



I HAVE Georgia on my mind — not the Louis Armstrong song or the American state, but one of the three countries, besides Armenia and Azerbaijan, I visited in the Caucasus region, located on the border of Asia and Europe.

All three were part of the former Soviet Union, but there the similarity ends. Each has its own distinct identity, culture and history.

I barely scratched the surface of what this region has to offer, but I saw enough to know that I will go back.

A day in Tbilisi

Legend has it that Georgia's capital city — the "T" is not silent — was founded in the fifth century by King Vakhtang Gorgasali. Searching for a bird his pet pheasant wound during a hunt, the king stumbled upon the sulphuric hot springs and decided to build his new capital there. He named it Tbilisi, which means warm place.

A dip in the sulphur baths is a must-do — there are many in the Abonotubani Bath district in the old town — and I was lucky to get a late-night slot. After soaking myself in the steaming water, I

was given a vigorous scrubbing by a cheerful lady who seemed to want to strip the skin off me.

Nevertheless, it was the perfect balm for muscles sore from a day of walking, from the quaint old town with buildings piled higgledy-piggledy, the little Metekhi Church overlooking the Mtkvari River, and the Holy Trinity Cathedral — the third-tallest Orthodox cathedral in the world — up to Narikala Fort, an ancient symbol of Tbilisi's defence.

Along with the bird's-eye views of the city, I marvelled at the

CAUCASUS calling

A maiden trip to this fascinating region enthralled Uma Venkatraman



Above: A soak in the sulphur baths is a must-do in Tbilisi. Right: The imposing Caucasus range seen from Bodbe monastery. PHOTOS: UMA VENKATRAMAN

20m-tall statue of the Mother of Georgia, erected in 1958, the year Tbilisi celebrated its 1,500th anniversary. Clad in the Georgian national dress, the figure holds a cup of wine in one hand to "greet friends" and a sword in the other, to "fight enemies".

Focus on the wine, for Georgia is where wine production is believed to have begun, over 7,000 years ago. A bottle of Saperavi, a dry red popular among the locals, is the go-to for beginners. Others include Khvanchkara, a semi-sweet red,

and Rkatsiteli, a dry white.

Any wine goes well with Georgian cuisine, from the khachapuri (warm gooey cheese-stuffed bread) and khinkali (stuffed dumplings) that reminded me of xiao long bao to mtsvadi (barbecued pork on skewers). Luscious tomatoes cut through the richness, and the cold fried eggplant stuffed with walnuts is a vegetarian must-have.

The most delicious food is found in family-run eateries where the portions are generous and the hosts beam at the sight of empty plates.

Majestic monasteries

From Tbilisi, an eight-hour car ride took us to Yerevan, Armenia's capital city. This rugged and mountainous country is replete with history — it became the world's first Christian country in 301 AD, and Noah's Ark is believed to have rested on top of Mount Ararat, part of Armenia until 1921 and now located in Turkey.

Yerevan is a modern city, with wide boulevards and the famous Republic Square surrounded by impressive buildings. But for me,

the country's appeal lies in the millennium-old monasteries repeatedly destroyed by invaders and rebuilt — in remote places of breathtaking beauty.

The sprawling complex of 10th century Hagpat is a sterling example of medieval Armenian architecture. It was also an important centre of learning for monks. The church within the complex is plain and spartan, as are most Armenian churches, as it is more important to concentrate on prayer and not be distracted by the beauty. The

highlight is the splendid acoustics in a chamber on the higher floor, musically illustrated by our guide Gayane. I felt transported back in time as I heard her sing a hymn that reverberated around the room.

Bustling Baku

Azerbaijan was the last leg of our itinerary, and as it has no diplomatic relations with Armenia, we crossed over from Georgia.

Azerbaijan, with its relatively flat terrain, was a stark contrast to the mountainous landscape of Armenia. It was also the most prosperous of the three countries we visited, thanks to its oil reserves. This was reflected in the smooth roads and the affluent towns en route to the capital Baku, located on the shores of the Caspian Sea, the world's largest lake.

Where is the Caucasus?

The Caucasus region is located at the border of Europe and Asia, situated between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea. It is home to the Caucasus Mountains.

The Greater Caucasus mountain range acts as a natural barrier separating Eastern Europe from Western Asia.

In the north, the Greater Caucasus range is within the Russian Federation, while the Lesser Caucasus mountain range in the south spans several independent countries — Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Getting there

I flew on Turkish Airlines to Tbilisi, travelled by road to Armenia and Azerbaijan, and flew back from Baku. Singaporeans do not need a visa to enter Georgia. Apply online for visas to the other two countries.

Guidelines

- Change US dollars to the local currency once you are there.
- Join a tour for ease of travel, as the tourism infrastructure is still being developed and English is not widely spoken.
- To admire the true majesty of the Caucasus range, head to the

Bodbe monastery in the Kaketi region of Georgia, where St Nina, who is believed to have brought Christianity to the country, is buried. Nearby is the hilltop town of Signaghi, with its fully preserved fortress walls.

- Head for Lake Sevan in Armenia and climb the 236 stairs that lead to the monastery for lovely views of the lake, fed by waters from 28 rivers, and the pretty town of Dilijan.
- En route to Baku from the Georgian border, stop overnight in the village of Sheki, an ancient halt on the Silk Route.



Geghard Monastery is surrounded by lofty mountains.

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