

# Georgia: Colchis and Svaneti

## Land of Gold, Mountains, & Myth

Dates: TBA

Arrivals: Batumi, Georgia; Departures: Tbilisi, Georgia



### TOUR INSPIRATION...

Last September, a group of us convened in Armenia and then toured portions of eastern Georgia. The trip was arranged (as this one is) by John A. Graham, and I for one was so taken by Georgia and its rich and diverse genius loci merging traditions of spiritual worship with celebration of life and the fruits of the earth (and the nectars they produce), that it seemed imperative to return as soon as possible to see the equally interesting western part of the country, which we had, for lack

of time, to omit. As on that trip, we will be well looked after by John and his two colleagues in Georgian chant, who will bring another dimension to our experience and transform the architectural spaces, from 'frozen music' as Goethe termed it, to the liquid architecture it was intended to become. Another interesting focus of this trip is on architecture as an expression of power and prestige. We will be seeing the age-old churches, representing the appeal and force of a new religion, as well as the defensive towers in Svaneti,



which are unique in the world. They, somewhat like the defensive towers which sprang up in Rome in the middle ages, are each family's expression of position, prestige, and the need to defend themselves. In recent times, after the fall of the Soviet Union and the period of corruption in its wake, President Mikheil Saakashvili was elected in 2004 with the promise of a progressive overhaul of the nation. For him, one symbol and expression of that effort was architecture, and he brought in many of the world's cutting-edge star architects to design public buildings throughout the country. We will see notable examples of this movement in Batumi (Alphabetic Tower), Kutaisi (Airport and Parliament), and Tbilisi (Freedom Bridge, UNM Headquarters Building).



Ornate gold earrings, Colchis, 1500 BC (above); Colchian coins with Greek inscription (below); Territorial map of Early Georgian States (below left);





### TRAVEL PROGRAM...

We begin the tour in the resort and oil-port town of Batumi (airport designation BUS) on the Black Sea coast, and end at the inland city of Tbilisi (TBS), capital of Georgia. The focus of this unique itinerary will be the ancient, medieval, and modern architectural and cultural monuments of the Eastern Black Sea region (ancient Colchis) and highland Svaneti. Venturing inland, we also plan to visit the city of Kutaisi, with its fantastic medieval Christian cathedral sites, National Museum, and spice market. The jewel of the Caucasus is in the highland region of Racha north of Kutaisi, and

after our visit we will travel over the Surami-Likhi range in central Georgia to visit the museums and cultural attractions of East Georgia. Our final day in Tbilisi will include a walking tour of the synagogue, mosque, baths, churches, and carpet shops of Old Town, as well as some of the notable modern monuments such as the Public Services Building by Italian architect Maximiliano Fucksas, before a final banquet featuring the top-rated local cuisine of Georgia. This is a tour of sites, sounds, and tastes to thrill even the most seasoned travelers. Our dedicated team takes excellent care to locate and vet every hotel, restaurant, and transport. The sites of Georgia speak for themselves!

### HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL OVERVIEW...

Ancient seafarers plying the eastern shores of the Black Sea encountered misty and jungle-covered precipices plunging into the coastal beachheads. These were the lands of Colchis, an ancient kingdom that historians date to at least 1300 BC. Strabo, a Greek historian himself from the Black Sea

region, wrote about both Colchis and the Soanes, one of the first references to the allied highland tribes of Svaneti. According to Greek mythology, Colchis was a fabulously wealthy land situated on the mysterious periphery of the Greek world. Here in the sacred grove of the war god Ares, King Aeëtes hung the Golden Fleece until it was seized by Jason and the Argonauts. Colchis was also the land where the mythological Prometheus was punished by being chained to a mountain while an eagle ate at his liver for revealing the secret of fire. The Romans called Colchis the kingdom of Lazica-Egrisi, and we visit two sites from this period: Gonio fortress on the coast, and the Archeopolis fortress inland. A unique language is spoken in former Colchis, and the women in the area have the playful reputation of being beautiful, wily, and shrewd, perhaps like the princess Medea before them.



*Defensive towers, Svaneti (above);  
Chapel, Martvili Monastery, 9th c. (left);  
Synagogue, Oni, Racha, 19th c. (right).*



Traveling up a narrow gorge from the plains of ancient Colchis, the hidden valleys of Svaneti eventually reveal themselves among the snow-capped peaks of the Great Caucasus range. In the 19th century, famous alpinist-explorers such as David Freshfield and Vittorio Sella recorded their travels through the area. Speaking an ancient language only distantly related to the Georgian of the lowlanders, the Svans are a fierce and proud people who have preserved aspects of their ancient rituals and traditions to the modern day. Certainly their three-voiced polyphony is intoxicating, preserving a unique tuning system without parallel in the world. Iconic defensive towers from the 10-11th centuries lend a feeling that these villages have been

frozen in time. But the capital city has been renovated to accommodate growing tourist demand, and now features modern hotel facilities and a ski resort. The neighboring highland region of Racha is described as the jewel of the Caucasus. Our main cultural destination is the unique 12th century Nikortsminda cathedral which has the finest exterior stone-carving in all of Georgia. Further into the mountains, we find a synagogue, one reminder of the pre-emigrant Jewish community that thrived in this highland reach until the late 1970s.

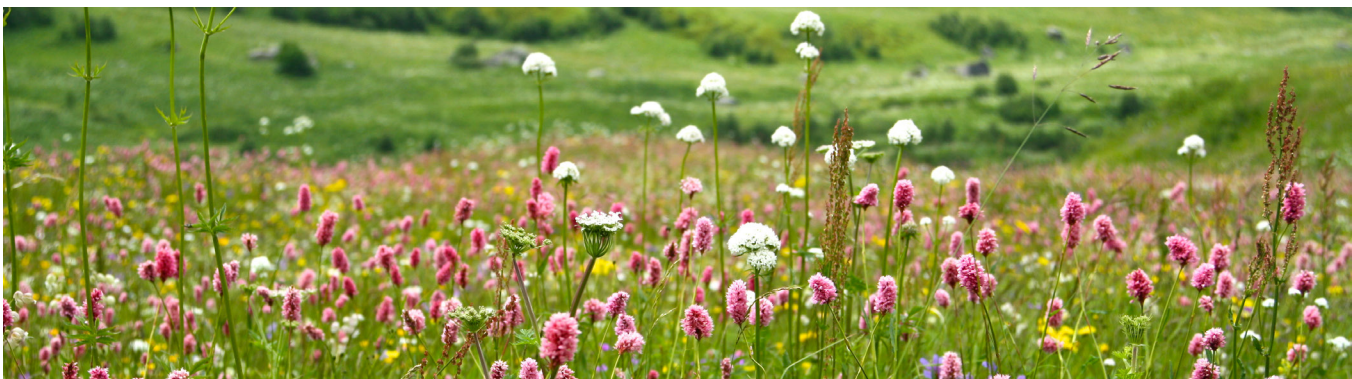
### CHRISTIANITY IN GEORGIA...

Georgia was one of the first states to convert to Christianity in the early fourth century, and it became an important socio-religious factor in the identity of Georgia as it struggled to survive against constantly invading empires. Many local legends describe the preaching of Apostles Andrew and Matias in West Georgia in the first century; Matias is said to be buried in the fortress of Gonio, and on the site where Apostle Andrew cut down a giant oak tree to prevent human sacrifices at Martvili, a seventh-century limestone monastery marks the site. Certainly by the fourth century, Christianity had become stronger as a bishop from Lazica-Egrisi attended the First Council of Nicaea in 325 AD. Monasticism became an important expression of Christianity, with the monarchy and local aristocracy



*Scenes from the Georgian highlands; Mother Mary, 10th c. wall-painting in Chapel of village Khe, Svaneti (top left).*

supporting the construction of fantastic cathedrals in the city centers and ornately carved monasteries in remote mountain valleys. Georgian communities were also active abroad in monasteries in Greece, Antioch, Jerusalem, and Egypt. Christianity took hold in the highland region of Svaneti in the tenth century, when more than



200 chapels appeared in every village and a unique wall-painting tradition flourished. In addition to the early Christian influence, Georgians are culturally closest to the ancient Mediterranean societies with their joy of song and dance, cultivation of the grape, and strong clan affiliation. Over the centuries, Persian, Turkish, and Arab words, cuisine, and values have also entered the Georgian cultural consciousness. Our tour leaders sing the folk songs and chants of West Georgia and Svaneti in each monastery church to bring these festive sites into the realm of sound.

### ABOUT THE TOUR LEADERS...

Ethnomusicologist and Georgian chant scholar, John A. Graham is a Ph. D. candidate at Princeton University, where he is pursuing research for a dissertation titled "The Transmission and Transcription of Georgian Liturgical Music, 1880-1910." He has been leading tours since 2006, and brings his developed organizational skills, knowledge of Georgia, and passion for music and history to our tour. He will be accompanied by two semi-professional singers and ambassadors of their culture: Shergil Pirtskhelani, a native of Svaneti, and Soso Kopaleishvili, a native of the Colchis area.



### ITINERARY...

#### Day 1, Batumi

Guests arriving at the Batumi international airport (BUS) will be met by chauffeur and transported to a 5-star hotel downtown. Dinner with a view of the ocean.

#### Day 2, Batumi

An active first day begins with a city tour of Batumi featuring several remarkable new buildings such as the Alphabetic Tower (2012) designed by CMD Ingenieros. In the afternoon, we'll take a walk through the Batumi botanical gardens, a mountaintop subtropical paradise, followed by a tour of the Roman-era fortress at Gonio.



*Nikortsminda cathedral, 11th c., narthex detail (top), and interior (above); Gelati Monastery, 12th c. (below);*

#### Day 3, Anaklia

Leaving Batumi, we travel north and inland to the heart of ancient Colchis visiting the 4th century Archeopolis city-fortress and the seventh century Martvili Monastery. In the afternoon, we'll return to the Black Sea coast for one night at the Anaklia resort.

#### Day 4, Mestia

We begin with a visit to the 19th century palace museum of the aristocratic Dadiani family, then pass the massive Enguri dam (1978) on our way to Svaneti. Once in the highlands, we'll stop at a local church in the village of Latali before checking into the Mestia hotel, our base for three days.

#### Day 5, Mestia

Optional attendance at Orthodox liturgy in Mestia, or join the group on





an adventure to the top of the nearby peak (via ski-lift) for spectacular views of the Caucasus. Reconvene mid-morning at the superb National museum of Mestia, which includes several illuminated Gospels from the ninth-tenth centuries as well as a large numismatic collection. A walking tour of the defensive towers of Mestia, visit to the Jurgen Mayer Public Service Hall (2011), and a trip to see the 12th century frescoes in a local church complete the afternoon schedule.

*St. George, 11th c., Nakipari village church, Svaneti (left); Lamara Church, 11th c. Ushguli, Svaneti (above); Gold cross detail, Mestia National Museum, Svaneti (below).*

#### Day 6, Mestia

Leaving the bus behind, we'll take 4x4 jeeps on a day excursion to Ushguli, the highest inhabited village in the Caucasus mountains. On the way, we'll stop to see several ninth-century frescoed chapels including in the villages of Ipari and Khe. In Ushguli, we'll take a walk through the towers, and visit the iconic Lamara Church before returning to Mestia for dinner.

#### Day 7, Kutaisi

Leaving Svaneti behind, we return to the lowlands. On the way we'll stop at the 14th century Tsalenjikha church, which features important original wall-paintings commissioned by the from the Byzantine painter Cyrus Emanuel Eugenicus. In Kutaisi, we'll view the International Airport (2013) designed by the Dutch firm UN-Studios, the Kawaguchi Parliament building (2013).

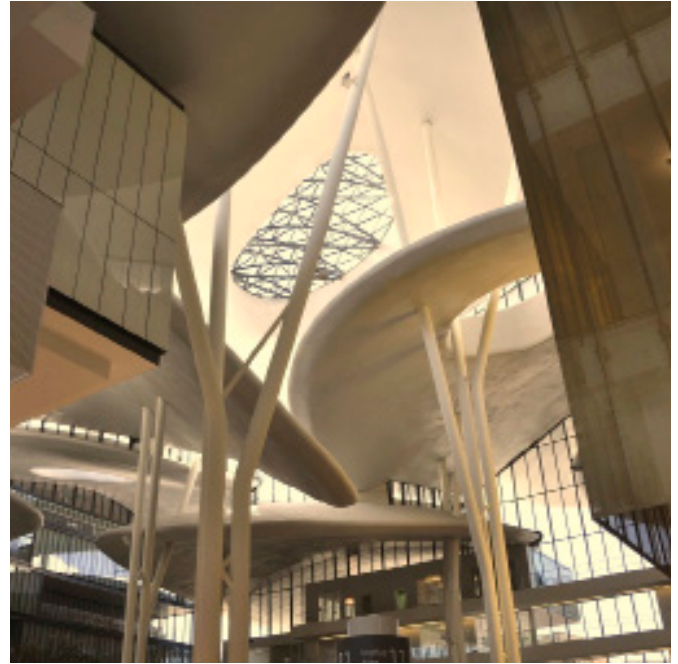
#### Day 8, Kutaisi

Our day includes visits to the impressive Gelati Academy-Monastery and nearby Motsameta Monastery, founded in the early 12th century by king David the Restorer. In the afternoon, we'll visit the reconstructed Bagrat Cathedral (10th c.), and take a walking tour of Kutaisi to see the National Museum, open air spice market, and Soviet-era theater (1924).

#### Day 9, Shovi

The majestic grandeur of the Racha highlands are completely different than those of Svaneti, as massive limestone ridges rise far above verdant river valleys, lakes, and forests. Leaving Kutaisi, we visit the 11th century uniquely-planned hexagonal cathedral of Nikortsminda and the massive 18th century Baratoni church situated above the Rioni River on our way to the Sunset Resort in upper Racha.





#### Day 10, Tbilisi

To begin the day, we'll take a walking tour of the town of Oni, which features a 19th century synagogue, a left-over from the once prominent (and ancient) Jewish community that lived here before emigrating to Israel in the 1980s. Returning to the lowlands, we'll drive East over the Surami pass and take an afternoon rest in Gori with a visit to the Stalin Museum. Evening banquet in Tbilisi, capital city of Georgia.

*Tbilisi House of Justice, Massimiliano and Doriana Fuksas, exterior (above) and interior (above right); Batumi skyline (top left); Tbilisi at night (below).*

#### Day 11, Tbilisi

We know that you'll be excited to visit this fascinating capital city, founded in the fifth century and retaining many important historical as well as modern buildings. We visit the Fuksas Hall of Justice (2012) and concert hall (unfinished), and the newly renovated National museum. In the afternoon, we offer a walking tour of Old Town Tbilisi featuring visits to the Catholic church, several Georgian Orthodox churches, an Armenian church, the one remaining historical mosque, one synagogue, the historic Persian baths, and the Narikala fortress (5th c.).

#### Day 12, Tbilisi

Venturing out of Tbilisi, we take a short excursion up the Mtkvari river to visit the Church of the Cross, an important architectural monument from the 6th c., the monolithic Cathedral of the Life-Giving Pillar (11th c.), and the remains of a Roman bridge built in 65 AD. The afternoon will feature a driving tour of Tbilisi to examine unique architectural buildings. Free time before our final tour banquet.

#### Day 13, Tbilisi

Guests will be transferred to Tbilisi airport to connect to their final destinations.

