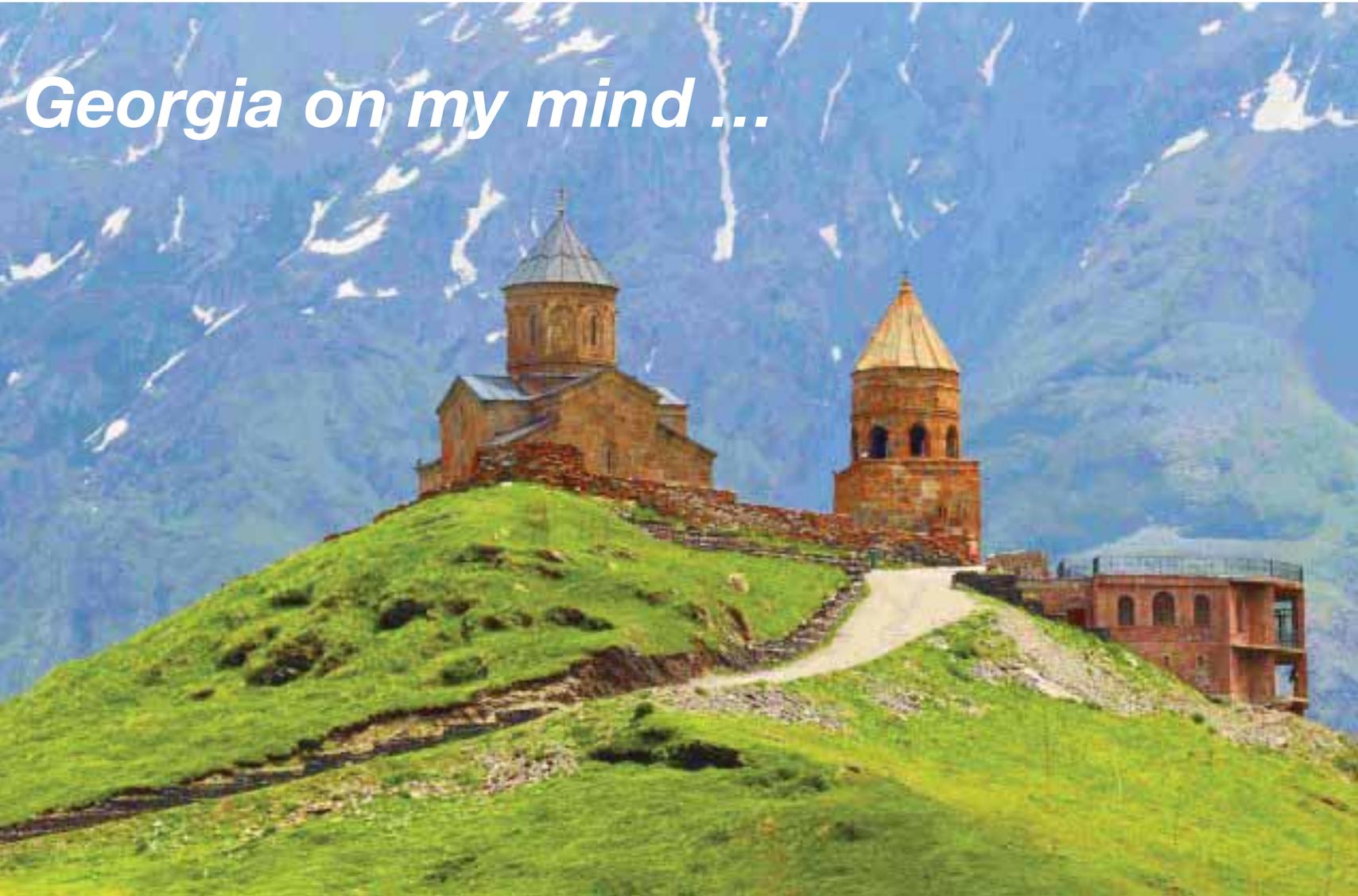


Georgia on my mind ...



“Wherever you visit in Georgia, food and drinks dominate everything you do; your day is planned around food, farms and vineyards, which are dotted across the landscape.”

Georgia lies at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, with the combination of cultures and flavours present in all aspects of this Caucasian republic.

Impressive European buildings inspired by St Petersburg of the 19th century stand side-by-side with modern glass buildings glistening in the sun and brick domes of the sulphur baths from the middle ages. The flavours of Georgia’s national foods and drinks take elements of Europe and Asia to create a mouth-watering menu of delectable dishes worth travelling to this up-and-coming part of the world in its own right.

Each of Georgia’s main towns and cities has its own unique cultural traditions, recipes and attractions. In Kutaisi, Soviet monuments overlook fountains dedicated to the foundation of Georgia, a wooden bridge crosses the roaring White River, and modern hotels built in a style sympathetic to the city’s historic roots hug the river bank. Tbilisi, as Georgia’s largest and most populous city, is a patchwork of medieval and ancient buildings,

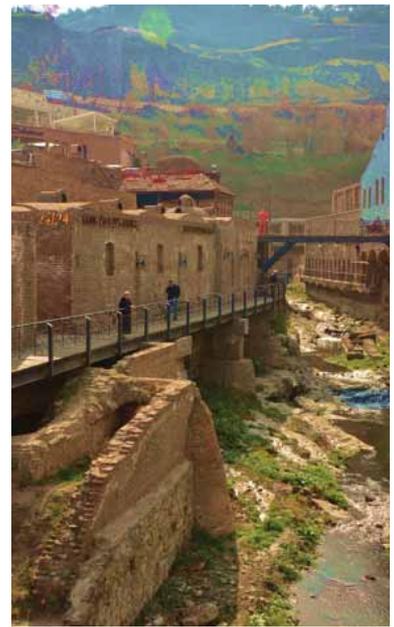
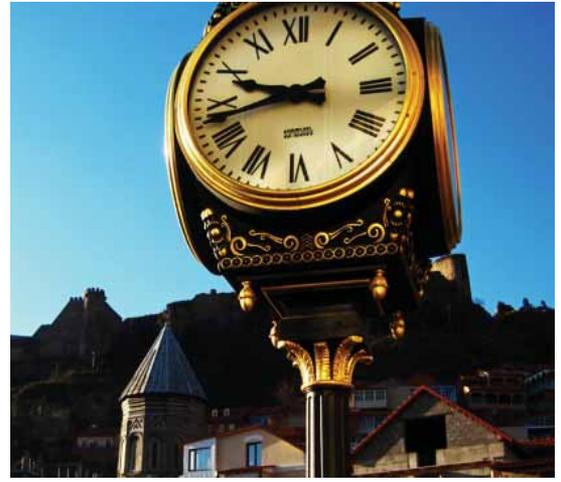
towering hills and sheer cliffs, quaint cafes and restaurants hidden down narrow winding cobbled streets, and traditions dating back to before the East and West kingdoms were unified by King Bagrat III (who oversaw the construction of the Bagrati Cathedral in Kutaisi).

Outside of the most well-known cities in Georgia, the historic resort town of Borjomi, complete with its salty mineral drinking waters, offers a welcome relaxing escape for those looking to taste one of the country’s biggest exports (aside from wine), and the seaside resort of Batumi offers a flavour of Georgia’s modern side, with contemporary sculptures and ultra-glitzy buildings lining the coast of the Black Sea.

Wherever you choose to travel in Georgia, you will find no shortage of history, faith and culture.

Kutaisi: Georgia’s historic capital

Compared to the official capital of Tbilisi, few people have heard of the legislative capital of Kutaisi, the former capital of the King-



“The Bagrati cathedral both dominates the skyline and offers spectacular views out across the forests surrounding the city from its prime position atop the Ukimerioni Hill.”

dom of Georgia in the Middle Ages, and a city that sympathetically bridges the gap between Georgian history and the future direction of this inspiring mountainous country. The miniscule David the Builder Kutaisi International Airport, named in honour of Georgia’s most successful king David IV who brought much of the Caucasus under Georgian control, is the gateway for visitors looking to explore the Imereti Region and the west of the country.

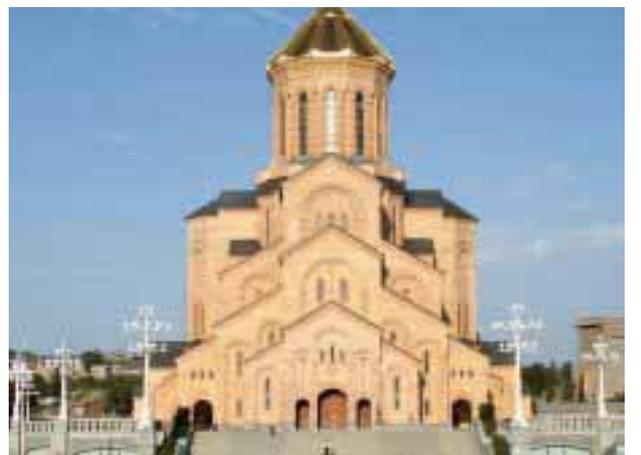
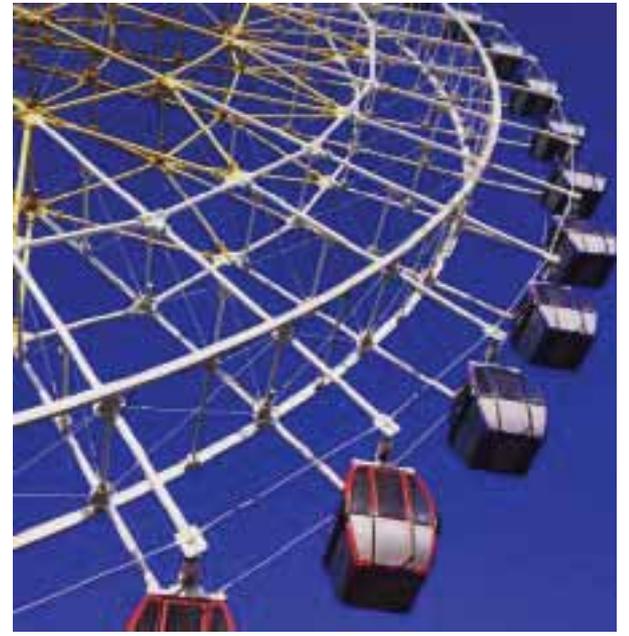
The city is dominated by white and cream buildings, with all streets leading to the White River that flows through the centre of Kutaisi. Green parks play host to elderly gentlemen playing chess and reminiscing about their lives under the Soviet Union as they proudly display their hammer and sickle lapel badges, and hidden restaurants serve some of the freshest and tastiest Georgian dishes.

Just a short drive from the central heart of Kutaisi, the Bagrati cathedral both dominates the skyline and offers spectacular views out across the forests surrounding the city from its prime position atop the Ukimerioni Hill. The cathedral, with its white walls and green domed roofs, was originally built in the early 11th century

during the reign of King Bagrat III but was partially destroyed by Ottoman troops when they invaded Bagrat’s Kingdom of Imereti. Today, the cathedral has been carefully restored in parts, with some sections original, and others modern imitations of the original. What makes this cathedral special, like many places in Georgia, is the sweeping views over the rooftops of Kutaisi from one side of the hill, and endless views of the forests and red river from the other.

On a similar theme, the beige-stone Gelati Monastery, which was built during the time of Georgia’s inclusion in the Byzantine Empire, is one of the masterpieces of the Georgian Golden Age and one of the finest examples of the importance put on religious buildings in the country. The exterior of the monastery, with its carved curved walls and grey domed roof is impressive, but the interior is perhaps more so.

The Gelati Monastery is recognised by UNESCO as →



Opposite, clockwise: Bridge of peace; Mount Mtatsminda Ferris Wheel; St Georgia in Freedom Square, Trinity Cathedral; Cable car over Tbilisi; Meat counter in the bazaar

a World Heritage Site and it is one of the most recognisable symbols of Georgia, visible from the hills and Caucasus mountains of the country and towering over Kutaisi.

Traditional Georgian Dining – Kutaisi

Wherever you visit in Kutaisi, and Georgia as a whole, food and drinks dominate everything you do; your day is planned around food, farms and vineyards are dotted across the landscape, and the welcoming scent of freshly-baked Georgian breads fills the air. It is no surprise then that the legislative capital has no shortage of cosy and traditional Georgian eateries.

Not all of Kutaisi's restaurants are fine dining and white table cloths, some are more traditional and Soviet-esque in feel. Walnuts are the staple of Georgian recipes, and at Sormoni, a restaurant hidden away in a village outside of Kutaisi, walnut paste was the stand-out ingredient. Much like the French tradition of mixing butter into every dish, the family at Sormoni do so with walnut paste.

Much like pasta in Italy, fish and chips in Britain, and hummus in Lebanon, Georgia's national dish is undoubtedly a bread filled with different varieties of cheese called khachapuri. The shape and thickness depends on the variety and recipe used, but at Sormoni you could see the cheese almost inflating the bread, creating a carbohydrate overload on a plate.

At Sormoni, like in most Georgian restaurants, it is tradition to order several dishes that are placed at the centre of the table to be shared with fellow diners. The owner of the restaurant brought an endless supply of dishes to sample – huge chunks of sulguni, a mozzarella-like cheese, jonjoli, a dish based on raw onions and pickled sprouts, kitris da pomidvris salata nigvzit, a salad of chopped tomatoes and huge Georgian cucumber coated in a sweet walnut dressing, and assorted pkhali, patties of minced greens and walnuts with either spinach or beetroot.

One thing is for sure, the Georgian women who own Sormoni and cook all of the dishes using traditional wood-fired and Soviet-era cast iron ovens will not let you go hungry. In fact, they will keep bringing you more Georgian dishes even when you feel like you can't eat anymore!

Gori and Uplistsikhe – Where Stalin meets ancient cave living
Who would have thought that Stalin, one of the most notorious figures in Soviet history, who was born in the Georgian town of Gori, was raised just a short ride from the ancient cave town of Uplistsikhe?

The views from the highest point of the Uplistsikhe cave complex are fantastic, with grazing sheep in the fields below, the fast-flowing river passing by, and the rooftops of Gori in the far distance

Gori itself is a unique phenomenon in Georgia; it was the birthplace of former Soviet leader Stalin and many people here still revere a man who was undoubtedly Georgia's most famous export. All streets seem to lead to the Stalin Museum, a huge stone and marble building constructed to honour Ioseb Jughashvili, or Stalin as he is commonly known. His former family home, a small wooden shack stands behind the museum, which houses photographs and gifts given to Stalin by world leaders throughout his time in power, alongside his death mask, which is an eerie sight. The train carriage that he used to travel across the Soviet Union is also on the site, and when you step inside, it feels like the ghosts of history are watching you.

Tbilisi – The beating heart of Georgia

Tbilisi is the official capital of Georgia and the country's largest city. It has also been the meeting point of cultures for centuries, with buildings at one side of the city resembling those from Asia, and at the other side recognisable European architecture. As you stand on the peace bridge that connects one part of the city to the other, you can see the brick domes of the sulphur baths, the minaret of the city's mosque, and the domes of an Orthodox Armenian and countless Georgian churches on one side, and a glistening casino, neoclassical European townhouses and the glistening presidential palace at the other.

In the Old Town you can really get a sense of the history in this part of the country. The ancient district, called Abanotubani, is home to the multiple grey and red domes of the subterranean sulphur baths and the Central Asian-style tiled entrance to the Chreli Abano baths. If the faint smell of rotten egg doesn't put you off then you will have no shortage of historic sights to see in this district, including Tbilisi's only synagogue and mosque, the falcon fountain dedicated to King Vakhtang Gorgasali, who is said to have discovered the warm sulphur waters when he went in search of a falcon that he shot and established Tbilisi, and the base of the Narikala Fortress. If you are feeling especially athletic then you can walk up several flights of steep stone stairs to the top of the fortress for its impressive sweeping views over the whole city and then take the cable car down to the other side of the Mtkvari River. Look out for the totally unrealistic Stalin impersonators lurking near the cable car station looking to take -

Opposite, clockwise: Narikala Fortress at night; Mother Georgia; Ancient frescos

photographs with tourists.

Wherever you stand in Tbilisi you are guaranteed countless postcard-perfect photo opportunities, whether it's the colourful balconies protruding from the apartments, narrow cobbled streets, or the sweeping views of the multi-level buildings blending into the cliffs and forests.

Rooms Tbilisi, as the name suggests, is a hotel located just a few streets away from the centre of the city and it is unlike just about anywhere in the region. The eight-floor 125-room building was once a publishing house in the trendy part of the Georgian capital, and the hotel's owners have tried to include many aspects of the building's history throughout the property.

The rooms include industrial metal framed beds, wooden flooring, thick velvet curtains and wooden writing desks, a rain shower, and chic armchairs. The lounge is dominated by its low lighting and tall bookshelves filled with books written in every language imaginable. Chandeliers hang from the ceilings, bellboys open doors and greet guests like in the classiest 1930s hotels, and the breakfast is to die for – freshly cooked pancakes and eggs, hummus and dips, platters filled with cakes, bowls full of caramel-coated nuts, melt-in-the-mouth walnuts, and thick Georgian yoghurt. Rooms Tbilisi is an ultra-stylish hotel that offers both a flavour of the city's past and its stylish future.

Traditional Georgian Dining – Tbilisi

Georgians are passionate about food and drink, and at Barbaristan restaurant they take traditions to a whole new level. The owners of the restaurant, located in an authentic stone building, discovered a lost recipe book written by a former Georgian princess and women's rights advocate named Barbare Jorjadze in the 19th century; the chefs have used the cookbook to recreate Georgian recipes that have long since been forgotten in an attempt to keep their national food alive.

Chefs from across Georgia consult Jorjadze's cookbook, but Barbaristan has a monopoly on which recipes to test next. Princess Jorjadze didn't only publish the first recipe for the perfect khachapuri – a cheese pizza-cum-pie – in Georgian history, it also offered advice on how to cook a turkey, how to make a soup using Asian quince, the perfect tkemali – a sour plum sauce – and the tastiest tolma – a mixture of pork and beef wrapped in grape leaves. Many of the dishes promoted by Jorjadze centuries ago can now be tried at Barbaristan.

Borjomi

Borjomi has been one of Georgia's most popular resort

towns since the 1840s and was once a popular summer retreat for Russia's ruling Romanov family; the unmistakable Romanov Summer Palace is testament to how much they loved the town. The resort has been known as the 'Pearl of the Caucasus' for over a century thanks in part to its naturally-hot mineral waters, lush forest views, clean mountain air and grand architecture. Undoubtedly, though, it is the town's most famous export that makes Borjomi one of Georgia's finest attractions, Borjomi mineral water.

The town's mineral water is thought to have healing properties and was used as a cure by Soviet doctors for skin and stomach problems. The water, which has a slight salty taste and is lightly carbonated, is both unusual and refreshing at the same time, an unexpected flavour when first sampled.

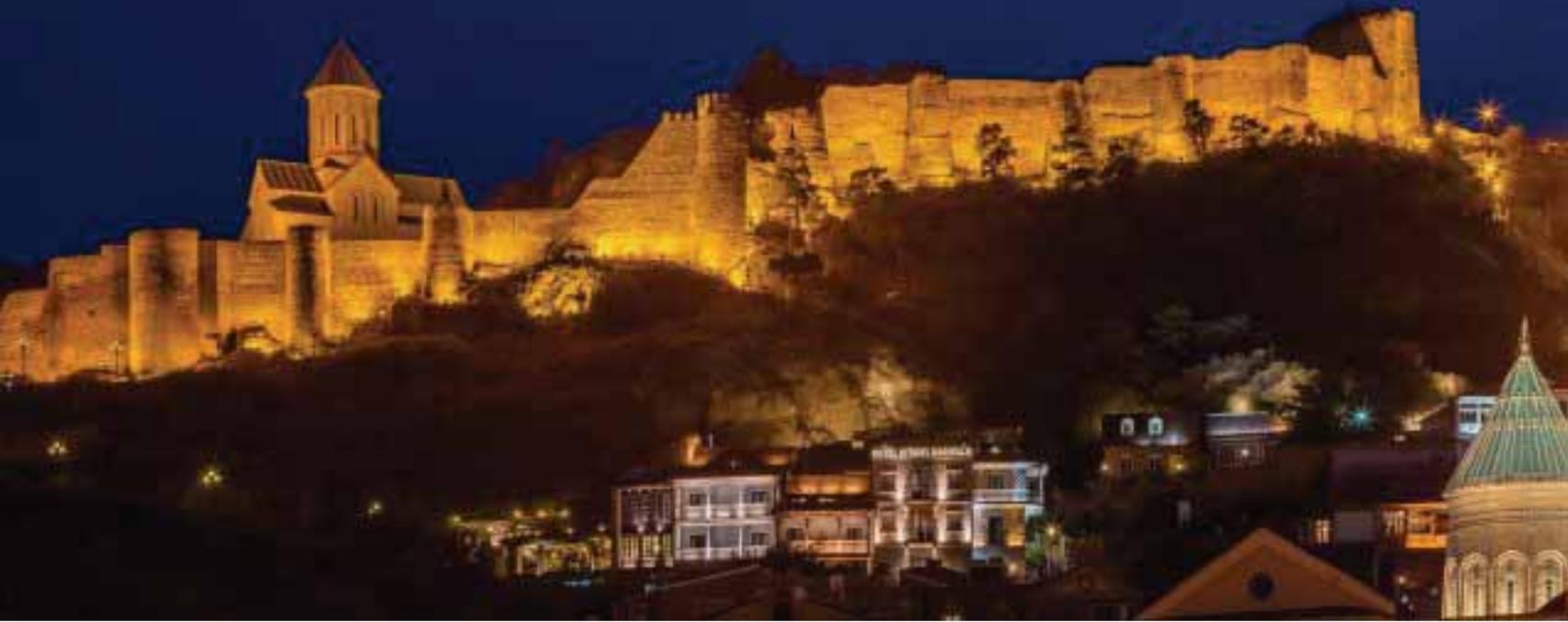
At the centre of the town is Mineral Water Park, a park dedicated to Borjomi water. Grand steel and glass atriums surrounded by fields of colourful flowers, forests of trees, and a cable car leading to a Ferris wheel overlooking the park all combine to make for a surreal but memorable experience. You simply cannot visit the park without drinking endless cups of the mineral water; join the many travellers who have come from across the former Soviet Union to drink the water in the hope that their illnesses will be treated by the naturally-occurring minerals.

The Crowne Plaza Borjomi hotel is like a fairy-tale castle. With rooms overlooking the Kura River, multiple turrets, Swiss ski-chalet styled façade, and prime location nestled between the towering grass-covered cliffs of the Borjomi Gorge, it is no overstatement to say that this is one of the finest hotels in the whole Caucasus region.

Batumi

Unlike many of the major towns and cities in Georgia, Batumi is a seaside city located on the coast of the Black Sea. The skyline in Batumi is futuristic, with flashing strobe lights glowing at night from skyscrapers including the all-glass Radisson Blu hotel, contemporary sculptures standing proudly in the parks, and a beach providing the perfect escape for Georgian holidaymakers. There is even a fountain that dispenses free chacha, a high-volume Georgian alcoholic drink produced from the vines and grape skins left over during wine production. The surrounding mountains are the mirror opposite of the city itself, with age-old tea plantations and 19th century squares sprawled out across the expanse of land leading to this seaside escape.

Batumi is unlike other parts of Georgia; most of Georgia is focusing on preserving its history, but Batumi is pushing



“Tbilisi is a patchwork of medieval and ancient buildings, towering hills and sheer cliffs, quaint cafes, and restaurants hidden down narrow winding cobbled streets.”



ahead with rapid modernisation and the development of its seaside tourist attractions. Visitors can choose between the historic parts in the east and centre of the country or the modernity of Batumi on the southwest coast.

Joe travelled to Georgia with regional specialists My Caucasus (www.mycaucacus.com), who offer a range of cultural itineraries across the whole of the country. The 11 day 8,000 Years of Wine Culture tour costs \$2,530pp and has regular scheduled departure dates in 2018. Highlights include the city of Kutaisi, the historic capital of Tbilisi, the resort town of Borjomi, and the lush Kakheti wine region. Wizz Air (www.wizzair.com) flies to Kutaisi from more than a dozen airports, including directly from London, Berlin, and Rome, and indirectly from Dubai.

Words: Joe Worthington

Images: Joe Worthington; F&TA; iStock

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Impressive European buildings inspired by 19th century St Petersburg stand side-by-side with modern glass buildings and brick domes of the sulphur baths from the middle ages.



This page, clockwise:
Peacock at Narikala
Fortress: Old town
bakery; Georgian
countryside; Tbilisi
river view at night

