

# Caucasian Paths: KHEVSURETI

*With a brief survey of Eastern Georgia*



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## **Caucasian Paths: Khevsureti** **With a brief survey of Eastern Georgia**

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# Eastern Georgia

## A Brief Survey





## *Georgia and the Georgian People*

The indigenous Georgians have lived on the slopes of the Main Caucasus Ridge, the boundary between Europe and Asia, at the crossroads of the ancient trade route called the *Silk Road* from time immemorial. Modern Georgia borders the Russian Federation, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Turkey. Georgia is a country with one of the worlds oldest civilizations with historical and cultural roots dating back to ancient times.

The country has an abundance of natural recreation resources. Although in terms of territory Georgia is a small country (69,700 square kilometers), it is distinguished by a diverse landscape and fabulously beautiful nature.

Thanks to its geopolitical position Georgia has always been the bridge between the West and the East. The Apollonian and Dionysian forces counteract and interflow here as the West and the East, as rational and irrational, intellectual and sensual. Who are the Georgians? Are they the Europeans or the Asians? The Georgians have always aspired to be European, however, the essence of Georgian culture is oriented to the East. Yet, Georgian culture has arisen under both of these influences, maintaining its originality, distinct from both European and Asian.

## *Georgians – the Ancient Smiths*

It was here, where the remains of the first primitive Eurasians – Homo erectus, dating back 1.8 million years, were discovered.

The aboriginal inhabitants of the Caucasus are considered to be the founders of an agricultural culture and it is in Georgia where the hotbeds of approximately 18 types of wheat and other cereals have been found.

Throughout the ancient world the Georgians were famous as skilful smiths and metallurgists. It has been proved that they traded bronze, copper, iron and gold items with the Sumerians, Hittites, Egyptians and other already extinct civilizations... The Greeks call iron "*khali-bus*" which is the name of one of the Georgian tribes – *Khalibebi*.

The first goldfield in the world dating back to 6,000 years was found to the south of Tbilisi, in the immediate locality of Dmanisi, where copper and gold are mined to the present day.

## Voices from the Past

Georgian is one of the ancient languages. The words of the now extinct Sumerian, Akkadic, Hittite origin have up to the present been preserved in Georgian vocabulary and toponymy.

The Georgians use their own alphabet created around 5th century. In fact, through history they used three different types of scripts – *asomtavruli*, *nuskhakhutsuri* and *mkhedruli* were used, sometimes even simultaneously, of which *asomtavruli* is the oldest. At present Georgians write in *mkhedruli*.



Ancient ritual of baptism still performed in Khevsureti

Georgian polyphonic songs have preserved fragments of ancient hymns, glorifications and chants in which the names of gods of the Sumerians and Akkadians, epithets and invocatory prayers are mentioned. As is known, they were also the gods of Proto-Georgians, such as Arale, Armaz, Kviria, Lale, Nanina, Lile...

The ancient epics, such as the narratives concerning Gilgamesh-Prometheus-Amiran, *dev-kerpebi* ("demons", "evil spirits"), giant human beings, Kopala – the liberator from demons, the Narts, etc. have been handed down to us through orally transmitted Caucasian legends.

The entire territory of Georgia, especially its upland regions is abundant in ethnographical material still alive in ancient rituals, festivals and ceremonial arts (*Khatoba*), such as *Atenghenoga*, *Lasharoba*, *Gomitsroba*, *Tetri Giorgoba*, the cult of the Tree of Wishes and many others.

A great deal of historical secrets are hidden under a veil of mystery in the snow-capped mountains of the Caucasus. Many of them will probably be revealed in the future. Such are the petroglyphs which have been discovered in abundance in Tusheti, Khevsureti



Petroglyphs on the Kistani tower



and other highland regions of Georgia and enveloped in an obscurity of mysticism. The indecipherable petroglyphs found on the stronghold towers located in one of the abandoned villages of Khevsureti – Kistani, are exact copies of the ideograms inscribed on the walls of ancient Gordion, in the territory of present-day Turkey. The Caucasian symbols inscribed on the stones also have much in common with the Etruscan petroglyphs as well as with the ones found in the Basque Country of Spain and in Mycenae.

### *Pages from History*

Around 3,200 years ago two states arose from the Georgian tribal unions – Colcha and Diaokhi. Both of these states established relations with the external world of those days. Especially the maritime Colchis Kingdom (Egrissi) traded extensively with the ancient Greeks, Phoenicians, Persians and others. There was a great demand for local gold, iron, timber as shipbuilding material, wine and implements for household use. The Colchis Kingdom minted silver coins known as “*kolkhuri tetri*”.

In the 4th century BC, King Parnavaz united the Kartli Kingdom called “Iberia” by the Greek historians and abovementioned Colcha, declared Mtskheta the capital and made the language of one of the tribes of central Georgia, “Karty”, the state language. From that the name “Kartveli”, the Georgians gave to themselves, and “Sakartvelo”, i.e. land inhabited by Georgians.

In the year 65 BC, the iron legions of the powerful Roman Empire headed by Pompey the Great approached the borders of Georgia. Unable to withstand the onslaught of the Romans Georgia submitted. In the following years the Georgians lived at peace with the Romans and were faithful allies. Emperor Antonius Pius took the unprecedented step of erecting a monument to the Georgian King



Uplistsikhe - an example of early pre-Christian settlement in Georgia

Parsman II in Rome. Closer relations with Rome tied Georgia forever with western perspective and culture.

## *Beginnings of Christianity*

Georgia is considered to be under the patronage of the Mother of God. St. Andrew, the “First-called” Apostle, as well as the Apostles Simon the Zealot and Mathias were sent to Georgia to perform evangelistic activity. The first Christian colonies appeared as far back as the 1st century AD and like the representatives of other religions they were not persecuted. This tolerance was favored by the country’s location at one of the main crossroads of the Silk Road, as foreign merchants moving around would introduce their cultures and religious beliefs. The ancient Georgian cities of Uplistsikhe and Vani, with abundant temples of different religious denominations, have flourished.

The country had to meet new challenges in the 4th century AD, after the official adoption of Christianity in 326.

This fact is associated with the names of St. Nino of Cappadocia, St. King Mirian and St. Queen Nana. In Georgia there some of the holy relics are kept, the robe and the belt of the Virgin Mary, the chiton of Christ.

A group of monastic missionaries known as the “Thirteen Assyrian Fathers” arrived from Syria to Georgia to strengthen Christianity in the country in the 6th century. They intended to carry out extensive construction of monasteries aimed at expanding the Christian religion all over the country.

Christianity is deep-rooted in Georgia even today and the 13 Assyrian Fathers made a huge contribution to this fact. Several monastery complexes founded by the Assyrian Fathers are scattered throughout the territory of Georgia, such as David Gareja, Khirsa,

Alaverdi and Martkopi in Kakheti region; Shio-Mgvime, Zedazeni, Tsilkani, and Urnisi in Kartli.

Besides Georgian monasteries were built in Syria, Palestine, on Mount Athos and in other locations.



Over 5,000 churches and monasteries have been recognized in Georgia, which are under protection of the state. If we take into consideration that Georgia has a considerably small territory, the above-mentioned number is clear proof of the country's rich historical past and culture.

With the adoption of Christianity as the official religion, Georgia found itself in a difficult position: the collapse of Byzantium turned the Christian country into the only outpost in a Muslim milieu. For that reason it was troubled endlessly by the Arab, Persian and Turk invaders. The upturn in the destroyed country's fortune started in the 11th century and is related to King David IV, whom the people dubbed "David the Builder". A wise politician and a brilliant soldier, he formed a regular army 60,000 strong and did away with the feudal division of the country by punishing the feudal lords. To complete the liberation of the country a general offensive against the Turks in the Southern Caucasus was launched. As a result of the Ruisi-Urbnisi council of the clergy, the Church was subjected to the regal authority.

At that period the West-European Crusaders were engaged in a military campaign to recover the Holy Land from the Muslims. King Baldwin has strategic relations with David the Builder. King of Georgia and Georgian troops were powerful allies to the Crusaders. On August 12, 1121, in the Didgori battle near Tbilisi, Georgian troops of 56 000 warriors defeated a 300,000 strong Moslem coalition army.

David IV the Builder was not a brilliant warrior and strategist only; the king was also a highly educated man for those times. He



had a perfect command of several foreign languages, knew much about the religious studies and trends of philosophy, and wielded a skillful pen... David himself composed “Hymns of Repentance” – a masterpiece of medieval poetry. It was in the reign of David IV that the Gelati Monastery Complex and the Academy was built – the center of higher education and scholastic studies. According to the last will of David the Builder, he was buried in one of the gateways of the monastery.

The time from the 11th until the 13th century, including the period of the reign of Queen Tamar\* is considered to be the Golden Age of the unified and powerful Georgian state. One can say that the Renaissance as a cultural phenomenon originated in the Georgia of that time. Queen Tamar has always been venerated by her people. This is evidenced by numerous legends, songs and poems glorifying her.

During this period Georgian culture flourished. The most perfect model of classical Georgian literature of that epoch is Shota Rustaveli's famous epic “*The Knight in the Tiger's Skin*”.\*\*

Vardzia, a rock cut architectural complex deserves special mention. The construction of the complex began during the reign of Giorgi III and ended in the times of Queen Tamar. The town-monastery is a system of caves cut in a tuff rock, stretching along the cliff for some five hundred meters and rising up thirteen tiers. The complex is provided with dwellings and utility premises, refectories, a “pharmacy”, as well as defences, secret tunnels, water supply, and an irrigation network.

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\* Queen Tamar (1184-1213) – according to the annals “the most powerful, hospitable and generous sovereign among the rulers of those days”. During Tamar's reign Georgia reached the peak of its power and became one of the largest and strongest states in all of Western Asia. The Georgian kingdom comprised, in addition to Georgia proper, all of Armenia, while the Northern Caucasus, Eastern Part of the Southern Caucasus, Southern or so-called Iranian Azerbaijan and the Trebizond Kingdom were Georgia's vassals.

\*\* Shota Rustaveli (1172-1216) – the genius of Georgian poetry, that lived in the 12th century – the time of the renaissance of Georgia's cultural life. According to a popular tradition, Rustaveli travelled to Jerusalem when well advanced in years and died there in one of the Georgian monasteries, having attained a venerable age. His immortal poem “The Knight in the Tiger's Skin” is the summit of classical old Georgian poetry, a profoundly philosophical epic, where the forces of Evil are powerless against the forces of Virtue, Love and Friendship. A dynamic plot, a style abounding in metaphors and brilliant aphorisms and a remarkable metrical pattern make it a masterpiece of unsurpassable perfection.



The invasions of the Mongol hordes in the 13th century and all-destroying attacks of Tamerlane in the 14th century reduced Georgia to ruins and ashes. The population of the country decreased dramatically. Georgia disintegrated into three kingdoms and several principalities. Additionally, the collapse of the Byzantine empire in the 15th century and the shift of major Silk Road routes from Europe to Asia caused economical and political regression in Georgia.

In the following centuries, similarly, incessant wars waged against the Ottoman Turks and Iran put Georgia in jeopardy of physical extinction. In 1783, King Erekle (Heraclius) II concluded the Treaty of Georgiyevsk between the Russian Empire and Eastern Georgia. The Georgian king sought protection of his country from Iran and Turkey, however, the result turned out to be rather deplorable. Having rid himself of the last Georgian sovereign, King Giorgi XIII, Russia established a protectorate over the eastern part of the country, then invaded Western Georgia and the country deprived of a leader, acceded to the Russian Empire.

In 1917, having taken advantage of the events which took place after World War I in Russia, Georgia declared independence. However, in 1921 Bolshevik Russia managed to annex Georgia for the second time and established a soviet regime in the country. The Russian supremacy lasted up to 1991. Georgia attained independence again.

The subsequent years, however, did not bring much good to the newly originated independent state. Conflicts regarding the separatist autonomous republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as well as the chaos in internal politics made people's life severe. No electricity, no gas, high unemployment... The infrastructure of the country was in bad need of total renewal. The situation was dramatic. Despite some efforts from president Eduard Shevardnadze the corruption rose to the level of plague. The Georgians once again made an effort to strengthen their state after the so-called "Rose Revolution" in late 2003, when Mikhael Saakashvili gained power. Since then the basic governmental facilities have developed to a level comparable to other European countries. The cities are safe both for locals and foreigners, the police and other public services function properly. Business can be conducted more simply than in many other places in the world and the administration of the country put special emphasis on inviting visitors or potential investors. Thanks to this liberal approach citizens of the European Union can cross the Georgian border without visas or even passports, just with a national ID.

Those positive changes were not stopped even by the Russian-Georgian war of 2008. Although Russia does not accept Georgia's territorial integrity and Abkhazia and South Ossetia are not under the jurisdiction of the government in Tbilisi, the country is still the leader in the region in implementing modern governance standards. Its ambition is to join European integration structures in the years to come.



Late in 2012 Georgia became the first post-soviet country, which changed political powers through peaceful democratic elections, when Saakashvili's administration was replaced by the "Georgian Dream" movement led by a multi-billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili.

## *Nature*

Apart from the ancient history, unique is the country's nature as well, abundant in national parks. Georgia with its diverse nature, including the arid climate of savannah, subtropical zones, subalpine and alpine landscapes, is a real godsend to the tourists.

It is a truism to say that Georgia is a mountainous country. A large part of the Main Caucasus Range is located here, with main peaks like Shkhara – 5,068 m, Mkinvartsveri (Mt. Kazbek) – 5,033 m, Ushba – 4,695 m, Tebulosmta – 4,495 m. Other important peaks are Shoda, Didi Abuli, Mepitskaro, Leila, Tetnaldi, Arjevani and others. On the highest altitudes one can encounter impressive glaciers, i.e. near Shkhara, Chaladi and Mkinvartsveri (Mt. Kazbek) mountains.

Georgia has settlements located at extreme altitudes, such as Ressa – 2,360 m, Gudauri – 2,280 m, Ermani – 2,180 m, Diklo – 2,180 m, Ushguli – 2,160 m and Juta – 2,160m. The country is abundant in water resources; the major lakes are: Paliastomi, Paravani, Tbatiskuri, Kartsakhi and Ritsa. The rivers Mtkvari, Rioni, Alazani, Aragvi, Enguri, Khrami and many others have picturesque gorges.



There is a striking abundance of mineral water springs in Georgia, of which Borjomi is the most renowned. Essentially the picturesque Borjomi Gorge is a vast preserve with numerous health resorts. Of no less importance are the mineral waters of Likani, Plate, Sairme, Utsera, Lughela, Menji, Shovi, Vedza and many others known for their curative properties.

The thermal waters of Tbilisi and mud baths of Tskaltubo and Akhtala have been made deservedly popular thanks to their balneological properties.

Astounding natural beauty of the Truso mineral waters geysers and calcite rivers, the alpine lakes of Abudelaure, Tobavarchkhili and Ritsa deeply impresses the visitors of Georgia. The karst caves “Prometheus”, “Sataplia” and others, the “eagle” canyons of Martvili and Vashlovani, the Katskhi pillar and Kvatsantsala, and the “*takhti tepe*” mud volcano on the Iori plateau. are striking tourist attractions in Georgia.

## Georgian Cuisine

Special mention should be made of the delicious Georgian dishes distinguished for their variety and original recipes.

It is due to the Silk Road that such dishes as *khinkali* – a Georgian version of dumplings, *khashi* soup, *satsivi*, *kababi*, *plavi* and many others have been brought and spread around Georgia by travelers. The evidence of foreign origins is also in the names of some now Georgian spices: Zafrana, Rehani, Utskho Suneli, etc.





***Khachapuri*** – traditional pastry filled with cheese ubiquitous in Georgia, however it is cooked differently in different provinces of the country. Thanks to this we have “*imeruli*”, “*acharuli*”, “*megruli*”, “*mokhevuri*”, etc. *khachapuris*.

***Mtsvadi*** – pork, mutton, veal, or goat’s meat roasted on a spit is also very popular. Especially delicious is the so-called *kakhuri* (*kakhetian*) *mtsvadi*, roasted on a spit cut from a vine trunk and called “*tsalami*”.

**(F9. Mtsvadi made by Khevsur)**

Of Georgian broths and sauces the most distinguished are:

***chikhirtma*** – chicken broth seasoned with vinegar, garlic and spices;

***bozbashi*** – mutton or beef broth, peppered and spiced up;

***bazhe*** – thick nut sauce abundantly seasoned with special spices (*utskho suneli*, *zafrana* and *khmeli kindzi*) for fish and poultry dishes;

***chanakhi*** – a mutton dish with tomatoes, garlic, eggplants and potatoes is prepared (baked) and served in clay pots;

***chakapuli*** – mutton or veal cooked in white wine and seasoned with all kinds of greens, corn mint, *tkemali*, spring onions and garlic is the favourite dish of every gourmet.

***tkemali*** – a sourish sauce made of wild varieties of damson and strongly spiced with red pepper. It is particularly good with meat.

Special mention should be made of ***churchkhela*** – a kind of candy prepared with grapes and nuts: grape juice is boiled with flour and peeled walnuts strung on a thread are dipped in it. When the juice



congeals it yields long, sweet, sausage-like *churchkheldas*. The high caloric content and the fact that its taste is preserved for a long time in this dish and so *churchkheldas* could be found in every warrior's bag in ancient times.

## *The Land of Wine*

Not long ago the Georgian origin of wine was proved when archeologists found grape seeds and earthenware wine jugs dating back to 6th millennium BC.

The ancient world was well aware about the age-old traditions of viniculture in Georgia. The records of Xenophon, Plutarch, Strabo and others contain references to the Georgian wine.

It is also noteworthy that out of 2000 varieties of the vine developed in the world about 600 are Georgian. According to a hypothesis, the terms "vine", "вино", "wein", "vin" come from the Georgian "ღვინო" ("ghvino").

It is no accident that St. Nino, the preacher of Christianity in Georgia, held a cross made of wine while she was preaching God's Word to the Georgians, as wines have always been considered here to be sacred plants.

The varieties of the Georgian wine such as *Tsinandali*, *Mukuzani*, *Napareuli*, *Khvanchkara*, *Kindzmarauli*, *Saperavi* and a number of others are known all over the world. For making and keeping wine



The qvevris

Georgians use Kvevri – huge conical clay jugs buried up to the neck in the ground of the old wine cellars, *marani*. This technology of making wine is originally Georgian and it is still used practically in all regions of the country. In recent years the number of wineries which produce also European-type wines, closer to the taste of westerners has increased.

The traditions of the Georgian *supra* (feast) and the *tamada* (toast-master) are known far and wide. One cannot image Georgia without the tradition of the *supra* – Georgians celebrate the birth of their children with wine and toasts; they also pour a half of a glass of wine on the grave of the deceased and drink the remaining wine. Georgian *supra* follows a strict pattern, observing ritual forms hal-lowed by tradition. The *tamada* presides over the table and announc-es the toasts in a precise order; the guests are expected to listen and may only expand on what he has said. There is a whole system of traditional toasts, which have been passed down to us from archaic ritual prayers. Depending on the reason for the *supra* the toasts are improvised by the *tamada*, who also permits the diners to propose toasts if they wish to.

## Tbilisi

The first data regarding Tbilisi is found in Roman “Tabula Peu-tengeriana” and Georgian “The Conversion of Kartli” – the written sources date back to the 4th and 7th centuries AD consecutively.

By that time Tbilisi had already been an important town en-closed with fortifications.

King Vakhtang Gorgasali (*gorgasali* is a Persian word and means “the head of a wolf”) decided to shift the capital of the country from Mtskheta to Tbilisi in the 5th century. According to a legend, King Vakhtang Gorgasali was hunting in the environs of Tbilisi and came by accident across the hot sulphur springs. He was fascinated with their curative properties and announced that a town would be built there with the name Tbilisi (in Georgian *tbili* means “warm”).

In fact the king correctly assessed the strategic location of the al-ready existing town and by making Tbilisi the capital he brought the Silk Road under control and stopped the political influence of Iran on the country.

In the 6th century Tbilisi was conquered by the Persians and later



on, in the 7th century, by Arabs. It came back under the control of the Georgian Kings only when king David the Builder won the battle in nearby Didgori, reclaimed the city and made it the capital of the renewed Georgian state.

Tbilisi lost its importance after the collapse of the Georgian state in the 13th century. In 1226, the sultan of Khoresm Jalal ad-Din took the city and gathered its dwellers near Metekhi bridge. They were forced to tread upon the holy icon of Metekhi. Many refused and were thrown down from the bridge in their masses to be remembered in the future as “100 000 martyrs”.

In consecutive centuries Tbilisi was ruined and plundered many more times, occasionally razed to the ground, such as in 1386 by Tamerlan or in 1795 by Agha-Mohammad Khan

It has developed once again only under foreign reign when both the city and the whole of Georgia came under Russian power. From the beginning of the XIX century it was a capital of so-called “Tiflis gubernia”. Bearing the role of the center of the whole of Russian “Transcaucasia” it rose rapidly; its outlook changed totally during those times, with hundreds of new buildings – neoclassical, art nouveau together with ones bearing traditional, oriental influences. The city has given home to the fathers of modern Georgian intelligentsia like Ilia Chavchavadze, Akaki Tsereteli and many others.

In communist times Tbilisi gained new districts such as Vake or Saburtalo where most universities now have their seats. In 1966 the underground (metro) was constructed.

**These are the most renowned architectural monuments in Tbilisi:**

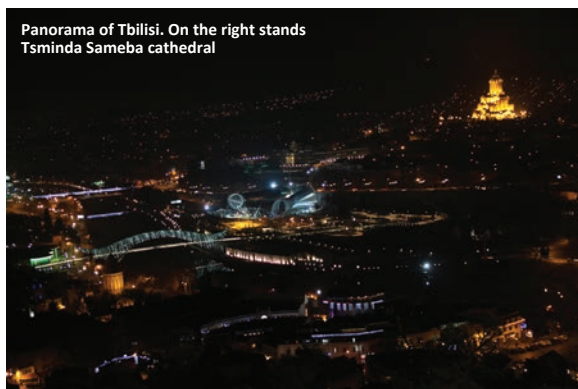
One of the oldest churches is the ***Sioni Cathedral***. Its construction is ascribed by legend to King Vakhtang Gorgasali (5th century). In the 6th and 7th centuries the building was restored by local nobles

("eristavis"). Today's shape is from the 12th century. After many tragedies during the 13th to 18th century, the church was finally restored in the 19th century. The Iconostasis and the paintings are the work of Russian artist and military leader G. Gagarin. St. Nino's cross, the skull of Thomas the Apostle and many other important christian relics are kept there.

The **Metekhi Church of the Virgin** is also a monument of the 5th century. In 1289, the building was restored by King Demetre. Beside the church stands the monument of King Vakhtang Gorgasali, one of the landmarks of the city.

The **Anchiskhati Basilica** was constructed in the 6th century. The name of the church originates in the 17th century, when the Anchiskhati Icon was brought here from the Anchi monastery in Tao-Klarjeti (today's Turkey). [Anchiskhati Icon is a 6th-century masterpiece with gilded chasing produced by 12th-century craftsman Beka Opizari]. The church was severely damaged in 1795 during the last Persian invasion. In the 19th century it was restored and painted anew.

**St. David's Church** standing on the foot of **Mtatsminda (Holy Mountain)**. The mountain is also called *Mamadaviti* (Father David's), as the first settler here was St. Father David of Gareja. Since 1929 a terrace close by Mamadaviti Church has officially been declared the *Pantheon of Writers and Public Figures*. On top of Mtatsminda you can find an amusement park and television tower. View



Panorama of Tbilisi. On the right stands Tsminda Sameba cathedral

points located on the hill offer some of the best panoramas of the city. Vake Park and Turtle Lake, two important leisure spots for Tbilisi dwellers, are located nearby.

**Narikala** fortress overlooks the Old City (dzveli Tbilisi) from the nearby hill. Established in the 4th century it was rebuilt several times and today's view is mainly from the XVI-XVII centuries. Near the castle stands the monument of “Kartlis deda” – Mother Georgia. A 20-meter statue holds a sword and a cup of wine, representing Georgian hospitality for guests and defiance against intruders.



The sulphur baths of Tbilisi have always been mentioned as a local curiosity. In the Middle Ages there were 65 baths in the city, forming the so-called **Abanotubani** district (“abano” in Georgian means bath). It is located down from Leselidze street and Gorgasali square. Today the focus of the complex is *Chreli Abano* (i.e. “motley bath”) with its arched main façade tiled with glazed blue plates. Further from Abanotubani or from Narikala to the south lies the **Botanical Gardens** where over 4,500 sorts of plants are displayed.

Not far away from the baths there is a mosque reminding us of the times when the muslim community accounted for a large part of Tbilisi's population. Among other temples of different religions one of the oldest is the Iranian sanctuary of Zoroastrianism or Mazdaism dating back to the 5th-7th centuries, so-called “**Atesh-gah**”.



Chreli Abano

It is located on the slopes of Narikala hill near two Bethlemi churches built between the 14th and 18th century. The biggest synagogue, in turn, you will find on Leselidze Street.

The **Tbilisi St. Trinity Cathedral** is located on the

opposite site of Mtkvari river, on Samreklo street. Approximately 100-meter high the church with its grandiose complex of religious buildings is one of the dominant marks on the cityscape. It was consecrated in 2004.

Apart from the abovementioned Turtle Lake, Tbilisi has two nother lakes within its borders. They are quite popular amongst local inhabitants as a good substitute for sea resorts. North of Vazha-Pshavela Ave. lies **Lisi Lake**, which surroundings are now subject to vast reconstruction works to create the so-called Green Lisi Lake complex. **Tbilisi's Sea**, in turn, is located on the eastern bank of the Mtvari and is easily accessible from the Ghrmaghele or Didube metro stations. A modern recreation complex in addition to the already functioning basic infrastructure is also planned.

**The most interesting museums in Tbilisi are:**

**The Georgia National Museum** – 3, Rustaveli Avenue,

tel.: (+995) 322998022; [www.museum.ge](http://www.museum.ge)

The National Museum covers the whole history of Georgia and houses rich historical, art and scientific collections. You will also find many interesting exhibits in the Gold Fund of the museum. The internet site is common for many other museums under the management of GNM, i.e:

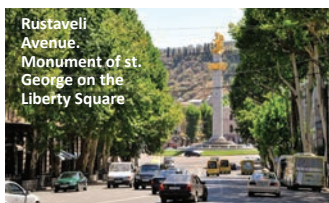
**Museum of Fine Arts** (1, Lado Gudiashvili Street)

**Museum of the History of Tbilisi** (8, Sioni Street)

**Open Air Museum of Ethnography** (1, Kus Tba Highway, from Mtatsminda and Turtle Lake to the west)

It is worth visiting the **Museum of Silk** also (6, Giorgi Tsabadze Street)

The museum displays interesting exhibits of ancient silk, as well as other documents referring to the emergence and importance of the Silk Road



**National Gallery** (former "**Blue Gallery**"), Opera and Ballet Theatre, Rustaveli Theatre and Philharmonia are all located around Rustaveli Street the central area in Tbilisi.

### **Recommended restaurants:**

**Taghlaura** chain – Bagrationi Bridge, 77 Kostava, 1 Gulia (near Ortachala Station)

**Machakhela** chain – 26 Leselidze Street, 16 Marjanishvili, 77 Kostava Street

**Mirzaani** chain – 1 Gorgasalis Moedani, 41 Uznadze, 140 Tsereteli Avenue (near Didube)

### **Hostels for budget travellers and backpackers:**

**Irina Japaridze house** – Ninoshvili Street 19B (up from Marjanishvili Metro), tel.: (+995) 599 111 669, <http://www.facebook.com/guesthause.irina/info> or [www.irinesplace.com](http://www.irinesplace.com)

First choice for budget travellers, very good service and a great atmosphere. Irina serves also as a bank of information about accommodation and tourism services throughout the whole of Georgia.

**Opera Hostel** – Chargalis Street 5, near Didube Bus Station and Tbilisi Sea, tel.: (+995) 593 410 066, [hostel@gruzinski.pl](mailto:hostel@gruzinski.pl), [www.operahostel.pl](http://www.operahostel.pl)

A very good place for people focused on mountain tourism. Staff speak English, Russian and Polish and who help in organising trips around Georgia; you can rent a jeep or borrow some trekking equipment, i.e. gas, tents, sleeping bags etc.

### **Exemplary hotels:**

**Vere Inn** – 53 Barnov Street, [www.vereinn.com](http://www.vereinn.com), tel.: (+995 32) 2291252

**Hotel Kopala** – Chekhov Street 8/10, [www.kopala.ge](http://www.kopala.ge), tel.: (+995 32) 277 55 20

## **Vicinities of Tbilisi**

There are a lot of historical monuments around Tbilisi, some of them dating back to antiquity or the early Middle Ages. Castles and monasteries were built mostly on hills, which are not very high and



are easily accessible; suitable for walking, cycling or light off-road tours. Public transport, in the form of marshrutkas, reaches most places. Below you can find three exemplary tours. If you have your own transportation, you should manage to complete each of them during one day.

***Tour 1 – Mtskheta and surroundings: Mtskheta – Jvari monastery – Armazi. Shio Mghvime and Zedazeni monasteries***

15 kilometers from Tbilisi lays **Mtskheta**, the ancient capital of Georgia. Here in the 4th century Georgia was baptised, its spiritual and religious center – the great cathedral Svetitskhoveli is located here.

There are marshrutkas running every 15 minutes from Didube bus station, the journey takes only about 20 minutes. Taking a taxi should not be more expensive than 25 GEL.

Mtskheta was founded by one of the southern Georgian tribes – Meskhis in the second millennium BC.

At that time “Great Mtskheta” was a densely populated town with one of the Silk Road routes passing through it. Under King Parnavaz, in the IV-III centuries BC, Mtskheta was at the height of its wealth and power. The king built an acropolis, “Armaztsikhe”, around a huge copper statue of the heathen god Armazi. Besides the stronghold Mtskheta consisted of other settlements – Bagi-



The place where Christ's robe is kept inside Svitskhoveli cathedral

neti fortress, royal palace, nobles residences etc. King Parnavaz also introduced the language of Kartvels – ancestors of modern Georgians – as an official tongue of the administration in the multi-ethnic capital.

Mtskheta retained the function of the country's main town up to the 5th century AD, though after moving the capital of Georgia to Tbilisi it remained the religious centre of the country.

The spread of the new, Christian religion in the country changed the appearance of Mtskheta greatly. Construction of numerous churches – Svetitskhoveli, Cathedral of the Cross (Jvari), the St. Nino, Samtavro and others – caused Georgians to call it “the second Jerusalem”.

**Svetitskhoveli**, the most important Georgian church, is located in the very center of Mtskheta. According to the legend, here Saint Sidonia was buried with Jesus's robe, later in the IV century a small church was built on the site. In the V century a richly decorated basilica was built there. Its fragments can still be recognised, built in the walls of the present church. The Cathedral that stands there today was built in 1010-1029 by architect Arsukidze. In the XIV century during one of the Temur-Lengi invasions it was strongly damaged, but soon recovered and updated with a new dome.

Here also is a model of church build on Golgota and other important relics. Cathedral is painted with frescos of XV-XVII centuries, IX century painting was restored in XIX century with the main monumental fresco of Christ above the altar.



Many Georgian kings are buried in Svetitskhoveli, including Vakhtang Gorgasali and Heraclius II. Above the entrance to the cathedral you can see stone sculptures in the shape of bull heads. They survived to our times up to the 5th century. In the 18th century king Heraclius II ordered the construction of the wall surrounding the temple.

In the end of 1980's traces of a settlement from the late middle ages below the cathedral were discovered.

Today Mtskheta is a city-museum. From 1994 Jvaris Monastery, Svetitskhoveli, Samtavro monastery and Armaztsikhe-Bagneti complex are listed as UNESCO's world heritage sites.

More detailed information and interesting artifacts can be found in the nearby museum, just opposite the entrance of the cathedral there is also a tourist information center. The newly restored center of the city provides a good offering of restaurants and potential over-night accommodation.

**Samtavro** nunnery, with two churches from the 4th and 11th century, is also worth visiting. King Mirian and Queen Nana are buried here, who together with saint Nino converted Georgia to christianity. Also, 2 km from the center of the city, lies the interesting Bebristsikhe castle (14th century).

**Jvari** (the Cross) monastery was built around 604 A.D. In IV century a giant wooden cross had been already placed here from which the name of the monastery is derived. The monastery built in crosslike shape became a model for many other churches spread throughout the whole Caucasus region. From the northern side there is a smaller, even older church. The hill on which Jvari stands offers an exceptional view down to Mtskheta and the Mtkvari and Aragvi rivers merge their paths. To get to the monastery you need to take a taxi from center of Mtskheta (around 10-15 GEL).



Panorama of Mtskheta taken from Jvari Monastery

South-west of the center of Mtskheta, on a hill lies the **Armaztsikhe-Bagineti** complex. During the middle ages it was a residence of the kings of Kartli. Today you can still see the remnants of the former royal palace, baths, temples and citadel.

**Shio Mghvime** monastery complex is located 13 kilometers from Tbilisi, on the northern bank of the river Mtkvari. It is located away from the main road, one must rent private transport to get here.

The Monastery was built in the 6th century. Its founder was one of the Assyrian fathers, Father Shio. He established the monastery carving first a church and then other buildings inside the caves, according to the traditions of eastern Christianity. Later, in the 11th century, the so-called upper church was built above as well. In its golden age 2000 thousand monks lived in the monastery. Besides the temples there was a refectory, library, a chapel and other buildings.

This monastery actively supported King David IV Aghmashenebeli in his reforms of the Georgian state and church. For this, the place was rewarded by the king with huge treasures. Shio monastery was home to many famous figures. Writing and painting richly illustrated manuscripts was a major occupation here. In the XVI-XVII centuries, after destructive attacks by the Iranians and the Ottomans, monastery life almost vanished. Only a few monks were left to protect the books, which by 1804 accounts were not able to be fitted into 10 carts. Today, monastery life in Shio Mghvime has been restored, even if only a few of those books remain. In the XX century,



Shio Mghvime

the upper church was restored; burned and scraped frescos were “renovated” by Russians – in reality they were totally destroyed by whitening with lime.

**Zedazenis Monastery** is located 20 km north-east of Mtskheta, on top of Saguramo mountain. After passing Saguramo village the road goes up and becomes quite hard, you should have 4X4 vehicle to reach the top.

The place was mentioned in ancient Greek scripts, according to that the idol of pagan god Zadeni was standing there surrounded by a stronghold.

It was here where the 13 Assyrian Fathers settled first having come to Georgia. They destroyed the pagan idol and started monastery life raising St. John the Baptist church.

In its northern wall rests the sarcophagus of Saint Joane Zedazneli, the Assyrian Father.

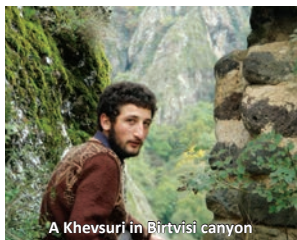
In the 7th century there were also walls built around the monastery complex, on the ruins of the ancient fortress.

***Tour 2 western surroundings of Tbilisi (150km)***  
***Tbilisi – Birtvisi – Gokhnari – Manglisi – Didgori –***  
***Betania – Kojori fortress***

To get to Manglisi you should use the Tbilisi-Tsalka or the Tbilisi-Manglisi bus route, these start either from the site of the Central Railway Station or from Ortachala bus station.

In order to get to the Birtvis fortress you can use the bus route starting from the surroundings of Navtlukhis Market (Samgori subway station) and this goes to Tsalka or Tetri Tskharo and use it up to the village of Partskhisi. Anyway, this route is best taken by private transport.

2 kilometers after Partskhisi one must turn right and follow a



A Khevsuri in Birtvisi canyon

narrow ravine by a river. This gorge is home to sulphur water springs. One can notice here the ruins of ancient bathes cut into the cliffs.

**Birtvisi's** fortress is located in the center of a volcanic crater, on the top of 90 meters of rock.

The castle system is very complex. It consists of man made fortifications strengthened with the form of the terrain which is a natural fortification in itself. The fortress had its own wine cellars, water pools and a secret water supply system. You can enter the castle only via walking along a narrow path, squeezed between steep, close rocky slopes.

Around 20 km north-west of Birtvisi there is the village of Manglisi, with the nearby church of **Manglisi's Sioni**. The temple was built in the 4th century and modified in the 6th-7th centuries. Only tiny fragments of the frescoes remain, which is the result of the wall whitening during the XIX century.

This was the place where a great Georgian bishop and saint Ioanne Mangleli completed his writings. In the temple yard one can find a rock which locals call Mkurnali ("healing"). Its curative powers are a source of many local legends.

Several kilometers from Manglisi towards the direction of Tsalka on the left side of the road there is a village called **Gokhnari**. Here one can find traces of walls, tunnels and menhirs which date back III-II thousand years B.C. Locals call those places "Devi's nest" or "Stonemen". Notably a large megalithic structure is Lodianebi, two kilometers from the village. There are gigantic cyclopean walls, built of huge boulders. One can still find lots of unexplored tunnels going deep into the ground there.

There are also lots of Christian historical monuments in the area. Especially interesting is the Saint George basilica from the 11th century dubbed by locals as "Lipariti's Church". Around the church there are lots of fragments of stone reliefs and ornaments scattered. They are remnants of an older church and some of them are parts of an even older pagan temple.

From Manglisi we return to Tbilisi straight to the east, via the road going through Orbeti and Kojori. 18 km after Manglisi we pass a field which is famous for the great **Didgori** battle. There is a memorial there for the commemoration of king David's victory over the muslim coalition in 1121; you will also find a small church there as well.



A further 10 km along the road from Didgori to Tbilisi we pass a village called Akhali Pantiani. About 1 kilometer after it there is a road sign pointing left. A steep road cutting through the forest leads to the **Betania** monastery which was constructed in the 13th century. Like many other places in Georgia, the monastery was heavily steeped in history. Once robbed and burned by Mongols it was considered lost, only to be re-discovered by accident during a hunt in the 19th century.

Betania is known for its unique 13th century frescoes. On the northern wall there is a painting of King Tamar, her father George II and Son Lasha-George IV. From four known frescos of Tamar the one in Betania is considered to be the most accurate. From the 1970s monks have returned to the monastery and it was restorated in the 1990s.

Kojori village is located 20 kilometers from Betania. One should turn right from the main road, go through the whole village until you reach the top of a hill. Here stands **Kojori Fortress** built in the 10th century. The castle, known also as “Agaran” or “Korogli” was expanded in the 17th century. There is also a memorial and small church built for the memory of people who died nearby in 1921 in a battle between the Bolsheviks and Georgians.

From Kojori back to Tbilisi the distance is only 20km.

***Tour 3 Tbilisi – Kolagiris Tsikhe – Bolnisi Sioni –  
Tsughrughasheni – Kveshi – ancient gold mine in Kazreti –  
Dmanisi (90km one-way)***

To get into the Dmanisi museum, one can use buses from Ortachala station, though we recommend using private transport, so you will be able to see other important relics on the way.

As soon as you pass the small town of Marneuli you will see a well preserved stronghold near the village of Nakhiduri. The castle was built in the 16-17th centuries and is called either “**Kolagiri**” or “Dedoplis Tsikhe”. On its territory there is an small older church, towers and other buildings.

In the city center of Bolnisi turn left and pass under a bridge. In several kilometers you will see a 5th-century basilica – **Bolnisi Sioni**, built by the order of King Vakhtang Gorgasali. On its facade there is writing, which is thought to be the oldest Georgian writing preserved to this day. To the side of the church stands a 17th century bell tower.





Tsughrughasheni church

4 kilometers from Bolnisi Sioni there is a fortified 12th-century church **Tsughrughasheni**, built by king Lasha-George. During his reign the king was accused of following Sufism and other eastern philosophical schools, he dismissed those accusations by building this church.

While traveling towards Dmanisi, on the right side of the road you will see a 7th-century **Kveshi** castle, former residence of the Dadiani family. In the middle ages there was a custom house

functioning there. Because of profits coming from the customs many wished to control the fortress and it was passed from hand to hand very often. On the same rock stands an 8th-century basilica along with water reservoirs, wine storage, secret tunnels and other buildings.

Nearby the small town of **Kazreti**, where till this day gold is mined, 6 thousand year old gold mines are found, probably the oldest in the world. Here we can see pools for washing ore, stone axes for cutting rocks and stoves for melting precious metals.

At the end of the road, 12 kilometers from Kazreti, we reach **Dmanisi museum**. In the village of Small Dmanisi (which is 12 km before the city of Dmanisi), you can see exposed layers of three different epochs: stone, bronze and medieval age. Remains of 3 pre-historical humans from 1.8 mln years ago, along with other artifacts, have been found here. They have given base for assumptions that from Dmanisi hominids spread to Eurasia.

Dmanisi has been inhabited constantly since times immemorial. Settlement and burial sites dating back to 2nd-1st millennium B.C have been found there. The city gained importance especially during the Middle Ages, trade, craftsmanship and metallurgy were specially developed. The city even minted its own coins. It was a multicultural center with churches, mosques, madrasah, baths, customs, etc.

The city was eventually destroyed in the XVI century during one of the Tamerlan invasions, though its stronghold remained functional till the end of the XVIII century.



## Kakheti

Kakheti is rich in medieval historical monuments, wines of superior quality and a picturesque environment. Visits to the **Vashlovani national park, Lagodekhi protected woodland and Tusheti reserve can be easily attached to the Kakheti tour.**

Apart from the trips to David Gareji and Tusheti, a journey can be made via minibuses (mostly leaving from Ortachala bus station) or other public transport.



48 kilometers away along the Kakheti highway (from Tbilisi to the east) the village of **Ninotsminda** is located with the 6th-century **St. Nino Cathedral and Convent**. The church contains fragments of 9-10th-century frescoes. The library houses a great deal of historical manuscripts. A severe earthquake in 1824 destroyed half of the church. The small basilica of a later period (16th-17th cent.) has been restored by the nuns and is still functioning as a church.

Farther from Ninotsminda is the small town of Sagarejo. The place name is associated with the David Gareji Monastery. Formerly the monastery possessed a large amount of land, including Sagarejo. At the exit of the town there is a sign pointing to a turn in the road which leads to the David Gareji site. From here public transport is not available and you will have to take a taxi.

**David Gareji** was founded in the 6th century by David Garejeli, one of the 13 Assyrian Fathers. Not many people may know that on this very territory 4 settlements of “metallurgists” have been discovered, dating back to the III-II millennia. The red rocks of Gareji con-

tain about 40% iron. The ancient metallurgists cut the forests that caused erosion and the inhabitants had to leave their settlements because of lack of water.

The road leading to the monastery passes one of these ancient towns where one can easily make out an opencast mine and artificial terraces which remain from the former settlement.

Formerly the monastery was comprised of natural caves today known as “Lavra”. Developed further, it turned into a grandiose complex of 12 monasteries and several churches, all known under the name David Gareji.



David Gareja, Lavra monastery

The monastery remained an important religious and cultural center for many centuries. Noteworthy is the Gareji monument fresco painting school. In the 12th century King David IV the Builder made it the royal domain and freed it from any kind of taxation except for one duty only: the delivery of monastery fruits to the royal table. It was here, in the tower of Chichkhituri, where the Georgian king Demetre I composed the famous hymn *Thou Art a Vineyard* after he had abdicated the throne and chose the Gareji monastery as the place for his confinement.

The monastery suffered periods of decline and devastation. First it was ravaged by the Mongol hordes under the Beqa-Khan, and then plundered by the warriors of Tamerlane; the complex was last devastated early in the 17th century as a result of the 15-year war against Persia, when the Shahsevans massacred 6,000 martyr monks. All of them were declared holy.

Some of the monasteries of Davit Gareja do not exist today at all; the complex is partially located on the territory of Azerbaijan because of the demarcation line fixed in the Soviet period. The worst damage, however, was caused by Soviets using the territory as a training ground for tanks. This inflicted destruction of approximately 40% of the unique murals in the monastery.

The original Lavra and two other monasteries known as **Dodo's Rka** ("the horn of Dodo") and **Natlismtsemeli** ("the Baptist") are still functioning today.

To see the majority of these frescoes you need to walk from the Lavra complex up the hill, on which a small chapel stands. On the other side of the hill you will discover more than one hundred caverns. This is yet another complex of David Gareji called Udabno ("a desert"). Even though the paintings were for the most part destroyed one can easily image the importance and beauty of this place in the middle ages. The panorama visible from the hill is also exceptional, covering many kilometers around quaint formations of rocks formed by the nearby tectonic rift. There is the possibility to stay overnight in the seismologists' hut just several hundred meters before the entrance to the Lavra.

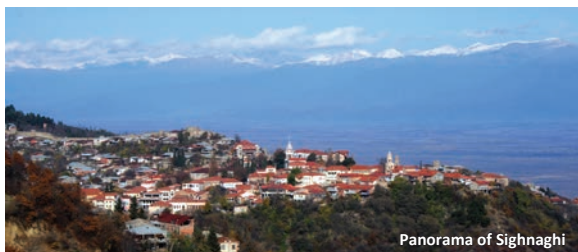
At 3 kilometers distance from Signaghi is the **Bodbe Convent**, which has always had a distinguished place in the spiritual life of Georgia. The Monastery was founded in the 4th century by St. Nino. She is buried in the monastery. The Bodbe church was expanded in the 5th century by King Vakhtang Gorgasali. In the 8th-9th century the present-day basilica came into use. During the Middle Ages coronations of the Kakhetian Kings took place in the Bodbe church. Here one of the richest book depositories in Georgia was also located. The



View from Udabno

Monastery was destroyed in 17th century during wars between the Kakheti Kingdom and Iran. It was restored only in the end of the 19th century. In 1924, the Monastery was devastated and annulled by the Bolsheviks. It was only in 1991 that the monastic life was finally restored here. Today there are 30 sisters carrying out icon painting, needlework as well as farming; the Monastery runs its own printery and girl's theological school. In a forest in the vicinity of the Monastery there is a chapel and a curative spring named after St. Nino, which today serves as a popular destination for tourism and pilgrimage.

**Sighnaghi** is one of the most picturesque towns in Kakheti. The name stems from Turkish origin and means “a firm, impregnable wall”. During the Iran-Kakheti wars of 17th century the Persians destroyed many towns in Kakheti except for Sighnaghi, thanks to its threefold fortification walls and towers which surround it. The fortress occupies an area of 40 hectares.



Panorama of Sighnaghi

The residents of Sighnaghi like all the natives of the surrounding region, Kiziqi, were always free citizens and never had feudal lords.

The list of places of interest in Sighnaghi includes several medieval churches, museums and the 19th-century wedding palace in which you can arrange a marriage 24/7. The world-known Georgian artist Niko Piroshvili was a native of Sighnaghi and his masterpieces are exhibited in the Sighnaghi museum.

Many artisan workshops manufacturing Gobelin tapestry and carpets have been restored in Sighnaghi. The best time to visit is at the time of the grape harvest, late September and October, when numerous feasts and concerts take place here.

#### **Lodgings and Restaurants:**

*“Mate Guesthouse”*, Vachtang Gorgasali 20,

*Manana Akhmetelashvili*, tel.: (+995) 557 402 080, m.axmeteli@mail.ru

**"Hostel Signaghi"** (Zandarashvili family), Giorgi Street 11,  
<http://www.facebook.com/hostel.signaghi>,  
 tel.: (+995) 599 750 510

**"Hotel Old Signagi"**, David Berja, tel.: (+995) 598 770 101, hotel-  
 old-signagi@mail.ru

Restaurant **"Kiziki Galavani"**, Cnori highway, tel.: (+995) 599 190 071

Winery **"Pheasant's Tears"** Baratashvili str. 18, (+995) 599 534 484  
[www.pheasantstears.com](http://www.pheasantstears.com)

In the village Tibaani there is a 6th-century **Khirsi Monastery** founded by Stefane Khirseli. The main church and the dome were restored in the 8th-to-9th century. From the surroundings of Signaghi to the east the road leads to the National Park of Lagodekhi.

You will come upon the **Khornabuji fortress**, the same Old Choety, which is erected on top of the rock 2-3 kilometers away from Dedoplistskaro. In the annals of history it is first mentioned in the 5th century; however some pre-Christian and ancient settlements and burial sites have been discovered there.

To the south-east of Dedoplistskaro is the Vashlovani National Park.

If you descend from Signaghi to the Alazani Valley, you will find yourself in Inner Kakheti. The road sign will show you the way leading to the **Gurjaani Kvelatsminda Church**. The 8th-9th centuries church is located in the forest 2 kilometers away from the town.



Kvelatsminda church

This is the only two-dome church in Georgia. Gurjaani is renowned for its curative springs and therapeutic mud baths located in the centre of the town, there is a balneological resort called "Akhtala"

Driving through the Alazani valley you should stay overnight in one of the small inns. There you can become acquainted with the local traditions of winemaking. Here are exemplary places on the road to Gurjaani – Kwareli:

Village Chumlaki “*Simonais zavoti*” – tel.: (+995) 599 235 355,  
 sruadze@yahoo.com, www.Simonruadze.webs.com

Village Chumlaki, “*XVI Saukunis Gvinis Marani*” (“*The 16th-century wine cellar*”) – Nodar Pridashvili, tel.: (+995) 591 611 119

Village Velistsikhe: “*Velistsikhis Veranda*” (Ethnographical restaurant) – tel.: (+995) 599 997 517

Winery “*Khareba*”, Kvareli, district Meurneoba,  
 tel.: (+995) 599 808 547, www.gvirabi.ge,  
 www.winerykhareba.com

In Kvareli you may visit the house and museum of Ilia Chavchavadze, a great humanist from the 19th century who was labelled the father of modern Georgia. In the city, famous for its *Kindzmarauli* wines, modern tourism infrastructure has been built recently. I.e., for visitors looking to unwind, there is a spa on the shore of the local lake: www.kvarelilakeresort.ge, tel.: (+995) 322 303 030

**Nekresi** monastery is located in the vicinity of Kvareli. It was established as a town in the 2nd-1st centuries BC. In the 4th century a small church was built here that became a refuge to one of the Assyrian Fathers, Abibus, in the 6th century. The stone chair of Abibus has still been preserved in the ruins of the town. He also established the Nekresi Episcopality, existing until the 19th century.

Nekresi was destroyed by the Arabs in the 8th century, but the monastic life continued. The 7th-century basilica was restored in the 16th century; there is also a 8th-century domed church, episcopal palace, a refectory, wine cellar, etc.

Upper Nekresi (3-kilometers above the main complex) can be reached on foot or by 4x4 minibuses provided by the monks. From the monastery territory you can enjoy a picturesque panorama of the Alazani Valley.



Nekresi monastery



Following Nekresi, after 13 km, you will come across **Gremi**. In the Middle Ages it was the economic and cultural centre of Kakheti, covering 17 hectares. Its ruins are visible even today. From the 15th to the 17th century it was

the capital of the Kakhetian Kingdom, but Shah-Abbas in 1616 turned the city into ruins.

Today you can still see the castle including the 16th-century royal palace, the cathedral, the royal wine cellar, etc.

20 km to the west of Gremi is **Telavi**. It has ancient roots but became a major town only in the 8th-10th centuries. Telavi was the capital of the Kingdom of Kakheti from the 17th to the 18th centuries.

It was at that period that **Batonis Tsikhe** ("Royal Castle") and many other structures were built. *Batonis Tsikhe* is a quadrangle fortification system with walls and towers stretching over an area of 3 hectares. It contains the royal palace, two churches, a tower, etc.

The ethnographic Museum is also here. Near the castle gates stands a monument to King Heraclius II and a 950-year-old plane tree. You can reach Telavi directly from Tbilisi by marshrutka from Ortachala bus station, the trip is just under 3 hours.

#### **Lodgings and Restaurants:**

**Guesthouse** – Asmat Sekhniashvili, 9 April Strret, 83,  
mob.: (+995)599565074

**Hostel** – Tamaz Khosroshvili, 26-may street, mob.: (+995) 593 981 862  
**Hotel Rkheuli Marani** with restaurant, Chavchavadze 154

The **Cathedral of Alaverdi** is 18 kilometres to the north-west of Telavi. In antiquity here stood the pagan idol depicting the Moon. Assyrian Fathers destroyed the heathen church; still many rituals have been preserved and are still performed outside the monastery. They were venerated especially by the mountaineers of the North Caucasus, who used to stay overnight around the temple walls during certain pagan feasts even up to the 19th century.





The Monastery was established in the 6th century by one of the 13 Assyrian Fathers, St. Ioseb Alaverdeli. Today's shape of the cathedral has been passed down to us from the 11th century. The 50-meter high church was the greatest in the whole of Georgia until recently as the Tsminda Sameba cathedral has been built in Tbilisi. Here the monks have a modern winery, where local wines can be sampled.

Close to the cathedral lies the village of Alvani. From here you can rent a jeep to reach the mountainous Tusheti region. There are marshrutkas running from Telavi to Alvani every day.

The **Iqalto Monastery and Academy** is 8 km west of Telavi. The monastery was founded in the 6th century by Saint Zenon, one of the Assyrian Fathers, who is buried in the main church of the Monastery. The academy was created in the 8th century by the philosopher Arsen Iqaltoeli. Here the so-called cycle of "Trivium Quadrivium" was taught but also technical subjects like metallurgy, pottery making, viniculture, pharmacology, etc.

In the building of the Academy, apart from the lecture rooms, there is a smithery, a "wine laboratory" with 11 *kvevris* and pottery works. You will find also numerous medieval churches in the monastery complex.

Iqalto Academy was a school for the rich. Well know scientists learnt here – the children of Georgian and foreign nobles. One of the disciples was also a famous poet, Shota Rustaveli.







Park in Tsinandali, house of Aleksander Chavchavadze

In 1616 the warriors of Shah-Abbas set it on fire and the Academy ceased to exist.

Taking the road to Telavi, 3 kilometres from Iqalto, near the village Ruispiri stands the **Shio Monastery** of the 4th-11th-centuries. The ruins of the Monastery complex are scattered over the vast territory of a nearby forest, covering an area of several hectares.

The village of **Tsinandali** is about 7 kilometers from Telavi in the direction of Gurjaani. The residence of prince Alexander Chavchavadze is located here, surrounded by a superb English park with exotic plants. Now there is the Chavchavadze museum with rich family collections, old wine cellars and restaurant.

Not so far away lays the village of **Kisiskhevi**, one of the oldest and largest settlements in Kakheti with its 40 historical monuments. Among them there are two 6th-century churches standing side by side in the centre of the village. Nearby there is a church which belonged to the Kobulashvili family and the tower in which the count organised a library. His priceless collection was destroyed by the Bolsheviks in 1924.

An intriguing formation is created by the so-called Rgis Sakdrebi – 8 small basilicas standing in line aside an old road. There are also 2 other monastery complexes in the nearby forest of Tetraani and Kondamiani dating back to the 7th century. Near Kondamiani basilica there are around 70 caves, serving formerly as houses, wine cellars and chapels.

#### **Lodgings and Restaurants:**

**Schuchmann Wines** – well-known winery with restaurant, terrace and hotel: Tel.: (+995) 577 508 089, g.dakishvili@schuchmann-wines.com, www.schuchmann-wines.com

**Hostel: Vano Lapauri** – Tel.: (+599) 558 604 360, e-mail: vano\_lap@yahoo.com

The nearby monastery of Old Shuamta (**Dzveli Szuamta**) derives from the V-VI century and comprises 3 churches. In 1616 a Persian attack led by Shah Abbas destroyed the monastery slaughtering all nuns who inhabited it. After this tragedy the Kahetians did not try to rebuild Old Shuamta, instead of this in the 17th century the queen ordered the construction of New Shuamta (**Akhali Shuamta**). Surrounded by a wall and a small park, the monastery consists of the church, bell tower and other buildings.

Returning from the vicinities of Telavi to Tbilisi through the Gombori pass, you are get by a fortified town from the 3rd century AD – **Ujaarma**. It was the summer residence of the Georgian kings and its surroundings were the royal hunting grounds. On the terrain of the former residence one will meet the ruins of the royal palace, 5th-century church, water reservoirs, baths, secret tunnels etc. It is said that king Vakhtang Gorgasali died there, deadly shot with a poisoned arrow. Ruins of the former town – churches, towers, city walls and others – are scattered in the forest surrounding the castle, in the gorge of the river Jori. In the 10th century the city was plundered by emir Abul Kasim and from those times the name Ujaarma is mentioned only in relation to the royal castle. From Ujaarma there is only a 40 km journey back to Tbilisi.

## *National Parks*

Information about National Parks in Georgia can be found on the site of the Georgian Agency of Protected Areas. [www.apa.gov.ge](http://www.apa.gov.ge), “--> main” “--> services” or email: [info@apa.gov.ge](mailto:info@apa.gov.ge).

**Vashlovani National Park** is located to the south east of Kakheti 40 km from the town Dedoplistskaro. To get there visitors should obtain a permit from Vashlovani protected area’s administrative office – Dedoplistskaro, 5 Baratashvili str. TEL: (+995) 577 101 850.



Here you can get maps of the national parks as well as in the “Visitors Center” in the heart of the reserve.

We can encounter plants endemic to various climate zones: high mountains, swamps, desert, and savannah. Many

of them are endemic and rare species. Lots of endangered species of birds, numerous species of fish and mammals inhabit this area. Vashlovani is the only place in Georgia where a Steppe Antelope “Jeiran” and leopard have been seen. Exceptionally common are reptiles, among them is “Giurza” - *Macrovipera* - the most poisonous of Georgian fauna. Rangers will give you some instructions on how to avoid this dangerous animal. They also have an antidote.

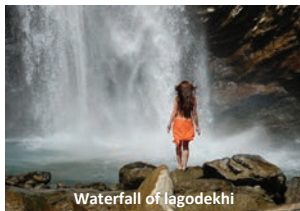
Vashlovani Reserve consists of 3 separate territories, the so-called Natural Monuments: Alaznis Chala (riparian forests of the Alazani valley), Eagle's Canyon and Takhti-Tepe. Eagle's Canyon (Artsivis Kheoba) lies north of Dedoplistskaro. Takhti-Tepe is located around 30 km to the west of the main reserve in the middle of steppes near the Azerbaijan border; it lies to the south of the river Iori and Dali reservoir.

In Vashlovani visitors can also organize rafting. There are lots of walking routes: Datvis Khevi or Eagle's canyon, both around 5 km long. You can also easily find longer tracks suitable for horseriding or offroading, i.e. in the Pantishara or Mjnisckure gorges.

You can stay overnight in the Visitors Center, ranger's bungalow or in places designated for tents. It is also possible to rent some trekking equipment (tents, sleeping bags etc.) in the administration office. You should take your own food and drinks with you and travel with an experienced guide or a ranger.

**Lagodekhi protected area** is located on the eastern fringes of Georgia, on the Azerbaijan border. You can get here from Signagi, Dedoplistskaro or directly from Tbilisi (marshrutkas from Isani metro station). The reserve was established in the XIX century by Polish naturalist Ludwik Młokosiewicz. One can find 121 species in Lagodekhi that are found only in the Caucasus and 9 endemic to Georgia. Lagodekhi Protected Area was the first official protected area in Georgia. Eastern Caucasus aurochs, the Caucasian Snowcock, chamois, deer, roe, brown and black bear, wolf, fox, lynx, and birds live here. Rare butterflies can be seen in the alpine zone, near the meteor station.

There are several hiking and horse riding routes: Lagodekhi Waterfall (8 km), Gurge-



Waterfall of lagodekhi

niani Waterfall (9 km.), Macha Castle (5 km), Black Rocks (Shavi Klde) Lake (28 km) and others. One can stay overnight in the administration building at the entrance to the park or pick up tents in designated places. Visitors can hire a guide-ranger, horses and trekking equipment. They also hand out free maps there but for trekking on longer routes we recommend buying a more detailed topographic map in Tbilisi (the same applies to Tusheti park and other mountainous reserves)

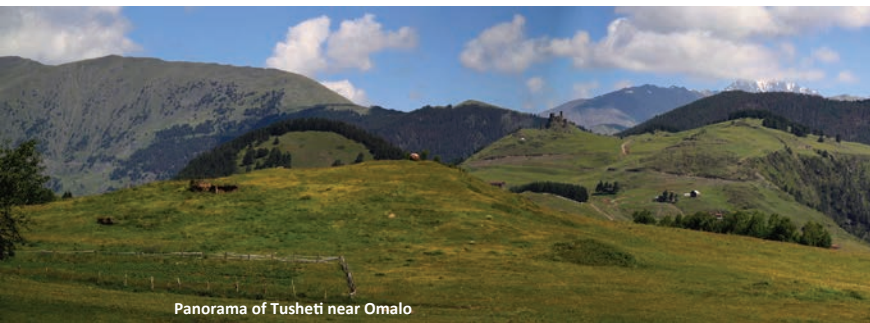
Contacts: Lagodekhi, 89 Agmashenebeli str.

Tel.: (+995) 577 101 890, [www.apa.gov.ge](http://www.apa.gov.ge)

**Tusheti National Park.** The road to Tusheti is one of the most difficult in the whole of Georgia. Only 4X4 vehicles are suitable on this road. Visitors can rent a car in Alvani or in Pshaveli. In Alvani there is also an office for the Protected Areas Administration where you can obtain some information and free maps. The road Alvani - Omalo is only 70 km long but it takes a 5 hours drive to reach. On your way you will cross the Abano pass 2 926 meters ASL (the pass is named due to the hot sulphur water located a couple of kilometers before it). The pass is accessible only in the summer season, from late May or June to October/November. In the winter and early spring Tusheti is isolated from the outside world.

A huge building serving as the Visitors' Center is located in Omalo. Here you can buy food and find accommodation as well as see an exhibition about the culture of the mountainous Tush people.

Contacts to NP Administration: Tel: (+995) 577 101 892, [www.tusheternationalpark.ge](http://www.tusheternationalpark.ge), [www.apa.gov.ge](http://www.apa.gov.ge), e-mail: [info@apa.gov.ge](mailto:info@apa.gov.ge), [iatchvritidze@yahoo.com](mailto:iatchvritidze@yahoo.com)



Panorama of Tusheti near Omalo



Village Dartlo

Tusheti is one of the most elevated territories in Georgia. The Caucasus Mountains form here relatively wide and mild slopes, which allowed the Tush people to found their settlements at a high altitude. Villages located above 2000m asl are nothing but exceptional.

Here you can spot medieval fortress-villages constructed from stone typical for Tusheti as well as for the whole Caucasus,

scattered all around the region. The biggest are Omalo with a complex of towers, so-called “Keselo”; Shenako, Dartlo, Verkhovani and others. Many of the historical towers have been refurbished during the last few years and there are comfortable guesthouses arranged inside.

#### **Omalo:**

Etnographer Nugzar Idoidze’s hotel “*Tusheti Tower*”

nidoidze@yahoo.com, Mob.: (+995) 599 272 265

#### **Dartlo:**

**Beso Elanadze**, hostel “*Samtsikhe*” – elanidze@posta.ge

Mob: (+995) 599 118 993

**Marika Otiuridze**, hostel “*Dartlo*” – www.dartlo.ge,

info@dartlo.ge, Mob: (+995) 598 246 405



**Chesho: Ekaterine Abaloidze** – Mob: (+995) 591 257 402

**Diklo: Maia Otaraidze** – Mob: (+995) 599 778 978

**Shenako: Prodi Buqvaidze** – Mob: (+995) 595 543 455

**Iliurta: Alexi Bakhturidze** – Mob: (+995) 599 355 150 or  
555 261 796

**Verkhovani: hostel “Lamata” – Anzori Kritiuli – Mob:**  
(+995) 599 775 543

Here are some of recommended trekking routes in Tusheti:

1. Trekking to the Tsovata valley, round route around 65 km [Omalo - Dochu - Verkhovani - Chesho - Dartlo - Omalo]
2. Tusheti - Khevsureti trail through the Atsunta pass, 75-85 km. Omalo-Dartlo-Chesho-Parsma-Girevi-Chontio-Atsunta pass (3519 m.) – Mutso-Shatili. For this route you need to take your passport as the path goes along the border, you will be checked on the posts by the border police.
3. Tuszeti-Khevsureti through Borbalo Mountain, around 90km. Omalo-Verkhovani - Borbalo pass (3294) - Andaki pass (2887) -Mutso-Shatili. It is also possible to turn south on the Andaki pass and go to Pshavi (Shuapkho/Barisakho direction) instead of Khevsureti.
4. Round route Omalo-Shenako-Diklo-Omalo (25 km)

### ***Georgia's military road – historical “khevi”***

Directly north of Tbilisi lies a road which is the most important connection between the north and south caucasus. It is the so-called “Georgian Military Highway”. It goes through the Cross Pass (Jvari - 2379m asl). Near the Russian border there is a town called Stepantsminda (former Kazbegi), sitting at the foot of Mount Kazbek (5033m). It is one the most popular places among tourists visiting Georgia.

The most important attractions around the Georgian Military Highway are:

***The Cathedral of Tsilkani*** west of the village Natakhtari, just a couple of kilometers from the main road. The first cathedral was built here as early as the 5th century. Episcopacy grew in the VI century, due to one of the 13 Assyrian fathers, Iesse, who later became the bishop of Tsilkani.

The whole middle ages episcopacy became powerful and rich. It controlled 40 villages and vast amounts of land. In 1811 the cathedral was abolished by Russians and its property confiscated. It was restored only after 1991.

If you go even further from Tsilkani, in the Ksani ravine you will come across **Dzalisi**. Here are remnants of the town from the antique period with the Temple of Dionise, a III century christian church, summer residence of the kings, district for aristocracy, bath furnished with mosaics, etc.

Getting back to the Military Road we follow the river Aragvi. There, 65km north of Tbilisi stands Ananuri a 16th-century stronghold of the Lords (Eristavis) of Aragvi.

Inside the walls there are two 17th-century churches, a bell tower, citadel and baths. Adorned with rich decor, the walls of the church were once fully covered by frescos. Unfortunately, in the XIX century, Russians whitened the walls and still today only a small part of the paintings have been restored to their former glory.

Below the castle you will see the Jinvali reservoir with characteristic, blue-color waters. Nearby the castle there are hotels, restaurants, stands with local bespoke crafts, etc. On the main road you can also eat and rest in Pasanauri, which is another 20km from Ananuri.

### **Pasanauri**

**“Sadi - restaurant”** – Mob: (+995) 577 791 684, 599 908 111

**Hotel Pasanauri:** Mob: (+995) 568 130 202,

ecolejordanian@yahoo.com, [www.welcome.ge/pasanauri](http://www.welcome.ge/pasanauri)

Near the village of Mleta, on the mountain dividing the Ksani and Aragvi ravines, the 13th-century “Lomisa Saint George’s” basilica stands. During Saint George’s holiday many locals gather here

Panorama from Ananuri castle





to participate in religious rituals and to spend the night. There are many legends concerning “Lomisa”, among the local highlanders it is considered one of the most holy places in the region.

After climbing the serpentine road you will reach Gudauri, one of the best Georgian ski resorts, located at an altitude of 2200 meters asl. A rope-way will take you from an altitude of 2000 to 3270 meters. The whole system of ski-lifts allows both beginners to gain experience and thrills professionals. Lovers of extreme sports can also find companies offering paragliding or heli-skiing. Gudauri has a nice offering of hotels and restaurants, i.e.:

### **Hotels**

**“Ski House Panorama”** Mob: (+995) 599 900800

skihouse-panorama.com, e-mail: info@skihouse-panorama.com

**“Gudauri”** tel.: (+995) 599554408 [www.hotelgudauri.com](http://www.hotelgudauri.com)  
reservation@hotelgudauri.com

A vast amount of information about Gudauri can be found under the address [www.gudauri.info](http://www.gudauri.info)

After the Jvari pass (2379 m.), which is located on the main ridge of the Great Caucasus, the road begins to descend. This region is rich in mineral resources, which abundantly flow off the roadsides. The “Khevi” region begins here.

If you turn left in the village Almaziani (before the Kobi settlement) and follow the river Tergi you will reach the Truso ravine. It is a real wonder of nature. Squeezed between the steep, icebound slopes of the Great Caucasus; it is abundant in hot, multicoloured mineral springs, abandoned medieval towers and pagan altars. Almost all inhabitants have left it so there is no accommodation available there. As this region borders the west with the occupied territories of Southern Osetia, you can expect controls to be in place by Georgian border police.

The largest settlement in the Khevi ravine is Stepantsminda (formerly Kazbegi). The close proximity of the famous Mt. Kazbek made it a capital of Georgian mountain tourism. The Museum of Alpinism, Muzeum of Aleksander Kazbegi, hotels, guesthouses and restaurants can all be found here. Close to the center of the town there is a Mountain House, in which you can rent equipment necessary for mountain climbing or you can purchase maps. Detailed information about local offers can be found at [www.kazbegi.org](http://www.kazbegi.org) (e-mail: info@kazbegi.org)



**Potential places for overnight stays in Stepantsminda:**

Hotel **“Stepancminda”** – Uznadze Street 68a, [www.kazbegihotels.ge](http://www.kazbegihotels.ge),  
tel.: (+995) 599 182 296

**Tsitsia Pichelaure** – tel.: (+995) 599 704 739,  
e-mail: [ciciaqatsashvili@yahoo.com](mailto:ciciaqatsashvili@yahoo.com)

**Levan Pichelaure** (speaks Russian, English and German) –  
(+995) 595 411 977

**Rezo Pichelaure** (Russian, German) – tel.: (+995) 599 281 962

**Murman Kushashvili** (Russian, German) –  
tel.: (+995) 555 613 542

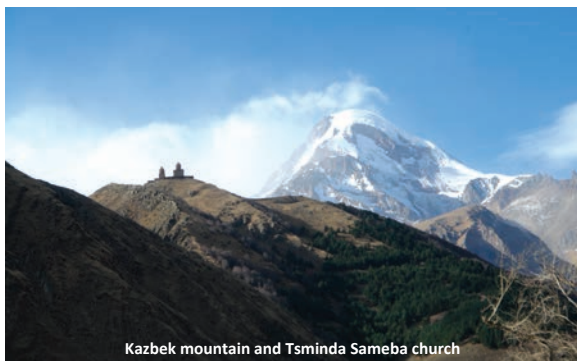
**Gocha Pichelaure** (Russian, English) – tel.: (+995) 598 234 580  
**Gergeti:**

**Nazi Chkareuli** – tel.: (+995) 598 398 274

**Nazi Sudzhashvili** – tel.: (+995) 598 382 700 (Russian, English)

**Hiking routes to and around Stepantsminda:****1. Stepantsminda–Gergeti–Gergeti’s Trinity  
(Tsminda Sameba or Gergetis Sameba), 7 km.**

Gergeti’s Trinity is a 14th-century temple located at an altitude of 2170 m. It is the biggest church in the whole region. From the remaining writings it is known that it was founded by a nobleman, who escaped here from the Mongols after a battle. For a long time the cross of Saint Nino along with many other important relics have been stored here, most of which were taken away by the Russians in the XIX century and lost. Due to the impressive mountainous land-



Kazbek mountain and Tsminda Sameba church

scape surroundings the place and its exceptional architecture the monastery has become a showcase of Georgia. To get there, cross the bridge near the central square of Stepantsminda and follow it up to the village Gergeti. Up from there are a couple of paths to the monastery and a road. An alpine meadow near the monastery is extensively used for camping, especially by the people who go further to the Meteo Station and Kazbek.

## ***2. Stepantsminda - Gergeti - Pansheti's Springs (3 km.)***

Cross the bridge in Kazbegi and turn back to the settlement Pansheti. There are natural caves nearby called "Saberoebo" and also healing mineral springs "Vedzi". A swimming pool has been made under one of them.

## ***3. Stepantsminda–Gergeti's Trinity–Meteo-Station (3653m)–Kazbek (5033) (walking route, 2 days, 18 km to the Meteo Station)***

From Tsminda Sameba church you should walk up the range to the west following the path. After a couple of kilometers you will reach the top of this range and see the front of the glacier. Walk down from the range and cross the stream, after it you will reach moraine. Walk up the moraine or on the left side of the glacier and finally you will reach the level when the glaciers levels out. From that place the meteo station should be visible above the glacier on the right hand side. Find a safe place to traverse the glacier from its left to right side, walk up another 50-100 meters and you will reach the meteo.

There is no heating inside the station, anyway it is the best place to camp and provides a base for your trip. Following meteorologica station V century "**Betlemi's Cave**" and IX century church ruins are also to be found. Betlmeni, where to this day monks come to pray, by its location is the first in the world, it is built at an altitude of 4200 meters above sea level. One should spend the night in either a tent or the meteorological station.

## ***4. Stepantsminda–Sno–Juta–Chaukhi pass (30km)***

To reach the road to Sno you should go back a couple of kilometers from Stepantsminda to the road sign that will direct you there. The village is 3 kilometers from the Military Road; the residence of the Georgian patriarch is located in the old tower of the Gudushauri

family and Sioni church which dates back to the 9th century. From the Sno village there is a 15-km gravel road that will lead you to Juta. Tour trails marking the start to Khevureti are here- the red one, leading you to Archoti and the blue, follows the path to the village of Roshka through the Chaukhi pass.

There are opportunities to stay overnight in Juta, more information is provided in further chapters of this book.

### ***5. Stepantsminda–Gveleti (8 km.)***

Several of kilometers after Stepantsminda you should turn left to get to the Gveleti waterfalls. Except for in the fall, there is a camp for rock climbers based there.

### ***6. Stepantsminda - Dariali Gorge (10 km)***

North of Stepantsminda the Georgian Military Road goes into the Dariali Gorge. Tourist come here for the impressive views of its steep slopes, there are also ruins of an ancient fortress named “Tamaris Tsikhe” by the locals. = This place is known among birdwatchers as the route of migration for birds of prey lies here. For birdwatching please contact one of the companies listed below:

Georgian Mystery: <http://www.georgiaadventure.entropi.com/home-1-sen.html> [adventure@georgianmystery.com](mailto:adventure@georgianmystery.com) +995 5555 68 302

Ecotours: <http://www.ecotours.ge/> [info@ecotours.ge](mailto:info@ecotours.ge) +995 599 261156



### ***Transport, practical information:***

Citizens of the European Union can enter Georgia without visas or even passports, just with a national ID. This does not apply when travelling through Turkey or the Ukraine.

Georgian currency - Lari (GEL) - is linked to USD and it is valued at approximately 0.6 USD.

To purchase lari it is best to take cash in EUR or USD and exchange it for lari in the many exchange bureaus in Tbilisi - the service charge is usually less than 1%. ATMs are common in most cities so you can withdraw lari directly from your debit or credit card. It will cost more but the rates are acceptable, it will be good option if you don't want to keep larger amounts of cash with you.

Most visitors to Georgia land in Tbilisi Airport. It lies around 15 km from the city center. There is an ATM and an exchange bureau so there is no difficulty in obtaining local currency immediately upon arrival.

From the airport there are several ways to get to the city center. There is a direct train at 4.00 AM, 8.45 AM, 1.40 PM and 6.05 PM. Current timetables and other information about railway connections in Georgia are available at:

[www.railway.ge](http://www.railway.ge) -> passenger operations -> traffic schedule -> traffic general schedule

There are also small busses (No. 37) running from the airport, starting from 7 AM. In around an hour they reach Sadguris Moedani (the square near the main railway station). In between they drive through the very center of Tbilisi around Rustaveli Avenue. A taxi from the airport will cost you around 15-30 GEL, depending on the part of the day and the season. Taxis are generally inexpensive, for a couple of kilometers within Tbilisi they usually charge 5 GEL.

### ***The most useful buses within Tbilisi:***

1. To Mtatsminda – 90 (from Pushkinis or Leonidze) and 124 (nearby Rustaveli Metro)
2. From the main railway station to Turtle Lake – 66
3. From the main railway station to Lisi Lake – 29
4. To Ortachala bus station – 55, 55, 71 (from Baratashvili Street) or 19 (from Isani or Samgori Metro)
5. To Kojori, described in this chapter – 10 (from Leonidze Street)

You can find more detailed information about public transport in Tbilisi on: [transiten.ttc.com.ge](http://transiten.ttc.com.ge)

You can move cheaply and quickly through Tbilisi by underground - the Metro. Two lines connect most of the points of importance in the city.

**Line 1** Akhmeteli Theter- Sarajishvili - Guramishvili - Grmagele - Didube (regional bus station) - Gotsiridze - Nadzalaveli - Sadguris Moedani (the main railway station, local and regional marshrutka station, fruit and vegetable market) - Marjanishvili - Rustaveli - Tavisuplebis Moedani (Liberty Square) - Avlabari - 300 Aragveli- Isani (a small station of marshrutkas) - Samgori (a small station of marshrutkas, fruit and vegetable market Navtlukhy) - Varketili

**Line 2** Sadguris Moedani (the main railway station) - Tsereteli - Technical University - Medical University - Delisi

At the metro station you can buy a card. It takes 2 lari as a deposit and further charges to pay for your travel, by keeping the receipts you can return the card one month after purchase. The card allows you to enter the metro but you can also pay for it on the marshrutkas used for public transport in Tbilisi. The prices for tickets are 0.5-0.8 GEL.

There are a couple of bus stations in Tbilisi from which you can travel by marshrutkas (minibuses) to other towns.

**Didube** bus station is best the place from where you can travel to western Georgia mainly: Batumi, Kutaisi, Gori, Borjomi, Dusheti. Concerning the places described in this book you can travel to Pshav-Khevsureti (barisakho, Shuapkho, Shatili), to the Georgian Military Road (Kazbegi, Gudauri) and to Mtskheta.

From the main railway station (Sadguris Moedani) among other buses there are those which travel to Tsalka and Manglisi.

**Ortachala** bus station in the southern part of Tbilisi is the only one not situated next to any metro station. From here buses go to the settlements south and east of Tbilisi, i.e. to Telavi, Signaghi, Dmanisi. International buses also operate to and from Azerbaijan, Turkey and Iran.

Two small marshrutka stations near Isani (i.e. buses to Lagodekhi) and Samgori metro stations are also in operation. Traveling by marshrutkas is a little bit uncomfortable, but quick and cheap - around 5 GEL per 100km.

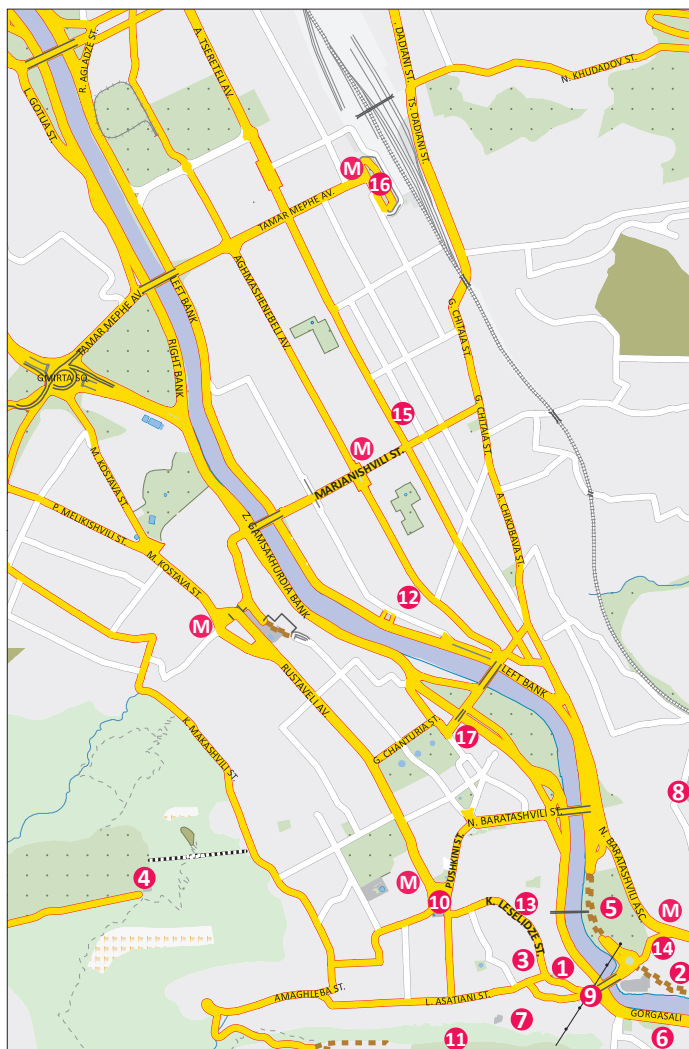
If you travel on your own buying good maps is recommended, both road and touristic maps: <http://www.geoland.ge/en/home,info@geoland.ge>

Telegraph cul-de-sac 3 (near the so-called Dry Bridge and Public Service Hall) (+995)322922553

Geoland offers various paper maps and GPS navigation systems, including detailed topographic maps of mountain regions necessary for trekking in high mountains such as Tusheti or Lagodekhi.

In case of issues with your health please visit the Aversi pharmacy chain, spread all around Tbilisi and other cities. There is also an Aversi clinic that could help you if you require any serious treatment. [www.aversi.ge](http://www.aversi.ge), 27b Vazha-Pshavela str., tel.: (+995 32) 239 48 53.

## *Maps*





## *Center of Tbilisi*

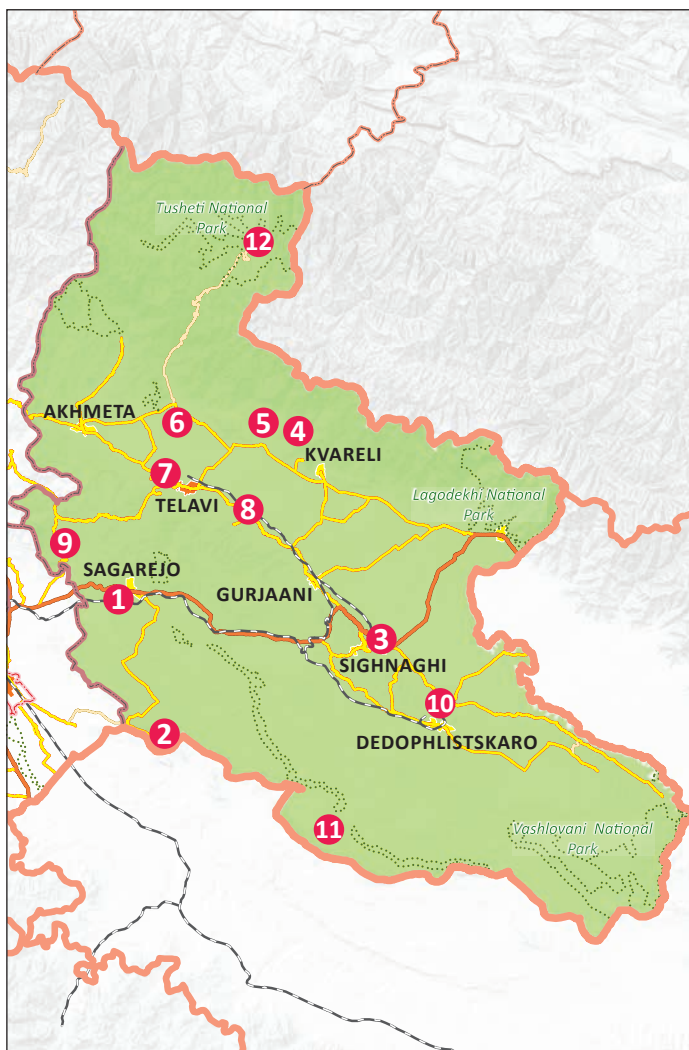
1. Sioni cathedral
2. Metekhi church
3. Anchiskhati basilica
4. Mtacminda hill – on the top an amusement park, the Panteon at the foot of the mountain
5. Rike park – station of cable railway to Narikala, nearby Presidential Palace
6. Abanotubani – baths quarter, nearby entrance to the Botanical Garden
7. Bethlemi churches, zoroastrian temple Atesh-Gah
8. Cminda Sameba (the Holy Trinity) Cathedral
9. Gorgasali Square – numerous restaurants, i.e. Mirzaani
10. Liberty Square (Tavisuplebis Moedani): st.George monument, National Museum
11. Narikala Fortress. Monument of Mother Georgia, "Kartlis Deda" nearby.
12. Mirzaani restaurant on Uznadze street
13. Leselidze street: restaurant "Machakhela", the Great Synagogue
14. Chekhov street, Kopala Hotel
15. Ninoshvili Street, Irina's Japaridze hostel
16. Main Railway Station
17. Dry Bridge – antiquities market, Geoland cartographic company

**M** – metro stations



## *Neighbourhood of Tbilisi, Georgian Military Highway*

1. Mtskheta and surroundings - Svetitskhoveli, Samtavro monastery, Bebristsikhe castle; Jvari monastery and complex Armaztsikhe-Bagineti
2. Shiomghvime monastery
3. Zedazeni Mmonasteri
4. Birtvisi fortress
5. The church of Manglisi Sioni
6. Gokhnari magaliths
7. Dodgori
8. Betania
9. Kojori castle
10. Kolagiri fortress
11. Bolnisi Sioni church
12. Tsughrughasheni church
13. Kveshi castle
14. Kazreti gold mines
15. Dmanisi museum
16. Tsilkani church, Dzalisi complex
17. Ananuri castle
18. Lomisa church
19. Truso gorge
20. Cminda Sameba (Gergetis Sameba) – Holy Trinity Church
21. Kazbek, meteo station (Bethlemi Hut)
22. Juta
23. Dariali Gorge



***Kakheti***

1. Ninotsminda
2. David Gareja monasteries
3. Bodbe monastery
4. Nekresi
5. Gremi
6. Alaverdi cathedral
7. Ikalto academy
8. Tsinandali - Chavchavadze family residence
9. Ujaarma
10. Eagle's Canyon - Artsivis Kheoba. Khornabudzi castle
11. Takhti Tepe mud vulcanos
12. Omalo village



## Khevsurs







## Khevsureti

In the Eastern Caucasus, on the southern and northern slopes of the Main Caucasus Watershed live the Khevsuris - an ancient Georgian nationality of extremely peculiar fate and character, whose dramatic mode of life, distinctive traditions have always been the subject of scientific research and the source of inspiration for writers and poets. Even some sixty years ago in Khevsureti one could meet with a medieval anachronism - the warriors wearing chainmail skirts and armed with sabers, daggers and shields. Although the Khevsuris dressed themselves like that on festive occasions only, the Middle Ages here actually lasted for a long time. Not long ago, an elderly man told me the story of the clash between the natives of two villages in Khevsureti - Shatili and Guro in 1901. A skirmish over a certain pasture at the *atengenoba* festival turned into a bloody battle leaving many people wounded and seven killed. The collision gave rise to the hostilities and blood feud which lasted decades. As a result of the very first scuffle, according to the narrator, the locals of Guro fighting with sabers and daggers only inflicted heavier losses than those of Shatili, who were armed with guns as well ...

Khevsureti is a very specific locality; I call it a land of poets confined between two rocks. The Khevsuris are very fond of poetry and succeed in rhyming verse. Folk songs are not characterized by tune-fulness, and there is no need for it. It is the verse that distinguishes a Khevsur song. Khevsuri takes a *panduri* or *balalaika* (string musical instruments), deepens his voice for more certainty, touches the strings and sings a verse of a recognized or nameless Khevsuri poet, or even his own one, which, quite possibly, can be a masterpiece. It is the folk verses and narratives handed down from generation to generation that is practically the only source of history in this place. For lack of annals of history it is thanks to local popular legends that we came to know the names of courageous heroes or lucky hunters, their remarkable feats and historical events which have a precise geography, but have no chronology. When the Khevsuris say "long ago", they simply mean one, two or three centuries. The dates seem to have lost their importance here and this creates the original charm of the facts that have turned into a saga.

The Khevsuris, however, occasionally appear in the chronicles and this, as a rule, happened for one and the same reason, i.e. when



they presented themselves the saviors of the low-lying country when the nation had a hard time, as it did in 1659, when a force of Khevsuris, Tushis and Pshavis came to the rescue of their nationals and having made a surprise attack on the Persians and Turkmans

settled in the territory of the Alazani Valley, delivered the entire region of Kakheti from the invaders within a day.

They, indeed, were the most excellent warriors, esteemed freedom and never had a feudal lord. The Khevsuris consider the holy objects (crosses and icons) to be their masters. The major object of worship is *Gudani jvari* (the Cross of Gudani) and most of the Khevsuris believe themselves to be the serfs of Gudani...

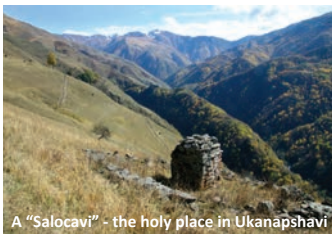
Local oral traditions still bear memory of the visits of King Erekle II in the uplands. The warrior king of Georgians Erekle II, who reigned over Kartli and Kakheti in the second half of the 18th century, was always accompanied by the fearless Khevsuri warriors in military campaigns. Apart from his personal courage and kind-heartedness there was an additional reason for which the Khevsuris held their king in great honour - they believed that Erekle II was a sworn brother of the Cross of Gudani. It was usual for him to go into the holy place - *khati* (the Georgian for "icon", in which the admission was not allowed to anyone but ministers) and proclaimed the message of the Gudani. To all appearances, the king would take advantage of the Khevsuris' faith and imposed his will on the highlanders in the name of the *khati*.

Mythology, too, has particular geography in Khevsureti. The locals here, as well as in neighboring Pshavi can show the battle fields of the evil creatures - *devis* and the divine beings sent to the rescue of people on earth, the boulders thrown by them in the fight, the rocks split with their swords. The deities appearing in the guise of mighty warriors on earth are heavenly bodies, stars: *Yakhsar*, *Kopala*, *Pirkushi*, *Ber-Baadur*, their elder brother - *Kviria* - the morning star. Their terrestrial abodes are the *khatis* of Khevsureti and Pshavi - the

places of worship where public festivities are held. People perform religious rites that are a strange synthesis of paganism and Christianity. The participants in the celebration brew up beer, a heavenly drink, and slaughter lots of sheep and neat cattle. The Khevsuris praise their deities and ask for divine grace.

Khevsureti is a real paradise for ethnographers and anthropologists. It may well be that nowadays completely archaic rituals originated in the pre-Christian world are performed absolutely unconsciously. The Khevsuris always arrange the races in honor of the departed man, which is one of the most heart-rending spectacles one has ever seen. The ceremony is accompanied with the lamentations of women and galloping of holiday-dressed unsaddled horses, much food, drinks and competitions of valiant men, dedicated to the deceased, something like that depicted in the *Iliad* by Homer. The departed person's horse, the so-called "horse of soul" also participates in the Khevsurian races. The soul leaves this world and transmigrates to a better world where the deceased is welcomed by his close relatives - uncles (his mother's brothers) sitting at a table feasting

Today Khevsureti is an almost depopulated region. This is a tragic and, at the same time, a kind of irreversible process. In the 50's of the 20-th century, the Soviet government compelled the Khevsuris to resettle in the plain. Later on, part of them returned to their home land, but a number of villages were deserted forever. The main thing is that the rural economy of Khevsureti as a whole and its village in particular was no more self-sufficient. The majority of Khevsuris prefer to stay in the lowland, whereas others lead a partly nomadic life visiting their mountain houses only in summer. A community with five or six households is considered to be a large village. There are villages the population of which is defined by one family only, or even one dweller, who stubbornly refuses to leave the land of his ancestors. The winter in Khevsureti is an extremely dramatic season - white silence, loneliness and the long nights in the villages or one-time settlements cut off from the outer world. If any accident happens, there is no rescuer in



the neighborhood - even mobile phone communication is unavailable in the greater area of Khevsureti...

Khevsureti is a picturesque locality. Narrow and steep gorges, alpine pastures, mountain peaks and inaccessible rocks - the abode of the Caucasian goat that is the most desirable game animal for the locals, the Rhododendron-bestrewn slopes watchfully gazing to the north, Khevsurian towers standing erect like silent guards of the Caucasus and the fortress villages of Kistani, Lebaiskari, Shatili, Mutso ... These shale-roofed, dry walled monuments have witnessed a vast number of wars and misfortunes. Similar towers are located further north - in the land of the Chechens and Ingush known as historical enemies of the Khevsuris. These two nations were referred to as Kists by the Khevsuris. The relations between the Khevsuris and Kists is a history of two nations written in blood, however, this, at the same time, is a relationship of two tribes brought up according to the laws of honour characteristic to the mountain-dwelling people and having a similar system of values in which respect and animosity were equally acceptable.

But the real treasure of Khevsureti is the local people - hospitable, proud Khevsuris, who treat their children like grown-ups and, even those resettled in the lowland, remain devoted to the moral principles of mountain dwellers. The process of migration of these highly interesting people is still in progress and cannot be reversed. That is a national tragedy. Khevsureti without Khevsuris will be a beauty spot only - really very picturesque, but deserted and dull.



Khevsurian horseracing



The Mutso tower

## *The History of the Khevsuris*

**Besik Kharanauli\* addresses Zurab Eristavi\*\*:**

*“One thing should be admitted: it was a great piece of luck that you encountered the people who possess nothing but barren soil and poetry.*

*These people defeated you, did not let you have even a small shred of their native soil and their profound hatred to you immortalized your name forever.”*

The Khevsuris had been released from any corvee by the kings of Georgia from ancient times and it was their bounden duty to defend the northern borders of the state and attend the king in military campaigns. The martial Khevsuris inhabiting the mountainous region of Georgia were engaged in agriculture and cattle breeding, guarded the northern border and raised well-equipped troops when the country was at war. Ardent and exceptional warriors, Khevsuris were always keen on courageous deeds and combats. No sooner did they learn of warfare, than the enthusiastic fighters eagerly gave up farming or other kinds of occupation and took up arms.

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\* B. Kharanauli – a Georgian poet

\*\* Zurab Eristavi – Zurab Aragvis Eristavi, a feudal lord of one of the upland districts of Georgia

Constant danger and threat of attack on the part of foreign invaders, proximity to the border, the sense of self-esteem, that is so characteristic to the highlanders, made the Khevsuris rigorously care for their military readi-

ness. The Khevsuris never parted with their arms and were always ready to give battle. They adored their weapons and anything that was not associated with arms, fighting or hunting was a question of minor importance to them. Personal arms, valor, fraternity and love of freedom made the charm of their existence, their poetry, their delight and passion. Otherwise life would have been worthless to them. Even the habitation of the Khevsuris in the olden days was a well-arranged system of fortress-towers.

From the early Middle Ages Khevsureti was part of historical Pkhovi composed of the tribal unions of the Georgian (the present-day Khevsuris, Pshavis and Tushis), Vainakh and Daghestani mountaineers. The Khevsuris seem to have been the major force of the mentioned conglomerate. The designation of the tribal union "Pkhovi" must have stemmed from the name the Kists called the Khevsuris. The present-day Kists (Ingush) refer to the Khevsuris only as "Pkhia" or "Pkhie".

When the Roman legions headed by Pompey (1st century A.D.) passed through Mtskheta and marched into the Aragvi Gorge, a small squad of the Pkhovis (Khevsuris and Pshavis) blocked their progress. Pompey was surprised at the daring of Georgians and spoke to them. He asked them who they were and if they had a king. The Pkhovis answered him that they had been promoted the royal guards by Georgian Kings. The Roman warlord wondered how they were going to resist the onslaught of his warriors. On hearing this Georgian highlanders unsheathed their sabers and made a show of martial art. Pompey was fascinated by their military equipment and mastery of combat technique. He gave presents to the brave highlanders and set them free.

A historical-administrative unit referred to as Pkhovi is mentioned in the *"Moqtsevai Kartlisai"*.<sup>\*</sup> After conversion of the royal



The last inhabitant of the village Blo

<sup>\*</sup> *"Conversion of Kartli to Christianity"* by Leonti Mroveli - a literary monument of the 10th century



Khevsuris

family of the Kartli Kingdom to Christianity in 337, at the request of King Mirian, the spiritual enlightener of Georgia. St. Nino of Cappadocia\* professed Christianity to the inhabitants of the *mtiuleti* (common name of the highland area) of Eastern Georgia. Among the

named tribes, mention of the “*Pkhovelni*”, i.e. people of Pkhovi is also made. In the early Middle Ages Pkhovi was subordinated to the king of Kartli and was a royal domain, however, at the outset of the 11-th century Pkhovi is a member of the Kakheti Episcopacy.

The Khevsuris, along with Georgian troops, participated in warfares conducted beyond the limits of the country. When the King of Jerusalem Balduin II applied to the King of Georgia David the Builder with a request to support him in the war waged against the Ottomans, the Khevsuri warriors formed part of Georgian forces. In 1147, the Khevsuris took part in the crusade led by Queen Eleanor. According to the Austrian scholar F. Heer, “... the Khevsuris, a Caucasian tribe, still have a recollection of her. They are equipped with medieval weapons, hold tournaments and sing a song: “The French warriors have Queen Eleanor, Eleanor! ...” After the crusading wars the European sword blades (“*Pranguli*”) and swords with crossguards became especially popular in Khevsureti.

No reference to Pkhovi is made in the Georgian written sources following the year 1213. It was at that time when Pkhovi rebelled against the king of Georgia and the population of the province was punished severely for disobedience. Regrettably, nothing is known in historiography about the real reasons of the popular uprising in Pkhovi. There are no sources of information to help the historian construct even the rough picture of the circumstance, owing to which the designations “Pkhovi” and “*pkhovelni*” have vanished from history.

\* **Cappadocia** – an ancient region of central Asia Minor, between Lake Tuz and the Euphrates River, north of Cilicia. It was an important center of early Christianity



From the latter half of the 15-th century, the Khevsuris and Pshavis were mentioned on the territory of Pkhovi. Pshav-Khevsureti was subordinate only to the Kakheti Kingdom and being reckoned among the royal property right

up until the late Middle Ages. Paramount importance was attributed to the relationship between the royal family and the population of Khevsureti on account of the fact that this region always guarded the northern border from which the Kakheti Kingdom as well as entire Eastern Georgia was constantly threatened with the danger of enemy attacks.

The Georgian kings regarded the Khevsuris as reliable guardians and they always formed the royal escort. They were permanent members, the vanguard of the king's army and went into action under their own sacred flag of *Guidanis Jvari* ("Cross of Gudani"). Following the battle, the Khevsuris had the right to choose the best weapons from the spoils of war. And really, they preferred good arms and living in the mountains freely to all kinds of prizes and belongings in the lowland granted by the authorities.

The independent Khevsuris and Khevsureti were subject to no one except for the king. Early in the 17-th century (1618-1629), the powerful feudal lords of the Aragvi "*saeristavo*" (principality) Nugzar and Zurab Eristavis, the father and his son, sought for subjugation of Khevsureti, along with the other mountainous provinces with the intention of turning it into their tributary. The Khevsuris delivered a rebuff to the haughty feudal lords and won a decisive victory over them. King Teymuraz I of Kakheti\*, by the way, among other things, reminded Zurab Eristavi of Aragvi of the military campaign waged in Pshav-Khevsureti and blamed him for the attempt of seizing the royal property.

\* **Teymuraz I** (1589-1663) - a famous Georgian king and poet, although brought up at the court of the great Shah Abbas, he kept his Christian faith and devoted his long life to the struggle against Persian aggression. He died a captive in Khorazan. He wrote impressive poems of the vanity of this world and deeply emotional love poems.



Throughout history the Khevsuris bravely fought against the Persians, Byzantines, Khorezmians, Mongols, Chazars, Arabs, Ottomans and other invaders. The Khevsuris played an important role in the battles of Bakhtrioni, Aspindza and Krtsanissi of the warfare conducted against the Persian and Turk invaders throughout the 17th-18th centuries. The enemy had no sooner appeared in the Aragvi Gorge than the freedom-loving highlanders made a surprise attack and destroyed them.

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From recollections of the men of the enemy troop: *“The Khevsurs were shooting in the standing position and mostly without missing; they never beat the wounded, on the contrary, helped them to rise...”*

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The Khevsuris were devotees of the King of Kartli and Kakheti Heraclius II. A squad consisting of seven Khevsuris constantly accompanied the King and participated in all battles waged by Heraclius II.

Noteworthy is participation of the Khevsuri warriors in the war of Krtsanisi in 1795. When Aga Mohammad Khan Qajar, Shah of Persia, invaded Georgia with the army 35,000 strong, the aged King could muster only 4,000 men to meet them. Though the Georgians fought valiantly, the invaders surrounded Heraclius, but his grandson Ioane went to save him with 300 warriors from the Aragvi region. Heraclius escaped to the Aragvi Gorges, but not one of his 300 rescuers survived. Now one of the Tbilisi metro stations is named after the 300 men of the Aragvi and an obelisk in the capital of Georgia immortalizes the courage of men who defended the city. The 300 men of the Aragvi are venerated as saints by the Georgian Church.

Having refused to put up with the expansion of tsarist Russia's colonialist policy in Georgia, the Khevsuris incited two great uprisings in 1813 and 1923. The rebellions were led by Alexandre Batonishvili (Prince) and the national hero Qaqutsa Cholokashvili, respectively. The Russian army, however, defeated the Khevsuris destroying the fortress-towers and setting fire to the villages.

## The Khevsur National Heroes

Historical and heroic narratives have a special place in Khevsur oral tradition. of martial spirit residing in the mountains of the Caucasus venerated their heroes, men of exceptional bravery, strength and character. Often they were deificated, described with mythic attributes.

Among the national heroes of medieval Khevsureti the most distinguished was **Torgva Dzagani**, who put an end to the plundering raids of neighbor tribes and built a fortress-village, **Mutso**, with its impregnable stronghold towers. His strength and deeds made him so famous that folk storytellers represented him as a mythical hero and deity. A legend has it that Torgva was born with visible marks of the sun, moon and cross on his shoulders that was considered to be a token of his supernatural strength and celestuality.

In the first half of the 17th century the freedom-loving, Khevsuris had to struggle simultaneously with the North-Caucasian wandering tribes and with feudal abuse from the south. The power-loving *eristavis* ("eristavi", i.e. a head (prince) or local feudal lord) of the valley Aragvi had an ambitious design to subjugate free Khevsureti. The bloody battles waged for more than ten years and ended in a victory by the Khevsurs. The warfare brought fame to many of the Khevsurs, such as **Khirchila Baburauli** (Arabuli), **Martia Misurauli** (Gogochuri), **Berdia Mamukauri** (Gigauri), **Mamuka Qalundaure** (Gogochuri)...

According to a legend, Mamuka Qalundaure, who fought against the Aragvi *eristavis*, was followed by a ray of light and had a miraculous sword, which would move itself out of the sheathe giving the sign to the master that it was time to start fighting. Qalundaure defeated the *eristavi* and erected a stone monument as a symbol of the victory on Beghengori in the vicinity of the village of Gudani.

Along with the male defenders of the native land, the Khevsur women also took part in warfare against the enemy. Oral traditions preserved the names of two distinguished female warriors - **Buba Basilaure** and **Tamarul Chincharauli**.

According to a narrative, the squadrons of Lekis (Avars) took part in a plundering raid on the villages of Khevsureti. The locals had to shelter themselves in the fortress-towers and resist the enemy from there. Tamarul failed to keep up with the others and tried



Mutso – Torgva's village

to fortify herself in the house. In an unequal skirmish she killed seven assailants. A special ritual dedicated to Tamarul Chincharauli was performed in commemoration of this brave feat in *Gudanis Jvari*.

Buba Basilauri, wearing her father's chain mail and armed with a broadsword, mounted her horse and entered the battle. The assailants found out that they had been fighting with a woman, when Buba fell from the horse and her long hair could be seen from under the helmet.

*Here is an example of stoicism characteristic to a Khevsuri woman:*

*One of the towers in the village of Shatili bears the following inscription in token of defeat of Akhverdi Mahmud's strong army: "By the supreme order, in reward to Shatilians for defeating Akhverdi Mahmud's hosts. 1843."*

*At the height of the fighting the bullet shot by the enemy ricocheted on the tower's wall, flew through the window opening into the dwelling and hit the baby lying in the cradle. The baby's mother noticed blood on the little one, covered the cradle with a blanket and continued giving ammunition to her husband. When the fighting ended, the husband said: «The baby has been sleeping for a long time... Wake him up!» «The poor thing will never wake up», - sorrowfully said the wife and removed the blanket from the cradle. The wife concealed the baby's death from her husband not to upset him, so that he could shoot the enemy without missing.*

## Military Equipment

The Khevsuris, born to be warriors, gave special emphasis and pride of place to weapons. They decorated their arms with silver and brass plates, named the weapons and composed legends about them. Fine specimens were handed down from father to son.



Khevsurian fight

Every male Khevsuri tried to have the best personal arms to be ready on all occasions for assault and defence. Blacksmithing was a traditional and highly developed craft in Khevsureti. The well-known artisan Samna Burduli, who was specializing in producing arms - both rifles and swords - paid the

highest price for his gift. He was caught and beheaded by the feudal lords of the Aragvi.

The melee weapons of the Khevsuris consisted of the swords, sabres, sword-sticks, spears, whips and many others. The most popular were straight blades with crossguards patterned on French medieval swords - the so-called *Khevsuruli Phrangula*, *Davitpheruli*. Khevsuris rated highly also *Dedal-Pranguli* (German and Austrian), *Mamal-Pranguli* (Italian), *Dedal-Misruli* (Damascene) and *Khorosnuli*. In the 14-17th centuries were popular the sword blades forged by Italian armourers Andrea and Pierre Ferrari.



Szatili men

Besides swords in common usage among Khevsuris where different types of daggers (*Shamkhal*, *Targho*, *Lekuri*, *Kisturi*...) and, finally, knuckledusters. Those metal caps worn on a thumb for cutting and stabbing had also variety of forms, such as *Ghachia* ("cutter"), *Lesula* ("sharp blade"), *Khveuli* ("twisted")

Firearms were mostly imported, the Khevsuris made locally only the bullets and gunpowder. Depending on the origin, they used then the rifles called *Istamuli* (Turkish), *Khirimi* (Crimean), *Mazhari* (Hungarian), *Siata* (French) and so on.

The hallmark of Khevsurian armory were the Assyrian-type coats-of-mail and the small, round, so-called "Hittite" bucklers known as Khevsurian shields, which were painted black to be invisible by moonlight. Khevsuris covered themselves by breastplates, helmets, gauntlets, plate leg and arm shields. If one did not wish to carry too heavy equipment he could wear the round Khevsurian cap contained a metal ring sewed in on the inside.

Leniency toward a captive is a genetic trait of a Khevsuri justifying his actions with the words:

"Captivity puts indignities upon him as it is"...

It happened that a certain Hassan, Kist by nationality, was taken prisoner barefooted. Leko, a young Khevsuri, gives the captive his footwear but the Kist refuses the offer, saying that he does not need any covering for his feet. «We have long way and the road is rocky, it is impossible to walk barefooted», - says Leko to his captive. «And what about you, will not it be difficult for you to walk barefooted?» - asks Hassan. «I was an orphan child and spent half of my childhood barefoot-



ed. Don't worry, I'm used to walking without shoes» ... So, Hassan puts on Leko's shoes.

Leko stayed at home the whole week. He was curing his chapped soles with the heated fat of sheep's tail.

## Diplomacy

It is no secret that the relationship between the Khevsuris and Northern Caucasian tribes was accompanied with conflict situations, which emerged occasionally as the northern neighbours used to attack and rob mountain-dwelling Georgians. Sometimes the feud between them lasted for years.

It was in such cases, when decisive and conscious actions of clever and prudent men were required. A "delegation" of several people, so-called *kats-shuakatsi*, took the responsibility upon themselves and went to the enemy's country or somewhere else in the marginal area to conduct negotiations. The highlanders were known for their respect towards guests, no matter - their friend or foe. Sometimes, the negotiations lasted several days and, not infrequently, ended in the reconciliation of the parties.

*"Once a young Khevsur, arrogant and self-confident, sets out to Kisteti (the land of the Kists - the name of the modern group of Chechen Georgians, actually referred to as the Ingush) to take vengeance on his enemy.*

*He goes up a steep hill, passes deep gorges and at last reaches the aul ("settlement", "village" in the North Caucasus and Central Asia) of the enemy.*

*Here it is! The habitation of the Khevsur's deadly enemy is before his eyes... But, what is it?! The whole village has gathered in Khiziri's yard, going up and down, shouting... A scene of utter confusion! All of a sudden, somebody starts playing the accordion and peerless sounds of the Kist dance a melody fills the air around... Khiziri is celebrating his younger sister's wedding...*



A horseman  
from Roshka



At that moment Khiziri storms into the circle of the dancers at lightning speed and on tiptoes, with his hands spread like wings, follows the dancing slim girl, overlooking her with an eagle eye. "Hai, hai... Marjah!" Words of hearty cheer are heard.

*The mepele ("killer") takes aim at Khiziri. He just has to trigger the rifle and everything will change in a moment...*

*But the young man lingers and in the meantime Khiziri keeps on dancing rapturously...*

*Some more seconds... and the Khevsur lowers his rifle and turns abruptly to his homeland.*

*The whole village comes to meet him. People ask him to tell them everything.*

*And he tells them...*

*- Why haven't you killed him? - ask him the young and old alike, burning with anger.*

*- If I had killed him, who would have danced that magnificent Kisturi? - says the young man sharply in reply."*

In Khevsureti, legal issues were decided and settled according to the local faith and justice. A council of authorized men, known as *matsodari* ("cognizant", "competent"), considered all disputable, *saardarao*, issues and delivered appropriate judgments within their competence. They were guided by an unwritten code of law. Anyone, who violated the established legal regulations or ignored moral norms, was punished...

One of the ancient customs was vendetta, the blood feud. In any case was it understood by Khevsuris as a permission for a murder. There are also examples of nobleness and magnanimity displayed by the Khevsur to their deadly enemies: *"The Khevsurs abandoned him [...] for the simple reason that by killing him our far-famed kin of the Jalabauris would have ceased existence... »*

*"Khevsur, by nature, never puts up with cowardice, not at any price, but at the same time, acknowledges a person's dignity, self-esteem and always tries to side with a defeated, abased, insulted one, even if the latter is supposed to be his deadly enemy."*

**Giorgi Tedoradze**



Warriors

Alexi Chincharauli writes about this subject the following way:

“A certain Gamikhardi from the village of Amgha once dropped a hint addressed to Mikheil, a native of Tsinkhadu: - “You’d better have the shroud in your bosom”. This was a figurative message on declaring hostility (“mtrobis bareba”), which meant: “Be ready and always have arms on you!”

As regards the deadly feud, it should be noted that the law of blood revenge practised in the mountainous region, is interpreted incorrectly and is reflected, so to say, unfairly, both in fiction and scientific literature. This is probably motivated by the fact that this *adat* (“habit”, “tradition”) is exotic and striking. This *adat* actually contributed to decrease in the death rate, made people control their behavior and language, cultivated reasonable caution while using arms, because he who gave severe wounds, was considered coward and clumsy. Therefore, however paradoxical it may seem to the reader, the *adat* of blood revenge at the same time played a positive role in society.”

*“When one sees the Khevsurs, bearing the scars on their face and on their body, always under arms and ready for battle, one may think that they are bloodthirsty. But that’s not right. Quite to the contrary. Nobody, not a single nation or tribe fears shedding blood as the Khevsurs do. “Coward” is a stigma attached to a killer in Khevsureti. It is their firm belief that a real hero always manages to avoid killing his rival, and the wound should be a scratch only, even in a fierce clash. That’s an obvious token of the Khevsurs’ bravery and gallantry.”*

**Grigol Robakidze\***

## Migration

Throughout history the Khevsuris have undergone several powerful processes of migration.

As far back as the 4th century, when St. Nino sent the representatives of the Kartli Kingdom to the mountains with the purpose of

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\* **Gr. Robakidze** - a well-known Georgian classical writer of the 20th century



converting the pagan population to Christianity, according to the chronicler, “... the Pkhovelni\* abandoned their native land and moved to Tusheti”.

That was a forced step taken by the Khevsuris for the avoidance of the renunciation of their traditional faith that found expression in seeking relative safety.

In the 17th-18th centuries the Khevsuris forcibly moved to Ertso-Tianeti, Dusheti district, Khevi, Ksani Gorge and Mtiuleti-Gudamaqari. A compulsory migration to the plain for taking up residence in new settlements of Shiraqi (now the Dedoplistskaro district), which took place in the early twentieth century, was especially painful and perturbing. Also, many high-mountainous villages were deserted in the 1950s as a result of the obligatory migration to the arid desert of the Samgori valleys initiated by the government of the Soviet regime without any rational explanation or reasoning.

The reason for this rural exodus by the Khevsuris must have been a lack of arable land and severe natural conditions. Economic hardship made it more and more impossible for the Khevsuris to keep families and the fertile lowland of Kakheti became their only resort.

### Fortress-Towers

In wartimes, when misfortune befell the Georgian highlanders, it was in the fortified buildings or dwelling towers used for defensive purposes where the battle-hardened Khevsurs, who knew no rest from enemies, would find a secure refuge, relative peace and almost the only chance of preventing physical annihilation.



Lebaiskari

Numbers of century-old fortress-towers are still seen standing proudly on the long-suffering soil of Khevsureti and with a haughty gaze witnessing the flow of days, months and centuries into eternity...

\* **Pkhovelni** - The territory of Khevsureti, together with the neighboring area of Pshavi was known to medieval writers under the joint designation Pkhovi, hence the word “pkhovelni”, i.e. the natives of Pkhovi.

“Unbeaten” Shatili is the most illustrative, so to say, striking example of a symphony of stone. A cluster of houses put up in stone side by side creates an unforgettable sight. The rusty walls of the fortress-village skillfully designed and embodied by anonymous builders have retained the memory of bygone times when in clashes against enemies the ambitious highlanders used primitive bows and locally forged short swords instead of rifles and gunpowder.

*“Rust adorns thee, sword, and mould’ring  
Is thy scabbard once so fine.  
Where is thy master’s arm of iron,  
Where is that flashing gleam of thine?”*

**(“The Sword’s Complaint” by Vazha Pshavela)**

The strongholds were erected on suitable sites, reasonably chosen from a strategic point of view. The solid and rigid bedplate provided a firm guarantee of stability and durability of a structure built for defensive purposes.

The North-Caucasian stone masons along with the local builders were actively engaged in the construction of defense towers in the mountainous areas of Eastern Georgia (in Georgian: *mtianeti*). They were known for their skill in the art of lifting stones by means of winches and erecting stable and straight stone walls; hence their practical knowledge was in much demand in the territories of neighbor tribes as well. The exterior view of the completed building gives a clear idea of its maker’s distinctive character, style, individuality and creative genius.



The “unbeatable” Shatili

In Khevsureti, as well as in other upland regions of Georgia, the number of fortified towers was decided on the order of pragmatic approaches. The strategic function of such structures was motivated by the defense and fortification of the county's boundary zones. The more frequent surprise attacks of enemies were expected, the more strongholds were built by the highlanders in certain gorges, settlements, communities.

In this respect mention should be made of the locality referred to as *Migmakhevi* in Khevsureti, which comprised several villages (now former settlements). The dwellings built on the slopes of a steep mountain from afar look like a severe complex of medieval towers.

Mutso deserves special mention thanks to its distinguished structural design and architectural style making most evident its impregnability and proofness. This is a striking unity of fortified towers, dwellings, cult monuments and burial vaults, a knot of human made harmony of stone structures enclosed by the enceinte having turned into ruins as a result of bygone misfortunes. One should see its magnificence with one's own eyes, as there are no words to describe this historical complex of former habitations.

A visitor heading for Shatili will without a doubt catch sight of the very impressive fortresses of Lebaiskari, Kistani and Qachu. To each of them popular legends, tales are associated, folk songs replete with heroic pathos and narratives rich in fantastic details...

A fortress, according to its symbolic meaning, is a material level connecting the sky with the earth. Judging by its mythical interpreta-



Ardoti – fortress village of mighmakhevi

tion, a fortress is a cosmic support of the universe. A mythological concept of the mediumistic mission of fortress is evidently expressed in one of the outstanding specimens of folk epic “*Shuris Tsikhe*” (“The Fortress of Envy”).

The poem states that the fortress of Khmala (*Khmalas tsikhe* in Georgian) was invisibly connected to the sky by means of a nine-fold chain (“*shiba*”) fastened to the very top of a poplar. Angels would sit on the chain and sing sweetly. And when a traitor revealed a secret of cutting off the anointed poplar to the enemy and the treacherous attempt took effect, the chain broke and the fortress darted up in the sky, hissing like a snake ...

The poem “*Shuris Tsikhe*” deals with the apocalyptic process of the gradual weakening and failure of the theocratic rule characteristic to the highland communities.

Fortress-towers - the organic attributes of the mountain dwellers’ everyday reality, having little by little lost their actual function, turned into the architectural “ornaments” of the mountainous relief and are taken as remarkable examples of the art of building. But formerly, when watch towers came into being at the entries of the deep, narrow gorges, on the steep, rocky slopes of inaccessible mountains or on the sun-burnt plateaus, those sturdy architectural monuments were used according to their intended, i.e. not in the least aesthetic but practical purpose...

Among the strongholds standing firmly as before on the soil of Khevsureti, either those fractured or lying in ruins, markworthy are the *Feraulta tsikhe* (*tsikhe* - Georgian for “fortress”) in Khakhmati,



*Shukiauris tsikhe* in Akhiela and *Tinibeqais tsikhe* in Batsalگو. Many of exciting sacral stories and incredible adventures are related to these citadels.

In Khevsur folk poetry and ethnographical sources dealing with the historical themes, a fortress-tower is the same personage of full value in the plot as a man of courage, the master and guardian of the very stronghold, who, at the will of God, is fated to serve his people valiantly and die unhesitatingly in the fight against the enemy if his native land demands it.

## Economy

Crop farming is evidently backward compared to animal husbandry in Khevsureti. The mountainous relief of the region deprives the locals of the possibility of providing families with sufficient cereal crops. Barley and rye planted in the rocky places make supplies scarce to live on for a year. That is why there is a necessity for economic relations with the plain which have always been a matter of major importance. It is impossible to solve the problem of the bread supply to Khevsureti without active participation from the capital or neighbouring regions based on the flatlands.

Animal husbandry has always been the main source of income for the Khevsuris. Through realization of dairy products they could purchase grain crops, salt, wine, tableware, tools, etc.

From this point of view, a special mention should be made regarding the Khevsurian cow, its place and importance in the everyday life of historical Phkovi. The Khevsurian cow is small in size, sturdy, capable of enduring severe climatic conditions and is easy to feed in winter; it produces plenty of high-caloric, fatty milk.

Sheep breeding in this area has always been an occupation of auxiliary character. This can be explained by the remoteness of



Cows on the steep slopes of Juta

Khevsureti from winter pastures. For this reason, it is characteristic to the Khevsuris to keep not numerous flocks of sheep, so as to be able to afford winter feeding in the mangers.

Sheepcote, as a rule, was arranged in the area adjacent to the cattle shed. Typical dwellings in Khevsureti generally were designed so that they were comfortable both for humans and for cattle. The first “floor” of the earthen



house with a flat roof was an area for the household and cattle. The second “floor”, *cherkho*, was the place where men lived, and the third “floor” was allocated for a barn for thrashing and storing grain.

In spring, after tilling the fields and sowing the grain, the cattle were driven to the summer pastures up in the mountains, where the covered enclosures had been arranged for livestock. The dairy cattle usually were driven to comparatively low localities, while the dry cows were sent to the grazing lands high up in the mountains.

Later on, having mowed corn, made hay and reaped harvest, the nomadic (known as *memte*, i.e. “mountaineer”) families left the highlands and returned home.

### *Talavari* (Garments)

The Khevsuris call their national dress *talavari*. The *talavari* is made of homespun woolen cloth (“toli”). The cloth for *talavari*, as a rule, is prepared by women. The *toli* is a thick, heavy and coarse but hardwearing and durable fabric.

The women wore dresses (*kaba*) called *sadiatso*, made of dark blue or black woolen stuff. The garment of the *kaba* for the upper body, *faraghi*, is colourfully embroidered and decorated with beads and buttons. The *sadiatso* is worn together with the outer garments called *kokomo* and *koklo*. The latter is similar to the winter fur jacket, however shorter and fitted closely at the waist.

The women’s suite also consists of the winter garment, *tkavi* (woman’s warm jacket), *pachichi* (gaiters), *kalamani* (soft leather slippers), *mandili* (kerchief) and *sataura* (headgear). Noteworthy is the significance of the *mandili* in the social life of the Khevsuris. The point is that if a woman throws her kerchief between the fight-



ing men, they are obliged to cease the fight immediately. This is a very effective precondition for averting the killing or wounding of people...

As for the costume of the men, they dressed no less originally. The men's shirts are a low-necked type of clothing with slits on each side. It is ornamented with embroidered crosses, the so-called *nachrela*.

The major value of the Khevsuri men's and women's costumes, looking like brightly and colourfully ornamented carpets, is their

decorative appearance that can be attained by great skill and exquisite taste.

Above the shirt a *chokha* (a woolen coat) made of black or dark blue *toli* was worn. The *chokha* is an item of the men's garment stretching down to the knees, close-fitting at the waist and richly ornamented with embroidered cross-shaped details.

The footwear consisted of socks, gaiters and raw-leather boots called *kalamani*.

The headgear consisted of a closely fitting felt cap girded with a black twist adorned with a string of white beads.

\*\*\*

A Khevsur woman, known for her rich fantasy in combining colours, the creator of the garments decorated with embroidery of amazing design, is so self-confident that says:

<i>"Dakvekhnebaze nu iqvas:</i>	I do hate the way others boast:
<i>Lampa ar minda qalsao,</i>	But I need no lamp at all,
<i>Tol-piris sinatlezeda</i>	As I can easily stitch and sew
<i>Davhkerav nachrelasao..."</i>	By the light of my fair face <i>and</i> eyes..."

The fine needlework (embroidery, garments, and richly decorated articles of clothing) made by the Khevsur women always fascinated the visitors. Fortunately, traditional embroidery and knitting are still practised in villages.

## Folk Medicine

Hostilities, tribal strives and family feuds resulting in bullet wounds or injuries inflicted by cold weapons, as well as frequent physical traumas made the Khevsuris acquire at least an elementary knowledge of medical treatment to cure people.



A man from Juta with the harvest of herbs

Local healers (“*akimi*”) studied and preserved the secrets of healing, explored and transmitted their predecessors’ and passed on theoretical knowledge and practical experience to the future generations.

Medical treatment was provided by applying home remedies, such as honey, wax, indigenous plants, to different parts of the body of domestic fowls and animals, urine, stones, etc. A kind of bitter brandy, the so-called “*tsintsanakari*”, was used as an anesthetic for soothing pain; brandy also served as a base material for making up different medicines.

Special mention should be made to the surgical procedures conducted by the folk healers in Khevsureti, including trepanations of the skull. Serious operations performed with primitive, home-made instruments were effective in most cases and the patients, in full or in part, made a full recovery.

Mgelika Liqokeli, Aleka Ochiauri, Gugua Chincharauli, Betsina Arabuli, Badzia Chincharauli... This is an incomplete list of the skilful and reputable folk healers known from the recent past of Khevsureti.

## “*Stsorproba*”

One of the most striking features of the traditional culture of Khevsureti is the relationship between a young couple known as *stsorproba*, which had been preserved up to the middle of the past century. “*Stsorperi*” is the Georgian for “equal” or “peer”, “two of a kind”.

A young Khevsuri couple (a single man and a single woman) could lie together during the night with a sword placed between





them. They could caress each other up to the waist only. Sexual intercourse between the pair was strictly forbidden. The sword between them was a symbol and, at the same time, a fatal margin, a kind of boundary which should not have been infringed upon. Anyone who ventured to try the forbidden fruit and trespassed against the local customs, was covered with shame and would have been branded with shame and disgrace to the end of his life. Such an extreme measure was taken in the case when the moral behavior of the couple raised doubts. *Stsorproba* was an extraordinary way of testing personal dignity, clear conscience and reputation of members of the opposite sex...

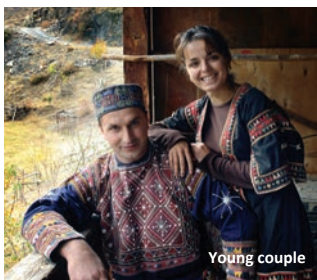
The affairs regarding the rite of *stsorproba*, as well as the relationship of the *stsoprebi* (i.e. couple) were settled by a mediator or go-between, who in most cases was one of the hosts. The Khevsuris believed that such an “envoy” would find salvation after death in return for his good deed, and he, in his turn, made every effort to exercise his right.

The righteous couple was held in deserved respect; their relations and friends had confidence in them and totally relied on them.

A couple was strictly forbidden to marry. Anyone who breached this centuries-old rule was either damned and banished from the native village or even condemned to death by the community.

The origin of the institute of *stsorproba* remains obscure. Although there are certain scientific hypotheses to explain this phe-

nomenon, it is still beyond understanding. Ethnographers, sociologists, psychologists, physicians keep on studying the essential idea of the ritual, however all their efforts are unavailing. So far we have no grounded, plausible, cogent answer to the question: What is *stsorproba*?...



“The sublimation of partially realized erotic energy”<sup>\*</sup> favored the emergence of fine Khevsur love poetry depicting the peripetias of *stsorproba*.

A secret desire to please his *stsorperi* (i.e. the chosen one) incited the young man to heroic deeds that in its turn was reflected in folk poetry of high artistic value.

According to one hypothesis, “the Khevsuris had initiated the ritual of *stsorproba* in some way to ease the lot of the hopeless lovers, who, for some reason, were forbidden from getting married and not for controlling their willpower.”<sup>\*\*</sup>

A laconic wording expressing the people’s belief - “*stsorproba khtis gachenil ars*” (“God is the creator of *stsorproba*”) points out that the fact of the matter is nothing but sincere love based on a pious, lofty and impeccable moral imperative.

*Stsorproba* is assumed to be the basis of the uniqueness of a Khevsuri garment known as “*talavari*”: a major factor in raising the Khevsuri women’s needlework (knitting, embroidery) to the rank of art was an ardent desire to please their beloved...

The ability to rise above the fleshly lusts, restraint of passions, patience and self-command were appreciated as the adornments not of human making suited both for *stsorperi* women and men.

The rite of *stsorproba* in Khevsureti always was an inexhaustible source of the people’s spiritual training, nobility and creative inspiration. Moral health of a traditional society to a great extent depended on the worthy behavior of each of its members.

<sup>\*</sup> L. Gaburi, *The Old Testament and Faiths and Beliefs of Khevsuris*

<sup>\*\*</sup> Same

## Marriage

It was the custom in Khevsureti to betroth a girl and a boy while they were still in the cradle. The ritual is called *datsindva* and was performed by separate personalities or families in accordance with their wish to become close relatives. A similar tradition is evidenced throughout the whole of Caucasia as well as in some provinces of Georgia, such as Khevi, Racha, Achara, Svaneti and Meskhet-Javakheti.

A powerful family of good stock always prefers to find proper people to become related with, and when such a family was chosen, the usual method of betrothal was as follows: a delegate, in most cases the uncle of the “groom” was sent to the future bride’s house and left a symbolic present (silver coins, a silver necklace, etc.) hanging on the cradle. Besides that he handed bread, brandy and a sheep or some other cattle for slaughter to the girl’s parents to prepare simple food to mark the event and wish the newly betrothed couple good fortune.

According to custom, every year on New Year’s Day the boy’s parents sent a ritual cake, *bediskveri*, to their bride. When the betrothed girl and boy reached the appropriate age, their parents started to prepare for the wedding. The boy’s father sent several competent, experienced and eloquent men with sheep or calves for slaughter to his future relatives to fix the day of the wedding.



A marriage



The couple

The bride had the right to choose and invite the attendants herself. At the threshold of her father-in-law's house the bride was met by some happily married women and after entering the room and taking her seat at the table, one of those women laid a one-year old baby in her lap.

It is noteworthy that during the festivities the bride and the groom stayed in separate rooms, as they were strictly forbidden to speak, even to look at each other.

The wedding ceremony lasted three days.

The youth of the village, *akhalukhali*, entertained the bride by dancing, singing, exchanging jokes and tales...

After one week, the bride was taken back to her father's house where she stayed for a year.

In this peculiar way, apparently, the Khevsuris ensured the correctness of their choice and only after that started out in their independent life.

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*"A Khevsuri tries to build up his son's sense of self-esteem and cultivate courage from his very childhood. The father never beats his son, never punishes him severely but speaks to him calmly, with restraint, as if he were a grown-up; he listens to the child's response as if he were listening to the arguments of a dignified, experienced man. When a child enters the room, all of the people, even if there were forty men of venerable age there, get up to greet him: "Welcome home, (the name of the child)!" "Thanks,*

*thanks! Please, sit down. I'm too very glad to see you in good health!" - says the boy in return to their salutation.*

**Vazha - Pshavela**

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*"The Kists happened to learn that one of their fellow villagers was intimate with a widow. It was an unheard-of occurrence in their aul. So, the Kists made up their minds to resort to the Shatilians (the natives of the village of Shatili in Khevsureti) for advice. But when they came to Shatili, they found no one but children there. It turned out that all of the grown-ups had gone to the hay mowing fields high up in the mountains. The disappointed Kists were about to leave when the children inquired about their concern and even offered their assistance. The Kists gave the children a smile, however, accepted the proposal of the little Shatilians.*

*- A friend of ours is intimate with a widow, he behaves irresponsibly and we don't know what to do, - said the Kists.*

*- Oh, it's an easy job to do, - light-heartedly replied the little Khevsurs, - you only have to hit the shadow of your "evil-doer" fellow-countryman with a gun at noon and it will knock some sense into his head. Otherwise, if he doesn't change his mind, the gun will hit him a hard blow.*

*The Kists, amazed at the worldly wisdom of the little Shatilians, thanked them and left the village..."*



Child with a sword

## **Funeral Rites**

Khevsureti is a unique province within Georgia, where the locals have retained their ancient customs and traditions as well as highly artistic funeral poetry, the so-called ritual laments in verse that is the representation of the cult of the dead. Profound veneration to the memory of ancestors has always been held within the framework of the mental and ethical norms by the Khevsurs - the inhabitants of a mountainous region, which is for the most part remote from life and isolated from the outer world for months.

Khevsur society appreciated a person according to his credit and the services rendered by him to his native land or the entire coun-



Mutso, the cemetery  
on the foreground

try. Frequent mention of the merits of popular heroes or even their peaceful fellow countrymen of good name in the presence of young people touched the right chord in their hearts, which was ingeniously intertwined with the patriotic inspiration and consciousness of performing one's duty honestly for the benefit and protection of one's homeland.

In Khevsureti, and also in other neighboring upland regions the ceremony of death, i.e. the funeral rites involved a somewhat creative process: oral composition of mournful poems, the authors of which in most cases were illiterate people - the countrymen living high in the mountains, the so-called "poets of lament".

"The instant of overwhelming grief, the instant of parting for ever" (N. Dadiani) caused feeling gradations in the experienced professional lamenters and gave birth to amazing poetry replete with unpretentious, heartfelt, profound human sorrow and pain.

The Khevsurs believed that the deceased needed to be prepared for life after death, so, it was a primary concern of the kin and companions of the departed to arrange a worthwhile funeral ceremony and pay homage to him in conformity with the generally accepted practice. In former times, in the highland provinces of Georgia one of the best manifestations of respect towards the deceased was ritual lamenting aloud. The keening was recited in the form of a free verse that consoled, comforted, soothed the close mourners and, in some respect, healed the wound inflicted on their feelings by the death of



a loved one. As noted by Victor Nozadze, “lamentation is not merely weeping or loud expression of one’s grief, but praise given to the departed, it’s eloquent portrayal of the deceased, - it’s poetry of the mourned”. Lamentation - a specific act of improvisation naturally implies the moment of inspiration, since deep human sorrow and pain is in the main an inexhaustible source of genuine poetry. . . And the death of every woman or man with of good standing in Khevsureti would become an impulse, a strong incentive to create a new lament based on the age-old tradition of the Georgian highlanders.

According to the old Khevsur tradition, it was impermissible, even impudent of a wife to mourn over her husband in public. She, as well as other close mourners of the deceased should have refrained from weeping openly; it was required that she suppress her tears and endure her pain without a display of feelings. But not everyone managed to adhere to the accepted rules. Rather infrequently, however, there were cases of non-obedience of the unwritten social norms and established rules. If a wife of the deceased could not stop herself from crying loudly, she, “in self-defence”, pointed out that she might have been in derision for, whether willingly or against her free will, violation of the unwritten law and breaking the age-old tradition.

In accordance with the customs and beliefs of the Georgian (and not only Georgian!) people, the deceased should have been buried in the daytime, i.e. before the sunset. Burying the corpse after sundown except for extreme cases was not permitted; it was wrong to act





The graveyard in Mighmakhevi

like this, as it was considered to be “ominous” and something harmful or evil would happen to the family of the departed. Below is an extract from one of the masterpieces of Georgian oral literature, in which a mother mourns over her brave son who is leaving this world, his companions and is heading for the gloomy world of souls:”

*“No sobs will fill thy mother’s breast;  
No tears will overflow her eyes,  
For proud is she to have a son  
Who on the shrine of courage lies.  
Farewell, my boy, farewell to thee!  
May God receive thy spirit free.  
No coward’s blood ran through thy veins;  
My bosom swells in pride for thee!”*

The traditional period of mourning for the deceased was one year in Khevsureti. The Khevsurs call it “*talavart gashla*”. At the end of this term (*tslistavi* in Georgian), after the funeral rites had been completed, a feast was held in honour of the departed (in Georgian: *cheris akhda*, i.e. “release from grief”) and a community or village reverted to the habitual life.

Proceeding from the belief that the deceased had the same daily requirements in the afterlife, it was the custom of the Khevsurs to bury the dead with a full panoply of arms, garments, an ample supply of food, water and tobacco... It was also a generally accepted



practice in Khevsureti to arrange somewhat of a memorial place at a spring nearby the village. A ritual of sanctification of the dead person's decorated "horse of soul" was held on the day of burial and the men of the village gathered to engage in commemoration competitions of *gabakhi* (shooting) and *horse races*, which took place during the *tslistavi* memorial festival as well. Khevsureti is abundant in the so-called *sulis tskaro* (Georgian for "spring of soul"), where a wayfarer, as a rule, stops to refresh himself with a glass of water and show respect to the stranger who untimely left this world and joined eternity.

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*"The plague broke out in the village of Anatori. Those who were plague-infected left habitations and went to the crypts to meet their death there. The locals firmly decided not to allow any spread of the disease from Anatori to the other settlements. Three gunmen were charged with controlling the three exits from the village so as not to let anyone run away... In case of non-observance of the decision made by the community, the gunmen had the right to shoot at their disobedient fellow countrymen..."*

*It happened that one day about twenty young men left Anatori and made their way towards the crypt. In the lead was a young man, playing the panduri\* and singing. The others accompanied him with zhipitauri\*\* and kantsy\*\*\* to drink a toast in remembrance of their companion..."*

## Poetry

Khevsureti is the mother country of folk poetry which, beyond all doubt, bears classical lucidity. All spheres of everyday life of the local population are reflected in Khevsur poetry. The historical past of Georgia's ancient province is represented in its wonderful, full-blooded poems.

This is a truthful literary chronicle the cognitive and aesthetic value of which is conditioned by the natural, inborn talent of its creators.

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\* **Panduri** – a stringed musical instrument played by strumming with the fingers

\*\* **Zhipitauri** - a home-distilled alcoholic spirit

\*\*\* **Khantsy** - a traditional drinking horn for wine or brandy

The birth of every Khevsuri is welcomed with a verse, and a verse is the last tribute paid to the departed Khevsuri, in other words, his sad farewell.

The Khevsuris cannot imagine life without poetry and, likewise, one can not imagine them without the splendid Khevsur rhymes.

A poetic word, a poetic strophe like the attendant immortal spirit constantly followed a Khevsuri everywhere, at home or on route, in the field while tilling and hay mowing or high up in the mountains while game-shooting, and eased his lot, alleviated his suffering, gladdened his heart.

Noteworthy are the words of an elderly Khevsuri woman: “The verses are floating in my mind all the time, regardless of what I am doing... How can I remember all of them?!”

“*Simghera*” (“song”), “*leksi*” (“verse”), “*shairi*” (“humorous rhyme”).

Conventionally, under these three appellations is grouped fathomless Khevsur poetry created by the “*matqvami*” (“songster”, “narrator”), “*melekse*” (“versifier”) and “*meshaire*” (rhymers of *shairi*).

Not only the depiction of reality and ideological education of readers or listeners was the function of a verse, but it also answered for the code of ethics. The versifiers devoted to the principle of truthfulness always praised virtue and criticized any wrongdoing.

The mother lode or “priority” trend of Khevsur poetry is presented by tens of glorious heroic poems.





deal of beautiful pieces of artistic impersonation of the people's ideal, the so-called *kai kma* ("fine young man")...

Among the moral values of a human being hospitality ("*stumar-maspindzloba*" in Georgian) has always ranked high in Khevsureti. A person inspired respect and admiration if he could play host in the best traditions of Georgian hospitality. The Khevsuris believed that a guest deserved to be welcomed by a hospitable host. A generous and welcoming man ranked higher than a brave and bold-spirited one in the hierarchy of values determined by the Khevsuris. Indeed, the truth of this statement is so evident even in the following poetic maxim:

<i>"Arshis tavs vepkhvi davkode,</i>	Once I happened to wound a tiger,
<i>Samjer saomrad metia,</i>	That needs triple as much of valor,
<i>Puradi katsi mamatsze</i>	But the open-handed host
<i>Samis gafrenit metia..."</i>	Is held in thrice as much of honor ...

Multidisciplinary Khevsur poetry is abundant in masterly manners of expression of human emotions. This, first of all, can be said in reference to love lyrics. The dialectic terms *ndoba* ("confidence")

\* **Bakhtrioni** - a stronghold built in the 17th century with the approval of Shah Abbas II is associated with freedom and love for the Fatherland in Georgian history and literature. The walls of now ruined Bakhtrioni fortress had witnessed a great deal of furious combats, one of which is the 1659 uprising in Kakheti that became the main theme of Vazha Pshavela's brilliant epic poem "Bakhtrioni".



Shota Arabuli –  
a khevsurian writer

and *survili* (“lust”), which stand for “love” clearly point at pungency of the feeling that has been in existence since the origin of mankind... The Khevsuris refer to the pieces of love lyrics as *saqal-vazho lexebi* (rhymes improvised for sweethearts). In most of these verses emphasis is placed on purity and loftiness of the feeling between a loving couple. The man having weakness for casual romantic relationship and being attracted by flirting only is considered to be dishonest...

One more so-called “autonomous” subject which stands out in the torrent of Khevsur poetry is hunting. The verses of this genre guide us through the severe, desolate and secluded environs, where mainly the Caucasian turs live and propagate. And in this ring of poetic folklore like a diamond sparkles the “*Lay of the Huntsman and the Tiger*”, the second, latter part of which was composed by Giorga Djabushanuri from Arkhoti...

In Khevsur poetry imaginary reality naturally merges with the sharp contours of factuality. The archaic faiths and beliefs generated by the Georgian people throughout the development of their conscious attitude towards the outer world is weaved into a plot of the rhymed legends. “*Tsikhis Nashali*” (“Ruins of the Fortress”), “*Yakhsar*”, “*Kopala*”, \* “*Gaburt Eshma*” and “*Devebis Qortsili*” (“The Wedding of Devis”)\*\* are the remarkable monuments of Khevsur oral literature evidencing the infinitude of human fantasy.

At one time Akaki Shanidze, the famous Georgian scholar, made notice of the poetic texts known as “*mtiblurebi*” in Khevsureti, which were performed by the haymakers when they were busy mowing hay. *Mtiblurebi* along with the lamentations and laudations in praise of the sacred places - *jvar-khati* (“cross” and “icon”) or *salotsavi* (“sanctuary”) are the most essential ingredients of Georgian folk poetry.

\* **Yakhsar and Kopala** - the deities charged with the duty of liberating human beings from the tyranny of demons

\*\* **devi** - demon, evil spirit



The singer Gela Daiaurilon during the feast

The rhythm and musical sound of the ancient pieces of folk poetry make us turn our mind's eye to the epochs, when physical effort was inalienably associated with artistic inspiration, with improvisation of oral literary creations.

Some *mtibluris* are “adjusted” to the tune of funeral dirge bearing more resemblance to the laments than to the labor lyrics. This kind of *mtibluris* is also called “*gyrini*”. The mowers perform them songfully, i.e. similarly to blank verse bearing the sounding of lament.

Death, in general, is an eternally old and eternally new theme of Khevsur poetry. It is a moral obligation of every versifier to immortalize the memory of young people “mowed” by the scythe of death. In such “memorials” or “last wills” of the dead prevails a kind of excessive emotionality caused by hopelessness aggrieving a human being with its tragic tonality.

The Khevsur poets do not seek for special time, place or any circumstances suitable for creative activity, such as solitude, leisure, etc. Yet, there is a season when the author can reap the “heavy harvest”:

<i>“Dabla dakina qvishani,</i>	“The first frosts’ve touched the flats,
<i>Magla datovna mtania,</i>	A white layer’s lying on the mountains,
<i>Dagvidga Giorgobistve,</i>	The season of talking in verse
<i>Leksis saubris khania...”</i>	Has come, along with Giorgobistve...”*

On rare occasions the author mentions his name at the end of the verse (as if expressing his modest wish not to be forgotten):

*“Lekso, ar daikargebi, natqvamo Omaisao!”*

“You will never be lost, O Verse, voiced by Omay!”

Not infrequent are the appeals to the musical instruments. This, as a rule, takes place in the beginning of a verse. The trace of ancient tradition (mentioning the deities as the addressees of a prelude in Greece of classical antiquity) is expressed by praising the *panduri*\*\* and accordion in Khevsur poetry:

\* **Giorgobistve** - November in old Georgian

\*\* **panduri** - a Georgian string instrument

*"Daukar, chemo panduro,  
angelozivit khmiano..."*

*"You do play, My Panduri, and  
Let your angelic sound be heard..."*

In this kind of appeal a musical instrument is the source of inspiration and excitement.

Noteworthy is that in Khevsureti it is a common occurrence that the author of a "memorial" verse asks for a symbolic present, mostly somewhat of earthenware jar or bowl just to drink a toast to the memory of the addressee of a verse.

In Khevsureti an old tradition of versification is still alive - the art of conversion of life experience into a poetic word. And this is one of the major prerequisites for a region confined within the Caucasus Mountains to remain the unique object of the growing interest of the researchers and travelers.

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From the recollections of the daughter of Bessarion Gaburi, a well-known folk poet, also engaged in collecting the specimens of oral literature: *"Father usually composed verses when he was busy with physical work, we constantly heard his murmur when he was packing a pile of hay or tilling the soil; even when he was in the field and had nothing to write with, he would take a stone and scratch the words on the hand... I remember his big and strong hands... Afterwards he would come home and rewrite the verse on a paper. Sometimes in winter, when he ran out of paper he would write on the walls. The walls and doors, even the pillars of our house were covered with father's verses..."*

### **LAY OF THE HUNTSMAN AND THE TIGER**

A beardless youth once went ahunting;  
He roamed o'er hills and valleys through  
The forests dense; then swiftly crossed  
The heights where rhododendron grew.  
Upon a mighty cliff a herd  
Of deer appeared before his eye;  
He killed their king, and then, a sound  
Of clashing horns rang in the sky.  
But suddenly a tiger sprang  
Before him on the rocky height;

And like a flash of lightning leaped  
 On him with yes that lit the night.  
 The huntsman and the tiger closed  
 In dreadful struggle; and the word  
 Groaned as the mount was in twain,  
 And rocks and pine were upward hurled.  
 The youth fought bravely, yet could not  
 Ward off the deadly claws that tore  
 His flesh, nor fend the cruel teeth  
 That rent the coat of mail he wore.  
 Bravely the youth endured the blows,  
 And like a bursting thunder-cloud  
 Struck at the tiger with such force  
 That down it crashed roaring loud.  
 The earth shook as the tiger's weight  
 Pressed down the cliff with blood imbued;  
 The youth lay weltering in his gore;  
 His face with gashes was fore hewed.

But who will tell the mother how  
 Her son upon the mount lay dead,  
 How in a well-fought struggle he  
 Had overthrown the tiger dread?  
 An awful hush, then suddenly  
 Heart-rending screams and cries resound:  
 In streams of tears now turned to seas  
 The mother's bursting heart is drowned.  
 With loosened hair the mother rushed  
 Where her son had in combat died;  
 Beside him was a naked sword  
 That to the hilt with blood was dyed.  
 "Though awe-inspiring was thy strength,  
 True wisdom did not guide thee on;  
 Though might met might in mortal strife,  
 Death claimed thee for its own, my son!"  
 She cleansed each gore-stained wound with tears;  
 Smoothed down the soiled and matted hair;  
 Then kissed the chilly pallid lips,  
 And heaved a sigh of cold despair.

“My son, no more will I mourn thee,  
 Weep bitterly, nor beat my breast.  
 My son, no more will I mourn thee,  
 Weep bitterly, nor beat my breast.  
 My son, no more will I mourn thee,  
 For thou art sleeping and at rest;  
 Wherefore should I grieve bitterly?  
 Weep seas or burst my heart with woe  
 For thee who fought so valiantly,  
 And braved the tiger’s dreadful blow?  
 No sobs will fill thy mother’s breast;  
 No tears will overflow her eyes,  
 For proud is she to have a son  
 Who on the shrine of courage lies?  
 Farewell, my boy, farewell to thee!  
 May God receive thy spirit free.  
 No coward’s blood ran through thy veins;  
 My bosom swells in pride for thee!”

The mother often in her dreams  
 Beheld the tiger, saw him tear  
 In rage with deadly claws the coat  
 Of mail her son was wont to wear.  
 Then lo! The youth would seize the beast  
 And dash him dead upon the ground.  
 Such visions ever vexed her dreams,  
 And thus, in sleep no rest she found.  
 Once, waking from a troubled sleep,  
 Thoughts seized and shook her burning brain.  
 “What hand can soothe more gently than  
 A mother’s when in bitter pain?  
 Perhaps the tiger’s mother grieves  
 And mourns her dead with loud lament;  
 Perhaps her heart is bursting now  
 With sobs that rend the firmament.  
 So, quickly will I go to her  
 And strive to soothe her sorrow deep.  
 She’ll proudly tell me of her child,  
 And we in common grief will weep.”



*“A mourning mother aspires to express her condolences to her son’s killer (in this case - the tiger), to share her grief and lament together over their lost sons. No analog has been found out in oral tradition of any people worldwide. This unique phenomenon is the national heritage of Georgian folk poetry.”*

**Amiran Arabuli**

## Religion

The system of religious belief of the Khevsuris is a symbiosis of Orthodox Georgian Christianity and paganism. A variety of deities, i.e. polytheism evidences that in the distant past the Khevsuris they were devotees of pre-Christian faiths and beliefs. They believed in the divinity of the sky - the abode of the deities (*“khvtishvilebi”*) patronizing clouds, martial arts (*“lashkroba”*), piracy (*“mekobreoba”*), hunting (*“monadireoba”*), fertility (*“shviliereba”*) and animals (*“saqoneli”*). The Khevsuris worshiped sacred places, kinds of earthly domains possessing heavenly powers, locally known as *sabrdzanisebi* or *jvar-khatebi*. They presented oblations at a fixed time of the year, decorated the community and village sanctuaries (*“salotsavi”*) with the antlers and the horns of the turs... *Temi* (“community”) was considered to be *sakmo* (“belonging”) to the *jvar-khati* and each *meteme* (“member of the community”) was his *kma* (“serf”). The supreme administrative organ of *temi* was *“darbazi”* (“audience”), the members of which discussed common matters, both home and external, and passed sentences.

The supernatural beings occupying different hierarchical levels enjoyed unequal powers. They, in their turn, had their own assistants known as *mtsevrebi*, *iasaulebi*, *dobilebi*.

*Sabrdzanebeli* (“sanctuary”) of *jvar-khatebi* was considered to be a holy place. No one but *khevisberi* (the elder of a community) had the right to approach the so-called *“kvrivi”* in the central part of the object of worship. Besides that women were strictly forbidden from overstepping the fixed boundary and come near the sanctuary.



The art and everyday life are not far away from each other



A union of people, who served the sanctuary, was known as “*das-tur-khelosnebi*”. It was considered their prerogative to lead the festive rituals. The so-called *khelosani*, i.e. one who administered religious rites was elected at the discretion of *jvar-khatebi* in the following way: one of the deities chose someone from a community and after instilling some illness in his body, forced him to be at his service.

The subordinate to *khutsesi* was *dekanози*. There were also several inferiors: *chanchkhi* (one who ploughed the land of *khati* domains and was occupied with farming), *medroshe* (“flag-carrier”), *mezare* (“bell-ringer”), *megandzuri* (keeper of treasury), *diasakhlisi* (house-keeper of *khati*), etc. *Khutsesi*, the same *khevisberi* was not only a religious leader, but he also was charged with the duty of solving martial as well as legal problems.

Among the servants of cult a distinguished person was *qadagi*, one of the high priests, who performed the duties of a mediator between the parish and the deities. He, as a rule, was considered to have the gift of prophecy. With the purpose of regulating the religious and public matters the *qadagi* would sit in a primitive hut and establish contact with the celestial forces. Having communicated with the deities, he warned people about their will.

One more clergy of a somewhat different category, “*mkadre*”, was also mentioned. He was “caught” by the *khati*. The deity appeared before him as the image of a bird, fire or cross and in reality spoke to him. Several distinguished *mkadres* are known: Minani, Gidauri,

Baskhajuri, Gakhua Megrelauri, Mgela Jabushanauri, Saghira Chincharauli ...

In Khevsureti, *atenghenoba* is the most important and illustrious festival held late in July. Quite a large number of people, not only the locals but also those, who have moved to the plain, gather to take part in their traditional ritual.

## Mythology

Among the monuments of Khevsur oral literature held in high regard are the epics and legends on mythological themes, the essence of which is an imaginative description of the origin and adventures of local deities (*khvti'shvili* in Georgian).

According to the ancient plots, the Pantheon of celestial powers is presided over by the supreme god Morige (*"morigeghmerti"*, i.e. "moderator god" in Georgian), who is not principally engaged with the administration of the country (he has assistants, the inferiors enjoying the corresponding authority to do these things) and as is obvious from his title, he only maintains order in this world. "The Pshavis and Khevsurs, - wrote Ivane Javakhishvili\*, - call their supreme god *"Morige"*..."

In times immemorial the most part of Pshavi and Khevsureti was captured by evil powers, the so-called *"dev-kerpebi"* (evil-spirits). The demons ruled over the territory and put the local population through torture and annihilation. There was no one who would be able to defeat the evil spirits and existing system and order

Asanctuary in Muko



\* **Ivane Javakhishvili**, a great Georgian historian, the founder of Tbilisi State University



in the country was under threat of collapse. It was then that the presiding supreme god Morige gave human forms to Yakhsar and Kopalaand, along with the other deities, charged them with the duty of freeing the place of people's settlement from de-

mons and liberate human beings from their tyranny. The creatures formerly existing as human beings (*"nakhortsivilari"*) and elevated to the ranks of deities destroyed the tormenting evil spirits completely and marked the beginning of peace and harmony on earth...

Along with the *devis* of threatening appearance, the so-called *qajis* (the same demons), knowing the secret of smithery, were considered to be the other deadly enemies of the human race. The place of their habitation was called *Qajeti* (i.e. the land of *qajis*). The *khati* (Georgian for "icon") of Khakhmati known by the name Giorgi Naghvarmshvenieri decided to wage war against the *qajis* and made for *Qajeti* accompanied with the other deities of Khevsureti and GakhuaMegrelauri, the *mkadre* ("servant") of the Gudani Cross. The celestial warriors smashed up the forge in *Qajeti*, killed the *qajis*, razed to the ground their habitation and returned home with a good deal of treasure. Namely, they fetched: a bowl, a golden *panduri* (stringed instrument), a horn, a rack, a nine-tongue bell, a sieve and an anvil, i. e. all of the objects regarded as necessary for the existence and normal functioning of society. In addition, they captured the female *qajis*: Samdzimari, Mzeqali, Asheqali and Simenqali.

Out of them the most noteworthy is Samdzimari, the only popular female deity in Khevsureti, who does not keep away from intimate connection with the mortal man – Kholiga Abuletauri (*Saghira*, according to another version), and who is not alien to the supernatural ability of changing the image. Her epithets are "*kheli*" ("Georgian for "wild", "unruly") and "*kelghiliani*" ("having a necklace on the neck" in Georgian), pointing out this creature's lack of timidity, her attractiveness and cheerful disposition.

The most prominent members of Khevsur Pantheon are: the Gudani Cross the Warrior ("*beribuqnaiBaaduri*"), "Tergvauli the White Mountain Hawk" and Pirqushi the Smith ("*tsetskhlisaliani*", i.e. "be marked by fire flame"). The merit of each of them, the kind

deeds performed by them are invaluable in Khevureti's sacral history. If it had not been for the assistance, protection and guidance of the deities sent to perform different missions on earth, perhaps the same chaos and uneasiness would have reigned on the soil of Khevsureti as in the immemorial, prehistoric age, when demons dominated under the sun.

The Khevsurs believed in the existence of the so-called *adgilisdeda* (word for word translation of the notion is "the mother of the place") - the deity controlling a certain geographical region, and Ochopintre - god of fauna, patronizing forest animals.

It was the prevalent belief of the Khevsurs that simultaneously with the birth of a human being his or her fortune star came into being. And with the death of a man his star fell from the sky as well. The following small fragment of a Khevsur verse evidences that there could be no doubt about the reality of a fortune star:

"A, is maskvlavachemia"	There it is, my fortune star,
Martorodavatsazeda..."	Shining solely in the sky..."

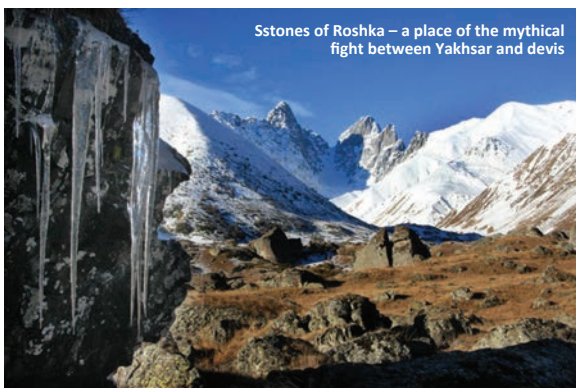
Astral symbols, in general, intensively figure in popular mentality. From this point of view, noteworthy is the Khevsurs' belief about the three suns. A folk poet esteems the powerful kin of the Kurazishvilis, as there are three suns, those of generosity (*puradobismze*), bravery (*mamatobismze*) and gun-shooting (*toposnobismze*) that rises daily in their name.

"*Mindi rom dabadebul, tsazesammzemdgar*", "When Mindi was born, three suns were shining in the sky", - in these words a Khevsur folk tale teller describes unusualness of the birth of Mindi, a mythical hero, elevated to the ranks of the gods. Khogais Mindi is a remarkable person of Georgian mythology, who later became a prototype of the main character of the epic "The Snake-Eater" by the outstanding and exceedingly original Georgian poet Vazha Pshavela. Another interesting example of the creative interpretation of the same hero's extraordinary life is "Khogais Mindia" by Konstantine Gamsakhurdia, a great Georgian classical novelist.

The mythical heroes of Khevsur origin are Torghva Dzagani (according to a version, a natural child of Prince Alexandre Batonishvili) and Mamuka



A sacrifice



Sstones of Roshka – a place of the mythical fight between Yakhsar and devis

Qalundaure. They differ from other far-famed heroes of good name thanks to the phenomenon of “*natsilianoba*” (god’s likeness). “*Natsilianoba*” is an exceptionally rare occurrence and can be determined as “possession of the god’s share”, i.e. existence of supernatural substance in a mortal being. Folk poetry traces the uniqueness of both of them in abundance of astral symbols: “*Didebulebadautqves*, “Distinctiveness of his was evident to all, *Bechebsunakhesjvario*, His shoulders, bearing the sign of the cross *Marjvninmzecerebuliqho*, With the sun on the right hand, *Martskhniko - mtvarisnalio*.” And the moon - on the left hand.”

Khevsur mythology offers an exceptionally impressive representation of the great beyond: at the entrance to the better world the aged judges stand and seal the fate of a newcomer according to the deeds performed by him or her in this world. It is their responsibility that the departed be sent either to the heaven or to the underworld. In the abode of the spirits (“*suleti*”) there is a lake of boiling tar with a hanging hair’s-breadthbridge thrown across it. The innocent people safely cross the bridge and those who are sinful, fall into the bubbling lake and disappear. According to another version, the recently deceased get into a nine-storey castle located in the very centre of the next world. The sinless occupy the upper storeys. As for the sinners, they stay on the lowest floor.



# Nature







## *Geography of Pshav-Khevsureti*

Pshav-Khevsureti is located in the northeast of Georgia, on the southern and northern slopes of the Caucasus Mountains.

Eastern and western borders of Pshav-Khevsureti are defined by high mountain ridges. The western border is formed of following ranges (looking from the north): Kidegana Range; Chaukhi Massive; finally Gudamakari and Alevi ridges located between rivers Ksani and Aragvi. From the East the border follows Mutso Ridge, Atsunta Ridge and from mountain Borbalo goes to Kakheti Ridge.

Local part of the Great Caucasus Range stretching from mount Chaukhi on west to the Borbalo mountain to the east is called Khevsureti Range. It divides Khevsureti into two parts: Piraketi, i.e. southern Khevsureti and Pirikiti, i.e. northern Khevsureti. Pirikiti Khevsureti consists of several gorges: Arkhoti in the basin of river Asa, Guro-Shatili and Ardoti in the basin of Arghun. Piraketi Khevsureti is confined among the ravines of headwater tributaries of the so-called Khevsureti Aragvi. Pshavi lies southern to Piraketa Khevsureti around the basin the river Pshavis Aragvi.

A local curiosity in Khevsureti's Ridge is that the slopes at lower altitudes are much steeper than the higher, relatively flattened peaks. It forms the characteristic landscape of Khevsureti with deep, steep gorges topped and vast alpine meadows formed on the wide ranges above them.

The highest peak in the region is mount Tebulo (4493 m). The other important peaks are: Kidegana (4275), Chaukhi (3842), Tanie (3499), Amghismaghali (3741), Makhismaghali (3991), Maistismta (4081), Borola (2954), Big and Small Borbalo (3294 and 3134 respectively). The main passes are Arkhotistavis Ghele (3287 m.), Ark-



Chaukhi massif – western border of Khevsureti



**Tebulosmta 4493 - the highest peak of Khevsureti**

hotisghele (2932), Datvisjvari (2676), Andaki (2887) and Atsunta (3431m).

The local landscape, stretched between 1300 and 4500 meters asl, is characterised by various climate zones: mountain forests, sub-alpine and alpine meadows, sub-nival (rocky levels between meadows and icebound territories) and nival (permanently covered with snow) levels.

In the Territory of Pshavi and Southern Khevsureti there are almost no glaciers, the only existing present-day glaciers are located on the slopes of the Chaukhi Massive, at the source of the River Abedaulaura. There are some traces of glaciers visible on the Main Ridge, i.e. around Mount Borbalo.

In Northern Khevsureti glaciers are present in many places.

In the Arghun-Ardotis ravine one encounters well developed glacial ridges such as mount Tebula, Amugo, Pirchita, Makhis Maghali, etc. In the Asa valley, on the Kidegani Ridge there are numerous cirque and hanging glaciers. They are the source of Asa's left tributaries-Chimghistskali, Akhielistskali and Chkhanta.

One of the most curious post-glacial natural structures are the so called "wandering boulders" in the Roshka ravine. They are relicts of the Pleistocene period and have been brought to this area by glaciers from the Chaukhis massive, approximately from an altitude of 3700-3800 meters. You can see an impressive "stone river" built by the boulders dragged all the way down to the subapline zone, around 2000 m asl.

### ***South Khevsureti and Pshavi***

The headwater of Pshavi's River Aragvi is located on Mount Borbalo.

The whole basin of Khevsureti's River Aragvi is located in Southern Khevsureti and comprises three rivers: Abudelaure, which flows out of the Chauchis Glaciers; a bit further up it is joined by the river Gorshegmistskali, which flows from the slopes of the Arkhoti and Anatori passes; and Kakhmatistskali, which source is located at Datvisvari Massive. Their confluence is near the village of Ghuli, at a height of 1600-1700 meters above sea level.

These basins were formed from Jurassic layers. Only the lower part of Pshavi's Aragvi basin originates from the Cretaceous period and is made out of limestone and sand-clay.

*(The Jurassic period began 195 million years ago and ended 140 million years ago. The Cretaceous period started 135-137 million years ago and ended 70-67 million years ago.)*

### ***North Khevsureti***

Arkhoti's valley (the other name for the Asis ravine) is deep and is characterized by the steep slopes and cliffs. Worth mentioning is Chingha's Gorge where cliffs are built from diabase and porphyritic rocks.

In the ravines of the river Asa and Arghuni we can find travertines - elements of limestone that were brought to the surface and deposited there by underground mineral springs (mostly hot ones).



Bridge on Abudelaure stream

## *Climate*

The climate in Pshav-Khevsureti varies in different parts of the region. The ravines of the river Asa and Arghuni (Northern Khevsureti) is harsher than in Pshavi and Southern Khevsureti (Aragvi's Ravine).

The Khevsureti Ridge prevents air currents from the North Caucasus entering Southern Khevsureti. Only currents from the south, east and west are reaching Pshavi and South Khevsureti, bringing humid air and increasing rain deposits.

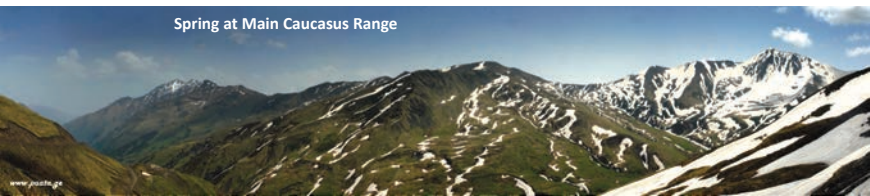
In the high mountains of the Caucasus continental air currents are dominant. The existence of mountain-ravine winds is also of importance. Complex and densely formed rugged mountain ranges in the Caucasus determine and change the direction of winds, therefore different climates can be characteristic for different, separated valleys.

A great scale of altitudes typical for Pshav-Khevsureti mountains results in multiple temperature levels.

The climate in the basin of the river Aragvi is warmer than the one occurring in the river ravines on the northern side of the Caucasus, Asa and Arghun. At an altitude of 1500 meters above sea level, the temperature during 5 months is below freezing. Maximum temperatures are observed in the month of August regardless of differences in topography over the whole region. In general summer in mountains is long but still it can be quite chilly. Temperatures over 10 degrees are registered only during five months here. In high mountain areas, summer is even shorter and colder. Average temperature at 2500 meters altitude exceeds 10 degrees only from 2 up to 4 months. Higher up, above 3000 meters it gets even colder.

The northern side of the Caucasus Ridge receives a significantly lower amount of rain than the Southern part, however with the rise in altitude difference it becomes less significant. An area from

Spring at Main Caucasus Range



1200-1300 meters to 1800-1900 is characterized by a temperate humid and moderately cold climate with long chilly summers and cold winters. Average temperature during January is from -6 to -3 degrees. Extreme minimum temperature can go down as much as -25 to -28 degrees. Rain deposits are quite high, from 900 up to 1400 mm. The largest amount of rainfall is during May. The maximum average humidity is during the warm season and reaches 74-76%, while the minimum occurs during the winter period: 67-68%. Duration of snowfall is from 3 to 6 months. Depth of snow layer can vary from 30 to 100 centimeters.

Higher up, the climate at altitudes from 1800-1900 to 2400-2500 meters is characterized by a humid, cold winter and short chilly summers. Most rainfall occurs at the end of spring and beginning of summer. The least amount of rain falls during January. Temperature during the warmest month is from 10 to 15 degrees. Yearly rainfall amounts to 1200-1500 mm. In some places the snow layer can reach a depth of 2 meters.

At an altitude of 2400-2500 to 2400-3500 summer is short, while winter is harsh and long. Average temperature during January is -12 -14 degrees; average temperature during July can reach 4-6 degrees. Temperature above zero lasts from 4 to 6 months. Absolute minimum is -30 degrees. The layer of snow here also reaches 2 meters in depth.

Further up above 3500 meters, we encounter Nival climate which is characterized by a permanent snow presence. This area is

Winter in Arkhoti valley



characterised by extreme cold and harsh winters. Temperature during the warmest month remains below 5 degrees. The absolute minimum is -30 to -35 degrees.

## Soil

In this region we encounter different types of soil, in accordance with the altitude of the area. This includes: forest, peat and primitive mountain-meadow soil types. Mountain-meadows (2000-3500 m.) occupy the largest area of land here. The composition of the soil is dominated by clay and shale as well as sand and rock elements.

## Flora and Vegetation

The diversity of Pshav-Khevsureti's flora and vegetation is dictated by the fact that this historical-geographical region is located on the boundary of the Central and East Caucasus ranges. Richness of its flora combines up to a thousand species of plants. They are divided on the northern and southern slopes (Pshavi - Southern Khevsureti and Northern Khevsureti) within separated vertical zones.

In the area of Pshavi and Southern Khevsureti (Ravine of River Aragvi's basin) the following vertical zones are present:

1. Moderate zone with beech, oak and hornbeam forests.
2. Sub-alpine forest zone, high altitude shrubs and sub-alpine meadows.
3. Alpine zone with alpine meadows and high altitude shrubs.
4. Sub-nival zone with petrophile flora.

In the ravines of the river Asa and Arghuni (in Northern Khevsureti) all of the above mentioned zones are represented but the Nival zone can also be found.

The Northern side is dominated by pine forests (barely represented in the Aragvi's ravine). In part of the Asa-Arghuni ravine which is located on Georgian territory there are no



3 zones - forest, meadows and icebound zones

beech forests to be found, while in the Aragvi ravine, at an altitude of 1000 to 2200 meters, they are ubiquitous. In the Asa's ravine, unlike the Arghuni ravine, no oak forests (*Quercus macranthera*) can be found. There are also less sub alpine tall-herbs grasslands, alpine meadows and flora in the sub-nival zone.

### ***Forest vegetation***

Forests that are located on the banks of the rivers are composed of alder-trees (*Alnus barbata*, *A. incana*) and fused with willow trees (*Salix exelsa*, *S.alba*). In some places Black Poplar (*Populus nigra*) and White Poplar (*Populus canescens*) can be encountered. In the southern slopes oak forests are to be found dominated by the Georgian Oak (*Quercus petraea* subsp. *iberica*). Its optimal altitude is 1000 meters above sea level. In the Oak forest one can encounter Hornbeams, Azalea, Nut-groves, Cornels, Poa and *Festuca drymeia*

At higher altitudes, 1500-1800 meters above sea level it is replaced by the Caucasian Oak (*Quercus macranthera*). This type of forest is quite ubiquitous in Pshav-Khevsureti, its remains are covered by Yellow Azalea (*Rhododendron luteum*) and wild berries such as: wild crab apples, hawthorns and medlar.

On the Northern slopes the dominant species are: beech (*Fagus orientalis*) fused with hornbeam (*Carpinus betulus*=*C. caucasicus*), field maple (*Acer campestre*, *A. laetum*), ash-trees (*Fraxinus exelsior*), elm (*Ulmus scabra*) and aspen (*Populus tremula*). At higher altitude the following trees exist: silver birch (*Betula pendula*) and Caucasian Oak (*Quercus macranthera*). Varieties of shrubs can also be found: Common Hazel (*Corylus avellana*), Wayfaring Tree (*Viburnum lantana*), Guelder Rose (*Viburnum opulus*), dog rose (*Rosa canina*) and spindle tree (*Euonimus latifolia*).



Subalpine forest,  
western Khevsureti

The temperate zones of mountain forests are characterized by diverse flora. Especially rich are the so called “windows”, which appear as a result of deforestation.

On the territory of Pshav-Khevsureti differ-

ent types of understory of beech forest can be found: hornbeam, Common Hazel, fern, tall-grass, blackberry, poa, *Festuca drymeia*, etc.

Temperate zones of mountains (1500-1700 m.), which are dominated by beech and oak forests, transform into sub-alpine forest zone. The endemic tree of Northern Khevsureti is the Black Birch (*Betula raddeana*). Birch trees are mixed here with Rowan/mountain-ashes (*Sorbus aucuparia*=*S. caucasigena*), Goat Willow (*Salix caprea*), Common Aspen (*Populus tremula*) and Maple (*Acer trautvetteri*). In North Khevsureti an important role in forest composition is held by the Caucasian Pine (*Pinus sosnowskyi*). In the Sub-alpine zone (1800-2000 m.) there is a mix of pine and pine-birch-aspen forest (*Pinus sosnowskyi* *Betula litwinowii*, *B. pendula*, *B. Raddeana*, *Populus tremula*). In the Arghuni ravine, between Shatili and Mutso, a mix of pine and oak trees (*Pinus sosnowskyi*, *Quercus macranthera*) grow on southern-eastern open, rocky slopes.

The birch forest in some places reaches an altitude of upto 2500 m above sea level. In birch forest the following understory plant species can be found: Snow Rose, Azalea, tall-grass, *Festuca varia*, rough small-reed (*Calamagrostis arundinacea*), etc.

In the region of Pshav-Khevsureti Aspen forests are mixed with: hazel undergrowth (*opulus tremula*, *Corylus avellana*), Yellow Azalea (*Populus tremula*, *Rhododendron luteum*) and different types of grass.

The sub-alpine zone has been used extensively by the local population for agricultural and pasture purposes, which caused deforestation in those areas. Presently, instead of trees, lot of rare herbs grow on the Eastern and South-Eastern slopes of the Northern Khevsureti mountains. Flora is especially rich there and includes more than 200 species. Such diversity is beyond comparison in Georgia. A similar type of plant variety and their composition is widespread in Dagestan and Chechnya-Ingushetia. The altitude of its vegetation territory reaches between 1000 and 2000 meters.

In the sub-alpine zone, on north-western slopes, one can encounter the Caucasian rhododendron (*Rhododendron caucasicum*) and types of berries, like: bilberry, lingonberry (*Vaccinium myrtillus*, *V. vitis idaea*). Caucasian Rhododendron always grows on the northern slopes and never on southern ones. From shrubs growing in the sub-alpine zone the most noticeable are: Common Hazel, Currant and





Rhododendron

Alpine Currant (*Ribes biebersteinii*, *R. alpinum*), Wayfaring Tree (*Viburnum lantana*), Caucasian honeysuckle (*Lonicera caucasica*) and Common Gooseberry (*Grossularia reclinata*). The Caucasian Rhodo-

dendron is especially widespread in Arghuni's (Datvisjvari, Guro-Giorgitsminda, Shatili's, Mutso's, Khoni's, Huro's, Kharohki's, Ardor-archilo-andaqi's watersources) and Asa's (Tsirtslovani, Kalotana, Tanie) sub-alpine and alpine zones.

### ***Tall Herbaceous (tall-herbs)***

This type of plant is widespread in Pshavi and Khevsureti. The optimum latitude for its vegetation is 1800-2200 meters. Dominant species are ones from the Parsley family (Fam. Umbeliferae+Apiaceae). The most widespread of them is Sosnowsky's Hogweed (*Heracleum sosnowskyi*). In South Khevsureti, it grows in Roshki's moraine relief and in the area of the Gudani and Khakhmati villages. While in North Khevsureti it can be found in the areas of Khone and Khakhabo. Hogweed is quite a dangerous plant, in case of contact with skin it leaves a scratch which will soon turn into a sore and last for a long time. Inexperienced tourists often become victims of this plant. To avoid nettling, one must wear long trousers and keep out of the plants reach. Other representatives of tall herbs are: teasel, valerians, Aconitum, Delphinium, etc.

### ***High Mountain Meadows***

The meadows of Pshavi and Khevsureti are home to more than 400 species of plants. Sub-alpine meadows are located at an altitude of 1800 - 2500 meters. They have a different composition, some with dominant grain and some with various species of herbs. Grain meadows consist of brown bent (*Agrostis planifolia*), matgrass (*Nardus stricta*), *Festuca varia*, bunch grass (*Calamagrostis arundinaceae*) and Brome (*Bromus variegatus*) meadows. Among these herb meadows are those dominated by Narcissus Anemone (*Anemone fasciculata*), globeflower (*Trollius patulus*), Caucasian Elecampane (*Inula*

orientalis) and *Alchemilla* (*Achillea caucasica*, *A. sericata*) species. Intensive mowing areas are occupied by False hellebores (*Veratrum lobelianum*), *Rumex* (*Rumex alpinum*), thistle (*Cirsium obvalatum*) and matgrass (*Nardus stricta*). These kind of weed meadows are seen on spring pastures in the mountain Borola massive, Roshki's Khorkhi, Velketili and Tsubrovni massives, Giorgitsminda, water-source of Shatili's Tsqali and areas around Huro and Kharohkis.

In Northern Khevsureti, we meet lots of plants typical for a dry climate, such as: *Stipa*, *Artemisia*, Caucasian *Astragalus* and etc. (*Stipa pulcherrima*, *S. capillata*, *S. dagestanica*, *Artemisia chamaemelifolia*, *Astragalus microcephalus*). The existence of those plants in this area is caused by the influence of Dagestan's flora mixed with steppe plants. Alpine plants and meadows are located at an altitude of 2500-2900 m. At these heights a dominant position is held by grain-herb meadows.

### *Alpine carpets*

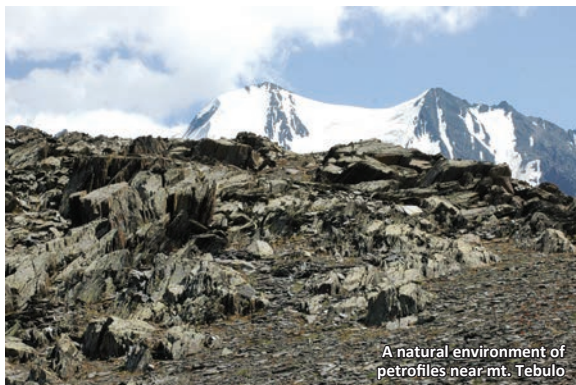
This type of plant formation is present mostly in North Khevsureti, on the border of the massive high mountainous alpine and sub-alpine zones and stretched up to an altitude of 2900-3300 m. Alpine carpets are created by comparatively low plants (*Taraxacum confusum*, *Carum caucasicum*, *Poa alpine*, *Carex micropodioides*, *Briza marcowiczii*, *Luzula sudetica*, *Plantago saxatilis*, *Minuartia oreina*). Alpine carpets are seen on mount Arkhoti, in the Guro-Giorgitsminda ravine, Khoniskhori's and also Atsuntis massive.



Alpine meadow at kistani

### ***“Rock-loving” plants (petrophilic flora)***

The most interesting and endemic is the flora of subnival zone in the Pshav-Khevsureti. At an altitude of 2900-4000 m. we can encounter a few species of local “rock-loving” plants. The Subnival zone lacks diversity - here, among cliffs and boulders small, homogenous communities of herbs grow. This is caused by extreme climatic conditions. As the altitude rises, the amount of plants diminish, though the amount of rare and endemic plants increase. Those are: *Pseudovesikaria* (*Pseudovesicaria digitata*), *Simfioloma* (*Symphyoloma graveolens*), *Vavilovia* (*Vavilovia formosa*), *Primula* (*Primula bayernii*), buttercup (*Ranunculus tebulossicus*) and many more.



In isolated zones rare Arctic-Alpine plants grow, such as *Saxifraga flagellaris*, *S. moschata*, *S. exerata*, *Myosotys alpestre*, *Oxyria digina*, *Empetrum caucasicum*(=*E. hermafroditum*), *Vaccinium myrtillus*, *Ligularia subsagittata* and etc. In Pshavi and Northern Khevsureti the Subnival zone is represented to a lesser degree, so it lacks the unique flora usual for it.

### ***Relicts and Endemic species***

In the flora of Pshavi and Khevsureti we can find many relict and endemic species, such as a unique type of Yew, Caucasian *Rhododendron* (*Rhododendron caucasicum*), two types of Birch (*Betula litwinowii*, *B. raddeana*) In Georgia only in the area of Shatili and

Tsukio (on the right bank of the river Andaqistskali) we encounter the Armenian Rowan (*Sorbus hajastana*), which until recently was considered to be a species endemic to Armenia.

Almost half of the high mountainous flora in this region is endemic to the Caucasus and Georgia. Most of the species can be found in the subnival zone.

Local Endemic species in Pshav-Khevsureti are - (***Peucedanum pschavicum***), (***Ficaria varia***), (***Pimpinella schatilisensis***), (***Allium chevsuricum***), (***Allium ochiauriae***), (***Galeopsis nana***).

Meadows around the village Khone in Tebulo's Massive are home to 6 out of 17 endemic Caucasus species - *sobolevskia*, *trigonokariumi*, *mandenovia*, *gadelia*, *pseudovesikaria*, *simfioloma*, *agazilisi*, *vavilovia* (*Sobolevskiacaucasica*, *Trigonocaryuminvolucratum*, *Mandenoviakomarovii*, *Gadelia lactiflora*, *Pseudovesicaria digitata*, *Symphyolomagraveolens*, *Agasyllis latifolia*, *Vavilovia formosa*).

Many endemic species are also encountered on the following tourist routes: Roshka-Arkhoti, Shatil-Mighmakhev-Atsuntatusheti. Here we encounter many endemic species as well as many plants of spontaneous spreading areal. (*Lilium monadelphum*



subsp. *georgicum*, *Lamyropsis sinuata*, *Primula luteola*, *P. bayernii*, *P. darialica*, *Mandenovia komarovii*, *Trigonocaryum involucratum*, *Aconitum tuschetium*, *Rosa tuschetica*, *Symphyoloma graveolens*, *Pseudovesicaria digitata*, *Podospermum grigorashvilii*, *Delphinium caucasicum*, *Ranunculus tebulossicus*, *Silene humilis*, *Senecio lapsanoides*, *Teprosieris karjaginii*, *T. caucasigena*, *Campanula argunensis*, *C. petraea*, *C. sarmatica*, *Cerastium kasbek*)

### ***Healing and Agricultural Plants***

Pshav-Khevsureti has a long history of natural medical practices. This is due to the isolation of the region and difficulty when import-



Khakhabo

ing medicine. Therefore, local dwellers specialized in the use of herbs and other natural resources in medical practices. Khevsureti's and Pshavi's "Wise Women" are known for their skills. For centuries they have performed complex operations, for example head trephination.

The purposes for utilizing these local plants are as diverse as the plants themselves. In Northern Khevsureti, alongside the river Andakistskali, rich in vitamins hop and sea-buckthorn fruits can be found. In subalpine and alpine zones Caucasian Rhododendron, Crowberry and Vaccinium along with sweetbrier and raspberries grow. They are dried and used for brewing tea. On Roshki's moulders Common Ragwort (*Senecio platypylus*) can be found. This rare plant can be used in the treatment of heart diseases.

In Northern Khevsureti, in the area of Guro-Giorgitsminda and Archilo-Khakhabo, we meet yet another rare species of tall-herbs, called Caucasian Agasyllis (*Angelica tatianae*). It also has healing abilities and is used when treating bowel diseases.

### ***Fauna of Pshav-Khevsureti***

There is a bird, whose voice is always heard in Pshavi and Khevsureti as well as in all the highest passes and peaks of Caucasus. This is Caucasian Snowcock- quite big (the size of a hen) and an almost invisible bird, whose whistle is one of the most common sounds of in the Caucasus. Still this bird is rarely seen by travellers. The snowcock

lives in upland areas, during winter it lives at a height of 3000 meters, while during the spring months of April and May, it descends to relatively low altitudes.

Khevsuri people say: He who can kill the Snowcock can also kill the female Jikhvi – East Caucasian Tur. In fact both Snowcocks and Turs live at the same altitude and are considered a most wanted loot. Many legends are told about the coexistence of these two animals- they say Snowcocks guard Turs and warn them about danger, in return they find food in the snow uncovered by Turs.

The Tur is a real beauty of the Caucasian mountains, especially the male Tur with their huge horns. All year around they inhabit the unreachable lower peaks and only during November do they leave these places for lower latitudes for the mating season. These animals have an incredible strength and ability to adapt to their environment. A group of frightened Turs can overcome absolutely vertical cliffs. Because they live in unreachable cliff strongholds they prefer to dwell on the northern steep slopes of the Caucasus. They are mostly encountered in the Northern Khevsureti and very rarely in the Southern areas.

Below the subalpine and alpine meadows where the Turs live, another hoofed animal dwells- Chamois. It has a lesser stature and is a beautiful creature, which lives in small groups. If you encounter a solitary Chamois, it's an aged male. The species is often encountered in an area around mount Borbalo.



East Caucasian Tur



In subalpine forest and slopes where rhododendrons are widespread the Caucasian Grouse dwells. For a long time this bird was considered to be the Black Grouse. The history of this species is connected with the

Polish naturalist Mlokosevich. This interesting man lived in the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He worked as a forester in the Lagodekhi forest reserve which belonged to Russian prince Demidov. He was the first one to notice that grouse living in the Caucasus were different from their European cousin. He had caught several birds and sent them to a University in Warsaw. There, experts declared them to be an independent species and gave them the Latin name *Lyrurus mlokosiewiczii*.

Like Snowcock, grouse is also a native of the Caucasian mountains. It spends winter time in evergreen rhododendron thickets, where it makes tunnels in the snow. During spring, when the snow becomes heavy and wet it migrates to the southern slopes. This is the easiest time to see this bird, especially the male, whose black cover is seen very clearly on the snow or in greyish grass.

On the Borders of Khevsureti and Chechnya, on the cliffs near Anatori, one can still encounter Bezoar Goats. Except for this place, on Georgian territory this animal can only be found in Tusheti. This wild goat lives on steep and sometimes completely vertical slopes covered by forests. Unfortunately, there are very few Bezoar Goats left in Georgia, the population of this species requires special care and attention.

There is no more Red Deer to be found in Pshav-Khevsureti. Pshavi's places for prayer are still abundant with horns of slain Deer. Mountain dwellers sacrificed their loot to the gods, in order to bring them luck when next hunting. Icons of Khevsureti are covered with Tur horns, while Icons of Pshavi are covered with deer antlers. No one is allowed to touch these sacrifices or move them from these places. Till this day deer antlers lay on icons in simple construction, while the noble animal itself is no longer seen in Pshavi.





Remains of a deer on ancient Khati

A small brother of the Deer – the Roe Deer is frequently encountered in Pshav-Khevsureti. Its home is within deciduous forests. If this animal is not bothered, it can dwell near a human environment and quickly multiply.

At high altitudes one can encounter traces of Brown Bear. Bears living in the Caucasus region are not aggressive and cautious; they are very hard to spot. In Pshav-Khevsureti and all over Georgia the population is quite stable, but the bear as with all other species are often targeted by poachers.

The other noticeable predators of Pshav-Khevsureti are: Wolf, Lynx, Fox, Cliff Marten and little, but the most widespread is the Least Weasel, which lives right next to human settlements.

In the distant past Khevsureti was a home to the Leopard as well, people used to call them tigers. Scientists still hope that somewhere in Northern Khevsureti and Tusheti there might still be Leopards. Several expeditions have been made to find one; unfortunately they have not been successful. The last Leopard on Georgian territory was seen in the most south-eastern region-natural reserve of Vashlovani. The first time it was seen in 2003, however in 2009 its tracks were lost. Information about the animal species comes from very old sources. Its existence in the mountains led to the creation of the Georgian national epic the “Tiger and the Young Man”, which tells a story of the battle between two worthy opponents, a young hunter and a tiger.



This is a hymn of praise for bravery and more importantly humanism. Both rivals die during the battle. The poem ends with the mother of the hunter crying over her son's death. She decides to find the mother of the tiger so they can both mourn the death of their sons together.

The formation of the Pshav-Khevsuri people's mentality has been shaped during direct contact with nature. In their faith and tradition predator birds play an important role. Khevsuri people believed that there exist "wise" birds- such as Crane, Wagtail and Cuckoo, which are possessed by the souls of dead people. Killing such birds was a terrible sin and would cause misfortune. Khevsuri even called the other worlds "the country of Cuckoos".

East Caucasus is inhabited by many interesting birds. This region is especially good for a kind of ecotourism called "birdwatching". Apart from the already mentioned Shurtkhi and Rocho, good targets for birdwatching are the Great Rosefinch and Guldenstadts Redstart. Also of rare beauty is a small bird called the Wallcreeper, whose Khevsurian name "Cliff Fire" is very appropriate as it jumps from one cliff to another with its red wings and looks like a real fire.

Mornings in the villages of Pshav-Khevsureti usually start with the song of the common Gosefinch, Goldfinch and Wheatear. Cuckoos song during their mating season is the main musical theme in the area.



Bearded Vulture

Obviously the mountains are impossible to imagine without large bird predators. The unchallenged ruler in the mountains is the Golden Eagle. Everyone who has ever seen this powerful bird flying has to recognize its majesty. This massive bird reaches an incredible speed while diving from above with folded wings. Even the cautious Snowcock cannot escape it.

The other predatory birds one will encounter in Pshav Khevsureti are: Kestrel, Peregrine Falcon, Common Buzzard and Sparrowhawk. From scavengers one can find here the Griffon Vulture (Gyps) and the Lammergeier (Bearded Vulture). The last one is one of the most beautiful birds in the Caucasus. No one knows why the Bearded Vulture takes mineral baths but these are the remains of minerals that give it a golden colour.

The bearded Vulture and Gyps belong to the elite group of scavenger birds. They have excellent sight and as soon as they spot carrion they appear as if from nowhere. However they might circle their food for a very long time, until a bird of larger intelligence, the Raven, comes first. When the Raven starts eating the carrion it is a signal that there is no danger.

When summer days are over in Pshav-Khevsureti, the areas where cattle and sheep are sacrificed are full of animal remains. After the human has finished, it is time for the birds to feast. This is also a part of a natural cycle unique to this area.

# Tourism





## ***Tourism Offer of Pshav-Khevsureti***

There are no real hotels in Pshav-Khevsureti but there are a lot of places where you will find rooms for. Hosts serve local food, some of them will help also to rent a horse, hire mountain guide, driver with a jeep, etc. All prices are negotiable, hosts usually make discounts if you stay longer or travel in a bigger group.

### ***Gueshouses in Khevsureti***

#### ***Shatili:***

**Host:** Mikheil Chincharauli +995 595-50-37-98

**Beds:** 12

**Rooms:** 4 (2 double rooms; one three and one five-bed room)

**Price:** 20 Laris per person a night (without meals), tea and coffee are included.

One meal a day - 30 Laris

Two meals a day - 50 Laris

Three meals a day - 60 Laris

One can rent a jeep or horses here, guesthouse also offers mountains guides.

**Host:** Vazha Chincharauli +995 577-72-93-62 [alionitour@gol.ge](mailto:alionitour@gol.ge)

**Beds:** 10

**Rooms:** 4 (2 double rooms; 2 three-bed rooms)

**Price:** 15 Laris per person a night (without meals); coffee and tea are included.

One meal a day - 25 Laris

Two meals a day - 35 Laris

Three meals a day - 45 Laris

**Hostess:** Mzia Tsiklauri +995 599-80-73-80

**Beds:** 14

**Rooms:** 4

**Price:** 20 Laris per person a night (without meals)

**Meals:** Two meals a day - 50 Laris

Three meals a day - 60 Laris

Tea, coffee, *khinkali* and a hard drink are included.

**Host:** Nana Gogochuri +995 599-99-20-25

**Beds:** 15

**Price:** 15 Laris per person a night (without meals)

Two meals a day - 30 Laris

Three meals a day - 40 Laris

Tea and coffee are included in the price.

**Historical Tower in Shatili Host:** Shorena Chincharauli

+995595518452 ;

**email:** *shorenaliqokeli@mail.ru*

**Beds:** 12 **Rooms:** 6 double rooms

**Price:** 30 Laris per person a night (without meals)

Two meals a day - 60 Laris

Three meals a day - 70 Laris

**Hostess:** Irma Gigaure +995 595-50-36-22

**Beds:** 8 **Rooms:** 3 (1 double room, 2 three-bed rooms)

**Price:** 20 Laris per person a night (without meals)

Two meals a day - 50 Laris

Three meals a day - 70 Laris

**Hostess:** Lamara Chincharauli +995 599-77-54-73

**Beds:** 8 **Rooms:** 3 (1 double room, 2 three-bed rooms)

**Price:** 20 Laris per person a night (without meals)

Two meals a day - 50 Laris

Three meals a day - 70 Laris



Shatili historical towers

**Hostess:** Zhuzhuna Chincharauli +995 599-20-32-08

**Beds:** 12 **Rooms:** 4 three-bed rooms

**Price:** 10 Laris per night (without meals)

Two meals a day - 40 laris

**Hostess:** Sopo Chincharauli +995 595 71-97-99

**Beds:** 12

**Rooms:** 4 (1 five-bed room, 2 double rooms, 1 three-bed room)

**Price:** 20 Laris per person a night (without meals)

Two meals a day - 50 Laris

Three meals a day - 70 Laris

Tea, coffee and hard drinks (wine, *chacha*) are included in the price.

**Hostess:** Lela Gogochuri +995 599 99-28-83,

**email:** *nunuca-2008@yandex.ru*

**Beds:** 15

**Rooms:** 8 (5 double rooms, 1 three-bed room, 2 single rooms)

**Price:** 20 Laris per person a night (without meals)

One meal a day - 30 Laris

Two meals a day - 40 Laris

Three meals a day - 50 Laris

Tea, coffee and hard drinks (wine, *chacha*) are included in the price.

*Chacha* can be bought for 7 Lari per 1 liter.

**Historical Tower in Shatili Host:** David Jalabauri

+995 598 12-76-14; [www.jalabauri.ge](http://www.jalabauri.ge)

**email:** *datojalabauri@yahoo.com*

**Beds:** 16 **Rooms:** 6 (5 double rooms, 1 six-bed room)

**Price:** 30 Laris per person a night (without meals)

One meal a day - 40 Laris

Two meals a day - 50 Laris

Three meals a day - 60 Laris

Tea, coffee and hard drinks (wine, *chacha*) are included in the price.

Hiring of horses is available: 1 horse a day on short distance routes - 30 Laris; on long distance routes -



50 Laris a day (a guide's service included). Service of Russian- and English-speaking guides is also offered.

### **Village Korsha**

**Host:** Mamuka Arabuli +995 599 741 199

**email:** korshaltd@gmail.com;

**Facebook:** korshaguesthouse

**Beds:** 18

**Rooms:** 6 (2 double rooms, 2 three-bed rooms, 2 four-bed rooms)

**Meals:** Traditional dishes (*khinkali*, *khachapuri* and other hot dishes)

**Price:** 20 Laris per person a night (without meals)

One meal a day - 30 Laris

Two meals a day - 40 Laris

Three meals a day - 50 Laris

Tea, coffee and hard drinks (wine, *chacha*) are included in the price.

Hiring of horses is available at the following price: 1 horse a day - 50 Laris a day (a guide's service included). The guesthouse also offers a Jeep for rent.

Guests will have the chance of visiting the Ethnographic museum located near to the guesthouse, where they will view the rarities - articles of household, weapons, etc.. The museum is run by local artist Shota Arabuli, whose paintings and wooden sculptures you can also see in the hostel. In the museum you can also purchase Khevsur traditional souvenirs and handicrafts.

### **Village Gudani**

**Host:** Dzila Chincharauli +995 593 30-11-70

**Beds:** 14

**Rooms:** 5

**Meals:** Traditional dishes (*khinkali*, *khachapuri* and other hot dishes)

**Price:** 10 Laris per person a night (without meals)

One meal a day - 25 Laris

Two meals a day - 40 Laris

Three meals a day - 50 Laris

Tea, coffee, milk, stewed fruit and hard drinks (wine,



View of the blue trail from the guesthouse in Gudani



*chacha*) are included in the price.

Service of a guide is offered at the following price: 25 - 35 Laris (Russian- and English-speaking guides, respectively).

### ***Village Roshka***

**Host:** Shota Tsiklauri

**+995 599 39-97-89**

**Beds:** 13

**Rooms:** 4 (2 four-bed rooms, 1 three-bed room, 1 two-bed room)

**Price:** 20 Laris per person a night (without meals)

Two meals a day - 40 Laris

Horses for hire is available at the following price: 1 horse a day - 50 Laris a day (a guide's service included).

### ***Village Juta***

**“Zeta” camping, host:** Anano Arabuli, +995 577501057

16 beds in 4 rooms.

**Prices:** 20 GEL for staying overnight without accomodation. Food and beverages are bought separately in the bar functioning within the camp. “Zeta” offers beds in a small, woodden house built recently; another possibility is to sleep in tents rented by the owner. “Zeta” provides also warm sleeping bags. There is also a hot shower in the campsite. Anano speaks english, german and russian, part of her staff also speak greek.

**contact:** [www.zeta.ge](http://www.zeta.ge); [facebook.com/zetacamping](https://facebook.com/zetacamping)



**Host:** Iago Arabuli

10 beds. Price is 25 lari with food included. Iago speaks German and his wife speaks English. Rooms are refurbished, the house is built according to normal western standards. Iago can also organise mountain guide, horses for rent, etc.

**contact:** +995 599 533 239

### *Guesthouses in Pshavi*

#### *Magharoskari*

The hotel “Pshavi”

**Host:** Beso Tsotskolauri 500188883, web page [www.pshavi.ge](http://www.pshavi.ge)

**The number of places** – 50

The hotel has small conference hall, it is possible to hire a guide, also with a horse

**Price:** one person without feeding - 20 lari, food service – 35-50 lari.

**Host:** Eva Bachiashvili **591 22 26 57**

**The number of places** – 20

The family hotel has transport (Jeep) and Russian speaking experienced guide service

**Price:** one person without food - 15 lari, with food 35-50 lari

**Host:** Marina Gognelashvili

**The number of places:** 8

The family hotel has horses and a car (Jeep), guests can hire an English-speaking guide.

**Price:** one person without food service – 15 lari, with food service 35 - 50 lari

**Contact information:** phone: 0790282 493

#### *Shuapkho*

**Host:** Zaza Kochashvili **0790 94 54 57**

**The number of places:** 20

At the family hotel they have horses and a car (Jeep) for rent.

**Amount:** one person without food service 15 lari, with food 35 – 50 lari

**Host:** Goderdzi 0790 65 38 26

**The number of places:** 6

They have horses and a car (Jeep), they have a guide speaking English and Russian

**Amount:** without food service one person - 15 lari, with food service 35-50 lari. Among other dishes, hosts serve mountain trout.

### ***Chargali***

**Hostess:** Melano Mchedluri **599 15 22 41**

**Beds:** 15

**Rooms:** 4

**Price:** 35 Lari per person a day (2 meals a day included)

**Service:** Mobile phone, hot water service

1 horse available for renting, 30 Lari per day. service of a tour guide are available.

**Hostess:** Tamriko Zurabashvili **558 37 47 31**

**Beds:** 10

**Rooms:** 3

**Price:** 35 Lari per person a day (2 meals a day included)

**Service:** Mobile phone, hot water service

1 horse available for renting, 30 Lari per day. service of a tour guide are available.

**Hostess:** Amiran Zurabashvili **595 16 62 24**

**Beds:** 13

**Rooms:** 4

**Price:** 35 Lari per person a day (2 meals a day included)

**Service:** Mobile phone, hot water

1 horse available for renting, 30 Lari/day. Excursion and the service of a tour guide are available.

There is also house-museum of famous Georgian poet ***Vazha Pshavela*** in Chargali.

### ***Guides in Pshavi:***

**Irma Butkhashvili** –speaking Russian, mob: 577 676 733

**Maiko** – English-speaking, mob: 599 30 53 53

**Mari Chubinidze** - speaking Italian, mob: 555 577 655

***Guides in Khevsureti***

**Mamuka Arabuli**, speaking Russian, mob: 599 741 199

**Ivane Arabuli**, speaking Russian, mob: 598 19 65 69

**Zviad Daiauri**, speaking Russian, mob: 574 84 33 11

**David Jalabauri**, speaking Russian, mob: 598 12 76 14

**Aleko Mishelashvili**, speaking English, mob: 558 14 31 54

**Anano Chincharauli**, speaking English and Russian, mob: 598 54 26 30

***Hiring of Jeeps***

**Ivane Arabuli** (Mitsubishi Pajero) mob: 598 19 65 69

**Mamuka Arabuli** (Mitsubishi Pajero) mob: 595 59 34 84

**Besik Chincharauli** (Russian) (Isudzu Truper) mob: 599 24 38 14

***Horses on Hire***

it is advisable to inform the hosts beforehand, i.e. to make advanced reservations corresponding to the planned routes. it may be that the horses are driven to the pastures and the owners need time to get them back from the far away fields. The number of tourists is increasing year after year and the horses may quite possibly be engaged on tours. Prices are usually 30 GEL per horse a day on short-distance routes; 30 Lari plus a 20-Lari charge for the service of a guide on long-distance ones.

**Horses on hire in the village of Korsha** (Piraketa Khevsureti)

**Contact person:** Mamuka Arabuli +995 599 741 199,  
**email:** korshaltd@gmail.com

**Horses on hire in the village of Roshka** (Piraketa Khevsureti)

**Contact person:** Shota Tsiklauri +995 599 39-97-89

**Horses on hire in Shatili** (Pirikita Khevsureti)

Horse riding in Juta

**Contact person:** Dato Jalabauri +995 598 12-76-14, **email:** *dato-jalabauri@yahoo.com*

**Horses on hire in Mutso** (Pirikita Khevsureti)

**Contact person:** Mindia Chinchauri +995 599 26-91-05

### ***Dining Houses and shops***

In Pshav-Khevsureti there are no restaurants but there are two so-called dining houses. They are located in the villages of **Shatili** and **Korsha** in Khevsureti and in Magharoskari and Chargali in Pshavi. They serv. traditional Georgian dishes.

**Dining house in Korsha**

**Host:** Mamuka

**Tel:** +995 599 741 199

**Dining house in Shatili**

**Hostess:** Irma

**Tel:** +995 595 503 622

In Pshavi there are two shops open in Magharoskari village. Food shops in Khevsureti can be found in three places - in the villages of **Korsha** and **Barisakho**, both located in Piraketa Khevsureti, and in **Shatili** that is in Pirikita Khevsureti. The shops sell cigarettes, alcoholic and soft drinks, tea, coffee, sugar and other goods of first necessity. Bread is not available in the Shatili shop.

There is no real petrol station but petrol can be bought in the shops of Korsha and Barisakho from small containers.

### ***Local Tour Operators in Khevsureti***

***www.shatilitour.ge***

Contact person: Irakli Chinchauri, mob: 551 943 446

E-mail: *shatilitours@gmail.com*

Tebulotour: ***www.paata.ge***

Contact person: Paata Vardanashvili,

mob: 599 91 46 55, 574 444 813

**Discover Georgian Mountains**

Contact person: Zura Chinchauri, mob 599 30 53 53

E-mail: *daquexi@ymail.com*

**The centre of popularization of culture**

Contact person: Makrine Chabashvili, mob: 551 600 844

### **Tours in Georgia**

Contact person: Vazha Chincharauli, mob: 595 50 36 57

E-mail: [vchincharauli@yahoo.com](mailto:vchincharauli@yahoo.com)

See all Georgia [www.seeallgeorgia.ucoz.com](http://www.seeallgeorgia.ucoz.com)

Contact person: Mindia Tsiklauri, mob: 551 844 644

E-mail: [mindiatsiklauri@yahoo.com](mailto:mindiatsiklauri@yahoo.com)

### **Guides in Pshavi:**

**Irma Butkhashvili** –speaking Russian, mob: 577 676 733

**Maiko** – English- speaking, mob: 599 30 53 53

**Mari Chubinidze** - speaking Italian, mob: 555 577 655

### **Campsites in Khevsureti**

The campsites as such are not allocated and fixed in Khevsureti, however the can camp almost everywhere but not nearby the shrines. According to a Khevsur traditions it is forbidden to make a noise or shine a light on a sanctuary; women are prohibited from passing close by a holy place. Tourists should take into consideration the established restrictions and ask the locals for advice on the choice of a place for camping.

Good sites for setting up camps in the territory of Piraketa Khevsureti can be found in the neighbourhood of the villages of Khakhmati, in the area surrounding Datvisjvari and Roshka village. In Pirikita Khevsureti places used for campsites are in the area of Kistani-Lebaiskari, on the Arghun riverside around Shartili, Mutso, Ardoti, etc. A strategic campsite for the tourists heading for Tusheti is near a spring on the crest of Mount Khidotani, before the Atsunta pass.

### **Renting of Trekking Equipment**

**Renting tents and sleeping sacks is possible, village: Gudani (Southern Khevsuretia)**

Tent – 10 lari, sleeping bag – 5 lari (1 day – 1 person)

Contact person: Dzila Chincharauli, mob: 593 30 11 70, 079040 1997

**Renting tents and sleeping sacks is possible in Shatili (southern Khevsuretia)**

Tent - 10 lari, sleeping bag - 5 lari (1 day – 1 person)

Contact person: Beso Chincharauli, mob: 599 24 38 14



Rafting on the Aragvi river

Persons who are interested in the historical tours, ancient culture and **pictograms** found in Pshav-Khevsureti can contact the research scientist Giorgi Gigauri who will provides information and organizes tours in the mountain for persons who are interested in this subject.

Mob: 577 453 481, e-mail: [maraisdze@yahoo.com](mailto:maraisdze@yahoo.com)

### ***Rafting on Aragvi river: Adventure club Jomardi***

**Contact person:** Mamuka Burduli, mob: 599 141 160 [www.jomardi.ge](http://www.jomardi.ge)

The difficulty level of the tour: 2-3

The minimum age of the participants - 10

The tour begins from the village Magharoskari (Pshavi) and finishes at the village Tvaliv (Pshavi).

The lengths of the route is 15 km, duration 1 hour and 30 minutes

Instruction will be held for participants before

Rafting is done in boats with 8-10 men with qualified instructors in each.

Price is 40 lari which includes equipment (a helmet, life-jacket, water-proof jacket, shoes, etc)

Season for rafting begins from 1 of May till 15 of October

### ***Traditional handcraft***

Traditional handicraft was for centuries a hallmark of Pshav-Khevsureti region. Today you can purchase such products in Dusheti and Korsha. In Dusheti, at the corner of the main square there is a “Khvaramze” shop with traditional products. You can also buy

similar artifacts in Korsha Museum. It is also possible to contact local producers directly as per below list:

**Tinain Arabuli** – (Khevsuretian embroidering and knitting). Works with Khevsuretian ornaments on embroidering and knitting, maintains the former face, Khevsureti (in winter - Barisakho, in summer – Roshka), mob: 598 97 23 20

**Mziso Turmanauli** – (embroidering, knitting) works with Khevsuretian ornaments on embroidering and knitting, maintains their former face. Pshavi, Magharoskari, mob: 591 24, 20 50.

**Tiko Mekokishvili** – (Khevsuretian embroidery and sewing, thick felt, beads) works with Khevsuretian ornaments on embroidery and maintains the former face. Khevsureti, Barisakho, mob: 598 52 18 66.

**Lela Gigauri** – (Khevsuretian embroidery, sewing) works with Khevsuretian ornaments on embroidery and maintains the former face. Khevsureti, Barisakho, mob: 599 43 84 36.





**Melano Mchedluri** - (Knitting of carpets). Works on knitting with traditional ornaments, Chargali, mob: 599 15 22 41.

**Tina Nakheuri** - (Sewing of Pshav – Khevsuretian clothes and embroidering on thick felt) works on sewing of clothes with traditional ornaments. Non-governmental organization “Pshauri house”. Ukanapshavi, Magharoskari, mob: 599 20 36 69.

**Aghaza Shaverdashvili** (sewing, embroidering, knitting and so on, preparation of souvenirs) works on preparation of souvenirs with traditional ornaments. Also on using traditional elements in sewing, embroidering and knitting. Magharoskari, mob: 599 25 80 13.

**Ketevan Veltauri** – (thick felt, Khevsuretian clothes, bags, accessories), works on preparation of clothes, bags, accessories with using thick felt, also by using of traditional ornaments. Dusheti, enterprise “Khvaramze”, mob: 599 18, 31 56. [www.khvaramze.ge](http://www.khvaramze.ge)

**Sanatha Gigauri** (thick felt, Khevsuretian embroidering), works with Khevsuretian ornaments on embroidering and maintains the former face. Jinvali, 12 block, flat 14, in summer in village Blo, mob: 598127163.

### ***Border Police, official contacts***

There are several border police posts in Khevsureti exercising strict control of the State border of Georgia therefore the foreign citizens should have passports by them. The police check tourist trips from Khevsureti to Tusheti near village Mutso and Atsunta pass and on the way Juta - Arkhoti near Khevsureti - Kazbegi region border. The border police are also assisting to the tourists in case of emergency, except there is no real rescue service in the region. You can only get some elementary medical assistance in Shatili, Shuapkho and Magharoskari.

#### **In case of emergency call the following persons:**

In Piraketa Khevsureti: **Armaz Tsiklauri**, Tel: +995 591 223 575

In Pirikita Khevsureti: **Levan Zviadauri**, Tel: +995 591 140 899

You can also contact representatives of official authorities:

**Dusheti municipality tourism development service**, mob: 595 22 03 41, 599 30 53 53.

**Shatili**, community mob: 558 441 441.

**Representative of Magharoskari community Taniel Udzilauri**, mob: 595 229 657 or Nugzar Gusharashvili, 790 23 88 54.

## ***Public Transport to Pshav-Khevsureti***

### ***Pshavi***

All below 3 buses to Pshavi are operating from Diduba bus station:

- There are minibuses to Magharoskari leaving every day at 11. 00, 16. 00 and 18.00.
- To Chargali the bus leaves every day at 11 o'clock and 15. 00 o'clock.
- To Shuapkho the bus leaves three times in a week: on Monday, Thursday and Saturday at 15.15.
- From Magharoskari to Tbilisi the bus leaves every day at 06.00, 08.00 and 14. 00. From Chargali to Tbilisi the bus leaves every day at 08.30 and 14.00
- From Shuapkho to Tbilisi the bus leaves three times in a week: on Monday, Thursday and Saturday at 09.00.

### ***Khevsureti***

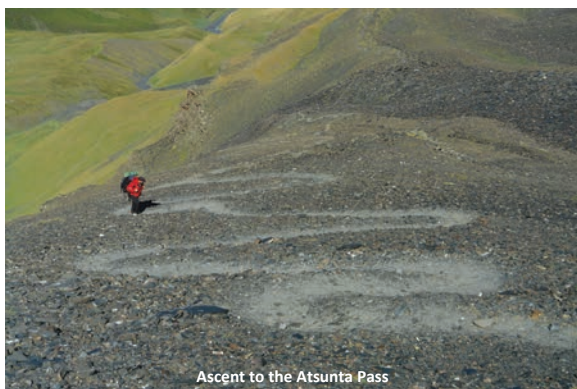
- To Barisakho buses leave from Didube station four times in a week: Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday and Sunday at 16.20 From Barisakho to Tbilisi the buses leaves four times in a week: Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday and Sunday at 09.00.
- From Navtlukhi (near Samgori metro station) auto station the minibus leaves in the direction of Shatili on Friday and Tuesday at 09.00. Bus to Shatili from Didube auto station leaves on Wednesday and Saturday at 09.00. From Shatili in the direction of Tbilisi the minibus leaves on Wednesday, Thursday and Sunday at 12.00.
- There are also private buses driving irregularly during summer season to Shatili, you have to call them to get know about the time of departure (communication possible in Russian)
- David Chubinidze, mob: 551 400 851
- Maia Chonkadze – 555 495507
- As the Datvisjvari pass on the road to Pirikita Khevsureti is not accesible through winter and spring there is no possibility to get to Shatili at that time. Usually there is no public transport there from late October to late May.

## *The characteristics of trekking routes in Khevsureti and the neighbouring regions of the Greater Caucasus*

Khevsureti, as Tusheti or the region of Khevi (Kazbegi), presents magnificent conditions for trekking. Up to the altitude of 3000 m there are alpine meadows, perfect for hiking and horse riding, riddled with paths used by shepherds and the inhabitants of the high-mountain villages. Some of the routes lead even higher, through rocky slopes, as, for instance, to the border with Khevsureti through the Atsunta pass— 3519m above sea level. To travel along established routes, even at such high altitudes, we do not need specialist climbing gear.

Some problems may arise while crossing rapid streams. In depopulated areas or higher parts of the mountains there are no bridges on rivers, or they are only seasonal: wooden footbridges deteriorate during winter and in spring are washed away by rivers in spate during the thaw. It is advised to be equipped with sandals so as not to get your main footwear wet, while crossing bigger rivers a safety rope may also be useful.

It is not advised to travel long distances at the altitude higher than 2500 m above sea level without a good map and a compass. At these altitudes it is easy to travel through vast high-mountain meadows, but while on them it is equally easy to turn aside from the marked



Ascent to the Atsunta Pass

routes and get lost. At altitudes close to 3000 m the weather is often unstable; it is advised to have appropriate clothing. On mountain routes longer than 20 km it is obligatory to be equipped in a tent and other equipment necessary for spending the night in the field.

We should remember that there are no rescue services nearby; on most routes there will also be no mobile phone signal. In depopulated areas we will not meet people other than shepherds and a few inhabitants of isolated villages. Therefore, if we happen to overestimate our physical abilities or turn aside from the path and get lost, the chances of quickly finding help are minimal.

It is advised to use sunscreen with UV filters, especially while in the higher parts, for trips longer than a week. Long-time exposure may cause sunburn.

To this day the people of Tusheti live off herding; we often encounter villages of shepherds with enormous herds. Near sheep herds one can often see giant herding dogs, Caucasian shepherd dogs, Nagazi, which can be unfriendly towards strangers. They are not very aggressive, but one should remember that their lives are directed by the instinct of protecting their herd and territory. It is advised to be cautious and equipped with a stick, or an electronic repellent.

Proper respect should be paid to sacred places, stone altars-shrines called “jvari” or “khati”. They, as well as the votive sacrifices (e.g. animal horns) must not be touched, and women should not get close to sacred places in general. If we want to maintain good relations with the local hosts, we should respect their customs. In case of doubt, it is advised to ask local people about “taboo” places which should be avoided.

### *Description of the Pshav-Khevsureti trails*

We advise to read the description alongside the map attached with this book, or to check the course of the described routes on [www.mygeorgia.ge/geotrails](http://www.mygeorgia.ge/geotrails).

#### **1. The blue trail Juta – Roshka – main road – Ghuli – Chie – Datvisjvari pass (41 km)**

In the village of Juta (2150m above sea level) you should go up the slope on which the village is situated, until you reach the Zeta



The Chaukhi pass (3338m)

camping site. From there we continue walking through the gently rising valley, to the south-east of the village. It leads to the rocky ridge of the Chaukhi massif, with Asatiani (3842m above sea level), the highest peak. Right in front of the massif the trail turns left, going around the Chaukhi summit from the North. Once you are north of the massif, at about 2900 m you reach the last marking point - a blue arrow pointing up and left. From there the track will be marked by small mound from stones. After meeting first mound, around 100m below the top of the range, you should turn right to reach a small pass. Following the range further to the South-East you will reach the Chaukhi pass (3338m).

Seen from the ridge is a magnificent panorama that encompasses, among others: the massif of Chaukhi to the South, Kazbek to the West; to the North is the main ridge of the Greater Caucasus with peaks reaching up to 4000 m at the Georgian-Ingushetian border, farther on are the Arkhotistavi and Sadzele passes. To the North-East you can see the Arkhoti range, Kalotana and Tanie to the Datvisjvari pass. Lower, to the South-East you can see small post-glacial lakes of Abudelaury (2650m above sea level).

The trail leaves the pass in their vicinity and follows the valley of the Abudelaury River to the East. Lying alongside the path are “wandering” post-glacial boulders, a group of which is spread as far as the Roshka village (2000m above sea level). In the village the blue trail intersects with the yellow one. In its centre the blue trail turns to the



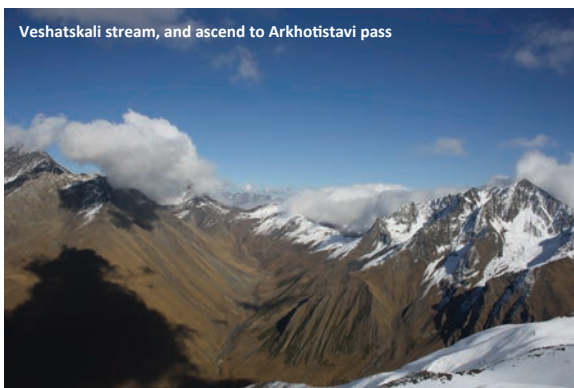
view from the Datvisjvari pass to Chaukhi

northern side of the village, through the bridge on the Abudelaure stream and continues to the East. After a few kilometers it reaches the Khevsureti Aragvi. It crosses the river on a small hanging bridge, and then it enters the main road and continues for about 100 m to the North. There it diverges from the main road to the East, onto a dirt road, which reaches the settlements in the village of Ghuli (1660m above sea level). From there it climbs to the West to, going through small groves, reach the settlements belonging to the Chie village (1900m). There it also meets the black trail. Going farther to the South-East, about 3km from Chie, the blue trail enters the ridge at the altitude of almost 2300m above sea level. From there it leads East on a rocky ridge, gradually increasing altitude. It crosses, among others, the Likoki peak (2868m) to reach the altitude of nearly 3000 m about 11 km from Chie. There it meets the yellow trail that leads from Shuapkho. There the blue trail turns north and after 3 km reaches the Datvisjvari pass (2676m). There it joins the main road to Shatili.

## ***2. Red trail Juta – Arkhotistavi pass – Akhieli – Amgha (28 km)***

Starting from the village of Juta the red trail follows a dirt road that leads North-East through a wide valley along a stream.

At the distance of approximately 4 km from Juta, on the other side of the stream, there is a Border Guard Station. There you should



Veshatskali stream, and ascend to Arkhotistavi pass

show your passport and gain permission for further travel. Past the station the route turns into a path, gently turning South-East. A little farther you should cross the stream onto its northern side and continue walking along the gently raising valley. At the altitude of 2400m above sea level the trail reaches the meeting point of two streams. To the North-East, in the direction of the pass is the river Veshatskali. The trail goes along it, at the altitude of about 2700 m meeting the yellow trail to Roshka, and continues down the valley. At the altitude of approximately 2800 m turns mildly to the left from the bottom of the valley, gradually getting higher, up to the Arkhotistavi pass (3287m above sea level).

From the pass at first the trail leads directly due East, along a stream and about 5 km farther, at the altitude of about 2400-2500 joins the paths that lead to Arkhoti directly from Roshka. There, along a river, it turns North and continues through a flat valley for another 7 km to the village of Akhieli. The streams that meet in Akhieli form the river Asa, along which the trail continues for another 4 km to the meeting point of the Asa and Kalotana valleys.

### ***3. Yellow trail in the vicinity of Roshka (bridge on Aragvi river – Roshka – Sadzele pass (17km))***

The yellow trail from the bridge on Khevsureti Aragvi to the village of Roshka is 7km long, longer than the blue one, but it leads along a dirt road, on which you can reach Roshka by an off-road ve-



Sadzele pass. In the background: the Tebulosmta peak

hicle. From the village the trail goes North-West. Going along the Roshka stream, it rises gently entering a basin that lies at the foot of the Sadzele pass (3056m). A slightly more steep ascend to the pass begins at approximately 2500m above sea level. On the western side the yellow trail reaches the red one on route to Juta. The Roshka - Juta route on the yellow and red trails is easier then the one on the blue trail through Chaukh: elevation on it is nearly 300 m lower, the slopes are not so steep as the ones you need to climb on the blue trail.

#### **4. Green trail: Ortskali – Barisakho – Korsha – bridge on Aragvi – Gudani – Batsaligo – Atabe (26km)**

This trail is on a dirt road, which allows us to reach the foot of the main ridge of Caucasus by an off-road vehicle. From the bridge in Ortskali, to the village of Gudani it follows the main road through Khevsureti. In Gudani the trail follows the road that leads West and then North. For about 1km it joins the black trail, and diverges from it to reach the village of Atabe. From there, on unmarked paths you can climb the rocky ridge and go to the Kalotana or Tanie valleys that lie behind it.

#### **5. Black trail: bridge on Aragvi – Akneli – Sanaghele pass – Gudani – Chie (8km)**

The black trail near Gudani is a route of one day of an undemanding walk. Together with a short fragment of the blue trail (from Chie to the bridge on Aragvi, about 4 km) it forms a 12km-long loop. Elevation on this route does not exceed 600 m.

The black trail begins on the bridge on Aragvi, goes down onto a small bridge. Next it rises onto a wooded slope, and after a few hun-



dred meters it joins the Gudani – Atabe road. There, for some time, it joins the green trail and past the village of Akneli turns East in the direction of the Sanaghele pass (2138m above sea level). From the pass the black trail turns back south to Gudani, past Gudani it crosses the main road and the Gudanischala stream to, after another 1.5 km reach the village of Chie and the blue trail, where it ends.

**6. Red trail: loop Aragvi River – the villages of Chirdili – Buchukurta – Ukanakho – Aragvi River (15km)**

The trail begins at the bridge on the Aragvi River near the village of Korsha. Going due West along the Buchukurta River it goes past an outpost of the border guard and after a few hundred meters reaches a stone building on which it is marked how the trails diverge into two paths. The right one leads to the slope on the northern side of the Buchukurta valley, on which it gently climbs for about 4 km to reach a small ridge at the altitude of approximately 2000 m. From there it leads in the direction of the village of Ukanakho (1750 m above sea level), going around it on the paths located on the slopes above the village. Only after going past the village, from a clearing located to the South-West of the village, the path begins to descend back to the dirt road. Then it reaches the villages of Buchukurta and Chirdili, to go back to the valley of Buchukurta where the route begins. The whole circle is not too demanding for one day of walking. The total elevation does not exceed 700 m, in case of time limitations you can make the route shorter by not going around the village of Ukanakho, but going directly down onto the main road.

**7. Blue trail: loop Barisakho – Kudnislak peak – Barisakho (10km)**

The route leads from the bridge on the river of Aragvi near Barisakho to the left, on the dirt road onto a ridge near The Kudnislak Peak. You will go through the local settlements, follow the ground road, after some further way up go through the wooden gate installed by the shepherds, until you reach the ridge at the altitude of 1950 m above sea level. There you should get off the road and climb the nearby peak of Kudnislak (2090m). Despite its relatively low height you will see a wonderful panorama of the mountains of Pshavi and Southern Khevsureti. The trail is recommended especially to people who, due to lack of time or other limitations, are not able to

choose more demanding routes. In fact there is a possibility of going by an off-road vehicle to the ridge and limiting the walk to less than 200 m uphill. At the altitude of almost 1900 m begins an alternative route back to Barisakho, which leads along paths through groves and a forest path.

#### **8. Green trail in Pshavi: Ortskali – Tkhiliana – Shuapkho – Muko – Ukanapshavi (19km)**

The trail follows the dirt road along the river Pshavi Aragvi. The road allows us to reach Ukanapshavi by an off-road vehicle. Two paths leading to the main ridge of Caucasus diverge from the green trail: the yellow trails from the villages of Shuapkho and Muko or an unmarked path from Ukanapshavi.



Green trail near Muko.  
View to the Andaki pass and the vicinity of Borbalo Mountain

#### **9. Black trail Tkhiliana - Tsabaurta (10km)**

In the village of Tkhiliana the trail crosses the bridge on Pshavi Aragvi, climbs a steep slope, and reaches a local ridge at the altitude of 1950 m above sea level. There it turns East and gently climbs up to the Iremtkalo Point (2222m above sea level). From there the trail does not go up on to the rocky ridge, but, maintaining the altitude, leads to the southern part of the slope of the local massif. After a few kilometers it joins the yellow trail in the village of Tsabaurta (2000m

above sea level). The black trail, together with the fragments of the yellow Tsabaurta – Shuapkho trail and the green Shuapkho – Tkhiliana trail, creates a 15km-long circle with an elevation of about 1000 m, a potential route for a one-day, quite demanding climb.

**10. Yellow trail: Shuapkho – Tsabaurta – Tskarosmta – meeting the blue trail at the Aprao range (15km)**

Past the village of Shuapkho the trail enters a steep ridge, and after 3km it reaches the village of Tsabaurta. During this stage we cover the distance of 700 m uphill, from 1300 to 2000m above sea level. Above the height of the ridge increases more gently, and after about 6 km reaches the Tskarosmta peak (3036m). There the rocky ridge levels, and the following kilometers, to the meeting point with the blue trail, are covered on a nearly flat ridge, going no lower than 2900 m.

**11. Yellow trail: Muko – Matura – the vicinity of Borola ridge (blue trail), 14 km.**

This trail links the Pshavi villages with the Main Ridge of Caucasus, marked by the blue trail. The yellow trail begins in the vicinity of the Muko village, where it enters the valley of the Maturkhevi River. A few times the trail changes from one side of the stream to the other on wooden bridges. Such crossings are temporary, often destroyed by the spring thaw, therefore their locations change every year. After 5 km the trail reaches the vicinity of a small settlement



View of Boriloskhevi from the yellow trail

called Matura. There it begins to climb the ridge on the eastern side of the stream, reaching the vicinity of the local chati (about 1700m above sea level). Farther on it goes around the local massif from the North, gradually increasing its altitude. Having reached the altitude of approximately 2100 m it stops raising, and continues its course along the slope to the East, along the Boriloskhevi stream. After a few kilometers it reaches the foot of the rocky ridge of Greater Caucasus. There it crosses the Boriloskhevi stream, beginning a steep 700-meter ascend onto the ridge, where it meets the blue trail at the altitude of approximately 2900 m above sea level.

### ***12. Blue trail: Datvisjvari pass – Chanchaki – Borola – Andaki pass (19km)***

The trail leads from the Datvisjvari pass (2676m above sea level) along the main road to the East. It descends to the valley of the Arghun River, to the altitude of 2500 m above sea level. From there the road leads north to Shatili, whereas the blue trail crosses the stream and goes due east, climbing a path to the Tsubrovani pass (Chanchaki, 2855m above sea level). It descends from the pass to the altitude of 2500 m, to the Chanchakistskali River, where it meets the yellow trail leading to Khakhabo. The blue trail turns south, climbing the main ridge of Caucasus. Having reached the altitude of



View from the Andaki pass

approximately 3000m it follows the ridge in the south-eastern direction, subsequently going through the Chanchakismta peak (3024m above sea level), vast Borola (2954m above sea level), and the fragment of the yellow trail which leads to the village of Muko in Pshavi. Farther to the South-East it meets the Saorbisgori range, which, along an unmarked path going to the South, leads to Ukanapshavi. Eventually, after approximately 13 km since entering the rocky ridge near Chanchaki, the trail reaches the Andaki pass (2887 m above sea level). From there you can go down to the valley of Andaki and the Mutso and Shatili villages, or go East through the vicinity of Borbalo to Tusheti.

### ***13. Green trail: Andaki pass – village of Archilo – village of Andaki – Ardoti – the vicinity of Mutso (25 km)***

From the vicinity of the Andaki path the green trail descends north from the ridge, to 2700 m above sea level. There it turns to the East, to reach the Boriloskhevi stream, at the altitude of approximately 2400m. It crosses the stream and goes north, on to a smaller ridge, climbing back to 2700m. From there it goes down to the North, reaching the meeting point of two bigger streams at the altitude of about 2100 m. Next it leads through the flat bottom of the valley, along the stream, for about 6 km, to reach the remnants of the Archilo village (1880m above sea level). Past Archilo it subsequently passes the Andaki settlement, the intersection with the black trail (leading east to the Khidotani ridge), the intersection with the valley of the Chanchakistskali River and the yellow trail (to the West to Khakhabo and Chanchaki); eventually it reaches the historic village of Ardoti. In Ardoti it enters a dirt road and after approximately 4 km reaches a bridge and Border Guard Station, near the village of Mutso. There it ends its course, meeting the red trail. Throughout the whole route from Mutso to the Andaki pass, the trail crosses the Andaki stream and its smaller tributaries numerous times, in the spring, with high water level, the journey might be difficult.

### ***14. Yellow trail: the vicinity of Ardoti village – Khakhabo village – the vicinity of Chanchaki Mountain (12km)***

This route leads from the valley of the Andaki River, through a ravine, along the Chanchakistskali stream, reaching the blue trail at the foot of the Chanchaki Mountain. It begins about 1 km south of the

Ardoti village. From there it goes west along Chanchakistskali, turning from one side of the stream to the other numerous times. After 6 km it reaches Khakhabo (2050m above sea level) – a village with a complex of medieval towers. The valley continues for another 6 km in the south-western direction, along the stream, up to the altitude of 2500 m where it ends, meeting the blue trail.

**15. Red trail: Atsunta pass – Khidotani ridge – Khonischala – Mutso – Shatili – Kistani (40km)**

This trail follows a popular route from Tusheti to Mutso and Shatili, the most interesting historic villages- fortresses scattered across Khevsureti.

From the Atsunta pass (3519m above sea level) the trail follows a steep switchback on the slate rock slope, descending to the altitude of approximately 3000m above sea level, to the small Kharokhistskali stream. From there it leads west, entering the slope of the Khidotani ridge. For a few kilometers it goes along the ridge, reaching a small plateau at the altitude of about 2500 m. There the red trail meets the black one. Also there begins the descent off the Khidotani ridge – North, along the red trail, or North-West, along the black one. The red trail descends north onto a slope, entering a path that leads through a forest. There it begins a steep descent, leading from 2400 to 1900 m above sea level, to the bank of the Khonistskali stream, to a dirt road. Following the road, it goes north along the stream and



Khidotani range and the valley of the Khonistskali stream

through the Khonischala village, to reach the point where the stream joins the Andaki river. There you will find a Border Guard Station where you should show your passport.

Continuing our walk north along the road, after approximately 1 km we will reach the village of Mutso with an impressive complex of stone towers. This is one of the greatest monuments of Khevsureti architecture, and it was populated until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Today the fortress itself is abandoned, but individual people still live in settlements in its vicinity. It is worth to spend at least an hour to diverge from the trail and climb a few dozen meters to see the fortress, near-by cemeteries and stone altars.

10 kilometers north of Mutso, near the border with Chechnya, the Andaki stream meets the Arghun River. Located at their meeting point are the Anatori tombs – remnants of a village, whose all inhabitants died during the epidemic in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. There the trail turns South-West, entering the valley of Arghun. It goes past the characteristic, grey-blue rock formations on the northern bank of the Arghun, and after 2 km reaches Shatili – the biggest and the best-preserved village in North Khevsureti.

The Shatili complex of a few dozen stone towers was built on the bank of Arghun in the Middle Ages. The towers create an uniform whole. They are connected by a system of terraces, passages, and wooden stairs, so that it is possible to get from one building to another without going outdoors. The only path leading to the village



enters the centre of this stone labyrinth. Today the towers serve only as accommodation for tourists; the present inhabitants of the village live in houses of the so-called new Shatili located right behind the historic fortress. Being the only village in Northern Khevsureti, Shatili has a relatively high number of inhabitants (approximately 100 people in the summer season), a small turbine providing electricity, and there is the signal of the Magti mobile phone carrier, here you can also buy staple products, food, etc. There is a marshrutka to Tbilisi at least twice a week, you can also hire an off-road vehicle to get you through the Datvisjvari pass to villages with more transport connections available.

From Shatili the red trail goes South-West, along the main road, and after 15 km reaches the remnants of the Kistani village. Visible to the West of the road are two towers and ruins of a bigger complex, which are the remnants of a village that used to be highly populated.

### ***16. Black trail: Khidotani ridge – the valley of the Andaki River (4 km)***

This route allows descending west from the Khidotani ridge, directly to the valley of Andaki. It is slightly more difficult than the main path along the red trail, but following this route to Mutso and Shatili you can go through the Ardoti settlement, also consisting of historic stone towers. The black trail also makes the route shorter if you want to go due West or south from the vicinity of Atsunta, and get to Pshavi or central Khevsureti.

Apart from the 300 kilometers marked in 2012 the mountains of Khevsureti offer also other interesting routes, such as:

The planned red trail from the Asa valley to the Kalotana pass (2978m), as well as farther east, along the main ridge of Caucasus to Kistani (26 km). This route incorporates two, already marked, fragments of the red trail into a whole, which allows covering the entire Khevsureti from the East to the West. Another planned route is a continuation of the green trail from the village of Atabe in central Khevsureti in the northern direction, also to the main rocky ridge of Caucasus, and from there to the Tanie valley with a high-mountain lake with the same name, and then through the Isartsgele pass (3486m) to Shatili. A relatively popular route is also the route north from the Roshka village to the valley of Arkhoti, through the Arkhotisghele pass (2968m).