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## **Sustainable Development of Mountain Tourism in Georgia**

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### **Abstract**

Mountain tourism is a rapidly growing sector in Georgia, and the role of mountain and ski resorts in the development of the country's tourism. Sustainable development of mountain tourism is one of the resources for economic growth in Georgia; furthermore, it is an important prerequisite for regional development, strengthening social capital and protecting natural heritage. The paper discusses the economic benefits derived from the visits of international travelers and the necessary conditions for sustainable development, and evaluates the influence of the number of visitors to Georgia and the income derived from international tourism based on statistical analysis. For this purpose, correlation-regression and dynamic analysis methods were used. Through secondary quantitative and qualitative research, we discussed important aspects necessary for the creation of sustainable mountain tourism in the country, for which an in-depth study was conducted. Consequently, several key problems were identified: insufficient infrastructure development, environmental threats, uneven distribution of tourism revenues, and limited involvement of the local population. The goal of the article is to analyze the development of sustainable mountain tourism, where one of the priority areas is the transformation of seasonal resorts into

four-season resorts. All the above should be realized in accordance with the goals and recommendations of sustainable development.

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**Keywords:** Tourism; mountain and ski resorts; statistics; correlation analysis, sustainable development

## **Introduction**

Georgia is one of the most important tourist countries in the South Caucasus, with 85% of its territory being hilly or mountainous. The mountainous regions of the country are attractive for external and internal tourism. The diversity of nature, landscapes and climate of Georgia's mountainous region provides significant recreational and resort potential; Georgia is rich in winter and summer resorts and cultural heritage, as well as historical, archaeological and natural monuments (Khozrevanidze, Koblianidze, 2023). In the modern world, ski tourism is becoming one of the most popular trends. The mountain resorts of Georgia have a therapeutic value as well (Zeikidze, 2023). At the same time, an attractive environment, mountain gastronomy, and various traditional and cultural elements create the best conditions for recreation and a healthy lifestyle.

It is important that the resort offers vacationers a well-developed infrastructure, created by considering the recommendations and goals of sustainable development. High quality of service and infrastructure has led to satisfaction and an increase in the number of visitors. The purpose of the paper is to discuss the state and prospects of mountain tourism in Georgia based on statistical data, important conditions for sustainable mountain development and the need for necessary PR and marketing campaigns.

In terms of economic growth and investment in the tourism sector, Georgia is one of the fastest-growing countries in the world. The number of tourists has more than doubled in recent years compared to the local population. Therefore, it is important to discuss the revenues generated from tourism and their impact on the economy of mountain regions.

## **Literature review**

In recent decades, the issues of mountainous regions have been actively elaborated in both developed and developing countries. It is significant that in this respect not only the ecological or recreational aspects of the mountain are brought to the forefront, but also the aspects of mountain people - farming, lifestyle, halting depopulation, etc., i.e., the problems of the mountain region itself. The challenge of mountain survival and development was first raised globally in 1992 at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, when the philosophy of sustainable development of mountain regions was introduced. The thirteenth chapter of the now widely known document,

Agenda 21, was devoted to the multifaceted problems of mountainous regions. Governments of states in different socio-economic conditions increasingly share the view that mountain areas play a key role in the process of sustainable development of mankind, and the importance of this role will increase in the future (Arabuli, 2016).

Equally important, the mountainous regions still represent a treasure of humanity's cultural heritage - be it architectural monuments or samples of social life, folk crafts or unique examples of folklore. This is why the mountainous regions are an irreplaceable source of domestic and international tourism development (Arabuli, 2016). The above shows the importance of sustainable mountain development in the modern world and its role in increasing the share of tourism.

The rapid development of tourism in Georgia and the benefits it brings have not reached a significant portion of the Georgian population. The problems of unemployment and poverty are still acute in the mountainous regions. The social assistance programs and similar redistribution schemes implemented by the government cannot solve the problems; in addition, they are a heavy burden on the state budget (Katsitadze et al., 2022).

With its mountains and natural resources, Georgia can compete with countries with developed mountain and ski resorts. Recently, the number of guests of Georgia's ski resorts has increased almost 10 times, and revenues have increased almost 3 times. The government of the country spares no effort to ensure that the mountain resorts are filled with tourists in all four seasons of the year (Zeikidze, 2023).

Planning the mountain tourism and recreation area is important both in winter and summer, paying special attention to active recreation and sports: ski tourism and recreation in winter, and hiking, rafting, bicycle tours, mountaineering, etc. in summer (Ukleba, 2017). Four-season tourism creates more jobs and allows locals to find a job where they are no longer dependent on seasonal work or the employment office for unemployment benefits. However, for year-round tourism, it is vital that there are enough activities and offers so that the tourists want to spend their vacation there in the low season as well. With financial support, the DMO can and should boost the local tourism economy, especially small businesses that own a tourism-related infrastructure facility (Nayak et al., 2023).

Mountainous regions of Georgia face problems of sustainable land use. One of the problems related to sustainable land use in mountainous regions is tourism activities. Uncontrolled tourism can lead to deforestation, pollution and habitat degradation. Increased tourist activities can damage local resources and infrastructure, disturbing the delicate balance of the ecosystem. Georgia's mountainous regions lack adequate infrastructure for sustainable development. Limited road networks, inadequate waste management and

insufficient irrigation systems can hinder efforts to implement sustainable practices (Akhalaia & Liparteliani, 2023). All this suggests that the sustainable development philosophy of a mountainous region should be fully considered in the planning and development of mountain tourism.

Tourism can be found in almost every mountain region and often dominates local economies, despite its seasonal character. To avoid these adverse impacts, sustainable forms of tourism such as eco- or agrotourism should be developed and promoted; mountain people's involvement and local ownership of tourism infrastructure are at the core of sustainable tourism development. Mountain tourism should satisfy the desires of tourists and enterprises, provide economic benefits to local communities and be environmentally sustainable (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2011). Mountain ecotourism has emerged as a promising way to promote harmonization between tourism activities and ecological conservation (Gamsakhurdia et al, 2024). Mountain people are considered to be among the poorest and most vulnerable people in the world. So, providing them with a safe environment and economic guarantees should be the first priority of the state.

In order to resolve this issue, Georgia has adopted the so-called "Mountain Law", which aims to: ensure socio-economic development of highland regions; stop migration of population from the mountains and, on the contrary, return people to the regions; as well as rational use of local resources, development of industry; boost employment of the population, etc (Europe For Georgia, 2015).

Over the last 50-60 years, tourism, unlike other industries, has undergone continuous expansion and diversification and has become one of the most dynamic and fastest growing sectors of the world economy, due to which it is recognized by specialists as an economic phenomenon of the present day (Melashvili et al., 2017).

Global warming has become the main problem of the modern world. The share of tourism in the total global warming is estimated at 5%. According to researchers, the growth of tourism by 2050 will itself lead to an increase in energy consumption (154%), greenhouse gas emissions (131%), water consumption (152%), and heavy waste (251%). That is why numerous recommendations for sustainable tourism have been developed. Sustainable tourism should: ensure optimal utilization of natural resources; Respect local socio-cultural peculiarities, cherish its cultural heritage and traditions; Fairly distribute socio-economic benefits for all parties involved - employment, profit, social security and thus contribute to poverty reduction (Melashvili et al., 2017).

## Methodology

The research was conducted using materials provided by research papers, strategies, academic articles, books and official reports of the state organizations.

The primary research was conducted according to a qualitative research method, in 2023 (from 19 February to 5 March, length of the interview 20 minutes). A total of 34 participants, with a snowball method, in person, were chosen to participate in the in-depth interview, which consisted of 7 open-ended questions. Respondents were from 15 different countries. The results were reviewed and grouped into categories and are demonstrated in the research findings. Before the interview, all respondents were informed about the aim and objectives of the study and was anonymous.

The paper includes a quantitative secondary data analysis. Official statistical indicators were processed in SPSS and analyzed using linear regression and correlation methods to assess the strength and direction of the relationship between arrivals and tourism revenues.

The aim of the research was to find out the economic benefits and their impact on sustainable development in the mountains; to evaluate the connection between the quantity of visitors and income with statistical tools.

The research question is: to what extent does transforming Georgia's ski resorts into four-season destinations increase local economic benefits while keeping environmental impacts within sustainable limits?

## Findings

The travel and tourism industry is one of the fastest-growing service sectors. According to the World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC), in 2024, Travel & Tourism's contribution to global GDP totalled US\$ 10.9 trillion. This includes direct, indirect, and induced impacts of the sector. As a share, Travel & Tourism represented 10% of the global economy. The sector supported a total of 357 million jobs globally, which is approximately 1 in 10 jobs. Domestic visitors spent US\$ 5.3 trillion, growing 5.4% over the 2023 level. At the same time, spending by international visitors increased 11.6% annually to reach US\$ 1.9 trillion (World Travel & Tourism Council, n.d.).

The tourism sector is one of the fastest-growing in Georgia. According to 2024 data, the share of tourism in Georgia's GDP was 7.3% (Georgian National Tourism Administration, n.d.).

According to the National Statistics Office of Georgia, 7.3 million non-resident international travelers visited Georgia in 2024, which is 4.2% more than in the previous year. The number of international traveler visits includes the number of foreign tourist visits, 6,456,064 (increase +4.6%; share 87.6%) and other visits (non-tourist) 912,085 (increase +1.3%; share 12.4%) (Georgian National Tourism Administration, n.d.).

According to the National Statistics Office, travelers aged 31-50 constituted the largest share of revenue (48.3 percent). Of that number, international visits totaled 6.4 million, up 4.6 percent from 2023 (National Statistics Office of Georgia, n.d.).

Tourist products are a multifactorial indicator, which are influenced by the number of employees, investments, infrastructure, country's economic and political stability, and other compulsory and secondary factors. We cannot assess the extent of the impact of all of them; however, we will highlight the main ones and try to make the most accurate calculation possible.

Nowadays, there is a big interest in the growth of international traveler flows and revenues from international tourism. To this end, we conducted a single-factor correlation-regression analysis based on data from 2011 to 2023 and assessed the impact of the number of visitors and international tourism revenue (See Table 1).

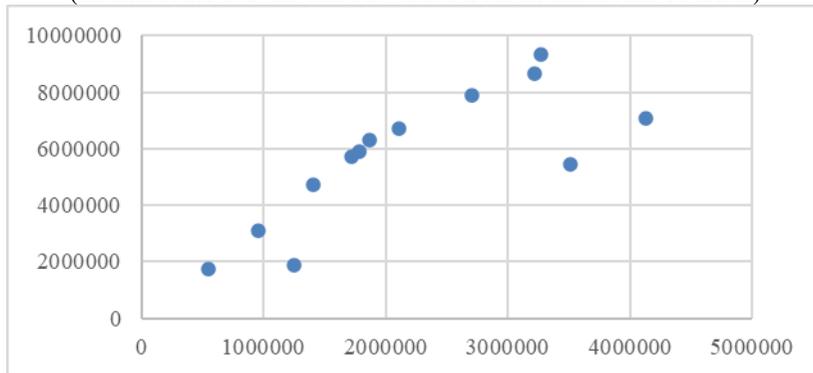
**Table 1:** Number of International Travels and Revenues from International Tourism  
2011- 2023

| Year | International tourism revenues (thousands of US dollars), $Y$ | Visits of international travelers, $X$ |
|------|---|--|
| 2011 | 954909  | 3115527                                |
| 2012 | 1410902   | 4741346                                |
| 2013 | 1719700   | 5734898                                |
| 2014 | 1787140   | 5888709                                |
| 2015 | 1868479   | 6305635                                |
| 2016 | 2110709   | 6719975                                |
| 2017 | 2704340   | 7902509                                |
| 2018 | 3222074   | 8679544                                |
| 2019 | 3268654   | 9357964                                |
| 2020 | 541686  | 1747110                                |
| 2021 | 1244988   | 1881271                                |
| 2022 | 3516634   | 5426903                                |
| 2023 | 4125329   | 7072220                                |

Source: Georgian National Tourism Administration, n.d.

As can be seen on the table, the connection between arrivals at the Georgian border and income from international tourism is characterized by an increasing trend (excluding the pandemic period). Therefore, in this case, the pairwise correlation is linear. (See Figure 1).

**Figure 1: The Linear Correlation**  
 (International Travels and Revenues from International Tourism)



Source: The authors' according to the research

The figure shows the relationship between these indicators. (The connection is linear - the intersection points of the indicators are located approximately or on a straight line). Accordingly, the analytical form of the connection is expressed by a linear function  $y_x = a_0 + a_1x$ .

To solve the function, we created an auxiliary table, through which we obtained the values of the parameters  $a_0$  and  $a_1$ . We reviewed the obtained calculations with the help of the statistical program SPSS. (We converted the number of visitors to millions of people and made the calculation that way.

As mentioned, for analysis, we used a linear function and performed calculations from which we obtained the following equation:

$$Y = 162771.2294 + 0.3535X$$

As a result, we obtained the following economic interpretation of the model parameters: an increase in the number of visitors (X) by 1 leads to an increase in the income generated from international tourism (Y) by an average of **0.3535**.

For the effective analysis of economic events, it is important to know the degree of tightness of interconnection between events. There are several types of correlation coefficients for assessing the quality of tightness: linear correlation coefficient, Fechner coefficient, determination coefficient, D. Yula's association coefficient, etc. But the most used is the linear correlation coefficient, which ranges from -1 to +1.

$$R = \sqrt{1 - \frac{s_e^2}{\sum (y_i - \bar{y})^2}} = \sqrt{1 - \frac{5700746220495}{14234241853033}} = 0.7743$$

$R^2 = 0.77432 = 0.5995$  more objective estimate is the adjusted coefficient of determination:

$$\bar{R}^2 = 1 - (1 - 0.5995) \cdot \frac{13 - 1}{13 - 1 - 1} = 0.563$$

The closer this coefficient is to 1, the more the regression equation explains the behavior of Y.

The correlation factor is **0.7743**. So the relationship between factors X and Y is quite high and straightforward.

One of the significant parts of correlation analysis is to determine how adequately the equation we have chosen reflects the development of empirical data. To solve this mission, Fisher's F criterion is used in statistics. The statistical significance of the equation was tested using the coefficient of determination and Fisher's test (Kbiladze, Metreveli et al., 2023). The tabular value of the degree of freedom criterion  $k_1=1$  and  $k_2=11$ ,  $F_{table} = 4.8443$ . Since Factual value  $> F_{table}$ , the coefficient of determination is statistically significant (the found estimate of the regression equation is statistically reliable).

To expand the analysis capabilities of the regression model, private elasticity coefficients are used:

$$E_1 = 0.353 \cdot \frac{5736431.615}{2190426.46} = 0.926$$

The private elasticity coefficient shows, on average, how much the value of the benefit Y changes with a 1% increase in the indicator of factor X from its average level, in the case of keeping other factors fixed in the model.

Regarding our situation, a 1% change in factor X will change Y by 0.926. Based on the maximum elasticity coefficient  $E=0.926$ , we conclude that factor X has the greatest impact on outcome Y.

It was determined that 59.95% of the total variability of income in the studied situation is explained by the change in the factor of the number of visitors. According to the matrix of pair correlation coefficients, all coefficients  $|r| < 0.7$ , which indicates the absence of multicollinearity of factors.

The assessment of the tourism economic impact is based on the expenditures incurred by tourists. The analysis found a direct correlation between revenue and the number of visitors. Given this, it is clear that the increased number of visitors to the country will increase revenues, which will directly impact the country's well-being and its population. For this, further infrastructure development is necessary, which is accompanied by job generation. This is in line with Sustainable Development Goals 8 ("Decent Work and Economic Growth") and 9 ("Industry, Innovation, Infrastructure").

Based on the analysis of the above data and taking into account that the country has sea, mountains, forests, versatile resorts and legendary healing mineral springs, the country offers favorable vacation conditions in all four

seasons. Given that Georgia attracts tourists in all four seasons of the year, their distribution across the regions of the country varies seasonally. If in summer, the main stream of tourists either heads to the Black Sea coast or mountainous Georgia, in the winter season, Gudauri, Bakuriani, Mestia and Goderdzi ski tracks are particularly appealing for tourists.

More than 65% of the territory of our country is occupied by mountains, and the government is actively developing mountain resorts to create more development opportunities in these regions. The development of mountain regions is part of the country's regional development policy and is aimed at ensuring equal socio-economic development of the entire territory of Georgia and solving social and economic problems of people living in mountain regions. According to various studies, Georgia's mountain and ski resorts have the potential to generate more than 300 million USD as tourism revenue (Business Insider Georgia, 2024).

Georgia's mountain resorts are characterized by significant seasonality. However, it is possible to make them busy both in winter and summer, and tourists have the opportunity to participate in hiking, recreational and sporting activities throughout the year.

The number of international visits to mountain resorts has not yet fully recovered from pre-pandemic levels (83% of 2019). It should be noted that the number of visits exceeded the pre-pandemic value in the first quarter of 2023, which was due to the World Championships in Bakuriani (Business Insider Georgia, 2024).

According to PMCG's quarterly tourism survey, Gudauri is the top mountain resort for international travelers visiting Georgia. A total of 447,696 foreign visitors visited Georgia's mountain resorts in 2023, with 71% of them choosing Gudauri.

Bakuriani ranks first in terms of popularity among domestic visitors. In 2023, 324,326 domestic visitors visited Georgia's mountain resorts, of which 71% chose Bakuriani. In 2023, the number of visits to mountain resorts exceeded the pre-pandemic rate by 21%, reflecting the growth trend characteristic of domestic tourism (Georgian National Tourism Administration, n.d.).

It is interesting to see how many tourist activities are directly related to mountainous areas (See Table 2).

**Table 2:** Distribution of International Tourists by Popular Activities 2023 - 2024

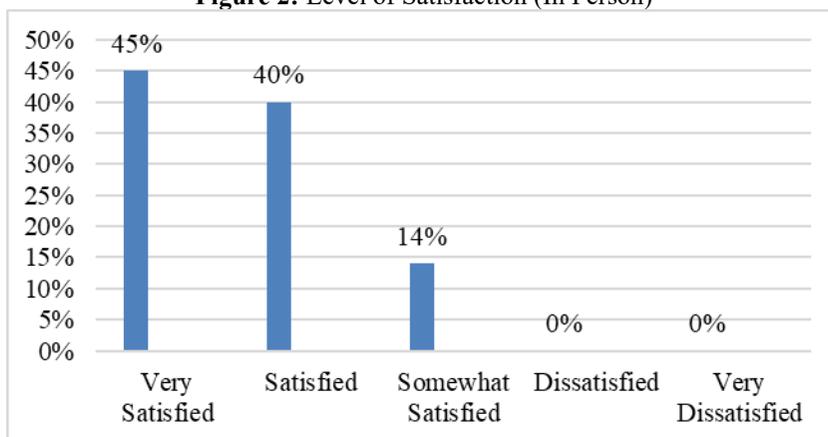
| Activities   | 2024<br>(In Thousands) | 2023<br>(In Thousands) |
|--|------------------------|------------------------|
| Visiting sights, cultural and historical heritage monuments, museums | 3,200,459              | 3,110,784              |
| Skiing, snowboarding, heliskiing                                     | 192,358                | 122,151                |
| Recreation in health resorts   | 79,377                 | 73,822                 |
| Mountaineering, rock climbing  | 61,7985                | 52,263                 |
| Sailing, rafting, canyoning  | 23,485                 | 18,706                 |
| Horseback riding   | 31,253                 | 15,791                 |

Source: Georgian National Tourism Administration

The above-mentioned made it clear that Gudauri and Bakuriani are particularly popular mountain and ski resorts in Georgia. In 2023, Bakuriani hosted the Freestyle Ski and Snowboarding World Championships for the first time. The organization and infrastructural quality of each competition were highly appreciated by foreign experts. The Championships contributed to the dissemination of information and rising awareness, infrastructure development (there were two artificial lakes built on Didveli and Kokhta Gora, 3 new ropeways, 6 new tracks for competitions, artificial snowmaking systems added, etc.), but it is important that all of the above was done in compliance with European standards and with minimal environmental damage. To understand the infrastructural quality and service level of the event above, we offer the main results of the secondary research.

When asked to the championship participants how satisfied they were with the organization of the championship held in Bakuriani, 45% respondents answered that they were very satisfied, 40% were satisfied, 14% were somewhat satisfied (See figure 2).

**Figure 2:** Level of Satisfaction (In Person)

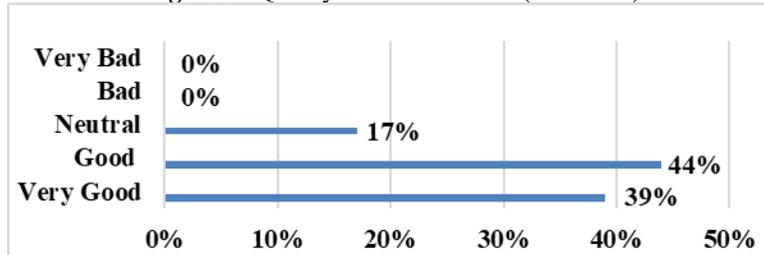


Source: Authors' according to the research

Respondents were mostly satisfied with the infrastructure of ski slopes; they expressed positive emotions towards the ongoing cultural events.

39% of the respondents evaluated the infrastructure in Bakuriani as very good, 44% evaluated it as good, and 17% evaluated it as neutral (See Figure 3). However, poor quality of roads, improper construction and waste management still remain problems, which hinder mountain sustainability.

**Figure 3: Quality of Infrastructure (In Person)**



Source: Authors' according to the research

Another interesting result was the price-service ratio in the Bakuriani resort during the championship. 40% of respondents considered that the connection between price and service was neutral and Bakuriani resorts could offer more entertainment options to their guests. 32% responded - somewhat enhance, because despite the high level of service and equipments there are few things that have to be improved, for instance: there should be more wellness and spa centers and the staff should be more motivated. 27% thought that they absolutely coincided.

Due to all of this, it is clear that such large-scale events have a great impact on the development of a destination and attract more visitors. However, on the other hand, it can damage the environment and create unsafe conditions. All have to be done in compliance with sustainable development standards. It is significant to promote eco-friendly buildings, water and waste management, and car-free zones not only in Bakuriani, but in other mountain resorts in Georgia. In addition, such events stimulate interest among the local population during the season, encourage community engagement, and contribute to increased economic benefits. The growth in visitor numbers further enhances the visibility and attractiveness of the resort, thereby strengthening its overall development and market position.

Mountain regions play a special role in the political and economic activities of many countries, and Georgia is not an exception. Therefore, the approaches used in the world's developed and developing countries are of interest. So, sharing their experience, it is possible to achieve four-season service at the mentioned mountain resorts.

For example, Switzerland is a country where the state policy of sustainable development of mountain areas has been traditionally and

successfully implemented. Initially, the state policy envisaged the implementation of infrastructure projects and allowing subsidies to farmers and foresters in mountainous areas. The efforts were made in the following areas: agricultural support; transportation policy; selective targeted financing; Tax incentives (Arabuli, 2016).

Uludağ ski resort in neighboring Turkey is a good example of proper and dedicated management. It is a fashionable, very expensive resort. In winter, it is an excellent area for skiing, and in summer, it is a great place for hikers and cyclists. Recreational enthusiasts are attracted to Uludağ by excellent ski slopes, first-class hotels, restaurants, souvenir shops, specially designed entertainment programs for children, hiking trails, mineral springs, spa centers and baths. Each of them is equipped with modern technologies. Nightclubs offer a lot of entertainment, including performances of famous stars, various festivals, corporate parties, “Snow Weekends”, etc. Every year, 1,000,000 people visit Uludağ, which is a good example of a four-season resort, demonstrating how important it is to develop service and infrastructure (Uludağ Ski Resort, n.d.).

## **Conclusion**

The natural environment is at the center of the tourism industry. “The 21st century phenomenon” is more and more forcing the tourism business to recognize the priority of the environment. The era of globalization has seen many negative processes along with many positive ones. Specific and clear approaches are needed for the sustainable development of the environment.

Georgia, with its outstanding natural and recreational resources, occupies a worthy place in the world tourism market. The diversified nature of the mountains and the difference between the western and eastern regions of the country create very favorable conditions for the development of mountain tourism. However, it is impossible to attract either foreign or domestic visitors without setting up the infrastructure, qualified personnel and improving the quality of service, because the pricing and level of service are important for all.

Tourism plays an important role in the economic and social development of society and is one of the main sources of income for the state. Therefore, it is important for the tourism sector to respond quickly to global challenges, including sustainable mountain development.

Ski resorts in Georgia should meet the requirements of international standards. It is necessary to have reservation, payment and feedback systems, to organize festivals, competitions and camping in different periods of the year, and to provide high Internet accessibility. It is necessary to analyze the examples of developed countries. In order to increase revenues and the number of visitors, it is necessary to make resorts four-season resorts and maximize

their utilization. To keep the mountain sustainable, it is important to install solar panels, build windbreaks, and to avoid soil erosion, it is necessary to provide transportation infrastructure and proper waste management. All these will help us achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. Achieving tourism sustainability is a continuous process that requires constant care and proper use of the environment, which will ultimately contribute to achieving economic sustainability as a whole.

To conclude, the article notes that sustainable mountain development is not only a resource of economic growth in Georgia, but also a significant prerequisite for regional development, strengthening social capital, and protecting natural heritage.

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

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