

You really must see...

Samtskhe-Javakheti



...the cave paintings of Vardzia...



...Akhaltsikhe Fortress...



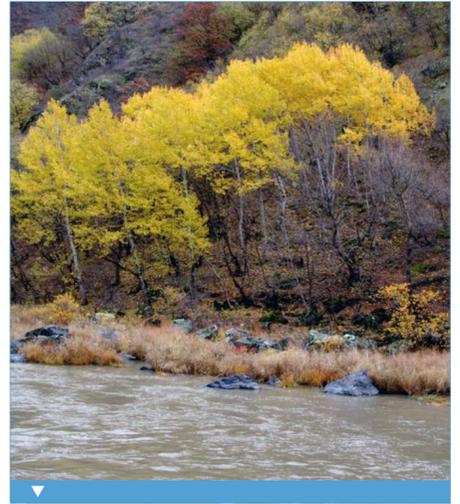
...the amazing cave town of Vardzia

WELCOME TO SAMTSKHE-JAVAKHETI
Samtskhe-Javakheti is a region that never stops surprising visitors, from the mineral springs of Borjomi to the ancient cave city of Vardzia. Historically one of the most important cultural centres in Georgia, much of the region today is virtually unknown to tourists, but this ancient land of cave cities and hilltop monasteries is once again opening its doors to the outside world – especially now that a new road means you can get here in just two hours from Tbilisi.

AGRO-TOURISM
It is a mountainous, volcanic region, traversed by ravines, springs and lakes, as well as large and fast moving rivers. But this diverse landscape provides a perfect cultivation area for the production of some of Georgia's most famous and best known traditional foods and cheeses. In many villages you can see the locals making their own cheese, and at Poka Monastery they make an incredible 18 different types of cheese, including their famous blue cheese. The region is also well known for its wheat which allows a unique type of delicious Georgian bread to be made: "Meskhuri Puri". You can see, smell and taste the result of thousands of years of cheese and bread making at the many guesthouses and restaurants throughout the region.



CULTURE
Samtskhe-Javakheti's location at the crossroads of three civilizations contributed to an intense development of relations between the ancient cultures of Georgia, Asia Minor, and the Middle East. Archaeological remains show that the area was particularly advanced by the Bronze Age and developed further through the medieval period. Today many monuments still stand to tell their remarkable stories and no modern traveller's journey to Georgia is complete without a visit to one or more of the Saro and Abuli castles, or Akhaltsikhe fortress, Safara and Zarzma Monastery complexes, Vardzia cave town, or the incredible mineral springs in Borjomi.



ADVENTURE
The only limit to the amount of adventure you can get here is the amount that you can take. Ski-jumping, on and off-piste skiing and snowboarding, cross country skiing, horse-riding, horse-drawn sleighs and snow-mobile tours to adjacent territories can all be found in or near the mountain resort of Bakuriani. And if you don't like the snowy mountains, try Aspindza district and hike or mountain-bike through the beautiful trails. Water enthusiasts can find tranquility in the regions' lakes which also offer amazing fishing possibilities, but if you are not afraid of a fast flowing mountain river and you like to feel a true adrenaline rush, go white water rafting on the river Mtkvari. This is also one of the best areas in Georgia to take a scenic mountain flight to take in all the stunning beauty of the rugged landscape.



RESORTS, SPAS AND MINERAL SPRINGS
The Park of Mineral Waters
The Mineral Water Park of Borjomi is a fascinating year round experience. Everyone has their own favorite season here, and they all have their own splendor and beauty. The park covers 30 hectares of the gorge and is the recreation center of Borjomi.

Borjomi Mineral Waters
The most famous and incredible thing about Borjomi is its unique mineral waters that are at least the equal of the world's best. Its natural high purity and healthy chemical components make it not only pleasant to drink but also a perfect preventive and curative against a number of diseases. The water is rich in the most important and necessary micro-elements for life and each spring in the region is characterized by the effect these various properties have on the wildlife. There are hundreds of different springs and each one has its own unique taste and temperature. The water's curative effects were well known to the locals since ancient times and a stone bathing tub dating back to the 1st century BC was recently found here.

Bakuriani
Bakuriani, the great mountain resort of Georgia, is a feast for snow-lovers and skiers. It is an internationally known winter sports centre, built to Olympic standards and Novices and children equally enjoy their first winter sports steps in this winter paradise.

Off the slopes, one of the most interesting places to visit in Bakuriani is the Botanical Garden, which opened in 1910. Over 1,500 species of plants provide a rich collection of Alpine and Sub-Alpine vegetation.

Abastumani
About 30km from Akhaltsikhe you reach the famous resort of Abastumani. The village is situated along the river Otskhe, which is crossed by numerous bridges. Its impressive old buildings have witnessed its glorious past, which reached its peak at the end of the 19th century. Today, two of the sanatoria have been restored and reopened to allow a new generation to enjoy the spa and its natural spring waters. Abastumani is also a starting point for hikes into the National Park; the Zekari Pass can be either climbed on foot, horse or mountain bike, from where you will be rewarded with a superb and unspoilt 360° panorama of high mountain peaks.

Atskuri Fortress
Atskuri is a former feudal fortress located on the river Mtkvari which dates back to at least the 10th century. The only entrance is a narrow tunnel cut into the cliff, which made the fortress so difficult to access that even once inside enemies were foiled by the guards.



Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park
The Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park is one of the largest in Europe and covers more than 76,000 hectares of native forest and sub-alpine and alpine meadows. It is the first National Park in the Caucasus to meet international standards and officially opened in 2001.

The flora and fauna found here is very diverse. Rare and endemic species listed in Georgia's Red Data Book (a list of endangered and protected species) can be found including a wonderful array of mammals. Among large carnivores it is possible to find gray wolves, lynx, and brown bears while roe deer and wild boar can frequently be seen. Among its native birds, the bird enthusiasts will easily spot rare species such as the golden eagle, griffon vulture, black vulture and the Caucasian black grouse.



Akhaltsikhe Fortress
18th century Akhaltsikhe Fortress is often called the symbol of tolerance, occupies around 7 hectares and was returned to its original appearance. A church, mosque, minaret, synagogue, as well as Jaqelebi Palace, a historic museum, old baths and a citadel, have been restored on the territory of Rabat Castle.

Saphara Monastery
Saphara Monastery is one of the most interesting monuments of Georgian architecture, located just 15 kilometres South-East of Akhaltsikhe. The first records of Saphara date back to the 10th century and in the 13-14th centuries the monastery included 12 churches and chapels. The monastery is surrounded by a wall equipped with an observation tower and even has a fortress where people from neighboring villages used to hide during times of war. While the monastery was turned into a Pioneer youth camp in the Soviet age, its monastic status was re-claimed in 1988 and is still functioning today.

Golden Fortress (Okros Tsikhe)
The fortress was built in late 13th and early 14th centuries and is one of the largest fortresses in Georgia offering picturesque views from its highest towers.

Chule Monastery
Chule St. George Monastery, dating back to 1308, is located in the foothills in the vicinity of Adigeni. Its access road passes through a narrow rocky ravine covered by coniferous forests and a tight passage through the hills, a spectacular experience.



Zarzma Monastery
Zarzma Monastery, located on top of a hill, includes a church bell tower, a chapel, ruins of two churches and a spring. The oldest records mentioning a monastery in the same area are contained in a book describing the life of Serapion of Zarzma, who came from Tao-Klarjeti together with his brother in the 9th century. Presently Zarzma is an acting monastery.

Khertvisi Fortress
The Khertvisi Fortress was built on a rocky mountain at the junction of the Artaani Mtkvari and Javakheti Mtkvari rivers. The first record of Khertvisi is part of a legend, in which it was one of the first fortresses that Alexander the Great came across in Georgia.

An inscription on a damaged stone reads "The King of the Kings" and is dated from 985. A small church located in the central part of the fortress had been ruined but was reconstructed in 2000. Khertvisi was built by Georgians to protect the country, but in the second half of the 16th century Osmons (a Turkish tribe) started to fortify it into a stronghold, making it easy for them to conquer Georgia. Part of the fortress has remained unharmed and still has a tunnel leading to the river. Another part of the original fortress – a twenty metre high tower

– is still in good condition
Vani Caverns
This noteworthy Georgian architectural and cultural monument consists of about 200 caves built into the rocky cliffs and rises over 16 levels. The Vani Cavern complex included a monastery in the 8-16th centuries and the small church built here still bears an inscription in the original Mkhedruli alphabet which dates back to the late 15th century.



Tmogvi Fortress
In 630-660 AD Sargis Tmogveli, an honorable political figure and philosopher, worked and lived here. Tmogvi fortress later became one of the most important fortress-cities in Georgia, and is located on a rocky hill overlooking the Mtkvari river. First mentioned in the historic chronicles of the 10th century, the upper and lower sides of the fortress are connected by a secret tunnel. The ruins of an old village, located on both banks of a river, can still be seen.

Vardzia
The cave town of Vardzia is one of the most important and impressive historic monuments in Georgia. At an altitude of 1300 metres above sea level, and starting 100 metres above the valley floor, the caves continue up for half a kilometre and had 13 floors, connected by a complex system of tunnels.

Vardzia was built by King George III in 1156-1184 and this incredible town quickly grew to consist of over 3,000 caves that could accommodate 50,000 people at a time. The Vardzia complex had living quarters, refectories, barns, wine cellars (marani), stables, drugstores and even libraries. The town had a potable water supply and a sewerage system. A monastery still exists and practices in the caves today.

Poka Monastery
The establishment of Poka Monastery is credited to St. Nino of Cappadocia who is said to have brought Christianity into Georgia. Saint Nino came to Georgia through Javakheti and stopped near Pharavani Lake where she had a vision of an angel who gave her a letter addressed to the pagan King. In the 11th century a cathedral was built at this very spot.

As a result of invasions in the 17th century, Javakheti, and the cathedral were destroyed but you can still see the remains of the original stone church, including fragments of the original frescos. In the early 19th century Georgia re-gained the territory and two Orthodox Christian monasteries were founded in Poka in the end of the 20th. century. The St. Nino Nunnery and a monastery located one and a half kilometres from the village. Both monasteries are still open and in use.

Kumurdo
The village of Kumurdo and Bishop of Kumurdo are first mentioned in the historic chronicles of the 6th century. A cathedral dating back to the 10th century still exists in the village and it is a fine and high-quality example of Georgian architecture. The inscriptions remaining on the walls tell us it was built during the reign of Abkhazian King Leon in 964.

Samtskhe-Javakheti Historical Museum
The Museum is located in the old castle, the Rabat. Here you will find and see rare and preserved archeological and ethnographical materials, old manuscripts detailing the stories of the region including a fragment of the manuscript of "The Knight in the Panther's Skin," Georgia's most famous poem, consisting of over 1600 verses and written in the 12th century at the Royal Court of Queen Tamar of Georgia.

Samtskhe-Javakheti

GETTING AROUND
You can also take the train from Tbilisi's Central Railway Station at Station Square 2.

! BORJOMI TOURISM INFORMATION CENTER
Address: Rustaveli Street and to the east, and by Armenia and Turkey to the south and southwest. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, the South Caucasus natural gas pipeline, and the Kars-Tbilisi-Baku rail-way pass through the region.

AKHATSIKHE TOURISM INFORMATION CENTER
Address: T. Kharatshvashvili Street
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E-Mail: tchborjomi@mail.com
Working Days: Everyday
Working Hours: 10:00 - 18:00
(Summer - 10:00 -19:00)

! VARDZIA TOURISM INFORMATION CENTER
Address: Rustaveli Street and to the east, and by Armenia and Turkey to the south and southwest. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, the South Caucasus natural gas pipeline, and the Kars-Tbilisi-Baku rail-way pass through the region.

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