

RUSSIAN TOURISTS HELP GEORGIA'S RECOVERY



The years leading up to the August 2008 war between Georgia and Russia saw increasing unrest and a constantly widening rift. In September 1991, the people of Tbilisi in Georgia had already blocked Russian TV and radio signals and had covered or removed signs written in the Russian language. Now, five years after the war is over, Russian troops still patrol in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, two provinces of Georgia.

Diplomatic relations between the two countries are nil, and trade agreements are strained. Despite joining the World Trade Organization, Russia still blocks produce from Georgia completely and disallows commercial travel. **However, the southern country has found ways of getting around these restrictions and increased Russian tourist numbers to nearly 500,000 visitors this year.**

First, Georgia has removed visa restrictions for Russians who want to visit. Second, they structure their flights as charters and continue to fly from Moscow to Tbilisi two times every day, and from Moscow to Kutaisi, Georgia's second largest city, three times per week. These measures have made Russians the most common people to visit Georgia for pleasure.

On the fifth anniversary of the war, Russian officials finally lifted restrictions on car, truck and bus travel into Georgia. Some Georgians still struggle with painful memories of the war, such as Alexander Rondeli, a Tbilisi think tank member, who stated that "It is good they are not coming on tanks". Most locals are however pleased with the increased trade and income from tourism. Russian travelers are glad to rediscover Georgia's unique culture, cuisine and even their familial roots.

Georgia has always been famous for its vineyards and wine production, and the wine has been enjoyed in over 50 countries stretching back into the BCE era. Just last year, Russia's Consumer Protection Agency declared 65 winemakers in Georgia up to code and able to export their wares to Russia once more. Nearly 5 million bottles of wine are sent north to Russian markets every year, and the current premium prices make profits high. The USD 60 per bottle price found in Russian stores soar over the USD 6 per bottle in Tbilisi, although this great disparity is not expected to last.

Despite the influx of wine profits and tourist dollars flowing into Georgia these days, political relationships still remain strained. Russian troops have controlled the breakaway provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia since the 2008 war and have no interest in leaving any time soon. Bidzina Ivanishvili, Georgia's prime minister, views the matter with utmost practicality. He focuses on the positive economic turn through wine exports and the steady flow of Russian tourists crossing the borders, although he does not believe tourism will be the saving grace of Georgia's economy or relationship with Russia.

Russia's Prime Minister, Dmitry Medvedev, maintains an optimistic view of the current and future relations between Russia and Georgia. He recently told an RT television journalist, "I'm convinced that everything will be fine. Our people aren't enemies."

While this may be the political declaration of improved relations between the two nations, things still remain strained for some citizens. In Tbilisi, for example, Russian street signs are still nowhere to be

seen. Young entrepreneurs seem increasingly interested in the new economic relationship between Georgia and Russia and target tourists with their projects. One has an idea to launch a Russian-language tourist magazine highlighting travel to Georgia. His goal is to bridge the gap between the people of both nations and introduce more Russians to all the wonderful things Georgia has to offer. These kinds of new plans for a more cohesive region can bring about more positive change.

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