

# PROSPECTS FOR DEVELOPMENT OF REGIONAL TRANSPORT-TOURIST ROUTES ON THE BASE OF KOPITNARI AIRPORT

## ПЕРСПЕКТИВЫ РАЗВИТИЯ РЕГИОНАЛЬНЫХ ТРАНСПОРТНО-ТУРИСТИЧЕСКИХ МАРШРУТОВ НА БАЗЕ АЭРОПОРТА КОПИТНАРИ

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**Abstract:** *The King David the Builder Kutaisi (Kopitnari) International Airport is located in the Black Sea region of the South Caucasus. The Airport's strategic geographic position and further improvement of the infrastructure allow for its transforming into the regional hub for providing transport services to travelers.*

*In the 1980s, the flights from this airport were carried out as inside the country (Tbilisi, Sokhumi, Batumi, Mestia), so outside country as well (Moscow, St. Petersburg, Kiev). The Kopitnari Airport was opened after reconstruction in 2012. Its priorities are attraction to attract low-tariff airline companies and create a harmonic environment between the airline companies and airports. As of today, the flights from the Airport are carried out to Eastern Europe, Turkey and Russia.*

*The Airport has the capacity to carry out domestic flights for small tourist groups to: highland ski runs in Mestia; well-appointed Black Sea beaches in Batumi; wine tours in Telavi and so on. Proximity to the trunk railroad and motorway are the opportune occasions to form the Kopitnari Airport as a synergic transport system.*

*Besides, the Airport's proximity to the Rioni River can be used for organizing there the short tour of the so-called "Travel of Argonauts to Kolkheti", which was passed by the well-known traveler Tim Severin by his oared boat named "Argo" in 1984, and the place where he finally dropped anchor was near the Kopitnari Airport.*

**KEY WORDS:** AIRPORT KOPITNARI; TOURIST TRANSPORT SERVICES; SYNERGIC TRANSPORT SYSTEM.

### 1. Introduction

Kutaisi International Airport is also known as the King David the Builder Kutaisi International Airport Kopitnari. The Airport is located 14 km west of Kutaisi. It is one of three Georgian international airports, along with Tbilisi and Batumi international airports. The Airport is equipped with the highest quality navigation and meteorological observation systems, the length of its takeoff field is 2 600 meters and completely meets modern standards.

Since the 1970s, the flights are realized from the Airport in both directions inside (Tbilisi, Sokhumi, Batumi, Mestia) and outside the country on the long-distance routes (Moscow, St. Petersburg, Kiev). Kopitnari Airport was reopened after reconstruction on September 27, 2012. Official reopening ceremony was attended by representatives of governments of Georgian and Hungary, as well as by Chief Executive Officer of the airline company Wizz Air. After reconstruction, the first plane arrived in the Airport was cargo Boeing 747 [1, 2].

Kutaisi International Airport is aimed at attracting the low-tariff airline companies and creating a competitive environment. The affordable air ticket price makes Georgia an active tourist zone and allows passengers for traveling in different directions for a friendly price.

### 2. Preconditions and means for resolving the problem

Due to its geopolitical location, the Airport is of highest importance for the Black Sea region of the South Caucasus. Kutaisi International Airport located 200 kilometers from Tbilisi, within 300-km radius links with Turkey, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Ukraine and Russia. Due to favorable climatic conditions and infrastructure, the Kutaisi International Airport is an airport standby. The Airport has the capacity of controlling flights in all weather and visibility conditions. The Airport is capable of servicing 600 passengers simultaneously. It is also capable of accommodating and operating three flights simultaneously. Kutaisi International Airport is gradually becoming the country's tourist airport owing to its location. Kutaisi is also interesting because of fact that the Imereti region of Georgia is gradually becoming a very attractive tourist

region. The strategic goal of regional development is to ensure that the Imereti region is capable of hosting 2 million tourists by 2020.

The King David the Builder Kutaisi International Airport Kopitnari is owned and operated by the United Airports of Georgia Ltd of the Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development of Georgia, which entered into a contract with the Hungarian airline company Wizz Air on establishing the base of this air company in Kutaisi in 2016 [3].

As a result of several years of the successfully concluded negotiations, the largest in Central and Eastern Europe low-tariff airline company Wizz Air is to house permanently one plane at the Kutaisi International Airport. The company owns 23 bases in all throughout the world, and the 24<sup>th</sup> base is to be opened in Georgia in the near future. This will be the first base of Wizz Air in the South Caucasus region. Since 2012, the Hungarian airline company Wizz Air performs flights to the Kutaisi International Airport, as a result of this basing, Kutaisi will become the first airport in the region with basing of low-tariff airline company that will contribute to increasing passenger flows and developing new directions [4].



*Pic. 1. Kutaisi – Europe, the cheapest way to travel*

The airline company Wizz Air fleet comprises 65 aircrafts of A320 and A321 types airbuses. Currently, the company is represented in 23 airports and performs flights in 400 directions, by which it links 188 airports in 38 countries. As of 2015, the airline

company Wizz Air has carried 19,2 million passengers. In the same year, for the achievements it made, the airline company Wizz Air was acclaimed by the World Transport Magazine as the leading airline company.

Since September 2016, the airline company Wizz Air plans to operate direct flights to such cities as Berlin, Munich, Milan, Dortmund, Thessaloniki, Larnaca and Sofia. The first flight will be carried out on September 23, and it will include Kutaisi-Berlin and Kutaisi-Munich directions. The flights to Thessaloniki, Larnaca and Sofia are planned to be carried out on September 24, the flights Kutaisi-Milan and Kutaisi-Dortmund will be operated on September 26.

The flights to six European cities will be operated twice a week, but the flight Kutaisi-Thessaloniki will be carried out three times. The cost of flights varies between 24.99 EUR and 39.99 EUR.

This in turn will contribute to the development of tourism sector in Georgia, as well as provide for Georgian citizens the new opportunities to travel cheaply to various European destinations.

The Kopitnari Airport has the capacity to carry out domestic flights for the interested tourist groups to Mestia, Batumi and Tbilisi.

Mestia Airport, which is also known as Queen Tamar Airport, is a local airport in Georgia, in Mestia municipality, in Mestia townlet, at an altitude of 1400 m above sea level. The Airport has a runway of sizes 850 m X 30 m. The type of the artificial surface is a cement-concrete.

In winter, the Airport receives one motor airplane and small passenger planes with carrying capacity of 18 people. In summer, the Airport is capable of receiving planes with carrying capacity of 50 passengers.

Mestia Airport joined them list of 10 amazing airports around the world. The designers of the web-page Novateput Mestia Airport on the list of the world's amazing airports and even named it "a small Georgian miracle".



**Pic. 2.** Mestia Airport was put on the list of 10 most amazing airports around the world.

The Mestai Airport terminal, which was designed by architect Jurgen Mayer Hermann, was put on the list of 10 most beautiful airports, which was drawn up by the British Broadcasting Corporation Ltd. (BBC). The Queen Tamar Airport is a kind of an analogue to the oldest towers of Svaneti [5].

Despite its small sizes, the Mestai Queen Tamar Airport is an impressive building, and it is the first one what impresses travelers arriving in this mountain region.



**Pic. 3.** Mestia's miracle – the oldest towers of Svaneti.

Mestia is a mountain small town in northwest Georgia, at an elevation of 1,500 meters in the Caucasus Mountains. Mestia is located in the Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti region, 128 km northeast of the regional capital of Zugdidi.

Mestia town is dominated by stone defensive towers of a type seen also in Ushguli. A typical Svan fortified dwelling consisted of a tower, an adjacent house and some other household structures encircled by a defensive wall.

Unique icons and manuscripts are kept in Mestia Historical-Ethnographic Museum. Mestia is also a center of mountaineer tourism and alpinism.

When traveling from Kutaisi International Airport, travelers are provided with a new type of service, and they are serviced by new comfortable buses, by means of which they can safely travel Tbilisi, Batumi, Zugdidi, Mestia and Kazbegi. The mentioned buses convey also passengers in Kutaisi direction and bring them to the particular bus stops. Together with bus tickets, all travelers are provided with a booklet, which contains the bus departure timetable in accordance with a flight schedule. The points of departure are marked on the map contained in this booklet. Also, there is provided a twenty-four-hour hotline, where any information is available to travelers if they wish. According to this new service, minibuses are equipped with the necessary comfort: air-conditioners, television sets, safety belts and passengers are provided with 1 free bottle of drinking water. The specially trained bus drivers can communicate in foreign languages.

### 3. Conclusion

A convenient complex geographical location of the central railway and highway lines, autobahn under construction and Rioni River, allow the Airport for developing new tourist routes by using different modes of transport:

1. The wine tours to East Georgia to the Kakheti region for those who like to travel by car – to the Telavi Airport by plane with a small carrying capacity, with a view to seeing the oldest grapes processing, wine-making and storage technologies, and to taking part in these processes in farm households;
2. A special speleological tour to the caves in the Imereti region by comfortable minibuses with a view to performing the extreme speleological tours to the adapted to be visited by tourists Kumistavi, Sataplia and Navenakhevi caves, as well as the still being unexplored caves of Tsutskhvat, Khreiti, Jruchi, Tabagrebi and others;

3. An extreme tour to the Khoni-Okatse canyon by minibus for thrill seekers and lovers of climbing;
4. A historical-cognitive tour "In the footsteps of Travel of Argonauts to Kolkheti on the Rioni River" from Kopitnari to Poti and back – by small-size comfortable river boats. This section of the Rioni River was passed by the well-known traveler Tim Severin travelling from the Adriatic Coast by his oared boat named "Argo" in 1984, and the place where he finally dropped anchor was near the Kopitnari Airport;
5. Water touring on the Rioni River "From Racha to Imereti" – traveling by comfortable bus to Racha, then bringing small groups to the Rioni River by special-purpose boating devices.

With the purpose of expansion of sphere of tourist transport services, the Airport also has to seize the capacities of Georgian railway, which offer customers pleasant innovation. Since summer-autumn 2016, travelers will have the opportunity to travel by Euro-standard train of the Stadler Kiss model. A new train is equipped with ultra-modern safety systems, which completely meet European safety standards. This will be the first train in Georgia realities, which is completely adjusted to needs of disabled people.

The train moves in the direction of the Black Sea resorts and back to Tbilisi without stops, except for only few stops at the some junction stations. These new trains will make traveling in a seaside region and capital city more comfortable for travelers that will contribute to the development of tourism.

Preliminary studies of the mentioned tourist routes have shown that each of them is attractive to particular tourist groups, and to further increase their recognition, tour operators have to carry out larger-scale and more intensive advertizing activities.

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