

The cream of the Caucasus

Joanna Booth joined an Explore fam trip to Georgia to discover why you should send clients now

The music is mesmerising. The complex vocal harmonies rise and fall, intertwine and almost jar before chiming into accord. The church is nearly empty – just a handful of congregants among the gilded saints and flickering candles. The vaulted ceiling rises high above us, a shaft of light from a narrow window illuminating drifting motes of dust.

Outside, swallows dart and chirrup in a cloudless sky, and we amble alongside a walled vineyard – a living museum of traditional grape varieties,

tended by monks. Friendly dogs outnumber tourists. Here at the rural Alaverdi Monastery, tranquillity is easy to find.

The Georgian countryside in spring is astoundingly beautiful. Drive out of the capital, Tbilisi, and tower blocks soon give way to verdant valleys. Rainbows of wildflowers blow in the meadows and you'll see more cows than Costa Coffees. Flocks of sheep are still guarded by shepherds with crooks, and fertile fields yield grapes, sunflowers and wheat. It feels as if we've travelled back in time. ➤

DESTINATIONS

ESCORTED TOURS | GEORGIA

HIGHLIGHTS OF GEORGIA

🌟 **Tbilisi:** The capital's compact Old Town is easily walkable. Book a session in a bathhouse and soak in the natural hot-spring water, ride the cable car for the best views of the city – for just 70p – and make the most of the thriving nightlife.

🌟 **Kakheti:** Enjoy the panorama from the hilltop town of Signaghi, taste the local wine, visit the tranquil Alaverdi Monastery and stop at Tsinandali – an idyllic ducal country estate.

🌟 **Cave cities:** Clamber around inside Vardzia and Uplistsikhe, ancient hidden cities hewn into the mountainside.

🌟 **Gori:** Learn about the life of Josef Stalin in the town of his birth, which has a museum dedicated to him.

🌟 **Akhaltikhe:** Here the Rabati Castle complex houses an ancient mosque, a towering fortress and an interesting museum.

🌟 **Stepantsminda:** In the High Caucasus mountains, the Gergeti Trinity Church sits above this village. Stop off at the Russia-Georgia Friendship Monument, which has sweeping views over the Devil's Valley.

BOOK IT

Explore's nine-day Discover Georgia trip starts at £1,399 including flights, bed-and-breakfast accommodation, some other meals and the services of a guide.
explore.co.uk



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Explore's agent group; freshly made churchkhela; khachapuri; Tbilisi

PICTURES: Explore; Shutterstock; Joanna Booth



GEORGIA ON MY MIND

Tourism to this destination, set at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, is growing exponentially – visitor numbers are predicted to rise from seven million last year to 11 million by the end of 2019.

The capital, Tbilisi, is a thriving, modern metropolis, where tourists are attracted by techno clubs as much as traditional culture. And the bustle isn't just reserved for the cities. In contrast to the peace of the Alaverdi Monastery, when we visit Jvari Church, one of Georgia's holiest Orthodox sites, we're surrounded by coachloads of people. Though the views from outside this domed church, set high on a cliff above the town of Mtskheta, are still breathtaking, inside, the peace is shattered.

While it is still far from mainstream, Georgia is on the brink of becoming very popular, in adventure tourism terms. It's little wonder. With distinctive culture, colourful history, immense natural beauty, write-home-about cuisine and genuinely warm hospitality on offer, its success was inevitable. But to show your clients the destination at its very best, it's important to choose the right trip. Look for a small-group tour, and one that mixes well-known highlights with off-the-beaten track gems, so that they see Georgia without the crowds.

LOSE THE CROWDS

Travelling with adventure tour specialist Explore, this is exactly what the agents and I enjoy. With an average

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group size of 12, the operator uses small, comfortable minibuses, capable of squeezing down narrow country lanes and up winding mountain passes. In Tbilisi, we stay in small boutique hotels, and outside the city, in comfortable guesthouses, enjoying the hospitality of the local population – and their exquisite home cooking.

Most significantly, we're able to enjoy experiences that would be impractical for larger groups. In the Kakheti region, we're welcomed into a family smallholding for one of the best alfresco lunches of our lives, and taught by sisters Nona and Manana how to make bread and churchkhela, a local snack. We visit Zaza, an artisan who keeps the tradition of making wine in gigantic clay pots alive, not only harvesting his own grapes, but also building and firing the qevvri vessels themselves in a kiln in his back garden.

In the small town of Telavi, we easily negotiate the narrow corridors of the covered market, sniffing spices and trying samples of the myriad varieties of local cheese. ➤

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ABOVE
AND LEFT:
Gergity Trinity
Church;
Alaverdi
Monastery

PICTURES: Shutterstock

ALL THE ANSWERS

At every turn, our Explore guide Giorgi is on hand to help. Endlessly patient and hugely passionate about his country, we feel we've made a new friend. We're given beyond-the-guidebook information, with local culture explained, historic events set in context, and – crucially, in this extremely food-focused country – menus successfully negotiated.

We chat about the influence of the Eastern Orthodox Church, LGBT rights, the education system and the current administration, and hear this Silk Route destination's complicated history – conquered by Mongols, Ottomans, Byzantines, Persians and, finally, Russians, before seceding from the Soviet Union in 1991.

In Gori, at the Stalin Museum, Giorgi gives us the unedited life of one of Georgia's most famous

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sons – in stark contrast to the hagiographic version of Josef on offer from the museum staff.

And it's from Giorgi that we pick up an essential Georgian life skill. The local brandy, chacha, can appear at any time of day, from late at night in one of Tbilisi's bars to the breakfast buffet in every hotel. Its properties are considered medicinal, almost miraculous, so we learn to fill our shot glasses, raise them skywards and say 'gaumarjos'. Here's to you, Georgia. [TW](#)



Kirsty Overson,
Althams Travel, Burnley

"I loved the warm hospitality of the Georgian people and the exquisite food and drink. With its breathtaking scenery, I'd recommend Georgia to people who enjoy adventure and photography."

Liz Murphy,
Discover Travel, Dungarvan

"Exploring the cave town of Vardzia was a highlight: more than 3,000 dwellings with bakeries, secret tunnels and churches, and amazing views from the top. For any wine lovers, a visit to the Kakheti region is a must – you can even get wine ice cream."

Seyyare Beyzade,
Diplomat Travel, London

"Spring is a wonderful time to visit, as wild flowers grow naturally along the high roads. It was wonderful to see the locals in Tbilisi holding bunches that had clearly been freshly cut from the fields that morning."



☛ **Khachapuri:** These flatbreads stuffed with cheese are doughy, salty and delicious – the quintessential Georgian fast food.

☛ **Khinkali:** Eating these meaty dumplings is art. First nibble a hole in the top and slurp out the soupy broth before devouring the rest.

☛ **Pkhali:** In Georgia, walnut goes with everything. Spinach, beetroot and carrots are made into rough pates with garlic and walnuts.

☛ **Churchkhela:** Hanging up on roadside stalls, you could mistake these for sausages or even candles, but they are strings of nuts dipped in grape juice.