

Bad News about Georgia Means Bad News for Georgia



How Georgia is Presented in the World ?

When foreign diplomats come to Georgia they all say they are happy to be here and look forward to working with Georgia and its people. It is therefore interesting to see how the country is portrayed on the websites of some of its major international partners. Georgia sees tourism as one of the solutions to its economic woes.

But it often appears that people are more interested in broadcasting bad news about the country than good. People are left to wonder whether Georgia is a safe country to visit. As there are so many other destinations to choose from bad news about Georgia means bad news for Georgia.

This is freely translated from the German Embassy website: "In all the larger cities of Georgia the same safety precautions needed in other metropolises are also required. In Tbilisi your safety can be endangered by armed robbery and, pretty often, the brutal use of force. You also need to pay special attention in quarters of the city which foreigners prefer such as Vake, Vera and Saburtalo as well as parks and recreation areas such as Turtle Lake.

Travellers should not be alone on the roads after dark and should protect their accommodation. Walking long distances alone is to be absolutely avoided, as are the carrying of decorative items or expensive clocks."

This is excerpted from a very long article on the US State Department website: "Crime is a very serious problem in Georgia. Petty street crime, such as pickpocketing, purse snatching, and cell phone theft, is common throughout the country. Furthermore, violent attacks have become more commonplace. Because illegal firearms are readily available in Georgia, assailants are likely to be armed with firearms and other weapons.

The threat of kidnapping exists both within and outside of Tbilisi. American citizens are urged to increase their vigilance, review their personal security precautions, and take appropriate security measures, e.g. travelling with a native Georgian escort familiar with the local area. Although police emergency response is good, criminals continue to have freedom of movement throughout Tbilisi day or night." At the TourCom international conference on September 25, Nick Easen, a freelance journalist for London-based Breaking travel news, noted that it is quite difficult to access information about Georgia in the world.

The only source for this is newspapers that have online versions. One cannot control bad news spreading but the solution is to provide facts and details about the country. Georgia is actually quite popular with Western governments at the moment. The country has cultivated their friendship and adopted policies the West is familiar with.

Consequently people are starting to realize Georgia might have something to offer them. Then they investigate the possibility of visiting it and this is the picture they are given. This is a strange way of working with Georgia. You can prove anything with selective quotation. Armed robberies do take place in Georgia. They also take place in Germany and America. Some American cities are internationally known as crime hotspots. In the American capital Washington DC they have long had a saying:

"If you can't get it done by six o'clock (18:00), don't do it!" No one wants to go out at night there with criminal gangs running around in the shadow of the gleaming white government buildings which are portrayed as beacons of democracy. Dudley Moore once starred in the film Crazy People, in which a group of mental patients start writing honest advertisements, which tell the truth about the products.

One of their advertising slogans was: "New York: There Were Fewer Murders Last Year." German crime figures make interesting reading. According to the NationMaster website (www.nationmaster.com), which collates these statistics from internationally recognized sources such

as the United Nations and Transparency International, fewer murders are reported there than in Georgia but both countries have a BELOW AVERAGE number of murders per head of population.

Germany has almost FIFTEEN TIMES as many assaults per head of population than Georgia. It has TEN TIMES as many robberies per head of population and a whopping TWENTY FIVE TIMES more total crimes per head of population (75.9996 per 1,000 people as against 3.21338 per 1,000 people). Diplomacy sometimes works in a strange way. Diplomats' stay in a country is limited - if they stay longer they might start adopting the local point of view, instead of that of the country they represent.

But there is another reason. Diplomats are there primarily to promote their country's image of the country they work in and we know little whether they have a grasp of local reality. Colin Malan used to be South African ambassador in London. Subsequently he entered politics in opposition to the government he had been paid to represent, having understood what the rest of the world was really like. Do we have any evidence of what foreign visitors actually think about Georgia?

According to the official data published by the Georgian Tourism Department 832,287 European tourists arrived in Georgia in the first nine months of 2007. 763,856 tourists visited Georgia in the first nine months of 2006. Therefore the number of tourists arriving in Georgia is up 26.8% on the comparable period last year.

A report was published on September 25 by THOMAS G. TAIT and ROBERT J. MILLER from the Nevada State Tourist Department on the current state of Georgian tourism. The report contains the usual Western criticisms of Georgia. It concludes however by saying: "It was a great pleasure for the two of us to have been selected to visit and examine the state of Georgian tourism and to meet a great many wonderful people. We will remember our visit for a very long time."

That is, in spite of the impression made by Western prejudice, Georgia is still a great place to be. Georgia does not have some of the material comforts Westerners take for granted. But that does not mean it is an inherently dangerous or criminal state. Every Western government does of course have laws which prevent its own citizens making such discriminatory comments about people who come from another country.

The Georgian Interior Ministry website does not provide official statistics on how many cases of attacks took place in Georgia. The Interior Ministry spokesperson was unreachable. However according to Nato Chikovani, head of the PR Department of the Foreign Ministry, law enforcement bodies have precise information about attacks on foreign tourists.

Chikovani has made comments on the website of the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs saying that travel dangers Georgia do not apply to the whole country but specifically to conflict zones. Similar information is placed on Foreign Ministry websites of any country.

The German Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to Georgia, H. E. Patricia Hildegard Flor, told Georgian Times: " In many European countries, including Germany, and in many cities, there is crime. So, there is nothing unusual in finding it in Georgia. It is our responsibility to warn our citizens to be as careful as they can. Georgia, unfortunately, is a country with two conflict regions many Germans would not know about it. So they need to be informed about this, and should not cross unofficial borders.

We want to inform our citizens that they have to be careful. This process needs to be fair for everyone. As for the capital, precautionary measures apply in Tbilisi as in all other big cities. There are many Germans living here and they feel quite safe and OK. But it is our responsibility to warn the tourists and those who come for a longer stay to be cautious."

Rumwold Leigh for The Georgian Times 2007.10.29 14:39