



# In the Spotlight: Tbilisi

## Taking the Midnight Plane to Georgia

Georgia is ideally positioned to attract long-distance air traffic due to it lying at a crossroads between Europe, the Middle East, Asia and Russia. **Luigi Vallero** met TAV Georgia General Manager Mete Erkal for an update on the capital's airport.

Tbilisi in Georgia is situated on the ancient Silk Road and is rapidly developing as an important hub for logistics and commerce in the Caucasus region. Supporting the region's growth are the country's good relations Georgia has with neighbouring Armenia, Azerbaijan and Turkey, and its membership of the United Nations, the Council of Europe, the World Trade Organization and the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation.

The country, which was once part of the Soviet Union, hopes to join NATO but this and the construction of the oil pipeline that runs between Baku and Ceyhan via Tbilisi have strained its long-standing relationship with Russia. Yet despite a series of changes in its top levels of government, the Caucasian state seems to have mastered the art of diplomacy and is enjoying relative stability in a region notorious for sudden, and sometimes dramatic, political upheavals.

Despite being a relatively small country, Georgia boasts a climate ranging from Alpine in the Greater and Lesser Caucasus ranges, to subtropical along its Black Sea coast. The country's attractions include the seaside resort of Batumi, cultural delights and a vibrant nightlife in the capital, and skiing in the mountains of Svaneti province.

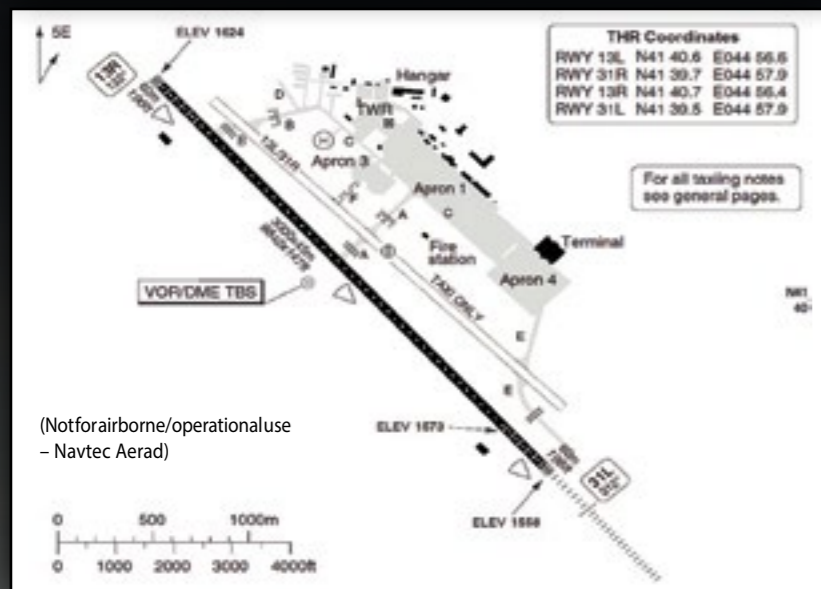
TAV Airports purchased a 66% stake in Tbilisi International Airport (TBS) on October 31, 2005 in a deal that included the



rights to manage the facility until 2027. It was the firm's first venture outside its home country and resulted in a new passenger terminal being opened 18 months later. TAV provides in-terminal and airside services including ground handling, customs and warehousing, retail and food and beverage outlets.

▲ Tbilisi's new terminal opened in 2007. (All photos author)

Having paid a visit to Georgia in January 2011, *Airports of the World* dropped into TBS again in July 2015, during the Routes Silk Road event. This provided an opportunity to meet Mete Erkal, General Manager TAV Georgia, and obtain an update on the progress being made at the nation's busiest airport.



▲ AirZeno Bombardier Challenger 850 4L-GAA (c/n 8046) and an Antonov An-12 in front of the old terminal building.

▲ Ukraine International and S7 Airlines are regular visitors to TBS. Transaero Airlines has recently ceased flying.

▼ Management, staff and equipment in front of the modern terminal.

**How was business last year and how are things developing now?**

ME: We handled 575,707 passengers in 2014, an increase of 124% over the past five years. In excess of 1.7 million are expected this year. In 2011 19 airlines were serving the airport and we expect this to increase to 30 by the end of the year.

**Georgia is a relatively small country with a limited population. Can you continue to grow at similar rates over the next decade?**

ME: The catchment area is getting larger thanks to its geographic location. Travellers from neighbouring countries are increasingly using Tbilisi due to the range of destinations and lower ticket prices offered by the airlines serving our airport. In addition, all of us in TAV Georgia are working hard to develop TBS into a transit point for traffic between Europe and Central Asia.

**How does your traffic vary across the year, and is it mostly inbound or outbound?**

ME: The market is relatively constant across the year, although 60% of the passengers use the airport in the summer season. Outgoing traffic is slightly ahead of incoming.

**You mentioned Georgia's location on the ancient Silk Road trading routes,**

**📍 Airport Statistics**

ICAO code: UGTB  
IATA code: TBS  
Location: 41°40.09'N 044°57.17'E  
Elevation: 1,624ft (495m)  
Runways: 13R/31L 9,843 x 150ft (3,000 x 45m)  
13L/31R 8,202 x 150ft (2,500 x 45m)  
Frequencies:  
Website: [www.tbilisiairport.com](http://www.tbilisiairport.com)

**and developing Tbilisi as a major transit point between Europe and Central Asia and the Far East. How do you see that market developing?**

ME: We are expecting to generate increasing transit traffic due to competitive pricing and the high-quality services we offer. Over the past four years Kazakhstan's flag carrier Air Astana has launched flights, and is now proposing flying a year-round schedule to Almaty in addition to a recently launched seasonal service to Astana. China Southern Airlines, flying to Ürümqi, is paving the way from Asia and additional opportunities are expected to be opened up soon.

**What are your main markets, and what destinations do you expect to come online over the next few years?**

ME: For a number of years Istanbul Atatürk (IST) has been our best route, in part thanks to the transit opportunities there. At present Turkish Airlines flies as many as four daily

**📊 Passenger Statistics**

Year	Total	Change
2005	547,150	n/a
2006	567,402	+3.7%
2007	615,873	+8.5%
2008	714,976	+16.1%
2009	702,916	-1.7%
2010	822,772	+17.1%
2011	1,058,679	+28.7%
2012	1,219,175	+15.2%
2013	1,436,046	+17.8%
2014	1,575,386	+9.7%

trips, mostly transferring passengers into its global network. AtlasGlobal has also been very successful on the same route, and Pegasus is serving the major market with daily trips to Sabiha Gökçen (SAW). Moscow became our fastest-growing destination



in 2014, thanks to Aeroflot-Russian Airlines providing a new daily service to their hub at Sheremetyevo (SVO). This added to the nine weekly S7 Airlines services we already had to Domodedovo (DME), and a daily AirZena Georgian Airways flight to Vnukovo (VKO). We are expecting further increases in traffic in the Moscow market over the coming years.

The Gulf countries have also proven popular since Qatar Airways launched a daily A320 trip to Doha (which also calls at nearby Baku) in 2012. We added flydubai from Dubai and Air Arabia to Sharjah last year. In October this year Etihad Airways will introduce a link to its hub at Abu Dhabi.

We also expect additional destinations in Central Asia to come online over the next year, and are hopeful that a direct link to London will be re-established.

**The passenger terminal is fairly new, having opened in 2007. Do you foresee the need to extend it over the next few years, and if so what are you planning?**

ME: Subject to the expected increases in passenger numbers, our major infrastructure modification plan will be implemented gradually between now and 2027. This will include a centralised security area, additional check-in desks, extensions to the baggage carousels, additional passport control points, extra bus gates, a remote arrivals area, self-service check-in kiosks and expansion of the car parks. We will also construct a separate arrivals building with new baggage belts, additional departure gates and airbridges, and we plan to extend the existing terminal.

We plan to open the new arrivals building to coincide with achieving a throughput of 1.8mppa, which we expect will happen in 2019. The current terminal will then be dedicated to departures and will be



Passengers board AirZena Georgian Airways Bombardier CRJ200 4L-TGS (c/n 7373).

NATO Boeing C-17A Globemaster III SAC-02 (c/n F-210) visiting from Pápa Air Base in Hungary.



AirZena's modern fleet includes Boeing 737-7BK 4L-TGN (c/n 33015).

Antonov An-12s such as Tajikistan-registered EY-415 (c/n 8346107) are still used regularly on cargo flights.

The modern terminal is a match for many in western Europe.

extended west; the work will include an additional airbridge and 18 check-in desks.

We are targeting March 2016 for a long-awaited runway rehabilitation project, which will mean the airport will be closed for 10 hours during daytime. We are busiest at night, handling approximately 70% of our traffic between 2400hrs and 0500hrs, so the work will not have too much impact.

**Air freight is important to the economy of the region. Is TAV trying to attract additional cargo airlines, and do you hope to turn the airport into a major cargo hub in the coming years?**

ME: Part of TAV Georgia's role is to market TBS to cargo airlines. Airport

fees, ground service, warehousing and fuel - provided by external companies - are the most important elements in attracting the business. Over the past five years the number of cargo airlines using our facilities has increased substantially. We now have regular Cargolux flights serving Luxembourg, Baku, Kuala Lumpur and Singapore; Etihad Cargo to Abu Dhabi, Amsterdam and Sharjah; Qatar Airways Cargo flies from Doha to Milan Malpensa; Silk Way serves Baku; and in addition to its passenger services Turkish Airlines Cargo runs dedicated freighters from Istanbul Atatürk. Consolidator Coyne Airways uses TBS as a regional hub, offering transit



connections from Amsterdam to Aktau, Aktobe, Ashgabat, Atyrau, Balkanabat, Baku, Kyzylorda, Mary, Oral, Shymkent, Türkmenba y, and Yerevan.

**What about inbound tourism? Is TAV Georgia working with the local tourist authority and AirZena to promote inwards traffic?**

ME: We are always looking to co-operate with those local partners to help support the Georgian market and promote incoming as well as outgoing travel. Over the past few years, an increasing number of services to leisure destinations have been opened, including Turkish Airlines serving Antalya and Air Cairo flights to Hurghada and

Sharm el-Sheikh.

With management working on a coherent strategy to ensure the airport infrastructure develops in line with traffic increases, and with positive projections for the next five years, it seems likely that Tbilisi will continue to prosper over the next few years. ✕

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**Airlines – Scheduled passenger services**

Aegean Airlines	Athens
Aeroflot	Moscow Sheremetyevo
Air Arabia	Sharjah
Air Astana	Almaty, Astana (seasonal)
airBaltic	Riga
Air Cairo	Hurghada, Sharm el-Sheikh
Alitalia	Rome-Fiumicino
Arkia Israel Airlines	Tel Aviv Ben Gurion (seasonal)
AtlasGlobal	Istanbul Atatürk
Azerbaijan Airlines	Baku
Belavia	Minsk National
China Southern Airlines	Ürümqi
Dniproavia	Dnipropetrovsk, Odessa (from July 1, 2015)
Ellinair	Thessaloniki (seasonal, from June 30, 2015)
flydubai	Dubai International
AirZena Georgian Airways	Amsterdam, Batumi, Kutaisi, Moscow Vnukovo, Novosibirsk, Odessa (from July 1, 2015), Tel Aviv Ben Gurion, Paris Charles de Gaulle, Saint Petersburg, Samara, Vienna, Vladikavkaz, Yerevan (from July 10, 2015)
Israir Airlines	Tel Aviv Ben Gurion (seasonal)
LOT Polish Airlines	Warsaw Chopin
Lufthansa	Munich
Pegasus Airlines	Istanbul Sabiha Gökçen
Qatar Airways	Baku, Doha
S7 Airlines	Moscow Domodedovo
SCAT	Aktau
Turkish Airlines	Istanbul Atatürk, Istanbul Sabiha Gökçen
Ukraine International Airlines	Kiev-Boryspil
Ural Airlines	St Petersburg (from July 14, 2015), Yekaterinburg
Yanair	Kiev Zhuliany

**Airlines - charters**

Air Cairo  
Israir Airlines  
Turkish Airlines

**Airlines - Cargo**

Cargolux  
Coyne Airways (consolidator)  
Etihad Airways (operated by Atlas Air)  
Qatar Airways Cargo  
Silk Way Airlines  
Turkish Airlines Cargo