
Abkhazia's tourism fights to regain fabled legacy

By Fred Weir

csmonitor.com - July 2, 2008

Russians are flocking back to the Black Sea beaches, although a string of recent bombings exposes the breakaway republic's ongoing tensions with Georgia.

Sukhumi, Abkhazia - Abkhazia's richest man, Beslan Butba, is an incurable optimist.

Although the tiny breakaway republic of Abkhazia is blockaded by much of the world, its people live under constant threat of war, and it's technically illegal for foreigners to visit, Mr. Butba is investing his personal fortune in restoring the tourist infrastructure that once drew 6 million Soviet holiday makers annually to its sun-soaked beaches and mountain resorts.

If you build hotels, Butba says, people will come: "Sukhumi is a beautiful city, but it's half destroyed."

A bitter war 15 years ago drove out the Georgian Army, along with some 250,000 ethnic Georgian residents, leaving Abkhazia with de facto independence that is unrecognized by any other country, including the rebel statelet's only friend, Russia.

Butba has already restored one luxury hotel on Sukhumi's fabled sea front and he has another hotel under reconstruction. "The way forward is to show the world that we can rebuild this country," he says, "and then they'll have to accept us."

Though laudable, Butba's hard-driving good cheer could be misplaced.

Once a lush, subtropical garden spot, Abkhazia has been ravaged and depopulated by war. The self-declared republic has a president, a flag, a national anthem, and an army. But most of its people carry Russian passports, the only valid currency is the ruble, and Abkhazia's borders are guarded by a hard-faced contingent of Russian "peacekeeping" troops.

Georgia exercises sovereignty over Abkhazia in the eyes of the world community and forbids any planes to land at its Soviet-era airport. The huge Black Sea cruise ships that used to make ports of call at Sukhumi's palm-lined waterfront have stayed away since the USSR's collapse.

"Before the war, it was heaven here, this was a happy place," says Lamara Tsvirzhba, a former scientist who ekes out a living as a small businessman. "Now we live amid ruins. Most people, even many Abkhazians, have left and all we have is the daily struggle to survive."

A few things are changing since Russia, in response to the West's recognition of Kosovo earlier this year, lifted the economic sanctions that had been in place since 1994. Russian tourists are trickling back to their Soviet-era beach haunts at Gagra and Pitsunda, where green-clad mountains plunge into a turquoise sea 30 miles south of the popular Black Sea resort city of Sochi.

"There are a lot of inconveniences to put up with, but it's so much cheaper than going to Sochi," says Natasha Savelyeva, a middle-aged Muscovite who was basking on the beach at Gagra recently. She says she hadn't heard anything about any threat of war, and isn't interested in politics.

Tensions in the region continue to reignite. On Sunday, two bombs exploded in Gagra and two additional bombs exploded in a Sukhumi market on Monday, prompting Abkhazia's President to announce that it would close its border with Georgia on Tuesday. Abkhazian officials said the bombs were Georgian-sponsored terrorism aimed at discouraging tourists; Georgia denies any involvement in the blasts.

Adding to the intrigue, the Moscow daily Kommersant published details last week about what it called a secret agreement between Russia and Georgia to divide Abkhazia into "spheres of influence," in which Russia would get the tourist region of the north — a report all sides denied.

The clashing narratives of the Abkhazians and the Georgians are almost impossible to sort out. The Abkhaz, the indigenous ethnic group, claim a long history separate from Georgia and allege that Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin (an ethnic Georgian) redrew the map to make Abkhazia part of Georgia and ordered thousands of Georgian settlers into the region. When Abkhazia tried to declare independence following the USSR's collapse, they say, the Georgian army was sent in to suppress them. With help from thousands of volunteers, including Russian Cossacks and Chechen fighters, the Abkhazians defeated Tbilisi's forces in 1993.

"When Abkhazia was freed from Georgian occupation, the Georgian population left because they were afraid of retaliation for what they had done against us," says Stanislav Lakova, head of Abkhazia's Security Council, a top state body. He says Israel and Kosovo have generated refugees but have not been denied independence.

Still, most of the world continues to recognize Abkhazia as an integral part of Georgia. Even Russia has so far stopped short of recognizing Abkhazia's independence.

"Moscow knows that undermining the principle of territorial integrity would create serious problems," in multi-ethnic Russia, says Tina Gogeliani, an analyst with the Center on Conflict and Negotiation in Tbilisi.

The present-day population of Abkhazia, about 200,000, is barely a third of the prewar numbers. "The majority of Abkhazia's legitimate population are internally displaced persons, and they would have to be consulted" in any independence referendum, Ms. Gogeliani says.

Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili has pinned his country's long-term hopes for reintegration on joining NATO and drawing closer to the European Union. He also raised the military budget by 30 percent to \$600 million last year, an action Abkhazians say they fear is aimed at them.

Despite their bleak position, some Abkhazian leaders argue that time is on their side. "We are very much in contact with other countries that are as yet unrecognized, such as Taiwan, Northern Cyprus, Western Sahara, and dozens of others that are on the verge of statehood," says Maxim Gunjia, Abkhazia's deputy foreign minister.

After Kosovo won its independence, he says, the wave of aspiring microstates is going to become unstoppable. "We have noticed an uptick in Western interest in Abkhazia lately, and we think at least some people in Washington and European capitals are starting to reassess our situation. We've been widely misrepresented as a separatist movement that wants to join Russia but we just want what other peoples have, to be free and take our place in the world community."

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