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Tbilisi Unlocked

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Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1** Founding Fires: Legends and Myths of Tbilisi
- **Chapter 2** Kings, Springs, and the Birth of a Capital
- **Chapter 3** Silk Road Crossings: Tbilisi as Trade Nexus
- **Chapter 4** Early Empires and the Making of Identity
- **Chapter 5** Tangled Streets: The Labyrinth of the Old Town
- **Chapter 6** Wooden Balconies and Winding Lanes: Vernacular Architecture
- **Chapter 7** Bathhouses and Bridges: Persian Echoes and Medieval Marvels
- **Chapter 8** Opulence and Order: Art Nouveau, Soviet Blocks, and Modern Facades
- **Chapter 9** Khinkali, Khachapuri, and the Supra: The Rituals of Georgian Cuisine
- **Chapter 10** Markets and Madloba: Everyday Food Culture
- **Chapter 11** Vine Roots: The Ancient Art of Georgian Winemaking
- **Chapter 12** Feasting and Toasting: Supra Traditions in Tbilisi Homes
- **Chapter 13** Faith's Mosaic: Churches, Synagogues, and Mosques
- **Chapter 14** Armenians in Avlabari: Stories from the Old Quarter
- **Chapter 15** Jewish Life Amidst the Sulfur Springs
- **Chapter 16** Azerbaijani Voices and Minority Histories
- **Chapter 17** Under the Double Eagle: Tbilisi in the Russian Empire
- **Chapter 18** Revolution, Repression, and the Soviet Shadow
- **Chapter 19** 9th of April and the Fight for Freedom
- **Chapter 20** Building Tomorrow: The Birth of Modern Georgian Identity
- **Chapter 21** Urban Revival: Art, Architecture, and Public Spaces Reborn
- **Chapter 22** Noise and Notoriety: Tbilisi's Music and Nightlife Boom
- **Chapter 23** Startups and the Spirit of Innovation
- **Chapter 24** Secret Courtyards, Hidden Bars: The Insider's Tbilisi
- **Chapter 25** The Soul of Tbilisi: Resilience, Humor, and Hope

Introduction

Few cities capture the imagination quite like Tbilisi. With its pastel-hued balconies hanging precariously over cobbled alleys, domed bathhouses venting wisps of ancient steam, and the melodic clang of a church bell mingling with the call to prayer, Tbilisi hums with a quiet, magnetic pulse. Here, on the shimmering banks of the Mtkvari River, at a natural crossroads between Europe and Asia, one finds a city shaped not just by centuries, but by the ever-turning wheel of empires, revolutions, and the indomitable will of its people.

At first glance, Tbilisi sparkles as a destination—its beauty visual and immediate, its hospitality legendary. But beneath the postcard-perfect facades lies a living palimpsest of cultures: Georgian, Persian, Armenian, Russian, Azerbaijani, Jewish, and more. The city's architecture alone unfolds like a historical atlas, from medieval fortresses overlooking the city skyline, to crumbling Soviet apartment blocks punctuated by street art, to glass bridges arcing gracefully into the 21st century. Every stone seems to conceal two stories—one official, one whispered—woven together through myth, memory, and survival.

To visit Tbilisi is to embark on a journey through contrasts and convergences. It is a place where faith communities thrive in harmony, where basilicas sit comfortably beside blue-tiled mosques and synagogues that have stood for centuries. In its famed markets and bustling courtyards, new meets old daily: hipsters sip natural qvevri wine as elders gather for backgammon, and young chefs reimagine ancient recipes beneath weathered wooden eaves. Tbilisi's neighborhoods, from the mysterious winding lanes of the Old Town to the leafy boulevards of Vera and Vake, each reveal a distinct rhythm and character, inviting both lingering and adventure.

This book is an invitation to unlock Tbilisi—not just as a visitor ticking off sights, but as a curious wanderer hungry for the stories embedded in the city's very soul. Across its pages, you'll trace the founding myths and pivotal upheavals that set Tbilisi apart. You'll enter local homes to observe the centuries-old tradition of the supra, and taste wine from ancient cellars dug deep into the city's hills. You'll meet artists, bakers, revolutionaries, and the everyday people whose laughter, resilience, and hospitality define Tbilisi's enigmatic spirit.

Through meticulous research, evocative storytelling, and interviews from every walk of life, *Tbilisi Unlocked* aims to unravel the city's complexities—from its Silk Road origins and imperial entanglements, to the creative renaissance and hidden corners that make modern Tbilisi irresistible. Along the way, practical travel insights are interwoven—where to eat, what to seek out, how to step off the beaten path—giving

you the tools to explore not just Tbilisi's landmarks, but its living, breathing heart.

Whether you hold this book as a guide on your travels, or as a window into a world apart, *Tbilisi Unlocked* offers you not only a map but a set of keys. The true essence of Tbilisi, as you'll discover, lies in its paradox—ancient and avant-garde, scarred and jubilant, eternally evolving yet fiercely rooted. Welcome to Georgia's capital. Welcome to the crossroads. Welcome, at last, to the wonder that is Tbilisi.

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CHAPTER ONE: Founding Fires: Legends and Myths of Tbilisi

Every great city has a creation story, a mythic beginning that intertwines fact with the poetry of human imagination. For Tbilisi, that origin tale is steeped in the very essence of its name: "Tbilisi," meaning "a warm place" in Old Georgian, a direct nod to the geothermal springs that still bubble beneath its historic heart. This legendary genesis paints a vivid picture of a wild, untamed land, and a king's serendipitous discovery.

The story, passed down through generations, begins in the 5th century AD with King Vakhtang I Gorgasali of Iberia, a powerful and revered ruler. One day, as the legend goes, King Vakhtang was hunting in the heavily forested region that now constitutes modern-day Tbilisi. This area, then a dense woodland, was a prime hunting ground, far from the then-capital of Mtskheta.

The hunt was in full swing when King Vakhtang's falcon (some versions say a hawk) caught a pheasant. During their struggle, both birds plummeted into a nearby hot spring. To the king's astonishment, when he and his hunters found them, the birds were not merely wet, but boiled alive by the natural heat of the water.

Impressed and intrigued by this natural wonder—the steaming, mineral-rich waters—King Vakhtang saw not just a hunting mishap, but immense potential. Recognizing the strategic advantages of the location, including its protected position between mountains and its place on future trade routes, he decided to establish a new city on this very spot. And so, Tbilisi, the "warm place," was born, destined to become the capital of his kingdom.

This legend, while charming and deeply embedded in the city's identity, is a blend of myth and historical fact. While medieval Georgian chronicles often date Tbilisi's founding to around 458 AD by King Vakhtang I Gorgasali, archaeological evidence tells an even older story. Excavations in the region have revealed that human settlements existed in the area of Tbilisi as early as the 4th millennium BC. Some historians even suggest a city-type settlement may have been present as early as the 2nd century BC.

The earliest written accounts of a settlement in the location where Tbilisi now stands date back to the second half of the 4th century AD. During this period, a fortress was built under the reign of King Varaz-Bakur. This fortress, the precursor to the Narikala Fortress, one of Tbilisi's most enduring landmarks, marked the strategic importance of the site long before Vakhtang's legendary hunt.

Towards the end of the 4th century, this fortress temporarily fell into the hands of the Persians, but by the mid-5th century, the kings of Kartli (present-day eastern Georgia) had recaptured it. It was in this context of a re-established Georgian presence that King Vakhtang Gorgasali likely played a pivotal role, not necessarily in founding a city from scratch, but in significantly enlarging and developing the existing settlement. His vision and strategic acumen transformed a fortified outpost into a burgeoning urban center.

The sulfur baths, central to Tbilisi's founding myth, have been a significant part of the city's life for centuries. Fed by naturally hot mineral waters, these bathhouses, particularly those in the Abanotubani district (literally "bath district"), have captivated visitors for millennia. The Arab geographer Ibn Hawqal, in his 10th-century "Book of Roads and Kingdoms," even noted that "In the city, there are baths similar to those of Tiberias, whose waters boil without fire."

These ancient origins, rooted in both legend and archaeological discovery, set the stage for Tbilisi's remarkable journey. The city's name, echoing the warmth of its springs, foreshadowed a destiny as a welcoming crossroads, a place where cultures would converge and history would unfold in layers as intricate and enduring as the stone and steam of its ancient baths. It's a testament to the enduring power of a good story, a tale that captures the very essence of a city's spirit and its deep connection to the land.

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