



The transformation of Georgia's tourism sector: Economic impact and strategic challenge



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Abstract

This article examines the evolution of Georgia as a leading tourism destination in the Caucasus region. It analyzes the transition from a post-Soviet recreational model to a diversified international hub, highlighting the economic contributions, the role of state policy, and the emerging challenges of sustainability and over-tourism.

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1 Introduction

Over the past two decades, Georgia has experienced a "tourism boom." Following structural reforms in the mid-2000s, the country repositioned itself as an open, safe, and culturally rich destination (Ciric et al., 2019). Today, tourism is a cornerstone of the Georgian economy, contributing significantly to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and providing a vital source of foreign exchange (Hall, 2018).

Key Economic Indicators

The growth of the sector is characterized by several key factors:

- **GDP Contribution:** Prior to 2020, tourism accounted for approximately **10-12% of Georgia's GDP**.
- **Inbound Diversity:** While traditionally reliant on neighboring countries (Russia, Turkey, Armenia), there is a growing trend of "high-spending" tourists from the EU, the Gulf States, and Israel.
- **Infrastructure Investment:** Significant capital has been directed toward the rehabilitation of historic districts in Tbilisi, Kutaisi, and Batumi. **Diversification of the "Tourism Product"**

Georgia's competitive advantage lies in its unique "niche" markets:

1. **Enogastronomy:** Utilizing the 8,000-year history of winemaking (Qvevri method) to attract culinary tourists.
 2. **Adventure & Mountain Tourism:** Development of year-round resorts like Gudauri and Mestia, focusing on trekking and skiing.
 3. **MICE Tourism:** Increasing capacity for Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Exhibitions in the capital.
- ### Current Challenges and Risks

Despite the success, the academic community identifies several critical issues:

- **Seasonality:** A heavy concentration of tourists in the summer months (coastal Adjara) and winter (ski resorts), leading to underutilization of resources during off-peak periods.
- **Environmental Impact:** The rapid development of mountain regions like Svaneti poses risks to biodiversity and traditional architectural landscapes.
- **Geopolitical Sensitivity:** Dependence on regional stability affects the predictability of tourist flows.

The **National Botanical Garden of Georgia**, located in the heart of the capital's historic center (Tsavkistskali Canyon), serves as a critical site for **ex-situ conservation**. Established on the foundations of the royal gardens from the 17th century, it now functions as a major research hub under the Georgian Academy of Sciences (Kutubidze & Khvadagiani, 2020).

- **Biodiversity Research:** The garden spans 128 hectares and houses a collection of over **4,500 taxonomic units**. It is particularly noted for its Caucasian flora section, which preserves rare and endangered endemic species.
- **Urban Ecosystem Services:** From a socio-economic perspective, the garden acts as a "green lung" for Tbilisi, mitigating the urban heat island effect and providing a controlled environment for environmental education.
- **Infrastructure for Tourism:** The recent addition of cycling paths and a zip-line has sparked academic debate regarding the balance between **recreational development** and the preservation of sensitive botanical zones.

2 Case Study: The Batumi Botanical Garden (Adjara)

Located at the "Green Cape" (Mtsvane Kontskhi), the **Batumi Botanical Garden** is unique for its specific microclimate. Unlike most gardens, its layout is based on **geographic principles** rather than taxonomic ones (Bazargani & Kiliç, 2021; Upadianti & Surya, 2025).

- **Phyto-geographical Zoning:** The garden is divided into nine floristic sectors (e.g., East Asia, Himalayas, New Zealand, North America). This allows researchers to study how exotic species from various climatic zones adapt to the humid subtropical climate of the Black Sea coast.
- **Economic Impact on Coastal Tourism:** The garden is a primary driver for the Adjara region's tourism economy. It demonstrates a successful model of **botanical tourism**, attracting researchers and eco-travelers who contribute to the local economy outside the traditional "beach season."

- **Scientific Significance:** The garden's dendrological collection is one of the most diverse in the former Soviet space, making it a vital site for global studies on **climatology and plant migration**.

3 Comparative Analysis and Synthesis

While the Tbilisi Garden focuses on the conservation of arid and mountainous Caucasian species, the Batumi Garden serves as a gateway for international subtropical flora (González-Benito & González-Benito, 2005). Together, they represent a dual strategy for Georgian tourism:

1. **Cultural-Historical Integration:** Merging botanical science with the heritage of the capital.
2. **Eco-Climatic Diversification:** Leveraging the unique subtropical environment of the coast for international scientific prestige.

4 Conclusion

Georgia's tourism strategy is moving toward **quality over quantity**. To ensure long-term growth, the focus must shift from increasing the raw number of visitors to enhancing the value of the experience and protecting the country's cultural and natural heritage. The integration of these botanical gardens into the national tourism strategy is essential for moving toward **knowledge-based tourism**. Future development must ensure that the increasing foot traffic does not compromise the scientific integrity of these historic institutions.

Conflict of interest statement

The authors declared that they have no competing interests.

Statement of authorship

The authors have a responsibility for the conception and design of the study. The author(s) have approved the final article.

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