

Georgia & Armenia

Caucasian specialties!

May 22 - June 2, 2021

Itinerary

Day 1 / May 22: Madrid - Istanbul (connecting flight to Tbilisi - Georgia)

Meet and welcome at Madrid airport to travel to Istanbul where we will land before midnight to take our connecting flight to Tbilisi.

Day 2 / May 23: Istanbul - Tbilisi (Georgia) - Stepantsminda (Kazbegi)

Arriving in Tbilisi, capital of Georgia, then quick transfer to the Hotel Betsy where we will just stop for a while, just enough for freshening up and our breakfast*. We will head northwards to the Greater Caucasus and Stepantsminda (1,740 m.a.s.l), an alpine townlet at the bottom of Kazbegi Mountain. A drive straight would normally take us about 3 hours, although we plan a few exciting birding tops en route such as Kojori and Ananuri Forest, with chances for Krüper's Nuthatch, Green Warbler, Semicollared and Red-breasted Flycatcher along with other forest species. Apart of birding we may also want to visit local burg, the Ananuri Castle. This fortress composes multifunctional architectural complex built between 16th and 17th cc. In 2007, the complex has been on the tentative list for inclusion into the UNESCO World Heritage Site program.

Upon arrival to our comfortable hotel we will check-in and then off again for some optional birding around the beautiful Elia Gorge surrounded by alpine meadows and rocky slopes, with large Rhododendron patches and a substantial population of Caucasian Black Grouse... At this time we should be able to see them displaying in the nearby slopes. In the vicinity we might find Red-fronted Serin, Goldcrest, Red Crossbill, Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush, Mistle Thrush, Water Pipit, Common Rosefinch, Ring Ouzel, Barred Warbler, Northern Wheatear and some other attractive species. Here we are also most likely to encounter a flock of red-listed East Caucasian Tur. Obviously, a local groups of these impressive angulates does well in Kazbegi and can be easily seen at many places around. Dinner and accommodation in the Hotel Iveria (Stepantsminda).

* In case of any delay in our flights we might not have time to quickly stop for a break at the Hotel Betsy.

Day 3 / May 24: Kazbegi Mountain - Dariali

After early breakfast we will bump up to the Gergeti Trinity Church placed at an altitude of 2,200 m.a.s.l, with some of the stunning views of the surrounding valleys. From here we will have a strenuous walk up to reach the glacier of the Kazbegi Mountain at 3,000 m.a.s.l, where most exiting birding awaits us, including close up views of the eminent Caucasus's Great Fiv: Caucasian Snowcock, Caucasian Grouse, Great Rosefinches, Guldenstadt's Redstarts and Caucasian Chiffchaff in line with many other alpine targets. Amongst raptors we should see Bearded (Lammergeier), Black and Griffon Vultures, Golden Eagle, Steppe Eagle, Peregrine Falcon and other species involved in their Spring migration. This is certainly the only challenging part of our tour, however it should provide some of the most rewarding and memorable highlights.

In the afternoon we will walk back down, visiting the Gergeti Trinity Church, also known as Sameba. That name comes from 14th century and translates as Holy Trinity Church. The church is located right on top of the Stepantsminda village under the Glacier Kazbegi. During the Soviet time all religious services were prohibited, but the

church remained a popular tourist destination. The church is now an active establishment of the Georgian Orthodox Church.

After lunch we will enjoy our birding at the beautiful Dariali Gorge, placed right to the Russian border and surrounded by the magnificent mountain range of Kazbegi National Park. Right from the Monastery itself we can explore the cliffs of the other side of the valley trying to find some more raptors and maybe, a new sight of East Caucasian Tur.

Day 4 / May 25: Surrounding gorges and valleys of Kazbegi

We will transfer before sunrise to the western edge of the Elia Gorge. This site offers incredibly beautiful views of the Kazbegi peak and the whole town itself. At this time of the year Caucasian Snowcocks emerges with the first lights to start calling every single morning. Chances to spot European Lynx, Grey Wolf and even Brown Bear.

We aim to spend here over an hour with a cup of hot coffee / tea before venturing short distance lower down towards the Terek River Valley. The forest patches along the river settings usually provide good views of Blue and Coal Tit, Rock Bunting, Bulfinch, Ring Ouzel, Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush, Green Warbler, Caucasian (Mountain) Chiffchaff, Dipper, and other interesting species, so we should certainly get interesting sightings before lunch.

Later in the afternoon we will explore the Truso Valley and its abandoned and mysterious shepherd's village, where one can see a good variety of alpine specialties including Wallcreeper, Alpine and Red-billed Choughs, Twite, Linnet, Red-fronted Serin, Black Redstart, Whinchat, Stonechat and the resident Golden Eagle.

Day 5 / May 26: Juta Valley and Shio Mghvime Monastery - Tbilisi

On our last day in Kazbegi we will visit the remote Juta Valley. Settled at 2,200 m.a.s.l on the main ridge of the Caucasus Mountain range this valley provides another stunning scenery and good chances to find Alpine Chough, Corncrake and small parties of Horned Lark.

After exploring Juta we will drive back to Tbilisi passing by the Shio Mghvime Monastery through a former military road built by the German Army during World War II. This will be certainly our last stop before arriving the capital of Georgia. The Shio Mghvime is an old monastery dated from VI century, surrounded by walls with caves built in the medieval ages. The surroundings of the monastery is a stronghold site for breeding Egyptian Vultures. Besides we might see other interesting species such as Black-eared Wheatear, Ortolan, Corn and Black-headed Buntings, Tawny Pipit, Red-backed, Woodchat and Lesser Grey Shrikes... Arriving at the Hotel Betsy in Tbilisi by late in the evening to dinner and a rest.

Day 6 / May 27: David Gareji Monastery and Lake Jandari

Today we will drive to David Gareji, a journey of around 1:30 hours through the colorful steppes where one can see good numbers of Rosy Starlings, Calandra Lark, Lesser Short-toed Lark, Skylark, European Roller, European Bee-eater and Chukar. This site consists of Mediterranean-type arid fields with multi-colored clay hills covered with shrub and steppe-like vegetation. David Gareji itself is a Monastery Complex created by the Christian Monks in the 5th Century.

Among raptors, Egyptian Vulture, Steppe Eagle, Short-toed Snake Eagle, Northern Goshawk, Steppe and Long-legged Buzzards should be all reported here. However the main attraction here are the Eastern Imperial Eagles, having a few breeding pairs near the Monastery complex itself. Other interesting species present are Western Rock Nuthatch, Blue Rock Thrush, Rock Sparrow, Pied and Finsch's Wheatear, Red-backed, Woodchat and Lesser Grey Shrike, Eurasian Penduline Tit, Redwing, Reed Bunting, Siberian Stonechat, Hoopoe, Eastern Orphean and Meneries's Warbler and Rufous Bush Robin amongst many others.

Once all main targets have been seen we will drive back to Tbilisi with a short break at the Lake Jandari. This is a medium-sized lake, placed right to southeast Tbilisi and surrounded by steppic habitat. We will have good chances to find some nice wildfowl including Pygmy Cormorants, as well as several species of ducks and waders. We might also see Demoiselle Crane hanging around the lake. If time allows we might do a last stop at the Ponichara Reserve. This forest is probably the best and closest birding location to Tbilisi, a real spot for Woodpeckers including Great Spotted, Lesser Spotted, Middle Spotted, Syrian, Green and Black.

Today's evening agenda will include an optional short walk in the beautiful old quarter and lovely traditional dinner to hopefully celebrate the successful ending of the Georgian section of our tour.

Day 7 / May 28: Dilijan Forest and Norashen Reserve (Armenia)

After breakfast we will drive today to the Armenian border. Our new minibus and new friends will be awaiting for us on the other side. Once we gently cross the police control we will head straight to the unique Dilijan Forest, our first proper birding stop in Armenia.

The Dilijan Forest is just a small section of the huge Dilijan National Park, which extends for 24,000 hectares. This is certainly a good place to watch raptors as Golden, Lesser Spotted and Booted Eagles, as well as various Buteo, Circus and Falco species. Amongst its wide selection of smaller birds we must mention the presence of Great Spotted and Middle Spotted Woodpecker (ssp. caucasicus), European Nuthatch, Eurasian Treecreeper, Hawfinch, Green Warbler... however the two main targets in this spot are Red-breasted and Semicollared Flycatcher.

We will drive afterwards to the town under the same name for our lunch in a local restaurant. Second half of our first day in Armenia will take place in the Norashen Reserve, located at the Southwestern shore of the huge Sevan Lake. The reserve was initially established to protect the only known breeding site of Armenian Gull. The impressive colony is one of the largest in the entire world with more than 6,000 breeding pairs recorded every year. Besides gulls and terns, this lake also offers a good selection of wildfowl species such as Bald Ibis, Eurasian Spoonbill, Ruddy Shelduck and several species of herons, egrets and waders, including the very special Terek Sandpiper.

Dinner and accommodation at Hotel Harsnaqar (Sevan).

Day 8 / May 29: Lake Sevan - Vardenyats Pass - Noravank Gorge

We will first start our birding in a small-like wetland called Lichk where we will try to find some interesting duck species. Further beyond we will explore an ancient traditional Armenian village which should provide good chances for seeing Rock Sparrow, Black Redstart, Linnet, Twite, Radde's Accentor, White-winged Swnofinch, Bluethroat, Yellow Wagtail and Citrine Wagtail. In the Vardenyats mountain pass we will look for Ortolan Bunting, Common Rosefinch and Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush, while un in the air we might find interesting raptors such as Bearded Vultures or Lesser Spotted Eagles.

Finally we will drive towards Noravank after our lunch. This is one of the most picturesque canyons in Armenia consisting in vertical cliffs and very steep slopes covered by nice red clay. This site is also known by its ancient Monastery dated on VIII Century. Amazingly the monastery itself and its surroundings lodge a very attractive birdlife like Eastern and Western Rock Nuthatches, Golden Oriole, White-throated Robin, Upcher's Warbler, Chukar, Alpine and Red-billed choughs, Blue Rock Thrush, Red-Fronted Serin, Linnet, Peregrine Falcon and Golden Eagle amongst others. After hopefully a very productive birding we will have our dinner in a local and very atmospheric restaurant carved in the cliffs themselves.

After our dinner then transfer to our hotel. Accommodation in the Hotel Arevi (Yeghegnadzor).

Day 9 / May 30: Gndasar Mountains - Vedi Gorge

Today we will concentrate in two main birding spots: Gndasar (or Yeghegnadzor) Mountains in the morning and Vedi Gorge in the afternoon. We will leave the hotel early in the morning before sunrise using 4X4 vehicles to reach the most productive location to see Caspian Snowcocks. As soon we arrive to the right place we should be able to hear their distinctive calls. The Gndasar covers the southern slopes of the Vardenis mountain range at the elevation between 1,500 and 2,700 m.a.s.l and biotopes change from mountain steppes to subalpine meadows with rocky outcrops. The surrounding hills sometimes provide views of Bezoar Goat and more rarely Brown Bear. Our plan is spending as much time as possible in this spectacular location trying to get some other bird species like Northern Wheatear, Meadow and Water Pipits, Eurasian Skylark, Alpine Accentor, Dunnock, White-winged Snowfinch, White-throated Robin and occasionally Bimaculated Lark and Crimson-winged Finch too.

The Vedi Desert Gorge is probably one of the most beautiful and exotic birding destinations in Armenia. Its rocky slopes and semi-arid landscape lodge a dazzling array of exclusive species such as Grey-necked Bunting, Pied and Finch's Wheatear, Upcher's Warbler, Eastern Rock Nuthatch, Trumpeter and Desert Finch, Pale Rockfinch (Pale Rock Sparrow), Rufous Bush Robin and White-throated Robin. Amongst the raptors we might also see Levant Sparrowhawk, Lesser Kestrel, Egyptian Vulture and Lanner Falcon. This is an interesting site as well for reptiles with chance for Caucasian Agama, Caucasian Emerald Lizard and Snake-eyed Lizard.

In the evening transfer to Yerevan where we will stay at the Hotel Hrazdan.

Day 10 / May 31: Yerevan - Armash Ponds - Uranots Mountains

Today we will firstly explore the well-known Armash Fish Ponds placed in the Southernmost section of Armenia, along to the border with Turkey and Nakhchivan (province of Azerbaijan). This complex of fish ponds was artificially created in times of Soviet Union, becoming nowadays into an amazing paradise for birds. Some of the species present here are Pygmy Cormorant, Ferruginous Duck, White-headed Duck, Marbled (Teal) Duck, Great-white Pelican, Eurasian Spoonbill, Terek Sandpiper, Broad-billed Sandpiper, Curlew Sandpiper, Collared and Black-winged Pratincole, White-tailed Lapwing... we might even have a little chance to see rare Spur-winged Lapwings! Amongst warblers we must mention a few such as Menetries', Moustached, Paddyfield, Upcher's and Olivaceous... being all of them relatively common. If all of this was not enough this wetland provides excellent opportunities to see Blue-cheeked Bee-eater and Bearded Reedling.

After spending whole morning in Armash we will leave after lunch towards the Uranots in the Ararat Valley. This is a dry steppe located next to the foothills of the Oorts Mountains. This eco-region amid way to the semi-desert and the mountain steppe lodges many interesting species, such as Golden Eagle, Griffon and Bearded Vulture,

Chukar, Eastern and Western Rock Nuthatches, White-throated and Rufous Bush Robin, Red-fronted Serin, Eastern Orphean Warbler, Upcher's Warbler, Desert Finch, Syrian Woodpecker... however the rare Persian Wheatear is the most wanted bird amongst birders from all the world.

After our birding in the Uranots we will travel back to Yerevan where we will dedicate some time to sightseeing walking in the downtown including a well deserved traditional dinner in a traditional restaurant to celebrate our fantastic tour to Armenia. Accommodation at Hotel Hrazdan.

Day 11 / June 1: Yerevan - Aragats Mountain - Amberd Fortress - Tbilisi

Our last day birding of this tour will take us to the Northwest section of Mount Aragats. This area should provide excellent opportunities to explore woodland, meadow-steppe and sub-alpine species such as Radde's Accentor, Rock Sparrow, Ortolan Bunting, Ring Ouzel, White-throated Robin, Bimaculated Lark, Alpine Accentor, Twite, Linnet, Bluethroat, White-winged Snowfinch, Crimson-winged Finch, Horned Lark and Red-billed Chough. We will also have good chances to see some raptors including Common Buzzard, Steppe Buzzard, Eurasian Sparrowhawk, Lesser Spotted Eagle, Short-toed Eagle, Golden Eagle, Black Kite and Bearded Vulture, while Wallcreepers usually forage in the vertical rock walls of these mountains.

The Amberd fortress dated from 7th century and located at 2,300 m.a.s.l in the slopes of the Mount Aragats will be our last birding stop in Armenia, to immediately transfer back to the border with Georgia and finally arrive in the late evening to our hotel in Tbilisi. Dinner and accommodation at the Hotel Betsy.

Day 12 / June 2: Tbilisi airport - Madrid

After our breakfast we will transfer to the Tbilisi airport where we will take our flight back to Madrid via Istanbul.

**If improvements can be made or unforeseen conditions beyond our control make changes necessary, we reserve the right to vary this itinerary and substitute hotels.*

PRICES:

Per person sharing in twin / doubled-room with private facilities: **€ 2,645**

Single Supplement: **€ 350**

Group size: Min. 10 – Max. 14 travelers plus our guide

The price includes:

- * Flights with Turkish Airlines Madrid – Istanbul – Tbilisi / Tbilisi – Istanbul – Madrid
- * 10 night accommodation in the hotels showed in the itinerary or same standard
- * All meals starting with breakfast on May 23 to breakfast on June 6
- * Guide services: John Muddeman and local guides
- * Ground transport in a 17 seater minibus
- * Basic travel insurance
- * Checklist of the birds of Georgia and Armenia
- * All taxes

The price doesn't include:

- * Any drink during meals but water
- * Any expenses of a pure personal nature such as laundry services, telephone calls, minibar or sauna
- * Cancellation insurance

1. PAYMENTS

Reservations on our Georgia & Armenia tour (Cod.SBNT2021/4) running between May 22 and June 2, 2021 require a booking form and a deposit of **€ 600** in order to guarantee your place. This first payment must be sent to us by bank transfer or credit/debit card as soon as we approve your booking request in writing. We cannot accept as valid any request until we have received and acknowledged the deposit as above.

Balance payment for the tour (including single supplement if applicable) must be sent to us before February 21, 2021. Both payments can be done either by bank transfer or by credit / debit card through the secure on-line system available on our web site. If you decide to send the money via bank transfer our details are as follows:

Holder: Spainbirds Nature Tours S.L.

Bank: Openbank

Address: Avda. De Cantabria, s/n

28660 - Bohadilla del Monte

Madrid

SPAIN

IBAN: ES55 0073 0100 56 0471764400

SWIFT / BIC: OPENESMM

When making your payment, we recommend you include both the name and code number of the tour. All payments made by clients should be confirmed to Spainbirds Nature Tours either by email to info@spainbirds.com or by sending a text to the following mobile number: 00 34 687 83 77 19.

Please note that all payments to Spainbirds Nature Tours should be in Euros.

2. PERSONAL DETAILS AND PASSPORT

Travelers must advise any personal details required by Spainbirds Nature Tours to confirm their reservation, particularly important being name and surname exactly as shown on their passports in order to avoid any problem when we purchase group flight tickets.

IMPORTANT NOTICE: Travelers flying into Georgia must have their passport in order and it must have an expiry date of at least 6 months after the return date of the tour. European Union, UK and USA citizens don't require a VISA to get into Georgia or Armenia. However we recommend you check with the embassy of Georgia in your country to get any information about possible extra documents. This would particularly apply to UK travelers after 31st December 2020.

To assist Spainbirds in their organization of the tour, we ask travelers to advise if they are following a particular medical treatment, whether they have any allergies (especially food allergies), or if they have any specific diet requirements that we should know in advance.

3. TRAVEL INSURANCE

It is highly advisable to take out a personal travel and medical insurance policy before leaving your country. Please let us know the name of your company insurance before travelling. In addition we strongly recommend you have your own insurance for your optical equipment (binoculars, camera etc.). For information of all travellers Spainbirds Nature Tours has its own civil liability insurance through REALE SEGUROS, policy number 1331100001899/0, covering damages to third parties to a maximum of 1,800,000 Euros. As travel agency licensed by the Spanish Tourism Board, all our clients will be traveling covered by a basic travel insurance, but this may not be enough to cover certain personal circumstances or specific items.

4. CANCELLATIONS AND REFUNDS

Penalties and refunds if a cancellation is made by the client:

Any cancellation must be firstly reported by email or any other written form as a letter to our office address (see Contact Us section).

a) If the cancellation is made before February 21, 2021 we will refund 75% of the deposit paid. The remaining 25% will be used to cover any expenses related to change or cancellation of flight tickets or any deposits paid to ground agents, local guides or hotels.

b) If the cancellation is made between February 21, 2021 and April 7, 2021 (both days inclusive) we will refund the balance but the client will forfeit the entire deposit meaning 600 Euros for this specific Georgia & Armenia tour.

c) If the cancellation is made between April 8, 2021 and May 22, 2021 (including a no-show in the meeting point the same day that the trip starts) the client will forfeit the total amount paid to Spainbirds Nature Tours including any supplement or extras arranged previously related to this tour.

Any breach of the above instalments or unjustified delays in paying them will automatically lead to cancellation of the booking, the above mentioned rules then being applied. The post-cancellation sum of money to be reimbursed will be sent by wire transfer within the following fourteen days after the cancellation has been communicated. The client will also assume any expense related to possible bank commissions applied in the process.

Since the main objective of the penalties noted above is to guarantee the smooth functioning of this tour without affecting other clients or Spainbirds organization of the tour, we refund in full the amount paid if we are able to replace on time the cancelled place, excluding any expenses purely related to the nature of this change and any airline conditions, if the flight has been booked by Spainbirds

Cancellation made by Spainbirds Nature Tours:

We reserve the right to cancel any tour for which there are insufficient reservations - always before 22 April. In case of such cancellation, all deposits and other payments will be automatically refunded in full to our clients.

If the cancellation of the tour is confirmed after April 22, 2021, Spainbirds Nature Tours will refund in full within the following 7 days the total amount paid by the client AND will compensate the client as follows below:

- a) A compensation equivalent to 10% of the total cost of the tour if cancellation is made between April 22 and May 2, 2021.
- b) A compensation equivalent to 15% of the total cost of the tour if cancellation is made between May 3 and May 22, 2021.

Spainbirds Nature Tours will not compensate to the client in the following cases:

- a) When the cancellation is made because the number of reservations is under the minimum required to run the tour as shown on our web site about this tour (spainbirds.com/en). In such case our travel agency reserves the right to cancel a tour and we will inform the client in writing of the cancellation as latest 20 days before the tour starts.
- b) When the cancellation is made due to reasons of force majeure, which would be acts, events or circumstances which could not have been anticipated and which would be beyond the control of the organizer.

5. FLIGHTS SCHEDULE FROM MADRID (TURKISH AIRLINES)

MAY 22, 2021 / TK1860 Madrid 18:20 h. - Istanbul 23:30 h.

May 23, 2021 / TK376 Istanbul 01:25 h. - Tblisi 04:45 h.

JUNE 2, 2021 / TK379 Tblisi 10:30 h. - Istanbul 12:05 h.

JUNE 2, 2021 / TK1859 Istanbul 13:20 h. - Madrid 16:50 h.

The price of the package holiday includes return international flights from Madrid. Other existing alternatives from other airports might not be an option since prices given by the airline company usually depends on the number of reservations previously requested by Spainbirds Nature Tours. However, if you are planning to fly from your home country or any other different airport from Spain, please let us know by email in advance for us to consider your enquiry.

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