

## Article

# Crises around Concepts of Hospitality in the Mountainous Region of Svaneti in the North of Georgia

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**Abstract:** This study revolves around the village community of Ushguli, located in the Upper Svaneti region in the North of Georgia, which attained UNESCO World Heritage status in 1996. Since around 2010, Ushguli has seen a step-by-step rise in tourism. Until now, it has found itself relatively unprepared to meet visitors' interests and needs and cope with the diverse aspects of modern lifestyles. The encounter and, in many instances, clash of interests between villagers and tourists, occurring in a context in which the economic objectives of the former group are encouragingly continuously growing visitor numbers, is correspondingly difficult to channel and manage. Ushguli represents a region with ideal conditions for exploring tourism as a strategy for overcoming economic and social crises and its effects on spatial, economic, environmental and social structures against a backdrop of change in material and immaterial objects driven by all stakeholders involved. This paper provides an overview of the specific focus of a multi-year study, which began in 2017. The research approach is critical findings related to impacts on regional values and life organization. In a nutshell, it can be concluded that tourists' online communicated expectations and reviews have a profound impact on local communities and create intense competitive pressure on the local people.

**Keywords:** Ushguli; Svaneti; Georgia; World Heritage; tourism; guesthouse ratings



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## 1. Introduction

Georgia has a population of 3.7 million people, and up to 9 million international travelers visit the region each year [1]. The tourism industry makes up more than 10% of the country's GDP, holds above 68% in service export and contributes about 30% in total to the country's employment [2]. The international tourism industry regards Ushguli as an ideal Svan mountain village community. In Ushguli, one encounters a cultural area, where, as described in the UNESCO award, the medieval architecture combines with a uniquely impressive, authentic mountain landscape. All this has been preserved as the people still practice traditional mountain farming (Figure 1).

Located at the end of the Enguri gorge in Svaneti (Georgia), Ushguli initially represented a classic example of rural depopulation of a peripheral high mountain region. Beginning in the late 1980s, this community of four villages experienced a severe loss of population in the context of state-organized resettlement plans, prompted by a series of extreme weather events in 1986/87, including snowstorms and avalanches, which led to the outmigration of about 50% of the population [3–5]. In contrast to these events, strengths have emerged in recent years with the development of significant tourism potential. On the one hand, tourism provides families in the Upper Svaneti area with opportunities to overcome poverty and attain a degree of economic independence and, therefore, social security [6–8]. In remote mountain regions, rich cultural and ecological heritage can be found, and this is usually seen as a significant potential for tourism development [9–12]. In Ushguli, it seems that this promise may be at risk due to threats to the long-term survival of the cultural landscape.

The accelerated development in Georgian tourism would not be reached without the development of online booking platforms. Firstly, these replace state advertising measures

and disseminate a country's tourism potential internationally. Secondly, they, for example, enable small businesses to advertise their offers for overnight stays online without much effort. On the other hand, the internal algorithms of the platforms ensure permanently low prices, which in turn increases the economic pressure on advertisers. In the following, the consequences of this change are outlined. In a region like Svaneti, which is characterized by traditional values and where values such as "hospitality" [13,14] are normal, those changes have serious social consequences, in addition to the economic ones, which can lead to a destabilization of village communities.



**Figure 1.** Placement of the historical region of Svaneti in the recent political map of Georgia according to regions with the zones of the Abkhazian and South Ossetian conflict (Applis 2022).

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Svaneti as a Special Cultural Area in Georgia

Ushguli's value as a tourist destination lies in its defensive tower houses (see Figure 2) and the remarkably extensive retention of its landscape's medieval-era appearance (Figure 3) [15–17]. The area has held UNESCO World Heritage status since 1996. The settlement Chazhashi (see Figure 3) is one of three places in Georgia to be listed as a World Heritage site. The UNESCO World Heritage List additionally names the whole of Upper Svaneti as an "exceptional" cultural landscape, but only Chazhashi holds the status itself.

However, within the last years, uncoordinated building works in response to the tourist impact/influence on Ushguli have changed the community's architectural character and the surrounding cultural landscape, producing discrepancies between UNESCO's justification for awarding World Heritage status and the current situation in the region (Figure 4) [18,19]. It is possible that UNESCO could, as it has in other cases, diminish the geographical extent of Georgia's World Heritage sites or remove the status from an entire architectural ensemble. In the meantime, this risk is also under discussion in Georgia [20,21]. Observers and the local population fear that a withdrawal of the World Heritage status could decrease the number of tourists and the chances of the mountain region catching up with its development [22,23].



**Figure 2.** The upper villages of Ushguli with Mount Shkhara in the background (Applis 2019).



**Figure 3.** View of Chazhashi, the current World Heritage site in Ushguli, which in the Soviet era was known as the Ushguli–Chazhashi Museum Reserve and has held protected status since 1971 (Applis 2018).

Even in the Soviet era, Svaneti was known for the substantial ethnic homogeneity of its population and distinct conceptions of community and legal precepts, as is typical of some of the mountainous regions of the Caucasus [24–26]. This homogeneity derives from the population’s subsistence from agriculture at an altitude of 1500–2500 m and the resulting need for a collective lifeworld and long-term maintenance of strong identification with a shared origin and heritage. A concomitant issue is that the population has a clearly defined idea of their own identity and a distinct delimitation from neighboring groups [27].





**Figure 4.** Different ways of constructing tourist space: (a) newly built hotel in European Alpine style (Applis 2019); (b) simple garden café in front of a 1950s Soviet-era building (Applis 2015).

From the early Soviet-era onwards, the region found itself the target of specific cultural interventions, typical for Soviet policy around nationality and national identities [28] (pp. 90ff.) about the relationship between the state and traditional law in Soviet times. However, Svaneti remained an exemplary region for limitations of measures that were intended to bring about cultural transformation. The Soviet authorities finally failed in their endeavors to break up local notions and institutions of law, such as councils of elders. Even in Soviet times, these councils intermediated in the arrangement of marriage, issues relating to the distribution of land and attempts to quell vendettas [24]. Even current studies suggest a continued high acceptance of such practices. They also indicate that non-Svan ethnic Georgians regard the country's mountain people as possessing an authentic core of ethnonational "Georgianness", inextricably linked to Georgian Orthodox Christianity [29].

## 2.2. General Challenges for Tourism Development in the Svaneti Region as Exemplified by the Village Community of Ushguli

There are numerous recent publications on Ushguli that have engaged with the region's challenges. Most authors emphasize the necessity of economically and socially sustainable approaches and highlight the risk to the location's architectural heritage by human activity and natural events such as avalanches and land- and mudslides [30–36]. However, almost all these studies emerged from relatively brief stays by the relevant research groups, recording primarily quantitative data or collecting fairly straightforward qualitative material, such as short interviews. Consequently, they tend to focus on the general information of factors common to sustainable agritourism activities. However, there is an overall consensus that the specific social conditions that characterize Ushguli would prevent the success of any management plan imposed from outside. It would take years for stakeholders to gain awareness of the developments and shifts that ensue when numbers of tourists swell. Mosedalee [37] (p. 60) emphasized that "more in-depth research is necessary that analyses (a) the meanings of hospitality in a neoliberal political economy and changes to local cultures (in particular values of 'giving' hospitality), (b) the distinct entrepreneurial cultures emerging from new institutional and political-economic constellations and (c) the 'new landscape of governance', particularly as different actors and levels of scale become involved."

At this point, further comments are necessary on the selection of literature on the mountain regions of Georgia and tourism research in general for this article. Svaneti was more or less closed to researchers from parts of the world that were not part of the Soviet

system until well into the 1990s. The region was also closed to tourists from Eastern Europe. Georgia's accession to Europe and the USA after the civil war turmoil of the 1990s quickly opened Georgia to English-speaking researchers, as evidenced by the literature cited above. However, both Georgian and Russian as lingua franca are mostly not widely spoken by these researchers. Therefore, these studies rather test general theses on the development of peripheral regions using the example of Georgia's mountain regions and present correspondingly general results.

However, Svaneti is a special case for various reasons explained in this article, which is why no meaningful qualitative data can be collected without appropriate language skills and without research designed for a longer period of time with long stays in the field. The qualitative data collected are accordingly not quantifiable. It is also questionable whether the social practices and phenomena described here are transferable to other peripheral regions on which several contributions are available (e.g., [38–42]). This is because traditionally shaped livelihoods unfold in culturally specific ways in the regions studied, where tourism is seen as a way of overcoming poverty. Comparing the available results would be a research goal in itself. This transfer cannot be undertaken here in a scientifically serious manner without visiting the corresponding regions.

Svaneti had only poorly developed mountaineering tourism during the Soviet era. This focused on the high peaks of the Great Caucasus and attracted mainly Soviet athletes. The Svans as an ethnic group thus had hardly any contact with tourists until well into the 2000s. During the Soviet period, Svaneti was considered a difficult region to control as explained above, despite intensive attempts to Sovietize it. The patriarchal structures of the communities there persisted, and collectivization was carried out only superficially. In fact, even Soviet law was only partially implemented there; de facto law continued to be pronounced in the communities by so-called councils of elders [24,28]. After the civil war in Georgia, Svaneti was a de facto lawless area for a long time; only in the early 2000s, the government there succeeded in defeating clan criminality and establishing security for the population. We are dealing with a society that is very mistrustful because of its experiences of insecurity and that is used to controlling outside influences and relying only on itself within strong family groups. Thus, there are also strong limits to the work with translators in the field.

The society of Svaneti has been confronted with multiple processes of globalization in the context of tourism development for about ten years now, of which the digitalization of travel in the form of online bookings and comments on stays is only one. Serious qualitative research in the mountain regions of Georgia must therefore overcome the following challenges: it must master linguistic thresholds and build long-term trust within fragile social communities in order to obtain reliable statements about the very specific challenges of the respective communities. Implementing these demands is the goal of the approach presented here. Therefore, in the following, reference is made to contributions by researchers from Georgia; the limitations of the older contributions to Svaneti, briefly outlined above, have been discussed elsewhere [18].

### *2.3. Effects of Over-Shaping the Livelihoods of Mountain Populations in Georgia*

In recent years, Georgian researchers have pointed out that tourism in the previously relatively remote regions of the country also has adverse effects on social and economic livelihoods [2,30,43]. So far, only one study has been published that explicitly addressed the change in mountain livelihoods under the influence of tourism and examined the types of change. The authors, like other researchers, set the preservation of the mountain farming cultural landscape as the norm. They used the examples of Mestia in Svaneti and Kazbegi in the Mtskheta-Mtianeti region to investigate why exactly tourism in the mountains of Georgia is causing a decline in agriculture. The authors identified “4 types of tourism-led livelihood change: (1) expanding non-agricultural activities; (2) reducing agricultural activities; (3) developing agritourism activities and (4) increasing agricultural activities.” [44] (p. 27). Types 1 and 2 dominate and cause a massive decline in agricultural

activities. This is because permanent residents of the mountain regions are too short of human, financial, technical and time resources to serve agriculture and tourism, and tourism work is less arduous. In contrast, the people who only stay in the region during the summer for the tourist season have less experience with agriculture and are more accustomed to urban lifestyles. In general, tourism causes intense competition between village communities because those who switch partly to accommodating guests soon depend on the income from overnight stays. Therefore, many authors recommend integrating tourism and community development practices, developing specific guidelines for community-based tourism projects and filling the knowledge gap of community development facilitators on tourism practices [30,45,46]. In the case of the South Caucasus, the following definition of CBT is proposed: “CBT in the South Caucasus is a community development practice for nonurban and remote mountain villages. It is a joint effort of a group of people living in a certain geographical area, in which local culture, environment, and hospitality are the main advantages. CBT focuses on the benefits for the local people, capacity building, and empowerment and should constitute a core component of tourism activities in rural mountain regions” [46] (p. 20).

In their research on a possible change in hospitality concepts in Georgia, some authors point out that tourism does lead to the revival of traditional cultures [47]. The perspective here is that the providers of tourist services become aware of the particularities of their cultures of origin and receive positive feedback from tourists. In this study, core elements of “traditional Georgian hospitality” were reconstructed from guesthouse comments.

The data presented here, in contrast, rather suggest experiences of insecurity and vulnerability through comments on online platforms that arise against a background of precarious socio-economic conditions on the ground.

### 3. Theoretical Approach to the Field and Methods

The findings presented in this article stem from a geographical and ethnographic research project spanning several years ([18] on ethnography as a research strategy as opposed to a “method”), starting in the summer of 2015. The study explores the issues referenced above, which revolve around the impact of tourism on regional cultural practices, life-worlds and mindsets and a sustainable engagement with this impact [19,23]. Extending the approaches of the authors mentioned above, I here focus on a reflection of the influence of guesthouse ratings and other tourism services on the local people.

The data generated in the field (interviews, photos, recorded documents, texts from websites and blogs) emerged from nine field visits, which took place at various times in the tourist and agricultural year over five years. All material was subject to continuous situational analysis [48,49]. Firstly, a selection of suitable informants from the villages was identified by preliminary surveys. During fieldwork, the group of informants was expanded to achieve a typical distribution across groups and individuals holding positions of significance in the village (elders, doctor, teacher, young people who return to Ushguli only in the summer months). Approximately 80 people live in Ushguli permanently, with up to 150 joining them in the summer months. We can divide this population based on their residence time, each of which the analysis treats as a distinct group of cases: (1) permanent residents who remained in Ushguli throughout the crises of the 1980s and 1990s; (2) “permanent returners” who resettled in the community in response to the economic crises that have occurred since the late 1990s, initially to subsist and later, after around 2010, in order to realize prospects of permanently securing a living by providing services to tourists; (3) intermittent returners who live in Ushguli during the summer months and have converted their properties and farm premises to guesthouses. All informants were asked about their experiences with tourists staying in their houses and the influence of tourism on their lives. When it eventually became obvious that the way tourists deal with the representation of guesthouses on the usual online platforms is of great concern to all providers, this topic area was added to the interviews.

At this point, it must be emphasized that especially problematic statements were only given after several field visits. This is because only after the researcher had established a trustful connection to the sub-communities of the villages, open discussions were possible. As proof of the seriousness of the project, two book projects were created in parallel, in the composition of which the local people were involved: The first was travel guide to Svaneti, structured as a classic cultural and nature guide with a strong sustainability perspective (published in German in November 2021) [50]. Second was an ethnographic book with photographs documenting everyday life, especially in Ushguli, in the transition between tradition and modernity (will be published by a German publishing house in November 2022) [51], with a text booklet in Georgian and English included. Doing that, the interviewees could reflect on the transformation processes within which they find themselves through the photographic material.

The theoretical approach of this article is based on conclusions drawn by Andreas Reckwitz regarding a theory of modernity [52] (p. 25). Reckwitz explains that late modern society acts, to a greater extent than societies in past eras, to inspire and encourage the performance of aesthetic practices, which thus diffuse into a wide range of social arenas and life-worlds, intensifying in the process [52] (p. 216). Machine-driven singularisation is a key aspect of this development, as Reckwitz explains: ‘Intelligent technologies are no longer restricted to acts of standardisation, as in industrial rationalisation; instead, they [ . . . ] contribute to the transformation of instrumentally rational practices towards an awareness of the particular and to the establishment of an all-encompassing technical fundament for the performance of the singular’ [52] (p. 74) on social media platforms. In the context of tourism, platforms such as Tripadvisor, Booking.com, Instagram and Wikitravel act as sites of such performance. Alongside these platforms, private individuals run blogs, and companies have commercial websites. The residents are under severe pressure to conform to their guest’s expectations. The visitors immediately rate their stay on popular internet platforms and indicate via reviews whether they experienced their accommodation as “authentic”. As an actor, the subject learns via the use of artifacts, which act as actants. During the practices that take place between actor and actant, the subject, engaged in an educational process, continually generates singularizing—that is, specific, particular—material and immaterial products or, alternatively, makes use of them while linking the practice and the product with a specific act of self-evaluation. Reckwitz comments: “In the mode of singularity, the social enters a situation of performing something or itself or performing something with others for the benefit of each one involved, so that what is performed is endowed with a cultural value to the participants” [52] (p. 72).

In relation to tourism, such performance takes place in the production of “must-see” or “bucket-list” objects, spaces or collectives [53]. In this sense, we might conceive of tourism as aestheticization and attention machine designed to generate attractive superficies. Digital platforms act as sites of this type of performance, alongside blogs written by private individuals or commercial entities.

In incipient late modernity, with the emergence of a new middle class of travelers, the landscape changed: “tourist destinations [ . . . ] [could] no longer be content to be uniform holiday spots for the mass tourist market. Instead, the tourist gaze seeks out the uniqueness of a place, the special town or city with an authentic atmosphere, the outstanding landscape, the quirky local life” [52] (p. 7). The tourist economy of the late modern age increasingly promises the subjects who are its customers an educational experience via a “culture of the authentic” and a “culture of the attractive”. In this way, subjects enter into the associated practices to the end of performatively augmenting their value, that is, of essentially curating themselves via education. Travelers in late modernity take an active role in curating their travel.

The research’s theoretical basis [52], which builds upon the analysis of the pre-interpreted data, is contextualized via situational analysis [48,49] and the conclusions drawn from it. The interviews allowed reconstruction of central areas of experience of the villagers (experiences of crisis in the past and present, questions of property and land



ownership, ideas of Ushguli as a moral community and possibilities and limits of practicing family life). These areas of experience are closely linked to how local stakeholders carry out tourist-related practices. In the following, results of data triangulation are presented to depict and analyze the effects of tourist practices in the study area in more detail. This study focuses on comments in blogs, travel platforms and booking platforms. Situation analyses generated in this way are explicitly designed to enable analyses of power.

#### 4. Some Effects of the Development of Tourism in Ushguli

##### 4.1. Brief Description of Tourism in Ushguli

Many visitors to Georgia stay only for one afternoon in Ushguli, as the journey to Mestia, the administrative center of Svaneti, does take a day. As the drive from Mestia to Ushguli takes about two and a half hours, this leaves about six to eight hours for sightseeing and a possible walk to the Shkhara glacier, including the return trip to Mestia. According to the various social platforms on the internet, most of these visitors consider this to be sufficient, as there is not much to see here except for the World Heritage Site of Chazhashi. Ushguli thus receives less overnight tourism than Mestia, which is accepted as a base station for other tours. Only the visitors who walk the five-day trail from Mestia to Ushguli stay overnight in Ushguli. This trail is advertised on the internet similarly to, for example, the Inca Trail in Peru.

The accommodation can be classified according to the groups of inhabitants (see above) that stay in Ushguli in summer (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Types of accommodation in Ushguli (Svaneti, Georgia).

	Homestay	Holiday Flat/Tiny House	Hotel/Pension
Operator	hosts live all year round in Ushguli	vendors live in Ushguli only in summer	vendors live in Ushguli only in summer
involvement in local social and cultural practices	high involvement: providers engage in farming and horticulture with seasonal work, keep livestock such as cows, horses and pigs, maintain year-round social and cultural life	medium to low involvement, somewhat higher in summer due to accommodation of own family members	
cold and hot meals	at all places available in comparable quality: traditional Georgian and Svan dishes, breakfast and dinner on a half-board basis are common		
single, double and multi-bed rooms	available throughout in comparable quality, size and additional equipment such as wardrobe, tables, chairs or armchairs depending on the accommodation		
external showers and washrooms	available in all types of accommodation		
day room	depending on the accommodation	available, depending on the accommodation, on the terrace or an open space in front of the house	available
external dining room	depending on the accommodation	available, depending on the accommodation, on the terrace or an open space in front of the house	available
additional services (horse rental, hiking guide, arrangement of travel to/from Mestia)	depending on the accommodation, can be organized or available		



The families living permanently in Ushguli accommodate their guests within their own houses. In the Soviet era, the traditional residential and stable buildings and towers were either abandoned from the 1940s onwards, and new buildings were constructed or rebuilt, and thus purely residential buildings emerged. These were equipped with terraces and balconies built in front of them, and by passing through them, the individual rooms next to each other could be reached separately. As the size of families decreases, this creates self-contained guest rooms. Often, however, the owners built the extensions in the 1980s because of an increase in family size or since the 2000s, with the prospect of tourist income. If one chooses such accommodation, a kind of homestay, they also have the opportunity to participate a little in family life. One can see how food is produced, processed and prepared or how livestock is kept. The standard is comparable between the different providers as far as accommodation and meals are concerned because the people living permanently in Ushguli have comparable living standards. In this kind of accommodation, older adults usually still live in the house. In addition, there are also younger or middle-aged residents who live permanently in Ushguli—they often have a state income because they are employed as teachers or work for the police and as border guards. However, all of them depend on the additional income from accommodating tourists and on keeping livestock, growing vegetables and often potatoes for self-sufficiency.

Visitors who prefer accommodation separated from the local families and in which they only have to interact with other travelers choose between two other types of accommodation (see Table 1). These accommodations are run by families who only spend the summer in Ushguli. Since the upswing of tourism in Georgia, more and more former residents are returning to the region, which is reflected in increased construction activity, especially in Mestia and Ushguli. As a result, the townscape is undergoing significant changes—a development that has accelerated dramatically, especially since 2017 [23].

In recent years, families with a higher investment potential have built accommodation similar to hotels or guesthouses, which resemble buildings in the European Alps. In addition, there are new single-story buildings that are more like permanent accommodation at campsites, such as small “holiday flats” or “tiny houses” for tourists traveling without a tent. Here, too, all meals are offered.

For the horse tours offered by all accommodations, the horses are from the permanent residents of Ushguli. These tours are led mainly by the younger members of the family who join them in the summer and have a basic knowledge of English.

#### 4.2. Significance and Effects of Online Booking Systems

Usually, all bookings for overnight stays in the mountain villages of Svaneti are made online via booking platforms. The hosts describe their accommodation and the services they offer. However, the standardized specifications for the description do not precisely match the conditions on-site. One example is the WLAN connection, which guests usually expect. The mountain villages of Svaneti do not have cable connections. Therefore, the hosts have to offer their smartphone as a mobile node. If their data are used up, they have to travel to Mestia to buy more of it because usually there is no possibility to do this online from Ushguli. Thus, tourists who use the “free” access often drastically reduce their earnings for overnight stays and meals.

A massive problem for the hosts is that very few visitors cancel an online booking once it has been made. In Ushguli, there is no stable electricity or internet supply for the inhabitants. They cannot fully service their accounts from Ushguli, neither in terms of their English skills nor digital logistical requirements. As a result, the providers have to pay a service fee of around 15% to the respective platform operator for every non-canceled booking, reducing their income. They do not have access to the usual credit card guarantees.

The significant difficulty for the hosts is the price comparison function on the booking platforms, which pushes the prices down. The prices for overnight stays in Ushguli, as in all other mountain villages, are permanently too low because of the strong competitive pressure. Tourists expect the same prices they get in the Georgian lowlands or centrally

located regions, even though the cost of living is much higher in remote regions because of the higher transport costs for everything. Thus, hosts in Ushguli rarely have the means to invest in comfort standards available at lower prices elsewhere. It is very risky for most Georgians to take out a personal loan on a sum as low as USD 1000 by Western standards. The interest rate is between 20 and 25% per year for three to four years.

Because of the precarious economic circumstances, the hosts usually work around the clock, are incredibly hospitable and make an excellent effort for the people who stay with them. However, one cannot expect complete Western holiday standards.

#### 4.3. Comments on Booking and Travel Platforms

Due to only superficial information about Georgia's current economic, political and social circumstances, many tourists misjudge the general conditions of private accommodation (homestay, holiday flat, tiny house). This misleads some people into a highly euphemistic view of the living and working conditions of the families, who urgently depend on tourism and also have to lead the hard-working life of a mountain farmer's family. The others are repulsed by the family members' precarious living conditions and poor service, whom they see as hotel staff (Table 2). In the following, this will be illustrated by a selection from the text corpus of 52 analyzed comments.

*"I loved everything about my stay [...] in Ushguli. The hosts were super nice [...]. Rooms are of decent size and very clean! The entire family was accommodating and caring. I felt like I was part of the family. One of the family members, who is normally based in Tbilisi but spends his summers in Ushguli, offered us a free tour to local sites, told us stories about Ushguli [...]. He also offered us free horseback riding tour. The breakfast was delicious, especially home-made pancakes and corn bread with cheese which was exceptional. [...] The hosts gave us a great recommendation for the dinner, too. In short, I wish I could have stayed longer and explored more! There are no private bathrooms. But the common areas and bathrooms are extremely well kept and clean. I did not feel much discomfort because of that. Plus, stunning views and incredible hospitality take all of your concerns away!" (Travel platform comment 'Ushguli', text corpus number 25, August 2019, accommodation type 'homestay', couple travellers)*

**Table 2.** Between enthusiasm and disapproval—poles of internet comments about homestays in Ushguli (Svaneti, Georgia).

	Experience of Authenticity and Exceptionality	Lack of Authenticity, Mass Tourism Experiences
accommodation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ideal of authenticity and hospitality at the typical low prices of the country</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• poor equipment (furniture, beds) and functionality (heating, WLAN, light and electricity)</li> </ul>
food and drink	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• typical Georgian food at country-specific low prices</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• limited offer at prices comparable or higher for Georgia</li> </ul>
additional services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• arranging transfers: trip to Mestia</li> <li>• arranging excursion experiences: horse guide, hiking guide</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• unpredictability of arrangements</li> <li>• unavailability of additional services</li> <li>• refusal of free offers for additional services</li> </ul>
host	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ideal of original hospitality close to friendship (selflessness, authenticity of the mountain people: free additional offers, e.g., entertainment through singing)</li> <li>• ability to communicate successfully despite language barriers</li> <li>• flexible service provider for tourists (price, time, telecommunication, etc.)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• capitalist orientation toward accommodation and supply services (tourist only as a customer)</li> <li>• failure of successful communication due to language barrier on the part of the host</li> <li>• inability or unwillingness to meet expectations of tourism standards as a service provider (tourist as customer)</li> <li>• inflexible provider of tourism services</li> </ul>

The positive comments mainly focus on the differences between the visited space that is classified as authentic and one's own life-world. The authentic mountain dwellers fulfill expectations by making much of what they have freely available or even giving it away, in contrast to what is usual in visitors' capitalist consumerist everyday life. Everything is original and homemade; the visitors are invited to participate in a fairytale world of everyday life. Ushguli itself, it is repeatedly emphasized, is not easy to reach, but those who make the long journey are rewarded by the people who live there. The inhabitants welcome the visitor into a community that the modern world has not yet been able to destroy.

*"The hosts of this property are truly wonderful people. They live a real Ushguli lifestyle and we loved sharing their guesthouse with them. It was like we were part of their family. Like every place in Ushguli...this Guesthouse can be a bit of a challenge to drive to. The roads in Ushguli are generally pretty bad (you are definitely going to need a strong 4WD to make this journey) and are even worse if it is snowy, wet and muddy. Our room in [ . . . ] was very clean and well maintained. The shared bathrooms and toilet were close by...but when we were there unfortunately there was no hot water...in fact there was no water in the shower or toilets at all. The only water available was from a spring downstairs near the entrance to the Guesthouse. This was not the fault of our hosts...it is just part of life sometimes in Ushguli. Our host included us in a family 'drinking session' where we got to listen to some authentic Georgian singing and we also got to taste some authentic Georgian Cha Cha...my face is still pretty numb from that!!! We had delicious meals prepared for us and we always felt very welcome. [ . . . ] If you come to Ushguli...and you really should visit this place...then you need to accept the fact that it is a small isolated village high in the mountains. There will sometimes be a break in the electricity and sometimes the water pipes might be out of action...but this is why you have decided to visit this amazing community."* (Booking platform comment 'Ushguli', text corpus number 13, April 2019, accommodation type 'homestay', single traveler)

All comments share an evaluative statement of the traveler themselves. They are people who are accepted as family members within an authentic livelihood or people who would be willing and able to do so due to years of travel experience. However, this is not their fault if they fail but of the hosts, who are not authentic Georgians; they only use the guests to make money.

*"I have travelled extensively and I must say that this is the worst place I have ever had the misfortune to stay. All I can say is avoid. Pay extra to get some comfort and respect. The rooms are horrendous. Smaller than single makeshift beds, the rooms are open without segregation so you are effectively sharing with strangers. Unfortunately, I was adjacent to the staff room and they spoke loudly with each other until gone 2am and then again from 5am. When challenged they were abusively shouting at me in Georgian and one literally slammed a door in my face. The shared bathroom facilities are the worst I have seen in many a year. My only advice would be to AVOID. Great yogurt at breakfast though."* (Booking platform comment 'Ushguli', text corpus number 24, June 2019, accommodation type 'homestay', single traveller)

In the words of Andreas Reckwitz, the self thus acts with a habitus of self-staging in front of the audience of readers of online comments [52] (p. 72). In the tourist economy of late modernity, subjects are used to performatively enhancing their self-value; as mentioned above, travelers in late modernity take an active role in curating their journeys.

*"This guesthouse is at the top of the village and has the best view of Shkhara mountain from the balcony and the village in the other direction. We made two horse treks with [ . . . ] the owner and made it up to the Shkhara glacier head with our eight y/o daughter the second time. [His wife] [ . . . ] is an excellent cook so you get to experience real Svan cooking, and she even showed us milking the cows. You get to experience real village life in Ushguli—much more authentic than Mestia. The hosts are lovely. A must for anyone who wants to see the real Georgia."* (Travel platform comment 'Ushguli', text corpus number 6, July 2017, accommodation type 'homestay', family travellers)



However, the desire for authentic experiences has clear limits for many commentators: whenever the travel experience becomes too real. After all, part of the reality of Ushguli is that this space is not a museum space but an inhabited space where those who live there year-round have to do the hard work of mountain farmers every day. Commenting in a negative sense always involves belittling those being judged as incompetent concerning the self-evident, which is part of life in modernity, as can be seen in the following representative post:

*“Opposite the house is a stable so early morning cows and dogs will probably wake you if you have one of the two rooms in the front [ . . . ] The guesthouse is not really located in Ushguli. It is in Zhibiani, a small community. This practically means that if your driver drops you in the centre of Ushguli, you have to carry your luggage almost a kilometer over a hill. There is also a problem with lamps at night. The owners have installed high efficiency bulbs, which do not work when electricity fluctuates. Expect that you will have only candle light in the bathroom at night [ . . . ]. Yet the biggest problem is [ . . . ] [the] owners’ daughter [ . . . ] who is designated to communicate in English. Unfortunately, she treats guests with disdain, as if they were unruly children at school.” (Travel platform comment ‘Ushguli’, text corpus number 22, August 2019, accommodation type ‘homestay’, single traveller)*

If the host does not correspond to the ideal of the selfless mountain dweller, the foreignness of the counterpart comes to the fore: the local becomes a counterpart who is not to be trusted, who does not keep to any promises:

*“We all experience the cold, unfriendly, uninterested Svaneti people while hiking the Mestia- Ushguli route. This guest house is another example of ‘please let us get your money after breakfast so you can pack your bags and leave’ attitude.” (Travel platform comment ‘Ushguli’, text corpus number 3, June 2016, accommodation type ‘homestay’, group traveller)*

*“When we asked about transportation the lady there tried to charge us twice as much as anyone else for a drive back to Mestia. All these people want is your money, they practically say it. And the beautiful views and nice rooms just can’t cover for it.” (Booking platform comment ‘Ushguli’, text corpus number 20, August 2018, accommodation type ‘homestay’, group travellers)*

The interviews conducted with the villagers reveal that the providers of accommodation and other tourist services feel highly pressured by the guests’ evaluations. On one hand, conservative local communication culture is based on a solid restraint with negative comments. On the other hand, due to traditional values and the fact that the inhabitants of Ushguli experienced a very unstable Soviet era and civil war period of the 1990s, every family had to take care of themselves [54,55], and offensive communications could immediately have serious negative consequences. In addition, the deeply inscribed concept of traditional hospitality is based on highly formal, non-offensive forms of interaction that allow for safe dealings with strangers [13,14]. Paid hospitality is structured according to market economy criteria, but it follows very different standards. In addition, tourists themselves are often undecided about their expectations. Do they want to demand a standardized service and thereby determine the prices themselves, or do they want to enter a supposedly “authentic” environment where they are accepted and wait to see what awaits them? They usually wish for both simultaneously, which leads to communications that are under latent tension. For many residents of Ushguli, the demands of the guests and especially the frank expression of these demands pose a significant challenge, not only because there is no common language in which to communicate well. The guests are often described as rude and badly behaved; they treat the facilities carelessly, bring dirt into the house and would have no idea how much work and money the maintenance of the building costs. The prices would be too high for them, they claim, who earn so much money in Europe; they do not know that there is no health insurance in Georgia and that a family member’s hospital stay can quickly devour a whole year’s income.

The following excerpts from interviews with people living permanently in Ushguli can represent the multiple tensions between the different life-worlds that clash in the interaction between locals and visitors:

*“Tourism is good for Ushguli, of course! Do you know what it was like here years ago? More and more people moved away because it was no longer possible to live here. No doctor, no functioning street and fewer and fewer children. Since the tourists are coming, the state is at least investing in the street. But these people—unfortunately many of them have no manners. No matter what I do, whether I look after the cows or just sit here on my bench and look, I always get photographed. What are people thinking? We are not animals in a zoo. I can’t say what I’m really thinking, because then the tourists wouldn’t come. That’s how it is.” (Interview permanent resident, text corpus number 41, August 2019)*

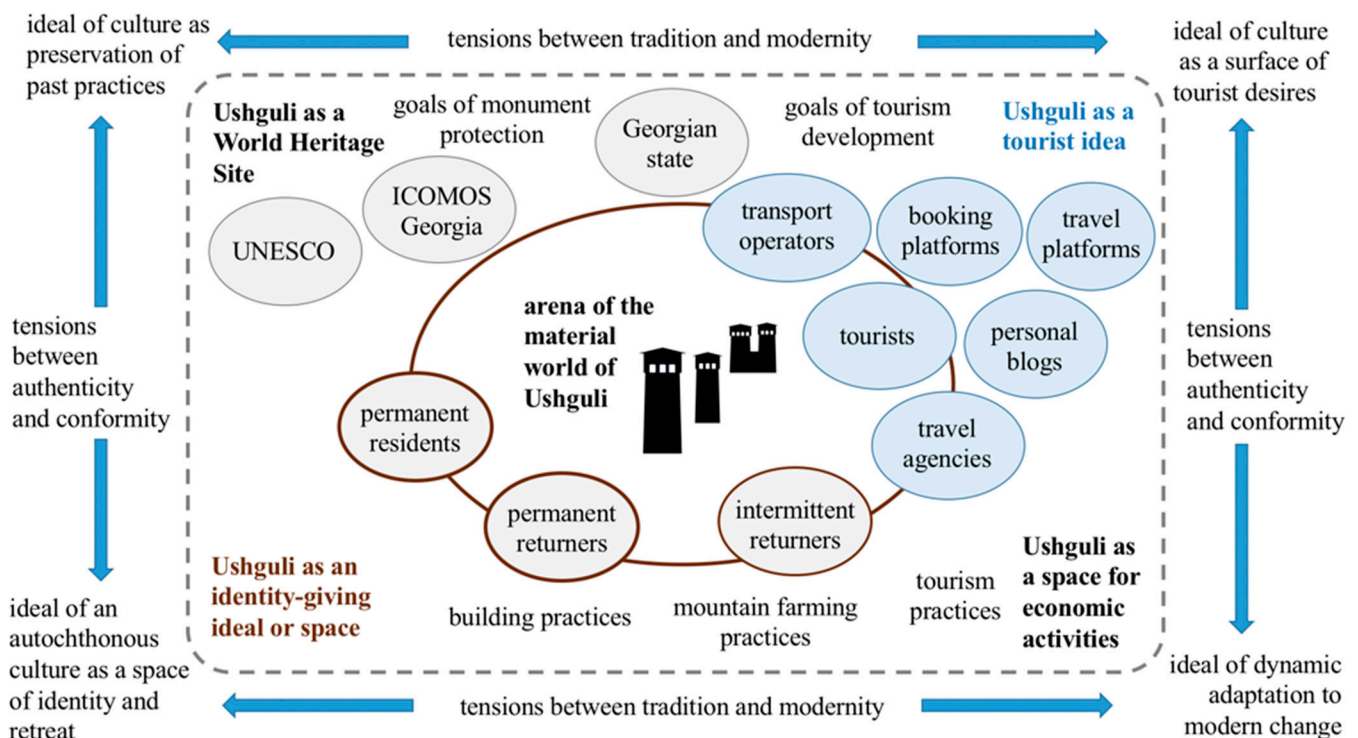
*“Cheaper, cheaper, cheaper, many think that just because you are here in Georgia, you can trade. But they have no idea what life costs in Georgia. I get 400 USD for an ox, but transporting the meat to Tbilisi already costs 200 USD. All the work with agriculture is not worth it, we can’t earn anything with it. Without the overnight stays, we can’t earn money for the doctor, for the children’s education. But the prices are too low—12, 13 or 14 USD for an overnight stay and that is already too much for many people. We have rebuilt the showers. The material alone, which we had brought from Tbilisi, cost 800 USD, including transport. And then they write that the showers don’t have enough pressure. Where is the pressure supposed to come from? The water comes from the mountains, there is no station that generates the pressure. The people have no understanding. And what about life in winter! But it’s good that they come, because we don’t want to leave here either. We are grateful for this place and are happy that others want to visit it. Ushguli!” (Interview permanent resident, text corpus number 17, June 2017)*

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

First of all, it can be noted that the presented results fit in with the basic considerations that have been made about the tourist gaze and its effects on the formation of the tourist space [53,56,57]. This gaze is directed at the cultural surface of societies and is fed by stereotypical ideas whose authors are the tourists and other tourism actors themselves. It was shown in the above text extracts from comments which principles these comments follow. The proposed theory on processes of singularization [52] helps to understand better what motivations drive the comments and what pressures they generate in the communication between tourists. The digital platforms function as accelerators of evaluative and powerfully affectively charged comments. Those being evaluated are more or less at the mercy of these, as they cannot adequately respond to them.

The aim of the qualitative-reconstructive approach to the field was, first of all, to identify all actors. One result was that the inhabitants of the studied village community of Ushguli themselves belong to different groups and pursue different interests. However, they are not the only actors who influence the formation and interpretation of the cultural space (Figure 5). In the course of the field research, it turned out that the tangible and intangible cultural objects in the space are the goods that all participants compete to interpret. In addition, every kind of interpretation has a direct impact on the transformation of both material and immaterial objects.

Great hopes for sustainable tourism are intimately connected with accommodation in permanently inhabited family houses, a kind of mixture of farm holidays and hiking as well as ecotourism. This is because the inhabitants who live in Ushguli all year round guarantee the preservation of the cultural landscape. Without them, there would be no horses, cows or pigs on-site, the pastures would not be mown, and there would not be the typical food that visitors can enjoy. The old stone buildings could hardly be preserved, and within a short time, there would be even more waste because the small farms would fall into disrepair, and no one would produce the food consumed locally ([21], p. 118, with reference to [19,23]).



**Figure 5.** Social arena of impacts on the material space of the village community of Ushguli (Applis 2022).

Analyses of the online comments and interviews with local stakeholders show the narrow limits of successful communication that open up room for maneuver for the providers of tourism services. Almost every visit can quickly become a balancing act, resulting in online reviews that have serious economic consequences for the villagers. Together with the permanent competitive pressure among the villagers, it is enormously difficult to generate sustainable income from overnight stays, horse tours, etc.

The following “situational map” (Figure 5), based on a situational analysis [48,49], shows the built space of Ushguli as a contested arena of interpretation, into which the external tourism actors intrude, partly desired, partly unwanted. In their communications about the social space of Ushguli, they themselves generate the ideal of an “authentic world” lying “on the edge of time”, which corresponds to their expectations of an extraordinary travel experience. If the villagers and local providers of tourist services do not adapt to these expectations, they react with disappointment, rejection, etc. Their expertise in visiting unusual places is cultivated through both negative and positive comments, and their status as experienced travelers increases with every online contribution.

Accommodating tourists in conditions that meet their expectations of comfort demands structural changes, but any modern addition or new construction endangers the World Heritage status. So far, the state seems indecisive on what consequences to draw from these conflicting expectations. However, the overall trend is heading in the direction that UNESCO will consider the World Heritage status to be questioned and may withdraw it [20].

For the permanent or temporary residents of Ushguli, tourism is an extension of their economic activities, filling income gaps. For those who are better adapted to this, it creates new investment opportunities; for others, only the maintenance costs are covered by the income from tourism. In the first years of field research after 2016, some inhabitants refused to offer rooms because they did not want to sell Ushguli. By 2019, all permanent residents of Ushguli had started to offer rooms for overnight stays in the lowest price segment of under 10 USD per night with breakfast.



The scarcity of money, should the majority of visitors from abroad continue to stay for only one day, is also shown by the fact that residents blocked the road from Mestia to Ushguli for several hours in August 2019 in protest because of the collapse of another tower. The families cannot maintain their cultural heritage from their resources (see Figure 6). Except for the early years of the Saakashvili government, the state has so far not provided any financial support for this, as it also lacks income. Finally, UNESCO does not offer financial support for the preservation of cultural heritage, even though the requirements for restoration following the preservation order are high.



**Figure 6.** Dilapidated medieval building in Murkmeli, the bottom village of the village community of Ushguli; the owners of the historic building have no means to preserve it. As Murkmeli is not a World Heritage Site, the various Georgian governments have not invested in the preservation of its buildings (Applis 2019).

As a result, the inhabitants are in charge of the buildings' maintenance and the conservation of historic buildings themselves, without worrying about heritage protection requirements (Figure 7). To make the investments worthwhile, they focus above all on the expectations of the guests and try to create an environment that corresponds to their ideas of an authentic village community living on the "edge of time", which at the same time has comfort standards.

The economic crisis resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic hit Georgia hard in 2021 and 2022 because, as explained above, "the prioritization of developing tourism has been embraced by the Georgian government and continues to be a dominant narrative in the economic development of the country to this day" [58] (p. 27) [11]. No precise figures are yet available on the consequences for the small providers of tourism services. From the material available, it can only be concluded that the consequences will be devastating. The interest rates for loans are astronomically high in Georgia. If there is no noticeable success in the first year of investment, many hopes for an income in tourism remain unfulfilled, and a heavy debt burden remains.

The results presented here show once again that tourism generates strong competitive processes within traditional social communities that previously relied on solidarity. This competition, generated under precarious economic conditions, leads to strong identity crises within the affected communities, which is also shown by studies in other regions of the world [59–63]. The market-based competitive economy has a strong potential to divide

local communities. Digital platforms play a special role here. On the one hand, they enable locals to become tourism actors; on the other hand, they generate practices that endanger their tourism engagement. In regions previously affected by emigration, competition can be intensified by the return of former emigrants, as is the case in Ushguli.



**Figure 7.** The tin roofing of Murkmeli does not meet the monument requirements; however, the villagers depend on the inexpensive type of roofing (Applis 2015).

If the hopes for development through tourism are to be fulfilled, especially in peripheral regions, strong and independent institutional support is needed for regional communities in which their own resources for regulating processes are not or no longer available. In Ushguli, the crisis experiences of the 1980s and 1990s can be considered the cause of the lack of these self-regulatory capacities.

On the one hand, this requires qualitative research that can very precisely capture the specific challenges faced by a peripheral region. In the author's view, such data can only be obtained to a limited extent by asking for quantifiable data, as other studies suggest [12,40,60]. Rather, it is the specific, historically developed local social structures that determine the limits and possibilities of sustainable development. Only by being deeply involved in the field and activating the social resources of the stakeholders on the ground can an equal participation of all players be ensured. This is, in the end, the only way to ensure equal involvement of all actors. On the other hand, research is needed on the effects of the digital processes that carry tourism into peripheral regions in times of globalization, establish it there and lead to social, economic and ecological changes. The description given here of the unique cultural conditions in Svaneti, which of course, still unfold differently from village to village, should make this clear.

Finally, it should be emphasized once again that digital practices are also social practices that, even if they are carried out from a distance, have immediate effects on the ground [64–67]. It is necessary to take these effects systematically into account in the study of peripheral mountain regions, within which tourism will only be a supplement to self-sufficient agriculture in the long term.

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