

Incoming Tourism in Georgia – a Road with Many Challenges

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Tourism is one of the highest rated potential profit sectors of the Georgian Economy, but unfortunately, after the August War, it has suffered a lot. *Georgia Today* asked Steffen Schulein, Consultant on Tourism Development from Georgian Tourism Association and Vakhtang Asatashvili, the General Director of tour operations "Detour" to talk about the present situation of incoming tourism in Georgia.

Georgia Today: What is the situation of tourism now in Georgia?

Steffen Schulein: For incoming tourism the situation now is very difficult. The breakdown after the war is at least 80%. Most of the companies had to reduce their staff drastically; even the directors of companies are working in hotels as reservation managers, as ski instructors in ski resorts, etc. It is especially difficult for those, who have been concentrating on one particular market segment and had no diversified offer in the outgoing or domestic tourism sector. There are credit problems for those, who have invested a lot in the growing tourism sector before the war.

Vakhtang Asatashvili: The image of Georgia abroad is still dominated by war pictures and rumors about destruction and landmines and political instability – not favorable for the tourism market. Additionally, the world economic crisis has reduced the ability of people to travel as much as they used to and Georgia is a comparatively expensive destination.

SS: For 2009 we expect a difficult situation for incoming tourism in Georgia. We suggest that tourism companies not to concentrate only on one market, but to diversify their products with a focus on quality niche markets. However, there are some signs of improvement and we increasingly receive requests from tourists, who want to do mountain bike or motorcycle trips or Jeep tours for example and who want to get first hand information about the situation on the ground.

GT: What was the situation before the August War?

SS: The situation before August was characterized by a growth scenario resulting from a situation of political stability and an increasing knowledge abroad about Georgia as a travel destination.

However, the main requirements for tourism development and a good destination image are political stability, cheap air fares, good infrastructure and service and good environmental conditions. Let's ask ourselves: Did all this exist before the war? I'd say: only to a certain extent. There were no cheap air fares; there was a lack in good infrastructure; there was a lack of educated people in the service sector, and the environmental conditions were deplorable, especially concerning garbage and waste water problems. So, there was and still is a necessity to work on the fundamentals. And I know that this is unpopular to say: there is a necessity to create a destination that deserves an image as a top tourism destination. In the long run, Georgia will not profit from an approach that is just "image" and lures tourists into the country and lets them return disappointed in one way or the other.

Of course, there is some progress as well. For example, the visa and border procedures are quite easy in Georgia when compared to other countries in the region. Plus, in Georgia, tourists don't suffer from corruption. Police won't ask you to pay a fine for no reason. This is a big plus.

VA: Before August, the biggest problem was how to regulate the prices. Georgia is getting more and more expensive every year. And to get in the world's travel market as a new destination you should offer competitive prices. As a tourist you have to choose – to pay 10% more for the destination that you don't know or to travel to an already known destination, which is cheaper. And one has to remember that Georgia is a new destination. I think if at least the air fares were not so high, it could help to stabilize the entire situation.

SS: The air fares are certainly an issue, but a long term subsidy of air companies by the government is probably not a very feasible idea. However there could be some support or incentive for flights and a

program to bring multiplicities, i.e. travel journalists to Georgia.

I don't believe that "cheap, cheap, cheap" is the most promising development concept for tourism in Georgia. The competition in this segment is quite strong globally and Georgia has no comparative advantage. Cheap mass tourism development is not the path that Georgia could and would want to follow. For Georgia, it seems more feasible to concentrate on high quality niche markets – nature and adventure tourism: mountaineering, trekking, skiing, bird watching in an individually designed mix with culture tourism and wine tourism.

As to target markets, in my opinion, the most promising target markets for Georgia are Russia and Post Soviet countries; and then niche markets from Western Europe, USA and Israel and to some extent Eastern countries – Japan and China.

GT: Is it popular for tourists to travel to Georgia?

VA: I can say that trekking is very popular in Georgia. We have also mountaineering, climbing, skiing, rafting, mountain biking. The Caucasus Mountains are very interesting for Western tourists, there are bigger opportunities to go wild and that's the main issue why people are coming here.

SS: In Western Europe mountaineering is very popular. And it's true that people don't know much about Caucasus. However, there is an image about the Caucasus as mysterious and somehow attractive, but also as an unsafe, unsure, unknown region. The result is an adventure incentive, but also a safety concern.

VA: If we compare, for example, culture tourism and nature tourism. For culture tourism, we need a more developed infrastructure in the country – accommodation, transportation, service etc.

In adventure or nature tourism, tourists do not have so many needs, because it's more orientated around nature and sight-seeing, you can spend a night at local families or in tents. Everything is basic and simple. Deficiencies in infrastructure and service count more in culture than in adventure or nature tourism.

GT: What is the situation of hotels in Georgia? Can tourist planning a trip to Georgia feel sure that there will be no problems to find a hotel and in-country traveling possibilities?

SS: I would say that generally a tourist will find this country safe to travel, except of course Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which are completely closed from Georgia. And, Tbilisi is probably one of the safest capitals in the world. I suppose that for example Berlin or Paris are more dangerous than Tbilisi. Here it won't happen that you'd have to strip in the metro because people want to rob your clothes... You can walk down the streets at night and normally nothing will happen if you respect the usual safety rules. One must be really unlucky to be assaulted in Georgia.

As to accommodation – if a tourist is contacting an experienced tourism agency, they can select a good guesthouse or hotel. And, it is also possible to book hotels with online booking systems. There are high level hotels with really high prices, but there are also other options for normal prices. The same is true for transportation – you can go by marshrutka, by bus, train or hire a car. It depends on the tourist. Except, if you want to go to some mountain areas, for example, Racha, where marshrutkas aren't very regular or don't reach particular places. Then it's recommended to organize transport with a tour operator.

VA: Individual travelers who don't hire tour operators have more problems. The problem is the lack of information. You can find something in the Lonely Planet, or in the Trekking Guidebooks, but for backpackers, traveling in Georgia is very hard. There are a lot of problems even to find a normal map of Georgia. Even if you are in the city, it's hard orient oneself.

SS: Probably, Tbilisi is the only capital in the world without a Tourist Information Center, were you can get advice, book a hotel, hire a guide from a tour company and buy guidebooks, maps, postcards, souvenirs etc.

GT: Does it mean, if a tourist is coming to Georgia on his own to travel individually as a backpacker, everything depends only on his own knowledge?

SS: To some extent yes. There still is a possibility to find some of the tourism agencies and ask for information, but say that you want to travel on your own. They will give you information about marshrutkas, guesthouses etc. But the start is very difficult, especially for backpackers, who don't speak Russian or Georgian, of course.

VA: In Tbilisi it is possible to contact people in English, but in other places it's impossible. At the same time

in Tbilisi, even if we had an information centre, you can't know where you are! At first you would have to reach that information centre, but how to do that, if all the names of the streets are in Georgian and only few of them are in Russian?! Moreover, the signs with the names aren't on all the houses or street corners.

SS: Still, for backpackers it is possible to get the information in their forums, guest books in guest houses etc. It's also a challenge. Backpacking in Georgia still is a challenge. If somebody asked me which countries can still offer challenges for backpackers, I'd say – Georgia! For example, in India, Nepal, South America there are special backpacker trails; at every guest house you'll find dozens of other backpackers. It's not so developed here in Georgia.

GT: What is the situation of information in Internet about Georgia – is it enough?

VA: First of all, there are two kinds of information sources – commercial and governmental. The commercial which has been published in internet by private organizations, is more or less good. It is close to Western standards. But, for the country, publicity must be done by the government and it's not good enough. There were some good ideas, but they haven't been developed. There are no governmental organizations' websites where you could find all the information you need. I'm not talking about political or economical issues, but pure travel information.

SS: The availability of information could be much increased, and it should be of high quality and more target group oriented. Furthermore, a focus on publications in specialized magazines abroad, i.e. mountain bike magazines, mountain magazines, travel magazines etc. would be good. Then, videos, slideshows, all kinds of audiovisual material could be distributed – not only at tourism fairs but also in the internet. And webcams could be quite useful.

I believe if tour-operators would focus more on the country image and not only on the publicity of their own tours, this would also be beneficial for the general tourism development - with positive effects for their business.

GT: What are the five things that make Georgia attractive?

SS: For me it is the amazing diversity of all the country. First: its nature. From the Caucasian Mountains to the Black Sea, from virgin subtropical forests to semi-deserts. Second: the hospitality and the way how you are received as a tourist, which is a very rich experience. Third: the history of Georgia. Starting from the first Europeans, Soviet times and nowadays. Actually, it would be interesting to organize some post soviet tours. Forth: the religion and the amazing architecture of churches in the most beautiful places. Fifth: the food and even more the wine! Together with song and dance!

VA: I agree fully! And: Skiing, Trekking, Mountain biking, Rafting, Climbing...

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