay (Map pp48-9; ☎ 950894; Marjanishvili 30/92; per person 20 GEL) Retired teacher Nasi Gvetadze has the longest-running Marjanishvili homestay in her homey old apartment. It's still an inexpensive and well-kept place to stay if you don't mind paying for showers (2 GEL for hot, 1 GEL for cold) and that she likes to lock the door at midnight. Nasi speaks fluent German and rudimentary English. Hers is the last entrance on the right in the courtyard.

Irine Japaridze's Boarding House (Map pp48-9; ☎ 954716; www.iverieli.narod.ru; Ninoshvili 19 B3; per person 20-25 GEL; ☎ ☎) Artist Irine's two-storey apartment is the hub of Tbilisi's backpacker social scene. She delights in the international atmosphere and has stacked her six rooms with beds and bunks to squeeze in as many travellers as possible. If you like a crowd and don't mind waiting for the shower, this is a great place. Guests can use the kitchen, and a load of laundry costs 5 GEL. Go in the entrance with two headless stone lions and up to the top of the stairs. Bicycles welcome!

our pick Dodo's Homestay (Map pp48-9; ☎ 954213, 893327010; dodogeorgia@gmail.com; Marjanishvili 38; dm/private room per person 25/30 GEL) Dodo's is the choice pick for budget travellers who like a slightly more spacious, less hectic atmosphere. The single-storey house has five large guest rooms and a shady courtyard for sitting out. Members of the extremely helpful family speak excellent English, German and Italian. Cooking facilities and washing machine are free.

Hotel Life (Map pp48-9; ☎ 773856; Ghvinis aghmarti 19; r 70-90 GEL; ☎) The friendly Life is a short walk across the river from the Old Town, close to Avlabari metro station. Rooms are good value and comfortable, all with good bathrooms and air-con, though the street is busy with loud traffic.

Midrange

There are many good midrange choices in the centre and in nearby leafy Vere.

Hotel Dzveli Ubani (Map p54; ☎ 922404; www.dzveliubani.com.ge; Diumas 5; r incl breakfast US\$40-80; ☎) This small hotel has a great location, just off Leselidze in the Old Town. Cosy, well-equipped rooms with good modern bathrooms are available at reasonable prices. Staff speak English, and it's one of the best deals in its range.

Hotel Kartli (Map pp48-9; ☎ 982982; hot_kartli@gol.ge; Barnov 32; s/d incl breakfast US\$40/50; ☎) Good-value Kartli, in a fairly tranquil uphill part of Vere, makes guests feel at home with 12 cosy, rustically furnished rooms, four of which have air-con. The helpful staff speak English and German and the terrace restaurant (mains 6 GEL to 15 GEL) is a popular lunch spot.

VIP Hotel (Map p54; ☎ 920040; hotelvipmail.ge; Leselidze 31; s/d US\$50/60; ☎) The VIP stands in a quiet courtyard off Leselidze in the thick of the Old Town. Rooms are spacious, with quality dark-wood furniture; those on the top floor are air-conditioned and enjoy great views across to the east bank of the Mtkvari.

Hotel Charm (Map p54; ☎ 986348; www.hotelcharm.ge; Chakhrukhadze 11; r incl breakfast US\$40-80; ☎) The atmospheric, centrally located Charm is a small, family-run hotel boasting a superb collection of antique furniture. The lounge includes a white Steinway, while the breakfast bar is rich with taxidermy. Three rooms on the 1st floor (each with a private bathroom) are extremely comfortable in 19th-century Georgian style, while the three on the 2nd floor share a very clean bathroom and toilet. There's billiards downstairs.

Hotel David (Map pp48-9; ☎ 935006; www.davidhotel.ge; Paolo lashvili 16A; s/d incl breakfast US\$50/60; ☎) A smart and comfortable small hotel not far from Tavisuplebis moedani. Rooms are equipped with attractive wooden furniture and satellite TV. You pay extra to use the small gym and sauna.

Vere Inn (Map pp48-9; ☎ 294733; www.hotels-tbilisi.com; Barnov 53; r US\$50-90; ☎ ☎) A very pleasant and reasonably priced option, this hideaway in Vere has four good-sized, quirkily but tastefully decorated rooms and is exceptionally friendly. The English-speaking owners are full of useful information and breakfast is included with all but the US\$50 room.

Hotel GTM (Map pp48-9; ☎ 273348; www.gtmkapan ltd.ge; Metekhis aghmarti 4; r incl breakfast US\$59-95; ☎)

With good prices and a great location opposite the Metekhi Church, the medium-sized GTM is understandably busy and popular. The more expensive rooms tend to be exterior, often with balcony; the cheaper rooms are interior or smaller.

Hotel Lago (Map p56; ☎ 380517, 899742433; hotel.lago@hotmail.com; Kandelaki 27; s/d incl breakfast US\$60/75) Despite its off-centre location in Saburtalo, it's well worth considering this unique hotel, which is furnished from top to bottom with French antique furniture. Friendly, cosy and elegant, it's unmarked outside except for the street number; ring to enter. Rooms 7 and 8 share an enormous walk-out balcony.

our pick Hotel British House (Map pp48-9; ☎ 988783; www.british-house.ge; Belinski 32; s/d incl breakfast US\$80/100; ☎ ☑) British owned but Georgian run, this little hotel is elegant, exceptionally welcoming, and located in a quiet, leafy part of Vere. The rooms are traditional in style but offer modern comforts.

Hotel Old Metekhi (Map pp48-9; ☎ 747431; www.oldmetekhi.ge; Metekhi 3; incl breakfast s US\$80-110, d US\$130; ☎ ☑) Perched on a rocky cliff above the Mtkvari, Old Metekhi is a traditional establishment favouring individual attention over visitor numbers: despite its size, it only has 15 rooms. Rooms are comfortable rather than luxurious, but most have attractive marquetry floors and balconies with fabulous views. Overall, one of the most pleasant places to put up in Tbilisi. The popular Dzveli Metekhi restaurant is attached.

Villa Mtiebi (Map p54; ☎ 920340; www.hotelmtiebi.ge; Chakhrukhadze 10; s/d incl breakfast US\$85/100; ☎ ☑) A small Old Town hotel that provides modern conveniences while maintaining its original late-19th-century elegance. At the centre of the hotel features a lovely skylit, plant-draped atrium, where continental breakfast is served. Rooms are soundproofed and have excellent up-to-date bathrooms, and service is personal and attentive.

Hotel Beaumonde (Map pp48-9; ☎ 986003; bali103@hotmail.com; A Chavchavadzis qucha 11; r incl half board & alcohol US\$90-120; ☎ ☑) The Giorgadze family will make you feel very welcome in their charming small hotel. The rooms are large and comfortable, and the hotel has good extra touches such as a library and a roof terrace with paddling pool.

Hotel Kopala (Map pp48-9; ☎ 775520; www.kopala.ge; Chekhov 8/10; s/d US\$90/105, ste US\$120/135; ☎ ☑) Classy Kopala has one of the loveliest

positions in the city, above the Metekhi Church. Many of its spacious rooms have large balconies overlooking the Old Town, and the staff are amiable and efficient. The excellent restaurant enjoys the same great views, and the hotel also boasts a bizarre meeting hall in the style of an 18th-century Metekhian mansion – definitely the place for a surreal corporate retreat.

Hotel Iliani (Map pp48-9; ☎ 335710; www.iliani.com; Anjaparidze 1; s \$90, d US\$100-120; ☎ ☑) On the so-called 'Hill of Dreams', the recently renovated Iliani is one of the most pleasant midrange hotels in Tbilisi, with good service. Most of the well-designed, individually furnished rooms have balconies overlooking a leafy garden. It's on a quiet residential street, a short walk from Kostava and the centre of town, and has its own good restaurant.

Hotel Tori (Map pp48-9; ☎ 923765; web.sanet.ge/tori; Chanturia 10; s/d incl breakfast US\$95/118; ☎ ☑) This friendly and comfortable place has a highly central location near Rustaveli, along with neat, clean rooms that boast great bathrooms. There's a restaurant and an exchange office, plus a fitness room, billiards, a sauna and a Turkish bath for your spare moments.

our pick Hotel VIP Victoria (Map p56; ☎ 291877; www.victoria.com.ge; Arakishvili 1 chikhi 3; r incl breakfast US\$118-142; ☎ ☑) A fine place to unwind, this charming small hotel in Vake is popular with international agency staff and businessfolk. It's modern, tasteful and very comfortable, with parquet floors, spacious and quiet sitting areas, interesting original art and even fur-covered toilet seats!

Top End

At least six more top-end international chain hotels – Radisson, InterContinental, Kempinski, Hilton, Hyatt and yet another Marriott – are due to open in Tbilisi in the next few years.

our pick Hotel Ambasadori (Map p54; ☎ 920403; www.ambasadori.ge; Shavteli 13; incl breakfast s US\$115, d US\$135-170; ☎ ☑) An elegant hotel in a great location overlooking the Mtkvari, the Ambasadori is an excellent alternative to the bigger, pricier establishments. Almost new but in attractive fin-de-siècle-style, it features well-equipped rooms with very comfortable beds, plus a rooftop pool overlooking the Anchiskhati Basilica. Service is friendly and polished, and the sepia-tint photos of old Tbilisi add character.

Betsy's Hotel (Map pp48-9; ☎ 931404; www.betsyshotel.com; Makashvili 32-34; s/d incl breakfast & dinner US\$165/195; ☎ ☑) A favourite with Georgia's numerous international-agency workers, this oasis of American-run efficiency is understandably popular. The rooms are bright and very comfortable and some boast great views over the city. The cocktail bar and restaurant are both highly recommended, and there's a bookshop and a small outdoor pool (don't expect to be able to work off the *khachapuri*).

Courtyard by Marriott (Map pp48-9; ☎ 779100; www.courtyard.com/TBSCY; Tavisuplebis moedani 4; r from US\$277; ☎ ☑ ☑ ☑) The less expensive and less formal of Tbilisi's two Marriotts, the Courtyard is another little island of Western comfort, with amiable staff. Rooms are typical international business class, brightened by colourful art and offering 54-channel satellite TV. The good indoor pool and fitness club are included in room prices.

Tbilisi Marriott Hotel (Map pp48-9; ☎ 779200; www.marriott.com/TBSMC; Rustaveli 13; r incl breakfast from US\$325; ☎ ☑ ☑) This palace of excellent service and facilities is aimed at a business and international-organisation crowd, so is rather formal and quiet. The rooms are spacious, with supercomfortable beds, and the bathrooms are huge. The hotel also houses the Majestic Restaurant (with Italian food), as well as a ballroom and a very good fitness centre. Originally built in 1914-15, the hotel was reduced to a burnt-out shell during the 1991-92 fighting. Marriott restored it to more than its former splendour and reopened it in 2002.

EATING

Tbilisi restaurants span a broad range from traditional-style feasts of superb Georgian fare to less boisterous eateries serving all sorts of other cuisines. There's also a great café culture.

Old Town

At the heart of the Old Town are the three pedestrian streets Erekle II, Sharden and Bambis rigi, all lined with fashionable cafés, bars, restaurants and galleries. Other eateries are scattered around the Old Town and in the Metekhi area just above the river.

Teremok (Map p54; ☎ 877454414; Dadiani 18; dishes 2.50-11 GEL; ☎ ☑ 10am-11pm) This cosy little restaurant in the style of an old Russian cottage specialises in scrumptious bliny, little round pancakes beloved of Russians and

indeed most people who have ever tried them. You can enjoy them with mushrooms, meat, cream, jam, cheese, fruit or many other options. Other Russian and Ukrainian dishes are served too.

Prestige (Map p54; Leselidze 40; dishes 3-6 GEL; ☎ ☑ 9am-1pm) This fairly standard beer bar has a leafy back garden where it's nice to sit out over a *mtsvadi* (shashlyk) or a *khachapuri* on a summer evening.

Puris Sakhli (Map pp48-9; ☎ 999537; Gorgasali 7; mains 4-10 GEL; ☎ ☑ noon-11pm) A short walk from the sulphur baths, Puris Sakhli (Bread House) is one of Tbilisi's most popular and lively spots for a meal. The menu is in English as well as Georgian, and a huge feast for two is unlikely to be more than 40 GEL.

Sans Souci (Map p54; ☎ 986594; Shavteli 13; mains 5-10 GEL; ☎ ☑ 10am-12.30am) This quirkily attractive little restaurant makes a great place for lunch or dinner. It offers friendly service and a view of both the Anchiskhati Basilica and the Hangar sports bar. The food is Georgian with original twists – try the leek hors d'oeuvre for starters.

China Town (Map p54; ☎ 754114; Sharden; mains 5-15 GEL; ☎ ☑) Colourful and consistently popular, China Town serves authentic Chinese dishes including tofu combinations and plenty of other options for vegetarians. There are meat dishes on offer too.

Dzveli Metekhi (Map pp48-9; ☎ 747407; Metekhi 3; mains 7-15 GEL; ☎ ☑ noon-10pm) Across the Metekhi Bridge from the Old Town proper, this understandably popular place attached to the Hotel Old Metekhi (opposite) has sought-after balcony tables with superb views over the Old Town. The food is excellent Georgian and international fare, plus there's a good wine list. Live music most nights.

Hotel Kopala (Map pp48-9; ☎ 775520; Chekhov 8/10; mains 7-17 GEL) Also on the Metekhi side of the river, the restaurant of the Hotel Kopala has one of the best views in the city (across the river to the Old Town) and a fairly tranquil ambience. It serves some of the best Georgian food and a good range of wines too.

12 Rue Chardin (Map p54; ☎ 923238; Sharden 12; mains 8-25 GEL) The best place for a proper meal on the Sharpen strip, with a mainly European menu and ambience, and French wine.

Shemoikhede Genatsvale (Map p54; ☎ 439646; Leselidze 25; 2-course meal incl drinks 15-30 GEL; ☎ ☑ 8am-11pm) Neat, modern and less atmospheric than the other Shemoikhede Genatsvale (p64), but

with the same excellent Georgian food and efficient service. Easiest identified by the Pirosmani painting on the street frontage of a dog and three men eating.

Rustaveli & Around

Caravan (Map pp48-9; ☎ 996691; Pirtseladze 10; mains 6-30 GEL; ☎ noon-3am) Interesting lounge-style restaurant-café with an East-meets-West literary ambience. Eclectic and well-prepared food – from Uzbek *plov* to French steak or Norwegian salmon – is served at low tables with cushioned benches in a relaxed space amid kilims, hookahs and assorted prints and posters of writers.

our pick Dzveli Sakhli (Map pp48-9; ☎ 923497; Marjvena Sanapiro 3; mains 8-25 GEL) Down by the river, the expansive ‘Old House’ is one of the best places in town, serving authentic dishes – with a twist – from all over Georgia. There’s often excellent Georgian music and dancing in the main dining hall, which has long banquet tables, ideal for small groups with time to enjoy a full evening. If you fancy a quieter meal, choose the partly open-air riverside hall. Service isn’t rapid but the food is worth a wait. You can order wine by the jug.

Csaba’s Jazz-Rock Café (Map pp48-9; ☎ 923192; Vashlovani 3; mains 10-15 GEL; ☎ noon-4am) Anyone curious about what to expect from a Hungarian-Georgian restaurant will be pleasantly surprised by the excellent salads and meat dishes in this friendly little establishment with a wooden interior. Most nights live jazz or rock is an enjoyable accompaniment from 8.30pm to 10pm.

Tokyo (Map pp48-9; ☎ 995632; Akhvlediani 17; mains 15-40 GEL) This sleek Japanese place is one of Tbilisi’s most stylish restaurants. The superb sushi is all prepared authentically, although it is pricey.

La Brasserie (Map pp48-9; ☎ 779100; Courtyard by Marriott, Tavsuplebis moedani 4; continental/full breakfast 21/32 GEL; ☎ 6.30-11am Mon-Fri, to noon Sat & Sun) The Marriott Courtyard’s not-too-formal restaurant is just the place if you feel like a truly enormous buffet breakfast. Wi-fi available too.

CAFÉS & CHEAP EATS

Chocolate (Map pp48-9; Rustaveli 36; snacks 1-2 GEL; ☎ 24 hr) Excellent little café serving baklava and other Turkish sweets, *khachapuri* and good coffee.

Kafe Lotus (Map p54; ☎ 877469197; Tavsuplebis moedani 7; mains 1.50-2.50 GEL; ☎ 10am-8pm Mon-Sat; (V))

This vegetarian canteen is one of the best places for lunch on the run in Tbilisi. It’s cheap, cheerful and delicious, and the menu includes vegetarian versions of traditional Georgian meat dishes and oriental fare.

Cafe Nikala (Map pp48-9; ☎ 998283; Rustaveli 22; mains 3-5 GEL; ☎ 9am-11pm) A bright self-service place with dependable salads, rice and meat dishes, *khachapuri* and cakes – a far cry from the dreary self-service canteens of Soviet times.

SELF-CATERING

Plenty of supermarkets offer a large range of foodstuffs. One of the best in the centre is **Populi** (Map pp48-9; Georgian Trade Centre, Vekua 3; ☎ 8am-11pm).

Marjanishvili & Around

Ankara (Map pp48-9; ☎ 957281; Davit Aghmashenebeli 128; mains 4-8 GEL; ☎ 8am-10pm) A short stretch of this busy street looks like it has been transplanted from Turkey, with Turkish restaurants, Turkish businesses and even a Turkish hotel. The Ankara is a modern, clean, air-conditioned restaurant done out in pink and white, where you can get plenty of good salad and sweets as well as kebabs and other meaty dishes.

our pick Shemoikhede Genatsvale (Map pp48-9; ☎ 910005; Marjanishvili 5; 2-course meal incl drinks 15-30 GEL; ☎ 8am-11pm) The name means ‘Drop in, Love’ and this restaurant enacts that invitation with terrific Georgian food in a fun, old-fashioned, but not overwhelming tavern ambience, with good service. Spot it by the Pirosmani painting of three men and a dog displayed outside. The house speciality is the excellent *khinkali* (with potato- or mushroom-stuffed varieties as well as meat) but there are very good *mtsvadi* (meat kebabs) and *chkmeruli* (sizzling chicken in garlic sauce). Wash it all down with draft beer or good house wine. The menu is in Georgian only, but some staff speak English.

CAFÉS & CHEAP EATS

Sachashnike (Map pp48-9; Davit Aghmashenebeli 114; mains 3-4 GEL; ☎ 7am-9pm) Straightforward and excellent-value place convenient for the Marjanishvili homestays. You can get *khinkali* for 0.40 GEL each, pork *mtsvadi* for 4 GEL and a carafe of Georgian wine for 3 GEL.

Vere & Vake

El Depo (Map pp48-9; Ghambashidze 10; khinkali 0.40-0.50 GEL; ☎ 24hr) One of the most central branches of the popular *khinkali* chain – a good place to enjoy this Georgian staple, with rustic wooden tables and other traditional decor. Does good *lobio* too.

Il Garage (Map p56; ☎ 877780090; Mtskheta 1; mains 10-17 GEL; ☎ noon-10pm Mon-Sat, closed Aug) Sardinian chefs whip up yummy concoctions of fresh pasta at this minimalist haunt facing the so-called Mrgvani Baghi (Circle Garden). Eat inside or surrounded by greenery on the patio.

CAFÉS & CHEAP EATS

Kafe Literaturuli (Map pp48-9; ☎ 444546; Tarkhnishvili 2; cakes & pastries 2-5 GEL; ☎ 10am-1pm) The Literary Café is a great stop near the Philharmonia for tea, coffee and sweet snacks. One branch of a small chain, it’s calm and informal, with neat modern design and a mildly trendy, artsy atmosphere.

DRINKING

The Old Town, especially the pedestrianised streets with their strings of designer bars and pavement cafés, is Tbilisi’s fashionable place to drink and socialise. The longer-established strip of bars and restaurants around Akhvlediani is a less-sceney alternative with less-inflated prices. Most bars serve meals as well, and stay open until at least 1am.

Old Town

On Erekle II, Sharden and Bambis rigi it’s a case of wandering along and seeing which bar grabs your fancy.

Café Kala (Map p54; ☎ 899799737; Erekle II 8/10; ☎ noon-2am) The bar that got the Erekle II scene going back in 2004, Kala is still consistently the most popular. There’s a comfortable, arty atmosphere, free wi-fi and the city’s best live jazz from 9pm to midnight. The food is pretty average.

Moulin Electrique (Map p54; ☎ 899359264; Erekle II 4/10; ☎ noon-2am) This funky two-level nook attracts a cool 20s crowd. The décor is a collection of random small objects that might have been assembled at the Dry Bridge market (p67).

Chardin Bar (Map p54; ☎ 752044; Sharden 4; ☎ noon-2am) Gilt, velvet plush and photos of fashion models pull in the beautiful people to chatter over cocktails and cakes to a techno and ambient background.

Hangar Bar (Map p54; ☎ 931080; Shavteli 20; ☎ 11am-last customer Mon-Fri, noon-last customer Sat & Sun) Focus for the expat community’s testosterone tendency, this Irish-American bar proclaims itself the ‘home of live rugby’, shows TV sport and serves Tex-Mex and Italian food. It’s always bustling and the welcoming staff speak perfect English.

Rustaveli & Around

Running off the north end of Vardebis Revolutsi moedani, Akhvlediani (formerly Perovskoy and still widely known by that name), along with neighbouring Kiacheli and Vashlovani, is home to a cosmopolitan variety of bars and eateries, several of which offer live music. You can always find somewhere lively to drop into here.

Laghidze, running down off Rustaveli beside the Opera House, is home to a small clutch of interesting bars.

Dublin (Map pp48-9; ☎ 984467; Akhvlediani 8; ☎ 10am-3am) The tight rock bands at this popular and convivial Irish bar usually get at least a few people dancing. The music may not be original, but the musicians sure know how to play it.

Nali (Map pp48-9; ☎ 986859; Kiacheli 4/1; ☎ 1pm-2am) It’s always worth checking out this other Irish pub, bigger than Dublin, for its live rock music and atmosphere.

Le Café (Map pp48-9; ☎ 934913; Vashlovani 4; ☎ noon-4am) A slick little bar with French ambience, Le Café is enjoyable to drop into for relatively quiet conversation.

Near Opera (Map pp48-9; ☎ 899681166; Laghidze 2; ☎ 11.30am-2am) This concisely named bar, popular with all ages, is a multichambered affair with décor seemingly inspired by Aubrey Beardsley. An excellent jazz trio plays from 9pm most nights.

Acid Bar (Map pp48-9; ☎ 899101238; Laghidze 2; ☎ 10am-2am) Hip little two-level bar with studenty ambience and a Cuban theme.

ENTERTAINMENT

Tbilisi has a fairly busy after-dark scene. You’ll find listings in *Georgia Today* (www.georgiatoday.ge) and *The Messenger* (www.messenger.com.ge) and online at etbilisi.com and www.info-tbilisi.com.

Live Music

Many Georgians seem to think music is best heard while eating, so while a lot of restaurants

provide musical entertainment (heaven or hell depending on quality and volume), venues where you can just go for the music and a drink are comparatively rare.

To hear traditional Georgian music, you need to eat at a restaurant with this kind of entertainment.

Two good bets are **Dzveli Sakhli** (p64) and the smart **Two-Side** (Map p54; ☎ 439038; Bambis rigi 7; ☎ noon-2am).

Some city-centre bars put on live jazz, rock or blues, starting about 9pm. The best include the jazz at **Café Kala** (p65) and **Near Opera** (p65), and the rock at **Dublin** (p65). The small, smoky **Jazz Club Non Stop** (Map pp48-9; ☎ 921664; Akhvediani 6; admission free-10 GEL) and the larger, purpose-built **Blues Brothers** (Map pp48-9; ☎ 931226; www.bluesbrothers.ge; Rustaveli 38; admission free-10 GEL) are both dedicated to live jazz and blues (from 9pm most nights), but atmosphere and musical quality are hit or miss.

Nightclubs

There's now a handful of good DJ clubs, though most of them shut up shop during July and August, when the scene migrates to Batumi.

our pick **Night Office** (Map p54; ☎ 923016; admission 15-35 GEL; ☎ from 10pm Fri & Sat) This hi-tech, laser-illuminated space under the Baratashvili Bridge, with three bars and room for 1000 clubbers, is the top party spot in town. International guest DJs fly in many weekends. You can dance to almost any electronic beat here, including breakbeat, house and the locally popular minimal.

Traffic (Map pp48-9; ☎ 999858; Leonidzis chikhi 1; ☎ 7pm-last customer) Down an alley near Tavsuplebis moedani, this LA-style lounge is popular with locals and expats. DJs spin electronic music till very late.

Tunnel Club (Map p54; ☎ 898177715; Asatiani 30; admission 15 GEL; ☎ from 10pm) Popular club set inside a former nuclear shelter in the hill below Mother Georgia. The setting is certainly unique and the dance floor must be one of the longest and thinnest in the world.

Switch (Map pp48-9; ☎ 899119655; Rustaveli 37; admission 20-30 GEL; ☎ from 11.30pm Fri & Sat) Another top club, with minimal and other techno beats and occasional headline guest DJs.

Maidan's Club (Map p54; ☎ 751188; Rkinis rigi 6; ☎ 7pm-5am) Convenient if you don't want to move far from the Old Town bars, this place offers cocktails and DJs in a long space

with two dance areas and ample outdoor loungers too.

Theatre & Dance

Georgia's great drama tradition continues to thrive, and Tbilisi has far more active theatres than most cities its size. Foreign plays, including Shakespeare's, are as popular as ever – nearly always in Georgian, though the Rustaveli Theatre offers simultaneous English translation for some shows.

Most theatres close during July and August.

Georgia's top folk song and dance groups, such as **Erisoni** and the **Sukhishvili Georgian National Ballet**, spend much of their time touring overseas, but if they happen to be performing in Tbilisi their spectacular shows are well worth the money.

Rustaveli National Theatre (Map pp48-9; ☎ 936583; www.rustavelitheatre.ge; Rustaveli 17; admission 5-25 GEL) The biggest theatre, headed by Robert Sturua, internationally famous for his interpretations of Shakespeare and Brecht.

Paliashvili Opera & Ballet Theatre (Map pp48-9; ☎ 206040; www.opera.ge; Rustaveli 25; admission 10-50 GEL) Opera, ballet and classical concerts regularly play to full houses here.

Nabadi Theatre (Map pp48-9; ☎ 989991; Rustaveli 19; admission 35-68 GEL) Doubtless with tourists in mind, Nabadi presents a show of music, dance and song about Georgian legends and culture, with some food and wine thrown in. Not bad.

Marjanishvili Theatre (Map pp48-9; ☎ 953582; Marjanishvili 8; admission 7-10 GEL) Another of the top drama theatres, recently refurbished.

Cinema

In general-release cinemas nearly all films are dubbed into Russian. **Kino Sakhli** (Kolga; Map pp48-9; ☎ 988326; kolga.geoweb.ge; Dzmebi Kakabadzebi 2; admission 5 GEL) shows foreign films in their original language (usually English), or Georgian or Russian films with English subtitles, at 8pm on Monday, Wednesday and Friday.

Gay & Lesbian Venues

The one acknowledgedly gay (or gay/mixed) bar is **Success** (Map pp48-9; ☎ 998230; Vashlovani 3; spirits & cocktails 5-10 GEL; ☎ noon-5am), which is less stylish than it was. But several other bars and cafés are gay-friendly, including **Le Café** (p65), opposite Success, and **Café Kala** (p65) in the Old Town.

SHOPPING

Tbilisi doesn't rank with Paris or Milan as a shopping destination, but you'll find a selection of distinctive products – from dolls to artworks, carpets to wine – that will serve as great mementos. Interesting shops are dotted along Rustaveli and in the Old Town.

Dry Bridge market (Map pp48-9; 9 March Park; ☎ 8am-1pm Sat & Sun) is the most interesting market. You'll find all kinds of knick-knacks and charming miscellanea from art, accordions, samovars and electrical gadgets to china, glass and silver being sold off by impoverished old folk.

Old Carpets & Kilims (Map pp48-9; Rustaveli 32; ☎ 10am-6pm) Come here for a variety of rugs from Georgia and around, and Central Asian suzani textiles. Be prepared to haggle.

Gallery Artgasm (Map pp48-9; Rustaveli 34; ☎ 11am-9pm) In the courtyard next to Prospero's Books, this gallery offers a range of funky items, from copper sculptures and enamelled jewellery to embroidered bags. All created by Tbilisi designers.

Georgian Souvenirs (Map pp48-9; Rustaveli 18; ☎ 10am-7pm) Some of the stock here veers towards the kitsch, but the icons, dolls and puppets are eye-catching, and the decorative wine bottles are full! It's the spot if you're hankering for a Caucasian sword.

Carpet Shop (Map p54; Leselidze 27; ☎ 11am-8pm) This unnamed shop halfway down the hill on Leselidze boasts 'carpet nice; price nice', and has an array of rugs from across the region. Locals shop here, so it must be good.

Meidan 91 (Map p54; ☎ 723546; Gorgasalis moedani; www.meidan91.wanex.net; ☎ 10am-7pm) Touted as the oldest carpet shop in the Caucasus, Meidan 91 is an Aladdin's cave of carpets, samovars, pewter and antique regional dress from across Georgia.

Green Sun Souvenirs (Map p54; Erekle II 11; greensun.etbilisi.com; ☎ 11am-11pm) This place offers a range of interesting knick-knacks, from figurines to embroidered scarves.

Dom Vina (Map p54; Leselidze 55; ☎ 10am-7pm) A bountiful wine cellar offering up tipples from across Georgia.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Tbilisi airport (☎ 433121/41), 15km east of the centre, has a modern terminal opened in 2007 and a growing range of international flights (see p320 for more information).

There were no domestic flights at research time, though Batumi and Mestia flights are constantly talked about.

Airline offices in Tbilisi include the following:

Air Baltic (Map pp48-9; ☎ 932829; www.airbaltic.com; Berika Travel Agency, Kostava 14)

Airzena Georgian Airways (Map pp48-9; ☎ 485560; www.georgian-airways.com; Rustaveli 12)

Austrian Airlines (Map pp48-9; ☎ 774506; www.aa.com; Sheraton Metechi Palace Hotel, Telavi 20)

AZAL (Azerbaijan Airlines; Map p56; ☎ 251669; www.azal.az; Chavchavadzis gamziri 28)

BMI (Map pp48-9; ☎ 940719; www.flybmi.com; Tavsuplebis moedani 4)

Georgian National Airlines (Map pp48-9; www.national-avia.com; ☎ 922020; Rustaveli 5)

Lufthansa (Map p56; ☎ 243324; www.lufthansa.com; Paliashvili 16)

SCAT (Map pp48-9; ☎ 921800; www.scat.kz; Contact Travel Agency, Ingorokva 12)

Turkish Airlines (Map pp48-9; ☎ 959022; www.turkishairlines.com; Davit Aghmashenebeli 147)

Ukraine International Airlines (Map pp48-9; www.flyuia.com; ☎ 433555; Ekaladze 3)

Bus & Marshrutka

Tbilisi has three long-distance bus and marshrutka stations: Didube (the main hub for national transport), Ortachala (for Kakheti, Armenia, Turkey and Greece) and the main train station (for western Georgia and further Yerevan services). See destination sections later in this chapter for further schedule details – and remember it's all subject to change!

Didube bus station (☎ 347239; Tsereteli; ☎ Didube) is a sprawling chaos outside Didube metro station. In the first yard you reach, just outside the exit tunnel from the metro, you'll find marshrutkas to Gardabani, Borjomi, Bakuriani and Akhaltsikhe. A second yard, straight ahead from the metro tunnel, then across a small road and behind a line of buildings, is the departure point for marshrutkas to Mtskheta and Kazbegi, and the bus to Barisakho. For further services walk 300m to the right along the above-mentioned small road. Here you'll find the Okriba bus station on your left, with buses to Kutaisi, and two chaotic yards on your right, with marshrutkas to Gori, Kutaisi and Batumi and further marshrutkas to Borjomi and Akhaltsikhe. Buses to Gori leave from the back of the first of these yards.

Ortachala bus station (☎ 753433; Gulia 1) is something of a backwater, about 2.5km southeast of the Old Town. From here marshrutkas depart for Yerevan (30 GEL, six hours) via the Sadakhlo border point, Vanadzor and Sevan, hourly from 7am to noon. Note that if you want to get off before Yerevan, you still have to pay the full 30 GEL fare. Marshrutkas leave for Qax, Azerbaijan (10 GEL, five to six hours), via the Lagodekhi border crossing, at 8am, 11am and 1pm. A minifleet of four or five buses run by different companies departs at noon for Istanbul (US\$40, 27 hours) via the border at Sarpi, Hopa, Rize, Trabzon (US\$25, 11 hours) and Samsun. There's also a mini-bus to Trabzon (US\$25, 11 hours) at 8pm by **Golden Travel** (☎ 877457680), and a 6am bus by **Özlem Ardahan** (☎ 899919958) to Istanbul (US\$50, 27 hours) via the Posof border point, Kars, Erzurum and Ankara. For the truly hardy, several companies run buses to Thessaloniki and Athens (€100) from Ortachala. You can reach Ortachala on marshrutka 94 from in front of Tbilisi's Borjomi train station via Marjanishvili metro station, Vardebis Revolutsis moedani (lower level), Tavisuplebis moedani and Gorgasalis moedani. Bus 55 runs to Ortachala from Vake via Rustaveli (it stops opposite the Opera House) and Tavisuplebis moedani, and marshrutka 150 runs between Didube and Ortachala bus stations.

Further marshrutkas to Yerevan (30 GEL, six hours) go from the front of the main train station (Map pp48–9), on Vagzlis moedani, at 8am, 10am, 1pm and 5pm.

Further marshrutkas and buses to Kutaisi, Batumi, Zugdidi and Poti depart from a yard at the back of the main train station (Map pp48–9) on Tsotne Dadiani.

There is no bus or marshrutka service from Tbilisi crossing into Azerbaijan via the Krasny Most border crossing. If you don't want to take the train, fly or go via Lagodekhi, you have various choices.

- Take a marshrutka from the main train station to Krasny Most (4 GEL, one hour); buses and marshrutkas run from there to Gəncə and Baku.
- Get a bus from Lilo market, near Tbilisi airport, to Krasny Most or beyond.
- Get a marshrutka from Tbilisi train station to Marneuli (2 GEL, 45 minutes), 30km south of Tbilisi, where buses depart for Baku.

Car

Taking a taxi for an intercity trip can be surprisingly inexpensive, especially if shared between three or four people. Your accommodation can usually organise this for you, or you can go to one of the bus stations or the train station, where drivers wait. Typical one-way fares are 80 GEL to Kazbegi or 100 GEL to Yerevan. A return trip to Davit Gareja is also around 100 GEL.

If you fancy your chances driving yourself on Georgian roads, car rental is easy enough to arrange, though not necessarily cheaper than taking a car with a driver.

Avis (Map pp48–9; ☎ 923594; www.avis.com; Tavisuplebis moedani 4) Also at the airport.

Cosmo Group (Map pp48–9; ☎ 920960; cosmo@gol.ge; Atoneli 31)

Hertz (Map p54; ☎ 987400; www.caucasustravel.com; Caucasus Travel, Leselidze 44)

Train

Tbilisi's **main train station** (Map pp48–9; ☎ 566253, 993253; Vagzlis moedani) is the railway hub of Georgia. Trains from Tbilisi are generally slower, less frequent, more comfortable and a bit cheaper than marshrutkas and buses.

The station is due for rebuilding but meanwhile remains a slightly confusing place. Schedule information is currently available at the left-hand end of the line of ticket windows. Some is also given in English on www.info-tbilisi.com and (in Georgian) on the Georgian Railway site (www.railway.ge).

The only international trains are the overnight sleepers to Baku and Yerevan. The train to Baku (2nd/1st-class 40/78 GEL, 14 hours) leaves at 5.15pm daily. Given the shortage of road transport from Tbilisi to Azerbaijan, this is the most convenient way to get to Baku and to stops en route such as Gəncə. The train to Yerevan (4th/3rd/2nd/1st-class 12/16/24/45 GEL, 15 hours) however takes a painfully slow, roundabout route via Vanadzor and Gyumri, and only runs every two days (on odd dates from Tbilisi to Yerevan and on even dates from Yerevan to Tbilisi). It leaves Tbilisi at 3.40pm.

Tickets for the Baku and Yerevan trains are sold at window 7 in the main train station. It's advisable to book a day or two ahead, though at busy times (eg the summer holiday season) you might be told the train is fully booked.

Within Georgia, the most useful trains include the night train to Zugdidi (3rd/2nd-class

5.50/11 GEL, eight hours, 9.30pm) and the night train to Batumi (3rd/2nd/1st-class 15/23/40 GEL, eight hours, 10pm). This Batumi sleeper, with air-conditioned 1st- and 2nd-class compartments, is another train for which it's advisable to book ahead. Note that Batumi appears as Makhinjauri (the exact location of its station) on some timetables.

Day trains include the 8.50am to Batumi (20 GEL, eight hours), the 2.45pm to Poti (8 GEL, six hours), both with 3rd-class seating only, and the 9.15am to Kutaisi (3rd/2nd-class 5/10.50 GEL, 5½ hours) and Zugdidi (3rd/2nd-class 6/11.50 GEL, eight hours). There's also an 11.40pm departure to Poti.

Elektrichky (electric trains with seating only) run from Tbilisi's Borjomi station, next door to the main station, to Borjomi (2 GEL, 4¼ hours) at 7.15am and 4.55pm, and to Kutaisi (3.50 GEL, 5½ hours) at 4.10pm. For these you pay on the train.

All the above domestic trains stop at Gori, and most at Mtskheta.

See p327 for general information on train travel in Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan.

GETTING AROUND To/From the Airport

Bus 37 (0.40 GEL, half-hourly, 7am to 7pm) runs between the airport and the train station. The route into town is via Ketevan Tsamebulis gamziri on the east side of the Mtkvari, then Tavisuplebis moedani, Rustaveli and Melikishvili in the city centre.

Going out to the airport, one of its stops is at Rustaveli 26, opposite the Opera House. From 7pm to 8.30pm there are a few services just between the airport and Samgori metro station.

A new rail link between the airport and Tbilisi's main train station was almost ready as this book went to press. The ride to the city will take 20 minutes, with trains running about every 40 minutes.

The official taxi fare from the airport to the city centre or vice versa is 25 GEL (30 GEL at night), but going from the city to the airport, a taxi hailed on the street will probably charge 20 GEL.

Public Transport BUS & MARSHRUTKA

Buses (0.40 GEL) and marshrutkas (0.50 GEL) provide an effective above-ground complement to the metro, though their

route boards are in Georgian only. Useful services are mentioned where appropriate elsewhere in this section.

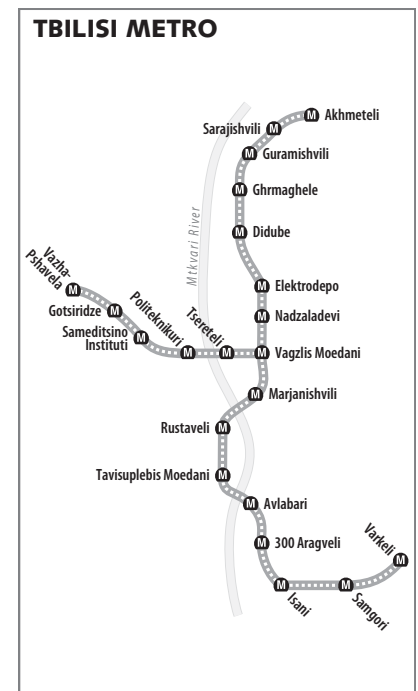
While buses only stop at predetermined stops, you can get on and off marshrutkas anywhere along their route. Pay when you get off. To get the driver to stop, yell out 'gaacheret!' ('stop!').

METRO

The deep, dank Tbilisi metro is the standard fast, efficient Soviet system seen all over the ex-USSR.

It operates from 6am to midnight with a flat fare of 0.40 GEL, and the two lines connect you to most important parts of the city, meeting at Vagzlis Moedani station. A third line appears on the official maps, but a shortage of funds makes its construction highly improbable for now.

The stations of most use to visitors are Tavisuplebis Moedani (Freedom Sq, for the Old Town), Rustaveli (city centre), Marjanishvili, Vagzlis Moedani (main train station) and Didube (main bus station).



Signs are only in Georgian but the station name is announced at each stop, and just before the doors shut the name of the next station is also announced.

TAXI

Taxis are plentiful and almost always unmetered. Agree on the fare before getting in unless you are so familiar with the city that you know what your ride will cost. A short-ish ride of a couple of kilometres in central areas costs 2 to 3 GEL; longer rides may be up to 10 GEL.

AROUND TBILISI

A cradle of Georgian culture, the region west, northwest and south of the capital is known as Kartli, after the mythical father of the Georgian people, Kartlos, whose progeny made their home at Mtskheta. Two towns in particular reflect contrasting sides of the Georgian story. Nobody can understand Georgian spirituality without visiting the ancient royal and religious capital of Mtskheta, just outside Tbilisi. Here St Nino converted the Iverian kingdom to Christianity in the 4th century. In Gori, Joseph Stalin was born Iosif Jughashvili in 1878; his influence on the modern world has been variously calculated in terms of the tens of millions of deaths in his notorious Gulags, or as victory against Nazi Germany in WWII.

MTSKHETA მცხეთა

☎ 37 (international), ☎ 27 (domestic) / pop 8000
To a non-Georgian, Mtskheta's near-mystical importance in Georgian culture is hard to describe. Containing some of the oldest and most important churches in the country, Mtskheta has been Georgia's spiritual heart since Christianity was established here in about AD 327. It was capital of most of eastern Georgia from about the 3rd century BC to the 5th century AD, when King Vakhtang Gorgasali switched his base to Tbilisi. It remained a spiritual capital, however, and Mtskheta's Svetitskhoveli Cathedral is still the setting for important ceremonies of the Georgian Orthodox Church. With an alluring setting where the Mtkvari and Aragvi Rivers meet, less than 25km from the centre of Tbilisi, Mtskheta makes a very easy and enjoyable day trip from the capital.

Orientation & Information

The main Gori highway from Tbilisi bypasses Mtskheta to the east. Coming from Tbilisi to Mtskheta, you'll turn off the highway well before it passes the town, then drive along the right bank of the Mtkvari River, before crossing a bridge into Mtskheta. If you are in a marshrutka or bus, get off once you draw level with the large Svetitskhoveli Cathedral to your right.

The **Tourism Information Centre** (☎ 322128; Arsukidze 3; ☎ 8am-8pm), with helpful, English-speaking staff, stands opposite the main gate of Svetitskhoveli. Staff can provide guides in several languages for Mtskheta's sights at 25 GEL per hour – best to contact them in advance for this.

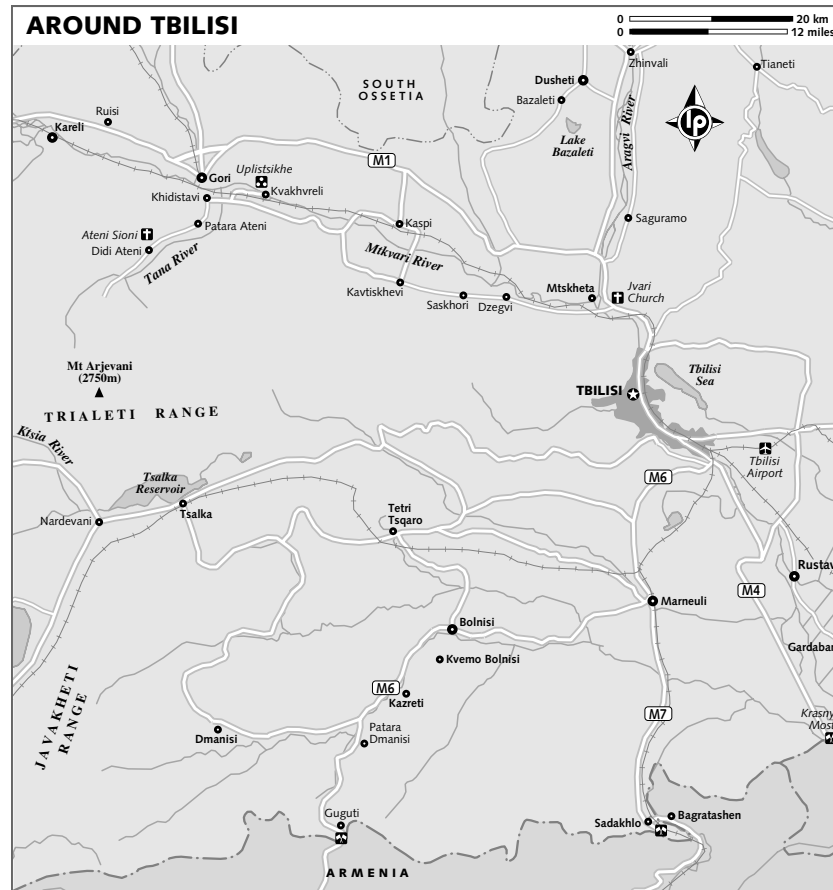
Sights

Dominating the low-rise town is the grand **Svetitskhoveli Cathedral** (Arsukidze; ☎ 8am-10pm). It's a large (for its time, enormous) building from the 11th century, early in the golden age of Georgian church architecture, with an elongated cross plan, adorned with beautiful stone carving outside and in.

According to tradition, Christ's robe lies buried beneath the cathedral. Apparently a Mtskheta Jew, Eliaz, was in Jerusalem at the time of the crucifixion and returned with the robe to Mtskheta. His sister Sidonia took it from him and immediately died in a passion of faith. No-one could prise the robe from her grasp, so it was buried with her. As years passed people forgot the exact site of the burial. When King Mirian decided to build the first church at Mtskheta after his conversion, the wooden column designed to stand in the centre of the church could not be raised from the ground. St Nino, in an all-night prayer vigil, had a vision of a young man imbued with fire who raised the column. Miraculously, the column slowly moved of its own accord to the burial site of Sidonia and the robe. The column subsequently worked many miracles and Svetitskhoveli means 'Life-Giving Column'.

In the 5th century King Vakhtang Gorgasali replaced King Mirian's original church with a stone church, whose modest remains are visible to the left of the cathedral today. The present building was constructed between 1010 and 1029 under Patriarch Melkisedek, and, despite being damaged in the 14th century by Timur, it's still one of the most beautiful

AROUND TBILISI



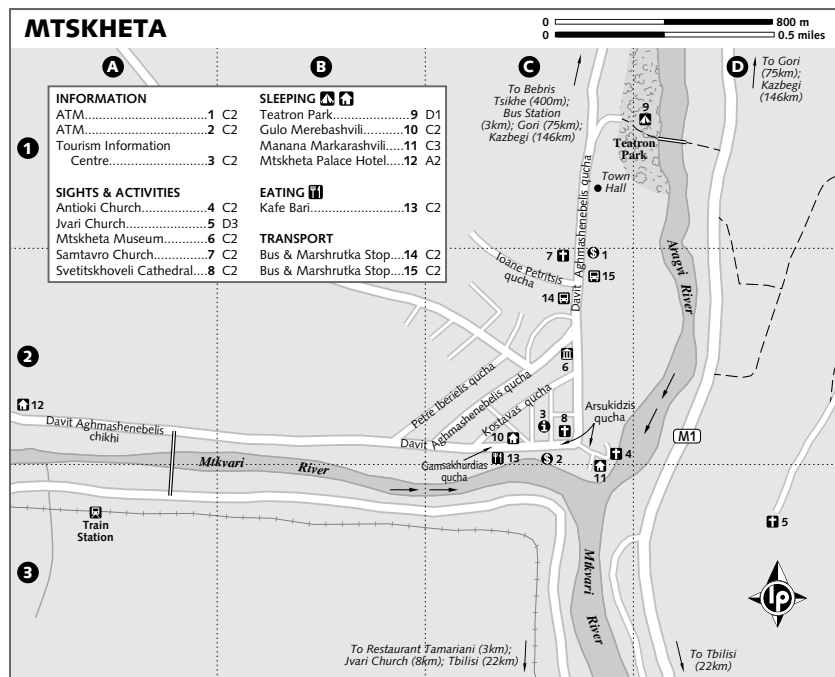
churches in the country. The defensive wall around it was built in 1787.

Inside, Christ's robe is believed to lie in the nave beneath the square, tower-like pillar, which is decorated with colourful frescoes of the conversion of Kartli. The tomb of Erekle II, king of Kartli and Kakheti from 1762 to 1798, lies directly in front of the altar. Vakhtang Gorgasali's tomb is behind this, cordoned off and with a raised flagstone. The frescoes in the main nave and south aisle date from the 16th to the 18th centuries.

Two other churches in Mtskheta are well worth visiting. The tiny but charming **Antioki Church**, in the grounds of a nunnery near the riverbank behind the cathedral, dates from St Nino's time. Renovated in 2000, it manages

to retain its modest charm despite the recently painted frescoes. The large **Samtavro Church** (Davit Aghmashenebelis qucha; ☎ 9am-7pm) is also now part of a nunnery. Once the palace church of the lords of Mtskheta, it was built in the 1130s. King Mirian and his wife, Queen Nana, are buried in the southwest corner, under tombstones from the early 20th century. The little church in the Samtavro grounds, Tsminda Nino, dates from the 4th century and stands on a spot where St Nino is said to have prayed.

Mtskheta Museum (☎ 899223181; Davit Aghmashenebelis qucha 54; admission 0.50 GEL; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sat) has an interesting collection of finds from archaeological excavations in the Mtskheta area, labelled in both English



and Georgian. Highlights include jewellery and an elaborately worked bronze ritual belt from the Bronze Age, perfume vials from the 2nd to 5th centuries AD, and a miniature mother-of-pearl Iranian sun temple from the 3rd or 4th century AD, found in the Samtavro cemetery.

Bebris Tsikhe, Mtskheta's castle, was built in the early feudal period to protect the town's northern approaches. It's a romantic ruin situated at the north end of Davit Aghmashenebeli, about 1.2km past Samtavro Church.

JVARI CHURCH

Visible for miles around on its hilltop overlooking Mtskheta from the east, **Jvari Church** (☞ 9am-10pm) is to many Georgians the holiest of holies, the country's spiritual heart. Jvari, or the Holy Cross Church, stands where a sacred wooden cross was erected in the 4th century (either by St Nino before she converted Mtskheta, or by King Mirian soon afterwards). In the 6th century Guaram, the *eristavi* (duke) of Kartli, built a small, simple church beside the cross. Between 585 and

604 Guaram's son Stepanoz I constructed the main church over the cross.

Jvari is a classic of early Georgian tetraconch design. The angles between the four equal arms of its cross-shaped plan are filled in with corner rooms, and the low dome sits on a squat, octagonal drum, with the overall result of a beautifully symmetrical little building. The interior is rather bare, but from the church site there are spectacular views over Mtskheta and the convergence of the Aragvi and Mtkvari Rivers. The road up to the church from Mtskheta takes a highly circuitous route; the easiest way to get there is by taxi (15 to 20 GEL round trip, including waiting time). If you're feeling fit, you can walk up there from Mtskheta in about one hour by crossing the footbridge from Teatron Park, then following a path from the far (east) side of the busy highway, which winds up to the road behind the church.

Sleeping

Mtskheta is an easy day trip from Tbilisi, but there are several accommodation options. You can camp for free (without any facilities

or supervision) in **Teatron Park**, off Davit Aghmashenebeli towards Bebris Tsikhe.

The tourist office offers details of about 15 homestays, for which it can arrange bookings. Two good ones are the houses of **Manana Markarashvili** (☎ 899116862; Arsukidze 85; per person incl dinner 20 GEL, breakfast 5 GEL, 300m from Svetitskhoveli, and **Gulo Merebashvili** (☎ 322636; Arsukidze 15; per person 20-25 GEL), facing Svetitskhoveli. The modern **Mtskheta Palace Hotel** (☎ 32-910202; fax 32-911717; Davit Aghmashenebeli chikhi; r incl breakfast 150-200 GEL; ♿ ♿) is quite palatial but rather devoid of atmosphere.

Eating

Mtskheta is famous for its *lobio*, which can be found in any local restaurant, served in a traditional clay pot. Mtskheta is a popular spot for Tbilisi folk to come for a meal, especially at weekends, and several establishments cater to them, though most are several kilometres out of town, requiring a taxi or marshrutka ride from central Mtskheta.

Kafe Bari (Gamsakhurdia 17; dishes 2-5 GEL; ☞ 10am-midnight) Easily the best of the central options, this smart little place is a stone's throw from Svetitskhoveli and serves up appetising *lobio*, *mtsvadi*, *khinkali*, *khachapuri* and more. The menu is in Georgian but staff speak a little English.

Restaurant Tamariani (☎ 32-544412; mains 7-15 GEL; ☞ 10am-11pm) About 6km from the centre on the Tbilisi road, the Tamariani has a lovely setting on a terrace right by the Mtkvari and

serves a good range of Georgian favourites. Live music frequently heightens the party mood of its customers.

Getting There & Away

Marshrutkas to Mtskheta (1 GEL, 30 minutes) leave Tbilisi's Didube bus station every 15 to 20 minutes from about 8am to 8pm. The last marshrutka to Tbilisi leaves Mtskheta at about 9pm. *Elektrichka* trains to Gori also stop at Mtskheta station, although it's a 15-minute walk from there to the centre.

GORI გორი

☎ 370 (international), ☎ 270 (domestic) / pop 50,000

To all Georgians, Gori is synonymous with just one man: this is the town where Iosif Jughashvili – later Joseph Stalin – was born and went to school. Place of pilgrimage or macabre monument to Stalin's enduring popularity in his homeland, Gori is an intriguing place. There's an abundance of older historical attractions within easy striking distance, making an overnight stay a good idea, though it can also be done in a day trip from Tbilisi.

Orientation & Information

The town is dominated by various paeans to its best-known son: the main street is broad Stalinis gamziri (Stalin Ave), running south towards the Mtkvari River. The large Stalinis moedani (Stalin Sq), with its tall Stalin statue, opens out at the junction with Chavchavadze,

ST NINO & THE CONVERSION OF GEORGIA

While some of the legends that have grown up around St Nino are ridiculously far-fetched, there is no doubt that Nino is the historical figure to whom the 4th-century Christian conversion of Iveria (eastern Georgia) can be attributed. Nino is generally believed to have hailed from Cappadocia in eastern Turkey and a widespread version has it that she was the daughter of a Roman general, Zabulon, and was also related to St George. Other accounts aver that she was a slave girl. The most common account of her youth has it that she was brought up in Jerusalem under the eye of an uncle who was Patriarch of Jerusalem, and at the age of 14 experienced a vision of the Virgin Mary telling her that her destiny was to convert the Iverians to Christianity.

Coming to Iveria in the 320s, Nino won respect from the people by her good deeds and the miracles she performed. But it was only at Mtskheta, when her prayers managed to save Queen Nana of Iveria from serious illness, that she won a royal convert. King Mirian was harder to convince, until he was struck blind while hunting, only for his sight to be miraculously restored after he prayed to the Christian God – leading to mass baptism in the Aragvi River for the townsfolk of Mtskheta. Mirian made Christianity the official religion of Iveria in about AD 327. The vine-leaf cross that the Virgin allegedly gave Nino (and which Nino later bound with her own hair) is still kept at the Sioni Cathedral in Tbilisi. She remains Georgia's most venerated saint, and is buried at Bodbe Convent in Kakheti (p113).

and the large Stalin Museum complex and park are a short trot further north. The bus station is at the west end of Chavchavadze, 500m from Stalinis moedani; the train station is across the Mtkvari from the south end of Stalinis gamziri. You'll find a few ATMs along Stalinis gamziri.

Sights

STALIN MUSEUM

Possibly the most interesting museum in Georgia, the **Stalin Museum** (☎ 75215; www.stalinmuseum.ge; Stalinis gamziri 32; admission incl photo permission and guide in English, German or French 15 GEL, video permit 400 GEL; ☎ 10am-6pm) is an impressive 1957 building that exudes a faintly religious air. The visit includes the tiny wood-and-mud-brick house where Stalin's parents rented the single room in which they lived for the first four years of his life. This stands in front of the main museum building, perfectly preserved and with its own temple-like protective superstructure. The rest of the poor neighbourhood in which it stood was demolished in the 1930s as Gori was redesigned to glorify its famous son.

The museum charts Stalin's journey from the Gori church school to the Yalta Conference at the end of WWII and his death in 1953. What's missing is any attempt at a balanced portrayal of Stalin's career. This is a purely selective exhibition telling the glorious tale of a brave local lad who rose to the highest office in the land and defeated Hitler. No mention

of the purges, the Gulag, the Ukraine famine or Stalin's 1939 pact with Hitler.

The first hall details Stalin's childhood and adolescence, including his rather cringeworthy pastoral poetry. The emphasis quickly shifts to his political work and revolutionary activities in the Caucasus, organising unions in Tbilisi and setting up an illegal workers' press in Batumi at the end of the 19th century.

Stalin's involvement with Lenin is then thoroughly detailed, taking us through the revolution of 1905, Stalin's Siberian exile, the revolution of 1917, the Civil War and Lenin's death in 1924. The first hall does display the text of Lenin's 1922 political testament that described Stalin as too coarse and power-hungry and advised Communist Party members to remove Stalin from the post of General Secretary, but your guide is unlikely to draw this to your attention. Two other key players in Stalin's life – Trotsky and Khrushchev – remain unsurprisingly absent from the displays.

One room is devoted to Stalin's eerie death mask, lying in state, while the next one is full of tributes and gifts to Stalin from world leaders and other senior Bolsheviks. Off the staircase leading downstairs, another room contains more gifts presented to Stalin and a reconstruction of his first office in the Kremlin (which he occupied from 1918 to 1922).

To one side of the museum (and included in the tour) is **Stalin's train carriage**, in which he

travelled to the Yalta Conference in 1945 (he didn't like flying). Apparently bulletproof, it has an elegant interior that includes a bathtub and a primitive air-conditioning system.

GORI FORTRESS

The heart of Gori is the ancient **fortress** (admission free; ☎ 24hr), an oval citadel atop the big hill west of the Stalin Museum. The walk to the top is easy; from the Hotel Intourist, cross the square and keep going until you reach the foot of the hill, from where a newly cobbled path leads up to the gate. There are fine views from up here and it's particularly attractive late in the day when the sun is setting.

A fortification existed here in ancient times and it is believed to have been besieged by Pompey in 65 BC. Most of the present building dates from the Middle Ages, with additions from the 17th century.

Sleeping

Homestay (Kristepokre Kasteli 8; per person 10 GEL) Those on a tight budget can try this basic homestay option just below the fortress. To get there from the bus station, take the first street to the left off Chavchavadze as you head towards Stalinis moedani, then the first right, then the first left, and turn left at the end. The house is at the far end of this street, where the asphalt turns to sand. It's no luxury option; no food is available and no-one in the family speaks English, but that shouldn't be a major obstacle.

Hotel Intourist (☎ 72676; Stalinis gamziri 26; r 50 GEL) Most travellers stay at the Intourist, a large building near the museum. Only one floor of rooms is open, but the available rooms are quite palatial, with marble pillars, parquet floors and comfortable-enough rooms. The plumbing needs work, though: water (hot or cold) is only available for five (separate) hours each day.

Hotel Victoria (☎ 75586; fax 70050; Tamar Mepi 76; s/d/tr 65/65/90 GEL, ste 120-140 GEL; ☎) The best hotel in the town, 200m off southern Stalinis gamziri, is a modern place offering large rooms with sitting areas, TV and air-con, and is decent value for money. Breakfast is available for 7 GEL.

Gori Hotel (☎ 70818; Gori-Tbilisi Hwy, 3rd km; r/ste incl breakfast 80/140 GEL; ☎) Set just back from the Tbilisi highway about 4km from town, this is worth considering as it has modern, carpeted rooms and the area's best restaurant.

A taxi from the centre costs 4 or 5 GEL. When leaving you can flag down a Tbilisi marshrutka at the end of the driveway.

Eating

Cake House (Stalinis gamziri 22; pizzas 4.50 GEL; ☎ 9am-10pm) A pine-panelled café serving *khachapuri* and reasonable pizza. It's between the museum and Stalinis moedani.

Restaurant Intourist (☎ 74433; Stalinis gamziri 26; dishes 2-5 GEL; ☎ 9am-midnight) Attached to the Hotel Intourist, facing the park in front of the museum, this offers all the Georgian standards in a calm environment.

Nikala (☎ 70824; Stalinis gamziri 4; dishes 2-6 GEL; ☎ 24 hr) Spacious Nikala, 400m south of Stalinis moedani, serves up tasty Georgian salads, cheeses, fowl (including quail) and meat dishes at very good prices. The *khbosostri* (veal stew with sour plums) is superb. It has an English-language menu and helpful staff.

Gori Restaurant (☎ 70818; Gori-Tbilisi Hwy, 3rd km; mains 4-10 GEL; ☎ 8am-midnight) The restaurant at this modern hotel 4km from town (4 or 5 GEL by taxi) is the best around Gori, with satisfying, well-prepared Georgian dishes, and a nice outdoor terrace if you prefer to steer clear of the live music inside.

Getting There & Away

Marshrutkas to Gori (4 GEL, 1½ hours) leave from Tbilisi's Didube station about every 40 minutes, from 7.30am to 4.30pm. Buses (3.50 GEL, two hours) go as late as midnight. All westbound trains from Tbilisi's main station or the Borjomi station next door stop at Gori, taking 1½ to two hours.

Gori's bus station is at the end of Chavchavadze, 500m west of Stalinis moedani. Marshrutkas (4 GEL, 1½ hours) and buses (3.50 GEL, two hours) to Tbilisi leave Gori about every 40 minutes until 6pm; marshrutkas to Kutaisi (8 GEL, three hours) go at 7.30am and 9.30am.

AROUND GORI

Uplistsikhe უფლისციხე

This impressive and once enormous **cave city** (admission 10 GEL, guide in English 10 GEL; ☎ 9am-6pm), on the north bank of the Mtkvari, 10km east of Gori, is one of the oldest places of settlement in the Caucasus. Uplistsikhe was founded in the late Bronze Age, around 1000 BC, but developed mainly from the 6th century BC to the 1st century AD. This was one of the principal

JOSEPH STALIN & GEORGIA

Few people's historical legacy is simultaneously greater and more uncertain than that of Iosif Jughashvili, the Gori cobbler's son who went on to rule the largest country on earth for a quarter of a century. Few would question his achievements: were it not for the Soviet role in WWII, Nazi Germany would probably have won, and in the space of a decade he turned the Soviet Union from a peasant economy into a vast industrial powerhouse – 'taking it with the plough and leaving it with nuclear weapons', as Churchill observed.

Yet the suffering of millions cannot be forgotten. Stalin's Gulags were responsible for the deaths of many millions, and his ruthless Cheka and NKVD (both secret police) terrorised the population from the late 1920s until Stalin's death in 1953. Nor did Stalin's Georgian origins translate into mercy for his own people – the purges in Tbilisi left mass graves in what is now the bourgeois suburb of Vake.

In a country that is still recovering from post-Soviet chaos, and where many still do not reap much material benefit from capitalism, it's perhaps not surprising that some still say they would like to see another Stalin in charge. While they don't seem blind to his faults, people simply prefer to focus on his achievements and the fact that here was a Georgian who, for better or worse, ruled a great power and was one of the key figures of 20th-century history. Portraits, busts and statues of Stalin can be found in all corners of Georgia, and while few are new or even in good condition, there is no sign of them disappearing yet.

political and religious centres of pre-Christian Kartli, with temples dedicated principally to the sun goddess. Archaeological findings from the 4th to 6th centuries AD speak of an ongoing struggle between Christians and adherents of the old religion.

After the Arabs occupied Tbilisi, Uplistsikhe became the residence of the kings of Kartli. A main caravan road from Asia to Europe ran just north of the city, which became an important trade centre with 20,000 people at its peak. Uplistsikhe's importance declined after King David the Builder retook Tbilisi in 1122 and it was irrevocably destroyed by the Mongols in 1240, along with its natural surroundings – there used to be forests here. What you visit today is the 40,000-sq-metre Shida Kalaki, or Inner City, constituting less than half of the original whole. Almost everything here has been uncovered by archaeologists since 1957, when only the tops of a few caves were visible.

Uplistsikhe is strategically located, with a deep valley to the east and cliffs to the west. Entering the main part of the site, you pass through what was the **main gate**, at the head of a small ravine, then wind your way up the main street. Over to the left, on the southwest edge of the site overlooking the river, you'll see a cave with a pointed arch carved in the rock above it. Inside, the ceiling is carved with octagonal designs in a similar style to Caracalla's Baths in Rome. Known as the **Theatre**, this is probably a temple dating from the 1st or 2nd century AD, where religious mystery plays may have been performed.

Further up the street and down to its right is the large pre-Christian **Temple of Makvliani**, with an inner recess behind an arched portico. The open hall in front of the portico has stone seats for priests, and two rounded holes in the floor for the blood of sacrificial animals.

A little further up on the left is the big hall known as **Tamaris Darbazi** (Hall of Queen Tamar). Here there are two columns built into the cliff and a stone seat dating from antiquity. The stone ceiling is cut to look like wooden beams, and there is a hole to let smoke out and light in. This was almost certainly a pagan temple originally, though the great Christian Queen Tamar may have occupied it later. To its left is an open area with stone niches along one side, thought to have once been a **pharmacy**. On the other side of Tamaris Darbazi is a large cave building with the remains of four

columns – probably originally a **sun temple**, used for animal sacrifices, and later converted into a Christian basilica.

The 10th-century church near the top of the hill is the **Uplistsulis Ekllesia** (Prince's Church). This triple-church basilica was also built over a pagan temple, probably the most important one.

On your way back down, don't miss the long **tunnel** running down to the Mtkvari River – an emergency escape route that could also have been used for carrying water up to the city. Its entrance is by a short flight of narrow metal steps, behind a reconstructed wall southeast of the Theatre.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The easiest way to visit Uplistsikhe is by taxi from Gori – the return trip including waiting time normally costs 30 GEL. Marshrutkas leave Gori bus station a few times a day for Kvakhvrelis (1 GEL, 20 minutes), the village across the Mtkvari River from Uplistsikhe. It's about a 2km walk from village to site, as you have to go downriver to a bridge then back along the other side. Gori-bound *elektrichka* trains, currently leaving Tbilisi's Borjomi station at 7.15am, 4.10pm and 4.55pm, take 1½ hours to reach Kvakhvrelis (2 GEL).

Ateni Sioni ატენის სიონი

This impressively ancient church has a beautiful setting, above a bend of the wonderfully lush Tana valley and surrounded by high hills and cliffs, 12km south of Gori. The entry to the church itself is through an orchard.

Architecturally, Ateni Sioni is modelled on the Jvari Church at Mtskheta (p72) and was built in the 7th century. Appealing reliefs of stags, a hunting scene and a knight were carved into the exterior walls later. Inside, the 11th-century frescoes, depicting biblical scenes and Georgian rulers, are among the finest medieval art in the country. They have been painstakingly preserved to prevent further fading, although there are no plans to restore them to their full former glory, as it is precisely their ancient nature that makes them interesting.

A taxi from Gori to the church and back should cost about 30 GEL, or 50 GEL if combined with Uplistsikhe. Alternatively, take a bus from Gori bus station (0.70 GEL, 30 minutes, hourly from 7am to 6pm).

WESTERN GEORGIA

Site of the ancient kingdom of Colchis, and famous as the destination of Jason and the Argonauts in their search for the Golden Fleece, western Georgia has always acted as a conduit for influences from the west into the Caucasus, from the Greeks to St Nino to the Ottoman Turks.

For long periods ruled separately from eastern Georgia, this region was also where the great united Georgian kingdom of the 11th and 12th centuries got its start. Georgia's two largest cities after Tbilisi – Kutaisi and Batumi – are here, and the country's lovely semitropical Black Sea coast and the border with Turkey

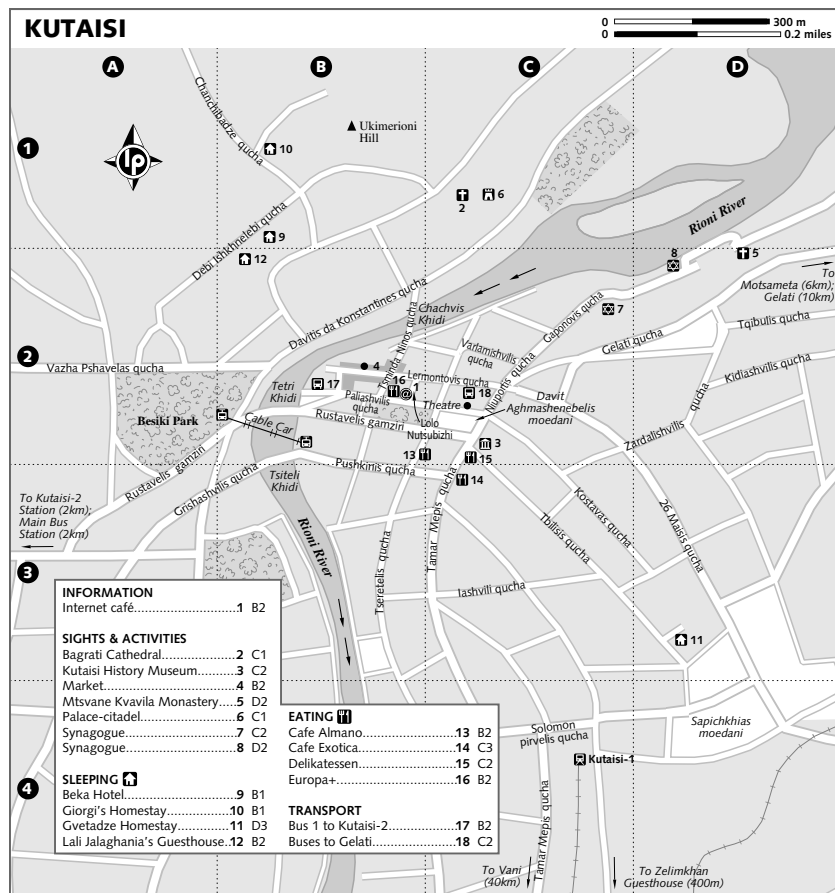
ensure a steady stream of visitors. The coast, especially vibrant, charming Batumi, has become a dynamic holiday and commercial area since Georgian independence. There's still a standoff in Abkhazia, where civil war and secession have caused enormous tragedy and suffering.

KUTAISI ქუთაისი

☎ 331 (international), ☎ 231 (domestic) / pop 180,000

Georgia's second city is one of the most ancient in the world. Capital at various times of several different kingdoms and groups of kingdoms within Georgia, Kutaisi has a rich and fascinating history, and much of this is





apparent to visitors. The town is attractive and not without things to see and do, although most people come to Kutaisi to see the surrounding attractions. Modern Kutaisi is still struggling economically, however, and is noticeably less lively than Batumi or Tbilisi.

History

Kutaisi is a very ancient city that has played several key roles in the Georgian drama. It was one of the main cities of ancient Colchis, and a settlement has existed here for nearly 4000 years.

In the 3rd century BC Apollonius of Rhodes referred to 'Kutaia' in a poem about the Argonauts, and some scholars believe this was the city of King Aëtes, father of Medea.

At the end of the 8th century AD Leon II, Duke of Abkhazia, renounced Byzantine suzerainty and declared himself king of Abkhazia, transferring his capital from Anakopia (in modern Abkhazia) to Kutaisi. In 1001 Abkhazia's King Bagrat III inherited the eastern Georgian kingdom of Kartli, effectively uniting western and eastern Georgia under one rule for the first time in many centuries. It was in Kutaisi that David the Builder was crowned Georgian king in 1089. These two famous rulers left great architectural monuments in the shape of the Bagrati and Gelati cathedrals. Kutaisi was the political, economic and cultural centre of Georgia until 1122, when Tbilisi took over after David liberated it from Arab rule.

Kutaisi resumed its role as capital of the western region when Georgia was again divided in the 15th century after the invasions of the Mongols and Timur.

In the early 17th century Giorgi III of Imereti developed the left bank of the Rioni, but the city suffered a 101-year Ottoman occupation from 1669, during which Bagrati Cathedral was blown up. In 1770 the city was recaptured by Georgian and Russian forces.

Under the Soviet regime Kutaisi became Georgia's second most important industrial centre, and its population grew significantly, only to shrink again with the decline of its industries after Georgian independence.

Orientation

Kutaisi is built around the Rioni River. The city centre is on the left bank, focused on Davit Aghmasheneblis moedani and the adjacent central park. The modern city spreads mainly to the south and west (across the river) from the centre. To its north, the right bank rises up to an older area where the landmark Bagrati Cathedral overlooks the city.

The main bus station is 3km west of the centre, beside Kutaisi-2 train station. The other train station, Kutaisi-1, is 1km south of the centre.

Information

ATMs are plentiful around the central park, especially on Tsereteli to its south, and there are lots of money changers around the market area just northwest of the park.

Internet café (Lolo Nutsubizhi 1; per hr 2.40 GEL; ☎ 9am-10pm)

Sights

Every visitor to Kutaisi will want to see Bagrati Cathedral, while those with more time will enjoy visiting the History Museum, wandering the busy **market area** around Lermontov, and exploring the attractive central streets and the old Jewish district.

BAGRATI CATHEDRAL

If you cross the Chachvis Khidi you can walk up cobbled streets lined with attractive houses and gardens to the magnificent ruins of the 11th-century **Bagrati Cathedral** (Kazbegi; admission free; ☎ 9am-8pm) on Ukimerioni Hill.

Bagrati was built by King Bagrat III, the uniter of western and eastern Georgia. An

Arabic inscription (no longer visible) on the north wall recorded that the floor was completed in 'Chronicon 223' (1003). Stone porches on the western and southern sides were added later in the 11th and 12th centuries. A great cupola rose over the centre of the cathedral, but in 1692 a Turkish explosion brought down both cupola and ceiling to leave the cathedral in a ruined state. The western porch and the cathedral's eastern, northern and southern arms have recently been repaired and the cathedral is again used for some religious observances.

There are plans to rebuild it fully, but even in its roofless, part-ruined condition it has a stately beauty matched by few churches in Georgia.

The ruined **palace-citadel** immediately east of the cathedral dates from the 6th century and in the 17th century was still reported by French and Russian travellers to be massively impressive. In 1769 King Solomon I of Imereti and the Russian General Todleben bombarded the castle (which was then occupied by the Turks) from Mtsvane Kvavila hill across the river, reducing it to a ruin. What remains is still of interest: you can see wine cellars at the west end of the palace, a church in the middle, and parts of the medieval walls.

KUTAIISI HISTORY MUSEUM

This **museum** (☎ 45691; www.histmuseum.ge; Tbilisi 1; general exhibition/treasury 2/3 GEL, tour in English or German 5/10 GEL; ☎ 11am-4pm Tue-Sat Sep-Jul, to 4pm Sat & Sun Aug), facing Davit Aghmasheneblis moedani, has superb collections from all around western Georgia and is well worth your time.

A guided tour is a good idea as labelling is very poor. The highlight is the Treasury section, with a marvellous exhibition of icons and crosses in precious metals and jewels including a large, reputedly miracle-working icon from the Bagrati Cathedral.

The rest of the collection ranges from archaeological finds (including figurines of fertility gods from the 8th to 6th centuries BC, one of them famously androgynous), to medieval weaponry, historical art, manuscripts going back to the 10th century, costumes, musical instruments and even the first telephone used in Kutaisi.

MTSVANE KVAVILA

Kutaisi used to have one of Georgia's largest Jewish communities but since independence

most of the 1000 or so families have emigrated to Israel. A handsome 1880s **synagogue** (Gaponov 12) in the old Jewish district is still in use, but the smaller **synagogue** (Gaponov 49) further up the street is now disused. The street leads on up the hill to the **Mtsvane Kvavila (Green Flower) Monastery**, with three churches and the Pantheon where famous Kutaislebi (denizens of Kutaisi) are buried.

Sleeping

The selection of hotels is poor, but a slew of homestays fills the gap.

Gvetadze Homestay (☎ 43007; Tbilisi 3rd Lane No 6; per person 10 GEL) Suliko and Mediko Gvetadze provide a friendly welcome at their house, 700m east of Davit Aghmasheneblis moedani, in the third lane off Tbilisi. Meals are available at a modest extra charge, and the wine flows freely! But the bathroom needs an overhaul and water is sometimes in short supply. The house is in the side street opposite Tbilisi 100.

Giorgi's Homestay (☎ 43720, 895591511; giorgihomestay@mail.ru, giorgihomestay14@yahoo.com; Chanchibadze 14; per person 15 GEL, half board 30 GEL; 🏠) Hospitable, English-speaking Giorgi Giorgadze and his family provide clean, plain rooms in their ample house on Ukimerioni Hill, a short walk from the Bagrati Cathedral. They'll make you feel at home, and Giorgi is full of helpful travel and sightseeing tips. The shared bathrooms are sparkling clean and have hot water. The food is very good.

Beka Hotel (☎ 46923; Debi lshknelebi 26; half board per person 40 GEL) An impressive white mansion on Ukimerioni Hill with superb views from the large terrace, the Beka is more guesthouse than hotel. Run by a friendly Russian- and Georgian-speaking couple, it has eight excellent, spick-and-span rooms with comfy beds.

Lali Jalaghania's Guesthouse (☎ 48395, 899376525; Debi lshknelebi 18; half board per person 40 GEL) A couple of doors from the Beka, the Jalaghania house has similarly spacious and comfortable accommodation. Neighbour Marina speaks some English.

Zelimkhan Guesthouse (☎ 22441; Vakhushti Bagrationi 67; per person incl breakfast 55 GEL) A 15-minute walk from the Kutaisi-1 station, this tall, three-storey, vaguely Art Deco house has bright rooms and good breakfasts. It's pricier than other options but still highly recommended.

Eating

Kutaisi lacks superb restaurants, but there's still plenty of opportunity to eat well.

Café Exotica (Tamar Mepi 15; dishes 2-4 GEL; ☎ 9am-9pm) A popular spot for Georgian fast food, including some of the best Adjara *khachapuri* this side of Batumi. The prices are unbelievably cheap.

Europa+ (Paliashvili; mains 4-5 GEL) The best restaurant in the centre, with neatly set tables and colourful murals. Go elsewhere, though, if you want to avoid live music with your dinner. It's in the corner of a courtyard set back from the street, and a cocktail bar and a beer bar are part of the same establishment.

Delikatessen (Tamar Mepi 3; dishes 3-6 GEL; ☎ 9am-10pm) This bright, new, brick-arched place just off Davit Aghmasheneblis moedani specialises in good *khachapuri* and there are large photos to help you decide which variety you fancy. It also does cakes, desserts and Georgian pastries.

Club Almano (Tsereteli; dishes 3-7 GEL) A smarter, modestly kitsch place just off Davit Aghmasheneblis moedani. It's a restaurant-cum-bar with a blue-lit mezzanine and tasty Georgian dishes. For a solid main dish, the *ojakhuri* (made from roasted meat and potatoes) is a good bet.

Getting There & Around

Both buses (10 GEL, four to five hours, about twice hourly from 8am to 7pm) and marshrutkas (10 GEL, four to 4½ hours, at least hourly, 7am to 8pm) to Kutaisi leave from Tbilisi Didube. Further marshrutkas leave from the rear of Tbilisi train station hourly from 8am to 6pm.

Buses and marshrutkas from Kutaisi's main **bus station** (Chavchavadzis gamziri), next to Kutaisi-2 train station, go to Tbilisi (10 GEL, four to five hours, hourly from 7am to 7pm), Zugdidi (6 GEL, two hours, half-hourly, 6am to 5.30pm), Batumi (8 GEL, 2½ hours, every 30 or 40 minutes, 6.30am to 5pm), Poti (5 GEL, 2½ hours, hourly, 7am to 6pm) and Borjomi (8 GEL, three hours, five daily, 8am to 1.30pm).

Of Kutaisi's two train stations, **Kutaisi-1** (Tamar Mepi) has trains to Tbilisi (five to 5½ hours) at 12.30pm (3rd-/2nd-class 5/10.50 GEL) and 12.40am (3rd-class, 4.50 GEL), and to Zugdidi (four hours) at 12.30pm. From **Kutaisi-2** (Chavchavadzis gamziri) there's an *elektrichka* to Tbilisi at 4.55am and a train to Batumi (four hours) at 5.45pm.

Kutaisi-2 is also the best place to look for long-distance taxis.

Bus 1 (0.20 GEL) runs a useful circular route (in both directions) between Kutaisi-2, Kutaisi-1 and the city centre (west end of Paliashvili). At Kutaisi-2 or the bus station, catch it on the far side of the road (Chavchavadze), going to the left, for the quicker route to the centre.

City taxis generally charge 0.60 GEL per kilometre.

AROUND KUTAISI

Motsameta მონასტეა

Motsameta monastery is 6km out of Kutaisi, off the Gelati road. Take the turning marked by a photo of the church and follow this track for a couple of kilometres. This little monastery has a spectacular setting on a cliff-top promontory above a bend of the Tskhaltsitela River. The river's name, meaning 'Red Water', derives from an 8th-century Arab massacre. Among the victims were the brothers Davit and Konstantin Mkheidze, dukes of Argveti. Their bodies were thrown in the river, but the story goes that lions brought them up to the church where their bones were subsequently kept. In 1923 the local Cheka (secret police) took the relics to a Kutaisi museum, with such unfortunate consequences for the Cheka men that the bones were soon returned to the church. It is said that if you crawl three times under the side altar where the bones are, your wish will be granted.

See the Gelati section (right) for transport information.

Gelati გელათი

Georgians have always had a knack for choosing the most superb locations for their churches and this monastery complex, on a wooded hillside 10km northeast of Kutaisi, is no exception.

Gelati was founded by King David the Builder in 1106 as a centre for both Christian culture and Neo-Platonist learning. King David invited scholars such as Iaone Petritsi and Arsen Ikalteli to teach here and the Gelati Academy became, according to medieval chroniclers, 'a second Jerusalem' and 'another Athos, albeit superior to it'. Many Georgian rulers were buried here, including David the Builder himself, Queen Tamar (according to her chronicler, although this is disputed) and Bagrat III of Imereti. In 1510

the Ottoman Turks set fire to the complex, but Bagrat III subsequently restored the monastery, and it was made the seat of a bishop and the residence of the West Georgian patriarch. The monks were cast out by the communist authorities in 1922, but the churches were reconsecrated in 1988. President Saakashvili chose Gelati as the site of his inauguration in 2004.

The interior of the main **Cathedral of the Virgin** is among the brightest and most colourful in Georgia. Among the frescoes, painted at various times between the 12th and 18th centuries, note especially the line of eight noble figures in the north transept: these include David the Builder (holding the church) and Bagrat III (with a cross over his left shoulder). Across the corner to the right of David are the Byzantine emperor Constantine and his wife, Helena. The apse holds a famous 1130s mosaic of the Virgin and Child, with Archangels Michael and Gabriel to the left and right respectively. The lower part of this was restored in the Soviet era by painting.

Outside the cathedral's west door is the smaller **Church of St Nicholas**, built on top of an unusual arcaded base, and beyond that, the roofless remains of the **Academy**, where philosophy, theology, sciences and painting were studied and important chronicles and translations written. To the left of these, inside the **South Gate**, lies David the Builder's grave. David gave orders that he be buried here so that all who entered the monastery would step on his huge 3m tomb, a notably humble gesture for such a powerful man.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Buses to Gelati (0.50 GEL, 30 minutes) leave from Lermontov behind the big theatre in central Kutaisi at 11am, 2pm and 5pm, starting back from Gelati at 11.30am, 2.30pm and 5.30pm. These buses pass the Motsameta turn-off. If you're visiting both places, it's a mostly downhill walk of about one hour from Gelati to Motsameta, should the bus schedules not suit. Buses to Tqibuli from Kutaisi-1 station (8am, 11am, 1pm, 2pm, 3pm, 4pm and 4.30pm) also pass the Motsameta turning and the turning for Gelati (from which it's an uphill walk of a little over 2km to the monastery).

A taxi from Kutaisi to Gelati and back should cost 12 GEL to 15 GEL, slightly more if you visit Motsameta too.

Vani ვანო

☎ 232

The site of this ancient city is 40km southwest of Kutaisi. Though there's not much to see at the ruins, the modern museum here, all labelled in English as well as Georgian, has spectacular exhibits. The first excavations here took place in the 1890s, after locals had reported gold ornaments being washed down the hill after heavy rains.

Vani (☎ 21602; admission 1.50 GEL; 🕒 10am-4pm) was one of the main centres of ancient Colchis, flourishing from the 8th century BC until it was razed to the ground in the 1st century BC. Some speculate that this could have been the city of King Aëtes, where Jason came in search of the Golden Fleece.

Archaeologists have found remains of monumental architecture and opulent burials from the 8th to 1st centuries BC. Strong brick and mud walls with towers were built towards the end of this period, when archaeologists think Vani may have become a kind of temple-city, dedicated principally to the goddess Levcoteia. From this latter era the ground floor of the museum displays the spear point of a battering ram, a bronze vessel depicting Greek gods, and large animal-head temple carvings. The most remarkable treasures, however, are on the museum's upper floor,

where you can see fine bronze casts including a statue of a youth, and copies of fabulous gold adornments with animal designs, whose originals are in the Museum of Georgia. The inner upstairs room contains original finds, including a pair of diadem pendants with incredibly fine bird decorations.

The site itself has not been developed for visitors but you can make out some temple areas, defensive walls and a deep ritual well, as well as a small city gate and a section of paved street beside the road below the museum.

Buses and marshrutkas to Vani (2 GEL, 1½ hours) leave the bus station next to Kutaisi-2 train station about hourly from 8am to noon, then every two hours until 6pm. From the Vani bus station, it's about a 15-minute walk to the large concrete museum building. A taxi from Kutaisi is 50 GEL return.

POTI პოტი

☎ 393 (international), ☎ 293 (domestic) / pop 50,000

Poti, Georgia's main port, is one of the most ancient towns in the country, founded as the Greek trading colony of Pazisi or Phasis in the 6th or 5th century BC, although there is little evidence of this now. It's a pleasant enough town, visited by travellers for two main reasons: the ferry to Ukraine, and the

nearby Kolkheti National Park with its wetlands and bird life.

A centre of the slave trade under Ottoman occupation in the 18th century, Poti was absorbed into the Russian Empire in 1828. It developed rapidly after acquiring port status 30 years later: Georgia's first railway was opened in 1871 between Poti and Shorapani, 35km southeast of Kutaisi. The town centre was laid out with an unusual radial plan centred on its cathedral, modelled on Istanbul's Hagia Sofia and completed in 1907. Today Poti has a Georgian navy base as well as a busy container port.

Orientation & Information

The centre of Poti is Rustavelis rkali (Rustaveli Circle), a very large roundabout surrounding the cathedral, with 10 streets radiating from it. Davit Aghmashenebeli, the main street, runs northwest across a river to reach a junction after 1.5km. Here Gegidze, with the Hotel Anchor and the best selection of places to eat, heads to the right (east), while the port is 400m to the west. Kostava runs 600m eastward from Rustavelis rkali to a square which is the terminus for some marshrutkas and has the *bazari* (market) off one corner. The train station is just north of this square, across a bridge.

You'll find ATMs scattered on Davit Aghmashenebeli, Gegidze and Rustavelis rkali. There's an **internet café** (Davit Aghmashenebeli; per hr 2 GEL; 🕒 10am-9m) opposite Aversi pharmacy, 1km from Rustavelis rkali.

Sleeping

If none of the options in town appeals, there are further possibilities a few kilometres south at Maltaqva (p84).

Hotel Kolkheti (Kostava 2; per person 10 GEL) This hotel facing Rustavelis rkali is very, very shabby and occupied by refugees from Abkhazia, but one room with four beds is usually available for budget travellers. Ask in room 218, where Julia speaks English. The only water is stored in the bath, which gets filled every two or three days.

Apartment (☎ 899777692; Room 12, Gegidze 20; r 30 GEL) Nona Topuria rents out this one-bedroom apartment for one or two people next to the Malibu bar. Call her or ask for her at the Türk Lokantasi restaurant across the street. Make sure you understand exactly how the wiring works before you take a shower!

Hotel Anchor (☎ 26000; fax 24600; Gegidze 90; s/d incl breakfast 90/100 GEL; 🍴) The best option is this modern hotel near the port, with good, clean, sizable rooms and a decent restaurant. Desk staff speak a little English.

Eating

Easily the best selection of eateries and bars is on Gegidze, within stumbling distance of the port. Most serve food from 9am or 10am to about midnight. **Shore** (mains 4-6 GEL), next door to the Hotel Anchor, with Georgian food served at indoor and outdoor tables, and **Türk Lokantasi** (kebab & salad 15 GEL), with Turkish fare a bit further along on the opposite side, are both good bets.

Getting There & Away

In Tbilisi, marshrutkas and buses to Poti (15 GEL, six to seven hours) leave the rear of the main train station at 9am, 10am, 11am, 12.30pm, 1pm, 5pm and midnight.

Poti has two marshrutka terminals. From the square next to the market, there are departures to Batumi (5 GEL, 1½ hours) every hour or half-hour from 8am to 9pm, plus some to Zugdidi.

The other terminal, about 300m west from the train station along Navsadbuli, has departures to Zugdidi (5 GEL, 1½ hours, about hourly from 10am to 3.30pm), Kutaisi (5 GEL, 2½ hours, about hourly, 7am to 4pm) and Tbilisi (15 GEL, six to seven hours, at 9am, 1pm and 4pm). **Grup Georgia** (☎ 895225445) has buses to Tbilisi (15 GEL, six hours) from its office just across the bridge north of the market, at 1.30am, 10.30am and 1.30pm.

Trains from Tbilisi to Poti take six hours, are 3rd-class only, and leave at 2.45pm (seating only, 8 GEL) and 11.40pm (12 GEL). Departures from Poti to Tbilisi are at 8.45am and 11.40pm.

The Ukrainian shipping company UkrFerry operates two passenger ferries a week each way between Poti and Ilyichevsk, near Odessa, Ukraine. Its agent in Poti is **Instra** (☎ 21998, 21060, 899915696; Gegidze 20; 🕒 10am-1pm, 3-5.30pm), 50m from the Hotel Anchor. See p323 for further information on this service. The Bulgarian company **Intershipping** (www.intershipping.net) operates a weekly passenger-carrying vehicle ferry from Burgas to Poti and back (one-way per passenger/car €150/300, three days).

JASON & THE GOLDEN FLEECE

The Ancient Greek myth of the Golden Fleece is known worldwide: Jason, a prince of Thessaly, responded to his uncle Pelias' challenge to go to the land of Colchis, on the eastern shores of the Black Sea, to find the Golden Fleece. Few realise that the myth relates to real places and events. Colchis was a historical kingdom occupying most of western Georgia in antiquity. The Greeks set up trading colonies at places like Phasis (now Poti) and Dioskuria (Sukhumi) in the 6th and 5th centuries BC.

The legend tells that Jason had a special ship, the *Argo*, built to carry him and 49 other adventurous young Greek rowers, thenceforth known as the Argonauts. After various tribulations, they reached the kingdom of Colchis and sailed up the Phasis River (the present-day Rioni), where they were received by King Aëtes in his capital (possibly Vani or Kutaisi). Aëtes agreed to give up the fleece if Jason could yoke two fire-breathing bulls to a plough, and then sow the teeth of a dragon from which a crop of armed men would spring. Jason accepted the challenge but secretly promised marriage to Aëtes' daughter Medea, who had conceived a violent passion for him, if she would agree to help him. Medea, who was skilled with magic and potions, gave Jason a charm which enabled him to survive Aëtes' tests and to take the fleece from the dragon that guarded it.

The Golden Fleece itself is related to real mountain traditions: in Svaneti and Racha people sifted for gold in mountain rivers by placing a sheepskin across the rocks, in which tiny nuggets of gold would collect. Amazingly, this technique still exists today in the Caucasus.

If the Golden Fleece story grabs your fancy, dig out Tim Severin's *The Jason Voyage* (1986), about a modern-day row from Greece to Georgia in a smaller replica of the *Argo*.

KOLKHETI NATIONAL PARK

კოლხეთის ეროვნული პარკი

☎ 393 (international), ☎ 293 (domestic)

This 285-sq-km **national park** (www.knp.ge) encompasses three separate areas of coastline and wetlands north and southeast of Poti. It's the southeastern area, focused on Lake Paliastomi, which is of most interest to visitors, thanks to its large bird population. More than 190 species have been sighted in the park. The best months to visit are September and October, when large and small raptors can be seen migrating southwards, and January to May, when swans, geese, ducks, other water birds and even rare pelicans, storks and booted eagles gather to winter here. The area is also a paradise for frogs (the cacophony in the mating season can be tremendous). Ancient Greek physician Hippocrates wrote that the people here lived in the bogs, making houses out of the materials found here, travelling in boats, and drinking rainwater. (He also commented that the people were so tall and so fat you couldn't see their faces!)

The park has an excellent **visitors centre** (☎ 23065; Guria 222; ☎ 10am-6pm), 4km south of the centre of Poti on the Batumi road. The main access to Lake Paliastomi is 1.5km further south along the same road. At the visitors

centre you can buy an English-language field guide to the park's birds and organise pontoon-boat trips on the lake (a two-hour trip costs between 10 GEL and 40 GEL per person depending on group size; maximum: 16 people).

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Paliastomi (☎ 20929; Lake Paliastomi; cottage 20-50 GEL, d 70-120 GEL; 🍴) Right near the lake, 1.5km south of the visitors centre, this small hotel has nice new pine-panelled or blue-painted rooms in its main building, and older but adequate rooms in brick-and-wood cottages. There's no food, but it's a short walk to Restaurant Iasoni, under the same management, on the corner of the main road.

Visitors centre (☎ 23065; Guria 222; r 50 GEL; 🍴) The visitors centre has four pleasant pine-built rooms available upstairs, all with bathroom, air-con and TV. There's a café for guests, too.

Getting There & Away

Marshrutkas 5 and 20 (0.40 GEL) from Poti will stop at the visitors centre or the turning to the lake 1.5km further south. You can pick them up at Akaki heading south off Rustavelis rkali.

STEWARD OF THE WETLANDS

If all Georgia's new generation was like Lasha Nodia, you could be happy that the country was in pretty safe hands. Educated, aware, ambitious but public-spirited, he also shares the typical Georgian's love of his country and of his local roots – in this case the Black Sea port of Poti and its surrounding countryside.

Lasha is deputy director of the Kolkheti National Park, established in 1998 to protect the wetlands and coasts around Poti. In Soviet times, official policy was to drain the wetlands to eliminate malaria, but the consequent ecological damage, to an area that is a vital bird refuge and home to rare semitropical plants, was huge. 'Our aim now is to keep what is left,' says Lasha.

The park faces many challenges, including from villagers whose livelihood depends on its lands. 'The arrival of electricity in villages after the Rose Revolution made a big difference,' Lasha comments. 'This has slowed the rate of wood cutting for fuel in the forests.'

Lasha did not come to environmental work from a scientific background. Born in Poti in 1981 and schooled there, he then studied foreign economic relations at Tbilisi State University. His father has a small printing firm in Poti, and Lasha's education, and admirable command of English, were furthered when he won a place on a training programme with a large printing company in Hayward, California. On return to Georgia in 2003 Lasha began working for the national park, initially as manager of the visitor and education programme. A major achievement has been the completion of the park's handsome new visitors centre, built in 2006 after eight years of planning and preparation. The park now employs 28 rangers.

Wages for park employees are inevitably low, and Lasha foresees that one day he may move to work in the private sector. 'But I'll always continue to work here in a voluntary capacity. This park is too important to leave behind.'

UREKI ურეკი

pop 1600

The only genuine sandy beach on the Georgian coast is at Ureki, 15km south of Poti. Ureki's sand is black because it's rich in magnetic iron; in Soviet times its medicinal properties saw three sanatoria built here. Today it's being developed as a small Western-standard resort, largely thanks to the investment of Georgian tycoon Badri Patarkatsishvili, so it's a good place to kick back for a day or two if this appeals to you.

The coast and the resort are 1.5km off the Poti-Batumi highway and the Tbilisi-Batumi railway. There are now about a dozen mostly mid-sized and midrange hotels fronting the beach or very near to it. Recommended are **Hotel Albatros** (☎ 8995503046; www.hotels-tbilisi.com; Magnetti; d full board US\$65; 🍴 🍷), on the seafront; **Hotel Edem** (☎ 899101393; d US\$40; 🍴), also sea-front and with a café; and **Hotel Dzveli Sakhli** (☎ 899560560; ureki2005@yahoo.com; Sanapiro; d full board US\$60; 🍴 🍷), a block back from the beach, with a playground and mini-aqua park.

Batumi-bound marshrutkas will drop you at the Ureki turn-off.

ZUGDIDI ზუგდიდი

☎ 315 (international), ☎ 215 (domestic) / pop 105,000 (estimated, including internally displaced persons)

The main city of Samegrelo (Mingrelia), Zugdidi is 108km northwest of Kutaisi. As the nearest Georgian city to Abkhazia, it has had to absorb a particularly high number of refugees since the 1990s (by some estimates they have doubled its population) and is a centre for Georgians who favour military action to regain Abkhazia. It was also from Zugdidi that deposed President Zviad Gamsakhurdia, himself a Mingrelian, launched his unsuccessful 1993 rebellion against the Shevardnadze government. Today Gamsakhurdia's statue stands on the town's central boulevard, which is named after him.

Despite this troubled recent past, today Zugdidi is a bustling and (at least outwardly) pleasant town that sees few travellers except for those heading for Svaneti, for which Zugdidi is an essential stepping stone.

Orientation & Information

The central boulevard, Zviad Gamsakhurdias gamziri, runs southwest to northeast with a shady park strip along its centre. Rustaveli

runs northwest from the middle of the boulevard to the train and bus station, 1km away. About halfway to the station, just past the busy market and across a river, Gia Gulua's qucha heads north towards a replica Svan tower. The main departure point for marshrutkas to Svaneti is on the right of this street, just before the Svan tower.

Bank of Georgia ATM (Kostava) Next to Hotel Samegrelo; Kostava runs south off Rustaveli one block west of Zviad Gamsakhurdia.

Computer Service-Centre (Rustaveli 89; internet per hr 1 GEL; ☎ 9am-6pm) Half a block off Zviad Gamsakhurdia.

Sights

The palace of the Dadiani family (old lords of Samegrelo), a castle-like building from the 17th to 19th centuries in a park 500m beyond the north end of Zviad Gamsakhurdia, is now the **Dadiani Museum** (☎ 26439; admission 2 GEL; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun). The most unusual exhibit is one of Napoleon Bonaparte's three bronze death masks, acquired via a 19th-century marriage between a Dadiani and a descendant of Napoleon's sister. The wooded botanical gardens beside the park are worth a stroll.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Zugdidi (☎ 54242; Kostava; r 40-60 GEL) One block along Rustaveli from Zviad Gamsakhurdia then a few steps south on Kostava, this hotel occupies the top two floors of a four-storey building. The rooms have bathrooms with showers, and are clean and parquet-floored, but the beds can be lumpy. No food available.

Hotel Samegrelo (☎ 50745; Kostava 54; r 50-100 GEL; 🍴) Almost opposite the Hotel Zugdidi, the Samegrelo provides cosy rooms in red tones with jolly dolphin-motif shower curtains. Some staff speak English and there's also a decent little restaurant (mains 3 to 4 GEL) with a short but good menu.

our pick Restaurant Diaroni (☎ 893517851; Konstantin Gamsakhurdia 9; mains 7-15 GEL) For a satisfying full meal with friendly, efficient service, look no further than this atmospheric cellar-like place. A full range of Georgian and Russian dishes is on offer and there's an English-language menu. To find it, head east off the middle of Zviad Gamsakhurdias gamziri and go 50m to the left along the first cross-street.

Getting There & Away

In Tbilisi, marshrutkas (15 GEL, six to seven hours, every 1½ hours, 8am to 5pm) and buses (12 GEL, seven hours, at 10am, noon, 1pm and 10pm) to Zugdidi leave from the rear of the main train station. The night train leaving Tbilisi at 9.30pm (3rd-/2nd-class 5.50/11 GEL) gets you into Zugdidi at 5.30am, in time to catch a marshrutka to Svaneti the same morning. The return train departs Zugdidi at 11.20pm. There's also a day train to Tbilisi (3rd-/2nd-class 6/11.50 GEL, eight hours) at 9.50am, and an *elektrichka* just to Kutaisi at 7.30am. From outside Zugdidi's train station, marshrutkas and some buses leave several times daily for Kutaisi (6 GEL, two hours), Poti (5 GEL, 1½ hours), Batumi (10 GEL, three hours) and Tbilisi (12 GEL to 15 GEL, six hours).

Marshrutkas and jeeps to Mestia in Svaneti (15 GEL, five to seven hours) leave from near the Svan tower on Gia Gulua any time from 6am on, once they fill up (which can be with goods as well as people).

It's a good idea to be there by 8am – though if you're unlucky you might still have to wait several hours before you get moving. They'll take your name and passport number at the ticket hut with the 'Mestia' sign. Some vehicles may meet the overnight train from Tbilisi but may still not leave Zugdidi until the driver has garnered a full load.

A jeep taxi from Zugdidi to Mestia typically costs around 20 GEL.

ABKHAZIA აფხაზეთი

The greatest tragedy to befall Georgia since its independence is the secession of Abkhazia and the bloodshed and misery that this has brought about.

Once the jewel of the 'Soviet Riviera' along the Black Sea coast, today this de facto independent republic is still struggling to recover from the devastation of the 1992–93 war, unrecognised by any country and with only about one-third of its prewar population of 535,000.

Russian tourism in Abkhazia, however, has grown fast and by 2007 it was also possible for other travellers to venture into the region, although the British **Foreign Office** (www.fco.gov.uk) and the US **State Department** (travel.state.gov) were still advising against it.

If you're tempted to visit, be aware that tensions, kidnappings and violence

have flared up repeatedly over the years, especially in the border region between Zugdidi (Samegrelo) and Gali (Abkhazia). Backpackers have been known to be arrested and interrogated at Sukhumi police headquarters. There is useful Abkhazia travel information on the Thorn Tree message board on the Lonely Planet website (www.lonelyplanet.com).

Information

MONEY

Abkhazia's currency is the Russian rouble (R). You can change cash US dollars, and in many cases euros, to roubles at banks and money changers, but Abkhazia's few ATMs only accept Russian Garantbank cards.

TELEPHONE

Abkhazia has the Georgian country code, ☎ 995. If calling from Georgia, dial ☎ 8 before the area code, as for an internal long-distance call.

VISAS

The first step if you want to go to Abkhazia is to apply for a visa. The best first move is to telephone the English-speaking **Abkhazia Foreign Ministry** (☎ 442-63948/65792/70044; www.mfaabkhazia.org; fax 442-63445/65792; ulitsa Lakoba 21, Sukhumi; ☎ 9.30am–6pm Mon–Fri). At the time of research you could apply for the visa by email or fax using a form available on the ministry's website. Supposedly within five days you will then receive a permit to cross the border on a specific date.

In practice you will probably have to make follow-up phone calls to the Foreign Ministry. If you plan to visit in busy July or August, make first contact a month ahead.

Once inside the country you have to collect your visa (US\$20 for 30 days) from the Foreign Ministry in Sukhumi. You will need this when you leave Abkhazia.

If you are entering Abkhazia from Russia (at the Psou border point, considered illegal by Georgia while it is not controlled by Georgia) you will need to have a double-entry Russian visa.

Sukhumi სოხუმი

☎ 442 / pop 45,000 (estimated)

Abkhazia's capital (Sokhumi in Georgian; Sukhum or Akua in Abkhaz) has a gorgeous setting on a bay backed by hills thick with

THE ABKHAZIA CONFLICT

The roots of the Abkhazian conflict are extremely complicated. Many Georgians see the provocative hand of Russia behind it all, but it is also true that Abkhazians had sought separation from Georgia well before the Soviet Union broke up.

The Abkhaz are linguistically distinct from the Georgians, their language being one of the northwestern Caucasus group (although Russian is now the most common language in Abkhazia). During the Middle Ages, Abkhazia was one of the most important kingdoms of Christian Georgia, but many Abkhaz converted to Islam under Ottoman occupation between the 16th and 19th centuries. Once Soviet power arrived in 1921, Abkhazia was proclaimed an independent republic within the USSR, but was then incorporated into the Georgian Soviet Republic in 1936. From the 1930s there was official encouragement for the settling of large numbers of Georgians in the region, and by 1989 about 46% of Abkhazia's population was Georgian, and only some 18% Abkhaz.

During Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms in the 1980s the Abkhaz began to demand more autonomy. The Abkhazian Supreme Soviet declared Abkhazia a full union republic (separate from Georgia) in 1990, and real conflict broke out in 1992 when the Georgian National Guard moved into Abkhazia and ended up occupying Sukhumi. Abkhazia was then plunged into a year of fighting, with the civilian population suffering terribly. Georgians claimed persuasively that Russian forces assisted the Abkhaz. In September 1993 the Abkhaz attacked Sukhumi in violation of a truce and drove the Georgian forces, and Abkhazia's entire Georgian population, out of Abkhazia; many civilians died while crossing the mountains to Svaneti and Samegrelo. Today Georgia still has approximately 250,000 refugees, the great majority of them from Abkhazia and most of them living in difficult conditions. Since a ceasefire in 1994, a CIS (in fact Russian) peacekeeping force has been deployed in Abkhazia, but Russia appears to be helping the breakaway regime – not just militarily but also by granting Russian passports to Abkhazians, opening the railway between Sukhumi and Sochi, and loosening controls at the Russian–Abkhaz border.

luxuriant semitropical vegetation. Much of Sukhumi is still in ruins, but a lot of restoration is going on.

Ruins of the Greek trading port Dioskuria lie beneath Sukhumi Bay. After periods of Roman, Byzantine, Arab, Abkhazian and Turkish domination, Sukhumi was taken by the Russians in 1810. By 1989 it had a population of 120,000, but the city was badly damaged during the fighting between 1989 and 1993, when its large Georgian population was driven out.

ORIENTATION & INFORMATION

The main street is prospekt Mira, two to three blocks inland from the seafront boulevard, naberezhnaya Makhadzhirov. A useful interactive city map, in Russian, is on the web at vmlmapsh.narod.ru/xvmlmap.htm. There are several cybercafés in the central area, charging around R50 per hour. Travel agencies offering tours and accommodation bookings in Abkhazia include **Abkhazintur** (☎ 61643; www.abkhazintur.moy.su in Russian; ulitsa Abazinskaya 35/11) and **Yug** (☎ 62410; ugturizm.h12.ru in Russian; prospekt Mira 69).

SIGHTS

Sukhumi Fort, on the seafrost just west of ulitsa Sakharova, is a Russian rebuilding of a Turkish fort built on the site of a Roman one.

The **Abkhazian State Museum** (prospekt Leona 22; ☎ 10am–3pm Mon–Fri), with archaeological, historical and ethnographic collections, and the **Botanical Gardens** (ulitsa D Gulia 22; ☎ 9am–3pm) are both well worth visiting. **Park Slavy** (Glory Park), between prospekt Mira and ulitsa Lakoba, is the burial site of many Abkhaz who died in the 1992–93 fighting.

Sukhumi Hill, 200m high in the northeast of the city, gives good panoramas and much of it is a woodland park.

SLEEPING & EATING

Numerous families rent rooms to tourists. Staff at the Foreign Ministry, where you must collect your visa, can probably help you to find somewhere.

Homestay (ulitsa Akirtava 55, Turbaza district; per person R200) Travellers have been welcomed here by the Kvitsinia family, whose twin daughters speak good English. Rooms are large, with shared toilet and shower. Coming from Gali,

you can get off your marshrutka under the railway bridge 500m after the big UN compound. Walk east along Akirtava, a narrow lane to the left of a dilapidated block of flats.

Holiday Home Abkhazia (Otdykh Abkhazia; ulitsa Akirtava; per person R300-500) The cheapest option after homestays; in the east of town.

Hotel Yasemin (ulitsa Lakoba 100; s/d incl breakfast from R1200/1500) Centrally situated, with 32 rooms and a restaurant.

Hotel Sukhum (☎ 68180; www.otel-sukhum.narod.ru in Russian; r with shared bathroom R1100, with private bathroom & air-con R2900-3500; 🍴) Excellent small hotel on the bank of the Basla River towards the east end of town. Prices include breakfast.

Hotel Ritsa (cnr naberezhnaya Makhadzhirov & prospekt Leona; s R1040-2600 Oct-May, R1560-3900 Jun-Sep, d R1560-3900 Oct-May, R2340-5850 Jun-Sep) Now rebuilt after war damage, the landmark Ritsa is the top hotel in town, with fan-cooled rooms. It also houses the fanciest place to eat, Restoran San-Remo, with an international menu.

There are several cafés and restaurants along naberezhnaya Makhadzhirov. Travellers have recommended the **Nartaa** (cnr ulitsa Aidylara) for its excellent Abkhazian food at minuscule prices.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Taxis for the 20-minute ride from Zugdidi to Abkhazia's southern border at the Enguri (or Inguri) River cost 10 GEL. At the frontier you pass a Georgian guard post and a Russian peacekeepers' post, before crossing the bridge to the Abkhazian border post on the far side (keep an eye on your belongings here). Most people crossing here are Georgian IDPs returning to tend their properties in the Gali area.

From the border you can take a marshrutka (R10, 20 minutes) or a shared taxi (R40) on to Gali, 15km northwest.

You may also find vehicles going through to Sukhumi (R150). Marshrutkas and buses (both R100, two hours) leave Gali for Sukhumi up to about 11am.

From Sukhumi's **bus station** (ulitsa Dzidzaria), in the northwest of town, buses run northwest to Novy Afon (R20, 45 minutes), Gagra (R100, two hours), and the Psou border crossing (R100, 2½ hours), about every half-hour up to 11am, then hourly. The first bus south to Gali leaves at 10am.

Taxis are easy to find.

Other Destinations

The coast northwest of Sukhumi is beautiful, with the thickly forested lower slopes of the Caucasus reaching right down to the shore in places. The multidomed **Novy Afon Monastery** stands out on a hillside about 20km from Sukhumi. Russian monks came from Mt Athos in Greece to found this monastery in the late 19th century. In Soviet times it was a workers holiday home. Nearby, a small train carries tourists through the impressive **Novy Afon Caves**, and atop Iverii Hill are the ruins of ancient **Anakopia**, capital of Abkhazia in the 8th century AD. There are a couple of homestays on the main road just before Novy Afon's old railway station.

At Bzyb (or Bzipi), 80km from Sukhumi, a road heads off north to **Lake Ritsa**, created by a Soviet-era dam amid beautiful Caucasus mountain scenery at an elevation of 950m. Stalin had a *dacha* (country cottage) on the far shore. The 41km drive up to the lake, via gorges and waterfalls, is spectacular. You can hire boats on the lake.

Gagra, Abkhazia's main resort and highly popular with Russian tourists, has a long beach below thickly forested mountains, 95km from Sukhumi. The old part of town has some charm. There are many homestays on Shapshugskoe, 1km north of the marshrutka station, and on Sayat-Nova, about 500m south of the marshrutka station, west of the railway. Most charge R150 per person.

ADJARA აჭარა

The southwestern corner of Georgia is a highlight of the country and intriguingly idiosyncratic: it's humid and semitropical and has a sizable Muslim population.

Since the loss of Abkhazia, Adjara (also spelt Achara, Ajara or Ajarria) has taken on the mantle of Georgia's holiday coast. Batumi, the Adjara capital, is the destination of choice for most Georgians – and many Armenians, Azerbaijanis and Ukrainians – in search of summer fun, with a real party atmosphere, especially in August.

Though Adjara's beaches are mostly stony, the climate is beautiful and the scenery gorgeous, with lush hills rising behind the coast, and peaks topping 3000m in the Lesser Caucasus inland.

Many travellers enter Georgia at the busy Sarpi border post with Turkey, just south of Batumi. Onward transport to the rest of Georgia is good.

Adjarians are ethnically Georgian and speak the Georgian language. Under Ottoman control from the 16th century to 1878, most of the inhabitants were converted to Islam. The Russian takeover in 1878 presaged an early boom time for Batumi as an export terminal for oil from Azerbaijan. In Soviet times Adjara returned to backwater status (the Turkish border was an absolute no-go area), but since Georgian independence it has again become an important entry point to the Caucasus region.

Adjara has retained its status as an autonomous republic within Georgia and until 2004 was the personal fiefdom of its pro-Russian president, Aslan Abashidze, who kept it out of Georgia's internal conflicts but ran an authoritarian, corrupt regime backed by his own militia. A standoff between Abashidze and President Saakashvili climaxed in 2004 when Abashidze sealed the Adjara border with the rest of Georgia, raising fears of another Georgian civil war. However, Abashidze lost his crucial support from Russia and days later left for ignominious exile in Moscow, to the delight of Adjarians.

BATUMI ბათუმი

☎ 222 / pop 137,000

Although Kutaisi is Georgia's second city population-wise, the resort and port city of Batumi is in many ways the real counterweight to Tbilisi in terms of atmosphere, setting and appearance. Set on a warm semitropical coast with a backdrop of mist-wrapped hills near the Turkish border, Batumi has become the country's summer holiday capital, pulling in tourists from around Georgia and beyond. Its history is a lot shorter than that of most Georgian cities, and it owes much of its unique charm to the elegant fin-de-siècle architecture of its original boom time a century ago.

For most travellers arriving from Turkey, Batumi will be the first Georgian city they encounter, and it makes a great introduction to the country, with its relaxed atmosphere, lots of hotel space, good restaurants and nightlife.

Batumi developed in the late 19th century as the western terminus of a railway from Baku that then carried one-fifth of the world's

oil production. A pipeline and refinery built by Ludwig Nobel, brother of Swedish dynamite inventor Alfred, soon followed. Batumi gained free-port status, over 20 foreign consulates set up here, and the town developed into a fashionable resort at the southern tip of the Russian empire and a crossroads between Europe and Asia.

One of the first decisions of the post-Abashidze administration in 2004 was to make Batumi an attractive place to visit, something in which they are, happily, succeeding. Charming old buildings have been restored, renovated and floodlit, attractive new ones are joining them, and strolling around the leafy, low-rise central streets is a real pleasure.

Orientation & Information

The central, oldest and liveliest part of town sits on a broad arrowhead of land with the harbour to its east and the stony main beach running down the western shore, backed by the Batumis bulvari (Batumi Blvd) park.

Two broad avenues, Chavchavadze and Rustaveli, mark the southern and northern boundaries of the central area, with K Gamsakhurdia and Baratashvili the most important cross-streets in the central grid. The bus station is east of the centre, a 1km walk along Tsereteli from Tbilisi moedani on Chavchavadze. Batumi's train station is 5km north of town in Makhinjauri, on the road to Kobuleti.

Adjara (www.tourismadjara.ge) This regional tourism website is useful and attractive.

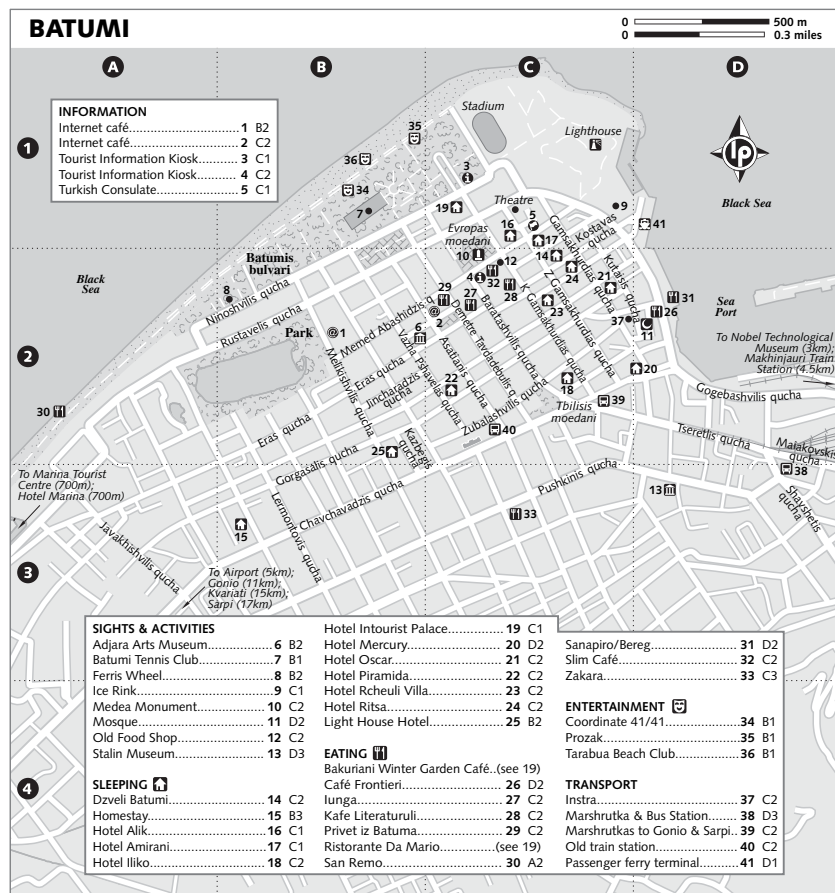
Internet Café (Melikishvili 23; per hr 1.50 GEL; ☎ 9am-midnight) The most pleasant spot to do your mail.

Internet Café (Marjanishvili; per hr 2 GEL; ☎ 24 hr) Noisy kids but good connections.

Tourist Information kiosks (☎ 10am-2pm & 4-8pm) Evropas moedani (☎ 877909094; cnr Baratashvili & Memed Abashidze) Boulevard (☎ 877909091; cnr Ninoshvili & K Gamsakhurdia) These helpful places provide good city maps and other material on Adjara in English. At research time they only opened from May to October but this may be extended.

Sights

Everyone soon finds themselves strolling along **Batumis bulvari**, the 1.5km park strip fronting the main beach. With its cafés, paths, trees, beach bars and large **Ferris wheel** (per person 0.50 GEL) at the south end, this is the life and soul of the resort. It was originally laid out in 1884 and contains some unique



plants and trees. The **beach** itself is fine though stony – extremely busy during the summer months, but kept clean enough. You'll find cleaner waters, and thinner crowds, a short drive south of the city, at Gonio and Kvartati.

The main central square, **Evropas moedani** (Europe Sq), is a broad, attractive space sporting musical fountains which are a magnet for kids on hot summer evenings. Towering over the square is a striking **monument**, unveiled in 2007, to Medea, 'the person who brought Georgia closer to Europe,' according to Batumi's mayor at the time. The Georgian government controversially paid over 1 million GEL for the monument, sculpted by Davit Khmaladze.

The **Adjara Arts Museum** (☎ 73894; Era 8; admission 2 GEL; 🕒 11am–6pm Tue–Sun) makes a happy break from many of Georgia's more turgid and badly lit museums. The collection covers Georgian art including works by Pirosmiani and Elena Akhvediani, as well as European and Russian painting from the 19th and 20th centuries.

For those who don't make it to Gori, the **Stalin Museum** (☎ 20456; Pushkin 19; admission 2 GEL, guide in English 1 GEL; 🕒 9am–5pm Mon–Sat) is an interesting and similarly hagiographic establishment. Stalin lived here for just a few months in 1901–02 when he helped organise the bitumen workers and set up an illegal printing press. Rather too amazingly (given that he didn't become famous until almost two decades later), his personal belongings

have survived, including a moth-eaten towel and the bed he slept on.

Batumi's last surviving **mosque** (Kutaisi 33), built in the 1860s, is also worth visiting. It's finely painted in pinks, greens and blues, with beautiful Koranic calligraphy on the walls. Friendly men often gather to socialise at the entrance. The nameless **old food shop** (K Gamsakhurdia 12) has very ordinary goods for sale, but its rich gold decoration is a unique memento of pre-revolutionary Batumi.

Batumi's most modern and one of its most interesting museums is the **Nobel Technological Museum** (☎ 54594; Leselidze 3, Tamari district; admission 2 GEL; 🕒 10am–5pm). This takes you back to Batumi's heyday in the late 19th and early 20th century, when it was in the vanguard of the international oil business, with investment from the Nobels and Rothschilds spawning technological innovations here. The museum also looks at the tea industry that grew up at the same time. It's just inland off the road to Makhinjauri train station.

Activities

The good open-air pool at the **Hotel Intourist Palace** (☎ 32123; Ninoshvili 11; admission 30 GEL; 🕒 10am–7pm) is open to nonguests, as is the hotel's excellent **spa** (admission 20 GEL; 🕒 7am–midnight) – see p92.

Batumi Tennis Club (☎ 72258; Batumis bulvari; per hr for 2 incl racquets & balls 20 GEL; 🕒 8am–9pm) has eight good hard courts, and you can ice-skate year round at Batumi's modern **Ice Rink** (Gogebashvili; per hr 5 GEL; 🕒 noon–11pm). The gleaming new **Marina Tourist Center** (☎ 76400, 899136565; www.marigroup.ge; Khimshiashvili 10; pool per hr 15 GEL, tennis court per hr outdoor/indoor 10/15 GEL, tennis racquets and balls for 2 15 GEL) has an excellent 25m indoor pool and tennis courts.

Sleeping

Batumi has a large and ever-growing number of hotels, with many attractive new midrange places opening up.

BUDGET

Hotel Iliko (☎ 73892; K Gamsakhurdia 42; r 20–50 GEL; 🏠) This inexpensive little family-run hotel is set around a small courtyard reached through an arch with a 'Sastumro/Gostinitsa' sign (that's 'Hotel' in Georgian and Russian). Room options range from fan-and-shared-bathroom to air-con-with-bath. All are clean and well cared for, if rather small.

Homestay (☎ 898525258, 899797224; Lermontov 24; per person 20 GEL) Kulnasi Miqueladze runs a veritable mini-budget hotel with 18 rooms, most of them newly built, on three floors. They're bare but spotless and good-sized. The shared bathrooms are equally clean and there's a guests' kitchen. Marshrutkas 12, 15 and 15A from the bus station via Tbilisi moedani stop nearby on Chavchavadze.

Hotel Piramida (☎ 32204; Vazha Pshavela 39; r 30 GEL Oct–Jun, 40 GEL Jul–Sep) A good-value, friendly budget option, the Piramida has smallish, well-kept rooms, all with bathrooms and some with balconies. The owner, Almazik, also has a travel agency and can organise city tours and day trips.

Hotel Oscar (☎ 76267; Gorgasali 6; r 40–60 GEL; 🏠) A touch shabby but friendly, the Oscar has ordinary 40 GEL rooms with fans and much brighter 60 GEL rooms with air-con. All have private bathrooms. Not too bad for the price and location.

MIDRANGE

Hotel Mercury (☎ 31401; www.hotelmercurybm.ge; Chavchavadze 10/12; r incl breakfast 60–80 GEL, ste 130 GEL; 🏠) The decent-sized and uncluttered rooms, most with balconies or large windows over the street, plus a raft of extras – roof terrace, 4th-floor bar, basement bistro and sauna – make the Mercury good value. It can fill up during high season.

our pick **Dzveli Batumi** (Old Batumi; ☎ 77157; www.davisvenot.ge/dzvelibatumi; batgts@yahoo.com; Kostava 24; s/d 60/80 GEL, ste 150 GEL; 🏠) Friendly and informal hosts Gocha and Irina have converted half a dozen rooms in their old-town home with spot-on contemporary taste, all in various pastel colours, with carpets and satellite TV. A guesthouse with one big difference: flair.

Hotel Ritsa (☎ 73292; www.hotelritsa.com; Z Gamsakhurdia 16; r incl breakfast 70–120 GEL; 🏠) This well situated, 14-room hotel provides comfort and *belle époque* style in a new building, opened in 2006. The cheaper rooms are an especially good deal.

Hotel Marina (☎ 76400, 899136565; www.mari-group.ge; Khimshiashvili 10; s 70 GEL, d 90–130 GEL; 🏠) Down on the southern seafront, the Marina is a welcoming, English-speaking place in a gleaming new sports-and-tourism facility with a pool, tennis courts, a fitness club, billiards and football pitches – but it's also a fine place to stay if you're not feeling particularly active. Rooms are spacious, modern and pleasant,

with a wave design theme, and many have balconies. Downstairs are an ATM, a bar, an Asian-theme café and a Mexican restaurant.

Light House Hotel (☎ 33610; www.lighthouse.ge; Kazbegi 4; r incl breakfast 120 GEL) This very stylish new hotel, on a quiet street just out of the busiest part of town, has just 10 rooms in a variety of eye-catching, modish styles and colours. A comfortable and friendly place to stay.

our pick Hotel Rcheuli Villa (☎ 70707; rcheuli.villa@centerpoint.ge; Jordania 21; r incl breakfast US\$50-80, ste US\$100-150; 🍷) A lovely pink-painted mansion, newly built in old Batumi style, houses fine rooms with marble floors and elegant imperial-style furnishings. Professional but friendly service helps make this newcomer one of the best bets in Batumi.

Hotel Amirani (☎ 7515; www.hotelamirani.ge; General Mazniasvili 3; r incl breakfast US\$60-130; 🍷) This small, central hotel has elegant rooms with parquet floors, thick rugs and classical décor. Reception staff speak excellent English.

Hotel Alik (☎ 75801; hotelalik.gol.ge; Memed Abashidze 12; r incl breakfast US\$80-120; 🍷 🍷) A comfortable, central place where large faux-cactus lamps and gaudy 21st-century bedspreads cohabit with Empire-style chairs. Services and facilities are good, but the sauna and plunge pool are only free to guests until noon.

TOP END

Hotel Intourist Palace (☎ 32123; www.intouristpalace.com; Ninoshvili 11; r incl breakfast US\$176-295 Aug; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Palace is no exaggeration for this luxuriously revamped large hotel, from its gleaming marble lobby to the large, thickly carpeted rooms, all with balconies. The position facing the Boulevard park is superb, and hotel facilities include two restaurants, a good open-air pool and a spa with sauna, Turkish bath, fitness centre and assorted massages (US\$20 to US\$80). Room rates vary dramatically with the seasons and can more than halve in winter.

Eating

Batumi is full of lively cafés and restaurants. In addition to those listed here, there are several cafés in the Boulevard park, and from July to September many more open up on the main beach, some making admirable efforts to create a tropical ambience.

Zakara (cnr Pushkin & Vazha Pshavela; khinkali each 0.50 GEL; 🍷 10am-midnight) This two-level wooden local restaurant is widely reputed to serve

the best beef and pork *khinkali* in town (if you aren't sick of them already). It's an animated place with plenty of beer flowing.

Iunga (Era 4; khachapuri 2-3.50 GEL; 🍷 9am-11pm) There's no better place than Batumi to decide whether you like *khachapuri acharuli*, Adjara's large boat-shaped variety of Georgia's national fast food with a lightly fried egg on top. And there's no better place to try it than this tiny, neat place which specialises in it – if one of its four tables is vacant.

Kafe Literaturuli (☎ 899155443; K Gamsakhurdia 18; cakes & pastries 2-5 GEL; 🍷 9am-11pm) The Literary Café is a great stop for tea, coffee, cakes and pastries, with a slightly artsy ambience.

Privet iz Batuma (☎ 32217; Memed Abashidze 36; light dishes 2-8 GEL; 🍷 10am-1am) A fashionable café with a colonial Russian theme and sailor-suited waiters, 'Hi from Batumi' is good for ice cream, cakes, sandwiches, deserts and bliny (pancakes). The interior is air-conditioned and there are outdoor tables too, but you may still have to wait for a table on summer evenings.

Slim Café (☎ 899550065; Memed Abashidze 27; dishes 4-7 GEL) Long and thin (true to its name) and in tasteful style, Slim serves wonderful bliny with fruit and chocolate dripping, plus assorted sandwiches, soups and salads.

Sanapiro/Bereg (☎ 31271; Gogebashvili 9; mains 5-8 GEL; 🍷 8am-2am) Right on the waterfront facing the harbour, this open-air pavilion is one of Batumi's best places to eat for its location alone. The food (mainly Georgian standards) and the service are fine too.

Café Frontieri (Gogebashvili 28; mains 5-10 GEL) A pleasant open-air spot facing the northern seafront, Frontieri is good for salads, shashlyk, cheese plates, apple pie – and draft Staropramen beer from the Czech Republic.

San Remo (☎ 877950950; Batumis bulvari; mains 5-10 GEL) Another place with sailor-suited waiters, the picture-windowed San Remo serves Georgian and Russian fare on a pier at the southern end of the Boulevard. It's a bit of a party place in the evening, with live music and a small dance floor.

Bakuriani Winter Garden Café (☎ 32123; Hotel Intourist Palace, Ninoshvili 11; cakes & sandwiches 7-9 GEL; 🍷 8am-4am) The Intourist Palace's large conservatory-style café is the most tranquil and comfortable, and expensive, in town.

Ristorante Da Mario (☎ 32123; Hotel Intourist Palace, Ninoshvili 11; mains 9-25 GEL) Classy service, excellent Italian food and a long wine list make this

hotel restaurant overlooking the Blvd a fine dinner spot.

Entertainment

In summer Batumis bulvari is the nightlife capital of Georgia. The main clubs – Tarabua Beach Club, Coordinate 41/41 and Prozak – are all fresh-air venues close to the beach, with stages and large dance spaces where people party till dawn every night. Long lists of guest DJs from around Europe provide high-energy and chill-out beats, helped out some nights by singers or bands. They open their doors around 9pm and start to fill after 11pm, with admission normally 10 GEL to 15 GEL. Plenty of smaller bars along the beach develop their own nocturnal scenes too.

Getting There & Around

As well as marshrutkas, buses and trains to other Georgian destinations, Batumi offers flights and overland transport to Armenia, and flights and ferries to Ukraine.

AIR

The new **airport** (☎ 76649) is 5km south of town on the Sarpi road. Turkish Airlines flies three times weekly to Istanbul and the small Georgian airlines Tbilaviamsheni and Marsi fly to Ukraine (Kiev, Odessa, Kharkov and Donetsk) once or more weekly. Tbilaviamsheni also has three flights a week to Yerevan.

Marshrutkas bound for Gonio or Sarpi from Tbilisi moedani will drop you at the airport.

LAND

Bus, Marshrutka & Taxi

Taxis to or from the Turkish border at Sarpi, 17km south, cost 15 GEL to 20 GEL; marshrutkas cost 1.50 GEL. In Batumi marshrutkas to Sarpi start from Tbilisi moedani. The border is open 24 hours daily and crossing it is normally straightforward, though there can be queues at weekends. Note that 'Hopa' marshrutkas from Batumi go to the Hopa bazaar, a huge market outside Batumi – not Hopa in Turkey!

In Tbilisi, marshrutkas to Batumi (18 GEL, seven hours) leave Didube bus station at least hourly from 8am to 8pm or later. Further marshrutkas and buses (at least every two hours, 9am to 5pm) leave from the back of Tbilisi's main train station.

In Batumi the main **marshrutka and bus station** (☎ 30163; Maiakovski 1) has buses to Tbilisi (about hourly, 7am to midnight), Poti (5 GEL, 1½ hours, eight daily, 8am to 6pm), Kutaisi (8 GEL, 2½ hours, hourly, 7am to 8pm), Zugdidi (10 GEL, three hours, at 11am, noon, 4pm and 6pm) and Akhaltsikhe (18 GEL, six hours, 8.30am and 10.30am) via Khashuri and Borjomi.

From about May to September there's a marshrutka to Akhaltsikhe (15 GEL, six hours, 11am) via Khulo – a route through mountainous interior Adjara which is not passable in winter. Also from here, **Lüks Karadeniz** (☎ 33984) runs buses to Trabzon in Turkey (20 GEL, three hours, every 1½ hours, 11am to 5pm).

Further marshrutkas to Tbilisi go hourly, between 7.30am and 11.30pm, from the **old train station** (cnr Asatiani & Zubalashvili).

Marshrutka 26 runs between the bus station and Tbilisi moedani, which is the terminus for marshrutkas 138 to Gonio (0.90 GEL) and 142 to Sarpi (1.50 GEL), both every 20 to 30 minutes.

Train

Batumi's shiny new **Makhinjauri station** (☎ 54158) is about 5km north of town on the Kobuleti road. Marshrutka 20 (0.40 GEL) runs here from Rustaveli and Gogebashvili, as does marshrutka 1 from Gogebashvili just east of Chavchavadze. The comfortable sleeper train to Tbilisi (3rd-/2nd-/1st-class 15/23/40 GEL, eight hours) departs at 11.25pm; it's best to book ahead for this (and essential in summer). There's also an afternoon train to Tbilisi at 4.45pm (one-class seating only, 20 GEL, seven hours), and an 8am *elektrichka* to Kutaisi (four hours). In July, August and the first half of September a train departs every second morning to Yerevan (3rd-/2nd-/1st-class 30/46/91 GEL, 21 hours).

SEA

Ferries sail about once weekly to Ilyichevsk (Ukraine) from Batumi's sea port. The local ticket agent is **Instra** (☎ 74119; Kutaisi 34). At research time Batumi's **passenger ferry terminal** (☎ 74912; Gogebashvili 3) stood idle – apart from furnishing information about sailings to Sochi in Russia from Hopa in Turkey, 30km from Batumi – after the Batumi–Sochi ferry was suspended in 2007. See p323 for further details on all these services.

AROUND BATUMI

The most interesting sight south of Batumi is the fortress at **Gonio** (admission 2 GEL; ☎ 10am–6pm), 11km from town, past the Chorokhi River. This is a vast and almost totally intact Roman fortress, which now has stunningly luscious gardens and is home to the grave of the Apostle Matthew/Levi. Marshrutkas to Sarpi and Gonio (p93) pass by the fortress, which is by the main road. Until the 12th century Gonio was known as Apsarosi, which may mean ‘place with water’, or may derive from Apsyrtus who, according to legend, was chopped into pieces and thrown into the sea by his sister Medea.

One of the best examples of Roman-Byzantine military architecture in the world, the fortress covers 47,000 sq metres and has 18 towers, a theatre and a Roman-era bathhouse. From Gonio the road continues for another 6km to **Sarpi** on the Turkish border. The route is lovely, with waterfalls in the lush green hills and mountains, and the sea on the other side.

Both Gonio and Kvriati, 4km to its south (before Sarpi), have pebbly beaches with cleaner water than in Batumi. They are starting to be developed for tourism with a few hotels and beach bars, but still make for a quieter stay than in Batumi. There’s a tourist information office at the border at Sarpi.

Batumi’s **Botanical Gardens** (admission 6 GEL; ☎ 9am–8pm), 9km north of town at Mtsvane Kontskhi (Green Cape), are well worth a trip. Marshrutka 1 (0.60 GEL) runs there from Gogebashvili just east of Chavchavadze. The lush gardens, with many semitropical and foreign species, cover a hillside rising straight out of the sea, and it takes about 1½ hours to walk the main path at a leisurely pace. A decent, stony beach, much less crowded than Batumi’s, is down to the left of the entrance, and there’s a handful of cafés and bars around there too.

The main Adjara town north of here is Kobuleti, 30km from Batumi, a less attractive and more downmarket beach resort, which straggles along the coast for several kilometres.

Sleeping

Gonio and Kvriati have plenty of homestays, many of them right on the beach. Locals let out rooms for between 15 GEL and 50 GEL per person depending whether you need a

private bathroom and/or meals. Travellers have recommended Muraba’s at Kvriati, next to the big Hotel Neptun.

THE MOUNTAINS

A trip into the Caucasus along Georgia’s northern border is a must for anyone who wants to experience the best of the country. Spectacular alpine scenery, wonderful walks and picturesque old villages with strange, tall defensive towers are all part of a trip to the Caucasus. Here traditions are more alive than elsewhere and the hospitality is almost compulsive in its intensity.

Georgia’s very identity hinges on this mighty range that rises in Abkhazia, forms the border with Russia and runs the length of the country into Azerbaijan and Dagestan. The Caucasus includes the highest mountain in Europe, Mt Elbrus (5642m), on the Russian side of the border, and remains almost untouched by commercial development in a way the Alps can only dream about.

The most accessible destination is Kazbegi, reached by the dramatic Georgian Military Hwy from Tbilisi, but other areas are more than worth the effort of getting there – including enigmatic Svaneti, a refuge for many things considered essentially Georgian, and beautiful, untouched Tusheti.

It’s notably cooler in the mountain villages, which can be a blessed relief in August, and in the hills you should be equipped for bad weather any time. The best walking season in most areas is from June to September. Indeed some areas such as Khevsureti and Tusheti are only accessible for a few summer months.

SVANETI სვანეთი

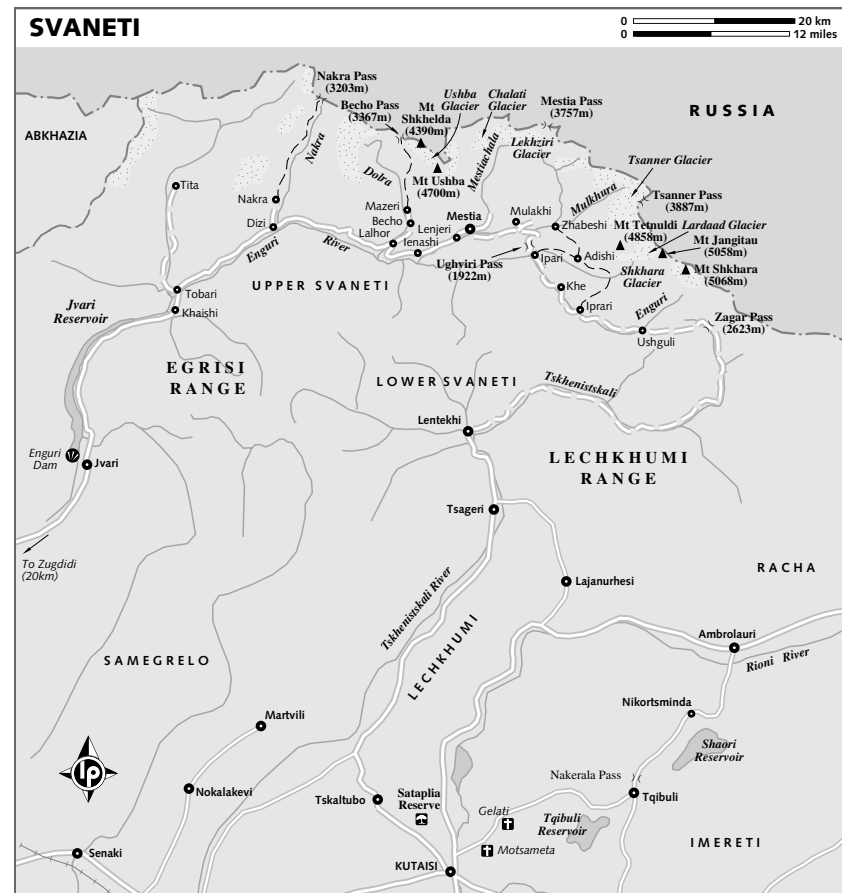
Impossibly beautiful, wild and mysterious, Svaneti is an ancient land locked in the greater Caucasus, so remote that it has never been tamed by any ruler, and even during the Soviet period it largely retained its traditional way of life. You need a minimum of three days to visit Svaneti (including one getting there and one getting out again), but if you can manage it, Svaneti is a must. Uniquely picturesque villages and snow-covered peaks rising over 4000m above flower-strewn alpine meadows offer marvellous walking opportunities. Svaneti’s emblem

is the defensive stone tower, designed to house villagers at times of invasion and strife. Around 175 towers, most originally built between the 9th and 13th centuries, survive in Svaneti today.

Until recently Svaneti was rather unsafe, with armed robberies against tourists too common to ignore. It’s become a much safer place since 2004, when security forces shot dead the area’s leading robber baron and his son, and jailed several other thugs. We did still hear of two attempted armed robberies (one successful) against tourist groups in 2006, but the overall picture is much safer. It’s sensible to go with a local guide when you venture out on hikes, or at least get good local information first.

Svaneti’s isolation has meant that during the many murderous invasions of Georgia over the centuries, icons, art and other religious artefacts from elsewhere were brought here for safekeeping, and many of them remain in private homes. Svaneti also has a rich church-art heritage of its own, with many of the tiny village churches boasting frescoes 1000 years old. This mountain retreat is regarded by many as the most authentically Georgian part of the country, despite the fact that the Svans speak an unwritten language that broke away from Georgian some four millennia ago and is largely unintelligible to other Georgians.

Svaneti is divided into Upper (Zemo) and Lower (Kvemo) Svaneti. Upper Svaneti offers



the best walking and climbing as well as the strongest traditions; it is very green, with sub-alpine forests of hornbeam, chestnut, spruce, pine and fir.

There are different species of wild goats, wolves, foxes and bears. The Svans mainly live by farming cattle, though they keep a breed of semiwild pig as well. In recent decades many Svans have moved to Tbilisi and southeast Georgia in search of a less difficult lifestyle. Tourism is one hope the region has for economic improvement.

Svan food tends to be less elaborate than other varieties of Georgian cuisine, but can be delicious.

Typical dishes are *chvishdari* (cheese cooked inside maize bread) and *kubdari* (minced meat in a *khachapuri*-type pie).

The **Svaneti Mountain Tourism Centre** (☎ 895 358049; www.svanetitrekking.ge; Stalin 7, Mestia), an NGO set up to develop locally based tourism in Svaneti, can provide accommodation in Mestia and several other villages (35 GEL per person, full board), plus hiking guides (50 GEL per day), foreign-language guides (30 GEL to 40 GEL per day), horses (20 GEL per day) and vehicle transport within Svaneti.

The office in Mestia is open erratic hours and may only have Russian and Georgian speakers available, so allow a day or two to make any arrangements, or contact the staff in advance. The website is an excellent source of Svaneti information.

Mestia მესტია

☎ 336 (international), ☎ 236 (domestic) / pop 2500
The administrative capital of Svaneti, at an altitude of 1400m, is a conglomeration of at least 10 neighbourhoods, with old buildings and typical Svan towers mixed in among drabber Soviet-era structures.

Mestia has no ATM, but many shops will change cash euros or US dollars. You can access the internet at the **Training & Consultation Centre** (Sgimieri; internet free; ☎ 2-4pm Mon-Fri). Most homestays can arrange guides and jeep transport.

An experienced and well-recommended English-speaking guide here, both for hikes and for visits to Svaneti's churches, is **Eteri Jorjoliani** (☎ 899167121; per day US\$25-30).

MUSEUM OF HISTORY & ETHNOGRAPHY

Six hundred metres south from the central square, across two bridges, you'll find Mestia's

excellent **Museum of History & Ethnography** (☎ 22158; admission 10 GEL, English-speaking guide 10 GEL; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun). Despite security problems, the Svans are reluctant to see their amazingly rich treasury of religious items moved from the villages, but this museum's collection is comprehensive, and labelled in English as well as Georgian, so it's the best place to get an overall idea of the glories of Svanetian art.

The exhibit includes a historic collection of 1890s Svaneti photos by Italian Vittorio Sella, and a hall with reproductions of famed Svaneti church murals, but the highlight is the two-room treasury: here you can see a 12th-century Persian silver jug given to Svaneti by Queen Tamar; a number of beautifully illuminated gospels from the 9th to 13th centuries; and golden altar crosses and chased-metal icons of amazingly high quality from the 10th to 14th centuries.

One rare 11th-century icon shows St George spearing the emperor Diocletian instead of his usual dragon. The 12th-century icon of the Forty Martyrs (who died by drowning) has a highly unusual modern quality; this piece is not Svanetian, rather it is thought to be from central Georgia.

SLEEPING & EATING

There are plenty of homestays in Mestia, all offering meals.

Manoni Ratiani (☎ 899568417; Gvaldir; per person half board 25 GEL, camping per person 5 GEL) Manoni's rooms are a little more basic than the following places but still fine. There's a hot shower, and Manoni also has tents and sleeping bags for camping in her big, grassy garden. Son Irakli speaks English. They're just over 1km east from the central square – up a lane to the right beside a long, white building, 400m past the bridge over the Mestiachala River.

Nino Ratiani (☎ 899183555; ninoratiani@gmail.com; Tamari 1; per person incl breakfast/half board/full board 20/30/35 GEL) Particularly good Svan food (including many vegetarian dishes), a hospitable welcome and clean, comfortable rooms make Nino's one of the best homestays in town. Nino speaks some English and daughter Tamuna is fluent. Their house is the one with the Mini Market shop, 600m along the street towards Zugdidi from the central square. If it's full, they will install you with relatives nearby.

Nino & Eka Japaridze (☎ 899572850, 899389300; per person full board US\$25) This excellent home-

WALKS AROUND MESTIA

Some routes are hard to follow without a guide, and much safer with one. Take local advice as you make your plans. You can remove some of the slog from many walks by going partway by jeep, which homestays can help you organise.

A moderately demanding half-day walk that many people do without a guide is up to the **Cross**, visible 900m above Mestia on the north side of the valley (actually just a single pole at research time). The views get better as you go, and from the Cross you can see the spectacular twin peaks of Mt Ushba (4710m), Georgia's toughest and most dangerous mountaineering challenge. From Mestia's central square walk 450m east along the main street then take the lane up to the left. Take the uphill option at all junctions. You pass under an arch after about 350m, and after 150m more the street becomes a footpath: follow this up and after 800m it bends to the right across the hillside, still climbing, eventually to meet a jeep track. You can follow this, shortcutting some bends, all the way to the cross. The round trip from Mestia takes about five hours. If you're feeling fit and energetic, with good weather and enough daylight you can continue to a series of small lakes, about two hours beyond the Cross and some 300m higher.

The walk to the **Chalati Glacier** is another lovely route, taking you out past Mestia's airstrip and up the Mestiachala valley. The last section is up through woods to the foot of the glacier. Watch out for rocks falling off the glacier in summer. This route is a nine- or 10-hour round trip including stops. There is a border-guard checkpoint en route, so take your passport.

You can spend a lovely three days walking to **Ushguli** if you start by taking a jeep as far as Ipari (Nakipari on some maps), about 20km southeast of Mestia. From Ipari the first stage takes you to Adishi, where you can sleep at **Zhora Kaldani's homestay** (☎ 899187359; per person half board 35 GEL). The second day is from Adishi to Ipari, where there are rooms at **Ucha Margvelani's** (☎ 899574783; per person half board 35 GEL). On the third day it's three or four hours' walk from Ipari to Ushguli.

Mazeri village, 1600m high in the Dolra valley, northwest of Mestia, is another fine base for walks. One spectacular day route is up to the Ushba Glacier and back. In Mazeri, there's homestay accommodation with mountaineer **Giri Tserediani** (☎ 895563155; per person half board US\$25) and **Natia Kvitsiani** (☎ 32-235691, 877411042; per person half board with lunch box US\$30), who has a comfortable new guesthouse.

stay, with large, spotless rooms, hot water and creature comforts, is on the north side of the central square. Nino and Eka have six 4WD vehicles and a minibus and can meet groups in Zugdidi or even Tbilisi. Russian and a tiny bit of English spoken.

David Zhorzholiani (☎ 899344948; per person half/full board US\$20/25) English-speaking David is a knowledgeable hiking guide. His family's farmstead, just off the east side of the square, has five good clean bedrooms, a hot shower in a good Western-style bathroom – and its own Svan tower!

Tsiuri & Lali Gabliani (☎ 899569358; Gablianis qucha; per person half board US\$25) Both of these sisters teach and speak English, and their house has homey rooms, lovely views from the verandah, a hot shower and books on Svaneti in several languages. It's 500m southwest of the main square, near the hospital.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Getting to Mestia is an adventure in itself. The five- or six-hour marshrutka or jeep trip from Zugdidi (see p86) travels through increasingly spectacular scenery as it runs up the Enguri valley, then the Mulkhura valley. From Tbilisi you can take an overnight train that gets you into Zugdidi at 5.30am, in time to catch a marshrutka to Svaneti the same morning. Alternatively, there's a 6am marshrutka that goes from in front of Tbilisi's main train station all the way to Mestia (25 to 35 GEL, 11 to 12 hours). Get there by 5.30am to ensure a seat.

Returning, a marshrutka leaves Mestia at 5am or 6am daily to Zugdidi and Tbilisi. There may be others later but you can't depend on it.

The jeep roads from Mestia to Ushguli and from Ushguli to Lentekhi in Kvemo Svaneti (via the 2623m Zagar Pass) can be blocked for

weeks in December, January and February, but the Zugdidi–Mestia road is normally kept open all year.

Mestia has an airstrip about 1km east of town. Flights have been an on-off affair but may have restarted by the time you go. Agencies and accommodation in Tbilisi or Mestia should know the latest.

Most Tbilisi travel agencies (p52) offer tours with trusted drivers and guides to Svaneti.

Ushguli უშგული

Ushguli, 47km southeast of Mestia and reaching up to 2100m above sea level, is claimed to be the highest permanently inhabited place in Europe, and with more than 20 ancient Svan towers, it was placed on the Unesco World Heritage List in 1996. Actually a conglomeration of four villages (from west to east and lowest to highest: Murqmeli, Chazhashi, Zhibiani and Chvibiani), Ushguli is a highly picturesque and atmospheric spot, set in the highest reaches of the Enguri valley beneath the snow-covered massif of Mt Shkhara (5068m), the highest peak in Georgia and the third highest in the Caucasus. A day trip from Mestia by jeep costs 150 GEL for up to six people.

There's plenty of good walking from Ushguli: it takes about seven hours to walk 8km up the valley to the foot of the Shkhara glacier and back. One tower in Chazhashi houses Ushguli's main **Ethnographic Museum** (admission 10 GEL; ☎ 10am–6pm Tue–Sun), with a superb collection of gold, silver and wooden icons and crosses dating back to the 12th century from Ushguli's seven churches. A second **ethnographic museum** (admission 5 GEL), in a barn in Chvibiani, opens erratically and has an assortment of domestic and agricultural artefacts. At the top end of Ushguli, beautifully situated on a hill below Mt Shkhara, is the 12th-century **Church of the Virgin Mary** (Lamaria) with a defensive tower next to it.

SLEEPING

There are several homestays. **Dato Ratiani** (☎ 895485622; Zhibiani; per person full board US\$30) runs one of the most comfortable, with a hot shower and great meals of Svan food. You can rent horses here for 20 GEL to 25 GEL a day. **Temuraz Nizharadze** (☎ 899209719; Chvibiani; per person full board 30–35 GEL) has simpler accommodation just below Lamaria church, with squat

toilets and hot showers when the electricity is working.

SOUTH OSSETIA სამხრეთ ოსეთი

Tensions and occasional outbreaks of violence in and around the borders of the separatist region of South Ossetia rose after the Saakashvili government came to power in Tbilisi in 2003. By 2007, if you did get through the various Georgian, Russian and Ossetian checkpoints around the border of South Ossetia, there was a good chance you would be hauled in for questioning and then expelled. No country recognises South Ossetia as an independent entity and the British and US governments were, at research time, advising their citizens against travel to South Ossetia.

If things ever normalise here, hiking in the Caucasus in northern South Ossetia is likely to be the chief visitor attraction. Marshrutkas run to the South Ossetian capital, Tskhinvali, from Tbilisi's Didube bus station (5 GEL, about three hours). For accommodation in Tskhinvali there's the shabby **Hotel Ireston** (Teatrnaya ploshchad; r with shared toilet R70; ☎), which has an internet café.

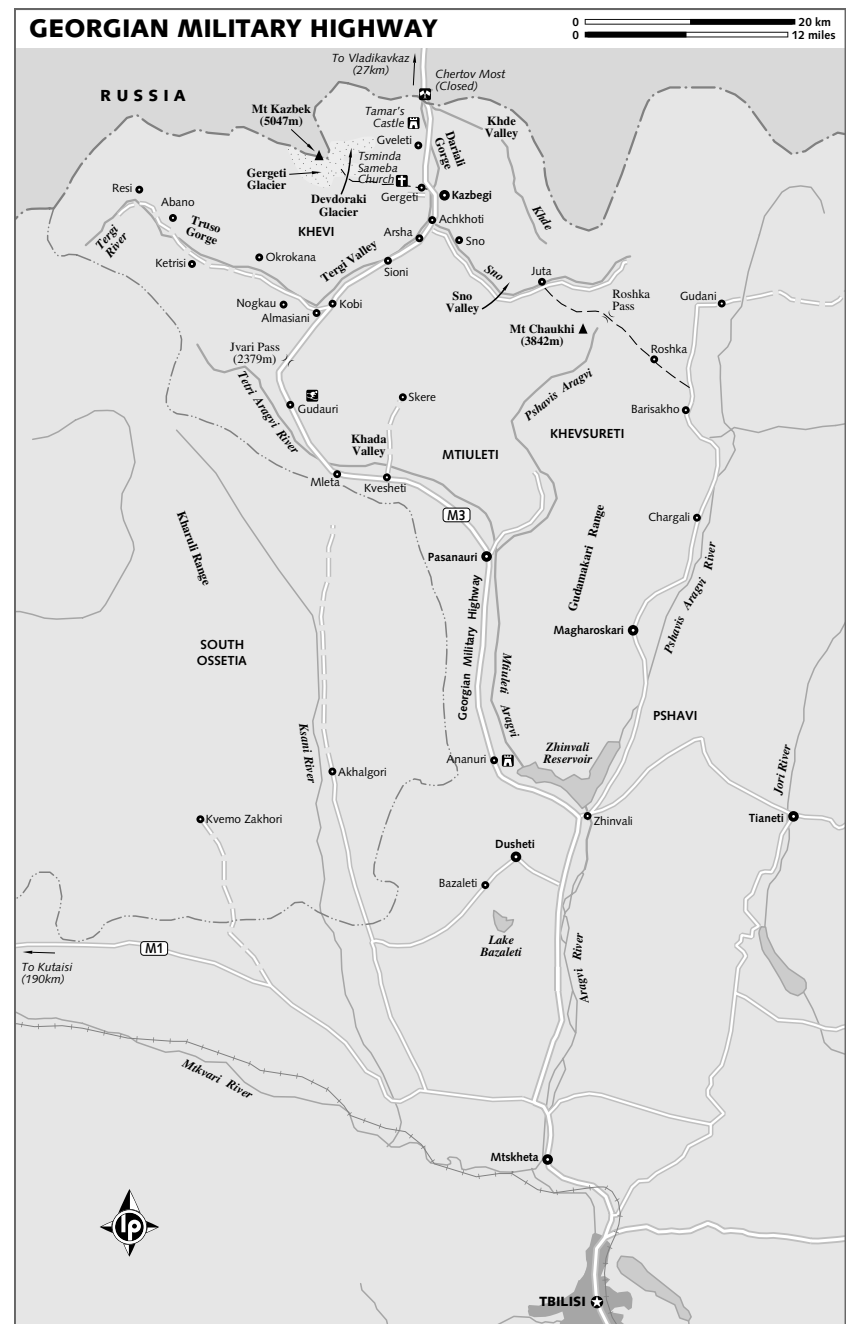
GEORGIAN MILITARY HIGHWAY

საქართველოს სამხედრო გზა

This ancient passage from Tbilisi over the Caucasus to Vladikavkaz in Russia is a spectacular adventure. The dirt track through the challenging mountain terrain was only properly engineered as a road in the early 19th century with the Russian annexation of the Caucasus. The scenery is dramatic even before the road gets into the Caucasus itself – the road clings to the side of the turquoise Zhinvali Reservoir and passes the sublime architecture of Ananuri and the ski resort of Gudauri before entering the most remote, eerily deserted mountain regions around its highest point, the Jvari (Cross) Pass. It then descends the Tergi (Terek in Russian) valley with its several settlements as it approaches the Russian border. Unfortunately, due to the continued closure of the Russian–Georgian border, the route is currently a dead end, but Kazbegi, the last town, is a superb base for walking, climbing and bird-watching.

Ananuri ანანურა

This fortress with its churches is another example of beautiful Georgian architecture in a beautiful location, even if the surroundings



are now, with a modern reservoir spread out below, not exactly what the builders envisaged. Ananuri is 66km north of Tbilisi, at the northwest end of the Zhinvali Reservoir. The fortress belonged to the *eristavis* (dukes) of Aragvi, who ruled the land as far as the Tergi Valley from the 13th century onwards, and was the scene of several battles. In 1739 a rival *eristavi*, Shamshe of Ksani, set fire to Ananuri and murdered the Aragvi *eristavi*'s family. Four years later, the peasants of Aragvi killed their lords and invited King Teimuraz II of Kartli to rule directly over them. Then the peasants themselves rose up in 1746, leading Teimuraz and Erekle II of Kakheti to join forces to subjugate them.

Within the fortress are two 17th-century churches, the larger of which, the Assumption Church, is covered with wonderful stone carving, including a large cross on every wall. Inside are some vivid 17th- and 18th-century frescoes including a Last Judgement on the south wall. You can climb the tallest of the fortress towers, at the top end of the complex, for fine views: it was here that the last defenders were killed in the fight with the Ksani *eristavi*.

Kvesheti ქვეშეთი

This village 40km beyond Ananuri is a good base for walks or horse rides. A 10km jeep track heads north up the **Khada valley** from Kvesheti, through a dramatic gorge and out into a more open valley with several small villages and many old stone towers. This was on the original main route across the Caucasus before the Georgian Military Highway was built.

In a roadside apple orchard as you enter Kvesheti from the south, the welcoming **Hotel Qvesheti** (☎ 899114377; www.kvesheti.ge; per person half board US\$25-30) has good, pine-floored rooms, each with a bathroom, and excellent local food. You can rent horses here for around 40 GEL per day.

Gudauri გუდაური

Shortly after Kvesheti the Georgian Military Highway climbs some 500m by a series of hairpins up to the ski resort of Gudauri. The bare hillsides here are among the least spectacular scenery along the highway but make for Georgia's best downhill ski runs. These total 16km of varied difficulty, with good Doppelmayr chairlifts. Normally the

ski season lasts from December to March, with the best snow in January and February. The only ATM in the Gudauri-Kazbegi area is in the Sport Hotel here.

A one-day lift pass costs 25 GEL per day, and ski-gear rental around 30 GEL to 40 GEL. An added attraction is heliskiing, operated by the Swiss company **Alpin Travel** (www.alpintravel.ch). For ski-touring possibilities check www.caucasus-randonnee.org.

SLEEPING & EATING

Gudauri has about a dozen hotels, with more being constructed. The following are open year-round.

Sno-3 (☎ 899557309; per person half board Dec-Apr US\$35, May-Nov US\$25) One of the cheapest options, this is a small and cosy four-room place in front of the Sport Hotel, with three showers and free *chacha*.

Hotel Gudauri Hut (☎ 899398123; www.gudaurihut.com; per person half board ski season US\$60-65, other times US\$40) A medium-sized hotel a short distance up the road from the resort centre, Gudauri Hut offers pleasant, pine-furnished rooms with good views. Ski rental is available and some staff speak English.

Sport Hotel Gudauri (☎ 32-202900, 899559222; www.gudauri.ge; s/d full board from 271/443 GEL ski season, from 174/287 GEL other times; 🚰) This flagship 1980s hotel is still Gudauri's best and the main chairlift starts right behind it. It has a host of free indoor-activity facilities open year-round: clay-court tennis, 10-pin bowling, billiards, a sauna and an excellent pool (all available to outsiders for 50 GEL per three hours).

Jvari Pass ჯვრის უღელტეხილი

The Jvari (Cross) Pass starts about 4km after Gudauri; 2379m high, it takes its name from a cross placed here by King David the Builder. The present red stone cross, about 500m to the right above the road, was erected by General Yermolov in 1824. This part of the road is notorious for avalanches, but galleries have been built for winter traffic and the pass stays open for all but a few days most years.

Kazbegi ყაზბეგი

☎ 245

This is most people's destination on the Georgian Military Highway: a spectacularly located town just a few kilometres south of the Russian border, with the snowy peak of Mt Kazbek towering to the west, behind the

famous hill-top silhouette of Tsminda Sameba Church (p102). Kazbegi is the main town of Khevi, the region north of the Jvari Pass.

Now officially named Stepantsminda, but still known as Kazbegi, this is a sleepy mountain town at about 1750m altitude, with mainly Soviet-era buildings. It's a favourite with backpackers for its relatively easy access from Tbilisi (with dramatic scenery along the way), its plentiful homestays and the walking in the area.

ORIENTATION & INFORMATION

The Georgian Military Highway brings you straight into Kazbegi's main square, Stalinis moedani, with its statue of Alexander Kazbegi as well as the marshrutka and taxi stops and the Stepantsminda Hotel. Here Stalinis qucha forks to the right, while the main road leads down to a bridge over the Tergi River, 200m from the square, then continues towards the Dariali Gorge. Immediately after the Tergi bridge a side road turns up to the village of Gergeti on the left (west) bank of the river, almost a suburb of Kazbegi.

The nearest ATM is in the Sport Hotel at Gudauri. You might be able to change euros or US dollars at the Stepantsminda Hotel or at shops or kiosks.

A useful map in English and Georgian of local walking trails is available for 5 GEL from the **Georgian Botanical Institute** (Stepantsminds qucha; ☎ May-Oct), which is widely known as the WWF Ecostation (a previous incarnation of the building).

ALEXANDER KAZBEGI MUSEUM

Alexander Kazbegi (1848-93) made the unusual decision to become a shepherd after studying in Tbilisi, St Petersburg and Moscow. Later he worked as a journalist and wrote the novels and plays that made him famous. At the end of his life he suffered from insanity. He died in Tbilisi, but his coffin was carried back to Kazbegi. His museum is a five-minute walk north from the main square. You first come to a **church**, dated 1809-11, with a striking relief of two lions with a chain above its door. To its east and west are two structures that look like bell towers but are actually the tombs of Alexander's father and mother. The writer's own grave lies under a large stone sculpture near the fence. He asked to be buried where he could see Mt Kazbek. The **museum**

(admission 1 GEL; Stalinis qucha; ☎ 10am-5pm), in Kazbegi's house, to the left of the church, contains photos, documents and some clothes and original furniture.

SLEEPING & EATING

Kazbegi is very well supplied with homestays (those mentioned here are just a selection), all of which provide meals of basic but tasty Georgian food. Many are closed outside the main season (May to early November).

Nazi Chkareuli (☎ 52480, 895500989; ssujashvili@yahoo.com; Gergeti; per person 15 GEL, half board 25 GEL) Nazi's house is the backpackers' favourite for its good prices, good meals and sociable atmosphere, with beds squeezed into every available room. Daughter Shorena speaks English. If you walk up towards Gergeti and turn left along the second street, opposite the green *khinkali* hut, Nazi's is the first two-storey house on the right. Many others along this street have rooms too.

Hotel Lomi (☎ 899403264; Stalinis moedani; per person 15 GEL) On the town square, the Lomi is a simple family-run place with agreeable little blue-painted rooms sharing hot-water bathrooms.

Nunu Maisuradze (☎ 52593; per person 15 GEL, half board 30 GEL) A good option with a friendly family and views of Tsminda Sameba and the mountains from the balcony. There's one very nice clean bathroom with a hot bath. Daughter Gvantsa speaks English. The house is 50m up the street opposite Hotel Stepantsminda, with green gates.

Luiza Tsiklauri (☎ 52353; Vazha Pshavela 34; per person half board US\$20) Luiza speaks German and has plenty of space for travellers, as well as a hot-water bathroom. Pass Nunu's, then turn right at the top of the street. Luiza's is on the left and has a grey gate.

Kamuna Sujashvili (☎ 52017; Vazha Pshavela 40; per person half board 35 GEL) This new two-storey house, next to Luiza Tsiklauri's, has three good-sized, very clean rooms and an upstairs balcony with mountain views.

Nargiza Alibegashvili (☎ 877415454; makasu75@yahoo.com; Stepantsminds qucha; per person full board US\$30) Nargiza's modern, three-storey home stands in splendid isolation just to the right of the TV dishes at the top of Kazbegi. There are three big, spotless rooms, the views are fabulous and the food is just as good. Daughter Maka speaks English. It's best to make contact a day ahead.

Hotel Stepantsminda (☎ 899646880; Stalinis moedani; s/d 50/80 GEL, half board 90/140 GEL) This most luxurious, alpine-style option provides good-sized, carpeted rooms with TV, and lovely views of Mt Kazbek from the rooms at the back. Its basement restaurant has a nice terrace but is only open to hotel guests.

The eating-out choices are very limited. The Hotel Lomi restaurant serves good, inexpensive homemade food, and the green khinkali hut on the road up to Gergeti provides *khinkali* and *khachapuri* in summer.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Marshrutkas to Kazbegi (8 GEL, three hours) leave Didube bus station in Tbilisi every one or two hours from 9am to 5pm. From Kazbegi to Tbilisi, departures are timetabled at 8am, 9am, 10am and 11am, and 1.30pm, 3pm and 5pm.

A taxi to or from Tbilisi can cost anywhere between 50 and 80 GEL.

Around Kazbegi

There are many wonderful walks in the mountains around Kazbegi. For jeep taxis to the start of the more distant ones, ask your accommodation to arrange one or simply find one in the main square. The walking season is from May or June to October or November, depending on the weather.

TSMINDA SAMEBA CHURCH

The 14th-century Holy Trinity Church above Kazbegi at 2200m has become something of a symbol of Georgia – its beauty and piety and the fierce determination to build it on such a lofty, isolated perch are all emblematic of the country and its people. The walk up to the church and the panoramas this affords are a highlight of Georgia. In 1988 the Soviet authorities constructed a cable-car line to the church, with one station in Kazbegi and the other right next to Tsminda Sameba. The people of Kazbegi quite rightly felt this defiled their sacred place and soon destroyed it. You can still see its base in the village, almost behind the Alexander Kazbegi Museum.

It takes about 1½ hours at an average pace to walk to the church from Kazbegi. Head up through Gergeti, turn right at a T-junction towards the top of the village, then go up a narrow path to the left after 20m. This leaves the village behind and reaches a broader vehicle track, with a cemetery to your right. Follow

the track up to the left, winding through the woods, and after approximately 30 minutes' walking you will emerge in an open area. Here take a path up to the left through the trees and in five minutes you'll rejoin the track in grassy meadows with the church in view to the left – just five minutes' more walk.

Vakhushti Batonishvili wrote in the 18th century that in times of danger the treasures from Mtskheta, as well as St Nino's cross, were kept here for safety. The beautifully weathered stone of the church and its separate belltower are decorated with some intriguing carvings, one on the belltower appearing to show two dinosaurs. The interior is not particularly unusual, but certainly well worth a look if you get this far!

GERGETI GLACIER

If you're up for another 900m of ascent from Tsminda Sameba, this quite strenuous walk rewards with spectacular views. The path heads straight up the ridge behind the church; an alternative route, more protected on windy days, runs up the left flank of the ridge. The two meet at a cairn at 2960m altitude, from where a path leads on up towards the left side of the Gergeti (Ortsveri) Glacier as it snakes its way down from Mt Kazbek. Head up here for about one hour for views of the glacier, then return. You'll need about nine hours to get up there from Kazbegi and down again the same day.

If you have a day in hand and are experienced on ice or have a good guide, it's possible, with a further 600m of ascent, to cross the glacier and climb to the **Betlemi Hut** (per person US\$10), formerly a meteorological station, at 3652m, where you can sleep. The hut has bunks and beds, but bring food, a warm sleeping bag and cooking gear. You can camp for free but the wind can be fierce.

SNO VALLEY

The Sno Valley runs southeast off the Georgian Military Highway 4km south of Kazbegi. About 15km along the unpaved valley road is the small village of Juta (2150m), inhabited by Khevsurs from over the mountains to the east. You can get a jeep from Kazbegi to Juta for around 45 GEL round trip. A beautiful short walk from Juta goes southeast up the Chaukhi valley to the foot of Mt Chaukhi (3842m), a dramatic multipinnacled peak popular with climbers, just 1½ hours from

MT KAZBEK

This 5047m extinct volcano towering west of Kazbegi has much folk history. The Greek Prometheus was supposedly chained up here for stealing fire from the gods, as was the Georgian Amirani, for challenging the omnipotence of God. Amirani's abode was somewhere near the Betlemi (Bethlehem) cave, 4000m above sea level, where resided a hermit and many very sacred objects – Christ's manger, Abraham's tent, a dove-rocked golden cradle whose sight would blind a human being. There were taboos against hunting on the mountain and climbing it. Not surprisingly, the first to conquer this peak were foreigners: Freshfield, Tucker and Moore of the London Alpine Club in 1868.

There is indeed a cave at 4000m, near the Betlemi Hut (opposite), which serves as the base for most Kazbek ascents today. At the hut you may be able to get an experienced local guide (non-English speaking) to lead you up the mountain for €150 to €200 per person – though to ensure guide services it's best to take a (more expensive) package with an experienced agency such as Explore Georgia (p52).

The ascent of the mountain is technically straightforward, though there is some danger in crevasses. The climb generally takes three or four days from Kazbegi.

- **Day 1** Hike from Kazbegi up to the Betlemi Hut at 3652m. It's also possible to camp at 2950m, about 2½ hours short of the hut.
- **Day 2** Spend the day acclimatising by climbing up to the Maili Plateau at 4500m, or to the summit of Ortsveri Peak (4365m) and then back down to the Betlemi Hut.
- **Day 3** Leave in the early hours of the morning and follow the north side of the glacier westward for 4km, passing south of the summit cone, and then up to the broad, snow-covered Maili Plateau at 4500m. Steeper climbing then leads back east to a saddle at 4900m, followed by mixed snow, rock and ice to the summit (six hours). This final section involves about three rope lengths of 35- to 40-degree ice. Descend to the Betlemi Hut for the night (five hours).
- **Day 4** Descend to Kazbegi.

Juta. With more time you can continue up the valley eastward from here towards the 3338m Roshka (Chaukhi) Pass. In one long day from Juta you can get over the pass and down to Roshka village in Khevsureti (p104).

In Juta, **Iago Arabuli** (☎ 899533239) and **Soso Arabuli** (☎ 895545149) have homestays, both charging 25 GEL per person with dinner and breakfast. Iago speaks German and his wife English, and they boast a Western-style toilet.

DARIALI GORGE

North of Kazbegi the Georgian Military Highway follows the Tergi River 11km to the Russian border in the grimly spectacular Dariali Gorge. Here granite cliffs tower over the road, which runs along a narrow shelf above the river. The gorge inspired much awe among 19th-century Russian artists and writers such as Lermontov and Pushkin.

Much of the gorge is across the Russian border, but you can walk or take a taxi (around 20 GEL return) as far as **Tamar's Castle**, on a big rock above the left bank of the Tergi, 10km out of Kazbegi. These ruins are from many

different periods. This Tamar, a legendary cruel beauty who chopped off her lovers' heads, is not to be confused with the great 12th-century queen of Georgia.

From Gveleti, 3km before Tamar's Castle, a fine day walk heads up through birch forests and rocky wildernesses to **Devdoraki Glacier** on the east flank of Mt Kazbek. It's 9km from Gveleti to the glacier, with an ascent of 1100m: allow nine or 10 hours there and back. At research time this route was blocked by rock falls, so check beforehand.

KHEVSURETI ხევისურეთი

The mountain region east of Khevi is Khevsureti, a sparsely populated district bordering Chechnya that is home to some fantastic mountain defensive architecture and some unique traditions – including a part-animist religion, the wearing of chain mail well into the 20th century and costumes embroidered with unusual, tiny cross and star patterns – as well as being credited with inventing *khinkali*.

Today Khevsureti's old culture is clinging to life. But its spectacular villages and

landscapes of steep, forested valleys and blooming mountain pastures are still there to be enjoyed by determined travellers who don't mind the scarcity of transport and food. Incipient tourism provides some sustenance for a few villagers. Those visitors who come should bring at least some food with them, and some warm clothes as it can get cold at night even in summer. It's also a big help if you're prepared to camp.

The road to Khevsureti turns northeast off the Georgian Military Highway shortly before the Zhinvali Reservoir and runs up the Pshavis Aragvi valley to the villages of Barisakho and Biso, before turning east (now a jeep track) and over the high Datvis-Jvari Pass (open from about June to October), and then northeast down the Argun valley to Shatili, the main village of inner Khevsureti.

Barisakho, about 100km from Tbilisi, is the largest village of the region, with a population of about 200. At **Korsha**, 2km past Barisakho, there's a small but interesting **museum** of Khevsur life, with armour, weapons, agricultural implements and the art of its curator, Shota Arabuli. From Korsha it's about a 7km walk up to **Roshka**, a small, muddy village off the main road, on the route towards the Roshka (Chaukhi) Pass (see p103).

East of Biso, **Gudani** village, about 1km up from the road, is a striking group of tower houses on a rock outcrop. Some 8km past Gudani comes the **Datvis-Jvari Pass** (2876m), from which it's 18km northeast to **Shatili**. Shatili's old town, built between the 7th and 13th centuries, is an agglomeration of tall towers clinging together on a rocky outcrop to form a single fortress-like whole. The old town was abandoned between the 1960s and '80s, and the new village, of about 20 houses, is just around the hill. But several towers have recently been restored and one contains a museum.

From Shatili the track continues 3km northeast to the border of Chechnya. Before the border you'll encounter a 'No Entry' sign, but you can turn south up the Andaki valley to almost-empty **Mutso**, about 8km from Shatili. Mutso's roofless old village on a very steep rock pinnacle across the river is one of the most spectacular in Khevsureti, with large stone tombs in which you can see human skulls. Ardoti is 6km further up the valley beyond Mutso. From **Andaki** (uninhabited), a similar distance beyond Ardoti, begins the

very steep route over the 3431m **Atsunta Pass** into Tusheti.

Sleeping

In Korsha, you can stay with **Shota Arabuli** (☎ 32-452099, 895503134; per person half board 20 GEL), artist and curator of the local museum.

In Roshka, photographer **Shota Tsiklauri** (☎ 899399789; per person half board 20 GEL) has rooms in his comfy house at the top of the village.

Shatili has three or four homestays, including **Vazha Chinchauruli's** (☎ 877729362), which has hot water and can normally provide meals. The others generally charge 25 GEL per person without food (they may be able to provide potatoes, bread and cheese). There's also a **hotel** (per person US\$25, half board US\$35).

Getting There & Away

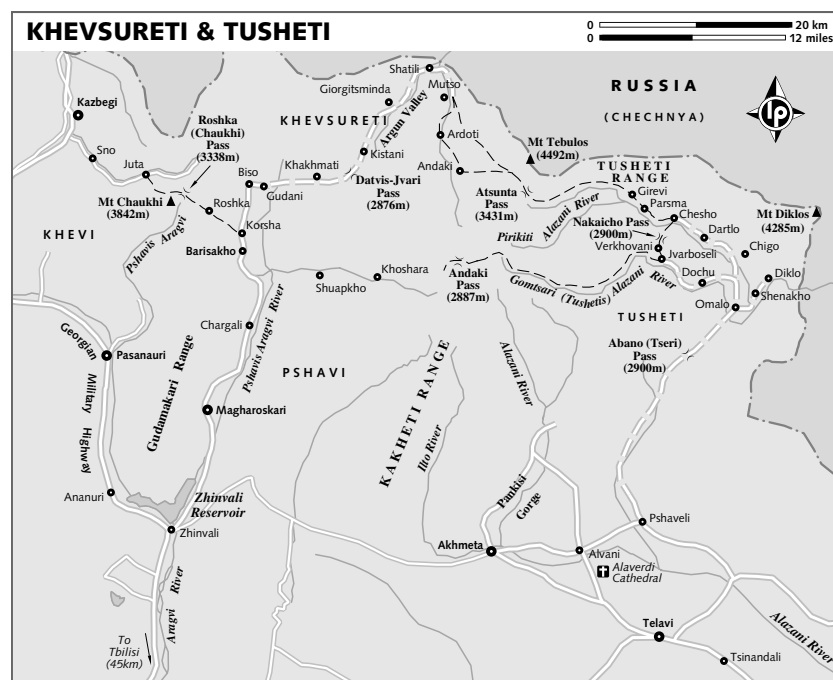
One bus a day leaves Tbilisi's Didube bus station for Barisakho (8 GEL, three to four hours, 5pm) and Korsha, 2km beyond. The bus sets off back for Tbilisi from Korsha at 8.30am. Beyond Korsha, it's a question of walking or trying to get a lift with one of the few passing vehicles, unless you have your own transport or can organise some from Tbilisi.

TUSHETI თუშეთი

Tucked into Georgia's far northeast corner, with Chechnya to its north and Dagestan to its east, Tusheti is an increasingly popular summer hiking area but remains one of the country's remotest and most fascinating and pristine high-mountain regions. The road over the nerve-jangling 2900m Abano (Tseri) Pass was not built until 1978; Tusheti still has no public electricity supply, and evidence of its old animist religion is plentiful in the form of stone shrines known as *khatis*, decked with the horns of sacrificed goats or sheep, which women are not permitted to approach. Tall defensive towers (*koshkis*) still stand in many villages, many of them dating back 600 years or more.

Today most Tusheti folk only go up to Tusheti in summer: to graze their sheep or cattle, attend festivals, to cater for tourists and generally reconnect with their roots. Many have winter homes in and around Alvani in Kakheti. The road to Tusheti is only open from about early June to early October, and some of the homestays may not open till July.

Tusheti has two main river valleys – the Pirikiti Alazani and the more southerly



Gomtsari (Tushetis) Alazani – which meet below Omalo, the biggest village, then flow east into Dagestan. The scenery everywhere is a spectacular mix of high, snow-covered, rocky peaks, deep gorges, and steep, grassy hillsides where distant flocks of sheep appear as slowly shifting patterns of white specks.

You can find a reasonable Tusheti map on **Tusheti Protected Areas** (www.tushe.tipa.ge).

Sights & Activities

Most of the villages are around 2000m above sea level and have picturesque settings, either sitting above near-sheer hillsides or nestling down by one of the rivers. There's a particularly splendid group of old towers, known as Keseloebi, on top of the crag at **Zemo Omalo**, the upper part of Omalo. **Shenakho**, a few kilometres east of Omalo, is one of the prettiest villages, with its houses of stone, slate and rickety wooden balconies grouped around Tusheti's only functioning church. **Diklo**, 4km northeast of Shenakho, has an old fortress perched on a spectacular rock promontory. **Dartlo**, about 12km northwest of Omalo in the Pirikiti Alazani valley, has another

spectacular tower grouping, overlooked by the single tall lookout tower of **Kvavlo** on the hill 350m above.

Walking routes are innumerable. Omalo to Shenakho and Shenakho to Diklo are two good short walks of a couple of hours each (one way). A good route of about five days starts in Omalo or Shenakho, runs up the Pirikiti Alazani valley to Dartlo and Chesho, then crosses the 2900m Nakaicho Pass over to Verkhovani in the Gomtsari Alazani valley, and returns down the Gomtsari Alazani.

The track up the Pirikiti Alazani valley beyond Chesho, through Parsma and Girevi, eventually leads to the 3431m Atsunta Pass, a very steep and demanding route over into Khevsureti. It's a one-week trek all the way from Shenakho or Omalo to Shatili in Khevsureti.

If you prefer to ride, horses are available in Omalo and Shenakho for between 35 GEL and 70 GEL per day.

Several Tbilisi travel agencies offer tours and treks in Tusheti. A good one run by a Tusheti native, the fluent English-speaking Eka Chvritidze, is Wild Georgia (p52).

Sleeping

There are no real hotels in Tusheti but plenty of guesthouses and homestays. The typical price is 50 GEL to 60 GEL per person, including three meals. It is best to head for places where you know there is a functioning guesthouse or homestay, and if possible make arrangements in advance.

In Omalo, the **Korochi Guesthouse** (☎ 898156728) is a substantial wood and concrete place near the electricity station at the top of Kvemo (Lower) Omalo. A new guesthouse was under construction in Zemo (Upper) Omalo, the older part of the village, at the time of research.

In Shenakho, **Dato Bukvaizde** (☎ 899616619) and his parents run a comfortable guesthouse with spring-fed running water, a hot shower and three pleasant wood-walled rooms. Wild Georgia agency (p52) also has a house here, just below the church.

Dartlo has several accommodation places. Just above the ruined Russian church at the foot of the village, **Beso Elanidze** (☎ 899118993) has two good, recently converted guesthouses with electric light, showers and Western-style toilets. Meals are available.

In Chesho, the first house on the right as you enter the village from the east, a substantial three-storey wooden construction, is **Eka Abaloizde's Guesthouse** (☎ 855570512, 899618734). Set just above a rushing stream, it has 14 beds, solar-heated showers and 15 horses for rent.

There are also guesthouses or homestays at Verkhovani and Dochu in the Gomtari Alazani valley.

Getting There & Away

When the Abano Pass is open, Niva 4WDs run daily to Tusheti from Alvani, 22km northwest of Telavi, charging 180 GEL for three or four passengers to Omalo. You can also hire one to pick you up for the return trip. Be at Alvani by 9am – they mostly leave from the central crossroads there. The spectacular drive takes about four hours plus stops.

For a cheaper, less comfortable and even more exciting ride, most days a large Kamaz truck carrying a mix of freight and passengers (20 GEL, standing in the back) lurches its way precariously from Alvani up to Tusheti, taking six or seven hours to Omalo. They leave any time between 6am and noon, when they have a load.

Marshrutkas run to Alvani (2 GEL, 45 minutes, once or twice an hour, 9am to 5pm) from the old bus station in Telavi.

KAKHETI კახეთი

The eastern region of Kakheti is Georgia's wine country. Hundreds of different grapes are grown here, and every village has its own particular variety. Almost everywhere you go in Kakheti, at almost any time of day, you'll be invited to a glass of wine and it's easy to find yourself wandering around in a semipermanent mellow haze.

Kakheti is also an area rich in history and was an independent or semi-independent kingdom for long periods. Here you'll find the incredible monastery complex of Davit Gareja, many beautiful churches, castles and mansions around the main town, Telavi, and picturesque Signaghi, which is being developed as the capital of wine tourism.

A very good time to visit is September or October, when the *rtveli* (grape harvest) is being taken in, to the accompaniment of feasts, musical events and other celebrations. Many accommodation places can organise for you to see the harvest in action and join in the partying. The region is famous for its drinking songs, the most famous of all being 'Mravalzhamieri'.

TELAVI თელავი

☎ 350 (international), ☎ 250 (domestic) / pop 22,000

The largest town in Kakheti, Telavi is set in the vineyard-strewn Alazani valley, between the Gombori Mountains and the Caucasus (visible to the northeast). Though of only moderate interest itself, it's the perfect base for exploring the historical, architectural and viticultural riches of Kakheti, and as a jumping-off point for Tusheti in the Caucasus.

History

By the 12th century Telavi was one of the main trade centres in Georgia. In the 13th century Telavi was caught in the onslaught of the Mongol invasion, to revive in the 15th to 16th centuries, and then be twice devastated by the Persia's Shah Abbas I in the early 17th century. In 1672 the Kakhetian King Archil II moved his court back to Telavi from Gremi. In 1744, as the Turks threatened Persian



hegemony in eastern Georgia, Nader Shah of Persia installed the local prince Erekle II in Telavi as ruler of Kakheti. Erekle and his father, King Teimuraz II of Kartli, managed to establish themselves as de facto independent rulers, and in 1762 Erekle united Kakheti and Kartli as a more or less independent state, ruling with a progressive Westernising policy. Erekle still occupies an honoured place in Kakheti annals today.

Orientation

The centre of Telavi is Erekle II moedani, with the Batonistsikhe Castle on its north side. Erekle meoris (Erekle II) gamziri heads 300m northwest from here to an intersection where Ketevan Tsamebuli runs 250m down-

hill (north) to meet another main avenue, Chavchavadze. Telavi's two bus and marshrutka stations are straight on downhill here on Alazani's gamziri – the new bus station on the left and the old one through a short alley to the right after 200m.

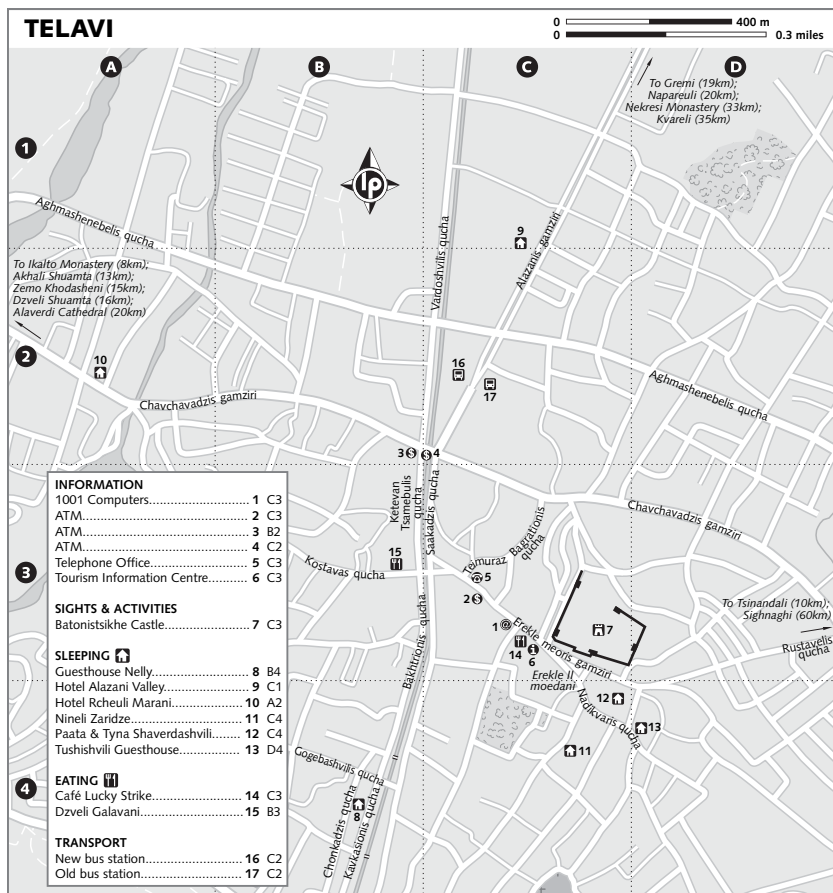
Information

You'll find ATMs around the intersection of Chavchavadze and Ketevan Tsamebuli (near the bus stations), and on Erekle meoris gamziri.

1001 Computers (Erekle meoris gamziri 3; internet per hr 2 GEL; ☎ 9am-8pm)

Telephone Office (Erekle meoris gamziri 10; ☎ 24 hr)

Tourism Information Centre (☎ 76338; Erekle II moedani 12; ☎ 10am-6pm) In an attractive verandahed



building on the main square, with English-speaking staff and information on all Kakheti, including accommodation and winery listings.

Batonistsikhe Castle

ბატონის ციხე

The main architectural and historical feature of Telavi, **Batonistsikhe Castle** (admission 5 GEL, English-speaking guide 6 GEL; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun) was the residence of the Kakhetian kings in the 17th and 18th centuries, built when King Archil II transferred his residence from Gremi to Telavi. Inside the castle yard is a **Persian-style palace** that was constructed in the 1660s, and rebuilt by Erekle II, who was born and died here. The central throne room

holds many historical portraits including one of Erekle himself (above the throne).

The castle precinct contains the remains of two churches: the dilapidated Archil church and a single-naved royal chapel – with holes for firearms in the walls – built by Erekle II in 1758. Included in the admission price are an art museum, with Georgian and western European paintings, and a history museum, in ugly modern buildings behind the palace.

Sleeping

Nineli Zaridze (☎ 71973, 899281144; Akhvediani 11; per person without/with breakfast 20/25 GEL) Nineli's beautiful house, full of antique furniture, is a two-minute walk from Erekle II moedani. The

rooms are large, there's a guest kitchen, and you can have a nice hot soak in the old marble bathtub! Daughter Nino speaks English.

Paata & Tyna Shaverdashvili (☎ 72185; Nadikvari 9; per person 20 GEL) This friendly little homestay has clean, spacious rooms and hot showers, in a quiet house. Nadikvari runs off the southeast corner of Erekle II moedani; at number 9, go through to the back of the street entrance and it's the building in front of you.

Tushishvili Guesthouse (☎ 71909, 877756625; sspiridon@rambler.ru; Nadikvari 15; per person without/with breakfast 25/30 GEL; ☎) This welcoming homestay is an established travellers' favourite and justly so. Hostess Svetlana speaks some English, cooks fabulous dinners (vegetarian available) and is more than helpful in organising local taxi trips and getting transport information. Nadikvari runs off the southeast corner of Erekle II moedani; the house is numbered.

Guesthouse Nelly (☎ 72594, 99581820; Chonkadze 11; per person half board 35 GEL) The six big, bright, modern rooms here, 500m uphill (south) of the centre, share bathrooms with hot showers. Nelly cooks excellent Georgian meals with fresh, locally grown ingredients, and the wine flows. Nelly and her husband between them speak a little English and German.

Hotel Alazani Valley (☎ 74144; www.elgitour.ge; Alazanis gamziri 75; r incl dinner 50-120 GEL; ☎) The lobby is spiffy and the rooms comfy enough, but this early-21st-century hotel already has a few cracks, and the atmosphere is rather soulless.

our pick Hotel Rcheuli Marani (☎ 73030; rcheuli.marani@centerpoint.ge; Chavchavadze 154; r incl breakfast US\$50-70, ste US\$75-100; ☎) New in 2007 and definitely the best hotel in town, the Rcheuli Marani is out of the centre, 800m west of the bus stations. Many of the pleasing, carpeted rooms are equipped with big, traditional-style balconies, and prints of paintings by Pirosmiani and other top Georgian artists add a welcome arty touch. The hotel also has the best restaurant in town and a nice courtyard garden.

Eating

Restaurant provision is rather bare, but luckily if you are in a homestay you'll usually eat excellently.

Café Lucky Strike (Erekle II moedani; dishes 2-6 GEL) This unexciting café next to the tourist office does average Turkish-style kebabs and pizzas.

Dzveli Galavani (Kostava 4; mains 4-8 GEL; ☎ noon-8pm) A friendly little Georgian restaurant doing the best meals outside the hotels and homestays. It has an English-language menu, though not much of it may be available.

Hotel Rcheuli Marani (☎ 73030; Chavchavadze 154; mains 10-15 GEL) Telavi's best eatery is this brick-cellar hotel restaurant incorporating an old wine cellar. A good range of Georgian and Russian dishes is on offer.

Getting There & Away

Marshrutkas to Telavi (6 GEL, 2½ hours) leave Tbilisi's Ortachala bus station about every 30 minutes from 7am to 6pm. There are also shared taxis (per person 7 GEL) from Tbilisi's Isani metro station.

Marshrutkas back to Tbilisi go about hourly from 8.30am to 1pm from Telavi's **new bus station** (☎ 72083; Alazanis gamziri), then more frequently until 5pm from another stop below the petrol station down the street. Shared taxis to Tbilisi wait up the street from the new bus station.

The **old bus station** (☎ 71619; Alazanis gamziri) is through a short alley opposite the new bus station. From here marshrutkas and buses leave for Alaverdi Cathedral (1 GEL, about every 20 minutes, 9am to 6pm), Kvareli (2 GEL, one to 1½ hours, about hourly, 9.30am to 5.30pm), Tsinandali (0.50 GEL, at least hourly, 9am to 4pm) and Signaghi (4 GEL, 1½ hours, at 3pm). Taxis wait on the corner of Chavchavadze and Ketevan Tsamebuli just up the street from the bus stations.

AROUND TELAVI

The villages and lovely countryside around Telavi are full of fascinating places to visit. Public transport reaches many of them (see above), but you can pack a lot more into your day by taking a taxi tour. Telavi drivers will take you to all or most of the following destinations in one trip for 40 or 50 GEL.

Ikalto Monastery იკალთო

This monastery, beautifully situated in a grove of cypresses 8km northwest of Telavi, was one of two famous medieval Georgian academies, the other being Gelati. Shota Rustaveli, the national poet, is thought to have studied here. The monastery was founded in the 6th century by Zenon, one of the 13 Syrian fathers. Six hundred years later King David the Builder invited the philosopher Arsen Ikaltoeli to establish an academy here, where the doctrines

of Neo-Platonism were expounded. In 1616 the complex was devastated by the Persians.

The main **Transfiguration Church** was built in the 8th and 9th centuries, over an earlier church where Zenon was buried, but its appearance was changed in the 19th century by the addition of a brick cupola and the whitewashing of the walls in the Russian style. To the east, the small **Sameba (Trinity) Church** dates back to the 6th century but has been extensively rebuilt over time. There's an interesting small relief of three saints at the top of its façade. The single-naved **Kvelatsminda** (St Mary's Church), to the south, dates from the 12th to 13th centuries. The roofless building behind this was the **Academy**.

Ikalto is 2km uphill from the 'Monastery Ikalto' sign on the Akhmeta road.

Alaverdi Cathedral ალავერდი

At the beginning of the 11th century, when Georgia was entering its cultural and political golden age, King Kvirike of Kakheti had a majestic cathedral built – at 50m high it was the tallest church in Georgia until the recent construction of the Tsminda Sameba Cathedral in Tbilisi. **Alaverdi Cathedral** (☎ 8am-7pm), 20km northwest of Telavi, is the main spiritual centre in Kakheti and a source of great pride and love for the local people. The exterior is classically proportioned with majestic rounded arches but minimal decoration, typical of Kakhetian churches. Inside, one is struck by the structure's beautiful spacious harmony and the light that streams in from the 16 windows in the cupola. The cathedral has been damaged several times by earthquakes, especially in the 15th and 18th centuries. Whitewashing in the 19th century was yet another form of damage and it was not until 1966 that this was partially rectified and some frescoes uncovered. Note the 16th-century St George and dragon over the west door. The Virgin and Child above the altar is from the 11th century.

A nunnery was added to the monastery here in the 17th century, and some members of the royal family took the veil here. Other buildings include the summer palace of Shah Abbas' governor (the ruins of which have now been restored as the bishop's residence), a bathhouse, a bell tower and a recently renovated *marani* (wine cellar).

The September festivities of Alaverdoba last three weeks, climaxing on 14 September,

with people coming from remote mountain areas to celebrate.

Gremi გრემი

This picturesque brick **citadel** (admission to museum & tower 2 GEL; ☎ 9am-8pm) stands on a small hill by the Telavi-Kvareli road 19km from Telavi, just before the village of Eniseli. Both Eniseli and Gremi are famous for their brandy. Kvareli-bound marshrutkas from Telavi will stop here.

From 1466 to 1672 Gremi was the capital of Kakheti, but all that remains of the market, the baths, the caravanserai, the palace and the houses after the devastation wrought by Shah Abbas in 1616 are some not-very-distinctive ruins. The impressive citadel, however, still stands. Within it, the **Church of the Archangels** was built in 1565 by King Levan of Kakheti (who is buried inside) and contains frescoes painted in 1577. The ground floor of the adjacent **tower-palace**, dating from the 15th century, houses a small museum of local archaeological and historical items. From here you climb up inside the tower: a structure in one of the rooms was thought to be a bread oven, but on examination turned out to be a tunnel, not yet fully excavated but thought to emerge in the yard outside. Another tunnel, which you can enter, leads down from the yard to the foot of the walls where in past centuries the Intsoba River flowed, providing a possible escape route from the citadel in times of danger.

Nekresi Monastery ნეკრესი

Nekresi Monastery is 4km off the Kvareli road from a signed turning 10km past Gremi. You have to walk the last 1.5km uphill through woods to the monastery, but it's well worth the effort as the views across the vineyard-dotted Alazani valley and the early Georgian architecture are marvellous, and you may well have the whole place to yourself!

One of the very first Georgian churches was built at Nekresi in the 4th century. In the 6th century one of the 13 Syrian fathers, Abibos, who converted many of the highland Georgians, founded a monastery here. Abibos was killed after he poured water on a Zoroastrian sacred fire.

The first church you reach at the monastery is a three-church basilica from the 8th and 9th centuries. This triple-church plan is unique to early Georgian churches, the three naves being

divided by solid walls into what are effectively three churches. Nekresi's tiny first church, built in the time of King Mirian's grandson Trdati, stands above this in the centre of the complex. It's an extremely small basilica, many times reconstructed. It's thought that its builders had heard about the design of basilicas but not seen any, resulting in a rather idiosyncratic construction with open arches in the walls. Inside, steps lead down to a lower chapel or vault.

East of this basilica is the main Church of the Assumption, another triple-church basilica from the 6th to 7th centuries. Some 17th-century murals adorn the smoke-blackened interior. Beside this is a ruined 9th-century bishop's palace.

Kvareli ყვარელი

☎ 252 / pop 9000

Kvareli, 35km east of Telavi at the foot of the Caucasus, is famous for its semisweet Kindzmarauli wine, and for being the birthplace of the famous Georgian writer, reformer and patriot, Prince Ilia Chavchavadze (1837–1907). Considered by some to be the father of modern Georgia, Chavchavadze was made a saint of the Georgian Orthodox Church in 1987.

Because of the town's proximity to the mountains and their often marauding tribes,

Kvareli's population needed the security of good fortifications. In the 18th century King Erekle II had two sets of walls built, one inside the other. **Ilia Chavchavadze's house & museum** (☎ 20511; Rustaveli 3; admission 2 GEL, tour in Georgian or Russian 5 GEL; ☎ 10am-5pm) contain a defensive tower that was useful on the very day he was born, as Lezgins were at that moment rampaging through the area. This museum has a lot of 19th-century photos and a few personal effects. The house is not very large, but the *marani* is truly impressive.

The importance of wine in Kakheti is demonstrated at the **Kindzmarauli winery**, 3km outside town, by a 2km-long tunnel with 15 side passages (each 500m long) all filled with huge 20,000L metal storage tanks of wine. Kindzmarauli is Georgia's biggest winery and the tunnel is the second biggest wine storage tunnel in the world. The temperature underground is a naturally consistent 14°C, ideal for the preservation of the wines here. Kindzmarauli has no organised visiting programme, but someone will probably show you the tunnel and give you a couple of glasses to taste.

Tsinandali წინანდალი

This village, source of a famous white wine and site of the **Chavchavadze family estate** (☎ 250-71751; Telavi-Gurjaani Rd; admission to gardens free, museum

KAKHETI WINERIES

Wine tourism is something Georgia is striving to promote, especially after Russia, the main export market for Georgian wine, banned imports of it in 2006 (Georgia lost US\$40 million worth of wine exports that year). Organised winery visits and tastings in Kakheti are still in their infancy, but they will undoubtedly become part of the scene. Meanwhile, it's not hard to organise visits and tastings through your accommodation or travel agencies. Here are five recommended and varied Kakheti wineries to consider visiting:

- **Badagoni** (☎ 32-936243; www.badagoni.ge; Zemo Khodasheni) Based at the village of Zemo Khodasheni, Badagoni is Georgia's biggest winery, producing over two million bottles a year – a modern, hi-tech business with Italian investment.
- **Telian Valley** (☎ 32-506088, 32-313248; www.telianivalley.com; Tbilisi gzatketili 3) On the Tbilisi road between Telavi and Tsinandali, Teliani Valley is a recently updated operation with a modern on-site **guest house** (☎ 899363600; per person 90-140 GEL) where wine tours are offered.
- **Shumi** (☎ 250-75333; www.shumi.ge; Tsinandali) A smaller, more typical Georgian winery based in Tsinandali but with 6 sq km of vineyards dotted around the Alazani valley.
- **Napareulis Marani** (☎ 899186414; Napareuli) A family-run operation at Napareuli village, 20km northeast of Telavi.
- **Villa Cinandali** (☎ 250-72500; Tsinandali) The Nikolaishvili family invites visitors to participate in making organic wine at their village home.

5 GEL, museum tour in Georgian, German or Russian 6 GEL; ☎ 10am-6pm) lies 10km southeast of Telavi. Prince Alexander Chavchavadze (1786-1846) was the son of Georgia's first ambassador to Russia and godson of Catherine the Great (but no close relation to Prince Ilia Chavchavadze). Despite his connections, Alexander was three times involved in anti-tsarist activities, for which he was eventually exiled. One of the first Georgian romantic poets, he was visited at Tsinandali by Lermontov and the exiled Decembrist plotters. His daughter Nino married the Russian poet and diplomat Alexander Griboedov in the family chapel here.

In 1854 Lezgin tribesmen from the Dagestan mountains ransacked the Chavchavadze house, kidnapping 23 women and children. Alexander's son David had to mortgage the house to raise the ransom. The hostages were returned, but David was unable to repay the loan and the house passed to Tsar Alexander III. The main room of the house is now a **museum**, with interesting paintings and photos of people and events associated with the house, including the Lezgin raid.

The 200,000-sq-metre park is beautifully laid out in an English style, with fine views, venerable trees and exotic plants such as ginkgo, bamboo, sequoia and yucca. The **Tsinandali Winery**, founded by Alexander's father, Garsevan, is in the northern part. Guides wait at the gate at the top of the estate drive: a two-glass wine tasting will cost you 5 GEL; if combined with a visit to the cellars, which contain wines dating to 1814, plus the gardens and museum, the price is 18 GEL.

Some changes can be expected at Tsinandali as the property has been leased to a Georgia-based company, Silk Road Group, with plans for several million dollars' investment, including one or more small tourist-quality hotels.

Akhali Shuamta & Dzveli Shuamta

ახალი შუამთა და ძველი შუამთა

The convent of Akhali (New) Shuamta and the old monastery of Dzveli (Old) Shuamta stand among beautiful woodlands – a favourite local picnic spot – off the Gombori road west of Telavi. Dzveli Shuamta, dating back to the 5th century, had fallen into disuse when Akhali Shuamta was founded in the 16th century by the Kakhetian Queen Tinatin. The churches at the two sites are fine works of Georgian ecclesiastical architecture.

A 'Monastery 2km' sign, 11km from Telavi, points the way to **Akhali Shuamta**, now a convent again after serving as an orphanage in Soviet times. Wait at the inner gate for one of the nuns to greet you and show you the church (some of them speak English). The brick church has a cruciform design with an unusually high cupola and large crosses inscribed on its extremities. The fine 16th-century frescoes inside portray Queen Tinatin, her husband, King Levan II, and their son Alexander, as well as biblical scenes. Tinatin later became a nun and is buried here. The poet Alexander Chavchavadze (left) is also buried here.

Three kilometres further up the road are the three stone churches of **Dzveli Shuamta**. Nearest to the road is a three-naved 5th- to 6th-century basilica, in a style typical of the earliest period of Georgian Christianity. The next is a 7th-century tetraconch church with a plan derived from the Jvari Church near Mtskheta. Third is another tetraconch church from the same period, but lacking the corner rooms of the otherwise similar middle church.

No public transport comes to Shuamta; a taxi round trip from Telavi is 5 GEL.

SIGNAGHI სიღნაღი

☎ 255 / pop 2000

Signaghi is the most attractive town in Kakheti and has a distinctly Italianate feel to it. Set on a hill 60km southeast of Telavi, the town was developed (over earlier ruins) in the 18th century by King Erekle II, in part as a refuge for the area's populace against Lezgin and Persian attacks. The name Signaghi comes from the Turkish word for 'shelter', *şişinak*. Each of the six entrances in Erekle's 23 tower walls was named after a local village. Erekle invited Armenian artisans and tradespeople to live here, and by the 19th century Signaghi was one of Georgia's leading trading centres. Three-quarters of its houses still date from the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries and a large part of its 4km defensive wall still stands.

Today Signaghi is being ambitiously developed into a tourism hub for Kakheti, with an emphasis on wine. It is already the scene of a big wine festival one weekend each October. In 2007 a huge government-sponsored renovation programme turned the town centre into one great building site, making it hard to determine what the place would eventually look like. But the renovation will maintain

the town's original style, with its handsome galleried houses built around a series of appealing small squares. In the pipeline are new family-style cellar restaurants, wine-tasting halls, new hotels and other accommodation, a government-run tourist information office, and new museums. All being well it will retain its charm with the addition of new facilities.

Set among wooded hills dotted with cypresses, the town has wonderful views of the Alazani valley and the Caucasus beyond. The main section of the 18th-century **walls** runs along the hilltop on the northeast side of town, where you can enter the tiny **Stepan Tsminda (St Stephen's) Church** inside one of the towers on Chavchavadze. Lower down, on the northeast side of town, is the handsome 19th-century **Tsminda Giorgi (St George's) Church**.

Sleeping & Eating

Signaghi is certain to develop many more accommodation and eating options (the tourist offices here and in Telavi will have information). **Hotel Pirosmani** (Davit Aghmashenebeli 6), a new hotel in the excellent small Rcheuli chain (see p109) opened shortly before we went to press. It has a Georgian restaurant and a French café.

David Zandarashvili's (☎ 31029, 899750510; david.zandarashvili@yahoo.com; Tsminda Giorgi 11; per person half board 25 GEL) Down near Tsminda Giorgi Church, this very hospitable and helpful family provides good rooms and excellent food, and is a favourite with travellers.

Nana Kokiashvili's (☎ 31829, 899795093; kksvhl@yahoo.com; Saradzishvili 2; per person 25 GEL, half board 35 GEL) Nana has four nice big rooms and wide balconies in her fine old house on one of the central squares, and provides good, home-cooked, local food. Her daughter Nino (☎ 893229178) speaks English and her husband can often drive guests to local attractions and even as far as Davit Gareja (right).

Other homestays to try, both up near the old town walls, include **Sergo's** (☎ 899393808; Chavchavadze 16) and the **Bejashvili family** (☎ 31736; Chavchavadze 10).

Pancho Villa (☎ 899192356; Tamar Mepi; dishes 3-10 GEL; ☎ 2pm-10pm Tue-Sun) You can't miss the green and orange paintwork of what is undoubtedly the only Mexican restaurant in Kakheti. Run by Shalva MIndorashvili, who took a liking to burritos and salsa while living in the USA, it serves up simple, tasty and filling versions of Mexican dishes, plus Georgian wine!

Getting There & Away

Marshrutkas to Signaghi (6 GEL, 2½ hours) leave every couple of hours from about 7am to 5pm from outside Samgori metro station in Tbilisi, with a similar schedule returning (the first and last from Signaghi are at 7am and 6pm). There's a single daily departure from Signaghi to Telavi (4 GEL, 1½ hours) at 9.15am. A taxi to or from Telavi should be 30 GEL.

AROUND SIGNAGHI

Bodbe Convent ბოდბის მონასტერი Bodbe Convent is 2.5km south of Signaghi, an enjoyable walk on country roads, or you could take a cab for 5 GEL or 6 GEL round trip.

The convent, set among tall cypresses, is dedicated to St Nino (see p73), who is buried here. The little church was originally built, over her grave, by King Mirian in the 4th century. It was converted into a triple-church basilica in the 8th or 9th century and has been renovated several times since. Nino's fairly simple tomb, beneath a recently installed marble slab, is in a small chapel in its southeast corner. The murals were painted in 1823 by Bishop John Maqashvili. A convent, founded here in the late 19th century, then turned into a hospital in Soviet times, has functioned again since 1991. Through an opening just northeast of the church, and then down a steep path of 800m, you can reach a small chapel built over St Nino's Spring, which burst forth after she prayed on this spot, where today locals queue up to drink and splash themselves with the holy water.

DAVIT GAREJA დავით გარეჯა

On the border with Azerbaijan, Davit (or David) Gareja is perhaps the most remarkable of all Georgia's ancient sites, and the most interesting easy day trip from Tbilisi. Comprising about 15 old monasteries spread over a large, remote area, its uniqueness is heightened by a lunar, semidesert landscape which turns green and blooms with flowers in early summer. Monstrously neglected during the Soviet era, Davit Gareja has since seen some restoration and is now again inhabited by monks. Two of the key monasteries, and the most visited, are Lavra (the only inhabited one today), and, on the hill above it, Udabno, which has beautiful frescoes (not to be confused with the village Udabno several kilometres north).

Lavra, the first monastery here, was founded by Davit Gareja, one of the 13 ascetic 'Syrian fathers' who returned from the Middle East to spread Christianity in Georgia in the 6th century. The religious complex grew until there were monasteries spread over a wide area. Here manuscripts were translated and copied, and a celebrated Georgian school of fresco painting developed. The monasteries were destroyed by the Mongols in 1265, revived in the early 14th century by Giorgi V the Brilliant, sacked by Timur and then suffered their worst moment of all on Easter night 1615 when Persian Shah Abbas' soldiers killed 6000 monks and destroyed most of their artistic treasures. In 1675 King Archil initiated some restoration and gave stipends to the monks. The monasteries never regained their former importance but remained working until the end of the 19th century.

During the Soviet era the area was used for military exercises, and some of the first demonstrations of the *perestroika* period in Tbilisi were protests against this vandalism. Ironically, the Georgian army then used the area for training in the mid-1990s. These manoeuvres were stopped when protesters camped in the firing range.

Entrance to both Lavra and Udabno is free, but you may want to leave a donation at Lavra. It takes two to three hours to explore both places at a leisurely pace.

The **Lavra** monastery is on three levels, with buildings dating from many different periods. The watchtower and the outer walls are from the 18th century. You enter by a gateway on the middle level which is decorated with reliefs illustrating stories of the monks' harmony with the natural world. From the gateway you go down past the 17th-century Church of St Nicholas to the lower level, where the caves of Davit and his companions are. Davit and his Kakhetian disciples Lukiane and Dodo are buried in the 6th-century cave Peristsvaleba (Church of the Transfiguration) on this lower level. Monks are now living in the monastery again, but you can't enter their quarters (caves in the rock above those of Davit and his companions), and you should refrain from making too much noise. They will also be offended by inappropriate clothing.

To get to **Udabno**, take the uphill path beside the church shop outside Lavra. Watch out for poisonous vipers on this route, including in the caves and especially from April to June.

When you come level with a watchtower overlooking Lavra, take the path leading straight up the hill. In 10 to 15 minutes you will reach a metal railing. Follow this to the left and up to the top of the ridge, then along the far side of the ridge (where the railing deteriorates to a series of posts). The plains and low hills below you now are in Azerbaijan, and the caves alongside and above the path are the Udabno monastery. Some were churches or chapels or rooms, and their inner walls still bear frescoes painted by the renowned fresco school that flourished here between the 10th and 13th centuries. The monastery's refectory, where the monks had to kneel to eat at low stone tables, is decorated with beautiful light-coloured frescoes, the principal one being an 11th-century depiction of the Last Supper. Paintings on the north wall of what was the main church show Davit Gareja and Lukiane surrounded by deer, a reference to the story that deer gave them milk when they were wandering without sustenance in this remote wilderness. Below them are figures of Kakhetian princes.

Finally the path climbs up to a stone chapel on the hilltop, then down past a cave known as Davit's Tears (because of the spring inside) and the top of Lavra monastery, to the watchtower you passed earlier.

Sleeping

Anyone with a particular interest in staying overnight at Davit Gareja can sleep at the **Seismology Centre** (☎ 899536373; per person full board US\$35-40) run by David Gotsadze, about 600m back from Lavra monastery along the approach road. There are six clean if basic guest rooms, sharing a bathroom and not-very-powerful solar electricity. You should call ahead.

Getting There & Away

There's no public transport to the remote site, but it's possible to do a day trip from Tbilisi using a marshrutka from Didube to Gardabani (2.50 GEL, one hour, hourly from 9am to 5pm), and then hiring a taxi in Gardabani. Most drivers will do the round trip for around 60 GEL including waiting time.

Many Tbilisi tour agencies (p52) run day trips to Davit Gareja, with the benefit of lunch, comfortable transfers by coach or car, and guides (especially useful at Udabno, where some of the caves are a little tricky to find). Rates are typically around 150 GEL

per person for two people or 110 GEL per person for four people.

LAGODEKHI NATURE RESERVE

ლაგოდეხის ნაკრძალი

This remote, 242-sq-km reserve runs up to heights of over 3000m in the Caucasus, above the small town of Lagodekhi in Kakheti's far eastern corner. It's a destination that will appeal to lovers of nature and off-the-beaten-track travel. It's most practicable for those heading into Azerbaijan. The reserve features deep river valleys, glacial lakes and some of Georgia's best-preserved forests, with wildlife including Caucasian turs, wolves, brown bears and lynx. You can make day hikes to waterfalls or to the 11th-century Machistsikhe castle, and there's a three-day, 50km route through the highest parts of the park near the border of Dagestan (Russia).

Accommodation and food are available at the **administration building** (☎ 254-22715, 899385283; vpavliashvili@yahoo.com; Vashlovani 197, Lagodekhi) and a couple of local guesthouses. Some information in English is on the **Department of Protected Areas website** (www.dpa.gov.ge), under 'Services'.

Marshrutkas and slow buses to Lagodekhi (5 GEL, up to three hours) leave the new bus station in Telavi at 7.30am, 8.30am and 1.30pm, and from the old bus station at 3pm. If requested, these may be able to take you on to the Azerbaijan border 4km beyond Lagodekhi. Some buses or marshrutkas run from Lagodekhi across the border to Balakən, Zaqatala or Şəki. Alternatively, take a taxi from Lagodekhi to the border and then a shared taxi to Balakən (AZN1), from which there are marshrutkas, buses and a train to Zaqatala, Şəki and Baku (see p280).

SAMTSKHE-JAVAKHETI

სამცხე-ჯავახეთი

The unpronounceably named southern flank of Georgia is a highly scenic region whose cultural and natural attractions have unfortunately not prevented it from becoming one of the country's most economically backward areas. Its biggest attractions are the spectacular 12th-century cave city of Vardzia and

the beautiful Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park. Also here are the popular spa resort of Borjomi and the ski resort of Bakuriani. Landscapes are very varied, from the alpine forests and meadows around Borjomi and Bakuriani to the bare volcanic canyons of the Vardzia area.

Historically known as Meskheti, the region has played an important part in Georgian history. It was part of Tao-Klarjeti, the collection of princedoms from which the Bagrationi dynasty expanded its power in the 9th and 10th centuries, leading to the unification of most of Georgia under their rule in 1008. A cradle of Georgian culture, Tao-Klarjeti extended well into what's now northeast Turkey, where many interesting Georgian churches and monasteries may still be seen. Tao-Klarjeti fell under Ottoman rule from the 1550s to the 1870s. It was briefly part of independent Georgia after the Russian Revolution, but most of it was reoccupied by Turkey when the Red Army attacked Georgia in 1921.

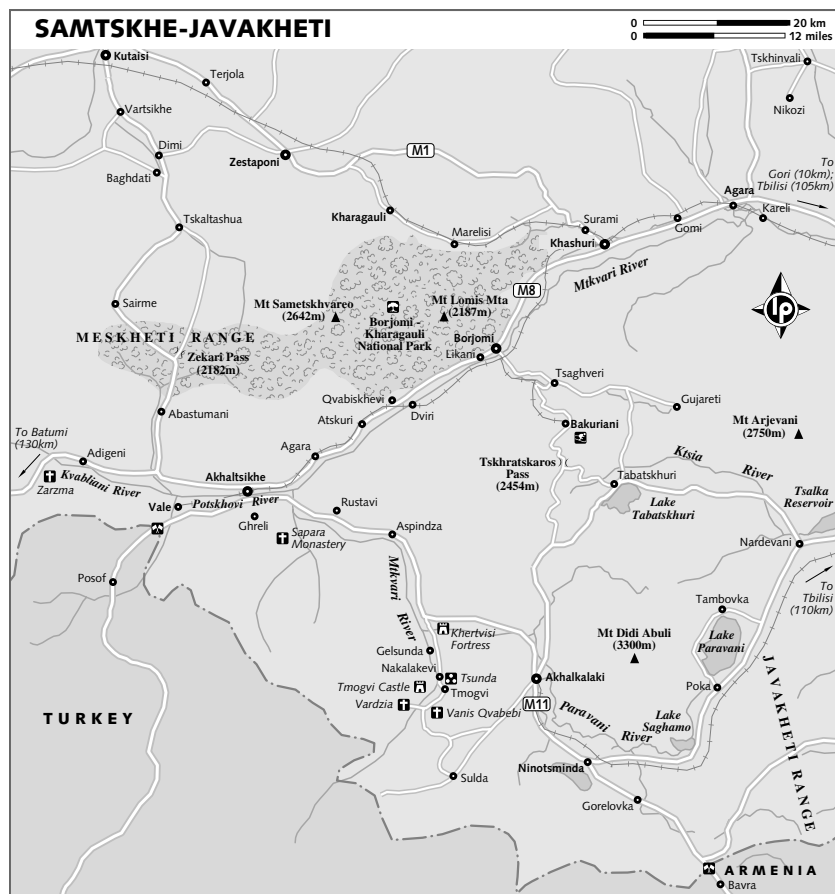
Javakheti is the more elevated southeastern half of Samtskhe-Javakheti. Bordering Armenia, it has a majority Armenian population.

BORJOMI ბორჯომი

☎ 367 (international), ☎ 267 domestic / pop 14,000

Famous throughout the former Soviet Union for its salty-sour, love-it-or-hate-it carbonated mineral water, Borjomi is an attractive resort town clinging to the hills either side of the Mtkvari River, 850m above sea level. The town dates from 1829 when some soldiers discovered the health-giving mineral spring here. A Russian governor of the Caucasus, Count Vorontsov, developed Borjomi as a resort, one that became fashionable with the aristocracy after Duke Mikhail Romanov (brother of Tsar Alexander II) took a liking to it. In the 1890s Duke Mikhail built a summer residence, the Likani Palace, 2km west of the modern centre off the Akhaltsikhe road. It's now a Georgian presidential residence.

During the Soviet era Borjomi attracted enormous numbers of visitors from all over the USSR. After the Soviet collapse, Borjomi's flow of visitors slowed to a trickle, but things are now looking up, with a steady number of new hotels and restaurants opening. Borjomi is a good jumping-off point for Vardzia, and the Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park, right



on its doorstep, offers some of the best hiking in Georgia outside the greater Caucasus.

Orientation & Information

The main road through town and also the main commercial street, Rustaveli, runs along the northern bank of the Mtkvari River. Arriving from Tbilisi in the northeast, you'll notice the tourist office in a glass pavilion between Rustaveli and the river. Beside this, a white suspension bridge crosses the river to the southern half of town, where the Borjomi Mineral Water Park is. The sparkingly renovated Stalin-era Borjomi Park train station is on the south bank, just east of this bridge. Rustaveli changes its name to Meskheti 300m west of the bridge, continuing 300m more to

the bus station and then a further 1km to the national park visitors centre. There are places to stay on both sides of the river. A few ATMs are located along Rustaveli.

Borjomi District Tourism Department (www.borjomitourism.ge) This website has maps and descriptions of walking and horse-riding routes in the Borjomi and Bakuriani areas.

Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park (www.nationalpark.ge) The website has information on the main attractions of Samtskhe-Javakheti.

Internet Café (Rustaveli 26; per hr 2 GEL; ☎ 10am-11pm) Next to the tourist office.

Tourist Information Office (☎ 21397; Rustaveli; ☎ 10am-9pm Mon-Fri, to 6pm Sat & Sun Jul-Sep) Extremely helpful and informative but unfortunately only open for the summer season at research time.

Sights

Borjomi's **Mineral Water Park** (9 April; summer admission 0.50 GEL, other times free) dates from 1850 and is a lovely place to walk. This was where the original water spring was discovered, and named Yekaterinsky Spring after the governor's daughter, who was cured here. To reach the park cross the little Borjomula River just east of Borjomi Park station, turn right and go 600m. The park occupies the narrow, wooded Borjomula valley, and its facilities – cafés, kids' attractions and a cinema – have recently been attractively renovated. Mineral water flows from taps in a pavilion straight in front of the entrance, and a modern cable car (down/up 1/2 GEL) carries you above the park to a hilltop Ferris wheel. If you walk about 3km upstream through the park, you'll find a small, natural, spring-fed swimming pool.

The **Borjomi Museum of Local Lore** (Tsminda Nino 5; admission 3 GEL, tour 5 GEL; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun) is housed in the former Romanov offices, in a street off the western end of Rustaveli. The collection includes china, glass and other articles from the Romanov palace, photos and documentation about the Borjomi mineral waters, some exhibits of local flora and fauna, and a papier-mâché map of Borjomi made in 1917.

Sleeping

Borjomi accommodation used to consist mainly of sanatoria of varying degrees of comfort, but there are now some comfortable hotels as well as copious homestays.

Marina Zulmatashvili's Homestay (☎ 22323, 898184550; Shroma 2; per person incl breakfast 20 GEL) One of the best homestays, with a welcoming family in a cosy house. Guests can use cooking facilities here. Son Giga and daughter Maia, usually here in the summer, speak perfect English. From the south side of the suspension bridge, go up the hill on Kostava, then where Kostava bends left downhill, fork right along an unpaved street. Go right at the end of this, then take the first left and the house is at the end on the left. There are several other similarly priced homestays in the same street (at numbers 3, 4, 8 and 9, for example).

Mzia Gogoladze's Homestay (☎ 21552, 895352580; Rustaveli 21; per person 20 GEL) This is another comfortable and friendly place, though less central: it's just before the Bakuriani turning as you head east out of Borjomi, 2km from the tourist office. Breakfast available.

Hotel Victoria (☎ 22631; Kostava 31; r 40 GEL, ste for 3 100 GEL) Has two quite adequate, pine-panelled rooms with shared bath upstairs, and two rather dark but more spacious 'deluxe' affairs downstairs with kitchen and private bathroom. It's 200m up the hill from the south side of the suspension bridge.

Saodzakho Hotel (☎ 20780; Kostava 2; r 60 GEL) A friendly, family-run, small hotel between Borjomi Park station and the suspension bridge. The rooms are cosy and carpeted, with hot showers, and some have balconies. No food, though.

our pick Hotel Borjomi (☎ 22212; Tsminda Nino 3; incl breakfast s 60-80 GEL, d 70-100 GEL; ☎) A characterful and well-managed place off Rustaveli, next to the museum, this small hotel occupies an attractive tsarist-era mansion and has the most comfortable feel of any hotel in town. The rooms are carpeted and spacious, with private bathrooms.

Borjomi Kheoba (☎ 23072; info@borjomiskheoba.com; Rustaveli 107A; d full board US\$85-165; ☎) Sharing its building with a sanatorium (run separately), this good modern hotel has comfy rooms with top-end touches like toiletries and hair-dryer; some of the more expensive ones are two-level. The pool and the gym are open to hotel guests only. There's also one single room at US\$53 with full board.

Eating

You can get *khachapuri*, *shashlyk*, hot dogs and coffee at the cafés in the Mineral Water Park. In town the main cluster of cafés and restaurants is on Robakidze, just south of the suspension bridge.

Bistro Aguna (Robakidze 2; mains 4-8 GEL; ☎ 9am-9pm) A straightforward café, with small booths for private dining, and tasty, if unimaginative, national standards.

Taverna Nia (Robakidze 1A; mains 4-9 GEL) In a two-storey 19th-century house with attractive wooden balconies, the Nia serves very good Georgian cuisine. It's popular with locals and packed on holidays, when it can be very loud – a great Georgian experience.

Shemoikhede Genatsvale (☎ 23343; Borjomi Park Station; 2-course meal incl drinks 15-30 GEL; ☎ 9am-11pm) A big, bright, new place in the train station, serving excellent Georgian food. *Khinkali* are a speciality but there's lots more. This is a branch of the very good Tbilisi restaurant of the same name.

Getting There & Away

Marshrutkas to Borjomi (7 GEL, 2½ hours) leave Tbilisi's Didube bus station about hourly from 8am to 7pm, with a similar return schedule from Borjomi's **bus station** (☎ 22534; Meskheti 8). Other marshrutkas from Borjomi bus station go to Akhaltsikhe (3 GEL, 1½ hours, about hourly), Gori (4 GEL, 1½ hours, at 7.30am, 10am and 1pm), Kutaisi (7 GEL, three hours, 11.30am and 2.15pm) and Batumi (14 GEL, six hours, 9am). Frequent buses and marshrutkas run between Borjomi and Khashuri (1.50 GEL, 30 minutes), on the main Tbilisi-Kutaisi road, 32km northwest of Borjomi, until early evening.

For those with plenty of time, *elektrichky* from Tbilisi's Borjomi station leave at 7.15am and 4.55pm, taking 4¼ hours to Borjomi Park station. Trains back to Tbilisi leave at 7am and 4.20pm.

A taxi from Borjomi to Tbilisi costs around 80 GEL, while one to Akhaltsikhe costs 30 GEL.

BORJOMI-KHARAGAULI NATIONAL PARK

ბორჯომ-ხარაგაულის ეროვნული პარკი

The ranges of the Lesser Caucasus in southern Georgia are less well known and less high than the greater Caucasus along the country's northern border, but they still contain some very beautiful and wild country.

The perfect chance to get out into this landscape is provided by the large Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park, open from April to October, which spreads over more than 850 sq km of forested hills and alpine meadows up to 2642m high, north and west of Borjomi. You might even see one of the park's 60 brown bears.

Nine marked trails of various lengths, some suitable for horses as well as hikers, crisscross different parts of the park, with overnight accommodation available on the longer routes. Trail 7 is a 3km introductory stroll starting from the **park office and visitors centre** (☎ 267-22117, 899233449; www.nationalpark.ge; Meskheti 23, Borjomi; 🕒 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, to 4pm Sat & Sun Apr-Oct), 1km west of central Borjomi. Trail 1 (Likani to Marelisi) is a 40km, three-day route crossing the park from south to north via Mt Lomis Mta (2187m). A popular day route of five or six hours follows Trail 1 up the Likani River valley then turns down Trail 6 to come out on the Akhaltsikhe road

at Qvabiskhevi. You can make this a two-day hike by continuing up Trail 1 to the Lomis Mta tourist shelter, and then returning down Trails 1 and 6. The longest and hardest route is Trail 2 (Atskuri to Marelisi), a north-south route of 50km, taking three or four days.

To visit the park, you need a ticket (free) from the visitors centre, where you can also obtain maps and information, pay for any nights in the park, and arrange for guides or horses. They also have tents (7 GEL per night), sleeping bags (5 GEL per night), backpacks (5 GEL per night) and camping mats (3 GEL per night) for rent.

Though the trails are marked and you're free to hike on your own, the management recommends taking a park guide (33 GEL per day) because some of the paint markers are damaged or missing, and minor trails can be confusing.

Most guides speak at least some English. You can rent horses for 40 GEL per day for rides from Atskuri or Marelisi.

Sleeping

Four basic wooden **tourist shelters** (per person 10 GEL) provide accommodation inside the park. They have spring water but you need to carry a sleeping bag, food and cooking gear. You can also sleep at the ranger shelter near the park's highest point, Mt Sametskhvareo, but there's no water there. There are **camp-sites** (per person 5 GEL) at the park entrances at Qvabiskhevi, Atskuri and Marelisi.

The park operates small guest houses at the **visitors centre** (r 60 GEL), where the rooms have private bathrooms but there's no food available, and **Marelisi** (per person 20 GEL, breakfast/lunch/dinner 5/6/10 GEL), just outside the park's northern boundary, with four double rooms sharing bathrooms.

Getting There & Away

The visitors centre is a short walk or taxi ride from Borjomi. Marshrutkas running between Borjomi and Akhaltsikhe will drop you off or pick you up at the park's Likani, Qvabiskhevi or Atskuri entry points.

Marelisi is on the Tbilisi-Kutaisi railway, with trains to Tbilisi (three hours) leaving at 4.35am, 5am and 3.15pm. Westbound trains leave Marelisi for Kutaisi and Zugdidi at noon, for Zugdidi at 12.25am and for Batumi at 1.44am.

BAKURIANI ბაკურიანი

☎ 367 (international), ☎ 267 (domestic) / pop 2500

Thirty kilometres up a winding road through pine-clad hills southeast of Borjomi, Bakuriani is the cheaper, and more locally popular, of Georgia's two main ski resorts (the other being Gudauri in the Caucasus, p100). Though new hotels big and small are going up all the time, Bakuriani still has the atmosphere of a mountain village. Developed in Soviet times as a training centre for Olympic skiers, its facilities declined after the Soviet collapse but are now being improved again.

The Bakuriani area is also good for picturesque walks in summer. The climate here is subalpine, with snow usually falling from December to the end of March, but it also has long, warm summers and high ultraviolet radiation.

Approaching the centre of town from Borjomi, you'll turn right (south) up the main street, Tavisupleba. After 500m Tskhakia runs off to the right to the bus station, 120m away, and Tavisupleba becomes Aghmashenebeli. There's a **Tourist Information Centre** (☎ 40037; bakuriani.cenn.ge; Aghmashenebeli 1; 🕒 10am-6pm Mon-Fri) at this corner, where you can find out about good summer walking routes.

The ski season runs from late December to some time in March. The main runs are **Kokhta I**, 1.5km long with a chairlift (per ride 2 GEL), on the eastern edge of town, and **Didveli**, 1.8km with a cable car (3 GEL), to the south. Skiing and snowboarding equipment is available for rent at around 25 GEL a day near the foot of the lifts. You can ice-skate and snowmobile here too.

Sleeping & Eating

Many hotels and guesthouses are scattered around the centre, up Aghmashenebeli towards the Didveli ski run, and along a ring road north and east of the centre which leads to Kokhta-I. In summer most places drop their rates by 10 GEL to 20 GEL.

Sport Hotel (☎ 899537716; Mtsi 28; per person 25 GEL, full board 50 GEL) This friendly small hotel is just 200m from the bus station. The bright, pine-fitted rooms have bathrooms and TVs and there's a nice big upstairs sitting area. The hotel can provide a walking or horse-riding guide for 20 GEL per day.

Hotel Apollon (☎ 40288, 899571108; www.welcome.ge/hotel_apollon; Aghmashenebeli 21; per person full board

US\$40) Another friendly smaller place, with satisfying meals in a cosy dining room, and very comfy, pine-floored rooms with balconies and comfortable wooden beds – 800m up the hill from the centre.

Hotel Villa Park (☎ 40405, 877504747; Rustaveli 25; s/d/tr/q full board from US\$90/120/150/200; 🕒) This is one of the most luxurious hotels in the centre, with a sizable indoor pool, and buffet meals served in the large restaurant. Rooms are carpeted and attractively furnished. The hotel is up a side street 250m from the bus station.

Restaurants are few, as most visitors eat at their accommodation. For a change try **Natali Restaurant** (Tavisupleba; mains 4-10 GEL).

Getting There & Away

Marshrutkas leave Borjomi bus station for Bakuriani (2.50 GEL, one hour) at least four times daily (7am, 9am, 10.30am and 2.30pm). There are also several marshrutkas and buses daily from Tbilisi Didube (p67; bus/marshrutka 7/10 GEL, three hours). Returning to Tbilisi there are eight departures between 8am and 5pm. A taxi from Borjomi to Bakuriani or vice versa costs 20 GEL to 25 GEL.

Slow but scenic trains run to Bakuriani (2 GEL, two hours) from Borjomi's Chornaya Rechka station (by the Mtkvari River, 2km east of the centre) at 6.50am and 1pm, returning from Bakuriani at 9.30am and 3.40pm.

AKHALTSIKHE ახალციხე

☎ 365 (international), ☎ 265 (domestic) / pop 20,000

The capital and biggest town of Samtskhe-Javakheti, Akhaltsikhe means 'New Castle' in Georgian. In fact, far from being new, the castle that dominates the town dates from the 12th century. The local power in Akhaltsikhe from the 13th to 17th centuries was the Jakeli family, but from 1688 until 1828 it was the centre of a *pashalik* (an Ottoman administrative area governed by a pasha). Little of Akhaltsikhe's Soviet-era industry remains, and unemployment is high, but it's a pleasant enough place, mostly used by travellers as a staging post for the cave city at Vardzia and the beautiful Sapara Monastery.

The bus station is on a square on the north side of the Potskhovi River. Cross the bridge over the river and bear right at two forks and you'll be on the main street, Kostava.

A DRIVING FORCE

Krishna Petrosian is Armenian-Georgian, or a Georgian-Armenian if you prefer. Born of Armenian parents, he has always lived in Akhaltsikhe, a southwestern Georgian town with a sizable Armenian population. Most of his life, Georgia and Armenia were part of the same country, the USSR, and Krishna, while not one to harbour regrets, is one of the many who think life was better back then. 'It's not that we were rich, but everyone had enough,' he avers.

You might meet Krishna, a courteous and friendly man in his mid-60s, outside Akhaltsikhe's bus station, where he regularly waits for customers in his 1990 Soviet-built Volga taxi. Though past retirement age, he continues working to make ends meet. Georgia's old-age pension, 39 GEL a month, is far from enough for Krishna and his wife to live on. He is still happy driving, something he has done for a living all his life.

'I trained as a driver during my military service in the Soviet army. Then I drove buses for years, to and from Yerevan. Later I became a taxi driver.'

After Georgian independence he managed to buy his cab from the government-run taxi organisation he had worked for, and set up as an independent driver. He's happy with his Volga, which still purrs along well and gives a smooth, comfortable ride. 'It's a good worker,' he smiles.

The breakup of the Soviet Union turned Krishna, overnight, into an international kind of guy. He speaks Georgian, Armenian, Russian and Turkish, and two of his three children live in Russia. His son is an officer in the Russian army and his elder daughter is married to a Russian general. Money they send home is a big help in keeping their parents and the second daughter, a young widow, afloat. The second daughter is a qualified pharmacist but is unable to find work.

And the Armenians and Georgians here get along OK with each other? 'A lot of Armenians left Georgia after independence, mainly to Armenia or Russia, but everything is fine now.' You sense Krishna is the kind of guy who'll always make the best of things, whatever potholes the road presents.

Rabati

A wander around Akhaltsikhe's *rabati* (old town), with its multicultural architecture, is well worthwhile. This district is on a hill on the north side of the Potskhovi, just west of the bridge. Rare examples of *darbazebi* (traditional Georgian houses) cluster around the castle, which was built in the 12th century and houses a mosque from 1752 and the ruins of a *medrese* (Islamic school). The castle also houses the fine **Ivane Javakhishvili Samtskhe-Javakheti History Museum** (☎ 21622; admission 3 GEL; Kharischirashvili 1; 🕒 10am-6pm Tue-Sun), whose interesting exhibits include a 16th-century manuscript of Rustaveli's *The Knight in the Tiger Skin* and a large collection of Caucasian carpets. The *rabati* also has a synagogue, an Armenian church and a Catholic church.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Meskheti (☎ 20420; Kostava 10; r 25-30 GEL) This superficially renovated ex-Intourist hotel is cheap, central and gloomy. The rooms are survivable, with hot showers.

White House (☎ 20410, 899513595; Aspindza 26; s/d incl breakfast 40/50 GEL, ste 60 GEL) Down a side street off Rustaveli (the Vardzia road), 1km east

of the town centre, the White House seems mainly aimed at NGO staff. The rooms are fairly bare but comfy, with good bathrooms and European-channel TVs. The big and rather ornate restaurant (mains 3 to 6 GEL), with gold-ribbed chairs, is probably the best in town.

Hotel Prestizhi (☎ 893937125; Rustaveli 76; s/d 40/50 GEL, incl breakfast 50/60 GEL) A short distance closer to the centre than the White House, the Prestizhi has a very attentive manager and clean, sizable rooms with large paintings in reasonable taste.

There are a few cafés serving *khachapuri*, snacks and meals near the Hotel Meskheti on Kostava, the main street.

Getting There & Away

The **bus station** (Tamarashvili) is busy with marshrutka and bus departures every hour or half-hour, 7am to 7pm, to Borjomi (3 GEL, 1½ hours) and Tbilisi (10 GEL, four hours), as well as to Batumi via Khashuri (18 GEL, six hours, at 8.30 and 11.30am), Batumi via Khulo (15 GEL, six hours, 10am, about May to September only), Kutaisi (10 GEL, 4½ hours, 2.20pm and 3pm), Vardzia (3.50 GEL, two

hours, 10.30am, 12.20pm, 4pm and 5.30pm), and to Gyumri (15 GEL, four hours, 7am) and Yerevan (25 GEL, seven hours, 7.10am) in Armenia. A taxi to the Turkish border, 20km southwest of Akhaltsikhe, costs 15 GEL to 20 GEL; taxis and minibuses run between the border and the first Turkish town, Posof (12km from the border). It's a four-hour minibus ride on from Posof to Kars.

VARDZIA ვარძია

The drive into the wilderness from Akhaltsikhe towards Vardzia is as dramatic as any in Georgia outside the greater Caucasus. The road follows the course of the upper Mtkvari, passing through narrow canyons and then veering south at Aspindza along a particularly beautiful valley cutting like a green ribbon between arid, rocky hillsides. Thirty-two kilometres from Akhaltsikhe is the village of Rustavi, from where Georgia's national bard Rustaveli hails. After the unremarkable town of Aspindza, you reach the impressive 10th- to 14th-century **Khertvisi Fortress**, where the road to Akhalkalaki and Turkey diverges from the Vardzia road. Inside the impressive walls is a square keep with rounded corners. According to legend, Queen Tamar held a competition to see who could build the best tower. A master stonemason and an apprentice were the contestants. The apprentice outdid his master, who jumped like a bird from the tower and died impaled on the knife in his belt. From the eastern wall two tunnels lead down to the river: one served the castle's inhabitants for water, the other for communication.

Nine kilometres from Khertvisi you come to a stone enclosure beside the road, which is an old **slave market**. Opposite is the turning to

the village of Nakalakevi, whose name means 'a city used to be here'. The city in question was **Tsunda**, which until the 9th century was the capital of Javakheti. Tsunda's remains are just east of the north end of the next village, Tmogvi, 1km further along the road: it's worth stopping to see Tsunda's beautifully ornamented 12th-century Church of St John the Baptist, with, curiously enough, a medieval stone lavatory next to it.

Two kilometres further along the road, but atop a high rocky hill on the other side of the river (which flows far below in the gorge), is the near-impregnable **Tmogvi Castle**, which was already an important fortification by the 10th century. About 1.5km past this, up on the left of the road, are the remains of **Vanis Qvabebi** (Vani Caves), a cave monastery that predated Vardzia by four centuries, with a maze of tunnels inside the rock.

The cave city of **Vardzia** (admission US\$3; 🕒 9am-5pm), 16km beyond Khertvisi, is a cultural symbol with a special place in the hearts of Georgians. In the 12th century Giorgi III built a fortification at the site. His daughter, Queen Tamar, established a monastery here, which grew into a virtual holy city housing perhaps 2000 monks, renowned as a spiritual bastion of Georgia and of Christendom's eastern frontier. The story goes that it was Tamar who, as a child, unwittingly gave the place its name: taken hunting by her father, she strayed from her companions and when called to, answered from the caves '*Ak var dzia*' (Here I am, uncle).

The remarkable feature of Vardzia as it developed in Tamar's reign was that the inhabitants lived in dwellings carved out of the rock and ranging over 13 floors, with the Church

WALKS IN THE UPPER MTKVARI VALLEY

A network of fascinating walking trails has been opened up between Khertvisi and Vardzia, giving access to places like Tmogvi Castle, Vanis Qvabebi and the convent of Zeda (Upper) Vardzia with its 11th-century stone church. You'll notice information boards showing these routes and describing their features in English and Georgian as you travel along the valley. Five routes of up to 8km are marked with yellow-and-black paint stripes and arrows in a project coordinated by the Swiss-based Foundation for Sustainable Development in Mountain Regions. Guesthouses with hot-water bathrooms at Gelsunda, Tmogvi and Vardzia enable you to stay overnight and enjoy exploring this fascinating area: prices including meals range from US\$20 to US\$30 per person. There are plans for a tourist information centre at Vardzia, guide services and an English-language telephone or email booking facility, but meanwhile for more information you can visit tgmproject.googlepages.com or contact coordinator **Malkhaz Jackelli** (☎ 32-752710, 899555032; mjackelli@gmail.com) or guide **Inga Tkemaladze** (☎ 899114506; tkemaladzeinga@yahoo.fr). Both speak English.

of the Assumption at the centre. To the west of the church, in the area that developed out of the 10th-century cave village of Ananuri, you can see 40 cave groups with a total of 165 rooms, and six smaller churches. On the east side are 79 cave groups, 244 rooms and six more churches. The total includes 25 wine cellars!

Guides are usually available at the ticket office; though none speak English, they can help show you the most interesting caves for a tip of a few lari.

At the heart of the cave complex is the **Church of the Assumption**, with its two-arched portico. The façade of the church has gone, but the inside is beautiful. Frescoes portray many New Testament scenes, and on the north wall depict Tamar before she married (shown by the fact that she is not wearing a wimple) alongside her father, Giorgi III. These were painted between 1184 and 1186, the period of the church's construction. The door to the left of the church door leads into a long tunnel (perhaps 150m) which climbs steps inside the rock and emerges well above the church.

Vardzia suffered a major earthquake in 1283, which shook away the outer walls of many caves. As Georgian power suffered successive waves of invaders, the monastery itself declined. In 1551 the Georgians were defeated by the Persians in a battle in the caves themselves and Vardzia was looted. Today Vardzia is again a working monastery and you may meet some of its inhabitants during your visit.

Sleeping

There's clean, basic accommodation with hot-water bathrooms at **Valodia Zazadze's Guesthouse** (☎ 899116207; per person full board US\$20) and a small hotel run by **Gocha Maisuradze** (☎ 898169915, 899543540; per person US\$10). They're next to each other, across the river from the cave city; you can ask at the ticket office for directions. The owners live on site. It's advisable to call in advance if you want to ensure places.

Getting There & Away

On current schedules you can just about make it to Vardzia and back in one day by marshrutka from Akhaltsikhe, or even Borjomi. The first marshrutka leaving Akhaltsikhe, at 10.30am, reaches Vardzia around 12.30pm, giving you just about enough time to see the site and catch the last marshrutka back at 3pm (earlier ones are at 8.30am, 9.30am and 1pm). But it's

more comfortable and enjoyable to do it by taxi, which normally costs 50 GEL round trip from Akhaltsikhe or 120 GEL from Borjomi. Drivers will stop at some of the sights on the way, too.

SAPARA MONASTERY

საპაროს მონასტერი

Rivalling Vardzia as one of the most beautiful places to visit in the region (and receiving just a fraction of its visitors), Sapara Monastery has a dramatic position clinging to the edge of a cliff. It has existed from at least the 9th century, and has numbered among its monks many important figures in Georgian ecclesiastical history. At the end of the 13th century Sapara became a possession of the Jakeli family, whose leader, Sargis Jakeli, was adept at staying on good terms with the Mongols, which enabled Samtskhe to enjoy a peace unusual for the time. When he grew old, Sargis took monastic orders and changed his name to Saba. His son Beka built the largest of the 12 churches here, **St Saba's Church**, named after the saint whose name his father had adopted, one of the most architecturally important churches of its time. The 14th-century frescoes inside are of high quality.

The first church on the left as you enter the complex is **St Stephen's**. To the south is the earliest surviving structure, the 10th-century **Dormition Church**, which used to house a famous 11th-century stone iconostasis (altar screen), Kankeli. Three of the very fine reliefs from this are now in the Fine Arts Museum in Tbilisi (p57), and two are in the museum in Akhaltsikhe (p120).

Sapara is about 12km southeast of Akhaltsikhe, off the Vardzia road. The drive is beautiful, and you will have great views of the monastery 2km before you reach it. Taxis charge around 15 GEL for the return trip from Akhaltsikhe.

GEORGIA DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATION

Georgian accommodation is getting better all the time and very rarely now will you have to stay in a dowdy Soviet-era hotel with flaking paint and cranky plumbing. Tbilisi has dozens of comfortable, modern, midrange hotels charging between US\$50 and US\$150 per double room, many of them

on a refreshingly small, human scale with attentive, friendly service. It also has a fast-growing number of top-end international chain hotels catering to business and official travellers as well as some tourists with particularly generous budgets. Budget travellers can select from a number of homestays or economical guesthouses, usually with dorm rooms. These are definitely not luxurious, but they're usually kept clean and are well run. They're also great places to meet other travellers, and their owners are often very willing to provide travel advice and some help with arrangements.

In the other cities and main regional towns, the choices are similar but cheaper, and usually without the luxury top-end bracket. In the villages in the mountains and elsewhere, the options are usually limited to homestays. These can provide some of your most enjoyable experiences in Georgia, with a warm welcome, and good home-cooked meals usually available, for a typical price of 25 GEL to 40 GEL per person including breakfast and dinner. You may get a private room or you may be sharing. Most of the better homestays now provide hot-water bathrooms. Even in little-visited places where there is no regular homestay, you will still almost always be able to find a bed in someone's home by asking around.

Camping in Georgia is also popular, and a very cheap way to go. There are very few organised campgrounds but equally few restrictions on wild camping. You should be sensible about where you pitch a tent – in the mountains there can be the threat of bears or wolves. If in doubt ask locals. The best place to camp is often in someone's garden, where you'll be enclosed and probably have access to washing facilities.

ACTIVITIES

Walkers, climbers, horse-riders and bird-watchers will be in heaven in Georgia. There are also opportunities for skiing, mountain biking and rafting. The Caucasus mountains stretched along Georgia's northern border provide a vast playground for anyone looking for active travels.

The outstanding hiking regions are Svaneti, Tusheti and the Kazbegi area in the Caucasus, and the Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park in Samtskhe-Javakheti. There are also good walks around Bakuriani in the hills near Borjomi, and a fascinating new network of trails has

been developed in the upper Mtkvari valley near Vardzia, south of Borjomi. On many routes it's fine to go without a guide, though guides are available almost everywhere and recommended for some of the more difficult and remote routes. Serious trekkers will want to do part or all of the route between Kazbegi and Tusheti via the little-known region of Khevsureti. Many walking routes can be done on horseback too, and horses can be rented in many of the same areas.

Give dogs a wide berth everywhere: Georgian mountain dogs are bred for fending off wolves. Peter Nasmyth's *Walking in the Caucasus – Georgia* is an excellent guide to over 40 day routes all around the country. *Under Eagles' Wings* by Katharina Häberli and Andrew Harker covers mountain, horseback and ski touring routes as well as hikes. The **Georgian Speleologists Union** (www.speleo.ge) has a useful website with interactive maps describing walking and horse-riding routes around the country.

The 5047m Mt Kazbek, near Kazbegi, is a classic adventure for climbers, and not too technical. Mt Chaukhi, east of Kazbegi, also presents many exciting routes. Svaneti is another great mountaineering area: twin-peaked Mt Ushba here is the country's hardest climb – potentially dangerous and only for very serious alpinists.

Georgia has two popular ski resorts, with prices much lower than their European counterparts. Bakuriani is Georgia's favourite 'family skiing' destination, while Gudauri, in the high Caucasus, offers longer runs, more developed facilities and the exciting possibility of heliskiing.

Bird-watchers have a huge variety of habitats to head for, from the wetlands of Kolkheti National Park or the mountains of the Caucasus, with their eagles and vultures, to the semi-desert terrain around Davit Gareja. Excellent resources include **Caucasus Birding** (www.birding-georgia.com) and Lexo Gavashelishvili's *Birdwatching Guide to Georgia, Raptors & Owls of Georgia and Vultures of Georgia*.

Rafting is growing in popularity on rivers such as the Pshavis Aragvi, Tetri Aragvi, Mtkvari and Rioni. A day's outing from Tbilisi can cost as little as US\$20 per person. Two recommended rafting outfits are **Georgian Adventures and Tours** (www.geoadventures.ge) and **Jomardi Club** (www.jomardi.ge).

Explore Georgia (p52) is a specialist in activity-based tourism, and other good Georgian tour companies, including Caucasus Travel and GeorgiCa Travel, offer a wide range of active trips.

BOOKS

Disappointingly little Georgian writing has been translated into English, though there are at least four versions of Shota Rustaveli's 12th-century national classic, *The Knight in the Tiger Skin*.

Englishman Donald Rayfield has translated some of Georgia's other leading poets, in volumes such as *Aluda Ketelauri* by Vazha Pshavela and *Georgian Poetry: Titsian and Galaktion Tabidze*.

Perhaps the two most widely published of contemporary Georgian writers both write in Russian and live in Russia.

Several of Boris Akunin's highbrow detective and historical novels in the Erast Fandorin and Sister Pelagia series are available in English, as are Abkhazian Fasil Iskander's *Sandro of Chegem* and *The House Under the Cypress Tree*.

British Georgia-ophile Peter Nasmyth provides a great introduction to the country in *Georgia: In the Mountains of Poetry* (revised 2006), roaming Georgia in time and space, covering its past and present (including the Rose Revolution) and visiting many of the places you are likely to see.

'Rogue reporter' Thomas Goltz gives a shrewd and colourful account of events since 1992 in *Georgia Diary* (2006), aptly subtitled *A Chronicle of War & Political Chaos in the Post-Soviet Caucasus*.

A great read for anyone interested in Georgia's section of the Caucasus, with a bit of Azerbaijan and Turkey thrown in too, is Tony Davidson's *Bread and Ashes* (2003), filled with the character of the land and its people. The author walks from Tusheti to Svaneti, with a couple of detours and many fascinating digressions.

The Spiritual Treasure of Georgia (Khelovneba Publishers, 2005) is a lovely coffee-table tome covering the architecture, art and history of nearly 100 of the country's churches, monasteries and convents, with text in both English and Georgian. *National Treasures of Georgia*, edited by Ori G Soltes (2001), is a similarly lavish look at the whole spectrum of Georgian arts and crafts. For out-and-out

history there's *The Making of the Georgian Nation* by Ronald Grigor Suny (1994).

For a practical introduction to the Georgian language, try *Survival Georgian* by Patricia Hall and Tatyana Bukia (1996), or *Georgian* by Nicholas Awde and Thea Khitarishvili (1997).

BUSINESS HOURS

Food shops are usually open every day from about 9am to 9pm. Other shops tend to open from 10am to 7pm Monday to Saturday. Banking hours are typically 9.30am to 5.30pm Monday to Friday, with a one- or two-hour break for lunch.

Typical Georgian restaurant hours are from noon to midnight.

Any exceptions to this are listed for individual restaurants.

CUSTOMS REGULATIONS

Valuable works of art or antiques require a licence from the **Ministry of Culture** (Map p54; ☎ 932295; www.mcs.gov.ge; Sanapiro 4, Tbilisi) if you want to take them out of Georgia. Some galleries and shops will provide this, but private vendors are unlikely to. You may have to pay a heavy export duty.

Arriving in Georgia, any medicines you carry should be for personal use and accompanied by a doctor's statement. In theory you may have to pay import duty on any item of goods worth more than 300 GEL. There is no limit on the amount of any currency you can bring into Georgia, but you are supposed to declare it on a customs form, of which you will get a copy to keep.

The currency amounts declared on entry can be exported without making another declaration. Customs rules are posted on the website of the Georgian **border police** (www.gb.g.g.e).

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

Foreign embassies and consulates in Georgia include the following (all in Tbilisi unless stated):

Armenia (Map pp48-9; ☎ 959443; armemb@caucasus.net; Tetelashvili 4; ☎ 10.30am-1pm Mon-Fri)

Azerbaijan (Map p56; ☎ 252639, 253526; fax 250014; Kipshidze II-BI No 1; ☎ 10am-noon Mon-Fri, documents distributed 4-5pm)

China (Map pp48-9; ☎ 252286; zhangling@access.sanet.ge; Barnov 52)

France (Map pp48-9; ☎ 934210, 922851; ambafrance@access.sanet.ge; Gogebashvili 15; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-6pm Mon-Thu)

Germany Embassy (Map pp48-9; ☎ 447300; www.tiflis.diplo.de; Sheraton Metechi Palace Hotel, Telavi 20) Consulate (Map pp48-9; ☎ 435399; Davit Aghmashenebeli 166)

Iran (Map p56; ☎ 913656; fax 913628; Chavchavadzis gamziri 80; ☎ 10am-1pm Mon-Fri)

Israel (Map pp48-9; ☎ 964457; tbilisi.mfa.gov.il; Davit Aghmashenebeli 61)

Netherlands (Map pp48-9; ☎ 276200; www.dutchembassy.ge; Sheraton Metechi Palace Hotel, Telavi 20)

Russia Embassy (Map p56; ☎ 912406; www.georgia.mid.ru; Chavchavadzis gamziri 51) Consulate (Map p56; ☎ 912782; Chavchavadzis gamziri 53)

Turkey Embassy (Map p56; ☎ 252072, 252076; fax 220666; Chavchavadzis gamziri 35; ☎ 10am-12.30pm & 2-4.30pm Mon-Fri) Consulate (Map p90; ☎ 222-74790; Memed Abashidze 8, Batumi)

Ukraine (Map p56; ☎ 311161; emb_ge@mfa.gov.ua; Oniashvili 75)

UK (Map pp48-9; ☎ 274747; www.britishembassy.gov.uk/georgia; GMT Plaza, Tavisuplebis moedani 4; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Fri)

USA (☎ 277000; georgia.usembassy.gov; George Balanchine 11, Didi Dighomi, Tbilisi; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri)

Details of other embassies and consulates in Georgia, as well as Georgian embassies in other countries, are on the website of the **Georgian Foreign Ministry** (www.mfa.gov.ge).

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Every region of Georgia has its special festivities. Here are some of the main ones:

Mariamoba (28 August) Day of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, celebrated nationwide.

Alaverdoba (September) Kakheti's main religious celebrations, focusing on Alaverdi Cathedral and lasting three weeks, climaxing on 14 September.

Mtskheto (14 October) Mtskheta's significance is underlined by the fact that its annual festival is also a national holiday.

Wine Festival (one weekend in October) In Signaghi.

Tbilisoba (last weekend in October) All Tbilisi moves into party mode.

HOLIDAYS

New Year's Day 1 January

Orthodox Christmas Day 7 January

Epiphany 19 January

Mother's Day 3 March

Women's Day 8 March

Orthodox Easter Sunday & Monday April or May; dates vary according to the church calendar

National Unity Day/Independence Restoration Day 9 April

Victory Day 9 May

Independence Day 26 May

Mariamoba (Assumption) 28 August
Svetitskhovloba (Day of Svetitskhoveli Cathedral, Mtskheta) 14 October
Giorgoba (St George's Day) 23 November

INTERNET RESOURCES

georgien.blogspot.com Huge number of links to news sites, blogs etc.

www.aboutgeorgia.net Good for cultural and historical background, with interesting maps.

www.civil.ge An excellent news site, with stories from many different sources.

www.tourism.gov.ge The official tourism site sings Georgia's praises in words and pictures but is short on useful practical detail.

www.tourism-association.ge The developing site of the Georgian Tourism Association covers homestays, active tourism and more.

The websites of some of Georgia's TV stations (p126) and its English-language newspapers (below) are excellent sources of news, features and listings in English.

MAPS

Good topographic maps are important if you are trekking or climbing. The best currently available are Soviet military 1:50,000 sheets produced in the 1970s and '80s. You can buy them by email or in person for 5 GEL per sheet (there are around 260 different sheets for Georgia) from Geoland in Tbilisi, which is also a source of other good Georgia maps (see p50).

MEDIA

The Georgian media is probably the freest in the Caucasus. While scrutiny of the government is generally seen as beneficial for the country's democracy, the standard of journalism is variable and some outlets are owned by business figures with their own agendas to pursue. There are also some complaints of government pressure on independently owned media.

Newspapers

The main daily newspapers in Georgian are *24 Saati* (24 Hours), *Rezonansi* (Resonance) and *Sakartvelos Respublika* (Republic of Georgia). The daily *Svobodnaya Gruzia* (Free Georgia) is the main Russian newspaper.

A surprising number of English-language newspapers is available in Tbilisi. Brightest and breeziest is *Georgia Today* (www.georgia.today.ge), which comes out on Friday with a

mix of straight news, features and the excellent *Tbilisi Life* supplement. The daily *Messenger* (www.messenger.com.ge) is reasonably good on news and entertainment listings. The *Georgian Times* (www.geotimes.ge), published on Monday, is pretty dry, but its website has up-to-date news in English.

Radio

The government-funded **Georgian Public Broadcasting** (www.gpb.ge) has two stations: Sazogadoebrivi Radio (Public Radio; 102.4FM) has a worthy mix of news and talk, while Radio 2 (100.9FM) is mainly music, for a mainly middle-aged and older audience. The independent Radio 105 (105FM) and Radio 1 (106.4FM) play music with a broader appeal.

TV

You'll find around 10 Georgian channels on most TVs, including some regional ones, and usually at least one Russian channel. **Georgian Public Broadcasting** (www.gpb.ge) operates two national channels: the main one, Sazogadoebrivi Televizia (Public TV), includes news, documentaries, debates and sport.

Privately owned channels tend to get bigger audiences, especially **Rustavi 2** (www.rustavi2.com.ge), whose broadcasting played a big part in the Rose Revolution, and **Imedi TV** (www.imedinews.ge), part owned by Georgian tycoon Badri Patarkatsishvili and Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, which became a thorn in the flesh of the Saakashvili government.

MONEY

The currency of Georgia is the lari (GEL). It's relatively steady, and was valued at 1.76 to the US dollar in 2007. One lari is made up of 100 tetri (still referred to by many people as kopecks!). Bank notes come in denominations of one, two, five, 10, 20, 50, 100, 200 and 500 lari; coins are one, two, five, 10, 20 and 50 tetri, and one and two lari.

ATMs, generally accepting MasterCard, Visa, Cirrus and Maestro cards, are plentiful in cities and most towns.

They all issue lari and a few will dispense US dollars as well. There are also plenty of small money-exchange offices in most towns and cities; they usually take US dollars, euros or Russian roubles.

It's useful to have some of these currencies in cash for times when there isn't

a convenient ATM nearby. You can make purchases with credit cards at the better hotels, restaurants and some shops in Tbilisi, but much less frequently outside the capital. Travellers cheques can be exchanged only in some banks.

TELEPHONE

The Georgian landline network is ancient, and almost everyone has a mobile phone. You can make calls to landlines within a town from antiquated street phones using a 10-tetri coin. To call a mobile phone or outside the city you'll need to find a call centre.

Mobile Phones

Anyone with a mobile phone can easily get a SIM card for a Georgian phone network. If you're spending a couple of weeks in the country, this is well worthwhile. SIM cards usually cost just 5 GEL, and the three main networks are **Magti** (www.magticom.ge), **Geocell** (www.geocell.ge) and **Beeline** (www.georgia.beeline.net) – see p52 for their principal outlets in Tbilisi. Geocell has the widest coverage, with Magti close behind.

Once you have a Georgian SIM card you can add credit by buying cards with scratch-off codes for units of 5 GEL or more from many shops and kiosks.

Most mobile calls within Georgia, to mobile or fixed phones, cost around 0.28 GEL per minute.

Phone Codes

CALLING GEORGIAN FIXED PHONES

Most Georgian cities have two area codes: one for when you are calling from other countries (usually starting with 3), and another for calls from inside Georgia (usually starting with 2). The Tbilisi city codes are ☎ 32 (international) and ☎ 22 (domestic). Tbilisi fixed phones have six-digit numbers. All other places have five-digit numbers (and three-digit city or area codes).

To call a Georgian fixed phone from outside Georgia, dial the country code (☎ 995), followed by the city or town's international area code, then the number.

To call a fixed phone from another fixed phone in the same Georgian town, just dial the five- or six-digit local number. To call a fixed phone from another fixed phone in a different Georgian town, or from a mobile, dial the long-distance access code (☎ 8),

then the town's domestic area code, then the local number.

CALLING GEORGIAN MOBILE NUMBERS

Georgian mobile-phone numbers have nine digits, starting with 8. To call from outside Georgia, dial the country code (☎ 995), followed by the last eight digits of the mobile number (omit the initial 8). To call a Georgian mobile from within Georgia (from a landline or another mobile), just dial the full nine-digit mobile number.

INTERNATIONAL CALLS FROM GEORGIA

To call internationally from a Georgian fixed phone, dial ☎ 8, then ☎ 10, then the country code, the area code and the number. International calls from Georgian mobiles may require varying prefixes: from Geocell phones it's ☎ + followed by the country code, the area code and the number. Service providers can give you further information.

VISAS

Citizens of EU countries, the USA, Canada, Japan, Israel, Switzerland, Norway, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Andorra, San Marino, Turkey, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, South Korea and CIS nations (except Russia) need no visa to visit Georgia for up to 90 days.

If you're not from one of the above countries, you can get a visa from a Georgian embassy or consulate.

Visas are also issued at the official road and air (but not rail or sea) entry points into Georgia.

The standard fee for a 90-day, single-entry 'ordinary' visa, which covers tourism, is 60 GEL or its equivalent. Double-entry 90-day visas (only available at consulates) are 90 GEL.

Visa-issuing procedures are pretty straightforward and can normally be completed in a matter of minutes at entry points to Georgia, although consulates require a few days for processing.

Border Crossings

Georgia's international entry and exit points are as follows. Visas, for those who need them, are available at the road and air entry points only.

Batumi International airport (visas available) and Black Sea port (visas not available).

Böyük Kəşik Rail border with Azerbaijan – visas not available here.

Guguti/Tashir Road border with Armenia.

Krasny Most (Red Bridge, Tsiteli Khidi, Qırmızı Körpü) Road border with Azerbaijan.

Ninotsminda/Bavra Road border with Armenia.

Poti Black Sea port – visas not available here.

Sadakhlo/Bagratashen Road and rail border with Armenia – visas available for road travellers only.

Sarpi/Sarp Road border with Turkey.

Tbilisi International airport.

Tsodna (Postbina) Road border with Azerbaijan, between Lagodekhi and Balakan.

Vale/Posof Road border with Turkey, reached via Akhaltsikhe.

The border with Russia at Zemo Larsi/Chertov Most, north of Kazbegi, was only open to Georgians and Russians for several years until 2006, when Russia closed it ('temporarily') to everybody.

The crossings from Russia into South Ossetia (the Roki Tunnel) and Abkhazia (Psou River between Gantiadi and Adler) are considered illegal by Georgia. Some travellers who continued on into Georgia after entering South Ossetia or Abkhazia from Russia have been fined or jailed. Others have got away without problems.

Visas for Onward Travel

Twenty-one-day tourist visas for Armenia are issued in a few minutes at land entry points into Armenia for US\$30.

The same visa from the Armenian embassy in Tbilisi costs US\$51 and takes two working days.

Azerbaijan visas (€60 for many nationalities, US\$100 for US citizens and US\$101 for British citizens) are issued on arrival at Baku airport, but if you are going by land you need to arrange a visa in advance. The Azerbaijan embassy in Tbilisi issues them in three working days.

None of the Central Asian countries has embassies in Tbilisi, so it's best to get their visas before you come, though you can apply in Baku for Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan visas (you'll need an invitation letter or tourist voucher for Uzbekistan, and sometimes for Kazakhstan).

Iranian visas are most easily obtained with the help of agencies such as **Persian voyages** (www.persianvoyages.com) – allow at least two weeks for preparation before you actually apply. For

Turkey, most Westerners either need no visa or can obtain it quickly at the border.

WORK

Many foreign businesses and international organisations, including NGOs and charities, operate in Georgia and run their Caucasus operations from Tbilisi. If you want to look

for work with them in Georgia, you should contact their offices outside the country.

There are few direct employment opportunities for foreigners in Georgia, save teaching English. Organisations with large presences in Georgia include the UN, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the International Red Cross.