



Flying somewhere different

Pilots in Israel pioneer a new fly-out destination in Georgia. By AOPA Israel's Safety Committee Chairman Yoram Avtaby

The former Soviet Republic of Georgia is terra incognita for general aviation; private aircraft are extremely rare and facilities for them almost non-existent. But a group of pilots from AOPA Israel arranged a fly-out to Georgia in the summer, and they may have blazed a trail that many in

the West will follow.

The few GA pilots in Georgia are expecting fly-outs from Poland, Lithuania and Ukraine in the coming year, and hoping for visits from even further west.

GA pilots in Israel face unique problems; apart from restrictions at home, we can only

fly west when they go abroad. Range issues mean we generally refuel in Cyprus, but it is not possible for political reasons to fly between Cyprus and Turkey – so if we can't reach Turkey direct, north is out. Nonetheless the idea of a fly-out to Georgia attracted 70 people in 27 planes, although the numbers thinned out when it was realised that only those aircraft which could reach Ankara direct from Israel could make the journey.

The idea of flying to Georgia came from GA pilot who had visited Tbilisi on business and found a brochure for the National Aero Club of Georgia. When AOPA Israel was kicking around ideas for summer fly-outs, the brochure was unearthed. After a few phone calls and emails, we found very unique, friendly and welcoming people at the Aero Club of Georgia. Within a day, with 27 aircraft signed up, we had to close the list. We have never had such a large number of requests to participate in a fly-out before.

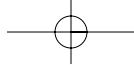
Planning routes, refuelling strategies, handling, hotel accommodation and everything else was a full time job. The major issue was getting to Georgia from Israel. We had to go through Turkish airspace. We did it, but it wasn't easy. There were endless phone calls and emails to the Turkish authorities, and we called on the help of the handling companies. Some of our planes would have needed to land at Cyprus, but if they did so, they wouldn't be allowed to cross Turkish airspace or land there. Therefore, all planes with low endurance had to be subtracted from the list. Ankara is about 550 nm from Haifa and Tel Aviv, so only those with this endurance could participate. Onward from Ankara to Batumi, Georgia, is an additional 450 nm. Eventually we narrowed it down to four aircraft, a Cessna 172, two Cirrus SR22s and a Cessna 414 twin. For the C172, fully loaded and flying at 90kt, this meant a six-hour first leg, an hour for refuelling and then five more flying hours, which makes it a long day. The SR22s cruised at 140 kt, making life much easier, while the C414 was in face able to reach Georgia in a single hop from Israel.

When we landed at Batumi we were believed to be the first group of general aviation aircraft to fly in to Georgia, a beautiful country on the eastern shore of the



Top left: the AOPA group with one of their Cirrus SR22s at Tbilisi International Airport
Left: the Old Town of Tbilisi, unlike any other in Europe or Asia
Below: helpful and enthusiastic refuellers at Batumi Airport on the Black Sea coast





Black Sea, bounded in the north by the Caucasus mountains and in the south by the mountains along the Turkish border. We were given a great welcome by Mr. Amiran, Manager of the National Aero Club of Georgia. With Miss Maia, Manageress of the Vanilla Sky Co and the team that helped with the refuelling, we had dinner at a restaurant with a great view of Black Sea. Next day the pilots from the Aero Club gave us a briefing for a flight over Georgia and we took off for Tbilisi International, a journey of about 160nm with spectacular views of mountains, rivers and valleys. That evening at dinner we were honoured by the presence of the Israeli Ambassador to Georgia and the chairman of the Chamber of Commerce. After a day of touring the Old City of Tbilisi, our hosts took us north to the Caucasus mountains, through amazing Alpine scenery to the

Left: flying in the Caucasus took the group up to 11,000 feet

Centre left: low flying over the lakes on the way to the airstrip at Tel Avi

Bottom left: Cirrus SR22 on the ramp at Batumi International Airport at sunset

Below: get that one in your log book – Batumi, first touchdown point in Georgia



Russian border.

On the fourth day, Air Force Three was due to arrive in Tbilisi carrying the US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton to celebrate solidarity with the Georgian people on American Independence Day. The airport would be closed to any other activity from 9am, so we had to be out of the CTR by then. We flew to a landing strip near a town called Tel Avi, in a beautiful area of hills and lakes. Next day took us back to Batumi, then we faced the 1,000 nm journey back to Israel via Ankara.

This was our best fly-out, a once-in-a-lifetime experience. We flew 2,500 miles in seven days, climbing to 11,000 feet over mountains, flying low over lakes and rivers, and experiencing true freedom in open skies. Many thanks are due for the great efforts by the Mr. Amiran for arranging the permissions, and the Aero Club of Georgia, who arranged avgas at Batumi and elsewhere, and thanks to the ground crews at each location we went to. Mr. Amiran's pilots, engineers and staff were with us to help and give any assistance we needed. We also owe many thanks to Maia and the Vanilla Sky team, who arranged our VIP ground and air tours.

If you are lucky enough to get the chance to go to Georgia, go and fly there. See the Aero Club website at www.nac.ge and Vanilla Sky at vanillasky.ge. ■

