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TOURISTIC RESOURCES AND TOURISM DEVELOPMENT PROSPECTS IN GEGHARKUNIK REGION OF THE REPUBLIC OF ARMENIA

Gegharkunik region is situated in the eastern part of the country and was established in 1995. The region has beautiful cultural and natural resources, based on which many tourism routes may be created. The main methods used in the article are: micro and macro analyses, statistical methods, correlation analysis, SWOT analysis. The article analyzes the main tourism assets of the region. Besides, the main socioeconomic indicators, tourism infrastructure, and the current state of tourism in the region were analyzed. SWOT analysis was applied for revealing key obstacles hindering tourism development. Based on it, some steps were offered, such as the creation of new tourist routes, the elaboration of a sustainable tourism development plan, improvement of marketing activities, creation of a typical tourist brand for the region, improving statistical recording, organization of new festivals, etc. The results may be useful for governmental and local authorities, as well as the private sector, for improving their tourism development policies.

Keywords: *Tourism, historical and cultural heritage, Gegharkunik region, marketing, tourist route, SWOT analysis*

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INTRODUCTION. Gegharkunik is situated in the east of the territory of the Republic of Armenia, surrounding Lake Sevan. The region borders Lori and Tavush regions from the North, from the East it borders the state border of Azerbaijan, from the South-West it borders with Kotayk and Ararat regions, and with Vayots Dzor region from South. The highest peak is Ajdahak mountain (3598 m). Spitakasar (3555 m), Vardenis (3522 m) and Geghasar (3446 m) are the highest mountains. Argitchi (51 km), Gavaraget (47 km) and Masrik (45 km) are the longest rivers. Lake Sevan is the largest lake (1279.65 km², the height above sea-level is 1900.62 m) (Marz Gegharkunik of the RA in figures, 2022).

There are 5 cities and 93 villages in the region. The territory share of the region in the territory of the Republic of Armenia is 18.0% (5352 km²). The population was 227.8 thousand people in 2022 (Marz Gegharkunik of the RA in figures, 2022).

The region has a rich touristic potential: mountains, rivers, lake, mineral waters, cultural monuments, churches, beautiful nature, tasty cuisine, etc. Based on this many types of tourism may be developed in the region.

The main purpose of the article is to explore the touristic potential of the region and to analyse the main issues for tourism development. The analysis of socioeconomic and tourism development of the region was carried out, SWOT analysis was done, which reveals the strengths and weaknesses of tourism development in the region, as well as the existing threats and opportunities, based on which a number of recommendations were developed. The results may be useful for state and self-government bodies, private sector for accomplishing tourism development policies.

LITERATURE REVIEW. Unfortunately, there are no scientific papers on tourism development issues in Gegharkunik region. However, many studies prove the positive impact of tourism on regional economic development in Armenia (Tovmasyan, 2022).

Lalayan (2014) explores community-based tourism in Armenia in the context of planning for sustainable development. He suggests that local communities should get engaged in tourism planning in their communities on the highest possible level and should have a decision-making role when it comes to CBT development in their community.

Petersen (2010) highlights the importance of integrated rural tourism development by the example of Goris in Armenia.

Tovmasyan et al. (2020, 2020a) explore agritourism development issues in Lori and Tavush regions highlighting the significant role of tourism in the economic development of regions.

Tourism development issues were analysed in the regional level for Aragatsotn region (Gevorgyan & Tovmasyan, 2021), Tavush region (Gevorgyan & Tovmasyan, 2022), Armavir region (Tovmasyan & Gevorgyan, 2023). In all the regions, tourism is considered a sphere that has high resource potential and in case of necessary steps, it may lead to sustainable social-economic development of the regions.

As for Gegharkunik region, the “Strategy of Gegharkunik region development for 2017-2025 years” has a short section that mentions that the region has a rich resource potential for tourism development. Based on this strategy, the “Action Plan of Gegharkunik region for 2022” mentions some activities towards the development of communities, and infrastructures, introducing alternative forms of tourism because of seasonality, developing agritourism till 2025, etc. However, there is a need to elaborate a specific tourism development plan for the region which will explore all the resource potential, existing problems and give a road map of actions towards developing tourism in the region.

Besides the above-mentioned analysis, the literature review also presents the main cultural heritage of the region and its application possibilities in tourist routes.

People have settled in Gegharkunik region since time immemorial. There are 10,000 small and large monuments in the territory of the region, which date from the ancient Stone Age to modern times (Manukyan, 2013).

Remains of Cyclopean castles, fortresses, ancient sites, and cuneiform inscriptions were found in the territory of the region. The objects found in Lchashen prove that the area was inhabited 5000 years ago.

Many churches have also been preserved, for example, **Hayravank church** (9-10th centuries), **Makenyats Monastery** (9-10th centuries), **Kotavank** (9th century), **Shoghagavank** (5-9th centuries), **Vanevan** (10th century), **Zod Monastery** (13th century), **Sevan Peninsula Monastery Complex** (10th century), etc.

Hayravank Church (9th-10th century) is a perfect example of the harmony of nature and architecture. Saint Stepanos Church in Hayravank was built in the 4th century and is considered one of the unique examples of Armenian architecture. It is built of basalt and tuff. In 1211, the brothers Hovhannes and Nerses renovated the church and built a vestibule with two columns. In the small walled courtyard of Hayravank, there are 16th-century tombstones and khachkars, and outside the wall are the ruins of cells and economic buildings (Alishan, 1893). Hayravank functioned until the 19th century. In the 1980s the monastery was repaired, and the dome of the church was rebuilt.

The monastery complex of Sevan Peninsula was founded by Grigor Illuminator in 305 on the island of Sevan. The island was fortified with a fortress wall back in the Bronze Age. There was a pagan temple here. In the 9th century, the princes of Syunyats made Sevan their stronghold. In 874, Mariam, the daughter of King Ashot Bagratuni, the wife of Prince Vasak Gabur of Syunyats, built two churches here (Orbelyan, 1910): Arakelots (the small one) and Astvatsatsin, which are functioning today. The construction protocol written in 874 has been preserved on the eastern side of the Arakelots Church. There are many khachkars in the territory of the complex. In 1956-1957, the churches were renovated. In 1990, the Sevan monastery school was opened here, which in honor of Catholicos Vazgen A was called Vazgenyan. The peninsula is considered the main tourist attraction of Gegharkunik region with artificial forests, surrounding hotel complexes, and service booths.

Makenis Monastery has been mentioned since the early Middle Ages, it was one of the famous religious and educational centers of Armenia. At the end of the 9th century, Prince Grigor Supan of Syunyats built St. Astvatsatsin Church, which is surrounded by a high wall. The Makenis monastery is considered a building with a new plan and spatial solution for the 9th-10th centuries and it belongs to the Syunik school of architecture (Mnatsakanyan, 1960).

Vanevan Monastery is located on the eastern edge of Artsvanist village, Gegharkunik region. It was founded in the early Middle Ages. According to the construction protocol, the main church of St. Gregory the Illuminator of the complex was built in 903 by the Armenian chieftain Shapuh Bagratuni. Narrator Hovhannes Draskhanakertsi (1912) mentions that Shapuh donated 5 surrounding villages to Vanevan monastery. In the 16th century, due to the invasions of Turkish tribes, the village was emptied, and together with the village, the monastery complex was abandoned. The monastic staff started working again in the second half of the 19th century. In 1871-1880, the buildings of the monastery were renovated by abbot Teodoros Shirakatsi.

One of the famous medieval monuments of Gegharkunik region is **Kotavank or Surb Astvatsatsin Church**, which was built at the end of the 9th century in the historical rural town of Kot. Kotavank was built by Prince Grigor Supan. It is located in the village of Nerkin Getashen of the current Martuni region. The entrances are from the west and south, they had a fenced yard. In the courtyard, there are ruins of monastic cells and other buildings. The dome and roofs have been demolished. At the entrance of the southeastern repository of the church, instead of the altar, there is a khachkar of the first half of the 9th century dedicated to the memory of the chieftain Vardan Mamikonyan. On both sides of the horizontal wings of the cross is written: HOLY VARDAN (Orbelyan, 1910).

Ozaberd or Teishebain Castle was built in the 1st millennium BC, on a plateau between the present-day villages of Tsovinar and Artsvanist. The edges

of that plateau face Lake Sevan from the north. The castle had walls, which included the castle and the citadel, and the settlements spread around them, built in B.C. I millennium. In these settlements, we find structures from different times. The dominant part of the castle is occupied by the quadrangle-shaped citadel, which has inward-facing towers on both sides. The walls of the castle have a two-row structure. On the south side of the castle, in the south-west direction, there is a vast burial ground with cromlechs of different sizes. A cuneiform inscription of the Urartian king Russa I is carved on the rock on the northern side of the castle, from which we learn that he captured an existing fortress here, rebuilt it, and named it "City of God Teisheba" (Teishebain castle (Ozhaberd), 2015).

Noratus village is located in Gegharkunik region, on the right bank of Gavaraget, 5 km northeast of Gavar city. In the center of the village is the Church of St. Astvatsatsin, in the southeast is the Church of St. Gregory the Illuminator and the cemetery. Noratus is famous in Armenia for its collection of khachkars, some of which date back to the 7th century. The majority of khachkars are from the XIII-XVII centuries. Most of them are grouped to form the cemetery of this or that family. There are small tombs, rectangular in plan, on which khachkars are placed. More khachkars are standing on separate pedestals. The khachkars of Noratus are directed to the east. Several talented builders worked in Noratus: Melikset the builder, Nerses, Kiram, and others. The list of historical and cultural monuments of Noratus village was approved by the Government of Armenia in 2003. 681 monuments are included in that list (RA Government Decision N 80-N of 09.01. 2003). Thousands of tourists from different countries of the world come to see the Khachkar forest of Noratus.

Located at a busy crossroads of civilizations, Armenia has historically been at the center of international trade and military routes, including the famous Silk Road that connected China to Europe. The caravanserai, the parking lot of antiquity, was open to merchants, travelers, and antiquities researchers. These architectural monuments of medieval Armenia testify to the adventure of legendary times. **Selim Caravanserai**, which was built in 1332, is the best preserved and is located on Mount Selim (Sulema), 2410 meters above sea level, on the road that connects two historical regions: Gegharkunik and Vayots Dzor. The caravan house is built from three successively built parts: they were the caravanserai itself, the vestibule, and the chapel. On the left side of the hall, there were 2 small rooms for people to spend the night (History of the Armenian People, 1976).

It is difficult to refer to all the historical and architectural monuments of Gegharkunik region within the framework of one article, so only the most famous monuments were presented here.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY. The main goal of the article is to analyze the touristic potential of Gegharkunik region, find out the main obstacles to tourism development, and find solutions.

The main methods used in the article were micro and macro analysis, statistical methods, correlation analysis, and SWOT analysis.

In order to evaluate the impact of tourism on the socioeconomic situation of the region, a correlation analysis was done based on the following indicators: the volume of tourism services, GDP, GDP per capita, and employment. The volume of tourism services includes the activities of hotels, catering, and travel agencies. As there are no separate data on the number of incoming and domestic tourists within the regions, these indicators are considered the main data representing the current tourism activities in the region. Also, there are some tourists who stay at rented apartments and may travel individually, without the services of travel agencies, but there's a lack of statistical information regarding these tourist expenditures.

The data sources for tourism service volume, GDP, and employment indicators are taken from the Statistical Committee of the Republic of Armenia for the years 2009 to 2020. Because of the limited variables and the short time series, other econometric methods may not be used for evaluating the impact of tourism service volume on regional economic development. For the analysis, the data were pre-processed using the first differences method. The results are shown in the article (Table 3).

To reveal the main obstacles to tourism development in Gegharkunik region, SWOT analysis was applied. The strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and existing threats related to its tourism development of the region were analyzed (Table 4).

ANALYSIS

1. Tourism assets of Gegharkunik region.

Gegharkunik region has ecotourism resources. The "Sevan" national park was established in 1978 for the protection of the Lake Sevan ecosystem, covering a total area of 147.3 thousand hectares, with 22.6 thousand hectares dedicated to lakeside territories. This park is surrounded by mountain chains, including Areguni, Geghama, Vardenis, Pambak, and Sevan. The species of 1017 animals are preserved here (Marz Gegharkunik of the RA in figures, 2022). Up to 267 bird species have been recorded in Sevan Basin. In the territory of Sevan National Park, 1145 species of vascular plants can be met, and in the protection belt - 1587 species. The flora of the park is presented by 28 species of trees, 42 species of bushes, 866 perennial herbs, and 307 species of annual and biennial plants (Sevan National Park, n.d.).

Lake Sevan is very much visited by tourists in the summer season for sun and beach tourism. Many people come here for water sports such as windsurfing, sup boarding, yachting, kayaking, wakeboarding, etc.

The following state reserves are also located in Gegharkunik region:

- Juniper thin forest reserve, created in 1958 for the conservation of sparse forests dominated by multi-fruited juniper, pungent juniper, and long-leaved juniper species (3312 ha),
- Getik reserve, created in 1971 for the protection of mountain forests, rare and valuable animals (goat, brown bear, Caucasian marehawk) (5728 ha) (Decision of the Government of the Republic of Armenia, N 1059-A of September 25, 2014).

Tourists also visit the ski resort Akhtamar-Sevan. For skiing and snowboarding, there are 2.5 km of slopes available. 1 lift transports the guests. The winter sports area is situated between elevations of 1,900 and 2,249 m (Ski resort Akhtamar - Sevan, n.d.).

The region has a tasty cuisine which may attract tourists. Among the most famous dishes of Gegharkunik are kufta of Vardenis and Gavar, Gavar baklava, and of course foods made with trout and whitefish (sig) (Tovmasyan, 2020).

The region also has natural curable resources for spa treatment purposes. The Sevan Peninsula is distinguished by its favorable landscape-climatic conditions. The northern and southern coasts of the peninsula are not the same in terms of microclimatic conditions. The south coast is advantageously different. It can be used for dosed climate therapy (air, sun baths, sea therapy).

"Lichk" mineral water was discovered in the territory of the city of Martuni, which belongs to the series of carbonated, cold, weakly acidic, hydrocarbonate-chloride-sodium-magnesium-calcium waters with a mineralization of 3.4g/m³, contains a large amount of biologically active microelements. This mineral water has been investigated and its positive effect has been confirmed in chronic gastritis with excretory insufficiency, and chronic inflammation of the gallbladder with non-specific reactive hepatitis.

The healing peat deposits of Gili are located in Vardenis. Its total area is 1500 ha, with more than 20 million m³ of peat reserves (Tovmasyan, 2012). These resources may be used for organizing spa treatment in sanatoriums.

Another touristic destination in the region is the village Kalavan. In 2013, one of the villagers started to take the first steps of community development. He created "TimeLand", which later became a foundation. "TimeLand" organizes adventure tourism. The tourist has the opportunity to live the life of a Stone Age man. Timeland is an area where nothing has changed for tens of thousands of years and this factor attracts people. Due to this, the village welcomes about 1000-1500 lovers of archaeology, adventure, and ecotourism every year (Aghbalyan, 2017).

When studying the tours organized by different tour agencies, it becomes clear that the following places are included among the tourist attractions of Gegharkunik region: Sevan Lake, Sevanavank monastery, Hayravank

monastery, ancient Khachkar field of Noratus village, Vanevank, Kotavank, Berdkunk, Odzaberd.

The following routes can be organized in Gegharkunik region:

- Sevan - Ddmmashen - Lchashen - Hayravank - Noratus,
- Gavar – Lijq – Martouni – Nshkhark,
- Martouni - Zolakar - Vardenik - Vanevan - Makenis - Tretuk - Sotk,
- Vardenis - Tsapatagh - Artanish peninsula - Shorzha - Ttujur - Kalavan - Dzoravank,
- Sevan national park (Avetisyan et al. 2021).

1. *Main touristic infrastructures and the analysis of tourism development in Gegharkunik region.*

In 2021 the specific weights of the main sectors of the economy of Gegharkunik region in the total volume of the relevant sectors of the RA economy were: industry - 2.5%, agriculture - 12.2%, construction - 5.0%, retail trade - 2.4%, services - 0.9% (Marz Gegharkunik of the RA in figures, 2022).

The volume of services of Gegharkunik region is 0.89% of the total structure of services of the RA. The volume of accommodation and public catering services in Gegharkunik in 2021 made up 1.29% of the total volume of the RA services, the volume of culture, entertainment and recreation services is 0.002% of the total (Table 1).

Table 1

Volume of services in Gegharkunik region, million AMD

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
The volume of services, total					
Republic of Armenia	1434321.2	1725840.2	1993439.3	1721735.5	1914936.6
Gegharkunik	19367.8	15516.0	16000.3	13967.8	17133.1
Organization of accommodation and catering					
Republic of Armenia	112035.6	150901.7	194257.4	114333.8	192615.3
Gegharkunik	743.1	1331.0	1653.1	1158.4	2493.9
Culture, entertainment, recreation					
Republic of Armenia	249766.3	338451.6	420755.7	339450.8	236664.6
Gegharkunik	2.8	4.9	8.4	1.2	4.8

Source: Marz Gegharkunik of the RA in figures, 2022.

In 2022, the number of incoming tourists to Armenia was 1665658, and the number of domestic tourists – 1929940 (Social-economic situation of the Republic of Armenia in 2023 January).

There is no statistical data on incoming and domestic tourists by regions. The only available data is the number of incoming tourists who stayed at hotel facilities (Table 2), but maybe there are many tourists who do not stay at hotels.

In 2022, the number of hotel facilities in Gegharkunik was 47, the number of catering facilities – 67, and the number of travel agencies and tour operators – 12 (Table 2). Unfortunately, there are no statistical data on the number of beds in hotels by regions, their occupancy rate, seasonality, etc. Also, there is no detailed information about the main services of travel agencies and tour operators, in order to know what kind of activities they do, whether they are engaged in inbound, outbound or domestic tourism, etc. However, the draft of the new law on tourism plans to create an electronic register of entities providing tourist services, which will ensure broader information on the above-mentioned directions (The Law of the Republic of Armenia on Tourism, draft version, 2023).

Table 2

Tourism infrastructure objects in Gegharkunik, 2022

	Number of hotel facilities		Number of incoming tourists who stayed at hotel facilities in 2021	Number of public catering facilities		Travel agencies, tour operators, reservation and other services in the field of tourism	
	Quantity, unit	Volume, mln. AMD		Quantity, unit	Volume, mln. AMD	Quantity, unit	Volume, mln. AMD
Republic of Armenia	1029	51833.4	278393	3020	189697.9	901	16737.5
Gegharkunik region	47	874.5	3788	67	2046.6	12	15.2

Source: Information was provided by the Statistical Committee of the RA, in September, 2023; Marz Gegharkunik of the RA in figures, 2022

To evaluate the influence of tourism on the socioeconomic progress of Gegharkunik region, a correlation analysis was conducted (Table 3).

Table 3

Correlation analysis between tourism services, GDP and employment indicators in Gegharkunik and in the RA

Indicator Location	Pearson correlation coefficient R		
	Volume of tourism services - GDP	Volume of tourism services - GDP per capita	Volume of tourism services - number of employed people
Gegharkunik	0,50	0,53	0,50
Republic of Armenia	0,88	0,88	0,42

Source: The analysis was performed by the authors via SPSS software.

The correlation coefficient shows that tourism has a primary role in the social-economic development of the region. So, it is necessary to align tourism

promotion with job creation, and the development of small and medium-sized enterprises. Such steps will lead to the increase of the standard of living of the population and income levels in the region.

To find out the main challenges of tourism development in Gegharkunik, SWOT analysis was conducted, evaluating the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats associated with tourism development in the region.

Table 4

SWOT analysis of tourism development in Gegharkunik region

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES	OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
Cultural heritage, monasteries and churches	Some destinations are not currently included in the existing tourist routes	Including new destinations into tourism routes	Tense situation on the border with Azerbaijan
Eco and agro touristic assets	Statistical recording is incomplete	Increasing tourist numbers based on new marketing initiatives	Threat of war
Tasty cuisine	Marketing and branding issues	Involving grants to support tourism-related initiatives	Rural poverty and migration
Rural life and hospitality	Low number of hotel and catering facilities	Developing agritourism in villages	Shortage of drinking water in some villages
Sport-adventure tourism activities (mountains, water sports, etc.)	Lack of qualified human capital	Organization of festivals based on existing resources	Poor condition of roads in villages
Natural curable resources	Lack of touristic information	Creating new tourist routes based on available resources	Environmental issues, climate changes
Lake Sevan	Deficiency in inter-community transportation options	Creating new touristic products	The water level of Sevan lake is decreasing
Yerevan-Sevan-Shorzha train	Lack of sustainable tourism development strategy of the region	Enhancing tourism infrastructure in the region	Tourism seasonality

Source: The analysis was performed by the authors

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS. The analysis in the paper indicates that the volume of touristic services in Gegharkunik region is still very low (Table 1). Also, the number of tourism infrastructure objects is still low in the region (Table 2). However, the correlation analysis shows that tourism has a crucial role in the social-economic development of the region (Table 3).

Based on the analysis it is evident that the region has significant opportunities for tourism development. Here are some suggestions for that:

1. *Creating new tourism routes based on the cultural and natural heritage of the region,*
2. *Developing new tourism products which will include not only sun and beach activities, but also summer and winter sports, new festivals, etc.,*
3. *Offering creative tourism experiences for experiential tourists who wish to participate in various workshops and learn different arts and crafts, and getting to know Armenian culture better,*
4. *Elaborating a strategic plan for sustainable tourism development of the region,*
5. *Improving infrastructures of the region,*
6. *Improving statistical recording, which will enable to gather data on the number of incoming and domestic tourists, their demographics, tourism preferences, etc.*
7. *Organizing agritourism activities in villages of the region for promoting rural development,*
8. *Implementing marketing activities and creating a unique touristic brand for the region.*

These steps should be taken by the main stakeholders: the government, regional and local government bodies, private sector, communities, etc.

Tourism development will bring several benefits to the region. It will improve the infrastructures, involve new investments, create new jobs, and will preserve the cultural and natural heritage of the region.

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