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Development of cultural tourism in the mountainous parts of the Sheki-Zagatala economic region (on the example of Gabala and Oghuz regions)

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ABSTRACT

Problem statement and Purpose. The article examines cultural tourism and its resources that contribute to the development of some types of tourism related to cultural tourism - archaeological, ethnographic, historical and educational tourism in the Gabala and Oghuz regions. The main objective of this study was to examine the cultural potential of the Gabala and Oghuz regions and assess this potential for tourism development. To achieve this goal, theoretical approaches to cultural tourism were reviewed, statistical data on cultural sites, hotels, and transportation from 2015 to 2023 were analyzed, and tourist routes were developed, covering cities and villages with the highest concentrations of archaeological monuments, local cuisine, museums, ethnic festivals, and folk crafts.

Research methods. The study drew on literary sources from various authors, historical and cultural monuments of national and international significance, the legislative framework governing tourism, and statistical data from the State Statistical Committee of Azerbaijan. Systematic, evaluative, and cartographic methods were also employed.

Research results. As a result of the study, it was determined that both regions have great potential for the development of cultural tourism. In comparison with Gabala region, Oghuz region, although has various cultural tourism resources, but these prerequisites are not sufficiently used. Historically, tourists visit Gabala region in the Sheki-Zagatala economic region, which results in the underdevelopment of other regions in the economic region in terms of tourism. The cultural tourism routes we propose will create conditions for the development of cultural tourism in Oghuz region, and like other types, will open up opportunities for the further expansion of this type of tourism in Gabala region.

Conclusion. The samples discovered during archaeological research in the Gabala and Oghuz regions create significant opportunities for the development of archaeological tourism in the area. The use of numerous architectural and historical monuments in these regions for organizing historical and educational tourism will play a decisive role in the future development of this field. The traditional holidays of the ethnic groups living in the Oghuz and Gabala regions, along with local cuisine, and folk crafts such as carpet

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weaving, jewelry making, pottery, and blacksmithing, contribute to the development of ethnographic tourism.

Gabala region has been more strongly promoted among local and foreign tourists, and it is appropriate to apply this tool to Oghuz region. Because Oghuz region is not inferior to Gabala and other regions in the Sheki-Zagatala economic region in terms of cultural tourism resources, and it is appropriate to use this potential in the general socio-economic development of Oghuz region, which lags behind in terms of its level of economic development. The fact that automobile transport is the only means of transport in Oghuz region makes the issue of constant repair and restoration of roads relevant. In terms of the development of cultural tourism, it is important to reconstruct inter-village highways of local importance in the Oghuz region, and to further improve modes of transport such as air and railway in the Gabala region.

Introduction. In the scientific literature, great importance is attached to the study of cultural tourism and its resources. Various researchers – X. Matteucci, Ko Cohens, L. Calvi, S. Moretti, I. Smirnov, O. Lubitseva, O.O. Beidik, A.O. Goncharuk, A.V. Gladkey, I.H. Huseynov, N.T. Efendiyeva, Z.T. Imrani, B.A. Huseynova, G.V. Veliyeva, E.A. Ismayilova, Q.Sh. Mammadov, E.F. Yusifov, M.Yu. Khalilov, V.N. Kerimov, G.B. Soltanova, C.A. Mammadov, S.H. Rahimov – have their own approaches to the essence of such concepts as historical and architectural monuments, cultural potential, cultural and historical factors, cultural heritage monuments, cultural tourism objects, historical and cultural monuments, ethnological resources, socio-cultural processes.

X. Matteucci, Ko Cohens, L. Calvi, and S. Moretti studied the development trends of cultural tourism and formulated three concepts for its near future. The authors examined utopian, dystopian, and heterotopian concepts of cultural tourism and concluded that the heterotopian concept provides the most comprehensive interpretation of the future of this sector. They also discussed the potential implications of adopting the heterotopian approach [13].

According to G. Richards, research in the field of cultural tourism is rapidly expanding, particularly in areas such as cultural consumption, cultural motivation, heritage preservation, the economics of cultural tourism, anthropology, and its relationship with the creative economy. The author notes that the primary motivation for tourists in heritage and cultural tourism is the desire to discover, study, experience, and engage with both tangible and intangible cultural values [18]. Approaches highlighted by Richards - such as the shift from tangible to intangible heritage, increased attention to indigenous peoples and other minorities, and the expansion of the geographic scope of cultural tourism research - can be applied in the study regions.

I. Smirnov and O. Lubitseva examined the unique architectural and tourist features of the sacral architecture of Kyiv-Podil, which developed during the Hetmanship period in Ukraine in the 17th-18th centuries. They compared the

architectural dominants of the medieval sacral architecture of the Ukrainian Orthodox Kyiv-Podil with the Roman Catholic architecture of Kamianets-Podilskyi (17th-18th centuries), highlighting their significant tourist potential for the development and restoration of Ukraine's tourism industry after the war. The authors emphasized the historical undervaluation of sacral medieval architecture in the Cossack Baroque style – both in terms of tourism development and the education of schoolchildren – illustrating this through examples of destruction during the Soviet era and the potential for restoring cultural memory in independent Ukraine (e.g., the Church of St. Nicholas the Good) [19]. Their approach, which underscores the importance of historical monuments for cultural tourism and educational purposes, is highly relevant to our research. Similarly, using the historical monuments in the study regions to educate local schoolchildren is both appropriate and valuable.

O.O. Beidik and A.O. Goncharuk, in their study of the festival segment of cultural and entertainment tourism highlighted the role of deep ethnocultural traditions and a unique historical past in the development of festival tourism. The authors identified several challenges that hinder the growth of festival tourism - insufficient funding, underdeveloped tourism infrastructure, and inadequate promotion of festivals both domestically and internationally [4]. These issues are also relevant to the Oghuz region, where the present study was conducted.

A.V. Gladkey examined the cultural resources of the Khmelnytsky region, which possesses significant historical and cultural tourism potential, and conducted a SWOT analysis of its cultural heritage [6]. The author's recommendations for developing and creating cultural tourism products, as well as mechanisms for promoting them in domestic and international markets, are applicable to the Oghuz and Gabala regions.

Along with the natural features of the region, cultural heritage monuments have also an important role in choosing the area to visit. In some cases, specific cultural objects, and unique heritage assets are considered a key factor in the

selection of the area by tourists. Cultural tourism selected as a developed type in the classification of tourism includes the following [2].

Gabala region covers 17.5% of the territory of the Sheki-Zagatala economic region with 1.55 thousand km², and 17.4% of the total population with 108.9 thousand people. These indicators are 1.08 thousand km² (12.2%) and 44.5 thousand people (7.1%) for the Oghuz region, respectively [21].

The industry of the Sheki-Zagatala economic region is mainly based on the production of food, light and partially building materials. The leading sector in the economic region is agriculture, whereas the most important and leading field is tourism. Since the attempts to develop tourism in Sheki-Zagatala economic region are not directed properly, tourism enterprises fail in a short time. The placement of tourism facilities in the forest areas of Sheki-Zagatala economic region and their expansion over time increases deforestation in large areas. Although ecotourism, winter tourism, cultural and historical tourism were developed in Sheki-Zagatala economic region in previous years, however adrenaline tourism will now be a more effective way [7].

It is of great importance to study the cultural tourism of Gabala and Oghuz regions, to identify the factors affecting its development, and to indicate the prospective development directions of various types of tourism related to cultural tourism - archaeological, ethnographic, historical and educational tourism. Gabala region is in first place in the region in terms of economic indicators of tourism. Although Oghuz region has favorable opportunities for the development of cultural tourism, it lags behind all districts in the Sheki-Zagatala economic region in terms of the current state of tourism. In this regard, it is very relevant to explore the cultural tourism opportunities of the Gabala and Oghuz regions, which are distinguished by their mountainous terrain.

Materials and methods. The sources of information included statistical data and information on historical and cultural monuments of national and international significance, which formed the basis for all calculations and tables. The overall methodological framework of the study consisted of the following sequential stages:

- *Software stage*: Analysis of literary sources and the legislative framework, and determination of the object, purpose, and objectives of the study.

- *Information stage*: Collection and processing of statistical data and information on historical and cultural monuments of national and international significance, and creation of a database.

- *Cartographic stage*: Construction of tables based on the processed statistical data and information, and preparation of a map.

The object of the study is the cultural tourism resources of the Gabala and Oghuz regions, including architectural and archaeological monuments, historical and local history museums, ethnic holidays, items of folk crafts and folk art, theaters and local cuisine.

The study uses a systemic method that allows the most effective study of the space of cultural tourism, then an evaluation method that allows identifying the spatial differentiation of cultural tourism resources, as well as a cartographic method that allows identifying cities and villages that actively use their cultural tourism resources in the development of tourism.

Results and discussion. Gabala region is one of the six regions included in the Sheki-Zagatala economic region, bordering the Russian Federation, Guba and Gusar regions in the north, Oghuz and Sheki in the west, Ismayilli in the east, and Agdash and Goychay regions in the south. Oghuz region as an integral part of the Sheki-Zagatala economic region borders the Russian Federation in the north, Sheki in the west and south, and Gabala in the east [15].

In the Sheki-Zagatala economic region, 27.2% of the number of hotels, 50.3% of the number of rooms, 51.3% of the single occupancy, 62.1% of the number of accommodated persons, and 60.9% of the number of overnight stays fall on the share of Gabala region. These indicators are 3.9%; 2.9%; 2.7%; 1.3% and 0.8% for Oghuz region, respectively [24]. Analysis of statistical figures shows a sharp difference in the economic indicators of hotels in Gabala and Oghuz regions and confirms that Gabala region is in 1st place in the region, and Oghuz region is in last place.

In order to ensure the rational use of tourism resources and to promote the components of the natural environment and cultural heritage, the year 2011 was declared the “Year of Tourism” in Azerbaijan by the Decree of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan dated February 15, 2011. The objectives outlined in the action plan prepared for this purpose were achieved in 2015. From this perspective, the 2015 indicators were used for statistical analysis in the study.

Although an increase was observed in all economic indicators of hotels in the study area in 2015-2023, the highest figures were recorded in the number of accommodated persons and overnight stays. During this period, the number of accommodated persons in Gabala region increased by 13.5 times, and the number of overnight stays increased by 17.8 times (Table 1).

Historical-cultural potential includes a number of cultural-heritage tourism objects, their importance (international or local), degree of use, semantic value, etc. [10].

11.7% of the number of libraries, 11.8% of the number of club institutions, 9.1% of the number

Table 1

Economic indicators of hotels in the study area

Economic indicators	Names of regions					
	Oghuz		Gabala		Sheki-Zagatala	
	Y e a r s					
	2015	2023	2015	2023	2015	2023
Number of hotels, units	3	3	9	21	54	77
Number of rooms, units	62	62	196	1079	1072	2144
Single occupancy, space	138	138	503	2611	2583	5090
Number of accommodated persons, people	1095	1606	5909	79823	31280	128455
Number of overnight stays, person-night	1194	1810	7653	136012	51064	223414

Source: Tourism in Azerbaijan. (2024). Statistical yearbook. State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan. Baku. 102 [in Azerbaijani]

Table 2

Economic indicators of cultural sites in the study area

Economic indicators	Names of the regions					
	Oghuz		Gabala		Sheki-Zagatala	
	Years					
	2015	2023	2015	2023	2015	2023
Number of libraries	27	24	27	20	251	205
Number of club establishments	27	21	36	17	261	178
Number of museums	2	2	3	3	21	22
Number of parks	2	2	4	4	19	19
Number of post offices	17	11	30	15	156	120

Source: Regions of Azerbaijan. (2024). Statistical yearbook. State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan. Baku. 845 [in Azerbaijani]

of museums, 10.5% of the number of parks, and 9.2% of the number of post offices fall to the share of Oghuz region in the Sheki-Zagatala economic region. These indicators are 9.8%; 9.6%; 13.6%; 21.1% and 12.5% for Gabala region, respectively [17]. Unlike the economic indicators of hotels, the statistical figures of cultural facilities do not have such large or small shares in Gabala and Oghuz regions (Gabala region has twice greater specific weight only in the indicator of parks).

Although a decrease was observed in all economic indicators of cultural facilities in the study area in 2015-2023, the lowest figures were recorded in the numbers of club institutions and post offices. During this period, the number of club establishments in Gabala region decreased by 2.1 times, and the number of post offices decreased by 2.0 times (Table 2).

In the process of organizing tourism, people strive to get in touch with the rich nature. In addition to the picturesque nature, the aesthetic and historical value of monuments enhances their attractiveness for cultural tourism. The presence of both features determines the development of tourism [8].

In the Sheki-Zagatala economic region, two main types of tourism have developed: ecotourism and cultural tourism. The Shahdag National Park (Gabala and Oghuz regions), Turyanchay State Nature Reserve (Gabala and Oghuz regions), and Gabala State Wildlife Refuge (Gabala region), all

established within the economic region, shape its natural and recreational resources and support the development of ecotourism.

The study area has various resources that determine the development of cultural attractions. The cultural tourism resources of the area include architectural and archaeological monuments, museums of history and local lore, ethnic holidays, examples of cultural heritage, theaters and local cuisine.

The historical past of the Gabala region is as rich as its nature. The favorable historical and geographical position of the Gabala region has led to the development of its territory by people since ancient times and, as a result, the creation of rich cultural and historical monuments. More than 90 historical, ethnographic and cultural monuments are protected in the region [20]. 15 km from the center of the Gabala region, between the Garachay and Jovurlu rivers, are the ruins of the ancient city of Gabala. The ancient city of Gabala, which was the capital of Caucasian Albania, was also chosen as a large trade center. The name of this city, which existed for more than 1800 years, is also found in the works of ancient writers. An excursion to the ruins of the city of Gabala is of great interest to tourists. On this excursion, tourists have the chance to see the preserved castle walls and separate parts of the tower [12].

The Mukhas Tower, which is 11.6 m high, 1.5 m thick and consists of 3 floors, is one of the

historical monuments of great importance in terms of tourism development. This tower, which dates back to the 9th-13th centuries, is located near the Mukhas village of the Oghuz region and played the role of a guard post during the historical period [11].

Although no architectural monuments of international importance were recorded in the study area, the ancient city of Gabala is included in the list of archaeological monuments of international importance. Architectural

monuments of national importance are concentrated in the villages of Hazra (Gabala region) and Filfli (Oghuz region). Archaeological monuments of national importance predominate in Gabala and Oghuz regions. In Gabala region, these monuments are mainly located in the villages of Savalan, Shafili, Bayramkokhali, Sileyli, Tovla and Dizakhli, and consist of a dwelling and a burial mound. In Oghuz region, a dwelling and a necropolis stand out among the archaeological monuments, located near the city

Table 3

List of archaeological monuments of national importance in the study area

Gabala region			Oghuz region
1. Gavur Castle (Bum village)	19. Soil mound (east of Amili village)	37. Bujaq Piri (Sileyli village)	1. Castle hill (1.5 km east of Oghuz city)
2. Chukhur Gabala settlement (in front of Gabala fortress)	20. Kamaltepe (50 m south of Gabala city gate)	38. Surkhay Fortress (between the Turyanchay and Goychay valleys)	2. Castle ruins (1.5 km east of Oghuz city)
3. Tomb (500 m south of Chukhur Gabala village)	21. Ustajan Castle (southeast of Bayramkokhali village)	39. Shihitapa settlement (between the Turyanchay and Goychay streams)	3. Necropolis (near the city of Oghuz)
4. Kurgan (5 km northwest of Hajialili village)	22. Ustajan Hill (10 km southeast of Bayramkokhali village)	40. Gachag house residence (at the junction of Gachachay and Turyanchay)	4. Gala settlement (2 km northeast of Oghuz city)
5. Kilsadag Temple (northeast of Hajialili village)	23. Khyrmantepe settlement (east of Bayramkokhali village)	41. Chakhchakhly settlement (1 km southwest of Yengija village)	5. Necropolis (3 km southeast of the village of Karimli)
6. Yaloylutepe Cemetery (Nij Village)	24. Garatepe (1 km southeast of Sarhajalli village)	42. Bayramkokha Fortress (east of Zalam village)	6. Castle site (500 m south of Karimli village)
7. Construction of «Gachag evleri» (Savalan village)	25. Kelesh fortress site (south of Sileyli village)	43. Maiden's Castle (3 km east of Zalam village)	7. Necropolis (north of Garabaldir village)
8. Kolatan (5 km south of Savalan village)	26. Topraktepe settlement (500 m south of Tovla village)	44. Castle (3 km southwest of the village of Kurd)	8. Big and Small Fortresses (1 km south of Tarkash village)
9. Bulagli dere settlement (2 km northeast of Savalan village)	27. Khazra wooden shrine (3 km northeast of Bayramkokhali village)	45. Yedditapa settlement (3 km north of Bayramkokhali village)	9. Tikanli reserve settlement (2 km south of Tarkash village)
10. Garaul Tepe (Savalan village)	28. Kabir Mikh settlement (2 km northeast of the village of Tovla)	46. Agjaburun settlement (3 km southwest of Kurd village)	10. Jalut settlement (500 m north of Jalut village)
11. Pirasharyf Castle (Dizakhli village)	29. Galadam (4 km north of Gamarvan village)	47. Necropolis of the Cube Graves (near the village of Yenikand)	11. Pir (500 m north of the village of Jalut)
12. Earthen mound (500 m northeast of Dizakhli village)	30. Temple area in Gabala city (3 km south of Tovla village)	48. Seyidatala settlement (5 km south of the village of Kichik Pirali)	12. Gavur Castle (2 km north of Khachmaz village)
13. Stone mound (north of Dizakhli village)	31. Ruins of the circular church (3 km northwest of the village of Amili)	49. Gafarli settlement (3 km south of Kichik Pirali village)	13. Balashu's residence (5 km northeast of the village of Khachmaz)
14. Castle (Vandam village)	32. Necropolis (Shafili village)	50. Stone mound (Sileyli village)	
15. Dashmir settlement (5 km north of Vandam village)	33. Daxaltepe (1 km south of the village of Shafili)	51. Ruins of Beyler village (between Amirvan and Yengija villages)	
16. Gala (Nij village)	34. Earthen mound (1 km north of Shafili)	52. Azakhly mound (Azakhly village)	
17. Yaloylutepe necropolis (south of Nij village)	35. Tomb (1 km north of Shafili)	53. Kharabakand location (2 km southwest of Mammadagali village)	
18. Residence and cemetery (Amirvan village)	36. Ahitapa settlement (500 m northeast of Bum village)		

Source: List of immovable historical and cultural monuments of Azerbaijan, approved by the Resolution No. 132 of the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Azerbaijan dated August 2, 2001.

of Oghuz and in the village of Tarkash (Table 3).

Cultural tourism includes architectural and archaeological monuments, culinary experiences, festivals and events, historical or cultural sites, museums and exhibitions, sightseeing, and religious sites such as temples, churches, and mosques [14].

One of the regions distinguished by its cultural heritage is Oghuz region. In Oghuz region, crafts such as carpet weaving, jewelry, pottery and blacksmithing have been developed and passed down from generation to generation. Local craftsmen weave carpets using natural dyes and intricate patterns. The art of jewelry is based on the preparation of jewelry and decorative items made of silver and gold. In pottery, various containers and decorative items are made of clay using traditional methods and ornaments. In blacksmithing, the preparation of household items and metal products occupies a large place. These mentioned art forms increase the cultural richness of Oghuz and attract tourists to the region.

In Gabala, which belongs to the Shirvan carpet weaving school has been one of the occupations of people since ancient times. One of the branches of “Azerkhalcha” Open Joint Stock Company, established in 2017 for this reason, began operating in Gabala region and produces wool and pile carpets. Although the Gabala branch mainly focuses on weaving Shirvan carpets, carpet varieties are made by the carpet weavers-artists of the Open Joint Stock Company. Aiming to preserve the ancient carpet weaving traditions, the Gabala branch continues its activities to attract the interest of local and foreign tourists.

The organization of the demonstration and sale of carpets and carpet products made in Gabala and Oghuz regions and of great interest to tourists will ensure the attraction them to the area and accelerate the development of cultural tourism.

Extensive work is being carried out to transform the Gabala People’s Theater into a state drama theater, which was established in 1964 and has shown small and large-scale works on its stage. The Oghuz People’s Theater, which has been operating since 1971, plays a major role in the cultural life of the region, and various performances are presented here.

The Gabala Historical and Local History Museum, which has been operating since May 15, 1980, preserves about 1,400 exhibits of historical and scientific importance. The museum, which has an area of 900 m², consists of 13 exhibition halls, a rich scientific library, a picture gallery and an open-air exhibition area of ancient stone monuments. There are also 2 branches of the Gabala Historical and Local History Museum, where archaeological, ethnographic and

numismatic materials, folk art samples, ancient manuscripts and printed books are exhibited: the Ismayil bey Gutgashenli Memorial House-Museum and the Martyrs’ Memory Museum.

About 4,000 exhibits are exhibited in the Oghuz Historical and Local History Museum, which was established in 1981. The museum, which preserves the history, culture, ethnography and craftsmanship of the area, exhibits found as a result of archaeological excavations are of particular importance. Thus, some of the 168 examples of material culture discovered during archaeological excavations in the region date back to 9-10 thousand years ago, further enriching the museum fund. The corners and halls where examples of coppersmithing, pottery, carpentry and numismatics, textiles, jewelry, clothing and household items are displayed are also of great importance for local and foreign tourists.

Theaters will play a major role in enhancing the cultural worldview of local and foreign tourists coming to Gabala and Oghuz regions, and the History and Local History Museums will play a major role in strengthening their historical memory.

Various ethnic holidays are also considered to be factors affecting the development of cultural tourism. The ethnic composition of the population in both Gabala and Oghuz regions is diverse. In Oghuz region, 10.82% of the total population is Lezgins, 0.20% are Jews, and 0.16% are Udins. In Gabala region, Lezgins account for 13.86% of the total population, and Udins account for 3.27% [5].

Jews also live in Oghuz, one of the regions distinguished by the ethnic composition of its population. The Jewish holiday “Pesakh”, which means freedom and spring, is important in terms of tourism development. The holiday “Pesakh” (Nisonu) is held in April, begins with a religious ceremony in the synagogue, and ends with the preparation of a festive table. The following delicacies are essential to the Jewish holiday table: “Mesat” instead of bread, the national dish “Khoyavush”, and “Khasurut” made from a mixture of fruits and berries.

Lezgin traditions constitute an important component of ethnic tourism resources of the Gabala region. They settled in villages such as Amirvan, Abrikh, Gamarvan, Kusnet, Yenikand, Dizakhli, Bilikh, Sileyli, Malikli, Yengija, Laza and Bayramkokhali. But in these villages, they live mixed with Azerbaijanis. Villages inhabited only by Lezgins, such as Laza, Gamarvan, Amirvan, etc., have their national costumes, folk groups and national cuisine [9].

The holidays of this people are celebrated in Oghuz and Gabala, which are the regions inhabited by Lezgins. The “Yaran Suvar” holiday, called “Bahar Bayrami” in the Lezgin language,

lasts from March 21 to April 4. On the eve of this holiday, “mel”, which means “cleaning”, also takes place. During the “Vastrakar” holiday, which is held on the night of March 21 to 22, candles are lit and various delicious dishes are prepared. The “Chichek” holiday, one of the ancient holidays of the Lezgins, is also celebrated with great enthusiasm in rural areas.

The Udins, one of the ethnic peoples living in the Oghuz and Gabala regions, are also distinguished by their holidays. The “Jogulin Askhibay” holiday is held in mid-March and combines the cooking of the national dish “Hasra”, people sending shares to each other and singing songs.

Local cuisine also belongs to the cultural tourism resources. Since Gabala region (mainly Bum village) is considered the homeland of chestnut in Azerbaijan, various dishes are prepared from chestnuts here. The dishes specific to Gabala region include chestnut kutab, chestnut halva, local baklava, dasharasi kebab and Hamzali halva made with walnuts, which have attracted the attention of tourists.

Oghuz region is famous for its local cuisine in Azerbaijan. Since the forests of the region are rich in wild fruits, various jams are prepared here: walnut, cranberry, barberry and rosehip jams. Among the dishes specific to Oghuz region are kutab cooked in the Oghuz style - Afar, chikirtmali and minced pilaf, dolma made from linden leaves, which attract local and foreign tourists to the area.

Transport plays a significant role in tourism development. It influences the placement and development of tourism and recreation infrastructure, facilitating the creation of various connections between regions of the country. When assessing a territory’s tourism and recreation potential, a region’s competence in transportation is particularly important [3].

Although only highways are developed as a means of transport in Oghuz region, automobile, railway and air transport are also distinguished in Gabala region. The movement of high-speed

passenger trains on the 309 km long Baku-Gabala route began on March 18, 2023. The seats in the four-carriage and double-decker high-speed passenger trains consist of standard, business and first class. The modern conditions and high-level service created at the railway station create conditions for the short and safe transportation of local and foreign tourists from the capital to Gabala region, as well as to other regions of the Sheki-Zagatala economic region.

Gabala International Airport, which provides transportation of tourists not only to the Sheki-Zagatala economic region and Gabala region, but also to the north-western zone of Azerbaijan in general, has been operating since November 18, 2011. The further expansion of flights between this airport, which has the ability to receive aircraft of any size, along with Baku airport, other local airports of the country - Ganja, Nakhchivan and Lankaran, as well as airports of neighboring countries, will create positive conditions for the development of cultural tourism and ensure safe transportation of tourists.

Of the 1810 km long Sheki-Zagatala economic region’s highways, 324 km (17.9%) fall on Gabala, and 202 km (11.2%) on Oghuz. Also, 24 km (66.7%) of the 36 km long first-class highways in the Sheki-Zagatala economic region are concentrated in Gabala [25].

In the region, Sheki and Gabala regions stand out in terms of the length of general highways, including Gabala for I category roads, Sheki for II category roads, Sheki and Gakh for III category roads, Sheki and Gabala for IV category roads, and Balakan for V category roads, 72.2% of general highways in Gabala region, and 65.3% in Oghuz region belong to IV category (Figure 1).

The Ismayilli-Balakan highway of republican importance passes through the territory of both Gabala and Oghuz regions, providing transport connections for many villages of both regions. There are local highways between other villages. The development of cultural tourism will

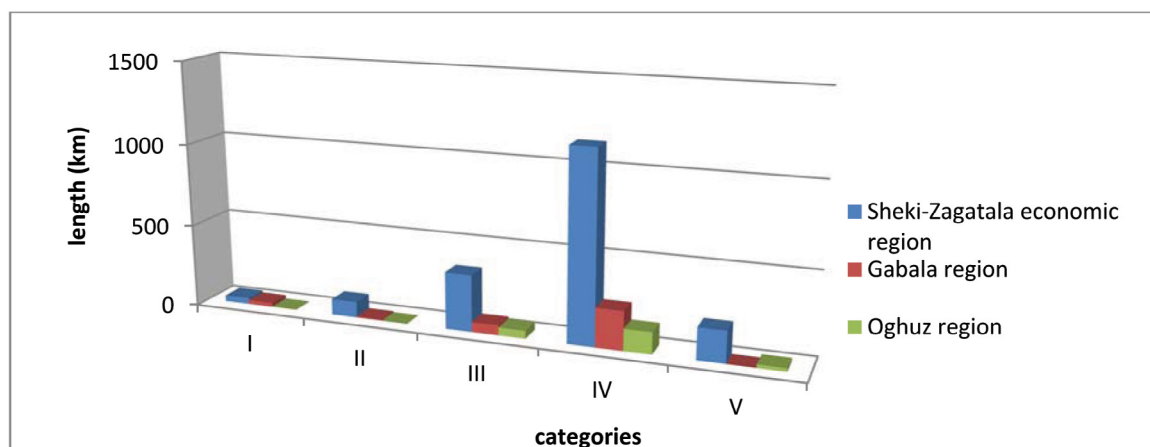


Fig. 1. Distribution of highways by category in the study area

necessitate the reconstruction of inter-village highways of local importance. Unlike Gabala, Oghuz region does not have other modes of transport, so it is advisable to further improve the roads.

The “Archaeological Tourism in Azerbaijan” cultural tourism route - created to promote cultural heritage and encourage the use of cultural assets for tourism purposes, and covering the Gabala, Sheki, Tovuz, Shamkir, and Aghsu regions - the “Five Capitals of Five Eras” cultural tourism route, which encompasses five cities that served as capitals of states that emerged on the territory of Azerbaijan in different historical periods (Ganja, Barda, Shamakhi, Baku, and Gabala), and the “Historical Traces of Ancient Caucasian Albania” cultural tourism route, which aims to popularize the historical and cultural monuments of Caucasian Albania and covers the Gabala, Sheki, and Gakh regions - have all received state status in Azerbaijan. The inclusion of the Gabala region in all three certified cultural tourism routes highlights the state-level attention given to the development of cultural tourism in this region.

The government’s efforts to develop tourism in the Gabala region are focused on creating a comprehensive network of tourism infrastructure. Even before Azerbaijan gained independence, a tourist base was established in the Gabala region in 1975 during the Soviet period. After independence, one of the eight tourist information centers created in the country operated in the Gabala region. Today, one of the country’s five functioning airports is located in Gabala, and one of the three high-speed passenger train routes in Azerbaijan also connects to this region.

The Gabala region stands out not only within the Sheki-Zagatala economic region but also across Azerbaijan for its level of tourism development. Gabala accounts for 4.0% of the total number of overnight stays in the country and 4.1% of the total number of accommodated persons. In terms of overnight stays, Gabala ranks 5th among the 70 cities and regions of Azerbaijan (after Baku (57.6%), Guba (5.5%), Khachmaz (4.7%) and Naftalan (4.2%) regions). In terms of the number of accommodated persons, the Gabala region ranks 3rd, following Baku (61.4%) and the Guba region (5.8%).

Oghuz region, which is included in the list of backward regions of the region in terms of its level of economic development, has a small population and specializes in the production of agricultural products, and with its rich cultural tourism resources, it is possible to achieve general socio-economic development (nominal income of the population - 147,816 thousand manats, number of employed person - 22,647 people, unemployment rate - 6.9%, average monthly nominal wage - 591.4

manats, number of newly opened jobs - 45 [17]).

The legislative framework for tourism consists of the “State Program for the Socioeconomic Development of Regions of the Republic of Azerbaijan (2019-2023)” and “Strategic Roadmap for the Development of Specialized Tourism Industry in the Republic of Azerbaijan”.

The State Program for the Socioeconomic Development of Regions for 2019-2023 in the Oghuz region envisaged the development of various types of tourism, including cultural tourism, major renovations and construction of cultural sites, restoration and conservation of historical monuments, improvement of telecommunications and postal services, construction, reconstruction, and major renovation of local and inter-village roads, as well as the creation of social infrastructure [22]. Since the State Program expired in 2023, most of these measures have already been implemented.

To further increase the tourism potential of the region, tourism activities should not be limited to natural sites. The combination of tourist routes with historical and cultural heritage sites creates more opportunities that are attractive for tourists. For example, ancient monuments, ethnographic villages, historic castles, and architectural examples can be presented as an integral part of tourist packages. This not only increases tourist interest but also creates an additional source of income for the local population [16].

In the “Strategic Roadmap for the Development of Specialized Tourism Industry in the Republic of Azerbaijan”, approved by the Decree of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan dated December 6, 2016, one of the strategic goals is the development of regional tourism types for local and foreign tourists. To achieve the strategic goal, 5 priorities are envisaged, one of which is the creation of cultural tourism routes [23].

Since the measures to be taken to create routes include the promotion of new tourism routes, it is very important to prepare automobile and pedestrian routes for the cultural tourism resources of the study regions. In Gabala region, it is proposed to prepare cultural tourism routes like Gabala city-Hamzali-Bum-Gamarvan, Shafili-Sarihajalli-Dizakhli-Chukhur Gabala and Yenikand-Zalam-Kichik Amili-Boyuk Amili-Hajialili, and in Oghuz region, it is proposed to prepare cultural tourism routes like Padar-Karimli-Garabaldır, Oghuz city-Jalut-Mukhas and Khachmaz-Abdalli-Filfili. During these cultural tourism routes that we propose and will cover both research regions, it is possible to get acquainted with local cuisine (Hamzali and Bum villages), History and Local History museums (Gabala and Oghuz cities), archaeological and architectural monuments, ethnic holidays and various folk crafts (Figure 2).

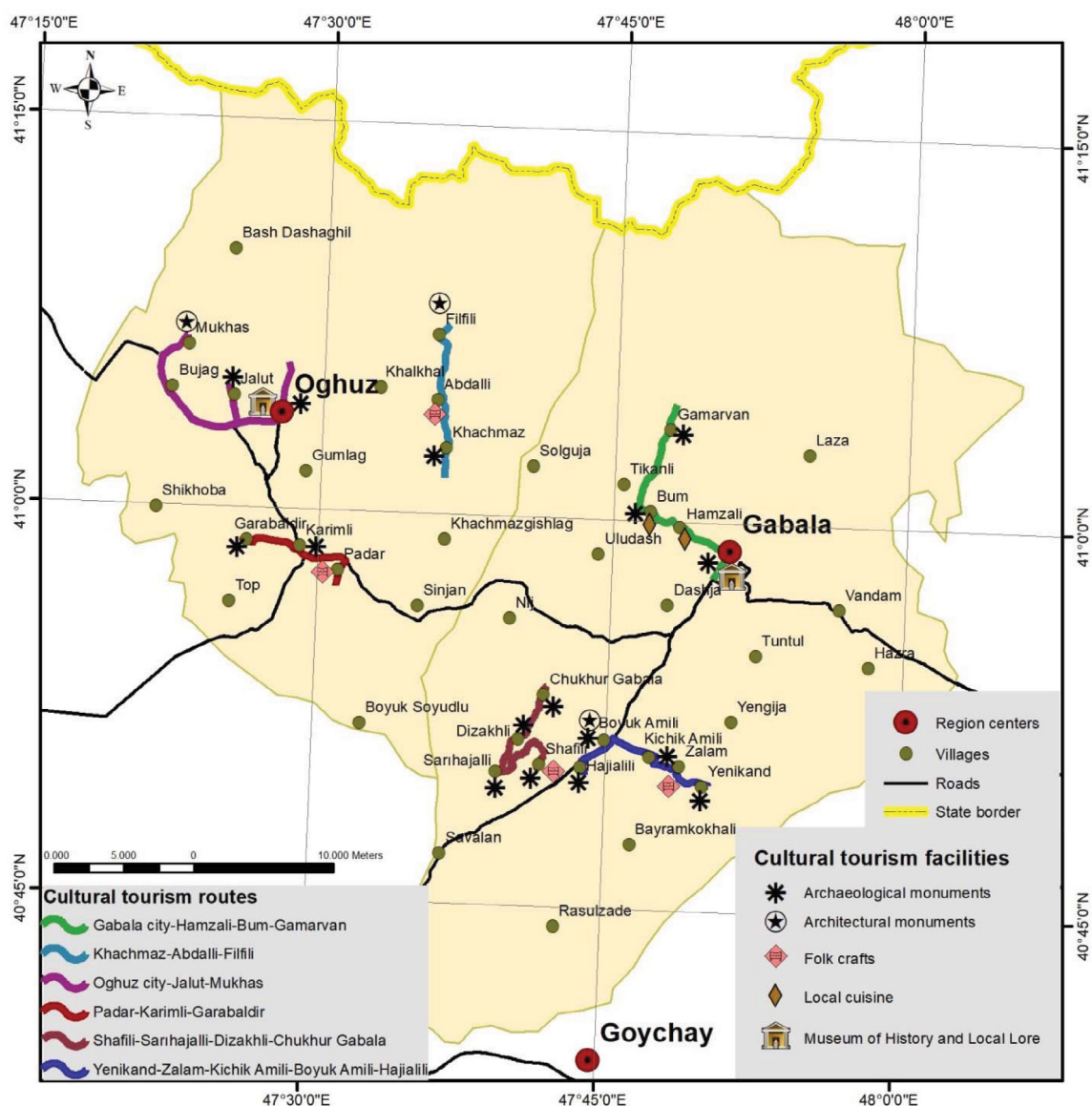


Fig. 2. Map of cultural tourism routes in the study area

It is planned that two of the 3 cultural tourism routes prepared for Gabala region (Gabala city-Hamzali-Bum-Gamarvan and Yenikand-Zalam-Kichik Amili-Boyuk Amili-Hajjalili) will be implemented on roads of republican importance and one (Shafili-Sarhajalli-Dizakhli-Chukhur Gabala) will be implemented on local roads, and two of the 3 cultural tourism routes prepared for Oghuz region (Oghuz city-Jalut-Mukhas and Khachmaz-Abdalli-Filfili) will be implemented on local roads and one (Padar-Karimli-Garabaldir) will be implemented on roads of republican importance.

The strengthening of socio-cultural processes, the emergence of cultural values change the norms and habits of consumption of services, the choice of services, determined in the field of tourism and recreation. Interest in other cultures gives rise to the desire to travel and get new experiences, which is manifested in the formation of various products of enterprises of the tourist

and recreational complex. Raising the cultural and educational level of the population leads to understanding the experience of other countries and regions and developing ways to use it in their professional activities [1].

Conclusions

1. The Sheki-Zagatala economic region ranks second in Azerbaijan, after the Baku economic region, in terms of ethnic diversity. This diversity is reflected in the distinct lifestyles and traditions of its small ethnic groups, which attract the interest of tourists visiting the region. While the ancient history of both regions positively influences their cultural tourism potential, the Gabala region possesses a particularly ancient past. The city of Gabala has even been compared to such ancient and renowned cities as Babylon, Troy, Pompeii, and Carthage.

2. The relatively weak development of tourism in the Oghuz region is associated with its level of socioeconomic development, the scale of construction activities, and the development of transport and other infrastructure sectors. However, several national policies are aimed at supporting tourism development in the Oghuz region, including the “Law on Tourism,” approved by the Decree of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan dated December 27, 2021; the “State Program for the Development of Tourism in the Republic of Azerbaijan for 2010-2014,” approved by the Presidential Decree dated April 6, 2010; and the “State Program for the Socioeconomic Development of Regions (2019-2023)”.

3. Gabala is the fastest-developing region within the Sheki-Zagatala economic region. In Gabala, which demonstrates a high level of socioeconomic development by Azerbaijani standards, numerous light industry and food processing enterprises have been established in recent years. These include lemonade and piano factories, dairies, grape and hazelnut processing plants, canning factories, bakeries, grain elevators, brick factories, and concrete plants. Although the Oghuz region is considered one of the most economically underdeveloped areas within the economic region, its rich cultural and tourism resources offer significant potential

for overall socioeconomic development. The Oghuz region could also be incorporated into the “Historical Traces of Ancient Caucasian Albania” cultural tourism route, one of the three certified routes in Azerbaijan. The presence of historical monuments dating back to the period of Ancient Caucasian Albania further strengthens this potential.

4. In addition to the cultural tourism routes currently developed in Azerbaijan - “Archaeological Tourism in Azerbaijan”, “Five Capitals of Five Eras”, and “Historical Traces of Ancient Caucasian Albania” all of which cover the Gabala region - we propose developing three additional cultural tourism routes for each of the study regions. In Gabala region, it is proposed to prepare cultural tourism routes like Gabala city-Hamzali-Bum-Gamarvan, Shafli-Sarihajalli-Dizakhli-Chukhur Gabala and Yenikand-Zalam-Kichik Amili-Boyuk Amili-Hajialili, and in Oghuz region, it is proposed to prepare cultural tourism routes like Padar-Karimli-Garabaldır, Oghuz city-Jalut-Mukhas and Khachmaz-Abdallı-Filfilı. Within the framework of these proposed routes, visitors could experience the majority of the regions’ cultural tourism resources, including local cuisine, historical and local history museums, archaeological and architectural monuments, ethnic holidays, and various folk crafts.

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АНОТАЦІЯ

У статті розглядається культурний туризм та його ресурси, що сприяють розвитку деяких видів туризму, пов'язаних з культурним туризмом – археологічного, етнографічного, історико-пізнавального в Габалинському та Огузькому районах. Основною метою цього дослідження було вивчення культурного потенціалу Габалинського та Огузького районів та оцінка цього потенціалу для розвитку туризму. Для досягнення цієї мети було розглянуто теоретичні підходи до культурного туризму, проаналізовано статистичні дані про культурні об'єкти, готелі та транспорт з 2015 по 2023 рік, а також розроблено туристичні маршрути, що охоплюють міста та села з найбільшою концентрацією археологічних пам'яток, місцевої кухні, музеїв, етнічних фестивалів та народних ремесел. У дослідженні використано літературні джерела різних авторів, історичні та культурні пам'ятки національного та міжнародного значення, законодавчу базу, що регулює туризм, та статистичні дані Державного комітету статистики Азербайджану. В результаті дослідження було визначено, що обидва регіони мають великий потенціал для розвитку культурного туризму. Порівняно з Габалинським районом, Огузький район, хоча й має різноманітні ресурси культурного туризму, але ці передумови використовуються недостатньо. Історично склалося так, що туристи відвідують Габалинський район у Шекі-Загатальському економічному районі, що призводить до нерозвиненості інших районів економічного регіону з точки зору туризму. Запропоновані нами маршрути культурного туризму створюють умови для розвитку культурного туризму в Огузькому районі та відкривають можливості для подальшого розширення цього виду туризму в Габалинському районі. Використання численних архітектурних та історичних пам'яток у цих регіонах для організації історико-пізнавального туризму відіграватиме вирішальну роль у майбутньому розвитку цієї галузі. Традиційні свята етнічних груп, що проживають в Огузькому та Габалинському районах, поряд з місцевою кухнею та народними ремеслами, такими як килимарство, ювелірне мистецтво, гончарство та ковальство, сприяють розвитку етнографічного туризму. Оскільки Огузька район не поступається Габалі та іншим регіонам Шекі-Загатальського економічного району за ресурсами культурного туризму, і доцільно використовувати цей потенціал у загальному соціально-економічному розвитку Огузької району, яка відстає за рівнем економічного розвитку.

ІНФОРМАЦІЯ ПРО СТАТТЮ :

Рукопис надійшов

26 липня 2026

Отримано після рецензування

21 січня 2026

Затверджено до друку

25 травня 2026

Опубліковано онлайн

30 червня 2026

Ключові слова :

Габалинський район, Огузький район, культурний туризм, архітектурні та археологічні пам'ятки, етнічні свята, туристичні маршрути, приклади культурної спадщини, історико-краєзнавчі музеї, театри, місцева кухня.