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Georgia

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Introduction

Georgia—known to its own people as Sakartvelo—stands as one of Europe and Asia's great crossroads, a nation whose extraordinary history and culture have been sculpted over millennia by its position between powerful empires, along vital trade routes, and amidst some of the region's most awe-inspiring landscapes. Flanked by the snowcapped ridges of the Greater and Lesser Caucasus Mountains and caressed by the warm breezes of the Black Sea, Georgia's geography is as dramatic as its past. With a footprint modest in size, it contains astonishing diversity: from subtropical valleys and lush forests to alpine peaks and arid uplands, this is a country shaped as much by its natural environment as by the peoples who have called it home.

The story of Georgia is woven with threads of legend and fact; myths like that of the Golden Fleece, sought by Jason and the Argonauts, mingle with archaeological discoveries attesting to some of the world's earliest wine-making and settlements. Ancient kingdoms such as Colchis and Iberia laid the foundation for a society which would repeatedly rise, unite, fragment, and assert itself through the centuries. In the fourth century, Georgia became one of the world's earliest Christian states, beginning a heritage that endures at the core of the national identity.

The medieval "Golden Age" of Georgia, under visionary monarchs like King David IV the Builder and Queen Tamar, saw the flourishing of a powerful, cultured kingdom—only to be followed by centuries of foreign conquest, forced division, and periods of domination by Persians, Turks, Mongols, and eventually the Russian Empire. The brief experiment in independence from 1918 to 1921, and seven decades of Soviet rule that followed, would mark the turbulent twentieth century as Georgia continually grappled with the challenge of self-determination.

Since regaining independence in 1991, Georgia's journey has been marked by profound transformation, sometimes painful. The country has weathered civil conflict, separatist disputes, economic crisis, and the difficult work of forging new democratic institutions. Through wrenching challenges, however, Georgia has also become known for its resilience, hospitality, and an irrepressible drive to reassert its place in the contemporary world—culminating most recently in its EU candidacy and strong aspiration toward Euro-Atlantic integration.

This book is an invitation to explore Georgia in all its dimensions. It is a portrait of a people and a landscape, a country where ancient traditions live side by side with bold dreams for the future; where polyphonic song and passionate debate are equally at home at the dinner table; where scars of recent hardship exist alongside optimism and innovation. Here you will find chapters on history and culture, politics and religion,

environment and economic ambitions, the vibrancy of everyday life and the practicalities of visiting—a holistic view of a nation both ancient and ever-renewing.

By delving into the many facets of Georgia's past and present, "Georgia: Portrait of a Country" hopes to illuminate not only what makes this small nation remarkable, but also how its singular journey offers lessons, cautions, and inspiration far beyond its mountainous borders. Whether you are planning a journey to Georgia, tracing family roots, or simply seeking to understand a dynamic and complex land at the edge of Europe, this book aims to be an engaging and comprehensive guide. Welcome to Sakartvelo.

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CHAPTER ONE: Georgia in the World: Location and Identity

To truly understand Georgia, one must first grasp its unique position on the global stage. It is a nation that defies easy categorization, straddling the perceived boundaries of continents and cultures. Is it European or Asian? The answer, as with many things Georgian, is nuanced and deeply ingrained in its very being. Situated at the eastern end of the Black Sea, perched on the southern flanks of the Greater Caucasus Mountains, Georgia occupies a land bridge between Eastern Europe and Western Asia. This strategic crossroads has been both a blessing and a curse, shaping its history, its people, and its enduring identity.

Known to its inhabitants as Sakartvelo, Georgia's geographic footprint is relatively small, approximately 69,700 square kilometers (26,900 sq mi). Yet, within this modest expanse lies a remarkable diversity of landscapes and a rich tapestry of human experience. The rugged terrain, dominated by the towering Greater Caucasus in the north and the Lesser Caucasus mountains to the south, has historically provided both natural defenses and challenging barriers. These formidable ranges have not only defined its borders but have also influenced internal distinctions, leading to regional variations in culture and even dialect. The Surami Range, for instance, acts as a natural divider, separating the more humid, Black Sea-influenced west from the drier, more continental east.

This geographical placement at the nexus of major historical powers has meant that Georgia has rarely been left to its own devices. For millennia, it has served as a crucible where empires have clashed, trade routes have converged, and diverse peoples have interacted. This constant interplay has fostered a resilience and adaptability within the Georgian people, alongside a fierce determination to preserve their distinct language, culture, and faith. It's a place where ancient myths, like that of the Golden Fleece, feel intrinsically tied to the very soil, and where every mountain pass and river valley whispers tales of invasions, resistance, and enduring spirit.

One of the most striking aspects of Georgia's location is its relationship with the Black Sea. This vast inland sea, connecting to the Mediterranean, has historically been a vital conduit for trade and cultural exchange, linking Georgia to the classical world and beyond. The western regions of Georgia, particularly the Kolkhida Lowland, bear the unmistakable hallmarks of this maritime influence, with their humid subtropical climate and luxuriant vegetation. This connection to the sea has always been a fundamental element of Georgia's identity, offering both opportunities for prosperity and vulnerabilities to external powers.

Yet, as one moves eastward across the Surami Range, the landscape shifts dramatically, reflecting a more continental climate. This geographical duality—the humid, almost Mediterranean west contrasting with the drier, more arid east—has not only influenced agricultural practices and settlement patterns but has also subtly contributed to regional cultural nuances. While Georgian identity is strong and unified, these environmental differences have fostered a rich tapestry of local traditions and ways of life, each contributing to the broader national character.

The presence of the Greater Caucasus Mountains, often referred to as the "Roof of Europe," further solidifies Georgia's complex geographical identity. These majestic peaks, including Mount Shkhara, the country's highest point at 5,068 meters (16,627 feet), form a formidable natural barrier with Russia to the north. Historically, this has meant a degree of isolation, but also a crucial line of defense against northern incursions. The mountains are not merely geographical features; they are deeply embedded in the Georgian psyche, symbolizing strength, endurance, and a connection to something ancient and profound.

Beyond its physical geography, Georgia's place in the world is also defined by its historical trajectory. For centuries, it found itself caught between the competing ambitions of Persian, Ottoman, and Russian empires. This often meant periods of subjugation and fragmentation, yet through it all, the Georgian language and the Georgian Orthodox Church served as powerful unifying forces, preserving a sense of nationhood even when political independence was lost. This long history of resilience against overwhelming odds has forged a deeply independent spirit, a fierce pride in their heritage, and a determination to chart their own course.

In the post-Soviet era, Georgia has consciously pivoted towards the West, seeking integration with European institutions like the European Union and NATO. This strategic choice is not merely a political calculation; it reflects a deeper cultural affinity and a desire to align with a community of nations that share similar values. The granting of EU candidate status in December 2023 was a significant milestone, reaffirming Georgia's long-term aspirations and its place within the European family, despite its geographical position at the crossroads.

However, this westward orientation does not negate Georgia's unique character, forged over millennia at the intersection of diverse influences. It is a country that effortlessly blends Eastern warmth and hospitality with a European sensibility for individual rights and democratic governance. The ancient winemaking traditions, the unique polyphonic singing, and the distinctive Georgian alphabet all speak to a culture that has absorbed external influences while fiercely retaining its own unique essence. It's a testament to a nation that has consistently defined itself on its own terms, even when facing immense external pressures.

The Georgian language, a member of the Kartvelian family, is itself a powerful marker of identity and a testament to Georgia's distinctiveness. Spoken by approximately seven million people worldwide, it is a linguistic island in a sea of Indo-European and Turkic languages, further setting Georgia apart. The preservation and continued use of this ancient language, with its own unique script, is a source of immense national pride and a fundamental pillar of Georgian identity.

Ultimately, Georgia's place in the world is not simply a matter of lines on a map, but a profound interplay of geography, history, and culture. It is a nation that has, for centuries, navigated the complexities of its position at a pivotal crossroads, forging a resilient and vibrant identity in the process. It is a country that looks to the future with a clear sense of purpose, firmly committed to its European path, while never forgetting the rich tapestry of its past and the unique characteristics that make it Sakartvelo – Georgia, the land of the Georgians.

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