Women’s Travel Group:
The South Caucasus Between Europe and Asia
Azerbaijan • Georgia • Armenia
April 2-13, 2022

This trip includes three countries, situated between Asia and Europe. All three are relatively new to tourism. Armenia was the world’s first Christian nation. Georgia’s mountainous remote villages lead to Black Sea resorts. Azerbaijan’s Silk Route paths dip to the Caspian Sea and include walled towns ruled by Shahs. Along the way are UNESCO Heritage sites, market towns, Greco Roman ruins, stone monasteries, snow capped mountains and vineyards. We promise you delicious food and fine wines that are exclusive to the region. The Caucasus have been populated by Jews, Christians and Moslems and are today a fascinating crossroad of cultures. This is an unspoiled area to see today.

Phyllis Stoller will join the group.

$4,599 per person double occupancy based on 10+ travelers   Deposit $600
$850 single supplement.   Room shares guaranteed if booked by August 1, 2021, then first come, first serve

Overview Daily Itinerary
Day 1, Sat, Apr 2   Depart USA
Day 2, Sun, Apr 3   Arrive Baku, Azerbaijan
Day 3, Mon, Apr 4   Baku
Day 4, Tue, Apr 5   Baku • drive to Sheki
Day 5, Wed, Apr 6   Sheki
Day 6, Thu, Apr 7   Sheki • drive to Telavi, Georgia
Day 7, Fri, Apr 8   Telavi • drive to Tbilisi
Day 8, Sat, Apr 9   Tbilisi
Day 9, Sun, Apr 10  Tbilisi • drive to Yerevan, Armenia
Day 10, Mon, Apr 11  Yerevan
Day 11, Tue, Apr 12  Yerevan
Day 12, Wed, Apr 13  Depart Yerevan

**One can add layovers: Frankfurt, Dubai and Doha are convenient options. MIR & The Women’s Travel Group can send suggested layover itineraries + pricing.

Descriptive Daily Itinerary

Day 1, Sat, Apr 2  Depart USA
Depart on international flights bound for Baku, Azerbaijan.  *Meals: in flight*

Day 2, Sun, Apr 3  Arrive Baku, Azerbaijan
Upon arrival in Baku, transfer to our centrally located hotel.  *Meals: in flight*

*Shah Palace Hotel or similar*
*The boutique Shah Palace Hotel is located in the Old Town, and features a fine restaurant with terrace dining, a cafe and a stylish wine bar, as well as a fitness center with sauna and Turkish bath. The elegant rooms include satellite TV, air conditioning, WiFi, minibar, tea and coffee set, in-room safe, bathrobes and hair dryer.*

Day 3, Mon, Apr 4  Baku
This morning a walking tour of Baku’s Old Town - the best place to picture its history. It is completely encircled by old city walls with medieval gates. The winding streets and alleyways are home to private residences, mosques and madrassahs, carpet merchants and tiny shops. The aura of the past that permeates the town with surprising glimpses of a bygone era.

On a hill above the walled Old Town, the Shirvan Shah Palace complex is part of a UNESCO World Heritage Site, along with the Maiden Tower and the Old Town itself. Founded in the 13th century, most of the Shirvan Shah complex was built in the 15th century. Encompassing the royal residence, mosques and tombs, the complex is a highlight of Azerbaijani architecture.

The vivid colors and bold designs of Azeri, Caucasian and Iranian carpets are on display at the National Museum of Azerbaijani Carpets, a modern building designed to resemble a rolled-up carpet. The extensive collection of wonderful carpets dates back to the 16th century. Learn how traditional Azerbaijani carpets are woven of naturally-dyed wool and cotton as weavers give demonstrations of traditional techniques. Regional differences and stylistic details are highlighted, revealing how handwoven carpets unite practical
value, artistic merit, historical significance and beauty. In 2010 UNESCO added the traditional art of weaving Azerbaijani carpets to the list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

Tour the interior of the **Heydar Aliyev Cultural Center**, the swooping architectural work that has become a landmark of modern Baku. Opened in 2012, the center was named after Azerbaijan's leader, and includes an innovative performing arts auditorium and spaces for major art exhibitions. The 619,000-square-foot building was designed by famed Iraqi-British architect Zaha Hadid, one of the most influential female architects of the 20th and 21st century and award-winning master behind such buildings as the London Aquatics Center, the Rosenthal Center for Contemporary Art in Cincinnati, Ohio, and the Guangzhou Opera House in China.

Gather this evening for a **festive welcome dinner.**  *Meals: B, L, D*

**Day 4, Tue, Apr 5**  **Baku • drive to Sheki**
Head overland past Baku’s oilfields to **Shemakha**. A renowned grape growing and winemaking district, Shemakha was the major commercial center of western Azerbaijan. Present-day Shemakha is known for its finely woven carpets and the 10th-century Djuma Mosque, the oldest mosque in the Caucasus. Stop here for lunch and **explore the town**, passing by the recently completed Friday Mosque, built on the site of one of the oldest mosques in the Caucasus.

Continue on in the afternoon, arriving to Sheki in time for dinner and overnight.  *Meals: B, L, D*

**Sheki Saray Hotel**
One of the most modern hotels in Sheki, the Sheki Saray offers rooms furnished in earth tones with modern, comfortable furniture. Each room is equipped with satellite TV, free wifi, climate control, a minibar, and private balcony. The Shebeke Restaurant is becoming known in town for its gourmet regional and European cuisine. Guests can also relax at the Buta Bar, a full bar/lounge.

**Day 5, Wed, Apr 6**  **Sheki**
Sheki is one of the oldest towns in Azerbaijan, claiming to have been founded some 2,700 years ago. Set in the foothills of the Greater Caucasus and surrounded by beech and oak forests, Sheki was moved in 1772 after a terrible mudslide destroyed the original town.

Embark on a walking tour of the town, exploring some of its small gems including the local crafts market, where old-fashioned manufacturing is alive and stop in at a local bakery to sample baklava or halvah. The **Historic City of Sheki** was added to the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2019. It is home to a well-preserved khan's palace (also a UNESCO World Heritage Site) with 500-year-old trees in its rose garden. The town is renowned for its carpets and its special type of sweet halvah.

Visit the mosaic-covered **khan's summer palace** with its brilliant stained glass work, called shebeke, and the fortress that surrounds the palace. The beautiful building was declared a UNESCO World
Heritage Site in 2019. Small museums focusing on crafts and history can be found within the complex.

Continue to Kish Village. On the bank of the River Kish, little Kish Village is all that remains of the original Sheki before the 18th century mudslide. Since 1998, archaeologists have been excavating near a 6th century Albanian church that survived the slide. The oldest discoveries are ceramics dating from the Early Bronze Age about 3000 BC.

Return to Sheki at the end of the day. Meals: B, L, D

Day 6, Thu, Apr 7 Sheki • drive to Telavi, Georgia
Get an early start and head overland towards the Georgian border. At the border, meet our Georgian guide and driver, and continue to the Kakheti grape growing region of Georgia.

Stop in Tibaani Vineyards, owned by the Pheasant’s Tears Winery based in Signagi. Enjoy a chance to walk through the vineyards, see where grapes are grown, and visit the cellars where the grapes are macerated and aged in huge ceramic vessels lined with beeswax. Called qvevri, these clay jugs have been used for winemaking for over 8,000 years. Learn about the techniques of making rich Georgian wine using this natural method. Afterwards enjoy lunch and a wine tasting at the Crazy Pomegranate Restaurant on site.

This afternoon, explore Signagi. King Erekle II constructed a defensive wall around the hill-town of Signagi in the 18th century. Its towers were named for the surrounding villages, and the townspeople were meant to gather at their tower in times of trouble. Wander the narrow streets and admire the richly carved balconies and the green valleys below.

A little over a mile from Signagi is 9th century Bodbe Nunnery, where St. Nino is buried. It is said that toward the end of her life she lived as a hermit in the Bodbe Gorge, and died here. The working convent overlooks the Alazani valley, and was used as a coronation venue by the kings of Kakheti. Its main basilica features some fine frescoes, and its surrounding gardens are refreshing. Some of the nuns here may speak English.

Continue on to Telavi for dinner and overnight. Meals: B, L, D

*Chateau Mere or similar*

*The Château Meré complex near Telavi features a nice restaurant, swimming pool and gift shop as well as a winery and stables. The spacious guest rooms are fitted with antique-style furniture and include*
all the usual amenities, rounded out by complimentary WiFi.

Day 7, Fri, Apr 8  Telavi • drive to Tbilisi
Visit the Alaverdi Monastery and Cathedral, one of the tallest churches in Georgia and, in its simplicity, one of the most striking. One of the 13 Syrian Fathers, Joseph of Alaverdi, established the first church here. The village of Alvani is a gateway to the spectacular mountainous province of Tusheti. This region is known for its carpets and hand-woven stockings.

Stop in at the workshop of a ceramicist who makes qvevri, the 200 to 900-gallon earthenware vessels used for Georgian wines. Because of the increasing interest in natural traditional-made wines, the demand for qvevri has increased greatly in recent years. The ceramicist will demonstrate and explain the qvevri-making process and present the resulting vessels.

Walk through the town of Telavi, the administrative and cultural center of Georgia’s wine-growing region, Kakheti. The town has been in existence from at least the 1st century, when it was a stop on one of the trade routes from the Middle East to Europe. Telavi is home to the only well-preserved palace in Georgia, the 17th century castle of Herekle II.

Enjoy a visit to the home of chef Sopo Gorgadze for lunch. Her husband makes four different types of cheese from their cow and goats, using French and Italian technology. They make about 10 kilos of cheese a day, including their specialty, Bona, made from pasteurized goat cheese and named after their first goat, Bona. Enjoy creative fresh-cooked meals featuring their cheeses and produce.

Tsinandali Village is best known for the family estate of Alexander Chavchavadze, located near here. A 19th century Georgian aristocrat and poet, Chavchavadze managed to serve admirably in the Imperial Russian army during the times he wasn’t fighting Russia for Georgian independence. His estate was a center of the intellectual life of the time. Here he and his father founded the first and foremost winery in the country, which still produces the dry white Tsinandali wine. His mansion has been transformed into a museum in honor of the poet and hero.

End the day with dinner in Tbilisi. Meals: B, L, D

Marriott Courtyard Hotel or similar
Located in the city center within walking distance of galleries, gardens, museums and other popular attractions, the four star Marriott Courtyard Hotel offers spacious and comfortable accommodations. All rooms include wireless Internet, individual climate control, ironing board, safe and hair dryer. Enjoy La Brasserie Restaurant with international cuisine and famous Georgian wine, as well as the onsite fitness center.

Day 8, Sat, Apr 9  Tbilisi
Today explore Georgia’s capital city, Tbilisi. Georgia’s strip of central lowlands has long been an important link between East and West. Tbilisi is set at the mouth of this passageway, in the Mtkvari River valley, and has changed hands many times. Most notably, the city was ruled by the Arabs for 400 years before King David the Builder defeated them in 1121 and moved his capital here from Kutaisi. The Georgian king fostered tolerance for its Arab population; the city still has a multiethnic atmosphere.

Visit the Simon Janashia Museum of Georgia, a component of Georgia’s National Museum, for a look at some of the country’s most significant archaeological finds. Visitors can see one of the largest collections of ancient gold decorative arts – 5th century BC golden jewelry and artifacts discovered in a tomb in Akhalgori – and a golden trove of treasures from 3,000-year-old burial mounds of the Trialeti culture. The most famous exhibit here, however, may be the 1.8-million-year-old Homo erectus skulls unearthed at Dmanisi, Georgia. This site was discovered by David Lordkipanidze, General Director of the museum.

Explore the oldest part of the charming town of Tbilisi. Proceed walking towards Gabriadz’s leaning clock tower, out of a fairy tale. Visit the Anchiskhati Basilica and then continue walking to the Maidan and the Abanotubani Historic District, where the famous Sulfur Baths of Tbilisi are located.

View Narikala Castle and walk towards the Mother of Georgia Statue where we enjoy lovely views of the town. Take a walk down the slope to visit Betlemi Street and its famous stairs, continue walking through pedestrian streets towards Kote Apkhazi Street and then on to Freedom Square.

Browse the wonderful high-quality handcrafted goods at Gallery 27. Set in a partially restored 18th century building, the space is filled with original handmade clothing, textiles, ceramics, jewelry, and artwork from Georgian artists. The owner, Nino Kvavilashvili, is an artist herself, and is committed to supporting local Georgian artists who incorporate natural materials and traditional techniques. Enjoy an opportunity to meet and converse with Nino.

After lunch, enjoy an afternoon at leisure or join an optional tour of the Dry Bridge Market, where vendors sell wares that run the gamut from jewelry, tchotchkes, carpets, and tableware to car parts and tools. Paintings and handicrafts are exhibited in a small park nearby. Dinner this evening is independent.

Meals: B, L

Day 9, Sun, Apr 10 Tbilisi • drive to Yerevan, Armenia
Get an early start and head out overland to Yerevan, Armenia. At the Armenian border, say goodbye to our Georgian guide and driver and meet our Armenian guide and driver. Continue on to Yerevan with stops en route.

The village of Dilijan, at Lake Sevan, is the center of an area known as the Armenian Switzerland. The town is located in a gorge, just 18 km from the fine 11th-century Hagartsin Monastery. The intimate monastery is set in a gorge above a mountain stream and surrounded by a forest of mature oaks. A
particularly lovely ensemble, Hagartsin has never been fortified.

Lake Sevan, situated at an elevation of 1,800 meters, is one of the largest mountain lakes in the world. Surrounded by mountains, it has a stunning setting, and is a popular summer resort for the locals. There is a small island in the lake with church buildings dating from the fourth to ninth centuries, but archaeologists have found evidence of far more ancient settlements around the lake. Not far from Sevan, outside of Lechashen village, prehistoric cave dwellings have been found and some once-submerged hills have turned out to be Urartu settlements. The cuneiform tablets identify King Argisti and the city of Istikuni.

Archaeologists have unearthed an almost complete four-wheeled carriage, bronze vessels, axes, jewels and daggers, all evidence of a highly developed Bronze Age culture. The discovery of these ancient artifacts came about when the water level dropped significantly as a result of massive irrigation and hydroelectric schemes put in place during the Soviet period.

Armenia is also famous for khachkar, intricately carved stone crosses. These masterpieces can be found in various parts of the country, but the Sevan region is home to hundreds of them. They are a unique art form, distinct to Armenia, which originally appeared in both pagan and Christian periods. Initially wooden, the first stone crosses appeared in the 4th-7th centuries.

Arrive in Yerevan this evening in time for dinner and overnight. *Meals: B, L, D*

**Ani Grand or similar**
The modern, four-star Ani Grand Hotel is located in the center of the city, just around the corner from Republic Square and within walking distance to museums, restaurants, theaters, and the Vernissage Art Market. The hotel has a fitness center, sauna, indoor swimming pool, and an Armenian restaurant with a bar and outdoor terrace. All rooms have individual climate control, flat-screen satellite TV, minibar, hairdryer, and complimentary WiFi.

**Day 10, Mon, Apr 11 Yerevan**
Start the day with a walking tour of the main sites of central Yerevan. **Republic Square** is Yerevan’s central square, designed in 1924 by renowned architect Alexander Tamanian and built of the characteristic pinkish tuff that the city is known for. Called Lenin Square until 1990, Republic Square features evening sound and light shows centering on its surging fountains.

**The giant "Cascade" stairway links central Yerevan to the Mother Armenia Statue in Victory Park.** The top of the Cascade and along the stairway offer fantastic views of Yerevan and Mt. Ararat on a clear day. Modern sculptures dot the outside of the structure, including signature pieces by Colombian sculptor Fernando Botero and Barry Flanagan. The Cafesjian Museum of Modern Art, built on the extensive collection of Gerard Cafesjian, is located inside and focuses on sculpture, glass, and paintings from contemporary artists.

Ride the escalators towards the top of the stairway, and walk the rest of the way up until you reach the Mother Armenia statue. Designed so that its interior resembles the iconic St. Hripsimeh Church at Echmiadzin, the base of this 167-foot monument was first used as a museum dedicated to WWII. In 1995, it was renamed the Military Museum of Mother Armenia and also includes exhibits pertaining to the Nagorno-Karabakh war.
A vast collection of more than 17,000 manuscripts and nearly 300,000 archival documents, the Matenadaran has existed since the 5th century and is one of the world’s oldest book depositories. The rooms of the museum showcase a variety of modern and ancient languages, with beautifully decorated manuscripts and literary treasures about all aspects of Armenian culture and scholarship. The documents are not only in written in Armenian, but also in Greek, Latin, Arabic, Persian, Syrian, Hebrew, Hindi, Japanese, and many other languages. The front of the hilltop building overlooking the city has statues of great Armenian scholars, most notably the inventor of the Armenian alphabet, St. Mesrop Mashtots, in honor of whom the Matenadaran received its own name.

The Armenian Genocide Memorial stands in a park at the top of Tsitsernakaberd, or “Swallow Castle.” According to scholarly estimates, over one million Armenians perished as a result of policies of the last Ottoman government between 1914 and 1918. Thousands were deported to Syria and faced consequent starvation, while others were methodically massacred. Many of the remaining Armenians fled to other countries in what is now called the Armenian diaspora. Learn about the tragedy at the nearby Genocide Museum.

Meals: B, L

Day 11, Tue, Apr 12 Yerevan
The Temple of Garni stands on a cliff near the Azat River valley. With walls of huge basalt blocks, the temple was once the summer palace of King Trdat I who built it in the first century AD. Destroyed by an earthquake in 1679, the monument has been restored by Armenian architects in recent years, and skilled work continues on the third century royal baths and their striking mosaics.

Carved into the side of a mountain, UNESCO-listed Geghard Monastery is one of the most fascinating monuments in Armenia. Beside the river at the foot of the rock, the church dates from 1215. It provides access to another building that has a roof formed by stalactites. The convent is in a cave adjoining this building; the only way in is through a narrow opening in the roof.

The compound includes monastic cells, churches, tombs and kachkars all hewn from solid rock. The churches are still functioning and for special events, such as baptisms, sacrifices of lambs sometimes take place.

Enjoy lunch in a private home with a lavash bread baking demonstration. Return to central Yerevan and visit the vibrant fruit and vegetable market, where we can find locals selling spices, fresh fruits and
vegetables, dried fruits, candied nuts, and so much more.

This evening, gather at a local restaurant for a **farewell dinner** to toast the end of the trip.  
**Meals: B, L, D**

**Day 12, Wed, Apr 13 Depart Yerevan**  
The tour concludes today with international transfers to the airport. **Meals: B (time permitting)**

*Photo credit: Peter Guttman, Richard Fejfar, Jered Gorman*

**2022 PRICING**

**Overview Daily Itinerary**

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**Land Tour Package Inclusions**

- All accommodation based on double occupancy per itinerary with breakfast daily, local service charge and tax (standard hotel check-in/out times apply unless otherwise noted): Baku (2 nights); Sheki (2 nights); Telavi (1 night); Tbilisi (2 nights); Yerevan (3 nights)
- Private vehicle for group arrival and departure transfers for those arriving on the trip start date (April 3) and departing on the trip end date (April 13)
- Transportation per itinerary by private vehicle and driver
- All sightseeing and excursions including entrance fees per itinerary
- National escorting guide that will travel with the group in each country: Azerbaijani guide will stay with group from arrival until departure from Telavi; Georgian guide will stay with group from arrival to Telavi until departure from Tbilisi; Armenian guide will be with the group throughout the program in Armenia
- Welcome and Farewell dinners including 1 alcoholic drink per person (local beer or wine); note that alcohol is not included at other meals
- Meals as listed in itinerary, breakfast daily, 9 lunches, and 7 dinners. Bottled/purified water with meals.
- Baggage handling at the hotel
- Destination preparation information packet
- Azerbaijan e visas for tour participants

**Land Price Does Not Include**

- International airfare between the U.S. and the start and ending cities; air taxes or fuel surcharges;
increases in local taxes/VAT; pre- or post-tour services; gratuities to escorting guides and drivers; visa or passport fees not explicitly mentioned under inclusions; medical and trip interruption insurance; evacuation costs; food or beverages not included in group meals; items of a personal nature such as laundry, alcohol, telephone expense, excess baggage fees, photo/video expenses inside museums (where allowed); other items not expressly listed as included.

Important Notes

• Prices are based on a group size minimum of 10 paying passengers. Prices are subject to increases if the number of paying passengers is less than a total of 10.
• Rates are based on receiving a deposit and the final payment in advance by check to our partners MIR, ACH or wire transfer in USD.
• Azerbaijan e visas are required for this itinerary. The visa cost is included to the package and MIR will apply for the visas on behalf of the travelers in advance of departure. To this end, travelers will be required to submit clear, color scans of their passports and some simple personal details to MIR Corporation at least 60 days prior to departure. Georgia and Armenia do not require visas for U.S. Citizens. Canadians do not require a Georgian visa, but will need to purchase an Armenian visa (currently costing around $10USD) when entering Armenia.
• We recommend that you read the U.S. State Department’s Country Information regarding travel to the destinations on your itinerary. Check https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/international-travel.html for up-to-date travel information.
• Travelers should consider enrolling in STEP, Smart Traveler Enrollment Program, a free service to enroll your trip with the nearest U.S. Embassy or Consulate. For more information: https://step.state.gov/step/