



VICTOR EMANUEL NATURE TOURS

ITINERARY

**ARMENIA:  
BIRDS & HISTORY  
MAY 16 – 29, 2026**

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Blue-cheeked Bee-eater © tahirsp photography/shutterstock

*Armenia is at the confluence of Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, and offers a variety of realms ranging from semidesert to deciduous forests, juniper steppe, and alpine mountain meadows. Its crucial placement along this continental corridor encompasses an unusually rich diversity of flora and fauna, and allowed the passage of routes connecting traders from the East to the West since time immemorial. This multi-themed departure is ideal for those interested in readily seeing bird species that are difficult to find elsewhere in the Western Palearctic, and in experiencing Armenia's cultural heritage spanning thousands of years.*

*During the spring, birds return to breed in the slopes, canyons, and marshes of Armenia from north Africa, the Middle East and south Asia. The wetlands hold breeding populations of Dalmatian Pelican, Pygmy Cormorant, White-headed and Ferruginous ducks, White-tailed and Spur-winged lapwings, Armenian Gull and countless White-winged Terns. The marshy edges and scrub hold Paddyfield, Moustached and Menetries's warblers, while rockier haunts present opportunities for Radde's Accentor and White-throated Robin.*

*During this tour we will visit various sites of importance to Armenia's natural and human histories, with opportunities for birding along spectacular landscapes, near ancient monuments, following a dynamic itinerary with plenty of time outdoors, cultural experiences at ancient sites, and an opportunity to delve into the music, customs, and history of this fascinating Transcaucasian nation.*

*Armenia has an ancient cultural heritage that includes some of the oldest Christian monasteries and churches in the world. The archaeological legacy of Armenian in the Lesser Caucasus encompasses stone art from the Neolithic, fortified settlements from the Iron Age, and sacred monuments and manuscripts from the dawn of Christianity. Armenian traditional music is renowned and comprises sacred and secular compositions interpreted with a variety of instruments including the oud, zither, hand drum, and the duduk – a haunting woodwind that is the national instrument.*

*The tour starts in Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia, Armenia's neighbor to the north. This will give us an opportunity to explore the city's rich history, and experience Georgia's famous feasting tradition, steeped in poetic toasting, chanting, and endemic wines. Our time in Georgia will also allow us to explore some of the most biodiverse wetlands in the region, with excellent birding opportunities as we travel south through Javakheti towards the Armenian border.*

*We will then travel through Armenia starting from the north where canyons offer Egyptian Vulture and Lesser Spotted Eagle and nearby Byzantine monasteries represent the pinnacle of Armenian religious architecture. With the spectacular backdrop of Mt. Aragats – a volcano giant crowned by four peaks – we will search the slopes for Persian Wheatear and Crimson-winged Finch. Caspian Snowcock and Blue Rock-Thrush are possible in the rocky crags of nearby ranges. Continuing south, Lake Sevan, the largest in the country, may offer gulls, shorebirds, and waterfowl, while surrounding fields hold hundreds of ancient stone crosses. Gorges south of Sevan were advantageous for the foundation of Smbataberd Fortress and nearby monastic complexes during the 5th century and are now places to search for Finsch's Wheatear, Eastern Rock Nuthatch and Desert Finch. Eventually we will arrive at Armash where fish ponds attract Marbled Duck, Ruddy Shelduck and a broad assortment of grebes, waders, Collared Pratincole, shorebirds, and the stunning Blue-cheeked Bee-eater.*

*Throughout the tour, we will be treated to the best of Armenian hospitality, and hosted by local experts to traditional musical performances, history, and wonderful food during the most beautiful time to visit, when fields are bountiful with wildflowers, crisp air allows for stunning panoramas, and birds thrive in a broad range of habitats. This multi-themed program promises an unforgettable travel experience.*

**May 16, Day 1: International Flight Tbilisi.** Most flights from the United States will depart the USA for Tbilisi, Georgia, Shota Rustaveli International Airport (airport code TBS) on May 16 (Day 1), arriving at different times on May 17 (Day 2). Flights into Tbilisi from the United States typically arrive late at night or very early in the morning.

Depending on your flight routing and if time permits, you may want to depart the USA on May 15 in order to be in Tbilisi in time for the initial group meeting on May 17, or to allow for potential flight delays and to be well rested. VENT will be happy to assist with additional lodging arrangements and transfers should you choose to arrive prior to May 17.

NIGHT: Aboard aircraft in transit to Tbilisi

**May 17, Day 2: Arrive in Tbilisi.** Tbilisi is the capital of Georgia. Upon arrival in Tbilisi and clearing customs and immigration, you will be transferred to our hotel in the city. Early this evening we will meet for a group welcome followed by wine, dinner, and a brief introductory presentation.

During the 5<sup>th</sup> century, the Georgian King Vakhtang Gorgasali was hunting outside of Mtskheta when a Ring-necked Pheasant flew from under cover. The king sent his Peregrine Falcon after the pheasant and the falcon caught its prey. However, both birds tumbled into a spring of hot water and died. That event and the discovery of thermal springs at that site impressed the king so much that he founded a settlement known as Tbilisi – translated as *warm place*. Soon thereafter it grew to become the capital city of Georgia and has remained a center of trade and conflict for centuries. Despite having been raided countless times by various invaders through the ages, it survives today as a modern hub of the South Caucasus.

At its core, Tbilisi is a lovely city filled with ancient monuments and buildings of historic importance. Having long proven its importance as a crossroads connecting continents, it has remained a magnet for tourists from throughout the world. This evening, we will meet for an orientation, and a Georgian *supra*. A *supra* is a traditional Georgian feast, hosted by our local toastmaster or *tamada*, at a table heaping with regional delicacies, wine, and music. Georgians take their toasting tradition during feasts seriously, along with their chanting and wines. Discoveries of grape seeds and vine remnants thousands of years old have reinforced the notion that Georgia played a high position in the origins of viticulture. Georgians have taken pride in their winemaking for many generations. Wine is not typically sipped but celebrated with rounds of poetry and music. We are likely to hear an assortment of songs at our feast table, including the polyphonic chants that Georgia is famous for, and songs accompanied by the *panduri* lute.

NIGHTS: Tbilisi

**May 18, Day 3: Kumisi and Tbilisi.** This day will be divided into two sections, with birding during the first half of the day, and a leisurely exploration of Old Tbilisi during the second half.

After breakfast, we will head out to the Kumisi Reserve not far from the capital. Many duck species have been documented there including Ruddy Shelduck, Red-crested Pochard, and Ferruginous Duck. Five species of grebes are regularly found there, with Great Crested being a common breeder. Black-winged Stilts are sure to be there at this time of year, as is also possible of Common Ringed and Little Ringed plovers. Among the many likely sandpipers, Marsh, Wood and Terek are a possibility, as are Ruffs and Curlew Sandpipers. Eight gull species have been documented during this season, with Armenian, Caspian, and Slender-billed likely. All three marsh terns frequent these wetlands – Black, Whiskered, and White-winged, the latter being most common. We are sure to find herons and egrets, and even Eurasian Spoonbills. We will look for White-tailed Eagle and Long-legged Buzzard, as well as Eurasian Kestrel and Little Owl. Many songbirds can be hiding in the marshes and fallow fields surrounding the reserve, including Black-headed and Reed buntings, and several others.

We will then return to the capital and explore parts of Tbilisi. The historic downtown area of Old Tbilisi is full of winding cobblestone streets, small shops, and restaurants, as well as the many public museums, churches, synagogues, and mosques that underscore the diversity of this unique country. The city is pedestrian friendly, and we will stroll down some boulevards and visit some historic sites and enjoy a nice dinner during our final night in Tbilisi.

NIGHT: Tbilisi

**May 19, Day 4: Tbilisi to Javakheti.** We will leave Tbilisi this morning heading to southcentral Georgia, with the goal of reaching the region of Javakheti this afternoon. Along the way, we will stop at some of the several lakes in this region. These may include the Kumisi and Tsalka reserves, Saghamo Lake, and Khanchali Reserve. The avian possibilities are vast, ranging from a broad array of waterfowl, to shorebirds, waders, raptors and landbirds.

The expansive Javakheti Plateau has long served as a summer destination for semi-nomadic pastoral communities, extending as far as Anatolia. According to tradition, it was along this route that St. Nino, a Cappadocian missionary, first introduced Christianity to Georgia in the 4th century. Carrying her grapevine cross through Javakheti, she eventually reached the ancient Kingdom of Iberia in eastern Georgia, where she converted Queen Nana and King Mirian III.



Illustrations by Rafael Gálvez. Caucasian Grouse, Caucasian and Caspian snowcocks, featured in

As we travel, we'll focus on key areas where wetlands break up the arid plains, creating rich habitats that attract a high diversity of birdlife. In the brush and surrounding thickets, we'll search for passerines, with potential sightings including Short-toed Larks, warblers, buntings, pipits, and wagtails. The open plains may also host resting Long-legged Buzzards, while raptors such as Egyptian Vultures, Montagu's Harriers, and Levant Sparrowhawks could be seen foraging overhead.

The region's large lakes are likely to hold a variety of dabbling duck species, including Red-crested Pochard, Tufted Duck, Ruddy Shelduck, and—with some persistence—even the uncommon Velvet Scoter. As we pass through villages, we'll see White Storks nesting on rooftops and utility poles. These lakes may also support Dalmatian and Great White Pelicans, along with a wide range of shorebirds and waders.

We'll also keep an eye out for the "eastern" form of the Common Crane (*Grus grus lilfordi*), a near-endemic subspecies restricted to the Transcaucasian breeding range. This form is distinguishable by its paler upperparts and a smaller red patch on the crown.

By midafternoon, we will arrive at the Georgian town of Ninotsminda – named after Saint Nino, now mostly an Armenian settlement, where we will have dinner and settle in for the night.

NIGHT: Ninotsminda

**May 20, Day 5: Javakheti.** This day will be dedicated to exploring the vast steppe range and lakes of the Javakheti Region. There are five large to mid-sized lakes in this part of Georgia that can be excellent for waterfowl and shorebirds. These include the enormous Paravani, Khanchali Reserve near Ninotsminda, Tabatskuri farther north, Lake Aktas, which is half in Georgia and half in Turkey, the smaller Saghmo, Bughdasheni Reserve, and Lake Madatapa near the border with Armenia, perhaps the most biodiverse body of water in the region.

We will be on the lookout for Graylag Goose, Ruddy Shelduck, Ferruginous Duck, Red-crested Pochard, several other ducks, and up to four grebe species including Red-necked and Eared. Even Greater Flamingo and Eurasian Spoonbill are possible at this time of year! A broad number of shorebirds have also been documented here, including Great Snipe, Terek, Curlew and Wood sandpipers, both redshanks, and many more. This is a good place to look for Armenian Gull, White-winged and Whiskered terns, and nearly all the heron species expected in the region. Raptors are also to be looked for here including European Honey-buzzard, Western Marsh and Montagu's harriers, Levant Sparrowhawk and Long-legged Buzzard. Eurasian Hoopoe, European Bee-eater and Red-backed Shrike should also be in the area. With persistence, we may find all four wagtails, particularly Citrine and Western Yellow, and many more.

We'll also explore rhododendron-covered slopes in search of the endemic Caucasian Grouse—a striking species with strong sexual dimorphism, as males are entirely black. With patience and a bit of luck, we may be rewarded with a sighting. These high plateaus offer many exciting possibilities, including Turkestan Short-toed Lark, Ring Ouzel, Rufous-tailed Rock-Thrush, Pied and Eastern Black-eared Wheatears, and Crimson-winged Finch. As this region remains relatively underbirded, the potential for unexpected discoveries is wide open.

NIGHT: Ninotsminda

**May 21, Day 6: Crossing into Armenia.** We will leave Ninotsminda this morning, with our luggage packed and loaded, heading south. The Armenian border is only 14 miles from Ninotsminda, but before crossing, we will make a stop on the Georgian side, at Lake Madatapa, the most biodiverse body of water in the region. We will spend the morning exploring along the shores of Madatapa, and, although we may have had time to visit it the prior day, it will likely render new avian surprises.

By midday, we will cross the border into Armenia, giving us enough time for the necessary processes required by customs and immigration. However, the crossing should be relatively smooth and inconsequential. Once in Armenia, we may have time to stop briefly at any of the wetlands and plains as we continue towards the southeast, with the ultimate goal of reaching the town of Dilijan in the afternoon. Dilijan is one of the most important resort and spa towns in Armenia and has long attracted artists and people seeking nature. Dilijan is in a forested valley surrounded by the Lesser Caucasus mountains, with more than 84,000 acres of protected habitat surrounding the town.

There, we will have a chance to taste some of the culinary specialties of Armenia, and even participate in a cooking workshop should scheduling allow. We will have an opportunity to visit some of the picturesque parts of Old Dilijan before and during dinner, such as Sharambeyan Street with its beautifully restored balconies, galleries, and shops. We will have a chance to visit some art studios and meet the artists to learn about the historic symbols now repurposed and much used in contemporary art.

NIGHT: Dilijan

**May 22, Day 7: Dilijan National Park and Lake Sevan.** We will start this day by visiting Dilijan National Park, known for its rich biodiversity, lush forests, natural spring water, and cultural monuments. The park is home to more than 150 species of birds, including the endemic Caucasian Grouse. Several woodpecker species including Middle Spotted, Eurasian Green, and Black can be found there, and it is also the place to look for Green Warblers, which breed exclusively in the Caucasus, along with several typical forest species such as Coal Tit, Eurasian Nuthatch and Song Thrush. We will also look for Common Wood-Pigeon, Eurasian Jay, Semicollared and Red-breasted flycatchers, Eurasian Bullfinch, Hawfinch and more.

There are two monasteries in the vicinity that together with the national park complex, have been proposed as potential UNESCO sites: Goshavank and Haghartsin. The monasteries are surrounded by beautiful natural settings and create a seamless opportunity to explore history and nature simultaneously. Goshavank is a 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> century monastery with a complex that includes various buildings and monuments, some of which are well preserved, surrounded by the town of Gosh and the forested slopes of the Dilijan. It is perhaps best known for peculiarities in its architecture, and some of the finest examples of *khachkars*, or cross-stones, which are stunningly etched and embroidered slabs of stone filled with ornamental motifs. Haghartsin was built between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, and lore says that at the time of its dedication, an eagle soared over its main dome, and the name of the monastery is derived from the term meaning “playful eagle.” The complex holds various chapels, churches, monuments, and sepulchers, surrounded by rich forested slopes where woodpeckers, tits, thrushes and many other birds thrive.

NIGHT: Dilijan

**May 23, Day 8: Along Lake Sevan and the Vardenis Mountains, to Yeghegis.** With our bags packed and loaded, we will leave the Dilijan area this morning and drive south along the shores of Lake Sevan towards Yeghegis. Although this will be primarily a travel day, we will make several stops along the way for birds and sites of cultural significance.

At 46 miles in length and 6,200 ft. in elevation, Lake Sevan is one of the largest freshwater high-elevation lakes in Eurasia and is situated entirely in Armenia. As we drive along its shores, there will be several locations that may be very productive for birds, particularly waterfowl. We will continue south towards Sevanavank, located on a peninsula on the shores of the lake. The monastic complex was founded in 874 during a period when Armenia was struggling to liberate itself from Arab rule. The monastery has an illustrious history and was originally relatively inaccessible on an island on the northwestern corner of the lake. During the Soviet era, Stalin’s misguided attempt to drain Lake Sevan caused water levels to drop by more than 60 feet, transforming what was once an island into a peninsula. Today, Lake Sevan remains Armenia’s most important source of freshwater, playing a vital economic role through irrigation, hydroelectric power, fishing, and tourism.

We will continue south to the Norashen Reserve along the shores of the lake. There, we may find a wide range of avian species including Ferruginous Duck and other waterfowl. The surrounding flats and reedbeds may provide shelter for Water Rail, Spotted Crake, and various shorebirds including Broad-billed Sandpiper. Collared Pratincole, Whiskered Tern, Pygmy Cormorant, and various herons may be found as well. The skies may render various aerialists including raptors, swallows, swifts, and with luck, Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters. We will also be on the lookout for Woodchat Shrike, Eurasian Penduline-Tit, Bearded Reedling, Moustached and Cetti’s Warbler, and much more.





*Khachkars at Noratus © Arantz*

About halfway down the length of the lake, we will stop at Noratus, an impressive medieval cemetery with many early *khachkars* – intricately carved stone slabs with symbolic motifs to commemorate the dead – some dating back to the 10<sup>th</sup> century.

South of Lake Sevan, we'll follow the scenic Vardenyats (Selim) Pass, which climbs to around 7,900 feet (2,400 meters) above sea level, flanked by snow-capped peaks and sweeping valleys. Depending on the season's weather patterns, we may encounter lingering snow in late May or catch the first vibrant bursts of spring wildflowers blanketing the foothills. As we cross the Vardenis Mountains, we'll stop at key sites to search for notable bird species such as Radde's Accentor, White-throated Robin, and—with some luck—Crimson-winged Finch. Other possibilities include Chukar, Eastern Rock Nuthatch, Bluethroat, Eastern Black-eared Wheatear, Water Pipit, and Black-headed Bunting. The pass is also known for raptors, with documented sightings of Steppe and Lesser Spotted Eagles.

Scattered along these mountain passes are the ruins of ancient caravanserais—roadside inns that once offered rest and shelter to travelers journeying across continents along major trade routes. The best-preserved example, which we plan to visit, is Orbelian's Caravanserai, built in 1332 by Prince Chesar Orbelian. Inscriptions on its vestibule, written in Persian, Arabic, and Armenian, underscore its historical significance as a key stop along the Silk Road.

NIGHT: Yeghegis

**May 24, Day 9: Mount Gndasar and historic sites of Vayots Dzor.** While based in Yeghegis, we'll use the town as a hub to explore a variety of birding and cultural sites unique to this region of Armenia. Depending on how productive each stop is and the amount of time we spend at each location, we may be able to visit most of the key sites planned for this area.

This morning, we will drive up Mount Gndasar in search of Caspian Snowcocks. The burly snowcocks are high alpine breeders and can be a challenge to find as they scamper with agility along high mountain ledges. Their curlew-like calls are often the best way to know that they are in the area. We will spend quality time exploring this mountainous area for these elusive galliformes, and other avian specialties. The Mount Gndasar summit rises to more than 9000 ft. asl., yet the road that leads to it gives limited access from season to season due to weather conditions. The mountain is part of the Vardenis system, and its slopes are covered in meadows and steppe-like habitat that can be good for flycatchers, wheatears, larks, buntings, and finches.

Several notable cultural sites can be explored from the Yeghegis area. Among them is Smbataberd, a fortress with origins dating back to the 5th century. Perched on a mountain ridge at around 6,500 feet, its outer walls remain impressively well-preserved. We may also visit Shativank Monastery, founded in 929, consisting of several structures, including a church that was rebuilt in the 17th century. Another highlight is the Arates monastic complex, a scenic cluster of medieval chapels and churches dramatically overlooking the riverbanks—a sight to behold.

There are several gorges along the route leading westward, and we may be able to explore some of them on the same day, including the Vedi Hills and Gorge region, where we will search for Eastern Rock Nuthatch, White-throated Robin, Mongolian and Trumpeter finches, Gray-necked Bunting, and Finsch's Wheatear among others.

NIGHT: Yeghegis

**May 25, Day 10: Armash, Vedi and Oorts - to Yerevan.** We will bid farewell to the Yeghegis area this morning and start making our way towards Yerevan, Armenia's capital. Along the way, we will stop at the famed Armash Fish Ponds – one of the birdiest places in Armenia. The avian possibilities in this area are quite exciting, combining waterfowl, shorebirds, and a variety of documented land birds. We will spend much of the day here, in search of species such as White-tailed Lapwing, Collared Pratincole, Blue-cheeked Bee-eater, with Upcher's and Paddyfield warblers, being among the most sought-out. More widespread species that we could encounter at Armash include Ruddy Shelduck, Ferruginous and White-headed ducks, Great Crested Grebe, Black-winged Stilt, Spur-winged Lapwing, Terek Sandpiper, Ruff, Armenian Gull, seven species of terns, Pygmy Cormorant, Little Bittern, and so much more!

We will also venture into the Oorts Gorge where several of the birds we may have missed in the Vedi area are again possible. Additional species of importance may include Upcher's and Eastern Orphean warblers, Rufous-tailed Scrub-Robin, White-throated Robin, Persian Wheatear, Crimson-winged Finch, and more. Additional sites in the area we may visit include the Vardashat Gorge and the Shaghap Valley.

Other sites in this region may grant us Blue-cheeked Bee-eater, European Roller, Turkestan Short-toed Lark, Eastern Olivaceous Warbler, Mountain Chiffchaff, Moustached, Menetries's, Upcher's and Paddyfield warblers, Rosy Starling and others.

Another site worth visiting is the beautiful Noravank, a 13<sup>th</sup> century monastery located at a sheer gorge surrounded by red-colored cliffs. The complex includes various structures, churches with elaborate architecture, and a fortified wall. The surrounding area has been designated an Important Bird Area, and it is possible we may find Bearded Vulture (Lammergeier), Eurasian Golden Oriole, Crag-Martin, Eastern Rock Nuthatch, Black Redstart, Eastern Black-eared, Persian, and Finsch's wheatears, Fire-fronted Serin, and Gray-necked Bunting there!



We may make additional brief stops for birding along the way, such as at another set of ponds near the town of Masis, where we may encounter species such as Squacco Heron, Common Reed and Great Reed warblers, Pied Wheatear, and Reed Bunting. By mid-afternoon, we will arrive to Yerevan, where we will settle for the night.

#### NIGHT: Yerevan

**May 26, Day 11: Yerevan.** We will spend part of this day in the greater Yerevan area, exploring the rich cultural offerings that the Armenian capital has to offer. The city offers various museum, gardens, sacred monuments, and much more, and we will enjoy a relaxed morning visiting some of these important sites. The possibilities include Tsitsernakaberd Memorial Park – the Armenian Genocide Museum, which offers crucial insights into the national pathos, the botanical gardens, and perhaps even the National Opera House if the timing of our visit aligns with a scheduled performance. Birding may be possible throughout the day, and even Tsitsernakaberd has an impressive bird list that includes Laughing Dove, Syrian Woodpecker, and more.



The Ionic Temple of Garni © Kim Davies

In the afternoon, we will drive into the Azat Valley to the east, surrounded by high cliffs of great beauty, where the Garni Gorge holds a temple dating back to the first century AD where pre-Christian gods were worshipped. The Ionic Temple of Garni was built during the reign of Tiridates I of Armenia. It has been described as the "easternmost building of the Greco-Roman world and the only standing colonnaded building of that era in the region. Around lunch time, we will go to a place where guests can observe Armenian traditional flat bread – *lavash* – being made in outdoor round ovens.

Then, at the nearby monastery of Geghard, medieval Armenian architecture is showcased at its finest, including several tombs and churches carved out of the living rock. The monuments at Geghard range from the 4<sup>th</sup> to the 13<sup>th</sup> century AD, founded soon after the adoption of Christianity

as a state religion in Armenia. At Geghard, we will enjoy a traditional singing event organized exclusively for our group.

There are impressive basalt formations on the surrounding cliff walls, in the form of cascading columns carved out through the ages by river waters, known at the *Symphony of Stones*. The area can be good for raptors including the Egyptian Vulture and other species such as Blue Rock-Thrush and even Eastern and Western Rock Nuthatches.

During the evenings in Yerevan, there are music and light displays at the Republic Square, and some of us may choose to stroll along the public fountain after dinner and enjoy the festivities.

NIGHT: Yerevan

**May 27, Day 12: To Mount Aragats.** This day, we will visit the mysterious Mount Aragats, a volcano massif crowned by four peaks, with its northern summit at 13,418 ft. asl. (4090 m.) being one of the highest points in the Lesser Caucasus. The volcano has long been dormant, but has experienced various periods of activity, the latest being roughly 5000 years ago. Although the origin of its name is uncertain, it derives from a rich history of legends and lore.

We will look for several bird species as we drive up the summit road, such as Rufous-tailed Scrub-Robin, White-throated Robin, Radde's Accentor, and others. Several raptor species are possible, soaring along the dramatic mountain range, including the magnificent Bearded Vulture, or Lammergeier, Eurasian Griffon, Cinereous Vulture, and Eurasian Goshawk. We will also be on the lookout for Ring Ouzel, Rufous-tailed Rock-Thrush, Alpine Accentor, Bluethroat, White-winged Snowfinch, and Twite.

There will be plenty of opportunities to stop along the way to enjoy the scenery and search for wildlife. The paved road climbs to about 11,000 feet (3,350 meters) above sea level, though it can be rough in places, a legacy of the Soviet era. In late May, snowfields may still linger at higher elevations, so how far we ascend will depend on the weather, our timing, and the success of our birding. If conditions allow and we reach the end of the road, we'll arrive at Kari Lake, which occasionally hosts waterfowl. As we drive up Highway H20 through lower elevations, we may encounter species such as European Cuckoo, Common and Alpine Swifts, Short-toed Snake-Eagle, Long-legged Buzzard, and choughs of both species.

On our return toward Yerevan, we'll stop on the plains near Yeghvard to search for Bimaculated Lark, with the possibility of also spotting Greater Short-toed and Crested Larks. Other species we may encounter in these open areas include Woodchat Shrike, Isabelline Wheatear, Rock Sparrow, and Tawny Pipit.

NIGHT: Yerevan



The Khor Virap Cross and Mount Ararat © John Graham

**May 28, Day 13: Mount Ararat, Khor Virap monastery, and the Armash Area.** This morning, we will set out southward to visit a combination of cultural sites and birding locations, retracing the route we had taken from Yeghegnadzor to the capital, and stopping at new sites; revisiting those that were bountiful with birds.

We will stop at Khor Virap Monastery, surrounded by vineyards and plains within view of Mount Ararat, near the quadripoint where Armenia, Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Iran share borders. The 16,854 ft. (5137 m.) dormant volcano has been called by the name Ararat since the Middle Ages when it began to be identified with the mythical mountains described as the resting place of Noah's ark. The Khor Virap complex is also a pilgrimage site because Gregory the Illuminator (Saint Gregory) was imprisoned there for 13 years by the king of Armenia, Tiridates III, yet ultimately became the king's spiritual mentor. As a result, he started the process of converting the nation away from Zoroastrianism, and in the year 301, Armenia was the first nation to be declared Christian.

If time allows, we may go as far as Armash and spend more time enjoying the diversity of waterfowl and marsh birds found there during this season. We are likely to find new birds we had missed during our prior visit.

Ultimately, the aim is to enjoy our final time together, sharing meaningful experiences that encapsulate the historical importance of Armenia, and its cultural contributions, along with more birding. Our last dinner will be accompanied by authentic food and music. Yerevan is one of the best places to hear traditional Armenian music, and watch performers do some engaging circle-dances. After our final checklist session, we will retire early to allow participants time to prepare for their flights back home.

NIGHT: Yerevan

**May 29, Day 14: Departure for home.** Participants are encouraged to depart the region from Yerevan's Zvartnots International Airport (EVN). We will organize transfers to the airport throughout the day. When booking your return flight, please keep in mind that transfers will depart from the hotel about 3 hours before the scheduled departing flight times. Invariably, some flights leave in the early hours of the morning, so you may want to consider giving yourself enough preparation time.

For those that may be interested in extending their time in the region, an extra day or two in Yerevan offers the opportunity to explore a variety of world-class museums and walking areas including the Matanadaran Museum where one can view an impressive collection of medieval manuscripts, the Yerevan History Museum, which covers 5,000 years of history, and the Tsitsernakaberd Memorial Park.

### **Essential Tour Information**

**TOUR SIZE:** This tour will be limited to 10 participants. However, VENT reserves the right to increase the tour limit by one in order to accommodate a couple when only one space is available.

**TOUR LEADER(S) and HOSTS:** This tour will be led by **Rafael Gálvez** and **Attila Steiner**. **David Beridze** will be the cultural guide and interpreter.



**Rafael Gálvez** has been birding and illustrating birds since childhood. He has combined his love of art and birds while collaborating in several publications, including field guides and school textbooks in the Republic of Georgia and Latin America. He gained knowledge of the Caucasus while traveling extensively through the region, soon after the fall of the Soviet Union, while producing musical recordings and documentary shorts. He published a broad collection of secular and sacred chants, as well as art books under his own label. He has worked with several traditional ensembles in Georgia including Mtiebi, Anchiskhati and Zedashe. His branding and graphic work with traditional wineries helped reawaken an interest in Georgian wines. He served as a board member of the BirdLife International affiliate in the Republic of Georgia and Audubon in the U.S., developing educational and conservation programs. After working with raptor research along the Black Sea, he returned to Florida to spearhead the Florida Keys Hawkwatch migration monitoring project.



**David Beridze** (interpreter and cultural guide in Georgia) was born and raised in Tbilisi, but his family is from Akhaltsikhe, a city in southern Georgia. He is married with two children, and sings traditional chant in the Kashweti Church. His education is in history and cultural and physical geography, and he has been working as a guide for ten years. Originally he worked as a hiking guide which is his main passion, but in recent years he has been operating a variety of private cultural tours because of his vast knowledge and interest in Georgian history and arcana. His passions remain hiking, singing, and being with his family. "Dato" is mild-mannered, quiet, but owns a lot of knowledge about every topic, and is entirely dependable as a driver and guide.



## **TOUR COSTS & PAYMENT INFORMATION**

**TOUR FEE:** \$7,905 per person based on double occupancy. This includes all meals from dinner on Day 2 through dinner on Day 13, accommodations as stated in the itinerary, all ground transportation during the tour, and guide services provided by the tour leaders. It does **not** include airfare to nor from the starting/ending city; however, flights within the tour (if any) are included. The fee also excludes alcoholic beverages, laundry, personal expenses, and other items of a personal nature. For information about gratuities, please see the “TIPPING” subsection below. If the minimum group size is not met, each participant will be charged a small-group supplement—shared equally and communicated in advance—to allow the tour to proceed.

**SINGLE SUPPLEMENT:** If you request single accommodations, a single supplement of \$720 will be added to your tour fee.

**REGISTRATION & DEPOSIT:** You may register for this tour through the VENT website or by calling our office (512-328-5221). The deposit for this tour is \$1,000 per person. We accept MasterCard and Visa. If you choose not to register online, you may pay your deposit by credit card, check, money order, or bank transfer. If not paying online, or by card, your tour space will be held for 10 days pending receipt of your deposit.

**PAYMENTS:** All tour payments may be made by credit card (MasterCard or Visa), check, money order, or bank transfer (contact the VENT office for bank transfer information). These include initial deposits, second deposits, interim payments, final balances, special arrangements, etc. Full payment of the tour fee is due 150 days (December 17, 2026) prior to the tour departure date.

**EXTRA ARRANGEMENTS:** Should you wish to make arrangements to arrive early or extend your stay, please contact the VENT office at least two months prior to your departure date. We can very easily make hotel arrangements and often at our group rate, if we receive your request with enough advance time.

**EXCHANGE RATE SURCHARGES:** Tour prices are based on the rate of exchange at the time of itinerary publication. If rates change drastically, it may be necessary to impose a surcharge. If a surcharge is necessary, every effort will be made to minimize the amount. In many cases, these additional foreign exchange rate surcharges have been passed on to VENT by its vendors and suppliers.

**FUEL SURCHARGES:** Our prices are based on fuel prices at the time of itinerary publication. While we will do everything possible to maintain our prices, it may be necessary to institute a fuel surcharge.

**TIPPING:** An important part of the value of a VENT tour is knowing that tips for local service providers at our destinations—restaurant staff, hotel staff, drivers, local guides, and various other support staff—are included in your tour fee. If you would like to offer any of your local guides an additional tip, \$5 to \$10 a day is a common amount.

Tips for your VENT tour leader(s) are **not** included, but it is customary to tip one or both if you feel that you have received exceptional service. To assist in your planning, we recommend tipping your VENT tour leader(s) \$15 to \$20 per day, or the equivalent of approximately 2–4% of the tour fee.

If you plan to give tips by cash, they should be given directly to your tour leader at the end of the tour and **not** sent to the VENT office. Some of our tour leaders use mobile payment applications such as Venmo, PayPal, and Wise. If you would like to use this method, please ask your tour leaders directly whether they can accept tips through such an application.



We emphasize that tipping is optional and that these amounts are only recommendations. The amount you decide to tip is based entirely on your experience and at your discretion.

## **CANCELLATION & REFUNDS**

**CANCELLATION BY PARTICIPANT:** Refunds, if any, for any cancellation by a participant are made according to the following schedule: If participant cancels 180 days or more before the tour departure date, a cancellation fee of **\$500** per person will be charged unless the deposit is transferred to a new registration for another VENT tour that will operate within the next 12 months from the date of participant tour cancellation, in which case the cancellation fee will be **\$100** per person. If cancellation is made between 179 and 151 days before departure date, the deposit is not refundable, but any payments covering the balance of the tour fee will be refunded. If cancellation is made fewer than 150 days before departure date, no refund is available. This policy and fee schedule also applies to pre- and post-tour extensions. **For participants' protection, we strongly recommend the purchase of travel insurance that covers trip cancellation/interruption.**

<u>If participant cancels:</u>	<u>Participant's refund will be:</u>
180 days or more before departure date	Your deposit(s) minus \$500*
179 to 151 days before departure date	No refund of the deposits, but any payments on the balance will be refunded
150 days or less before departure date	No refund available

\*Unless the deposit is transferred to a new registration for another VENT tour that will operate within the next 12 months from the date of participant tour cancellation, in which case the cancellation fee will be \$100 per person. To qualify, cancellation must occur 180 days or more before departure date; deposit transfers must be made at the time of cancellation; and one transfer per deposit.

**CANCELLATION BY VENT:** If VENT cancels a tour prior to departure without cause or good reason, VENT will provide the participant a full refund, which will constitute full settlement to the participant.

If VENT cancels or delays a tour or any portion of a tour as a result of any Force Majeure event, VENT will use its reasonable best efforts to refund any payments on the balance of the tour fee to participant; provided that, VENT will have no obligation to provide a participant with a refund and will not be liable or responsible to a participant, nor be deemed to have defaulted under or breached any applicable agreement, for any failure or delay in fulfilling or performing any term of such agreement. A **"Force Majeure"** event means any act beyond VENT's control, including, without limitation, the following: (a) acts of God; (b) flood, fire, earthquake, hurricane, epidemic, pandemic or explosion; (c) war, invasion, hostilities (whether war is declared or not), terrorist threats or acts, riot or other civil unrest; (d) government order, law or actions; (e) embargoes or blockades; (f) national or regional emergency; (g) strikes, labor stoppages, labor slowdowns or other industrial disturbances; (h) shortage of adequate power or transportation facilities; and (i) any other similar events or circumstances beyond the control of VENT.

This VENT Cancellation & Refunds policy does not apply to air tickets purchased through VENT or to any special arrangements, such as additional hotel nights, that fall outside of the services described in the tour itinerary.

**Victor Emanuel Nature Tours is not a participant in the California Travel Consumer Restitution Fund. California law requires certain sellers of travel to have a trust account or bond. This business has a bond issued by Travelers in the amount of \$50,000. CST #2014998-50.**

## **TRAVEL INSURANCE**

**MEDICAL EVACUATION INSURANCE/PROTECTION REQUIREMENT:** This tour visits remote locations where immediate access to primary medical care may not be available. **For this reason, travel insurance/travel protection which covers you for emergency evacuation is required for participation on this tour.** This coverage is included in the **Ripcord Rescue Travel Insurance™** program. Alternatively, comparable service can be obtained through **Medjet** and its **MedjetAssist** plan. If you choose not to purchase insurance/travel protection through Ripcord or Medjet, you are required to obtain it through another provider. Please refer to the TRAVEL INSURANCE/TRAVEL PROTECTION section for additional information.

**SUGGESTED OPTIONS:** To safeguard against losses due to illness, accident, or other unforeseen circumstances, we strongly recommend the purchase of travel insurance as soon as possible after making a deposit. VENT has partnered with **Redpoint Travel Protection** as our preferred travel insurance provider. Through Redpoint, we recommend its comprehensive Ripcord plan, which includes a medical evacuation benefit. With this in mind, it is important to note that medical evacuation is not offered by Redpoint as a stand-alone policy or benefit. For travelers not interested in comprehensive travel insurance, VENT recommends **Medjet** and its **MedjetAssist®** plan. Medjet is not an insurance company, and Medjet Assist is not an insurance product; rather, Medjet is a membership-based air-medical transport company specializing in moving hospitalized travelers from an admitting hospital to a medical facility of choice. Medjet does not provide medical evacuation service from the point of injury or illness; yet, the MedjetAssist plan offers robust enough travel protection to satisfy the medical evacuation insurance requirement in place for many VENT tours.

### **About Redpoint Travel's Ripcord Plan**

Ripcord is a completely integrated travel insurance program with single contact for emergency services, travel assistance, and insurance claims. Critical benefits include comprehensive travel insurance for trip cancellation/interruption, medical evacuation from your point of injury or illness to your hospital of choice; medical expense coverage, death of pet, and much more. Optional expanded insurance coverage is available and includes items such as evacuation coverage in case of a natural disaster or political or security reasons, waiver for pre-existing medical conditions exclusion, and a "Cancel for Any Reason" benefit. Ripcord is available to U.S. and non-U.S. residents.\*

For a price quote or to purchase travel insurance, please visit: [Ripcord Travel Insurance](#); or click the **Ripcord** logo on our website (click Help > Preparation and Insurance > Trip Insurance); or call +1-415-481-0600. Pricing is based on age, trip cost, trip length, and level of coverage.

\*To be eligible for the pre-existing medical condition exclusion waiver and the optional Cancel for Any Reason (CFAR) upgrade, you must purchase your policy within 15 days of making your first trip payment. The CFAR benefit provides reimbursement for 75% of covered costs, and increases the policy premium by approximately 50%. Policies may be purchased either for the full value of the tour fee at the time of deposit or in segments as individual tour payments are made (deposit, second deposit, final balance, additional arrangements, etc.). The "pay as you go" approach reduces up-front expense and ensures that the amount paid toward your full policy premium is in proportion to the amount paid toward the full tour fee. If you choose to "pay as you go," you must cover each deposit or payment within 15 days, and insure all non-refundable trip costs in order to maintain the CFAR benefit. Please refer to the policy for a full description of coverage.

Redpoint considers COVID-19 illness as any other seasonal respiratory illness. Providing only a positive Covid-19 test result will likely not be considered a covered event per the terms and conditions of the company's policy. Redpoint maintains a [Coronavirus FAQ page](#) on its website

that addresses questions and concerns travelers may have regarding COVID-19 and Redpoint's policy. We strongly recommend that you visit the page for an overview of relevant topics.

### About Medjet's MedjetAssist Plan

MedjetAssist is a membership program that functions like AAA for motorists. The company's primary service is air medical transport. Critical benefits of MedjetAssist include a staff on call and ready to provide assistance 24 hours a day, 7 days a week; all-expenses-paid air medical transport in the United States and internationally to medical facility of choice, regardless of medical necessity; repatriation of remains; and no exclusions for pre-existing conditions.

For travelers under 75, MedjetAssist may be purchased as Short-Term Memberships of 8, 15, 21, and 30 days, or Regular Annual Memberships from 1 to 5 years. For travelers 75–84, Medjet offers a Diamond Membership that is the same program but with a few additional conditions.

For a price quote or to purchase MedjetAssist, please visit: [Medjet.com/VentBird](https://www.Medjet.com/VentBird) or call 1-800-527-7478. Pricing is based on type and term of membership.

### GETTING THERE & REQUIRED TRAVEL DOCUMENTS

**AIR TRAVEL:** Victor Emanuel Travel is a full-service travel agency and wholly owned subsidiary of Victor Emanuel Nature Tours (VENT). Victor Emanuel Travel will be happy to make any domestic or international air travel arrangements from your home and return. Per person fees apply for each set of travel arrangements: \$50 domestic; \$75 international.\* Many of our travelers choose to make their own air travel arrangements, but we emphasize the benefits to using our services. If you book your air arrangements yourself, Victor Emanuel Travel is unable to provide support in managing any flight delays and/or cancellations that could occur before and during a tour. When you purchase air tickets through Victor Emanuel Travel, our staff has ready access to your air ticket record and can provide assistance as problems arise. Please feel free to call the VENT office to confirm your air arrangements. **Please be sure to check with the VENT office prior to purchasing your air ticket to confirm that the tour is sufficiently subscribed to operate. VENT cannot be held responsible for any air ticket penalties.**

\*An air ticket will be purchased by Victor Emanuel Travel on behalf of the traveler with the traveler's consent. A purchase is considered final upon receipt of payment. If a ticket is subsequently reissued at the behest of the traveler (i.e. voluntary change of plans), the same fee rates apply for the reissue process, in addition to any fees that may be charged by the airline.

**BAGGAGE:** Please limit baggage to one piece of luggage and one carry-on. The airlines now strictly enforce baggage regulations. Excess baggage charges, which can be substantial, are the personal responsibility of each participant. Please consult your pre-departure materials and/or airline to find out specific weight restrictions.

As a precaution against lost luggage, we suggest that you pack a change of clothes, toiletries, medications, important travel documents, optics, and any other essential items in your carry-on bag. Due to ever-changing circumstances in the government's attempts to improve airport security, we recommend that you check the website of [the Transportation Security Administration \(TSA\)](https://www.tsa.gov) for information pertaining to permissible carry-on items.

### TRAVEL DOCUMENTS

**PASSPORTS:** A passport valid for at least six months beyond your planned departure from Georgia and Armenia is required. Please check the expiration date on your passport. **If it is not valid for at least six months after your trip return date, you will need to get it renewed.** You will also want to make sure that you have at least two blank pages in your passport for stamps.

As a safety measure, photocopy the first two pages of your passport and keep the photocopies in a safe place, so if your passport is lost you will have proof of identification. Your passport should be signed and easily available at all times. You will need it for check-in at the airport on your first day of departure, so **do not pack it in your checked luggage**.

**VISAS:** A visa is not required for U.S. citizens visiting Georgia and Armenia for stays of 180 days or less. Non-United States citizens should check with their consulate/embassy for instructions.

## **WHAT TO BRING**

**CLOTHING:** : Casual dress is the rule for this trip; however, short pants, short skirts, and halter-tops are **not recommended** for a tour of this region. You may want to pack one set of slightly “smarter” clothes to wear at our hotels, during *supra* feasts, or for special occasions. A dress code is observed when visiting sacred sites such as churches and monasteries, which are part of this itinerary. At such sacred sites, women are asked to cover their hair and shoulders with a personal scarf, a shawl or some kind of hat. They are also asked to wear a wrap-around skirt over their pants, if they are not already wearing a skirt. Such wrap-around covers are provided at most church entrances. Men are asked to wear closed toe shoes – meaning that sandals for men are not allowed at sacred sites. The wearing of sandals in general is discouraged during this tour for all, except inside hotels.

Hard-wearing, easy-to-wash-and-dry field clothes are ideal. Participants should bring layers rather than one or two large items. Nights, evenings, and mornings can be quite cold at higher elevations such as in Svaneti and Kazbegi regions, where temperatures can change suddenly from hot to cold or vice versa. Several layers of clothing are much recommended as temperatures could drop to near freezing. Particularly on the peaks of the Caucasus or in the open steppe, the wind can be piercingly cold so be sure to pack a good down jacket, warm sweaters or vests, a warm hat and gloves. Silk or synthetic thermal long underwear have been highly rated by participants during early morning and cold nights, so at least a light set is recommended. Sturdy, rainproof jackets and pants are strongly recommended (shower proof plastic jackets are not sufficient). For example, a single day in October in the Javakheti Plateau can offer temperatures in the 30s° F with a light rain during early morning birding, persisting for a couple of hours, yet by midday temperatures may rise to the mid-70s° F under sunny skies.

Other items you may consider bringing include a balaclava, in addition to a regular birding hat and a scarf. Thick socks that absorb perspiration and cushion one’s feet from hard surfaces are important. It is also useful if the socks are long enough so that the bottom of one’s pants can be tucked inside.

**FOOTWEAR:** Sturdy hiking boots with a solid lug sole are essential; sneakers or sports-type shoes are not appropriate, as the ground will be rough, sandy and occasionally wet and possibly slippery a lot of the time.

**EQUIPMENT:** One of the most important aspects of having an enjoyable travel experience is being prepared with proper equipment. The following items will come in handy during your trip through Armenia:

- **Backpack** – Good for carrying extra clothing, field guides, supplies, and optical equipment, etc.
- **Notebooks and pens**
- **Travel alarm clock** – Battery operated is best.
- **Polarized sunglasses with good UV protection** – Essential! Bring a back-up pair as well.

- **Sunscreen, lip balm, skin lotions** – All essential items.
- **Personal toiletries**
- **Cameras, lenses, memory cards, and extra batteries** – Please bring all the camera equipment, spare flash-cards, batteries, and film that you will need. Flash-cards and film will be almost impossible to obtain once we are away from cities. **Nearly everyone brings too few batteries and too little film or flash-card space, and this can cause some distress.** UV and polarizing filters are recommended, especially at higher elevations where glare can be a problem. Please read the section under “**Electricity**” below and make sure to bring the necessary adapters to charge your devices.
- **Small flashlight or headlamp** – A good flashlight or headlamp is essential, so please ensure that yours is in good working order and that you have spare bulbs and batteries. Couples should bring one flashlight or headlamp each.
- **Plastic bags** – Plastic bags are very useful for protecting equipment from rain and dust.
- **Handy-wipes** – These are very important, and paper tissues are also especially useful. All participants should carry sufficient amounts for their personal needs for the entire tour.
- **Tissue packs**
- **Water bottle** – Drinking water is always provided. While bringing a bottle of your own is not essential, some people prefer to have their own bottle for having an extra supply on hand.
- **One bath towel and washcloth:** Please bring an extra towel if you require more than the basic provided allotment.
- **Umbrella:** The collapsible type is easy to carry and useful both against rain and sun.
- **Walking stick** – Collapsible walking sticks will come in handy in several situations. They are strongly recommended for those with balance problems.
- **Small folding stool** – Many people find this item extremely useful when we are at the raptor migration watchpoints, or when we are patiently waiting for shy birds.
- **Snacks** – Snacks are always provided during the day before lunch including nuts, chocolate, and dried fruit. However, other western-style snacks may not be readily available. As such, if you require more, we recommend bringing a supply of other snacks such as granola bars or protein bars.

**Binoculars:** We strongly recommend you bring a pair of good binoculars of 8x32, 8x42, or 10x42 magnification. Please do not bring mini-binoculars of any kind. Some people like them because they are small and lightweight; but they have an extremely small field of view and very poor light gathering power. You will find that 8x32 binoculars are compact and light enough.

**Spotting Scopes:** Your tour leaders will have scopes available for group use throughout the trip, but if you have one and wish to bring it, please feel free to do so.

## **DESTINATION INFORMATION & LOCAL CONDITIONS**

**CLIMATE:** During this tour, we will be spending time in two countries in the Caucasus Region, primarily Armenia, but also Georgia to the north, where the tour begins.

**CONDITIONS:** Our accommodations will be comfortable throughout, ranging from excellent hotels in cities and authentic guesthouses in remote areas.

**Altitude:** The Caucasus Region is diverse, ranging from deserts to temperate forests and alpine regions. Georgia is at an average elevation of 4,698 ft. (1,432 m) above sea level, while Armenia is at an average elevation of 5,900 ft. (1,800 m). Tbilisi averages at 2,515 ft. (767 m) in elevation, while Yerevan averages 3,245 ft. (989 m) in elevation. During our highest driven climb, we will be



reaching roughly 11,000 ft asl. by vehicle. Elevations will be reached by driving, with walking excursions within close proximity to vehicles during most situations. Overall, most if not all the walking will be on fairly flat, albeit sometimes rocky, rough, stony or dusty terrain. We will seldom be walking along paved roads. However, we will walk at a slow pace, so this should not be a matter of concern for anyone in moderate to reasonable condition. Those with heart or respiratory concerns should contact their doctor prior to departure.

**ARMENIA** is a landlocked country in Transcaucasia, with its borders defined in part by the Lesser Caucasus Mountain Range, particularly to the north along its borders with Georgia and Turkey. It is roughly about the size of the U.S. state of Maryland, about 11,400 mi<sup>2</sup> (29,743 km<sup>2</sup>). Lake Sevan makes up one-sixth of Armenia's territory, and plays a large role in defining the country's character. The country's climate is continental highland, with cold winters followed by short bursts of a spring season primarily during late April and May, followed by hot summers from mid-June. The arid region encompasses low humidity and evening breezes downslope, providing a cooling or chilling effect. Though the spring season is short, it is known for vibrant blooms of flowers throughout the countryside and cool weather. The weather at this time of year can be relatively unpredictable, with snow lingering at highland plateaus and higher elevations, and sporadic rains throughout. While temperatures can be comfortable in Yerevan during spring, with highs in the 60s and 70s F, the lows vary yearly, and can be into the 40s F. However, away from the capital, and particularly at higher elevations, it will be cold, with temperatures possible down to the low 30s F.

**ARMENIA** is a rugged country with an average elevation of 5,900 ft (1,800 m). We will be visiting sites where we will be driving up to 11,000 ft, should weather allow. This will not require strenuous hiking or walking, because we will access these areas by 4x4 vehicle, and always remain relatively close to the vehicle.

**GEORGIA** is a mountainous country in the Caucasus Region roughly 26,900 mi<sup>2</sup> (69,700 km<sup>2</sup>) in size – slightly larger than the U.S. state of West Virginia. The climate of Georgia ranges from mild and rainy on the western plain, to continental and arid in the central inland areas. The Greater and Lesser Caucasus ranges are typically colder, variable and relatively unpredictable. We will reach altitudes over 7,000 ft. (2,100 m) as we traverse through the Lesser Caucasus.

The vast open landscape of Javakehti in spring can be swept with cold winds in the 40s° F (4° to 6° C), but can also expose one to periods of strong sun exposure and probabilities of rain. The region toggles between vegetated plateaus, wetlands and arid steppe-like habitat. In the capital of Tbilisi, May temperatures range from 45° F (10° C) to 70° F (20° C). The weather in Georgia at this time of year is varied, ranging from cold to hot and dry to wet, so layers will be important. It is essential to carry a day pack and always have warm clothes with you in the vehicles, even on sunny days.

**FOOD & WATER:** Although piped water throughout much of the region is potable, environmental sanitation, food safety, and the availability of piped potable water can be problematic and unpredictable in parts. Participants are advised NOT to drink tap water or unboiled water placed at the table unless advised by your tour leader. Bottled drinks (including bottled water) will be available at all times. You should not eat uncooked foods such as meat or vegetables, or food that has cooled and/or been sitting in the open, permitting flies to settle. Unpeeled fruit is fine, provided you wash the exterior first in clean water.

**CURRENCY AND SPENDING:** Your tour fee includes all necessary expenses; however, you will want to bring enough cash to cover personal expenses not included in the program, such as gifts, laundry, gratuities, meals on your own, and personal items. It is best to carry small denominations of cash in U.S. Dollars (USD) as some exchange facilities may be unable to

provide change for large bills. Bank notes need to be in good condition as banks and other money changing places may refuse damaged or torn notes.

The Georgian Lari (GEL) is the sole legal tender in the territory of Georgia. The symbol for the Georgian Lari is ₾. Lari are divided into 100 Tetri.

The Dram (AMD) is the legal tender in Armenia. The symbol for the Armenian Dram is ₼. Dram are divided into 100 Luma.

Armenia and Georgia do not typically accept each other's currency, except at the border. USD can be exchanged at the Shota Rustaveli International Airport upon arrival to Tbilisi, and at locations in Yerevan. ATM machines are widely available in both major cities. The Caucasus region remains a relatively traditional economy and most transactions occur in cash. In select locations where credit or debit cards are accepted, Visa and Mastercard tend to be preferred over American Express, while Discover cards are rarely accepted. Please check with your bank and credit card issuer for more information regarding banking and the use of ATM and credit cards overseas.

**SHOPPING:** For those interested in traditional souvenirs, Georgian folk artisans can be found at a number of locations where they may be depending on sales as a primary source of their income. Felt crafts in the form of scarfs, jewelry and accessories, woollen toys and hand knitted slippers are popular souvenirs. Ornamental decorated daggers can be found at many locations, and are popular souvenirs. Intricate wood carving has a long tradition in Georgia, and carved utensils, decorative panels and ornaments are also typically available. During this tour, there is a possibility we will be in close proximity to stalls selling such crafts in Tbilisi. However, this tour is not tailored for shopping, and such an opportunity will be made available if the schedule allows.

**TRANSPORTATION:** In order to reach the various habitats and birds of this diverse region, there will be a good amount of driving. After driving on paved roads along the main highways, we will occasionally be traveling on dirt roads and sometimes bumpy and dusty tracks. We'll be using vehicle well suited to the purpose and making frequent stops. There will be the occasional strenuous uphill walk such as when searching for the likes of snowcocks. Elsewhere, we'll be wandering around fairly flat open landscapes at altitudes often around 6,500 ft. (2,000 m), making plenty of stops for birds.

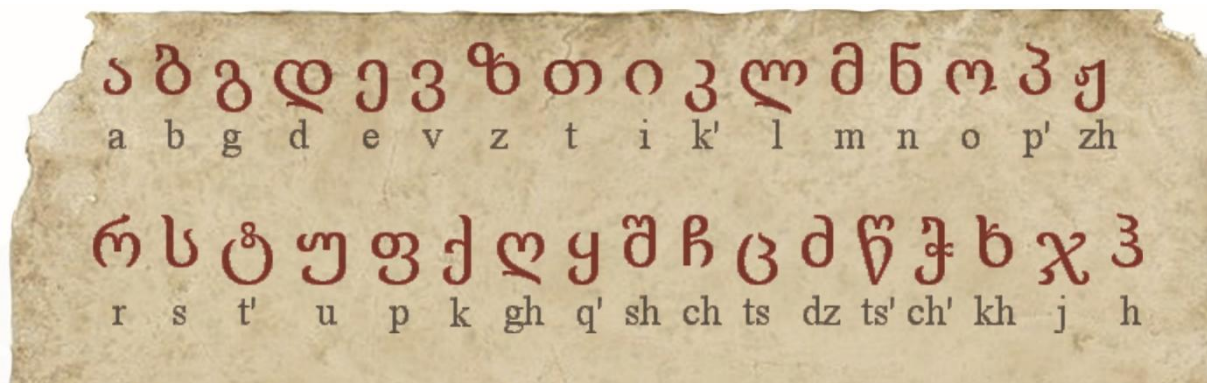
**ELECTRICITY:** Georgia and Armenia use 220 volts, 50 cycles, AC. The sockets are designed to accommodate two round prongs in the European style. Make sure to pack your own adapters. Type F electrical plug (also known as a Schuko plug) adapters can be used, which have two 4.8 mm round pins spaced 19 mm apart and two earth clips on the side. Simpler Type C electrical plug (or Europlug) adapters can also be used. All hotels are equipped with electric sockets in each room, and guests should have no problems recharging electronic devices with the right adapters.

**INTERNET ACCESS:** Over the last decade, many parts of this region have been modernized, while remote regions remain modest in infrastructure. Internet service is relatively good throughout Georgia and Armenia and should be available at most hotels except in the highlands.

**LANGUAGE:** The languages of both countries are completely unrelated to one another. The Georgian languages are non-Indo-European languages, endemic to the Caucasus, in the Ibero-Caucasian language tree. The languages in this tree are related to each other, but are not related to any languages outside of the Caucasus. Armenian, on the other hand, is an Indo-European language, thought to be distantly related to Greek.

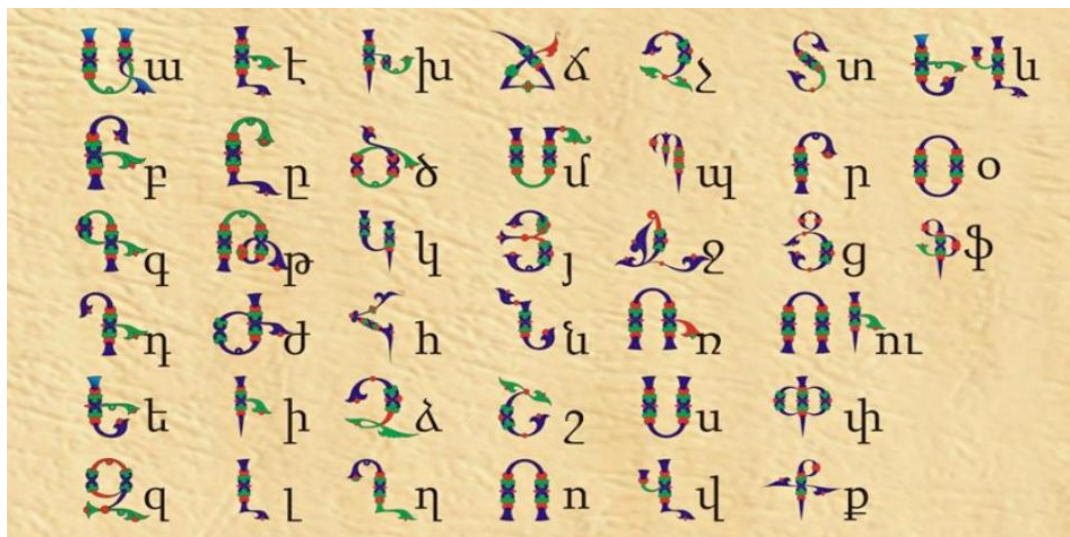
The native name of the nation of “Georgia” is **Sakartvelo**. The name is derived from Kartli, the core region in central Georgia. The Georgian people are Kartvelians, an endemic non-Indo-European ethno-linguistic group that is not related to Slavs or other Indo-European groups, nor to Turkic or Mongol ethno-linguistic groups. The official language of Georgia is Kartuli. Three other Kartvelian languages are spoken in Georgia in addition to Kartuli: Svan, Megrelian and Laz. Kartuli is by and large spoken throughout the territory. Svan is native to the highlands of the northeast – Svaneti. Megrelian is spoken in western Georgia, south of Svaneti and along the coast to Poti. Laz is spoken primarily in the Georgia-Turkey border areas south of Batumi.

The Georgian alphabet is endemic to the country, and shares no letters with any other alphabet in the world. The written language is almost purely phonetic, in that it is written as it is spoken. The modern alphabet in broad use was created in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, derived in part from two older alphabets that are used only in liturgical texts and can also be found depicted in church frescos and carvings.



Georgian alphabet

The Armenian alphabet is endemic to the country, and shares no letters with any other alphabet in the world. The Armenian script is an alphabetic writing system developed for Armenian and occasionally used to write other languages, developed during the 5th century, originally with 36 letters. In reformed Armenian orthography, the total number of letters is 39.



Armenian alphabet

**THE GEORGIAN FEASTING TRADITION:** Regardless of size and type, a *supra* – or Georgian feast – is always led by a *tamada* – or toastmaster – who introduces each toast during the feast. The tamada is elected by the banqueting guests or chosen by the host. A successful tamada must possess great rhetorical skill and be able to consume a significant amount of alcohol without showing signs of drunkenness. During the meal, the tamada will propose a toast, and then speak at some length about the topic. The guests raise their glasses, but do not drink. After the tamada has spoken, the toast continues, often in a generally counter-clockwise direction. The next guest who wishes to speak raises their glass, offers a toast on the topic, and then drains their glass. If a guest does not wish to speak, they may drink from their glass after some words that particularly resonate for him or her. Eating is entirely appropriate during toasts, but talking is frowned upon. Once everyone who wishes to speak on the theme has done so, the tamada proposes a new toast, and the cycle begins again. Some popular traditional themes include toasts to Georgia, family, friends, ancestors, God and the mother of God, various saints and so on. However, the theme of each toast is up to the tamada, who should be able to tailor his or her toasts to the occasion.

**THE GEORGIAN SINGING TRADITION:** Georgia is renowned for its multi-voiced singing tradition, and recently Georgian polyphony was enshrined by UNESCO as representative of intangible heritage of humanity. Singers used to sing for all occasions of daily life including work and pleasure, travel and feasting, marriages and funerals. Even today, when wheat threshing songs are no longer heard in the farm yard, polyphonic song often accompanies church festivals, family gatherings, and public ceremonies. Georgians prefer to sing in a strident direct tone, as if singing outside, and enjoy close-interval harmony. Each region enjoys its own distinct harmonic and melodies styles, and the local liturgical music also reflects regional harmonic conventions. In east Georgia, the basses sing a drone, while in west Georgia the basses are more active and the top voice sometimes sings a unique form of yodeling called *krimanchuli*. In Svaneti, a unique tuning system is preserved to this day, which music connoisseurs find mesmerizing and thrilling. Meanwhile, the more modern 19<sup>th</sup> century "urban songs" a mix of Georgian nationalist poetry and imported Italian-Neopolitan music styles –remains the favored genre for both Georgians and their guests.

**TIME:** Armenia and Georgia currently have equivalent time zones. This is 4 hours ahead of Coordinated Universal Time (UTC) and is 8 hours ahead of Eastern Daylight Time (EDT).

**LAUNDRY SERVICE:** Laundry service is available in some hotels, but is not covered by the tour fees. Note that such services tend to have pricing based on a per-item cost, with each item costing between \$1-\$3 USD.

## **HEALTH & SAFETY**

**HEALTH:** Vaccinations for Hepatitis A and pre-exposure rabies are recommended by the U.S. Department of State – Bureau of Consular Affairs. In addition, Diphtheria/Pertussis/Tetanus (DPT), Typhoid and Hepatitis B immunizations are suggested. As standard travel precautions, you should always be up to date with vaccination against a variety of preventable diseases, including the **routine vaccinations**, which are Measles/Mumps/Rubella (MMR) and Varicella (chickenpox).

If you are taking prescription medication or over-the-counter medicine, be sure to bring an ample supply that will allow you to get through the tour safely. Please consult your physician as necessary. Remember to pack all medication in your carry-on baggage, preferably in original containers or packaging. As airline baggage restrictions can change without warning, please check with your airline for procedures for packing medication.



**COVID-19:** We continually emphasize that our number one priority is the health and safety of our customers and employees. Although VENT no longer maintains any of its COVID-era prevention protocols, we strongly recommend best practices for protecting yourself and your fellow travelers against COVID-19 illness. These measures include receiving the primary series vaccinations for those eligible, staying “Up to Date” with COVID-19 booster shots, wearing high filtration N-95 or KN-95 masks when in airports and on airplanes, and avoiding risky social settings in the lead-up to your tour. These recommendations are firmly rooted in CDC guidance regarding recommendations for avoiding COVID-19. Please visit the **Coronavirus Travel Update** page of our website <https://ventbird.com/covid-19> for our official statement regarding COVID-19 and the operation of our tours. Please visit the CDC website for the most up to date information about COVID-19 and associated guidance for proper health and hygiene: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-nCoV/index.html>.

**SUN EXPOSURE:** The sun’s ultraviolet rays are damaging to the eyes and skin with prolonged exposure, particularly at higher elevation. Anytime you are outdoors you will want to protect your skin, including your lips, eyes, nose, and ears. Severe sunburn is potentially very painful and will affect your level of enjoyment. Always protect yourself when outdoors and be sure to bring an ample supply of high SPF sunscreen and lip balm. We strongly recommend the use of ultra-violet blocking, polarized sunglasses.

**ANIMAL BITES:** Some populated areas may have significant numbers of stray dogs roaming the streets. The temptation of getting close to a cute dog begging for food can result in bites, particularly when dogs are foraging in a feral state. Having to deal with the consequences of a dog bite, including the problem of rabies prophylaxis, is best avoided, so reasonable caution is advised. Recent efforts in Georgia have rendered favorable results in vaccinating strays against rabies.

There are eight venomous snake species in the region, all of which are uncommon to rare and will not likely be encountered during our tour. However, all snakes should be treated as potentially venomous, considering that few medical facilities have antivenin serum.

**Notes on medical care in Georgia:** Medical facilities in the region that meet most Western standards are available in Tbilisi and Yerevan. American Medical Centers, an American owned and managed clinic of American Medical Centers, is a 24-hour on-call urgent care, assistance, and specialty care clinic staffed with international and regional doctors with facilities in both cities. They specialize in family medicine, pediatrics, gynecology, ENT, physiotherapy, psychiatry, dermatology, trauma, gastroenterology and orthopedics. Contact information can be found at [www.amcenters.com](http://www.amcenters.com).

Outside major cities, medical facilities are limited. In the highlands or volcanic plateau, medical facilities and treatment are extremely limited or non-existent. Serious medical problems requiring hospitalization and/or medical evacuation to the United States can cost thousands of dollars. **Therefore, VENT requires all tour participants to purchase a medical evacuation insurance policy. Please be aware of this before joining the tour. Furthermore, western doctors are few and far between outside of Tbilisi or Batumi.**

**BITING INSECTS:** Mosquitos and biting flies could be a nuisance to some individuals in wetter areas. We suggest bringing a stick-type repellent for your face and hands. We also recommend the usual precautions of wearing pants and long-sleeved shirts at all times when in the field.



**Insect Repellents** – There are insect repellents for the skin and an insect repellent used to treat clothing that should not be applied to the skin.

Insect repellents for the skin are commonly available in three forms:

- DEET (N,N-diethyl-meta-toluamide): A chemical compound that is marketed under various brand names (OFF!®, Cutter™, Ultrathon™, etc.) and offered in a variety of formulations including sprays, lotions, time-release preparations, and disposable wipes. The formulations will state a percentage of the active ingredient DEET on the packaging. DEET may be applied to exposed skin directly and/or sprayed on clothing. Please be careful when applying DEET as it can damage plastics and lens coatings.
- Picaridin: A synthetic formulation that is derived from piperine, a substance found in plants that produce black pepper.
- Herbal insect repellents: Various mixtures of organic ingredients such as oils from eucalyptus, citronella, cedar, and other herbs. The herbal repellents are more difficult to categorize because of the difference in ingredients from one brand to another. There is considerable variation in their effectiveness.

An insect repellent for clothing is marketed in one approved formulation:

- Permanone® (Permethrin) is an odorless spray-on repellent that may be used for **pre-treatment** of clothing, gear, and tents. It should not be used directly on the skin or sprayed on clothing while it is being worn. The pre-treatment process requires a number of hours to complete and must be done outdoors, so is best completed in advance of travel. Do-it-yourself pre-treatment has to be repeated more often than commercial treatment using Insect Shield® technology. It is available at various outdoor stores and can easily be found online.
- Insect Shield® apparel: Clothing pre-treated with Permanone is made by a variety of manufacturers. It is available for purchase from some sporting goods suppliers. The clothing is advertised as retaining its repellency for up to 70 washings.

The US EPA offers a search tool to help choose a repellent that is best for a particular situation. For example, some repellents work for mosquitoes, but not for ticks.

<https://www.epa.gov/insect-repellents/which-insect-repellent-right-you>

In addition to your physician, a good source of general health information for travelers is the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta, which operates a 24-hour recorded Travelers' Information Line (800) CDC-INFO (800-232-4636). You can check the CDC website at <https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel>. Canadian citizens should check the website of the Public Health Agency of Canada: <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health.html> (click on Travel Health).

### **SUGGESTED READING & TRIP PREPARATION**

A number of traditional booksellers and online stores list excellent inventories of field guides and other natural history resources that will help prepare you for this tour. We recommend [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com) which has a wide selection; [www.buteobooks.com](http://www.buteobooks.com) and [www.nhbs.com](http://www.nhbs.com) which specialize in ornithology and natural history books; and [www.abebooks.com](http://www.abebooks.com) for out-of-print and hard-to-find titles. We also recommend Andrew Isles books for the Asia-Pacific region at <http://www.andrewisles.com> for difficult to find and out of print books for Australia.

This list includes some basic field guides and reference volumes of use to the visitor. A great deal has been written about all aspects of Australia's natural history. You will find a variety of

selections in any library. Browse around a little and you will discover many resources not listed here.

## FIELD GUIDES:

### **Birds:**

Svensson, L. , K. Mullarney and D. Zetterström. ***Birds of Europe: Second Edition***. Princeton Field Guides, 2009.

Also known as *The Collins Guide*, this is definitive field guide to the diverse birdlife of the Western Palearctic, and lauded by many experts as the best field guide ever produced, with excellent illustrations by Mullarney and Zetterström. Includes all avian species we are likely to encounter in Georgia, the common birds of the Palearctic and vagrants native to Siberia and Central Asia. The Second Edition by Princeton University Press is highly recommended, since others editions are outdated.

**Collins Bird Guide** – App. Available for Apple and Android devices.

This is the app version of the famed *Birds of Europe* by Lars Svensson, Killian Mullarney and Dan Zetterström (Second Edition 2009, available through Princeton University Press). The app includes all avian species we are likely to encounter in Georgia, the common birds of the Palearctic and vagrants native to Siberia and Central Asia. The app is superbly illustrated, easy to use and most importantly it includes recorded vocalizations for most species. This app makes a great supplement to the printed version and could be used as the sole guide for the region by those accustomed to using electronic apps frequently.

Aye, R., M. Schweizer and T. Roth. ***Birds of Central Asia***. Princeton University Press, 2012.

This beautifully illustrated guide covers the region east of the Caucasus, from the Caspian Sea to China and can be a strong supplement to *Birds of Europe*, particularly when sorting through uncommon eastern species. However, it is not comprehensive for the birds we will see in Georgia.

Adamian, M. S., D. Klem Jr. ***A Field Guide to Birds of Armenia***. American University of Armenia, 1997.

Although this guide is intended solely for the country of Armenia and is somewhat outdated, it remains the sole field guide dedicated to all avian species in a nation within the Caucasus. It is beautifully executed. Its strengths are in that it addresses subspecies found in the Caucasus. However, not all species found in Georgia are contained in this guide, and range maps are only limited to Armenia.

Galvez, R. A., L. Gavashelishvili, Z. Javakhishvili. ***Raptors and Owls of Georgia***. Buneba Print, 2005.

A compact identification guide co-authored and illustrated by one of the leaders of this tour, Rafael Galvez. At 130 pages, it easily fits on a back pocket. The text is both in English and Georgian Kartuli – nicely demonstrating the native script and a regional perspective. This was a project in partnership with the Georgian Center for the Conservation of Wildlife in order to discourage the trapping and hunting of raptors in western Georgia during migration – a problem that still persists to this day. This guide was disseminated to local falconers, school children and enthusiasts as part of a large educational program that has bore fruit in the last 15 years since publication.

### **Mammals:**

Aulanger, S. et al. ***Mammals of Europe, North Africa and the Middle East***. Bloomsbury Wildlife, 2009.

### **Plants:**

Fischer, E. A. Gröger, W. Lobin. *Illustrated Field Guide to the Flora of Georgia (South Caucasus)*. Universität Koblenz-Landau.

### **Music:**

Zedashe Ensemble. ***The Raising of Lazare***. Archivos Alba, 2002. Available as a digital download\* from <https://zedashe.bandcamp.com/album/the-raising-of-lazare>.

Features traditional polyphonic chants, sacred and secular music from three Georgian regions: Svaneti, Kakheti and Mingrelia. Produced by Rafael A. Galvez, your tour leader, and the Zedashe Ensemble, it captures the early days of the reawakening of Georgian traditions after the fall of the Soviet Union. Produced in a field recording style, performed by a native family choir in authentic settings. Some of the recordings even capture the songs of birds on-site.

\*Those that purchase the digital download, contact Rafael Galvez at [galvezbirds@gmail.com](mailto:galvezbirds@gmail.com) to obtain free support material about the music.

### **History and Current Affairs:**

King, C. ***The Ghosts of Freedom***. Oxford University Press, 2008.

An engaging and easy read, mostly about Georgia and Armenia during the Russian Imperial period. Brings readers right up to speed on the most important events of the current era through succinct discussion of pertinent 19th and 20th century events. Pdf available here: [http://georgica.tsu.edu.ge/files/06-History/Nationalism & Identity/King-2008.pdf](http://georgica.tsu.edu.ge/files/06-History/Nationalism%20&%20Identity/King-2008.pdf)

De Waal, T. ***Black Garden. Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War***. On the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and regional politics of the 1990s-2000s). NYU Press, 2003.

Nasmyth, P. ***Georgia: In the Mountains of Poetry***. Abrams, 2017.

Although originally published in 1998, this book remains a beloved eyewitness account of Georgia's rebirth and creates an unforgettable portrait of its remarkable landscape, history, people and culture. Based on personal experience and offering fascinating insights into the life of ordinary and high profile Georgians, it is essential reading for anyone who does not yet know, or wants to know more, of this astonishing place.

### **Poetry:**

Rustaveli, S. ***The Knight in Panther's Skin***. Translated by Lyn Coffin. Poezia Press Ltd.

The 12<sup>th</sup> century Georgian poet and philosopher Shota Rustaveli is considered by literary critics and scholars throughout the world as one of the most significant poets in the history of medieval literature. Rustaveli is considered equivalent to Shakespeare in the Georgian language. This epic poem is a fascinating tale of chivalry, love and friendship, impossible to put down once you've started it! Many translations exist, this one is recommended.

## **TERMS, CONDITIONS & RESPONSIBILITIES**

**Victor Emanuel Nature Tours, Inc.**, a Texas corporation, and/or its agents (together, "**VENT**") act only as agents for the participant in regard to travel, whether by railroad, motorcar, motorcoach, boat, or airplane and assume no liability for injury, damage, loss, accident, delay, or irregularity which may be occasioned either by reason of defect in any vehicle or for any reason whatsoever, or through the acts or default of any company or person engaged in conveying the participant or

in carrying out the arrangements of the tour. VENT accepts no responsibility for losses or additional expenses due to delay or changes in airfare or other services, sickness, weather, strike, war, quarantine, terrorism, or other causes. All such losses or expenses will be borne by the participant, as tour rates only provide for arrangements for the time stated.

VENT reserves the right (i) to substitute hotels of similar category, or the best reasonable substitution available under the circumstances, for those indicated and (ii) to make any changes in the itinerary that are deemed necessary by VENT or which are caused by third party transportation schedules (i.e. railroad, motorcar, motorcoach, boat, airplane, etc.).

VENT reserves the right to substitute leaders or guides on any tour. Where VENT, in its sole discretion, determines such substitution is necessary, it will notify tour participants.

VENT reserves the right to cancel any tour prior to departure with or without cause or good reason. See the VENT Cancellation & Refunds policy set forth above.

Tour prices are based on tariffs and exchange rates in effect on August 2, 2025 and are subject to adjustment in the event of any change thereto.

VENT reserves the right to decline any participant's Registration Form and/or refuse to allow any participant to participate in a tour as VENT deems reasonably necessary, in its sole discretion. VENT also reserves the right to remove any tour participant from any portion of a tour as VENT deems necessary, in its sole discretion, reasons for such removal include but are not limited to, medical needs, injury, illness, inability to meet physical demands of a tour, personality conflict or situations in which such removal is otherwise in the best interest of the tour, the tour group and/or such participant. A participant may also voluntarily depart from a tour. If a participant is removed from a tour or voluntarily departs from a tour, such participant will be responsible for any expenses associated with such removal or departure, including but not limited to, transportation, lodging, airfare and meals, and VENT will have no obligation to refund or reimburse any such removed or departed participant for any tour payments or deposits previously paid by such participant.

Baggage is carried at the participant's risk entirely. No airline company, its employees, agents and/or affiliates (the "**Airline**") is to be held responsible for any act, omission, or event during the time participants are not on board the Airline's aircraft. The participant ticket in use by any Airline, when issued, will constitute the sole contract between the Airline and the purchaser of the tickets and/or the participant. The services of any I.A.T.A.N. carrier may be used for VENT tours, and transportation within the United States may be provided by any member carrier of the Airlines Reporting Corporation.

View the complete [Terms and Conditions](#) on our website.

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