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Region 4 h 20 min by car from Tbilisi 1 h 20 min by car from Kutaisi 3 h 30 min by car from Batumi Pop

Racha-Lechkhumi & Kvemo Svaneti is a region — a region of Georgia, about 4 h 20 min by car from Tbilisi and 3 h 30 min from Batumi. Home to about 32,089 people.

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Racha-Lechkhumi & Kvemo Svaneti

By [Mariam Lomidze](#), GTour desk · Fact-checked against the sources listed · Last checked 17 October 2026

Overview

Racha-Lechkhumi and Kvemo Svaneti is an administrative region in north-west Georgia, occupying the upper part of the central Caucasus range toward Imereti. It is bordered by Svaneti to the north, by the Russian region of Abkhazeti to the west, by the largely impassable watershed, and by Imereti to the south. The region combines three historic highland areas (Kvemo) part of Svaneti — under one modern administrative unit, with its capital at Ambrolauri. According to the 2002 census, it is one of the least populous regions of Georgia, with roughly 32,000 residents spread across small towns and mountain villages.

The region matters to travellers for what it has kept rather than developed: pine and beech forest, alpine lakes, a slower pace of rural life, and a wine tradition tied to a handful of villages along the Rioni. Khvanchkara, the sweet white wine of Alexandrouli and Mujuretuli grapes, is produced only here and is among the most recognised Georgian wine. The region's distinct medieval and early modern heritage, visible in the eleventh-century cathedral at Nikortsminda and the ruins of the city of Ambrolauri, are both reminders that this isolated valley was, for centuries, a crossroads of Georgian, mountain and Jewish culture.

History

Racha appears in Georgian historical tradition as part of the western Georgian kingdom of Egrisi-Lazica and, later, of the Kingdom of Georgia. Through the medieval period it was governed as a hereditary duchy (saeristavo) by the Eristavi of Racha, a branch of the Bagrationi royal line; the valley's relative isolation behind mountain passes allowed local lords considerable autonomy. In the 19th century, after the Russian conquest, later Tbilisi claimed overlordship.

After the breakup of the unified Georgian kingdom in the fifteenth century, Racha and Lechkhumi fell within local *eristavis* continued to rule the upper Rioni valley with shifting loyalty to the Imeretian crown and, at times, Russia's annexation of western Georgia in the early nineteenth century brought Racha under imperial administration. The growth of Oni as a district centre with a notable Georgian Jewish community; the town's synagogue, common to the Caucasus, is. Much of this community later emigrated to Israel in the twentieth century, leaving the building an active large congregation.

In the Soviet period the region was developed modestly for domestic tourism: the mountain village of Shovi had a sanatorium for visitors, and Khvanchkara wine was bottled on an industrial scale and distributed across the USSR today.

What to see

Nikortsminda Cathedral

Built in the early eleventh century, this domed cross-in-square church near Ambrolauri is known for its intricate carvings of animals and biblical scenes — and for fragmentary interior frescoes. It is one of the finest surviving examples of ecclesiastical carving and remains an active church.

Oni Synagogue

Completed in 1895, the synagogue at Oni served one of Georgia's largest Jewish mountain communities before the mid-to-late twentieth century. The building's scale and restored interior give a sense of a once-substantial community.

Barakoni Church of the Virgin

Standing above the village of Tsesi in Lechkhumi, this eighteenth-century church is built of warm pink and orange stone, offering sweeping views over the Tskhenistsqali valley. It is a favoured stop for travellers moving between Racha and Guram.

Shovi

A former Soviet-era mountain resort at the head of the Rioni valley, Shovi sits beneath forested peaks and glacial lakes, a trailhead for hikes toward Lake Udziro (the Black Lake) and the Zekari and Guram passes. Sanatorium buildings stand alongside newer guesthouses.

Lake Shaori

A reservoir lake ringed by pine forest near Ambrolauri, Shaori is used for fishing, quiet walking and picnicking. It's one of the easier natural sights to reach without a long hike.

Khvanchkara wine villages

The protected appellation of Khvanchkara covers a small cluster of villages along the Rioni near Ambrolauri where grapes are grown. Several family cellars and larger wineries offer tastings of the naturally semi-sweet red wine of the region.

Getting there

From Tbilisi, the drive to Ambrolauri takes about 4 hours 20 minutes by car, generally via Kutaisi and Tskaltubo gorges; marshrutka services run from Tbilisi's Didube station on a less frequent schedule and take longer. From Batumi, it's about 20 minutes on a mountain road that climbs over the Nakerali Pass, which can be affected by ice or landslip in winter. Check current conditions on the [road status page](#) before travelling. From Batumi, the trip is about 3 hours 30 minutes by car. There is no passenger rail service into Racha; the nearest railheads are in Kutaisi, connected to Tbilisi by Georgian Railway. For Lower Svaneti or combining the trip with Mestia and Ushguli should see the dedicated [Svaneti route guide](#). Consider a guided day or multi-day [tours](#) with an English-speaking driver familiar with the mountain roads.

When to go

Late spring through early autumn (May to early October) is the most reliable window: roads are clear, guesthouses are open, and high trails around Shovi and the lakes are accessible. July and August bring warm days and cooler mountain nights. Higher passes from late autumn to April, and some guesthouses outside Ambrolauri and Oni close for winter. Plan your trip around confirmed accommodation and current road conditions.

Where to stay and eat

Ambrolauri and Oni have the region's main concentration of small hotels and family guesthouses, many offering home-style Racha cooking — smoked ham (lori), walnut sauces and Khvanchkara or Usakhelauri wine with local cheese. Many guesthouses aimed at hikers in summer. GTour's verified register of checked guesthouses, wineries and restaurants is in the [Best of](#) section, with up-to-date recommendations and private tour options available through [GTour's tours page](#).

Practical notes

Mobile coverage is patchy in the higher valleys and around Shovi; download maps in advance. Fuel stations are only in Ambrolauri and Oni, so plan refuelling and cash withdrawals before heading into smaller villages. Mountain roads have occasional unpaved sections; a vehicle with good clearance, or a hired driver, is recommended, particularly beyond Oni. Nikortsminda Cathedral are both active religious sites; modest dress is expected, and photography inside should be avoided. Speaking guides can be arranged through GTour's regional [guides directory](#).

Questions travellers ask

Is Racha the same as Svaneti?

No. Racha-Lechkhumi and Kvemo Svaneti is a single administrative region combining three historic areas; Kvemo Svaneti is on the northern edge, while Upper Svaneti, with Mestia and Ushguli, is a separate administrative region further north.

How many days are needed to see Racha properly?

Three days is a reasonable minimum: one for Ambrolauri, Nikortsminda and a wine tasting, one for Oni and a mountain excursion, allowing for the slow mountain roads.

Can Khvanchkara wine be bought only in Racha?

The grapes legally permitted for genuine Khvanchkara grow only in a defined area near Ambrolauri, but bottles bought directly from a Racha cellar simply guarantees origin and allows tasting before purchase.

Is the road from Kutaisi to Ambrolauri difficult?

It is a winding mountain road over the Nakerala Pass, manageable for most drivers in good weather but best avoided after heavy rain, via the [road status page](#).

Is there public transport within the region?

Marshrutkas connect Ambrolauri, Oni and some larger villages on a limited schedule, but reaching smaller sites generally requires a private car or hired driver.

Is the Oni Synagogue still in use?

The building survives and is maintained as a historic and architectural landmark; the Jewish community that once lived here has mostly moved to the city. Active services are infrequent compared with its nineteenth-century heyday.

What is the best time to hike near Shovi?

June through September offers the most stable trail conditions, with snow lingering on higher routes into early autumn.

Does Racha have any UNESCO-listed sites?

No. The region has no UNESCO World Heritage inscriptions; Georgia's listed sites lie elsewhere, including Mtskheta and Upper Svaneti.

Is Racha suitable for a day trip from Kutaisi?

A long day trip covering Ambrolauri, Nikortsminda and a wine stop is possible given the roughly 1 hour 20 min drive. An overnight stay allows a more relaxed visit to Oni and the mountain areas further north.

Sources

- Racha-Lechkhumi and Kvemo Svaneti
- Nikortsminda Cathedral
- Oni Synagogue
- [Georgian National Tourism Administration — Racha Lechkhumi region](#)
- [UNESCO World Heritage — Upper Svaneti](#)

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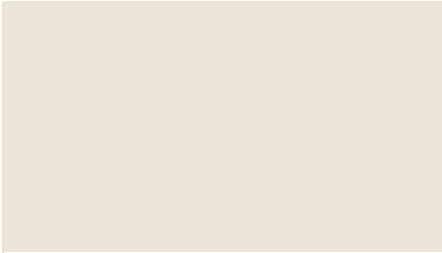
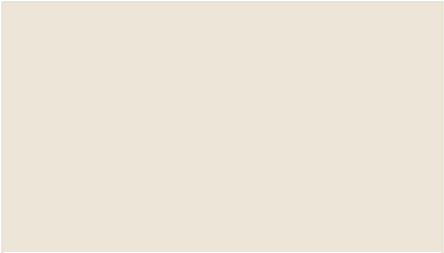
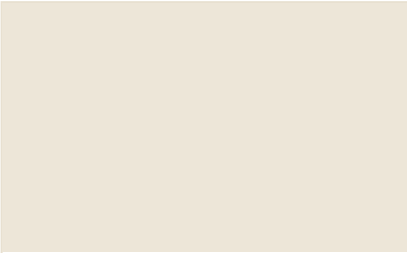
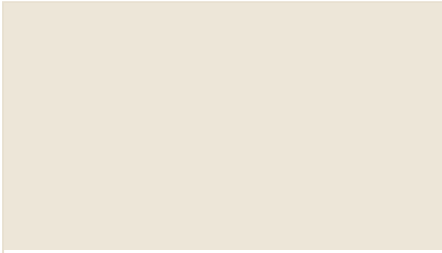
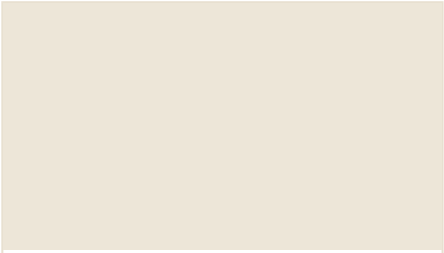
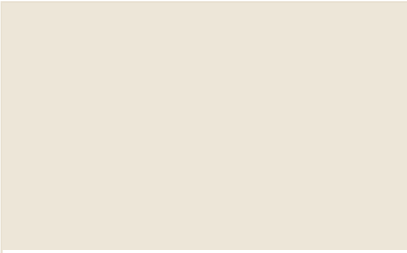
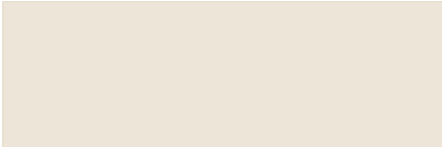
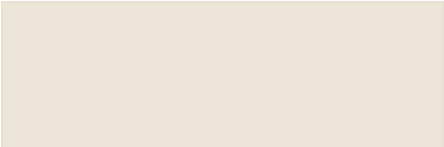
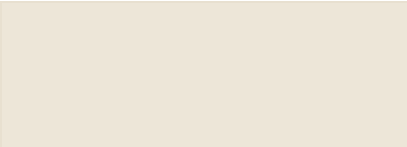
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Racha-Lechkhumi and Kvemo Svaneti is Georgia's smallest and least visited region, and its most pine forests, alpine lakes, wooden balconied houses and a slow, hospitable way of life. It sits in the heart of the Caucasus, beneath the peaks of the central Caucasus.

Ambrolauri is the small capital; Oni, with its nineteenth-century synagogue, and the eleventh-century Oni Monastery are cultural high points. The lakes at Shaori and Udziro and the resort of Shovi draw hikers in summer. Local specialties include Khvanchkara, the semi-sweet red from the Alexandrouli and Mujuretuli grapes, comes only from the region.

Racha rewards travellers with time — three days or more, ideally in late spring or early autumn, when the mountain roads are open.

PLACES TO VISIT IN RACHA-LECHKHUMI & KVEMO SVANETI · 19

 TOWN Ambrolauri	 VILLAGE Chazhashi	 TOWN Chiatura
 VILLAGE Gogolati	 VILLAGE Khidikari Village	 RESORT Kvereti
		

RESORT Lashitchala Resort	TOWN Lentekhi	VILLAGE Mravaldzali
TOWN Oni	TOWN Sachkhere	RESORT Shovi
TOWN Tsageri	VILLAGE Tvishi	VILLAGE Usholta

VERIFIED PLACES IN RACHA-LECHKHUMI & KVEMO SVANETI

TOURIST INFORMATION CENTER Tsageri Tourist Information Center	HOTEL Kipiani House & Winery	WINE Naberauli Wines
WINE Wine Cellar Iliaseuli	WINE Gonadze Vineyards	WINE Tchrebalo Wine Cellar

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Facts and travel times: Georgian National Tourism Administration. Text and selection: GTour.

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