

NEW TRENDS IN MOUNTAIN AND HERITAGE TOURISM: THE CASE OF UPPER SVANETI IN THE CONTEXT OF GEORGIAN TOURIST SECTOR

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Abstract: Upper Svaneti, a mountainous region of Georgia located in the north-west of the country and surrounded by the spectacular peaks of Greater Caucasus mountain range, is a good example of tourist potential deriving from the interaction between natural and cultural features. In this paper we will first outline an introductory framework of tourism in Georgia. Then we will analyse the case study of Upper Svaneti, which is nowadays undergoing a phase of early tourist development, thanks to a combination of factors: the pathway of Georgia towards a greater political and economic stability; an increased accessibility of the area thanks to the improvement of the road network and the establishment of air connections with Tbilisi; an intensive process of rehabilitation of the human settlements, combined with the creation of tourist facilities; a growing image following the inclusion, in 1996, of its famous medieval stone towers in the UNESCO World Heritage, which make the mountain landscape of Upper Svaneti extraordinarily interesting from the cultural, architectural, ethnographical - and therefore tourist - points of view.

Key words: Georgia, Upper Svaneti, mountain tourism, heritage, landscape

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INTRODUCTION

Globalization is characterised, among other things, by the simultaneity and the multiplicity of experiences, identities, models in what has been called the "global village" (McLuhan, 1964). At the same time, globalization has accelerated the transition from closed to open systems, from fixity to mobility, from isolation to interdependence. Hence comes the desire of the contemporary individual - that someone would define post-modern (Minca, 1996) - to belong to a socio-cultural system that is wider than local or national ones, and therefore to broaden his horizons through the experience of different

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realities, cultures and territories: in one word, with the "other". Such an experience becomes possible primarily through the practice of tourism.

One of the main features of contemporary tourism is the increasing segmentation of the demand, in terms of income, age, consumptions, habits, origin of the flows, educational levels, motivations, attitudes. Analysts agree, moreover, that the world demand for tourism will further diversify in the medium and long terms (Wilson, 2011). Supply, therefore, is moving towards an increasing customization: on the one hand, new types of tourism arise and develop; on the other hand, new destinations emerge for the traditional types. All of this represents an alternative to mass tourism. Consequently, if the related targets may be considered as small market niches from a local viewpoint, at the continental or global scale they represent a potential market which is wide enough to generate profitability for emerging destinations, if visibility, image, accessibility, attractiveness and usability are insured (Viken & Granås, 2014).

The causes can be technological (increased accessibility of a growing number of places due to the development of transport networks, especially the low-cost flights; wider and real time information, thanks to the Internet), motivational (search for alternative destinations; desire to meet the "other", as long as perceived as genuine; aspiration to expand one's own sphere of action to new, unusual or just trendy experiences), but also geopolitical (e.g., the collapse of Soviet Union and communism in Eastern Europe and the subsequent opening of the borders – and of the markets - to inbound and outbound tourism). Therefore a growing number of destinations, that just a few years ago were left out of the tourism market because lacking of major tourist attractions (sea, lake, snow, spa, monuments), or peripheral to mainstream tourist routes, or difficult to access due to geopolitical reasons, are now experiencing a growing reputation and a promising development through a combination of effective promotion and increased accessibility.

Under this respect, the most substantial evolution of the last decades (especially since the late nineties) has been the fast growing international tourism headed for the Eastern European countries and the post-Soviet space, especially for the traditional types of tourism (beach, mountain, lake, thermal, cultural, rural etc.), but also, to a certain extent, for the innovative ones (heritage, memory, adventure, medical, dark etc.). The main destinations of these emerging flows are the historical towns of Eastern Europe¹ (such as Prague, Budapest, Moscow, St. Petersburg, Gdansk, Baltic capital cities) and the seaside resorts of Adriatic Sea (Slovenia, Croatia²), followed by the Black Sea (Romania, Bulgaria, Ukraine). As far as mountain tourism, ecotourism and rural tourism are concerned, the Slovenian section of the Alps (Kranjska Gora), the Tatra Mountains (between Slovakia and Poland) and the Carpathians³ (Romania, Ukraine) are showing an interesting evolution.

Further east, some countries of the Southern Caucasus (Armenia⁴ and Georgia) and Central Asia (Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan) are entering the international tourism markets, thanks to a combination of natural and cultural tourist resources that can successfully address traditional market segments (such as the cultural, mountain, rural ones), as well as more innovative segments like adventure and heritage tourism. Heritage tourism⁵ can be defined as an immersion in the natural and cultural history of a place, made perceptible to human senses by a specific mix of tangible and intangible resources that represent the basic elements upon which values, memories and identities are built. Under

¹ See, at this regard, Czepczyński, 2008.

² For Croatia, see Albolino, 2014.

³ For Romanian Carpathians, see Bădulescu & Băc, 2009; Gaceu et al, 2012; Gozner & Zarrilli, 2012; Ilieș et al, 2014; Gozner, 2010.

⁴ For Armenia, see Cappucci & Zarrilli, 2008.

⁵ On this topic, see Timothy & Boyd, 2007; Marcos Arévalo & Ledesma, 2010.

this respect, a central role is played by the "cultural landscape"⁶, which can be regarded as the specific product of the interactions between natural features (climate, vegetation, orography etc.) and human activities (agricultural structures, human settlements, social organizations etc.). Such an interaction gives the territory its unique character, its individuality (Wallach, 2005; Smith, 2006; Zarrilli, 2007; Roca et. al., 2011). Cultural landscape, therefore, is a key resource for heritage tourism, as defined above.

A very good example of tourist potential deriving from the aforementioned interaction is represented by Upper Svaneti (Georgia). In the following chapters we will outline an introductory framework of tourism in Georgia, which is experiencing a quick growth phase. Then we will analyse the case study of Upper Svaneti, which is a mountainous region of Georgia located in the north-west of the country on the border with the Russian Federation, surrounded by the spectacular peaks, ranging from 3,000 to 5,000 meters, of the southern side of the Greater Caucasus mountain range. Upper Svaneti is nowadays undergoing a phase of early tourist development, thanks to a combination of factors which will be discussed further, one of which is represented by its cultural landscape, which is unique and extraordinarily interesting from the naturalistic, architectural, ethnographical - and therefore tourist - points of view (Figure 1).



Figure 1. The settlement of Ushguli, about 2,100 m.a.s.l.
(Source: Luca Zarrilli, 2009)

Georgia as a tourist destination

Located in the Southern Caucasus, along the Black Sea coast, Georgia has a huge tourist potential: about 100 mountains (Abastumani, Bakuriani, Bakhmaro, etc.), seaside (Kobuleti, Ureki, Batumi, etc.), balneotherapeutic and mud health resorts (Borjomi, Sairme, Likani, Akhtala, etc.). Furthermore, more than 12.000 historic-architectural monuments are counted (Pavliashvili, 2003) – some of which included in UNESCO “World Heritage Sites” list (Upper Svaneti, Bagrati Cathedral, Gelati Monastery,

⁶ On this topic, see Mitchell et al., 2009.

Mtskheta) – and several nature sanctuaries. All of these are concentrated within a small territory, occupied by hospitable and distinctive people (Prikhodko, 2014). There are 103 resorts and 182 so called “resort places”, which means that in such places there are enough natural factors for treatment and organisation of resort, but for the moment they do not have any tourist infrastructure⁷.

Georgia is also distinguished for its share of pristine natural environment, which represents 14% of the territory. Pristine natural landscape can be found both in protected and high mountain areas (Elizbarashvili & Kupatadze, 2011). The country also provides unique opportunities for birdwatchers. Based on the information of Galvez (2005), it is possible to watch more than 200 species in a two-week period. Georgia, as part of the Caucasus, is one of three “Endemic Bird Areas” of Europe.

In addition to its natural features, the country boasts an age-old human history that competes with, or even surpasses, most European countries (Metreveli & Timothy, 2010). Georgia was part of several ancient civilizations including the Hittite, Persian, Greek, Roman and the Byzantine empires. In ancient geography, Colchis was an ancient kingdom in Western Georgia. According to Greek mythology, it was the home of Medea and of the golden fleece, the destination of Jason and the Argonauts (Zurabishvili, 1987). The country is also one of the world's most ancient Christian countries, dating back as early as the fourth century (Goldstein, 1999).

Furthermore, it was probably here that humans started to domesticate grapevine and make wine for the first time in the history, over 8,000 years ago (McGovern, 2003; Chilashvili, 2004). Over 500 varieties of vines have been recorded in Georgia. Furthermore, the ancient Georgian tradition of winemaking method using the Kvevri clay jars has been added to the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2013. The wine, together with a very specific cuisine and a strong tradition of conviviality, is a vital part of Georgian identity and culture. As a result Georgia has a strong tourist potential to offer and develop: among the others, eco-friendly, cultural, heritage, leisure and gastronomy tourism.

The country was one of the most popular holiday destinations in the USSR, due to its scenic beauty, its mild climate and a large number of health resorts. Data on Soviet tourism are difficult to find. The most reliable figures assume that in the late 1980s Georgia counted approximately 4.5 million visitors annually (Pavliashvili, 2003), of which about two millions headed to sanatoria and health resorts. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the ensuing ethnic fragmentation and civil strife in Georgia, the conditions for tourism in the country underwent deep constraints. Only in recent years the number of visitors in the country reached, and even surpassed, that of Soviet period.

Tourism in today's Georgia: opportunities and challenges

Georgia has experienced dramatic increases in the number of tourists over the past decade. According to the Georgian National Tourism Administration (GNTA) in 2014 the number of international visits was about 5,49 million (Figure 2) and exceeded the country's total population, which amounts to 4,6 million people.

The World Tourism Organization's report, “UNWTO World Tourism Barometer”⁸, highlighted that, in 2013, the increase in the number of international arrivals in Georgia (about 22% over the previous year) was rated as the highest in Europe. From a statistical point of view the increase of visitors was even higher in 2012, when the number of international arrivals increased by 57% over the previous year. More in general, from

⁷ Gudauri, one of the most import ski resort of the country, has both natural resources and tourist infrastructure, but it doesn't have the resort status yet.

⁸UNWTO Volume 12, January 2014, retrieved on: http://accounts.unipg.it/~fpompei/UNWTO_Barom14_01_Jan.pdf

2009 to 2014 inbound tourism increased over 3.6 times. The outlook for the industry is highly optimistic and as a matter of fact the Lonely Planet travel guide elected Georgia one of its top-10 Best Value Destinations for 2013⁹ while, for Rough Guides, Georgia ranks 5th among the “Top Ten Countries to Visit in 2014”¹⁰.

Such a positive result is mainly due to both public and private political priorities in tourism industry after the Rose Revolution. Since 2004 - year in which, according to the GNTA, the number of international arrivals was only 368,312 – the Georgian State considers tourism as one of the major economic sectors, and has quickly adopted reforms in developing and modernizing infrastructures: building of new airports, railways, roads, hotels, recreational spas, swimming pools, water parks, aquariums, national parks, etc.; reconstruction of historic monuments and settlements on a large scale. The development of tourism in Georgia was also stimulated by providing a high degree of security and by the easing of visa restrictions which opened the country to a great amount of visitors (Alasania, 2013).

For the Georgian government, tourism plays an important political role, also because it often involves and gets support by foreign aids and banks. For example, in 2012 the GNTA, together with the World Bank, implemented a regional development program for the western part of Georgia, with a financial support amounting to USD 60 million (TTG, 2014:16-17). As a consequence of this development, tourism in Georgia has become one of the major sources of income. Services, including tourism, comprise approximately 60% of GDP, followed by industry and agriculture (Metreveli & Timothy, 2010).

Tourism contributed 6.5% to Georgia’s GDP in 2013 and employed about 169.000 persons in the fourth quarter of 2013, the 10% of total employment (GNTA, 2014).

However, despite big investments and efforts, it should be said that modern physical infrastructure is still critical for the tourism industry. In particular, considering that in 2013 most of foreign travellers came to Georgia by land (87%), but only a much smaller fraction by air (11%)¹¹, building of modern airports and improving the existing airports should be a priority.

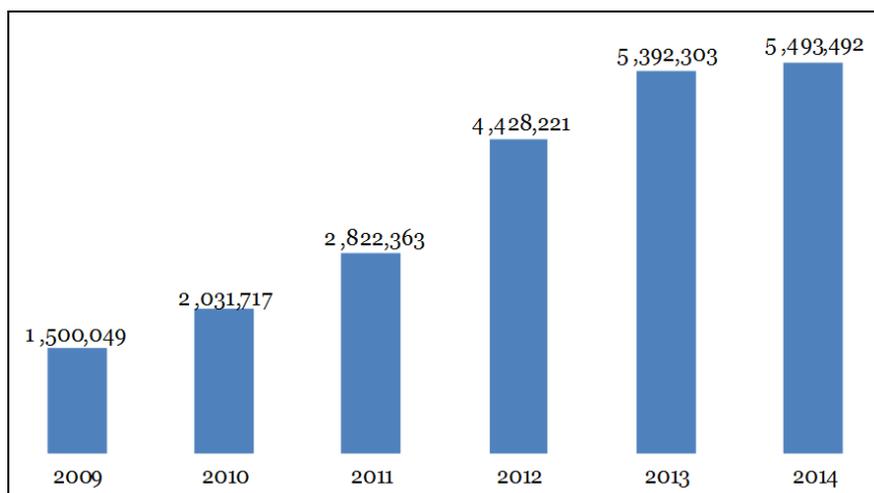


Figure 2. International visitors by years
(Source: Georgian National Tourism Administration - GNTA)

⁹ <http://www.lonelyplanet.com/themes/best-in-travel/best-value-destinations/>

¹⁰ <http://www.roughguides.com/best-places/2014/top-10-countries/>

¹¹ GNTA, 2014:7.

Furthermore, in order to become a more competitive and attractive destination for western travellers, Georgia is still lacking tourism international standards and visibility: in effect, one of the aspect of Georgia’s tourism industry is that most of the tourists come from four neighbouring countries such as Turkey (30%), Armenia (24%), Azerbaijan (20%), Russia (14%), and only 10% of visitors arrive from other countries (Figure 3).

Anyway the number of tourists from western countries – European Union countries in primis – is increasing year by year (in 2013 there were 208,754 international arrivals from EU countries, representing a 4% share of total arrivals and an increase of 22% over the previous year).

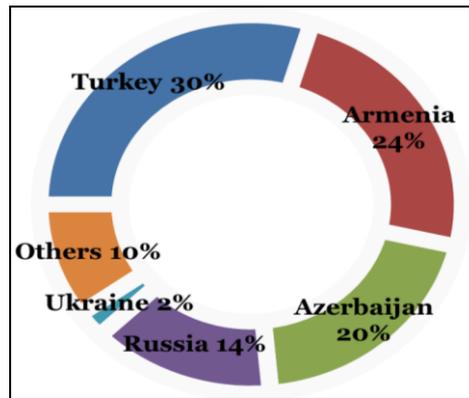


Figure 3. International Arrivals in 2013 - Top Countries
(Source: Georgian National Tourism Administration - GNTA)

Another interesting aspect is related to the length of stay: in 2013, according to the GNTA, out of the total number of visits, 39,6% were made by same day visitors, 22% were made for the purpose of transit and only 38,4% lasted longer than 24 hours with an average stay of 5 days (GNTA, 2014).

Looking at the purpose of the visit (figure 4), international visits were mostly undertaken for holiday, leisure or recreation purposes (37%). Other frequently observed purposes included visiting friends or relatives (26%), transit (17%), shopping (9%) and business/professional trips (4%). Only 7% of visits were made for other purposes.

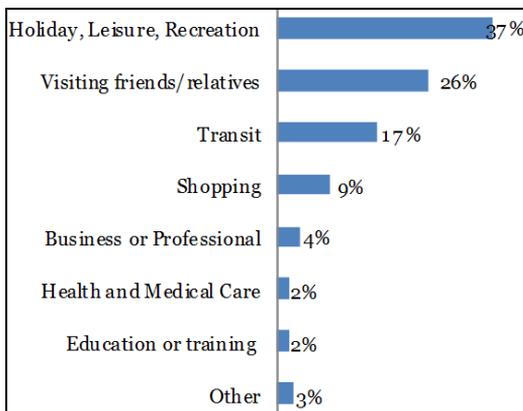


Figure 4. Main purposes of the visit

(Source: Georgian National Tourism Administration - GNTA)

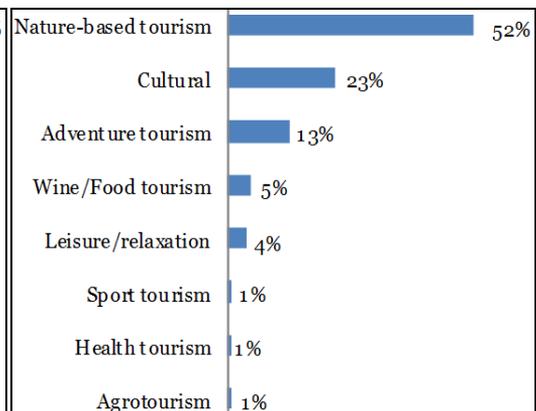


Figure 5. Tourism types

(Source: Georgian National Tourism Administration - GNTA)

Data included in figure 5 are of great interest for the aim of this paper. As mentioned above, Georgia has very good conditions for the development of environmental tourism thanks to its location, geography, landscape diversity, climate, history and culture. Indeed the great majority (52%) of tourism activities in the country are “nature-based”, such as camping, hiking, hunting, bird watching, swimming, fishing, skiing, and mountain climbing, among others. Then, since “adventure tourism” (caving, paragliding, rock climbing, etc.) can be considered in a way as “nature based”, it can be said that over 65% of tourists going to Georgia are strongly attracted by its pristine natural environment and landscape. Also cultural and ethnic aspects – including the traditional cuisine and the good quality and variety of the local wine – play an important role in choosing Georgia as a tourist destination.

Upper Svaneti

The myth of the Greek Argonauts’ voyage to Colchis is thought to be connected to the gold of Svaneti which was brought to the region by the rivers’ currents. At that time Svaneti was part of the Colchis Kingdom and was the only territory that supplied King Ayet with gold. Svans (inhabitants of Svaneti) used sheep skin to capture gold – the skin was fixed to a board that was placed into water wool side up. Once removed from the water and dried, the gold would fall from dry wool. The legend of Golden Fleece comes from this method of gold producing.

Svaneti is one of the most beautiful geographical provinces of Georgia. It comprises of two parts – Upper and Lower Svaneti, which are divided by the Svaneti range and belong to two municipalities – Mestia and Lentekhi. As Upper Svaneti has always been secure and independent because of its isolation between high mountains, it preserved its historical traditions and ethnographical peculiarities. Throughout history during hostilities it was the depository for the whole Georgian cultural treasures and until now the locals, especially old people, consider it their duty to defend them. That is why the Upper Svaneti is of great interest to all visitors.

Greek historian and ethnographer Strabo wrote about the Svans that “They are noteworthy for their courage and power, they reign over almost everything around them and control the peaks of the Caucasus”.



Figure 6. Mt. Ushba, 4,710 m.a.s.l.
(Source: M. Tutberidze)

Upper Svaneti (“ZemoSvaneti” in Georgian) has a rich history, picturesque natural beauty and is located in the northern part of the country on the southern slopes of the Caucasus in the upper part of the river Enguri stream. The region has plenty of tourist resources, both natural and cultural. It is surrounded by wonderful high (more than 4,000 meters) white-capped peaks such as Shkhara (5,068 m – the highest peak of Georgia), Tetnuldi, Ushba (Figure 6), Ailama, etc. There are wonderful forests, rivers, several waterfalls (in the valley of the river Dolra), speleological caves (near Khaishi) and lot of trekking and hiking areas all over the region.

Upper Svaneti is famous for its cultural tourist resources as well. Ancient Svans are known for their tower settlements (Figure 7), cultivating unique species of wheat and their own style of mural painting. Svans created musical instruments unique for the region and also developed a tradition of woodcarving, examples of which can still be found in some homes and churches. Svans have great respect for rituals. Their polyphonic songs and specific dances are also unique for the region.

Since the Middle Ages the tower settlements of Svaneti served both as defense and dwelling structures. Most of them are 20-25 meters high and have 4 or 5 floors connected to each other by the internal wooden staircases.



Figure 7. Towers in Ushguli
(Source: M.Tutberidze)

In almost every village there is a small church. Many of them have ancient mural painting inside; some of them have also facades with such paintings (e.g. churches in Adishi, Lenjeri, Ushguli). Priceless ancient icons, crucifixes and valuable manuscripts are still kept in those small churches.

The Svaneti Museum of History and Ethnography in Mestia is a remarkable tourist attraction (Figure 8). It was founded in 1936. Nowadays it has unique archaeological, numismatic, ethnographic and photographic collections, manuscripts, jewelry, vessels, weapons, painted and engraved crosses and icons. The items belong to different periods from Neolithic to Middle Ages. Among the photographic exhibits noteworthy are the works of significant Italian scholar, mountaineer and photographer Vittorio Sella, who travelled to the Caucasia in 1889, 1890 and 1896 and whose photos of landscapes, towers and humans compiles a richest archive. The museum affiliation is

located in a tower of Ushguli. It has very valuable artefacts on display; the edifice itself though is in need of serious restoration.

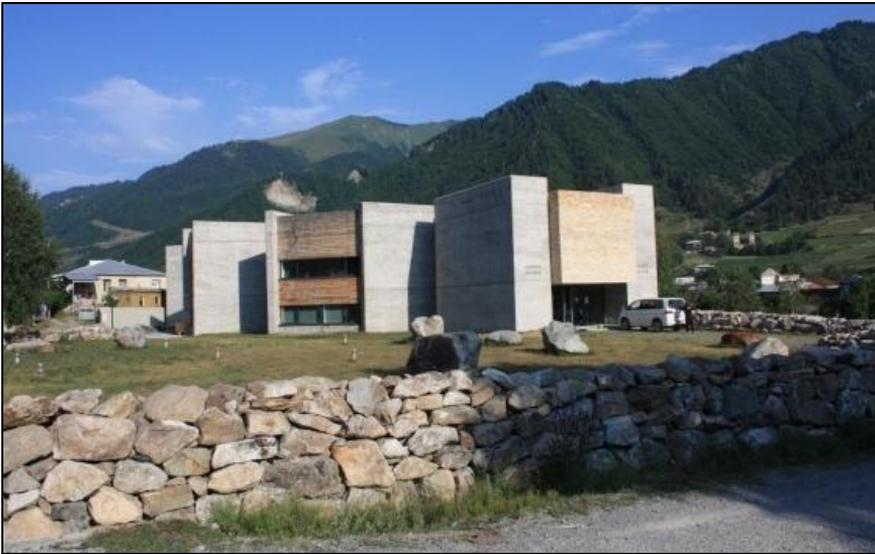


Figure 8 – Svaneti Museum of History and Ethnography in Mestia
(Source: G. Khomeriki)

One of the most frequently visited destinations in Svaneti is village Chazhashi (Ushguli community). Its architectural complex of towers was added to the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1996. In accordance with this organization a 5 year project of the village restoration has started this year. Noteworthy is the fact that mostly the local dwellers are employed on these works, and slate, tower building main material, is mined locally, from the banks of the river Enguri.



Fig. 9 – Queen Tamar Airport in Mestia
(Source: G. Khomeriki)

Lately the number of tourists has been growing rapidly. The reason is that people in many countries get better informed about this picturesque region – its interesting architecture, nature and inhabitants, their traditions and folklore; so the significance of a recently constructed motorway to Mestia (the administrative center of Upper Svaneti), which increased the region’s availability, cannot be overestimated. The works in other destinations continue. For the last two years the main tourist flows have been coming to Mestia from the Kutaisi King David Agmashenebeli Airport and the Tbilisi International Airport. Short-time flights on comfortable small planes are performed three times a week from Natakhtari (near Tbilisi) to Mestia, the Queen Tamar Airport (named among top 10 unusual airports by the architects of Novate web-site, Figure 9). The service is rendered by the “Service Air”, a Georgian operator.

The number of tourists has been increasing yearly. Three years ago the number of tourists in Upper Svaneti was less than 9,000. In 2013 the region was visited by 13,431 tourists (Source: Svaneti Tourism Center in Mestia). In 2014 the trend was the same and the number of tourists (16,053) exceeded the previous year’s data (Table 1). Simultaneously it was mentioned that about 60% of all tourists come to the Tourism Center for registration. So if we take this in account the real number of tourists would be more than 26,700.

Table 1 - Number of tourists by months, 2011-2014
(Source: Svaneti Tourism Center)

month	number of tourists			
	2011	2012	2013	2014
January	151	57	56	165
February	38	17	21	101
March	35	22	272	158
April	177	59	308	108
May	525	572	1243	1767
June	1002	983	1784	1750
July	1431	3128	2820	2778
August	2610	2806	3222	4465
September	1817	2279	2641	2868
October	1031	949	694	1398
November	92	89	263	444
December	45	74	107	51
total	8954	11035	13431	16053

During the Soviet period the Upper Svaneti was the destination basically for domestic tourists and Russian visitors who came from the Northern Caucasus by mountain passes of Becho, Tviberi and Nakra, stayed there in shelters for a while and later continued on their way to the Black Sea shore of Georgia. It was a very popular route for tourists in that period. In 1986 there was one hotel in Mestia with capacity of about 375 beds, and two shelters in Nakra and Tviberi with 70 and 45 beds respectively, but in 1996 only one tourist hotel (“Ushba”, with just 203 beds) was functioning.

Now as the number of tourists is growing fast, more accommodations are needed and many Svans turn their habitats into guest houses, farm houses or hostels and run them successfully, offering B&B on demand. Nowadays there are more accommodations in the region than years ago: 249, among them 10 hotels, 102 guest houses, 136 farm houses and 1 hostel (Table 2, Figure 10). It is hard to calculate their general capacity though: most guest houses have 5 or 6 rooms of different sizes, so that the number of beds that owners put in them varies significantly.

New Trends in Mountain and Heritage Tourism:
the Case of Upper Svaneti in the Context of Georgian Tourist Sector

Table 2 – Accommodations in Upper Svaneti
(Source: Svaneti Tourism Center)

Community	total number	hotel	guest house	farm house	hostel
Mestia	70	10	59		1
Ushguli	34		7	27	
Mulakhi	25		9	16	
Becho	19		6	13	
Ipari	15		6	9	
Nakra	14			14	
Chuberi	14			14	
Kala	13		2	11	
Lakhamula	9			9	
Lenjeri	8		2	6	
Etseri	7		2	5	
Pari	6			6	
Tskhumari	4		4		
Khaishi	3			3	
Latali	3		2	1	
Tsvirmi	3		3		
Idliani	2			2	
Total	249	10	102	136	1

**Upper Svaneti -
Tourist Accommodations**

Map compiled by David Sichinava (david[at]sichinava.ge)

Data sources: Svaneti Tourism Center, brochure "Travel to Svaneti",
"Svaneti Tourism Center" Union, 2014, OSM, CGIAR-CSI, ESRI, own work, NGA gazetteer

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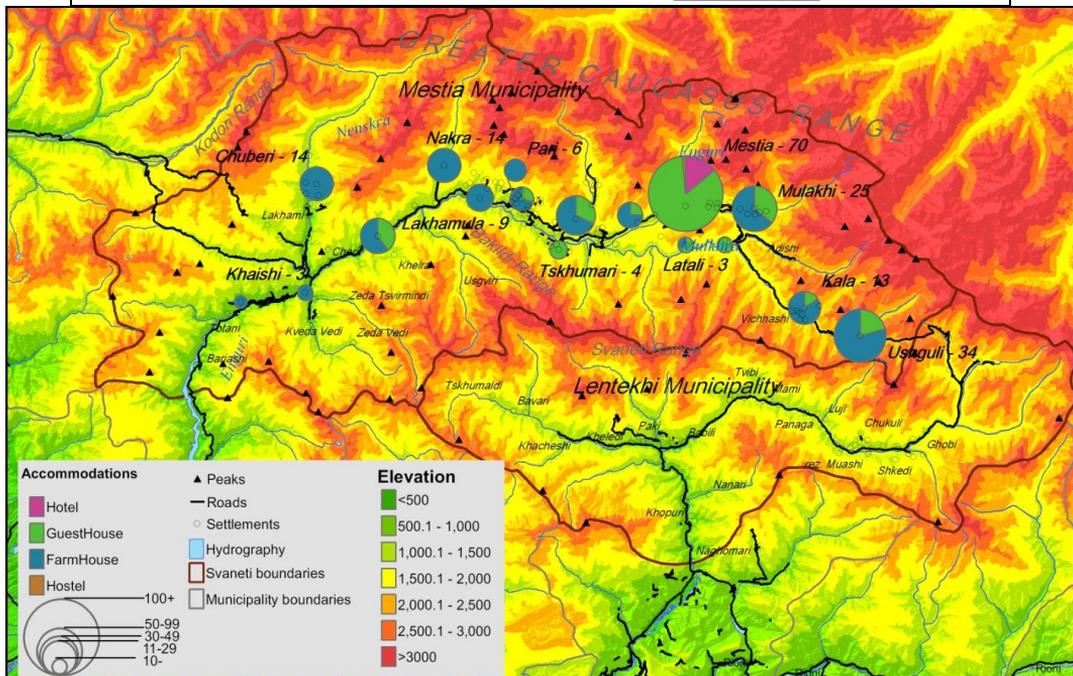


Figure 10 – Upper Svaneti – Tourist Accommodations
(Compiled by David Sichinava)

The most popular tourist destinations in Svaneti are following: Mestia, Adishi, Kala, Ushguli, Becho. The best months for visit are in summer (second part of July, August and partially September), when the number of tourists is several times more than in winter. But it should be emphasized that the winter tourism has great potential for development: the Hatsvali complex on the mt. Zuruldi (8 km from Mestia), with 2,400 meters alpine skiing track for skiers of all capabilities is already functioning, Tetnuldi complex is under construction and is said to be good especially for skilled skiers.

Regarding the main tourist generating countries, the majority of tourists come to Svaneti from Poland, Israel, Russia, Germany and Ukraine and their number is diligently increasing (Table 3). The aforementioned countries have been top of the list for several consecutive years.

Table 3 - Main generating countries
(Source: Svaneti Tourism Center)

	country	number of tourists			
		2011	2012	2013	2014
1.	Poland	1169	2120	3173	4771
2.	Israel	2848	3133	3267	4016
3.	Russia	155	655	1058	1173
4.	Germany	590	547	746	934
5.	Ukraine	321	488	930	701

It is remarkable that development of tourism in the region caused those Svans, who years ago for ecological reason moved to Southern Georgia (Dmanisi municipality), to return to their homeland, particularly to Ushguli and Khalde.

The government is involved in road construction, organization of water supply in settlements. Besides it attracts investors and supports training of locals as tourist guides.

Food supply for the visitors in this region, at such high altitude, is no problem whatsoever: locals grow potatoes and produce dairy products, while fruits and vegetables are brought from Kutaisi.

Unemployment is the main problem in the region – young people are leaving because of lack of jobs. Night life or eating out are alien notions for the region. Meanwhile there are no swimming pools, only 2 spots (Becho and Chuberi) can boast with their mini stadiums and souvenir shops are found only in Mestia and Ushguli. Public WCs are scarce and of very poor quality.

Khaishi hydroelectric power station, which is under construction, presents a major problem since it will supposedly cause partial inundation of the Khaishi area which causes population's anxiety. The year 2014 will see the completion of 12 towers' roof restoration, providing its quality is adequate.

Conclusions

Upper Svaneti can be considered a "newcomer" in the international tourist market. Due to geographical and cultural reasons, it has suffered a long-lasting isolation, barely mitigated, during the Soviet period, by overnights of transit tourist flows coming from Russia and bound for the Black Sea coast.

Thanks to a combination of factors, Upper Svaneti is nowadays experiencing a preliminary phase of tourist organization and development that could be defined "pioneer", according to the model of Miossec (1976). It's worth noticing that the growth of inbound tourism is quite significant: international arrivals increased from almost 9,000 to more than 16,000 in just four years (2011-2014). If the present trend is intended to continue, a

stable – although niche – presence in the international market of both mountain and heritage tourism is foreseeable in the near future.

As pointed out above, foreign tourists are coming mainly from Poland and Israel, followed by Russia, Germany and Ukraine. In the case of Russia, notwithstanding the difficult political relations, geographical proximity and economic viability are certainly playing a leading role; furthermore, it's also worth mentioning that in 2012 Georgia unilaterally abolished the existing visa system with Russia (operating since 2000), which has simplified travel to Georgia for Russian citizens. For Ukraine and Poland cultural and “geopolitical” affinities can probably be an explanation; moreover, the sharp decrease of Ukrainian tourist between 2013 and 2014 is certainly due to the political turmoil that is affecting that country.

In the case of Germany and Israel the “otherness” and the “exoticism” of Georgia in general, and of Upper Svaneti in particular, are presumably the key factors; they are associated, in the case of Israeli tourists, to a special interest in adventure tourism and “off roading”, the latter being quite easy to experience in Georgia due to the features of the territory and, maybe, to a more flexible approach by the authorities. In addition, it can be argued that some of them come to Georgia because of nostalgia of the country where they lived for about 26 centuries without any persecution or harassment.

The reasons for the ongoing development are manifold: the pathway of Georgia towards a greater political and economic stability and stronger ties with the European Union (Cappucci, 2013a, 2013b), which are fostering the overall inbound tourism in the country; an increased accessibility of the area thanks to the improvement of the road network and the establishment of air connections with Tbilisi; an intensive process of rehabilitation of the human settlements, combined with the creation of tourist facilities; a sharper presence in the international tourist imagery – and market – thanks to the inclusion, in 1996, of the medieval stone tower complex of the village of Chazhashi in the UNESCO World Heritage. However, it should be underlined that, notwithstanding the big steps forward undertaken on the path of tourist development, still much remains to be done for what concerns tourist image, which is still weak and lacks an adequate international promotion, and civil and tourist facilities which, with few exceptions, are still far from matching international standards.

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