

Georgia

A Greentours Itinerary

Days 1 & 2

Davit Gareja

We leave the UK in the afternoon bound for Istanbul from where we'll pick up our connection to Tbilisi, landing there early in the morning. Note that there are now flights from Edinburgh, Manchester and Birmingham which follow the same routing.

Open steppe country with rolling grasslands covered in shimmering stipa grasses stretches southwest from the airport. There is only one road, a few tracks, and hardly any settlements. Occasional early Christian churches interrupt the landscape, some of these, such as the one at Davit Gareja, world-famous. Natlismtsemeli Church is fantastically situated on an eroded bluff above unspoilt steppe rich in beautiful plants. The spectacular *Dictamnus caucasicus* dominates along with orange *Colutea lutea* and the stunning *Verbascum formosum*. The last blooms of *Iris pumila* can be found amongst *Celsia orientalis* and the endemic *Thymus tiflisensis*. Flocks of Rose-colored Starlings make sorties past us as Griffon Vultures hang low in the air. Amongst *Campanula hohenackeri* and large pink-flowered endemic *Salvia garejii* fly plenty of butterflies and garnering nourishment from the many knapweeds on show is the bizarre scarlet *Phelypaea coccinea*.

Day 3 - 5

The Greater Caucasus – Gudauri, Cross Pass and Truso Gorge

The impressively high snowy peaks of the Greater Caucasus are visible even as one drives out of Tbilisi. Within an hour we are rising steadily up the Aragvi Valley and into the heart of these great mountains. Higher than the European Alps and much less populated, this is a truly wild region. Once up into the mountains we'll pass few settlements until we reach the ski resort at Gudauri.

In May the skiing has largely stopped though occasional heavy snowfalls on the passes above Gudauri mean that May skiing is certainly not out of the question. The meadows and birchwoods around Gudauri will only just be greening up and the views all around will see us admiring many a snowy peak. *Scilla armena* and patches of yellow *Trollius patulus* populate the woods. Above the ski centre the road quickly rises to the Cross Pass, and some wonderful alpine country. Streams meander through snow-melt lined with *Galanthus platyphyllus*. Twite and Ring Ouzels flit from boulder to boulder on slopes coloured blue by *Gentiana angulosus* and purple where the feathery pasque flower *Pulsatilla violacea* is at its finest. This is fabulous primula country with many species on offer. Abundant everywhere is a triumvirate of *Primula macrocalyx* (golden yellow), *Primula ruprechtii* (primrose yellow) and *Primula amoena* (deep purple or white). The little pink *Primula algida* grows with *Cerastium pseudokazbek* and *Potentilla caucasica*. Under birch trees there's *Primula cordifolia* and under serpentinite cliffs the rare *Primula darialica*.

These same cliffs host *Saxifragas pseudolaevis*, *kolenatiana*, *moschata* and *cartilaginea* as well as the stunning Wallcreeper!

Flocks of Common and Honey Buzzards use the high ridges either side of the valley to guide them northwards. There can be hundreds in the air together. Black Redstarts, Red-fronted Serins and Rock Thrushes are among the common mountain birds. In the Truso Valley we'll see a phenomenon frequent in the High Caucasus. Gently trickling water deposits minerals that form yellow, white and orange terraces over the whole valley floor – an amazing sight. There are several large sulphur springs too, these bubbling up by the river, the mud holding the tracks of Brown Bear, Wolf and East Caucasian Tur. Spreading wide across the gravels of the valley floor are abundant *Merendera trigyna*. *Androsace villosa* and the endemic *Sobelowskia caucasica* inhabit dry slopes and abundant yellow bells of *Fritillaria collina* make a fabulous sight in the evening sun. The distinctive round purple face of *Viola somchetica* greets us wherever we walk but much scarcer is the yellow *Viola caucasica*.

Days 6 & 7

The Greater Caucasus – Kazbegi and the Juta Valley

The geology is complex and landforms extreme, it is as if these mountains were pushed skywards just yesterday. The majestic glaciated peak of Kazbegi (5033m) rises just behind the Hotel Stepantsminda. *Saxifraga desoulavyi* blooms with Snowdon Lily, *Sempervivum caasicum* and lovely *Corydalis emanuelii* on rocky bluffs. Below are slopes carpeted with three species of primula and in the valley bottoms *Dactylorhiza euxina* and *Dactylorhiza caucasica* bloom in wet meadows.

Birdwatching in the Greater Caucasus is excellent and there is a set of species, which while not all are endemic, can be considered the 'must sees' of this area. Fortunately all are locally common though for one species some effort may be required. Strawberry-hued Great Rosefinches feed in gravelly valley bottoms and will certainly be an avian highlight. The beautiful Guldenstadt's Redstart will be so too – if we see them. At this season they are moving up to their breeding areas and these are very high. If still in the valley bottoms we can see them easily, otherwise it'll be quite a walk for this species! A third speciality passerine, the Caucasian Chiffchaff, is common in the birchwoods around Kazbegi. Then there are the two gamebirds. Caucasian Snowcock are plentiful, indeed early in the morning one can even hear their eerie whistling calls drifting down to our hotel! They are birds of the snows and rocky ridges and we'll see them only by walking uphill a bit (though telescope views are obtainable from the bottom of the mountain behind Kazbegi), however the Caucasian Blackcock are much easier to see. In a secret valley we'll look for leks where the males gather and perform bizarre backward and forward somersaults. Made even stranger as after each one they sit for a while as if waiting for the spring to coil again! This valley is also a major stronghold for the endemic East Caucasian Tur and evening visits are sure to yield sightings of this rare and beautiful relative of the Ibex. Males and females form separate groups and as the sun wanes they descend from the icy heights passing the bouncing blackcock to feed on the grassy slopes. Wolves prey on

them and with a bit of effort and patience we've a chance of seeing these beautiful animals, and the Brown Bears which live in this valley too, though we are more likely to observe signs of either than the animals themselves.

Both pink and white forms of *Anemone fasciculata* flower with purple *Iris furcata*, white *Muscari pallens*, the spikey-headed *Pedicularis acmodonta*, *Veronica gentianoides* and the rare *Astragalus kazbegiensis*. From dripping cliffs hang the bells of *Fritillaria orientalis* and by patches of melting snow we'll find *Puschkinia scilloides* and *Gagea sulfurea*. Indeed there are many of these little yellow star-flowered bulbs here with *Gageas germainae*, *charadzeae* and *anisanthos* growing by ponds and in turf, along with *Scilla sibirica*, *Ranunculus ledebourii*, *Rhamnus depressa* and yellow *Anemone speciosa*. In warmer gorges is the lovely deep crimson *Silene pygmaea*, *Linarias*, *Saxifrages*, and many butterflies. *Minuartia oreina* and *Minuartia imbricata* provide pretty cushions of white on rocks also home to the strange nightshade relative *Physochliana orientalis* with its large purple blooms. The inhabitants of the rustic summer village high in the Juta Valley will only just be returning as the snow recedes, the newly emerged turf studded with hundreds of beautiful *Merendera raddeana*. Many strange-looking locally hewn implements stand stacked outside the stone and wood dwellings and the wonderfully decorated haystacks will attract much attention we are sure.

Day 8 to Bakuriani

As we descend from the heights of the Greater Caucasus we'll enter woodlands and meadows where vibrant yellow shrubberies of *Rhododendron luteum* dominate. *Corydalis marschalliana* and *Corydalis angustifolia* flower amongst abundant ferns and lovely yellow *Anemone ranunculoides*. On the cliffs are mats of yellow *Draba bryoides*. *Orchis simia* is abundant under Oriental Hornbeam with large-flowered *Aristolochia iberica* and Lily of the Valley by one stunningly situated church and dry turf by another has myriad flowering *Astragaluses* (*troizkii*, *fragrans*, *mollis* etc) as well as *Muscari szovitsianum* and statuesque *Eremostachys laciniata*. In the Kura valley we'll explore flowery shibliak (shrubby vegetation) where Blue Gromwell, Sainfoins and a great variety of shrubs occur before rising up into the Lesser Caucasus.

Days 9 - 11 The Lesser Caucasus

Bakuriani is beautifully situated amongst forests of Fir and Oriental Beech and under a 2300m pass that leads out on to the endless Javakheti Plateau. *Galanthus alpinus* flowers alongside snowmelt rivulets with *Scrophularia chrysantha* and *Trollius patulus*. Steppe Eagles, Golden Eagles, Long-legged Buzzards and Harriers are never far from sight as we contemplate the incredible scene in front of us. Stretching away to horizons far away is a landscape all above 2000m with large lakes and shallow valleys drawing the eyes to the volcanic peaks that interrupt the rolling landscape. It looks barren but is anything but for closer at hand we'll see slopes coloured blue by a sea of *Gentiana angulosus* and *Scilla roseni*. *Pulsatilla*

albana, *Muscari sosnowskyi*, *Bellevalia paradoxa*, gageas and ornithogalums add to the show. Dry bluffs host lovely *Viola oreades* and *Pedicularis armena*. Down in the forest by Bakuriani are banks of the gorgeous deep pink *Primula sibthorpiana* and the creamy-yellow goblets of *Paeonia steveniana*. Scenic alpine meadows dotted with pines and *Quercus macranthera* are covered in yellow *Primula pseudelatior* occasionally interrupted by sumptuous deep purple *Primula meyeri*. Three species of newt including the Marbled Newt are most easily seen at this season in Bakuriani's small ponds and in damp turf surrounding them we'll see elegant *Primula pallasii*. Crossbills, Bullfinches and Caucasian Chiffchaffs are common in the forests and we'll see plenty of sign of Brown Bear and Wild Boar. Lower still we'll visit the Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park where a rich euxine flora includes Caucasian Helleborine, *Paris incompleta*, *Dactyorchiza urvilleana*, Bird's-nest Orchid, *Symphytums* and red *Paeonia ruprechtii*.

Day 12

The Zekaris Pass

At the western end of the Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park is the Zekaris Pass, the road in starting close to the Turkish border and winding up into a landscape of great beauty. Black Woodpecker and Goshawk are frequent in the forests and as we ascend the flowers will become prolific with yellow and pink forms of Georgian Orchid common and some fine *Orchis pinetorum* too. Some very flowery Mezereon will mark the start of a rich zone where *Pedicularis wilhelmsiana* and *Ornithogalum balansae* are hardly competition for the stunning almost black tubby bells of *Fritillaria latifolia*. Up into the alpine zone and we will be in flower heaven. Stream valleys have hardly any green showing so thick are the flowers. And what a mix of colours. There's acres of brilliant blue *Scilla caucasica*, sheets of yellow from both *Caltha palustris* and *Trollius patulus*, and many shades of pink from gorgeous many-flowered *Primula auriculata*. There's plenty of Colchicums as well as great shows of white and blue *Anemone caucasica* and on dry bluffs a super-compact form of *Primula algida*. We'll be lucky to see any large mammals but there will be signs everywhere, especially of Brown Bears, and a star attraction among the birds is the Caspian Snowcock – our second snowcock species of the tour!

Days 13 & 14

Tbilisi via Nicbisi

En route to Tbilisi we'll visit an area of limestone which hosts many rare and beautiful plants. Amongst bright purple-pink *Hedysarum sericeum* and spires of deep red *Echium russicum* we'll look for scarlet *Phelypaea occinea* and *Muscari tenuifolia*. This is great orchid country with lots of *Orchis caucasica*, some of them impressively big, and also Steven's Orchid, some very tall forms of the Hooded Orchid, and many and confusing white *Cephalantheras*. Two local bee orchids will be a major attraction – *Ophrys transcucasica* and *Ophrys transhyrcana* – as well as the impressive *Ornithogalum magnum* and lovely *Daphne transcucasica*. After a night near Tbilisi we'll take the morning flight back to the UK.

Lagodekhi Extension

May 8

Depart UK for Tbilisi

May 9-13

Lagodekhi Nature Reserve

Lagodekhi is the oldest nature reserve in the Caucasus region and protects a large area of primary deciduous mountain forest, alpine tundra and lakes, in the far eastern corner of Georgia. It is only three hours from the capital, Tbilisi, yet feels very remote, a wonderful wilderness. Whilst our main tour features good accommodation and fairly easy walking this extension is for those willing to take on something more difficult! We'll have two nights based in homely guesthouses by the national park entrance (one run by an ex-director) with exceptional homecooking and three nights in a very basic hut high in the mountains which offers nothing more than beds and roof. By necessity food up there will be rather plain too! The walk (or ride) is strenuous. The distance isn't too bad – about thirteen kilometres, however you will need to walk uphill for five thousand feet in the day. Riding a horse is a good way of taking the strain out of this however you should be aware that you will still probably need to walk down at least the steepest sections. The rewards should be great! We will see the narrow endemic snowdrop *Galanthus ketzkhoveli* and the equally rare and local *Paeonia lagodekhiana* and *Paeonia mlokosiewitschi*. *Primula juliae* and *Fritillarias latifolia* and *collina* are others to look out for. The forest is home to Green Warblers, many woodpeckers and Semi-collared Flycatchers. Abundant *Corydalis marshalliana* carpets the woodlands on the treeline with pink and white and a little higher the landscape has a blue tinge from the incredible numbers of *Scilla otschiauriae* and *Scilla bifolia* in flower. Large mammals can be more easily observed here than anywhere else in Georgia and we'll certainly see East Caucasian Tur, and hope to see one or more of Chamois, Red Deer and Brown Bear. Wolf and Wild Cat are also quite possible too. In the evening of Day 18 we'll return to Tbilisi.

May 13

Return to Tbilisi and join main tour

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pack will be dispatched twelve weeks prior to departure. Flower, bird and mammal checklists are available.

Seasonal Variation. The dates set for a tour are aimed at the prime time for the flora and fauna listed above. Seasons can vary greatly, so here's a little pointer to what, flower-wise, may be different from the above description if we encounter an unusual season. If spring is very late then you'll get amazing displays of *Primula sibthorpiana* at Bakuriani and probably the last flowers of the various species of pink peonies, however yellow *Paeonia steveniana* will not be in flower and numbers of the Greater Caucasian fritillaries and primulas will be low. If the spring is very early then you will miss all pink peony species, and the corydalis shows around Bakuriani, however you will see much greater numbers of fritillaries and primulas in the Greater Caucasus.