



OFFICIALLY A TBILISI LOVER

There's lots to discover in adventurous Georgia

WHAT IN THE WORLD?

ACCORDING to legend, while he was out hunting, Vakhtang Gorgasali, the founder of Tbilisi, injured a pheasant which fell into a hot spring and died. He was so impressed with the discovery, he built Tbilisi, which means 'warm place', at this location.

Tbilisi, Georgia, Europe.

ADMIRING ancient jewellery and decorated clay wine vessels in the Georgian National Museum in Tbilisi, I am astonished to find out that one 1,500-litre qvevri wine container dates back to the third century BC.

It is in Georgia that the earliest evidence of winemaking was found. Wine jars up to 8,000-years-old were discovered in this region at the edge of Europe, set between the Caucasus Mountains and the Black Sea, which is said to be the birthplace of wine.

With its hospitality, green landscape and many churches, the country of Georgia has a lot in common with Ireland too, and its wine culture is just one of many surprises it has for the visitor, as I find over a week-long visit.

I start my trip with a walking tour of the colourful city of Tbilisi, where the architecture ranges from old wooden houses with ornate balconies, to shiny glass and steel structures like the pedestrian Peace Bridge across the Mtkvari River.

We walk across the bridge to a park on the river bank and then take a cable car up to Narikala Fortress which overlooks the capital.

Here, the sulphur baths from natural mineral water deep in the ground have provided a reviving and calming experience to visitors for more than a thousand years — including those travelling the Silk Road which connected Europe to Asia.

Tbilisi itself is quite a relaxed capital — many of the older houses were built with inner courtyards so it's not hard to find an open-air cafe or restaurant with its own garden, or an ornate balcony sharing space with leafy green trees.

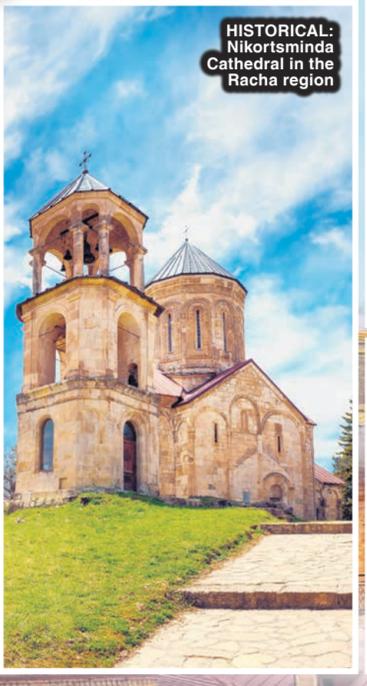
At Cafe Ornament on Shalva Dadiani Street, the entrance lane is lined with umbrellas and in the courtyard, a small garden is being planted up with flowers.

Inside the cafe, we tuck into tea and cake served on colourful crockery and admire the vintage furniture and windowsills with plant pots and old books.

In the evening we check out Cafe Linville which is in an old house, where a crooked wooden staircase leads to a charming first floor with rooms of mismatched wallpaper and old furniture.

On the balcony, branches of trees and vines give the setting a garden feel.

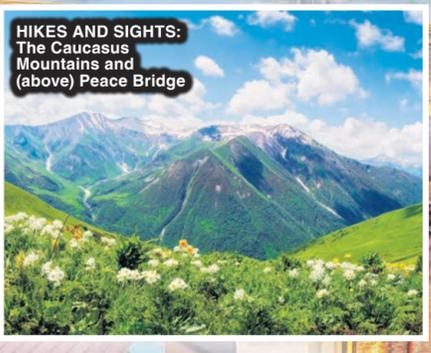
At an alfresco dinner in the courtyard at Shavi Lomi, we have our first sample of



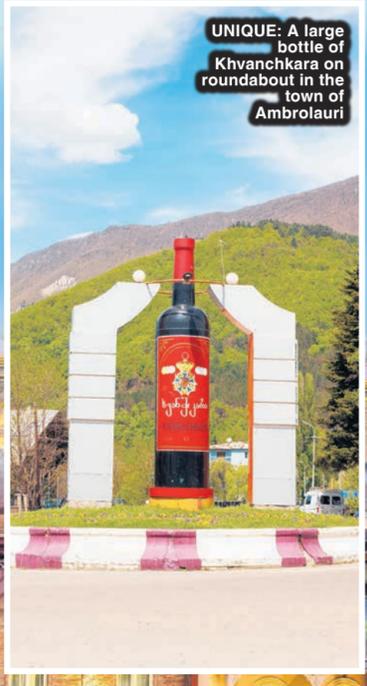
HISTORICAL: Nikortsminda Cathedral in the Racha region



UNIQUE: A large bottle of Khvanchkara on roundabout in the town of Ambrolauri



HIKES AND SIGHTS: The Caucasus Mountains and (above) Peace Bridge



Yvonne GORDON

Georgian wines and learn about the tradition of tamada — where a toastmaster is appointed during a feast or supra, to make a series of celebratory toasts.

Peace

Our first toast is to meeting each other and our second one is to our countries — we go on to toast family, peace, the Earth and various other subjects as the merriment continues.

Continuing on the wine theme, we travel north to the Racha region at the foothills of the Caucasus Mountains, and the motherland of two famous Georgian wines — Usakhelauri and the semi-sweet Khvanchkara

red wine. In the town of Ambrolauri, a large monument of a bottle of Khvanchkara welcomes us at the main roundabout and we see the Caucasus Mountains as a backdrop in the distance, their dark rocky summits still with snow, even in summer.

The tradition in Georgia is to make wine in huge clay vessels called qvevri, which are placed underground to ensure an even temperature.

Glaciers

We visit Chateau Dio winery in Ambrolauri, around four hours' drive from Tbilisi, to see the 'holy place' where the qvevri are stored in the ground during the winemaking process.

We taste a 'green' white Mtsvane wine from the area and the semi-sweet red Khvanchkara.

Churches and cathedrals are a big feature of the Georgian landscape and culture — many were built on hills.

In the Racha region, we visit the beautiful Nikortsminda Cathedral, a Georgian Orthodox church which dates back to the year 1010.

The inside is richly decorated and full of colourful frescoes, while the huge dome at the top has 12 windows in it.

Our appointed toastmaster (our guide Zviad) brings us through the toasts — to God, family, our countries and to peace.

We add a new one, to the weather gods, to bring us another beautiful day of exploring and hiking.

monument made of rock, where we have a picnic and admire the views of trees and greenery stretching along the valley into the distance. It's a pleasant 5km return trip.

In the evening, at the guesthouse we are staying in, we tuck into a Georgian feast, with khachapuri (cheese-filled bread), lobiani (bean-filled bread) plus chicken, potatoes and vegetable dishes with walnuts, accompanied by the traditional Georgian drink, chacha.

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EXPLORE: Gran Canaria has lots to do all year round

Canaries the perfect spot for romance

THE Canary Islands are popular holiday destinations for many people across Europe.

They're not too far away, they boast great year-round weather and there's lots of things to see and do.

If you and your partner are looking to get away from it all, here are some of the most romantic things to do in the Canaries...

● 1. Explore the Maspalomas Dunes: If you're heading to Gran Canaria, the Maspalomas Dunes are a great romantic destination. Known to be a special nature reserve, the dunes cover a staggering 400 hectares. As well as the golden sand dunes, the reserve also features stretches of palm trees, a great beach and a lagoon. You and your partner can stroll across the sand and have a picnic on the beach.

● 2. Enjoy a spa experience for two: No matter which part of the Canaries you head to, you'll never be far away from a luxury spa. Couples spa days are a great way not only to bond together, but to ensure all your worries drift away.

● 3. Go whale and dolphin watching: Due to the warm tropical waters of the Canaries, it's not unusual to spot dolphins and whales. No matter where you go, you'll be able to take a whale and dolphin watching tour. You and your loved one will create lasting memories together as you watch bottlenose dolphins drift through the water.

● 4. Take a sunset cruise: Few activities are as romantic as taking a sunset cruise together. The sunsets in the Canaries are truly spectacular. As you gaze out into the sunset together it will feel like it's just you and your partner.

● 5. Catch an open-air movie: With the tropical weather, what better way to spend an evening in the Canaries than by catching an open-air movie together? Snuggle up under the night stars as you watch a popular film. These open-air cinemas serve up a range of delicious food too — an ideal way to enjoy the cooler evenings.

See www.tui.ie for trips to the Canary Islands.



CULTURAL MECCA: Tbilisi old town in Georgia

Fact file

FLIGHTS

● TURKISH Airlines flies from Dublin to Tbilisi via Istanbul from €398 return, see www.turkishairlines.com.

WHAT TO DO

● For information on what to see and do in Georgia, see www.gobarefoot.travel. For eco-friendly and adventure travel in Georgia, see www.gobarefoot.travel.

For more on travel, see **buzz.ie**

What's happening at home

The Address at Dublin 1 has announced an expansion at their central location on Amiens Street, opposite Connolly Station and just minutes from the IFSC.

A €10m investment by Brian and Ciara McGettigan as part of the M Collection, which includes the Kingswood and Ambassador hotels, will add an additional 40 bedrooms to the 80-bedroom property which includes The Address at Dublin 1 and The North Star hotel.

Over 100,000 guests stayed in The Address in 2018 and those numbers look to be surpassed this year as over 90,000 visitors have stayed in the hotel to date this year.

One of Dublin's most conveniently-located luxury boutique hotels, The Address is the perfect location for business travelers and tourists alike.

What's happening abroad

SCHOOLS are only just back but nevertheless, it's never too soon to be thinking of your next family break — and Halloween is just around the corner after all.

As the nights close in and weather changes for the worst, the October mid-term break is the perfect time to seek out some sun, sea and sand — and Emirates Holidays has some amazing deals on offer for families looking to do Halloween a little bit differently this year.

With return flights with Emirates and guaranteed 4* or 5* luxury accommodation, this late deal from Emirates Holidays is less trick and a lot more treat.

Stay at the 4* Lapita Hotel, Dubai Parks and Resorts for five nights from €4,325 per family (2 adults, 2 kids).

Price is based on staying in a deluxe twin room on a half-board basis, departing Dublin on October 26.

The holiday also includes unlimited access to Dubai Parks and Resorts for the family and return Emirates Economy class flights.

Emirates Holidays also have deals to the 5* Rixos The Palm Dubai; the 5* Rixos Saadiyat Island, Abu Dhabi; the 5* Kempinski Hotel Muscat, Oman; the 4* Santhiya, Koh Yao Yai, Thailand; and 4* Kandima Maldives.

Bookings for the Dubai package listed above must be made by the September 30. See www.emiratesholidays.com/ie.



FUNKY: The Marlin Hotel is now open to guests; (right) the indoor garden

OPEN FOR BUSINESS...

THE €55 million Marlin Hotel is now open at 11 Bow Lane East, adjacent to St Stephen's Green Shopping Centre, right in the heart of Dublin city centre.

Interior designers O'Donnell O'Neill were tasked with translating Marlin's ethos of 'Don't Just Stay — Live' into the truly unique ground floor space that will appeal to both corporate and leisure markets alike.

Guests can choose to check in at the ultra-speedy self-service check in desk, or opt for a warm welcome from the front of house team. Valet parking is also available for

residents in the hotel's carpark. Throughout the ground floor, natural materials, indoor planting and pops of neon are juxtaposed against the building's exposed concrete structure and cool terrazzo floors.

Those in search of an urban sanctuary will love the indoor garden featuring a kiln dried olive tree centrepiece and an open fire.

Offering the perfect night's sleep, the Marlin Hotel Dublin's 300 high-tech modern bedrooms start from €179 per night. See www.marlinhotel.ie for more.

DEAL OF THE WEEK

NONE of us want to start thinking about winter just yet, but holiday-wise now is the time to do so are heading on a ski break.

Andorra's ski resorts are rated as some of the best in Europe for learning to ski. The varied value make it a great option for families. Groups also flock here for the lively and affordable nightlife.

Now, with Crystal Ski, you can depart on January 12, 2020 and stay in the 2* Manzano Apartments, Pas De La Casa on a self-catering basis from €385pp (4 share, includes €50 off per person). See www.crystalski.ie for more.