

Georgia's Caucasus Mountains: Alpine Wildlife & Walking

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

- Day 1** Fly London to Tbilisi
- Day 2** Tbilisi to Stepantsminda
- Day 3** Stepantsminda & Truso Valley
- Day 4** Sabertse Pass Hike
- Day 5** Stepantsminda to Borjomi
- Day 6** Kvabiskhevi trail
- Day 7** Javakheti Plateau
- Day 8** Borjomi to Tbilisi
- Day 9** Depart Tbilisi, arrive London

Departs

June

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code GEO07)

Grading

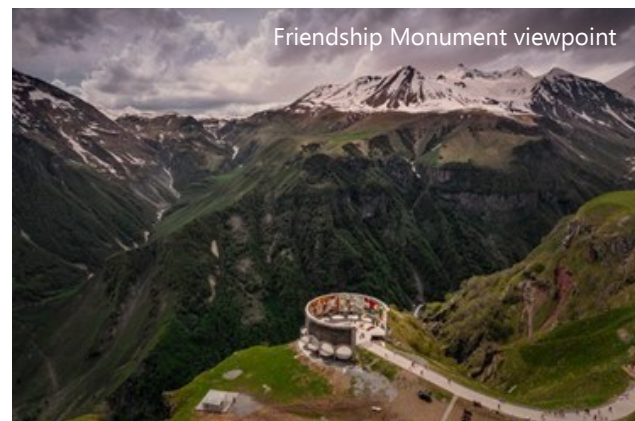
Grade C. (See tour grading notes)

Focus

General naturalist history, walking and some cultural and historical interests.

Highlights

- Spectacular Caucasus Mountains
- Caucasian Black Grouse, Caucasian Snowcock, Great Rosefinch & Güldenstadt's Redstart
- Prime Caucasian forest and rich spring flora
- Experience Georgia's warm hospitality



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Introduction

Georgia nestles at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, where the towering Greater Caucasus meets the lush forests of the Lesser Caucasus, creating a compact natural paradise of extraordinary diversity. Straddling ancient trade routes and shaped by millennia of human history, this small nation boasts a remarkable concentration of endemics, from the alpine heights of Caucasian Snowcock and East Caucasian Tur to the Colchic forests and volcanic plateaus that shelter Brown Bears, Velvet Scoters and a host of raptors.

Arriving in Tbilisi, we waste no time heading north along the iconic Georgian Military Highway to Stepantsminda (formerly Kazbegi), our base for three nights amid the soaring peaks of the Greater Caucasus. Our first day features birding at shallow Bazaleti Lake for Armenian Gull and Marsh Harrier, raptor-watching at the stunning Jvari Pass and a walk in the Dariali Gorge where Wallcreeper flutters against sheer cliffs and East Caucasian Tur descend the slopes at dusk. The next day we explore the Truso Valley's otherworldly travertine terraces and bubbling mineral springs, scanning scrub for Caucasian Chiffchaff and Red-fronted Serin, seeking Great Rosefinch in gravel beds and checking for Brown Bear and Wolf tracks in the soft mud. The highlight is a strenuous hike from the 14th-century Gergeti Trinity Church up to Sabertse Pass, with its panoramic glacier views of Mount Kazbek, where we set scopes on distant ridges for the ultimate prizes of Caucasian Snowcock and Caucasian Black Grouse amid swirling flocks of choughs and accentors.

From Stepantsminda we descend to Borjomi in the Lesser Caucasus, pausing at Nadarbazevi Lake for migrant waterfowl amid the arid plains. A full day follows on the magnificent Likani–Kvabiskhevi trail through Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park, a moderate walk transitioning from Colchic beech forest to spruce and fir, where we listen for Black Woodpecker, watch for Red-breasted Flycatcher and search for bear claw marks on favoured trees. The dramatic Javakheti Plateau brings a complete change of scene, with a high pass raptor watch en route to windswept Lake Tabatskuri, Georgia's only breeding site for Velvet Scoter, where Armenian Gull colonies line the shore and we scan snow patches for lekking Caucasian Black Grouse.

Our final full day takes us to the ancient rock-hewn cave city of Uplistsikhe, where sun-warmed cliffs hold basking Caucasian Agama and the skies above may carry Imperial Eagle, before we return to Tbilisi for departure the following morning.

Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather and 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.

Itinerary

Day 1

In flight

We depart from London on a scheduled service flight direct to Tbilisi. Occasionally we may have to use an indirect route via Istanbul; however, this will be avoided where possible.

Day 2

Tbilisi to Stepantsminda

We arrive in Tbilisi early this morning and begin our journey north along the Georgian Military Highway towards Stepantsminda (formerly Kazbegi), our base in the Greater Caucasus. After leaving the city, we make our first major stop at Bazaleti Lake, about 60 kilometres to the north, where we will stretch our legs and enjoy some introductory birding. This shallow lake is an important stopover for migrant waterfowl and we will spend around an hour scanning the open water and reed-fringed margins for Armenian Gull, early herons, Marsh Harrier and other passage wildfowl and waders.



Lammergeier

Continuing north, we follow the Aragvi River to the impressive 16th–17th-century Ananuri Fortress, dramatically set above the Zhinvali Reservoir. Here we can enjoy the first wide views of the southern slopes of the Greater Caucasus, while keeping an eye on the sky for passing raptors. The road then climbs steadily towards the highest point of the Military Highway at around 2,395 metres, where we stop near the spectacular Friendship

Monument viewpoint. In suitable weather the thermals here can be superb, and we will scan for Golden Eagle, Griffon Vulture and, with luck, Lammergeier, while the surrounding alpine meadows may hold Horned Lark and other high-altitude passerines.

Rather than heading directly to our guesthouse, we continue past Stepantsminda into the dramatic Dariali Gorge. Here we will take a gentle 2-hour walk either towards the Gveleti Waterfalls or along the Terek River, depending on conditions. This is one of the best areas for finding East Caucasian Tur, which often descend the steep slopes towards evening, and we will also carefully scan the rock walls for Wallcreeper, whose butterfly-like flight and crimson wing patches are always a tour highlight. By late afternoon we return to Stepantsminda and settle into our comfortable guesthouse. Over dinner we will outline plans for the coming days, focusing on the walks and opportunities to find the 'Big Three' specialities of the region, Caucasian Snowcock, Caucasian Black Grouse and Great Rosefinch.

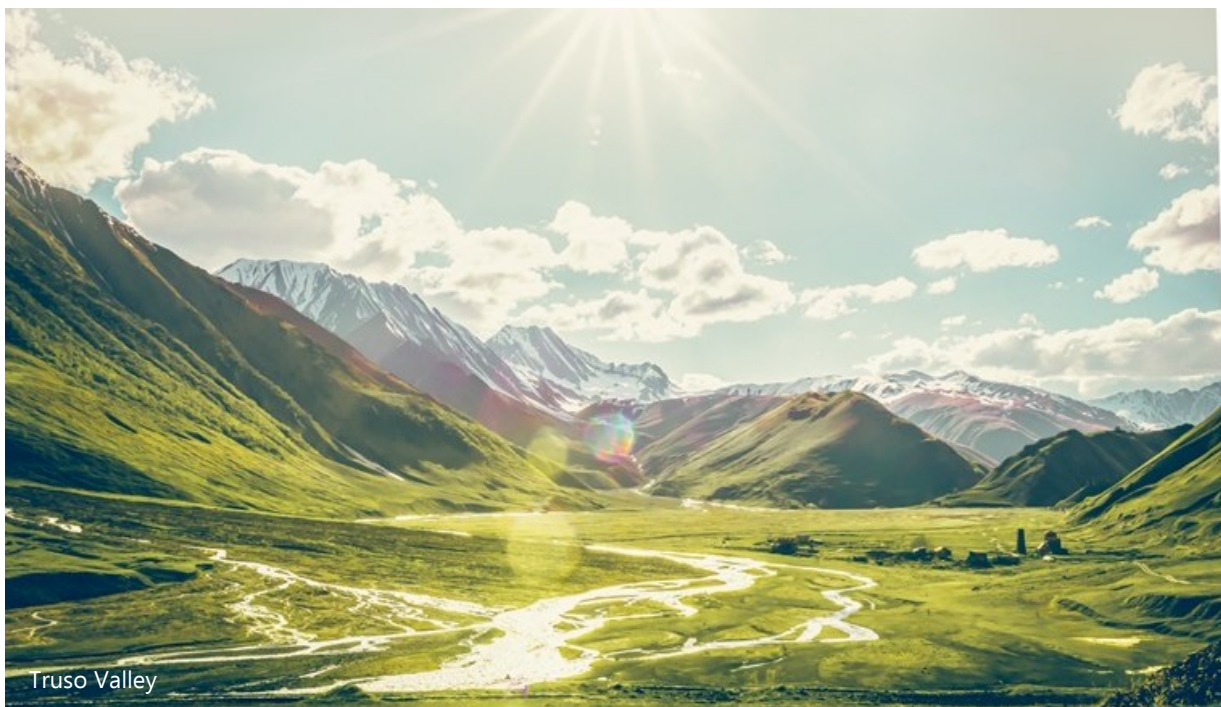
Day 3

Stepantsminda & Truso Valley

Today we explore the magnificent Truso Valley, an accessible yet wild-feeling side valley of the upper Tergi River that offers a superb cross-section of Greater Caucasus biodiversity. After an early breakfast we drive a short distance to the village of Kvemo Okrokana, where we begin a mostly gentle 3.5-kilometre walk. The morning is spent in the narrower lower gorge, where steep rocky slopes funnel the wind and we search the scrub, river terraces and skies for Caucasian Chiffchaff, Red-fronted Serin and early raptors riding the first thermals.

As the valley opens out, the scenery becomes increasingly dramatic. We pass vast, brightly coloured travertine terraces, yellow, orange and white mineral deposits formed by carbonate-rich springs, and pause at bubbling sulphur springs whose soft mud often preserves perfect tracks of Brown Bear, Wolf and East Caucasian Tur. Botanically, this is a rich subalpine zone and we may find a variety of early-flowering Caucasian endemics among the turf and scree, while sunlit rocks and ruined buildings are good places to look for Caucasian Agama and other rock lizards. Continuing up-valley, we reach the unusual, gas-rich Abano Mineral Lake before stopping near the semi-abandoned seasonal village of Ketrisi for a field lunch, using the wide vistas to scan for Great Rosefinch in the gravelly riverbeds and Rock Thrush foraging on the slopes.

In the afternoon we continue towards the ruins of Zakagori Fortress, a medieval outpost that marks the practical limit of access without special permits. From here we set up telescopes to scan the high, grassy slopes and crags for herds of East Caucasian Tur beginning their evening descent, and we keep watch for Lammergeier and other raptors drifting along the ridges. As the light softens we retrace our steps and drive back to Stepantsminda for dinner and an evening review of our growing bird and mammal list.



Day 4

Sabertse Pass Hike

Today's excursion is the most demanding of the tour but, for those who undertake it, one of the most rewarding. After breakfast we take 4x4 vehicles from Stepantsminda up to the iconic 14th-century Gergeti Trinity Church, perched on a shoulder high above the valley at around 2,170 metres. Arriving early allows us to scan the birch edge and rhododendron scrub for Caucasian Black Grouse at first light, whilst photographers will relish the sunrise views of Mount Kazbek's glaciated summit.



Gergeti Trinity Church

From the church we begin our steady climb towards Sabertse Pass along a scenic ridge path. This is a strenuous hike, with a total distance of approximately 10-14 kilometres and around 1,200 metres of ascent and descent, but we will proceed at a measured pace with frequent pauses to enjoy the views and scan for wildlife. The route soon leaves the last shrubs behind and crosses open alpine meadows where we look for high-altitude passerines such as Alpine Accentor, White-winged Snowfinch, Water Pipit and flocks of choughs, while Lammergeier, Griffon Vulture and Golden Eagle may be seen cruising the valley thermals below.

By early afternoon we reach the Sabertse Pass area, close to the Altihut (about 3,000 metres), where the landscape is transformed into a rugged glacial environment of moraines, scree and ice. After a well-earned rest and refreshments, we set up telescopes to scan the surrounding cliffs and boulder slopes for the elusive Caucasian Snowcock and for herds of East Caucasian Tur on the higher ridges. Later we begin the long descent, with the warm afternoon air often producing excellent raptor movement as we return towards the church. In the early evening we rejoin our 4x4s and drive back down to Stepantsminda for dinner and a review of our high-altitude sightings.

Day 5

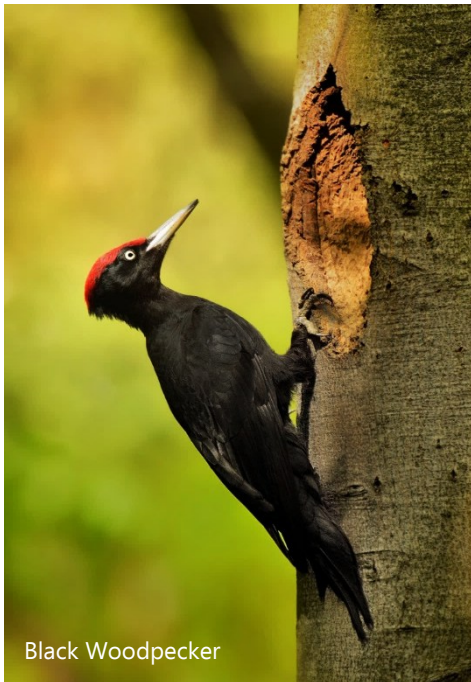
Stepantsminda to Borjomi

Leaving Stepantsminda this morning, we retrace the Georgian Military Highway south, taking a final opportunity to scan the high slopes and passes for Lammergeier and other raptors as we cross the Jvari Pass. Descending into the drier lowlands around Gori, we make a birding stop at Nadarbazevi Lake, an artificial reservoir set on the open plateau. We will spend some time here, scanning for migrant waterfowl and waders as well as steppe and farmland birds along the shore.

From Nadarbazevi we continue west and then south towards Borjomi, leaving the arid plains behind as the road enters the narrow, forested gorge of the Mtkvari River and the foothills of the Lesser Caucasus. The vegetation changes quickly to lush, humid mixed forest, giving us a first taste of the habitats we will explore tomorrow. On arrival in Borjomi we check into our hotel, with time to relax before dinner.

Day 6

Kvabiskhevi trail



Black Woodpecker

Today we enjoy a full day on what is widely regarded as the 'jewel in the crown' of Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park: the point-to-point trail from Likani to the village of Kvabiskhevi. After a short drive to the Likani ranger station, we will begin our walk along the Likani River through deep, humid forest. The first kilometres are on a good path beside the river, offering excellent opportunities for woodpeckers and forest passerines, and we will listen and look for Black Woodpecker, various tits, nuthatches and crossbills in the surrounding trees.

The path then climbs steadily, with a sustained ascent of around 400 – 500 metres, towards a wooded ridge. The lower slopes are cloaked in magnificent Oriental Beech, gradually giving way to stands of Caucasian Fir and Oriental Spruce as we gain height, and we will pause to search for signs of Caucasian Red Deer and for Brown Bear claw marks and hair on favoured 'bear trees'. From the ridge crest we are rewarded with fine views across the Lesser Caucasus and we will keep an eye on the sky for passing raptors using the updrafts from the valley.

The descent towards Kvabiskhevi is steeper and drier, with more open, south-facing slopes and rocky outcrops providing habitat for Rock Bunting and Caucasian Agama, as well as a range of sun-loving herbs and shrubs. By late afternoon we reach the village, where our vehicle awaits to return us to Borjomi. Throughout the day we will also enjoy the rich ground flora of this mixed forest, which includes a variety of orchids, primulas and other Caucasian endemics in season.

Day 7

Javakheti Plateau

Today we travel south-east into a very different Georgian landscape, exchanging the vertical, forested valleys of Borjomi for the wide, windswept volcanic plateau of Javakheti. As we climb towards the high pass that leads onto the plateau, we stop to enjoy the expansive views and to scan for migrating raptors, since this corridor can act as a spring bottleneck. Using telescopes, we will also check the snow-patched slopes for Caucasian Black Grouse 'bubbling' at their leks, their dark profiles standing out on the remaining snowfields.

Beyond the pass, the scenery opens out into broad, treeless uplands dotted with villages and volcanic cones, with Lake Tabatskuri lying in a great basin at around 2,000 metres. The village of Tabatskuri sits on a striking peninsula jutting into the lake and from here we follow the so-called 'Velvet Scoter Path' along the northern



shore. This is the key vantage point from which to look for Velvet Scoter at their only known Caucasian breeding site, as well as breeding colonies of Armenian Gull and other waterfowl. Later, conditions permitting, we may also walk towards the southern end of the lake, near the mouth of the Ktsia River, where Common Crane, Black Stork and other migrants often pause to feed in the wetlands. Throughout, the backdrop of the Abul-Samsari volcanic range provides superb photographic opportunities.

Mammal-life here is more secretive, but Red Fox and European Hare are fairly common, and tracks of Wolf are often found in the thawing snow. By late afternoon we return to our accommodation in the Borjomi area.

Day 8

Borjomi to Tbilisi

After breakfast we leave Borjomi and travel north and east towards Tbilisi, breaking our journey at one of Georgia's most remarkable archaeological and cultural sites, the ancient cave town of Uplistsikhe. Carved into a cliff above the Mtkvari River, this rock-hewn settlement dates back to at least the early first millennium BC and offers a fascinating window onto Georgia's pre-Christian history, as well as far-reaching views across the surrounding steppe.

As always, we will combine culture with natural history. The sun-warmed rocky outcrops around the site are an excellent place to see Caucasian Agama at close range, and we will scan for raptors such as Eastern Imperial Eagle hunting over the rodent-rich plains below. Botanically, the semi-arid slopes support a distinctive flora including Georgian Almond and a range of other drought-adapted shrubs and herbs in season. Later in the day we continue to Tbilisi, where we spend our final night.

Day 9

Fly London

Depending on flight times, there may be some free time in Tbilisi this morning before we transfer to the airport for our flight home.

Weather

Whilst we hope for fine weather, participants should be prepared for a range of temperatures. In the mountains snow can fall and blizzard conditions occur on occasions but with the advance of spring it is more probable to experience warm, sunny days with no precipitation. Kazbegi does, however, lie at an altitude of 1,700 metres and the cooler mountain air is likely to temper even the warmest of days. Further south any precipitation will fall as rain, not snow, and hot daytime temperatures can be anticipated.

Accommodation & Food

Accommodation will be in very comfortable hotels where all rooms will have private facilities. All meals are included in the tour cost starting with lunch on Day 2 and ending with breakfast on Day 9.

Tour Grading

This is an active walking tour graded as moderate to strenuous, requiring a good level of fitness and the ability to hike for extended periods across varied terrain. Participants should be comfortable walking distances of up to 13 km in a day, often on uneven trails, with sustained ascents of 400–500 metres on forested routes and up to 1,200 metres on alpine hikes. The itinerary includes both relatively gentle valley walks (e.g. a 3.5 km hike with minimal elevation change in Truso Valley) and significantly more demanding days, such as the ascent to Sabertse Pass at nearly 3,000 metres, where altitude, steep gradients and longer distances combine to increase physical challenge.

Overall, this tour is best suited to fit, active travellers with prior hill-walking experience, capable of maintaining a steady pace over consecutive days of activity. While some sections are optional or supported by vehicle transfers (e.g. 4x4 access to higher starting points), the programme still involves long days outdoors, potentially variable mountain weather, and hiking at altitude, which can increase fatigue. A strong level of stamina, good mobility, and comfort on steep, uneven, and sometimes exposed terrain are essential to fully enjoy both the wildlife-viewing and the scenic alpine environments.

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, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking.

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