



15 years ESJ  
*Special edition*

## **Advancing Rural Tourism in Adjara: Key Projects and Strategic Approaches**

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[Doi:10.19044/esj.2025.v21n39p301](https://doi.org/10.19044/esj.2025.v21n39p301)

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Submitted: 22 November 2024

Accepted: 21 January 2025

Published: 15 March 2025

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OPEN ACCESS

*Cite As:*

Khakhubia N., Gogitidze G., Shainidze J., Lazishvili S. & Gogvadze L. (2025). *Advancing Rural Tourism in Adjara: Key Projects and Strategic Approaches*. European Scientific Journal, ESJ, 21 (39), 301. <https://doi.org/10.19044/esj.2025.v21n39p301>

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### **Abstract**

This article explores the development of rural tourism in general, the evolution of its definition, and its connection to the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. It focuses on key projects and strategies that have driven the growth of this sector in the Adjara region. With its diverse landscapes, rich cultural heritage, and traditional agricultural practices, Adjara has become a significant destination for rural tourism. The study highlights various initiatives and community-based tourism projects supported by governmental and international organisations. The findings suggest that rural tourism offers local communities economic opportunities and contributes to cultural heritage preservation and environmental sustainability.

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**Keywords:** Rural tourism, projects, development strategies, communities, authentic experiences

## Introduction

Rural tourism appeared at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as people traveled for leisure, hunting, and local festivals, often linked to agricultural societies. In contrast, in the post-war era, increased leisure time and mobility led to a rise in domestic tourism. Urban dwellers seek rural experiences for relaxation and escape from city life. The term "rural tourism" has been used more frequently since the 1970s. Governments and tourism organisations started promoting rural destinations to diversify local economies. The Agri-tourism emerged, and farms opened their doors to tourists, offering experiences like farm stays and agricultural tours. In the 1980s, various countries implemented policies to support rural tourism for economic development and sustainable land use. Hence, the growing interest in the 1990s is followed by the use of the concept of rural tourism with an emphasis on sustainability, local culture, and experiential travel. Scholars have begun to study rural tourism more systematically, defining its characteristics and benefits. The 21<sup>st</sup> century marked the focus on ecotourism and sustainability: rural tourism increasingly focuses on environmental sustainability, with travelers seeking authentic experiences that respect local culture and ecology. In the 2000s, the European Union promoted rural tourism to revitalise rural economies and preserve cultural heritage. In the 2010s, the digital transformation took the stage - the rise of social media and online platforms changed how rural tourism is marketed, allowing direct engagement between travelers and rural destinations. With the digital transformation, rural tourism diversifies further, incorporating wellness tourism, adventure activities, and culinary experiences. In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic drove a resurgence in rural tourism as travelers sought less crowded destinations and outdoor experiences. The increased emphasis falls on responsible travel and sustainability in rural tourism practices, with many destinations adapting to meet these new expectations.

There is no one final definition of Rural Tourism, though different authors explain it in their own way; for instance, Rural tourism is tourism that occurs in rural areas and is deeply connected to the characteristics of these areas, including small-scale settlements, traditional lifestyles, and natural landscapes. It emphasises interaction with nature, agricultural activities, and the local community (Lane, 1994). Rural tourism encompasses all tourist activities in rural areas, particularly those tied to agricultural landscapes, traditional rural practices, and rural life's cultural and social aspects (Roberts & Hall, 2001). Rural tourism is a form of tourism where visitors experience the rural environment, including the way of life, culture, and natural environment of the countryside. It often includes farm tourism, nature-based tourism, and ecotourism (Sharpley & Sharpley, 1997). Nowadays, we have more broadened definition of rural tourism, for example by the United Nations

World Tourism Organization: Rural tourism is a type of tourism activity in which the visitor's experience is related to a wide range of products generally linked to nature-based activities, agriculture, rural lifestyle/culture, angling, and sightseeing. Rural tourism activities take place in non-urban (rural) areas with the following characteristics: i) low population density, ii) landscape and land use dominated by agriculture and forestry, and iii) traditional social structure and lifestyle. The European Parliament Research Service (EPRS) defines Rural tourism as tourism activities occurring in non-urbanised, natural environments where the central theme revolves around nature, rural heritage, and agricultural landscapes; according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Rural tourism encompasses all tourism activities in rural areas, particularly those tied to agricultural landscapes, traditional rural practices, and the cultural and social aspects of rural life. As we can see, the similarities and differences have evolved throughout the years, but each definition highlights the importance of local culture, nature, and agricultural practices in shaping rural tourism, although the emphasis varies among scholars.

Rural tourism and its development are directly and indirectly related to several United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); it aligns with multiple SDGs by fostering sustainable economic growth, supporting local communities, promoting responsible consumption, and preserving natural and cultural heritage. When appropriately managed, rural tourism can be a powerful tool in contributing to these global goals for sustainable development. Rural tourism, when developed sustainably, can contribute to achieving the following SDGs:

**SDG 1: No Poverty:** Rural tourism can help alleviate poverty by creating income and job opportunities in rural areas, often where other economic activities are limited. It supports local economies by attracting tourists and developing services such as hospitality, local crafts, and Agri-tourism.

**SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth:** Tourism, including rural tourism, is mentioned explicitly in this goal as a driver of economic growth. Sustainable rural tourism creates jobs, promotes local entrepreneurship, and stimulates other sectors, such as agriculture and small-scale production. It helps diversify the economy in rural areas, providing new opportunities for employment and innovation.

**SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities:** This goal emphasises making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable. Rural tourism supports this by preserving cultural heritage and revitalising rural communities, often depopulated due to urban migration. It encourages sustainable community planning that integrates tourism while preserving the natural and cultural landscape.

**SDG 12: Responsible Consumption and Production:** Sustainable rural tourism encourages responsible resource consumption, promotes local products (e.g., food and crafts), and reduces environmental impact. It promotes responsible tourism practices, ensuring that tourism development does not exploit local resources or harm ecosystems.

**SDG 13: Climate Action:** Rural tourism often incorporates **ecotourism** and other sustainable practices that align with efforts to mitigate climate change. By promoting low-impact, nature-based activities, rural tourism can reduce the carbon footprint and encourage climate-resilient development in rural regions.

**SDG 15: Life on Land:** This goal focuses on protecting, restoring, and promoting sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems. **Rural tourism**, particularly ecotourism and Agri-tourism, can contribute to protecting biodiversity, forests, and landscapes. It often encourages the conservation of natural resources and wildlife protection through sustainable tourism practices.

**SDG 17: Partnerships for the Goals:** Rural tourism development often involves partnerships between governments, local communities, international organisations, and the private sector. Collaboration is key to ensuring sustainable practices, sharing knowledge, and providing financial or technical assistance.

Along with the development of rural tourism worldwide and to represent and support the interests of rural tourism businesses and stakeholders across Europe, the "RuralTour – European Federation of Rural Tourism" was created in 1990, uniting 28 professional organisations from 25 countries, plus four affiliated members in 4 countries of Central Asia – summing up to more than 100.000 establishments. Its main goals include:

- Promoting Rural Tourism as a sustainable, competitive, and attractive form of tourism;
- Contributing to the socio-economic development of rural areas in Europe;
- Supporting Local Economies, the federation helps strengthen local economies, creating job opportunities and income for rural communities, particularly in regions where agriculture or traditional industries may be declining;
- Standardising Quality by establishing and maintaining high-quality standards for rural tourism services and accommodations, ensuring a consistent, positive experience for tourists across Europe;
- Advocating for Rural Tourism, acting as a voice for rural tourism operators at the European level, advocating for policies and initiatives

that benefit rural tourism development, such as infrastructure improvements, marketing, and financial support for rural businesses;

- Encouraging Sustainable Practices promoting environmentally friendly and culturally respectful tourism practices, ensuring that tourism development does not negatively impact rural communities or their natural and cultural heritage;
- Networking and Collaboration: providing a platform for stakeholders in rural tourism to exchange knowledge, share best practices, and collaborate on projects, fostering innovation and growth in the sector.

To underline the significance of rural tourism in preserving the local cultures and traditions, celebrating diversity, fighting rural depopulation, and providing opportunities through protecting biodiversity, the UN World Tourism Organization launched the project Best Tourism Villages in 2021 for villages of low population density (up to 15.000 inhabitants), located in the areas with a high presence of traditional activities, cultures and traditions. Almost 260 candidate villages from around the world, showing their excellence, compete to win the status of the Best Tourism Villages. The places go through explicit evaluation by the independent advisory board in 9 areas (Cultural and Natural Resources, Promotion and Conservation of Cultural Resources, Economic Sustainability, Social Sustainability, Environmental Sustainability, Tourism Development and Value Chain Integration, Governance and Prioritization of Tourism, Infrastructure and Connectivity, Health, Safety and Security). Being named the Best Tourism Village by UNWTO leads to increased awareness and interest from travelers, encouraging the local population to return to their homes, engage in relevant business and contribute to the overall goals set by the local and international governmental and non-governmental establishments.

Rural tourism development in the Adjara region also holds great potential for diversifying the local economy, preserving cultural heritage, and promoting sustainable tourism practices. With its natural beauty, agricultural traditions, cultural festivals, hospitable communities and well-developed tourism infrastructure, Adjara is well-positioned to become a significant rural tourism destination in Georgia. One of the main goals of the regional tourism board, the Department of Tourism and Resorts of Adjara, is the development of tourism products and services aimed to:

- Create compelling, marketable experiences that attract visitors and satisfy their needs;
- Contribute to the sustainable growth and diversification of the local economy;
- Enhance environmental conservation and cultural preservation;

- Improve destination competitiveness and address seasonality;
- Support community development and involvement.

As a governmental establishment, the regional tourism board has a planned and approved state budget for running several projects aimed at rural tourism development. These projects are:

- 1. Rural Tourism International Conference:** The primary goal of the conference is to bring together participants, including foreign and Georgian experts, entrepreneurs, guesthouse owners, travel agents, and representatives from various sectors such as rural and ecotourism, as well as governmental and non-governmental organisations. The focus is to discuss the challenges and opportunities for rural tourism development. During the conference, Georgian and international experts share their experiences, conduct presentations and seminars, and participate in excursions and study visits to the mountainous regions. This engagement with local communities help generate recommendations for advancing rural tourism.
- 2. Rural Tourism Festival “Gandagana”:** One of the most popular events in Adjara is the Gandagana Rural Tourism Festival, which adds to the charm of Batumi's sunny autumn. Held in October, the festival brings vibrant colors and energy from the mountains into the city, immersing the visitors in the authentic village atmosphere, showcasing their unique products—fruits, dairy, wine, sweets, handicrafts, and more; experiencing local culture, traditions, cuisine, and folklore. The festival grounds are organised into thematic areas, where guests can savour traditional dishes and even participate in their preparation, travel in the mountainous part of the region and engage in the everyday activities of the locals.
- 3. International Birdwatching Festival:** There are few places on earth where bird migration is as impressive as in Batumi. 2008, the first Batumi Raptor Count made headlines when over 800,000 raptors were counted at this poorly known bottleneck. Since then, hundreds of birders have visited the place, and its fame has continued to grow. This event has already taken place for the 10th time in 2024. It features a conference with the participation of famous foreign and Georgian ornithologists, educational lectures and activities for children, and organised tours to the birdwatching platforms for those interested. Within the framework of the festival, the region was visited by journalists from various publications who work in bird observation.
- 4. International Hiking Festival:** In 2024, Adjara hosted a large-scale 5-day hiking festival, "From the Sea to the Mountain," for the first time. About 100 hikers walked a 45-kilometer route in the alpine zone.

- 5. Publishing Thematic Books** such as *The Culinary Trip to Adjara*, *Fish in local cuisine*, *Folk Crafts in Adjara*, *Folk Games and Toys in Adjara*, and *Public Traditions and Rituals in Adjara*. These books bring together the local population's past and present, stories, customs and rituals that have been forgotten. Distributed free of charge in printed and digital format, these thematic books create bonds between the young and elder generation, local hosts and traveling guests, reminding and introducing an essential part of the identity and authenticity. The local population, especially the elderly ones, were actively engaged in preparing these books as they are the primary source of old stories, habits, traditions, and recipes passed from generation to generation.
- 6. Mountainous Routes:** More than 25 easy and moderate adventurous routes of different duration and distances are marked in the mountainous area of Adjara, each supported by specific guidelines: route details and description, what to see on the route, where to stay and eat, with relevant contact details and prices. These routes take travelers to the region's beautiful landscapes, lakes, and waterfalls, offering them the opportunity to stay at local guesthouses or well-equipped tourist shelters. The local population is trained as mountain guides and accompany the travelers on these routes, though GPX files are also available for those hikers who prefer to travel alone.
- 7. Picnic and Camping Areas:** There are 15 picnic and camping areas in Adjara, both near Batumi and at different altitudes above sea level. Ghoma, Kvesaura, Robi, Tago, Mirveti, Chirukhi, Nakonagvari, Jvarimindori, Kapnistavi, Shuamta, Zekari, Batumi Botanical Garden, Alpine Botanical Garden, Mtirala National Park, Kintrishi National Park picnic and camping areas are arranged to admire the picturesque landscapes of Adjara. The local population was involved in planning, choosing, and implementing work in these areas. They were the hosts who met and greeted the guests and provided them with the necessary information and relevant services.
- 8. Tourist Shelters:** Three tourist shelters in Adjara are located at Jvarimindori, Mtirala National Park and Kintrishi National Park. The Agency of Protected Areas of Georgia constructed and managed the national parks' shelters. In contrast, the Jvarimondori tourist shelter was built and is managed by the Department of Tourism and Resorts of Adjara. It is located in Shuakhevi municipality at 2000 m above sea level and connects the protected area of Kintrishi and Shuakhevi municipality. It is located near the border of the neighboring region, Guria. In addition, the longest 88-kilometre hiking route in Adjara passes through Jvarimindori. Those who want to travel on this route can rest and spend the night in one of the four free tourist shelters of

Jvarimindori. One can find a fireplace, a picnic area, a shower and a bathroom. The residents living nearby are responsible for taking care of this shelter and are involved in hosting the travelers who get there. Hence having a source of income.

- 9. Tourist Information Centres:** Nine tourist information centres in Adjara are ready to assist travelers. They are located at Batumi International Airport, Batumi Boulevard, Argo Cable Car, the Georgian-Turkish border (Sarpi), and the Kobuleti, Keda, Shuakhevi, and Khulo municipalities. Residents are employed in the tourist information centres of the municipalities.
- 10. Other Tourism Infrastructure:** Along with the development of existing mountain routes, new tourist infrastructure has been added to mountainous Adjara in all five municipalities in recent years. Among them are the tourist trail to the historical fortress of Khikhani, the tourist trail on the Kobuleti peatland, the canyoning infrastructure in Kapnistavi and Uchkho villages, the cycling route in Kaviani village, constructing the bird watching tower for the development of ecotourism and tourist infrastructure on the Ispani peatland.
- 11. The "Good Host" project** is being launched in the Adjara region to enhance hospitality standards and service quality in rural accommodations. This initiative serves as a quality mark and incentive for hosts to improve their service delivery and management skills, contributing to the growth of rural businesses. To obtain the "Good Host" status, lodging facilities must meet specific mandatory and recommended criteria set by the Tourism Product Development Agency, the European Rural Tourism Federation, and the Estonian Rural Tourism Organization. Eligible facilities include family hotels and guesthouses in rural areas, registered in the economic activities register and listed on international accommodation platforms for at least one year. The project aims to ensure the provision of tidy accommodations, create a comfortable environment, and preserve the local cultural and natural heritage. The "Good Host" status enhances credibility among visitors and signifies adherence to hospitality principles. Once granted, the "Good Host" status comes with marketing support from the Tourist Product Development Agency, including professional photo and video material, signage, branded souvenirs, social media management consultation, staff training, and opportunities for knowledge sharing through information tours across Georgia.
- 12. Pieces of training** for those working in the hospitality industry: Annually, over 20 thematic pieces of training for more than 1000 participants are held by the Department of Tourism and Resorts of



Adjara to improve the theoretical and practical knowledge of the local population regarding the service quality and service delivery: Introduction of wine to guests, wine degustation and basic rules of wine service; successful sales, serving coffee and tea, housekeeping, stewarding, first aid, social media management, self-motivation and self-development, work safety, cooking fish and meat, preparing sauces, inclusive tourism services, tour guiding, communication and marketing.

- 13. Regional Tourism Excellence Awards:** The "Magnolia" ceremony is a prestigious event that honors outstanding figures in the region's tourism and hospitality sector with special awards and certificates of appreciation. Organised by the department since 2015, this ceremony follows thorough research to determine the winners. The research consists of several components contributing to a points system for identifying awardees. These components include surveys of tourists, online customer feedback, assessments of the tourism industry, surveys of travel agencies, evaluations of guides, and feedback from accommodation and food establishments. Data from Booking.com, Google Maps, and TripAdvisor ratings are also considered. The ceremony attracts attendees from the regional tourism sector and representatives from government bodies and non-governmental organisations involved in tourism development. This event fosters the adoption of modern standards in tourist services and motivates the private sector to enhance service quality continuously.
- 14. Mystery Guest:** Using the mystery guest method, a survey of the service quality in 100 accommodation facilities and 100 catering facilities throughout Adjara, both in the city and in the mountainous areas, was carried out to regularly monitor and evaluate the quality of service in tourist facilities in the region.
- 15. Video Lessons:** Short videos on various topics were prepared as educational resources that use video as the primary medium to convey information, teach concepts, or demonstrate skills. These video lessons are a versatile and effective way to deliver educational content, making learning more engaging and accessible. These videos are accessible free of charge on the official webpage and social media channels of the Department of Tourism and Resorts of Adjara.

Developing rural tourism requires a comprehensive approach that balances economic growth, sustainability, and community involvement. Here are the strategies employed by the Department of Tourism and Resorts of Adjara for rural tourism development:

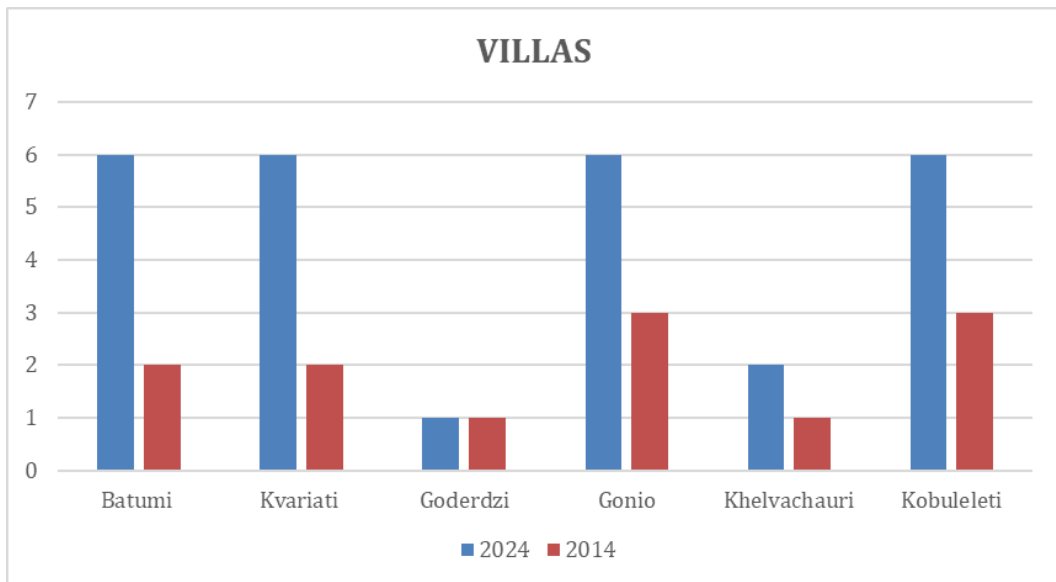
- **Community Engagement:** Involve local communities in tourism planning and decision-making. Encourage local participation in developing tourism products and services, ensuring equitable benefits are shared.
- **Cultural Heritage Promotion:** Highlight and preserve local culture, traditions, and heritage through festivals, crafts, and storytelling. This creates authentic experiences for tourists and helps maintain community identity.
- **Diverse Product Development:** Develop a range of tourism products, including agri-tourism, adventure tourism, wellness retreats, and culinary experiences, to attract different market segments.
- **Infrastructure Improvement:** Invest in infrastructure such as roads, signage, public transportation, and amenities (e.g., accommodations and restrooms) to enhance visitor experience and accessibility to rural areas.
- **Marketing and Branding:** Create targeted marketing campaigns that showcase the unique aspects of the rural destination, emphasising its natural beauty, cultural offerings, and experiential opportunities. Utilise digital marketing and social media to reach broader audiences.
- **Partnerships and Collaboration:** Foster partnerships between local governments, businesses, and tourism organisations to promote rural tourism collectively. Collaborative efforts enhance resource sharing and amplify marketing reach.
- **Training and Capacity Building:** Provide training and capacity-building programs for local businesses and communities to enhance their skills in hospitality, service delivery, and sustainable tourism practices.
- **Monitoring and Evaluation:** Establish mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating tourism impact, ensuring that development aligns with sustainability goals and community well-being.
- **Accessibility Improvements:** Ensure that rural destinations are accessible to all visitors, including those with disabilities. This involves improving transportation options and making facilities more user-friendly.
- **Agri-Tourism Development:** Encourage farmers to diversify into agri-tourism by offering farm stays, tours, and local produce experiences to provide additional income streams for rural communities.
- **Innovative Technology Utilisation:** Leverage technology to enhance visitor experiences, such as virtual tours, mobile apps for local

attractions, and online booking systems for accommodations and activities.

- **Sustainable Practices:** Implement eco-friendly practices to minimise tourism's environmental impact, such as promoting conservation efforts, waste reduction, and sustainable resource management.

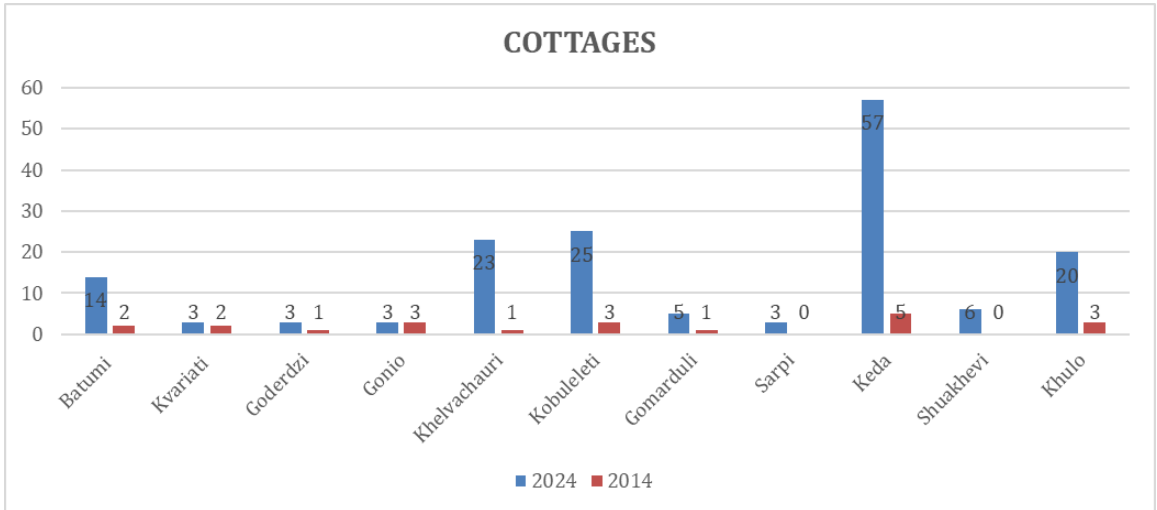
These strategies help create a vibrant, sustainable rural tourism sector that benefits visitors and local communities while preserving rural areas' natural and cultural heritage. Taking into consideration what efforts were made to develop rural tourism in the Adjara region, we can compare the number of accommodation facilities in the decades' perspective:

- **Glamping:** In 2014, there was no glamping in the Adjara region, but as soon as the first one appeared in 2020 in Keda municipality, glamping became a significant accommodation option. There are 14 locations region-wide: one in Batumi, Kvartiati, Sarpi, Kobuleti, and Khulo, two in Khelvachauri, and seven in Keda.
- **Villas:** By 2014, there were only 12 villas in Adjara, though the number increased to 27 in ten years.



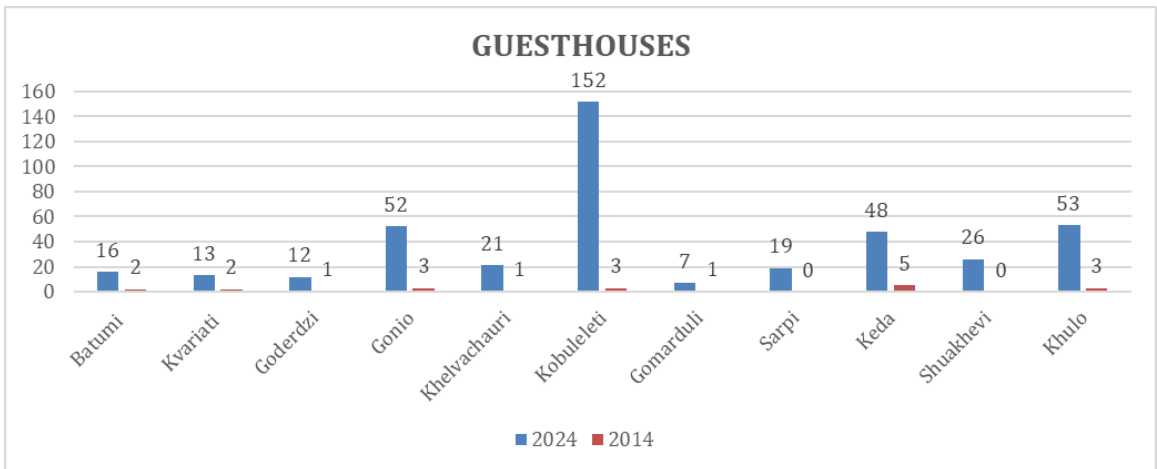
Source: infoajara.com

- Cottages: The number of cottages grew from 21 in 2014 to 162 in 2024, a 671% increase.



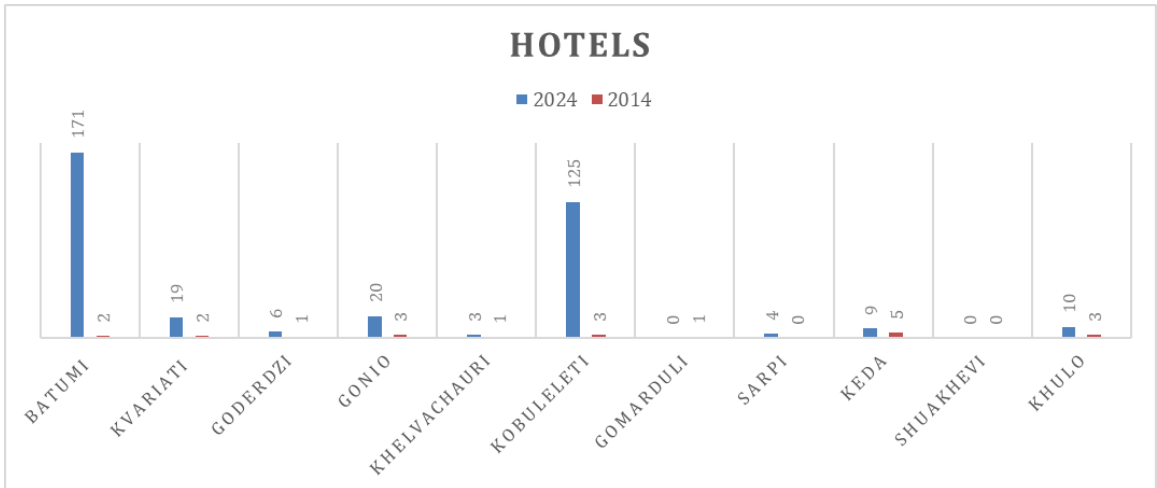
Source: infoajara.com

- Guesthouses: By 2024, the number of guesthouses in the Adjara region surged by over 1895%, reaching 419 locations.



Source: infoajara.com

- Hotels: The region saw significant improvement in hotel accommodations, with the number of hotels rising from 21 in 2014 to 367 in 2024, an increase of 1647%.



Source: infoajara.com

- Hostels: In 2014, there were no hostels in the Adjara region. However, five hostels are now available due to the growing number of young and budget travelers.

## Conclusions

- Even though rural tourism has existed for almost a century, there is no universally accepted definition, as different scholars and organisations interpret it based on their perspectives and the context of their research. Despite the variations, many definitions of rural tourism emphasise certain core aspects, such as interaction with nature, agricultural activities, rural lifestyles, small-scale settlements, and traditional social structures.
- Rural tourism has significant connections to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), as it can promote sustainable development, economic growth, and community well-being in rural areas. Rural tourism can provide income-generating opportunities for local communities, reducing poverty by creating jobs and supporting small businesses; it can encourage sustainable agricultural practices and local food production, which can enhance food security and nutrition for local populations and create job opportunities in hospitality, guiding, and various service industries, contributing to economic growth in rural areas while promoting fair labour practices.
- Rural tourism can help revitalise rural areas, making them more attractive for residents and visitors alike and encouraging tourists to engage in sustainable behaviours, such as minimising waste and supporting local products, thus fostering a culture of sustainability. It can emphasise environmental conservation, raising awareness about

climate change and encouraging eco-friendly practices among visitors and host communities, contributing to preserving biodiversity, landscapes, and ecosystems by promoting conservation efforts and responsible use of natural resources.

- Adjara region is where rural tourism grows quickly and visibly: different projects are implemented by the regional tourism board in collaboration with the governmental and non-governmental bodies, implementing high-standard projects tackling various aspects of rural tourism. They create and diversify the tourist products and services, involve local communities, help them develop small and medium-sized businesses through training and sharing the experiences from both national and international entrepreneurs and experts, create a competitive environment to encourage further development and excellence of their activities and introduces different ways of engagement to the local population.
- The strategies used by the Department of Tourism and Resorts of Adjara align with European best practices and recommendations, contributing to creating a similar environment and expectations for international visitors. They cover all the key points of rural tourism development, such as community engagement, cultural heritage promotion, diversification of tourism products and services, training and capacity building, etc.
- Rural tourism development contributes to the revival of traditional villages-this suggestion is backed by the increased number of accommodations in 2024 compared to 2014.

**Conflict of Interest:** The authors reported no conflict of interest.

**Data Availability:** All data are included in the content of the paper.

**Funding Statement:** The authors did not obtain any funding for this research.

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