



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

## BACKGROUND

### Land and Climate

Georgia covers 26,912 square miles (69,700 square kilometers) and is slightly larger than South Carolina. Most of the country is mountainous; to the north is the Great Caucasus Range, with its highest peak being Shkhara at 17,656 feet (5,382 meters). The Lesser Caucasus Range is in the south, and the Surami (Likhi) Range divides the country between east and west. Several rivers supply hydroelectric power, and natural and thermal springs are abundant.

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

### History

The native name for Georgia is Sakartvelo, or “the land of the Kartvels,” as Georgians call themselves. Historically, Kartvels were only one of several ethnic groups to settle the area, but their name was applied to the entire area. Eastern Georgia was part of the ancient Caucasus Mountain region known as Iberia.

Between the sixth century BC and third century AD, the western part of the country was known as Colchis. The wealth and power of Colchis (the legendary land of the Golden

Fleece) was reflected in the ancient Greek myth about Jason and the Argonauts. The Egrisi (Lazica) Kingdom flourished in the third and fourth centuries. Situated on strategic territory, Georgia was influenced by Romans, Arabs, Persians, and Turks prior to the 10th century.

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

Exhausted by repeated wars and famines, Georgia sought Russian protection. A protectorate treaty signed in 1783 did not save the region from a Persian invasion in 1795. In 1801, the last Georgian king, Giorgi XII, urged Russia to honor its treaty commitments. But Russia ignored his petitions and had annexed the entire region by 1864. Despite intense Russification, the 19th century saw a Georgian cultural revival led by nobleman Ilia Chavchavadze. He was assassinated in 1907 by opponents of Georgian nationalism. The 1917 Russian revolution allowed a brief period of Georgian independence between 1918 and 1921, just prior to the Soviet Red Army's invasion.

Although Joseph Stalin was an ethnic Georgian (his original surname was Jugashvili), Georgia suffered from his repression, as did all Soviet republics. For many years, resistance to Moscow's rule was not overtly apparent, with the exception of a 1956 protest that was put down by tanks. However, Georgians never accepted Soviet ideology. On 9 April 1989, a group of protesters were killed by Soviet troops, and Georgians pressed for independence—which they

declared in 1991.

The Soviet Union's disintegration did not bring peace to Georgia. Zviad Gamsakhurdia, Georgia's first elected president, alienated ethnic minorities, and his policies combined with other factors to spark regional separatist movements. The economy soon collapsed, and an estimated 350,000 people became refugees. After Gamsakhurdia fled from the fighting in 1992, former Soviet foreign minister Eduard Shevardnadze assumed leadership. He began to implement democratic and market-oriented reforms, and Georgia joined the United Nations. Shevardnadze was elected president in 1995. After years in leadership, he was overthrown peacefully in the 2003 Rose Revolution after voting irregularities.

At the forefront of Georgia's troubles are the independence-seeking regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, where most people see themselves as ethnically different from the rest of Georgia. Many ethnic Georgians have been forced out of these regions. Abkhazia has been seeking full independence, while South Ossetia wants to be united with the region of North Ossetia in Russia. In May 2004, a near-rebellion in Ajara (an autonomous region of Georgia) was averted when autocratic Ajarian president Aslan Abashidze was forced to step down and the central government moved in to reestablish the terms of autonomy.

In August 2008, Georgia used military force to secure the capital of South Ossetia from separatists. Russia responded with major troop movements and bombings both in the region and elsewhere in Georgia. Dozens of Georgians and Russians were reported killed during the conflict, and several thousand Georgians were displaced. Roughly a week after Russian troops moved into Georgia, Russia announced an end to its operation and agreed to an EU-brokered peace agreement, though Russia formally recognized South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states.

Relations between Georgia and Russia remain extremely tense. Georgia now considers Russian peacekeepers in Abkhazia to be an occupying force and has announced its decision to pull out of the Russian-dominated Commonwealth of Independent States. Relations with Russia are further strained by Georgia's pro-Western stance. This Western orientation was reinforced when Georgia joined the Council of Europe in 2000, and again in 2010 when the United States called for Russia to remove its troops from South Ossetia, confirming its support of Georgian sovereignty.

## THE PEOPLE

### Population

Georgia's population of around 4.6 million is shrinking annually by 0.33 percent, mainly because of emigration. About 53 percent of the people live in urban areas. Ethnic Georgians comprise 84 percent of the population. Minorities include Azeris (7 percent), Armenians (6 percent), Russians (2 percent), Ossetians, Abkhazians, and several smaller groups (Kurds, Ukrainians, Germans, Greeks, and others). Exact tallies are impossible because the separatist movements have forced hundreds of thousands of people to become

refugees.

Georgians are divided into more than a dozen regional groups, each of which claims distinct attributes. For instance, Kartlians and Kakhetians from the east consider themselves more composed and even-tempered than Mingrelians, Gurians, and Imeretians in the west.

Tbilisi, founded in AD 459, is the capital and largest city. The second largest city is Kutaisi, followed by Sukhumi and Batumi. Large Georgian communities are found in France, Russia, Turkey, and Iran.

### Language

The official language is Georgian, which is part of the South Caucasian, or Kartvelian, language family. Abkhazian also ranks as an official language but is used only in Abkhazia. Many adult Georgians can also speak Russian, but now young people usually choose to learn English or other languages instead. Minorities speak their native language in addition to Russian or Georgian. Historical sources say Georgia's alphabet was created in the third century BC by King Parnavaz and is one of the world's 14 original alphabets. Its 33 letters are still written in the original, although slightly modernized, script (called *Mkhedruli*).

### Religion

Georgia adopted Christianity by the fourth century AD. St. Nino is revered for converting many people and is one of the most worshiped saints in Georgia. Despite long periods of non-Christian domination, Georgia remains a Christian nation. Even under Soviet rule, people considered religion crucial to cultural survival. The Georgian Church is autonomous but affiliated with the Greek Orthodox Church; it is respected for encouraging interreligious tolerance and nonviolence. Most people (84 percent) are Orthodox Christian (either Georgian or Russian). Four percent belong to the Armenian Gregorian Church.

The Ajaria Autonomous Republic in the southwest part of the country has a large Muslim population. Owing to the considerable time Muslim Turks ruled Ajara, 10 percent of Georgians are Muslim. Roman Catholics, Baptists, and Jews also live in Georgia. There are several functioning synagogues.

### General Attitudes

Georgians are committed to their land of rich history and tradition. Centuries of multicultural interaction have made Georgians tolerant of other religions and cultures. For instance, Jews have lived in the land for at least 2,500 years without notable discrimination.

Despite a geographical link to Asia Minor, Georgians identify with the West and expect to develop stronger ties with Europe. Georgians are proud of their country and are pragmatic and positive about the future. Pessimism has increased in recent years because of hardships, but Georgians try to remain cheerful. They view themselves as a peaceful, easy-going, and romantic people with a difficult destiny, expecting continued struggles for national identity and independence. Georgians have always valued friendship and time spent in pleasant company. Their society is influenced

more by family and peer values than by abstract norms and rules.

### Personal Appearance

The standard dress is European. Traditional costumes are seen mainly at folk dance performances and during national holidays. Georgians pay attention to how they dress and choose quality clothing even if it is not affordable. Sloppy or careless dress is considered improper, even in casual situations. Jeans are popular among all segments of society.

## CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

### Greetings

When greeting, Georgians shake hands and say *Gamarjoba* (literally, “Let you win”), which means “Hello.” One may respond with the same greeting in formal situations or with *Gagimarjos* (Hello) in informal situations. *Rogora khar?* (How are you?) is an informal way to begin a conversation. *Rogor brdzandebit?* is more formal. *Kargad ikavit* means “Bye, take care.” *Mshvidobit* (Peace be with you) is used for a more substantial parting. In cities, it is uncommon for Georgians to greet strangers on the street; in rural areas, however, people commonly greet, smile at, and sometimes speak to passing strangers.

Shaking hands is common, even at casual meetings. Embracing in a friendly manner or kissing on the cheek is also common, especially among young people and women. Small children might receive hugs and kisses. Adults are addressed by first name following *Batono* (Sir) or *Kalbatono* (Madam). Using *Batono/Kalbatono* with just the last name is very formal. First and last names (without titles) are used almost exclusively in correspondence and in the media.

### Gestures

Conversations can be animated, and Georgians often use their hands to express themselves. Eye contact is appreciated. People sometimes express appreciation for something by raising a “thumbs up.” Chewing gum in public, especially when talking, is impolite. Legs may be crossed at the knee, but feet never touch the furniture. Many people consider public displays of affection inappropriate, but they are fairly common between young couples. People usually stand when an elderly person enters a room.

### Visiting

Georgians are sociable and hospitable; they are known for friendly and generous treatment of even unexpected guests. “Any guest is God's messenger” is a popular Georgian saying. In the past, it was quite common to have guests in the home. However, social unrest and a difficult economic situation have forced people to make fewer visits to friends and relatives. Hosts also feel they cannot provide as adequately for guests as in the past. Still, hosts expect to offer at least cookies or a cup of coffee to guests. They offer full dinners to invited guests when possible. Guests bring gifts on special occasions, but flowers or sweets are a common and welcomed gesture at any time; bringing something for the children is

always appreciated.

In Tbilisi, people have long enjoyed strolling down Rustaveli Avenue in the evenings. During the civil unrest, they preferred the safety of their homes. With life slowly stabilizing, however, Georgians are returning to old pleasures.

### Eating

Families share most meals together. Breakfast is light if eaten early and more substantial if eaten around 9 a.m. Lunch is called a “second breakfast” if eaten before noon and “dinner” if eaten after noon. The evening meal is called “dinner” if eaten around 5 p.m. and “supper” if eaten after that hour. Most people eat the evening meal after 6 p.m. Georgians eat in the continental style, with the fork in the left hand and knife in the right. Some fish and meat dishes are eaten with the hands. Georgians would rather eat with a neighbor or someone else than eat alone.

Before a meal, a toastmaster (*tamada*) proposes toasts to anything from national values to each person at the table, and drinks the entire glass after each toast. Women involved in the toast drink only sparingly. At social gatherings, it is improper to serve alcohol without first proposing a toast, and scores of toasts may be offered during a banquet. Traditionally, people drank Georgian wine from a *kantsi* (a hollowed deer, bull, or goat horn) passed around the table. Today, a *kantsi* is displayed in the home or sometimes used by the *tamada*, but it is passed around only for special toasts.

When guests are present, the hostess prepares and serves the meal, joining the group if other women are present. Hosts traditionally provided more than could be eaten, but hard times have changed this practice. Guests might not ask for seconds and can decline offers of such without insulting the hosts. However, guests are expected to eat everything on their plates and compliment the hosts on the food.

## LIFESTYLE

### Family

Georgians value family unity. In traditional homes, three generations may live together. The father is responsible for economic support, major financial transactions, and protecting the family's old and young. The mother is the most influential in the decision-making process. Parents usually have two children. Most women care for the household and children in addition to holding jobs outside the home. Grandparents often provide day care in these cases. Also, more young adults are working to help support the household.

### Housing

Georgian housing is a mix of uniform Soviet-style apartment buildings and distinctive homes. During the Soviet era, apartments were relatively large (sometimes consisting of four or five bedrooms), but those available today are smaller. Hence, fewer newlyweds can move in with the groom's parents permanently; they stay only until they can afford their own apartment or home. Urban families typically rent or own apartments, which until the end of the Soviet era were owned by the government. The law now allows families to buy

apartments, but many are waiting for society to stabilize before making the investment. A typical apartment has one or two bedrooms, a living room, a small kitchen, and a bathroom. Inside urban homes, there are often several couches that can be converted into beds for family members or guests.

An abundance of forestland has allowed for the construction of many wooden houses. Some of the older wooden houses have ornate triangular roofs and elaborately carved facades. In rural areas, most homes have one or two bedrooms and a large parlor that doubles as a dining and living room.

### Dating and Marriage

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

A person generally is free to choose a spouse, and families do not often interfere. Weddings in the past were rather flamboyant, with large feasts, folk dancing, and singing. Today's weddings are not so extravagant, and urban ceremonies are fairly quiet events with family and close friends. A woman's virginity on her wedding day is a traditional value. Fidelity is important in marriage, although men used to take some liberties that many wives now refuse to accept.

### Life Cycle

Life-cycle rituals in Georgia are usually comparable to those that occur in other heavily Christian Orthodox countries. The Georgian funeral ceremony is somewhat different. When a person dies, the body lies in the home for three to four days. Relatives, friends, colleagues, and neighbors come to pay their respects. Women in the family remain seated around the open coffin, while male relatives remain standing and assist mourners. Rice, meat, wine, and *kolio* (a cold wheat porridge) are usually served. Wailing loudly is not uncommon, and in some regions (Megrelia, for example) it is carried out by professional women cantors, who also pray. For the next 40 days (called *ormoci*), male kin of the deceased may allow their beards to grow. When the 40 days are up, a meal is held for close family to commemorate the deceased. A memorial service may also be held at the church. On the birthday of the deceased, relatives and close friends usually visit the cemetery and share a meal.

### Diet

Georgians grow a variety of fruits and vegetables as well as wine grapes and tea. Salads, vegetables, eggs, bread and butter, cheese, ham or sausage, and coffee or tea are eaten for breakfast. The “second breakfast” or “dinner” typically consists of soup and/or meat, potatoes, beans, vegetables, fruit, bread, and wine. The same basic foods eaten at dinner are also eaten at supper. Good wine is seen as indispensable. Dishes in the west tend to be lighter than in the east. Spices are popular everywhere. Walnuts are used extensively in Georgian cuisine. The most common meats include beef,

pork, chicken, and lamb. *Matsoni* (a mild yogurt) is eaten often. Abundant vegetables include cucumbers, beans, eggplant, and cabbage. Popular fruits are apples, melons, figs, grapes, cherries, pears, peaches, and tomatoes. *Satsivi* (fried chicken or turkey in a walnut sauce), *khinkali* (a boiled meat dumpling), and *mtsvadi* (marinated, grilled meat) are favorite dishes. Georgians enjoy *khatchapuri* (a puff-pastry hors d'oeuvre), *churchxela* (nuts strung on twine and then dipped in a grape syrup and hung to harden), and on special occasions such as New Year's, *gozinaki* (a honey-and-walnut confection).

### Recreation

In their leisure time, Georgians watch television or videos, read, play chess, or go to theaters, movies, exhibitions, or concerts. Favorite sports include soccer, basketball, skiing, wrestling, and tennis. People also follow figure skating. Georgians enjoy weekend outings. Urban residents who have summer cottages spend as much time there as possible, enjoying nature, gardening, or tending to greenhouses.

### The Arts

Folk music and dance are popular. Tempo and choreography of Georgian dance varies by region. Despite years of social evolution, Georgian folk music and dance have remained remarkably unchanged. Georgians also take pride in theatrical and performing artists. Their national ballet and several theater companies are well regarded internationally. Festivals supporting these and other arts are common. Of Georgian authors, Shota Rustaveli, a poet of the 12th century, is the most famous. Georgians view their traditional literature as an expression of national identity. Georgia is also famous for its beautiful churches, frescoes, and religious icons.

### Holidays

The main official holidays include New Year's Day, Orthodox Christmas (7 Jan.), Easter Sunday, and Independence Day (26 May). Families usually celebrate New Year's together, but parties are also arranged. Special meals and champagne are common for New Year's Eve celebrations. Colored eggs and special cakes are prepared for Easter. Other prominent religious holidays include Epiphany (19 Jan.), Our Lady's Day (28 Aug.), the Dormition (28 Aug.), and St. George's Day (23 Nov.).

## SOCIETY

### Government

Georgia is a democratic republic. It is headed by a strong executive president (currently Mikhail Saakashvili), who is elected to a five-year term. The president is both chief of state and head of government. A new constitution was ratified in October 1995. Parliament has 150 seats. Georgia's Law of Citizenship allows every permanent resident to become a citizen, regardless of ethnic origin. It also sets generous guidelines for new settlers. The voting age is 18.

**Economy**

Georgia remains one of the poorest countries of the former Soviet Union. Traditionally, the country has had a strong agricultural and industrialized economy, with exports of wine, tea, produce, mineral water, marble, and arsenic. However, many enterprises closed in the post-Soviet era after the system of supply and distribution had collapsed, so Georgia began importing basic necessities. Still, the country has the potential for food self-sufficiency.

As the economy stabilizes, tourism, agriculture, and mineral sectors can expand. The 1998 Russian financial crisis severely hurt the Georgian economy, doing the most damage to the chemical, metallurgical, and machine-making industries. The conflict in nearby Chechnya has hurt foreign investment. Unemployment is high and poverty affects most people. Georgia's national currency is the *lari* (GEL).

**Transportation and Communications**

Georgia has a well-developed transportation system, with taxis, buses, and streetcars serving urban areas. Tbilisi has a subway. The expense and scarcity of fuel have hampered transportation, but private enterprises and government efforts are filling gaps as the economy improves. Buses running between towns are crowded. Most roads are paved but are not in good condition. Government efforts are underway to improve and expand roads. Bicycles are not common, partly because steep terrain in many areas makes riding them difficult. Airports operate in all major cities, and Tbilisi Airport receives daily international flights. Two large ports at Poti and Batumi are vital to shipping throughout the Transcaucasian region (the area between the Black and Caspian seas).

Most urban families and businesses have phones, and many people in rural areas do as well. Cellular phones are used throughout the country. Independent television and radio broadcasts reach most homes. Fewer people are reading newspapers because they cannot afford to buy them. The postal system is slow and undependable. It can take months for a letter from abroad to reach an addressee; those who can afford it use fax machines or e-mail to communicate internationally. Internet use is popular among the youth.

**Education**

Children begin school at age six and graduate at seventeen, at which time they receive a certificate of completion that allows them to begin working or to seek higher education. Though controversial, recent reforms have aimed at Westernizing curriculum and mandating a state-wide standardized college entrance exam in an effort to reduce the millions of dollars in bribes paid each year to college officials. Major ethnic minorities have their own schools, some of which use their native language along with Georgian for instruction. Private and specialized schools are becoming more popular.

There are 21 state-run institutions of higher education and more than 100 private or cooperative institutions. Obtaining a good education is a high priority for most Georgians.

**Health**

Georgia's public healthcare system is being transformed into a market-oriented, fee-for-service system. Many people are unable to afford such care, especially in rural areas. Physicians find it difficult to make a living in medicine, and many have left the profession. In 2001, nearly half of Georgia's doctors lost their medical licenses when they failed to pass professional competency exams. Poorly staffed hospitals face the additional problem of insufficient medical supplies.

**AT A GLANCE**

**Contact Information**

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**POPULATION & AREA**

Population	4,600,825 (rank=121)
Area, sq. mi.	26,912 (rank=120)
Area, sq. km.	69,700

**DEVELOPMENT DATA**

Human Dev. Index* rank	74 of 182 countries
Gender inequality rank	71 of 155 countries
Real GDP per capita	\$4,500
Adult literacy rate	100% (male); 100% (female)
Infant mortality rate	16 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	74 (male); 81 (female)

\*UN Development Programme, Human Development Report 2010 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).