

POLITICALTOURS

Travel beyond the headlines

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Georgia

Dates: 9 nights

October 2019, Saturday 5th to Monday 14th

Tbilisi, Batumi, Svaneti, Kakheti

with Dima Bit-Suleiman & Nicholas Wood

Georgia has been through numerous incarnations since the collapse of the Soviet Union. We track its progress from Communism to the Rose Revolution, from Mikheil Saakashvili 's controversial presidency to the ill-fated conflict with Russia. To this day not one but two Russian satellite states sit within its borders. How does it cope?

Our tour goes from West to East, from the Black Sea port of Batumi, past the breakaway state of Abkhazia and the Caucasus mountains that divide Georgia from Russia, and on to Gori, the birth place of Stalin. We then skirt the borders of Georgia's second breakaway state, South Ossetia before spending time in the capital Tbilisi to speak with the nations leading analysts and politicians. We end in Khakheti famed for its vineyards – during the wine harvest – where we look back over the tour.

There is a heady political mix at the heart of this tour; Georgia's uneasy relationship with Russia and its aspiration for both EU and NATO membership – all that is combined with stunning scenery and legendary Georgian hospitality.

Price: £4900.00

Single Supplement: £500.00

Most meals and all accommodation are included in the price. Flights are not included and need to be arranged with your own travel agent. We will advise you as to which flights best fit the itinerary nearer to the tour.

Like all our tours the itinerary is focused on current affairs. Events on the ground may change and the final schedule may be adjusted accordingly.

Itinerary

Day One – Saturday October 5 – Batumi

Our tour starts on Saturday evening with a walk around Batumi and its main boulevard. At dinner we get an introduction to the week ahead and look at Georgian politics today with our tour expert Dima Bit-Suleiman and Political Tours founder Nicholas Wood.

(There are flights to Batumi via Istanbul, Turkey and Kiev, Ukraine as well as via Tbilisi on the previous day)

Overnight in Batumi

Day Two – Sunday October 6 – Batumi – History and Economic Ambitions.

Batumi promotes itself as being the heart of the Georgian Riviera – it's attracted investment with Doha-like skyscrapers popping up on its beautiful shoreline. With massive Chinese and Kazakh investment in a major deep-sea port, Georgia hopes to make it a key hub on the Silk Route between Asia and Europe. But its fortunes are still tied to uneasy relations with Russia. We'll meet local leaders, ordinary Georgians and an economic analyst who maps out Georgia's prospects.

Overnight in Batumi

Day Three – Monday October 7 – Poti and Abkhazia

Drive to Poti – a major port city on the Black Sea with an operational Free Economic Zone. Meeting with the supervisor's board and port director. Drive to Inguri Hydro Power Plant modelled on the Hoover Dam that straddles the boundary between Abkhazia and the rest of Georgia – the second highest dam in the world. The enormous complex is managed by Russian backed Abkhazia and Georgia and sheds light on relations between the two sides. Both countries share power from the dam, but it is in bad need of repair. Drive to Zugdidi – we meet with internally displaced people from the conflict in Abkhazia. Abkhazia is now firmly allied with Russia and their prospect of return almost 30 years later seems unlikely. Late arrival in Kutaisi.

Overnight in Kutaisi

Day Four – Tuesday October 8 – Kutaisi, Stalin's Legacy, and South Ossetia

Kutaisi is one of the ancient cities of the region and was

the capital of the United Kingdom of Georgia. Visit the new Georgian parliament to meet parliamentarians and to discuss the idea behind building the parliament in Kutaisi – a very controversial project. After morning discussions we look around the city and drive to Gori, birthplace of Stalin. We examine the continued admiration for the Georgian born Stalin at the Occupation Museum (Formerly Stalin Museum). In Gori we begin to examine the consequences of the 2008 war. Visit to communities forced out of their homes by the conflict. *Overnight in Gori*

Day Five – Wednesday October 9 – The Legacy of the 2008 Conflict

We visit the villages near line of contact with South Ossetia. We explore the causes of the war and see first hand the new and creeping border that Russia's allies in the territory have erected. We visit a family of IDPs (internally displaced people) who still live in settlements erected shortly after the invasion. Our guide who covered the conflict and was in the midst of the action when Russian tanks rolled in explains what has changed since 2008 and discusses the chances of Russia invading again. Drive to Tbilisi. Talks with media representatives and briefings on key political issues facing government today. *Overnight in Tbilisi*

Day Six – Thursday October 10 Media Briefings – What Next for Georgia?

The tour starts with a walking tour of the Tbilisi old and new. We visit the old city centre in a steep valley, get a sense of geography and overview of how the city has developed and changed since the collapse of the Soviet Union. There will be a visit to the Justice Palace, a symbol of success of Georgia's Rose Revolution which Mikheil Saakashvili tried to recreate during his stint as Governor of Odessa in Ukraine, where Georgians can get a new passport, buy property, register deaths or births all in a matter of hours. At lunch a leading local journalist gives us an update on recent events in the country. Visit in the afternoon to the Georgia Museum, including the Museum of Soviet Occupation, which has copious detail on the era. *Overnight in Tbilisi*

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Day Seven – Friday October 11 – Government

In the morning we meet groups from both government and opposition. How do they assess relations with Russia and how realistic are their ambitions for NATO and EU membership? Later we'll go up to the Narikala Fortress to look at the neighbourhood and the surreal palace of Georgia's richest man – İbidzina Ivanishvili. Ivanishvili succeeded at ousting Mikheil Saakashvili in an election in 2012. Today he is Georgia's Godfather. For some he is a saviour figure, for others he is a danger greater than the Kremlin. We look at the legacy of the city's mayor, Davit Narmania, a controversial figure, who is coming in for criticism for failing to protect the city's heritage. Dinner LITERA, Tbilisi's writers club. *Overnight In Tbilisi*

Day Eight – Saturday 12 October & Day Nine – Sunday 13 October – Tbilisi – Occupation line – South Ossetia

Our last two nights are spent in Georgia's wine region – it's harvest time. We'll learn about the industry – which ironically received a boost after the conflict in 2008 when Russia banned Georgian imports. Georgia found new international markets, tourism is also booming in Georgia and is now a key element in state economic planning. We look back over the tour at our final dinner. *Overnight in Kakheti*

Day Ten – Monday 14 October – Tours Ends

Tour ends after breakfast in Kakheti.

There will be return transport to Tbilisi.

Transfers to the airport as well as additional hotel reservations can be arranged through Political Tours.

Tour Expert

Dima Bit-Suleiman has almost two decades of experience as a journalist and producer for many international TV companies including ITN, CNN, National Geographic and BBC. Born in the Soviet Union, Dima grew up in one of the most corrupt countries in the world, but after 2003 he saw Georgia change from a failing state into a regional leader. The 2003 Rose Revolution, led by Mikheil Saakashvili challenged the post-Soviet order of nepotism and corruption, transformed the country, inspired uprisings elsewhere (including Orange Revolution in Ukraine) and infuriated Moscow. Dima didn't just witness these changes; he took part in them. In 2005 he worked for the national security council under President Mikheil Saakashvili and was part of a small team that prepared for the historic George W Bush visit to Georgia.