
GEORGIA
Eurasian Treasure

GEORGIA

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EurAsia's Best-Kept Secret

Stunning nature. Ancient history. Extraordinary wine.
Low prices. Open doors. A new beginning.
2026

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INTRODUCTION

Where Europe ends and Asia begins, there lies a country that few Westerners know about — even though it deserves to be on everyone's lips.

Georgia. Not the American state. Not a tech company. But a 3,700-year-old culture at the heart of the Caucasus — an ancient civilisation with its own language, its own alphabet, its own winemaking tradition — and now, 30 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, a bold new identity as a Western-oriented nation striving to join the European family.

This book is written for the curious. For those who want more than the tourist masses of Southern Europe. For those wondering: 'Where can you still live well, affordably, and somewhere genuinely interesting?'

The answer is often: Tbilisi.

"Georgia is such a hidden gem that when you discover it, you want to keep it to yourself. But that would be a shame — this country deserves to be known."

In this book we cover everything: history, politics, food, wine, prices, taxes, visas, housing, car culture, restaurants — and in the final chapter we answer the big question directly: should you move to Tbilisi?

Spoiler: very often the answer is yes.

PART 1

THE SOUL OF THE LAND

History, people and identity — Chapters 1–4

CHAPTER 1

WHO ARE THE GEORGIANS?

A PEOPLE AND THEIR CHARACTER

1.1 Population and demographics

Georgia is a small country — slightly smaller than Finland in area (69,700 km²), but with a population of only around 3.7 million people. The largest city is Tbilisi, home to an estimated 1.1–1.2 million residents — nearly a third of the entire country's population. The second largest city is Kutaisi in western Georgia (around 160,000 inhabitants) and third is Batumi on the Black Sea coast (around 160,000 inhabitants).

The population is predominantly ethnic Georgian (around 86%). Significant minorities include Armenians (around 6%), Azeris (around 6%), as well as small Russian, Ossetian and Abkhazian minorities. The country is practically very homogeneous — unlike many of its neighbours.

❖ Population: ~3.7 million (2024)
❖ Tbilisi population: ~1.1–1.2 million
❖ Area: 69,700 km² (Finland: 338,000 km²)
❖ Ethnic Georgian: ~86%
❖ Religion: Orthodox Christianity ~84%
❖ Official language: Georgian
❖ Capital: Tbilisi

1.2 The national character — hospitality above all

Georgian culture is defined by one trait above all others: hospitality. In Georgian tradition, a guest is a messenger from God. This is not merely a phrase — it manifests in everyday life. A stranger asks for directions on the street, and moments later they may find themselves in someone's home

drinking tea or sitting down to dinner.

Georgians are a proud people — proud of their history, their culture, their wine and their food. This pride is warm-hearted, not aggressive. They want to share it with you.

A European or American visitor in Georgia will often experience something rare: a genuine, unconditional warmth from people who do not know them at all.

"A Georgian table never ends. Food is added, wine is poured, and just when you think dinner is over, it is only beginning."

1.3 Family and tradition

The family is the cornerstone of Georgian society. Grandparents, parents, children and grandchildren often live very close to one another — or under the same roof. Respect for elders is a central value.

Traditions live on strongly: Orthodox religious holidays, funeral rituals, wedding customs. At a Georgian wedding, hundreds of guests are often seated, the table is laden with food, and the supra — the traditional feast — can last for hours. The tamada, the toastmaster, delivers speeches that are small poems about life, love and friendship.

Religion is strongly present: the Georgian Orthodox Church is one of the oldest in the world, and its influence extends into politics, culture and everyday life.

CHAPTER 2

GEORGIA'S HISTORY

FROM ANTIQUITY TO THE PRESENT DAY

2.1 An ancient civilisation — 3,700 years

Georgia's history stretches back at least 3,700 years. Archaeological finds at Dmanisi — about 90 kilometres south of Tbilisi — show that Homo erectus lived in the area around 1.8 million years ago. These are the oldest human fossils found outside Africa.

Georgia's winemaking history is the oldest in the world: archaeologists have found ceramic vessels with wine residue dating back around 8,000 years. This makes Georgia the birthplace of winemaking.

Colchis — an ancient kingdom in western Georgia — appears in Greek mythology. The Argonauts sailed to Colchis to retrieve the Golden Fleece. Trade flourished with Greece, Persia and Rome.

Key events in Georgian history
~3000 BC — First city-states in the Georgian region
~800 BC — The kingdoms of Colchis and Iberia
337 AD — Christianity adopted as the state religion
500–800 AD — Sasanid Persian and Arab conquests
1008–1184 — Georgia's Golden Age: Queen Tamar
1220s — Mongol invasions, devastation of the country
1400–1700 — Caught between Ottoman and Safavid Persian pressure
1801 — Russia annexes Georgia into its empire
1918–1921 — Brief independence, then Soviet conquest
1991 — Independence restored

2.2 The Golden Age — Queen Tamar

Georgia's history culminates in the Golden Age of the 12th–13th centuries. King David IV 'the

Builder' united Georgia, drove out the Seljuk Turks and made the country a regional superpower. His granddaughter Tamar (reigned 1184–1213) was a queen considered Georgia's greatest historical leader.

During Tamar's reign, Georgia extended its influence across the entire Caucasus, Anatolia and Persia. Culture, architecture and poetry flourished. The poet Shota Rustaveli wrote Georgia's national epic The Knight in the Panther's Skin during this period, considered one of the great works of Caucasian literature.

"Tamar is to us what Napoleon is to France — but more beloved and more human." — Georgian historian

2.3 Under Russian rule 1801–1991

In 1801, Russian Emperor Alexander I annexed Georgia into the Russian Empire — initially with promises of protection against Persia and the Ottomans. It soon became clear that Georgian culture, language and autonomy were under threat.

During the Soviet era (1921–1991), Georgia experienced both massive modernisation and brutal suppression. During Stalin's period — himself of Georgian descent — the Georgian intelligentsia suffered severe purges. At the same time, factories, universities and infrastructure were built.

Yet a strong national identity survived in the Georgian SSR. Language, church and culture were kept alive underground and semi-officially. When the Soviet Union began to falter in the 1980s, Georgia's national awakening was rapid and powerful.

CHAPTER 3

BREAKING FREE FROM THE SOVIET UNION

3.1 Tbilisi, 9 April 1989

Georgia's independence movement accelerated in the late 1980s. In 1989, a massive demonstration was held in Tbilisi, drawing tens of thousands of people. The Soviet army dispersed the crowd with violence — 20 people died, hundreds were injured. The date, 9 April, remains Georgia's national day of mourning and a symbol of independence.

The event dramatically accelerated the independence movement. Zviad Gamsakhurdia rose as a national leader, and in the free elections of 1990 his party won by a landslide.

3.2 The declaration of independence 1991

Georgia declared independence on 9 April 1991 — symbolically the same date as the 1989 massacre. It was one of the first Soviet republics to break away. The referendum was decisive: 98.9% voted in favour of independence.

But freedom brought chaos. Gamsakhurdia proved to be an authoritarian and unstable leader. Civil war and a coup followed. Georgia's first years of independence were disorder: power cuts, food shortages, weapons on the streets.

Key moments of liberation
1989 — Tbilisi massacre: 20 killed, Georgia's awakening
1990 — First free elections, Gamsakhurdia wins
1991 — Declaration of independence on 9 April
1991–1992 — Civil war, Gamsakhurdia overthrown
1992 — Eduard Shevardnadze returns, order partially restored
1991–1993 — Wars in Abkhazia and South Ossetia begin
2003 — Rose Revolution: Shevardnadze removed peacefully

CHAPTER 4

THE YEARS OF INDEPENDENCE

RISE, CRISES AND SURVIVAL

4.1 The chaos of the 1990s

Georgia's 1990s were extremely difficult. The country lost control of Abkhazia (on the western coast) and South Ossetia (in the north), where Russian-backed separatists declared independence. Over 250,000 Georgians fled their homes — one of Europe's largest refugee crises.

The economy collapsed. Electricity was sometimes available for only a few hours a day. Crime was rampant. A mafia-style power structure controlled the cities. Eduard Shevardnadze — the former Soviet Foreign Minister — held the country together through bribes and compromises.

4.2 The Rose Revolution 2003

Following the rigged elections of 2003, young city-dwellers — inspired by Serbia's Otpor movement — organised themselves. Mikheil Saakashvili led a crowd of protesters into parliament, roses in hand. Shevardnadze resigned peacefully. It went down in history as the Rose Revolution.

Saakashvili brought a radical wave of reform. The police were completely overhauled — corruption was eliminated through strict punishment, new young officers received Western-level salaries and modern vehicles. Tbilisi changed visibly. Infrastructure improved, bureaucracy decreased, investment grew.

But Saakashvili also proved authoritarian. Press freedom suffered, opponents were pressured. And in 2008 he made a fateful mistake.

4.3 The summer of war 2008

In August 2008, the Georgian army attacked South Ossetia in an attempt to restore control of the territory. Russia responded with a full-scale invasion — Russian tanks advanced toward Gori, less than 80 kilometres from Tbilisi.

The five-day war ended in humiliation for Georgia. Russia recognised Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent — the only country in the world to do so (with a handful of minor exceptions). Around 20,000 Georgians were once again made refugees.

The war taught Georgia a lesson: the West will not come to help with military force. But it also strengthened in Georgians the importance of EU and NATO aspirations as protection for the future.

4.4 Georgian Dream and the present day

Since 2012 power has been held by the Georgian Dream party, founded by billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili — a man who made his fortune in Russia in the 1990s, returned to Georgia, founded the party, and has since then run the country's politics directly or from behind the scenes.

Economic reforms have continued. Tbilisi has grown into a centre of modern urban life. Tourism has exploded. But politics are tense, democracy fragile, and the shadow of Russia always looms.

PART 2

POLITICS AND THE WORLD

Geopolitical position, EU aspirations and Russia — Chapters 5–7

CHAPTER 5

ASPIRATIONS TOWARD THE EU AND NATO

THE LONG ROAD TO WESTERN INTEGRATION

5.1 EU candidate status 2023

In early 2022 — shortly after Russia's attack on Ukraine — Georgia applied for EU membership alongside Ukraine and Moldova. Ukraine and Moldova received candidate status in 2022. Georgia received it later, in December 2023.

This is a historic step. But it does not mean that membership is close. The EU has set Georgia strict conditions: strengthening democracy, press freedom, the rule of law, combating corruption. Many of these remain unfinished.

Georgia's constitution prohibits renouncing aspirations toward the EU or NATO — it is enshrined in law. Public support for EU membership is strong: surveys indicate that 70–80% of citizens support western integration.

5.2 NATO aspirations

Georgia's NATO membership application has a tragic history. At the 2008 Bucharest Summit, Germany and France blocked the MAP process (Membership Action Plan) for Georgia and Ukraine — fearing Russia's reaction. A few months later, Russia invaded Georgia.

Today Georgia is not a NATO member and does not have an active membership application in process. Russia's presence on Georgian soil (Abkhazia and South Ossetia) makes membership complex from the perspective of NATO's Article 5.

In practice: Georgia is close to the West in its values and aspirations, but geopolitically it remains under the pressure of Russia's neighbourhood.

Georgia's western integration status 2024
✓ EU candidate status granted December 2023
✓ Visa-free access to the Schengen Area (short stays)
✓ Association Agreement with the EU in force since 2016
✓ DCFTA (Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement) with the EU
✗ NATO membership — not in active process
✗ EU accession negotiations not opened (situation worsened late 2024)
⚠️ Democratic development has weakened 2023–2024

CHAPTER 6

THOSE IN POWER — THE SITUATION TODAY

POLITICAL TENSIONS 2024–2025

6.1 Georgian Dream — the oligarch's party

Georgia is formally a parliamentary democracy. In practice the country is largely under the shadow rule of one man — Bidzina Ivanishvili. Ivanishvili is a billionaire who made his fortune in Russia in the 1990s, returned to Georgia, founded a party in 2012 and has since then run the country's politics directly or behind the scenes.

Ivanishvili's personal fortune is estimated at over $5 billion — more than Georgia's entire state budget. Critics call Georgia an oligarchic state where formal democratic structures exist, but real power is concentrated.

6.2 The 2024 elections and crisis

In the parliamentary elections of October 2024, Georgian Dream declared victory — but the opposition and Western observers questioned the result. Massive protests followed for months after the elections. President Salome Zourabichvili — who had voted for the opposition — refused to recognise the election result.

The government pushed through parliament a law on 'foreign agents', requiring organisations funded from abroad to register as 'foreign agents'. The EU and the West criticised the law sharply — it resembles Russia's equivalent law, which the Kremlin has used to suppress civil society.

Toward the end of 2024, the government announced it was freezing EU negotiations until 2028. New, large-scale protests erupted in Tbilisi. Police dispersed them violently. The West condemned the crackdown, sanctions entered the discussion.

"The streets of Tbilisi are full of young people who want to go to Europe. The government wants to go elsewhere. This contradiction is Georgia's current drama."

6.3 What does this mean for a traveller or resident?

The political situation is more tense than it has been in years. Demonstrations are held regularly, police are mobilised. Tbilisi is not dangerous, however — protests generally remain in specific areas (around Rustaveli Avenue).

A Western visitor or resident is not the target of political unrest. Daily life continues normally.

People eat in restaurants, shops are open, people smile. The political crisis is real, but it does not dramatically disrupt ordinary life.

CHAPTER 7

RELATIONS WITH RUSSIA

A FROZEN CONFLICT AND EVERYDAY REALITY

7.1 Two occupied territories

Russia currently occupies around 20% of Georgia's internationally recognised territory: Abkhazia (the western coastal region, around 8,700 km²) and South Ossetia (around 3,900 km²). A total of around 400,000 people have fled these territories as a result of the conflicts of 1991–2008.

Russian soldiers remain in place. The so-called 'boundary line' runs only 40 kilometres north of Tbilisi — visible distance from the capital. Yellow warning signs by the roadside remind travellers: 'Occupation line ahead'.

7.2 Public attitudes

Surveys tell a clear story: the Georgian people broadly oppose Russia. According to polls, around 70–80% consider Russia a threat. Among younger age groups the figure is even higher.

Yet in practical life the situation is more nuanced. Some Georgian business flows through Russia. Russian tourists brought significant revenue before the war. The country's political leadership has acted ambivalently — Western in words, accommodating toward Russia in practice.

The Ukraine war from 2022 has intensified feelings. Many Georgians feel Ukraine's fate as their own. A significant number of Russians who fled their own government moved to Tbilisi — this has created an interesting social dynamic.

Russia-Georgia relations — facts 2024
20% of Georgia's territory under Russian occupation
~400,000 internally displaced persons since the 1990s
Direct flights to Russia restored in 2023 (a controversial decision)
~100,000 Russians relocated to Georgia after the Ukraine war began
Georgia did not join Western sanctions against Russia
Georgia voted at the UN against Russia — principled support for Ukraine
Direct investment and trade with Russia: declining

PART 3

LAND, NATURE AND CULTURE

Beauty, wine and the art of living — Chapters 8–11

CHAPTER 8

A BEAUTIFUL COUNTRY

NATURE, MOUNTAINS AND SEA

8.1 Geography — everything in a small space

Georgia is geographically exceptional. Its small territory contains almost every climate type: snow-covered alpine mountain terrain in the north (the Caucasus mountain range, whose peaks reach over 5,000 metres), subtropical wetlands in the west, dry steppe landscapes in the south, and lush valleys everywhere in between.

Northern Georgia is one of Europe's most impressive mountain landscapes. The Svaneti region — particularly the town of Mestia and the village of Ushguli — are UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Ushguli is one of Europe's highest permanently inhabited villages (2,200 metres). Ancient towers, snowy peaks, river valleys. Breathtaking.

The Kakheti region in the east is Georgia's wine country — a valley where grapes have been grown for as long as memory extends. Kazbegi in the north is a hiking paradise. Batumi in the west sits on the Black Sea — warm, lush and exotic.

❖ Highest peak: Shkhara 5,201 m (Caucasus)
❖ Coastline: Black Sea 310 km
❖ Major rivers: Mtkvari (Kura), Rioni
❖ UNESCO sites: Mtskheta, Bagrati Cathedral, Svaneti
❖ National parks: Borjomi-Kharagauli, Kazbegi, Vashlovani
❖ Cave system: Prometheus Cave near Kutaisi — one of Georgia’s most spectacular
❖ Ski resorts: Gudauri (international), Bakuriani, Mestia

8.2 Climate

Tbilisi has a continental climate: hot summers (July average 28–32°C, heat waves above 40°C) and cold winters (January often 0 to -5°C, snow possible). Autumn is magnificent — warm, sunny and filled with the grape harvest.

Batumi in the west is completely different: subtropical, humid, with heavy rainfall. It is a Black Sea holiday destination, but humidity is abundant. In the mountains winters are arctic, summers cool and sunny.

The best time to visit Tbilisi is May–June or September–October — warm but not scorching.

CHAPTER 9

GEORGIAN WINES

THE WORLD'S OLDEST WINEMAKING TRADITION

9.1. 8,000 years of wine

Georgia is demonstrably the birthplace of winemaking. Archaeologists have found qvevri ceramic vessels — large clay jars in which wine ferments and matures — dating back around 8,000 years to the Shulaveri-Shomutepe culture in Georgia. This makes Georgian wine at least 3,000 years older than the wine traditions of France or Italy.

The world's oldest winemaking method, the qvevri technique, is still alive today. A large clay vessel is buried in the ground, grape clusters — often including skins and seeds — are placed inside, and natural fermentation is allowed to occur. The result is an amber (orange) wine — white wine made like red — that is earthy, tannic and completely unique.

"Georgian wine is not just a drink. It is a prayer, a tradition and a connection to our ancestors." — Kakhetian winemaker

9.2. Grape varieties and regions

Georgia has over 500 indigenous grape varieties — more than any other area of comparable size in the world. The most famous are:

🍇 Rkatsiteli — the oldest and most widely cultivated variety, produces dry white wines
🍇 Saperavi — Georgia's most important red wine variety, dark and tannic
🍇 Mtsvane — aromatic white, often blended with Rkatsiteli
🍇 Chinuri — light red, suitable for sparkling wine
🍇 Kisi — rare white, a rising star in the natural wine world
🍇 Tsolikouri — the most important white variety of western Georgia
Main regions: Kakheti (east, 80% of production), Kartli, Racha, Imereti, Adjara

9.3 Natural wine and international recognition

Georgia is the mecca of the natural wine movement. Qvevri wines — made without additives, industrial yeasts or sulphur dioxide — have achieved cult status in European sommelier circles. French, Italian and Scandinavian wine enthusiasts make special trips to Kakhetian vineyards.

Tbilisi has dozens of excellent wine shops and wine bars. The value for money is astonishing: an outstanding bottle of Georgian qvevri wine costs 8–20 euros, while a comparable European natural wine would cost 25–50 euros.

Georgian wine can already be found in specialist retailers across Europe and the UK — but in Georgia itself it is an entirely different experience.

CHAPTER 10

GEORGIAN FOOD CULTURE

THE SOUL ON A PLATE

10.1 Supra — the feast

In Georgian culture, food is more than sustenance — it is a social ritual, an expression of love and the heart of the culture. The supra is a traditional festive lunch or dinner where the table is laden with dozens, even hundreds of dishes. It can last for several hours.

The tamada — the toastmaster — delivers toasts in order. First a toast to God, then to the hosts, then to the guests, then to the departed, then to the country — each round of toasts is a small story about life. Wine is drunk not from small glasses but from a horn or large cups.

10.2 The classics of Georgian cuisine

Georgian food is one of the richest in the Caucasus — with influences from Turkey, Persia and Russia, but above all entirely its own. Central flavours include walnuts, pomegranate, coriander, suneli spice blend and khmeli-suneli.

Georgian cuisine must-eat list
🥟 Khinkali — large, juicy dumplings. Georgia's answer to soup dumplings. Bite the top, slurp the broth.
🧀 Khachapuri — cheese bread, which varies by region (Adjaran = topped with egg + butter)
🍆 Badrijani nigvzit — aubergine slices with walnut filling
🥗 Pkhali — pressed vegetable salads with walnut sauce
🍗 Mtsvadi — Georgian-style grilled meat (kebab but better)
🍲 Chakhokhbili — chicken in tomato sauce with herbs
🥞 Lobiani — bean pie
😐 Ojakhuri — fried meat and potatoes with onion
🍮 Churchkhela — walnut chains coated in grape juice (Georgia's answer to a chocolate bar)

10.3 Food prices

Food in Georgia is extremely cheap by Western European standards. In Tbilisi you can eat a filling lunch at a local restaurant for 4–8 euros. A dinner for two with wine at a good bistro is typically 25–45 euros. In tourist areas prices may be higher, but still cheaper than in most Western cities.

At markets and local grocery stores, vegetables, fruit, cheese and meat are truly inexpensive. In-season tomatoes cost a few cents per kilo in summer. Home cooking is even more affordable.

CHAPTER 11

LANGUAGE, ALPHABET AND IDENTITY

ONE OF THE WORLD'S MOST UNIQUE LANGUAGES

11.1 The Georgian language

The Georgian language is one of the most unique in the world. It belongs to the Kartvelian language family — a language group that has no relationship with any other language family in the world. It is not Indo-European, not Semitic, not Turkic. It is entirely unique.

Georgian grammar is complex: the verb system is particularly challenging, as a single verb can simultaneously convey information about the subject, object, tense and aspect. Speaking Georgian requires years of study.

11.2 Mkhedruli — the alphabet

The Georgian alphabet, Mkhedruli, is one of the most beautiful in the world — rounded, flourishing letters that look more like art than text. It was developed in the 5th century AD and contains 33 letters.

Georgia has had three different alphabets throughout its history — Asomtavruli (liturgical), Nuskhuri (written) and Mkhedruli (modern). All three are still in use in certain contexts, particularly in church.

The alphabet is on UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage list. When you see Georgian text on a street sign or restaurant menu, pause for a moment — you are looking at history.

Facts about the Georgian language
Language family: Kartvelian (no relation to any other language family)
Native speakers: ~4 million
Alphabet: Mkhedruli, 33 letters
Earliest written sources: 5th century AD
Oldest literature: Shota Rustaveli's epic from the 12th century
Vocabulary: Akhali tseli = New Year, Gmadlobt = Thank you, Gamarjoba = Hello

11.3 English language proficiency

English language skills vary considerably by generation. The older generation (over 45) often speaks Russian as a second language, with little English. Middle-aged people (30–45) may speak reasonable English.

Young Georgians — particularly urban residents, students and service sector workers in Tbilisi — often speak quite good English. In tourist areas (restaurants, hotels, Airbnb hosts) English generally works well. Taxi drivers vary; the Bolt app solves communication challenges.

As an international resident in Tbilisi, you can get along very well with English. The expat community has grown, and there is plenty of English-language activity. Learning Georgian, however, is the key to deeper connections and engagement with local culture.

PART 4

TBILISI — THE CITY THAT SURPRISES

Life in the capital, restaurants and car culture — Chapters 12–14

CHAPTER 12

TBILISI

A BEAUTIFUL AND CHAOTIC CAPITAL

12.1 A city with a soul

Tbilisi was founded in the 5th century AD — according to legend, King Vakhtang I Gorgasali discovered the site on a pheasant hunting trip, when the pheasant fell into a hot spring and was healed. 'Tbili' means warm in Georgian — the city named after its hot springs.

Tbilisi is a city of layers. The Old Town (Kala) is a labyrinthine network of narrow lanes, wooden balconies, Persian-era bathhouses and Orthodox churches. Narikala fortress watches over the city from a hilltop. Below flows the Mtkvari river. Further away, modern skyscrapers and the Peace Bridge — a metallic structure crossing the river in futuristic style.

Rustaveli Boulevard is Georgia's Champs-Élysées: a wide, tree-lined promenade flanked by a theatre, opera house, gallery, cafés and boutique shops. In the evening the lights come on and the city comes alive.

12.2 Neighbourhoods — where to live

Tbilisi is divided into several distinct neighbourhoods:

Tbilisi neighbourhoods — a brief guide
Old Town (Kala) — Most historic, most touristy, more expensive to live. Beautiful.
Mtatsminda — On the hillside, great views, most peaceful. International families.
Vake — Stunning park area, most expensive neighbourhood. Diplomats and wealthy locals.
Saburtalo — Large, modern, services nearby. Good value, popular with families.
Isani/Samgori — Eastern, cheaper, fewer tourists. Authentic Georgian everyday life.
Didube — Mixed, cheap prices, near the bus station. Local atmosphere.
Rustavi — Separate industrial town 30 km from Tbilisi. Not popular with expats.

12.3 Getting around the city

Tbilisi is exceptionally well-served for its size. The metro is fast, cheap (€0.50 per journey) and works well. There are many bus routes. Bolt (the rideshare app) works excellently and is genuinely cheap: a typical urban journey of 3–6 km costs 2–4 euros.

Walking suits the Old Town and the Rustaveli area. Tbilisi is a hilly city — particularly in the Old Town your legs carry you up and down constantly. A good daily workout.

A car is useful but not essential for a city resident. Parking is limited in older areas. Traffic jams are Tbilisi's regular evening problem.

CHAPTER 13

SHOPPING MALLS, RESTAURANTS AND EVERYDAY LUXURY

MODERN LIFE IN TBILISI

13.1 New shopping centres

Tbilisi has undergone a commercial revolution over the last decade. Modern, large shopping centres have dramatically changed the face of the city.

East Point and East Center are located in the city's eastern districts — modern, large shopping centres with international brands, cinemas and food halls. Galleria Tbilisi near Rustaveli is more elegant, a high-end shopping centre at the heart of the city. Tbilisi Mall is a large, family-oriented shopping centre in western Tbilisi.

In all of them you will find familiar international brands: Zara, H&M, Mango, Nike, Adidas. Electronics stores, pharmacies, supermarkets. In short: everything is available that a Western European needs.

Shopping centres in Tbilisi
East Center — Large, modern, eastern Tbilisi. Hypermarket + international brands.
Galleria Tbilisi — On Rustaveli, premium level, best location.
Tbilisi Mall — West Tbilisi, family-oriented, large. Cinema.
Karvasla — Modern market within historic architecture, Old Town.
Goodwill Hypermarket — Supermarkets, excellent range.

13.2 Restaurants — better than expected

Tbilisi's restaurant scene has exploded over the last decade. The city now has top-tier restaurants that would hold their own easily in European capitals — but at a fraction of the price.

The Old Town is full of small, atmospheric restaurants where you can eat traditional Georgian food on beautiful wooden terraces. In the Vake neighbourhood there is a thriving bistro and chef movement: young Georgian cooks returning from Europe open their own restaurants, bringing modern techniques and local ingredients.

The price range is wide: a local khinkali restaurant 5–8 euros per person, a trendy fine dining dinner 40–80 euros per person with wine. The latter would cost 150–200 euros in London or Paris.

13.3 Cafés and bakeries

Georgians have a passionate relationship with baking. The city has hundreds of small bakeries where fresh churchkhela, tonis-puri bread and delicious pastries are sold from early morning to late evening.

Café culture has developed rapidly. Tbilisi now has excellent specialty coffee shops where the barista knows their craft. A flat white or pour-over typically costs 2–3 euros. Additionally, an older culture favours small tea lounges where you can drink Georgian tea from the Racha region.

Small business culture is vibrant: family bakeries, market vendors selling home-made delicacies, home-cooking restaurants run by a mother from her living room. This human scale is one of Tbilisi's finest qualities.

CHAPTER 14

CAR CULTURE

THE STATUS CAR ON GEORGIAN STREETS

14.1 Why such an impressive vehicle fleet?

One thing that surprises almost everyone arriving in Tbilisi: the cars on the streets. In a developing country you might expect to see old, rusty vehicles — and you do see those too. But above all you see new, large, expensive SUVs. Lexuses, Toyotas, BMWs, Mercedes-Benzes, Porsches. In terms of cars, Tbilisi looks in some areas wealthier than many Western cities.

Why is this? There are several reasons:

- Tax structure: Georgia has historically kept vehicle import taxes low. Registration is cheaper than in many EU countries.
- Transit country: Georgia has traditionally been a transit country for cars — vehicles are brought from the USA, Japan and Korea and sold onward to Central Asia.
- Leasing culture: Bank loans and leasing are readily available even on small incomes. A family can borrow 20,000 GEL and buy a large SUV.
- Status symbol: A car is a clear status symbol in Georgia. Success is displayed through the car you drive.
- Infrastructure: Tbilisi does not have adequate public transport to the city's outskirts — a car is a practical necessity.

14.2 The car as a status symbol

Georgian culture has traditionally valued visible prosperity. A house, a table full of food, a car — these are signs that the family has succeeded. A car is not just a vehicle, it is a public declaration of status.

Large, dark SUVs are particularly popular — they also suit the country's poorly maintained roads, so practical and status motives combine. Tbilisi rush hour is almost entirely filled with new Toyota Land Cruisers, Lexus GXs and Mitsubishi Outlanders.

The younger generation has begun to question this culture. A young urban Tbilisi resident might choose a scooter or bicycle, or use the Bolt taxi app — it is cheaper and more practical in a congested city.

❖ Most popular car brands in Georgia: Toyota, Lexus, Hyundai, Kia, BMW
❖ Most popular model: Toyota Land Cruiser Prado
❖ Imported from USA: common — American cars are cheaper
❖ Driving culture: aggressive, caution required
❖ Rush hours: mornings 8–10, evenings 17–20 are worst
❖ Parking problem: growing challenge especially in the Old Town

PART 5

THE MOVER'S GUIDE

Prices, taxes, visas and the big question — Chapters 15–20

CHAPTER 15

LOW PRICES AND THE COST OF LIVING WHAT DOES YOUR MONEY GET YOU?

15.1 Cost of living comparison

Georgia — particularly Tbilisi — is significantly cheaper than Western Europe. According to Numbeo cost-of-living comparisons, living in Tbilisi is around 60–70% cheaper than in London or Berlin overall. This is a dramatic difference.

FOOD:
❖ Lunch at a local restaurant: €4–7
❖ Dinner for two with wine at a good restaurant: €30–50
❖ Coffee: €1.50–2.50
❖ Groceries (single person/week): €30–50
HOUSING (per month, Tbilisi):
❖ Studio in the Old Town: €400–700/month
❖ 2-bedroom flat in Vake/Saburtalo: €500–900/month
❖ 3-bedroom flat for a family: €700–1,400/month
TRANSPORT:
❖ Metro/bus: €0.50 per journey
❖ Bolt taxi (5 km): €2–4
❖ Petrol: ~€0.90–1.00/litre
LEISURE:
❖ Cinema ticket: €4–6
❖ Gym membership/month: €15–30
❖ Haircut: €8–15

15.2 VAT at only 18%

Georgia's value-added tax rate is 18% — significantly lower than the UK's 20%, Germany's 19% or the rates of most European countries. This is visible in prices, particularly in services and goods

where VAT makes up a large share of the cost.

Additionally, many small transactions occur in cash or through the local market economy, where the tax burden is practically even lower. Economic growth has been rapid — the World Bank regards Georgia as one of the most successful economic reform stories of recent decades.

CHAPTER 16

TAXES, BANKS AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP AN ENTREPRENEUR'S PARADISE?

16.1 Tax structure — one of Europe's lightest

Georgia is one of the most attractive countries in Europe for entrepreneurs. Tax rates are low and bureaucracy minimal:

Georgia's tax structure 2024
Personal income tax: 20% (flat tax)
Corporate tax: 15% (paid only on profit distributions — not on business revenue)
VAT: 18%
Social security contributions: 0% (employer), 2% (employee pension)
Small business status: Under 500,000 GEL (~€180,000) turnover = 1% tax only!
Virtual Zone (VIZ): IT service companies pay 0% income tax
Company registration: 1–2 days, under €100 in costs

16.2 Small business status — 1% tax

One of Georgia's most attractive tax benefits is Small Business Status. If you are a sole trader and your turnover is under 500,000 GEL (around 180,000 euros) per year, you pay only 1% tax on your revenue. This applies to freelancers, consultants, craftspeople and many types of service businesses.

The Virtual Zone (VIZ) is a special status for IT companies: if your company provides IT services to foreign clients, you are practically exempt from income tax entirely. Only 5% withholding tax on dividend distributions. This has attracted hundreds of European software companies and freelancers.

16.3 Georgian banks — excellent service

Georgia's banking system is one of the most developed in the region. Two large banks dominate the market: TBC Bank and Bank of Georgia. Both are listed on the London Stock Exchange, well-capitalised and offer comprehensive digital banking services.

Opening an account as a foreigner is straightforward — with a passport and proof of address (or even without, if on a short visit). Mobile banking apps are high quality, available in English and fully functional.

The exchange rate is stable — the Georgian lari (GEL) has remained reasonably stable in recent years. ATM withdrawals are easy, cash is widely available.

Georgian banking services
TBC Bank — largest bank, excellent mobile app
Bank of Georgia — most international, NYSE-listed
Account opening: passport sufficient, often open within a day
Online banking: excellent apps, English supported
Currency: Georgian lari (GEL), 1 EUR ≈ 2.95 GEL (2024)
Cryptocurrencies: widely accepted, many use Georgia as a crypto hub
International transfers: SWIFT operates normally

CHAPTER 17

VISA POLICY AND HOUSING
THE EASIEST PATH TO A NEW LIFE

17.1 Visa-free entry for EU citizens — 365 days

This is one of Georgia's greatest attractions for Western Europeans: EU citizens can stay in Georgia visa-free for an entire year — 365 days. You need only a valid passport.

In practice: you fly to Tbilisi, show your passport at the border, and can live in the country for a year without any special permits. No visa applications, no bureaucracy, no waiting. This is an exceptionally liberal policy.

If you want to stay longer, you can apply for a residence permit or simply leave the country briefly and return — the so-called visa run. In practice many expat residents make a short trip to Turkey or Armenia and return with a fresh 365 days.

Visa policy — EU citizen
✅ Visa-free stay: 365 days per calendar year
✅ Requirement: valid passport
✅ No registration obligation for short stays
✅ Travel insurance: recommended, not mandatory — but important
✅ Job-seeking: permitted under visa-free status
⚠️ Over 183 days = tax resident in Georgia
📋 Residence permit: can be applied for at the local LEPL office

17.2 Travel insurance — the only essential

Although no visa is required, one thing should be arranged properly: travel insurance. Georgia is not covered by the European Health Insurance Card (EHIC), so healthcare is not automatically covered.

Healthcare in Georgia is reasonably affordable — a private GP appointment costs 20–50 euros, and hospitals have improved significantly in recent years. But surgery or serious illness can become expensive without insurance.

Good comprehensive travel insurance (e.g. SafetyWing, World Nomads or an extended policy from your home country insurer) costs 50–100 euros per month. It is absolutely worth it.

17.3 The housing market — buy or rent

Tbilisi's housing market is interesting. Prices have risen in recent years (particularly following the influx of Russians in 2022), but remain clearly lower than in Western Europe.

Buying is relatively straightforward — foreigners can purchase properties in Georgia without restrictions. The conveyancing process is fast. A notary confirms, registration happens within a few days.

BUYING — Tbilisi prices (2024):
❖ Older flat in the Old Town: €800–1,500/m²
❖ New flat in Saburtalo/Isani: €700–1,200/m²
❖ Premium flat in Vake: €1,500–3,000/m²
❖ 2-bedroom flat (60 m²) on average: €60,000–90,000
RENTING — monthly rent:
❖ Studio/one-bedroom (30–40 m²): €350–600/month
❖ 2-bedroom flat (60–70 m²): €500–900/month
❖ 3-bedroom flat (90–100 m²): €800–1,400/month
❖ Furnished vs. unfurnished: +€100–200 for furnished

CHAPTER 18

IMMIGRANTS AND FOREIGNERS IN GEORGIA WHO WILL YOU FIND AS YOUR NEIGHBOUR?

18.1 Few immigrants — but a growing phenomenon

Georgia is not a traditional destination for immigration. Historically it has been rather an emigration country — Georgians have moved to Russia, EU countries (particularly Greece, Spain and Italy) and Israel in search of work.

In recent years the situation has changed. A growing expat community has emerged in Tbilisi, drawn by low taxes, a low cost of living and an open visa policy. After 2022, the wave of Russian and Ukrainian migrants dramatically changed the picture.

18.2 Which countries do immigrants come from?

Immigrants in Georgia — countries of origin
🇷🇺 Russians — the largest single group since 2022. ~100,000 relocated following the Ukraine war. Fleeing mobilisation and sanctions.
🇺🇦 Ukrainians — the second large wave. War refugees, some of whom have stayed in Georgia.
🇺🇸 Americans — digital nomads, startup entrepreneurs, English teachers.
��🇪 🇩 Germans — digital nomads and remote workers.
🇮🇱 Israelis — strong community, historical connection to Georgia.
🇮🇳 Indians — students, IT professionals.
🇹🇷 Turks — trading and business community.
🇦🇲 Armenians — historical minority, particularly in Tbilisi.

18.3 Are foreigners welcome?

Generally speaking: yes, very welcome. Georgians are naturally hospitable, and a Western tourist or resident typically receives a positive reception.

There are nuances, however. The mass influx of Russians in 2022–2023 has created some friction — housing prices rose, shops filled with Russian-speaking customers, and some Georgians found the situation difficult. The Georgian people have experienced historical suffering at Russia's hands — a Russian neighbour is a complicated situation.

A British, German or American resident receives a completely different reception — nothing but curiosity, warmth and a desire to get to know you. Western expat residents are generally very warmly welcomed.

CHAPTER 19

TOURISM
GEORGIA'S GROWING INDUSTRY

19.1 Tourism's explosive growth

Georgian tourism has grown explosively over the past decade. In 2019 — just before the pandemic — Georgia welcomed over 9 million international tourists. This is a staggering figure for a country with a population of only 3.7 million.

Tourism's share of Georgia's GDP is around 7–10% — a significant portion of the national economy. The sector employs hundreds of thousands of Georgians directly or indirectly.

❖ International tourists 2019: 9.4 million
❖ International tourists 2023: ~7.1 million (COVID + Ukraine war impact)
❖ Tourism share of GDP: ~7–10%
❖ Direct revenue from tourism: ~USD 3–4 billion annually
❖ Top visiting countries: Russia (pre-2022), Turkey, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Ukraine, Israel, Poland
❖ Growing markets: Germany, UK, USA, China (pre-COVID)

19.2 Where do tourists come from?

Historically the largest tourist group were Russians — before 2022 around 1.5 million Russians visited Georgia annually. Following the Ukraine war this dropped sharply.

Turks are currently the largest group — Batumi is a popular Turkish holiday destination, partly due to the high cost of alcohol in Turkey. Israelis visit frequently — there is a strong Jewish community in Georgia historically. Europeans — particularly Poles, Germans and British — are a growing group.

Adventure and hiking tourism is growing rapidly. The Svaneti region, Kazbegi and Borjomi are attracting increasing numbers of hikers and outdoor enthusiasts.

19.3 Tour services and operators

Georgia's tour service offering has expanded enormously. Online you can find hundreds of options: day trips from Tbilisi to Kakheti's vineyards, trekking camps in Svaneti, rafting in the Pankisi Gorge, walking tours of the Old Town.

GetYourGuide, Viator and local Georgian tour operators offer a comprehensive range. Prices are very reasonable — a full-day trip to Kakheti with wine tasting typically costs 30–50 euros per person.

From Tbilisi, day trips are easily accessible to the ancient city of Mtskheta (20 min), the mountains of Kazbegi (3 h), Gori-Uplistsikhe (2 h) or Kakheti's vineyards (1.5 h).

CHAPTER 20

IS IT WORTH MOVING TO TBILISI? AN HONEST ASSESSMENT

20.1 Who is Tbilisi right for?

This question has an honest answer: it depends entirely on what you are seeking from life. Tbilisi is not right for everyone. But for certain types of people, it is close to perfect.

It is an excellent fit for:

- Digital nomads and remote workers: fast internet (fibre common), cheap housing, visa-free entry, functioning cafés, international community.
- Entrepreneurs and freelancers: 1% tax for small businesses, Virtual Zone for IT companies, company registration in a day.
- Writers, artists and creative professionals: inspiring environment, low cost of living, a unique culture.
- Investors: cheap property prices, growing rental market, tourism revenue.
- Retirees: low prices, warm climate, affordable medical appointments, a hospitable culture.
- Adventurers: nature, mountains, sea, wine, culture — all within reach.

20.2 The challenges — an honest list

Tbilisi is not a utopia. There are also things to adapt to:

- Traffic and pollution: Tbilisi is congested. Air quality is a problem in winter, when the city is partly heated with wood.
- Bureaucracy: improved, but still slow in places. The residence permit process can be lengthy.
- Language barriers: the older generation speaks Russian, not English. Shop price tags and public transport are in Georgian only.
- Political uncertainty: the 2024 situation is more tense than in previous years.
- Power cuts: rarer than before, but possible. Water can occasionally be absent in older buildings.
- Winter challenges: Tbilisi is colder than many expect. Heating in older buildings can be inefficient.
- Healthcare: better than stereotypes suggest, but not at EU standard. Insurance is essential.

20.3 The final verdict — is it worth it?

If you are a digital nomad, freelancer, entrepreneur, investor or retiree — and you are open to new experiences — Tbilisi is one of the best places in the world to live right now.

Consider this: six months in Tbilisi costs perhaps 4,000–7,000 euros in living expenses (housing + food + transport + culture). The equivalent six months in London or Berlin costs 12,000–18,000 euros. You save 6,000–10,000 euros — and experience something you cannot experience at home.

Tbilisi is a city that is in exactly the right middle ground: modern enough to be comfortable, exotic enough to be interesting, affordable enough to give you freedom.

"Tbilisi is one of those places where you go for two weeks and stay for months. It happens surprisingly often." — Canadian expat, Tbilisi 2023

20.4 Practical first steps — if you decide to move

1. Fly out for a week first to get a feel for the place. Walk through the Old Town, eat in a restaurant, look at apartments. Make the decision with your own eyes.
2. Get comprehensive travel insurance before you leave.
3. Open a TBC Bank or Bank of Georgia account as soon as you arrive.
4. Find housing on Airbnb or locally (MyHome.ge, SS.ge are Georgia's Rightmove equivalents) — start with a short-term lease.
5. Register a small business or apply for Virtual Zone status if entrepreneurship interests you.
6. Join the Tbilisi Expats Facebook group — thousands of people who have been through the same process.
7. Learn a few phrases in Georgian — even a small effort opens doors enormously.

CLOSING WORDS

Georgia is waiting for you.

Not neatly, not perfectly — but honestly, warmly and genuinely. There you can drink the world's oldest wine, gaze at the peaks of the Caucasus, eat food you have never heard of, and meet people who welcome you like family.

3,700 years of history. Its own alphabet. Its own soul. And EU visa-free entry for 365 days.

That is an offer that is hard to refuse.

"Gamarjoba, stumari!" — Welcome, guest! — The Georgian greeting for an arriving visitor

— 2026 —