

Georgia – Wildlife, Wine & History

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline Itinerary

Day 1	Outbound flights
Day 2 – 3	Tbilisi
Day 4	Chachuna Managed Reserve
Day 5	Vashlovani National Park
Day 6 – 7	Stepantsminda & Truso
Day 8	Gori & Uplistsikhe rock-hewn town
Day 9	Inbound flights

Departs

June

Focus

Wildlife, Wine, Cuisine & History

Grading

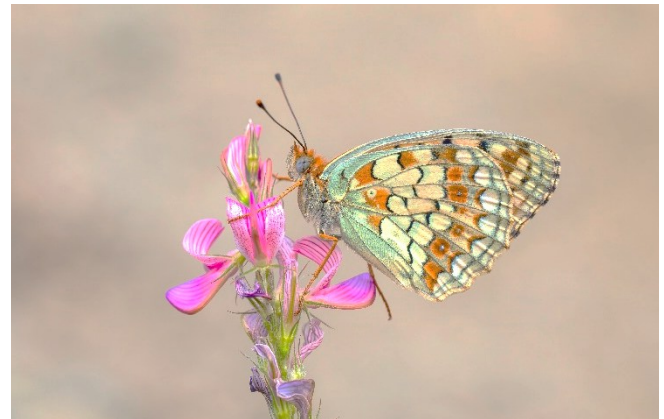
B. This tour is suitable for participants with a good level of fitness.

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code GEO05)

Highlights

- An appreciation of birds, butterflies, mammals, reptiles, amphibians and flora
- Western Palearctic specialities across the taxa
- Sample wine from Georgia's long history of winemaking and natural wine production
- Explore historical sites including Gergeti Trinity Church and Uplistsikhe Cave Town



Levant Sparrowhawk, Niobe Fritillary, Gergeti Trinity Church



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Introduction

The Caucasus is one of the richest wildlife hotspots in the world, featuring a high degree of endemism. From the towering peaks in the south and north to the semi-deserts in the east, Georgia's strategic location along migratory routes ensures a superb birdlife year-round. Through the sub-alpine meadows of Kazbegi National Park to the ancient deciduous forests of Gori, over 200 species of butterfly can be found through the country's varied ecosystems. Somewhat landlocked by the surrounding mountains and the Black and Caspian Seas, the region boasts approximately 6,400 species of vascular plants, with a quarter found exclusively within the region. Its diverse fauna includes around 850 species of vertebrate animals, with about 120 endemic to the area. This high level of endemism in the temperate world positions Caucasia as one of the most significant biodiversity hotspots on Earth.

Nestled between the breathtaking Caucasus Mountains, this ancient land has witnessed the rise and fall of empires, each leaving an indelible mark. From the mythic Kingdom of Colchis, renowned for its coveted Golden Fleece, to the glorious era of the Bagrationi dynasty, Georgia's aristocracy has long epitomised grace and sophistication. Weathering centuries of Persian, Ottoman, and Russian influences, Georgia's spirited nobility and artistic luminaries like Shota Rustaveli have shaped a heritage steeped in poetry, chivalry, and a deep reverence for Orthodox Christianity. Today, amid its wild national parks, bustling cosmopolitan cities and pristine vineyards, Georgia stands as a beacon of timeless elegance and cultural revival, inviting admirers to revel in its majestic past and embrace its dynamic future.

Georgian winemaking, with its ancient traditions dating back over 8,000 years, epitomises the art of viticulture, merging time-honoured methods with a unique terroir that yields exquisite wines. Renowned for its indigenous grape varieties and the use of qvevri clay vessels, Georgia's vinous heritage is a testament to the country's dedication to crafting wines of unparalleled depth and character. The country's cuisine, too, is a tapestry of flavours, an array of exquisite dishes crafted from the freshest local ingredients, such as aromatic herbs, tangy cheeses, and fresh vegetables. From the iconic khachapuri, oozing with molten cheese, to the intricately spiced khinkali dumplings, Georgia's culinary offerings are a sophisticated feast for the discerning palate.



Itinerary

NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Day 1

Fly London to Tbilisi

Our journey begins with an overnight flight, likely connecting through Istanbul, to Georgia's capital, Tbilisi.

Day 2 – 3

Tbilisi

Depending on flight schedules, we should arrive in Tbilisi mid-morning, giving us time to rest and freshen up at the hotel. Tbilisi, with its rich history and vibrant culture, offers much to see. An optional escorted tour of the city is available in the afternoon for those interested in already getting to know the city, including the famous sulphur baths and the impressive golden treasury of the Georgian National Museum.



Tbilisi

In the evening, we'll enjoy a fantastic meal together with our local guide, giving us the first opportunity to sample Georgia's renowned natural wines and its mouthwatering cuisine, finally gaining rightful recognition on the world stage. The next day, we have a full day to explore Tbilisi at our own paces and interests. The National Botanical Garden, within walking distance of our hotel, harbours exotic and native flora, providing habitats for numerous wildlife species. The Old Town (Altstadt) of Tbilisi is a must-see, particularly for the leaning clock tower created by the renowned Georgian puppeteer Rezo Gabriadze and its cobble-lined streets with tempting cafes. Other notable sites include Tsminda Sameba Cathedral, the Bridge of Peace, Narikala Fortress, and the Open Air Museum of Ethnography. Today might be the day to enjoy relaxing inside the sulphur baths, for those who wish!

In the evening, we will reconvene for dinner before our final night in this wonderful city.

Day 4

Dedoplistskaro; Chachuna Managed Reserve

The next morning, we'll move to our next base at Dedoplistskaro in the east of the country. After arriving in Dedoplistskaro, we'll continue east to Chachuna Managed Reserve, a stunning wildlife-rich semi-arid landscape. Here, we have a good chance of spotting Black Francolin, Rufous-tailed Scrub Robin, Ménétries's Warbler, Lesser Kestrel, wild Ring-necked Pheasant, Levant Sparrowhawk, and, if we are fortunate, Finsch's Wheatear. Other notable bird species in the area include Rosy Starling, Tawny Pipit, Calandra Lark, Western Rock Nuthatch, Eastern Black-eared Wheatear, Isabelline Wheatear, and Pied Wheatear. The flora includes Wild Pistachio Tree, *Phlomis laciniata*, *Ephedra procera*, Willow-leaved Pear, and Pallas' Buckthorn. The excellent reptile-life features a very healthy population of Mediterranean Spur-thighed Tortoise, Caucasian Agama, Red-bellied Racer, and Levantine Viper.

We will stay in a comfortable hotel in Dedoplistskaro for the next two nights.

Day 5

Vashlovani National Park

After breakfast, we will visit one of the country's premier wildlife sites, Vashlovani National Park.



Black Francolin

Here, we hope to see Black-bellied Sandgrouse, Little Bustard, Chukar, Blue-cheeked Bee-eater, and Saker Falcon. Other raptors in the area include Eastern Imperial Eagle, Steppe Eagle, Lesser-spotted Eagle, Eurasian Griffon, Egyptian Vulture, and Cinereous Vulture. We will also visit the area where Goitered Gazelles have been reintroduced. Plant species of interest include Foetid Juniper, Turkestan Juniper, Afghan Pine, *Astragalus microcephalus*, and *Elaeagnus angustifolia*.

Day 6

Kakheti; Stepantsminda

After breakfast, we will leave Dedoplistskaro and drive north to Kakheti. In Kakheti, we will visit historical highlights such as Ikalto Monastery and Alaverdi Cathedral. We'll enjoy a delightful lunch at a local family winery, complete with a wine-tasting session (optional). The tradition of winemaking in Georgia can be traced back more than 8,000 years, with over 500 indigenous grape varieties thriving in the country's diverse climatic zones. Following lunch, we'll explore the Ananuri fortified complex and the Gergeti Trinity Church, one of the country's absolute highlights, with a good chance to find interesting wildlife in the area too.

After a fascinating day, we will stay overnight in Stepantsminda, our base for the next two nights.

Day 7

Truso

The following day, we will visit Truso gorge, known for its superb wildflowers, including, *Dactylorhiza euxina*, *Gentiana verna ssp. pontica*, Prophet's Flower, *Pontechium maculatum*, Gentian Speedwell, *Polygala major*, *Polygala caucasica*, *Daphne glomerata*, Caucasian Stonecrop, *Androsace villosa*, *Anemonasteum fasciculatum*, Caucasian Primrose, and Caucasian Astrantia. Truso Gorge provides excellent opportunity for spotting mammals, such as Caucasian Chamois and East Caucasian Tur. Butterflies in the area include Caucasian Skipper, Caucasian Spotted Fritillary, Niobe Fritillary, Esper's Marbled White, and numerous others. Birdlife here is also excellent, with a great chance of seeing Green Warbler, Mountain Chiffchaff, Red-fronted Serin, Northern Wheatear, Water Pipit, Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush, Ring Ouzel, Common Rosefinch, Red-billed Chough, Alpine Chough, Cinereous Vulture, Whinchat, Red-breasted Flycatcher, Honey Buzzard, Griffon Vulture, Golden Eagle and Lammergeier.

Day 8

Uplistsikhe Cave Town

On our last full day, we visit the rock-hewn town of Uplistsikhe, meaning "the lord's fortress," before enjoying a wonderful final dinner and wine-tasting at a local natural winery in Ateni; overnight back in Tbilisi.

Day 9

Departure

Sadly, it will be time to leave this extraordinary country and return home with a connection via Istanbul or another European city.

Tour Grading & Focus

The main focus of the tour will be the excellent general natural history of the country, with the local wines, cuisine and history as additional interests. Some of the holiday will be enjoyed at above 1,740m asl.

Weather, Clothing & Equipment

Whilst we should hope for warm, sunny conditions, it can be overcast at times with occasional rains. The time in the mountains could be cool, particularly at night. It would be sensible to come prepared for such possibilities.

What's Included

All meals are included from dinner on Day 2 through to breakfast on Day 9, except for lunch and dinner on Day 3 (the designated free day). Wine-tasting sessions are included in the tour price. However, all other alcoholic drinks and soft drinks are not included.

We will enjoy stays in 3-star hotels and guesthouses with en suite facilities throughout.

Extending Your Holiday

We would be happy to assist in arranging extensions, should this be of interest. Please contact Dan Lay (Dan@naturetrek.co.uk or 01962 733051) for further information and/or make sure to stipulate any interest in a possible extension upon booking.

How to Book Your Place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements at the time of booking.

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