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Visiting Georgia

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Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1** Getting to Georgia
- **Chapter 2** Visa and Entry Requirements
- **Chapter 3** Best Time to Visit
- **Chapter 4** Getting Around
- **Chapter 5** Accommodation
- **Chapter 6** Top Destinations & Things to Do
- **Chapter 7** Georgian Culture & Etiquette
- **Chapter 8** Food & Drink
- **Chapter 9** Money & Costs
- **Chapter 10** Safety & Health
- **Chapter 11** Practical Information
- **Chapter 12** Responsible Tourism
- **Chapter 13** Tbilisi: The Capital
- **Chapter 14** Mtskheta: A Spiritual Journey
- **Chapter 15** Exploring Kakheti: Wine & More
- **Chapter 16** Adventures in Kazbegi
- **Chapter 17** Discovering Svaneti
- **Chapter 18** Kutaisi and Surroundings
- **Chapter 19** Coastal Charm in Batumi
- **Chapter 20** Borjomi: Beyond Mineral Waters
- **Chapter 21** Historical Marvels: Vardzia & Uplistsikhe
- **Chapter 22** Tales from the Mountains: Adjara & Racha
- **Chapter 23** Seasonal Highlights and Festivals
- **Chapter 24** Pedestrian Adventures and Hiking Trails
- **Chapter 25** The Spirit of Sakartvelo

Introduction

Nestled at the crossroads of Eastern Europe and Western Asia, Georgia (Sakartvelo) stands as a mesmerizing mosaic of contrasts, where ancient traditions coexist with modern innovations, and nature paints the landscapes in vivid strokes. From the majestic snow-capped peaks of the Caucasus mountains that challenge adventurers and thrill-seekers, to the sun-kissed shores of the Black Sea, where relaxation takes on new dimensions, Georgia offers a captivating tapestry of experiences. It is a place where history whispers stories through the ruins of ancient monasteries and fortresses, each with its own legend and cultural significance.

Exploring Georgia means immersing oneself in a culture rich with traditions and warm hospitality, where visitors are welcomed like family and every meal becomes a celebration. The country's culinary delights are a feast for the senses, with aromas and flavors blending into unique dishes that reflect Georgia's diverse terrain and multicultural influences. Wine lovers will find themselves in paradise, as Georgia is considered the cradle of wine, with vineyards stretching across the east and traditional winemaking methods that have been preserved for centuries.

In this guide, prospective travelers will discover an intricate web of practical advice, insightful anecdotes, and cultural nuances that go beyond the common itineraries. This book delves into the specifics of traveling through this transcendent land, offering not only logistical planning tips but also pathways to truly immerse in the local way of life. The journey through Georgia is not just about seeing sights, but about experiencing a way of life that is anchored in familial bonds, community, and a deep-rooted connection to the land.

Whether your passion lies in scaling rugged peaks, savoring the sophistication of a perfectly-aged wine, or unraveling the timelines of history, Georgia promises to not only satisfy but to surpass your expectations. This guide serves as your trusted companion, ensuring that you leave with lasting memories, all the while respecting the culture and environment that graciously welcomes you. In Georgia, every journey is personal, a narrative where each traveler writes their own story.

Georgia's magic lies in its ability to surprise and to share its wonders with all who venture across its borders. As you traverse through this beautifully diverse and welcoming country, let the rhythm of its heart lead you to discoveries new and old. May your journey through the pages of this book inspire real-life adventures, as you step into the spirit of Sakartvelo, a world beautifully and irrevocably unique.

CHAPTER ONE: Getting to Georgia

Embarking on a journey to Georgia, or Sakartvelo as its people call it, means preparing for arrival in a land uniquely positioned between continents. While geographically nestled amongst neighbors, the most common and often most convenient way for international visitors to reach this captivating country is by soaring through the skies. Air travel serves as the primary conduit connecting Georgia with the wider world, offering a relatively swift passage to the Caucasus region. The country is well-equipped to welcome aerial arrivals, boasting three international airports strategically located to serve different regions and travel styles. Understanding the options available will be the first step in tailoring your Georgian adventure to your specific needs and itinerary.

The main aerial gateway is **Tbilisi International Airport (TBS)**, situated approximately 17 kilometers southeast of the nation's vibrant capital. As the largest and busiest airport in Georgia, TBS handles the lion's share of international flights. Its runways welcome aircraft from a multitude of airlines, connecting Tbilisi directly with major hubs across Europe, the Middle East, and Central Asia. If you're flying from cities like Paris, Amsterdam, Munich, Warsaw, or Vienna, chances are you'll find direct or convenient one-stop connections landing here. Likewise, travelers originating from or transiting through Istanbul, Doha, Dubai, Tel Aviv, or Baku will find frequent services into Tbilisi.

Tbilisi International Airport has undergone significant modernization, presenting travelers with a contemporary and generally efficient experience. Upon arrival, you'll find the standard amenities expected of a major international hub: currency exchange counters, ATMs, duty-free shops, cafes, car rental desks representing both international chains and local providers, and various transport links ready to whisk you into the heart of the capital. Flag carriers like Georgian Airways share the tarmac with numerous international players, including Turkish Airlines, Lufthansa, Qatar Airways, FlyDubai, AirBaltic, LOT Polish Airlines, and others, ensuring a competitive market and a range of service levels. Planning to base yourself primarily in the capital or explore eastern Georgia, including the wine region of Kakheti or the historical sites around Mtskheta? Landing at TBS is often the most logical starting point.

Further west lies **Kutaisi International Airport (KUT)**, officially named the David the Builder Kutaisi International Airport. Located near Georgia's third-largest city, Kutaisi, this airport has carved a significant niche for itself, largely thanks to its role as a major base for low-cost airlines. Wizz Air, in particular, has established a strong presence here, offering remarkably affordable direct flights from numerous European cities, including destinations in Germany, Poland, Italy, Greece, Austria, Hungary, the

Baltic states, and beyond. Ryanair has also added Kutaisi to its network, further solidifying its status as the budget traveler's preferred entry point into Georgia.

The appeal of Kutaisi extends beyond just cheap fares. Its central location within western Georgia makes it an excellent springboard for exploring regions like Imereti (where Kutaisi itself is located), Samegrelo, Svaneti, Racha, and even the Black Sea coast. While the terminal facilities are simpler compared to Tbilisi's, they are functional and geared towards the needs of budget airline passengers. Regular shuttle bus services connect KUT not only with Kutaisi city center but also directly with Tbilisi and the coastal city of Batumi, making onward travel relatively straightforward, even if your final destination isn't immediate Kutaisi. Choosing KUT often means embracing a slightly more adventurous start to your trip, potentially saving significantly on airfare, and positioning yourself conveniently for exploring Georgia's diverse western landscapes.

The third international airport serves the Black Sea coast directly: **Batumi International Airport (BUS)**, named after Alexander Kartveli. Situated just south of Batumi, the energetic capital of the Adjara autonomous republic, this airport primarily caters to the seasonal influx of tourists drawn to the region's beaches, modern architecture, and lush subtropical hinterland. While it operates year-round, Batumi Airport truly comes alive during the summer months, from late spring to early autumn. During this peak season, the schedule swells with flights, including many seasonal routes and charter services from countries around the Black Sea, Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and sometimes further afield.

Airlines operating into Batumi often include Turkish Airlines (via Istanbul), Georgian Airways, Belavia (Belarusian Airlines), Arkia and Israir (from Israel), FlyDubai, as well as various seasonal carriers. Its proximity to the Turkish border also makes it a convenient entry point for those combining a trip to Georgia with northeastern Turkey. If your Georgian plans are centered around sunbathing on the Black Sea, exploring the Adjara mountains, enjoying Batumi's nightlife, or visiting the nearby botanical gardens and Roman fortress of Gonio, flying directly into BUS can save considerable travel time compared to arriving via Tbilisi or Kutaisi. The airport is compact and located very close to the city center, making the transfer to your accommodation quick and easy.

Choosing the right airport depends heavily on your travel plans and priorities. For maximum flight options, direct connections from major intercontinental hubs, and immediate access to the capital, Tbilisi (TBS) is usually the default choice. For budget-conscious travelers, particularly those arriving from Europe and keen on exploring western or central Georgia, Kutaisi (KUT) offers compelling low-cost alternatives. For a trip focused squarely on the Black Sea coast and the Adjara region, especially during the summer season, Batumi (BUS) provides unparalleled convenience. Consider your overall itinerary, airline preferences, and budget when making your decision – sometimes a slightly cheaper flight into one airport might be offset by the cost and

time of onward travel to your primary destination within Georgia.

When booking your flights, standard advice applies, but with a few Georgian nuances. Booking well in advance, especially for travel during peak summer months (June-August) or the popular autumn grape harvest season (September-October), is highly recommended to secure better fares and availability. Keep an eye out for deals, particularly from the low-cost carriers serving Kutaisi, but pay close attention to their often-strict baggage allowances and fees – factor these into your total cost comparison. Major hubs like Istanbul, Munich, Warsaw, Riga, and Kyiv (prior to the conflict) often serve as efficient connection points for reaching Georgia from further afield. Comparing prices across different airlines and dates using online search engines is always a prudent strategy.

While air travel is the dominant mode of entry, reaching Georgia overland is a viable and often adventurous alternative, particularly for those already traveling in neighboring countries or undertaking a more extensive Eurasian journey. Georgia shares land borders with four countries: Turkey to the southwest, Armenia to the south, Azerbaijan to the southeast, and Russia to the north. Most border crossings are typically open for international travelers, but it's absolutely crucial to verify the current operational status, required documentation, and any specific restrictions or advisories *before* you travel. Political situations, health requirements, or even weather conditions (especially on high mountain passes) can impact border accessibility, sometimes with little notice. Always consult official government sources or your embassy for the latest information.

Traveling overland from **Turkey** into Georgia is a relatively common and straightforward route. The main border crossing is at Sarpi, located directly on the Black Sea coast, just south of Batumi. This crossing is generally efficient and sees a steady flow of traffic, including buses, cars, and pedestrians. Regular bus services connect Turkish cities like Trabzon and Hopa with Batumi and onward to Tbilisi. Driving your own vehicle across this border is also a popular option. The proximity to Batumi makes this an excellent entry point if the Adjara region is high on your list. Another crossing exists further inland at Vale, south of Akhaltsikhe, which might be convenient if exploring Samtskhe-Javakheti region first.

From **Armenia**, several border crossings facilitate travel into Georgia, with Sadakhlo (south of Tbilisi) being one of the most frequently used, particularly for traffic between the two capitals, Yerevan and Tbilisi. Bavra (connecting to Ninotsminda in Georgia's south) is another option. Direct buses and shared taxis (marshrutkas) ply the route between Yerevan and Tbilisi daily. The journey takes several hours, offering scenic glimpses of the Armenian and Georgian countryside. It's an affordable and popular way to combine visits to these two neighboring Caucasus nations. Train services between Yerevan and Tbilisi (often running overnight via Gyumri) might also be an option, though schedules and comfort levels vary.

Similarly, connections from **Azerbaijan** are well-established. The primary border crossing is known as the Red Bridge (Tsiteli Khidi in Georgian, Qırmızı Körpü in Azerbaijani), located southeast of Tbilisi on the main highway to Baku. Daily buses connect the Azerbaijani capital, Baku, with Tbilisi, making for a long but direct journey. Perhaps the most classic way to travel between these two countries is the overnight train service linking Baku and Tbilisi. This journey offers a nostalgic travel experience, allowing you to sleep through the border formalities (which usually happen in the early hours) and wake up in a new country. Again, verifying the current schedule, availability, and booking procedures for the train is essential.

Entering Georgia from **Russia** requires particular attention and caution. The only currently operational land border crossing for international travelers is the Verkhniy Lars (on the Russian side) / Dariali Gorge (on the Georgian side) checkpoint, situated on the famous Georgian Military Highway. This route traverses the High Caucasus mountains, offering spectacular scenery but also subject to closure due to weather conditions like heavy snowfall or landslides, especially outside of summer months. Furthermore, the political situation can affect border operations and entry requirements for citizens of different countries. It is imperative to check the absolute latest information regarding the status of this crossing and any specific entry regulations or potential difficulties before contemplating this route. Driving this route requires preparedness for mountain conditions.

For those opting for overland travel without their own vehicle, international bus services provide a network across the region. Major bus companies and smaller operators run routes connecting Tbilisi's main international bus terminal (often Ortachala) with cities like Istanbul, Ankara, Trabzon (Turkey), Yerevan (Armenia), and Baku (Azerbaijan). These services vary in comfort and duration – some are modern coaches, others more basic. Journeys can be lengthy, sometimes involving overnight travel, but they offer an economical way to traverse the region and witness the changing landscapes. Booking tickets in advance, especially for popular routes or during holidays, is advisable.

Adventurous travelers might consider arriving in Georgia with their own car or motorcycle. This offers unparalleled freedom to explore but requires careful planning regarding documentation. You'll typically need your vehicle's registration papers, proof of insurance valid for Georgia (check if your home country's insurance or an International Motor Insurance Card - Green Card - is accepted, otherwise you'll need to purchase local border insurance), and your valid driving license. An International Driving Permit (IDP) is strongly recommended and may be legally required alongside your national license. Be prepared for potentially varied road conditions near border areas and understand that Georgian driving styles can be, let's say, spirited – a topic explored further in Chapter 4.

A third, far less common, but theoretically possible way to reach Georgia is **by sea**. Georgia has a significant coastline along the Black Sea, with Batumi and Poti being its major international ports. However, it's important to set realistic expectations: these ports primarily handle cargo traffic, and regular, scheduled international passenger ferry services are rare and often unreliable. Historically, there have been occasional ferry connections linking Georgian ports (usually Batumi, sometimes Poti) with ports in Ukraine (like Chornomorsk near Odesa) or Bulgaria (Varna or Burgas).

Finding reliable information about these ferry services can be challenging. Schedules, if they exist, are often infrequent, subject to change without notice, and may not be easily accessible online. Services can be suspended for long periods due to operational, economic, or political reasons. If you are determined to arrive by sea, it requires diligent research far in advance, trying to contact potential ferry operators directly or working through specialized shipping agents. This route is generally not practical for the average tourist seeking a predictable travel plan. It remains an option mostly for hardcore adventurers, those shipping vehicles, or travelers with specific logistical needs and a high tolerance for uncertainty. Poti, while a major cargo hub, is even less focused on passenger traffic than Batumi. For most visitors, the Black Sea is something to be enjoyed upon arrival in Georgia, rather than the means of getting there.

Regardless of your chosen mode of transport – be it a jumbo jet touching down in Tbilisi, a budget flight into Kutaisi, a bus rolling across the border from Armenia, or even a rare ferry docking in Batumi – the moment of arrival marks the true beginning of your Georgian experience. You'll pass through immigration, where officials will check your travel documents (visa requirements are detailed in the next chapter), and potentially customs. Once the formalities are complete, you'll step out into Georgia proper, ready to navigate its internal transport networks, find your accommodation, and start exploring the rich tapestry of sights, sounds, and flavors that await. The journey to Georgia is just the prelude; the real adventure lies within its borders.

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