



TOUR INFORMATION FOR GEORGIA in spring

These are designed to help you prepare for the tour. Please read carefully.

ENTERING GEORGIA: United Kingdom citizens will need a passport valid for six months after the date of entry. A visa is not required by citizens of the EU. Citizens of other nations should contact their nearest Embassy for entry requirements.

It is always a good idea to take a photocopy of your passport and air ticket with you when travelling abroad. They can prove invaluable in helping you get replacements if your originals are lost or stolen. Obviously you should keep the photocopies in a separate bag to the originals.

TIME DIFFERENCE: Georgia is +3 hours British Summer Time (BST) or +4 hours (GMT).

CURRENCY: The local currency of Georgia is the Lari (GEL). These can be obtained at the airport on arrival and changing cash is quicker than travellers' cheques and we advise against taking these. As the tour price includes all travel, hotel, local tips and main meal costs, you only need to change enough money to cover items of a personal nature, such as laundry.

LANGUAGE: Few people speak English but a local guide will accompany us throughout the tour. Georgian is the common language and Russian is also spoken.

CLIMATE: We may experience a wide range of conditions on this tour. The first part of the tour is spent at Stepantsminda (the old Russian name for this town is Kazbegi) in the mountains. Here we can expect some snow, low cloud and possibly rain at times, so you need to take suitable clothing such as waterproof jackets, woolly hats and gloves. Temperatures are likely to be between 0-10°C, especially in the early mornings. When we leave Stepantsminda we travel to the south-east corner of Georgia and will experience an improvement in the weather. It is likely to be hot and sunny (25°C or more), so appropriate clothing such as sun hat and lightweight shirts are essential, although rain and cooler temperatures are still possible here.

PACE OF TOUR AND DAILY ROUTINE: This tour may require some physical effort and participants should have a reasonable degree of fitness and be prepared for some occasional discomfort. As we spend half of the tour in a mountainous region, some uphill walking is inevitable. How much we need to do will depend a lot on the weather conditions and the snow line and the effect that has on the birds we are looking for. None of the walks are in any way dangerous but we may find ourselves looking out across dramatic vistas from a great height. Some participants might find a lightweight metal walking pole useful.

We could find ourselves walking over snow at some point although this will usually be small patches - we do not expect to spend long periods trekking across snow fields, and this has not actually happened in the last 7 years. We will however, be crossing a small scree slope and spending time standing on grassy slopes. There will be no rush on any of our walks, and there will be plenty of time for breaks. We may reach altitudes of 2500-3000m (8000-10,000 feet), although around 2100m (7000 feet) is more usual. The accommodation at Stepantsminda is around 1900m (6500 feet).

Mornings in Stepantsminda will start around 06:30, with coffee and optional early birding, followed by a sit-down breakfast around 09:00. Then we will go out birding for the day, either taking a packed lunch with us or having lunch in a local cafe. We are usually back at the hotel in plenty of time for some relaxation before dinner at 19:30 or 20:00. A similar situation will prevail in Chachuna, with the exception that we may take advantage of the hot temperatures to have a sit down lunch in the ranch we stay at. There are four decent drives on this tour, from Tbilisi to Stepantsminda and back, then

GEORGIA: Tour Information...2

from Tbilisi to Chachuna and back. These drives are broken by either a picnic lunch or lunch in a café, and there will be several stops for birding along the way. On the drive to Chachuna, the last 30km are along a track, from which the birding can be excellent.

HEALTH: It is essential that you contact your own doctor to obtain the latest information on the regions you are visiting. Please contact your doctor well in advance of your tour's departure as some medication must be initiated weeks before the period of possible exposure.

It is recommended that you are up-to-date on routine vaccinations. Biting insects are very scarce, and have never been a problem on this tour. Tap water is basically alright to drink but to be safe drink bottled water, which, along with soft drinks and beer, is widely available. Upset stomachs are possible in Georgia although unlikely. We suggest bringing anti-diarrhoea medicine such as Imodium or Arret. Packets of Dioralyte are also worth bringing as they replace the vital salts and minerals lost during a bout of diarrhoea. Make sure you bring a good sun-screen and also sunglasses to protect you not only from the sun but also from possible snow glare. Finally, ensure you to bring adequate supplies of all personal medication as it may be impossible to obtain them during the tour.

For further information on health advice refer to the Medical Advisory Services for Travellers Abroad website www.masta-travel-health.com

ACCOMMODATION: In Stepantsminda we will be staying in a modern new hotel. Each room has its own facilities including a bathroom and the hotel is kept very warm. In Tbilisi we stay in a modern hotel. At Chachuna we stay in some new but basic cottages which have en suite facilities for each room. However please note that the electricity here is from a generator and is only available after dark. Also note that if we have a large number of singles on this tour, single accommodation may not be possible at Chachuna where we stay for two nights.

LAUNDRY SERVICE: This may be possible in Stepantsminda, but is unlikely to be available in Chachuna. The short duration of our stays in Tbilisi make it unlikely to be offered here.

ELECTRICITY: The current is 220 volts AC, 50 cycles. A continental plug adapter with two small circular pins is required. An international travel plug can be bought in most airport departure lounges. Power cuts are not uncommon so bring a good torch. You may find the following website helpful: <http://www.power-plugs-sockets.com>.

FOOD: The food of Georgia is similar to that of Turkey and, although meat does feature in most main meals, these are usually served with a variety of vegetable dishes. The hotel at Stepantsminda makes an effort at providing vegetarian meals and these are usually good, although simple. On our night in Tbilisi we plan to go out to a restaurant in the old town for a traditional Georgian meal. Here there will also be an opportunity to sample some Georgian wine.

Sunbird tours are all-inclusive and no refunds can be issued for any tour meals participants choose to miss. While we will try to do all we can to accommodate the requirements of all participants, please note that we cannot guarantee all causes of food allergies can be avoided at every destination. Many restaurants offer set menus and are unable to accommodate all special requests within a group. Thus, participants with significant food allergies or special dietary needs should bring appropriate foods with them for those times when their needs can, regretfully, not be accommodated.

Our tours are carefully scheduled to ensure the best possible birding experience and although the leaders will do all they can to make sure the group eats at a reasonable time, sometimes early or late lunches and/or evening meals cannot be avoided. Any participants who need to eat at specific times may need to take supplemental food with them.

GEORGIA: Tour Information...3

DRINKS: Bottled water, a soft drink or a beer (or wine if appropriate) are provided at meals, as is coffee or tea. In addition, we keep a supply of bottled water on the tour vehicles. Bottled or filtered water may also be provided in some rooms where we stay.

INTERNET AND MOBILE PHONE ACCESS: Wi-Fi should be available in the hotels at Tbilisi and Stepantsminda, although it can be slow and unreliable. There is no Wi-Fi at Chachuna. Phone signal is generally good throughout the country, although beware of excessive charges from your mobile phone provider.

FIELD CLOTHING: Dress is informal throughout and flexibility is the key. When we are out walking in the mountain regions you need to be prepared for changes in the weather and we strongly recommend that you bring lots of layers that can be discarded or added as conditions dictate. We would suggest bringing thermal underwear, good shirts and a sweater or fleece, topped off by a good water- and wind-proof jacket. **Some of the terrain we will be walking over will require good walking shoes or boots.** A good hat to protect from the sun is advisable plus a pair of sunglasses for use in snow as well as to protect from strong sunlight.

Light weight clothing for our time in the lowlands is key, with lightweight shirts that can be teamed with other layers being ideal.

MISCELLANEOUS ITEMS: Please bring the following:

Notebook and pencil	Sun hat & sun screen
Insect repellent	Small rucksack/Day pack for daily use
Torch with spare batteries	Sunglasses
Walking stick or pole	Alarm Clock
Universal plug	Personal medication

Optional: Telescope & tripod (recommended if you have them), camera, film or memory cards, spare binoculars and spare spectacles (in case of loss or damage), field guide. A telescope and tripod are very useful on this tour for scanning high alpine fields and ridges for some of the special birds. It will also be useful at Chachuna for scanning the reservoir and riverine forest from the dam.

LEADER'S EQUIPMENT: The leader will provide the following for group use:

Telescope & tripod	Basic first-aid kit
Field guides	Reference books
Playback equipment	Laser Pointer

LUGGAGE: Our Final Information document, which will be sent to you approximately three weeks before departure, will give details about baggage weight and size restrictions imposed by the airline used for this tour.

If possible, please bring your luggage in soft-sided bags or cases (rather than large hard 'Samsonite'-type suitcases) as these pack more easily into our vehicles during the tour. Please note that on many tours there are no porters to carry your luggage so please ensure that **no bag is so heavy that you are unable to lift and carry it yourself.** There is also no lift in our hotel in Stepantsminda, and lifts are occasionally out of order in Tbilisi, so be prepared to carry your own bags upstairs. As a general rule, in addition to using your luggage labels, it is a good idea to fix identification to the *inside* of each piece of luggage.

GEORGIA: Tour Information...4

PHOTOGRAPHY: There are no restrictions on photography in Georgia but we advise against taking photographs of bridges, stations, airports or 'official' buildings. Always ask before taking a photo of a local person. There are plenty of opportunities for good scenic shots and some of the birds can be reasonably approachable, especially some of the migrant species. 'Digiscoping' is perfectly compatible with the tour, though you should bring your own telescope! The leader's telescope will not be available for this. There will be plenty of opportunities to take photos of birds, mammals and scenery and the leaders will do all they can to accommodate anyone wishing to take photographs. However if you are a serious photographer please bear in mind that this is first and foremost a birdwatching tour. Please do not allow your photographic desires to conflict with other participants' birdwatching activities.

TRANSPORT: Transportation is in a minibus or possibly four-wheel drive vehicles. There are a few long drives to and from Stepantsminda but these are broken by stops for birdwatching. The leader will arrange a seating rotation. Participants should be able to ride in any seat in tour vehicles.

SMOKING: Smoking is not allowed in the vehicles or when the group is gathered for meals, checklists etc. If you are sharing a room with a non-smoker, please do not smoke in the room. If you smoke in the field, we ask that you do so well away and downwind from the group if possible. Note that smoking is an extremely common habit in Georgia and we are sure to find ourselves on some occasions in the presence of local people who will be smoking. A dislike of smoking here is sometimes regarded as a western affectation, although they have recently banned smoking in restaurants.

TRAVEL INSURANCE: Travel insurance is essential and we insist that you take out suitable cover as soon as your tour is booked. If you are bringing expensive optical equipment or other valuable items, please make sure they are also adequately insured on your home contents policy, as most travel insurance policies do not cover very expensive individual items. You may wish to consult your insurance broker regarding coverage. Please also ensure that your policy covers you in the event of a medical emergency, cancellation of a trip or severe delays. Medical costs abroad can often be extremely expensive. Please note that Sunbird is not liable for any medical or repatriation costs resulting from injury or illness during a tour or for covering any costs resulting from a flight delay such as extra hotel accommodation.

If you wish, insurance can be arranged by Helen Fisher, Bullerwell Independent Insurance Brokers, 13 Goldington Road, Bedford, MK40 3JY. Tel: 01234-866964. Please contact Helen for a quote and she will send the schedule directly to you.

TIPPING: All tour-based tips are included in the tour price. These include tips to local guides, drivers, hotel porters, and waiters and waitresses when we have group meals together in restaurants. You only need to pay tips for personal services such as room service or drinks from the bar.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Birds:

Mullarney, Killian, Svensson L. & Zetterstrom D. *Collins Bird Guide*. 2nd Edition 2009. HarperCollins. (ISBN 978 0 00 726814 6). The latest, most up-to-date and portable field guide to the birds of Europe. This book has quickly become established as the standard field guide for the region. **Highly recommended**

Porter, R. Christensen, S. & Schiermacker-Hansen, P. *Field Guide to the Birds of the Middle East*. Another guide that covers in detail most (but not all) of the birds we will encounter.

GEORGIA: Tour Information...5

Mammals:

Aulagnier, S., Mitchell-Jones, A.J., Moutou, F., Zima J. & Haffner, P. *Mammals of Europe, North Africa and the Middle East*. 2009. (A&C Black, London, 2009). Now the definitive guide to the mammals of the Western Palearctic region.

General Interest: There is an excellent Bradt Guide to Georgia written by Tim Burford. Easily the best travel guide to the region.

OBTAINING BOOKS: Most of the field guides and the major ornithological references in print are available by mail order from booksellers specialising in natural history titles.

Natural History Book Service Ltd
Tel: 01803 865913
www.nhbs.co.uk

Subbuteo Books
Tel: 0870 010 9700
www.wildlifebooks.com

WildSounds
Tel: 01263 741100
www.wildsounds.co.uk

MAPS: A good map of Georgia is published by International Travel Maps of Vancouver. The scale is 1:625,000. The follow outlets may have a copy in stock.

The Map Shop
Tel: 01684 593146
www.themapshop.co.uk

Stanfords
Tel: 020 7836 1321
www.stanfords.co.uk

FINAL INFORMATION: Final information with instructions for meeting the group, hotel addresses etc., and your international air tickets will be sent out about three weeks before the start of the tour. If you have any questions, please contact us.