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Region 3 h by car from Tbilisi 2 h 30 min by car from Kutaisi 3 h 15 min by car from Batumi Population

Samtskhe-Javakheti is a region — a region of Georgia, about 3 h by car from Tbilisi, 2 h 30 min from Batumi. Home to about 155,900 people.

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Samtskhe-Javakheti

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

Overview

Samtskhe-Javakheti lies in the south of Georgia, bordering Turkey and Armenia, roughly three hours by road from Tbilisi. It features a high volcanic plateau that drops westward into the forested gorge of the Mtkvari (Kura) river, and it covers an area with a population of around 155,900. Its landscape ranges from the alpine lake country of Javakheti in the east to the mountainous regions of Guria and Bakuriani in the west, with the dry, cliff-cut valley near Akhaltsikhe and Vardzia in between.

The region matters because it holds some of Georgia's most distinctive historical and natural sites in one corner. From the ruins of Vardzia, the restored walled town of Rabati in Akhaltsikhe, the mineral-water town of Borjomi and its national park, to the plateau of Javakheti with Georgia's largest lake, Paravani. For travellers, it combines naturally into a loop from Tbilisi to the Sea coast through [western Georgia](#).

History

The historical province, known as Meskheta or Samtskhe, was an important crossroads of medieval Georgian history. In the thirteenth century it was ruled by the Jaqeli dynasty, who governed it largely as an autonomous principality with a separate political entity after the Mongol invasions weakened central royal authority.

The cave monastery of Vardzia was carved into the cliffs above the Mtkvari river mainly during the reign of Queen Tamar in the second half of the twelfth century, serving as both a fortified refuge and a major monastic centre. Much of the outer rock face, exposing many of the chambers that are visible today.

In 1578 the region fell under Ottoman control and the principality became the Akhaltsikhe Pashalik, a period during which much of the local population converted to Islam and the town of Akhaltsikhe developed its characteristic bathhouse architecture, later reconstructed as the Rabati complex. Russian forces captured Akhaltsikhe in 1828 and the region was formally annexed to the Russian Empire under the terms that followed the war, after which Merab was reorganised under Russian administration.

In the Soviet period the region was developed for industry, agriculture and health tourism, with Borjomi's mineral water being a major attraction. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Abastumani Astrophysical Observatory founded in 1932 on the slopes above the spa town. Since 1991, the region has seen significant heritage restoration, most visibly the reconstruction of Rabati Castle in 1991, a state-funded restoration programme overseen by Georgian cultural heritage authorities.

What to see

Vardzia Cave Monastery

Vardzia is a vast complex of several hundred rooms, churches, stables and storerooms cut into a cliff face about the twelfth century under Giorgi III and Queen Tamar. The Church of the Dormition at its centre preserves medieval frescoes of Queen Tamar. It is administered as a protected cultural heritage site and sits on Georgia's Tentative List for UNESCO World Heritage.

Rabati Castle, Akhaltsikhe

Rabati is a walled fortress town combining a citadel, mosque, Orthodox church, synagogue and madrasa, reflecting centuries of Ottoman and Jewish history. The complex was extensively restored and reopened in 2012, and today functions as a museum and event venue.

Khertvisi Fortress

Set on a rocky outcrop above the confluence of the Mtkvari and Paravani rivers, Khertvisi is one of the oldest fortresses in Georgia, with its current structure dating largely from the medieval period. It commands the approach road to Vardzia and is a popular viewpoint looking further south.

Sapara Monastery

A few kilometres from Akhaltsikhe, Sapara is a monastic complex associated with the Jaqeli family, with churches and a church in the forested hills. Its frescoes and stonework reflect the patronage of the Samtskhe princes between the ninth and thirteenth centuries.

Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park

One of the largest protected areas in the Caucasus, the park covers mixed and coniferous forest rising from the Caucasus ridge, and is managed by the Agency of Protected Areas. It has a network of marked hiking trails and Borjomi itself is the source of Georgia's best-known mineral water.

Bakuriani and Abastumani

Bakuriani is a family-oriented ski resort in winter, with slopes suited to beginners and intermediates, and a cable car. Abastumani, higher in the mountains, is known for its clean air, nineteenth-century health resort architecture and an Astrophysical Observatory, founded in 1932.

Javakheti Lake Plateau

The high plateau east of Akhalkalaki holds a chain of volcanic lakes, including Paravani, Georgia's largest lake. Wetlands around Khanchali that are significant for migratory birds. The open, treeless landscape and clear skies attract hikers and travellers seeking a different, quieter side of Georgia.

Getting there

From Tbilisi, Samtskhe-Javakheti is reached by road in about three hours via Borjomi and Akhaltsikhe, with a cable car beyond Akhaltsikhe. Marshrutkas (shared minibuses) run regularly from Tbilisi's Didube station to Borjomi and Akhaltsikhe. Connections toward Vardzia are less frequent, so many travellers combine public transport with a local taxi or a private car. From Tbilisi to Borjomi, with a scenic narrow-gauge branch continuing up to Bakuriani.

From Kutaisi, the drive is about two and a half hours, mainly via Khashuri and the Borjomi gorge road. From Borjomi, it takes about fifteen minutes, following the inland route through Khulo or via Khashuri. Road conditions in the mountains can change rapidly, so check the [road status page](#) before travelling in winter. GTour arranges private transfers and guided tours with a driver-guide; see [GTour's tours](#) for options.

When to go

Late spring through autumn (May to October) is the most comfortable period for visiting Vardzia, Rabati and the cable car. Warm days and dry trails in Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park. Winter brings snow to Bakuriani's ski slopes, usually in good condition. The Javakheti plateau can be bitterly cold and some rural roads become difficult. Borjomi itself, in its sheltered gorge, is mild.

Where to stay and eat

Near Vardzia, the [Vardzia Resort](#) offers accommodation close to the cave monastery, convenient for an early start. Akhaltsikhe and Borjomi both have a range of guesthouses and small hotels, and Borjomi in particular has restaurants serving traditional Georgian dishes alongside standard Georgian fare. GTour's verified register lists more properties and restaurants across the region, with details on location, operation and standards.

Practical notes

Entry to Vardzia and Rabati Castle involves a ticketed entrance fee payable on site; comfortable footwear is advised as the cave floors are uneven. Mobile signal is generally reliable in towns but patchy on the Javakheti Plateau. Winter travel to Bakuriani and across the Javakheti lakes should allow extra time for snow and ice on mountain roads.

Questions travellers ask

How long does it take to see Vardzia properly?

Most visitors need one and a half to two hours to walk through the main cave complex, including the Church of the Holy Trinity. Visiting in the morning avoids the largest tour groups.

Can Vardzia and Rabati Castle be visited in one day from Tbilisi?

It is possible but long, with roughly six hours of driving round trip plus time at both sites; many travellers prefer to stay overnight near Vardzia to see both comfortably.

Is Borjomi mineral water from the same town travellers visit?

Yes, the water is bottled from springs in and around Borjomi, and the town's central park has public taps where visitors can fill their own bottles.

Is Bakuriani suitable for beginner skiers?

Bakuriani is generally considered Georgia's most family-friendly ski resort, with gentle slopes, ski schools and rental equipment for children, alongside steeper runs for more experienced skiers.

Are the Javakheti lakes accessible without a car?

Public transport to the lake plateau is limited, and most independent travellers either rent a car or arrange a private taxi. The lakes are located in the Tabatskuri and the Khanchali wetlands.

What is the best time for birdwatching in Javakheti?

Spring and autumn migration periods bring the greatest variety of species to the Javakheti wetlands, though some species are only seen on the lakes.

Is Rabati Castle an original medieval structure?

Rabati combines genuine older elements, including the citadel and some religious buildings, with extensive modern additions. Much of its current appearance reflects that restoration rather than an unaltered medieval fabric.

Does Vardzia have UNESCO World Heritage status?

Vardzia is included on Georgia's Tentative List for future UNESCO consideration but is not yet an inscribed World Heritage site.

What language is spoken in the region besides Georgian?

Javakheti has a significant ethnic Armenian population, and Armenian is widely spoken there alongside Georgian. Georgian predominates in the rest of the region.

Can the Borjomi-Kharagauli park be hiked without a guide?

Yes, the park maintains marked trails of varying difficulty and length suitable for independent hikers, though local guidance or advance planning through the park's managing agency is recommended.

Sources

- [Agency of Protected Areas](#)
- [National Agency for Cultural Heritage Preservation](#)
- [Georgian National Tourism Administration](#)
- [Georgian Railway](#)

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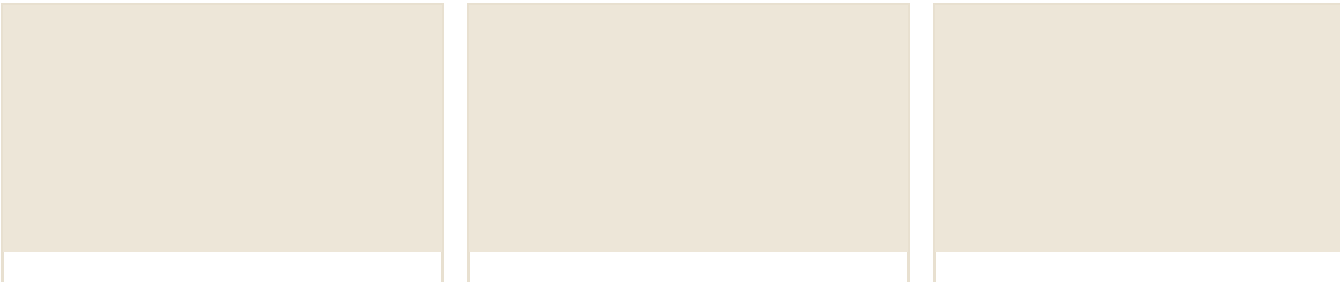
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Samtskhe-Javakheti is southern Georgia — a high volcanic plateau of lakes and wide skies, dropping to the Kura river. Its landmarks are among the country's most extraordinary: the cave city of Vardzia, 9th century, and the restored Rabati fortress at Akhaltsikhe, a walled town of mosque, church and palace.

Borjomi, in a wooded gorge, is the home of Georgia's famous mineral water and the entrance to the Borzhomi Gorge National Park. Above it, Bakuriani is a family ski resort in winter and a cool mountain retreat in summer; Akhaltsikhe for its pure air and its old observatory. The lake plateau of Javakheti — Paravani, Tabatskuri, the 'Land of the Birds' — is a birdwatching and big-sky country.

The region combines naturally with Vardzia as a two-day trip from Tbilisi or as a link between the capital and the coast via Kutaisi.

PLACES TO VISIT IN SAMTSKHE-JAVAKHETI · 15



RESORT Abastumani	VILLAGE Adigeni	TOWN Akhalkalaki
TOWN Aspindza	RESORT Bakuriani	RESORT Borjomi
VILLAGE Chobareti	TOWN Ninotsminda	RESORT Nunisi
VILLAGE Tabatskuri	TOWN Tsagveri	VILLAGE Tsikhisjvari

VERIFIED PLACES IN SAMTSKHE-JAVAKHETI

GASTRONOMY IFANI	GASTRONOMY RESTAURANT „USHBA“	HOTEL Borjomi Likani

HOTEL

Hotel & Restaurant Emerald

GASTRONOMY

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

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