



Cultural Tourism in Georgia: Challenges and Development Priorities

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ABSTRACT

Cultural tourism is a significant segment of contemporary tourism that integrates the preservation of cultural heritage with the creation of economic, social, and cultural value. With its rich tangible and intangible cultural heritage, Georgia has significant potential for cultural tourism development. The study aims to identify the major challenges and priority areas for the development of cultural tourism in Georgia. The research is based on an analysis of scientific literature, international studies, official statistical data, and relevant strategic documents. The findings indicate that the major challenges include increasing tourist pressure on cultural heritage sites, the need to diversify cultural tourism products, strengthen local community engagement, and advance digital transformation, as well as limitations in the statistical measurement of cultural tourism. The analysis conducted in the study demonstrates that the sustainable development of cultural tourism in Georgia should be based on synergy among heritage preservation, the use of digital tools, and the generation of local economic benefits. Such an approach can develop high-value tourist experiences while strengthening the country's long-term competitiveness in the international tourism market

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is one of the primary sectors of the modern economy, with its impact extending beyond revenues and employment growth. Particular importance is attached to tourism segments that link economic activity with the preservation of cultural heritage and the development of local communities. In this regard, cultural tourism represents an important component of the contemporary tourism industry, encompassing travel motivated, among other factors, by an interest in history, cultural heritage, arts, traditions, lifestyles, and other cultural values.

The growth of tourism based on cultural heritage creates significant economic opportunities while simultaneously increasing the need for the protection and effective management of cultural resources. Excessive concentrations of tourist flows may result in the physical deterioration of cultural heritage, increased pressure on the local environment and communities, and the erosion of cultural authenticity. Consequently, under contemporary conditions, the development of cultural tourism is increasingly associated with the principles of sustainability, which seek to combine economic benefits with the preservation of cultural and social values.

Cultural tourism is particularly important for Georgia. The country's centuries-old history, rich tangible and intangible cultural heritage, historical and religious monuments, traditions, folklore, and wine and gastronomic culture provide a significant basis for competitive positioning in international tourism markets. The international significance of Georgia's cultural resources is further demonstrated by the cultural properties inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List.

However, the mere existence of cultural resources does not in itself ensure sustainable tourism development. For Georgia, key priorities include balancing the protection and tourism use of cultural heritage, diversifying cultural tourism products, strengthening the participation of local communities and small businesses, improving infrastructure and service quality, and making more effective use of digital technologies. Improving data on cultural tourism is also essential, as it would enable a more accurate assessment of its economic and social impacts.

The study aims to identify the major challenges facing the development of cultural tourism in Georgia and determine its priority areas for development. **The study is based on** an analysis of scientific literature, international studies, official statistical data, and relevant strategic documents.

The main objectives of the study are to examine the relationship between cultural tourism and sustainable development, assess the current state and potential of cultural tourism in Georgia, identify the major challenges, and determine priority areas for its further development.

The central premise of the study is that the long-term competitiveness of Georgia's cultural tourism depends not only on the richness of its cultural resources but also on the country's capacity to manage these resources sustainably, increase the distribution of economic benefits at the local level, and create contemporary high-value tourist experiences.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study employs comparative-analytical and synthesis methods, which enable an assessment of contemporary trends in cultural tourism development and the current situation in Georgia. Based on the information obtained, the major challenges facing cultural tourism are identified, and priority areas for its sustainable development are determined.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Contemporary research on cultural tourism primarily focuses on balancing the preservation of cultural heritage with its use in tourism, strengthening local community engagement, advancing digital transformation, and assessing the economic impacts of tourism. Liu et al. (2022) note that cultural heritage tourism can expand economic opportunities available to local communities; however, the benefits generated by tourism are not always distributed equitably. Accordingly, the participation of local communities and the retention of tourism-related economic benefits within local economies are essential for sustainable development.

The application of digital technologies is also increasingly recognized as an important area of cultural tourism development. Zheng et al. (2023) indicate that digital technologies facilitate the interpretation of cultural heritage, the personalization of tourist experiences, and the promotion of cultural resources. Maietti (2023) likewise emphasizes the importance of digital tools for the sustainable use of cultural heritage and the enhancement of visitor experiences. In the Georgian context, Koblianidze and Sachaleli (2020) highlight, alongside the country's significant cultural potential, the problem of its incomplete utilization and emphasize the need to diversify cultural tourism products and expand the use of digital technologies.

Regarding the digital development of tourism in Georgia, Makasarashvili and Giguashvili (2025) emphasize the need to improve digital infrastructure, digital skills, and the capabilities of small businesses. Giguashvili and Sadagashvili (2025), in turn, examine the opportunities to apply artificial intelligence in tourism, including personalized services and enhancing tourist experiences. These approaches are particularly relevant to cultural tourism, as digital tools can be employed to provide contemporary interpretations of cultural heritage, deliver multilingual information, and develop more interactive and accessible tourist routes.

Recent Georgian studies increasingly associate cultural tourism with sustainable development and strategic management. Gamsakhurdia and Gogiashvili (2026) link cultural tourism with inclusive economic growth and the Sustainable Development Goals, while Orjonikidze and Zhodzhuashvili (2026) consider the strategic management of cultural tourism as an instrument for advancing sustainable tourism development.

Overall, the literature analysis demonstrates that the sustainable development of cultural tourism rests on the preservation of cultural heritage, local community engagement, diversification of tourism products, digital transformation, and the enhancement of economic benefits. At the same time, in the Georgian context, the integrated assessment of these dimensions, particularly the synergy between digital tools in cultural tourism and the generation of local

economic benefits, remains a relevant and relatively underexplored area of research. This gap defines the primary focus of the present study.

DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

Global Trends and Major Challenges in Cultural Tourism

The rapid recovery and growth of global tourism are creating new opportunities for advancing cultural tourism. In 2025, international tourist arrivals reached approximately 1.54 billion, while the global economic contribution of Travel & Tourism reached USD 11.6 trillion, accounting for 9.8% of the global economy (WTTC, 2026). Against the backdrop of continued tourism growth, cultural resources are playing an increasingly important role in shaping tourist experiences and strengthening destinations' competitiveness.

According to UNESCO, contemporary cultural tourism is no longer limited to visits to historical monuments and increasingly encompasses museums, arts, crafts, gastronomy, festivals, and other cultural and creative experiences (UNESCO, 2021). Accordingly, the development of cultural tourism contributes to the diversification of tourism products and facilitates the realization of the economic potential of cultural resources.

One of the major trends in contemporary cultural tourism is the growing demand for authentic and high-quality experiences. Tourist experiences are increasingly associated with local lifestyles, traditions, cuisine, arts, and creative industries. This process is further reinforced by the development of digital technologies, which create new opportunities to interpret and promote cultural heritage and to personalize tourist experiences.

At the same time, the growth of tourism increases the risk of pressure on cultural heritage. Excessive concentrations of tourists in popular historic cities and at cultural sites may lead to overcrowding, infrastructure issues, deterioration in residents' quality of life, and the erosion of cultural authenticity. Therefore, the approach - "quality over quantity" is becoming increasingly prominent in international practice, emphasizing the economic, social, and cultural value of tourism rather than simply increasing tourist numbers (UNESCO, 2026).

Another major challenge to the sustainability of cultural tourism is climate change, which increases the vulnerability of cultural heritage to floods, extreme temperatures, changes in humidity, and other environmental risks. Consequently, sustainable heritage management increasingly incorporates climate risk assessment, and measures aim to strengthen the resilience of cultural sites (UNESCO, 2026).

Local community engagement is equally important. The economic impact of cultural tourism is more sustainable when a significant share of tourism revenues remains within the local economy and local communities participate both in the creation of tourism products and the preservation of cultural heritage. Accordingly, the core principles of contemporary cultural tourism development can be identified as heritage preservation, increased local economic benefits, community participation, enhanced quality of tourist experiences, and effective management of tourism pressures.

In light of these global trends, two factors are particularly important when assessing Georgia. On the one hand, the country possesses rich cultural resources

and is experiencing growing international tourist flows; on the other hand, cultural tourism is not recorded as a separate, fully disaggregated category in Georgia's official tourism statistics. Consequently, its current state should be assessed through an integrated analysis of overall tourism statistics, cultural heritage data, visitor behavior, and relevant strategic documents.

The State, Major Challenges, and Development Priorities of Cultural Tourism in Georgia

Georgia's diverse tangible and intangible cultural heritage constitute an important foundation for the development of cultural tourism. It encompasses historical and architectural monuments, religious and archaeological heritage, historic cities and cultural landscapes, as well as traditional arts, folklore, cuisine, and wine culture. Georgia has four properties inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List, three of which are cultural: the Historical Monuments of Mtskheta, Gelati Monastery, and Upper Svaneti. The fourth, the Colchic Rainforests and Wetlands, belongs to the category of natural heritage. An additional 14 properties are included on the country's Tentative List (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, n.d.).

This diversity of cultural resources represents an important basis for Georgia's tourism competitiveness. Its economic significance has become particularly evident amid the growth of international tourism. Between 2024 and 2025, international traveler visits increased from 7.37 million to 7.80 million, international tourist visits from 5.09 million to 5.52 million, while international travel revenues increased from USD 4.43 billion to USD 4.69 billion (GNTA, 2026). These figures do not directly measure the scale of cultural tourism, as cultural tourism is not fully reported as a separate category in official statistics. Nevertheless, they indicate the expansion of the tourism market in which cultural heritage constitutes an important basis for tourism products and the creation of additional economic value.

At the same time, product diversification and a more balanced spatial distribution of tourist flows remain key challenges facing tourism development in Georgia. In 2025, a significant proportion of international visits was for leisure, recreation, and entertainment, while visitor flows remained concentrated in the country's major tourism centers. Under these circumstances, the development of cultural tourism can serve both as a mechanism for diversifying the tourism offering and as a means of increasing tourism activity in less developed and underutilized regions.

Another important feature of cultural tourism development in Georgia is the existence of a state policy and strategic framework. An important foundation in this regard was the *Georgia Tourism Strategy 2025*, which emphasized the protection of cultural and natural heritage, the creation of unique and authentic tourist experiences, and the positioning of Georgia in international tourism markets (Georgian National Tourism Administration, 2015). In addition, the preparation of the National Tourism Strategy 2035 began in 2025, placing particular emphasis on sustainability, cultural heritage preservation, visitor management, local community engagement, and digital transformation (Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development of Georgia, 2025). This indicates that cultural tourism policy is gradually becoming more closely aligned with contemporary principles of sustainable tourism in Georgia. However, the

existence of a policy framework and its effective implementation are two distinct issues.

One of the major challenges remains balancing the preservation of cultural heritage with its use in tourism. The growth of tourist flows, particularly at highly popular sites, increases physical pressure on heritage resources and the need for conservation. Accordingly, sustainable cultural tourism requires not only an increase in visitor numbers, but also effective management of tourist flows, infrastructure capacity, and the impacts of tourism on cultural heritage (UNESCO, 2016).

Another important issue is retaining tourism-generated economic benefits at the local level. The economic impact of cultural tourism is greater when visitor expenditure is connected to local accommodation, food services, guiding services, handicrafts, cultural events, and other locally produced goods and services. Therefore, the development objective should not be limited to increasing visitor numbers but should also focus on retaining a greater share of tourism value within the local economy. The participation of local communities and small businesses is particularly important in this process.

Another challenge concerns the quality and diversification of cultural tourism products. The richness of cultural heritage alone does not automatically create high-value tourism products. There is a need for contemporary interpretation of cultural resources, multilingual information environments, high-quality guiding services, the development of museums and exhibition spaces, the integration of cultural events and festivals into tourism products, and the incorporation of local culinary, craft, and creative resources while preserving their authenticity.

The potential for advancing this area is significantly enhanced by applying digital technologies. Digital maps, audio guides, QR code interpretation, virtual tours, and personalized information powered by artificial intelligence can promote cultural heritage, improve visitor experiences, and support the management of tourist flow.

The development of cultural tourism in Georgia is also constrained by uneven-quality infrastructure and tourism services. The mere existence of a cultural resource is insufficient to ensure the destination's competitiveness. Improvements are needed in transport and information infrastructure, visitor centers, digital services, accessibility, and professional tourism services, particularly at lesser-known cultural sites and in regions outside the country's major tourism centers.

Overall, Georgia possesses significant cultural resources and a growing tourism market; however, realizing their full economic and social potential requires a cultural tourism development policy not only on increasing visitor numbers but also on preserving cultural heritage, enhancing local economic benefits, and improving the quality of tourist experiences. Several interconnected priorities have emerged in this regard:

- **Cultural heritage preservation and tourism management:** monitoring visitor flows, regulating highly frequented sites, and ensuring the long-term conservation of cultural resources.

- **Diversification of cultural tourism products:** integrating historical, culinary, craft, and creative industries to enhance authentic experiences and increase economic impact.
- **Engagement of local communities and small businesses:** supporting family-owned accommodation facilities, tour guides, and local entrepreneurs to promote employment and preserve cultural traditions.
- **Development of cultural routes and thematic networks:** establishing thematic routes like historical, gastronomic, and religious routes, and integrating them into international tourism networks.
- **Digital transformation:** applying audio guides, QR codes, and artificial intelligence to improve accessibility and visitor-flow management.
- **Improve infrastructure and service quality:** ensure adequate access roads, visitor centers, and universal accessibility, particularly in regional destinations.
- **Improvement of the cultural tourism data system:** systematically monitoring visitor numbers, tourist expenditure, and tourism pressure on cultural sites.
- **International positioning and cultural branding:** consistently positioning Georgia's cultural identity within the global tourism market.

Thus, the priorities for cultural tourism development in Georgia form an interconnected system: heritage preservation provides the foundation for sustainability; product diversification and quality enhancement create tourism value; local engagement increases economic and social benefits; digital technologies improve accessibility and management; while international positioning strengthens the country's competitiveness. Coordinated development across these dimensions provides an important foundation for the long-term sustainability of cultural tourism in Georgia.

CONCLUSION

Cultural tourism represents an important direction for the development of tourism in Georgia, underpinned by the country's rich tangible and intangible cultural heritage. The growth of international tourism and increasing demand for cultural experiences create significant economic opportunities for Georgia; however, the growth of tourist flows alone does not ensure sustainable development. Achieving this requires a balance among economic benefits, cultural heritage preservation, local communities' interests, and the quality of tourist experiences. Furthermore, the sustainable development of cultural tourism is not merely an economic objective; it constitutes a strategic foundation for preserving the country's cultural identity and strengthening its long-term competitiveness.

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