

HITCHHIKING GEORGIA

Off-grid in the South Caucasus

On this alluring journey across the breadth of Georgia, you'll hit the road in eclectic Batumi on the shimmering Black Sea coast, traversing the lush slopes of the Gombori Mountains to Telavi's vineyards, before pushing on to the dynamic capital city of Tbilisi. Then, finally, buckle up for the most scenic – and spine-tingling – drive in the country, climbing 3050m to heavenly Tusheti, a remote hamlet-dotted region tucked into the folds of the Greater Caucasus. Hitchhiking across Georgia is relatively easy and commonplace, but more so, it's often a heartwarming and enriching experience too.



THE JOURNEY

Hitchhiking can be an enriching experience, deepening an understanding of a different country and its people and culture. A favourite museum or dish, a humorous anecdote or historical titbit – sharing a conversation with a driver can yield surprising insights. Most Georgians believe that visitors are a gift from god, which explains the generosity and hospitality offered to travellers in this South Caucasus country.

Some pointers on etiquette: though many young Georgians are fluent in English, it is good practice to prepare for your journey by learning a handful of essential phrases – *madloba* (thank you), for instance, goes a long way. A few Russian words can also be helpful, but be mindful of the sensitivities

around speaking the language due to Georgia's history and the current Russian-occupied territories. Another appreciated gesture is to pack sweets or small souvenirs from your home country to give as thanks for free rides.

BREEZY BATUMI

Located between the snow-capped Caucasus Mountains and the Black Sea, Batumi is a cosmopolitan coastal resort with a wide 1884-built corniche wrapping around a pebbly beach. Georgia's second city – the capital of the southwestern Adjara region – is a favoured summer playground for holidaying Georgians. Piece together the border region's layered

history through the city's architectural jigsaw: the late Ottoman-style Ortajame Mosque, a neo-Gothic cathedral, an Art Nouveau theatre, a Greek Orthodox church, austere Soviet-era blocks, and the harmonious amalgam of Belle Époque and modern buildings at Europe Square (Evropas Moedani). Wander the charming Old Town before lingering over a coffee at one of the pavement cafés flanking the Venetian-style Batumi Piazza. Catch sunset from the ferris wheel, which offers a decent view of the Alphabet Tower, a 145m-high monument to Georgian script and culture. After dark, visit the mesmerising moving sculpture by Georgian artist Tamar Kvesitadze, *Woman & Man*, or as it's better known, *Ali & Nino* – a nod to the protagonists of Kurban Said's eponymous novel.

When you're ready to move on, head to the fish market on the outskirts of Batumi, and find a spot where drivers can easily see you from a distance and have space to stop without obstructing traffic. You'll likely have to wait a while for a ride, but don't be discouraged: put up your thumb (or sign) and smile, and you'll soon be driving across the relict UNESCO World Heritage Site of Colchic Rainforest and Wetlands. If you're lucky, you'll flag down a driver travelling the full 152km to Kutaisi; otherwise, ask to be dropped off at Magnetiti, Ureki's black sand beach with presumed healing properties, for a short break before hailing another ride.

PRACTICAL INFORMATION

Distance covered: 924km

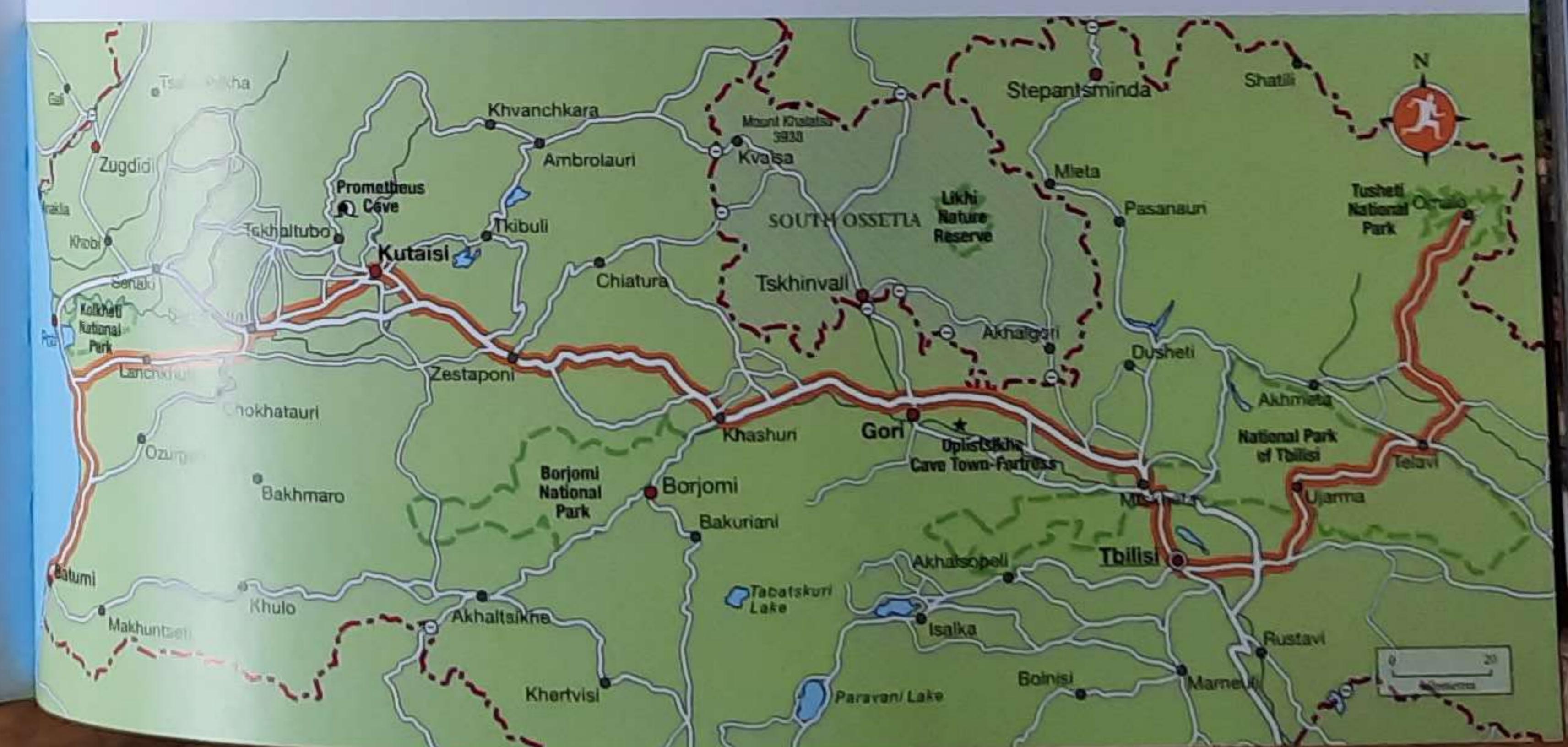
Recommended journey time: 15 days

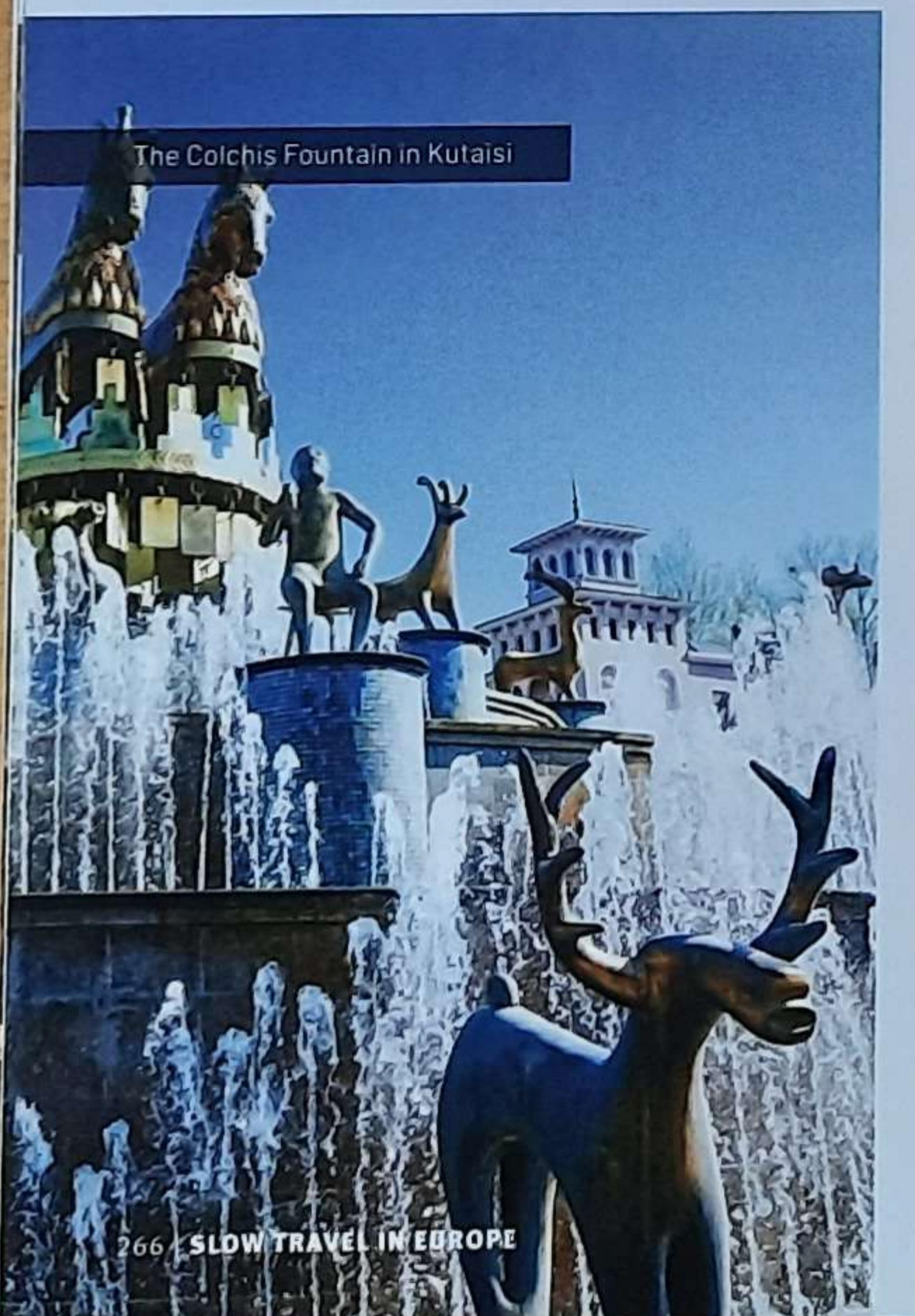
Transport details:

- This hitchhiking trip starts in Batumi and ends in Tbilisi. Allow 15 days for this trip, best taken between spring and summer, as the Abano mountain pass closes from October to May.
- For day-trips, it's easiest to use marshrutkas (shared minibuses); bring lari and pay the driver directly unless you're in a big city, where you must buy tickets in advance at the counter.
- As anywhere, the universal hitchhiking sign is put up your thumb (or sign) and smile; pack sweets or souvenirs to give drivers as thanks for the free ride.

KUTAISI: CONTROVERSIAL CATHEDRALS AND LEGEND-STEEPED CAVES

Kutaisi, a historic capital of the medieval Kingdom of Georgia, is your base for the next three days. Drop your backpack and wander through the Old Town from Kutaisi State Historical Museum to the effervescent Green Bazaar, one of the largest and liveliest food markets in





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Hitchhiking Georgia

Batum
Kutaisi
Zestafoni
Gori
Tbilisi
Ujarma
Telavi
Omalo

Georgia. Pause by two monuments that recall the city's origins: Colchis Fountain, studded with replicas of the gold jewellery unearthed at Vani archaeological site, and the Soviet-era terracotta relief Kolheti at the entrance of the Kutaisi Central Bazaar. Walk across the Chain Bridge and climb up to the eleventh-century Bagrati Cathedral that looms over the city, whose roof sparked controversy when it was added at the behest of former president Mikheil Saakashvili (the cathedral was stripped of its UNESCO World Heritage Site status for the insensitive restoration). From here, follow the silvery course of the Rioni River as it flows through the Old Town.

If time allows, set off by marshrutka (shared minibus) to Prometheus Cave, a subterranean labyrinth of caverns, tunnels, petrified waterfalls and underground rivers and lakes. According to legend, water droplets seeping down the mountain where Zeus chained Prometheus, one of the titans of Greek myth, have sculpted the stalactites and stalagmites in the gloomy halls of this rocky basilica. On guided tours, multicoloured lights cast psychedelic shadows on the petrified curtains and karst sculptures, and the murmur of the water grows to a low roar; take a boat to navigate the Kumi river running beneath the cave.

When you're ready to continue on to Tbilisi, head to the E60 near the Kutaisi Sports Palace to start hitchhiking. Alternatively, depart in a marshrutka and try to hail a ride in Zestafoni. If the option of a detour to Gori – Stalin's hometown – is on the table, be sure to take a guided tour of the museum complex dedicated to the notorious despot. The ancient rock-hewn Uplistsikhe Cave Town-Fortress, fifteen kilometres away, is one of the oldest settlements in the Caucasus.

TBILISI, A CAPTIVATING CAPITAL

Straddling the crossroads of Europe and Asia, Tbilisi bears the marks of a complicated history in its architectural medley. Arab, Ottoman, Mongol and Russian imperial forces have all left their cultural imprint on the city. Tbilisi's evocative Old Town is a tangle of narrow streets, fresco-adorned churches and pastel-hued houses punctuated with colourful latticed balconies. Amble through the cobbled lanes



Japanese garden in Batumi

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Bathhouses in Tbilisi's Abanotubani district

of the Abanotubani neighbourhood, whose collection of ancient dome-shaped bathhouses have restored Georgians for centuries. Look out for the imposing blue-tiled facade of the Orbeliani Baths, which shelters a string of underground steaming sulphur baths; book a body scrub and massage for silky-smooth skin.

Hop on a cable car up to the fourth-century Narikala Fortress, which is guarded by the 20m-high aluminium sculpture of Mother Georgia, bearing a cup of wine in one hand and a sword in the other – a nod to the country's warm hospitality as well as its stoutness in the face of invaders. Head down to Rike Park, home to a pair of metal exhibition and concert halls designed by Italian architect Massimiliano Fuksas. Return to Old Tbilisi via the Peace Bridge and revive with coffee at one of the snug cafés clustered around Shota Rustaveli Avenue. Don't miss the National Museum of Georgia, the National Gallery, the Botanical Garden and the 50m vertiginous funicular ride to Mtatsminda Park.

As part of the Silk Road, an ancient trading route linking Europe and Asia, Georgia's cuisine incorporates influences from neighbouring countries. Feast on clay-oven-scorched *khachapuri* (bread baked with cheese, herbs and egg), *shkmeruli* (chicken cooked in garlic and cream) and caraway-spiced *khinkali* meat dumplings in local taverns, washed down with local wine. Georgia is one of the oldest viticultural regions on Earth, with around eight thousand years of grape cultivation under its belt. Oenophiles can book a tasting session in one of the city's cavernous wine cellars (try *Vino Underground* near Freedom Square).

If you can spare a day, travel by marshrutka to Georgia's ecclesiastical capital, Mtskheta, around twenty kilometres north of Tbilisi. Even if you aren't religious, it's a spiritual experience climbing to the sixth-century Jvari Monastery and gazing down at the point at which the turquoise waters of the Aragvi River collide with the pearly Mtkvari.

WINE, GLORIOUS WINE

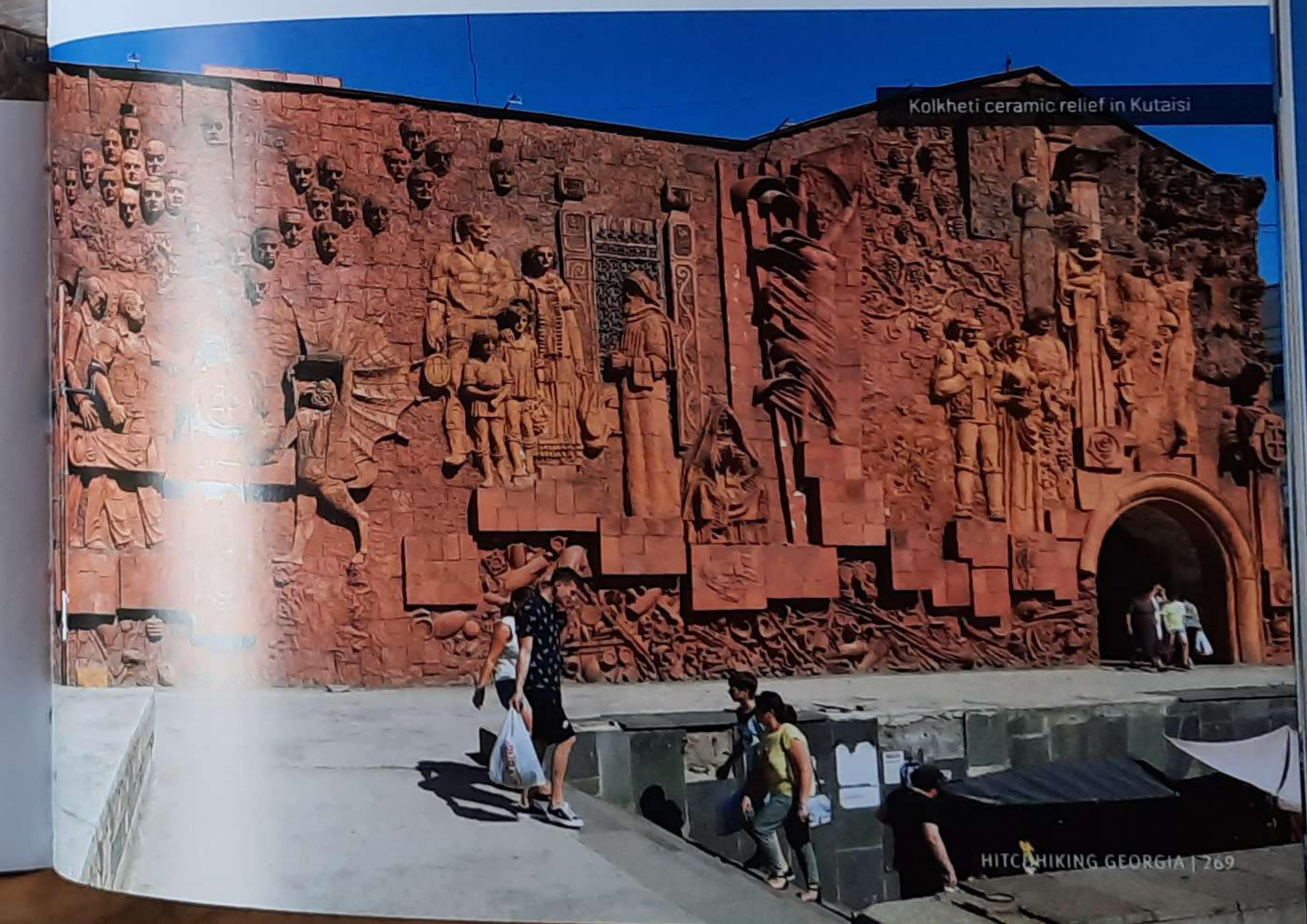
From Tbilisi, the best way to hail a ride to Telavi, Kakheti's largest town, is to take the metro to Varketili and then a bus to Lilo Bazar to find a good spot to hitchhike. Once ensconced in a car, the route passes the historic fortress-village of Ujarma and then winds upwards, tracing the contours of the Lori river to the point at which it meets the Gombori river. The most picturesque part of the journey is the Gombori Pass, at 1620m, with fine views of the Greater Caucasus mountain range that forms the northern belt of Georgia.

Kakheti, the largest and most famous wine region in Georgia, is a mosaic of vineyards and wineries. Rivel (harvest season) starts in September and is an extraordinary event: families gather for grape-picking, some following a historic winemaking practice involving *qvevris*, clay amphorae buried underground

— today inscribed on the UNESCO list of intangible cultural heritage. Everyone enjoys a well-deserved Georgian feast, known as *supra*. There is no shortage of *kinkhali* dumplings, *mtsvadi* (grilled pork skewers), *nigvziani badrijani* (fried eggplant stuffed with walnut filling) or freshly baked *khachapuri*, and of course plenty of wine and *chacha* (pomace brandy).

ON THE ROAD TO TUSHETI

When you're ready to press on, try hitchhiking from just outside Telavi railway station. If you can reach Omalo in a single ride, you'll have hit the jackpot. The narrow unpaved dirt track of the Abano — Georgia's most dangerous mountain pass and one of Europe's highest — cuts a treacherous path on its dizzying 2000m-high climb. In fact, it featured in the 2013 BBC documentary *World's Most Dangerous Roads*. But this is the only route to the villages of Tusheti, a remote



Kolkheti ceramic relief in Kutaisi



shepherding region tucked into the folds of hostile mountains. Since the sixteenth century, shepherds have walked their flocks over 190km down from the Tusheti mountains to the Kakheti lowlands in autumn, where they live until the spring before reversing their tracks and taking their sheep to the summer pastures in the mountains once more.

If you're visiting from June to September, you'll likely pass Georgians travelling along the road from Kakheti to family homes peppered across Tusheti's 49 villages to escape the lowland heat. For the rest of the year, the

LIKE A LOCAL

STAY

Excellent House 44 Gelati St, Kutaisi. Nino and her family will welcome you into their excellent hostel where unbeatable views take in Kutaisi and the mountains.

Karvi Hostel 69 Parnavaz Mepe St. Decent hostel in a

snow-engulfed pass cuts the region off from the rest of the country (the road closes from mid-October until late May). For those who do venture to Omalo, Tusheti's main village, the reward is pristine nature and unrivalled hospitality. From Upper Omalo, dazzling views take in the Gomtsari and Pirikitli valleys and tiny hamlets studding the mountains. Hike to Keselo to see five hilltop towers built during the 1230s Mongol invasions for locals to seek shelter from raiders. Restored in the twenty-first century, a couple now host museums.

quiet part of Batumi with a lovely inner courtyard.

Nona's Guest House 1 Grigol Khandzeli St, Tbilisi. Don't be misled by the uninviting facade; this family-run guesthouse is a home-from-home in Old Tbilisi with a charming inner garden.

EAT & DRINK

Agerari Georgian Cuisine 1 Tsereteli St, Kutaisi; +995 599 08 87 08. This Kutaisi restaurant serves generous plates of traditional Georgian food paired with local wines and beers.

Barbarestan D, 132 Davit Aghmashenebeli Ave, Tbilisi 0112; +995 551 12 11 76. Descend the curving iron staircase to this chic family-owned gem in an old brick meat cellar with ageing hooks still studding the ceiling.

Beer Alkhanadze 26 Teimuraz Bagrationi St, Telavi. Taste the freshest and most delicious beer in Telavi (and probably in all Kakheti) at this small local brewery. You can also buy bottles to go.

Karalashvili Wine Cellar 19 Vertskhli St, Tbilisi 0105; www.karalashvili.ge. One of Tbilisi's most atmospheric bars to sample a glass (or two) of Georgian wine.

Legvi Café Botanikuri St, Tbilisi. Hearty Georgian specialities and Saperavi wine served on an outdoor terrace with fine views of the Abanotubani district.

Purpur 1 Abo Tbileli St, Tbilisi 0155; +995 32 247 77 76. A charming Tbilisi restaurant decked out with mismatched tablecloths and vintage lamps.

SHOP

Biblusi Gallery 2 Erekli St, Bakhrioni St, Telavi. A beautiful bookshop where you enjoy a cup of coffee and tasty cake while reading your latest find.

Dry Bridge Flea Market 3 Zviad Gamsakhurdia, Tbilisi. Daily antique market dating to 1950; stalls are piled high with kitsch decorative items, retro appliances, Soviet medals, handmade products and more.

Gallery 27 N 52 Lado Asatiani St, Tbilisi 0105. An arts and textile gallery selling handmade Georgian crafts.

Green Bazaar Kutaisi 4600. Fresh produce at its best. At the largest and liveliest food market in Georgia, pick up seasonal fruits and vegetables, cheeses, herbs, spices, pickles and *churkhela* (strings of walnuts coated in grape-juice caramel).



The modern Bridge of Peace in Tbilisi