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The Hidden Heart of Georgia: Tbilisi Unveiled

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Introduction

Tbilisi, Georgia's lively heart, sits at a meeting point of worlds—literally and figuratively. Here, the Caucasus Mountains meet the gentle curve of the Mtkvari River, East meets West, and legends are written into the stones of ancient fortresses and the laughter echoing through bustling streets. At first glance, the city beguiles: pastel spiral balconies dangle above shadowy courtyards, the golden dome of Sameba Cathedral rises above the skyline, and the distinctive scent of walnut and coriander wafts from kitchens both grand and humble. Yet beneath the surface lies a deeper story, one that pulses with the mystery and resilience of centuries, layered into every facade, festival, and familiar greeting.

For as long as Tbilisi has existed—since the fateful day that King Vakhtang's falcon fell into the city's warm sulfur springs—its fortunes have ebbed and flowed with the tides of empires. The city has been sacked, burned, and rebuilt more times than any resident can count. Persians, Byzantines, Mongols, Russians—all left their marks, challenging the city's survival and shaping its unique cultural mosaic. But through every wave of conquest and change, Tbilisi's spirit has not only endured but flourished, drawing from both hardship and hope to create something entirely its own: a city at once European and Asian, traditional and avant-garde, where the only constant is a tireless embrace of life's fullness.

Modern Tbilisi is a place of vibrancy and contradictions, where echoes of medieval intrigue ring through the narrow lanes of Old Town and futuristic glass bridges arch gracefully over ages-old rivers. The city's neighborhoods tell distinct stories—Sololaki's Belle Époque charm, Avlabari's multifaith heritage, Vake's leafy sophistication—all woven together by the friendly chaos of daily life. One is never far, here, from a burst of song, a heated debate over politics and poetry, or the open-armed invitation to share wine and laughter at a supra, the legendary Georgian feast that cements friendships and unites generations.

Yet to know Tbilisi, one must move beyond the monuments and markets to the soul of its people. Warmth is an ethos here—hospitality that runs deeper than tradition, a willingness to welcome strangers not as visitors but as honored guests. It is in conversations with market vendors, impromptu toasts from taxi drivers, the generous hospitality of families, and the lived stories of artists and entrepreneurs carving new paths in the city's post-Soviet renaissance. These moments, both ephemeral and transformative, offer a window into Tbilisi's hidden heart: its ability to continually reimagine itself without ever losing sight of its storied past.

This book invites you on a journey through Tbilisi as both traveler and confidante.

From the founding myths and battered fortresses of the ancient city, through the labyrinths of neighborhoods and souks, past the sizzle of street food and the profound solemnity of its cathedrals, to the energetic hum of contemporary nightlife and artistry—every page is a step through time and place. Whether you come seeking practical advice for your own exploration, or simply wish to dream your way through the Caucasus from afar, you will find in these chapters a guide to Georgia’s capital that goes far beyond the surface.

In pulling back the veil on Tbilisi’s secrets and charms, this book aims to capture the city’s essence: the indomitable resilience, layers of history, surprising creativity, and irrepressible hospitality that make it one of Eurasia’s most captivating—and still widely undiscovered—capitals. Welcome to Tbilisi, the city that loves you back. Your journey, whether in spirit or in person, begins here.

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CHAPTER ONE: Founding Myths and Hot Springs: Tbilisi's Legendary Origins

Every city has a beginning, a tale whispered through generations, carved into its oldest stones. For Tbilisi, that origin story is inextricably linked to its abundant natural hot springs, a gift from the earth that not only gave the city its name but also shaped its destiny. This isn't just a quaint folktale; it's a living legend, with the distinctive scent of sulfur still lingering in the air of the Abanotubani district, where ancient bathhouses stand as monuments to a king's fortunate discovery.

The most widely accepted version of the legend begins in the mid-5th century AD with King Vakhtang I Gorgasali of Iberia, a historical figure whose formidable presence still graces Tbilisi's skyline in the form of a grand statue near Metekhi Church. The king, a keen hunter, was in the heavily forested valley near his then-capital, Mtskheta, when his prized falcon gave chase to a pheasant. The hunt took an unexpected turn as both birds, locked in a struggle, plummeted into a steaming hot spring.

Upon discovering his falcon and its prey cooked by the boiling waters, King Vakhtang was reportedly astonished by the natural warmth emanating from the ground. It wasn't just a curiosity; he quickly recognized the potential of these thermal waters, believed by many to possess healing properties. So impressed was the king that he declared a city should be built on this very spot.

And so, Tbilisi was born. Its name, "Tbilisi," is derived directly from the Old Georgian word "Tpili" (or "Tbili"), meaning "warm," a clear and enduring homage to the geothermal springs that inspired its founding. These warm waters, even today, remain a defining feature of the city, especially in the Abanotubani district, where the iconic brick domes of the sulfur baths dot the landscape.

While the falcon and pheasant tale is the most enchanting and popular account, archaeological evidence suggests that the area around Tbilisi was settled much earlier, with traces of human habitation dating back to the 4th millennium BC. The earliest written accounts mentioning a fortress above the Mtkvari River, where Tbilisi now stands, date to the second half of the 4th century AD. At that time, a Persian citadel, which would later become the Narikala Fortress, already existed on the site.

King Vakhtang's legacy, therefore, isn't necessarily about building a city from scratch in an uninhabited forest, but rather about recognizing the strategic and natural advantages of the location and establishing it as a significant center. He is credited with conquering and restoring the Persian stronghold and, crucially, making the

decision to relocate the royal capital of Iberia from Mtskheta to this promising new site. This strategic move solidified Tbilisi's importance and set it on its path to becoming the vibrant capital it is today.

The 5th century was a formative era for Tbilisi. The burgeoning settlement was enclosed by strong defensive walls, and early Christian structures began to appear, such as the Anchiskhati Basilica, which still stands today as one of the city's oldest churches. Another important site from this period is the Sioni Cathedral of the Dormition, though much of its current structure dates from later reconstructions.

The strategic position of Tbilisi, nestled on the banks of the Mtkvari River and surrounded by mountains, was not lost on the burgeoning empires of the ancient world. Its location at the crossroads between Europe and Asia, and its proximity to the lucrative Silk Road, meant that from its very inception, Tbilisi was a contested prize. This geopolitical reality would profoundly shape the city's tumultuous history, leading to centuries of invasions and occupations.

Indeed, Georgian control of Tbilisi in its early centuries proved to be fleeting. By the 6th century, the Persians had already seized the city. This initial conquest was just the first in a long series of foreign dominations that would mark Tbilisi's early history, as empires vied for control of this vital gateway. Each invasion, though often devastating, would also leave an indelible mark on Tbilisi's architecture, culture, and the resilient spirit of its people.

The story of Tbilisi's founding, while rooted in legend, highlights the enduring connection between the city and its unique natural environment. The hot springs, far from being a mere backdrop, are central to its identity, giving birth to its name and shaping its very existence. They were a draw for early settlers and a source of wonder for a king, laying the groundwork for a city that would, against all odds, continue to rise from the ashes of conquest, always drawing strength from its warm, hidden heart.

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