

Frequently Asked Questions

John Graham Tours
<http://www.johngrahamtours.com>

Flights:

Q: what connecting airports are recommended?

A: flights from Europe and North America to Tbilisi connect through: Paris, Amsterdam, Munich, Istanbul, Vienna, Riga, Kiev, and many other airports. Recently Qatar Airlines and Azerbaijani Airlines have been offering competitive prices, routing through Baku or Doha.

Q: What about airport transfers?

A: Traversing the globe naturally takes its toll. We understand that after arriving in Tbilisi you will be quite tired, and we look forward to whisking you straight from the brand new, state-of-the-art airport to the hotel (a 20-30 minute drive into the city). There are no visa requirements for visitors from most Western nations, and no entry fees for a 90-day tourist visa to Georgia or Armenia (as of April, 2016). Visas to Turkey can be obtained online: <https://www.evisa.gov.tr/en/> Visa requirements do change on a regular basis though, so it is worth investigating before your visit. After passing through customs and baggage claim, you will find a chauffeur waiting in the reception area holding a sign with your name printed on it. The chauffeur has already been paid.

What to Bring:

Q: What should we bring on the tour?

A: This depends on the time of year of your trip, and your destination. Also, the answer depends on the tastes and interests of each client. Here are some suggestions: sunglasses, sunscreen, sunhat, flashlight with extra batteries, hand-sanitizer, wet/dry toilet wipes (also available in Tbilisi), camera, video camera for recording music/scenery, personal journals, insect repellent (hardly needed), travel board games, musical instruments, and songbooks (if you like to sing!).

Medications:

Q: Are medications available?

A: It is best to bring your own pharmaceuticals, but there are also many pharmacies in Georgia and Armenia with over the counter drugs. Especially recommended if you have a sensitive stomach is Imodium, though most people have no problem adjusting to the food in the region. Be sure to check with your doctor about any special medications or disease warnings about the locations you plan to visit on your trip. That being said, no one has ever gotten seriously ill on any of my tours, other than the stomach flu. There will be a constant supply of bottled drinking water on the bus. In general, tap water around the country is considered excellent.

Money, Tipping, ATMs, Cash:

Q: What currency is used in Georgia and Armenia; are dollars or euros accepted?

A: The Georgian national currency is the *lari (GEL)*, the Armenian national currency is the *dram (AMD)*. Only local currency is accepted in shops, though larger stores will

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accept credit cards. Bank card machines are everywhere in the major cities, so withdrawing local currency (or dollars or euros) is quite simple. If you bring cash into the country, this can be exchanged for lari in any bank or at special money changing window vendors throughout the city.

Q: Tipping?

A: The tour covers all tips at restaurants, hotels, taxis, etc. Guests are encouraged to "pass an envelope" to tip the drivers and the guides at the end of each tour with between \$20-50 per person. On most tours, there can be 1 or 2 drivers, and up to 3 guides. Any currency accepted! These tips should be presented from the group to the drivers and guides at our final parting. Other tokens such as postcards, magnets, music, or trinkets from your home country/state also welcome!

Q: Credit cards?

A: Credit cards are not widely accepted outside of Tbilisi, neither is foreign currency.

Q: ATM Bank machines?

A: The tour recommends bringing an ATM card, and withdrawing local cash (Georgian lari) from any of the ubiquitous ATM machines in Tbilisi. There are several right near the hotel. Though most package tours will include all related expenses (including meals, museums, tips, transportation needs, etc.), some tours may require you to purchase certain meals or other services on your own.

Q: How much do souvenirs cost?

A: We recommend \$100-\$200 per person in local currency to purchase the odd handmade textile, snack, or trinket. If you are interested in a carpet (many tourists are!), they cost between \$400-\$2000.

Meals:

Q: What are meals like on this tour?

A: Excellent food is a priority for the tour organizers. In general, the cuisine is one of the most popular aspects of travel in the Caucasus. In the summer months, many local seasonal foods are available, ensuring a diverse range of dishes that can accommodate folks with any dietary concerns. Vegetarian, gluten-free, nut-allergic... no problem. Tell your tour guide, and the appropriate food will be ordered. Typically, the package-tours provide three meals per day, with beers and house wines included. We also provide coffee, ice-cream, and in general seek to pamper our guests! On the tour bus, water will be provided by the tour. Mark your water bottle to refill and save the landfill from plastic wastage. Breakfast will be served at the hotel/guesthouses between 8am-9am, with early risers having the opportunity to serve themselves coffee or tea by prior request (please indicate if you would like this service). The tour day begins between 9:00-9:15am. Lunches will be around 1-2pm, usually at restaurants but also sometimes picnics, and dinners will typically be around 7-8pm. Every day is scheduled in order to arrive at the destination by 6:00-6:30pm in order to have a rest before dinner. Under rare circumstances such as traffic accidents, bad weather, or other unforeseen circumstances, we may arrive late. Your flexibility and patience in this regard is appreciated.

Q: Are alcoholic beverages included?

A: This depends on your tour package. In general, the answer is a hearty yes! All you can drink house wines and beers are provided. Extra wines or spirits are up to you.

Q: What is the Supra tradition?

A: Among the many things that Georgia is famous for, the tradition of welcoming guests is paramount. We guarantee that you will be the honored guests at several traditional supra feasts throughout the tour, both in homes and in restaurants – an occasion which calls for the best in home cooked meals, homemade wine, toasts, and song. In general, the series of toasts present an opportunity for each person at the table to share some thoughts and impressions to the entire group. To create an inclusive, safe, and sincere environment, a toast master leads the series of toast themes, while also serving as something of a master of ceremonies for the evening's entertainment. To read more, see the Wikipedia article on the Georgian feasting tradition called "[supra](#)."

Electronics, Internet, Photography:

Q: Internet service?

A: Internet service on the whole is quite good throughout Georgia and Armenia. Only in the highland regions is it lacking (Svaneti, Tusheti), in which case one can access the internet via telecommunications networks if one has a Georgian or Armenian SIM card.

Q: What electronics should I bring or not bring on the tour?

A: Georgia is wired for 200 volts, and uses European-style sockets (two round prongs). Bring your own adapters. All hotels are equipped with electric sockets in every room, guests shouldn't have any problem recharging their electronic devices.

Q: Can I purchase a SIM card?

A: Yes. To use the local communications network, you will need a Georgian SIM card. These are easily obtainable for \$3 from any of the tele-communications companies, who have offices throughout Tbilisi. Be sure to take your passport to obtain a Georgian SIM card, and expect the process to take 20-60 minutes depending on lines. Your phone must be "unlocked" to accept foreign SIM cards. Once you have a SIM card, you can buy prepaid phone cards or buy a weekly or monthly plan. Staff in the telecommunications companies speak English.

Q: Can we take photos inside churches and museums?

A: This depends. It is a good habit to check with the person selling candles inside the churches whether or not taking photos is allowed. A typical answer is that it is allowed, but without flash. In museums, the answers vary widely depending on whether the museum has modernized with a post-Soviet staff or not. In the Georgian National Museum network, photos are allowed. But in the Christian Treasury Museum, all photos are "strictly forbidden!" In the Matenadaran Museum in Yerevan, one must purchase an additional ticket in order to take photographs.

Q: Can we take portrait photography?

A: Georgians and Armenians tend not to be shy about having their portraits taken, but they may want to come to admire the photo after you have taken it, especially the children! Nuns, monks, priests, and other members of the clergy typically prefer not to be photographed. This is perhaps due to their vows of humility. However, when asked permission, they are often happy to join a group photograph.

Luggage-Laundry:

Q: How much luggage can we bring?

A: Because of transportation and staff limitations, we have a strict policy on only handling one medium sized suitcase per person. The time necessary for check-in and check-out at hotels needs to be kept to an absolute minimum for the convenience of everyone in the group and to stay on schedule. Also please bring a daypack that you can take with you on the coach to save your books, water, and other personal items in one place.

Q: Are laundry services available?

A: Yes. Laundry services are available at several hotels, please talk to the reception just after arrival. Laundry services are not covered in the tour budget.

Clothing and Dress Codes:

Q: Is there a dress code for entering Orthodox Churches?

A: Yes. When visiting churches and monasteries, it is respectful to follow local Orthodox Christian decorum by dressing according to the following guidelines. Being respectful of the Georgian Orthodox custom will be a priority for our pilgrim group, as we wish to cultivate a sense of respect and reverence for local traditions. In general, men are asked to wear shoes (not sandals), long pants (not shorts), and to remove headwear. Women are asked to don a wrap-around skirt (provided at most church entrances), and cover their hair and shoulders with a kerchief, shawl, or hat of any kind. Be creative!

Q: Are there any cultural taboos on what to wear?

A: In general, dress codes in Georgia have completely modernized in recent years, so feel free to wear whatever is comfortable for traveling in warm weather (70-90 F). Walking shoes and light raincoat recommended.

Q: What should we wear in the mountains?

A: If staying overnight in the Highlands (Svaneti, Kazbegi, Tusheti, etc.), be sure to pack a light sweater and knit cap for cool evenings (50 F).

Behavior in Church:

Q: Where can we go in the church?

A: This might be a good place to mention the physical characteristics of churches. The door to the Church will typically be in the West end, so we will be facing the altar area, which is located in the East end. The altar area is considered sacred and mystical in the Orthodox Church, and is screened from the uninitiated (those not in the priesthood) by the "iconostasis", a decorated wall of stone or wood upon which there will be a series of icons: Christ on the right, the Virgin on the left, with additional icons to important saints of the church on either side. These icons, and the iconostasis area in general (the bema) are off-limits for lay people. This area is physically raised from the church floor, presenting an obvious step. Otherwise, visitors are free to roam the interior of the church in respectful silence. In Orthodox churches, it is common to make prayers in front of specific icons, asking for the intercession of that saint to God, and offering a candle to illuminate the space. Each church conforms to the rules of the local bishops, and some are more or less conservative based on their interpretation of scripture in the newly reviving Post-Soviet religious space of modern Georgia. While on the surface, this inconsistency

can seem annoying to the tourist, the dynamic revitalization within the church during this period are extremely exciting.

The Georgian Language:

Q: What is the Georgian language?

A: Georgian is a language with three unique alphabets. Two of these alphabets are only used in Church texts today, but we will see this alphabet inscribed in church carvings and on fresco paintings. The "modern" alphabet, created in the 11th century, will be visible on signage throughout the country. The spoken language is called kartuli, and is one of sixty languages in the broader Caucasus language group (non Indo-European) and is the most widely spoken of the four languages in the closely related "Kartvelian" sub-group (Laz, Megrelian, and Svan are the other languages in this group). A small phrasebook called "Survival Georgian" by Patricia Hall can be purchased on the internet. Many of you will be interested to tackle the beautifully scripted Georgian alphabet in order to be able to read signs around the country.

Q: Phrase List!

- *Gamarjoba* - hello
- *Nakhvamdis* -goodbye
- *Gmadlobt* -thank you
- *Didi madloba* -thanks very much
- *Diakh* -yes Ara -no
- *Tu sheidzleba* - please
- *Gaumarjos!* - cheers!
- *Ra lamazia!* - it's so beautiful!
- *Tualeti* -toilet;
- *Restoranti* -restaurant;
- *Sastumro* - hotel
- *Sad aris...?* - where is...?
- *Ratom?* - why?
- *Romeli?* - which one?
- *Ra ghirs?* - how much?
- *Vin?* - who?
- *Es minda* - I want that one
- *Puri* - bread;
- *Qveli* - cheese;
- *Ghvino* - wine;
- *Khachapuri* - cheesebread
- *Tkveni kveqana lamazia, da kartuli enats!* Your country is beautiful, and the Georgian language also!
- *Tu sheidzleba, erti ghtismshoblis troparia am sautsari lamazi da tsmindani eklesiashi sheidzleba vigalobot?* - If it wouldn't be too much to ask, would it be possible to sing one hymn to the Holy Theotokos in this most beautiful of churches?
- *Joni, tu sheidzleba, gaacheret tkveni sagaloblebi da tsavidet khachapurze, ra!* - John, will you please quit singing so we can go get some more cheese-bread, soon! :)