

Tourism Potential of Imereti

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Abstract

Georgia is a country with ancient history and original unique culture. The country history is a long list of rises and downfalls of empires, intrusions of external enemies, violence and wars. But, at the same time, this country has huge cultural heritage. Georgia is a unique country possessing enormous tourism potential. Extended along the Black Sea coast, it has about 300 mountains (Abastumani, Bakuriani, Bahmaro, Gudauri, etc.), seaside (Kobuleti, Ureki, Batumi, and etc.), balneotherapeutic and mud (Borzhomi, Sairme, Likani, and etc.) health resorts, over 10 thousand monuments of archeology, history, architecture and art, and also numerous nature sanctuaries. And all these are concentrated within the small territory occupied by the hospitable and distinctive people. Since the Georgian government decided to move their parliament to Kutaisi, there has been a lot of work on restoring streets, buildings, parks and monuments and the city has become much safer. But a visit here is nonetheless near mandatory to see the magnificent Bagrati Cathedral, and Gelati Monastery, both of which are UNESCO World Heritage sites, and have commanding views from the mountain slopes over the city and the Rioni river.

Keywords: Bagrati, Gelati, Imereti, Kutaisi, tourism, tourists

Introduction

Georgia occupies the central and eastern part of Caucasus. Its neighbors are the Russian Federation in the north, Azerbaijan in the east, Armenia in the south and Turkey in the south-east. It is a mountainous country, the northern border of which passes along the Big Caucasian ridge, and southern border — across Small Caucasus. In the west it is washed by Black Sea. Local weather and the landscape epitomize meeting of the East and the West (Berdzenishvili, 2012).

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Temples and monasteries are the most typical and interesting sights of the country. Here, on this small area, a large number of these monuments of faith and history is concentrated (Berdzenishvili, 2016).

The capital of Georgia – the city of Tbilisi is one of the most ancient cities of the world. It is 1500 years old. Until 1936, the city was called Tiflis in Russian transcription. It was called so due to warm sulfuric wells (translated from Georgian “tbili” means “warm”).

The city is filled by unique national flavor. Almost all buildings in historical city centre and at the bottom of mountain Mtatsminda represent historical or cultural monuments. Georgian Orthodox church, the Armenian Apostolic church, the Synagogue and the Muslim mosque are located in the very center of old Tbilisi (Katamadze, 2013).

By the quantity of cultural monuments and constructions, Tbilisi is among the richest cities of the world. Here is the list of some sights in Tbilisi:

- “Sameba” Cathedral (21 century) that is the biggest Cathedral in the world;
- “Metehi” Cathedral (13 century) with the monument of the founder of Tbilisi – Vakhtang Gorgasali;

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- “Narikala” Fortress with a beautiful temple in its yard. Memorable photos could be taken from the top of towers;
- The modern bridge, named “WORLD BRIDGE” by the country president, which is the second in the world by the complexity of its architecture;
- “Sioni” Temple, located on the left coast of the bridge and well-known by its wonder-making icons. Sioni Cathedral is the current residence of the Catholics of Georgia;
- Mountain “Mtatsminda” with famous wonderful garden “Funicular” (mountain lift), from which one can clearly view all Tbilisi;
- The Pantheon where many famous writers, actors, scientists, and national heroes of Georgia are buried.
- Well known sulfuric baths in the place called “Abanotubani”;
- Paliashvili Opera building (1851).

Discussion

Kutaisi (pop. 197,000) is a city in the Rioni Region of Georgia. Kutaisi is the traditional rival of Tbilisi for capital status, and has since the days of the Golden Fleece been considered the capital of Western Georgia (then Ancient Colchis). It remains Georgia’s second largest city, but to the irritation of the proud locals, does not come even close to Tbilisi’s present day size and wealth (Berdzenishvili, 2012).

Gelati Monastery, a masterpiece of the Georgian Golden Age, was built in 1106 by King David IV and was one of the main cultural and intellectual centers in Georgia throughout the Middle Ages. It had an Academy which employed some of the most celebrated Georgian scientists, theologians and philosophers, many of whom had previously been active at various Orthodox monasteries abroad, one of which was the Mangan Academy in Constantinople (Katamadze, 2013).

Bagrati Cathedral of the Dormition is an early-11th century masterpiece of medieval Georgian architecture. In 1692, it was devastated in an explosion by the Ottoman troops but was gradually restored in the 1950s and later, the 2000s. The site was designated endangered by UNESCO, which was concerned that the continuing restoration was not carefully prepared. Despite this, proponents of restoration argued that the site was more likely to fall apart if it was let to soak in rainwater, as it had done for centuries.

The classification includes two of Georgia’s most ancient religious structures: the Svetitskhoveli (Cathedral of the Living Pillar) and the Jvari Monastery (Monastery of the Cross), as well as the historical area of Mtskheta in which the two are situated. The monuments trace their origin to the dawn of Christianity in Georgia in the first half of the first millennium A.D. and were judged by UNESCO to be a testament of “the high artistic and cultural level attained by this ancient kingdom” (Kvaratskhelia, 2009).

The upper lands of Georgia’s alpine region of Svaneti were recognized by UNESCO as an “exceptional example of mountain scenery with medieval-type villages and tower-houses”, which were often family-built and served to protect against invaders for centuries.

The construction of Bagrati Cathedral, named after Bagrat III, the first king of united Georgia, started at the end of 10th century and completed in early 11th century. Located in Kutaisi, it is cruciform in plan, richly ornamented capitals and fragments of piers and vaulting scattered throughout the interior. Different approaches can be seen in the decorative treatment of the facades, capitals, and bases, resulting from the preferences of successive master-builders. The monastery precinct is enclosed by a stone wall which houses the tomb of its founder, King David IV ‘the Builder’ (1089-1125). The exterior mass is relieved by the decorative arcading on all its facades, emphasizing the upward thrust of its forms, while the interior, surmounted by the large dome, combines space and solemnity. The main church is in the center of the enclosure, flanked by the Church of St George and Church of St Nicholas; and the Academy building behind it (Ukleba, 2009).

The Church of St George is a tall, domed structure with projecting apses, supported by massive stone columns and apse angles and well lit by windows with fragments of original wall paintings. The Church of St Nicholas is two-storied and the ground floor is open on all sides through arches. The Academy building is a large structure lit by wide arched windows with richly decorated porch to the centre of the original entrances.

The Gelati Monastery, built in 1106, is a complex with wonderful mosaics, wall paintings, and enamel and metal work. A centre of science and education, it was one of the most important cultural centres in ancient Georgia. Both belong to the flowering ‘golden age’ of medieval Georgia, a period of political strength and economic growth between the reigns of King David and Queen Tamar (1184-1213).

Motsameta Monastery is smaller and quieter than the one in Gelati, although its cliff-edge setting is more spectacular by far. It is located 6km out of Kutaisi, off the Gelati road. Take the turning marked by a photo of the church and follow this track for a couple of kilometres. This little monastery has a spectacular setting on a cliff-top promontory above the bend of the Tskhaltsitela River. Situated dizzily high above the ravine of the Tskhaltsitela River, the monastery offers awe-inspiring views of the river and the surrounding countryside from any number of buildings and points on the grounds. Extremely isolated and seldom visited by tourists, this place will give you an unadulterated taste of the monastic life.

The Tskhaltsitela River’s name, meaning ‘Red Water’, derives from an 8th-century Arab massacre. Among the victims were the brothers Davit and Konstantin Mkheidze, dukes of Argveti (read below). Their bodies were thrown in the river, but the story goes that lions brought them up to the church where their bones were subsequently kept. They are now saints, with their skulls in a casket behind the red velvet curtain, and your wish will be granted if you crawl three times under their tomb, set on two lions on the south side of the church, without touching it.

As you walk to the monastery, you'll see strips of colored cloth tied to the myrtle bushes and fig and pomegranate trees that flank the lane. These are votive offerings, placed there in hopes that a prayer might be granted.

The church itself is on a site on which there had been a church and village since the fourth century. The name Mot-sameta is derived from the Georgian word for martyrdom. Two brothers, David and Constantine Mkheidze, were lords of this region in the eighth century. Sometime between 720 and 730, succumbing to a superior Arab force, they were captured and tortured for refusing to convert to Islam. They were thrown into the Rioni River with stones tied around their necks and their bodies washed up on the riverbank below the monastery. They were buried as martyrs in the crypt of the church, which was also destroyed by the Arabs at the time of the brothers' death. In the 11th century, King Bagrat III built a monastery on the foundations of the destroyed eighth-century church in honor of the two brothers, now national heroes and saints in the Georgian Orthodox Church. Their tomb rests on two carved lions at the top of a side altar in the church. The lions are connected with the legend of David and Constantine Mkheidze, for it is believed that they appeared to bring the bodies of the brothers up from the river to the church. Believers also hold that if you walk three times through the small passage beneath the saints' tomb without touching the walls, your prayers will be answered (Elizbarashvili, 2007).

In 1923, the Cheka (the Soviet secret police) came into the church, seized the bones of the two saints and put them in the museum in Kutaisi. After protests by a local teacher, the relics were returned, but the once-perfect skeletons were hopelessly jumbled. The Father Superior of the Monastery relates that the Cheka agents who took the bones all suffered terrible fates: one was killed by his son, one went insane, and the third died of tuberculosis. The church was once completely covered in frescoes, but a fire set in 1923 destroyed everything except some fragments in the cupola. The bell tower also dates from the 11th century. To the left of the gatehouse there is a steep path down to the river, which makes this a very popular excursion in summer, when Kutaisi swelters.

Conclusion

Since the Georgian government decided to move their parliament to Kutaisi, there has been a lot of work on restoring streets, buildings, parks and monuments and the city has become much safer. But a visit here is nonetheless near mandatory to see the magnificent Bagrati Cathedral, and Gelati Monastery, both of which are UNESCO World Heritage sites, and have commanding views from the mountain slopes over the city and the Rioni river. Otherwise, Kutaisi is a relatively pleasant city, although not as attractive for tourists as Tbilisi and cities on the nearby Black Sea coast.

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