



## Armenia & Georgia

### Treasures of the Southern Caucasus

**5–16 September 2026 (MM 165)**

12 days

Speaker: Ian Colvin

Exquisite jewellery and metalwork from the Bronze Age and Antiquity.

Ravishing churches and monasteries in breathtaking settings; frescoes and manuscripts – a remarkable legacy of early Christianity.

A delicious and varied regional cuisine in a land that is the cradle of wine.

Outstanding mountainous landscape.

Armenia and Georgia belong neither to Europe, nor Asia, but stand in a place in-between – the South Caucasus. Two ancient lands, two modern republics. This is a land whose long history and archaeology span the ages. The earliest well-dated hominin fossils in Europe were found at Dmanisi in Georgia. The Neolithic in the South Caucasus brought domestication of animals and plants (including grapes, and wine production), preceding the equivalent revolution in north-west Europe by some two millennia. It was an early centre for metallurgy – as we will see at Tbilisi and Yerevan's history museums. Its cultures have been shaped by long contact with the peoples of the Near East.

The kingdoms of Armenia and Georgia emerge soon after Alexander the Great's defeat of the Achaemenids. Both found themselves at a critical interface between empires: the Romans, Byzantines and later the Ottomans to the West, and the Parthians, Sasanid Persians, Arab Caliphate and Safavids to the South and East. North, beyond the Greater Caucasus mountains, the vast Eurasian steppe unfolds, home of the nomad powers, until Russia claimed it following the gunpowder revolution.

Today, Georgia and Armenia sit between NATO and Russia, astride some of the most important gas and oil pipeline routes in the world. And yet it is the rhythm, the periodicity of its history that makes it so attractive to the visitor. Armenia dominated in the 1st century BC when the Seleucid empire was in retreat. Its great ecclesiastical monuments are the product of early Christianisation: distinctive domed churches and monasteries that were developed from the late sixth century; and the grand cathedrals and monastic academies of the 11th and 12th centuries. A magnificent Georgian tradition of folk and ecclesiastical polyphony



*Yerevan, mid-18th-century engraving*

exists, that Tsarist- and Soviet-era choirmasters consolidated into a national art form.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the marriage of oriental architecture with the latest European trends in Art Nouveau, left Tbilisi with a legacy of buildings that late Soviet austerity has failed to erase. Armenian history is a model of resilience in the face of tragedy; Yerevan, planned in the aftermath of the first great genocide of the 20th century, has been praised as the most attractive of post-Soviet cities.

Armenian cuisine draws on the legacy of a great diaspora; Georgian on the fertility of its agricultural lowlands. Food and wine are a highlight of the trip.

### Itinerary

**Day 1: Yerevan.** Fly at c. 11.30am from London Heathrow to Yerevan via Paris (Air France), arriving c. 01.20am the following day. Transfer to the hotel in the heart of the city. First of four nights in Yerevan.

**Day 2: Yerevan.** After a leisurely start, the day begins with a visit to the comprehensive and fascinating State Museum of Armenian History.

**Day 3: Khor Virap, Echmiadzin, Yerevan.** Visit the Khor Virap monastery in the foothills of Mount Ararat, where St Gregory the Illuminator was imprisoned. Echmiadzin, the seat of the Armenian Apostolic Church is

also a UNESCO world heritage site. Return to Yerevan and visit the Museum of the Armenian Genocide – powerful for its simplicity.

**Day 4: Yerevan, Garni, Geghard.** In the morning, visit the Matenadaran, a repository of 17,000 illuminated manuscripts. The Hellenic temple at Garni is the last remaining pre-Christian building in Armenia. Much of the monastery at Geghard is carved out of the cliffside. Enjoy a performance from a traditional Armenian vocal ensemble here.

**Day 5: Lake Sevan, Dilijan, Vanadzor, Dzoraget.** Drive to Lake Sevan, and the peerlessly situated Sevanavank monastery that overlooks it. Visit a stone-carver who continues the tradition of cutting khachkars (cross-stones), characteristic of medieval Christian Armenian art. Overnight in Dzoraget.

**Day 6: Haghpata, Akhtala, Tbilisi.** The 13th-century frescoes in Akhtala are strongly influenced by Byzantium. The monasteries at Haghpata and Sanahin, both UNESCO-listed sites, are both fine examples of Armenian sacred architecture. Cross the border into Georgia and continue to Tbilisi for the first of two nights.

**Day 7: Tbilisi.** The Asiatic Old Town set beneath the Narikala fortress remains a twisting maze of streets, caravanserais and ancient churches, adding contrast to the subsequent architecture erected by the tsars' viceroys, by merchant princes, Bolsheviks

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continued

and post-Soviet presidents' favourite modern architects (the vast post-Soviet Sameba – Holy Trinity – Cathedral, rivals the ambition of the great cathedrals of the Middle Ages).

**Day 8: Mtskheta, Kazbegi.** Just north of Tbilisi is the old capital, Mtskheta, scene of the country's fourth-century conversion and still the religious heart of this strongly Christian country. Its spiritual landmarks include: the sixth-century Jvari Church, perched high above the town; and the 11th-century Cathedral of Svetitskhoveli, symbol of Georgia's Conversion. Follow the Georgian Military Highway, the route the Russians constructed at the turn of the 19th century to secure their hold on their Transcaucasian possessions. Overnight in Kazbegi in the high Caucasus Mountains.

**Day 9: Gergeti, Kakheti.** The 14th-century Gergeti Sameba Church on the slopes of volcanic Mount Kazbek is in perhaps the most dramatic setting in Georgia. Lunch is provided at a traditional kvevri studio. First of two nights in Kakheti.

**Day 10: Tsinandali, Bodbe, Kakheti.** Depart for Tsinandali and the country estate of the princely Chavchavadze family. Built by Alexandre (1786–1846) diplomat, poet and general, raised at the court of Catherine the Great – and one of the first to introduce enlightenment ideas and modern agricultural methods to Georgia – in 1854 the house was the scene of a notorious raid by the Imam Shamil's Daghestani fighters. Today it is a small museum affording a glimpse of 19th-century Georgian noble life. Bodbe Convent houses the grave of St Nino who is famed for bringing Christianity to Georgia.

**Day 11: Signaghi, Mtskheta.** The Signaghi Museum contains small but well-curated exhibits on bronze-age artefacts from the area, and the paintings of Niko Pirosmiani, a locally-born artist from the early 20th century. Continue to Tbilisi. Overnight here.

**Day 12, Tbilisi.** Fly at c. 7.00am from Tbilisi Airport to London, arriving at Heathrow at c. 10.00am (British Airways).

## Lecturer

**Ian Colvin.** Historian and Byzantinist specialising in Late Antiquity and the South Caucasus, with interests in the wider history of the region. Trained at Oxford, he is now a researcher at the University of Cambridge. He has directed an ongoing archaeological expedition to ancient Archaeopolis in the South Caucasus since 2001, and leads a number of tours in the region.

## Practicalities

**Included:** travel by private air-conditioned coach throughout; breakfasts, 10 lunches and 8 dinners with wine, water and coffee; all admission to museums, churches and sites; all tips for restaurant staff, drivers and guides; all state and airport taxes; the services of the lecturer, tour manager and a local guide.

**Accommodation.** **Tufenkian Historic Hotel, Yerevan** ([tufenkianheritage.com](http://tufenkianheritage.com)): a 4-star hotel in a central location. **The Avan Dzoraget** ([avan-dzoraget.tufenkianheritage.com](http://avan-dzoraget.tufenkianheritage.com)): a small and stylish hotel in a wonderful riverside location, equivalent to a 4-star. **Marriott Tbilisi** ([marriott.co.uk/hotels](http://marriott.co.uk/hotels)): a 5-star hotel behind a 19th-century façade, within walking distance of Tbilisi's central attractions. **Rooms Hotel, Kazbegi** ([roomshotels.com](http://roomshotels.com)): a former Soviet resort, now a modern hotel. It has spectacular views of the mountains. **Bodbe Hotel, Kakheti** ([bodbehotel.ge](http://bodbehotel.ge)): a stylish hotel nestled above Signaghi, with good views of the Caucasus and Alazani Valley. *Single rooms are doubles for sole use throughout.*

**How strenuous?** You will be on your feet for long periods. Many of the sites are reached by steep, uneven steps often without handrails. There are 220 steps to a monastery. The tour would not be suitable for anyone who has difficulties with everyday walking and stairclimbing. There are several journeys of over 2 hours (average distance by coach per day: 80 miles).

**Group size:** between 10 and 22 participants.

**Combine this tour with:** *Silk Roads of Central Asia*, 20 August–1 September 2026; *Pompeii & Herculaneum*, 21–26 September 2026.