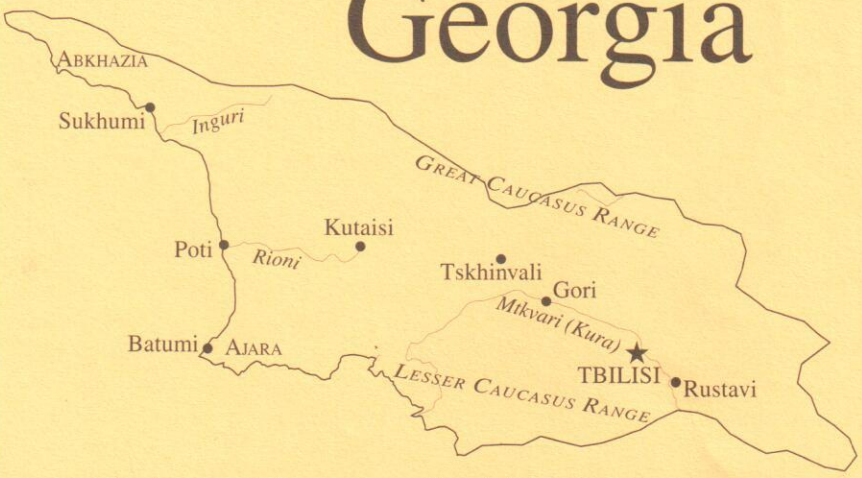
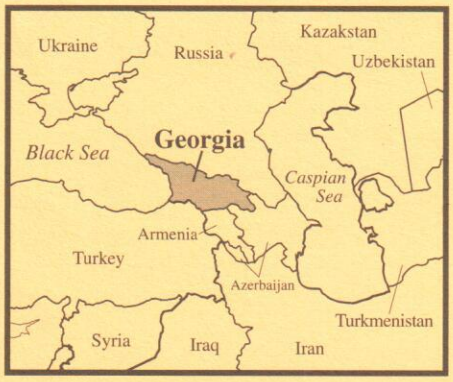
CULTURGRAM '99™

Georgia



Boundary representations are 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 is in the south, and the Surami (*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 a continental climate farther inland. The capital, Tbilisi, is located in a valley and along the slopes of high hills; its winter is windy and chilly with 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 heaviest in coastal areas.

History

The native name for Georgia is *Sakartvelo*, or "the land of the Kartvels," as Georgians call themselves. *Georgia* is indirectly derived from a Turkish translation for Sakartvelo. Historically, Kartvels were only one of several ethnic groups to settle Georgia, but their name was applied to the entire area. Western Georgia was known between the sixth century B.C. and third century A.D. as Colchis (the legendary land of the Golden Fleece). The east was part of Iberia. The wealth and power of Colchis was reflected in the ancient Greek myth about Jason and the Argonauts. The Egrisi (Lazica) Kingdom flourished in the third and fourth centuries. Situated on strategic territory, Georgia was either invaded or influenced by Romans, Arabs, Persians, and Turks prior to the tenth century.

Georgia's "Golden Age" 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 Russian Empire. A protectorate treaty signed in 1783 did not save the region from a Persian invasion in 1795. In 1801, the last Georgian king, Giorgi XII, urged Russia to honor its treaty commitments. Instead, Russia annexed eastern Georgia and, by 1864, 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 (1918). The door closed quickly in 1921 when the Soviet Red Army invaded.

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 protesters were killed by Soviet troops and Georgians pressed for independence—which they declared in 1991.

The Soviet Union soon disintegrated, but peace did not come to Georgia. Georgia's elected president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, alienated ethnic minorities and his policies combined with other factors to spark independence movements and insurgencies. The economy soon collapsed and 350,000 people became refugees. After Gamsakhurdia fled fighting in 1992 (he died in 1994), former Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze assumed leadership. Shevardnadze began to implement democratic and market-oriented reforms,

and Georgia joined the United Nations. Shevardnadze was elected president in 1995.

At the forefront of Georgia's troubles is Abkhazia, where ethnic Georgians were first driven from the region in 1992-93 by Abkhazians demanding independence. A 1994 accord to end the struggle has never been implemented. Russia, which had been aiding Abkhaz rebels, cut off supplies in 1996 and rebel leaders agreed to new peace talks. Unfortunately, Russian peacekeepers sent to patrol a buffer zone did not prevent fighting from erupting in 1998. Another 30,000 or more Georgian refugees were driven from their homes in Abkhazia. A May 1998 ceasefire ended active fighting and Abkhaz leader, Vladislav Ardzinba, said the newest refugees could return home. Since many homes had been burned down, it is doubtful they will return soon. The president has asked for UN action against Abkhazia.

Two assassination attempts (1995 and 1998) against Shevardnadze, an energy shortage, the Abkhazia conflict, crime, and other factors have worked against Georgia's efforts to improve living standards.

THE PEOPLE

Population

Georgia's population of 5.2 million is shrinking annually by 1 percent due to emigration. 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. Georgia's Human Development Index value (0.637) ranks it 105th out of 175 nations.* This reflects how social institutions are struggling to provide people with opportunities to pursue personal goals.

Georgians are divided into a dozen distinct 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 Mingrelians, Gurians, Imeretians, and others. Mingrelians 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 (in Abkhazia) and Batumi. Large Georgian communities are found in France, Russia, Turkey, and Iran. Those in Iran are Muslim descendants of Georgians taken to Persia in the 17th century.

Language

The official language is Georgian. Most urban Georgians can also speak Russian. 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 one of the world's 14 original alphabets. It has 33 letters and uses the original, but slightly modernized, script.

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

Religion

Georgia adopted Christianity by A.D. 337. St. Nino is revered for doing much of the "enlightening," and is one of the most worshiped saints in Georgia. Despite long periods of non-Christian domination, Georgia remains a Christian nation. Even under Soviet rule, people considered religion crucial to cultural survival. The Georgian Church is autonomous but affiliated with the Greek Orthodox Church; its patriarch, Ilia II, is respected for preaching interreligious tolerance and nonviolence. Most people (65 percent) belong to the Georgian Church, but some are Russian Orthodox (10 percent) or Armenian Grigorians (8).

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 Turkic 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 difficult times such as those they are now experiencing. 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 the West and see their future as tied to Europe. Georgians are proud of their country and are pragmatic and positive about the future. Pessimism has increased in recent years because of the hardships, but Georgians try to remain cheerful and not too self-critical. 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.

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 dress is European. Traditional costumes are seen only at folk dance performances and during national holidays. Georgians pay 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* serves as 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 for people to greet strangers on the street; in rural

areas, however, people commonly greet, smile at, and sometimes speak to passing strangers.

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 very 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. People sometimes express appreciation for something by raising a "thumbs up." Pointing with the index finger is improper but practiced. Chewing gum in public, especially when talking, is impolite. 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 cannot provide as adequately for guests as in the past. Still, hosts expect to offer at least a cup of coffee or cookies to guests. They offer full dinners to invited guests when possible. Guests bring gifts only on special occasions, but flowers are a polite and welcome gesture; something for the children is always appreciated.

In Tbilisi, people have long enjoyed strolling down Rustaveli Avenue in the evenings to meet friends, eat at sidewalk cafés, or attend theater or opera performances. During the civil unrest, they retreated to the safety of their homes. With life slowly stabilizing, these old pleasures are returning.

Eating

Family meals are shared together. Breakfast is light if eaten early and more substantial if 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. Georgians eat in the continental style, 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 person 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 horn) passed around the table. Today, a *Kantsi* is displayed in the home or sometimes used by the *Tamada*, but it is only passed around for special toasts.

When guests are present, the hostess prepares and serves the meal, although she eventually joins the group if other women are present. Hosts traditionally provided more than could be eaten, but hard times have changed that. Guests might not ask for seconds and can decline offers of such without insulting the hosts. They are, however, expected to 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 until recently were 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

When dating, couples might go to movies or concerts, visit each other's homes, listen to music, walk in city parks, or meet at cafés. Social unrest and economic hardship have made it unsafe and expensive to do some things, but greater stability is allowing for more recreational choices.

A person generally is 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 traditionally have 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

cucumbers, beans, eggplant, and cabbage. Popular fruits are apples, pears, peaches, and tomatoes. *Satsivi* (fried chicken or turkey soaked in walnut sauce with spices) and *mtsvadi* (marinated, skewered grilled meat) are favorite dishes. Georgians eat *Khatchapuri* (various cheese-filled cookies) and *Gozinaki* (a honey-and-walnut confection) on special occasions.

Recreation

In their leisure time, people might watch television or videos, read, or go to theaters, movies, exhibitions, or concerts. Georgia boasts high-quality theater performances. Favorite sports include soccer, basketball, skiing, tennis, and chess. People also follow figure skating and hockey. Georgians enjoy weekend outings. Urban residents with summer cottages spend as much time as possible there enjoying nature, gardening, or tending to greenhouses. Rural people generally are occupied by farming and have less time to relax.

Holidays

The main official holidays include New Year's Day (1 January), Christmas (7 January), 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. People usually do not exchange gifts for Christmas, as this is primarily a religious holiday. Colored eggs and special cakes are prepared for Easter. 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 is a democratic republic. It is headed by a strong executive president, elected to a five-year term. A new constitution was ratified in October 1995. Parliament has 250 seats. The largest party is Shevardnadze's Citizens Union, but various other parties also have representation. Georgia's Law of Citizenship allows every permanent resident to become a citizen regardless of ethnic origin. It also sets generous guidelines for new settlers. In cooperation with President Shevardnadze, Parliament is strengthening democratic institutions and working to curb crime and corruption. The voting age is 18.

Economy

Georgia traditionally has had a strong agricultural and industrialized economy, with exports of wine, tea, brandy, fruit, vegetables, manganese, marble, and arsenic. In the post-Soviet era, when the system of supply and distribution had collapsed, many enterprises closed and Georgia began importing basic necessities. Still, the country has the potential for food self-sufficiency. 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. Economic growth for 1997 was 12 percent. Poverty affects most people and is the target of future economic reforms. Real gross domestic product per capita is estimated to be $1,585.* Georgia introduced its national currency, the *lari*, in 1995.

Transportation and Communication

Georgia has a well-developed transportation system, with taxis, buses, trolleys, and streetcars serving urban areas. Tbilisi has a subway. The expense and scarcity of fuel have hampered transportation, but private enterprises and government efforts are filling gaps as the economy improves. Buses running between towns 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 urban families and businesses have phones, and many in 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; the literacy rate is 95 percent.

Health

Georgia's public health-care system is being transformed into a market-oriented, fee-for-service system. Many people are unable to afford such care, especially in rural areas. Georgian physicians are highly skilled but hospitals lack supplies. Poverty, war, and other factors have caused the infant mortality rate to rise to 50 per 1,000. Life expectancy averages 66 years.

FOR THE TRAVELER

U.S. citizens need a visa, a passport, and a letter of invitation to enter Georgia.† Driving in the countryside is advisable only if accompanied by local people. To ask directions, first say "Excuse me" (*Ukatsravad* or *Bodishi*). For travel information, contact the Embassy of Georgia, 1511 K Street NW, Suite 424, Washington, DC 20005; phone (202) 393-6060.