



Azerbaijan

The only Caucasian country with a coastline on the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan has been influenced by its oil and gas reserves for centuries. It is sometimes thought that fire rituals were incorporated into the Zoroastrian religion because of mysterious burning natural gas vents on the Absheron Peninsula, near where Baku is today. The name “Azerbaijan” comes from an old Persian word meaning “protected by fire.”

The capital, Baku, is a dynamic city that is modernizing rapidly due to its strategic location near the oil and gas fields of the Caspian. New construction is everywhere and includes upscale Western chain hotels, a new Museum of Modern Art, and a waterfront pedestrian promenade. Oil money is fueling everything from public works programs and road upgrades, to a flourishing local nightlife. Further from the coast, as you climb into the mountains, the countryside retains more of a traditional village flavor, honoring older customs and Islamic values.

People and Place

Azerbaijan is made up of a semi-arid irrigated central plain, the Kur Steppe, which is surrounded by fertile slopes bearing fruits, vegetables, and nuts. The Greater Caucasus Mountains loom to the

north, and in the extreme south are the subtropical Talis Mountains. The forested Lesser Caucasus covers the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, currently under Armenian control. On the east is the saline Caspian Sea, which is rising slowly year after year.

Oil was discovered on the Caspian coast in the late 19th century and has played a major part in Azerbaijan's recent history, bringing its best hope for prosperity and its worst environmental degradation. Near the walled Old City sit beautiful Beaux Arts mansions built during Baku's first oil boom, some of them transformed into upscale boutiques and prestigious shops for the newly rich.

The Azerbaijani people speak a Turkic language and identify themselves as Shi'a Muslims, even after 70 years of official atheism under the Soviet Union.

Musical history in Azerbaijan dates from before 3000 BC. The best known of its musical forms is *mugham* (moo-GAHM), a fusion of Persian and Turkic traditions that is honored as a World Cultural Masterpiece by UNESCO. The unwritten pieces have traditionally been passed from ear to ear as the basis for improvisation by performers. This mesmerizing music is usually sung, accompanied by traditional instruments, but can be performed instrumentally as well.

History

Recent archaeological research tracing geographical references in the Bible points to the possibility that the Garden of Eden may have been an actual place – the Ajichai Valley in northern Iran, formerly southern Azerbaijan. Whether or not this is true, parts of Azerbaijan, notably Gobustan, below Baku on the Caspian coast, show evidence of human habitation beginning in the Stone Age. Cave and rock paintings and carvings illustrating the life of primitive humans have remained in the easily carved, yet durable, rocks along the Caspian.

After the time of the early hunter-gatherers, the history of the Azerbaijan area rapidly became more complex. Like the other Caucasus countries, Georgia and Armenia, Azerbaijan has been washed by waves of different ethnic groups and dynasties since the beginning of recorded time. The early history of Azerbaijan was linked to that of Persia. Medes and Persians entered the area around 1000 BC, and after 600 BC accepted Zoroastrian beliefs, which incorporated fire rituals and pagan animism into local traditions.

In the late 7th century, soon after the death of the prophet Mohammed, Muslim Arabs occupied the Iranian region, including what is now Azerbaijan. The Seljuk Turks moved into Azerbaijan in the 11th century, and the next 200 years marked a major migration of ethnic Turks from Central Asia. Today's Azeri people are descendants of Turkic tribes from Central Asia, as are today's Turks.

Tamerlane led his troops into the territory in the 13th century, but it remained firmly Muslim. Both Iran and Azerbaijan are Shi'ite Muslims, as opposed to Sunni Muslims.

Azerbaijan became a battleground for the Persians, Ottoman Turks, and Russians beginning in the 16th century, first with Persia and finally Russia winning supremacy in the region.

In the 20th century, after the fall of the Soviet Union, conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia erupted over Nagorno-Karabakh, a part of Azerbaijan that was, at the time, 60% ethnic Armenian (Karabakh means “Black Garden”). A cease-fire was negotiated in 1994, but not before Armenia had won jurisdiction over the Nagorno-Karabakh area, and thousands of ethnic Azeris were killed or forced to flee. The territory remains disputed to this day.

Please be aware that tensions remain between Azerbaijan and Armenia and it is not possible to travel directly between these countries. Routing through Georgia works well and Georgia maintains good relations with both Azerbaijan and Armenia.

In October 2003, Ilham Aliyev (New Azerbaijan Party) was reelected President with 86% of the popular vote. Novruz Mammadov has been the Prime Minister since April 2018.

Language

Azeri is a Turkic language, descended from the Oghuz, or Western Turkic, group, and related to the languages of both Turkey and Turkmenistan. Azeri is spoken in northern Iran, formerly Southern Azerbaijan, as well.

Originally Azeri was written in Arabic script, but the Soviets first required that it be written in a modified Roman script, then reversed the decision and required Cyrillic for all official communication. This reversal came after Turkey adopted Western script, and succeeded in keeping Azerbaijan isolated from its Islamic and Turkic neighbors.

Upon independence in 1991, Azerbaijan returned to the Latin alphabet, which was updated and slightly revised in 1992.

Climate

The climate of Azerbaijan varies widely. The north Caspian coast enjoys an arid subtropical climate, which becomes more moderate in the forested lower mountains. In the high mountains, the alpine tundra is sparse and chilly, and around Baku, the land is semi-desert. The southeast coast is subtropical and receives 1,300 mm of rainfall each year.

Azerbaijan experiences very hot summers and cold winters. Spring (April-May) and fall (September-October) are the best times to travel here. The spring provides a look at the wildflowers, while the fall brings spectacular colors as the leaves change. Rain is minimal. During your visit in October, you will likely experience average daily high temperatures in the 60s Fahrenheit and nighttime lows in the 50s.

Weather can always be unpredictable. Check a weather reporting source closer to the time of your travel to get the best idea of the weather conditions to expect during your tour.

Food and Drink

The cuisine of Azerbaijan underwent a profound change during the Soviet period, as the working people were regularly fed in Russian-style cafeterias. Russian dishes, like *kasha* (hot cereal) and *schi* (fish soup) were added to the Mediterranean cuisine found in Turkey, Greece, Lebanon, and Persia.

Azeri cuisine makes extensive use of the fresh and dried fruits, nuts, green herbs, and vegetables produced in the region. Sweet and sour flavors are often combined, with fresh pomegranate juice, dried lemons, and sour plums playing their parts. Great claims to long life and health are made based on the health-giving properties of Azeri food.

An Azeri drink called *ovshalla* is made of infused rose petals and sugar water.

The water situation, as you may already know, can be problematic and we strongly advise against drinking tap water. We recommend that you use bottled or filtered water for drinking and brushing your teeth.

Shopping

Traditional Azeri hats, scarves, socks, and copper wall paintings are found in the markets and shops of Baku's Fountain Square. Shopkeepers appreciate attempts to bargain. Beautiful Azeri carpets are sold in the Old City, near the Maiden Tower.

If you buy a carpet in Azerbaijan, you will need a special export permit for it. Ask the seller and/or your guide about the correct documents.

Currency

The currency of Azerbaijan is the *Manat* (AZN).

1 U.S. Dollar = 1.70 Manats, as of 06/11/2024. See <http://www.xe.com/ucc/> or any universal currency converter for updated exchange rates. Make sure the bills you bring to exchange are crisp, new, and unmarked, or they will be rejected at the exchange point.

ATMs: ATMs are widely available in Baku and other cities.

Credit Cards: Accepted in upscale hotels, restaurants and shops, and all banks in Baku. It is advisable to have cash on hand when traveling outside of Baku.

Travelers Checks: These are impossible to use in Azerbaijan; don't bring them.

Contact your credit card/debit card company before you depart the U.S. to let them know you will be traveling in Azerbaijan. This will help prevent your funds from being frozen.

Communications

Mobile Phones: Mobile coverage is generally good in cities, but may be sparse in the countryside. U.S. mobile phones with international roaming enabled work in Azerbaijan, although roaming charges can be high. Please contact your wireless provider about available international roaming and data packages. Buying a local cell phone or a SIM card is not recommended.

Internet Access: You will have access to Wi-Fi at your hotels and there may be some connection at restaurants used during the program.

Special Notes for Azerbaijan

Passport & Visa: A passport and a visa are required for the U.S. and most other countries' citizens to travel to Azerbaijan. The visa for Azerbaijan is issued electronically online (e-visa). Azeri e-visa is included in the cost of your trip and will be sent to you by e-mail prior to departure to print at home and bring on the trip along with your passport.

Cultural Tips: It is not considered proper to mention bodily functions in Azerbaijan. In a private home, you may ask someone of your age and gender for directions to the toilet.

People of the same gender are comfortable walking arm in arm and hugging, but often men and women avoid bodily contact with each other, except perhaps when shaking hands.

There are some cultural expectations concerning smoking in Azerbaijan: Smoking in front of older people is viewed as disrespectful, and women who smoke on the street are apt to be disapproved of.

Electricity: Electricity in Azerbaijan is 220 volts at 50 Hertz. Outlets generally take a plug with two round pins.

Interesting Facts about Azerbaijan

- Since 2008, when Azerbaijan first entered the Eurovision Song Contest, its contestants have placed in the top ten in the finals (with the exception of 2014). In 2011, the Azerbaijani duo Ell/Kikki won the contest, making Baku the 2012 venue for the popular contest.
- Thor Heyerdahl, of *Kon-Tiki* fame, declared toward the end of his life that he suspected early Azerbaijani people to be ancestors of the Vikings.
- The history of Baku's oil boom is inextricably bound up with the Nobel family, including Alfred, the man who established the Nobel Prize. About 12% of the money he used to fund the prizes came from his interest in the Branobel Oil Company, founded in Baku by siblings Robert and Ludvig Nobel in 1876.
- Burning natural gas vents on Azerbaijan's Absheron Peninsula may have inspired Zarathustra, a local resident, to include fire rituals in his new Zoroastrian religion.
- Azerbaijani author Rustam Ibrahimbeyov wrote the screenplay for *Burnt by the Sun*, the Russian movie that won the 1995 Oscar for Best Foreign Film.
- *Navruz* (from the Farsi for "new day"), a Zoroastrian celebration of the spring equinox, is Azerbaijan's most important holiday. Surviving from early Sassanid times, *Navruz* is celebrated for the four weeks leading up to the equinox itself. Preparations include thorough spring-cleaning, pruning, and clearing of fields, and the purchase of a new set of clothes for everyone. On the main day of festivities, people light bonfires and children jump over them, re-enacting visits from spirits in the last days of the old year. Then the children run through the streets knocking on doors and asking for treats.

- Sheki was named the 2016 Culture and Arts Capital of the Turkic World and featured performances, special events, and celebrations throughout the year.

For more information on Azerbaijan, go to:

<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/index.html>

and

<https://travel.state.gov/content/passports/en/country/azerbaijan.html>

United States Embassy in Azerbaijan:

111 Azadlig Avenue

Baku AZ1007

Tel: (+994 12) 488-3300

Fax: (+994 12) 488-3330

E-mail: consularbaku@state.gov

Website: <http://az.usembassy.gov/>

Consular Section's public hours for American Citizens Services are M–Th 2 pm–5 pm and Fri 9 am–12 pm, except for American and Azerbaijani holidays. Routine American Citizen Services are provided by appointment only. If there is a life-threatening emergency involving an American citizen after regular Embassy business hours (8:30 am–5:30 pm), you may call (+994 12) 488-3300 and ask for the Duty Officer. For an emergency involving an American citizen during regular business hours please call (+994 12) 488-3300 and ask for the Consular Section. If you are calling outside of Azerbaijan use 1-888-407- 4747.



Georgia

The ancient land of the Colchis, where Jason sought the Golden Fleece, Georgia has lived in myth and legend for centuries. Mostly mountainous, Georgia's lush lowlands and sunny Black Sea coast round out the character of the country – demanding and uncompromising, but also welcoming and abundant.

The green hills and the fertile valleys have inspired travelers throughout the centuries the desire to remain, living easily off the fruits of the land, tending their sheep, and drinking the deep-flavored wines crushed from their own grapes. In the end, the indigenous Georgian people have prevailed over a parade of rich and powerful nations that have tried at various times to claim their territory.

Today Georgia is one of the travel world's undiscovered jewels – a fabulously beautiful country that claims to be the place where the wine grape originated; that invented one of only a few world alphabets; that has a population with a tendency to shower hospitality on guests, and a government that has recently made huge strides in infrastructure improvement, like new airports, better roads and visa-free status for U.S. and EU visitors.

People and Place

The peaks of the Caucasus mark the northern borders of the small country of Georgia. To the west lie the subtropical shores of the Black Sea, and to the south, the hills of the Lesser Caucasus rise from the floor of Georgia's central lowland. The Caucasus is a geologically active chain of mountains that is slowly being thrust upward as the Arabian tectonic plate nudges into the Eurasian plate. This movement is responsible for the hot springs that the area is famous for, as well as for the highest peaks – which are volcanic cones – and the region's periodic earthquakes.

Russia borders Georgia on the north and encompasses the Caucasus' highest mountain, Mt. Elbrus. On the south lies Turkey, Georgia's Black Sea neighbor, and to the southeast and east are Armenia and Azerbaijan, the other countries of the southern Caucasus. In recent years, Georgia's roads have improved greatly, shaving time off the wildly scenic drives through the mountains.

The population of Georgia numbers just under five million. In the early days of independence, many Georgians emigrated to find better job opportunities, and the population has since remained less than what it was during the Soviet era. Notable people connected to Georgia are, of course, Joseph Stalin, whose real name was Iosep Dzhugashvili; famed choreographer George Balanchine, born Giorgi Balanchivadze; and the Olympic luger, Nodar Kumaritashvili, who was killed during a training run at the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver, Canada.

History

Georgia's mountainous geography and its location between the landlocked seas, the Caspian and the Black, have dictated its history. Georgia's strip of central lowlands has long been an important link between East and West. In modern times, this corridor presents a logical route for oil pipelines from the Caspian region. It is also a fabulously beautiful country with fantastic diversity – mountains, semi-arid steppe, and seacoast. It's not surprising that the ancient Greeks, Romans, Scythians, Persians, Turks, Russians, and Soviets have all quarreled bitterly over the South Caucasus region, but the indigenous Georgians populating and defending the mountains and their passes are still here today.

Archaeologists have unearthed traces of human settlements around Georgia's Black Sea coast that date back to 100,000 BC. By the early Bronze Age, around 3000 BC, the metalwork from the Georgian area was well-known in the Middle East. Toward the end of this era, an Indo-European group invaded the western Caucasus, strongly influencing the indigenous culture. The resulting culture then assimilated many pre-Hittite people fleeing from Anatolia; these people are considered the first Georgians.

The mountainsides and the hilltops of Georgia are dotted with fortresses and stone fortifications, evidence of the harsh battles and the daily difficulties of the Georgian tribesmen. As Georgian history progressed, empires large and small struggled for sovereignty in its hills and valleys. Christian Rome and Byzantium fought against Muslim Persia here for centuries, with Georgia and Armenia won over by the Christians and Azerbaijan by the Muslims. In the 7th century AD, the Persians conquered the area and immediately began struggling with the Seljuk Turks.

Georgia's "Golden Age" of art, literature, and architecture stretched from 1089, when David the Builder became king, until around 1220. After the death of his great-granddaughter Queen Tamar,

the Mongols began making forays into the area. Under repeated attacks, the temporarily unified kingdom disintegrated into feuding princedoms.

After the fall of Byzantine Constantinople in 1453, the Ottoman Turks began gaining power and split the South Caucasus between themselves and the Persian Safavid Empire. When the Safavid Empire collapsed in the 1720s, the Ottomans filled the power vacuum. By this time, Peter the Great of Russia had realized the area's importance as a trade and military route and began sending his troops to skirmish with the Ottomans and the Persians over control of the lowlands.

For the next two hundred years, Russia, the Ottoman Turks, and Persia battled in the Caucasus, with Russia finally subduing the area in the late 1800s. Russia's tactics of burning crops, looting and destroying villages, and deporting their people made it an unpopular overlord.

After the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, Georgia was assimilated into the Soviet Union as an "Autonomous Republic", and its produce, wines, and wool were redistributed by the USSR's Central Planning Committee. Georgian independence was restored at last in May 1991.

Eduard Shevardnadze, former Soviet Foreign Minister and a key player in the dissolution of the USSR, was elected President in 1995. In spite of his earlier reputation as a corruption fighter, by 2003 his regime was accused of widespread corruption and toppled in the largely peaceful Rose Revolution. Mikheil Saakashvili's election in 2004 brought market reforms, a move toward more democratization, and more interaction with the U.S. (Saakashvili received his LL.M from Columbia Law School in 1994.)

In August of 2008, Georgian military action in South Ossetia resulted in a Russian military response in the breakaway areas as well as parts of undisputed Georgian territory. Russia eventually withdrew its troops from much of the territory it had occupied, but soon unilaterally recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent nations. Tensions remain between Georgia and Russia along their shared border.

In June 2014, Georgia signed an agreement formally establishing closer ties with the EU. In 2017, amendments to the Constitution declared 2018 as the last year of direct presidential voting. Because no candidate was able to secure at least 50% of the vote in October's first round, Salome Zurbishvili won with around 60% of the vote in the second round in November 2018. Her 6-year presidency will be the last before presidents are elected by the 300-member College of Electors.

Language

Because of Georgia's mountainous terrain, its people lived for centuries with little contact among tribes. Consequently, three different though related languages evolved here from a common ancestor, Old Kartvelian. Old Kartvelian itself is not related to any language except its own group of Southern Caucasus languages.

Modern Georgian is now spoken throughout the country, although at home many people still speak their own particular branch of the language. The beautifully curling Georgian script is one of only a few world alphabets, and evolved around the 5th century BC, possibly influenced by Aramaic.

Climate

Protected from northern winds by the Caucasus range, western Georgia is warmed by the damp winds that blow in from the Black Sea. As the land rises to the plateaus of eastern Georgia, the climate becomes semi-arid and continental, with hot, dry summers and cold winters. Up in the mountains, it is always cooler than down in the lowlands. Rain is minimal. Spring (April-May) and fall (September-October) are the best months to travel here. During your visit in October, the average daily high temperatures are in the 60s and nighttime lows may drop into the 40s.

Weather can always be unpredictable. Check a weather reporting source closer to the time of your travel to get the best idea of the weather conditions to expect during your tour.

Food and Drink

Books have been written about Georgian hospitality and the abundance and flavor of its foods and wines. Georgians believe that travelers are sent by God, and they treat them accordingly. A Georgian feast, or *supra*, is a cultural and culinary experience that can include dozens of dishes and countless toasts. The table is covered with plates of delicacies – chicken in crushed walnut sauce, *khachapuri* (a savory cheese pie), puff pastries, little meat dumplings called *khinkali*, salads, and marinated vegetables, just to name a few. A large feast will have a sort of toastmaster, called a *tamada*, who is charged not only with toasting and inviting others to toast but with telling stories and jokes and sometimes leading songs.

Fruits, vegetables, nuts, grains, and grapes all grow beautifully in southwest Georgia's Mediterranean climate, and its food is characteristically rich and varied. Lamb and mutton are favorites, but pork and chicken are featured in many dishes. A Georgian table will have numerous room-temperature salads and vegetable dishes displayed at the beginning of a meal, and the hostess will bring more as the evening wears on. Hot dishes, such as roast suckling pig, *mtsvadi* (shish-kebob), *chanakhi* (baked whole tomatoes with greens, eggplant, lamb, and peppers), and soups may be presented at any time to supplement the room-temperature dishes.

While many traditional Georgian dishes are meat-based, there are many vegetarian and vegan-friendly options in both traditional and modern Georgian cuisine (examples include Georgian salad (cucumber and tomato with or without walnut), *pkhali* (spinach or beetroot leaves with crushed walnut), baked mushrooms, bean soup and more).

At the market, you may buy *churchkhela*, a candy made by stringing walnuts and dipping them in a hot grape mixture, then hanging them to dry. The various breads are crusty and baked in clay ovens. *Katchapouri*, cheese pies like pizzas without the tomato sauce, are baked in every home, but the bell-shaped meat dumplings called *khinkali* can usually be found only in special restaurants called *sakhinkle*.

The water situation, as you may already know, can be problematic and we strongly advise against drinking tap water. We recommend that you use bottled or filtered water for drinking and brushing your teeth.

Shopping

The famous Georgian dagger, or *khanjali*, is an example of fine Georgian metalwork. Traditional winehorns, called *khantsy*, are made from the horns of mountain rams and can be filled with Georgian wines, which are an excellent value here. Georgian ceramics, embroidery, carpets, jewelry, and clothing make authentic gifts and keepsakes. All of these (except the wine) can be found in art galleries or tourist shops. Most of Georgia's outdoor markets sell food rather than handicrafts, but can be fascinating nonetheless.

Antiques must be accompanied by an export license from the Ministry of Culture to be allowed out of the country. Georgian customs sometimes enforce strict regulations about the import/export of alcohol, tobacco, jewelry, and art as well. Official tourist shops or your MIR guide can help you with these requirements if you find you must buy older rugs or icons. Speak with your local guide if you have any questions about your purchases.

Currency

The currency of Georgia is the *Lari* (GEL).

1 U.S. Dollar = 2.86 lari, as of 06/11/2024. See <http://www.xe.com/ucc/> or any universal currency converter for updated exchange rates. Make sure the bills you bring to exchange are crisp, new, and unmarked, or they will be rejected at the exchange point.

ATMs: ATMs are widely available in Tbilisi and other cities.

Credit Cards: Accepted in upscale hotels, restaurants and shops, and all banks in Tbilisi. It is advisable to have cash on hand when traveling outside of Tbilisi.

Travelers Checks: These are impossible to use in Georgia; don't bring them.

Contact your credit card/debit card company before you depart the U.S. to let them know you will be traveling in Georgia. This will help prevent your funds from being frozen.

Communications

Mobile Phones: Mobile coverage is generally good in cities, but may be sparse in the countryside. U.S. mobile phones with international roaming enabled work in Georgia, although roaming charges can be high. Please contact your wireless provider about available international roaming and data packages. Buying a local cell phone or a SIM card is not recommended.

Internet Access: You will have access to Wi-Fi at your hotels and there may be some connection at restaurants used during the program.

Special Notes for Georgia: The two separatist regions, Abkhazia (in northwest Georgia, on the coast) and South Ossetia (along the Russian border in the middle of the country) have experienced periods of civil war and unrest since Georgian independence. The Abkhazian people consider themselves a separate Caucasian ethnic group and the Ossetians are an Iranian ethnic group said to be descended from a Scythian tribe. Both regions have had close ties with Moscow, and have had independent aspirations for many years. Since the fighting in August 2008, the U.S. State

Department advises “to exercise caution when traveling in the mountainous areas of northern Georgia bordering the Russian Federation.”

Visa & Passport: A passport is required for U.S. citizens to enter Georgia. Georgia is visa-free for U.S. and Canadian passport holders.

Customs Regulations: Georgian customs sometimes enforce strict regulations about the import/export of alcohol, tobacco, jewelry, art, and antiquities. The Department of Expertise and Evaluation of the Ministry of Culture must issue a license for any valuables such as artwork, antiques, jewelry, or paintings. Speak with your local guide if you have any questions about your purchases.

There is no limit on the amount of currency you can bring into Georgia, but if you bring in large sums, it’s recommended that you declare it. Take note: if you take more currency out than you declared on your way in, you will be required to show that you obtained the currency legally.

Cultural Tips: It is acceptable for both men and women to kiss each other on the cheek in public. Women shake hands less often than men do. As a rule, the closer the relationship between two people, the closer they stand to each other.

Electricity: Electricity in Georgia is 220 volts at 50 Hertz. Outlets generally take a plug with two round pins.

Interesting Facts about Georgia

- Some Georgians do not toast with beer – it is reserved for toasting enemies.
- Georgians call themselves *Kartveli-ebi*, a name derived from the pagan god Kartlos, father of all Georgians. The Western European name for the Georgian people may come from the word *Gurj*, which the Arab world calls them, rather than from St. George, the country’s patron saint.
- The furry grey Caucasian Shepherd is an ancient breed of dog, bred to guard herds of sheep and goats. It is said that they are too proud and arrogant to do normal dog-like things, such as chasing sticks.
- George Balanchine, celebrated choreographer and co-founder of the New York City Ballet, was born Giorgi Balanchivadze in St. Petersburg, the son of a Georgian father and a Russian mother.
- In the mountain region of Khevsureti, people sometimes speak to each other in verse.
- The special taste of homemade Kakhetian wine is caused in part by fermenting and aging it in clay vessels called *qvevris*, which are buried in the ground. In traditional Georgian homes, the birth of a baby boy is marked by burying a *qvevri* of new wine, which is unearthed and drunk only on the boy’s wedding day.

- A small population of Georgians concentrated in villages on the shores of the Black Sea speaks a language called Pontic Greek, a form of Greek that more closely resembles Ancient Greek than does the language spoken in modern-day Greece.

For more information on Georgia, go to:

<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/index.html>

and

<https://travel.state.gov/content/passports/en/country/georgia.html>

The Embassy of the United States of America in Georgia

11 George Balanchine Street, Didi Dighomi

Tbilisi, Georgia 0131

Tel: (995 32) 227-70-00 Fax: (995-32) 253-23-10

U.S. Citizen Emergency Assistance: (995-32) 227 77 24

After-hours Emergencies, Duty Officer: (995 32) 227-70-00

E-mail: askconsultbilisi@state.gov

Web: <http://ge.usembassy.gov>

Embassy Hours: M - F, 9 am–6 pm. Closed on American and Georgian holidays.



A rmenia

Armenia famously claims to be the first country to embrace Christianity as a state religion, and this record informs its history. Powerful old churches, built of huge blocks of red or yellow stone are silhouetted on the hilltops or tucked away in the valleys. Thousands of basalt *khachkar* crosses, lovingly carved and filigreed memorial stones dating from the 10th century onward, draw the eye toward the East.

Although a majority of Armenians live in urban areas, small farming operations and hospitality are the new growth industries. Travelers can join pilgrims riding the new 3.5-mile aerial tramway over the spectacular Voroten River Gorge up to the robust stone churches and outbuildings of 9th-century Tatev Monastery, an 11-minute journey of incredible beauty. The new tramway, “Tatev Wings,” is said to be the longest in the world and epitomizes the enhancement projects that Armenia is pursuing.

People and Place

Armenia is a mountainous country of peaks and high plateaus cut by numerous river valleys. Only 17% of it is arable. Lake Sevan, one of the area’s largest freshwater lakes, covers 5% of Armenia and lies 1,000 meters above sea level.

This landlocked country is in southwestern Asia, just east of Turkey. Its eastern half is sandwiched between two parts of Azerbaijan, whose territory it splits. In the northern part of Azerbaijan lies

Nagorno-Karabakh, a disputed territory claimed by both Armenia and Azerbaijan. To the north is Georgia, and to the south is Iran.

Armenia's people are some of the most homogeneous in the world, with more than 98% being ethnic Armenian. Close to 4 million Armenians live in the country, but an estimated 8 million more claiming full or partial Armenian ancestry live in other countries, with some 500,000 to 1 million living and working in the U.S.

The country adopted Christianity in 301 AD and formed the Armenian Apostolic Church, independent of either the Catholic or the Eastern Orthodox churches. Armenia is famous for its *khachkar*, intricately carved stone crosses that are a unique art form distinct to Armenia. These masterpieces can be found all around the country and originally appeared in both pagan and Christian periods. Initially wooden, the first stone crosses appeared in the 4th-7th centuries.

One of Armenia's favorite sons is Sergei Parajanov, the revered filmmaker and artist, whose unquenchable creativity brought him into conflict with Soviet authorities. His classic 1968 film *The Color of Pomegranates* was withdrawn after a two-month run in the then-Soviet Union. Yerevan's Sergei Parajanov Museum presents over 600 of his eclectic works, including collages, film sketches, assemblages, dolls, and drawings.

History

Armenia has had a long and difficult history, caught as it was between the Greek, Roman, Persian, and Ottoman empires. Yerevan, the present-day capital of Armenia, was founded under the name Erebuni in 782 BC. The Armenian people, a tribe of Indo-Europeans known at the time as the Hayk, took Erebuni from its founders and began their own empire, soon swallowed up by Alexander the Great. Later, Tigran the Great united two separate Armenian kingdoms into one large empire, but this was short-lived as well. Before even the time of Christ, the Armenian Empire had come and gone, conquered with all its territory by the Romans.

Christianity has been crucial to the development of a sense of identity and pride in Armenia. In 301 AD, Armenia's King Trdates III converted to the new creed and adopted it as the state religion, making Armenia the first Christian country. Since that time, Armenia has been firmly Christian, a fact which has greatly affected its history. By the 7th century, Islam had become the dominant religion in the nearby country of Albania, and in the 11th century, the Seljuk Turks consolidated Islam and introduced the Turkish language in Azerbaijan, Armenia's closest neighbor.

After the fall of Constantinople in 1453, the Ottoman Turks and the Persians struggled over the Caucasus until the 1800s, when Russia went to war with Persia and Turkey and won parts of it from them. The Ottomans repressed and killed Armenians in Turkey. In 1915, the new government of Young Turks, fearing that Armenians would side with Russia rather than Turkey, systematically massacred and deported between one and two million Armenians. Many of the remaining Armenians fled to other countries in what is now called the Armenian Diaspora.

After the Russian Revolution, the three Caucasus countries, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, were incorporated into the Soviet Union, where they remained until its collapse in 1991. Since that

time, Armenia has had trouble with its neighbor, Azerbaijan, over control of the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh. Both Azerbaijan and Turkey (out of solidarity with their Turkic ally, Azerbaijan) closed their borders with Armenia as a result of the armed conflict. In 1994, a ceasefire was declared, and negotiations for a permanent resolution of the conflict began, but the borders remained closed.

In 1995, Turkey and Azerbaijan began an energy blockade of Armenia in response to Armenia's continued control of Nagorno-Karabakh. During the winters of 1996 and 1997, the Armenian people, faced with freezing temperatures, cut down many of their forests and scavenged for wood in the cities. Since then, the energy-poor country has brokered energy deals with both Russia and Iran and reopened the Metsamor nuclear facility near the Turkish border.

In 2010, Turkish-Armenian relations began to thaw. The Turkish government, in a goodwill gesture, allowed Armenian pilgrims to celebrate a Mass at the 10th-century Armenian Church of the Holy Cross on Akhtamar Island in Turkey's Lake Van. The presidents of each country visited the other to attend soccer matches.

Armenia and Azerbaijan exchanged prisoners in 2010 as well, one of the first intimations of a thaw between the two countries. However, at the December 2010 summit of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), which brought 38 national leaders together for talks, hopes for a peaceful, negotiated settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict appeared to be on hold again, as negotiators were unable even to come up with acceptable language to describe the conflict. Since then, occasional incidents between Armenian and Azerbaijani soldiers have been taking place.

Be aware that tensions remain and it is not possible to travel directly between Armenia and Azerbaijan or Armenia and Turkey. Routing through Georgia works well and Georgia maintains good relations with both countries.

In September 2013, Armenia decided to **join the Russian-led Customs Union**, an entity that also includes Belarus and Kazakhstan. In December 2013, Armenia and Russia signed an agreement to cancel export duties for natural gas and oil products. In November 2016, plans were made for Russia and Armenia to create a joint military command, but in 2017, Armenia signed a Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with the EU.

The chief of state is President Armen Sarkissian, elected in April 2018 for a single seven-year term. The Prime Minister since May 2018 is former newspaper editor and dissident Nikol Pashinyan, who organized a movement to oust veteran politician Serzh Sargsyan from the role.

Language

Armenian is a distinct branch of the Indo-European language most closely related to Greek. In the past, it was erroneously considered an Iranian language because it has so many borrowed Persian words. There are two Armenian dialects, Eastern and Western. Eastern is mainly spoken in Armenia and the Armenian enclaves in Azerbaijan and Iran. Armenians of the diaspora, now living in other countries, usually speak Western Armenian. The Armenian alphabet was developed from the early Greek alphabet and contains 36 letters.

Climate

Armenia has a semi-arid highland continental climate, with four distinct seasons. The summers are hot and the winters are cold, with temperature extremes more pronounced in the mountains. Spring (April-May) and fall (September-October) are the best months to travel here. The spring provides a look at the wildflowers, while the fall brings spectacular colors as the leaves change. Rain is minimal. During your visit in October, the average daily high temperatures will be a few degrees higher than in Georgia potentially reaching the low 70s and nighttime lows may drop into the 40s.

Weather can always be unpredictable. Check a weather reporting source closer to the time of your travel to get the best idea of the weather conditions to expect during your tour.

Food & Drink

Armenian food has been strongly influenced by Greek, Turkish, Georgian, and Middle Eastern cuisine. The Armenian diet relies on lamb, chicken, and beef, dried peas, lentils and chickpeas, cheeses, rice, bulgur wheat, bread and noodles, and Mediterranean vegetables such as eggplant, olives and tomatoes. The national fruit is the pomegranate, with its symbolic association with fertility and plenty.

Weekend breakfasts can be major events. *Khash*, a gelatinous dish of long-simmered cow legs and hooves, is served with spices and garlic and consumed with Armenian brandy or vodka. It is said to have great health properties and is a trusted cure for hangovers.

The most popular drink in Armenia is strong coffee, very much like what we know in the U.S. as Turkish coffee (though in Armenia, of course, it's called Armenian coffee). You can prepare it at home by bringing water, a little sugar, and "pulverized" coffee to a boil three times, backing it off the heat just before it boils over. After the third time, let the coffee settle slightly, pour it into demitasse cups, and add more sugar to taste. It should be very strong and chewy.

Shopping

Silver and gold jewelry are bargains in Armenia. Woodcarvings, jewelry made with semi-precious stones, and pottery can be found at the Vernissage, the outdoor weekend market in Yerevan. The salespeople here are usually the artists and craftsmen themselves. If you want to buy an antique Armenian carpet, you must have a certificate to take it out of the country. Ask the advice of your local guide, since the certificate may be obtainable only two times a week.

Armenian cognac and red wines make great gifts for those who appreciate fine wine and spirits.

Currency

The currency of Armenia is the *Dram* (AMD).

1 U.S. Dollar = 387 drams, as of 06/11/2024. See <http://www.xe.com/ucc/> or any universal currency converter for updated exchange rates. Make sure the bills you bring to exchange are crisp, new, and unmarked, or they will be rejected at the exchange point.

ATMs: ATMs are widely available in Yerevan and other cities.

Credit Cards: Accepted in upscale hotels, restaurants and shops, and all banks in Yerevan. It is advisable to have cash on hand when traveling outside of Yerevan.

Travelers Checks: These are impossible to use in Armenia; don't bring them.

Contact your credit card/debit card company before you depart the U.S. to let them know you will be traveling in Armenia. This will help prevent your funds from being frozen.

Communications

Mobile Phones: Mobile coverage is generally good in cities, but may be sparse in the countryside. U.S. mobile phones with international roaming enabled work in Armenia, although roaming charges can be high. Please contact your wireless provider about available international roaming and data packages. Buying a local cell phone or a SIM card is not recommended.

Internet Access: You will have access to Wi-Fi at your hotels and there may be some connection at restaurants used during the program.

Special Notes for Armenia

Visa & Passport: A passport is required for U.S. citizens to enter Armenia. Armenia is visa-free for U.S. passport holders, although Canadian and some other countries' nationals need visas for Armenia, which can be purchased at the border for a fee of about \$10 USD.

Customs Procedures: To leave the country with antiquities and other items that could have historical value, such as paintings, carpets, old books, or other artisan goods, special authorization is required in advance from the Armenian Ministry of Culture. Speak to your local guide if you have any questions about your purchases.

If you are traveling through the South Caucasus and plan to enter Azerbaijan after visiting Armenia, be prepared for the possibility of additional questioning at passport control about your reasons for visiting Armenia. Alcohol produced in Armenia (especially with Nagorno-Karabakh on the label) and guidebooks, maps, or other printed materials manufactured in Armenia (depicting Nagorno-Karabakh as Armenian territory or as an independent country) will not be allowed into the country of Azerbaijan.

Cultural Tips: Hospitality and generosity are very important in Armenia. Don't be surprised if you are invited into a home for tea or coffee, especially in rural areas.

If you are attending an Orthodox church service, do not lounge or put your hands in your pockets: this can be interpreted as disrespect. Women are not expected to wear headscarves in church, except perhaps at the active services at Echmiadzin.

Armenians are considered to be direct in their communications; "beating around the bush" is not encouraged.

Electricity: Electricity in Armenia is 220 volts at 50 Hertz. Outlets generally take a plug with two round pins.

Interesting Facts about Armenia

- A monument to Armenian-American author and playwright William Saroyan was dedicated in Yerevan on the 100th anniversary of his birth in 2008.
- Commercial yogurt making in the U.S. began in 1939 when an Armenian family, the Colombosians, started Colombo & Sons Creamery. General Mills bought out the company in 1993, renaming it Yoplait-Colombo.
- 70,000 pagan Yezdi Kurds live in Armenia. Their monotheistic faith, based on the worship of the sun god, Mithra, dates back to the 7th century.
- Winston Churchill was a great fan of Armenian cognac.
- Armenian-American Michel Ter-Pogossian is one of the inventors of the PET scan.
- The sculpted stone crosses called *khachkar* are the pride of Armenia. There are more than 10,000 of them dotting the countryside, and no two are alike.
- Travelers can now ride a new 3.5-mile aerial tramway over a spectacular gorge to the 9th-century Tatev Monastery, an 11-minute journey of incredible beauty. The new tramway, “Tatev Wings,” is said to be the longest in the world.
- Los Angeles socialites The Kardashian sisters’ grandparents came to the U.S. from Armenia just before the Holocaust, and they were raised with Armenian stories, food, and holidays.

United States Embassy in Armenia:

1 American Avenue

Yerevan 0082

Republic of Armenia

Tel: (+374 10) 464-700

E-mail: ACSYerevan@state.gov

U.S. Citizen Services: 2pm – 4 pm, M-F

Tel: (+374-10) 49-45-85 Fax: (+374-10) 46-47-37

For emergencies during Embassy business hours (M – F, 9 am – 6 pm) please call (+374-10) 49-46-86. For after-hour emergencies please call (+374-10) 49-44-44.