

A monument in Kutaisi's Central Square, Colchis Fountain, echoes the legends of the ancient Colchian kingdom

THE ART OF SLOWING DOWN

One of Europe's oldest settlements and a city with a "big village" atmosphere, Kutaisi gives you a glimpse of raw, unfiltered Georgia, minus the tourist tumult

BY SHIKHA SHAH

For city dwellers living in concrete jungles, an opportunity to escape the jam-packed, often monotonous, daily routine is both a rare indulgence and a meaningful accomplishment. No wonder the definition of luxury travel is changing rapidly, especially for the immersive travellers who find solace in embracing the unhurried rhythm of life in faraway, lesser-known places. After all, there is a certain charm in trading opulent resorts with butlers and private jets for small towns and villages where you can stroll aimlessly and revel in the art of doing nothing.

With the idea of pausing for a bit and observing the nuances of life, I boarded a train from Georgia's capital city, Tbilisi, for a four-hour delightful journey to Kutaisi, a tranquil backwater city nestled in Western Georgia and the former capital of the Imereti kingdom. My adventure begins when my train enters Rioni Railway Station, an atypical station without a traditional platform. I am asked to hop off the train and cross the tracks to get to the exit, where I hail a taxi for a short 25-minute ride to Kutaisi's downtown.

Tucked away on Jacob Gogebashvili Street is House 1899, a welcoming, family-run guesthouse in a 126-year-old mansion. In their living area, the owner greets me with a warm smile and a glass of fine Georgian wine from the family vineyard. I feel an instant connection to the host despite the language barrier.

Over the next four days, I explore the Transcaucasian jewel and soak in its old-world charm, minus an agenda or a rigid itinerary.

Most first-time travellers to Georgia are so enticed by the buzz and glamour of Tbilisi and Batumi and the dramatic natural landscape of Svaneti that they tend to overlook the simple pleasures of Kutaisi, one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world. In a way, this ensures the compact riverine town's ancient sites, lush parks, distinctive culinary scene, and exceptional hospitality remain reserved for the discerning traveller seeking rather meaningful experiences.

To learn about Kutaisi's storied past, I set out on a self-guided stroll in the winding lanes of its Old Town. My starting point is the ornamental Colchis Fountain. Sitting at the town centre, the tiered water feature is decorated with enlarged copies of jewellery and ritual figurines found at Vani, a nearby archaeological site, with no dearth of inspiration for art and architecture lovers. I find myself gaping in awe at the Meskhishvili Theatre, one of the oldest theatres in Georgia, established in 1861, and Rustaveli Avenue's Kutaisi State Opera Theatre, which boasts 13 Greco-Roman sculptures watching over the city. Among other highlights are the Art Deco Mon Plaisir Arch (meaning "My Pleasure" in French) with its Wall of Love, and Soviet-era, terracotta bas-relief at the western entrance of the Green Bazaar.

A gem of Kutaisi's Catholic Quarter or the old French Quarter, the Holy Annunciation Temple was built in 1862 by King Solomon II. Inside this Baroque-style Orthodox church, I spend some moments in solitude, admiring its Vatican-style murals of Mary.

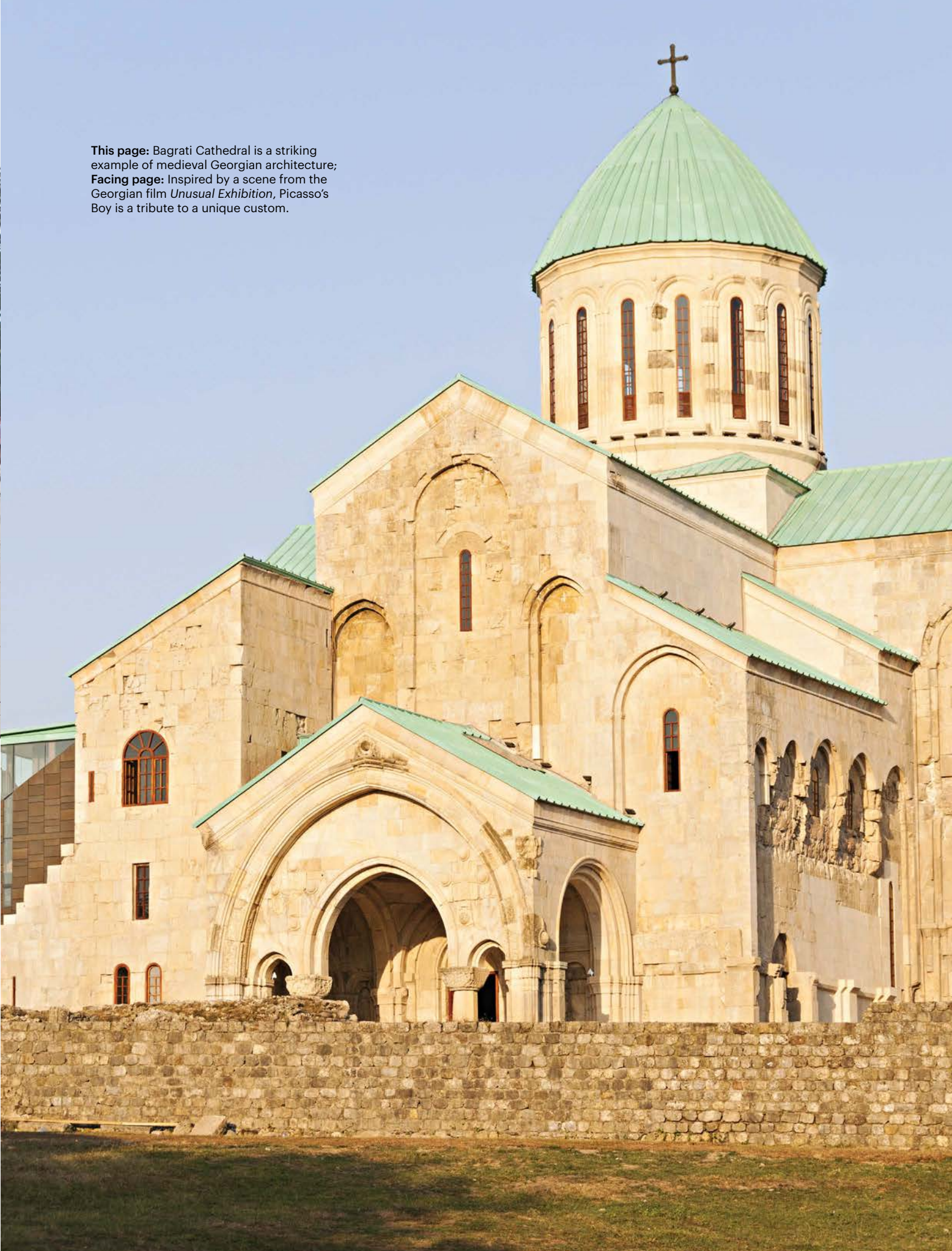
My next stop is the iconic White Bridge, an 1850 engineering wonder built over the gushing Rioni



river, flanked by old, traditional houses, representing the only remaining examples of Georgian settlements. While here, I capture a selfie with *Picasso's Boy* (named after Kutaisi artist Merab Kajaya, nicknamed "Picasso"), the famous sculpture of a playful boy sitting on the bridge's railing, holding a hat in each hand.

Georgia's fresh produce markets overflowing with sights, sounds, and smells are a photographer's delight and a window into the local way of life. Located at Paliashvili Street, Kutaisi's boisterous Green Bazaar is one of the region's oldest and largest agricultural markets. I hit the market, early morning, to see vendors selling freshest vegetables and seasonal fruits alongside nuts, candies, spice mixes, herbs, cheese,

flour, dried fruits, Imeretian tea, freshly-ground coffee, and local specialties like *Churchkhela* (colourful strands of walnuts coated in grape juice) and *Tklapi* (fruit leather). I am pleasantly surprised to hear a candy vendor crooning the iconic song '*Mera Joota Hai Japani*', inviting me to try candies at his stall. For a quick, light breakfast, I grab a stool at Bread and Wine, known for its *Imeruli Khachapuri* (round and soft bread with cheese stuffed inside), a local specialty born in Kutaisi. If you fancy a picnic, consider packing some local produce and relishing them at the nearby 19th-century Kutaisi Park. Beautified by fountains and the eye-catching monument of Ishkhneli sisters (a quartet of Georgian singers), the enchanting garden is where the region's poets and revolutionaries once gathered



This page: Bagrati Cathedral is a striking example of medieval Georgian architecture; **Facing page:** Inspired by a scene from the Georgian film *Unusual Exhibition*, Picasso's *Boy* is a tribute to a unique custom.



This page: A lifelike mural by Ukrainian artist Sasha Korban at 4 Varlamishvili Street is an ode to a Georgian *Bebia* (grandma).
Facing page: Vardzia is Georgia's largest and most impressive cave city complex; Kutaisi's Royal District is full of eclectic historic buildings.



for artistic and intellectual exchange.

Kutaisi is full of appealing cafés; many have outdoor garden seating to bask in the sun. For a hearty breakfast of egg dishes, homemade bread, pancakes, yoghurt, and fruit, visit Cafe Fleur on Tamar the Queen Street. Cafe Neta on Tamar Mepe Street is ideal for a quick coffee and pastry.

My evenings are spent sipping wine, devouring Georgian specialities, and grooving to live music at King's Lounge. It has a marvellous terrace overlooking the Rioni River and a menu consisting of local favourites. The rustic and elegant Sisters restaurant, hidden in a historic, blush-pink building at 35 Zacharia Paliashvili, is ideal for a dressy dinner.

One of the affable locals recommends I visit the Gelati Monastery, a UNESCO World Heritage Site located on a cliff, 8km north-east of Kutaisi. "It is a powerful place to reconnect with your spiritual side," he says. So, I board

a *marshrutka* (shared van and Georgia's famed public transport) from Kutaisi's Old Town for a 25-minute ride to Gelati, which stands out with a unique emerald tiled roof. Looking up at the masterpiece founded by King David in 1106, I realise why it has been one of the most important churches in Western Georgia and a learning centre for philosophers, scholars, and scientists for centuries. The interiors of the main chapel are decorated with gorgeous frescoes worth your time and attention.

One of the other evenings, a pleasant 30-minute uphill walk from the city centre brought me to the 11th-century Bagrati Cathedral, an imposing religious structure on the hill of Ukimerioni. Standing in its churchyard overlooking Kutaisi, I take in the purple-pink sunset sky before enjoying a glass of wine at the nearby Our Garden Café & Bar, which offers a stunning view of the illuminated cathedral. **✎**

