

TOURIST POTENTIAL OF THE BLACK SEA COAST OF GEORGIA

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Abstract: Georgia is a traditional tourist country. It was the third country in the former Soviet Union by development of tourist industry. The Black Sea coastal area was and still is the most popular destination for domestic and inbound tourists as well. Before transition the main tourist activities held in this region were of 3S type, cognitive and medical tourism. Whereas, while this period the utilization of rich tourist resources of the region have been modified and new tourist activities have been introduced, such as business, adventure, cruise, ecological tourism and diving.

The paper aimed at revealing the tourist potential of the Black Sea coastal area of Georgia by using the economic-geographical methods.

After analyzing and consideration of the main parts of the territorial-recreational system, as a result, there were distinguished three tourist-recreational zones and several subzones with tourist activities characteristic to them. These zones are as follows: *medical zone*, which includes climatic and balneal resorts and which consists of five subzones; *health tourism zone*, which is spread along the coastline (excluding the territory of Kolkheta National Park), where the main activities are thalassotherapy, promenade, fishing, tourism of water sports; *cognitive zone*, which offers natural, cultural and historical sights, national parks, interesting industrial and agricultural enterprises, areas for ecotourism (fishing and bird watching), underwater and scientific tourism. On some territories these zones are overlapped.

We made up a conclusion that the Black Sea coast of Georgia has a high potential for further development of different types of tourism.

Key words: Tourist potential, Tourist-recreational zone, Tourist activity, Destination.

Georgia is a traditional tourist country. It was the third among the countries of the former Soviet Union by development of tourism industry after the Russian Federation and Ukraine.

The Black Sea coastal area is the most popular tourist destination for both – domestic and inbound visitors. Under this area we mean only those administrative districts of historical-geographical provinces of Georgia - Adjara, Guria and Samegrelo which have outlet to the Black Sea. We have not mentioned the longest (more than 200 kilometers) and very interesting part of the Georgian Coastline – the Abkhazian seashore for now, as the territory of the Abkhazian Autonomous Republic is not under the jurisdiction of the Georgian Government temporarily and the reliable data is not available. For researching this region we used traditional economic-geographical methods: analytical, statistical and cartographical.

The Black Sea neighboring territories are characterized with strongly marked humid subtropical climate. At the same time the Georgian water area is distinguished by the calmest

regime of blowing winds and choppiness of the sea. The summer season lasts from May till October (inclusively) there. During this period the temperature of the sea water is within 20⁰C and mass bathing is allowed.

Taking into account the climatic conditions and the temperature of the sea water the number of days appropriate for mass bathing varied between 130 and 134. However, according to the last researches the mentioned index decreased to 126 days due to the cooling of the surface layer.

Besides this, along the whole coast there are nice beaches, which are substantial recreational resources of the region. We can also note that the sand between two rivers of Supsa and Natanebi contain approximately 4% of magnetite and titaniferous magnetite, which affects positively on organisms of human beings, especially on children's body, on cardio-vascular and osteoarticular systems, which is caused by the influence of permanent magnetic field.

In the region there are several outlets of mineral waters; among them most popular are Tsaishi, Nasakirali, Kvaloni, Chakvi, Khutsubani, Kulevi, etc.

Forests predominate in the mountainous regions of Adjara and Guria; in the Kolkheti Lowland the groves of Colchis forests are presented. The structure of the species of flora is very considerable.

There are five categories of protected areas in Georgia and their total area is 6, 6% of the whole territory of the country. Several preserved territories are in the coastal area of Georgia. Establishment of the Kolkheti National Park has become the significant event of recent years. It consists of the Kolkheti Reserve, nearby bogs, swamps, damp forests, sand dunes, Paliastomi and Imnati Lakes. Parts of the National Park are located in five administrative districts, which belong to two historical provinces of Georgia – Samegrelo and Guria. The world-wide significance of the region was acknowledged in 1996, when Georgia joined the international convention on wetlands known as the Ramsar Convention. Two sites within the Kolkheti Lowland were identified as Ramsar sites of international importance because they are important for wintering, nesting and migratory birds.

Visitors' Center of the Kolkheti National Park offers several routs. Among them the most interesting one is to Paliastomi Lake and Pichori River, where there are presented swampy forests found nowhere else in Georgia. You can get there by the National Park's administrative vehicle.

In the Kolkheti National Park tourists can enjoy the bird-watching, photographing, implementing educational and scientific programs, boating and in case of owning the special authorization of the administration – fishing as well.

Mtirala National Park was developed in 2006 on the Kobuleti-Chakvi Ridge. The Park covers the area of about 16 thousand hectares and includes a well-preserved ecosystem of forests and shrubs. It must be mentioned that this territory is the wettest area not only in Georgia but in the countries of the former Soviet Union as well. Narrow gorges and canyons form the

dissected relief of the area. Mountain tourism and ecotourism are possible here. It is obvious that the flow of visitors will be increased in future, as near the Park the summer sea tourism is very popular in the settlements of Kvariati and Chakvi, the nearby villages can be used for ethnographic tourism, the National Park has great opportunities for development of horse-riding, hiking, bird watching and ecotourism as well.

It is also planned to establish one more – the Machakhela National Park in the region.

Besides the National Parks, there are also other preserved territories, such as the Kintrishi Reserve, Batumi Botanical Garden and the Ispani Moss Peat Bog.

Batumi Botanical Garden has no analogue, as the plants of completely different climatic and landscape zones co-exist there side by side. Thousands of plant species are represented in the Garden. It consists of nine diverse sections, such as of East Asia, North America, New Zealand, South America, the Himalayas, Mexico, Australia, the Mediterranean Sea and the Caucasian Humid Subtropics. Among the presented 2037 taxonomic units there, only 5,1% out of them is of local origin, the rests are the representatives of foreign flora.

Ispani Moss Peat Bog is located to the east of the resort of Kobuleti and it is the unique ecosystem as the peat areas are of the dome type, similar to northern countries and composed of moss plants. Resembling peats are rare at such relatively low latitudes. Ecotourists can watch the local and migrant flying birds, also bog tortoise, seldom imbricate moss preserved only in Kolkheti, typical bog flora and fauna. The unforgettable emotions are connected with walking over the “sphagnum carpets” by wooden skis.

All these preserved territories are of high cognitive importance as they protect the biological diversity and natural resources and contribute to the preservation of cultural heritage.

The water resources of the region are presented by rivers (Rioni, Enguri, Supsa, Pichori, Chorokhi, Kintrishi, Natanebi, Khobi, etc.) and several lakes. The rivers mostly are used for fishing. However, on the upstream waters it is possible to develop different types of water sports. Lakes are suitable for fishing, boating, swimming and air and sun baths.

There are two speleological caves in the karst massif of Zugdidi district. In case of financing their improvement they will become interesting tourist attractions.

Besides natural recreational resources, the region is rich in anthropogenic tourist resources as well. The ethnographical historic-geographical parts differ sharply by their life stile, traditions, garment, folklore and cuisine. These conditions are favorable for development of cognitive and gastronomical tourism.

Among the historical and cultural monuments it must be mentioned the dwelling houses (palaces of Gurieli and Dadiani), fortification (fortresses of Gonio, Petra, Anaklia, Rukhi, etc.) and religious buildings (monasteries of Shemokmedi, Atsana, Jiketi, Khoni, churches of Baileti, Zugdidi, etc.), medieval arched stone bridges over the rivers of Adjara.

Batumi aquarium is the significant anthropogenic tourist resource, where in the nearest future it is planned to recover the dolphins' show, which was very popular among the visitors of all ages.

The subtropical agriculture is also a sphere of tourist interest. Tourists can be attracted by the tea plantations, citrus gardens, vineyards. The holiday-makers can participate in vintage, gathering citrus; they can also attend the technological processing of vine and tea, which will be considered as an exotic activity for them.

There is a plan of creating a new and attractive tourist destination – the Anaklia Seafront Park in near future. It is located at the place where the Enguri River flows into the Black Sea. This tourist area will consist of Marina, National Park and Beach Resort where the sports courts, playgrounds, fitness and picnic areas, sun bathing spots and resting zones will be designed.

Tourist infrastructure of the region is presented by the developed hotel net and by a great majority of different types catering units.

The hotel industry has long history in the region, especially in Batumi. On the boundary of 19th and 20th centuries there were functioning several high level and architecturally notable hotels there – “Oriental”, “Francia”, “Imperial”, etc.

After the crisis of 1990-s in the last decade the revival of hotel industry began. In Batumi the hotel “Inturist” was renewed and reconstructed, brand new “Sheraton” was built, 3 and 4 star hotels were built in Kobuleti, Ureki and one is under construction in Anaklia. In 2008 according to the data of the Department of Tourism and Resorts of Georgia there were 603 accommodations in the country, 137 (23% of total) out of them were represented in the research region. Simultaneously with the increase of the hotel number and their capacity, the new types of hotels appear such as the family and guest houses. Particular concentration of such hotels is observed in Kobuleti and Ureki. 61% of the Black Sea Coastline hotels are exactly of mentioned types.

Among the catering units the high class restaurants must be mentioned, which in general are located in the hotels, but the independent ones occur as well. There are lots of specialized objects with typical Georgian cuisine.

In the Black Sea region the Adjarian cuisine is especially popular. On the whole, it can be mentioned that this type of cuisine is some kind of tourist attraction.

Lately, the provision of transport for tourism is significantly improved. All kinds of vehicles are used in the region. Tourism development in whole caused the increase of informational and promotional activities. In April 2010 the International Tourist Fair took place in Batumi.

The number of visitors to the Georgian Black Sea region is increasing, which is confirmed with the example of Adjara, where their number in 2009 was about five hundred thousands (554150), 30% of them were foreigners. This data is almost four times more than that of

2005. In the first three months of 2010 the number of visitors increased greatly up to about 40 thousands.

The great majority of tourists are represented by Georgian residents. The increasing number of Armenian and Azerbaijanian tourists is added to them. The main part of inbound tourists is stated in Batumi-city and Khelvachauri region, and small quantity – in Ureki. We can assume that those tourists mainly participated in the international conferences and meetings which recently became more frequent in Adjara region.

While transition to the market economy the usage of tourist resources and consequently the types of tourism activities have been changed. Traditional tourism types for the given region are medical, recreational, 3S type, health-improving and cognitive, which maintain their meaning also today. At the same time, business, adventure, cruise, underwater and ecological tourism are becoming popular and they are most magnetic for those inbound tourists who would like to see something unfamiliar or special for them.

In the region one of the promising, studied and partly approved types of cognitive tourism is diving. It is widespread in Europe and America, in Russian Federation it is the fastest growing and highly profitable type of tourism. In Georgia there are favorable natural conditions for its development, the coastal waters are rich in diverse exotic landscapes, cays full of mollusks and water-plants, sunken cities and ships. The most convenient places for diving are Kvariati-Sarpi, Mtsvane Kontskhi-Tsikhisdziri and Anaklia strips, also the Kolkheti National Park water areas. There are the specialists, who will train persons interested in diving. The center of underwater swimming is founded in the coastline of Kvariati-Sarpi.

Due to appearance of new tourist activities, people employed in tourism, their qualification and also upgrading the professional level of their skills obtain the special significance.

Thanks to multiplicatory effect of tourism, which means the involvement of representatives of different industrial spheres, the areal of employees is expanding considerably.

It must be emphasized that during a high season even today the great majority of coastal zone's labor resources is busy with servicing the holiday-makers.

So, we can view the above mentioned region as a formed recreational system, which consists of comparatively well developed Adjarian and comparatively less developed Kolkheti recreational subsystems with the centers in Kobuleti, Batumi and Ureki.

Batumi is the most interesting city of the region. It is the attractive settlement which basically consists of two and three storeyed beautiful houses. The "Old Batumi" is about 150 years old. Climatotherapy, heliotherapy and thalassorecreation are the main forms of recreational activities in Batumi. For cognitive tourists there function several museums and theatres. The city attracts also the religious tourists. As far as Batumi is a multinational city, people of diverse religious denominations have their own sacred places. There are Orthodox, Catholic, Armenian Gregorian, Muslim churches and Synagogue as well. In summer period the cruise ships arrive to Batumi port bringing thousands of tourists.

The attractiveness of the region is growing by the neighboring territories which give an opportunity to carry out different recreational activities. For example, in Adjara at a distance of hundred kilometers from Batumi there is a village of Gomarduli, the climatic and landscape conditions of which are similar to those of Davos Switzerland and skiing is possible there from December till March. The similar tourist product can be set up also in the village Kedlebi near Khulo. In the same administrative district at a distance of 140 kilometers from Batumi the high mountainous resort Beshumi is located, which is wonderful place for recreational, mountainous and cognitive tourism thanks also to its ethnographical peculiarities and local rural holidays.

In several hours' journey is presented high mountainous resort Bakhmaro distinguished with its unique climatic conditions.

In case of using the air transport, it is possible to get in an hour from the city of Poti to Zemo Svaneti – the region rich in ethnographical and architectural buildings, where even in summer it is very likely to ski at the foot of marvelous peak of Ushba.

At a distance of 80 kilometers from the coastline there is a Georgian historical city Kutaisi, where you can find two monuments of cultural heritage under UNESCO protection, the Bagrati Temple and Gelati Monastery Complex. Not far from them there is an outstanding speleological object, the Tskhaltubo Cave System as well.

From the point of view of development and taking into account the types of recreational activities, we can mark out the following perspective tourist-recreational zones:

I – medical, which includes climatic and balneal resorts and is divided into five subzones, such as: 1. *Tsaishi subzone* with mineral waters having high medical terms and cultural places; 2. *Ozurgeti-Nasakirali-Ureki subzone* with several outlets of mineral waters, Ureki magnetite sands and wonderful beach; 3. *Kintrishi subzone* with outlets of mineral waters and mountainous-climatic resort locality of Kintrishi; 4. *Kvaloni subzone* with balneal resources; 5. *Grigoleti-Shekvetili subzone*, also with the sandy beaches rich in magnetite, Jumati, Vakijvari, Mount Khino, Tsiskara).

III – cognitive (cultural and historical monuments, natural sites, visit to particularly interesting industrial and agrarian places, ecotourism, scientific tourism, bird and fish watching, horse-riding, underwater tourism - diving). The main areal is the Kolkheti National Park, partially, the Kintrishi Reserve, Batumi, Mtsvane Kontskhi (Green Cape) Botanical Garden, Zugdidi and its outskirts rich in cultural and historical monuments.

It must be necessarily underlined that in some territories the medical, health-improving and cognitive recreational zones are overlapped.

We concluded that the Black Sea Coastline, which always had a leading position in tourist and recreational potential of the country, is again of particular importance by the level of tourist service and great number of tourists and it is still the promising region, where the new types of tourism are being developed.

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