

Georgia Blooms With Russian Tourists

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Georgians celebrating the Novruz spring holiday. More Russians are traveling to enjoy Georgia's hospitality. **David Mdzinarishvili**

Georgia's tourism industry, whose share of economic output has grown to 7 percent this year, is set to expand further as a thaw in relations with Russia spurs an influx of visitors.

"Russian tourists, as a high-spending segment, are important for Georgia," Maya Sidamonidze, chairman of the National Tourism Agency, said Tuesday in a telephone interview from the capital, Tbilisi. "We expect their share to grow to 40 percent in the next few years from only 7 percent of total tourists this year."

The Black Sea nation is benefiting from a threefold increase in Russian arrivals last month at tourist destinations such as Tbilisi, the port of Batumi and ski resorts of Bakuriani and Gudauri. Georgia's tourism industry contributed 5 percent to economic output in 2011, Economy and Sustainable Development Minister Vera Kobalia said, the former Soviet republic expects more than 3 million tourists this year, from 2 million in 2010.

Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili in February called for closer economic ties with Russia, with which it fought a five-day war in 2008, offering visa-free travel for investors and tourists from its larger neighbor. Russia proposed to restore diplomatic relations last month, an offer spurned by Georgia until "illegal embassies" are removed from the breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Russia routed Georgia's army in an August 2008 war over South Ossetia, before recognizing its independence and agreeing to defend its borders. Georgia considers South Ossetia and Abkhazia part of its territory.

Georgia's \$11.6 billion economy grew a preliminary 7 percent in 2011, the statistics office said last month. Gross domestic product rose 8.8 percent from a year earlier in the fourth quarter.

Georgia was ranked as the world's third fastest-growing tourist destination last year with a 39 percent increase in international arrivals, according to a March report published by the World Tourism Barometer.

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There are no obstacles in the way for the resumption of deliveries of Georgian mineral water to Russia, Russia's chief sanitary doctor Gennady Onishchenko said Tuesday, RIA-Novosti reported.

"There are no obstacles. We are ready to go to Borjomi," Onishchenko, who is also the head of the Federal Consumer Protection Service, told journalists.

Russia banned imports of Georgian wines and two popular brands of mineral water in 2006 citing the poor quality of the products, a move widely condemned in Georgia as politically motivated.

Georgian winemakers and producers of Borjomi mineral water have made numerous attempts to return to the Russian market since then but have not received political support from Georgian authorities.

Russia says it needs to inspect technological processes during the production cycle and study samples of products before deciding whether to resume imports from Georgia.

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