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GEORGIA

*Agritourism Guide to
Samtskhe-Javakheti*

PRODUCTS

PLACES

PEOPLE



GEORGIA

Agritourism Guide to Samtskhe-Javakheti

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Village Tabatskuri



Foreword

The purpose of this booklet is to better acquaint the general public with the agritourism potential of the Samtskhe-Javakheti region, part of Georgia's oldest province, Great Meskheti. The region was famous for its agricultural resources and also known as the granary of Georgia since it was the country's main supplier of wheat, flax, and legumes. Today, Samtskhe-Javakheti offers many attractions with impressive cultural and natural sights, architectural monuments, churches, fortifications, and unique artworks. Here, Georgian customs and traditions and the Meskhetian culinary inheritance are well preserved.

The booklet will help those who love independent travel to gain a clear idea

about places of interest in the region: agroroutes, historical monuments, natural attractions, guesthouses, agritourism farms and restaurants. The first part gives a general description of regional products, with information on local food and recipes. The second part introduces host families who open their doors to visitors and can offer memorable hospitality experiences. The last part describes places to see along the agritourism routes and gives practical travel tips: how to get there, tour guide services, where to stay and where to eat.

We hope this booklet will serve as your companion and guide during your visit to the region and give you wonderful adventures, experiences and memories.

Welcome to Samtskhe-Javakheti!

Mariam Jorjadze, Elkana, Director
Davit Mumladze, DMO Executive Director

Georgia

Agritourism Guide to Samtskhe-Javakheti

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Ninotsminda, Javakheti

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About the region

Located in Southern Georgia, Samtskhe-Javakheti includes the territories of three ancient provinces: Samtskhe, Javakheti and Tori. The region stretches over 6 421 km² (9.2 percent of the territory of Georgia) and rises from 1 000 to 3 300 metres above sea level. Akhaltsikhe, Adigeni, Aspindza, Akhalkalaki,

Ninotsminda and Borjomi municipalities comprise the administrative territory with the city of Akhaltsikhe the administrative centre. The region is bordered by Armenia to the south and Türkiye to the west and southwest.

Samtskhe-Javakheti is ethnically diverse, its inhabitants comprise many different nationalities, religions, traditions and cultures. Sixty-nine percent of the



Lake Paravani



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Samtskhe-Javakheti population is rural and it has a long tradition of agriculture made up of family farms and commercial farms. More than half the agricultural land is under pasture and the rest is arable land.

As well as the landscape and culture, the region's climate is diverse. In most of it summers are cool and winters are cold and

snowy especially in Javakheti.

If you are looking for a diverse experience enriched with a long history, hospitable people, a vibrant culture, magnificent landscapes, fantastic food and diverse natural beauty, then Samtskhe-Javakheti should be on your list. You will leave with wonderful memories of your time there.

1. Products

This chapter introduces traditional and local products of Samtskhe-Javakheti. It also features a selection of recipes so you can prepare and enjoy the dishes of the region.

Traditional and local products

Samtskhe-Javakheti was an economically developed region, known as the granary of Georgia since it was the country's main supplier of wheat and flax, while the locally produced apple and wine were exported abroad. Today, the leading agricultural products include grains, potatoes, vegetables and fruit, along with cattle

breeding and beekeeping; winemaking is on a limited scale. There are two aboriginal wheat varieties in the region – *akhaltsikhe (Meskhetian) tsiteli doli (Triticum aestivum L. var. ferrugineum)* and *javakhetian dika (f. dzhavachetica dica.)*. Each is well adapted to local conditions having developed many useful biological qualities and an economic value over the years. *Akhaltsikhe (Meskhetian) tsiteli doli* and *javakhetian dika* breads are scented, exceptionally tasty and nutritious. In the past these wheat varieties were critically endangered, although they have been preserved and

Meskhetian bread, kada and bishi



Tenili cheese



reintroduced in local farmers' fields, becoming more popular in recent years.

Due to longstanding and extensive wheat production in the region, bread baking holds a special place in local cuisine. Households traditionally bake four types of bread in their *Meskhetian purne* oven (a bread oven made of brick or stone). First, *lavashi*, a narrow, long bread, then *shoti*, a small, round shaped bread with a hole in the middle (also called *titiani*, *kokora* or *podola* in different villages). The third type is *kakala*, a small, round loaf and finally *somini*, a large round loaf which can be up to 10 cm high with a thick crust, baked on moderate heat. Many local dishes are also

made with dough. These include *tatarberagi*, *tutmaji*, *erishta*, *bishi*, *lukhumi*, *kada*, *kada-khachapuri* among others. *Korkoti*, husked wholewheat grain, is also used in various soups, porridges and other dishes, the most popular being *khashili*, *kolio*, *dokorkota* and *plavi* with *korkoti* and goose.

As cattle breeding in the region has a long history, dairy products are very important to local households. *Tenili* (fine strands of cheese mixed with heavy cream, pressed into clay pots) and *chechili* (fine cheese strands braided together) are unique local types of cheese. Another dairy product particular to the region is *do*, made from



Snail dish

buttermilk and an ingredient in local dishes, such as *dokorkota* soup.

Local people also preserve meat for various dishes. *Apokhti* is cured and dried beef or pork, made from late autumn through the early winter period. It is also made with goose, mainly *Javakhetian goose*, a local breed. *Kaurma* is another traditional meat dish made from boiled beef or mutton and preserved in large clay or enamel pots.

The region is famous for its snail dishes: snails are collected on rocks and either boiled or fried. There is also a local tradition of collecting field herbs such as nettles (*Urtica dioica* L.), patience dock (*Rumex patientia* L.), asparagus (*Asparagus officinalis*), tuberous chervil

(*Chaerophyllum Caucasicum* (Fisch.& Hoffm. Schischk.) used to make various traditional dishes or for medicinal purposes.

Fruit growing has always been very important in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region. Local varieties of apple like *turashauli*, *abilauri* and *shakarnabada*, and pears such as *nanadziri*, *zamtris gulabi* and *kabakarmudi* are still grown and preserved, along with other fruits. The region's fruits and berries are high quality and exceptionally tasty. There is a tradition of drying fruit as well as making a variety of pulps, jams, juices, compotes, sauces, and vodka. Vodka is mainly distilled from mulberries, *chanchuri* (a plum variety) or cornelian cherry. There are some quite exceptional fruit products, such as



Honey

Local fruit produce



mulberry or pear *bakmazi*, boiled mulberry or pear juice, *tklapi*, a thin, dried pulp of mulberry, wild plums and *chanchuri*, a plum variety. Among the oil-bearing fruits, there is an abundance of walnut trees in the region. Walnuts are used in cooking various dishes and desserts and walnut jam is especially popular.

Honey production has a long tradition and is extensive in the region, having a long history and tradition. The honey from pollinators in the alpine meadows is well known for its quality and taste.

Archaeological finds in the region have included grape seeds, testifying to well-developed winemaking in Georgia going back 7 000 years. "...Meskhetians are skilful farmers and the locality abounds in vineyards", wrote the Byzantine historian

Procopius of Caesarea (sixth century). Tending vineyards and winemaking held a special place in the region where we still find wine cellars in caves, stone wine presses, wild vines and local grape varieties.

Taste Samtskhe-Javakheti, traditional dishes and recipes

Samtskhe-Javakheti is a gastronomic treasure of Georgia. Ancient, traditional, authentic, exceptional, specific, diverse, delicious, nutritious – it is no exaggeration to describe the flavours and cuisine of Samtskhe-Javakheti thus. Traditional cuisine has a long history thanks to local people who preserved family recipes and everyday cooking methods. This section offers a selection of delicious regional recipes.



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Apokhtis Khinkali

Cured meat dumplings

A main dish

Serves 4–6 persons

Ingredients

- 300 g of *apokhti*
(cured and dried beef, pork or goose)
- 1 kg of wheat flour
- 600 ml of water
- salt to taste
- 1 onion, finely chopped
- 50 g of clarified (melted) butter
- 4–5 cloves of garlic, crushed (to taste)

Preparation

Sprinkle a small amount of salt over the flour in a bowl and gradually add cold water to knead into a firm dough. Divide the dough

into three or four balls and let them rest for 30 minutes. Roll out each dough ball to make a thin layer (2 mm) and cut into squares of 7 x 7 cm. Put the *apokhti* cut into cubes with 1 cm sides in the centre of each square of dough and fold it by bringing the square dough angles together and pressing them into an envelope-like shape. Press the three sides together but leave the fourth side open so that the dumplings are juicy when cooked.

Put the dumplings into a pot of salted boiling water and boil for 5–7 minutes, until the dough is soft. Meanwhile, fry the finely chopped onion in the clarified butter. When the dumplings are cooked, remove them from the boiling water, put on a platter and sprinkle the fried, chopped onions over them. A mixture of crushed cloves of garlic and water can also be sprinkled over them to taste. Eat while warm.



Erishta

Main dish

Serves 4-6 persons

Ingredients

- 1 kg of wheat flour
- 500–600 ml of water
- 100 g of clarified (melted) butter
- salt to taste

Preparation

Sprinkle a small amount of salt over the flour in a bowl and gradually add room temperature water to knead the mixture into a firm dough. Let the dough rest for 30 minutes and turn it out onto a well-floured surface, dust with the flour and knead until smooth and elastic, then form dough balls and let them rest for another 20–30 minutes. Roll out each dough ball into a thin (2 mm)

round layer of up to 40–50 cm in diameter, bake both sides of each rolled out layer in a hot Meskhetian *purne* or a conventional oven until half cooked. Place the baked dough layer, called *ukha*, on a cotton cloth and cover it to keep it soft. When all the layers are baked, remove from the cloth in turn, roll up and cut each one into 1–1.5 cm wide rolls (later stripes), mix them well and place in a moderate *purne* or conventional oven for further baking. Remove the *erishta* strips from the heat after they are well dried, baked and have turned pink, allowing them to cool. The well baked *erishta* strips will keep in a small cloth sack for months. Continue cooking this dish by sprinkling a small amount of boiling water over it in a bowl, covering for about 5–7 minutes until it becomes soft from the steam. When the strips are soft, drain and serve with clarified butter on top. Eat while warm.



Bishi

Fried dough in sunflower oil

Serves 4–6 persons

Ingredients

- 1 kg of wheat flour
- 500 ml of sunflower oil
- 50 g of sourdough
- 700–750 ml of water
- 1 teaspoon of yeast
- salt to taste

Preparation

Mix 50 g of sourdough or 1 teaspoon of yeast into 200 ml of warm water in a bowl and add 1 kg of wheat flour. Gradually add a small

amount of salt and warm water, knead into a soft dough. Cover the bowl and place it somewhere warm to let the dough rise. When it has risen, knead it firmly then let it rest again for 10–15 minutes. Turn out the dough onto a floured surface and form little dough balls. Let these rest for 10–15 minutes, then flatten them with your fingers to 1 cm thin round layers according to the size of the pan or the pot you are using for cooking. Heat enough sunflower oil to float the flattened *bishi* layer over a medium heat and place the *bishi* in it, fry until golden then turn over to cook the other side.



Notes to the recipe

Lukhumi dough is made the same way as *bishi*, but softer, making it easier to cut into small pieces with a spoon, in the shape of small balls; fry them in sunflower oil.

Chirikhta is the same shape as *lukhumi*, with the same sort of dough and the same cooking method. The difference is in the dough ingredients: *chirikhta* dough is kneaded with milk instead of water and you add two eggs.

Bishi, *lukhumi* and *chirikhta* go nicely with cheese, pickles, *pelverda* (fruit jam), honey and *bakmazi* (boiled down mulberry juice).



Patience dock soup

Serves 4–6 persons

Ingredients

- 200 g of dried patience dock leaves
- 900 ml of water
- 70 g of clarified (melted) butter
- 2 onions, finely chopped
- 2 tablespoons of wheat flour
- salt to taste

Preparation

Put the finely chopped dried patience dock leaves in a pot, pour in just enough water to cover them, bring to the boil and rinse. Then pour 900 ml of water over the patience dock and boil until cooked. Meanwhile fry the finely chopped onion in the clarified butter. Remove the patience dock and keep the

water. Place the patience dock in a pot with the fried onion. Sprinkle a tablespoon of wheat flour and mix well, continue stirring with a spoon over a moderate heat for a few minutes so that the flour is well mixed. Then add enough of the water used to boil the patience dock leaves to obtain the desired consistency of soup. Season with salt to taste, stir well and bring to the boil before removing from the heat.

Patience dock soup is also prepared with the husked wheat grains called *korkoti*. Boil 100g of *korkoti* with the Patience dock leaves but leave out the wheat flour.

Patience Dock (*Rumex patientia* L.)



Note to the recipe

Rural households dry the patience dock by braiding fresh leaves and hanging them out of direct light.



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Halva

Dessert

Serves 4–6 persons

Ingredients

- 500 g of wheat flour
- 100 g of clarified (melted) butter
- 100 g of honey or *bakmazi* (boiled down mulberry juice)
- 50 ml of water

Preparation

Toast the wheat flour in a saucepan until golden, then add the clarified butter, stir continuously over a moderate heat until it is fully melted to make a homogeneous mass.

Stir honey or *bakmazi* into the hot water in another saucepan over a moderate heat until well mixed. Then gradually add the mixture of water and honey or *bakmazi* to the mass of flour, leave on a moderate heat stirring continuously until it is thick. Cool slightly and transfer the mass onto a platter or wooden board, flatten evenly until it is 1–2 cm thick, or shape the mass into small balls using your fingers and cool. Cut the *halva* into small pieces before serving.



Note to the recipe

Rural households cooked *halva* as a dessert for holidays and special occasions.

Kada preparation process



2. People

This chapter tells the stories and experiences of some local agritourism entrepreneurs in different parts of the region. It reveals their personal journey of developing sustainable businesses in the agritourism sector, their dedication to culture and heritage-based activities and their exemplary commitment to the region. They all run successful businesses that bring substantial social and economic benefits to their communities.

Agritourism service providers

1. Zaza Ivanidze's Agritourism Farm Ambari

Observing bees was Zaza's childhood hobby. He initially kept bees in the village of Muskhi and decided to establish a honey house and study apitherapy. He launched the business with one hive and today owns a multi-functional farm. Zaza began to teach beekeeping to the village children and was actively engaged in professional

education, teaching beekeeping at Opizari College in Akhaltsikhe. He is a member of the Georgian Beekeepers' Union and in 2015 became a member of Elkana, the Biological Farming Association. He began to grow local varieties of wheat, including endemic species and native varieties such as *akhaltsikhe (Meskhetian) tsiteli doli (Triticum aestivum L. var. ferrugineum)* and *javakhetian dika (f. dzhavachetica dica.)*.

In 2020, Zaza opened his farm to visitors and equipped his house to offer guests classes in Meskhetian cuisine, including baking *tsiteli doli* bread in *purne*, a traditional Meskhetian oven, much used in



this region. Zaza and his wife Tiko act as hosts to their visitors and when needed the villagers help out too.

Their agritourism farm is located on the Akhaltsikhe-Saphara tourist route, in the village of Ghreli. Visitors to the farm can buy honey (acacia, alpine) and other home-made products such as fruit, bread, cheese, vodka, *gozinaki* and mulberry *bakmazi*.

Zaza's family have developed a guest package that includes a visit to the orchard where they grow different fruits and to the bee garden. They can also take part in other farm activities such as harvesting, baking bread, making honey etc. The products used in their kitchen are homegrown. Zaza's work is an example of combining local resources with traditional knowledge.

2. Marina Nariashvili's hotel Edemi and agritourism farm

“Hospitality for me is an expression of love and care; I don't get tired of doing what I love” says Marina Nariashvili. Marina grew up in the city, but in the family Marina's mother and grandmother always baked their own bread in a *purne*. According to family tradition, the first *lavash* made in their bakery is offered to their grandfather – in memory of their forebears. The family maintains this tradition and has installed another oven in their kitchen, also used for making *lobiani* and *khachapuri*.

Marina has been a member of Elkana, the Biological Farming Association, since 2009. Using her own finances, she started her agritourism business with family members. They renovated their home, added extra rooms and facilities suitable for small groups and to host family holidays. The house is decorated with handicrafts, including some made by Marina herself, such as embroidery with beads.

Today the Hotel Edemi receives guests from all over the world, mainly through booking platforms and local guides and is a model for others in the region. Marina uses her culinary talents to offer traditional food in a family atmosphere, generating enormous demand from gastro tour



organisers. Marina has recently received support from international organizations such as USAID ZRDA to instal outdoor kitchens, set up facilities for tasting Meskhetian cuisine and dining and promote gastro tours. Here, visitors can taste three types of bread: *somini*, *titiani* and *khmiadi*, as well as Meskhetian trout in grape leaves, goose and duck, *lukhumi* with mulberry *bakmazi* – the same as *chirikhta* with *bakmazi*. The hotel also serves homemade jams and other sweet preserves. Marina is co-author of a cookbook, *Meskhuri Tabla*.



3. Marina and Sergo's agritourism farm, Tirebi

When Marina and Sergo started their business, their children were small and so they decided to offer family vacations. Families with small children like to experience rural life, having contact with domestic animals, showing children how to milk cows, make cheese, feed hens and gather fruits and vegetables.

Marina and Sergo's farmhouse, Tirebi, was one of the first agritourism projects in the region. It welcomes visitors, providing fresh, natural products made by the host family on their own farm. The farmhouse is in Nakalakevi, 25 km from Aspindza town, at the foot of Tmogvi Fortress, in a quiet,

relaxing area some distance from the village.

Sergo has been a member of Elkana, the Biological Farming Association, since 2008 and has participated in start-up programmes supported by international organizations. He renovated a single storey building with a veranda, four double rooms, a sitting room with a fireplace and a kitchen. There is a traditional Meskhetian *purne*, an outdoor dining area, and a twelfth century winepress on the farm. Guests can swim or fish in the nearby River Mtkvari as well as go horse-riding or explore hiking trails. In 2015 Sergo and Marina expanded their business, building a Meskhetian style guesthouse on Vardzia road, near Tsunda Lake, which serves Meskhetian dishes.

4. Valodia's cottage

Everyone knows Valodia's family in their area. For a long time, Valodia was Director of the Vardzia Cave Museum, managing important nearby cultural sites. Today, his son Kakha continues this work. In 2009, Valodia built an agritourism farm in the Koriskhevi area, 2 km from Vardzia Cave Monastery. The farm consists of a beautiful yard, an orchard, an outdoor dining area and terrace orchards with Meskhetian grapes, a *marani* (traditional wine cellar) and a bakery. The family has a cattle farm, trout farm and bee colony, serving their guests with fresh local produce.

Timber cottages provide 10 double bedrooms in total with private bathroom, while the stone buildings have 32 double bedrooms including one room for disabled visitors. Guests have use of the conference hall and attractive outdoor seating areas and there is a beautiful view of the Mtkvari River valley from the cottage balconies.

The hosts have invested in their own business. Initially, they used income from the farm and their own resources to market their tourism product, investing the returns back into their agricultural business.



© Kakha Zazadze

The family has been a member of Elkana, the Biological Farming Association, since 2008. Inga, Valodia's daughter-in-law, said the most important thing is to create an environment that offers different, new hands-on experiences to tourists by involving them in various activities along with good interaction between host and guests. "Even picking tomatoes is great fun for tourists. If they like it, they always buy some", says Inga. Every year the family tries to start the new season with fresh ideas that will keep their loyal customers happy.



5. Chiko Hotel

Nodar Nemsadze was one of the pioneers whose family opened a hospitality business, founding the Chiko Hotel in Aspindza. Elkana, the Biological Farming Association, promoted it to tour operators, implementing a rural development and tourism project in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region that seeks to establish links between visitors and local service providers. Initially, Nodar had doubts about this project, thinking his hotel was not suitable for foreign guests. After attending a series of training sessions on entrepreneurship,

hospitality and tourism conducted by Elkana experts, he decided the family hotel business has a future in the region. His father, Titiko, a skilled craftsman and agronomist, helped Nodar bring this idea to fruition. They designed a guest reception area, a cellar, a restaurant, and a separate cottage to accommodate their guests. The hosts pay great attention to every detail of the house, creating an atmosphere that offers memorable experiences and new adventures to people visiting the region. The family also plans to set up a bazaar where local farmers can sell their produce.

Producers

6. *Monastris Nobati* - Monastery Food

Monastery Food, *Monastris Nobati* in Georgian, is a joint venture by three monasteries in the old village of Meskheti-Ude. The monasteries make a variety of products such as wine, meat products, honey, bread, snails and handicrafts. In one of the three religious houses, Ude Convent, visitors can taste traditional Meskhetian cuisine, wine, dishes made from snails and many others, all prepared by the gentle nuns in the monastery.

Ude Convent started making wine in 2010. Gradually the sisters developed other products and today they make dry meat (jerky) varieties called *apokhti* from pork, beef, chicken and duck. The nuns have their own snail farm and you can taste original snail dishes prepared by them. Marinated snails in elegant jars are also on sale.

In 2020 as a result of hard work and the initiative of Archimandrite Grigol, the Father Superior of these monasteries, the first Meskhetian vineyard was planted in Adigeni Municipality. There are nine grape



varieties such as Tamari Vine, Black Aspindzuri, Meskhuri Mtsvane, Kharistvala, Klertmagari. The nuns and monks make the wine using their own secret methods and techniques, passed down through the decades.

Along with selling their produce, in 2017-2019 Ude Convent opened a tasting centre for visitors. You might sit at a table with Archimandrite Grigol to hear interesting stories about Meskheti, wine, grapes and so on. As well as tasting the wine you can buy some to take home together with other food products from the monastery that will remind you of your visit each time you taste them.



© Davit Mumladze

© Davit Mumladze

7. Davit Mumladze's Marani

Making wine has been a centuries-old tradition for the Mumladze family in Atskuri village and the business is now run by father and son, Gia and Davit Mumladze. Previous generations of winemakers were also good craftsmen in clay and their *Qvevris* (amphoras or vats) were well known throughout the region. Davit Mumladze relates that the family still has ancient winemaking equipment used by his grandfather which they show to visitors when telling the story of how their love of wine and winemaking comes from earlier generations. Five years ago, the family decided to turn a hobby into a business,

turning the basement of the family house into a wine cellar. Each year they made further renovations to the house and this year completely renovated the first floor, restoring it to its original authentic style. They installed nine *Qvevris* and built a tasting venue where visitors can try the wine and hear the family story of an ordinary Meskhetian man. At present the winery has the following varieties: Saperavi, Rkatsiteli, Kakhuri Mtsvane and Muskati.

Mumladze's wine is very popular within and beyond the region. They consider it their duty to maintain the family traditions and in future they plan to extend the business and preserve Meskhetian traditions related to wine.



© Zaza Zedgenidze



© Zaza Zedgenidze



© Zaza Zedgenidze

8. Zaza Zedgenidze's Amphora Beer

Zaza is an entrepreneur and owner of a brewery in Aspindza. He produces Amphora Beer in *Qvevri* (Georgian amphora). Initially, brewing was a hobby and he brewed beer at home for family and friends. Later on, he turned his hobby into a business and established a small beer business in 2017. Zaza explains how they use their own technology. The liquid stays in *Qvevri* for two weeks, until it turns into so called “green beer”, an immature beer that is then poured into tanks.

The company uses only high-quality ingredients to maintain the quality of their beer. They produce eight different types of light and dark beer, each with its own unique taste.

As well as beer, in 2020 the company launched a new product – malt bread, a zero-waste product as it is made using the malt left over from the brewing process.

In 2021, Zedgenidze's family opened the Brewery House Hotel where guests can enjoy plenty of local amphora beer, malt bread baked in a Meskhetian oven, local cuisine and a unique beer spa.

9. Natenadze's Wine Cellar

“I have spent much of the past decade traipsing through mountain forests in search of ancient vines growing the way nature intended – close to trees. I found some vines that are more than 100 years old and one that I reckon is more than 400 years old”, says Giorgi Natenadze.

While searching for those vines, Giorgi discovered 40 rare grape varieties in the forests to the south of the country, near the border with Türkiye and has identified 24 of them so far. Centuries ago the valuable local grape species were lost and in 2009 Giorgi restored the tradition of winemaking in the Meskhети region. Soon after, he poured the first Meskhétian wine, made in a using traditional Georgian winemaking methods.

Today Natenadze's Wine Cellar produces 14 types of red and white wines and the citizens of 11 countries across the world can enjoy unique Georgian wine. Giorgi's wines are very quaffable and tasty with low alcohol and well-balanced acidity. Each year he makes a different wine from these ancient varieties. Giorgi uses organic processes, dry-farming all grapes manually using no irrigation. He combines his



© Giorgi Natenadze

curiosity to rediscover forgotten skills and knowledge with a passion to revive lost traditions and the ability to bring all this to a new, younger target audience in a modern, contemporary way. The labels on his wines are designed in street-art style and speak a fresh and unconventional language.

Apart from winemaking, Giorgi has developed a gastronomic facility in the historic Rabati district, where authentic Meskhétian dishes and wine occupy a leading place. He is a member of the Georgian Gastronomic Association and takes part in the world's largest gastronomic exhibitions and competitions.



10. Aluda Jvaridze's Meskhuri Oda

Aluda Jvaridze, a farmer from Aspindza municipality, began restoring Meskhetian oda houses a few years ago. He enjoys living in Chobareti village and today manages an agritourism farm, *Meskhuri Oda*, in the village.

“I think that we should observe traditions and keep them for future generations. I try to save money in order to keep them alive... Some years ago, I moved to the city but came back to the village. In the city, time

flies but here time is slow, accordingly, I have more time to do things”, says Aluda. He owns livestock, producing Meskhetian *tenili* cheese, using almost forgotten cheese-making skills from childhood. Aluda decided to revive this tradition and established a small business in the village.

Today *Meskhuri Oda* is an agritourism farm, hosting visitors who come to enjoy Meskhetian culture and hospitality and locally grown fruits and vegetables. Visitors can see how *tenili* cheese and bread are made. The hosts make *kada*, *apokhti* and Meskhetian *khachapuri* using a *purne* that is two and a half centuries old.



11. Galina Inasaridze's Meskheti Farmhouse

Galina Inasaridze's family was the first to revive the ancient technique of making *tenili* cheese in small clay pots. Previously, only made for holidays such as Easter, New Year, and for family consumption the recipe is quite complex and differs from regular cheese in technique and consistency. When someone has a guest staying with them, they call Galina and ask her to make *tenili* cheese.

Making *tenili* cheese is now the Inasaridze family business. Elkana's New Year fairs are an important outlet for her as traditional products become more popular.

“I started selling *tenili* cheese at markets and fairs and it is now very popular. It is on sale in six or seven shops, cheese houses, and restaurants in Tbilisi”, says Galina.

The family has now expanded its business and offer guests cheese making workshops and food tasting sessions.



© Nikoloz Khachapuridze



© Nikoloz Khachapuridze

12. Khachapuridze's Marani

Niko Khachapuridze and his family manage their wine cellar in the village of Kvabiskhevi, Borjomi Municipality. It is a traditional Georgian cellar dating from the nineteenth century. The Meskhetian fireplace, a very old wooden winepress and *Qvevri* enjoy pride of place here. The wine cellar appears on the Wine Map of Georgia and is very popular in the region and beyond.

Father and son started making wine in 2015 and since then host guests from all over the world. Here you can taste different Georgian and European wines such as

Chinuri, Goruli Mtsvane, Rkatsiteli, Pinot, made according to Georgian traditions. Besides their wine, the family produces *chacha* and offers hands on classes in Meskhetian cuisine where visitors can bake bread in Meskhuri *purne* or make *mtsvadi*.

The Khachapuridze family has set up the Marani as a museum with a large collection of weapons, vessels and local historic exhibits such as carpets, agricultural and winery tools, as well as a variety of handmade crafts.

The family is noted for its hospitality. During your visit you can hear Georgian folk songs, try local wines, taste delicious food and discover more about winemaking in the region.



3. Places

This chapter describes three visitor routes, with the opportunity to meet and engage with Meskhetian people, famous for their generous hospitality, to taste Georgian wine and enjoy food matching with these wines.

These excursions take in many picturesque places such as the town of Borjomi with its diverse natural and cultural attractions, Akhaltsikhe, the scenic Mtkvari River Valley with the historic Khertvisi Castle, the Vardzia Cave complex and more. Trips start from Tbilisi and it is possible to plan a circular route such as entering the region via the main highway and returning to Tbilisi via the

Javakheti Region (Paravani and Sagamo Lakes) and/or across the Samsari ridge (see Route #2). These excursions take in nice hotels and family-run guesthouses, pleasant places to relax and enjoy a delicious local feast. If you are thinking of rural accommodation or staying on a farm, see “Where to stay in the region” or consult the Elkana Rural Tourism Network: www.ruraltourism.ge.

You can make your reservation via the Samtskhe-Javakheti Destination Management Organization or the Elkana Rural Tourism Department.

Exploring the region along agritourism routes

The Best Wines and Culinary Delights in Samtskhe-Javakheti

Travel period: March – November

- A 3- day gastronomic, wine journey through Samtskhe-Javakheti;
- Visit some of the best wineries in the region, taste the wines and *Qvevri* beer made with unique Meskhetian wheat varieties;
- Join a cookery class and prepare your own Meskhetian dishes;
- Visit ancient vine groves and cave wineries near the Vardzia Cave complex;
- Enjoy lunch with local wines made by the monks of Ude Monastery;
- Visit the Vardzia Cave complex, Saro village, Akhaltsikhe Castle and Mtsvane Monastery .

Akhaltzikhe Castle



Itinerary

- Day 1 - Tbilisi - Borjomi - Kvabiskhevi - Akhaltsikhe - Chobareti - Vardzia**
- Day 2 - Vardzia - Chachkari - Saro - Aspindza/Aluda - Akhaltsikhe**
- Day 3 - Akhaltsikhe - Ude - Borjomi - Tashiskari - Tbilisi**

Day 1

Drive to Samtskhe-Javakheti region via Borjomi and stop at Khachapuridze's Winery (*Marani*) in Kvabiskhevi where father and son will greet you, serving a light local meal with their excellent red and white wines. A good place to relax after the drive and Niko Khachapuridze will

accompany the food and drink by singing some Georgian love songs. Your next stop is Akhaltsikhe with the recently restored Akhaltsikhe Castle complex. After visiting it and the beautiful areas nearby, continue on to Chobareti village, where some houses are built partly underground to mitigate the harsh winter climate. Village women will invite you to join a cookery class where you can learn how to make Meskhetian *kada* and *khachapuri* breads and the unique *tenili* cheese. That evening at dinner you'll be able to enjoy the dishes you made earlier, as well as other Meskhetian delicacies. After dinner, settle in for the evening with accommodation available in nearby villages.

Vardzia Cave Complex



© Samtskhe-Javakheti DMO

Day 2

After breakfast, drive across the Mtkvari River to the Vardzia Cave complex, one of the most intriguing sites in Georgia. During your visit, your guide will show you the Bell Tower, which juts out from the cliff face and offers stunning views of the caves. Further on, walk through the cave complex to the spiritual centre of Vardzia, the stone Church of the Dormition with its colourful medieval frescoes. Another favourite among visitors is a natural spring, aptly called the Tears of

Queen Tamar which is accessible via a low tunnel.

A few minutes' drive from the complex is a less visited site, of great interest to the wine enthusiast. In the secluded village of Chachkari you will find the ancient wine making facilities that supplied wines to the thousands of inhabitants of Vardzia. In the eleventh century special presses carved out of the rock in the caves pressed the grapes to produce large amounts of red and white wine for the cave dwellers. Chachkari is steeped in oenological history and it is a



Archangel's church and Ruins of Megalithic Fortress, village Saro

© Elkana

treat to have lunch in the meadows under the forest canopy where 400-year-old vines are still growing.

The next place to visit is the ancient village of Saro, located high on the canyon above the river. This rarely visited spot has many historic attractions including the ruins of a megalithic fortress that span thousands of years.

Continue your way along the Mtkvari River Valley with its terraced vineyards till you come to Aspindza. Here we suggest a visit

to a local brewery, Amphora Beer, famous for brewing tasty, cold wheat-based beer in traditional wine *Qvevris*, large Georgian clay jars normally used for making wine. Sample the beer and enjoy a Georgian feast on the terrace.

For your overnight we suggest staying in Akhaltsikhe, where you will find various hotels and guesthouses. In the evening we recommend walking to Akhaltsikhe Castle to enjoy a meal in the restaurant inside the fortress walls. Further information on the Castle below.



Day 3

After breakfast, drive a few kilometres to the out of the way Saphara Monastery in the green mountain gorges above Akhaltsikhe (see below) and then to nearby Ude Monastery where monks and nuns grow their own vegetables and fruits and produce tasty red and white wines. You can taste some of their wonderful wines and enjoy a light lunch here.

The next stop after lunch is Mtsvane Monastery, a half-hour drive before you come to Borjomi. This religious gem is hidden in the dense forests near Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park. The buildings

were abandoned in the eighteenth century and almost reclaimed by nature, giving them an air of almost Tolkien mystique.

We suggest you don't leave the region without visiting Borjomi, a charming resort town and the perfect spot for any visitor looking for wellfullness combined with nature and culture (more information below).

To finish off your trip we recommend an early dinner at Dimitri's family in Borjomi famous with its hospitality, food and wine. At family marani, Dimitri will serve you different types of classic Georgian wines from four different regions.



Akhalsikhe Castle at night

Alternative place for dinner is a restaurant Kevri in Tashiskari, located on the Mtkvari River and famous for its fresh river trout. There you will savour wonderful Georgian dishes with a modern twist, prepared by well-known chef Davit Narimanishvili - Davit Nari.

Akhalsikhe Castle

Akhalsikhe Castle has a long and diverse history. Visiting it you will discover many different periods of its colourful story,

including the Ivane Javakhishvili Samtskhe-Javakheti History Museum in the castle (see below). Over time it was a madrasa, a synagogue, an eleventh century Orthodox church, a Catholic church, a citadel, a seventeenth century mosque built by Ahmed Pasha, an amphitheatre and other roles that will evoke many different periods of the building's history. The castle was fully restored in 2011–2012. Today, in addition to the historical buildings, there are elegant modern parks, whose atmosphere will take you back in time while reconnecting you with the present.



Samtskhe-Javakheti History Museum

Ivane Javakhishvili Samtskhe-Javakheti History Museum

In the Samtskhe-Javakheti Museum of History are samples of relief sculptures from the very early period together with Christian works of art. If you would like to see Meskheti statues, such as those of the twin idols dating from the third century BCE, you will definitely enjoy a visit to this Museum. Various artifacts are exhibited chronologically, showing the multicultural and diverse history of Meskheti, from ancient times to the twentieth century.

Saphara Monastery

Located 15 kilometres south-east of Akhaltsikhe, Saphara Monastery lies hidden

in a deep gorge surrounded by coniferous and deciduous forests. Today the complex includes St Saba's Church (the main one) dating from the twelfth to fourteenth centuries, the Assumption of the Mother of God Church (circa ninth to tenth centuries) and St George's Church (fourteenth to fifteenth centuries), a bell tower and several small chapels. The complex is surrounded by a wall with an observation post and a fortress where people from neighbouring villages once hid during times of war. The iconostasis dates to the eleventh century and is a masterpiece of Georgian sculptural art. The paintings in St Saba's Church are well preserved and there are a lot of carvings.

Borjomi Central Park



Saro Village

The ancient village of Saro, a few kilometres from the Akhaltsikhe-Vardzia road, is where indigenous Meskhetian culture and architecture are probably best preserved. It contains the ruins of a megalithic fortress built 3 000–4 000 years ago, the medieval Chapel of the Archangel, secret defence buildings (darns) and traditional Meskhetian dwellings that are half below ground, i.e. *oda* houses and Meskhetian halls. The village is located high in the mountain, displaying the wild beauty of the Javakheti and Erusheti ridges.

Borjomi

If you want to experience rich forests, taste mineral water with healing properties from a natural spring, walk through a delightful park or take a scenic ride in a cable car, then you should not miss Borjomi which will surprise you with its range of interesting places and activities, all of which can be seen in one day. Most of the attractions, hotels, and restaurants are in the centre of Borjomi. Nearby are Central Park, Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park, beautiful churches and fortresses and of course there is lots of clean, fresh air. This town has a lot to offer and is quite close to the ski resort of Bakuriani.

The Grand Tour of Samtskhe-Javakheti

Travel Period: April – October

- A 3-day/2-night tour of the top natural and cultural attractions in Samtskhe-Javakheti;
- Visit the historical sites of Timotesubani, Akhaltsikhe Castle, Khertvisi Fortress, the Vardzia Cave complex and St Nino's Monastery at Lake Paravani;
- Enjoy the natural wonders of Mtkvari River Canyon and the Samsari Mountains;
- Stay in the region's hotels and guesthouses throughout the trip;
- Eat delicious Meskhetian food and taste fine local wines.

Itinerary

Day 1 - Tbilisi - Borjomi – Timotesubani - Elkana Seed Ark Farm, Tsnisi - Akhaltsikhe

Day 2 - Akhaltsikhe - Zarzma - Ghreli - Saphara - Vardzia Resort

Day 3 - Vardzia Cave Monastery - Khertvisi - Village Gandzani - Phoka Monastery - Tbilisi

Day 1

Drive to Samtskhe-Javakheti via Borjomi, 2½ hours of easy driving. Our first stop is at the whimsical Borjomi Local Lore Museum for an expert guided tour. Afterwards walk through the Historical Park of Borjomi and saunter past the local shops offering honey, local handicrafts and a bottle of the famed





© Samtskhe-Javakheti DMO

Church of St. Seraphim of Sarov



© Elkana

Elkana Seed Ark Farm

Borjomi mineral water. If you are patient, you can even fill your own bottle at the Ekaterine limestone spring in Central Park.

After your walk enjoy a sumptuous lunch at the best and most authentic restaurant Tabla in town - expect the table to be piled high with Georgian delicacies.

Your tour continues by cable car to the rim of the Park Canyon and then a walk to the Chapel of the revered Russian St Seraphim of Sarov. People come from all over to pray at this site and find solace, believing that praying at this shrine can cure serious illness. The last stop in Borjomi Municipality is one of the most iconic Georgian

monasteries in the area - the imposing Timotesubani Monastery.

Your first day finishes with a visit to Elkana Seed Ark Farm, an experimental demonstration plot in the village of Tsnisi, 6 kilometres from Akhaltsikhe. It specializes in indigenous varieties of cereals, legumes and fruits that farmers have grown in the area for centuries. Here you can taste dishes that were common in ancient times, the food our ancestors ate before our diet became mainly dishes made from imported crops. These indigenous plant varieties form the basis of ancient recipes, which are not likely to feature in a modern cookbook. Taste dishes made from grass

Elkana Seed Ark Farm



© Elkana

peas, faba beans, chickpeas, cowpeas and lentils as well as bread baked with indigenous varieties and endemic species of wheat (more information below). Continue your trip to Akhaltsikhe where you can settle into the boutique Hotel Taba

Hall. Enjoy a sunset dinner with a full spread of Georgian delicacies and hearty wines at one of the town's best eateries, located atop the steep ramparts of Akhaltsikhe Castle.

Day 2

The morning starts with a visit to the Akhaltsikhe Castle complex, a medieval fortress built in the ninth century, originally named the Lion's Castle. The restored museum on top of the walls is well worth visiting to get a glimpse of Georgia's intriguing and complex past.

After Akhaltsikhe Castle, drive a short distance westward to the Adigeni Valley close to the Turkish border to see the well preserved Zarzma Monastery. Apart from its historical and cultural significance, it is also an important Orthodox education centre, known for its tradition of male polyphonic church singing. If you plan your trip on a church service day (usually Saturday evening or Sunday morning) you can hear the church choirs while visiting the monastery (more information below).

After Zarzma next stop is Saphara Monastery which is famous as the place where for many centuries the Governors of Meskheta lived and raised one of the kings of Georgia – George V the Brilliant. On the way you can visit Zaza Ivanidze's small, multi-function farm, recently opened to visitors and offering classes in Meskhetian cuisine, baking traditional *tsiteli doli* bread

in *purne* (traditional Meskhetian oven of the region). The products used in cooking are homegrown. In the late afternoon, drive up the Mtkvari River Valley and check in to the luxurious Vardzia Resort overlooking the Vardzia cave Complex across the river.



Zaza Ivanidze's Agritourism Farm Ambari

Zaza Ivanidze's Agritourism Farm Ambari



© Elkana



© Samtskhe-Javakheti DMO

Day 3

After breakfast the day starts with the Vardzia Cave complex. This site has been inhabited since the Bronze Age and developed into a sophisticated monastic and defensive site between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries.

Continue your trip along the Mtkvari River Canyon where the imposing Khertvisi Castle guards the entrance to the valley (further information below). The drive will take you to the eastern part of Samtskhe-Javakheti where you can enjoy lunch at the Family Corner in Gandzani village. The owner of this family business offers delicious local fish dishes while relating interesting stories about the area. Also on

offer are additional services including hiking, cycling, walking in the mountains and so on. Gandzani is famous for its small temple built of megalithic stone. Do not forget this area has more than a thousand ruins and the remains of many megalithic buildings and is famous for its large, abundant lakes.

The excursion finishes at St Nino's Monastery in the village of Phoka on the shores of Lake Paravani where you can enjoy a cup of coffee at the lakeshore. The nuns at the nearby convent make the most delicious, delicate products such as chocolate, cheese and honey.

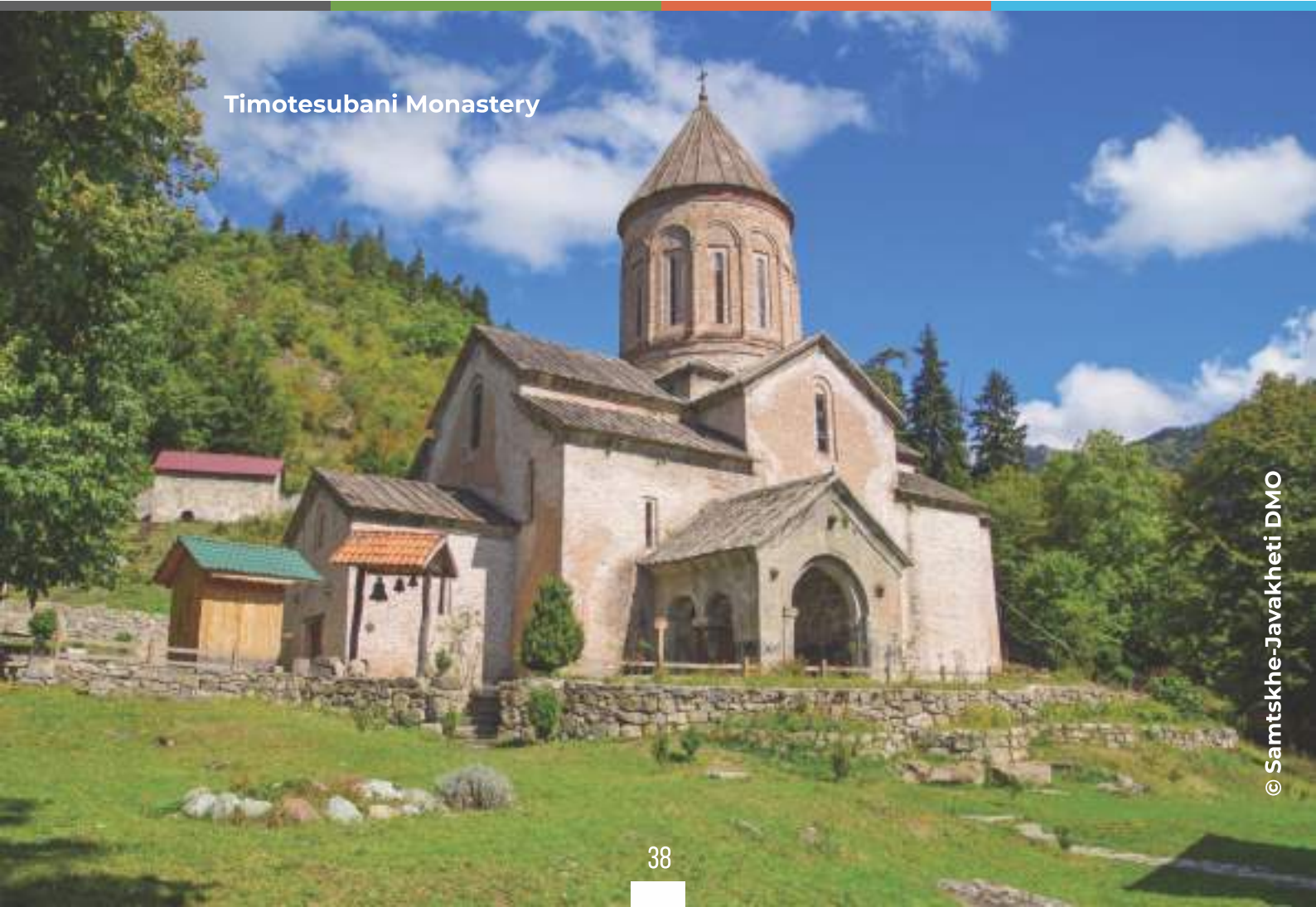
You can reach Tbilisi from Tsalka in the late evening.

Timotesubani Monastery

In the small village of Timotesubani in Borjomi Municipality just 17 kilometres from Borjomi is the great Timotesubani Monastery complex, built of rose-coloured

Georgian brick in the era of Queen Tamar. Many of the frescoes are preserved and one of the most important cultural monuments in the complex is a Georgian cathedral included in the World Culture Reserve Fund for its unique paintings.

Timotesubani Monastery





Elkana Seed Ark Farm

© Elkana

Elkana Seed Ark Farm

Since 1996 conservation of agricultural diversity has been one of the main activities of Elkana, the Biological Farming Association. It aims to restore and promote indigenous crop varieties and domestic animal breeds through on-farm reintroduction to Georgia.

Samtskhe-Javakheti is a unique region in terms of plant biodiversity. That is why Elkana established its experimental demonstration plot Seed Ark Farm here in 2004, in particular in the village of Tsnisi, 6 kilometres from Akhaltsikhe. It specializes in endemic species and indigenous

varieties of cereals and legumes as well as apples and pears, all cultivated using an organic production system.

Interested visitors, farmers and students can see the plots of endemic wheat species *chelta zanduri* (*Triticum timopheevii* Zhuk.), *macha* (*Triticum macha* Men.), *dika* (*Triticum carthlicum* Nevski), *hexaploid zanduri* (*Triticum zhukovskyi* Men.), *kolkhuri asli* (*Triticum palaeocolchicum* Men.) also *gvatsa zanduri* (*Triticum monococcum*) and aboriginal wheat varieties *Akhaltsikhe* (*Meskhetian*) *tsiteli doli* (*Triticum aestivum* L. var. *ferrugineum*) cultivated by Georgian people for centuries to bake exceptionally tasty, scented and nutritious breads.

Elkana Seed Ark Farm



Legumes formerly cultivated in Georgia were replaced by haricot beans and these ancient varieties of legumes have been restored and cultivated at Elkana Seed Ark Farm. These include chickpeas (*Cicer arietinum* L.), faba beans (*Vicia faba* L.), grass peas (*Lathyrus sativus* L.), lentils (*Lens culinaris* Medic) and cowpeas (*Vigna unguiculata* L.Walp.). Various delicious and nutritious dishes are prepared from them. An oil-bearing variety of flax (*Linum usitatissimum* L.) is also cultivated here, formerly grown in large quantities and used by local people, it almost disappeared in recent years.

Seed Ark Farm also has an orchard of local fruits. Apple varieties include *turashauli*, *abilauri*, and *shakarnabada* and pear varieties are *inzhira*, *kabakarmudi*, etc. still to be found in some local orchards.

For additional information contact Elkana's regional office in Samtskhe-Javakheti at:

9 Shalva Akhaltsikheli St., Akhaltsikhe.

Tel: +995 365 22 02 46;

email: akhaltsikhe@elkana.org.ge.

Khertvisi Fortress

Khertvisi Fortress, one of the best preserved of Georgia's fortification structures, has been restored and rebuilt many times. Originally built on a rocky mountain at the confluence of the Mtkvari and Paravnistskali Rivers, it is the last point of the historical Javakheti region and the beginning of Meskheti. The Fortress is over 100 metres long and includes many different structures. According to a well-preserved inscription, the wall was built in the fourteenth century and an inner fortress with thick walls and watchtowers were built inside that outer wall. With its little church dating back to 985 and the remains of dwellings, auxiliary premises and bridges, as well as a tunnel going down to the river, Khertvisi is a good illustration of the historical vicissitudes of the region.

Zarzma Monastery

The Zarzma Monastery complex, located on top of a hill in Zarzma, Adigeni Municipality, includes a church bell tower, chapel, the ruins of two churches and a spring. The first mention of a monastery here is in a book from the ninth century. At the beginning of the fourteenth century, the Duke of Samtskhe, Beka Mandaturtukhutsesi, erected a new shrine in honour of the assumption of the Mother of God. It is



Paintings at Zarzma Monastery

unique in Georgia in having a large cross carved into the eastern façade of the church.

Phoka Monastery

Follow in the footsteps of St Nino who brought Christianity to Georgia and visit Phoka Monastery in Ninotsminda Municipality. St Nino came to Georgia through Javakheti and stopped near Lake Pharavani. In the eleventh century, a church was built on the site of her former home. Javakheti and the church were destroyed during the invasions of the seventeenth century with only the ruins of the original stone church remaining, including fragments of the original frescos. Only at the beginning of the nineteenth century was it possible to return and two Orthodox Christian monasteries were founded in Phoka: St Nino's Convent Nunnery and a second monastery 1.5 kilometres from the village, both still open.



Lake Khanchali, Javakheti Protected Areas

Javakheti Lakes

Javakheti is famous for its lakes such as Paravani Lake, the largest lake in Georgia, according to its surface area (37.5 km²), Lake Saghamo, a mystical lake abounding in legends, as well as Lake Khanchali, famous for its multitude of islands and dozens of others. Most are part of the Javakheti Protected Area established in 2011 and include Javakheti National Park,

Bugdasheni, Khanchali, Madatapa, Sulda, and Kartsakhi Managed Reserves. The total area of the territory is 16 614 hectares and the Javakheti Protected Area includes the Municipalities of Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda. These areas are ideal for birdwatching and the lakeshores have hides and watchtowers for those who like to observe bird life. The lakes are equally spectacular in winter when they are frozen over.



Lake Madatapa, Javakheti Protected Areas

Enjoy the harvest season of Samtskhe-Javakheti

Travel Period - June-July / September-October

- Two-day tour with two variations depending on the season;
- Best places where you can make and taste traditional products in Samtskhe-Javakheti;
- The beautiful scenery of the Mtkvari River Valley, Vardzia Cave complex, Tmogvi Fortress, Upper Vardzia Monastery;
- Taste unique and traditional cuisine, products and confectionery based on Meskhetian cuisine;
- Explore the wholesome foods being harvested in the region.

Option 1

Day 1 - Tbilisi - Vardzia Resort

Day 2 - Vardzia - Valodia's Cottages
- Upper Vardzia Monastery - Tbilisi

Option 2

Day 1 - Tbilisi - Vardzia Resort

Day 2 - Vardzia - Agritourism Farm
Tirebi - Tmogvi Fortress - Tbilisi

Day 1

Drive south towards the Hotel Vardzia Resort, overlooking the Vardzia Cave complex across the river. June and July are

the mulberry picking season with residents busy harvesting mulberries and other fruits to make various products. Mulberries are distilled to make vodka and also *tklapi*, *pelamushi* (fruit juice pudding), *chiri* (dried fruit) and *bakmazi* (reduced mulberry). On this trip you can join in harvesting and making *bakmazi*, a condensed juice made from white mulberries (*Morus alba*) and sometimes pears. *Bakmazi* is typical of the Samtskhe-Javakheti region and used as a natural sweetener, often eaten with bread and butter and various cookies. Vardzia Resort offers classes in traditional cuisine, so you can fill your day with a fun learning experience and then feast on what you have made.



Day 2

Start with a visit to the Vardzia Cave complex, inhabited since the Bronze Age and developed into a sophisticated monastic and defensive site between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries.

In Valodia's Cottage in Korsikhevi you will hear many interesting stories from your hosts about the region and its culture, have

a delicious dinner and swap stories with other guests about your trip.

The excursion ends at Upper Vardzia Monastery where the nuns make a range of handicrafts and offer classes in making candles, wooden crosses, icon painting and embroidery.

An optional program for travellers visiting the region in the autumn

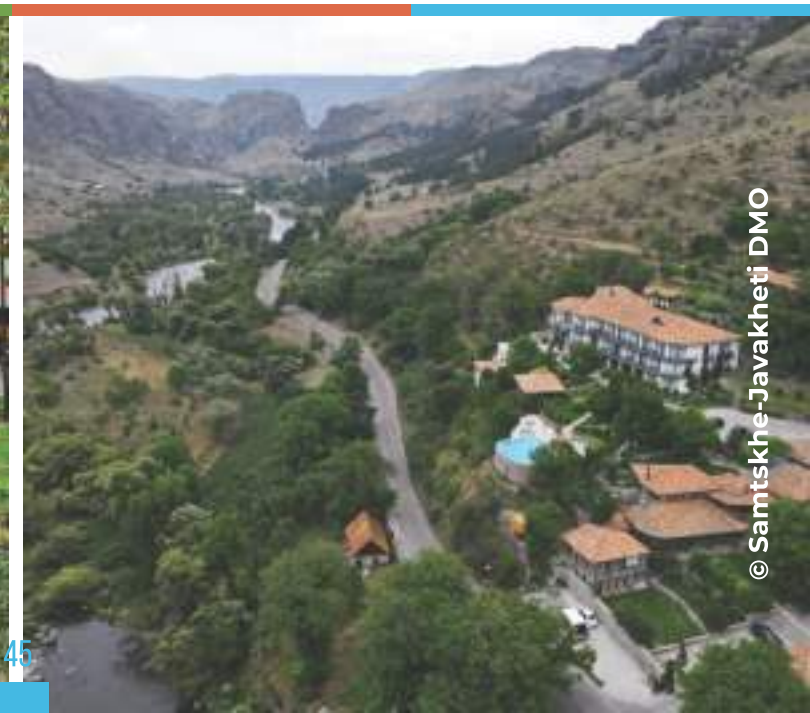
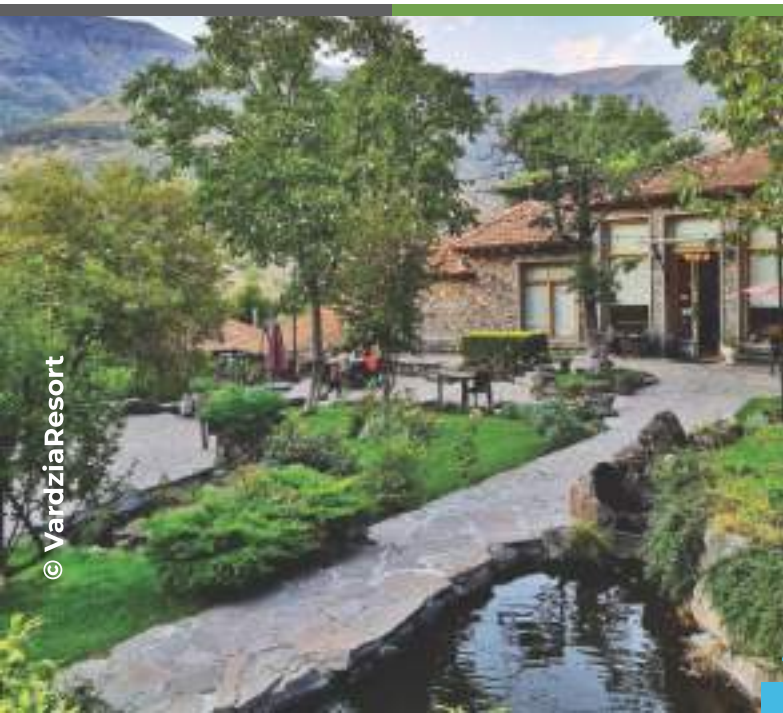
Day 1

Drive to the Hotel Vardzia Resort. In September-October you can explore all the wholesome foods being harvested such as local families picking numerous varieties of plums. The most popular are *chanchuri* plums, used to make vodka, *tklapi*, *pelverda* (jam), *chiri*, and walnut *churchkheldas*. You can join various classes offered by your hosts in the Vardzia Resort including the enjoyable process of making *tklapi*, a

traditional Georgian pureed fruit rolled up dessert. It is poured thinly onto a sheet and sun-dried on a line.

Day 2

Start your day with a visit to the Vardzia Cave complex and then continue to the agritourism Tirebi Farm where you can taste delicious local cuisine. The owners will accompany you to the ancient Tmogvi Castle either on horseback or on foot. If you do not plan to travel to Tbilisi, you can book accommodation in Tirebi and enjoy a few more days in its rural atmosphere.





Vardzia Resort and the Natenadze family

The name of the Natenadze family is associated with the creation of Vardzia as a historical monument and the first tourist facility in the area. During the communist era, Vardzia was considered to have a religious ideology and was consequently neglected while as a border area, it received few tourists due to its proximity to Turkey. Niko Natenadze's family has been striving to revive Vardzia since the 1930s and have now achieved this, having built a modern hotel in Vardzia.

The area of the Vardzia resort was once an impassable gorge with small springs. Today there are excellent modern tourist amenities close to nature. When Niko started building the hotel, everyone was

sceptical but he had purpose and motivation and his family supported him.

During construction the Natenadze family discovered the ruins of a small chapel, a third of it built into the rock in the form of a cave. The family has since restored the chapel to its original form, it is dedicated to St Marina of the tenth century.

Vardzia Resort occupies almost three hectares. The development expands every year with Meskhetian terraces growing grapes, fruits and vegetables. A small river meanders through the land and there are now seven lakes for various sorts of fishing, hiking trails, children's entertainment, a wine cellar, two outdoor swimming pools and a spa with other facilities.

A mix of antiquity and modernity gives the

Vardzia Resort its unique charm. Added to this is the unusual, varied and distinctive Meskhetian cuisine made with locally grown vegetables, wheat and spices. Classes are held in the Meskhetian *oda* where guests can learn how to make local dishes, bake Meskhetian bread and discover Meskhetian wine. The Resort often hosts salon evenings organized by Meskhetian Tours, offering a comfortable environment for artists and writers.

The family wants the Vardzia Resort to be a kind of cultural centre for Samtskhe-Javakheti. The Meskhetian hall, the cellar, restaurant and the entire infrastructure of the resort are designed for those who want to fully experience Meskhetian culture, cuisine and life.

The hotel is open from March to November but there are plans to extend the season to receive guests in winter.





4. Useful Information about the region



Getting there

The region's major cities, Borjomi and Akhaltsikhe, are about a 2½ hour drive from Tbilisi and a similar distance from the gateway airport near Kutaisi.

The region can also be reached from Adjara. However, the road crosses mountainous terrain (Goderdzi Pass) and requires a four-wheel drive vehicle. It often closes in winter due to heavy snowfall.

There are several ways to get to Samtskhe-Javakheti:

1. **Tbilisi - Borjomi - Akhaltsikhe:** distance 220 kilometres, travel time 3 hours
2. **Tbilisi - Borjomi - Bakuriani - Tabatskuri - Akhalkalaki:** distance 275 kilometres, travel time 5 hours, closed from November to April, requires a four-wheel drive vehicle
3. **Tbilisi - Manglisi - Tsalka - Ninotsminda - Akhalkalaki - Akhaltsikhe:** distance 240 kilometres, travel time 3½ hours

Travelling from western Georgia you can arrive in the region via the following routes

4. **Kutaisi - Borjomi - Akhaltsikhe:** distance 200 kilometres, travel time 3 hours
5. **Batumi - Goderdzi Pass - Adigeni - Akhaltsikhe:** distance - 180 kilometres, travel time 4 hours.

Public transport (minibus, bus) connects all the large towns in Georgia with the region. Minibuses leave Tbilisi for Borjomi, Bakuriani, Aspindza, Akhalkalaki, Vale, Ninotsminda, Adigeni and Abastumani every hour, the earliest departure is 08.00.

Address of Tbilisi Didube Bus Station: 4 Karaleti St., Tbilisi

Tickets cost GEL 12 at the moment, but that may change. A taxi from Tbilisi will cost approximately GEL 150-200.

Trains leave Tbilisi for Borjomi twice a day. Public transport from Kutaisi or Batumi to Samtskhe-Javakheti. Minibuses depart from Kutaisi Central Bus Station, #67 Chavchavadze Str. Kutaisi and from Batumi Central Bus Station. Ticket prices are GEL 15 Kutaisi-Akhaltsikhe and GEL 25, Batumi-Akhaltsikhe.

Visitors from Armenia can use buses to get to Samtskhe-Javakheti or take the train to Tbilisi and from there to Samtskhe-Javakheti. Buses to Armenia depart from Akhaltsikhe Central Bus Station.

Visitors from Türkiye can use Metro Georgia or the buses which depart from Akhaltsikhe Central Bus Station, contact details: +995 599 952101



Transport within the region

It is most convenient to travel around the region by your own car, as public transport does not reach attractions located away from the main roads. But for those who prefer public transport, minibuses run from bus stations which connect Akhaltsikhe to

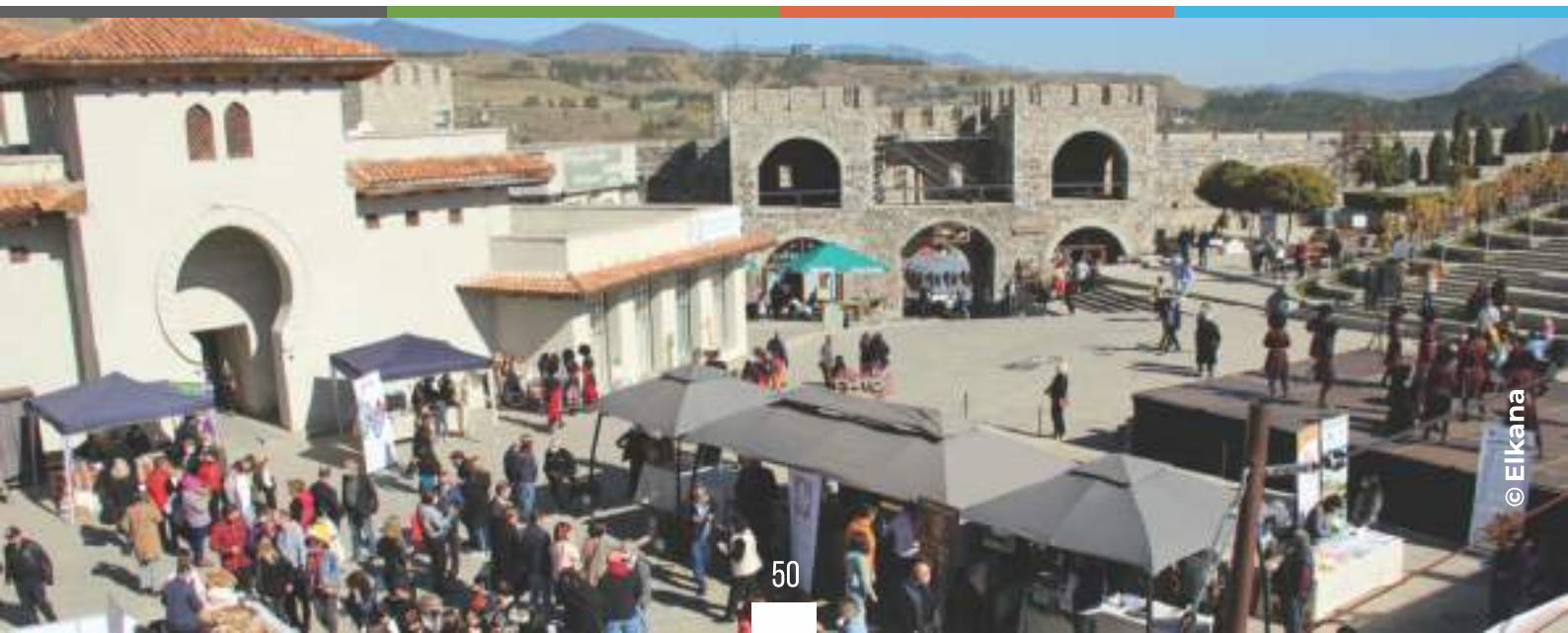
the other towns and villages. The price is generally quite low, maximum GEL 5.

You can also hire a taxi to get from one place to another.



Events in the region

Samtskhe-Javakheti is very rich with old and new folk festivals. Each municipality has its own festivals distinguished by rich and varied traditions that always attract interest from visitors. You can find more information on the festivals during different seasons on the Facebook page of Samtskhe-Javakheti Destination Management Organization (@visitsamtskhejavakheti) or its website: www.visitsj.ge.





Antimozoba is held annually on 26 June in the village of Ude to commemorate the outstanding ecclesiastic and secular figure of Antimoz Iverieli (Andria Khurtsidze-Merabishvili). The festival began in 2005 at the initiative of the Romanian Embassy as research in Romania revealed that Antimoz Iverieli was born in Ude village.

Shuamtoba is an ancient Georgian holiday held every year on the last weekend of July. Locals gather on Persati Mountain to take part in the activities, with a horse race, sports competitions, dances, and other forms of entertainment.

Zarzmoba is a traditional religious festival held annually in the village of Zarzma on 11 November, the Memorial Day for the

ecclesiastical figure Serapion Zarzmeli. After a religious service in Zarzma Monastery, amateur stage performances take place near the monastery, along with exhibitions and fairs selling local farm products and handicrafts.

Shalva Akhaltsikheli, Commemoration Day, is celebrated annually on 30 June with a festive concert, an exhibition and sale of works of fine art by crafts people, Georgian wrestling and horse racing. There are also special places for local cuisine and guests can view the traditional customs from each village in the municipality.

In Aspindza Municipality Rustavi village hosts **Shotaoba**, an annual folk festival held in the autumn since 1966. The festival commemorates the 800th anniversary of the Shota Rustaveli immortal poem, "The Knight in the Panther's Skin." Poets, writers, and artistic groups from different parts of Georgia take part and the event consists of a public walk, sports competitions and an exhibition and sale of local arts by folk craft workers.

Ninooba is a holiday to mark St Nino's arrival in Georgia, celebrated since 1989 on 1 June in Phoka Village, Ninotsminda Municipality. Members of the Holy Synod, clerics and parishioners from different corners of Georgia attend the festival. There is a divine liturgy and those who choose are

baptized in Paravani Lake. Beginning that evening, participants can follow St Nino's footsteps on pilgrimage towards Mtskheta, ending on 13 July at the Mtskhetoba festival.

Jivanoba was established in the twentieth century by the local Armenian population and takes place on the first Saturday in July on Lake Kartsakhi in Akhalkalaki Municipality. Artists, writers, poets and folklore specialists gather to celebrate and share their work.

The Bread Festival is an annual event held in the last week of October. Elkana, the Biological Farming Association, initiated it in 2010 and 2011. In 2021 the festival was held jointly with Elkana and Samtskhe-Javakheti DMO. The festival aims to revive and

promote indigenous varieties of wheat by involving as many farmers as possible and fostering collaborative short agrifood chains.



International Festival of Traditional Crafts Workshops

The traditional Crafts Workshops Festival takes place in Samtskhe-Javakheti at Akhaltsikhe Castle during the summer. It brings together international and local craft workers to show the diversity of crafts and to promote professional craft workers and their skills. During the festival the whole of Akhaltsikhe Castle is transformed into a vibrant and fascinating venue.



Bread Festival, Akhaltsikhe



Tour Guides

Travelling in the region?

Are you looking for local people who can accompany you during your trip, to advise on the very best, unique and attractive places to visit?

Here is a list of reliable, recommended tour guides.

1. Merab Chitashvili is a young tour guide who also manages his own travel company, Matare, www.facebook.com/matareteam +995 595 751441.
2. Aleksig Grigalashvili is a tour guide who also manages a tour company, Abuli Club, +995 599 040452.
3. Giorgi Maghradze, a local guide who is full of enthusiasm and a great lover of his region, +995 591 990171.
4. Shota Beridze is a guide based in Akhaltsikhe Castle who can accompany you throughout your visit to the region, +995 551 044714.



Weather

The climate of Samtskhe-Javakheti is quite diverse due to the landscape of the region. The average annual high temperature is 23°C and the average low is -8°C. The best time to visit the region is from May through September. Samtskhe has a moderately dry, subtropical mountain climate with light snowy winters and warm long summers. Javakheti has a moderately dry climate, with cold winters and long cool summers. The average annual rainfall varies from 490 mm (Mtkvari Gorge) to 1 800 mm (Meskheta Ridge).

Summers are generally hot with dry conditions though mountainous areas have relatively lower temperatures.

Winter is quite cold, especially in Javakheti and in the mountains. Sometimes snow cover reaches 40–50 cm in the highlands.





Currency

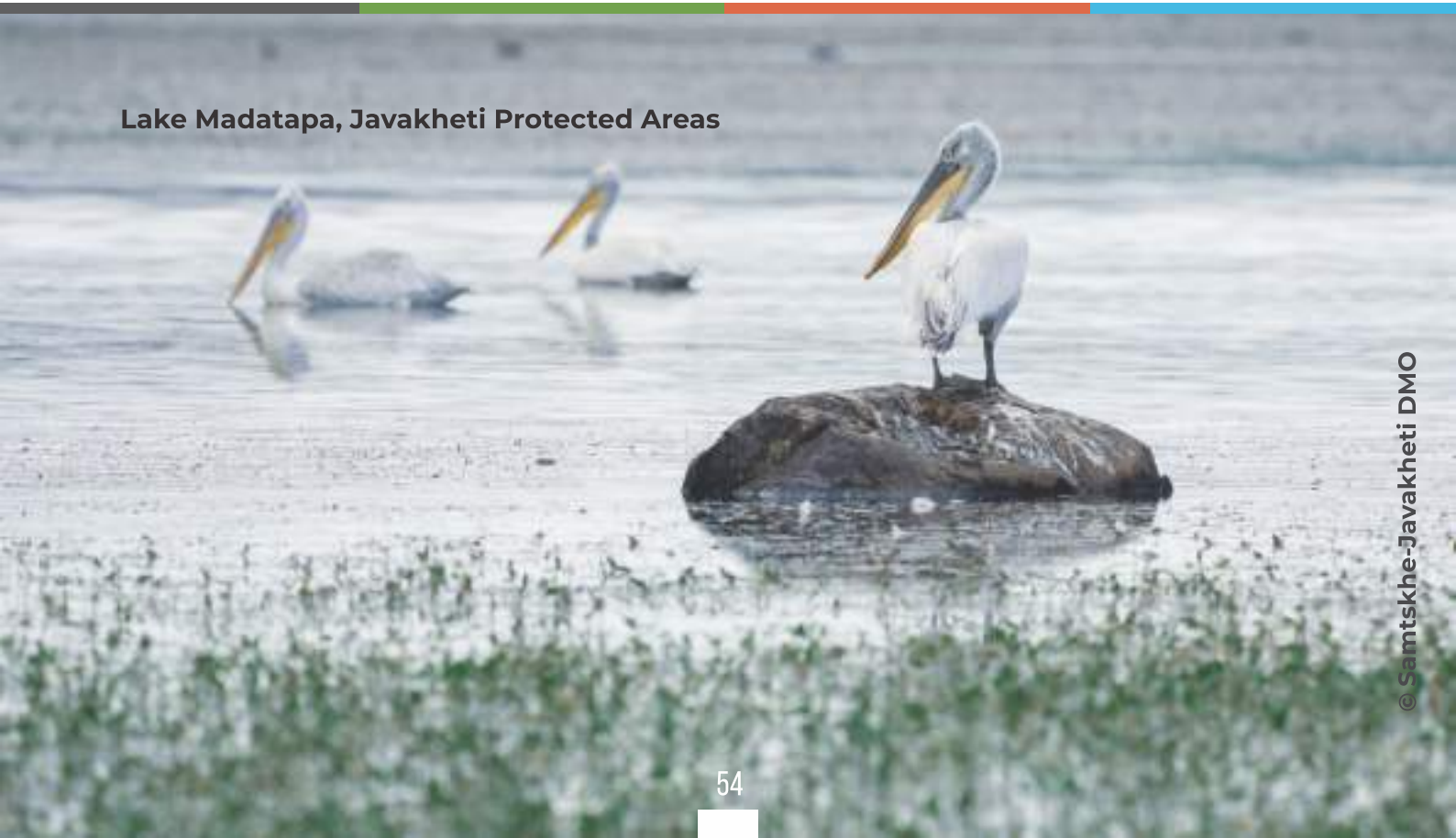
Georgian Lari (GEL) is the Georgian national currency and all payments are made in GEL. Cash is the preferred method of payment especially in the regions and in villages.



Language

The official language of Georgia is Georgian. But in Samtskhe-Javakheti you will meet people talking Armenian or Russian. In the southeast of the region around Akhalkalaki, Armenian is widely spoken, even more than Georgian. But in the rest of the region, Georgian predominate. Russian is also widely spoken, especially by the older generations.

Lake Madatapa, Javakheti Protected Areas



Where to stay



Akhaltzikhe

Hotels

Hotel Tiflis

12, Aspindza str.,
+995 568 111 188
www.facebook.com/hoteltiflis.ge

Tabahall Boutique Hotel

29, Andria Pirveltsodebuli str.,
+995 599 133 433
<https://bit.ly/3l6KN0l>

Gino Wellness Rabath

21, Kharischirashvili str.,
+995 599 880 924
www.gino.ge

Guesthouses

Hotel Beni

5, Kharischirashvili str.,
+995 555 777 200
<https://bit.ly/3nQcdu>

Hotel Terrace Rabath

18, Tsikhisdziri str.,
+995 595 091 133
<https://bit.ly/3xy8gNj>

Millennium Rabati

94, Atoneli str.,
+995 591 953 619
<https://bit.ly/3xkrBB8>

ALMI Hotel Akhaltzikhe

11, Sulkan Saba str.,
+995 598 117 474
<https://bit.ly/3CLHyS5>

Hotel Golden Gate

17, Tsikhisdziri str.,
+995 568 008 042
www.facebook.com/Hotel-golden-gate

Edemi

105a, Rustaveli str.,
+995 599 185 159
www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100006011328102

Tbili Sakhli

33 Gvaramadze str.,
+995 599 937 343
www.facebook.com/placewaitingforyou/

Kantora 19

30 Grigol Khandzteli str.,
+995 592 088 899
<https://www.facebook.com/hotelkantora19>

Klde

Village Klde
+995 555 775 434
<https://www.facebook.com/guesthouseklde>

Nick and George

Village Atskhuri
+995 555 259 355
<https://www.facebook.com/Guesthouse-NickandGeorge>



Agritourism farm Valodia's Cottage

Koriskhevi, Vardzia

+995 599 114 506

<http://accommodationvardzia.ge/>

Hotels

VARDZIARESORT (Hotel Spa Restaurant)

Vardzia

+995 591 321 515

<https://vardziaresort.com/>

Hotel Vardzia Cave

4, Tabidze str., Aspindza

+995 568 906 817

www.facebook.com/vardziacave

Guesthouses

Tirebi

Village Nakalakevi

+995 599 338 871 +995 322 192 095

<https://bit.ly/3cH7CTY>

Tsiskari

Village Tmogvi

+995 598 968 687

Imedi

Village Tmogvi

+995 595 285 750

Hotel Chiko

9, Vardzia str., Aspindza

+995 555 030 088

www.chiko.ge

Taoskari

Vardzia

+995 577 749 996

<https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100057687750146>

Hotel Kala

72, Vardzia str., Aspindza

+995 591 918 862

<https://www.facebook.com/hotelkalaaspindza>



Guesthouses

Flora

Village Sulda

+995 595 211 136

Sulda

Village Sulda

+995 551 084 799



Guesthouses

Family Corner

Village Gandzani

+995 599 148 528

www.facebook.com/FamilyCorner.MS

Madatapa

Village Sameba

+995 568 020 092





Hotels

Abastumani Residence

10, Paliashvili str., Abastumani,
+995 599 182 299
www.facebook.com/hotelabastumaniresidence

Abastumani

1, Asatiani str., Abastumani,
+995 599 939 627
<https://www.facebook.com/hotelabastumani>

Guesthouses

Green Hotel Abastumani

16, Asatiani str., Abastumani,
+995 568 333 636
<https://bit.ly/3JTHV1M>

Villa Abastumani

5, Asatiani str., Abastumani,
+995 599 202 407
<https://www.facebook.com/sastumroabastumanshi/>



Hotels

Borjomis Kheoba

107a, Rustaveli str.,
+995 599 323 247
www.borjomiskheoba.com

Hotel Motion

49, Meskheti str.,
+995 551 772 727
<http://www.hotelmotion.ge>

Hotel Crown Plaza Borjomi

9 Baratashvili str.,
+995 322 221 221
<https://bit.ly/3JZxPfE>

Hotel Golden Tulip Borjomi

48, 9 Aprili str.,
+995 322 880 202
<https://borjomi.goldentulip.com>

Hotel Borjomi Bridge

12b Meskheti str.,
+995 511 101 070
<https://www.facebook.com/HotelBorjomiBridge>

Hotel Borjomi UnderWood

#40 9 April str.,
+995 591 131 112
<https://www.facebook.com/BorjomiUnderWood>

Guesthouses

Hotel Victoria-Panorama

1, Gogias Tsikhe str.,
+995 577 732 002
<https://www.facebook.com/VictoriaPanoramaHotelBorjomi>

If you are looking for farm stays, it is better to make a reservation through Samtskhe-Javakheti Destination Management Organizations or Elkana Rural Tourism Department .
Whatever type of accommodation you go for around the region, you can usually expect excellent hospitality!

Where to eat



Adigeni

Monastris Nobati (Monastery)

Village Ude, Monastery

+995 595 956 475

<http://www.monastrisnobati.ge/>



Akhaltzikhe

Zaza Ivanidze's Agritourism Farm

Village Ghreli

+995 555 347 337

Restaurant Tabla Rabati

1, Kharischirashvili str.,

+995 595 555 635

www.facebook.com/TablaRabat

Mumladze's Marani

Village Atskuri, Akhaltzikhe

+995 595111474

Restaurant Rabath

1, Kharischirashvili str.,

+995 598 920 999

www.facebook.com/restaurantrabath/

Restaurant PUB SG

27, Tamarashvili str.,

+995 574 505 535

www.facebook.com/PUBSGGeorgia

Guesthouse Edemi

105a, Rustaveli str.,

+995 599 185 159

www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100006011328102

Rabati Launge Bar Terrassa

1, Kharischirashvili str.,

+995 599 010 551

www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100039406086342

Restaurant Old Bar Akhaltsikhe

3, Kostava str.,

+995 598 648 064

www.facebook.com/oldbarakhaltsikhe

Bar-Restaurant Lager Brau

10, Saphara str.,

+995 551 556 787

www.facebook.com/LAGER-BR%C3%84U-125490982180037

Bar-Restaurant Golden Time

1, Kharischirashvili str.,

+995 555 538 963

www.facebook.com/goldentimebar

Restaurant Old Pub

2, Orbeliani str.,

+995 365 222 929

www.facebook.com/dzveliduqani.oldpub

Restaurant Emigrant

Village Tsnisi

+995 591 021 102

www.facebook.com/restaurantemigrant



Restaurant Chiko

9a Vardzia str., Aspindza
+995 555 030 088
www.chiko.ge

Guesthouse Tirebi

Village Nakalakevi
+995 599 338 871 +995 322 192 095
<https://bit.ly/3cH7CTY>

Agritourism farm Valodia's Cottages

Koriskhevi, Vardzia
+995 599 114 506
<http://accommodationvardzia.ge>

Brewery Amphora Beer

Village Aspindza, Zedgenidze's family
+995 599 946 500
www.amphorabeer.com

Hotel Spa Restaurant VARDZIARESORT

Vardzia
+995 591 321 515
www.vardziaresort.com



Restaurant Pesvebi

3, Erekle str.,
+995 367 221 702
www.facebook.com/Restaurant.Pesvebi

Khachapuridze's Marani

Village Kvakhiskhevi, Khachapuridze family,
+995 551 13 64 68

Restaurant Loko

9 str, Chavchavadze., Akhaldaba,
+995 599 228 514
www.facebook.com/loqorestaurant

Restaurant Metropol

Kostava str,
+995 595 140 180
www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100063763110535&ref=page_internal

Café Inka

2, 9 Aprili str,
+995 599 978 872
www.facebook.com/INKACAFE

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Fax: (+995 32) 237 8048
FAO-GE@fao.org
<https://www.fao.org/georgia/fao-in-georgia/en/>

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
Tbilisi, Georgia

Association ELKANA
61 Gazapkhuli St., 0186 Tbilisi, Georgia
Phone: +995 32 2536487
www.elkana.org.ge

Samtskhe-Javakheti DMO
1 Kharischirashvili St., 0800 Akhaltsikhe, Georgia
Phone: +995 577773221
www.visitsj.ge

