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The Culture of Georgia

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Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1** The Land and People of Georgia
- **Chapter 2** Historical Foundations of Georgian Culture
- **Chapter 3** The Georgian Language and Alphabet
- **Chapter 4** The Role of Religion in Georgian Society
- **Chapter 5** Icons of Faith: Cathedrals and Monasteries
- **Chapter 6** Architectural Heritage: From Ancient to Modern
- **Chapter 7** Traditional Georgian Homes and Urban Design
- **Chapter 8** Visual Arts: Painting and Iconography
- **Chapter 9** Traditional Crafts and Handicrafts
- **Chapter 10** The Magic of Georgian Music
- **Chapter 11** Polyphonic Singing Traditions
- **Chapter 12** Folk Dance: Stories Through Movement
- **Chapter 13** The Georgian Table: Cuisine and Customs
- **Chapter 14** Khachapuri and Khinkali: National Favorites
- **Chapter 15** Winemaking and the Qvevri Tradition
- **Chapter 16** Supra: The Heart of Georgian Hospitality
- **Chapter 17** Family, Kinship, and Social Structure
- **Chapter 18** Customs, Etiquette, and Daily Life
- **Chapter 19** Festivals and Celebrations Across Georgia
- **Chapter 20** Folklore, Myths, and Epic Poetry
- **Chapter 21** Georgia's Literary Heritage
- **Chapter 22** Modern Arts and Cultural Expression
- **Chapter 23** Georgia on the World Stage: Global Connections
- **Chapter 24** Balancing Tradition and Change in Contemporary Georgia
- **Chapter 25** The Spirit of Georgian Culture: Enduring Legacy

Introduction

Georgia, a country located at the vital crossroads of Europe and Asia, is renowned for its rich and enduring cultural tapestry. Blessed with breathtaking landscapes and a history that stretches back for thousands of years, Georgia has been shaped by an extraordinary convergence of civilizations, belief systems, and social influences. Its culture is the result of this long journey—layered, vibrant, and unlike any other. For beginners seeking to understand Georgian culture, the journey begins with an exploration of the fundamental elements that create the essence of this remarkable nation.

At the very heart of Georgian identity lies its language—a unique and ancient tongue belonging to the Kartvelian family, adorned by its elegant script. This living language has served not only as a means of everyday communication but also as a vessel preserving the nation's poetry, wisdom, and resilience throughout centuries of change and foreign rule. The Georgian language, along with its script, stands as a proud bearer of heritage and identity, helping to unite people across the country's diverse regions.

Religion, particularly the deep roots of Orthodox Christianity, plays a profound role in Georgian society. With its early embrace of Christianity, Georgia developed a spiritual landscape filled with magnificent cathedrals and centuries-old monasteries that are central both to worship and to the nation's architectural identity. Religious traditions, festivals, and customs are not mere observances but are fundamental to the very fabric of Georgian daily life and community.

Georgian culture is also an exuberant celebration of the arts. Distinctive architecture, expressive visual arts, intricate craftsmanship, polyphonic music, and energetic dance all offer windows into the Georgian soul. These artistic expressions are not only reflective of historical influences but also act as forms of storytelling that transcend time, communicating values, beliefs, and collective memories from one generation to the next.

No introduction to Georgia would be complete without honoring its legendary hospitality, renowned the world over. In Georgia, every guest is considered a blessing and is greeted with open-hearted generosity, often becoming part of a joyous feast known as a Supra. Food and wine play central roles in social gatherings, with age-old winemaking traditions and a cuisine as rich and layered as the culture itself.

As Georgia embraces modernity and faces the challenges and opportunities brought by globalization, its people continue to strike a delicate balance between tradition and

progress. This book will guide you through the multifaceted world of Georgian culture, from its ancient customs and time-honored festivals to the creativity and dynamism of its contemporary society. Whether you are a traveler, a student, or simply a curious reader, you are invited to discover the enduring legacy and vibrant spirit that make the culture of Georgia truly unforgettable.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Land and People of Georgia

Georgia, or Sakartvelo as it is known to its people, is a nation deeply intertwined with its dramatic geography. Situated at the convergence of Eastern Europe and Western Asia, it occupies a strategic position on the Black Sea coast. This small country, covering an area of 69,700 square kilometers (about 26,900 sq mi), presents an astonishing diversity of landscapes, from subtropical coastlines to towering glacial peaks. This unique location, bordered by Russia to the north and northeast, Azerbaijan to the southeast, and Armenia and Turkey to the south, has profoundly influenced Georgia's history, culture, and the very character of its people.

The topography of Georgia is dominated by mountains, a defining feature that has shaped its regions and even contributed to linguistic and cultural variations. To the north, the formidable Greater Caucasus mountain range acts as a natural barrier against cold air masses from the north, moderating Georgia's climate. Here, you'll find some of Europe's highest peaks, including Mount Shkhara, the highest point in Georgia at 5,201 meters (17,064 feet), along with Mounts Kazbegi, Janga, Tetnuldi, and Ushba, all exceeding 4,700 meters. These majestic mountains offer breathtaking vistas and attract intrepid alpinists and hikers from around the world.

Running parallel to the Turkish and Armenian borders in the south is the Lesser Caucasus range, a lower mountain system that further sculpts the Georgian landscape. Connecting these two major ranges is the Surami Range, which acts as another natural divide, contributing to the distinct regional identities within the country. The mountainous terrain, making up about one-third of Georgia's land area, also gives rise to numerous deep, wild gorges and narrow valleys, which have historically served both as defensive strongholds and pathways for cultural exchange.

Beyond the dramatic mountain ranges, Georgia's climate is remarkably varied, a direct consequence of its mountainous topography and proximity to the Black Sea. The Black Sea coastal areas in the west, including regions like Abkhazia and the Colchis Lowland, enjoy a humid subtropical climate with high humidity and substantial rainfall, often reaching between 1,000 to 2,000 mm (39.4 to 78.7 inches) annually. Batumi, a prominent Black Sea port, is particularly wet, receiving around 2,500 mm (98.4 inches) of precipitation each year. This favorable climate supports the growth of palm trees and citrus fruits, with mild winters averaging around 5°C (41°F) and warm summers around 22°C (71.6°F).

As one moves eastward, away from the Black Sea's moderating influence and shielded by the Surami Mountains, the climate becomes more continental, characterized by hotter summers and colder winters. In eastern plains, such as those found on the Iori

Plateau in the southeast, summer temperatures typically range from 20 to 24°C (68 to 75.2°F), while winter temperatures hover between 2 and 4°C (35.6 to 39.2°F). Here, humidity is lower, and annual rainfall averages between 500 to 800 mm (19.7 to 31.5 inches). However, even within these broader climatic zones, Georgia boasts numerous microclimates, particularly in its alpine and highland regions, and a semi-arid zone in the southeast.

Water resources are abundant in Georgia, with approximately 25,000 rivers crisscrossing the country. These rivers are vital, not only for providing water but also for generating hydroelectric power, a significant contributor to Georgia's energy needs. The rivers of western Georgia, including the Rioni and Enguri, ultimately drain into the Black Sea. The Rioni, the longest river entirely within Georgia, originates in the Greater Caucasus and empties into the Black Sea near the port of Poti. In contrast, most of the rivers in eastern Georgia, such as the Kura (known locally as Mtkvari) and the Alazani, flow eastward, eventually joining the Caspian Sea basin after passing through Azerbaijan.

The Kura River is the largest river in the South Caucasus, flowing for 1,364 kilometers (about 848 miles) from its source in northeastern Turkey, through the plains of eastern Georgia, and right through the capital city of Tbilisi, before reaching the Caspian Sea. The Alazani River, another significant eastern river, stretches for 406 kilometers and is particularly important for agriculture in the Kakheti wine-producing region. These rivers, with their diverse characteristics, provide opportunities for various activities, from rafting and kayaking on the Aragvi to supporting rich biodiversity in areas like Kolkheti National Park.

As of early 2025, the population of Georgia is estimated to be around 3.7 to 3.8 million people. A significant portion of the population, over a third, resides in the bustling capital city of Tbilisi. Tbilisi, an ancient city with a history dating back to the 5th century, is the political, economic, and cultural heart of Georgia, nestled partly in a scenic gorge of the Kura River. It's a city where historical monuments blend harmoniously with modern architecture, reflecting its rich past and forward-looking spirit.

Beyond Tbilisi, other major urban centers include Kutaisi, Georgia's second-largest city and a historical and cultural hub situated on the Rioni River. Batumi, the third-largest city, is a vibrant Black Sea resort known for its modern skyline, beaches, and a thriving tourism industry. Rustavi, an industrial city, Gori, historically known as the birthplace of Joseph Stalin, and Poti, a major port city on the Black Sea, are also significant urban centers that contribute to Georgia's administrative and economic landscape. Over half of Georgia's population now lives in cities, a trend that began during the Soviet period and has continued into the 21st century.

The ethnic composition of Georgia is predominantly Georgian, with ethnic Georgians

constituting around 86.8% of the total population. Georgians refer to themselves as Kartvelebi, and their homeland as Sakartvelo, a name derived from the central Georgian region of Kartli. This strong sense of national identity is deeply rooted in the land and its history. However, Georgia is not entirely homogeneous and reflects the intermixtures and successions of the broader Caucasus region.

Significant ethnic minority groups in Georgia include Azerbaijanis, who make up about 6.2% of the population, and Armenians, accounting for approximately 4.5%. These communities, along with smaller numbers of Russians, Ossetians, Yazidis, Greeks, Abkhazians, Ukrainians, and others, contribute to the country's diverse cultural mosaic. These groups have their own cultural heritage and, in some cases, distinct languages, enriching the overall fabric of Georgian society. For instance, the Georgian Public Broadcaster offers news programs in Abkhaz, Azerbaijani, Armenian, Russian, and Ossetian languages, reflecting this linguistic diversity.

The population of Georgia is currently experiencing an aging trend, with a birth rate below and a death rate above the global average. About one-fifth of the population is under 15 years old, while nearly two-fifths are under 30. Life expectancy in Georgia is around 72 years for men and 81 years for women. The country has also seen demographic shifts due to migration, with a net migration loss in recent decades, particularly in the period following its independence from the Soviet Union. Despite these trends, the enduring connection to the land and a strong national identity remain central to the Georgian people.

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