

DEVELOPMENT PROSPECTS AND SUSTAINABLE TOURISM IN MOUNTAINOUS ADJARA

Tamar Beridze¹, PhD/ Assistant professor; **Natia Beridze**², PhD/ Assistant professor;
Nino Devadze³, PhD/ Assistant professor; **Tsira Tsetskhladze**⁴, PhD/ Assistant professor

^{1,2,3,4}Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University

Abstract. Sustainable tourism as an economic sector is of crucial importance and affects the social, economic and ecological environment. The promotion of tourism in mountainous regions is based on special features that are attractive for visitors. Adjara has a great mountain tourism potential. Statistical data indicates a positive trend in a number of visits in the mountainous Adjara and significant potential for the development of new forms of tourism. For the development of sustainable tourism, it is necessary to analyse the prospects and opportunities of the region, to assess the tourism environment of the region and what hinders the success and development of this sector.

The main objective of the article is to explore mountainous Adjara as a tourist destination, analyse the findings of the conducted research on lodging establishments in the region and identify key problems. The study included quantitative research method and data was collected through a structured questionnaire. The discussion and classification of the research results are provided based on the revealed economic, social and environmental problems, and specific recommendations have been developed.

Key words: sustainable tourism development, mountain tourism, sustainability indicators.

JEL code: Z32, Q01, O18

Introduction

The natural environment is one of the most important resources for tourism development. Recently, a new type of tourism has emerged, especially based on nature. Mountain Tourism is a type of "tourism activity which takes place in a defined and limited geographical space such as hills or mountains with distinctive characteristics and attributes that are inherent to a specific landscape, topography, climate, biodiversity (flora and fauna) and local community. It encompasses a broad range of outdoor leisure and sports activities". Mountain tourism has a high potential to stimulate local economic growth and social change because of its complementarity with other economic activities, its contribution to GDP and job creation, and its capacity to promote the dispersal of demand in time (fight seasonality) and along a wider territory (World Tourism Organization, 2024).

Mountains, especially those covered with forest trees; make up a good proportion of the land area. It is considered one of the most important tourist attractions due to its distance from sources of pollution. Sustainable mountain tourism is part of the issues that have become a concern for international bodies and organizations, including the World Tourism Organization, which has adopted the rules of sustainability in tourism and the modalities of its development. Tourists can enjoy the snow in winter and enjoy the fresh air and shade in summer. Since sustainable tourism development is one that 'meets the needs of tourists and host sites as well as protects and provides opportunities for the future, it is the guiding rules in the field of resource management in a way that meets the requirements of environmental, economic, social and cultural issues, cultural integration, environmental factors, biodiversity and support for life systems (Kharboutli, 2004).

Tourism should be developed in accordance with the sustainability principles. Sustainability principles require changes in the way of thinking and values, where the changes must include global interdependence, life environment management, social responsibility and economic sustainability (Drumm et al., 2004).

¹ E-mail: beridze.tamar@bsu.edu.ge

² E-mail: beridze.natia@bsu.edu.ge

³ E-mail: devadze.nino@bsu.edu.ge

⁴ E-mail: tsetskhladze.tsira@bsu.edu.ge

The promotion of tourism in mountainous region is based on special features like the fresh, cool air, and the spectacular landscapes. Moreover, tourism offers a great variety of opportunities. In mountain regions tourist activities include trekking, hiking, skiing, snowboarding, visiting national parks, bird-watching, and a number of new extreme trend sports. Long recognized as places of sanctuary and spiritual renewal, mountains will become even more attractive as places of escape from city life (University of Berne, 1999).

Adjara region, the popular tourist destination in the Black Sea region, was chosen study area of the paper. The region is known for its coastal and mountainous landscapes and stands out with its rich biodiversity, with four protected areas and national parks, three of which hold UNESCO World Heritage status. The region offers diverse tourism activities, including rural, wildlife, adventure, and eco-tourism such as hiking, horseback riding, rafting, and bird watching. With over 2 million international traveller visits annually, Adjara is not only popular among international tourists but also ranks as a top destination for domestic tourism. Statistical data shows a positive trend in a number of visits in the mountainous parts of region too. The post-pandemic data indicates the impressive recovery rates and increasing dynamics, reaching 23% increase compared to pre-pandemic data in 2023 (Table 1). These numbers demonstrate the growing popularity of mountain destinations among the visitors and highlight the significant potential for the development of new forms of tourism.

Table 1

Distribution of the number of visits made by international and domestic visitors by the municipalities in Adjara (2019-2023)

Mountain Municipalities in Adjara Region	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	% 2023/2022	% 2023/2019
Keda	42025	4793	36501	56269	73093	29.90%	74%
Kobuleti	114177	385	56356	104826	109263	4.23%	-4%
Shuakhevi	13171	109	4400	6860	11364	65.66%	-14%
Khelvachauri	29929		30575	48992	49006	0.03%	64%
Khulo	28519	2124	3551	14671	38392	161.69%	35%
Total	227821	7411	131383	231618	281118	21.37%	23%

Source: author's calculations based on the data provided by Tourism Product Development Agency (TPDA) / Department of Tourism and Resorts of the Autonomous Republic of Adjara

The main goal of the article was to analyse the lodging establishments segment in the mountainous Adjara, to identify the key problems and develop the recommendations based on the results of the conducted research.

The quantitative data needed for research purposes was collected through a structured questionnaire. We have provided discussion and classification of the research results in three contexts of sustainability: economic, social and environmental.

Research results and discussion

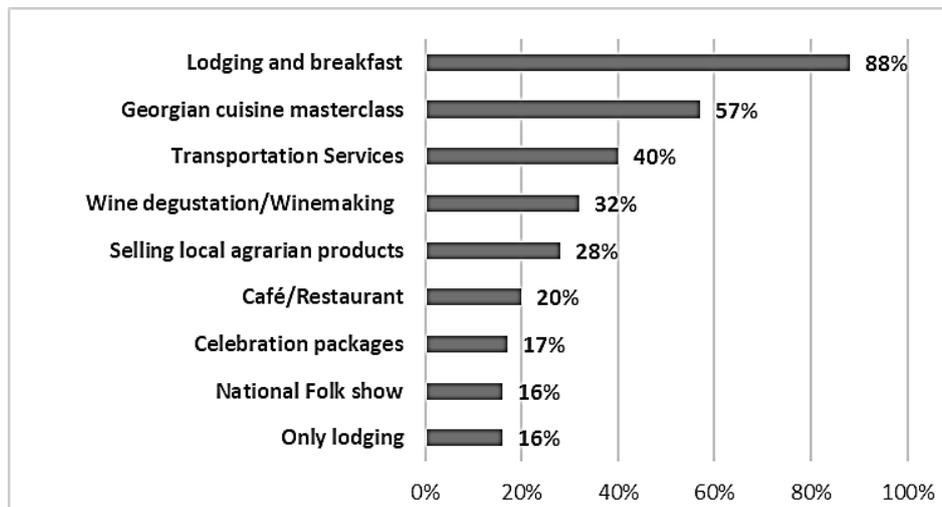
The geographical area of research was mountainous area of Adjara, including Keda, Khulo and Shuakhevi municipalities. Qualtrics online server was used for sending the questionnaire to the respondents. From the total population of 252 rural lodging establishments in the mountainous Adjara, random sample of 156 filled questionnaires were received. Sample covered about 62% of respondents, with 95% of confidence interval and 5% of the sampling error, the survey results are representative for the lodging establishments in the mountainous Adjara.

The profile of surveyed respondents. The majority of surveyed respondents are female (52%) and the age groups are almost equally distributed, with the least represented age groups of 16-24 (7%) and 60+ (11%). The mean for surveyed establishments functioning on the market is 4.9 years.

As the distribution of surveyed lodging establishments show the majority of accommodation sector consists of guesthouses (53%) and cottages (40%).

The owners state that average cost per room night is 58 GEL (Georgian Lari), while the average daily rate (ADR) is 152 GEL (*Stdev*=89). As it was expected the highest ADRs were noted in the subgroups of Hotels and Glampings with mean rate of 213 GEL (*Stdev*=75).

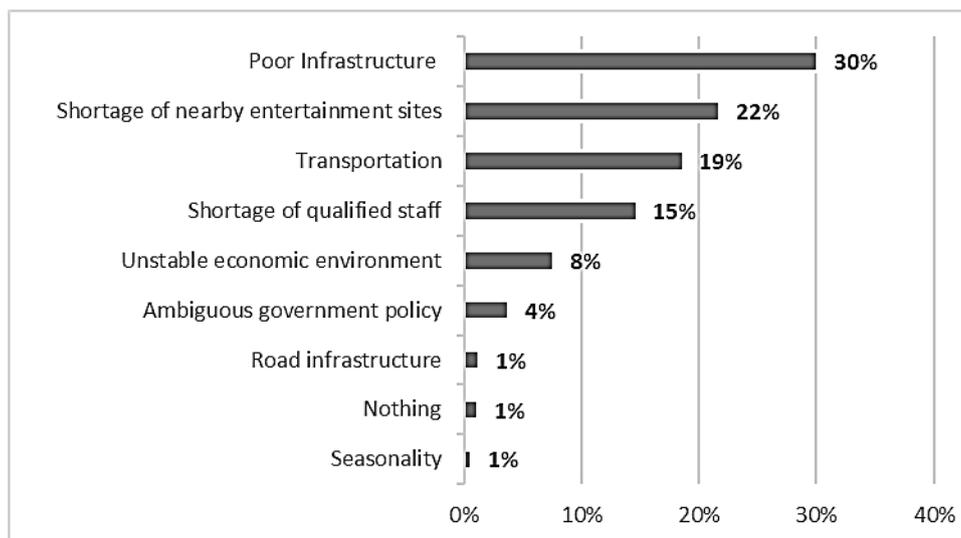
The research shows that only 19% of surveyed establishments are occupied throughout the year, the great majority (66%) notes that they are mostly functioning only during the summer season. Seasonality problem can be caused by natural, social or institutional factors, inertia or tradition. Judging by our research, the trend that can be observed in this regard is to develop such a strategy that will not be focused only on room rental and breakfast offer, and will include a variety of services in tourist packages. For example, fishing, tea picking and producing, engaging traditional activities, trekking in mountains and forests, etc. The majority of the owners try to expand their services beyond the renting a room only. Top supplements include: Breakfast, Georgian cuisine masterclasses, Transportation service, Wine degustation or winemaking, selling locally produced agrarian products, café-restaurant, wedding, birthday or other celebration packages and national folk show. However, we see that the percentage share of additional services is not so favorable. Adding and offering diverse services and activities could mitigate the seasonality problem for mountain tourism. which could be called one of the causes of the problem of seasonality (Fig. 1).



Source: author's calculations based on the research results

Fig. 1. List of services offered to visitors on site

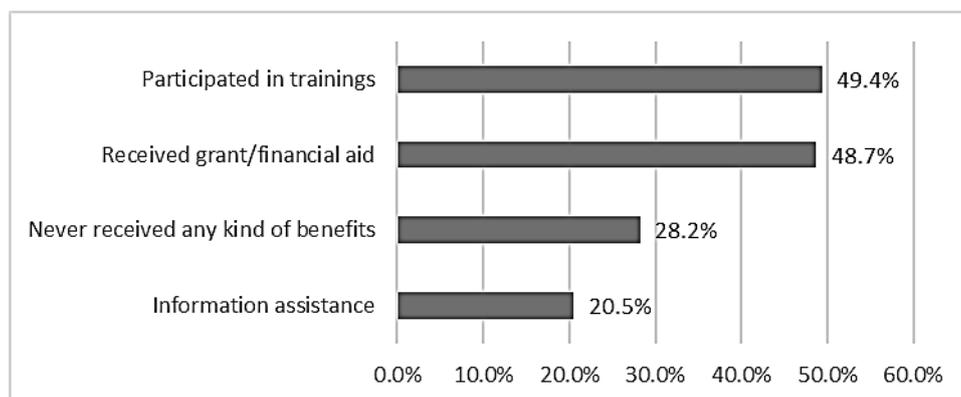
The positive trends are seen in one of the most important indicators of sustainable tourism development - rate of local community employment. 67% of the surveyed owners state that they have employed at least one person on the site, including 17% corresponding to 5-10 or more employed persons. Optimistic perceptions are evident in future plans too. According to the results, 87% of owners are planning to expand their existing business. It could be concluded that the local people do see future in the tourism development and they hope to get more benefits from the industry.



Source: author's calculations based on the research results

Fig. 2. Owners perceptions on top barriers of the tourism development

As the results show, almost the half of respondents have already benefited from several supporting services from the government and/or international organizations, including the financial benefits, trainings for staff, providing information assistance (Figure 3). After analysing the existing practices of the governmental and international programs in the country, we can conclude that Adjara region has seen a notable increase in interest and investment in mountain tourism development. Various financial aids and support mechanisms have been identified to facilitate sustainable development in this sector. One of the frequently mentioned, governmental program "Produce in Georgia" aims to develop and financially support the country's tourism and tourism-related services. The goal of the "Produce in Georgia - Business" direction is to develop entrepreneurship in Georgia, support entrepreneurs, promote the creation of new enterprises/hotels and the expansion or retooling of existing enterprises/hotels (Enterprise Georgia, 2022).



Source: author's calculations based on the research results

Fig. 3. Type of benefits lodging establishments have received from Government/International organisations

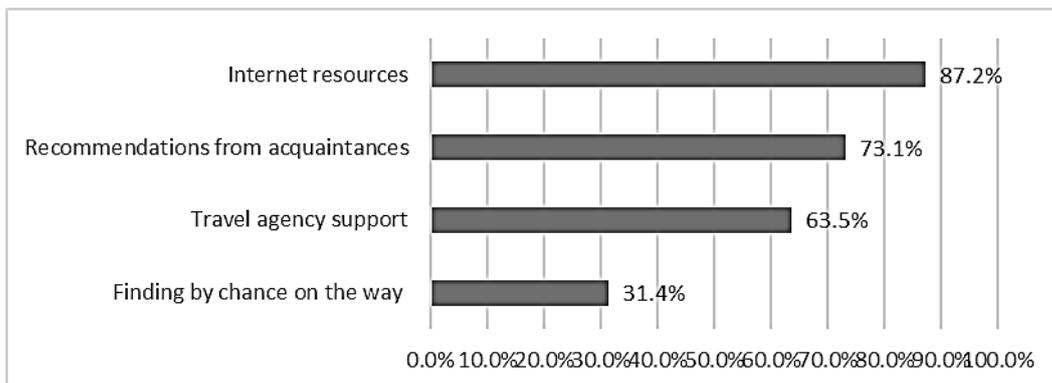
Specific non-governmental organizations (Keda Lagi; Khulo Lagi) improve the well-being of the population living in rural areas through the diversification of agriculture, the purpose of which is to involve the population of the mountainous region, to train them, to participate in various projects. Also, the generation and financing of new projects and ideas (such as family hotels, fast food establishments, greenhouses, animal husbandry etc.) which is made from the Rural Development Fund (Georgia today, 2021).

In Keda and Shuakhevi region, with the support of the European Union "ENPARD" program, the Keda leader project was implemented. Within the framework of the project, it became possible to grow Adjarian grapes and give tourists the opportunity to taste foreign and unique wine. A small bee farm was financed within the framework of the project of the local development group (LDG) of Keda, which serves to promote the diversification of economic activities and tourism, as well as to strengthen the role of women in the village of Wayo. The production of beekeeping products increased significantly after the purchase of a honey bottling machine and a honey vodka distilling machine (Delegation of the EU..., 2020).

Within the framework of the project "Tourism Development School" organized by the regional tourism board, Department of Tourism and Resorts of Adjara, in order to develop tourism and improve services in mountainous Adjara, the identification of the needs of accommodation, catering and other service providers in mountainous Adjara and the training of the existing personnel in various directions are actively carried out (Tourism Development School, 2017). According to the needs, the training modules were written according to the content, which were loaded according to the following topics:

- accommodation facility standards;
- specifics of the cleaning service;
- organization of food;
- online resources and social media;
- regulations related to tourism;
- specifics of working with foreign tourists.

Special interest was caused by the topic of online resources and social media, which was related to the study of modern technologies, implementation and operation through them in the Internet space. The results of our research show that a large share of accommodation facilities manage to position their business in the Internet space, make reservations and increase the awareness of their facility (Figure 4).



Source: author's calculations based on the research results

Fig. 4. Information source for visitors while choosing the accommodation

The respondents evaluated their perceptions towards the overall satisfaction level of tourism development in the surveyed area. The Table 2 shows the comparison within the different types of accommodation measured for 2 variables. Satisfaction level corresponded 5-point Likert scale statement, where 1= totally unsatisfied, 5= totally satisfied. As the results show mean number is stable between the glamping, cottage or hotel owners ($mean > 4.00$), where the most neutral perceptions were demonstrated by the guesthouse owners ($mean = 3.00$) who are operating on the market for more than 6 years. The indicated rates of the respondents' satisfaction levels may be due to the outstanding unique culture and traditions of mountainous Adjara, which in turn is highly popularized by the public festivals held by the local government and municipalities throughout the year, such as: rural tourism festival "Gandagana",

honey festival, Shuamtoba, Machkhloba, Selimoba and other. Holding each festival or event opens up new opportunities for the region: raising awareness and popularization, introducing a culture of recreation and entertainment, increasing economic income and more employment, the opportunity to see famous performers, developing infrastructure, attracting investors, creating a healthy competitive environment (Shanidze, 2012).

Table 2

Respondents' overall satisfaction level of tourism development in the surveyed geographical area

Lodging establishment type	Operating on market (years)		Satisfaction level	
	Mean	StdDev	Mean	StdDev
Glamping	3.22	1.79	4.14	0.81
Cottage	3.03	2.20	4.01	0.87
Guesthouse	6.26	2.54	3.01	1.04
Hotel	6.20	3.33	4.12	0.62

Source: author's calculations based on the research results

Another aspect of social sustainability to be considered is accessible tourism for people with special needs. People with disabilities still face numerous obstacles due to the lack of appropriate environmental and the technical conditions necessary for movement. The major barrier is the accessibility of services in mountainous Adjara, including accommodation, food, transportation, as well as participation in festivals and events in the region. The mentioned challenges are still only at the discussion and recommendation stage. Based on the principles of sustainable development, the mentioned issue requires a prompt response and concrete steps, both by the state to introduce relevant regulatory legislative acts and by the private sector in sharing social obligations and introducing accessible travel practices.

Another critical area of focus are environmental issues of sustainable tourism development. The Department of Environmental Protection and Natural Resources is constantly working in regard of the state of air and water, soil, waste management, geological monitoring, forest resource management, biodiversity, although there are still problematic issues:

- state of waste management, lack of monitoring of the state of fulfilment of the requirements of the environmental legislation in the centres of active pollution of water and atmospheric air;
- purification of agricultural waters in densely populated areas - study of the state of decontamination;
- ecological condition of the sanitary protection zones of the main building of the rural water supply system;
- monitoring of active environment polluting enterprises in connection with the arrival of the holiday season in the region;
- study of the situation of alternative energy use; absence of central water supply;
- unauthorized cutting of timber; Inactive work of the forest disease fighting service; faulty monitoring of landslide and eroded areas;
- damage to the soil through the destruction or movement of the upper fertile soil layer (construction of buildings, structures, car parks, roads, footpaths), degradation or complete destruction of vegetation as a result of compaction and soil tamping (the formation of new paths and roads);
- lack of knowledge popularization of environmental protection, the public's awareness of environmental protection;

- motorized transportation, including cars, buses releases pollutants such as carbon monoxide, nitrogen oxides, and particulate matter into the air.

Addressing these challenges requires a holistic approach, involving joint efforts from the government, local communities and private sector representatives. By prioritizing sustainable practices, investing in infrastructure, implementing effective monitoring mechanisms, and raising awareness, the region can move towards a more environmentally sustainable future.

Conclusions, proposals, recommendations

The findings from the various aspects of tourism development in the surveyed geographical area highlight several key areas that require attention and action from different stakeholders. The following priority actions need to be promoted to enhance the competitive advantages, social equitable and sustainable development.

- 1) Involving and providing travel service and tourism activities for people with disabilities, is a legal and ethical obligation of the tourism industry practitioners. Based on the principles of sustainable tourism, this is a problem that requires a quick response and specific measures, both by the government, the relevant regulatory legislative acts, and the involvement of private business players and the imposition of social obligations on them in the provision of services for the creation of appropriate environmental conditions for disabled people.
- 2) Based on the results of the overall satisfaction level of tourism development in the surveyed geographical area, owners require more support from the government, especially towards the developing or improving the roads, infrastructure and solving transportation problems to the villages of Mountainous Adjara. Government should contribute to the creation and promotion of new tourist products and entertainment sites.
- 3) Taking into consideration the unpredictable and seasonal nature of the tourism industry, tourism development should be integrated into broader economic strategies for mountain regions. Government should be focused on strengthening existing systems and diversifying local economies. On the other hand, property owners should diversify their services and offer more activities to visitors, that will contribute to the mitigation of seasonality problem.
- 4) Direct financial contributions and contributions to government revenues can contribute directly to the conservation of sensitive areas and habitat. Revenue from park-entrance fees and same types of sources can be allocated to pay for the protection of environmentally sensitive areas. Special fees for park operations can be collected from tourists or tour operators. Governments also can raise funds by user fees, income taxes, taxes on sales or rental of recreation equipment, and license fees for activities such as hunting and fishing to manage natural resources. Improved environmental management of tourism facilities, based on analysis of the environmental resources of the area, can increase the benefits to natural areas.
- 5) It is necessary to heighten awareness of the value of nature and lead to environmentally conscious behaviour and activities to preserve the environment. Therefore, it is important to induce people to participate in pro-environmental action by providing general information on environment to make people aware of a problem.
- 6) The Department of Environmental Protection and Natural Resources should manage monitoring system for state of waste, pollution of water and atmospheric air, landslide and eroded areas. Motorized transportation, including cars, buses should be replaced by ecofriendly transports.

7) Collaboration between non-governmental organizations, the private sector, and local stakeholders is essential to promote sustainable tourism development and enhance community participation in the tourism sector.

Bibliography

1. Delegation of the EU to Georgia. (2020). Progress of Georgia in rural and agricultural development. Retrieved from: https://eu4georgia.eu/wp-content/uploads/enpard_ge-2020.pdf
2. Drumm, A., Moore, A., Soles, A., Patterson, C., & Terborgh, J. (2004). *Ecotourism Development – A Manual for Conservation Planners and Managers. The Business of Ecotourism Development and Management (Vol II)*. Arlington, USA: The Nature Conservancy
3. Enterprise Georgia. (2022). Tourism Development. Retrieved from: <https://www.enterprisegeorgia.gov.ge/en/business-development/tourism-development?fbclid=IwAR1ov1uoBGgdLcwPR9XsX711j6uZwXLT5RDapuxGMuIE8PMqeQw98cjvpm0~>
4. Georgia today. (2021). EU ENPARD Supported Project in Keda and Khulo Summarize Four Years of Success!. Retrieved from: <https://georgiatoday.ge/eu-enpard-supported-project-in-keda-and-khulo-summarize-four-years-of-success/>
5. GeorgianTravelGuide. (2020). About Adjara. Retrieved from: <https://georgiantravelguide.com/en/adjara> Tourism Product Development Agency. (2018). Birdwatching Festival. Retrieved from: https://old.visitajara.com/en/blog/Birdwatching_Festival_
6. Kharboutli, S. (2004). *Sustainable Tourism, Guide to Local Devices*. Damascus, Syria: Dar al-Reda publishing.159
7. Ministry of Environmental Protection and Agriculture of Georgia. (2023). On August 19-20, 2023, the Sixth Honey Festival was held in Batumi. Retrieved from: <https://mepa.gov.ge/En/News/Details/21371>
8. Ministry of Regional Development and Infrastructure of Georgia. (2019). 2019-2023 strategy for the development of highland settlements of Georgia. Retrieved from: <https://mrdi.gov.ge/pdf/5fe3112855cdd.pdf/strategy%20-%20geo.pdf>
9. Shanidze, G. (2021). The role of cultural events in the development of tourism business of Ajara. Retrieved from: <http://www.economicprofile.org/pdf/0594a25b75b0d46fd49e9d04f0e990c3.pdf>
10. Tourism Development School. (2017). Trainings and rural tourism. Retrieved from: <https://gnta.ge/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/%E1%83%A2%E1%83%A0%E1%83%94%E1%83%9C%E1%83%98%E1%83%9C%E1%83%92%E1%83%94%E1%83%91%E1%83%98-%E1%83%93%E1%83%90-%E1%83%A1%E1%83%9D%E1%83%A4%E1%83%9A%E1%83%98%E1%83%A1-%E1%83%A2%E1%83%A3%E1%83%A0%E1%83%98%E1%83%96%E1%83%9B%E1%83%98-%E1%83%91%E1%83%A3%E1%83%99%E1%83%9A%E1%83%94%E1%83%A2%E1%83%98-2017-%E1%83%AC%E1%83%9A%E1%83%98%E1%83%A1-2.pdf?fbclid=IwAR1Dzig0tTXInCyqX1a9KpxuzpzNZcd2yy-mLoTPyq0Woq5Uyrrp8Qr0Ncg>
11. Tourism Product Development Agency. (2023). Rural Tourism Festival Gandagana. Retrieved from: <https://visitajara.com/en/about-us/agency-events/5>
12. Tourism Product Development Agency (TPDA). (2024). Distribution of the number of visits made by international and domestic visitors by the municipalities in Adjara.
13. University of Berne. Institute of Geography. (1999). *Mountains of the world: Tourism and sustainable mountain development. Mountain Agenda*. Retrieved from: <https://lib.icimod.org/record/10393/files/378.pdf>.
14. World Tourism Organization. (2024). Mountain Tourism. Retrieved from: <https://www.unwto.org/mountain-tourism#:~:text=Mountain%20tourism%20has%20a%20high,and%20along%20a%20wider%20terri>