

CULTURE AND TOURISM IN URBAN SPACES: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES (Kutaisi Case)

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Abstract. Cultural heritage and cultural environment determine the face of the country and give us special features that we got from our ancestors. It is the basis of our identity, a source of knowledge and experience, containing a lot of information which needs to be deciphered and passed on to future generations. Urban tourist destinations are distinguished not only by their cultural-historical heritage but also by the diversity of their cultural landscape. In this regard, Kutaisi has a unique opportunity to emerge as one of the tourism urban centres in Georgia and bring great benefits to the country. Therefore, our research aims to evaluate and study Kutaisi as a cultural-tourist urban centre through its natural and cultural heritage monuments, considering future trends, opportunities and challenges. Based on the study of the mentioned issues, we tried to identify the city of Kutaisi as an authentic tourist destination and prove its competitiveness. To achieve the goal and objectives of the research, we were guided by qualitative research methods and an analysis of statistical information, literature, and publications within the framework of desk research. We collected data and formulated a set of innovations. The conducted research theoretical and statistical materials allow us to analyze the development of the cultural destinations of Imereti to identify the existing tourist potential in the Kutaisi municipality using the systematic analysis method. By developing and implementing the right destination planning strategy, Kutaisi will be one of the leading cities in terms of tourist destinations, bringing us economic benefits in the long term.

KEYWORDS: CULTURAL HERITAGE, IDENTITY, URBAN TOURISM, IMERETI

INTRODUCTION

The historically formed cultural environment and cultural heritage define the face of the country and give each of us special responsibilities inherited from our ancestors. It is the basis that moves us forward, gives us self-confidence, and defines our identity. However, we often do not properly realize these factors. Therefore, we don't take care of them properly. Our cultural heritage is a source of knowledge and experience containing a lot of information, which needs to be deciphered, announced and passed on to future generations.

The Faro Convention comprehensively indicates the meaning and importance of cultural heritage and emphasizes the role of urban tourist destinations in tourism development. (FARO,2005) [1]. Urban tourist destinations are distinguished not only by their cultural-historical heritage but also by the diversity of their cultural landscape. In this regard, Kutaisi has a unique opportunity to emerge as one of the tourism urban centres in Georgia and bring great benefits to the country.

With the growth of tourism as a global phenomenon, cities are becoming increasingly attractive to tourists. The city meets the expectations of the growing flow of tourists, attracting them with rich and diverse cultural facilities, sports, business, and constantly renewed opportunities.

There are interesting and valuable urban tourist destinations in Georgia, distinguished not only by their cultural-historical heritage but also by the diversity of their cultural landscape. In this regard, Kutaisi has a special place in the Georgian urban heritage. (Beridze, 1974) [2]. Therefore, our research aims to evaluate and study Kutaisi as a cultural-tourist urban centre through its natural and cultural heritage monuments, considering future trends, opportunities and challenges. Based on the study of the mentioned issue, it will be possible to identify Kutaisi as one of the authentic tourist destinations in Georgia and justify its competitiveness.

To achieve the goal and objectives of the research, we were guided by qualitative research methods and an analysis of statistical information, literature, and publications within the framework of desk research. We collected data and formulated a set of innovations.

Based on the comparison and analysis of numerous archaeological artefacts and written sources, the question of the origin of the original clothing on the land and water of Kutaisi, the transition to production, the development of bronze and iron metallurgy, urban processes, the topography of the city at different stages of development (outer appearance), connections with the outside world, fortification, secular and monuments of cult architecture, the results of the archaeological research of Bagrat temple. The treasure of Georgian national culture enriched with discoveries is extremely interesting. They depict the continuous path that brought Kutaisi to the capital of united Georgia a thousand years ago (Lanchava, 2015) [3].

When we talk about heritage and tourism, we should consider that the tourist is primarily interested in seeing and perceiving the unique character of the host country and understanding its cultural heritage, through which he will know the authenticity and greatness of this country. That is why, in the 21st century, states, including Georgia, at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, pay great attention to developing heritage tourism. In this regard, Kutaisi, with its 3500-year history, is really attractive to tourists. People have lived in Kutaisi and its surroundings since the Lower Paleolithic period. Dinosaur footprints have been found here, and even traces of the "Argonauts" in search of the "Golden Fleece" come to this city. For centuries, Kutaisi was the cultural and political centre of the country and, from the 8th to the 11th century - the capital of Georgia. In different eras, it was referred to by different names - Aya, Kutaia and Kutatisium. It combines architecturally interesting urban structures, historical centre, unique archaeological monuments, church architecture, and landscapes of self-made beauty, which, if properly presented to the tourist, is the best way to see the connections between cultures; that is why the urban fabric of Kutaisi can be considered as a "mixed heritage". Besides, Kutaisi is the only large city in Western Georgia with a large development space. 2400 hectares, on which industry, logistics, construction, service sector and tourism can be developed simultaneously [4].

While speaking about the tourism of this city's cultural heritage, we must consider the principles of sustainable development. Based on such an

approach, a place of tourist destination can bring significant economic benefits to a city or region. "Sustainable development of tourism implies the use and management of all resources, during which economic, social and aesthetic needs will be supported with the preservation of cultural heritage, basic ecological processes and vital requirements" (WTO, UNP, 2005) [5].

MAIN PART

A country or a city is often identified with some monument or landmark that defines the identity of that city. For Kutaisi, such is the Ukimerioni Hill, where the Bagrati Cathedral, a symbol of the united Georgia, is located and the Rioni River, or in antique sources, Phasis, with its white stone bottom, which is visible most of the year and gives the city a special appeal. The Rioniphenomenon is pivotal for old Kutaisi because the city is directed towards Rioni. There, you can see the only secular building of the 17th century, "Okros Chardakhi" that survived from the Imereti Royal Palace complex. The building has the status of a cultural heritage monument. (Isakadze R. 2017) [6].

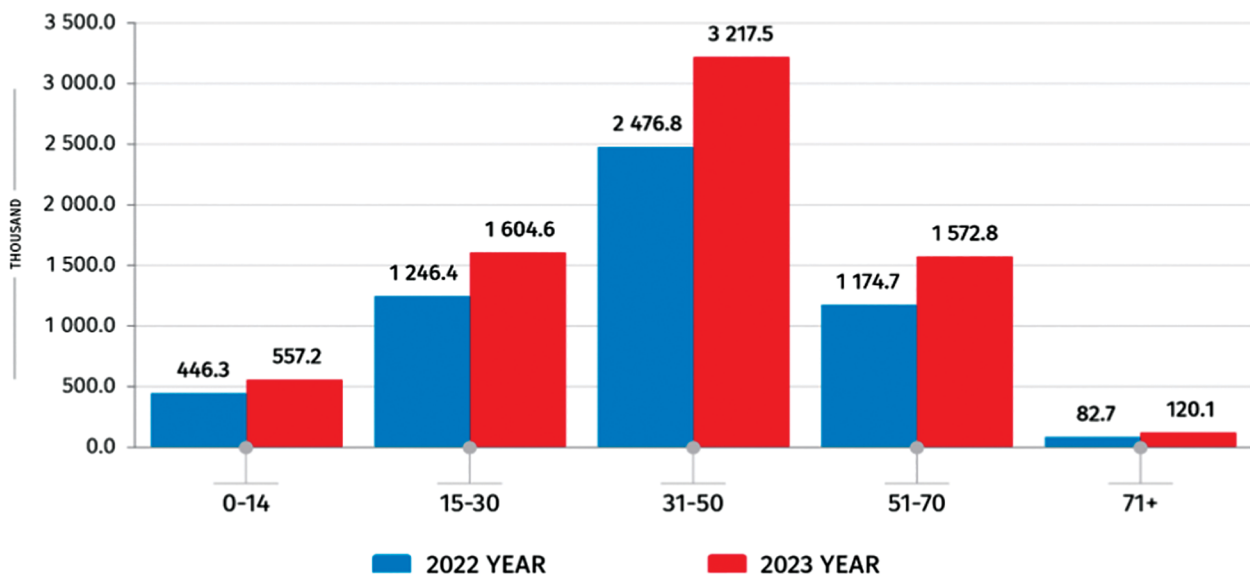
In the first half of the 21st century, as a result of the restoration of the city centre implemented

by the central government, Kutaisi presented its European beauty. Tourists have the opportunity to feel the authenticity of the city not only through the classic and modernist style architecture but through crooked paths, homestead-type buildings spread over the hills, which are hidden in the greenery, the bridges over the Rioni, stone-paved, cobbled streets, the hospitality of family hotels, delicious cuisine available in the chamber-type cafe-bars and restaurants.

The cultural landscape of Kutaisi is attractive for tourists with a variety of monuments of both church and secular architecture (the well-known Bagrat Cathedral, Gelati Academy and Monastery Complex, the Mtsvanekhvavila Pantheon of public figures, the remains of the Imereti kings' residence and fortress-wall on Uimerion Hill, Geguti Royal Hall - Georgian secular special monument of architecture, Jewish synagogues, etc.) in Kutaisi, the monuments of natural and material architecture are combined in such a way that they become one fabric and give the historical part of the city an authentic beauty.

Kopitnari International Airport, from which flights to Europe and Middle and Far East countries are carried out, made the city attractive for tourists. This allowed us to receive tourists from the Eastern civilization, which is a completely new

Diagram 1. DISTRIBUTION OF ARRIVALS OF INTERNATIONAL NON-RESIDENT TRAVELLERS BY THE AGE GROUPS IN 2022-2023 YEARS



Source: *Inbound-Tourism-Statistics-(2023-year)* (www.geostat.ge)

page and a great challenge in the history of Georgian tourism. 2023 was a historic year for Kutaisi International Airport. Last year, the passenger flow of Davit Agmashenebeli Airport increased by 103% compared to 2022 and served 1,671,017 passengers (2022: 822,486 passengers). In terms of the number of flights, 2023 was also a record year for Kutaisi airport. Kutaisi International Airport served 5,040 flights in January-December 2023, which is 57% more than in the same period of 2022 [7].

Since Georgia attracts tourists in all four seasons of the year, their distribution varies according to the country's regions. Statistical studies of tourist flows in Georgia, parameters related to the number of tourists, their distribution by countries and cities, and the visitors' goals are interesting. International travel makes a significant contribution to the development of the country's economy.

In 2023, the number of arrivals of international non-resident travellers in the territory of Georgia equalled 7.1 million, which is 30.3 per cent higher compared to the previous year's data. Most of the incomes, 45.5 per cent, were made by travellers of the 31-50 age group [8] (See Diagram 1).

Tourists actively travel to the regions of Georgia,

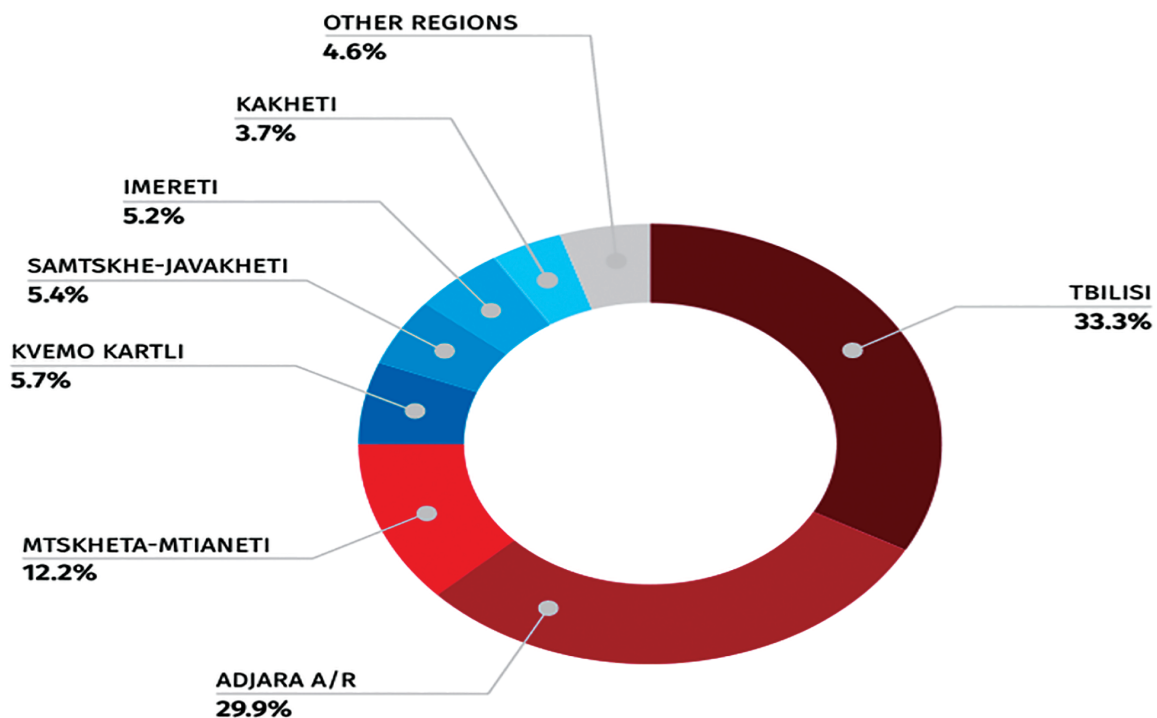
diagram 2 presents the statistical data of different parts and the number of Visits By Region. Tourists actively travel to the regions of Georgia, diagram 2 presents the statistical data of different parts and the number of Visits By Region. According to the data of the DMO Imereti Information Center, in 2023, most of the tourists who visited their centres were from Poland, followed by Kazakhstan, the United Arab Emirates, Germany, Latvia, and Russia (See Diagram 2).

The Department of Statistics of Georgia distinguishes tourists according to the purpose of their visit; the groups formed by them are recreation and leisure (tourists who come for vacation), business and professional (tourists who come on a business trip), treatment (tourists who come to health resorts) other purpose (tourists who visit friends and relatives). (The chart shows the number of visits by goal) (See Diagram 3).

It turned out that the Imereti region is the most interesting for local tourists. The characteristics of domestic travellers are slightly different from those of international travellers. The three most frequently visited places are Tbilisi, Kutaisi and Batumi [9] (See Diagram 4).

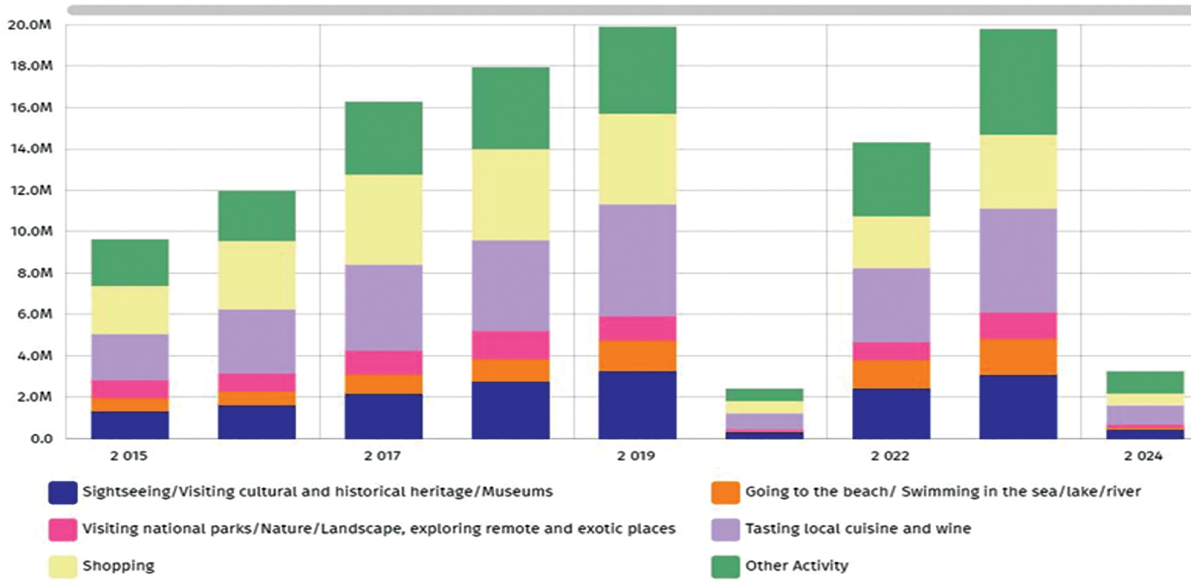
Diagram 2.

DISTRIBUTION OF THE NUMBER OF VISITS MADE BY INBOUND VISITORS BY THE VISITED REGIONS IN 2023 YEAR



Source: Inbound-Tourism-Statistics-(2023-year) - (www.geostat.ge)

Diagram 3. Inbound-Tourism-Statistics-(2023-year)



Source: (www.geostat.ge)

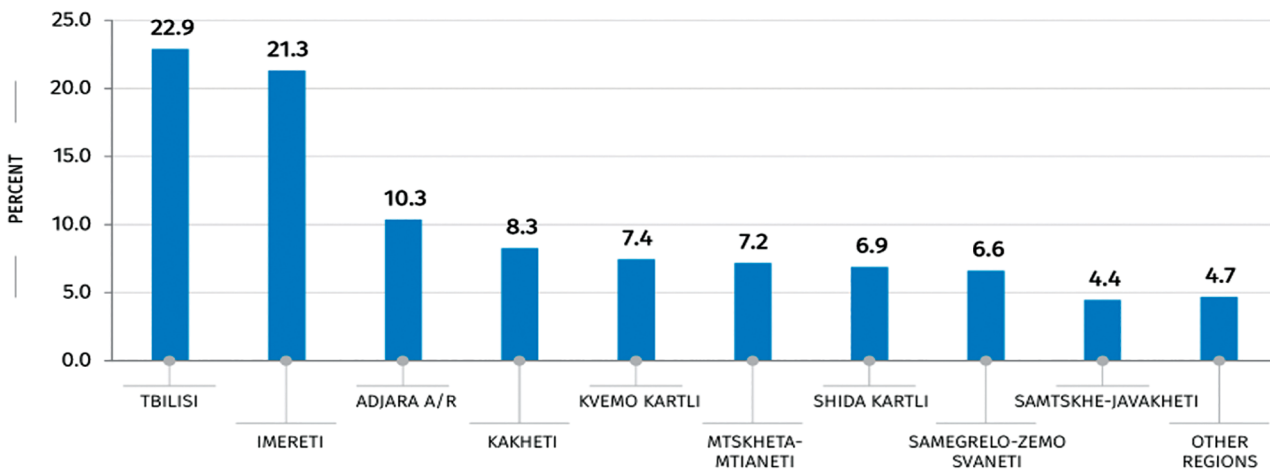
Despite great efforts, we believe that the city’s tourism potential is still not fully exploited. First, we must understand that so far in our country and Kutaisi in particular, few wealthy tourists have arrived. The main flow of tourists is the middle class, so we should direct our tourism potential to satisfy this segment. The religious factor should also be taken into account. Muslim tourists are less interested in our religious monuments, so we

should offer them secular architecture and natural monuments, such as the caves on the outskirts of Kutaisi or the nearby canyons with their magnificent beauty. There is a lot of work to be done in this regard.

Kutaisi is a seasonal city, tourism is active from March to the end of October. Recently, the number of visitors has increased considerably. Still, much effort is needed to make the city attractive for

Diagram 4.

DISTRIBUTION OF THE MONTHLY AVERAGE NUMBER OF VISITS MADE BY THE GEORGIAN RESIDENTS OF AGE 15 YEARS OR MORE ON THE TERRITORY OF GEORGIA BY THE VISITED REGIONS IN 2023 YEAR



Source: National Statistics Office of Georgia. <https://www.geostat.ge/en>

them and make tourists more informed about the city's tourism potential.

CONCLUSION

Tourism is vital for Kutaisi, and infrastructure development is of great importance; as you know, since the second half of the 19th century, the city was bypassed by the railway, and it became a dead end. This has been supplemented by a major transit highway that also bypasses the city. In such a situation, the opening of Kopitnar airport became a lifeline for Kutaisi. The airport turned tourism into an important economic resource of Kutaisi. If the city's tourism potential can be properly managed, it will allow us to create jobs, attract foreign investment, improve local infrastructure and help raise the profile of the country and the city.

However, many factors need to be solved. In particular, logistical problems include insufficient parking space at the airport and in the city of Kutaisi, which is one of the hindering factors in tourism development.

It should be noted that the role of Imereti Regional DMO is big on the management, marketing, development and success of the city's destination as a tourism centre, though the local authorities should develop strategies that will realize the demands of the government and other stakeholders.

For this purpose, cultural heritage should become part of a unified local (municipal) spatial planning plan.

We have to consider that the government, public, private and non-governmental sectors should be actively involved in developing tourism policy. Their involvement in the processes will allow us to objectively assess the current situation and develop plans in a specific (cultural) direction in short-term and long-term dynamics.

Through grant projects, it is possible to advertise different heritage areas and make them known to foreign markets. That is why there is a need for more educational programs related to the protection of cultural heritage, conducting training for young people, and promoting the development and modernization of the scientific research system of the cultural sector.

It should be noted that Kutaisi, as one of the outstanding cultural-urban centres of Western Georgia, is an attractive place with its history, socio-cultural and tourist opportunities, and with proper management and economic calculations, it will be possible to create a new niche in the international tourism market.

It is necessary to develop and implement a detailed annual marketing strategy for the tourist destination of Kutaisi, to present the target markets' priorities, clearly define the activities, and determine the success evaluation measures.

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