

GEORGIAN TOURISM EXPERIENCES SHOCK AMID TROUBLES WITH RUSSIA



Georgian tourism suffers the negative impact of the complicated relations with Russia. The atmosphere between Russia and Georgia have been tense for a long time, with the Russo-Georgian War in August 2008 is one of the examples. The conflict originated due to unrest among the ethnic minorities in the country.

As a result, Russia invaded Georgia and territorial changes took place, with South Ossetia and Abkhazia being recognized by Dmitry Medvedev's administration as independent countries. To date, there are only very few countries recognizing their independence.

Since then, the situation has calmed down somewhat. However, the last couple of days have brought back hostility between the two states. This fresh and most recent conflict originated after the trip of the Russian State Duma Deputies to Georgia upon which the opposition accused Georgian authorities of "treason".

As a response, protestors gathered in front of the building of the Parliament to demonstrate against Russia's occupation of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. **240 people were injured in Tbilisi during the unrest and protests.**

Besides the people themselves, even the head of the country Salome Zourabichvili had her say on the matter, labelling Russia as 'our enemy and occupier'. A day later, however, she changed her tone, insisting that 'Russian tourists should continue to come because they love Georgia'.

Anti-Russian measures in Georgia were launched on an even larger scale. In addition to the higher prices at cafes and restaurants for Russians, Georgian cinemas have stopped showing films dubbed into Russian.

Moreover, Georgian footballers in the top division of the country also expressed their opinion on the matter. On June 23 in the 19th round of the Georgian Championship players from three teams wore t-shirts with anti-Russian slogans.

And thus, it cannot be seen as a surprise that Moscow's response came very fast. A day after the first protest, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a decree according to which, from July 8, **Moscow will impose a temporary ban on passenger flights to Georgia.**

Following this, Russian airports were closed to Georgian airlines and tour operators and travel agents were invited to refrain from selling vouchers to Georgia for the duration of the ban.

After the Russian president signed this decree, Russians started immediately cancelling their trips to Georgia. But not only Russians but also Russian-speaking visitors from other former Soviet republics. "Many of them follow Russian news which says there are anti-Russian riots here and that there is violence, so they are afraid," a local tour guide noted.

This chain of events represents a massive blow for the Georgian tourism industry. The economy of the country relies heavily on tourism. In 2018, the industry accounted for 7.6% of the country's GDP.

Despite the territorial tensions between the two countries, Russians appreciated Georgia as a destination in the last couple of years. They accounted for the majority of foreign visits to Georgia this year, with some 540,000 arrivals until May.

Last year, 1.4 million tourists from Russia arrived in the country and rise to 2 million was predicted for this year. Russians are also the biggest spenders, having an average expenditure of 530 dollars per trip compared to the average of 440 dollars regarding other travelers.

This tension will lead to great financial losses. According to the National Bank of Georgia, the reduction of tourist flow from Russia for the remaining period of the year will have an impact on the economy and Georgian tourism of about 200-300 million dollars.

Russian sources even speak of a loss of 750 million dollars in annual revenue. Considering the size of the Georgian economy, this represents a big blow. Earnings from tourism amounted to 3.2 billion dollars last year, while the income of the entire budget of Georgia is 4.7 billion dollars.

Georgian authorities know that the situation is critical and are preparing countermeasures against Putin's flight embargo to soften the situation. For example, the country will resume the distribution of wines to arriving tourists at airports in Kutaisi, Batumi, and Tbilisi.

As a direct response to the embargo, Georgia has offered to launch free buses from airports in Baku, Yerevan, and Trabzon. The head of the Association of Hotels and Restaurants of Georgia presented this proposal to the Ministry of Economy and other representatives of the industry.

Many famous Georgians have also taken matters into their own hands. "My dear friends, please come to Georgia this summer," wrote Georgian opera singer Anita Rachvelishvili, who is famous all over the world, on her Facebook page.

"Georgia needs support! Come to Georgia," famous Georgian footballer Guram Kashia, who previously played for the Dutch club Vitesse, invited his fans and friends to come to Georgia on Instagram. "My Dutch friends, go to Georgia to finally see the real mountains (although I love your flat country," he wrote.

Lastly, the industry received a boost from Hungary's Wizz Air. The low-cost company has announced 12 new routes from its Georgian base in Kutaisi. The new destinations include Turku, Nice, Hamburg, Naples or Venice. The flights should begin operating by the end of 2019 and in the summer of 2020.

However, experts in the industry think that all this is unlikely to minimize the damage from the "sanctions" introduced by the Russian Federation. "Tens of thousands of families will be affected, whose representatives are involved in the tourism business in one form or another," political analyst Petre Mamradze explained. Thus said, difficult months, perhaps years, are ahead of Georgia, with a lot of uncertainty and question marks to be resolved.

Date: 2019-07-01

Article link: <https://www.tourism-review.com/georgian-tourism-suffers-news11120>