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The Art of Tbilisi

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Introduction

Tbilisi is a city where the ancient and the modern exist in vibrant, harmonious contrast. Set against the backdrop of the South Caucasus, this dynamic capital straddles the Mtkvari River and bridges worlds—between continents, between eras, and between cultures. The moment you enter Tbilisi, you're enveloped by the warmth of its hospitality, the symphony of languages, scents of fresh bread and spices, and the mysterious allure of winding cobblestone streets. Tbilisi is not merely a place; it is an experience, a living crossroads shaped by centuries of resilience, creativity, and cosmopolitan exchange.

Founded in legend by King Vakhtang I Gorgasali after a serendipitous discovery of natural hot springs, Tbilisi has always been a hub of movement and encounter. Greeks, Persians, Arabs, Mongols, Turks, Russians—all have left palpable marks on the city, woven into its architecture, language, cuisine, and character. Behind every ornate balcony and beneath every weathered stone, there are echoes of triumph and transformation, devastation and revival. Even as Tbilisi marched through invasions and empires, it cultivated its own inimitable identity, one of artistry, openness, and endurance.

Today, Tbilisi is in the throes of a cultural renaissance. Contemporary galleries light up the facades of nineteenth-century mansions, while chic cafés nestle in renovated Soviet-era buildings. Artists and artisans bring fresh energy to age-old crafts, and chefs reinterpret family recipes for the global palate. The city buzzes with fusion—of flavors, styles, ambitions—and yet remains deeply anchored in tradition. Street musicians fill the air with the haunting harmonies of polyphonic song, and the rituals of the Georgian table endure, still gathering friends and strangers in celebration.

This book is an invitation to journey into the heart of Tbilisi: to stroll its neighborhoods, linger in its wine cellars and hidden courtyards, marvel at its monuments, and revel in the creative dialogues that shape its present and future. Each chapter uncovers a different facet of the city: from the foundations of its legendary past to the intricate beauty of its domestic architecture, the dazzling spectrum of its art scene, and the irresistible allure of its kitchen.

You will meet the people—painters, poets, winemakers, grandmothers, bakers, and dreamers—whose stories make Tbilisi endlessly surprising and alive. You will learn how to fold khinkali, decipher the carvings on an ancient church, and toast like a true Tamada. Along the way, you'll discover practical tips for deepening your experience, whether from home or as a visitor, allowing you to savor the spirit of Tbilisi long after turning the final page.

Above all, "The Art of Tbilisi" seeks to capture what truly animates this city: its boundless curiosity, its immense heart, and its remarkable ability to continually remake itself—without ever forgetting where it came from. Welcome to Tbilisi: a masterpiece etched by time, lived by its people, and always ready to share its stories.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Legend of Tbilisi: A City Born from Hot Springs

Every great city has a founding myth, and Tbilisi's is as warm and inviting as its name suggests. The story begins, as many good stories do, with a king and a hunting expedition. The year was the 5th century AD, and the ruler in question was Vakhtang I Gorgasali, a formidable King of Iberia (the ancient Georgian kingdom, not the peninsula to the west). Legend has it that King Vakhtang was out enjoying a favorite pastime – hunting with a falcon – in the heavily forested lands that now form the heart of modern Tbilisi.

The hunt was progressing as expected until the king's falcon, having caught a pheasant, plummeted into a hidden hot spring. When the royal party retrieved the birds, they were astonished to find both the falcon and the pheasant perfectly cooked by the steaming waters. Another version of the tale recounts a wounded deer seeking refuge in the same thermal springs, emerging miraculously healed. Regardless of whether it was a falcon and pheasant or a deer, the underlying theme was the same: the discovery of natural hot, curative waters.

Recognizing the strategic and perhaps even divine significance of this discovery, King Vakhtang Gorgasali declared that a city should be built on this very spot. He named it "Tbilisi," a derivative of the Old Georgian word "tbili," which means "warm." And so, from the depths of the earth, warmed by the very springs that gave it life, Tbilisi was born. This tale, while steeped in myth, is more than just a charming anecdote; it speaks to the very essence of the city. The hot sulfur baths of Abanotubani, with their distinctive domed roofs, are a tangible link to this founding legend, continuing to draw visitors seeking their therapeutic properties centuries later.

Beyond the enchanting origin story, Tbilisi's strategic location played a far more prosaic, yet equally crucial, role in its development. Nestled in a valley through which the Mtkvari River (also known as the Kura) flows, and situated at the crossroads of major trade routes connecting Europe and Asia, the city was destined for greatness—and for conflict. Its geography made it a natural gateway, a place where goods, ideas, and people from diverse cultures converged. This unique position meant that Tbilisi would forever be a melting pot, absorbing influences from every empire that sought to control it.

The initial settlement by King Vakhtang marked the beginning of Tbilisi's journey from a nascent fortress town to a burgeoning capital. While archaeological evidence might not pinpoint the exact moment of the falcon's dip, it confirms continuous habitation in

the area from the 4th millennium BC, long before King Vakhtang's legendary hunt. However, it was his decree that truly set Tbilisi on its path to becoming a city of significance, establishing it as a political and cultural center for the region.

From these humble, warm beginnings, Tbilisi quickly grew. The fertile lands around the Mtkvari River provided sustenance, and the trade routes brought wealth and diverse populations. Early Tbilisi was likely a more modest affair than the sprawling metropolis we see today, but its foundational elements—the baths, the river, and the strategic hilltop fortifications—were already in place. These elements would shape its urban fabric and determine its destiny for centuries to come.

The Narikala Fortress, looming majestically over the Old Town, stands as a testament to these early defensive needs. Though its current structures primarily date from later periods, a fortress has stood on this commanding height since at least the 4th century AD, serving as a crucial bulwark for the city. It's easy to imagine King Vakhtang surveying his newly designated capital from these heights, envisioning its future prominence.

The early inhabitants of Tbilisi were a mix of ethnic Georgians, Armenians, Persians, and Jews, reflecting the city's role as a regional trade hub. This multiculturalism wasn't a modern invention; it was baked into Tbilisi's DNA from its very inception. Different religious communities lived side-by-side, contributing to the vibrant tapestry of the city. Evidence of this historical coexistence can still be seen in the Old Town, where a mosque, a synagogue, and various Christian churches (Georgian Orthodox, Armenian Apostolic, and Roman Catholic) stand in remarkably close proximity.

While the legend of the hot springs provides a romantic origin, the practicalities of defense and trade ensured Tbilisi's survival and growth. The city's strategic importance meant that it would frequently become a prize to be won, leading to a tumultuous history filled with invasions and periods of foreign rule. Yet, each conqueror, while leaving its own imprint, also inadvertently contributed to the unique character that defines Tbilisi today.

The legend of the warm springs isn't just a quaint tale; it encapsulates a deeper truth about Tbilisi. The city itself feels warm—not just from its thermal waters, but from the hospitality of its people, the inviting aromas of its cuisine, and the vibrant glow of its artistic spirit. It is a city that embraces, absorbs, and transforms, much like the very waters from which it is said to have sprung. This foundational narrative sets the stage for understanding Tbilisi not just as a collection of buildings and streets, but as a living entity, constantly evolving, yet forever connected to its legendary beginnings.

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