

Doing Tourism Right: Gudauri



BLOG

How many years has it been since I was there? Certainly more than ten. An invitation came, however, to attend a couple of days' conference in Gudauri on Sustainable Mountain Tourism, sponsored by Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GbmH (in English, the German Society for International Cooperation). I jumped at the chance.

About 80 of us gathered in the village's Marco Polo Hotel: Georgians, Germans and a few other foreigners. We represented businesses, NGOs, and government on local, national and international levels, and we came to hammer out some understanding of the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats of our conference subject. This, in short, is a SWOT analysis. Simultaneous translation between English and Georgian in both directions via headphones sped things up, and the five-star accommodation in a different mountain region from the one most of us live in didn't hurt either.

There were guest house and hotel staff; adventure tourism company members; advisors to the Georgian government; vocational college representatives; hiking trail renovators and blazers; champions of local culture and more. A good mix, a friendly atmosphere, where we could really talk about what works or might work and what doesn't both in Georgia and abroad. I realized an important thing: you can do nothing, you can do the right thing, but you can also do the wrong thing. This last option can be as harmful as doing nothing, if not more so. For example, the wrong kind of hotel, wrong in possibly many ways. If its waste water pollutes a local water source. If its employment is all from far away, outside the region or country, benefiting the local community minimally if at all. If its size is wrong, or its architecture badly out of place.

We were encouraged to mix and mingle with people we didn't know instead of our colleagues or friends, and this worked well to maximize meeting new people and contacts. The synergy was palpable!

Racha was the special focus among Georgia's many mountain regions, a place which has much to offer but is not nearly as much visited as its counterparts. As with every location in Georgia, Racha has unique characteristics of dialect, food, costume, dance, traditions, landscapes, churches and so on. For such a small country, the

diversity in Georgia is simply astounding. I maintain that a lifetime is necessary to discover it fully, or even to delve deeply into one corner as I seem to be doing.

All of the different interests represented need to listen to one another. What do foreigners want on a Georgian holiday? What can Georgia offer? What will make them rise above in “quality of experience,” a key selling point? What, in other words, will make lasting memories which the visitor can take away and treasure and share? The infrastructure, the online presence and other advertising, the training, the language, the safety, the authenticity, the flexibility of offers and prices, the local sourcing, the offers for guests to participate, the benefits to one’s whole community? All important issues.

It was an eye-opener for me. If, for example, I want to offer my guests bicycles, can I repair and maintain them on-site? Do I have enough for all ages and sizes? Known routes of various difficulty from beginner to off-road? Guides trained in both language (at least English, preferably also Russian) and safety/first aid? Similar qualifications for hiking or horseback guides. Does my guest house have fire extinguishers, and fire escape routes marked?

One dream of mine is to have uninterrupted electricity no matter what the local situation. This proved to be unavailable even at our venue, which lost power briefly four times in one day. Not serious, but it meant that the interpretation booth and projector had to be re-booted. Oh, for a generator which kicks in without missing a beat, automatically, and can be powered either by the grid when it’s working or by the sun when necessary!

Having done our SWOT analysis, we then came up with lists of action points, you know, things to DO. Because all talk with no action is just that, talk. We want to be involved in seeing the mountain tourism situation in Georgia continue to improve, matching in quality the quantities of guests which seem to be on the rise. And to be SUSTAINED.

<https://www.giz.de/en/html/index.html>

Tony Hanmer has lived in Georgia since 1999, in Svaneti since 2007, and been a weekly writer for GT since early 2011. He runs the “Svaneti Renaissance” Facebook group, now with over 1700 members, at www.facebook.com/groups/SvanetiRenaissance/

He and his wife also run their own guest house in Etseri:

www.facebook.com/hanmer.house.svaneti

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