

GEORGIA WINE TOUR

27th September to 7th October 2009



A ten day tour of Georgia looking at the viticulture and ancient wine growing areas of the country but also giving plenty of opportunity to visit places of significant cultural interest: ancient monasteries, mountain villages, and sites of special importance in Georgian history.

In his book *Vintage: The Story of Wine*, Hugh Johnson wrote that "Archaeologists accept the accumulation of grape pips as evidence of winemaking... the oldest pips of cultivated vines so far discovered and carbon dated were found in... Georgia and belong to the period 7000-5000BC." Archaeologists have also found very early large *kvevris*, huge clay amphorae buried in the ground for fermenting and storing wine. This ancient technique is still in use today. We shall be visiting Georgia during the harvest season, the *rtveli*, the best time to go, when the autumn colours are magnificent and every village celebrates the harvest with baskets and buckets of grapes displayed in front of each house and with traditional songs, dances and feasts.

The very word for wine in Georgian, *ghvino*, intimates, as some maintain, that Georgia was the birthplace of wine and historical evidence certainly suggests that Georgian wine-makers introduced the art to others. The vine and all its products are intimately linked with Georgian culture: St. Nino, who brought Christianity to Georgia in the 4th century, made her cross from vine branches and the great crosses, carved in relief on the fronts of so many Georgian churches, are entwined in wonderful growing vines. There are still over 500 grape varieties cultivated in Georgia and over 60 commercially produced wines.

Day 1: Arrival in Tbilisi. Book into hotel. Visit the open-air ethnographic museum & wine cellars. Georgia as the birthplace of wine. Explore the old town area of Tbilisi.

Day 2: Drive to Khakheti. The main wine-producing area of Georgia. On the way visit the rock-hewn monasteries of David Gareja, built during the 5th to 9th centuries, set in a surprising area of semi-desert. Drive to **Telavi** and lunch at the famous Wine Maker's House restaurant. Possible visit to Nadgora, a cemetery of wine pitchers, if time. Walk in Telavi.

Dinner and overnight at **Rcheuli Marani Hotel**, located in the old wine-cellar area of town. The name of the hotel means the best wine-cellar, and, indeed, it possesses one of the best cellars in the area.

Day 3: Tsinandali. After breakfast visit the famous estate of the Chavchavadze family – producing one of the great white wines of Georgia and the scene of one of the most dramatic episodes of Georgia's history: the abduction of two Georgian princesses by Lesghian tribesmen (see Lesley Blanch's *The Sabres of Paradise*). This was the home of **Alexander Chavchavadze**, one of Georgia's greatest poets and a towering figure in the intellectual life of 19th century Georgia. The cultural elite of imperial Russia came to visit – **Lermontov** wrote his famous poem *The Demon* here.

To **Ikalto** village to meet local, traditional wine producers, walk the vineyards and learn about the Marani method of wine making: huge clay pots are sunk into the ground in which the grapes are left to ferment. Also the famous Ikalto monastery, 6th century, where Georgia's national poet, **Shota Rustaveli**, studied. Visit **Alaverdi** cathedral, early 11th century, the most important religious centre in the area, magnificently situated with the great Caucasus mountains behind. See the cathedral's recently renovated wine-cellar. On the way back to Telavi stop at one or more of the leading wineries of the region: Shumi, Teliani Valley, Badagoni, Telavis mariani.

Day 4: Napareuli & Kindzmaruli Wineries. Further exploration of wineries and the area with specialist talks by experts on distinctive Georgian wine culture and traditional methods of cultivation, the social history of viticulture in ancient times, during the Soviet period and in the modern day. Political aspects of this with info on export to the EU & USA and the current ban on Georgian wine by Russia.

Visit the citadel of **Gremi** and the nunnery complex at **Bodbe** (depending on time and appetite). Dinner and overnight in **Signagi**, ancient fortress town undergoing restoration.

Day 5: Tibaani - Tbilisi. After breakfast, drive to **Tibaani**, lovely small village amongst vineyards. Here, if we can, listen to songs and see dances of harvest and drinking, central to Georgian history and culture. Visit **Khirsa**, built by the Assyrian fathers who brought Christianity to Georgia. Lunch in Gurjaani wine-house. Back to Tbilisi for night.

Day 6: Drive towards Ratcha. Then Kutaisi.

Stop to visit **Dzhvari** Church (6th century) and **Mtskheta**, a Unesco site, with the cathedral of **Sveti-Tskhoveli** (the church of the Life-giving pillar) - probably the most sacred site in Georgia and certainly one of the most beautiful of all Georgian churches with its fantastic relief carvings. Lunch en route then



stop at **Gelati** Monastery and Academy complex, beautifully situated above the Tskhaltsitela river, a great intellectual, Neoplatonist centre of learning and teaching, built in the early 12th century.

Possible stop (if time and appetite) at **Atenis Sioni** to visit cathedral and village where every family makes 'Atenuri' wine.

Dinner and overnight in **Kutaisi**, second largest city in Georgia, capital of Imereti region – and a thousand years ago capital of all Georgia.

Day 7: Into Ratcha and to Khvanchkara.

Ratcha province, north-west of Tbilisi, is one of the loveliest parts of Georgia. It produces famous chefs and the most expensive of wines:

Kvanchkara, Stalin's favourite. On the way visit **Nikortsminda**, one of Georgia's most extraordinary cathedrals with a plethora of fabulous carvings in relief (bring binoculars).

The vineyards are situated on the southern slopes of the Letchkumi mountains at between 500 and 750 metres and overlooking the right bank of the Rioni river gorge. A wonderful setting. Spend the morning here and lunch, then on to village of **Oni**. Douglas Freshfield, the great English mountaineer and explorer of the Caucasus in the 19th century, called the road to Oni "the most beautiful road in Europe" and little has been done since to change it. Visit the mineral springs to drink their life-enhancing waters (a certain cure for all ills). Overnight in Oni guesthouse with a visit to its ancient synagogue.

Day 8: Drive to Ghebi. Ghebi is one of the highest villages in Ratcha at 4,400 feet, surrounded by forested slopes thick with azalea blossom and fields rich in a profusion of wild flowers. The mountain setting is magical. It is a busy and populous village with sturdy wooden houses with wide verandas, neat haystacks, tidy plots of potatoes and corn. It is right on the river **Rioni** and not far from its source. This is the Georgian name for the river which the ancient Greeks called the **Phasis** – where Jason sailed with his Argonauts to find the Golden Fleece. Here we will try to find traditional Ghebiot singers and the harvest songs of Ratcha and also, if we are lucky, its extraordinary funeral laments. Back to Oni for the night.

Day 9: Drive back to Zestaponi, Gori, Tbilisi. Stopping for rests and meals in beautiful spots and visiting Gori, Stalin's birthplace, if required. A long day to get back to hotel in Tbilisi. Farewell dinner at traditional restaurant.

Day 10: Early morning flight home.

There may be slight changes to the itinerary depending on time and distances. We find it is best to adopt a flexible approach and we will do our best to inform you in advance of any alterations to the route.



TONY ANDERSON is the author of *Bread and Ashes: a Walk through the Mountains of Georgia* published by Jonathan Cape, 2003. He has travelled to Georgia many times since 1989 and is on the committee of Farig (Friends of Academic Research in Georgia) and a member of the British Georgian Society. He will accompany us all the way.

FRANCES HOWARD-GORDON speaks Russian and has been organising tours to Russia, Georgia, and Siberia since 1984. She runs Gothic Image bookshop, Publishing, and Tours. She will be with us all the way.

IRAKLI TOPURIA is a founder of the International School in Tbilisi and a wonderful Georgian host. He has invited us to his vineyards in Kakheti and we will sample his wines.

Price £2150.00 inclusive of flights, 3 meals per day, 4 wine-tasting sessions, accommodation, transport, entrance fees, local guides. This price is based on two sharing a room in hotels and guesthouses. The price does not include a room of your own (single supplement of £325), porters or alcoholic drinks. We had hoped the price would be lower but Georgia will only deal in US dollars and the rate to the pound sterling is unfortunately not good at the moment.

Visas and insurance No visa is required for Georgia. We will have to take out our own individual fully comprehensive travel insurance in our country of residence and be sure to get cancellation insurance just in case.

Deposit A deposit of £500 will secure your place on the tour. Final payment is due on 27th July 2009.

Flight times

Outward:	Sunday 27 Sept, 19:00	Return:	Wednesday 7th Oct, 08:55
Depart	London Heathrow on BMI 965	Depart	Tbilisi (TBS) on BMI 966
Arrive	Tbilisi (TBS) 05:00 +1 day	Arrive	London (LHR) 13:05
Duration	7hr 0mn (one stop at Yerevan)	Duration	7hr 10mn (one stop at Yerevan)

If you are interested in joining us on this adventure, you will receive more detailed information on what to bring with you, currency, climate etc.

We look forward to welcoming you on this journey!

With best wishes,

Frances Howard-Gordon

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