



# GEORGIA ON MY MIND

Story by LAUREN HO

*Since the Rose Revolution that ended communist rule 15 years ago, the Georgian capital of Tbilisi has opened up and is now reborn as an absorbing destination for the curious traveller*

IT TAKES SOME EFFORT to get to Tbilisi. If you're coming from London, Georgian Airways is the only carrier that offers a direct service: a thrice weekly four-and-a-half-hour flight that departs from a deserted Gatwick Airport at the final time slot of 11pm, for an unsociable 3:30am (UK time – Georgia is three hours ahead) arrival. Persistence though – and perhaps a nap – will pay handsome dividends.

Wedged between Europe and Asia, on the north eastern coast of the Black Sea, with Russia, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Turkey as its neighbours, Georgia's advantageous position – within close proximity to the Silk Road – has not only defined much of its turbulent past, but it has also created a distinct cultural blend that has influenced the country's religion, language, cuisine, arts and architecture.

And while travel to Georgia was once the reserve of the intrepid few who were prepared to navigate the limited accessibility of a country emerging from Soviet power, in the past 15 years since the Rose Revolution – a shift from communist rule in 2003 – the country has flourished. In fact, last year, close to eight million international travellers eagerly swooped in to experience Tbilisi's lively cultural scene and beyond that, the picturesque tableau of muscular ridges and tree-strewn hills speckled with family-run vineyards and remote mountain villages.

Against a backdrop of these rugged peaks, embraced by the curve of the Kura River, Tbilisi, the country's capital city, is a hodgepodge of colourful crumbling balconied buildings, austere Soviet structures, grand European piles and ornate Moorish architecture – a visual storybook of the city's varied, and often stormy history under the control of a string of global powers for most of its existence.

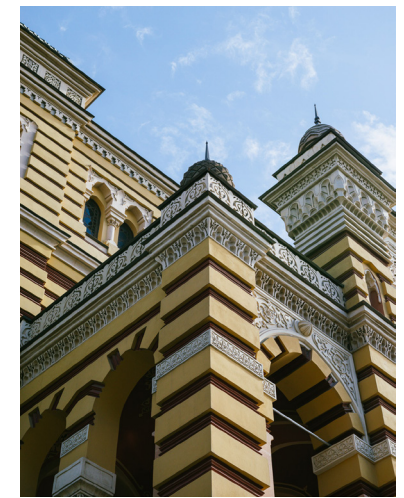
Now, Tbilisi is coming into its own, thanks to the emergence of a well-travelled and globally-minded creative set, determined to put the city on the map. This has been bubbling under the surface for a while, with events like the Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week Tbilisi – founded in 2015 – propelling a new generation of local designers onto the international stage. Smartly, these homegrown talents are using their global recognition as a springboard to transform their home capital into a cool, cultural hub, resulting in an abundance of hip openings. These are mostly installed in once abandoned buildings, like the industrial Soviet-era sewing factory now home to Fabrika, an urban hangout that comprises a hostel, artists' studios, restaurants, bars, cafés, a co-working space and shops that champion local crafts.

Elsewhere, fashion It designer Gola Damian recently co-launched Chaos Concept Store, an innovative hotspot that functions as a destination for like-minded fashion and art

people to hang out, and also brings together Georgia's most exciting designers – and a host of equally buzzy international brands – under one roof. Its home, within the complex of a former Soviet-era publishing house, in the intellectual Vera neighbourhood, is also part of a wider urban destination that includes two hotels, Rooms and Stamba. The latter occupies the brutalist bones of the old printing section that has now been re-shaped to include a co-working space, an amphitheatre with art installations, a slick rooftop pool with views over the city, Tbilisi's first Photography Museum, and a thrumming curb-side restaurant, which spills onto a buzzy inner terrace that looks out onto the gardens.

Here, international dishes such as vegetable curry or risotto with asparagus and parmesan are served alongside classic Georgian crowd-pleasers from chakapuli – a tender and fragrant lamb and tarragon stew – to traditional cheese-filled khachapuri. Alternatively, munch on burgers, hot dogs or pizza while rubbing shoulders with the city's creative elite at nearby Lolita, an open-air restaurant in the courtyard of a three-storey gothic building that was once home to the country's most prominent artistic and cultural figures.

Like any nation worth its salt, food is, in fact, a cultural affair, best experienced at a supra, a traditional Georgian feast, with lots of chacha (brandy). Failing that, and given the



Clockwise from far left: an artist in Tbilisi's bustling city centre; a view over Tbilisi reveals the blend of traditional, Soviet and modern architecture; the neo-Moorish Georgian National Opera and Ballet Theatre; the bow-shaped Bridge of Peace spans the Kura River and connects Old Tbilisi with the new district





locals’ propensity for homecooked food, there’s no shortage of excellent dining options in Tbilisi, but for something off the beaten track, head to Keto and Kote. Occupying a crumbling old house with traditional carved balconies, the best thing about this restaurant is that – despite its location just behind the heaving Rustaveli Avenue – you won’t find it, unless you are in the know. Ask for a table under the grapevines on the terrace, where Georgian dishes from elarji (cornmeal with sulguni cheese) to mchadi (cornbread and beans) are served against romantic views of the city’s rooftops.

For something a little more innovative, the queen of Georgian cuisine, chef Tekuna Gachechiladze, serves up local dishes with a modern twist at Cafe Littera, a restaurant named for its location in the leafy courtyard of Writers’ House, a century-old pile that was the former home of a local aristocrat and philanthropist. Expect experimental dishes like kharcho, a beef and rice soup made alternatively with the sweetest of shrimps, and served with a glass of from the extensive list that focuses on natural wine produced by small family enterprises.

It’s exactly this blend of old and new that defines the spirit of Tbilisi. From the winding lanes, the tumble of colourful balconied houses, noble churches, and leafy squares of the Old Town, to spruced-up museums and the collection of repurposed buildings that now house an assortment of restaurants, cafés, bars, shops and hotels, Tbilisi is a thinking traveller’s haven. Rich in cultural and intellectual heritage, it is a city on the cusp of change. Throw in its dramatic setting and the hard-to-avoid warm Georgian hospitality, and it’s one that is worth visiting over and over again. ●



Top right: the Shota Rustaveli Monument, erected in honour of one of Georgia’s most celebrated poets. Above right and above: Rooms is Tbilisi’s first design hotel. Enjoy a glass of chacha in its Garden Bar



rooftop pool. Rooms at Rooms start from £106 and at Stamba from £145. [roomshotels.com](http://roomshotels.com)

**How To Get There**

Georgian Airways flies to Tbilisi three times a week from London Gatwick. Return economy fares from London to Tbilisi start from €113 (£102). [www.georgian-airways.com](http://www.georgian-airways.com)

**Where To Stay**

Next-door neighbours, Rooms and Stamba are a short stride from the city’s famed Rustaveli Avenue. Distinctly different to one another, Rooms has a 1930s New York aesthetic with hints of old-world Tbilisi charm; Stamba has a preserved industrial vibe and boasts the city’s coolest

**Where To Eat**

The ultimate Georgian comfort food is khinkali, a delicious soup-filled dumpling stuffed with meat and herbs. While the city is packed with restaurants that serve all variations of this dish, the best place to sample it is Kakhelebi, a homely tavern with two branches, each on the outskirts of the city. Arrange a pitstop on the way to the airport at the Lilo outpost, for a final, and delicious, souvenir. [www.kakhelebi.ge](http://www.kakhelebi.ge)

**What To Do**

The dome-shaped sulphur baths in the city’s Abanotubani district are such a recognisable part of Tbilisi’s landscape that it makes no sense not to stop by for a session. Locals will tell you the waters have healing power and that the best time to visit is the morning after too many shots of homemade chacha (Georgian brandy) the night before.

