

FROM GEORGIA *with love*



Louise Quick takes us on a tour of the Georgian capital Tbilisi with these ten experiences to see, do and, most importantly, eat

Georgia is quickly rising in the ranks as a must-visit destination for travellers of all kinds. Connecting Europe and Asia, this small country is packed with impressive historic sites, quality winter skiing and more delicious national delicacies than you can shake a khachapuri at, (more on those later).

While the whole country is worth exploring, a perfect weekend getaway can be found in Tbilisi, Georgia's charming, ancient and captivating capital. The city runs deep with a history of invading

forces, creative revolutionaries, and a true passion for national dishes.

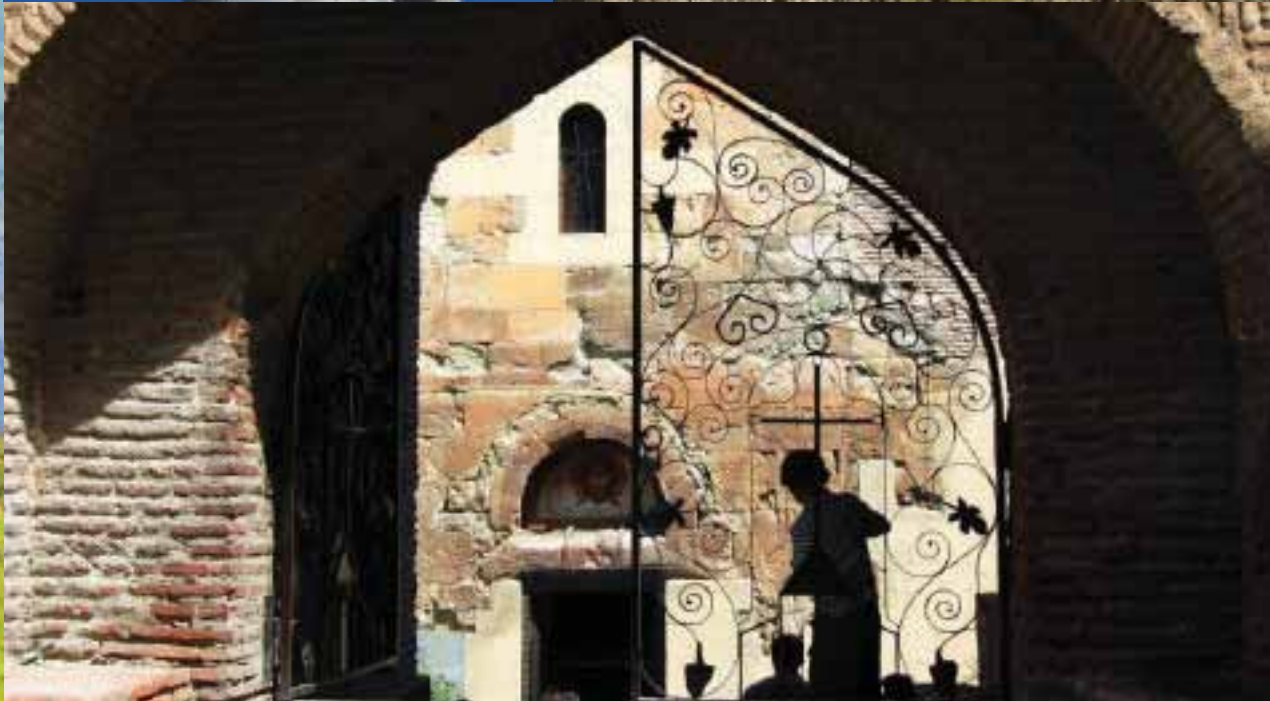
Built on the Mtkvari River, which carves its way through Georgia's ragged mountains, Tbilisi is a patchwork of grand facades and crumbling balconied buildings leaning precariously over pot-holed roads. Its old quarters are dotted with churches, forts and ruins, while walls everywhere are adorned with graffiti.

It is a city with endless stories to tell and a passion to share them. But, just in case, here are ten experiences not to miss.



Clockwise: Georgian countryside; Mother Georgia; Metekhi Church; Anchiskhati Basilica; Tbilisi Narikala View; Narikala Fortress by night





VISIT METEKHI

On an outcrop overlooking the river, Metekhi is where Tbilisi all began, which conveniently makes it a great spot to start exploring the city. In the fifth century, King Vakhtang Gorgasali chose this spot for his city, a decision that's marked today with a modern statue of the warrior king triumphantly surveying his city.

The historic district used to house a mighty royal fort, but today only Metekhi Church remains standing. Built in the 13th century on the grounds of its predecessor, the tall boxy structure has had many incarnations, including Soviet barracks.

Its long and tumultuous history can be seen in its varied brickwork while, inside, the air is thick with incense and the walls are decked in elaborate golden murals, which tell tales of great battles and religious figures.

CLIMB NARIKALA FORTRESS

The Tbilisi history field trip continues across the Metekhi Bridge and up the hillside to Narikala Fortress. Originally built as a Persian fortress, sadly only its shell remains, which juts out of the hillside protectively over Tbilisi's old town.

From Rike Park, a modern patch of green on the opposite side of the river, a nifty cable car sends visitors flying into the air above the city at an angle that has some gripping their seats, before dropping them directly outside the fort. Alternatively, if you can handle the burn, the quirky residential streets and steep stairways beneath the fort lead up the hillside.

St Nicholas Church is one building that remains intact, but is actually little more than 20 years old, built as a replica following an explosion that saw the original destroyed. More worthwhile are the sweeping city views that are to be gained from clambering atop Narikala's rocky walls.

MEET MOTHER GEORGIA

A short stroll from Narikala Fortress takes in stalls selling souvenirs and local painters' handiwork before reaching Mother Georgia, or Kartlis Deda. The gleaming aluminium statue of a matriarch standing tall over the city skyline juxtaposes, almost jarringly, the ancient stone walls of its neighbouring ruins.

Locals appear to have mixed feelings about the domineering

Clock wise: Architecture features of Tbilisi sulphur baths; Meat counter at the Bazaar; Khinkali; Local seller at Tbilisi Market; Exhibit at Georgia Musuem; Rose Square Garden

figure, built in 1958 under the occupying Soviet forces to commemorate Tbilisi's 1500th anniversary. It's hard, however, not to be endeared by the powerful female, who stands with a cup of wine in one hand and a sword in the other. She makes the perfect metaphor for Georgia: proudly welcoming guests while also passionately defending its land.

MUSEUM OF GEORGIA

Rustaveli Avenue is the mighty central artery running through the city. Its wide pavements are lined with trees and dotted with makeshift stalls peddling keepsakes, snacks and vintage books while locals play the odd game of chess in the small parks nearby.

The avenue is also home the city's grand-fronted buildings, including the Museum of Georgia. The lofty space is often quiet in the mornings, allowing visitors to make the most of the fascinating, and sometimes obscure, exhibitions that cover a variety – from recently unearthed ancient Georgian archaeology to medieval Middle Eastern fine art.

However, if there's one exhibition every visitor must make a bee-line for, it's the Soviet Occupation exhibit. Georgia only gained independence in 1991 after seven decades of occupation. While the country's history tends to get lost in the loud buzz of the Cold War, this display hammers home what, for many Georgians, is a very recent, relevant and important period.

THE NATIONAL GALLERY

Allow a good hour to absorb the regional artwork on display at The National Gallery, also found along Rustaveli Avenue. Some of the art hails from as far back as the fourth century and it's an opportunity to learn of some highly regarded Georgian artists and creative revolutionaries.

The gallery's permanent collection paints a picture of Georgia's past that we might otherwise never discover. This includes the work of famous primitivism painter Niko Pirosmani. His scenes of Georgian people, animals and feasts highlight the everyday life of rural Georgia at the turn of the 19th century.

Pirosmani shares gallery space with other Georgian creatives, such as the bright and beautiful landscapes of modernist artist David Kakabadze, the quirky characters of painter Lado Gudishvili and sculptures by Iakob Nikoladze.

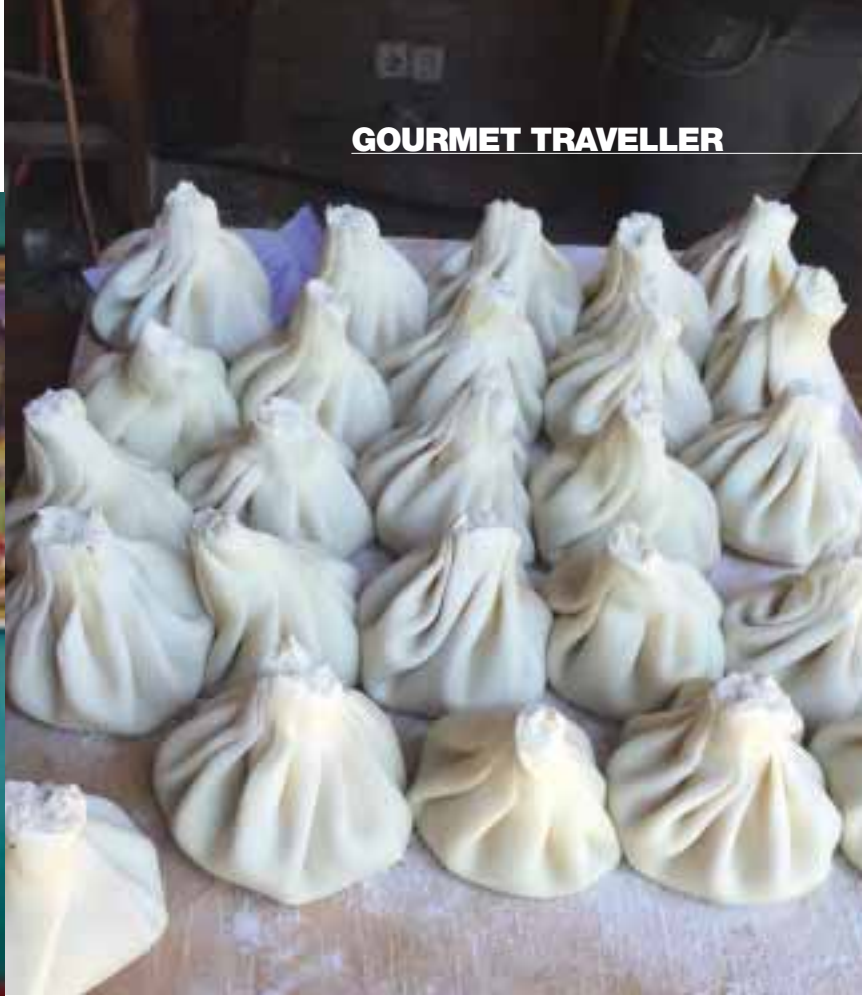
CLIMB MOUNT MTATSMINDA

Tbilisi is full of surprises and great views. For both, head to the peak of Mount Mtatsminda via its funicular. With glimpses of the city peeking through the trees, the cliff railway crawls up the hillside at an unnervingly steep angle for 500 metres.

Literary fans hop off at its halfway point in order to visit the Pantheon of Writers and Public Figures of Georgia. As the title reveals, this noble necropolis holds the graves of the country's finest writers, including the famous poets Nikoloz Baratashvili and Galaktion Tabidze.

Continue to the top and, alongside panoramic views, there is a surprisingly large and unexpected amusement park. Complete with Ferris Wheel, roller coaster, haunted house and log fume ride, the landscaped park and shady tree-lined avenues are home to teens whiling away an afternoon and picnicking families. It's not exactly what you'd expect atop a mountain in central Tbilisi, but adds to its charm nonetheless.





TAKE A BATH

Legends say that King Vakhtang Gorgasali chose his city or, rather, his hunting falcon inadvertently did after it fought with a pheasant and both plummeted into a natural hot spring. The same hot spring still runs today in Tbilisi's Abanotubani district where, nearby, stands a small statue dedicated to those ill-fated birds.

The word Tbilisi actually comes from the old Georgian for 'warm' and its natural spring has played a vital role in its long history. The therapeutic waters were popular with traders passing along the Silk Road and in the 13th century there were said to be 63 baths here.

Today, only a handful of bath houses remain open to the public. Old brick domes rise out of the ground and, inside, light streams in through mosaic walls and ceilings, but these bath houses are far from five-star luxury and instead offer tried-and-tested experiences.

EAT KHINKALI

Georgia is a fiercely patriotic country with a true passion for its own food and drink. As such, its capital has a surprisingly superior food scene, serving up a colourful plate-load of delicious dishes, packed with plenty of veg thanks to the numerous meat-free fasting days in the orthodox Georgian calendar.

Every visitor should wander the city's markets and cafes, exploring the morsels on offer and using locals' plates as inspiration. But there are two delicacies that are essential on any visit to Georgia. The first: khinkali.

There's a reason these chunky parcels resemble far-east dumplings. Khinkali are said to have become a Georgian staple following invading Mongol forces in the 13th century. Originally adopted by shepherds in the surrounding mountain regions, the dumplings are commonly filled with a herby beef mince broth. Nowadays there's a whole host of fillings, including cheese, mushrooms and mashed potato.

Do as the locals do by ordering plenty, using the top knot of dough as a handy grip and, once finished, discarding them on the plates so the waiters can keep count.





Left: The Bridge of Peace. Below, top-to-bottom: Tbilisi Oldtown Church; Adjarian khachapuri; Cable car over town



EAT KHACHAPURI

Health-conscious eaters should look away now. The classic adjarian khachapuri is essentially a fluffy bread 'boat' filled with a generous helping of cheese, butter and topped with fried eggs.

Dipping the torn bread into the gooey middle, khachapuri is undeniably delicious, well worth the inevitable guilty greasy feelings and makes perfect fuel for exploring the streets of old town.

Tbilisi's passion for local produce extends to its drinks and both these national favourites are improved with a glass of Georgia's finest, made from the vineyards in the surrounding countryside.

TAKE A WALK

Tbilisi is somewhere to be enjoyed on foot and, with a city-load of residents passionate about their capital, it makes sense that visitors have several free walking tours to choose from.

For a history-packed stroll book a private walk with Kartveli Tours. It takes in Tbilisi's old town, starting at Metekhi church, where you meet your Georgian guide, before exploring Narikala Fortress, the bath houses and Freedom Square, where stands the gleaming golden monument to St George.

Alternatively, tag along on one with Tbilisi Free Walking Tour. The company promises to run from Freedom Square at midday and 5pm, rain or shine, and over three hours the stroll takes in the old – the bath houses and old city wall – to the city's more modern side.



Getting there

TRAVEL

The local currency is the Georgian Lari, Tbilisi is GMT +4 hours (same time as UAE). Flying time from Dubai to Tbilisi is about 3½ hours

flydubai offers between 2 & 3 direct flights from Dubai to Tbilisi Airport each day flydubai.com

TOP TIP

Don't stop at Tbilisi – there's loads to see in Georgia, from intriguing cave villages and the natural beauty of the Black Sea coast.



Words: Louise Quick Images: Louise Quick, iStock, Food and Travel Arabia