BEST OF THE CAUCASUS

15 days
Countries visited
Azerbaijan • Georgia • Armenia

Tour Highlights
• Iconic Palace of the Shirvanshahs and Maiden Tower in Baku
• 40,000-year-old engravings in Gobustan National Park
• Sample fine wine’s in Georgia’s Kakheti region
• Head just south of the Russian border for panoramic views of Mount Kazbek
• Georgian felt-making workshop
• Delve deeply into Soviet history at The Stalin Museum
• Incredible 13-tier cave complex & monastery at Vardzia
• Enjoy stunning views from the sacred pilgrimage site of Jvari Monastery
• Leisurely wander through the picturesque narrow streets of Tblisi’s old town
• The ‘Pink City’ of Yerevan
• Lake Sevan, the largest lake in the Caucasus
BEST OF THE CAUCASUS

• The ruins of Zvartnotz Temple
• Pay your respects at the Armenian Genocide Museum
• 'Symphony of the Stones' at Garni
• Yerevan Brandy Factory tour and tasting

Places visited
Baku • Sheki • Telavi • Gremi • Velistsikhe • Tsinandali • Gudauri • Kazbegi • Uplistsikhe • Borjomi • Gori • Vardzia • Rabati Castle • Tbilisi • Mtskheta • Lake Sevan • Fioletovo • Sevanavank • Yerevan • Garni • Areni Village

What's included
• Arrival & departure transfers
• Air-conditioned ground transport with driver
• English-speaking guides
• Accommodation
• Meals as specified in the itinerary
• Entrance fees to sites & parks
• 500ml bottle of water per person per day

What's not included
• Meals not mentioned in itinerary
• Drinks
• Visa fees
• Insurance
• Tipping
• Camera / video camera fees
• Personal items (laundry, telephone, etc.)
• Medical expenses
• Any services not mentioned in itinerary

All accommodation subject to availability. Final accommodation choices will be confirmed after booking.
BEST OF THE CAUCASUS

Your Itinerary Map

[Map of the Caucasus region showing major cities, monasteries, and natural attractions]

- Georgia: Gudauri, Borjomi, Telavi, Gori, Mtskheta, Sheki
- Armenia: Yerevan, Echmiadzin Monastery, Zvartnots, Garni Temple, Geghard Monastery, Sevan Lake, Khor Virap
- Azerbaijan: Shamakhi, Baku, Ateshgah Fire Temple, Gobustan National Park
- Turkey

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ID 2084 - Page | 3
Your Itinerary Explained

The first part of the text in each day is the itinerary schedule and will explain what you will normally see/do during this day of your itinerary.

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The part of the day’s text in italics (and comes after the three dashes “---”) is background information on the places or sites on that day of your itinerary. It is not part of your itinerary and may mention places that will not be visited on your itinerary. If you have any questions please ask us. Travel times where noted are only meant as a guideline.

Tour Itinerary

Day 1  Arrival in Baku

Arrive into Baku, where you will be met at the airport by a Travel The Unknown representative and transferred to your hotel. Overnight in Baku.

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Flight

Overnight in Boutique Hotel, Baku

Day 2  Baku - Gobustan - Baku

Go on a sightseeing tour of Baku, where you will visit the Palace of the Shirvanshahs, Maiden Tower, Martyr’s Lane and the authentic Taza Bazar. After lunch at the bazar, drive to Gobustan National Park to see the famous caves. Return to Baku for a cooking masterclass at Caravanserai restaurant. Overnight in Baku.

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Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, is an ancient city that is located between Asia and Europe on the Absheron peninsula in the Caspian Sea. Its name means ‘city of winds’ or ‘city on the hill’ and Baku was first mentioned in the Egyptian Pharaoh Minesan’s Book of the Dead in 3500 BC, meaning the city is at least 5,500 years old. A UNESCO World Heritage site since 2000, Baku was an important staging post on the Silk Road and is still a key rail junction and Caspian port. The city is also where the first national theatre in the Muslim world opened, and where the country’s first newspaper and library were established. In the area around Baku there is a large concentration of ancient oil fields (or ‘Oil Stones’).
The Palace of the Shirvanshahs and Maiden Tower are two UNESCO heritages sites of Baku’s Inner City (or Icheri Sheher). The Palace complex used to be the seat of the Muslim rulers of Shirvan, a historical region in the eastern Caucasus. It is composed of the Divankhana pavilion, Shirvanshah Mausoleum, Palace Mosque, Sultan Murad’s Gate and a bath house, as well as several residential buildings and caravanserais. The Maiden Tower (or Giz Galasi) is an iconic symbol of Baku that features on Azeri bank notes. There are many legends that surround it and much debate as to how old it is, though most observers reckon it was built in the 12th century. The tower holds a museum showcasing the historic development of Baku. There is a great view of the Old City from the top.

Martyr’s Lane is a memorial park located on one of the highest hills in Baku, overlooking the beautiful coastline and boulevard zone. The complex is dedicated to those that were killed fighting for Azerbaijan's independence on 20 January 1990, known as Black January. On that day, Soviet forces invaded the city and shot thousands of innocents, along with many Turkish and British soldiers. Roughly 15,000 people are buried in the cemetery here. At the end of the lane, there is a large eternal flame where visiting dignitaries lay wreaths to commemorate the lost lives.

Gobustan National Park is located in the southeastern part of the Greater Caucasus mountain range in the Jeyrankechmaz River basin. A UNESCO World Heritage Site since 2007, it boasts more than 6,000 preserved rock engravings that reflect up to 40,000 years of rock art. These engravings cover hunting scenes, people, plants, animals, boats and much more. The National Park also hosts the remains of settlements, lived-in caves and burial sites used between the Upper Palaeolithic and Middle Ages.

Taza Bazar is Baku’s main market and is arguably the largest in the Caucasus, much larger than the main markets of Yerevan and Tbilisi. You can find many stalls of fresh and pickled produce, meats, spices, carpets, kitchen utensils and even hardware. Some traditional buys are dried persimmons, pomegranate juice, Azeri jams, fresh beluga caviar and Lankaran tea. Haggling is expected here!

The Caravanserai Restaurant aims to preserve the ambience of ancient Silk Road travellers’ inns with its castle-like decorations, friendly service and live entertainment. It is located in the Old City and serves traditional Azeri dishes like kutab (a very thin variation of pizza) and dushbere (a classic dumpling soup).

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**Day 3**

**Baku - Shamakhi - Sheki**

After breakfast, visit the Ateshgah Fire temple before driving to Maraza to visit the Diribaba Mausoleum. Continue on to Shamakhi to see the Seven Domes tomb complex and the Juma Mosque, then drive to Sheki, where you will visit the Khan’s Palace and the local history museum. In the evening, attend a Shebeke craft workshop for a vitrage masterclass. Overnight in Sheki.

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The trip includes:

- Visit to the Ateshgah Fire temple
- Visit to the Diribaba Mausoleum
- Visit to Shamakhi to see the Seven Domes tomb complex and the Juma Mosque
- Visit to Sheki to see the Khan’s Palace and the local history museum
- Shebeke craft workshop for a vitrage masterclass

**Meals**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day 3</th>
<th>Baku - Shamakhi - Sheki</th>
<th>Meals</th>
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The 17th-century Ateshgah Temple (also known as the 'Fire Temple of Baku') is located in the Surakhani district of Baku and is often described as a castle-like monastery complex. Ateshgah was built on a pocket of natural gas that produced a 'holy fire' and was used by Hindus and Zoroastrians as a place of worship. The temple was abandoned in 1883 when the flow of natural gas ended and extinguished the flame. Nonetheless, it is still frequently visited by Zoroastrians on religious pilgrimages.

The 15th-century Diribaba Mausoleum is located on and partly carved into a cliff in the Maraza district, approximately 110 km away from Baku. There are many myths and legends associated with it that have been attracting curious visitors since the 17th century. NOTE: It is possible to enter the mausoleum but there are very steep stairs.

Juma Mosque (translated as 'Friday Mosque') in Shamakhi was the second mosque to be built in the Caucasus, with construction being completed in 744 AD. As a result of serious damage caused by earthquakes as well as a series of battles throughout the years, the mosque has been reconstructed several times. Its interior is beautifully decorated and the building is one of Shamakhi's must-see attractions.

The Seven Domes (also known as the Shirvan Domes) is a complex of tombs built for Shirvan's royal family in the 18th century. Only three of these domes remain to this day - the others have been destroyed by earthquakes. There is a good view of Shamakhi city from this location.

There are many interesting historical monuments in Sheki. To the north of the city there are the ruins of the once impregnable fortress "Gelersan – gerarsan" ("come and see") dating from the 16th to 18th centuries. The city itself which was famous for its trade and boasted numerous caravanserais during the Silk Road era. Two still exist; the Upper and the Lower Caravanserais, both built in the 18th century. The nearby Albanian temple in the village of Kish dating to the 1st century is another popular attraction. Sheki is famous within Azerbaijan for its baklava, piti (stew with vegetables in a clay pot), and the sense of humor of its people.

Sheki Khan’s Palace is one of Azerbaijan's major historical sites. It was built in the late 18th century by Khan Gadzi Chelebi, who founded the country's first independent khanate. The palace was used by his grandson, Hussein-khan Mushtad, as a summer palace. It is the only remaining structure from the larger complex that was once surrounded by fortress walls. Among its main attractions are the outstanding drawings and stained-glass Shebeke windows.

Shebeke is an ancient Azerbaijani technique of making vitrage windows that is also practised in Georgia and Iran. Thousands of pieces of colourful glass and walnut wood are assembled together in intricate, usually geometric, patterns without the help of any nails or glue. One square metre of this artwork consists of 4,000 small parts, although this number can rise up to 14,000 in more complex styles. This precise and complicated craft has been passed down through generations of artisans. Shebeke panels are a central feature in Azerbaijani architecture.

Total travel time: 5 hours
Overnight in Sheki Saray, Sheki
Day 4

Sheki - Gremi (Georgia) - Telavi

After breakfast, visit Sheki Bazar and the local sweet bakery to stock up on snacks for your journey into Georgia over the Lagodekhi checkpoint. Travel to the home of a local Georgian family, where you will help prepare a home-made lunch to enjoy with local wine. Your main meal will be 'Mtsvadi', a pork shashlik (a form of shish kebab popular in Eastern and Central Europe) barbecued on vine tree branches. You will also get to bake 'shoti' bread in a 'tone', which is a tall upright circular clay oven lined with bricks. After a delicious lunch, you will journey on to explore the Gremi Architectural Complex. Next, you will visit a local master who will show you how traditional Georgian 'Qvevri' wine jars are made. Overnight near Telavi.

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Telavi is a historical city in Kakheti, an eastern region of Georgia and is considered to be one of Georgia’s most ancient cities. With fascinating museums, well-preserved religious buildings and a castle, Telavi offers visitors a unique insight into Georgian history and culture.

Gremi was once a trading town with a population that reached 100,000, until it was destroyed by invading Persian forces in the mid-17th century. The architectural complex used to be a citadel and consists of a tower, the king's chambers, defensive walls and the Church of Archangels that was built out of square bricks. The Church is now one of the only remains of the 16th-century town. It is a fine example of Georgian architecture and its faded frescoes offer a glimpse into the religious devotion of the period. King Levan, who built this complex, is buried here.

Total travel time : 4 hours
Overnight in Schuchmann Wines Chateau & Spa, Telavi

Day 5

Telavi - Gudauri

This morning you will explore Kakheti, the famous wine region. Visit a typical farmers' market in Telavi and go on a tour of the Tsinandali family estate, where you will enjoy a glass of wine. Then visit a local farmer's family and the Numisi Wine Cellar in Velistsikhe to taste some typical wines of the region. Afterwards, drive to Gudauri ski resort, visiting Ananuri fort and passing along part of the Georgian Military Highway on the way. Overnight in Gudauri ski resort.

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The 16th-century Numisi Wine Cellar in Velistsikhe is a traditional winery that also acts as an ethnographic museum. There is a permanent exhibition that showcases ancient wine-making culture and artifacts.

The Tsinandali family estate and wine cellar once belonged to the 19th-century aristocratic poet Alexandre Chavchavadze (1786-1846), who was one of the most important figures of his time. He dedicated his life to promoting and developing Georgian culture, and was the first nobleman to produce and bottle Georgian wine. Chavchavadze's residence consists of a summer home, garden and winery, and now operates as a House-Museum. It has been welcoming visitors since 1947 and periodically hosts exhibitions by prominent Georgian and foreign artists.
The Georgian Military Highway is a 220km-long road that runs between Tbilisi and Vladikavkaz, a Russian city in the southeast. The road reaches an elevation of 2,380m when going through the Jvari pass. This route has a long history of being used by armies due to its relatively straight route through the Central Caucasus.

Gudauri is one of the prime ski resorts in Georgia and has a well-developed infrastructure. It has the greatest contrast in altitude in Georgia and is the loftiest settlement on the Georgian Military Road at an altitude of 2,000m.

Total travel time : 4 hours
Overnight in Gudauri Marco Polo, Gudauri

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day 6</th>
<th>Gudauri - Kazbegi - Gudauri</th>
<th>Meals</th>
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<td>Take a stunning drive along the Tergi River to Kazbegi, the main town of the region. From here, go on a leisurely two-hour walk through beautiful valleys and woodlands to Gergeti Trinity Church. For lunch, you will visit a local family who will teach you how to prepare a traditional Georgian dish, such as 'Khinkali', dumplings filled with meat, onions, and various spices (can be made vegetarian if needed). Drive into the Dariali Gorge. On the way back to Gudauri, visit a local Teka master. Dinner and overnight in Gudauri. ---</td>
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Kazbegi, officially known as "Stepantsminda", is a small town located just 10 kilometres south of the Russian border. The town is 1,750 metres above sea level and has breathtaking mountain views that include Mount Kazbek (or 'Glacier Mountain'), Georgia’s third highest peak, standing at 5,047 metres high. Kazbek is associated with the myth of Prometheus, who is said to have been chained to the mountain as punishment for stealing fire from the gods and giving it to mortals.

The isolated Gergeti Trinity Church, constructed in the 14th century, is elevated 2,170m over the Chkheri riverbank, facing Mt. Kazbek. The church holds important religious relics which were brought from Mtskheta during the 18th-century Persian invasion. Even when religious services were outlawed during the Soviet era, tourists were still drawn to the church to admire the small town of Kazbegi.

Visit a local craft studio to see how traditional Georgian Teka felt is made. Felting is one of the oldest and most ecologically clean ways of processing wool; sheep do not suffer at all when their wool is collected. Felt fragments have been found from as far back as the second millennium BC and felt is still commonly used in everyday garments and accessories to this day. The material is also a popular art medium. Every step of felting is a manual, individual and highly creative process. It takes 2 to 3 days (depending on complexity) to make one scarf.

The Dariali Gorge, located on the border with Russia, boasts scenic views of the vertical mountain walls and Terek River. Russian poet Mikhail Lermontov wrote about this gorge in his work, 'The Demon', and it is now known as one of the most romantic places in the Caucasus.

Total travel time : 2 hours
Overnight in Gudauri Marco Polo, Gudauri
**Day 7  Gudauri - Gori - Borjomi**

Visit the town of Gori to visit the Stalin Museum, then continue to Uplistsikhe Cave Town. In the afternoon, stop at Borjomi and visit the small Children's Park to taste the famous mineral water straight from the source. Dinner and overnight in Borjomi.

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**Uplistsikhe** (meaning 'Fortress of the Ruler') is a rock-hewn town that dates back to 1000 BC and covers an area of approximately 8 hectares. The town is divided over three levels that are connected by a series of narrow tunnels. Uplistsikhe used to be a main point on the Silk Road, but was abandoned in the 17th century.

Founded in 1829, **Borjomi** is a resort town that was popularised when the Russian royal family built a summer residence here in 1895. Today, Likani Palace belongs to the Georgian president, and the town remains famous as the source of Georgia's number one export - naturally carbonated mineral water. This water is exported to over 40 countries and is said to have medicinal and restorative properties. Borjomi is known for its picturesque location and setting within the protected Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park, one of the largest national parks in Europe. The town of Borjomi is also home to the most extensive ecologically-themed amusement park in the Caucasus.

The city of **Gori** is famously known as the birthplace of Joseph Stalin. The city is home to the Stalin Museum, which was originally built in 1951 as a local history museum. It later became a memorial museum to Stalin, following his death in 1953. Visitors to the museum can delve into the dictator's past, seeing the house where he spent the first few years of his life, his personal armored train carriage and many items that once belonged to Stalin - including hand written texts, office furniture and a bronze cast of his death mask.

Total travel time : 4.5 hours

Overnight in Borjomi Likani Health & Spa Centre, Borjomi

**Day 8  Borjomi - Vardzia - Borjomi**

In the morning, travel to the magnificent cave town of Vardzia, making a photo stop at Khertvisi fortress on the way. On the way back to Borjomi, visit the Rabati Castle in Akhaltsikhe. Dinner and overnight in Borjomi.

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With most construction taking place during the second half of the 12th century, **Vardzia** is a complex of cave dwellings set over 13 levels that centre around a main church and throne room. The Church of the Dormition, which dates back to the 1180s, is decorated with religious and royal murals. The site at Vardzia, however, was destroyed beyond repair by an earthquake in 1283.

The 13th-century **Rabati Castle** in Akhaltsikhe stands on top of a small hill and its four towers provide excellent views over the surrounding area. The complex occupies a territory of seven hectares and its museum is of great cultural and historical importance to the region.
The precursor to Khertvisi Fortress was purportedly destroyed by Alexander the Great; the current fortress, one of the largest in Georgia, was constructed in the 14th century, more than a millennium later. With 1.5-metre-thick and 20-metre-tall walls, it stretches over half a kilometre and has 19 tiers. The fortress stands guard to the current village of Khertvisi at the joining of the Mtkvari and Paravani rivers.

Total travel time: 4.5 hours
Overnight in Borjomi Likani Health & Spa Centre, Borjomi

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day 9</th>
<th>Borjomi - Mtskheta - Tbilisi</th>
<th>Meals</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Drive to Mtskheta, the ancient capital and religious centre of Georgia, for a walk around the Svetitskhoveli Cathedral and Jvari Monastery. Continue on to Tbilisi and visit the stunning treasury of the Georgian History Museum (closed on Mondays). Dinner and overnight in Tbilisi.</td>
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Mtskheta

Borjomi

Drive to Mtskheta, the ancient capital and religious centre of Georgia, for a walk around the Svetitskhoveli Cathedral and Jvari Monastery. Continue on to Tbilisi and visit the stunning treasury of the Georgian History Museum (closed on Mondays). Dinner and overnight in Tbilisi.

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Mtskheta is one of Georgia’s oldest cities, located roughly 20 km north of Tbilisi at the confluence of the Aragvi and Mtkvari rivers. Within the city (which is itself a UNESCO World Heritage Site) is the Svetitskhoveli Cathedral, one of Georgia’s largest places of worship. The site, surrounded by a defensive wall, has housed churches since the 4th century, but the standing building was constructed in the early 11th century and artfully restored in the 1970s. According to Biblical canon, Christ’s robe was carried to Mtskheta after his crucifixion and buried beneath the cathedral. Inside, a painting illustrates the buried garment and the miracle of a pillar rising into the air during the church’s construction.

Tbilisi, formerly known as ‘Tiflis’, is Georgia’s capital and the largest city of Georgia. It lays on the banks of the Mtkvari River and has a population of roughly 1.5 million people. Founded in the 5th century by the monarch of Georgia’s ancient precursor, the Kingdom of Iberia, the city was invaded by different invaders over the centuries. The increase of Armenian population was noticed in the 19th century. Tbilisi has many narrow streets and a mixture of religious and secular architecture. There are many churches, synagogues, mosques and 19th-century houses with multi-coloured wooden balconies.

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The cross-shaped Jvari Monastery precipitously tops a mountain, peering over the city of Mtskheta and the three-pronged intersection of the Mtkvari and Aragvi rivers below. This UNESCO World Heritage site was built on the site where St. Nino erected a cross outside of a Pagan temple, symbolising Iberia’s shift to Christianity in the 4th century. The Small Church of Jvari was built to the north of the cross, 60 years before the Jvari Monastery was completed, and can still be identified as ruins. Relief sculptures survive on the sacred pilgrimage site’s exterior, and a giant wooden cross still adorns the small monastery today.

Total travel time: 3 hours
Overnight in Shota @ Rustaveli Boutique Hotel, Tbilisi
Day 10  Tbilisi  Meals

After breakfast, begin your sightseeing tour of Tbilisi's old city. Take a cable car ride (if available) to Narikala Fortress, from where you can enjoy superb panoramic views of Tbilisi. Walk down to the sulphur baths which made an unforgettable impression on poets and writers like Alexander Pushkin, Mikhail Lermontov and Alexandre Dumas. Stroll along Rustaveli Avenue – Tbilisi’s main street. Finish the day with dinner at a local restaurant with a folklore dance show. Overnight in Tbilisi.

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Tbilisi’s old town stands in the shadow of Mother Georgia’s silvery statue, perched on a hill overlooking a mosaic of multi-coloured houses constructed in the 19th century. Nestled together on narrow streets, the homes feature wooden balconies that allow residents to revel in the fresh air. Established in the 4th century and fortified over hundreds of years, the ruins of Narikala Fortress also tower over Georgia’s capital, offering visitors spectacular panoramic views.

Overnight in Shota @ Rustaveli Boutique Hotel, Tbilisi

Day 11  Tbilisi - Yerevan (Armenia)  Meals

Make your way to Sadakhlo on the Georgia-Armenia border, where you will change your transport and go through some document formalities before continuing on to Armenia. Visit the Haghpat Monastery, Fioletovo village and then continue on to Lake Sevan, the largest lake in the Caucasus. Climb up Sevan Peninsula and, depending on timings and road conditions, you may even get to see the Sevanavank monastic complex situated on the mountain. Have dinner at a traditional Armenian restaurant with live folklore music and get an insight into the country’s musical culture. Overnight in Yerevan.

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Lying at 1900 metres above sea level with an area of 940 square kilometres, Lake Sevan is not only the largest lake in the Caucasus, but it's also one of the largest freshwater high-altitude lakes in the world. It holds a large variety of fish, including crayfish and the endangered 'ishkhan' (prince trout). Considered the "jewel" of Armenia, the lake scenery is beautiful, with the water often changing colour depending on the weather, from deep blue and turquoise to bright azure.

Built between the 10th and 13th centuries, the UNESCO-listed Haghpat Monastery was Armenia’s largest centre of science during this period, holding a rich collection of books and manuscripts within its library. Along with the nearby Sanahin Monastery, Haghpat became the religious centre of the Lori region in the mid-11th century. It is a beautiful example of medieval Armenian architecture, with many well-preserved structures within the site showcasing wonderful detailing and craftsmanship.

Fioletovo village is inhabited by molokans (translated as 'milk-drinkers'). Molokans are Russian sectarians that drank ‘too much milk’, even during Lent, and refused to obey the guidelines of the Russian Orthodox Church. They were rejected by their church and exiled from the Tambov Governorate in 1842. Visit one of the village houses to see how this minority lives, remains faithful to their religion and keeps their tradition alive to this day.
The Sevanavank monastic complex sits on a picturesque peninsula off the shore of Lake Sevan. It was founded in 874 AD for monks from Etchmiadzin Cathedral who had sinned against God.

Total travel time: 6.5 hours
Overnight in Republica Hotel Yerevan, Yerevan

Day 12  
Yerevan - Etchmiadzin - Zvarnots - Yerevan

Meals

Breakfast at the hotel. Full day tour of the capital visiting the main sites including: Republic Square, the Opera House and Cascade Complex, the Tsitsernakaberd Genocide Memorial Complex and the History Museum of Armenia. Lunch will be held at a local art school where you will learn how to cook “dolma”, an Armenian traditional dish. Drive to Armavir visit the Etchmiadzin Cathedral, St. Hripsime Church and Zvartnots Temple. Overnight in Yerevan.

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The capital of Armenia, Yerevan, sits on the Hrazdan river surrounded by picturesque hills and snow-capped mountains. It is often referred to as the 'Pink City' due to the 106 shades of tufa lava stone used on the city's buildings. During the Soviet years, Russian architect Alexander Tamanyan completely reconstructed Yerevan to resemble the neo-classical city styles of Paris and St. Petersburg.

The History Museum of Armenia is located on the Republic Square in Yerevan and houses a collection of over 400,000 archaeological, ethnographical and numismatic objects.

The 4th-century Etchmiadzin Cathedral is the central authority of the worldwide Armenian Apostolic Church. Its name translates as 'where the Only Begotten descended' in reference to Gregory the Illuminator's vision of Christ descending from heaven and striking the ground with a golden hammer. The Cathedral was then built on that exact spot. The complex consists of the Mother Cathedral, the monastery with a residing brotherhood, the Catholicos residence, the Kevorkian Theological Seminary and a museum.

Constructed in the 7th century, the UNESCO-listed Zvartnots Temple originally stood at a height of 49 metres, making it one of Armenia's tallest structures during that period. It consisted of three stories in a cylindrical shape and was crowned with a dome. While all that remains now are the ruins of the lower walls and individual fragments, details including floor mosaics and intricate stone carvings indicate how the temple was once beautifully decorated from top to bottom. It is still questioned as to what caused the temple's fall in the 10th century, though theories include destruction by a powerful earthquake or the temple's cornerstone being removed during an Arab invasion, causing the building to collapse in on itself.

Total travel time: 1.5 hours
Overnight in Republica Hotel Yerevan, Yerevan
Day 13  Yerevan - Garni - Yerevan

Breakfast at the hotel. Visit the museum of acclaimed Armenian filmmaker Sergey Parajanov. Afterwards, drive through rural Armenia to the ancient pagan temple of Garni. Walk towards the river valley to reach the "Symphony of Stones" (cliff side natural formations). Lunch at a local house and enjoy 'lavash', an Armenian flatbread consumed with most meals. Head up the gorge of the Azat River, northeast of Garni where the medieval Geghard monastery is located. On the way back stop at Mount Ararat Brandy Factory. Overnight at hotel in Yerevan.

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*Sergey Parajanov* (1924-1990) was a visionary artist and film-maker, acclaimed for his film 'The Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors'. He was persecuted by the Soviet regime and arrested and imprisoned twice under dubious pretexts. The House-Museum was opened a year after his death and has over 1,400 exhibits: collages, drawings, installations, dolls and unpublished screenplays.

*Garni Temple* is a picturesque monument of the Hellenistic period and an impressive piece of ancient Armenian architecture built in the 1st century A.D. After Christianity was proclaimed as a state religion in 301, the temple was used as a summer residence of the kings. The *Garni canyon*, which is a one-hour walk away along the Azat River, is particularly interesting. Its walls are formed of hexagonal rock strips, which is a natural formation known as the 'Symphony of Stones'. The gorge is listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

*The Geghard Monastery* is a magnificent monument of medieval Armenian architecture that is partially carved out of a mountain. It was founded in the 4th century by Gregory the Illuminator when a sacred spring was found inside a nearby cave, but the main chapel was built only in 1215. The name is translated as 'Monastery of the Spear', named after the spear that pierced Jesus on the crucifix. Apostle Jude supposedly brought this spear into Armenia and it is now displayed in the Echmiadzin treasury. However, churches in Rome, Vienna and Antioch also claim to possess this spear. Geghard has been named a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

*The Yerevan Brandy Factory* has preserved the cultural and historical heritage of its brandy-making traditions since 1887, when the first wine and brandy factory was founded in Yerevan. Authentic Armenian brandy uses only local grape varieties that are grown in the unique Ararat Valley microclimate. During a guided excursion of the factory, you will discover Armenian brandy-making secrets and see the oldest brandies kept in barrels. Afterwards, there will be a degustation of various brandies.

Total travel time: 2.5 hours
Overnight in Republica Hotel Yerevan, Yerevan
### Day 14  Yerevan - Aragatsotn - Khor Virap - Yerevan

| Meals |  
|-------|---|
| **B** | **L** |

Breakfast at the hotel. Visit some other iconic Armenian monasteries including the Khor Virap monastery built during the Arshakid's dynasty and the Noravank monastery. Enjoy lunch in a local cave restaurant and on the way back to Yerevan, stop off in the Areni region where some of the country's best wine is produced. Overnight in Yerevan.

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The **Khor Virap Monastery**, located in the Ararat plains, is the closest point to biblical Mt. Ararat. It is a prominent pilgrimage site, as it is where the first Armenian Catholicos resided and where Gregory the Illuminator, Armenia's patron saint, was imprisoned for 14 years. The monastery holds regular services to this day.

**Duduk** is a traditional Armenian instrument made of apricot wood. Duduk and its music is inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

Contrary to its name (which translates as "New Monastery"), **Noravank Monastery** was constructed before the 12th century. Perched on the ledge of the gorge in which the river Amaghu flows and surrounded by steep red rocks, the building is as famous for its magnificent surroundings as it is for its beautiful medieval Armenian architecture. The monastery's main temple, Surb Karapet, is the oldest part of the structure, built between the 9th and 10th centuries.

Total travel time: 4.5 hours  
Overnight in Republica Hotel Yerevan, Yerevan

### Day 15  Departure from Yerevan

| Meals |  
|-------|---|
| **B** | --- |

At an appropriate time, transfer to the airport for your flight home or to another onward destination.