

Steffen Schülein

Green Tourism in Georgia

12 PORTRAITS OF PRACTITIONERS



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GEORGIAN NATIONAL TOURISM
ADMINISTRATION

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Foreword by GIZ

The 'Green Tourism in Georgia – 12 portraits of practitioners' is published by GIZ's Private Sector Development and Technical Vocational Education and Training South Caucasus Programme. The programme is implemented by the responsible ministries of Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia and the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH, acting on behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), with co-financing by the European Union.

The programme aims at improving the conditions for sustainable economic development in selected sectors relevant for employment, along the following three main principles:

- The private sector is strengthened through increased competitiveness and newly developed inclusive business models in employment-relevant sectors. The programme provides advisory services to enhance the capacities of public bodies, business service providers as well as private companies.
- The vocational education system is modernised with a major focus on establishing close cooperation with the private sector. The programme provides support to technical vocational education and training (TVET) schools and training providers to develop and apply curricula for vocational education in line with international standards, to revise their teaching methods, and to improve management in education institutions.
- Regional and international exchanges foster collaboration and networking among the implementing partners in the region. During regional academies, public and private actors of the three South Caucasus countries develop cross-regional product approaches in the areas of TVET, tourism and wine.

The Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development of Georgia is supported in improving the conditions for sustainable economic development. In the tourism sector, sustainable business models and labour-market relevant qualification offers are being established. The 'Green Tourism in Georgia – 12' publications contribute to sustainable tourism development in Georgia by showcasing the success stories of existing green tourism businesses throughout the country.



Foreword by Georgian National Tourism Administration (GNTA)

Georgia is an ancient country, renowned for its fascinating history, 8,000-year-old winemaking tradition, the majestic Caucasus Mountains, the Black Sea coastline, climate and biodiversity, healing mineral waters, national parks and UNESCO World Heritage Sites. These offerings are further enhanced by its warm hospitality and unique cuisine, making Georgia a delight for green tourism enthusiasts from around the world.

Over the past years, the tourism sector has grown dynamically, and the country continues to mark historic successes. In 2017, Georgia welcomed a record-breaking 7.9 million international arrivals, exceeding 2016 figures by 18%. This rapid growth underscores the responsibility that is placed on us to expand our efforts and promote the sector's sustainable development. The government's long-term tourism development strategy highlights the importance of preserving and enhancing Georgia's natural and cultural heritage.

To achieve our long-term goals, we need to develop new policies and diversify tourism products and offerings. I firmly believe that sharing knowledge, experiences and our home-grown best practices via this publication will further highlight the potential and important contribution of green tourism in the sector.

I want to emphasise that today the tourism sector is one of the key contributors to Georgia's economic growth, prosperity, employment, infrastructural development and realisation of Sustainable Development Goals. The numerous achievements demonstrate how a small nation can transform itself through the development of tourism. The overall success is driven by visionary individuals who are devoted to their passion and work tirelessly to realise their ideas. I hope that you will enjoy their personal stories, as the practitioners take you along on their journey of realising their dream of establishing green tourism in Georgia.

Giorgi Chogovadze

Head of the Georgian National Tourism Administration



Introduction

Georgia, the small country in the South Caucasus is situated between the Greater and Lesser Caucasus mountain ranges and at the shores of the Black Sea. It is graced by stunning diversity of natural and cultural treasures and the warm hospitality of its inhabitants. The national cuisine, a delightful mix of European and Asian influences, is beloved across the region and beyond.

Despite all this potential, 10 years ago Georgia was still a blank spot on the world travel map for most tourists. What a difference a decade can make! In 2018, Lonely Planet rated the country as one of its top 10 destinations, and the country is the Guest of Honour at the 2018 Frankfurt Book Fair. Enthusiastic accounts in international travel magazines and newspapers paint a vision of an up-and-coming travel hotspot. According to the World Tourism Organization, Georgia welcomed 6.3 million arrivals in 2016, with 2.7 million spending a day or longer and 3.6 million transit travellers. According to GNTA statistics, international border arrivals have skyrocketed, from 4.4 million in 2012 to more than 7 million in 2017.

However, the rapid increase in visitor numbers has already created a sense of urgency, as some travel writers' exclaim: 'Visit Georgia now, before mass tourism spoils it!' And, in fact, the country is not adequately prepared to take the necessary actions to limit the negative impacts of the tourism boom and ensure sustainable, high-quality growth. The challenges of how to quickly build capacities for a huge number of high-quality tourism service personnel, the issue of enforcement of needed land-use planning as well as the requirement to rapidly construct environmental infrastructure to ensure waste management and wastewater treatment are on the national agenda.

In recent years, 'green tourism' has gained more attention in the public debate, as a way of introducing additional services in the current tourism offer. Sustainable tourism is understood by UNEP and UNWTO as 'tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities'. This focus is also reflected in Georgia's National Tourism Development Strategy 2025, which emphasises quality over quantity, setting the protection of natural and cultural heritage as a priority. There is a growing and vocal community of ecotourism and nature conservation activists, and more and more businesses in Georgia have started to go 'green'. The rural tourism sector is a forerunner – with almost 15 years of engagement by the Biological Farming Association Elkana as well as by the nature conservation organisations working in the protected areas of Georgia. Many new developments in different networks and communities of practice are emerging. Some are led by strong entrepreneurship in setting up new businesses, while other initiatives build on international donor support or cooperation with local associations.

The publication 'Green Tourism in Georgia – 12 portraits of practitioners' tells the stories and experiences of some of these people, covering multiple business types and locations in Georgia. It reveals their personal journey of developing sustainable business in the ecotourism sector and their exemplary engagement for their country. Green tourism, like any practice that promotes a more sustainable lifestyle, is certainly not without contradictions, imperfections and compromises. While the protagonists often spoke of the limitations they faced and their aspirations to do more and better, it should be emphasised that all of them operate successful businesses that introduced innovations, bringing substantial economic and environmental benefits to their communities.

Green Tourism

'Green tourism' in Georgia aims to promote the development of more sustainable tourism practices by encouraging linkages between private sector initiatives and by improving private–public cooperation. It is inspired by international good practices, such as the 'green scheme' in Slovenia. Green tourism is not limited to ecotourism activities, such as hiking or bird-watching, but also promotes environmentally friendly and sustainable practices across the entire tourism value chain. The figure below visualises the selected components of the green tourism concept as developed for this publication:



Criteria for Green Tourism

The following list presents the criteria selected for Georgia's green tourism concept. It is not an exhaustive list of good practices but rather serves as a starting point to explore what is currently offered in Georgia and to provide direction for future development.

- Use of innovative technologies and renewable materials for infrastructure, integration of infrastructure into the natural landscape and surroundings;
- Use of renewable energy and energy efficiency technologies;
- Safe drinking water supply, minimisation of water consumption;
- Wastewater treatment system;
- Solid waste management (avoidance, recycling, disposal);
- Production and consumption of natural, homemade or local products;
- Quality control, labelling and certification of products as 'organic production';
- Minimisation of negative impacts of tour operations, avoidance of high-impact activities;
- Staff training in environmental awareness and behaviour;
- Enhancing environmental awareness among visitors during tours and in accommodations;
- Use of visitor guidelines/'Code of Conduct' for tours and in accommodations;
- Support of non-profit activities for conservation or regeneration of natural resources, protection of cultural heritage and social development.



LELA KHARTISHVILI
Rural Tourism Expert

Lela Khartishvili is one of the most experienced rural tourism experts in Georgia. She has worked as a tour guide, tour operator, consultant and served as the team leader of the rural tourism programme in the Biological Farming Association Elkana. After her time with Elkana, she established a tourism magazine *The Georgian*, and continued consulting on skills development in rural tourism and ecotourism. Currently, Lela is writing her PhD thesis at the University of Vienna, Austria. Her ambition is to combine her consulting work with an academic career and educate new generations of sustainable tourism experts in Georgia. She renovated a family guest house in Sno (Kazbegi Region), which she manages together with her daughter.

LELA'S STORY

My personal green tourism' story started in the early 2000s, with an introduction to rural- and ecotourism. It seemed more interesting than the usual tour operator work. In 2006, I came to Elkana to work on a rural development project, funded by Swiss Development Cooperation (SDC), which grew into the rural tourism programme.

At that time, the concept and principles of rural tourism were new in Georgia. The former National Department of Tourism and Resorts (now GNTA) did not find it feasible to introduce standards in rural areas, when even big hotels in the capital did not have quality service standards. So, there was not much support from them.

The exchanges at the Rural Tourism Congress in 2007 in Hungary, organised by European Federation of Farm and Rural Tourism (EuroGites), and the contacts with the Rural Tourism Training Network (RTTN) were eye-opening experiences. We realised that tourism provides many rural development opportunities. We started collecting case studies and training materials, and received expert training. Then we shared this information with Elkana members.

ORGANIC FARMING AND GUEST HOUSE SERVICES

The development of rural tourism in Georgia is strongly linked to old traditions of product processing, particularly winemaking in *Qvevri* (traditional earthenware amphorae). They create a lot of interest. We understood that organic farmers had good local products but were not ready to provide and supply tourism services. The tour operators were also not ready to send their guests. The guest houses were too small for bus tours and the expected standards were not met. The concept of tourism at that time focused much more on pure sightseeing rather than encounters with local residents. And, we realised that developing organic farming and rural guest house operations at the same time was too difficult.

This changed when we started to look for families who were interested in developing family guest houses/homestays in small towns like Aspindza or Telavi. Especially in regions that already had some visitors, we did not have to create demand but supported the development of facilities. Also, the community-based tourism approach in the buffer zones next to the National Parks and Protected Areas of Georgia provided a helpful connection.



BOOKING PLATFORM AND CERTIFICATION

Already in 2008, Elkana started a booking platform for the registered guest houses, a certification programme, and a platform for marketing and branding using Elkana's logo. Standards were adopted for Elkana's rural tourism network members, but we realised that Elkana could not implement and enforce these standards nationwide. Perhaps it was too early. Rural tourism was not considered a priority by donors or by the government, and with the political situation and the war in 2008, tourist numbers were not growing as quickly as today.

NEW PRIORITIES

After 2012, with the new wave of tour operators who did not only focus on classic bus tours, there was also an opening for new tour products. Also, a new profile of tourist started visiting Georgia. When agriculture became a priority area for the government, there was again more focus on combining tourism and agriculture as well as on tourism as a tool for local development. So, today additional supportive factors exist. However, the standards and certification programme need to be updated considerably to become suitable for the current situation. And, there is a huge need for service trainings and capacity building in rural areas. Rural tourism is still largely dependent on initiatives from outside and funding by international donor organisations.



LEARNING THROUGH NETWORKING AND PEER-TO-PEER EXCHANGES

It is interesting to understand how the idea of environmentally friendly tourism inspired practitioners and how they communicate in their professional networks. In many cases, people say that they are very interested in professional exchanges, that they need each other, but often they don't know each other. It is very good to hear other opinions from like-minded people and learn from their experiences. In Georgia, this exchange and learning from very concrete and real-life experiences is what works best. The most successful businesses are those that take advantage of this networking opportunity.

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NATALIA BAKHTADZE-ENGLÄNDER
Georgian Ecotourism Association

'No summer holiday this year!' jokes Nata Bakhtadze-Engländer, the co-founder of the Georgian Ecotourism Association. The preparations for the European Ecotourism Conference (EuroEco2018) – taking place for the first time in Georgia – are more time-demanding than expected. The conference is one of many activities that crowd her agenda. Nata is organising safety trainings for raft guides, is on the jury of the National Tourism Award, and does regular consulting work for international organisations. We were fortunate to catch her during a coffee break and chat about the development of green tourism in Georgia.

NATA'S STORY

I started already in 1996, working as a tour guide for Rainer Kaufmann, one of the first German tourism companies in Georgia. It was an excellent opportunity for very good on-the-job training in German and English. I wanted to study tourism in Georgia, but at that time the education level was not very high, and opportunities were limited.

I also worked for Caucasus Travel, for the environmental NGO CENN, for Marriott Hotel and Lufthansa, but this was not my cup of tea. I wanted to develop tourism products that focused more on authenticity and the guests' emotional experiences. Also, I realised that the added value in quality-oriented tourism is much higher than in mass tourism. From 2010 to 2012, I worked for the Georgian National Tourism Administration (GNTA) as a tourism product manager and was involved in developing the strategy, together with the World Bank's Regional Development Project (RDP). I served as a counterpart in the EU twinning project in destination management.

The concept of destinations and Destination Management Organisations (DMO) is a very appealing approach. We still need to bring this idea closer to the private sector and the realities of local tourism businesses in Georgia. For example, in GNTA we developed the idea of wine routes, which was put into practice with some success.



From 2012 to 2016, I was in Germany to study management of non-profit organisations and did backstopping for the newly created Ecotourism Development Center. In 2015, the Ecotourism Association was founded, with the objective to work more closely with the communities. The statutes and strategy of this organisation were recently mentioned by USAID's CIPE Project as a good practice example.

LACK OF STANDARDS

Currently, there are no standards in Georgia; tourism is not being actively managed. We need to develop standards, and sooner or later also introduce certification, but I don't think that standards should come artificially from abroad. We are already moving in that direction. The private sector will say: 'We want standards to protect our business against low-quality offers and against foreign companies operating in Georgia without any licence and control'. To achieve this, we need a few adaptive approaches, very easy procedures for obtaining a certificate, but also credible monitoring of compliance. Otherwise, there will be too much cheating. International standards can develop from this base at a later date.

I believe that capacity building is key in all aspects, not only in ecotourism. There is a lack of awareness and understanding of what visitors want and a lack of long-term thinking. Storytelling is the foundation of a successful travel experience. The cooperation with local guides must be intensified, and trainings need to be given in service skills but also in communication and storytelling.

Green tourism does not only involve ecotourism activities but everything that helps reduce the environmental impact of all tourism activities. Environmental awareness is still acutely lacking in the tourism sector. People often don't know what they can do to make tourism 'greener' and more sustainable. It is important to engage all tourism stakeholders in all sub-sectors and throughout the entire value chain.



Tbilisi



ZIA AND MAKVALA KONTSELIDZE
Guest House and Honey Production

In the land of milk and honey where everything thrives stands a small wooden house, surrounded by waterfalls flowing through impenetrable forests. Welcome to the guest house of Zia and Makvala Kontselidze. It is located in Chakvistavi, a small village in the middle of Mtirala National Park in the coastal region of Adjara. The guest house is basic, but it would be difficult to find a more authentic, close-to-nature experience. Our host serves us personally. 'I don't want to leave all the work to my wife', he smiles. Over an excellent dinner with homemade food from their own garden, we talk about his bees, how the family started the guest house, and life in a village at the foot of a national park.

ZIA AND MAKVALA'S STORY

During Soviet times, many more people used to live in the area. They cut construction timber from the forest and sold it in Turkey. This was the main livelihood here. But over the years, more and more families left the area.

When Zura Manvelidze from WWF came in 2005, he was the first person to talk about the creation of Mtirala National Park and the potential of investing in tourism. I was convinced from the beginning and supported Zura. There were only eleven families left in the village, and nine were for and two against. Ultimately, the families who were against had their sons employed as forest rangers.

As an alpinist, I worked my entire youth showing tourists the beauty of nature throughout the Soviet Union. So, I was involved in planning and construction of the hiking trails and supervised the works.

GUEST HOUSE RENOVATION

In 2007, we started with the guest house at the same time as the National Park. We extended the terrace, installed the solar power and hot water panels, and renovated the rooms. The solar equipment was donated by WWF, and it still works after more than 10 years. I remember that the house was painted with spar varnish, and we sandpapered and polished every plank to make it as natural as possible.

We can host eight guests in our house and an additional six in the small cottages on the camping area, 200 m below our house. This year we mainly have guests from Lithuania, but usually they come from many countries, also from Germany. Last year we had 400 to 500 overnight stays. This year is not as good so far. Some people find us via booking.com, but it's mainly by word of mouth. Our son and daughter, who live in town, take care of the booking.com reservations.

Our plans are to further develop the campsite, to construct an additional cottage with a kitchen and two rooms, and to divert a small channel from the little stream to make a natural swimming pool. For toilets, we have constructed a cesspit, which is emptied by a tanker truck.





LOCAL PRODUCTION AVOIDS GARBAGE

Actually, we hardly produce any garbage here. We don't use plastic bottles, not many plastic bags and no packaging, as most of the products are fresh. We just buy sugar, salt, oil and flour for the bread we make. The rest is produced here. The biodegradable things are fed to the animals, and the remaining garbage is brought to Chakvi town by my son.

HONEY PRODUCTION

Our additional income comes from honey production. The area is very good for natural honey; there are no chemicals or pesticides around here. Our speciality are 'Sweet Chestnut Honey' and 'Mountain Flower Honey', which we sell for GEL 30 (EUR 10)/kg, and we also offer honey vodka. More and more visitors come into the village to buy honey. They want to make sure that they are getting the best quality and are ready to pay a higher price for it. Unfortunately, some people from the lowlands started to buy 'fake' honey at the coast and drive up here in the mountains to sell it as natural mountain honey. There is no quality control, yet.



NEW DEVELOPMENTS

The increasing visitor numbers are bringing a lot of changes to the valley. Down by the river we have a concentration of small restaurants, bars and other entertainment, including quad rental and a new zip-line. There is much more garbage and uncontrolled construction. Some people are making a lot of money now. It would be good to distribute visitors more evenly, for the benefit of the entire community. We are lucky to be located higher up, above the 'business zone', but we receive significantly fewer visitors here.

Also, there are problems with the service personnel. Guests need a lot of attention, and the young generation has lost the feeling and attitude how to serve a guest and make customers happy. It seems humiliating to them, but tradition teaches us that we should treat every guest equally – regardless which country they come from. We have a saying that you can win every heart with a bit of friendliness.

Many visitors do not like this uncontrolled development. Unfortunately, the National Park does not have sufficient resources to maintain the hiking trails and huts. In a few years, the trails will not be operational anymore. It would be good if all visitors register at the visitors' centre and get information what they can see and do as well as how they should behave. Some activities, for example quad driving should not be allowed – even in the village area. Otherwise, we will lose those guests that specifically want a pure nature experience.











BAIA ABULADZE
Baia's Vineyard

The Imereti Region in Western Georgia is one of the lesser known wine and tourism areas of the country. It boasts excellent wines from local grape varieties, such as Tsolikouri, Tstska and Krakhuna. In addition, the area offers ample possibilities to explore the foothills of the Lesser Caucasus Mountains. Baia Abuladze's winery provides an excellent starting point for uncovering the treasures of the region. This young, dynamic entrepreneur is one of only a handful of women making organic wine in Georgia. While strolling through the ripening grapevines, Baia tells us her story and how important it is to always enter the vineyard with a smile.

BAIA'S STORY

The 2.5 ha vineyard in Obcha village has been in our family for a long time, but we did not consider hosting guests until very recently. In 2015, we started bottling our wine with support from the 'Produce in Georgia' SME programme. We expanded into wine tasting and accommodation only last year. Starting with 5 rooms, now we are constructing a new building to accommodate growing demand, with an expanded wine cellar, additional guestrooms and agro tourism offerings. Our aim is to offer visitors a taste of 'Georgian village life': tours with our wooden ox-cart, traditional cooking classes, harvesting of grapes and the like. For families, the kids are always very fond of our pet animals on the farm.

We recently increased our vineyard by 2 ha and can produce around 4,000 bottles, sold for GEL 20-30 (EUR 7-10) per bottle. Like most wine producers in Imereti, we focus on small, artisanal production. There is no ambition to produce thousands of tons and compete on the mass market. This is how organic production became our niche. We know what we want and what we can deliver – quality wine made by our hands and the traditional Qvevri method.

Baia's Vineyard started supplying restaurants and even exports wine to Germany, Austria and the USA. Exporting and participating at international fairs (the Grüne Woche and the Wine Fair in Düsseldorf, among others) helped us get international media coverage. For example, after we featured in an article of a German newspaper, we got many booking requests. We are also on TripAdvisor as well as on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. We always try to combine traditional knowledge with modern technologies.



STRONG FAMILY TIES AND BIODYNAMIC INNOVATION

Of course, I am not managing the business alone, but together with my sister Gvantsa and my brother Giorgi. Gvantsa, as an agronomist, is more into the technical aspects. She just completed a training at the Mosel wine area in Germany. Giorgi, who also started studying agronomy, is much into the organic production. When he comes from the vineyard after spraying the garlic solution, he can smell of garlic for days. The family has given us great emotional support. When you start a business, you have no clue how it will go. My parents, who are teachers at the local school, have done everything to support us, even learning English. They always had tremendous trust in us. The only thing that we could not convince them – yet – is to adopt green harvesting, the cutting of unripe grapes. It makes the remaining stronger and thus enhances the quality of the wine. But, it is too strange for them and against local traditions. Focusing on quality and introducing new methods is still a challenge in Georgia.

PROFESSIONAL AND REGIONAL CLUSTERS

Giorgi Aladashvili from Ruispiri (Kakheti Region) provided us with a lot of help in biodynamic production techniques. He and Davit from Bakurtsikhe supply us with nettles for spraying as organic pesticides. They also advised us in the beginning how to apply manure in every second row and let the others rest for a year, how to use chickens for weed control, just to name a few techniques. Giorgi also taught us that a positive personal attitude when working in the vineyard is key. The Bio-agro network, or as we jokingly say our 'green mafia', is really very helpful. We are not yet an official member of the Biological Farming Association Elkana, but our working relationship is good, and we want to apply for membership soon. Also, a wine producer friend from the Pfalz region in Germany supports us, by sending monthly updates when and what to spray. Our connections with other people in the wine sector are constantly growing. I made my master's thesis on the wine cluster in Georgia, and I can say that our wine cluster is already working very well. Even some of the neighbours are starting to show interest in how we do our organic production.



For tourism development we face the challenge that the Imereti Region does not receive many visitors, despite the many amazing places and sightseeing opportunities. We have good contacts with several tour operators, for example Kaukasus-Reisen, Budget Georgia and Living Roots. And, we started to establish connections with local farmers to supply our catering, for example cheese and vegetables. Stronger regional cooperation with different providers would be very useful, as producing everything by ourselves would be too difficult.







GIORGI ALADASHVILI
Ruispiri Biodynamic Vineyard

The wide valley of the Alazani River in the Kakheti Region is the birthplace of Georgian wine. It boasts more than 8,000 years of winemaking history and more than 500 traditional grape varieties. Grapes carry names like Rkatsiteli, Mtsvane and Kisi. These are the standard white grapes in Georgia, but also less-known varieties like Rubela Kakhuri, Ikalto Tsiteli and Simona Seruli are used. Giorgi Aladashvili, who trained in biodynamic winemaking in France and Switzerland, granted us an insight into his philosophy of winemaking and wine tasting for his guests.

GIORGI'S STORY

I started winemaking in Georgia when I came back from Switzerland four years ago. I had inherited some land from my grandfather and bought additional fields. Now we have 5 ha in total: 2.5 ha here in Ruispiri and 2.5 ha spread out in the region. Scattered vineyards are a challenge to cultivate, but, on the other hand, it allows us to give more exposure to different people.

In Georgia people tend to think that everything produced in the country is 'natural', but of course this is nonsense. Farmers often overdose with pesticides and practice soviet-style chemical agriculture on small plots. This is neither good for the soil nor for product quality. The majority don't even understand what they are doing or simply don't care. So, I told myself that in my professional life I want to set a good example.

BIODYNAMIC PRODUCTION IN GEORGIA

For me biodynamic production is full of wonders. It gives the Earth, which we have only borrowed from our children, the possibility to be productive and alive, and to regenerate in a sustainable way. Of course, we have a smaller production volume. We could produce double the quantity of grapes, but then I would not drink my own wine anymore, and in principle I do not give my guests anything that I would not consume myself. Almost everything I eat, we produce locally following ancient traditions. We don't use machines, but work with two horses to do the ploughing. My vines never hear a tractor! This means of course a lot of manual work, but I work with students who want to learn about biodynamic agriculture and with seasonal workers.



QUALITY VS. QUANTITY

It is not always easy with the seasonal workers. They have not yet internalised that what matters is quality and not quantity. For example, when I show them how to do the green harvest and to leave only one grape per vine instead of 3-4, they still only cut away one. They say it breaks their hearts to cut more. But this way we can get one very beautiful and healthy grape, instead of four mediocre ones.

The manual labour is of course expensive, and our wine is also not cheap. Quality costs money. We sell our wine at GEL 110–140 per bottle. Most of it is already reserved in advance, and we have only 30% left for wine tasting and small-scale sales. This year tourist groups are flocking to Ruispiri for wine tasting events, up to 60 persons per day. From the beginning of July, we've had only six days without guests. Wine tasting costs from GEL 35 (EUR 12) (one wine) to GEL 80 (several wines) and GEL 150 including food. And, I also organise other events, for example the Bread Festival, to raise awareness for green tourism.

CONSULTING IN BIODYNAMIC AGRICULTURE

We are a member of the Biological Farming Association Elkana as well as a member of the Georgian Farmers Association (GFA). During last two years, interest in biodynamic winemaking has exploded. My telephone never stops ringing. I've already consulted on roughly 150 ha of vineyards, mainly for three big, but also for many small, producers. These are chiefly younger people; the old winemakers in the neighbourhood are not going to learn anything new. They plant their vineyard and exhaust the soil in a couple of years. Actually, quite often the soil is already totally exhausted due to former soviet agriculture practices and has to be rehabilitated. We believe that we need another six years of careful work to fully restore the productivity of our soil.

Moreover, we need to consider climate stress. Already under present conditions, we will need to put nets on top of our vines to filter out sunlight. Otherwise there will be problems with the sugar content, requiring a lot of post-treatment, which we want to avoid in our traditional winemaking. It may become necessary to move to higher regions with the present grape varieties and introduce other varieties in the lowlands. Georgia is not immune to climate change, and we need to find suitable responses and adaptations.









DAVID NIGURIANI
Bapsha Guest House

Svaneti, the spectacular region of the Greater Caucasus, is experiencing a tourism boom. While it brings considerable economic growth into the region, it also leaves lasting impacts on the small, rustic settlement and the natural treasures of the area. We spoke with David Niguriani, the executive director of Ethic Capital Credit Union in Georgia. He shared the journey of opening the Bapsha guest house in Mestia with his sister and his thoughts on tourism development in Svaneti.

DAVID'S STORY

Five years ago, my sister and I inherited our grandparent's traditional Svanetian House. It had stood empty for many years and included the original threshing floor and an old barn. For the renovation and the interior of the guest house we tried to use mostly regional and natural materials. Local stones and wood types help preserve its traditional character. We restored the old walls and beams, but also added some modern elements to enhance comfort. All doors and floors were treated only with natural linseed oil, instead of the usual varnish which reduces the wood's natural vitality. Solid wood furniture is everywhere in the house. Our guests are generally very pleased with the accommodation and the friendliness of the staff. Currently in our second season, we host around 2,000 guests per year. The heating system uses wood and pellets (pressed woodchip residues from a regional saw mill). Unfortunately we don't have a solar system yet, and, like the entire village, we don't have a wastewater treatment system. Solid waste management is provided by the municipality.

NEED FOR START-UP CONSULTING

Generally speaking, Svans are very proud and hospitable people, often treating the guests better than themselves. With the development of tourism this will inevitably change, and a professional relationship will prevail. Unfortunately, some people are taking very unwise decisions. Many people who received loans to renovate their houses have no economics education and no clue what tourists like and what not. They never had the chance to travel and experience what it means to be a tourist. They sometimes make very costly 'EuroRemont-style' renovations, which look fancy but actually are of low quality. In the eyes of foreign tourists, this looks ugly, especially if they come from Western Europe.



To quickly pay off their loans, they look for very short-term benefits with low-quality service, not thinking about the image of the property in the long-term. They forget that they would want people to come back and to make good publicity for them. Especially in times of online feedback via booking.com or Trip Advisor, this can have a very big impact on your business. Of course, this is not true for all, but we need to take care to safeguard our future.

Actually, there is a big need for individual consulting of people who have taken out a loan to start a tourism business or for renovations, to help them avoid costly mistakes. Also, in terms of environmental awareness many things can be improved.

COMMUNITY-BASED PRODUCTION AND CONSUMPTION

I lived for many years in Germany, working for the GLS Bank in Stuttgart. When I returned to Georgia a couple years ago, I also started working with several organisations and projects in local development. For example, I work for the 'Sobissuri' cooperative, which produces the natural apple juice that you can get in hotel 'Suliko' and a few organic restaurants in Tbilisi. The 'Ezo'-restaurant, for example, specialises in sourcing natural and local products for their take on traditional Georgian cuisine. I am also a member of the cooperative board there. Their motto is 'Village, Farm, Wine, Food', and they also organise tours to their producers. This networking between the different stakeholders and sectors in green tourism is for me the key issue.

Unfortunately, there is no common standard for organic quality, because there is no certification and no control. So, when people talk about offering 'natural products', it often does not mean anything. We have to look more into controlled organic production, because of the growing need and pressures to ensure quality.









GEORGE AND KATRIN TEVDORASHVILI
Georgia Insight Tour Operator and Suliko Hotel

Some people are endowed with an extraordinary level of life energy, and Katrin and George Tevdorashvili are a shining example. In the past 7 years, they built up Georgia Insight into a top-quality tour operator and established a hotel in the centre of Tbilisi – all while raising six children. During a nightshift at their hotel (the employees were on holidays), they still found time to share their experience with green tourism.

GEORGE AND KATRIN'S STORY

We actually started our business with green tourism. During my first few years in Germany, I (George) became familiar with Waldorf Schools, travel agency Aventerra and Forum Anders Reisen (FAR), a network of tourism companies engaged in responsible tourism. There, I learned about the basic criteria and approach behind more sustainable tourism.

In 2011 we founded the company Georgia Insight. Right from the start, sustainability was a high priority, mainly because nobody else seemed to care much about it. Since 2012 our company is certified by TourCert. In 2016, we constructed the 10-room Suliko hotel; it's not quite a boutique hotel yet, but we are slowly getting there.

ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT

First of all, we simply don't do certain tours that have big environmental impacts, for example, off-road jeep tours. We do not drive to places that cannot be reached by bus. We want to keep our groups together and walk as much as possible.

In terms of waste management, we are very strict. All garbage is brought back to Tbilisi, except biodegradable things. It was a lot of work to get drivers into the habit! We don't separate waste, except for glass and plastic bottles. There is an urgent need for plastic recycling facilities in Georgia.

For the hotel we used energy efficient construction materials with good insulation. The air conditioning uses modern inverter technology (90% less energy intensive), and of course we use energy saving light bulbs.



It's a work in progress, really. Just today we printed out a guidance note for guests to put towels on the floor if they want to have them washed, in order not to wash every day and save water. We also minimised the use of paper in the office. But to be honest, our plans for sustainable products and practices were much bigger than what we are currently realising.



It is difficult, especially with local organic produce. We offer only breakfast, so our turnover of fresh produce is not big enough for viable provision by local organic farmers. Milk products need to have an official health certificate, and the packaging is also important. It gets more difficult when you get into the details. Yes, we get the natural apple juice from Sobissuri cooperative and honey and some other products. We use the TourCert checklist for our tours and the hotel. However, we can always do more in terms of environmental sustainability.

LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION SKILLS ARE KEY

We don't require of our employees to have a special tourism qualification. A university diploma, some life experience, excellent language skills are sufficient. The main qualification our staff needs to have is a strong motivation to bring Georgia closer to our guests and build enthusiasm for the country and its culture.

We offer our staff good working conditions, health insurance, better pay than in other companies, and a guaranteed number of guide days per season. We mainly work on the German-speaking market (Germany, Austria and Switzerland). Their travel tastes are familiar, and our service profile is targeted to their needs. We provide German-speaking guides and staff; our e-mail correspondence is entirely in German. We only offer guides as 'German speakers' if they have truly excellent language skills. Maintaining the high quality of our services is key.



ENCOUNTERS INSTEAD OF SIGHTS AND STORIES INSTEAD OF FIGURES

There is a new trend among visitors who come to Georgia. People do not want to hurry through the country and 'tick' a list of churches. They prefer to stay a second night at a place they like and skip some points of the programme. They also do not want to hear only facts and figures but stories and to experience an emotional discovery. Our most frequent feedback for the best part of a visitor's trip sound like this: 'the evening when the host took the time to sit with us and we could experience Georgian hospitality'. These experiences are even more impressive in the remote mountain areas than here in Tbilisi.

We do not place the hotel on online booking platforms. We tried booking.com, but it didn't work well. Guests who came through booking.com had different expectations, complaining that there is no TV in the rooms, and treated the facilities with less respect. There is a different mentality, wanting to consume the maximum that is offered instead of saving resources or using them moderately. Our guests are paying for quality services and the encounters. We have a TV only in the recreation room, to encourage guests to spend time there and to seek communication and exchange. We want them to feel good with all their senses. This includes the materials; we use wood instead of plastic, as wood gets even more beautiful as it ages and shows traces of use.

BUILDING BRIDGES BETWEEN GEORGIA AND EUROPE

We had several exhibitions of local painters in the hotel, to popularise their work but also to share Georgian art culture with the guests. In our library we hold examples of Georgian literature, which is increasingly being translated into German (e.g. for the 2017 Frankfurt Book Fair). Also, our website is definitely one of the most informative web portals on Georgian culture in the German language. Our biggest motivation is to build bridges between Georgia and European countries and promote real, meaningful encounters. We want to awaken the interest and fascination for Georgia, its culture, history, soul and its people. We don't want Georgia to be just a consumable travel destination.



HAPPY GUESTS COME AGAIN

2018 is our second season at the hotel Suliko, and we already have many regular guests, who come several times a year. With rates from 60 to 90 euros we are not cheap, as quality necessarily has its price, but also not expensive. People who come here generally do not care about a difference of 20 euros; the more expensive rooms are always booked first. Without any active marketing, we are already operating at 70% capacity in the hotel.





TEMO POPIASHVILI
Savanna Guest House

The recently opened Savanna guest house in Dedoplistskaro, Kakheti Region is located at the entrance of Vashlovani National Park and near the Eagle's Canyon Natural Monument. The stunning landscapes and biodiversity of the semi-desert steppe and spectacular limestone canyons endow the region with unique ecotourism potential. Teimuraz 'Temo' Popiashvili talked about combining his work for an environmental conservation NGO and his family-run guest house.

TEMO'S STORY

My interest in nature goes back to my childhood days in Dedoplistskaro. During the difficult years of the 1990s, we had no money, no electricity. My parents were working outside the whole day. I remember that at home, we had this huge old book, a nature atlas, and as a small boy I used to sit with this book and daydream to go and see all these places. It was only a few years later that I discovered that we actually have very interesting ecosystems around us. So, it was not necessary to go to the other side of the globe to experience nature.

Somehow, things fell into place for me. One day while I was studying in Tbilisi, Vazha, a senior officer from Vashlovani National Park, told my father that he needed help. This was my opportunity to work in the Park, a very exciting experience.

When they offered me a permanent position, I left Tbilisi and continued my studies as distance learning, while working at the Park. I spent five years in the Vashlovani National Park Administration before joining Amiran Kodiasvili and his company Ekoturi. There, I spent two years taking tourists to different areas around the country and learning the tourism business by doing.

After this, I joined the NGO Nacres, for which I still work in very diverse projects related to biodiversity monitoring, pasture management and human-wildlife conflicts. I especially like the last topic, because it does not only include wildlife but also the human side, which can be very complicated. My small family also lives in Dedoplistskaro. My wife is also from here, and we have a 2.5-year-old son. We lived in Tbilisi for one year, but we were both very happy to return to the countryside. I am still thankful to Nacres that despite many assignments all over Georgia they give me the opportunity to stay here in Dedoplistskaro.

INVESTING IN ACCOMMODATION

During my tourism work, I made many contacts, and a lot of people were asking me for information, like accommodation tips around Vashlovani. I realised that it was difficult to recommend somebody and be sure that the visitors would get good service and be happy with the experience.

So, I started think about opening a guest house, and we discussed it in the family. Then many things came together. My mother was looking for a new job, and we could get some support through the state programme 'Produce in Georgia'. We made the necessary renovations to trans-



form our family house into a guest house, starting with five rooms. We manage it together with my parents, while I do all the planning for future extensions. The next steps will be to add a room for relaxing and additional guestrooms in an annex building, to construct a nice terrace, and to beautify the façade. Inside I want to put more



information materials about the area, some of my photos framed, information about the ecosystems and what is special here. I have also bought additional land for agriculture, to be able to provide healthy produce to our guests. Now in our second season, all rooms are often fully booked, especially during spring and autumn, with Georgians and foreigners alike.

We did not receive formal training in the guest house business. Somehow, I knew what was required from my tour guide experience, and I follow guest comments on booking.com to see how their experience was and what they liked and what not.

FROM GREEN SLOGANS TO GREEN ACTIONS

I'm afraid that Georgia will lose its ecotourism potential with current developments, with uncontrolled infrastructure developments, garbage, etc. Environmental awareness in Georgia is still quite low. People simply don't realise what they are doing and that their behaviour is bad for nature; they simply do not think at all when they throw garbage outside. What worries me is that this could also be the case for people involved in taking decisions about infrastructure development in the country.

Today it is difficult to be 'green'. It is not enough to protect an area and behave correctly, but you actually have to rehabilitate the areas before you can really start. This can mean restoring soil fertility for agriculture but also cleaning up waste and introducing wastewater management at a key site such as the Eagle's Canyon. For this you need a lot of money as well as people to do the work and actions to prevent further degradation.



To some extent, the government has adopted 'green' slogans, but I fear that this could also be just an attempt to 'speak the donors' language'. On the other hand, especially in Tbilisi, more and more people understand the issues, and there is a growing community of people who think 'green'. There is some notable behaviour change through tourism. It is hard to convince people that in the long run the national parks will bring in more money through tourism – much more than the associated costs or the benefits of quick exploitation – but slowly they are seeing the potential. For example, two years ago there was not a single guest house in Dedoplistskaro on booking.com; this year there are already five.









Khornabuji Fortress / Dedoplistskaro / Kakheti



AMIRAN KODIASHVILI
Friends' Association of Vashlovani PA

Amiran Kodiashvili is a 'hands-on' environmentalist from tip to toe. His stories are captivating, and his schedule is always full. He works as deputy director of Vashlovani Protected Areas (PA), advisor to the Chairman of the Agency of Protected Areas, Director of the Friends' Association of Vashlovani PA, tour operator and guide for wildlife, botany and photography tours. Also, he finds time to hold nature camps for local schools. Despite all these responsibilities and travels, he remains firmly connected to his home area around Dedoplistskaro, running a project to breed and reintroduce the Colchis Pheasant in its original habitat. During our chat, we talked at length about the latest project of the Friends' Association, the development of an ecotourism trail and a camp at Eagle's Canyon in Dedoplistskaro and of a co-management system with the Agency of Protected Areas to preserve this spectacular natural monument.

AMIRAN'S STORY

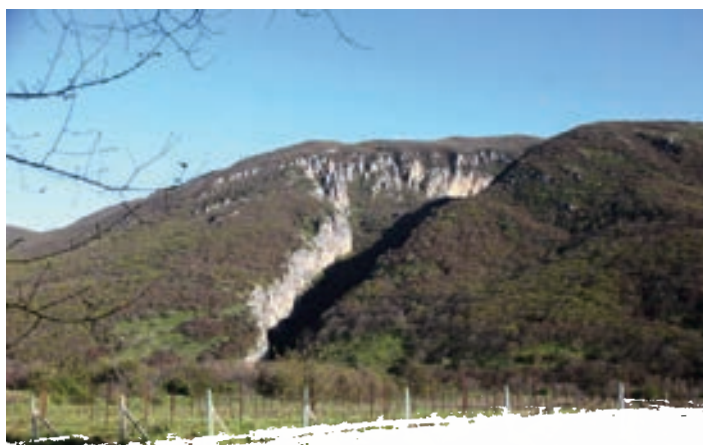
I have always been very much attached to nature, keeping all kinds of animals in the house and spending a lot of time in Vashlovani Protected Areas, where I was involved from the early stages of its creation and engaged in the Friends' Association of Vashlovani Protected Areas.

In the new project of the Friends' Association, I want to develop ecotourism as an effective tool for the protection of this natural monument. Tourism should generate income to effectively clean up the area and ensure long-term, sustainable management of this unique and valuable ecosystem. As a first step, the Friends' Association won a small grant from the European Neighbourhood Programme for Agriculture and Rural Development (EN-PARD).

The plan is to build a ranger's house and renovate the info centre, including a spot for the payment of entrance fees. A minimalistic walking trail will be built through the canyon, using ladders and safety ropes for difficult passages. A campsite will be established next to the pheasant farm near the lower end of the canyon. Big infrastructure is not our goal. Actually, we protested against the plans to build a huge, fancy viewpoint platform on the edge of the cliff, and luckily the Head of the Agency of Protected Areas shares our vision. All infrastructures should be minimalistic and integrated into the natural environment as much as possible. It is especially important not to disturb the birds, as they breed in the high cliffs.

REHABILITATING NATURE

Another project component is an effective clean up of the canyon, from the garbage brought in by visitors but also by the river. The catchment area of the river is in the inhabited region of Dedoplistskaro. As people throw all their garbage into the river, every flood brings a huge intake of plastic waste. We need to reconstruct a proper metal grid to filter out the garbage from the river before it enters the canyon. The collected garbage will then be taken to the municipal waste dump. In order to prevent picnickers from leaving their garbage in the area, better control by the Vashlovani Protected Areas Administration is needed.



Actually, we would also need to rehabilitate the wastewater treatment plant or at least create a pond for upstream biological treatment. This should be accompanied by awareness-raising activities in the catchment, to prevent people from throwing garbage into the river. This will hopefully come step by step.



At a later stage, the campsite will be equipped with eco-cottages, catering and wine tasting facilities, solar power generation etc. The pheasant farm is an attraction in itself, but also a good place for raising the environmental awareness of visitors and school children.

MULTI-STAKEHOLDER MANAGEMENT

To better manage the natural monuments in Georgia we should look into effective co-management approaches that involve all stakeholders: the protected areas administrations, the municipalities, the local residents, the friend's associations and local tourism sector businesses. The Agency for Protected Areas does not have sufficient capacities to do this alone. In Vashlovani, there is no ranger presence in the Eagle's Canyon, so everybody does what he likes there – which leads to further degradation of the area. Now, with our project, the Agency of Protected Areas is going to develop a new management approach together with the Friends' Association.



The local private sector will be included in operating tourism services, for example, guided tours, camp management and catering. The municipality will be responsible for enforcement of fines in case of violations and for the removal and disposal of solid waste as well as maintenance of the wastewater treatment. The Friends' Association will be responsible for the development and maintenance of infrastructure and monitoring of nature protection and the operation of ecotourism activities. This can be an interesting pilot project for other natural monuments in Georgia, if all actors do their part as best as they can.







GIORGI RAJEBASHVILI AND ZURA JAVAKHISHVILI

Ecotours Tour operator

Georgia is a biodiversity hotspot, home to more than two-thirds of the species in the entire Caucasus, which inhabit many diverse landscapes. The guides of Ecotours are among the most dedicated and well-known specialists for bird watching, botany and wildlife observation. Giorgi Rajebashvili and Zura Javakhishvili come from a conservation NGO background and also teach at Ilia State University in Tbilisi. Giorgi and Zura shared the growing pains and successes of their company and the challenges they see for green tourism to really take off in Georgia.

GIORGI AND ZURA'S STORY

The origins of our company go back to 1998 when our friend Lexo started guided tours, but this was during the difficult years of 90s. It was hard to get a minibus, and one was stopped by the police looking for bribes all the time. So, after one year he stopped. Only when we joined him in 2003, and amidst growing demand from international birdwatchers, we created the company Ecotours. In the beginning, we were doing specialised tours for birdwatchers and wildlife photo tours, so we had to construct hideouts, which was quite a big effort. The main seasons for birdwatching are in spring and autumn. Our main target group are 'full-on' birdwatchers from Western Europe, but also from Poland, the Czech Republic, and Scandinavia.

Most of our clients want to be in the midst of nature and sleep in a tent, sometimes in simple guest houses. Near Chachuna Protected Areas, for example, we convinced the owner to transform his basic hostel that was mainly used by hunters into a hostel for birdwatchers. Now, he has stopped receiving hunters and focuses on this market. But, there are also groups that want proper guest houses and in rare cases hotels.



COMBINED TOURS TO DISCOVER NATURE AND CULTURE

Generational changes and shifting perceptions about Georgia are transforming tourist demand. Nowadays, we are increasingly offering combined tours, because a lot of people want to do birdwatching but also to have a cultural experience. There are more families and couples, where usually the husband wants to watch birds whereas the wife is not that much into it. So, we added sightseeing, wine tasting and local encounters to our tours.

Together with the Caucasus Nature Fund (CNF) we are involved in a pelican-breeding project on one of the Javakheti Lakes, with two species, the Great White and the Dalmatian Pelican. By installing a breeding platform in the lake (as used in Greece and Montenegro) and an observation hideout on the shore, we want to make birdwatching more accessible in Javakheti National Park. Our extended target group are nature lovers, and this is an expanding market. We have guides with different specialisations, but in general our business is bounded by the limited number of guides rather than by guest interest.

ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS AND ETHICAL BEHAVIOUR

In terms of environmental impact our target group is easy. They are highly sensitised and many of our guests even pick up garbage that was left by other people. On our tours we don't leave garbage in areas where we are not sure that the municipal disposal site is in good condition. For example, we bring garbage back from Shatili and even from Kazbegi. A system for waste management and recycling is desperately needed, especially in the more remote mountain areas.



With regard to ethical behaviour in birdwatching, we try to minimise the use of birdcalls and do not take guests close to nests. There is no regulation for this in Georgia, but we follow international good practices.

DESTRUCTION OF HABITATS – HARM TO BUSINESS

The destruction of habitats is very worrisome. For example, in Kazbegi the buckthorn habitats are being destroyed at an alarming rate. We are not traditionalists who are against all infrastructure developments, but what is happening in Kazbegi is bad for the habitats of several species on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. This includes the gravel pits and the municipal waste disposal in the valley of the Tergi River, the trucks' parking at the customs centre, the new road to Gergeti Church, the ski resort extension in Kobi, and many other developments. The worst is that a lot of damage could have been avoided by proper planning and good construction practices. Unfortunately, we see a lot of top-down approaches: local people are not asked, and environmental impact studies are not taken seriously. If we get information, we try to write letters to change the projects, but it is very difficult and often too late. Decreasing habitats harms nature and our business. Some say that with 200–300 tourists per year we are not important players. However, green tourism is not about short-term benefits but about making Georgia fit for the future.







Gergeti / Mt. Kazbeg 5047m / Mtskheta-Mtianeti



IA TABAGARI

Living Roots Tour Company and Ranch

As one of the most experienced Georgian tour operators, Ia Tabagari has been at the forefront of Georgia's tourism development. During the last 20 years, she cultivated her passion to protect and develop the 'living roots' of her homeland in a sustainable way. Tour guide and operator, Head of Georgian Incoming Tour Operators Association (GITO), filmmaker, consultant, hotel and ranch owner – a few of the notches on her impressive career. Her extensive and diverse experience is more than reason enough to ask her which perspectives she sees for green tourism in Georgia.

IA'S STORY

During my childhood, my father often took me and my sister into the mountains to experience and understand nature first hand. From that time onwards, I cared a lot about the cleanliness of rivers and nature in general. Afterwards, during my ethnology studies, I spent a lot of time in remote areas and fell in love with Georgian culture. From that moment I understood that tourism is potentially doing a lot of damage to our natural and cultural heritage, and I started promoting responsible tourism.

Our motto 'living roots' signifies that we all share roots with the past and with nature. We want to promote green culture and local production, healthy food and lifestyles. Our ranch, located near the town of Sighnaghi in the Kakheti Region in Eastern Georgia, has nine riding horses and five foals. The horses receive regular veterinary care and are trained to be very gentle.

The tours are designed to offer diverse experiences for varying tastes and difficulty levels. The longer ones include additional sightseeing or lunch and wine tasting. Prices for the tours start from GEL 35 for one hour. When we have big groups of 20 to 30 people, they take turns riding. As we are still developing and need to train additional staff, we could accommodate only 700–1,000 visitors last year. In addition to the horse tours, we constructed a 6-room boutique hotel, a natural beer brewery, and the Qvevri winery. The special events on offer include crafting churchkhela (the renowned delicacy made from walnuts dipped in gelatinous grape juice) and baking bread.



STRONG LOCAL INVOLVEMENT

The ranch, hotel and brewery employ 12 full-time as well as additional seasonal staff. The majority are from the neighbouring Nukriani village, and one family lives permanently at the ranch. Of course, it would be easier to bring managers from the capital, but in the long run the investment in training and capacity building at the local level is important and beneficial for regional development.



Empowering women is a central aspect of my work. Local women entrepreneurs were the first to come to the newly established ranch with questions, looking for advice for their small businesses. We also support them by buying their products, like natural jams and preserves. Men only came after the women acted as a bridge. The men had questions about buildings, construction materials and business operations. Economic thinking and planning is not very developed, and a major need is to build confidence and self-esteem.

We try to promote the concept of clean environment and clean food, of organic gardening and are trying to motivate people in the neighbourhood to grow food without agrochemicals. When we developed the horse tours, I was personally involved in cleaning the area, lecturing that the earth belongs to everyone and that we have to keep it clean. Slowly people are following our example.

Our experience of 20 years grants us credibility: when we say something, people believe us. What is more important, when we make recommendations, for example for a local tour guide or guest house, we immediately send tourists there. In this regard, the connection with the Pheasant's Tears winery is very beneficial. Recently, Living Roots has been awarded an UN-WTO certificate for 'community ethics'.

A GREEN TOURISM REGION AND VALUE CHAINS

As a leading tourism service provider in Signaghi, we want to promote a new life for the town, bringing different companies and more active tourists, who do bike tours, horseriding and hiking. People need to be pushed to excel. Signaghi and the surrounding areas are very promising for green tourism, with five small valleys and gorges, where old trails can be reactivated and developed as info-trails, but also with the Lagodekhi and Vashlovani National Parks nearby.

What we need is professional education, especially in organic agriculture and in hospitality management and services. Support for equipment and infrastructure for local communities through small grants programmes should also be strengthened.



With our cooperation partners we already form a small green tourism network. We work on the value chain with our local producers, by sourcing organic feed for our horses, for example. We also nurture cooperation and strong ties with many organisations: Elkana, the tourism association, and Village Ways, a UK company that supports local communities.











SOSO MEKVEVRISHVILI
Aragvi Adventure Center

Just one hour north of Tbilisi, the Pshavi's Aragvi river flows through a lush, forested valley in the Mtskheta-Mtianeti Region. On its banks, Soso Mekvevrishvili discovered the perfect spot for an ecotourism camp and in 2011 built the Aragvi Adventure Center. It offers white-water rafting, lake kayaking, mountain biking, hiking and trekking tours. For those looking for on-site fun, the camp offers a treasure chest of goodies: beach volleyball, trampoline, zip-line, children's playground or simply relaxing in hammocks on the spacious and shaded campsite. After the exhausting sporting activities, guests can replenish their strength and recuperate with traditional Georgian food, homemade wine and accommodation in cosy cottages or tents. Soso explains his green tourism concept and the considerable effort needed to keep the place clean and to build local capacities.

SOSO'S STORY

After finishing my studies in political science and economics in Augsburg, Germany, I returned to Georgia in late 2008 as a CIM/GIZ 'returning expert', to work with the Georgian Tourism Association (GTA). After two years, I decided to start my own business. In the beginning, my friends who were already in the rafting business helped out. I could also secure financial support through a small grants programme from USAID. This was very helpful of course, but I had to put all my savings, my sister's as well, and all my energy into the project. Step by step, I built the camp that now stands up to international standards.

In terms of infrastructure, we have ten cottages (three with integrated bathrooms), four toilets, four showers, a dining hall (in case of bad or cold weather), picnic places for 120 persons, plus 'startents'. We can host events for more than 200 people, including teambuilding, company retreats, workshops. Personally, I like to work with small groups and families who appreciate good service more than with a big group. I have now delegated most of the day-to-day camp management to my nephew and his wife, who is from the neighbouring village. Additionally, we offer tailor-made nature and culture discovery tours for groups of German-speaking visitors (max. 20 persons) all across Georgia.



USE OF ECO-TECHNOLOGIES

One of the first things we built was a two-chamber cesspit. It was important to prevent any wastewater from flowing into the river, especially as it empties into the drinking water reservoir of Tbilisi. There is no sewage system in the valley, and all the villages simply empty untreated wastewater into the river. As an ecotourism camp we have to set a good example. The camp's water supply has a special filter, and the showers and kitchen use as little energy as possible. For example, we installed solar water heating system and energy efficient bulbs. My latest 'baby' is the eco-house we built using the straw-bale method, which I discovered in Kakheti and wanted to replicate. I can't wait to build another one!



ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS

Before 2017, the municipality did not provide any waste removal services, so we loaded everything on the pickup and brought it to Tbilisi. Now there is a municipal service twice a week. Waste separation is not fully implemented, but we bring glass bottles for recycling, and most of the plastic bottles are taken and reused by local shops. We also created a compost pit for biological residues, but most of it is used by employees as animal feed. Cleaning the camp is a constant, team effort. A lot of my time is spent going around the camp and collecting cigarette butts. I remember that in the beginning the guides threw all waste directly into the river. I had to teach them to collect everything – including cigarette butts – and not to throw anything into the river or burn waste.



Maybe it's because of the long time I spent in Germany and also because of the clean-up-campaigns that we organised in the Georgian national parks during my time at the GTA. Once you have developed a certain level of awareness you start seeing the garbage and want to have the area clean. It is all a matter of education.

CAPACITY BUILDING AND SAFETY

All employees are from the neighbouring villages. We have six raft guides, four cooks in the kitchen, a guard, a cleaner. Together with the other rafting companies, we are among the biggest employers in the valley, excluding road construction and timber. We personally trained all raft guides, and now the first two have completed a special training programme and are certified by the International Rafting Federation (IRF). In the future all guides should have this certificate in order to improve safety on the river.

USING LOCAL PRODUCTS



We offer traditional Georgian cuisine in different categories, from picnics to full supras (traditional feasts) including homemade wine and chacha (the Georgian grappa). We also offer bread baking in toné (a local clay oven) and khinkali-making (Georgian meat dumplings). We source local natural products whenever possible. You can't really call them 'organic' as there is no certification scheme in place, but we make an effort to get products from known sources. For example, pork, melons, and tkemali (plum sauce) come from my parents own production in Kakheti, cheese from the neighbouring villages, and vegetables from the local market stalls on the road to Tbilisi. It would be great to get more local products, but everything is not available during the entire season in this largely mountainous region.

REDUCED ECOLOGICAL FOOTPRINT

I try to minimise the ecological impact of the tours: 'Leave nothing but footprints, take nothing but photographs!' It starts with the garbage – everything is taken back to the next waste container of the camp. But, we also try to make the activities as eco-friendly as possible. We do not offer quad driving, off-road motorcycle or helicopter tours, but low-impact hiking, biking and rafting. Of course, we have to use cars for transfers; unfortunately this is unavoidable.





Conclusion and recommendations

The conversations with green tourism practitioners in Georgia revealed a kaleidoscope of personal experiences and insights. Despite the lack of a formal 'green scheme' in tourism, these success stories demonstrate the challenges, the potentials, and the possible ways forward in developing a more sustainable tourism sector in Georgia.

One common thread emerged in relation to the identified criteria of success:

- The most successful green tourism businesses (1) have a good network and close collaborations across the entire value chain, and (2) learn from national and international experiences (often personal work experience abroad).

The following recommendations outline potential actions to further stimulate the development of green tourism in Georgia:

SKILLS AND NETWORKING

- Support professional trainings, and facilitate peer-to-peer exchanges and exposure visits;
- Promote internships, vocational trainings, on-the-job trainings and study possibilities in the tourism sector abroad (in both Western and Eastern Europe);
- Networking through green tourism value chains and cooperation in regional clusters (e.g. between winemakers of one region, but also between guest houses, local producers and tour operators);
- Small grant programmes (including individual contributions) to support the implementation of green technologies, especially in rural and remote areas;
- Start-up consulting in basic economics, business planning and how to wisely use microcredits. Inclusion of advisory and counselling services in capacity building and development programmes.

STANDARDS, CERTIFICATION AND QUALITY CONTROL

- Introduce basic environmental management principles in the hotel and accommodation sector (efficient resource use, minimisation of energy and water inputs as well as waste outputs, promoting use of green technologies);
- Encourage and provide technical assistance (as well as small-scale subsidies) to facilitate international certification of local producers, tour companies, accommodation providers (potentially under the umbrella of a 'green scheme' in tourism);
- Introduce a Code of Conducts for tour companies and accommodation providers;
- Encourage and develop criteria for a green tourism award through GNTA, potentially in cooperation with existing tourism award structures instead of creating a parallel award.

DESTINATION MANAGEMENT

- Support development planning and land-use planning approaches for constructions and activities in tourism areas, including monitoring and regulatory oversight;
- Designate and separate areas aimed at high-quality tourism from those for low-quality, mass tourism;
- Avoid use conflicts by designating specific areas for high environmental impact activities (e.g. quads and motocross, heliskiing etc.) while enforcing strict prohibition in all others (especially hiking and nature recreation areas);
- Strengthen the Destination Management Organisation (DMO) concept beyond a pure marketing focus and provide a coordinating function for green tourism;
- Encourage local participation in tourism development planning;
- Invest in municipal waste management and recycling infrastructure;
- Invest in wastewater treatment infrastructure;
- Support and facilitate awareness raising for waste management and clean-up campaigns in tourism destinations.



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CONTACTS TO ASSOCIATIONS:

- Biological Farmers Association Elkana www.elkana.org.ge
- Caucasus Environmental NGO Network (CENN) www.cenn.org
- Georgian Ecotourism Association www.ecotourism.ge
- Georgian Farmers Association (GFA) www.facebook.com/gfa.com.ge
- Georgian Tourism Association (GTA) www.tourism-association.ge
- Georgian Incoming Tour Operators Association (GITO) www.gitoa.ge
- Georgian Mountain Guides Association (GMTA) www.mountainguide.ge
- Georgian Wine Association (GWA) www.gwa.ge



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