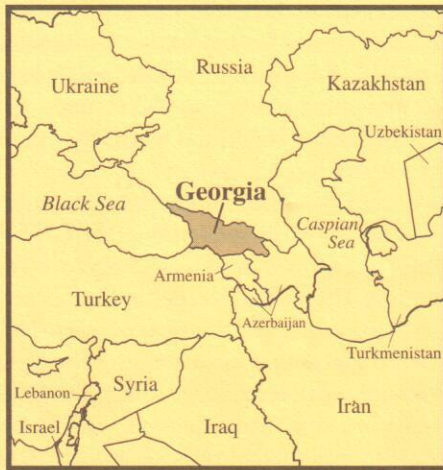
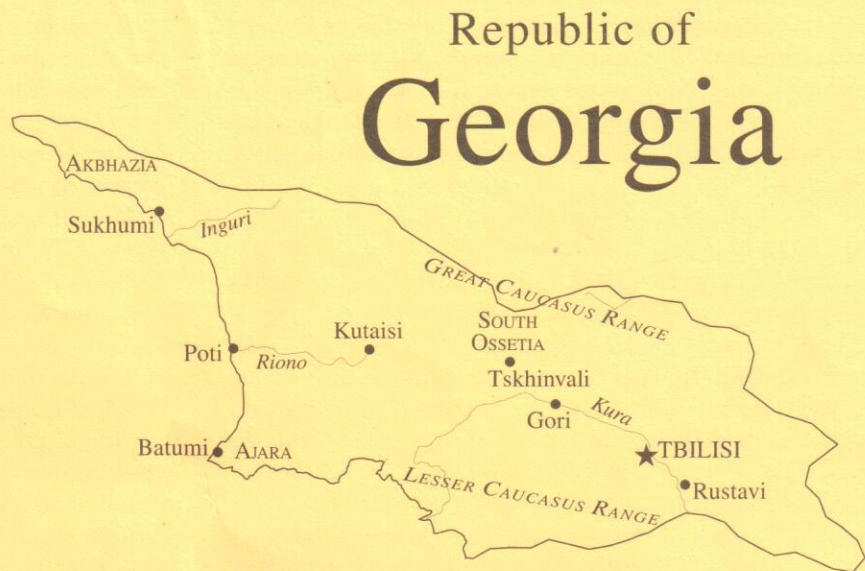


CULTURGRAM™ '96



Boundary representations not necessarily authoritative.



BACKGROUND

Land and Climate

Georgia covers 26,912 square miles (69,700 square kilometers) and is slightly larger than South Carolina. Most of the country is mountainous, including the highest peaks, Shkhara (17,656 feet) and Mkinvartsveri (16,677 feet) of the Great Caucasus Range. The Lesser Caucasus Range runs along the Turkish border, and the Suram (*Likhi*) Range divides the country between east and west. Several rivers supply hydroelectric power, and natural and thermal springs are abundant.

Georgia's climate ranges from subtropical in coastal areas to continental climate further inland. The capital, Tbilisi, is located in a valley and along the slopes of high hills; its winter is windy and chilly with Fahrenheit lows in the 30s and highs in the 40s (0°–10°C). Snow falls mostly in mountainous regions. Spring begins late and summer is hot and dry, with temperatures reaching above 90°F (32°C). Rain is most heavy in coastal regions.

History

"Georgia" is Greek for "the land of farmers." The native name is *Sakartvelo*, or "the land of the Kartvels," as Georgians call themselves. Historically, however, this name applied only to central Georgia. Western Georgia was known between the sixth century B.C. and the third century A.D. as Colchis; the east was part of Iberia. The Egrisi (Lazica) kingdom flourished in the third and fourth centuries. Situated on strategic territory, Georgia was invaded or otherwise influenced by Arabs, Persians, and Turks prior to the tenth century.

Georgia's "Golden Age" of unity and prosperity occurred in the 11th and 12th centuries. King David the Builder (ruled 1089–1125) created a strong, ethnically mixed, and internationally active state. Under the rule of Queen Tamar (1184–1213), Georgia's territory and population (12 million) were at their largest. A 13th century Mongol invasion ushered in a gradual decline.

Exhausted by repeated wars and famines, Georgia sought protection from the Orthodox Christian Russian empire. A Protectorate Treaty was signed in 1783, but it did not protect the region from a devastating Persian invasion in 1795. In 1801 the last Georgian king, Giorgi XII, asked Russia for autonomous incorporation into the Russian empire. Russia obliged but, by 1864, had fully annexed the entire region.

Despite intense Russification, the 19th century was marked by a Georgian cultural revival led by nobleman Ilia Chavchavadze. He was assassinated in 1907 by opponents of Georgian nationalism. The 1917 Russian revolution reopened the door to Georgian independence, which was declared in May 1918. The door closed quickly in 1921 when the Red Army invaded and began the period of sovietization.

Although Joseph Stalin was an ethnic Georgian (real last name: Jugashvili), Georgia suffered his repression like all Soviet republics. While resistance to Moscow's rule was not overtly apparent for many years, with the exception of a 1956 protest that was put down by tanks, Georgians never accepted Soviet ideology. In April 1989, several political protesters were killed by Soviet troops, and Georgians pressed for independence. It was declared in April 1991 following elections that removed Communists from power.

The Soviet Union soon disintegrated, but peace did not come to Georgia. The policies of Georgia's President Zviad Gamsakhurdia led some ethnic minorities to seek their own independence. After a series of insurgencies, the economy collapsed and 350,000 people became refugees. The problem was most severe in Abkhazia (a northwest autonomous republic created in 1921), where ethnic Georgians were driven from the region by Abkhazians who wanted independence. A bitter struggle finally ended in an agreement to let the refugees return home, but implementation of the 1994 accord was hindered by continuing disagreements. South Ossetia (an

autonomous political unit on the Russian border) also sought to withdraw from Georgia, desiring to unite with North Ossetia in Russia. That situation remains unresolved.

After Gamsakhurdia was forced to flee in 1992 (he died in 1994), leadership was assumed by former Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze. Georgia was then accepted into the United Nations and instituted democratic, market-oriented reforms. Georgia joined the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) to help ensure its territorial integrity.

PEOPLE

Population

Georgia's population of 5.6 million is growing at less than 0.9 percent. About 55 percent of the people live in urban areas. Ethnic Georgians comprise 70 percent of the population. Minorities include Armenians (8 percent), Russians (6.3 and declining), Azeris (5.7), Ossetians (3), Abkhazians (1.8), and several smaller groups (Kurds, Ukrainians, Germans, Greeks, and others). Exact tallies are impossible due to the refugee crisis.

Georgians themselves are divided into a dozen distinctive regional groups. Their differences are not unlike those between people in different U.S. states. For instance, eastern Kartlians and Kakhetians consider themselves more composed and even-tempered than the Mingrelians, Gurians, Imeretians, and others. Mingrelians also speak a unique ancient dialect.

Tbilisi, founded in A.D. 459, is home to 1.25 million people. The second largest city is Kutaisi, followed by Sukhumi and Batumi (although Sukhumi was destroyed during the Abkhaz rebellion). Large Georgian communities are found in France, Russia, Turkey, and Iran. The latter are Muslim descendants of Georgians taken to Persia in the 17th century.

Language

The official and common daily language is Georgian. Most urban Georgians can speak Russian. The minorities speak their native language in addition to either Russian or Georgian.

Georgia's alphabet was created in the second century B.C. by King Parnavaz and is considered one of the world's 14 original alphabets. It has 33 letters and uses the original but slightly modernized script. Georgia's oldest known literary work, "The Martyrdom of St. Shushanik," dates to the fifth century.

Abkhazian also ranks as an official language, but it is only used and understood in Abkhazia. English is the most popular foreign language, followed by German, French, and Turkish.

Religion

Georgia was Christianized by A.D. 337. St. Nino is revered for doing much of the "enlightening," and is the most worshipped saint in Georgia. Despite lengthy periods of non-Christian domination, Georgia remains a Christian nation. The Georgian Church is autonomous but affiliated with Greek Orthodox churches; its leader, Patriarch Ilia II, is respected for preaching interreligious tolerance and nonviolence.

Even after seven decades of Soviet rule, people consider religion crucial to cultural survival. Some 65 percent of the population belongs to the Georgian Church, with 10 percent belonging to the Russian Orthodox Church, and 8 percent the Armenian Orthodox Church.

The Ajara Autonomous Republic near the Black Sea in southwest Georgia is the only region to have a Muslim Georgian population, as the region spent considerable time under

Turkish rule. Overall, 11 percent of Georgians are Muslim. Roman Catholics, Baptists, and Jews also live in Georgia. There are several working synagogues.

General Attitudes

Georgians are committed to their land of ancient history and tradition; even in the most difficult times, emigration has been minimal. Centuries of multicultural interaction have made Georgians tolerant of other religions and cultures. For instance, Jews have lived in the land for at least 2,500 years without notable discrimination.

Despite a geographical link to Asia Minor, Georgians identify with Western culture and see their future as tied to Europe. Georgians are proud of their country—pragmatic and positive about the future. They view themselves as a peaceful, beautiful, nonchalant, and romantic people with a difficult destiny—difficult because of their history of having to fight for a national identity and independence. Georgians value friendship and passing time in pleasant company. To outsiders they sometimes seem boastful and verbose, as Georgians like to create an impression of abundance. Pessimism has increased in recent years because of growing hardships, but Georgians try to remain cheerful and not too self-critical.

In Georgia, abstract norms and rules are generally less important as social regulators than are the mores and values formed between relatives, colleagues, and peer groups.

Personal Appearance

The standard of dress is European. Traditional costumes are only seen at folk dance performances and during national holidays. Georgians pay serious attention to how they dress, choosing quality clothing even if it is not affordable. Sloppy or careless dress is considered improper, even in casual situations. Jeans are popular among all segments of society. Adults and teenage girls do not wear shorts in public. Dress, hairstyles, and public behavior remain conservative. Eastern Georgians tend to have darker hair and eyes than western Georgians.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings

When greeting, Georgians shake hands and say *Gamarjoba* (literally, "Let you win"), which means "Hello." Responses differ; the term is repeated for official greetings, or *Gagimarjos* is a responding "Hello" in informal cases. *Rogora khar?* (How are you?) is an informal way to begin a conversation. *Rogor brdzandebit?* is more formal. *Kargad ikavit* means "Bye, take care." *Mshvidobit* (Peace be with you) is used for a more substantial parting. In cities, it is uncommon to greet strangers on the street; in rural areas, however, it is common to greet, smile at, and sometimes speak to strangers passing by.

Shaking hands is common even at casual meetings; embracing in a friendly manner, or kissing on the cheek, is also common, especially among young people and women. Small children might receive hugs and kisses. Adults are addressed by professional title and last name, or by first name following *Batono* (Sir) or *Kalbatono* (Madam). Using *Batono*/*Kalbatono* with just the last name is heavily formal, so first and last names are used in correspondence or in the media.

Gestures

Conversations can be animated and Georgians often use their hands to express themselves. Eye contact is appreciated.

Raising a "thumbs up" is sometimes used to express appreciation for something. Pointing with the index finger is improper but practiced. Chewing gum in public, especially when talking, is impolite but also practiced. Legs may be crossed at the knee, but feet never touch the furniture. Public displays of affection between young couples are inappropriate. People usually stand when an elderly person enters a room.

Visiting

Georgians are sociable and hospitable, known for friendly and generous treatment of even unexpected guests. A Georgian saying is "Any guest is God's messenger." Oral and phone invitations to the home are traditionally popular. The hardships of the 1990s have changed cultural habits; once frequent visits to friends and relatives have declined. This is due not only to social unrest, but also the economic situation; hosts feel they are not able to provide as adequately for guests as in the past. Still, hosts expect to offer at least a cup of coffee or cookies to guests. Full dinners are offered to invited guests when possible. Gifts are brought only on special occasions, but flowers are polite and welcome; something for the children is always appreciated.

In earlier times residents of Tbilisi enjoyed strolling along Rustaveli Avenue in the evenings to meet friends and eat at numerous sidewalk cafés. During the violence they retreated to the safety of the television and phone, but an energy crisis in 1994 made even that a rare pleasure.

Eating

Family meals are shared together. Breakfast is light if eaten early and more substantial when eaten around 9:00 A.M. Lunch is called a second breakfast if eaten before noon and "dinner" if eaten after noon. The evening meal is called "dinner" if eaten before 5:00 P.M. and "supper" if eaten after that hour. Most people eat after 6:00 P.M. The continental style of eating is followed, with the fork in the left hand and knife in the right. Some fish and meat dishes are eaten with the hands. Georgians prefer to eat with a neighbor or someone else than to eat alone.

Georgia is known for a traditional table ritual. Before a meal, a toastmaster (*Tamada*) proposes toasts to anything from national values to each individual at the table and drinks the entire glass after each toast. Women only drink symbolically, but men do as the *Tamada*. It is improper to serve alcohol without first proposing a toast. Traditionally, people drank Georgian wine from *Kantsi* (embroidered deer, bull, or goat horns) passed around the table. Today, *Kantsi* are displayed in homes or sometimes used by the *Tamada* but not passed around.

When guests are present, the hostess prepares and serves the meal, although she eventually joins the group if other women are present. Hosts traditionally provide more than can be eaten at a gathering, but hard times have changed that. Guests do not usually ask for seconds and can decline offers of such without insulting the hosts. They should, however, eat everything on their plates and compliment the hosts on the food.

LIFESTYLE

Family

Family attachment is highly valued in society. In most families, at least three generations have lived together for a considerable portion of their lives. The father is responsible for

economic support, major financial transactions, and protecting the family's old and young. The mother is most influential in the decision-making process. Parents usually have two children. Most women care for the household and children, as well as hold jobs outside the home. Grandparents often provide day care in these cases.

Traditionally a newlywed couple lives with the groom's parents until they can afford an apartment or home. This is changing now and families try to accommodate couples who cannot rely on traditional arrangements. Also, more young adults are working to help support the household.

Urban families typically rent apartments, which were until recently government owned. The law now allows families to buy apartments, but many are waiting for society to stabilize before making the investment. A typical apartment has one or two bedrooms, a living room, a small kitchen, and a bathroom. Rural homes are more spacious, but constructing such houses is difficult due to the price of scarce building materials.

Dating and Marriage

In Georgia it has always been difficult for young people to find things to do and places to go. When dating, couples usually went to movies, visited each other's homes, listened to rock music, or walked in the city parks and dreamed aloud about the West's bars, discos, and rock concerts. When such places eventually appeared, it was too expensive and unsafe to go to them. So, dating couples still have few recreational choices.

A person is generally free to choose a spouse, and families do not often interfere. A traditional wedding is rather flamboyant, with large feasts, folk dancing, and singing. Today's weddings are not as extravagant, with urban ceremonies being fairly quiet family events. Virginity on a girl's wedding day is a traditional value. Fidelity is extremely important in marriage, although men have traditionally enjoyed some liberties that more wives now refuse to accept.

Diet

Georgians grow a variety of fresh fruits and vegetables, as well as wine grapes and tea. Variety and abundance in mid-autumn are celebrated by the rural harvest holiday, *Rtveli*. Salads, vegetables, eggs, bread and butter, cheese, ham or sausage, and coffee or tea are eaten for breakfast. The second breakfast or "dinner" typically consists of soup and/or meat, potatoes, beans, vegetables, fruit, bread, and wine. Supper comprises the same basic foods as dinner; good wine is indispensable.

Dishes in the west tend to be lighter than in the east. Spices are popular everywhere. The most common meats include beef, pork, chicken, and lamb. Abundant vegetables include tomatoes, cucumbers, beans, eggplant, and cabbage. Popular fruits are apples, pears, and peaches. Among the most favorite national dishes are *Satsivi* (fried chicken or turkey soaked in walnut sauce with spices), *Khatshapuri* (twisted, salted cookies, sometimes with a fried egg in the center), and *Gozinaki* (pressed pieces of Christmas cookies with honey-sweet nuts).

Recreation

With Georgians going out less than in the past, long lines at movie theaters and crowded evening streets are gone. In their leisure time, most people stay home, watching television or videos when energy is in sufficient supply. Reading is popular.

Favorite sports include soccer, basketball, and skiing, and people also follow competitions in figure skating and hockey. Those with cars enjoy weekend outings. Urban residents with summer cottages spend as much time as possible there enjoying nature, gardening, or tending to greenhouses. Rural people have less time to relax, being occupied by farming and the hardships of the present situation.

Holidays

The main official holidays include New Year's Day (1 January), Christmas, Easter Sunday, and Independence Day (26 May). New Year's is celebrated mostly in families, but parties are also arranged. Special meals and champagne are common for New Year's Eve celebrations. Christmas is on 7 January according to the Orthodox calendar. Gifts are not commonly exchanged, as this is primarily a religious holiday. Other prominent religious holidays include Epiphany (19 January), Our Lady's Day (28 August), and St. George's Day (23 November).

Commerce

Businesses are mostly open from 10:00 A.M. to 7:00 P.M., with a break around midday. Prior to national holidays, offices close early but stores are open longer. State stores, private businesses, and kiosks have fixed prices. Bargaining occurs at farmers' markets or with spontaneous street traders.

Georgia's private industry is in its infancy, as are the standards of commerce. The most recent trend is the "trade fair," where prices are lower than in stores and bargaining for the wide variety of goods and foods is acceptable. Such fairs are held regularly in a growing number of cities.

SOCIETY

Government

Georgia has a unicameral Parliament; its chairman is head of state. A prime minister is head of government. The presidency was abolished in view of Gamsakhurdia's authoritarian rule, but it may be restored with constitutional reform in 1996. Until then, the 1921 constitution is in force. A large array of political parties are represented in Parliament, and there is no single ruling party, although the newest political force is the Union of the Citizens of Georgia, chaired by Shevardnadze.

Georgia has adopted a Western-style government and legal system, but it is not yet a full democracy. Still, a good initial step is the new Law of Citizenship, which allows every permanent resident to become a citizen regardless of ethnic origin. It also sets generous guidelines for new settlers. The voting age is 18.

Economy

Georgia has traditionally had a strong agricultural and industrialized economy, with exports of wine, tea, brandy, fruit, vegetables, manganese, marble, and arsenic. But in the post-Soviet economic crisis the system of supply and distribution collapsed. Many enterprises closed and Georgia began importing basic necessities. Still, the country has the potential for food self-sufficiency. And as the economy stabilizes, tourism, agriculture, and mineral sectors can expand. Even amid

crisis, private enterprises are emerging in light industry, construction, transportation, food, and finance.

Georgia's inflation stabilized by 1995, allowing the coupons used as currency since 1992 to increase their buying power against the Russian *ruble* (still in circulation). A national currency, probably with the name *lari*, will soon replace the coupons. Georgia's Human Development Index (0.747) ranks it 66th out of 173 nations. Real gross domestic product per capita is estimated to be \$3,670. These figures give a false impression of the current crisis, but they indicate future potential.

Transportation and Communication

Georgia has a well-developed transportation system, with taxis, buses, trolleys, and streetcars serving urban areas. Unfortunately, the expense and scarcity of fuel have interrupted service, leaving only the subway effective in Tbilisi. Buses between towns still run and are crowded. Most roads are paved but are not in the best condition. Bicycles are not common, partly due to steep terrain in many areas. Airports operate in all major cities and Tbilisi Airport receives daily international flights. Two large ports at Poti and Batumi are vital to shipping throughout the Transcaucasian region.

Most families and businesses in Tbilisi have phones and many in the rural areas do as well. Media broadcasts reach most homes with independent television and radio programs. People read newspapers regularly. The postal system, a remnant of the Soviet network, still depends on Moscow. It can take months for a letter from abroad to reach an addressee; those who can afford it use fax machines or electronic mail to communicate internationally.

Education

Children begin school at age six and graduate at seventeen, whereupon they receive a certificate of completion that entitles them to begin work or seek higher education. Major ethnic minorities have their own schools, some of which use their native language for instruction along with Georgian. Private and specialized schools are becoming more popular.

There are 21 state-run institutions of higher education and more than 100 private or cooperative ones. Obtaining a good education is a high priority and literacy is 99 percent.

Health

The public health care system lacks the efficiency and quality of expensive private services. Georgian physicians are highly skilled, but the nation lacks ambulances and fuel, heated and supplied hospitals, and so forth. Rural areas suffer particular difficulties in obtaining care. At present, regular humanitarian aid from abroad is vital. The infant mortality rate is 24 per 1,000; the life expectancy rate is 73 years.

FOR THE TRAVELER

U.S. citizens need a visa and passport to enter Georgia. Driving in the countryside is only advisable if accompanied by local people. To ask directions of a stranger, begin your inquiry with "Excuse me" (*Ukatsravad* or *Bodishi*). For information, contact Georgia's embassy at 1511 K Street, NW, Suite 424, Washington, DC 20005; phone (202) 393-6060.

A *Culturgram* is a product of native commentary and original, expert analysis. Statistics are estimates and information is presented as a matter of opinion. While the editors strive for accuracy and detail, this document should not be considered strictly factual. It is a general introduction to culture, an initial step in building bridges of understanding between peoples. It may not apply to all peoples of the nation. You should therefore consult other sources for more information.