

MIDNIGHT TRAIN
TO
GEORGIA

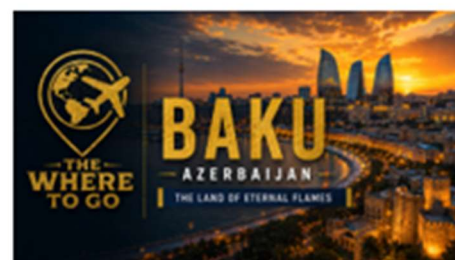


YEREVAN · TBILISI · BAKU

The inside cover for your information.....



Midnight Train to Georgia is just one of a series of travel guides under 'The Where To Go' banner. You can also find curated videos of the many different places visited on my tours on my YouTube channel as well as via my website at www.TheWhereToGo.com. Please feel free to like and subscribe.



Other titles include:



You will also find up to date information about my worldwide travels on my dedicated Facebook page at www.facebook.com/TheWhereToGo.



CONTENTS

Chapter 1: Armenia, Georgia & Azerbaijan

Chapter 2: Yerevan in Armenia

Chapter 3: Tbilisi in Georgia

Chapter 4: Baku in Azerbaijan

Chapter 5: Summary

Chapter 1: Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan

Introduction

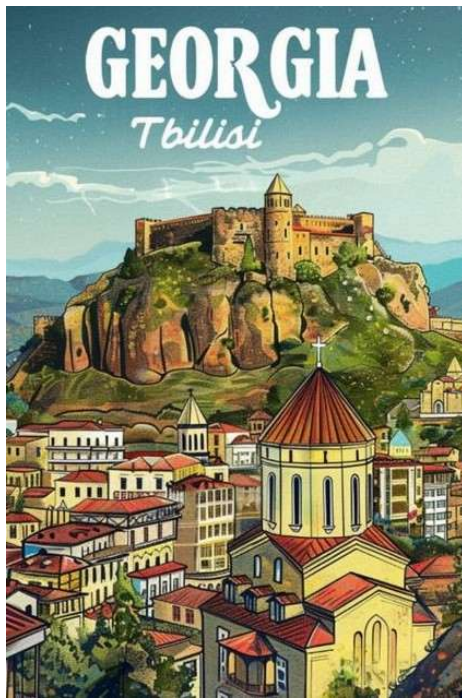
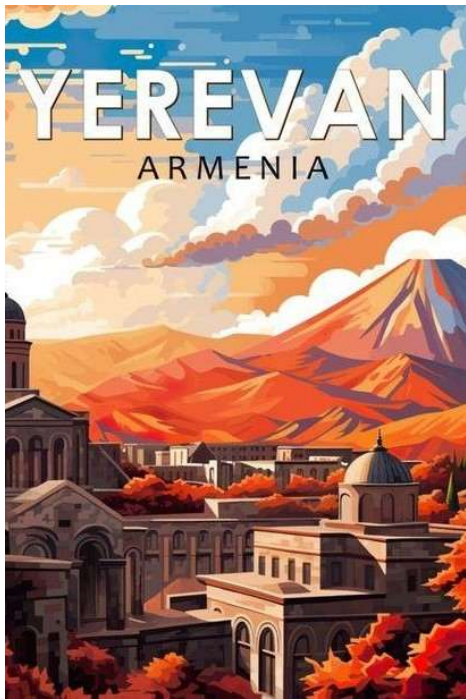
Tucked between Europe and Asia, the South Caucasus is a region of rich contrasts, layered histories, and breathtaking landscapes. Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan are three neighbouring countries with each offering something distinct yet interwoven through shared geography and complex histories. Travelling across the three countries presents its own problems as Armenia and Azerbaijan have no diplomatic relations and their shared land border is closed...this means that you cannot travel directly between Armenia and Azerbaijan by land or air. As such, Georgia is the easiest of the three countries to access and travel in and out of. It shares open land borders with both Armenia and Azerbaijan, so you need to plan your route carefully if you intend to visit all three countries in one go and be aware that Azerbaijan does not take too kindly to knowing that you have visited Armenia!!!!

The most logical order is Azerbaijan to Georgia to Armenia although I got away with away with Georgia to Armenia to Georgia to Azerbaijan. My starting point was Tbilisi in Georgia, so my trip involved a brief stopover there before travelling to Yerevan in Armenia, then back to Tbilisi in Georgia followed by Baku in Azerbaijan. I flew to Tbilisi with FlyDubai and managed to get upgraded at the gate. The stopover in Tbilisi was interesting as the place was covered in European and Ukrainian flags with the occasional graffiti stating 'F**k Putin.' Indeed, there might have been even more such sentiment expressed if had I any idea what that looked like when daubed in the home language. Needless to say, spoken or written English is quite unusual in this capital city which is desperately trying to attract tourism. Booking hotels, ordering food and using public transport is something of a challenge unless you can speak and read the Georgian language.



My first nightmare is trying to book an overnight train from Tbilisi in Georgia to Yerevan in Armenia. The only way to make a booking was to present yourself at the railway station and by the time I got there, all the first-class compartments had been long since commandeered. My taste for business class travel was about to come to a sudden end as I was offered the dismal choice of traveling second or (heaven forbid even for me) third class. A second-class sleeper compartment from Georgia to Armenia was purchased for 103.85 Georgian Lari which is equivalent to £31.45. Not too bad for a 10-hour overnight journey and the opportunity to sleep with a random selection of complete strangers.

The overnight sleeper train from Tbilisi in Georgia to Yerevan in Armenia left at 2020 as advertised. The five-coach train was full to capacity which is why I find myself bunked up with a Russian couple and their daughter as well as a young female student escaping from Russia. First stop was the Georgian border where we stayed for a full hour while our passports were commandeered by some officious looking representative of the border police. Across the platform is the overnight sleeper train from Yerevan to Georgia. It is midnight and, for some inexplicable reason, I am struck by the thought that there, in front of my very eyes, was the Midnight Train to Georgia.....for the uninitiated, the Midnight Train to Georgia was the chart topping single from Gladys Knight and the Pips in the 1970s.



With the echoes of Gladys Knight and the Pips reverberating through my head we set off to the Armenian border where we spent another hour going through exactly the same process. The time spent reminds me that it probably is quicker to fly and ignore the environmental impact. Not soon enough and we are on our way again. It is some ridiculous hour of the morning and we are expected to make our beds which is no mean feat given that I am assigned to the top bunk but living in hope that some kind Russian might volunteer to take pity on me and avoid the awkward embarrassment of watching an aging and overweight (with two bad knees) man ascend a flimsy ladder then dive unceremoniously onto the bed without the aid of a safety net.

Eventually it's lights out in our compartment but no sooner are we acclimatising to the dark when the carriage attendant throws open the door to tell us to take our lights out. A few seconds after I finally fell asleep, the whole carriage/train was plunged into brightness as a result of all the cabin lights being switched on simultaneously. We were told in no uncertain terms to get up and return our two blankets, one pillowcase and a face flannel masquerading as a bath towel. Fortunately, I received my instructions second hand from the lovely Russian couple who put it much more nicely. It is 6.30am and I am busy handing in my bedding to the carriage commandant who is busy checking the items off on his itemised inventory.



Chapter 2: Yerevan in Armenia

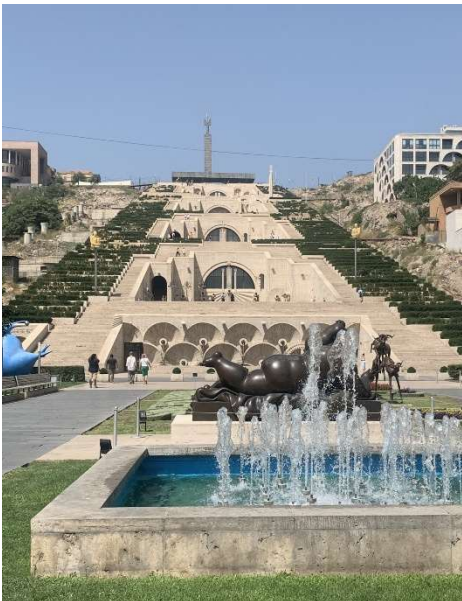


Introduction

Yerevan is one of the world's oldest continuously inhabited cities, with a history stretching back to 782 BC when the fortress of Erebuni was founded by King Argishti I of Urartu. Situated beneath the snow-capped peak of Mount Ararat, the city has witnessed the rise and fall of numerous empires, including Persian, Roman, Byzantine, Arab, Ottoman and Russian rule.

Following the tragic events of the Armenian Genocide in 1915, Yerevan became the cultural and political heart of the Armenian nation and later the capital of independent Armenia. Today, Yerevan combines ancient heritage with a lively modern identity. Its distinctive pink volcanic stone buildings have earned it the nickname "The Pink City."

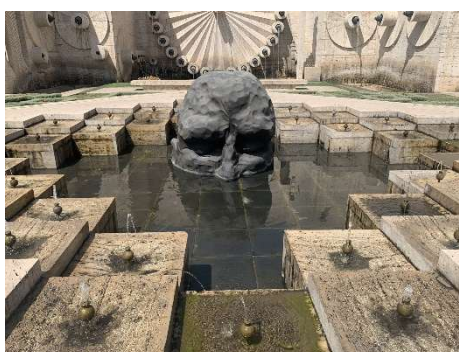
Armenian culture is deeply rooted in Christianity, literature, music and family traditions, all of which are reflected throughout the city. Visitors encounter grand Soviet-era avenues, bustling cafés, traditional markets and impressive cultural institutions. From Republic Square to the Cascade Complex, Yerevan celebrates both its ancient past and its role as the centre of Armenian culture, resilience and national pride.



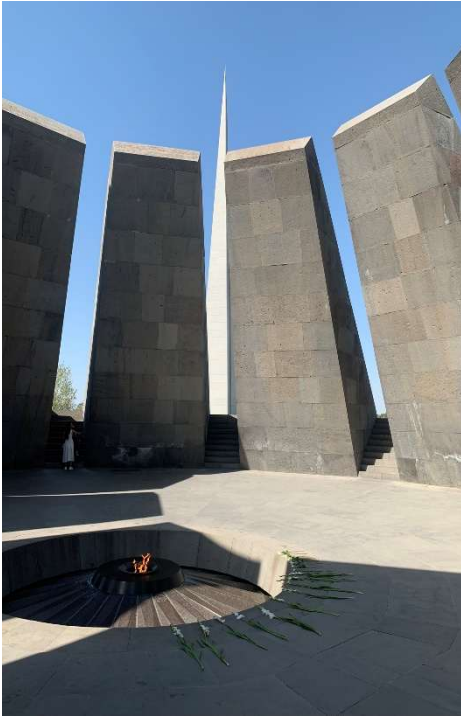
Yerevan Cascade

The Yerevan Cascade is a giant staircase located in the centre of the city, and it is one of the main tourist attractions in Yerevan. The idea was conceived in the 1920s by architect Alexander Tamanyan as part of his vision to connect Yerevan's northern and central districts with green spaces, waterfalls and gardens. The project was revived in the 1970s by architect Jim Torosyan, who expanded the design to include stairways, escalators and an exhibition hall.

Building began in the 1980s but was halted due to the 1988 Armenian earthquake and the Soviet Union's collapse. The site lay neglected until 2002 when the idea was resurrected and the renovated complex opened in 2009. There are 572 steps and five terraces on the Cascade featuring fountains, gardens, and sculptures. If 572 stairs are not enough to put you off, then you will be pleased to know that escalators and elevators provide access to galleries and exhibition spaces.



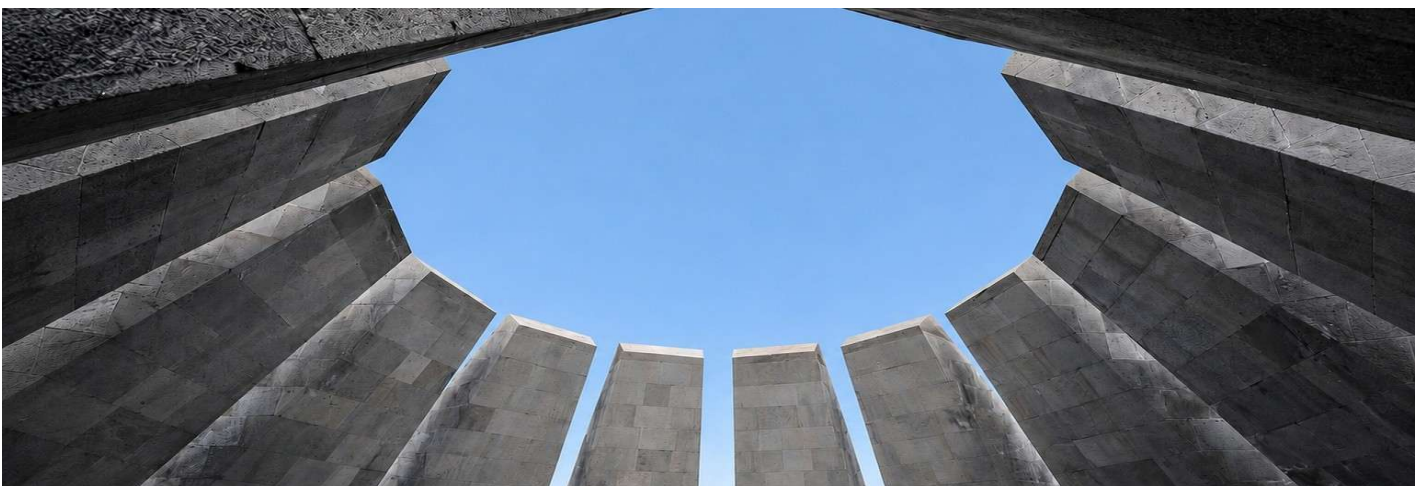
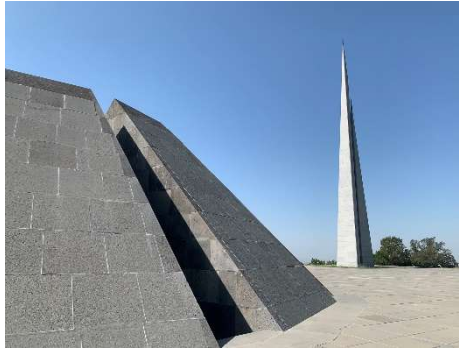
Armenian Genocide Memorial



The Armenian Genocide Memorial complex is Armenia's official memorial dedicated to the victims of the Armenian genocide of 1915-1923. The memorial was completed in 1967 on the hill of Tsitsernakaberd following mass demonstrations in 1965 demanding Soviet Armenia's official recognition of the genocide on its 50th anniversary.

The site is profoundly moving, and the memorial's architecture is steeped in symbolism. The 12 slabs arranged in a circle, represent the 12 historic Armenian provinces lost in modern-day Turkey during the genocide. A 100-meter-long wall is inscribed with the names of towns and villages where massacres occurred. At the centre of the slabs, a 1.5-meter-deep flame honours the 1.5 million victims of the genocide.

Adjacent to the monument is the Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute, which presents documents, photographs and personal testimonies that help explain this tragic chapter of history. More than a monument, Tsitsernakaberd represents resilience, remembrance and the determination of Armenians around the world to preserve their history and cultural identity.



Charles Aznavour



Pictures and posters of Charles Aznavour adorn the streets of Yerevan, and I had no idea that he was of Armenian descent. He was born Shahnour Aznavourian, in Paris, in 1924, to parents who had escaped the Armenian genocide in Turkey. Aznavour became one of the most successful entertainers in French history, recording over a thousand songs and selling millions of records worldwide.

His singing career took a turn for the best when he was taken under the wing of Edith Piaf although he denied that the two were ever lovers and claims his relationship was, "more than friendship and less than love." He does not deny his relationship with Liza Minelli who said "Charles Aznavour changed my life. He changed my entire life."

Although he achieved international fame through classics such as "She" and "La Bohème," Aznavour never forgot his Armenian roots. Following the devastating Armenian earthquake of 1988, he became deeply involved in humanitarian work and later served as Armenia's representative to international organisations.

Charles Aznavour was a self-conscious global pop star, singing in French, Russian, English, Armenian, Spanish, and German. He is often compared with Frank Sinatra whose signature song was "My Way," while his was "She." But could you ever imagine Sinatra singing a song about a gay man who works as a female impersonator in a nightclub.....

What Makes A Man
Words & Music by Steve Mac & Wayne Hector

The image shows a musical score for the song "What Makes A Man" by Charles Aznavour. It includes a tempo marking of quarter note = 68, a key signature of two sharps (D major), and a 4/4 time signature. The score is written for voice and piano. The lyrics are: "I know my life is not a crime / I'm just a victim of my time / I stand defenceless / Nobody has the right to be / The judge of what is right for me / Tell me if you can / What make a man a man". The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings like *mf* and *sfz*.

© Copyright 2008 Warner Music Group Limited. All Rights Reserved. Warner Music Group Limited. London W1A 0AA
All Rights Reserved. International Copyright Secured.

I know my life is not a crime
I'm just a victim of my time
I stand defenceless
Nobody has the right to be
The judge of what is right for me
Tell me if you can
What make a man a man

Charles Aznavour
1924-2018

Lake Sevan and the Sevanavank Monastery

Lake Sevan, often called the 'Jewel of Armenia' is a high-altitude (6200 feet/1900 metres) lake situated in eastern Armenia. The lake itself is popular for recreation, fishing and relaxation during the summer months. It is one of the world's largest high-altitude freshwater lakes and is an area of amazing beauty so definitely worth a visit.

The lake's most famous landmark is Sevanavank Monastery, dramatically perched on a rocky peninsula overlooking the deep blue waters. Founded in the ninth century, the monastery originally stood on an island before water levels changed during the Soviet period. Its dark stone churches provide a striking contrast against the surrounding landscape.



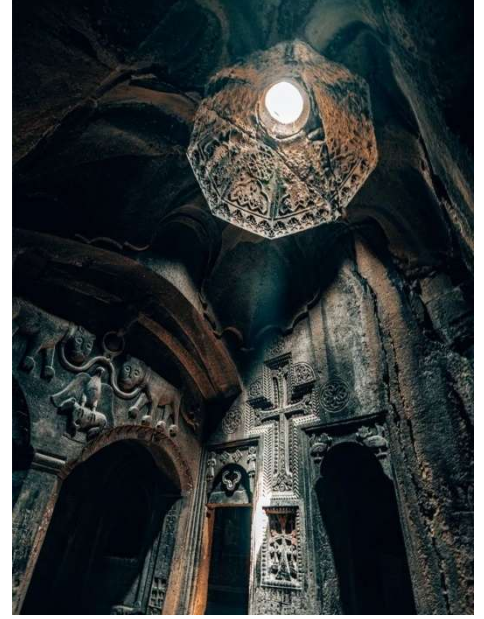
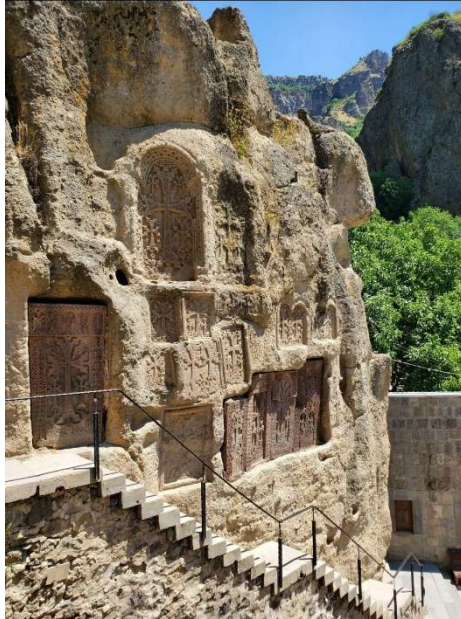
Geghard Monastery



Hidden within a dramatic canyon east of Yerevan, Geghard Monastery is one of Armenia's most remarkable religious sites and a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The Monastery was founded by St Gregory the Illuminator who is credited with converting Armenia to Christianity. The name, Geghard, means 'spear' and refers to the Holy Lance that, according to tradition, pierced the side of Jesus during the Crucifixion and was once housed here.

Founded in the fourth century and expanded during the medieval period, the monastery is famous for its unique rock-cut architecture, with many chapels and chambers carved directly into the surrounding cliffs. The monastery was destroyed by Arab invaders in the 9th century and later rebuilt and extended in the 13th century.

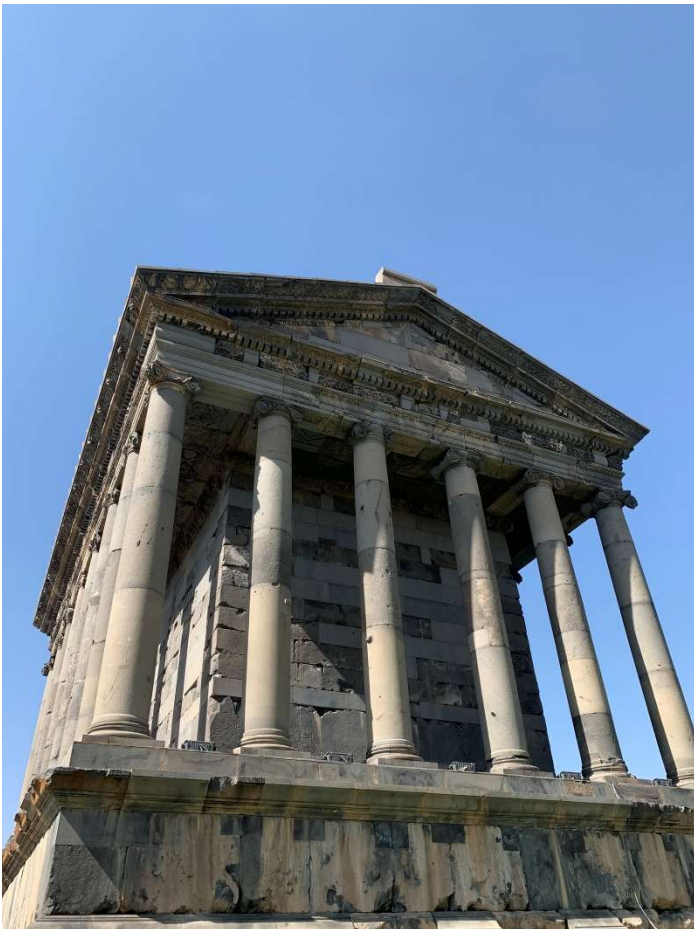
The monastery embodies Armenia's spiritual resilience and the fact that it is carved into cliffs is seen as a testament to medieval craftsmanship and enduring faith.



Temple of Garni

The Temple of Garni is the last remaining Greco-Roman building in Armenia and dates back to the first century AD. It is believed that the temple was built by King Tiradates as a temple to the sun god Mihr (Mithra) although scholars debate its original function as a temple, tomb or royal residence. Remarkably, it survived the 4th-century destruction of pagan sites during Armenia's Christianisation.

Perched on a plateau above the Azat River Gorge, the site offers breathtaking views of surrounding mountains and provides a rare glimpse into Armenia's pre-Christian past and demonstrates the influence of Roman and Hellenistic culture in the region. It remains one of the country's most important archaeological and historical treasures.



Reflection

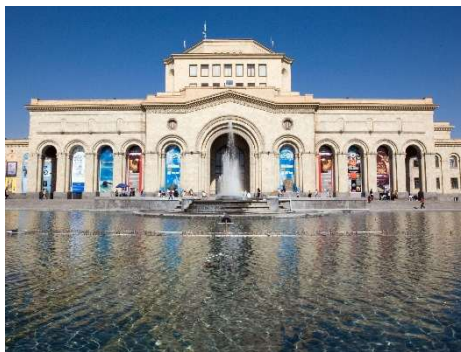
Armenia is a land of dramatic landscapes, deep history, and soulful hospitality. It is a former Soviet republic conveniently situated between Asia and Europe and is one of the earliest Christian civilisations and this is confirmed by the plentiful supply of religious sites..... a few too many to be honest as I am now completely overdosed on monasteries, churches and cathedrals.

In Yerevan, the influence of Russia is much less evident in their architecture. Modern architecture responds to past traditions with a focus on concrete and stone built to resist the country's earthquake-prone geography. Regardless, the place is overrun by Russians who are equally split between those on holiday and those escaping the country.....Armenia is one of the very few places that Russians can enter without a visa.

Russian is definitely the second language here and English rarely spoken so thank heavens for Google Translate. Signage is equally biased towards Russian, so it is challenging (but adventurous) to find your way around without a decent local to help you out. Thank you so much Aghabek (aka Albert for those who cannot pronounce his name) for showing me your wonderful city.

The city is small and compact so most of the places to visit are walkable. On top of that it is full of delightful restaurants and welcoming bars including a few that brew their own beer on site. Local drink (including beer and wine) is amazingly inexpensive so you can easily get drunk for the cost of a pint in London. Here are a few things that I learned on this trip:

- Armenia is one of the oldest wine producing countries in the world. The success of Armenian wine production is attributed to the fertile valleys of Mt Ararat.
- Around 95% of Armenians identify as Christians. Indeed, the country was converted to Christianity by none other than St Gregory the Illuminator in 301 AD.
- Approximately 1.5 million Christian Armenians were killed during the Armenian genocide which took place in the Ottoman Empire during the time of World War I.
- Chess is a compulsory subject on the Armenian curriculum and there are even exams in chess as well. The country is host to a number of international chess tournaments.
- You will find a Marks & Spencer and a Body Shop as well as an HSBC bank in the capital citybut no McDonalds restaurants across the whole of Armenia.



Chapter 3: Tbilisi in Georgia

Introduction

Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia, has stood at the crossroads of Europe and Asia for more than 1,500 years. According to legend, it was founded in the fifth century by King Vakhtang Gorgasali after he discovered the area's natural hot springs. Its strategic location along historic trade routes made it a coveted prize for Persians, Arabs, Mongols, Ottomans and Russians, all of whom left lasting influences on the city.

The result is one of the most culturally diverse cities in the Caucasus. Tbilisi's Old Town is a fascinating blend of medieval churches, ornate balconies, narrow lanes and colourful houses. Eastern and Western influences coexist throughout the city, reflecting Georgia's unique position between continents.

Georgian culture is renowned for its hospitality, polyphonic singing, traditional dances and centuries-old winemaking traditions, recognised among the oldest in the world. Modern Tbilisi is creative and energetic, balancing historic landmarks with contemporary art, fashionable cafés and a thriving cultural scene. The city remains the heart of Georgian identity, where history, religion and tradition continue to shape everyday life.





Bridge of Peace and the embankment

Spanning the Mtkvari River in central Tbilisi, the Bridge of Peace is more than a crossing—it is a technological artwork and a symbol of Tbilisi’s transformation. The bridge was designed by Italian architect Michele De Lucchi and was built in Italy and transported to Tbilisi in 200 truckloads. It was assembled on-site and opened on May 6, 2010, as part of Tbilisi’s urban renewal efforts. The pedestrian bridge features a sweeping steel-and-glass canopy that contrasts dramatically with the historic buildings surrounding it.

The bridge links the historic Old Town with Rike Park, creating a connection between Tbilisi’s ancient past and contemporary future. From its elevated position, visitors enjoy excellent views of the river, churches, fortress walls and surrounding hills. Illuminated by thousands of LED lights after dark, it has become a symbol of modern Georgia and the country’s aspirations for progress and international engagement.

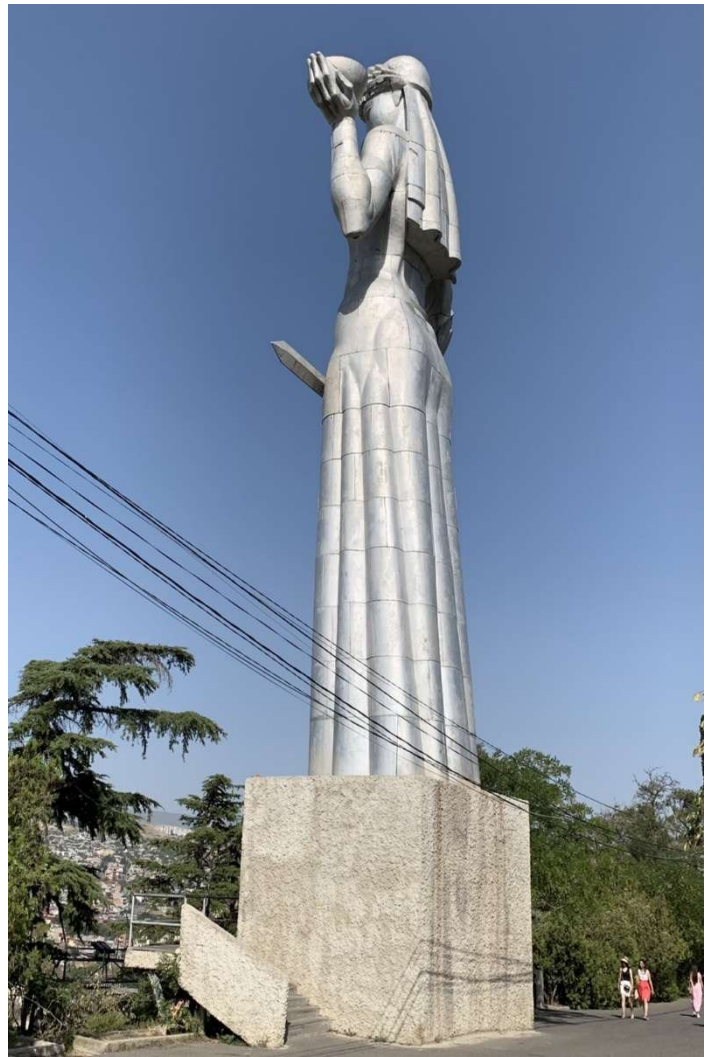


The nearby embankment is a popular place for walking and relaxation. Cafés, gardens and riverside pathways create a lively atmosphere throughout the day and evening. Together, the Bridge of Peace and the riverfront highlight Tbilisi's ability to blend innovative architecture with centuries of history, making this one of the city's most photographed and visited locations.



Mother of Georgia

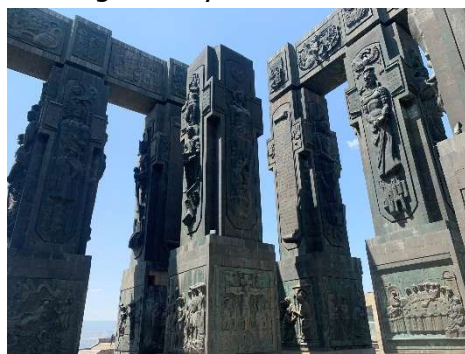
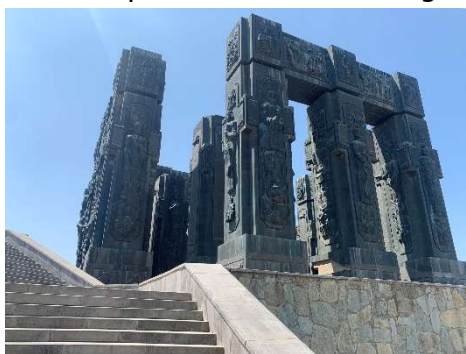
Mother of Georgia was erected in 1958 to commemorate Tbilisi's 1,500th anniversary. The statue symbolises Georgia's dual spirit: hospitality (a bowl of wine in her left hand) and resilience (a sword in her right hand). The statue is located on Sololaki Hill which offers panoramic views of Tbilisi as well as the neighbouring Narikala Fortress. You can get to the top by cable car or, if you are feeling particularly energetic then you can try out the stairs.



Memorial History of Georgia

Often called the "Georgian Stonehenge," the Memorial History of Georgia is one of the country's most impressive yet lesser-known monuments. Located on a hillside overlooking the Tbilisi Sea, this vast complex was designed by Georgian artist and sculptor Zurab Tsereteli in 1985. It was built to commemorate 3,000 years of Georgian statehood and 2,000 years of Christianity in the country. Construction began in 1985 but remains partially unfinished because of funding shortages following the Soviet collapse.

The monument consists of enormous stone pillars. Their upper sections depict Georgian kings, queens and historic rulers, while lower panels portray scenes from the life of Christ and important events in Georgian history. Together, the carvings create a visual narrative that celebrates both the nation's religious heritage and its long struggle for survival and independence. The scale of the monument is breathtaking, and its elevated position also offers magnificent views across Tbilisi and the surrounding countryside.

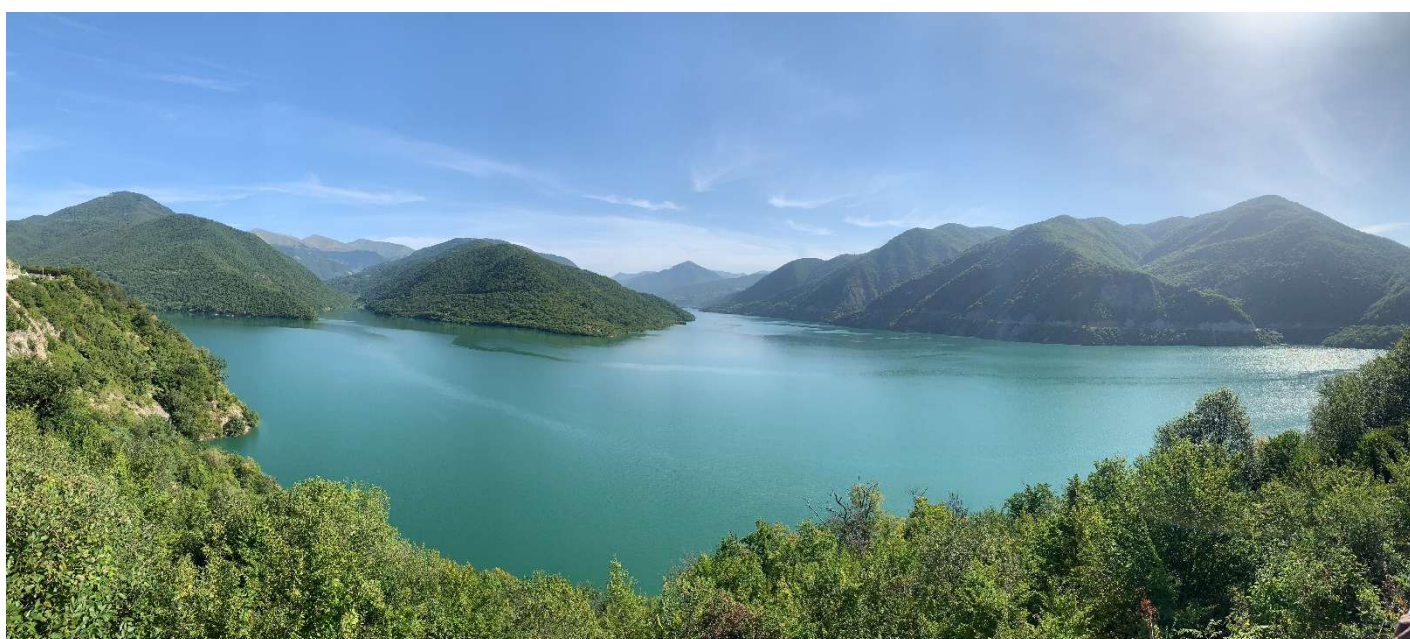
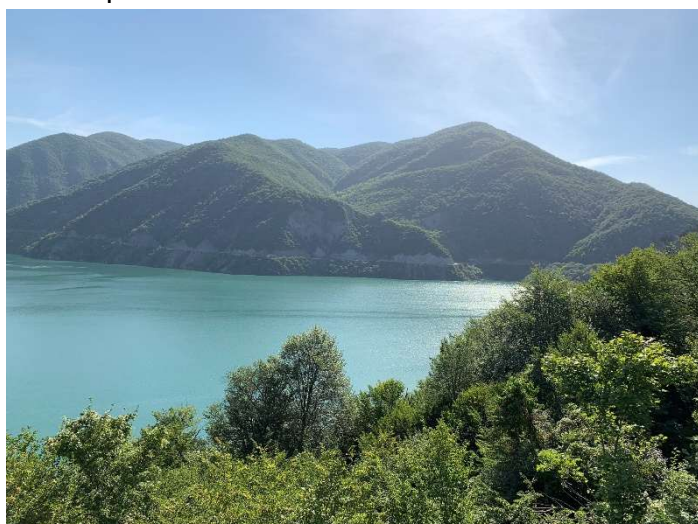
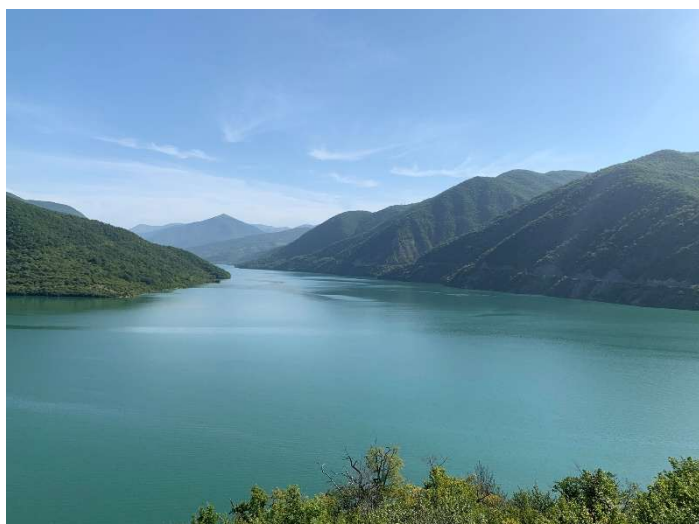


It is the last day of my visit to Georgia, and I decide to take a guided tour to the Kazbegi mountains located in the northern part of the country just 7 miles from the Russian border. The day is a 14-hour marathon with an English-speaking guide and a price tag of just £28 per person.....less than £2 per hour!!!!

Zhinvali Reservoir



First stop is the Zhinvali (Jinvali) reservoir which is a striking artificial lake combining natural beauty with Soviet-era engineering. The dam was constructed by the Soviets in the 1980s in spite of strong protests from the local communities who lost their accommodation and their livelihoods. Unfortunately, the protests did not bother the Soviet Government who proceeded to flood the area burying centuries of history under water. What makes Zhinvali particularly memorable is its striking turquoise water, which contrasts beautifully with the surrounding mountains and forests. There are numerous viewpoints providing opportunities to admire the scenery and appreciate landscape.

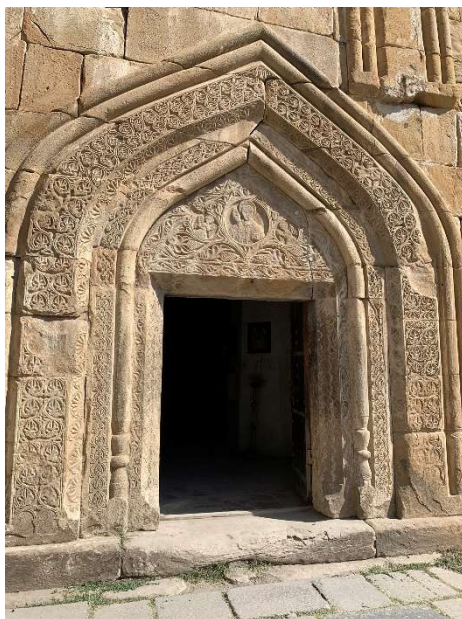
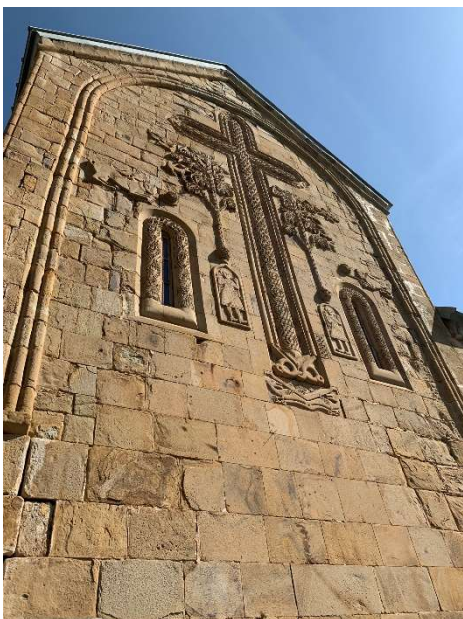


Ananuri Fortress

Next stop is Ananuri Fortress also known as Ananuri Castle or the Ananuri Fortress Complex. The complex was built in the 13th century to control trade and military routes between the Caucasus and central Georgia. According to folklore, the fortress was named after a woman named Ana from the village of who refused to reveal the location of a secret, even under torture. Her sacrifice became a symbol of Georgian resilience. The site was added to the tentative World Heritage list in 2007 for its cultural and architectural value.

The complex includes defensive walls, towers and several churches decorated with intricate stone carvings. The Church of the Assumption, completed in 1689, is particularly admired for its detailed façade and impressive interior artwork. Despite centuries of conflict and political upheaval, much of the fortress has survived remarkably well. Ananuri played a significant role in regional power struggles and witnessed numerous battles throughout its history.

Today, however, its atmosphere is peaceful, with visitors exploring the historic structures while enjoying panoramic views over the reservoir and surrounding mountains. The combination of medieval architecture, dramatic scenery and historical significance makes Ananuri one of Georgia's most popular attractions. Few locations capture the romance and beauty of the Caucasus quite as effectively as this remarkable fortress overlooking the water.



Gudauri Viewpoint (Russia–Georgia Friendship Monument)

We stopped for a brief while at the Russia–Georgia Friendship Monument, also known as the Gudauri Viewpoint or Treaty of Georgievsk Monument which was built in 1983 to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the 1783 Treaty of Georgievsk. The monument is considered as a bit of a joke since relationships between Russia and Georgia were far from friendly at the time.

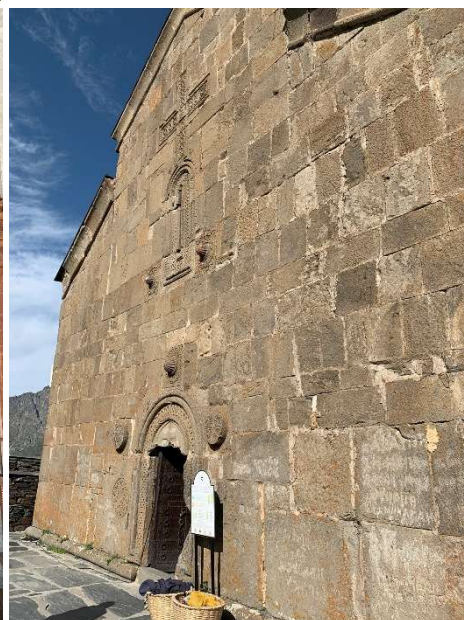
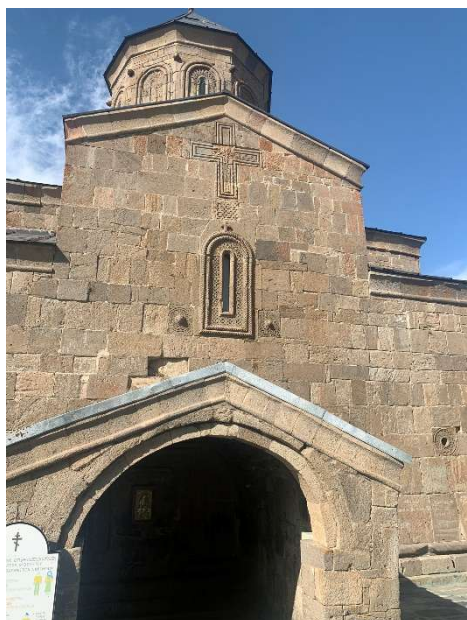
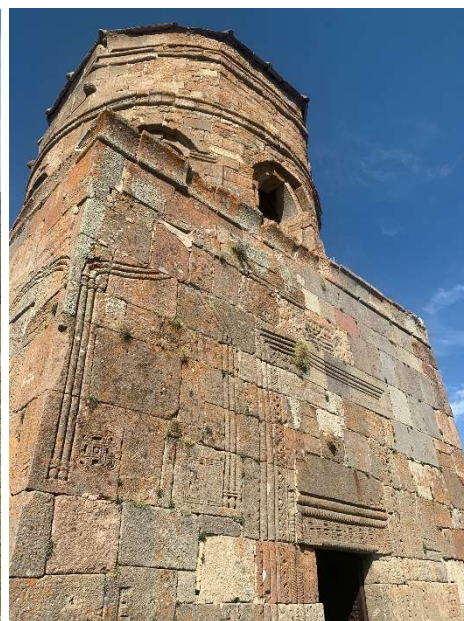
The structure's colourful mosaic panels depict scenes from Georgian and Russian history, folklore and culture. Positioned on the edge of a dramatic cliff, the viewpoint overlooks deep valleys, rugged mountains and winding rivers stretching into the distance. Today, the Gudauri Viewpoint remains one of Georgia's most memorable locations, celebrated for its artistic design and unparalleled mountain vistas.



Gergeti Trinity Church

The Gergeti Trinity Church, also known as Tsminda Sameba, is found at an elevation of 7120 feet (2170 metres) near the town of Stepantsminda (Kazbegi) and is one of Georgia's most iconic landmarks. The church is impossible to get to without the help of a four-wheel drive van and an incredibly careful driver. The momentous journey up the side of the mountain (talk about shake, rattle and roll) is well worth it given the spectacular views when you get there. The site is still an active monastery so be on your best behaviour,

Built during the fourteenth century, Gergeti Trinity became an important place of worship and refuge. During times of invasion, valuable religious treasures from other parts of Georgia were often brought here for safekeeping because of its remote and defensible location. The church itself is relatively simple in design, constructed from local stone and reflecting traditional Georgian architecture. Its true appeal lies in the breathtaking landscape that surrounds it.



Reflection

The truth of the matter is that Georgia and the country was a bit of a mystery to me and if you feel the same, then I hope my notes will help you appreciate this place better. The place is best understood when you appreciate that, during its time, the city has been variously ruled by Mongols, Arabs, Russians, Byzantines, and Soviets, among others.

The impact of these different rulers can be felt in its culture, cuisine and architecture. The country feels European but with a massive influx of Russians it is clearly wrestling with its identity. Reluctantly the countries second language is Russian and Stalin was born here. The Russians are clearly occupying this country by stealth.

Nonetheless, Tbilisi is a charming city that oozes culture and history. The city is characterised by pastel colours and traditional carved wooden balconies. This is a city that does not really wake up till 10 in the morning, but it certainly knows how to make most of its nightlife. Smoking would seem to be Georgians national pastime.

If smoking is the national pastime, then chacha (50-85% proof) is the national drink. It is claimed to have medicinal properties and let me tell you it tastes like medicine. The local wine is equally dubious but very potent. I had one glass courtesy of the city bus tour (which promised free water, free coffee and free wine) and I cannot for the life of me recollect anything from the first half of the tour.

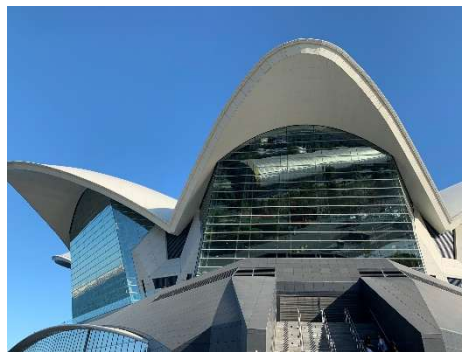


Chapter 4: Baku in Azerbaijan

Introduction

Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, occupies a dramatic position on the shores of the Caspian Sea and has long served as a gateway between East and West. Its history stretches back many centuries, with the walled Old City, known as Icherisheher, preserving evidence of medieval trade, Islamic scholarship and regional power. During the nineteenth century, Baku experienced extraordinary growth as one of the world's leading oil-producing centres, attracting wealth, innovation and international influence.

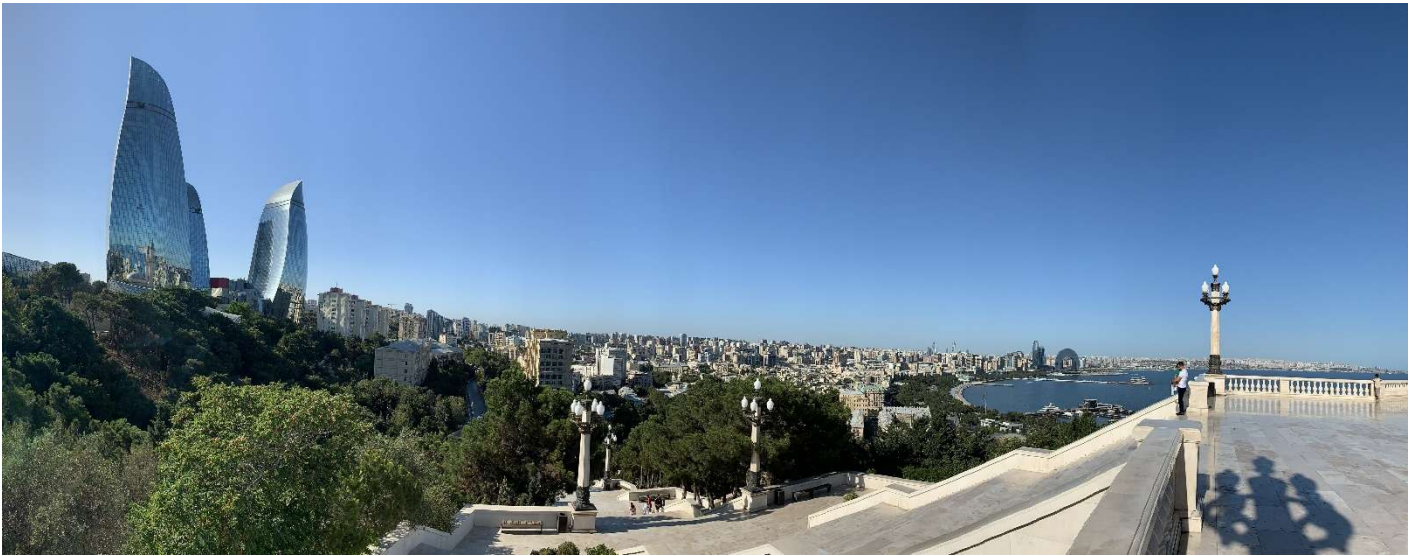
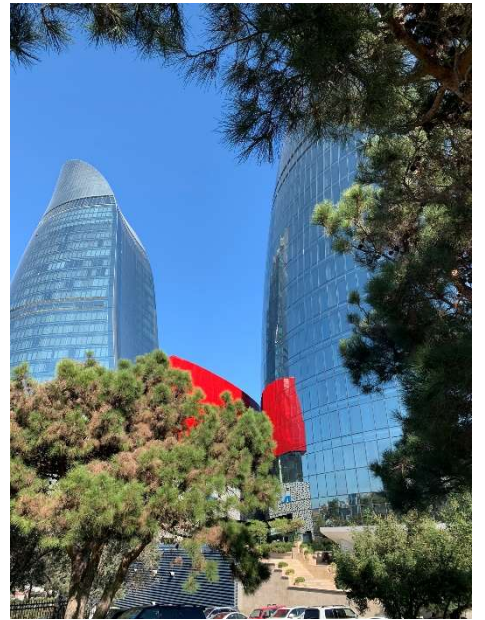
This combination of ancient heritage and modern ambition defines Baku today. Within the Old City stand landmarks such as the Maiden Tower and the Palace of the Shirvanshahs, while beyond the walls rise futuristic skyscrapers including the iconic Flame Towers. Azerbaijani culture reflects influences from Turkic, Persian, Russian and Caucasian traditions. Baku's wide boulevards, seaside promenade and striking architecture create a unique atmosphere where history coexists with modern urban landscapes.



Flame Towers



Dominating Baku's skyline, the Flame Towers have become the defining symbol of modern Azerbaijan. They were completed in 2013 at a cost of \$350 million and embody Azerbaijan's moniker as the 'Land of Fire'. The complex comprises three towers: a 39-story residential building, a 33-story Fairmont Hotel, and a 28-story office block, all anchored by a shared podium housing retail and leisure spaces. The towers have faced criticism due to their architecture and partial occupancy. Visible from almost every part of Baku, the towers dramatically transform after dark when thousands of LED lights illuminate their curved façades which light up to give the appearance of giant flickering flames, national flags and moving patterns.



Old City

The Old City, known locally as Icherisheher, forms the historic heart of Baku and is one of the most important cultural sites in the Caucasus. Enclosed by formidable medieval walls, this UNESCO World Heritage Site preserves a maze of narrow streets, stone houses, mosques, caravanserais and courtyards that reveal centuries of Azerbaijani history.

Exploring the Old City feels like stepping back in time. Hidden alleys reveal unexpected viewpoints, traditional workshops and atmospheric squares where daily life continues much as it has for centuries. The area also contains some of Azerbaijan's most famous landmarks, including the Maiden Tower and the Palace of the Shirvanshahs.



Baku Fortress



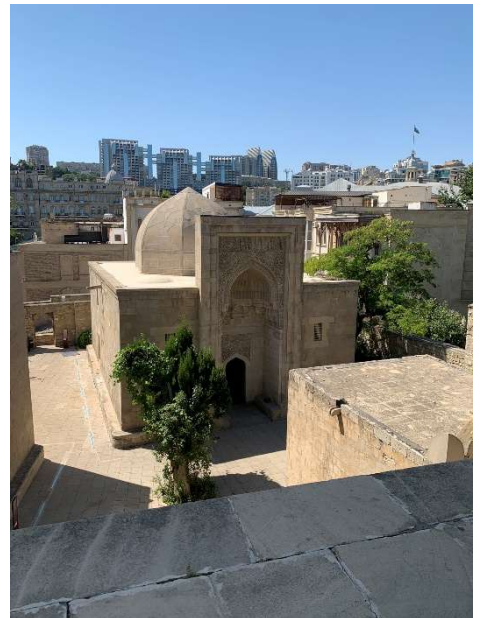
The Baku Fortress is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and a reminder of Azerbaijan's medieval history and architectural prowess. The fortress is located in the heart of Baku's Old City and dates back to the 12th-century when it was commissioned to protect the city from invasions and secure its status as a strategic trade hub. The fortress protected the city for centuries and included towers, gates and watchpoints overlooking approaches from both land and sea. The fortress now serves as a living museum and remains central to Baku's identity.



Palace of the Shirvanshahs

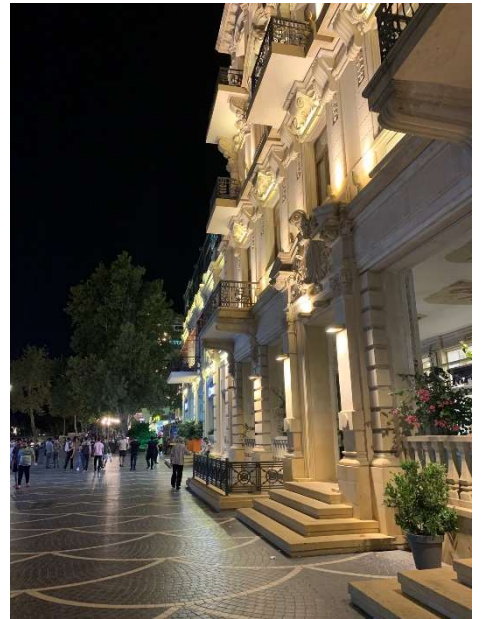
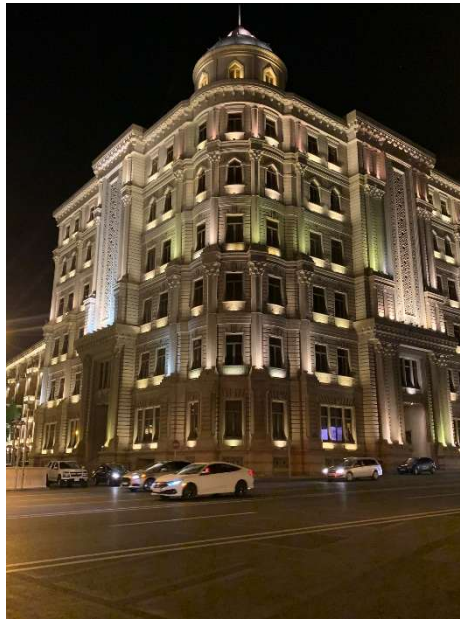
The Palace of the Shirvanshahs is situated in the old city and described as 'one of the pearls of Azerbaijan's architecture.' The site is worth a visit in spite of the admission charge which is an awful lot cheaper if you happen to be a local. The place was built in the 15th century by the Shirvanshahs which literally translates as the 'the kings of Shirvan.

Shirvan was the original capital city of Azerbaijan but was prone to frequent earthquakes, so the capital was moved to Baku. The complex is small, but the gardens are peaceful. Recent excavation has unearthed a bath house, and it is believed that the palace might be more extensive than originally thought. The site was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2000.



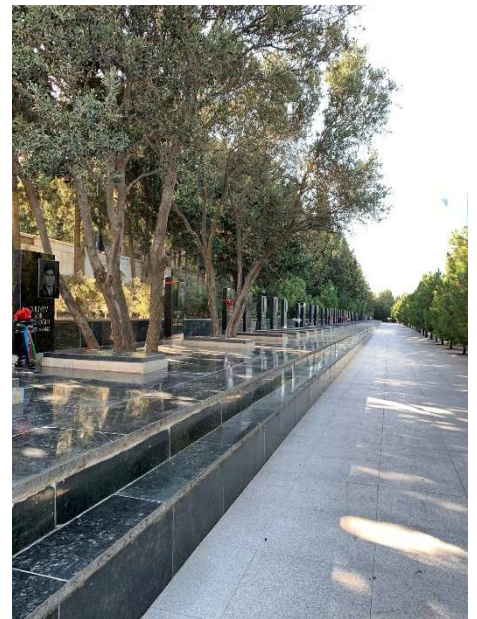
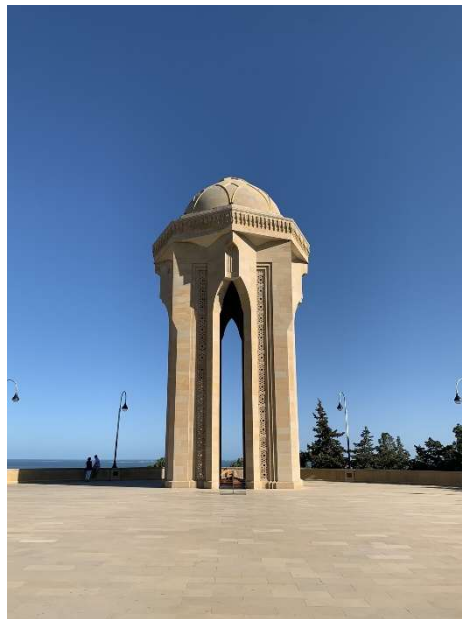
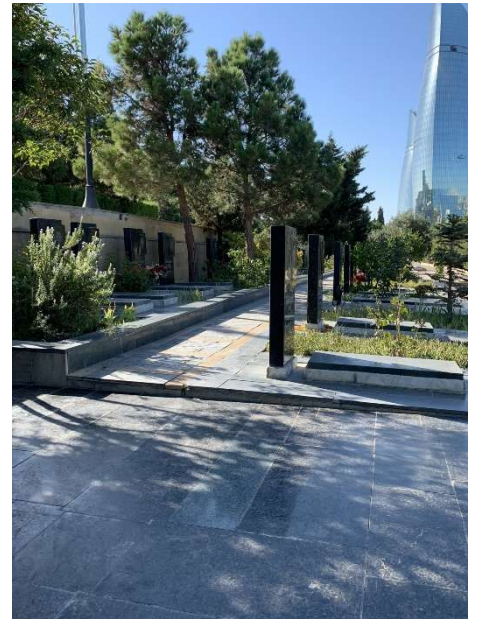
Fountain Square and Baku at night

It is 11.00pm in Fountain Square. The restaurants are still serving, and the square is heaving with humankind. As darkness falls, Baku undergoes a remarkable transformation. Historic buildings, parks and modern landmarks become illuminated, creating a dazzling urban landscape. Late nights are definitely de rigueur here and probably explain why breakfast is served from 10.00am to 1.00pm the following day.



Martyrs Lane

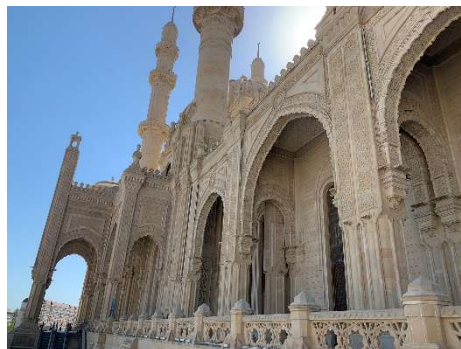
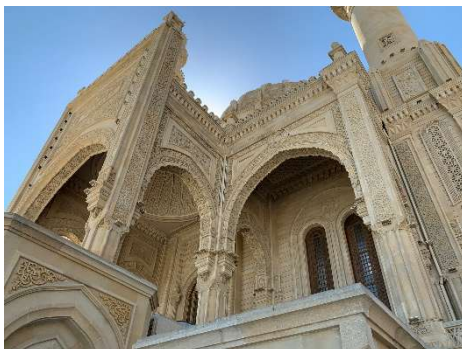
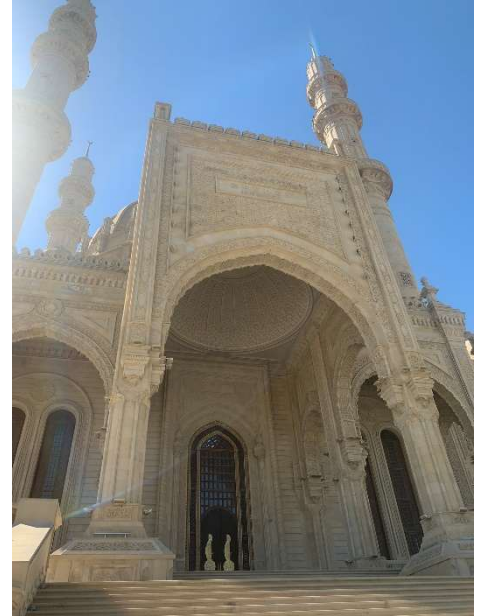
Martyrs' Lane, also known as the Alley of Martyrs, is a moving memorial complex dedicated to those who perished in pivotal conflicts shaping the nation's history. The site was originally a cemetery but became a place of national remembrance after Soviet troops entered Baku in January 1990 to suppress Azerbaijan's independence movement. The site also commemorates casualties from earlier conflicts, including the 1918 March Days and British soldiers who died during WWI.



Heydar Mosque

The Heydar Mosque is a monumental symbol of Azerbaijan's Islamic heritage and architectural innovation. The mosque was inaugurated in December 2014 and is the largest mosque in the South Caucasus. The facade of the mosque features intricately carved stonework, while the interior boasts marble and wood detailing. The complex was named after Heydar Aliyev, Azerbaijan's former president and national leader.

The mosque's elegant architecture combines traditional Islamic design with modern construction techniques. One of the mosque's most notable characteristics is its role in promoting religious harmony. It has hosted joint prayers, for Sunni and Shia congregations, reflecting Azerbaijan's long-standing reputation for religious tolerance and coexistence.



Heydar Aliyev Centre

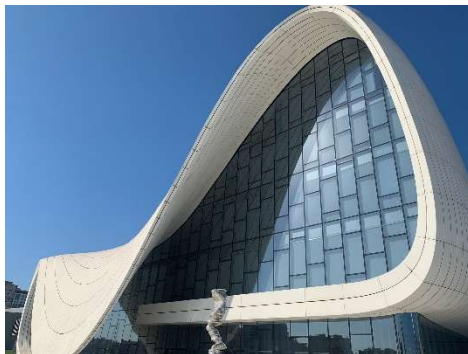
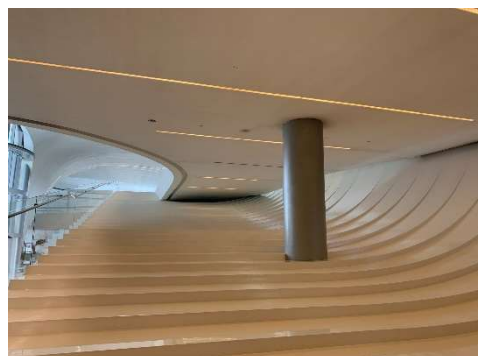
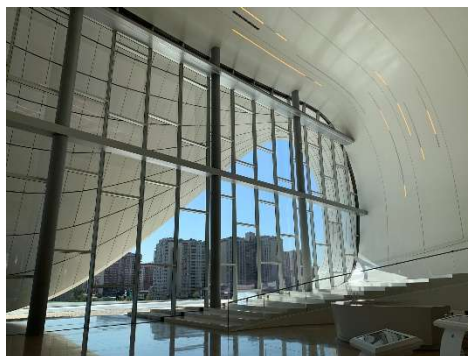


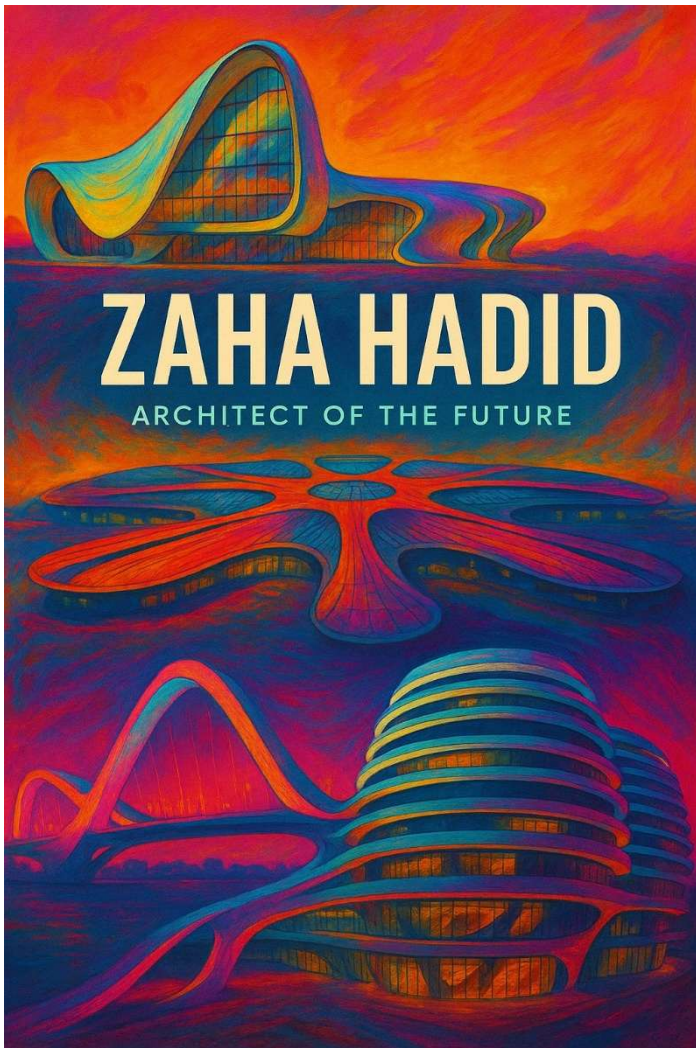
The Heydar Aliyev Centre is a gigantic cultural and conference centre built on the outskirts of Baku. The centre is eight stories high and includes an auditorium with 1000 seats, a vast exhibition space, a conference hall, a workshop and a museum. The shape of the building is wave-like and there are no straight lines anywhere..... except the lifts, I guess.

The building's smooth white curves were intended to break from the rigid architectural styles associated with the Soviet era and symbolise a forward-looking Azerbaijan. Its innovative design has received numerous international awards and was the building that first introduced me to Zaha Hadid.



Dame Zaha Mohammad Hadid (1950–2016) was a revolutionary Iraqi-British architect whose avant-garde designs redefined modern architecture. Born in Baghdad, she studied mathematics in Beirut before pursuing architecture in London, where her early career was marked by unbuilt, yet visionary projects influenced by Russian Constructivism and abstract art.





You can find out more about Zaha Hadid from my downloadable guidebook from www.thewheretogo.com

Reflection

Even after a week in Baku, I am still not clear how to describe this place. I doubt I am the only one who has gone through life avoiding places ending in 'an'such as Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan to name a few. However, Azerbaijan is different although most of us would be hard pressed to identify it on a world map or say anything much about the country.

Azerbaijan is bounded by the Caspian Sea and the Caucasus Mountains as well as sharing land borders with Russia, Georgia, Armenia and Iran. It is surprisingly home to an exceptionally large number of volcanoes..... 350 volcanoes at the last count. Azerbaijan literally means 'protector of fire.' Azerbaijan also has a lot of oil and gasin fact enough reserves to keep going for about 200 years which is a lot longer than Dubai.

The majority of the country's population are Muslim although the country's constitution does not declare an official religion. Sufficient to say that, in 1918, the country was the first Muslim country to enfranchise women and is still considered one of the most gender-equal Muslim nations in the world. The local language is similar to Turkish, and Russian is the second language although English is increasingly common.

Baku is simply beautiful and fully reflects the contradictions of the country as a whole..... it is a complete potpourri of different cultures, ethnicities and architecture. Baku has Paris's boulevards, London's parks, Rome's fountains, Dubai's buildings and the Soviet's very ugly concrete blocks. Restaurants, cafes and bars are heaving and everything is open till midnight with breakfast rarely served before 10.00am.

My kind of place in fact!!!!

Chapter 5: Summary

The South Caucasus proved to be one of the most fascinating and rewarding regions I have visited. Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan sit at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, yet each country possesses its own distinct identity, culture and character. Although separated by political tensions, disputed borders and very different historical experiences, they are united by dramatic landscapes, remarkable hospitality and a deep sense of national pride.

The journey itself became as memorable as the destinations. Travelling between the three countries required careful planning, particularly given the closed border between Armenia and Azerbaijan. What initially seemed a logistical headache became part of the adventure. From negotiating railway bookings in unfamiliar languages to sharing an overnight sleeper train with complete strangers, the experience provided a glimpse into the country's culture.

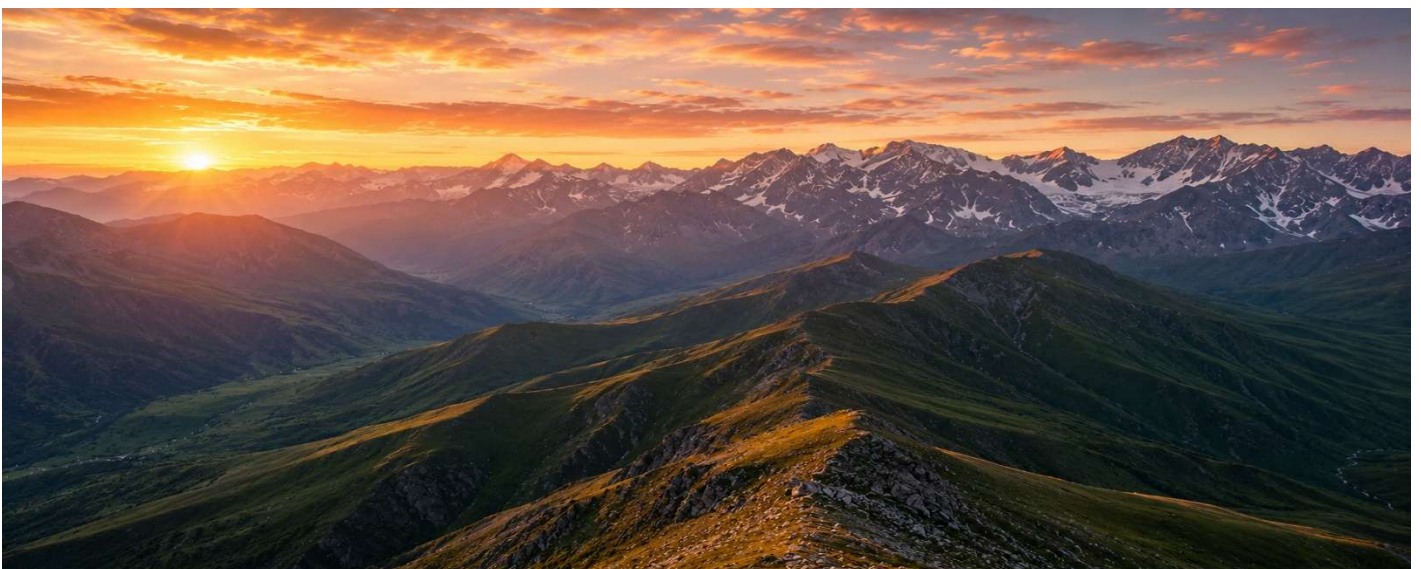
Armenia impressed me with its resilience and sense of history. Everywhere I travelled there seemed to be reminders of a civilisation that has endured immense hardship yet remains fiercely proud of its identity. The monasteries, mountain scenery and moving Genocide Memorial all told part of that story. Yerevan itself felt relaxed, welcoming and surprisingly vibrant, with excellent food and inexpensive local wine.

Georgia offered a fascinating blend of old and new. Tbilisi's colourful streets, riverside promenades and historic churches exist alongside striking modern architecture and a growing cultural scene. It felt the most accessible of the three countries and perhaps the easiest place in which to spend an extended period of time simply soaking up the atmosphere.

Azerbaijan provided the greatest contrast. Baku's futuristic skyline, immaculate boulevards and ambitious development projects felt a world away from the ancient monasteries and mountain villages encountered elsewhere on the trip. Yet beneath the modern façade lies a city shaped by centuries of trade, empire and cultural exchange.

What struck me most throughout the journey was how little known this region remains to many Western travellers. Despite their rich histories and spectacular scenery, these countries attract only a fraction of the visitors seen elsewhere in Europe. That relative lack of tourism is part of their appeal. There remains a genuine sense of discovery, where encounters feel authentic rather than staged and where curiosity is often rewarded with unexpected conversations and acts of kindness.

As the trip ended and I realised that the South Caucasus offers exactly what many seasoned travellers seek.... somewhere genuinely different. It is a region that challenges assumptions, rewards curiosity and leaves visitors with a far deeper appreciation of the complex histories and cultures that continue to shape this fascinating corner of the world. For anyone seeking adventure, Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan offer an unforgettable journey filled with history, hospitality, adventure and discovery.



The outside cover if you enjoyed this guide.....



Midnight Train to Georgia is just one of a growing series of documentary travel guides collated under 'The Where To Go' banner. The following titles are presently available or coming really soon.....

