

# Javakheti Plateau – New Tourist Area of Republic of Georgia

Vazha Neidze<sup>1</sup>, Mzia Tutberidze<sup>1</sup>, George Khomeriki<sup>1</sup>, Merab Gongadze<sup>1</sup>, George Lominadze<sup>1</sup>, Nino Pavliashvili<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>The Vakhushiti Bagrationi Institute of Geography of Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, Tbilisi, Georgia

<sup>2</sup>The Department of Human Geography of Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, Tbilisi, Georgia

## Email address:

neidze@gmail.com (V. Neidze), mziatutberidze@gmail.com (M. Tutberidze), gogihom@hotmail.com (G. Khomeriki), merabgongadze@ymail.com (M. Gongadze), g\_lomin@hotmail.com (G. Lominadze), npavliashvili11@gmail.com (N. Pavliashvili).

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**Abstract:** Javakheti, a historical province of Georgia, is a region of complex natural conditions, distinctive landscape and a unique limnographic network. Eight protected areas have been established in this region during the last 20 years. In the past, a variety of reasons hindered tourism development in this region, leaving it substantially behind other regions of the country. Now, as a result of a geographical study of natural, cultural and historical sites in the region - and following the launch of the Baku-Tbilisi-Akhalkalaki-Kars railway crossing its territory - considerable touristic development is expected in Javakheti. Five tourism resource zones have been allocated within the region.

**Keywords:** Tourism in Javakheti, Tourism Resources, Lakes of Javakheti, Protected Areas, Tourism Resource Zones

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## 1. Introduction

Javakheti has its unique place in a landscape diversity of Georgia. Its nature is characterized by distinct peculiarities from other regions. The most characteristic forms of the natural environment of this historical region are: lava plateau, high (2500-3300 m) mountain ridges, volcanic cone-shaped mountains, canyon-like gorges, treeless landscapes, lots of lakes and rivers.

Unfortunately, the uniqueness of the landscapes of this region and inimitable beauty of the environment are not widely known and used for both, international or local (domestic) tourism. In the Soviet period, due to the frontier position and basing of a large military unit here, the entry into the region was limited that prevented the entry of tourists, development of tourist activities, and creation of tourist objects and infrastructure. Now this barrier does not exist and there is an opportunity to maximally reveal the tourist and recreational capacity of the unique natural environment and cultural heritage of Javakheti and this knowledge to be served as a basis for tourism development.

This region is still an untouched territorial reserve for tourism development in Georgia.

Perfect identification of opportunities of tourism development in Javakheti requires multilateral substantial study of the tourist-geographical, landscape-geographical, ecological, security, economic efficiency and other issues. In the Georgian geographical literature the number of researches dedicated to these issues is insignificant, however among them it should be mentioned the most important work dedicated to the study of landscapes and sightseeing of Javakheti, prepared by professor D. Nikolaishvili and her group [1, 2].

The authors of the present article began special development of the above-noted issues during field expeditions in the Southern Georgia [3, 4]. Carried out in 2011-2012 within the project dedicated to the research of the tourist and recreational potential of the nature of the southern Georgia.

## 2. General Overview

Javakheti is one of the oldest historical regions of Southern

Georgia. According to Georgia's geomorphologic scheme compiled by Levan Maruashvili, a famous Georgian geographer, it is a part of Southern Georgia's Plateau zone which consists of Akhalkalaki plateau, Javakheti lake area, Nialiskuri hill, regions of the Samsari and Javakheti ridges and Tabiskuri (Tabatskuri) subregion [5].



**Figure 1.** Lake Tabatskuri and Mountain Tavkvetili.

The main part of its territory is the volcanic plateau surrounded by ridges from north, east and south. Javakheti stands apart from Georgia's other regions for the peculiarities of its natural conditions; its landscapes are in sharp contrast with those of the neighbouring regions. Flat relief of the unforested Akhalkalaki plateau is particularly emphasized by angular relief of the adjacent Trialeti ridge, with its dark coniferous woods and subalpine and alpine landscapes. Karl Ritter a famous 19th century German geographer called Javakheti "a cool island in the South Caucasus rich in air and water".



**Figure 2.** Abuli fortress. Lake Paravani in the background.

Javakheti itself with its complicated relief is characterized by diverse and peculiar landscapes. It comprises of Akhalkalaki Plateau, Abul-Samsari ridge, western downhills of the Javakheti and Nialiskuti ridges. The most typical forms of relief are plateau of more or less flat relief partitioned by river canyon-like gorges, lakes of different size and volcanic genesis almost treeless ridges, only on small areas there are cultivated pine-tree forests and natural groves. Akhalkalaki Plateau-depression is partitioned by the erosive canyons net, whose vertical incise

is deep enough. Its maximum depth is 400-500 m in Akhalkalakishtskali river gorge. Akhalkalaki Plateau on the West is bordered by river Mtkvari with its canyon-like gorges which are in stark contrast with this plateau. This segment stretches from Vardzia to the Minadze village. The main characteristic relief forms and landscapes of this region are clearly visible from the Abul-Samsari and Javakheti ridges and also from the crest part of the Trialeti ridge. The lower part of the Akhalkalakishtskali gorge is sullen enough, its slopes covered with exhausted rocks and dispersed here and there xerophytes is very imposing. Monumental remains of religious, secular and fortification buildings organically combine with the environment and create a peculiar natural-anthropogenic landscape.

The considerable part of Javakheti territory is the plateau of lava origin, with height between 1800-2100 m. There are lots of volcanic rocks: volcanic slag, pumice, basalt, dolerite, perlite and volcanic glass – obsidian. The dwellings of prehistoric man along with obsidian tools producing workshops, as well as tools and production waste have been discovered next to obsidian deposits. The signs of Paleolithic man's existence and activity are in plenty, especially in Paravani Lake area. Among them most remarkable are megalithic monuments – the Abuli and Shaori fortresses. There are also animals' fossils particularly on the Amirani hill in Akhalkalaki and near the village Diliska.

Lakes hold a special place in natural potential of Javakheti tourism development. In total there are 56 lakes in Javakheti, of which six range from 4 to 40 sq. km (table 1). There is the largest lake of Georgia - Paravani among them. The lakes are mostly of volcanic and tectonic origin. The large lakes of Javakheti are rich in fish and aquatic animals, which make them a good habitat and gathering place for wild birds. The route of migrant birds passes over these lakes. The Javakheti ecosystem is a famous habitat of birds most of which are entered into the Red List. 112 bird species nest in Javakheti which creates good conditions for development of one of the types of ecotourism, and birdwatching. White Pelican is the most widely spread species of wild birds in the area. They build their nests on electric polls and on the roofs in the villages around the lakes.



**Figure 3.** Pelicans near lake Madatafa.

**Table 1.** The largest lakes of Javakheti [6].

Lakes	Height above sea level (meters)	Maximum depth (meters)	Surface area (in km <sup>2</sup> )
Paravani	2.073	3.3	37.5
Kartsakhi	1.799	1.0	26.3
Tabatsquri	1.997	40.2	14.2
Khanchali	1.928	0.7	13.3
Madatapa	2.108	1.7	8.8
Saghamo	1.996	2.3	4.8
Total area			104.9

The problem of Khanchali lake must be mentioned especially. Unlike other lakes the water level here is very low – only 80 sm. That facilitates feeding for wading birds. Also water in the lake is comparatively warm. Hence the largest colony of wild birds used to be there. Earlier Khanchali Lake was the forth in Georgia by surface area. In the 1990s by the initiative of local government a dam was built there and the lake lost one third of its space. Water was used for agricultural purposes. As result of unadvised meliorative works thousands of birds disappeared from the lake and never returned to their old habitation [7]. This fact can be qualified as a local ecological disaster.

**Figure 4.** Lake Khanchali.

Tourism and recreation opportunities of Javakheti lakes are multilateral – fishing, boating, other types of water recreation and birdwatching. The lakes of the region remain frozen for long time. The ice is thick enough (for example on Paravani lake it is 47-73 cm) which might interest skaters.

In order to protect rare and unique ecosystems of Javakheti there are created several protected territories: Javakheti National Park, Ktsia-Tabatskuri, Tetrobi, Kartsakhi, Sulda, Khanchali, Bughdasheni and Madatapa managed reserves (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Protected areas of Javakheti [8].

Protected areas	PA acreage (ha)
Javakheti National Park	13498.02
Ktsia-Tabatskuri Managed Nature Reserve	22000.00
Tetrobi Managed Nature Reserve	3100.00
Kartsakhi Managed Reserve	157.50
Sulda Managed Reserve	309.30
Khanchali Managed Reserve	727.30
Bughdasheni Managed Reserve	119.30
Madatapa Managed Reserve	1398.00

Javakheti National Park, Kartsakhi, Sulda, Khanchali, Bughdasheni and Madatapa managed reserves were established in 2011. They are aimed to protect landscapes of the large lakes and marshes of Southern part of Javakheti – mainly for protection of water fauna and water-plants' ecosystems.

**Figure 5.** Madatapa Managed Reserve.

Tetrobi managed reserve is located in the north-western part of Javakheti, near the border of historical Tori. This territory is the most wood part of Javakheti. This managed reserve was created in 1995 to protect the woods and local endemic species of the Javakheti Plateau. There are lots of remains of ancient man's living and culture. First of all Tetrobi Managed Reserve is interesting floristically as there are many endemic species of plants.

Ktsia-Tabatskuri managed reserve is also located in the northern part of Javakheti at the border of Tori. Its territory covers basins of Lake Tabatskuri and headwaters of the river Ktsia. It was also created in 1995 to protect the unique wetland ecosystems of high mountains. It must be mentioned the rich fauna, for example mammals: fox, hare, badger, weasel, etc. There are also lots of historical monuments in this managed reserve.

Abundance and specificity of protected territories creates good conditions for development of ecotourism in Javakheti.

Mountain slopes remain covered with snow long enough to attract skiers to the region. Near Aragva village on the Samsari ridge, a ski training center has already been created.





**Figure 6.** Winter in Javakheti.

There are lots of low temperature mineral water high-output, so-called lava vacluses (in headwaters of the Rivers Kulikhami and Abulistskali). On coasts of the lakes Paravani and Sagamo there are warm volcanic springs (36°C). These springs have no medicinal value but they can be interesting to campers and adventure tourists. It should be noted that in the region there are no spa tourism resources, there is only one climatic resort area – Chobareti.

“The Javakheti architecture is as unusual and diverse as its landscapes are. Built on contrasts, it is as monumental, austere and condensed as these mountains - also a part of this astonishing environment (D. Berdzenishvili) [9]. There are numerous megalithic monuments in the territory dating from the time immemorial. In Abuli, Shaori and Satkhe one can see cyclopean fortresses that stand out among other such edifices in Georgia; there is remarkable Kumurdo Temple of the 10th century, other medieval temples, castles and abandoned villages as well as early Christian stone crosses. Numerous lapidary inscriptions can be seen on the church walls.

The socio-geographical location of a region unlike physical geographical is a historical category. It changes under the influence of the historical, political and economic phenomena which is well seen in case of Javakheti. Historically its geographical location as trade route was very convenient. According to the Georgian historian N. Berdzenishvili [10] its network of roads and central position can be compared only with that of Trialeti. Today Javakheti borders with Samtskhe on the south-west, Kvemo Kartli - on the east, the Tori - on the north, Trialeti - on the north-east, Turkey and Armenia - on the south.

Javakheti almost 200 years was depressive area: at first it was the fringe of the Russian Empire, later frontier border of the Soviet Union or actually restricted zone. Even today different reasons cause that the territory has weak connections with internal regions of Georgia. In independent Georgia transport-geographical location of Javakheti remarkably improved, which is significant for development of tourism. The new highway connecting the capital Tbilisi to Tsalka and then to Akhalkalaki has been built. The railroad

Baku-Tbilisi-Kars is under construction and a part of it runs across the territory of Javakheti. Its role in the region's development can hardly be overestimated.

The region's tourist-geographical location is enhanced by proximity of adjacent Samtskhe's popular tourist attractions such as Vardzia, Vani caves, Tmogvi, Tsunda which historically belonged to Javakheti. Proximity of Borjomi-Bakuriani at North and Kvemo Kartli at East is of no less importance. Be new tourist routes arranged it's feasible to consider these four regions as a unity.

It should be mentioned that the Akhalkalaki railway station is a unique site exceptional not only among the post-Soviet countries but also among world analogues. On the territory of 100 hectares about 170 objects of railway terminals are situated. The station itself is of international importance. It will have all necessary services and infrastructure. The passenger and cargo transport will smoothly shift with special equipment from the so called Soviet rails to narrower gauge spread in Europe and vice versa. The railway project connecting Asia to Europe will start in near future. Later it will be extended from Turkey to England via the Sea of Marmara. Undoubtedly inclusion of Javakheti in such transit communication advances its cultural and economic relations and will give certain stimulus for development of domestic tourism. Last but not least the local population is interested and involved in tourism business.

Tourist infrastructure in the region is now under development. There are a dozen hotels in Akhalkalaki. Some can be used only as a lodging for the night, some are well-planned multipurpose complexes. The number of catering enterprises, branches of banks and pharmacy chains has increased.

In Javakheti together with cognitive tourism perspectives in the industry lie with ecological, pedestrian, moto- and bike-tourism, winter sports, hunting, horse riding and pilgrim tourism.

### 3. Results

It's possible to allocate five zones with different composition of resources for development of tourism within the Javakheti region. The principle of territorial structure of these zones is identical — central areas of the zones feature lakes, with peripheral areas formed by ridges (Abul-Samsari, Javakheti, Nialiskuri) with volcanic peaks (Greater and Lesser Abuli, Tavkvetili, Shavnabada, Godorebi, Gekdagh, Ziareti, Aghrikar, Emlikli).

The following factors were taken into consideration during the zonal allocation of the tourist and recreational potential of Javakheti: distribution of tourist attractions and service facilities, their accessibility, and efficiency of logistics and communications. The task of supporting and organizing tourism business in Javakheti region is distributed to zonal tourist centers which combine a number of functions: accommodation, other services (transport, trade, catering, entertainment, medical, financial), providing tourist information and safety.

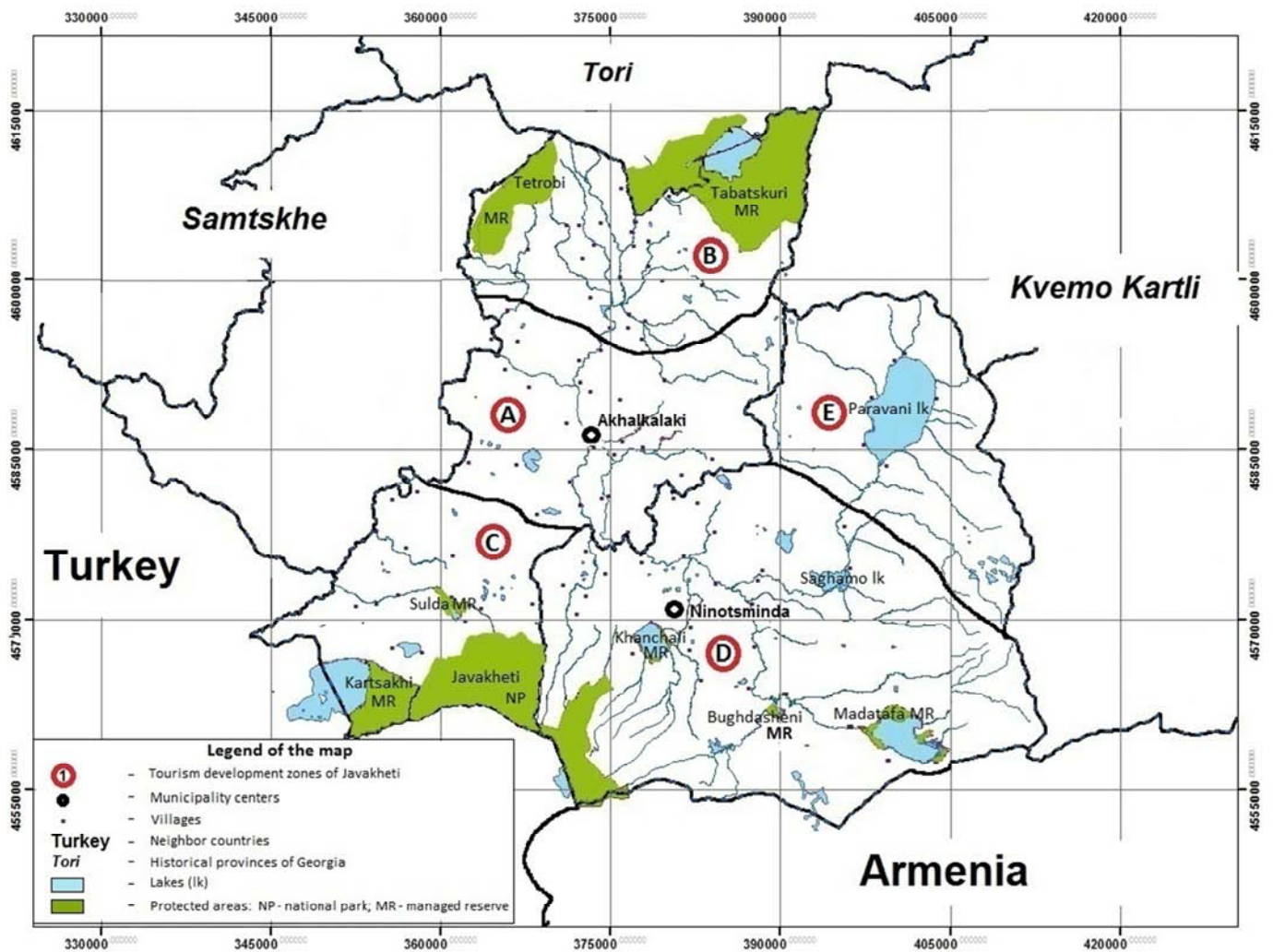


Figure 7. Javakheti tourism resource zones.

#### A. Central Zone

The zone includes the central part of the Akhalkalaki Municipality bordered by the Abul-Samsari Ridge from the East and the high-lying precipice of the right bank of the River Mtkvari from the West.

Natural attractions: The central part of the Abul-Samsari Ridge, the Greater Abuli Peak (3305m above sea level), Amiranisgora, Lake Zreski.

Monuments of cultural heritage: Akhalkalaki fortress and ancient settlement, Kumurdo Cathedral, Buzaveti Church (9th Century), Murjakheti village church, the site of 1535 Battle of Murjakheti, Khospio, Naisa Church (2nd half of the 10th Century), Abuli Church (10th Century), Bavra, Ptena, Chunchkha, Murjikani Churches, Zreski Stone featuring an illustration of “Giorgi the Son of Tamar”<sup>1</sup>.

Tourist centers are currently undeveloped. Akhalkalaki could be developed into one such center. The Samsari Ridge could be a potential site for winter ski tourism. A ski school was created near the village of Aragva in 2010, including a

base building and 300 m long ski track.

Opportunities. Resource potential of the zone can be considered significant. The following types of tourism are prospective in the area: mountainous tourism, adventure tourism, winter ski tourism, cultural tourism, and geotourism.

#### B. Northern (Tabatskuri) Zone

This zone includes the Northern part of the Javakheti Plateau within the Akhalkalaki Municipality boundaries, continued to the North up to the foot of the Trialeti Ridge.

Natural attractions: Lake Tabatskuri, the Ktsia-Tabatskuri Managed Nature Reserve, Tetrobi Managed Nature Reserve, volcanic mountains Samsari, Shavnabada and Tavkvetili, as well as River Ktsia (within the natural reserve boundaries).

Monuments of cultural heritage: Lesser Samsari Caves and cave church, Lesser Samsari Monastery, Lesser Samsari scripture, Meghvrekisi Church (2nd half of the 12th Century), Khando Church (9th Century), Azavreti Church (7th Century), Alastani Hallway Church, Baraleti Church, Baraleti Javakh Hall, Burnasheti Church, Varevani Church, Varevani Church scripture, Vardistsikhe Church, Kotchio Church, Kotelia Church, Ikhtila Church, Baraleti Stele.

<sup>1</sup>The queen of Georgia in XII-XIII centuries.

The village of Kotelia has the most realistic prospect of becoming a tourist center due to its convenient location on the central road.

Opportunities. Resource potential of the zone is significantly high for both ecological and wellness tourism as well as adventure- and geotourism.

#### C. Kartsakhi Zone

It includes the South-Western part of the Javakheti Plateau.

Natural attractions: Lake Kartsakhi and Kartsakhi Managed Reserve, Javakheti National Park (part of), Nialiskuri Ridge, peaks of Gekdagh (2790m), Ziareti (2257m) and more.

Monuments of cultural heritage: Gogasheni Archangel, Gogasheni Fortress, Aphnia Church.

Tourist center is currently non-existent for the zone. In case of development of tourist and recreational resources as well as tourist directions the village of Vachiani, due to its key location, could adopt the role of informational and distribution center of the zone. Creation of an ecotourism base in the areas adjacent to Lake Kartsakhi is viable.

Opportunities. Resource potential of the zone is tied to Lake Kartsakhi (fishing, summer recreation) as well as Kartsakhi and Sulda Managed Reserve (ecotourism, bird watching).

#### D. Ninotsminda Zone

The zone includes the South-Eastern part of the plateau and Western slopes of the Javakheti Ridge.

Natural attractions: Lake Khanchali and Khanchali Managed Reserve zone, Madatafa and Madatafa Managed Reserve zone, Lake Bugdasheni and Bugdasheni Managed Reserve zone, Lake Saghamo, Javakheti National Park (part of), Javakheti Ridge, peaks of Aghrikar (2971m) and Emlikli (3054m).

Monuments of cultural heritage: Khorenia Church, Karneti Church, 10th Century church in village of Saghamo, Saghamo churches, Javakheti Satkhe 11th Century church, Javakheti Satkhe monuments, Kaurma Church, Kulalisi Church, ancient settlement of Digasheni, Doukhobors' sanctuary and cultural center in Gorelovka, Kaurma Bridge, Toria Tombstone.

No tourist centers currently exist in the zone. Ninotsminda, Gorelovka or Sameba could be developed into such.

Opportunities. Resource potential of the zone is significant. Prospects of developing tourist and recreational work are mostly tied to the lakes and rich cultural heritage. Prospective directions include ecotourism (particularly bird watching), cultural- and geotourism.

#### E. Paravani Zone

It includes Lake Paravani and its adjacent territory, as well as South-Eastern part of Samsari Ridge.

Natural attractions: Lake Paravani, Samsari Ridge, peaks of Lesser Abuli (2799m) and Godorebi volcanic crater on Samsari ridge (3189), numerous volcanic lakes of Samsari Ridge.

Monuments of cultural heritage: Abuli and Shaori Megalithic Fortresses, Phoka St. Nino Church, Hallway Church in the village of Paravani, Gandzani single-nave

churches, stone age workshops of the Mount of Tchikiani, Paravani Caravanserai, Stone Cross of village of Paravani, Tchikiani menhir, newer churches and monasteries.

Currently the zone features no tourist center. Foka could be suggested as having potential for developing into such in the future due to development of the monasteries and the presence of an area of influence around them. The Western bank could have its center in Tambovka, and the Southern part in Abuli Fortress Outpost in village of Gandzani.

Opportunities. Resource potential of the zone is significant and is connected to recreational potential of Lake Paravani, which could be used for sports, amateur fishing, sailing and other activities. Geotourism could be another direction in the area and include the volcanic highland of the South-Eastern part of Samsari Ridge, as well as cultural tourism routes on Abuli and Shaori fortresses. Due to close proximity of the lake and mountains, water recreation could be combined well with adventure-, geo- and cultural tours.

## 4. Conclusions

Historians, archaeologists, ethnographers, geographers explored Javakheti but it is still "terra incognita" from tourism point of view. Specialists in human geography researching its tourism potential and revealing contributing factors provide opportunity for the region's unique natural and anthropogenic monuments become factors of its economic development as well. Once caring out tentative work tourism, this "hospitality mechanism" is put in place, it may play positive role in settlement of ethnic relations in this multinational region. Tourism development in Javakheti definitely requires state support. The strategy of this activity must include following aspects:

- (1) research of tourist resources and determination of the industry's priorities;
- (2) working out the plan of the region's tourism development;
- (3) developing the recommended routes;
- (4) planning of tourism infrastructure (hotels, tourist centers and attractions, sanitation, information centers, units of commerce and catering);
- (5) fundrising and investors involvement in specific projects;
- (6) use of the railway for tourism development;
- (7) training the local entrepreneurs, personnel and managerial staff for receptional operating.

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