

GEORGIA: YOUR NEW HOME AWAY FROM HOME

For our latest travel destination, we chose Georgia - a gem of a country that is known as the balcony of Europe offering picturesque countryside, contemporary restaurants and a thriving nightlife. Set on the banks of the Kura River and encased by the Caucasian Mountains, Georgia offers an undisturbed countryside and old-world charm with the capital Tbilisi at the heart of the country.



Making Our Travel Plans

Enticed by the beauty of Georgia and its temperate weather, we planned our travels during the winter holiday. We chose Qatar Airways to get us to our three-night stay in Georgia. Our trip included travelling from Kuwait to Doha and then Baku airport, finally arriving in Tbilisi nine hours later. While we booked Qatar Airways, we later found out that a direct flight would have been much easier and only about three hours of travel.

We were able to secure our visa entry into the country with little hassle and no fee to speak of. Once we arrived in Georgia, we whizzed through customs and found a friendly face in the crowd waiting for us. We had booked Interco Travel Georgia to help with our arrangements and it had graciously sent a driver to meet us at the airport and take us to our hotel.

A Perfect Place To Stay

On our ride to the hotel, we observed Georgia at its finest. The weather was good at 2°C and we were able to see why Georgia is a jewel to embark upon. We caught glimpses of the city of Tbilisi as well as its residents. The city had a warm and inviting feel to it with older architecture that was stunning in its appearance.

After a 40-minute drive, we arrived at the hotel - the Holiday Inn Tbilisi. We had heard this was one of the best and biggest hotels



in Georgia and we weren't disappointed. The staff welcomed us and we immediately felt at ease with our lodging choice.

The room we had reserved was on the 14th floor of this 270-room hotel and provided a breathtaking view of the city below. We had expansive floor-to-ceiling windows that gave us a scenic, panoramic view. There was something to see everywhere we looked. We had booked an executive suite as there were four of us including the kids who each had their own bed. The room was amazing from top to bottom. There was luxury and convenience everywhere you looked. Fine finishes adorned the room and there was a spacious living area for us to relax in.



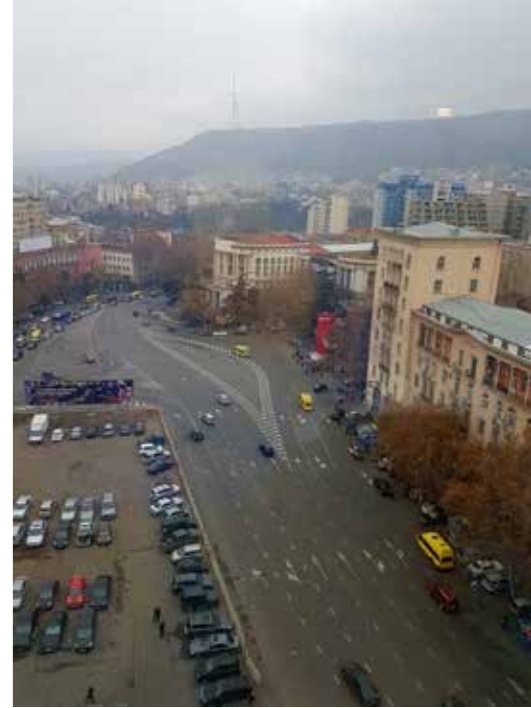
The room itself was 40m2 and even provided a workspace where we could feel comfortable checking email and looking up additional itinerary plans for our trip. There was a complimentary espresso coffee machine and chocolate treats in the room that helped to give us a pick-me-up after our travels. We were impressed by the modern bathroom and its reinvigorating bath and made a note of the generous amenities that also included high-speed internet, safe, minibar and cable TV. We also found a plush bathrobe and slippers and an ironing board for use later. Everything we needed for our stay had been thought of by the Holiday Inn Tbilisi.



Our First Adventure

With so much excitement filling us up from this gorgeous hotel, we knew we had to begin our adventures of Georgia immediately. We had arrived mid-afternoon and were ready to discover all that Tbilisi had to offer. Our first venture out was a short walk around the area of the hotel and we decided to ask the staff at the hotel where we should go first. They had been so friendly to us when we checked in that we knew they would have good recommendations for us.

Upon the Holiday Inn Tbilisi staff's suggestion, we headed to the old city. Only a short 15-minute drive away, we hopped into a taxi for the commute, which only cost us 10 Lari (or KDI) for the one-way ride. The taxi was an easy convenience for us as one could be found virtually



everywhere you looked. They offered no hassle and really were reasonable with their rates. We were very happy with our experience in Georgia so far.

Once in the old city, we took a walk of the area. It was a beautiful historic city with many of its houses turned into shops and restaurants. After exploring for about an hour, we stumbled upon an Indian restaurant, offering Indian and Pakistani dishes, called the Taj Mahal. Located in the basement of an old building we had a decent meal and headed back to the hotel for an early night's rest.

Holiday Inn Tbilisi

The next morning, we had one of the best breakfasts that Tbilisi had to offer at the Adjara Restaurant in the hotel. It was an amazing spread with virtually anything you could imagine offered. The staff was friendly and engaging and we were thoroughly full and happy after the meal.



After such a scrumptious breakfast, we wanted to see what more the Holiday Inn Tbilisi had to offer. We met with Mariam from the marketing department and requested a tour. The Holiday Inn Tbilisi had all the amenities we needed during our stay and so much more.



There was a restaurant, lounge bar, 24/7 fitness center and generous 25m long and 1.4m deep outdoor pool for use during the warmer months. It even included a massage room and sauna as well as several meeting and event spaces. The Adjara Conference Hall was the hotel's largest at 220m². It can accommodate 230 people and set up in a variety of configurations to suit any type of event.

There was also a Glass Meeting Room that provided plenty of light with its glass walls. It could hold 50 people at 70m². Other meeting and event rooms included the Idea Meeting Room, Living Room and Business Boardroom. They each held up to 70, 50 and 12 people respectively, and could be arranged in a variety of setups. All of the meeting and event rooms at the Holiday Inn Tbilisi were available with catering from the Adjara Restaurant in the hotel featuring Executive Chef Irakli Asatiani.



Mariam also told us about the 24-hour room service the hotel offered and we vowed to keep this in mind. There was also a business area in the hotel that we could use to print our boarding passes upon our departure with several Mac computers and a professional feel to it. We really have to say that the Holiday Inn Tbilisi was top notch!

While we had booked an executive suite for our stay, we were also interested in seeing the other rooms that the Holiday Inn Tbilisi had to offer. Mariam was gracious enough to show us around and we got to see the standard room, which was fitted with either king or twin beds with pillowtop mattresses. This room was neat and provided plenty of room to sprawl out at 23m². There was a workspace and a spacious bathroom with a rainfall shower. This was the perfect room for a weary traveller looking to get some rest for another adventure.

We also toured a business room in the hotel, which was specifically designed to provide plenty of entertainment and rest for a business traveller. This room was 30m² and equipped with a living room, rest area and work zone. It was almost like a home away from home. This room also featured a double pillowtop mattress for the ultimate rest space and a contemporary bathroom also equipped with a rainfall shower. A business traveller would certainly get some work done here and feel recharged after a night of rest in this oasis.



A Tour Of Mtskheta

After the tour, Mariam directed us to check out Mtskheta, the old capital of Georgia. Only 20km away and just north of Tbilisi, Mtskheta is the birthplace of Christianity for Georgia. It was declared a Holy City by the Georgian Orthodox Church in 2014 and is also known as the UNESCO World Heritage Site because of its many historical monuments including the Svetitskhoveli Cathedral.



The Svetitskhoveli Cathedral is a marvel of the early middle ages and is the second largest church building in Georgia. It was built by architect Arsukidze in the early 11th century and is the crowning and burial location of many Georgian kings. Its stature and beauty will awe you and it is definitely a must-see when travelling to Georgia.

A Scrumptious Place To Eat

We departed Mtskheta for the hotel around 3:30pm that day and wanted a good lunch. Mariam for the Holiday Inn Tbilisi had told us of an interesting restaurant to try and we were eager to take her up on her recommendation. We made our way to Barbarestan, which was approximately 15 minutes from the hotel on the bustling Aghmashenebeli Ave.

Barbarestan was everything that Mariam promised with its cozy, family feel and deep history rooted in Georgian food. The meal was delectable and we made a note of the other dishes we wanted to try in another visit. The menu features homestyle recipes that come from Duchess Barbara Jorjadze with a twist on the traditional.



More Exploration

During this day, we also ventured to the Georgian National Museum, which is massive with four floors and an extensive array of gold masterpieces. The fee to get into the museum is nominal and you will find yourself immersed in the culture of Georgia the moment you enter.

We also visited Mtatsminda Park, an amusement park located on top of a hill. It was a great delight for the kids as there were rides and a view from 770m up – the highest point in Tbilisi. To get to Mtatsminda Park, we took a funicular, but a taxi is also an option. Unfortunately, we arrived at the park too late and couldn't take full

advantage of the view. It would be ideal to plan a visit in summer or earlier in the day.

From here we headed to the Galleria Mall. This is a newer mall that sits adjacent to the Georgian National Museum. The mall was decorated for the winter season and featured an array of shops that had virtually anything you could imagine for purchase.

After being exhausted from shopping, we went back to our hotel, where we unanimously decided to order pizza from room service as kids eat free when you order a meal. We all agreed that it was the best pizza we had ever eaten and went to bed dreaming that night of pizza pies.



A Tour Of Vardzia

We had a big day planned for the next day and was met by Vakhtang from Interco Georgia at 10a.m. He was here to take us on a tour of the country and had a Mercedes Vito van waiting for us. On our travels, we passed through Borjomi, a popular tourist destination because of its natural springs made famous by the Russian Empire.

Our destination was to Vardzia, a medieval city inside caves of rocks. We took a speaking guide for a tour of the caves and learned the history and origins of this very ancient city. There was snow everywhere in Vardzia and it was much colder

than what we experienced in Tbilisi. But, we still managed to visit the museum located inside the castle of the city.

Dinner followed and was arranged by Vakhtang. We went to the Golden Time restaurant within the Vardzia castle. We experienced many Georgian delicacies such as khachapuri and ajika sauce. It was one of the best places we had eaten at so far on this trip.



On To Gudauri

Back to the hotel after dinner, where we readied for a new day tomorrow. The next day Vakhtang arrived with a Mitsubishi Delica, which he said was more suited to where we were going. And, he was right as we traversed to Gudauri. This was a skiing resort and a place we were all looking forward to seeing. It was beautiful, as expected, but the skiing resort was not opened yet for the season.



Vakhtang wanted us to see one more destination on our trip and took us to Kazbegi. Here, we explored the old villages and had lunch at the Rooms Hotel. We loved the hotel immediately and enjoyed our meal of grilled fish. We have to say this was our favourite place to dine at since coming to Georgia and we didn't want to leave. But, alas, we had a late flight and needed to get back.



We thanked Vakhtang for the adventures and gave our appreciation to Interco Travels. They were professional and are one of the best tour companies in Georgia. We highly recommend their services to anyone looking to tour the country.



One Last Adventure

After making sure we were ready for our flight home, we took one last jaunt to see the Narikala Forest. We rode an aerial cable car to get there and were on top of the mountain, but again it was too dark for us to see. We finished our trip with some souvenir shopping and said our goodbyes to the hotel staff when checking out.

We loved our short but busy trip to Georgia and are so happy with the selections we made for our travels. The Holiday Inn Tbilisi was perfect and our tour company, Interco Georgia, made our trip even more special. We are looking forward to visiting Georgia again in the summer months and experiencing even more that this country has to offer.

USEFUL INFORMATION

Churchkhela



Churchkhela is a traditional Georgian candle-shaped candy. The main ingredients are grape must, nuts and flour.

Khachapuri



A traditional Georgian dish of cheese-filled bread. The bread is leavened and allowed to rise, and is shaped in various ways.

Chiri



Georgian dried persimmons.

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TRAVEL IN STYLE: KENYA

Nada S. Al-Muzaini

Have you ever wondered how giraffes live, how long they sleep or what they eat? If you have a once in a life time opportunity to live with them, then Giraffe Manor is the place for you!

History:

Giraffe Manor is a boutique hotel where it's all about the long necked, squared designed animal. It's located South of Nairobi, Kenya, with a sprawling 150 acres. Giraffe Manor is a free roaming sanctuary for several endangered Rothschild giraffes. It was built in 1932 by a Scottish hunter and was kept only as a giraffe conservation until the 1970s. However, in 1984, the lodge was opened to the public as a sanctuary and the hotel helped to raise awareness of the endangered species.

Experience (Service & Facilities):

The hotel provides a unique experience for guests. They ensure all staff know the guest's names from the time they escort them from the airport until their departure. In addition, they make sure you feel welcome and safe. Guests are also provided with a questionnaire so the hotel is aware of their preferences. Once settled in at the hotel, they can freely roam around and explore the facilities until it is time to start feeding the giraffes. This great experience occurs during breakfast and afternoon tea. First, from 6am till 9am, you have the opportunity to have breakfast with the giraffes. This is a great chance to meet and be up close and personal with them - so close you can see their beautiful eyes! Later, from 3pm till 5pm, you can have afternoon tea with the giraffes and feed them. This really is the time to treasure those precious moments with these great animals, to take pictures and create memories that will last a lifetime. At the end of the day, dinner is served and then you can sleep under the stars with no noise pollution, just the sound of small creatures in their natural habitat.

The design of the hotel

At Giraffe Manor the details are very important. From the interior to the exterior, it makes you feel as if you are living in the 1930s. Each room is named after a giraffe; a nice touch which adds character. The hotel rooms vary from a suite to a twin. The colours of the furniture and furnishings are influenced by the life of the giraffe itself.

Food:

Tasting the food in Giraffe Manor is an exquisite and exciting experience for the guests, thanks to the hotel's well trained chefs. The amazing food is all home-made and the menu for lunch and dinner is based on modern European cuisine with a twist from the Middle East. Of course, breakfast with the giraffes makes it extra special!

The best thing about Giraffe Manor is to enjoy a once in a lifetime experience that all guests will treasure for life.

