

Georgia: Lake of Dreams

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A man-made lake is putting a once-thriving resort back on the map - but not all locals are celebrating.

Sergo Tsiklauri gets little thanks from his neighbours for contributing to a tourist revival in Manglisi.

A few years ago, the local businessman turned a local rubbish dump into an attractive lake that draws a growing numbers of visitors. It's a timely boost for the picturesque region - once one of the most popular resorts in Georgia - which has suffered a decline in fortunes over the years.

The authorities are pleased with the enterprise, but many locals don't share their enthusiasm. "The forest and the holiday-makers are real, but the lake is a fiction. There has never been anything like that here," one resident Vakho said contemptuously as he showed a group of tourists around the area - about 60 km from Tbilisi - which is famous for its stunning mountains, pine forest and abundant mushrooms, berries and nuts.

Tsiklauri decided to transform the former wasteland back in 1998. "I am going to remove the garbage, dig out a pit and make a lake," he told his incredulous wife that winter, a time when life in the village slows down and people tend to hibernate till the next holiday season comes round.

A qualified economist, Tsiklauri sold his house and borrowed the rest of the money he needed to make his dream a reality. "At times my wife would nag, saying, 'you've thrown all your money into the water'," he told IWPR.

"Now I am ladling money out of this very same water. It is true I have not yet cleared all my debts, but never mind. I'm pleased, just like those who come here."

The businessman, who gets by with little help from the villagers, describes himself as a dreamer, so it's appropriate that official documents name his lake "Otsneba" - which means dream in Georgian.

"I'm spending all my time on this lake, this is business. First I removed mountains of garbage. Now I have to do all kinds of work, be it sweeping or building - the beach needs to be further developed," said Tsiklauri, who doubles up as a lifesaver during the holiday season, having dragged around 30 drunken tourists and ten children from the lake over the last two years.

The 120m hedge-lined shore of the lake is teeming with holidaymakers. Admittance to the aqua-park is 30 tetri - 15 cents - and one lari - 50 cents - for visitors and vehicles respectively. Those who can't afford the entrance fee can get in free in return for clearing away some litter or shifting a few wheelbarrow loads of earth.

The latter hasn't gone down well with locals, who have little good to say about the new venture. "He built himself a lake and he's making quite a lot of money, and we have to pay or work for him just to be allowed to have a swim?" protested Giorgi, one of the villagers.

Some locals so resent Tsiklauri's business that they appear to have tried to sabotage it.

"There have been cases when they have dynamited my fish or poured chlorine in the lake. Even now they like to throw garbage from the road to the beach," he complained.

One possible reason for local antipathy is that residents are unaccustomed to having a big business on their doorstep. Soviet era dairies lie idle and half ruined. Villagers appear to have grown accustomed to living from hunting and tree felling and, in the summer season, renting out their flats and houses and selling fruits, vegetables and dairy products to holidaymakers.

Tsiklauri gets on far better with the local authorities, who are pleased that he's bringing more tourists to the region, which first caught the eye of nineteenth century Russian generals who set up a military garrison here.

"Once the number of people who came here on summer holidays was more than 25,000, today it is only two or three thousand. As well as harming the locals, who live on proceeds from tourism, that's also a blow to our pride as one of Georgia's most famous resorts," said Vakhtang Mchedlidze, head of the local administration

The numerous crumbling cottages, abandoned sports grounds grazed by cows and pigs, are a reminder of this once thriving resort. "Sergo and those who follow his example will restore Manglisi to its former living standards," said Mchedlidze.

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