

Silk Roads and Crusaders

Day 1: Arrival - Baku (D)

Azerbaijan a country that lies at the cross-roads of Europe, Asia and the Middle East and a land of legendary hospitality and fantastic cuisine. Where else can you cool off in the crystal waters of the Caspian Sea and watch natural fires burning from the ground. With its' enticing blend of Middle Eastern and Eastern European flavours we'll sample some of the best food that Baku has to offer at our welcome dinner.

Day 2: Baku (B) (L)

Get your walking shoes on today as we explore Baku together. We'll wander through the winding alleyways of the old city and visit Memory Alley (Martyr's Lane) a cemetery and memorial dedicated to those killed by the Soviet Army during Black January and also for those killed in the Nagorno-Karabakh War. We'll see the Maiden's Tower a powerful eight storey fortress and the Shirvanshah's Palace complex parts of which date back to the 15th century. After lunch visit the world class cultural centre named after Heydar Aliyev, Azerbaijan's third president. The Heydar Aliyev Centre consists of various exhibitions and is recognised as one of the world's most famous buildings, the masterpiece of Zaha Hadid has become an architectural landmark of modern Azerbaijan. After dinner we will head to the Upland Park viewpoint and check out the light show on the Flame Towers and gaze at the stunning sunset view of the city and the Caspian Sea.

Day 3: Baku - Absheron Peninsula - Gobustan - Baku (B) (L)

After breakfast we'll head to the Absheron Peninsula and the Gobustan National Park where you will see the petroglyphs from 10 thousand BC. We'll visit one of the most exciting sites in the area - mud volcanoes in Gobustan. It is believed that almost half of world's mud volcanoes are in Gobustan. You will understand why Azerbaijan is labelled the "land of fire" when we visit an ancient temple of fire worshippers called Ateshgah. After a leisurely lunch we head to "Yanardag" (burning mountain) a place that has attracted visitors for thousands of years. We'll return to Baku and head to the famous Nizami Street where this busy boulevard comes to life at night and enjoy the best "Lavangi" this city has to offer.

Day 4: Baku - Shamakhi - Lahich - Sheki (B) (D)

This morning we'll travel the historic trade route from Baku to Sheki stopping along the way in the village of Maraza known for its unique monument, a 15th century two-story mausoleum-mosque called Diri-Baba. We'll continue to Shamakhi and visit the historical Juma Mosque purported to be the oldest and largest mosque in Azerbaijan. A scenic drive will bring us to the village of Lahich and you will be forgiven if you think you are back in the middle ages. With its' cobbled sidewalks this quaint 5th century corner of

the Caucasus Mountains is rich in history and architecture. Tonight we will sample “piti” Azerbaijan’s signature dish and a Sheki specialty.

Day 5: Sheki - Kish - Sheki (B) (L)

Lost in the folds of the forested slopes of the Caucasus foothills, Sheki has for centuries been an important market town on the east west trading route running across the Caucasus from the Caspian Sea in the east to the Black Sea in the west. A further trade route across the mountains to Dagestan in the north turned Sheki into a thriving commercial centre - especially during the 18th and 19th centuries, when there were no fewer than five working caravanserais providing safe lodging to merchants and traders. We visit the Palace complex including the museum. In the afternoon we’ll visit the nearby village of Kish and check out the Armenian church. Built around 1st century AD it has functioned at different times as a Caucasian Albanian Apostolic church, a Chalcedonian church within the Georgian Orthodox Church and later as Armenian Apostolic Church. We’ll also get to see how the traditional “Kelagai” headscarves are handmade in one of the many workshops along the cobbled streets of this beautiful town.

Day 6: Sheki - Kvareli (Georgia) (B) (L)

This morning we’ll say goodbye to Azerbaijan and cross over into Georgia. No only famous for its’ breathtaking landscape and hospitable people Georgian wines are renowned the world over, so of course our first stop will be Khareba’s Tunnel winery. The temperature in the tunnel stays at an idyllic 12-14 degrees throughout the year. After a leisurely lunch and a nip or two! we’ll continue to Kvareli for the evening.

Day 7: Kvareli - Tbilisi (B) (D)

After a leisurely breakfast we’ll head to the Georgia capital of Tbilisi but first we’ll stop at the picturesque village of Signaghi (labelled recently as the “city of love”) and check out the Nekresi Monastery. Perched high on a forested slope some parts of this monastery date back to the 4th century. We’ll hunt around for the wine room where you can see a set of qvevris embedded in the floor. Think this combination of religion and alcohol is strange? You’d better get used to it. Viniculture is as old as the hills in Georgia. The country’s signature vino is unlike any wine you’ve tasted before and sampling wine is a lesson in Georgian history. We’ll visit Bodbe Monastery acclaimed to have the best kept grounds in Georgia. - it’s nuns, not monks, who live here and are responsible for tending the gardens. A woman’s touch! Tonight we’ll share platters of some famous Georgian “khinkali” slightly chewy, doughy dumplings filled with minced meat and herbs, or potato and cheese and a glass or two of wine.

Day 8: Tbilisi (B) (D)

Tbilisi is a city that draws you in, reveals itself ever so slowly and then gets under your skin. Its’ charming, eclectic and oozing with history and tradition. Where else can you find a synagogue, mosque, basilica, Armenian church and a Zoroastrian fire temple all

within 15 minute walk from each other- welcome to Tbilisi!!! This afternoon we will learn how to cooking Georgian style!

Day 9: Tbilisi - Kazbegi (B) (L)

A tour to Georgia would not be complete without a visit to Kazbegi, a small town close to the border with Russia. The area is a treasure trove of mythology - it was to the majestic Mount Kazbegi the highest peak in this region that Prometheus was chained. This part of the Caucasus is a protected area and home to a variety of flora and fauna. Upon arriving in Kazbegi we'll change to 4-wheel-drive vehicles and head to the Gergeti Holy Trinity church, nestled on top of one of the highest hills at 2170 meters above sea level. This afternoon we'll chill out, relax and enjoy the mountain air and views before we sample some of the of the tastiest food this town has to offer.

Day 10: Kazbegi - Ananuri - Gori - Tblisi (B) (L)

After a leisurely breakfast we'll head back to the Georgian capital but first stopping at the castle complex in Ananuri. Perched along the turquoise waters of the Aragvi River the complex is a prime example of Georgia's unique blended architectural aesthetic. We'll head to the Soviet style town of Gori where Georgia's most famous son, Stalin, was born for lunch and check out the museum dedicated to his life. Continue to Tblisi for the evening.

Day 11: Tbilis - Dilijan (B) (D)

This morning we'll cross the border into Armenia a small nation but certainly big on character with its' breathtaking countryside and make our way to Dilijan known as the "Little Switzerland" of Armenia. We'll stop at the Goshavank Monastery, a perfect sample of medieval architecture which housed a school/university known for its' "Book of Laws". Not to be outdone we'll head to the Haghartsin Monastery the spiritual and cultural center of medieval Armenia. Finally arriving in the picturesque town of Dilijan we'll check out Museum Street famous for its' preserved houses dating back to the 18th century with typical fretwork wooden balconies as well as local handicraft studios. Tonight we will sample some of the best Tolma this country has to offer.

Day 12: Dilijan - Garni - Yerevan (B) (L)

Barheev! Welcome to Armenia. We'll head this morning to Armenia's capital Yerevan but first stopping at the Hellenistic Temple in Garni. Built in AD77 this pagan monument is dedicated to the worship of the sun. After lunch we'll head to the UNESCO listed Geghard Monastery (according to legend the monastery of Geghard was named in honour of the spear, with which the Roman legionary pierced the body of Christ on the cross). Try the spring water is purported to have rejuvenating properties!

Day 13: Yerevan (B) (L)

The capital of Armenia is a busy and cosmopolitan city, looking to the future but deeply rooted in its often tragic past. It has an easy-to-navigate city centre and a street cafe culture that could easily rival London or Rome! On a clear day there are splendid views across the Ararat Plain to the silhouette of Turkey's Mount Ararat, the legendary resting place of Noah's Ark. We'll visit the Matenadaran, a depository of ancient manuscripts that contains historical documents from all over Europe and Asia. The building also holds the first copy of the Bible in Armenian. After all that wandering around we'll head on over to one of our favourite brewpubs for lunch and maybe sample one (or two) of their boutique brewed beers.

Day 14: Yerevan - Khor Virap - Echmiadzin - Yerevan (B) (D)

This morning we'll head south to the Ararat Valley and explore the Khor Virap Monastery where Grigor Luisavorich (Saint Gregory the Illuminator) was imprisoned for a period of 13 years until he cured King Trdat III. The backdrop is simply stunning as it is the closest point to Mount Ararat. We'll head to the "Vatican of Armenia" Echmiadzin and visit the Cathedral of Echmiadzin. Founded at the beginning of the fourth century the cathedral is considered to be one of the oldest churches in the world. Legend has it the church was built in a place where an apparition of Jesus Christ came to the religious leader Gregory the Illuminator in a dream.

Day 15: Yerevan - Gyumri (B) (D)

After a leisurely breakfast we'll head to Armenia's second largest city Gyumri. The first thing you'll notice about Gyumri is its' striking architecture. Churches, municipal buildings and houses all look as if they've been blackened by fire. The carbon colour is in fact the natural tone of volcanic tuff, stone quarried outside. We will explore city life together, enjoy lunch at one of the many cafes then head to the Black Fortress for picturesque views of Gyumri. Museum lovers be warned this city is home to some of the most significant cultural institutions this country has to offer.

Day 16: Gyumri - Vardzia Caves - Akhaltsikhe (Georgia) (B) (D)

This morning we bid goodbye to Armenia and head back to Georgia for our crossing into Turkey. Along the way we will stop at the labyrinthian Vardzia Cave Monastery, an entire city carved within the very side of the Erushti Mountain in Georgia. With its' double arched entry, a row of hanging bells on the outside and intricate paintings decorating the interior The Church of Assumption is regarded as the most impressive sight in the complex. We'll head to Akhaltsikhe for lunch and check out the newly renovated Rabati Castle with its' church, mosque, synagogue and a madrasa all within the walls of this fortress.

Day 17: Akhaltsikhe - Kars - Ani - Kars (B) (L)

This morning we'll cross the border and head to the crumbling ruins of the once-great metropolis of Ani, known as "the city of a thousand and one churches." Ruled by a vast array of kingdoms and empires over time the city of Ani once housed over 100,000 people becoming both a cultural and regional power under the medieval Bagratid Armenian dynasty. We'll stop at Lake Cildir and sample some of their fresh fish and perhaps a raki or two (definitely with ice).

Day 18: Kars - Erzurum (B) (D)

Known for its' distinctive rugs and kilims the city of Kars played an important role in Turkish history and was at the center of the Turkish-Russian War - you can still see the Russian legacy in much of the town's architecture to this day. We'll check out the Havariler Museum (the 10th century Church of the Apostles) as well as the Armenian Bagratid (Armenian Apostolic church) located in the centre of Kars city, After serving as a mosque, a Russian Orthodox church and a museum, it reverted back to a mosque in 1993 and is connected to a larger Islamic complex that includes Kars' largest mosque, the Evliya Mosque. After lunch we will continue our journey to Erzurum famous for its' stunning Seljuk, Saltuk, Mongol and Ottoman mosques and medreses. Tonight we will dine on their famous Cag Kebab.

Day 19: Erzurum - Trabzon (B) (L)

Due to its' location on the old silk road, Trabzon has been influenced by many cultures and religions over the centuries. Often called the "city of sultans" it was the birthplace of the famous Ottoman sultan, Suleiman the Magnificent. Today we'll visit Trabzon's take of the Aya Sophia. Once a church, a hospital, a museum and now a mosque it certainly is not as famous as its' counterpart in Istanbul but still equally stunning with its' frescoes of evangelists and soaring angels. Lunch stop at our favourite pide restaurant. We've come to realise why the Black Sea region's pide is so awesome - copious amounts of butter and not just used in the actual cooking but piled in a melting spoonful on top. This afternoon we'll head to the Ataturk Museum. The home now contains a museum of his belongings and photographs as well as the furniture he used for a total of five nights during his visits to Trabzon.

Day 20: Trabzon - Sumela Monastery - Trabzon (B) (D)

Perched on the face of a cliff above a deep gorge stands the imposing Sumela Monastery. A former Greek Orthodox monastery, now an outdoor museum, this 1700 year old landmark is simply stunning. Inside the complex is the Rock Church, several chapels, kitchens, student rooms, a guesthouse, a library and a sacred spring revered by Orthodox Christians. Beautiful frescoes depicting biblical scenes decorate the inner and outer walls of the Rock Church. Tonight we'll have our final dinner together

Day21: Depart Trabzon (B)

All good things come to an end - after breakfast transfer to airport for flight home.