

THE WAR IS OVER - LET'S WELCOME TOURISTS



As a result of the last year's conflict between Georgia and Russia, the tourism industry of the Caucasian country was seriously hit. The situation got later even worse thanks to numerous protests as well as rumors about the possibility of another war. Today, the tourist numbers are increasing.

When the Caucasian conflict started, local tour operators grew quite pessimistic about the numbers of tourists entering Georgia in such unstable situation. The statistics show that during the conflict the tourist arrivals drastically dropped to the numbers of 1990s.

In an effort to boost tourism as well as to help tour operators' businesses the **Georgian government decided to invest extensively in the promotion of local resorts** and the development of tourism facilities. Other countries also supported the industry trying to help the country to go back to normal. The European Union for instance allotted €17 million to Georgia specifically for the development of travel trade and tourism relations between Georgia and the EU. As a result, the total numbers of tourists coming to the country in 2008 was even 20% bigger than in 2007 - 785,000 visitors (data of the Border Police of Georgia). Furthermore, despite the war and fears of further conflicts, **in the first half of 2009 Georgia was visited by 446,000 tourists**, which is almost the same amount as during the same period in 2008. Surprisingly, major part of the incoming tourist number is represented by Russian citizens (almost 50,000). According to the head of Georgian Department of Tourism and Resorts, Petr Kankava, the number of Russian tourists highly exceeded tourist arrivals from other ex-Soviet countries. Nevertheless, the numbers of visitors from Armenia and Azerbaijan were also quite notable.

The greatest amounts of tourists traditionally head to the Black Sea coast of Adjara, an autonomous republic of Georgia, where 420,000 people spent their sun & sea vacations during this summer. Since tourists usually come to Adjara until the beginning of October (the so called "velvet" season), the total amount of visitors might reach 500,000 in Adjara.

The popularity of the region is often explained by fast infrastructure development, rising quality of services as well as aggressive promotion. Adjara offers plenty of good restaurants, cafés, bars, and other opportunities of entertainment including sight-seeing tours. Therefore the coast is in particular popular among families looking for quiet areas and young travelers enjoying local night life. The government of Adjara is also currently discussing further development of winter ski-resorts in the local mountains.

In general the Georgian authorities seem well aware of the potential the country has for both summer and winter tourism. President Mikhail Saakashvili for instance announced that during the next two years the biggest airport in Caucasus will be built in Georgia. It will be situated in the city of Poti and the authorities expect that the new airport will bring more tourists to the country.

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