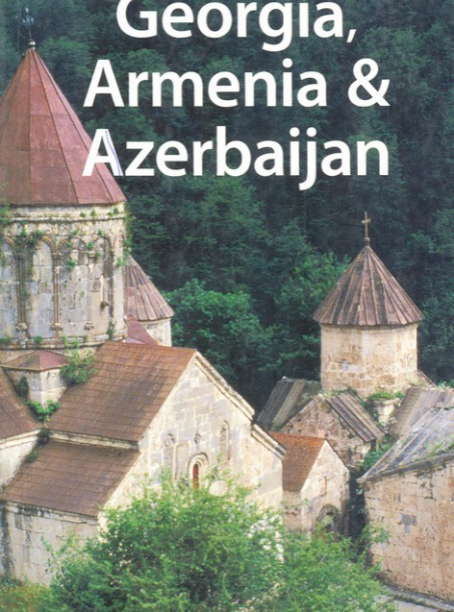


lonely planet

ეროვნული
ბიბლიოთეკა

Georgia, Armenia & Azerbaijan



Quick Reference

Exchange Rates

March 2004

		GEL (lari)	AMD (dram)	AZM (manat)
Australia	A\$1 =	1.52	417	3,682
Euro zone	€1 =	2.54	700	6,176
Japan	¥100 =	1.86	511	4,152
New Zealand	NZ\$1 =	1.33	367	3,235
UK	UK£1 =	3.74	1,026	9,058
USA	US\$1 =	2.06	566	4,996

1 Georgian lari = 100 tetri

For current exchange rates see www.xe.com/ucc/full.shtml

Prices in this guide are in US dollars (US\$) unless otherwise stated.

Telephone Codes

Georgia	☎ 995
Armenia	☎ 374
Azerbaijan	☎ 994

Useful Numbers

AMBULANCE & EMERGENCY 24 HOURS

Georgia & Azerbaijan	☎ 03
Armenia	☎ 103

DIRECTORY INQUIRIES

Georgia & Azerbaijan	☎ 09
Armenia	☎ 109

INTERNATIONAL CALLS

from Georgia	☎ 810
from Armenia & Azerbaijan	☎ 00

POLICE

Georgia & Azerbaijan	☎ 02
Armenia	☎ 102

Key Phrases

GEORGIAN

Hello.	<i>Gamarjobat.</i>
Goodbye.	<i>Nakhvamdiz.</i>
Thank you.	<i>Madlobt.</i>
Do you speak English?	<i>Inglisuri itsit?</i>

ARMENIAN

Hello.	<i>Barev dzez.</i>
Goodbye.	<i>Tstesutyun.</i>
Thank you.	<i>Shnorhakalutyun (Merci).</i>
Do you speak English?	<i>Khosum es Angleren?</i>

AZERI

Hello.	<i>Salam aleykum.</i>
Goodbye.	<i>Saq ol.</i>
Thank you.	<i>Tayakkur edirəm.</i>
Do you speak English?	<i>Siz ingilizca danırsınızımı?</i>

Text Symbols

☎ telephone	☎ 995 994 374
🕒 opening hours	🕒 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22
❄️ air-con available	
🌐 Internet available	
🏊 swimming pool	
s single rooms	
d double rooms	
tr triple rooms	
q quad rooms	
r rooms	
ste suites	
dm dorm beds	
apt apartments	

E84.258
3-wf

Metric Conversions

TEMPERATURE

$$^{\circ}\text{C} = (^{\circ}\text{F} - 32) \div 1.8$$

$$^{\circ}\text{F} = (^{\circ}\text{C} \times 1.8) + 32$$

DISTANCE

$$1\text{in} = 2.54\text{cm}$$

$$1\text{cm} = 0.39\text{in}$$

$$1\text{m} = 3.3\text{ft} = 1.1\text{yd}$$

$$1\text{ft} = 0.3\text{m}$$

$$1\text{km} = 0.62\text{miles}$$

$$1\text{mile} = 1.6\text{km}$$



WEIGHT

$$1\text{kg} = 2.2\text{lb}$$

$$1\text{lb} = 0.45\text{kg}$$

$$1\text{g} = 0.04\text{oz}$$

$$1\text{oz} = 28\text{g}$$

VOLUME

$$1\text{L} = 0.26\text{US gallons}$$

$$1\text{US gallon} = 3.8\text{L}$$

$$1\text{L} = 0.22\text{imperial gallons}$$

$$1\text{imperial gallon} = 4.55\text{L}$$

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ქართული
წიგლმცოდნეობა

Georgia, Armenia & Azerbaijan

Richard Plunkett, Tom Masters



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Destination: Georgia, Armenia & Azerbaijan



საქართველო
Հայաստան
Азербайджан

The Caucasus has always been a region out of the ordinary. For millennia it has been both a bridge and a refuge, a home to mountain clans and ancient peoples and a belt where empires and nomads clash. As late as the 20th century there were mountain men in Georgia wearing medieval tunics and wielding swords.

Like the Balkans, the three nations of the Caucasus seem to have too much history for their modest territories. The region has splintered into three countries and several breakaway statelets since the death of the Soviet empire. The local economies are still recovering from the blow – besides wine from Georgia, cognac from Armenia and oil from Azerbaijan, not many exports flow out of the region. Revolutions make the headlines but the process of Sovietised peoples rediscovering their old crafts and traditions on their own terms continues below the horizons of the international media.

The shores of Lake Sevan, the oil boomtown of Baku, the lush church-studded hills of Georgia, knots of guarded mountain valleys: the Caucasus is its own world. This is an extraordinary ride out from mass tourism into a Eurasian mosaic of cultures and hospitality.







Georgia's beauty takes many forms. On the Black Sea there's lush, subtropical **Batumi** (p68) and its tea-growing hinterland. The ~~two hubs~~ ^{two hubs} ~~of Davit Gareja~~ ^{of Davit Gareja} (p90) are unmissable. Take part in traditional dinners full of toasting, dancing and singing – Georgians are the real 24-hour party people. Explore the beautiful **Racha** region (p76), leap off the map into medieval **Svaneti** (p73), rugged **South Ossetia** (p77) and countless country monasteries and churches.



Venture into the heart of the Greater Caucasus chain at Kazbegi (p79)

Lose yourself in the glories of royal Vardzia (p95)



Explore Tbilisi (p32), the most ramshackle and elegant of the Caucasus capitals





Ancient Armenia has culture to spare. The marvellous monasteries of **Sanahin** (p156) and **Haghpat** (p156) in verdant Lori province are World Heritage sites. Escape to the forests of **Dilijan** (p161) or the shores of **Lake Sevan** (p157), taste wine in the **Areni Valley** (p167), explore the ancient wonders of **Zorats Karer** (p171) and **Tatev Monastery** (p174) deep in southern Syunik, take in the views from **Amberd fortress** (p145), and sample cognac and fruit vodkas everywhere.

Make a wish at the rock-hewn Geghard Monastery (p140)



Feel the awe at holy Echmiadzin (p141), living centre of the oldest legal Christian church



Come face-to-face with ancient cultures and landscapes at Garni Temple (p140)





Take the challenge of a trip to little-visited but endlessly fascinating Azerbaijan. Delve into the gracious Persian/Turkish past in the **Palace of the Shirvan Shahs** (p204), shop for carpets or join the locals for tea and a game of *nard*. The **Abşeron Peninsula** (p215) evokes the planet Tatooine from *Star Wars*, a rusty Soviet industrial desert. Climb into the Mountain of Languages – the eastern Caucasus mountains – to preserved pockets like **Xinalıq** (p222) and **Laza** (p229). Retreat to **Şaki** (p229), a weekend mountain hideaway.

Travel back to the Stone Age with a trip to Qobustan (p235)



Head upcountry to meet the coppermiths of pretty Lahıc (p227)

Taste the oil-boom atmosphere and visit the old city in Baku (p198), the region's biggest city



Getting Started



The national languages are largely unfamiliar to the wider world, so getting by with a few key phrases in the local tongue or in Russian pays off quickly. The Caucasus are recovering economies with ailing health systems, so get decent insurance and, of course, be in good health when you set off. Costs plunge once you're on your feet and willing to stay and dine like the locals – \$40 a day is often as much as you can spend in the provinces. Public transport is best done on marshrutkas (minivans) with limited room for luggage, so you'll thank yourself for packing light before getting aboard. If you can fit everything into airline cabin luggage, you'll save hours of travelling while nursing a backpack on your lap. Get those greenbacks and bring along ATM bank cards – travellers cheques are largely unfamiliar to bank tellers here. Visas are available at all airports and some borders, but you might feel safer with a visa prearranged online or through an embassy. The first few days are always the most discombobulating; book through a travel agency or a hotel for a pick-up from the airport and kick off exploring one of the capitals. A trip to the Caucasus requires a little more preparation than a trip to other parts of ex-communist Europe. A trip here should be approached with the kind of mindset you'd have for a visit to Russia, rather than for a weekend in Prague. A stoic sense of patience when faced with transport delays, dodgy telecommunications and limited local menus is perhaps the most useful thing to bring with you.


See the climate charts (p254) for more information.

WHEN TO GO

Spring and autumn are the best seasons to travel in the Caucasus. Spring can arrive rather late in the high mountains of the Great Caucasus and Armenia, but May and June see meadows bursting with wildflowers. However, sudden downpours and cloudy days can beset early spring. July and August can be rather hot for days on end in the capitals, but

WHAT TO TAKE?

- Less luggage than usual
- Some good reading material (p10)
- A Polaroid camera so you can give human photo subjects an instant memento
- Sturdy shoes – the pavements of old Soviet cities can be cracked and uneven
- Vitamin tablets and hangover pills
- Decent toilet paper (the local variety is alarmingly stiff)
- Comprehensive insurance
- A rainproof jacket
- The peoples of the Caucasus are conservative dressers by and large; black pants and a dark jacket or jumper are a good male uniform; a long skirt and long-sleeve shirt are assets for female travellers
- Toiletries can be hard to find in the provinces, so stock up in the capitals
- Stay in touch with local developments and danger zones (p255)
- The locals couldn't be friendlier or more hospitable in the main, but you still hit the blunt rudeness of Brezhnev-era customer service – make sure you pack your sense of the ridiculous



it's never too far to a mountain retreat. September is quite ideal – warm, calm weather and harvests everywhere. Rich autumn colours cover the hornbeam forests of the mountains in October. Winter is *icy* and slushy in Tbilisi, cold and windy in Baku and downright icy up on the plateau in Yerevan. Competing with crowds of tourists is rarely a problem in the Caucasus: the summer holidays between July and August see beach life on Lake Sevan, picnickers fleeing for the mountains from Baku and some seaside action in Batumi, but it's quiet the rest of the year.

COSTS & MONEY

Accommodation is likely to be the biggest expense, but you can eat well for very little and public transport is cheap indeed. The cost of hiring a car and driver isn't prohibitive except for ultra-low-budget travellers. There are budget hotels and homestays in the capitals for \$10 or less – some are rough, unrenovated Soviet hotels (a story in themselves), while others are cheap and cheerful local homes. Spending about \$40 to \$50 for a double room gets you a nice B&B or a room in a decent little hotel. A splurge-out meal in the capitals might cost \$15, but in the provinces a full meal could be less than \$5. Travelling from one end of a country to the other costs around \$10 on public transport. Marshrutkas (minivans) are the quicker, more expensive option, while buses and trains are slow, in varying degrees of decrepitude and damn cheap. The US dollar is the most popular foreign currency in the region, and while local currencies may fluctuate, the cost of food and accommodation tends to be quite stable when converted to US dollars. For those reasons, prices in this book are given in US dollars.

Tipping isn't expected but given the low wages of waiters and staff it sure is appreciated. The usual 10% applies to Western-style restaurants. At local restaurants \$1 or 50¢ in local currency is usually plenty. With taxi drivers you should settle on a fee before setting off, and add a gratuity when you leave or just hand over the agreed price. Exchange rates are given on the inside of the front cover and in the country directories, but be aware that rates do fluctuate. Travellers cheques are a real hassle to change outside of a few big city banks – cash up with an ATM card in the capital with \$100 to \$200 in local currency and that'll last a week or two in the provinces. After that, you're probably ready for some bright city lights and nonlocal food again. Carrying US dollars is the best insurance – shops everywhere happily swap greenbacks for lari, dram or manat at fair rates. A credit card is handy for cash advances, splurging on one of the better hotels, and maybe buying a carpet, a beaten copper *plov* plate, a Soviet military uniform or a precious metal icon of St George in dragon-slaying mode.

READING UP

Books

The New Great Game: Blood & Oil in Central Asia Lutz Kleveman details the Machiavellian power plays between the US, Russia, local barons and Big Oil in the Caspian Sea oil and gas bonanza.

Imperium Polish journalist Ryszard Kapuscinski gets right into the awful absurdities of the USSR, and includes some up-close reporting of the insurgency that marked the beginning of Karabakh War in the late 1980s.

Among the Russians Colin Thubron travelled the open routes of the USSR in the early 1980s, including Georgia and Armenia. It still gives a strong evocation of an era that echoes everywhere in the Caucasus.

The Crossing Place: A Journey among the Armenians A stunning evocation of the 20th-century Armenian catastrophe and survival by Philip Marsden.

www.armenianow.com

Lively webzine based in Yerevan, covering the social transitions and struggles as well as interesting insights into distinctive places and traditions.

www.bakupages.com

A magazine on Baku, with features on arts, culture and politics. Also includes an excellent collection of links.



Georgia: A Rebel in the Caucasus and **Georgia: In the Mountains of Poetry** In these two books Peter Nasmith has produced accessible, creative investigations of the passions of Georgia.

Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War Thomas De Waal, a long-time journalist covering the former USSR, gives a highly detailed, rather dry account of the brutal Karabakh War, which ruined Armenia and Azerbaijan in the early 1990s.

Adventures in the Caucasus Alexander Dumas travelled through the region in 1858, just as the Russians were subduing Imam Shamil's revolt, and wrote a colourful, amusing account of his journeys.

A Hero of Our Time Mikhail Lermontov's 1840 classic of a bored, cynical Russian officer in the Caucasus; shades of modern conditions and politics abound in this sorely neglected masterpiece.

RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL

Travellers should be sensitive to their impact on local environments and societies, and try to spend their money in ways that benefit local communities. Try to buy local products, not imports, but avoid buying souvenirs made from rare species (or even meals in the case of barbecued bear meat). Litter at picnic sites is a problem everywhere. Don't contribute to the mess, and if you're on a tour make a point of seeing that litter is disposed of responsibly.

Sex tourism does exist in the Caucasus, and the number of prostitutes has exploded since the fall of the USSR. Be warned that besides the health risks (HIV/AIDS is getting a grip in the region), the racket is largely controlled by the mafia; if you get robbed, absolutely no-one will feel sorry for you.

The custodians of churches and Muslim pilgrimage sites earn very little except from the sale of candles and little souvenirs. Even if the idea of paying to visit a religious site seems irksome, as little as 30¢ makes a difference. Religious sites aren't erected for the benefit of travellers with video cameras; wear respectable clothing and don't treat the worshippers or clerics as exotic photo subjects.

The staggering hospitality offered so often in the Caucasus is hard to refuse but shouldn't be taken advantage of. The tables groaning with food are given with all the generosity the hosts have. This can be a tricky one to navigate around - you don't want to insult your hosts by offering money, but you don't want to leave them short of basic necessities either. If you stay overnight and wolf down a few feasts, it's thoughtful to leave a small gift behind on the bedside table. Presenting money to your hosts with a flourish may well cause offence. Inexpensive boxes of chocolates and sweets are sold everywhere and make good 'thank-you' gifts.

With the pervasive poverty it's sometimes hard to remember how well educated people are. That taxi driver might be an academic moonlighting to supplement a meagre government income. The people of the Caucasus see their countries as recovering economies, not developing ones, and it's tactful to refer to them as such. Foreigners giving money to beggars can infuriate proud locals, so keep it discreet if you feel compelled to give.

www.parliament.ge

Georgian government-run introduction to travel, with lots of maps, details and resources for travellers.

www.lonelyplanet.com

This up-to-the-minute travel website includes country profiles and the Thorntree bulletin board, where you can post questions on the region and compare experiences with other travellers.

Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTES



COAST TO COAST

One Month / Baku to Batumi

Baku (p198) has a big-city boomtown buzz; explore the Old Town and the vibrant nightlife. Venture into the **Abşeron Peninsula** (p215) for a taste of Mad Max-style industrial decline. The weirdness deepens at the mud volcanoes of **Qobustan** (p235). Head for the mountains of old **Şaki** (p229) to get a taste of the laid-back Azeri culture. Continue west into Georgia and the urban quaintness of **Tbilisi** (p32), then the splendours of the old capital, **Mtskheta** (p53). Take a detour to mountainous Armenia; **Vanadzor** (p151) is a fine base for exploring the World Heritage monasteries of **Sanahin** (p156) and **Haghpat** (p156). Continue on to **Yerevan** (p118), packed with cafés, galleries and museums. From Yerevan take easy day trips to holy **Echmiadzin** (p141) and the rock-hewn **Geghard Monastery** (p140). Marvel at turquoise **Lake Sevan** (p157) and stay in forested **Dilijan** (p161). Return to Tbilisi and venture up into the Mountains at **Kazbegi** (p79). There's more Soviet weirdness in Stalin's hometown of **Gori** (p56), on the way to pretty **Kutaisi** (p60), with the Bagrati and Gelati cathedrals nearby. Finish up in **Batumi** (p68) in Adjara, a distinctive little region. It's just a short hop from Batumi to Turkey.

A trip through the heart of the Caucasus, visiting the three national capitals and most of the region's best-known sights.



CITY TO CITY

One month to six weeks / Yerevan to Baku

The Armenian capital **Yerevan** (p118) has its share of drab Soviet construction but the views south to holy Mt Ararat more than repay a visit. The core treasures of the ancient Armenian church are close by: **Khor Virap monastery** (p146) sits beneath Ararat's snowy peaks; **Geghard Monastery** (p140) once protected the Holy Lance that pierced Christ's side at his crucifixion; and **Echmiadzin** (p141) is the Armenian Vatican, home to the Catholicos of All Armenians and a wealth of treasures (including the Holy Lance). **Tbilisi** (p32) is the most attractive city in the Caucasus, with tree-lined boulevards, charming old churches and the pride of Georgian culture. Take excursions to the old capital at **Mtskheta** (p53) and to the Stalinist lunacy of the dictator's museum in **Gori** (p56). The cave monasteries of **David Gareja** (p90) on the arid edge of the Azeri border are also close by. Combine your sightseeing with frequent feasts of Georgian food and wine. Travel on to Azerbaijan through **Şaki** (p229), a mountain town with an 18th-century khan's palace. **Baku** (p198) lies by the oil-rich Caspian Sea, the world's biggest inland body of water. The medieval walled city at Baku's core is well worth exploring, as is the city's early 20th-century boomtown architecture. While in Baku, take an excursion into the raw, primordial landscape of petroglyphs and mud volcanoes at **Qobustan** (p235). The heights of the eastern Caucasus are also close by, sheltering ancient pockets of languages and cultures. The Jewish community of **Quba** (p220) speaks an ancient Persian dialect, and is well worth a visit.



A trip centring on the better quality accommodation of the three capitals, plus excursions to some of the cultural and natural wonders of the Caucasus.

ROADS LESS TRAVELLED



DISTANT MOUNTAINS, HIDDEN VALLEYS

ՅԵՐԵՎԱՆԻ
 ԵՐԵՎԱՆԻ ԿԵՆՏՐՈՆԻ
 Two months or more

Nagorno-Karabakh is a self-declared Armenian republic hacked out of Azerbaijan. The ruined Azeri ghost city of **Agdam** (p186) is possibly the most striking place in the Caucasus. **Gandzasar monastery** (p186), on the other hand, is both a living religious centre and ravishingly beautiful. The adjacent region of southern Armenia has some amazing sights: the petroglyphs of **Ughtasar** (p171); the Stonehenge-like astronomical observatory of **Zorats Karer** (p171); and **Tatev Monastery** (p174) perched above the deep slash of the Vorotan Canyon. The Georgian Caucasus Mountains are wracked by instability but if conditions are OK then the high valleys and stone towers of **Svaneti** (p73) shouldn't be missed; **Mestia** (p73) makes a good base in the area. The adjacent region of **Racha** (p76), including ancient **Nikortsminda** (p76), is safer and richly forested. The mountains of southern Georgia hold Queen Tamar's cave complex at **Vardzia** (p95), and a back door into Turkey at Posof. Alternatively, head deep into the south of Azerbaijan, where the mountainous Talysh region offers lush and spectacular scenery, sleepy towns and remote mountain villages, including **Lerik** (p242), and **Lankaran** (p240). Lastly, swing through Baku and onto **Quba** (p220) and **Şaki** (p229), remnants of an older, less industrialised Caucasus.

A thorough exploration of the lesser-known corners of the Caucasus. Accommodation in the regions might not be up to Club Med standards but local hospitality more than compensates. For people with language skills, a sense of adventure and more time than money.



The Authors



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Coordinating Author

Armenia & Nagorno-Karabakh



RICHARD PLUNKETT

Richard grew up on a farm near Avenel in Victoria, Australia. He first saw an Armenian church in the backstreets of London, and then started running into them all over the place – Dhaka, Singapore, Syria...even Tamil Nadu! Richard has written guidebooks for Lonely Planet on Central Asia and the Middle East as well.



TOM MASTERS

Azerbaijan & Georgia

Tom first went to the Caucasus in 1999 when he absconded from a particularly dull university course in Russia and took a three-day train ride south. Getting drunk in the mountains and swimming in the Black Sea proved to be far more enjoyable than studying Russian grammar, and this led to a repeat visit in 2001. Since finally finishing his Russian degree at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies in London, Tom has worked in journalism, TV and radio. While accepting that he'll probably spend the rest of his life visiting the former Soviet Union, he now wishes he'd studied Spanish.

THE SURREAL CAUCASUS

A place where the locals exclaim that drinking vodka has medicinal benefits, but no-one trusts the water supply. Where gleaming gold teeth complement polyester summer dresses with Brady Bunch designs. A region with dozens of brands of cigarettes and vodka, but mostly only one brand of toilet paper. With brassy Soviet monuments, cracked plazas with mega-fountains and possibly the last statues of Stalin still standing. A place where paunchy police stand at roadside checkpoints with prostitutes, and shops close for Brazilian soap operas on TV. Where independent countries barely believe they exist – when Richard went to get a visa for Nagorno-Karabakh, the consul complained that his Armenian visa had expired. Yes, but that's another country, isn't it? Tom, on the other hand, was chased by wolves in the mountains of Azerbaijan and barely escaped on horseback. A place where mud volcanoes fart in the deserts of Azerbaijan, animal *matagh* sacrifices drip from Armenian shrines, and many Georgians think Stalin wasn't as bad as everyone says. It's a weird place, the Caucasus, and that's only part of the reason we like it so much.

Snapshots



CURRENT EVENTS

At the moment the south Caucasus consists of two countries with an unresolved territorial war (Azerbaijan and Armenia) and one deeply fractured country (Georgia). There are two breakaway statelets (Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabakh) and a couple of others that darn well act like it (Adjara and South Ossetia). The good news in the region is the economic recovery that's underway. Armenia and Azerbaijan have both been experiencing economic growth of 10% or more per year since 2000, although you won't see the impact of this much beyond Baku and Yerevan. Georgia's economy is showing signs of picking up, though from a very low base. The other good news is that there hasn't been a war in the region since 1994, though the conflicts over Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabakh could restart unless the US, a new player in the region, and Russia keep the pressure on. Signs are fairly positive here – the US wants stability and access to Caspian oil, while Russia broadly speaking wants the same, though in competition with the US. The region is sandwiched between its much bigger neighbours and traditional conquerors. The entire population of the region is something like 12 million, compared with 65 million in Turkey, 145 million Russians and 75 million Iranians. Millennia of history have created a complex web of alliances and feuds among the regions, countries and neighbouring powers of the Caucasus, feeding tensions that bedevil the region today.

Democratic processes aren't exactly thriving in the region. Georgia is the healthiest democracy, yet the last two changes of president have been via revolution. Armenians believe democracy can't change anything and sullenly voted Robert Kocharian back into power in flawed elections, while Azerbaijan has undergone a dynastic change in power from father Heydar Aliyev to son Ilham Aliyev.

The only real success stories among the states that emerged from the USSR are the Baltics, which are collectively trying to show the Caucasus states the way forward, out of dead industries and floor-to-ceiling corruption, and into the EU. Georgia and Armenia see themselves as EU candidates, though no-one thinks it can happen soon. Poverty levels are high across the entire region: up to 70%, or perhaps even more, of the rural population live on less than \$1 a day. Many breadwinners have left to find work in Russia or further abroad, and remittances have grown into one of the region's most important sources of income. The relatively large Armenian diaspora (10 million strong, compared to 3,150,000 in Armenia and Karabakh) and its wealthy benefactors have played a vital role in that country's nascent recovery. Many plans for international road and rail links through the Caucasus have been proposed, but the closed borders and rickety infrastructure have put paid to them.

At least in the cultural field the region is starting to appear on the world stage. Georgian theatre companies and national orchestras are winning acclaim abroad, while Georgia even sent a team to the 2003 Rugby

In the winters of the mid-1990s Georgians were forced to puncture the oil pipeline to Azerbaijan for heating fuel – thousands and thousands of holes had to be patched up.

Georgian quip about the lack of government control: in our country the central government is very, very central.

TIMELINE A long, long time ago

Prometheus escapes captivity in the Caucasus after arson charges

A bit later

Noah grounds on Mt Ararat, having lost the unicorns, dragons etc

World Cup in Australia. The dislocation brought about by the collapse of the USSR and the separatist and nationalist demons it unleashed still haunt the region. It takes a great deal of faith to see a peaceful, prosperous Caucasus in the immediate future; after all the disasters since the break of the USSR in 1991, the people of the Caucasus truly deserve it.



HISTORY

Neolithic tribes inhabited the region at least 100,000 years ago. Some historians believe that some of the basics of civilisation such as astronomy and astral time-keeping emerged from the Caucasus, rather than from Babylonia or Sumer further south in Iraq. The Aryans emerged from somewhere in the region perhaps 4000 years ago and swept east to create Vedic India. Greeks, Romans and Persians brought the classical pagan faiths and philosophies to the Caucasus over the 1000 years before Christianity took hold, creating rich local cultures under the Iberian and early Armenian kingdoms. Under Pompey the Romans arrived, with dozens of translators, before ceding the region in long wars with the Persians. The pattern of the flowering of local kingdoms interspersed between periods of domination by Persia or the Mediterranean world put the Caucasus in the same complicated region-between-region position it occupies today - it's European, Middle Eastern and Asian while also a region in itself. With land routes open in four directions the Caucasus frequently became a highway for invaders - Byzantines from the west, Arabs from the south, Persians from the southeast, and Khazars, Scythians and Russians from the north.

The Armenian church records that two apostles visited their country and won followers in the decades after the death of Jesus, and in 301 Armenia became the first nation to embrace Christianity. The Georgians and Armenians established their distinctive alphabets and architecture by the 6th century, while Persian Zoroastrians influenced the early Kurdish tribes. Islam arrived in the form of the Arab caliphs in the 7th century, setting up emirates across the region. The next great influence came with the Turkmen nomads of the 8th century, followed by the Seljuk Turks and the Mongols. Frequently devastating militarily, they soon settled down into Muslim khanates on the plains and valleys, and developed complex relations with mountain-bound Christian princes and dukes.

Inevitably the tide shifted again and Persia took hold, while the Ottoman Turks swept away the Byzantine Empire in the 15th century. The civilisation of Shiah Persia emerged from Turkic-speaking Azerbaijan in the 16th century, and the distinctive Azeri fusion of Persian and Turkish languages began. As luck would have it, this put the Caucasus, still home to Christian Georgian kingdoms and Armenian mountain lords, on the frontline between Islam's great schism - Sunni versus Shiah, Ottoman versus Persian.

Peter the Great began the great Russian push south in the 1720s, first capturing the Caspian coast as far as Baku before being pushed back by the Persians. The first of many long Russian novels about the wildness of the Caucasus, flashing spurs, mountain guerrillas and shifting alliances began appearing not long after. Pushkin, Tolstoy, Lermontov and others brought the region to Western literary life. The Russians pushed further south for more than 100 years, holding all of the modern-day Caucasus region by 1830. Many Armenians emigrated to the Russian-held corner of

'Where the Caucasus should be classified has been a puzzle since the dissolution of the USSR. Should we see it as part of Europe or Asia, the Middle East or the former USSR?'

JOHN J. HANCOCK, UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

'What an exciting country the Caucasus is! If only the snow were not so cold and the roads so bad!'

ALEXANDER DUMAS, 1858

F86-258
3



66 BC


The Romans under Pompey capture the region, long wars between Persia and Rome follow

AD 301

Armenia adopts Christianity as its state religion

'After all, who remembers the Armenians?'

RODOLPH WELTER, PLANNING THE
ARMENIAN GENOCIDE IN 1915



their traditional homeland, while Circassians and other Muslims went the other direction into the Ottoman Empire. Russian colonialism developed with the 19th century – the first oil wells struck black gold in Baku in 1848, and Tbilisi (Tiflis) grew as an urban centre. The Russians divided the region into provinces with no attention to ethnic boundaries. The 19th ideologies arriving with formal education brought socialism and nationalism, which soon grew among all the varied nationalities of the south Caucasus – Georgians, Abkhaz, Ossetians, Armenians, Azeris and Kurds. The boom-town oil fields of Baku brought wealth as they brought working conditions reminiscent of the Californian and Australian goldfields. Gracious colonial garrison towns such as Alexandropol (Gyumri) grew up, and during the heyday of global trade before WWI the vineyards, churches and mountains of the Caucasus began attracting European tourists as well.

The horrors of WWI scarred the Caucasus deeply. The sinister military planners of Ottoman Turkey launched the Armenian genocide of deportations, massacres and death camps in 1915, while the Russian and Turkish armies slaughtered one another for two years. The October Revolution saw the departure of the Russian forces, and the sudden emergence of an independent Caucasus in 1918. The Transcaucasus Republic barely lasted a month before Georgians, Armenians and Azeris turned on one another and formed their own republics, while a resurgent Turkish army under Mustafa Kemal regrouped and pushed east as far as Baku, and the Red Army came south to reclaim the region. The three young republics faltered and fell to the Bolsheviks, and the Caucasus again came into Moscow's empire.

Stalin's 'prison of nationalities' didn't favour his own Georgian ancestry, and neither did the Great Terror of the 1930s. There's a street of apartment blocks in central Yerevan that was almost entirely populated by academics and their families in the 1920s. By the time Stalin died, only three of the 60 or 70 families were still in residence, the rest having been banished to the Gulags or murdered. The pressures eased after Stalin's death. Corruption worsened but many, probably most, people from the Caucasus look back to the Brezhnev era as a halcyon age of stability and jobs. Others see it as a period of brainwashing and manipulation – 'they once gave half of what we needed, so we had to cheat to get the other half' is one such opinion. It's fair to say that everyone was surprised when the USSR unravelled in 1990–91, but the Caucasus played its part. The 1988 earthquake in Armenia and the bungled reconstruction effort matched the growing discord over the status of Nagorno-Karabakh, an autonomous Armenian region within Azerbaijan. Naxçıvan became the first part of the Soviet Union to declare independence, beating Lithuania by a few weeks in January 1990, but soon rejoined Azerbaijan. A heavy crackdown on Karabakh militants by first Soviet and then Azeri forces almost erupted into a Cold War scenario after independence, as Turkey sided with Azerbaijan, and Russia belatedly began supporting Armenia. For more on post-independence developments and history, see the country chapters.

PEOPLE

It might be useful here to remark on each nationality's view of its neighbours. The Armenians may have fought a war with the Azeris, but person to person they much prefer them to the Georgians, whom

Stalin's mother believed her son should have stayed at the seminary and become a priest.

Winston Churchill had a taste for Armenian cognac, which Stalin obliged in some quantity.

they see as proud, wilful and only superficially Christian. The Georgians don't like the Armenians much either. They regard the Armenians and the Azeris as being less sophisticated and European than themselves. The Azeris, with 800,000-odd refugees among them, are bitterly opposed to the Armenian occupation of Karabakh and its surrounding territories. An Armenian joke sums it up well: a boy asks his grandfather why the Armenians haven't sent a man into space. The old man replies 'If the Armenians sent a cosmonaut into space, the Georgians would die of envy. If the Georgians die of envy, the Armenians will die of pleasure. And if the Georgians and Armenians die, the Azeris will be left with all the land.' Add in some other feisty nationalities, notably the Abkhaz, Ossetians, Chechens, Lezgins and Talysh, and the Caucasus is like Asia and Europe in miniature.

The USSR positively encouraged mixed marriages, and the only Armenians still living in Azerbaijan tend to be those married to Azeris and their children; likewise the only Azeris still in Armenia are those in mixed marriages. Otherwise the ethnic cleansings of Azeris from Armenia and Armenians from Azerbaijan during the late 1980s and early 1990s was extremely thorough. The Russian and Ukrainian minorities have also largely departed the region, unless they too are in mixed marriages. Baku, the biggest city in the region, has the largest remaining Slavic community.

RELIGION

Socialist atheism has given way to materialism for many urban dwellers, but the religions of the Caucasus withstood 70 years of Soviet suppression and have been steadily reviving. Attending a mass or prayer service anywhere in the Caucasus leaves you with the impression that people are finding relief in belief more than ever. Georgia is a particularly multi-cultural country but the main faith is the Georgian Orthodox Church, aligned with the Greek and Russian Orthodox churches. Georgian liturgical music is particularly beautiful. The Armenian Apostolic Church was the first legal Christian church in the world, dating back to AD 301.

The Armenian church has followed a lonely, independent path separate from the Orthodox and Catholic faiths. It belongs to the Oriental Orthodox churches, along with the Assyrian, Coptic Egyptian and Ethiopian churches. The Armenians have always been mobile as well as pious, and they have held onto a quarter of Old Jerusalem beside the Jews, Muslims and other Christians since at least 1000 years ago.

Azerbaijan is the only Turkic country to follow Shia Islam, established here in the 16th century by the Persian Safavid dynasty. Some Abkhaz, Georgian and Kurdish peoples follow mainstream Sunni Islam. The Yezidi Kurds living on the highlands around Mt Aragats in Armenia are among the last followers of the independent Yezidi religion in the Middle East, following an ancient mix of Gnosticism, mystic Islam and hints of the old Persian religion, Zoroastrianism. Yezidis have leaders named sheiks who keep their holy books secret. There have been Jewish communities living peacefully in Georgia and in the mountains of Azerbaijan for millennia, though many have emigrated to Israel since the end of the USSR.



Nagorno-Karabakh is a **blend of Russian, Turkish and Persian words**. Leased apart, it means 'mountainous (Russian), black (Turkish) garden (Persian)', which sums up its imperial pasts and its landscape.

About three million people, out of a total regional population of 15 million, have left since 1991 – most dramatically from Abkhazia and Armenia.

1830s

Russia consolidates control of present-day Caucasus


1919–20

Bolsheviks take control of the region, minus western Armenian provinces

www.eurasianet.org

Daily news and occasional features on the Caucasus and the Central Asian states, plus excellent analytical pieces.

Full exploitation of the Caspian's oil reserves is held up by bitter disagreement over whether it is a sea or a lake – the distinction changes the maritime boundaries under international law.



People in the Caucasus tend to identify with their religion, even if they don't attend churches or mosques. The old traditions of tying bits of cloth to wishing trees, visiting shrines and graves and spending lavishly on funerals is pretty common everywhere, more so among rural Georgians than the urban sophisticates of Baku. There's no particular stigma in claiming to be an atheist in the Caucasus, though people might persist in asking what religion your family belonged to.

ENVIRONMENT

The different habitats of the Caucasus embrace deserts, glaciers, forests and steppes, and many endemic species. Harsh Soviet-era industrialisation left scars all over the Caucasus; the postindustrial desolation of Azerbaijan's Abşeron Peninsula shows it clearly enough. Deforestation has been going on for millennia – the stark plains around Georgia's Davit Gareja monastic complex were once covered in woodlands – but was stepped up with the energy shortages of the 1990s. The loss and degradation of crucial forests is a risk in Georgia and Armenia in particular, along with black-market logging of the thick belts of beech, oak and hornbeam on the lower mountain slopes and larch, pine and spruce higher up. Add in a couple of nuclear plants and some outdated gas- and oil-extraction technology and the present picture is a difficult one. For the future, it's perhaps not so encouraging that Azeri oil is by far the region's biggest global export. Conservation movements were some of the first civic organisations to appear as a result of Gorbachev's 1980s *glasnost* (openness) reforms. In some ways the pressure has eased on the environment since the fall of the USSR – pesticides aren't used with such giddy abandon and some of the nastier polluters such as chemical plants have shut down. The region has a scattering of nature reserves and national parks, although hiking-trail brochures and ecotours are barely heard of. In Soviet times many nature reserves were off-limits except to scientists, and the local communities are sometimes only vaguely aware that a reserve appears on a map of their neighbourhood. Many of the nature reserve offices are only functioning at a skeletal level, and if you have an interest it's a good idea to visit and try to sell the impression that national parks are a real asset, not just government land. The reserves protect some rare and spectacular animal species, including the Persian leopard, the lammergeier (or bearded vulture) with a 2.5m wingspan, brown bears, several species of mountain goat and deer, and wild boar. The plains of Azerbaijan and Eastern Georgia are home to jackals, lynxes and Persian gazelles, while the saline waters of the Caspian hold threatened populations of seals, prehistoric caviar-bearing sturgeon, and pike and perch.

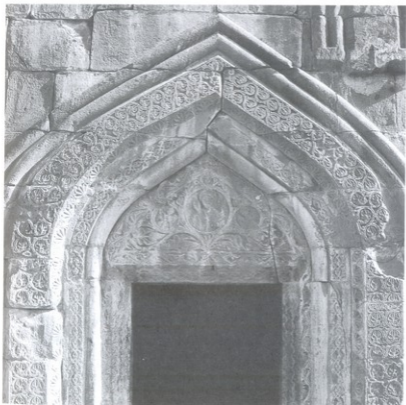
1991

Break-up of USSR, countries gain independence, Karabakh and Abkhazia wars escalate

1994

Regional economies hit rock bottom, ceasefires established, millions of refugees

Georgia



Georgia

საქართველო



ქართული
ენი

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FAST FACTS

- **Area** 69,500 sq km
- **Capital** Tbilisi
- **Famous for** The Golden Fleece, possibly inventing wine, Stalin, mountains and dancing
- **Official Name** Sakartvelo
- **Phrases** *Gamarjobat* (hello), *Madlobt* (thanks)
- **Population** 5.4 million, 288,00 IDPs





Wherever you enter Georgia your first impression is likely to be of beauty, ~~of beauty~~ and of the diverse. Georgia lives up indeed to the great travel writing cliché of the 'land of contrasts': steep cliffs through which waterfalls pour down to the turquoise waters of the Black Sea coast, the incredible snow-capped peaks of the Caucasus Mountains to the north, and the wild semidesert of the east. This natural beauty is broken up by human additions as well: lone ancient churches that seem to cater to no-one, cave cities inhabited by monks, and the inevitable disused factories, bleak legacies of Soviet five-year plans.

The most consistently beautiful country in the former Soviet Union it may be, but another unsung attraction of the country is its good-humoured, hospitable people, whose dominion over their guests (and the constant pouring of wine and *chacha*, Georgia's national spirit) borders on the compulsive. You'll be féted, fed, watered, made to sing and dance, all in incomprehensible Georgian, one of the world's most unique languages. Even if you can't understand much more than your hosts' smiles, the warmth you'll experience here will help you understand why Georgia remains a highlight of many people's travels.

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Tbilisi** (p32) – The delightful old town, sulphur baths, tree-lined avenues and Mtkvari River; Tbilisi is the most charming Caucasian capital and a great base for exploring Georgia.
- **Kazbegi** (p79) – Tsminda Sameba Church silhouetted against mythic Mt Kazbek is a truly breathtaking sight; plus superb trekking.
- **Davit Gareja** (p90) and **Vardzia** (p95) – Ideally visit both, but if time is limited, visit at least one of these ancient religious complexes.
- **Adjara** (p67) – Lush semitropical vegetation, rolling green hills, enchanting Batumi and cliffs, beaches and waterfalls on the road south to Sarpi – Adjara shouldn't be missed.
- **Svaneti** (p73) – The unique Svan culture, the ancient defensive towers and the best alpine scenery in the south Caucasus are incomparable.

ITINERARIES

- **Three Days** Concentrate on Tbilisi, the fascinating capital, and perhaps take a half-day trip to Mtskheta on the second day to get a feel for Georgia's ancient Christian heritage. On the third day, a day trip to Vardzia or 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, where you can enjoy walking in the spectacular Caucasus Mountains.
- **Two Weeks** You can make your way comfortably from Tbilisi to the Black Sea coast with plenty of time to stop and see places on the way. One good route would be to see all the places listed above, as well as a side trip to wine-soaked Kakheti, before continuing to Gori and Kutaisi, another significant historical city, then on to Adjara and Batumi.

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. The winter can be grim everywhere, mainly due to power shortages, although thanks to the buffer of the Caucasus Mountains that protects the country from the freezing northern winds, Georgia rarely freezes. There is a surprising amount of rain year-round. See p254 for climate charts.

GEORGIA



26 GEORGIA



1:1,000,000

© 2004 National Geographic Society

0 100 200 Kilometers

0 100 200 Miles

CURRENT EVENTS

After a tumultuous decade that changed everything in the country, Georgia finally came blinking into the light of some kind of stability at the start of the 21st century. The 1990s had been a rollercoaster ride from independence, civil war, the secession of Abkhazia, conflict in South Ossetia, and the presence of Chechen rebels in the Pankisi Gorge to economic meltdown, energy crises, refugees and a kidnapping problem that made it almost as dangerous as Colombia. It's unsurprising that tourism failed to take off, really.

It has taken military intervention from Russia, a US military presence, and huge aid packages from the West, but Georgia's future looks a great deal brighter now than it did in the late 1990s. Most importantly, peace looks like it will hold. The Abkhazian secession may have left Georgia without one of its most economically important areas – the country's biggest beach resorts and, crucially, the vital train link to Russia – but the conflict has been contained for now, and while not in Georgia's favour, there is no more fighting.

Domestically, the first years of the millennium saw people lose all faith in the man who had at one point offered Georgia its only hope of national unity and who had staved off a total collapse into anarchy in the late 1990s – President Eduard Shevardnadze. Since 1992 the former Soviet foreign minister had allowed endemic corruption to continue unchallenged, and ultimately lost even the support of his backers in Washington, paving the way for mass protests that finally boiled over into a popular revolt in November 2003. After highly flawed parliamentary elections, a group of protestors gathered outside the national parliament in Tbilisi, promising to remain there until Shevardnadze resigned from office. While at first looking just like

the countless opposition rallies that had gone on throughout the 1990s, the protestors captured the imagination of the frustrated inhabitants of the capital. They had offered another summer of power cuts and economic hardship. Led by former protégé-turned-opposition leader Mikhail Saakashvili, the throng finally invaded parliament while Shevardnadze was addressing the newly assembled delegates. Humiliatingly bundled out the back door by his bodyguards, Shevardnadze announced his resignation the next morning, citing a desire to prevent bloodshed as his principal reason.

When presidential elections were held in January 2004, Mikhail Saakashvili stormed into office with a landslide, and set the tone for his presidency by announcing campaigns against the corruption and nepotism that have plagued Georgia's economic development since independence. While the challenges facing the new Georgian government are enormous, the significance of the 'Rose Revolution' is still resonating throughout the former Soviet Union, and particularly in the Caucasus, making democratic change a serious possibility for the region for the first time since the USSR collapsed.

HISTORY

The Georgians are an ancient people who know themselves as Karthians, tracing their origins to Noah's great-grandson Karthlos. Historically, Georgia was a jigsaw puzzle of small kingdoms including Colchis (legendary land of the Golden Fleece) on the Black Sea, Abkhazia to the north and Iveria to the east.

Converted from paganism by St Nino in the 4th century, Georgia was the second country to adopt the Christian faith, following Armenia's conversion a quarter of a century beforehand. King Gorgasali (446–502), still considered by many to be the father of the nation, created a powerful nation and moved the capital from Mtskheta to the current seat of government, Tbilisi. However, there followed four centuries of occupation by the Persians, the Byzantine Empire and the Arabs.

The first united Georgian kingdom was formed at the start of the 11th century by King Bagrat III. King David II Aghmashenebeli (the Builder), who came to the throne in 1089, drove the Seljuk Turks out of Tbilisi and made Georgia into something

GEORGIA INDEX

Litre of petrol 60¢

Litre of bottled water 50¢

Bottle of beer 50¢–75¢

Souvenir T-shirt \$5–10

Street treat – *khachapuri* (cheese pie) 25¢–50¢, *chebureki* (meat pie) 50¢

of a local superpower. This flourished into the golden age during the reign of Queen Tamar (1184–1212), when great advances in culture and the arts were made.

The Mongol invasion in 1220 brought this period of great progress to an end and Georgia was sacked and split up into rival kingdoms until the arrival of the Russian empire in the 18th century. Due to the continuing threat to Georgia from Persia, King Irakli II turned to Russia for protection, feeling it would be better to be ruled by an Orthodox land than a Muslim one. This led to the Treaty of Gergievsk being signed in 1783, paving the way for Georgia's annexation and the removal of the Georgian royal family in 1801. Russia's control of Georgia lasted almost unbroken from then until 1991.

Despite brave attempts to assert its independence in the wake of the Russian revolution in 1917, Georgia was eventually annexed by the Bolsheviks 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 Josef Stalin, a cobbler's son from 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 still looked back upon with great nostalgia by older Georgians as a time of public order, peace and high living standards. Yet by the mid-1980s the government of Mikhail Gorbachev began its policies of reform and the USSR disintegrated over a period of just six years.

Georgia became an independent republic again in 1991 and almost immediately descended into chaos. Celebrations of the renewal of statehood were drowned out by the sounds of heavy street fighting in Tbilisi in December 1991, when for two weeks rebel national guards and other paramilitary forces battled in the city centre to overthrow the first postindependence president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia. He was forced to flee to the unlikely sanctuary of Chechnya, and in his place a military council took power. The post-Gamsakhurdia ruling council gained an international respectability it might otherwise have lacked 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. On 11 October 1992 parliamentary elections effectively legitimated the post-Gamsakhurdia changes and Shevardnadze was elected chairman of the parliament and head of state.

While the presence of what the West then considered to be a trusted and respected democrat did wonders for Georgia's reputation abroad, it was internal conflict that characterised the immediate postindependence period for the country. A truce on 24 June 1992 did at least put an end to the fighting which had been going on between Georgians and Ossetians in the autonomous region of South Ossetia since 1989, but in August of the same year an even more serious conflict erupted in Abkhazia, Georgia's second autonomous republic. For more details about this bitter ethnic war, see p67.

In September 1993 Georgia suffered a comprehensive defeat in Abkhazia, which had two major consequences. Firstly, Gamsakhurdia saw this as an opportunity to recapture power from Shevardnadze, and as the Georgian army was scattered and shattered, his irregular forces were able to advance almost unopposed towards Kutaisi, Georgia's second city. Shevardnadze's quick negotiation of support from Russian troops in the country brought this short but bloody civil war to a quick end, however, and Gamsakhurdia died in 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 in Abkhazia. The economic burden that refugees entailed for the country was all the more severe in view of the fact that the Georgian economy was already on the brink of collapse.

Since then, Georgia has oscillated between periods of relative peace and security and terrible crime waves, gang warfare, infrastructural collapse and rampant corruption. There were no fewer than two assassination attempts on former president Eduard Shevardnadze, who, despite his enormous failings as president, had at least staved off a total collapse into anarchy.

Georgia embarked on a fresh period of hope following the Rose Revolution of November 2003. This brought an ignoble end

to Shevardnadze's presidency and swept 35-year-old Mikhail Saakashvili to power, making him Europe's youngest president. Quite how long the current optimism can last is hard to say – the enormous problems faced by the country will require a lot of hard and contentious decision making. Yet, as anybody in Georgia will tell you, nobody could be worse than Shevardnadze.

PEOPLE

The Georgian people are perhaps one of the main draws to the 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 Georgian cooking and lengthy toasting ceremonies (see p31), you can't claim to have seen the real Georgia.

The National Psyche

Georgians are irreverent, good humoured and generally high spirited – the absolute opposite of their neighbouring Russians who have dominated them for the past two centuries. A good demonstration of the Georgian character can be had as a guest in a Georgian home, where you'll be treated like a monarch and fed and watered until you can take no more. Few things can offend a Georgian, but refusing a drink is one of them.

Georgians are proud of their culture, but nationalism is rarely felt – Georgians tend to identify with their own regions more closely than the country as whole, which is something of a mishmash of different nationalities. While some dislike the influence Russia has had over the country for the past two centuries, most Georgians speak good and often fluent Russian and find it hard to totally dismiss their northern neighbour, having absorbed so much of her culture. Towards the Armenians and Azeris a gentle superiority is felt, despite the fact that Georgia's economy and infrastructure are in a far greater mess than either of theirs. Azeris in particular are the butt of many a Georgian joke about stupidity and sexual deviance, although relations are generally very positive otherwise.

Lifestyle

Georgians lived better than anyone else in the USSR – their agricultural wealth made

food readily available, meaning few people suffered in the way that most of the USSR did from huge queues and shortages of all but the most basic products. Despite unemployment and a huge first job lottery, Georgians still live relatively well, often growing their own food, keeping their own animals and having large families who look out for each other.

Most Georgians outside Tbilisi live in big traditional homesteads, often housing three or more generations of a family. Like most Caucasians, Georgians love to sit up late and talk, and aren't generally early risers.

Population & Multiculturalism

Georgia is a cobbling together of different nationalities and cultural identities – some more successfully integrated than others. In the worst cases this has led to secession and war (Abkhazia, South Ossetia), but in others, cultural independence has been asserted while remaining part of the Georgian Republic (Svaneti, Adjara).

As well as the multiple nationalities within Georgia, there are still a significant proportion of Russians (mainly in Tbilisi) and Georgians whose first language is Russian, due to their education in Russian schools. While the Georgian language has unquestionably reasserted itself, it is still a no-no in intellectual circles to be nonconversant in Russian. The anti-Russian feeling that was pronounced immediately after independence has faded almost totally now, so don't be shy about using the Russian language.

RELIGION

Georgians are endlessly curious about religion and tend to ask their guests about their beliefs without the sense of intrusion that such questions sometimes bring in the West. While overwhelmingly Orthodox Christian, Georgians are open-minded, and mosques and synagogues have existed peacefully side by side with churches for centuries. However, in recent years there have been a number of attacks carried out by more extreme elements of the Georgian nationalist movement against Jehovah's Witnesses, Baptists and other Christian minorities operating in the country.

When a church comes into sight, whether they are on the street, in a car or marshrutka

(minivan), Georgians will nearly always cross themselves three times. Such a public display of devotion does not always imply regular church attendance, but simply underscores the near-ubiquity of people who identify themselves with the Orthodox Church.

ARTS

Literature

Georgian literature is a rich tapestry that remains virtually unknown outside the country. The national bard, Shota Rustaveli, wrote the classic of Georgian literature *The Knight in the Tiger Skin*, a work that every Georgian can quote from. This was not even translated into English until the early 20th century, when Marjory Wardrop, whose brother Oliver was later appointed British Commissioner in Transcaucasia, translated it as *The Man in the Panther Skin* in 1912 (give her a break, though, she learned Georgian by simply 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 literary influences, particularly romanticism, as personified by Nikoloz Baratashvili (1817–45). Other notable 19th-century movements included the group 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. This was a movement for public, educational and political reform and its leading lights were Ilia Chavchavadze and Akaki Tsereteli.

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

The principal poetic movement of the first decades of the 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.

Today one of the most famous Georgian writers in the world is the Tbilisi-born Grigory Chkhartishvili, who writes postmodernist highbrow detective novels in Russian and is better known by his pen name, Boris Akunin. Other contemporary authors writing in Georgian include Akaki Morchiladze and Dato Turashvili.

Cinema & Television

Georgia was one of the first provinces of the old Russian Empire where a film studio was established, and cinema production has continued since then to be a strong feature of Georgia's cultural life. In the 1970s and '80s Georgian film-makers were among the first to satirise life in the Soviet Union (Eldar Shengelaia's *Blue Mountains* is a good example), but one film above all is now seen as heralding a new openness about the Soviet past – Tengiz Abuladze's *Monanieba (Repentance)*, a black portrait of a dictator whose character is clearly based on Stalin's henchman Lavrenty Beria, made in 1986, which won the Grand Prix at Cannes in 1987. Currently the Georgian director with the most international recognition is Otar Iosseliani, who has lived in Paris since he left Georgia in the 1980s. His most recent films, *Monday Morning* (2002) and *Farewell, Home Sweet Home* (1999) were both filmed in France, although they include Georgian actors and retain a strong Georgian identity.

Music

Live music is always close at hand in Georgia. Virtually every home has a piano and someone ready to play on request, and dinners are often extended by polyphonic singing round the table. There are various genres of song: *supruli* (songs for the table, the most famous being 'Mravalzhmier'), *mushuri* (working songs), *satrpialo* (love songs), *sagmiro* (epic songs), and *sagalobeli* (church songs).

Since the 19th century Georgia has also developed a classical music tradition. The first major figure here was the opera composer Zakaria Paliashvili, whose most famous works are *Abesalom and Eteri* (1919) and *Daisi* (1923). Tbilisi Opera House is



named after him. The major 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'.

Travellers will not want to miss hearing traditional Georgian polyphony during their visit, and Tbilisi has plenty of famous ensembles, such as the Rustavi Choir, who perform regularly in Georgia when they are not on tour abroad.

Theatre

Tbilisi boasts a very interesting theatrical scene, with far more theatre companies working to acclaim than many other cities its size. While the majority of drama companies perform in Georgian, there is also a strong Russian-language scene.

Four directors dominated Georgian theatre in the 20th century: Kote Marjanishvili and Sandro Akhmeteli in the 1920s and '30s, and Misha Tumanishvili and Robert Sturua throughout the '70s, '80s and '90s. Marjanishvili and Akhmeteli directed at a time when the Soviet grip on culture was ever-tightening, and both were denounced for 'anti-Soviet activities'. While Marjanishvili died of natural causes in 1933, Akhmeteli was shot in 1937.

With these two men began Georgia's love affair with Shakespeare, continued by Tumanishvili and Sturua. Sturua's Rustaveli Theatre productions of *Richard III* (1980) and *Caucasian Chalk Circle* (1975) daringly burlesqued dictatorial regimes and won critical acclaim throughout the world. Rezo Gabriadze's Puppet Theatre has also enjoyed huge international success with the *Battle of Stalingrad*, his marvellously multilayered allegorical and satirical adult puppetry production.

Visual Arts

FRESCOS & MOSAICS

The golden age of the fresco in Georgia was the 11th to 13th centuries. In this period Georgian painters, through their mastery, could employ the fully developed Byzantine iconographic system, and also portray local subjects such as Georgian monarchs and saints. There were two main schools: one each at the monasteries of Tao Klarjeti (now in Turkey) and Davit Gareja.

The 12th- to 13th-century frescoes in churches such as Betania, Kintsvisi and Timotesubani show a freer, more expressive, but very harmonious style. In the late 1400s and early 1500s, a more manneristic style is apparent, known as the paleological style. This can be seen in Uvisa, Sapara and Zarzma, and seems to have been a reaction to the devastation and insecurity resulting from the Mongol invasions.

After the fall of Byzantium to the Ottoman Turks, fresco painting became less creative and more schematic, but there are still fine examples of the spirit of the time in paintings around the country at Maghalaant Eklesia, Tsinarekhi and parts of Svetitskhoveli.

MODERN PAINTING

Perhaps the last major artist in the tradition of fresco painting was one who painted not religious themes but scenes of everyday life. Niko Pirosmani (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 Gudziashvili and Shalva Kikodze. All three lived for a time in early-20th-century Paris, and were influenced by the radical new artistic ideas they encountered there.

ENVIRONMENT

From the Caucasus Mountains to the semi-desert on the border with Azerbaijan, Georgia has a fantastically diverse and rich ecological make-up. Flora and fauna varieties are particularly diverse in the mountain regions and nature reserves of the north of the country, where the Great Caucasus Mountains form a natural border with the north Caucasus and Russia. Animals to be found here include bears, mountain goats, boars, red deer, lynxes and ibexes. Another range, the Likhi, divides Georgia more or less down the middle - to the west the climate is wetter and the vegetation lusher. The main river is the Mtkvari, which rises in Turkey and flows through Borjomi and Tbilisi and on into Azerbaijan, where it flows into the Caspian Sea. There are more than 850 lakes in Georgia.

In the 1980s fledgling environmental movements were organised against Soviet

plans to build a railway through the high Caucasus and a dam in Svaneti, and against the use of the Davit Gareja wilderness area for military training. Environmental NGOs (nongovernmental organisations) remain active in Georgia, and have collaborated with international organisations such as the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) to not-insignificant effect; in 1995 the Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park – one of the largest in Europe – was founded in the south of the country.

However, there are threats to the natural environment in the form of illegal deforestation and overgrazing, leading to serious erosion problems and landslides in mountain areas, and poaching in nature reserves. There is an international programme to reduce the severe level of contamination in the Black Sea, but the waters continue to be badly polluted.

FOOD & DRINK

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

Staples & Specialities

Any traveller who spends more than two weeks in Georgia runs the risk of getting *khachapuri* fatigue. This staple food is everywhere in many different forms, be it bus-station snack or elaborate self-contained feast. Essentially it's cheese bread, or a cheese pie. Sometimes it's simply puff pastry with a slice of cheese inside, sometimes it's Adjaran *khachapuri*, an enormous calorie injection, overflowing with stringy cheese, butter and runny egg, baked in a furnace.

The second-most widely seen dish in Georgia is *khinkali* – meat dumplings which 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 – locals will find it highly amusing if you do. Similarly, it's virtually impossible to order less than five at a time (the waiter will view you with deep suspicion and probably bring you six anyway), even though they are quite substantial and two or three will often fill you right up.

Drinking

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 tastes nothing like normal white wine, but is still a fine drop. Most commercially marketed Georgian wine tends to be sweet to Western taste buds, although the Sapervai grape tends to be reliably crisp and plummy. While vodka is commonly drunk throughout the country, trying the national firewater, *chacha*, is a real experience.

Two Georgian beers have an almost total duopoly of the market – Kazbegi and Argo. The latter is smoother and creamier than the slightly acidic former, although Kazbegi seems to be winning the marketing war, running cafés and restaurants throughout the country and even a hotel in Kazbegi town.

For nonalcoholic drinks, the national favourite is Borjomi, a salty mineral water that was the beverage of choice for every Soviet leader since Lenin. It polarises opinion, and is certainly an acquired taste. Nonsalty, still Borjomi Springs is the alternative and certainly a better thirst-quencher, 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. Breakfasts are the trickiest meal to get outside of homestays and hotels. While some places may serve up eggs, bread and tea early in the morning, many others will offer only *khachapuri*.

Outside Tbilisi, restaurants are almost universally cheap – it is rare for a dish to cost you more than \$2, while a full slap-up feast will rarely come in at over \$5 per person. Addresses and contact telephone details have been included in our restaurant listings where useful, although more often than not opening and closing times are on whim, telephones don't work and addresses don't exist. Even in Tbilisi there is rarely a need to book ahead, although for larger parties it's always a good idea.

Despite the wonderful national cuisine, outside Tbilisi it can be hard to enjoy variety



outside someone's home. Many restaurants and cafés will be limited to *khachapuri*, *khinkali* and salads.

At the bottom of the Georgian food chain is the *sakhchapur* or the *sakhink* – workers' cafés where *khachapuri* or *khinkali* are literally the only thing served. These are cheap and good for a quick bite, but can erode the will to live after a few days. Cafés tend to serve sweet dishes – indeed, the Georgians have some excellent pastries and cakes for those with a sweet tooth.

Many better-quality Georgian restaurants are not really pleasant for the single traveller. Even couples can feel overwhelmed by the large spaces, huge tables and extraordinarily loud music. Simply put, Georgian meals are events rather than banal acts of imbibing calories to continue living. The idea of having a quick meal in a restaurant is still an unusual one here.

Vegetarians & Vegans

Vegetarians will fare well in Georgia. *Khachapuri*, *badrijani nigvzit* (aubergine with walnut paste), *pkhali* (crushed walnuts, garlic with spinach or beetroot paste) and *lobio* (bean paste or stew with herbs and spices) are all standard fare, and breakfast will often consist of *matsoni* (Georgian sour yogurt) or perhaps bread with cheese or honey. However 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 Georgian feast or *supra* (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 deal with 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 you toast your friends with. However, you should only drink when the

designated *tamada* (toastmaster) proposes the toast. Some complex *supras* will involve an *alaverdi*, a second man whose role it is to elaborate on the toast. While the *tamada* is there to pour the wine, *alaverdi* is interesting to watch, as Georgian toasts are long and improvised (reading out a prepared toast would be unthinkable) – making for some good spectacles. 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

MENU DECODER

- ajapsandali** – spicy vegetable mixture
- ajika** – chilli sauce
- apkazura** – spicy meatballs
- asetrina** – sturgeon
- badrijani** – aubergine (usually with walnuts and garlic)
- bazhe** – walnut sauce
- chakapuli** – lamb with tarragon and plums
- chakhokhbili** – chicken in tomato sauce
- chanakhi** – lamb with potatoes, aubergine and tomatoes
- chebureki** – triangular pies stuffed with ground meat
- chikhirtma** – chicken broth with a leg of chicken floating in it
- churchkhela** – walnuts in solid grape juice
- ghomi** – maize porridge
- kababi** – doner kebabs
- khachapuri** – Georgian cheese pie
- kharcho** – soup with rice, beef and spices
- khashi** – tripe and garlic soup
- khinkali** – spicy meat dumplings
- kuchmachi** – heart, lungs and stomach chopped, seasoned and simmered
- kupati** – sausage
- lobio** – bean paste or stew with herbs and spices
- matsni sup** – yogurt soup
- matsoni** – sour yogurt drink usually consumed at breakfast
- mchadi** – corn-flour bread
- mtsvasdi** – shish kebabs
- mzhavi** – pickled vegetables
- ojakhuri** – meat with potatoes, onion and garlic
- pkhali** – beetroot, spinach or cabbage with crushed walnuts and garlic
- plovi** – rice with meat, mushrooms or fruit
- sastsivi** – cold turkey in walnut sauce
- shkmeruli** – chicken in garlic sauce
- sulguni** – smoked Georgian cheese
- tqemali** – plum sauce
- tskhotskali** – boiled river fish, served cold
- tvini** – brains

TBILISI თბილისი

☎ 32 / pop 1.7 million

The Georgian capital has a magnificent setting, hemmed in on all sides by dramatic hills and the distant mountains. A long city built on the narrow banks of the Mtkvari River, it's both defensively brilliant and remarkably attractive. The city's left bank is built in part on a sheer cliff that overlooks the truly ancient Old Town, studded with churches and delightfully forgotten squares. Relaxed, European and charmingly run down, it's hard to imagine, while strolling down the smart boulevards or the tree-lined embankment, that civil strife,

war, revolution and gang violence have all been recent realities here. Like their fellow Georgians, proud of their country, despite all the troubles of the past decade, Tbilisi's cosmopolitan residents love their city and are brimming with cautious confidence about its steadily growing economy and prospects. Hands-down the most attractive of the three Caucasian capitals, Tbilisi is the throbbing heart of the Caucasus and should not be missed by any visitor.

HISTORY

Despite a history of settlement in the area stretching back to Neolithic times, Georgians prefer the legend that King Gorgasali, who remains honoured as a saintlike figure



today, founded Tbilisi in the 5th century. The legend runs that the king was hunting (either for deer or pheasant, depending on who you believe) and that either the pheasant fell into a hot sulphur spring and was conveniently cooked for dinner, or that the wounded deer fell into the hot sulphur spring and was miraculously healed. Either way, the name Tbilisi derives from the Georgian word *tbili* (warm), and there seems to be little doubt that it was the magnificent hot springs, which still lure visitors today, that attracted the king.

In fact Tbilisi was part of the Greek and Roman trade networks to the East, as well as the Silk Road. It was King Gorgasali who won the town back from the Persians who had invaded in 368, and moved his capital here from Mtskheta in the late 5th century. Gorgasali died before he could see the completion of the new capital, but his son King Dachi finished the building after his father's death. From that point on, however, Tbilisi's fortunes nosedived. Georgia's position, sandwiched between several powerful empires, and its natural wealth meant that its history until the 12th century is simply one of occupation and the forced conversion of its citizens to Islam. In the 7th century the Arabs arrived and made Tbilisi an emirate for four centuries.

In 1121, after his great victory at Didgori, King David the Builder captured the city and made it the capital of a newly united Georgia. He built a palace (long disappeared) near the Metekhi Church, and extended the boundaries of the city. In the centuries that followed, Tbilisi grew as the political and cultural centre of Georgia, with a multiethnic population of 80,000. This was Tbilisi's golden age, and saw great cultural and scientific progress under David and later Queen Tamar. Tamar died in 1213, and soon afterwards the golden age was wiped off the face of the earth by the arrival of the Mongols, followed in turn by the Black Death, Tamerlane and the Persians.

While Tbilisi made some significant cultural progress under the Persians during the 17th and 18th centuries, it wasn't until the arrival of the Russians in early 19th century that Tbilisi saw many changes: wider streets were laid out, libraries, schools and theatres were constructed, and immigrants from Germany and Poland were invited to settle in the

city. By the end of the 19th century, Tbilisi had a population of 159,000. Throughout the 19th century, less than a quarter of Tbilisi's population were Georgian. The majority of inhabitants were Russian.

While the Soviet era saw huge growth and relative prosperity, Tbilisi remained something of a backwater, despite enjoying high living standards. The 1990s were a particularly dark time for the city. Already a centre of resistance to the Soviet government, Tbilisi became the setting for demonstrations challenging Moscow's authority, culminating in a massacre by the Soviet army on 9 April 1989 outside the parliament building. Once independence was finally achieved, things got no better as the regime of Gamsakhurdia collapsed into a civil war during which people starved to death on the streets of Tbilisi. There are still plenty of ruined buildings around the city centre that were destroyed by the fighting. Just as peace had been re-established in the capital in 1993, overnight Tbilisi became home to thousands of Georgian refugees fleeing from ethnic warfare in Abkhazia – still a bone of contention today with many residents who feel that the refugees have contributed to Tbilisi's unwholesomely criminal reputation.

The 21st century has so far been a time of great improvement for the city – despite a significant earthquake in 2002 – with crime levels having dropped from their 1990s high and lots of foreign investment pouring in. Tbilisi is a city full of confidence and energy once more (metaphorically not literally).

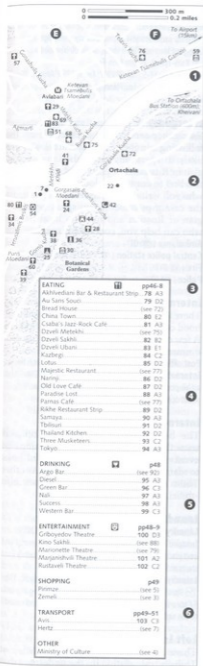
GEORGIAN STREET NAMES

The spelling of Georgian street names varies slightly, depending on whether the word *kucha* (street), *gamziri* (avenue) or *moedani* (square) is present. In Georgian, Sioni Street is Sionis kucha, a grammatical form that literally means 'Street of Sioni'. However, to make things easier, we have used the noninflected name alone in addresses – for example Sioni 23 rather than Sionis kucha 23. Only when there is more than street named after something (in the case of Chavchavadzis kucha and Chavchavadzis gamziri, for example) have we routinely left in the type of street for clarity.

CENTRAL TBILISI



INFORMATION			
Airzena Georgian Airlines	1 E2	Anchiskhati	23 D2
Armenian Embassy	2 A2	Armenian Cathedral of St George	24 E2
ATM	3 A3	Ateshgha Temple	25 E3
ATM	4 B3	Blue Monastery	26 A2
ATM	5 C2	Catholic Church	27 A1
ATM (see 56)		Church of St Nicholas	28 E2
ATM (see 77)		Echmiazin	29 E1
Austrian Airlines (see 76)		Folk Art Museum	30 E3
Bank of Georgia	6 D3	Georgian State Art Museum	31 C2
British Airways	7 E2	Governor's Palace	32 C3
British Embassy	8 D3	Janashia Museum of Georgia	33 C2
Caucasus Travel (see 7)		Ivans Mama Church	34 E2
Central Police Station	9 C2	Karis Eklesia Church	35 D2
Chemist	10 C3	Kartlis Deda Statue	36 E3
Internet Café	11 C3	Kashveti Church	37 C2
Laundry & Dry Cleaners	12 C2	Kidsubnis Church	38 E3
Levon Travel	13 C2	Kvemo Betlemi	39 E3
Main Post Office	14 B2	Mama Davit	40 B4
Ministry of Foreign Affairs	15 C3	Metekhi Church	41 E2
Post Office & Call Centre	16 B3	Mosque	42 F2
Prospero's Books	17 B3	Museum of Money	43 D3
Russian Embassy	18 A1	Nankala Fortress	44 E2
Swissair (see 76)		Norasheni Church	45 D2
Turkish Embassy	19 A1	Palashvili Opera House	46 B2
Ukrainian Embassy (see 19)		Parliament Building	47 C3
United Georgian Bank	20 D2	Russian Church	48 A1
USA Embassy	21 C2	Russian Church	49 B1
		Russian Church	50 A1
		Sachino Palace	51 E2
		School No 1	52 C3
		Sioni Cathedral	53 D2
		Synagogue	54 E2
		Tbilisi History Museum	55 D2
		Town Hall	56 D3
		Tuminda Sameba	57 E1
		TV Tower	58 B4
		Wedding Palace	59 F1
		Zemo Betlemi	60 E3
SLEEPING  pp43-6			
		Guesthouse Dzveli Ubani	61 D2
		Hotel Beau Monde	62 B3
		Hotel Boni	63 D2
		Hotel David	64 D4
		Hotel Europa	65 A1
		Hotel Ipani	66 B3
		Hotel Iveria	67 B3
		Hotel Kopala	68 E2
		Hotel Lile	69 E1
		Hotel Merani	70 B3
		Hotel Ton	71 C2
		Jeji Hotel	72 F2
		Mtatsminda Hotel (see 15)	
		Misi Brili Guesthouse	73 D1
		Nasi Gvetadze's Homestay	74 A1
		Old Metekhi Hotel	75 E2
		Sheraton Metekhi Palace Hotel	76 F1
		Tbilisi Courtyard Marriott (see 8)	
		Tbilisi Marriott Hotel	77 C2
SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES pp38-42			
Abanotubani	22 F2		



TBILISI IN ONE DAY

Begin the day with a cup of Georgian coffee and Adjaran *khachapuri* at one of the Cafes on **Rustaveli**. Wander through the narrow alleyways of the **Old Town**, dropping into some of the fascinating **old churches** on the way. If you feel like an invigorating scrub down then try the **Tbilisi Sulphur Baths** (you'll smell them before you see them), where both Pushkin and Dumas bathed. A walk up to the **Narikala Fortress** and **Kartlis Deda** above the city will give you great views and help to work up an appetite for lunch, which can be taken at one of the popular Old Town eateries. Visit the **State Museum** to see the incredible collection of the treasury and then wander down Rustaveli for some **shopping**. In the evening head out to a traditional **Georgian restaurant** with as many people as possible for some serious feasting accompanied by traditional song and dance. For a **nightcap**, head to the crowded bar and restaurant strip on Akhvediani (Perovskaya).

ORIENTATION

Due to the limited area available for development, Tbilisi spreads itself out along the banks of the Mtkvari River, the main suburbs being to the east and north of the city. The two most obvious landmarks, visible from all over town, are Kartlis Deda (Mother Georgia) and the city's TV tower, both perched on top of tall hills on the right side of the river. The town centre is at Tavisuplebis moedani (Freedom Square), which marks the meeting place of the old and new towns. The right bank is of most interest to tourists, containing the old town, sulphur baths, the main avenue (Rustavelis gamziri) and many hotels. The left bank is newer and as such contains the main bus station, the train station and airport.

INFORMATION

Airline Offices

Aeroflot (Map p32; ☎ 943896, 943927; Davit Aghmashenebeli 76)

Airzena Georgian Airlines (Map pp34-5; ☎ 252668, 387103, 778804; Shartava 40)

Austrian Airlines (Map pp34-5; ☎ 778214/5; Sheraton Metechi Palace Hotel)

British Airways (Map pp34-5; ☎ 940719/20; Leselidze 40)

Caucasus Airlines (Map p32; ☎ 912183; caucasusairlines@hotmail.com; Saburtalo 32)

Swiss Air (Map pp34-5; ☎ 943825/27; Sheraton Metechi Palace Hotel)

Turkish Airlines (Map p32; ☎ 940703, 959022; Davit Aghmashenebeli 147)

Bookshops

The most popular with visitors is the pricey but excellent **Prospero's Books** (Map pp34-5; ☎ 923592; Rustaveli 34), an English-language American-run establishment. As well as a large range of travel books and novels, you can rent DVDs and videos, use the Internet, get all the local English-language press and enjoy coffee and cakes on the small terrace. The shop is actually in the courtyard, and is not very clearly marked from the street.

The best Georgian bookshop is probably **Parnasus** (☎ 253986; Chavchavadzis gamziri 22), where there is a range of books in both Georgian and Russian as well as posters, postcards and some English books. There are also busy daily book markets near Tavisuplebis moedani and Marjanishvili metro stations.

Embassies

Tbilisi is badly served by Central Asian embassies for those continuing east, so get any onward visas before you leave home.

Many diplomatic missions to Georgia operate from embassies in neighbouring countries. In emergencies, the British embassy looks after the interests of Commonwealth nationals.

Armenia (Map pp34-5; ☎ 959443; fax 990126; Tselashvili 4; ☎ 11am-2pm Mon-Fri)

Azerbaijan (Map pp32; ☎ 252639, 250014; fax 250013; Mukhadze 14; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Sat)

China (Map p32; ☎ 212575; fax 252283; Barnov 52; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 3-6pm Mon-Fri)

France (Map p32; ☎ 934210, 922851; fax 953375; Gogebashvili 15; ☎ 10am-1pm & 3-5pm Mon-Fri)

Germany (Map p32; ☎ 953326, 950936; fax 958910; Davit Aghmashenebeli 116; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri)

Iran (Map p32; ☎ 986990; fax 986993; Zovrety 16; ☎ 9am-1pm & 3-5pm Mon-Fri)

Russia (Map pp34-5; ☎ 951754; fax 913085; Tsinamdzgrishvili 90; ☎ 9am-1pm Mon-Fri)

Turkey (Map pp34-5; ☎ 952014, 292319; fax 951810; Davit Aghmashenebeli 61; ☎ 9.30am-6.30pm Mon-Fri)

Ukraine (Map pp34-5; ☎ 989362; fax 287143; Davit Aghmashenebeli 61; ☎ 10am-1.30pm & 3-4pm Tue-Thu)

UK (Map pp34-5; www.britishembassy.gov.uk/georgia; Courtyard Marriott Tbilisi Hotel, Tavisuplebis moedani; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Fri)

USA (Map pp34-5; ☎ 989967; fax 933759; Atoneli 25; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri) Planning to move to new premises in 2005.

Emergency

Emergency services are contactable on the following numbers, but operators are unlikely to speak anything other than Georgian or Russian. For petty theft or muggings it is best to contact the local police precinct, who will write you a report and investigate the case if possible. If you speak no Georgian or Russian and have no local friends who can help you, contact your embassy.

Ambulance (☎ 03)

Central police station (☎ 995579; Tabukashvili 27)

Fire (☎ 01)

Police (☎ 02)

Internet Access

There are Internet cafés in every neighbourhood of Tbilisi. Most have a sign in English. A few centrally located ones that we can recommend include:

Post office (Map pp34-5; Rustaveli 31) Next to Hotel Iveria.

Internet Café (Map pp34-5; Rustaveli 14; ☎ 24hr) Also an all-purpose communications centre; entrance on side street opposite the Western Bar.

Internet Resources

The best resource devoted to Tbilisi is www.tbilisipastimes.com, with listings of events and nightlife as well as useful links to many other sites across Georgia. Another Tbilisi site worth checking out is www.info-tbilisi.com.

Laundry

Laundry & dry cleaners (Map pp34-5; ☎ 933019; Sanapiro 2; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat) One of the newest and best places with a full range of services. Normal laundry starts at \$3 per kg of whites.

Laundry (Map p32; ☎ 230598; Chavchavadzis gamziri 33a; ☎ 9am-7pm) A more traditional laundry, costing around \$7 for a full load. To find it, go in the courtyard and round to the right.

Left Luggage

There are three left-luggage facilities at Tbilisi's train station, in the underpass that

connects the platforms. Only one of them (the one nearest the street exit) opens 24 hours; the others close at 10pm and 11pm. It costs about 25¢ to leave a bag overnight.

Media

There are several English-language publications in Georgia, all of which can be purchased from kiosks in the city centre and at **Prospero's Bookstore** (Map pp34-5; ☎ 923592; Rustaveli 34). The latter also gives old issues away for free. *Tbilisi Pastimes* (\$1.50) dubs itself a 'cultural-satirical magazine' and it has the best selection of exhibition and nightlife listings as well as some amusing cultural articles. See p99 for details of English-language newspapers about Georgia.

Medical Services

Some private Western-standard health facilities include:

Chemist (Map pp34-5; Lagidzis 5; ☎ 24hr) Off Rustaveli

Cito (☎ 290671; www.cito.ge; Arakashvili 2)

Curatio (☎ 968679, after hours 938061; www.curatio.com; Vazha Pshavela 27b)

Frontline Medical Services (☎ 251948/41, after hours ☎ 899550911, 899551911; Arakashvili 2)

Medicines are widely available in chemists (*aptiaki* in Georgian, *apteka* in Russian) throughout the city; even if your Western brand name is not stocked, they will usually have a perfectly acceptable (and often chemically identical) locally-produced version.

Money

Tbilisi provides plenty of chances to change your dollars and euros. Every vaguely busy street has several exchange offices and there is little to be gained by black-market deals.

ATMS

ATMs are thin on the ground but plentiful enough for you to be able to rely on cards during your stay. MasterCard, Visa, Cirrus and Maestro are all accepted for cash withdrawals. Given Tbilisi's street crime problem, one of the best places to withdraw cash (in lari or dollars) is in the Marriott Hotel on Rustaveli, where the ATM is located privately in a small booth. Other centrally located ATMs include: Rustaveli 37; Chavchavadzis gamziri 40 and 10; the Zemeli supermarket opposite the Academy of Sciences; outside Pirimze by the all-night flower market;

and to the right of the town hall on Tavushlebis moedani.

CREDIT CARDS

AmEx (Map p32; Davit Aghmashenebeli 44) Tbilisi office. You can easily make over-the-counter cash withdrawals from banks in Tbilisi using Visa and MasterCard. Banks that offer this service, and Western Union money transfers, include:

Bank of Georgia (Map pp34-5; Pushkin 3)

TBC Bank (Map p32; Chavchavadzis gamziri 11)

United Georgian Bank (Map pp34-5; Pushkin 17)

Post

The **Main Post Office** (Davit Aghmashenebeli 44; ☎ 9am-6pm) is the only place in Tbilisi from where you can send parcels abroad. More useful is the large **post office and call centre** (Map pp34-5; Rustaveli 31) immediately next to the Hotel Iveria. Here you can make international and national phone calls, use the Internet, photocopy, fax and, of course, post letters. It costs 50¢ to send a postcard to anywhere in the world from Georgia.

Telephone & Fax

Pay phones are everywhere, but only of use to call local numbers, for which you need a 10-tetri coin. Some street stalls have a phone from where you can call nationally or to mobiles. The best place to do this is at any telephone centre (look for a large telephone sign; they are all over central Tbilisi), where charges are lower. The post office at Rustaveli 31 is the most central. Faxes can be sent from the post office as well as the Internet Café at Rustaveli 14.

Toilets

Public toilets in Tbilisi are in a fairly lamentable state. Your best course of action is to drop into a café or restaurant if you need to use the bathroom while out and about. Georgian hospitality is such that staff rarely insist foreigners make a purchase – although top-end places may not be the same.

Travel Agencies

Local companies can often be very useful in Georgia, particularly for day trips to hard-to-reach places such as Davit Gareja and Vardzia, but also for longer expeditions into the mountains, and trips to bandit-ridden Svaneti, where accompaniment is essential.



Caucasus Travel (Map pp34-5; ☎ 987400; www.caucasustravel.com; Leselidze 44) Can help you do everything from booking flights to organising expeditions in the mountains, and its tours department can custom organise just about any tour in the country, plus trips throughout the region. It also holds the franchise for Hertz and Carson WagonLit, and all staff members speak good English.

Georgica Travel (☎ 252199; www.georgica.caucasus.net; Shanidze 22) Runs cultural and adventure guided tours in Georgia, and also cover Armenia and Azerbaijan. All guides are multilingual specialists and offer very professional services.

Georgian Travel Guide (☎ 371977; www.travelguide.ge; Digomi 2/19/30) GTG run an interesting array of tours – from pilgrim sights for foreign Christians to ‘myth tours’ that take in Georgia’s legendary past, as well as painting and cycling itineraries.

Levon Travel (Map pp34-5; ☎ 921611; www.levontravel.ge; Rustaveli 13) A US-based outfit, Levon runs everything from tours through the country over two weeks to off-road trips in the mountains.

Tbilisi Tourist Center (TTC; ☎ 982966; ttc@wanex.net; Barnov 39) Has extremely helpful staff who will prepare any itinerary in Georgia for guests. Formerly Sak Tours, TTC work closely with German Caucasus specialists Erka Reisen (see p266) and has particularly strong links with the Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park. It can also organise short-term flat lets in Tbilisi. German and some English are spoken.

Visit Georgia (☎ /fax 996829; www.visitgeorgia.ge; Nishnianidze 14) Another professionally run agency that can organise just about any tour of Georgia and the Caucasus, provide transportation and interpreters as well as make any other bookings as necessary. The multilingual staff speaks English, German and Italian.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Tbilisi has a very bad reputation for muggings and general street violence. In 1999–2000 these reached their height and many embassies issued warnings to their nationals not to walk the streets of the city at night. That said, the situation seems to have improved a great deal these days. Follow common sense – don’t attract attention to the fact that you are a foreigner while walking about after dark, keep to main streets and if you are alone and don’t feel safe, take a taxi. Vake Park has been a hot spot for muggings for some time now, even during the day, so be cautious if you visit it.

SIGHTS

Tbilisi, while used to foreigners, is still rather new to tourists. There are almost no places in Tbilisi that are ‘touristy’, though the Old

Town is the obvious focus for sightseeing, containing as it does the most interesting churches and museums.

Narikala Fortress (Map pp34-5) Dominating the city skyline (until the TV tower came along, anyway), the **Narikala Fortress** is an ancient symbol of Tbilisi’s defensive brilliance. Its walls date from various periods, the earliest being the 4th-century Persian citadel. The tower foundations and much of the present walls were built on the orders of the Arab emirs in the 8th century. Subsequently Georgians, Turks and Persians captured and patched up the fortress, but in 1827 a huge explosion in the Russian munitions stored here ruined not only Narikala, but also the **Church of St Nicholas** inside it. The church was recently rebuilt with the help of funding from a police chief, and it’s impressive, if in need of a bit of ageing. There are superb views over Tbilisi from the top, although finding the path up from the Old Town can be tricky. Ask local residents to point you in the right direction – they are used to lost tourists.

From the fortress, you can follow the walls round to the statue of **Kartlis Deda** (Mother Georgia). Erected in the early 1960s, and 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. Near her are the ruins of **Shahtakhti** (Shah’s Throne) fortress, which housed an Arab observatory from the 9th century. Slightly further on is a pleasant **Folk Art Museum** and down on the other side of the ridge from the city is the **Botanical Gardens**. The gardens can be reached by taking Botanikuris kucha to the end. In the 17th and 18th centuries this was the site of the king’s gardens. A physic garden was laid out here at the beginning of the following century, and in 1845 the Botanical Gardens were opened.

Old Town

Map pp34-5

The Old Town, known to locals as *Maidan* or *Kala*, is centred on **Gorgasalis moedani**, once the setting of the city’s bazaar and where Gorgasalis kucha, Leselidzis kucha and the Metekhis Khidi (Metekhi Bridge) all meet. On the square today the main historic building of note is the **Armenian Cathedral**



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of **St George**, a large church founded in 1251 with a surprisingly small interior but interesting frescoes. King Irakli II's exiled court poet Sayat Nova was killed here during the Persian invasion in 1765 and his tomb is in front of the main door with an interesting inscription. The current structure mainly dates from the 18th century.

The social if not the spiritual hub of the *Maidan* is further along the riverbank (or down the side street that runs in front of the Armenian Cathedral) – the **Abanotubani** (Tbilisi sulphur baths). Alexanders Dumas and Pushkin both bathed here, the latter describing it as the best bath he'd ever had. *Abanos kucha* (Bath St) is full of subterranean bathhouses with beehive domes that rise in various places, although the most impressive, the *Orbeliani Baths*, with a vaguely Central-Asian feel to its blue-tile mosaic façade, is above ground. Entry to the communal pool costs just 50¢, while a full body scrub costs \$2.50. Small private washing rooms are \$5 and large, relatively luxurious private baths for small groups cost from \$10.

A short distance beyond the baths up the hill is the **mosque**, the only remaining mosque in Tbilisi since Lavrenty Beria had the others destroyed in the antireligious purges of the 1930s.

The main traffic thoroughfare of the Old Town is **Leselidzes kucha**, a graceful Russian addition to the city named for General Leselidze, a Georgian WWII hero. Here there's the main Tbilisi **Synagogue**, a very welcoming place built in 1901, and which almost collapsed after Tbilisi's last major earthquake in 2002. A short walk further up the street, opposite a curious stone café, is the **Jvaris Mama Church**, where there has been a church since the 5th century. The current structure is a 16th-century Jvari Georgian Cross Church. The frescoes were being given a much-needed repaint at the time of writing, but the atmosphere is exquisitely pious and calm. Next door is the disused Armenian **Norasheni Church**, dating from 1793. From here, Leselidze continues up the hill and runs into **Tavisuplebis moedani**.

Also in the old town, on the other side of Tavisuplebis moedani, is the **Museum of Money** (Leonidze 10; admission 10¢; ☎ 10am–4pm Mon–Fri) which is certainly the best-presented museum in Tbilisi, financed by the next-door National Bank of Georgia, which set

it up in 2001. Here you can see Georgian money from the 6th century to the present day and an interesting collection of money from most countries of the world.

Walking aimlessly around the *Maidan* is one of its major attractions, always leading to discoveries, from pleasant shaded squares to disused churches and enormous 19th-century houses with unfeasibly large balconies.

Sioni & Shavteli

Map pp34–5

While Leselidze is the busiest street in the Old Town today, it was not always thus. Historically the main thoroughfares were Shavtelis and Sionis kuchas, both now pedestrianised and pleasant places to stroll. Sionis kucha is home to the **Tbilisi History Museum** (☎ 982281; www.thm.art.ge; Sioni 8; admission 25¢; ☎ 11am–4.30pm Tue–Sun). Housed in an old caravanserai, despite its incongruously modern interior, this look at the history of the city includes some wonderfully evocative photographs of the pre-Soviet Georgian capital. There's a contemporary art gallery upstairs, as well as a large collection of Georgian weapons from different ages.

Next door is the **Sioni Cathedral**, centre of the Georgian Church and seat of Catholicos Ilia II, who lives in the gated mansion beyond. The first church was built here in the 6th to 7th centuries, but it has been destroyed and rebuilt so many times that it is difficult to say which part comes from which period, although the portico is undeniably the work of a shabby 1990s contractor. What you see now is mainly 11th to 12th 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, on the left of the altar, which, according to legend, is made from vine branches bound with the saint's own hair. In the churchyard is a 15th-century bell tower. On the opposite side of the street is another, taller bell tower built in 1812, the first example of Russian classicism in Tbilisi.

Sioni opens out into **Irakli II moedani**, site of the *catholicos*' residence and a pleasant park. Here the large Church of the Archangels used to stand, until it was destroyed by the Mongols in the 13th century. Later, three smaller churches were built from the ruins, one of which is *Karis Eklesia*, on your right. The king's palace also stood here in the 17th and 18th centuries.

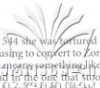
Here, Sioni becomes Shavteli, once the throbbing medieval hub of the Old Town, and now just a quiet pedestrian street. Shavteli's main attraction is the **Anchiskhati**, the oldest church in Tbilisi, built by King Gorgasali's son Dachi in the 6th century. The name comes from the icon of Anchi Cathedral in Klarjeti (now in Turkey), brought here in the 17th century and now in the Georgian State Art Museum. It is a three-nave basilica that has been restored several times, especially in the 17th century, when the brick arches and columns were made. The ancient parts are those higher up and the windows in the east façade. In 1958 restorers found the remains of 17th-century frescoes under the 19th-century ones. West of it is the brick bell tower and gatehouse, typical of late-medieval Eastern Georgian style. Further down the road is the **Marionette Theatre** and busy **Baratashvili kucha**, now the home to a string of smart restaurants built into the Old Town walls.

At the top end of Baratashvili stands the **Georgian State Art Museum** (Gudlshvili 1; admission \$1; ☎ 11am-4pm, closed Mon & Thu), a comprehensive if underwhelmingly presented collection of Georgian art, spanning two millennia until the late 20th century. Some of the earlier religious paintings are interesting, and the 19th century portraiture is also good.

Avlabari & the Left Bank **Map pp34-5**

Facing the Old Town across the river, Avlabari is the dramatically located slice of Tbilisi on the cliff side overlooking the Mtkvari River. This is where the river is at its narrowest and where the Mtkvari was first bridged. At least twice (Jalaledin in 1226 and the Persians in 1522) foreign conquerors used the bridge as the site for the forcible conversion of the Georgian population to Islam, although many resisted and were thrown into the river. The bridge was controlled by a fortification on the strategically important cliff above it, where you can now see the **Metekhi Church** and a statue of King Gorgasali. Historically this part of town housed the large Armenian population of the city, one that has traditionally been focused around the **Echmiadzin Cathedral**.

The biggest attraction in Avlabari is the **Metekhi Church**; according to legend the first church here was built in the 5th century and the early Christian martyr St Shushanik



buried here. In 544 she was tortured by her husband for refusing to convert to Zoroastrianism. Metekhi means something like 'place for a palace', and in the one that stood here Queen Tamara bore the children of her father, King David II Aghmashenebeli, and later married her second husband David Soslan. The palace and the church were destroyed by the Mongols in 1235. The church was rebuilt by King Demetre Tavadzebuli (the Self-Sacrificing) between 1278 and 1289. A rather old-fashioned design for the period, it is thought the reconstruction was a deliberate copy of the original. The palace was reconstructed several times until its final demise in 1795 when the Persians sacked Tbilisi. In 1819 a prison was built here, whose later inmates included writer Maxim Gorky. This was dismantled in 1935. In 1974 the site had yet another function when the church was converted into a theatre, finally being reconsecrated in the 1980s.

Avlabari is currently the site of an enormous undertaking to build the biggest cathedral in the Caucasus. The project to build the **Sameba Cathedral** is controversial, as the site is an old Armenian cemetery upon Mt Elia (something of a misnomer for a large hill). Controversy is also generated by the fact that the construction has already taken seven years and is being financed by an anonymous benefactor. Despite being just a huge building site at the time of writing, it already dominates the skyline of the Mtkvari's left bank and is a favourite topic of taxi drivers.

Elsewhere on the left bank of the Mtkvari sights are less obvious. The main street on the left bank is largely unattractive **David Aghmashenebeli kucha**, which features some good shops, and the busy **Marjanishvili moedani**, next to the metro station of the same name, where books are sold.

In the other direction, further towards the airport, is one of Tbilisi's most striking buildings – the eccentrically modernist **Wedding Palace** where locals married during Soviet times. Tbilisi residents generally prefer church weddings these days and this incredible structure was sold to colourful businessman Badri Patarkatsishvili as a personal residence.

Rustaveli & the New Town

Tbilisi's main artery is the elegant **Rustaveli gamziri** (Map pp34-5), running between

Tavisuplebis moedani and Respublikis moedani, and it tends to be the place in Tbilisi you always find yourself walking.

The first building of interest after the monstrous concrete Univermag department store and the Griboyedov Theatre is the **Janashia State Museum of Georgia** (Map pp34-5; ☎ 999402; Rustaveli 3; admission 50¢, guided tour extra \$1; Ⓜ 11am-4pm Tue-Sat). Unfortunately, due to a standoff with the electricity company over unpaid bills totalling thousands of dollars, the main museum remains closed, although the stunning basement treasury is open and should not be missed. You have to go down accompanied and in small groups, but the display of gold artefacts and jewellery from pre-Christian Georgia is incredible.

On the other side of Rustaveli is the **Governor's Palace** (Map pp34-5), the elegant white building built in 1807 opposite the museum. In Soviet times this became the Pioneer Palace, and it is still used for children's cultural activities. Next door is the Georgian **parliament building** (Map pp34-5), one of Tbilisi's most striking façades, constructed between 1938 and 1953 and finished off by German POWs. A small monument marks the place where, on 9 April 1989, 20 Georgian demonstrators were massacred by Russian soldiers. During the new-year period of 1991-92, President Gamsakhurdia was besieged inside parliament for two weeks until he finally fled via the back entrance. The next building, **School Number 1** (Map pp34-5), was gutted in the 1991-92 fighting, but reconstructed soon after. It was founded in 1802 for the sons of the Georgian nobility, to prepare them 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 the parliament stands **Kashveti Church** (Map pp34-5), on a spot where it is said pagan rituals used to take place. The first church here is supposed to have been built by the Syrian father Davit Garejeli. According to legend, a nun accused him of impregnating her. He replied that if this were true, she'd give birth to a baby, if not, to a stone, which duly happened. Kashveti means 'Stone Birth'. The building was designed by architect Leopold Bielfeld in 1910, commissioned to make a copy of Samtavisi Cathedral. The altar apse was painted by modernist Lado Gudiashvili in 1946.

On the same side of the road is the elegant **Rustaveli Theatre** (Map pp34-5), built between 1899 and 1901 in a baroque-rococo style. Inside, the **Chimerioni café**, a favourite haunt of the Blue Horn symbolist poets, are murals by Lado Gudiashvili and Davit Kakabadze.

A short way further on is the other main cultural centre, the **Paliashvili Opera House** (Map pp34-5). Built in 1896 in a fantastic Moorish style, it was burnt down in 1974 (some say for political reasons) and later reconstructed.

Just after the glass-and-yellow stone post-office comes **Respublikis moedani** (Map pp34-5), from where there are views towards the Caucasus Mountains. A landmark here is the structure known as **Andropov's Ears**, after the man who was leader of the USSR at the time this podium was erected.

Continuing on the left-hand side of Rustaveli you come to **Rustavelis moedani** (Map pp34-5), easily identified by a 1937 statue of the poet himself. The building of Georgia's first McDonald's restaurant right behind the statue provoked demonstrations in 1998. The continuation of Rustavelis moedani is **Kostavas kucha**. This long street leads to the **Philharmonia** and **Vera Park** (Map p32), then downhill to the district of Saburtalo. Vera Park contains two churches, one Georgian, one Russian, and overlooks the north of the city.

Vera & Vake

Map p32

Melikishvili is the principal thoroughfare through **Vera** district, which is named after the little tributary of the Mtkvari River that flows in the valley below. At the noisy traffic junction of Varaziskhevi (Vera Gorge St) Vera borders the district of **Vake**, which is considered to be either the most prestigious part of town, or just the suburb where the nouveau riche and expats live, despite the fact it's said to be built over the graves of the victims of the 1930s purges. Nowadays it's a pleasant neighbourhood of apartment blocks and houses, with a good sprinkling of bars, cafés and shops. Its main claim to fame is the buildings of **Tbilisi State University** stretching down Chavchavadzis gamziri towards the leafy slopes of Vake Park. The main university building is elegant, white and neoclassical, and dates from 1906. It was originally a school for the nobility.

Vake Park is about 2km from the university. The 226-hectare area used to be known as Victory Park, as it contains the tomb of the Unknown Soldier and a WWII memorial. Unfortunately, some muggers also enjoy a wander about this park, so do be careful. Also in the grounds are an amusement park and **Kus Tba** (a rather dirty lake reached by cable car from near the park gates). The **Museum of Georgian Folk Architecture** (admission \$2, tour \$5; ☎ 11am-5pm Tue-Sun) is a short way up the hill and is a more innovative museum than most in Georgia. The museum is divided into three parts: Eastern Georgia, Western Georgia and the mountains. There are 68 buildings in all, most taken from their original sites and reconstructed here. Examples of Georgian architecture on display include the house of a noble from the region of Imereti, a beautiful house from Kartli with a 12-cornered dome supported by 452 beams, a 6th to 8th century Sioni basilica, and an *akldama* (burial chamber) from the same period.

WALKING TOUR

This walk takes you from the centre of Tbilisi's New Town through the small streets of the Old Town, via the baths, across the

river to the dramatically located left bank of the Mtkvari and then back over to the other side.

Start your tour of Tbilisi inside Rustaveli metro station, one of the city's main hubs and home to the grotesquely large main branch of McDonald's. More attractive are the **monument (1)** to the national bard Shota Rustaveli and the pleasantly Stalinist Academy of Sciences building. From its courtyard a cable car used to take tourists up to Mtatsminda, the looming holy mountain of Tbilisi with the imposing but disused restaurant on top of it, giving superb views over the capital. Walk down Rustaveli, and soak up the cosmopolitan, bustling atmosphere of Tbilisi's main artery, taking time to drop into the **Kashveti Church (2; p41)**, the impressive **parliament (3; p41)** and the **Janashia Museum's (4; p41)** magnificent treasury.

Entering **Tavisuplebis moedani (5)** at the end of Rustaveli, turn right up Leonidzis kucha, passing the National Bank of Georgia and the next door **Museum of Money (6; p39)**. Follow the road round to the left and you'll find yourself in the middle of the charming Old Town with its dilapidated mansions and cobble streets. Turn left down Asatians kucha, which skirts the hillside below **Kartlis Deda (7; p38)** and descends to Puris moedani (Bread Square), a centre of the *Kala* community and near to the curious **Ateshga (8; Fire Worshipers' Temple)** built by the Persians during their occupation of the capital.

TBILISI WALKING TOUR

Distance: 5.5km

Time: 1½ to 2 hours



Carrying on you'll join Leselidze, the main thoroughfare of the Old Town where the **Jvaris Mama Church** (9; p39) stands proudly. Turn right on Leselidze and pass the **Tbilisi Synagogue** (10; p39) to your right and follow the road into Gorgasalis moedani, where Tbilisi's daily food bazaar once took place. Take the small road that leads past the lovely **Armenian Cathedral of St George** (11; p38) down to Abanos kucha, the setting of Tbilisi's traditional **sulphur baths** (12; p39), after which the city was named. Here you can enjoy a scrub down in the communal baths (or splash out on a private chamber if you feel like pampering yourself). Refreshed, walk on to the left bank via Metekhi Khidi (Bridge), climbing the steep hill to the left of the **Metekhi Church** (13; p40), which is well worth dropping into. Follow the road up the hill, past the Old Metekhi Hotel, and just beyond it on the right is a **small church** (14; p40) from where there are superb views across the Mtkvari to Narikala and the Old Town. The views are just as good as you make your way around the top of Avlabari moedani – look out for the enormous new **Tsminda Sameba (Holy Trinity) Cathedral** (15; p40), the biggest in the Caucasus – and on down to Baratashvili Hill. Cross back over the Saarbrücken Khidi and, if it's Saturday, you'll run into one of the most interesting markets in the country – the **Dry Bridge Fleamarket** (16; p49). Here entrepreneurs are backed up across the Saarbrücken Khidi selling their wares – from communist trinkets to postcards of old Tbilisi to souvenirs and paintings. Once on the other side of the river, it's a short walk through the Alexandrovsky Park back to Rustaveli, where the walk ends.

TBILISI FOR CHILDREN

Tbilisi is not a great place for kids, mainly due to a lack of anything designed specifically for them, although Georgians are generally well disposed towards children. Some things to try are: the sulphur baths (p39), which can be a lot of fun, climbing up to the Narikala fortress (for older children; p38), and swimming at the Tbilisi Sea, which can prove highly popular in summer.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

The highlight of the year is **Tbilisoba**, the city's festival held on the last Sunday of October. This is a wonderful time to visit – the whole

city comes out to party and every region of Georgia is represented in different parts of the city, including displays of traditional activities such as **wrestling and dancing**. Other big events include **Chikobomboba**, a pagan festival held the week before Easter, when bonfires are lit and the athletic jump over them to ward off evil spirits.

SLEEPING

Tbilisi has an enormous number of hotels for its size and relatively small tourist industry. Budget accommodation is still hard to find, and homestays are far less developed in the capital than in the regions. All prices given below include the 20% tax that is often left out in hotel brochures, as well as breakfast, unless otherwise stated. Of the hotels listed below, only the top-end options take credit cards. At the time of writing the **Hotel Adjara** (☎ 334360; Maisis moedani 26), popular with backpackers, was shut for renovation.

Budget

Bus Station Hotel (☎ 724636; Ortachala International Bus Station; s & d \$2.50-10) Unlikely to appeal to many, this small place is in the stark Soviet-era Ortachala international bus station in south-eastern Tbilisi. It's easy to get into town by marshrutkas 94 and 48, however. The rooms range from stunningly basic (no washing facilities at all, shared toilet) to 'lux' with hot water and private toilet, and, although it's rather a depressing place to stay, you can't expect much better at these low prices.

Hotel Europa (Map pp34-5; ☎ 940834; Davit Agh-mashenebeli 103; s/d/ste \$15/20/40) The rather grand, albeit largely disintegrating façade of the Europa is a tad misleading – with just seven rooms, the hotel is a small annex of a block otherwise given over to offices and smoking men. However, the rooms are clean and safe, all with TV and private bathroom, although no other luxuries. The 'lux' options at \$40 and \$50 are not a significant improvement and are not worth the price tag.

Hotel Iveria (Map pp34-5; ☎ 936461; Respublikis moedani 1; s & d \$20, ste \$40) Of all the floors in this depressing Tbilisi landmark only the third still houses tourists, while the rest is given over to refugees who have created their own chaotic mimicry here. Despite the grotesque odour in the main hall, the third floor is fine, with kind staff and clean, functional rooms. However, you will most likely feel rather unsafe coming

and going after dark here, and for this price you could stay in far nicer places. One of the two 'suites' has air-con.

Hotel Life (Map pp34-5; ☎ 773856; Gvinis Agmarti 19; s & d \$30-40; ☎) One of the best bargains in Tbilisi, the well-located Life is a short walk from the Old Town across the river, next to Avlabari metro station. The rooms are comfortable, half of them with smart new bathrooms and air-con. The prices vary according to room size.

Mtatsminda Hotel (Map pp34-5; ☎ 989455; Chitadze 6; s & d \$30) The only Soviet-era hotel not filled with refugees in Tbilisi is the Mtatsminda, excellently located a steep walk uphill from the parliament. The rooms are drab and unrenovated but perfectly acceptable and have hot water. The consular section of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is located in the building, so this is also where you come for visa extensions.

Nasi Gvetadze's Homestay (Map pp34-5; ☎ 950894; Marjanishvili 30; per person without breakfast \$6, hot shower \$1) It seems most backpackers you meet between Batumi and Baku have stayed at Nasi's old house just a block from Marjanishvili metro station. It's a great but basic place and one of the few homestays available in the city. Ring ahead in the summer, as there is a maximum of 10 beds, and be prepared to share rooms. Nasi speaks fluent German, and rudimentary English. There is no food provided, but there are plenty of local cafés.

Hotel Tela (Map p32; ☎ 379421; Gamsakhurdia 44; s & d with/without private bathroom \$20/15; ☎) The Tela is a tiny annex behind the main building at Gamsakhurdia 44. It's basic but a good budget choice – with clean and safe rooms, all of which have air-con, save room three.

Mid-Range

Hotel Beau Monde (Map pp34-5; ☎ 986003; fax 996246; Chavchavadzis kucha 11; s & d incl half board, free internet access & alcohol! \$80) Don't be put off by the rather shabby brickwork of this wonderful family-run hotel – inside it's charming and the Skhirtladze family will make you feel very welcome. The rooms are comfortable, all with private bathroom, and the hotel has good extra touches such as a library, rooftop sunbathing deck (complete with paddle pool) and an aquarium full of piranhas.

Hotel Boni (Map pp34-5; ☎ 986348; fax 985333; Chakhrakhadze 11; s & d with/without private bathroom \$60/30) One of the most atmospheric and best-

located hotels in the city, the former Sharmi Guesthouse is run by a family, with a superb collection of antique furniture. Indeed, the lounge includes a billiard table, while the breakfast is as rich as a taxidermy. Three rooms on the 1st floor are extremely comfortable in 19th-century Georgian style, while the three rooms on the 2nd floor share a very clean bathroom and toilet. There's billiards downstairs and English is spoken.

Hotel David (Map pp34-5; ☎ 935006; fax 982719; Paolo Iashvili 16a; s/d/ste \$50/60/70; ☎) The David began operation in 2001 and is a smart and comfortable place in Tbilisi's old town. The rooms offer good value for money, although you pay extra to use the small gym and sauna.

Guesthouse Dzveli Ubani (Map pp34-5; ☎ 922404; fax 922464; Alexander Dumas 5; s & d \$40, ste \$50-80; ☎) This hotel has a great location, just off Tavisuplebis moedani in the Old Town. It also has a new extension, bringing the total number of rooms to 15. English is spoken and the rooms are well equipped and comfortable.

Hotel Iliani (Map p32; ☎ 234086; fax 225676; Anjaparidze 1; s \$90, d \$100-120; ☎) On the so-called 'Hill of Dreams', the Iliani is one of the more pleasant mid-range hotels in Tbilisi, with individually furnished rooms and a great roof terrace to sit out on in the evenings. It's a short walk from Melikishvili and the centre of town, on a pleasant and quiet residential street.

Hotel Ipari (Map pp34-5; ☎ 996799; fax 990751; Rustaveli 23/4; s/d/ste \$60/80/120, apt per person \$30; ☎) This amusing little hotel is atmospheric and fun, as well as being right in the city centre. The rooms have questionable modern Georgian décor, but are all clean and comfortable and, despite some being rather small, all rooms have satellite TV. There are also apartments, although we were unable to see them ourselves.

Jejili Hotel (Map pp34-5; ☎ 999537; Gorgasali 7; s/d/ste \$40/50/65; ☎) Located in the Old Town just beyond the sulphur baths and above a lively restaurant, Jejili is a small guesthouse run by Lyuda. All four rooms are very comfortable and spacious in the airy Georgian style and have good bathrooms and balconies. Rather noisy by the busy embankment road, but otherwise a great place to feel at home.

Hotel Kartli (Map p32; ☎ 982982; fax 995429; Barnov 32; s/d \$54/66; ☎) This place is highly recommended and offers 12 airy and rustically

furnished rooms, four of which have air-con. The helpful staff speaks English and the European-style terrace restaurant is a very popular lunch spot for locals.

Hotel Kopala (Map pp34-5; ☎ 775520; www.kopala.ge; Chekhov 8/10; s/d/ste 570/90/200; ☎) This up-market venture 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 its staff is friendly. It also boasts a highly bizarre conference and meeting hall in the style of an 18th-century Metekhian mansion – definitely the place to come for a surreal corporate retreat. The bar-restaurant has some of the best views in the city.

Hotel Lago (Map p32; ☎ 967133; fax 374210; Kandakeli 27; s/d 550/100; ☎) Despite its awkward location in Saburtalo, the Lago is one of Tbilisi's more unique hotels, furnished from top to bottom with French antique furniture. Totally unmarked from the street, you must ring to enter. Rooms 7 and 8 share an enormous walk-out balcony, while room 1 is gorgeously furnished and the perfect place for romance. There's a little swimming pool in the pretty back garden.

Hotel Merani (Map pp34-5; ☎ 932378; www.iberiapac.ge/merani; Rustaveli 42; s & d 560-100, ste 140; ☎) This small hotel has a great position and friendly owners. The rooms are very comfortable, with little difference between the cheapest and most expensive rooms, although the suite is two rooms and includes a Jacuzzi. The price includes being met at the airport and Internet access in the corridor is free.

Old Metekhi Hotel (Map pp34-5; ☎ 990536; www.oldmetekhi.com.ge; Metekhi 3; s/d/apt 580/90/120; ☎) Perched atop a rocky cliff looking down onto the Mtkvari River, the Old Metekhi is a traditional establishment favouring individual attention over visitor numbers – despite its size, it only has 15 rooms. The whole place was renovated in 2003 and remains one of the more classy and traditional places to put up in Tbilisi.

Mtis Broli Guesthouse (Map pp34-5; ☎ 940604; www.wiv.ge/hotels/mtis_broli.html; Akhvlediani Agmarti 4; s/d/ste 540/50/100; ☎) This is one of Tbilisi's most charming hotels – a mansion converted into a guesthouse by Veronika Buladze, with a very 19th-century feel, stuffed full of tasteful antiques and musical instruments. The bathrooms are very good, with marble floors and views over the river, and

the suite is definitely worth its price tag – includes a sitting room and office.

Hotel Tori (Map pp34-5; ☎ 923765; tori@access.sanet.ge; G Chanturia 10; s/d 580/100, ste 6150-200; ☎) The splendid location of this unassuming but very comfortable place is its best recommendation, along with very comfortable rooms that boast great bathrooms. The staff was rather unfriendly at first, but lightened up eventually. One of the best deals in this price range, without question.

Vere Inn (Map p32; ☎ 294733; fax 291252; Barnov 53; s/d 540/50; ☎) A very pleasant and reasonably priced option, this charming hideaway near the Chinese embassy has four quirkily decorated, charming rooms and is exceptionally friendly. All rooms have all creature comforts, including satellite TV, and there's a sauna and plunge pool downstairs.

Top End


Betsy's Place (Map p32; ☎ 931404; www.betsysshotel.com; Makashvili 32-34; s/d 138/162; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) A favourite with Georgia's numerous NGO workers, this oasis of American-run efficiency is understandably popular. The comfortable rooms have good views over the city and are very comfortable. The Bribery cocktail bar and hotel restaurant are both highly recommended, and there's a small outdoor pool (don't expect to be able to work off the *khachapuri*) and basement gym.

Sheraton Metekhi Palace Hotel (Map pp34-5; ☎ 772020; www.sheraton.com; Telavi 20; s/d 162/180; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) Proof that not only the Soviets built ugly hotels, the inconveniently located Sheraton has the look of a Swedish prison about it, yet for years it was Tbilisi's best. It's safe to say that the Marriott has now eclipsed it comprehensively, although this is still a very high-standard business hotel. The metal detector at the door recalls the heady days of mid-'90s Tbilisi, when semi-automatics had to be left at reception. The 24-hour bank and ATM are useful too.

Tbilisi Marriott Hotel (Map pp34-5; ☎ 779200; www.marriott.com; Rustaveli 13; s & d 174, ste 5594; ☎ ☎ ☎) The first of two Marriott developments in Tbilisi, this classic five-star establishment has the best location of the top-range hotels and is a palace of excellent service and efficiency. It's aimed at the business and NGO crowd, so is rather formal and quiet. The rooms are spacious and bathrooms huge. Cigarettes in the minibar remind you

THE BEST TBILISI HOTELS FOR...

- A Good Deal** The **Lile** (p44) near the Metekhi Church or the **Dzveli Ubani** (p44) in the centre of the Old Town.
- Budget Travellers** The cheapest bed in town is at the **Bus Station Hotel** (p43).
- Georgian Charm** The **Lago** (p45) with its wonderful antiques and vast balconies.
- Location, Location** It's hard to beat either of the **Marriotts** (p45 and below).
- Romance** The **Old Metekhi Hotel** (p45) with its glorious walk-out balconies overlooking the river and Narikala Fortress.



restaurant makes a great place for lunch or dinner. Outside the summer months there are performances most evenings – these are a much-celebrated Tbilisi tradition and aimed at adults rather than children.

Dzveli Metekhi (Map pp34-5; ☎ 74407; Metekhi 3; mains \$8) This understandably popular place at the Old Metekhi Hotel (p45) has much sought-after balcony tables with some superb views of Tbilisi. The food is excellent Georgian fare with a good wine list. Live music most nights.

Dzveli Sakhli (Map pp34-5; ☎ 923497; Sanapiro 3; mains \$9) Down on the riverside, the impressive and expansive 'old house' serves authentic dishes, with a twist, from all over Georgia and is simply one of the best in town. The live entertainment is unusually excellent – superb mountain dances and polyphonic singing on Saturday and Sunday. Great for a small group and a lively meal.

Erisoni (Map pp34-5; ☎ 629207; Rikhe; mains \$6) One of the smartest of the lot on the Rikhe strip, Erisoni has a pleasant courtyard with private dining rooms and a communal dining room in the elegant two-storey wooden house at its centre. Late-night feasting and live music for a wealthy local crowd.

Gircha (Map p32; ☎ 252536; Melikishvili 12; mains \$7) A very trendy-looking establishment let down by slovenly service and cheap bar furniture, but a real social hub next to the Vere Palace Hotel. Georgian cooking with a modern twist.

Kalakuri (Map pp34-5; ☎ 899-159194; Rikhe; mains \$5) Possibly the nicest of these riverside establishments and certainly the most down to earth, the Kalakuri is in a very pleasant wooden house with both booths and open seating. Excellent Georgian standards and not pricey.

Kazbegi (Map pp34-5; ☎ 923194; Tabukashvili 5; mains \$5) One of the many restaurants run by the Kazbegi corporation in Tbilisi, the main selling points here are the outside tables and fountains in a private garden next to the Alexandrovsky Park. Food is not inspirational, but perfectly good – it's a nice place for an outside meal.

Kheivani (☎ 724439; Dmitri Gulia 1; mains \$4) A favourite place to take tour groups, this is actually a great place for a meal, despite being rather out of town by the Ortachala bus station. It's very good value too, serving up delicious Georgian feasts.

that you are in Georgia, however. The building also hosts the Parnas Café and Majestic restaurant, as well as a very good gym.

Tbilisi Courtyard Marriott (Map pp34-5; ☎ 779 200; www.marriott.com; Tavisuplebis moedani 4; s/d/ste \$125/135/175; P ☎ ☎) The new cousin to the Marriott is the four-star Courtyard development, an upmarket but cheaper version of the Marriott proper. The swimming pool and disco supposedly demonstrate that this development is aimed at tourists and the younger cashed-up crowd.

Vere Palace Hotel (Map pp34-5; ☎ 253340; fax 221298; Kuchishvili 24/8; s/d \$108/144; P ☎ ☎) While 'palace' might be pushing it a bit, this hotel is comfortable and well-appointed enough to have hosted the Pope. It's also got a central location and friendly English-speaking staff and the rooms – while nothing special – are perfectly nice. The hotel has a second location in Bakuriani (see p94).

EATING Georgian

Tbilisi's restaurant scene improved dramatically during the late 1990s and there is no shortage of places to experience the superb national cuisine. Two areas to find high-standard Georgian cuisine are Baratashvili and the upmarket strip of restaurants on Rikhe, the left embankment of the Mtkvari.

Au Sans Souci (Map pp34-5; ☎ 986594; Shavteli 13; mains \$5) Owned by Rezo Gabriadze, who also runs the Marionette Theatre in the same building, this quirky but attractive

Megrelia (Map pp34-5; ☎ 743831; Rikhe; mains \$6) You have no option but to sit in one of the wooden cabins here, ranging from the enormous to the intimate. It's a true Georgian experience, popular with locals and part of the long line up along the riverfront.

Narinj (Map pp34-5; no phone; Baratashvili 1; mains \$9) In an atmospheric brick building, this good family-run restaurant will look after you very well – the host is happy to explain the menu, recommend the best dishes and put together a *supra*. The Kakhetian white house wine is also superb and very easy to drink.

Old Love Café (Map pp34-5; ☎ 936569; Shavteli 18; mains \$6) Opposite the Anchiskhati Church, this strangely named establishment has a strikingly over-the-top baroque interior and makes a good place to stop off for lunch while wandering about the old town.

Paradise Lost (Map pp34-5; ☎ 391390; Dzmevi Kakabadze 2; mains \$7) A more Westernised and tourist-oriented place, Paradise Lost still delivers the goods – superb Georgian cooking, and nonintrusive live music, although the décor is rather dubious.

Puris Sakhli (Map pp34-5; ☎ 999537; Gorgasali 7; meals \$7) In the old city 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 \$15.

Tbilisuri (Map pp34-5; ☎ 990129; Pushkin 19; ☎ until 2am; mains \$7) Located under the rather unctuous Sports Bar, the exterior belies the fact that this is a lively and enjoyable place to try traditional Georgian food. Live music can be extremely loud, but the friendly service and great fare makes up for that.

Verisubani (Map p32; ☎ 936246; Kostava 23; mains \$6) Another delightful basement restaurant popular with locals and usually full of *supra* festivities, the Verisubani is located beneath a forgettable bar next to Beatles. Its brick walls and plain Georgian decoration make it a charming place.

International

Catering to Tbilisi's new rich and the expat community are a wide range of high-quality restaurants serving up international cuisine. If in doubt head down to the strip of Western eateries on Akhvediani (still known to most people as Perovskaya) and Vashlovani's kucha. Here, you can eat until early into the

morning and drink even later. Some of the best foreign restaurants are listed below.

China Town (Map pp34-5; ☎ 75114; Lesgidze 46; mains \$8) Billing itself as a Chinese restaurant and tea saloon, this is a smart and authentically run by efficient chefs from the people's republic.

Csaba's Jazz-Rock Café (Map pp34-5; ☎ 923192; Vashlovani 3; mains \$8) Anyone curious about what to expect from a Hungarian-Georgian restaurant will be pleasantly surprised by the excellent food in this lovely little establishment with a wooden interior. Live jazz is a good accompaniment to a superb meal.

Majestic Restaurant (Map pp34-5; ☎ 779200; Rustaveli 13; mains \$14) The Tbilisi Marriott Hotel's main restaurant has a largely Italian menu, although the wine list is only Georgian. There's an Italian buffet every Thursday, although for \$18 you'd better be hungry. Good food, but very much a hotel restaurant.

Thailand Kitchen/Argo Bar (Map pp34-5; ☎ 999723; Irakli II 19; mains \$8) This is one of the city's most lovely restaurants, with an atmospheric main dining room and a quirky basement bar that has tables set up above small ponds and low lighting. The food isn't bad, given the total unavailability of coconut, lemongrass and galangal in the Caucasus. Home deliveries are available and good English is spoken.

Three Musketeers (Map pp34-5; ☎ 923645; Chanturia 6; mains \$13) A central and sleek venture with a French and Georgian menu, the former being pricey yet authentic, the latter being cheaper and similar to many elsewhere.

Tokyo (Map pp34-5; ☎ 995632; Akhvediani 17; mains \$15) This hypersleek Japanese place is one of Tbilisi's most stylish restaurants, and a rather pricey treat. The sushi is all prepared authentically and is superb, although beer prices are astronomical.

Cheap Eats

For a quick bite drop into any *sakhinkle*, of which El Depo is the most popular city-wide chain, or *sakhachapure* – there's one on every main street in the city. More substantial meals can be had from the restaurants below.

Dzveli Ubani (Map pp34-5; ☎ 755118; Gvinis Agmarti 7; mains \$2) An, unembellished Old-Town treat, this family restaurant is certainly authentic, with a curiously designed but charming dining room which, when busy, is a great place to enjoy home cooking.

Lotus (Map pp34-5; ☎ 893-206127; Tavissuplebis moedani 7; mains \$4) This charming vegetarian canteen is one of the best places for lunch on the run in Tbilisi; it's cheap, cheerful and delicious. You can watch the world rush by on Tavissuplebis moedani and read their proselytising booklet that promotes vegetarian diet with quotes from Einstein and Tolstoy. Did you know Brooke Shields is a vegetarian?

Samaya (Map pp34-5; ☎ 920402; Mikheil Javakhishvili 2; meals \$4) This is one of the few Tbilisi restaurants where you can eat outside, although its tasty Georgian menu is reason alone to go. Samaya is a cluster of tables around a fountain and a superb place to sit out eating and drinking in the summer months. The *chikhirtma* (Georgian chicken broth) is superb.

DRINKING

The busy strip of bars and restaurants around Akhvlediani is definitely the centre of Tbilisi's drinking scene, although the majority of bars seem to suffer from a lack of clientele. This is the place to head late at night once everything else is shut, although only the Nali and Dublin pubs can be guaranteed to have a crowd. Most bars serve meals as well, and open until at least 1am, usually later.

Acid Bar (Map p32; ☎ 899-411980; cnr Chavchavadzis gamziri & R Lagidze 4) A very cool bar with two campuses, one in Vake and one just off Rustaveli. Both attract a young crowd most nights of the week.

Argo (Map pp34-5; ☎ 999723; Irakli II 19) Certainly the most imaginatively designed of Tbilisi's bars, this dark place has booth seating intercut with goldfish ponds in the floor.

50 Chavchavadze (Map p32; ☎ 223055; Chavchavadzis gamziri 50) Looks like an expat bar, festooned with flags and Americana, but seems to have a mainly local crowd of well-heeled Vake residents. Friendly and atmospheric.

Nali (Map pp34-5; ☎ 986859; Kiacheli 4/1) Perpetually busy and supposedly an Irish bar. Customers take turns singing most nights. Whether you like it or not, this is Tbilisi's most happening bar with a good mix of foreigners and locals.

Western Bar (Map pp34-5; ☎ 931893; Besiki 1) Central and busy with a mixed Georgian and foreign clientele, this is a pleasant wooden bar with food, a short walk off Rustaveli.

Green Bar (Map pp34-5; ☎ 934761; Rustaveli 16) Still a busy place most nights, full of expats

and rich Georgians. Service can be temperamental when the bar's crowded though and it's extremely expensive by local standards.

Success (Map pp34-5; ☎ 992200; Vashmaral 3) Supposedly a hang-off-it-for-the-city-Berlitz and trendsetters, this bar has made a brave, if somewhat misdirected, attempt at cutting-edge interior design, but there are few signs of this being any more outré than any other Tbilisi late-night bar. The worst Long Island ice tea in the Caucasus, hands down.

Diesel (Map pp34-5; ☎ 989976; Akhvlediani 18) Once a hypercool spot (a fact to which the transparent visit cards attest) and run by Pakistani entrepreneur Faiyaz Moda. It was empty during the summer we visited, but it may take off again.

Smuggler's Arms (Map p32; ☎ 253314; Chavchavadzis gamziri 42) A favourite with the rugby shirt and tattoo fraternity, the Smuggler's is Vake's most popular expat bar, with big-screen TV showing sports and a pool table.

ENTERTAINMENT Cinemas

The main cinemas in Tbilisi are unlikely to interest visitors, as nearly all films are dubbed into Russian. However, the **Kino Sakhli** (Map pp34-5; ☎ 997518; Dzeveli Kakabadze 2) shows films in English on Wednesday evenings.

Gay & Lesbian Venues

There are no officially gay venues in Tbilisi, although trendy Success (above) is known for being gay-friendly. The Adjara Music Hall (p49) is less so, but as the city's main dance venue, it is popular with the gay crowd along with everyone else. Alexandrovsky Park, north of Rustaveli is a popular meeting place in the evenings.

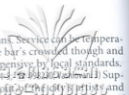
Live Music

Most Georgian restaurants will lay on entertainment in the evening – heaven or hell depending on the quality of the performance and noise levels. Some of the best can be seen at the Dzeveli Sakhli (see p46).

Most of the Irish/expat bars around Akhvlediani and Kiacheli offer live music in the evenings – everything from country-and-western to appalling rock covers.

Nightclubs

Tbilisi nightlife is still rather limited, and most nightclubs shut up shop during July



and August, as people go to parties and discos at Tbilisi Sea. By far the most fashionable place in town is the **Adjara Music Hall** (Map p32; ☎ 433433; Maisi moedani 1/26; admission from \$10), where most Western DJs play when they are in town. The entrance is to the right-hand side of the Adjara Hotel. Cheesier by far is **Beatles** (Map p32; ☎ 920950; Kostava 25) which even expats seem too trendy to be seen dead in. Check *Tbilisi Pastimes* or any other local paper for new listings and events.

Sport

The Marriott Hotel and Betsy's Place (p45) have good gyms where you can buy day membership. The Marriott is better, although it has no pool. Locals swim at the nearby Tbilisi Sea and at Lisi Lake in Saburtalo. Easier to get to and arguably cleaner is the **Laguna Vere swimming pool** (Map p32; Kostava 34; admission \$2.50) although first-time visitors will also need to pay \$2.50 extra for a health certificate (an absurd requirement given that the doctor on duty simply asks 'are you healthy?' and then stamps your card, assuming you answer in the affirmative). More upmarket is the pool at the Sheraton Metechi Palace Hotel (outdoor, rather small; p45) and at the new Marriott Courtyard (p46) on Tavisuplebis moedani.

Theatre

Some of the most interesting venues are: **Griboyedov Theatre** (Map pp34-5; ☎ 995471; Rustaveli 4) **Marionette Theatre** (Map pp34-5; ☎ 996620, 986593; Shavteli 16) **Marjanishvili Theatre** (Map pp34-5; ☎ 952425; Marjanishvili 8) **Mikhail Tumanishvili Film Actors' Theatre** (Map p32; ☎ 990345, 932057; Davit Aghmashenebeli 127) **Rustaveli Theatre** (Map pp34-5; ☎ 936583; Rustaveli 17)

SHOPPING

Souvenirs are sold along Rustaveli and throughout the old town. Particularly good shops are on Leselidze and Shavteli. There is a rather nasty tourist market outside the Academy of Sciences building on Rustaveli.

The most interesting market is the **Dry Bridge flea market** (Map pp34-5) on weekend mornings; you'll find all kinds of knick-knacks and charming miscellanea. The **main food market** (Map p32) is the sprawling chaos outside the main train station where you can buy fruit, veg and *chacha*.

There are plenty of supermarkets that offer a large range of foodstuffs, generally at higher prices. The best is probably **Zemeli** (Map pp34-5; 37 Rustaveli) open 24 hours a day, but also reliable are **Big Ben** (Map pp32; Chavchavadzis gamziri 52)

EuroCentre Central (Map pp34-5; Gudiasvili 1) Vake (Map p32; Chavchavadzis gamziri 54)

Supermarket (Map p32; Davit Aghmashenebeli 90/86)

One of the most useful places in Tbilisi is **Pirimze** (Map pp34-5), a six-storey building by the all-night flower market. Here you can get clothes and shoes repaired, photocopy, fax, cut keys etc, and there is an excellent coffee stall at the entrance for anyone wanting real ground coffee.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Tbilisi is not well served by international flights, and there are few flights within Georgia. For information on the untime-tabled flight to Mestia, see p75.

The newly created **Caucasus Airlines** (☎ 91 2183; caucasusairlines@hotmail.com; Saburtalo 32) links Tbilisi to Batumi, Baku and Yerevan at least twice a week, charging \$130 one-way and \$270 return.

See p261 for more on international flights to Tbilisi.

Bus & Marshrutka

Tbilisi has three long distance bus stations - Didube (the main hub for national transport, from where marshrutkas and shared taxis leave to Mtskheta, Kazbegi, Gori, Tskhinvali, Mestia, Borjomi, Akhaltsikhe, Akhalkalaki and many other destinations throughout Georgia), Ortachala (buses to Armenia, Azerbaijan and Turkey) and the main train station, Vagzlis moedani (for Western Georgia - Kutaisi, Poti, Zugdidi, Kobuleti, Batumi, Samtredia).

Ortachala international bus terminal is something of a backwater - from here buses run to Yerevan twice a day (\$7.50, seven hours, 8.15am and 9.30am), daily to Istanbul (\$40, 30 hours, noon) and twice weekly to Baku (\$10, 14 hours, Monday 1pm and Thursday 5pm). There are also marshrutkas throughout the morning to Yerevan (\$12.50, 6½ hours, last departure at 1pm). For the truly hardy, there are also services to Greece. To get to Ortachala, take

marshrutka 48 or 94 from the parliament side of Rustaveli. Marshrutka 94 runs between Ortachala and the main train station.

Car

Car rental is easy in Tbilisi:

Avis (Map pp34-5; ☎ 923594; www.avis.com; Rustaveli 1)

Cosmo Group (☎ 920960; cosmo@gol.ge)

Hertz (☎ 922978; hertz@georgia.com.ge; Leselidze 44)

Perhaps a better option, given the Georgian driving ethic (see p267), is hiring a driver for the day. This can be done through any travel agency for between \$20 and \$30 per day, plus petrol.

Train

The only international train routes to Tbilisi are the overnight sleepers from Baku and Yerevan. Services to Russia and Ukraine have been abandoned since the secession of Abkhazia, which took the train line with it.

There are two trains to Baku: the nightly train (\$13/22, 2nd/1st class) and the quicker and more comfortable American Express-run Silk Road Express, which runs five times a week and costs \$168/270 (2nd/1st class).

The train to Yerevan is painfully slow, and only runs every other day (on odd dates from Tbilisi, returning from Yerevan on even dates), leaving Tbilisi in the mid-afternoon and arriving in Yerevan the next morning. Tickets cost \$13 in a four-berth sleeper, and \$22 1st class (two-berth with air-con). See p265 for more details on international trains to and from Georgia.

The overnight train to Batumi (\$7, seven hours) is the only domestic sleeper service, leaving every night in both directions and arriving early in the morning. There are also two quicker day-time trains that run the route in both directions. Tbilisi's **main train station** (Map pp34-5; ☎ 993253) is the railway hub of Georgia. Domestic destinations include Kutaisi (\$5, four hours), Gori (\$1, one hour), Borjomi (\$1.25, three hours), Zugdidi (\$6, seven hours), Akhaltsikhe (\$7, 10 hours) and Tskhinvali (\$2.50, three hours).

GETTING AROUND

To/From the Airport

Most people will take a taxi; a decent price from town to the airport is 10 lari (\$5) one-way. Heading from the airport into town you'll be charged far more – and be careful

whether the agreed price is in dollars or lari! A realistic fare into town is \$10.

A red bus runs every 15 minutes between the airport and city centre (25¢), passing through Tavisuplebis moedani, Rustaveli and terminating at the train station. This service only operates until 6pm.

Public Transport

Buses, trolley buses and trams all trawl their routes through Tbilisi at snail's pace, although only buses run through the city centre. In reality, unless you are staying somewhere far flung where these are the only public transport option, you'll really only use marshrutkas and the metro.

Marshrutka

The marshrutka is king in Tbilisi. The bane of drivers' lives but the saviour of anyone trying to get anywhere quickly and cheaply, they are the best way to get around, costing 40 or 50 tetri (20¢ or 25¢) per journey. All marshrutkas display a number defining their route (p51) and then a summary (in Georgian) of the main places they pass through. Simply hail them anywhere along their route and jump aboard, asking the driver to stop when you reach your destination and paying when you get off. To get the driver to stop, yell out '*gucheret!*'. Your main problem will be understanding the destinations, as they are only written in Georgian. If in doubt, simply say your destination (or at least, the nearest big street by it) to the driver and he'll either shake or nod. Beware of pickpockets, although most people are very friendly and keen to help foreigners.

Metro

The deep, dank Tbilisi metro is the standard fast and efficient Soviet system seen all over the former USSR. The flat fare is 20 tetri (10¢) and the two lines connect you to most important parts of the city, meeting at the train station (Vagzlis moedani). A third line has been in planning for a while, but a shortage of funds makes its construction highly improbable for now. The stations of most use to visitors will be Tavisuplebis moedani (Freedom Square, for the old town), Rustaveli (for the town centre), Marjanishvili (for Davit Aghmashenebelis), Vagzlis moedani (for the main train station and bazaar) and Didube (for the national bus station).



PICK A NUMBER, ANY NUMBER

Some of the most useful Tbilisi marshrutka routes are:

2 – Tavisuplebis moedani, Rustaveli, Kostava, Vazha Pshavela

2A – Metro Isani (past Sheraton Metechi Palace Hotel), Tavisuplebis moedani, Rustaveli, Kostava, Vazha Pshavela, Kavtaradzi

4 – Tavisuplebis moedani, Rustaveli, Chavchavadzis gamziri, Delisi

6 – Tavisuplebis moedani, Saarbrückenis Khidi (Dry Bridge), Davit Aghmashenebeli, Marjanishvili moedani, Metro Didube bus station

9 – Vagzlis moedani (train station), Gmirta moedani, Chavchavadzis gamziri, Vake Park

12 – Vagzlis moedani (train station), Gmirta moedani, Tavisuplebis moedani, Leonidzi, Davitashvili

12A – If you want to go straight from the train to the baths, this is the same as route 12, except that after Tavisuplebis moedani it goes to Asatiani, the baths, and Leselidze

34 – Dighomi, Gagarinis moedani, Gamsakhurdia, Kostava, Rustaveli, Tavisuplebis moedani, Baratashvili, Metro Isani

48 – Vake Park, Chavchavadzis gamziri, Rustaveli, Tavisuplebis moedani, Baratashvili, Gorgasalis moedani

51 – Metro Didube (bus station), Tseretli, Gmirta moedani, Gamsakhurdia, Vazha Pshavela, Kavtaradzi

61 – Tavisuplebis moedani, Respublikis moedani, Philharmonia, Saburtalo Market, Dighomi, Metro Didube (bus station), Tseia

67 – Vagzlis moedani, Davit Aghmashenebeli, Tavisuplebis moedani, Chonkadzi (funicular), Makashvili, Gogebashvili

68 – Tavisuplebis moedani, Rustaveli, Marjanishvili Khidi, Davit Aghmashenebeli, Vagzlis moedani (Train Station)

74 – Begebi, Vake Park, Chavchavadzis gamziri, Rustaveli, Tavisuplebis moedani, Baratashvili

94 – Vagzlis moedani (train station), Davit Aghmashenebeli, Eilbakidzi, Tavisuplebis moedani, Galaktion Tabidze, Asatiani, Gorgasalis, Ortachala (bus station)

108 – Dighomi, Metro Didube (bus station), Dinamo Stadium, Davit Aghmashenebeli, Saarbrückenis moedani, Ortachala (bus station)

platforms themselves, signs are in Russian too for those who remain overwhelmed by the Georgian alphabet. At each stop the station name is announced by the driver and just before the doors shut the name of the next station is also announced. Passengers tend to be highly amused by foreigners getting lost in the system, but will help you if you are not sure where you are going.

Taxi

Taxis are easy to find in Tbilisi, and are unmetered except in some more modern cars (usually red Mitsubishi). For rides in the centre of town, 2 to 3 lari (\$1 to \$1.50) is standard, although longer rides may be more. Hand over the money confidently when you get out. Agree in advance if you are not confident, although the driver is likely to up the price if you do this.

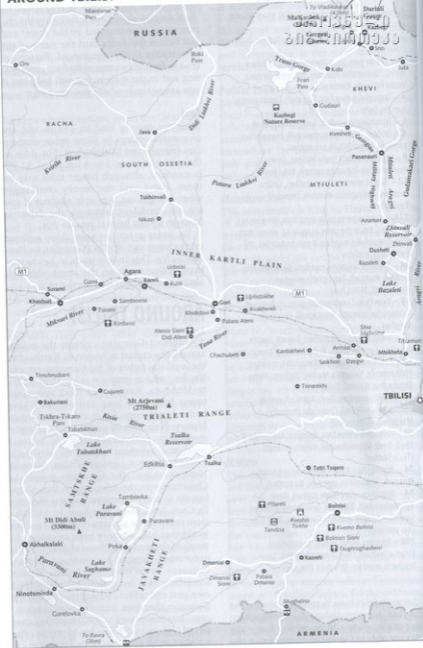
To order a taxi to your door without extra charge call ☎ 929 (Georgian or Russian only). This in fact tends to be cheaper than hailing a cab on the street, although always ask the operator for the price.

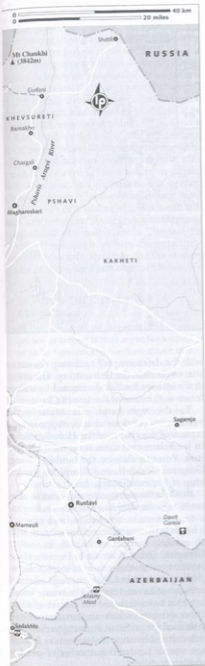
AROUND TBILISI

A cradle of Georgian culture, the region around the capital is known as Kartli, after the mythical father of the Georgian people, Kartlos, whose progeny made their home at Mtskheta. Kartli's two most important towns both have long histories and have had a hugely significant role in Georgian history. Nobody can understand Georgian spirituality without visiting the ancient royal and religious capital of Mtskheta, a short distance beyond Tbilisi. Here St Nino converted the Georgian people to Christianity in the 4th century, thus shaping the country's modern cultural identity. In Gori, Josef Stalin was born in 1878; he went on to make an impact on the modern world that has variously been calculated in terms of the tens of millions of deaths in his notorious Gulags, or as victory against Nazi Germany in WWII. Both towns remain something akin to open museums to their own past and reflect contrasting sides to the Georgian character. Studded with magnificent churches as well as the fascinating cave city of Uplistsikhe, Kartli has plenty to offer a visitor in an easy trip from Tbilisi.

Security fears have been overplayed in the past, but remain vigilant for pickpockets. Your main worry will be getting lost – the signs are only in Georgian. However, on the

AROUND TBILISI





MTSKHETA მცხეთა

☎ 273 / pop 10,000

To a non-Georgian, Mtskheta's almost mythological place in Georgian culture is hard to describe. While it's something of a backwater these days, Mtskheta contains some of the oldest churches in the country and has been its spiritual heart since the establishment of Christianity as the state religion of Kartli in 337, one of the defining moments in Georgian history. This, and the fact that the most powerful kings chose Mtskheta and later Tbilisi as their political capitals, confirmed the central importance of Kartli in Georgia. A Unesco World Heritage site just 27km from the centre of Tbilisi, Mtskheta's attractions, including four churches, an excellent museum and an alluring setting where the Mtkvari and Aragvi Rivers meet, make this a very easy and enjoyable day trip from Tbilisi, and essential for anyone wanting to get to grips with Georgian spirituality.

Orientation

Mtskheta is just off the main Gori highway from Tbilisi. Coming off the motorway, you'll drive along the right bank of the Mtkvari River, before crossing the bridge into Mtskheta and onto Davit Aghmashenebeli, the main road of the town. If you are in a marshrutka or bus, ask them to let you off once you see the Samtavro Church on your left (the first church you'll pass close by), or the town fortress, Bebris Tsikhe, a little further on, otherwise you'll find yourself at the bus terminus a few kilometres from the town centre, where there is nothing to see.

Sights

Dominating the low-rise town is the impressively grand (and for its time, enormous) 11th-century **Sveti-Tskhoveli Cathedral**, the largest functioning cathedral in Georgia. According to tradition, this is where Christ's robe was buried. Apparently a Georgian Jew, Elio, 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 take the robe from her grasp, so they were buried together. A tree grew on the grave. The builders of the first church cut through the trunk, but it would not fall. St Nino came and, through prayer, made the tree whole again and caused it to

MTSKHETA



blossom and give out a healing oil. Sveti-Tskhoveli means 'life-giving column'. Another version of the story has it that when builders tried to cut down the tree to supply pillars for the supports of the original church it began floating in the air and could only be brought back down by prayers from St Nino. This episode is illustrated in a fresco at Nino's resting place in Bodbe, Kakheti.

The first church in Georgia was built on this site in the 4th century, and was replaced with a stone church in the 6th century by King Vakhtang Gorgasali, and you can see its modest remains to the left of the cathedral today. Between 1010 and 1029 Patriarch Melkhisiedek initiated the construction of the present building, and Sveti-Tskhoveli became the burial ground for the kings of Eastern Georgia. Despite being damaged in the late 14th century by the forces of Tamerlane, the cathedral is still one of the most beautiful in the country. The impressive cupola was restored in the 15th century, making it the newest part of the structure.

Entering the grounds today, you will come through the main gate, which along

with the defensive wall enclosing the entire site, was built in the 18th century. The cathedral's interior itself is dominated by a huge fresco in the nave of the face of Christ.

To the right-hand side towards the narthex is a curious chapel, supposedly a replica of the chapel of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, that dates from the 14th century. You can also see the tombs of Kings Gorgasali, Irakli II, and Giorgi XI, the last king of Eastern Georgia, here.

Mtskheta Museum (David Aghmashenebeli 54; admission 25¢; ☎ 11am-7pm) has recently undergone a comprehensive renovation, and now it's a brightly lit, interesting place to visit, with all exhibits marked in English as well as Georgian. Some of the finds from local excavations are nothing short of incredible, including urns from 6,000 years ago adorned with swastikas and incredibly ornate jewellery that has weathered the course of time. Other exhibits include ancient armour and vials used for perfume, attesting to the area's rich cultural heritage. A 1st-century Iranian sun temple rendered in mother-of-pearl is another highlight.

JVARI

Visible for miles around, perched on a hill overlooking the valley, **Jvari Church** is the main reason many people come to Mtskheta. It is one of the greatest examples of early Georgian Christian architecture, a classic of tetraconch design. To many people in Georgia this church is the holiest of holies, Georgia's spiritual heart, and a visit to Jvari should be carried out with this in mind.

First built at the end of the 6th century, Jvari stands where St Nino set up her cross above pre-Christian Mtskheta before successfully converting the town from paganism. In the second part of the 6th century Guaram Eristavi had a little church built to the north of this site, which you can still see. Not long after, Guaram's son Stepanoz constructed the main church. The interior is rather bare, but from here there are spectacular views over Mtskheta and the convergence of the Aragvi and Mtkvari Rivers. To

ST NINO & THE CONVERSION OF GEORGIA

While some of the legends that have grown up around St Nino are so far-fetched as to be ridiculous, there is no doubt that Nino is the historical figure to whom the 4th-century Christian conversion of Iveria (Eastern Georgia) can be attributed. Born a slave girl (although many have exaggerated her social status saying that she was a Roman princess), Nino is widely believed to have hailed from Cappadocia in eastern Turkey.

According to legend, Nino received a vision from the Virgin Mary when she was 14 years old telling her that her destiny was to convert the Iverians to Christianity. Coming to Iveria, Nino won respect from the people by her good deeds and the miracles she performed. It was only when she managed to save Queen Nana from serious illness by prayer that she won a royal convert, however. King Mirian and the court quickly followed suit – leading to a mass baptism in the Aragvi River for the townsfolk of Mtskheta. The vine-leaf cross that the Virgin Mary allegedly gave Nino (and which Nino later bound with her own hair) is still on display at the Sioni Cathedral in Tbilisi. She remains Georgia's most venerated saint, and is buried in the village of Bodbe, Kakheti.

get there from the town it's best to take a taxi (\$2), or for the fit, coming into Mtskheta by marshrutka, ask the driver to stop before you turn off the main road and then walk to the hillside and scramble up.

There are two other churches in Mtskheta worth visiting. The **Samtavro Church** on Davit Aghmashenebeli now functions as a nursery. It was the former residence of the lords of Mtskheta and former inhabitants include St Nino. The large church was built in the 1130s. King Mirian and his wife Queen Nana are buried in the southwest corner, under early-20th-century tombstones. The little church, Tsminda Nino, dates from the 4th century and stands on the spot where St Nino is said to have prayed. Far smaller but charming is the **Antioki Church**, by the river behind the cathedral. This tiny church in a lovely rose garden dates from St Nino's time, although it was renovated in 2000. It manages to retain its modest charm despite the freshly painted frescoes.

Bebris Tsikhe, Mtskheta's castle, was built in the early feudal period to protect Mtskheta to the north. It is a romantic ruin situated at the top end of Davit Aghmashenebeli, near Teatron Park.

Sleeping

Mtskheta Palace Hotel (☎ 910202; fax 911717; Davit Aghmashenebeli; s & d \$50-100, ste \$130-150; P ♻ ♿) This new hotel is signposted for miles around, hoping to attract wealthy customers from the motorway. It's certainly quite palatial, but also rather deserted. Like any four-star business hotel, it's very comfortable, but rather devoid of atmosphere.

Unless you can find a homestay (ask at the museum or at one of the restaurants if they know of one), your only budget option is camping or staying in huts at **Teatron Park** (s & d \$5), off Davit Aghmashenebeli towards Bebris Tsikhee. The site seems to be frequently unattended though, so although camping is no problem, the huts may not be available.

Eating

Mtskheta is famous for its *lobio* – which can be found in any local restaurant, served in a traditional clay pot. This is a popular spot for Tbilisi folk to come for a meal, especially at weekends, and there are a number of up-market establishments that attest to this.

Dionysus Dukani (David Aghmashenebeli) On the river bank, this is one of the most pleasant eateries in Mtskheta, with tables in the orchard overlooking the Mtkvari, as well as tables inside by the open fireplace.

Other worthy options:

Gumbat Restaurant (David Aghmashenebeli)

Gumbat Restaurant 700m beyond the castle, you can enjoy a huge feast for \$5 here.

Sakhachapure A popular *sakhachapure* next to the tourist centre, where beer and *khachapuri* are served.

Salobie Restaurant Out of town towards Tbilisi is this popular place for Tbilisi day-trippers to have large banquets and parties; the food is very good.

Getting There & Away

Buses (25€) and marshrutkas (35€) leave Tbilisi's Didube bus station all day long – the journey takes around 20 minutes. *Elektrichka* trains to Gori also stop at Mtskheta station, although it's not in the town itself, but a 15-minute walk from the main attractions. A taxi between the two towns will set you back about \$6.

GORI გორი

☎ 370 / pop 70,000

Gori is synonymous to all Georgians with just one man: this is the town where Josef Dzhugashvili – later Josef Stalin – was born and went to school. Place of pilgrimage or macabre monument to Stalin's enduring popularity in his homeland, however you look at it, Gori is an intriguing place. Moreover, it has an interesting fortress that dominates the town, as well as an abundance of ancient churches and other sights within easy striking distance, making staying the night a good idea, though it can be done is a day trip from Tbilisi if time is short.

Orientation

Gori is built around the confluence of the Liakhvi and Mtkvari Rivers, with the population concentrated on the left bank of the Mtkvari. The town itself is dominated by the huge Stalinis gamziri (Stalin Avenue) and various paeans to the town's best-known son: Stalinis moedani (Stalin Square) at the crossroads with Chavchavadze, and the large Stalin Museum complex and park, which form a triangle to one side of the fortress. Perched atop the only sizable hill in the centre, the fortress still dominates the town. The bus station is at the end of Chavchavadze,

while the train station is across the Mtkvari River and a short walk to the left, about 15 minutes on foot from Stalinis moedani.

Information

The ticket desk at the Stalin Museum sells decent town maps for \$2.50, as well as informative English-language booklets describing the museum and its exhibits. At the **Cultural Centre** (☎ 22147; Mshvidoba 12a) ask for Robert Maglakelidze, who runs the centre as well as his own in-house travel agency. This can organise reasonably priced trips throughout the Kartli region, and can also supply interpreters. One excellent website resource on Gori and the surrounding area is <http://gori.iatp.org.ge/>.

Sights

STALIN MUSEUM

Possibly the most interesting museum in Georgia, the **Stalin Museum** (☎ 22681; Stalin 32; admission 50€, guided tour (no English) \$1, photo permission \$1; ☎ 10am–6pm) is an impressive building dating from 1957 that exudes a faintly religious air. The tiny house Stalin lived in until he was 15 is in front of the museum proper, perfectly preserved and with its own temple built around it, as if a relic from millennia past.

Anyone with knowledge of 20th-century history should have no problem understanding the museum, which charts Stalin's journey from the Gori Seminary to the Yalta Conference at the end of WWII. All labelling is in Russian and Georgian only, and lighting is very bad, making it wise to go while the sun is shining.

The first hall details Stalin's childhood and adolescence, including his rather cringe-worthy pastoral poetry that gives an unexpectedly romantic perspective on the young Georgian. The emphasis quickly shifts to his political work and revolutionary activities in the Caucasus, including organising unions in Tbilisi and setting up an illegal press for the workers in Batumi at the end of the 19th century.

Stalin's adoption of Leninism and involvement with the man himself is then detailed very thoroughly, taking us through the revolution of 1905, Stalin's Siberian exile, 1917, the Civil War and Lenin's death in 1924. In a surprising piece of curation, the museum now includes excerpts from

Lenin's final testament in which he warns that Stalin is unfit to hold power and calls him a 'brutish bully'. Three key players in Stalin's life, Trotsky, Khrushchev and his daughter Svetlana (who defected to the United States in 1966) are unsurprisingly absent, however, although there are a few pictures of the young Svetlana with her father at the end of main museum.

The museum culminates with tributes to Stalin from world leaders and other senior Bolsheviks, and then Stalin's eerie death mask that lies in state in the following room. Off the staircase leading downstairs, there is a small annex containing gifts presented to Stalin. These include an inscribed pair of red clogs sent to Stalin from the Netherlands to mark his 70th birthday and a dove of peace from Italy addressed to 'Giuseppe Stalin'. Most touching of all is an ornamental box made and inscribed by Stalin's youngest son Vasily in 1931, reading 'to daddy, a souvenir from Vasya'.

To one side of the museum is **Stalin's train carriage** (admission 50¢), used to travel to the Potsdam Conference in 1945; it is apparently bulletproof, and has a simple and elegant interior.

GORI FORTRESS

The heart of Gori is the ancient fortress that occupies the big hill at the city centre. Even Stalin cannot compete with it in terms of dominating the landscape. The walk to the top is easy; from the Intourist hotel, cut straight across the square and keep going until you reach the foot of the hill from where a well-trodden path leads up to the top. It's particularly attractive late in the day when the sun is setting, giving the fortress a warm glow.

A fortification existed here in ancient times and it is believed to have been besieged by Pompey in 65 BC. The main part of the present building dates from the Middle Ages, with additions from the 17th century. From the oval citadel at the top, which contains the ruins of an 11th-century church that was destroyed in the 1920 earthquake, there are views over the valley.

ST GEORGE GORI JVARI CHURCH

This is perhaps the spiritual heart of Gori. Perched above the city on a hill top and commanding some great views, this is a tiny

6th-century church with a typically troubled past – it was destroyed by the Turks and then rebuilt during Georgia's 12th-century renaissance. The 1920 earthquake once again wiped it out; and it was rebuilt steadily during the 1980s. It is now open only on Tuesday, when townsfolk come in large numbers to worship here. During the winter months it is totally closed up, and its opening and closing dates (6th May and 23th November respectively) attract huge crowds and lots of revelry, marking as it does the coming and going of the summer in Gori. A taxi will take you up to the top and back down again for \$10, and may even stop at the small Shepherd's Church en route. There is no public transport.

Sleeping

Homestay (☎ 78769; Kristeperek Kasteli 8; per person \$1) Those on a very tight budget can try this homestay option, where you should ask for Maya. The house is at the very end of the street, below the fortress, where the asphalt road turns to sand. This is no luxury option; no food is available and English is not spoken, but this shouldn't be a major obstacle.

Hotel Intourist (☎ 22676; Stalin 24-26; s/d \$10/20) Most travellers stay at the Intourist which, while large, was only operating one floor when we stayed. Impressive and well located with its unusual and attractive lobby, this hotel is faded grandeur taken a step too far, although plans are afoot to revamp the entire place. Sadly these have begun with the exterior rather than the antediluvian plumbing or the ancient mattresses. There is no hot water available, but that aside, it's a decent and safe place to stay, and should get better during the lifetime of this book.

Hotel Victoria (☎ 877-402372; fax 951272; Tamar Mepi 76; s & d \$35, ste \$60-70; P) Gori's most upmarket hotel, just a short walk from the town centre, has slashed its prices generously to attract more trade, and it's now decent value for money. The pool has been planned for a while, but was still not functioning at the time of writing.

Gori Hotel & Restaurant (☎ 827-050266; Gori-Tbilisi Hwy, 3rd km; s & d without breakfast \$40-70; P) On the main road to Tbilisi and a short drive into town, this is a good option for someone with their own transport. It's good value for the high standard of rooms and stylish décor – the \$70 'lux' options are especially well



JOSEF STALIN & GEORGIA

Few people's historical legacy is simultaneously greater and more uncertain than that of Josef Dzhughashvili, the cobbler's son from Gori who went on to rule the largest country on earth for quarter of a century. Even his detractors admit that were it not for the Nazi invasion, Nazi Germany would have won, and no-one can deny that in the space of a decade he turned the Soviet Union into a vast industrial powerhouse – 'taking it with the plough and leaving it with nuclear weapons', as Churchill observed in his autobiography.

Yet the suffering of millions cannot be discounted as easily as the curators of the Stalin Museum in Gori might like – Stalin's Gulags were responsible for the deaths of tens of millions, and his ruthless *Cheka* and NKVD (secret police) terrorised the population from the late 1920s until Stalin's death in 1953. Stalin's Georgian origins did not translate into mercy for his own people either – the purges in Tbilisi left mass graves in what is now the bourgeois suburb of Vake.

In a country that for a decade has desperately lacked a contemporary national figurehead, it's unsurprising that Stalin has been rebranded by many for the role. People don't seem blind to his faults, but simply prefer to focus on his achievements and greatness. Portraits, busts and statues can be found in all corners of Georgia, and while few are new or even in good condition, there is no sign yet of them disappearing in the way they have done from the rest of the former communist world.

designed. The large restaurant in the same building is one of the best in town.

Eating

Most restaurants are on Stalinis gamziri.

Café Intourist (Stalin 28) This small and cosy restaurant on the park by the museum, nothing to do with the hotel itself, offers all the Georgian standards.

Nikala (Stalin 10) The friendly chef here will personally consult with visitors about what they want to eat. His *chakapuli* (calf meat stew with sour plums) is superb, and the ambience very pleasant.

Coffee House (Stalinis moedani, opposite the town hall) Boldly facing off Stalin's stern statue across the square, this is the undoubted social hub of Gori, where the young meet, usually to drink far stronger stuff than the name would suggest. Basic meals available, but definitely the place to come for lively company.

21st Century (Tsabadze 3; meals \$4) This place is one of the friendliest in town, in a small side street behind Stalinis moedani. It serves up good Georgian food.

Fountain Café (Stalinis 24) A good spot for an ad hoc breakfast – selling delicious nut pastries, tea and ice cream.

Out of town and both somewhat fancier are the **Venetsiya Restaurant** (Gori-Tskhinvali Hwy, 5th km; meals \$10), with its ponds and outdoor terrace, and the **Gori Restaurant** (Gori-Tbilisi Hwy, 3rd km; meals \$10); they're probably the two best restaurants in town.

Getting There & Away

Marshrutkas leave Tbilisi's Didube station regularly throughout the day – the journey costs \$1.75 and takes around 1½ hours. *Elektrichka* trains go from the Borjomi terminal of Tbilisi's train station, and take two hours. Alternatively, you could get on a fast train to Batumi or Kutaisi from the main terminal. They make the same trip in one hour, although they require pre-purchased tickets, which can often mean long queues.

Arriving by marshrutka in Gori, ask the driver to stop shortly after you see Stalin's personal train carriage on your left if you want the Intourist or Victoria hotels. The bus station is at the end of Chavchavadze, a five-minute walk from Stalinis moedani. Marshrutkas back to Tbilisi go from the eastern side of the square, while buses to Western Georgia and South Ossetia leave from the west side of the square, directly to the left of the bus station.

AROUND GORI

Uplistsikhe

Of all the places to visit around Gori, **Uplistsikhe** (admission \$1, tour \$3; ☎: 9am–6pm) is the most impressive – a once enormous cave city that is one of the oldest places of settlement in the Caucasus. It was founded in the late Bronze Age, around 1000 BC, but developed mainly from the 6th to the 1st centuries BC, when it was a major centre of paganism before Georgia converted to Christianity. When the

Arabs occupied Tbilisi, Uplistsikhe became the residence of Georgian kings. The main caravan road from Asia to Europe used to run just 2km or 3km north of the city, which became an important trade centre.

At its peak in the early Middle Ages, the city had a population of 20,000 spread over an area of 9.5 hectares. Now only the 4-hectare remains of the Shida Kalaki, or Inner City, are visible. There were 700 caves altogether; now you can see just 150. From 1122, when Davit Aghmashenebeli retook Tbilisi, Uplistsikhe began to lose its importance. In the 13th century the Mongols devastated not only the city but its natural surroundings too – there used to be forests here. Tamerlane was responsible for his share of destruction, and the city was also struck by a series of earthquakes.

Uplistsikhe is strategically located, with a deep valley to the east and cliffs to the west. The city was built taking advantage of a series of natural terraces, with the main road running up along them from north to south, dividing the city in two.

The first building you come to as you go up the hill on your guided tour is the **ancient theatre**, built in the southwest overlooking the river. This has an octagonal ceiling in a similar style to Caracalla's Baths in Rome.

Farther up on the left is the big hall known as **Tamaris Darbazi**. Here there are two columns built into the cliff and a stone seat dating from antiquity. The stones of the ceiling are cut to look like wooden beams, and there is a hole to let smoke out and light in. Just below this is an underground prison, and nearby is an ancient pharmacy, in which archaeologists have found traces of herbs and parchment. Above Tamaris Darbazi is a large cave building with the remains of four columns; in ancient times it was a **temple** dedicated to the sun and used for animal sacrifices, but later converted into a Christian church. In front of this are the ruins of a medieval goldsmith's workshop.

The 9th to 10th century three-nave basilica on the top of the hill is known as **Uplistulis Eklisia** (Prince's Church). This was also built on the site of a pagan temple. It has been whitewashed inside. The bell tower dates from the 18th century.

The guided tour finishes with the long tunnel (made to bring water up to the city) which runs south to the banks of the Mtkvari

River. This was also the site of the main gate to the Shida Kalaki. A spring 4km north of the city supplied water to Uplistsikhe via a system of ceramic pipes. *Remains of water pipes among the ruins.*

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The train from Tbilisi's Borjomi station (the smaller of the two terminals at Tbilisi central station) takes about 1½ hours to get to Kvakhvrel, where you get off and walk, crossing the river and continuing west for about 1km from the bridge to reach Uplistsikhe. A one-way train ticket costs \$1. There is no bus service that goes all the way from Tbilisi to Uplistsikhe, but you can get one from Gori. The easiest way to see Uplistsikhe is to hire a taxi for a few hours from Gori – there and back including waiting time of 1½ hours should set you back about \$10.

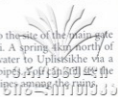
ATENIS SIONI

This impressively ancient church has a beautiful setting, standing impressively over a bend of the Tana River, surrounded by high hills and cliffs and the wonderfully lush vegetation of the Tana Valley, 12km from Gori. The entry to the church itself is through an orchard.

Architecturally, **Atenis Sioni** is a faithful copy of the Jvari Church in Mtskheta, and the current exterior was built in the 7th century. The frescoes, painted in the second half of the 11th century, are almost totally worn away, but some are still vividly visible and striking in their artistry. One inscription inside tells of the burning of Tbilisi in 853!

The frescoes are now being painstakingly preserved to prevent the paint fading any more, although there are no plans to restore them to their former glory, as it is precisely their ancient nature that makes them interesting.

By car, turn right 100m after Gori train station, then take the first left. Turn right in the village of Khidistavi, and the road will bring you to the village of Didi Ateni, where the church can be seen perched on a cliff on the left bank of the Tana River. Alternatively, take a bus from Gori bus station (30€, 30 minutes, hourly between 8am and 7pm). The journey takes you through the beautiful and fertile Tana Gorge. A taxi from Gori to the church and back should cost about \$10.



WESTERN GEORGIA

Known in ancient times as Colchis, and made famous as the destination of Jason and the Argonauts in their search for the Golden Fleece, Western Georgia has historically acted as a conduit for the Western world into the Caucasus, from the Greeks to St Nino. The two largest cities in the country after Tbilisi – Kutaisi and Batumi – are here, and the country's Black Sea coast and border with Turkey ensures a steady stream of visitors throughout the year. Since Georgian independence Western Georgia, and particularly its increasingly vibrant, unofficial capital in Batumi, have become dynamic trade and holiday centres. While there's still a standoff in Abkhazia, where civil war and secession have caused enormous tragedy and suffering, the rest of Western Georgia is a wonderful place to visit, from the ancient city of Kutaisi to the port city of Batumi.

KUTAISI ქუთაისი

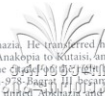
☎ 231 / pop 240,000

Georgia's second city is one of the most ancient in the world, founded just under 4,000 years ago. Various a capital of different kingdoms within Georgia, Kutaisi has a rich and fascinating history, and much of this is in evidence 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 economically depressed, however, and is noticeably less lively than Batumi or Tbilisi.

History

Kutaisi has been a city since at least the 6th century BC, and a settlement existed here long before that. It is first mentioned by Apollonius of Rhodes in the 3rd century BC. In his poem about the Argonauts he calls it Kutaia, and some scholars believe that this was the city of King Aëtes, father of Medea. Kutaisi was one of the main cities of Colchis, and later of Egrisi.

The city was in the thick of the 6th-century war between the Byzantine and Persian empires, and in the 730s the area was devastated by the Arabs. At the end of that century Leon II, Duke of Abkhazia, renounced his status of vassal to Byzantium and declared himself



king of Abkhazia. He transferred his residence from Anakopia to Kutaisi, and built a palace in the city on the left bank of the Rioni. In 978 Bagrat III became king of the newly united Abkhazia and Kartli-Iberia, with Kutaisi as its capital, and in 1089 King David the Builder was crowned here. The two rulers left great architectural monuments in the shape of the Bagrati and Gelati cathedrals. Until 1122, when Tbilisi, liberated from Arab rule by David, took over this role, Kutaisi was the political, economic and cultural centre of Georgia.

After the Mongol invasions Georgia was again divided and Kutaisi resumed its role as political capital of the western region. In 1510 the Ottomans burnt the city. There was a revival at the beginning of the next century when Giorgi III developed the left bank of the Rioni, but this was snuffed out by the 101-year Ottoman occupation starting in 1669, during which Bagrati Cathedral was blown up. In 1770 the city was recaptured by Georgian and Russian forces. Since then Kutaisi has enjoyed a period of peace.

In the second half of the 19th century it played a significant role in the movement of national reawakening and reform. Under the Soviet regime it became the second-most important industrial centre in Georgia, and its population grew significantly.

Orientation

Kutaisi is built around the Rioni River. The town centre is on the left bank, focused on Davit Aghmashenebelis moedani, and also includes an attractive Jewish quarter. The right bank rises up to where the ancient Bagrati Cathedral overlooks the city. The modern city is on this side of the river too.

Kutaisi has two train stations – I and II. The main terminus, Kutaisi-I is the station that links the city to Tbilisi.

Information

ATM (Tsminda Nino 17)

Internet café (Rustaveli; ☎ until 7pm) Set up at the back of the mobile phone shop, one block towards Besiki Park from the Hotel Kutaisi.

Post office (Tamar Mepi 56; ☎ 24hr) Has international telephone and fax facilities, plus a post bank with Western Union money transfers.

Yversy (cnr Davit Aghmashenebelis moedani & Tamar Mepi; ☎ until 7pm) Internet café.



Sights

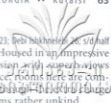
Every visitor to Kutaisi will want to see Bagrati Cathedral, while those with more time will enjoy walking the attractive streets of the city and particularly the Jewish district of **Mtsvane Qvavila**. Gaponovis kucha contains two synagogues, and leads up to the Pantheon where famous Kutaislebi are buried on a hill, which also hosts a 16th-century tower, a 19th-century Russian church and a basilica dating from 1013.

The three bridges are notable landmarks, with Chachvis Khidi the oldest. Originally a rope bridge, the chains were laid down in 1866. Tsiteli Khidi was partly made in Paris, also in the 1860s. Tetri Khidi dates from 1872.

BAGRATI CATHEDRAL

If you cross the Chachvis Khidi you can walk up cobbled streets lined with houses and gardens to the magnificent ruins of Bagrati, visible from the centre of Kutaisi.

This 11th-century cathedral is perfectly sited on a promontory above the river, giving fine views of the city below; from the ruined palace to the east there are even finer views along the Rioni to Gelati monastery. The hill is known as Ukimerioni, and was the site of an **ancient citadel and royal residence**, which was one of the most important castles in Western Georgia in the 6th century, and even in the 17th century was 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 Turkish pasha and his soldiers, from the hill of Mtsvane Kvavila opposite, reducing it to a ruin. What remains is still of interest. You can see parts of the walls and the palace, including the wine cellars, and a church.

However, this is in the shadow of the much more imposing ruins of the **cathedral**, which you come to first. Bagrati was built during the reign of King Bagrat III. On the north wall there is an inscription which reveals that when the floor was laid it was 'chronicon 223' (1003). In 1510 Bagrati was damaged in a fire started by the Turks, and in 1692 it was devastated by a Turkish explosion that caused the cupola and ceiling to collapse.

MUSEUM OF HISTORY & ETHNOGRAPHY

There's a good collection of Bronze Age and antique-period artefacts, including 10,000 ancient coins, at this **museum** (☎ 55676; Tbilisi 1; admission 50¢; ☎ 11am-4pm Tue-Sat). There are also fine 10th-century icons, a very good collection of manuscripts, typical artefacts from Imereti, and the first telephone used in Kutaisi.

Sleeping

The selection of hotels in Kutaisi is poor and a slew of good homestays has grown to fill the gap.

Hotel Kutaisi (☎ 44277; Rustaveli 5; s & d without bathroom \$5, with cold-water bathroom \$10, with hot-water bathroom \$20-25) The town's main hotel is this former Intourist, which has a few rooms on each floor available to tourists. The rest of the hotel is given over to refugees, but as most of them are family groups, security seems to be fine. The hotel certainly has an excellent location, on the corner of the main town square. However, give the restaurant a miss.

Lia's Guesthouse (☎ 45012; Kostava 25; s & d \$10-30) Centrally located, all the rooms have private bathroom and very comfortable, although it's totally unmarked from the street – it's the new house with forbidding gates. Lia, with her purple hair and make-up, is quite a character herself.

Gogelia Homestay (☎ 44842; Iashvili 13; s & d \$10) Another centrally located homestay option, with three rooms, each sleeping two.

There are several very large and comfortable houses on top of the hill around the cathedral.

Beka Hotel (☎ 46923; Debi Ishknelebi 26; s/d half board per person \$20/15) Housed in an impressive hill-top white mansion with superb views from the large terrace, rooms here are comfortable and clean. Though it's difficult to argue for being alone seems rather unkind.

Lali Jalaghania's Guesthouse (☎ 48395; Debi Ishknelebi 18; s/d half board per person \$20/15) Almost next door to Beka, Jalaghania's operates on the same system, and has similarly spacious and comfortable accommodation. Marina speaks some English, and the collective children of the house put on folk dancing shows for the guests, should they so desire.

Giorgi Giorgadze's Homestay (☎ 43720; Chanchibadze 14; half board per person \$10, per person without food \$7.50) A more down-to-earth option, with a charming family who will make you feel very much at home, located a few blocks away by the primary school. The facilities are shared, but clean and with hot water, and the food is very good.

Zelimkhan Guesthouse (☎ 22441; Vakhushti Bagrationi 67; per person \$30) A 15-minute walk from the Kutaisi-I train station, Zelimkhan is pricier but still highly recommended.

Eating

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

Café Exotica (Tamar Mepi 15) The busiest in town, with crowds of young people enjoying Georgian fast food, including the best Adjara *khachapuri* this side of Batumi. There are some private booths for large parties, and food is unbelievably cheap.

Club Almano (Tsereteli) A smarter, kitschier place just off the town's main square. It's a restaurant-cum-bar with suitably tacky décor and an in-house violin player. The food is very tasty however, serving both Georgian and Russian standards.

Europa+, still considered by many to be the best place in town, is through a very unlikely courtyard off the main square. It's smart and atmospheric with large and comfortable leather seating in booth style.

Café Burrito (Tamar Mepi) will do scrambled eggs and tea for those who can't face cheese first thing in the morning, and there are plenty of *sakhchapur* for breakfast.

Getting There & Away

Buses from the Okriba bay of Didube bus station in Tbilisi leave for Kutaisi at least

every hour until 9pm (\$2, five hours), while marshrutkas also leave from here and from the main Tbilisi train station (\$3, 4½ hours) until 7.30pm. Buses and marshrutkas back to Tbilisi leave from the main train station, Kutaisi-I on Tamar Mepis kucha.

Taxis charge around \$36 to cover the distance from or to the capital – this can be shared between up to four people. The train stations in the two cities are the best places to ask, and the Kutaisi-II is a better bet than the main station.

There are two trains every day in both directions between Tbilisi and Kutaisi departing Kutaisi-II (\$3, six hours), one leaving in the late afternoon, and one overnight.

Kutaisi-II is 3km on the other side of the Rioni River, at the end of Rustaveli. Services to Tbilisi and Batumi depart from here.

AROUND KUTAISI

Motsameta

Motsameta is 6km out of Kutaisi on the Gelati road. Turn left at the police checkpoint, then stop the car and walk along the wooded path to the promontory. There are marshrutkas (20¢) from the local bus stop in the centre of town; ask for Motsameta. Alternatively, you can get a cab for about \$2. This little monastery has very beautiful views over the gorge of the Tskhaltsitela River below whose name, meaning 'red water', derives from an 8th-century Arab massacre. Among the victims were the brothers Davit and Konstantin Mkheidze, dukes of Argyveti. Their bodies were thrown in the river, but the story goes that lions brought them up to the church where their bones were 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.

Gelati

The Georgians have always had a knack for choosing the most superb locations for their churches and this monastery complex is no exception. It is situated on a wooded hill 11km northeast of Kutaisi. You can take a bus from behind the Kutaisi State Theatre, though it may only take you to the junction 3km below the monastery. A

taxi from Kutaisi to Gelati and back will cost about \$15.

Gelati was founded by King David the Builder in 1106, the first church and academy being built in the same year. Between the 12th and 15th centuries Gelati Academy was subject only to the king, and the monks were members of the royal court. Many Georgian rulers are buried here, including David the Builder himself, Demetre I, Giorgi III, Queen Tamar (according to her chronicler, although this is disputed) and Bagrat III.

In 1510 the Ottoman Turks set fire to the complex, but Bagrat III of Imereti subsequently restored the monastery, and it was made the seat of a bishop and the Western Georgian residence of the patriarch. After the Russian annexation of Georgia, however, Gelati lost importance and was no longer an episcopate. In 1922 the monks were cast out by the communist authorities. Finally, however, the churches were reconsecrated in 1988 and the links with the past restored. Not all the original buildings have survived: there are no living quarters or workplaces, but the churches are all still standing.

The academy is the oldest building in the complex, dating from 1106. King David the Builder invited scholars such as Iaone Petritsi and Arsen Ikaltoeli to teach here. The aim was, according to the medieval chroniclers, to create 'a second Athens and a second Jerusalem'.

When King David died in 1125 he left instructions that he should be buried under the stone of the southern gatehouse (to the left of the other buildings as you look towards Kutaisi), which was then the main entrance to the complex, meaning that all who came here would step on his huge 3m tomb, a strangely humble gesture for such a proud man.

VANI ვანი

☎ 232

The site of this ancient city is 40km southwest of Kutaisi. Both the ruins and the museum are well worth visiting. This was one of ancient Colchis' main cities. At present there are still many unanswered questions concerning Vani, including what its original name was. Could this have been the city of King Aëtes, to which Jason came in search of the Golden Fleece?



JASON & THE GOLDEN FLEECE

Everyone is familiar with the myth of Jason, a prince of Thessaly, who responded to his uncle Pelias' challenge to go to the land of Colchis, on the eastern shores of the Black Sea, in search of the Golden Fleece. Many people remember the ludicrous special effects from the 1963 Hollywood epic, but few realise that the myth relates to actual places and events.

Jason had a special ship built, the *Argo*, to transport him and 49 other adventurous young Greeks, henceforth known as the Argonauts. After some trials, they arrived at the kingdom of Colchis (probably at Poti, Western Georgia) and sailed up the Phasisi River (the present day Rioni) where they were received by King Aëtes in his capital (possibly Vani or Kutaisi). He agreed to give up the fleece if Jason could yoke two fire-breathing bulls to a plough, and sow the teeth of a dragon, from which it was thought a crop of armed men would grow. Jason accepted the challenge but secretly promised marriage to Aëtes' daughter Medea, who had fallen in love with 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 which guarded it. The Golden Fleece itself is also 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 tradition still exists today in the Caucasus.



Vani (admission 53, tour 55) flourished in two periods, from the 6th to the 4th centuries BC and from the 3rd to the 1st centuries BC. In the first of these it was the residence of the ruler of the surrounding region known as Skeptukhia. Very richly endowed tombs have been excavated from this period, containing finely wrought Colchian jewellery and Colchian and Greek pottery. Sacrificial altars and temples have also been uncovered. The view of Professor Otar Lordkipanidze, in charge of the excavations, is that in the second period Vani was a kind of temple-city, functioning as a religious centre, dedicated principally to the goddess Levcoteia (an inscription relating to her was found near the gate) and her ward Dionysus. Another view is that although there were temples here, it was more a cultural and economic centre than a religious one.

The area being excavated covers 12 hectares; only one third has been worked on so far, but the finds have been remarkable. The items are well displayed and labelled in English and the dig continues, thanks to new funds from Germany.

There is no accommodation in Vani, unless you are lucky enough to be invited to stay with the archaeologists. However, it's easy to visit in a day trip from Kutaisi – marshrutkas run all day until about 6pm between Kutaisi and Vani (50€, one hour). From the Vani bus station, cross the bridge and walk up the hill for 300m to the museum.

POTI ქოთი

☎ 293 / pop 50,000

Poti, Georgia's main port, is one of the most ancient towns in Georgia, although there is little evidence of this now. It was originally the Greek trading colony of Phasisi. This is where Jason and the Argonauts entered Georgia, sailing up the Rioni River in search of the Golden Fleece. A Colchian Academy flourished here between the 3rd and 6th centuries AD.

In 1578 the Ottoman Turks appeared in the area and built a fortification. In 1640 this was captured by Georgian soldiers, but in 1723 the Turks re-established themselves and Poti became a centre of the slave trade. It was not until 1828 that the city was finally given up by the Turks and absorbed into the Russian Empire. Thirty years later it acquired the status of a port, and thereafter developed rapidly – a Tbilisi–Poti railway was constructed, and the town centre laid out with a radial plan. Most people end up here in transit and there's little to detain you.

Orientation

Poti can be a rather confusing place to find your way around. If you arrive by car from the west, through Senaki, you will cross a bridge on the outskirts after which the road forks. The right-hand road takes you directly to the port; from here, Davit Aghmashenebelis leads to the main square. If you arrive by bus you will come in via the left-hand road. About 200m to the right

of this is the train station. From here, turn right again, cross a bridge over the Rioni River, and you will find the market.

Sleeping

Hotel Anchor (☎ 26000; fax 24600; Gegidze 92; s/d \$50/60; ☼) The best option is this hotel near the port. The rooms are clean and comfortable and the restaurant gets good reports.

Hotel Kolkheti (Kostava 2; r \$5) This hotel is in poor condition and full of refugees, though there may be one or two rooms available.

Getting There & Away

Trains leave Tbilisi at 8.30pm and arrive in Poti at 7.45am. Return times are 7.45pm from Poti, arriving at 6.55am in Tbilisi. Marshrutkas to Poti also leave from the Tbilisi train station. Poti is also connected to Tbilisi Didube (\$6, eight hours) Kutaisi (\$3, 3½ hours) and Batumi (\$2, 2½ hours) by regular buses and marshrutkas.

From Poti there are ships to Sochi in Russia that originate in Batumi (see p265).

MALTAQVA მალთაყვა

The popular beach resort of Maltaqva, complete with several hotels and lots of restaurants, is 3km south of Poti, reachable by marshrutka No 5 or a \$3 taxi. Northeast of Maltaqva is an ecologically unique area of lakes and marshes. In the 4th to 5th centuries BC, 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 added the curious detail that the people were so tall and so fat you couldn't see their faces. Less apocryphally he wrote about the fog and the unpleasantly hot local wind.

At least 21 species of birds migrate here in the winter from northern Europe, Siberia and the Arctic, there are 30 different kinds of fish in the many lakes and rivers and the region is a paradise for frogs (the cacophony in the mating season can be tremendous). There are many endemic and remnant species of flora here.

Of the many rivers and lakes here Lake Paliastomi is the most beautiful. It has an area of 18.2 sq km, but its maximum depth is only 3m. The lake has an island, Bokveradzis Kundzuli, which is an excellent place for bird-watching. In 1947 the Kolkheti wetlands were declared a nature reserve.

To the south of Maltaqva, a new holiday resort town is being built in the village of Ureki, a pet project of Aycoan Badri Patakatsishvili, who aims to make it a new Western-style resort town.

ZUGDIDI ზუგდიდი

☎ 215 / pop 52,000 (plus 72,000 internally displaced persons)

The administrative centre of Samegrelo, Zugdidi is 318km from Tbilisi, 104km from Kutaisi. The first known reference to it dates from as late as the 17th century, when it became the residence of the local dukes, the Dadiani family. For around 300 years the Turks harried the Zugdidi area until in 1803 Grigol Dadiani agreed that Samegrelo should be a Russian protectorate. Afterwards the dukes Levan and Davit paid a lot of attention to improving Zugdidi, laying out roads and a botanical garden, among other projects. In 1855 the Turks captured Zugdidi and burnt the palace, but it was soon recaptured.

In Soviet times Zugdidi was an important point on the way to the holiday regions of Abkhazia and Svaneti, and a centre of industry and the tea trade, but after Georgian independence in 1991 the region became embroiled in civil wars. Zugdidi has had to cope with a large number of refugees from the war in Abkhazia. Unemployment is high, as is the number of men in uniform.

Orientation

The main road from Tbilisi brings you right into the centre. In Zugdidi it becomes the long Davit Aghmashenebelis gamziri which leads directly to the football stadium, behind which is the botanical gardens and the museum. Rustavelis gamziri bisects Aghmashenebeli between the main square and the stadium. Turn left into Rustaveli for the market, on the right just before the bridge. The bus and train stations are further along Rustaveli on the left-hand side.

Getting There & Away

Marshrutkas (\$7, five hours) and buses (\$6, seven hours) leave Tbilisi's Didube bus station throughout the day. There are also connections from Kutaisi, plus a daily train in each direction between Zugdidi and Tbilisi (\$7, eight hours).

The Zugdidi bus and train stations are next to each other on Rustaveli. Buses,

marshrutkas and jeeps for Svaneti leave from the Svan tower off Rustaveli gamziri northwest of the bridge.

ABKHAZIA

The greatest tragedy to befall Georgia since its independence is the secession of Abkhazia and the bloodshed and misery this has created. Once the jewel of the Soviet Union's beach resorts, Abkhazia enjoyed one of the highest standards of living in the former USSR, and beautiful Pitsunda has been a favoured retreat for Soviet leaders, including Stalin and Khrushchev.

As a Muslim people, the Abkhaz look to the north Caucasus rather than towards Georgia, despite having been incorporated into the Kingdom of Georgia in the Middle Ages. While historically Christian, the Abkhaz converted to Islam during the Ottoman occupation between the 16th and 18th centuries. The Abkhaz are also linguistically distinct from the Georgians.

Once the Soviets arrived in 1921, Abkhazia was proclaimed an independent republic before being incorporated into the Georgian Soviet Republic. From the 1930s there was official encouragement for the settling of large numbers of Georgians in the region, and the Abkhaz proportion of the population fell considerably – by 1989 46% of the people living in Abkhazia were Georgian, and only 18% Abkhaz.

Throughout the Soviet period it appears that Moscow's policies towards the region chopped and changed alarmingly. The script used for the Abkhaz language was Latin in 1921, Georgian from 1938 and Cyrillic after 1954. During Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms the Abkhaz began to demand more cultural and political autonomy. At the same time many Georgians were beginning to assert their nationalism, with Zviad Gamsakhurdia as their chief spokesman. They regarded the Abkhaz Supreme Soviet's request for the restoration of Abkhazia's status as a Union republic as a provocation.

Nevertheless, though political declarations and demonstrations continued, real conflict did not break out until 1992. Ostensibly to protect the railway link with Russia, Georgian soldiers occupied the capital Sokhumi and the Abkhaz leader, Vladislav Ardzinba, fled to the Russian army base of Gudauta.

In September 1992 the Abkhaz began a counteroffensive. Fierce fighting went on for a year, and the civilian population suffered terribly. Georgians, ^{claiming} with persuasive evidence, that Russian forces assisted the Abkhaz. Certainly they received support from the north Caucasian volunteers of the Confederation of Mountain Peoples. In September 1993 the Abkhaz attacked Sokhumi in violation of a truce and drove the Georgians from Abkhazia. The entire Georgian population of the region was forced to leave; many died while crossing the snow-covered mountains to Svaneti and Samegrelo. There are now more than 250,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Georgia, most living in difficult conditions.

Abkhazia remains devastated by the war, and resolution of the conflict is clearly still a long way off. The Georgian government is demanding the safe return of the IDPs before the question of Abkhazia's status is settled.

Visiting Abkhazia still cannot be recommended. While it is an increasingly popular destination for Russian holidaymakers looking for cheap hotel deals, it remains unsafe to casual tourists. For those determined to visit, it is necessary to enter from Russia, either by crossing the land border or taking the ferry from Sochi to Sokhumi. Visas are issued on arrival for \$10, but only for those who have a letter of invitation from the Abkhazian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. To get a letter of invitation, most people go via the **Abkhazian Press Center** (fax 7095-1879718) in Moscow. Requests should be marked for the attention of Zurab Avidzba, Consular Section, and should outline the purpose and dates of your visit, including a photocopy of your passport's information page and proof of insurance. For more information check out www.abkhazia.org.

ADJARA

The southwestern corner of Georgia is a highlight of the country although, being humid, semitropical and predominantly Muslim, it's atypical of the country as a whole and intriguingly idiosyncratic. Run, until recently, with an iron fist by the unavoidably gnome-like Aslan Abashidze, Adjara remains an autonomous region within Georgia. It is now the country's most popular seaside destination and busiest port since the secession of Abkhazia.

Adjarans are ethnically Georgian and speak the Georgian language. Their only real cultural difference is the gradual conversion of the population to Islam under the Ottoman occupation. Adjara has seen a reversal of its geographical role from 'end of the line' in Soviet times (the border with Turkey was an absolute no-go area) to its current function as an entrance to Georgia, the rest of the Caucasus and beyond. Adjara's distinct identity within Georgia is brought home when you cross the 'other border' from Guria to the north: the Adjaran police usually stop incoming cars and check the occupants' documents, so don't come here without your passport. Abashidze keeps a tight grip on power, and craftily managed to run Adjara as an autonomous region during the Shevardnadze era, while avoiding direct conflict with Tbilisi.


This peaceful coexistence of two tiers of government ended with President Saakashvili's election. Not accepted by Abashidze, a standoff between the two leaders followed reaching its height in May 2004 when Abashidze sealed the Adjaran border with Georgia proper and blew up bridges connecting the two, alarming the world as the country spiralled towards another civil war. However Abashidze lost his crucial support from Russia and days later left for ignominious exile in Moscow to the popular delight of Adjarans. In the following elections to the Adjaran assembly Mr Saakashvili's party won 28 of the 30 seats.

Batumi ბათუმი

☎ 222 / pop 136,000

Although Kutaisi is Georgia's second city population-wise, Batumi is still reckoned by nearly everyone to be the true holder of that title. Batumi is the only place in the country to provide both a political and cultural counterweight to Tbilisi. The Adjaran capital is a sultry, unpredictable place with architecture and a climate that make it more akin to the capital of a Caribbean banana republic than a provincial centre. It's quite unlike anywhere else in Georgia.

The city's 19th-century architecture, busy port, chaotic market and beautiful mist-wrapped mountainous backdrop make this an intriguing place to be, especially during the summer months when it comes alive with holidaying Georgians enjoying the beaches and attractive promenade.



For many, Batumi will be the first city they visit in the country, situated as it is just a few kilometres north of the Turkish border at Sarpi, and it makes a great introduction to Georgia with its great space, good restaurants and nightlife.

ORIENTATION

Batumi is made up of a grid system of streets, hemmed in by the Black Sea to the north and west. The northern section of the seafront is a natural harbour, and is now Georgia's main port, while the western seafront has a pleasant beach and is set out with a park full of traditional recreations.

Arriving at the bus station, to the west of the town centre, it's just a 1km walk down Tseretli to the market square and the city's main drag, Baratashvili. Marshrutkas terminate on the large market square. The city's train station is far out of town in the suburb of Makhinjauri, further along the coast to the north. If you arrive by train, take marshrutka Nos 101, 120, 136, 200 or 201 into Batumi from outside the terminal. A new train station is being built nearer to the town, but still outside it. Once complete, it should be served by the same marshrutka routes, however, as both stations are on the coastal road to Kobuleti.

INFORMATION

ATM (Era 35) Accepts foreign Visa and MasterCard.

Internet café (Vazha Pshavela 30; ☎ 24hr)

Main post office (Abashidze 33)

Netclub (Kutaisi 27) Internet café.

Netspace (Portis Shesakhevi) Internet café.

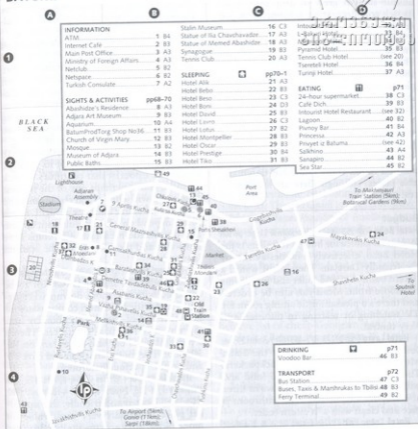
Supermarket (Chavchavadzis kucha; ☎ 24hr)

SIGHTS

The main sight in Batumi in Soviet times was the **Aquarium** (Rustaveli 51; admission 50¢; ☎ 10am-8pm), where scientists carried out experiments and did research on all kinds of marine life. Today, it's a shadow of its former self, and boasts just one large room housing different fish from piranha to carp. The lighting is bad and the glass often dirty or scratched, but it's still worth a visit and is fun for kids.

The **Adjara Art Museum** (☎ 73894; Era 8; admission 50¢; ☎ 11am-6pm Tue-Sun) is a very well-curated gallery that makes a happy break from many of the more turgid and badly lit Georgian museums. The ground floor has contemporary art from Adjara, while the

BATUMI



1st floor houses a collection that takes in 19th- and 20th-century painting.

For those who do not get to see Gori, the **Stalin Museum** (☎ 10am-5pm; Pushkin 10; admission 50¢) is an interesting and similarly hagiographic establishment. Stalin lived here for just a few months in 1901 and 1902 when he helped organise the bitumen workers and set up an illegal printing press. Rather too amazingly (given he did not become famous until almost two decades later), his personal belongings have survived, including a moth-eaten towel and the bed he slept on. The second room briefly tells the story of Stalin's life in photographs. There is a bust of the man himself outside, as well as what must be one of the biggest

Stalin portraits in Georgia hanging in the museum's office.

Batumi's most striking religious building is the handsome early-20th-century **Church of the Virgin Mary**, built by Catholics but now used by Orthodox Christians. Obviously taking its lead from French church architecture, the building looks very odd indeed in Georgia, but has a pleasant interior that is worth a look.

Batumi's **mosque** is also worth visiting, with brightly painted walls and lots of friendly men socialising at the entrance. The **Museum of Adjara** (Jincharadze 4) is extremely missable. A slightly offbeat attraction is the wonderful old food shop on the corner of Eras moedani and Gamsakhurdias kucha,

signed as **BatumProdTorg Shop No 36**. This unique shop is great to drop into to see its rich gold decoration, a memento of pre-revolution Batumi.

The town **beach** is fine – busy during the summer months, and clean enough. The promenade and park were set out in 1881, and the park includes some unique plants and trees. The best beaches are a short drive or bus ride south of the city, in Gonio and Sarpi.

SLEEPING

Batumi has a large and ever-growing number of hotels, so there is plenty of choice. Most are mid-range, comfortable but unremarkable places, although there are a couple of real gems.

Budget

Hotel Bebo (☎ 998-584415; Zubelashvili 31; per person \$5) A great choice for budget travellers is the Hotel Bebo, effectively a homestay run by the friendly Darejan. There's hot water, a decent bathroom and toilet and five rooms to choose from. Meals can also be ordered and there's a pleasant little sitting room for TV watching or relaxing in the evenings. Very central.

Hotel Lavro (☎ 23275, 877-465167; Pushkin 29; per person \$3.50) This little place near the Stalin Museum is a great deal for backpackers. The owner is very friendly and kind and will offer you a bed in rooms of two or three at a very reasonable rate. The bathroom is nice and clean with a Western toilet.

Hotel Lotus (☎ 76970; Kutaisi 23; s & d without air-con \$13, d with air-con \$18; ☺) The Lotus has seven rooms, of which one is a single. It's a pleasantly simple place with constant hot water and private bathrooms, well located in the town centre.

Pyramid Hotel (☎ 23330, 899-268654; Vazha Pshavela 39; s & d \$12.50-17.50, q per person \$5) Another good budget option, the Pyramid has pleasant, clean doubles, many with balconies in the centre of town. A bed in a room with shared facilities is a bargain at \$5. The manager, Almazik, is very friendly and can also organise city tours and day trips into Adjara.

Mid-Range

Hotel Beso (☎ 76669; Zurab Beridze Seshakhveri 15; s \$15, d \$20-25; ☺) Well located next to the market square, Hotel Beso is unremark-

able but safe, clean and comfortable, with air-con, satellite TV and decent bathrooms. Rooms 305 and 306 have huge walk-out balconies; great places to sit in the evening.

Hotel Boni (☎ 766078; fax 76595; Ninoshvili 4; s/d \$12.50/20) This very smart new hotel is wedged between the Batumi bazaar and the sea port. It has very friendly English-speaking staff and offers a high standard of accommodation for the price range. Not particularly central, but this is the only gripe. A swimming pool and sauna are planned, but showed no sign of materialising at the time of writing.

Intourist Hotel (☎ 766078; fax 76595; Ninoshvili 11; s \$25-30, d \$35-40) Unlike many of its siblings, this is one Intourist that continues to pack them in, and is perhaps one of the liveliest hotels in town, with several restaurants and bars that are abuzz until late at night. Room prices depend on whether you want air-con and do include breakfast. All rooms have hot water and the position on the seafront is superb.

L-Bakhuri Hotel (☎ /fax 76930; Chavchavadze 121; without breakfast s/ste \$20/60, d \$35-40) Not to be confused with the more downmarket Bakhuri Hotel, the L-Bakhuri compensates for its rather out-of-the-way location by having very nice rooms at fair prices. There's a pleasant hotel bar and restaurant on the 5th floor. The rooms are clean and have TV and bright, spacious bathrooms.

Hotel Metropol (☎ /fax 73794, 899-161815; Irakli Abashidze 7; d \$30, 2-room apt \$60, 4-room apt \$100; ☺) Well located and friendly, this upmarket place is actually very good value for money – the three apartments can sleep two couples in separate rooms, working out as just \$15 per person. All the comfort you'd expect, however, from a decent hotel.

Hotel Oscar (☎ 76267; Gorgasali 6; d \$15-20) This hotel has 10 double rooms, of which all but the cheapest have air-con. It's clean and pleasant and all rooms have fridges and private bathrooms. The \$18 rooms are a real step down from the \$20 rooms, though. There's also a little bar downstairs.

Hotel Prestige (☎ 893-948943; Pushkin 160; without breakfast s & d \$20, apt \$40) Formerly the Bermukha Hotel, the Prestige has reoriented itself towards a more modest clientele and makes a good mid-range choice. The 13 rooms are unexpectedly spacious, even the doubles confusingly sleep three (having a double and single bed), while the



apartments have two double bedrooms and even more space.

Hotel Tiko (☎ 72715; fax 75017; Zubalashvili 18; s/d/ Ⓜ \$15/25/35) This newly opened place has very flexible prices (the best plan is to negotiate on arrival) and they claim to offer good discounts depending on the length of stay. Prices include a buffet breakfast. All rooms have private bathroom with hot water.

Tsereteli Hotel (☎ 76684, 75873; Era 33; s/d \$50/100; Ⓜ) Next door to Batumi's one functioning ATM, this hotel is a clean, smart and friendly place. Many rooms contain antiques, and prices are slashed out of the summer season.

Turinji Hotel (☎ 73443; Dumbadze 5; s/d \$25) All four rooms at this small hotel next to the Intourist are doubles and have fan, TV, phone, fridge and hot water. An Internet café has just opened on the ground floor, and it's pleasant enough and well located, although without air-con or a restaurant.

Top End

Hotel Alik (☎ 75801; <http://hotelalik.gpi.ge>; Memed Abashidze 14; s \$80, d \$120-180, 2-room apt \$150-180; Ⓜ Ⓜ Ⓜ) You can't get closer to Abashidze and his power centre than this rather nouveau but comfortable four-star place just a short walk from the presidential residence. Facilities look great, but it seems rather stingy that the sauna and plunge pool are only free to guests until noon, given the room prices.

Hotel David (☎ 71718; www.hoteldavid.ge; Baratashvili 33; s & d \$120, ste \$220; Ⓜ) The swankiest hotel in town, the David also has one of the best locations, right on Baratashvili. The rooms are very well appointed, and suites particularly roomy. The price also includes free use of the hotel driver. The restaurant is said to be very good.

Hotel Montpellier (☎ 76951/2/3; fax 76950; General Mazniasvili 18; s & d \$100, ste \$150; Ⓜ) Classy without being pretentious, this pleasant place has just six rooms, three of which are suites. All are very nicely furnished and comfortable, with obliging staff.

Tennis Club Hotel (☎ 74708; fax 74700; s & d \$70, ste \$150; Ⓜ Ⓜ) Home from home for Batumi's new rich, and a frequent meeting place for Abashidze and his henchmen, the Tennis Club Hotel is doubtlessly very comfortable, but the security are very unpleasant and reception often unmanned. A great place for the beach and, of course, the tennis courts.

EATING & DRINKING

Batumi is full of good and lively restaurants that are especially busy in the summer months. Be aware that the eateries along the seafront will inevitably be (off)shore in town, and not always as authentic. Two good concentrations of restaurants can be found on Portis Shesakhevi by the docks, and on Era south of the art gallery.

Café Dich (Baratashvili) Come for breakfast, and Café Dich will rustle up a plate of scrambled eggs, bread, butter, fruit juice and tea for about \$2.

Lagoon (Portis Shesakhevi) A naval-themed restaurant, fun and busy with locals enjoying the relaxed atmosphere and tasty food.

Sea Star (Portis Shesakhevi) Opposite Lagoon is this more intimate establishment with delicious food. The *chakapuli* is especially good.

Princessa (Memed Abashidze 45) Another local favourite, serving up pizzas and a variety of tasty Adjaran dishes – and having that rarest of Georgian beasts, unobtrusive live music.

Pivnoy Bar (cnr Pushkinis & Vazha Pshavelas kuchas) This great wooden restaurant is widely reputed to serve the best *khinkali* in town (if you aren't sick of them already). It's also air-conditioned and lively, with a comprehensive list of cheap Georgian standards.

Privyet iz Batuma (Memed Abashidze 39) Next to Princessa is this ice cream parlour and café with a colonial Russian theme, good for afternoon tea, and thankfully air-conditioned.

Salkhino This spot has long had the reputation of being Batumi's top restaurant. It's pricier than other options, but on the seafront and consistently popular.

Sanapiro (on the harbour waterfront) *Should* be one of the best places to eat in town, but the service is unbelievably bad. Great for outdoor breakfasts on summer days if you don't mind waiting.

Intourist Hotel (Ninoshvili 11) Another well located and fun restaurant is the sprawling complex at the Intourist Hotel, where it's great fun to dine and drink in the summer evenings. For dinner with a serious view, take marshrutka No 126 past the Sputnik Hotel to the outdoor restaurant that overlooks the city for a superb sunset.

For bars and nightlife, try **Voodoo Bar** (Gorgasali 46), certainly the coolest bar in town at the time of writing. There are several night-clubs down the coast towards Sarpi that are open during the summer months.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Many travellers enter Georgia at the busy Sarpi border post with Turkey. Onward transport is good, whether by train, bus and marshrutka, throughout the rest of Georgia, by bus to Armenia or by boat and plane to Russia and Ukraine.

Air

The small Batumi Airport operates flights on **Adjaran Airlines** (☎ 76626; General Mazniashvili 7) – twice a week to Moscow (\$165), once a week to Kiev and Minsk (\$140) and once a week to Kharkov (\$145). Marshrutkas No 110a and 110b run between Batumi's market square and the airport.

Caucasus Air, a small foreign-owned airline based in Tbilisi, flies clean, new Embraer 30-seaters between Tbilisi and Batumi at least twice a week, charging \$130 one-way and \$270 return.

Land

To get to and from the Turkish border at Sarpi is easy. Drivers at Batumi's train and bus stations are always on the look out for foreigners and the trip should cost about \$5, although for 50¢ you can take a marshrutka from Tbilisi moedani in the town centre. Other buses go to the Hopa bazaar outside Batumi (not Hopa in Turkey!), a busy hub from where you can pick up a second bus or cab to the border. Coming in from Turkey, share taxis and marshrutkas to Batumi will be competing for your custom.

Batumi's **Makhinjauri station** (☎ 54158) has two fast trains to Tbilisi that leave every morning at 8.25am and 10am, taking seven hours. There is also an overnight train leaving 9.35pm and arriving in Tbilisi at 7.30am. Tickets cost \$7, and should be booked several days in advance during the summer months, as demand is very high. The route passes through Kobuleti, Samtredia (bypassing Kutaisi) and Gori. The day train is very comfortable, although you may be subjected to Russian music videos throughout the journey. There is also a daily train to Kutaisi.

The main bus station has buses to Tbilisi every two hours (\$8, 7½ hours), several a day to Poti (\$2, 2½ hours), one a day to Akhaltsikhe (\$6.50, 7½ hours, 10.30am) and Borjomi (\$5.50, six hours, 10.15am), and to Kutaisi every hour (\$3.50, seven hours). For those transiting from Georgia

to Armenia, there is an overnight bus every evening to Alkhalkalaki, from where you can connect to a bus to Armenia.

A place in a shared taxi to Tbilisi costs \$25, and chartering a whole one yourself will cost \$100. Marshrutkas to Tbilisi leave throughout the day and night, costing \$8. Additional departures to Tbilisi by bus, marshrutka and shared taxi leave from the ad hoc hub at Asatiani.

Sea

There are ferries heading off to Poti, Sochi (Russia) and Ilycheyesk (Ukraine); see p265 for details.

Around Batumi

The most interesting sight south of Batumi is the fortress **Gonio** (admission 50¢), 12km away near the mouth of the Chorokhi River. This is no ancient ruin, but 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.

Any marshrutka to Sarpi or Gonio will pass by the fortress, which is on the main road facing out to sea. Until the 12th century Gonio was known as Apsarosi, which may mean 'place with water', or may derive from Apsirte, the brother of Medea who, according to the myth, was killed pursuing the Argonauts as they began their return voyage to Greece. This is one of the best examples of Roman-Byzantine military architecture in the world. It covers a large area (4.7 hectares) and has 18 towers from the Roman period. From Gonio the road continues for another 3km to **Sarpi**. The route is lovely, with waterfalls in the lush green hills and mountains, and the sea on the other side. Sarpi itself has a pebble beach, but the water is cleaner here than in Batumi and there is a good view of Turkey just a few hundred metres round the bay.

The **Botanical Gardens** (admission 50¢, tour \$5; ☎ 9am-6pm), 9km north of Batumi at Mtsvane Kongschi (Green Cape), are well worth the half-hour trip out. Marshrutkas No 101 and 150 go there. This is a good place for a day trip, in which case take a picnic. The gardens are between the beach and the hills, and offer fine views. The beach is stony but clean. The Botanical Gardens were founded in 1912 by Professor Alexei Krasnov, who had a vision of the Adjara coast as a new Riviera.



Kobuleti ქობულეთი

This depressing stretch of coast north of Batumi (and the town really is just that, one long street overlooking the rather uninspiring beach) has become Georgia's most popular holiday resort since Abkhazia seceded and took the country's best beaches with it. Coming from Tbilisi or Kutaisi by bus you'll pass through Kobuleti, but there is no particular reason to stay, as the beaches south of Batumi are nicer.

THE MOUNTAINS

Georgia's very identity hinges on the spectacular Great Caucasus Mountains that rise in Abkhazia, forming the border with Russia and running the length of the country into Azerbaijan and Dagestan. This enormous range includes the highest mountain in Europe, Mt Elbrus (5642m), on the Russian side of the border, and remains virtually untouched by commercial development in a way the Alps can only dream about.

Anyone wanting to experience a totally different side of Georgia should make a trip to one or more of the beautiful mountainous regions; here traditions are more alive than elsewhere, winter and summer festivals provide entertainment and the hospitality is almost compulsive in its intensity. The various regions have something to offer every traveller, from the most accessible and comfortable – Kazbegi and the Georgian Military Hwy – to truly adventurous destinations such as remote and untouched Tusheti and stunning, enigmatic Svaneti.

SVANETI

Impossibly beautiful, wild and mysterious, Svaneti is an ancient land locked in the Great Caucasus, so remote that despite being ethnically Georgian, modern Svans speak a language (Svan) that broke away from Georgian some four millennia ago and is now unintelligible to Georgians elsewhere. This land of deep tradition, violent justice and banditry is the ultimate destination for any traveller to Georgia. Its symbol is the defensive stone tower, designed to house entire villages at times of invasion and strife, although just as often employed as shelter during intertribal feuds, long a way of life in the mountains.

Svaneti's isolation has meant that during the many murderous invasions of Georgia over the centuries, icons, art and other religious artefacts from throughout the country were brought here for safekeeping, and many of them remain in private homes. The Svans have never been tamed by any ruler, and even under the Soviets they largely retained their traditional way of life.

Svaneti is divided into Upper (Zemo) and Lower (Kvemo) Svaneti, with Upper Svaneti the more stunning of the two, offering the best walking and climbing as well as the strongest traditions. This area is very green, with subalpine 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.

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). Potatoes, honey and salt from the region are famous throughout Georgia. Svans drink a fiery spirit made from bread, called *rakhi*.

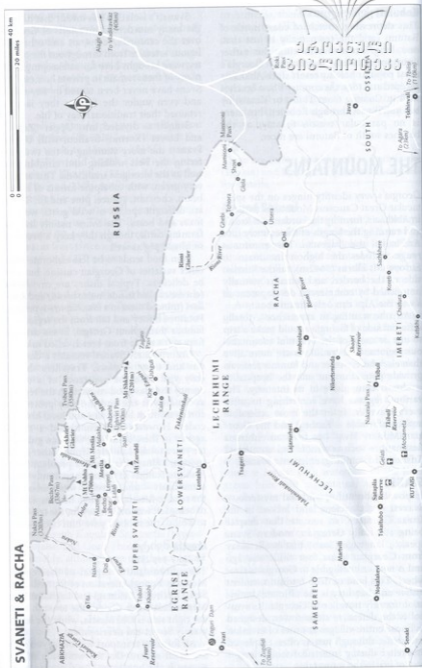
Unfortunately Svaneti remains a dangerous and unstable place. Travellers should only visit with the assistance of a travel agency that has good contacts in the region, as banditry is rife and the only protection comes through blood ties and local honour codes. However well connected a travel agency is, there is nobody who can guarantee you a totally safe trip. Unlike other areas though, kidnapping is not a problem here. And the bandits in Svaneti apparently have some heart – one traveller was robbed on the road to Mestia, but when he complained of being left without money for the trip back to Tbilisi, the robbers gave him back \$100!

Mestia მესტია

☎ 236 / pop 2350

The administrative capital of the region, Mestia is a conglomeration of four villages: Seti, Lanchvala, Lekhtagi and Laghami. The Mestiachala River divides the town in two: the right side is Old Mestia, while the left is mainly Soviet-era development.

All forms of transport will bring you into the main square. On the west side of the square is the *gameoba* (local government



building), and opposite this is a burnt-out hotel, which was destroyed while being used by police. Now the police station is in a modern building along with the Post Bank and post office, just behind the *gamgeoba*. There are shops and kiosks at the south end of the square. An experienced, English-speaking guide in Mestia is **Eteri Jorjoliani** (☎ 899-167127; per day \$25-30).

MUSEUM OF HISTORY & ETHNOGRAPHY

Fifty metres northeast of the square, beyond the burnt-out hotel, you'll find the **Museum of History & Ethnography** (admission 55; ☎ 11am-4pm). Svaneti's treasury of religious items is amazingly rich and it is not unusual to find unique works in people's houses. Security is a problem, but the Svans are understandably reluctant to see their sacred objects moved from the villages and churches in which they have always had a very special significance. It is not always easy to obtain the permission of those who are locally responsible to view their treasured artefacts, but if you really want to see as much as possible in Svaneti you can ask for a special permit from the museum in Mestia, which may or may not open doors elsewhere. However, the museum's collection is comprehensive and it's the easiest place to get an idea of the glories of Svanetian art.

Of special interest are the two metal water jugs: the Persian-style one belonged to Queen Tamar and the Georgian one to her father, Giorgi III. The oldest objects in the museum are incense burners used by the Syrian fathers who came to Georgia as missionaries. However, it is the collection of icons that is really remarkable. Beginning from the 9th century you can see here the development of Georgian religious art.

SLEEPING

It is best to arrange accommodation through a travel agent in advance, though people may greet the bus or marshrutka, offering rooms in their houses. Obviously be cautious about trusting strangers.

CUNA Svaneti Guesthouse (☎ 32-932555; per person \$10-12) This venture, set up by the eponymous German NGO and run by Nana Nigaradze and a group of other local women, opened in 2004. Nana can also organise accommodation in Upper Svaneti and mountain guides for local trekking.

Nino and Eka Japaridze (☎ 899-572859; full board per person \$25) Nino and Eka run an excellent homestay, with hot water and creature comforts. They own three *WAD* huts and can meet groups of up to 10 people for 2-3 nights or even Tbilisi.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Getting to Mestia is an ordeal. Buses go from Tbilisi Didube via Kutaisi (17 hours) and from Zugdidi (11 hours). It's an incredibly long journey in usually cramped conditions, and another factor to consider is the lawlessness of the Zugdidi-Mestia road. Marshrutkas and buses have been stopped and people robbed on this almost totally deserted route.

One happy alternative is to fly to Mestia. Flights from Tbilisi are operated without a schedule, although are usually daily in the summer months, and weekly outside this time. Tickets cost \$30 each way, but in general, like a marshrutka of the skies, the plane only leaves once it is full. For information call **Muraz or Timur Ratiani** (☎ 877-499396, 877-414181), who run the flights.

Nearly all Tbilisi travel agencies offer good deals with trusted drivers and guides to Svaneti. Particularly recommended are Caucasus Travel and the Tbilisi Tourist Centre (see p38).

Ushguli უშგული

Ushguli, 47km southeast of Mestia and 2200m above sea level, is believed to be the highest permanently inhabited place in Europe. Actually a conglomeration of four villages – Murqmeli, Chazhasi, Zhibiani and Chvibiani – Ushguli lies below Mt Shkhara (5201m), the highest mountain in Georgia and the second highest in the Caucasus. There are more than 20 ancient towers here. One tower in Zhibiani houses the **Ethnographic Museum**, which holds the most precious treasures from Ushguli's seven churches. The collection includes several very fine icons of the Virgin, of Christ enthroned, of the Archangels Gabriel and Michael and of Sts George and Tevdore. In the east of Ushguli, beautifully situated on a hill below Mt Shkhara, is the 12th-century **Church of the Virgin Mary** with its defensive tower. Pridon Nizharadze and Nanuli Chelidze have the keys to the museum and to Lamaria. Ask for them in town. To the south are the ruins of

Tamaris Tsikhe (Tamar's Castle). There is a local belief that Queen Tamar may be buried here. **Dato Ratiani** (☎ 899-912256; full board per person \$25) runs a well-recommended homestay in Ushguli. You'll be treated to great meals and even a shower with hot running water. Ask for him anywhere in town.

RACHA

This delightful region of Georgia is often unfairly overlooked by visitors, stuck as it is between dangerous Svaneti and unstable South Ossetia. While its mountains and traditional architecture are not as obviously spectacular as Svaneti's, Racha is still a dramatically scenic place – this is where the Rioni River rises, and one of the possible origins of the Golden Fleece. Unlike its neighbours, however, Racha is neither dangerous nor unstable and in summer is a popular centre for Georgian holidaymakers, who come here for the clean air, curative waters and the holy site of Nikortsminda. Racha is also Georgia's second-most significant wine producing area – *Khvanchkara* a sweet, thick, dark red wine that was Stalin's favourite, is produced here.

Ambrolauri & Nikortsminda

☎ 239

The first Rachan town you'll get to from the south, Ambrolauri is pleasant enough and the jumping off point to visit the 11th-century Nikortsminda Church. A highly recommended homestay can be organised with **Nana and Murman Donadze** (☎ 21461; Pushkin 15; with/without full board per person \$15/5) who live five minutes from the bus station near the first secondary school. Their children speak English and the facilities include hot running water and a flushing toilet.

Nikortsminda is the main sight in Racha, and one of the most important examples of ecclesiastical architecture in the whole of Georgia. The road from Kutaisi to Racha passes through Nikortsminda; you reach it about 41km from Tkibuli, with the cathedral dedicated to St Nicholas dominant on a hill.

It was built between 1010 and 1014, as is evidenced by an inscription above the west entrance, which mentions Bagrat III and his son Giorgi. Nikortsminda was damaged in an earthquake in 1991, but has been restored. The very fine carved decoration on the façade is the main feature of the church.

Each part of the design is related to the theme of the divine greatness of Christ – bring binoculars if you have them. You can get a taxi from Ambrolauri for around \$5.

ბიბინა, ბიბინა

Oni

The administrative centre of Racha, about 30km northeast of Ambrolauri, Oni is a pleasant town, and the main transport centre for the area. Besides an interesting synagogue and some very pleasant ivy-clad 19th-century houses, there is little to see here, and most people will just be passing through or connecting to other towns north. There is, however, **Paata Maisuradze's Guesthouse** (David Aghmashenebeli 29; per person \$30) which has four bedrooms. Conditions here are fine, and there is even hot water.

Utsera

This village overlooking the Rioni is a very popular centre for taking the waters. There are 28 different springs in the immediate vicinity, and in the mountains either side of the village the rivers run orange, due to the high amount of calcium in the water. The **Fazisi Sanatorium** (☎ 899-536352; full board per person \$9) is a surprisingly well-maintained Soviet-era sanatorium that was once the reserve of the party elite. It has hit hard times since the end of the Soviet Union, but is still in far better condition than most such establishments. It is run by the enthusiastic Dr Nelly Gvaradze, who still operates a rather Soviet-style regime herself, making guests sign a declaration of how long they intend to stay. There is a communal shower with hot water, although all rooms have cold-water bathrooms and toilets. The sanatorium is only open in the summer months, and you should phone ahead (Nelly only speaks Georgian) to make a reservation.

The walking is spectacular here, and the water incredibly tasty and in an endless variety. Springs number 1 and 28, a short walk out of the main gate to the right (follow the crowd of locals carrying bottles), are particularly good.

If you need a driver, ask for Tarel in the village, as he is used to taking groups up to the most remote parts of Racha in his UAZ jeep. It's perhaps unwise to rely solely on public transport to get here – there is a daily marshrutka to and from Oni, but it sometimes doesn't show up.

Shovi

This summer resort is the end of the road before the Russian border and suitably spectacular and remote, about half an hour north of Utsera by jeep. There are several places to stay in the summer months, although it is truly remote and really only for those who enjoy mountain walks and plenty of fresh air. Shovi is only inhabited during the summer months; the rest of the year the local population moves to lower Racha.

The first place you'll reach coming from Utsera is the **Turbaza Shovi** (☎ 899-234768, 899-513301; full board per person \$8; ☺ Jul & Aug only). While predictably Soviet (the canteen in particular is like a time machine), this is a clean and pleasant base for walking in the area.

Further up the road is a dilapidated and very undesirable sanatorium (whose salient feature is a rare decaying silver statue of a seated Stalin) and also the much better **Pensionat Racha** (☎ 899-108800, 899-500136; full board with/without hot-water private bathroom per person \$10/7.50; ☺ May-Oct), where the staff can organise guides to the mountains and excursions to Mamisoni, the highest mountain village in Georgia, only inhabited during the summer months.

Getting to Shovi is best by car or hired jeep, as the road is terrible. A daily marshrutka runs from Oni via Utsera, but it is unreliable and if the weather has been bad it may not be able to make the trip, due to the state of the roads.

Getting There & Away

Transport in Racha is limited. Buses run daily between Oni (via Ambrolauri) and both Kutaisi (\$2.75, five hours) and Tbilisi (\$4, nine hours). While there are some unreliable marshrutka services that go all the way to Shovi, taxis are your best bet. All villages have UAZ jeep drivers used to taking holidaymakers into the mountains or to the nearest transport centre. The drive from Oni into the South Ossetian capital of Tskhinvali is very attractive, but not served by public transport. A taxi will cost from \$40.

SOUTH OSSETIA

The status of this region is still not completely resolved, following the conflict between Georgians and Ossetians that went on at different levels of intensity between 1989 and 1992. However, it seems that

significant progress has been made, and although some tension may still be felt between the two ethnic groups who live here, it is unlikely that a foreigner will feel unsafe. The countryside is very attractive, although hiking in the mountains in the north of the region is still not recommended.

The Ossetians are thought to be the descendants of the Alans, who are believed to have been related to the ancient Sarmatians. They speak an Iranian language and are largely Christian, having settled in the north Caucasus sometime between the 4th and 6th centuries AD. As Nationalities Minister, Josef Stalin rejected a request from South Ossetia to be united with North Ossetia (currently within Russia) in 1925, and nationalist aspirations were silenced until Gorbachev's reforms in the late 1980s. South Ossetians continue to have unification with the north as their goal, despite the fact that they seem to have accepted its unfeasibility since the conflict with Tbilisi.

Despite the present relaxation of tension, it's a good idea to carry your passport at all times. You will probably be better received if you can speak a little Russian, rather than Georgian, although there are areas where the population is predominantly Georgian. The preferred currency is the Russian rouble, though the lari is sometimes accepted, and the clocks here are one hour behind the rest of Georgia, in harmony with Moscow time.

Tskhinvali ცხინვალი

☎ 344 / 62,000

Until the 18th century Tskhinvali was just a small market town. Irakli II stopped here under the trees to rest on the way to Gergievsk to sign the 1783 treaty with Russia. The town is still fairly green, and many people live in houses with gardens. However, the overall impression is of a struggling, run-down place.

Behind the 'president's' residence in Moskovskaya ulitsa is the dilapidated old quarter, with the 17th- to 18th-century **Church of St Mary**. It was built as a Georgian Orthodox church, but its interior design is now Russian Orthodox and it seems to be mainly used by Ossetians. There's not too much to do in Tskhinvali itself – most visitors here are transiting to Racha, aid or NGO workers, or heading off for the good walking in mountains to the north of Tskhinvali.

ORIENTATION & INFORMATION

The first sign of the outskirts of Tskhinvali is a market where people buy goods from the north Caucasus in bulk. Ossetian troops may stop you at a checkpoint just north of here and have been known to ask for an 'entrance tax'.

Buses and marshrutkas bring you to the main square, Privoksalnaya ploshchad, where you'll find the nonfunctioning train station and the Hotel Alan. The two main streets are Moskovskaya ulitsa, which begins at the square, and ulitsa Stalina, the third turning on the right of Moskovskaya after the square. The post office on ulitsa Stalina is open 24 hours and you can also make international calls there. Ulitsa Stalina leads on to Teatralnaya ploshchad, home to the theatre and Hotel Iriston.

SLEEPING & EATING

Hotel Alan (Privoksalnaya Ploshchad; s/d without running water \$1/2) A typically run-down Soviet behemoth, with one floor operating and friendly ladies unashamedly curious about tourists visiting South Ossetia. The rooms are absolutely standard, but the bathrooms worse than usual.

Hotel Iriston (Teatralnaya ulitsa; ste per person \$2.50) You can also try Hotel Iriston, which used to be the Intourist Hotel; facilities here are basic. There is a rather depressing restaurant downstairs. **Minas Restaurant** at the other end of ulitsa Stalina, is a better bet, owned as it is by the Kazbegi beer company.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Buses and marshrutkas run between Tbilisi Didube and Tskhinvali (\$1.50, 2½ hours, every hour). Trains run as far as Nikozi to the south of the city, coming from Tbilisi via Gori twice a day. From Gori, marshrutkas to Tskhinvali leave every 20 minutes throughout the day from the west side of the square, directly to the left of the bus station.

Onwards from Tskhinvali buses run all over South Ossetia and to the North Ossetian capital of Vladikavkaz in Russia, although foreigners cannot cross the border here. There is no public transport into neighbouring Racha, which is a pity, as it makes a quicker and more picturesque journey to Oni (three hours) than the road from than the laborious road from Kutaisi. A taxi will charge from \$40 to make the trip.

GEORGIAN MILITARY HIGHWAY

This ancient passage from Tbilisi through the Great Caucasus to the North Ossetian capital of Vladikavkaz in Russia is a fantastic adventure. The road is a challenge by challenging mountain terrain was only properly engineered as a road in the early 19th century with the Russian annexation of the Caucasus. However, today 'highway' seems to be a distinct misnomer. While there's little risk of war or banditry on the highway, nowhere in Georgia are you safe from the roads and drivers; nerves can be frayed as marshrutka drivers swerve at dangerous speeds to avoid perilous potholes next to sheer drops into the valleys below. The scenery is spectacular though, even before the road gets into the



Caucasus themselves – the road clings to the side of the turquoise waters and lush forestation of the Zhinvali Reservoir and passes the sublime architecture of Ananuri and the ski resort of Gudauri before becoming truly remote and eerily deserted. Unfortunately, due to the continued closure of the Russian-Georgian border to foreigners, the route is currently a dead end, but in Kazbegi there's a superb base for walking, climbing, bird-watching and a host of other activities.

Ananuri

This fortress is another example of beautifully located Georgian architecture, even if the surroundings are now, with the waters of the reservoir spread out below, not exactly what the builders envisaged. Ananuri is 66km north of Tbilisi, and 9km above the Zhinvali Reservoir. It dates from the 16th to 17th centuries, a time of feudal disunity in Georgia. The fortress belonged to the *eristavis* (dukes) of Aragvi, who ruled the land as far as the Tergi Valley from the 13th century onwards. This castle was the scene of several battles. In 1739 another *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. However, the peasants themselves were not easy to control, and in 1746 their uprising led to Teimuraz and Irakli II of Kartli joining forces to subjugate them.

Of the two original fortresses, the upper one is very well preserved, while only some ruins of the lower one have survived. The largest tower is the 17th-century one known as Sheupovari. It was here that the last defenders were killed in the fight with the Ksani *eristavi*. You can climb to the top for fine views of the fortress and the countryside around. If the door to the complex is locked, ask Margalita Choliashvili in the village for the key.

Jvari Pass

Jvari Pass, the Pass of the Cross, starts about 4km after the town of Gudauri. It takes its name from the fact that there once was a cross here, erected by David the Builder. The present red stone cross, about 500m to the right above the road, was put there by General Termolov in 1824. Historically

this area was known as Khevis Qeli, or the throat of Khevi, because this is where the Khevi region begins.

This part of Georgia has been off its history ruled directly by the monarch, except for a period in the 17th and 18th centuries when the Aragvi *eristavis* temporarily took it over. Justice here was traditionally administered by the *khevisberis* (local chief) who, unlike their equivalents in Khevsureti and Tusheti, were also responsible for raising armies and had their own castles. The law here was strictly applied to preserve the mountain communities – if a man wanted to leave the area, he had to give much of his livestock to the village.

There are a lot of springs here. At a lay-by on the west side of the river the Narzan mineral water has stained the rocks rust coloured. You can stop and drink the refreshing water straight out of the mountain. This part of the road is notorious for avalanches, and five galleries have been built for traffic to use in winter.

Sno Valley

Further on, just beyond the village of Arsha, is the turn-off east to the Sno Valley. This track eventually leads to Khevsureti, about 26km away. The valley has many good climbing opportunities. The village of Sno contains a 16th-century fortification. It was strategically important, guarding the way east. The last village in the valley is Juta, to the east of which are the Chaukhi Mountains, which have good cliffs for climbers. The route to Juta can be covered by a 4WD in good weather, or you can hike or ride a horse.

Kazbegi ყაზბეგო

☎ 245

This is understandably most people's destination on the Georgian Military Hwy: the charmingly located town just a few miles south of the Russian border, below impressive Mount Kazbek and the hill-top Tsminda Sameba Church.

The town's name comes not from the Georgian writer Alexander Kazbegi, but from his great-grandfather Kazibek Chopikashvili, who was in charge of collecting tolls in the area in the late 18th century. During the expansion of the Russian Empire into the south Caucasus in the early 19th century, the people of Mtiuleti, as it was then



known, revolted against their new Russian masters and allied themselves with other mountain peoples, demanding that Gabriel Chopikashvili, Kazibek's son, hand over the Russian soldiers resident in the town. His refusal led to his promotion to general in the Russian army and the town was renamed Kazbegi in his honour.

Today Kazbegi is a sleepy, pleasant mountain town, with a steadily increasing backpacker presence. There are plentiful homestay and hotel possibilities and Kazbegi makes a great base for walking and climbing in the region.

INFORMATION

The Georgian Military Hwy brings you straight into Kazbegi's main square, Stalinis moedani, where there is a statue of Alexander Kazbegi, as well as the marshrutka and taxi stops and the swanky new Stepan Tsminda Hotel. From here the road divides into Stalinis kucha to the right, and another road that crosses the Tergi River and continues on to Dariali Gorge.

The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) has an ecostation here that can provide you with good trekking maps and other useful information, open from May to October.

For the post office, turn right into Stalinis kucha just after you reach the Alexander Kazbegi Museum and walk up to the next parallel street where you'll find it on the left. It's open 24 hours and you can make international calls from here.

ALEXANDER KAZBEGI MUSEUM

The museum is a five-minute walk from the main square along Stalinis kucha. You first come to a church, dated 1809-11. Above the door is a striking relief of two lions with a chain. To the east and west are two structures that look like bell towers (but aren't). Under them are buried 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.

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 through the Jvari Pass

and back to Kazbegi. The museum (admission 25c, tour in Russian or Georgian \$1; 10am-5pm) in Kazbegi's house, which is on the left of the church, contains photos, documents and some clothes. ~~Upstairs, but there~~ contain some original furniture.

TSMINDA SAMEBA CHURCH

The 14th-century Holy Trinity church (2170m) has become something of a symbol of Georgia - its beauty, piety and the fierce determination to build such a huge structure so high up are all perfectly emblematic of the country and its people. Walking up to the church is one of the highlights of the Georgian Military Hwy, but before heading off, ask for Genri Tsiklauri in Gergeti village - he has the key. During the summer, locating the key can be a problem, as numerous groups go up taking different routes. It's best to drop by and see Genri the evening before you want to go up to let him know your plans. If he accompanies you, you should give him something for his trouble. Women should consider hiking either with Genri or a friend or two; one female reader was sexually assaulted while doing the walk alone.

There are two routes to the top - both obvious. From Kazbegi town square cross over the Tergi River and walk through the village of Gergeti until you come to the cemetery. From here the steepest and fastest route goes straight up the hillside to the right of the church, taking 35 to 45 minutes, while the longer route snakes round the hill and is passable by car in dry weather. It's about a 2km to 3km walk each way.

The walk is a delight and it's worth bringing a picnic and spending a day up here. In 1988 the Soviet authorities constructed a cable-car line, with one station in Kazbegi and the other right next to Tsminda Sameba. However, the people of Kazbegi quite rightly felt this defiled their sacred place and soon destroyed it. You can still see its base station near the old Intourist Hotel.

Vakhushti Batonishvili wrote in the 18th century that in times of danger the treasures from Mtskheta, including St Nino's cross, were kept here for safety. This is also where the *khevisberis* used to come to discuss local issues. The interior is not particularly unusual or interesting, but certainly well worth a look if you get this far!



SLEEPING

Kazbegi is well developed for homestays.

Vano's Place (☎ 52418; full board per person \$5) This a great place to meet other people, although it's best to ring ahead in summer due to the high volume of visitors. Vano speaks good English and is incredibly helpful – he can give you homestay suggestions for many other places in Georgia. His mother Venera is a *nard* (a backgammonlike game) genius, and will provide meals served under the gaze of a huge Stalin portrait in the dining room. You can negotiate rates for accommodation without food or to camp. From the bus stop cross the river and head up the hill bearing left. Ask anyone for Vano.

Nunu Maisuradze's Homestay (☎ 52593; with/without full board per person \$12.50/7.50) Another good option with a nice clean Western toilet and bathroom with hot water. No English is spoken, but it's a friendly place. From the main square, walk up the street that leads up the hill from the bakery and hotel. Nunu's two-storey house is on the right, with green gates.

Luiza Tsiklauri (☎ 52353; half board per person \$12.50) Luiza is rather deaf, but speaks German and has plenty of space to accommodate travellers, as well as a Western toilet and bathroom with hot water. Follow directions to Nunu's, then turn right at the end of the road. Luiza's house is on the left and has a light-blue gate, next to a newly built two-storey house.

Yago Kazalikhvili's House (☎ 52401; per person without food \$15) Those interested in mountain climbing and bird-watching should head straight to Yago, who speaks some English and leads bird-watching and ecotours in the region. Yago also runs the small Mountaineering Museum opposite his house and his grandfather was one of the first professional guides to the region. His house can take up to eight guests and has a Western toilet and hot water. Yago's house is on the same street as Luiza's, but turn left rather than right at the end of the road coming from the town square.

Hotel Lomi (☎ 52029; per person without breakfast \$5) Hotel Lomi is on the town square, beyond the Kazbegi statue, and is simply marked 'hotel' from the outside. The toilets and bathroom are shared, but are clean and there is hot water. You can also change money here.

Stepan Tsminda Hotel (☎ 162296; with/without half board per person \$25/15) This luxury option is surprisingly good value, and is owned and run by the ubiquitous Kazbegi Beer Company. It's a very comfortable hotel with lovely views of Mt Kazbek from the rooms at the back and a rather alpine décor. Somewhat underfurnished 'lux' rooms are available for \$80 including half board.

WWF Ecostation (☎ 52056; full board per person \$30) Staff at this ecostation are at times downright impolite, and it's not very well located, although the views of Kazbek are stunning from up on the hillside. However, they do offer a large range of half- to four-day tours focusing on everything from waterfalls to bear-watching, and they also sell a great map of the Gergeti Glacier and the Truso Gorge for \$2.50. The rooms are comfortable but basic. Arriving in Kazbegi, turn right immediately after a slippery-roads sign before you get to the main square. Carry on up the hill about 300m and it's the unmarked, white two-storey building with brown window shutters.

EATING

You aren't spoiled for choice in Kazbegi. Most homestays will see that you are fed basic but tasty Georgian food, but if you fancy going out, the restaurant in the basement of the **Stepan Tsminda Hotel** has a nice terrace to sit out on, and serves tasty food. There is a small nameless **café** near the bridge to Gergeti, which is very basic but friendly and tasty.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Marshrutkas (\$3.50, three hours) leave Didube bus station's central bay in Tbilisi several times during the day. From Kazbegi timetabled departures leave the main square at 3pm and 5pm, although there are often others. There are no longer bus services to Kazbegi.

Shared taxis to Tbilisi leave from the town square and cost \$5 per person, or \$20 to charter the whole thing.

Around Kazbegi**GERGETI TREK**

This 10.5km trek starts at the village of Gergeti. Climb the hill to Tsminda Sameba, and then continue up until you reach the massive Gergeti Glacier. The glacier is 7.8km

long and 6.8km wide and begins at 2950m above sea level, rising almost to the tip of Mt Kazbek. It's possible to cross the glacier and climb a further 700m to Georgia's highest meteorological station, though this is only advisable for those experienced on ice or with good guides. The route is outlined in the WWF's nature trail map. It's possible to stay overnight at the **meteorological station** (\$10), although it's little more than a refuge and rather dirty. You can camp for free, but the wind can be fierce.

MT KAZBEK

This 5047m extinct volcano has many myths and much folk history connected with it. Amirani, the Georgian Prometheus, is supposed to have been chained up here for stealing fire from the gods and giving it to mortals. His prison was a hut which stood near the cave of Betlemi (Bethlehem), 4000m above sea level. Betlemi cave was the abode of a hermit, and according to legend many very sacred objects were kept here – Christ's manger, Abraham's tent, and a golden cradle rocked by a dove – the sight of which 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 three foreigners: Freshfield, Tucker and Moore of the London Alpine Club in 1868. There is indeed a cave at 4000m, near which is the Caucasus Travel hut (doubling as a meteorological station). It

costs \$10 to stay here for the night (it's best to bring some food with you). For \$50 you can climb the mountain, assisted by experienced guides. The meteorological station can also lend climbing equipment.

KAZBEGI NATURE RESERVE

The Kazbegi Nature Reserve, established in 1979, includes the Jvari Pass, the Truso Gorge and the southern slopes of the Khokhi Range. Three distinct levels can be distinguished: between 1500m and 2000m above sea level there are beech forests, then higher up subalpine forests, followed by alpine meadows. A total of 1347 different plant species grow in the reserve, 30% of them Caucasian endemics. The fauna includes *turs* (Caucasian goats), chamois, hares, foxes and wild cats, as well as many species of bird. Overgrazing, especially along the Georgian Military Hwy, is causing erosion. The cutting down of trees for firewood is another problem, partly eased in recent years by the provision of natural gas.

DARIALI GORGE

This rather grim but evocative 11km pass is the gorge of the Tergi River. Granite cliffs tower over the road, which runs along a narrow shelf above the river, at one point passing through a tunnel (watch out for cows sheltering inside). The name comes from the Persian 'Dar-i-Alan' (Gates of the Alans), after the ancestors of the Ossetians

CLIMBING MT KAZBEK

Mt Kazbek (5047m) stands west of the town of Kazbegi on the Georgian Military Hwy, three hours from Tbilisi. The ascent of the mountain from Kazbegi is technically straightforward, though there is some danger in crevasses. The climb generally takes three or four days.

Day 1 Hike from Kazbegi up the south side of the Ortsveri Valley to a campsite at 2950m among grassy moraines just south of the Ortsveri Glacier (4½ hours), which is part of the enormous Gergeti Glacier.

Day 2 Climb onto the glacier and cross to the north side, and then up to the old meteorological station at 3680m (2½ hours). Spend the rest of the day climbing up to the Maili Plateau at 4500m, or to the summit of Ortsveri Peak (4365m) and then back down to the meteorological station for the night, to allow acclimatisation. It is possible to climb all the way from Kazbegi to the meteorological station in one long day, but the following should be spent acclimatising.

Day 3 Leave in the early hours of the morning and follow the north side of the Ortsveri 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 meteorological station for another bivouac (five hours).

Day 4 Descend to Kazbegi.

who came here around the 5th century AD. Many others came this way too; the first fortification was built in the 2nd century BC by King Mirian. This was the limit of Pompey's advance through the Caucasus.

The ruins of **Tamar's Castle** are on a cliff on the left bank 14km north of Kazbegi. The remains are from many different periods. This Tamar, a legendary cruel beauty, is not to be confused with the great 12th-century queen of Georgia.

The border with Russia is at **Chertov Most** (Devil's Bridge) 20km from Kazbegi, although at the time of writing it was closed to non-Russians and Georgians.

TUSHETI

Largely untouched by much of the 20th century, let alone the 21st, Tusheti is a huge draw to anyone wanting to find ancient culture, superb scenery and lively festivals. Electricity is totally unavailable, there are no phones – let alone mobile coverage – and booking accommodation in advance means sending a letter with a lorry driver from Alvani, the region's staging post.

Like Svaneti, Tusheti is also characterised by large stone towers, although they are warning towers from which beacons can be lit in the event of attack from the Dagestanis and Chechens who live on the other side of the mountains. Before special events and races, they are also lit up to attract people to come and partake in the festivities, looking stunning in the mountain night. Tusheti contains the notorious Pankisi Gorge, which was bombed by the Russian military in 2002, who believed it to be the base of terrorist operations in next-door Chechnya. Since the bombing, security has been tightened, but this is still potentially a very dangerous area.

Shepherds herd their flocks down to the Kakhetian hills and valleys at the onset of winter then return with the warmer weather in the spring. However, even at the height of summer there are frozen streams visible near the few roads that wind precariously up and down the valleys. The only products made locally are the famous milk and cheese, meat from the slaughter of sheep and homemade bread. Despite this, by and large visitors will eat very well in guesthouses.



Tusheti is perfect for trekking and horse riding. It is possible to ride or walk from Khevsureti to Tusheti or vice versa, a route accessible to cars only for the first part of the journey. From Khevsureti the path starts in the village of **Ardoti** and goes over the Atsunt Pass (3570m) to the village of **Parsma**. On foot you would probably need two days for this. Check with your country's embassy in Tbilisi before attempting the hike (or indeed before visiting the region at all) that there is no danger due to spillover of the turbulence in Chechnya. Even though the Pankisi Gorge was a lot more secure in 2003, things can change very rapidly in Georgia.

Another very scenic route which can be walked in around nine hours is that between the villages of **Parsma** and **Jvarboseli**. There are guesthouses in both villages.

Sleeping

There are no hotels in Tusheti, but plenty of makeshift guesthouses. There's no electricity or running water, but the warm welcome and unique way of life should more than compensate. While strangers turning up in villages will always be accommodated according to the honour code of the mountains, it is best to make arrangements in advance with guesthouse owners. Most have contact phones in Alvani, from where messages are conveyed by people travelling up to the mountains. In all cases, you should ring ahead at least three days in advance.

Dato Bukvaidze's (☎ 893-279882; full board per person \$25) Dato and his father run this guesthouse in Shenako, where they have shower facilities and eight comfortable rooms. They'll provide a hearty lunch box for guests who plan to go walking during the day as well.

CUNA Georgia organisation (☎ /fax 932555; www.cuna-georgia.org; Kakabadze 3, Tbilisi) For some years, CUNA has been working to improve the social and economic development of rural populations in Georgia, and has helped villagers in Tusheti establish a network of cheap guesthouses. The amenities may be limited, but the hospitality will be warm and the chance to see the Tusheti way of life at close quarters unique.

Vazha Chincharauli (☎ 877-729362, in Tbilisi 304186; full board per person \$25) In Shatili, Vazha is very accommodating – both he and his wife will often accompany tourists from Tbilisi, if you arrange this in advance. The

homestay has hot water and three clean bedrooms for guests.

Getting There & Away

The journey to Tusheti is a long one, but not too difficult to organise and an experience in itself. Departure points are Telavi or Alvani, where you can ask near the bus stations if anyone is going there. From Alvani to Omalo, the trip by car (which must be 4WD) will cost around \$40 one-way and take between three and four hours. A place on top of a lorry will cost about \$5 per person, plus something for baggage, and will take four or five hours. One leaves Alvani between 8am and 9am most days. From Telavi the ride will be a few dollars more and half an hour-or-so longer. **Vazha Kardlidze** (☎ 822-001137, 899-319905) regularly makes the trip from Alvani to Omalo in his Niva. He usually charges \$60 to \$70 per party to drive up to Tusheti, and then \$40 to \$50 per day after that, enabling visitors to see several villages a day.

Check with your embassy about the safety of travel here. Some travellers reported police check points, with foreigners being turned back, although this could well be temporary.

KAKHETI

Georgia's eastern region of Kakheti is synonymous with wine. There are hundreds of different grapes grown here, and every village has its own particular variety. It's also an area rich in history, including the incredible monastery complex of Davit Gareja and the burial place of St Nino, who converted Georgia to Christianity in the 4th century. Monasteries and ancient towns crowd the dramatic scenery of Kakheti, much of which is easily reached from Tbilisi in a day trip. The ideal time to visit the region is in September or October when the *rtveli* (grape harvest) is being taken in. The region is also famous for its drinking songs (the most famous of all being *Mravazhamieri*), and its homemade wine is frighteningly drinkable.

TELAVI თელავი

☎ 250 / pop 28,000

The largest town in Kakheti, Telavi is situated in the valley of the Alazani, northeast



of the Gombori Mountains, where it has fine views of the Caucasus. While Telavi does have a quiet charm, it does not really merit a visit in its own right, but it is useful as a base for exploration of the historical and viticultural riches of Kakheti, and as the starting point for trips further afield to Tusheti and the eastern mountains.

History

Founded in ancient times, Telavi is first mentioned as Teleda (*tela* means elm tree) in Claudius Ptolemy's 2nd-century *Geography*. The first reference to Telavi in Georgian texts occurred in the early Middle Ages, when it was mentioned as the capital of the principality of Kakhet-

Hereti from the 8th to the 10th century. By the 12th century it was one of the main trade and manufacturing centres in Georgia, though when at the beginning of that century King David the Builder united Kartli and Kakheti, it lost its status of royal residence to Tbilisi, and in the second half of the next century it was caught in the onslaught of the Mongol invasion. Telavi was revived in the 15th to 16th centuries, and although in the first half of the 17th century Shah Abbas I twice devastated the city, in 1672 the Kakhetian King Archil II moved his court back there from Gremi. Little appears to have happened here since the 17th century, and there's something of a forgotten feel to the place.

Orientation & Information

Marshrutkas and buses terminate in the bus station opposite the market. Walk uphill along Ketevan Tsamebuli and turn left to reach Kostava, the main street with the few shops and cafés that Telavi has. At the end of Kostava is Tavisuplebis moedani, an unimpressive square flanked by the theatre and the walls of Batonistsikhe Castle. There are three Internet cafés around the square, two on Kostava and one in the little wooden house on top of the small hill in front of the theatre. The easiest place to change money is in the kiosks opposite the bus station, which operate until early evening. At the **post office** (Kostava 10; ☎ 9am-6pm) you can make international calls but there isn't a fax.

Batonistsikhe Castle


This is the main architectural and historical feature of Telavi. It was the residence of the Kakhetian kings in the 17th and 18th centuries, built when Archil II transferred his residence from Gremi to Telavi, and its most famous royal resident was Irakli II (r 1744-98). Inside the castle yard is a **Persian-style palace** that was constructed in the 1660s, with some 18th-century alterations. The only remaining artefact here is a portrait of Irakli II painted by an unknown Italian artist.

The castle precinct contains the remains of two churches: the dilapidated Archil church and the single-naved royal chapel built by Irakli II in 1758. This chapel is unusual in that it has holes for firearms in the walls. There are also oriental baths. Later a school, an **art gallery** (admission 20€, tour \$1; ☎ 10am-2pm) and a **Museum of History and Ethnography** (admission 20€, tour \$1; ☎ 10am-2pm) were added.

Sleeping

Although both of the town's hotels are closed, there are some excellent homestay options.

Guesthouse Tushishvili (☎ 71909, 877-756625; www.globalsalsa.com/telavi; Nadikvari 15; per person \$10) This friendly homestay is highly recommended. Enormous meals are served and there's even Internet access and BBC World TV. The family speaks some English and German and their house is charming. One entry in the guestbook reads 'best stay between Istanbul and Singapore'. To get there walk to Tavisuplebis moedani at the end of Kostava and it's right next to the tall grey concrete



Kakheti Hotel. In fact there are plenty of other homestays on the same street, so if the Tushishvili are full, you are likely to find somewhere else nearby. **Maya Khatiasvili** (☎ 32386; Nadikvari 15) **Mikhail Dromkashvili** (☎ 33431; Nadikvari 9).

Neli and Mahad Tapolishvili (☎ 899-581820; Chonkadze 11; full board per person \$15) A very pleasant and spacious house a short walk up the hill from the town centre. There's a lovely garden and a great choice of food, and the homemade wine never stops flowing.

Eating

It's safe to say that eating won't exactly be the highlight of your stay, and restaurant provision is rather bare. Luckily if you are in a homestay you'll usually eat excellently.

Café Lucky Strike (Tavisuplebis moedani) This unexciting café does a superb kebab.

Kazbegi Beer Restaurant (cnr Kostava & Ketevan Tsamebuli) This place was out of food when we tried to have lunch there.

Getting There & Away

Comfortable Mercedes buses to Telavi leave roughly once an hour all day long from the chaotic bus stop outside the Samgori metro station in Tbilisi (\$3, two to three hours). Less comfortable marshrutkas leave with similar regularity. There are two bus stations in Telavi; the main stop is the Tbilisi terminus by the bazaar. Local buses to destinations within Kakheti leave from the smaller **bus station** (☎ 72083) slightly further down the hill, behind some market stalls on the other side of Ketevan Tsamebuli. From here, marshrutkas run to Alaverdi and Gremi every half-hour (50€, 20 minutes). There is also one bus each afternoon to Signaghi (\$1.50, 2½ hours).

AROUND TELAVI Alaverdi Cathedral

At the beginning of the 11th century, when Georgia was entering a period of great cultural and political development, King Kvirike of Kakheti had a majestic cathedral built – at 50m tall it was one of the biggest Georgian structures of its time, and was the tallest church in Georgia until the recent construction of the Sameba Cathedral in Tbilisi. The exterior is classically proportioned with five decorative arches, while the façade is minimally decorated, which is

typical of Kakhetian churches. Inside one is struck by the beautiful spacious harmony of the structure and the light which streams in from the 16 windows in the cupola. It has been damaged several times by earthquakes, especially in the 15th and 18th centuries. In the 19th it was damaged in another way when the walls were whitewashed, and it was not until 1966 that this was partially restored and some frescoes uncovered. Note the 16th-century St George (the cathedral's patron) and the dragon over the west door. Above the altar the Virgin and Child is from the 11th century.

Alaverdi was a monastery until the 16th century, when it became a nunnery. Some members of the royal family took the veil here. Alaverdi is the main spiritual centre in Kakheti and a source of great pride and love for the local people. The September festivities of Alaverdoba last three weeks, with people coming from remote mountain areas to celebrate. The festival climaxes on 14 September.

Like Sveti-Tskhoveli in Mtskheta, the cathedral is surrounded by impressive defensive walls, dating mainly from the beginning of the 18th century. Other buildings include the ruins of Shah Abbas's local governor's summer palace, a bathhouse, a bell tower and a *marani* (wine cellar).

Alaverdi is 20km from Telavi. Take the Akhmeta road as far as Khodasheni, then turn right and continue for 9km. This road passes through the village of Ikalto.

Gremi

This fortified **church complex** (admission to complex free, to museum & tower \$3; ☎ daily) is on the Telavi-Kvareli road 19km from Telavi, on the right bank of the Intsoba River, just after the village of Eniseli. Both Eniseli and Gremi are famous for their brandy.

In the 16th century Gremi was the capital of Kakheti, but all that remains of the market, baths, caravanserai, palace and houses after the devastation wrought by Shah Abbas in 1614 are some not very distinctive ruins.

The impressive **citadel**, however, still stands and encloses a church, a tower, and the king's chamber. The tower dates from the 16th century. A structure in the corner was once thought to be a bread oven, but on examination turned out to be a tunnel which has not yet been completely excavated.

Shuamta

Shuamta, meaning 'between the mountains', refers to two sites: Akhali (New) Shuamta and Dzveli (Old) Shuamta.

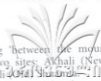
On the main Georgian road a little west of Telavi, a sign points the way to the 16th-century **Akhali Shuamta**. Wait at the gate for someone to greet you. The nunnery was founded by Queen Tinatin in the 16th century. The church has a cruciform design with a high cupola and the fine 16th-century frescoes portray Queen Tinatin, her husband King Levan II, and their son Giorgi, as well as scenes from the life of Christ. Alexandre Chavchavadze, the poet, is buried here. In 1604, when Kakheti was looking for Russian support in the struggle against the Persians, Akhali Shuamta was the site of a meeting between Prince Giorgi of Kakheti and envoys from Tsar Boris Godunov.

If you continue up the hill for 3km you come to **Dzveli Shuamta**. The whole area is wooded, and the monastery has beautiful views over the valley.

The monastery consists of three churches: the nearest to the road is a three-naved 5th- to 6th-century basilica, built in a style typical of the earliest period of Georgian Christianity. An unusual feature is that the entrance is from the south. The next is a 7th-century tetraconch cupola church, which has remains of frescoes. Finally you come to another church of tetraconch design from the same period, which lacks the corner rooms of the otherwise similar middle church. The site was abandoned in the 16th century.

Ikalto Monastery

This monastery, beautifully situated in a grove of cypresses, is one of two famous medieval Georgian academies, the other being Gelati. Shota Rustaveli, the national poet, is said 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 in the same spot, where the doctrines of neo-Platonism were expounded. In 1616 the complex was devastated by the Persians. The main church (dedicated to Peristvaleb, the Transfiguration) is originally from the 8th to 9th centuries, but its appearance was changed in the 19th century by the addition of a brick



cupola and the unfortunate whitewashing of the walls in the Russian style.

To the east of the main church is the small 6th-century **Sameba Church**, which has an interesting relief of saints over the door. Under this building is an ancient crypt. The third church, a single-naved basilica to the south, dates from the 12th to 13th centuries.

By car from Telavi, take the Akhmeta road. Ikalto is 8km away, 2km uphill from the 'Akademia Ikalto' sign.

Tsinandali

This village, source of a famous white wine and site of the **Chavchavadze family estate**, lies 10km southeast of Telavi on the Gurjaani road. Alexander Chavchavadze (1786–1846) was the son of Georgia's first ambassador to Russia and the godson of Catherine the Great. Despite these connections, he was three times involved in antiterrorist activities, for which he was eventually exiled. He was one of the first Georgian romantic poets and was visited by Lermontov and the exiled Decembrist plotters. His daughter Nino married the Russian poet and diplomat Alexander Griboyedov in the family chapel in the park here.

In 1854 Lezgin tribesmen from the Daghestani 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. It's now a **museum** (admission 20¢, tour in Georgian or German per group \$1; ☎ 10am–6pm Tue–Sun). The house gives a good idea of aristocratic Georgian life in the 19th century.

The park is beautifully laid out in an English style, with fine vines, venerable trees and exotic plants. The **Tsinandali Winery**, founded by Alexander's father Garsevan, is in the northeast corner. It has the same opening hours as the house, but you have to join a tour to visit the cellars, which contain wines dating to 1814. You will probably be able to do a spot of tasting in the banquet hall.

Getting There & Away

Public transport around Tevali tends to be slow and not altogether reliable, and many places, such as Shuamta, are not on any bus routes. The most practical way to get around is to hire a car and driver for

the day to take you to Shuamta, Ikalto, Alaverdi and Tsinandali. This should cost around \$15 to \$25.

SIGNAGHI

☎ 255 / 2000

Signaghi is the most attractive town in Kakheti and has a distinctly Italianate feel to it. This is one place that should not be missed if you are travelling through Eastern Georgia. With its unique city wall and charming old quarter, there are few places more perfectly preserved from the 18th century than this, although it's probably not worth staying the night.

Irakli II had the walls built to protect the area from incursions by Lezgins from the north Caucasus, although there had been a settlement here since ancient times. It is the capital of the Kakhetian region of Kiziki, which was famous for supplying some of the staunchest Kakhetian fighters. Indeed, the Kiziki people had a reputation for not accepting any lord, and of being independent-minded.

The name Signaghi comes from the Turkish word for 'shelter'. Each of the 23 towers in the town walls were named after local villages and the respective villagers would take refuge here in times of danger. Irakli invited mainly Armenians – artisans and tradespeople – to live here. The site of the town, on a spur of undulating ground, was not favourable for the usual Kakhetian activity of agriculture.

The town has wonderful views of the Alazani Valley and the Caucasus beyond. It's also a good place for just strolling around – the atmosphere is relaxed, there is a park alongside the wall, a late-medieval church with a bell tower, and very few modern buildings to disturb the overall picture. There's also a bust of Stalin on Aghmashenebelis moedani and two attractive churches further down the hill.

Sleeping

Hotel Nugo (Dodashvili's moedani) This hotel was being renovated at the time of writing, with a promise to transform this bottom-of-the-pile Intourist into a pleasant and comfortable place to stay with hot running water and a good restaurant.

Nana Kokiashvili's (☎ 32778; Saradzhishvili 2; with/without full board per person \$15/7.50) There is no problem organising a homestay, and



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this appears to be the best. Nana's daughter Nino speaks English and can be reached on ☎ 877-723704. Nana also has a car and is happy to drive guests about to local attractions and even as far as Davit Gareja for an additional charge. Her house is in the middle of the old town, surrounded by cobbled streets and 18th-century homesteads.

Todo's Homestay (☎ 31606; Ketevan Tsamebuli 3; per person \$5) Less comfortable but a good budget option is Todo's, although she has no hot water. You can usually find Todo at the Elite Bar, where she works during the day.

Eating

There are two cafés in town.

Café (Aghmashenebelis moedani) A truly miserable little place, where snacks and *khachapuri* are served, rather than meals.

Elite Bar Slightly better, but nevertheless very inappropriately named. To get down here, take the lower of the two streets that lead in the direction of the church from outside Hotel Nugo. It's housed in the apparently derelict house, but is pleasant enough inside. Don't expect the fare to stretch far beyond *khinkali* or kebabs, however.

Getting There & Away

Marshrutkas to and from Tbilisi (\$1.50, 1½ hours) leave six times a day in both directions. From Tbilisi the marshrutkas leave from the chaotic hub around Samogori metro station; coming back (the last marshrutka is at 6pm) they leave from the small square in front of the post office in Signaghi.

There is one bus each morning at 9.45am from Telavi (\$1.25, two hours) that returns from Signaghi after lunch. There are marshrutkas and buses to Tsnori every hour from 10am to 5pm, and this is often the best way to get to and from the town as transport from Tsnori onwards is better. There's no shortage of keen drivers in Signaghi either – a taxi to Telavi should cost about \$10, while one to Tbilisi should cost about \$25.

AROUND SIGHNAGHI

Bodbe Monastery

Bodbe Monastery is 2km north of Signaghi. Just outside Signaghi is a big **statue of Amiran**, the Georgian Prometheus – a good place to stop for the views. From here the road descends to a bus shelter. Turn right just after this, and the monastery is about

1km further on. You can take a bus, walk or take a cab (\$1.50) here.

The monastery is dedicated to St Nino (see boxed text p55) and is built here. The three-naved basilica was built in the early feudal period, but has been rebuilt several times since. The frescoes inside are exceptional. Nino's tomb, newly clad in marble, is in the southeast chapel. You can drink the delicious holy water from the Nino fountain and talk to the friendly nuns.

KVARELI ყვარელი

☎ 252 / 11,000

This town, at the foot of the Great Caucasus Mountains, is famous for its semisweet *Kindzmarauli* wine, and for being the birthplace of the famous Georgian writer and reformer Ilia Chavchavadze.

Because of its proximity to the mountains and their often marauding tribes, Kvareli's population needed the security of good fortifications. In the 18th century King Irakli II had two sets of walls built, one inside the other. **Ilia Chavchavadze's house & museum** (Rustaveli 3, nr Chavchavadze 99; 15¢, tour \$1; ☎ 10am-6pm) is itself fortified with a tower that was useful on the day he was born, as Lezgins were at that moment rampaging through the area. His 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 Kvareli is demonstrated at the **Kindzmarauli winery** (☎ 10am-5pm) by a 500m tunnel with 13 passages running off it – like an Egyptian tomb for wine. The temperature underground is a naturally consistent 14°C, ideal for the preservation of the wines here, which include examples of every type in Georgia.

NEKRESI MONASTERY ნეკრესი

Nekresi Monastery is 7km from Kvareli off the Telavi road. Three kilometres out of Kvareli, turn right at the Nekresi sign and follow the road for 4km. At this point you reach the monastery gate, where you have to leave your vehicle and walk the last 1.5km uphill to the monastery.

This is a historically significant place for two reasons. Firstly, at the beginning of the 4th century one of the very first Georgian churches was built here. Secondly, in the 6th century one of the 13 Syrian fathers, Abibos,

who converted many of the highland Georgians, lived here. Abibos was killed after he poured water on a Zoroastrian sacred fire. The first church, built in the time of King Mirian's grandson Trdati, still stands in the centre of the complex. It's a very small basilica, many times reconstructed. It is thought that the people who built it had heard about the design of basilicas but not seen any, resulting in a rather idiosyncratic building. The arches in the façade are open, possibly to allow the congregation to follow the ritual from outside.

East of this basilica is the main Church of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, built in the 6th to 7th centuries. This has a plan which is unique to Georgia, the three naves being walled up to make what is a three-church basilica. The central frescoes, from the 16th century, are the best preserved.

DAVIT GAREJA დავით გარეჯა

On the border with Azerbaijan, and in parts even spilling over, Davit Gareja is perhaps the most remarkable of all of Georgia's ancient sites, and the most interesting easy day trip visitors can do from Tbilisi. Monstrously neglected and used for military exercises during the Soviet era, large-scale restoration work is now being carried out on the 19 known monasteries in the area. Two of the key monasteries are the Lavra monastery, and, up the hill a bit, the Udabno monastery, which has excellent frescoes.

The first monastery here was founded by Davit, one of the 13 Syrian fathers, in the 6th century, and is now called the Lavra monastery. Davit first lived in a cave with his Kakhetian disciples Lukiane and Dodo. Later they each established their own monasteries. All three are now buried in the Church of the Transfiguration in the Lavra area.

The monasteries of Davit Gareja were made by expanding caves in the soft limestone. They became centres of pilgrimage because it was said that one third of Jerusalem's spiritual treasure was kept here. The story goes that Davit travelled to Jerusalem, but was overcome by emotion and felt unable to enter the city. He started to retrace his steps towards Georgia with just three stones he had picked up. The same night the King of Jerusalem had a dream that someone had taken all the spiritual peace from Jerusalem. His soldiers followed Davit

and reclaimed two of the stones, leaving him with the third to take to Georgia. This stone is now kept in the altar of Saint George's Cathedral in Tbilisi (p39), and is taken to Gareja every year for religious celebrations.

The religious complex grew until there were monasteries spread over a wide area. Here, manuscripts were translated and copied, a school of fresco painting developed and the monks gained the right to act as tutors to the princes of Georgia.

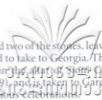
In 1265 the Mongols destroyed the monasteries, but in the first part of the 14th century Giorgi V the Brilliant restored their spiritual and political importance. However Davit Gareja was sacked again in the 14th century, this time by Tamerlane. On Easter night 1615 it suffered its worst moment when Shah Abbas' soldiers killed 6000 monks and destroyed most of its artistic treasures. From that night no services were held here until 1675, when King Archil initiated some restoration work and gave stipends to the monks. But the monasteries never regained their former importance. The last king of Kartli-Kakheti, Giorgi XII, lived in a tower here for two years. The monasteries remained working until the end of the 19th century.

During the Soviet era the area was used for military exercises, and subsequently some of the first demonstrations of the *perestroika* period in Tbilisi were protests against this vandalism. Ironically, after independence the Georgian army used the area for training. The military manoeuvres have now stopped, pending a judicial decision.

The main site of the Lavra area 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 second level that is decorated with reliefs illustrating stories of the monks' close relations with the natural world.

From the gateway you go down past the 17th-century church of St Nicholas where the caves of Davit and his companions are. Davit, Lukiane and Dodo are buried in the 6th-century cave **Church of the Transfiguration** (Peristsvaleba in Georgian) on the opposite side of the complex.

Monks are now living in the monastery again, but you can't go inside their quarters and you should refrain from making





SAMTSKHE-JAVAKHETI

too much noise. They will also be offended by inappropriate clothing. From the third level you can go up to the cave known as Davit's Tears, because of the spring inside. Near here you can see the water system developed by the monks. They had gardens and made their own wine.

To get to the upper monastery of **Udabno** from the gate, go up to the watchtower on the cliff, and then follow the path up. It is very steep for about 100m, but there is a metal line you can follow. The path continues for about another 2km, but it's less steep. When you reach the top of the ridge, you're at one of the edges of Christendom, looking down on Azerbaijan.

Udabno Monastery consists of many caves. Between the 10th and 13th centuries an excellent fresco school flourished here. In the **refectory**, where the monks had to kneel to eat, there are beautiful light-coloured frescoes, the principal one being an 11th-century depiction of the Last Supper.

Entrance to Lavra and Udabno is free, although you should leave a donation.

Sleeping

Seismology Centre (☎ 899-536373; full board per person \$25) Most people will want to visit Davit Gareja in a day trip, and there is no real reason to stay overnight. However, for anyone with a particular interest in the complex, you can spend the night at the Seismology Centre run by David Gotsadze. Seismologists study the frequent earthquakes in the Caucasus here in the isolation of the semi-desert, and there are six guest rooms, but you must call ahead.

Getting There & Away

While there is no public transport to the remote site, it's possible to do a day trip for around \$25 using a marshrutka as far as Gardabani from Didube (\$1, one hour) and then hiring a taxi in Gardabani. Most drivers will want \$25 for the round trip including waiting time, although you can argue them down to \$20.

Many Tbilisi tour agencies (p37) run day trips to Davit Gareja, and this has the benefit of including lunch and guides, as well as comfortable transfers by coach or car. The going rate seems rather at steep \$95 for one person or \$40 per person for three to four people.

The unpronounceably named southern flank of Georgia is an **exclusively Jewish** whose cultural attractions have unfortunately not prevented it from becoming being one of the country's most economically backward places. Its main sights are the 12th-century cave city and monastery of Vardzia, the newly inaugurated Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park and the attractive alpine scenery around Borjomi and Bakuriani.

This historically important region, named after two of the original Georgian tribes who settled here, is often seen as the cradle of Georgian culture. St Nino passed through on her way to Mtskheta and the poet Shota Rustaveli was born here. Paradoxically, this has also been one of the areas most subject to the influx of other cultures. What was historically the largest chunk of Meskheta, the old name for the whole of southwest Georgia, is now part of Turkey, and many interesting Georgian churches and monasteries may still be seen in eastern Turkey. There is also a sizable Azeri population living on the Armenian border here.

After the Russo-Turkish war of 1828-29 ended Ottoman occupation of the area, some of Meskheta was restored to Georgia, then part of the Russian Empire. The consequence was that many of the Muslim inhabitants were deported to Turkey – so many, in fact, that Akhalkalaki, Javakheti's capital, was left almost empty. Armenians were invited to occupy the abandoned houses.

Samtskhe-Javakheti is varied in its landscapes, which range from the subalpine forests and meadows of Bakuriani to the bare volcanic canyons of the Vardzia area. The construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline through the area has inspired new hope in the region's depressed economy, and also raised some major environmental concerns.

BORJOMI ბორჯომი

☎ 267 / pop 16,000

Famous throughout the former Soviet Union for its salty-sour, love-it-or-hate-it carbonated mineral water, Borjomi is an elegant and attractive resort town clinging to the hills either side of the Mtkvari River. The town dates from 1829 when some soldiers

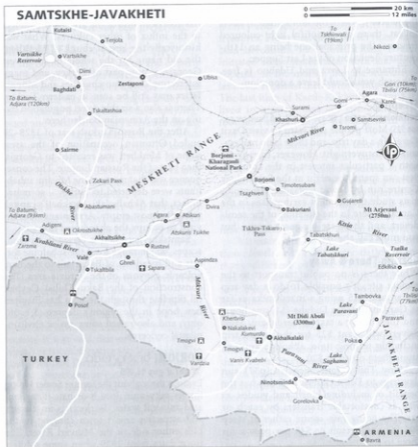
discovered the delicious mineral spring here. It was the Russian governor of the Caucasus, Count Vorontsov, who developed the town as a resort, one that became fashionable with the aristocracy after Duke Mikhail Romanov, son of Tsar Nicholas I, built a summer residence here. Tchaikovsky and Gorky were other celebrated visitors.

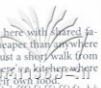
During the Soviet era, Borjomi was a huge resort that attracted enormous numbers of visitors from all over the USSR. While it still attracts visitors, it's a fraction of those who came in the past and the town is economically depressed, with many of the sanatoriums full of refugees from Abkhazia. Things are looking up though, with a steady number of new hotels and

restaurants opening. It's a great place to stop off overnight en route to Vardzia (and has far more to offer than Akhaltsikhe), and for those who like their walking on the well-trod path, the well-lit paths for unchallenging, leisurely strolls. Those looking for more adventurous trekking should also come here, as the Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park offers excellent hiking through pristine landscapes.

Orientation

By bus or car you will arrive on the northern bank of the Mtkvari River, coming in along the town's main commercial street, Rustaveli. Most hotels, sanatoriums and the Mineral Water Park are on the south





bank, so the easiest thing is to cross over the bridge above the bus station. From here, Robakidze will take you onto the quiet main square, Kostavas moedani, where you'll see a golden-grey bust of Stalin. From here it's a short walk through the park, across the Borjomi River and up 9 Aprilis kucha to the Mineral Water Park.

Sights

Borjomi's Mineral Water Park (summer admission 5€, 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. You can taste different waters here free (a babushka will give you a cup to drink with) or you can walk several kilometres upstream, where you'll find a swimming pool and some great picnic areas. On the way, you'll pass a number of holy trees, where locals have tied strips of material to the branches – a pagan tradition to ensure health, prosperity or fertility.

Petres-Tsikhe is a medieval fortress on the right side of the Mtkvari, opposite Likani Sanatorium on a hill. It was built between the 10th and 14th centuries. From here you have a good view of the Mtkvari Valley and can see another medieval castle, **Gogias-Tsikhe**, on a hill on the other bank, nearer the centre of town.

The **Borjomi Museum of Local Lore** (Tsminda Nino 5; admission 50¢; 10am–5pm, closed Mon) is housed in the former Romanov offices. The collection includes china and other articles from the Romanov palace, a collection of 2000 butterflies, some exhibits of local flora and fauna, and a papier-mâché map of Borjomi made in 1917.

Sleeping

Many once-elite sanatoria have become homes to refugee families from Abkhazia. However, there is also some decent newly opened mid-range accommodation here. Homestays are common – ask around at the bus stop on arrival if you want to find one, otherwise **Tamari Mosiashvili's Homestay** (☎ 20922; Guramishvili 14; per person \$10) can be recommended, although bathing facilities are rather basic.

Joint Stock Company Hotel (☎ 22270; Kostava 26; per person \$2.50) This oddly named hotel is probably the best-value place to stay. A

clean and basic room here with shared facilities comes in far cheaper than anywhere else in town, and it's just a short walk from the park and river. There is a kitchen where guests can prepare their own food.

Hotel Tbilisi (☎ 22511; Gogias-Tsikhe 11; full board per person \$18) This large white Soviet block houses some refugees, but on the whole it's safe and pleasant, with a good location a short walk from the Borjomi River. Rooms are typically Soviet, with unappealing but functional bathrooms and temperamental electricity supply.

Hotel Borjomi (☎ 22512; Tsminda Nino 3; s & d \$25-60) On the north of the Mtkvari and next to the town museum, this hotel is housed in an attractive tsarist-era mansion, and opened in 2000. The rooms are diverse in their facilities – the \$25 rooms have fold-out beds and little else. For en suite facilities, the lowest price is \$50, while the \$60 rooms are really not worth the price hike.

Hotel Victoria (☎ 22631; Kostava 31; d/tr/q \$25/30/75) This impressively converted homestay opened in 2003. All rooms have kitchens and private bathrooms, with wooden floors and mezzanines for sleeping. There is no food available, but they plan on opening a restaurant soon.

Saodzako Hotel (☎ 20780; Kostava 2; s & d \$25, ste \$50) A family-run, handsome-looking hotel just beyond Borjomi Park train station and on the corner of Kostavas moedani. The rooms are comfortable, modern and clean, with balconies. Full board is available for an additional \$5 per person, and there is a kitchen where guests can cook for themselves.

Sanatorium Firuza (☎ 22678; Baratashvili 3; full board with/without private bathroom per person \$17.50/12.50) For the proper Borjomi experience, try this sanatorium, where medical assessment, curative treatments and massage are included in the price.

Likani Sanatorium (☎ in Tbilisi 988711; full board per person \$25) Similar in style to the Firuza (think English boarding school and you're almost there), the Likani is in pretty Likani Park, 2km out of the town centre (carry on down Rustaveli and up the hill). This curious place includes eight dachas, one of which was used by the Romanovs and Stalin. You can sleep in Stalin's bed for a price hike if you book in advance. The whole complex is sometimes used for government

meetings and may be off-limits to casual visitors, but it's worth a try.

Eating

There are plenty of cafés and restaurants in Borjomi – a legacy of its 1980s tourism heyday. You'll have no problem eating in and around the park – there are shashlyk places, hot dog stands and other street food as well as a few more traditional restaurants scattered about by the Borjomi.

Taverna Nia (Robakidze 1a) In town, this eatery is housed in a two-storey 19th-century house with attractive wooden balconies and serves very good Georgian cuisine. It's very popular with locals and packed on holidays, when it can be very loud, although a great Georgian experience.

Aguna Bistro (Robakidze 2) This nearby bistro is more down to earth, and there's less chance of live music. You'll find small booths for private dining and tasty, if unimaginative, national standards.

Getting There & Away

Borjomi is easy to reach from Tbilisi, and can be seen in a day trip. Marshrutkas from Tbilisi's Didube bus station leave throughout the day as soon as they are full (\$2.50, 2½ hours). On leaving Didube metro station the buses are immediately to your left after you've walked through the long tunnel.

For those with plenty of time, *elektrichka* trains from Tbilisi's Borjomi terminal (next to the main train station) leave with similar regularity – the journey takes five hours.

There are two stations in Borjomi – **Borjomi Park** (☎ 23002) for the town centre and Borjomi Chornaya Rechka (more frequently served). The former has only three trains a day from Tbilisi, but it's a classic station, and looks fit to be used as a film set, with its elegant arches and quaint Stalin-era waiting room.

BORJOMI-KHARAGAULI NATIONAL PARK

Set up with money from the WWF and the German government in 1995, the Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park is one of the largest in Europe, covering almost 1% of Georgia's territory. The park is spread across three climate zones – humid semitropical in Kolchheti, subalpine in the Lesser Caucasus Mountains, and the dry climate of Meskheta-Javakheti to

the south. There are eight routes for hiking and horse riding that are open from late April to late October, as well as newly built shelters and other facilities. Contact the **Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park History Programme** (☎ 367-22117; www.borjomi-kharagauli-np.ge; Mekheta 23, Borjomi) for more information.

BAKURIANI ბაკურიანი

This resort used to be the most popular skiing spot in Georgia before Gudauri got going, and possibly still merits this description, as it's generally cheaper than its rival, and much less Westernised; however, its skiing facilities have declined a lot in recent years. Bakuriani is a picturesque village among the mountains, 1700m above sea level, which offers good walks in summer. The climate is subalpine. Winters are cold, with snow usually falling from December to the end of March. Summers are hot and quite long, and ultraviolet radiation is very high here.

Sleeping

There are three kinds of accommodation: the big old state hotels, the small private ones and rooms in people's homes. The old state hotels are cheaper and often nearer to the slopes, but usually less comfortable.

Vere Palace Hotel (☎ in Tbilisi 32-253340; fax 221298; Tsinuli 12; s/d with full board \$50/70; ♿) The most impressive hotel in Bakuriani was opened in 2002 and is tasteful and smart. Most rooms have balconies with spectacular views and its two restaurants are both good, serving Georgian and Western cuisine.

Hotel Iveria (☎ in Tbilisi 32-235754; fax 390043; full board per person \$30-55; ♿) Near the ski jump, this newly renovated hotel is the most luxurious in Bakuriani, with marble fittings and a swimming pool. It has its own cable car and rooms for 100 people.

Turbaza (☎ 899-553071; full board per person \$18) A big former state hotel, newly redecorated, with two bars and a billiards room, is good value. It also has its own cable car.

The White House (☎ 32-998771; http://whitehouse.bakuriani.ge) Another newly opened top-range hotel, the White House has a lovely wooden interior and some of the rooms are superb, with fireplaces and walk-out balconies with incredible views.

Hotel Apoloni (☎ 899-571108; Davit Aghmashenebeli 21; full board per person summer/winter \$25/30) Very pleasant, with a comfortable lounge



and a basement bar. The owner offers bed and four meals a day, as well as use of the sauna, billiards and ping pong tables and can also organise horse treks.

Getting There & Away

Bakuriani is 27km by car and 37km by train from Borjomi. There are buses from Borjomi (\$1, one hour) as well as a bus from Tbilisi Didube (\$3, 3½ hours). A taxi from Borjomi will cost around \$14.

AKHALTSIKHE ახალციხე

☎ 265 / pop 22,000

The biggest town in the region, Akhaltsikhe means 'New Castle' in Georgian, and is mostly used as a staging post to get to and from the cave city at Vardzia. Rather than being new, the castle that dominates the town dates from the 12th century.

It's a pleasant place, without actually going as far as being interesting, although a wander around the *rabati* (old town) is pleasant, with its old Georgian houses, Catholic and Armenian churches, mosque and synagogue.

Many look upon the new Baku-Ceyhan pipeline that will pass by the town as being Akhaltsikhe's possible economic saviour – unemployment is high and little of the Soviet heavy industry remains.

Rabati

This district is on a hill on the north side of the Potskhovi River. 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 multicultural and multifaith character of this region is evidenced by the fact that there is also a synagogue, an Armenian church and a Catholic church in Rabati. The local power here from the 13th to 17th centuries was the Jakeli family, but in 1578 the Ottomans captured Akhaltsikhe. From 1688 until 1828 it was the centre of a *pashalik*, a Turkish administrative area governed by a pasha. In 1828 the Russian general Paskevich captured the city. The castle also houses the fine **Samtskhe-Javakheti Ivane Javakishvili Museum of History & Art** (admission 50¢; ☎ 10am–5pm Tue–Sun). There are some interesting exhibits including a 16th-century manuscript of Rustaveli's *The Knight in the Tiger Skin* and a large collection of Caucasian carpets.

Sleeping

Meskheti Hotel (☎ 20420; Kostava 10; s/d per person with/without hot water \$15/7.50) This superficially renovated Intourist is the best located. Half the rooms have hot running water and decent en-suite bathrooms. There is a minuscule TV.

Military Hotel (☎ 899-983495; Kostava 6; per person without bathroom 53–5) Those on a very tight budget could try the Military Hotel (not as frightening as it sounds), so-called because the building is owned by the Ministry of Defence. It's also central, next to the town theatre, although the rooms are very basic. When you phone, ask for Irma, who speaks basic English.

White House (☎ 50018; Aspindza 26; q per person \$10, s/d \$20/30, ste \$35–40) Locals all rave about this newly constructed hotel, a short walk from the town centre. Despite its flashy billboards all over town, this place is nothing special, located behind a block of crumbling flats and largely deserted when we visited, it's aimed at NGO staff. The rooms are fine, although decorated in bordello reds and painful greens. The big restaurant looks like the best in town.

Eating

Shorena Café Opposite the Meskheti Hotel, the Shorena does good food and coffee, and it's one of the few places here to be busy in the evenings. Other small cafés and restaurants run the length of Kostava.

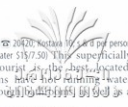
For something more substantial, try the **White House Restaurant** at the eponymous hotel, or the Soviet-style but pleasant **Salchino** (Rustaveli 56), where there is a nice balcony for alfresco dining.

Getting There & Away

The town's bus station is busy with departures throughout the day to Tbilisi Didube (\$3.50, 3½ hours) and Borjomi (\$1, one hour). Crammed marshrutkas head to Vardzia (\$1.50, two hours, 10.35am, 12.20pm, 3pm and 5.30pm).

VARDZIA ვარძია

The drive into the wilderness from Akhaltsikhe towards Vardzia and the Turkish border is as dramatic and attractive as any in Georgia outside the Great Caucasus. The road passes through the village of Rustavi, from where Georgia's national bard



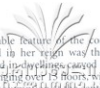
Rustaveli hails, after which the landscape becomes noticeably sparser as the lush landscapes around Akhaltsikhe dry up.

After passing through the unremarkable town of Aspindza, you'll come to the impressive 10th-century **Khertvisi Fortress**, where the Javakheti Mtkvari and Artaani Mtkvari Rivers join. This is one of the oldest fortresses in Georgia. Inside the impressive walls is a square keep with rounded corners. The outer walls were built later. 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 Javakheti Mtkvari: one served the castle's inhabitants for water, the other for communication.

The next historic site on this route is near Lake Tsunda, 8km after Khertvisi. The city of **Tsunda** was, until the 9th century, the capital of Javakheti, ruled by an *eristavi*. Now there is only a small village, with the unassuming name of Nakalakevi, meaning 'a city used to be here'. However, there is still one monument worth stopping for, a beautifully ornamented 12th-century church, with, curiously enough, a medieval stone lavatory next to it.

Just 1km further on, after Lake Tsunda, but on the other side of the river, is the castle of **Tmogvi**. At this point the Mtkvari flows far below in the gorge, and there are no bridges at road level, so the castle is virtually inaccessible, meaning that historically it was almost impregnable.

The **cave city** (admission \$3, car extra \$1, Russian-language tour for group of up to 25 \$10; ☎ daily) of Vardzia itself 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, now only 12km from the border with Turkey. His daughter, Queen Tamar, changed the purpose of the site from a military to a religious one by establishing a monastery, which grew into a city of 50,000 people. The story goes that she was responsible for Vardzia's name – during her childhood she was taken hunting by her father; having strayed from her companions, Tamar was called to and answered from the caves, 'Ak var dzia' (Here I am, uncle).



The remarkable feature of the complex as it developed in her reign was that the inhabitants lived in dwellings carved out of the rock and ranging over 15 floors, with the Church of the Assumption at the center. On the west side of the church, in the area which developed out of the 10th-century village of Ananuri, you can see 40 houses with a total of 165 rooms, and six smaller churches. On the east side there are 79 houses, 244 rooms and six more churches. Legend has it that Tamar herself had 366 rooms, to confuse any enemy who might come looking for her.

At the heart of Vardzia is the **Church of the Assumption**, with its two-arched portico. The façade of the church has gone, but it is still very beautiful. Inside, its frescoes portray Tamar before she married (shown by the fact that she is not wearing a wimple); they were painted between 1184 and 1186, the period of the church's construction.

In Tamar's reign Vardzia became renowned as the spiritual bastion of Georgia and of Christendom's eastern frontier.

Vardzia suffered a major earthquake in 1283. As Georgian power crumbled in the face of 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'll probably meet some of its inhabitants during your visit.

At the bottom of the huge Vardzia façade is the ticket office where you can also get a guide for the complex. Though none of them speak English, they are useful for leading you through the labyrinth of caves.

Sleeping

Across the river from the caves a local businessman has just bought the land and is planning to develop it, but in the meantime is happy for tourists to camp there. You should take food if you are planning to camp, as there are no shops. The enormous Intourist Hotel opposite the caves is currently sitting derelict and now the nearest hotel – for want of a more accurate term – is the **Nakalakevi Hotel** (☎ 899-284103; per person \$2) in Tmogvi. It's really suitable only for hardened backpackers – there are no locks on the doors and it's incredibly basic, although the price includes free use of the next-door bathroom, where water

comes out of the ground at a temperature perfect for showering. Tmogvi is a 3km walk from Vardzia back along the main road from Akhaltsikhe.

Getting There & Away

Vardzia is a destination that is easiest reached with your own transport or on a trip organised by a travel agent in Tbilisi. It's tough to do it in a day trip by public transport from Tbilisi, or even from Akhaltsikhe, as the first marshrutka to Vardzia from Akhaltsikhe leaves at 10.35am, arriving between 12.30pm and 1pm. This makes seeing everything and getting back to the marshrutka stop by 3pm for the last bus back rather tight, although it's possible. Moreover, bear in mind that marshrutka schedules change far more quickly than guidebooks.

The stop in Vardzia is by the statue of Nikoloz Natenadze. You have to cross the Mtkvari River to get to the caves. A taxi there and back from Akhaltsikhe will cost about \$20.

SAPARA MONASTERY

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 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. The head of the clan, 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 had a church built here, named after the saint whose name his father had adopted.

St Saba's is the largest church in the complex and one of the most architecturally important of its time. The name of the architect, Parezasdze, is inscribed over the west door. The 14th-century frescoes inside are of a 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 **Ghmrtismshoblis Midzinebis** (the Assumption of the Mother of Christ) church. Here used to be a famous 11th-century stone iconostasis,

Kankeli. Three of the very fine reliefs from this are now in the Georgian State Art Museum (p40) in Tbilisi and two in the museum (p95) in Akhaltsikhe.

The drive to Sapara is beautiful, and you will have great views of the monastery 2km before you reach it. A taxi will charge \$5 for the return trip to Akhaltsikhe (about 12km each way).

GEORGIA DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATION

Many of the Soviet-era hotels once run by former travel behemoth Intourist are now full of refugees from Abkhazia and have few or no rooms for tourists. Staying in a hotel full of refugees can be a depressing experience and not always the safest one, although it's usually pretty cheap.

Tourism has been slow to develop since independence, but Tbilisi is full of mid-range, comfortable and safe hotels. New establishments in the rest of the country are gradually opening, although outside Tbilisi the best deals and most enjoyable experiences are to be had in homestays. Expect a clean and safe room, a very warm welcome and delicious home cooking. The disadvantages are that these homestays are often without good washing facilities, although all will provide water and useable toilets. As well as those listed here, all travel agencies have networks of their own homestays. The **CUNA NGO** (☎/fax 932555; www.cuna-georgia.org; Kakabadze 3, Tbilisi) maintains a list of homestays in Tusheti and Svaneti and is a good resource for people seeking to explore the more remote areas of Georgia.

Camping in Georgia is also popular, although you should be sensible about where you pitch a tent – if in doubt ask locals, but remember that once you are in the mountains there can be the threat of bears or wolves, as well as criminals. The best place to camp is in someone's garden, where you'll be enclosed and have access to washing facilities.

ACTIVITIES

Walkers, climbers, photographers, bird-watchers, fishermen and anyone with an interest in history, archaeology and architecture will be in heaven in Georgia. Most of

the above will head for the Great Caucasus Mountains, although the newly opened and excellently managed Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park in the Lesser Caucasus will also delight most parties. For architecture, Tbilisi, Mtskheta, Kutaisi and the region of Kakheti are the most interesting; all of them have a large number of Georgian churches from different eras.

Horse riding is also very common and in some of the more remote areas of Svaneti and Tusheti horseback is about the only way to travel. Swimmers will be fairly disappointed by Georgia's Black Sea coast, which is clean but not particularly beautiful, although they will love the rivers and lakes inland, where it's possible to swim in the summer months.

Georgia is a great place for skiing, and its resorts are a lot cheaper than their European counterparts. Both Bakuriani and Gudauri are well developed for skiing and offer some superbly empty pistes.

BOOKS

Frith Maier's *Trekking in Russia & Central Asia* (1997) has a section on the Caucasus despite its title. It's now thoroughly dated and only the mountain information is of use.

Georgia appears more frequently in travel writing than guidebooks. Alexander Dumas' *Adventures in the Caucasus* (1859) is amusing to read. *The Jason Voyage: The Quest for the Golden Fleece* (1986) is Tim Severin's account of reenacting the voyage of the Argo. Peter Nasmyth recorded his experiences of the country in *Georgia: A Rebel in the Caucasus* (1992) and *Georgia: In the Mountains of Poetry* (1999), both equally accessible.

Wendell Steavenson's *Stories I Stole*, published in 2002 to much critical acclaim, is a rather sentimental and nostalgic account of Georgia during the 1990s, but is also extremely evocative and a great introduction to both the culture and problems of the country.

The national poetry epic *The Knight in the Tiger Skin* by Shota Rustaveli is available in English (look in Tbilisi bookshops and book markets), but difficult to find outside Georgia.

Also of interest may be the work of Fasil Iskander, an Abkhaz author writing in Russia, whose novels *Sandro of Chegem* and *The House Under the Cypress Tree* are

set in Western Georgia and Abkhazia; both have been translated into English.

The Georgian language is so unique that it attracts linguists. The best reference and highly difficult-to-find text is the best introduction to Georgian grammar is *Georgian: A Reading Grammar* by Howard Aronson, although more commonly available is *Georgian: A Learner's Grammar* by George Hewitt.

BUSINESS HOURS

Food shops are usually open every day from morning until night. Other shops tend to open 10am to 7pm Monday to Saturday. Museums often do not open until 11am, and most close one day a week. Banking hours are 9.30am to 5.30pm, with a one- or two-hour break for lunch.

CUSTOMS

Leaving Georgia with any works of art or antiques you have purchased, you will need to consult the **Ministry of Culture** (Map pp34-5; ☎ 990285; Rustaveli 37, Tbilisi) about its value in order to obtain export documentation. Georgian customs officers largely ignore the need to collect a customs declaration form from each person, although you must fill these in at Tbilisi Airport on exit, particularly if you are planning to export a carpet or antique drinking horn. If you do fill one in, keep it just in case, although in practice they are never asked for.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

Following is a list of Georgian embassies and consulates in other countries. For a list of embassies in Georgia, see p36.

Armenia (☎ 523674, 585511; fax 564183; 42 Aram St, Yerevan)

Azerbaijan (☎ 974558/9; fax 974561; 24 Asafa Zeinalli küçəsi, İçan Şahar, Baku)

France (☎ 01 45 02 16 16; fax 01 45 02 16 01; 104 Ave Raymond Poincaré, Paris 75116)

Germany (☎ 48490715; geobotger@aol.com; 32 Heinrich Mann St, Berlin 13156)

Iran (☎ 2211470; fax 2206848; Elahie, Shahid Fayazi (Fereshte) Av, Agha Bozorgi Av, Shahid Ahmad Vali N 5, Tehran)

Kazakhstan (☎ 432641, 231661; Cottage #7, Posolsky Gorodok, Astana)

Russia (☎ 2904657; fax 2912136; 6 Maly Rzhnevsky pereulok, Moscow 121069)

Turkey Embassy (☎ 4426508/9; fax 4426507; 15 Abdullah Cevdet sok, Cankaya, Ankara) Istanbul Consu-

late (☎ 2928111; fax 2928112; Inonu cad 55, Marmara apartamenti, D2, Gumususuylu/Taksim, Istanbul) Trabzon
 Consulate (☎ 3262226; fax 3262296; 20 Gazi Fasha Gadesi, Trabzon)
UK (☎ 020-7603 7799; www.geoemb.org.uk; 4 Russell Gardens, London W14 8EZ)
USA (☎ 202-387 9151; fax 393 4537; 1511-1615 New Hampshire Ave, NW Suite 300, Washington DC)
Uzbekistan (☎ 541668, 545408; fax 546535; 16 Tarab St, Tashkent)

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Every region of Georgia has its special festivities. Here are some of the main ones:

Mariamoba 28 August
Alaverdoba 14 September
Mtskhetoba 14 October
Tbilisoba last Sunday of October
Giorgoba 23 November

The Gazapkhulis Music Festival is held in Tbilisi every spring.

HOLIDAYS

New Year's Day 1 January
Orthodox Christmas Day 7 January
Epiphany 19 January
Mother's Day 3 March
Orthodox Easter Monday date varies according to the church calendar
Restoration of the Act of Independence & Commemoration 9 April
Independence Day 26 May
Mariamoba (Assumption) 28 August
Svetitskhoviba 14 October
Giorgoba (St George's Day) 23 November

INSURANCE

It is important to be properly insured in Georgia, as it is the least stable of the three Caucasian states. If you plan to spend a long time in Georgia or travel in remote mountain regions, you should ensure you have hostage cover, which usually covers you for a ransom of up to \$5 million. Obviously, once in Georgia, do not tell anyone you have this...

EU citizens have the right to free health-care in Georgia due to a reciprocal arrangement between the two. However, if you visit a Georgian hospital, it'll be clear who is getting the best deal here. Make sure you have comprehensive health insurance, as there are Western-style private clinics in Tbilisi.

INTERNET ACCESS

Setting up Internet access from your laptop is simple. Simply buy a card (you can buy these at supermarkets and electronics and computer shops) and follow the instructions in English. The three main ISPs are:

Geonet (www.geonet.ge)
Georgia Online (www.online.ge)
Sanet (www.sanet.ge)

INTERNET RESOURCES

www.abkhazia.org & **www.abkhazia.ge** Offer two very different portraits of the Abkhazia conflict.
www.caucasustravel.com.ge Caucasus Travel's good website with lots of information and pictures.
www.civil.ge An excellent news and current affairs site, taking articles from different sources and giving a good overview of the political scene.
www.geotimes.ge Bilingual website of the main Georgian weekly, the *Georgian Times*. Unfortunately, they now charge a \$50 yearly subscription fee.
www.parliament.ge The Georgian government's portal, this is a great starting place, providing statistics, maps and good information for travellers.

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 low and much of it owned by business figures with their own agendas to pursue. There is a staggeringly comprehensive Georgian media resource at www.mediaguide.ge.

Newspapers

The main daily newspapers in Georgia are *Alia*, *Akhali Taoba*, *24 Saati*, *Eco-Digesti* and *Rezonansi*. *Svobodnaya Gruzia* (Free Georgia) is the main Russian newspaper. In English, there's a surprisingly large number of publications available. Well-put-together magazine *Georgian Profile* comes out every two months with large features on the economy and politics. Daily rag the *Messenger* (www.messenger.com.ge, \$1) is printed every weekday, although is a little overpriced. *Georgia Today* (www.georgiatoday.ge, \$1.25) and the *Georgian Times* (www.geotimes.ge, \$1.25), published every Thursday and Monday respectively, are better produced. Both publications have a wonderfully Georgian

turn of phrase. The American Chamber of Commerce publishes a quarterly magazine distributed free at Propsero's Books, among other outlets, called *AmCham News* (www.amcham.ge). Keep in mind that all English-language publications are hard to get outside central Tbilisi.

Radio

The FM radio (105FM) station in Tbilisi plays a good mix of modern music – pop, rock and dance for a trendy young crowd of listeners. BBC World Service frequencies are 103.3FM, SW15.580, 12.010, 9.410 and 6.180 MHz. The Voice of America is on 101FM, SW 9.760, 6.040, 1.197 and 0.792 MHz. There is also Radio France International, which broadcasts daily on 102.9 FM.

TV

Georgia has around 10 channels, some of which broadcast in Russian, as well as Georgian. Channel 1 is the Georgian state channel; broadcasting to the whole of Georgia, its remit includes news, historical documentaries and political debates. Channel 2 is also state run, but it only broadcasts in the evenings.


Adjara TV is run as the personal propaganda organ of Aslan Abashidze, but it is of mild interest to foreigners as it often broadcasts in English. Rustavi-2 is a commercial channel, and is said to be the mouthpiece of politicians Zurab Zhvania and Mikhail Saakashvili. Other channels include Iberia, Channel 9, Eureka and Kavkazia. Most TVs can pick up at least one Russian channel. Cable TV is very cheap and popular in Tbilisi.

MONEY

The currency of Georgia is the lari. It's relatively steady, and was valued at 2.06 to the US dollar in 2004. One lari is made up of 100 tetri, although many Georgians confusingly still refer to lari as roubles and tetri as kopeks! Coins come in denominations of 5, 10, 20 and 50 tetri, with notes of 1, 2, 5, 10, 20, 50 and 100 lari.

TELEPHONE

The Georgian phone network is antiquated, and as a result many people prefer to use mobile networks. For information



call ☎ 09 (Georgian or Russian only). 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 first need a call centre or, increasingly, a market stall holder with a telephone. In Tbilisi, the call centre at the post office next to the Iveria Hotel is a reliable place in general, although it ceases to function if the electricity has been turned off.

You can fax from most telephone centres and major post offices in the country.

Mobile Phones

Anyone spending more than a week in Georgia will probably find it easiest to get a SIM card from a Georgian phone network. These cost about \$15, and the two main networks are **Magti** (www.magtigsm.com) and **Geocell** (www.geocell.ge). All Magti GSM phones have a 99 prefix and Geocell phones have either the prefix 77 or 93.

You can set up an account anywhere where phones are sold; there are plenty of places in Tbilisi along Rustaveli and Davit Aghmashenebeli, but you'll need your passport as proof of identity.

Phone Codes

To call Georgia from abroad, dial ☎ 995 followed by the town code and the number; Tbilisi is ☎ 32. From a Georgian fixed telephone, you can call within the town you are in without dialling any code at all. To call to another town, country or mobile however, you'll have to dial ☎ 8 first and wait for a second tone. Many phones do not have the 8 (or *vosmyorka* as locals refer to it), which means you'll have to find a call centre in order to make your call. To call internationally from a Georgian fixed phone, dial ☎ 8, wait for the second tone, then dial ☎ 10, the country code, the area code and the number.

To call a mobile phone from a landline, dial ☎ 8, wait for the second dial tone and then dial the prefix plus the mobile number. To call a landline from a mobile, dial ☎ 8, the city code and then the number. To dial a Magti GSM phone from a Geocell (or vice versa) dial ☎ 8, prefix, then number. To call between mobiles on the same network neither 8 or the prefix is needed, just the mobile number.

VISAS

All nationalities require a visa to enter Georgia with the exception of people from some of the former Soviet republics and citizens of Bulgaria. Types of visa available include diplomatic, business, tourist, private and transit. It appears to be an unwritten rule that anyone can get a private visa without a letter of invitation – Georgian embassies seem far more interested in the ever-rising consular fee than in paperwork – so although you may find you are required to enter a dummy inviting-organisation onto the form, you will probably never see it checked.

No letter of invitation is required for transit or tourist visas, but you must have proof of onward travel for the former and a letter from a registered travel agency for the latter.

Business and multi-entry visas do require an invite accredited by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Tbilisi; these can take over a month to come through, so apply well in advance of travel. Visa regulations and costs change enormously from country to country.

Visas in Advance

The easiest place to get Georgian visas was for a long time the consulate in Trabzon, Turkey. However, price rises in 2003 of up to \$100 per visa mean that backpackers now get visas in Istanbul or their home countries instead. Minimum payment seems to be \$40 for a two-week private visa, rising to over \$200 for a multi-entry visa. Many consulates will charge huge fees for quick delivery of the visa, meaning that unless you have time or money to spare en route to Georgia, it's best to get them in your country of residence before you leave.

Visas on Arrival

Two-week visas are available on arrival at Tbilisi Airport at a cost of \$80 for nationals of countries with Georgian embassies in their home country and \$40 to nationals of countries with no Georgian embassy; nothing is needed save your passport and the fee. This service is also available at train and vehicle border posts with Azerbaijan and Armenia, but not with Turkey. However, as visa regulations change all the

time, it's always a good idea to confirm this information with a Georgian embassy before relying on it.

Registration

It is no longer necessary to register Georgian visas, although it's a case of the legislation being ignored rather than changed.

Most Western embassies in Tbilisi will encourage their citizens to register with them for peace of mind while staying in Georgia. You can extend visas within Georgia at the **Ministry of Foreign Affairs consular section** (in Tbilisi Map pp34-5; ☎ 989422; fax 989430; Chitadze 6; in Batumi Map p69; ☎ 70800/1/2; fax 74111; Memed Abashidze 40).

Visa extensions cost approximately the same as receiving a visa for the extension period.

Border Crossings

Georgia's international border posts are as follows.

Batumi (sea & air) Black Sea port and international airport; visas unavailable.

Bavra (land) Border with Armenia; visas available.

Chertov Most (land) Border with Russia; closed to non-Russians and non-Georgians.

Krasny Most (land) Border with Azerbaijan; visas available.

Lagodekhi (land) Border with Azerbaijan; visas available.

Mughanlo-Tashir (land) Border with Armenia; visas available.

Posof (land) Lesser-used border crossing with Turkey, reached via Akhaltsikhe; visas unavailable.

Poti (sea) Black Sea port; visas unavailable.

Sadakhlo (land) Border with Armenia; visas available.

Sarpi (land) Border with Turkey; visas unavailable. You will need to pay a \$3 'computer fee' here.

Tbilisi (air) International airport; visas available.

WOMEN

Georgian generally women enjoy a good deal of freedom, prominent positions in government and a large presence in the work place. However, they are also still expected to be cleaners and cooks in the home, and while the perceived Muslim attitude to women is roundly ridiculed by many here, it's fair to say that this is hardly a feminist culture.

Female travellers will usually go unharassed, but they may find that they are the

objects of curiosity in some of the more remote regions.

Walking about alone at night should be avoided if possible. We have been contacted by one traveller who was raped while she climbed up to Tsminda Sameba Church in Kazbegi alone. It's always unwise to walk alone in remote areas anyway, but Georgia is one country where this advice should definitely be taken seriously.

WORK

There are few direct employment opportunities for foreigners in Georgia save teaching English. However, there is a huge NGO and charity sector in the country - many organisations run their Caucasus office from Tbilisi, due to the stalemate between Baku and Yerevan. Organisations with large presences in Georgia include the UN, the OSCE and the International Red Cross.





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Armenia

ARMENIA



Armenia

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FAST FACTS

- **Area** 29,800 sq km
- **Capital** Yerevan
- **Famous for** cognac, stony resilience, being the first Christian nation
- **Official name** Hayastan, Hayastani Hanrapetutyun (Republic of Armenia)
- **Phrases** *Barev dzez* (Hello), *Genats!* (Cheers!)
- **Population** 3,020,000





Հայաստանի Հանրապետություն
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Ancient highland Armenia is the safest and easiest Caucasus country to visit. Armenians combine the sturdiness of mountain folk with an expressively Mediterranean mindset. There's an old saying that Armenians have their minds in the West but their hearts in the East; there are operas, classical music and theatre along with sober social mores, a love of tragic music, and long hours spent socialising. Armenia's landscapes span bare rocky highlands, mossy hornbeam and oak forests, stony pastures, gorges cut through layers of volcanic rock, and Lake Sevan's vast blue eye. Distinct seasons run from icy winters to hardened summers; spring's bloom and the long autumn days are ideal. The land is studded with ancient stone churches and beautiful carved *khatchkars* (stone crosses) – Armenia was the first Christian country, converting in AD 301. In Yerevan and on the Ararat Plains you feel what Russian poet Osip Mandelstam called another sense, a sense of mountain, as 5000m-high Mt Ararat, where Noah grounded, looms above you.

In 2003 Armenia had the fastest-growing economy in Europe – 15% – and it tells in the clang of hammers and the new shops and cars in Yerevan. The pace of recovery also says a lot about how far Armenia fell after independence in 1991. Earthquakes, war, freezing winters without fuel, and no jobs drove a quarter of the population to leave in 15 years. It's not a perfect democracy today but President Robert Kocharian wins some respect for the visibly improving economy.

Armenians remember the denials and unanswered prayers of their long history (a local form of 'good to see you' is *tsavuh danem*, 'let me take your pain'), but they always put on a good face for visitors. If you're ever someone's guest at home, watch how quickly a table of fresh produce, snacks, cognac, fruit vodkas and wine appears. Carrying on, rebuilding stone by stone, is how the centuries pass in Armenia; come and see it for yourself.

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Yerevan** (p118) – A lively cultural life, buzzing late-night café scene and some fine museums smooth out some of the Soviet stylings of the Armenian capital.
- **Lori** – this northern region has everything, really; forests, canyons (such as the incredible Debed Canyon; p155), and a stunning string of medieval monasteries, including Sanahin (p156) and Haghpat (p156).
- **Lake Sevan** (p157) – An almost otherworldly expanse of turquoise water, surrounded by barren mountains.
- **Échmiadzin** (p141) – The Vatican of Armenia, a living spiritual centre of hooded monks, ancient churches with Eastern flourishes and a wealth of holy relics.
- **Tatev Monastery** (p174) – on the edge of the Vorotan Canyon, Tatev is unmiss-

able, and the road south to Armenia's toe on Iran is a spectacular adventure.

ITINERARIES

Three Days There's lots to do and see around Yerevan, plus take short day trips to Garni and Geghard, Echmiadzin or a longer one to Lake Sevan and Dilijan. Take in live music at a concert or restaurant, and shop for brandy, *oghée* and handicrafts in Yerevan.

One Week Travel up to Lori to the awesome setting of the World Heritage-listed Haghpat and Sanahin churches, stay in Vanadzor or Dilijan, or concentrate on the best of the south – Tatev and Noravank in particular.

Two Weeks Take more time around Echmiadzin and taste more of Yerevan's cosmopolitanism, organise a village or

town homestay, explore more of Lori, or head for Sisian and Goris in the south.

One Month Enough time to see the best of everything, including Karabakh, southern Syunik and around Gyumri and Ijevan.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Most of Armenia has a dry, high-altitude climate except for verdant rainy pockets in Lori, Tavush and Syunik. Spring has more flowers but autumn has long, warm days and more stable weather - Yerevan averages 27°C in both seasons. August in Yerevan can be 40°C for days at a time, while conditions can be radically different in the north. Lake Sevan has a short summer - late June to September - but is Canadian during winter: -10°C on average. Cold weather lasts until April or May over much of the country. See p254 for details.

CURRENT EVENTS

Armenia sits at the heart of the Caucasus conundrum. As Russia's base in the Caucasus it punches above its weight but risks isolation. Relations with Azerbaijan are poisonous, and will remain so as long as the stalemate over Nagorno-Karabakh (commonly called Artsakh or Karabakh) continues.

In the early 1990s the landlocked, blockaded and energy-starved Armenian economy nosedived harder than almost anywhere else in the former USSR. By 1994 it had hit rock bottom with 80% unemployment and barely a factory open. Something like 400,000 refugees flooded in from Azerbaijan, in desperately crowded conditions with no heating besides coal and firewood through successive winters. The government's record on managing the transition to capitalism is judged to be good by regional standards - not as corrupt as Azerbaijan, nor as disor-

ganised as Georgia - but then by the mid-1990s there was no room for error.

The new millennium looks more positive. The economic *Jooffe's Big Book* fed by cheap Iranian fuel, remittances and investments from the diaspora, and quite a large chunk of aid money from the US - Armenia picks up more aid dollars per capita than anywhere except Israel. One surprise success is the diamond-cutting industry, which has grown to a billion-dollar industry, based on Russian diamonds and Armenian skills and wages. Yet in 2003 wages averaged \$50 a month, pensions \$10 to \$15 a month, and teachers' salaries only a little more. Around half the population lives in poverty. The hardest hit seem to be the postindustrial regional towns, where two or three generations lived and worked according to Party diktat. Chambarak and Martuni in the hills around Lake Sevan have bitter winters and few employers, while Gyumri, Spitak and Vanadzor had the multiplier effect of the 1988 earthquake.

Almost uniquely among post-Soviet countries, Armenia seems to be moving closer to Russia, the only neighbour capable of preventing the country being squeezed between Azerbaijan and Turkey. Nostalgia for the Brezhnev era of full employment and stability is enormous. Armenia's government has hocked much of its energy infrastructure to Russian companies to repay debt, perhaps in the hope that Russia won't turn its back on Armenia if it holds valuable assets here.

The 2003 elections were marred by the government's huge advantages in media coverage, and by outbreaks ballot-box stuffing and vote-buying. International observers sent in a mixed report but didn't contend the overall result - President Robert Kocharian won a second term. He may not be wildly loved, with the autocratic, militant figures that have gathered around him, but he was able to point to visible improvements. Main rival Stepan Demirchian seemed inexperienced and out of his depth. The elections were followed by protests, which went on peacefully for some weeks. The big question is how the stalemate with Azerbaijan over Karabakh will be resolved - in the best case scenario, everybody walks away happy, the borders open and the Caucasus might be able to move forward as a region. Worst case - see Agdam in Karabakh (p186).

ARMENIA INDEX

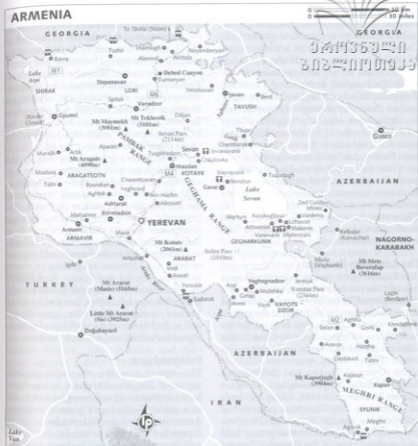
Litre of petrol 50¢

Litre of bottled water 35¢

Bottle of beer 30¢-40¢

Souvenir T-shirt 55-10

Street treat - *lahmajoon* (lamb & herb pizza) 15¢, *khovavats* (barbecued pork) 40¢



HISTORY

The Armenians first emerged as a distinct people in the 6th century BC when the Hayk tribes (from which comes Hayastan – Armenia) coalesced into a nation led by kings, centred on Lake Van and the plains below Mt Ararat. The Armenian highlands north of the Fertile Crescent had long been inhabited, and historians believe that local advances in mining, chemical and metallurgical technologies were major contributions to civilisation. With invasion routes open in four directions, the early Armenian kings fought intermittent wars against Persia and the Mediterranean powers. Then Greek and Roman cultures arrived to mix with Persian angel-worship and Zoroastrianism.

The local religious scene attracted early Christian missionaries, including the Apostles Bartholomew and Thaddeus. Striving for a new national unity between Zoroastrian Persia and pagan Rome, Armenia became the first country to declare Christianity the state religion, and the church has been a pillar of Armenian identity ever since.

Another pillar of nationhood arrived in 405 with Mesrop Mashtots' revolutionary Armenian alphabet. His original 36 letters were also designed as a number system – the first nine letters are number ones to nine, the second nine 10 to 90, and so on. Armenian traders found the script indispensable in business – you try multiplying numbers with Roman numerals. Meanwhile

one tank and amassed 13 more by the time of the ceasefire. Kocharian quickly moved to woo back the diaspora, especially the influential Dashnak faction.

After eight years of independence the new class of wealthy import barons stood out in shocking contrast to the country's poverty. Anger over this disparity was at least partly responsible for the terrible 1999 massacre in the national assembly, when gunmen, screaming that the barons were drinking the blood of the nation, murdered eight members of parliament and wounded six others. The event sparked a wave of emigration and endless recriminations, but the 1700th anniversary of the founding of the Armenian church in 2001 marked something of a turning point in the country's fortunes. Memories of the suffering and upheaval since independence linger on, but the rapid economic revival of recent years has raised spirits.

PEOPLE

The National Psyche

Visitors are struck by how European Yerevan feels – with cafés, swish clothes, chamber orchestras and churches – but out in the countryside the social attitudes are quite Middle Eastern. The alphabet and language support a deep Christian piety and an intense love of learning and intellectual achievement. Osip Mandelstam said the Armenian language has boots of stone that won't wear out. There is also a sadness to Armenia which underpins the enjoyment of sunshine, music and brandy. Peace with Azerbaijan over Karabakh seems as distant as ever, and the Turkish land border looks no closer to being opened. People feel this suits a small number of import barons, with nicknames familiar from the boxing world, to the exclusion of anyone else. Some Armenians say they are their own worst enemies – if they can't succeed at achieving something they might succeed at tearing down a rival.

Lifestyle

In the clubs and mansions of Nork in Yerevan, the elite text each on cell phones, hang out at the latest new cafés and shop on fashionable Abovyan Poghots (Street). Money comes in from everywhere to keep the country alive – sons in Moscow, daughters in Greece, cousins in Glendale, Toronto and Sydney. Although the national income has climbed

back to where it was in the Soviet era, the distribution of wealth is now wildly uneven. Out in the grim factory towns around Lake Sevan, life is a lottery, and inconsistent, and a whole generation has emigrated to work overseas. The people left are often the ones who couldn't leave – the elderly, single-parent families, the disabled. Begging and scavenging seem to be increasing among Yerevan's destitute, and the orphanages are full of children whose parents could barely feed them. It's almost cruel seen next to the Abovyan Poghots hairdos and couture, but the country has been pushed down into poverty by recent history and the only way out is via the socially dangerous income disparities of capitalism. The least affected seem to be people from the country, who can usually feed themselves from the land parcelled out to them soon after independence.

Armenian work culture is happily relaxed. People might stay out until midnight, arrive at work the next day at 10am or 10.30am, pop out for an hour or two to pay the bills, and leave work around 6pm. This relaxed attitude to time stretches to appointments – an hour late is no big deal – and to restaurants, where waiters let you linger over coffee or drinks for hours before you ask for the bill.

Population

Accurate population figures are a matter of some debate in Armenia. The last census, in 2001, counted 3,020,738 people. There were 3.8 million in 1979; another census was held in 1989 but the figures were disrupted by the 1988 earthquake. With the departure of the Azeris and the arrival of Armenians from Azerbaijan pushing the total as high as four million, it means one million have left since independence, or a quarter of the total. Nearly every family includes someone who left for Russia, Europe or the USA. Emigration from postindustrial towns has been particularly steep, as much as 30% in Sevan and Martuni. There has also been an exodus from rural areas isolated by the new frontiers, such as Syunik and the Shamshadin region, to Yerevan and abroad. About one third of the population lives in Yerevan, and more than half in the Ararat Plains within a 60km radius of the capital. Armenians make up 93% of the population, Russians are 2% and Yezidi Kurds, Assyrians and Greeks make up the rest. There is a small diasporan Armenian

medieval scholars translated scientific and medical texts from Greek and Latin.

New forms of architecture spurred the Gothic cathedrals of Europe, while a number of Armenians rose to rule the Byzantine Empire in the 9th and 10th centuries. Meanwhile the invaders kept rolling in. Arabs, Turkmen, Seljuks, Mongols and Tamerlane hacked their way through the population, as earthquakes regularly toppled villages and cities. By the 17th century Armenians were scattered across the empires of Ottoman Turkey and Persia, with diaspora colonies from India to Poland. The Armenians rarely lived in a unified empire, but stayed in distant mountain provinces where some would thrive while others were depopulated. The seat of the Armenian Church wandered from Echmiadzin to Lake Van and further west for centuries.

The Armenian Question

The Russian victory over the Persian Empire brought the territory of the modern-day Armenian republic under Christian rule, and Armenians began immigrating to the region. The Tsarist authorities tried to break the independence of the Armenian Church, but conditions were still vastly preferable to Ottoman Turkey. Many Armenians still lived within Ottoman Turkey, and the paranoid Sultan Abdulhamid II unleashed massacres against Armenians in 1896, killing hundreds of thousands. The European powers had talked often about the 'Armenian Question', but always prevented each other getting hold of Armenian areas of the Ottoman Empire. A new regime in Constantinople planned the extermination of Armenians in Turkey, and took advantage of WWI to unleash the first mass extermination using modern technology, from telegraphs to bureaucratic files, to uproot and destroy western Armenia. The genocide is denied by Turkey today but the inescapable fact is that between 1915 and 1923, 1.5 million Ottoman Armenians died.

The first independent Armenian republic emerged in 1918, after the November 1917 revolution saw the departure of Russian troops from the battlefield with Ottoman Turkey. It immediately faced a wave of starving refugees, the 1918 influenza epidemic and wars with surrounding Turkish, Azeri and Georgian forces. It fought off the invading Turks in 1918, and left the final demarca-

tion of the frontier to Woodrow Wilson, the US president. Wilson was a major figure in the international negotiations at the end of WWI, and he was seen by both sides as an independent arbiter. Meanwhile the Turks regrouped under Mustafa Kemal (later Kemal Ataturk) and overran the Caucasus. Wilson's map eventually arrived without troops or any international support, while Ataturk offered Lenin peace in exchange for half of the new Armenian republic. Beset by many other enemies, Lenin agreed.

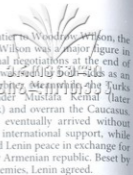
The Armenian government, led by the Dashnaks, a party of Armenian independence fighters, capitulated to the Bolsheviks in 1921. They surrendered in order to preserve the last provinces of ancient Armenia. The Soviets hived off Karabakh and Nakhchivan (Naxçıvan) for Azerbaijan. Forced from their homes, hundreds of thousands of survivors regrouped in the French-held regions of Syria and Lebanon, emigrating en masse to North America and France. Remarkably the Armenians who stayed began to rebuild with what was left, laying out and building Yerevan starting in the 1920s. Armenia did well in the late Soviet era, with lots of technological industries and research institutes.

Independence

The debate over the Armenian-majority region of Nagorno-Karabakh inside Azerbaijan brought a new wave of leaders to the fore under Gorbachev's *glasnost* reforms. Armenians voted for independence on 21 September 1991, and Levon Ter-Petrossian, a 40-year-old scholar and leader of the Karabakh Committee, became president. The war with Azerbaijan over Karabakh exploded just as the economy went into freefall. See the Nagorno-Karabakh chapter (p182) for more information on the conflict.

After the war rumours of coups and assassination attempts prompted Ter-Petrossian to reverse civil rights and throw Dashnak leaders and fighters from the Karabakh War into jail, where some spent three years as political prisoners. Ter-Petrossian was re-elected for another five-year term in September 1996 amid claims of fraud. He resigned in February 1998, isolated and unpopular.

He was replaced by Robert Kocharian in March 1998, a war hero from southern Karabakh. Kocharian entered the war with



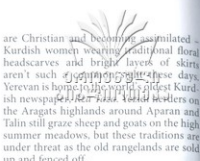
community in Yerevan, sometimes called repatriates, different from earlier diasporan generations who arrived after WWII.

Multiculturalism

Over the last 200 years, the territory of modern-day Armenia has shifted from encompassing a Muslim majority to an almost monoethnically Armenian population. In 1828 Armenians made up perhaps 30% of the population, outnumbered by Azeris, Turks and Kurds. Waves of immigration after the Russian conquest pushed this up to about 70% by 1918, when the first republic was declared. More immigrants arrived after WWII, but as recently as 1988 there were Azeri majority regions on the eastern shore of Lake Sevan and in the corner of Shirak marz (region) around Lake Arpi, plus scattered villages across the country. The mutual ethnic cleansing by Armenia and Azerbaijan in 1988-94 removed pretty much all of the 300,000-odd Muslims, and many place names changed from Turkic to Armenian. Other minorities, including Russians and other Soviet nationalities, also departed.

Today non-Armenians make up less than 5% of the total. There are Assyrian Christians in and around Yerevan, members of an Oriental Orthodox church like the Armenian church. The half-Assyrian village of Arzni is just north of Yerevan.

The 80,000 or so Yezidi Kurds are just about the last pagans in the Middle East, following an ancient Gnostic faith, a living link to Zoroastrianism. A company of Yezidi cavalry fought alongside the Armenians at the battle of Sardarapat in 1918. In the last 100 years most of their villages have been emptied across Turkey and Iraq. Some Kurds, in the Ararat Valley especially,



are Christian and becoming assimilated. Kurdish women wearing traditional floral headscarves and bright layers of skirts aren't such a common sight these days. Yerevan is home to the world's oldest Kurdish newspaper, *Ren Akad*. Yezidi leaders on the Aragats highlands around Aparan and Talin still graze sheep and goats on the high summer meadows, but these traditions are under threat as the old rangelands are sold up and fenced off.

The Molokans (Milk Drinkers) are a sect of Russian Old Believers split from the Russian Orthodox church in the 16th century, a bit like Russian Protestants. They're well regarded for their honesty, piety and excellent farm produce. They number about 5000, down from 50,000 20 years ago - many left for Russia and Canada. The Greek community has fallen to similar figures. Greek miners have been digging out Armenian copper and gold since the 18th century. Most took a Greek passport after independence and departed from hamlets such as Maddan near Alaverdi.

Armenian Diaspora

The majority of Armenians live outside historic Armenia, a process which goes back centuries to colonies across Asia and Europe but is mostly due to the 1915-23 genocide. Diasporan (*spyurk*) Armenians and native or Eastern Armenians have a complex relationship. The stereotypes from the local side are that Western Armenians are religious, wealthy, annoyingly hard bargainers and a bit patronising. Western Armenians sometimes mutter that the locals are overly Russified, irreligious, addicted to bad cigarettes and either unmotivated or shifty in business. There are about 10 million Armenians living

ARMENIANS IN THE ORIENT

The Armenians travelled widely in Mughal India, and some Armenian craftspeople from Isfahan are said to have worked on the Taj Mahal. Armenians reached India and shared bases like Kolkata (Calcutta) with the British, French and Portuguese in the 16th century. Various British explorers who were just beginning to push into the Himalayas from India report meeting Armenians with breezy accounts of trips far off the map into Bhutan and Tibet. The first church in Singapore was the 1835 Surp Grigor Lusavorich Armenian church. There's also an 18th-century Amenaprkich church in central Dhaka, Bangladesh, in a neighbourhood named Armanitola. Subcontinental communities have dwindled in the last 50 years, but until the 1960s the strength of India's national rugby team were Armenians from Kolkata. Ethiopia has an Oriental Orthodox church like the Armenian faith and there's long been an Armenian colony in Addis Ababa.

KIRK KERKORIAN

There's a local joke that if Azerbaijan has oil, Armenia has Kirk Kerkorian. The American billionaire casino magnate has channelled hundreds of millions of his own dollars into the country. In 2009, he donated \$165 million through his Lincy Foundation, equivalent to 10% of the national budget. One of Kerkorian's earlier coups was as boss of MGM studios in the 1970s, when he green-lighted *Midnight Express*, a chilling tale of brutal Turkish justice and prisons written by Oliver Stone. The depiction of Turkey mixed insult (the mostly Greek and Armenian actors spoke an invented gibberish) with a classic story of survival, which is why it still resonates with audiences and Turkey's international image today. Since 2000 the Lincy Foundation has funded the completion of the Sevan-Dilijan tunnel, repaired major roads in Yerevan and across the country, and built apartments to finally house people made homeless by the 1988 earthquake in and around Gyumri, and has also run social programs and business lending schemes. Kerkorian has helped before – during the 1990s when the Turkish-Azeri blockade cut energy supplies, Kerkorian matched diaspora donations dollar for dollar. These projects have provided incomes for thousands of men who might otherwise have gone abroad. His money and his faith in Armenia have given diaspora-Armenian relations a huge boost, and single-handedly improved Armenia's economy. President Robert Kocharian's successful relations with Kerkorian are one of the pillars of his support.

abroad but only 3,150,000 in Armenia and Karabakh. Tbilisi (Tiflis to Armenians) was a 19th-century Armenian cultural capital, and there between 300,000 and 400,000 Armenians in Georgia, including a majority in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region ('Javakhh' in Armenian) north of Gyumri. There are big communities in the USA, Russia (especially Moscow), France and other areas of Europe, Lebanon and Syria, plus others in Canada, Australia and South America. There is also an old community in Iran, particularly in Esfahan and Tehran. Remarkably, there is still an Armenian community in Turkey. About 60,000 Armenians live in Istanbul. Vakifli, the last Armenian village in Turkey, stands amid orchards on the slopes on Musa Dagh about 40km from Antakya, not far from the Syrian border. The Hemşin are a Muslim mountain people on the Turkish Black Sea coast who speak a distinct Armenian dialect.

Outside Armenia, Russia and Iran, most Armenians speak Western Armenian, which differs from Eastern Armenian in grammar, slang and the pronunciation of about eight letters out of 38. A radical fringe in the diaspora included several terrorist groups which ruthlessly murdered Turkish diplomats in the 1970s and 1980s. These included the mostly Lebanese- and French-Armenian ASALA (Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia) and the mysterious but highly effective Justice Commandos of the Armenian genocide, noted for killing people up close.

RELIGION

Around 90% of the population align themselves with the Armenian Apostolic Church, with smaller numbers of Armenian Catholics, Russian, Greek and Assyrian Orthodox churches and the neo-Gnostic Yezidis. The Muslim population is minute.

The differences between the Armenian Apostolic Church and the Catholic and Orthodox faiths are subtle but ancient. The first differences arose in AD 451, when the Armenians were too busy fighting the Persians to attend the worldwide church's Council of Chalcedon. The Armenians disagreed with the authorities in Constantinople over the nature of Christ. The Armenian church sees the divine and human nature of Jesus Christ combined in one body (monophysite), while the Greek Orthodox see each nature as separate. An Arab caliph proclaimed the Armenian church to be the most senior of the Oriental Orthodox monophysite churches in the 7th century, including the Ethiopian, Assyrian and Egyptian Coptic churches. There are also Oriental Orthodox churches in southern India, which helps explain the Armenian presence in Egypt, India and Ethiopia. While the Armenian church followed neither Peter nor Helena (Rome nor Constantinople), it sometimes steered closer to Rome in the 12th to 18th centuries.

The Mekhitarist fathers, Armenian Jesuits, started the first Armenian printing press on the isle of San Lazzaro in the Venice lagoon in the 17th century. Armenian Catholics



make up about 5% of the total Armenian population, and are relatively well represented in Gyumri and Yerevan.

Nearly all Armenians celebrate Christmas on the Epiphany (the baptism of Jesus) on 6 January. Until the 4th century other Christians did as well, until the church in Rome moved the date to 25 December to absorb a popular pagan bacchanal on that date. The exception is the Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem, which follows the original Julian calendar and celebrates Christmas on 19 January.

The church was assimilated into Communist rule by Stalin in the 1930s, and Catholicos Khoren I died in the Gulags in 1938. During WWII the pressure relented a little, and in the Brezhnev years the church began regaining its ancient independence. During the Cold War the diaspora church fractured between the anti-Communist Catholicosate of Sis, based in Antelias, Lebanon, and the Catholicosate of Echmiadzin in Soviet Armenia. The division has been partly reconciled since independence.


Churches are being rebuilt and reopened all over the country and in Karabakh – paying for church renovations seems popular among pious diasporans. Many churches are pilgrimage sites – Echmiadzin, Khor Virap, Geghard, Sevanavank, Tatev and Amaras in Karabakh in particular.

Armenians have a difficult relationship with the region's other main religion, Islam, and with Turkish and Azeri Muslims in particular. Strangely enough, people say they get on better with Azeris than with Georgians on a personal level, but the genocide and the Karabakh War poisons relations on a national level.

ARTS

Literature

The first words written in the Armenian alphabet were 'recognise wisdom and advice, heed the words of a genius'. The incredible wealth of Armenian religious writing dates from Mesrop Mashtot's creation of the alphabet in 405; many early works were translations of Greek and Assyrian texts. Classics include St Grigor Narekatsi's *Book of Lamentations* (also just called the *Narek*) a book of simple, practical ways of prayer written when Narekatsi (951–1003) was ill. Mkhitar Gosh (1130–1213) wrote the *Book*



of Trials (a code of law) at Goshavank near Dilijan, the first collection of Armenian civil laws. Medieval Armenian scientists wrote works such as *Armenia for the Ignorant*, a work on medicine by the Armenian sea captain, Andon Haykazun, brought Chinese printed texts to Europe in the 14th century, and the first Armenian book was printed in Venice in 1512. By the 17th and 18th centuries there were further Armenian publishing centres in India, Lvov (Ukraine), Russia and Amsterdam. The rise of modern Armenian literature began in the 19th century. Khachatur Abovyan's *Wound of Armenia* novelised the shocks, patriotism and hopes of the nation, with a prescient eye on the events of early next century.

The Armenian-American writer William Saroyan (1908–1981) crafted lively short stories on immigrants and Armenians in California. When Saroyan visited Soviet Armenia he always put an American flag in front of him at public occasions, saying it was a tribute to the country that gave him a life. *The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze & Other Stories*, published in 1934, is probably his best-known collection. Contemporary American-Armenian historians and writers include Richard Hovhannisian and Peter Balakian.

Hardly any translations of Armenian classics are on sale in Yerevan, so try ordering through www.amazon.com, or through specialists such as the bookstore of the New York-based Armenian General Benevolent Fund (www.agbu.org).

Cinema & Television

The ArmFilm studios on the Ashtarak road out of Yerevan once thrived with productions but are now mostly moribund. Sergei Paradjanov (Parajanian) was born in Tbilisi and adopted the Russian -ov suffix to his name. Frequently out of favour with the culture moguls, he still managed to unleash camp-visionary theatrical films including *Colour of Pomegranates*, *Ashough Gharib* and *Souram Fortress* in the 1960s and 1970s. While the films may not have seen success in the USSR, he won fans internationally including Fellini and Antonioni.

Canadian-Armenian director Atom Egoyan has made several films on Armenian themes, including 1993's *Calendar* and 2002's *Anrath*, a film within a film on the genocide. It's

RABIZ PARTY

Rabiz is a contraction of the Russian words 'rabotchi izkustva' (worker's culture). It's entertainment and it's also a lifestyle – the guys in the silk shirts and gold chains smoking and talking on their mobile phones. If you ask a hip student, the (Armenian) popular culture is divided between loud, showy, raucous *rabiz* culture on one hand and everything of good taste on the other. *Rabiz* also covers a lot of highly inventive slang. *Rabiz* music is marshrutka-driver music, a mix of brainless pop and over-the-top tragic ballads (girl has cancer, boy says he'll kill himself before she dies) that strike a sentimental Middle Eastern chord in Armenian hearts. They want music that will make them cry, as well as impassioned love songs and arms-aloft dancing music. This kind of music booms from taxis in Greek, Russian, Turkish and Arabic. The Armenian variety comes from Los Angeles, Beirut and Moscow as well as Yerevan, where it plays in neighbourhood bars, clubs and *khoravats* joints late into the night.

typical of Egoyan's arthouse leanings, leaving you wondering about how it all fits together more than the subject matter. You could say the interweaving plot structure is intrinsically very Armenian. *Calendar* fits his style better, where he always finds a new angle on the visit of a photographer to Armenia.

Armenian TV is an interesting collision between the often very creative music and theatrical shows and the commercial instincts of the barons in charge – one TV station crushed staff dissent after management announced some of their wages would henceforth be paid in cigarettes.

Music

Armenian religious music's mythically complex harmonies are partly lost, though there are many fine, melancholy choirs of the Armenian liturgy. The great composers of the 19th and 20th centuries include Komitas, whose works for choir and orchestra put Armenian music on an international stage, and Armen Tigranyan for his opera *Amush*. Aram Khachaturian is best known for his *Sabre Dance* and the ballet *Spartacus*. The country is still a centre for classical music, with a ballet theatre, opera company, orchestras for chamber music and symphonies, and an active world of composers and performers.

Folk music is alive and well in town troupes and late-night clubs and *khoravats* palaces. Spend a night at a popular venue like Ashtarak's Ashtarak Dzor (p145) complex and marvel at the range of talent. For good traditional music try the RealWorld label, which has albums by *duduk* master Djivan Gasparian. Also try Parik Nazarian, Gevorg Dabagian and the album *Minstrels and Folk Songs of Armenia* by Parseghian Records.

Current artists of note include Lilit Pipyoyan, a Joni Mitchell-esque singer and songwriter, and Vahan Artsruni, a composer with folk guitar pickings who also rocks out in Yerevan's small live rock scene. Arto Tunçboyacıyan's Armenian Navy Band mixes jazz and folk music on the albums *Bzdik Zinvor* (Little Soldier) and *New Apricot*. Time Report are highly rated jazz musicians who play shows in Yerevan.

The diasporan music scene is highly varied – from the Los Angeles metal masters System of a Down, to Cher (Cheryl Sarkisian) and her groundbreaking gowns, to the timeless croonings of Charles Aznavour ('mmm...come closer...eets nice to be like zeets'). A concert featuring all three would really be something else. Be warned that a search of Armenian music at your local record store may turn up *rabiz* wedding-hall music powered by Russian pop beats and singers with more power than grace – approach with caution.

Architecture

Reconstructions at Erebuni (p127) and the Metsamor museum (p143) give an impression of the cities of classical Armenia – sprawling palaces with Persian, Hellenic and local influences. Surp Hripsime (618 AD) in Echmiadzin (p143) is a classic of early church architecture, when the halls of basilicas transformed into domed square or cross-shaped churches. St Gregory the Illuminator built churches on top of pagan temples across historic Armenia. His successors had a flair for placing churches and monasteries above cliffs and on sunlit shelves of land. Saghmosavank (p144) perches on the edge of Kasagh Gorge, pinning down



KOMITAS & SOGHOMIAN TEHLIRIAN

Two figures from the genocide are particularly well remembered by Armenians. Komitas represents the losses. A *vardapet* (monk) of the Armenian church, Komitas travelled through Armenian villages collecting folk songs; he was the first great ethnomusicologist. He devoted his life to finding the mysteries of medieval Armenian liturgical music. His concerts in Europe in the early 1910s were hailed as the arrival of a distinct national musical tradition. His Liturgy remains unfinished. On 24 April 1915 Komitas was in Constantinople when he was rounded up with the 250 other Armenian community leaders and intellectuals. He was one of possibly two to survive – his life was literally bought from the Young Turks by a benefactor and he was smuggled to France. But the atrocities he witnessed broke his mind, and he died in an asylum in Paris in 1937 having never again spoken. His ideas for breathing life into the ancient harmonies and chorales were lost with him.

Soghomian Tehlirian's family was wiped out in the genocide. He searched for family survivors before ending up in Berlin in the early 1920s, where, on 15 March 1921, he assassinated the man most responsible for the genocide, Mehmet Talaat Pasha. Talaat Pasha was Minister of War in 1915, and founder of the covert Teshkilati Mahsusa (Special Organisation), which among other things recruited psychotic killers from prisons to serve on the deportations. Tehlirian's trial was one of the few public vindications of the genocide. Survivors and witnesses gave testimony on the marches, massacres, tortures and rapes, and Talaat Pasha's prime role in it. After two days the German jury found Tehlirian not guilty and released him. Other senior Turkish officials were killed in the early 1920s in Operation Nemesis, a secret Dashnak (ARF) plan to execute their own justice. Tehlirian later settled in the US and remains a kind of Armenian icon of revenge.

the land from collapsing into the abyss. Tatev (p174) stands in a similar position on the Vorotan Canyon. Even through the years of the Mongol invasions stunning monasteries were built at Gandzasar (p186), Goshavank (p164), Haghpat (p156) and Haghartsin (p164).

Only a few frescoes have survived from the medieval period, with images of varying faintness at Lmbat and other churches near Talin (p146), and at Kobayr (p155) in Lori and the Surp Petros-Poghos church at Tatev (p174).

Yerevan was rebuked as a hovel of mud houses by visiting Russian Tsarist officers at the end of the 19th century, but some fine stone buildings with high walls and arched windows can be found in many old villages and towns such as Meghri, Ashtarak, Malishka and Goris. The Tsarist old quarter of Kumayri in Gyumri is the most complete 19th-century urban area in Armenia.

Yerevan is an almost entirely Soviet city with some startling edifices, such as Mother Armenia (p124), the Cascade (p124) and the Yeritasardakan (Palace of Youth Culture; p124). What one writer termed 'random monumentality' describes the impact of Soviet art in Armenia. Silver astronauts, brooding 5m-high eagles, and the superheroic muscles of designated National Heroes

in bronze leap from granite pedestals all over the country.

Visual Arts

There are enough art galleries, artists' studios and house museums to fill several weeks in Yerevan. Miniaturisation and microsculpture is a peculiarly Armenian pursuit, with a number of impressive artists, including Eduard Ter-Ghazaryan of Sisian, whose pieces require a microscope to be appreciated; you can see examples of his work at Sisivan church (p170). Martiros Sarian is one of Armenia's most famous painters, and a museum in Yerevan preserves his studio (p127). Suitably enough, a Sarian sculpture in a Yerevan park is the focus of Yerevan's art market, where painters gather to offer a critique of each others' work and sell their paintings (p136). Most of the paintings have religious iconography or capture familiar Armenian landscapes. Yervand Kochar has his own gallery filled with portraits nearby on Moscovyan Poghots (p128). Yousef Karsh was one of the great portrait photographers, and once achieved a famously defiant photo of Winston Churchill by snatching his cigar away at the last minute.

The illustrated manuscripts preserved in Yerevan's Matenadaran (p125) and the libraries of Echmiadzin are testament to



centuries of monastic endeavour. The brilliant dyes gleam today from the pages of thousands of manuscripts, prepared with rare dyes and preparations that were state secrets in classical and medieval Armenia. Some highly skilled calligraphers create copies of classic images like the Annunciation, which can be bought in Yerevan (p136).

Theatre & Dance

Theatre runs deep in Armenian culture – a 10th-century fortress at Saimbeyli in Cilicia had three storeys of theatres and two stories of libraries. The Hellenic kings of Armenia patronised theatre in the 3rd century BC, and Greek dramas played to King Tigran the Great. There are about a dozen active theatre houses in Yerevan specialising in musical comedy, contemporary plays and drama revivals. The musical comedies and shows for kids are easy to follow and very professionally done (booking details p135).

Armenia has a rich tradition of folk dancing, and chances are you'll stumble across a performance in a public square. Revellers at country weddings might not be so professional but then it is the real thing. Armenia has a rich array of dances and costumes, straight out of a medieval spring festival. There are also dance and ballet companies in Yerevan.

ENVIRONMENT

The Land

Armenia's land is filled with mountain ranges and plateaus with valleys and plains in between, folded and creased into a stunning array of regional environments. Perched on the northeastern edge of the Anatolian Plateau, there are several peaks above 3000m. Indeed, only 10% of the country lies below 1000m. The country's highest peak, Mt Aragats, is 4090m, though the highest mountain of historic Armenia is Noah's mountain, 5165m Mt Ararat (Masis), in present-day Turkey.

National Parks

About 12% of Armenia is protected by natural and historic reserves, though much of this is Lake Sevan National Park. In Soviet times the reserves were closed except to scientists. Nowadays all are open, and it's a good idea to leave a tip of around \$1 per person with the custodian – they don't earn much.

The Khosrov Nature Reserve (p146) in the hills beyond Geghard is terrific for hikes, with volcanic 'organ-pipe' cliffs, *khatchkars* and isolated churches. The Dilijan Nature Reserve protects hornbeam and oak forest, while the woods and canyons of Shikahogh Nature Reserve (p175), south of Kapan, are practically unexplored by tourists. The state also protects a number of archaeological sites, including Erebuni (p127), Dvin and Metsamor (p143) around Yerevan, and some rare habitats, such as scrubland near Jrarac south of Echmiadzin preserving Vordan Karmir beetles, once used to prepare dyes.

Environmental Issues

Parts of the Armenian environment took a terrible beating from Soviet industry. There are stories of driving through the haze around Vanadzor's giant chemical plant when it was in full swing and noticing that your nylon shirt was rotting away. The Metsamor nuclear power station, 40km west of Yerevan, had international observers running around with their hair on fire in the 1990s. Its shut-down date features highly in relations with the EU, but it won't shut before 2010 or until a replacement for its cheap electricity is found. A lot of work with international assistance has gone on at the plant in the meantime. Hydroelectricity provides much of the rest of the country's electricity.

Poverty and the lack of alternative fuels has put pressure on forests. Larger-scale logging of questionable sustainability has occurred in Lori and Tavush *marzes*. The economic recovery might also bring hazards – one mining works apparently restarted with its old exhaust scrubbers already stripped out and sold off.

The air quality in Yerevan suffers from so many vehicles rumbling along past their retirement date and from low-quality fuel. Still, the quality of birdlife in Armenia proves that the country has an abundance of healthy wilderness – perhaps as much as 70% of the land surface – from the oak and hornbeam forests of Dilijan and rocky highlands of the Geghama range to the ice fields on Mt Aragats.

FOOD & DRINK

Armenian cuisine is a national treasure, a delicate mix of lightly spiced meats, fresh

salads, lots of chewy light lavash bread and home-made specialities dating back centuries. It combines elements of the cuisines of all its historic neighbours – Arabic, Russian, Greek and Persian – but remains distinctive. Scientists believe that the first wheat was grown on the southern flanks of historic Armenia, south of Lake Van, while the Romans dubbed the apricot *prunus armeniaca*, or Armenian prune. A lot of Armenian produce is practically organic by default, and you might notice a difference between industrial-scale Western supermarket chicken and happily free-range Armenian chicken.

Staples & Specialities

If there's one word for dining, that word is *khoravats* (barbecue). Pork is the favourite though lamb, beef and sometimes chicken are usually available too. *Ishkhan khoravats* is grilled trout from Lake Sevan. *Siga* is another good grilled fish dish. Kebabs are also very common.

Broadly speaking, western Armenian cuisine is more similar to Lebanese and Turkish cooking, while eastern Armenian swaps the Arabic influence for Russian and Georgian influences. Besides *khoravats*, staples include dolmas wrapped in vine leaves, soups, vegetable stews and lavash fresh from the oven. Armenians aren't afraid to throw in garlic and salt by the handful to boost the flavour. Hors d'oeuvres come as cold salads, cheeses and dips such as *jajik* (yogurt with cucumbers and fennel). *Tan abour* is yogurt soup sprinkled with parsley and fennel, much admired for its curative qualities. Pastries appear everywhere, such as Georgian *khachapuri* (cheese pies) and *bourek* (flaky pastry with salty cheese and spinach). Cured meats include *sujukh* or *yeghchik* (dark, cured spicy sausage) and *basturma* (finely cured ham). Desserts include honey-drenched baklava and sweetly crunchy *kedayif*, though thick chocolate cakes and tortes are popular in the region too.

Drinks

The most popular drink is *soorch* (Armenian coffee), also claimed by Georgians, Greeks and Arabs; a potent, finely ground cup of lusciously rich rocket fuel, with thick sediment at the bottom. It goes well with honeyed pastries such as baklava. Tea is also popular, as are soft drinks and

an interesting array of mineral and table waters, ranging from salty volcanic Jermuk to lighter Noy and Dilijan waters. Fruit juices are cheap and delicious, but the local fizzy soft drinks are too faithful to the Coke and Pepsi empires.

The two main lagers are Kilikia and Kotayk, widely available and quite refreshing on a hot summer afternoon. Kilikia is a typical middle-European lager, very good when fresh. Its main rival Kotayk is sold everywhere and is a little more reliable, if bland, while Erebuni has more flavour and is made by the same company. Russian Baltika beer is also sometimes available; Baltika 3 and Baltika 7 are the most common lagers. *Kvas* is a home-brew sometimes sold at markets, a lightly alcoholic drink made from rye bread, something like a natural cola or sweet soda.

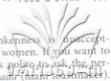
The country's national liquor is cognac (around 40% alcohol). There are several other producers, such as Great Valley, but the Yerevan Brandy Company's Ararat label is the real thing, a smooth, intense liquor with a smoky aroma similar to whisky. Armenian *konyak* (cognac) has a huge following in Russia and Ukraine, but even Winston Churchill favoured it to the French stuff, and Stalin used to send him cases of Ararat cognac.

Most red wines are made from the Areni grape, well suited to the hot summers and harsh winters. The one-dollar-a-bottle stuff is what you'd expect, but some of the wines for \$3 to \$8 are very good. Frosts and late springs make the Armenian vintage as shaky as the Champagne region. Some reputable Areni makers are Vayots Dzor, Vedi Alco, Getap and Noravank, and new wineries are springing up. White wines are produced from vineyards in Tavush, Lori and Karabakh, and are generally sweet or with extra tannins from the skins.

Where to Eat & Drink

Yerevan's restaurant scene is booming, which creates the happy dual effect of pushing down prices while raising standards. It has everything from pizzas to silver service at very moderate prices. Just \$10 can deliver an entrée, a main course and a bottle of wine; halve that price if you eat somewhere simpler. Cafés in parks everywhere across the country serve up salty bread sticks,





popcorn, sandwiches and more. One of the nice things about Armenian dining is that no-one ever pushes you to pay up and leave. You can sit from noon to midnight with a coffee if you like (though you might get hungry).

Outside Yerevan, the choices can often be limited to *khoravats*, kebabs and sometimes *lahmajo* or *lahmajoon* (spiced-up little minced lamb pizzas). Cooking *khoravats* is a male domain, and every neighbourhood has a local master who lends his name to the place eg Artashi Mot (Artash's Place).

Eating solo can feel a bit awkward in a small-town café packed with men on their lunch breaks, but cafés often have secluded booths covered in vines and many places have private dining rooms and often a little buzzer to call a waiter.

Vegans & Vegetarians

There are hundreds of fine meat-free dishes in the Armenian cookbook, but at restaurants the options might only be salad, grilled vegetables, bread and cheese (sorry, vegan comrades). Nuts are sold everywhere – sunflower seeds are a very Middle-Eastern obsession. Tomatoes, rice, aubergines, courgettes and a profusion of herbs and spices have created a wealth of vegetarian dishes. Western Armenian has hummus, *tabouleh* and other dishes associated with Lebanese cuisine, and there are lots of home-made ratatouilles made from beans, carrots and onions with olive oil. *Kartofel* (pilaf rice) is a buttery mix of dried raisins, apricots and other spices. B&B hosts will do vegetarian meals.

Habits & Customs

Breakfast isn't a big meal here, but for all other mealtimes, Armenians love to sit, drink and eat for hours. Restaurants are open all day and late into the night. Menus are becoming more common, but the custom is to discuss options and prices with the waiter if there's no menu, and often even if there is. Some say it's rude to eat with your left hand, others say that's a Muslim custom and not Armenian.

The drinking culture is highly developed, but it needn't be crippling. As one host said, it's my duty to keep your glass full, it's up to you how you drink it. Women drink wine or brandy rather

than vodka. Drunkenness is unacceptable, especially for women. If you want to propose a toast it's polite to ask the permission of the *tamatar* (main toastmaker). Armenians enjoy *zambob* (համբոբ) to the deepest, most concealed secret in your heart. There's a custom of clinking glasses of holding your glass lower than the next person's, as a sign of deference. This can develop into a game until the glasses are at table level. If you empty a bottle into someone's glass, it obliges them to buy the next bottle – it's polite to put the last drops into your own glass.

Eat Your Words

Armenians often call common foods by Russian, Turkic and even Hindi words.

MENU DECODER

- abour** – soup
- basturma** – cured beef or ham
- biber** – capsicum, pepper
- bourek** – flaky stuffed pastry
- dolma** – rice and meat parcels in vine leaves
- hats** – bread
- hav** – chicken
- hummus** – ground chickpea paste with oil
- gov** – beef
- ishkhan** – Sevan trout
- kebab** – ground meat cooked on a skewer
- kedayif** – crunchy dessert pastry
- khamaju** – a meat pie similar to *khachapuri*
- khash** – winter stew of animal parts
- khaghogh** – grapes
- khashlama** – lamb stew cooked in beer or wine
- khoravats** – barbecue, usually pork, lamb or beef, also vegetables and fish
- khoz** – pork
- kyufta** – meatballs mixed with onion and egg
- lahmajo (lahmajoon)** – minced lamb minipizza
- lavash** – thin flat bread
- matsoon** – yogurt
- oghee** – fruit liqueurs
- paneer** – cheese
- patlijan** – aubergine
- pomidor** – tomato (also *loleek*)
- shakar** – sugar
- sigar** – river trout
- suchush** – plum and walnut sweet
- sujukh** – cured sausage
- tabouleh** – diced green salad with semolina
- tan** – yogurt
- tsiran** – apricot
- vochkhar** – lamb

YEREVAN ԵՐԵՎԱՆ

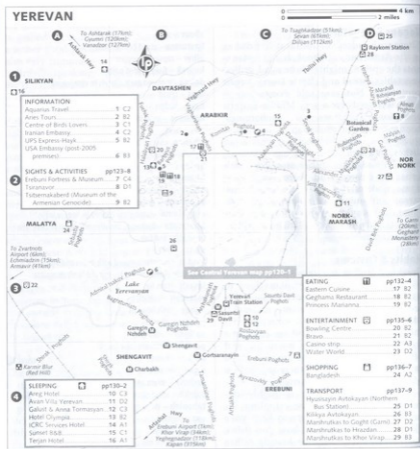
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The modern incarnation of Armenia's capital is the product of Alexander Tumanyan's 1924 master plan, a design with echoes in contemporaries like New Delhi, Canberra and many Soviet cities. Beyond the many shades of tuff-covered walls, apartment blocks, avenues and café-dotted parks, the best thing about Yerevan is the people. Expressive black eyebrows, proud noses and classical Greek and Persian profiles appear everywhere, in a street culture somewhere between Marseilles, village Armenia and old Beirut. Yerevan is a relaxed and safe place where

people live at one pace while the traffic goes at another. Newly repaved grand squares, intimate museums, and burgeoning nightlife and shopping are proof of the city's move forward. The cultural life is intense for a city of its size, including dozens of theatres, concert halls, galleries and live music clubs. Construction sites and a variable climate can make walking difficult but there's a Metro, really cheap taxis and no particular rush – in summer people stay out talking, drinking and eating until the early hours.

HISTORY

Yerevan's history dates back to 782 BC, when the Erebuni fortress was built by King Argishti I of Urartu at the place where the



Hrazdan River widened onto the fertile Ararat Plains. It was a regional capital of Muslim khanates and Persian governors until the Russian annexation in 1828. The Soviet rebuilding of the Tsarist city removed most of its mosques and hid churches away in residential backwaters, but kept some of the 19th-century buildings on Abovyan Poghots and left the old neighbourhood of Kond more or less alone.

ORIENTATION

Yerevan sits in a valley ringed on three sides by hills, with the little Hrazdan River cutting a serpentine gorge west of the city centre. To the south, it opens out onto the Ararat Plains and the ice-capped peaks of Mt Ararat (Masis) and Little Ararat (Sis). Central streets in the city are laid out on a grid with several ring roads, intersected by the Hyusisayin Poghota (Northern Avenue) project. In the centre is Hanrapetutyán Hraparak (Republic Square), while the Opera House a few blocks north is another focal point. Mesrop Mashtots Poghota (avenue) is one of the city's busiest thoroughfares.

Marshall Baghramian Poghota (Embassy Row) includes the presidential palace and national assembly. The main bus station is the Kilikyá Avtokayan west of town on the Echmiadzin Hwy, which also leads to Zvartnots Airport. Marshrutkas to various parts of the country leave from all over the city centre, with a concentration around the Kino Rossiya building on Tigran Mets Poghota. The main train station is above Sasuntsi Davit Metro station. Yerevan's Metro has four stations in the city centre with the last stop at Berekamutyun.

INFORMATION

Map pp120-1

Airline Offices

Aeroflot Russian Airlines (☎ 53 21 31; www.aeroflot.org; 12 Amiryán Poghots)

Aerosvit (Aero Sweet) (☎ 54 04 43; www.aerosvit.am; 23/1 Tigran Mets Poghota)

Armavia (☎ 56 48 17; armavia@infocam.am; 3 Amiryán Poghots)

Armenian International Airways (☎ 28 77 32; www.armenianairways.com; 14 Mesrop Mashtots Poghota)

Austria Airlines (☎ 51 22 01; www.aua.com; 9 Alek Manukyan Poghots)

British Airways/British Mediterranean Airways (☎ 52 13 83; www.british-mediterranean.com; 10 Sayat-Nova Poghota)

YEREVAN IN ONE DAY

Start off with breakfast at a **café** on Abovyan Poghots (with a **freshly brewed** ground sooroh (coffee)). Take a look around the grand buildings of **Hanrapetutyán Hraparak** (Republic Square), and have a browse in the **National Gallery**. Head up Abovyan and take a look at the **Katoghike church** hidden behind the street. The square around the **Opera House** has plenty of **cafés** for lunch dining. The **Matenadaran** is a fine building with a small but beautiful collection of manuscripts on display, or go up to the **Cascade** for a grand view over the city, surrounded by flower beds. Then head out to a restaurant for a **long dinner** of Armenian *khoravats* with salads, desserts and cognac. Check out a **club** or **people-watch** from any one of dozens of late-night **cafés**, around the Opera House and the Ring Park in particular.

Caspian Air (☎ 52 44 01; info@tatev.com; c/o Tatev Travel, 19 Nalbandyan Poghots)

Caucasus Airlines (☎ 52 52 10; klm@arminco.com; c/o Levon Travel, 10 Sayat-Nova Poghota)

CSA Czech Airlines (☎ 52 21 62; www.csa.cz; c/o Visa Concord Travel, 2 Marshall Baghramian Poghota, near cnr with Isahakyan)

Syrian Arab Airlines (☎ 53 85 89; astrontravel@netsys.am; c/o Astron Travel, 3 Moses Khorenatsi Poghots)

Bookshops

Map pp120-1

There are quite a few bookshops selling Armenian and Russian publications but stockists of other languages are rare.

Artbridge Bookstore Café (☎ 52 12 39; 20 Abovyan Poghots; ☎ 8.30am-midnight) Has a small but well-chosen range of titles and a book exchange; see p132 for details.

Macmillan Bookstore (☎ 56 56 61; 9 Gharam Partetsi Poghots) Has a few English-language novels but mostly sells learning materials, including dictionaries.

Noyan Tapan (☎ 56 81 84; Hanrapetutyán Hraparak) Has a few English novels plus maps and books on Armenia.

Embassies & Consulates

Canada (Map pp120-1; ☎ 56 79 03; aemin@freenet.am; 25/21 Demirchyan Poghots)

France (Map pp120-1; ☎ 58 35 11; www.ambafra.am; 8 Grigor Lusavorich Poghots)

Georgia (Map pp120-1; ☎ 56 43 57; georgia@arminco.com; 42 Aram Poghots)



CENTRAL YEREVAN

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British Airways/British Mediterranean Airways	(see 28)	Levon Travel	28 D4	UK Embassy	43 B3
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Germany (Map pp120-1; ☎ 52 32 79; www.deutschebotschaft-erivan.am; 29 Charents Poghots)

Greece (Map pp120-1; ☎ 53 00 51; grembarm@arminco.com; 12 Proshyan Poghots)

Iran (Map p118; ☎ 23 29 20; emiranar@arminco.com; 1 Budaghyan Poghots, Arabkir Park)

Italy (Map pp120-1; ☎ 54 23 35; www.ambitam.am; 3 Italia Poghots)

Nagorno-Karabakh (Map pp120-1; ☎ 58 72 40; ankr@arminco.com; 3rd fl, 11 Moskovyan Poghots)

Poland (Map pp120-1; ☎ 54 24 93; polemb@arminco.com; 44/1 Hanrapetutyun Poghots)

Russia (Map pp120-1; ☎ 56 74 27; ruscon@arminco.com; 13a Grigor Lusavorich Poghots)

Turkmenistan (Map pp120-1; ☎ 53 83 56; serdar@arminco.com; Hotel Hrazdan, 72 Dzorap Poghots)

UK (Map pp120-1; ☎ 26 43 01; www.britemb.am; 34 Marshall Baghramian Poghota)

USA (Map pp120-1; ☎ 52 46 61; www.usa.am; 18 Marshall Baghramian Poghota, moving to Admiral Isakov Poghota 2005, Map p118)

Emergency

Emergency services ☎ 103

European Medical Centre ambulance ☎ 54 00 03

Fire ☎ 101

Police ☎ 102

Internet Access

Map pp120-1

There are Internet clubs on virtually every city block, varying from cramped basements to places with 20 terminals or more. Many are open very late and cost around 50¢ per hour. There is an **Internet café** (1 Abovyan Poghots; ☎ 24hr) in the basement of Sil Plaza, and the reliably quick **Zeon** (29 Tumanyan Poghots; ☎ 24hr) is near the corner with Mesrop Mashtots Poghota.

Internet Resources

Tour Armenia (www.tacentral.com) and *Armenia Now* magazine (www.armenianow.com) have regular updates of clubs, pubs and restaurants in Yerevan. The website www.armeniadiaspora.com also has some handy information.

Laundry

Map pp120-1

Laundromats are uncommon, but all hotels and most B&Bs and homestays can arrange clean laundry.

New Shahab (☎ 54 31 96; 2 Grigor Lusavorich Poghots).

Selena Service (☎ 53 65 08; 4 Zakyun Poghots) Charges about \$3 for a shirt or \$2 for trousers or dry-cleaning.

Media

Noyan Tapan and *AIM* (p179) are available from Noyan Tapan and Artbridge Bookstore Café (p119) and sometimes from hotels and souvenir shops. **Հայաստանի Հանրապետության Գրական և լրատվական կենտրոն** Magazines and newspapers are harder to find, though

Hay Optik (Map pp120-1; 7 Abovyan Poghots) – yes, an optometrist – opposite the Kino Moskva sold up-to-date editions of *The Economist* and *Time*. Shops at the Armenia Marriott Hotel (p132) or Ani Plaza Hotel (p131) might be possibilities in the future, or newsstands on Abovyan and Amiryan Poghots. The NPAK Gallery (p127) puts out the handy *Yerevan Guide* booklet with good listings, tips and reviews; it's also available at hotels and tourist-oriented shops around town.

Medical Services

Map pp120-1

Yerevan has the best medical facilities in the country, but they're still inadequate by international standards.

4th Yerevan City Polyclinic (☎ 58 03 95; 13 Moskovyan Poghots)

European Medical Centre (☎ 54 00 03; 3/1 Vazgen Sargsyan Poghots)

Nork-Marash Hospital (☎ 65 09 71; 13 Armenakyan Poghots, Nork-Marash)

Pharmacies, marked by the Russian word 'Apteka', are common and there's also one open late in every neighbourhood. For things like dental emergencies, embassies usually have a list of recommended specialists.

Money

There are moneychangers everywhere in Yerevan and cash machines are becoming quite common too, some with an option to withdraw US dollars. Euros, dollars and roubles can be changed nearly everywhere; the pound and Georgian lari are less commonly traded. **HSBC** (Map pp120-1; main branch ☎ 56 32 39; hsbca@arminco.com; 9 Vazgen Sargsyan Poghots) is the leading international bank and has several branches with cash machines around the city. If you had to organise a money transfer, this would be an easy place to do it. Travelers cheques are mostly spurned or met with bewildered looks – avoid relying on them if possible or try a bank like HSBC.

Post

The public mail service in Yerevan is slow but fairly reliable. The **Haypost Main Office** (Map





pp120-1; Hanrapetutyán Hraparak; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Sat) is centrally located. A letter or postcard sent abroad might take four to six weeks, but it gets there. Several local and international companies compete for the parcel business:

Armen Express (Map pp120-1; ☎ 57 20 07; delivery@armenexpress.am; 1 Yervand Kochar Poghots)

FedEx/Transimpex (Map pp120-1; ☎ 54 42 77; tripex@arminco.com; 2nd fl 26a Abovyan Poghots)

UPS Express-Hayk (Map p118; ☎ 27 30 90; upsarm@arminco.com; 1 Kievyan Poghots)

Telephone

Telephone services in Yerevan are fairly good and you usually get through on the first or second attempt. The ArmenTel monopoly has made international calls fiercely expensive and cellular services both expensive and not very comprehensive – improvements should be rapid if ArmenTel loses its monopoly. In the meantime many Internet cafés offer cheap international calls – they'll often have a telephone stencil on the window. Try **Mergelyan IP Phone** (Map pp120-1; 4/20 Amiryán Poghots; ☎ 7am-2am) for international calls – 25¢ per minute to North America, and 50¢ to the UK, Europe and Australia. There's another **Internet telephone office** (Map pp120-1; 4/22 Amiryán Poghots) next door.

Tourist Information

Armenia Information (Map pp120-1; ☎ 54 23 03; www.armeniainfo.am; 3 Nalbandyan Poghots; ☎ 9am-7pm) is the best tourist office in the region, with lots of books and brochures, and young staff who are happy to help with virtually anything from nightlife to transport. They keep lists of homestays and B&Bs in Yerevan and in the provinces. It's just off Hanrapetutyán Hraparak near the Metro station of the same name.

Travel Agencies

There are lots of useful travel agencies offering everything from one-day minivan tours with lunch to private car tours, from a day to a week anywhere in the country. Some specialise in group bookings or airline tickets, others work in travel to Iran, Georgia and even Turkey. The following is a selection of agencies that have been recommended more than once:

Ajdahag Mountain Hiking Club (☎ 58 95 57;

www.ajdahag.narod.ru) Arranges one-day treks up the southern peak of Mt Aragats and Mt Ara, a two-day climb

up to Aragats' highest peak, plus hikes in the Beghlam Mountains to the petroglyphs on Mt Azhdahak and other peaks.

Aquarius Travel (Map p118; ☎ 55 60 85; www.aquarius.am; Hotel Arabkir, 54 Byuzandyan Poghots, Arabkir Park) Arranges Yerevan apartments and homestays for \$20 to \$25 per night, and tours by car and driver in Yerevan and beyond. Offering good service and good value, Aquarius has garnered several hearty recommendations.

Aries Tours (Map p118; ☎ 22 01 38; www.bedandbreakfast.am; 43 Kyulpenkiyan Poghots, Arabkir) Has an excellent B&B network in parts of the country where the local hotels aren't so great, and arranges transport and excursions.

Avarayr (Map pp120-1; ☎ 52 40 42; www.avarayr.com; 1 Pavstos Byuzand Poghots) Avarayr is an adventure-tour company offering treks from three to 12 days (the latter covering much of the country), camping trips for groups, and some unusual cultural and archaeological tours.

Caravan Tours (Map pp120-1; ☎ 56 52 39; www.caravanarmenia.com; 42/1 Teryán Poghots) Arranges apartments, homestays and tours; garners good reports for prompt individual service.

Levon Travel (Map pp120-1; ☎ 52 52 10; www.levontravel.com; 10 Sayat-Nova Poghota) Mostly does group tours (not so good for individual needs) but is the local agent for regional carrier Caucasus Air and other airlines. It also arranges tours in Georgia and has an office in Tbilisi.

Menua Tours (Map pp120-1; ☎ 52 73 72; www.menuatours.com; Ani Hotel Plaza; 19 Sayat-Nova Poghots) Does daily tours to sites around the country and is a reliable organiser of apartments, car rental, cell-phone rental and other services.

Saberatours (Map pp120-1; ☎ 52 55 55; www.sabera-tours.am; 32-38 Hanrapetutyán Poghots) Based at the Europe Hotel, a major agency with airline tickets, group and individual tours, transport and accommodation bookings.

Sati Tours (Map pp120-1; ☎ 53 10 22; www.satiglobal.com; 21 Mesrop Mashtots Poghota) Highly rated agency with daily excursions to major sites around the country from Yerevan for \$8 to \$22 per person, plus accommodation, two- and three-day all-inclusive regional tours, and car and driver hire.

Tatev Travel (Map pp120-1; ☎ 52 44 01; www.tatev.com; 19 Nalbandyan Poghots) Specialises in travel to Iran, including arranging visas. It has daily coaches from Kilikya Avtokayan to Tabriz, Iran for \$30/\$5 one-way/return, and is the local agent for the Iranian Caspian Airlines, which flies Yerevan–Teheran three times a week. Also sells airline tickets, arranges local tours and apartments.

SIGHTS

Yerevan is not 'touristy', and if the locals are keen for your money they put on a good show of hiding it. It takes a little exploring to get to

know what at first seems like a city of subtle variations on Soviet apartment design – the best stuff is hidden indoors, while churches are hidden in courtyards and culs-de-sac. The oldest surviving part of the inner city is the Kond neighbourhood, between Sarian and Proshyan Poghots, close to the gorge of the Hrazdan. Central Yerevan is small enough to be able to walk to all the major sites inside Tumanyan's central circuit.

Cascade ԿԱՍԿԱԴ Map pp120–1

A vast flight of stone steps and flower beds, the **Cascade** (Kaskad) leads up to a monument commemorating the 50th anniversary of Soviet Armenia. It completes one end of Tumanyan's north-south axis through the city, in line with Tigran Mets Poghota and the Hyusisayin Poghota (Northern Avenue) project. There are five recessed fountains along the Cascade, some with sculpted panels and postmodern *khatchikars*. The top section of the Cascade was left unfinished when independence arrived, until 2001 when diasporan philanthropist and art collector Gerald L. Cafesjian took over the project. Since then the vast concrete structure has been cleaned, the escalators through its core repaired and hundreds of flower beds planted. Take the escalators up through the belly of the building, which looks like a skyscraper resting on its side, and walk onto the 'roof' to take in the panorama surrounded by flowers. At the top is a rather bleak plaza with the **50th Anniversary of Soviet Armenia Monument** at its centre (though the views are great). The new **Cafesjian Museum** is being integrated into the Cascade to house a vast collection of art and glassware. Cafesjian is spending \$30 million to complete the structure and add galleries – final plans might include a new arts centre beside the Cascade. The completion date is 2008, though some exhibition spaces might open before then. Fernando Botero's cheerfully fat sculpture *Cat* stands at the base of the Cascade, the first element of Cafesjian's collection put into place.

Opera House ՕՊԵՐԱՅԻ Map pp120–1

The landmark of the northern part of the city, the **Opera House** is surrounded by parks, cafés, nightclubs and shops. The building has two main halls; the Aram Khachaturian Concert Hall (p135) and the National Academic Opera and Ballet Theatre (p135),

thoroughly upgraded in 2003. Tastes have broadened a bit since Soviet Armenia, and the music scene here goes beyond opera and symphonies to Russian pop, MTV and, undernourished in the Kond square, pounding techno and house music in the Astral nightclub (p135). It's cheaper to see *Turandot* (\$2) at the Opera House than to listen to Ibiza remixes at the Astral (\$5), not generally the case elsewhere.

Hanrapetutyan Hraparak

(Republic Square) Map pp120–1

ՀԱՆՐԱՊԵՏՈՒԹՅԱՆ ՀՐԱՊԱՐԱԿ
The former Lenin square is surrounded by the city's finest ensemble of buildings, particularly the Armenia Marriott Hotel and the National Art Gallery and State Museum of Armenian History, where Stalinist scale meets Armenian architecture in a huge yellow and cream building facing some massive fountains. The statue of Lenin now lies on its back in the museum's courtyard, with an earlier one of Catherine the Great, while the head is apparently stored in the basement. The centre of the square (more of an oval) is now a flat stretch of polished marble. New lights and repaired fountains make it a focal point on warm afternoons and nights.

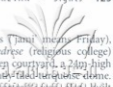
Mother Armenia

ՄԱՅՐ ՀԱՅԱՍՏԱՆ Map pp120–1

Symbolism abounds in the huge statue of **Mother Armenia** (*Mayr Hayastan*). She looms over the city in line with Mesrop Mashtots Poghota, on a classic Soviet plaza complete with tanks and jets set on pedestals at the eastern end of Haghthank (Victory) Park. The 23m-high Mother Armenia glares out across the city towards the Turkish border with a massive sword held defensively in front of her. She replaced a Stalin statue in 1967. Two soldiers died when his statue was wrenched off unannounced one night, leading to grim muttering about Stalin still killing from beyond the grave.

Inside the 50m pedestal is a **Military Museum** (☎ 25 14 00; admission free; ☎ 10am–5.30pm Tue–Fri, 10am–3pm Sat–Sun). The interior is based on Surp Hripsime at Echmiadzin, a brave acknowledgment of religion by the architect during Stalin's lifetime. Originally fitted out with displays from WWII (300,000 Armenians died, half of those sent to fight), today most of the space is devoted to the Karabakh





War – a Dashnak's paradise which includes a tableau of female soldiers in the Karabakh conflict. All explanations are in Armenian but the dioramas are easily grasped. There's a great view of Yerevan's carbunclelike Palace of Youth Culture tower and complex. The Palace, commonly called Kukuruss ('corn-cob' – self-explanatory when you see it), gets our vote for weirdest Soviet building in the city – not counting the airport. **Haghtanak Park**, next to Mother Armenia, is a mostly overgrown patch of woods. Watch out for little cars used to teach drivers on a forest obstacle course – apt training for the streets, apparently. There's a quaint amusement park in the park with a Ferris wheel, cafés and outdoor billiards tables.

Yerevan Brandy Company Map pp120–1
ԵՐԵՎԱՆԻ ԿՈՅԱԿԻ ԳՈՐԾԱՐԱՆ
The fairyland of the world-famous Armenian brandy', **Yerevan Brandy Company** (☎ 56 33 38; Admiral Isakov Poghot; tours by appointment, tour & tastings 56; ☎ 10am–5pm Mon–Fri) runs fun tours with generous tastings from its iconic premises by the Hrazdan River. Other Armenian brandy companies such as Great Valley are neophytes compared to the Yerevan Brandy Company, now part of the French Pernot-Ricard group. The company has cellars of barrels dating back to the 19th century, including one which won't be opened until a Karabakh peace deal appears. Tours take 75 minutes, including tastings, and end at the souvenir shop. It's a pleasant walk across the Haghtanak Bridge or a short taxi ride (80€) from the city centre.

Gök Jami Map pp120–1
ԿԱՊՈՒԼՅՏ ՄՉԿԻԹ
Of the eight or so working mosques in Yerevan in 1900, the **Gök Jami** (Blue Mosque; ☎ 42 84 98; 12 Mesrop Mashtots Poghot; ☎ 10am–6pm) is the only one remaining. The **Iran Information & Communication Centre** next door has the key. It's appropriate to wear trousers and a long-sleeved shirt – no bare legs or shoulders. The Soviets turned the mosque into the Yerevan City Museum until it was restored and somewhat 'modernised' by an Iranian religious/government foundation in the 1990s. It lives on as a sign of Armenia's necessarily good relations with Iran.

The mosque was built in 1765 by the Persian Governor Hussein Ali Khan as a place

for Friday sermons (Jami means Friday), and features a *medrese* (religious college) built around a garden courtyard, a 24m-high minaret and a brightly tiled turquoise dome. A seven-hectare fortress, built during this time, but was destroyed in the 1880s. Today it's the site of the **Yerevan Wine Plant**, just on the city side of the Haghtanak Bridge across from the Metropal Hotel. As you drive from the airport over the Hrazdan River into the city, look at the walls on the left above the river, which are said to be the original walls of this fortress.

Museums & Galleries

STATE MUSEUM OF ARMENIAN HISTORY

ՀԱՅԱՍՏԱՆԻ ՊԱՏՄՈՒԹՅԱՆ

This museum spans from Stone-Age cave dwellers in the Hrazdan Gorge to the astronomy and metallurgy of 3000 BC Metsamor, the Urartu Empire and the gathering of the Hayk tribes into a nation in the 6th century BC. After that centuries fly past at the **State Museum of Armenian History** (National Museum; Map pp120–1; ☎ 52 14 57; Hanrapetutyan Hraparak; admission 51, guide 54; ☎ 10am–6pm Tue–Sun); through Hellenic Armenia, the arrival of Christianity and long wars against Persia, the Arab conquest and subsequent flowering at Ani, and then the long centuries under Muslim Turkish and Persian rule. There are medieval *khatchkars* (intricately carved stone crosses), costumes, jewellery, coins and models of buried settlements and lost churches.

NATIONAL ART GALLERY

ԱՁԳԱՅԻՆ ՊԱՏԿԱՊԱՐԱՆ

Holding the third biggest collection of European masters in the former USSR, many of the works in the **National Art Gallery** (Map pp120–1; ☎ 58 08 12; Hanrapetutyan Hraparak; admission 51, guide 54; ☎ 10am–6pm Tue–Sun) were appropriated in Europe during WWII. This national treasure includes works by Donatello, Tintoretto, Fragonard, Courbet, Theodore Rousseau, Rodin, Rubens and Jan Van Dyck. There are also many works by Russian painters, and Armenian painters, sculptors and graphic artists including Martiros Sarian, Yervand Kochar and Sedrak Arakelyan.

MATENADARAN ՄԱՏԵՆԱՊԱՐԱՆ


Armenia's ancient manuscripts library, the **Matenadaran** (Map pp120–1; ☎ 58 32 92; 53 Mesrop Mashtots Poghot; admission 80€, guide 53.30; ☎ 10am–4pm

Tue-Sat), stands like a cathedral at the top of Yerevan's grandest avenue. It preserves more than 17,000 Armenian manuscripts and 100,000 medieval and modern documents. The first Matenadaran for Armenian texts was built by St Mesrop Mashtots at Vagarsapat (Echmiadzin) in the 5th century. By the early 19th century only 1800 manuscripts were kept at Echmiadzin after centuries of invasion, looting and burning. The collection grew in importance after the Armenian Genocide in WWI saw the destruction of countless tomes. The current Matenadaran was built in 1959, with a research institute dedicated to preserving and restoring manuscripts attached to it.

At the base of the building there is a statue of Mashtots teaching his alphabet to a disciple, while six other statues of great scholars and writers stand by the door. The outdoor gallery has carved rock tombs and *khatchkars* (carved stone crosses) brought here from ancient sites around Armenia. Inside, the 1st floor houses the library's public collection – a small but expertly chosen sample. It includes Greek and Roman scientific and philosophical works, Iranian and Arabic manuscripts and the 15th century Homilies of Mush, so heavy that it was ripped in half and carried by two women after the 1915 genocide. The book was not put together until years afterwards – one saviour had emigrated to America. The illuminated works on display show swirls of red and gold combining classical borders with luxuriant flowers and gardens. Many of the more rare books in the collection are researched behind closed doors and are not on display. The ticket office has a gift shop with a good collection of books and souvenirs.

TSITSERNAKABERD (MUSEUM OF THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE) ԾԻՇԵՆԱԿԱԿԵՐԴ
Commemorating the agony of the 1915–22 genocide of Armenians by the Ottoman Empire and Turkish republican forces, the **Museum of the Armenian Genocide** (Map p118; ☎ 39

14 12; Tsitsernakaberd Hill; admission free; 🕒 11am–4pm Tue–Sun) and memorial creates a moving experience. The museum lies underground in a grey stone hall. Large photographs (many, but not all, with English explanations) tell the story of the genocide simply and baldly. There's no effort to demonise the Turkish people; the facts are allowed to speak for



themselves. It starts with the massacres of 1896 and 1909 and the lack of an international response and the move on to the murder of Armenian labour conscripts in the Ottoman army in late 1914 and early 1915. The arrest and subsequent murder of community leaders and intellectuals on 24 April 1915 marks the beginning of that nightmare summer. All over Anatolia men were arrested, marched out of their towns and murdered at the nearest lonely spot; then came the forced deportations and death marches into the killing fields of the Syrian desert. The massacres ebbed for a time after the Ottoman surrender but escalated in the early years of the Turkish Republic in Cilicia and southern Anatolia, and at Smyrna in 1922.

A permanent exhibition of paintings of half-dead, naked survivors stands in the hall. The final image is a huge blown-up photograph of an orphanage in Syria after the genocide. Outside there's a magnificent view of Mt Ararat, the symbol of Armenia 40km inside modern Turkish territory.

Nearby there is a *khatchkar* in remembrance of the 1988 Sumqayit massacre in Azerbaijan, and the graves of early victims of the Karabakh War. There is a row of trees planted by foreign leaders who recognise the genocide, despite the Turkish government's determination to punish any foreign power that does so. The Turkish denial works on many levels – it never happened, the documents are fake, it wasn't deliberate, the deportations were for their own safety, not that many people died, Turkish people suffered too, it was the fault of the Dashnaks. Considered in full it falls over with inconsistencies, but that doesn't seem to make a difference.

A broad pathway flanked by a 100m-long wall engraved with the names of massacred communities leads to the **memorial**, consisting of a 40m-high spire next to a circle of 12 basalt slabs leaning over to guard an eternal flame. The twelve tilted slabs represent the lost provinces of western Armenia, while the spire has a fine split dividing it into larger and smaller needles, the smaller one representing western Armenia. Some surmise other layers of meanings – the 12 slabs huddle like refugees around a fire on a deportation march, and the spires might be a highly stylised monument to Mt Ararat and its smaller peak, or blades of newborn grass. Set on Tsitsernakaberd Hill (Fortress

of Swallows) across the Hrazdan Gorge from central Yerevan, the memorial was built in 1967 after unprecedented demonstrations on 24 April 1965, the 50th anniversary of the genocide. A rare acknowledged sign of public discontent, the Soviets deposed the local Communist Party boss in response and gave permission for the memorial to be built. The museum was constructed in 1995. Genocide Remembrance Day on 24 April sees masses of people bringing flowers to the site.

A taxi (\$1.60 from the city centre) is the easiest way to reach Tsitsernakaberd. If you feel up it you can walk to and from town over the Haghtanak Bridge and past the Hrazdan Stadium.

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

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On the corner of Sarian Poghots is the main exhibition centre for contemporary Armenian artists, the **Museum of Modern Art** (Map pp120-1; ☎ 53 53 59; 7 Mesrop Mashtots Poghota; admission 60¢; 🕒 10am-6pm Tue-Sun). It also has an impressive collection of works from the 1970s onwards. The **Artists' Union** (Map pp120-1; 16 Abovyan Poghots), next to the Hotel Yerevan, is another major exhibition space.

MARTIRO SARIAN MUSEUM

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This museum preserves the studio and some of the works of 20th-century painter Martiros Sarian. Some say the pick of his works adorn galleries in Moscow and Paris. Start your visit to the **museum** (Map pp120-1; 3 Sarian Poghots; admission \$1; 🕒 10.30am-4.30pm Fri-Tue, 10am-3pm Wed) upstairs with his sombre early works, then watch the colours erupt as he falls in love with Persia and Egypt. His art seems to mature by fusing those colours into a vision of an Oriental Armenia, landscapes of stark mountains, green villages and plunging gorges. Sarian's large studio remains as it was when the artist died in the 1950s.

SERGEI PARADJANOV MUSEUM

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This engaging, eccentric **house museum** (Map pp120-1; ☎ 53 84 73; 15/15 Dzoragyugh Poghots; admission 80¢, guide \$4.20; 🕒 10.30am-5pm) of an avant-garde film director and artist stands by the Hrazdan Gorge near Surp Sargis. Paradjanov was born in 1924 in Tbilisi, but retired to Yerevan after serving prison

terms on charges of immorality in the 1970s and 1980s. While some of his international admirers campaigned for his release (with mixed results), his **house museum** and he died in 1990. This fine house showcases his colourful, amusing collages and framed found-object sculptures, as well as sketches and designs for his films. There's real wit and flair to his work, and it's well worth visiting even if avant-garde 20th-century film isn't normally your thing. There are postcards and videos of his major films for sale.

EREBUNI FORTRESS & MUSEUM

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Excavations began at the **Erebuni Fortress** (Map p118) site in 1959 after a farmer found a stone tablet with writing on it in the dirt. Follow Tigran Mets Poghota south past the train station and turn left onto Erebuni Poghots; the site and museum are at the end of the road.

Archaeologists found a large cuneiform slab with the inscriptions of Argishti I, king of Urartu, setting the date the fortress was built at 782 BC. It reads, in part, 'Argishti, the son of Menua, has built this magnificent fortress as a house for Khaldi, the Lord, to the glory of the Biayni countries and to the horror of enemies', which says a bit about the nature of Armenian pride.

The view from the fortress takes in the city and Karmir Blur (Red Hill), where excavations have revealed similar ancient finds. Frescoes in the reconstructed palace wall are replicas. The layout of the fortress is impressive, although it's difficult to tell what's original and what's been added for demonstration's sake. There are huge storerooms for wheat, along with gigantic pitchers for wine and oil, and *tonir* (oven pits). There's also a place for animal sacrifices, and workshops (still buried) for making tools, including arrows for fighting and hunting.

The **Erebuni Museum** (Map p118; ☎ 45 82 07; 38 Erebuni Poghots; admission \$1.60, guide \$4; 🕒 10am-5pm Tue-Sun), at the bottom of the hill, has other cuneiform tablets and jewellery excavated from the site in a striking 1960s Soviet building with huge apricot-coloured tufa friezes.

NPAK ՆՊԱԿ

The Norarar Pordzarakan Arvesti Kentovon (Armenian Centre for Contemporary

Experimental Art) is a large, well-appointed gallery and art complex (Map pp120-1; ☎ 56 82 25; www.accea.org; 1/3 Pavstos Byuzand Poghots; admission free; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Sat) facing the big Vernissage market. Yervand Kochar's 1959 figure *Melancholy* pines at the entrance. Most of the artists in residence are in their 20s, and avant-garde concerts and performances are held in a huge auditorium. Viewed with healthy suspicion by the more conservative arts audience, the next Armenian cultural revolution might start here.

OTHER MUSEUMS

& GALLERIES

Map pp120-1

Yerevan has another 20 or so museums, many small house museums dedicated to artists. The following is a selection of the more visually interesting ones. Many have multilingual guides for \$2.50 to \$4.

Ara Sargsyan & Hakob Kojoian Museum (☎ 56 03 31; 62/7 Pushkin Poghots; admission 50¢; ☎ 10am-4pm Tue-Sun) The sculpture of Ara Sargsyan is on the ground floor and the paintings of Hakob Kojoian upstairs.

Aram Khachaturian Museum (☎ 58 94 18; 3 Zaroubyan Poghots; admission 80¢; ☎ 11am-4pm Tue-Sun) A shrine to the famous composer, including a concert hall and a library of recordings.

Museum of Children's Creative Art (☎ 52 09 02; 13 Abovyan Poghots; admission adult/child 50/30¢; ☎ 11am-4pm) A cheerful and inviting place filled with bright paintings, some part of a permanent collection and some regularly changing exhibitions. The full collection includes embroidery, sculpture and carpets.

Museum of Russian Art (☎ 56 03 31; 38 Isahakyan Poghots, entry on Tamanyan Poghots; admission 80¢; ☎ 11am-4pm Tue-Sun) A collection of 200 works by 19th- and 20th-century Russian artists, donated by Professor Aram Abrahamian, who had a taste for cheerfully picturesque landscapes.

Museum of the Middle East (☎ 58 16 51; 1 Aram Poghots; admission 50¢; ☎ 11am-4pm Tue-Sun) A small but diverse collection of artifacts from Zoroastrian Persia and early regional civilisations from Luristan and Elam. It's at the back of the National Art Gallery, and affords a peek at Lenin's headless statue in a courtyard.

National Folk Art Museum of Armenia (☎ 56 93 83; 64 Abovyan Poghots; admission 80¢; ☎ 11am-4pm) Has a large display of Armenia's finest crafts, which reveal the exotic influence of the East in Armenian culture. There's also a nice lace exhibit and some interesting woodcarving.

State Museum of Wood-Carving (☎ 53 24 61; 4-2 Paronyan Poghots; admission 50¢; ☎ noon-6pm Tue-Sun) Actually an interesting collection of some meticulous pieces, both modern and medieval.

Yervand Kochar Museum (☎ 52 03 26; 39/12 Mesrop Mashtots Poghota; admission 5¢; ☎ 11am-5pm Tue-Sun) Features the sculpture and Cubist-style three-dimensional paintings of the brilliant draughtsman and artist.

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Churches

Map pp120-1

SURP GRIGOR LUSAVORICH CATHEDRAL

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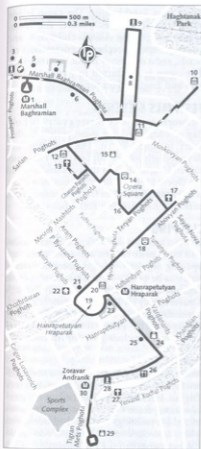
Modern Yerevan's first real cathedral was built to celebrate 1700 years of Christianity in Armenia and was consecrated in 2001. This hulking building stands on a small hill where Khandjian Poghots meets Tigran Mets Poghota. It's a bit brutalist in execution, possibly because it hasn't been around for 1000 years and collected age, atmosphere and *khatchkars*. Stairs leading up from Tigran Mets Poghota point straight at the carbuncle of the Kino Rossiya building across the street. There's a statue of Zoravar Andranik at the bottom of the stairs. General Andranik Ozanian led the army that defeated the Turks at Sardarapat in May 1918.

OTHER CHURCHES

Yerevan has very few churches after the Soviets demolished some and forbade new ones being built. **Surp Sargis** (Map pp120-1; 1853) is on Israeliyan Poghots just off Mashtots, overlooking the Hrazdan. The Sunday liturgy and choir is particularly good. **Surp Hovhannes** (Map pp120-1; Paronyan Poghots) dates from 1708. The **Zoravar church** (Map pp120-1; 1694) is one of the nicest little secrets in the city, tucked away off Gharam Parpetsi Poghots. The tiny **Katoghike** (Map pp120-1; 13th century) is hidden in a courtyard behind the corner of Sayat-Nova Poghota and Abovyan Poghots. The Soviets were demolishing a later church here in 1936, which exposed the fine inscriptions on the chapel. Amazingly enough for that era, a public outcry let the chapel survive. Fragments from the dismantled church lie around it. Northwest of the city the village of Avan has been absorbed into the suburbs. Avan's 6th-century church, called **Tsiranavor** (Map pp120-1; Apricot-coloured) locally, is the oldest within Yerevan and once belonged to a pro-Byzantine faction of the Armenian church. There are other churches in Kanaker, north of the city.

WALKING TOUR

This tour can be walked in two stages. Starting at **Marshall Baghramian Metro station** (1).



YEREVAN WALKING TOUR

Stage One

Distance: 3.2km (Marshall Baghramian Metro to Matenadaran 1.6km, Matenadaran to Opera House 1.6km)

Duration: 90 minutes

Stage Two

Distance: 2km (Opera House to Shuka No 2)

Duration: one hour

iversity of Armenia (3). The marshal was born in Karabakh and led some of the great tank battles of WWII. Next to it is the **British Embassy (4; p119)**, a good attempt at blending traditional styles with ambassadorial presence. Next along is the **Presidential Palace (5)**, and the **National Assembly (6; Azgayin Zogov)** on a high grassy rise on the right. Opposite stands the **National Academy of Sciences (7)**. Continue on down Baghramian past the US, Syrian and Chinese embassies. After the Constitutional Court take the first left onto Isahakyan Poghots and another onto the top end of Tamanyan Poghots. A belt of parkland leads to the foot of the **Cascade (8; p124)**, a grand project of steps and gardens leading up to the **50th Anniversary of Soviet Armenia Monument (9)**. Returning downhill, take the first left onto Isahakyan and another left onto Mesrop Mashtots Poghota and climb two blocks to the **Matenadaran (10; p125)**, the repository of Armenia's written and illuminated heritage.

Head back to the base of the Cascade. There are several galleries and museums in the vicinity, including the **Yervand Kochar Museum (11; p128)** on the corner of Mesrop Mashtots and Moskovyan. Cross Marshall Baghramian and head along the curve of Sarian Poghots to the **Martiros Sarian Museum (12; p127)** and its captivating Eastern landscapes. Just behind the museum, via Gharam Parpetsi Poghots, is the lovely orange tuff of the **Zoravar (13; p128)** parish church. It's a short walk along Tumanyan to the **Opera House square (14; p123)**. The area of park around the Martiros Sarian statue across Mashtots from the Opera House holds the painters' branch of the **Vernissage markets (15; p136)** on weekends. The Opera House grounds are ringed by some of the city's smartest cafés, clubs and 24-hour bars, a good place for a rest and a light meal.

Begin Stage Two at the **Northern Avenue project (16)**, a new development of multi-storey buildings starting at Tumanyan Poghots. Head along stylish Sayat-Nova Poghota and turn left on Abovyan, and left again into the courtyard behind the apartment buildings. Here stands the gorgeous 12th-century **Katoghike (17; p128)**, a chapel so tiny the congregation stands in the yard. Down Abovyan Poghots in the other direction are souvenir shops and the **Kino Moskva complex (18; p135)**. The lower part of the

it's a downhill stroll through the heart of the government and embassy district. Walk uphill a bit to the statue of **Marshall Baghramian (2)** below the steps up to the **American Uni-**

street has some sturdy 19th-century buildings in volcanic hues of orange and black. Abovyan debouches into **Hanrapetutyan Hraparak**, (19; Republic Square) where the Lenin statue once stood. It now lies headless in a courtyard of the **National Gallery** (20; p125). Locals joke about how soon it will be before yet another café sets up umbrellas and tables in the centre of the square.

Ringed the broad hippodrome-shaped space are the **Ministry of Foreign Affairs** (21), the **Armenia Marriott Hotel** (22; p132), the central post and telephone office and the **Finance and Economy Ministry** (23) with its clocktower. On weekends you can head up Nalbandyan one block on the far side of the National Gallery and take the first right into the main **Vernissage Market** (24; p136).

The **NPAK Gallery** (25; p127) is next to the Vernissage. After crossing busy Khandjian Poghots continue to the right through the Ring Park with lots of fancy **cafés** (26; p133) to the city's newest landmark, the **Surp Grigor Lusavorich Cathedral** (27; p128). The equestrian statue of **Zoravar Andranik** (28) springs from a pedestal in front of the cathedral. Continuing down Tigran Mets through a bustling hub of shops and marshrutka stands, you can veer onto an extension of Moses Khorenatsi Poghots to **Shuka No 2** (29), one of the city's biggest food markets.

YEREVAN FOR CHILDREN

A Soviet-era city with overgrown parks and rusty playgrounds, Yerevan isn't as attractive as Disneyland, but there are some attractions to keep the youngsters entertained. The Vernissage art market (p136) and the big *shukas* (markets; p136) are fun for the inquisitive, or there's Water World (p136) for a splash around in a modern, well-maintained facility. Some of the theatre companies put on shows for kids – the Artbridge Bookstore Café (p119) has show details and sells tickets.

The amusement parlours tend to have some vintage games. There are some newer places along Abovyan Poghots, and there are plenty of Internet clubs (p122). Some diasporan organisations run summer camps for kids – see www.armeniadiaspora.com.

And for something completely different, one company runs a **communist nostalgia camp** (contact Haik Makaryan at smma@freenet.am; per person \$50; ☎ 10am-6pm) at a former KGB holiday

resort near Tsaghkadzor. The camp is run along traditional lines: pioneer and Kom-somol songs (the USSR children's and youth groups), speeches by communist officials, and a ceremonial awarding of medals. The camp is conducted in Armenian, Russian and English. Fun for everyone!

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Fireworks seem to celebrate a national holiday or commemorate some event or other every fortnight or so. The independence days sometimes see concerts on Hanrapetutyan Hraparak or in the parkland around the Opera House. The major summer event is the **Kenats Festival**, in late September, with concerts, folk dancing and other events.

SLEEPING

Yerevan has a good selection of accommodation in all price ranges, and more places are opening regularly. Budget accommodation tends to be poorly signed but many people organise an apartment or homestay through a travel agency for \$15 to \$30 or more a night, depending on the number of bedrooms in the apartment. Prices for mid-range and luxury hotels include government taxes.

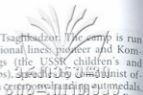
Budget

Anahit Avedisyan (Map pp120-1; ☎ 58 16 17; 6/5 Sayat-Nova Poghota; s/d \$7/14) Arty Anahit speaks a little English. Her simple flat, reached via the staircase along from Our Village, features some incredible paintings and two bedrooms, one with a fold-out couch. She doesn't do breakfast but guests can use the kitchen.

Anahit Stepanyan (Map pp120-1; ☎ 56 81 34; 25/5 Sayat-Nova Poghota; s/d \$7/12, breakfast extra \$3) Apartment 25 at the top of the stairs, on the right with the wooden door, welcomes budget travellers. There are two bedrooms with twin beds, in a family apartment with good English spoken.

Areg Hotel (Map p118; ☎ 45 62 13; www.areg.am; 80 Burnazyan Poghots; s/d \$24/34) Run by a friendly family, Areg has large, plain rooms with clean bathrooms and satellite TV. It also has a bar and can arrange transport to local sights.

Galust & Anna Tormasyan (Map p118; ☎ 45 23 10; 97 Burnazyan Poghots; s \$6-10, d \$12-20) A couple of blocks from Yerevan train station (and Sasuntsi Davit Metro), this two-storey village-style house has four bedrooms. Breakfast costs \$1 extra. Rooms with bathrooms are



THE BEST YEREVAN HOTELS FOR...

Best Deal The **Parev Inn** (p132) or, for a bit more, the **Arma Hotel** (p131) uphill in Nork.

Budget Try a homestay like **Gayane Simonyan's** (p131) apartment by the Opera House, or organise an apartment through a travel agent (p123).

Location It's impossible to beat the **Armenia Marriott Hotel** (p132) on Hanrapetutyun Hraparak, though the **Ani Plaza Hotel** (p131) has its charms too.

Luxury The **Avan Villa Yerevan** (p132) has style, beautiful crafts and textiles and possibly the best mattresses in Armenia.

more expensive. Anna Tormasyan speaks basic English, and runs a friendly homestay. Guests can use the kitchen and washing machine. It's about 80m down Burnazyan Poghots from the corner with Sasuntsi Davit Poghots (walk over the canal bridge and turn right at the corner with the apartment block). It's on the first corner on the left, with a metal grille gate for the garage.

Gayane Simonyan (Map pp120-1; ☎ 56 81 34; 22/5 Sayat-Nova Poghota; s/d 57/12) This is a budget B&B-homestay with a good reputation in a great location across from the Opera House, in the same building as Anahit Avedisyan, one floor below. Gayane and her daughter speak French and some English. There are four beds in two rooms; no breakfast provided but you can use the kitchen. The bottom of the staircase is next to Our Village restaurant.

Naris Artsruni (Map pp120-1; ☎ 53 49 20; artsruni@media.am; Apt 22/26 Gharam Parpetsi Poghots; r 525) This homestay in the centre of town has one guest bedroom. Naris and son Vahan speak good English. It's a homely apartment with a modern bathroom – look for the Uruguayan Consulate plaque on the street by the stairwell. Vahan is a well-known musician who often has late-night band practices.

Sunset B&B (Map p118; ☎ 23 15 16; www.sunsetarm.boom.ru; 61/65 Komitas Poghota; s/d 525/35) Sergey and Nune Lalayan are your hosts at this apartment B&B near Haghtanak Park, north of the centre. There are two bedrooms, a kitchen, living room and Internet access. Reservations are recommended in summer.

Mid-Range

Ani Plaza Hotel (Map pp120-1; ☎ 58 95 00; www.anihotel.com; 19 Sayat-Nova Poghota; s 584-90, d 5104-168; ☎) This landmark in the heart of the city has been updated to be an upper-mid-range hotel.

Some of the cheaper rooms are on the small side but all are modern and comfortable. Rates include breakfast plus either a buffet dinner or lunch (the Ani restaurant here has a good reputation) and free airport service.

Arma Hotel (Map pp120-1; ☎ 546000; www.arma.am; 275 Norki Ayginer Poghots, Nork; s/d 574/92; ☎) On the hill just east of the city centre, with sprawling views of the city and Mt Ararat. It's a quiet spot, suitable for business travellers. The hotel has a fresh modern twist on Armenian design, and a gym and health centre.

Congress Hotel (Map pp120-1; ☎ 580095; www.congresshotelyerevan.com; 1 Italia Poghots; s/d 572/96; ☎) Congress is a new hotel with 128 rooms and a big outdoor swimming pool in the centre of Yerevan. The rooms are fairly typical for the price (it could be a Holiday Inn almost anywhere) but it's popular, modern and in a convenient location.

Europe Hotel (Map pp120-1; ☎ 586137; www.europehotel.am; 32-38 Hanrapetutyun Poghots; r 570-85, ste 5100; ☎) This spiffy new hotel has a flair for bright colours in its décor, and a groovy bar and café on the ground floor. The rooms are on the small side but perfectly comfortable.

Hotel Erebuni (Map pp120-1; ☎ 56 49 93; fax 54 45 23; 26/1 Nalbandyan Poghots; s 545 d 570-90, prices 50% lower Nov-Mar) Right in the city centre, Hotel Erebuni openly charges foreigners much more for dim corridors and Brezhnev-era rooms and bathrooms.

Hotel Hrazdan (Map pp120-1; ☎ 53 53 32; hrazdan@aviatrans.com; 72 Dzorap Poghots; s 550-90, d 590-110; ☎) A multistorey tower overlooking the Hrazdan Gorge, formerly only for Soviet bigwigs but now privately run and being renovated. The finished rooms are plain but light and airy, the unrenovated ones plain and dark with old bathrooms. Soviet relics include the Turkmenistan embassy based here.

Hotel Olympia (Map p118; ☎ 27 18 50; www.olympia.am; 56 Barbyus Poghots; r 550-85; ☎) The Olympia is a little out of the centre near the Hrazdan Bridge, off Kievyan Poghots. Located up on the edge of the Hrazdan Gorge, it has terrific views and a nice terrace restaurant with Greek and Armenian cuisine. The cheaper rooms don't have air-con but the others are spacious and have satellite TV.

Hotel Shirak (Map pp120-1; ☎ 529915; www.shirak-hotel.am; 13a Movses Khorenatsi Poghots; r \$50-100; ☺) This is a fairly priced multistorey hotel close to the centre. The building may be 30 years old but it's well-run, the hot water works and the sheets are clean. In this price range it's vastly preferable to the Hotel Erebuni.

ICRC Services Hotel (Map p118; ☎ 34 23 49; arc.hotel@freenet.am; 50/1 Gevorg Burnazyan Poghots; s \$18-30, d \$36-60; ☺) This hotel is 8km out of town on the highway to Ashtarak, close to the gated community of Vahagni. Location aside it's an excellent deal, with studios and apartments available for discounts by the month. The friendly managers also arrange horse-back riding and outdoor activities.

Nork Hotel (Map pp120-1; ☎ 65 52 62, 09-40 64 43; 123 Armenakyan Poghots, Nork; s \$22-40, d \$40-50; ☺) Also called the Maison d'Hote de Nork, this rather elegant building at the top of the Nork cable car is better than some of the Soviet hotels in town; the rooms are clean but fairly basic.

Parev Inn (Map pp120-1; ☎ 55 99 85; www.parev.am; 71 11th Aigestan Poghots; s/d \$40/50; ☺) An excellent guesthouse just up from Mkhitar Heratsi Poghots (near the Nork cable car), run by a Canadian-Armenian couple. Prices are about 25% lower from 15 October to 15 May. Rooms cost an extra \$10 for each person, so if there's six of you it costs \$15 each. The rooms are large and comfortable, with a kitchenette and modern bathrooms. The owners are very helpful and can advise on restaurants and shopping for art during your stay. It's popular, so in summer make a booking.

Top End

Ararat Hotel (Map pp120-1; ☎ 51 00 00; www.ararathotel.com; 7 Grigor Lusavorich Poghots; s \$102-120, d \$120-144; ☺) Across from the French embassy is this stylish luxury hotel with handsome furnishings. There's a café in the atrium and a gym, sauna and bathing pool.

Armenia Marriott Hotel (Map pp120-1; ☎ 59 90 00; www.hotelarmenia.com; Hanrapetutyan Hraparak; r from \$150; ☺) Recently upgraded as part of the Marriott chain, with a ritzy buffet breakfast, a 24-hour gym (one of the best in town), the excellent Ginger Restaurant and the popular Meeting Point café at the front. Rooms have balconies and the location can't be bettered.

Avan Villa Yerevan (Map p118; ☎ 54 27 07; www.tufenkian.am; 16 13th Poghots, Nork; s \$102-150, d \$122-170, ste \$210-230; ☺) High up in the Nork neighbourhood east of the centre, this is the

prime candidate for Armenia's best boutique hotel. Individually designed rooms and furnishings, plus fine food and wine in a handsome stone building are making Yerevan.

Hotel Bass (Map pp120-1; ☎ 55 99 85; www.bass.am; 3/1 Aigedzor Poghots; s \$117-123, d \$144-165; ☺) The Bass was one of the first upscale small hotels, catering largely to business people. New competition makes the prices seem high but it's very comfortable and a good mix of the efficient and the homely. It's in an interesting neighbourhood close to Marshall Baghramian Metro station. The hotel has switched-on staff, a bar and a restaurant. Prices are 30% lower from November to May.

Hotel Yerevan (Map pp120-1; ☎ 58 94 00; www.hotel.yerevan.com; 14 Abovyan Poghots; s \$180, d \$240-300, ste from \$393; ☺) This Italian-owned hotel is stylish in parts, but not as luxurious as the prices suggest. Still, it has all mod cons, a rooftop pool and an Italian restaurant.

Metropol Hotel (Map pp120-1; ☎ 54 37 01; www.metropol.am; 2/2 Mesrop Mashtots Poghota; s \$110, d \$125-150; ☺) Set away from the centre by HaghTanak Bridge, the brown carpet belies an otherwise decent attempt at an upscale hotel. It's a bit nouveau riche but it has a small basement swimming pool and sauna.

Terjan Hotel (☎ 39 03 88; www.terjanhotel.com; 39/1 5th Poghots, Silikyan; r \$78-132; ☺) Terjan is about 7km west of the city centre in the village-cum-suburb of Silikyan. The garden is splendid, and the ranch-style building has a business centre, swimming pool, sauna.

EATING

Yerevan's café culture is thriving – there are about 500 cafés and counting, twice as many as in 2000. Cafés stay open until the last customer leaves, serving drinks and an increasingly sophisticated array of snacks in parks and on sidewalks. The city's restaurants are all open late, prices are very reasonable and there's an interesting mix of upmarket restaurants serving Armenian, Russian, Georgian, Italian, Lebanese and Greek dishes. Hotel restaurants such as the multicuisine Ginger at Armenia Marriott Hotel are worth a splurge. Traditional fare is also thriving: there are plenty of places for carnivores to taste the best lamb, pork and beef *khoravats* (barbecue) Armenia can offer. Street snacks like kebabs wrapped in lavash and pastries and pies are sold from stalls and bakeries in every neighbourhood.



Restaurants

Artashi Mot (Map pp120-1; ☎ 55 32 23; Yervand Kochar Poghots, opposite south entrance of Surp Grigor Lusavorich cathedral; meals \$5) Artash's place is a traditional grill house with excellent cuts of veal, pork and beef, plus grilled vegetables and mushrooms. The real thing and great value too.

Beirut (Map pp120-1; no phone; 5 Vazgen Sargsyan Poghots; meals \$4-6) A clean, modern restaurant-café with good service and some of the best felafel (\$2) this side of Aleppo. The *lahmajoon* (mini pizzas with minced lamb and spices) are very filling for 80¢, and the pickles, salads, hummus and grills are tasty too.

Bellagio (Map pp120-1; ☎ 54 59 00; 3 Amiryani Poghots; meals \$10-20) Close to Hanrapetutyani Hraparak, Bellagio has a marvellously varied Russian, Armenian and French menu, all very well prepared.

Caucasus Tavern (Map pp120-1; ☎ 56 11 77; 82 Hanrapetutyani Poghots; meals \$3-7) The Caucasus Tavern is one of the more successful ethnic 'tourist' restaurants in town. Waiters in Georgian garb dish up cheap drinks such as mulberry *oghce* shots for 60¢, feasts of *khachapuri* pies and main courses (grills mostly) for \$2 to \$4, to the sound of live folk music.

Diamond (Map pp120-1; ☎ 54 34 34; 2 Parosyan Hrazdan Poghots, cnr Abovyan Poghots; meals \$3-8) Serves some of the best pizzas in Yerevan. There's a slightly formal *robya* (live jazz music (plinky keyboard versions of Sade's *Susannah Operator*) on the ground floor and a cosy cave-like basement with a bar. There's a big range of pizzas and pastas for \$2 to \$3, and fresh salads and grilled dishes for \$4 to \$6.

Dolmama's (Map pp120-1; ☎ 56 89 31; 10 Pushkin Poghots; meals from \$20) A small, upmarket restaurant where you'll get personal attention, a good wine list and some interesting local specialities – it only seems more expensive because it's in Yerevan.

Golden Fork (Map pp120-1; ☎ 53 35 54; 40 Mesrop Mashtots Poghots; meals \$6-8) This is one branch of a decent bistro with a long menu of Armenian and European cuisine with a Russian flavour. Steaks cost around \$6, salads 50¢ to \$1.20, plus it has a long list of desserts and cocktails including the very *rabiz* 'Kiss of a Prostitute'.

Lagonid Bistro-Cafe (Map pp120-1; ☎ 58 49 93; 37 Nalbandyan Poghots; meals \$3-5) A good-value restaurant serving terrific Syrian-Armenian cuisine, including *tabouleh* (50¢), hummus

CAFÉ CULTURE

Throw a rock in the air in Yerevan and it will hit a café. Sidewalk cafés have turned a break for coffee into an entertainment and dining treat, with TVs playing old movies or MTV, or a live band or singers with backing tapes and dangerously high heels after dark. They compete in designs as well – little wooden chalets, angular structures of glass and steel, Internet clubs, jungle greenhouses, leather couches and an unpretentious place for a drink, a smoke and a snack. In some places there's more café acreage than parkland. Many tables have little buzzers to summon waiters. 'Sooroh normal' costs 25¢ to 40¢, cappuccinos around 70¢, iced coffees with ice cream and cognac up to \$4. The menus can be several volumes of drinks and foods from nuts, chocolate and fruit to three course dinners. Sandwiches cost from \$1, large pizzas and grills around \$5.

Good places for people-watching include the cafés at the foot of the Cascade, the Poplovok (p134) and its neighbours on Isahakyan for glamour, and the cluster around the corner of Mashtots and Tumanyan by the Opera House. Some of these have glass indoor sections, 24-hour black marble-and neon-bars and sushi. The ring park over by Yerevan University also has trees, lawns, ponds and lots of cafés with striking décor, and there are more in the park belt down to Surp Grigor Lusavorich cathedral. This area may have the best variety of places, from live music and video screens to quiet leafy retreats and unpretentious places with just tables and umbrellas.

The **Meeting Point Café** (Map pp120-1) in front of the Armenia Marriott Hotel (p132) is popular for business lunches, or there are cheaper places on Vazgen Sargsyan Poghots. There are others in the Hrazdan Gorge; there's a pedestrian tunnel at the end of Karen Demirchian Poghots to the gorge's cooler air. **Monte Cristo** (Map pp120-1) – not the one on V Sargsyan – is a riverside palace sort of Disneyland meets Survivor, which also has good food. Further on are some handsome places popular with the rich and powerful, including the **Geghama Restaurant** (Map p118) and **Princess Marianna** (Map p118), a small ship done out with white tables and umbrellas with staff in naval uniforms, almost underneath the Kievan Poghots bridge.



KHORAVATS!

The *khoravats* restaurants along Proshyan Poghots (aka 'Barbecue Street') range from simple courtyard eateries run by families through to large and sophisticated places, especially on Tamanyan Poghots where huge terraces step down into the Hrazdan Gorge. The *khoravats* joints, similar to the old days when these house restaurants were rare examples of tolerated private enterprise, are on the upper stretch near the Greek embassy. Some have private dining rooms, other have live music and a gregarious atmosphere. It's hard to recommend just one – stroll along and pick one that suits your mood – with a loud *rabiz* soundtrack or sometimes without. A dinner of tasty grilled pork, lamb and beef wrapped in lavash with salad and onions only costs \$2 to \$4 at the smaller places. Many do grilled chicken (\$1.50) as well. I felt I was being fed to death by the mum and dad chefs crying 'Gnoom! Gnoom! Nstek!' (Come! Come! Sit!) every time. Some have home specialities – it helps to go with someone who can recommend a favourite.

Clustered around the corner of Paronyan Poghots and Dzorap ('gorge bank') Poghots are three of the modern variety. **Caesar's Palace**, **Urartu** and **Dzoraghybyur** (Map pp120-1) all cost a little more (around \$5 to \$8 per person, not including too many drinks) – Urartu has a good reputation for getting it all right.

(50¢), and grills and kebabs for around \$1.20. The décor is fairly simple but the food is fresh and tasty.

Our Village (Map pp120-1; ☎ 54 87 00; 5 Sayat-Nova Poghota; meals \$15) A rather fun 'ethnic' Armenian tourist restaurant with good home-style cooking and rousing live music, plus sturdy pine tables and a long drinks list.

Phoenicia Restaurant (Map pp120-1; ☎ 56 18 94; 3 Tamanyan Poghots, entrance on Isahakyan Poghots; meals \$15-20) A fine upscale restaurant with a refined wine list, good service and an interesting Italian, French and Middle-Eastern menu.

Sawasdee (Map pp120-1; ☎ 26 69 23; 28 Proshyan Poghots; meals \$6) Yerevan's only Thai chef works from this modest premises on 'barbecue street'. *Pad thai* costs \$3, curries around \$4. Some of the ingredients can be difficult to source locally but the spring rolls with sweet chilli sauce make a great change from *khoravats*.

Cafés

Marco Polo (Map pp120-1; ☎ 54 53 50; 1/3 Abovyan Poghots; pizzas \$1.50-4, mains \$5) A good meeting place, this big modern café and bar playing cool sounds is at the lower end of Abovyan. It has an extensive list of café snacks (salads, sandwiches, cakes), quite good pizzas, and main courses such as grilled lamb with salad for \$5. The coffee is good, and you can sit inside on a cold or rainy day.

Artbridge Bookstore Cafe (Map pp120-1; ☎ 52 12 39; 20 Abovyan Poghots; sandwiches \$1.50-3, coffee \$1-2) This is a comfy, arty café behind a bookstore which sells concert and drama tickets. The

food is reasonably priced and there are even nonsmoking tables. Huge café lattes cost \$2, grilled eggplant and goat cheese on herb bread is \$1.50. Just like a downtown café in any Western city, with Armenian business hours. Artbridge also has French toast and herbal teas for breakfast, and pastas in the evening.

Eastern Cuisine (Map p118; ☎ 27 16 20; 16 Komitas Poghota; meals \$4-6) A friendly modern bar/café/fast food joint which never seems to close. Massive *pides* (toasted bread with cheese, meat or vegetable fillings) are \$3, kebabs around the same price, including one made with that venerable Armenian ingredient, cannabis seeds. Students and locals stay up late to eat and drink on the terrace.

Sayat Nova (Map pp120-1; ☎ 58 00 33; nr Sayat-Nova Poghota & Khandjian Poghots; meals \$6) A colourful, busy institution combining a bar, rooftop café, restaurant and nightclub. The ground floor Amazon Restaurant has a tropical Mayan theme straight from Vegas, plus steaks for \$4, treats like sandwiches with avocado for \$2 and decent pizzas for \$2 to \$3. The café helped introduce *nargile* pipes to Yerevan – a hookah pipe with fruit-flavoured tobacco costs \$5 and last about 30 minutes.

DRINKING

Practically all restaurants and cafés serve drinks and are open late, so this is just a selection of specialist drinking spots.

Popovok Jazz Café (Map pp120-1; ☎ 52 23 03; Isahakyan Poghots, btwn Teryan Poghots & Mesrop Mashtots Poghota) A café complex centred on a large



pond. Poplovok is the one by the side of the pond, with live jazz on weekends. President Kocharian is a jazz fan and sometimes drops by. Musicians like Chick Corea have played here.

Cactus (Map pp120-1; ☎ 53 93 93; 42 Mesrop Mashtots Poghota; cocktails \$2-3, meals \$6) An ersatz Mexican restaurant (the basics are there but it lacks the spices), best enjoyed for the excellent frozen margaritas.

Wheel Club (Map pp120-1; ☎ 56 00 46; 2 Sayat-Nova Poghota; meals \$6-15) A safe, non-threatening space for expat men who need lager on tap and cute bar staff. Drop in and say hi to Roy from Liverpool. There's live music in one room from Yerevan's semimetal, rock and blues cover band scene, and sports on TV in the other. The meals are hearty and well-prepared; chunky cheeseburgers for \$4.50, steaks \$8 to \$13.

Cheers (Map pp120-1; 46 Nalbandyan Poghots) A cheerful, youthful pub popular with tourists and locals. There are good tunes and bright staff with a lethal array of drinks.

Pioneer Club (Map pp120-1; ☎ 58 18 19; 2 Marshall Baghramian Poghota) Part of the active 'exotic' cabaret scene, with a strip club downstairs but a porn-free bar upstairs, open until 3am or later with reasonably priced drinks.

ENTERTAINMENT

Casinos

Gambling is a thriving business and Yerevan's outskirts have several dozen casinos. Most resemble a small-town poker machines venue. The city authorities banished the casinos in 2002, sparking a building boom on major roads just over the city limits. The glitziest strip of garish neon-lit gambling dens is Argavand, 3km from the centre on the Echmiadzin highway. It's a slightly misleading introduction to the city if you've just arrived at Zvartnots. The casinos often have a restaurant and a nightclub attached. Most are OK but you might not want to push people about how they made their money. Many are open 24 hours, just like Kirk Kerkorian's MGM Grand in Las Vegas.

Cinemas

Kino Moskva (Map pp120-1; ☎ 52 12 10; 18 Abovyan Poghots) American blockbusters dubbed into Russian anyone? Tickets are cheap and there is a bar, an Internet club and a nightclub. Nice Soviet-Classical balcony.

Kino Nairi (Map pp120-1; ☎ 54 28 79; 50 Mesrop Mashtots Poghota) Sometimes shows movies in English one night a week, and has two slightly alternative late-night bars. The 13th Element (movie theme) and underground, with cabaret on weekends.

Gay & Lesbian Venues

Gay life is fairly low key, but moving ahead since the government repealed laws introduced (and enforced) by Stalin – check www.gayarmenia.com. Monte Cristo (below) and the Astral nightclub (below) suit the dancing queens, while quieter types prefer places like the Artbridge Bookstore Café (p134). Places where expats unwind seem to be popular, maybe because attitudes are more tolerant.

Nightclubs

The local club scene is developing quickly, and the first European-style techno caverns are catching on.

Aqua (Map pp120-1; Alek Manukyan Poghots; admission \$2.50; ☎ until late Tue-Sun) Sits over the little Getar River in the park in front of the Yerevan State University. This is one of several café-nightspots in this area, lively on weekends.

Astral (Map pp120-1; near Opera House; admission \$5; ☎ until late Wed-Sun) Astral is to Yerevan what the Hacienda was to Manchester; ground zero for the dance-music scene. It's in a huge underground space (a car park turned into a dance palace) next to the Opera House.

Bravo (Map p118; ☎ 27 06 10; 13 Hrachia Kochar Poghots, Arabkir; meals from \$8; ☎ until late Tue-Sun) This cheerfully weird complex of theme bar-restaurants with dancefloors and live music attracts an older crowd as much for its Japanese and European food as the tropical and jazz-themed rooms.

Café Atlantic (Map pp120-1; Pushkin Poghots; ☎ 24hr) This café-bar by the Opera House has pulsing music and a nightclub.

Monte Cristo (Map pp120-1; 8 Vazgen Sargsyan Poghots; admission Thu free, Fri & Sat \$5; ☎ until late) Monte Cristo was the in place for gay club-goers and young expats at the time of writing. It's cheesy but very relaxed once you get past the doorman. Monte Cristo also has a cool bistro with French and Middle Eastern food, wine and coffee.

Sport

The local football league has a regular winter season; the national team and top clubs

haven't had much luck in European competitions. Basketball is popular among kids, while *nardi* (backgammon) is the elders' game of choice, along with chess (watch for young chess prodigies in the sports pages). Armenia is represented in the top 50 ATP rankings by Sargis Sargsian and by diasporan players such as David Nalbandian and Andre Agassi (half-Armenian, in the latter's case).

There are two modern sport and leisure facilities in Yerevan. **Water World** (Map p118; ☎ 63 89 98; 40 Myasnikiyan Poghota; admission \$6; ☎ noon-8.30pm, nightclub until late Fri & Sat) is a \$2.50 taxi ride towards Sevan. The entry fee covers a range of pools and water rides, plus a beach towel. There are cafés and bars at the complex; quite a scene on a hot summer's day with all the kids, jewellery and luxuriant Armenian male body hair. It's open-air and closed in winter, except for penguins perhaps. **Bowling Centre** (Map p118; ☎ 39 36 37; 18 Halabyan Poghots, Ajapniak; ☎ noon-late Tue-Sun), Yerevan's best bowling hall, is modern and costs, per lane, \$10 an hour during the day or \$13 an hour after 6pm.

Theatre, Ballet & Classical Music

Billboards by the Opera House and on Abovyan Poghots advertise upcoming events; the Armenia Information office (p123) and the Artbridge Bookstore Café (p134) can help with tickets and upcoming events. Many venues have undergone thorough renovations, paid for by Kirk Kerkorian. Tickets are a steal at just \$1 to \$2.50 for most events. The Opera House has a concert hall and a theatre for opera and ballet. Orchestras sometimes have open rehearsals and concerts at the Arno Babadjanian Concert Hall before playing at the Opera House or the Komitas Chamber Music Hall.

Aram Khachaturian Concert Hall (Map pp120-1;

Opera House; ☎ 8 06 45; 46 Mesrop Mashtots Poghota)

Arno Babadjanian Concert Hall (Map pp120-1; ☎ 58 28 71; 2 Abovyan Poghots)

Chamber Theatre (Map pp120-1; ☎ 56 63 78; 58 Mesrop Mashtots Poghota)

Hakob Paronyan State Musical Comedy Theatre (Map pp120-1; ☎ 59 01 01; 7 Vazgen Sargsyan Poghots)

Hamazgain Theatre (Map pp120-1; ☎ 53 94 15; 26 Amiryan Poghots)

Hovhannes Tumanyan Theatre of Marionettes (Map pp120-1; ☎ 56 32 44; 4 Sayat-Nova Poghots)

Hrachia Ghaplanyan Drama Theatre (Map pp120-1; ☎ 52 47 23; 28 Isahakyan Poghots)

Komitas Chamber Music Hall (Map pp120-1; ☎ 52 67 18; Isahakyan Poghots, near Abovyan Poghots)

National Academic Opera and Ballet Theatre (Map pp120-1; Opera House; ☎ 52 70 70; 10 Abovyan Poghots)

State Musical Chamber Theatre (Map pp120-1; ☎ 27 07 40; Bafekamotiyun Hrapark)

State Theatre of Pantomime (Map pp120-1; ☎ 56 18 55; 36 Isahakyan Poghots)

SHOPPING

Vernissage market (Map pp120-1; Pavstos Byuzand Poghots) The main weekend market has lots of handicrafts for broader tastes (kitten portraits, smoked-glass desk ornaments) but also has reproductions of illuminated manuscripts, Russian dolls, Communist medals, embroidery and carpets for sale.

Vernissage art market (Map pp120-1) Around the Martiros Sarian statue across from Opera Square, you can turn up some real gems here at negotiable prices. Major painters and sculptors sometimes have works for sale in galleries (see p125), but the cognoscenti visit their home studios and buy directly from the creator. I ain't no expert but I was impressed – works selling for \$300 to \$500 here seem a bargain compared to Europe and North America.

Salt Sack (Map pp120-1; 3/1 Abovyan Poghots) Better than average souvenir and handicrafts shop with some maps and books for sale, and a range of jewellery, pottery, items like woven salt sacks, carpets, dolls and T-shirts.

Manul Collection (Map pp120-1; 9 Mesrop Mashtots Poghota) A local design firm making high quality leather bags for \$60 to \$100 and wallets for around \$25.

Other popular purchases include cognac and carpets. There are lots of cognac stores on the main streets (Mesrop Mashtots Poghota, Sayat-Nova Poghota and Abovyan Poghots). **Tufenkian Carpets** (Map pp120-1; 21/1 Tumanyan Poghots) is owned by James Tufenkian who made his name in Nepalese and Tibetan carpets and is now working to revive Armenian carpet-making tradition which had been collectivised and sucked dry during the Soviet era. **Gabeh Carpets** (Map pp120-1; 28 Moskovyan Poghots) is another big carpet dealer – there are others sold at the main Vernissage; see p178 for information on customs procedures.

Carpet prices vary greatly, from \$15,000 for a first-rate hand-woven carpet from Tufenkian Carpets, down to \$50 to \$100 for a smallish (1m by 1.5m) worn, homely

piece from the Vernissage. Most people would spend \$500 to \$1000 for a handmade nonantique carpet in reasonable condition.

Freight costs vary a lot according to the destination, but you're looking at a minimum of \$75 for a 2m long carpet to Europe, so it might be worth taking it with you if you're leaving by air and don't mind haggling over an excess baggage fee (Armenians do this all the time). See p178 for details on customs restrictions.

Bootleg CDs, games and software are sold everywhere for a pittance. **Hayastan Market** (Map pp120-1) above Barekamutyun Metro station is the closest thing to a department store, but it still has a bootleg feel to it. Some others are tucked into **underground stores** (Map pp120-1) at the Yeritasardakan Metro station. There are two big **shukas** (food markets; Map pp120-1) at 3 Mesrop Mashtots Poghota and at 35 Movses Khorenatsi Poghots, just off Tigran Mets. One of the city's biggest markets is called **Bangladesh** (Map p118), on Malatya Poghots in the western suburb of Malatya, off Sebastia Poghots.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Yerevan can be reached by air from many countries, by road from Georgia and Iran and by rail from Georgia. If you're travelling to Karabakh, you must come through Yerevan. While there are a couple of arduous bus services to Turkey via Georgia and flights to Istanbul, the land border is closed. There are no direct routes to Azerbaijan; it's most easily reached via Georgia.

Air

Zvartnots Airport (flight information ☎ 187), 11km from Yerevan, is Armenia's major airport. The main terminal looks like a Soviet scale model of the space station in *Star Trek Deep Space Nine*; high-tech in conception but low-tech in construction materials. The Zvartnots experience used to be memorable for graft, theft and ghastly toilets, but it is improving. An Argentinian-Armenian airports magnate has taken up the lease and repaired the runway and air traffic control, and a new terminal is being built. Checking in still brings flashes of a rugby match, as counters change inexplicably and everyone employs their best elbowing and queue-jumping techniques. In the departure hall there are a couple of snack bars and small duty-free shops and not much

else. At least the toilets are clean. See p262 for details on airlines which serve Zvartnots.

Bus

Buses are generally cheap and drive Soviet models, and while they may be half the price of a marshrutka they're often twice as slow as well. Buses mostly serve on village and suburban routes. The main bus station is the **Kilikya Avtokayan** (Map p118; ☎ 56 53 70; 6 Admiral Isakov Poghota), past the Yerevan Brandy Company on the Echmiadzin road, which has international bus services and buses to Gyumri and the towns of the Ararat Plain. The **Hysisayin Avtokayan** (Map p118; Northern Bus Station; Tbilisian Mayrughi, 4km from centre) is on the Tbilisi Hwy, and serves Sevan and Dilijan.

Besides the following there are also buses from the Kilikya Avtokayan as far as Moscow and Istanbul, which can take days and are for extreme travellers only.

Batumi (Kilikya Avtokayan; \$16; 14-20hr; 6pm Mon)

Tabriz (Kilikya Avtokayan; \$30; 14hr; 10am; book 1-2 weeks in advance through Tatev Travel, p123)

Tbilisi (Kilikya Avtokayan; \$6; about 9hr; 8am & 10am)

Tehran (Kilikya Avtokayan; \$30; 27hr; 10am; book 1-2 weeks in advance through Tatev Travel, p123)

Trabzon (Kilikya Avtokayan; \$45; about 30hr, 2pm Sat)

Car & Motorcycle

Car rental is fairly new to Armenia, as it is often cheaper to hire a car and a driver to tackle the variable road and traffic conditions. Beside the following specialists many travel agencies also arrange car hire.

EET (Map pp120-1; ☎ 54 42 05; 15 Tumanyan Poghots)

Hertz (Map pp120-1; ☎ 54 33 11; 7 Abovyan Poghots)

Marshrutkas

Yerevan is the hub of the national network, and minivans leave from spots around the city, from a kerb to a minibus station to one of the main bus stations. For transport all over Armenia they're fast, reasonably efficient and not much more expensive than the buses. The following list is obviously subject to change but it should assist. Ask '*Vor tegh marshrut gnoom eh?*' (What is your destination?). Drivers and helpers will often guide foreigners to the right van or put you in the front seat. Try to arrive about 30 minutes before departure to make sure you get a seat. This can be especially important in summer, where the myth of the killer chill can send cabin temperatures skyrocketing;

there's a folk myth that the slightest breeze in a moving vehicle is dangerous, especially for children. The trick is to arrive early and hustle to get a window seat, though matrons with hair sets to preserve might elbow you to close the window anyway.

NATIONAL

Agarak (Grigor Lusavorich Poghots; 30¢; 40min; every 2 hr 8am-6pm)

Alaverdi Shahumian Hraparak (Movses Khorenatsi Poghots; \$2.50; 3hr; 3pm, 4pm & 5pm) also (cnr Agatangeghos & Movses Khorenatsi Poghots; \$2.50; 3hr; 3pm) Yentasaradkan Metro station (Isahakyan Poghots; \$2.50; 3hr; 9am & 2pm)

Armavir (Hoktemberyan) (Kilikya Avtokayan; 80¢; 45min-1hr; every 15 min 7.30am-9.30pm)

Ashtarak (Grigor Lusavorich Poghots; 40¢; 30min; every hr 7.30am-6.30pm)

Dilijan (Hyusisayin Avtokayan; \$1.70; 2hr; 11am, plus Ijevan services)

Echmiadzin (Sarian Poghots near cnr Mesrop Mashtots; 40¢; 20-30mins; every 10 min 8am-10pm)

Goris Kilikya Avtokayan (\$4; 4-5hr; 8am & 3pm) Kino Rossiya (\$4; 4-5hr; every hr 8am-noon)

Gyumri (cnr Agatangeghos & Movses Khorenatsi Poghots; \$2; 2hr; every 20 min 7.30am-8pm)

Goght (for Garni) (GAI Poghots, near Mercedes Benz showroom; 40¢; 25min; every 50 min 10am-9.30pm)

Hrazdan (for Tsaghkadzor) (Raykom Station; 80¢; 40mins-1hr; every 30 min 9am-6pm)

Ijevan (Hyusisayin Avtokayan; \$2.50; 2½hr; 9am, 11am, 12.30pm & 3pm)

Jermuk (Kilikya Avtokayan; \$2.70; 2hr; 10am, 2.30pm & 3pm)

Kapan Kilikya Avtokayan (\$6; 6-8hr; 7.30am) Kino Rossiya (\$6; 6-8hr; 7.30am & 11.30am)

Khor Virap (Sasuntsi Davit Metro, Sevan Poghots; 60¢; 40min; 11am & 3pm)

Meghri (Kilikya Avtokayan; \$10; 9-11hr; 9am)

Sevan (28 Isahakyan Poghots in front of Drama Theatre; 80¢; 40min; every hr 9am-7pm)

Sisian Kilikya Avtokayan (\$4; 4hr; 8.30am, 10.30am, 12.30pm & 2.30pm) Kino Rossiya (\$4; 4hr; 9am)

Stepanavan (Kilikya Avtokayan; \$2.50; 3hr; 9am, 11am, 2.30pm & 4pm)

Vanadzor (cnr Agatangeghos & Movses Khorenatsi Poghots; \$1.60; 2hr; every 20 min, 7.30am-8pm)

Vayk (Kino Rossiya; \$1.60; 2hr; every hr 8am-7pm)

Yeghgnadzor (Kino Rossiya; \$1.60; 2hr; every hr 8am-7pm)

INTERNATIONAL

Batumi (Kilikya Avtokayan; \$20; 10-15hr; 7am Tue, Thu & Sat)

Stepanakert (Kilikya Avtokayan; \$8; 7-8hr; 8 or so per day, 7am-2pm)

Tbilisi (Kilikya Avtokayan; \$15; 6hr, 9am & 11am)

Train

The imposing **Yerevan Train Station** (Map p118; information ☎ 184; reservations ☎ 57 77 22; Sasuntsi Davit Hraparak) is off Tigran Melik Poghos, south of the city centre, with the Sasuntsi Davit Metro station underneath. The booking office is on the ground floor to the left. Information boards are in Armenian and Russian, but some of the staff speak English. The main route loops west and north through Gyumri (3½ hour), on through Vanadzor (8½ hour) and Ayrum near the border (11 hours) and on to Tbilisi (16 hours). There are a couple of local trains to Yerashk (near the Naxçıvan border) and to Hrazdan.

Trains leave for Tbilisi every second day at 7pm, arriving theoretically at 9.40am, though a couple of hours late is normal. There are also trains every day to Gyumri at 4.50pm. There are four classes. Open seating (on benches) costs \$1.60 to Gyumri or \$2.80 to Tbilisi, reserved seating costs \$2.50 (Gyumri) or \$4.20 (Tbilisi). Standard ('coupe') compartments cost \$4.20 to Gyumri, \$6.60 to Tbilisi, while luxe ('SV') compartments cost \$8.50 to Gyumri and \$14 to Tbilisi. Bedding costs \$1.50 in coupe compartments but comes free with SV class. The toilets aren't great and the carriages aren't new, but it's a very pretty ride. Book compartments a day ahead, and take food and drinks with you.

GETTING AROUND

To/From Zvartnots Airport

Minibuses and buses from Zvartnots (Place of Angels) Airport leave from the car park 300m from the main terminal. There are no trolleys so you have to cart your luggage by yourself. Yerevan minibus Nos 107 and 108 (30¢, every 20 minutes, 8am to 6pm) run between the airport and Barekamutyun Hraparak (which has the Barekamutyun Metro station). Bus No 50 goes to the airport down Mesrop Mashtots from the Opera House (25¢, every 30 minutes, 8am to 6pm). Alas for public transport users, many flights come and go at night, though this may change when they finish working on the runway during the day.

The price of a taxi to and from the airport turns on whether you arrange it in advance or chance it with the cowboys outside arrivals. Travel agencies usually charge \$20 for a pick-up or drop-off. A taxi should cost



\$10 from the airport, although they'll try for more. An airport drop-off with a telephone taxi can cost as little as \$4. The trip takes about 15 to 20 minutes to central Yerevan.

Public Transport

Yerevan has tonnes of public transport. There are no special passes, you pay as you go – but it's cheap, and it takes you right into the bustle of urban life.

The cheapest are the city minibuses, renowned here and across the developing world as the worst drivers on the streets. There are hundreds of routes, shown by a number in the front window. A sign in the window indicates the price, eg 100 dram. They do stop at bus stops but you can flag one down anywhere on the street. You pay when you leave. Ask to stop by saying 'kangnee aystaigh'. Women travellers should try to sit near the front and next to a female passenger if possible.

There are also buses following numbered routes and trolleybuses running on electricity from overhead cables. Trams have been ripped up in the city centre, but old rams still trundle along Komitas Poghota and Kievyan Poghots in the north of the city and elsewhere. Buses, trolleybuses and tram tickets cost 10¢ to 20¢.

Best of all there's the clean, safe and efficient **Yerevan Metro** (10¢; ☎ 6:30am-11pm; trains every 5-10 min), which runs roughly north-

south through these underground stations – Berekamutyun, Marshall Baghramian, Yeritasardakan, Hanrapetutyun Hraparak, Zoravar Andranik near Surp Grigor Lusavorich Cathedral and Sasun Davit station at the Yerevan Train Station. The line continues west and south on ground level to stations in the industrial suburbs.

Taxi

Taxis are cheap and plentiful, from well-loved Ladas to late-model Benzes. There are two types – street taxis and telephone or call taxis. Neither type carry meters, so you should set the price before starting off. You'll see numbers for call taxis stencilled on buildings everywhere. Tourist publications such as *Yerevan Guide* carry listings for many companies. A ride within the city centre in a street taxi costs \$1.60, or \$2.50 to Nork or Komitas Poghota. Prices with call taxis are around \$1 in the city centre or \$2 to \$3 to the suburbs.

AROUND YEREVAN

Because Armenia has so much history centred around its capital, it's easy to see many sites on half-day excursions from Yerevan. This section covers the *marz* (provinces) of Ararat, Kotayk, Armavir and Aragatsotn, comprising the core of the population on the ancient fertile fields of the Ararat Valley up onto the old eroded volcanic highlands of Mt Aragats.

To the west of Yerevan are the ruins of the 5th-century Zvartnots Cathedral and Holy Echmiadzin, the Armenian Vatican. Nineteenth-century visitors describe a rutted country track leading to Echmiadzin, but the modern highway takes only 30 minutes from Yerevan.

Probably the most frequently visited tourist sites in Armenia are the ancient temple and church sites of Garni and Geghard, east of Yerevan. Both places are busy with visitors on the weekend, but on a week day can be pleasantly deserted.

To the south of Yerevan is the monastery of Khor Virap, the vineyards of the Ararat Plains and ruins of the ancient city of Dvin. The Khosrov Nature Reserve exists in several chunks but the heart is reached through the town of Vedi.

YEREVAN MARSHRUTKAS

- 11 – Erebuni Museum, Tigran Mets Poghota, Hanrapetutyun Hraparak, Haghtanak Bridge
- 13 – Kilikya Avtokayan (Bus Station), Haghtanak Bridge, Mesrop Mashtots Poghota, Marshall Baghramian Poghota, Berekamutyun Metro
- 18 – Yerevan Train Station, Hanrapetutyun Hraparak, Nalbandyan Poghots, Marshall Baghramian Poghota, Ajapniak
- 43 – Nor Zeytun, Azatutyun Poghots, Haghtanak Park, Yeritasardakan Metro, Surp Grigor Lusavorich Cathedral, Gortsaranayin Metro
- 81 – Avan, Nalbandyan Poghots, Tigran Mets Poghota, Erebuni
- 101 – Hyusisayin Avtokayan (Northern Bus Station), Tbilisi Hwy, Komitas Poghota
- 107 – Zvartnots Airport, Echmiadzin–Yerevan Hwy, Sebastia Poghots, Kievyan Poghots, Berekamutyun Metro



GARNI TEMPLE ԳԱՐՆԻ

This comprehensively rebuilt Hellenic temple was dedicated to Helios, the Roman god of sun. It was built by Armenia's King Trdat I in the 1st century. It became a summer house for Armenian royalty after the Christian conversion.

The area around Garni has been inhabited since Neolithic times, with archaeologists finding Urartian cuneiform inscriptions dating back to the 8th century BC. The high promontory site is protected on three of four sides by a deep valley with rock cliffs, with a wall of massive blocks on the fourth. The wall featured 14 towers and an entrance graced by an arch. Ruins of the fortress are on the left and right sides as you walk towards the temple from the parking area. The Avan Gorge, carved by the Azat River, lies below.

A Roman bathhouse, now partially covered by a crumbling modern structure, was built for the royal residence. In the 7th century, a church was built nearby. The bathhouse features an intricate mosaic, made with 15 colours of natural stones, depicting the goddess of the ocean. In the ruins of the church next to the temple, is a **vishap** (dragon stone). This is a marker to show the location of water. Some marks on the middle of the stone are in fact writing from King Argishti from the 8th century BC, which reads 'Argishti, son of Menua, took people and cattle from Garni to Erebuni [the original site of Yerevan] to create a new community'.

GEGHARD MONASTERY ԳԵՂԱՐԴ

Named after the holy lance which pierced Christ's side at the crucifixion, Geghard Monastery stands in a steep scenic canyon 9km beyond Garni. The spear itself was once kept here but is now housed in the holy treasury at Echmiadzin (p141).

Legend has it that Geghard Monastery was founded in the 4th century. The most ancient of the **cave churches**, St Gregory's, dates back to the 7th century. Also called Ayrivank (Cave Monastery), Geghard was burned by invading Arabs in 923.

As you approach the monastery, look to the left up the hill for caves that house monastic cells built by monks. Trees here are often dotted with strips of cloth, as are trees on the other side of the monastery near the river. It is said a person can say a prayer or make a wish and tie a strip of cloth to a tree near the monastery to make it come true.

Inside the monastery walls, Geghard's two main churches date from the 13th century. The principal structure, **Surp Astvatsatsin** (Holy Mother of God) was built in 1215. The adjoining vestibule, larger than the church itself, with an intricate carved ceiling and nine arches, dates from 1215 to 1225. Outside above the south door is a **coat of arms** of the family of the Zakarian prince who built it. The theme is a common near-Eastern one, with the lion symbolising royal might.

On the right-hand side of the vestibule are two entrances to **chapels** hewn from the rock. The left-hand one dates from the



1240s. It contains a basin with spring water believed to be lucky or holy. Splashing some of this water on your body is said to keep your skin youthful.

The right-hand chapel, constructed in 1263, includes the four-column **burial chamber** of Prince Papaq Proshian and his wife Hruzakan. The family's **coat of arms**, carved in the rock above, features two lions chained together and an eagle.

Outside, steps on the left lead up the hill to a 10m passage into another **tomb** that has been carved out of the raw rock. The proportions in this room are nothing short of extraordinary, considering it was carved from the rock around it. The acoustics of the chamber are also quite amazing. In the far corner is an opening looking down on the church below.

On the right-hand side of the church are steps that lead to some interesting **monastic cells** and **khatchkars**. Outside the monastery, next to the stream, is an active *matagh* (sacrifice) site.

Getting There & Away

While marshrutkas go to Garni (40€, 25 minutes, every 50 minutes from 10am to 9.30pm), they don't continue on to Geghard, making this a complicated trip if you're trying to make it on public transport.

ZVARTNOTS CATHEDRAL

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Built in 641–61, the ruins of the **church** (admission \$1.60; ☎: 10am–5pm Tue–Sun) of Surp Grigor Lusavorich (St Gregory the Illuminator) at Zvartnots are different to every other in Armenia. Catholicos Nerses II the Builder (building might have been his profession before joining the clergy) sponsored construction of the cathedral. Reputedly one of the most beautiful churches in the world, it housed relics of St Gregory, the first Catholicos of the Armenian Church.

A model of the partially reconstructed church in the Museum of Armenian History (p125) in Yerevan shows it to have been a round creation with a hood-shaped dome 45m high. An earthquake in 930 caused the building to collapse. An arc of finely carved pillars and a massive stone floor is what remains, along with a profusion of decorated stone fragments. Architecture historians argue over whether the reconstruction in

the Armenian History Museum is really true to the church's original design. Either way, the pillars evoke a feeling for a Greek- and Roman-influenced **Leontokleion** similar to many early Syrian church ruins.

A pool in the centre of the building was used to baptise adults. Around the cathedral are the ruins of the palace of the Catholicos and the wine press and stone tanks of a massive medieval winery. Zvartnots lies in rich farmlands and orchard just south of the Echmiadzin–Yerevan highway, next to the delightfully named village of Ptghunk, 17km from Yerevan and 4km from the centre of Echmiadzin. It's easy to catch public transport either way along the highway.

ECHMIADZIN ԵՉՄԻԱԾԻՆ

☎ 31 / pop 52,000

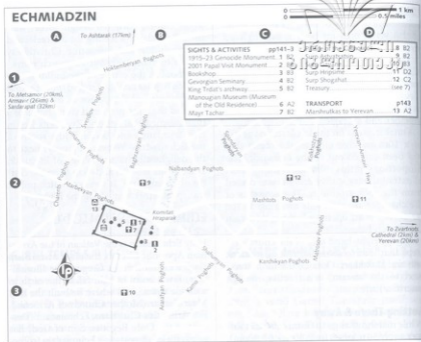
Holy Echmiadzin is the Vatican of the Armenian Apostolic Church, the place where Surp Grigor Lusavorich (St Gregory the Illuminator) saw a beam of light fall to the earth in a divine vision, and where he built the first Mayr Tachar (Mother Church of Armenia). For Armenian Christians, Echmiadzin (Descent of the Only Begotten Son of God) has unparalleled importance. Echmiadzin (sometimes spelt Ejmiatsin or Etchmiadzin) was the capital of Armenia from 180 to 340 AD, when Christianity was first adopted by the Armenian nation. The seat of the Catholicos (patriarch of all Armenians) wandered across western Armenia for centuries before returning to the Mayr Tachar in 1441, with substantial rebuilding in the 15th century. The cathedral has sprouted more bell towers over the last 400 years but the core is much as St Gregory's vision guided him.

The Palace of the Catholicos in front of the Mayr Tachar is the home of the present Catholicos, Garegin II, the supreme prelate of the 1700-year-old Armenian Apostolic faith, and is reviving fully as an active Christian centre after decades of Soviet atheism. The modern town (renamed Vagarshapat in the 1990s, a name so rarely used it's practically a local trivia question) is a fairly utilitarian collection of apartment blocks, parks and industrial decline, 21km west of Yerevan.

Holy See of Echmiadzin

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The main cathedral, **Mayr Tachar**, stands in a quadrangle of hedges and lawn surrounded by



19th-century buildings. By the main entrance at the southern end the large grey **2001 Papal Visit Monument**, built for Pope John Paul II's visit and mass in 2001, stands next to the **Gevorgian Seminary**. The 19th-century seminary was closed in 1921 when Echmiadzin was swamped by refugees from the genocide, and it was forbidden to reopen under Soviet rule. The main gate leads past the bookshop between buildings holding monastic cells to the central compound. Bearded clergymen in hooded black robes glide along the garden paths around the Mayr Tachar.

The three-tiered bell tower at the entrance of the church is richly carved, and dates from 1648. Inside, the church is modest in scale, about 20m by 20m, but the roof gleams with frescoes. Rich swirls of red, green and gold, first painted by Naghash Hovnatan in the early 18th century, evoke an Oriental garden of roses, cypress trees and winged cherubs. At the centre is an altar at the place where St Gregory saw the divine light strike the ground. The main altar holds an image of the Virgin and Child surrounded by rich carpets. Light a few candles and take it all in.

There are some beautiful Armenian classical paintings around the walls, including a lovely Virgin and Child by Vadkes Surenyants, and a striking image of Christ on the cross, grey with pain, with sad-eyed angels collecting streams of blood in goblets.

At the rear of the church, through a door on the **right** of the altar, is the **treasury**. It houses 1700 years of treasure collected by the church, including the Holy Lance (Surp Geghard), the weapon used by a Roman soldier to pierce the side of Christ on his way to Calvary. It's a suitably brutish spearhead set into a ornate gold and silver casing. It was brought to Echmiadzin from Geghard Monastery.

There is also an image of the crucifixion which, according to tradition, was carved by St John. The treasury has relics of the apostles Thaddeus, Peter and Andrew, some in hand or arm-shaped reliquaries, and fragments of the Holy Cross and Noah's Ark. Among the other items on display are vestments, chalices, jewelled crosses and fragile illuminated manuscripts, part of the royal crown of King Trdat the Great, vessels for myrrh, crosiers

tiaras and censers. A door from the treasury leads under the main body of the church to a pagan shrine with a fire altar, seemingly left *in situ* in case this whole Christianity thing turned out to be a fad and the old faiths reasserted themselves. The shrine can be visited with a prior appointment through a travel agency, or with a bit of luck by asking one of the clerics in the treasury.

The gardens of Mayr Tachar have a **1915–23 Genocide Monument** and many fine *khatchkars* assembled from around the country. The **archway** leading to the Palace of the Catholicos was built by King Trdat III in the 4th century. The **Manougian Museum (Museum of the Old Residence)** stands next to the palace. It's off-limits to casual visitors but if you have some clout with the Armenian church it can be visited. Travel agencies in Yerevan can arrange visits to the church's private museum. The two-storey museum contains portraits of patriarchs and saints, a restored throne room, and gifts to the church such as fine furniture and manuscripts. There are some particularly fine *khatchkars* across the garden from the museum's entrance, including some from the threatened cemetery in Julfa's old town in Naxçıvan.

Surp Gayane ՍՈՒՐԲ ԳԱՅԱՆԵ

This handsome church is a short walk past the main gate of the Holy See from the town's main square. St Gayane was the prioress of the 32 virtuous maidens who accompanied St Hripsime to Armenia. The original 6th-century chapel over her grave was rebuilt into a church in 1630. It's a fine orange-toned building with a plain interior and some fine *khatchkars* scattered about. The central altar holds an icon of the Virgin and Child with golden haloes, and there's delicate stonework around the doorway and at the base of the altar. The church compound has trellised vineyards and fruit trees.

Surp Shoghahat ՍՈՒՐԲ ՇՈՂԱԿԱԹ

This 17th-century church rather pales beside the splendour of its neighbours in Echmiadzin but it's a sturdy stone structure with simple, elegant lines. It was rebuilt on the foundations of a chapel to one of the companions of Hripsime and Gayane. Surp Shoghahat is on Nalbandyan Poghots, about two thirds of the way from Mayr Tachar to Surp Hripsime.

Surp Hripsime ՍՈՒՐԲ ՀՐԻՍԻՄԵ

This lovely church was originally built in 618, replacing an earlier chapel on the site where Hripsime is said to have been killed after she refused to marry King Trdat III, choosing instead to remain true to her faith. Hripsime fled Diocletian's Roman Empire after the pagan emperor chose her from among the portraits of the most beautiful women in his domain. She and a group of Christian maidens fled to Armenia, where King Trdat III also took a fancy to her. Again she refused, and was stoned to death with her companions outside Trdat's palace. The story was popular in medieval Europe, with the 32 murdered maidens inflated up to 11,000 or more in some accounts. The church was comprehensively reconstructed in 1653. A two-tiered bell tower stands at the entrance of the almost square church, topped by a broad drum pierced with windows. The church stands next to the main road into Echmiadzin from Yerevan, about 2km from the Holy See.

Getting There & Away

Marshrutkas for Yerevan (40¢, 20 to 30 minutes, 21 km, every 10 minutes) leave from Atarbekyan Poghots, two blocks up from the main traffic circle. The minivans leave from on Sarian Poghots in Yerevan near the corner with Mesrop Mashtots Poghota. Taxi rides to Surp Hripsime and Zvartnots save long walks or short hops on public transport.

METSAMOR MUSEUM ՄԵՇԱՍՈՐ ԹԱՆԳԱՐԱՆ

Besides an internationally renowned nuclear power plant, Metsamor also has intriguing remains of sophisticated early cultures. The **Metsamor Museum** (☎ 3750-59 26 77; admission 80¢; ⏰ 10am–4.30pm Tue–Sun), 6km from Metsamor town, displays evidence of thousands of years of civilisation from an early Iron Age settlement excavated nearby. From Echmiadzin take the main road to Armavir, then turn left and travel for 3km to the village of Taronik, then take a right in the village and another left about 500m on. The collection includes gold jewellery from 600 BC and earlier, and an ancient astrological stone. Metsamor was highly advanced in metallurgy around 3000 BC, refining iron slag from the gravel.

Outside the museum entrance is a row of **phallus stones**, some measuring 3m high,

most brought here from other excavation sites. Dating from pre-Christian times, the stones are fertility symbols created to ask for God's help not only with human fertility, but also for good crops and animal health. Other exhibits require more explanation and an English-speaking guide. Behind the museum, giant stones around the outside of the excavation are part of an ancient **Cyclopean fortress**, yet to be completely excavated.

On the second hill, before descending to the **covered excavation site**, ask someone from the museum to point out the lichen-mottled **astrological stone**, with markings that were part of an early astronomical observatory with similarities to Zorats Karer near Sisian.

Sleeping & Eating

Lake Motel (☎ 31-45 00 44; Aknalich rd, 2km from Metsamor archaeological site; r \$15-50; ☼) This cheerful cluster of cottages sits by a small lake which attracts migratory birds. There's a little restaurant on the pier and great little cottages with hot water, couches, TV and privacy (plus a nuclear power plant nearby...).

SARDARAPAT ՍԱՐԴԱՐԱՊԱՏ

About 10km past the small city of Armavir (Hoktemberyan) in the orchards and farms of the Ararat Plain stands the venerated war memorial site of **Sardarapat** (☎ 37-6 34 97; admission 80¢; ☼ 10am-4.30pm Tue-Sun). It was here in May 1918 that the forces of the first Armenian republic under Zoravar (General) Andranik turned back the Turkish invaders and saved the country from a likely annihilation. Built in 1968 with statues of giant bulls, a 35m stone belltower shrine to the fallen, five eagle statues built of tuff and a memorial wall, the site puts an Armenian twist on Soviet war memorials. Nationalist Armenians treat a visit here as a kind of pilgrimage. The museum has relics from the battle itself in the first hall, as well as exhibits of items from the Neolithic Age up to the Middle Ages. Upstairs there are some superb examples of Armenian carpets, jewellery, ceramics and handicrafts.

Getting There & Away

Sardarapat is about 10km southwest of Armavir, signposted near the village of Araks. If time is short it makes sense to combine a visit with one to Echmiadzin or Metsamor. Marshrutkas leave from Yere-

van's Kilikya Avtokavan for Armavir (80¢, 45 minutes to an hour, every 15/minutes 7.30am to 9.30pm). A taxi from Armavir with two hours of driving should cost about \$7 with bargaining.

ASHTARAK ԱՇՏԱՐԱԿ

☎ 32 / pop 27,000

Ashtarak is a mid-sized regional town on the Kasagh Gorge, 22km northwest of Yerevan and somewhat higher at 1100m. The Kasagh River slices through layers of cooled lava between Mt Aragats and Mt Ara, right through Ashtarak. Ashtarak is the capital of Aragatsotn, which takes in the high, lonely slopes of Mt Aragats and the highland town of Aparan, the unhappy butt of jokes about being home to the dimmest people in the country. Ashtarak is an interesting old town with lots of 19th-century buildings. There's a 16th-century stone bridge below the new bridge, and four churches around town, including the little 7th-century Karmravor church with intricate carvings and a cemetery with *khatchkars* a short way north, and the 6th-century Tsiranavor church on the edge of the gorge. Ashtarak has some very rural neighbourhoods as well, full of fruit trees and stacks of hay in late summer.

Kasagh Gorge Churches

Churches from the 6th to the 16th century dot the landscape north and south of Ashtarak along the gorge of the little Kasagh River. Across the gorge from Yerevan on the northern outskirts of Ashtarak is the village of **Mughni**, with the splendid **Surp Gevorg** church, finished in 1669, featuring striped bands of stone around its central drum and a classic half-folded umbrella cone on top. The church has been restored. About 4km north in **Ohanavan** is the 7th-century monastery of **Hovhannavank**, famous for producing manuscripts and for its wealth of inscriptions and decorative carvings. It's right on the lip of the gorge, looking as though it pins down the flat volcanic grazing land, preventing it from tumbling into the chasm. Another 5km north is perhaps the prettiest monastery of all, **Saghmosavank**, a cluster of drums and conical domes from the 13th century.

About 8km southwest of Ashtarak in **Oshakan** is a 19th-century church built over the tomb of St Mesrop Mashtots, the genius who created the Armenian alphabet.

Sleeping & Eating

Ashtarak Dzor (☎ 3 67 78; Kasagh Gorge, Ashtarak; s/d \$18/42; ☼) A mid-range hotel best known for its dining and entertainment, built on terraces down the walls of Ashtarak Gorge. *Khoravats* dinners cost \$5, and there's a big dance floor and some pretty good local talent singing and playing. The hotel rooms are modern with satellite TV, though the service is a bit rusty. A fun choice for a weekend out of Yerevan with friends.

Getting There & Away

Ashtarak is on a major road, so public transport is easy. In Yerevan, Ashtarak marshrutkas leave from Grigor Lusavorich Poghots, (40¢, 30 minutes, every hour from 7.30am to 6.30pm). There are also marshrutkas from here to villages such as Voskevaz and Agarak which go via Ashtarak. Marshrutkas return to Yerevan from Ashtarak's main *shuka*.


You can take a car and driver from Yerevan for the day, or hire one locally. A three- or four-hour tour from Oshakan to Saghmosavank will cost about \$8.

BYURAKAN & AROUND

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The landscape around the village of Byurakan, about 14km west of Ashtarak on the southern slopes of Mt Aragats, includes a couple of astronomical observatories and the magnificent fortress of Amberd, 15km up the mountain. The Surp Hovhannes church in Byurakan is an interesting early basilica model. Other churches and villages in the vicinity have *khatchkars* and *vishap* scattered about. The long volcanic slopes are quite stark in the middle of summer but the views across to Mt Ararat are tremendous.

The fortress of **Amberd** was constructed on a ridge above the confluence of the little gorges of the Amberd and Arkashen streams. The high stone walls and rounded towers are a rough but effective defence, rebuilt many times but mostly dating from the 11th century. It's easy to see why the site was chosen – at 2300m above sea level, it commands a position above the farms and trade routes of the Ararat Plain. According to local lore, the thick walls of the fortress were never breached. A church stands downhill from the fortress with the ruins of fortified houses and a substantial public bathhouse.



The fortress is about a two-hour trek from the scout camp near the very end of Byurakan village. The scenery along the footpath is rewarding. Walk along the Mt Aragats road until you reach the ski house. A sign in Cyrillic and Armenian points ahead – take the lefthand fork anyway. The fortress can be seen from a distance, but you have to walk around a steep valley before reaching it. By car, the road loops around for 15km from Byurakan.

The **Tegher monastery** is about 5km uphill from the village of Aghtsk in the old village of the same name, on the far side of the Amberd Gorge from Byurakan. The church was built by Mamakhatun, the wife of Prince Vache Vahutyan, in 1232.

MT ARAGATS ԱՐԱԳԱՏ ԼԵՐ

Snow covers the top of the highest mountain in modern Armenia almost year-round, so climbing is best in July, August or September. Beware – even in August, clouds can gather in the crater by about 10am, so it's good to start walking as early as possible. It's not unusual for hikers to start on mountain ascents at 5am. The southernmost of its four peaks (3893m) is easy enough for inexperienced climbers but the northern peak (4090m) demands greater abilities.

The road from Byurakan winds 27km up to the Cosmic Ray Institute observatory and the waters of Kari Lich. The road ends at the lake, and uphill the route is rocky and strewn with debris. There's no path, but the peaks are visible so you basically slog it uphill. Several tour companies can arrange walks up Mt Aragats, including the Ajdahag Mountain Club (p123) and Avarayr (p123). **Serzh Hovsepyan** (☎ 35 00 46; serzh_hovsepyan@yahoo.com) is also a recommended guide for climbing the mountain's peaks. Serzh is a member of the Spitak mountain rescue team.

Sleeping

Mary's Guest House (Pine Tree House) (☎ 52 16 25; s/d \$25/50) A much-praised retreat-style B&B in Byurakan with hot showers and good views; breakfast is included. Mary Panyan is an experienced guide and an excellent hostess.

Getting There & Away

Public transport here is fairly limited, though there are six or so marshrutkas and buses a day from the bus stand on Grigor Lusavorich

Poghota in Yerevan to Agarak (50¢), 6km south of Byurakan on the Ashtarak-Gyumri highway. To get from Agarak to Byurakan, look for a taxi or try to catch a ride. A car and driver from Yerevan is usually the easiest option.

TALIN & AROUND ԹԱԼԻՆ

☎ 490 / pop 8,000

Talin lies in one of the stonier, more rugged corners of the country, 75km northwest of Yerevan. The area has a moody landscape, especially striking on days of patchy cloud when shadows roam over the dry pastures and rocks. There's very little accommodation or public transport out here. Many of the surrounding villages were settled by refugees from Van and Kars in historic western Armenia, now part of Turkey, and local folk-dancing troupes preserve western Armenian songs and dances. There are also some Yezidi Kurd villages in the vicinity. Those with an abiding love of Armenian church architecture might want to visit Aruch's 7th-century **Aruchavank** monastery, midway between Ashtarak and Talin, and a similar 7th-century **Surp Astvatsatsin** church on the outskirts of Talin itself. About 5km south of Talin is the interesting 10th-century double fortress of **Dashtadem**, which still shelters flocks of sheep inside its sturdy walls after dark. Follow the highway onto Gyumri to **Mastara** and its very different fortlike church from the 5th century, with rare vestiges of frescoes.

KHOR VIRAP MONASTERY

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Khor Virap Monastery, 30km south of Yerevan, is a famous pilgrimage site with an iconic location at the foot of Mt Ararat. The monastery is on a hillock close to the Araks River, overlooking river pastures, stork nests and vineyards, 4km off the main highway through the village of Pokr Vedi (sometimes also called Khor Virap). The pagan King Trdat III imprisoned St Gregory the Illuminator (Surp Grigor Lusavorich) in a well (*khov virap* means 'deep well') here for 12 years, where he was secretly fed by Christian women. The king was later cursed by madness (or cursed by sprouting the head of a boar in a more colourful version) and miraculously cured by St Gregory. Historians contend that Trdat may have switched allegiances to tap into the strength of Ar-

menia's growing Christian community in the face of Roman aggression. In any case the king converted to Christianity, and St Gregory became the first Catholicos of the Armenian Apostolic Church, about building churches on top of pagan temples and teaching the faith.

The ground level buildings at Khor Virap have been repeatedly rebuilt since at least the 6th century, and the main Surp Astvatsatsin church dates from the 17th century. Khor Virap is an important pilgrimage site and people often visit for a baptism or after a wedding to perform a *matagh* (a sacrifice, often of sheep or chicken), which keeps the priests busy on weekends. It's a shivery experience to climb 60m down into the well. The well is lighted, but you need to wear sturdy shoes to scale the metal ladder. Thankfully there don't seem to be any descendants of the snakes and other vermin the unreformed King Trdat threw in to torment St Gregory. Just outside the monastery walls are some excavations on the site of Artashat, Trdat's capital, founded in the 2nd century BC.

The Armash Fish Ponds, 25km downstream from Khor Virap near the border town of Yeraskh are home to a great variety of migrating birds in spring and autumn as well as local species. The ruins of the ancient capital of Dvin are on the edge of the plains near Verin Dvin, about 13km from Artashat.

Getting There & Away

There are two marshrutkas a day to Khor Virap from Yerevan (60¢, 11am and 3pm) from the Sasuntsi Davit Metro station, but most people visit by car. The main highway is 4km away, with lots of public transport to and from Ararat and towns further south. A return-trip by car from Yerevan costs about \$20 through a taxi service.

KHOSROV NATURE RESERVE

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Khosrov Nature Reserve protects several chunks of rugged hills and wooded slopes in the upper valleys of the Azat, Votankunk and Khosrov Rivers. The most visited part is around Garni and Geghard, where the Havuts Tar monastery is a rewarding hour-long hike from the river below Garni. You need a 4WD to reach the other parts of the reserve. The park's main office is in Vedi, 49km from Yerevan. From here 4WD roads



climb up past Dashtakar to a bridge across to Urtsadzor, and then up to **Surp Karapet**. It's an isolated spot with a 13th-century church topped by a classic ribbed umbrella cone, more easily reached via the southern highway, at the turnoff about 4km after the hamlet of Tigranashen. The road up to the reserve reaches a pretty camping spot on the Vedi river, then it's a trek by foot into the rugged light forest to the **Jamsho Monastery** and **Geghi Fort**. Companies such as Avarayr (p123) arrange treks and nature tours in the reserve.

NORTHERN ARMENIA

Northern Armenia comprises the *marzes* of Shirak, Lori and Tavush – this chapter also includes the rugged bare highlands of Gegarkunik around gorgeous Lake Sevan. The regional landscapes vary from Shirak's open plains to Lori's pine forests and Tavush's lush hornbeam and oak woods around Dilijan. The 1988 Spitak earthquake caused mass destruction in Spitak and Gyumri, killing an estimated 25,000 people, and a major rebuilding effort in the last few years is only now putting the terrible aftermath in the past. Numerous early Christian sites dot the hills and forests, including the World Heritage-listed monasteries of Sanahin and Haghpat near Alaverdi, the 6th-century Odzun Monastery with its towering stone arches, and the deserted church of Akhtala.

GYUMRI ԳՅՈՒՄՐԻ

☎ 41 / pop 80,000

Armenia's second biggest city has struggled harder since the end of the USSR than most places in the Caucasus. Devastated by the 1988 earthquake and left hanging by a botched rebuilding effort, the population has fallen from 220,000 before the earthquake to 80,000 today. Few factories have reopened, but the Lincy Foundation and other foreign donors have revitalised the town's reconstruction with a corridor of new apartment buildings. Many people endured up to 15 years of living in rusty, rodent-prone *domiks* (housing units made from cargo containers).

Ancient trade routes are shut off by the Turkish blockade and by shredded roads and police extortion in Georgia, but some new shops and hotels are among the first signs of a revival. The townsfolk of Gyumri have a distinctive accent with hints of western Armenian, and a famously ridiculous sense of humour in tandem with conservative social mores. Other Armenians like to tease Gyumrits about local delicacies such as *kalla* (cow's head) and the particularly rich stew of *khash* made here in the cold seasons. The winters last longer here than in Yerevan, until April or May.

Modern Gyumri emerged from the 19th-century Russian garrison town of Alexandropol, and was built up with cobbled streets and handsome tuff-faced homes, shops and churches. The rest of the city is, frankly,

NORTHERN ARMENIA



GYUMRI

0 0.1 0.2 miles
0 0.1 0.2 km

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distinctly eastern bloc, with rows of apartment buildings and a garrison of Russian soldiers watching the frontier with NATO. The city has undergone several name changes (to Gyumri, Leninakan, Kumayri briefly and now Gyumri again), and some signposts still spell out Leninakan. The splendid churches of Marmashen and Harichavank can be visited in a single day trip from the city.

Orientation & Information

Gyumri rather lacks a town centre but stretches out along a narrow north-south corridor, from the avtokayan on Tigranyan Poghots up Haghtanaki Poghota and Sayat-Nova Poghots to the Marz Petaran (Provincial Headquarters) on Garegin Nzhdeh Poghots.

Most of the banks and hotels are on this strip. A fair percentage of the population lives in the postearthquake Soviet-built neighbourhood of Ani, several kilometres northwest towards Marmashen (it's in the opposite direction to the Ani viewpoint). International fundraisers and donors are commemorated in street names such as Charles Aznavour Hraparak and Margaret Thatcher Poghots.

In downtown Gyumri the centre of the shopping district lies between Haghtanaki Poghota, Azatutyan Hraparak (Freedom Square) and Khaghaghutyuan Hraparak (Peace Square). The Haypost office and the Zhravi private telephone office are on little Rizhkov Poghots between the two squares.

The **Shirak Development Centre** (☎ 3 39 61; www.shirakinfo.am; 16 Garegin Nzhdeh Poghots; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Fri), in the Marz Petaran building, acts as a local tourist office, with brochures on local sights and a map. The staff can help arrange tours around Shirak and Gyumri with English-speaking drivers.

Shirak Tours (☎ 2 31 48; www.berlinhotel-gyumri.am; 25 Haghtanaki Poghota) is a useful local tour company run from the Gastehaus Berlin by Alex Ter-Minasyan. He arranges day trips by car to Marmashen for \$20 and to Harichavank for \$40. Shirak Tours works with an English-speaking historian/archaeologist who takes tours to lesser-known sites such as the fortress at Horom and the ruins of Benjamin. Shirak Tours also arranges wildlife excursions to Lake Arpi (Turki Lich) high in the Ashotsk Plateau, and down the Akhuryan River to the Ani viewpoint.

There are several Internet cafés and banks along Sayat-Nova and Garegin Nzhdeh Poghots, including the **Internet Club** (7 Sayat-Nova Poghots) and **4+1 Internet** (22 Garegin Nzhdeh).

Sights

The historic core of town, the **Kumayri** neighbourhood, is between Azatutyan Hraparak and the city park – the Shirak Development Centre has a walking-tour brochure of the district. While not as intact as Goris, the buildings of Kumayri are of a finer standard. Gyumri's atmospheric 19th-century Astvatsatsin church, locally called **Yot Verk** (Seven Wounds) stands on the northern side of the square. The battered and worn roof cones from an earlier incarnation of the church stand outside. On the south side of the square is the **Amenaprkich** (All Saviours) church, which is being restored with an eye for detail the envy of a Silver Age churchbuilder. A couple of blocks north of Yot Verk is the more modest **Surp Nishan** church built in 1870; it's usually locked. The old buildings along Gorki Poghots and by the city park are worth wandering around – some buildings are shells, others have been restored to their prime. On Teryan Poghots there is a 19th-century pyramid-shaped **Russian army chapel** with a peaked silver roof. Continuing over the hill for 500m or so brings you to the **Sev Ghul** or 'black sentry' fort. From here you can see the **Mother Armenia statue** on an adjacent hill, towards the Turkish border.

The **Museum of National Architecture and Urban Life of Gyumri** (☎ 2 36 00; 47 Haghtanaki Poghots; admission 20C; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun) is a substantial building in the corner with Teryan Poghots. The 1872 mansion of the Dzitoghtsyan's includes fine furniture and authentic décor, plus an art gallery and displays on local history. The **Museum of the Aslamazyan Sisters** (232 Abovyan Poghots; admission 10C; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Fri) on what was once Kumayri's finest promenade is another house museum with a display of traditional furnishings and more contemporary artworks.

Sleeping

Donara Kazaryan (☎ 2 42 63; 142 Frunze Poghots; s/d \$7.50/15) Donara runs a homestay from her fine family house, with two chintzy bedrooms and a shared bathroom. Daughter Vartuhi speaks some English.

Garun Hotel (☎ 3 77 03; 1 Marmashen Poghots; r \$16) Quite decent, with rooms with hot water, a TV and VCR, and a kitchen on site, but it's inconveniently out of town on the Marmashen road and best used by those with their own transport.

Gastehaus Berlin (Berlin Hotel) (☎ 2 31 48; www.berlinhotel-gyumri.am; 25 Haghtanaki Poghots; s/d \$60/70; ☎) This hotel was built as an accommodation wing for a German hospital on the same premises, and while it has a slightly institutional feel it's very comfy and the manager is a real character. The spacious rooms have comfy beds, satellite TV and minibar. The breakfasts are hearty and the kitchen prepares fine lunches and dinners too.

Hotel IsUZ (☎ 3 33 99; www.isuz.am; 1/5 Garegin Nzhdeh Poghots; s \$60-90, d \$70-100; ☎) This is a new hotel with 12 comfortable rooms with minibars, excellent bathrooms and neat decorations including murals. The front desk can arrange transport.

Hotel Araks (27 Gorki Poghots) A luxury hotel project which hadn't opened at the time of research. The building is one of the old quarter's finest.

Eating

There are cheap street snacks available from shops and stalls at the *shuka* and a good range of new and historic restaurants around town.

Phaeton Alek (☎ 3 29 88; 47 Haghtanaki Poghota; meals \$4-7) In the cellars of the architecture museum, this spot often hosts groups for an

'ethnic' experience, with old artifacts on the walls and sometimes entertainment as well. Solo diners may not feel so welcome but the food is hearty and good value.

Gyumri Restaurant (☎ 2 37 69; 30 Gorki Poghots; meals \$5) This is tucked away in an old, atmospheric cellar in the building on the corner of Gorki and Shahumian – enter through the archway on Gorki and the door is on the left. It's a simple, old-fashioned affair with no menus, so the waiters tell you what's on offer – generally beef and pork *khoravats* and sometimes grilled *alabalagh* (trout) from local rivers and lakes.

Polos Mukuch (☎ 3 45 11; 75 Jivani Poghots; meals \$5) The latest restaurant to occupy a historic building near the Hotel Araks, Polos Mukuch is popular with family groups and sometimes has entertainment – the menu is Armenian and has a long list of drinks.

Edera (104 Gorki Poghots; meals \$2-4) Near the railway station is this clean local pizzeria. It's open until late, with pizzas for \$1 to \$3 and salads for \$1.

Shara Restaurant (1/5 Garegin Nzhdeh Poghots; meals \$7) Located in Hotel IsUz, this place has a rustic theme with typical Armenian fare (*khoravats*, salads etc). Pizza di Napoli around the side of the complex has great pizzas for \$1.50 to \$3.

Drinking & Entertainment

The **Flamingo Café** and **Robinson's** occupy the little park in the middle of Khaghaghutyun Hraparak. Both serve drinks and *khoravats* until the last customer staggers away, with a soundtrack of pumping Russian drinking tunes.

Meanwhile Gyumri's only nightclub, the **21/16 Club** (Ghorgharyan Poghots; ☎ 5-10pm Thu-Sat) is pushing the limits of local social mores, yet still closes at 10pm.

Getting There & Around

Buses and marshrutkas, including those to Yerevan (\$2, two hours, every 20 minutes 7.30am to 8pm), leave from the avtokayan on Tigranyan Poghots. Marshrutkas to Vanadzor (\$1.20, one hour) leave at 9am, 10.15am, 1pm and 2pm. Buses and marshrutkas alternate on the daily run to Tbilisi (\$5, 3½ hours, 10.30am). There are buses and marshrutkas on a road past the border at Bavra to Akhalkalaki (\$2.50, three to six hours, 10am and 2.30pm daily) and

Akhaltsikhe (\$4.30, five to 10 hours, 7am). From Gyumri to the nearest open Turkish border gate at Posof can take 10 hours or more.

There's a daily train to Tbilisi (80¢, five hours, 4.50pm). The line runs very close to the border along the valley of the Akhuryan River. Trains between Yerevan and Tbilisi run every day in one direction, (seat \$6, cabin berth \$10 to Tbilisi). There is one train at 6am to Vanadzor (five hours) and on to Alaverdi (seven hours).

There are lots of taxis in Gyumri and cheap marshrutkas all over town. A taxi ride from the avtokayan to Garegin Nzhdeh Poghots should cost around \$1, an urban marshrutka costs 20¢.

Shirak Airport is 5km southeast of town, served by lesser-known Russian carriers such as Pulkovo and Vnukovo airlines (see p264). There are plenty of ticket agencies in town. Flights to Moscow cost around \$125 to \$140, including the 10,000 dram (\$17) departure tax, about \$25 cheaper on average than from Yerevan. A taxi to the airport is around \$4.

MARMASHEN ՄԱՐՄԱՇԵՆ

The monastery at Marmashen is about 10km northwest of Gyumri, just past the village of the same name in the wide gorge of the Akhuryan River. There are three churches hewn from lovely apricot-coloured tuff clustered together next to an orchard, plus the ruins and foundations of other structures nearby. The biggest church, Surp Stepanos, was built between 988 and 1029, with a 13th-century *gavit* (forehall). An Italian team led restoration work in the 1960s, so intricately carved old church stones have been incorporated into newer building blocks. Beautiful carved tombs and *khatchkars* dot the land around the churches, and it's a peaceful, rural environment typical of Shirak, with grassy horizons. The caretaker is here 8am to 8pm daily, and he can recite some of the inscriptions on the sides of the churches by heart. A return taxi to Gyumri is about \$8.

HARICHAVANK ՀԱՐԻՇԱՎԱՆՔ

Harichavank monastery is in the sturdy old town of Harich, about 4km from the town of Artik. Harichavank stands high on the rock-fringed slopes of Mt Aragats, an area with its own windswept grandeur. This complex was the summer residence of the

catholicos of Echmiadzin for a period after 1850 and is surrounded by 19th-century buildings. Harichavank is one of those monasteries where a 7th- or 8th-century chapel has been dramatically expanded with 13th-century *gavits* and domes. There is some beautiful geometric stonework over the main door church and around the dome of the *gavit*.

Inside the main building of the church are the remains of a dark fresco. Stone carving in the ceiling blocks is similar to that found in the vestibule at Geghard Monastery near Yerevan. An open high chamber immediately to the left was built for singing, with acoustics designed to make the voices sound as if they're coming from heaven.

An Armenian prince built the extension and a second entrance to the main church and connected the two together. Inside, the church's caretaker can point out the anteroom/storeroom with a hole in the ceiling leading to a secret upstairs room. During times of invasion, the room was used to house women and children and sometimes even important local officials. A stone would be fitted exactly into the ceiling hole once everyone had climbed to safety.

There are frequent marshrutkas and buses between Gyumri and Artik (50¢, 30 minutes). From Artik there are six marshrutkas a day to Harich, the last one returning around 5pm, or you can get a taxi in Artik for \$3 return. The well-preserved 7th-century church of **Lmbatavank** stands southwest of Artik, with important early frescoes.

ANI VIEWPOINT ԱՆԻ

The southern tip of Shirak *marz* includes the restricted border zone around the viewing point for **Ani**, across the Akhuryan on the Turkish side of the border. You need to pass a Russian-run checkpoint to reach the achingly beautiful view over Ani, the 10th-century capital of Armenia. The ruined city occupies a promontory above the river, a wasteland of rubble with the bare stones of old churches scattered around. The city was captured by the Seljuk Turks in 1064, and abandoned after the Mongol invasions. Its position on the old front line of the Cold War between NATO and the USSR has preserved its isolation. People of Armenian descent can often schmooze their way past, but foreigners usually need to arrange a visit through a travel

agency. It's no particular hassle to visit with permission. It's utterly haunting at sunset in late summer or autumn, when the Kurdish herders return to the rough little village outside the city walls. *Զիջե՛ք իր քաղաքին* the Armenian side for the nouveau riche who want buildings made of Ani tuff. Some of the villagers in the vicinity are descended from genocide survivors, so every year on 24 April there's a tradition of lighting bonfires along the border as a reminder to Turkey.

VANADZOR ՎԱՆԱԶՈՐ

☎ 51 / pop 70,000

Leafy Vanadzor, formerly Kirovakan, is a reviving regional city on the banks of the Pambak River. The main street, Tigran Mets Poghota, bustles with shops, cafés and the swishest clothes outside Yerevan. The young folk attending the teachers' college add a bit of nightlife to the city. The huge chemical works at the eastern end of town are mostly moribund, but some factories are reopening and some new industries are starting to appear.

Vanadzor has very different weather from Yerevan, wetter but milder in winter, and lush forests on mountain slopes surrounding the city. Mt Maymekh (3081m) and Mt Tezh (3101m) stand at the head of steep winding valleys to the south, and Dilijan is only 40km east along the beautiful Tandzut valley. Vanadzor is a useful base for the classic churches of Debed Canyon, with good transport links to other cities.

Orientation

Tigran Mets Poghota has lots of money-changers' signs as well as a cash machine at the **ACBA Bank** (22 Tigran Mets). There are also Internet clubs and Internet telephone offices along this street, including the Nixie Internet Café near the corner with Myasnikyan, and also a post office. The train station and the *avtokayan* are together at the bottom of Khorenatsi Poghots.

Sights

There's not a whole lot to see but there are parks and some interesting neighbourhoods to explore. The new **Cultural Centre** at the western end of Tigran Mets incorporates the interesting **Regional Museum** (admission 20¢; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun), a cinema and a café. At the other end of town the **Vanadzor Art Gallery**

(Tumanyan Hraparak; admission 30¢; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun) shows off local talent across widely divergent styles of painting and sculpture.

Vanadzor's **shuka** on Myasnikyan Poghots is one of Armenia's busiest regional markets. The old village neighbourhoods of **Dimats** and **Bazum** are east of the town centre, over the Tandzut River. The centre of town has the usual Soviet look but south along Myasnikyan Poghots there are some elegant stone villas and country houses. There's a little **Russian Orthodox Church**, in the park by the train station, and the Armenian Apostolic church called the **Ghara Kilise** (Black Church) built from suitably black stone and surrounded by an elaborate cemetery. The Armenian church stands near the lower bridge on Tumanyan Poghots. There's an interesting walk up Abovyan Poghots along the little valley of the Vanadzor River, past boating ponds, tall trees and shuttered sanatoriums to an overgrown **Dendropark** (Forest Reserve).

Sleeping

Hotel Gugark (☎ 4 15 19; Hayk Hraparak; s \$8, d \$16-25) This prewar Soviet building on Hayk Hraparak is in need of renovations. The rooms are fairly clean but dark with short beds. The more expensive double rooms have hot water.

Heghine & Ashot's Guesthouse (☎ 4 66 23; 33 Michuryan Poghots; s/d \$15/30) A well-established B&B with four bedrooms, a hot shower in the bathroom and Heghine's big breakfasts. There are handsome pink tuff houses on Mi-

churyan Poghots, standing on the southern outskirts above the town centre. Head up Garegin Nzhdeh Poghots, turn left at the army base and then take the first right after the hospital. ☎ 3 2 0 6 6 5 5 5 5 5 5 almost at the top of the street on the left, with a park bench by the gate.

Natasha & Lentrush's Guesthouse (☎ 4 63 43; 24 Michuryan Poghots; s/d \$15/30) A B&B with four rooms in an elegant two-storey villa with a garden. The main rooms are quite plush, decorated with ornate plasterwork and murals. The couple's daughter, Kristine, speaks English. On the same street as Heghine and Ashot's Guesthouse, No 24 is halfway up the street on the right, distinguished by a large grapevine and a little metal balcony.

The website www.bedandbreakfast.am also lists several well-run B&Bs in Vanadzor. There are quite a few sanatoriums and old ministry guesthouses in the valleys around Vanadzor awaiting revival.

Hotel Argishti (☎ 4 25 56; 1 Batumi Poghots; r \$50-80) Three blocks from Hayk Hraparak on a quiet street you'll find this decent mid-range hotel, which is currently undergoing expansion. The furnishings are new and comfortable and there are some family rooms (for four people) for \$80. It also has a restaurant, a bar and a billiards room.

Eating

Restaurants and cafés in Vanadzor are open similar hours to Yerevan; 10am until 11pm or later every day.



ARMENIAN NAMES

The vast majority of Armenian surnames end in '-ian' or '-yan'. The former is usually western Armenian, the latter eastern, though it's not a set rule. The suffix means 'from' (Հայրենիքից, son of the father) from a town (Marashlian from Marash; Vanetsian from Van), from a parent (Յոյան, son of Boya), from an occupation (Najarian, son of a carpenter; Boyajian, from the Turkish word 'Boya' for someone who dyes fabrics), or from status or personal traits (Melikyan, son of a king; Sinanian, from a Turkish term for a well-endowed gent). Names with the prefix Ter, mean a married priest (Ter Hayr) was an ancestor, eg ex-president Levon Ter-Petrossian. Western Armenian names may spell it Der, as in Der-Bedrossian. There are also families with the suffix '-runi', such as Siruni and Artsruni. These families were once aristocrats.

Western and Eastern Armenians pronounce about eight letters differently. Komitas in eastern Armenian becomes Gomidas in western Armenian. In this chapter we've commonly translated the last three letters as 'yan', except if that person was western Armenian or if that is the way their name most commonly appears eg Robert Kocharian and Martiros Sarian.

Nshkhark Hatsatun (☎ 4 10 11; 25 Azatamartikneri Poghots; meals \$3-5) After a few consecutive days of *khoravats*, this modern restaurant is a worthy destination in itself. It's a grey stone building with a green and yellow sign in Armenian, standing back from the street, with a park on one side. The staff are friendly, there's a long menu in English and the bathrooms are a pleasant surprise. The cooks are highly capable at grills (\$3), salads and pizzas (\$2), plus there's cold beer, ice cream and desserts.

999 Café (☎ 2 46 96; 16a Garegin Nzhdeh Poghots; meals \$2-3) Just up from Tigran Mets is this cheap and cheerful *khoravats* eatery, with quick delivery, ample portions and rousing (read rather loud) music.

There are lots of outdoor cafés along Tigran Mets serving coffee, cake and snacks until late. **Greta's Pastries** (38 Tigran Mets) is a great little hole-in-the-wall bakery, near the corner with Myasnikyan. Look for the green grille on a basement window.

Getting There & Around

Vanadzor's avtokayan and train station are at the bottom of Khorenatsi Poghots. Marshrutkas to Yerevan (\$1.60, two hours, every 20 minutes from 7.30am to 8pm) take a 132km route via Spitak and Aparan to Yerevan. There's also transport to Dilijan (marshrutka or bus 80¢, up to one hour, 1pm and 1.30pm). There are a couple of daily buses to Stepanavan, and at least one at 8am to Alaverdi (80¢, up to one hour), plus one marshrutka and/or bus, depending on the day, to Ijevan (\$1.30, two hours, 1.30pm).

There is a daily passenger train at 9am (no reserved seats, 30¢) down the Debed Canyon to Alaverdi and Ayrum, near Akhtala. It takes two hours to Katsotsk (for Alaverdi and Sanahin) and 3½ hours to Ayrum. You can watch the forests and cliffs roll by from the doors at a far slower pace than by road. It's mostly used by villagers on excursions to a market, so it gets crowded some days.

The churches of the Debed Canyon and Lori Berd can be visited on a day trip by taxi. Hotels charge around \$25 per car for seven or eight hours, or about \$8 to Lori Berd, or you can negotiate with drivers based at the avtokayan.

STEPANAVAN & AROUND

☎ 56 / pop 28,000

Stepanavan sits on a plateau above the steep-sided gorge of the Dzoragets River, fabled for its fine summer weather and, less proudly today, as one of the centres of Armenian communism. The area has been a site of settlement for millennia, on fertile fields above the river. The town is quiet but it's a nice place for a wander (away from the usual monumentalist Soviet centre) and the locals are friendly. An early cell of the Bolsheviks led by local lad Stepan Shahumian operated from hideouts and caves before the revolution. Shahumian died in a lonely corner of the Turkmenistan desert with the other 26 'Baku Commissars' in 1918, later sanctified in countless memorials across the region. (The Baku Commissars were Bolshevik leaders in the Caucasus in the early days of the revolution.) A rather dashing

Shahumian poses on a pedestal in the main square, Stepan Shahumian Hraparak.

Information

The Language and Computer Centre on the main square has a reliable Internet connection, and several of the staff speak English and are happy to answer questions or perhaps arrange a tour for you. The centre has put up a multilingual website about the town at www.stepanavan.am. There are banks and shops exchanging money around the main square and the *shuka* (market). Taxis, buses and marshrutkas leave from the main square.

Sights

The **Stepan Shahumian Museum** (Stepan Shahumian Hraparak; admission 50¢; ☎: 10am-5pm Tue-Sun) has an art gallery, plus displays on Stepanavan's history, and - excitement, comrades - the life story of the martyred commissar.

On the north bank of the Dzoragets about 3km east of Stepanavan is the dramatically sited fortress **Lori Berd** (berd means fortress). The road from Stepanavan passes hillocks in the fields, which are actually **Bronze-Age tumulus tombs**. The fort sits on a promontory between the gorges of the Dzoragets and Urut Rivers, with huge round towers and massive stone blocks along its exposed side. This was the capital of David Anhogin (949-1049) and later a local power base for the Orbelians and Zakarians, powerful families of Armenian nobles. There is a story that the Mongols captured the fortress after the defenders became distracted by alcohol. There is an ancient cemetery nearby and a 14th-century bridge in the gorge below. A taxi from Stepanavan takes about 15 minutes and costs \$2, or it's a nice hike from town.

The cool and tranquil 35-hectare **Dendropark** (admission free, not including tip for a guided tour; ☎: in summer daily, other times Mon-Fri) is a botanical garden near Gyulagarak village. Established in the 1930s, it has a vast array of conifers and deciduous trees. The park has been well maintained and the directors welcome visitors. The Dendropark is about 11km from Stepanavan, a taxi should cost \$10 to \$15 return. Cross the bridge in Gyulagarak and the park is about 2km away past the 6th-century Tormak church.

From Stepanavan, you can head west along the Gargar River to its confluence

with the Dzoragets, where the **Anevank** monastery stands inside the gorge on the southern side of the canyon. It was founded in the 7th century and dates mostly from the 12th century. The road here joins the Vanadzor-Alaverdi highway.

The **Lori Plains** stretch north of Stepanavan to the Georgian border, with a few mixed Armenian-Russian villages such as Saratovka and Privolnoye. The main road passes through the town of Tashir to the minor border post at Gogavan. On the Georgian side a decayed 77km road leads to Tbilisi. Another road (best tackled in summer) climbs to the west over the lonely mountains and meadows of the Khonav range to Shirak marz and Gyumri.

Sleeping & Eating

There are 10 or so B&Bs on the north side of the river, costing around \$15 a night including meals. The hosts know the hospitality business but they may not speak English. Ask at the Language and Computer Centre for a recommendation. There's a small hotel being built on the main square.

Ruzan Marikyan (☎: 2 21 96; info@bedandbreakfast.am; 6/6 Left Bank quarter; s/d \$10/16) A member of the Aries Travel network (see p123) with a couple of comfortable bedrooms. The Marikyans are an educated couple (a doctor and an engineer) and are very helpful and sincere.

Anahit Pensionat (r from \$8, cottages 550; ☎:) This Soviet sanatorium is in the forest on the ridge behind town. The cottages have been remodelled and there's a swimming pool and some sports facilities. Three meals a day cost \$4 per person. Anahit arranges tours with English-speaking guides.

Dining out is a bit limited at the moment, though there are plenty of shops for picnic supplies. Besides a few cafés and *khoravats* joints in parks, the **50/50 Restaurant** (meals \$3-5) near the central square has four private dining rooms and serves traditional Russian and Armenian food.

Getting There & Away

Marshrutkas for Yerevan (\$2.50, three hours) leave from the main square at 9am, 11am, 2.30pm and 4pm. There are three buses a day to Vanadzor (50¢). A taxi anywhere in town from the main square costs 80¢.



DEBED CANYON ԴԵԲԵԴԻ ՉՈՐ

If one part of Armenia epitomises the country's beauty, the forests and fields perched above the walls of this spectacular canyon is it. Nearly every village along the Debed River has a church, a chapel, an old fort and sprinkling of *khatchkars* somewhere nearby. Two World Heritage-listed monasteries, Haghpat and Sanahin, justly draw most visitors but there are plenty more to scramble around. Tourist facilities are improving but transport is best done by car if time is short. The region is also a gateway further north to Tbilisi and Georgia.

Hotel Anush (☎ 51-40 808; Vanadzor-Alaverdi Rd near Pambak village; r 520) This stone-clad motel and restaurant is about 12km from Vanadzor. There are 12 modern rooms with satellite TV and clean bathrooms. The restaurant is a good place to break for lunch or dinner, and costs about \$5 per person.

Avan Dzoraget Hotel (☎ 01-543122; www.tufenkian.am; s/d 570/140; ♿) A 34-room luxury hotel run by the arty Tufenkian group, near the confluence of the Debed and Dzoraget Rivers, midway between and Vanadzor and Alaverdi. Opened in spring 2004, it's by far the best hotel in the region, with a spa, swimming pool and restaurant, plus a bar in a Soviet bomb shelter.

Kobayr ԲՈՒԱՅՐ

This charming ruined 13th-century convent lies above the hamlet of Kobayr (also spelt Khober or Kober). Coming from Vanadzor you can see the complex from the road near Tumanyan. From Alaverdi you pass the Kobayr train station, a white structure on concrete pillars. About 100m up the road a track switches back over the railway lines. Walk back along the railway lines and find the stone step up through the almost hidden hamlet. Stick to the most direct route uphill (villagers will redirect you if you stray). The path is quite mucky and boots are a good idea. At the top of the hamlet a path leads to the left to a memorial spring at the base of a rockface. The convent is a short scramble uphill – in total the climb takes 10 to 15 minutes. Kobayr is a perfect picturesque ruin, with trees and vines springing from finely carved mossy stones. The main building has lost its roof but has some elegant, partially restored

frescoes, and the bell tower is largely intact. Kobayr is about 18km from Alaverdi, or \$6 return by taxi.

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Odzun ՕԶՈՆ ԵՆՆԵՆԻՄԵՅՅ
Perched on a broad shelf which terminates at a sheer plunge down to the Debed, Odzun is a substantial settlement of about 6000 with a magnificent 7th-century church in the centre of the village. The unusual monument next to it is a memorial but locals say it has the power to inspire fertility – approach with caution. The sturdy church features magnificent arches outside the main entrance. Teachers once used this outdoor area as a school. There was also a library, a scriptorium where books were copied, and a refectory. The custodian turns up sooner or later to unlock the church. There's another church on the edge of the cliff. One kilometre south of Odzun, at the edge of the canyon, is the three-chambered Horomayri monastery, the well-camouflaged remnants of which are visible below the cliff on the right.

Odzun Guesthouse (s 55-15, d 58-25) above Odzun village at the foot of a forested slope is run by the redoubtable Anahit, who charges individuals according to her own ideas. The building is a two-storey 1960s-style motel, with 13 standard rooms and two deluxe rooms with balconies, space and hot water. The place is surrounded by orchard trees and lawns with views over Odzun. A taxi to and from Alaverdi should cost about \$3.20.

Alaverdi ԱԼԱՎԵՐԻ

☎ 53 / pop 10,000

The quiet, conservative mining town of Alaverdi is tucked into a bend in the canyon, with rows of apartment blocks and village houses cut into strata by the highway and the railway line. The town is rather poor with few jobs besides those at the half-open copper mine. A cable car (20¢) climbs the lip of the inner canyon from the mine up to Sadahart and the nearby village of Sanahin. It runs according to work shifts at the mine – 7.45am to 9.45am, 11am to 2pm, 3pm to 7.30pm and 11.15pm to 11.45pm.

Tamara's bridge, about 1km down from the bus stand, was built by Queen Tamar of Georgia. This humpbacked stone bridge was used by road traffic until 25 years ago. There are four kitten-faced lions carved on

the stone railing. Legend tells that when a 'real' man finally walks across, the lions will come to life.

SLEEPING & EATING

Hotel Debed (main square, Sadahart; s/d \$5/10) This hotel is housed in the yellow tower a short walk uphill from the cable-car station or a longer route by road. Though it languishes unrenovated the managers are helpful and can provide meals for \$2 to \$3, heaters in cold weather and buckets of hot water (otherwise there's only irregular supplies of cold water). There's a local English-speaking guide, the daughter of an administrator, who works with the hotel.

It's possible to stay in local homes in Alaverdi, Sanahin, Odzun and Haghpat if you ask around and have luck on your side. If you're invited but not asked to pay, discreetly leave \$5 or \$10 behind when you leave.

Flora Restaurant (south bank, Alaverdi; meals \$3) To get here, cross Tamara's bridge, climb the stairs on the far side and turn right for a short walk along a road. There are private dining rooms for one to 10 people, clean bathrooms and freshly prepared *khoravats*, kebabs, salads and sometimes dolma.

There are two cafés open in warm weather near Tamara's bridge, good for an ice cream, light snacks and a drink, and stores with pastries around the bus stand.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The bus and marshrutka stand is a parking bay off the main road – taxis wait here and further up the hill. Public transport to points south go to Vanadzor for 80¢, every hour from 8am to 11am and then every 90 minutes until 5pm. There are marshrutkas to Yerevan (\$2.50, three hours, 8am, 9am, 12.30pm and 2pm). There's also a bus (five hours) at 10am for \$1.20. There's a bus to the Georgian border (50¢) at 6pm, or try to jump on a passing marshrutka. A massive truck fitted with a cabin tackles the wild road through the forests over the Virahayots range to Jiliza. The train station is 2km down the valley by the copper mine at Katsotsk. A daily train to Vanadzor leaves at 6pm (30¢, two hours). A taxi to Haghpat and Akhtala or to Odzun and Kobayr should cost between \$7 and \$9, or about \$15 to \$20 to all of them.

Sanahin Monastery ՍԱՆԻՆ

Moss-covered Sanahin is a fascinatingly detailed church and monastery complex, packed with ancient graves, darkened chapels and medieval gallery schools (study halls where pupils sat on benches on either side of a corridor). The inner sanctum of the Surp Astvatsatsin (Holy Mother of God) church, located in the middle of several buildings, is the oldest structure here, dating back to 928, while it's adjoining *gavit* or entrance hall is one of the later buildings, built in 1211. A library was created at Sanahin in 1062, and a medical school flourished in the 12th century. All that's left of the educational facility are the evocative open stone archways surrounding a large room. *Khatchkars* are scattered around the site. Sanahin means 'older than that one', referring to its younger cousin at Haghpat. The monastery was the seat of an archbishopric and a favoured place of rest for the royal Zakarian family, who have a funeral chapel beside the complex.

From the cable-car station, walk up to the main square of Sadahart and take a left and in a few minutes you reach the centre of Sanahin village. Sanahin Monastery is uphill, or follow the sign downhill to the **Mikoyan Museum** (admission 10¢; ☎ 11am–5pm), a shrine to the Mikoyan brothers Anastas and Artyom. Anastas Mikoyan survived 60 years in the Politburo, outlasting even Stalin, and so deserves a museum. Artyom was the designer of the USSR's first jet fighter in WWII, the MiG. There's an early MiG jet outside the museum (no climbing allowed!). The charming administrator is unstoppable once she starts explaining every photo, medal and uniform on display – a tip of 30¢ or so is a nice gesture after a tour.

Haghpat Monastery ՀԱԳՊԱՏ

This pearl of a monastery perched on the lip of the Debed Canyon has Unesco's World Heritage status, along with Sanahin. Words fail me; this place has atmosphere and architectural splendour in abundance. The views around the canyon alone are worth the trip. Founded around 976 by Queen Khosrvanuch, who built Surp Nishan at the centre of the walled complex, it really took off in the 12th century with a magnificent bell tower, library and refec-

tory. An inscription on the *gavit* (entrance hall) of Surp Nishan reads in part 'You who enter through its door and prostrate yourself before the Cross, in your prayers remember us and our royal ancestors, who rest at the door of the holy cathedral, in Jesus Christ'. Further around past a cute Surp Astvatsatsin chapel is the freestanding *gavit* built by Abbot Hamazasp in 1257, which has glorious acoustics. Uphill is the bell tower, and off by the wall a stone refectory. *Khatchkars* and study halls surround the central church.

Haghpat Zhivank (☎ 53-2 25 30, ask for extension 5 62 37; s/d 59/18) is a cheerful village B&B run by the Israeliyan family, with enough rooms for 10 people, a bar, rustic dining rooms and a billiards table. Follow the signs in Haghpat.

A taxi from Alaverdi to Haghpat and back will cost \$5.

Akhtala Monastery ԱԽԹԱԼԱ

Situated at the edge of Akhtala, this 13th-century complex is recommended for its fine decorative carvings and frescoes. A thick wall surrounds it. Historians aren't sure if the church was dedicated to St Gregory (Surp Grigor) or the Apostles (Arakelots). The doors of the church are usually locked, but the people in the house directly across from the fort gate have the key. If they're not around, the church has a beautiful newer fresco in the nave area that can be seen through a hole in the locked church doors. Surrounding the church are a couple of well-preserved chapels and the ever-present graveyard with some new stones. Akhtala is about 18km northeast (downstream) of Alaverdi. A taxi trip combined with a visit to Haghpat will cost about \$7.

LAKE SEVAN ՍԵՎԱՆԱ ԼՒՃ

Perched at 1900m above sea level, the great blue eye of Sevana Lich (Lake Sevan) covers 940 sq km, and is 80km by 30km at its widest. The lake is perfect for escaping Yerevan's summer heat. Its colours and shades change with the weather and by its own mysterious processes, from a dazzling azure to dark blue and a thousand shades between. The freshwater lake supports a healthy fish population, including the *ishkhan* (prince trout), named for a row of spots like a crown on its head.

When Sevan's outlet, the Hrazdan River, was tapped for hydroelectric plants and irrigation in the 1950s, the lake fell and is now about 20m lower. *Old Soviet plans* to drain the lake down to one-sixth its size thankfully went nowhere. The retreating waters uncovered forts, houses and artifacts dating back some 2000 years, and made Sevan Island a peninsula. The exposed land has been designated as the Sevan national park. Tourism is starting to pick up around the lake but except for a hectic 10 weeks in summer it's usually quiet. The stark volcanic highlands and plains around the lake endure a long winter, and except for a string of achievements in medieval church building around the lake's edge, the hinterlands of Gegharkunik *marz* are not often visited.

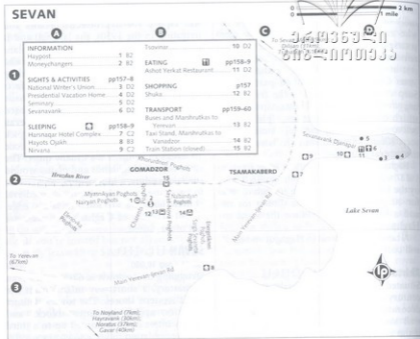
SEVAN ՍԵՎԱՆ

☎ 61 / pop 10,000

Struggling Sevan town is 6km from Sevan monastery, a short way inland from the lake's western shores. The town's defunct factories, ageing apartment blocks and early winters have prompted up to a third of the population to leave town since independence. Founded in 1842 as the Russian village of Elenovka, there are few signs of the past besides some Russian provincial houses at the western end of town. Sevan's main street, Nairian Poghots, has a Haypost office, cafés, a *shuka*, moneychangers and taxis to Sevan monastery and lakeshore hotels. The main beach strip is along the sandy south side of the Sevanavank peninsula, crowned by the much-photographed churches on the hill at the end. This beach is suddenly transformed into the Armenian Riviera in the brief hot summers, with bars, beach volleyball, waterskis and paddleboats. There are other, quieter beaches closer to Sevan town across the highway near the Hayots Ojakh motel-restaurant. There are fees in summer to use the beaches near Sevan, from \$5 per person for the trendy part of the beach with bars and discos to \$2 to \$8 per carload at other beaches.

Sevanavank ՍԵՎԱՆԱՎԱՆԹ

Sevan Monastery (Sevanavank) is up a long flight of steps on the peninsula's turtle-backed hill and has commanding views of the lake. In summer and autumn a thick



carpet of cloud pushes over the Areguniats mountains to the north and evaporates at the lake's edge.

The first monument on the steps leading up to the monastery is dedicated to a 20th-century navy captain, commander of the Russian fleet on Lake Sevan. The first church is **Arakelots** (Apostles), followed by **Astvatstsain** (Holy Mother of God) with a courtyard filled with *khatchkars*. St Mesrop Mashtots had a vision of 12 figures walking across the lake, who showed him the place to found a church. Queen Mariam, wife of Vasak of Syunik, built the churches in 874, and they have recently been restored. In the 19th century the monastery was a place to reform errant monks – there was a strict regime and no women allowed.

Continue up the hill past the foundations of the **Surp Harutyun** church to the highest point of the peninsula, with panoramic views. On the far side of the hill are two buildings: one belongs to the **National Writers' Union** (closed to the public), the other is the **president's vacation home**, protected by a high fence. The building on the north side of the

peninsula is a new **seminary** for the Armenian Apostolic church. The students sometimes play football in the car park near the stairs. There are a couple of souvenir stalls and the **Ashot Yerkat** restaurant (see p159) too. There's no public transport out here so arrange for a **taxi** to wait for you (about \$3.20 with 30 minutes waiting time from Sevan town).

Sleeping & Eating

Sevan's beach resorts run on a very strict schedule – open with a bang on 23 June, closed on the last weekend of the school holidays (around the start of September). Most tourist facilities, bar some of the hotels given below, are closed outside the summer season. It's hard to find a bed in August or weekends from June to September. However, quite a few new hotels are opening and old ones are being renovated. Camping is possible for a fee and there are lots of little *domik* cabins, ministry lodges and guesthouses around the lake which you might unearth if you ask around. Sevan is also close enough to Yerevan for a day trip.



Tsovinar (☎ 1-52 52 72; Sevan peninsula; s/d \$12/15) A friendly little two-storey lodge about halfway along Sevanavank's main beach. The rooms are small but they have hot water.

Hayots Ojakh (☎ 2 12 56, 09-48 00 61; Yerevan Hwy; r 58-13) This roadside restaurant and motel offers 20 rooms in prefabricated cabins with en suites. The surroundings are mostly asphalt and grazing land, but the rooms are clean. The restaurant is busy with people enjoying meals including grilled *ishkhan* (Sevan trout) for \$2 to \$3 per meal.

Harsnaqar Hotel Complex (☎ 2 00 92; fax 2 00 65; Yerevan Hwy; s \$60, d \$70-100; ☎) This is the large Holiday Inn-style hotel where the highway meets the lake. It has a waterpark, tennis courts, lawns and a private stretch of beach. It also has a very good restaurant, with a terrace overlooking the lake. Grilled sturgeon costs \$4, assorted cold meats \$3.50 and smoked salmon \$2; meals are around \$5 to \$8 per person.

Nirvana (☎ 2 21 21; Yerevan Hwy; cottages \$50) Between the Harsnaqar and the peninsula, Nirvana has five-person cottages with hot and cold water and a refrigerator. There's a café-bar here open late and a wide stretch of beach at the front.

Noyland (☎ 09-42 22 63, 4014 67, Gavar Hwy; cottages \$50) A European-style holiday cottage resort on a series of little coves about 7km from Sevan, off the road past the hamlet of Chkalovka. The cottages fit two to five people in comfort. There's a restaurant on site.

Sevan Motel (☎ 2 42 13; North Sevan Rd; r 70-40) At the northern end of the lake, about 15km from Sevan past a partly unfinished hotel complex, you'll find this large, ageing Soviet-era place. The rooms are in the old Soviet shape, the beach is good and the funky '70s décor is quite striking – check out the disco bar.

Ashot Yerkat Restaurant (☎ 2 50 00; meals \$3-4) You can feast on kebabs, grilled *ishkhan* trout, salads and lavash on the terrace of this restaurant out on the Sevan peninsula.

Getting There & Away

By car Yerevan is only 30 to 40 minutes away by freeway. Buses (60¢, one hour) and marshrutkas (80¢, 40 minutes, every hour 9am to 7pm) to Yerevan leave from the corner of Nairian Poghots and Sayat-Nova Poghots in the centre of Sevan town. Coming from Yerevan buses and marshrutkas stop at the corner of Nairian and Shinararneri Poghots, one block further on.

There's a marshrutka to Vanadzor from the corner of Nairian and Shinararneri Poghots at 10am (\$1.60) which can drop you in Dilijan. This corner is also a taxi stand. A taxi to Yerevan (67km) costs about \$12, to Dilijan \$8, to Tsaghkadzor \$5, and to Sevanavank with 30 minutes waiting time about \$3.20. A taxi to one of the hotels around the peninsula costs \$1.60. A four- or five-hour tour of Sevanavank, Hayravank and the *khatchkars* of Noratus should cost around \$15.

There are no passenger trains past Sevan at the moment, though the line through

ARMENIAN FUNERALS

A funeral might cost \$500, including a grave with a dark polished marble tombstone and a spookily accurate etching of the deceased from a photograph. It's not an easy sum to find for people earning \$50 a month, and people borrow money at usurious rates for a suitable send-off. People gather to remember the departed on the first day after the death, the seventh day, the 40th day and the first anniversary. The 40th day is called the *Karasoonk*. There's a graveside gathering of family and friends, perhaps with a *duduk* and an accordion playing bittersweet old songs. A fire is lit in a pot by the gravesite, and people drop a piece of aromatic shredded bark called *khounk* into the fire in turn. The party retires to the family home, where a female relative waits at the gate to wash *khounk* dust off everyone's hands. The mourners share a table of food and drink, telling stories of the deceased.

Part of what makes hiking through village lands so easy (besides the mild danger of being invited by a local for lunch or dinner with too many drinks) is the number of piped springs with memorial stones built by relatives. Armenians were already putting *vishap* (dragon stones) and carved stone rams at springs millennia ago.

Sevan and around the north side of the lake to Vardenis might reopen some day.

AROUND LAKE SEVAN

About 30km south of Sevan is the charmingly typical tufa **Hayravank Monastery** – 1100 years old, sturdy as the day it was built, and with *khatchkars* in the cemetery attesting to centuries of Armenian life. The promontory it stands on has a fine view of Lake Sevan. Further south is Noratus (sometimes spelt Noraduz), an old village and fine place to wander around. There's a tall chapel of **Surp Grigor Lusavorich** at one end of town and an ancient *khatchkar*-studded cemetery on the eastern side of the village. Noratus is a good area to find a **beach** on the sunny side of the lake.

The provincial capital of Gegharkunik *marz* is **Gavar (Kamo)**, population 30,000, on the cold slopes of the Geghama Mountains west of Lake Sevan. It's a quietly poor town, similar to **Martuni** at the lake's southern end, with a few cafés, a Soviet-era hotel and a feeling that it is just struggling to survive. A newly repaired road heads south through a tunnel under the **Selim Pass** (2410m) from Martuni to Yeghegnadzor in Vayots Dzor. About 20km east of Martuni is the handsome little **Vanevank church** (903), in a gorge south of the town of Artsvanist. Turn off at Karchagbyur and head up the valley through Lchavan to the centre of Makenis village to find the 10th- to 13th-century churches of **Makenyats Vank**, close to a gorge.

Further on, the road cuts inland to **Vardenis**. One road continues around the eastern side of the lake and another heads towards the mountains and the valuable **Zod gold mines**. A famously rough road used only by fearless truckers and truck-bus hybrids heads on from the mines over the Sodk Pass (2400m) into the wilds of northern Karabakh.

On the far side of the lake at Tsapatagh is the **Avan Marak Tsapatagh** (☎ 1-54 31 22; www.tufenkian.am; s \$47-83, d \$52-88, ste \$125; ♿ ♿), a stylish lakeside hotel with a swimming pool, an escape from the bustle of Yerevan. If you need to lay up in comfort for a weekend, you can pay by credit card. The hotel has sailboats and windsurfers for hire in summer, and the splendid Zanazan restaurant (meals around \$10 to \$15). By road the

shortest route to Yerevan is along Sevan's north shore (140km, two hours).

Public transport around the lake is sporadic – there are regular marshrutkas and buses from the city to the Yeghegnadzor (Tbilisian highway) on the northern limits of Yerevan to the main towns (Gavar, Martuni and Vardenis) for around \$1.50. The best way to discover the lakeshore miles of quiet, clean beaches is with your own transport and perhaps camping gear.

TSAGHKADZOR ՇԱՂԿԱԶՈՐ

☎ 23 / pop 1800

Highland Tsaghkadzor (Gorge of Flowers) is a pleasant, leafy little resort town 57km north of Yerevan. The Tsaghkadzor Sport Base here was once a training centre for the formidable USSR Winter Olympics team. Armenia's only ski resort also has a fine monastery. The main road reaches a central square and veers right up to the House of Writers, or left and around to the Kecharis Monastery.

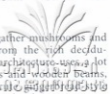
The road straight on from the monastery leads to the cable-car station, while another branches to the left up to the Sport Base. The 6km cable car up Mt Tsaghkuniats runs on weekends outside winter and every day during the ski season. The skiing facilities at the ski resort are basic but they won't send you bankrupt – try skiing in Europe for \$20 to \$40 a day. A single cable-car ride costs 80€, and you can hire basic ski equipment, much of it vintage gear, for about \$4 an hour from the cable-car station. The forests around the base of the mountain provide some nice walks, and in summer there's horse riding from the Tsaghkadzor Sport Base.

The **Kecharis Monastery** is a finely carved 11th- to 13th-century complex with *khatchkars*, a *Katoghike* (cathedral), a Surp Grigor church and a smaller Surp Nishan chapel. It's now the seat of the bishop of Kotayk *marz* and is open daily.

Sleeping & Eating

Many local homes offer homestays for \$5 to \$10 per person per night. Asking around once you arrive might be leaving it a bit late; see if someone can pass on a recommendation and make contact in advance. There are a couple of cafés open in summer along the main street.





Leya (☎ 5 26 06; 2-person cottages \$30, 3 meals per day extra \$5) A woodland reserve dotted with 18 cottages, Leya is a bit rundown, but repairs were underway when we visited.

House of Writers (☎ 1-28 10 81; www.hrazdan.am; \$25-32, d \$32-50, apt \$80, 3 meals per day extra \$5; ♿) The House of Creativity of Writers, to give its full name, is a classic Soviet ministry hotel reborn as a popular resort hotel. The rooms and facilities are being upgraded but the distinctive décor (bulbous ceramic murals, macramé curtains) remains to inspire writers to glorify the Party. The hotel has a decent restaurant, a swimming pool and billiards room. Follow the main road into town and look for the sign on the left.

Tsaghkadzor Sport Base (☎ 423 44; s \$18-21, d \$36-42) This former USSR training base is roughly one-star standard at the moment but it does have vast grounds, horse riding and an administration happy to negotiate around the high rack rates (which include meals) – \$25 for two people is reasonable. There's a bar and a café, both dated but functioning. The Sport Base is about 1.5km from the centre of town – turn left at the main roundabout, then another left at the Kecharis Monastery and take the road up into the forests.

Viardo (☎ 5 26 20; 6-person cottages \$50-130, 3 meals per day extra \$5) A complex with 25 cottages separated by trees, with spiffy cottages from \$50 – prices drop 30% outside the summer holidays and ski season. There's a café and a bar here as well. It's on the road to the cable-car station, straight on past the Kecharis Monastery.

Getting There & Away

Tsaghkadzor is only about 40 minutes drive northeast of Yerevan. There are no direct buses or marshrutkas but a taxi to Yerevan costs about \$8 to \$10. There are frequent buses and marshrutkas between Yerevan and Hrazdan, 6km down the valley – a taxi up to Tsaghkadzor from here will cost \$2.50. There are only a few taxis in Tsaghkadzor.

DILIJAN ԴԻԼԻՋԱՆ

☎ 0680 / pop 17,000

Alpine Dilijan is surrounded by the lush oak and hornbeam forests and deep mountain soils of the Dilijan Nature Reserve, one of the gentlest landscapes in the country. In summer the villagers herd cattle down from the mountain pastures through the

town, and people gather mushrooms and mountain herbs from the rich deciduous forests. Local architecture uses a lot of steep tiled roofs and wooden beams, along with some stone and brick structures. Even the local Soviet monuments have a touch of flair. Dilijan was justly famous in Soviet times as a retreat, especially for writers, composers and artists, and the town has an active local arts scene. The gorgeous churches of Haghartsin and Goshavank are an easy day trip from Dilijan.

Information & Orientation

Victoria Harutunyan, the helpful local tourism officer, runs the **Dilijan Tourist Office** (☎ 56 51; Sharambeyan Poghots; ☎ 10.30am-5pm Tue-Sun) from the Dilijan Historical Cultural Preserve. She keeps a detailed brochure, the *Dilijan Tourism Information Directory*, which she can give or lend to you, with lists of local homestays, B&Bs, craftspeople and artists. She also arranges guides, B&B/homestays and tours to local sites.

Red Rooster Tours (☎ 73 20; moparboogie@yahoo.com; 19 Atarbekyan Poghots) organises tours and lodging around Dilijan, and other areas in Armenia, including trips to Goshavank (\$30, three hours), and Haghartsin combined with Goshavank (\$50, five hours). Owner and guide Armen Minassian is an affable American-Armenian with a Jeep for mountain trails, a tonne of knowledge and a rare rocking CD collection.

Myasnikyan Poghots wriggles up from the main roundabout past the little *shuka* (market) and the Dilijan Historical Cultural Preserve to the town centre and out to Shahumian Poghots to the older residential quarters. On the north bank and up the river are the later, Soviet-era suburbs. There's a **Haypost-Armentel** (58 Myasnikyan Poghots) in the town centre. There were no private Internet clubs at the time of writing, but they can't be far away. There are moneychangers on Myasnikyan as well as the **Ardshininvest Bank** (60 Myasnikyan Poghots), next to the Haypost office, and an **Armsavingsbank** (19 Maksim Gorky Poghots) just off the Yerevan road.

Sights

The **Dilijan Historical Cultural Preserve** (☎ 56 51; Sharambeyan Poghots; admission \$1.60; ☎ 10.30am-5pm Tue-Sun) is on a little cobbled street next to

Myasnikyan Poghots. This collection of stone and wooden traditional buildings includes a fine 19th-century house museum. Master woodcarver Revik Hovsepyan has been at work in his workshop here for two decades, with backgammon sets for around \$200 and delicate wooden *khatchkar* models for \$6 to \$10. Another building has a carpet museum upstairs and an art gallery with paintings by the complex's founder Vanik (Hovhannes) Sharambeyan, plus a craft shop.

There are shows three times a week in August at the **Palace of Culture** (53 Myasnikyan Poghots), anything from dances and children's shows to performances by the excellent local folk music company. Tickets are sometimes free, or around 80¢.

A crownlike monument to the **50th Anniversary of Soviet Armenia** stands near the main roundabout. The **WWII Memorial**, with the huge silver figures of a soldier holding a dying comrade, is on a hillock south of the river.

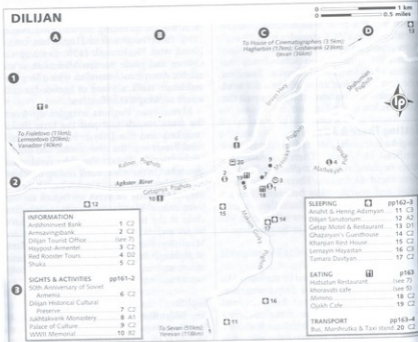
The ruins of **Jukhtakvank Monastery** are near the Dilijan mineral water plant, 3.2km

east along the Vanadzor road and about 3.5km up to the right. The **Surb Grigor** church, built around the 11th century, is missing its dome. The **Bobek** setting is a nice place for a picnic. If you go towards Vanadzor the scenery is gorgeous, passing the Russian **Molokan villages** of Fioletovo and Lermontovo.

Sleeping

There are lots of hotels and sanatoriums in and around town, many being snapped up and renovated now that a tunnel cuts travel time to Yerevan to around 90 minutes. The Hotel Dilijan was being rebuilt at the time of writing. Some beautifully located resorts, such as the House of Composers where Khachaturian, Shostakovich and Prokofiev stayed, are still run by government ministries. A local B&B scene is also developing.

Khanjian Rest House (☎ 24 27; 3 Maksim Gorky Poghots; s/d \$17/34) This place is off the Yerevan road behind a college and a deserted building (reputed to be haunted). Students camp here over summer. It has very basic





A-frame huts and basic shared facilities in a separate building. Meals are laid on for \$5 to \$8 a day.

Ghazaryan's Guesthouse (☎ 70 59; www.geocities.com/armenianvilla; 12 Myasnikyan Poghots; s/d \$17/34) A handsome modern house run by the director of the local art school and his wife (French and English are spoken). There are five rooms and a modern bathroom. They'll pick you up from the bus stand if you call. Up in the orchard there's a cute new cottage for a little seclusion.

Tamara Davtyan (☎ 56 51; 12 Myasnikyan Poghots; s/d \$17/34) Next door to Ghazaryan's, this spot is run by the mother of tourist officers, Victoria Harutunyan. It's a much less modern house (hot water at least) but the family is very friendly.

Anahit & Henrik Adamyant (☎ 29 93; in Yerevan 01-26 36 24; 195 Kamo Poghots, off Yerevan Hwy; s/d \$10/20) Five kilometres south of the centre is this comfortable family home set back from the road with clean, plain rooms and a balcony. Mrs Adamyant speaks a little English.

Getap Motel & Restaurant (☎ 43 41, 56 14; 4.5km along Ijevan Hwy; d/cottages \$8/25) Getap means riverbank in Armenian, which sums up the out-of-town location of this motel. There are a couple of spiffy new cottages with enough room for four people, and some rooms in the main building with a basic shared bathroom. The restaurant has little open-sided cabins by the water and serves *khoravats* (including grilled fish) for \$2.50 per person. A taxi to and from Dilijan costs about \$3.

Dilijan Sanatorium (☎ 39 27; www.spyur.am/dilijansan; 66 Getapnya Poghots; s \$12.50, d \$25-42) Sixty-two rooms of Soviet health resort past the WWII Memorial; the new owners are improving things. The suites are the size of small apartments. Rates include three meals in the school refectory-style restaurant and a range of health treatments, including paraffin massages. Yes, really.

House of Cinematographers (☎ 27 10; s \$12, d \$12-25, cottages \$50) About 11km out of town, 3.2km up a winding old road off the Ijevan highway. It's a bit of a kitsch classic (built in 1984), with chunky buildings along a ridge looking up the Aghstev valley. It's worth exploring for odd Clockwork Orange-era touches like plastic *krieg* lamps and funky old couches. Renovations are planned so there will probably be modern rooms for

\$50 or so during the life of this book. A taxi from Dilijan costs about \$4.

Lernayin Hayastan (☎ 52 40 10; Yerevan 01-26 34 70; s \$16-25, d \$32-50; ☎ 52 40 10) A huge neo-classical hotel 7km south of Dilijan, popular with Yerevantsis escaping the heat. Luxe rooms have balconies and pianos, though lack 24-hour hot water. Rates include all meals and a range of testing health treatments by thick-armed attendants, including water and paraffin massages. The hotel is run by the Defence Ministry, so there are lots of young soldiers *in situ*, which might put off (or delight) female visitors. There's also a swimming pool and great walks in the surrounding woods.

Eating

There are a couple of friendly local cafés and restaurants, but nothing in the fine dining bracket. There's a humble *khoravats* café in the *shuka* where a tasty kebab with barbecued aubergine and tomatoes costs \$1.

Ojakh Cafe (Myasnikyan Poghots; meals \$6) A cheerfully typical eatery, with a few tables, healthy serves of *khoravats*, salads, drinks and sometimes local specialities such as mushroom salad. It's on a loop of the street near the *shuka*.

Mimino (☎ 41 41; 37 Myasnikyan Poghots; meals \$2.50) A little café in a gingerbread building between the *shuka* and the historical preserve, with Georgian treats such as *khingalee* dumplings, and *khachapuri* pies, plus salads.

Hatsatun Restaurant (☎ 56 61; Sharambeyan Poghots; meals \$6) At the Dilijan Historical Cultural Preserve, this eatery serves terrific local organic produce in a heritage building – book one day ahead.

Getting There & Around

Buses and marshrutkas to Yerevan leave from the main roundabout down by the river. Buses (\$1.20, three hours) leave at 9.15am, 10.30am and 11.30am – some of these are services starting further north from Ijevan or Noyemberyan. One marshrutka sets off at 11am (\$1.70, two hours), and there are others passing through to Yerevan every 40 minutes or so from 10am to 3pm. There is a bus to Vanadzor (50¢) at 9.30am, and a marshrutka (70¢) at 3pm. Heading north to Ijevan there are buses (15¢) at 9.30am and 10.30am, and marshrutkas (50¢) every 40 minutes from 10am to 3pm.

There are taxis at the main roundabout (80¢ to \$1.60 around town). During the day a local bus trundles between the western side of town around Kalinin Poghots up to Shahumian Poghots (10¢). A taxi to Haghartsin or Goshavank and back costs around \$7 to \$8, or \$10 to \$12 for both combined.

HAGHARTSIN ՀԱՂԱՐՏԻՆ

The handsome **Haghartsin Monastery** (Haghartsin means 'Dance of the Eagles') was built in the 12th century by two brothers, princes of the Bagratuni kingdom. It's hidden away in a lovely forest valley by some massive nut trees. The monastery has three churches, the first for Gregory the Illuminator, the second for the Virgin Mary, named Surp Astvatsatsin (Holy Mother of God) and lastly a chapel to St Stepanos. An image of the virgin and child by the door has distinct Mongolian features – added to convince the next wave of Mongol invaders not to destroy the church. The brothers' family seal can be seen on the back of this church. There are some stunning *khatchkars*, a sundial on the wall of the St Grigory church, and a refectory (1248) with amazing arching interlocked stone beams. Mass is held in the Surp Astvatsatsin at 11am on Sunday.

GOSHAVANK ԳՈՇԱՎԱՆԿ

Goshavank Monastery stands in the mountain village of Gosh, founded in 1188 by the saintly Armenian cleric Mkhitar Gosh who was buried in a little chapel overlooking the main complex. It's also called Nor Getik because it was built to replace the Getik Monastery destroyed by an earthquake. Goshavank features a main church (Surp Astvatsatsin) and smaller churches to St Gregory and St Gregory the Illuminator. The tower on the *matenadaran* (library) was once taller than the main church. With a school attached, the library is said to have held 15,000 books before it was burned by Tamerlane's army in the 13th century. The building next to the *matenadaran* has a base of rough-hewn stones from a 3000-year-old fort.

The quality of the carved crucifixes left by donors and the Grapar (Old Armenian) inscriptions is exquisite. The wondrous Aserghnagots (Braided) *khatchkar* comes alive with writhing patterns by the door of the Surp Grigor Lusavorich (St Gregory the Illuminator) church. Considered one of

the principal cultural centres of Armenia in its time, historians believe Goshavank was abandoned at the end of the 14th century. Goshavank then appears to have been reoccupied in the 15th and 16th centuries and restored from 1957 to 1963. The local custodian, Zarik, is a delightful guide and loves to demonstrate the acoustics in the main church with an old prayer.

Zarik's son Armen Grigoryan organises guided hikes to Gosh Lich (Gosh lake; 2.5km away) and Parz Lich (6km), caves and forgotten forts in the mountain forests. A trek to the little-known remains of Ak Kilise (Turkish for 'White Church') takes about six hours.

Sleeping

Gosh village has four homestays. The Ritz they ain't but the hosts are very friendly. Zarik and Armen Grigoryan can help you find these places. Prices include breakfast; extra meals are about \$2.50 per person.

Hayk's Home (☎ Dilijan operator 0680 22 22, ask for 143; s/d \$5/10) A simple family home with one bedroom for guests. One family member speaks Russian, otherwise try and get by in Armenian.

Tteni Guesthouse (s/d \$8/16) Has two bedrooms in a classic two-storey village house, a garden and a *tteni* (mulberry) tree. Walk down from Goshavank and take a left past the school – the house is on the left.

Gosh's Home (s/d \$8/16) Home to the Hovsepian family, whose two children speak some English. There's room for four people in two bedrooms here in the middle of the village (ask around for directions).

Getahovit B&B (☎ Dilijan operator 0680 22 22, ask for 221; s/d \$8/16) Run by Varditer Vardanyan, this B&B has one bedroom for two people, preferably couples or female travellers. From Goshavank head uphill past the Haypost branch and shop, and ask directions.

Getting There & Away

A taxi from Dilijan or Ijevan (both 23km away) is the easiest option (about \$6 to \$8 one-way). There are a couple of buses a week to Dilijan and Ijevan.

IJEVAN ԻՋԵՎԱՆ

☎ 63 / pop 21,000

The capital of Tavush *marz* lies in a high stony valley 36km down the Aghstev River

from Dilijan. Ijevan means caravanserai or inn and the town has been on a major east-west route for millennia. The local authorities are trying to encourage tourism and there's a good tourist office and some nice B&Bs here. The local climate is warmer than Dilijan, and the town is the centre of a wine-growing district with some very acceptable white table wines. The town has some handsome early 20th-century buildings, a big *shuka*, a winery and a little museum.

Orientation & Information

There are banks on Melibekyan Poghots directly across the river from the Marz Petaran on the main highway, and a couple of cafés in the nearby parks. Down the main road from the Marz Petaran is the Haypost office, the busy *shuka* and the local *avtokayan*, with plenty of moneychanging shops and stalls here. The **Ijevan Tourist Information Centre** (☎ 3 32 58; 5a Melikbekyan Poghots; ☎: 9am-5pm Mon-Sat) in the cultural centre/theatre is very helpful and arranges homestays and local tours with English- and French-speaking guides. There were no private Internet cafés when we visited. **Rouben Simonyan** (☎ 3 24 32) is a local historian who speaks Armenian and Russian and can arrange guides for road trips and hikes to unusual sites in the region.

Sights

The **Ijevan Wine Factory** (☎ 3 39 53; 9 Yerevanyan Poghots; ☎: 9am-6pm Mon-Sat) presses much of the local vintage into dry white wines and champagne under the Haghartsin, Gayane and Makaravank labels. It offers free tours and tastings with advance notice, and has cellar door sales. The winery also puts on lunches overlooking the river. It's about 800m from the town centre towards Dilijan, just past the little **Ijevan Local Lore Museum** (☎ 3 42 59; 5 Yerevanyan Poghots; admission free, donation appreciated; ☎: 9am-5pm Tue-Sun) with a couple of rooms of ethnographical displays. A short way up the left bank of the Aghstev river from Melikbekyan is a **sculpture park**.

Sleeping & Eating

Gyulnara Meliksetyan (☎ 3 15 54; 2 Nalbandyan Poghots; s/d \$10/15) This B&B is in a big house north of the centre, with four big bedrooms, satellite TV and modern plumbing. The Meliksetyans are an affable couple who speak

English and French. Home-cooked dinners cost about \$3.

Biboulyan (☎ 3 15 85; 70 Ohanyan Poghots; s/d \$10/18) Another B&B in a *shuka* in the town, Biboulyan has three bedrooms, a kitchen and a large garden with a little bathing pool. An advance booking is required in winter so the family can get the house heated. Dinners cost \$3. The house is on a winding dirt track north of the town centre – it would pay to arrange for someone to meet you in Ijevan.

Armineh Sargsyan (☎ 3 15 85; 54 Metaghagortsneri Poghots; s/d \$10/18) This is a village house with a vegetable garden, turkeys and chickens inside the gate and farm animals outside. Mrs Sargsyan speaks a little English and is everybody's Mamma. There are two bedrooms and a clean, simple bathroom.

Geghetsik Edilyan Guesthouse (☎ 32 195; off Dilijan road 5km from Ijevan; dm \$3.20-4, r from \$10) This simple country lodge is run by the gregarious Geghetsik, who speaks Armenian and Russian. It was built as a teachers' college on a hill with views over the Spitak Reservoir. The building is a prefab construction with warm, clean rooms. The food is terrific and Geghetsik arranges tours and transport in the area. Coming from Ijevan you pass the Spitak Reservoir. Before reaching the railway bridge look for a tunnel under the railway, head uphill 150m and the hotel is on the right. A taxi from Ijevan should cost \$2; ask for '*Geghetsiki pansionat*'.

Getting There & Away

Ijevan is 36km northeast of Dilijan. Marshrutkas to Yerevan leave just uphill from the marz petaran, near the Vardanants Café.

AROUND IJEVAN

The rugged mountains around Ijevan hide old roads, forts and churches in their many folds. A fantastic hike to the west of Ijevan can be found along the road leading to the town of **Yenokavan**, which sits by the Sarnajur River. On the southern edge of Yenokavan is a small church perched on a rock overlooking a gorge. Inside the gorge is the 13th-century **Surp Astvatsatsin** church.

North of Ijevan one road turns northwest at Azatamut through the captured Azeri enclaves of Upper and Lower Askipara (now Verin Voskepar and Nerin Voskepar) to Noyemberyan and the Georgian border.

Another road turns right just before the border to Berd in Shamshadin district. There are still landmines along this frontier; it's unwise to explore the shattered villages around here.

Just past the turn-off to Noyemberyan there's a road to Achajur village and onwards 6km to the 11th-century **Makaravank** monastery, with fine carvings on its main structures. Heading on towards Noyemberyan, turn up the valley at Kirants for the epic ride to the **Kirants** monastery – Niva or Villis Jeep only. It's a muddy 14km road hemmed in by forest. After about 10km you can walk up the north bank of the valley about 50m to 100m to find a **medieval stone road** parallel to the new track. The 13th-century Kirants monastery is quite unique, built of brick and decorated with coloured tiles by a Greek-influenced branch of the Armenian church. The forest setting is very lush, but watch out for ticks in summer.

Other churches in the vicinity include the **Arakelots** monastery, the little **Moro-Dzoro** monastery and **Deghdznuti Vank**, with a rough-hewn chapel from as early as the 4th-century, next to a 13th-century church. A guided tour with Rouben Simonyan from Ijevan (p165) or perhaps with someone from Kirants or Acharkut village would be a real advantage.

The **Shamshadin region** east of Ijevan is a fertile stretch of woodlands, vineyards and farms carved by three valleys; the Khndzorut, Tavush and Hakhum. With Azerbaijan on two sides and rugged mountains dividing it from the rest of Armenia, it's also quite isolated. There are some hopes for an economic revival based on the local wine industry but the area has seen a steep drop in population. The countryside around the village of Verin Karmiraghbyur is spectacularly pretty. After independence the collective-farm lands were divided into narrow strips, some as little as two metres wide, so the landscape seems to be braided with crops of corn and vegetables such as lettuce and potatoes.

Berd's little **Tavush fortress** is in an appealing state of ruin across the river. The woodland **Nor Varagavank** monastery stands above the Hakhum valley and the village of Varagavan, about 3km off the main road, with a Surp Astvatsatsin church (1237). **Khoranashat** monastery used to be Sham-

shadin's most visited historic attraction, but these days it's off-limits as it's only a few hundred metres from the border. The villagers of nearby **Khoranashat** recommend going there if it might be more than a warning shot.

The road from Lake Sevan to the regional centre of Berd is one of the wildest and most beautiful in the country. From Chambarak (Krasnosyelsk) it turns north past the village of Ttujur over the 2286m Getik pass and winds over the summer pastures and through forests along the ridges and flanks of Mt Mrkhuz (2993m). From Berd, maps show a more direct 56km road over the Sarum pass to Ijevan but it's a rough ride best done by Jeep. A better road traces the border to join the main highway north of Ijevan. Public transport in Shamshadin combines old roads and old buses, so a Jeep is the best option.

VAYOTS DZOR & SYUNIK

Armenia's remote southern regions, between Karabakh to the east and the Azeri enclave of Naxçıvan to the west, are linked to Yerevan by a single, vital highway. The region is starkly different from one mountain pass to another. Vayots Dzor (Gorge of Woes) centres on the headwaters of the wine-growing Arpa valley, with jagged gorges and rugged peaks. The name comes from a history of ruinous earthquakes across these mountainous valleys and cliffs. One local explorer rates this region as the frontier to seek out mountain chapels and monasteries, preferably by Villis Jeep or on horseback. A newly repaired 65km road runs over the Selim Pass to Lake Sevan from Yeghegnadzor, the main town.

Northern Syunik is a highland moor of cropland and pastures, divided from the forested south by the deep slash of the Vorotan Canyon. The main highway twists along valleys and over passes to Kapan, then past Armenia's second-highest peak, Mt Kaputjugh (3904m), to the warm rocky valley of the Araks River on the Iranian border. Syunik is full of ancient churches and monasteries, rustic villages making home-made fruit vodkas, forests, high pastures and stunning evidence of much older human cultures in the rocks of Zorats Karer



and Ughtasar near Sisian. Vorotan Pass (2344m) between Vayots Dzor and Syunik and the highlands around Sisian and Goris can be closed for a day or two in the middle of winter, and icy conditions from November to March or later can add hours to road journeys.

ARENI ԱՐԵՆԻ

Few grape varieties can thrive in Armenia's climatic extremes, but the Areni grape does. Most of the country's vineyards are on the Ararat Plain but the valleys from the village of Areni up to Yeghegnadzor comprise a quality wine-growing region. Wineries open for tastings (daily in summer, 10am to 6pm) include **Areni** in the town of Areni, **Ginetas** at

Arpi and **Getnatep** on the main highway at Yeghegnadzor. The **Surp Astvatsatsin** church across the river from Areni sits on a shelf below a cliff. **Getap** just up the Yeghegis Valley before Yeghegnadzor is also a local wine-making centre. **Hotel Noy** (☎ 087-2 55 45; main hwy, Arpi village; r \$12-18; 🚗) is a new motel-style complex with clean rooms, a bar, a buffet and swimming pool. The Tufenkian group (www.tufenkian.am) plans to build a **luxury hotel** and restaurant at Areni. There are frequent buses and marshrutkas along the main highway.

NORAVANK ՆՈՐԱՎԱՆԷ


This church complex is a masterpiece by the 13th-century architect Momik, both for its

architecture and dramatic setting. Noravank (New Monastery) was founded by Bishop Hovhannes in 1105, and was last restored in the 1990s. Climb the narrow stone stairs outside **Surp Astvatsatsin** (1339) to get a closer look at its dome. Astvatsatsin is also known as Burtelashen, after its patron Burtel Orbelian, who is buried here with his family. Historians say the church is reminiscent of towerlike burial structures created in the early years of Christianity. There's a wonderful carving of Christ flanked by Peter and Paul above the door.

The smaller **St Karapet church** (1227) next to Surp Astvatsatsin is the original shrine built by the miracle-working Bishop Hovhannes. Noravank once treasured a piece of the True Cross stained with the blood of Christ, acquired from a mysterious stranger. The side chapel of St Grigor includes a carved lion-human tombstone dated to 1300.

There are picnic spots and springs around Noravank, and something of a litter problem. The valley really warms up in the middle of a summer's day so come early, or late in the afternoon. During medieval summers the monks of Noravank retired to a mountain retreat.

Noravank features on many travel agency tours from Yerevan, about 90 minutes away by road – many combine a visit with a stop at Khor Virap and a winery. Public transport from Yerevan or Yeghegnadzor takes you as far as the turn-off on the highway, 6km from Noravank.



The **Boloraberd fortress** crowns a rocky crest across from the monastery. Verrjashen's church has been converted into a museum of the 13th- to 14th-century **Gedzor University**. Tanahati (Տանահատի Գեղեցիկ Դպրատան Գոյնը), the actual site of the medieval university, is about 7km away; the impressive main **Surp Stepanos** church was built by the Orbelians, who added their family crest to the stone carvings.

Sleeping & Eating

Gohar's Guest House (☎ 2 33 24; 44 Spandaryan Poghots; s/d \$15/30) A comfortable homestay with Gohar Gevorgyan, whose house is just past the football field. It's a good idea to arrange for them to pick you up. Meals can be prepared on request.

Hotel Yeghegnadzor (☎ 2 35 42; main square; r \$15-40) Just off the main square is this ageing and underfunded hotel. It has a dodgy water supply now but it could improve with investment. The rooms are overpriced for foreigners, more reasonable for locals.

If you have your own transport there are several riverside restaurants between Yeghegnadzor and Vayk which set a good Armenian table for around \$5 per person, including kebabs, *khovavats* (including venison and, more controversially, bear meat *khovavats*), salads and drinks. Open 8am until late outside winter. In the various seasons there are roadside stalls selling watermelons, fruit, honey, nuts and home-made wines and preserves.

Getting There & Away

Marshrutkas to Yerevan (\$1.60, 90 minutes to two hours, hourly 8am to 6pm) leave from the avtokayan near the main *shuka*. Space permitting you can also catch a marshrutka heading north or south from the junction with the main highway. There's little regular public transport between Yeghegnadzor and nearby towns besides creaky village buses and shared taxis rides. Arranging a car and driver is the easiest option. Noravank is about 20km west, while Jermuk is 53km east.

SELIM CARAVANSERAI

ՍՈՒԼԵՄԱՅԻ
ՔԱՐԱՎԱՆՍԵՐԱԻ

Built in 1332, this is the best preserved caravanserai in Armenia. According to the

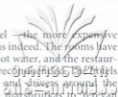
YEGHEGNADZOR & AROUND

ԵՂԵԳՆԱԶՈՐ

☎ 81 / pop 10,000

The wide civic spaces and cluttered village outskirts of Yeghegnadzor (*yeh-heg-nadzor*) sprawl above the meeting of the Yeghegis and Arpa rivers. A few small factories (eg a diamond-cutting plant) have opened but remittances and agriculture provide the biggest incomes.

The **Spitakavor** monastery is about 8km from town or 4km from Vernashen. The 20th-century Armenian fighter Garegin Nzhdeh was buried here in the 1980s. He fought in the Balkan Wars and in WWI, went into exile and lobbied the Nazis to restore Armenian territory, before being handed over at the end of the war by the Allies and dying in a Soviet prison.



inscription by the door, this traveller's inn for traders and their caravans of pack animals was built by Prince Chesar Orbelian. It was built for the days when the great Silk Road passed from Iran through Goris, the highlands, Yeghegnadzor and Selim Pass on its way to Europe. The inscription also honours the Mongol despot Abu Said II Khan as 'the ruler of the world'. Built on basalt blocks, the building has a central hall for animals divided by two vaulted side aisles with stone mangers. There's a little spring and fountain monument just up the hill.

Down the valley at Aghnjadzor near Getap are the ruins of the **Lernantsk Caravanserai**, a smaller version of the Selim Caravanserai built in the same period. The **Yeghegis Valley** branches off eastwards at Shatin, with a rare concentration of churches. **Shativank** is a fortified monastery near Shatin with a church (rebuilt in 1665), a waterworks, a grain storage silo and two-storey monk and guest quarters. About 2km up, a road branches up the valley to the west to the **Smbataberd fortress** above Artabuynk, and to the 10th-century **Tsakhatskar monastery** 6km northeast of the village with several churches and old *khatchkars*. The village of **Yeghegis** looks as though it's been inhabited forever, and has a couple of churches including the very unusual **Surp Zorats**, where worshippers gathered before an outdoor altar. The next village up the valley is Hermon, where a rough track north up the valley (on the left) leads to Arates and **Arates Vank**, a monastery with three churches (7th to 13th century).

VAYK & AROUND ՎԱՅԻ

☎ 82 / pop 7000

The rugged hills and valleys around this overgrown village hide lots of artfully positioned churches, monasteries and chapels from the 8th to 12th centuries. Heading 6km up the valley, the first turnoff left leads 10km north to Herher and a cluster of churches at the **Surp Sion monastery** 1km beyond it. There are the ruins of **Kapuyt Berd** (Blue Fortress) and *khatchkars* around Herher as well.

There are a couple of accommodation options in dusty Vayk, formerly named Azizbekov after an Azeri commissar. The **Vaik Hotel** (☎ 2 16 51; town centre; r 520-30) on the hill in the middle of town is a renovated

19th-century hotel — the more expensive rooms are spacious indeed. The rooms have satellite TV and hot water, and the restaurant has also been renovated. The hotel can arrange cars and drivers around the region. There are *marshrutkas* to Yerevan (\$1.60, less than two hours, every two hours 8am to 7pm) from the main road.

JERMUK ՋԵՐՄՈՒԿ

☎ 87 / pop 7000

This small resort town, 2080m above sea level on the upper Arpa River, was popular in the USSR as a vacation spot for mineral-water treatments and hot springs, some of them very hot. One writer described the salt and mineral-rich Jermuk water as the last expirations of the dying volcano above the town. The landscape around Jermuk is very pretty, excellent for walks and hikes.

The spa business gets most of its customers in the July and August holidays, and largely hibernates outside this season. Some of its sanatoriums have swimming pools and treatment areas. The spa attendants take their job seriously — in the old days people would sign up for 18-day courses with medically-supervised immersions in Jermuk's waters.

Open to the public is the **Gallery of Waters**, with a façade of archways and a pleasant view. Water runs into stone urns from pipes set in the wall and the temperature of the water is printed next to its pipe. The various waters are said to have different properties, good for curing stomach and liver problems, heart disease and cancer.

The best way to take advantage of the waters is at the **Ararat Sanatorium**, which has a swimming pool, sauna, hydrotherapy rooms and various other treatment rooms.

Sleeping & Eating

There are lots of informal pensions and spas open in July and August, but very little in the winter. Dining options outside the hotels and guesthouses are limited to a few local cafés and *khoravats* places in summer.

Anush Guest House (☎ 2 24 41; Vardanyan Poghots; s/d with half board 520/40) Anush has two guest bedrooms sharing a bathroom with hot water. Owner Ashot Margaryan can also arrange dinners, visits to sanatoriums and transport around the area.

Ararat II B&B (Getapnya Poghots, s/d \$10/20) This gets good reports from travellers for comfortable beds and hot showers. Turn right after the main bridge and then right again after a park. It's the small hotel on the left by the canyon. Decent meals cost extra, around \$4 to \$5 for lunch or dinner.

Getting There & Away

Jermuk is 177km from Yerevan, about two hours by the main highway, and then 26km off the main highway on a spur road. There are usually at least three marshrutkas to Yerevan each day (\$2.70, 2½ hours) at 8am, 10am and noon, and sometimes one at 2pm or 3pm.

SISIAN ՄԻՄԻԱՆ

☎ 830 / pop 18,000

Sisian sits on a high plateau where it snows as late as March or April, and the autumn ends early here too. Long miles of cropland are mown from the Spendaryan Reservoir to Goris after its short growing season, and in September the villages stack up with piles of hay, some taller than their houses. Sisian is a fairly quiet country town with a core of early 20th-century buildings. The people seem to feel more relaxed and cheerful to strangers than in some other towns. This land below the mountains of Syunik has been inhabited since forever, back to the ages of Neolithic observatories and animal petroglyphs. Some examples have been gathered in the town's *karadaran* (stone museum) park. The site of Sisian itself was inhabited as long ago as 2000 BC.

Sisian is located centrally in the southern end of Armenia and is a good base if you want to stay overnight outside Yerevan. There's plenty to see and do in and around Sisian, and other regional sites are accessible from here.

Information & Orientation

Sisian is mostly laid out on a grid and is small enough for walking around. The centre of town is on the northern side of the Vorotan River. Marshrutkas leave from the junction on the northern end of the bridge. The main street, Sisakan Poghots, runs parallel to the river, one block inland. One end of Sisakan has a Soviet memorial cheerfully celebrating the crushing of the Dashnaks in 1920; from here a road swings

to the right and up to Sisakan church. The other end of Sisakan Poghots passes the Hotel Dina and a couple of banks and stores on its way toward the Haypost office. The Base of the Mountains is just the Haypost. You can change money at stores and kiosks near the main bridge.

Ashot Avagyan (☎ 53 48, 36 63; ukhtasar@mail15.com) is an artist who arranges Jeep trips up the mountains to Ughtasar and also acts as Sisian's tourist information office. Ashot is a local legend for organising an annual avant-garde art happening in Sisian on the August full moon (find information at www.naregatsi.org/Ashot/), which is making a name for itself among bohemian Armenians. One day is held at Zorats Karer and a second day up at Ughtasar.

Sights

Originally built in the 6th century, **Sisakan church** was restored as recently as the 20th century. It combines an elegant square-cross floor with some striking sculptures of royal and ecclesiastical patrons inside and out. Inside there's a display of microsculptures by local artist Eduard Ter-Ghazaryan. Seen through a microscope, one features 17 images of the cross on a human hair coated with metal. The road up from town passes a large Soviet war memorial with a Karabakh War monument – local men were some of the first to volunteer to join their kin over in the next mountain range when the war began, and paid a heavy price for it.

The **karadaran** (stone museum) park in town one block from Sisakan Poghots gathers together stone carvings from different millennia, with sarcophagi, phallus stones, ram stones and megaliths evolving into pagan *khatchkars* and rough stone crosses and finally into medieval Armenian *khatchkars*. Facing the park is the **Museum of History** (admission 20¢; ☎ 10am–5pm Tue–Sun), with some carpets and ethnographical displays beside maps and historical information, all labelled in Armenian.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Dina (☎ 33 33; 35 Sisakan Poghots; www.freespeech.org/oneworld/Armenia; s \$4, d \$8.50–13) A handsome 1930s building with basic rooms with shared bathroom (showers \$1), and nicer double rooms with en suite bathrooms. Breakfast costs \$1.60, and other meals can be

arranged for around \$3 to \$4. The managers speak some English and can help with arranging tours and transport onwards.

Basen Hotel Complex (☎ 53 70; fax 46 82; Manukyan Poghots; s/d \$20/40) A comfortable hotel across from a school behind the Haypost office. It's a series of two-storey buildings, all with a large sitting room, a fridge and hot water on both floors. The restaurant is good too; it's open for lunch and dinner with classic Armenian fare for \$4 to \$5 per person. The cheerful young manager is a great dinner host.

ZoratsQarerB&B (☎ 3611; info@bedanbreakfast.am; 40 3rd Poghots; s/d/t \$30/50/60; ☎ ☑) A modern stone-clad villa, at the end of a track close to the Sisavan church. The four bedrooms are smallish and cosy, with extra bunks for kids. The cheerful hosts serve meals prepared from organic produce. A private cave at the end of the garden has been fitted out with tables and cushioned benches – potentially Sisian's very first underground club.

Besides the hotels, Sisian's dining scene is limited to some small-town cafés and neighbourhood *khoravats* joints.

Getting There & Away

There are four marshrutkas to Yerevan (\$4, four hours, 8.30am, 10.30am, 12.30pm and 2.30pm) each day, where the bridge meets Ori Poghots (along the north bank). Taxis wait at this junction too. There's also a bus stop at the turn-off from the Yerevan-Goris road into town, where people often wait for rides.

Local tours can be negotiated directly with the taxi drivers or through one of the hotels. A trip to Shaki Falls or Zorats Karer costs about \$2.50, a ride to Goris \$8, and a longer tour to Tatev Monastery and back about \$15.

AROUND SISIAN

Two hundred and four upright basalt stones up to 3m high set along sweeping lines and loops, some punctured with sight holes aligned with stars, make up the ancient site of **Zorats Karer**. The site, situated on a rise above the river plains ringed by mountains, is dotted with tombs dated to 3000 BC. Scientist Elma Parsamian argues that the site's elaborate astronomical functions can be shown at the solstices and equinoxes.

Lines of stones define an egg-shaped area with a burial tumulus in the centre, with a north arm stretching 170m and a southern alley 160m long. About 700 stones are pierced with finger-sized holes. Along with the 5000-year-old observatory at Metsamor west of Yerevan, it suggests the builders had a deep knowledge of astronomy, including the Zodiac and the lunar phases, combined perhaps with worship for stars such as Sirius. Zorats Karer is 3.5km north of Sisian, signposted on the left about 700m before the main highway. The stones are in the fields about 400m from the turn-off.

The **Shaki Waterfall** lies about 4km from Sisian near the village of the same name. About 18m high, it sluices down a wide expanse of stones above the Shaki River. The water is used for Shaki's hydroelectric power station so the waterfall isn't always 'on'.

About 6km down the Vorotan from Sisian in **Aghitu (Aghudi)** village is a distinctive 7th-century **tower-tomb**. There are dragon stones nearby from the 2nd to 3rd century BC. The road continues as the canyon deepens past Vaghatin to **Vorotnavank**, 12km from Sisian on the south side of the Vorotan, a striking 9th- to 11th-century fortress and church complex built by Queen Shahandukht and her son Sevada. A couple of kilometres down the valley on the other side of the river the road passes Vorotan to the **Shamb hot springs**, where you can warm your toes.

The petroglyphs of **Ughtasar** (Pilgrimage Mountain) in the mountains north of Sisian are even older than Zorats Karer. They lie at an altitude of 3300m around a lake on Mt Tshguk, accessible between June and September and even then only if it's not a cold summer. Carvings of leaping, dancing animals and hunters adorn rocks and boulders everywhere around the small lake. It's a haunting place surrounded by isolated peaks, and you can only wonder why ancient people would trek to such an inhospitable place to leave their mark on stone. The tracks are steep, rocky and hopeless without a Jeep (Villis) and a guide. Ashot Avagyan (see p170) helped build the tracks to Ughtasar during the Karabakh War, and can arrange drivers and Villis hire for \$50 per vehicle for a trip of eight to 10 hours – the ascent takes at least three hours.

The ruins of **Tanahati Vank** are 17km south-west of Sisian past the Tolors Reservoir. A university was established here in 1280. Called Karmir (Red) Vank by locals, Tanahat Monastery is on a high promontory by a gorge. The monks here were so pious and ascetic they refused soup, cheese and oil, eating only vegetables, hence the name Tanahat, meaning 'Deprived of Soup'.

GORIS ԳՈՐԻՍ

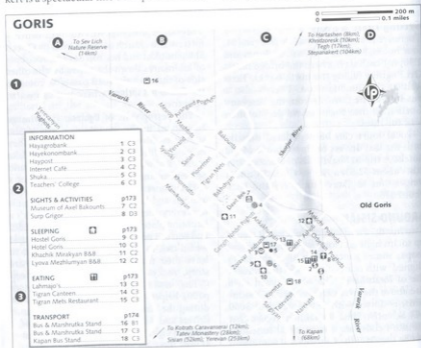
☎ 84 / pop 25,000

Leafy Goris stands on a grid of streets in a deep valley. White volcanic pillars spear through the steep grassy slopes of Old Goris, east of town. Goris boasts fine stone houses with arched windows and balconies on tree-lined avenues. The valley seems to have its own microclimate; foggy and dewy inside and dry windswept cropland moors above. Goris is an important junction between Yerevan, Karabakh and Iran, and there are some good guesthouses here to break the journey between Yerevan and Karabakh. The 104km highway to Stepanakert is a spectacular line of loops and climbs

paid for by the Armenia Fund. The highway south to Kapan leads down a canyon fenced with sculptured forms of soft volcanic rock, and there's a required detour to the Holy Monastery via Satan's Bridge and the Vorotan Canyon. Goris is known for its variety of home-made fruit *oghee* (vodkas) including the deliciously potent mulberry and Cornelian cherry (*hone*) *oghee* - explore the *shuka* on Syuniki Poghots or ask at a B&B to find some. The only drawback to Goris seems to be the more than usual staring by inquisitive (puzzled?) locals.

Orientation & Information

Goris was laid out to a plan by a German architect in the 19th century. The banks, the **Haypost office** (19 Syuniki Poghots) and most of the local eateries are within a block of the main square. There's one little **Internet café** (Garegin Nzhdeh Poghots) near the corner with Mesrop Mashtots Poghots; new places will probably start appearing. There's also Internet access through the **Teacher's College** (cnr Gusan Ashoti Poghots & Khorents Poghots; per hr 80C; ☎: 10am-6pm); best to go before noon



FRUIT VODKA

Oghee (pronounced something like 'or-ee') are delicious fruit vodkas, sometimes called *vatsun* or *aragh*, made in village orchards everywhere. Around 60% alcohol, oghee is made from apples, pears, apricots, pomegranates, grapes, cherries, Cornelian cherries or cornels, mulberries and figs. The best mulberry (*t'te*) and Cornelian cherry (*hone*) oghee are intense, lingering liqueurs. Vedi Alco makes some oghee commercially, weaker than the village stuff.

or after 5pm. Most transport leaves from near the **shuka** on Syuniki Poghots, but some leaves from a stand at the top end of Mashtots at the junction with the main Yerevan–Stepanakert highway.

Sights

Locals say the cave shelters and stables of **Old Goris** carved into the hillside on the east side of town were built and inhabited in the 5th century. Several trails lead up over a saddle where there are more volcanic pinnacle clusters to explore. Many of the rooms are linked together and arched 'shelves' grace some walls. The caves are sometimes used to house cattle – watch your step.

The **Museum of Axel Bakounts** (☎ 2 29 66; 41 Mesrop Mashtots Poghots; admission 15¢; ⌚: 10am–5pm Tue–Sun) is a typical Goris villa with stone walls and a veranda looking onto a courtyard. The museum was the home of writer Axel Bakounts (or Bakunts) who died in Stalin's 1937 purges. It features his personal effects and furnishings from the late 19th and early 20th century.

Sleeping

Khachik Mirakyan B&B (☎ 2 10 98; 13 Davit Bek Poghots; mirakyanbb@rambler.ru; s/d \$15/30) Situated near the park where Davit Bek meets Syuniki Poghots, Khachik Mirakyan B&B is welcoming and comfortable. There are three bedrooms and one bathroom with hot water, and a great balcony for resting up. A home-cooked, substantial dinner or lunch costs \$4 to \$5.

Hostel Goris (☎ 2 18 86; jirmar28@yahoo.com; 55 Khorenatsi Poghots; s/d \$15/30) A house next to the Hotel Goris, this hostel is run by an affable couple who speak English and French.

One of the hosts, Jirayc Martirosyan, is also an accomplished artist. There are two rooms with three beds each, and extensions are planned. The rooms and the bathroom are basic but there is free Wi-Fi, tea, good coffee and a filling breakfast.

Lyova Mezhlumyan B&B (☎ 2 22 98; 7 Makichi Poghots; s/d \$15/30) A fine stone house close to the Vararik River. There's no sign but the exterior has curved walls reaching in to a recessed door. There are three simple bedrooms, a large living room and a good bathroom. Mrs Mezhlumyan's daughter Nairi speaks English.

Hotel Goris (☎ 2 16 67; 53 Khorenatsi Poghots; s/d \$4/6.60, lue \$12) In an emergency there's also this place, home to refugees and a few waterless rooms.

Eating

There are a few local eateries and cafés but nothing too fancy. The B&Bs prepare meals for \$4 to \$5 per person.

Tigran Mets Restaurant (cnr main square & Komitas Poghots; meals \$4–5) The Tigran Mets serves up local fare such as *khoravats*, salads and roasted potatoes with a range of drinks.

Tigran Canteen (Mesrop Mashtot Poghots; meals \$3) Opposite the church is this simpler place frequented mostly by local men.

Lahmajo's (Gusan Ashoti Poghots; pizzas \$2.50, snacks 20¢) A little café where Goris ladies snack on fresh pastries, *lahmajo*, cakes and pizzas.

AROUND GORIS

There are several historic villages around Goris, many with ancient artificial caves still used as stables. **Khndzoresk**, 10km east of Goris, perches above the ruins of Old Khndzoresk, which was dug into a grassy gorge of soft volcanic sandstone. Whole walls of rock are dotted with caves. There are more caves around **Tegh** on the Stepanakert road, and around **Hartashen**, a tough but rewarding 3km on foot from Old Goris or about 8km by road. A smattering of **standing stones** similar to the ones at Zorats Karer is visible from the main road towards Sisian. Interestingly, there's a village in the gorge below Goris called Karahunj, which means 'stone henge' in Armenian. The substantial remnants of the 12th-century **Kotrats Caravanserai** (built by the Orbelian princes) lie 2km south of the main highway near Harzhis. The **Sev Lich Nature Reserve**, 14km

northeast of town on the shoulder of Mt Mets Ishkhanasar, protects a lake (Sev Lich means 'Black Lake') at 2666m. The track up requires a Jeep and a guide.

Getting There & Away

There are two marshrutka stands for trips to Yerevan. One is near the *shuka* on Syuniki, with services at 7.30am and 1pm (\$3.20, four to five hours), and two or three marshrutkas leave from the corner of Mashtots and the Yerevan–Stepanakert highway between 8am and noon. Stepanakert marshrutkas (104km, two hours) cost \$4; there's one roughly every hour from 11am until 3pm from the highway bus stop. An old bus to Kapan (\$1.60, 11am daily) leaves from Komitas Poghots on the uphill side of the corner with Syuniki Poghots. A taxi to Kapan costs \$10 to \$12, \$12 to Stepanakert and \$8 to Sisian (there's no public transport between Sisian and Goris). A day trip by car to Khndzoresk or Tatev costs \$10 to \$15 for three to six hours. The B&Bs are happy to arrange taxis with friendly, semi-professional drivers.

TATEV ՏԱԹԵՎ

Built on a fairy-tale natural fortress of rock on the edge of the Vorotan Canyon, Tatev is as jaw-dropping as any of the World Heritage-listed churches in Lori. The views down the gorge reach to the peaks of Karabakh. The road to Tatev turns south of the main highway and reaches the northern edge of the gorge at Halidzor. Near the start of the descent is a gorgeous little stone cone-roofed stone shelter, at the end of a ridge; it's well worth stopping to look. At the bottom of the canyon are mineral springs and Satan's Bridge. Legend tells that villagers fleeing to Tatev were blocked by the raging river. Before the invaders attacked, a bridge was magically created by a huge falling rock and the people were saved.

A steep climb up the south side turns left before Tatev village. The great fortified monastery's main church of **Surp Poghos-Petros** (St Paul and St Peter) was built by the bishops of Syunik in the 9th century to house important relics. There are faint signs of **frescoes**, intricate carvings and portraits of the main donors on the northern side. The 11th-century **Surp Grigor** church nestles next to it, and there's a masterfully miniaturised

chapel above the gatehouse. The fortifications, added in the 17th century, have been restored and are full of **mosaics**, towers and libraries. At the monastery's peak, some 600 monks lived and worked at Tatev, and national icon St Grigor Tatevatsi (St Gregory of Tatev, 1346–1409) is buried here. An 8m octagonal pillar topped by a *khatchkar* next to the Surp Grigor church dates from the 9th century and is said to have predicted seismic activity by shifting.

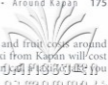
In the summer there's a store with drinks and snacks in the car park. There isn't much public transport besides rickety buses from Tatev village to the market in Goris 28km away several times a week. A day trip by taxi from Sisian or Goris costs about \$10 to \$15 depending on how long you stay.

KAPAN ԿԱՊԱՆ

☎ 85 / pop 35,000

Kapan spreads for miles along valleys beneath Mt Khustup (3210m). Some of its industrial outskirts and concrete apartment blocks have a harsh appearance, but the town centre, where two rushing rivers meet, has leafy parks and squares. The reopening of the copper-molybdenum mine has kick-started the local economy after a decade of jobless isolation. Employees were surprised when the mine's Swiss owners raised wages to an average of \$95 a week. Locals say there's so much unrefined metal beneath the ground that magnetic compasses won't work in some parts of town. The town is a step ahead economically from other towns in Syunik, with new cafés, shops and hotels opening up in the last couple of years.

The 68km road from Goris to Kapan dives in and out of the Vorotan Canyon before climbing around the forests and pastures of the Bargushat Range. Some maps don't show that the road wriggles through occupied Azerbaijan in several places. The task of removing minefields continues on this border, and there have been injuries and deaths among civilians at villages like Davit Bek as recently as 2002. Kapan was shelled by artillery in the early 1990s, with the border only 1km from the eastern suburbs. From Kapan the main highway heads west up the Voghi River to Kajaran (33km) and across the Tash-tun Pass before descending to the Iranian



border on the Araks River. Another road heads south into the mountainous wilds of the Shikahogh Nature Reserve. There is a belt of villages north of Kapan, perched on fertile slopes above the Geghi, Voghji and Achanan Rivers.

Orientation

The town centre is a triangle joined by two rivers, with a Davit Bek statue in rippling bronze across the main highway from the confluence. Facing the buildings between the rivers, the Hotel Darist is up the right fork and the Hotel Lernagordz is up on the left. The hulking Marz Petaran (provincial government building), the Haypost building and the Palace of Culture face each other off in the middle of the triangle. There's an **Internet café** (per hour 80¢) in the Hotel Lernagordz, and a couple of other, slower places with Internet connections among the shops close by. There are banks and shops with cash exchange around the Marz Petaran and around the main *shuka*, across the river from the Hotel Darist. Kapan's main church is near the Hotel Lernagordz (below), and is noted locally for its good acoustics and the priest's fine singing. There are four or five small **museums** in town, discovered largely by chance by Peace Corps volunteers over the years.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Darist (☎ 6 28 62; hotel_darist@yahoo.com; 1a Aram Manukyan Poghots; s/d/ste \$20/30/40) A clean, well-run establishment with renovated rooms and bathrooms and a good restaurant on the 1st floor, which serves *khovavats*, salad and bread for \$5, and serves drinks until late.

Hotel Lernagordz (☎ 6 20 86; Davit Bek Hraparak; s/d \$20/40) This hotel runs a dual pricing policy – locals pay as little as \$2.50 each. The condition of the unrenovated rooms and the timeless Soviet atmosphere at this multistorey hotel are better than many of its ilk.

Caravan (☎ 5 45 00; Kajaran hwy; r \$20) This restaurant and guesthouse is in a pretty valley 8km towards Kajaran. Each room has space for two or more. There's ample parking, a balcony on the guesthouse perched above the river and a busy restaurant with outdoor dining cabins and a dining room. Classic Armenian fare based around *khovavats*,

bread, salad and fruit costs around \$5 per person. A taxi from Kapan will cost \$3 to \$4; the staff car will take you back to town.

Eating out options in Kapan include the **Tip Top Café** at the back of the Palace of Culture, very cheap at \$2 to \$3 for a hearty lunch; **Milady Restaurant** (Aram Manukyan Poghots), a few minutes walk up the Voghji from the Hotel Darist, with pizzas and *lahmajos*; and the **Pzhni Café**, in the park to the left of the Palace of Culture, which has vine-shaded outdoor tables. Everyone has a favourite neighbourhood *khovavats* master; ask around for recommendations.

Getting There & Away

There are marshrutkas to Yerevan (\$6, six/eight hours in summer/winter, 7am, 8am and noon daily) from in front of the Hotel Lernagordz. There's a bus to Goris (\$1.60, 90 minutes to two hours, 8am) from Kapan and buses to Kajaran (\$1, 30 minutes, every two hours from 8am to 6pm) from a stop at the Davit Bek statue. A taxi to Goris or to Meghri costs \$10 to \$12.

AROUND KAPAN

The remains of 9th-century **Vahanavank**, about 7km from Kapan, are fairly modest but the epic views across southern Syunik repay the effort of a visit. The monastery was once the religious centre for Syunik's kings.

The road to the **Shikahogh Nature Reserve**, 45km south of Kapan, climbs up a valley, over a ridge and into the valley of the Tsav River, where at the hamlet of Nerkin Hand there's an ancient grove of massive plane trees. The oak and hornbeam forests either side of the Tsav comprise the nature reserve, though you'll need a Niva or Villis to explore the 100 sq km of gorges and forests.

The ruins of **Baghaberd fortress**, the capital of Syunik until it was sacked by Seljuk Turks in 1170, stands north of the confluence of the Geghi and Voghji Rivers, halfway between Kajaran and Kapan. Once the largest historic defence construction in Armenia, now only its towers and some walls remain.

The struggling mining town of Kajaran (population 8000) lies beneath Syunik's highest mountain, 3904m Mt Kaputjugh, 33km west of Kapan. The local hostelry is the **Hotel Ganzasar** (☎ 85-3 32 04; 2 Lernagordzneri

Poghots; r 55-14), scraping by on a shoestring with hot water for a couple of hours in luxe rooms. The hotel is on the main square.

MEGHRI ՄԵՂՐԻ

☎ 860 / pop 5000

The rocky land between the Meghri Range and the Araks River is known for its figs and pomegranates. Strategic Meghri, Armenia's toehold on Iran, is worth exploring for its fine stone houses. The town sits deep in the rocky, lushly irrigated gorge of the Meghri River surrounded by jagged peaks. The postindependence borders left Meghri deeply isolated, and the local economy struggles by on remittances, farming and a bit of business from the highway to Iran. The name Meghri comes from the sun god Mihr, and Meghri does get hotter in summer than practically anywhere in the country. The border crossing is at the Araks bridge near Agarak (population 3500), 10km from Meghri, open all day. Copper has been mined here for millennia and the biggest local employer is a small underfunded copper-molybdenum mine.

The Meghri fortress above the town dates mostly from the 18th century. The brick domes of Surp Hovannes at the Meghri town monastery date from the 17th century. In the centre of the main part of town is the fine St Astvatsatsin church with a distinctive octagonal dome, built in the 17th century with later frescoes. There's also the Surp Sargis church across the river in Pokr Tagh, the smaller side of town, with two rows of columns and some delicately restored frescoes.

There are a few Russian soldiers based at Agarak with Armenian troops and officials. It's a slow border crossing (it may close for lunch) but there's no particular hassle. Across the bridge is the tiny Iranian outpost of Noordoos (also spelt Noghdoz or Norduz).

Sleeping & Eating

There are a handful of B&Bs in Agarak and Meghri which can be booked through Aries Tours (p123).

Haer B&B (☎ 30 54; info@bedandbreakfast.am; 14 Karakert Poghots; s/d 55/10) In the centre of Meghri, Marieta Azatyan runs this B&B with two rooms with double beds in classic provincial style – satin duvet covers, carpets and wood-veneer furniture.

Grigor Margaryan's B&B (☎ 29 33; fax 33 49; info@bedandbreakfast.am; 7/24 Adelyan Poghots; s/d \$15/30; ☎) Also in Meghri, Grigor's B&B has two comfy bedrooms and good showers with hot water.

Elya Martirosyan B&B (☎ operator 1-07 ask for Agarak 2 14 42; info@bedandbreakfast.am; 3 Nshagortsneri Poghots; s/d 55/10) This B&B has two bedrooms with double beds and an outside bathroom in Agarak. Elya's house is close to the customs and border post, and is one of the last buildings before the frontier.

The B&Bs will prepare dinners and lunches with prior notice for a couple of dollars. There are no restaurants as such in Agarak or Meghri, but there are a few basic roadside cafés offering *khoravats* for \$2.

Getting There & Away

A Yerevan-bound marshrutka (\$10, nine hours in summer, 11 hours in winter) departs at 9am from the Hotel Meghri, just off Central Square, on Block 2. A taxi to Kapan should cost \$10 to \$12 (90 minutes) from Agarak or Meghri. A taxi between Meghri and Agarak costs about \$4. On the other side of the border, buses are rare or nonexistent but a taxi to Jolfa (Julfa, Culfa) should cost \$5 to \$8 (40 minutes) with bargaining. A shop just outside Iranian immigration exchanges currencies. See p137 for information on buses to Iran.

ARMENIA DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATION

Yerevan has a good range of places to stay, from \$7-a-night budget options through to mid-range hotels (\$40 to \$100 per night), to good three- and four-star hotels. It's debatable if any hotel really shines in the five star category. The new Armenia Marriott Hotel (p132) is the likeliest candidate. There are a couple of excellent boutique hotels in Yerevan. For upmarket hotels we've included government taxes in the prices.

Across Armenia there is a burgeoning range of budget pensions for around \$15 to \$25 per day. Renting and sharing an apartment is a good way to keep down costs (see below). The **Foreign Students Hostel** (☎ 56 00 03; pr-int@ysu.am; 52 Mesrop Mashhots Poghot; dm \$10) in Yerevan accepts only Peace Corps Volunteers and exchange students.



THE AYAS NAUTICAL RESEARCH CLUB

One of the best stories about post-independence Armenia concerns a medieval sailing ship in a lake. The Ayas project began back in 1985 when the club's founders became interested in the times of the Cilician Kings, from the 10th to 14th centuries, when Armenian naval vessels and traders plied the eastern Mediterranean from the ports of Ayas and Korykos. Club members discovered old plans of Armenian ships in the British Library. Armenia hasn't had a sea coast since 1375, but they set out to build a sailing ship the old way. After independence, the fuel shortages made the timbers of the Ayas a target for people on the verge of freezing. Club members lived and slept in the boat for several years to protect it. The vessel survived to sail on Lake Sevan in 2002; there are plans to take it onto the Black Sea. The **Ayas Nautical Research Club** (Map pp120-1; 54 16 14; 19/8 Komitas Poghot; www.aau.am/ayas/) has a substantial library of books on maritime Armenia and its fleets.

Outside Yerevan there is a handful of impressive new hotels and some comfortable homestays and B&Bs. The best hotel in a regional city such as Kapan will only cost about \$20 per person. Resort areas such as Dilijan, Tsaghkadzor, Jermuk and Lake Sevan have a range of Soviet-era hotels and sanatoriums either recently privatised or owned by government ministries. Conditions here vary a great deal. We've tried to choose places where new owners are investing to raise standards. With a new water tank and lick of paint many hotels are restoring a wing or a floor to provide the basics, and a few luxuries. Meanwhile, most towns have a Soviet-era hotel with rusty pipes and skeletal finances, where economy rooms lack bathroom tiles and running water and where a night's stay is more sensibly approached as a camping trip. The websites listed on p179 will inevitably list new places.

Rentals

Renting an apartment in Yerevan is a common practice among visitors. Rents are rising in the centre, where property prices doubled between 2000 and 2003. Prices peak between June and October. At the time of writing, \$10 to \$15 a day got you a single-bedroom apartment with sporadic water supplies and a marshrutka ride away from town. From \$20 to \$30 a day rented a two- or three-bedroom apartment with a more convenient location. Up to \$50 a day earned a three or four bedroom, renovated apartment or house. Besides the travel agencies which frequently arrange apartments (p123), here are some specialists for standard and luxury apartments:

www.armasta.com
www.hyurservice.com
www.tufenkian.am
www.visitarm.com
www.yerevanrentals.com

ACTIVITIES

Armenia is quickly building a reputation among bird-watchers, with 346 species recorded out of 550 for all of Europe, including one-third of Europe's threatened species. The Birds of Armenia Project at the **American University of Armenia** (Map pp120-1; ☎ 27 45 32; www.aau.am/boa; 40 Marshall Baghramian Poghot, Yerevan) has maps and books on the country's profusion of avian plumage. A *Field Guide to Birds of Armenia* and the

Handbook of the Birds of Armenia are both by Martin S Adamian and D Klem. There's also the **Centre of Bird Lovers** (☎ 24 70 59; adamians@freenet.am; Panuyr Sevak Poghots, Nor Zeytun, Yerevan) which engages in conservation efforts and works with ornithological guides.

Mountain climbing on Mt Aragats is possible in summer, and there are challenging hikes along the Garni Gorge and through the Khosrov Nature Reserve close to Yerevan. Country hikes are made easier by the profusion of piped springs. Horse riding is becoming more popular and is a great way to explore off the beaten track. Sailing and fishing on Lake Sevan on a mild summer's day is idyllic – the Harsnaqar and Avan Tsapatagh hotels are good places to inquire. Underground there are *karst* (limestone) caves in Vayots Dzor, largely unexplored and for experienced climbers only. The cave villages around Goris are an easier challenge.

BOOKS

A glossy little guide with some terrific photos is *Edge of Time: Travelling in Armenia & Karabakh*, that reveals a shining love for the country. *Rediscovering Armenia* by Brady Kiesling

and Raffi Kojian details every village and nearly every monument in the country. You can buy it in Yerevan or it's also online (free!) with maps at www.cilicia.com. Pictorial books include Jacob Majarian's *Armenia - Pictorial Treasury of an Ancient Land*. Majarian also creates excellent calendars; see www.majart.com.au.

Peter Balakian's justly praised *Black Dog of Fate* deals with suburban Armenian life in the USA and with the silences and agonies of his family's experiences during the genocide.

The Crossing Place by Philip Marsden is as haunting as travel literature gets, an evocation of the Armenian spirit from the killing fields of Syria through to the old communities of the Middle East and Eastern Europe to a frontier village in the middle of the Karabakh War. Marsden's *The Spirit Wrestlers* explores the Russian dissenter communities in the region, including the Molokans.

Finding translations of writers such as Raffi and Abovyan is best done through specialist bookstores such as the **Sardarabad Bookstore** (www.sardarabad.com) in Los Angeles and the **Armenian General Benevolent Fund bookstore** (www.agbu.org) in New York.

The Armenian language is no pushover - Lord Byron gave up after a few months of study at the Mekhitarist Fathers monastery of San Lazzaro near Venice and returned to the courtesans and brothels. Try the *Spoken East Armenian* tapes and books by Gordon Fairbanks and Earl Stewick. For other phrasebooks make sure it's eastern Armenian rather than the western dialect.

BUSINESS HOURS

Most churches are open 9am to 6pm daily, though in winter you might have to wait a while for the key to appear. Give a tip or buy some candles. Government offices and international organisations usually work 9am to 5pm weekdays. Fairs and markets open daily. Museums and galleries often close Monday. Shops are usually open 9am to 7pm, or 10am to 10pm. Bank opening hours vary but are usually 9.30am to 5.30pm Monday to Friday and 10.30am to 1.30pm Saturday.

CUSTOMS

The usual restrictions apply (one carton of cigs, two litres of booze, no guns) and

there's no currency declaration to keep. If you plan to take something out of the country considered to be of cultural or historical or national value (eg a rug, a samovar or similar) a certificate is required from the **Ministry of Culture** (Map pp120-1; ☎ 1-52 93 49; 5 Tumanyan Poghots, Yerevan). You'll find it's much easier if the shop you bought the item from arranges the permit for you, or if you can speak Armenian. Otherwise the bureaucracy can be quite baffling.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

For a list of foreign embassies in Armenia, see p119. Armenia does not have embassies in Australia, Ireland, New Zealand or the Netherlands. Irish travellers should contact the Armenian embassy in the UK. Dutch visitors should contact the Armenian embassy in Brussels. Australian and New Zealand inquiries should also be addressed to the UK embassy. A full list of Armenian embassies and consulates can be found at www.armeniaforeignministry.com; they include:

- Austria** (☎ 431-522 7480; armenia@armembassy.at; Neubaugasse 12-14/1/16, 1070 Vienna)
- Belgium** (☎ 322-346 3058; armembel@infoboard.be; 157 Rue Merjay, 1060 Brussels)
- Canada** (☎ 613-234 3710; www.armembassycanada.ca; 7 Delaware Ave, Ottawa, Ontario K2P 0Z2)
- France** (☎ 331-4 212 9800; armbarmen@wanadoo.fr; 9 Rue Viète, 75017 Paris)
- Georgia** (☎ 32-951 723; armemb@caucasus.net; 4 Tsetelashvili Kucha, Tbilisi)
- Germany** (☎ 4930-405 09110; armenb@t-online.de; Hillman Strasse 5, d 13-68, Berlin)
- Greece** (☎ 301-934 5727; armemb@hol.gr; 1 fl, 159 Syngro Ave, Nea Smyrni, Athens)
- Iran** (☎ 982-1 674 833; emarteh@yahoo.com; 1 Ostad Shahriar/ former Arfa St, cnr of Razi, Jomohouri Eslami Ave, Tehran)
- Italy** (☎ 396-329 6638; embarmen@tin.it; 174 Via dei Colli della Farnesina, 00194 Rome)
- Russia** (☎ 095-924 4535; armembu@df.ru; Amianski pereulok 2, Moscow 101000)
- UK** (☎ 207-938 5435; armembuk@onetel.net.uk; 25a Cheniston Gardens, London, England W8 6TG)
- USA** (☎ 202 319 2983; www.armeniaemb.org; 2225 R St, NW, Washington, DC 20008)

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

December to April

Armenia has a full range of festivals, strongly Christian but intimately tied to the seasons.





the land and its folk traditions. The year ends (and kicks off) with **New Year's (Navasard)**. The pre-Christian new year was on the first day of the month of Navasard (August). The Church fathers moved the date to 31 December, but the name carried over. Households bake cookies and the New Year bread, which contains a coin. Whoever finds it has good fortune coming. **Christmas (Surp Dzenount)** is held on 6 January, the Epiphany (baptism) of Jesus. Hymns and psalms ring out from churches, and water and myrrh are blessed – it's sometimes called water blessing day. **Purification (Trndez)** occurs 40 days after Christmas (16 February). Bonfires are lit and people leap over them for protection from the evil eye, illness and poisons. Trndez also signals the coming of spring.

Easter Season

Surp Sargis Don (Saint Sargis Day) falls nine weeks before Easter, between 18 January and 23 February. The handsome warrior saint may appear in the dreams of girls this night, wearing gold armour, to decide their fate – the man she dreams of who gives her water will be her husband. The 40 days of Lent before Easter is a fasting period with holidays such as Shrove-Tide, a good time for public celebrations. **Palm Sunday (Tszardard)**, one week before Easter, is a proper spring celebration. Trees are brought into churches and hung with fruit. **Easter (Zatik)** falls between mid-March and mid-April, depending on the Church calendar. Households which planted lentil seeds 40 days earlier at the start of Lent lay red-painted eggs on the bed of green shoots on Easter Sunday.

May to November

The big summer holiday is the **Transfiguration (Vardavar)**, which falls between mid-June and mid-July, when kids and teenagers throw water on everyone they can, and no-one takes offence (much). It's hilarious but not a day for nonstayfast colours. In pagan times this was the festival of the love goddess Astgik, when her love was spread by sprinkling petals and rose water on the ground. **Ascension Day (Hambartsum)** is in May, 40 days after Easter. In the old days young women had the freedom to sing in the fields and socialise on this day. It's also a festival of fate. At midnight, space and time pauses and nature speaks to itself. Witnesses to such a moment

will have their dreams fulfilled. The **Holiday of the Mother of God (Astvatsatsin)** in mid-August is when priests bless the grain and fruit harvests. **Holy Cross (Khatchverats)**, falling on the Sunday closest to 17 September, is a day for commemorating the dead.

HOLIDAYS

Annual public holidays in Armenia are:

- New Year's Day** 1 January
- Christmas Day** 6 January
- International Women's Day** 8 March
- Good Friday** varies, from mid-March to late April
- Motherhood and Beauty Day** 7 April
- Genocide Memorial Day** 24 April
- Victory Day** 9 May
- Republic Day** 28 May
- Constitution Day** 5 July
- Independence Day** 21 September
- Earthquake Memorial Day** 7 December

INTERNET RESOURCES

Armenia Diaspora.com (www.armeniadiaspora.com)

Run by the Armenian Foreign Ministry, with news and a very good travel section.

Armenia Guide (www.armeniaguide.com) A strong links website, with connections to the following sites and many more.

Armenia Now (www.armenianow.com) A lively weekly Yerevan-based web magazine with interesting features on life and current events.

Cilicia.com (www.cilicia.com) Maps, photos, travel advice, the entire *Rediscovering Armenia* guidebook and some interesting weblogs and forums.

PanArmenian.net (www.panarmenia.net) Online community site carrying comprehensive news bulletins on Armenia, Karabakh and regional issues.

Tour Armenia (www.tacentral.com) Another terrific local culture and tourist information site.

MAPS

The maps made by Yerevan-based company Collage are the best available, with a full-colour foldout map *Armenia & Mountainous Karabakh*, the nifty brochure-sized 26-page *Roads of Armenia* and the brilliant *Yerevan Atlas*, with new and old street names, street numbers and lots besides. They cost \$5 to \$10 from souvenir shops and bookstores in Yerevan.

MEDIA

Newspapers & Magazines

Russian newspapers are widely available, as well as Armenian language dailies such as

Anavot, *Azg* and *Yerkir*. *Iravunk* is a weekly with political news and features. *Noyan Tapan* is a rather dry weekly English-language newspaper, while *AIM* (*Armenia International Magazine*) is an English-language colour magazine which tries to steer a centrist path through Armenian politics. It has struggled recently but usually comes out monthly.

Radio & TV

Hye-FM (91.1 FM) plays a good mix of popular music on international playlists and some local music as well. There are a half-a-dozen moderately interesting Armenian and Russian TV channels. The only channel with an independent editorial policy, A1, has been hounded through the courts for years by the government, but it hasn't given up the fight yet. CNN is broadcast over public TV in Yerevan. Big hotels carry satellite TV.

MONEY

Costs


Armenia has enough places to spend extra but generally it's a very inexpensive place to travel. A seat on a minibus to the furthest corner of the country costs \$10. A taxi across Yerevan costs \$2. *Lahmajo* (*lahmajoon*) cost 20€, while a hearty meal of *khoravats* with salad, bread and drinks at a country restaurant might only be \$3 to \$5 per person. There is budget accommodation in Yerevan as low as \$7 a night, but elsewhere in the country it pays to spend around \$10 to \$20 a night for a reasonable bed and breakfast.

Currency

The Armenian currency is the dram, which has been relatively stable over the last five years after dramatic depreciations in the 1990s.

Exchanging Money

The best cash currencies are US dollars, euros and Russian roubles, roughly in that order. Georgian lari can also be changed in Yerevan and border towns. Other currencies are hard to change except at a handful of major banks in Yerevan. There are moneychanging signs waving flags and rates at customers everywhere in Yerevan and around *shukas* in all major towns. Virtually any shop can change money legally, and many food stores and small goods vendors do. Scams seem to be rare, and transactions straightforward.



Travellers cheques are rare in Armenia and not recommended. Bring cash or an ATM or Visa card. Some local ATMs are linked to the PLUS system and others to the Maestro system. There are cash machines in prominent locations around Yerevan, including half-a-dozen HSBC branches. You can withdraw money in US dollars from HSBC machines and sometimes from local bank ATMs as well. ATMs are just starting to appear in other cities. There are Western Union offices all over the country.

Tippling & Bargaining

The usual tipping rule at cafés and restaurants is 10%. Taxi drivers won't complain if you set the price when getting in and stick to it when getting out. Shops have set prices but *shukas* (markets) and outdoor fruit and vegetable stands are more negotiable. Foreigners might be charged a little extra but might also be laden with extra goods.

POST

National postal service Haypost has offices in every major town. A letter might take anything from two weeks to six weeks to reach North America or Australia, but the service is fairly reliable. If you're sending out something of value you might feel safer with DHL, FedEx or a local courier company in Yerevan (p122).

TELEPHONE & FAX

The country code is ☎ 374, while Yerevan's area code is ☎ 1.

Armenia's telecommunications are shaky, largely because of the 15-year monopoly held by ArmenTel, owned by Greek telecom giant OTE. ArmenTel offices often show the Greek and Armenian flags. Services are patchy, even in Yerevan, and expensive, while international and cellular services in the regions frankly suck. Outside Yerevan you sometimes have to rely on town ArmenTel offices (often paired with Haypost) for intercity and international calls. Give the attendant the phone number, and you'll be directed to a phone booth with a vintage telephone. There's usually a clear line after a couple of attempts.

To rub it in, international calls with ArmenTel are expensive – up to \$5 a minute. The government is making moves to break the monopoly and deliver competition in



long-distance calls, cell phones and Internet providers.

In the meantime Internet innovators are getting around the problem by charging much less from shopfront telephone offices and Internet clubs, up to 50¢ per minute for most countries.

For calls within Armenia, call ☎ 0 + city code + local number, for cell phone numbers dial the ☎ 09 prefix first (most people will give you this along with their cell phone number), then the number. For international calls, dial ☎ 00 first.

Mobile Phones

These are currently an ArmenTel monopoly and marked by poor to average reliability at relatively high prices. Armenia trails behind its neighbours in the number of mobile phone users and services. It uses the GSM system, standard in most parts of the world except the USA. To call mobile numbers, dial 0 and wait for a dial tone to trill agreeably, then dial 9 and the six digit number.

TOURIST INFORMATION

The main tourist office is the Armenia Information centre (p123). They have a ton of information, and they're well organised and helpful. The website www.cilicia.com has downloadable maps and features the 200-page (in printed form) in-depth guidebook *Rediscovering Armenia*. The website www.tacentral.com presents good information in a lively way. There are only a handful of tourist offices outside Yerevan.

VISAS

Armenian visas are available at all entry points – 21-day tourist visas cost \$30, and three-day transit visas cost \$20. The officials might not speak much English but it's just a matter of filling out a form and paying. A 21-day e-visa from www.armeniaforeignministry.com costs \$60 and take two days to be emailed to you. Print out a copy and have it on hand on arrival and departure. E-visas are only for arrivals at Zvartnots Airport for now. Armenian embassies also sell visas, but these generally cost more and they take longer (between four days and a fortnight) to issue them, with fees varying from \$60 to \$100.

Border Crossings

Armenia's international border posts are as follows:

- Agarak** Land border with Iran
- Bavra** Land border with Georgia
- Gyumri (Shirak airport)** CIS airport.
- Mughanlo-Tashir** Land border with Georgia.
- Sadakhlo-Bagratashen** Land border with Georgia.
- Yerevan (Zvartnots airport)** International airport.

Visa Extensions

You can get a visa extension at the Passport and Visa Department of **OVIR** (Map pp120-1; ☎ 53 43 91; 13a Mesrop Mashtots Poghota; ☎ 2-6pm Mon-Fri) or pay \$3 per day for every day you overstay when you leave. We wouldn't normally recommend this, but it does seem easier to overstay (for less than a couple of weeks) than to negotiate the mordant bureaucrats and red tape of OVIR. There are happier stories of efficiency once you have an audience with the passport and visa section director. OVIR at Zvartnots were no hassle with my overstayed visa once I gave reasons – family in the area or a visit to Karabakh helps – and charged me only \$15. Land border guards are similarly happy to be paid \$3 for every day you overstay. For people of Armenian descent and their partners, OVIR issues 10-year residency permits. The process takes about three months and costs around \$300.

Visas for Neighbouring Countries

GEORGIA

The grumpy **Georgian Embassy** (Map pp120-1; ☎ 1-58 55 11; georgia@arminfo.com; 42 Aram Poghots) specialises in raising visa fees arbitrarily. Visas cost from \$50 in four working days to same-day visa service from \$75. It is usually possible to buy the visa at the border for \$80 – however check first.

WORK

Wages are very low in most sectors but there is a ton of NGO and volunteer work going on. NGOs have bloomed everywhere – Vanadzor alone has 80 or so. International relief agencies are well represented, and there are many local and diasporan bodies as well, covering everything from health to the environment to teaching. The website www.armeniadiaspora.com is a good place to start investigating.

Nagorno-Karabakh

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FAST FACTS

Area 10,700 sq km

Capital Stepanakert

Famous for Forests, mountains, the bitter 1990-94 war which separated it from Azerbaijan

Official name Lernayin Gharabaghi Hanrapetutyun (Nagorno-Karabakh Republic; NKR), also called Artsakh

Phrases *barev dzez* (hello), *shnorhakalutyun* (thanks)

Population 150,000





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Taken apart by word and origin, 'nagorno kara-bagh' means mountains (Russian) black (Turkish) garden (Persian), which neatly sums up the landscape and historical influences of this patch of land. This little Montenegro (which also means 'black mountain') of the Caucasus is a self-declared republic; poor, well armed, proud and very welcoming. The Armenian Karabakhtsis call these lush green mountains Artsakh, an ancient province at the eastern edge of historic Armenia. Sheer-sided valleys, verdant forests and rich pastures make the landscape very beautiful indeed, dotted with some of the finest Armenian monasteries and churches. Forests cloak the slopes of the 4000m-high Karabakh mountains and cry out to be explored, but land mines from the long war make visits to some areas inadvisable.

HIGHLIGHTS

Gandzasar (p186) – An extraordinary example of Armenian architecture with rich friezes and magnificent detail.

Agdam (p186) – Just behind the front line, this large city, destroyed in the war, is frozen as a dead, melancholy monument.

Rural Karabakh – A rich, wildly photogenic landscape with *khatchikars* (carved stone crosses), orchards, forest-topped cliffs and friendly, self-sufficient farmers.

Churches and fortresses – With suitable transport head off to classic churches including Amaras (p187), Dadivank (p187) and Gtchavank (p187), and fortresses such as Jraherd (p187).

History

In this region, names and history are as contested as the land itself. Azeris claim 'Qarabağ' as their cultural heartland, and point to the role of Şuşa (Shushi) in the growth of their literature and language. In Azeri accounts, the Christian inhabitants of Karabakh are descendants of the Christian nation of Albania (unrelated to the present-day state of Albania). Caucasian Albania lost independence after the Arab invasion, and most Albanians converted to Islam, while the remnants of the Albanian Church were usurped by the Armenian Church. Armenians agree that the Albanian Church was officially absorbed into the Armenian Church in the early 19th century, but argue that this was done at Russian prompting to sign off on a 1000-year-old reality. Certainly the locals say they're as culturally Armenian as anyone, with 4000 churches,

monasteries and forts on their hills to attest to their long presence.

Stalin separated Karabakh from Armenia in the 1920s and made it an autonomous region within Azerbaijan. The natural growth of the Azeri population outpaced the Armenian one and Azeri settlers were moved to Armenian villages. By the 1980s the territory's population was down to about 75% Armenian.

Demands to join Armenia grew in 1987–88 until the local assembly voted for independence from Azerbaijan in December 1989, and hostilities commenced. From 1989 to 1994 the area was racked by war, which, in its first stage pitted the Karabakhtsis against overwhelming Azeri and Soviet forces. Grad antitank missiles fell on Stepanakert from Shushi until 1993 – people spent five years living in cellars. Bands of local men, organised into fedayeen units, scavenged and made weapons by various means, and ranged them against jets, tanks, and a full range of Soviet military hardware. After the fall of the USSR, the war escalated into a heavily armed clash between Armenian troops and fedayeen commandos on one side and the Azeri army assisted by Turkish officers on the other. Soon after the Armenian capture of Shushi, the Azeri retreat turned into a rout. Two Azeri governments fell as a result, and Nagorno-Karabakh's entire 500,000-strong Muslim population was forced to flee, joining 150,000 other Azeri refugees from Armenia. A ceasefire was declared in May 1994 and the lines have remained constant since then. Karabakh was left as a peasant



Gyamish. The occupied territories between Armenia, Karabakh and Iran are mostly empty, with only 25,000 or so settlers rebuilding among the few ruined villages and roofless walls of **ՄԱՐՏԱԿԵՐՏ**.

International negotiations have repeatedly failed. The US-sponsored Key West talks in 2001 failed, even in sunny Florida, to produce a compromise between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The most likely outcome will be some sort of separate status within Azerbaijan, though the questions of resettling Azeri refugees and creating a land border with Armenia remain sticking points.

STEPANAKERT ՍՏԵՓԱՆԱԿԵՐՏ

☎ 41 / pop 40,000

Stepanakert, Karabakh's capital, stands above the Karkar River, surrounded by a typical landscape of forest, pasture and fields backed by craggy mountains. The city is not much different from a typical Armenian town, though maybe a little more lively. There are no particularly striking sights in the town but there are some good hotels and it's easy to arrange transport around Karabakh from here. The town has a Soviet-era feel to it despite massive reconstruction since the end of the war – there are more signs in Russian than in Armenian and more evidence of military and security forces.

Information & Orientation

There's no official tourist office, but the **Ministry of Foreign Affairs** (☎ 4 14 18; info@mfa.nk.am; 28 Azatamartikneri Poghots; ☎: 10am–5pm Mon–Fri) can suggest routes and places to visit – you have to register there on arrival anyway (see p188). Unfortunately they don't have any maps, but the town layout is simple.

Mashtots is the main road up from Mayraberd. At the roundabout with the Goris road it becomes Azatamartikneri, with shops, banks, Internet clubs, a Karabakh Telecom office and a small supermarket. The avtokayan (bus and minivan station) is just up the road. The street continues for 1km past the Ministry of Foreign Affairs before it reaches the parliament buildings. At the top of Azatamartikneri, David Sasuntsi Poghots goes to the left past the museum to the main *shuka* (market). The grid of streets behind the parliament buildings contains the city hall, the main Karabakh post office and the drama theatre. At the

society with 30,000 dead, massive damage and hundreds of thousands of land mines.

Since then the territory has struggled on, rebuilding as best it can.

Stepanakert, the self-proclaimed capital, is a town of about 40,000 with a parliament, presidential palace, ministries and a national museum. The local economy is similar to Georgia's – retro-industrial and surviving on agriculture, with farms and villages linked by rough roads to country towns, and a diaspora-funded highway to Goris in southern Armenia. The North–South Hwy is being built along the spine of the territory, from Martakert in the north down to Karmir Shuka and Hadrut in the south.

Visitors should be aware that because of the region's disputed status, foreign embassy staff can't visit the region; you're on your own. That said, if you stay away from the frontline areas and don't trek on your own (due to land mines) it's no less safe than Armenia. The front line traces along the edge of the hills of Karabakh, where they spread into the plains. The northern frontier is along the Mrav ranges, with 3724m Mt

top of town is the headquarters of the Karabakh army.

Hayagrobank (1 Mesrop Mashtots Poghots) serves MasterCard and Diners Club. There were no ATMs in Stepanakert at the time of writing – US dollars or dram are the best option. Street names are signed in Armenian and Russian, if at all, and the old names – Marx, Lenin, Engels etc – are as recognised as the new ones.

One recommended local travel agency is **Asbar** (☎ 28 65 10; www.asbar.nk.am; 16a Vazgen Sargsyan (Yerevanyan) Poghots), which handles apartments, houses, hotels and multilingual guides.

Sights

There are apartment blocks in the lower end of town, two-storey houses along the middle section and leafy streets with smart walled villas around the parliament buildings. The **Artsakh State Museum** (4 David Sasuntsi Poghots; admission 30¢; ☎ 9am–5pm Tue–Sun) features old coins and dioramas of Neolithic caves, information about churches in the region, historic carpets and saddlebags, and a room dedicated to important people of the Soviet period. The displays on the Karabakh war include some of the homemade weapons used in the crushing early days of the war and photos of refugees arriving from Baku and the rest of Azerbaijan after the Sumqayit massacre in February 1988, when hundreds of Armenians were butchered in this Azeri industrial city close to Baku.

On the outskirts towards Mayraberđ (Askaran) is the **Papik Tatik** monument, which appears on mugs, T-shirts, desk ornaments and more. The tuff statue of a bearded elder and a woman with a veil is named 'We are our mountains', their stony gaze embodying the indomitable local spirit.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Nairi (☎ 7 15 03, 07-22 22 25; www.nairi.nk.am; 14a Hekimyan Poghots; s\$35 d\$50-100; ☎) This fine establishment has shared bathrooms for the single rooms and en suite bathrooms in its double rooms. It certainly made this Australian nostalgic to see billboards with kangaroos in the middle of the Caucasus. It is a converted school run by a friendly Australian-Armenian couple and staff. Good food, spacious rooms and satellite TV make

it the best option in town. Meals cost \$5, and they'll happily arrange transport around the region.

Hotel Lotus (☎ 4 52 22 00 20 30; ktsurf.ktsurf.net; 77 Varagshyan Poghots) is by an older hotel at the top end of town. The décor isn't great but the people working here and the food get good reports. The cheaper rooms have old bathrooms but the mid-range ones are reasonable value.

Hotel Heghnar (☎ 4 66 26, 07-26 66 66; heginar@ktsurf.net; 11a Barsakov Poghots; s \$30 d \$40-60) Has 12 rooms in two buildings, which can be combined into apartments. It's quite cosy and comfortable with decent beds and big couches, and all the rooms have a balcony. The caretakers speak only Armenian and Russian. The Heghnar is on a side street behind the avtokayan.

Many travel agencies in Yerevan can arrange homestays in Stepanakert with a little notice. At the time of writing, several new hotels were in the works, including a thoroughly renovated **Karabakh Hotel** (20 Pedravar Hraparak), on the main square (February 20 Sq) next to the parliament buildings. A guesthouse is being built on the North–South Hwy approximately 10km north of Stepanakert, apparently by French Armenians – it might be a terrific base in rural Karabakh.

Naver Restaurant (☎ 4 07 94; Shushi Mayrughi; meals \$4; ☎ 11am–late) This riverside restaurant with private dining rooms and an outdoor terrace is just outside town. The menu is typical fare but done very well; *khoravats*, fresh bread and interesting local salads. In spring try the fresh greens wrapped in hot lavash – it's amazingly tasty even for nonvegetarians.

Getting There & Away

Yerevan is 356km away by road. The trip takes about seven or eight hours by car, depending on breaks. Marshrutkas from the avtokayan on Azatamartikneri Poghots cost \$4 to Goris (\$4, two hours). There are eight or so marshrutkas to Yerevan (\$8, seven to eight hours) daily, and quite a few taxis charging the same for one seat. There are plenty of taxis at the avtokayan, charging about \$25 a day around Stepanakert and Shushi. A taxi anywhere in Stepanakert costs 80¢ to \$1.60. Village buses and minivans tend to be infrequent, usually only one or two a day.

SHUSHI ՇՈՒՇԻ

☎ 41 / pop 5,000

Shushi (Տսսա) stands on a plateau 9km from Stepanakert, with high walls and views over a wide swathe of central Karabakh. Before the war the population was around 25,000, with an Azeri majority. The war damage and depopulation is immediately apparent, with gutted apartment buildings and roofless, ruined houses. It's a melancholy place, with only a few signs of life in roadside kiosks and apartment buildings hung with washing – a town reduced to a village. A fine medieval wall protects the eastern ramparts of the town. The fortress was built in 1750 by Panah Khan. The Azeri army used the town heights to fire barrages of Grad missiles down onto Stepanakert and surrounding villages. It was conquered by a stunning night assault up the cliffs on 9 May 1993, a crucial turning point in the conflict. The town's once shining example of cultural co-operation, a famed centre of Armenian and Azeri cultures, has been shattered before – the town was ravaged by Turkish forces in 1918, killing more than half the population. The scarred centre of town has the restored **Ghazanchetsots Cathedral**. Another church, **Kanach Zham** (green church) stands uphill. Two damaged **mosques** lie near the cathedral, one a rather elegant building with Persian influences. The annual Shushi festival in August to September is an attempt to bring some life back into the town.

Sleeping

Hotel Shoushi ☎ 77-3 13 57, 07-24 25 26; www.shoushi-hotel.com; 3 Amiryani Poghots; s \$30-35, d \$45; ☎ ☑



You wouldn't guess there would be a boutique hotel here, but the extremely comfortable Hotel Shoushi stands across from the Ghazanchetsots Cathedral. It has 12 very tasteful, spacious rooms with interesting artwork and a good restaurant. Dinners cost around \$6. The staff are multilingual and can arrange transport around the region.

Getting There & Away

Marshrutkas between Shushi's main square and avtokayan in Stepanakert, 9km downhill, leave every 30 minutes or so during the day (30¢). A taxi costs about \$5.

NORTHERN KARABAKH

The road out of Stepanakert down the valley past the Papik Tatik statue goes to the town and fortress of **Mayraberd (Askeran)** 19km north, with huge medieval walls and towers. Built by Panah Khan in the 18th century, it once stretched 1.5km across the valley. Further north more burned tanks and armoured vehicles appear, as do land-mine warning signs put up by the Halo Trust; don't venture off the road onto any unploughed land. The road branches before Agdam, one road going north to Marta.

Gandzasar Monastery is about two hours drive north from Stepanakert. This 13th-century monastery is probably the most important structure in Karabakh, and deserves World-Heritage status. The church of **Surp Hovhannes Mkrtich** (St John the Baptist) is the largest in the grouping, with beautiful friezes around the central drum. There are well-preserved inscriptions and

AGDAM

The accreditation card from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs does not permit a visit to Agdam, though some travellers do visit this unique place anyway. Karabakh and the occupied land around it have many deserted villages and towns, but no others are quite like this former city of 100,000 people. The city was captured in 1994, sacked and looted. Tall shattered tower blocks stand in the distance, past a sprawling city centre of one- and two-storey buildings. Shredded playgrounds sprout with shrubs, the streets are cracking open with trees, and ponds fill in bomb craters. The city was picked clean by people from Stepanakert looking for building materials, and by professionals who took out everything from copper wires to bathroom fittings. Besides a few soldiers and scrap-metal hunters, this city is as dead as Pompeii. You could almost forget that the front line between Armenian and Azeri forces stretches north and south at the eastern city limits. Don't venture beyond the mosque (defaced, sadly) at the town centre. You can climb one of the rickety minarets for a 360-degree view of the city. There are soldiers camped around the city so travel with a local guide – most locals seem to know some of the men serving nearby.

khatchkars in the church's *gavit* (ante-chamber), which is filled with the floor-slab tombs of former bishops and nobles of the region. Today the church and the monastery around it has been restored as the seat of the Arkepiskopos (Archbishop) of Artsakh. Locals say that Azeri bombers tried to take out the church several times but missed (damaging other buildings instead). The views up the ruffled blankets of forest to the west are sensational, and it's worth walking around the cemetery next to the church for the views north as well.

The North-South Hwy from Stepanakert goes within 14km of Gandzasar, but the last stretch is rutted and slow, and the final ascent past the village of Vank at its base is practically for jeeps only. Until the highway is finished up to Martakert (perhaps by 2005-06) the quickest way to the northern part of Karabakh is via Agdam. The ruined fortress of **Tigranakert** is about 4km west of the village of Nor Maragha between Agdam and Martakert. Further north the road passes the white mountaintop church of **Vankasar**, (close to a military base and possibly mined, so don't go without permission and an expert guide) before reaching **Martakert**. Karabakh's northern market town was the scene of fierce battles during the war, changing hands frequently. The **Surp Hovhannes Mkrtich** church in town has been a community reconstruction project. The **Hotel Jraber** (no phone; Azatamartikneri Poghota (formerly Lenin Prospekt); r 52-3) on the main street is very basic and offers little besides a roof and beds.

It is unwise to go further north than Martakert. Spectacular scenery lies west of the town, including the Sarsang Reservoir, and, downstream on the far bank, the **Jraber fortress**, with a brilliant defensive position on a gorge within view of the splendidly sited **Yeritsmankants** (Three Youths) monastery – visits to both require permission from the military. Past the reservoir and up the Tartar River the road enters dense, lush forests, very slow going in wet weather. After about 65km you reach the village of Dadivank and a military checkpoint. **Dadivank monastery** is an overgrown masterpiece with a bell tower, fine *khatchkars* and monastic cells around the main 13th-century Surp Dadi church. Watch out for holes into underground cisterns and chambers as you walk around. The princes of Upper Khachen are buried

under the floor of the main church's *gavit*. The road continues up the Tartar River into the Kelbajar region (see below).

SOUTHERN KARABAKH

These green hills are as beautiful as the roads are slow. A new road to Karmir Shuka (Red Market) will one day stretch to Hadrut, but in the meantime the quickest route is via Mayraber (Askeran), the outskirts of Agdam and south to Martuni. The interior roads twist and turn and it's hard to do more than 20km an hour. **Martuni** is a small market town with a few palm trees and the ageing **Hotel Artsakh** (no phone; Azatutyun Hiraparak; r 52) on the main square. Karmir Shuka is a larger village among several dozen villages, including **Skhtorashen** about 2km north. A giant plane tree here, said to be 2000 years old, is so large you could hold a party inside its core. There are old cemeteries and *khatchkars* all over these hills. Winding roads between Karmir Shuka and Martuni lead eventually to the **Amaras Monastery**, founded by St Gregory the Illuminator and completed by his grandson, Bishop Grigoris. Mesrop Mashtots also founded a school here to educate people in the new alphabet in the 5th century. The church and monastery have been rebuilt and destroyed with relentless frequency over the centuries. The current structure is a modest church surrounded by monastic cells.

The next valley south of Karmir Shuka holds the **Gtchavank Monastery**. The quickest way from Stepanakert is via Martuni and Varanda (Fizuli), then up the valley past Togh; the monastery should be visible at the base of a cliff off to the right. This 10th- to 13th-century gem was once the seat of the bishops of Amaras, with a library, intricate *khatchkars* and tremendous views. Alas the monastery has been thoroughly covered with graffiti. The roads after Fizuli turn to jeep-only conditions in wet weathers. The **Azokh cave** is not far from the village of the same name, across the valley from Gtchavank.

KELBAJAR ՔԱՐՎԱՃԱՌ

This wild, mountainous region between Armenia and northern Karabakh is ringed by 3000m peaks, with rivers cutting through high gorges and a scattering of villages being resettled by Armenians. Most of the

population before the war were Muslim Kurdish farmers and herders – the Bolsheviks toyed with the idea of creating a Red Kurdistan here in the 1920s. Apart from soldiers, loggers, beekeepers and a few farmers, the region is largely deserted, though some say there are still individual soldiers who lost their minds in the war camped out in the hills. A rough road (jeep only) leads across the Sodk Pass to the Zod gold mines and Vardenis near Lake Sevan.

The main town in the northern part has been renamed **Karvachar**, and populated with people from the Shahumian district north of Karabakh proper, driven out of Azerbaijan in the early 1990s. The former Soviet spa town of Istusu (Vaykunik) lies 25km south but appears to be abandoned. The southern part of Kelbajar can be reached from Berdzor (Lachin) and the Goris–Stepanakert highway. Close to the checkpoint a sign points to the north up to the **Tsitsernavank Monastery** (Monastery of Swallows), a modest but ancient church, dating back to the 5th century. The round-trip from the checkpoint takes about one hour.

NAGORNO-KARABAKH DIRECTORY

Dangers

A huge amount of unexploded ordnance (UXO) and land mines has been dug out of Karabakh's black earth and the work will continue for years. The UK's Halo Trust is one of few international organisations to work in Karabakh, with the mammoth task of removing land mines and UXOs. One British staffer was quoted as saying that what distinguishes Karabakh from other war zones is the sheer variety and size of the weaponry employed in the war. Injuries to people and livestock still occur and it is unwise to venture into open pasture land anywhere near the front line. Warning signs are prominently displayed in areas close to the main roads.

However on matters of personal safety, crimes against visitors are almost unheard of; Stepanakert is as safe as Yerevan or any part of Armenia.

Internet Resources

www.artsakhworld.com Detailed Armenian cultural and historical information on Karabakh.

www.cilicia.com Mostly in Armenian but has excellent reference sections in English.

www.nkr.am The website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

www.nkrusa.org Website of the NKR office in Washington, with a list of NKR representatives in 10 or so countries.

Visas

The only place to get a visa for Karabakh is in Yerevan at the **Permanent Representative of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic** (☎ 58 72 40; 11 Moskovyan Poghots; ☎ 10am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Fri). Drop in before lunch, fill out a single page form including every destination you're heading to in Karabakh, pay a \$1.60 administration fee in dram and attach one photo. A seven-day visa is issued that afternoon for \$25, or \$45 for a same-day 21-day visa. The 21-day visa costs \$35 in five days or \$40 in three days. The consul section staff will ask how you're travelling to Karabakh and where you intend to stay. Note that you will not be permitted to enter Azerbaijan if you have a Karabakh visa on your passport, so if you plan to visit Azerbaijan have the visa stamped on a separate piece of paper.

VISA REGISTRATION

The visa is checked at the checkpoint on the Aghavno River between Goris and Berdzor. You can't buy a visa here. In Stepanakert you must register on arrival (or the next day if it's after hours) at the **Ministry of Foreign Affairs** (☎ 4 14 18; info@mfa.nk.am; 28 Azatamartikneri Poghot; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Fri). You must restate the places you want to visit, your passport is photocopied and you are issued with an accreditation card. All this bureaucracy might not happen if you're of Armenian descent. The accreditation card might be asked for at the checkpoint on exit. The card states that you can only travel on the internal roads, with the exception of the front line.





ქართული
ზოგრაფიკა

Azerbaijan



Azerbaijan



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FAST FACTS

- **Area** 86,600 sq km
- **Capital** Baku (Bakı)
- **Famous for** oil, Zoroastrianism, saffron, caviar, kebabs
- **Official Name** Azərbaycan Respublikası (The Republic of Azerbaijan)
- **Phrases** *Salam* (hello), *sağol* (thank you)
- **Population** 7,830,000





AZERBAIJAN

AZERBAIJAN

Azerbaijan is exotic by the standards of its more European neighbours, and overflowing with natural resources that seem to seep through the very earth you walk on. With the click of *nard* (backgammon) through hot summer nights, endless sweet tea, jam and cigarettes and entire herds of cattle wandering aimlessly across motorways, it's clear that while Georgia and Armenia look to Europe, Azerbaijan is very much part of Asia.

Visiting the country takes creativity and imagination as there is almost no traditional tourist industry outside Baku and a few mountain resorts, although a deeply ingrained sense of hospitality makes visiting any area from the cosmopolitan capital to remote villages hugely enjoyable. This ancient land of Zoroastrianism (a religion founded by the Persian prophet Zoroaster in the late 7th or early 6th centuries BC) displays a history and scenery that are equally dramatic – from ancient Albanian churches and Baku's old walled city to the extraordinary beauty of the Great Caucasus Mountains and the lush plantations of tea covering the gentle hills of the south. With much of the country still unexplored by travellers, Azerbaijan is an exciting and challenging destination for anyone seeking true adventure.

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Baku** (p198) – Azerbaijan's cosmopolitan capital, packed full of crumbling oil-boom mansions, Soviet and Islamic architecture and the impressive walled city, the İçəri Şəhər.
- **Şəki** (p229) – the former mountain capital of the Khan Hacı Çalabı, with its perfectly preserved 18th-century palace and its picturesque old town, makes a lovely weekend retreat, with some great walking nearby.
- **Qobustan** (p235) – home to a unique reserve of Stone and Bronze Age petroglyphs where you can wander freely around the hunter-gatherers' caves as well as see the incredibly weird and impressive mud volcanoes.
- **Xinalıq** (p222) – perhaps the most impressive sight in the whole country, this remote and ancient village high in the Caucasus Mountains has a unique language and culture and has changed little since the Middle Ages.
- **Lahıc** (p227) – an ancient Persian mountain hamlet with strong traditions of copper engraving. Lahıc is charming and one of the prettiest villages in the country. Visit the workshops along its delightful cobbled main street and walk in the stunning mountains nearby.

ITINERARIES

Three Days This affords enough time to soak up the atmosphere of bustling Baku and to include a half-day trip to both Qobustan and the Abşeron Peninsula.

One Week Spending a few days in Baku, you have time to travel into the mountains and visit Şəki as well as Qobustan and the Abşeron Peninsula.

Two Weeks This is the ideal amount of time to spend here – several days in Baku, followed by Şəki and then Lahıc (for the less adventurous) or Xinalıq (for the truly adventurous), and a couple of days' hiking in each as well as a side trip to the charming south.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

The best time to visit Azerbaijan is from May to June and September to October. The summer months are unpleasantly hot in low-lying areas, although a short drive into the mountains will get you to cooler and breezier climes. The winter is mild, and freezing conditions are rare. Daily summer temperatures in Baku are usually between 25°C and 35°C, although the capital gets some relief from the Caspian breeze. Winter temperatures tend to

AZERBAIJAN INDEX

- Litre of petrol 35C
- Litre of bottled water 40C
- Bottle of beer 30C
- Souvenir T-shirt \$5-10
- Street treat – kebab \$1, tea and jam 25C

be between 0°C and 8°C. See p254 for climate charts.

CURRENT EVENTS

During the 1990s Azerbaijan seemed to be shaping up as a dynamic new regional player thanks to its vast oil reserves and mercurial, Western-looking government. However, while the Aliyev-led government (see the boxed text p194) had long been criticised for its authoritarian approach to political opponents and human rights, it was only in the last few years that the country slipped into the nepotistic mire that has afflicted many of the former Soviet republics.

When former president Heydar Aliyev collapsed twice from a heart attack during a speech being broadcast live to the nation in April 2003, the ensuing chaos leading up to the October 2003 presidential elections saw his son and heir apparent Ilham Aliyev being appointed prime minister. Once it became clear that Aliyev Snr would not be capable of standing for president again, the full weight of the then president's political machine was thrown behind Ilham, who stormed home with a landslide victory that brought the opposition out onto the streets of Baku in protest at widespread irregularities and alleged ballot box stuffing.

While the transfer seems to have been fairly smooth from father to son, it's understandably worrying for the diplomatic community to see a feudal-style power transfer so shamelessly undertaken. The future remains uncertain, and whether President Aliyev can distinguish himself from the shadow of his father, who died in December 2003, remains to be seen. Most observers predict a bloody power struggle at some point in the near future. What does seem sure, though, is that American investment

in Azerbaijan is now significant enough to ensure the US will not let Azerbaijan slip into instability, even if it means supporting a dictatorial regime. **Difficult Concerns for human rights.**

As it is, harnessing the output of the so-called 'megastructure' of the Azeri, Chirag and Guneshi oil fields in the Caspian Sea has become a US energy policy priority as it attempts to shift its reliance from the increasingly unstable Gulf States to more reliable countries. Moreover, the construction of the \$3 billion Baku-Ceyhan oil pipeline that will take Azeri oil to the Mediterranean port of Ceyhan in Turkey and on to US markets is seen by many as the ultimate US investment in the country, and one that Washington will seek to protect at all costs.

HISTORY

Tactically important and caught between three great empires, tiny Azerbaijan never really had much of a chance to go it alone. From the 6th century BC it was part of the Persian Empire, through which Zoroastrianism became the predominant religion. From the 4th century BC, the state of Aghvan or Albania (no link to the present-day Balkan republic) grew steadily to reach the size of modern Azerbaijan. The Albanians adopted Christianity from Armenia in the 4th century, and then built many churches and cities, the ruins of some of which still remain today.

After the Arab advance into Albania in the 7th century and later that of the Seljuk Turks in the 11th century, Islam became the major religion and much of what is now considered Azeri culture became apparent. This was the period of the classical writer Nizami Gəncəvi, who remains the national bard today. From the 13th century Azerbaijan was passed between various empires – the Mongols, the Ottomans and the Persians – and by the early 18th century Azerbaijan was a collection of Muslim khanates (the territory ruled by a khan) with no central authority at all.

The Russians, who had conquered the Caspian provinces in the 18th century, didn't bother to consolidate their power until a century later when oil was discovered. This created an unprecedented oil boom and made Baku into a big city almost overnight. Amazingly, at the turn

Azerbaijan has produced a few recent films of note. These include *The Bat* (1995), a film by Ayaz Salayev that was awarded the Grand Prix at the International Film Festival in Angers, France, and Samil Aliyev's *The Accidental Meeting* (2002), which was critically acclaimed.

Music

Azerbaijan has maintained a strong folk music tradition. The *ashug* was an itinerant musician who made his living by performing at weddings and other social and public occasions. Clever improvisation of both words and music was highly valued, and *ashugs* would compete with each other in contests similar to the bardic competitions of the Celtic world. The name given to this traditional musical style is *mugam*.

The word *mugam* describes a musical mode with its own characteristic scale. Azeri music has several different modes, each of which creates a different mood or feeling. *Mugam* also refers to the traditional trio of musicians who perform the music, usually a singer, a *tar* player and a *kamancha* player. The *tar* is a stringed instrument with a keyhole-shaped sound box, and is plucked; the *kamancha* is also stringed and has a circular sound box with a sounding board of gazelle hide. The strings are made of horsehair, silk or gut.

Jazz came to Baku along with the oil industry in the early decades of the 20th century, and grew increasingly popular in the 1950s and 60s. Vaqif Mustafazade (1940–79), an accomplished jazz pianist from Baku, created a fusion of American jazz and traditional Azeri improvisational music called *mugam* jazz. His daughter Aziza (1969–), a *mugam* jazz pianist and composer, has continued in her father's footsteps. She has a large international following, released several CDs, and toured extensively in Europe.

ENVIRONMENT

The Land

Azerbaijan is enclosed to the north by the mighty Caucasus Mountains that separate it from Dagestan in Russia. To the south the country has a border with Iran running along the Talysh Mountain range. The highest peak in the country is Bazardüzü at 4466m. The fertile lower slopes of the

mountains are clothed in lush pastures and broad-leaved forests that give way to farms and orchards. Only the few, 4000m peaks remain snow-capped all year.

The broad plain of the Kura River occupies the centre of the country. This monotonous lowland is intensively irrigated for the cultivation of cotton and grain, but the central Caspian coast south of Baku remains a barren semi desert. Lush wooded mountains rising to over 3000m occupy the Nagorno-Karabakh region in the west. The 2500m Talysh Mountains in the extreme south are cloaked in subtropical forests.

Azerbaijan has 15 nature reserves, 21 restricted natural habitats and three national parks totalling some 600,000 hectares. The latest addition, the Shirvan National Park, was established in 2003 and is the only natural habitat for wild Caucasian antelopes in Europe.

Environmental Issues

One of the worst legacies of the Soviet period in Azerbaijan is the pollution and environmental degradation that have resulted from the intensive, low-tech exploitation of Azeri oil, the indiscriminate dumping of toxic industrial waste and the excessive use of artificial fertilisers and pesticides.

The Abşeron Peninsula is one of the most polluted places in the world. Whether you arrive in Baku by bus from Tbilisi, or in a taxi from the airport, the journey through the city's hinterland is like a trip through some postapocalyptic vision dreamed up by the creators of *Mad Max*. Nothing grows in this blighted landscape of barren earth and glistening ponds of oil and slurry.

Toxic wastes from the copper and aluminium processing plants and chemical industries of Sumqayıt polluted the Caspian Sea and the atmosphere, resulting in a high incidence of still births, birth defects and child mortality, problems that persist today despite the fact that many plants have had to close.

There is no money to upgrade equipment or treat waste products. The cost of decontaminating land and modernizing industrial plants in the Abşeron region alone is estimated at a staggering \$15 billion.

The list of Azerbaijan's serious environmental problems goes on and on: the pollution of ground water and drinking water



sources, the overfishing of sturgeon in the Caspian Sea, deforestation caused by refugees from Karabakh felling trees for firewood, and the steadily rising level of the Caspian.

FOOD & DRINK

Azeri cuisine is rich in variety and very tasty, although outside the better restaurants in Baku it can unfortunately be a little samey. Despite the fact that dishes from Turkey, Central Asia, Iran, Russia and the Middle East have converged to form traditional Azeri cuisine, you'll inevitably eat shashlyk (lamb kebab) way too often.

Staples & Specialities

The cornerstone of Azeri cuisine is the meat kebab. These divide into two standard forms, the 'normal' kebab and the *lülə* kebab. The former is whole chunks of meat, fat and all, grilled on a skewer over embers, while the latter is minced meat with herbs and spices cooked in the same way. Both often come with grilled vegetables as well. In many places, kebab (also known by the Russian name shashlyk) will be the only dish available, although cooked well, it's still always a treat.

More interesting dishes include dolma, minced lamb infused with fresh mint, fennel and cinnamon and then mixed with rice, traditionally served up in either vine leaves or cabbage leaves. Nearly everywhere these days, however, dolma comes in hollowed-out aubergine, tomato and pepper. A traditional dish seen less commonly is *plov*, an import from Central Asia. The Azeri version has rice and meat mixed with fruit – a delicious variation on standard Uzbek *plov*.

Where to Eat & Drink

The standard eatery in Azerbaijan is the *yeməxanə* – even remote villages tend to have them – a low-rent snack bar really, with very little choice on the menu. Expect a dirt cheap meal and a chance to meet the locals, but don't expect much beyond shashlyk, salad and soup.

As for restaurants, their place in Azeri culture is social rather than functional. Therefore, outside Baku expect to feel quite strange eating alone, as around you there are likely to be large groups of Azeris having a feast that lasts for hours. If you

are lucky (and like loud music) you'll see a wedding feast while visiting Azerbaijan – a true insight into one of the most highly valued and important aspects in Azeri culture.

Outside Baku and a few other centres in Azerbaijan there is little or no practical application of telephone numbers, which are often out of use or simply nonexistent. Likewise, many places in remote areas don't have street addresses, and opening hours are fluid and usually dependent on the number of customers. A meal outside of Baku will never cost more than \$5 per head for a shashlyk and salad, so we've not included specifics of meal prices with restaurant reviews outside the capital.

Vegetarians & Vegans

While vegetarians won't starve in Azerbaijan, largely thanks to the fact that *choban* salad (chopped tomato and cucumber with herbs and onions) is served as a preamble to most meals, the choice is limited. Azeri breakfasts are vegetarian-friendly – bread with butter, honey and cheese then chased with tea. However, there is no avoiding the fact that most Azeri meals are squarely based around meat. *Qutab* (stuffed pancake) can often be served without meat, and is about as tasty as vegetarian cooking gets in Azerbaijan. *Dogramma* and *dovga* – both dairy-based soups – are also good for vegetarians, but obviously not for vegans.

Eat Your Words

MENU DECODER

baliq – fish, which usually means sturgeon, normally skewered and grilled as a kebab, and served with a tart sour-plum sauce

dogramma – a cold soup made with sour milk, potato, onion and cucumber

dolma – the traditional recipe calls for minced lamb mixed with rice and flavoured with mint, fennel and cinnamon, and wrapped in vine leaves (*yarpaq dolması*) or cabbage leaves (*kaləm dolması*), but most restaurants offering dolma tend to serve up stuffed tomato, sweet pepper and aubergine

dovga – a hot, thick soup of yoghurt, rice, spinach and fennel

düşbara – small dumplings stuffed with minced lamb and herbs, served in broth

lavangi – delicious casserole of chicken stuffed with walnuts and herbs; it's supposedly a speciality of the Talysh region of southern Azerbaijan, but is very difficult to find in restaurants

lūla kobab – a mixture of minced lamb, herbs and spices squeezed onto a skewer and barbecued, often served with lavash (thin sheets of unleavened bread)

piti – a soupy stew of mutton, fat, chickpeas and saffron, cooked and served in individual earthenware pots; spoon it out into your bowl, and mop up the juices with plenty of bread

plov – a classic dish of rice, mutton, onion and prunes, flavoured with saffron and cinnamon; difficult to find outside upmarket Baku restaurants

qutab – a sort of pancake turnover stuffed with minced lamb, cheese or spinach

tika kobab – chunks of lamb marinated in a mixture of onion, vinegar and pomegranate juice, impaled on a large skewer and grilled on the barbecue; more commonly called shashlyk, from the Russian word *shashka* (sword)

BAKU (BAKI)

☞ 12 / pop 1.7 million

Baku is not only the Azeri capital, but also the Caucasus' largest and most cosmopolitan city. It is an ancient and fascinating place, whose current incarnation as an oil boomtown will ultimately be just another episode of its dramatic history. Between the medieval mosques, new glass and steel towers rise over a city finally waking up to its birthright as one of the last great oil cities on earth. This is a city brimming with confidence and wealth, yet one that retains its essentially relaxed, Asiatic feel at street level.

A walk around the ancient walled city (İçəri Şəhər) will reveal a very different Baku though – one of bustling mosques and cobbled backstreets that seems to have barely noticed the city's remarkable 20th-century shifts between communism and capitalism. Few cities in the world are changing as quickly while essentially remaining the same and nowhere else in the Caucasus do East and West blend as seamlessly or as chaotically as in Azerbaijan's enchanting capital.

HISTORY

Baku's name refers to its striking climate – generally believed to be derived either from the Persian *bad kube* (city of winds) or the ancient Caucasian word *bak* (sun, or god) – a possible hint to its role as a centre for fire worshippers since ancient times. Baku boasts copious amounts of both elements – from the gale-force *xəzri* wind that comes

howling in off the Caspian to the intense sunshine the city experiences from spring until autumn every year.

Although there is evidence of human habitation dating back to 3000 BC, the first historical reference to Baku does not appear until the 9th century AD. Baku's perfect harbour had already made it a vital trading centre and vibrant city when the Shirvan Shahs, Azerbaijan's ruling dynasty, moved their court here after the ancient capital of Şamaxı was struck by an earthquake in the 12th century.

Baku came under the control of the Mongols for a period in the 13th and 14th centuries, and then Peter the Great captured the city for Russia in 1723. It was returned to Persian control in 1735, but was finally ceded to Russia in 1806.

Oil had been scooped from surface diggings here since at least the 10th century, but when commercial extraction began in 1872 Baku became a boomtown. The oil barons built their luxurious mansions around the Old Town not too far from the shantytowns and slums that housed thousands of hungry oil workers from all over Russia. By the start of the 20th century Baku was a hotbed of labour unrest and revolutionary talk. Following a general strike in 1904, the Baku oil workers negotiated Russia's first ever worker-management contract.

In the wake of the Russian revolution, the south Caucasus nations declared their independence and set themselves up as democratic republics opposed to the Bolsheviks. British troops landed in Baku in 1918 at the invitation of the interim government, ostensibly to help defend the city against the Turks and Germans advancing from the east, but also to help tip events against the Soviets. On 20 September 1918, 26 Bolshevik leaders were rounded up in Baku and shipped across the Caspian to Turkmenistan, where they were taken into the desert and shot. The Soviet government held the British responsible for the deaths of these martyrs, and erected a monument in the city to the '26 Baku Commissars'. But the British soon withdrew ignominiously, slipping away in ships under cover of darkness, and the Red Army eventually marched into Baku on 28 April 1920.

In 1935 the search for oil moved into the shallow coastal waters of the Caspian, and



a forest of offshore platforms and derricks joined the tangle of wells and pipelines on land. But Soviet drilling and extraction technology was primitive, and every possible corner was cut in an attempt to keep costs down. The result was inefficiency, accidents, pollution and devastation of the landscape. During the Soviet era, the Abşeron Peninsula was the most polluted stretch of coastline in the world – a combination of crude oil from the seabed and chemical slick from Sumqayıt, the chemical manufacturing capital of the USSR. As production fell off, Soviet attention turned to new oil and gas fields in Siberia.

Since Azerbaijan's independence, Baku has grown enormously as foreign oil consortiums have begun pouring money into the city to explore its resources. In 2003 work began on the long-discussed and highly contentious Baku–Ceyhan oil pipeline, a vast financial undertaking backed by Western oil companies to export Caspian oil from Baku via Georgia and on to the Mediterranean port city of Ceyhan in Turkey. This huge undertaking will mean that Azeri oil can be exported safely and quickly to the US market and looks set to guarantee Baku's place in the sun during the 21st century.

ORIENTATION

Baku grew out of the amazingly well preserved İçəri Şəhər, and is now centred on the long stretch of sea front known as the *bulvar* (boulevard). Its central piazza is the pretty Fountain Square, although the fountains only work at some times of the day. The main shopping street is pedestrianised Nizami küçəsi, still known universally by its Soviet-era moniker Torgovaya, or Trading Street.

INFORMATION

Airline Offices

Aeroflot (Map p200-1; ☎ 981167; 34 Xaqani küçəsi)

Air Kazakhstan (Map p200-1; ☎ 937837; 129 Nizami küçəsi)

Azerbaijan Airlines (Map p200-1; AZAL; ☎ 934004; 28 May küçəsi 66/68)

British Airways/British Mediterranean Airways (☎ 970500/1; Park Hyatt Baku, 1033 İzmir küçəsi)

Domodedovo (Map p200-1; ☎ 934243; 66 Nizami küçəsi)

Imair Airlines (Map p200-1; ☎ 984587/982376; 115 Azi Azlanov küçəsi)

Iran Air (Map p200-1; ☎ 985886; 1 Xaqani küçəsi)

Lufthansa (☎ 907050/1; Park Hyatt Baku, 1033 İzmir küçəsi)

Turan Airlines (☎ 989431; 102 Mardənov qardaşları)

Turkish Airlines (Map p200-1; ☎ 994555/5; 13 Nizami küçəsi)

Uzbekistan Airlines (Map p200-1; ☎ 983260; 42 Nizami küçəsi)

Bookshops

Akademiya (Map p200-1; 13, Əziz Əliyev küçəsi) In one part of the Nizami Museum Building, Akademiya is probably the best-stocked Azeri bookshop in the city. There is a selection of books in English – mainly tourist guides to the country.

Book Shop of the Presidential Administration (Map p200-1; N Rafibaylı küçəsi 29) Has an amusing selection of hagiographic literature about both Aliyevs, including portraits for sale.

Chirəq Books (Map p202; Zərgər Palan küçəsi) The only English-language bookshop in the city, Chirəq Books stocks a decent range of classics, bestsellers and second-hand editions, even though its main trade is in religious literature.

Embassies

The British embassy looks after the interests of nonrepresented Commonwealth citizens in Azerbaijan. The Netherlands embassy is now a part of the German one. The Turkmen embassy in Baku may reopen soon, but was closed at the time of writing.

France (Map p200-1; ☎ 931286, 937180; Rasul Rza küçəsi 7)

Georgia (Map p202; ☎ 974558/59/60; Asaf Zeynalli küçəsi 24)

Germany (Map p200-1; ☎ 987918/9; Yusif Məmmədaliyev küçəsi 15)

Iran (Map p202; ☎ 926453, 924407; Bünyard Sadarov küçəsi 4) Consular section (☎ 959540; Jafar Jabbarlı küçəsi 44, next to Nizami metro station)

Kazakhstan (☎ 906521/284; İngilab küçəsi 82, Blok 889)

Russia (☎ 986016/83; Bakikhanov küçəsi 17)

Turkey (Map p200-1; ☎ 988133/5; Xaqani küçəsi 27)

Turkmenistan (☎ 409900, 616203; fax 613969; Tarix-erdiev küçəsi 4) Suspended in 2001, future uncertain

UK (Map p200-1; ☎ 975188/89/90; Xaqani küçəsi 45)

USA (Map p200-1; ☎ 980335/6/7; Azadlıq prospekti 83)

Uzbekistan (☎ 9972549; 437, Lane 9, Hwy 1, Badəmdar, Baku)

Emergency

All operators will be Azeri and Russian speaking only.

Ambulance (☎ 03)

Fire (☎ 01)

Police (☎ 02) For nonemergencies ☎ 934265



CENTRAL BAKU

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Aeroflot	1 E3
Air Kazakhstan	2 F3
Akademya	(see 34)
American Express	3 E3
Aptek Aspirin	4 C4
Aptek Hayat	5 D3
AZAL	6 F3
Azntourist	7 E4

Book Shop of the Presidential

Administration	8 C4
British Embassy	(see 32)
CGTT Voyages	9 D4
Dorhododovo	(see 13)
Dry Cleaning Service	(see 46)
French Embassy	10 C4
German Embassy	11 C4
German Medical Centre	12 D3

Imar Airlines (see 13)

Impotex Travel

International Bank of Azerbaijan	14 C4
Internet Cafe	15 C4
Iran Air	16 C4

Main Call Centre

Main Post Office	18 E4
Mountain Sports Club	(see 13)
Nabir Pharmacy	19 D3
National Bank	20 D3
TQ3 Travel Solutions	(see 9)
Turkish Airlines	21 B4
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US Embassy	23 D2
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American Implant Centre	25 D2
Armenian Church	26 C4
Carpet Museum	27 D5
Clock Pylon	28 D5
Dom Soviet	29 F4
Hammmam	30 A5
Interior Ministry	31 B4
ISR Plaza	(see 46)
Landmark Building	32 E3
Museum of Independence	(see 27)

NewYacht Club

Nizami Museum of Literature	34 C5
Republic Palace	35 D3
Rostropovich Museum	36 A5
Russian Church	37 B4
Taza Pir Mosque	38 B4
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Abderron Hotel	39 F4
Ascot Guest House	40 C4
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Caspian Guest House	42 F3
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Hotel Kompas	44 F4
Maharaja	45 C4
Radisson SAS Plaza	46 C4

EATING

Anadolu 1	47 D5
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Cafe Napoli	50 C4
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Pancho's	57 D4
Pink Elephant Restaurant	58 E4
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Sahli Cafe	61 D5
Taj Mahal	62 E4
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Zoom Grand Restaurant

Zoom Grand Restaurant	66 C5
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DRINKING

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City Lights Bar	(see 46)
Tiger Bar	68 C4

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Capitol	(see 41)
Opera & Ballet Theatre	69 D4
Russian Drama Theatre	70 D4



See Map p202



Internet Access

Internet cafés are absolutely everywhere in Baku, costing around 25¢ per hour. A short stroll in the centre will have you to the Internet there's a particularly thick concentration in the arcades along Nizami küçəsi.

Despite an antediluvian phone system, Internet access is no problem from Baku, although you may have to call the Internet Service Provider (ISP) up to 10 times before getting a connection. The main ISP is **Azeronline** (www.azeronline.com); ask for a *per-voye podklyucheniye* (first-time connection) package at any phone store.

Internet Resources

Baku (www.baku.com) A good general site about the history, economy and development of the city, with photos.

Bakupages (www.bakupages.com) A magazine of Baku, with features on arts, culture and politics. Also includes an excellent collection of links.

Bakusun (www.bakusun.az) Baku's main English-language publication has news and information about the capital.

Laundry

Dry cleaners are common throughout the city, although it's advisable to entrust clothing of particular importance to the dry-cleaning service at the ISR Plaza.

Milnaya Opera (Soap Opera; ☎ 975767; 8 H Javid prospekti) An American-style laundry that offers all services, including service washes and dry cleaning, or you can do your own washing in their Speed Queens on site. Service wash prices are \$1 per kilo without ironing, or \$1.50 with ironing, with a 3kg minimum.

Left Luggage

The train station offers safe lockers for \$1.20 per 24 hours. Look for the sign *Saxlama Kameralari* on the main concourse. There is a similar facility at the city's Bina Airport, in the international terminal.

Medical Services

Aptek (pharmacies) are prevalent all over Baku, and are generally well stocked and cheap.

A full and regularly updated list of emergency medical services and English-speaking general practitioners (GPs) can be taken from the US Embassy's website at www.usembassybaku.org.

American Dental Implant Centre (Map p200-1;

☎ 415655/348; 54 R Behbutov prospekti) Highly recommended with English-speaking staff and American-standard dentistry.

BAKU - OLD TOWN

0 100 200 m
0 0.1 miles

INFORMATION

- Branch Post Office 1 A4
 Chirag Books 2 B3
 Georgian Embassy 3 C5
 Iranian Embassy 4 A4
 SkyLife Tours 5 D5

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- 17th century Market Square 6 C4
 Carpet shops 7 C4
 Ceremonial Gate 8 D6
 Cistern 9 D6
 Cuma Mosque 10 C5
 Dervish's Mausoleum 11 D6
 Divan Kana 12 D5
 Hajinski Mansion 13 D4
 Hammam 14 B5
 State Art Museum 15 B6
 Kaervanaray Restaurant 16 D4
 Lezgi Mosque 17 C4
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 Mausoleum of the Shirvan-Shahs 19 D6

- Murad Gate 20 D6
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 Palace Apartments 23 D6
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 Palace of the Shirvan Shahs 25 B4
 Palace Ticket Booth 26 D6
 Qasimbay Hammam 27 C6
 Royal Mosque 28 D6

- Ruins of the Keygubad Mosque 29 D6
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 Maiden Tower Guest House 35 B5
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 Café Muzey 37 D3
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 Karvanaray Restaurant 39 D4
 Mugam Club 40 D5
 Silk & Spice Restaurant 41 D4
 Sunset Cafe (See 43) 42 C3
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- Azerbaijan Cinema 43 D3
 Caravan Jazz Club 44 D3

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- Aznelli Bus Stop 45 C6
 Baksov Bus Stop 46 A5

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6



Aptek Aspirin (Map p200-1; Nizami küçəsi) A centrally located 24-hour chemist next to the Kafé Caledonia.

Aptek Hayat (Map p200-1; ☎ 936161; Bülbül prospekti 30) Open 24 hours a day and will even deliver medicines to your home or hotel.

German Medical Centre (Map p200-1; ☎ 937354, 934089; www.sosinternational.com; 30 R Behbutov prospekti)

HIV tests (☎ 949924) You can organise anonymous tests via this number.

Medical help line (☎ 973333)

Overseas Medical Services (☎ 989416; 45 Aziz-bekov küçəsi)

Money

ATMs are extremely common and reliable in Baku, although not all of them accept foreign credit cards. Some of the more reliable ones can be found in the city centre – particularly the two ATMs at the International Bank of Azerbaijan, next to the ISR Plaza. There are also good ATMs at the main entrance to Tsentralny Univermag (Central Department Store, also known as TsUM or MUM), opposite the Interior Ministry, and on Əziz Əliyev küçəsi (next to Dolce Vita).

Exchange facilities are likewise on every corner, and offer good rates for US dollars. Euros and sterling are also easy to change, although rates vary. Russian roubles and Georgian lari are accepted by some banks. Always check your money carefully when changing currencies, as petty fraud is commonplace. Exchanges are open late into the evening usually – until 9pm or 10pm – while banks all shut at 4pm.

Post

Parcels can be sent from any of the city's post offices and are a cheap and generally reliable means of getting things home.

Branch post office (Map p202; İstiqlaliyyət küçəsi 35)

Main post office (Map p200-1; Azərbaycan prospekti 41; ☎ 24hr)

Telephone

Baku's International Telephone Centre (Map p200-1) is just south of Fountain Square on Ə Əlizadə küçəsi. The cashier will

give you a phonecard and help you place the call; you return to the desk and pay afterwards. Private international call centres are common all over the city.

Toilets

There are passable *tualet* (public toilets) on the north side of Fountain Square (10¢). *Kişi* is for men, *qadın* for women. Elsewhere in Baku your best bet is to drop into a café or restaurant, as they are usually perfectly happy to have foreigners use their facilities.

Travel Agencies

The following are a few of the most foreigner-friendly and helpful travel agents in Baku.

Azintourist (Map p200-1; ☎ 933481; www.azintourist.com; Azadlıq prospekti 1) The remains of the former Intourist agency are in the Azerbaijan Hotel. The company can provide tours and accommodation throughout the country although its approach, while friendly, remains very Soviet.

CGT Voyages/TQ3 Travel Solutions (Map p200-1; ☎ 983133; www.cgtt-tq3.az; Samed Vurgun küçəsi 3) CGT offers a range of business travel and logistic management services, and also caters for individual needs.

Improtex Travel (Map p200-1; ☎ 932279; www.improcc.in-baku.com; Samed Vurgun küçəsi 16) One of the oldest travel agencies in the country, with a huge network of contacts across Azerbaijan. Services range from visa support and caviar tours to goat hunting and extreme sports.

Mountain Sports Club (Map p200-1; ☎ 938110; sarik@azintex.com; Samed Vurgun küçəsi 16) This is the club to speak to about mountain climbing, as it can organise ascents of Azerbaijan's highest and most challenging peaks, as well as glacier climbs and trekking.

SI Travel (☎ 970800; www.si-travel.com; Park Hiyatt Baku, 1033 İzmir küçəsi) American Express representatives in Azerbaijan, SI Travel mainly offers corporate services, although it does have a tourism department that can arrange individual tours and hotel bookings. SI Travel also runs the luxury Silk Route Express train between Baku and Tbilisi.

Skylife Tours (Map p200-1; ☎ 925577; www.skylife-travel.com; Neftçilər prospekti 97/3) Another very well run and professional company, Skylife has English-speaking staff and they are IATA members. The company also operates its own flights from Baku to Aktau, Kazakhstan.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Baku's streets are eerily quiet after dark, even in the city centre at weekends. Street lighting away from the main civic areas can make walking alone at night both unnerving and difficult (watch out for potholes). However, the crime rate is low, and following the usual precautions should mean you'll be fine.

All Baku landline telephone numbers now have an extra digit; a '4' has been added to the front, making the numbers seven digits long, eg ☎ 912087 becomes ☎ 4912087.

SCAMS

The policemen patrolling Baku's main train station are particularly prone to stopping perfectly innocent foreigners and trying to escort them off for 'kontrol' (bag search and passport check). The best tactic is to play the dumb tourist: tell them the name of your hotel (make one up if you are not staying in one) and say the passport is there. If they try to take you away, open your bag and make it clear you have no intention of moving. Ultimately, these guys are looking for bribes, but keep smiling and stand your ground and they'll soon leave you alone.

Carry a photocopy of your passport and visa with you rather than the real thing, in case of police checks (see the Scams boxed text above for details).

SIGHTS

Baku's most interesting area is the İçəri Şəhər, containing the city's two most accessible sights, the Maiden's Tower and the Palace of the Shirvan Shahs. It's also the most atmospheric and least changed area of the Old Town. The sea front is taken up by more modern structures, including the supremely Soviet Government House and some fine oil-boom mansions.

Maiden's Tower

One of the many symbols of Baku and perhaps its most accessible tourist attraction is the surprisingly squat 29m tower overlooking the Caspian from the far end of the Old Town. Initially built some time in the 7th to the 8th centuries, the original function of the **Maiden's Tower** (Map p202; admission \$1; ☎ 11am-7pm Tue-Sun) is the subject of much debate among historians. While most agree that it was a defensive tower at the heart of the old walled city, others have claimed variously that it was a lookout post, a fire beacon and an astronomical observatory.

One of the more popular theories is that the tower was a Zoroastrian temple, perhaps even a 'Tower of Silence' where the dead were laid out while the vultures stripped the flesh from their bones. In accordance with this interpretation, the door on the third level may well have opened onto a wooden balcony that gave access to

niches in the 'buttress', which served as an *astodan* – an ossuary where the bleached bones were then stored.

There are of course plenty of blatantly untrue legends that have grown up about the tower – the best and most ridiculous has it that the tower was built by a wealthy baron who fell in love with his daughter and asked her to marry him. Torn between obeying her father and revulsion at the thought of incest, she commanded that he build a tower high enough so that she could see the extent of his domain. She stalled and stalled, saying it needed to be higher and higher and when it was eventually the height it is today she climbed to the roof and threw herself off.

In fact, 'maiden's tower' (Qız Qalası in Azeri) might well be better rendered in English as the virgin tower, an allusion to its impenetrability rather than its association with tragic females.

A massive structure for its time, the tower is built on a rocky outcrop with walls 5m thick at the base, tapering to 4m at the top. A buttress projects from the eastern side, and openings on the south side permit light to enter. There are eight floors inside, all linked by steps within the walls, except for the ground floor, which is linked to the 1st floor by a modern iron staircase. A deep well descends from a recess in the 2nd-floor chamber, and a doorway on the 3rd floor opens into thin air, its original function unknown.

Today, the second level contains an interesting display of old photographs of the tower, while the third is given over to a souvenir shop. There are superb views of the Old Town from the top, giving a real sense of the old Islamic centre of Baku.

Palace of the Shirvan Shahs

The Baku **palace of the Shirvan Shahs** (Map p202; admission \$1; ☎ 10am-5pm). Azerbaijan's ruling dynasty in the Middle Ages, is one of the city's most fascinating sights and underwent painstaking restoration in 2003. The Shirvan Shah Khalilullah I built the complex in the 15th century on a series of terraces and it remains the finest surviving example of Shirvan architecture in Azerbaijan. Its main appeal lies in the fact that you get a real feel for every-day life within the palace walls, from the crypt to the cistern, the

hammam (Turkish-style bathhouse) and the mosque.

The ticket booth is in the main ceremonial courtyard, which is dominated by the towering portal of the main **palace apartments**, built in the 15th century for Khalilullah I. A small gateway on the left leads into the courtyard of the **Divan Xana**, where the court of the Shirvan Shah once assembled. The western portal is beautifully decorated with intricate carving and calligraphic inscriptions.

Steps lead down from the ceremonial courtyard to the main courtyard, which contains an octagonal **cistern** (for water storage) and the so-called **Dervish's Mausoleum**. This pointed-roof structure is the tomb of Seyyid Yəhya Bakuvi, an astronomer, philosopher and mystic at the court of Khalilullah I. East of the tomb are the **ruins of the Keyqubad Mosque** (16th century) and the surviving **Murad Gate**. The carved stone blocks that lie around the courtyard, inscribed with Arabic calligraphy, animal figures and human faces, are known as the Bayil Stones. They were recovered in the 1950s from the ruins of Sabayil Qala, a 13th-century castle that once stood on a now-submerged island near the Bayil Peninsula in the southwest corner of Baki Buxtası (Baku Bay).

The next level down to the west begins at the **Ceremonial Gate** and leads to a courtyard containing the **Royal Mosque**, a small and rather plain structure, with a simple, unadorned mihrab (a niche that indicates the direction of Mecca) opposite the door, ie the south wall – the direction of Mecca from Baku. An inscription beneath the balcony on the minaret reads: 'Built at the command of the great sultan Khalilullah I. May Allah glorify his reign. The year of the Hejira 854' (AD 1444).

The **Mausoleum of the Shirvan Shahs** is also very plain, with simple faceted decorations around the base of the dome. Photographs inside the building show archaeological excavations carried out in the 1940s on the burials within the palace grounds. Another gate leads down to the final terrace and the **ruins of the Palace Hammam**. In the chamber furthest from the entrance stairs you'll find fragments of coloured tiles on the walls.

Taza Pir Mosque

This grand, imposing **mosque** (Map p200-1) on the steep Yasamal Slopes was built between

1903 and 1914. The two minarets and the beautiful green dome are visible across the city, and you are welcome to visit – the imam himself will often show you the high-quality workmanship of the main facade, which makes an interesting comparison with the already deteriorating Centre for Islam in the Caucasus building to one side, barely a decade old. The stunning pyramidal chandelier in the mosque is an amazing sight, and the red stained-glass windows are beautifully simple. To the left of the mosque is Baku's Islamic University.

Martyr's Lane

The bleak memorial to those killed in the Red Army's 1990 quelling of a popular uprising in Baku was swiftly augmented to honour Azerbaijan's fallen in the Karabakh conflict a few years later, and now the majority of the **cemetery** is given over to victims of the war. The long cemetery sits high above the south of the city opposite the concrete hulk that was once the Hotel Moskva. There is now a new memorial to British and Commonwealth troops killed in Azerbaijan during WWI, although it has been vandalised several times by radical nationalist groups, who claim the British were in cahoots with the Armenian partisans living in the area at the time. The large parkland is covered in graves, and you'll often see families there mourning their loved ones. A funicular (10¢, every 15 minutes) links Martyr's Lane to the sea front just beyond Azərneft meydanı (square).

State Art Museum

Housed in two very impressive oil-boom mansions, the **State Art Museum** (Map p202; ☎ 925789; Niyazi küçəsi 11; ⏰ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun; admission \$3) is a very comprehensive gallery of painting and ceramics. The main building houses a collection of 19th-century Azeri and Russian art, while the annex immediately up the hill contains Azeri modern art.

Perhaps the most interesting – though unofficial – exhibits are the bullet-scarred bronzes of poet Natavan, singer Bulbul and composer Hacıbəyov in the courtyard behind one of the buildings. These once stood in the city of Şuşa in Nagorno-Karabakh, but following the Armenian occupation of the region the busts were discovered in Georgia, having been sold for scrap. Another victim of recent history has been Karl Marx;

his disused statue can be seen from the main road gathering moss to the side of the upper museum entrance.

Nizami Museum of Azerbaijan Literature

One of Baku's most visually imposing buildings, the **Nizami Museum of Azerbaijan Literature** (Map p200-1; ☎ 971713; Fountain Square; admission \$5, English tour additional \$3; 🕒 11.30am-5pm Mon-Sat) is a large two-floor display that gives an overview of Azeri literature up to the heights of Nizami and on to more modern writers. The guided tour is informative, although overall entry is rather overpriced.

Carpet Museum

Once the Lenin Museum, this neoclassical building on the waterfront is now home to no less than three museums. The star is the **Carpet Museum** (Map p200-1; ☎ 931821; Neftçilər prospekti 123; 🕒 9.30am-5.30pm; admission \$4.40, guided tour in English additional \$6), which charts the history of Azeri carpet making and includes over 1000 rare and beautiful rugs from Azerbaijan as well as Iran and Dagestan. A guided tour helps to put the designs in context and to explain the significance of their symbols. Two far less interesting museums in the same building are the **Theatre Museum** (☎ 934098; admission \$1) and the **Museum of Independence** (☎ 988351; admission \$1).

Russian Church

Hidden on a backstreet off Xaci Xaciev küçəsi, the **Russian Church** (Map p200-1) is the centre of Baku's Orthodox community. It is not geared towards tourists, but there is nothing to stop you visiting. Go through the entrance, turn right through the courtyard and go up the stairs to get to the long church itself. The icons don't compare with Orthodox churches in Russia, although they are still attractive and this offers an interesting glimpse into Baku's Russian community.

Rostropovich Museum

Honouring Mstislav Rostropovich, the world-renowned cellist, conductor and Bakuvian, this small **museum** (Map p200-1; ☎ 926205; 19 Rostropovich küçəsi 19; admission \$1, per group for a tour in Russian or Azeri \$3; 🕒 10am-5pm Tue-Sun) in the musician's childhood home displays photographs of Rostropovich's life and family. The display is small, but worth a visit for those

interested in the man. The guided tour is rather hit-and-miss and unavailable in English anyway, so it's best just to nose around.

TV Tower

Baku's impressive **TV needle** would afford superb views of the metropolis, were this not a restricted zone. There were plans to construct a public restaurant at the top for 2005, but the guards seemed rather unconvinced that this would ever happen. However, if you want to see it up close, it's a steep 15-minute hike from Martyr's Lane.

WALKING TOUR

Start in Azərneft meydanı where you'll see the headquarters of **Socar** (1), the Azeri National Oil Company. Walking up the gentle hill of Niyazi küçəsi, you'll see the two large attractive buildings that make up the **Azerbaijan State Art Museum** (2; p205); look out for the Karl Marx statue kept behind bars next to the second building. Across the road on the other side you'll see the newly renovated **Baku Philharmonic** (3). The soldiers hanging around threateningly are guarding the Presidential Administration – the ugly concrete building to the left. Turn right up cobbled İstiqlaliyyət küçəsi – one of Baku's most cosmopolitan and architecturally rich thoroughfares.

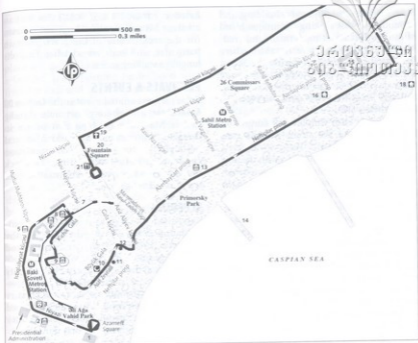
After passing the brutal Bakı Sovieti metro station on your right, you'll see **Baku City Hall** (4), as bullish a building as you'd expect late 19th-century oil-boom Baku to be run from, and now again the administration for one of the world's most dynamic oil centres. Across the road at 35 İstiqlaliyyət küçəsi is the **Nariman Narimanov House Museum** (5), home to Azerbaijan's first Communist leader (and novelist too), who was poisoned on Stalin's orders in 1925 before being transformed – also on Stalin's orders – into a national hero.

Continue down the road, past the **Museum of Manuscripts** (6) on your right where there are large numbers of mainly 18th- and 19th-century Korans on display. Carry on

BAKU WALKING TOUR

Distance: 6km

Time: 2 to 3 hours



down the hill and you'll see the walled city of **İçəri Şəhər (7)** on your right. The main entrance is down the hill, or you can take a sharp right after **Ismailia Palace (8)** and take a less obvious side entrance to the wonderful maze of timeless streets.

Once inside the **İçəri Şəhər**, make an active attempt to get lost – you're never more than a few minutes' walk from the perimeter wall, and this way at least you get to have a bit of adventure and absorb the very real atmosphere of the magical Old Town – this is no whitewashed tourist attraction but a lived-in, chaotic and charming Islamic walled city now listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site. You'll be able to visit the **Palace of the Shirvan Shahs (9)** (p204) as well as the old **mosques (10)** and **carpet sellers (11)** on Asaf Zeynalli küçəsi before finishing up with a climb to the top of the **Maiden's Tower (12)** (p204) for some amazing views over the city and the Caspian Sea.

Taking the exit out of the **İçəri Şəhər** by the Maiden's Tower, you'll find your way onto the roaring Neftçilər prospekti, the busy sea-front road. Cross Əziz Əliyev küçəsi

to the small park, then cross through the nearby subway across to the sea front. Once called Primorsky Park, it is now known to all Bakunians as simply the *bulvar*. The sea front is where Bakunians come to stroll in the early evenings and it enjoys the official status of a national park! Looking out onto the turquoise waters of the Caspian Sea, the impression is the overpowering smell of the crude oil that literally seeps from the seabed, simultaneously Azerbaijan's biggest asset and most onerous environmental burden. The water is thick and oily and you're unlikely to fancy a dip.

Turning left down the *bulvar*, you'll soon pass the colonnaded **Carpet Museum (13)** (p206) on your left, which was the Lenin Museum in more political times. Further on to your right there's a concrete **pier (14)** with the remnants of a once-fashionable café at the far end. The rising sea level has left it looking rather romantically abandoned. Young lovers come to the pier to drink beer and canoodle conservatively. Carrying on down the *bulvar* past all the fairground rides, you'll see the **Dom Soviet (15)**, perhaps

Baku's single most impressive building, and certainly its most striking – a unique blend of monolithic Soviet modernism and traditional Islamic architecture. It was from here that Azerbaijan was run during the Soviet era, although it appears to be largely empty these days. Either side are the two similar concrete monsters, the **Azerbaijan (16)** and **Abşeron hotels (17)**.

The *bulvar* ends with a small fairground for children and the sleazy **Hotel Kompas (18)**, housed on board a 1960s Soviet ferry. Beyond this Baku's port begins with the port building, a dramatically large and totally deserted building, crumbling quietly behind the Hotel Kompas. From here, walk up Puşkin küçəsi to Nizami küçəsi, Baku's most cosmopolitan shopping street and a great place to wander. To the north of Fountain Square is an **Armenian Church (19)**, currently used as a warehouse due to the lack of Armenians in Baku these days. It's an impressive reminder of how totally two nationalities who lived side by side for centuries have divided since the war in Karabakh.

Turn left onto Nizami küçəsi and carry on all the way down until you reach **Fountain Square (20)**, Baku's pleasantly shady central piazza, although the fountains are only switched on during summer afternoons and evenings. Another sign of the times on the square is one of Baku's two branches of McDonald's – the second is a drive-thru in the suburb of Ganjlik – although you'll probably prefer to cross over to the far side and have a more traditional restorative cup of tea at **Araz (21)**, the large *çayxana* (teahouse) next to the Maharaja Restaurant.

BAKU FOR CHILDREN

The decaying Soviet-era fairground attractions spread out along the *bulvar* might please younger children, as will the mini-cars and motorbikes available on Fountain Square and around Fisherman's Wharf restaurant. **Zoom** (Map p200-1; 33/35 Hajibeyov) is a great place for kids of all ages. A Lego-sponsored café behind the Dom Soviet, it has a fantastic children's play area, arcade games and a café.

TOURS

Most travel agencies will organise a half- or full-day city tour for individuals and groups. Also worth considering is a tour with **Fuad**

Axundov (☎ 050 318 6552, 405178, 520-30), an amateur historian with a huge enthusiasm for the architecture of the *İçəri Şəhər* in particular, who leads very detailed English-language walks (see p103).

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Baku's largest annual event is the **Caspian Oil & Gas Show**, a week-long corporate shindig in late May or early June that brings in delegates from around the world. Mid- and particularly top-range accommodation can be hard to find at this time. To check out dates and get more information, see www.caspianoilgas.co.uk.

SLEEPING

Baku's oil boom means that its accommodation is largely aimed at the wealthy business traveller, although bargain and mid-range hotels do exist. Most people will want to be in the city centre, with proximity to the sea front and the Old Town. However, some of the more spacious and luxury accommodation is outside Baku's cramped central district, presumably because they expect guests with cars or drivers.

Budget

Azerbaijan Hotel (Map p200-1; ☎ 989000; fax 985352; Azadlıq prospekti 1; unrefurbished s/d \$20-50 rooms; refurbished s/d \$50-120; ☹) It's hard to even imagine a scenario in which a stay at the Azerbaijan would be a good idea. This enormous Soviet behemoth is one of the two Caspian-side hotels that flank the Dom Soviet. (In contrast, its one-time twin, the Abşeron Hotel, has gone impressively upmarket.) While some floors here have been renovated to a just-about-passable level, the unrefurbished ones are revolting and the one we were shown stank.

Circus Hotel (☎ 949509; behind Baku Circus, off Samed Vurgun küçəsi; s/d with shared bathroom \$6, s/d with private bathroom \$9) The delightful ladies running the Circus Hotel combine business nous and charm – they have reintroduced the foreigner pricing system to what was once Baku's best-value hostel. Azeris can still have one of decrepit rooms for \$2, but foreigners are charged three times that amount. As it is now, you'd be better off at the Araz or Cənub. Constant hot water supply doesn't make up for the state of the bathrooms either.



Hotel Araz (☎ 905063; Y Safarov küçəsi 30; per bed with shared facilities \$4, d with en suite \$16, refurbished d with en suite \$20; ☎) Despite being a little out of the centre, the Araz is a great place for backpackers and anyone else on a budget. It's a bustling hostel/hotel with friendly staff and basic but clean facilities. The shared toilets and showers are fine. Marshrutkas No 1, 4 and 131 go into the centre of town from outside the hotel, and it's also on the main route from the airport into the city.

Hotel Conub (☎ 479488; Azərbaycan prospekti 31; unrefurbished s/d with bathroom \$6; refurbished s/d with bathroom s/d \$20-30; ☎) The \$6 rooms have real damp problems and miserable bathrooms, but it's still a great price for this location. The rooms with upgraded bathrooms are far more comfortable, although there seemed to be very little difference between the \$20 and \$30 options. A great location next to Sahil metro station makes this a very good budget base.

Hotel Kompas (Map p200-1; ☎ 481265; s/d with shared toilet and shower \$6, s/d with en suite \$12, ste \$20) Undoubtedly the oddest of Baku's accommodation, the Kompas is housed in a rusting 1962 Soviet ferry docked at Baku's insalubrious port. Its interior is a blend of sex-club décor and musty Intourist hotel chic. Rooms are also rented by the hour, and the disco and bar are open all night.

Hotel Velotrek (☎ 315189; Tbilisi prospekti 3007; s/d \$10/20) Named after the next-door cycling track, the Velotrek is a real bargain. Only built in 2003, this place is well located. It has clean rooms, all with en suite, TV, telephone and ludicrously camp leopard-skin duvets. There is even a sauna, pool and gym, although these cost extra. The main disadvantage is that they shut the complex early unless you tell them you are coming back late.

Mid-Range

Abşeron Hotel (Map p200-1; ☎ 987384; fax 937275; Puşkin küçəsi; unrefurbished s/d \$30-60, refurbished s/d/ste \$110/120/180; ☎) The Abşeron is definitely the best of the two twin hotels on the Baku sea front, and the refurbished rooms are unexpectedly excellent. Even the tatterier unrefurbished rooms are perfectly habitable, but it's a good idea to ask to see yours first.

Ascot Guest House (Map p200-1; ☎ 925477; www.azcot.com; Xaci Xaciev küçəsi 7; s \$118; ☎) While

its street entrance looks distinctly sleazy, the 4th-floor Ascot Guest House is spotless and boasts one of the best locations in Baku, overlooking the Baku-Baku Square. Guests are fine to cook their own meals in the clean and spacious kitchen, and staff are friendly.

Caspian Guest House (Map p200-1; ☎ 986581; fax 985287; 8 Zorge küçəsi; s/d \$100/120; ☎) This rather characterless hotel is owned by the Caspian Shipping Company, and is a minute's walk from the port. Although somewhat overpriced, it is comfortable. Similar rooms for less money in the same location are available at the Abşeron.

City Mansions (☎ 908041; baku@tjt.baku.az; 153 Azadlıq prospekti; per night \$70; per week \$445; per month \$1700; ☎) One of the best value-for-money hotels in Baku is a good 15-minute drive out of town. Its standards are very high, providing comfortable, serviced apartments, all of which include kitchen, satellite TV, DVD player, stereo and access to the gym, Jacuzzi and sauna. Guests are welcome to stay from one night to a year, and apartments with two and three bedrooms are also available.

Icheri-Sheher Hotel (Map p202; ☎ 925315; fax 920280; Mammedyarov küçəsi 1/34; s/d \$110; ☎) This small, quiet hotel is within the Old Town walls and offers very comfortable accommodation with all you'd expect from an above-average hotel, including satellite TV, minibars and helpful staff.

Intourist Hotel (☎ 989842/3; fax 989845; Neftçilər prospekti 63; s/d \$50, ste \$60-80; ☎) While admittedly not as horrible as many of its namesakes across the former Soviet Union, the Baku Intourist has only just woken up to *perestroika*. The potential for a good hotel is here – the rooms are perfectly fine, if a little shabby, and have balconies, TVs and telephones. The only reason to go for a suite is if you want a kitchen. Staff seemed surprisingly polite. It's a 10-minute walk from the İçəri Şəhər on the main coastal road out of the city.

Irshad Hotel (☎ 410132; www.irshad.in-baku.com; 11 Vaqif prospekti; s/d \$110, per apartment \$200; ☎) The Irshad had its five minutes of fame when it became the first hotel ever to house a pope. Baku's tiny Catholic community had nowhere grand enough of its own, so John-Paul II stayed in room 68 during his visit to Baku in 2002, while the international press

corps looked on in bemusement from the Hyatt. Despite a papal blessing the rooms are cramped, although the apartments spacious. It's located rather out of the way to the north of the city centre.

Maiden Tower Guest House (Map p202; ☎ 475001; maiden_tower@azdata.net; Mirza Mansur küçəsi 34; s/d \$89/106; 🍷) This lovely place is an oasis of clean and cool high-standard accommodation in the heart of the Old Town. Its rooms are incredibly spacious and offer all the usual amenities. Laundry facilities also exist.

Old City Inn (Map p202; ☎ 974369; fax 970155; Kichik Gala küçəsi 10; s \$90, d \$110-120; 🍷) Set up by Baku's Western University to train students in the tourism industry, the Old City Inn's standards are high, and it has an undoubtedly central location, as its name suggests. With just 12 rooms, it's an intimate and friendly place. It's a shame their lovely roof terrace bar is shut most of the year – in June we were told it was 'only open in summer'.

Top End

There are no traditional Azeri top-end hotels in Baku – those meeting four- and five-star standards have sprung up in the past decade to cater to the oil-boom businessmen.

Crescent Beach Hotel (☎ 974777; www.crescentbeachhotel.com; Salyan Highway, Şixov; s/d/ste \$177/200/378; 🍷 🍷 🍷) This development on Baku's rather sorry excuse for a city beach is undoubtedly excellent, with comfortable rooms, good facilities and restaurants, but begs the question why anyone would want to stay here, when for the same price they could be in the city centre. Its popularity with weekenders and as a venue for conferences probably accounts for its success. Its own well-manicured private beach overlooks two giant oil rigs.

Grand Hotel Europe (☎ 907090; www.europehotel-baku.com; 1025/30 Tbilisi prospekti; s \$200, d \$235, ste \$320-650; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Top end but out of the centre, the Europe's rooms still offer some Caspian views due to its hillside position. Everything else here is exactly as you'd expect from a five-star international. The good-sized outdoor pool provides a good distraction from the poor location.

Park Hyatt Baku (☎ 901234; www.baku.hyatt.com; 1033 İzzmir küçəsi; s/d \$271, ste \$413-1239; 🍷 🍷 🍷) and **Hyatt Regency Baku** (☎ 981234; fax 900817;



THE BEST BAKU HOTELS FOR...

Best Deal The **Vesela** (p209) has amazingly clean bedrooms with en suite, TV and priorities for just \$10.

Budget The **Cənub** (p209), slap-bang in the centre and with clean(ish) rooms starting at \$6, or the cleaner but further-out **Araz** (p209).

Business The **Radisson** (below) has it all – full business-centre facilities, a superb location and good restaurants for entertaining.

Quirkiness The intrepid will climb aboard the truly sleazy **Kompass** (p209) boatel, a docked and rusting Soviet ferry at the sea port.

Location The **Maiden Tower Guest House** (opposite) is in the heart of the cramped Old Town, but you'd never guess it from the spacious rooms.

1 Bakikhanov küçəsi; s/d \$218 ste \$277-826; 🍷 🍷 🍷) The two Baku Hyatts are side by side, a short drive from the city centre. The Park Hyatt is the more luxurious option, with larger and more comfortable rooms. Both are, however, international-standard business hotels with excellent facilities.

Radisson SAS Plaza (Map p200-1; ☎ 982402; www.radissonsas.com; 340 Nizami küçəsi; ste \$280, presidential suite \$1000; 🍷 🍷 🍷) It may not have contributed much to Baku's architecture, but the city's best hotel is at the top of the ISR Plaza, towering above Fountain Square, in blue glass and anonymous grey-pink marble. All 40 rooms are suites, and most boast incredible views over the Old Town and the Caspian. The City Lights bar is a classy place for an evening cocktail.

EATING

Baku is a culinary treat, where good local restaurants jostle with equally impressive foreign eateries that cater for the large expatriate community. Azeris tend to visit Azeri places for special occasions such as wedding feasts and parties, while Turkish restaurants tend to be more popular with locals for just a quick bite to eat. Phone numbers are provided for places where it



is advisable to book, otherwise you should have no problems just turning up and getting a table.

Azeri

The vast selection of local restaurants run the gauntlet from high-end options, which often include loud musical entertainment and belly dancing, to cheap and friendly *yeməxanas* (food houses), where home-cooked specialities will set you back as little as \$2.

Bəh Bəh (☎ 961810; Şıxaliev küçəsi 20; meals \$10) Good, imaginative variations on Azeri national cuisine – a starters' trolley followed by well-realised mains and good service. The place is atmospheric and noisy – ask for a quiet table unless you have come for the warbling and belly dancing. For the intrepid, Bəh Bəh also boasts a 'summer restaurant' in the seaside resort of Züqulba.

Canaq Qala (☎ 667558; Tabriz küçəsi 35; meals \$7) Next door to Shusha (below), this is also a great place to come to taste good Azeri national cuisine as made for the locals at decent low prices.

Izmir (☎ 957373; Izmir küçəsi 5; meals \$10) An inexplicably popular place for the full Azeri cuisine experience. Georgian Kylie Manana enjoys a bizarre Vegas-style residence here, sharing the stage with belly dancers, though whether this is greater punishment for her or the dining public is open to debate.

Kərvansaray Restaurant (Map p202; ☎ 926668; Böyük Qala küçəsi 11; meals \$10) As popular with tourists as you'd expect a restaurant housed in a 14th-century caravanserai to be. The belly dancing and music make this an atmospheric place to get a taste for Azerbaijan, but with traditional fare at tourist prices.

Mugam Club (Map p202; ☎ 924085; Həqiqət Rzayeva küçəsi; meals \$14) Set in a wonderfully atmospheric caravanserai, Mugam is the place to come if you have one night in Baku and want a taste of the country. It's squarely oriented towards tourists, with fountains, antique shops scattered around the alcoves and belly dancing and live music all night, although thankfully not too loud. The food is good but overpriced. Check the bill.

Shusha (☎ 667225; Tabriz küçəsi 35; meals \$7) Named after the occupied capital of Karabakh, an ancient cultural city of immense importance to Azerbaijan, Shusha is an extremely popular place with locals, who

come here in droves. Expect loud music, big groups of families and a great atmosphere.

Turkish

Anadolu (Map p200-1; ☎ 933644; Nizami küçəsi 5; meals \$5) A chain with branches throughout the city (including one at Puşkin küçəsi). Anadolu is tasty and inexpensive.

Inter Grand (☎ 934692; Tagizade küçəsi 5; meals \$4-5) Part of a chain of Turkish restaurants in the city, Inter Grand offers good value and tasty cooking.

Ramix (Map p200-1; ☎ 940468; Xaci Xaciev küçəsi 36; meals \$4) This totally unpretentious, tasty family-run joint is just up the road from the MUM department store. It offers Turkish mainstays in a pleasantly informal environment – try the spicy eggplant (aubergine) salad for a treat.

Star (Map p200-1; ☎ 987625; Nizami küçəsi 68; meals \$4) This is a fantastic place for a tasty Turkish meal. The staff is unbelievably friendly, the aubergine *dolma* excellent and the prices very low.

International

You can eat most world cuisines in Baku.

Café Mozart (Map p202; ☎ 981925; Əlizadə küçəsi 2; meals \$6) This café is an expat favourite, but is a great place to sit outside during summer evenings. The steak here is unexpectedly superb, but avoid their pizzas. Otherwise the menu encompasses everything from Azeri dishes to Russian and American mainstays.

Café Napoli (Map p200-1; ☎ 949356; Mirza İbrahimov küçəsi 7; meals \$7) Obviously once an Italian restaurant, Café Napoli now does tasty Georgian home cooking; the management has stopped shy of replacing the awning, however. The dark basement setting with candlelit booths is wonderfully atmospheric and a nice place for a romantic evening.

Fisherman's Wharf (Map p200-1; ☎ 930223; Malikan Park; \$6) King of the expat joints, Fisherman's Wharf is a pleasant open-air restaurant in the middle of a duck pond, run by a couple from Louisiana. The food is reliable, though nothing out of the ordinary, but their all-day breakfasts (English and American) are rightly popular.

Georgian Home (Map p200-1; ☎ 938536; Bəşir Səfər-Əyubov küçəsi; meals \$10) For Georgian food this is the pick of the bunch. It remains popular with locals and expats alike despite

its unusual habit of giving visitors rather garish ceramic souvenirs as they leave. The size of your pot is in direct correlation to the number of your visits. However, the food is very tasty and enjoyable.

Panchos (Map p200-1; ☎ 985700; Xaqani küçəsi 14/16; meals \$13) Though it may have the world's least comfortable seats, it still serves up delicious and authentic Mexican dishes.

Silk and Spice (Map p202; ☎ 929866; Hagigat Rzayeva küçəsi 11; \$10) This place has the potential to be Baku's loveliest restaurant. Its faultless position in the middle of the Old Town, under the Maiden's Tower makes dining outside on summer evenings a treat, while its sleek interior wouldn't look out of place in London or New York. The modern European food is varied and mains are good, but small complaints such as stale bread and warm beer need to be overcome.

Sunset Café (Map p202; Əziz Əliyev küçəsi 8; meals \$7) Inside the Azerbaijan Cinema, Sunset Café is a fantastic if predictably expat place. Still, its American-style sandwiches and salads are great. It is also very child-friendly and will provide crayons and paper to keep the darlings occupied while you have a burger. Zoom (p208) is also child-friendly.

Baku has three *actual* Italian restaurants, of which preference should be given to the trendy and chic **Scalini's** (☎ 982850; Bakikhanov küçəsi 2; meals \$10) or the formal and plush **Vasco's** (Map p200-1; ☎ 983102; ISR Plaza; meals \$12) rather than the somewhat tacky and overly air-conditioned **Dolce Vita** (Map p202; ☎ 927572; Əziz Əliyev küçəsi 9; \$10). All offer a very high standard of cooking, however, with real Italian chefs.

The best Thai is **Pink Elephant** (Map p200-1; ☎ 988975; 39 Xaqani küçəsi; meals \$15), which counts President Aliyev as its number-one fan. Its dubious musical ensembles suggest that it is aimed at rich Azeris. For Chinese, the choice is the **Wok** (Map p200-1; ☎ 982556; Xaqani küçəsi 39; meals \$11) a sleek and classy restaurant with excellent service. Its food is still rather MSG-d up, but the Peking duck is very good. **Yin Yang** (Map p200-1; ☎ 927364; Əziz Əliyev küçəsi 5; meals \$7) also gets favourable reports.

For Indian food, try **Maharaja** (Map p200-1; ☎ 924334; Fountain Square; meals \$10) or **Taj Mahal** (Map p200-1; ☎ 930870; Uzeyir Hajibeyov 17; meals \$9). The Park Hyatt Baku (p210) has a decent sushi restaurant, **Robatabar** (☎ Wed-Sun).

DRINKING

Despite Muslim mores having a take-it-or-leave-it aspect in Azerbaijan, drinking in the evenings is still a most casual *çayxana* affair. Central Baku is full of British-style pubs for the expat communities, most of which are rather sad mementoes of home for exiled oil men.

City Lights Bar (Map p200-1; 340 Nizami küçəsi) On the top floor of the ISR Plaza, the more up-market City Lights Bar is a cool place for a drink, with outside tables giving some incredible views of the city.

Otherwise, all along the sea front there are outdoor bars serving beers into the night.

Tiger Bar (Map p200-1; Z Tağıyev küçəsi) This is one exception to the pub rule; friendly staff, a pool and pleasant booths to sit in make this a great little hang-out.

On balmy summer evenings head for the stretch of open-air bars along the sea front for a relaxed atmosphere where Azeris and foreigners mix amicably and draft beer is incredibly cheap.

Decent *çayxana* include **Araz** (Map p200-1; Fountain Square), next to the Maharaja restaurant, and the colourful and friendly *çayxana* (Map p200-1; cnr Puşkin & Dilara Aliyeva küçəsi) next to Baku train station.

ENTERTAINMENT

Live Music

Caravan Jazz Club (Map p202; Əziz Əliyev küçəsi 4) Founded in memory of Vaqif Mustafazade, who pioneered a fusion of Western jazz and traditional Azeri *mugam*, this club is a fun and intimate place to listen to live music, although performances can vary in quality dramatically. Give the food a miss.

Many top-end restaurants, including the Kərvansaray Restaurant, Bəh Bəh and the Mugam Club (see p211), will include a full programme of traditional music, singing and belly dancing to accompany your meal.

Cinemas

Azerbaijan Cinema (Map p202; English films \$10) This is the closest thing the country has to a multiplex, and it's just south of Fountain Square. English films are shown without dubbing every Wednesday and Sunday at 7pm, while the rest of their programme is dubbed into Russian.



Theatre

Baku's theatre season runs from September to May. Performances range from modern Azeri plays to classical ballet and opera. Russian performances, usually performed by visiting troupes from Russian theatres can be seen at the **Russian Drama Theatre** (Map p200-1; Xaqani küçəsi 7).

Nightclubs

Since President Aliyev decided to crack down on the moral corruption inherent in staying up late, even attempting to ban the time-honoured Caucasian tradition of sitting outside in the late evening watching the world go by, only two nightclubs officially exist in Azerbaijan. However, in the best Azeri tradition, the law is largely ignored and small nightclubs proliferate in central Baku. Some of the better ones are **Capitol** (Map p200-1; Azadlıq prospekti 1) in the Azerbaijan Hotel and **Tunnel** (1025/30 Tbilisi prospekti) in the Grand Hotel Europe (see p210), both of which operate on Friday and Saturday. During the summer months there are often large parties outside at the seaside resorts of the Abşeron Peninsula. Entry for clubs in central Baku is usually around \$10, although women usually get in half-price or even free.

Gay & Lesbian Venues

There is no visible gay and lesbian scene in the city, and conservative attitudes prevail here. Fountain Square has a reputation of being a meeting place for gay men in the evenings, but discretion is key. While homosexual acts were decriminalised in 2000, don't hold your breath for any public acceptance or even consciousness of homosexuality in Azerbaijan. A newly created gay website for Azerbaijan's nascent gay-rights movement is <http://mavi-oglan.chat.ru/>.

SHOPPING

In Baku you'll find a vast array of cheap, illegally pirated DVDs and CDs available throughout the city, traditional Azeri hats, caviar, carpets and copperware. Save pirated goods, however, all of the above can be obtained more cheaply in the provinces. While Azerbaijan as a whole is a great place to buy carpets, the capital and particularly the shops in the İçəri Şəhər are not the best places to do so.

The best places to buy DVDs (\$7) and CDs (\$2.50) are in the centre of Baku, where the choice is widest and often, surprisingly left-field. Try **ABC** (Map p200-1; Xaqani küçəsi 25) on Fountain Square (see p200-1) or **Grand Mall** (Map p200-1; Nizami küçəsi 54) for the widest selection.

Baku's biggest department store is the invaluable TsUM (variously known as MUM and BUM too, although its Soviet-era name TsUM remains the most commonly used). Over four floors you can buy everything from cheap electronics to wedding dresses.

Designer stores are well established in Baku, and the largest selection can be seen in and around the Xaqani Shopping Centre on Rasul Rza küçəsi.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

See p266 for details on getting to/from Baku by boat.

Air

Baku's Binə Airport is the busiest in the Caucasus. There are several flights daily from Moscow (Aeroflot, Imair, Domo-dedovo and AZAL) as well as regular flights to and from Almaty, Beirut, Bishkek, Frankfurt, Istanbul, London, Paris, St Petersburg, Tashkent, Tbilisi, Tehran, Tel Aviv and Zurich. For more information see p261.

Internally, there are four daily flights to and from the exclave of Naxçıvan (\$100 each way for non-Azeris) and four times per week to Gəncə (\$50 each way). For tickets go to the main **AZAL** (Map p200-1; ☎ 934004; 28 May küçəsi 66/68) office just off Səməd Vurgun Gardens (the third door on your right as you approach from the square is where they sell tickets to foreigners). The small air-ticketing agencies all over the city may well think they can sell you a ticket for the Azeri price, but after a few attempts and lots of delays, they will realise that you are not eligible. For Naxçıvan, try to book a few days in advance, especially in summer, as the flights are usually completely full.

The cheapest route to Baku from Western Europe is the twice weekly AZAL flight from London via Istanbul for \$375 return. From North America, connecting in London is the best route, although AZAL also flies three times a week to Paris (\$456 return). Western airline tickets tend to be prohibitively expensive, as they are largely marketed to the business community.

Bus & Marshrutka

Buses connect Baku to nearly every town in the country, as well as to towns in Georgia and Russia. The main bus station is the recently constructed *Təzə avtovağəl* on Rovshan Jafarov küçəsi, a short walk from the 20 Janvar metro station. Buses leave all day long, although longer journeys leave only in the morning and late evening (arriving the next day).

The rows of *kassa* (ticket booths) only sell tickets to destinations marked on them, so walk down the central strip until you find the right one. Daewoo has its own booth for its comfortable air-conditioned buses, as does Sönmez (serving the northern cities). Sample prices and times are Gəncə (\$3.50, six hours), Krasny Most (\$5, nine hours), Lənkəran (\$2.75, five hours), Qax (\$4, eight hours), Şəki (\$3.75, seven hours), and Tbilisi (\$7, 11 hours). There's usually no problem getting a ticket on the day you wish to travel, but turn up an hour before departure to be sure.

Marshrutkas leave for Sumqayıt from a small fenced-in area next to the 20 Janvar metro station. Between this and the main bus station on Rovshan Jafarov küçəsi, marshrutkas leave for points throughout the country. Bear in mind that these are more cramped than buses for long distances but often faster. They are untimetabled and leave when full.

The 'Shamakhenka' bus station is further north from the Sumqayıt hub, on Tbilisi prospekti on the other side of the roundabout. From here buses go to northern towns including Lahıc (four hours), Nabran (four hours), Quba (three hours), Qusar (3½ hours) and Şamaxı (two hours).

Car & Motorcycle

Baku is the centre of the Azeri road system and the roads are generally good in the city. Cars can be hired through **Hertz** City (☎ 982022/198; Uzevir Hacıbəyov küçəsi 64/18) and **Bina Airport** (☎ /fax 971857); **Avis** (Map p200-1; ☎ 975455; Samed Vurgun küçəsi 13/6); and **Caspian Motors** (Map p200-1; ☎ 981415/585; 28 May küçəsi 27).

Metro

The Baku metro is a functional system primarily aimed at connecting the city centre to the dormitory *mikrorayony* (the Soviet-constructed suburbs that are made up almost entirely of grey residential blocks) further

out, and thus unlikely to be of huge use for tourists. The flat fare is 1000 manat (20¢). Useful stations for visitors are **Bakı Sovieti metro** (for the Old Town), **Sahil** for the Caspian sea front, **20 Janvar** for the bus stations and **28 May** for Baku's train station.

Train

The main international train route into Baku is the overnight sleeper from Tbilisi. A berth costs \$22 (1st class) or \$13 (2nd class). The train leaves Baku at 8pm each night, getting into Tbilisi at 10.20am the next day, stopping in Gəncə. A faster, but far more expensive train is the American Express-run Silk Road Express. This train departs Baku five times a week at 7.30pm, arriving in Tbilisi at 8.30pm the next day. Tickets cost \$168/270 one way/return, with business class return a staggering \$470.

Other services include Yekaterinburg, Moscow, Kiev, Makhachkala and Kharkov, but at the time of writing the Azerbaijan-Russian border was closed to foreigners making all these routes out of bounds to travellers.

Domestically, Baku is the centre of the national train network. It is nearly always faster to take a bus, however, and there is little to recommend internal train travel save pure curiosity. There are daily trains to Gəncə, Mingəçevir, Lənkəran, Astara, and Şəki, among others. There is also an *elektrichka* service (hard wooden seats only) for Qusar and Xudat en route to Derbent in Russia.

Trains to Sumqayıt and the Abşeron Peninsula towns are frequent throughout the day. Buy a ticket at the end of the relevant platform or just board the train and wait to be asked for payment.

GETTING AROUND To/From Binə Airport

A bus runs between Binə Airport and central Baku, from outside the main AZAL ticket office on 28 May küçəsi (30¢, 40 minutes). A cab is a far simpler option, and the standard price is \$6 each way. On arrival at the airport, you'll be approached by touts – walk beyond them until you find someone willing to go for \$6 or thereabouts.

Public Transport

Nearly everyone gets around by trusty marshrutka, although there are also some



popular bus routes. Most marshrutkas cost 500 to 1000 manat (10¢ to 20¢). Those that leave the city cost more, otherwise no ride in the city centre should cost more than 20¢. You pay when you get off and can ask the driver to stop at any point on the route. Simply shout 'saxhla, saxhla' (stop) or more emphatically 'saxhla burada' (stop here). Don't be timid – if the driver doesn't hear you he'll keep on going.

Identifying which marshrutka to take is likely to be the biggest problem. All routes have numbers, with their end destination written in boards in large letters, and a summary of where they go en route written in smaller script. Unless a bus is stationary for a few seconds, you have little chance of glean anything from a bus, unless you know the exact number you need. It's therefore easiest to huddle in a crowd of people waiting for a bus and ask them for help.

Taxi

The standard fare for a short trip within the centre of Baku is 5000 manats, or \$1. Longer trips cost 1 shirvan (\$2). In most cases, being confident and handing over the money at the end is absolutely fine, as prices are standard. However, if you are worried, agree on a price in advance. Metered taxis are still a rarity,

but they are usually the less common white taxis (as opposed to the standard yellow issue). You can flag down a taxi anywhere – there is no

☎ 3660441

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ABŞERON PENINSULA

The incredible environmental holocaust visited upon the oil-sodden outcrop of eastern Azerbaijan is an unforgettable sight, and a fairly unequivocal display of greed winning out over common sense and concern for popular well-being. It was not always so; before it brought multinational corporations, the oil brought Zoroastrians and Hindu fire worshippers to this bare and barren peninsula. Even those with little time in Azerbaijan should try to leave Baku on a day trip to see something of the real Azerbaijan.

SUMQAYIT

☎ 264 / pop 280,000

Worth a mention only for those interested in the truly grim and haunting, Sumqayıt is Azerbaijan's third-largest city, a coastal village made dystopian industrialist nightmare by the placing of much of the Soviet chemical industry here after WWII. From miles around the factory chimneys are visible, and a trip into the town itself is a fairly unique experience. The main 'sight' (for want of a better word) is the **Baby Cemetery**, horrifying evidence of the Soviet petrochemical programme's real victims. Many of the graves are unmarked, but some include portraits of horribly deformed and visibly retarded children.

While the collapse of the USSR and independence has meant hard times for those living in lethal but once-prosperous Sumqayıt, the closure of many of the factories has meant that the town's ecology is slowly improving.

Getting to Sumqayıt from Baku is easy; buses and marshrutkas leave from the chaotic enclosure next to the 20 Janvar metro station constantly throughout the day, the journey taking about 30 minutes.

SURAXANI

☎ 12

It is a wonderful incongruity (and one typical of Azerbaijan) that a nasty, poverty-ridden township such as Suraxani can play

BAKU BUS STOPS

Baku buses and marshrutkas have their routes and destinations clearly displayed in the windscreen or in a side window. Getting around by bus will be easier if you learn to recognise the names of the most useful bus stops, which are given below:

20 Janvar near the bus station.

28 May (Map p200-1) 28 May Square, outside the train station.

Azneft (Map p200-1) Azerbaijan State Oil Company, south of the Old Town.

Bakı Sovieti (Map p202) Bakı Soviet (City Hall), for the Old Town and Bakı Sovieti metro station.

S Vurgun Bağ Saməd Vurgun Gardens, near the airport bus stop and close to Azadlıq meydanı.

Şıxov Beach Şıxov beaches.

Təzə avtovağ New Bus Station, also near 20 Janvar.

TsUM (Map p200-1) Tsentralny Univermag (Central Department Store), for Fountain Square. Also known as MUM and BUM.

there are irregular *elektrichka* departures from Baku's main station. Pay on board; it's a 10-minute walk from the station once you arrive. A cab from Baku to Suraxanı should cost about \$6.

ARTYOM ISLAND

☎ 12

The long strip of land that makes up Artyom Island looks dangerously susceptible to the ever-rising Caspian waters, and those unlucky enough to live here have been relocated further down the spit for this very reason. You can't help thinking that they'd have been better off making a clean break from it, as this remote island seems to sum up desolation in one handy image. There is nothing to do here per se, unless you count staring at rusting boats and industrial wasteland as an activity, but it's undoubtedly an eye-opener. The Caspian is a luxurious and inviting blue here, which is amazing given the amount of oil extraction. Drive or walk to the very far tip of the island, north of Artyom town 'centre' and the train station. The little café at the end is something of a social hub and a nice place to stare at the postapocalyptic scenery.

One thing that should not be missed if you have your own transport is a drive up to the lighthouse overlooking Artyom. It may not look like it, but the view is superb, although the lighthouse has long been abandoned and locked up. Coming from Baku, take the road off to the left immediately after you pass a military installation on your right with a Heydar Aliyev quotation outside it.

To get to Artyom by train, there are just two services per day, and the train station is a long walk from the north end of the island, and too far away to visit the lighthouse. A taxi there and back including waiting time should cost around \$20. By car, follow the road to Binə Airport; carry on after the airport turning and make a right turn at an orange sign for the Middle East Petrol Farm, from where you simply follow the road straight onto Artyom.

NARDARAN

☎ 12

The scene of religious rioting in 2002, Nardaran is a centre of conservative Islam in otherwise rather progressive Azerbaijan.

It's an interesting place to drive through for its complete absence of women on the street and high-walled private houses bearing religious slogans in a style reminiscent of worker's banners under communism. Further towards the coast is the awesome **Rehime Khanim Mosque**, built in the late 1990s, presumably with massive donations from neighbouring Iran. A *medrese* (Islamic school) of similarly impressive size is being constructed a short distance away.

Nardaran is best visited by car or taxi and it's easily reached from Baku or from the coastal road from Züğülbə. Marshrutkas also run here from the big marshrutka hub at 20 Yanvar in Baku.

ABŞERON BEACHES

While the water may shine a tempting turquoise and the sand looks clean and inviting, the Abşeron Peninsula's pollution makes swimming a far less tempting prospect than it might otherwise be. For visitors determined to find a decent beach, those on the north coast of the peninsula are generally better than on the south coast next to Baku itself. Those seeking some peace and quiet should avoid Züğülbə beach and head on further to **Bilgəh** or **Amburan**. The latter is particularly pleasant – unlikely palm-thatched umbrellas provide the backdrop to a clean and inviting strip of water and there are some decent food and drink places right on the beachfront.

YANAR DAĞ

The Abşeron Peninsula once boasted countless natural gas flames – they were mentioned by Marco Polo in the 13th century – but most have burned out as the drilling of oil wells has reduced the underground pressure. However, Yanar Dağ (Fire Mountain) is one flame that lives on and it definitely makes for one of the stranger sights on the peninsula. Locals claim that the natural gas outlet was accidentally set alight by a shepherd in the 1950s and has been blazing away in a 10m-long wall of fire ever since. It's particularly vivid at night, and there's a ramshackle *çayxana* set up next to it for curious visitors to drink at – it's polite to order tea, as this is the only income available to the people who look after the site.

Yanar Dağ is only 7km north of Baku, but there is no public transport to the site,

which is fairly remote. Without your own car, your best bet is to hire a taxi. Going from Baku and back, with time to have tea overlooking the flames should set you back about \$15.

SIXOV BEACH

This uninspiring stretch of suburban Baku just off the highway to Qobustan is the default town beach for Bakunians. The main attraction here is the top-end Crescent Beach Hotel (p210). There is also a string of *çayxanə*s, restaurants and a public beach for the less wealthy, giving romantic views over two giant oil rigs out at sea.

While this is a nice place to stop for a meal or a drink on your way back into the capital, think twice before swimming here. The beach may look clean, but the water is heavily polluted both by oil extraction and one of Baku's main sewage outlets. Leaving Baku, however, the views over the largely disused nodding-donkey pumps that crowd the bay are particularly impressive from **Bibiheybat Masjid**, an Ottoman-style mosque newly built on the site of a 13th-century predecessor, which was demolished by the

Soviets in the 1930s. Most drivers will stop on leaving Baku and place some money in the alms box by the side of the road.

NORTHERN AZERBAIJAN

The northern corner of Azerbaijan, bounded by the crest of the Caucasus, the Caspian coast and the border with Russian Dagestan, contains some of the country's finest and most varied scenery. It is also a region of cultural diversity – some 100,000 Lezgins live in Qusar and in the towns and villages of the north; a unique community of mountain Jews can be found in Quba; and there are the Ketsch people of Xinalıq, descendants of the ancient Caucasian Albanians.

The northeastern slope of the Caucasus is broader and more gently inclined than the steep mountain front that overlooks the Şamaxı–Zaqatala road.

The contrast between the desert landscapes around Baku and the verdant mountains of northwestern Azerbaijan could hardly be greater. Here, only 150km west of the capital, the snowcapped peaks of the eastern Caucasus rise above luxuriant forests of beech, oak, sycamore and sweet chestnut, providing some of the country's best hiking and most beautiful scenery.

BEŞBARMAQ DAĞ

Probably the most illuminating sight in Azerbaijan in terms of understanding the strange blend of Islam, spiritualism and animism is Beşbarmaq Dağ (Five Finger Mountain), which towers 520m above the main road about 15km north of Giləzi. The coastal plain is narrow here, and in past times the natural fortress of Beşbarmaq controlled the trade route between Derbent and Baku. A wall was built between the mountain and the sea, and all traffic had to pass through a toll gate.

The summit of Beşbarmaq is a *pir* (holy site), drawing crowds of locals seeking good fortune, a child, a cure, or the answer to all their problems. An assortment of holy men frequent the summit rocks, chanting prayers and dispensing wisdom in a curious blend of Islam and ancient animist beliefs. There's also an attendant host of old women, children and assorted hangers-on hoping to cadge some money from the visitors.

NEFT DAŞLARI

Potentially one of the most fascinating places in Azerbaijan, Neft Daşları (Oily Rocks) was the world's first ever offshore oil rig, built in 1949 on rocks and stilts in the South Caspian, some 110km from Baku. A hugely ambitious late-Stalinist programme, the rig developed into what can only be described as an offshore town, with over 5000 inhabitants (all male) and 200km of gangways and platforms. Amazingly the complex includes a cinema, bakery, school and high-rise Soviet tenement blocks in the middle of the sea. Neft Daşları still produces some 15,000 barrels of oil a day, although this is a far cry from its Soviet average of over 150,000.

Sadly Neft Daşları is not being cultivated as a tourist attraction and visiting remains at the discretion of Socar, the national oil company. The well connected may be able to get an invitation, and once you have that, you can make the trip by helicopter from Baku or Artyom or take the far slower six-hour ferry.

NORTHERN AZERBAIJAN



NEFİTOVA

The remains of old fortifications can be seen around the base of the crags, and precarious paths lead in and out of the caves and clefts in the limestone. The way to the summit begins at a staircase on the southwest side (above the tea sheds). Everything comes in threes: you will be given three small stones that you take with you to the top, you must sip from a cup of holy water three times, you must kiss the sacred rock three times, and you must make your wish three times.

The route continues up rickety metal ladders and through rock clefts polished smooth by the passage of thousands of bodies to the summit pinnacles. Here you'll find the white-capped holy men ensconced in various nooks, their pitches marked by a few blankets, a samovar and fluttering votive ribbons. The view from the top is superb, from the turquoise Caspian in the east to the Caucasus foothills in the west.

Getting There & Away

If travelling by public transport, you can get off a bus from Baku to any northern town at the truck stop immediately below the peak (the bus usually makes a refreshment stop here anyway). There is a tin-roofed prayer house on the west side of the road, and on its left a track leads across the railway to the foot of the boulder-strewn hillside. Various paths wind up the steep slope to the summit – allow a hot, sweaty hour from the road. There are several buses a day, so if you arrive in the morning you can climb the hill and then catch another bus later in the day, either on to Quba or back to Baku.

With your own vehicle, continue past the truck stop and look for an unsurfaced track on the left, 2km after the main road crosses the railway. A 15-minute drive leads up to the west side of the summit. You can park at the collection of tea sheds, or drive right up to the foot of the rocky summit.

ÇIRAX QALA

The dramatic ruins of Çirax Qala sit atop a wooded crag commanding the old trade route along the Caspian coastal plain. The castle was built by the Sassanid Persians in the 5th century AD, and in the 18th century was used as part of the southern defences of the khanate of Quba. Although ruinous, it

is still one of the best preserved of Azerbaijan's ancient fortresses and the views from the top are superb. It's worth a side trip here on your way north, although the castle itself is not exactly pasturing.

At the southern edge of the industrial town of Siyazan a road forks west into the Caucasus foothills, following a line of old oil derricks and nodding-donkey pumps. The road was built to service these wells, and in places the original cobblestone surface survives. Pollution is everywhere though, and glistening black rivulets of raw crude disfigure the hillsides. About 20km from the main road you reach the village of **Qala Altı** (Under the Castle), with a holiday camp and sanatorium based around a sulphurous spring in the woods beneath Çirax Qala.

The road above the village leads past several open-air cafés advertising spring water to the gates of the old Soviet-era sanatorium. There's a huge pink restaurant here that served 'special meals for the ill'. You'll eat decently at one of the tourist restaurants on the road through the village. Through the gates at the top of the hill is the huge concrete cube of **Qala Altı Hotel** (☎ 050-3341228; s/d \$10) the best accommodation available, but still pretty poor.

It takes about an hour or so to hike up to the castle from the sanatorium. Alternatively, you can hire horses and ride up – İlham Ahadov (ask for him at the café beside the sanatorium gates) will rent you a couple for a half-day for \$10.

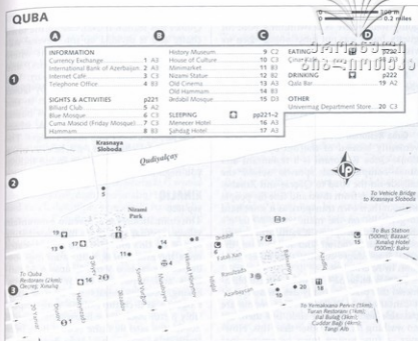
QUBA

☎ 169 / pop 27,000

The principal town of northern Azerbaijan, Quba has a lovely setting on the Qudiyalçay River, overlooked by cliffs and the distant mountains. Its cool climate even during summer makes it a popular spot for week-enders, most of whom stay in the surrounding resorts rather than the town itself. Quba was founded in the 18th century when the local potentate Fatali Khan moved his capital here from Xudat. The khanate was absorbed into the Russian Empire in 1806, and Quba lapsed into the lifestyle of a quiet provincial backwater.

Information

There is a currency exchange on Drusov. The International Bank of Azerbaijan and the



telephone office are on Fətəli Xan. There is an Internet café on the eastern side of the park between Rəsulzadə and Azərbaycan.

Sights

The main attraction in Quba is just wandering around its orderly grid of quiet streets, admiring the old Russian houses and perhaps poking your nose into the partly ruined *hammam*. Easily recognised by its tall beehive dome, this **old hammam** is more than 100 years old but was abandoned over 15 years ago through lack of money, and is now falling to pieces. You can enter by the stairs at the southwest corner to take a look at the marble-clad steam room, now ankle deep in rubbish and fallen plaster. Locals say the design is Middle Eastern, and that there is a similar *hammam* in Damascus.

Nizami Park is a pleasant tree-shaded retreat overlooking the broad gravel bed of the Qudiyalçay River. A long flight of steps lined with statues of Adonis-like Soviet youth leads down to the old bridge, which links Quba to the town of **Krasnaya Sloboda**

on the far bank. This town is home to a unique Jewish community. The people are extraordinarily friendly and hospitable and you may be invited to a meal, or even to visit the town's new **Bet Knesset Synagogue**.

Quba is famous for its carpets; a couple of carpet shops near the bus station offer a good range.

Sleeping

Your choice of accommodation in the town centre is limited. The better options exist a short drive from town.

Bal Bulag (☎ 050-3100203; 4-sleeper cabin \$5; house \$20) The furthest from town (along the road from Cəddar Bağı), Bal Bulag epitomises summer holidays Soviet-style – it's a shabby hangover from the Brezhnev era. All toilets and bathing facilities are shared and there is nothing to do here at all save thank God you don't have to go back to the aluminium smelter for a fortnight.

Cəddar Bağı (☎ 12-560098; d \$50) This smart new resort aiming for the top end of the Azeri market is 4km from Quba and is widely advertised on TV. More rooms were

built in summer 2003, a sign that things are going well. There is a swimming pool for guests, but it was not functioning when we visited. The rooms, however, are very comfortable and the resort area very pleasant.

Menecer Hotel (s/d \$2/4) In the town centre, the unwelcoming Menecer Hotel offers beds at the same price as the Şadağ Hotel, although we were not permitted to see the rooms themselves.

Quba Restorani (t/st \$20-40) The most conveniently located of the out-of-town options, Quba Restorani is a restaurant and hotel complex that sprawls across the hillside on the road to Qəçrəs and Xinaliq. It's only 2km from town and fine for people without their own transport, as it's not hard to get a lift on the main road. While it's the most central option, it's still rather mediocre accommodation, and suffers from the usual low-budget construction blues common in Azerbaijan.

Şadağ Hotel (s/d \$2/4) A Soviet-era establishment, this place is totally deserted save for a cantankerous old man. The rooms are passable and include a sink, but there are no washing facilities other than this. However, a functioning town *hammam* does exist, so you can easily wash there. It's on Ərdəbil between the old *hammam* and the Blue Mosque.

Xinaliq Hotel (☎ 54445; per person \$1-2) This is a small, centrally located trader's guest-house perched above the chaos of the market area from where UAZ jeeps leave every day for Xinaliq. It's a good budget option, but the toilets are communal and rather unpleasant.

Eating & Drinking

Çinar Kafé (Azərbaycan; per person \$3) This is probably the best restaurant in town. The friendly and attentive staff serve up veritable feasts in their back garden.

Two other restaurants on the road to Cəddər Baği are **Yeməlxana Perviz** and **Turan Restorani**. While both are a little seedy, their food is reliable and decent.

Qala Bar For an evening drink, try the intriguing Qala Bar, across the street from the Şadağ Hotel. Housed in an 18th-century brick-vaulted cellar, this place attracts a fun local crowd. There are pool tables, a dance floor and a resident keyboard player, and you can order coffee as well as alcohol.

Getting There & Away

Quba's bus station is 2km east of the town centre and is divided up into several stations. The national bus station is where buses from Baku (Qəbələ, Jeyranqala) and other large towns arrive and depart. You can also get shuttle buses to nearby Qusar (25¢, 20 minutes) from here. Next to this is the lower bus station (regional buses) and then the Xinaliq bus station, where UAZ jeeps leave for mountain villages. The latter is total chaos and it's best to bring a Russian or Azeri-speaking friend to help you negotiate (see p223).

XINALIQ

pop 1000

This dramatically located, remote mountain village is perhaps the single most fascinating tourist destination in Azerbaijan. Located on a mountain peak with stunning 360-degree views across the Caucasus Mountains and opportunities for some great hiking, Xinaliq boasts its own distinct language and culture, along with impossibly picturesque stone houses that, were it not for the satellite dishes, could have been transported from the Dark Ages. Often wrapped in a spooky cloud that gives it a haunted medieval feel, this is the ultimate adventure in Azerbaijan.

That said, annual tourist figures are probably under 100 people, mainly due to the remote location and the difficulty in getting here. The dirt track from Quba is only passable by 4WD and, even then, the route may not be clear to those who have never been there, and often changes depending on the weather conditions and the strength of the numerous rivers that need to be forded.

Hiking

If your driver cannot find you a guide, try asking anyone *dzhim onongondeh pshii i hadmē ishkelēh Laza guisu* (where can I find a horse and guide to take me to Laza?). There should be no shortage of volunteers; there are few employment opportunities in the village other than shepherding, and crowds of young men sit about doing nothing all day long. Rates vary from one individual to another, but you should pay a minimum of \$20 per day up to a maximum of \$40. However, you will probably be charged extra for the horse (they are



more valuable than people here, expect to pay up to \$40 for each horse) and do make it clear that you expect one horse per traveller, otherwise they will expect you to share a saddle.

Sleeping

One of the highlights of this trip is that you'll have to spend the night in a Xinalıq home. Locals are excessively hospitable and, like most Caucasian mountain people, are well used to itinerant guests. Your driver will point you in the right direction to find somewhere to stay. Failing that, try asking *asir yedemé xinalıq'r giyeh yetsindé* (I would like to stay overnight in Xinalıq) to anyone, and you'll doubtless be warmly received by someone. Despite linguistic barriers, you'll be made to feel at home, in warm houses decorated with richly coloured carpets, and given plenty of tea and *ktap* (freshly fried lavash, filled with cheese and green herbs). Having something small to offer as a gift your hosts is a great idea (photos, postcards, foreign coins or magazines), as you may offend by offering to pay for your accommodation. Be cautious, however – in other cases payment may be expected. If you engage a paid guide, he may well put you up, too, alleviating this problem.

Getting There & Away

There is no public transport to Xinalıq as such, but shared UAZ jeeps go frequently from the chaotic bustle outside the Hotel Xinalıq in Quba. If at all possible, try and get an Azeri friend to check out the situation for you, and agree on a price with a trustworthy driver. Turning up alone as a foreigner can induce a feeding frenzy among the drivers, who will inevitably try to charge more than the going rate. However, playing the drivers off against each other is not advisable, as a form of honour code seems to exist whereby they will not poach passengers from their colleagues. Picking a driver you trust is important, as they will usually help you find accommodation and a guide in Xinalıq.

Rates vary tremendously: locals pay \$6 for a place in a shared taxi, while as a foreigner you should realistically expect to pay \$10. Chartering your own UAZ should set you back about \$30 (it seats four plus a driver comfortably). If you want to come back

from Xinalıq as well, it's best to arrange this at the same time) as finding drivers in Xinalıq is hard work.

LAZA

☎ 128

The descent into Laza Valley is one of the most stunning sights in Azerbaijan, with its dramatic grass-clad slopes descending from Baltaqayadağ and overlooking the fast-running Qusarçay River. With a perilously huge drop below, scenery doesn't come much better than this. The carpets of wildflowers are quite spectacular in the late spring and summer and the views just magnificent. Laza, sometimes called Qusarçay Laza, can be employed as the start- or end-point to a trek to equally stunning Xinalıq, or even more ambitiously, the three-day trek to Qebelinsky Laza (confusingly sharing a name with Qusarçay Laza despite being in quite a different place near the town of Qəbələ – see p229). Now that there's good accommodation here, Laza's possible to visit for a short break and some walking, although the village of Laza has almost nothing of interest.

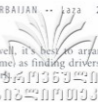
Sleeping & Eating

Suvar Resort (☎ 12-471931, 12-53671, 050-3539266; www.suvar.azetur.com; s/d \$30/50, 2-bedroom houses \$70) Of all the modern mountain resorts in Azerbaijan, Suvar Resort incontestably wins out with the best setting, looking across Laza Valley to the dramatic, rock-strewn green shelf that leads down to the raging Qusarçay below. The accommodation is comfortable – and somewhat pricey – but with a range of options available. The cheapest are two-berth rooms in houses sleeping six and sharing a bathroom. Families can hire a freestanding house of their own. The kind and knowledgeable Lezgin owner speaks English and with notice can organise hiking (including ascents of Mt Şahdağ); she also provides a taxi service to Qusar (\$20, one hour). The restaurant is also very good, knocking up a superbly tasty meal of salads, chicken and kebabs for around \$5.

QUSAR

☎ 238 / pop 80,000

The Lezgin capital, provincial Qusar is largely unremarkable, although from here there is a relatively easy road to Laza (4WD



needed) from where there is spectacular hiking. It's also the nearest town to the resort of **Long Forest** (☎ 12-930807, 050-3630085; d/q \$60/100; P ☹), a chalet complex popular with the foreign community in Baku and owned by a British expat. It's a nice place to stay, with plenty of outdoor and indoor activities, and it offers a full range of local sightseeing, including trips to Xinalq.

NABRAN

pop 60,000

Azeris often recall summers of love in Nabran with a fondness that may lead you to expect a Soviet Ibiza. Don't. It's indicative of Azerbaijan's sorry lack of pleasant coastline that this strip just south of the Russian border could be generally considered the best in the country. With sand like topsoil, sleazy Soviet sanatoria and unwelcoming gated resorts for the BMW-driving classes, Nabran is not somewhere to visit unless you've got lots of time to kill.

However, if you are here, the water is at least clean enough and there's a good vibe from the Azeri holiday-makers who swamp the place in July and August.

Sleeping

There is a huge number of resorts and hotels to choose from – just shop around for a bargain.

Isti Su (☎ 050-2160838; d/q \$30/50) The first hotel you see on Nabran's sea front as you drive in from Baku, Isti Su is a large, pleasant complex of huts built around a spring of naturally hot water, which is available in all its gritty glory to each room. It's right on the sea front though, so good for beach access.

Malibu (☎ 050-3308803; www.malibu.in-baku.com; s/d \$25/35, ste \$70-80; P ☹) This gated complex with good facilities in a cottage-resort style is actually perfectly friendly once you've negotiated the goon contingency at the gate.

Ober Lux (☎ 050-2139999; d \$40, 2-/4-bed house \$80/100; P ☹) This is a very smart resort in which people are housed in what looks like suburban California. There's a decent pool, a kids' pool and lots of facilities.

Palma (☎ 055-7911104; s/d/ste \$30/40/80; P ☹) Next door to Malibu, Palma is slightly pricier but with equally modern facilities catering to the higher end of the Azeri holiday market.

NORTHWESTERN AZERBAIJAN

The most accessibly beautiful area of Azerbaijan is undoubtedly the Caucasus Mountains to the north of the Balakan-Baku highway; it's particularly impressive between the towns of Şaki and Şamaxı. Ancient Albanian churches, pristine mountain walks and chaotic modern towns combine to make this a charming region, and one that anyone visiting Georgia and Azerbaijan can see with ease by taking this slightly longer but infinitely prettier route between Baku and Tbilisi.

The route from Baku to Şamaxı is pleasingly barren and dramatic, with views over the postindustrial hell of Sumqayıt as well as a series of unfeasibly shaped electricity pylons cutting through the sparse landscape. Approaching Şamaxı the landscape becomes more luscious and the hills give lovely views over Pirsaatçay Valley.

ŞAMAXI

☎ 176 / pop 32,000

Founded in the 6th century AD, Şamaxı is one of Azerbaijan's most venerable cities. It was the royal seat of the Shirvan Shahs from the 9th to the 18th centuries, and was an important centre of culture and trade. But earthquake, fire and invasion have taken their toll on Şamaxı's buildings and there is little to remind the visitor of its past importance. In the Soviet era the town was famous for the wines and cognacs produced by the vineyards that once covered the surrounding hills, but the industry collapsed following the break-up of the USSR. Grapes are still an important part of the local economy, along with carpet making, cattle raising and fruit and vegetable farming. It can be a nice stop for a couple of hours on the way from Baku to the mountains.

Orientation & Information

The bus station is on the Baku highway about 3km southeast of the town centre. The road into town slopes uphill from the bus station, passing the mosque on the left after 1km, then curving up and right to reach the town centre at a T-junction beside the police station and the silver-domed Universam

department store. The road ahead goes to Pirquli, while the street on the right runs downhill, past steps on the right leading up to the Univermag store and the hotel. At the bottom of the hill, turn left to find the post and telephone offices. You can change dollars in the Univermag store.

Sights

The only surviving historic building in Şamaxı town is the **Cuma Məscid** (Friday Mosque). It was built in the 19th century, but was badly damaged during the civil unrest of 1918 and not restored until recent years. It stands on the site of a 10th-century mosque, one of the oldest in the Caucasus, whose foundations can be seen in excavations in the grounds. The little nodding-donkey pump in the middle of the excavations has nothing to do with oil – it draws water for the congregation's ritual ablutions. The imam is usually to be found in the little house to the left of the mosque, and he is happy to show visitors around and explain the building's history.

Sleeping & Eating

Şamaxı Hotel (☎ 92307; s/d \$2/4) A decomposing 10-storey tower block tucked behind the department store, the Şamaxı Hotel is the only place to stay in town. The tiny, tatty rooms have lumpy beds and mouldering en-suite toilets that can only be flushed using the metal bucket provided. You can fill your bucket and wash your hands at a tank-fed tap in a room halfway down the corridor. Your best bet for food is to try one of the tourist restaurants on the road to Pirquli.

Getting There & Away

Marshrutkas and shared taxis (\$2, two hours) go from outside the main bus station all day long. You can also connect with ease to Mingəçevir, Şəki and Zaqatala.

AROUND ŞAMAXI

Gulistan

On a hilltop 3km north of Şamaxı stand the ruins of the castle of Gulistan, the original residence of the khans of Şamaxı. The oldest parts of the walls date from the 11th and 12th centuries, though they are badly ruined, having been long since tumbled by earthquakes and raided for building stone. But the fine views over the surrounding coun-

tryside make the climb from the village of Xinişli worthwhile. To get there, head along the road to Pirquli and take the second road on the left after the Univermag store.

PIRQULI

Not in the mountains itself, but giving pleasing views from its hilltop position towards the Caucasus, Pirquli is the kind of place where you'd expect to see the Brontë sisters taking an afternoon constitutional, as its rolling hills are strikingly similar to those in Yorkshire. Anyone with even a passing interest in astronomy will want to come and see the observatory here, and it's a lovely base for hill walking, boasting two comfortable and modern holiday villages.

Sights

The village's one substantial 'sight' is the fascinating **Pirquli Observatory** (☎ 050-358 6761; admission 50¢), which was one of the key space-research centres in the Soviet Union, beginning work in 1966. Since the collapse of the USSR, the place has become rather dilapidated, but its main telescope is still in good working condition. Visitors are warmly welcomed by the staff, who speak no English but will show you around, let you play with a collection of meteorites and demonstrate how the 85-tonne telescope revolves and how the roof opens. Even better, if you are staying in the village and the night sky is clear, you can organise a star-gazing session from one of the smaller surrounding observatories. Ask for Muşvık and he may even allow you to come in to see the main telescope on the sly if there's scientific research going on.

Sleeping & Eating

There are two decent establishments offering modern chalet accommodation in Pirquli.

Fortuna (☎ 12-986831; d \$25, family chalets \$35-45) Less comfortable than Magic Life but still fine, the Fortuna has 35 chalets, all with hot water and toilets, spread out on the hilltop. It also has tennis courts, pool tables and discos at the weekends.

Magic Life (☎ 12-3167288; fax 12-982514; 2-/3-person chalet \$30, 4-person chalet \$60) This oddly named place is the best on offer. While sounding like a hippy commune, it is actually a pleasant assemblage of wooden huts, all equipped with toilet, hot water, TV and

fridge. The sprawling restaurant at the bottom of the resort is pleasant, and tables are spread out among ponds and waterfalls.

Apart from the resorts' respective restaurants, there's the **Pirgulu Restorani** (dishes \$2-3) halfway between the two. Well-connected animal rights' activists may want to rescue the caged wolf and bear on sorry display here. Otherwise, leaving your morals at the door, you can stop and have cheap shashlyk here.

Getting There & Away

The best way to Pirgulu is by taxi from Şamaxı (\$4, 20 minutes). There are infrequent marshrutkas from Şamaxı.

İSMAYILLI

☎ 178 / pop 16,000

The nondescript town of İsmayilli, named after the 16th-century Shah İsmail, straggles downhill for 3km from a roundabout on the Şamaxı-Qəbələ road (next to the Motel Talistan). There is nothing to see or do in the town, but it serves as a starting point for exploring the magnificent mountain country that lies to the north.

The run-down **Motel Talistan** (☎ 53632; per person with/without en suite \$6/4), beside the roundabout on the Şamaxı-Qəbələ road, is the best of the town's two accommodation options, although it's a walk into the albeit very uninteresting town centre. The rooms are shabby, but the en-suite options have perfectly servicable toilets and bathrooms, while the cheaper rooms only have a sink and share washing and toilet facilities.

In central İsmayilli is **Niyal Hotel** (20 Janvar küçəsi; s/d \$3/6), 2km south of the roundabout. There is no phone, and the price is negotiable on arrival. The bathrooms are truly decrepit, and hot water is 'sometimes' available, but don't count on it. The location is better, however, as it's next to the sleepy town police station and a short stroll from the pretty main square.

Further out, on the road to Lahıc, is the lovely **Qora Qaya** (☎ 050-3481894, per 4-person chalet \$50-60). This upmarket development is 12km from İsmayilli and enjoys a lovely position below the black cliffs from which it takes its name. At the time of writing, they were building a restaurant and a pool and tennis courts were planned. The proud manager, Rüstam, seemed a bit nonplussed about what

to do with single visitors, as this place is very much aimed at families. Once the restaurant is open, they intend to offer full board and accommodation at \$20 per person.

There is a dearth of recreational provisions in İsmayilli. You may be able to get a meal at the banqueting hall next to the Motel Talistan, although amazingly their *çayxana* was out of tea when we visited. Far better options exist out of town on the mountain roads where there are plenty of rustic shashlyk joints. You can buy picnic food at a bazaar 1km south of the motel roundabout.

Getting There & Away

The road from Qəbələ through İsmayilli to Şamaxı is poorly served by public transport, so the best way to get about is by taxi or by sharing. A taxi to either Şamaxı or Qəbələ should cost no more than \$10. Catching a ride in a shared taxi should get you there for around \$2.50.

AROUND İSMAYILLI

Qız Qalası

About 8km northwest of İsmayilli on the road to Qəbələ is the little village of Xanəgah. From here, a dirt road signposted 'Qız Qalası' leads north up the valley of the Ahoğçay River for 4km to a restaurant and picnic area. From here, you can hike up to the ruins of an 11th-century stronghold known as the **Maiden's Castle** (Qız Qalası).

Head up the boulder-strewn riverbed beyond the restaurant for about 200m and cross the river to the far bank (impossible after rain). Head back downstream on the riverbank, and turn right up a narrow valley. Follow the stream bed between fragments of ruined walls, and continue uphill, crossing and recrossing the stream as the gully opens out and curves round to the right. After 15 to 20 minutes' walking, the path crosses the stream from left to right and heads gently uphill away from the stream to a saddle. Turn right and go up onto a narrow wooded ridge that leads to the final steep climb to the summit, about 45 minutes from the restaurant.

The castle ruins consist of waist-high walls of white stone and red brick, pitted here and there with holes dug by local treasure hunters. There is a perfect picnic site beneath a mossy birch tree on the highest point of the castle hill.



You can stay in the idyllically located **Pensionat Qız Qalası** (☎ 050-6136490; s/d \$10/20), which is below the castle hill next to a lovely stream set among woodland, and which also has a good restaurant. All rooms have electricity and hot water. You can also hire horses here for climbing up to Qız Qalası. A taxi from İsmayilli to Xanəqah costs \$2.50, but you might be able to share a ride for less.

LAHIC

☎ 178 / pop 2000

Of all the mountain villages in northwestern Azerbaijan, Lahic has the most spectacular setting at the end of a precarious 20km-long cliff-side road from İsmayilli. It's a superb place to come and sample traditional mountain life.

Legend has it that Lahic was founded by a Persian shah more than a thousand years ago. It is famed for its coppersmiths, whose workshops overflow into the narrow, stone-paved main street, and the carpet makers, whose looms occupy the upper floors of the workshops. These artisans claim descent from the Persian craftsmen who accompanied the shah's court to his Caucasian retreat. The village is supposedly named after the Persian town of Lahijun, near the southern shore of the Caspian, where many of the settlers originated from.

In the 19th century there were around 200 craftsmen in the village, and Lahic carpets and metalwork fetched high prices in the bazaars of Baghdad. Today only a dozen or so workshops remain, producing goods mainly for the domestic market, but increasingly with an eye to the developing tourist trade. The town is on three levels, of which the first two are the most interesting and accessible. The copper workshops are welcoming places, where young apprentices and old masters alike are happy to be watched and photographed making their intricate patterns. It's fascinating to watch, and copperware is a great and inexpensive purchase here.

The small Lahic **History Museum**, housed in a former mosque on the second level of the village, has some interesting traditional cooking and farming instruments, as well as ancient weapons and pottery on display. There is also a painted representation of the disproportionate number of artists and

writers that this tiny place has produced over the years. The attractive **Village School** is also open to the curious during the summer, and it's far better appointed than any other you are likely to see in Azerbaijan.

One of Lahic's more unusual sights is the semicompleted concrete bridge that spans one half of the valley. The intention was to link Lahic to Quba, thus creating a very useful route through the otherwise impenetrable mountains. However, the project was undertaken as the Soviet Union disintegrated and construction stopped when the money ran out.

Sleeping

Cannət Bağı (Garden of Paradise; ☎ 77200; campsite \$4; per person half-board \$10; per person full board incl local guide \$15) Run by the charming İsmailov family, this guesthouse and camping ground is at the entrance to the village. It's truly a lovely place and staying here means you can use the adjacent 320-year-old village *hammam* (now the İsmailovs' private one), which is a fantastic experience. Both the younger sons speak good English and are extraordinarily keen to help. To get there, turn up the stream as you enter the village, where there is a signpost for the Yeməxanə Niyal (below).

You can also pitch a tent at the Girdiman Café (below), 70m downstream from Cannət Bağı.

Eating

Girdiman Café Downstream from Yeməxanə Niyal, this café is perched on an outcrop overlooking the valley and serves home-cooked dishes.

Yeməxanə Niyal (kebabs & salads \$2) In the orchard of Cannət Bağı, Yeməxanə Niyal has tables under the fruit and nut trees looking up towards the mountains. The food is simple but tasty.

The unappealing-looking building further towards the village centre simply marked 'Kafe' has lovely views out over the valley itself.

Getting There & Away

There are three buses in each direction between Lahic and İsmayilli each day: at 7.30am, 11.30am and 2pm from İsmayilli to Lahic and 8.30am, 1pm and 4pm down again. There is also a direct marshrutka between Baku and Lahic each morning at

around 8am (it leaves when it is full – to be sure of a place, reserve one the evening beforehand by telling the driver). From Baku's Shamakhenka bus station, the marshrutka leaves at a similar time. The trip takes four to five hours and costs \$2.

A taxi from İsmayilli should cost about \$8, although the last part of the road can be impossible to pass without a 4WD, even in the summer months, after heavy rain. The drive to Lahic is nothing short of amazing, though, with perilous drops and stunning mountainscapes on all sides.

QƏBƏLƏ

☎ 160 / pop 14,000

Known as Qutqaşın until 1991, Qəbələ is a quiet market town serving an agricultural hinterland that produces mutton, grain, tobacco, grapes, apples and nuts. Its main claim to fame is the nearby Radio Location Station (RLS), a massive Soviet-built radar that tracked the USSR's space programme until 1991. The Russians have leased the station and continue to use it despite local objections about the tumours and birth defects that have plagued the adjacent villages. The RLS is visible for miles around, and is usually a topic of heated local conversation. More traditional sights include the History Museum in the old mosque, which displays finds from the site of Old Qəbələ.

Orientation & Information

From the bus station, the road to Laza continues north, uphill. About 500m up on the right is another, smaller bus station used by local buses to Laza and other surrounding villages. Another 500m leads to a junction marked by a small, white clock tower. Go straight ahead for Laza, or turn right along Qəbələ's main drag.

On the main street you will pass a currency exchange on the right; several food shops, *çayxanas* and *yeməxanas*; on the left the old mosque (now a museum); and the post and telephone office on the right.

History Museum

The 19th-century mosque on the main street is a low, rectangular brick building with an arcade on the north side. It now houses Qəbələ's **History Museum** (admission 25¢; ☎ 10am–5pm Tue–Sun), whose main exhibit covers the excavation of Old Qəbələ, one

of the most important cities of Caucasian Albania. There are photographs of the excavations, a tableau featuring the city in its heyday, and finds from the archaeological digs, including a *şirən* (bread jar) and *kyçe* (large earthenware jar). The other exhibits include an interesting collection of 13th- and 14th-century ceramics decorated with colourful patterns and animal designs. Remember to remove your shoes before entering. The attendants, who don't speak English, will follow you around switching the lights on and off as you go.

Sleeping

The town hotel is in an even worse state than its Intourist peers and is almost totally boarded up and full of refugees. A short drive up Dəmiraparançay Valley amid some impressive scenery there are a couple of clean and comfortable places to stay.

Ayışığı Pensionat (☎ 36728, 050-3394304; s/d \$10/16, cottage sleeping 4–540) You should give preference to this hotel complex. Built in a small wood next to a string of ponds, it offers family accommodation in cottages and a main hotel for normal rooms.

Xanlar Pensionat (☎ 050-3193434; s/d \$20) Further on up the road, the Xanlar Pensionat is pretty but the rooms are nevertheless very basic, literally containing a bed and nothing else, although there are shared bathing facilities.

Eating

There are several *yeməxanas* on the main street and on the road down to the bus station, where you can get a kebab and salad for about 50¢ to 75¢. There are a couple of minimarkets on the main street where you can buy picnic food.

For a meal with a view, take some picnic grub to the east end of the bridge over the Dəmiraparançay River, on the road to İsmayilli about 2km east of town. An enterprising local has set up an outdoor café here that enjoys a stunning panorama of snowcapped peaks. You can buy tea, soft drinks and ice creams, but no food.

Getting There & Away

The main Baku–Şəki road is well served by public transport, the main bus station being a short diversion in the direction of Qəbələ proper. Both buses and marshrutkas go to

the capital (\$3, five hours) several times in the day, most regularly in the morning. Shared taxis to İsmayilli, Şamaxı and Baku leave from the main street around the clock tower and busy bazaar. There are also buses to Şəki (\$1.25, three hours), Qax (\$1.50, 4½ hours) and Zaqatala (\$2, five hours).

AROUND QƏBƏLƏ

Old Qəbələ

Along with Şamaxı, Old Qəbələ is one of the most ancient cities in Azerbaijan. It is first mentioned in print in Pliny the Elder's *Natural History* in AD 77, where it is referred to as Cabalaca, one of the foremost cities of Caucasian Albania. Its history extends from around the 3rd century BC to the 18th century AD, when the city was laid waste by the Persian invader Nadir Shah.

The site of Old Qəbələ was discovered by a local archaeologist in 1959, and minor excavations continue despite a severe shortage of funds. There is very little to see – the most prominent remains are the stumps of two massive brick towers at the southern gate. The rest of the site is just a series of overgrown hummocks. Finds from the site are displayed in the Qəbələ History Museum.

Old Qəbələ lies about 20km southwest of modern Qəbələ, near the village of Çuxur Qəbələ (head south from the Qəbələ-Şəki road at the village of Mirzəbəyli). The site is fenced off, but archaeological staff are happy to let visitors in. A small donation (say \$1) is appreciated. The best way to get there is by taxi from Qəbələ. Expect to pay \$10 for a round trip, including half an hour to look around.

Laza

Fifteen kilometres north of Qəbələ, Qəbelinskiy Laza is a photogenic little village clinging to the western side of Dəmiraparañay Valley. The rough, winding road from Qəbələ passes potential picnic spots with superb views towards the conical, snowcapped peak of Tufandağ (Thunderstorm Mountain). There's no accommodation in the village, so be prepared to camp if you plan to stay overnight (ask permission from the mayor first). Taxis from Qəbələ will cost about \$10.

HIKING

Laza is the starting point for several long and serious expeditions into the mountains.

These treks take you into some of the most incredible scenery in the country, through areas almost totally untouched by tourism. Bear this in mind when visiting. The trek leads up Dəmiraparañay Valley and over a 3500m pass into Qusarçay Valley. It then descends to another Laza ('Qusarsky Laza', see p223) from where you can get transport on to the town of Qusar. This trek is a major undertaking, covering a distance of 80km and requiring high camps and skilled navigation, but it is one of the most rewarding adventures Azerbaijan can offer. You'll need three days to make it to the northern Laza, camping en route. As well as all food and equipment, bring sticks to fight off sheepdogs. You'd be wisest to make the trek with a guide.

This route also gives access to the high ridge between Bazardüzü Dağ (4466m) and Tufandağ (4191m). Both of these peaks remain snowcapped throughout the summer, and should only be attempted by very experienced mountaineers. Villagers in Laza can recommend guides for a shorter, two-day hike across the ridge to the south of Tufandağ to reach the fascinating and remote village of Xinalıq (see p222).

It's also possible to make a tough one-day hike up the valley from Laza to a series of waterfalls. The annual spring floods caused by melting snow regularly rearrange the boulder-strewn valley floor, and often obliterate the previous year's trail.

ŞƏKİ

☎ 177 / pop 63,000

Şəki is one of Azerbaijan's loveliest towns, with a rich history and beautiful mountain setting. It's one of the few places in the country where tourism can be described as even vaguely organised mass, but don't come expecting to see more than a handful of fellow travellers here, even during summer.

One of Şəki's main draws is the atmospheric conversion of an old caravanserai to a hotel – it's one of the most enjoyable accommodation options in the country. The medieval Khan's Palace, comprehensively renovated in 2003, the charming old town and the surrounding mountains are also strong reasons to visit.

History

Little is known about the early history of Şəki, but archaeologists have discovered evidence

of habitation on this site from more than 2500 years ago, making it one of the oldest settlements in the south Caucasus.

The original town of Şaki, known as Nukha until the 1960s, was higher up the valley on the site now occupied by Kiş village, but it was twice obliterated by catastrophic floods and mudflows in 1716 and 1772. The survivors rebuilt their town lower down the valley, below the Khan's Palace. The rebellious Khan Hacı Çalabi built two fortresses here – the one that surrounds the Khan's Palace (1761–62), and one in the hills above Kiş (1740s) – and set up an independent khanate in defiance of the Persian shah. Nukha remained the capital of the khanate of Şaki until it was ceded to Russia in 1805. The last khan died 14 years later.

Nukha flourished as a staging post on the main east–west caravan route between Baku, Tbilisi and Turkey, situated where the trade route to Derbent (via the town of Axti and Samur Valley) branched northward over the mountains into Dagestan. During its heyday in the 18th and 19th centuries, there were five working caravanserais here,

and the city was famed for its crafts, especially silk-weaving and embroidery.

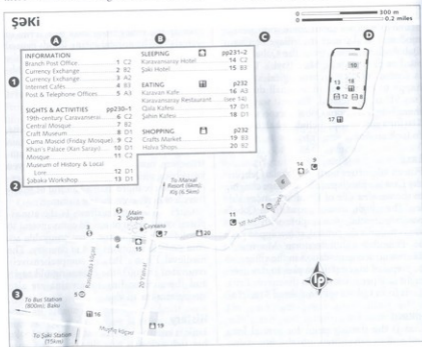
Silk remained an important local industry until recent years. During Soviet times, the town's silk factory employed around 7000 workers, but the industry declined after independence, and the factory closed in 1999.

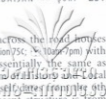
Orientation & Information

From the bus station, Rəsulzadə küçəsi runs north for 1.6km to the town centre and main square. The Kərvansaray Hotel and the Khan's Palace are 1km northeast of the centre at the top of the steep cobbled hill of MF Axundov küçəsi. The village of Kiş is 6.5km north. There are currency exchanges on the main square, and the post and telephone offices are 400m south of the square on Rəsulzadə küçəsi. There is also a branch post office on MF Axundov küçəsi. There are four rather sorry-looking Internet cafés on the south side of the main square.

Xan Sarayı

Şaki's main attraction sits within the old fortress at the upper end of town. The two-





storey **Khan's Palace** (Xan Sarayı) was built between 1761 and 1762, and is surprisingly small. The exterior is decorated with dark-blue, turquoise and ochre tiles in geometric patterns, and intricately carved, wood-framed, stained-glass windows known as *şabaka*. The shady rose garden in front contains two huge plane trees said to be 470 years old.

The apartments inside are appealingly modest. The central room on the ground floor has a slim, Ottoman-style fireplace and a marble fountain. The walls are decorated with painted murals of floral and arabesque patterns, birds and bunches of grapes. The central apartment upstairs is rather grander, with a colourful frieze depicting the heroic battles of Hacı Çalabi complete with requisite swords, guns and gory severed heads and a ceiling decorated with Arabic calligraphy, including the signature of the architect.

The room to its right (as you face the window) was the women's apartment, decorated with more flowers, birds and arabesques. The room to the left was for the men, and has scenes of hunting, mythical beasts, and lions ripping antelopes to pieces.

During research, the palace was undergoing total renovation, but was to reopen in summer 2004. No price or opening hour information was available.

Museums

There are a couple of museums within the fortress walls below the Khan's Palace. Probably the most interesting is the **Museum of History and Local Lore** (admission 50¢; ☎: 10am-7pm) where, among other things, one of the most moth-eaten displays of taxidermy imaginable is on display: the wild boar's nose is held together with adhesive tape, while the deer seem to be on the brink of total disintegration. Otherwise the museum contains some interesting artefacts from daily life in Şaki between the Middle Ages and the 19th century. There are also some impressive weapons, armour and a rug collection. The emotive Karabakh display includes photographs of a martyr's bullet-ridden corpse, along with his shattered wristwatch and bloodstained pocketbook. Before you leave, take a look at the town model in the entrance hall to get an idea of the huge size of the old caravanserais further down the hill.

The old church across the road houses a **Craft Museum** (admission 75¢; ☎: 10am-7pm) with exhibits that are essentially the same as those in the Museum of History and Local Lore. The church itself dates from the 9th century but the present structure is from the 19th century.

Uphill, to the left of the fortress, is a **Şabaka Workshop**, where you can occasionally see local craftsmen at work on these traditional stained-glass windows. The intricate wooden frames are assembled from hundreds of pieces of hand-carved wood, and cleverly slotted together so that no metal fastenings are needed.

Old Town

Şaki's old town straggles down the banks of the stream beneath the fortress, in an appealing maze of red-tiled roofs and shady lanes. Beyond the shops and immediately downhill from the Kərvansaray Hotel, is a second, much larger **19th-century caravanserai**, now used for storage. Its immense size is not evident from the street. There are now ambitious plans to convert this into a hotel as well.

There are three **19th-century mosques**: the Cuma Məscid (Friday Mosque) next to the Kərvansaray Hotel, one halfway down, and one at the foot of MF Axundov küçəsi. About halfway down on the right is the **Children's Chess School**, with interesting metal reliefs on the outer walls.

Sleeping

Kərvansaray Hotel (☎ 44814; MF Axundov küçəsi; s/d/ste \$6/12/30) One of the best reasons to visit Şaki is in order to stay here. This superbly converted caravanserai dating from the 18th century has been operating as a private hotel for a decade. The 37-room complex is wonderfully cool in its hilltop position, with views towards the mountains beyond. The doubles are small but comfortable, while the suites are very spacious and well worth their \$30 price tag. All rooms have bathing facilities and their own toilets, although only the suites have hot water. You'll stay in many more comfortable places in Azerbaijan, but nowhere as unique. Book ahead even out of season, as the hotel is a favourite location for corporate retreats as well as local weddings.

Marxal Resort (☎ 61265; r for up to 3 people \$4, ste \$50) Six kilometres north of Şəki, this was a fading Soviet 'house of rest' until it was done up to good effect in 2001. It's only a good option for those with their own transport, given its isolated yet idyllic position, but it's a nice place to stay with picnic sites and springs set in beautiful woodland around a couple of artificial lakes.

Şəki Hotel (☎ 42488; r \$5, r with WC & hot water \$16) The other accommodation option in Şəki itself is this made-to-order Intourist Hotel overlooking the main square. It is at least well located, but its drab rooms are even more expensive than the Kərvansaray's basic ones, so presumably its only guests are those who forgot to book ahead.

Eating

Kərvansaray Restaurant (MF Axundov küçəsi; per person \$4-6) This place in the garden of the eponymous hotel enjoys a lovely setting amid the rose bushes and fruit trees, which compensates for the rather overly relaxed service. The food is sound, however, and not expensive at all. However, we were informed that nothing on the menu was available, and dishes other than shashlyk have to be ordered 'in advance' – including rice. On summer weekends a small disco is held here for hotel guests and curious locals.

Other eating options include the two similar cafés within the palace complex, **Şahin Kafesi** (dishes \$2-3) and **Qala Kafesi** (dishes \$2-3), offering tasty national food. The **Karavan Kafe** (Rəsulzadə küçəsi; dishes \$4-5), at the other end of town, is a more upmarket place for a meal, although it was deserted at lunch time.

Shopping

The huge Təzə Bazaar is one of the biggest in the region, and sells pottery, metalwork, carpets and other souvenirs as well as fresh fruit, vegetables, meat and cheese. To find it, walk down Rəsulzadə küçəsi towards the bus station for 500m, and turn right at Muşfiq küçəsi (one block beyond the post office). A 10-minute walk, with a short dog-leg, leads to another main road; turn right to reach the bazaar.

Several bridges cross the stream from MF Axundov küçəsi to a quiet lane. From here, you can amble downstream through the old market area, where most of the shops are closed. However, a few artisans have set up

stalls displaying metalwork and woodwork, in a tentative attempt to revive the crafts market that once flourished here.

Near the foot of the hill are several small shops that make and sell Şəki halva, a local speciality. The halva consists of a layer of chopped nuts sandwiched between two layers of white, stringy, fried pastry, all saturated in a sickly sweet, sticky syrup. It costs about \$2 a kilo.

Getting There & Away

Şəki is the regional transport hub and well served by public transport. Buses head to and from Baku's main bus station roughly once an hour throughout the day (\$3.50, seven hours). There is one bus a day from Şəki to Lankəran and one to Qazax; two per day to Balakən (for Georgia and Tbilisi) and to Qəbələ; three to Gəncə; four to Mingəçevir and six to Zaqatala (last one at 4.30pm). You can check the latest departure information (in Azeri and Russian only, of course) on ☎ 44617.

Taxis to Qax cost just \$10. Shared taxis are \$3, but harder to find due to the low traffic volume. If you plan to travel by train to Şəki, be warned that Şəki station is 15km south of the town, and while a taxi should only cost \$4, you may find the terminal deserted.

Marshrutka No 11 runs from the bus station to the Kərvansaray Hotel and the Khan's Palace (25¢); marshrutka No 3 serves the same destinations from the stop opposite the Şəki Hotel. Marshrutka No 8 goes from the bus station to Kiş.

Expect to pay \$1.25 for a taxi from the bus station to the Kərvansaray Hotel, and \$4 from town to the train station.

QAX

☎ 1445 / pop 12,000

This pleasant and tidy but rather forgotten town between Zaqatala and Şəki is famous for its bottled mineral water, sold throughout the country. Travellers are a rarity, and even the Şəki to Zaqatala bus bypasses the place. The natives are friendly, but expect to be stared at.

Qax's only historic attraction is a ruined **Albanian church**, which perches above the dilapidated A20 road (the direct route to Şəki), about 3km south of town. A taxi will take you there and back for \$2.50, but



you might prefer to walk when you see the condition of the road bridge across the K rm k y River.

To the north of town are the lovely mountains of İlisu, and most people passing through Qax will be on their way there. Those wanting to stay in town can try the dilapidated **Hotel K rm k** (\$2 per bed) next to the main post office. There are no bathrooms, just a wholly undesirable *hammam*. There is no telephone either, but it's unlikely to be booked up – when we visited there was just the kind old lady who runs the place and her grandson in residence.

İLISU

People in Qax refer to this mountain village as a 'mini-Switzerland' and it's easy to understand why – İlisu is set in the beautiful Qara ay Valley – a completely different world from the unremarkable Qax, 20km southwest. Amazingly, this tiny place was once the capital of a short-lived 18th-century sultanate, but only two castle towers in ruins bear testament to that fact today. The pleasantly located village is a great base for walking in the nearby mountains, including some more challenging hikes among the peaks of **Qaffan Dağ** (2979m) to the east and the forests of the **İlisu Nature Reserve** (İlisu  oruđu) to the west. The reserve covers 9200 hectares, more than 90% of which is forested with oak, sycamore, ash, lime, beech and sweet chestnut. The woods are home to brown bear, wild boar, marten and some 90 species of bird, as well as rare wild cats.

The **İlisu Pensionat** (☎ 050-3285615; full board per person \$16, child under 11 \$8) has a lovely setting, although its modern rooms are predictably basic, despite the clean toilets and hot water. The rooms are divided up into hotel-style twins and small family cabins perched higher up on the hill. It's very family oriented, and there's volleyball, billiards and the foundations for a future swimming pool. The *pensionat* is on your right immediately after you cross one of the two bridges over the river, before you reach İlisu proper. At the time of writing the restaurant on the other side of the road from the İlisu Pensionat was building on-site accommodation.

There are a number of remote sights that can be seen on day trips from İlisu,

including the remains of three 16th-century Albanian Churches in the villages of Lehid and  um, on the other side of the mountains from İlisu. ~~They are hard to find without a guide, but the İlisu Pensionat can organise trips.~~

ZAQATALA

☎ 174 / pop 26,000

Tucked away in the far northwestern corner of Azerbaijan, Zaqatala has a lovely position, next to a confluence of mountain rivers that descend from the Caucasus directly to the north. Coming from Georgia by bus or car, this will be the first major Azeri town you'll see – and it's a pleasantly presented place, with an attractive new mosque, pretty old town and bustling chaotic bazaar. However, aside from these small distractions, there is nothing to do in the town itself, and a stay here is best employed to explore the nearby hills.

The mountains above Zaqatala are a little lower and less rugged than those further east, rising to a high point of 3401m at the summit of Qudurdağ. The lower slopes are covered in thick deciduous forests of sycamore, beech and elm, which give way around 1800m to open, grassy ridges. The **Zaqatala Nature Reserve**, which extends across the remote upper valleys along the Dagestan border to the west of Qudurdağ, is home to brown bear, wild boar and the rare Caucasian *tur* (huge, very endangered mountain goat).

Zaqatala's castle was built by occupying Russian forces in 1830 to defend the town from rebels hiding out in the surrounding mountains. In the 1850s Zaqatala was attacked several times by the guerrilla army of Imam Shamil, and was the scene of savage fighting until the rebels retreated back into Dagestan. In more recent times, Zaqatala's fortress was used as a prison for the sailors from the battleship *Potemkin*, whose famous mutiny at Odessa in 1905 foreshadowed the Russian revolution of 1917.

Money can be changed at the Bank of Azerbaijan, letters sent from the post office and calls made from the telephone office opposite the Texas Restaurant.

Sights

The Central Square used to be Lenin Square, but is now just 'Square' according to one

taxi driver. It houses a couple of **700-year-old trees**, which pass as perhaps the town's most obvious sight. There is also a **disused Russian Church** slowly going to rack and ruin on the northwestern side of the square. Walking down pleasant 20 Yanvar küçəsi, Zaqatala's main shopping street, will get you to the pretty square around the town hall and post office.

The impressive big **new mosque** is on Azadlıq prospekti towards the bus station.

Sleeping

The dire **Hotel Azerbaijan** is full of refugees and totally undesirable anyway. There are two new private guesthouses at the bus station that are far better.



Ləzzət İstirahət Zonası (☎ 55251 050/3133199; s/d \$12) In the small village of Car, Ləzzət İstirahət Zonası is in the middle of some thick woods. It's a pleasant place – renovated to a degree and with an indigenous restaurant where you can eat pan-Caucasian specialities in a tree house.

Motel Avtovağzal (☎ 050-3375611; r \$10) This place is in the bus station itself – the entrance is through the black doors next to the Daewoo ticket office round the back. You may have to knock for some time before the door is opened – enlist the Daewoo cashier's help if nobody comes. Once inside, however, you'll find the 10 rooms are all spotlessly clean and have hot running water and full bathrooms.

Motel Görüş (☎ 050-3225289; r \$6) Across the bus station forecourt, Motel Görüş is definitely grubbier than Motel Avtovağzal but still has a real toilet and running water. The rooms sleep up to three people and home cooking is provided by Muxtar and his wife.

Tala Pensionat (☎ 54960; d/ste \$6/10) Just outside Zaqatala's centre, the Tala Pensionat seems empty of guests and visibly enjoying a commercial decline. The rooms are shabby, and only the suites have en-suite facilities, but are a must for aficionados of Soviet bad taste.

Eating

Texas Restaurant (meals \$3; ☎ noon-11pm) Just off the town hall square, the Texas Restaurant has, not surprisingly, nothing American about it but its name. However, it's central and decent enough for a cheap meal.

The Görüş Restaurant at the Motel Görüş (above) also provides perfectly fine Azeri staples.

Getting There & Away

Zaqatala is on one of the main roads into Georgia and as such is well connected by buses and marshrutkas, although there is no train station.

The main bus station is just beyond the market as you come into the town from the direction of Şaki. Buses leave from here to go to Baku throughout the day (\$4.50, eight hours). There are also buses to Şaki (\$1.50, 2½ hours) and Qəbələ (\$2.50, four hours). Local marshrutkas leave from the main road that runs past the bus stations to Balakan, Qax and Car.

BALAKƏN

☎ 119 / pop 10,000

If you arrive from Georgia via Lagodekhi then sleepy Balakən will be the first Azeri town you will see. It's just one long, dusty main street, with a wider stretch next to a wooded park marking the town centre. At the west end of the park, two blocks south of the main street, a tall, red-brick minaret leads you to the town's 19th-century **mosque**. The imam generally allows visitors to climb the minaret for a fine view over the town. But there's little else to see here, and most travellers will move swiftly on, taking either the evening train to Baku, a bus to Şəki, or a marshrutka to Zaqatala.

If you have to spend the night in Balakən, the run-down Soviet-era **Balakən Hotel** (s/d \$2.50) is opposite the mosque. The rooms are fairly nasty with no water and typically dire, bucket-flush toilets. It's far better to carry on to Zaqatala.

Getting There & Away

Marshrutkas to Zaqatala (25¢, 30 minutes) leave from the east end of the central park. The bus station and main taxi rank are at a roundabout at the east end of town, a 10-minute walk from the park. Buses also go to Baku (\$4.75, 8½ hours) and Şəki (\$2, three hours). A taxi to the Georgian border costs around \$3.

CENTRAL AZERBAIJAN

Much of the centre of Azerbaijan has been carved up by the Armenian presence in Karabakh, making huge swathes of Azeri territory inaccessible, and nearby towns nervy places where foreigners are likely to get harassed by the police. As a result of these sensitivities, do not try travelling far south of the M27 road (the main road from Krasny Most to Gəncə) until you are east of Yevlax.

Karabakh itself is often thought of as Azerbaijan's cultural heart, and the occupation of the ancient cultural centre of Şuşa is a particular source of grievance to Azeris. Moreover, with its lush mountains and ancient fortress towns (at least the ones not destroyed in the war) Karabakh is also by far the most appealing destination in central Azerbaijan. For information about travelling there via Armenia see p185.



The rest of the central plains are of little interest to casual tourists, as they are largely salt marsh or semidesert and completely unrepresentative of what the country has to offer elsewhere. However, Azerbaijan's second city of Gəncə is a pleasant place to stop off, and coastal Qobustan offers an unlikely selection of fascinating sights.

QOBUSTAN

One day trip from Baku that should not be missed under any circumstances is to Qobustan, 60km south of the capital. The ramshackle string of semicollapsed industrial sites and badly built Soviet flats that passes for the town of Qobustan does little to suggest that it has Stone Age cave drawings and fascinating mud volcanoes just a short drive beyond it, and indeed many of the locals seem to know nothing of the latter attraction themselves.

Petroglyphs

The backdrop to the depressing town is a barren, semidesert of rock, but it was not always thus: 12,000 years ago, at the beginning

of the Stone Age, hunter-gatherers settled in caves that were then just a short walk from the Caspian Sea, some 80m higher than it is now, and surrounded by lush vegetation. While the environment has changed, the caves remain covered in over 6000 petroglyphs (cave engravings) as well as other remnants of the hunter-gatherers' existence, making it a fascinating place to visit. In 1989 and 1994 controversial Norwegian ethnologist Thor Heyerdal visited the caves and developed his theory that the Scandinavians originated in modern Azerbaijan, as reed-boat petroglyphs similar to the ones in Qobustan have been found in Norway.

Even if you have no particular interest in cave engraving, Qobustan is still likely to fascinate you, such is the ease with which you can imagine Stone and later Bronze Age man going about daily life here. Twelve millennia ago, when the area was a lush oasis next to the Caspian (which has since receded to its current position) these cave complexes made natural homes for the primitive peoples who lived here. Some 5km west of Qobustan town, the site was discovered by quarry workers in the 1930s and since then 3500 cave engravings have been catalogued.

The **Qobustan Museum** (☎ 926145; admission 53, guided tour 56, permission to take photos 52; ☎ 10.30am-4.30pm) is run by helpful staff and it's well worth paying for a guided tour (English, Russian and Azeri), as the details of the petroglyphs and what they portray are largely incomprehensible to the casual visitor. To make the etchings more easily visible, toothpaste has been run through the grooves, which, while probably provoking apoplexy in some archaeological purists, makes the drawings very accessible to visitors.

The earliest Stone Age petroglyphs portray men, women and animals in full scale, while later petroglyphs, from the Bronze Age and Neolithic periods, show an increased understanding of art's potential to represent and depict the same figures at a smaller scale. By entering the caves you can get a feel for daily life, made more vivid by the many holes hollowed out of the stone to collect rainwater and the fascinating tambourine stone, a primitive musical instrument that amazingly visitors can still play today. Beating the rock produces different sounds, and was used for the *yally* dance (a form of which still survives

in modern Azerbaijan), originally a ritual to ensure a successful hunt. Other petroglyphs depict men performing the *yally* at various points throughout the caves, the reed boats that so intrigued Heyerdal and endless representations of livestock, horses and wild animals. For some reason, children were never depicted.

The museum itself offers some interesting conjecture on daily life in the caves, setting the scene with models of cave dwellers eating and hunting as well as with tools and weapons found on the site.

The reserve is signposted by a mock-stone petroglyph off the main highway that runs through Qobustan. Follow the road into the hills and a sign that reads 'Qoruq' (reserve), which indicates the track up to the museum and caves.

Roman Graffiti

At the bottom of Böyük Dash Mountain there's a fenced-in piece of Latin graffiti that is remarkable as the easternmost Roman inscription ever discovered. In this case, it is believed to be from a centurion on a reconnaissance mission to Azerbaijan from the Roman stronghold of Syria. The inscription has been eroded to illegibility since it was written in the 1st century AD, but what remains suggests that the scribbler was the bored Julius Maximus, centurion of the 12th Legion under Emperor Titus Flavius Domitianus (AD 51-96). To find this strange site, turn immediately left at the bottom of the road from the petroglyphs back to Qobustan. This leads to the forbidding prison complex beyond, with the graffiti fenced in on your left; it's about 2km from the petroglyphs to the graffiti.

Mud Volcanoes

Qobustan's mud volcanoes are nothing short of astonishingly weird. A good 10km south of Qobustan itself, the lunar scenery at the top of an otherwise unremarkable hill is characterised by 'geological flatulence', meaning that small volcano-like mounds cover the hilltop, gurgling, oozing, spitting and sometimes erupting thick, grey mud. It's more entertaining than it sounds - you get the feeling that the volcanoes are alive, and while some are dormant, others erupt irregularly, and the larger, more excitable volcanoes can send their goo flying high

into the air. The place is completely deserted and many locals seem to have no idea what people are talking about (ask for *palçik vulkanlar*) – perhaps this is not surprising given its out-of-the-way location.

From the main road through Qobustan, take the exit marked for the cave engravings, and drive up onto the overpass. Instead of turning right towards the petroglyphs, turn left, so that you are driving parallel to the main road south. Keep following this dirt track until you reach a derelict building; turn right here and cross over the oil pipelines. Follow the track round to the left and you should find yourself driving parallel to three rows of electricity pylons. When the road forks, go right, heading towards a small dip between two hills. As you approach a small factory on your right, there's an unlikely path that disappears up the hillside to your left, which you can drive or walk up to the volcanoes. The views from the top over the dramatic mountains and towards the Caspian are also spectacular, and the fact that it's usually deserted makes the experience all the more enjoyable.

Getting There & Away


It is worth the expense of hiring a driver for half a day; the round trip from Baku to all three sights should take about four hours, and a good price would be \$20. To save some money, you can take marshrutka No 105 (terminus Ələt, 40¢) to Qobustan from the large marshrutka stop a short walk beyond the Intourist Hotel (p209) in Baku.

Once in Qobustan you'll need to find a taxi driver for the sights, as there is no public transport to any of them. Paying \$6 is plenty to take you to all three sights, including waiting time. Walking to the caves from Qobustan is not an attractive option and would take an hour or so through semi-desert scrub. If money is very tight, try a one-way taxi (\$2) and walk back downhill.

GƏNCƏ

☎ 161 / pop 300,000

Ancient Gəncə is Azerbaijan's second city, but also something of its cultural heart – or at least its makeshift pacemaker given Suşa's occupation since the Karabakh conflict. The city was home to national bard Nizami Gəncəvi (1141–1209), whose statue can be found in every Azeri town.



While Gəncə was founded in the 5th century AD, the ancient city was levelled by an earthquake in the 12th century, and razed by the Mongols in the 13th into Persian hands in the 17th century. Gəncə became the capital of an independent khanate and flourished as a centre of trade and religion until the Russians arrived in 1804 and renamed the city after the wife of Tsar Alexander I. Known as Elizavetpol from 1804 to 1935, it served as the capital of the short-lived Azerbaijan Democratic Republic for a few months in 1918 until Baku was recaptured from the Soviets. Despite being short-lived, the democratic republic (declared from what is now the city's agricultural institute) was the first Muslim democracy in the world.

Once the Soviet Union swallowed up Azerbaijan, Stalin decided the city should be renamed in memory of Sergei Kirov (whom Stalin had recently had assassinated), and Kirovabad it was from 1935 to 1991. Following independence from the Soviet Union, Gəncə took on its Azeri name again. The past decade has been rather slow in Gəncə – second city it may be but it lags considerably behind Baku in almost all senses.

Information

You can withdraw cash from one of two ATMs that accept Visa and MasterCard on the west side of the main square, to either side of the city administration building. There is also a string of Internet cafés here offering unpredictable Web access for \$1 per hour. There are several Western Union money transfer points on and around the main square.

Sights

Modern Gəncə is cosmopolitan and pleasant, and a good place to break the journey from Baku to Tbilisi, although there are few concrete sights to visit. The vast central plaza, formerly known as Lenin Square, and now presumably just as 'Square', is one of the most traditionally Soviet in Azerbaijan. The **Town Hall**, on the western side of the square, has had its Soviet motifs painstakingly removed and replaced with symbols of Azeri nationalism, and it's an impressive building.

Hidden elsewhere in the central arcade are the Old Town **hammam** and the **Cuma**



Mosjid Mosque, a twin-minareted affair dating from 1620 and located at the south end of the town square. From here, you can take a stroll down **Gəncə küçəsi**, a suggestion of how all Azeri cities might look one day – a pretty if patently fabricated pedestrianised street that sees the city's youth, disillusioned and otherwise, gather every evening for tea, jam and cigarettes.

The quirkiest sight in the city is an extraordinarily designed house a short walk east of the main square. On quiet and residential Guseinli küçəsi, is the **Bottle House** – a building-cum-work of art created by İbrahim Jaffarov using beer, champagne and water bottles. Painted reliefs depict the artist at war and his brother Yusif,

who went missing in action during WWII. While the family assumed that Yusif had been killed, a letter from Yusif was delivered to them anonymously by hand in 1957, thus prompting them to add the coda *zhdyom* ('we are waiting') to his portrait. The house has been constantly altered since, including a rather out-of-date peon to the 1980 Moscow Olympics. İbrahim's son collects money for further renovations by selling pistachio nuts and cigarettes to passing gawpers. He seems to have a sixth sense, and appears within seconds of you walking past.

The **Nizami Mausoleum**, beside the main road from Baku, on the eastern outskirts of the city, was only built in 1991. Its setting

is spoiled somewhat by the huge aluminium smelter in the background. Here Nizami is interred, but it's not worth the trip unless you are a paid-up fan.

Sleeping

Hotel Gəncə (☎ 565106; Xətai küçəsi; s/d with bathroom \$20; ☼) Gəncə's main hotel is a very well appointed, Stalin-era Intourist that faces the impressive central square. There are some lovely views from the rooms with even numbers. The hotel has undergone progressive renovation, and although the bathrooms are still shabby, they are leagues ahead of most former Intourists.

Kəpəz Hotel (☎ 567221/566013; Abbaszadə küçəsi; s/d \$4-8) The Gəncə's poor cousin is a monstrous piece of decomposing concrete that overlooks the river, a short walk from the city centre. Even those on a budget should go for the luxury \$8 option, although the simple rooms are survivable and have an approximation of a shower. Only the 6th to 8th floors function due to an understandable lack of guests.

Eating

Two upmarket options, both of which enjoy riverside views, are on the other side of the bridge in front of the Kəpəz Hotel.

Elnur (☎ noon-10pm; mains \$2-3) To the left of the bridge is the Elnur, which is slightly more formal but offers similar fare and river views.

Göruş Restorani (☎ noon-10pm; mains \$2-3) To the right, on the embankment in front of the disused Puppet Theatre is the lilac-painted Göruş Restorani. The pleasant atmosphere and good food make this a very nice place for an alfresco evening meal.

In the immediate vicinity of the main square is the good if uninviting-looking **Neptun** (Xətai küçəsi). Here you can enjoy very tasty home cooking for as little as \$1.20 for *golubtsy* (minced lamb and herbs wrapped in vine leaves or roast vegetables) and beer.

Getting There & Away

Gəncə's airport has four flights a week to/from Moscow on **Turan Air** (Xətai küçəsi) and daily flights to Baku. There is also a weekly AZAL flight to Naxçıvan (\$60).

Gəncə is reached by hourly buses from Baku's main bus station (\$4, six hours). From here there are buses to all major

towns in Azerbaijan, including several a day to Mingəçevir (\$1, two hours), Şəki (\$2.50, three hours) and Zaqatala (\$4, four hours). There are two bus stations: the main one, Yevlax, in the east of the city, on Nizami küçəsi handles towns in western and northern Azerbaijan, while the smaller Şəmkir bus station in the west of the city serves towns west of Gəncə, including buses to Krasny Most (\$3, three hours) and thence on to Tbilisi.

The two nightly trains between Baku and Tbilisi stop here (\$7 to Baku, \$8 to Tbilisi on train 37/38; \$99 to Baku, \$79 to Tbilisi on train 1/2, the Amex-run *Silk Express*). The station is 4km north of the centre.

Shared taxis from Baku cost \$6 to \$8 per person, while chartering a whole taxi costs \$25.

SOUTHERN AZERBAIJAN

In stark contrast to the flat and largely unremarkable plains of central Azerbaijan, the south plays host to dramatic mountains, some pleasant towns and the non-Azeri Talysh people who reside on the Iranian border. Unlike the arid Abşeron Peninsula, southern Azerbaijan is the lush breadbasket of the country, where tea plantations line the roadsides and trees are heavy with fruit. A trip to the south was once a dead end, as the border with Iran was open only to Azeris and Iranians, but now it is open to anyone with an Iranian visa.

MASALLI

☎ 151

While not a particularly attractive place, Masallı has two lively bazaars and is well located for trips into the Talysh Mountains. The main street runs perpendicular to the main Baku-Lənkəran highway going south, and has a **clothing bazaar** at the point where the two meet. At the other end of town, there's the chaotic **food bazaar**, which by 2pm resembles a ghost town as the stall holders return home. There is little else to see in town, although there's an Internet café on the main drag. You can stay at the **Hotel Masallı** (☎ 53231; s/d \$6, ste \$30), which, despite looking very unappealing is in fact both clean and comfortable, although you may well be the only residents.

The town's bus station is 1km south of the town centre. Buses to Baku (\$2.20, four hours), Yardımlı (50¢, one hour) and Lankaran (50¢, one hour) are frequent throughout the day. Taxis go from the same place and will charge \$10 to Lankaran and \$30 to Baku.

Isti Su

The real reason to come to Masallı is to visit the nearby mountains, and in particular the unique resort of Isti Su ('hot water'). Driving from Masallı takes you through a series of attractive villages. At a fork in the road, turn left for the resort; the right-hand branch carries on higher into the mountains to Yardımlı.

Stop and enjoy the lovely views of Lake Vilas, before this turning and after the village of Ərdikan. This is also the stretch of road where the best accommodation in the area is to be had.

Isti Su is a sanatorium that takes itself very seriously. The water leaves the mountain at an incredible 68.7°C, and has been engineered to fill the baths of this rickety Soviet resort for curative purposes. A doctor will evaluate you and tell you how long to bathe for (\$1 per two-minute bath, or \$2 for the inappropriately named luxury bath, which is just bigger; towels included in both).

For those whose idea of fun is less regimented, follow the well-trodden path through the resort and down to the river below, going upstream. To get to the best swimming area, you will have to ford the river, but the effort is worth it – this is a fantastic place to swim, as the hot water comes cascading down into the cold mountain stream, creating a pleasant temperature.

SLEEPING

You have no shortage of accommodation options around Isti Su.

Daştvend Hotel (☎ 55131; www.dashtvend.com; s/d \$15/40; P ☒) Best of all is this impressive hotel on the main road from Masallı, just before the village of Ərdikan. Squarely aimed at wealthy Azeris and expats, this place is something of an attraction in itself – most bizarrely featuring an aviary that includes emus, peacocks and even eagles. This is definitely the most upmarket resort in southern Azerbaijan, although you can't

help thinking it might be better situated, standing as it does in a rather lonely place on the dusty road to Ərdikan.

Golüstü Park (☎ 55131; 010 345) Another option is this Finnish-style chalet lodge overlooking the gorgeous Lake Vilas. The rooms and facilities are comfortable, but the large balconies over the lake are sublime, and everything is very clean and well maintained. There is no sign for the hotel, but turn in after the signpost for the Turist Restaurant on the road to Isti Su, in the small village of Karıblar.

Sanatorium (☎ 050-3593083; 3-/5-bed apt \$40/20) Isti Su is a thoroughly Soviet resort, and the Sanatorium features very unappealing shacks for ailing babushkas on the hill above the bathing complex. There are larger and much more comfortable apartments higher up.

Plenty of roadside restaurants line the road from Ərdikan to Isti Su and the on way to Yardımlı.

LANKƏRAN

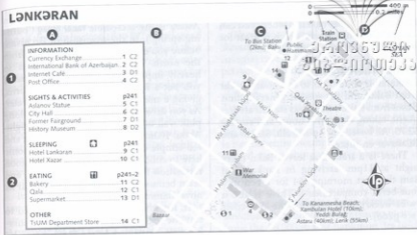
☎ 171 / pop 80,000

The closest thing approaching a city in southern Azerbaijan is sleepy Lankaran. If you are expecting anything vaguely similar to Baku, then forget it, although Lankaran is not without its own docile charm. The town is leafy and pretty much traffic-free, made attractive in places by the disused network of open sewers that crisscross the town and provide aesthetically pleasing ad hoc flowerbeds on every street corner.

There's a clean but uninviting beach north of the town centre with some submerged Soviet buildings crouching amid the waves, having been built during the Soviet era when the Caspian had receded. The best beach is south of the city, though, in the village of Kanarmesha (see p241).

The sleepy town centre revolves around the central square, with the train station at the far end, the local TsUM department store at the other, and a homage to local WWII general Hazi Aslanov in the middle. There is live music in the evenings in the open-air *çayxana* known as Qala (next to TsUM), which is divided into a family area and a men-only area. The emblem of Lankaran, a formidable matriarch bearing a cup of tea in one hand and a sword in the other, bears down in 30 feet of metal above





the idle tea drinkers, very similar in style to Tbilisi's Mother Georgia.

You can change money in places all over the town centre, including the International Bank of Azerbaijan. There's an **Internet café** (Qala Xiyabani; per hour \$1) that offers reliable Net access.

Sights

Lankaran is best seen as a base from which to explore southern Azerbaijan rather than an attraction in itself. There is a **History Museum** (5 Axundov küçəsi; admission 20¢; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun) with little of interest save a mock-up Talysh house. Morbidly intriguing are the neglected rusting heap of the **former fairground** in the woods behind Lankaran University and the **Soviet tank** on display by the seashore, now semisubmerged by the rising Caspian. Joseph Stalin was at one point held prisoner here during his early revolutionary period in a tower that is now used as a carpet warehouse. The tower is back a few hundred metres beyond City Hall. **Qala Xiyabani küçəsi** has the makings of a nice pedestrianised street when local businesses and cafés catch on and set up there – at the moment there's just an Internet café and shop.

Those seeking some swimming in the Caspian are best advised to head for the small but pleasant and clean **Kanarmesha Beach**, just outside Lankaran. On the Astara road heading south out of town, turn back on yourself at the hairpin bend immediately after the Qaz Firma Çinar petrol station,

and about 50m later there's a dirt track on your right. Follow this through Kanarmesha village until you reach an open clearing with a bent pole in the middle. Turn left here and you'll get to the lovely **Yeddi Bulağ Restaurant**, which overlooks the sea. The beach is narrow and the sand black, but it's clean.

Sleeping

Both Lankaran's hotels were being gutted and rebuilt at the time of writing. No information, not even a vague opening date, was forthcoming about the **Hotel Lankaran** (Mir Mustafaxan küçəsi).

Hotel Xazar (☎ 51663; Qala Xiyabani küçəsi) Once open, this hotel will offer high-standard rooms at the rather substantial rates of \$50 to \$70.

If for whatever reason neither of the two is in operation and you can't find a homestay, your best bet is to head south to Lake Xambulan on the main road to Astara, where the modern **Xambulan Hotel** (☎ 57190; cabin \$30) offers the nearest accommodation to Lankaran proper.

Eating

Most of the area's best restaurants are tucked away off the main roads to Lerik, Astara and Masalli. You can get a basic meal of shashlyk and salad at **Qala** (shashlyk \$1-2) on Lankaran's main square. For a great sturgeon kebab, head south to Kanarmesha and its **Yeddi Bulağ Restaurant** (Seven Springs; mains \$3-4), which overlooks the Caspian.

Along the main coastal road into Lənkəran are small bakeries where you can buy delicious hot bread, which is great for picnics. Look for the sign *isti çörək*.

Getting There & Away

Lənkəran is about four to five hours by car from Baku, and the road is generally fine. Buses from Baku's main bus station are frequent, taking about five hours and costing \$2.75. All buses stop in Masallı, Salyan and Biləsuvar en route.

There is a train that leaves Baku every night at 11pm, arriving in Lənkəran at 8am the next morning (\$4 for a bed in a four-berth compartment). There is also a twice-weekly boat between the two cities (see p266).


LERIK

One of the highest towns in the Talysh Mountains, Lerik is a haven of Talysh culture and tradition. While the mountains are spectacular, the only way onwards is by 4WD or on horseback, and in both cases it's pretty important to know where you are going, as the Iranian border is nearby. Even in summer it's cool, so remember to bring appropriate clothing.

The centre of town is taken up by an eerie memorial depicting the faces of the locals who gave their lives in the Karabakh conflict. The six-bed **hotel** (☎ 54276/54428; bed \$4) run by Gussein and his wife offers basic rooms. Toilet and washing facilities are as lamentable as ever, but the welcome is genuine. You can find the hotel by going up the hill to the right of the war memorial, and following the pathway immediately to the side of the Lerik Finance Committee (signposted in English). There is also a **government guesthouse** (\$4) available, but you have to arrange to stay there in advance through a travel agent. Lerik is linked by bus to Lənkəran (60¢, 1½ hours, three times per day). There is also a daily bus to/from Baku (\$3, six hours) leaving both Lerik and Baku in the morning.

ASTARA

This quiet border town was sadly divided as the haphazard line between Iran and Azerbaijan was drawn, intriguingly meaning that another town, also named Astara, lives on in Iran.



The most interesting thing to see in Astara is the incredible **Yanar Bulag** ('burning spring'), in the township of Ərchivan, before you enter Astara town coming from the north. The burning liquid is so heavily impregnated with methane that if you put a lighter to it, it instantly burns, giving a magical display of fire and water. As you drive into town, you'll pass the long pink wall of the post office on your right. About 100m beyond, a little white, blue and red temple covers the spring. Locals come here to collect the water, which has a good reputation for its remedial properties, and seem bemused by foreigners gawping at its novel flammability.

If, for whatever reason, you do need to stay the night, there's an exceedingly insalubrious, unnamed **hotel** (☎ 055-7908039; bed \$2) right next to the pedestrian border post. Toilets and cold running water are at the end of the corridor, and it looks perfectly safe, if wholly undesirable.

Astara is easily reachable from Lənkəran, just 40km south. Buses go from Baku (\$3.10, six hours) and Lənkəran (50¢, 45 minutes). If you want to see Yanar Bulag don't go all the way to Astara, but ask the driver to stop in Ərchivan, immediately before Astara proper.

NAXÇIVAN

Completely cut off from the rest of Azerbaijan, Naxçıvan is a barren and dramatically mountainous slice of land wedged uncomfortably between Armenia and Iran, kept going by a combination of its tiny border with Turkey and fierce determination from Baku. Despite its bleak isolation between hostile and indifferent neighbours, Naxçıvan is a cradle of Azeri culture and history, and can be a very interesting, albeit challenging, place to visit. Nowhere else in Azerbaijan will your resourcefulness and imagination be more required to make a visit worthwhile. It's completely unused to tourists, so expect to be viewed with suspicion and even hostility by authority figures, especially outside Naxçıvan City. However once you break the ice with the locals, the warmth and hospitality you'll receive is as strong as ever.

HISTORY

The city of Naxçıvan has a long history, dating all the way back to 1500 BC – the legend runs that it was founded by none other than Noah. In medieval times it flourished under Persian rule as an important centre of trade, and was the capital of an independent khanate in the 18th century. Naxçıvan became part of the Russian Empire in 1828 and then a republic of the Soviet Union in 1920, but its leaders decided a year later that it should be part of Azerbaijan (which, along with Georgia and Armenia, constituted the Transcaucasian Soviet Federal Socialist Republic).

In 1924 Naxçıvan was made into an Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, while around the same time the boundaries of Armenia and Azerbaijan were redrawn and the province of Zangezur given to Armenia, thus isolating Naxçıvan from the rest of Azerbaijan, a situation that continues today.

As the Soviet Union finally began to crack in January 1990, the Supreme Soviet of the Naxçıvan Autonomous Soviet Republic passed a decree stating its intention to secede from the USSR. It thus became the first part of the Soviet Union to formally declare independence, beating Lithuania's declaration by a matter of weeks. It didn't last, though, and Naxçıvan soon rejoined the rest of Azerbaijan. Life following independence has been marked by economic decline and population migration. The line outside the Turkish consulate in Naxçıvan City is always huge, and unemployment runs at well over 50%. While Baku keeps the enclave going with subsidised flights and endless propaganda, the reality is bleaker.

NAXÇIVAN CITY

☎ 136 / pop 60,000

It seems almost laughable that this pleasant provincial town was once the capital of an autonomous Soviet republic. Entering the city today you get a feeling of dormancy, reinforced by the small amount of traffic and the incredible summer heat, which renders most activities beyond playing *nard* and drinking tea out of the question. However, Naxçıvan City's position, on a plateau overlooking the Araz Su Reservoir and the shores of Iran beyond, is impressive, and its long main streets and well-maintained

buildings suggest that it's not quite the one-horse town it might at first seem.

There are several currency exchanges throughout the town, as well as a few Internet café featuring maintained booths for privacy on Azadlıq prospekti. The important position Naxçıvan occupies is exemplified by the presence of an Iranian and Turkish consulate. The Iranian consulate can theoretically issue visas, but its opening hours are erratic. The Turkish consulate is permanently swamped with local unemployed men seeking working papers.

Sights

The town's most famous landmark is the impressive **Möminə Xatun Mausoleum**, a structure that should be familiar to visitors from the 50,000 manat banknote. Its brick tower is decorated with geometric patterns, turquoise tiling and Kufic script (a stylised, angular form of Arabic). Located in the park of the same name, the mausoleum dates from 1186 and was built for the wife of a local ruler.

Next to the mausoleum is the **Carpet Museum**. It's a ridiculously large and overstated building, but the museum is beautifully laid out and includes a small but comprehensive history of Azeri weaving techniques and styles. Its ghoulish centrepiece is a totally nonironic representation of a young Heydar Aliyev in silk-wool weave. Photography is forbidden, but all other information was unavailable.

A less obviously impressive sight lies hidden up an alley off İdris Məmmədov küçəsi. The **Mausoleum of Yusif Hüseynoğlu** was built in 1162, and is of the pointed, octagonal type common throughout eastern Anatolia. This style of tomb is thought to have derived its shape from the central drum and spire of Armenian churches through the practice of the Muslim nobility employing Armenian architects.

At the southern end of the town centre, on the road to the train station, is the blue-domed **İmamzadə Mausoleum**, the tomb of the 18th-century khan of Naxçıvan. It's guarded by a delightful old woman who will insist on giving you sweets and may well show you the shrine to the dead khan.

It's a pity that the **Heydar Aliyev Museum** appears to have closed permanently, as it would be interesting to see the officially sanctioned



version of what Aliyev got up to during his stint as a KGB boss during the 1970s. As it is, we shall never know, although the pretty square in front of the erstwhile museum is a social hub for families in the evenings, and faces the town's **theatre**.

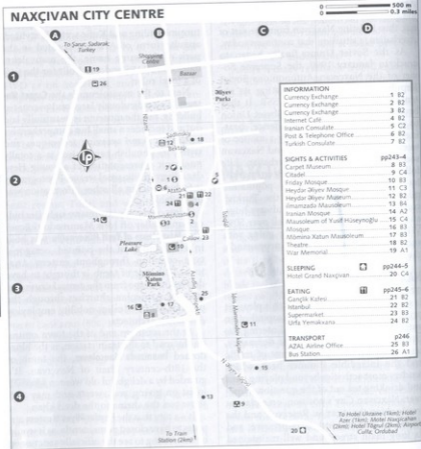
Of the town's mosques, the impressive **Iranian Mosque** next to the Tehran Hotel at the end of Nizami küçəsi is the one you should make a beeline for. Donated by Iran, the building is unmistakably Persian in style with its grandiose turquoise arches and dome.

Sleeping

With its two Soviet-era concrete affairs undergoing much-needed gutting and re-

building at the time of writing, the accommodation in Naxçıvan is left precariously in the hands of the private sector. Many hotels here are aimed at weekend-long Iranian men in search of **relaxation**—**relaxation**—**relaxation**, so take this into account before deciding where to stay.

Hotel Grand Naxçıvan (☎ 45930; fax 45932; N Əliyev küçəsi 1; r \$50; P: ☒) Built in 2002, the Grand is definitely Naxçıvan's best hotel, although this in itself is no outstanding achievement. The place looks incredibly impressive and the location is not bad at all – just a 10-minute walk into the centre of town. However, the fittings are all fairly bad, the hot water temperamental and the young staff members clueless, despite



NARD

Knowing how to play *nard* (backgammon) will hugely enhance your social interaction with Azeris. No matter whether you speak any Azeri or Russian, a challenge to a *nard* match at a *çayxana* anywhere between Astara and Nabran will win you instant friends.

The object of *nard* is to move your pieces through all four parts of the board and then out. The first player to get all their pieces out is the winner. After rolling two dice to start, each player rolls the dice and moves one or more pieces in accordance with the numbers cast. If they roll a five and a three, for example, they can either move one piece eight spaces, or one piece five spaces and another piece three spaces. If the same number appears on both dice, the player is entitled to four moves instead of two. Thus, if he rolls two threes, he can move up to four men, but each move must consist of three spaces.

By positioning two or more pieces on one 'point' (the lines around the board) the player's opponent is blocked and can neither come to rest on that point nor touch down on it when taking the combined total of his dice with one piece. The players throw and play alternately throughout the game, except in the case where a player cannot make a legal move and therefore forfeits his turn.

However, if just one piece occupies a point, the opponent can land on it and the piece must be removed and placed on the bar. A piece that has been hit must go back to the start and re-enter the game. A player may not make any move until such time as he has brought the man on the bar back into play. Re-entry is made on a point equivalent to the number of one of the die cast, providing that point is not owned by the opponent.

Even children play *nard* with speed and confidence that might put you off, but Azeris are likely to be sympathetic to people who haven't grown up playing it. The loser buys the next round of tea and jam.



having good intentions. Beggars can't be choosers though and, in summer, its \$50 price tag is well worth it just for the air-conditioning and proper toilets.

Hotel Tögrül (☎ 52742; s/d \$6-8, ste \$10; P) This glorified brothel off the airport road is squarely aimed at Iranian weekenders, although the staff seem friendly enough. It's a large complex with run-down gardens and a small *çayxana* in the middle, as well as the inevitable 'sauna'. As a last resort, the rooms are clean enough, but only the suites have their own bathrooms.

Hotel Ukraine (☎ 55383; per person \$6, per person with en suite \$8; P) This ageing establishment used to be the town's best, and although it has been comprehensively eclipsed by the Grand, it's still the best option for budget travellers. The en-suite bathrooms boast hot and cold running water and are clean. The rooms are shabby but acceptable.

Motel Naxşıcahan (☎ 41441; s/d \$40/60; P; ☼) This has to be one of the biggest rip-offs in Azerbaijan - \$60 for a room without an en-suite bathroom! Stuck out towards the airport, it could only possibly be of interest for those with their own transport. Its only redeeming feature is that each room has

air-con, but if that's what you're after the Grand is far better value for money.

Eating & Drinking

The eating options in Naxçıvan are pretty limited, and most places that serve food are heavily influenced by nearby Turkey.

Gəndlik Kafesi (Azadlıq prospekti; dishes \$1-2) The largest and one of the most popular places in the centre of town, the huge Gəndlik Kafesi serves good, tasty Turkish dishes. However, avoid the salads that are not made to order and have been sitting out all day. If you want alcohol with your meal, you'll have to go to the beer cellar round the back (a cool haven on a summer's day), as, like most places in town, Gəndlik is dry.

Right next door there's the **Istanbul** (Atatürk; dishes \$1-2) where you can enjoy similar tasty Turkish fare. More basic is **Urfa Yeməlxana** (Azadlıq prospekti; dishes \$1-2) - again the fare is Turkish.

Naxçıvan is one of the driest areas of Azerbaijan in both senses. Perhaps humbled by pious Iran across the lake, local restaurants and cafés do not serve alcohol on the whole, although you can buy cold beers from any shop and there's nothing stopping

you from drinking in public. One place that does serve the rather weak local beer is the run-down but friendly bar that sits above the lake off Nizami küçəsi. Otherwise, evening entertainment is limited to the vast array of *çayxanas* and a match of *nard*.

Getting There & Away

There are four flights a day from Baku on AZAL, with an inflated foreigners' price of \$100 each way (Azeris pay \$20). There is also a far more reasonable flight once a week from Gəncə (\$50) and one flight a week from Moscow (\$250). Otherwise, the only option is to take a bus or car from Turkey or Iran.

Coming by land is now a better prospect than it used to be. The Iranian border at Culfa is now open to foreigners, as is the busy Turkish border at Sədərək. There are five comfortable air-conditioned coaches a day, the first one departing at (or more likely after) 8.30am. The fare is \$5, and you can connect at İğdır for Erzurum (\$5, five hours), the nearest big city, or Ankara.


İLANDAĞ

The rocky 2415m peak of İlandağ (Snake Mountain) is the most distinctive natural feature in Naxçıvan, clearly visible from Naxçıvan City almost 30km away. Legend has it that the cleft in the summit was created by the keel of Noah's Ark as the floodwaters abated.

Above the village of Xanəgah, about 5km north of İlandağ, the remains of the 7th-century Alınca Fortress sit on a rocky hill-top. A two-hour climb, which involves some steep scrambling, leads to the ruins – your reward is the magnificent view of İlandağ.

CULFA

Tensions run high in this Iranian border town. The town is plagued by bureaucrats who like nothing better than interviewing foreigners at great length and pontificating about the town's enormous strategic importance. The one very good reason to visit, however, is the superb train journey from Naxçıvan City. The line hugs the banks of the Araz River and thus the Iranian border. The scenery is stunning, and while the other side is uninhabited, it's a great taster for Iran. Trains leave Naxçıvan at 10.30am and 3pm every day, arriving in



Culfa (known as *Julfa* in Iran) 17 hours later. About half an hour into the trip, just after the confluence of the Qotur and the Araz Rivers on the Iranian side, watch out for **St Stephen's Church**, a 13th-century building built over the ruins of a church originally founded by St Bartholomew just 60 years after the death of Christ.

Culfa itself is not an interesting place. The present town was founded in 1848, 2km from an ancient town of the same name. In the late Middle Ages this was a thriving cultural centre and home to Christians and Muslims alike, but it was sacked by the Persian shah in 1604, who exported all the talented craftsmen to build his new capital at Esfahan and brutally converted or murdered the Christians. What remains of the **old town** (referred to as *Cuga* by the locals) can be seen a short walk beyond the town, although police are likely to prevent you from visiting due to its spitting distance from Iran. Here you'll find the **Gülüstan Turbe** (large tomb or mausoleum) in a huge cemetery, the remains of two churches, a caravanserai, a bridge across the Araz and a 10th-century fortress.

The only possible distraction in the new town is the small **History Museum** (*Xətai küçəsi*), for which you should head out of the station, continue straight down for several blocks (about 400m) and turn left. There's nothing really to see but a few unimpressively stuffed animals and some old weapons, but you're more likely to be permitted to visit the museum than anywhere else! You can stroll around for half an hour and still have time for a relaxed beer in the shade before taking the train back to Naxçıvan.

ORDUBAD

Ordubad is Naxçıvan's second-largest city and was once the seat of a sultanate, but now it lies in a forgotten corner of the Zangezur Mountains, isolated by the closed Armenian border and the bridgeless Araz River. The surrounding district is famous for its irrigated orchards, which produce juicy peaches, pears and apricots. The town's isolation has preserved it as a charming backwater, with tree-lined streets of quaint old houses and a couple of 18th-century mosques. You can take one of two daily trains here from Naxçıvan City, stopping en route at Culfa.

AZERBAIJAN DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATION

Two types of accommodation predominate in Azerbaijan: the decaying remnants from the Soviet tourist infrastructure and the new generation of small, resort-style accommodation. The depressing and generally deserted former option is often the only possibility in each town, although usually barely functioning and full of refugees from Karabakh. Resort-style accommodation is far more comfortable, although in most cases still rather basic, but clean and friendly at least. These are mainly found in the mountains and out of town areas where wealthy week-enders from Baku can come to relax.

BOOKS

Trailblazer's *Azerbaijan with Excursions to Georgia* by Mark Elliot has established itself as a classic guide to the country. The author's zeal for all things Azeri has made it an encyclopedia as much as a travel guide, and it is scripture to the expat community of Baku. Visitors passing through or just spending a week in Azerbaijan may find its size rather overwhelming, but it's an enjoyable read even if you don't plan to see many of the places it lists.

Kurban Said's *Ali and Nino* is a fantastic introduction to the whole Caucasus – the story of a love affair of a young Azeri Muslim and a Georgian Christian princess set in Baku on the eve of WWI. It's a wonderfully atmospheric tale of the city at an age of immense change and modernisation and an interesting examination of the clash between Europe and Asia on a human scale.

BUSINESS HOURS

As a general guide, the Azeris work Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm. Shops are nearly always open on Saturday and in Baku on Sunday too. Markets all over the country tend to start at dawn and operate until lunch time. Banking hours are standard: usually 10am to 4pm with a lunch break of often up to two hours. Restaurants usually function at least from midday until 10pm or 11pm. However, outside Baku opening hours don't really exist and it's more dependent on the number of people visiting the establishment.

CUSTOMS

Azeri customs used to be notorious until former president Heydar Aliyev stepped into the fray and deposed the rampant corruption and abuse of power. Amazingly, since then Azeri customs officers have been professional and friendly, at least to Westerners. You should have no problems coming or going, and even the customs forms are hardly used anymore. Taking carpets out of the country will involve getting permission from the Ministry of Culture. Caviar, the other export favoured by visitors, is limited to 800g per person.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

For a list of embassies in Azerbaijan, see p199. Azeri embassies and consulates overseas include:

Austria (☎ 403 13 22; Strozgigasse 10, Vienna)

France (☎ 01 44 86 02 02; Ambazer@CompuServe.com; Rue de l'Université, 75007 Paris)

Georgia (☎ 252639; azer@caucasus.net; Nutsbidze street 47)

Germany (☎ 206 29 46; Axel-Springer Strasse 54 A, Berlin)

Iran (☎ 221 25 54, 221 51 91; Shahid Levasani khiyabani, Shahid Doctor Saleh Khiyabani, Vatanpur street 30, Tehran)

Russia (☎ 229 42 62, 229 16 49; azerirus@ns.cnt.ru; Leontiyevsky pereulok 16, Moscow)

Turkey Ankara (☎ 411 26 20/21/22; azer-tr@tr-net.net.tr; Chankaya, Cemal Nadir sokaki 20) Istanbul (☎ 279 54 00, 325 80 45; 1 Levent, alt Zeren sokaki 13)

Turkmenistan (☎ 391102; fax 355625; Ata Gowşudow Kögesi)

UK (☎ 020-7938 3412; fax 020-7937 1783; lower ground fl, 4 Kensington Court, London W8 5DL)

USA (☎ 1-202-337 35 00, 337 59 12; 2741 34th Street, NW, Washington, DC)

Uzbekistan (☎ 173 61 67, 177 05 38; posol@ishonch.uz; Sharg-Tangi st 25, Tashkent)

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Religious festivals are taken quite seriously in Azerbaijan. The dates of religious holidays are calculated according to the Islamic lunar calendar, and therefore occur about 10 or 11 days earlier each year than the preceding year.

February–March

Gurban Bayramı (Festival of Sacrifice, early spring) commemorates Abraham's test of faith on Mt Moriah, when God ordered him to sacrifice his son Isaac. People visit family and friends, and the head of the

top-range hotel (no budget hotels are likely to fax confirmation) then you can simply cancel the booking subsequently. Transit visas, usually valid for 72 hours, are issued to anyone with an ongoing ticket to a third country in the region. Single-entry visas are usually processed by embassies in three to four working days. Business visas and any visa endorsed for multi-entry is subject to an LOI and take five to seven working days to issue. An average visa price (though these vary enormously) is \$40 for a 30-day tourist visa. Express processing (usually meaning a visa is issued within 24 hours) is nearly always available for a fee of about 50% extra.

Visas on Arrival

Visas are available on arrival at Baku airport for \$40. No LOI or photo is necessary, and they are usually valid for 30 days. However, this situation may well change and you should check with your nearest embassy before relying on it. Azeri visas

on arrival are not available at any other arrival points in the country.

Visas for Neighbouring Countries

GEORGIA

Tourist visas (\$80) can be issued within a couple of days at the **Georgian embassy** (Map p202; ☎ 974558/59/60; Asaf Zeynalli küçəsi 24, Baku). A surcharge is applicable for same-day service and prices skyrocket for double- and multi-entry visas (\$180 to \$300).

Registration

Registration is only necessary for those staying longer than a month, and many who do so will be looked after by their companies. In reality, passport control seems to be blissfully unaware of these regulations, or just disinterested in enforcing them. For those who need to register themselves, you need to go to the City Police headquarters (next to the Təzə Bazaar) with your passport and a copy of your apartment lease.

Regional Directory



Mid-range hotels and guesthouses are appearing more frequently in large regional cities, and there are usually places with air-conditioning, a TV, constant hot water and a front desk to arrange things. These cost from roughly \$40 to \$100 a night, usually for a double room with breakfast, and sometimes other meals as well. It can be hit and miss with the staff – the days when hotel administrators took as long as they wanted to do anything, simply to show their authority, haven't completely deserted the Caucasus. A more common problem is inexperienced staff.

In mid-range and local hotels there might also be some prostitution activity. If the lobby seems to be full of dead-eyed, smoking men and there's a raucous bar, this is probably the case. The floor lady will keep any misunderstandings at bay in older Soviet management-style hotels.

The number of truly five-star hotels is small – three in Baku, one or two in Yerevan and the same number in Tbilisi. On average, they cost upwards of \$150 for a double room.

B&Bs & Guesthouses

There is a growing range of B&Bs and homestays, some simple, some quite luxurious. You could also include in this bracket a brave bunch of boutique hotel pioneers, such as the Tufenkian Group in Armenia and 20 or so upmarket guesthouses in Baku and Tbilisi. Places run by expatriates and small business hotels with serviced apartments also help to fill this part of the accommodation scene. There are good B&B networks and independent places in Armenia and Georgia offering far superior hospitality than the local Soviet hotels.

Camping

There are very few commercial campsites except for a few seaside or lakeside places that open for the summer school holidays. Those that do exist have few facilities besides a basic amenities block with cold water and maybe earth toilets. It's not safe to camp anywhere you like in Georgia or the mountains of Azerbaijan, so if you

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ACCOMMODATION

The accommodation in the country chapters is divided into budget, mid-range and top-end categories. Around \$10 per night pays for a bed and a shared bathroom in the capitals and most regional towns. The budget category includes homestays, B&Bs, plus apartment rentals, especially if they're shared between a few people – it's around \$15 to \$30 for an apartment per night. Homestays and B&Bs are the best option in small towns and rural areas – the hospitality is usually wonderful and it's a chance to sample some of the endless variety of Caucasian home recipes. Some homestay hosts might feel uncomfortable housing one or two male travellers if there are daughters in the house, though this isn't so common – Caucasian hospitality can ride over these cultural matters.

plan to pitch a tent get good information on local conditions. If there's a local landowner whom you can ask for permission to camp on their land, people are usually happy to oblige. It's also good manners to drop by the village mayor or deputy mayor and say hello before you camp in their neck of the woods.

Hotels

The Caucasus is full of decaying Soviet hotels packed with refugees, offering bleak décor, short beds with failed mattresses and bathrooms lacking running water. Luckily, new homestays and resort hotels are appearing around the region, more so in Armenia and Azerbaijan than Georgia, while Tbilisi, Yerevan and Baku have a full range of accommodation. Facilities in place such as Karabakh and Abkhazia are limited to a few relatively expensive new hotels, if anything. There's very little in the way of typical European backpacker hostels as yet, though a network of places that recommends people on to hotels and B&Bs in other cities is starting to emerge. Armenia seems to be leading the way in resettling refugees and renovating at least one floor of hotels on main squares in major towns. Some Soviet-era hotels have dual pricing policies – around \$5 for locals and \$25 for foreigners.

Rental Accommodation

Renting an apartment can be very economical over a month or the whole summer. Rates vary from city to city and in different seasons, but \$15 to \$25 a day gets you a simple, unrenovated apartment in an outer suburb, while \$25 to \$50 gets a decent new apartment, often with a water tank and gas-heated hot water (local contingencies permitting). Rates drop over periods of a month or more. Renting apartments is very common in Yerevan due to a regular influx of visitors from the Armenian diaspora, but seems to be less established in other cities. It's obviously much easier to deal with the paperwork and landlords if you speak the local language or Russian, but real-estate agents rent out places just as they do anywhere else. Travel agencies often arrange apartment rentals as well.

Renting in Baku is a huge business with the enormous expat oil population, but

prices are steep and if you don't speak Russian or Azeri you'll have trouble finding a place for less than \$500 per month. In both Tbilisi and Baku it's easy to rent somewhere through local English-language papers or travel agencies, but far cheaper if you can get a local to ask around for you. In the latter case, \$200 per month for a

BEST HOTELS & GUESTHOUSES

Budget

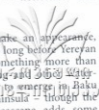
- Cannat Bağı, Lahic, Azerbaijan (p227)
- Guesthouse Tushishvili, Telavi, Georgia (p86)
- Hotel Araz, Baku, Azerbaijan (p209)
- Hotel Bebo, Batumi, Georgia (p70)
- Mary's Guest House, Byurakan, Armenia (p145)
- Zorats Qarer B&B, Sisian, Armenia (p171)

Mid-range

- Avan Marak Tsapatagh, Lake Sevan, Armenia (p160)
- Europe Hotel, Yerevan, Armenia (p131)
- Hotel Boni, Tbilisi, Georgia (p44)
- Hotel Nairi, Stepanakert, Nagorno-Karabakh (p185)
- Karvansaray Hotel, Şaki, Azerbaijan (p231)
- Maiden Tower Guest House, Baku, Azerbaijan (p210)
- Mtis Brolı Guesthouse, Tbilisi, Georgia (p45)
- Suvar Resort, Laza, Azerbaijan (p223)

Top-end

- Avan Villa Yerevan, Armenia (p132)
- Betsy's Place, Tbilisi, Georgia (p45)
- Daştvand Hotel, near Masallı, Azerbaijan (p240)
- Armenia Marriott Hotel, Yerevan, Armenia (p132)
- Radisson SAS Plaza, Baku, Azerbaijan (p210)
- Tbilisi Marriott Hotel, Tbilisi, Georgia (p45)



comfortable apartment in the city centre is a good starting rate.

Sanatoriums & Turbazas

There were a great many Soviet sanatoriums built in the days when an entire Ukrainian metallurgical institute would pop in for a week of regimented spa treatments, local feasts and compulsory toasts of *druzhiba narodov* (friendship of peoples, a central Soviet slogan of unity). Some lie derelict in forest valleys across the Caucasus but others struggle on. Some were run by Soviet ministries as retreats for the upper echelons or for favoured artists and members of the writers', cinematographers' and musicians' unions. Nowadays the ones run by postindependence power bases such as the defence ministries tend to be in the best shape. The ones listed in this book are open to overseas visitors (obviously) but others require a local contact or introduction before you may stay.

A *turbaza* (a Russian mangling of tourist base) is a far simpler sanatorium. It's usually a collection of wooden cottages and huts set in woodlands or by a lake or riverbank, where local people or city students could escape for the weekend. Many were located next to natural hot springs and served as the proletariat's equivalent to a sanatorium or ministry guesthouse. The surviving *turbazas* have been privatised (officially or not) and some are upgrading facilities, but their market is still much the same.

ACTIVITIES

The Caucasus has the potential to offer a huge array of sports and travel activities, but the economic and safety situation in many parts of the region hampers development. Before 1989 many visited the seashores, snowfields and forest reserves of the Caucasus from other parts of the Eastern Bloc, but activity dwindled after independence and is now showing stuttering signs of revival.

Bird-watchers are discovering Armenia's 350-odd bird species, including many that are endangered in Europe but appear in relatively large numbers across the Caucasus. Horse riding is popular across the region and there are quite a few agencies and country lodges that can arrange rides across some of the spectacular landscape.

Golf has yet to make an appearance, though it can't be too long before Yerevan and Baku acquire something more than driving ranges. Sailing and other watersports are beginning to emerge in Baku and the Abşeron Peninsula - though the oil derrick-dotted seascape adds some unusual hazards. Armenia's Lake Sevan has a brief sailing season during the summer holidays.

Mountaineering

The highest summits in the Caucasus region are the 500m peaks of Jangha, Shkara and Kazbek, all towering above the central Caucasus along the Georgia-Russia border. The highest peak of the range, Mt Elbrus (5642m) lies entirely within Russia. The ascent of Mt Aragats (4090m) in Armenia is more of a walk than a climb. The peaks of Bazardüzü (4466m) and Şahdağ (4243m) in northern Azerbaijan have permanent ice near their summits, but in fact offer only moderate climbing routes. There is nothing in the way of developed rock climbing in Azerbaijan, but there may be opportunities for adventurous climbers on the remote limestone crags southwest of Quba. The spectacular jagged peaks of the Zangezur Range (highest peak, Mt Kaputjugh, 3904m) are off limits because they form part of the border between southern Armenia and Azerbaijan's Naxçıvan enclave.

BOOKS

Frith Maier's *Trekking in Russia & Central Asia* (1997) has a section on the Caucasus, despite its title. It's thoroughly dated, however, and only the mountain information is now of use. *Trekking in the Caucasus* by Yuri Kolomiets and Aleksey Solov'yev concentrates on the Russian side of the Caucasus, but includes about half a dozen trekking routes among the valleys and glaciers above Mestia and Ushguli in Georgia. *Classic Climbs in the Caucasus* by Friedrich Bender is a compilation of 100 alpine mountaineering routes. Again, the emphasis is on the centre of the Caucasus Mountains.

Skiing & Snowsports

At the time of writing there were three functioning ski resorts in the Caucasus. Conditions are fairly simple and the equipment for hire may be 20 years old,

but it certainly won't bankrupt you. Tsaghkadzor north of Yerevan was once a training facility for the USSR Winter Olympics squad, and the facilities and range of hotels here is starting to improve. The ski resorts in Georgia have been hit hard by the country's instability. Gudauri on the Georgian Military Hwy was one of ex-president Eduard Shevardnadze's early projects, and while it had a brief period in the limelight in the late 1990s, activity here has declined because of its proximity to Chechnya. The skiing facilities at Bakuriani in Georgia are pretty much on a pay-as-you-go basis, and the ski fields here have declined in popularity since Gudauri got going.

BUSINESS HOURS

Working hours tend to be flexible across the region as people pop out to have lunch, pay the bills and do the shopping. Food shops are usually open every day from morning until around 7pm or 8pm, although some can be open much later. Other shops tend to open 10am to 7pm Monday to Saturday. Museums may open as late as 11am and most close one day a week. Banking hours are roughly 9am to 4pm, with a one- or two-hour break for lunch.

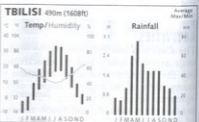
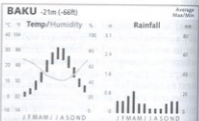
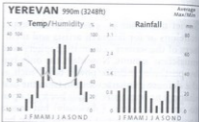
In the big cities some cafés and restaurants are open very long hours, from 9am until the early hours of the next morning. In smaller towns restaurants tend to be open for lunch (noon to 3pm) and dinner (roughly 6pm until 9pm). Few restaurants outside the big cities serve breakfast, though there are always snack stalls around the local market.

CHILDREN

Family is important in the Caucasus, and children are treasured gifts from God. Local people love meeting children and are very relaxed with them - it's perfectly normal for strangers to strike up a conversation over kids, and people will generally be extremely considerate towards travellers with children. However, journeys in sweltering minivans and buses can be trying for children and adults alike, and electricity cuts and water shortages can make life more difficult at the low-budget level. Disposable nappies are on sale in all the big cities, but may be hard to come by

elsewhere. Highchairs in restaurants are almost unheard of. In Soviet times there were lots of playgrounds and museums for a happy socialist childhood, but many have fallen into disrepair in the post-independence economic malaise. Kids with a taste for the outdoors will enjoy the countryside, where there are lots of cute little farms and picnic spots.

CLIMATE CHARTS



CUSTOMS

The usual rules apply on cigarettes, alcohol and firearms, though only the rules on firearms are taken seriously. Suitcase traders, who comprise a hefty proportion of passengers to the Caucasus, bring in booze and fags by the planeload. Each country also has laws regarding antiquities, including old carpets - it might be easier to go through a major courier agency, and

if necessary pay someone to chase up the paperwork. The application of customs laws at border posts around the region is exotic in its variety. This ranges from mild extortion in Adjara, a risk of bribe-soliciting and official obfuscation in Georgia, and fairly clean dealings in Armenia and Azerbaijan. The trick is to follow what the locals do. If no-one is queuing up at the customs office at the airport, don't go near it.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Conflict & Danger Zones

Safe bits of the Caucasus, when this book was written, included most of Azerbaijan and Armenia, except on their mutual frontier and the Karabakh ceasefire line; central and southern Georgia; and rather gappy bits of the Caucasus Mountains. At the other end of the scale, Abkhazia is really bad, Svaneti is bad and the areas of Georgia and Azerbaijan close to Chechnya aren't suitable for solo hikes either. Other Georgian Caucasus mountain regions are almost fiefdoms, some more lawless than others. Racha, Imereti and the Georgian Military Hwy area are the most reliably safe mountain areas. Banditry lives on in mountain regions such as Svaneti, where people have been robbed at gunpoint, and you are advised not to travel alone in this region.

Karabakh is OK to visit, but the occupied territories around Karabakh are not. The war between Armenia and Azerbaijan was halted by a ceasefire in May 1994, leaving about 15% of Azerbaijan's territory occupied by Armenian forces. The border is firmly closed, and there are no peacekeepers separating the two lines. Despite the ceasefire, there are still exchanges of sniper fire along the Karabakh front line in particular but sometimes also along the official Armenia-Azerbaijan border as well. Landmines are still being dug up by the thousands, and will be for years.

The area near the front line of Abkhazia and Georgia is also dicey. Anyone approaching with 10km to 15km of the border is likely to be stopped and questioned by the military. Kidnappings and sniper fire occur along the front line. The other areas of concern are the mountain regions of Georgia and Azerbaijan close to Dagestan and Chechnya. See the country chapters for details.

TRAVEL ADVISORY WEBSITES

Check one of these websites for up-to-date information on safety conditions in the region:

Australia www.dfat.gov.au/travel

Canada www.voyage.gc.ca

UK www.fco.gov.uk/travel/

USA travel.state.gov/travel_warnings

Other Dangers & Annoyances

Pickpocketing is fairly rare, beyond the usual urban spaces (metro crowds, buses), and muggings very rare. We haven't heard of any trouble with short-changing at money exchange shops. Tbilisi became a bit wild in the late 1990s but common street sense usually allows you to avoid problems. Dress down, don't flash around expensive jewellery or wristwatches, and don't wander the streets with a camera hanging off your shoulder - keep it in an ordinary bag. Don't use bumbags (fanny packs) - they look terrible, scream 'tourist!' and are an open invitation to a thief with a pocketknife.

Corruption is less of a problem for visitors than it used to be. If you do encounter a sticky-fingered customs officer, it usually pays to stay calm and stand your ground. Say that you don't have any cash, only a credit card. It's always good to make friends with local people travelling with you - they'll often show you through the process and fend off demands from corrupt officers.

Cuts in water and electricity supplies can be an everyday occurrence, but there's little that can be done about it.

DISABLED TRAVELLERS

The Caucasus is not terribly accessible to travellers in wheelchairs, although the cost of a car and driver/helper isn't extortionate. Quite a few elderly travellers come to the Caucasus. There are comfortable hotels in major cities and distances within countries are fairly short. However, as in most Soviet urban spaces, the pavements are cracked, roads are pitted and wheelchair access is rare. Economic recovery hampers access as well - parts of Yerevan were virtually inaccessible to pedestrians in 2003 while the pavements were repeatedly ripped up and relaid.

DISCOUNT CARDS

Student cards are sometimes accepted at museums and sites, but they're quite cheap anyway.

ELECTRICITY

Power cuts have been a feature of Georgian life for years, and intermittent facts of life in many regional areas. Theoretically, the region should be awash with cheap gas but the politics of the issue goes up to super-power level.

The standard voltage is the European standard, 220V, 50Hz AC, and sockets require European-style plugs with two pins. Conversion plugs are hard to find locally but technicians can graft on a new plug.

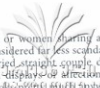
EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

It's important to realise what your national embassy can and can't do if you get into trouble. Generally speaking, they won't be much help in emergencies if the trouble you're in is remotely your own fault. Remember that while you are in the Caucasus you are bound by national laws. In genuine emergencies you might be able to get some assistance, but only if other channels have been exhausted; the embassy would expect you to have insurance. If you have all your money and documents stolen, it might assist with getting a new passport, but a loan for onward travel is out of the question.

If you're going off to Svaneti or other remote parts of the Caucasus you should register with your embassy if possible. In Karabakh and Abkhazia, you're on your own. Assistance would have to come from Baku and Tbilisi, respectively, which isn't possible. Foreign embassies in Tbilisi, Yerevan and Baku are listed in those sections, while national embassies overseas are in each country's directory section.

GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELLERS

Homosexuality for both men and women has been decriminalised in all three countries, but there are few signs of any kind of gay scene in any of the national capitals, let alone elsewhere in the region. While homosexuality is as common as anywhere else, traditional values and a patriarchal society make it totally taboo: it'll be a while before there are gay bars or clubs anywhere in the Caucasus. Social consciousness of homosexuality is high, due to the large currency the term 'gay' has as a general insult, while lesbianism remains totally incomprehensible to most Caucasians. Gay travellers should be discreet but there's no need for



fear - two men or women sharing a bed will often be considered far less scandalous than an unmarried straight couple doing the same. Open displays of affection will draw startled glances pretty much anywhere although, ironically, nobody will bat an eyelid at two men or two women holding hands or kissing each other on the cheek - indeed many visitors may find themselves led by hand through a city by a local same-sex friend. For those wishing to make contacts in the gay community, the best (and safest) means is the Internet. While all three countries have their own national gay servers (in their own language), English language websites such as www.gay.com and www.gaydar.com have Caucasian chat rooms and message boards.

INSURANCE

It is important to be properly insured against theft, loss and medical problems in the Caucasus. Compare the small print; some policies specifically exclude 'dangerous activities' such as skiing, mountain climbing, horse riding and even short treks. Also check that the policy covers emergency medical evacuations by air - if you do require an operation but can still travel it may be wise to fly to Europe.

If you plan to spend a long time in Georgia or travel in remote mountain regions, you should ensure you have hostage cover, which usually covers you for a ransom of up to \$5 million. Obviously, once in Georgia, do not tell anyone you have this... Local hospitals are poorly funded and paying as you go is the norm (see the Health chapter p270).

INTERNET ACCESS

The capitals are full of Internet clubs and none of the governments restricts access. Connections are a bit shaky due to power outages, but it's usually cheap, from 30¢ an hour in Tbilisi to 80¢ an hour in Yerevan. Internet clubs are less common in regional towns, but many places have Internet access through schools and NGO offices, and it's usually fine to use them outside core hours for a nominal fee.

LEGAL MATTERS

By and large the 1990s epidemic of police harassment of foreigners has abated, though less has changed in relations between the lo-

cals and police. Traffic fines always involve heartfelt bargaining. We've heard of difficulties with reporting robberies, both from getting the report made by the police and in the insurance company honouring a police report in any of the major languages of the Caucasus. Paying bribes to police on Georgian roads has been a fact of life since 1990 but it has died out elsewhere in the region. Drugs are viewed very seriously indeed. Cannabis grows in the region and the seeds are sometimes used as a cooking ingredient, but partaking in any other way carries severe risks. Prisons in the region are dismal, underfunded and very authoritarian.

MONEY

The easiest way to carry money is with an ATM card, and US dollars cash as backup. Tbilisi, Yerevan and Baku have money-changing shops on practically every main street, and it's entirely legal to change cash into local currency. Many towns have shops with exchange-rate boards out the front as well. Euros and pounds sterling can also be exchanged in many places but the rates vary more. You can't change Azeri manat in Armenia or Armenian dram in Azerbaijan, but both can be exchanged in Georgia. Georgian lari are exchangeable in both countries. Travellers cheques are often a real pain to change except at a handful of major bank branches in the three capitals. ATM machines are becoming common in the capitals, though not all accept foreign cards. Some ATMs dispense US dollars as well as the local currency. Visa cash advances are also possible at major banks, and there are Western Union offices in many places channelling remittances back into the region. See the sections on the capital cities and the country directories for specific information on changing money. In this book all prices are in US dollars to make price comparisons between the three main countries easier, and to avoid distortions due to different local inflation rates. The greenback is the most popular foreign currency in the region.

PHOTOGRAPHY & VIDEO

Good-quality film is available in Baku, Yerevan and Tbilisi from professional photo shops, many of which offer cheap 24-hour film processing. There are also camera supply and repair shops, though there's often

little anyone besides the manufacturer/can do to a fix a digital camera.

There are fairly heavy restrictions on what can be photographed, and not just in border regions such as Nagorno-Karabakh. Photographing bridges, railways and metro stations, airports, communication facilities and power stations can all cause complications with the police if they happen to be around – even the parliament in Yerevan was off limits for us. It is never a good idea to point a camera at military vehicles or army bases. Photographing images of urban decay and poverty might also offend local people. Extend the usual courtesies when photographing people – generally people are happy to pose if you ask, and it's a good way to break the ice. If you want to give people a souvenir, having a Polaroid camera on hand is a great alternative to fibbing about posting them a photo.

RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL

Distasteful as the idea of killing for sport is to many, hunting is a popular local activity in the Caucasus, and hunting tourism is a particular favourite in Azerbaijan. This might have something to do with the number of Westerners working in the oil industry who enjoy this sort of recreation. In the USSR nature reserves were totally off-limits, and the locals have little interest in preserving them. Legitimate hunting tours (requiring guides, cooks, drivers etc) are one of the few ways of saving these reserves from being used as grazing land, and many hunters are actually keen conservationists. Be aware that local knowledge can be a bit hazy on which species have healthy populations and which ones are endangered. If you do sign up for a guided hunting trip, be sure that your guides know which species must be left alone. The big prize seems to be the eastern Caucasian ibex (*tur*), an alpine animal with a fairly healthy population. Endangered species in Azerbaijan are often steppe animals such as the Persian gazelle, the peregrine falcon and the striped hyena.

You can minimise your impact on the environment by following a few pointers:

- Don't litter on trails, in parks or at picnic spots. If you take a tour, maybe make a point to the organisers by ensuring that litter is disposed of responsibly.

- Learn the local lingo and spread your tourist dollars around among local drivers, tour guides and amateurs.
- Accept hospitality, but don't stretch people's means.
- Firewood is a threatened resource in the Caucasus; try to minimise cooking or heating water with it.
- Hill and mountain slopes are prone to erosion, especially at high altitudes. Stick to existing tracks and avoid short-cuts that bypass a switchback.
- If you're hiking, carry out all your rubbish. Minimise the waste you must carry out by only taking necessary quantities of supplies with minimal packaging.

SOLO TRAVELLERS

Broadly speaking, the biggest irritant for solo male travellers is the drinking culture in all three countries, and for solo women travellers it's harassment and lechery (p259). There aren't that many travellers going through the Caucasus, so if loneliness starts to deaden the experience it's time to take a tour with a group of people or hit one of the big cities. Eating alone in a restaurant seems odd to local sensibilities, as restaurants usually cater to big groups. Quite a few places have private dining rooms or booths where solo travellers might feel less awkward.

TELEPHONE

The landline telephone systems throughout the Caucasus are in poor shape. Old Soviet relays and lines need a huge investment to be replaced. Calling from one country town to another might take five or six attempts. Sporadic upgrades are developing. All towns have a telephone office, often paired with or next to a post office. International calls through Armenia's ArmenTel monopoly are expensive (up to \$5 per minute). Internet clubs and private telephone offices get around this via the Internet and charge only 50¢ per minute or less. Codes for dialling locally and overseas vary from country to country – see the Telephone section in the country directories for details.

Mobile Phones

All three countries use the GSM standard, and you can buy a SIM card from a local cellular network for about \$20, plus prepaid phonecards in the major cities. Armenia

lags behind its neighbours due to the monopoly by ArmenTel and limited coverage of the country. The Georgian and Azeri cellular networks are growing very rapidly, as they are all over Eastern Europe because of the antiquated land lines.

TIME

All three countries are four hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time (GMT +4), making the Caucasus four hours ahead of the UK and three hours ahead of Western Europe, 10 hours ahead of New York and 13 hours ahead of the West Coast of North America. At the time of writing none of the countries have summer daylight-savings time.

TOILETS

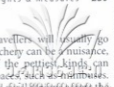
Public toilets are rare across the region, and some of the old facilities by pilgrims' churches and mosques are positively medieval. Toilets are usually marked by supposedly rather apt symbols – a smoking pipe for men, a high-heeled shoe for women. At bus stations you may have to pay a nominal fee to the attendant – squat toilets are the norm. There's often a basket for waste paper. If there's any toilet paper it may be grey cardboard-like material, so it's a good idea to carry a supply. The best places for clean toilets are Western-style restaurants, cafés and bars in the cities.

TOURIST INFORMATION

The regional record is mixed on this regard. Yerevan has an excellent tourist office, and there's a couple of smaller ones in a few regional Armenian capitals. There's no official tourist office in Tbilisi but a couple of travel agencies try and cover for this. There is one in Batumi, though. Azerbaijan has no tourist offices at all, which says a lot about the government's record on developing the non-oil economy. The closest thing is the Azintourist travel agency at the Azerbaijan Hotel, a descendant of Intourist. Thankfully there's lots of good stuff on the Internet – see the Internet Resources sections of the country directories.

VISAS

Visas are available on arrival at the three main airports and at some border crossings, ranging from \$30 for Armenia up to \$80 in Georgia for people with a Georgian embassy in their home country. Regulations



do have a habit of changing though – see the Visa section of the Country Directories for more information. As usual you need at least six months' validity on your passport. If you're visiting Karabakh, be aware that you can't visit Azerbaijan with a Karabakh visa in your passport, so have it stamped on a separate piece of paper (not a problem). The same situation applies for Georgia if (God forbid) you visit Abkhazia.

WEIGHTS & MEASURES

All three countries use the metric system – see the chart inside the back cover for conversion from US and UK scales and measurements.

WOMEN TRAVELLERS

In Soviet times women enjoyed a good deal of freedom in towns and cities, and were prominent in government and the workplace. However, they are still expected to be cleaners and cooks in the home, and while ultraconservative attitudes to women are roundly ridiculed by many, it's fair to say that Caucasian cultures are hardly feminist ones. In villages an unmarried woman seen in public with a man would be expected to be engaged within a fortnight.

Drunkenness is very bad form generally, but for women even being tipsy is frowned upon. However, women aren't expected to drink heavily during toasts – a sip will suffice.

While female travellers will usually go unharassed, male lechery can be a nuisance, and harassment of the pettiest kinds can happen in public spaces, such as minibuses. Expatriate women in rural regions (especially the Caucasus) advise not sitting next to a man on a minibus if possible, and sitting closer to the driver rather than the back seat.

Female travellers may be objects of curiosity in more remote regions. Walking alone at night should be avoided if possible. One traveller was raped while she climbed up to Tsminda Sameba Church in Kazbegi alone. While it's always unwise to walk alone in remote areas, Georgia is one country where this advice should be taken particularly seriously.

If you're alone it's unwise to accept an invitation from a man to visit his house or office unless he's with a female relative; it could be misinterpreted as strong interest on your part. Eating alone at the often all-male restaurants can be awkward as well, but some restaurants and cafés offer private dining rooms or discreet vine-covered pavilions and tables. Women with fair hair seem to have problems being mistaken for 'easy' Russian women, so if you look Russian it might pay not to speak Russian in public. When the Caucasus was a major tourist destination for the Eastern Bloc it was a place for Mediterranean-style holiday romances for Russians, Ukrainians and Eastern Europeans.

Transport

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Fittingly for a region that has historically been famed for its trade links, the Caucasus is today accessible by air, sea and land. Local politics complicates matters somewhat on the ground however – also very Caucasian.

Georgia and Azerbaijan's borders with Russia are closed to foreigners, while breakaway Abkhazia is only accessible from Russia. Armenia's eastern and western borders, to Turkey and Azerbaijan respectively, are sealed. This means the main intrepid-traveller route is through Turkey to Georgia, and then heading either south through Armenia to Iran or east through Azerbaijan to Iran or across the Caspian (or vice versa).

Baku (Azerbaijan) has by far the busiest airport in the region, while Yerevan (Armenia) has a growing number of international flights. The most common destination for flights from the region is Russia – departure and arrival boards frequently mention Moscow and St Petersburg, as well as an exotic list of Russian provincial cities, including Ufa, Sochi, Novosibirsk and Stavropol.

Surly, bribe-soliciting immigration officialdom is thankfully less common than it was five or 10 years ago, and travel to and from the wider world is becoming simpler.



GETTING THERE & AWAY

ENTRY REQUIREMENTS

Entering Georgia

Georgian border crossings are relaxed and generally unproblematic. It's important to check current procedures before you travel if you intend to get a visa on arrival at the border, as the rules and availability of instant visas change frequently (see p101 for details). Tbilisi's Novoalexandreyev Airport is small but modern, and your only problem is likely to be the long queues. The wait for visas on arrival can be particularly long but officers often scout the crowd for people wanting 'special service' – ie to queue-jump. Expect to pay \$10. At the time of writing the border with Russia was still firmly shut to foreigners. Border crossings with Azerbaijan and Armenia are very straightforward, with guards rarely asking for bribes or causing trouble, although there have been cases of both. Entering from Turkey at Sarpi you must deal with Adjaran 'customs' as well as Georgian. This translates into what is called a computer fee of \$3 per person. Many travellers report not having to pay this if you claim only to have credit cards and no cash. The second, less-used border with Turkey at Posof is not subject to the computer fee. In

THINGS CHANGE...

The information in this chapter is particularly vulnerable to change – prices for international travel are volatile, routes are introduced or cancelled, schedules change, special deals come and go, and rules and visa requirements are amended. Check directly with the airline or travel agency to make sure you understand how a fare (or a ticket you might buy) works. Get opinions, quotes and advice from as many airlines and travel agencies as possible before parting with your cash. The details given in this chapter should be regarded as pointers: they are not a substitute for careful, up-to-date research.

neither case are visas available on arrival. Arriving at both Poti and Batumi by boat is also hassle-free, although visas are not available on arrival.

Entering Armenia

Visas are available at Armenian land borders and airports, and navigating through immigration and customs is generally slow but easy. Armenia has one main international airport (Zvartnots, near Yerevan) and one with flights to Russia (Shirak airport at Gyumri).

Arriving at the space-age Soviet Zvartnots terminal is not a great introduction to the country, but there have been improvements, not least in stemming corrupt practices. You can pay \$42 extra for the privilege of using the modern VIP terminal, which is expensive but efficient (as little as 30 minutes on arrival) and a welcome luxury for some. Arrange this through a travel agency or request it from a VIP representative as soon as you step off the plane. In the old, gloomy main terminal it can take an hour or more to queue up and collect your baggage, and even longer at check-in.

The borders with Turkey and Azerbaijan are firmly shut, though you can fly from Istanbul to Yerevan. The border posts with Georgia (Sadakhlo is the main route to Tbilisi, Bavra is the closest to reach Turkey) and Iran (Agarak, near Meghri) are open from 8am to 6pm daily. Make sure you receive a tourist visa (\$30, 21 days), not a three-day transit visa (see p181 for more on Armenian visas). There are some smaller border crossings with Georgia near Tashir and Privolnoye in Lori *marz*, but it's unlikely you'll use these without your own transport (preferably a jeep to tackle Georgia's rural 'roads'). All border posts are open to foreigners.

Entering Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan, after personal intervention by former president Heydar Aliyev, has exemplary customs officers and passport control. Baku's Binə Airport is a large, modern and efficient place to arrive and foreigners are not harassed. Visas are available on arrival, but double check this before travelling (see p249).

The Azeri-Russian border is closed to foreigners. The border posts with Iran at Astara

and Julfa (in Naxçıvan) are both now fully open after being closed for decades, as is the border with Turkey from Sadarak, Naxçıvan. Borders with Armenia are, of course, firmly shut, and anywhere near the de-facto border of Karabakh is out of bounds. The two Georgian border posts at Krasny Most (Red Bridge) and Lagodekhi and Baku's sea port are all problem-free. The only place to get an Azeri visa on arrival is Baku's Binə Airport.

PASSPORTS

Azeri immigration officials will refuse entry to people travelling on passports with visas for Nagorno-Karabakh in them, as visiting what remains a *de jure* part of Azerbaijan is considered illegal entry to Azeri territory. If you plan to go to Karabakh, ask to have your visa put on a separate piece of paper. Even Armenian visas tend to arouse interest with Azeri border guards, although this rarely leads to problems.

AIR

A small but growing number of international airlines fly to the three main airports at Tbilisi, Yerevan and Baku. Flight times are around 2½ hours to Moscow, four hours to Europe, five hours to the UK and 12 to 14 hours to the East Coast of North America, not including connections. There are a few direct flights to the Middle East and Central Asia, but very little further afield on to Africa or the Far East. Flying to and from Australasia, you can fly via Dubai or Europe, or even look at a round-the-world ticket. None of the national airlines of the Caucasus are world class, but there are some good European airlines serving all three countries, plus cheaper options via Russia and Ukraine. British Airways is represented by its subsidiary franchise, British Mediterranean Airways.

Airports & Airlines

The region's three main airports are:

Baku Binə Airport (☎ 12257900; www.airportbaku.com)

Tbilisi Novoalexandreyev Airport (☎ 32-433121; www.airport.ge)

Yerevan Zvartnots Airport (☎ 01 187; www.zvartnots.am)

The national airlines of the south Caucasus are all minor operators but each has acquired new aircraft and upped standards. Airzena and Azerbaijan Airlines (AZAL), respectively the Georgian and Azeri national carriers,

have gone rather impressively upmarket. Flights from both countries to former Soviet republics may still be on Tupolev and Ilyushin jets, but most flights to Europe and Asia are aboard Boeing and Airbus aircraft. AZAL's flights to London and Paris are some of the most competitively priced in the region, at around \$600 return. Armenian Airlines folded in 2002. Most of its routes were taken over by Armavia, owned by Siberia Airlines. It uses modern aircraft on routes to Europe and older Ilyushin and Tupolev jets to Russia, Iran and Syria. A new, smaller carrier, Armenian International Airlines, flies Airbus to Paris and Dubai.

AIRLINES FLYING TO & FROM GEORGIA

Aeroflot Russian Airlines (☎ 32-943896/927; www.aeroflot.com) airline code SU; hub Sheremetyevo Airport, Moscow

Airzena Georgian Airlines (☎ 32-252668, 32-387103; www.airzena.com) airline code A9; hub Tbilisi International Airport

Austria Airlines (☎ 32-778214/5; www.aa.com) airline code OS; hub Vienna International Airport

British Mediterranean Airways (☎ 32-940719/20; www.british-mediterranean.com) airline code BA; hub Heathrow Airport, London

Caucasus Airlines (☎ 32-943896/927; www.caucasairlines.ge) airline code NS

Germania Express (☎ 32-773171; www.geox.de) airline code ST; hub Düsseldorf International Airport

Swiss Air (☎ 32-943825/27; www.swiss.com) airline code SR; hub Zurich International Airport

Turkish Airlines (☎ 32-940703, 32-959022; www.turkishairlines.com) airline code TK; hub Ataturk Airport, Istanbul

AIRLINES FLYING TO & FROM ARMENIA

Aeroflot Russian Airlines (☎ 01-53 21 31; www.aeroflot.com) airline code SU; hub Sheremetyevo Airport, Moscow

Aerosvit (☎ 01-54 04 43; www.aerosvit.com) airline code VV; hub Boryspil Airport, Kiev

Armavia (☎ 01-56 48 17; armavia@infocom.am) airline code US; hub Zvartnots Airport, Yerevan

Armenian International Airways (☎ 01-28 77 32; www.armenianairways.com) airline code MV; hub Zvartnots Airport, Yerevan

WELCOME TO MOSCOW!

Flights via Moscow to the Caucasus can be as much as 40% cheaper than flights via other hubs. While some people sail through without difficulties, we do hear plenty of stories of people who've been misled, intimidated and left to stew at one of Moscow's airports. The clichés about steely-eyed, dour officials and hours wasted in unheated waiting halls contain enough truth that some regular travellers will happily spend extra to avoid Moscow. That said, it can save money, so here's what you do.

Russian immigration rarely honours the three-day transit period theoretically available if you have a visa for one of the Caucasus countries. This leaves you two options – buy a three-day Russian transit visa from an embassy or authorised visa service office (fees vary from one place to another, but allow about \$75 to \$100 for single entry and \$100 to \$120 for double entry), or book a flight through Sheremetyevo Airport where you can use a no-visa transit service. Our advice is to get the three-day transit visa regardless and breathe more easily. Even with the extra fee, the flight could still be cheaper than via another country, and if you don't have a visa there's no guarantee that things won't come unstuck.

The trick to Sheremetyevo Airport is that there are two terminals on either side of the runways; one for international flights and one for regional and internal flights. You can travel from one to the other without a visa, as long as you travel on a special service between transit points. The maximum visa 'free' period is 24 hours. These transit points only seem to be staffed during daylight hours, so if your flight arrives in the middle of the night you may need to use a transit visa to go through immigration, catch a taxi and go back through immigration in the other terminal. If you plan to fly via Sheremetyevo without a visa, make sure the airline, ie Aeroflot, knows that you need free transit. Even better, get them to take you to the transit point. Here you may have to wear down the Russian official to let you use the service. A quietly determined stance and a firm stare seem to work, eventually. Obviously it's simpler if you speak Russian. If you fly in and out of any other Russian airport, you need a transit visa.





Austria Airlines (☎ 01-51 22 01; www.aa.com) airline code OS; hub Vienna International Airport
British Mediterranean Airways (☎ 01-52 13 83; www.british-mediterranean.com) airline code KJ; hub Heathrow Airport, London

Caspian Air (☎ 01-52 44 01; info@tatev.com) airline code CA; hub Mehrabad Airport, Tehran

Caucasus Airlines (☎ 01-52 52 10; www.caucasusairlines.ge) airline code NS; hub Tbilisi International Airport

CSA Czech Airlines (☎ 01-52 21 62; www.csa.cz/en/) airline code OK; hub Ruzyně Airport, Prague

Syrian Arab Airlines (☎ 01-53 85 89; astrontravel@netsys.am) airline code RB; hub Damascus International Airport

AIRLINES FLYING TO & FROM AZERBAIJAN

Aeroflot (☎ 981167; www.aeroflot.com) airline code SU; hub Sheremetyevo Airport, Moscow

Air Kazakhstan (☎ 937837; www.airkaz.com) airline code 9Y; hub Almaty International Airport

Azerbaijan Airlines (AZAL; ☎ 934004; www.azal.az) airline code J2; hub Bina Airport, Baku

British Mediterranean Airways (☎ 970500/1; www.british-mediterranean.com) airline code KJ; hub Heathrow Airport, London

Domodedovo (☎ 934243; www.dmo.tch.ru) airline code E3; hub Domodedovo Airport, Moscow

ImAir Airlines (☎ 984587/2376) airline code IK; hub Bina Airport, Baku

Iran Air (☎ 985886; www.iranair.co.ir) airline code IR; hub Mehrabad Airport, Tehran

Lufthansa (☎ 907050/1; www.lufthansa.com) airline code LH; hub Frankfurt International Airport

Turan Airlines (☎ 989431) airline code 3T; hub Bina Airport, Baku

Turkish Airlines (☎ 975352; www.turkishairlines.com) airline code TK; hub Ataturk Airport, Istanbul

Uzbekistan Airlines (☎ 983120; www.uzbekistan-airways.com) airline code HY; hub Vostochny Airport, Tashkent

Tickets

Different deals and packages come and go all the time, but the best advice is to check widely and buy early. There are reliable travel agencies in the major Caucasian cities, some with websites offering specials – look under Travel Agencies entries for the capital cities. In researching flights to the Caucasus with a travel agent elsewhere, you may have to suggest possible routes and airlines – and perhaps endure some puzzled looks (“Tbilisi...where is that exactly?”). Specialists on Russian travel are a good place to check for cheap flights via

Moscow and Kiev. From the more far-flung places like South Africa and New Zealand you should look into a round-the-world ticket with one or two stops to the Caucasus with the OneWorld or Star Alliance airline carriers.

From Asia

There are flights to cities like Tashkent and Almaty in Central Asia and to Dubai and Damascus in the Middle East, but very few to major east Asian hubs such as Singapore, Hong Kong or Bangkok. Caspian Airlines has two or three flights a week (depending on demand) between Yerevan and Tehran (\$125/200 one-way/return). Armavia also has flights to Tehran and to Aleppo in Syria. There are flights from Baku and Yerevan to Dubai. Turkish Airlines operates flights from Trabzon to Tbilisi, but not from Istanbul or Ankara. It has frequent flights to Baku.

Recommended agencies include:

Al-Rais Travels (www.alrais.com) in Dubai

Orion-Tour (www.oriontour.com) in Istanbul

From Australia & New Zealand

Connections are not great. Look at buying a round-the-world ticket or fly via Europe. The shortest route is via Dubai to Yerevan or Baku, though at the moment this involves changing airlines and it isn't particularly cheap – around \$2000 return. Look out for any new flights with Emirates or Gulf Air – Emirates used to fly to Baku. A return trip on Austria Airlines is around \$1700 from Sydney to Tbilisi or Yerevan. Flights via Moscow are competitive; Aeroflot charges around \$1500 from Sydney to each of the three capitals.

In Australia, try these travel agencies for tickets:

STA Travel (☎ 1300 733 035; www.statravel.com.au) Branches throughout Australia.

Flight Centre (☎ 133 133; www.flightcentre.com.au) Also has offices throughout Australia.

www.travel.com.au For online bookings

Some recommended travel agencies for New Zealanders:

Flight Centre (☎ 0800 243 544; www.flightcentre.co.nz) Offices across New Zealand.

STA Travel (☎ 0508 782 872; www.statravel.co.nz) Branches throughout the country.

www.travel.co.nz Recommended for online bookings.

From Europe

It's possible to fly directly from London to Yerevan and Baku with British Mediterranean; their Tbilisi flight was suspended at the time of writing due to disputes with the Tbilisi Airport authorities.

Other helpful gateway cities to research include Amsterdam, Vienna, İstanbul, Prague and Frankfurt, all of which have flights to two or more cities in the Caucasus. Connections through Kiev are very competitive, and Kiev's airport is easier to negotiate than Moscow's. One rare bargain is the no-frills German airline Germania Express, which flies once a week to Tbilisi from Düsseldorf for \$250/380 one-way/return.

From London, Paris and Amsterdam, return flights to any of the capitals range from \$500 to \$730.

AZAL, ImAir, Airzena, Turkish Airlines and Armavia fly from İstanbul to cities in the region. Turkish Airlines doesn't fly to Yerevan, but it does fly to Tbilisi and Baku. Armavia flies between İstanbul and Yerevan.

Recommended agencies include:

FRANCE

AnyWay (☎ 0892 893 892; www.anyway.fr)

Lastminute (☎ 0892 705 000; www.lastminute.fr)

Nouvelles Frontières (☎ 0825 000 747; www.nouvelles-frontieres.fr)

OTU Voyages (www.otu.fr) This agency specialises in student and youth travellers.

Voyageurs du Monde (☎ 01 40 15 11 15; www.vdm.com)

GERMANY

Expedia (www.expedia.de)

Just Travel (☎ 089 747 3330; www.justtravel.de)

Lastminute (☎ 01805 284 366; www.lastminute.de)

STA Travel (☎ 01805 456 422; www.statravel.de) For travellers under the age of 26.

ITALY

CTS Viaggi (☎ 06 462 0431; www.cts.it) Specialises in student and youth travel.

NETHERLANDS

Airfair (☎ 020 620 5121; www.airfair.nl)

UK

Bridge the World (☎ 0870 444 7474; www.b-t-w.co.uk)

Flightbookers (☎ 0870 010 7000; www.ebookers.com)

Flight Centre (☎ 0870 890 8099; www.flightcentre.co.uk)

North-South Travel (☎ 01245 608 291; www.northsouthtravel.co.uk) North-South Travel donate part of their profit to projects in the developing world.

Quest Travel (☎ 0870 447 3547; www.questtravel.com)

STA Travel (☎ 020 300 0392; www.statravel.co.uk) For travellers under the age of 26.

Traillfinders (www.trailfinders.co.uk)

Travel Bag (☎ 0870 890 1456; www.travelbag.co.uk)

From Russia & Ukraine

Flights to Russia count for more than half of all international flights into the region. Flying via Moscow can be a competitive fare from many parts of the world. Besides Aeroflot and the major Caucasian airlines, there are a large number of regional Russian and Ukrainian carriers, (eg Pulkovo, Vnukovo and Donbass) with flights to the three capitals and regional airports such as Batumi, Gyumri and Gəncə. Flights cost around \$120 one-way and \$200 return between the Caucasus and Moscow. **Infinity Travel** (☎ 234 6555; www.infinity.ru) can organise flights from Ukraine and Russia to the Caucasus.

From the USA & Canada

Nicer airlines fly via Europe, but routes via Moscow and Kiev are cheaper. So far none of the national carriers have flights to the US or Canada. British Airways and their local partner British Mediterranean fly from North America to Baku and Yerevan.

Flights via Europe take up to 16 hours, not including connection times. Prices include around \$850 return from New York to Baku or Yerevan with British Airways, \$900 from Toronto and \$950 from Los Angeles. Delta Airlines has a connection with Armavia through İstanbul for \$1050 return. Czech Airways and Austria Airlines also connect with the region.

The following agencies are recommended for online bookings:

www.cheaptickets.com

www.cyrstravel.com

www.expedia.com

www.lowestfare.com

www.orbitz.com

www.sta.com

www.travelocity.com

LAND**Border Crossings**

Border crossings are generally open 8am to 8pm, or 24 hours on the main routes

between Georgia and Turkey and Georgia and Azerbaijan.

OUTSIDE THE CAUCASUS

Land crossings between Georgia and Turkey are heavily trafficked by trucks and minibuses. There should be no problems for travellers trying to cross into Georgia from Turkey at Sarpi (Sarp) on the Black Sea coast or inland at Posof, although the latter is a little off the main drag. Azerbaijan also has a border with Turkey, at Sədərək on the western tip of Naxçıvan, busy with trucks and transport. Turkish visas are available at all borders, costing \$20 for most Europeans, but \$100 for US citizens. Armenia's borders with Turkey and Azerbaijan are firmly sealed.

The borders with Russia are closed to foreigners at present. The main crossings are at Daryal on the Georgian Military Hwy, and at Samur in northern Azerbaijan. The Iranian borders with Armenia and Azerbaijan are open, provided you have an Iranian visa. The Armenia-Iran border crossing is at Agarak on the Araks River. The main link with the Azeri 'mainland' is at Astara, while the Culfa border crossing serves Naxçıvan.

GEORGIA-ARMENIA

On the main Tbilisi-Yerevan road the main border crossing is Sadakhlo-Bagratashen, in the east. Two others are less frequented; the Mughanlo-Tashir crossing on the road between Marneuli and Vanadzor; and at Bavra between Ninotsminda and Gyumri. Travellers heading into Armenia can buy a three-week visa for \$30, or a two-week \$80 Georgian visa in the other direction.

GEORGIA-AZERBAIJAN

The main border crossings are Krasny Most on the main Tbilisi-Baku highway, and the Lagodekhi-Balakən crossing on the Tbilisi-Zaqatala road. Two-week Georgian visas can be purchased at these crossings for \$80, but not Azeri visas. Both crossings are relatively hassle free.

Bus

From Tbilisi there are daily buses to Istanbul (\$40, 72 hours) and to Trabzon (\$25, 30 hours), and there are daily buses from Baku to Istanbul and Ankara. There are no direct bus connections from Azerbaijan to Iran, but you can take any bus to

Astara (\$3, five hours) and then cross the border by foot and take a bus to Tehran from there.

There are daily buses between Yerevan and Iran (\$30, 14 hours to Tabriz, 28 hours to Tehran). From Yerevan there are also buses via Georgia to Turkey, including a masochistic three-day marathon trip to Istanbul. The road from the Armenian border at Bavra to Posof via Georgia is in terrible shape and is worth avoiding – it can take 10 to 12 hours by bus.

There are also regular bus services from all three countries to southern Russia and Moscow, but the Russian borders with Georgia and Azerbaijan are closed to foreigners.

Train

The only trains beyond the three republics are from Baku to southern Russia, Ukraine and Moscow. The Azeri-Russian border was closed to foreigners at the time of writing; these services are open to Azeris and Russians only.

SEA Georgia

The Black Sea ports of Poti and Batumi have regular sailings for Sochi (Russia) and Ilycheyevsk (Ukraine). Batumi's **ferry terminal** (☎ 74912, ext 1209; ask for 'spravochnaya', which means 'information') operates sailings to Sochi via Poti Monday, Wednesday and Friday. The two boats sail against each other on any given day (ie when one is leaving Batumi, the other is leaving Sochi), so if you want to take the quicker one, you'll need to call ahead. The *Kometa* leaves at noon and takes six hours, costing \$60 one-way. The *Mikhail Svetlov* leaves at 4pm and sails overnight, taking 14 hours and costing \$52 one-way.

There are also sailings to Ilycheyevsk in Ukraine by **Istra** (☎ 74119; www.instrageo.com; Kutaisi Kucha 35, Batumi), usually every Sunday and often more regularly (averaging once every three days). While Istra runs cargo boats, there are on-board cabins for travellers, costing between \$105 and \$145. See the website www.ukrferry.com for schedules.

Sailings to Burgas (Bulgaria) and Trabzon (Turkey) also exist, but are less regular and unmetabled. To get to Sokhumi in Abkhazia by boat from Georgia, you'll need to travel to Sochi (Russia) and then take another ferry back to Sokhumi.



From Georgia's second port of Poti the **Eximteka** (☎ 20655/0) shipping company will take passengers to Burgas in Bulgaria via Novorossiysk in Russia. As in Batumi, **Istra** (☎ 21060, 21998; www.instrageo.com; Geidze Kucha 8, Poti) can also take passengers from Poti to Ilychevsk, Ukraine.

Azerbaijan

Ferries from Baku go to Turkmenbashi, Turkmenistan (\$40 to \$100, 13 to 18 hours, several boats per day) and Bandar-é-Anzali in Iran (\$40 to \$80, 21 to 30 hours, two boats per day). There is also a (roughly) weekly connection to Aktau in Kazakhstan (\$40 to \$60, 24 hours). However, you'll have to enquire at the port itself for departures during the time you visit, as timetables do not exist; the ferries simply leave when they are full. There are no longer regular connections to Makhachkala or Astrakhan in Russia, although you might get lucky if a ship is passing through. In all cases, simply buy the cheapest seat-only ticket and 'upgrade' on board for a fraction of the full cabin price.

You will not be allowed to board the ferry to Turkmenistan without a valid Turkmen visa, even though you are theoretically able to get a transit visa on arrival in Turkmenbashi. Likewise, visas to Iran and Kazakhstan are essential.

TOURS

Erka Reisen (☎ 7681 493870; www.erkareisen.de) Based in Germany, Erka are Caucasian travel specialists and offer comprehensive tours of all three countries. They also own the Tbilisi Tourist Centre (p38), one of Tbilisi's better travel agents.

Regent Holidays (☎ 117 921 1711; www.regent-holidays.co.uk) Pioneers of the most unusual and least-visited destinations in the world, UK-based Regent offer tours to Armenia and Georgia with add-on options to Azerbaijan.

Steppes East (☎ 1285 651010 www.steppeseast.co.uk) Mainly focusing on bespoke itineraries for individuals, UK company Steppes also offers small group tours led by regional experts. They organise tours to all three Caucasian countries.

Explore (☎ 1252 760000; www.explore.co.uk) Offers a very comprehensive Golden Fleece tour that takes in Georgia and Armenia, as well as offering an extension into Azerbaijan.

This tour comes in at around £995 for the 16 days in Armenia and Georgia and £1365 for the 20-day tour including Azerbaijan.

GETTING AROUND

AIR

Flights between the three countries are limited. AZAL flies twice weekly between Baku and Tbilisi. There is one AZAL flight per week between Baku and Ganca, and four flights per week on AZAL between Baku and Naxçivan. Caucasus Air, a small foreign-owned airline based in Tbilisi, flies clean, new Embrauer 30-seater planes to Baku, Batumi and Yerevan at least twice a week, charging \$130 one-way and \$270 return. In Georgia there are also irregular flights from Tbilisi to Mestia, the mountain capital of the remote Svaneti region.

BICYCLE

It's very rare to see cyclists in Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, probably for three reasons: firstly, the terrain is very hilly and the roads are often terrible, so only mountain bikes can cope; secondly, the recklessness of motorists makes cycling pretty hazardous; and thirdly, many local people look down their noses at cyclists – cars are the thing to have! However, foreign cyclists have reported that they got a very warm reception here. Just take great care on the main roads and bring all your own spare parts.

BOAT

There are very limited boat services within the Caucasus. A boat runs between Baku and Lankaran (\$10, four hours) at 9.30am every Tuesday and Thursday, returning the same days from Lankaran at 3.30pm. While this is a quick way to get there, check that the service is running, as on a perfectly

DEPARTURE TAXES

Armenia's Zvartnots and Shirak airports levy a 10,000 dram (\$17) departure tax, to be paid before immigration control at a money-exchange counter. Departure taxes from Tbilisi are included in the price of the ticket. There is no departure tax in Azerbaijan.

sunny and calm June day the service was cancelled due to 'bad weather'. It's best to call Baku Yacht Club (☎ 050 3950075) to check if it's sailing.

In Georgia the Batumi-Sochi ferry calls into Poti when it sails three times a week in both directions, taking you a good way up the Georgian coast (p265). This leg of the trip costs between \$10 and \$15 and takes between one and four hours, depending on which boat you take.

BUS & MINIVAN

Buses in the Caucasus are mostly ageing Soviet-era workhorses with rumbling engines and ripped seats. They pale in comparison to marshrutkas (minivans) for speed and reliability, if not for baggage space. Buses are usually very cheap (a few dollars on most regional routes). Reservations are recommended only for international buses.

The drawback for travellers in remote areas is that the buses are timed for local markets, arriving in town from a village in the morning and returning in the afternoon, with no public transport out of the village until the next morning. Buses have the advantage of more room for luggage, including big loads of produce for the market. This can slow down buses quite considerably on steep stretches and make for awkward seating next to stacks of potato sacks. Country buses can turn into picaresque journeys, involving holding someone's geese on a slow amble through the countryside, stopping to change tyres and correcting tilting suspension.

Marshrutkas (the full Russian name is marshrutnoye taxi) are 10- to 20-seat minivans, typically a Ford Econoline van, which travel a fixed route, picking up passengers and putting them down on request. They're the most frequent option in Armenia and Georgia, while buses are more common in Azerbaijan.

It pays to arrive about 20 or 30 minutes before the departure time. Marshrutkas usually cost a little more than buses but they are the fastest public transport available. They nearly always have a sign in the front window with the destination in one of the local languages (making them tricky to identify in Georgia and Armenia where the Latin alphabet is not used). To hail a marshrutka or a bus, just stick out your

arm and wave. If you want to get off, say *gaacharet* (stop) in Georgia, *ho gunkyr* in Armenia and *sakhla birada jh* in Azerbaijan. If boarding a bus at the terminus you sometimes pay at a ticket office; otherwise you pay on board.

Costs

Some typical bus fares:

From	to	one-way fare	duration
Baku	Quba	\$3	2hr
Baku	Şaki	\$3.50	7hr
Tbilisi	Baku	\$10	14hr
Tbilisi	Batumi	\$8	7½hr
Yerevan	Batumi	\$16	14-20hr

These fares gives a general idea of what marshrutka travel costs:

From	to	one-way fare	duration
Tbilisi	Batumi	\$8	8hr
Tbilisi	Kutaisi	\$3	4½hr
Yerevan	Gyumri	\$2	2hr
Yerevan	Stepanakert	\$8	7-8hr

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Driving in the Caucasus requires steely nerves and fast reactions, and for this reason most visitors avoid getting behind the wheel. With such low local wages it's cheaper and easier to hire a car and a driver accustomed to the rich and varied local traffic conditions. Even main roads can have potholes, and a reasonably smooth-surfaced stretch of road can deteriorate into a cratered track in the space of a few metres. Conditions on major highways in Armenia and Azerbaijan are improving, but country roads practically require a jeep (usually a Niva, a Lada jeep). Add to this a lack of signs and road markings, the bravura driving techniques of local road users, and the dangers of unfenced roads and livestock, and the local driving experience leaves a lot to be desired.

Driving is on the right, or at least it's supposed to be. In reality, vehicles weave all over the road in an attempt to avoid the worst of the potholes. Almost all road signs in Georgia are in Georgian script only; Azerbaijan has a mixture of old Russian Cyrillic signs and newer ones in Latin; and in Armenia

signs might be in Russian, Latin or Armenian script. The numerous police checkpoints you will see are primarily for making checks on commercial vehicles – you should slow down as you pass, but there's no need to stop unless you are flagged down. If you are stopped, hand over your licence and insurance papers, keep smiling and say 'tourist' a lot. Pretend not to speak the language, even if you do, otherwise you will be engaged in an interminable debate. If you have done nothing wrong, don't give in to any demand for bribes – just sit tight, and the policeman will get bored or frustrated and send you on your way.

Exploring minor roads and unsurfaced tracks calls for a 4WD, which can be hired from rental agencies in the capitals. (Alternatively, try using an ageing Lada – local people manage to drive these sturdy old workhorses into the most unlikely places! Many travel agencies, hotels and guesthouses can arrange one for you.) If you are planning to venture into the mountains, it's safest to travel in a convoy of at least two vehicles. Mountain roads are often blocked or washed away by landslides and flash floods.

Rental costs (without driver) range from around \$50 to \$75 a day for an ordinary saloon car, to \$120-plus per day for a 4WD. Note that most rental cars (and foreign vehicles) require 95-octane fuel, which is not as widely available as diesel and low-octane Lada-juice – try to find out in advance where 95-octane will be available, and make sure you fill up at every opportunity. Unleaded petrol is unheard of.

Motorcycles are very rare birds in Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. The same words of caution apply to them as to cars. You will need to bring spare parts and tools with you.

Bringing Your Own Vehicle

Drivers of cars and riders of motorcycles will need the vehicle's registration papers, liability insurance and an international drivers' permit in addition to their domestic licence. Beware: there are two kinds of international permits, one of which is needed mostly for citizens of former British colonies.

In addition you may also need a *carnet de passage en douane*, which is effectively a

passport for the vehicle and acts as a temporary waiver of import duty. The *carnet* may also need to specify any expensive spare parts you're planning to carry with you, such as a petrol tank. Contact your local automobile association for details about all documentation.

Liability insurance is not available in advance for many out-of-the-way countries, but has to be bought when crossing the border. The cost and quality of such local insurance varies wildly, and you will find in the Caucasus that you are often effectively travelling uninsured.

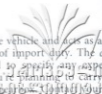
HITCHING

This is not a common practice, except in rural areas with poor public transport where local people regularly flag down passing vehicles. In such places it is pretty easy to cadge a lift, provided there is any traffic at all. You will probably be expected to contribute a small amount of 'petrol money'. This is not a rip-off – local people are expected to chip in too.

Hitching is never perfectly safe anywhere. Solo hitching by men or women is not a good idea – the best combination is as a man and a woman. Refusing rides from drunk drivers is crucial, and generally speaking you can never be too careful.

TRAIN

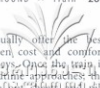
The main railway line in the south Caucasus runs from Batumi in the west, through Poti, Kutaisi, Gori, Tbilisi and Gəncə to Baku, with a branch south through Vanadzor and Gyumri to Yerevan. From Baku there are lines north to Xaçmaz and south to Lənkəran, but trains no longer run to Naxçıvan. Train travel in the Caucasus is slow – very slow. But it's also very cheap, and as most intercity trains run overnight they offer the chance to save money on a hotel bed. There are four classes of ticket: *spalnyy vagon* (sleeping car), usually abbreviated to SV (CB in Cyrillic) or *luks*, has comfy upholstered berths and only two people to a compartment; *kupe* (compartment) has four to a compartment, with harder berths and fold-down upper bunks; *platskartnyy* (reserved) has open bunk accommodation, and is more crowded and less comfortable; *obshchiy* (general) is just an unreserved bench seat.



SILK ROAD EXPRESS

The Silk Road Express between Tbilisi and Baku is the first train in the region to claim international status (and big spenders). It departs Baku five times a week at 7.30pm, arriving in Tbilisi at 8.30pm the next day. Tickets cost \$168/270 one-way/return, and business class return \$470. This compares to \$22 in 1st class on the regular train. While you save a few hours, the other differences are largely cosmetic, with a selection of brash furnishings that make the normal Soviet train look like the epitome of good taste. However, the toilets are clean and you get a four-course meal thrown in.

An *elektrichka* is a local service linking a city and its suburbs or nearby towns, or groups of adjacent towns; often useful for day trips, though they can be crowded.



Kupe berths usually offer the best compromise between cost and comfort for overnight journeys. Once the train is under way and bedtime approaches, the attendant will dole out (or buy) the lowcases so that you can make up your own bed. The attendant will also wake you up before arrival and collect the used bed linen. It's best to bring along all the food and drink you think you'll need, though it is often possible to nip out during stops and buy overpriced drinks and snacks on the platform.

Typical rail fares (for *kupe* berths) and journey times include:

from	to	one-way fare	duration
Baku	Ganca	\$6.25	5-6hr
Baku	Lankaran	\$4	9hr
Tbilisi	Baku	\$22	11-12½hr
Tbilisi	Batumi	\$7	7hr
Tbilisi	Yerevan	\$14	16-20hr

Health

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Prevention is the key to staying healthy while abroad. A little planning before departure, particularly for pre-existing illnesses, will save trouble later: see your dentist before a long trip; carry a spare pair of contact lenses and glasses, and take your optical prescription with you.

The health-care systems in the Caucasus can be very patchy due to underinvestment in hospitals since the fall of communism. Saying 'thanks' to a nurse or a doctor with cash is the norm across the region. In the Caucasus, where surgeons can go unpaid for a year, bribes are paid as much as 90% of the time. The payments are cut into shares and distributed by seniority among medical staff. The result is that staff and patients bargain over treating a broken leg.

There are fair to adequate hospitals in the three national capitals, but treatment is expensive. It's crucial to have comprehensive travel insurance with medical evacuation cover, not just a policy that will reimburse you months in the future.

BEFORE YOU GO

Bring medications in their original, clearly labelled containers. A signed and dated letter from your physician describing your medical condition and medications, includ-



თქვენთვის

ing generic names, carry a copy of the letter. If carrying syringes or needles, carry a physician's letter documenting their medical necessity.

INSURANCE

If your health insurance doesn't cover you for medical expenses abroad, consider getting extra insurance. Find out in advance if your insurance plan will make payments directly to providers or reimburse you later for overseas health expenditures. Doctors and nurses in the Caucasus do expect cash payments, but as many of these are unofficial payments, it's hard to see an insurance company reimbursing you for this, even if you could wrangle a receipt in exchange.

RECOMMENDED VACCINATIONS

The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends that all travellers should be covered for diphtheria, tetanus, measles, mumps, rubella, polio, and hepatitis B, regardless of their destination. Planning to travel is a great time to ensure that all routine vaccination cover is complete.

Since most vaccines don't produce immunity until at least two weeks after they're given, visit a physician at least six weeks before departure. Ask your doctor for an International Certificate of Vaccination (otherwise known as the yellow booklet), which will list all the vaccinations you've received. Those travelling from Africa will be required to present proof of yellow fever vaccination upon entry, but it's a good idea to carry it wherever you travel.

ONLINE RESOURCES

There is a wealth of travel health advice on the Internet:

www.mdtravelhealth.com Provides complete travel health recommendations for every country and is updated daily.

www.fitfortravel.scot.nhs.uk General travel advice for the layperson.

www.ageconcern.org.uk Advice on travel for the elderly.

www.maristopes.org.uk Good for information on women's health and contraception.

www.who.int/ith/ WHO publish a superb book called *International Travel and Health*, which is revised annually and is available free online.

GOVERNMENT WEBSITES

It's usually a good idea to consult your government's travel health website before departure, if one is available:

Australia www.dfat.gov.au/travel/

Canada www.travelhealth.gc.ca

United Kingdom www.doh.gov.uk/traveladvice/

United States www.cdc.gov/travel/

IN TRANSIT

DEEP VEIN THROMBOSIS (DVT)

Blood clots may form in the legs (deep vein thrombosis or DVT) during plane flights, chiefly because of prolonged immobility. The longer the flight, the greater the risk. The chief symptom of DVT is swelling or pain of the foot, ankle or calf, usually – but not always – on just one side. When a blood clot travels to the lungs, it may cause chest pain and difficulty breathing. If you have any of these symptoms you should immediately seek medical attention. To prevent the development of DVT on long flights you should walk about the cabin, contract the leg muscles while sitting, drink plenty of fluids and avoid alcohol and tobacco.

IN GEORGIA, ARMENIA & AZERBAIJAN

AVAILABILITY & COST OF HEALTH CARE

Medical care is not always available outside major cities, and medical supplies required in hospital may need to be bought from a pharmacy with limited opening hours. Nursing care may be limited; this is something families and friends are expected to provide. The assistance provided by your insurance may be able to locate the nearest source of medical help, or ask at your hotel. In an emergency contact your embassy or consulate.

The standards of dental care are variable and there is an increased risk of hepatitis B and HIV transmission via poorly sterilised equipment. Your travel insurance will not usually cover you for anything other than emergency dental treatment.

This is not the place to be stuck without decent medical insurance. EU citizens have

the right to free health care in Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan under reciprocal arrangements; however, if you visit a typical hospital in the region, it'll be clear who is getting the best deal here.

INFECTIOUS DISEASES

Poliomyelitis

Polio is spread through contaminated food and water. It is one of the vaccines given in childhood and should be boosted every 10 years, either orally (a drop on the tongue), or as an injection.

Rabies

Spread through bites, scratches or licks on broken skin from an infected animal, rabies is always fatal unless treated promptly. Animal handlers should be vaccinated, as should those travelling to remote areas where a reliable source of post-bite vaccine is not available within 24 hours should be vaccinated before they go. Three injections are needed over a month. If you have not been vaccinated, you will need a course of five injections starting as soon as possible after the injury or within 24 hours. If you have been vaccinated, you will need fewer injections and have more time to seek medical help.

Tick-borne Encephalitis

Spread by tick bites, this is a serious infection of the brain, and vaccination is advised for those in risk areas who are unable to avoid tick bites, such as campers and rambblers. Two doses of vaccine will give a year's protection, three doses up to three years.

Typhoid & Hepatitis A

Both these diseases are spread through contaminated food (particularly shellfish) and water. Typhoid can cause septicemia; hepatitis A causes liver inflammation and jaundice. Neither is usually fatal but recovery can be prolonged. Typhoid vaccine (Typhim Vi, Typherix) gives protection for three years. In some countries, the oral vaccine Vivotif is also available. Hepatitis A vaccine (Avaxim, VAQTA, Havrix) is given as an injection; a single dose will give protection for up to a year, a booster after a year gives 10 years' protection. Hepatitis A and typhoid vaccines (such as Hepatyrix or Viatim) can also be given as a single-dose vaccine.

TRAVELLER'S DIARRHOEA

If you develop diarrhoea, be sure to drink plenty of fluids, preferably in the form of an oral rehydration solution such as Dioralyte. If diarrhoea is bloody, persists for more than 72 hours or is accompanied by fever, shaking, chills or severe abdominal pain, you should seek medical attention.

ENVIRONMENTAL HAZARDS & TREATMENT

Altitude Sickness

Most people feel at least a little unwell if they travel from sea level to 3500m. Headache, fatigue, flu-like symptoms, undue breathlessness on exertion, loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, minor swelling of the face, feet and hands, dizziness, difficulty sleeping and irregular breathing during sleep are all common complaints. These are symptoms of Acute Mountain Sickness (AMS), which usually develops during the first 24 hours at altitude.

AMS is common at 3500m and likely with rapid ascent to 5000m. Acclimatisation and slow ascent are recommended. Dehydration may worsen symptoms of AMS – drink at least four litres of water a day. A practical way to monitor hydration is by ensuring that urine is clear and plentiful. Avoid tobacco and alcohol. Diamox (acetazolamide) reduces the headache pain caused by AMS and helps the body acclimatise to the lack of oxygen. It is only available on prescription and those who are allergic to sulphonamide antibiotics may also be allergic to Diamox.

Heatstroke

Heatstroke occurs following excessive fluid loss with inadequate replacement of fluids and salt. Symptoms include headache, dizziness and tiredness. Dehydration is already happening by the time you feel thirsty – aim to drink sufficient water to produce pale, diluted urine. To treat heatstroke, drink water and/or fruit juice, and cool the body with cold water and fans.

Hypothermia

Hypothermia occurs when the body loses heat faster than it can produce it. As ever, proper preparation will reduce the risks of getting it. Even on a hot day in the mountains, the weather can change rapidly so carry waterproof garments, warm

layers and a hat, and inform others of your route. Hypothermia starts with shivering, loss of judgment and clumsiness. Unless rewarming occurs, the sufferer deteriorates into apathy, confusion and coma. Prevent further heat loss by seeking shelter, warm dry clothing, hot sweet drinks and shared bodily warmth.

Insect Bites & Stings

Mosquitoes are found in most parts of the Caucasus; they may not carry malaria but can cause irritation and infected bites. Use a DEET-based insect repellent.

Bees and wasps only cause real problems to those with a severe allergy (anaphylaxis.) If you have a severe allergy to bee or wasp stings carry an 'epipen' or similar adrenaline injection.

Sand flies are found around the Mediterranean beaches. They usually only cause a nasty itchy bite but can carry a rare skin disorder called cutaneous leishmaniasis.

Bed bugs lead to very itchy lumpy bites. Spraying the mattress with insect killer after changing bedding will get rid of them.

Scabies are tiny mites that live in the skin, particularly between the fingers. They cause an intensely itchy rash. Scabies is easily treated with lotion from a pharmacy; other members of the household also need to be treated to avoid spreading scabies between asymptomatic carriers.

Water

Tap water may not be so safe to drink; it's best to stick to bottled water or boil water for 10 minutes, use water purification tablets or a filter. Do not drink water from rivers or lakes, as this may contain bacteria or viruses that can cause diarrhoea or vomiting. There are many piped springs in farming regions across the Caucasus; many are safe but there's always a slight risk of contamination so follow the above precautions.

TRAVELLING WITH CHILDREN

Make sure the children are up to date with routine vaccinations, and discuss possible travel vaccines well before departure as some vaccines are not suitable for children under one year old.

In hot, moist climates any wound or break in the skin is likely to let in infection. The area should be cleaned and kept dry.



Remember to avoid contaminated food and water. If your child has vomiting or diarrhoea, lost fluid and salts must be replaced. It may be helpful to take rehydration powders for reconstituting with boiled water.

Children should be encouraged to avoid and mistrust any dogs or other mammals because of the risk of rabies and other diseases. Any bite, scratch or lick from a warm-blooded, furry animal should immediately be thoroughly cleaned. If there is any possibility that the animal is infected with rabies, immediate medical assistance should be sought.

WOMEN'S HEALTH

Emotional stress, exhaustion and travelling through different time zones can all contribute to an upset in the menstrual pattern. If using oral contraceptives, remember some antibiotics, diarrhoea and vomiting can stop the pill from working and lead to the risk of pregnancy – remember to take condoms with you just in case. Upmarket pharmacies in the capitals stock Western brands of condoms. Time zones, gastrointestinal upsets and antibiotics do not affect injectable contraception.

Applicator tampons are not readily available in Georgia or Azerbaijan but they are

in Armenia. Regular tampons can also be difficult to find; it's a good idea to bring supplies with you or stock up at big city pharmacies.

Travelling during pregnancy is usually possible, but there are important things to consider; always consult your doctor before you travel. The riskiest times to travel are during the first 12 weeks of pregnancy and after 30 weeks.

SEXUAL HEALTH

Emergency contraception (the morning-after pill) is available over the counter in some Western European countries; in other countries, a prescription is necessary. It is most effective if taken within 24 hours after unprotected sex. The **International Planned Parenthood Federation** (www.ippf.org) can advise about the availability of contraception in different countries.

The morning-after pill is not commonly available in the Caucasus. Abortion is by far the most common form of birth control. European-quality condoms are available from major pharmacies in the national capitals – look for a European CE mark, which means it has been rigorously tested. Condoms should be kept in a cool, dry place or they may crack and perish.



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Language

COUNTRY CODES

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Medieval Arab geographers called the Caucasus *jebel al alsine* (mountain of languages). More than 40 different languages are spoken in an area the size of the British Isles. Fortunately, a traveller visiting the south Caucasus should only have to cope with four of these – albeit four different languages belonging to three different language families and written in four different alphabets! However, it would be a pity not to learn at least a little of one or more of the national languages.

RUSSIAN

Russian is widely spoken in all three countries, and few people will ever object to being spoken to in it. More likely, they'll be delighted that a foreigner can communicate with them in any language. If you speak passable Russian, there's no need to try and use the native language (beyond perhaps 'hello' and other basic pleasantries).

For all Caucasian countries, anyone with even basic secondary education over 35 will speak strong Russian. Most young people under 25 will speak little Russian, save those from particularly educated backgrounds. In the three capital cities the penetration of Russian is a lot higher than in the countryside due to the Soviet elite schools that employed (and sometimes still employ) Russian. For a very useful traveller's guide to Russian, get a copy of Lonely Planet's *Russian Phrasebook*.

Conversation & Useful Phrases

Hello.	Здравствуйтe.
<i>zd'rast-vuy-te</i>	
Goodbye.	
<i>da svi-do-ni-ya</i>	До свидания.
Yes/No.	
<i>da/net</i>	Да/Нет.



THE RUSSIAN CYRILLIC ALPHABET

Cyrillic	Roman	Pronunciation
А, а	a	as the 'a' in 'father' (in stressed syllable); as the 'a' in 'ago' (in unstressed syllable)
Б, б	b	as the 'b' in 'but'
В, в	v	as the 'v' in 'van'
Г, г	g	as the 'g' in 'god'
Д, д	d	as the 'd' in 'dog'
Е, е*	e	as the 'ye' in 'yet' (in stressed syllable); as the 'yi' in 'yin' (in unstressed syllable)
Ё, ё**	yo	as the 'yo' in 'yore'
Ж, ж	zh	as the 'z' in 'measure'
З, з	z	as the 'z' in 'zoo'
И, и	i	as the 'ee' in 'meet'
Й, й	y	as the 'y' in 'boy'
К, к	k	as the 'k' in 'kind'
Л, л	l	as the 'l' in 'lamp'
М, м	m	as the 'm' in 'mad'
Н, н	n	as the 'n' in 'not'
О, о	o	as the 'o' in 'more' (in stressed syllable); as the 'a' in 'hard' (in unstressed syllable)
П, п	p	as the 'p' in 'pig'
Р, р	r	as the 'r' in 'rub' (rolled)
С, с	s	as the 's' in 'sing'
Т, т	t	as the 't' in 'ten'
У, у	u	as the 'oo' in 'fool'
Ф, ф	f	as the 'f' in 'fan'
Х, х	kh	as the 'ch' in 'Bach'
Ц, ц	ts	as the 'ts' in 'bits'
Ч, ч	ch	as the 'ch' in 'chin'
Ш, ш	sh	as the 'sh' in 'shop'
Щ, щ	shch	as 'sh-ch' in 'fresh chips'
Ъ, ъ	-	'hard sign'
Ы, ы	y	as the 'y' in 'ill'
Ь, ь	'	'soft sign'
Э, э	e	as the 'e' in 'end'
Ю, ю	yu	as the 'u' in 'use'
Я, я	ya	as the 'ya' in 'yard' (in stressed syllable); as the 'ye' in 'yeam' (in unstressed syllable)

* E, e are transliterated ye when at the beginning of a word

** Ё, ё are often printed without dots

Thank you (very much).

(ba'l'sho-ye) spa-si'ba (Большое) Спасибо.

How are you?

kak di-la? Как дела?

I'm well.

kha-ra-sho Хорошо.

good/OK

kha-ra-sho хорошо

bad

plo-kha плохо

What's your name?

kak vas za-vut? Как вас зовут?

My name is ...

mi-nya za-vut ... Меня зовут ...

Where are you from?

at-ku-da vy? Откуда вы?

I don't speak Russian.

ya ni ga-va-ryu pa ru-ski Я не говорю по-русски.

I don't understand.

ya ni pa-ni-mo-yu Я не понимаю.

Do you speak English?

vy ga-va-ri-te pa ang-ly-ski? Вы говорите по-английски?

Could you write it down, please?

za-pi-shi-te pa-zhal-sta Запишите пожалуйста.

Numbers**How many?** skol'ka? Сколько?

0	nol'	ноль
1	a-din	один
2	dva	два
3	tri	три
4	chi-ty-ri	четыре
5	pyat'	пять
6	shest'	шесть
7	sem'	семь
8	vo-sim'	восемь
9	de-vit'	девять
10	de-sit'	десять
20	dvo-tsat'	двадцать
30	tri-tsat'	тридцать
40	so-rak	сорок
50	pyat'di-syat	пятьдесят
60	shest'di-syat	шестьдесят
70	sem'di-syat	семьдесят
80	vo-sim-di-syat	восемьдесят
90	di-vya-no-sta	девяносто
100	sto	сто
1000	ty-sya-cha	тысяча

Shopping & Services**Do you have ...?**

u vas est' ...? У вас есть ...?

How much is it?

skol'ka sto-it? Сколько стоит?

How much is a room?

skol'ka sto-it no-mer? Сколько стоит номер?

money

den'gi деньги

EMERGENCIES - RUSSIAN**Help!**

na po-mashch'! na po-ma-gi-til'!

I'm sick.

ya bo-lin (m) Я болен.

ya bal'-na (f) Я больна.

I need a doctor.

mne nu-zhin vrach Мне нужен врач.

hospital

bal'-ntsa больница

police

mi-li-tsi-ya милиция

Fire!

pa-zhar! Пожар!

currency exchange

ab-men val-yu-ty обмен валюты

shop

ma-ga-zin магазин

bookshop

knizh-nyy ma-ga-zin книжный магазин

market

ry-nak рынок

pharmacy

ap-te-ka аптека

hotel

gas-ti-ni-tsa гостиница

square/plaza

plo-shchat' площадь (пл.)

street

u-li-tsa улица (ул.)

toilet

tua-let туалет

Time & Days

Dates are given as day-month-year, with the month usually in the Roman numerals. Days of the week are often represented by numbers in timetables; Monday is 1.

When?

today kag-da? Когда?

tomorrow si-vod-nya сегодня

yesterday zaf-tra завтра

vchi-ra вчера

Monday pa-ni-del'nik понедельник**Tuesday** ftor-nik вторник**Wednesday** sri-da среда**Thursday** chit-verk четверг**Friday** pyat-ni-tsa пятница**Saturday** su-bo-ta суббота**Sunday** vas-kri-sen'e воскресенье

Transport

If you want to get off a minibus, just say *astanavit'ye pazhalsta*.

Where is ...?

gde ...? Где ...?

When does it leave?

kag da at-prav'lyo etsya? Когда отправляется?

What town is this?

ka-koy e-ta go-rat? Какой этот город?

airport

ae-ra-port аэропорт

bus

af-to-bus автобус

railway station

zhi-lez-na-da-rozh'nyy железно дорожный

vag-zal (ж. д.) вокзал

train

roy-etz поезд

ARMENIAN

Armenian is an Indo-European language with heavy influences from Persian evident in its vocabulary. There are two main dialects: western and eastern – the latter is the variety you'll encounter in Armenia today.

The Armenian script and alphabet was created by Mesrop Mashtots in the early 5th century for the principal purpose of religious translation. The written language at that time was known as *grabar* (Classical Armenian), and it remained the literary form until modern Armenian literature came to the fore in the nineteenth century. This newer variety (Modern Standard) was a much more faithful representation of the spoken language. Two letters were added to Mashtots' original alphabet in the twelfth century, one to represent changes undergone in the sound system of the language over many centuries, the other to cover the 'f' sound found in loan words.

Armenia has quite a few distinct dialects. The standard eastern Armenian is based on the variety spoken in Ashtarak, close to Yerevan. People from Lori *marz* have a slower, more musical accent, while speakers from Gegarkunik and Karabakh display a particularly strong local accent that can be very difficult for outsiders to understand, and vocabulary that is sometimes even unique to one valley. Armenian has many loan words and phrases borrowed from Russian, Turkish, French and even Hindi.

THE ARMENIAN ALPHABET

Armenian	Roman	Pronunciation
Ա ա	a	
Բ բ	b	
Գ գ	g	
Դ դ	d	as in 'do'
Ե ե	ye-/e-	as the 'ye' or 'e' in 'yet'
Զ զ	z	as in 'zoo'
Է է	e	long, as in 'there'
Ը ը	e	neutral vowel; as the 'a' in 'ago'
Թ թ	t	as in 'tip'
Ճ ճ	zh	as the 's' in 'measure'
Ի ի	ee	as in 'meet'
Լ լ	l	as in 'let'
Խ խ	kh	as 'ch' in Scottish loch
Տ տ	ts	as in 'bits'
Կ կ	k	as in 'kit'
Հ հ	h	as in 'here'
Չ չ	dz	as in 'adze'
Ղ ղ	gh	as French 'r'
Ճ ճ	ch	as in 'each'
Մ մ	m	as in 'met'
Ե յ	y	as in 'yet'
Ն ն	n	as in 'no'
Շ շ	sh	as in 'shoe'
Ո ո	vo-/o-	as in 'vote'
Չ չ	ch	as in 'chair'
Պ պ	p	as in 'pet'
Ջ ճ	j	as in 'judge'
Ռ ռ	r	a rolled 'r'
Ս ս	s	as in 'sit'
Վ վ	v	as in 'van'
Տ տ	t	as in 'ten'
Ր ը	r	as in 'run'
Յ ջ	ts	as in 'tsar'
Ո ռ	u	as in 'rule'
Փ փ	p	as in 'pit'
Թ թ	k	similar to the 'c' in 'cat'
Օ օ	o	long, as in 'woe'
Ֆ ֆ	f	as in 'fit'

The original 36 letters also have a numerical value, meaning any number can be represented using combinations of letters. Ա (a) to Թ (t) is 1 to 9, Ճ (zh) to Ղ (gh) is 10 to 90, Ճ (ch) to Ջ (j) is 100 to 900, and Ռ (r) to Թ (k) is 1000 to 9000.

Conversation & Useful Phrases**Hello.**

barev dzez (polite)

barev (informal)

Good morning.

barev luees

Good evening.

barev yereko

Goodbye.

tsetesutyun (polite)

hajoogh (informal)

See you later.	<i>arayzh'im</i>
Goodbye, good luck.	<i>hajooghutyun</i>
Yes.	<i>ayo</i> (polite)/ <i>ha</i> (informal)
No.	<i>voch</i> (polite)/ <i>che</i> (informal)
Please.	<i>khuntrem</i>
Thank you.	<i>shnorhakal em/shnorhakalutyun/merci</i> (French, commonly used)
No problem.	<i>problem cheeka</i>
How are you?	<i>vonts ek?</i> (polite) <i>vonts es?</i> (informal)
I'm fine, thank you.	<i>lav em shnorhakalutyun</i>
OK/So-so.	<i>vocheench</i>
And you?	<i>eesk' duk?</i>
(very) good	<i>(shat) lav</i>
(very) bad	<i>(shat) vot</i>
I'm tired.	<i>hoknats em</i>
I'm sick.	<i>heevand em</i>
What's your name?	<i>anunut eench eh?</i>
My name is ...	<i>anuns ... e</i>
I'm from ...	<i>yes ... its em</i>
Do you speak English/ Armenian?	<i>khasum es angleren/hayeren?</i>
A little.	<i>mee keech</i>
I understand.	<i>haskanum em</i>
I don't understand.	<i>chem haskanum</i>
Please speak more slowly.	<i>khuntrem em dandagh khosek</i>
I	<i>yes</i>
you	<i>duk</i> (polite, plural) <i>du</i> (informal)
I want ...	<i>uzum em ...</i>
I don't want ...	<i>chem uzum ...</i>
I don't know ...	<i>chem eemanum ...</i>

Numbers

1	<i>mek</i>
2	<i>yerku</i>
3	<i>yerek</i>
4	<i>chors</i>
5	<i>heeng</i>
6	<i>vets</i>
7	<i>yot</i>
8	<i>ut</i>
9	<i>eenuh</i>
10	<i>tas</i>
20	<i>kuhsan</i>
30	<i>yeresun</i>
40	<i>karasun</i>
50	<i>heesun</i>
60	<i>vatsun</i>
70	<i>yotanasun</i>
80	<i>utsun</i>
90	<i>eeneesun</i>
100	<i>hayrur</i>
200	<i>yerku hayrur</i>

1000
2000
one million



Shopping & Services

bank	<i>berd</i>
castle	<i>deghatun/apteka</i>
chemist/pharmacy	<i>yegeghetsee</i>
church	<i>kentron</i>
city centre	<i>pak</i>
closed	<i>dramee bokhanagum</i>
currency exchange	<i>bjheeshk</i>
doctor	<i>parseeonat</i>
guesthouse	<i>heevandanats</i>
hospital	<i>hyunanots</i>
hotel	<i>shuka</i>
market	<i>vank</i>
monastery	<i>bats</i>
open	<i>vosteegan</i>
police	<i>post</i>
post office	<i>khanut</i>
shop	<i>namakaneesh</i>
stamp	<i>herakhos</i>
telephone	<i>zugaran</i>
toilet	

Do you have a room?	<i>unek senyak?</i>
How much?	<i>eench arjhey?</i>
cheap	<i>ezhan</i>
expensive	<i>tang</i>
good	<i>lav</i>
bad	<i>vot</i>
Where is the toilet?	<i>vortegh e zugarane?</i>

Time & Dates

When?	<i>yerp?</i>
today	<i>aysar</i>
tomorrow	<i>vaghe</i>
yesterday	<i>yerek</i>
Monday	<i>yerkushaptee</i>
Tuesday	<i>yerekshaptee</i>
Wednesday	<i>charekishaptee</i>
Thursday	<i>heengshaptee</i>
Friday	<i>urpat</i>
Saturday	<i>shapat</i>
Sunday	<i>keerakee</i>
January	<i>humvar</i>
February	<i>petrvur</i>
March	<i>mart</i>
April	<i>apree!</i>
May	<i>mayees</i>
June	<i>hunees</i>
July	<i>hulees</i>

August	<i>okostos</i>
September	<i>september</i>
October	<i>hoktember</i>
November	<i>noyember</i>
December	<i>dektember</i>

Transport

When does ... leave?	<i>yerp jampa gelle ...?</i>
When does ... arrive?	<i>yerp gee hasne ...?</i>
every day	<i>amen or</i>
except	<i>patzee</i>
cancelled	<i>hedadzvodz</i>

airport	<i>otनावakayan</i>
bus	<i>avtobus</i>
bus station/stop	<i>avtokayan/gankar</i>
car	<i>mekena</i>
minibus	<i>marshrutny/marshrutka</i>
petrol	<i>petrol/benzen</i>
plane	<i>eenkateer/otanol</i>
taxi	<i>takse</i>
ticket	<i>dams</i>
Stop!	<i>gankneel/getseer!</i>

Where?	<i>ur/vortegh?</i>
here	<i>aystaeegh</i>
left	<i>dzakh</i>
right	<i>ach</i>

AZERI

The Azeri language (known as *azərbaycanca* or *azərbaycan dili* in the language itself) is a member of the Turkic language family, and shares its grammar and much of its vocabulary with Turkish; some knowledge of Turkish is very useful in Azerbaijan.

Azeri was originally written in a modified Arabic script, but this was replaced by a Latin alphabet (similar to the Turkish alphabet) during the country's first period of independence in 1918–20. The Russian Cyrillic alphabet was imposed in 1939 and prevailed during the reign of the Soviets, but in 1991 a modern Azeri Latin alphabet was reintroduced.

Conversation & Useful Phrases

Hello.	<i>salam aleykum</i>
Good morning.	<i>sabahın xeyir</i>
Good evening.	<i>aşamın xeyir</i>
Good night.	<i>gecən xeyna qəbim</i>
Good bye.	<i>sağ ol</i>
How are you?	<i>neccasan?</i>
Yes. (polite)	<i>bəli</i>
Yes. (informal)	<i>ha</i>

THE AZERI ALPHABET

Azeri	Roman	Pronunciation
A a	a	long, as in 'hair' as in English
B b	b	as in English
C c	c	as in 'case'
Ç ç	ch	as in 'chase'
D d	d	as in English
E e	e	as in 'bet'
Ə ə	a	short, as in 'apple'
F f	f	as in 'far'
G g	g	like the 'gy' in 'Magyar'
G ğ	gh	pronounced at back of throat (like French 'r')
H h	h	as in 'here'
X x	x	as the 'ch' in Scottish loch
I ı	i	neutral vowel; as the 'a' in 'ago'
İ i	i	as in 'police'
J j	zh	as the 's' in 'leisure'
K k	k	as in 'kit'
Q q	q	hard 'g' as in 'get'
L l	l	as in 'let'
M m	m	as in 'met'
N n	n	as in 'net'
O o	o	short 'o' as in 'got'
Ö ö	o	as the 'e' in 'her'
P p	p	as in 'pet'
R r	r	a rolled 'r'
S s	s	as in 'see'
Ş ş	ş	as in 'shore'
T t	t	as in 'toe'
U u	u	as in 'chute'
Ü ü	u	as the 'ew' in 'pew'
V v	v	as in 'van'
Y y	y	as in 'yet'
Z z	z	as in 'zoo'

Words in Azeri are usually lightly stressed on the last syllable. Note that in many parts of the country, the hard **k** is pronounced more like a 'ch', so that **Baki** sounds like 'ba-chuh' and **Şaki** becomes 'sha-chee'.

No.	<i>xeyr/yox</i>
Please.	<i>lutfan</i>
Thank you.	<i>taşakkur ediram</i>
Thank you very much.	<i>çox sağ ol</i>
Excuse me.	<i>bağışlayın</i>
Sorry.	<i>bağışla</i>
It doesn't matter.	<i>bir şey deyil</i>
Cheers! (toast)	<i>deyilan sağdılıja!</i>
Fine! That's great!	<i>yaşadır!</i>
Do you speak English/ French/German?	<i>siz ingilizca/fransızca/ almanca danışarsınızmi?</i>
I don't speak Azeri.	<i>mən azərbaycan dili danışmıram</i>

I don't understand.	<i>man anlamıram</i>
There is.	<i>var</i>
There isn't.	<i>yox</i>
Where?	<i>harada?</i>
Who?	<i>kim?</i>
What?	<i>na?</i>
Why?	<i>niyə?</i>
How?	<i>necə?</i>
How much/many?	<i>na qədər?</i>
cheap	<i>ucuz</i>
expensive	<i>baha</i>
good	<i>yaqşı</i>
bad	<i>pis</i>

Numbers

0	<i>sifr</i>
1	<i>bir</i>
2	<i>iki</i>
3	<i>üç</i>
4	<i>dörd</i>
5	<i>beş</i>
6	<i>altı</i>
7	<i>yeddi</i>
8	<i>səkkiz</i>
9	<i>doqquz</i>
10	<i>on</i>
11	<i>on bir</i>
12	<i>on iki</i>
13	<i>on üç</i>
20	<i>iyirmi</i>
30	<i>otuz</i>
40	<i>qırx</i>
50	<i>əlli</i>
60	<i>altmış</i>
70	<i>yedmiş</i>
80	<i>səksən</i>
90	<i>doxsən</i>
100	<i>yüz</i>
105	<i>yüz beş</i>
200	<i>iki yüz</i>
349	<i>üç yüz qırx doqquz</i>
1000	<i>min</i>
50000	<i>əlli min</i>
one million	<i>bir milyon</i>

Shopping & Services

ambulance	<i>təcili yardım maşını</i>
bank	<i>bank</i>
castle	<i>qala</i>
chemist/pharmacy	<i>apteki</i>
church	<i>kilsə</i>
city centre	<i>səhər mərkəzi</i>
closed	<i>bağlı</i>
cold	<i>soyuq</i>
currency exchange	<i>döyüşmə</i>

doctor	<i>həkim</i>
guest	<i>qonaq</i>
hospital	<i>xəstəxana</i>
hot	<i>isti</i>
hotel	<i>mənzilxana</i>
market	<i>bazar</i>
hot	<i>isti</i>
open	<i>açıq</i>
post office	<i>poçt</i>
room	<i>otaq</i>
shop	<i>dukan, mağaza</i>
stamp	<i>marka</i>
telephone	<i>telefon</i>
toilet	<i>tualet</i>



Time & Dates

When?	<i>na vaxt?</i>
today	<i>bugün</i>
tomorrow	<i>sabah</i>
the day after	<i>birisi gün</i>
tomorrow	
yesterday	<i>dünən</i>
Monday	<i>bazar ertəsi or birinci</i>
Tuesday	<i>çərşənbə axşamı or ikinci</i>
Wednesday	<i>çərşənbə/üçüncü</i>
Thursday	<i>cuma axşamı or dördüncü</i>
Friday	<i>cuma/beyinci</i>
Saturday	<i>şənbə/altıncı</i>
Sunday	<i>bazar/yeddinci</i>
January	<i>yanvar</i>
February	<i>fevral</i>
March	<i>mart</i>
April	<i>aprel</i>
May	<i>may</i>
June	<i>iyun</i>
July	<i>iyul</i>
August	<i>avqust</i>
September	<i>sentyabr</i>
October	<i>oktyabr</i>
November	<i>noyabr</i>
December	<i>dekabr</i>

Transport

When does ... leave?	<i>... nə zaman qalır?</i>
When does ... arrive?	<i>... nə zaman gəlir?</i>
every day	<i>hər gün</i>
except	<i>başqa</i>
cancelled	<i>saxlanılıb</i>
airport	<i>hava limanı</i>
avenue	<i>prospekti</i>
boat	<i>gəmi</i>
bus	<i>avtobus</i>
bus station	<i>avtovağzal</i>

bus stop	<i>avtobus dayanacağı</i>
car	<i>maşın, avtomobil</i>
lane/alley	<i>xiyabani</i>
minibus taxi	<i>mikroavtobus/marshrutka</i>
petrol	<i>benzin</i>
plane	<i>toyvara</i>
port	<i>liman</i>
square	<i>mejdani</i>
Stop!	<i>saxla!</i>
street	<i>küçesi</i>
taxi	<i>taksi</i>
ticket	<i>bilet</i>
train	<i>qatar</i>
train station	<i>dampir yolu stansiyasi</i>

GEORGIAN

Georgian (*kartuli*) belongs to the Kartvelian language family, which is related to the Caucasian languages – it has no linguistic connection to any other known language groups and continues to fascinate linguists. There are three other Kartvelian languages: Svan (*svanuri*), spoken in the mountains of Svaneti, Mingrelian (*megruli*), spoken in Samegrelo, and Laz (*zanur-chanuri*), spoken by the Laz people who live in north-eastern Turkey. Georgian is an ancient language with its own cursive script. There are some loan words from other languages which you'll recognise, but generally the vocabulary is very specific to Georgian.

Most Georgians also speak Russian, and aren't reluctant to converse in it. The younger generation is increasingly taking up English as a second or third language, particularly in Tbilisi. However, outside the capital you'll almost certainly need a few phrases of Georgian to help get yourself around, and any attempt you make to speak the language, however halting, will be greatly appreciated by the Georgians you meet.

Travelling around Georgia without some knowledge of the Georgian alphabet is extremely hard work. Anyone wanting to make the most of their time should try and learn some of the main letters, if only to identify bus destinations and street names – it's not as daunting as it looks. There are no capitals, and each of the 33 letters of the modern alphabet has a one-to-one sound relationship.

Conversation & Useful Phrases

Hello.	<i>gamarjobat</i>
Good morning.	<i>dila mshvidobisa</i>

THE GEORGIAN ALPHABET

Georgian	Roman	Pronunciation
ა	a	as in 'father'
ბ	b	as in 'bet'
გ	g	as in 'get'
დ	d	as in 'do'
ე	e	as in 'get'
ვ	v	as in 'van'
ზ	z	as in 'zoo'
თ	t	as in 'to'
ი	i	as in 'police'
კ	k	a 'k' pronounced very far back in the throat
ლ	l	as in 'let'
მ	m	as in 'met'
ნ	n	as in 'net'
ო	o	as in 'cot'
პ	p	as in 'tip' (with a stop on the outflow of air)
ჟ	zh	as the 's' in 'pleasure'
რ	r	as in 'rub', but rolled
ს	s	as in 'see'
ც	t	as in 'sit' (with a stop on the outflow of air)
უ	u	as in 'put'
ყ	q	as in 'put'
ჩ	ch	a 'k' pronounced very far back in the throat
ცხ	gh	as a French 'r'
კ	k	as the 'ck' in 'lick' (with a stop on the outflow of air)
შ	sh	as in 'she'
ჩ	ch	as in 'chip'
ც	ts	as in 'Tsar'
ძ	dz	as the 'ds' in 'beds'
წ	ts	as in 'its' (with a stop on the outflow of air)
ჭ	ch	as in 'each' (with a stop on the outflow of air)
ბ	kh	as in Scottish loch
ჯ	j	as in 'judge'
ჰ	h	as in 'here'

Word stress in Georgian is very light and is usually on the first syllable.

Good evening.	<i>saghamo mshvidobisa</i>
Good night.	<i>ghame mshvidobisa</i>
Goodbye.	<i>nakhvamdis</i>
Yes. (polite)	<i>diakh</i>
Yes. (neutral)	<i>ki</i>
Yes. (informal)	<i>ho</i>
No.	<i>ara</i>
Please.	<i>tu sheidzleba</i>

Thank you.	<i>madlobt</i>
Thank you (very much).	<i>(dzalian) didi madloba</i>
How are you?	<i>rogara khart?</i>
Sorry.	<i>badishi</i>
Excuse me.	<i>ukatsrovad</i>
It doesn't matter.	<i>ara ushavs</i>
Cheers! (toast)	<i>gaumarjas!</i>
Do you speak English?	<i>inglisuri itsit?</i>
Do you speak French/German?	<i>itsit pranguli/germanuli?</i>
I don't speak any Georgian.	<i>ar vitsi kartuli</i>
I don't understand.	<i>ar mesmiv</i>
There is.	<i>aris</i>
There isn't.	<i>ar aris</i>
Where?	<i>sadi?</i>
When?	<i>radis?</i>
Who?	<i>vin?</i>
What?	<i>ra?</i>
How?	<i>rogar?</i>
Why?	<i>ratam?</i>

Numbers

1	<i>erti</i>
2	<i>ori</i>
3	<i>sami</i>
4	<i>otkhi</i>
5	<i>khuti</i>
6	<i>ekvis</i>
7	<i>shvidi</i>
8	<i>rva</i>
9	<i>tskhna</i>
10	<i>ati</i>
11	<i>tertmeti</i>
12	<i>tormeti</i>
13	<i>tsameti</i>
14	<i>totkhmeti</i>
15	<i>tkhutmeti</i>
16	<i>tekvsmeti</i>
17	<i>chvidmeti</i>
18	<i>tvrameti</i>
19	<i>tskhrameti</i>
20	<i>otsi</i>
21	<i>otsdaerti</i>
22	<i>otsdaori</i>
30	<i>otsdaati</i>
31	<i>otsdatertmeti</i>
32	<i>otsdatormeti</i>
33	<i>otsdatsameti</i>
34	<i>otsdatotkhmeti</i>
35	<i>otsdatkhumeti</i>
36	<i>otsdatekvsmeti</i>
37	<i>otsdachvidmeti</i>
38	<i>otsdatvrameti</i>

39	<i>atsdatskhrameti</i>
40	<i>armotvi</i>
41	<i>armotsdauri</i>
50	<i>armotsdajati</i>
60	<i>ardadi</i>
70	<i>tsvatsvati</i>
80	<i>otkhmetsi</i>
90	<i>otkhmetsdaati</i>
100	<i>asi</i>
1000	<i>atasi</i>

Shopping & Services

ambulance	<i>sastnapo dokhmarebis mankana</i>
bank	<i>banki</i>
break (eg for lunch)	<i>tsakhemseba</i>
castle	<i>tsikhe</i>
chemist/pharmacy	<i>aptiaki</i>
church	<i>eklesia</i>
city centre	<i>kalakis tsentri</i>
closed	<i>daketilia</i>
doctor	<i>ekimi</i>
guest	<i>stumari</i>
hospital	<i>saavadmqopo</i>
hotel	<i>sastumro</i>
market	<i>bazari/bazroba</i>
open	<i>ghvia</i>
police	<i>politsia/militsia</i>
post office	<i>posta</i>
room	<i>otakhi</i>
shop	<i>maghazia</i>
stamp	<i>marka</i>
telephone	<i>teleponi</i>
toilet	<i>tualeti</i>
How much/many?	<i>ramdeni?</i>
good	<i>kargi</i>
bad	<i>tsudi</i>
cheap	<i>iapi</i>
expensive	<i>dzviri</i>

Time & Dates

today	<i>dghes</i>
tomorrow	<i>khval</i>
day after tomorrow	<i>zeg</i>
in 3 days time	<i>mazeg</i>
yesterday	<i>gushin</i>
day before yesterday	<i>gushin tsin</i>
Sunday	<i>kvira</i>
Monday	<i>orshabati</i>
Tuesday	<i>samshabati</i>
Wednesday	<i>otkhshabati</i>
Thursday	<i>khutshabati</i>
Friday	<i>paraskevi</i>
Saturday	<i>shabati</i>

January	<i>ianvari</i>
February	<i>tebervali</i>
March	<i>marti</i>
April	<i>aprili</i>
May	<i>maisi</i>
June	<i>ivnisi</i>
July	<i>ivlisi</i>
August	<i>agvisto</i>
September	<i>sektemberi</i>
October	<i>oktemberi</i>
November	<i>noemberi</i>
December	<i>dekemberi</i>

Transport

When does it leave?	<i>rodis midis/gadis?</i>
When does it arrive?	<i>rodis modis/chamadis?</i>
every day	<i>qovel dghe</i>
except	<i>garda</i>
cancelled	<i>gaukmda</i>

airport
avenue
boat
bus
bus station
bus stop
car
minibus taxi
petrol
plane
port
road/way
square
Stop here!
taxi
ticket
train
train station



<i>aegapoti</i>	ავიანობის სადგომი
<i>ganzini</i>	საავტობუსო გზა
<i>geni</i>	ავტობუსი
<i>gashvili</i>	ავტობუსის სადგომი
<i>artosdgudi</i>	ავტობუსის სადგომი
<i>gachereba</i>	ავტობუსის სადგომი
<i>mankana</i>	მანკანა
<i>marshrutka</i>	მარშრუტა
<i>benzini</i>	ბენზინი
<i>tvitmpinavi</i>	ტვიტმპინავი
<i>porti</i>	პორტი
<i>gza</i>	გზა
<i>moedani</i>	მოედანი
<i>gaacheret!</i>	გააჩერეთ!
<i>taksi</i>	ტაქსი
<i>bileti</i>	ბილეთი
<i>matarebeli</i>	მათარებელი
<i>(rkinigzis) sadguri</i>	(რკინიგზის) სადგური



Also available from Lonely Planet:
Russian Phrasebook



Glossary

You may encounter some of the following words during your time in Georgia (Geo), Armenia (Arm) and Azerbaijan (Az). Some Russian (Rus) words, including the ones below, have been adopted in the Caucasus.

about (Arm) – soup

ajika (Geo) – hot chilli

akhdama (Geo) – burial chamber

alaverdi (Geo) – appointed by the toastmaster at a *supra* to elaborate on the toast

Amenaprkich (Arm) – All Saviours

APF (Az) – Azerbaijan Popular Front

apteka (Az), **аптека** (Rus), **aptiaki** (Geo) – pharmacy

Arakelots (Arm) – the Apostles

ARF (Arm) – Armenian Revolutionary Federation; the Dashnaks

ashug (Az) – itinerant musician

astodan (Az) – ossuary

Astvatsatsin (Arm) – Holy Mother of God

avtokayan (Arm) – bus station

avtovağ (Az) – bus station

ayran (Az) – lightly salted yogurt and water

baklava (Arm/Az/Geo) – honeyed nut pastry

balıq (Az) – fish, usually sturgeon, often grilled

basturma (Arm) – cured beef in ground red pepper

berd (Arm) – fortress

bulvar (Az) – boulevard

caravanserai – travellers' inn

Catholicos (Arm/Geo) – patriarch of the Armenian and Georgian churches

çay (Az) – tea

çayxana (Az) – teahouse

chacha (Geo) – powerful home-made liquor

chakapuli (Geo) – calf meat stew with sour plums

Chanuri – language spoken by the Laz people from northeastern Turkey

churchkhela (Geo) – strings of nuts coated in wine juice and flour

chvishdari (Geo) – Svanetian dish of cheese cooked inside maize bread

CIS – Commonwealth of Independent States; the loose political and economic alliance of most former member republics of the USSR (except the Baltic states)

çörək (Az) – bread

dacha (Rus) – a holiday bungalow

darbazi (Geo) – home design with the roof tapering to a central hole

dograma (Az) – cold salad of sour milk, potato, onion and cucumber

dolma (Arm, Az) – vine leaves with a rice filling

domiks (Arm) – housing units made from cargo containers

dovga (Geo) – hot thick soup of yogurt, rice, spinach and fennel

dram (Arm) – currency

duduk (Arm) – traditional Armenian reed instrument

düşbərə (Az) – small dumplings stuffed with minced lamb and herbs, served in broth

dzor (Arm) – gorge

elektrichka (Rus) – local train service linking a city and its suburbs or nearby towns, or groups of adjacent towns

eristavi (Geo) – duke

gamgoeba (Geo) – local government building

gavit (Arm) – antechamber to a church

ghomi (Geo) – maize porridge

glasnost (Rus) – openness

golubtsy (Rus) – minced lamb and herbs wrapped in vine leaves or roast vegetables

halva (Az) – pastry with nuts

hamman (Az) – bathhouse; until the 20th century they were usually the only washing facilities available, and remain so in many mountain villages

hraparak (Arm) – square

IDP – internally displaced person

Intourist (Rus) – Soviet-era government tourist organisation

ishkhan (Arm) – trout from Lake Sevan

jvari (Geo) – religious cross; spiritual site in mountain regions

kamancha (Az) – stringed musical instrument

Kartuli – Georgian language

Kartvelebi – Georgian people

kassa (Rus) – cash desk

katoghike (Arm) – cathedral

khachapuri (Geo) – cheese pie

khamaju (Arm) – meat pie

khash (Arm) – winter meat stew

khashi (Geo) – garlic and tripe soup

khashlama (Arm) – boiled lamb, potato and tomato juice

khatchkars (Arm) – carved stone crosses

khevi (Geo) – gorge

khidi (Geo) – bridge

khinkali (Geo) – spicy meat dumplings
khoravats (Arm) – barbecued food
kişi (Az) – men's toilets
kubdari (Geo) – spicy Svanetian meat pie
küçəsi (Az) – street
kucha (Geo) – street
kupe (Az) – large earthenware jar
kupe (Rus) – compartment-class train ticket
kvass (Rus) – Russian beverage made from fermented rye bread
kyufta (Arm) – ground beef meatballs

lahmajo, lahmajoon (Arm) – small lamb and herb pizzas
lari (Geo) – note currency
lavash (Arm) – thin bread
lavangi (Az) – casserole of chicken stuffed with walnuts and herbs
lobio (Geo) – beans with herbs and spices
lüks (Rus) – deluxe

Manat (Az) – note currency
marani (Geo) – wine cellar
marshrutka (Rus) – minivans on public transport routes
marz (Arm) – region, province
marz petaran (Arm) – regional headquarters
matagh (Arm) – animal sacrifice
matenadaran (Arm) – library
matsoni (Geo) – yogurt drink
mayrughi (Arm) – highway
medrese (Az/Geo) – Islamic school
merikipe (Geo) – man who pours wine at a *supra*
meydani (Az) – square
mihrab (Az) – niche indicating the direction of Mecca in a mosque
moedani (Geo) – square
mtsvadi (Geo) – shish kebabs
mugam (Az) – traditional musical style
mushuri (Geo) – working songs
muzhskoy (Rus) – men's toilet

nagorno (Rus) – mountainous
nard, nardi (Az/Arm) – boardgame similar to backgammon

obshchiy (Rus) – unreserved train ticket for seats
oghee (Arm) – delicious fruit vodkas; sometimes called *vatsun* or *aragh*
OSCE – Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe
OVIR – passport and visa department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs

paneer (Arm) – cheese
perestroika (Rus) – restructuring

pir (Az) – sacred place
piti (Az) – soupy meat stew with chickpeas and saffron
piva (Rus) – beer
pkhali (Geo) – spinach or beetroot paste with walnuts and garlic
platskartnyy (Rus) – reserved train ticket for open bunks
ploshchad (Rus) – square
plov (Az) – rice dish with meat and fruit
poghota (Arm) – avenue
poghots (Arm) – street
prospekti (Rus) – avenue

qadin (Az) – women's toilets
qatig (Az) – yogurt
qəhvə (Az) – coffee
qutab (Az) – stuffed pancake

rabiz (Rus) – worker's culture, party music
rtveli (Geo) – grape harvest

sagalobeli (Geo) – church songs
sagmiro (Geo) – epic songs
sakhachapure (Geo) – workers' cafés where *khachapuri* or *khinkali* are literally the only things served
sakhinkle (Geo) – see *sakhachapure*
satraps – Persian governors
satrpialo (Geo) – love songs
satsivi (Geo) – cold chicken in walnut sauce
şabəka (Az) – intricately carved, wood-framed, stained-glass windows
shashlyk (Az) – shish kebab
shkhmeruli (Geo) – chicken in garlic sauce
shuka (Arm) – market
smetana (Rus) – sour cream
soorch (Arm) – coffee
spalny vagon (Rus) – sleeping-car class train ticket
suchush (Arm) – plum-walnut sweet
sulguni (Geo) – type of cheese from Samegrelo
supra (Geo) – dinner party; literally means 'tablecloth'
supruli (Geo) – songs for the table
surp (Arm) – holy, saint
Svanuri (Geo) – Svanetian language

tabouleh (Arm) – diced green salad with semolina
tamada (Geo) – toastmaster at *supras*
tan (Arm) – yogurt
tar (Az) – stringed musical instrument
telefon karti (Az) – telephone cards
tetri (Geo) – coin currency
tika kabab (Az) – shish kebab; more commonly called *shashlyk*
tkemali (Geo) – wild plum, wild plum sauce
tonir (Arm) – traditional bread oven
tsikhe (Geo) – fortified place

TsUM (Rus) – Tsentralnyy universalnyy magazin; central department store

tteni (Arm) – mulberry

tufa (Arm) – volcanic stone famous to Armenia

tur – large, endangered Caucasian goat

turbaza (Rus) – tour base; usually a simple cottage by a river or in the woods

ulitsa (Rus) – street

Univermag, Universam (Rus) – old Soviet department store

vank (Arm) – monastery

virap (Arm) – well

vishap (Arm) – carved dragon stone

xazri (Az) – gale-force wind

yeməxana (Az) – food house, cheap eatery

zhenskiy (Rus) – women's toilets

zheton (Az) – telephone token



Behind the Scenes



THIS BOOK

The 1st edition of this book was researched and written by Neil Wilson, Beth Potter, David Rowson and Ketj Japaridze. This 2nd edition was written by Richard Plunkett and Tom Masters.

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CREDITS

This title was commissioned and developed in Lonely Planet's London office by Imogen Franks and Fiona Christie. Cartography for this guide was developed by Mark Griffiths. *Georgia, Armenia & Azerbaijan 2* was coordinated by Imogen Bannister (editorial) and Jolyon Philcox (cartography). Ray Thomson (with assistance from Rachel Imsen) project-managed this edition. Margaret Jung laid out the book. Brendan Dempsey designed the cover. Quentin Frayne coordinated the language content. Thanks to Vivek Waglé for helping with the Health chapter. A talented team of editors, proofreaders, cartographers and designers assisted on this project: Charlotte Keown, Valentina Kremenchutskaia, Joeline Kowalski, Pablo Gaster, Sally Steward, Sally O'Brien, Brooke Lyons, Carolyn Boicos, Jacqui Saunders, Karen Fry, Anneka Imkamp, Kim McDonald, Katherine Marsh and Adrienne Costanzo.

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ABBREVIATIONS

Arm	Armenia
Az	Azerbaijan
Geo	Georgia
NK	Nagorno-Karabakh

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ROUTES

	Freeway		One Way Road
	Primary Road		Dimed Road
	Secondary Road		Street Wall/Steps
	Tertiary Road		Tunnel
	Lane		Walking Tour
	Under Construction		Walking Trail
	Track		Walking Path

TRANSPORT

	Ferry		Rail
	Metro		Rail (not in use)
	Tram		Cable Car, Funicular

HYDROGRAPHY

	River, Creek		Canal
	Glacier		Water

BOUNDARIES

	International		Ancient Wall
	State, Provincial		Cliff
	Disputed		

AREA FEATURES

	Area of Interest		Land Park
	Building		Forest
	Campus		Sports
	Cemetery, Christian		Urban
	Cemetery, Other		

POPULATION

	CAPITAL (NATIONAL)		CAPITAL (STATE)
	Large City		Medium City
	Small City		Town, Village

SYMBOLS

	Sights/Activities		Eating		Information
	Beach		Drinking		Bank, ATM
	Temple		Entertainment		Embassy/Consulate
	Castle, Fortress		Shopping		Hospital, Medical
	Christian		Sleeping		Information
	Islamic		Camping		Internet Facilities
	Jewish		Transport		Parking Area
	Monument		Airport		Police Station
	Museum, Gallery		Border Crossing		Post Office, GPO
	Point of Interest		Bus Station		Telephone
	Pool		Taxi, Washrucka		Lighthouse
	Park				Mountain
	Zoo				National Park
					Pass, Canyon
					River Flow
					Waterfall

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